

## SEXUALITY AND SEX-RELATED RITUALS AMONG THE MGBOWO WOMEN OF AWGU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ENUGU STATE.

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### Abstract

*Man is a pleasure-seeking being, the influence of sex and sexuality in human being cannot be over-emphasized. As a natural instinct, sex and sex-related culture form the basis for not only procreation, but a veritable avenue for role differentiation and sanity maintenance in the society. Sexuality and its attendant rituals, especially in Africa, has become a worthy area for intellectual brain-storming and academic research. In Mgbowo community, sex-related rituals and culture are noted as strong forces for upholding conjugal fidelity and trust. Although the society abhors infidelity (especially among the female folks), certain rituals seem to enhance extra-marital sexual intercourse, thus creating a paradox in the interpretation of sexuality, sex-related culture and behaviour. The girl-child is not exempted from sexuality and sex rituals in Mgbowo, as the community maintains sex-related rituals and rites of passage for the girls. The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of sex-related rituals among the females in Mgbowo community and establish the effects such have had over time on the people. The impact of Christianity and Western education on sex-related rituals will be outlined in this study.*

**Key words:** Sexuality, Sex Ritual, Infidelity, woman, Mgbowo, Awgu.

### Introduction

Sexuality and sexual behavior has a cross-cultural dimension. Biologically, living beings engage in sexual activities to reproduce and sustain their various races, family lineages, and perhaps to fulfill the socio-cultural and religious obligations of a given society.<sup>1</sup> The dynamics of sexual behaviours, and the differences in the application of sexual activities across the societies of the world made it difficult to find a universally acceptable definition of sexuality.

Nonetheless, Tolman and Diamond observe the two most contentious approaches towards defining sexuality thus: the Narrow Conception and the Broader Conception of Sexuality. The Narrow Conception tends to view sexuality as the sum total of individual's sexual feelings, beliefs, attitudes, fantasies, and behavior. While the Broader Conception incorporates issues of body image, sexual violence and abuse, emotional affections, gender roles, sexual fetishes and reproductive health. More so, the duo propose for a modern reappraisal of gender and sexual desire that takes into account the biological, socio-cultural and political factors that interact to shape subjective sexual experiences<sup>2</sup>.

As a time and space bound attitude, sexuality serves as a platform for the regulation, coordination and ordering of a given society. Sexuality and sexual culture often create the benchmark for sex roles and gender-based activities of some society, Igboland in particular. This study is an expository study of sexuality and sexual culture among the Mgbowo women. Mgbowo is a community in Awgu Local Government Area of Enugu, Nigeria. The community is located about

forty four kilometers south of the state capital, Enugu, along Enugu- Okigwe-Port-Harcourt express way. The town lies on the featureless plain at the foot of Udi hills. The escarpment separates the South-Eastern plain from the North-Western Plateau. Mgbowo is bounded in the north by Nenwe, on the south by Awgu, on the east by Ndeaboh, on the west by Maku. The town is made up of five villages of Alachara, Amata, Ezioha, Inyi and Imama. It covers an area of approximately 18square kilometers.<sup>3</sup>

### **Sexuality and Sexual Behaviors among the Mgbowo Women.**

Although, a patrilineal society dominated by male socio-political and religious activities, sexuality and sex-related culture among Mgbowo women serve as platform through which the community achieve some elements of social stability, value enhancement and religious sanity. Like most Igbo communities, female sexuality in Mgbowo starts from the birth of the girl child. At birth, *nzu* ( white chalk) is placed at the entrance of the family house, where villagers, passersby and well wishers are obliged to share in the joy of the arrival of a new baby by robbing the *nzu* on the wrist. For a male child, the *nzu* is robbed on the right wrist, while left wrist is for the girl-child. This sharp differentiation is a clear indication of gender roles and a demonstration of the unchallenged strength, valour, independence and dignity of the male-child, against the restrictive, dependent, and monitored life of the girl-child which has been demonstrated by the *nzu* on the left wrist.<sup>4</sup>

