

## Female Goddesses, Male Priests: an Anthropological Study in Role Complimentarity and Women Empowerment Among the Igbo

OGONNA AGU

(Received 27 November 2002; Revision accepted 19 February 2003)

### ABSTRACT

One consequence of western education is the injection into the African psyche the feeling of inferiority complex bordering on dependency culture. In the traditional past this was the dependency of women on male dominated psychology, making men the originators of ideas and creators of gods; while women kept the home as their domestic "slaves" as sometimes claimed by feminists. Drawing on oral traditions, this paper takes a look at some of these prevailing assumptions, and examining them in the light of oral traditions. On the contrary, it seems men served their society by idealizing women in terms of dominant female symbols as providers, procreators and protectors of society. In literal terms, men served women, while women held the position of power. It postulates that it is indeed better for women to rediscover their potentials, and harness them in terms of progressive values of modern times, by creating their own female-centred gods as an ideological standpoint, instead of worshipping male centred gods of the Oriental world.

**KEYWORDS:** Education, culture, tradition, gods, world.

Much discourse in gender studies has tended to capitalize on the issue of male subordination of female Society. Simone de Beauvoir's world-famous study of *The Second Sex*, for instance, is a case in point. There is this perceived notion, quite well articulated and extensively, (1979) that can be provoking. In this paper we take a different view, based on evidence from oral tradition, itself an expression of African thought. We do not deny that much of the views on feminine ideology has come, and has been developed in the West and America. An examination of some of these views will present another side to the issue. I will limit this study to Igbo cultural complex with which I am familiar, and of Nnobi tradition in particular. Nnobi came to scholarly limelight internationally with Ifi Amadiwe's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. Besides, Nnobi society, like many others in Anambra State is a patrilineal society with a strong female deity, Idemmili, which Chinua Achebe has celebrated in his novels, and in my recent novel too *The Strong Boy of the Forest*. The thrust of my preoccupations in this paper is that though this goddess acts as a female and sometimes as a male (as I shall explain in due course) she has been erected to be worshipped as a female, with male priest as her servant. In every way there is a sense in which *Male Daughters Female Husbands* is about Nnobi (where I come from, about sixteen kilometers from Onitsha) Nnobi is decidedly Nri-Igbo in culture, with powerful mother figure cult of Idemmili. About nineteen village groups are under her influence. In earlier years of less political age, *Idemmili*

was worshipped not only by citizens of Nnobi, but also citizen of Obosi, Ogidi, Uke, Mkpo, Umoji, Oba to mention only a few. Other groups outside of this periphery, such as Nnewi, Uraukwu, etc. have similar mother figures usually associated with rivers. At Nnewi she is called Edo, presumed to be the daughter of *Idemmili*; at Uraukwu she is *Nwucha*, whose chief priest, Ezenwucha Ezedirika (late) had been my mentor in the priestly vocation. The point to note is that in all those areas where the *Idemmili* cult was practiced, gender ideology was not traced to the myth of *Idemmili* far from it. This is so because the regulations moderating her worship were not laid down by the female gender, but by the male. In fact, as Simon de Beauvoir would say, "in no domain whatever did she create", she merely "maintained the life of the tribe by giving it children and bread, nothing more" (105). Following in this line of argument, the water goddesses *Idemmili*, *Edo*, *Nwucha*, *Ngene* and so on, all of them entities emanating from water, are "idols made by man" (105). In this paper, I intend to pursue my earlier preoccupation, by arguing a means whereby the female consciousness can be uplifted by the females themselves. Creating a female centered entity in their own image relative to their present aspirations and achievements is central to our discourse; for indeed, gods are created by living individuals, and should not be by the males alone as in the traditional dispensation.

### Evidence from Oral tradition

For obvious reasons we shall depend on Igbo oral tradition associated with religious worship of the entities, for in them lies the genus of human values associated with the gods. We

have to stress here that they are in most part, male creations, since men performed the function of priest both on private and public religious observances. Their utterances to some extent can be taken to represent folk liturgies and sacred texts of worship, as well as the mind of the male protagonists.

Two types of materials are of immediate relevance in this study: the morning kolanut invocations, said while the head of household is heralding the dawn of a new day, and, of course, the invocation to the entities, themselves communal entities who act as the centrifugal force holding the people together. The utterances are what their male originators have said. However, incidents where women have offered expressive utterances abound, but largely in private religious observances associated with their female procreative principle, *umumu*.

