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GENDER, SPACE AND POWER IN THE INDIGENOUS IGBO SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexities of gender relations in the indigenous Igbo socio-political space, drawing from the kinship system, and the spatial context of intragroup interactions. With copious examples from Nanka Igbo society, the paper notes that the institutionalized mechanisms in the Igbo culture afford men and women the opportunity to access power as means of social negotiation and identity legitimation. Women's agency and collective power are reflected in the various ways their participation engenders group integration and harmonious co-existence. The physical context of the polygynous household further demonstrates both the socio-cultural and structural relationships that engender men and women's agency. The paper, thus, offers new perspectives on the indigenous Igbo socio-political world through its contribution to the critique of the thesis of women invisibility that dominated earlier studies on Igbo people. The paper concludes that collaboration and gender mutuality characterize gender relations in the indigenous Igbo society.

Introduction

A lot of work has been done on the indigenous Igbo socio-political organization, describing it as stateless or segmentary, egalitarian, gerontocratic, patriarchal, and so on (see Ilogu, 1974; Basden, 1938; and Onwuejegwu, 1981, for example). Evident in these works are attempts to analyse the political life of the Igbo traditional society. In this regard, many of these works focused on such units as the family, patrilineage, village, and village group, with little attention given to the position of women in these entities, and how their ability to negotiate power is enshrined in the cultural processes and ensures gender equity. Few other studies that try to look at the position of women in the indigenous Igbo society do this in isolation of the position of men. This, to a large extent, forms the basis of feminist research. It, thus, lacks a balance, that is, a platform to project the overall picture of men and women in society. In the light of the fact that feminist research is done at the negligence of men's studies, gender studies has become more acceptable as both men and women are brought into focus. This paper examines the complexities of gender relations in the indigenous Igbo socio-political space, drawing from the nature of the kinship system, spatial context of the household arrangement in a polygynous family, and intra- and intergroup relations, and how these translate into access to power for either of the sexes. With copious examples from Nanka, a patrilineal rural Igbo society, the paper notes that the institutionalized mechanisms in the Igbo culture afford men and women the opportunity to access power as means for social negotiation and identity legitimation. Women's agency and collective power are reflected in the various ways their participation engenders group integration and harmonious co-existence. The spatial context of the household further indicates the socio-cultural and structural relationships that engender women's agency. The discussion in this paper bothers on how space and the individual's

positionality define and redefine the political landscape of gender. The paper demonstrates that cooperation and gender complementarity are the *modus operandi* of the indigenous Igbo socio-political life by providing new perspectives on the indigenous lifeways of the people. It, therefore, deconstructs the thesis of women invisibility that dominated earlier studies on Igbo people. The methodology of the study is qualitative, employing participant observation and key informant interviews, with documentary evidence supporting data from the ethnographic approach. Fieldwork for the study took place between 2004 and 2006. Data generated were analysed descriptively.

There are four sections in this work. Besides the introduction, which is the first section, other sub-sections include the nature of the indigenous Igbo socio-political organization; kinship system and cultural processes in Igbo society, and the interconnectedness that exists between gender, space and power in Igbo culture. The final section is the conclusion, where the paper establishes that the Igbo indigenous socio-political life depicts a society that recognizes the complementarity of men and women in the development of the society and the making of their civilization.

Indigenous Igbo Socio-political Organisation

Igbo land is segmented into multiplicities of autonomous communities or towns known as *obodo* or *mba*. Each *obodo* is led by a paramount leader called *eze* or *igwe*, a phenomenon that cuts across all Igbo societies in the contemporary time, and is, in fact, a legacy of European contact. Cases of monarchical system, however, could only be found in few places like Onitsha, Oguta, Osomari, Asaba, Arochuku, and Agbor (Kalu, 1993) prior to colonial contact. *Obodo* is the highest political unit of the Igbo traditional society. Each town is further segmented into smaller groups known as villages.

Olisa (1971) describes the village as simply a geographical

unit providing some considerable solidarity based on neighbourhood rather than an immediate blood relationship (Olisa 1971: 16). The villages are in turn segmented into *umunna* (patrilineage or literally meaning, 'children of the same father'). Among the Northern Igbo people for instance, residence is patrilocal, and members of the same extended family tend to reside closer to one another than with those outside the group. As each nuclear family shares its landed property, which is usually a large expanse of land, among the male children, it follows that members that are more closely related by blood are likely to reside closer to one another than those that are not. Ultimately, members of the same *umunna* reside closer to one another than to those of other patrilineages. The network of social relationships established through blood bond and daily interactions nurtures closer ties among kin groups, and further ensures support from kinsmen and women. For the Igbo people, obligatory mutual support, whether in cash or kind, is a significant part of social relationships within kin network.

The *umunna* is the central, most influential and basic socio-political unit of the Igbo indigenous society. It comprises of the descendants, in the male line, of an apical ancestor by whose name the patrilineage is sometimes called. Within a town, therefore, there are several village constituents, with clusters of *umunna* that make up each village. In Nanka town for instance, by 2006, there were over seventy *umunna* constituents, and still counting, from the seven villages of the community. It is instructive that the *umunna* in Nanka has become relevant in the division of the town into wards in contemporary society for the purpose of political mobilization in the community and local government administration. Thus, in each village, a cluster of *umunna* forms a ward, depending on how large such an *umunna* is, as illustrated in Table I below:

Table 1: Names of Wards and the constituting patrilineages/ sub-families in Ifite village, Nanka (adapted from Ezeugwa 1999)

Name of ward	Names of patrilineages/sub-families
(i) <i>Umuezeagbanari</i> ward	<i>Umuezeagbanari</i> 's seven sub-families.
(ii) <i>Uhuagu</i> ward	' <i>Uhuagu</i> ', ' <i>Uhuakpu</i> ', and ' <i>Isiakpu</i> ' families
(iii) <i>Umuezenwekwe</i> ward	' <i>Umuezenwekwe</i> ' family
(iv) <i>Ndu-Nnanebo</i> ward	' <i>Umuezenwekwe</i> ' family
(v) <i>Amoye</i> ward	' <i>Umuezegee</i> ', ' <i>Umuhanofo</i> ', ' <i>Umuakamonye</i> ', ' <i>Umuezeadam</i> ', ' <i>Umuezike</i> ', and ' <i>Umuhanonye</i> ' families.

