

Cultural Restriction, Respect for Women, and Environmental Sustainability in Africa: Extrapolations from Igboland, South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

In most African societies, some restrictions exist that manifest themselves in the form of taboos, laws on the use of public spaces, land use, and the exploitation and management of resources, which on the surface appear to be targeted at women. However, when their origin, essence, and dynamics within specific cultures are subjected to critical interrogation, a new picture emerges. What was assumed to be a legal apparatus deliberately devised by men to sideline women turns out to be respect for women and the ontological forces in the polity. There are some species of fish that people are not allowed to kill, and if they are killed by accident some form of ritual is required. There are also restrictions on access to sacred groves and forests associated with some spirit beings. The rationales behind such taboos are many, but they are all targeted at protecting the environment. As there appears to be a lacuna in this aspect of studies on African women, this paper aims to plug this gap. The broader implications of this research for the study of Africa and gender relations among its people are equally discussed. Anchored by the theory of cultural peculiarity, the study adopts a qualitative research approach using extant literature, field investigations, interviews with elders and other stakeholders on the origin of the restrictions as its sources.

Key words

African environment, cultural restrictions, Igbo women, environmental sustainability

Introduction

The clamoring of human beings to sustain their environment reached a crescendo in September 2000 when leaders from 189 countries met to design what was afterwards recognized as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Through

the MDG, the leaders sought to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and, lastly, develop a global partnership for development (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). One of the major thrusts of this policy document is environmental sustainability. Prior to the September 2000 meeting, there had been other attempts in other places to protect the environment. For instance, Melissa Petruzzello (2015) recorded that a group of women in India emerged in the 1970s to protect Indian forests from destruction by physically embracing the trees to obstruct the loggers who were bent on felling them. The import of their action can be appreciated when we observe that deforestation is a major cause of land degradation and increases in the sedimentation and downstream nutrient enrichment of rivers and lakes worldwide (WRI, 1992). Their actions, which gave birth what is today known as the Chipko Movement, were largely targeted at conservation. This is because those actions were synonymous with sustainability in the sense that their focus was on how the forest resources would be utilized for them and generations after them. Hence, their actions were in accord with the definition of a sustainable environment as espoused by the Brundtland Commission (IUCN-UNEP-WWF, 1980) as that development that [meets] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Udoh and Godwin (1997) posit that the environment could be described as the outer physical and biological system in which man and other physical organisms live. However, an informed academic discourse regarding the environment can be approached from anthropocentric or holistic angles. Ukiwo (2005) contends that the environment is construed differently in many quarters. It could mean the physical conditions of the landscape, a perspective that includes the area's topography, drainage, climatic conditions, animals, minerals, and vegetation. This perception, centering on the ecosystem, is limited to the physical environment. However, beyond the physical environment is also the human environment which includes human activities such as agriculture, mining, settlement, industry, and infrastructural development. A more encompassing definition of the environment espoused by Dickson, Audu, and Nwaomah (2012) argues that any meaningful discourse regarding the environment must take cognizance of both the physical and the human and the interplay between them. For the purpose of the present research, the environment is seen in this wider sense.

In the debate over the place and role of women in society, two contending and

contradictory views prevail. While some are of the view that women are marginal, others argue that they are critical and essential to the development of their societies. However, the proponents of the marginality thesis help in contributing to what might be tagged the “litany of lamentations” as a consequence of the biased historicization of women and therefore confront researchers with a biased view of women and their role(s) in society. For instance, Nasrin (2012) contends that although half of the world’s population are women, ten per cent of global income is spent on them, they own less than one per cent of global resources. Okolo and Ezegebe (2011) wrote that African culture depicts male children as the embodiment of power and associates them with duties or functions that have to do with the exercise of power and authority, while on the other hand their female counterparts are evaluated as weak and assigned low-status jobs or duties. Mabawonku (2001), as cited by Egaga and Aderibigbe (2015), accuses women of being responsible for much of the environmental destruction taking place in rural and urban areas. On the other hand, Nasrin (2012) submits that women are actually the greatest victims of environmental degradation. Odoemene (2008) contends that nowhere is the neglect of or insensitivity toward women’s contributions to societal development more obviously the case than in Africa, where the impact of women in both the political and the broader social spheres has been overlooked where the political impact of women has been overlooked, just as their impact in their own society. African women are hedged around by a plethora of regulations that restrict not only their relationships with men but also with the flora and fauna around them. Such limitations are rooted in the culture of the society in question. This creates room for variations and thus for peculiarities. Incidentally, these debates are raging even as the role of women in the protection of their environment remains largely under-researched. Overall, most of the available literature (UN, 1995; UNDP, 2009; World Bank, 2011; UN Women, 2015a, 2015b) concurs that notwithstanding the fact that women have been indispensable in the human and material development of their various communities; their contributions are neither properly recognized nor adequately evaluated and compensated. Bridging this yawning gap appears to be the mission of *Asian Women* in this Special Edition.

