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TRADITIONALISM AND THE WOMEN QUESTION IN NIGERIA: AN
APPRAISAL OF SOME IGBO TRADITIONS.

Aghamelu Helen . U

ABSTRACT

Taking a critical look on society one will see that some of our traditional practices have actually enslaved us to the extent that one begins to wonder whether these traditional practices were instituted to benefit the persons in society. Or were these meant to exploit and enslave them? There is no doubt that exploitative traditionalism abound in the Igbo society but the female folk seem to get buried in these practices. They seem to live in an oppressive situation justified by tradition and the custom of society in which they find themselves. This paper therefore tries to highlight four of the prominent exploitative traditional practices as they concern women in the present contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

According to Cambridge International dictionary of English, "traditionalism is the act of following ideas and ways of doing things that have been believed or followed by a particular society for a long time". (1996; P. 1547). It is the strict adherence to customs, information, actions, beliefs and thoughts that are handed down from generation to generation. Traditionalism like every other practice, be it religious, social, economic or otherwise, has some detrimental or negative aspects that are some times impossible or difficult to control; hence, "pathology of traditionalism". Pathology of traditionalism is the act of following, uncontrollably, and to the extreme; ideas customs, thoughts and information irrespective of its negative effect on the person and the society.

An insight into the society has shown that despite the revelation and discoveries being witnessed in some parts of Africa and Nigeria particularly, concerning the deities and injustices being perpetrated against some people or group of people in the guise of "order" from the gods, shrine or oracle, people still allow themselves and their loved ones to be enslaved spiritually, socially and psychologically in the name of these traditions. Enough light has been thrown to the nefarious activities behind some of these deities, gods and goddesses that should enable people liberate themselves from the shackles of these negative tradition but to no avail. This strict adherence at all cost has been traced to the selfish interest of few people in the society who create unnecessary fear and punishment for violators of these unwholesome traditions. These selfish leaders made their subjects believe that these traditions are decrees from the gods and must never be violated. This was very easy to achieve because most traditions are claimed to come from god and any violation is punished by the gods by death or wretch.

In Igbo society of Nigeria, for instance, as F.U. Okafor puts it "a typical Igbo strives not to disassociate himself from the spiritual community by violating the taboos or by involvement in any *nso* behaviour" (1992; p. 65). They believe strongly that "their *omenani*; the traditional norms come directly from God who is all knowing and all seeing... thus every Igbo action is done religiously because they believe that God who has one eye penetrates any depth and closely watching them" (Adibe, 1992, p.8)

The priests capitalize on this and inflict unbearable hardship on the society in the name of tradition. Some of them even go to the extent of using supernatural forces to inflict the violators with some strange illnesses and or misfortunes, severe enough to convince them of the efficacy at the gods. Onyeneke was able to capture this vividly when he said that these forces can be "artificially applied by man to affect the state of fellow men... relieving them of illness, preventing or even inflicting the same"

(1987, p.91). It is this fear that make people accept and adhere strictly and most times blindly to certain traditions irrespective of the pains they experience in the course of keeping such traditions. They are also made to believe that the entire society is polluted once the tradition is violated thereby disrupting their communion with the ancestors.

As the strangles of traditionalism tend to choke the life out of the citizens, women seemed to be worst hit by some of these unwholesome traditional practices. This paper is therefore restricted to the review of some of these traditional practices which seemed to be doing more harm than good to the woman and girl child. The author was able to make some findings regarding four of these traditional practices which include childlessness, Male-child progeny, Harmful widowhood practices, female genital mutilation.

These are discussed sequentially below;

Childlessness:

In traditional African society and in Nigeria particularly, procreation is almost seen as the primary aim of marriage and the woman is usually blamed if this falls. "Fertility is so much insisted upon that the woman who has not born a child does not have a role in the society" (Mbuy-Beya; 1998, p.18). Ann Nasimuyu -Wasike in one of her papers collaborated the above statement when she said that "what ever other qualities, gifts and talents a woman might poses, the inability to procreate reduces her to a non person" (1994; p.105).

