IGWEBUIKE: A CONCEPTUAL TOOL FOR CHANGE IN THE LIBERATION OF AFRICAN WOMEN

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Abstract

When women in their numbers find themselves socially, economically, politically deprived and progressively thrown further and further away from the centre of life and meaning, it is not a mere accident or effect of an unknown factor. Consciously or unconsciously, it shows that there is a big problem unattended to. The subjugation of women in the world remains one thing men do not consider seriously as something worth fighting for. Recently, the struggle has started toward the liberation of African women. Igwebuike principle is used here to show the way to the liberation of African women. The approach used here is reflective and theological approach.
Keywords: Liberation, Igwebuike, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, African, Women, Conceptual Tool

Introduction

Recently, liberation has been a cause of concern to the whole world, both from the point of men and women. For ages, liberation has been about men in Africa or community or village; nothing meaningful has been done or carried out about women liberation. According to Umeh (2004), the "Book of Exodus" is an account of God's liberation of the people of Israel. This means that liberation has been there for ages, about people who are dominated by other people stronger than they are. It is known that Israelite liberation happened because of injustice, slavery, social and economic exploitation found among the people of Israel by their stronger opposing nation, Egypt. This goes on to show that for liberation to take place, there must be underlying crisis or factors that necessitate liberation. It does not happen in a vacuum, for man always yearns to be free, yet always chained by one bad situation or the other.

Today, in the world of globalization, women suffer in different ways, which can stem from psychological, sociological, cultural, to political crisis or problem meted out to them by their male counterparts or society. Arinze-Umobi (2010) articulated it as thus:

> Violation of women's right is a global problem that affects third world countries and some developing countries …. Violence against

women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, and it can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, and it cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography. It takes place in the home, on the streets, in schools, the workplace, in farm fields during conflicts and crises. (P. 715).

From the above quotation, one recalls the prevalent rape going on everywhere in most places, or brutal killings of women in war or by terrorists. Objectively, liberation cut across all ages, races, continents, human right and status because sufferings or crises are seen or emanate virtually from these aspects and spheres of life or from any part of the world. So far, it is known that crisis or suffering is a monster bedeviling our society or African nations, especially for their backwardness or understanding of life in this contemporary age. Hence, there is need for the liberation of African women from all these shackles of devils reducing their meaningful and joyful life.

Sequel to this hopeless situation in Africa, this write-up views *Igwebuike* principles as a way of liberation for African women. This will ensure a balance and joyful life for African women. Though many principles or solutions for the liberation of African women have been given or suggested by many African scholars or theologians, from their own point of view, *Igwebuike* principles will ensure the development and advancement of African women because it is based on African world views primarily, rather than other world views. Though references may go beyond African women, but it measures more on African women and Igbo perspective.

African Situation: Women Predicament

African nations, as of today, are still suffering heavily from the burdens of their past invasion, exploitation and partition of African countries by the European countries. Under the evils of slave trade, millions of Africans, especially women, were taken into slavery and abused violently, and most of them died. Slave traders engaged in the exportation of able-bodied women for sexual activities outside Africa. This is one of the ways the rights of the African women were subdued, and violence enthroned into their lives. Today, slavery is being replaced by human trafficking in major parts of Africa, and this involves women and children mostly. It goes on to show that women are less valued in our society today. There may be other causes of women trafficking but the bottom line is that society does not value them as their male counterparts, and

government in place does not protect its citizens. It is known that recently, African women are deceived for better jobs in other countries of the world, like Italy, Germany, Malaysia, China, and so on. Slavery or women trafficking, which may be caused by unemployment, poverty, greed, ignorance, will be controlled through quality education and self-sustenance, and this involves liberation.

Culturally, African women are subjugated in different ways. This hampers them from living the fullness of their lives as normal human beings. According to Oborji (2005), there are some cultural hardships that African women are experiencing. These range from aspects of African customs and traditions that oppress women and put them in the state of inferiority complex, when they compare themselves with other women in the world. This, of course, prevents them from participating fully and elegantly in the development of the African society. There are some cultures that restrict African women from coming out at certain times of the day or at festivals. Most of the African cultures place more value on the male child in the society.

