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Editorial Comments

African Notes is still a unique forum for Africanist discourse and construct. The journal remains platform for expressing cultural ideas in intellectual context and it is still widespread all over the globe. It has ever been intellectual in scope and standard.

Nothing spectacular has changed in the house style of the journal. Even though there was a mix-up in the covers of about three past volumes, there has been a “welcome back” to the original conception of the cover with artistic representation of African symbolic artworks. This is notable in this current edition.

Logistics problems threatened regular and continuous “outing” and “outreach” of *African Notes* to our readers and subscribers alike. The Editorial Board wishes to impress on all that the problems have been solved and all the backlogs of *African Notes* are published with renewed vigour, vitality and heightened hope.

African Notes vol. 29, nos 1 and 2, 2005 is already in press. The Editorial Board wishes to express gratitude to our readers and subscribers for their patience thus far: It is, indeed, a unique “welcome back”.

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Gender and its Implications for Succession and Inheritance in Umuezechima and Neighbouring Communities

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Introduction

This paper is an ethnographic work on the Umuezechima of Delta State, Nigeria and her neighbours. The neighbours are the Igbo to the east of the river Niger and Benin on the west. The Umuezechima are a predominantly Igbo speaking people who claim Benin origin and cultural heritage. Arguments and counter-arguments have been advanced on their actual identity. While scholars like Dike (1956) and Ryder (1968) support the claim that Umuezechima and indeed other Western Igbo elements owe their origin and cultural traditions to Benin, others, such as Afigbo (1981) Isichei, (1972), Ijeoma (1984) and Onwuejeogwu, (1984) contend that the Umuezechima, in terms of origin and cultural

traditions, are an integral part of the larger Igbo stock. It is this confused state of affairs that inspired the study on the socio-cultural ties and linkages between the Umuezechima, Benin and Igbo (Fig. 2). The study examined a number of cultural factors in the context of the ties, affinities and divergences between the three areas. Specifically, the factors examined included settlement patterns, political arrangement, public administration, religion, succession and inheritance, and the position of women in the societies. Others include festivals, marriage patterns, land tenure, linguistics and historical linkages. This paper, however, focuses on the implications of gender for succession and inheritance among Umuezechima, Igbo and Benin.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the study was anthropological and ethnographic. Participant observation, indepth interviews and survey questionnaires were utilised for data collections. Other aspects of the methodology included the use of key informants, content analysis of existing works and historical and comparative analysis. Data were collected at Benin, Issele-Uku, Obior, Onicha-Ugbo, Nri and Aguleri.

In order to understand gender relationships in the three societies of Umuezechima, Benin and Igbo, the position of women and men in the societies was first examined and then followed by succession and inheritance. It is important to make a distinction between feminism which deals exclusively with women and the broader concept of gender, which refers to the relationship between men and women in a given society.

To put this discussion in its proper perspective, it is important to discuss briefly the concept of patriarchy. A patriarchal society is a male-centre and male dominated society. Patriarchy emphasises male superiority over the female. It is a system which, essentially for cultural reasons, denies the womenfolk some rights and privileges. For example, in a patriarchal society, a woman cannot assume any meaningful political position such as that of the king. A wife, in such a society must be subserviently loyal to her husband. It is a system in which women are to be seen and not heard. Thus, in such a society, the girl child is considered inferior to the child.

Gender, Succession and Inheritance Among the Umuezechima

In all societies, gender relations are culturally defined. Since women occupy positions of central importance in societies, it is deemed imperative to examine their place (vis-a-vis their male counterparts) in the society with regards to succession and inheritance, political rights and obligations as well as religion. For instance, the table below is on the possible areas of inheritance for women. From it, it is clear that women have nothing to inherit from their family of orientation (especially their father's lineage).