Source: Ukpokolo, 2006

These political wards are also currently used to run the Nanka Patriotic Union (NPU) in the management of the affairs of community. Representation in traditional leader's cabinet is also drawn using this division. And, any levy imposed on the people for the communal development of the town is equally based on the ward system. The *Umuezeagbanari* in Table 1 above means 'the children of Agbanari' or 'the descendants of Agbanari'.

According to Njaka (1974), the *umunna* represents:

The catalyst of Igbo political behaviour and attitudes, the main controlling factor that regulates and conditions an Igbo citizen. It is the authority and reason for political and social participation in the Igbo town-state government (Njaka 1974:85).

The major features of the *umunna* are allegiance to the apical ancestor 'father', one shrine, and a common *obi* (a large open square where the patrilineage members meet to deliberate on issues of common interest). There is no intermarriage among members of the same *umunna*. However, in situations where the lineage has become extremely large,

which could threaten internal cohesion, sooner than later, a group within the patrilineage may opt out from the larger body to form a new patrilineage. For example, about three decades ago in Ifite village, Nanka, a new patrilineage known as *Umuezeike* (children of *Ezeike*), broke away from the *Umuezeagbanari* patrilineage, signifying yet the birth of a new patrilineage.

The *umunna* is made up of other micro units referred to as *umunne*, literally meaning 'children of the same mother'. Marriage is prohibited among group members, otherwise the individuals involved are accused of committing incest, an abomination, described as *alu* or *aru ala* or *nso ala*. The members of *umunne* are closely related by blood, and the founding father is traceable within less than ten generations. Although members are called *umunne*, they are actually related patrilineally. Describing the group as the children of the same mother demonstrates the bonding power of women in the people's social thought, and underscores women's agency in Igbo culture. Motherhood is perceived as a binding agent in intra-group relations. Besides, a man finds solace amongst his mother's people when he has problem with his own people. An individual is never rejected in his mother's patrilineage. A typical Igbo family is polygynous and consists of a man, his wives, children, and his sons' wives. With time these sons, except the first son known as *okpala*, move out of the compound to establish their individual compounds. The residence pattern is such that while the family head resides in the *obi*, which is located at the centre of the compound, the wives reside in mini-compounds within the larger compound. In each of these mini-compounds, each wife resides with her children. The political implications of this domestic arrangement and spatial context will be discussed later in this paper.

Prior to colonial contact, the council of elders who are mostly *nze na ozo* titleholders exercised authority and leadership at the village-group level. These people are

freeborn, that is, they are neither *osu* (social outcasts) nor slaves. They were the elite of Igbo traditional society. They directed discussions and summarized decisions in the assembly of the whole village-group and carried out other socio-political activities like settlement of disputes. When a man takes the *ozo* title, the wife automatically becomes the *lolo*, although there is no political role for her as *lolo*. Today, in Nanka town, just like in most indigenous Igbo society, the *nze na ozo* titleholders are the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people, while some of their former roles have been taken over by the traditional leader and his cabinet members, and the town union executives. In many Igbo communities, this new development often leads to contestations for power between the traditional leader (*eze* or *igwe*) and the town union executives, two political structures that are products of colonial contact and urbanization respectively (see Ukpokolo, 2012).

The *okpala*, whether at the level of the *umunna* or *umunne*, occupies a leadership position, which is based on the fact that he is the oldest man in this patrilineage or extended family, the living representative of the ancestors, and the holder of the *ofo* (symbol of authority and justice made up of a stick of *Detarium Senegalense* or pieces of it tied together) of the particular unit. While men hold the *ofo*, the women are assumed to hold the *ogu*, which is supposed to be the feminine symbol of justice. Thus, while *ofo* is assumed to be masculine and can only be in the possession of the man, *ogu* is assumed to be feminine. In most societies in Igbo land, the *ogu* has no physical symbol. For instance, one could say “*Eji M ofo na ogu*” meaning “I am holding *ofo* and *ogu*”, without physically holding either *ofo* or *ogu*. The *okpala* plays the role of the coordinator of the affairs of general interest in his group. Other responsibilities include presiding over the sharing of landed property of a member of the patrilineage, being the chief host in traditional marriage ceremonies in the unit that he leads, and so on.

Every *umunna* (patrilineage) has its own 'square' called *obi*, which functions as a space for meetings and within that vicinity is located the 'nuclear' family of the *okpala* of the founding father of the patrilineage. At the death of the *okpala*, the most senior in the relevant sub-unit succeeds him. This could be the brother or cousin but definitely not his son. Women have different assemblies of their own which correspond to different units that make up Igbo socio-political structure. Among the patrilineal Igbo people, the *umuada* (an institution for daughters both married, unmarried, divorced or widowed) constitutes a veritable body for women to access both social and political power. In pre-colonial times, their decisions in conflict situations were final as they functioned as the watch dog of public morality. For instance, each *umunne* (extended family), *umunna* (patrilineage), village and village-group has parallel women's groups and associations. In their meetings, the women address issues affecting the women, in particular, and the community at large for the common good of all. Importantly also, members of *umuada*, to a great extent, share in the social life of their natal homes when married. The system of exogamy as practiced in most Igbo societies ensures that a woman marries outside her patrilineage. Other institutions in the Igbo socio-political structure such as the age grades and title associations, *nze na ozo* title society, are not kinship based. The *nze na ozo* title society is a village-based group whose membership is by choice and the ability to meet the criteria for membership.