Female childhood sexuality encompasses the system of socializing the girl-child. As a restrictive and sex-negative society, Mgbowo community openly disapproves of childhood masturbation and sex play among peers. Girl-child virginity and chastity are valued as mark of family honour, parental discipline and virtue. This is similar to various sex-negative societies such as the Inis Baeg, the horticultural Trukese, Kwoma of New Guinea, Ashanti and the Manus. The above societies reprimand and abhor any action that could lure the child (Girl-Child) into penile-virginal intercourse.<sup>5</sup>

Sexuality and sexual behavior are guarded with myriads of religio-cultural ethics, observances and rituals. A significant female sex ritual in Mgbowo is the ritual of *Igbuihi*. *Igboihi* sex ritual is exclusively for every first female daughter of the family (Ada). The ritual is performed once the *Ada* sees her first menstrual cycle (probably at the age of 12). *Igbuihi* is a pubertal sex ritual. It is the traditional role of the father to buy a hen and four tubers of yam. The items would be given to the eldest daughter of the girl's paternal home (*Ishi Ada* or Aunty) who would call other daughters of the kindred (Ndi Ada) and cook the materials provided, but not without praying for God's protection and provision of a good husband to her niece. The *Igbuihi* rite is a death-preventive measure. It is the tradition of the people that if a girl child gets pregnant out of wedlock and prepares food for the father, the father will die. Therefore, the ritual serves as a preventive measure to save fathers, especially from the immoralities of his daughter(s).<sup>6</sup>

### **Menstrual Rituals/Customs**

Menstruation is the natural process of shedding the uterine tissue, blood vessels, and unfertilized egg when a pregnancy has not occurred. Derived from the Latin word *Mensis*, which means month, menstruation marks the end of one reproductive cycle and the beginning of the next. As such, it is the singular, biological process unique to women of child-bearing age. It is a sign of women's reproductive potential and in many cultures, her place in the society.<sup>7</sup>

Menstruation is not only a biological process but an aspect of religious and cultural rite. Among the Igbo, menstrual period is generally referred to as *Nso* (*Holy or prohibition period*). Menstruating Igbo women have several culture-bounds, observances and rituals associated with the period. The Igbo regard menstruating woman as “unclean”, therefore, they are not involved in some aspects of traditional rituals especially in connection to *Ala* (earth deity), agricultural rituals and as well forbidden to enter the yam barn so that she will not defile the sacredness of the barn and the farm yield of the next agricultural season. Equiano agrees with above argument as he remarks that:

Every woman too, at certain times, was forbidden to come into the dwelling-house or touch any person or anything we ate. I was so fond of my mother I could not keep from her or avoid touching her at some of those periods, in consequence of which I was obliged to be kept out with her in a little house made for that purpose till offering was made, and then we were purified.<sup>8</sup>

The value the Igbo have for blood could have been the rationale for the segregation of menstruating women in religious affairs. In Mgbowo community, traditional office holders, religious leaders, titled men, warriors and priests abstain from sexual intercourse, body contacts, or eating the food prepared by their menstruating wives, pending the end of the flow. Similarly, menstruating Mgbowo woman is forbidden to appear, consult or make sacrifices before any Mgbowo deity, shrine or ancestral gods. It should be noted that even the traditional Mgbowo warriors are forbidden to have any affair with their wives (menstruating or not), a night before going to the war.<sup>9</sup> Menstrual customs shape the socio-cultural and religious decency and fidelity of Mgbowo women.

