

Gender and notions of autonomy in Igboland: An assessment of literatures on the phenomenon of female husbands

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Abstract

The notions of autonomy in Igboland, or anywhere else, can be subjective, as it can be conceptualised from an economic, cultural, gender or other standpoint. Gender autonomy, as conceptualised in this paper, focuses on how women in traditional Igbo culture married other women and assumed all the inherent functions and customary responsibilities thereon. Ifi Amadiume has elaborately documented this complex, institutionalised system of gender-bending in her groundbreaking book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. Other writers of Igbo extraction, like Cheluchi Onyemeleke and Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo's books, *Son of the House* and *Children of the Eagle*, respectively, have addressed the phenomenon too. This essay is a metacritical analysis of Ifi Amadiume's anthropological work, which explores the processes and nature of such relationships in Igboland, while also critically analysing the novels by Cheluchi Onyemelukwe and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo which fictionalise the practice. The paper concludes by arguing that female-female marriage in Igbo land strongly indicates the strength, agency, and individuality of Igbo women and the density of the Igbo culture, thus necessitating its continuous study.

Keywords: Gender, Igboland, Autonomy, Sexuality, Women, Female Husbands

Introduction

It cannot be contended that people's perception of the world and the relationships among things largely determine how they relate to the world and their environment. Every society has its worldview, encompassing its outlook on the environment, social and political organisation, economic life, religious orientation, values, etc. The Igbo people are not an exception to this. Regarding political organisation, the Igbo society is highly de-centralised. According to Nwoye (2011), Igbo political groupings are based on the agnate Umunna group, which can be patrilineal or matrilineal. This agnate (Umunna) group is organised into three levels, namely: the primer level, which is the family; the higher level, which is the village (*ebo*); and the highest level, which is the town. Igbo people view the universe as a dual reality consisting of the world of the living and the dead. Although the categorisation of humans into only two categories (male and female) was universal, the binary was a faulty ground upon which the studies and discourses around sexuality had been premised for decades. The categories "male" and "female" are cultural concepts that take different meanings cross-culturally. According to Sherry and Whitehead (1981), gender is what men and women are and what sorts of relations do or should exist between them. These are reflections or elaborations of

human biological composition and products of social and cultural processes.

Unlike many other creations of culture, it is axiomatic that gender has a biological component. We have different bodies and some male–female dissimilarities, including reproductive capacities and roles. Depending on culture, these roles are seen as central and have come to be established within a concrete framework of gender ideologies. Thus, sexuality, sexual desires, and responses are, in a way, based on human natural capacities. According to Mukhopadhyay et al. (2020), "In many ways, sexuality and gender are like food. We have a biologically rooted need to eat to survive, and we can enjoy eating. What constitutes "food," what is "delicious" or "repulsive," the contexts and meanings that surround food and human eating—those are cultural" (232). They observe that a powerful aspect of culture, which is why cultural norms feel natural, is that we learn culture the way we learn our native languages. We do this within social contexts without formal instruction. We subconsciously learn it from people around us, and gradually, it becomes deeply embedded in our minds. Mukhopadhyay et al. (2020) posit that "the same principles apply to gender and sexuality. We learn very early (by at least age three) about the categories of gender in our culture—that individuals are either "male" or "female" and that elaborate beliefs, behaviours, and meanings are associated with each gender" (232). Our

study conceptualises gender and sexuality as cultural symbolic constructs rather than customary binaristic designations.

The gender "woman", like the gender "man", remains provisional and open to interpretation and "resignification" and constantly resists strictures and permanent significations (Judith Butler, 2006; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Nancy Chodorow 1978). This is why sexuality, in the words of Sennet (1977), is an "expressive state, rather than an expressive act" (7). This notion of sex and gender applies to the Igbo society as well. Amadiume (1987) powerfully argues that among the Igbos, gender is not always tied to biological sex. According to her, women could be 'husbands' and wives, and many political roles were ascribed to both sexes. Older women can marry 'wives' whose activities they can control and can be curtailed. Gender was considered fluid, and roles were never defined based on one's biological sex. Gender fluidity was made possible by the cultural practice of woman-woman marriage. This tradition entails some rituals and processes that 'transform' a woman into a man in the eyes of society, thus bestowing on her all the privileges that are accorded only to male members of society. Amadiume (1987) argues further that this flexible gender system resulted in role and status ambiguity. To go further, we will explore the nature of woman-woman marriage among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria.

