

**NOT EVERY EXTRAMARITAL SEX IS ADULTERY:
AN ETHNO-HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE IGBO OF
SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA**

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Abstract. Extramarital sex is culturally abnormal among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. This is not to say that it does not exist. Olaudah Equiano was the first Igbo indigenous historian who researched Igbo life when he published his narratives in 1789. Unfortunately, most of the parameters he used in measuring and reconstructing Igbo life have been questioned by many leading Igbo academics and one of such areas is the Igbo view of extramarital sex. Equiano saw every act of adultery among the Igbo as culturally unacceptable. This is not true in every circumstance. In this paper, Equiano's claim about adultery among the Igbo is seen as inconclusive and thus the present writer provides historical insights, which insist that not all extramarital sex among the Igbo implies adultery.

Keywords: historiographer, adultery, sex, culture, sexuality, Equiano

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1. Introduction

Sex is a global issue, yet it has a very modest place in African historical scholarship, especially in Igbo studies. Human sexuality, by operational definition is not limited to sexual intercourse alone. Ikpe (2005:2) in her paper on *Culture and pleasurable sexuality in Southeastern Nigeria* identified marital sexuality to include home-keeping, personal cleanliness, husband care and petting, good relationships with members of the husband's family and how to remain desirable to the man. Sex is one of the most significant aspects of early European ethnographic reports on southern Nigeria. Most precisely, each time the need arises for scholarly discourse on sex, many leading Igbo academics do not consider it worthwhile. It was in response to this academic shortsightedness that led Ikpe to

note that historical approach to sexuality would stress the impact of social, political, religious practices and discourses which influenced sexuality through the setting of sexual parameters, enhancement or limitation of sexual relationship and pleasures and development of resistance to orthodox culturally acceptable sexual behaviors (Ikpe 2004:5)

Extramarital sex can at times constitute a remarkable feature in Igbo traditional humane living. Equiano's narratives mention Igbo women and sexuality. Published in 1789, Olaudah Equiano bought his freedom as an ex-slave from Igbo extraction whose last touch with his place of birth was at eleven, an age many academics consider too tender to recollect the exactitude of the Igbo life and culture. Nevertheless, the *Igboness* of Equiano and his account is not entirely wrong. However, the concern of this paper is to place the limitations of his account in the context of Igbo sexuality and probably inform the reader that Equiano's understanding of adultery in the Igbo worldview is inconclusive. Equiano made mention of the punishment for adultery to include slavery or death (The Early Travels 1987:71). According to him: 'so sacred among them is the honor of the marriage bed and so jealous are the fidelity of their wives' (The Early Travels, 1987). Furthermore, he acknowledges adultery among the Igbo to imply a personal injury to the husband who decides and punishes the wife and in most cases, the punishment was death (The early Travels 1987). Mistakenly, early ethnographic reports on the Igbo, as well as post independence reports have continued to see adultery in the same way Equiano saw it. For instance in 1972, Afigbo in his *Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929* asserts that:

Among the Ibo, for instance, adultery fell into two broad groups. In the first category was adultery committed within the kingship group, which was regarded as an offense against Ala (the earth deity) and against the ancestors. The settlement of this varied from place to place but invariably included a ceremonial removal of the pollution of the community by the priest of Ala. At Mgbidi, the male adulterer could be sold into slavery while at Mmako the guilty couples were banished for this class of offense. In the second group was adultery committed outside the kingship group which involved no offense to Ala nor to the ancestors and which was regarded as a private injury and was settled as that, generally with compensation to the injured man (Afigbo 1972:264).