Today, with the influence of Christianity, these groups/associations have continued to exist side by side with religious associations such as those of Catholic and Anglican churches, the predominant religious denominations in Igboland currently. For instance, every Igbo town holds Annual Meeting, known as 'August Meeting', which takes place in the month of August every year. In Nanka community, the meeting is held at church denominational level (Catholic Church and Anglican Church).

Every Nanka woman is expected to travel home for this meeting. In Nanka, for example, the meeting lasts for two weeks: the first week, the meeting is held at the village level, and the second week, the general meeting for all the women from all the seven villages of the town as a corporate body. Issues affecting the women residing in the rural areas and the problems encountered by members in urban centres are discussed, solutions proffered. Intra-group disputes are also resolved in such meetings. The resolutions reached are later communicated to the men. The emergence of town unions in the urban areas has given rise to women's wing of such unions wherever the Igbo people find themselves, which demonstrates women's right to communal resources and advance struggles for equity. Women's right of association remains a strong basis that informs Igbo women's political consciousness, social mobilization and women's collective power. The fact that decisions on issues that affect the larger social group are taken at such meetings, and resolutions reached, after due consultation, are binding on members of the community, reflects women inclusion, and diffuses the myth of invisibility that has characterized some of the earlier research works on women in Africa. In the next section, we look at Igbo kinship system and cultural processes, with a view to providing the backdrop upon which the nexus between gender, space and power in the indigenous Igbo society can be x-rayed.

Kinship System and Cultural Processes

Kinship is a universal phenomenon in human societies, and its importance lies in the position it occupies in the regulation of human behaviour and the formation of social groups. The socio-cultural recognition and meanings of affinal and consanguineous relationship form the basis for kinship systems. Prohibition of incest and rules of marriage, for instance, are regulated by the kinship system, thus placing the system and marriage in a crucial position in the maintenance of group

cohesion and solidarity, and to function as instruments of orienting the individual members in the societal systems. Kinship research is as old as the discipline of anthropology, and some scholars have envisaged the death of the subject matter in scholarship. In his paper, "Kinship Theory: A Paradigm Shift" (2007), Read questioned the insinuation that kinship study has become a thing of the past in American anthropology in the contemporary times. Indeed, kinship remains one of the core courses in the discipline of anthropology, especially in the departments of anthropology in universities that are in the developing countries. And so, attention of scholars has continued to be drawn towards the subject matter and its indispensability in the understanding of this cultural practice in intra- and inter-group relations and the maintenance of orderliness in human society (see Jegede *et al.*, 2012, for instance). In Africa where kinship still shapes, in one way or the other, the people's everyday lives, and remarkably influences life decisions and choices, it seems right to posit that, indeed, kinship remains relevant even in the changing social and cultural dynamics of our present day reality. This position is concurred in some of the literature cited in the current paper.

At its inception, studies on kinship tended to focus on understanding kinship in two main perspectives: first, kinship as a terminological system, and two, kinship as a symbolic system in its own right (Read, 2007: 329). The essence, often times, is for the purpose of understanding how kinship terminology influences social organisation. Although this issue was not completely resolved in anthropology, change and diversification in research focus remains inevitable. Thus, according to Peletz, (1995: 366) as cited in Read (2007), there is currently the move toward examining kinship as "a social relations of variably situated actors engaged in the practice of social reproduction" (Peletz, 1995: 366 cited in Read, 2007: 329). In other words, there is a shift in the study of kinship, a shift away from focusing on structure and pattern of kinship

or kinship organization and terminology (see Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950; Ottenberg, 1960) to the nature of kinship interactions or relations (Read, 2007). Thus, Akanle and Olutayo (2011), in their paper 'Kinship Construction Variability among Nigerian Migrants: The Context of Contemporary Diaspora', noted that "understanding the selves, situations, and actions of Africans can never be comprehended outside kinship. Local and foreign worldviews are pigeonholed into culture and defined within kinship realities in Nigeria and Africa" (Akanle and Olutayo, 2011: 470). In the same vein, Quinlan (2005) earlier focused on the relations between migration and kinship in developing countries, with particular reference to how gender influences these variables. In developing countries, kinship remains the hub of social network, and therefore influences, to a very large extent, decisions taken by individuals and group. Quinlan's (2005) study, carried out at Bwa Mawego, a rural community in the Commonwealth of Dominica, looked at the associations between patri- and matrilineal kin networks and sex differences on migration from the rural community in Commonwealth of Dominica. The author discovered that while the availability of matrilineal kin and concerns over childcare may influence whether women migrate or not, access to patrilineally inherited smallholding for commercial and subsistence agriculture, significantly influence men's decision to migrate or not (Quinlan, 2005: 3). Sarker *et al.* (2006) focused on the link between kinship interaction and perceived stress level in adult individuals in Bangladesh and came to the conclusion that high frequency of interaction on the positive side will tend to reduce stress among the kin groups. Studies like Dorfman and Mertens (1990) titled "Kinship Relations in Retired Rural Men and Women" earlier lent credence to that conclusion. The emerging trend indicates a move towards understanding of how kinship network/interactions affect decision making and survival in contemporary society.

