

## ONYIMA CUSTOM AMONG THE IGBO OF NIGERIA: RETHINKING HIGH FERTILITY AND PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

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Nigeria is classified among high fertility countries, which despite sustained campaigns, has experienced very slow rate of fertility reduction. The Igbo ethnic group contributes substantially to the country's prevailing fertility regime. Population pressure in Igbo sub-groups is a product of patriarchy and specific reproductive practices. This study examined onyima, which is a relatively less emphasized pronatalist custom among the Igbo, as way of understanding the inherent ideology and the feasibility of fertility reversal in relevant contexts. Data were collected through 16 in-depth interviews, 8 focus group discussions and 456 questionnaires. We discuss the implications of the findings and note that intervention should target modifications that will be sensitive to the complexity and interests of different stakeholders in order to make necessary community adaptation inclusive.

### BACKGROUND

At seven billion, and counting, the world population has demonstrated profound resilience to the effects of increasing mortality and migration in counteracting high fertility in less developed societies. Despite rising incidence of deaths resulting from diseases including HIV/AIDS and the persistent evidence of migratory outflows, human figures continue to surge in most African societies (Population Reference Bureau 2013; 2014; Nwokocha 2012a; 2007a). The import of this scenario is unmistakable and suggests that there are inbuilt mechanisms sustaining high fertility among groups especially in sub-Saharan Africa - reputed for its record of increasing population (Snow, Winter & Harlow 2013; ISERT 2014) that diffuses the effects of high death rate and emigration. The immediate implication of this scenario is youth bulge, which is counter-productive in contexts characterized by over-arching poverty, diseases and insecurity.

Isiugo-Abanihe (2011) had noted that nearly 42 per cent of the total population of Nigeria are children age 0-14; it rises to 52.4 percent when extended to include adolescents.

The Igbo ethnic group contributes substantially to Nigeria's population configuration due to a combination of socio-cultural and economic factors that find expression in patriarchy and patriliney (Nwokocha 2012b). Of the 389 ethnic groups in Nigeria (Otite 2000), the Igbo constitute over 13 percent of the population (National Bureau of Statistics 2007; NPC 2006) Writing on the value and benefits of children among the people, Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwokocha (2008: 53-54) noted:

Igbo women traditionally achieve status and recognition through children. A woman with many children is admired and respected. Her husband bestows honour and affection on her; her children meet her needs and give her a great sense of fulfillment in life; younger women revere and role-model her; she is seen as a mother to all. Common Igbo metaphors compare female fertility with soil fertility; a fertile soil is the delight and desire of everybody, so is a fertile woman. They associate high fertility with divine and ancestral blessings through numerous allegories, names and ceremonies.

Yet, some Igbo communities are more prolific than others. Mbaise people for instance are known for frequent childbearing and large family size as a reflection of their pronatal orientation that embeds in patriarchal ethos (Uwalaka 2003). A relate custom *ewu-ukwu* has received relatively more attention in literature perhaps due to the immediacy of the conditions that characterized its celebration. As Uhegbu (1978: 41), an Mbaise scholar wrote:

Mbaise people delight in having large families. Our Eze-Chinyere society has been formed by people who proudly regard themselves as the most fortunate set in the community. This is because what qualifies a couple for membership is the birth of at least 10 children.

Although Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwokocha (2008: 54) observed that the custom has waned greatly, large family norms still pervade the Mbaise society. This study aimed at examining the role of *onyima*, which is a considerably less emphasized high fertility related ceremony, in sustaining population density in the area notwithstanding the influence of modernization and formal education (Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwokocha 2008; Uwalaka 2003). Indeed, understanding the demography of Mbaise is imperative and enables insight into how the people cope with the contradiction between availability of very limited land resource and

sustained high fertility. Thus, the objective of the study is four-fold: (1) describe the nature of and ideology behind *onyima*, (2) examine the factors sustaining the practice in the midst of financial poverty, (3) investigate the maternal health and social implications of the custom on the people, and (4) explore the possibility of modifying the practice.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two theoretical perspectives – the Voluntary Social Action Theory (Talcott Parsons) and Symbolic Interactionism (Herbert Mead) are employed in examining issues related to *onyima* as a custom and the main driver of high fertility and population density among the Mbaise-Igbo. This combination was necessitated by the complexity that inheres in a custom that has existed for centuries and remained largely unperturbed by changing times, taste and fashion. These perspectives explain the processes through which human actions are defined to reflect collective understanding of a given situation or event hinged on norms, values, beliefs and practices.