In what appears to be a contradiction of earlier views of women, Awe (1992) maintains that some women are “Saviours of their Societies,” based on their contribution toward the building of a peaceful environment for the development and growth of their communities. Seemingly in agreement with Awe (1992), Anyebe (2012, pp. 224–226) wrote that even though women are regarded as properties in most patriarchal societies, their role as mothers places them at vantage positions to

determine what happens in their societies. Anyebe insists that among the Idoma of Nigeria, masquerades (the incarnate or spirit being institution) are essentially a male affair, but they cannot operate effectively without the involvement of women. He contends that this is because *Odegwudegwu* is the mother of masquerades, and as such women must make provisions for the coming into being of the masquerades in the Idoma Pantheon, especially because “they are the custodians of ancestral secrets”. In the same vein, among the Igbo of Nigeria—the focus of this study—women are seen as being very relevant to environmental sustainability and the overall development of society, as will be made evident in this study.

The Theory of Cultural Peculiarity

The theory of cultural peculiarity recognizes that there are diverse cultures and that small differences exist even within particular ethnic groups. This idea may have informed the Igbo in developing the adage *nkụ di na mba naeyere mba nri*—“the firewood (cooking fuel) in any society serves the purpose of cooking food.” As is generally true with all Igbo adages, the point being addressed is not about food but about laws and regulations guiding human conduct. In some societies, contravention of such regulations is regarded as a desecration of the land that requires serious propitiatory rites; in some cases, these may even amount to ostracizing the offender(s). In her forward to *Gender Equality, Heritage and Culture*, Farida Shaheed observed that gender discrimination is so frequently defended by reference to culture, religion, and tradition that it seems safe to conclude that no social group has suffered a greater violation of human rights in the name of culture than women (Shaheed, 2014). This at face value may be said to be very true of Igbo women and their relationship with men and their environment. For instance, in Obukpa village, Lejja, women are not allowed access to Ajimaka forest, whereas men have unrestricted access. However, the logic behind the restriction will be made known later in this text in the subsection titled “Women and access to wood fuel in some Igbo communities.”

Method

As research with a historical slant, this study employed both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consisted largely of oral information elicited from very knowledgeable individuals of both sexes. They were chosen based on their positions in their various societies and how relevant such positions were in

placing them at a strategic advantage in creating policies, and in the preservation, execution, and implementation of decisions relating to the violation of rules and regulations relating to the environment. The interview period spanned two years (2018 to 2019). Three communities in Igboland—Nsukka, Lejja, and Ozalla, all in Enugu state—were selected based on the survival of such restrictions that are as yet undocumented. However, among the informants were also some people who had originated from other parts of Igboland. Forty-three persons (twenty-four women and nineteen men) were interviewed separately. Specific questions were targeted at each community based on the nature of the restriction being investigated, and the same set of questions was put to all the informants from a given community. Those whose information were more detailed and more specific and had direct bearing on the subject of inquiry were cited in the study.

To strike a balance, secondary sources used were drawn from other states in Igboland where excellent work had been done earlier. Works with a global focus were also examined to identify the gap in the literature and also for comparative analysis. The data were sourced from books, journals, on-going postgraduate research, journals, periodicals, and other online resources. Overall, a historical descriptive and analytical method was employed.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the findings, it is obvious that Igbo societies had traditional mechanisms in place that were designed to protect and sustain their environment. However, such mechanisms are more pronounced in the form of cultural restrictions. Unfortunately, some Igbo cultural practices relating to the environment have been misconstrued based on the tendency to interpret them out of context. What appear to be undue restrictions on the rights of women by their male counterparts were not actually intended to discriminate against women, rather they were meant to preserve some of the resources for the future and to ensure that such resources, if renewable, were used carefully to avoid their exhaustion, which could cause ecological disaster. Some were targeted at the health of women and unborn babies as evident in the restriction on the use of public space in the Ozalla community.