Table 1: Areas of Inheritance of Women from their Fathers

Land	None
Houses	None
Personal effects, clothes, beads and others	Available
Cash	None

It is also clear that women cannot inherit landed property. The same is true politically as women cannot take the *ozo* title and there is no equivalent title for them. This is evident when one examines the entire political paraphernalia, it is a fact that women are not involved in the running of the political machinery of the society. All these are the exclusive preserve of men. For instance, a woman can never become the *Obi* of any town; she cannot even act as a regent during an interregnum. This can be contrasted with

the practice among the Yoruba and other ethnic groups which allow women regency during an interregnum. In the history of towns studied, such as *Issele-Uku*, *Onicha-Ugbo*.

Table 2: Areas of Political Powers of Women

Umunna	None
Idumu	None
Ogbe or Ebo	None
Obodo	None
Umuada	Available
Dibia	None
Omu	Available
Onotu	Available

Obior, *Obomkpa* and *Ezi*, a woman never became the *Diokpa* (the head) of a village, a kindred or an extended family. All these are clearly demonstrated from Table 2 above. Exclusion of women from political offices is an example of a culture of gender inequality. It is a culture by which women are to be seen and not heard and must in all respects play roles that are subordinate to men. In their families of birth, they cannot aspire or be conferred with positions of headship because they are either married out of the family or will soon do so. Similarly, in their families of marriage, they cannot also become heads because they were not originally born into such families. Thus, in Umuezechima society, women occupy a doubly precarious position.

Traditionally, for a woman, it is expected that, at the point of marriage, she must be a

virgin. This is not the case for the man. In fact, a woman who is not a virgin at marriage is considered unchaste. A man can marry more than one wife but a woman can marry only one man at a time. A woman can only inherit clothes, beads bangles and cooking utensils from their mother. In the area of religion, women are not allowed to act as priests or to offer sacrifices directly to the gods. If the oracle demands that certain deities be propitiated or worshipped on behalf of a woman, it is done for her by a man. However, some female traditional medicine practitioners (*dibia*) exist, but the number is negligible. Indeed, a woman's son in many instances is considered superior to his mother. There are many meetings and gatherings to which a son could be invited and allowed to participate but to which his mother can neither be invited nor allowed to participate. If a man is considered weak, he is derogatorily nicknamed a woman. Similarly, a man who is known to always seek his wife's views and opinion before taking decisions is also seen as weak and a *woman wrapper*. For a man to be respected, he must meet all the needs of his immediate family. As a result, a man is expected to be hardworking at all times. To show so much love to a wife openly is seen as a mark of weakness. This underscores the need for a man to be up and doing all the time. The inability of a man to cater for his family or a man's dependence on his wife is considered disgraceful and unbecoming of a man. Such a man is insulted and referred to as a "wife" to his wife. On the contrary, if a woman demonstrates any act of bravery or

achieves an uncommon feat, she is referred to as a "man".

The *Umuada* is the group for women just as *Umunna* is to the men. The eldest daughter of a family is the *ada* of that family while an aggregation of all the women in an extended family constitutes the *umuada* of that extended family. In the same way, you have *umuada* for their kindred (*idumu*) and the *umuada* for the village (*Ogbe*). The *umuada* are important during events such as burials and festivals. During burials, it is their role to come on the second day after internment to perform the traditional sealing of the grave called *itechiini*. They also gather on the fourth day after the interment for funeral celebration. This is known as *ikwaozu*.

Another area where women have roles to play is in the area of spiritual cleaning. If a woman commits adultery, the purification, cleaning and punishment are done by the *Umuada*, extramarital affairs by men are not considered bad except if it is an affair that involved his relation or someone else's wife. During the annual festivals, a woman is expected to visit her father's family to assist with the preparations for the celebrations. While the head of the *Umuada* is known as *Ada*, the head of the *Umunna* is called *Okpalla*. Therefore, you have *Okpalla* for the extended family, the kindred (*Idimu*) and for the village (*egbe*). The *umunna* settles disputes and sees to the well being of the society. If there is a dispute within the *Umuada* it is referred to the *Umunna*. However, a case cannot be referred from the *Umunna* to the *Umuada*. An example of the subordinate

position of women is that a woman cannot break kola nut for a man. In any gathering, it is the prerogative of men to break kola-nut irrespective of the number and ages of the women at the gathering.