### **Extra-Marital Sex and Adultery**

In every society around the world, almost every male and female are encouraged to marry, establish family and sustain family names and descent. Among the Igbo, marriage is a most important aspect of life. Celibacy is an impossible prospect, as the unmarried persons of either sex, except in special cases, are objects of derision<sup>10</sup>. Although a social institution, a deeper definition of marriage could be a bond, union, and platform through which the sexual rights and services of a girl are transferred to her husband<sup>11</sup>. The basic feature of every Igbo marriage is fidelity. Equiano maintains that “adultery, however, was sometimes punished with slavery or death, a punishment which is inflicted on it throughout most of the nations of Africa”<sup>12</sup>

In Mgbowo, the community abhors adultery and infidelity among the womenfolk. Men could engage in extra-marital sexual relations, but not the women. A notable extra-marital ritual among the Mgbowo is the rite of *Nrefu*. *Nrefu* is brought to limelight as a reconciliatory move and peace-making approach between “a repentant adulterous woman” and her husband. The “infidel woman”, having confessed and adjudged guilty of adultery, and the husband willing to accept her back, the daughters of the kindred (*Ndi Ada*) would be invited for the *Nrefu* ritual. The daughters of the kindred will take the woman to a road junction at midnight with a day-old chick (*uriom okuko*). At the junction, the woman would make confession before the daughters of the kindred and as well pledge her allegiance and fidelity to her husband. After the confession, the woman would sit on the chick until the animal dies. The daughters of the kindred would lead her back to her husband’s house. This marks the beginning of a new marital life. Following the ritual of *Nrefu*, the husband would be given the right to have sexual intercourse and as well eat the food cooked by the wife. However, upon confessing to her

husband about her infidel actions, the inability of the husband to report same to the daughters of the kindred may cause the man his life. This is in respect to the fact that most men would often prefer not to wash their wives dirty linens outside. Death is always the endpoint of such act of cowardice for such men.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, if an adulterous Mgbowo woman eventually conceives in her extra-marital sexual affairs, she may die during child birth (labor), unless she confesses the real biological father of her unborn child. This scenario ignites people to interview/question a woman of her fidelity, especially if she has overspent the required hours in the labor room. Confession in such a critical time entails giving the woman a bowl of water mixed with palm oil, the woman, having taken the bowl, confesses her infidelity and adulterous actions, she would beg the living and the ancestors for forgiveness for defiling the land, afterwards, she pours the water on the ground and deliver her child safely.<sup>14</sup>

Mgbowo sexuality and sexual cultures are flexible. The restrictions on infidelity and adultery could be relaxed under condition of impotency. Fertility concerns are almost universal<sup>12</sup>, one central objective of marriage, especially in African societies is to have successors (Children). Nonetheless, infertility may occur from either side of the union. The socio-cultural and psychological effects of infertility would better be imagined than experienced. Fertility problems may be attributed to witchcraft, sexual transgressions or taboo violations<sup>15</sup>. Since the essence of marriage is to have children, Mgbowo community believes in the principle of *Amaechina* (family/ lineage continuity). Following the doctrine of *Amaechina*, the people of Mgbowo-devised the ritual of *Iwushi Mmiri* (Pouring the water away) as a remedial approach to impotency. Under ritual of *Iwushi mmiri*, the daughters of the kindred, having confirmed that the man is impotent, following his wife's report, will organize the ritual. The daughters of the kindred would take a calabash of water mixed with palm oil along side with the wife of the impotent to the entrance of the compound at night; the daughters of the kindred would proclaim as follows:

Our wife, we have seen that you are healthy and faithful. Your fidelity to our brother is not in doubt, but circumstances have made us to assemble here. Since our brother cannot produce fruits, we hereby give you our unilateral support to go and get us children from any good man, whose character and actions are not against the custom of the land<sup>16</sup>.

Following the above proclamation, the woman is no longer culturally bound to be sexually faithful to her husband. She could go about her sexual life as long as the result is productive (giving birth to children). The ritual of *Iwushi mmiri* does not encourage divorce, disrespect or abuse of the husband, rather, the wife is culturally bound to give maximum respect to the husband, lest the daughters of the kindred pronounce curse upon her. Comparatively, the above scenario is a unique one when compared to other Igbo communities where extra-marital sexual relationship is totally forbidden among the women even in the case of infertility and ailment.