Women and Access to Wood Fuel in some Igbo Communities

In Lejja community, Enugu State, Nigeria, Omeje (2018) informed the present researcher that in Obukpa village, any woman who fetched firewood from Ajimaka forest was “ostracized for twenty-eight days”—one month in the traditional Igbo calendar—after which she was meant to “atone for her sins by offering two gallons of palm wine, a healthy and full-grown cock that must be not less than a year, pounded yam, and soup to the spirit guarding the forest.” The oldest man in the village officiated during the sacrifice of atonement. Ajimaka forest is so revered because it contains an *Ofo* tree and also because it harbors the grove of the incarnate beings of the village as well as the shrines of some deities. The *Ofo* is regarded among the Igbo as one of the sacred trees that represent the gods. Hence, in their world view, it represents truth and justice and is worshipped and/or mythologized and believed to be sacred. For that reason, it could not be used as cooking fuel. Garg (2013) posits that sacred trees are those which are subjected to practical manifestations of adulation, adoration, and profound veneration to honor a deity or to please a devil, demon, or any other ghostly creature, offer safe haven for/to spirits, remind present generations of ancestors, or protect a sanctified place from willful damage and exploitation. This appears all the more significant when linked to Nasrin’s (2012) observation that “women rely heavily on biomass fuels (e.g. wood, straw, or dung) which emit smoke that contain levels of suspended particular matter (SPM) that exceed safe levels. (p. 156)” Through such emissions, some plant species are threatened.

Logical as this might sound, some pertinent questions must be asked and answered: why is the restriction placed on women only. Are the *Ofo* and its symbolism gendered? Is the *Ofo* tree the only sacred tree standing in the forest and, if not, are other sacred trees save the *Ofo* used as fuel? Omeje (2018) insists that the law was made for women because they are not born in the village and hence do not and could not enjoy equal rights with men. This explanation is inadequate in those women born in the village, as opposed to those who married into the village, are not exempted from the restriction. Be that as it may, it is plausible to argue that as a consequence of a society’s level of technological advancement, wood serves as the primary source of cooking fuel, and women as the primary cooks and providers of cooking fuel would readily harness anything available to them if not restricted. As women and men occupy the same environment, the same regulations should apply to both parties with respect to environmental laws, rules, access to environmental resources, norms, and values except where and when the

disparity is to protect the interests of women.

Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Considerations in some Igbo Cultural Practices

Among the Igbo, culture is known as *Omenala*. Nwala (2010) posits that *Omenala* refers to the entire system of Igbo culture and civilization. By implication, it (*Omenala*) is, as Nwala noted, “the totality of the lore of the land, customs and tradition, a complex of beliefs and practices, which every Igbo man inculcates as a guiding philosophy and code of behavior (pp. 76–77)”. Therefore, all the taboos, totems, and prohibitions that form part of Igbo culture are designed to make certain that the natural order is not tainted and that proper relationships among spirits, between spirits and men, and among men are maintained. However, these systems of natural order extend from the high principles and fundamental ideas about existence and the cosmos to those that guide everyday economic pursuits, even down to the simplest elements of etiquette. All these are encapsulated in the world view of the people and form a body of knowledge that is termed “indigenous” or “local.” Boven and Morohashi (2002) suggest that “indigenous or local knowledge refers to a complete body of knowledge, know-how and practices maintained and developed by peoples, generally in rural areas, who have extended histories of interaction with the natural environment.” The authors posit that “these sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part of a cultural complex that encompasses language, naming and classifications systems, practices for using resources, ritual, spirituality and worldview (p. 6)”.

Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, conservation of natural and genetic resources has been of major concern for eons. The search for industrial raw materials and other anthropogenic factors contribute immensely to the alteration of the ecosystem. The Nsukka Igbo, on whom much of this study is focused, use cultural totemic beliefs, traditional laws, and taboos to sustain their environment. Be that as it may, there appear to be more cultural limitations on women regarding the use of resources in their environment. This could be accounted for based on some observations made in different settings in some Igbo localities. For instance, in Lejja, women are not allowed to climb certain hills (*Ugwu*), such as *Ugwu Amashi* and *Ugwu Esha*, until after the men have performed the ritual dance for the hills, ending with the cutting of dried grasses from the hills and their use to construct a thatched house for the spirit that inhabits the hills during the ninth month in the people’s local calendar; a time dedicated to the worship of ancestors. A close look

at some of the hills reveals that they were ancient iron smelting sites with clear evidence of iron slag debris. According to Nwiyi (2018), the essence of placing these limitations on women is to make sure that the grasses on the hills are not tampered with by women who use them in the manufacture of locally woven trays or for compost manure. Through this regulation, the greenery of the hills, which add to the beauty of the environment, is maintained.

