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Onyinyechi Priscilla Christian Wariboko

University of Port Harcourt (Port Harcourt, Nigeria)

Caroline N. Mbonu, HHCJ

University of Port Harcourt (Port Harcourt, Nigeria)

Di bu ugwu nwanyi (Husband is the dignity of a woman): Reimagining the Validity of an Igbo Aphorism in Contemporary Society

ABSTRACT. Cultural aphorisms tend to sustain gender disparity. There are certain cultural expressions which tend to sustain gender disparity and oppression among the Igbo of Nigeria. One of such is *di bu ugwu nwanyi*, literally translated 'husband is a woman's dignity'. This Igbo maxim tends to foster gendered marginalization and oppression in contemporary Igboland. The saying reinforces the status of the husband as requisite for the visibility and pride of the woman. Perhaps this may explain why some marital issues such as husband infidelity, wife-battering, are culturally underplayed for protection of the man. Thus women are forced to endure abuses in their marriages. There exist a plethora of other gender related issues that are rooted in the *di bu ugwu nwanyi* metaphor. This paper engages the implications of this Igbo cultural expression amidst the advocacy of gender justice and inclusivity in Igbo land. As qualitative study that adopts the phenomenological approach, this paper, draws insight from interviews, observations, oral histories and extant Igbo literature. Akachi Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism and Obioma Nnaemeka's negofeminism undergird the theoretical framework. The paper advocates for the obliteration, or reinterpretation of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* that honours dignity for gender equity and inclusivity so as to valorize the status of women in Igboland.

KEYWORDS: *Di bu ugwu nwanyi*, Igbo, aphorism, feminism, marriage, patriarchy

Introduction

Igbo worldview and cultural practices are given expression in their aphorisms, proverbs and metaphors. Such sayings are regarded as words of wisdom and are consciously handed down and perpetuated orally from one generation to another. The age long aphorism among the Igbo—*di bu*

ugwu nwanyi which literally means 'husband is the dignity of a woman' has survived the ages. This has fostered the social practice among the Igbo that the visibility of a woman depends on marriage or that marriage established a woman. Thus, an unmarried woman in the community is usually seen as deficient in her personality and oftentimes taunted for that reason by members of her family or even the community. Singlehood, therefore, among the Igbo is stigmatized as evil. The saying *di bu ugwu nwanyi*, has created palpable pressure and desperation in the psyche of women of marriage age in Igbo society, resulting to such women seeking marriage either by crook or by hook.

Di bu ugwu nwanyi creates an impression that women in Igbo land lack dignity, personality, honour and self-worth independent of a man. Little wonder women are often identified as either their father's daughter, their husband's wife or their child's (often first son) mother. She is always an object, never a subject. By definition, an Igbo woman is subsumed in and has no identity outside the man. Perhaps, this explains why Okoye (2017) posits that women are portrayed as inferior in the name of marriage. Continuing, Okoye (2017, p. 363) sums up as "oppressive proverbs", sayings like *di bu ugwu nwanyi* and other such idioms that foster gender imbalance and oppression among the Igbo. Chukwuma (2012, p. 90) notes that because of patriarchy, "woman is there for and at the pleasure of men. Husband is supreme, is the head of the family." This therefore lays credence to some of the expressions that inundate feminist studies in Africa, that women are subjugated, oppressed and infact victims (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 45, 139; Chukwuma, 2012; Shaka & Uchendu, 2012; Ngcobo, 2013; Ogbujah & Onuoha, 2014; Ike, 2017; Oluremi, 2017; Schmidt's introduction to Heise, 2018, p. 197; Smith, 2019). Agbasiere (2000, p. 46) corroborates this while discussing the taboos that surround marriage in Igbo society. In her words, "the weight of taboo falls less heavily on men than it does on women. The discrepancy is evident in sanctions governing marriage and conjugal relations." Little wonder "many twentieth-century feminists condemned marriage as a central source of patriarchal oppression and control" (Schmidt's introduction to Heise, 2018, p. 197).

From the foregoing, the effect of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in Igbo societies is deemed repugnant and counterintuitive. Oduyoye (2002, p. 153) rightly observes that "closely binding a woman's sense of being to marriage and child-bearing has been a traditional means of marginalizing women." This view is not peculiar to African scholars alone. Schmidt's introduction to Heise (2018, p. 197), agrees with Oduyoye and many oth-

er African scholars that marriage is apparently an institution that guarantees what he refers to a “(legal) oppression.” of women. Young women paradoxically, live all their lives in preparation for marriage in order to add ‘dignity’ to their lives at the detriment of preparing themselves for a tremendous future, whether married or not. Girls get indoctrinated into patriarchy early:

where the value of women lies only in their sexuality. Her worth is measured by first the shape of her body, second whose daughter she is and thereafter, whose wife she is ... her mental energy is expended thinking of and imagining a prince charming of a husband with whom she will live happily ever after. (Shaka & Uchendu, 2012, p. 5).