Among the Igbo, sexuality has multiple meanings. According to Ikpe (2005:4), sexuality can be used in negotiating an economic, political and social status. This view applies to the Igbo a great deal. One of the shortcomings of Archdeacon Dennis' committee of 1906–1913 in the translation of Igbo bible was the forceful injection of English words into Igbo and a lack of ethnographic study on the traditions and customs of the people in relation to conveying useful literary meanings. Writing in 1921, for example, Basden (2006:59) *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* notes that: "the word love is not even found on the Igbo language. The nearest approach to the idea is *Ifunanya*, i.e. to look in the eye in a favorable manner"

Adultery among the Igbo was measured by Eurocentric parameters by early European ethnographers. However, among the Igbo adultery does not imply sex outside the matrimonial home since there is culturally acceptable adultery. Hence, the proper definition of adultery among the Igbo should be conceptualized in line with people's traditions, culture and historical significance of value. This is important and has been neglected in historical scholarship over the years. Hence, there is a need to establish a distinction between marital sexuality and prostitution. Edlund and Korn wrote that a prostitute cannot simply be a woman who sells her body since that is done every day by women who become wives in order to gain a home and livelihood (Edlund and Korn 2002:183). These scholars argue further that the difference between a wife and a prostitute is that prostitutes sell non-reproductive sex while wives sell productive sex (Edlund and Korn 2002:183). The above views seem to suggest that most wives are in actual sense prostitutes. Nevertheless, in this paper, we are looking at the circumstances that the Igbo view would not consider adulterous for a woman who enjoys sex outside her matrimonial home while still married.

2. Women's sexuality and power in precolonial Igbo

Igbo women had control over their sexuality in precolonial times. For example, in Oma mythology, a woman was believed to have practiced polyandry and gave birth to communities under this group. Oma was believed to marry a man and raised children for him only to be remarried and in the process begot children that make up the towns. Apart from Omuma town, other children begotten by Oma include the towns of Ibiasogbe, Aji, Akatta, Amiri, Awo Omama, Otulu, Amagu, Egbuoma, Egwe, Eleh, Ibiasogbe, Ubulu, Mgbidi, Ozara, Nempi, Ohakpu, Egbema, Akuma, and Uli (Anyachonkeya 2006:5–10). The reason why Oma had the privilege to marry as many times as she wanted has remained a subject for debate for a long time now. However, for the present writer, it demonstrates the liberty of the Igbo women in precolonial times, especially in relation with their sexuality. To a justifiable extent, sexuality in the Igbo worldview is not all about pleasure in the context many Eurocentric scholars may view the subject, especially using alien parameters of other societies. Among the Igbo, sex is defined in so many ways since sex is an essential instrument for women trying to sustain the family line, as well as exercise powers in their own way. According to Racheal Spronk the challenge of sex research is to understand the ways how societal factors organize sex and sexuality and establish how these processes shape the experience of people (Spronk 2007:3).

The Igbo society provides an essential historical theater of studying sexuality in Africa. Korieh's (2003:85) appraisal of Uchendu's *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria* notes that a woman can leave her husband at will, abandon him if he becomes a thief and summon him to tribunal, where she would get a fair hearing. In most cases, women among the Igbo even deny their husbands sexual pleasure in trying to make a demand or reach a compromise in the height of injustice.

Acholonu (1995:4) agreed with this view when she wrote: “Igbo women (wives) also use the weapons of general domestic boycott to sit on their husbands or the entire male community, to carry out the wishes of the women in political and social matters”

In addition, in a precolonial Igbo setting, sex was not forced on a woman, she was constantly surrounded by children and other people. According to Amadiume, men did not enter women’s quarter freely or casually. Avenues were open for politicking and there was a particular kind of romance insinuations, innuendos, bribery or sweetening the heart or words to poison it, as the case may be. The sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect. One woman might see marital obligation as a necessary but loathsome duty. Some might abandon their relationship with their husband and shun men and their trouble. Indigenous architecture and male/female polygamy made these choices possible (Amadiume 1987:91). The emphasis being that women had power over their sexuality and were of no lesser gender in that respect. Although the Igbo polygamous setting afforded men the opportunity to make alternative choices of sex since they had many wives, but there was no power available to the man to insist he must sleep with a particular woman. The refusal of a particular wife to have sex with the husband was a denial of right and a challenge to the man’s authority which was best resolved by members of the families or formal patrilineage organizations (Amadiume 1987:1). An Igbo saying has it that when a man begins to maltreat his wife, a hurt wife would refuse her husband sexual favors (Amadiume 1987:91).

