Position of Women in Igbo Traditional Religion

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Abstract
Human beings are remarkable and extra-ordinary complex species and adaptable beings that have ever existed on the planet. Among the things God created, man is special and highly esteemed, valued and honoured. For this reason, man in the time past has always tried to maintain the honorary position God has kept him during the creation. He tries to do everything within his power to make sure that he does not bring himself down to the level of other creatures. It is then not surprise why Igbo people have been so religious in keeping the rules of this creator. There have been so many assumptions that Igbo women are being discriminated in Igbo traditional worship. In the Igbo traditional worship, everybody participates but in the level he or she belongs. This paper aspires to show that Igbo women are recognized in the Igbo traditional religion. Several interviews were conducted and the findings showed that Igbo women participate in the Igbo Traditional worship but in their own level.

Introduction
Almost everybody in our generation was subjected to a school system that gave us the ideas that: the Igbo (and most African societies) were savage and primitive, and had inferior cultures. The major beliefs of the Igbo religion are shared by all Igbo-speaking people. However, many of its practices are locally organized, with
the most effective unit of religious worship being the extended family. Periodic rituals and ceremonies may activate the lineage (larger kinship unit) or the village, which is the widest political community. The Igbo attitude towards their deities and spirits is not one of fear but one of friendship.

Igbo traditional religion has a philosophy that has stood the test of time. To understand the basis for Igbo philosophy, there is need to understand first the Igbo concept of the Cosmos, a logical concept that makes few pretensions about the great unknown. This concept has survived the introduction of Middle Eastern religious beliefs and modern science. This is why Ene (1997:35) states this about God the creator:

The Supreme Being (Chi ukwu or Chukwu) is the God of Creation (Chi Okike), the Force that fires all forces. God in Igbo language is also called Chineke ("God in the morning of creation, “or "the God who creates" or "God and the Creator" (duality of deity)... depending on perspectives. Chineke is far removed from the perception of mere mortals. This Supreme Power (Ikekaike) is neither a living-dead (ancestor) nor a spirit. It has no known physical form, yet indirectly impacts the affairs of the human world. Chineke manifests to our world as…

According to Ene, God, in Igbo cosmology is at the head of worship, he is the creator of all things and the giver of life, who cannot be seen yet he directs the affairs of the whole world.

Onwuejeogwu (1975:27) also opines:
While today many Igbo people are Christians, the traditional ancient Igbo religion is known as Ọdịnala. In the Igbo mythology, which is part of their ancient religion, the supreme God is called Chukwu ("great spirit"); Chukwu created the world and everything in it and is associated with all things on Earth. Chukwu is also a solar deity. To the ancient Igbo, the Cosmo is divided into four complex parts: Okike (Creation) Alusi (Supernatural Forces or Deities) Mmụọ (Spirit) Ìwa (World)

In the worship of this creator, a priest or priestess is one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and deities. They also have the authority or power to administer religious rites; in particular, rites of sacrifice to, and propitiation of, a deity or deities. Their office or position is the priesthood, a term which also may apply to such persons collectively.

Igbo woman and Religious Worship
The Igbo belief system represents both feminine and masculine deities, presenting an equal spiritual realm. Women's and men's roles in the social structure of Igbo land were very symbolic of their religious practices and beliefs. Male and female gods and goddesses, such as Chukwu and Ala, governed the lives of people. Chukwu was the masculine "Supreme Being" of all creation and actions, and "Ala" feminine deities was the "great mother goddess". Chukwu and Ala seem to represent the father and mother of a human household. The Igbo relied on balance in their religious and social life in order to prevent negative consequences. In Igbo culture "misfortune and untimely death were consequences of living in disharmony with the
higher beings" (Ohadike, 1994:33). This commitment to the deities correlated with the inherent desire for equal roles for men and women.

It was discovered that in the Igbo society, women played and still play some roles in the religious activities of their communities and villages. It was very certain in Igbo land that women both participated in the religious activities of their society and made their own contributions to the spiritual welfare of their families and society at large. This was clearly seen in Achebe (1958:40) who holds this about Igbo women:

> Aside from their roles in a family, women paint the Egwugwu house, even though they never enter... Despite women not fulfilling many responsibilities, they play the role of Priestess.

According to Achebe, Igbo women participate in religious worship but are not allowed into the shrine, they can be priestesses to minor deities like the ọgbanye priestess; “chi” personal spirit for women, etc.

