

Female Husbands in Igbo Land: Southeast Nigeria

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of female husbands in Igbo land, southeastern Nigeria. It highlights the issues that necessitated and sustained the phenomenon, and the perpetual conflict and dichotomy within the connotations and ideas of patriarchy in Igbo land. While distinguishing it from lesbianism as practiced elsewhere, the paper argues that unlike other societies, women to women marriages in Igbo land were not contracted in response to the sexual emotions or attractions of the couples, but simply an instrument for the preservation and extension of patriarchy and its traditions. The paper also argues that the concept of Female husband in Igbo land served more of the interest of patriarchy than contend against it. It concludes that the two gender nomenclatures; patriarchy and matriarchy should be re-conceptualized to reflect the eclecticism that has been present in gender relations overtime.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Inheritance, Matriarchy, Gender, Marriage, Masculinisation

Introduction

The concept of patriarchy is not new. Indeed, it has been an age long defining concept in gender relations the world over. In Africa for instance though cultures that operate matriarchy as a social system abound, its application is only limited to inheritance. Generally it has been argued by scholars that there could be no absolute practice of either patriarchy or matriarchy.¹ Nevertheless, patriarchy largely dominates most of the world's social system today. A popular alteration to the practice of this social system has been that of woman to woman marriage, an improvisation to sustain patriarchy, but a negation of its definition and import. That woman to women marriage or female husbands was more pronounced than might be supposed especially in Africa where it occurred in over 30 societies, including; the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, the Zulu of Southern Africa, the Nuer of East Africa etc., is incontrovertible. Indeed, it suggests the flexibility and dynamism that have attained gender roles in Africa.

Patriarchy: a Conception or Misconception?

Conceptually, patriarchy has been defined in various ways by scholars. It has been defined as a social system wherein the family headship and along with it power and possession passed from the man on to his sons.² It also referred to a social system in which men wielded all the powers and used it only to their own advantage. For the purpose of this work, the latter definition seemed more significant. Since it was normal for authority to go with function, patriarchy as practiced in Africa naturally assigned authority to the men for the system had allowed them all the powers and its use. Consequently, since they wielded all the powers and the discretionary right to use it, it was only natural that they were bound to use it selfishly.

One of the functions bestowed on the men by the system of patriarchy was the headship of the family. And since the family remained the smallest building block of the society, though not exclusive, the men became the leaders of the society by extension. According to Chinweizu,³ “the patriarch zone of function and authority includes the physical protection of the homestead and its territory, the male economic sphere..., the spiritual sphere..., the social sphere.” The matriarch zone of function on the other hand restricted the women to the kitchen, cradle, the female economic sphere, mostly perceived as demeaning for men to venture or intrude into. These socially ascribed functions inhibited women's participation in public life, since they were to be seen and not heard.

The concept of patriarchy permeated every aspect of societal life, in every age, so much so that even most religions especially the major ones: Christianity, Islam and Judaism, preached patriarchal ideologies. Indeed, the masculinisation of the gods of these religions was an affirmation of the patriarchal dispositions of their parent societies and cultures. Such dispositions and perceptions led to the marginalization and underdevelopment of women. This however, was consequent upon the ambience of anti- women cosmologies of other civilizations and the destruction of the knowledge of other people of women which led to the emergence of only “one monolithic scientific paradigm in all its rationality and objectivity which dominated all civilizations with a patriarchal order which denied all women.”⁴

In Europe for example, though the ideals of equality of the genders, women empowerment and liberation, feminism and other ideals that were geared towards the elimination of the vestiges of patriarchy emerged and despite all the mobilization and even legal support in most countries for women, patriarchy was still dominant and matriarchy vestigial. Even the political elite of those societies still did not accept or appreciate women’s participation in public life. A Roman senator Cato, said,

Our ancestors did not allow women to handle any business even domestic, without special authorization. They never failed to keep women dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands.⁵