Unfortunately however, some women settle for lazy or abusive men, just because their dignity is defined by marriage. Not to mention the harrowing experiences like battering, infidelity and verbal abuse some women go through in some Igbo marriages. Most times, these women continue to stick around at the expense of their lives sometimes because they cannot afford to be mocked or held in disdain by a community that ridicules single women or women from a broken marriage. More disturbing, is the fact that daughters of Igbo communities (*umuada* or *umuokpu*), made up of married and mostly unmarried daughters of the community, do not integrate and synergize with the wives’ group (*ndi inyom*), who are naturally their brothers’ wives. The *umuada* are perhaps discriminated against, either real or imagined, on the basis of their marital status, with the married women glorying in the glee that their ‘dignity’ is very much intact. It could also be that *umuada* deliberately maintain the dichotomy between the two women’s groups so that they would be able to antagonize or ‘cut the excesses’ of *ndi inyom*. Hence, women among the Igbo do not speak with one voice against patriarchal structures that have kept them bound in the society. Women generally, irrespective of marital status, share similar experiences and face the same patriarchal obstacles such as demeaning aphorisms that subsume a woman in the man. The unjust structure contributes significantly to women’s lack of access to economic power. This limits the women from maximizing their potentials and enjoying their dignity as full humanbeings independent of men.

One wonders why *di bu ugwu nwanyi* is parochial. Do men and women not complement each other in every human society? Are unmarried Igbo men not regarded as *efurefu* (a foolish or lost person)? Does mar-

riage in Igbo land, with a few exceptions of matrilineal communities not benefit the man more?, where his wife becomes his servant, gives him children that will bear his name, nurtures the children and takes care of the home. All these without a paycheck. In addition, she endures all manner of patriarchal injustice and restrictions on her fundamental rights as human beings even more, she loses her identity as a person to patriarchy. Why then is there no corresponding aphorism among the Igbo as regards the important place of a woman in a man's life with respect to marriage?

This paper therefore, engages the effects and relevance of the aphorism *di bu ugwu nwanyi* among contemporary Igbo amidst the outcry against all forms of subjugation and dehumanization of women as well as a clamour for gender equity and justice all over the world. To carry out this task, the research design deploys phenomenological and descriptive approaches and data gathered through the instrumentality of personal interviews, oral histories, participant observation and extant literature. Data collection and presentation is purely qualitative.

Obioma Nnaemeka's negofeminism and Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism is used as the theoretical basis for this study. It is hypothesized that the saying, *di bu ugwu nwanyi* and its despicable consequences has become antique and parochial in present realities and is anti-gender equity. It fans the embers of gender disparity and injustice and sequesters Igbo women from self-realization. In this paper, attempt is made to understand the 'patriarchal wisdom' behind this dictum. The twists and turns of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* will be explored as well as its flows and ebbs in modern times. More so, *di bu ugwu nwanyi* will be evaluated with respect to its practical application in present times. Then, recommendations will be made and conclusion drawn from findings.

Theoretical Framework

The rationale behind this research is based on two feminist theories—negofeminism and snail-sense feminism indigenous to Africans (Nigerians) and propounded by feminist scholars of Igbo ethnic origin. In this paper, the age-long saying *di bu ugwu nwanyi*, which exacerbates gender disparity among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria is interrogated against contemporary context.

Nego-feminism

Negofeminism is an afro-centric feminist theory that was put forward by Obioma Nnaemeka in her 2005 work titled: *Negofeminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's way*. Nnaemeka and many other afro-centric feminist theorists identified patriarchy and the disadvantaged position of women in Africa as a problem. On the other hand, they were dissatisfied with the Euro-centric 'universal' feminist theories that was incongruous with peculiarities of African women experiences, or ways of living and knowing. Acknowledging the fact that gender issues in the West and gender issues in Africa are not coterminous and that the experiences and voices of women of African decent and other non-caucasian women were not represented in mainstream feminist theories, African women gender scholars resorted to developing indigenous feminist theories to address the issues of women in Africa in the African way. Nnaemeka, therefore, proposed negofeminism as a culturally appropriate and compliant model. Negofeminism is about negotiation; 'no ego' in the bid to herald gender balance and justice in Africa. 'No ego' here, stands for pursuit of harmony and justice without ego either from the women or even the men. Nnaemeka, the theorist, admits that patriarchy is pathological in African culture and culture drives and props gender disparity in Africa. However, since African women valorize marriage, motherhood, complementarity, solidarity and other forms of femininity (to be distinguished from feminism), Nnaemeka contends that African women should be willing to negotiate with and around men in conflicting circumstances in ways that are congruent with Africa's historical and cultural contexts. She promotes negotiation and cooperation which she believes is rooted in the value system of Africans. For her, negotiation here, should not be mistaken for passive resistance. She unequivocally states that an African woman knows "when, where and how to detonate patriarchal landmines. In other words, she knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (Nnaemeka, 2005, p. 377-378). Negofeminism advocates for negotiation and an indigenous feminism devoid of ego from any of the sex groups. Gender is thus, men and women working collaboratively. Alkali, Talif and Jan (2013, p. 11-12) note that "nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace or conflict management, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, collaboration, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration." According to Nnaemeka, for African feminists to cross boundaries, they need to be