It has to be said, however, that in terms of magnitude the kolanut corpus is considerable, and abounds ever where the sacred attitude towards the kolanut has been retained, not supplanted by the new 'warrior' prayers of the pentecostalist! With regard to the *Idemmili* corpus, we have to say that we have only traces of it, while the *Nwucha* corpus is of considerable magnitude. All these constitute our sources for materials of the kind we need to examine male attitudes to women in Africa, using Nnobi case study.

### Image of the Water Goddesses

Nnobi oral tradition associates *Idemmili* with the mother figure, often referred to as *nne Uchiura* "mother, and ruler of the people". In this context she is *Ezennwanyi* "Queen". By extension, she is a titled elder" (which is what the concept of *eze* connotes). That means she has taken the highest title in the land, *Ozo*, with all rights and obligations associated with it. That is not all. *Idemmili* is *ugaranya ngada* "woman of superfluous wealth". In legends and folk tales, stories of her stupendous wealth are told, whereby the poor are made rich, and the greedy impoverished.

But it is as a mother that she is celebrated. This corroborates with the general feeling and attitude of mother-figures in many places, for example, the concept of *Madonna* and child. In *Igbo* kolanut invocations, this is no less expressed. The paterfamilia, as he invokes the entities, beseeches them to grant them life thus:

*Ndu, ndu ka anyi na-ario*  
*Nd? nwoke, ndu nwaanyi*  
*Ndu nne na nnwa*

*Life is what we request,*  
*Life of the males, life of the female*  
*Life of mother and child*

The dualities, male and female, mother and child, are recurrent themes in many kolanut invocations, and in complimentary relationships. This suggests strong maternal as well as domestic roles, for while the female is "forced" to a sedentary life as a result of her procreative domestic chores in association to weaning the child, the males went warring, hunting, fishing and making conquest in foreign lands (105). This is a pessimistic view of the relationship, a painting in feminist colours, which is not what is suggested by those lines. To our view it simply states the natural order, or the patterning of roles; the pure thought, suggesting the humane nature of the protagonist male, not his relative advantage or subordination over the female.

The image of the female as mother appears to be universal and inevitable as the earth mother. She is *Cybele* to the Germans for the obvious reason that she nourishes her children through its productive largesse. "Hail earth, mother of men, may you be fertile in the embrace of God and may you be filled with fruits for man's use", says an old Anglo-Saxon incantation, *Simon De Beauvoir* (99).

Nearer home, the earth is conceived as the "mother", and the sky as "father" both female and male principles respectively, by virtue of the fact that the sky fertilizes the earth. Here, we are dealing with sympathetic magic, the basis of poetic imagination where like affects like; the domain of similarities where the sky, like a male, fertilizes the female by which earth is regenerated.

Indeed, the earth is re-generated through her offspring, by which means the lineage is perpetuated. In her lies the protective principle, in the mother figure of the female who gives birth to the child, who she had protected and nourished within her body. Ironically, it is on this, in part, that feminist ideology finds its springboard when motherhood leads to immanence, not transcendence; in the notion that "in no domain whatsoever did she create". This need to create seems to elude her, thereby inhibiting her rise from private to public domains of existence and power, *Beauvoir* has called this the *mitsein*, or the transcendent component of life. As she puts it:

Perhaps. if productive work had remained within her strength, women would have accomplished with man the conquest of nature. What was unfortunate for her was that while not becoming a fellow workman with the labourer, she was also excluded from the human *Mitsein*. The fact that woman is weak and of inferior productive capacity does not explain this exclusion; it is because she did not share his way of working and thinking, because she remained in bondage to life's mysterious processes, that the male does not recognize in her a being like himself (109).

