

MISSIONARIES AND WOMEN EMANCIPATION IN IGBOLAND

H.O. Anyanwu*

1. Introduction

The biblical concept of the origin of the woman that she was created from the ribs of a man presupposes woman to be inferior to men. In the traditional Igbo Society, though the concept of women being made from the rib of man is absent, women were still placed under men. Women have remained in some measure passive members of the human world. They were banished to the back of the house where they did the main house chores, cared for the young ones and prepared and catered food in the house. It is therefore, the wish of this paper to highlight the limited role of women in the traditional society and to show a progressive assumption of greater role through the instrumentality of the missionaries.

2. The Place of Women in Traditional Igbo Society

The structure of Nigerian societies in general has placed women in such a disadvantageous positions that even where a few of them possess leadership qualities; they cannot assume such leadership positions. This is mainly because such positions are out of tune with the roles apportioned of them by the society. "The traditional Igbo society is agrarian. Its world construction operates with the agrarian world matrix"¹. The position of women in this simple culture therefore was dependence oriented hence they are referred to as 'Ori-aku'-consumer of wealth.

In Igbo traditional system the wealth of man was not only measured by how much property he had but also by the number of women he married. Women were acquired not for companionship nor solely for the

*Dr. Herbert Onyema Anyanwu is professor in the Department of Religious Studies at University of Uyo, Nigeria.

¹Ifeanyi Ezeaku, "Women in the Traditional Igbo Society: A Socio-Religious Perspective" in Emma Ekpunobi and Ifeanyi Ezeaku (eds.), *Socio-Philosophical Perspective of African Traditional Religion* (Enugu: New Age Publishers, 1990), p.105

purpose of procreation but also for the contributions they were expected to make towards the wealth of their husbands. It is not surprising therefore that in Igbo traditional society wives formed the major work force on the farms and the produce of the farms were sold by the husband who also kept the proceeds from such a sale.

Traditionally, things have been arranged in such a way that from the very beginning women were made to occupy subordinate positions in relation to their male counterparts. Women have lived under this condition from the earliest times and have accepted it as a way of life. Even in the Bible male and female are by no means depicted as one either in the sense that one might mean equal in standing or in the sense of being similar in nature and character. In traditional society women are usually portrayed quite consistently as appendages of men. They are looked upon as possessions of men, as goods which may be sold, disposed of, given away, traded or just ordered about by men, as things which might better be seen and not be heard.

As the traditional society is male chauvinistic women are equally seen as the recipients of the rough end of a system of laws and customs which differ significantly in their application according to gender. The women are placed in a position of such demeaning, relative consequence that they are not killed during wars, and the disgrace of having been killed in battle by one of them is usually considered to be worse than death itself.

In Igbo traditional system it is generally the case that men judge, foretell, fight, rule and legislate and women are either absent altogether or else do little more than fill the background of the societal events, usually in the role of some man's appendage or possession.

Throughout the traditional society it is the norm to find men occupying the positions of authority and command. Men are the rulers, the generals, the judges the priests and the landlords; and not because of their proven ability to undertake such roles or because of any proven inability among women, but rather simply because such roles are unquestionably and automatically reserved for them; conversely men are specifically designated to fill those roles.

Bareness in traditional society is conceived as a tangible sign that god and the ancestors have turned away and the final image of lifelessness is couched quite specifically in feminine terms such that infertility is connected directly to a miscarrying womb and dry breasts rather than a malfunctioning penis or diseased testicles. Equally waywardness or foolishness of children is connected back directly in one form or another to the mother just as seen in the Bible (cf. Proverbs 10:1).

Also virginity is usually held up in traditional society as a highly valued feature of women. Men are generally advised and at times even commanded to take virgins for wives; women are equally advised, commanded and expected to retain their virginity, until they are married. But contrary the same expectation is not laid down explicitly for men.

As far as inheritances are concerned women and men are treated differently. Regardless of the order of birth things pass down automatically to the sons.

3. Characteristics of Women

In general men and women are depicted differently in the traditional society with men getting better recognition. Women are portrayed as stupid, as having a marked propensity to nag and prattle, as weak and cowardly and as possessing an evil influence and power usually capable of leading men astray. They are variously depicted as potentially evil, as the source of filth and sin and as the curse of the world.

Implicitly, and explicitly the traditional society paints the picture of women as the cause of sinful behaviours among men and as the cause of the downfall of human race. The overall implication is the human race could be untainted or less tainted if not for the presence and actions of women. Thus,

The religion which has recognized the world as divinely ordered has no active role for women. Instead it has recognized them as the causes of all the calamities, bad omen etc.²

²Ifeanyi Ezeaku, 1990, p.104.

Despite its predominantly negative attitude to women, the traditional society does not deny the possibility that there can be good women.