With this, women or girls in the African society or family are valued less than their male counterparts. Sometimes, this leads the head of the family to marry another wife, thereby putting the woman or the wife in perpetual agony. Here, Ezeigbo (1966) is of the opinion that the losing or changing of names upon marriage by African women subdues them all the more, though marriage is seen as one of the hallmarks of a complete woman. Ezenwanebe (2010) agrees strongly that being an African woman in the family has a lot of demands like pregnancy, house work, child care, and so on, which is a burden to womanhood and a serious threat to self-realization and freedom. Yet, marriage is seen or perceived as the major perspective from which one can better access a woman's other life aspirations. According to Muonwe (2016), a woman is, so to speak, a nobody outside of marriage" (P. 3).

From the social point of view, African women are subjugated in different ways. They are being discriminated against in so many ways in favour of their fellow Africans or male counterparts in the family circle. Muonwe (2016) relates that:

> In the traditional Igbo society, during her menstruation, the wife is not allowed to cook for her husband, especially if he is a titled man (though this practice is no longer wide spread today), because she is believed to be impure…. She is not only forbidden to cook for her husband during this period, but is also required to avoid coming near him. In certain cases, she lives in a separate house and is

> forbidden to touch ceremonial objects, else they become defiled. (pp. 14-15).

Poverty also has helped to reduce African women to a mere human whose task cannot be more than that of man or just bearing children. Unemployment finally gave a deadly blow to our economy, and consequently our women are affected adversely. Traditionally, it is believed that there are certain tasks or employments or jobs women will not do. This hampers greatly the actualization of their dreams in life. Some African men believe that the task of women begins and ends in the kitchen and "the other room". Through this way, abuses and violence are done to African women, and their rights constantly denied. According to Arinze-Umeobi (2010):

> Violence affects the lives of millions of women worldwide, in all socio economic and educational classes. It cuts across cultural and religious banners, impeding the right of women to participate fully in a society. Violence against women takes a dismaying variety of forms, from domestic abuse and rape to child marriages and female circumcision. (P. 716).

Some ideologies believe in the reality of inequality. This shows that women, generally, in the family and society are oppressed. Marxists claim that gender inequality originated from man's desire to own property in herding and agricultural economy of pre-industrial society. Engels (cited by Ezenwanebe, (2010)) points out that certain historical conditions led to women's subjugation and this started when man's desire to ensure the paternity of the children, who would become heirs to his properties, led to an increased restriction of the women; a mere instrument for breeding children. Zaretsky (1976) agrees with the Marxists that it is the capitalists who benefit most from women's subjugation and oppression. In private life, women dominate, but in public life, it is believed to be the area of men; that is why Zaretsky agrees with Marxists that capitalism benefits more from domestic labour of housewives who reproduce future generation of workers at no cost to the capitalist. Male domination or chauvinism has been traced again as the source or the problem of women's subjugation in most places. This is seen most often in patriarchal societies. This ideology or society favours male issues and sees women as not equal to men.

It is known that Africans accepted this ideology or cultural system without making any effort to deconstruct the system. The deconstruction of patriarchal ideology is necessary for the growth of African women. This is a social system in which men hold primary power and pre-dominate in roles of political

leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage. This patriarchal ideology is attributed to inherent natural differences between men and women. But sociologists tend to see patriarchy as a social product and not as an outcome of innate difference between the sexes, and they focus attention on the way that gender roles in a society affect power differentials between men and women. In fact, most societies are patriarchal in practice.

Again, feminist theorists see it as a primary cause of women's oppression and subjugation. So many feminists have called for culture repositioning as a method for deconstructing patriarchy. This culture repositioning relates to culture change and it involves the construction of the cultural concept of a society. Layli (cited by Ezenwanebe, 2010)) defines feminism as the "critical perspective and social movement that revolves around the eradication of sexism, the dismantling of patriarchy and elimination of violence against women" (p. 6). This is a view that women are oppressed and subdued by many obstacles limiting the actualization of their potentials. It calls for women to challenge and transgress the obstacles to free themselves.