According to Ikeokwu (2000:20), “...a woman cannot handle or be the chief priestess of a family or village deity. It is said in Igbo “Agwụ anaghi ama nwaanyị” which means that an oracle cannot suggest a woman as a legitimate person to handle “Isi Agwu” (the head deity). A woman cannot lead public worship in the presence of men. The “Isi Mmoo” is meant for a man. This has been from the beginning, from creation. God has made man the head in all things and he should continue to be the head while women are made helpers of the men.
The Igbo people respected their gods and goddesses and therefore respected the people who interacted directly or indirectly with the deities. The Igbo people sometimes consulted the male oracle through the female priestess (Achebe, 1958:17). Every male god seems to have a correlating female goddess to keep the balance of animus and anima in the spiritual world. The priestess to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves was "full of the power of her god" and was "greatly feared" by those who came to seek the oracle's wisdom (Achebe, 1958: 17). The oracle was so powerful that "only the chief priestess ever looked upon" his face. Both the "chief priestess" and "an oracle" served as the mouthpiece of the deity that dwelt in the shrine. If a person chose to disregard the "final" words of a priestess it was considered disobedience to "the deity she represented". The Igbo people must adhere to the passage of advice from deity to oracle to priestess in order to keep a balance in society. The harmonious representation of anima and animus archetypes is rooted in the religious ideals and correct worship styles.

To illustrate this further, it must be recalled in *Things Fall Apart* that during Okonkwo's boyhood, "the priestess in those days was woman called Chika. She was full of the power of the god, and she was greatly feared" (17). The present priestess is Chielo, "the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the hill and the Caves" (49). There is an episode during which Chielo has come for Okonkwo and Ekwefi's daughter Ezinma. It was told, "Okonkwo pleaded with her to come back in the morning because Ezinma was now asleep. But Chielo ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala wanted to see his daughter . . . The priestess screamed. "Beware Okonkwo" she warned" (101). There is no other point in the novel in which Okonkwo was seen to "plead"
with anyone, male or female, for any reason. It was witnessed that a woman was not only ordering Okonkwo to give her his daughter, but threatening him as well. The fact that Okonkwo allows this is evidence of the priestess's power. The ability of a woman to occupy the role of a priestess, a spiritual leader, reveals a clear degree of reverence for women in Igbo society, although this is not generally practiced in all Igbo land.

For most indigenous religions, priests and priestesses are common. Traditional priests and priestesses get their power and influence from their ability to be possessed by their gods or by their ability to tell the future or to heal. In Igbo religion usually men serve as priests to Igbo deities such as Amadiọha, Ogwugwu, Qgba, Arọ, Arọbinagụ, Agwụ, Udo, Ikenga, Iyiojii (Nkwelle-Ezunaka) etc but women serve minor deities like Qgbanje, chi and other personal deities.

The women in different traditional religions have the diverse ways through which they played and still play active roles. In some communities women were and are still Priestesses, known amongst the Igbo as “Eze Nwaanyi” and as “Nne Mmanwu”. A good number of the women belonged to the various masquerade cults and play very active roles. The priestesses offer prayers for their families and communities and consult the oracles to seek for direction and instruction for the society. Women were and are still traditional healers and some of these female traditional healers handle women and children’s ill health. The role women play in religion has been restricted to female deities, where women are in charge of only the female and small divinities (owned personally by them) while males have always been in charge of male and bigger divinities (owned collectively by the community). This has been the same in most part of the world. That is why Yoruba
Religious Tolerance Organization (2009:112) says: “There are always ritual chiefs, priests, and diviners in each community whose duties are to perform the necessary rituals”

This shows that in every religion, there are priests and priestesses whose duties include, to serve the community and to perform sacrifices and rituals where necessary. However, it is noted that in traditional belief, no one; male or female is forced to embrace any belief. This is why Arinze (1970:23) asserts:

In the real sense, every woman has the duty to seek the truth since religious freedom consists in her right to claim immunity from external and psychological force (or pressure) in determining and taking her stand in religious matters. It is man or woman exercising the same natural right of theirs in a different natural dimension of their social life.

What Arinze is saying is that there is freedom of worship, everybody is free to believe in whatever he or she wants and to worship that in the way he or she likes. Therefore women also participate in the worship of the creator just as men; the only difference is the way and process of worship where only men offer sacrifices to the community divinities.

It is on this note that Ezeaku (1990:6) posits, “History and religion have made mankind look at women as passive human persons”. According to him, history has placed women, particularly the pre-modern (primitive) women, as passive as it has never shown them as active in the world’s economic, political, military and social activities. Religion on the other hand, which has recognized the world as divinely ordered, has no active role for women. Instead it
has recognized them as the sources of all the calamities, and bad omen in the world especially in the traditional Igbo religion.

