

Full Length Research

Gender Biased Cultural Practices, and it's Implication for the Development of Eastern Nigeria

¹Ogunayo D. Adeleke, ²Alao, Bukola Adenike, ³Ngozi J. Israel-Ohaja and ⁴Obinna I. Ohaja

¹Department of History and International Studies, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Corresponding author's E-mail: adelekeod@babcock.edu.ng

²Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.

E-mail: alaobu@babcock.edu.ng

³Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.

E-mail: Ngozi4eva@gmail.com

⁴Department of History and International Studies, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.

E-mail: obinnaohaja@gmail.com

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Prominent among the causes of economic and political underdevelopment is the gender biased cultural practices which has been handed down to the 21st century inhabitants of the eastern part of Nigeria from their fore fathers. Culture no doubt is the peoples way of life, and Gender biased cultural practices are those practices which tends to discriminate against a particular gender in most cases, especially in patrilineal societies, the male gender is ascribed as superior and the female gender as inferior. The paper specifically gives a scholarly insight into the areas affected by this ugly trend, these specific developmental impediments were observed through consultation of relevant literatures and oral interviews. Thus the study adopted a qualitative method of investigation, and findings from the study reveal that women are mostly affected by the gender biased cultural practices as specific superior roles in the political and economic endeavours of the region are exclusively for the masculine gender, women on the other hand are left with no option than to accept the roles assigned to them. The implication of this bias, is a wastage of manpower and a retarded level of development. The study therefore recommends that educational institutions and government agencies should mount serious campaigns and make laws to discourage discriminatory gender roles practiced by some communities within the eastern region. Thus gender should not be a determinant for choice of economic or political aspirations, as this has an adverse effect on the level of development of the region.

Key Words; Culture, Gender, Development

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INTRODUCTION

Every society is identified by the uniqueness of its culture, these cultural practices which can be simply put as the way of life of the society, distinguishes them from other societies. A society is appreciated by its cultural

heritage. Although cultures are passed from generation to generation through socialization, the obvious remains that cultures are dynamic, some are even time bound and lose their relevance over time, others are transformed to meet the present generational needs. Thus, new cultural values emerge to align with prevailing socio-cultural

values, contact technology and globalization. In his view, Bukonga (1976) sees culture as the characteristics that distinguish the intellectual, artistic, moral and material life of a country or a society at a given moment of its history. This definition implies that culture is time bound.

Every individual has the legal right to practice the cultural values which has been handed to him from birth, as article 27 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948 recognizes the social, political, economic, legal and civil rights of people in the world. The cultural rights that are fundamental to human existence includes the right to speak ones indigenous language, to have a traditional name as a mark of identity, wear a traditional mark on any part of the body, eat one's indigenous food and right to promote and defend the cultural and traditional values of one's locality.

The people of Eastern Nigeria are predominantly Igbos, scholars from various fields had made attempts to trace the origin of the Igbos as some believe they are from the Jewish race, others believe they originated in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the Igbo society constitutes the dominant ethnic group in Eastern Nigeria and they are seen majorly in the south eastern part of the region. The Igbo states in the south eastern region of Nigeria include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo states. That notwithstanding, other Igbo speaking Nigerians are found in Delta and Rivers, Thus, a critical insight will be given on the cultural practices of the Igbo that are gender biased and suggestions made for the modification of such cultural practices to align them with the social values of the 21st century.

Conceptual clarifications and theoretical postulations

Culture

Culture is known widely as a people's way of life. But beyond the peoples way of life culture comprises everything that makes man who he is, as well as the heritage he possesses. It is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of the society. (Igwe & Adeyemi 2011) In essence everything made by God is nature while everything made by man is culture. (Ajayi 2005) culture can be expressed through religion, language, philosophy, music, dance, drama, architecture, political organization, technology and any other man made inventions. It portrays the unique ways in which people engage in activities within their environment. Culture is no doubt passed from generation to generation through a process known as socialization. From the historical perspective, Bukonga (1976) defines culture as the whole group of characteristics that distinguish the intellectual, artistic, moral and material life of a country or society at a given moment of history. No

doubt this definition portrays culture as the totality of man's activity at a given period in time. Therefore culture is simply a product of history.