guided by the 'chameleon sense'. The chameleon makes slow and calculated steps in one direction, and then in another depending on prevailing circumstances of the environment. Such 'moves', according to Nnaemeka, could be helpful in feminism. In Nnaemeka's (2005, p. 382) words, the African feminist, like the chameleon, should be—"goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views." This theory repudiates antipathy towards men. Rather, men are seen as allies in their fight for emancipation. Ike (2017, p. 210) writes that negofeminism is one of the Nigerian gender theories that "seek to nigerianise feminist struggle by devising strategies for gender complementarity that support African communal life."

The weakness of Nnaemeka's negofeminism lies in the fact that it cannot claim sufficiency in addressing the nuances of African women's experiences in a non-monolith Africa. On that basis, it has been criticized for exclusion.

Snail-sense Feminism

This theory was advanced by Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo in her 2012 monograph series, titled: *Snail-sense feminism: Building on an indigenous model*. Snail-sense feminism is Ezeigbo's own version of Nigerian (African) indigenous feminist theory. Her work develops from the fact that Western feminism lacks the temerity to authoritatively speak for non-European women. Just like Nnaemeka and other African feminist theorists like Catherine Acholonu, Chioma Opara, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, and others, Ezeigbo (2012, p. 26) is of the opinion that a suitable feminist theory for Nigerians (Africans) must be built on the indigenous and must be "realistic, practical and functional." Uwandu (2018, para. 4) posits that such theory has to "fit into Nigerian/African worldview, mannerism and ideals." Ezeigbo used the habits of snails and its smart sense as a model for feminism in Africa. The snail is a small feeble animal with antenna-like tentacles on both sides of the head, a shell into which it retracts when faced with a strong obstacle or when it senses a threat. It moves slowly with its always lubricated lips and is dogged in terms of reaching its goals. It navigates through rough, smooth, rocky, thorny paths undeterred from reaching its target. A snail is also an individualistic animal as it is hardly seen in a closely-knit group or in the company of its young. Ezeigbo avers that Nigerian women in the past, successful-

ly employed the habits of the snail, that is, wisdom, sensitiveness, resilience, doggedness and determination, in their relationship with men and patriarchy; she believes those habits remain germane in the present context as well. Snail-sense feminism is about tolerance and accommodation. In Ezeigbo's (2012, p. 27) words, the snail "does not confront objects but negotiates its way past any obstacle."

Unlike other afro-centric feminist theories that center on communalism, Ezeigbo's model centers on the individual woman first. When she succeeds in achieving self recognition and preservation which are crucial to a woman's success, the success of the family or community follows naturally (Ezeigbo, 2012). In essence, "snail-sense feminism, symbiotically, advocates Western feminism's individualism and African womanism's communalism" (Ezeigbo, 2012, p. 35).

Snail-sense feminism can be used by the modern Nigerian woman as a strategy to "negotiate tradition, respond to political, socio-economic and cultural impositions" (Ezeigbo, 2012, p. 33). This model is phenomenal because it queries the efficacy of extant ideas about sisterhood, female agency and group consciousness. Ezeigbo (2012, p. 36) contends that, "in the end, it is the individual that constitutes the group." Nevertheless, Ezeigbo pointed out that her theory has been criticized as demeaning to Nigerian women, owing to the fact that the snail is weak and sluggish. Critics of snail-sense feminism subscribe more to African women being more unapologetic in their demand for their rights and justice.

Negofeminism and snail-sense feminism are similar in the sense that they are both Nigerian variants of feminism that are not radical, separatist and appreciate female-male complementarity. The theories only differ slightly in approach. Negofeminism is communalistic, while snail-sense feminism is more individualistic than communalistic. Both are however practical home-grown models for issues bordering on feminism in Nigeria and among the Igbo in particular.