In all, Umuezechima is a predominantly male dominated society. This explains such names as *Okeibunor*, which means "a man, is the bedrock of a home" or *Nwabuokei*, which means, "it is a son that is the real child". Indeed, to die without a male child is almost as good as dying childless. Because family continuity is very important and because women would have to marry into another family, an all female family is considered less than desirable. For instance, if a family has been giving birth to only females and eventually a male child arrives, some parents would name such a child *Nkemcho*, which means "what I desire". On the other hand, a family after the delivery of many daughters could name one of them *Ukemumuna*, which mean "which ever one that I gave birth to". The reluctant expression of gratitude (to God) that is implicit in the above name is a pointer to the low acceptance of the girl child in Umuezechima. In a situation where a spouse has all females as children and with very slim chances of having more children, custom permits that one of the daughters be retained at home unmarried. In this case, she is expected to bear children who would belong to her father. The expectation is that in the process, she could give birth to a son who will ensure the continuity of the lineage. This practice is called *idegbe*. For a woman to be kept as an *idegbe*,

her father must inform his kindred by slaughtering a goat for them. A woman who has been retained as an *idegbe* is automatically treated as a man with the rights, obligations and privileges of men. The children begotten under this situation are considered as legitimate members of the family. Anyone who makes any form of derogatory remark about them is severely punished.

We can also fully grasp gender relationship in Umuezechima if we examine the relationship between *Issele-Uku*, *Obior* and *Onicha-Ugbo*. These three towns are contesting for the headship of the *Ezexhima* clan. *Obior* is, without any controversy, the eldest of all the descendants of *Ezechima*. However, all the other eight towns are unanimous in the view that *Obior* cannot be the head of Umuezechima since her founder was a woman; *Obior* has vehemently and repeatedly denied this claim, insisting that its founder was a man called *Ukpalli* and uses this as basis to justify its claim to the headship of the clan.

Beyond Umuezechima, the same scenario was observed in *Ubulu* clan. *Ubulu-Uno* claims to be the head of the clan because its founder, *Aniobodo*, was the eldest child of *Ezemu*, the founder of the clan. While admitting that *Aniobodo* was the eldest child, the other towns maintain that *Ubulu-Uno* cannot be the head of the clan because its founder *Aniobodo* was a woman- a claim which *Ubulu-Uno* denies insisting that *Aniobodo* was a man. The point of interest here is to bring to the fore the subordinate position of women to men. Otherwise, of what interest is it to anyone if its founder was a

man or a woman if not that being a woman in these societies, traditionally, commands lower recognition and status than to be a man.

As a result of the above, inheritance is mainly from the father to the eldest son. If a man dies, his eldest son, *Diokpala* succeeds him as the head of the family and inherits his house or houses if he had more than one. If the man died without a house, the place where he was buried would be inherited by his first son who is expected to build on it. Thus, in Umuezechima, burial sites are very important because of its implication for inheritance. If the deceased had acres of land, it will be shared among his sons with the first son taking the lion share. As the first son inherits assets, he also inherits liabilities. It is his duty to see to the upbringing of the underage children of his late father. When they reach marriagable age, he arranges marriage for them and is expected to pay a greater part of the costs that may arise in the process. In the same way, if his late father left a young wife, he also inherits her though he could also marry his own wife when the time comes. If there were more than one wife, the other male siblings could inherit any of them. This is called *igbunwunyenanzo*. This is the practice of widow inheritance. In the same way, a brother can inherit his late brother's wife but an elder brother cannot inherit the wife of his late younger brother. In a polygamous setting, there is a slightly different scenario. For instance, if the eldest son had already inherited his father's house he cannot inherit the house built for his brother. This will be inherited by his immediate younger brother. Commenting

on this, an informant (Mary Mosindi, Personal Communication 2006) stated thus:

It is against our custom for the first son to inherit the estate of his father and also inherit that of his mother.

