

The Phenomenon of Male and Female Crops in Igbo Agrarian Culture: Implications for Gender Equality

Uzochukwu UFEAROH, PhD

**Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Nigeria**

E-mail: tonito2006@yahoo.co.uk ; au.ufearoh@unizik.edu.ng

ORCID: 0000-0003-2617-6808

Abstract

The present paper is an investigation of the phenomenon of gendering crops in traditional Igbo-African agrarian culture in order to determine the extent it promotes gender equality. The approach is both phenomenological and analytical. The philosophical tool of hermeneutics is equally employed in interpreting the cultural symbols in the study. The focus is on the staple crops, their cosmogonic myth, and the religious feasts associated with the crops: yam and New Yam Festival, for male crops and, cocoyam/Pumpkin with their attendant feasts for female crops. The paper x-rays the intersection between this gendered agrarian praxis imbued with onto-anthropological elements and gender equality in Igbo society. It is discovered that the phenomenon of male and female crops creates equal and enabling space for complementarity and participation of both sexes not only in the agro-economic but also in the socio-political and religious arena. The paper, therefore, submits that the phenomenon of gendering crops enhances gender equality.

Keywords: crops, Igbo, gender, equality, complementarity, and festival.

Introduction

The present paper examines the phenomenon of gendering crops in traditional Igbo agrarian culture in order to determine the extent it could fecundate better relationships between male and female gender in the present society. Amidst the eloquent feminist cry of purported gender inequality and polarization, it would seem, prima facie, that the female gender is marginalized in Igbo patriarchal culture. It has also been observed that the “effect of patriarchy and gender, and indeed the contributions of African women, have up until now been largely ignored by critics” (Florence Stratton i). While gender can be a means of differentiation, it is most often believed that the binary division creates privileges one half. The attendant inequality tells negatively on the status, self-determination, and overall well-being of the underprivileged party. This, understandably, is a societal malady that plagues many societies. In search of a possible panacea to the above predicament, the present paper examines the phenomenon of gendering in Igbo agrarian culture. It aims at distilling therefrom, principles that could enhance gender equality.

The practice of binary classification or gendering of stable crops in Igbo agrarian culture, the cosmogonic myth, and concomitant religious feasts associated with these crops say much about the status of both male and female gender. This derives from the fact that the crops, as buttressed by their myth of origin, in a way serve as a metaphor for the human. What significance or implication does this classification have for gender equality in society? This is the major engagement of the present paper.

The work adopts the philosophical methods of phenomenology and analysis. The work builds on the personal experiences of the researcher himself, having been born and reared in a rural

agrarian Igbo village in Eastern Nigeria. This qualifies the work as an “insider account”. The paper equally relies on a written account of life in the traditional Igbo community. African literature such as texts and novels that reflect the Igbo agrarian culture serve as fodder for the present research. As part of the phenomenological approach, the authors are sometimes allowed to speak for themselves. The Igbo myth of origin provides the (meta) historical background for the practice of gendering crops. The paper goes beyond phenomenological presentation to interpretative (hermeneutic) excursus in order to draw the undergirding principles and their implications on the lived experiences of the people in the Igbo society.

Accordingly, in the first section, I consider the concept of gender equality/equity. The second section presents the practice of crop gendering in Igbo culture. The praxis, cosmogonic origin, and the agricultural festivals and ritualization of the crops are here highlighted. In the third section, I sieve out the principles that undergird the gendering of crops in Igbo agrarian culture. The implications for the gendering of crops and gender equality are discussed in the fourth section. The fourth section is the conclusion.

The Concept of Gender Equality

Gender equality (equity?), in a way, can be said to be an off-shoot of the unequal binary created by cultural and historical factors between the male and female sexes. Understandably, when a newborn is delivered, it is either a girl or a boy. Period! Each of these two comes with complexities of biological, hormonal and psychological trappings. Gradually, come gender roles and expectations which are mostly dictated by sociocultural values and environment and are subject to change with time. Hence the assertion that, “gender is socially constructed” (Judith Butler x). It is believed that gender as a means of classification easily slips into or serves as a springboard and tool of oppression by way of privileging one of the binary components over the other. The imbalance comes in various incarnations such as social, political, economic, and available opportunities. All manner of marginalization, exclusion, and denigration based on sex are manifestations of the above inequality. It has been variously argued that women, more than men, have historically borne the brunt of systematic gender inequality. This, therefore, calls for a process or means that guarantees fairness for all. This is gender equity. Can all genders be equal? The answer is yes and no! Human beings, considered a species of animals gifted with rationality, are ontologically equal. Conversely, ontological equality does not translate to biological equality. All fingers are not equal. It is the opinion of the present researcher that ontological equality serves as the ground norm, indeed, the justification for the equality of the sexes.