An overview of woman-woman marriage in Igboland

Woman-woman marriage defies a single definition and can only be unpacked using descriptions, explanations, and critical studies. Adimora-Ezeigbo (1996) claims that "male daughters," "female husbands," and "same-sex marriage" among women in Igbo culture are cultural devices created to address the problems of impotence, barrenness, and male child succession or inheritance syndrome. She argues that they are indigenous models that the ancestors in Igboland adopted to ease the pain and get around the 'problem' of not having a male child and solve the 'problem' of inheritance. In this way, they could secure the family investment and property and prevent capital flight from the patriarchal lineage.

Uchendu (2007) claims that woman-woman marriage in Igboland is most likely a cultural innovation that traces its origin to the union of two female deities, Ogugu and Wiyeke, in old Owerri. She narrates that:

Ogugu, the chief female deity in Ohambele and neighboring towns in the Owerri District, was popular for giving children to its female worshippers. In another town, Akwete, resided another female deity, Wiyeke. At one point, for undisclosed reasons, Wiyeke courted Ogugu as her wife. Ogugu agreed to the marriage on the condition that Wiyeke would come and live with her at Ohambele. Wiyeke accepted the condition and thus joined

Ogugu as one of the female deities of Ohambele, assuming the status of Ogugu's husband (3).

Aside from its spiritual origin and sanctions, woman-woman marriage is a highly utilitarian union that serves as an avenue to circumvent all the stumbling blocks erected by patriarchy to deny women their rights of inheritance. Uchendu (2007) affirms this when she observes that the primary goal for woman-woman marriage in Igboland was for women to have children they could call their own through the agency of other women. This is for inheritance purposes. It also reflects the Igbo worldview in which the continuation of the lineage through the male offspring is essential for maintaining the cosmic balance between the dead ancestors and the living. Therefore, among the Igbo, a barren widow or one who had no male child for her deceased husband had no claim to the deceased's property.

Urama (2019) argues that, amongst other things, woman-woman marriage makes an otherwise childless woman a mother. She posits that amongst the Igbos, being a mother brings fulfilment to a married woman. Having a male child is believed to secure a woman's position in her husband's family. Because of this socially accepted belief, she is ready to accept practices that make her get a male child whom she can call hers. The childless wife, or a wife with no male child, is given the legal right to marry another wife to produce male children to

help the woman maintain her position in her husband's home. This would make the wife a "female husband." An unmarried daughter of a man who does not have a male child also has the legal right to marry a wife who will produce children to bear her father's name for the continuity of her father's lineage. That makes her a "female husband" in her father's home. Additionally, the decision by Igbo women to become 'husbands' by marrying 'wives' for themselves or their deceased or impotent husbands is a trend of complementarity. The void in the power play between men and women is filled up when a woman attains a certain status in her husband's house, implying her exercise of a unique kind of willpower. It also exposes the helplessness of men in the face of their impotence, hidden deeply under their patriarchal ego. This is because the new wife to be married is betrothed to a 'more fertile' man who would make her conceive discretely, although the child will openly and culturally be that of the 'known husband'. This method is what Eaglewoman in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* uses to accept Nkemdirim as an heir to her husband's home. Consequently, woman-woman marriage confers on women a degree of female autonomy in household and family structures and gives women control over their economic resources and means of production. The gender dynamics in terms of power and authority in the household and *Umunna* are viewed differently, more with awe. Such women can also stand before and speak for the interest of women before the

council of elders to which they have now been admitted. Moreover, the practice gives women total control over their choice of a partner or partners, what Nwando (2011) calls "male sperm donors" (108).

However, there is a question mark on the side of the political empowerment claim. The political empowerment that this practice offers is still within the overall context of patriarchy, which limits its effectiveness. The empowerment it offers is only at that micro-level of affording the single woman some respite and hope for the future. It does not address the final question of women's collective position and fate in society. For instance, this practice does not have the potency to drive the discourse and litigation that culminated in the Nigerian Supreme Court ruling based on a case about women in Southeast Nigeria being entitled to family inheritance just like men. The Nigerian Supreme Court, in April 2014, affirmed the decisions of two lower courts, which judged an Igbo customary law of succession as unconstitutional, excluding female offspring from having inheritance rights to their father's property.