Tradition has always made the woman a ready culprit whenever infertility is mentioned. She is forced to consider herself less than a woman and others remind her of her childlessness because tradition made it to be so. The following questions prick my mind whenever I think of this; "why must tradition lay the blame of childlessness solely on the woman? Does it mean that there is no man with fertility problem? Each time I ask these questions, the same answer come to my mind; "traditionalism". Tradition made it that a man's sterility must never be made public; the woman must be blamed. That is why, in a situation where it was discovered that the man cannot impregnate his wife, an arrangement is made with a trusted friend of the husband to "help" him procreate. This "trusted" friend of the sterile husband is then free to sleep with his friend's wife in order to procreate for him. However, such arrangement leaves the woman with no option than to accept the arrangement or else she will be labelled barren- so says tradition!. A respondent of mine who happened to be a victim of this tradition has this to say;

"I have to go out and have sex with some one recommended by my husband. I have no choice because if I refuse to, he will easily

divorce me and marry another person who may accept such offer and or worst still, he will ignore me and do same; then I will be branded a witch and barren; and thereby scorned by other women. But the stupid thing about the whole thing is that the children I've, all look like their real father and no one seemed to notice. Well..., heaven knows that if not for tradition, such a man can never touch me"

Perpetrators of this tradition forget the health hazards involved in such arrangement. The psychological effect of such on the women is never put into consideration; after all it is the tradition that the man's sterility must be kept secret at all cost. However, in a situation where the woman is confirmed barren, the story is different. The best a considerable man does is to make the woman marry a young girl for him who will then bear children in her name for him. But recently, divorce is almost always inevitable.

Recently, research has confirmed that about "... 40 percent of cases of infertility are caused by male partners; another 40 percent is caused by the females; while the remaining 20 percent is shared equally by both sexes" (Tell Magazine, August 2003). The above shows that men and women should be blamed equally in the problem of procreation. However, in a situation where it is confirmed that one partner is actually responsible, solution should be sort for amicably and the image of the partner should be protected regardless of the sex. Tradition should help and sustain the society by being realistic in its decisions and adherences regarding certain practices.

The Male-Child Progeny:

As Rev. Fr. Chiegboka rightly puts it, "it is not only the predicament of childlessness that women suffer but the gender of the child (2001:p.78). A woman may have as many children as possible but if there is no male among them, tradition treats her almost as if she is childless. The woman and never the man is held responsible in this situation by tradition!

This tradition "neglects the biological constitution of the "XY" chromosome in men which are normally responsible for the gender of the child" (Chiegboka, 2001, p.78). It refuses to acknowledge that it is now an established fact that the man almost determines the sex of his child. It is what the man gives the woman that she brings forth into world. Science has proved this. but despite our acclaimed literacy and enlightenment, we prefer to stick to tradition rather than facing the fact.

One is free to have preference to the sex of a child but the question is "why must the woman bear the burden all alone in the name of traditionalism". Why must she suffer because tradition insists that it is a male that determines the continuity of a family or stead? Many women are experiencing a lot of psychological

trauma because of this traditional practice. Neglect and desperation top the list. Out of desperation, many women are saddled with more children than they can cater for, all in an effort to beget a male. Some have been abandoned in the maternity homes after giving birth to yet "another girl".

Girls have been and are still being forced to stay back in the father's house so as to bring forth male children for the family. Such young girls are deprived of marrying their desired husbands simply because a male must be born who will inherit and ensure the continuity of the homestead so that the dead ancestors will be happy. Wherever they are or else they will unleash their wrath on the family. One may ask, where were the ancestors when these children were coming into the world? If they are really as powerful as they are being acclaimed to be, why didn't they make sure that a male child was borne into the family? Why is it that the power of the ancestors are usually felt mainly in Punishments rather than privileges. I believe that the ancestors or this tradition per se is being misrepresented by some selfish individuals who benefit from it.

The moment we say no to this, will be the moment we see the joy of the woman child.

Harmful Widowhood Practices:

Widowhood is a situation where a woman loses her husband to death.

Traditionally, widows get some special treatments that can be easily classified as harmful before, during and after the "ritual" of burying the dead husband.

As Rev. Fr. Chiegboka puts it, "the rituals of widowhood are so dehumanizing and hazardous to the health of the woman who is bereaved" (2001, p.80) that one begins to wonder if the woman is responsible for the death of the husband.

These women are made to undergo some excruciating rites and rituals that are very inhuman to human dignity all in the name of tradition. These rituals and rites range from the bizarre act of drinking the bath water of the corpse; especially if the woman is suspected of killing the husband (which is very frequent), restriction from having a bath, seclusion and some times eating without washing her hands. After everything, she is then ushered into the society by having a bath in the stream at midnight. This, according to reports from respondents is actually meant to make the woman ritually clean for other men to be able to have sex with her.