Most feminist theorists believe that it is an unjust social system that is harmful to both men and women. It involves any social, political or economic mechanism that evokes male dominance over women. Again, some feminists believe that it is man and his society, not capitalists, who benefit most from women oppression, and only a change in the status of women in society can bring an end to their subservient oppression. But Firestone (1970) argues that gender inequality and women operation are3 biologically determined, producing what is referred to as sexual class system. The above thought refers to the burden of family lives on women. Some scholars objected strongly to the view that it is not the family task or biological make up of women that devalues them but the way African society interprets their world view, and the interpretation that ties them to reproduction and family care.

This in a great way hampers African women from the business of governance in Africa. In fact, women in politics are sometimes seen as wayward women; it is only recently that the mentality is changing. Sequel to this and other factors, women are not seen much elected in political offices in the African political arena. Even in the process of appointment into political offices, African women are neglected because of mindset . But women can lead when elected and can manage authority more than men. It is on record that during this Corona virus pandemic that most countries of the world ruled by women are low in the

number of people affected and number of people that died. But most countries in the world ruled by men recorded more suffering and death during this Corona virus pandemic. This means that women govern well and care very much.

African women are highly subjugated or oppressed in the world today. There are many accusing fingers pointing at the ugly situation of African women. The solution is yet farfetched; where it is found or suggested, it is hard to be implemented. The worst is that even the women themselves seem to accept and enjoy the situation. *Igwebuike* principle will help to enhance the freedom of African women because it is African worldview-oriented and it is going to be achieved by collective and individual efforts.

Igwebuike and its Principles

Having seen the condition of African women, which needs liberation urgently, we proffer and analyze   the principles to ameliorate the conditions of African women. For it is known that most African women migrate to other continents of the world for better living and balanced life. Recently, the rate of rape against African women reported in the internally displaced peoples' camp was alarming. Sequel to all these, the principles of *Igwebuike* developed by Professor Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony need to be analyzed for the liberation of African women. According to Kanu (2015), *Igwebuike* is the modality of being, and being in Igbo ontology is '*idi*', that is 'to be'. *Igwebuike* is an Igbo word which is a combination of three words. According to him:

> It can be understood as a word and as a sentence: as a word, it is written thus *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written thus, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space and [meaning]. (p. 67).

He goes further to explain the three words that make up the word, *Igwebuike.* *Igwe* is a noun which means 'number' or 'population', usually a large number or population; *Bu* is a verb which means 'is'; *Ike* is a noun, which means 'strength' or 'power.' When these words are put together, it means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). This, in effect, means when a good number, group or society of human beings comes together in solidarity, they are powerful. Again, solidarity combines with complementarity because everybody needs each other to make a complete whole. It constitutes a powerful group and an insurmountable force. At this level, Kanu asserts that no task is beyond their collective capability. Again this analysis provides or proves an African ontology that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations. Mbiti (1960) also asserts that "man is at the very

centre of existence, and African people see everything else in its relation to this central position of man… it is as if God exists for the sake of man" (p. 92). Metuh (1991) affirms that "everything else in African worldview seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man" (p. 109).

The above analysis shows that for man to achieve his aims or objectives in this world, he has to be in relational character with the other people around him. This will ensure a formidable force. The human person, following the African worldview, is understood in his relation with God and his fellow human beings. Ideologically, Kanu (2015) argues that 'to be' is to live in solidarity and complementarity, and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. 'To be' is to be with the other in a community of being. Onwubiko (1991) expresses this sense of community rightly with Lozi proverb which says: "Go the way that many people go, if you go alone you will have reason to lament" (p. 13).

