

# The Characteristics of Igbo Culture That Influence Career Choice Among Female 12th Grade Students In Enugu Urban School, Nigeria

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study sought to obtain an understanding of Igbo culture characteristics that influence the career choice of female 12th grade students as they approach their graduation from high school in Enugu Urban School. The research designs applied in this study are individual as well as focus groups audio-taped interviews of thirty-one individuals that formed the three focus groups. Semi-structured and informal questions were used. Analysis of documents and artifacts from literature review served as secondary sources of data collection.*

*The study concluded that there are three cardinal factors which influenced the post high school career attainment of 12<sup>th</sup> female students. They were the patriarchal and in-egalitarian nature of Igbo culture, gender roles stereotype, and child's position in the family among other siblings. Other cultural and non-cultural barriers that empower or hinder female students from career attainment in other groups should be of interest for further studies.*

**Key words:** Igbo, Culture, Career Choice, Patriarchal, Gender Role, Inheritance

## Introduction to the Problem

The Igbo people of Nigeria have a culture that binds them together, despite the influence of western education and civilization. Such culture has influence on the choice of career. Culture gives meaning to the life and work of the Igbo people of Nigeria. That is why Ozumba (2005) re-emphasized that it is embedded in every aspect of their life. Igbo culture, unlike the western culture, is patriarchal in nature and, consequently, limits the freedom of females to a greater extent than the males. In fact, there is a popular saying among Nigerians, especially the Igbo people, that women's education ends in the kitchen (Cooper, 1997; Emilia, 2007). The general view is that Igbo culture has greater influence than any other factors in limiting the choice of career among female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students as they approach their graduation from high school (Ozumba, 2005).

In an Igbo family, if a male child is born, that meant greater joy for the parents (Ozumba, 2005). For the father, it is joyous, because he has a son who will take his place after his death and continue with his family line. This is portrayed in such Igbo names like “Ezi-echina” [let not my family lineage die out], and “Afam-efuna [let not my name be lost].” On the part of the mother, it is joy because that will properly entrench her in her husband’s heart. Having a son means for her that nothing can uproot her from the family. A son further means having a voice to defend you in the family. On the contrary, if the child is a girl, the husband and wife receive the baby girl with mixed feelings. Also if female child is coming as the third, fourth, fifth or sixth female in the family without a male child that is enough reason for sorrow. It brings sorrow for the man because his hope of having a male child to continue his lineage is becoming slimmer as daughters will soon be married off to other men. So within the Igbo culture, having female children is like “tending other people’s vineyards while your own is unkempt” (Ozumba, 2005, p. 5). This stereotype attitude ingrained in Igbo culture is the basis for the inequality that exists between the male and female.

As the children begin to grow, the males and the females are socialized differently. The males are made to see themselves as superior, stronger, more important and indispensable. The females are trained to see themselves as appendages of the men. In his book, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958) presented a vivid picture of Okonkwo telling Nwoye and Ikemefuna masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. These stories are told so as to toughen them and prepare them for their future roles as the protector, guardian and head of their families. On the other hand, the mothers tell their daughters feminine stories about how to behave themselves so as to attract worthy husbands and how to serve their husbands in order to win their hearts.

The gender roles are in many cases clear cut which makes crossing the role an abomination (nso ani) (Ozumba, 2005). For example, it is an abomination for a girl to go and handle her father’s gun. However, the boy can do it. Also, it is unacceptable for the boy to hang around the kitchen when the women are cooking and cracking jokes that touched on female genitals, puberty rites and the like.

Boys have a variety of duties to perform (Ozumba, 2005). The boy’s duty ranges from washing his father’s clothing, taking care of the flock (of sheep, goat, etc), getting the yam seedlings ready, getting the knives sharpened, the hoes and other farming implements ready for farm work. He leads in the way to the farm lands, he protects the girls, and he ensures that the difficult tasks are done by him and so on. He gets involved in age grade, secret societies, masquerades, wrestling matches, meetings, and accompanies his father to ceremonies like funeral, title taking, marriages, etc., as the father demands (Ozumba, 2005). The boy begins to learn how to establish himself as a farmer, a shepherd or some other trade. In traditional Igbo society farming was the mainstay of the economy. It is one’s ability to have his barns filled with yams that marked him as a prosperous man. The man could do a range of things. His movements were not restricted. He could try his hands in different occupations at any time.