Like almost all traditional practices, there are no serious reasons for carrying out most of these rituals other than superstition. Just because tradition says that it must be done. Moreover, most people believe that failure to carry out these rites attracts calamity ranging from ostracisation to death. This tradition fails to acknowledge the fact that no normal woman needs cohesion to mourn for her husband's death. Forcing some one to wail at a particular time of the day is not necessary as this will be

too mechanical and artificial that the real feeling of mourning for a dear one is forgotten and in its place will be "fulfillment of duty".

Reports have shown that these most dreaded punishments which are claimed to come from the gods has nothing to do with the gods but were actually created by man for his or her own purposes. Evidences have shown that nothing happens if one says "no" to them. Mrs. Ngozi Orjiakor in one of her papers confirmed this when she said that during the funeral of her cousin who died in 1992, she was able to restrain the "umuada" from carrying out all the rituals on her cousin's wife "I stood my ground and refused vehemently. I reminded them that since am one of them, I cannot permit such in human punishment, after much argument, they gave in" (2000, p. 231). It is only a little determination that is needed on our part to curb these practices that are meted on the women folk in the name of tradition.

Female Genital Mutilation:

Another dehumanizing tradition being practiced on the female folk is genital Mutilation "The origin of genital mutilation has been traced to the desire to control female sexuality and the need to preserve the virginity of young girls until marriage" (Kuteyi, 2000, 97). However, it has been established that there is no justification on health or medical grounds to support this. Female genital mutilation. "involves the cutting or alteration of the female genitali for social rather than medical reasons" (PRB, 2001, P. 3).

This singular act can render a woman sexually, psychologically and physically useless in event of complications, which are very common. Many a woman has been made very subtle to infections and diseases. Some matrimonial homes have been experiencing one problem or the other from complications resulting from this practice.

The problems that are inherent in this traditional practices include; difficulty in passing urine, yulva abscesses, sterility, surgical shock etc. However, Despite efforts being made to discourage this practice, many traditional communities still adhere to it and because the practice is prohibited medically only traditional female circumcisers perform it thereby increasing the risk of complications.

Efforts made by the author to find out the benefits of this tradition yielded little or no result as almost all the people questioned laid their claim on tradition while those that say some thing good in it have only "sexual control as their only answer. No matter the benefits from the traditional, it has been confirmed that the harm it does far out weighs the good. Therefore, it is high time it is abandoned. People should say no to this practice and stop hiding under traditionalism to carry out such harmful act.

CONCLUSION

Every true and authentic tradition is geared towards liberating all men from various forms of slavery and annihilation so as to give each one a full sense of achievement and importance. "Yet, most African women are conferred to the anonymity, crushed as they were by the weight pulled upon them by the conditions in which they have to live and by the culture of their own people (Sarah, 2000, p.15) women have not always been spared from the consequences of traditional taboos. She "lives" in an oppressive situation justified by tradition as well as by certain philosophical and even religious way of thinking". (Mbuy-Beya, 1998: p.15). The reactions of many concerning these traditions is still very lukewarm. They all claim to be "cautions" but I think it is cowardice or fear of the unknown.

These traditions have persisted in our midst simply because people have been brain washed into believing that the gods will strike once they deviate from the stipulated norms. Those that benefit from these traditions will go to any length in protecting it. It is quite disheartening that despite our claimed modernization, civilization and literacy level, custodians of our traditions have chosen to remain rigid.

However, change is an ever present factor in any social setting "like a living or moving organisms, a functioning society invariably changes as it continues to exist and function..." (Akukwe, 1988, p.16). Any society that refuses to change can never move forward because "if traditional rural societies stay as they are and remain unwilling to change, it is easy to see them as an obstacle to development (Akukwe, 1988, p. 34). Therefore, these traditions should be changed to ensure meaningful development in the society. That we cannot do with tradition is some how true. However, where the problem lies is the manner in which we follow these traditions and allow them to enslave us despite the pains and regrets that are mostly the outcome of these traditions. We tend to adhere blindly to these traditions probably to avoid any type of punishment from the gods, as we are made to believe. However, we should also know that such docile adherence to tradition without asking questions entails some inherent difficulties.

It is patriotically necessary for us to know our traditions and protect it. In the same vein, it is also necessary for us to question the authenticity and benefits of these traditions so as to make changes where and when necessary without any fear of any god or goddess, an oracle or shrine..

I believe that no god, goddess, shrine or oracle will subject its people to any form of slavery or difficulty. Therefore, change is absolutely necessary concerning these traditions because "Any group that affects significant change in behaviour gains advantage over those that cling to traditional pattern of behaviour" (Akukwe 1988, 18) especially the pathological ones.

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