Anchoring on or explaining Igwebuike on the basis of African worldview, Iroegbu (1994) describes it as being characterized by a common origin, common worldview, common language, common historical experiences and common destiny. Determining the role of community to individual or human beings, Mbiti (1969) asserts that "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). The sense of community here portrays family-hood or brotherhood, which means collaboration in existence. Achebe (cited by Kanu, 2015), in order to bring out the essential nature of the Igbo African communal relationship, asserts that:

> We do not ask for wealth because he that has wealth and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsmen to scratch him. (p. 68).

The above shows that life is shared in African worldview which makes life meaningful. So, it is in relationship or coming together that each completes a whole. Thus, every being has a missing part and is at the same time a missing part. Ekwulu (cited by Kanu, 2015) confirms the above view that "if the other is my part or a piece of me, it means that I need him for me to be complete, for me to be what I really am. The other completes rather than diminishes me" (p. 189).

This rightly explains why Igbo-African worldview would refer to the other as *'ibe'*, which means a piece of or a part of, as in *'ibe ji'* (a piece of yam), or *'ibe ede'* (a piece of cocoyam). Kanu (2015) asserts that the Igbo-African refers to the other

person as *'ibe'* which means 'my piece', or *'mmadu ibe m'* (my fellow human being). This is a concept also employed in relation to relationships and reciprocity: love one another *(hunu ibe unu n'anya)*, help one another *(nyere nu ibe unu aka)*, respect one another (*sopuru nu ibe unu*). From the above, we see that *Igwebuike* portrays the African sense of commonality, solidarity, brotherhood, familyhood and complementality as the root of African world view, thought and ontological quality of real the African which is needed to liberate African people from the state of subjugation seen in all aspects of their lives (Kanu, 2016 & 2018).

Igwebuike and its Powers towards Liberation

We have seen the ugly situation of African women which needs liberation to have a full life. We noticed again that the feminist writers, more than any set of people, increasingly and strongly call attention to an end to the oppression of women which has been there since human history. Sequel to the above, Tutu (1979) posits that liberation is the objective task of contemporary African scholars. African theologians have sought this liberation in the light of the gospel message. *Igwebuike* principles, on its own, combine gospel message and African world view in seeking a way of liberation for African women.

The liberation of African women entails eliminating all forces that hinder African women from living fully as human beings. The above assertion on the principles of *Igwebuike* are the same with Murray's (1979) principles of liberation which assert that the term liberation has three distinct levels of meaning:

(a) Socio-political liberation,

(b) A historical process of humanization and self-realization, and

(c) Liberation from sin and admission to communion with God.

The *Igwebuike* principle is rooted in the African world view, and this can be linked to the inculturation used by theologians today (Kanu, 2017). It involves removal of bad traditional cultures. Oborji (2005) relates that these are those cultural hardships that African women experience; that is, those aspects of African customs and traditions which oppress women, put them in the state of inferiority complex and subjugation with the men folk, and deny them the right to participate fully as equal partners in the development of Africa. This entails that Africans can, on their own, stop all customs and traditions which they see that is oppressing their womenfolk. It coincides with the saying that man is meant for Sabbath and not Sabbath for man. This implies also replacing those customs and traditions with good ones that will make African women to be proud of themselves.

One of the principles of *Igwebuike* includes complementarities and shared experiences. It is true that men and women differ in some significant ways, but it equally shows that they are not different as day and night or light and darkness (Kanu, 2017 & 2019). Hence, Udebunu (2010) asserts that:

> From the stand point of nature, men and women are much closer to each other than either anything else and an exclusive gender identity is a suppression of these natural similarities. Men and women have the human "species characteristics" of capacity for language, intellect and imagination, upright stance, thumb opposition and manipulation, tool-making and tool-using and extended childhood and parenting that mark us off from other species and are constituents of the evolutionary jump to human society. These characteristics are shared between the sexes and there is no good reason to doubt that the shift from biological evolution to history should also be shared accomplishment. (P. 158).

This shows that human beings generally are almost the same in everything. Since men and women share the same capacity, ability and skill, there is no reason to suppress the other on the basis of gender.