Culture has basically two categories, the tangible or material culture and the intangible or immaterial culture. The tangible culture are physical objects produced by man in a given society, this includes artefacts, and other products of a given community, while the immaterial culture refers to religious beliefs, value systems, laws and customs which one cannot touch with the hand. This study however does not deal much with material culture its concern is on the immaterial culture which are displayed in forms of tradition laws and value system of the people of eastern Nigeria.

Development

Development in simple terms is an improvement in the quality of something. Most people tend to associate development with its synonyms like expansion, advancement and growth. They might also be right, depending on the approach adopted. Growth is the increase in quantity while development is the increase in quality. Development has to with an improvement in the social wellbeing of a people in a community, it is widely believed that development should bring a lasting change. In his blog post, Barder (2012) argues that Development is a characteristic of a system; sustained improvements in individual well-being are a yardstick by which it is judged. The development of a community is directly binding on the development of the people. The community can only be developed if the humans existing in that community are developed. According to the United Nations Document (1996), human development can be measured by life expectancy, adult literacy, access to all three levels of education, as well as people's average income, which is a necessary condition of their freedom of choice". Human development, therefore, incorporates all aspects of a person's well-being ranging from health status to his economic and political freedom. From the above it can be rightly stated that if a cultural practice prevents a particular set of individual to enjoy political freedom, such practice hinders the development of the person or group of persons thus the end result will be an adverse effect on the development of the area. In his own view, Agagu (citing Thomas, 2000:5) defines development as "escape from underdevelopment. And escape from underdevelopment simply means desisting from those practices that hinder development. Other scholars like Chambers (2012) defines development as "good change". The definition simply presupposes that there is "bad change". Therefore, in line with Chambers' definition, development means progress. So when there is a progressive change from the old ways of doing things, it simply means development is taking place. Thus

if some communities in the eastern Nigeria hold to ancient discriminatory cultural practices, it invariably will affect their level of development.

Gender

The Merriam Webster dictionary (2012) defines gender as a subclass within a grammatical class of language that is partly arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics and that determines agreement with and selection of other words or grammatical forms. Gender is generally believed to be a distinguishing word for separating the sex of living creatures. Thus generally the two widely known types of gender is the masculine (male) and feminine (female) gender. Gender has become a subject of interest for most scholars across different disciplines (Kolawole, Abubarkar, Owonibi, & Adebayo, 2012). In analysing gender from a broader perspective, it cuts across aspects of development studies (Etete, 2012). Biological factors have nothing to do with gender because men and women are not born knowing how they should look, dress, speak, behave, think or react in the society (United Nations, 2013). The concept of gender includes prospects held about the characteristics, abilities and likely behaviours of both the male and female (United Nations Education, Scientific & Cultural Organization, 2003).

Gender is relevant because it shows how women's subordination or men's domination is socially constructed. Thus the subordination can change since it is neither biologically predetermined nor static (United Nations Education, Scientific & Cultural Organization, 2003). The idea of gender varies within and between cultures. Restructuring of gender roles occur by social differentiations such as political status, class, ethnicity, physical and mental disability, age and more (United Nations Education Scientific & Cultural Organization, 2003). In various cultures, men are considered to be stronger and critical. However, gender does not seek to slow down the men so that the women can catch up (Etete, 2012) rather; it is for both to enjoy equal rights and opportunity.

The patriarchal nature of the society where the man is considered as the breadwinner and the woman is confined to the kitchen and the notion or belief that one class of gender can perform better than another class of gender is enough to create inequality in the society. Consistent discriminatory practices such as Side-lining one gender to the backburner would at a period naturally stare up a reaction and or a revolt from the gender being side-lined leading to competition and struggle for power and resources between both the male and female. Thus is necessary to address this bias and reorient the mind of the people to prevent the ugly occurrences that may be the resultant effect of this side-lining the feminine gender.