This outlook made it impossible for women to be acknowledged in areas where they were often seen as intruders, or even encouraged to venture into activities that were believed to be reserved for their male counter-parts. Theological justifications, as mentioned earlier, worsened situations. However, with the emergence of secular societies in Europe and the Americas, women gradually appeared and played active roles though scantily in public life. In Africa, the concept of patriarchy was entrenched due to its reinforcement by socio-cultural institutions and beliefs. In Nigeria, particularly since the women’s domain was believed to be in the kitchen and cradle, their contributions to the male sphere were not seen as deserving of any attention. These socially and culturally ascribed functions of women had put them in a position and situation in which they were materially and psychologically dependent on the men. Consequently, any attempt at improving the conditions of women largely attracted pessimism.

In Igbo land, the traditional village comprised two or more compounds. Each had its foundation on patrilineal relations. In conformity with that, the male by seniority was accorded status, respect and recognition in the scheme of things irrespective of polygamous family and agnatic emphasis.

In the family, the first son was the head and the custodian of the family heirlooms like *Ofo*, (symbol of strength), and *Chi* (personal god of the family). Having custody of the *Ofo*, the first son known as *Opara*, was invested with the symbol of the family authority. Consequently, this patriarchal perception put the female child at a disadvantage; she was denied formal education or skill even in the contemporary times. Indeed, attention had focused only on the male child under whose headship the female and indeed the women were placed. Inheritance and other issues relating to positions of authority in Igbo land were seen as the preserves of the male. Though gender division was usually strict among the Igbo, there were some unique exceptions that suggest more fluidity between gender roles. Ifi Amadiume explores this in her classic book; *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. It would appear that the patrilineal base for power and authority was not without a check. The matrilineal or mother lineage, *Umunne* mediated in any conflict arising from patrilineal functions and power. For instance, as depicted in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Violent deaths were frequent but nothing like this had ever happened. The only course to Okonkwo was to flee from his clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman: a man who committed it must flee from the land... and before the cock crowed Okonkwo and his family were fleeing to his motherland⁶

One was accorded and treated with the highest respect and regard when one visited one's mother's home (mother's lineage). Similarly, whenever one was in any serious trouble with one's father's lineage, *Umunna*, the *Umunne*'s (mother's lineage) decision or opinion on the matter remained decisive. This regards for the mother's lineage was not unprecedented. Indeed, it derived from the two Igbo positions of esteem that were formally institutionalized in the patriarchal Igbo family; the *Opara* (first son) and *Ada* (first daughter). The first two *Opara* and *Ada*, were accorded higher status in an Igbo family.⁷

In the Igbo world view, importance was attached to a male child more than a female or indeed any full grown woman. The obsession for a male child in every Igbo family, and in Africa generally stood a restriction to the efforts and further contributions of women. This cultural preference for the male child and restrictions against the female had hindered the development of women and denied them self-actualization. It is within this obsession for the male child that the 'pregnancy' of the concept of the female husband in Igbo land was conceived.