Equally, the hill is considered to be pregnant and must not be stressed. This consideration stems from the fact that the hills act as sources of raw materials that are used in sustaining many traditional industries. These include haematites used in iron smelting, and grasses used in roofing, weaving, and as fodder for ruminants. The hills also serve as a natural habitat for some animal species. Nwiyi avers that if women were allowed unrestricted access to the hills, they would deplete the resources therein. To ensure that the resources are not decimated, society created regulations to control their use.

However, an interesting aspect of the regulations is that even though they placed limitations on women's access to the resources in the hills, they were designed to show respect for women. According to Agboeze (2019), cutting the immature and unripe grasses on the hills is like "aborting a pregnancy." The grass is assumed to be the "fetus" while the hill is assumed to be "a pregnant woman." As a mark of respect for the mother (hill), the unborn children (the immature grasses on the hill) are not to be harvested. Thus, it is taboo for women to exploit the resources on the hill during the period proscribed by tradition. Equally, Agboeze (2019) insists that the people argue that harvesting the grass when it is yet to mature would deny "the chances of allowing it to flower, pollinate, fruit and dry and hence allow the seeds to regenerate naturally." Narrating her experience after the Nigerian Civil war, she stated that her hut was one of those burnt by soldiers. When the war ended and she wanted to fetch grass with which to repair the hut, her husband and other relations prevailed on her not to contravene the law as the annual building of a house for the spirit guarding the hill had not been done. She had to sleep in an open hut for two weeks in the severe Harmattan cold.

Women and the Use of Public Squares in Igboland

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the state of the environment remains a serious concern. They fashioned ways to both curb the harm being done to it and engage in sustainable practices, and embedded them in their cultural practices. For the Igbo, their conception of the environment is the same as that of Tairu (1995), who

defined environment as “the combination of natural resources (plants, animals, streams, air and forests) living and non-living things, things made by man and the inter-relationship between these as well as various circumstances which surround people on earth.” Notwithstanding this perception, Chima and Nuga (2011, pp. 677–682) noted that “97% of sacred groves in parts of Abia State have been demolished completely.” Writing on the threat to the Igbo-built environment, Emeasoba and Ogbuefi (2013, pp. 61–67) wrote that “most of the sacred sites in Anambra State have almost disappeared completely.” This underscores why the cultural restrictions on the use of environmental resources are taken seriously, especially those considered sacred environments. Among such sacred environments is the traditional village or community square.

Public squares remain a central feature in most Igbo communities. As a human construct, it is a mark of the autonomy of the group that established it. In most communities, they are swept by women who have married into the village in an alternate arrangement of twenty-eight days—the traditional Igbo month. However, it is taboo to sweep the square on *eké* market day. In some communities, the male folk compensate their women for keeping the square clean all year round by making contributions (money, palm wine, yam, kola nut, coconuts, and sometimes fowl) during the ninth month of the local calendar. Asogwa (2019) observed that the contributions made to compensate the women for tending to the square are called *Ụ́tụ́ Orobó*. However, the right of women to use the square for certain purposes is hedged about with some restrictions. For instance, Igwe (2018) states that in Ozalla, in the Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State, no woman was allowed to process breadfruit seeds near the square. This is because “the dirt from the process is so stinky, laden with a very offensive odor and as such generates a lot of air pollution.” The origin of this restriction is of the essence in establishing if it was designed to limit women’s rights or protect and respect their interests.