Talcott Parsons' voluntary social action theory emphasizes the constraint of individuals within specific customs and values and attempts to explain behaviour related to socio-cultural variables and their influence on *onyima* custom. The perspective is premised on some basic assumptions:

1. Actions of individuals are ordinarily directed at achievement of end goals. In this case, achieving a large family size will facilitate the quest for early attainment of the grand-parent-status necessary to qualify for the *onyima* ceremony.
2. The course of action is determined by the conditions of the physical and social environments. A given milieu and the structures and conditions around it shape as well as dictate an individual's perception and attitude towards actions that ultimately manifest in behaviours, both in everyday life and isolated occasional-activities such as *onyima*. In relation to the latter custom, the respect associated with it among most Igbo communities is a sufficient motivation for families to strive towards it.
3. Members of society have emotions and therefore make moral judgments which influence selection of ends and means and their order of priority. This implies that individuals are free to seek achievement of set goals through whatever means they consider

necessary. In this case, a couple may perceive celebration of *onyima* as an easy way to achieve status and recognition particularly among the poor who may equate it with high self-esteem and a source of boosting their ego.

4. Actions are to be explained by the subjective meaning given to these by the actors who are usually propelled by perception and definition of the ends and conditions. Therefore, even when *onyima* is associated with prolific childbearing and high infant and maternal mortality, these consequences would hardly be obvious to individuals who only see the positive side of the custom.

In sum, Parsons' position showcases the effects of social and cultural variables on *onyima*. The perspective sees behaviours related to high fertility and large family size such as short birth intervals, non-use of contraceptives and rejection of abortion among others as determined by cultural norms and values at a particular time.

Symbolic Interactionism by Herbert Mead, which focuses on the use of symbols related to the things that people attach meaning in developing their views of the world and for communication with one another, was adopted as the second perspective in this study (Henslin 2007; Schaefer 2005). The perspective emphasizes pragmatism, which as observed by Ritzer (2008: 347-348) can be explained at three levels:

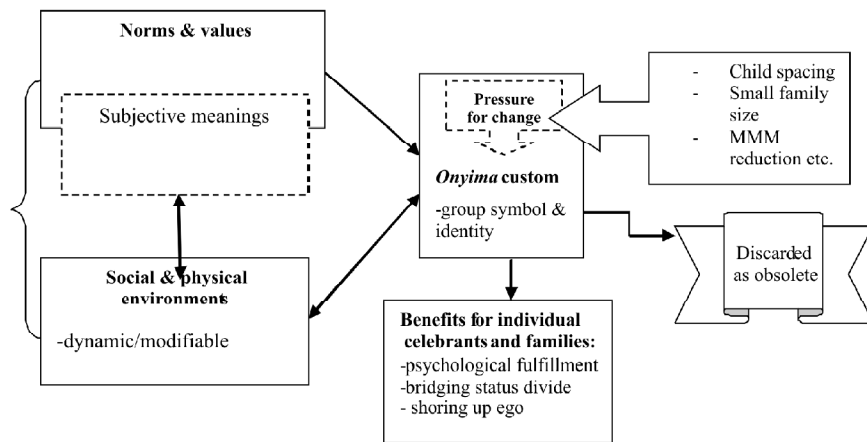
1. That both actors and their social and physical environments are dynamic processes which individuals have the capacity to modify in order to reflect the reality of times. Thus, as rational beings actors are meant to assess a situation and suggest the point at which alteration of values, perception, attitude and behaviour of individuals is most appropriate. Hence, they are meant to be at liberty to, for instance, to adjust or discard out-rightly aspects of their existence considered dysfunctional and in some instances obsolete in the context of contemporary social thoughts and events. In this case, acting individuals and groups may conceive as dangerous repeated and often short-interval childbearing, which is a precursor to high maternal and infant mortality, as a way of fast-tracking attainment of the grandparent-status. Such perceived danger may facilitate modifications or wholesome abandonment of the custom.
2. That true reality does not exist 'out there' in the real world, but rather actively created by individuals in the process of acting in

and around the world. The implication is that actors in a given situation create and recreate their environments in an attempt to maximize the benefits that such efforts attract. This ability for modifying what does not work at a given period agrees with Herskovit's (1955) conceptualization of culture and its variants like customs, norms, beliefs and practices as the manmade part of environment. Haralambos and Holborn (2004: 961) had noted that symbols are human-made and not only refer to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which people perceive and interact with them.