Nature of Marriage in Igbo Land

Marriages were undertaken for very different reasons in different times and places. For example, in old Europe, marriages were made for dynastic reasons, to form alliances between families and for the production of heirs. Today Europeans have other perspectives - people prefer to marry for 'love', and some forgo marriage altogether. Likewise, in some cultures in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa, marriages, be it woman to woman or opposite-sex marriages were often conducted out of family duty, most times for purposes of inheritance, and not so much motivated by love, or sexual orientation. Not that there is anything inherently wrong or right about 'loveless' marriages, they were the norm in most cultures of the world through most of history and are still popular today. Among the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria, the institution of marriage was greatly regarded. Marriage was believed to be as old as man and to them it helped to propagate and perpetuate human life; it was revered and held sacrosanct. The Igbo, avoided an incestuous relationship hence most of the Igbo villages were exogamous. The different Igbo villages could intermarry, but could not intra-marry. Although monogamy was the practice, yet polygamy was appreciated as a mark of greatness and high social status.⁸ Intermarriage with neighbours on the other hand was encouraged as it enhanced trade and travels. In the pre-colonial period, distant traders and polygamists usually took care to select their wives from geographically strategic and important communities along their business routes.⁹ This was of great implication; by marriage, such merchants enjoyed acceptability in their father in-law's clan, most significantly where the father in-law was from a respectable and influential family that could guarantee security.¹⁰ Furthermore, the father in-law's house provided accommodation and warehouse facilities which were otherwise non-existent in the pre-colonial Igbo land.¹¹ However marriages in Igbo land were not restricted to adult males and females alone. To a large extent, marriages were contracted between two females and between underage children till they grew up. For the latter, it was for various reasons; to ensure the continued friendship ties of their families, and to protect especially the girl bride from any future suitor. Child marriage was "the most common way of acquiring rights in women."¹²

Undoubtedly, marriage in the Igbo world view represented the instrumentality for the realization, preservation and the accentuation of the Igbo essence. The agency of this preservation was child birth; hence infertility was considered a peculiar harsh misfortune and sometimes a punishment for one's misdeed or disapproval of a particular union by the gods. Children were considered the ultimate blessing of all and the best product of any marriage. This was demonstrated in popular names such as *Nwakaego*, a child is treasured more than money; *Akuakanwa*, no wealth is worthier than a child, or *Nwabugwu*, a child is the greatest honour.¹³ It was a popular practice in many parts of Igbo land to honour women who were successfully delivered of ten or more children; they were rewarded with the *Lolo* title, a special celebration and rite that venerated their hips.¹⁴

The Concept of Female Husband in Igbo Land

The practice of female husband was not novel in Igbo land. However, the practice did not involve sexual relationship between the couple as opposed to lesbianism. Lesbianism involves a relationship in which a woman is romantically or sexually attracted only to other women. Scholars are disagreed on the exact period that the practice of lesbianism started or the first lesbian relationship. Nevertheless the earliest known written references to “same-sex love between women are attributed to Sappho who lived on the island of Lesbos in ancient Greece from about 625 to 570 BCE and wrote poems which expressed her sexual attraction to other females.”¹⁵ This practice however spread across societies in Europe, Americas and other societies.

Among the ancient Romans and Greeks, the phenomenon was accepted as normal. For example, public baths were set aside for women who, in spite of being married, wanted to continue sexual contacts with other women especially in Rome. In such situations, these women had sexual relationships with the slave girls, who satisfied their lesbian desires.¹⁶ However, as the Christian faith gained prominence, the acceptance of this homosexual relations became demonized not because it was a misnomer, the disapproval centered more on the practice being adulterous than an abnormal relations between women.

In Latin America, evidences abound of the practice among the aboriginal communities at the end of the 16thC. For example the women known *ascacoaimbeguira* of Tupinamba tribe, were involved in lesbianism.¹⁷ They were known to have exercised male roles, engaged in wars and were having sexual relations with other women who adopted the wife's role.¹⁸ In Europe and the United States this type of relationship was accepted since the mid-19th century. The *Bostonians*, by Henry James, was one of the works that explored this same sex union between women popularly referred to as "bostonian marriage" in the America of the 19th century. Similar experiences exist in the UK and France. Examples of this include the romance between Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, or those of Sarah Scott, Elizabeth Carter, Anna Seward, Honora Sneyd, Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Blood, etc.¹⁹

At the turn of the 20th C, prior to the emergence of European sexology a branch of psychology which attempted a scientific study of this phenomenon and its effects, female homosexuality was relatively invisible as compared to male homosexuality, which was subject to the law and more regulated and reported by the press.²⁰ However the proliferation of works by sexologists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and Magnus Hirschfeld, made the practice increasingly known. With the emergence of sexology, the practice became stereotype because it was perceived as a medical condition.