Sexuality in the Igbo sense needs to be properly understood in the context it is used as well as its significance and values. For instance, Clitoridectomy, known as *Ibenwanyugwu* has been misconceived to be female genital mutilation instead of seeing it from the perspective of an indigenous way of having pleasurable sexuality by cutting the erectile tissue of the clitoris in order to maintain family dignity (Okonkwo 2008:100) and to limit excessive urge for sex by young unmarried women. Its health challenge seems to be the epicenter of contemporary scholarship instead of looking inwardly to appreciate its ethno-historical values. Among the Igbo, parents of a young girl found to indulge in so much premarital sex habits were often advised to circumcise the girl. A typical illustration of this belief was showcased in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* where Igwilo asked to drink the dregs of palm wine because it was good for men going to their wives (Achebe 1958:15). Sex is generally accepted as therapy for healthy marriages (Ikpe and Lasisi 2006:97). Acholonu (1995:12) observes that women's fertility is power. The use of this power among the Igbo is extensively discussed below.

3. Realities of Igbo extramarital sexuality

In 1921, Basden wrote that an extramarital affair was a prominent feature among the Igbo women. According to him, Igbo women select their companion from their own sex, as do the men, but each has her own particular male friend,

independently of her husband, with whom a more or less clandestine relationship is maintained (Basden 2006:79–80). This assertion helps in so many ways to suppress the claim of Amadiume that Igbo women never had the opportunity for recreational sex (Amadiume 1987:114). On 3 November 1925, the women Dance War vindicated Basden's claim. It is recorded that women from Akpuje and Owelli towns in Awka district, under Ajalli Native Court, and some women from Inyi numbering a total of about 150 people assembled in the house of chief Ezechuku (head chief of Inyi) and made the demands that married women should be allowed to have sexual intercourse outside the matrimonial homes. They made their demands through songs as follows: women should not charge too much for their services as prostitutes (from LokpantaVia Ngodo and Amuda in Okigwi district) and married women should be allowed to have intercourse with other men without being liable to be taken to the Native Court (NAE, ONPROF 7/12/92). This demand was made as a result of incessant litigation on adultery filed during this period at the Native Courts.

The idea according to M. Macgregor Report, was mystery to local chiefs who claimed not to know the origin of the women's movement as well as its meaning. Hence, colonial authorities threatened to take action if the women breach the peace of the area. Furthermore, the Warrant Chiefs in that area refused to accept that such cultural practices as exhibited by the women were in existence. This probably could have been said out of the fear of losing their warrants. Some Igbo women who moved to urban areas borrowed a leaf from the professional prostitutes from Akunaakuna from Obubra which later became Igbo world for prostitution (Akwunakwuna) (NAE, Obudist 6/1/421). Nevertheless, the loss of wives value is attributed to colonial policies of urbanization policy which eroded the powers of indigenous institutions of social control and created a large territorial space which encouraged commercial sex (Naanen 1991:65). There are various reasons attributed to the desire of an Igbo woman to enjoy sex outside her matrimonial home and is deemed by the husband to be justifiable. One of such cases is when it is fully established that the husband is impotent. In the case of impotency of the man, the woman can move out to seek sexual pleasure for procreation. Ifemesia (1979:61) justifies this view:

As for the man, in intractable situations, his impotency could eventually lead to divorce. But quite often, arrangements would be made by his parents (or in their absence, by other responsible members of the lineage) to provide the man with a robust, reliable, and reputable friend outside her own and her husband patrilineages. And the whole affair would be conducted with such decency and privacy that the man's self esteem was carefully preserved.²⁷