Igwe (2018) asserts that *Egbuñi*—the mother deity of Ozalla community—was said to have lost her “first pregnancy as a result of the offensive odor that emanated from the very slippery and fluid-like substance that remained after a woman named Nwaezeoyiru, who was intent on extracting the seeds of the plant from the fluff, finished processing the breadfruit.” As the women who did the processing always regulated the effect of the stench on them by adding ash, especially that derived from “the male inflorescence of oil palm trees (*Ombhúrinbú*) to the unprocessed seeds of the plant” before washing the seeds that were encased by the fluff in a sieve made from a clay pot, they could not perceive the offensive odor

while the seed was being processed. However, after the washing and when the water has evaporated, the stench increases and becomes offensive; at this point, the processing has finished and the women have exited the scene. *Egbuyi*, either by accident or providence, passed by the square not long after the processing had been completed near it and was said to have vomited several times because she was in the third month of her pregnancy. According to Igwe (2018), this made her “weak and to suffer some complications which ended in her having excessive bleeding, leading to the eventual loss of the expected baby.” As a result, the Ozalla community reasoned that air pollution arising from the processing of breadfruit should be prohibited near and around public places, especially village squares, as a way to forestall unplanned abortion among pregnant women, an admirable precautionary measure and preventive approach to maintaining a pollution free environment. That the actions of the Ozalla people are targeted at environmental sustainability can be seen from the observations of Smith (1971) and Mba (1995) that environmental pollution causes some damages especially within the first three months of pregnancy to the fetus” and that “consequent upon the pollutions and degradation in the environments, some children are therefore born blind, deaf or mentally retarded. Egaga and Aderibigbe (2015) observe that professionals in the field of special education have attributed some of the causes of disabilities to environmental problems, which “manifest in form of sickness, diseases, poison and other infections suffered by the mother during the first three months of her pregnancy (p. 185).” Even people that are not concerned with the bearing of children are affected by air pollution. Nasrin (2012, p. 156) insists that “[people’s] mental and physical health is severely hampered due to breathing of polluted air.” Preventing the emergence of handicapped children, mentally and physically challenged citizens, and ensuring the safety of pregnant women translates to ensuring the future of the children through a clean environment via the instrument of cultural restriction.

Water Bodies, Women, and the Environment among the Igbo

Nwala (2010) postulates that among the Igbo, two ontological realms or orders of existence are discernible: the Supernatural World (or invisible realm) and the Natural World (or visible realm). However, both realms are called *Ala*. *Ala* is further divided into *Ala Miri*, which includes oceans, seas, rivers, streams, and lakes in which water spirits live together with fishes and other aquatic living things and objects, and *Ala Okpo*, dry land on which living beings such as man, animals, in-

sects, and trees exist, and which includes hills, valleys, and mountains. All these, in conjunction with the invisible realm, constitute the environment. For the Igbo, the most critical element of life is water. This is specifically captured in one of their maxims *Miri bu ndu* (water is life). Consequent on this assumption, they venerate and respect water bodies and some aquatic life in them. The respect accorded to water bodies is manifest in some of the deities named after rivers, lakes, or streams. For instance, the peoples of the Nsukka Local Government Area in Enugu State insist that “Adada is a river as well as the mother deity of Lejja” (Ezugwu, 2019). In Oguta town, Imo State, Oguta Lake is assumed to be a woman. Jell-Bahlsen (2014, p. 22) observes that, among the Igbo, water spirits are considered female elements and they have a very special cosmological place, not only with regard to creation but also in the circulation and flow of time, re-incarnation, challenge, initiation, promotion, and innovation. She argues further that the Igbo perceive both women and the water spirits as mobile, fluid, and slippery since they are at the crossroad between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between spirits and humans, life and death. By implication, spirits are vital to the existential order of the Igbo and female spirits as represented by water spirit loom large among them.

Probably based on the notions formed about the spirits associated with water, the Igbo developed a culture of placing some forms of restriction on the use of water resources. Jell-Bahlsen (2014, p. 157) observed that, among the Oru Igbo, wading in the water and the related ban on fishing with baskets during a specific time of the year (flooding season) have an inadvertent ecological significance as it is part of an economic activity carried out by women who fish by means of throwing baskets at the fish in the warm, shallow waters near the shores. Jell-Bahlsen contends that the spots where fishing is banned are the breeding grounds for the fish population whose young ones grow predominantly during the time of the flood. She argues that if fishing with baskets near the shoreline were to continue unregulated all year-round, the new generations of fish would be caught before having had a chance to reproduce, resulting in a reduction in the fish population in the long run. Banning fishing activities for the time of the year when the young fish are maturing and are plenty, but have not yet reproduced, increases the probability of a larger amount of fish surviving. *Ogbuide's* (the water goddess) rule, she (Jell-Bahlsen) avers, allows the young fish to reach maturity and reproduce. She suggests that this not only helps to maintain the fish population but is also a major way of ensuring a regular source of protein in the local diet. In this case, religious convictions serve as catalysts for the preservation and sustenance of the Igbo

environment.