Lesbianism was perceived as a pathological perversion, in the same category as sadomasochism, fetishism, exhibitionism, zoophilia or the paedophilia. Consequently, lesbians were socially stigmatized as sexology was considering them as sick, mentally and emotionally. Based upon these erroneous concepts, various treatments which were tantamount to abuses were committed on lesbian women considered as prostitutes such as hospitalization in mental homes or hospitals, enforcing lobotomy or female genital mutilation especially of the clitoris, etc.²¹

In contemporary times, cultural changes in Western and a few other societies made lesbianism more pronounced than before. Lesbians express their sexuality more freely in recent times which has resulted in new studies on the nature of female sexuality. A 2005 study by the government of the United States,²² indicated that among women aged 15 to 44, 4.4 percent had a sexual experience with another woman during the previous 12 months. Despite, the increasing popularity of lesbianism in recent times especially in the West, the practice continued to receive condemnation as it did during the Middle age when it was considered shameful, an offence on nature and a sin of lechery.

As demonstrated above, the practice of female husband in Igbo land was different from lesbianism as practice in the West and other societies. Reasons for this phenomenon have been highlighted by many. While some have seen it as a way out for a barren couple,²³ others believed that it was a customary way for pre-colonial single but wealthy women who could not have their own children to procreate.²⁴ However, it would seem that the most significant reason for the practice of female husband was the improvisation of the male child personality, with the inherent functions and responsibilities thereon. In the traditional Igbo society and in line with the patriarchal traditions, a man's genealogy and lineage were preserved in the personalities of his sons. According to this practice when a man was unable to have a male child, he appointed one of his daughters, in most cases the first daughter to stay back in the family and procreate. To Amadiume, a man who did not have a son could pass land and trees to his daughters if the daughters were recognized. To her, this passage from female hood to male hood and the rights of "sons" could only be accomplished and recognized through rituals.²⁵

However, the practice of female husband conferred on the daughters (female husband) these rights even without the rituals. This successor-apparent, either procreated directly by going for a sex mate known as *ikonwanna* or looked for a younger female who she took in as a wife after the necessary bride price and other traditional rites had been performed. In this way, she assumed the traditional status of a man and a husband before the society and the gods. It is note-worthy to point out here that during the traditional marriage rites, the female husband still needed a male relation to front for her or speak on her behalf before her in-laws.²⁶

As mentioned earlier, there were variations to this practice. In some cases, it was the barren wife in a marriage that took a younger wife for herself, while in some others; it was the wealthy and influential or the single wealthy woman. Elsewhere, especially the Igbo of *Osumari* area, a titled woman took a wife, which was the paraphernalia of her status, in some cases more than one.²⁷ Though this particular practice was not common place, nonetheless, the rarity did not deny its existence. Other examples also abound especially among the Mbaise Igbo where the female children of a family collectively paid the pride price of a younger woman after the demise of their father in the name of their eldest sister so that the new bride could procreate and raise male children to preserve the family lineage.²⁸ In any case, the young bride was then expected by her female husband to identify a well behaved young man from the kindred, but in most cases blood relation of the female husband as the bedmate. This was of serious implications; firstly, it was believed that by so doing, the blood tie of that particular family was preserved; secondly, the family was sure that the young bride would not pollute the family by raising children fathered by miscreants, thieves or even persons with strange ailments. It was also to prevent the introduction of unwholesome and undesirable traits into the family.²⁹

However, the most significant of the reasons was the avoidance of contact with the *Osu* (the outcast). The *Osu* in Igbo land according to Uchendu,³⁰ were abhorred, for any blood contact between the *Osu* and a *Dialla* (freeborn) automatically turned the *Dialla* into an *Osu* and indeed the whole family. Under the *Osu* caste system, interaction between the *Osu* and the *Dialla* was frowned at for the fear of defilement, except on the occasion of sacrifices to the very deities that the *Osu* served.³¹ Therefore, great care was taken when selecting a bedmate for the new bride.