The thesis that traditional patriarchal societies or culture privileges the male gender and marginalizes the feminine gender suffers from hasty generalization. The submission simply overlooks what Nkiru Nzegwu calls, “cultural specificity and the historicity of societies” (559). In Igbo traditional setting one finds complexities of gender ideologies and roles. The Igbo agrarian culture as we shall see, presents a melting pot of plurality, unique but complementary existence of female and male crops which metaphorically stand for the mutual sharing of spaces, labour, representation, and co-existence between man and woman in the Igbo world. Indeed, the search for equity or equality here might seem superfluous given the rootedness of the representation in the cosmogonic myths and the metaphysics of balance that undergird every relation in the Igbo worldview.

Male and Female Crops in Igbo Agrarian Culture: the Praxis, the Myth, and Ritualization

The present section x-rays the myth, the ritualization, and the praxis of gendering crops which is part and parcel of the traditional and existential Igbo agrarian culture. The gendering of crops, in literal language, means that, while some crops are designated as male, others are regarded as female. Yam, for instance, is regarded as a male crop and King of crops whereas some other crops like cocoyam and pumpkin, are seen as female. The gendering is observed more in the taxonomy of Igbo mystical trees whose symbols and their implicit meanings may not be apparently clear to the uninformed observer. For example, *Chrysophyllum Albidum* (udala tree) stands as a symbol of fertility and motherhood in most parts of Igbo land. This is a quintessential feminine tree, treated with great respect. Yam tuber (*Dioscrea*) stands as a symbol of providence. The gendering extends to inanimate entities. Rain stone which is an indispensable instrument in rain making has both female and male counterparts and each has got its respective functions. A few words about the Igbo seem ad rem here.

The Igbo is one of the three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Though highly adventurous and enterprising, inclined to travel far and wide in search of greener pasture, they predominantly occupy the five South Eastern states of Nigeria where they are the aborigines. Theirs is largely and fundamentally an agricultural community comprising mainly of subsistent farmers with a few exceptions that engage in fishing and wine tapping in riverine areas, smiting, handicraft, etc. A sizeable portion of the Igbo population today engages in business merchandise and white-collar jobs (Chinwe Nwoye 306). As in many traditional societies, agriculture here serves as the basic means of sustenance. Remarkably, success in agriculture is largely believed to be dependent on Transcendence or supernatural influence. A good harvest is inextricably premised on fidelity to these unseen forces. Gregory Adibe writes that “The Igbo primordial times were agrarians and pastoral before the arrival of Western civilization. The economic life and existence of the peasants were dependent on nature, which are dependent on supernatural forces” (5). Agriculture thus becomes the pivot around which economic and political and somehow, religious power is structured and measured. Religion remains highly significant in Igbo society today.

The influence of Christianity notwithstanding, the resilient indigenous occupational or agricultural festivals still hold overwhelming sway in contemporary Igbo society and beyond the borders of Nigeria. The Igbo celebrate New Yam Festival in countries of Europe, America, and other areas where they reside. As we shall see, the Igbo believe in the complementary roles of opposites. On this note, Innocent Asouzu avers that anything that exists is a missing link to reality (41). The farm crops are not exempted.

Accordingly, one of the phenomena that confronts one in traditional Igbo agrarian culture is the gendering of crops. Male and female crops co-exist in a perfect combination on the farm, thanks to share-cropping, and are taken care of by their respective human counterpart. While men cultivate male crops, women plant females. As the crops complement each other on the farm, so also on the dinner table! A combination of pounded yam (male crop) with cocoyam soup (female crop, with bitter leaf or similar vegetable) makes a perfect Igbo dish widely sought after. A tantalizing account of this pre-eminent food in Igbo culture was given in chapter five of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Similarly, among the African literature that captured the praxis of gendering crops, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, seem to be the most outstanding. The texts reflect the raw and unadulterated life in Igbo society. The title of the present paper was informed by a line from Achebe’s *magnum opus* (*Things Fall Apart*) where

he wrote that Okonkwo's mother and sisters "grew women's crops, like cocoyam, beans, and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (16).

On another note, from an anthropological perspective, one can tacitly draw the inference that, using the gendered crops, Achebe metaphorically presents the communal, mutual, and complementary human functioning and division of labour in traditional Igbo agriculture. The complexity of human existence is such that human beings need the services of each other at one point or the other. Each has got areas of strengths and weakness, hence the need for complementarity. Achebe wrote that while the men undertake the exacting task of cultivating yam, the women plant maize, melons, and beans and weed the farm at intervals (24). The above presentation offers a bird's eye view of the practice of share-cropping and division of labour in a typical Igbo farm. Moreover, the assignment of functions or division of labour as presented above is not done in cast iron. It rather presents what is fashionable in Igbo society. Any crop can be cultivated by men or women. Karen Warren is therefore wrong to have described the extensive involvement of African women farmers in the cultivation and processing of cassava as a "plight" (9). The arrangement is simply guided by the spirit of the gendering of crops and division of labour in an African agrarian cultural setting.

