

AFRICAN WOMAN AS A PRISONER OF CULTURE: A DISCOURSE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS (EXAMPLE OF THE IZON PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA)

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Abstract

The African women have yet not gained independence from their masters, male chauvinism and obnoxious traditional practices in the 21st century has continuously caged the women from open expressions. Inequality still exist under guise of social norms and structural challenges; evident of the practice are genital mutilation to keep the woman's sexual emotions under check, patriarchal rules, forced singleton, early marriage and widowhood practices have. The study is provoked by the psychological effects of the mentioned cultural practices on women and the long run consequences, even as there has been much expository advocacies by scholars in this regard. The Izontribe in focus forms the five southern states of Nigeria. The study is aimed at beaming its searchlight on the-afore mentioned Izon cultural practices that have incapacitated womanhood by its restrictions and limitations. Findings from the study show that the female genital mutilation seem going into extinction, however insertions are now made to represent circumcision. Patriarchy and force singleton are still in full practice within the region. Marriage and widowhood practices appear to leash out the highest psychological effects on the African woman. Amidst these practices, artistic influence has been sought as an instrument of intervention through global visual advocacies to re-inform the populace. Artistic intervention forms bases for emotional freedom and psychological breakthrough that would place women on their rights amidst cultural impositions. Art as an instrument of rehabilitation is therapeutic in this instance of mental health and feminine deprivations.

Keywords: African woman, Culture and Tradition, Prisoner, Izon, Artistic Representation and Intervention.

Introduction

Globally, women are considered as the most instrumental to procreation and productivity, it is opined that women are a half of the world's population while the remaining half is brought

into existence by them according to Joyce Banda former, PaycaBaender for Malawi President. A school of taught have argued the provoking manipulations of fictions to stage-manage the ideology that men out numbered women in the

society, but research have granted most of these artificial contemplations and deceit to humanity. References, in India, China, Sweden and Africa, researchers have a lot to reveal as this laudable topic in the pursuit to balance the thoughts and ideologies that will be required to set the records straight.

Africa is the seemed largest continent with 54 countries now, women in Africa are beautiful, energetic, supportive, fertile and industrious. They are humans that explored the indigenous potential of the African continent through Agriculture, mining, trade, ancestral worship beliefs and marriage as the key to growth and development of the continent. African women originally relate freely without ambiguity to polygamy, a succumb to the conquest of communal or regional wars as a show of might. Women were a good source of labor supply to the predominant farming work which characterized the sources of livelihood in an African men's family in the 19th century and early 20th century.

Nigeria as sub-Saharan – African Country, will have over 300 indigenous tribes and languages. In the present-day Nigeria, 6 Geo-political zones are technically used to rate activities and performances of humanity in the country.

The Izon Example on Southern Nigeria:

The 'Ijaws' as an English pronunciation and spelling acceptable in the academia is originally written "Izon" which means TRUTH, Balance & co. (2047). The kindred is situated in the Niger Delta Region of the southern Nigeria with Deltaic influence, draining and pouring to tributary by the Atlantic Ocean. They are dwellers of the green forest with aquatic vegetation to relate with.

African Culture and Women

Ways of life and livelihood is characterized by birth, upbringing and trade or fishing. Womanhood in Africa is a great pride for serious home making, procreation and resourcefulness: The family might is largely built around the man (husband as the head in most cases). There are so many limitations to the freedom of women in the olden times, thus the advancement for rights and

equality became a serious struggle, the 20th century witnessed a lot of struggles for human liberation against marginalization and considerations that could be demeaning at most times. The African women are naturally strong, beautiful and formidable, they coordinate activities, group economic activities to make livelihood and support their precious families and husbands.

Izon Culture and Women

The izon women are largely found in Niger Delta Region of the federal Republic of Nigeria. Izon (IJAWs) are considered as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, this could possibly mean that Izon women are larger in population than their male counterparts because observations in late 20th centuries reveals that an average Izon man is polygamous, the Izon kindred have an obvious large number of teenage marriages and young mothers that form a bulk of the society. It is also very important to observe that the Izon (Nembe Axis) is different in this context, the Nembe tradition does not bequeath the child to the father. Mothers claim ownership of a child, children are fastened to their mother's opinion.