To actualize the essence of the marriage, the female husband remained the sociological father of any resulting offspring. The children belonged to the lineage of her father, not to their biological father. Consequently, she played the role of the father, provider, protector and indeed all the functions and responsibilities enshrined in the patriarchal concept which included physical protection of the family and its territory, the male economic sphere, the spiritual sphere, the social sphere, etc.

At this level, the female husband in theory enjoyed equal status with her male kit and kin though this was not the general practice in Igbo land. Among her female mates, the *Umuada*, she was regarded as a man and first among equals, *Okenwanyị*. She was treated like a man and her opinion was first sought in the gathering of opinions. In any ceremony, she enjoyed equal privilege with her male counterparts and in some Igbo communities like Uguta, could break kola nut,³² but only among her female folks. She combined both secular and spiritual functions and obligations. She participated in secret rituals and sometimes associated with the male elders in communal rituals.

Spiritually, she might propitiate on behalf of her family before the gods and even carry out sacrifices, but her propitiations would not include her extended family. It was believed that the gods at this level now saw her as a man rather than a woman. Her ability to engage in this religious function demonstrated that she also, like her male counterparts, exercised power and authority within her constituency. Amadiume captures this inherent power in religious structures as she argues that “political administration was embedded in the religious structure; we find both patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies juxtaposed in the indigenous political structure of Nnobi.”³³ In any case, the Igbo relationship with the lesser gods and ancestors was contractual, friendly and reciprocal.³⁴ Hence the gods would not turn their back on her for they needed more worshippers to enjoy veneration and reverence. According to Chukwukere, each of these gods was engaged in the manipulation of its relationship with Igbo mortal beings in order to secure more power and influence in the very same way that the latter themselves manipulate their own social relationships for material and spiritual benefits.³⁵

The female husband was also allowed in some Igbo communities such as Onitsha and its environs to take titles. For where the title systems existed, male and female titles existed hand in hand,³⁶ reflecting the dual pantheon of the Igbo God-head. For example in Nnobi, *Ozo* was the male title while the female equivalent was *Ekwe*.³⁷ This was the apogee of her manhood. She inherited her late father’s properties which included; farmland, economic trees, domestic animals, etc. Indeed, there was a total transplant of the patriarchal rights and functions. And her lineage was counted without bias among the lineage of the extended family tree, an imbedding of matrilinealism into patrilinealism.

However, her limitations arose from the emotional and biological realities. While her wife went out in search of a bedmate, it was also expected that this female husband had a male companion, usually known as *dinwanna*, who satisfied her erotic desires and supported her when the biological realities became inevitable. It was not expected of her at this time to get pregnant or seen openly with any man since she had crossed the maternal Rubicon. Any offspring directly from her was considered illegitimate and an outcast and treated as such. Unlike the children from her wife, her direct offspring might not enjoy or share from any communal inheritance.³⁸

Nature of Women to Women Marriage Elsewhere

Woman to woman marriage had been documented in more than 30 African populations, including the Yoruba and Igbo of West Africa, the Nuer of Sudan, the Lovedu, Zulu and Sotho of South Africa, and the Kikuyu and Nandi of East Africa,³⁹ despite the existing notion that same sex relations were alien to Africa.⁴⁰

While Murray S.O and Roscoe W., (eds.) *Boy-wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* ⁴¹ refuted long standing claims that homosexuality in Africa is nonexistent, incidental, or the result of western influences, what will certainly remain true is that the practice of women to women marriages in Igbo land did not involve sexual relationship between the couples. Instead, it was a traditional way of legalizing what ordinarily would have amounted to the birth of illegitimate children who, traditionally, would have been denied inheritance. In other words, the female husband improvised the sociological father to the resulting offspring. The children belonged to her lineage and had inheritance rights accordingly. Therefore, women to women marriages were not actually contracted in response to the sexual emotions or attractions between the couples, but simply an instrument for the preservation and extension of patriarchy and its traditions. Indeed, while the Igbo of southern Nigeria engaged in female to female marriage to preserve the lineage of the patriarch, the Yoruba of the southwestern Nigeria simply employed it to keep a loving and faithful widow who desired to stay with her in-laws even when there were no males in the family to keep her. In that case, she was acquired by any of the surviving female relations of the late husband.⁴² Unlike the Igbo, the woman was not allowed any sexual relationship within or outside.⁴³