Be that as it may, the theories are appropriate for this paper because they are built on the indigenous model with respect to the issues about the Africanness of African women. This theoretical framework will help push the frontiers of knowledge forward because it will be used to interrogate *di bu ugwu nwanyi* among the Igbo in the contemporary society. In order to engage this aphorism that promotes female oppression among Igbo people, negofeminism and snail-sense feminism remain instructive. According to Alkali, Talif and Jan (2013, p. 11), "efforts are needed to proffer ways for women to achieve their objectives without recourse to injurious method-

ology. Nego-feminism in this exact sense sets out to achieve just that." Also, snail-sense feminism is unique as a result of its emphasis on individualism which is uncommon among traditional Igbo people.

Historical Justification for *di bu ugwu nwanyi*

The aphorism *di bu ugwu nwanyi* evokes the psychology and consciousness that patriarchy holds sway in Igboland. The expression props and perpetuates societal disequilibrium as it marginalizes the femalefolk. However, nothing happens without a reason. Some of the reasons held as justification for this aphorism are apt and somewhat convincing, others seem trivial, androcentric and ridiculous.

In an interview conducted on 27 December 2019, Mrs Evelyn Aniago avered that *di bu ugwu nwanyi* is used in Igboland to deter young women from promiscuity. She opined that suitors only ask for the hands in marriage of ladies that are perceived to be 'chaste'. Promiscuous ladies remain unmarried. According to Aniago, to remain unmarried was highly undesirable for any family or even young girl. Hence *di bu ugwu nwanyi* was to prevent the distasteful condition of remaining single. Marriage was elevated to almost a sacrosanct rite of passage in Igboland. Thus, it was normative for every young girl in Igboland to marry. During an interview conducted on 16 March, 2020, Prof Ngozi Iheanacho asserted that in Africa, "perpetuity in a woman's home of orientation makes her a failure." At a certain stage and age in the life of an Igbo woman it is said that people will cease to ask whose daughter she is and begins to ask whose wife she is (PK Amilo 2019, personal communication, 29 December). Such cases serve as strong reminders to the lady that culturally, she ought to have over-stayed her welcome in her natal home.

On the other hand, the Igbo believe that marriage restricts sexual relationship to one partner or at least with one's spouse in the case of polygyny. This is hardly true with some couples though. However, it is assumed that an unmarried woman is open for sexual advances from every interested man since she has 'no dignity' without a husband. During an interview conducted on 16 March 2020, Prof Ngozi Iheanacho noted that when the man who is like a protective cover is not there, any man could come at any time knocking at the door of a woman for sex. To protect the sexual sanctity of Igbo societies therefore, women should get married (P Isintume 2020, personal communication, 2 January). Isintume insisted

that marriage *per se*, does not regulates sexual advances on women but marriage to a man. *Di* (husband) does not only connote male among the Igbo, a woman's in-laws represent her *di*, whether the husband is alive or dead. When a woman is widowed, she still has many *di*. Her in-laws, some men outside the inlaw-*di* relations, still make undue advances at her suggesting different kinds of marital relationship in Igbo society.

Different kinds of marriage are recognized among the Igbo. One of such is the marriage of two women. This relationship is nothing to being lesbians. Progeny drives this form of marriage. In the case that a woman could not have children, or wants to advance her status in society, she could marry a woman for herself. The woman so married becomes her wife. The female husband claim the children the 'wife' bears. Amadiume (1987) spells out this relationship among the Igbo. In this case of a 'female husband', marriage hardly regulates sexual advances on her. In essence, the Igbo society has regard for a woman that is married to a 'male', that is to say, the marriage is not for her sake, but for the sake of the male husband.

Strictly gendered roles in Igboland in the past, where the man was responsible for catering for the family, and the woman was responsible for domestic chores, placed women in an economically disadvantaged position. Their job both in their natal homes and marital homes majorly attracted no financial remuneration. With no compensation for the long labours within the household, women's work was usually regarded as 'nothing' (Oduyoye, 2002; Chukwuma, 2012). Consequently, marriage served as economic covering for women. Wives depended on their husbands for their needs, chief among which were dresses which remain a major boost for married women (N Iheanacho 2020, personal communication, 16 March). Many take pride in the fact that their husbands provided them clothing. "In the patriarchal world order, there are a few possible means by which a woman can break out from the circle of perpetual poverty. One way is marriage to a wealthy man who can offer the luxury required to live well" (Shaka & Uchendu, 2012, p. 14). Aside economic dependence on the husband, preference for males in child bearing indirectly fuels *di bụ ugwu nwanyi*.

It is common knowledge among the Igbo that male children are preferred in child bearing because they perpetuate their family line (Mbonu, 2010, p. 89–90). From childhood therefore, girls were socialized in such a way that they come to terms with their second fiddle status in the family. The girl-child grows up painfully aware that she does not have a permanent abode in her natal home. Her transitional existence within the family motivates her to actively seek solace in marriage. This simply corroborates

the impression young women have been made to embrace and make marriage appear a safe haven as well as dignifying. Dignity in marriage is not without children, especially male.