Widowhood Practice in Izon

Widowhood is a state of mourning as a result of the loss of a husband. This title of widow stigmatizes the women as first suspect over the death of their spouses. In Nigeria most cultures exercise various degree of torture just to ascertain the innocence of the woman, vindicating her from being physically or mystically involved in the death of her husband. In the Izon traditional widowhood practices; immediately a woman loses her spouse, she is firstly adorned with black cloth and made to sit on the floor while she cries alone for days as a sign of respect for her husband. She is also shaven off every hair on her head and her private part because those are her husband's rights. She cannot leave the house, compulsory seclusion for a given period which differs from place to place. Izon culture does not allow the widow to see the corpse of her husband. A widow is denied access to every of her husband's assets except there is a written will from the man. Family members take custody and preside over her husband's property. Arinze

Umobi and Anyogu (2011) stated that in some Igbo land in Nigeria, it is demanded that the widow sleeps with the high priest of a deity to separate herself from the spirit of the dead husband as mark of purification. These cultural practices are all targeted at debasing the woman and eventual condemning her to the life of destitution as she is usually deprived of every livelihood she enjoyed during the life time of her spouse. Widows are transferred to the siblings of the late husband because the woman is the property of the family she is married into. Every widow is to sleep on the floor for seven days at the demise of her husband. In Oporoma clan in southern Izon of Bayelsa State, married women are not allowed to eat from the same plate with a widow, only the widows sympathizing with her may eat with her. In Nembe Izon culture, a widow is expected to go to a particular water front, wailing for her husband and she will be made to fetch water from the same river with which the husband's corpse will be cleansed, it is a demoralizing physiological state of mind, a jawing that requires and of care and moderation in tradition reveals.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy as a system of stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex which promote the male gender. Makama (n.d.) states that the patriarchal society set parameters for women structurally and unequally in family social organization, community leadership and institutions at all levels. Patriarchy is a form of social organization in which male is the family head and the title is traced through the male lineage. Most families in Africa is in this order.

This practice depicts the conspicuous nature of the topical issue in discourse; placing African woman as a prisoner of culture and tradition; because they are always at the receiving end with little or no opinionated ideology to support or buttress her interest in the society except in the case of a group of women as observed in Ghana.

The male dominates amongst the Izon tribe in the southern Nigeria and this is very conspicuous from the childhood of a girl child to full-blown female adult. Mass female illiteracy is the effect

of education deprivation on the girl child, her education is referred to as a futile venture since she will become a member of another family and only be useful for procreation. Patriarchy in many Izon communities is conspicuous by the restriction placed on the woman like in Nembe Kingdom where a woman can never be a chief or family head according to Osuku (2021), women cannot share toiletries with a man because she is unclean. She opined that there used to be a hamlet where women in their menstrual circle stay until they are dry again. The Urhobos of Delta state do not recognize the woman in the sharing and proceedings of inheritance, therefore, she must queue behind the youngest male child if she must be heard in a family meeting. Community patriarchal structure in Izon land has led to Economic dependence, timidity amongst the women, therefore only a few percentage are able to veer for political responsibilities.

Singleton

This particular tradition does not allow the first female child to be given out in marriage outside the family; every relationship is arranged in Elizabethan manner, given credence to sustaining and raising children in a woman's father family house. The Ekwere and Ogoni people of Rivers State, South-south, Nigeria have this cultural practice where the first daughter must not leave her father's house.

Early Marriage

Young girls between the ages of 16 years are put in this act and practice which is prevalent in the South-South zone of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, it is a major issue that has poses great challenge to the traditional society, young girls are exposed to early marriage, early child birth and increased mortality rate as a result of early pregnancy. The sociological, economical and physiological imbalances are enormous.

Single Motherhood

The Izon culture of polygamy encourages single motherhood because she is completely responsible for providing, giving care and discipline to her children. Atypical Ijaw man is allowed to marry many wives as he pleases, this may bring laziness and negligent of

responsibility from the man.

Effects of Tradition to Izon Women

African Tradition and culture do not protect women and humans in partnership for the development of humanity and existence, the women are bent to serve the men in most cases. The culture cuts boundaries for feminine operations and involvements in the society, the females have their responsibilities and rights as the case may be though with strict checks.

Psychological effects

The pains from female genital mutilation, widowhood, early marriage and patriarchy are dehumanizing condition that affects the woman psychology, especially as they feel inferior, incapable and incompetent to function productively in the society.

Social Effect of the Izon Cultural Practices

Women liberation becomes a struggle in the global scene; adopted by Africa and suffered by the native Izon women, most especially the rural women of the South-South, Nigeria. Their inability to seek public office portfolios and also to demand for their human rights is a product of social defeat from patriarchy and other dehumanizing Izon cultures.