Ezeaku (1990:6) sees the concept of woman in the area of religion that if a child behaves well, he is the father’s replica, but if he behaves badly, he is the mother’s replica. This portrays a clear picture of the knowledge of the traditional Igbo people’s regard for women because women are thought to be inferior to men.

Women have absolute fear of the community deities. They do not get near to their shrines and in most cases avoid picking fruits which belong to the deities. This is why Basden (1921:93) states:

Woman fears her husband’s gods but may not touch or worship them. Her objects of worship are of the most primitive character, consisting of little more than lumps of shapeless clay. Women offer sacrifice to the gods at footpaths and stream sides. They hardly go to the shrine for such sacrifice because they are forbidden to do so. However, they can be priestess to small gods.

Basden acknowledges that women have their own deities and they also serve as priestesses to them. The only difference is that their deities are different from men’s. In support of Basden, Achebe (1958:63) also states:

Women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked
questions about the most powerful and most secret cult in the clan.

From the above statement it is seen that because women are thought to be preserved from any contamination by the deities so that they remain natural for performing their major duty of procreation, they were forbidden from seeing certain things like the objects representing the deities.

On this Umezuruike (1996:6) further asserts: “…as an obstacle to women equality…religion assigned inferior roles to women. Religiously, women are unclean during their monthly menstrual period” Therefore they are not allowed to perform significant religious matters. They are to sweep the shrine, cook food for the worshippers where necessary and isolate themselves from eating what is sacrificed to the gods

Umezuruike further stresses that religiously, a woman climbing palm tree, roof of a house or a kola nut tree especially if in addition the woman attempts doing so with the special palm-tree climbing rope is “nsọ ala” that is a taboo. A woman throwing the husband on the ground during a fight, eating eggs, gizzards, disclosing the identity of the masquerade in public are all taboos. A woman in her menstrual period cooking and serving the husband especially if the husband is a “ọzọ titled” person is also considered to be a taboo.

**Women in other Religions**

To support Igbo peoples’ view about women in religious matters, Yoruba religious beliefs recognize a wide variety of deities, with Olorun or Odumare venerated as the creator and other spirits serving as intermediaries to help with the concerns of humans.
Yoruba deities include "Ọya" (wind goddess), "Ifa" (divination or fate), "Ẹlẹda" (destiny), "Ibeji" (twins), "Ọsanyin" (medicines and healing) and "Ọsun" (goddess of fertility, protector of children and mothers), and “Ṣango” (God of thunder). Each human being is also assumed to have his or her individual deity, called "Ori," who is responsible for controlling the person’s destiny. In order to placate the Ori for providing a beneficial future, cowries’ shells are often used to bedeck a sculpture of the personal deity. When not seeking guidance from an Ori, the Yoruba may also turn to deceased parents and ancestors.

They practice an indigenous religion with a religious hierarchy of priests and priestesses that date back to AD 800-1000. Ifá priests and priestesses bear the titles Babalowo for men and Iyanifa for females. Priests and priestesses of the varied Orisha are titled Babalorisa for men and Iyalorisa for women. Initiates are also given an Orisa or Ifá name that signifies under which deity they are initiated. Priests and priestesses exercised considerable influence in pre-colonial times. They were responsible for divining, curing, maintaining peace and harmony, administering war magic, and organizing extensive rites and festivals. In Yoruba land women are not discriminated against in their religious practices as in Igbo land. There is religious tolerance between the genders. This is clearly explained by a Yoruba Religious Tolerance Organization (2009:141) thus:

Priests are commonly known as "olorishas" or owner of Orisa. Once those priests have initiated other priests, they become known as babalorishas, "fathers of orisha" (for men), and as iyalorishas, "mothers of orisha" (for women). Ifá Priests receive Orunmila who is the Orisha of Prophecy, Wisdom and
Knowledge. Ifa Priests are known by the title Babalawo or "Father Who Knows the Secrets". In the recent years, the practice of traditional Yoruba Ifa priests has come to the diaspora of initiating women to be Iyanifa or "Mother of Destiny"

The Yoruba people have priests and priestesses who participate and serve their deities -Yoruba gods in different levels and capacity, without discrimination between genders.