That notwithstanding, the Igbo of Nigeria valorize fecundity for many reasons. Children are regarded as blessing and must be sought after. As Oduyoye (2002, p. 141) put it, “procreation is the most important factor governing marriages in Africa.” For the women, among other things, children, especially male children provide security in marriage and guarantees a secured old age. According to Chukwuma (2012, p. 90), “in Igbo traditional ethos, motherhood is the quintessential honour and crown of the married woman.” To have children therefore, in a socially approved way in line with cultural mores in Igboland, marriage becomes a necessity. In other words, to enjoy the benefits that come from motherhood, one must necessarily pass through the ‘dignifying’ institution of marriage. In essence, motherhood is empowering (Chinweizu, 1990); but this empowerment often contends with other societal bottlenecks on women. Hence, Chukwuma (2012, p. 90), asserts: “though motherhood elevates a woman’s status in the society, her femalism continues to define and limit her.” Religion has also been pointed as a justification for *di bu ugwu nwanyi*.

In a way, Christian religion, which majority of the Igbo have come to embrace supports *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in principle and in practice. Okure (2013, p. 364) decries the scriptural injunction that wives be subject to their husbands in all things. For Okure, this “places on the wife an impossible burden that borders on a case of conscience; it creates internal conflict and reduces the wife to a non-person.” Continuing, Okure impressively bares and debunks the obvious anomalies in the biblical reference to men as head in Eph. 5:25–33. She posits that whether ‘head’ here means source, part of the body or boss (being in charge) of the woman, such comparisons cannot stand their ground. Without condemning the author of Ephesians, Okure (2013, p. 370) thinks it is time to “carry forward in our own context, with over 2000 years of history, the christologizing of the passage that he [the author of Ephesians] started.” Okure concludes that the distorted use of scripture against women are misrepresentations by men and not based on Christ. Decock (2013) shares the same thoughts with Okure. On her own, Oduyoye (2002, p. 182) submits that, “a church that consistently ignores the implications of the gospel for the lives of women ... cannot continue to be an authentic voice for salvation”.

The aphorism—*di bu ugwu nwanyi* is also strengthened by the Igbo religious views. Igbo indigenous religion as well as the Christian religion, are

patriarchal religions. These religions reinforce male domination and women's marginalization (Shaka & Uchendu, 2012; Decock, 2013; Okure, 2013; Ezenweke, 2015; Schnabel, 2019). Although the participation of women in Igbo traditional religion is said to be adequate (Oduyoye, 2001), patriarchal structures sometimes eclipse this fact. For instance, Okafor (2012, p. 20) avers that, "as daughters, wife and mothers, women are revered because of that principle that extends to the [earth] goddess but patriarchal social organization tends to constrain this power."

The argument canvassed above are the explanations given as justification for the saying—*di bu ugwu nwanyi*. Some interviewees accept the adage as chiseled on stone, they simply note that the axiom is cultural and normative for the Igbo ethnic group.

The Twists and Turns of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in Igbo Contemporary Context

Having looked at some reasons for *di bu ugwu nwanyi*, it becomes pertinent to consider its merits and demerits in Igbo contemporary context. The effects of the saying *di bu ugwu nwanyi* on women, perhaps unintended, remains repulsive. The aphorism portrays an unmarried woman as worthless and handicapped. Moreover, the concept of woman's dignity issued from that of her husband subjects her to perpetual serfdom in marriage.

Marriage is desirable among the Igbo of Nigeria and the absence of it is sinister for the female folks. Women are therefore 'talked' into marriage sometimes when they are neither ready nor have a suitor of their choice. Mothers who have been immersed in Igbo traditional practices and aphorisms like *di bu ugwu nwanyi* pressurize their daughters into marriage so that the daughter may be a "dignified humanbeing". This is a contested situation for the society. Such pressure create psychological problems for young women, some suffer depression and some others settle hurriedly for some man they are incompatible with. Such is the predicament of young Igbo women. Ngcobo (2013, p. 540) insists that "the plight of a woman is desperate, ... Many will hang on to the same man long after he has lost interest. This raises a crucial question for African women today—that of self-definition and self-determination." Such shaky marriages could easily end in divorce.

There is an unwritten code attributing perfection to women in Igbo society in terms of marriage. The society holds her accountable if she does

not get married, and again if she does marry and the marriage fails, she is deemed culpable for her inability to endure the indignities and atrocious relationship. Therefore, women hardly 'left (divorced) their husbands' in the past. Regardless of whether a man left his wife and went his way, or sent her out of the house, or maltreated her until she could take it no more, it was said that she 'left her husband' (Nwapa, 1966). Writing about women and divorce in African literature, Ngcobo (2013, p. 539) rightly states:

the image of divorced women in our society and our literature is negative. Only a handful may earn the understanding of the community ... On the whole a wife will do anything to endure even a stressful marriage, for in a divorce she comes out the loser: Even when her husband is the offending party.