Economic Effect of Izon Tradition

Izon traditional practice of early marriage and child birth deprives the woman from proper education and skill acquisition to enable financial independence. The Izon woman is the poorest as she does not get the support of her husband and family such as the raising of her children. There is a serious need to create a comprehensive template for empowerment to cover the gap between women and men empowerment structure and policy in African, women should be treated and seen as humans for equal economy, social engagements and politics of the continent.

Political Effects

The scenario politically is loud and aggressive; the population is questionable and results for various votes in general elections where women minute participation becomes a big challenge in

the wheel. Patriarchy and poverty amongst Izon women denies them the confidence to come out and participate with their male counterparts in contesting for elective positions.

Compulsory Circumcision

There is a practice that is predominant in the South-South region of Nigeria, it the case where women are forced to undergo genital mutilation, the pain and agency of the barbaric act and dehumanizing state of a woman is not a casual one because the conational pains and trauma is continually recounted due to total loss of sexual arousal and feeling caused by the mutilation.

Women are forced against their will to perform conjugal function while men enjoyed the patriarchy, the polygamous loyalty from the women in the perpetuation of this and dehumanizing act of compulsion.

Artistic Representations and Interventions

African art, in its various traditional forms, encompassing sculpture, textile, body painting, Tattoo, Scarifications, dance, drama performance, and ritual objects, have always been a powerful reflection of culture, beliefs, and social systems. However, while these artistic expressions embody the richness of African heritage, they also reveal deep-seated gender constructs that often place the African woman within cultural boundaries that restrict her freedom and autonomy. The Izon (Ijaw) people of southern Nigeria, like many African societies, use art to communicate and reinforce social values, including gender roles and expectations. Izon traditional art is replete with visual expressions of femininity and motherhood. For instance:

- i. Wooden sculptures of female figures often emphasize physical fertility broad hips, full breasts, and calm facial expressions, signifying the woman's role as nurturer.
- ii. Ceremonial masks and dance performances (such as those in water goddess festivals like Egbesu or Adumu) often portray women as intermediaries between humans and the spirit world.

Yet, these representations are not necessarily

emancipatory. They often reflect male interpretations of femininity, created and controlled within patriarchal religious systems. The female figure, though divine in imagery, becomes symbolically idealized but socially restricted to a “prisoner of beauty and culture.”

From the late 1990s through the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Nigerian women artists have produced a body of work that is both aesthetically captivating and conceptually profound. Their artistic practices have evolved as powerful intellectual and visual commentaries on the condition of women in post-colonial Africa. Through painting, sculpture, mixed media, photography, and installation art, these artists interrogate themes of gender, identity, cultural memory, and social justice-issues central to African feminist discourse.

The creative expressions of these women go beyond mere aesthetics; they transform artistic spaces into arenas of activism and consciousness-raising. By engaging with topics such as patriarchy, migration, domesticity, body politics, spirituality, and historical erasure, these artists use their works to challenge the socio-cultural systems that perpetuate inequality. The exhibition space itself often becomes a performative and intellectual site where audiences are prompted to reflect on the live realities of African women and the complexities of navigating tradition within a modern globalized world.

This era saw the emergence of a generation of women artists whose practices are diverse in medium yet united in purpose. Notable among them are **Marcia Kure**, known for her exploration of gender and power through drawing and collage; **Peju Alatise**, whose mixed-media installations interrogate female identity and child labor; **Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze**, celebrated for her surrealist depictions of hybridity and diaspora; **Olawunmi Banjo** and **Lucy Azubuike**, who both use visual symbolism to explore social and ecological narratives; and **Nnenna Okorie**, recognized for transforming discarded materials into organic sculptural forms that evoke the cycles of life and womanhood.

Others such as **Toyin Ojih Odutola** and **Njideka Akunyili Crosby** have gained international recognition for their technically masterful and conceptually layered works that re-imagine black identity and domestic life through a personal and diasporic lens. Artists like **Fatimah Tuggar**, **Unoma Giese**, **Zemaye Okediji**, **Aisha Augie-Kuta**, **Chineze Araka**, **Priscilla Nzimiro**, **Taiye Idahor**, **Amarachi Okafor**, **Abigail Nnaji**, **Fati Abubakar**, **Patience Torlowei**, **Mercellina Oseghale Akpojotor**, **Ngozi Omeje**, **Addis Okoli**, **Anthonia Nneji**, and **Ayobola Kekere-Ekun** have equally contributed to the diversification of Nigerian contemporary art through photography, textile art, ceramics, fashion, and experimental media.