Theoretical Framework

Gender conflict approach

The theoretical postulation adopted by this study is the Gender conflict approach. This theory is a specific variation of social conflict theory that prioritizes the inequality and conflict between men and women and the major contributors to the theory is Harriet Martineu who was the first female sociologist who fought for women's right of education and Jane Addams who was an applied sociologist and founder of the Hull House (Boundless, 2016).

We know conflict is inevitable and a natural part of life. Where there are relationships, there will be conflict (Nelson, 2012) and it could be carried out either overtly or covertly. Discrimination is in-built in every class society in spite of the laid down treaties, conventions and declarations that has been signed and ratified by states. Discrimination in itself implies the unequal treatment of human beings based on certain class groups (Etete, 2012). In this context, discrimination gender based. Discrimination is treating someone in a different (non-pleasing) way simply because of whom he or she is or what the individual believes (Amnesty International, 2017).

Gender conflict approach assumes that the core of discord in the society is primarily between the male and female gender that make up the social group. In the context of gender conflict approach, gender is best understood as men attempting to maintain power and privilege to the detriment of women, therefore, men can be seen as the dominant and women as the subordinate (Boundless, 2016). This however does not deny the fact that women are being recognized in the society. It simply assumes that there is more dominance of men in power than of women. Gender relations intersect with many other lines of social cleavage, such as class, race, ethnicity, age and geographical location, to determine the major actors in a conflict and the relative capabilities of different actors to intensify or resolve conflict (United Nations Women, 2009). Gender relations which have to do with the attitudes and role of the genders and the manner in which both genders interact determine gender inequality. It is often thought that it is a man's world and women are the subjects. The class struggle of who is in charge result to gender inequality.

The root causes of gender conflict are traced to the patriarchal nature of the society and violence which all boils down to gender inequality. Gender inequality has been a social problem for centuries. If people in the world forever choose to live by the "guidelines" of gender inequality, then the line that separates men and women will forever be thick (United Nations Women, 2009). Gender conflict approach thus advocates for a balance in decision, law making process and political participation in

order that both genders might enjoy equal rights and privileges which the state can offer.

Friedrich Engels, a German Sociologist in regard to work and labour suggested that the same owner-worker relationship seen in the labour force could also be seen in the household, with women assuming the role of the proletariat. Prior to the 1980's revolution on gender, women depended on men for the attainment of wages. Contemporary conflict theorists suggest that when women become wage earners, they gained power in the family structure and create more democratic arrangements in the home, although they may still carry the majority of the domestic burden (Boundless, 2016).

This theory therefore affirms that the cultural practice of patriarchy is responsible for the discriminatory policies and the relegation of the feminine gender in our societies.

Gender biased cultural practices as observed in South Eastern Nigeria

This study succinctly investigates several gender biased cultural practices which is prevalent in the Igbo communities of the south eastern Nigeria. Among these practices are the widowhood practice, the Igbo marriage system, the male child syndrome which is propelling denial of female rights to inherit properties, forbidding women from certain leadership positions, relegation of the female voice in family decisions then women devaluation in Igbo proverbs. Sadly most of these practices placed the women folk at disadvantaged positions.

The Widowhood practice

The woman in Igbo land tend to lose her honour when her husband at the death of her husband. As Oreh (2015) rightly observed in his inaugural lecture, the Igbos prize their womenfolk, yet a woman in Igbo culture is not accorded full social recognition no matter her status in life unless she is married and bears children or at least a child. He further believes that the Igbo women remain women of substance as long as their husbands are alive. Because on the death of their husband, the widow becomes a murder suspect because most people in the Igbo community do not believe that death comes naturally. as a result of this, various widowhood practices are meted on the widow. Agumagu (2007) observed that a widower has no traditionally laid down laws governing his mourning rites. This period which is supposed to be a quiet and private time as the widow strives to accept her loss has been turned into a period of agony, anxiety, pain and insecurity for the widow in Igbo land. This is because it is usually a period the widow is subjected to psychological, social, physical and emotional torture as a

result of her bereavement.