If a man dies without children, his property will be inherited by his immediate younger brother who is traditionally the next of kin.

It is because of the low recognition accorded women that they do not inherit from their fathers and have only limited inheritance rights from their mothers. While sharing their mother's properties, the eldest daughter takes a greater share but parts are also given to the other daughters. It is expected that, to enjoy inheritance rights from any parent, such a child would have accorded his or her deceased parents full burial rites.

Gender, Succession and Inheritance in Benin

Though Benin is basically a patriarchal society, yet women are, to some extent recognised. Benin customs make provision for the position of *Iyioba* or the queen mother. Both the *Edaiken* (a title conferred on the eldest son of the Oba) and the *Iyioba* are the joint rulers of *Uselu*. The *Edaiken*, is, however, said to be the main head of political administrative machinery of *Uselu* but only assisted by the *Iyioba*. However, there are certain rights and privileges which a woman cannot enjoy in Benin. For instance, a woman cannot be the Oba of Benin, the head or *Okaegbee* of a family or an *Odionwere* (head of council of elders). Women cannot also take titles. This notwithstanding, women play some

roles in the socio-cultural setting of the palace. For example, the *Oba's* harem, under the control of *Okhaifieha*, chant royal songs during chieftaincy installation. The same is done when the Oba is hosting a naming ceremony. The songs must never be sung by women outside the palace groups.

While polygamy is an acceptable practice, it is men who can marry many wives (polygyny), the marriage of a woman to many husbands, (polyandry), is forbidden. In Benin, a good woman is the one who plays a supportive but subordinate role to her husband. A woman who does not submit wholly to her husband is seen as a bad woman. As such, a woman must be industrious, chaste and reputable as a good home-keeper.

Benin, otherwise called Edo, has an inheritance system that is shrouded in rituals, ceremonies, family and societal secrets. It is a tradition which accords the first son (known as *omodion*) overwhelming advantage over the other children. According to an informant.

There are, however, legitimate and illegitimate first sons. A legitimate first son is the one whose mother is properly married to his father. This entails that bride price was paid and the woman performed the *ke'wu* ceremony. This is a ceremony during which a woman cooks for her husband and his family. If a woman has not performed this ceremony and gives birth to a first son, such a son is an illegitimate first son. (Ebohon, Personal Communication: 2006).

Traditionally, two things could be inherited in Benin (Igbe, 2006:10). These are houses and titles that are hereditary. If a Benin man has many houses, the house which he lives in is his *igiogbe*. On his demise, it automatically

belongs to his first son, the *Omodion*. It is never shared. It was pointed out (Ebohon, personal communication, 2006) that before the *Omodion* inherits his father's property, he must have done all the final funeral rites of his father, which he alone can perform. This ceremony is called the *ukonwen*. Though the *omodion* succeeds his father as the head of the family (*the Okaegbee*) and also inherits the *Igiobe*, he is not entitled to the sole ownership of the property.

A woman's properties are inherited by all her children, male and female. Unlike some other societies, Benin women have some inheritance rights. They can inherit land, houses and other things from their fathers but cannot inherit the *igiogbe*. In a polygynous setting, where there are as many as five wives the man is said to have five doors. If the man dies, his first son has the right of first choice, especially of the *igiogbe*. Thereafter, his estate is shared among the number of wives he has. Binis refer to each wife as a door. The custom is that no *urho* can have a share twice before another *urho*.

One of my informants stated that:

If a man die without a male child, it is said in Benin that the ancestral staff has fallen into the bag. To bring it out, one of the brothers, preferably of the same mother and father, will be taken to continue his lineage. If he has none, then his daughters will be examined. From the daughter, the one who is married to a Benin man will be chosen. One of the sons of this daughter, married to a Benin man, will be asked to continue his maternal grand father's lineage. In this case, he is no longer the son of his biological father and will never bear his name. He automatically becomes a brother to his mother by being

biologically and perpetually adopted by his mother's family. (Ebohon; 2006: personal communication).