3. That people remember and base their knowledge of the world on what has proven useful to them and are likely to alter what no longer functions. For instance *onyima* may have been useful in bridging the status divide between the rich and poor by acting as a leveler in traditional illiterate societies with very limited pathways to social mobility. As such, being identified as an *onyima* celebrant blurred the perception of incapacity ascribed to low socioeconomic status. In the contemporary setting, particularly with emphasis on attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), customs that encourage frequent childbearing and large family size are not only antithetical to the socioeconomic and mental wellbeing of people but also less desirable in a poverty-stricken society as most Igbo communities represent. Moreover, as Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwokocha (2008) had argued, men quickly remarried when their wives die trying to give birth to a large number of children as a manifest or latent condition for having either the *ewu-ukwu* and/or *onyima* customs celebrated on their behalf.

Figure 1 represents a synthesis of the theoretical perspectives employed in examining the interaction of culture and behaviour. The framework highlights the influence of norms and values on social and physical environments and, in turn, the capacity of the latter to facilitate alterations on the former, based on contemporary reality. That is to say that both the environment and cultural traits are not static phenomena, but modifiable elements that define human actors as rational with inherent capacity to respond to stimuli. For the most part, such responses derive from subjective meanings that may be constructed on the basis of motives, taste and fashion and an actor's conviction about the desirability of an intended action.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Source: Nwokocha 2015

The framework reveals that norms and values and the environment in which they operate affect people's perception and what they consider essential in acting within acceptable normative limits. A high premium is placed on celebrating *onyima* in Mbaïse society of Southeastern Nigeria as a valued custom that also depicts group symbol and identity. At micro-individual level, the benefits may range from psychological fulfillment, bridging the status gap, to boasted ego among others.

A combination of factors such as poverty, enculturation, intervention programmes targeted at population change including policies, and community awareness through advocacy and sensitization, may exert considerable pressure on an existing custom such as *onyima* to necessitate change both in content and outlook. Figure 1 also shows that change may impinge on the extent of emphasis on family planning, which has implication for child spacing, small family size and reduction in infant and Maternal Morbidity and Mortality (MMM). It is also possible that a custom or tradition be considered absolutely obsolete and unnecessary to the extent of being discarded particularly if it has implications for negative consequences including death. To be certain, prolific childbearing in the context of a weak medical system, ignorance and lack of access and use of already inadequate facilities are critical issues in poor pregnancy outcomes (Nwokocha, 2012a), which are typical of the Nigerian situation. Therefore, the *onyima* may also dwindle into insignificance, just like

*ewu-ukwu* and become extinct if the main eligibility criterion remains large number of children and grandchildren.

## METHODS

We chose the Mbaïse-Igbo in Imo State for this study for two important reasons. First, it is the most populated Igbo sub-group and second, the *onyima* custom is widely celebrated by the people more than most other Igbo communities. Mbaïse is situated at the centre of Igboland and occupies an area of about 404 square kilometers (Agulanna, 1998). Going by the two most recent censuses in Nigeria, the population of the people increased from 304,338 in 1991 (Agulanna 1998) to 524,370 in 2006 (FRN), which represents a 58 percent increase in 15 years. As has been observed, population density among the people is both an instrument of power and development as well as weakness (Agulanna 2004; Njoku 2003), particularly when many of these children are sent out for engagement by relations and strangers in domestic servitude that largely translates to slavery (Njoku 2003).

Literacy level among the Mbaïse is very high and perhaps higher than any other group in Southeast Nigeria; they also have the highest number of Catholic clergy in Africa (Uwalaka 2003). Yet, the people delight in observing their customs and traditions. A study by Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwokocha (2008) revealed that *Ewu-ukwu* custom which required women to experience at least ten pregnancies as a condition for induction into a respected group was a significant contributor to persistent high fertility among the people while it lasted. The latter custom having waned appreciably suggests that *onyima* is the main factor that still shapes family reproductive health decisions.

The study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The use of mixed method was necessitated by the complexity surrounding the thematic phenomenon to the extent that a single approach would have proven inadequate. For instance, while it was appropriate to examine issues related to community perception and attitude towards the custom through questionnaire survey, qualitative techniques interrogated specific experiential components of the custom among a few stakeholders. A total of 456 questionnaires were administered to adults in four selected communities; 16 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted among community elders and opinion leaders of both sexes; and 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with individuals whose family members had celebrated *onyima*. Fieldwork started with IDIs,

which provided the preliminary insight that necessitated design of the quantitative instrument. A sample questionnaire was designed and pre-tested in locations other than those selected for the data collection. The final questionnaire included closed and open-ended items addressing issues related to underlying ideologies, practices, consequences and the possibility of seeking alternative ways of honoring women without subjecting them to avoidable risky reproductive behaviour and high fertility among others.

