

## Cultures in Nigeria That Still Keeps the Female Gender in the Dark: An Igbo Example

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### Abstract

Most women still hold to such traditions that have been adjudged inadequate by most modern society. They want to protect and preserve it no matter how one want to free their conscience from it. Many women may feel it is an invasion of their values. They still prefer it to changes or modern trends. They want to resist such changes by all means no matter the education against it. Such traditions have been studied as a failure of women “empowerment” or modern feminism. Suggestions are made on methods that could help change this preference for unusual tradition that modernity can no longer entertain because of their uncomfortable and embarrassing appearance on modern free world.

**Key words:** Empowerment; Modern feminism; Unusual tradition; Values

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### INTRODUCTION

There are yet many instances of barriers that prevent women of the modern world to participate freely and fully in the making of the new world. These barriers have been identified in some ancient cultures like in the Athenian civilisation. There persistence in the modern world is an evidence and an avalanche of difficulties in human nature

which resists change or finds it uncomfortable to leave an established tradition which is a mark of her identity. Although the new woman is exposed with modern education as a background and her new role different from the old, she yet anchor on values of some traditional practices that yet separates her from the world of men. Most women still hold to traditional rites. They want to protect and preserve it, no matter how one want to free their conscience from such traditions. They still prefer it to changes or the so called modern trends. It does not give women the free liberty to participate fully and actively in the building of the new world.

The arrival of a new world seems to have changed some bestial treatment which it termed man’s inhumanity against man. Nevertheless all these measures seem to anchor as methods of control, of hegemony, superiority and leadership. Thus the United Nations Charter, section 34, (1), states that:

(A) No person shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;

(B) No person shall be held in slavery or servitude,

(C) No person shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour.

Yet some underpinnings lie at the base of cultures which seem threatened by modern laws that tend to set free man’s oppression by fellow man. Thus Lady Oyinkan Abayomi Stated in Folarin Coker (1987) “A Lady”, “equal opportunity for boys and girls especially in education and employment”; According to Coker, “in the past, this was a most debatable matter, and even today, the issue is finalized, there are still critics of this doctrine”. She cited that “In some cultures, a widow is forced to drink the water that was used in washing the corpse of the husband. She is not allowed to keep any of the husband’s property”. These are some of the treatment against womanhood which not too long ago had been the practice, but is seriously frowned at and rejected by the new society.

## 1. SOME SYSTEMS THAT STILL KEEP WOMEN IN THE DARK

**The caste system:** this system in most cultures, today maintain, directly or indirectly measures that put women at disadvantaged position in order to control them in the name of religion or culture. In most matriarchal systems a woman could lose her life for not completing her dowry to her husband's family according to the measure expected of her. This is most prominent among the third world countries where religion and culture still reign very supreme above any reason; especially when a practice is seen as a portal to the sacred, eternal order, according to the creed or belief of the people. In most cases answers to the reasons for these conditions is usually for the appeasement of the deified. This sums up to the fact of humans as faculty of complexities.

**The Outcast (osu) or Slave (ohu):** In a caste system, social class is an obvious feature. These are the wealthy, the freeborn, the slave and the poor. It is an age old tradition. It is seen prominently in some cultures. Also in the Western culture, the feudal lords, the vassal, the aristocrats and the monarchs are all class distinction in the society that places the human status in a particular group to be recognized as such. This may be caused by a lot of factors. For example, war emigrants, child pawning, ownership of property, landlords who had subjects or slaves that work in their farm to survive.

In Igbo land Osu (who is an outcast or Ohu (slave) are few examples that places some individuals in a society in such social class. For example anybody that runs to a deity for protection has become an Osu and will be excommunicated from the rest of the society as a custodian of that oracle or deity. He or she or such families cannot intermarry with people of the same society. They do not pass the same road or fetch water on the same day with the others or go to the same market. It was an abomination for a freeborn to associate with them. For a freeborn to marry an Osu or Ohu is tantamount to becoming an Osu or Ohu.