We do not want to state that women are not useful members of the human society. Rather, their usefulness in traditional Igbo Society cannot be equated with that of men hence, they are regarded as passive.³

As a show of its male chauvinism the Igbo traditional society tends to measure the goodness in women in relation to how well they serve their husbands and is manifested in qualities such as loyalty, fidelity, piety and the ability to keep house and rear children properly. As such good wives are those who submit themselves to their husbands in all things, they must be of a meek and quiet spirit, they must be chaste and reverent and seek and display an inner rather than an outward adorning.

4. Missionaries and Women Emancipation

No history of the missionaries in Nigeria will be complete without reference to the emancipation of women from all repressive bond that held them from the beginning of time. Likewise no analysis of the progress of women towards self-realization and actualization will be complete without the mention of the role of the missionaries. This is because much of the progress that has taken place in the status of women and conception of their role in the society has been due to the efforts of the missionaries.

The concern for women, makers of future homes, was the brain child of Bishop Shanaham, who after seeing the good works done for the raising of the social, religious, and educational standard of the men, thought of the women folk and was determined to do something for them.⁴

Prior to the coming of the Missionaries, women were held to be the private property of their husbands and even when they were not married

³Ifeanyi Ezeaku, 1990, p.104.

⁴Rose Adure Njoku, *The Advent of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, Its Growth in Owerri Diocese* (Owerri: Assumpta Press, 1980), p.95

the conception was that their fathers were only keeping them in trust for the eventual husbands.

A gradual change began in this position of women with the coming of the missionaries.

Bishop Shanahan felt that Christianity was insecure unless it had its roots in the Christian home.... Bishop Shanahan said that true family would only be a reality in his vicariate when women were educated in the truth of faith and sharing in the life of Divine Grace.⁵

In the traditional religion, women could not enter the shrine let alone join in the ritual. But with the coming of the missionaries and the admission of women into the church marked the beginning of a bi-sexual gathering which later created a forum for women to associate with others without the direction of their husbands. The admittance of women into the church would not have been successful if not for the doctrine of the church which was that everyone irrespective of sex is equal in the sight of God. This doctrine boosted the morale of women.

The missionaries also taught that contrary to the people's belief, marriage is not a commercial enterprise with women as a commodity.

Bishop Shanahan recognized the importance of women as the heart of the family and the centre of its love. He wanted to make full use of this influence. The new woman has to be educated to understand her role, her status and her rightful place in the society of educated men in government and professionals.⁶

The missionaries' teaching of love and brotherhood cultivated in women a growing sense of patriotism and communalism. As a result the women organized themselves into various social associations for the purpose of singing, dancing, working and studying the Scriptures.

The missionaries did not stop at involving women in the affairs of the church but also undertook the responsibility of training the women to

⁵Rose Adure Njoku, 1980, p.96.

⁶Rose Adure Njoku, 1980, p.97.

be more productive in their homes. They were also taught the basis of hygiene and health care. This increased the sphere of women participation in the affairs of the society.

The introduction of formal education by the missionaries was seen as an important step towards the development of the society. Although the missionaries' establishing schools was to a greater extent selfish as their main purpose was to encourage literacy so as to make their missionary work easier. Their introduction of formal education provided the foundation from which the women became liberated.

While it is debatable that the mission education made no significant contribution to the economic and social development of the people, the education nevertheless contributed to the political emancipation of the people.⁷

The influence of women missionaries effected a considerable change in the status of women. In missionary women, the Igbo women saw their kind breaking into a class which in their society was reserved for the men only. To the menfolk missionary women served as examples of what their women could do if they are given the chance and adequate encouragement.

5. Conclusion

The presentation of women in the society is consistently condescending, patronizing, derogatory and in many places down right insulting. Considering the negative picture painted of women virtually throughout the traditional society we might expect to find somebody at some time questioning the very need for them at all, suggesting that it might be better to do without them. But on the other hand, recognizing that without women there would be no procreation, no future and no humanity, it is obvious that women cannot be completely put aside by all men for all times. The whole process of assimilating our inheritance and constructing and reconstructing our present and future is one which we know far too little about, but if there is one thing we should have learnt it is that in the past we have paid far too much attention to significant and leading historical figures with the destructive result that we seriously

⁷Rose Adure Njoku, 1980, p.251.

misunderstood and underestimated the role played by what have also been badly misnamed the silent majority - those people without whose concurrence in both theory and practice there would have been no spreading of the ideas and material practices.

In the traditional Igbo society the influence of women appear on the surface to be relatively undramatic; and yet it is women who are usually centrally implicated and basically responsible for the establishment and propagation of cultural milieu in general and the acceptance, realization and promulgation of sets of beliefs, attitudes, values and practices in particular.

The activities of the missionaries, notwithstanding, the converted equality with men which has been the desire of women all over the world is not in sight in Igbo. In Igboland there are a combination of factors instigating scheming against this total equality. They range from social, economic, cultural and to religious factors. Traditional Igbo woman occupied a secondary position in the affairs of the society and this traditional conception of the role of women has not been completely eradicated despite the efforts of the missionaries. But:

It is a proven fact that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Women should not be strangers in their own environment.⁸

⁸Rose Adure Njoku, 1980, p.111.