Typically, in Igbo land such arrangements involved two women undergoing formal marriage rites; the requisite bride price was paid by one party as in a heterosexual marriage. The woman who paid the bride price of the other woman became the sociological 'husband'. The female husband was the sociological father of any resulting offspring. The children belonged to her lineage, not to their biological father's. They belonged to the patrilineal *obi* (homestead) and had inheritance rights accordingly. To this end, the concept of female husband was an instrument for the preservation and extension of patriarchy and its traditions.

Elsewhere, especially in the Americas, same sex marriage exist in recent times but for various reasons different from that for which it existed in Africa as mentioned earlier. While it was viewed as either lesbianism or homosexuality or whatever derogatory name it was called, the fact still remains that the reason for its practice in Africa was not seen as pervasive. In the United States, it is a controversial issue. This is hardly surprising, considering that it had stimulated debates in other western countries before its acceptance in Scandinavia and Canada. But the fact is, same sex marriage is not new to the 20th or 21st century, nor is it unique to any particular people or continent. Various cultures in the Americas, Africa, and Asia had, or still have the custom of same sex marriage. This is not to say that the essence of woman to woman marriages in Africa or any one society is equivalent to, or should serve as model for same-sex marriages in other cultures.

Conclusion

It would appear that the exigencies and metamorphosis of life favoured men and availed them skills, toughness and leadership elements which they perfected overtime to surmount the vagaries of existence, thanks to their physical and biological compositions. In different continents and cultures of the world prior to the fossilization of the patriarchal ideologies of the major religions of the world especially Christianity and later Islam, as well as their reinforcement by colonialism, the dual pantheon or mixed gender pantheon in the early cultures of these peoples demonstrated the complementarities of the sexes in human kind. Indeed, in some societies, there was the feminization of the God-head.⁴⁴

In practice, it would appear that the invention of the woman to woman marriage was to ensure the continuity of patriarchy as a social system, yet it striped the latter of its purity. Therefore, this paper argues that there was no absolute patriarchy as practiced in Igbo land, Africa or indeed any culture of the world. The Igbo society exhibited both patriarchal and matriarchal attributes; in leadership, family and societal headship, inheritance, genealogy and locality, etc. Hence, Amadiume⁴⁵ is of the opinion that there should be a redefinition of the words 'Matriarchy' and 'Patriarchy'. Traditionally, the term matriarchy depicted a society where women held all the power and inheritance was matrilineal, a society that was traditionally mythical. However, no society on earth had structured itself that way; but no society on earth had structured itself so that men also had all the powers either, yet the world generously apply the term 'patriarchy' to the majority of societies.

Contrary to Amadiume's argument that women were alienated from traditional sources of power, during the colonial and even the post-colonial era, the phenomenon of female husband as the preserving instrument of patriarchy and from which it derived its strength and verve tended to allocate more power to woman during these periods. The question then arises, on how this Igbo society should be categorized, if the female husband took on the functions, responsibilities and the paraphernalia of the patriarchal tradition, could it then be referred to as patriarchy, matriarchy or 'Patri-matriarchy'? It is the opinion of this writer that men and women alike should be treated as individuals and not relegated to categories as though they weren't of the same human race. In fact, this is the right opportunity to balance the faulty equation that says; 'what a man can do a woman can do better,' to 'what a man can do a woman cannot do but can attempt and vice-versa.' This reflects the uniqueness in the genders!

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- ⁴³ Ibid.
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