Although, Christianity preaches equality, that there is no Jew or gentile in Christ Jesus, some Christians still recognize some of these cultural features till today. It has affected the marriage of most young women in the society. This system was recognized in the Athenian culture as regards the female gender, especially in the issue of the slave woman. The Athenian traditional culture did not permit the relationship of a slave woman with a freeborn because she was just "a thing" purchased for a price (Bonnard, 1975).

**Child Pawning:** There are various forms of exchange of wealth or payment structure. A man can pay back a debt by offering his daughter or son. This is practiced indirectly in the contemporary society. The problem is that even the elites may not recognize it as such. For example when a man or woman wants a wealthy man to marry his

or her daughter to enrich the family, she may give away a young girl of about sixteen years of age or even less to sixty years old man (who already had wife and children) for marriage undermining the law on child marriage. Mothers send out their daughter to work for others as payment for debts. Such a child or individual is always at the mercy of the owner who may never be reprieved even while maltreatment is obvious. This multiplies the campaign on age related, and forced marriages. Also child pawning is an imitation of such practice which may be regarded as child abuse.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** Till the present some cultures or individuals insist on FGM and call it a kind of cleansing before a girl child is ready for marriage. This is carried out till today in the hospitals even without the consent of the parents. This is an evidence of clash of interest as regards keeping tradition.

**Widowhood:** This is an area that till today sees womanhood behind civilization. The Igbo observe what could be called 'NKUCHI NWANYI.' This means that when a woman's husband is dead, the male brother takes over or marries the widow. But in the process a lot of humiliation, intimidation, manipulation and exploitation take place. We readily have a case at hand. Presently, sons of the same family take over their father's role as husband for a younger wife especially in a polygamous home.

An interview with Maris Nwakaego, a middle aged woman from Ibuzo in Delta State, revealed that the widow would be subjected to a lot of humiliating circumstances. For example, the widow must drink the water used in bathing the dead husband to prove innocence on the husband's death, eat with left hand, shave her pubic hair, armpit, sleep in the dark for seven days. When she goes to visit her own biological parents she will sit outside. It will be abomination for her to go into the house where she grew up before getting married. Some will not comb the hair for one year after the first shaving. Perhaps the universal concept as the widows mourning cloth is black but due to Christianity the widow may now wear white. This is won for at least a year.

Women are often forced to marry the husband's brother or relation at the death of their husbands. Some are forced to sleep with the corpse - Umuada usually enforces this. If you reject any of these practices you will be accused of killing the husband.

**Cleansing:** A woman who left the husband to live alone may have the implication of prostitution. But any time she wants to come back to the husband, she must carry out the cleansing. In the cleansing, the woman must go naked in the public before the children who will be jeering at her, clapping hands and beating the drums in mockery in order to appease her people.

**Forced Marriage:** There are various forms of forced marriage one of which is as violent as it obtains in the barbaric or hunting period of the cave man. For example,

in the traditional Ibuzo, before this time, if a man is interested in a girl and such a girl does not like the man, if by trick or mistake she enters the very man's house who is interested in her and the man is able to lay his hands on a double barrel gun, or any type of gun and shoots it, she will automatically be forced to marry the man or she will be excommunicated in that village for life.

**Stealing (Nwanyi Aka Ntutu):** If a woman steals something like food item, she will also be excommunicated from that society. Of course such an event or occurrence stay with that family and prevents prospective wives or husbands from interacting or relating with such a family.

**Sex and Culture:** to fulfill conjugal rites, a woman must be subjected to the man during coition. She must be ready at all times for the man, despite her health conditions which she must not mention especially as regards sex. The man determines or decides the terms and time of pregnancy or the number of children. Often a woman who gives birth to only female children is a witch and does not want the man to have a replacement, pedigree or genealogy.

**Rape in Marriage:** this is simply having a wife against her will in marriage. In the African context, it is manly to force a woman to submit to his sexual passes or else he is not a man. Some argue that most women appreciate this as a positive form of pass.

**Concubine/Polygamy:** Here, it is not abomination for a man to have many wives or extra- marital affair but a sacrilege or anathema for a woman to do so.