The practice of gendering crops is deeply rooted in the Igbo cosmogonic myth. Adiele Afigbo (41-42) describes the origin of the staple foods: yam, cocoyam, oil palm, and breadfruit, in these lines:

While Eri lived, *Chukwu* [God] fed him and his people with *azu-igwe!* But this special food ceased after the death of Eri. Nri his first son complained to *Chukwu* for food. *Chukwu* ordered Nri to sacrifice his first son and daughter and bury them in separate graves. Nri complied with it. Later after three-Igbo-weeks (*Izu ato* = 12 days) yam grew from the grave of the son and cocoyam from that of the daughter. When Nri and his people ate these, they slept for the first time; later still Nri killed a male and female slaves burying them separately. Again, after *Izu Ato*, an oil palm grew from the grave of the male slave, and a bread fruit tree (*ukwa*) from that of the female-slave.

The above account shows that staple food did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Gendering plays out in the myth in such a way that the immolation of the male child gave rise to male crops, while the immolation of the female child yielded female crops. The male and females are equally involved and represented. Igbo agricultural festivals commemorate the above primordial event and serve as an avenue for thanksgiving for the gift of staple crops. And more, for a group that relies heavily on the supernatural for a good harvest, appreciation for a good harvest.

The agrarian festivals include the New Yam Festival, Cocoyam Festival, Festival of Pumpkin Leaves, etc. Ritually speaking, by virtue of these crops (yam, cocoyam, oil palm, breadfruit) serving as the indispensable matter for the festival, their ontological status ambivalently changes from mere edible crops to sacramental objects. For instance, Achebe's account of the Feast of Pumpkin Leaves describes how "the women waved their leaves from side to side across their face, muttering prayers to Ulu" (Achebe). The leaves of pumpkin thus become ritual objects serving for spiritual purification. The New Yam Festival seems to be the most widely celebrated agricultural festival. "The age-long festival is celebrated across Nigeria and the world wherever the Igbo people live" (Punch). The annual New Yam festival is celebrated in thanksgiving to the yam deity for the gift of yam and a good harvest. Its corollary is Cocoyam Festival. This is popularly known as the Festival of *Ede Opoto* or *Ede Aro* in Dunukofia and Njikoka councils of Anambra state, Nigeria, from where the present researcher comes. In Abba community of Njikoka Council, the Cocoyam Festival is dedicated to the most portent goddess

called *Oyi*. Though cassava is a female crop and widely eaten in Igbo land, it does not have any festivals. The reason may not be unconnected with the fact that it is not indigenous to the Igbo, having originated from South America and not dedicated to any traditional Igbo goddess. According to Josef Pieper (33), a festival without gods is simply inconceivable.

The Metaphysics of Gendering Crops in Igbo Agrarian Culture

For a better appreciation of the implications for gender equality, one must x-ray the principle(s) that undergird the phenomenon of male and female crops or gendering of crops. As already stated above, the Igbo believe in the metaphysical principle of complementary duality and balance. This is the principle of mutual co-existence and complementary roles of opposites. This metaphysics is informed by the Igbo understanding of reality as force, dynamic, and interdependent. This is unlike Western ontology which perceives being as static and isolated. No reality exists in isolation. Entities do, in fact, most times exist in copula and complementary configurations such as *muo na madu* (spirit and human); *elu na ala* (the sky and the land); *nwoke na nwanyi* (male and female) et cetera. This calls for balance. On the need for balance, Nwoye (309) states that "Igbo cosmology places emphasis on the importance of striking a balance between masculine and feminine principles." The dynamic ontology of complementary duality and balance, therefore, informs the gendering of crops.

The above principle equally plays out in the cosmocentric configurations of Igbo deities where some parts of the earth's crust are deified in Igbo traditional religion. The sky is a male god whereas the land is female (goddess). The earth goddess plays a significant role as the custodian of morality and fertility. She is inextricably linked with productivity and harvest. According to Nwoye, "In Igbo religious worldview, key areas, such as land, river, hills, forests, caves, are believed to be controlled by female deities. Such sites are also connected with agriculture, fertility, morality, mores, beauty, and blessings" (308). The intersection between the gods, morality, and productivity in African agrarian culture is an area that calls for further research which is beyond the scope of the present work. As it relates to agriculture, it is believed that the male and female cosmological forces (the sky and the land) must necessarily harmonize to facilitate better yield in the farms. Meanwhile, it is quite informative to know that unlike some other religions such as Christianity and Islam that abysmally lack female representation in their divine configurations, Igbo theogony has pride of place for the female and there also exist priestesses in Igbo traditional religion. A total eclipse of female presence makes for imbalance theogony which invariably, tells negatively on the status of the female in the society. Little wonder why Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, queried the missionaries: "You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then" (Achebe 103). Males and females ought to be represented so as to create the balance needed for gender equity.