Thus, women in Igboland usually endure mistreatments as *ijedi* (liabilities that come with marriage). The notion of *ijedi* was unequivocally and exhaustively discussed by Agbasiere (2000). It is troubling however, that many women in Igboland past and even in contemporary times silently endure untold abuses and inhumane treatment from husbands because they believe their humanity and dignity rest in the marriages. This bares the 'culture of silence' that has bedevilled Igbo women and perhaps, women in other parts of the globe. Defining the good woman in Africa, Udumukwu (2007, p. 3) says that she is "that woman who suffers the effects of oppression ... and who must maintain a silence and passivity in order to remain good." In the same vein, Shaka & Uchendu (2012, p. 9) aver that nollywood video films, in line with African patriarchy, often portray Nigerian model of a 'good' woman as "docile, submissive, accepting, never protesting, never questioning." Such a woman as described by Udumukwu (2007), Shaka & Uchendu (2012) must be a robot, without emotions or will.

On the other hand, Makama (2002), cited in Ike (2017, p. 207) stresses that in Nigerian movies, "educated working women activists are portrayed as audacious insubordinate agitators, while those who opt to remain single are portrayed as prostitutes, social degenerates and immoral human beings." Depicting a typical Igbo sentiment about marriage in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Diala-Ogamba (2012, p. 320) states that women "stay in marriage even when there is chaos or some kind of spousal abuse in their marital homes." In the same vein, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Chukwuma (2012) narrates how brute force is used to bend wives to submit to their husbands.

Additionally, among the Igbo, at the demise of a husband, the wife apparently loses 'dignity'. The unwholesome widow rites meted out and the untold woes of widows in Nigeria and Africa have been adequately documented (Shaka & Uchendu, 2012; Mbonu, 2013; Quayson, 2013; Ogbujah & Onuoha, 2014; Oluremi, 2017).

For the Igbo woman, marriage could be a fulfilling, ambivalent or even an awful experience. Nevertheless, the strength of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* lies in the fact that it serves to champion marriage, a decidedly esteemed institution in Africa. Most African gender activists, past and present, amidst their struggles for gender equity and justice, endorse marriage. Moreover, marriage remains the only institution that guarantees a woman the privilege to bear children according to cultural norms. Marriage strongly regulates sexuality, continence and chastity among women in Igboland. Having considered the flow and ebb of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in contemporary Igbo societies, a discourse on *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in contemporary context will follow.

***Di bu ugwu nwanyi* in Contemporary Context**

Modernity brings to the fore the full implication of the concept of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in contemporary Igbo society. The pertinent question becomes whether this expression is still relevant in the present realities among the Igbo. In the past, *di bu ugwu nwanyi* served some palpable purposes. This notwithstanding, the relevance and practicability of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in the contemporary times has become problematic. With advancement in knowledge and the whole new area of gender roles, feminism and other forms of women's activism and struggle, the age old marginalization structures have begun to crumble. Issues bordering on Igbo traditions are however recalcitrant because for the Igbo, tradition is sacrosanct and should not be questioned. Quayson (2013) therefore calls for subtlety in handling them. Nnaemeka's negofeminism and Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism are subtle and strategic and should be applied in finding a way around and making a headway within obstinate traditions.

No doubt, marriage among the Igbo is *sine qua non* and mutually reinforcing to women and men. In other words, ideally, marriage is essential and beneficial to both parties in Igboland. However, culturally, men seem to be the ones that benefit more in marriage. Be that as it may, strong changes that alter or point to a modification of the saying *di bu ugwu nwanyi* have

permeated the system. For instance, in contemporary times, due to education and other modernizing agencies, patriarchal structures that support the marginalization of Igbo women is being interrogated. Some women are now demanding for a deconstruction of patriarchal structures that have thingified Igbo women as second class citizens for a long time. As a result, the aphorism *di bu ugwu nwanyj*, honorific titles such as Oriaku (wealth consumer) and names like 'Ejinwanyiemegini' (what can one do with a female?), which disparage women and the very essence of their humanness are being questioned. Among the Igbo of Anambra State, for instance, *oriaku*, which is pejorative in a sense, has been modified and replaced with *odoziaku* (wealth manager), *oso di eme* (supporter of husband). Because culture is dynamic, Igbo culture and sayings have continued to evolve.