In Hausa religion, most Hausa are devout Muslims who believe in Allah and in Muhammad as his prophet. They pray five times each day, read the Koran (holy scriptures), fast during the month of Ramadan, give alms to the poor, and aspire to make the pilgrimage (hajj) to the Muslim holy land in Mecca. Islam affects nearly all aspects of Hausa behaviour, including dress, art, housing, rites of passage, and laws. Islam does not have priests, as Christians do. The person who leads Islamic prayer is called an "Imam," but this can be any Muslim of good character who has memorized parts of the Holy Qur'an. An Imam is an Islamic leadership position, often the worship leader of a mosque and the Muslim community. Similar to spiritual leaders, the Imam is the one who leads Islamic worship services (Robinson, 2004:141).

Robinson says that in Islamic religion, women could only lead prayers for a congregation of women. And in the Mosque, women are not to stand in the same row with the men but separately behind the rows of men. This is virtually what obtains in Igbo traditional religion.
In Sunni Islam, a cleric is referred to as mufti and maulana. The term "Imam" is generically used to refer to various forms of religious leadership, ranging from the leader of a small group prayer to a scholar of religion, none of which involve any sort of religious ordination. In Shia Islam, the term "Imam" has more specific meanings. The Ulema are the class of Muslim scholars primarily devoted to the study of and, in some governments, the implementation of the Shari'a, or Islamic Law. Some Muslim clerics are called Mullahs. The Sunni branch of Islam, where approximately 90% of Muslims adhere, does not have a clergy and therefore an Imam is not a cleric like that of a Christian priest. In the Shi'a branch of Islam, the concept of an Imam occupies a much more central religious position (Masquelier, 2001:110).

India is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, with some of the most deeply religious societies and cultures. Religion still plays a central and definitive role in the lives of most of her people. Their main religion is Buddhism founded by Buddha. In the religion, women are virtually not recognized or given any major role. This is why Swana (1988:8) states:

The social matrix in which Buddhism arose was one which accorded to women an inferior position. In this regard Indian society did not differ radically from that in other places, and in some respects its treatment of women may actually have been more liberal. Indian religion in the Buddha's time is usually designated as "Brahmanism" to distinguish it from Hinduism, which in its classic form was a post-Buddhist development

Swana goes further to state:

The position of women has been a subject of considerable interest in recent decades. In all societies, particularly in the
West, there has been a rethinking of the position accorded to women in all spheres of activity. This has resulted in a significant change in the role played by women in social, economic and even political life. This reappraisal has also touched on the question of the position accorded to women in the main religious traditions of the world. In Christian countries the issue of the ordination of women has become a highly controversial topic, and some Churches are facing the prospect of dissension, and even schism, on this question. It is therefore opportune to consider the place accorded to women in Buddhism.

What Swana is saying is that in the past Indian women did not have much position in religion as men did but she feels that their position in Buddhism will be considered in this present time. She says, by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. Women were prevented from performing religious rites, and even the knowledge of the Vedas was to be kept away from them.

In China, Confucianism influences the Chinese culture in the domains of government and family life. The rights of parents upon their children and children upon their parents were amongst the values that the Chinese learnt from Confucius. Although Buddhism is today the most widely practiced religion in China there are many aspects of the Chinese culture that reflect the influence of Confucianism.

Writing about Chinese religion, Hays (2008:45) opines:
Male household leaders are usually in charge of the domestic worship of ancestor spirits and household gods. Part time specialists act as priests, diviners and shaman. They wear special clothes when they preside over rites and employ chants, prayers and songs they have memorized. They are paid in food for their services. Shamans are generally called upon to cure illnesses by bringing back lost souls. They play a key role in funeral rites and are called upon to explain misfortunes and preside over rites that protect households and villages.

In all the religions of the world it was noted that women are recognized and given some positions in religious worship but the point is that they never share equal or the same positions with men because men have always been known as the head of the family.

**Conclusion**

The researcher made in-depth study on this by going into the fields, collected data and reviewed many related literature. In the analysis of the data collected, lots of truths were revealed concerning Igbo people and how they lived their lives in the past which made them different from other tribes in the world. The analysis was done based on the result obtained, showing that Igbo women were held in high position in the past, the observances they were subjected to were to enhance their dignity as women and not to oppress them, the present Igbo women are no longer interested in those things that will enhance their dignity rather they are after the offices to be shared with men.
Igbo women were not given equal rights and positions with men in Igbo traditional religious worship because God is seen in all religions as male and therefore has made man to be the head and woman the supporter of man; therefore they can never share equal right in anything be it religion, politics or economic pursuits.

Moreover, it must be noted that a woman’s physical make up, her psychological propensities, her emotional refinement, her moral commitment and all the other qualities that God has endowed her with, are generally geared towards making the woman a mother indeed.

References

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