**Rites/Initiation:** Till today, some young females are forced or initiated into so many occult groups against their will with the conditions and fear that it is cultural and could bring about the wrath of the gods on the parents who refuses. For example, such initiation can be noticed by the scarification, tribal marks or other marks on the skin, no matter her modern religious background.

Eating some part of the meat is prohibited to women. The rear of the fowl whenever killed is for the man, while the waist is for the woman. Any woman who contravenes this will pay for it.

In the breaking of kola nut, amongst women, the smallest male figure, heads the process if adult males are not present. If adult males are not present, it is wrong for a woman to break kola in most cultures. A woman must thank the man who has eaten her food or the food she served even if she is starving. In most cultures she must kneel to serve the food, and stay with the man whom she thanks after eating the food.

**Violence:** There are various types of violence. Some are physical while some are psychological (emotional) or spiritual. However, any form of association that hurts or violates the peaceful Co existence of couples could be looked at as violence. But the most worrisome and the most dangerous are physical. It has caused a lot of death in women, especially in a caste system.

In most African societies, wife battering seem not to be an offence. Even where it is regarded as such it is not always taken seriously. The police will often say, "go and settle". There are cases where women are battered to death by boyfriends or husband. In Malaysia there s a reform that bans a husband from beating the wife.

A typical experience ,shows that some societies still do not regard wife battering as a crime. Here was a boy of about eighteen years of age beating a girl of about fourteen. He beat her to the extent that blood was coming out of her ears. While she was lying on the ground unable to stand, her assailant continued to rain blows on her head. When someone intervened passersby accused him of trying to snatch away the girl from the boyfriend beating her. To the society around her it was proper for a boyfriend to beat his girlfriend so that their love will be stronger. On further inquiry, it was observed that the boy pays the elder sisters school fees that was his girl friend and also gives money for food to the parents. Of course, the young man is from a well to do family. The girl he was beating did not approve of the relationship because the boy sleeps with her sister. To end the relationship the girl attacked the boy since he did not heed to her warning to stop coming to their compound. The society overlooked the boy's control.

Often men are afraid that the young wife if not threatened early in the marriage, even when she has not committed any offence, could over power or dominate the husband. So husbands beat the young wife often. She must have to be afraid of him before the child could grow to protect her. It is often worse when she has no children. Most men not minding marriage custom send their wives packing after impregnating their maid or house help, especially when the outcome is a male child. Some men go and pay a second dowry without returning the first dowry. It she most men also send their wives packing if they have only female children on the marry another wife ignoring custom or religious doctrine.

**Inheritance:** If a man dies, the junior or senior brother inherits the wife and the property especially where she has no male child. If she has no child at all and she rejects the offer she could be sent back home to her parents and the dowry returned. An exception to the rule is where she has a male child (no matter the age). The son will become the husband, if they are only girls there will be problem.

In some areas, where a man has only daughters, the first daughter will not get married. She must have a male child as a single parents at home before she gets married to any other man. If she gives birth to a female, she will not leave the family. The irony of this culture today is that most of such ladies end up being single parents and some do so because they enjoy being free from marital stress. Any lady that they have not paid dowry on will not be recognized in the society. If they had children and she dies, the man will marry her at death before her burial.

**Traditional Religion:** Many people are regarded as Christians because it is the most popular modern religion in the region. But there exists a relative clash of interests between tradition and modernity which is basically Christianity. Although the Christians insist that “Old things have passed away and now the new,” they seem to be selective in what they consider as new or old. Thus, some have resolved to hang on tenaciously to Christians, because to them it has given succor and genuine transformation in their lives that is positive. Yet many still revisit tradition and seem to co-opt the tradition into Christianity. In Igbo society, some use the phrase, “mmanwu indiuka,” meaning church masquerade to moralise the practice of masquerade as a form of entertainment and not a form of idolatry. It is no news that some still visit the so called native doctors where rituals and charms are handed over to individuals as forms of protection and healing. Some still visit the shrines to cast out unwanted spirits. Most of these practices involve women who by virtue of marriage are required to conform even against their will.