Collectively, their works reframe the narratives of African womanhood-rejecting stereotypes and asserting agency through creativity. They employ visual language as a form of resistance and cultural affirmation, making art not just a reflection of beauty but a tool for advocacy, healing, and societal transformation. Nigerian women artists of this period, therefore, embody the intersection of art and activism, situating their practice within a broader dialogue on gender, post-colonial identity, and the politics of representation in Africa and beyond.

Feminist art scholars and practitioners such as **Ayobola Kekere-Ekun** have consistently employed their artistic practices as a form of visual advocacy for African women. Through her works, Kekere-Ekun challenges patriarchal narratives and reclaims the visibility of women's experiences within contemporary African society. A professionally trained studio artist, she specializes in **mixed-media painting** but is best known for her innovative use of **paper quilling**—a decorative art technique traditionally considered a craft rather than fine art.

Quilling involves the manipulation of thin strips of colored paper, which are coiled, shaped, and glued onto a two-dimensional surface to produce textured and intricate designs. Kekere-Ekun's transformation of this seemingly fragile medium into a vehicle for feminist expression is both

conceptually profound and aesthetically compelling. By adopting and elevating quilling-a form historically associated with domesticity and “feminine” craft-she subverts the hierarchical distinctions between “high” and “low” art. Within her compositions, paper quilling becomes a metaphor for resilience, delicacy, and the layered complexities of womanhood.

Her creative process and conceptual framework have been influenced by several contemporary artists who interrogate themes of identity, memory, and gender, including **Stacey Gillian Abe**, **Chiharu Shiota**, **Nandipha Mntambo**, **Isabelle van Zeijl**, and **Wang Ziling** (Bitrus, 2019). Like these artists, Kekere-Ekun's works draw inspiration from personal and collective experiences that highlight both the strength and vulnerability of the female mind. Through her visual language, she explores the contradictions of being a woman in a socio-cultural context that often celebrates femininity while simultaneously restricting it.

By situating her work within the gallery space, Kekere-Ekun redefines the boundaries of craft and art, asserting that materials traditionally dismissed as feminine or domestic can articulate complex intellectual and political ideas. Her quilled portraits and compositions not only celebrate the beauty of African womanhood but also confront deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. In doing so, she aligns with a broader movement of African feminist artists who employ their creative practices as tools for dialogue, empowerment, and societal transformation.

In Izon society, the artistic representation of women often romanticizes subservience, while the actual voices of women remain marginalized in decision-making and artistic authorship.

Nzegwu (2001) critiques how traditional African art frequently perpetuates androcentric perspectives, with men as creators and interpreters, while women serve as subjects or muses. In the Izon context, this can be seen in the limited role women play in ritual artistry and the dominance of male sculptors and performers in

representing female deities.

Modern African female artists, including those from the Niger Delta, have begun to challenge these imprisoning narratives. Through visual art, photography, and performance, they reinterpret cultural symbols to assert autonomy and critique patriarchal traditions.

For instance:

- i. Ndidi Dike, a contemporary Nigerian artist, reexamines cultural motifs to highlight the struggles of women in post-colonial and traditional societies.
- ii. Peju Alatise uses mixed media to explore how culture both shapes and traps the female body and spirit in African settings.

Such works reflect a shift from cultural imprisonment to cultural negotiation, reclaiming African identity that includes the woman's voice. In the context of African art and Izon culture, the African woman as a prisoner of culture represents the paradox of reverence and repression. While she is celebrated as a source of life and spiritual strength, she is simultaneously constrained by cultural codes that limit her freedom and expression.

Art, therefore, becomes both a mirror and a mechanism, reflecting these gendered limitations while offering a potential space for *resistance and redefinition*. Through contemporary reinterpretations, African women artists are gradually breaking this symbolic prison, transforming cultural representation into a tool for emancipation and self-expression.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Izon woman liberation is a lead way to feminine development and empowerment. The study which advocates the cancellation of the barbaric traditional practices against women forms an emancipatory stance for women to co-habit favorably with their male folks. The paper went further to recommend as follows;

- Writing of will to protect the marital authorities of women at the demise of their spouses becomes evidently imperative as it will inform family

progression rather than extinct.

- Enforcement of human right laws will provide strength among women to solicit for their marital and cultural rights in the society. Enforcement of human right laws will provide strength among women to solicit for their marital and cultural rights in the society.
- Women empowerment is sacrosanct for feminine development economically, politically and socially. This will fuse the woman properly in the society where she can make inputs for national development.
- A strong campaign and educational programmes be regularly published on the media for proper awareness.

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