Nevertheless, the study of kinship in various ramifications such as looking at a more recent development occasioned by social dynamics, or the need to throw more light on certain areas not adequately documented in past studies, suggests that the study of kinship still remains relevant in developing societies such as in Africa, and this includes the Igbo societies of southeastern Nigeria. This dimension receives attention in the current paper.

Most Igbo societies construct kinship groupings and relationships through unilineal descent system, that is, through the male (patrilineal) or female (matrilineal) line. While the dominant practice in Igbo societies is patrilineal descent system, matrilineal elements predominate in the social systems of the Cross River Igbo, among which we have such towns like Nkporo Ada, Aro, Abiriba, Abam and Afikpo. Among this Igbo sub-culture, the regulation of political relations in the village is the responsibility of age-based associations. However, the matrilineal areas like Abiriba and Afikpo practice double descent system, that is, descent is traced both matrilineally and patrilineally system (Okpoko, 1996; Onwuejiegwu, 1981; Ottenberg, 1968).

As a distinct Igbo cultural area, the Cross River Igbo (Eastern Igbo) reflects their peculiarity, mostly, in their systems of kinship and marriage. This is shown in their rules of inheritance and succession, and in the forms of their men's associations (see above; Forde and Jones 1950, Nsugbe 1974, Okpoko, 1996). Both the agnatic (through the father) and uterine ties (through the mother) play significant role in the individual's life among the Afikpo people (Ottenberg, 1968). 'Ego' (an individual) may belong to the two sides sharing descent with a common male ancestor and a common female ancestress. The matrilineal grouping in these areas are non-residential as members of a matrigroup are dispersed in the neighbouring villages and are, therefore, not directly, tied into other organizations of the village group as the patrilineal Igbo do. The matrigroups in Afikpo, for instance, are free-floating in

the overall Afikpo social structure and, therefore, lack direct representation in the village or village-group (Okpoko, 1996: 94). Again, among the matrilineal Ohafia people, the matrilineage is the main property owing and property-inheriting group, making the patrilineage in this society endogamous. This allows for a man to take a wife among his agnatic kin group. Among the people, the belief is that this helps to foster peace in the home and in the partilineage. On the other hand, the matrilineage is exogamous, though the residential group is the patrilineage. Generally, however, partilineal system is more common among the Igbo than the matrilineal system.

In a patrilineal descent structure (as indicated in the Fig. 3 below), descent is established by tracing descent exclusively through the males from a founding male ancestor, focusing on the 'unity of the male group', which also determines successive generations.

Matrilineal Descent System

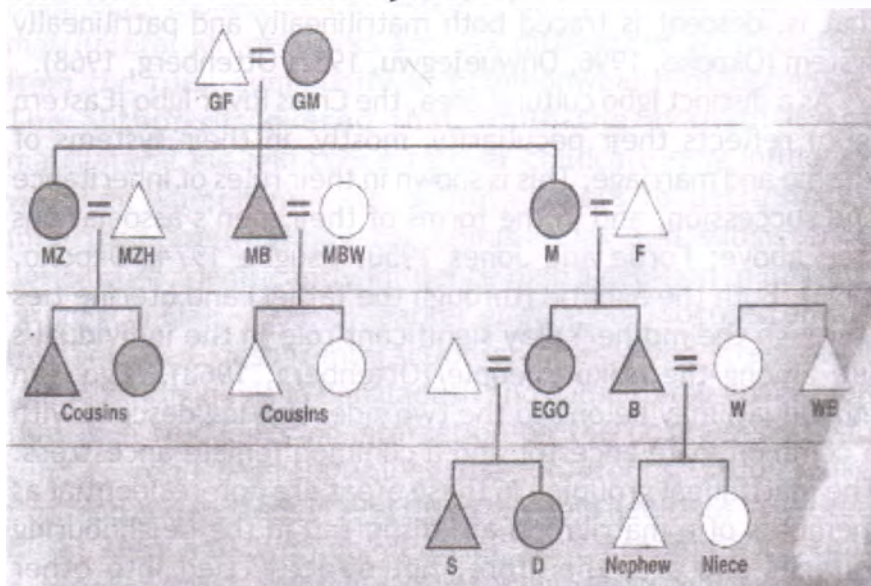


Fig.2: Matrilineal descent system (Source: Adapted from Haviland, 2003).

The diagram above reflects the matrilineal descent system. The 'ego' inherits through the mother's brother rather than the father. All shaded figure in black are related to the 'EGO' through the mother. The abbreviation F stands for Father, B for Brother, H for Husband, S for Son, M for mother, Z for Sister, D for Daughter, and W for Wife.

The function of unilineal descent system lies basically on its role as a primary group, and people belong to the group by the virtue of blood relationship. Although there are no well defined objectives, the group's unity and character reflect bonds formed upon common origin and identity and are concerned with the general welfare of the members (Schwimmer, 1995). Kinship, thus understood, often constitutes a corporate group, which becomes a legal entity in itself and is assigned collective right on behalf of its members. Two major theories, according to Schwimmer, have been offered as explanations for this, and these are economic and political theories. The economic theory, the author observed, focuses on the corporate land owning patterns. The postulation is that because land is corporately owned, individuals need the descent system for equitable distribution of the economic resources among descent groups, which also serves as the basis for regulating the individual's right to productive goods and right to call upon the economic assistance of others, and assumes important corporate functions in landownership, political representation, mutual aid and support.