It is also *Beauvoir's* view that maternity dooms woman to a

sedentary existence, and so it is natural that she remains at the hearth while the male hunts, goes fishing, and makes war", that economics and religion left them with agricultural labour, and domestic industry held them down to weave matting, and blankets and make pottery. The evidence on hand proves that this is not the case, if in practice the case may be different. What we are out to demonstrate is, indeed, that in male thinking women are endowed with similar qualities as the men, to delve, hunt and conquer. In our second corpus of religious expressions which we said were invented, or created by the male-priest of the sacred tradition in which the female is the idol to be worshipped, we have ample evidence to show that the female also dares the world; that she in fact, delves as much as the male. In the invocation chant of Ezenwucha Ezedrika to his goddess Nwucha at Uraukwu, we have a classical example of where a male subject concedes to a female principle the superiority which is often supposed to be reserved for the male. Take for instance, the opening lines of this invocation:

*Ogbute obute  
Biko gelu onu gelu anyi okagba  
Nwaanyi odu,  
K'i mee ife a yiulu gi.*

*bi na mmili awu na-ekweluujulima  
O mentu na-eli igbegulu anu sili ike  
ukadike odezuluigbo mmanwu  
Kedu ka nwagu ga-esi na-acha ilulo  
Nwugo na-acha utu-oo okagba  
Nwaanyi udu,  
Na udiroluwanu mma.*

She who kills and brings  
Please hear my voice, hear my god  
She who lives in the river  
For whom the frogs are singing  
Strong arusi  
Gunpowder that feeds on the palm fronds  
Creature of strength  
Ukadike, famous all over the land  
Masquerade one.

How can the child of the lion bear  
The colour of green grass, while  
The child of the eagle bears the colour of ash Is it fair?...

This chant, two hundred and fifty five lines of invocation, speech and petitions, is extensive to say the least. In structure it covers the exhortatory opening, then the petitions. For our purpose, we are concerned with those

exhortatory lines. Nwucha is referred to as *ogbute obute* hunter who kills and brings home. She even has a male's name, Okogba, who he imbues with female qualities for he is the woman with the ivory bracelets, suggesting she has power and fame and wealth. This commentary, perhaps, cannot be fully appreciated unless we understand the place of ivory in Igbo tradition. The ivory horn, or oliphant, is the traditional Igbo symbol of authority and power. For a woman to be associated with such a symbol therefore suggests her importance since by far, it is her most prized of all forms of ornaments (92).

What has emerged so far it must be said, is the ideal, and by no means represents the practical reality. It is what the men have said while idolizing their deity, and as such valid as African thought. It may be argued that in creating these figures they have tended to paint them in the image of man. But indeed, they are seen as idols to be coveted, loved and adored hence their propensity to be revered in worship.

Basden has given us an insight into the condition of women in pre-literate Igboland (97). Their state was no different from that of other women elsewhere. The general impression one gets is that it was the struggle against nature that conditioned their existence. As a result, they were little concerned with dress except where they could afford it. Girls almost went naked. Adult women wore ivory anklets and bracelets. They were engaged in domestic chores and child bearing; "practically the whole of the trade" in the country was in their hands and so on. Although these women were often married by the male by providing dowry to the family of the girl, thereby making them subordinate to the males, oftentimes tradition affords them certain leverage to cultivate a piece of land, have shelter, and be provided for by their husbands. Also, they belonged to free association of women. The three chief associations powerful as the men's, are the association of *umuukpu* daughters of one lineage; *inyomdi* association of married women of the lineage and at the level of the village group, *inyom Nnobi* association of married women of Nnobi town. Basden refers to the later type as "a sort of committee of women which controls all women's affairs and exercise great influence in various directions". A leader is chosen, and "a ceremonial crowning is performed by a *nri* (priest), similar to the coronation rites observed in the making of a king. The woman chosen is known as *awmu* (umu)".

That was in the past, when the committee controlled everything in town relating to women, making its own laws though still referring to the men when difficult matters required their input. On balance, however, in matters affecting the town, the chiefs often invited the women for their opinions.

On another level, equality with the men is witnessed in marriage. Usually a woman has equal status in society with

her male counterpart. Where he has other wives, the chief wife attains such a rank comparable to that of the husband. Basden goes on to say that "Every degree to which he advances is bestowed simultaneously upon his wife; as he adds additional title chord around his ankle so the chief wife must add a similar chord".