As contained in The Library of Congress (2014), the details of the inheritance case that the Supreme Court ruled on show that Gladys Ada Ukeje, the daughter of Lazarus Ogbonna Ukeje, an Igbo man who died intestate in Lagos in 1981, sued Lois Chituru Ukeje (the deceased's wife and the plaintiff's step-mother) and Enyinnaya Lazarus Ukeje (the deceased's son and plaintiff's half-brother)

before the Lagos High Court, praying that she be included among those eligible to administer the deceased's estate. From this, it can be seen that Lois Ukeje, a woman, too, was one of the defendants seeking to stop a fellow woman from succeeding in her quest to be able to be among those to inherit her father's property. This shows that patriarchy is not sustained only by men but also by the close collaboration of women. The defendants relied on Igbo customary law, which was patriarchally inclined. The plaintiff's pursuance of the case was inspired by a different value altogether. That value would most likely be anti-patriarchal and feminist in orientation. Hence, we argue that female-female marriage exists in Igboland and is projected by the likes of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo to echo the woman's presence in the home. This underscores, for instance, not just her representation of this phenomenon but the deliberate characterisation of women in her trilogy: *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001), and *Children of the Eagle* (2002).

Nwoko (2012) has linked the entire phenomenon of woman-woman marriage in Igbo land to patriarchal agendas that are aimed at maintaining the supposed superiority of men by employing the superiority and centrality of the male child to the perpetuation of any homestead and all the properties that belong to such homestead. Nwoko further argues that,

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 (69).

Nwoko's position is highly contestable and arguable as woman-woman marriage does not only bestow a degree of freedom to the wife and wife-husband in such union (as they can freely choose and let go of their male partners at will) but also confers on the woman the status of a man who can speak in the council of elders and even commune with the gods.

There are widespread scenarios of female husbands in Igbo land. A classic but still unique example is that of the now-abolished *Efuru* Deity, whose *modus operandi* was marrying women. *Efuru*, as documented by

Omegoha (2005), is historically a female; she is sometimes said to be a woman and sometimes a young girl who migrated to Idoha in Igbo-Etiti, in the old Anambra State, now Enugu state, from Ugbene Ajima in the same Enugu state in Eastern Nigeria. Although the stories had no exact dating, the practice of marrying wives *Efuru* continued until 1987 when it became apparent that the reasons behind the practice were contaminated and not achieving its original aims. It took the intervention of the Catholic Church and the government of the former Anambra State of Nigeria to bring the practice to a halt. The state government had set up a commission of enquiry on the *Efuru* deity, and one of its findings, as recorded by Omegoha (2005), is that:

Efuru, though not an ancestral deity, was a woman of considerable powers who came to be believed in by the Idohas as their saviour from oppressions, raids and other malefactions by their more potent neighbours... the commission also found the betrothal of maidens to *Efuru* as an integral and indispensable part of the practices in its worship (9).

Although the *Efuru* saga is complicated, it is evidence that in traditional Igbo society, female husbands existed and, in this instance, a female deity. In this case, there is a socio-

cultural significance beyond the pleasures associated with same-sex marriage, as we will see shortly. There were reasons why Efuru, a maiden, had maidens betrothed to her. As Omegoha narrates, one was a way to avenge the injuries inflicted on the adherents, and another, to replace the army of men and boys lost during battles in the days when inter-tribal wars were rampant. Although it can be argued that these women, thus married, gained a certain level of independence, society still viewed them as unusual.

Literary representations of the phenomenon of female marriage

Literature, as often argued, mirrors society. Woman-woman marriage in Igbo land, though not widespread or commonly practised anymore, has found its way into the literary outputs of Nigerian writers of Igbo extraction. There are growing literary discourses and textual productions on the phenomenon of "male daughters," "female husbands", and same-sex marriage in Igbo culture. In her NLNG award-winning novel, *Son of the House*, Onyemelukwe-Onuobia (2009) tells the story of Nwabulu, the orphaned protagonist who is sent to the city to work as a domestic help to some city dwellers. In her naivety, she falls in love and is impregnated by the son of her wealthy neighbour, who insistently denies ever setting eyes on her. She is soon bundled back into the arms of her hostile stepmother in the village, whose hostility is heightened by the fact that Nwabulu is not just an extra mouth to feed but is bearing another.

In another instance, Mama Nathan, a widow who loses her only son in a ghastly accident, looks for a wife for the late Nathan, who unfortunately was not married nor had any children before his sudden death. Mama Nathan, who is inconsolable at the demise of Nathan, soon finds solace in the prospect of marrying a wife who would bear children in Nathan's name and, by implication, Nathan's father's name. The marriage party soon arrives, and she contrives a way to pass the information to Nwabulu:

I know your mother has spoken to you. So, this will not surprise you. He peered into my face and, seeing the dismay there, continued. Perhaps he said after a little pause, his brows furrowing, this was not a proposal you would have considered in other circumstances. But, as the Igbo people will say, afuroka-eme, eme-ka-afu. It is the best offer, indeed the only offer, you are likely to get in your condition. It is necessary that your child have a name. This will spare him or her much embarrassment in the future.... In your best interests, eh, so that it will be well with you, we have accepted the proposal, he said 'We have told Okoye's family to come and commence the marriage rites during the coming weekend...' Mama Nathan will see that you

want for nothing. She will treat you well (103).