Given the above metaphysics of complementary duality and balance which undergirds relationships in the Igbo worldview; and the involvement of the male and female in the cosmogonic origin of the various staple crops in Igbo land, it is logical enough to infer that the phenomenon of gendering of crops has deep foundations in Igbo traditional agrarian culture. This praxis not only gives room for proper representation but also enhances division of labour. This leads to economic empowerment in a society that thrives predominantly on an agrarian economy. Since economic power is in a way political power, the gendering of crops gives a political voice or power not only to the male but also to the female. Religion portrays the culture of a people in its nakedness. The use of the crops as ritual objects at the agricultural festivals elevates the ontological status of the crops. The inclusion of the male and female crops in the

Igbo festal calendar not only makes for balanced representation but also affords the rest and leisure which humans direly need to balance the long periods of work.

Male and Female Crops: Implications for Gender Equality

The quest for gender equality is propelled by principles that make for balanced and fair treatment of both the male and female sexes. From the above exposé on the phenomenology of male and female crops, one can glean the following implications:

Balanced Representation (Inclusiveness): Reality is concatenated. There is equal representation of both male and female sexes in the cosmogonic myth, the actual praxis in the farms, and the festal calendar. This makes for a sense of belonging. Inclusiveness is a *conditio sine qua non* for gender equity. Discriminatory representation leads to gender inequality.

The Principle of Complementarity: This plays out in the phenomenon of gendering crops in Igbo agrarian culture. The male crops serve to complement the female crops. Division of labour in the field, as we saw above equally toes the line of complementarity of efforts. This implies that there ought to be a combination and complementarity of efforts from the male and female gender in order to achieve set goals and objectives in society.

Autonomy: the creation of a sense of autonomy is imperative in the actualization of gender equality. Equal space must be given for the genders, firstly, to be who they are. In the language of Martin Heidegger, this entails, “letting being be” (Heidegger). Secondly, there should be adequate space and motivation for self-actualization without undue interference and constraints.

Empowerment: None of the binary components (male and female) should be unduly disadvantaged by virtue of sex. The phenomenon of the gendering of crops in Igbo agrarian culture makes for the empowerment of both genders via agriculture which is the mainstay of the traditional economy. It simultaneously offers both sexes economic, political, and religious voices. The lesson for modern society is that an adequate platform should therefore be created for the empowerment of men and women without discrimination.

Conclusion

The present paper has examined the phenomenon of gendering of crops in Igbo agrarian culture in search of principles that could fecundate gender equality. The work x-rays the cosmogonic myth, the praxis and principles that undergird the gendering of crops. From the above discourse, the paper could glean the values of inclusiveness, complementarity, autonomy, and empowerment as core principles derivable from the phenomenon of male and female crops in Igbo agrarian culture. These are vital ingredients for gender equality. A good application of these principles and values in the social, economic, political, and religious arena can serve to enhance gender equality.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, 1958.
 *Arrow of God*. Penguin Books, 2010.
 Adibe, Gregory E. *Igbo Mysticism: The Power of Igbo Traditional Religion and Society*. Gregory Ejiofor Adibe, 2008.
 Afigbo, Adiele E. *Ropes of sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. University Press, 1981.
 Asouzu, Innocent I. “*Ibuanyidanda*” and the *Philosophy of Essence (Philosophy The Science Of Missing Links of Reality)* (Inaugural Lecture). University of Calabar Press, 2011.
 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.

- Heidegger, M. "On the Essence of Truth," <http://aphelis.net/wpcontent/uploads/2011/02/Martin-Heidegger-On-the-Essence-of-Truth.pdf>. Accessed 10/12/2021
- Pieper, Josef. *In Tune With the World: A Theory of Festivity*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.
- Nzegwu, N. "Feminism and Africa: Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender." *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, Blackwell, 2004. pp, 560-569.
- Nwoye, Chinwe M. A. "Igbo cultural and religious worldview: An insider's Perspective." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol.3, no.9, 2011, pp. 304-317.
- Punch Online. "How Ekweremadu was attacked with stones, yam in Germany." <https://punchng.com/how-ekweremadu-was-attacked-with-stones-yam-in-germany/> . Accessed 14/01/2022.
- Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Routledge, 1994.
- Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.