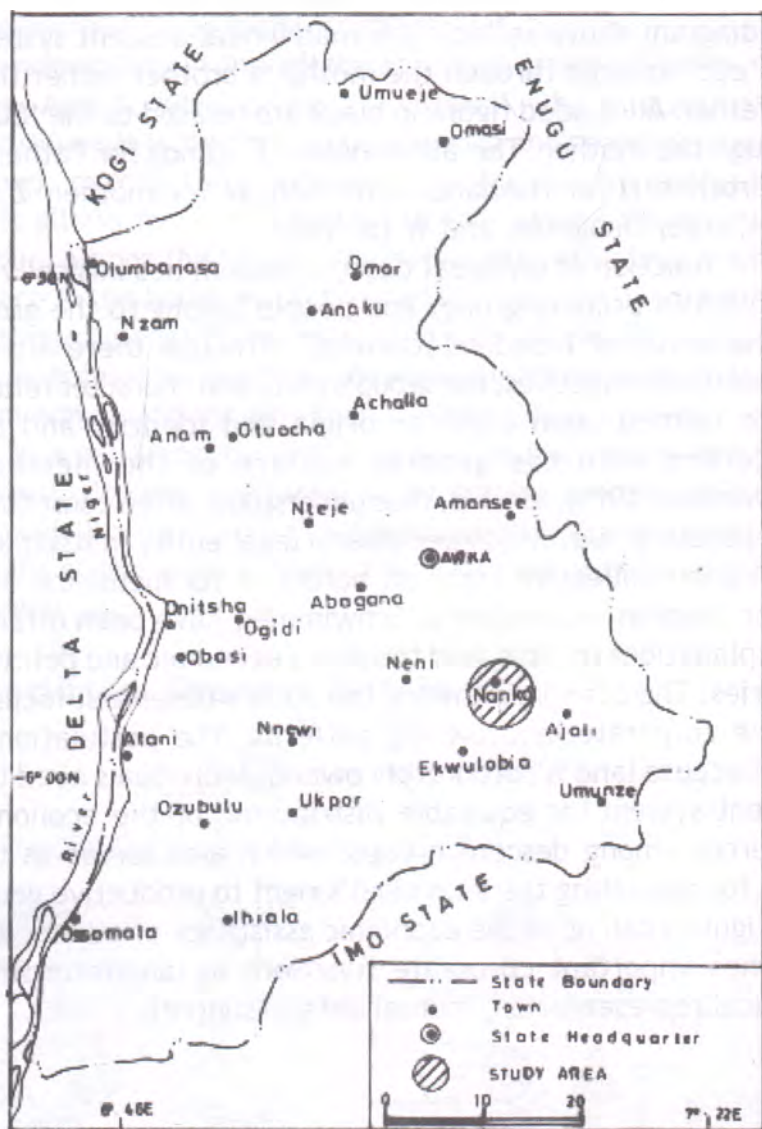


Fig. 3: Map of Anambra State showing Nanka from where samples were generated

The political explanations, on the other hand, focus on the need for social order in stateless societies that lack centralized political systems with formal institutions of law-enforcement.

Under these conditions, strong and permanent alliances within and between large family-based organizations are necessary to establish the sanctions needed to control disruptive behaviour among their members and in repressing violence when it does occur, an approach associated with the structuralist-functionalist school (Schwimmer 1995). In addition to group membership, patrilineal descent controls the course of succession, and hence helps in preventing conflict that may likely occur when such structures for grouping people are absent. Generally, therefore, the system of descent as practiced in a society helps in the determination parenthood and identification of ancestry. It further controls the course of inheritance and assigns people to social categories, groups, roles and social status. For instance, the child of a patrilineage daughter born within wedlock is recognized in the kinship structure as *nwadiala* in a woman's patrilineage, where such a child has some social claims and shares, to some extent, in the membership of his/her mother's patrilineage.

A man's personal property passes to his first son, who will assume the responsibility of caring for his younger ones. If it is a polygynous family, as it was often the case, the property is shared among the most senior sons of the deceased's wives. Each of these sons then shares his portion with his mother's male children. In the pre-colonial Igbo society, the '*okpala*' was also entitled to inherit the dead man's widows whom he may marry (depending on her age) or simply cater for. This practice is known as *nkuchi*. However, this cultural practice has gone into extinction in most societies in Igboland. The cultural practice ensured that the widow was not subjected to untold hardship due to the absence of a man-figure around her, guaranteed her companionship, and a helper in performing gender sensitive duties in the culture, such as climbing palm trees, and repairing her leaking roof. The successor also catered for the children of his late brother as his own children. A young widow might choose to return to her father's house if she so desired. In contemporary times, due to the influence of Christian religion, rather than

marry the widow, the *okpala* simply caters for her and her dependent children as much as his means can carry. While in Igbo traditional culture, women lack inheritance in their even from their husbands, except to the extent that they are expected to be maintained by their husband's heir, which is the late husband's first son. Indeed, such intricate network of relationships and kinship ties in the Igbo culture are the basis for understanding the Igbo man's social consciousness, the structures of his political, religious and economic organization, and the reasons behind his insistence in bringing up his children according to the customs, ethos, and manners dictated in the culture of his people (Ilogu, 1974:13-14).