Sampling procedure for selection of questionnaire respondents started with the random selection of Ezinihitte Local Government Area comprising 16 communities; 4 communities were also selected through the simple random method. In each of the selected locations, 5 villages were randomly chosen from which households were sampled. One adult was selected from the households; where more than one person was eligible for participation in the study, random selection was undertaken to decide who eventually took part.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 community elders including traditional rulers, chiefs, and religious and opinion leaders. That way, the views of a wide spectrum of the people were elicited on the subject matter. Ethical considerations were emphasized throughout fieldwork. The consent of both respondents and participants was sought prior to their participation in the study; the right to withdraw at any point or withhold information perceived to impinge on their privacy was fully acknowledged and respected. In addition, their confidentiality was guaranteed to the extent that information would never be traced to these subjects.

Qualitative data analysis involved the use of ethnographic summaries and content analysis. The procedure began with the translation and transcription of tape recordings of IDIs and FGDs. These were followed by the examination and, later, thematic isolation of various responses that threw light into study objectives. By adopting this method, responses from qualitative data complemented questionnaire survey. Quantitative data were edited and cleaned to eliminate inconsistencies that could undermine validity and reliability. Thus, although 456 copies of the questionnaire were administered on respondents, only 401 were found usable, which represents 88 percent return rate. Data generated from pre-coded, open-ended and fixed choice questions were entered using Microsoft Access software in order to minimize data entry error and to ensure effective data management. These data were finally exported and

analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) at univariate, bivariate and multivariate levels.

## RESULTS

### (i) Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1 presents data on selected socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. It shows a few respondents did not answer all the questions presented in the questionnaire schedule. Perhaps some of the issues were conceived as sensitive and impinging on their privacy and were deliberately avoided. This implies that although, a total of 401 respondents took part in the quantitative aspect of the study, less than that number responded to some of the questions. The table shows that most of the respondents were aged 60 years and above (68.7 percent). About 52 percent of the respondents are females, while the remaining 48 percent are males. The marital status of the respondents is indicative of the predominance of currently married respondents (61.8 percent) relative to those who previously married (36.1 percent) including divorced/separated, and single (1.5 percent).

Table 1 also shows that nearly all the respondents (99.7 percent) identified themselves as Christians, and a majority them (41.3 percent) are of Roman Catholic faith. Close to one respondent in three had no formal education; 8.8 percent had primary education, 33.2 percent had secondary education and the remaining 28.4 percent had some tertiary education. The latter figure is far above the national average of 5.4 percent and 8.6 percent for females and males respectively (NPC 2009). This corroborates the finding of Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwokocha's (2008) study that showed high level of literacy among Mbaise people. On the occupation of the respondents, about 61 percent of the respondents are traders or farmers, the rest comprise civil servants, artisans and other occupational categories. About 61 percent of the respondents have had relations that celebrated *onyima*, to indicate the pervasiveness of the custom in the area.

### (ii) Onyima in Context

Respondents described *onyima* as a celebration for couples that have several grandchildren both as a mark of honour for prolificacy and in thanksgiving to God. Indeed, due to late marriages among the people, achieving that feat is usually at very old age, most times, with only one

**Table 1**  
Percent distribution of respondents by selected Socio-demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency (N=401)	Percent
Age	40-44	8	2.0
	45-49	22	5.5
	50-54	67	16.8
	55-59	28	7.0
	60+	274	68.7
Sex	Female	208	51.8
	Male	193	48.1
Marital status	Single	6	1.5
	Married	248	61.8
	Divorced/Separated	5	1.2
	Widowed	140	34.9
	Others	2	.5
Religion	Catholic	165	41.3
	Protestant	119	29.7
	Pentecostal	115	28.7
	Traditional	1	.3
Education	No formal edu.	118	29.6
	Primary	35	8.8
	Secondary	132	33.2
	Tertiary	113	28.4
Major occupation	Trader/Business	177	44.2
	Civil servant/Teacher	114	28.5
	Farmer	65	16.3
	Artisan	43	10.7
	Others	1	.2
Relation ever celebrated <i>onyima</i>	Yes	245	61.1
	No	146	36.4
	No response	10	2.5

living couple to celebrate it. Table 2 displays data on what respondents think about *onyima* presently. About 63 percent said the custom is still necessary in contemporary Mbaise society; 34 percent did not see *onyima* as necessary; and the rest (3 percent) did not indicate an opinion on the issue.