Still on aquatic life, Jell-Bahlsen (2014) wrote that in Oguta and other Oru Igbo communities that worship water deities, it is taboo to catch or eat *asa*—a type of mudfish without scales. If caught and killed, it would neither be eaten nor sold by the person that caught it privately or secretly. Rather, it would be taken to the lineage group head or village head who would offer it as a special sacrifice to the ancestors of the village. As a rule, after the sacrifice, it would be shared in such a way that every household in the village or lineage group concerned got a share. Jell-Bahlsen observed that “subjectively, these rules are religiously motivated, but their objective benefits limit the exploitation of this special fish and protect the species” (p. 158). The rule on *asa* is not limited to preserving the specific species of fish. What needs to be added is that, in the Igbo worldview, there is a strong relationship between women and nature that dictates how natural resources are to be used among them. Their views, which parallel the observations of Mies (1988), are that: (a) Women’s interaction with nature, with their own nature as well as their external environments, is a reciprocal process in the sense that women conceive of their bodies as productive in the same way as they conceive of external nature as productive. This makes them care more for the environment than men (b) Even though women challenge nature, their appropriation of the external environment is neither a relationship of domination nor a property relationship since they are neither the owners of their body nor owners of the earth however, they cooperate with their bodies as well as with the earth in order to let it and make it grow.

The Igbo sense of and craving for a secure future for their environment is manifest in how they structure some of their cultural practices relating to the use of water bodies and the resources therein. They make provision for the younger generation to be tutored in the practice of environmental protection through the canvas of cultural festivals. For instance, in the Ohafia community, young adolescent girls took part in a festival from which adult women were excluded in terms of active participation. According to Ituma (2019), this was called the *Uzọiyi* festival. The festival, which involved symbolic songs and long processions of nude adolescent girls to the stream called *Iyi umu agbogo* (maiden’s stream), was held every three years. The key purpose of the long march to the stream was to cleanse the stream by removing any debris or dirt that might be breeding grounds for organisms that pollute the water and make their water hazardous to human health. As they cleaned the stream, they sang and recited incantations, blessing the community that owned the stream and wishing it well. Ituma (2019) maintains that as they were busy cleaning the stream, they also made time to pick white chalk (*nzi*)

from the water, which they applied unevenly to their naked bodies as they all went back to the village in an organized procession. They also fetched water from the cleansed stream, which they gave to the sick to restore their health.

Since it is human beings that give meaning and value to the environment, it follows therefore that any means of assuring a healthy livelihood for mankind is equally a good step toward a sustainable environment. One of the *Uzojiyi* rituals performed by the maidens involved the sacrifice of a white fowl (preferably a white hen that had raised many chicks) to plead that women who were either barren or finding it difficult to conceive would be made fertile; this is also a practice targeted at sustaining the human population. However, Ituma (2019) insists that the young women, most of whom are virgins, pleaded with the water spirit to grant their prayers on behalf of the troubled person(s) they were interceding for as they (the maidens) did not want any of the lineages or families in the community to become extinct because of not being able to have offspring.

Women and Non-Aquatic Life in Igboland

Women in Igboland keep animals like, fowl, goats, sheep, and a host of other domestic animals. However, there are regulations governing the rearing of animals. For instance, during the planting season, the movements of animals like goats, sheep, cows, and all ruminants are restricted. At the end of the harvest season and before the planting season begins, they are left to roam freely. During the planting and pre-harvest period, they are either tethered to a post in places where they eat fodder or taken to a vast area of land where they are also tethered using a long rope to allow them to graze on the grasses. However, if any of the animals gets loose and strays into a farm, it is the women who will raise the alarm, chase the animal, catch it, and take it back to the owner who will pay the stipulated fine. In the Lejja community, the present writer witnessed this at Umuoda-Eze village on September 23, 2018. In what the women refer to as *Nwaonwele Nwaonwelele* (the cry made by the women if any animal strays into a farm), they used this means to ensure the safety of their crops and by extension food availability and accessibility in their society.