Woman-woman marriage can be contracted for many reasons and under various guises. Here, Nwabulu is marrying Nathan (a man), who dies before Nwabulu returns to the village, thus making Mama Nathan the partner. Apart from the apparent purpose of inheritance, such unions are contrived to ensure that a family name does not go extinct. The union is considered sacrosanct according to the norms governing society. Thus, when Mama Nathan becomes weary of Nwabulu and orders her out, she demands a refund of the bride price paid on Nwabulu while insisting on keeping Nwabulu's baby – Ezinwa. She reasons that her story will only elicit pity and not intervention from any quarters, since "there was no disputing that a child belonged to the father (114). The child has been theirs since they married her, although Mama Nathan knows nothing about the child's biological father. While a vast majority of the argument for women-women marriage portrays it as a phenomenon that empowers women, isolated cases like this show that women-on-women subjugation abounds as much as in heterosexual relationships.

In Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), Aziagba, as a "male daughter", stays in her birth home to have Ugonwanyi and the twins, Nnamdi and Chiedochie so that the family of Obiatu and Ejimnaka would sustain their lineage. In Adimora-Ezeigbo's

Children of the Eagle (2002), Obioma's child, Nkemdirim, adopted by her mother, saves the family of Josiah and Eaglewoman Okwara from extinction. Even though Obioma is impregnated by a Nigerian soldier who sexually exploits young Biafran girls after the Nigerian/Biafran war, the pregnancy is seen as a blessing in disguise for her family. Amara, Eaglewoman's last daughter, asserts that the birth of Nkemdirim ushers so much sunlight into her mother's face and dispels the fog she used to see in her mother's face when she thinks nobody is looking at her.

Does woman-woman marriage as a practice empower women?

As practised in Igboland, woman-woman marriage is arguably a phenomenon that empowers women. This is because, in the Igbo culture, women are not entitled to economic resources like lands and other valuable property that can be inherited from either their fathers or their late spouses (especially if they have no male children or have no children at all). With this practice, women assume the status of men and can inherit property from their fathers or late spouses.

In addition to bestowing on one the rights of inheritance, woman-woman marriage is also a status marker. Amadiume (1987) argues that "these institutions placed women in a more favourable position for the acquisition of wealth and formal political power and authority." In Igboland, such women were deemed exceptional because of their wealth and social standing. Those of them who were

past menopause could marry wives for themselves, for their husbands, sons, and siblings. These influential women were regarded as men in a woman's body. Paying the bride price for other women elevates their status even higher than their wealth affords them. The female husband enjoyed equal privilege with her male counterparts; she sometimes even associated with the male elders and was invited to some gatherings and ceremonies that were otherwise solely male. Furthermore, among the Nnobi people of Anambra state studied intensively by Amadiume (1987), a woman can only take the Ekwe title (the highest traditional title bestowed on women) if she has a collection of wives in her harem. Marrying other women is a quintessential prerequisite for conferring this highly coveted title on a woman by the goddess Idemili herself.

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*: A metacritical appraisal

Amadiume (1987), in her seminal and groundbreaking study on women-to-women marriage in Igbo land, particularly amongst the Nnobi people of Anambra state, argues about the phenomenon being an Institution of its own. She opines that a flexible gender system played a crucial role in determining the level of women's access to economic resources and positions of authority and power through the *institutions* of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands'.

However, researchers would contend that woman-woman marriage is not an institution but a socially accepted practice. We argue

here that the practice of having female husbands is not an institution in the same way that marriage between man and woman is. It is also different from an institution like the Ozo title institution. However, it is a pragmatic practice that addresses many women's issues and desires. Issues such as infertility, the absence of a male heir in the family, and the pursuit of social prestige are among the concerns. These reasons are part of why female-to-female marriage existed in Igboland.

In precolonial Igbo society, the practice of having a female husband cannot be considered an institution. It was rare, if not entirely impossible, to find a woman marrying another woman; it was often a means to achieve a particular goal. If it were for the sake of marriage, this would come with its attendant sexual satisfactions and obligations. On the contrary, Cadigan (1998) affirms that "the wife's lover, with whom she will procreate, is often chosen by the female husband. The lover rarely lives with the married couple but instead visits the wife" (5). The question arises: Why not consider polygamy? This prompts an indirect justification, as Cadigan affirms that when women marry other women, they assume a traditionally masculine role and can assert dominance within their households.