Patrilineal Descent System

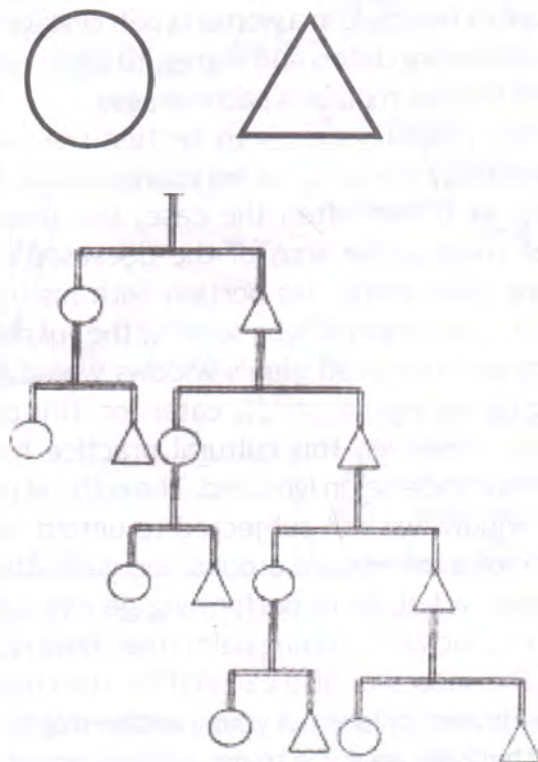


Fig.4 (Adapted from Schwimmer 1995)

The triangles at the extreme right (under the shaded triangle) represent the individuals under the patrilineal system through which successive generations are traced.

Gender, Space and Power: The nexus

Anthropology, as a science that studies humans holistically, places much importance on the spatial context of human interactions. In the discipline, therefore, 'space', as a concept occupies major position based on two pivotal facts: first, the physical environment considerably influences human behaviour and, secondly, anthropological fieldwork, which is key in knowledge production in the discipline of anthropology, is carried out within spatial boundaries referred to as 'the field' (Kokot, 2006: 10). Yet, as Kokot rightly observed, in recent decades, 'space' has become highly contested, for various reasons among which is that culture as bounded, has been deconstructed. Globalization, migration and their correlates have problematized the tendency to define culture as space-bound. Technological invention and innovations have created new networks, global and interterritorial connectedness, which have all contributed in making the idea of 'culture as bounded', considerably, questionable. In the emerging scenario, translocality has carried on its tale 'imagined homelands' (Anderson, 1983). Kokot has argued that as a result of the complexities surrounding the concept of space, anthropologists, substantially, rely on other disciplines such as geography and sociology for the theoretical underpinnings in their study of space. Against the increasing human mobility, such concepts as 'diaspora space', 'transnational social space', 'moving targets' 'global ethnoscares' (Appadurai, 1991), and so on, have gained currency in the discourse on culture and space (see Kokot, 2006). Thus, in the discipline of anthropology, which applies qualitative methodology as primary tool of research, 'space' continues to generate new significances. In the indigenous societies in Africa, however, 'culture as bounded' still persists,

albeit in diverse degrees. Space and humans' interactions within it define a people's cultural values, meanings, identity, available resources, and access to these resources and in the process defines and redefines the political landscape of gender. It is in the light of this that Atkinson *et al.* (2007) pointed to the significance of incorporating places and spaces in ethnographic research when they noted:

The physicality of social phenomena can be extended to incorporate an appreciation of the built environment and physical space. ...[W]e ought to pay serious attention to the material circumstances that constrain social activity [or enhance it], how a sense of place is reŕected in individual and collective identities, and how places are used by social actors, just as they use any material and symbolic resources (Atkinson et al., 2007: 136).

Crucial in the subject matter of this paper is to discover the extent to which the representation of men and women in the socio-political and spatial contexts translate into access to power and functions as checks against the hegemonic control of power by a particular individual or group of individuals over the other. Consequently, the remaining part of this section provides answer to such questions as: In what forms does the Igbo kinship system empower men and women in the culture? In what form does space conceived as spatial, hence an avenue for decision making, include or even exclude the individual along sex line? And, in what forms does the physical environment of the household, for instance, reflect social structures, power, and men and women's agency in intra- and intergroup relations in the kinship network?

In his study of identity and space in Ibadan politics, Ajala (2008) observed that space performs certain functions, which include means of communication, security and settlement. These functions, according to him, are usually expressed in the political, social and economic values attached to space. Acknowledging that the construction of space varies across

cultures and societies, he concluded that the varied perspectives on space are informed by a group's attitude to space, access to space, and interaction with space as a resource for political power (Ajala, 2008: 156). Like all Yoruba communities, in Ibadan, space is constructed from historical, symbolic and functional perspectives (Ajala, 2008: 155). The symbolic dimension to space links a group to cultural construction of meanings, particularly as it deals with the issue of identity, power, and the political scape of gender. Thus, for the Igbo people, space both spatial and symbolic, play crucial roles in the definition of the individual and group. Understanding the significance of the physical context of human relations in qualitative research, O'Toole *et al.*, observed, "adds richness and depth to the data collected" as "textual representations can be overtly representative of the views of the privileged" (O'Toole *et al.*, 2008: 617).

A critical examination of the spatial arrangement of buildings within a household in a polygynous family in Nanka demonstrates how space can define one's identity and legitimates one's exercise of power along gender line. Within the domestic arrangement, for instance, the *obi* as the abode of the head of the household is situated at the centre of the compound and functions as zone of power. Within the compound also is a mini shrine, which is the abode of the fore-fathers of the household, and where the head of the family offers prayers and sacrifices daily to the ancestors for the protection and prosperity of the members of his immediate family and the patrilineage generally. This spatial arrangement projects the head of the household as the general overseer of his compound, who monitors the activities within and ensures the security of members of his household. Decisions that are for the overall interest of the household are taken at the *obi*, after due consultations. At the same time, each woman in a polygynous household has her own mini-compound - an enclosure, containing a residential building