If the succession issue is one of palace title, the usual role of primogeniture will apply. In a case where there are complications, such as when a chief dies without a son, the *Oba* might use his royal authority to appoint someone to take the title. It is forbidden for an older person to inherit from the late younger siblings. Though women do not take titles, they could be given some royal positions such as *Okhaifieha*, who is the person who organises the women to chant royal songs when the *Oba* is hosting a naming ceremony or when a new chief is being installed.

The above is a representation of the traditional Benin practices of inheritance and succession. Western cultural influences have altered all these. With the growth in the accumulation of wealth, it is no longer possible for the eldest male child to take the lion's share of his deceased father's estate even if it is the *igiogbe*. People who are married under English Law now prepare wills stating who inherits which property. Nonetheless, such wills could only be successfully implemented under exceptional circumstances as the custom still remains paramount.

Gender, Succession and Inheritance Among the Igbo

Igbo society especially of Nri extraction, accords women some recognition though they are still considered inferior to men. Women are the custodian of various homes and they also belong to so many cultural organisations. For instance, there is the elite group of women

called *ilimadunato* or thirty strong women, membership of which is determined by the kindred. Each kindred provides a member into the *ilimadunato* group of its village who assist in the maintenance of law and order. For example, if a domestic animal destroys crops, members of this group can seize the animal till the owner pays a ransom before it is released. They also keep surveillance in the town against thieves. There is also another women's group called *Amu Na Uno*. These are women born in Nri and also married in Nri. They assist to maintain law and order and also engage in community development efforts. Currently, they are engaged in the building of a health centre in Nri. There is also *Ugosinba* or *Amu nanba*. These are people born outside Nri but married to Nri men. Like the other groups, they support in the maintenance of law and order too, and they also engage in community development. Women of Nri origin married outside do not constitute any group. They participate in family ceremonies such as marriages and funerals. There is also the *Umuada*, which is the group of women born into either a kindred or a town. So you have *umuada* of a kindred, *umuada* of a town and so on. *Umuada* mainly settle disputes between their brothers or other male members of their extended families and their wives.

Both in Nri and *Aguleri*, women can take the *Iyom* title which is the equivalent of the male title of *ofozo*. It is usually an elaborate and costly ceremony which only the rich can afford. An *Iyom* title holder could be identified by the bangles worn on hands and legs. When

a new entrant into *Iyom* society is about to be initiated, she pays a mandatory levy. The money is shared among the existing member of the *Iyom* society. As a source of income to the existing members, it could be described as a social security system. They are accorded respect in the midst of other women. A new *Iyom* has to adopt a name with which she will be known. During the *iguAro* festival, they occupy the front seat near the *Eze Nri*. All these notwithstanding, women are supposed to be subordinate to men. For instance, if the head of a family dies, a woman cannot succeed him no matter how old she may be. Though women can take the *Iyom* title, the *ozo* title of men commands more respect and recognition. For instance, it is from the *ozo* title-holders that members of the ruling council are appointed and not from the *Iyom* group.

It is a purely patriarchal society. Inheritance is from father to the son. According to Tony Akunne (2006: personal communication) the keeper of *Odinani* museum in Nri, the first son, known as *Diokpalla* is given priority. He inherits the father's *obu* or temple which is regarded as a very important possession of the deceased. Other children will be given other areas to build their own houses when they come of age. This is called *ipuobu* which means leaving the *obu*. It is the *Diokpalla* that must remain in his father's compound where he was buried and where the *obu* is. Strictly, women do not inherit from their fathers. But a father could give a portion of land to any of his daughters as a gift. But if he dies intestate, a daughter

cannot inherit any of his properties. On the inheritance of land, the *Diokpalla* inherits the lion share including the *obu* and its adjoining land. He also inherits his father's prime farm land called *anajinaanaede*, the land for yam and cocoyam. Thereafter, the others are shared among the remaining children. If it is a polygamous family, the land is shared equally among the children based on the number of wives in the family. But this is after the first son has taken the lion share. In Nri, the place where a woman lives is called the *nkpuke* while the place man lives is called the *obu*. According to Nri custom, it is the last son who inherits the *nkpuke*. He is called *oduduna*, which means a child came at the tail end. If the last child does not like the *nkpuke* and rejects it, the *Diokpalla* can assign another place to him. In that case, he forfeits the *nkpuke* to the first son.