In any case, among the Igbo, it is only when a man is dissatisfied with the wife's sexual conduct that the case of adultery can fully be established. Hence, adultery among the Igbo is deemed as personal injury to the man. The most primary issue in every Igbo marriage custom is that every child born while the marriage lasts belongs to the man. At no point will anybody make claim to a child by a woman married to another man. Extramarital sex is also permitted in the case

of gynaegamy. Gynaegamy is a term used to describe woman to woman marriage by Professor V. C Uchendu. According to him: it is a strictly patrilineal institution inherent in the logic of the transfer of a woman's reproductive powers to her husband's lineage (Uchendu 1995:69). He argues further that in a gynaegamous marriage the seed raiser or genitor is different from the genetrix and the social father. The important issue here is that among the Igbo, preserving the father's lineage was so supreme that a daughter can stay in his father's house and procreate. Women at menopausal age who could not bear children for their husbands in Igbo land could marry their fellow woman and assume the role of a sociological father of any resulting offspring. The children born out of such intercourse belonged to the lineage of her husband not to that of their real biological father. The Ekwe title holders of Nnobi were excellent in this type of practice, most probably as a sign of wealth and elevated social status. As female husbands they gave their wife a male and adopted the role of mother to her but claimed her services. The wives stay with her bearing children in her name (Amadiume 1987:42). Nwoko (2012:76) justifies this further: in traditional Igbo society and in line with the patriarchal traditions, a man's generation and lineage was preserved in the personalities of his sons. To actualize the essence of marriage a female husband is a sociological father of any resulting offspring. The children belonged to the lineage of her father, not that of their biological father. The wife of the female husband in this circumstance is conditioned to engage in extramarital sex since the idea of same sex sexuality will not lead to procreation which is the engine of Igbo matrimony.

Extramarital sex can take place in a situation where a woman desires the physical build of a man, his handsomeness and color (Ikpe 2003:47). The woman may not formally inform the husband of her erotic desire outside the home but in most cases, the husband cannot claim ignorance of the wife's actions especially when children borne by the woman do not have the same hereditary qualities as the husband. Corroborating this fact, a researcher in Obowo area of Imo state relays to the present writer of many cases of *Ikonne* (male friend of a man's wife) was not publicly done but that nobody in the village where he carried out his research claimed ignorant of the women's extramarital sex habits and that the real father of most of their children borne out of such intercourse do not in actual sense belong to their biological fathers (Okoro Personal Communication with the Author, 10 May 2010). *Ikonne* is a popular name in Umuahia and Ngwa axis of Igboland. In most cases, widows who gave birth to children after their husband's demise, without remarrying, can also name their children *Ikonne* as a way of remembering the emotional assistance of the post-husband sex partner. Unfortunately, in Igbo culture, the children borne out of this arrangement still belong to their late husband since the sex partner did not pay dowry as the one paid by the deceased husband. In Anam, there is culturally permissible adultery known as *agiri*. In that connection, older women engage in the act of teaching the younger men the act of sex. This is not hidden as their husbands are aware of it and it is specified within the town's cultural norm (Private Discussion with

Philomena Okereke Ihejirika). In Igbariam-a neighboring town from Anam, *Omo* represents their own idea of *agiri*. *Agiri* was built on the idea of a confidant who could assist in rendering advice, manual jobs and even farm work. *Agiri* permits extramarital sex such that the man or woman is not unaware of each others *agiri*. Sexual relationships among these groups are not culturally questioned (Oral Interview with Ngozi Chinwuba, Ndidi Ozoemena, and Nkechi Ozoemena 23 May, 2014). Regrettably, Chinedu Obidigwe feared that increasing hardship could tamper the idea behind *agiri* as wives could go to men who had money to spend and this could lead to the disintegration of families (Atupulazi 2014).

In most cases, the cultural status and origin of a woman among the Igbo can be an acceptable background for extramarital sex. Ottenberg in his *Double Descent in African Society* which focuses on Afikpo village group notes that Ibe Osim-the slave matriline considered by the Afikpo village group as outcasts as follows: clan women, married or not, were sexually available to any man in the same manner as was the clan founder according to the tale of origin. It was particularly common for young men to pursue them and while these women might attempt to resist such advances, they had no legal recourse (Ottenberg 1968:108). Furthermore, Ottenberg explained that even after marriage they were still sexually available to others and might leave her husband for another. In addition, some social stigma such as leprosy diseases, was also responsible for extramarital sex among Igbo women. Ethnographic reports carried out in 1922 indicate that:

In the case of leprosy in the husband, a disease which is common in Asaba Division, the woman may refuse connection with the man. She is free to any other man or men for sexual pleasure. They will give her small presents. Any children borne by the women in the course of having sexual intercourse with another man outside the husband's matrimonial enclave, still belongs to the leper husband (NAE, CSE 36/1/MInloc).