Among respondents that see *onyima* as necessary, about 93 percent said the custom prolongs life of celebrants or a source of psychological well-being. One of the IDI respondents corroborated this when she noted:

**Table 2**  
Percent distribution of respondents by perception on the necessity of *onyima* in the community

Perception of respondents	Frequency	Percent
<b>Necessity of onyima</b>		
Yes	251	62.6
No	138	34.4
No opinion	12	3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Why onyima is necessary</b>		
Prolongs life	157	59.0
Psychological well-being	91	34.2
Preservation of tradition	8	3.0
honoring parents/Family reunion	10	3.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Reason why onyima is not necessary</b>		
Not solution to people's problems	85	62.9
It is related to idol worship	47	34.8
Brings course upon celebrants	3	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>100</b>

*Onyima* is a great custom celebrated in thanksgiving to God for safeguarding grand and great-grand parents through years of childbearing and rearing in poverty stricken conditions. It rather rejuvenates them psychologically and mentally through a perception of their own achievements measured by the number of people in their individual households, in a community that places high premium on children. The sense of fulfillment arising from eligibility to celebrate *onyima* alone is a source of joy that prolongs the life of these potential or actual celebrants. I do not see anything wrong with it and hope that our young people, copying western lifestyle wholesome, would not one day see it as unnecessary or obsolete.

Another respondent trying to justify the existential imperative of *onyima* described the custom as antithetical to gender inequity and male-child syndrome within the context of patriarchy (Nwokocha 2007b). He opined:

When the custom is studied carefully, one could observe that what is most important is the number of grand and great-grand children and not the number of males in particular... in fact, the more female children one has, the higher are the chances of celebrating *onyima* earlier than

those whose children are mainly males; females marry far earlier than their male counterparts in Igboland and also begin procreation early, while the latter prolong marriage (and by implication *onyima*) in order to acquire wealth to cater for the family both of orientation and procreation.

The implication of such views is that changing the attitude and behaviour of these individuals would be difficult to achieve. To be sure, observations related to life prolongation can be canvassed only in situations where women survived threats of maternal mortality and morbidity. But as studies have already indicated, Nigerian communities are characterized by high maternal mortality prevalence (Nwokocha 2012a; 2007c; Onabanjo & Nwokocha 2010), including in Mbaise (Isiugo-Abanihe & Nwokocha 2008). A large majority of respondents (62.9 percent) who do not see the custom as necessary dismissed it as not being a solution to problems that people encounter in society; the rest (37 percent) said it is related to idol worship and could attract curses on celebrants.

**Table 3**  
Percent distribution of respondents by people who would not want to celebrate the custom

	Frequency	Percent
Whether there are people who would not want to celebrate <i>onyima</i>		
Yes	281	70.6
No	117	29.4
Total	398	100
The people that would not celebrate <i>onyima</i>		
Born again Christians	249	86.8
Religious fanatics	37	12.9
Highly educated	1	0.3
Total	287	100
Reasons why they would not		
Belief in God	115	40.0
Idolatry/fetish/worshipping the devil	172	59.7
Some late people are celebrated	1	0.3
Total	288	100

About 71 percent of the respondents said that there are people who would not want to celebrate the custom, while the remaining 29 percent did not think some people would not want to. The implication of these

views is clear; the Mbaise community is no longer as rigidly attached to some of its cultural beliefs and practices including *onyima* as in the past. This aligns with Parsons' voluntary social action theory which sees actors as directed and constrained within a particular cultural domain but still allowed some freedom or discretion to function in a social environment (Ritzer 2008).

Table 3 further shows that virtually all the respondents (99.7 percent) said that Born-again-Christians or Religious fanatics would not celebrate *onyima* even if they meet the criteria for such ceremony. The main reason pointed out by the respondents is that this category of people see celebrating *onyima* as contrary to their belief in God. This view was also captured by an FGD participant:

*Onyima* is an unprogressive ancient custom, which is connected with idol worship... sacrifices are made to the gods during the ceremony. The custom involves rituals such as breaking of eggs and killing of animals to appease the gods. Indeed, it is embedded in superstition and fetish activities, which run contrary to Christian belief.

Table 4 is a composite of respondents' view on whether *onyima* is still relevant in contemporary Mbaise society and two independent variables - educational status and relations ever-had *onyima*.