consisting of two or three sleeping moulds, a sitting space, cooking area, and a room or two for keeping her valuables. Besides the building, the compound also contains a poultry house for her birds, pen for her goats and sheep, and barns for her farm produce. Few economic trees like banana, plantain, orange and pears trees are sparingly planted within the compound. The source of water for her immediate use is a well in her compound. A door then links the mini-compound to the bigger family compound where the *obi* of the household is located. Within her compound, the woman lives with her children and is in total control of both the economic and cultural reproduction. Although the man, as the head of the family, takes certain decisions concerning the over all interest of his household, there is a limit to which he can interfere in the woman's 'private business' in this domestic arrangement. For instance, she enjoys economic autonomy, decides when to take her pears, oranges, or cocoyams or any of the animals to the market for sale, and has the right to keep the proceeds from her trade. Internal politics and associated intrigues in a polygynous household are also nurtured and inculcated in the children in various mini-compounds in this household, depending on the number of wives the man has, and women are crucial in these dynamics of power. As a major agent of children's socialisation, the woman inculcates in her children the strategies essential in navigating the socio-political context of their immediate household and the larger society. It may not be totally incorrect to argue that this residential pattern in polygynous household contributed to children bearing their mother's name rather than their father's in precolonial Nanka society. O'Toole *et al.* capture the significance of this scenario when they observed that "Social structures relating to power, status and authority are reflected in the places that we live in" (O'Toole *et al.*, 2008: 619). This, of course, includes the cultural systems and meanings that underscore their formation. In the same vein, Atkinson *et al.* (2007) maintain, "Social

worlds are created out of material goods as well as from interpersonal relationships, and meaning inheres in them” (Atkinson *et al.*, 2007:122).

Indeed, the current reality of children bearing their father’s name is a product of colonial incursion and was initiated and cemented through the instrumentalities of the Christian religion (the Church) and Western education. Again, O’Toole *et al.* (2008) hinted, “The social structures that influence and are influenced by the material culture and space are in juxtaposition to the human need to protect personal space and maintain identity”. And, indeed, the “power of individual will determine their capacity to protect their personal space from intrusion by others” (O’Toole *et al.*, 2008: 619). The residential pattern in the indigenous polygynous households provides framework for action, which points to and reproduces social structures and landscape of power based on equity.

At the patrilineage level, the *obi* of the *umunna* also functions as a space for decision making and power negotiation. As the abode of the *okpala* of the patrilineage, the *obi* is also symbolic, as it represents the tempo-spiritual essence of the collective identity. Within this space, rituals are performed using the *oji* (kolanut) and/or *ofo* (symbol of authority, justice and peace) as key objects of ritual performances, invoking the Earth goddess as the mediatrix between the physical and the spiritual realms. Within these processes, the woman becomes active participants, though symbolically, in the activities in the ‘*obi*’ (Ukpokolo, 2011). Space, in this sense, is conceptualized as processes through which the individual or group has claim to the right and power to make decisions, or question the decisions or resolutions that could exclude the individual or group or affect the life of the group members.

The institution of *umuada* gives women the opportunity to negotiate power by their ability to scrutinize decisions made, which affects the life of the group. Power, therefore,

can be exercised in various ways, such as through coercion, when we force a person to do something he or she does not want to do; as persuasion, when we convince someone that that is what he/she really wishes to do; or as the construction of incentives when we make the alternative so unattractive that only one reasonable option remains (Shively, 1997: 6). Therefore, power, obviously is complex, elusive and takes varied forms. Situated within the complex Igbo socio-political and spatial arrangements, the dynamism of power and gendered interactions and relations further underscores the landscape of gender and power in the society in such a manner that no group can marginalize the other in the social, cultural and political life of the community.

Men and women's agency is further demonstrated in the various gendered groups in the indigenous society. The associational life is gendered though men and women's associations/assemblies enshrined in the culture. In Igbo social thought, women in particular have the right to contest any decision that is not in the best interest of the group. Not only do they speak for women, they also speak for men, youth, and children. The picture that emerges is that of diverse publics, which points to 'discentring' of power in the people's socio-political consciousness, and re-enforces the people's belief that the world belongs to all. Hence, the people say, *Uwa bu nke onye?*, meaning, 'Who can claim the sole ownership of the world?' The world, here, is used metaphorically to represent the Igbo universe. From the *umuada* institution, as a platform, other women organizations, and multiple men's associations within the body polity, all constituting publics, voices emanate, promoting common good. The juxtaposition of women's groups and men's groups is not in binary opposition but within the physical and symbolic contexts that reflect inter-group complementarity, at the same time recognizing sameness in difference. The inter-relatedness of groups inherent and instituted in the body polity ensures that power

is not concentrated on a single individual or group of individuals. For the Igbo, power belongs to all. Everybody has the right of voice. Hence, the people say “*Onu ejeghi be onu gbara aka*”, meaning literally, “mouth does not go to the house of another mouth and goes back empty handed”. The implication is that everybody has the right of voice; to object to what one believes to be unacceptable. Again, the people say “*A tua eze egwu, ekpuru nkata n’iru were gwa ya okwu*”, meaning, “If one fears the king one covers one’s face with a basket to talk to him”, and thus reflects a culture that rejects subservient tendencies or oppression; or, a society where an individual or group possesses hegemonic control of power. Power is recognized in Igbo culture as a major resource, without which other necessities may elude the individual; and it must be accessible to all, irrespective of sex identity. With equitable access to power, justice and equity can thrive. In fact, without power, Lawuyi (2004) reasoned, “it may be difficult to access resources, retain resource, or commercialize the resource (Lawuyi, 2004: 41).