Human imperfections apart, this society is basically a humane society by all standards. The harmony and stability which it seeks to achieve in society between male and female protagonists makes nonsense of certain posturing of feminists. I have referred at length to the work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Though her postulations are often cogent and logical, they are ideologically misplaced, where ideology is one of cultural action. Her central thesis, which is that women should have the right to delve to greater heights and achievements rather than remain tied down to the apron strings of domestic servitude and maternity is well demonstrated, flawed though in tone. As she would say, men claim ownership of the women (110); thereafter the mother falls to the rank of nurse and servant; the men wrote the codes, it was natural for them to give woman a subordinate position (111). Most times terms like subordinate, slave, hostage, slave, ownership of women, servant etc. which she uses to qualify the state of women generally do not apply because they are coloured by prejudices and must be rejected from the point of view of African thought. The same must be said of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* whose views, directed to Americans in particular, nevertheless contains germs of feminist invectives against the happy housewife who she paradoxically refers to as the heroine to deride her; and against men who glorify in the low state of woman. In fact, her imprecation on womanhood as sex seeker and wife, which leads them to forfeit themselves, freeze functionally, and end up in comfortable concentration camps, (meaning their marital homes) where they retreat in complete passivity is unfounded in Igbo traditions and unfair. These are the prevalent notions as perceived by feminists in Europe and America which African women must reject.

### Myth of the gods

The subject of mythology is complex and sometimes requires a cultivated mind to get to the heart of the subject. Oftentimes, advocates of myth use it as charter to validate existing notions and realities, and it is precisely for this reason that it can be misleading. Ruthven in his book of *Myth* reassures us that it is a mighty maze, "not without a plan, because myth is nothing more than primitive science, or history, or the embodiment of unconscious fantasies, or some other solvent currently in favour". In prosaic terms, it is a story told about gods, "remote in origin, protean in

form and ambiguous in meaning". It is this ambiguity that has rendered it to a number of interpretations. As primitive science, its origin is in magic and poetry. Because the female mystique is like sympathetic magic in which like affects like a poetic projection of metaphors and similes, of the imagination is used to characterize the female as nne "protector" and as organizer of society (nne Uchiura). Another way of appreciating this myth of the goddess of Idemmili for instance, is to see it as a potent medicine established, or instituted by man, by powerful dibias, or medicine men, for the protection of the village groups. However there is always a plan, which is the story told of the entity to give her form as a personage. This brings us to a relevant character of myths, which is that they represent characters as personified qualities. Thus, Chukwu is Wisdom; and the water goddesses Idemmili, Nwucha at Uraukwu, Edo at Nnewi, is Ezenwaanyi, "Queen"; Ezechiora "ruler over groups of people"; ogbute obute, "provider" and so on.

On these grounds Ifi Amadiume's claims must be revisited. Her explanation of gender and sex roles in Igbo society of Nnobi is premised on those governing the relations of production and on the myth of Idemmili goddess. Amadiume claims that in the myths of origin of Nnobi Idemmili have the more prominent place" (29); and that Idemmili is the "mother" and protector of the Nnobi people. She however makes the crucial point that Nnobi society followed a patriarchal segmentary descent lineage system in which men and women held positions of power. This inevitably is based on the matrifocal concepts originated by men; so that whether as slave or idol, men make the gods; women worship them, as Frazer has said (Beauvoir, 1979: 109).

### Conclusion

We have dwelt at length on the relationship between male and female entities in the lights of oral tradition as a culture authenticating evidence of the complimentary roles of the sexes in society. There is no doubt that in the affairs of life men have, perhaps, conducted themselves in superior ways, over women but only as the discrepancies of nature have allowed them. In an earlier article titled *The Personal Chi and Role differentiation in Igbo Tradition* (presented at the first international colloquium on Igbo language and culture at Nsukka in 1983). I had called for the establishment of Ikenga nnwaanyi as a mark of recognition for women who have made successful contribution to society in spite of their limiting maternal roles. This paper is a logical development of that same idea. There is no doubt that women have made remarkable progress in the last century and this must be acknowledged. The evolution of women from the state of anomie, from eminence to transcendence is well desired, and of right. The irony for me, in fact, is that here is a male protagonist trying again to set up female goddesses. In the case of Idemmili and other sundry goddesses this has far-reaching implications as the male has gone all the way to

promote and empower the female. What women should do is to create their gods themselves for men to worship by imbuing them with qualities which will make them respected personages for all times. They should therefore, reject the image of the mother as virgin, or that of woman as femme fatal. In fact, they should review again their relative position with all colonial religion, and politically reject them if possible for their limiting and subordinating influences, by promoting African models. In doing so they should work with the men in creating and achieving their much desired transcendence and fulfillment.

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