**Table 4**  
Respondents' views on whether the custom is still necessary by education and relations ever-had *onyima*

A		Whether <i>onyima</i> is still necessary			Total
		Yes	No	No response	
<i>Education</i>					
	No formal education	98 (83.1)	18 (15.2)	2 (1.7)	118 (100)
	Primary school	23 (65.7)	12 (34.3)	0 (0.0)	35 (100)
	Secondary school	78 (59.1)	50 (37.9)	4 (3.0)	132 (100)
	Tertiary	51 (45.1)	58 (51.3)	6 (5.3)	113 (100)
Total		250	136	12	398
		<i>Df</i> = 10, <i>p</i> < 0.001			
B		Whether <i>onyima</i> is still necessary			Total
		Yes	No	No response	
<i>Relations ever-celebrated onyima</i>					
	Yes	182 (74.3)	56 (22.9)	7 (2.8)	245 (100)
	No	63 (43.1)	78 (53.4)	5 (3.4)	146 (100)
Total		245	134	12	391
		<i>Df</i> = 4, <i>p</i> < 0.001			

It is clear from Table 4 that respondents' level of education has an inverse relationship with their view on whether the custom is still necessary, at 0.001 significance level. As people acquire more education, their awareness level and worldview change, and may likely deemphasize aspects of culture considered obsolete. The same level of significance (0.001) exists between relations-ever-had *onyima* and perception of whether the custom is still necessary. Table 5 shows the multiple regression analysis on the relationship between selected demographic variables (age, sex marital status and level of education) and support for continuity of *onyima* custom.

**Table 5**  
Multiple regression analysis on the relationship between selected demographic variables and support for continuity of *onyima* custom

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.801	.198	-.016	9.098	.000
Age	-.008	.029	-.030	-.272	.785
Sex	-.031	.053	.025	-.591	.555
Marital Status	.013	.031	-.204	.435	.664
Education	-.090	.025		-3.565	.000
ANOVA					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	4.714	4	1.178	4.427	.002a
Residual	104.354	392	.266		
Total	109.068	396			
Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.208a	.043	.033	.516	

The F-test is statistically significant with a p-value of 0.002. The adjusted R-square indicates that about 3% of the variability of support for continuity of the custom is accounted for by the model even after taking into account the number of predictor variables in the model. The coefficients for each of the variables shows the level of change one could expect in support for continuity of the custom given a one-unit change in the value of a specific variable, holding all other variables constant. Considering the variable age

for instance, one would expect a decrease of 0.008 in the support for continuity of the custom for every one unit increase in age assuming that all other variables in the model are held constant.

### (iii) Maternal health and social implications of *onyima*

Table 6 presents data on the implications of *onyima* on three categories of stakeholders. Over 72 percent of the respondents said *onyima* affects women's health or reduces their lifespan. Being tied to the number of grandchildren, the custom exerts some latent pressure on women to have many children that would in turn bear grand and great-grand children to be eligible for the ceremony. One of the IDI respondents noted:

Most people would not tell you that *onyima* motivates them to strive for high fertility but would rather readily identify *ewu-ukwu* custom as a push-factor. While the latter was a significant motivator in the olden days, the former is still a ceremony marked with pomp and pageantry; however its pressure is not as pronounced as *ewu-ukwu* that requires women to have experienced ten pregnancies. The main eligibility criterion for *onyima* celebration is postponed and tied to the second generation of children or grandchildren.

The critical underlying issue is that projection into becoming an *onyima* celebrant exerts some pressure on the prospective celebrant, whether consciously or otherwise.

**Table 6**  
Distribution of respondents by likely consequences of *onyima*

Categories	Responses	Frequency (N = 402)	Percent
On mothers	Reduces life span	84	20.9
	Affects women's health	206	51.4
	Creates financial problems	8	2.0
	No negative effect	101	25.2
On children	Source of happiness, joy & respect	2	0.5
	Poor parenting/upbringing	112	27.9
	Malnutrition/poverty	128	31.9
	Poor/no formal education	117	29.2
	Leads to division of labour	5	1.2
On the family	No adverse effect	39	9.7
	Diverse views/lack of cooperation	250	62.3
	Poverty/starvation	87	21.4
	Large families are respected	21	5.2
	No negative effect	43	10.7



Studies show that high fertility occasioned by short birth intervals in the context of poverty and inadequate medical facilities and personnel are among the factors accounting for high maternal mortality and morbidity particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Jain 2011; Monjok *et al.* 2012; Nwokocha 2012a; Onabanjo & Nwokocha 2012; Oni & Tukur 2012; Paz-Soldan *et al.* 2012; Saha & Soest 2013; Smith *et al.* 2012). Aside linking high fertility to *onyima* celebration, a correlation may not be established between number of children and old age support. A study on the Ijesas of South-Western Nigeria found that empowerment of a child rather than the number of children is more significant in ensuring the well-being of the elderly (Akinyemi 2009).