In conflict situations, women employ diverse mechanisms to restore peace to the family or community. For instance, ‘sitting’ on a man, where women could ‘occupy’ the residence of the offender, until their demands were met was a strategy of enforcement of public morality. The employment of *ikpe* (satirical songs) to criticize and mock the offender publicly was also a strategy to criticize the negative aspects of people’s lives. The intention was often to correct. For instance, it could be employed to criticise a young man or lady in order to caution him or her against immoral conducts. In songs of praise, on the other hand, the individual’s positive attributes are appreciated and recommended to the people. Although men sometimes sing satirical songs, it is more common amongst women. An individual that is the object of *ikpe* is expected to turn a new leaf. Below is an example of an *ikpe* (satirical song) directed to a young man:

Onye huru agbogho ju nri, O je anu agbogho anu?	<i>He that sees a lady and rejects food, Will he 'drink' a lady?</i>
Elele Nwazombe, mgbe O kporo agbogho ura, Egwu ekweghi agbogho eje.	<i>Elele Nwazombe, when he called a woman for a 'sleep', fear did not allow the lady to go.</i>
Ma oburukwa M ka akporo njee. O je eme ya mwere?	<i>If I were the one called I would go. Will he arrest her?</i>
Mara na agboro bu alunsi Onye nuru agboro O je egbu ya.	<i>Know that a lady is a shrine. He that 'drinks' a lady will be killed by her.</i>
Anaghi anu agbogho anu.	<i>You do not 'drink' a lady.</i>

(Madam Theresa Obeke, a sixty-nine year old informant from Nanka, August, 2004).

The above satirical song is intended to correct immoral behaviour among the youths. By referring to a lady as an '*alunsi*' (a shrine), she is seen not only as dangerous but also as something to be held in awe and respect. She is not to be approached by an 'uninitiated'. In other words, only one who is legally married to her has the right to 'drink' the lady. Tyrannical leaders are also object of criticisms through the use of *ikpe*. At times, women could converge in the compound of their victims and singing satirical songs to force such an individual to do their bidding. As the *umuada* are sacrosanct, their victim had no option but to listen to their complaints.

In a stateless society with no formal and centralized law enforcement agent, such collective approach to problem solving went a long way in maintaining moral tempo and cohesion among the people. Eventually, the tides of disruptive behavior are curtailed, and the society is protected from disintegration. Little wonder that Basden posited that "the

lives of men run on lines quite distinct from those of women” (Basden, 1938: 80). In other words, women have their own power base from where they impact the life of people around them, and their society. In the western Igbo, before the European contact and colonization, for instance, each town (for instance, Asaba, Ibusa, Agbor among others) was ruled by the *obi* as the father of the community, and the *omu* as the mother of the community (Okonjo, 1972, Van Allen 1972, and Uzuegbunam 1988). It is in the light of this that Basden again submitted:

In every town there is a sort of committee of women, which controls all women affairs and exercises great influence in various directions. The leader is chosen, and a ceremonial crowning is performed by a Nri [a priest from Nri town, the mythological home of the Igbo people] similar to the coronation rites observed in the making of a king. The woman chosen is known as ‘awmu’ (‘omu’), a title equivalent to queen. She is never the wife of the king She is assisted by a limited number of members who take precedence according to age and rank, all of them having taken one or more titles.

The committee further controls everything in the town relating to women. In judging cases where both men and women are involved the chiefs must call upon the members of the committee for their opinions and assistance. The committee makes its own laws for the women of the town irrespective of the men (Basden, 1938: 94 -95).

The above description depicts a society where power is diffused within the body polity and men and women participate from different power bases. Women’s participation in decision making in Igbo society contradicts the theory of women’s invisibility in the society. The cultural practice of ‘sitting on a man’ (Van Allen, 1976), where the *umuada* (patrilineage daughters) could mount pressure on male member of the community, forcing him to obey their resolution further

buttresses the power of women to enforce their decision and establish order in the society. As a member of the *umuada* institution, a woman controls burial rites and fertility ceremonies. In her marital home, the woman belongs to the '*inyomedi*', which is an association of wives, and here she plays significant role in maintaining peace between the wives and their husbands' relations.

Although the rule of patrilineal system stipulates that people acquire membership in these various descent groups through their father, the Igbo system sometimes equally allows for descent to pass through the mother rather than the father. Instances like this arise where a child born outside wedlock inherits the mother's patrilineage. There also exists cultural arrangement that allows the retention of a lady in her father's house to procreate outside wedlock. Although her father is not the biological father of the children from such arrangement, the children belong to him, as he assumes their sociological father, and they bear his name. This practice takes place mostly when a man has no male child of his own. Such cultural practices highlights women's agency in the people's socio-political thought. As a mother and a daughter in her natal home, her positionality enhances her ability to negotiate the social and political space both at the domestic and patrilineage levels. Women in Igbo society are, thus, presented, not as objects but as actors in the socio-political and economic life of their society (see Meek 1937; Leith-Ross 1939; and Amadiume 1987). This network of relationships offers the Igbo traditional society its uniqueness and colour and concretizes equitable gender relations, strengthens the family, kinship and communal bonds with the woman functioning as the nucleus in this connectivity. In these contexts, space both implicit and explicit is a manifestation of social structures, depicting men and women's agency, identity and power structures in Igbo culture.

Conclusion

Gender in the indigenous Igbo socio-political life reflects cultural recognition of the complementarity of men and women in the development of human society and in the making of a people's civilization. This is evidenced in the gendered social and political relations and their interfaces. As power is diffused in the social maze, each sex group recognises the indispensability of the other. Men and women in the kinship network, and other social and political systems are defined by their positionality from where they derive their power and participate in the sustenance of those values, precepts and norms that shape the people's world. In essence, the position of men and women in the indigenous Igbo socio-political arrangement shows a clear element of collaboration, inclusiveness and mutual dependence rather than competition or marginality as currently reflected in the contemporary society.

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