Exploring the Lineages and Divergences

In some areas, the inheritance and succession system in Benin and in Umuezechima follow the same pattern. There is the special emphasis on the first son. In Benin, he succeeds the father as *Okeegbee* while in Umuezechima he is known as *Diokpalla*. It was found that Igbo equally believe in the supremacy of the eldest son also known as *Diokpalla*. In both places, the first son has right of first choice and actually takes a larger share of a deceased parent's estate. There are similar practices where the *igiogbe* in Benin, the main building of a late man's house, is also the same as in Umuezechima where the main building of a man belongs to his eldest son.

Nonetheless, there are areas of departure between Benin and Umuezechima inheritance patterns while seniority by age is used absolutely in Umuezechima, this is not the case in Benin. Rather, after concession has been given to the eldest son, the outstanding property is shared based on the number of wives of the deceased man. The inheritance system in Benin in this aspect follows closely that of the Igbo at Nri which shares a dead man's estate not entirely according to seniority but also on the basis of the number of wives he had. A point that is worthy of note is that among the Umuezechima and their Igbo brothers east of the Niger, women cannot inherit anything from their fathers. Even from their mothers, they can only inherit clothes, beads and cooking utensils. The situation in Benin differs because women have some limited inheritance rights from their fathers. A woman cannot be the head or *Okaegbee* of a family. She cannot inherit a title but she can inherit land and houses, except the *Igiogbe*.

In all, it could be observed that Umuezechima inheritance system is tied to the system in Benin and Nri.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the Igbo of Nri, the Umuezechima and Benin are overwhelming male-centred societies. In all the places, women cannot aspire to certain positions of leadership. A woman cannot become the *EzeNri*, or the *Oba* of Benin or *Obi* in an Umuezechima town. A woman cannot also become the head of a kindred or lineage. In the same vein, in Benin, till the present day and in traditional Umuezechima, a woman cannot take a

chieftaincy title. However, while women are now being conferred with chieftaincy titles in Umuezechima, Benin, has adhered strictly to the tradition of not conferring titles on women.

Of the three societies, the Igbo appear to accord more recognition to women. Women can for example take the *Iyom* title. There is also the group of elite women known as *ilimadunato* or thirty strong women. During the *iguaro* festival, they sit very close to the *EzeNri*. It could be observed that they are an integral part of the public administration of the Igbo society. The recognition enjoyed by women is further exemplified by the Aba women's riot of 1929. From all of the above, it could be observed that gender relationships, succession and inheritance in Umuezechima is a reflection of aspects of Benin and Igbo gender, succession and inheritance systems. It therefore reinforces the view that they (the Umuezechima) are a good example of a hybridised socio-cultural phenomenon.

From this study, gender relationship in Benin, Umuezechima and among the Igbo of Nri extraction, to some extent, showcases the situation in the larger Nigerian society. It is a situation of gender inequality that is skewed asymmetrically against women. Interestingly, progress is now being made, though slowly, to promote gender equality. For instance, Nigeria is not only a signatory to but has also ratified, the convention on the elimination all forms of discrimination against women since 1985. It has also created the Ministry of Women's Affairs and formulated the National Policy on Women. Commendable as these efforts may be, the reality of the situation is

that Nigeria is still far from a society where there is gender equity. For example, there is no woman who is a state governor. Similarly, the number of women legislators for the whole country is less than five percent.

This scenario permeates the entire Nigerian society where women are under-represented in key positions. Basically, the reasons are cultural. Therefore, to ensure gender balance and a framework where women and men are equal partners in progress, a programme of cultural re-orientation is very important. It must be a programme that would encourage Nigerians to accept men and women as equals. To achieve this will certainly not be easy but efforts in that direction will ultimately yield results.

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