On the likely effects on the children, Table 5 shows that about 57 percent of the respondents identified poor parental upbringing or poor/no formal education as the major consequence of *onyima*; hence, high fertility accounts for poverty and the inability to train young family members in school. This finding does not however reflect the people's high literacy level as described by earlier studies (Agulanna 2004, 1998; Isiugo-Abanihe & Nwokocha 2008; Njoku 2003; Uhegbu 1978; Uwalaka 2003). About 11 percent did not link the custom to any known negative consequences on the children. A large majority of the respondents stated that diverse views or lack of cooperation in family (62.3 percent) results from having many children; the figure increases to 83.7 percent when poverty/starvation is included. The rest (15.9 percent) did not link *onyima* to any negative consequence on the entire family.

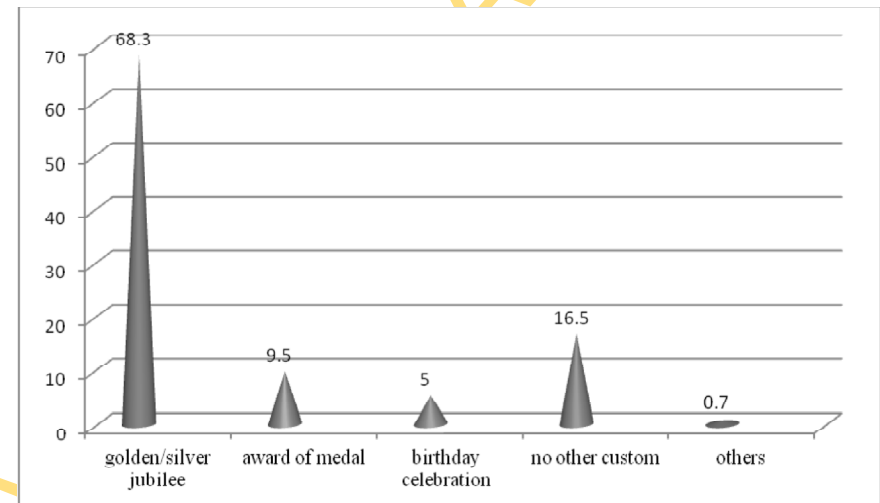
#### (iv) On the possibility of modification

On the possibility of discarding or modifying *onyima* custom to align with contemporary reality, Figure 2 indicates that while none of the respondents suggested any form of modification, most said celebrating golden/silver jubilee or award of medal (77.8 percent) to deserving individuals in the community could serve as alternative to the custom. About 17 percent of the respondents maintained that no other custom should replace *onyima*; thus implying that replacing it is not necessary.

According to an FGD participant:

When the Catholic Church saw the negative side of *onyima*, it decided to ensure that the custom is discarded and/or replaced with award of medals to deserving individuals after fifty years of marriage. The award serves three purposes: to honour recipients for persevering in marriage despite the usual ups and downs; to encourage Catholics (the Anglican

Figure 2: Suggested events in place of *onyima*



Church has also started award of medal) to practice their faith; and to discourage them from having interest in the fetish *onyima* custom that has existed over centuries. The medal award does not involve traditional fetish attachments, but is purely a Christian practice which is a source of happiness to celebrants and progress to the church... it is not dependent on the number of children that couples have.

Although the seemingly negative aspect of *onyima* was reported by most study-subjects mainly as anti-Christian, an IDI respondent noted that modification rather than outright elimination of the custom is a better option, mainly to preserve group symbol and identity:

Granted that *onyima* in its present form involves traditional rituals, I would not subscribe to replacing it with medal award, but rather suggest that the fetish aspect of it be stop while retaining the name (*onyima*). Not so doing would mean losing a distinctive part of our culture...after all, the medal award has its shortcomings such as the large amount of money paid (registration fee) to the church by aged people nominated as prospective recipients, the accompanying elaborate ceremony and concomitant financial pressure on families and households among others.