A major driving force in the practice is the question of family inheritance. Inheritance was not only patrilineal but also the exclusive reserve of the males in the family or kindred. As a woman could not actively

partake in sharing the family inheritance but desired inclusion nonetheless, she sought a symbolic means to father a male child who would be recognised as a legitimate family member. The male child, by extension, would participate in the family inheritance. This is why Adimora-Ezeigbo's Amara in *House of Symbols* (2001) also points out that the birth of Nkemdirim is what assured her family that his father's greedy relatives would not share the family property. Hear her expression of displeasure:

Sometimes, I wondered: what would be the fate of the family property in Umuga if there were no Nkemdirim? Would we be kicked out from our home by greedy relatives after papa died? [...] what would happen to all the lands if this lad did not exist? In Umuga's thinking, he is the symbol of continuity of the Okwara's family tree descending through our father. This, I told myself, is all the sense of justice there is in this town. Yes, this is what Umuga's sense of justice amounts to in a house of five daughters and one son. Astonishing (144).

Through rhetorical questions, Eaglewoman's challenge and courage to accommodate hatch, and nurture the idea of Nkemdirim becomes the rationale for striving towards self-actualisation in the face of inhibitory

patriarchal tendencies. Family inheritance was typically in terms of lands, economic trees, and notable cross-generational titles (some without which one could not hold or aspire to certain societal positions; for example, the Ozo title necessary for participation in king-making, which is passed down from generation to generation). In this context, the practice empowered the women who participated. Eaglewoman's means of economic and political empowerment was assured by her nuclear family's share in the broader family inheritance, and she also had her voice without feeling inadequate. She was confident that her family was not handicapped for any future political office or role. There was hope for the future. She could contribute her ideas and thoughts in the meetings of the womenfolk without being afraid or mocked for not having a complete family (not having a male child in the family as a whole was seen as some deformity).

Amadiume (1987) also argued that woman-woman marriage brings role and status ambiguity. She opines: "This flexible gender system resulted in not only role ambiguity but also status ambiguity. In the political system, there was flexibility in gender classification, which allowed the incorporation of certain women into the male category, giving them positions of authority in the power structure" (104). This point is also highly debatable. This is because, even though the phenomenon affords women many privileges that are otherwise the exclusive preserve of men, there are specific

roles that women cannot perform. For example, in the Igbo worldview, the living and the dead co-exist and interact in one universe of meaning, where the living of sacrifices and libations to the ancestors. return, the ancestors offer protection and prosperity to the living progenies. Male family members are essential in this arrangement. Sacrifices and libations can only be made by males.

Furthermore, Amadiume (1987) vehemently argued that there is nothing romantic or sexual about female-female marriage in Igboland, claiming that "these priorities in the west are of course removed from, an alien to the concerns of the mass of African women." Chukwuemeka (2012) supports this claim by observing that "while the wife married to the female husband has her companions, the female husband too always had a male companion, mostly her legitimate husband. This male companion satisfied her erotic desires and supported her when the biological realities became inevitable"(7). This suggests that most women have an emotional and biological need to be with a man. It is, therefore, evident that the conviction and practice of woman-woman marriage did not involve a sexual relationship between the couple, nor was it homosexual. At least the authors of our present study have not depicted these women specifically in this light. They were mainly preoccupied with either children or the radical (maybe desperate) need to uphold their positions in the household and society.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the phenomenon of female husbands, doing a critical and meta-critical study of Ife Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, with additional specific references to Cheluchi Oyamelukwe-Onubia and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's novels. In the course of espousing Amadiume's work, we argued that the phenomenon of the female husband is not a cultural institution in itself but a socially accepted device to circumvent the dictates of patriarchy or disprove reproductive stereotypes. Considering the complexities of childbirth, one spouse should not take the blame alone. However, research has shown that sometimes, the impotence of the man implies the infertility of the woman. With this, polygamy becomes irrelevant or futile. Moreover, if the adventure of marrying a woman proves successful, it affords women rights of inheritance that were otherwise out of their reach because of gender limitations.

We also revealed how this phenomenon empowers women within the constraints of patriarchy while disagreeing with Nwoko who argues otherwise. We maintain that the practice is not institutionalised as it cannot withstand the test of colonialism, religion, and new medical advancement. Moreover, like polygamy, gathering a harem of women by a woman is also fraught with problems, disagreements, strife, jealousy, and financial strain, and is overall, cumbersome.

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