These practices differ from community to community. In some Igbo communities mourning begins at once a loved one dies, while in some communities there is a differentiation between the time of death and the beginning of mourning which kick starts the widowhood rituals. In essence, while some communities begin mourning immediately after the death of a member of the family, others begin after the burial ceremony. The Mbaise people of Imo State, and many other Igbo culture, have the practice of beginning their morning at the exact instance of death. In Igbo land generally at the instance of death, the family members wail and call the attention of everyone who can hear their voice to the ugly incidence, however this practice is influenced by the class and social status of the person. Goldman and Lord (1983) articulated this fact when they detailed that while the wife or wives of an ordinary man is expected to go into traumatic wailing, beat her chest, fling around her arms and go into falling down immediately the husband takes in his last breath, with other women surrounding and restraining her from hurting herself and force her to sit down on the ground, where they sit around her. The wife or wives of titled man is not allowed to go into any loud crying till appropriate arrangements have been made to inform other title men, in laws and relatives, who should confirm the death before laments take place.

Death is seen as a very bad event in the Igbo land, thus on the occasion of death investigations are usually carried out by the family members or members of the deceased social class to ascertain the cause of the death. In most cases the wife, of the dead man or the relations become suspects. The wife becomes the major suspect because she is the closest person to the man, and to prove her innocence, she will have to go through some oath taking and even remain with the corpse till burial, in other places especially if the couple have been divorced traditionally, the wife is made to drink the water used in washing the husbands dead body. In other areas of Igbo land as soon as a woman loses her husband, culture dictates that his widow must sit on the bare floor, neither taking bath, changing her clothes, and secretly attempting to attend to her personal hygiene might attract some punishments (Ohale 2012) some other cultures demand that the widow be placed inside the house stripped naked with only leaves covering her most sensitive parts. In this situation she can only move out and attend to urgent needs by carrying a calabash which is the symbol of the deceased and she must be accompanied by a widow. She is expected to remain in this mood till the burial of her husband. After the burial, other ritual which is aimed at cleansing her from the impurity of death and separating her totally from her dead husband begins. The first ritual starts with the *umuada* taking the widow to secluded area where they shave off all her hairs including the pubic hairs then she takes a

ritual birth and her indecent cloth is removed and either burnt or buried while she puts on a new mourning attire. Which she will wear for a period of time till she finally ends the mourning period and is free to either remarry or remain in her husband's house.

The Male Child Syndrome

Male child penchant remains a prevailing cultural practice among the Igbos of eastern Nigeria. This preference cuts across gender as the father and the mother would prefer male children over the female ones. Igbos are patrilineal in nature thus a man who dies without giving birth to a male child is seen to have lived a worthless life because it is believed that at his death, his family tree is ended and his belongings will automatically go to his brothers. Prior to this time, male children were seen as the strength of the family as a man with so many male children was respected and thus his neighbours will avoid any form of confrontation with him. Male children in the traditional society were the only ones authorized to perform religious and political duties. Of course in Igbo land, the first son (okpara) is the only one entitled to the family symbol of Authority which is the *ofor*. The opera performs the religious right of giving the father a second burial in some parts of Igbo land, thus, any man who has no son will not be accorded the privilege of a second burial. Most times inability to give birth to a male child is blamed on the woman and in some cases the man might be compelled to get a second wife or even a third wife just to make sure he has male children, and in this situation the wife that eventually gives birth to a male child is more loved and cared for while others are neglected. In most cases a man is seen as the most elderly in the family even if he has elder sisters, this practice is often backed up with the proverb that says "*Nwanyi anghi ato nwoke n'ala igbo*" which means a woman cannot be older than a man in Igbo land. This type of practice gives room for the disrespect of female children not minding their age. In other instances, the male child syndrome leads to a neglect of the female children and concentration of the family resources on improving the wellbeing of the male child to ensure the male child grows and becomes somebody in the society because it is believed that no matter the amount of training given to the woman she ends up in a man's kitchen.