**Right to Education:** Most women are not educated today because of being female, not because their parents could not afford it. Most families feel that training a woman is useless because the husband is the only one who will benefit from it. It is like washing one's hands to break palm kernel for the fowl. The culture reveals that training a woman is like throwing away good meat to the dogs.

In marriages today dowry on a female is considered according to her level of education. The man pays more if she is educated. However most men avoid such females in order to have an easy marriage. There are many other cultural issues that still bar the woman despite empowerment. However, in modern times because of economic condition over the man, a prospective wife provides every resource needed in a marriage in order to have a husband and a name as a woman.

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## 2. IMPLICATIONS

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### **Igba-Mkpe (Woman in mourning for the death of her husband)**

A widow who is mourning her husband, if subjected to all these may decide to run away or go back to her father's house. In as much as most of these cultural treatment is changing and many dying away because women are no more obliged, there are still people in our society that insist, resist, or maintain what they regard as tradition.

**Health:** Now we have AIDs with us, it is most dangerous to practice unsafe sex by the male counterpart having multiple sex partners. No matter how one looks at it, all these treatments have one health implication or the other, emotionally, physically or otherwise.

The culture that a man must have his wife at anytime without considering her disposition is unhealthy and a

cultural misnomer. Polygamy or concubinage may no more be favourable to families especially on economic grounds. When in modern times, out of religious practice a woman was to be stoned to death for committing adultery, the people never looked for the man responsible. It is unfortunate that there are cases of rape; those involved may be having a psychotic problem. Even if a wife denies the husband unjustly, it should not warrant force or violence.

In wars women are raped and forced to take diseases which often results to death. They are misplaced or forced to marry their enemies.

Betrothing a girl child to the adult or to her mate is still child molestation or abuse. The child cannot choose for itself. It should be given the opportunity to grow to a reasonable age when it will be ripe to make decisions. These and some of the ills in the culture have affected the female gender. They often grow to believe that it is supposed to be so.

An interview with Angela Obasi, a middle aged student in the University, revealed the mind of a modern woman concerning gender role, especially the male role. She said, “that men have failed in this aspect in terms of taking care of the entire house; some men do not provide for their families yet they beat their wives.” Many men don't live up to their responsibility in modern times. According to Leth Dawson Scanzoni (1988), “Fear about changing roles is growing in men recently.” In Itsekiri in Delta State, it is as if it is the women's role to fend for the family. When the woman was asked why she took the family responsibility when the husband was there, she said that if the man gives, she will acknowledge him. If he does not she will still thank God because it is the responsibility she shoulders that makes her a heroine in her husband's house. She feels that it is a privilege for her to be married to a man. So she is yet happy even in conditions where she should not. To show deep respect, responsibility and commitment to a family setting, the man must accept with equality and fairness the result of a family situation. A man who considers all these shows the respect with which he relates with the wife. The society respect him for that, using him as the role model of their society, despite his social class.

### **Problems Developed by Female Liberation Through Civilization**

- **Prostitution:** Some young girls feel that now they are free to choose their life-style. After all “it is a free world” they have lost self control and feel that this is the time to express their desires.

- **Promiscuity:** This is also likened to prostitution. But it shows loss of morals. It is also a sign on how modern culture affected women folk. A woman can give birth to a child outside marriage without the consent of the husband.

- **Indirect Polygamy/Polyandry:** This is a situation where a woman has the freedom to decide who gives her children. Single parents are often seen with many children

by different men. This system can be seen in many other cultures outside Africa.

- **Indecent Dressing:** What modern young ladies wear today may be regarded as being naked in the 1940s which is also looked at as a kind of madness or immorality.

- **Living in Lover :**Living in lovers could give birth to children unaccounted for. This is why marriage is solemn, supreme and superior in relationship. It may not be proper for a man and a woman to declare themselves husband and wives without witness in case there is problem. Thus civilization has taught that the society gives the wife to an individual otherwise marriage has not taken place. This is for responsibility to be accounted for. Living in lovers can separate at will and have other lovers or partners and should not be encouraged. It is rampant among young people, especially students.