Although a patrilineal society dominated by men's socio-political and religious activities, Mgbowo community places premium on female sexuality. The community abhors mentioning the reproductive organs especially in public gathering. Children could get to pubertal age without knowing the actual names of their sex organs.<sup>17</sup> The notion that female reproductive organs are 'sacred' and not to be mentioned abusively helps in maintaining sanity and respect in the community.

Whenever an obscene remark (*itu olu*) is made to female sexuality or sex organ, the culprit would be made to appease the woman. Two categories of *Itu olu* in Mgbowo are:

- A. *Itu olu* from the husband
- B. *Itu olu* from an outsider

In category A, the abused woman would launch a formal report to *Ndi Iyomdi* (Wives of the kindred), who would march en mass to the man's house. It is customary for the man to appease the "invaders" by giving them a hen and as well retract his earlier obscene statement on the wife's reproductive organ.

In category B, the abused will launch a formal report to the kindred of the offender, the kinsmen of the offender will compel him to buy a goat for the abused woman, and tender an apology for his obscene remarks. (The goat will be used to clean off the obscene remarks). The ritual of appeasement and tendering unreserved apology for any obscene remarks on women's sexuality is not peculiar to Mgbowo community but to various Igbo communalities. In Ohafia, Njoku observes that an obscene remark on women sexuality:

Attracted swift and hostile reactions from the entire womenfolk of the village. They could assemble at the residence of the offender, chanting bellicose songs, questioning the manhood of the offender and wondering if he ever had a mother. The offender would invariably sue for peace by meeting the fines imposed by the council of women elders<sup>18</sup>.

The activities of women as stated above demonstrate women's 'absolutism' especially in sexuality and sexual affairs. Although weaker sex, a group of women could change the course of a society for either good or bad. Their protest, when provoked, is often destructive and uncommon. They could prefer to demonstrate nude and proclaim evil upon a bad leader, bad policy or ills of the society. Such proclamation, if not retracted by sacrifices and appeals, may have destructive effects on agricultural yields and soil fertility.

### **Sexuality and Sex-related Rites for the Bride**

Sexuality and sex-related culture in Mgbowo cannot be exhausted, without the ritual of *Ewu Ogbuihi*. *Ewu Ogbuihi* is exclusively for the first daughter of every family. It is done immediately the bride price is paid. The ritual involves the presentation of a mother-goat (*Nne Ewu*) to the bride's family by the groom's family. The goat will be killed and shared among the kinsmen of the bride, but not without some parts of the meat going to the groom's family. Prayers for procreation and good health are offered by the eldest of the family upon the bride. The ritual of *Ewu Ogbuihi* is very crucial because no member of the girl's family visits the new couple upon child birth, unless the ritual is done, lest the new baby dies.<sup>19</sup> The ritual of *Ewu ogbuihi* is a demonstration of the unity, love and the centrality of the ancestral forces in the marital and sexual affairs in Mgbowo. Furthermore, it is believed that the life of the bride is secured especially during child birth by the ritual of *Ewu Ogbuihi*. Another aspect of sexuality and sex-related rites is the connectivity between female fashion and sexuality. Writing on the nature of Igbo women's fashion, Basden observes:

Ibo women are but little concerned with dress, and in this respect, they differ from the men....On the eastern side, it is the custom for the girls to go entirely naked up to (and sometimes after) marriage. In certain parts, the women, old and

young, rich and poor, married and single, pass their whole lives in a state of nudity.<sup>20</sup>

In Afikpo, Ottenberg observed that unmarried girls wore only strings of beads around the hips in public. Nudity or wearing only beads is equated with chastity, purity and virginity, as cloths were reserved for married women in the more traditional Afikpo culture. The people attributed wearing of cloths among the unmarried to an avenue to hide unwanted pregnancy in the society.<sup>21</sup> Nudity and styles of female fashion differ across the various Igbo communities, while some observed complete nudity especially for the unmarried, others found a way of dressing to cover at least the sensitive parts of the body.