Nwalaya (2018) noted that there are some animals that women are not allowed to eat. Such animals include (*Thryonomys winderianus*) the greater cane rat (for pregnant women) and bats (for all women). The rationale for this restriction is that the female greater cane rat experiences serious pain whenever it gives birth. They reason that if pregnant women eat the meat, they might experience the same level of

pain as the animal. To ensure that women have quick deliveries, society bars them from eating the meat only when they are pregnant. However, if any woman eats it by mistake and experiences some difficulty during labor, she is given a bone of the same animal to chew. As for the bat, the people hold that bats have no anus and as such excrete through the mouth. Excreting through the mouth is considered an abnormality. The Igbo restrict their women from eating bats because the birthing of babies should naturally obey the law of gravity. Allowing women to eat an animal whose excretion process is against the law of gravity, they reason, would jeopardize their health. Through such restrictions, the rate at which such animal species are hunted and killed is reduced, and their existence and role in biodiversity promoted.

Another area in which Igbo women play a major role is in counteracting those who use their knowledge of rainmaking and/or creating drought to punish their society. A case in point is what happened at Amube village in 2005 between the women's council (*Umuada*) and Patrick Ozota, a rainmaker and cloud dispeller, as narrated by Omeke (2019). When the community experienced severe drought in the middle of the rainy season, to the extent that plants started withering, the men's council met with Patrick to plead with him to "send down the rain," but he snubbed them. However, when the *Umuada* intervened, he denied having any hand in the prolonged drought. The *Umuada* carried out consultations and investigations with diviners and fortune-tellers, and then met him again. He denied any responsibility a second time and told them to go. The women then resorted to their age-long practice of using nudity as an instrument of protest. Among the Igbo, it is taboo for any man to see members of the women's council naked. As the women went nude and were intent on sleeping in his compound overnight, he had a rethink and assured them that they would have rain that night. The women left, and at midnight there was a heavy downpour. This did not appease the *Umuada*. They went back to his house in the morning and forced him to swear by their long wooden spoon (*ekur*—the symbol of female power and women's paraphernalia of authority) that he would never cause such havoc in the future. As cultural norms restrict men from seeing these classes of women naked, it was the fear of what would have followed if they slept had in his house that forced Patrick to shift his ground. Had he insisted, he would have been accused of having had sex with all the women and as such would be made to compensate them, their husbands, children, and the earth goddess. Each case would involve sacrificing a cow and entertaining the entire village.

Conclusion

The need to re-examine women's roles in specific cultural contexts is made imperative when we realize that events and developments do not occur haphazardly. Rather, they result from the systematic convergence of a community of factors. In some cases, as evident in this study, gender, as well as environmental considerations and/or factors, looms large. As naturalists, the Igbo strongly believe that man is part of the world of nature. Abah, Maheba, & Denuga (2015), in what appears to mirror the beliefs of the Igbo, put forward the view that cultural beliefs and traditional laws and taboos often play major roles in conserving biodiversity for sustainable development. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, many cultural practices, traditional laws, taboos, and a host of other considerations that are gendered are used in sustaining the environment. These strategies and their provisos may appear inimical to women if taken only at their face value, but the reality is that they are far from being instruments for the marginalization of women. They were designed to help protect the environment by addressing the issues of resource maximization and restricted utilization of environmental resources in a way that would ensure that generations to come might enjoy a better life through having access to those preserved environmental resources; however, they were also developed with a special consideration for women, informed by a respect for women as an ontological category, their health, and that of the society at large.

Unfortunately, the position of most writers is that these practices are inimical to women. The problem is that they treat Africa as one cultural homogenous whole. Such a perspective leads to faulty conclusions and blanket generalizations. Any meaningful discourse on African culture is better approached from the point of micro studies, which, when added together, would present a better picture.

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Oral Sources

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Appendix 1: Examples of Questions Answered by the Informants

1. How do the Igbo conceptualize their environment and the resources therein?
2. What laws and rules relating to environmental sustainability exist in your community?
3. How did such laws or rules evolve and why were they instituted in the first place?
4. How do such regulations affect women?
5. In which ways do such regulations inform how environmental resources are used in the communities where they exist?
6. Are there religious or ritual attachments to such regulations?
7. If the answer to number five (5) is in the affirmative, are there gender considerations?
8. Do such regulations have anything to do with class distinctions?

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