In the past, Igbo women were hardly given formal education. Currently, a significant number acquire formal education and are equipped to contribute meaningfully to the society with or without the assistance of the malefolks. This way of being could not have been acceptable in the past. Again, with education, women seek and obtain financially secured employment in business and industries, although many still engage in menial or skilled labours. Women now contribute economically in their household. They no longer depend totally on their husbands for their economic and financial needs. For the woman, there is a way in which the sense of economic independence convey a sense of dignity.

Today, most women, Igbo women inclusive, whether unmarried or divorced, stand their grounds and achieve great feats without a husband. For instance, Genevieve Nnaji, a multiple award winning Nollywood actress, producer and director is single, but very successful. Also, Tsai Ing-wen, the current President of Taiwan is unmarried. Today, there are single women who are captains of industries, Chief Executive Officers of Companies, owners of big and small businesses, bosses, University Professors and even world leaders. The likes of Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr Oby Ezekwesili and late Prof Dora Akunyili, who are women of Igbo extraction, have served and performed excellently in different national and international fora. This simply testifies to the fact that women are humanbeings in their own rights and can achieve fabulous feats with or without a husband. These positive examples of these and other such women debunks *di bu ugwu nwanyj*. Oduyoye (2002, p. 147) states that "real change will come about when women can say—with or without husbands, ... the most important fact is that women are human and will find fullness in reaching for goals that we set for ourselves."

On the other hand, there are also married women who are successful and at the same time, value femininity, heterosexuality and feminism. For instance, an advertisement campaign—*Modern Bride*, launched by US bridal magazine in 2008, “shows quite palpably how the ‘modern’ bride defines herself through quintessential femininity and heterosexual appeal while simultaneously claiming a feminist stance” (Heise, 2018, p. 204).

Needless to say, *di bu ugwu nwanyi* can only continue to offend Igbo women’s psyche and render them powerless and unproductive. This is not good for the Igbo society. The saying has apparently lost its relevance and applicability in modern times. Perpetuating it will amount to taking Igbo society decades back. Chukwuma (2012, p. 98) notes that the brute force with which Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* cowed women has:

faded away into the horizons of history. Achebe the master artist that he is has continued to upgrade his narrative reflecting the pulse of the times. His other novels leading to the *Anthills of the Savannah* (1981) show the female characters slowly reclaiming their self-worth. ... Beatrice in *Anthills*, created her own identity as a person, educated, knowledgeable and accomplished. She did not clamor for marriage and motherhood in order to win social acclaim.

It must be clearly stated that the position of this paper is not that marriage in itself is a bad phenomenon. Marriage and all that it brings—the fulfillment and pleasure that comes with companionship and coitus, procreation, family relationships, fostering of human societies and other benefits are desirable and as a matter of fact, endorsed by Igbo culture and religion. The worry here, is the age-long cultural practices perpetuated by such expressions as *di bu ugwu nwanyi*, which tends to devalue women and subject them to bear the brunt of male indiscretions, while the man becomes the winner who takes all both in and outside of marriage.

Recommendations

To strike a balance in the present context, this paper supports a proactive move to engage and change the gender insensitive adage: *di bu ugwu nwanyi* that has endured from times past among the Igbo so as to avoid culture stagnation. This may not be without the problem of Igbo women taking their rightful place in modernity and at same time re-

nouncing 'normality' (Quayson, 2013). It must, however, be reiterated here that culture is dynamic. As it evolves, it sheds some traits and imbibes new ones in a continuous process of modification without necessarily losing its originality. There is need for adjustments so as to strike a balance between the past and present realities. Apparently, *di bu ugwu nwanyi* in the face of present circumstance, particularly with advance in women's education and new ways of knowing, among the Igbo, has become outdated for the most part. The Igbo should move along with the rest of the world that is clamouring for and vanguarding gender harmony and inclusivity. The Igbo should therefore shelve the sayings and practices that exclude gender justice and equity in society. Traditional rulers, heads of Igbo communities as well as leaders of other smaller communities in Igboland can propagate this new understanding, however subtle. To continue to promote the virtue of marriage among the Igbo, if the society deems fit, they can modify the vexing adage to read: *di na nwunye bu ugwu onwe ha* (spouses give dignity to each other) or *alum di na nwunye mara mma* (marriage is beautiful) or *ezi mmekolita di na nwunye di ike* (marriage relationship is empowering).