The latter position did not however address the issue of the number of grand and great-grandchildren and by implication high fertility and large family norms as a prerequisite for *onyima* celebration. We note that if aged Parishioners are requested to pay large sums of money as one of the

conditions for the award of medal it would discourage the poor but eligible members from participating in the ceremony. In the long run, such award may create class divisions in the community. As an IDI respondent noted: "its expensiveness depends on the financial strength and taste of the celebrant".

## DISCUSSION

The data and analysis of results of this study have thrown up several issues for discussion, and perhaps for further investigation. For instance, since *onyima* neither emphasizes the number of children nor males that couples have, it would be important to examine the extent that it ameliorates the agony of childless couples or the pains of women who do not have male children in a patriarchal society such as Mbaise. It would seem that whereas the *ewu-ukwu* custom puts pressure on couples to have at least ten children while it lasted (Isiugo-Abanihe & Nwokocha 2008), the *onyima* subtly counteracted such pressure by postponing appraisal of prolificacy to second generation of children or grandchildren. Thus, although the Mbaise cherish high fertility and preference for male children (Uwalaka 2003), the *onyima* custom gives hope to mothers of female-only children. However, neither of the two customs gives respite to childless couples given that both in the immediate and long-run, eligibility for each is tied to children. Perhaps the award of medals by churches to couples that had been married for fifty years irrespective their fertility status is a veritable strategy at deemphasizing the social and psychological effects of childlessness, secondary infertility and small family size (Adegbola 2007).

This study found that respondents' level of education has an inverse relationship with perception of the necessity of *onyima*. As was revealed by this research and others, the Mbaise Igbo are highly literate (Agulanna 1998, 2004; Njoku 2003; Uhegbu 1978; Uwalaka 2003) and therefore would have overwhelmingly perceived the custom as no longer necessary due to exposure to knowledge and worldview. However, even among affluent and literate families, a high premium is placed on *onyima* celebration to suggest the likely influence of other underlying factors. For instance, results of this study indicated that most respondents whose relations had ever celebrated *onyima* said they would also want to have the ceremony. Thus the lasting impression made by the custom while being witnessed by relations of some literate members of the community in the past may downplay the effect of their education in constructing the custom as unnecessary.

The socio-demography of Mbaise presents a contradictory scenario wherein the people are reputed for high fertility as well as high literacy level. Literature is robust with studies linking high fertility to poverty and low educational attainment (Jacobstein, Bakamjian, Pile & Wickstorm 2009; Jennings & Barber 2013; Nwokocha 2006), which is not the case with the Mbaise-Igbo. We would rather argue that doggedness, community orientation towards literacy, and strong extended family cohesion and support undermine the consequences of dense population on acquisition of education. In addition, Uwalaka (2003) identified the Catholic priesthood and ardent Catholicism among the people as important to accounting for a high literacy level in the area.

Three views on prospects for change related to *onyima* are easily identifiable: outright stoppage without any form of replacement; moderate modification; and extensive change that will combine elements of the existing structure. Our position is that each of these positions has a modicum of relevance to the extent that some community members adjudge them appropriate. Balancing these opinions would translate to accommodating the different views. For instance, since most respondents who stopped *onyima* based their disapproval on its fetishness, expunging that component and in its place the medal award at no cost to prospective recipients would make a lot of difference. That way, the convergence of elements of ancient/modern and traditional/Christianity leading to social equilibrium that embeds in community inclusiveness can be achieved.

## CONCLUSION

Results of this study have shown that the ideology behind *onyima* among the Mbaise-Igbo is to indemnify the people's pronatalist values, which the *ewu-ukwu* custom sought to sustain while it lasted. Perhaps to ensure that even when the latter practice dwindles into insignificance, as the current situation depicts, a related tradition that would make some form of fertility demands on couples particularly women, would linger. Although such ideological disposition, which finds expression in patriarchy may have outlived the people's perception of its negative consequences (seen as normal due to centuries of institutionalization), the present analysis conceives these thematic customs as embedded in reproductive injustices to women, the majority of whom are voiceless in the midst of socioeconomic powerlessness.

The current reality about *onyima* is that its seemingly sacrosanct posture, that hitherto made it attractive to the people, has caved-in in

response to Christian religious doctrine that frowns at fetish practices such as sacrifices to idols and pouring of libation among others that pitched adherents against the supernatural. The people's pulse, exemplified by the overwhelming response of study-subjects, suggests that change either in form of outright rejection or modification of the custom has become necessary. Whatever alterations that may be contemplated, it is essential to carry the generality of the people along to ensure community acceptance, unity and sustainability.

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