The Igbo Marriage system

The high cost of bride price in Igbo land, gives the man the purchasing power over the woman and thus the woman is seen as a commodity and not a wife. In Igbo land virginity is seen as a mark of purity, thus a virgin bride brings much honour to her parents and she goes

to her husband's house with gifts, thus a woman that loses her virginity before marriage is a disgrace to her parents. But the case is different with men as no one talks of virginity before getting a wife although this situation is made complex by nature as there are no equipment's to test a man's virginity. The wife leaves her father's house to the husband's house and thus does not have any other inheritance from her father's house, their children draw their legitimacy from the father, and the man is allowed to marry as many wives as he desires whereas the woman is not allowed to marry more than one man. Divorce on the other hand lies in most cases in the husband's hands, all reasons for divorce which include childlessness, infidelity, poverty, reoccurring death of children, etc. are blamed on the woman and thus in most cases the woman is sent packing with her cloths and kitchen pots alone, as the man stays back to utilize every property that has been jointly acquired by the couple. The man also is entitled to a refund of the bride price he has paid as soon as his ex-wife finds a new husband.

Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs

Proverbial constructs that relegates the status of a woman includes;

1. "***Nwata nwanyi zuru tooro onwe ya***"? There is an assumption among the Igbo that any child brought up under the guidance of a woman lacks a deep sense of discipline. This supposition is based on the idea that women are no good disciplinarians and there is a little difference between them and children. (Kewulezi, 2004:82)
2. "***Nwoke luchaa ogu nwanyi enwere akuko***" (Women only tell stories about a war, after men have finished fighting the war).
3. "***Mma nwanyi wu di***" (The beauty of any woman is the husband). This implies that without men, women are worthless.
4. "***Nwoke o na-aso nwanyi ike ukwu anya, o bu ya ga-akpo onwe ya***" (A Man has no reason to be afraid of a fat buttock woman, because she must always pair with a man. This proverb portrays the dependence of a woman on a man and also suggests ownership).
5. "***Onye jiri nwanyi buru ibu bu isi-adighi aju***". (Any person who uses a woman (as a pad) in carrying a luggage is carrying the luggage without a pad). This proverb portrays the unreliability of women therefore they cannot interpret culture.
6. "***Eri ago mere umunwany agbala afufu onu***". (Due to their habitual denial of favours they receive, woman do not grow beards).

7. "**Nwanyi makaa di ya n'uzo, ihe chere di ya ewere ya**" (If a woman sets out on a journey earlier than her husband, she will be caught by the trap that was set for her husband). The idea of this proverb is that a woman must not move faster than a man.
8. "**Nwanyi anaghi anyuli mmamire elu**" (Woman cannot urinate upwards). This simply says the woman is weak and cannot do what a man does.
9. "**O naghi adi mma agbachaa oso ka nwoke ebie ya ka nwanyi**" ("It is not good to end a race like a woman after running it like a man").
10. "**A na-emere nwanyi, o na-emere onye di ya mma.**" (One would be doing good to woman and she would be doing good to whoever she (truly) loves). This portrays the woman as an ungrateful person.

The implication of these cultural practices to development

The status accorded to a person in most cases determines the impact such a person will make in the society. In Igbo land for instance, women who have creative ideas on how to improve on certain aspect of the economy or culture, might end up keeping those ideas to themselves since such ideas might not be valued because it is from a woman. Of course some when major family decisions are taken in Igbo land, a woman is not allowed to speak. The fact that women are not allowed to hold some important position in the eastern part of Nigeria totally eliminates the unique contributions the women would have given if they were allowed to occupy those positions.

Furthermore, the male child preference limits a woman's contribution to the growth and development of her family and community because a woman who could not give birth to a male child knows she will be left with nothing if peradventure her husband dies before her, thus she channels her resources to a place where she can fall back to when such needs arises.

CONCLUSION

The gender biased cultural practices as observed the Eastern Nigeria, has its implication for the development and sustainable quality of livelihood in the area. This paper made succinct effort to outline certain areas in which the cultural practices promote this bias, and it is believed that if adjustments can be made on these practices which tend to discriminate and put the female gender on a disadvantaged position, the region will most likely experience a greater level of development, because the women will now be empowered to put in their quota to

the social and economic wellbeing of the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study thus recommends that laws that will end this gender biased cultural practices should be put in place to end or reduce to the barest minimum, these cultural practices. The study also recommends that further studies should be conducted in other aspects of social and economic lifestyle of people of the eastern Nigeria to ascertain other impediments to development of the region.

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