That said, there is need for Igbo women (married and unmarried) to unite and speak with one voice with respect to their rights and dignity. Women's groups for the married and singles in communities should put their efforts together to deconstruct the cultural structures that tend to promote backwardness and underdevelopment. Oduyoye (2002) challenges women to join together in the face of increasing social pressure to return to or remain in 'tradition' while men move on into the twenty-first century. To achieve this bonding among women, therefore, sensitization needs to be carried out especially at the grassroots to encompass rural women, who sometimes appear to be trapped in an ever ending marital servitude. Nnaemeka's negofeminism, that is nonviolent and non-confrontational would be a veritable tool in the campaign as well as Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism. The basic ingredients of African feminism which include gender complementarity and love for all of humankind should be the watchword. Nevertheless, the sensitization should include the place of mutual respect among women regardless of marital status. Igbo women, as individuals or a group, should therefore be taught to desist from perpetuating the ideology behind *di bu ugwu nwanyi* through the repugnant practice of giving respect to women on the basis of their marital status and not who they are. Oduyoye (2002, p. 108) insists that women should refuse to "let seemingly trivial issues—such as our naming by Madam, Mrs.,

or Ms.—overshadow questions of real autonomy, the naming and defining of who we are.”

Again, since gender is transmitted through different avenues, awareness should be created for Igbo women (mothers) to begin to play their nurturing roles in transmitting the right mien to their children so as to begin to close the gender gap. For instance, Ezenweke (2015) meticulously describes the various stages of preparing a girl for marriage. No such rigorous training/preparation is done for the young men. Hence, there are strict societal expectations from the young lady, but not from the young man. In addition, feminist scholars should not relent in writing more balanced literature. There is need to complement some androcentric literature that young adults read in Nigerian schools that continue to transmit a prejudiced idea of gender such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with literary works that depict independent women that are not passive, but active and assertive. 'Her-story', as opposed to 'his-story' that is biased against women need to be told. Those are models for the modern woman to help her overcome subservience. A good example is Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. For instance, Efuru the protagonist in Nwapa's novel is heroic, strong, independent, self-reliant and courageous against patriarchal odds that fought to hold her down.

Finally, since every marriage is unique in itself, issues about marriage becomes individualistic. Therefore, women's agency or synergy to pull down unfavourable structures may not work perfectly in marriage matters. Hence, Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism which is more individualistic and a bit communalistic fits well. Igbo married women should look inwards, build the snail's survival traits that makes it dogged, focused, and strong enough to navigate through diverse kinds of terrain and hit its target all by itself and not in solidarity with other snails, even though it is a feeble animal. In other words, individual Igbo women have to take their destinies in their own hands in marriage and be determined to make it work without being swallowed up in it.

In summary, efforts should be made to better the lots of women in Igbo society. These women, without doubt, are indispensable agents of transformation. Their potentials cannot be maximized in a subservient position. Therefore, "any attempt to transform the society must start with enhancing the lot of women" (Ogbujah & Onuoha, 2014, p. 56). In the same vein, Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, can also play a role in this regard. Shaka and Uchendu (2012, p. 21) note that "film is a very powerful medi-

um for the dissemination of information and the engendering of a particular ideology in the psyche of a people. It can be used to enslave or liberate.” Hence, the story lines should be written with a view of its effect on society. Gender inclusivity abhors sexist movies, however stealthy. This must be discouraged.

Conclusion

Di bu ugwu nwanyi is an old aphorism that has outlived its usefulness. There were much rationale for it in the past, ranging from deference to chastity in young girls to preserving the sanctity of the society and so on. This saying, amidst its strengths has its major pitfall in the fact that it objectifies women and makes them of little or no relevance as individuals. This, of course, has a lot of negative consequences for the women as well as the Igbo society generally.

Marriage should not be a death sentence for a woman. Some women endure indignities in marriage in order to guarantee their dignity. Nnu Ego in Emecheta’s (1979, p. 186) *The Joys of Motherhood*’s lament and desperate prayer: “God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” captures the sentiments expressed in this paper.

Single women are being ridiculed and disdained for the singular reason that they are not married and therefore lack dignity. This is a clear example of culture lag—a situation whereby evolved cultural practice moves ahead, while cultural thoughts and sayings lag behind. *Di bu ugwu nwanyi* bares the gap between actual reality and cultural dogmas among the Igbo in the contemporary. This saying therefore, in contemporary practicality, is not without obvious contestations.

Without demeaning the institution of marriage among the Igbo, the aphorism *di bu ugwu nwanyi* has lost its practical relevance in modern times because it props Igbo women’s objectification and thingification. In present realities, mutual respect and equity should be key. *Di bu ugwu nwanyi* has to be reviewed, modified or discarded entirely in the midst of an international clamour for gender inclusivity, visibility, mainstreaming and respect for women’s rights. Like Negofeminism and snail-sense feminism, unlike Western feminism, are built on indigenous knowledge and are not hostile to men, neither do they abhor marriage and motherhood. Hence, these theories are suitable models for discussing marriage among

the Igbo of Nigeria. In all of this, Igbo woman's ability to simultaneously navigate femininity and indigenous feminism, which collaborates with men, in her quest to carve out a space as an important and equally indispensable part of the society is ultimate.

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