Among the Igbo, especially in Owerri and Okigwi areas, wives' concubinage is well known and possible children are regarded as their husband's. Ikpe in her research on *Human Sexuality in Nigeria* observes that: In some parts of Igbo land, there were cases of culturally permissible adultery known as *Iko*. If a man had multiple wives he would allow a young interested man to have a constant relationship with one of his wives (Ikpe 2004:16–17).

Furthermore, marriages, which lasted for some time without children, also paved way for culturally permissible extramarital sex. Basden (2006:76), asserts that: If in due course no children are forthcoming as a result of the union, in an atmosphere of serious differences between the husband and the wife, the wife is at liberty to cohabit with another man in order to secure the desired results and any children born by this way belongs to the husband as if he were the actual father (Basden 2006:76). In addition, it is also not categorized as an act of adultery if in a family, the last daughter or any of them remains in her father's compound to liaison with her father's guests to procreate (Basden 2006:76). Women who are engaged in this practice are referred to as *Idegbe*.

4. Extramarital sexuality and colonialism

Colonialism created serious space for increase in extramarital sex in Igbo land. Afigbo (1972:264) made a remarkable observation about adultery: in native court no distinction was made between the two types of adultery. It would seem that in some courts the warrant chiefs up to 1921 gave compensation to the husband of the adulterous woman but made no effort to ensure that the supernatural elements which a particular case of adultery was outraged were propitiated (Afigbo 1972:264).

As already mentioned, the women's Dance War in 1925 protested against being charged so much for their effort in extramarital sexuality in native courts. Unfortunately, the colonial presence created an atmosphere of labor migration since cash crops replaced food crops, which formally served as the yardstick of self-economic actualization. Hence, the movement of laborers to Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and some other places created a situation where wives moved out with other men, especially in the former, to improve harsh economic realities.

In some commercial coastal communities such as Oguta, colonial presence heightened extramarital sex. Kalabari men who acquired enormous wealth used it to seduce Oguta women. According to Ekechi many Oguta women left their husbands and lived with the Kalabari men. Many of the Kalabari merchants had several mistresses among the Oguta women, while they married some of them. Sexual union between the Kalabari and Oguta women produced a number of offspring (Ekechi 1981:58).

For the Oguta men, this development was unacceptable. In the colonial era, many prominent Igbo women proved they had control over their sexuality. The case of Omu Okwei of Ossomari is a reference point. Her first marriage to Joseph Auagoa in 1888 collapsed. She later remarried Opene in 1895 and acquired a number of domestic servants who acted as her public relation agents and promoted her business among clients. She adopted her servants and gave them in marriage to business men (Ekejiuba 1967). This mild description presented by Ekejiuba is a doctored history of Omu Okwei's personality. The truth is that she introduced her domestic servants to corporate prostitution and enriched herself through that means, especially the favors she got from European merchants of the Royal Niger Company in exchange for sex, be it from her domestic servants or herself. This is because it can only take one skilled person in the act of transacting sex to employ sex workers. In any case, only women who had sole control over their sexuality could play the role Omu Okwei played. The publication of Nwando Achebe (2011), which depicts Ahebi Ugbabe as a successful Igbo prostitute who later became a king is a clear testimony of the influence of colonialism on women and sexuality.

5. Conclusion

Extramarital sex among the Igbo in precolonial, colonial and even in post-colonial times was in most cases justifiable by culture. Historical scholarship should no longer sustain the view that every extramarital sex indulged in the past was adultery. In this paper, we have established that extramarital sex was/is a grievous offense in Igbo tradition, yet there are several cases of culturally permissible extramarital sex. This paper outlined impotency, leprosy and related diseases, as relevant reasons for extramarital sex. Hence, every case of extramarital sex does not necessarily imply adultery. Adultery is only a man's personal injury that is specified within certain cultural situation.

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