Among the Mgbowo, a significant female fashion was the *Alama* (a towel-like fabrics) tied on the hips alongside the fashion beads (*olorkpor*). Unlike in some Igbo communities where the unmarried (female) observed complete nudity, the *Alama* was worn by both the married and the unmarried alike. As for the upper part of the body, the female used *uri* (indigo), *uhie* (camwood), *odo* (yellow coloured fluid used for decorating the body), *nzu* (white chalk) and *tangele* (lead) in body decoration, nourishment and dermatological purposes<sup>22</sup>. Skin diseases, rashes, and likes were uncommon among the Mgbowo females due to the medicinal contents of the body decorative.

Similarly, a veritable fashion attribute that showcases sexuality and marital fidelity among the Mgbowo women is the *Iyi olu* (necklace). It is an abomination for any married woman to be found without necklace. This abominable act is called *Igba olu otor* (roaming on naked neck).<sup>23</sup> The culprit will be called to order, a cock would be found anywhere and killed on her behalf, the cost she pays later to the owner. The rationale behind this tradition is to distinguish between the married and the unmarried women in Mgbowo. The necklace is believed to scare away prospective admirers or mischievous men away from the married woman.

### **Female Sexuality in Mgbowo and the wave of Change**

The popular aphorism that 'change is constant' is applicable in every culture and society. The dynamic nature of a given culture gives room for change and transformation over time. The socio-political and cultural changes witnessed in Igboland over the past century could be attributed to some external factors such as western education, Christianity, colonialism, the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, and so on. Writing on the impact of the external forces on traditional Igbo culture, Amadiume affirms that "under colonialism, these indigenous institutions condemned by the churches as 'pagan' and anti-Christian were abandoned or reinterpreted to the detriment of women."<sup>24</sup>

Mgbowo community is noted for its unwavering devotion to traditional values and cultural norms. Although a Christian community, the people never lost interest in the traditions of the land. (Perhaps due to the adverse effects that accompany any violation of cultural norms). Nonetheless, fieldwork data indicate some elements of changes and gradual neglect of some sexuality norms and values. Chronologically, the resource persons interviewed maintained that the changes in sexuality in Mgbowo started immediately after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war of 1967-1970. The war exposed the community to adverse dangers, as the Nigerian soldiers appropriated, raped and eloped with some Mgbowo girls who served as saboteurs, sex workers and 'army wives' during the war. These gory attitude were never seen in the town prior to the war and were unilaterally condemned by the community. It should be noted that other Igbo communities

experienced the same sordid war scenario as Mgbowo, thus creating a unwanted change in the communities

The immediate post civil war and the return of the 'army wives' to the community created tension in the community, as some of the 'army wives' came back with children whose army fathers had abandoned after the war. This marked the beginning of pre-marital pregnancy, internal elopement (within the community) among the youths and the abuse of some sexuality rites and rituals.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, western education and Christianity affected some aspects of the people's sexuality rites, for instance, instead of the traditionally recognized idea that necklace is the symbol of marital fidelity; wedding rings are gradually taking over the position of necklace in Mgbowo sexuality and fashion. This attitude is common among the Mgbowo women in the Diaspora. The home-base are still abreast of the tradition, although not without some elements of negligence<sup>26</sup>.

Accolades should not be given to western education and globalization, the duo have established some foreign attributes in the traditional sex life of the people. The use of contraceptives, family planning, and sometimes abortion as birth control measures have come to stay among the people. These western patterns of birth control have coalesced with the traditional sexuality and sex-related activities of the people of Mgbowo.

## Conclusion

This study is an objective analysis of sexuality and sex-related female rituals in Mgbowo community. The study x-rays the importance of sex-related rituals and sexuality in maintaining progressive economy, political stability and marital fidelity among the people over time. The people's traditional sex-education and the changes witnessed in the indigenous 'sex-behaviours' are critically assessed in the study. The study did not shy away from the various impact of the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967-1970 on Mgbowo sexuality and tradition.

This study recommends a gradual reversal to the indigenous traditional sex-related rituals in Mgbowo. This will bring back the much needed decency, role differentiation and mutual respect between the two genders, marital fidelity, morality and absolute decorum in the community.

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