### **Freedom to be Married at Will Without Divorce**

The failure of Marriage bond: Most women use this opportunity to tie the men to them. They now treat the man as they like after all they have been married the legal way. Some women prefer to stay with their mother and children while the man stays in another location. Most married women dictate the pace or determine the direction of the marriage. No two families are the same.

- **Child Trafficking:** Women are major custodians of child trafficking. After all, the girl is her daughter. She may send her out to make money for her in whichever way possible. Often they regard it as miracle and go to give thanks if they succeed in sending their daughter out of the country on prostitution.

- **Male Insult:** Most women often attack or humiliate men who they consider weak. For example calling some Men “woman wrapper.” Some go to the extent of beating such husbands that they can overpower. Most women take to prostitution, even to the knowledge of the husband because they feel that the man is not doing well, especially, financially. Although in most cases, not to the men’s best emotional health. The man is quiet to avoid losing his meal and companionship.

### **Women Help to Enslave Their Folk**

The big question is, do women like what is going on, even when they know that they are free? However, “we are free but everywhere in Chains”. But this statement is more psychological than real. It may not be wrong to state that women constitute a major problem especially in the contemporary sense. They are mainly the principal actors that enforce these crude laws. Most of them may not appreciate freedom. They would want somebody to control them. Some are in daring need of men who can order them around. Sometimes it is when a woman misbehaves that a man may use his natural physical power to suppress her. The point is that there should be a balance in the relationship between a man and a woman especially in marriage. Thus, Onu (2019) informs:

I am very happy to inform you that we have secured the services of very highly educated women professionals in science, engineering and related areas who currently occupy very important positions in the country, to serve as role models. They will move from one girl’s school to another, particularly in the rural areas of our dear nation, to get the girl child to be interested in science, and technology. We want all Nigerians, irrespective of any differences, to be fully involved in the task of nation building.

### **Recommendations and the Way Forward:**

If one compares these cultures with Athenian culture, there may not be much difference but modernity has changed all these and one has to adapt to the times demand especially, those positive demands on gender roles.

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## **CONCLUSION**

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One should look at the natural universal woman first before the cultural (tribal woman). With the two there will be harmony. Often the female world is looked at as different from the male but this may not be the case especially when they share common interest. What we look at is complement. Oil and salt, bread and butter: these are still too distant. We can say groundnut oil and red oil, or mixing orange water and pineapple. We think alike. At a tender age, it may be difficult to differentiate male or female except on their genitals. Certain natural features manifest but they are the same specie; what one feels, the other feels also. In the Bible, it was stated thus: “she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man” Gen.2:23. This means that both man and woman are of the same nature or body. So they should not be treated as another body. Therefore, there should be fresh reform to augment the already existing ones as the need arises in order to have a progressive community of perfect gender harmony. We should always bear in mind that the family is the unit of a society. What it is fed or cultivated is what it harvests and the beginning point is the home.

There should be a comprehensive law reform on violence against women; and child abuse. Women are non-confrontational. The Aegean matriarchal regime is an example.

They don’t want to take over from men but to be equal citizens with equal right. In the existing law reform, it is just the UN Declaration which is international but in most cases not enforced locally. Dialogue could be used to correct a wife: dialogue, subtle persuasion. Women are easily convinced that is why they make good preachers or administrators. They always want to stand for harmony, peace, love, justice and these are attributes of a progressive nation. Akunyili, Okonjo Iwuala, Ezekwesili, are examples. They brought about due process rebranding and encouraged cooperative societies. And it is working

for many governments; it protects the system and processes from fraud; it reduces temptation where they are possible and prevents dubious activities. Even a criminal minded individual will approach issues with caution because of due process.

The big question still remain; what do women concerning the present cultural inhibitions. They have every right now to decide. In an interview of a religious type and a traditionalist, these new initiatives and abandonment of such traditional rules is tantamount to anathema or “Uwa Ojoo” (bad world). But this is modern society that is entirely affected by her values or standard of living. They are living for health and human progress not for culture or tradition; those aspects of the culture that encourages “man’s inhumanity to man” as we have seen must be avoided and dropped- until this is done the lot of women in most African societies will take long to improve.

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