Igwebuike is endowed with the principle of complementarity (Kanu, 2014). We know that no tree can make a forest. So, instead of amplifying the differences in men and women by virtue of their biological or body difference which leads to subjugation and exclusion of women from the vital activities in the African society, Africans should decide or develop how best to harmonize or complement the great qualities or skills found in men and women's biological nature to achieve great living and advancement in the society. However, Udebunu (2010) rejects the efforts of those who, in an attempt to achieve the above complementarity and advocated for both sexes, that is encouraging women to become more like men, dropping their womanly qualities, as if they succeed only to the extent they achieve masculine status or vice versa. Hence, *Igwebuike*, as a principle, is projecting a means whereby both male and female come together in a new synthesis or synergy and achieve a difficult task in a holistic manner.

Using *Igwebuike* as a conceptual tool for change, the issue of mental attitude towards certain areas of life has to be changed or reconstructed to accommodate womens' life in the society. For example, in terms of political life, family life is seen by certain feminists as the tyranny of family or criticized as barrier to political equality and a source of psychological, economic and political

oppression. Here, the principle of relation in *Igwebuike* comes in because family must be part of the political life. Udebunu (2010) hints also that gone is the time when political institution exists exclusively of its own, independent of the family life. Bottomore (1964), on the above stand, says that "the institutions which exist in the differing spheres of society are not merely co-existent but are connected with each other by relations of coincidence or contradiction and mutually affect each other" (pp. 121-122).

This implies that there is a significant relationship that exists between the structure or formation of nuclear family and the structure of the wide political society of which it is a part and parcel . Eckstein (cited by Udebunu, 2010) supports the above when he points out that the stability of any political order is dependent upon the congruence between governmental authority structures and other such structures in the society, including those of work places, pressure groups, schools and, most significantly, the family. With this, the above family life, through the principles of *Igwebuike*, can never be a barrier to political life, but indeed can bring fullness of life for African women.

The principle of solidarity in *Igwebuike* again brings in the effort of women themselves to recognize the power in them and to rise up against oppression meted out to them by the menfolk. The coming together of women to have one voice and strength etymologically depicts *Igwebuike* (strength in number). This has been done in most countries of Africa where women liberate themselves from the oppression they found themselves in. Muonwe (2016) expresses the efforts of Igbo women through their organized women revolts as thus:

> Because of the weakened position Igbo women found themselves in, as a result of colonial policies and administrative strategies, the staged quite a good number of demonstrations, "wars", protests and riots. They did these to press home their demand for a better treatment and to register their displeasure with what they saw as injustice, deprivation of their basic rights, and bastardization of Igbo culture. (P. 97).

Some of these revolts by Igbo women include:

(a) 1916 Onitsha Women Market Demonstrations.
(b) 1925 Women Movement.
(c) Oil Mill Demonstration 1940-1950.

There are revolts, especially those bordering on rape in the recent times, by which young women in Nigeria and other African countries protest openly

against rape and other oppressive actions. Finally, the situation of African women needs liberation. The principles of *Igwebuike*, as a tool for change, when properly applied within Africa, will definitely help in liberating the African women.

Conclusion

The write-up has shown the possibility of liberating African women using the liberating principles of *Igwebuike*. It does not involve dismantling of any institution, but transforming our world view which involves change of attitude, empowerment, and proper education of African women. This will ensure that every woman can say no to subjugation and exploitation or oppression of any kind. Mbefo (2009) supports and enumerates strategies for winning the battle or the struggle for African women liberation from male hegemony and subjugation. Firstly, he proposes that we must look into the contemporary situation of women in the wider world in order to insert African women into broader global picture. African women must see themselves as modern women of twenty-first century. Secondly, in order not to be alienated from African roots and, therefore, to highlight their identity as African women, women must look deeper into their African history to effect a genuine update of African values. All these affirm the principles of *Igwebuike* discussed above. However, this involves strong will and effort, for liberation struggle entails much.

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