The story is different in the case of female. Her freedom of choice of career and other involvements in societal affairs is somewhat restricted. A girl is from the onset made to believe that her world begins and ends with getting married, having children and serving the meal-needs of her husband with the kitchen as the headquarters of her functions. As Achufusi (2000) has portrayed it, females are specifically engaged in sex-oriented roles of marriage, child bearing and rearing. They accept the societal prescriptions for and conceptions that wife-hood and then motherhood constitute because it is the only avenues open to them of attaching respect or of earning prestige in the society. Achufusi (2000) avers that the above portraiture is the order because of the patriarchal orientation of Igbo society within which the woman operates, and which limits and confines her right to alternate choices. He indicates that “This makes the image of the woman in the Igbo traditional society to appear lack luster, excitement and impressiveness. The narrowness of her

operational sphere is said to be responsible for this lack luster image of the women..." (Achufusi, 2000, p. 159).

In the education arena, all Nigerian children are supposed to have access to a local elementary school (Curry, 2011). While the government aims to provide universal education for both boys and girls, the number of girls in class is usually much lower than the number of boys. Sending every child in a family to school can often put a lot of strain on a family. The family will lose the child's help around the house during school hours and will have to pay for uniforms and supplies. If parents are forced to send one child to school over another, many will choose to educate boys before girls (Curry, 2011).

Furthermore, among the Igbo cultural group, inheritance is basically a male affair (Curry, 2011). Though the constitution stipulated that women have a legal right to inheritance in Nigeria, they often receive nothing. This is because Igbo culture has more power over the right of inheritance than the constitution itself. Property and wealth are usually passed on to sons, if they are old enough, or to other male relatives, such as brothers or uncles rather than the wife of the deceased. Men are dominant over women in virtually all areas (Curry, 2011).

The traditional Nigerian culture, however, has begun to change as Nigeria develops as a nation (Ozumba, 2005). The Igbo have become one of the most sophisticated tribes in the present Nigerian nation (Ozumba, 2005). They are profoundly educated, widely traveled, economically advanced, socially advanced and psychologically active. According to Ozumba (2005) "In fact, gone were the days when women were regarded only as "*Oriaku*" or a consumer of husbands' wealth. Today, she is seen as "*Odozi aku*" and "*Okpata aku*"; that is, keeper and moderator of wealth and a maker of wealth respectively" (p. 9). Times have changed, values have changed and expectations have changed in the face of economic hardship, breakdown of some traditional moral norms, infiltration of norms of other cultures and the general enlargement of scope of roles and functions for men and women (Ozumba, 2005). Ndiokwere (1989) declares that "the Igbo traditional identity is being eroded as many Igbo leave their country for other places in search of greener pastures" (p.296). Nevertheless, the Igbo culture is not yet still gender sensitive, because it still limits career choices of female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students more than it does for their male counterparts (Ozumba, 2005).

Nigeria practices the 6-3-3-4 system of education; there are six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary (JS 1-3), three years of senior secondary (SS1-3) and four years of university education (Babafemi, 2010). So Senior Secondary three (SS-3) is the graduation class for high school students in Nigeria, an equivalent of 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the United States education system. It is the decision making class for the students with regard to their choice of future career. In whatever choice the female student makes, the assumption is that the Igbo culture must have influenced such a choice of career, because Igbo culture is seen as not being gender sensitive (Ozumba, 2005). It does not give equal opportunity to both sexes, hence limiting career choices based on gender (Ozumba, 2005).

The relationship between gender and career choice is supported by the research of Odebunmi (1983) and Ozumba (2005). They include research on various aspects of Igbo culture, Job aspiration, Career choice and other related topics. The research is clear that Igbo culture influences career choice among women in general. Understanding the relationship between culture and career choice for female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students is an area that has not been researched within the context of Igbo people.

## Research Methodology

The research design used in this study is qualitative. It required direct data collection, rich narrative descriptions and inductive data analysis. Its goal was to understand participants from their point of view. The method the researcher used in this qualitative research is ethnographic study. As an ethnographic study,

data was obtained through audio-taped interviews, observations and document analysis. The interviews were semi-structured. Here both a purposeful sampling and a snowball sampling were employed in the choice of participants to be interviewed.

First, the purposeful sampling was used to select the first focus group of eleven men, that is, the traditional ruler and the ten members of his cabinet. Purposeful sampling selected information rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). Members of the first group are the custodian of the people's culture and therefore, should be useful in the area under study.

Second, a snowball sampling was used in the choice of the ten men and ten women that form the second and third focus groups respectively. Snowball sampling according to Shafie (2010) is a process where existing study subjects help to recruit further subjects from among their acquaintances. In this case each of the eleven members of the first focus group, that is, the traditional ruler and the ten members of his cabinet, that were already identified through purposeful sampling were asked to identify other members of the population that best fulfilled the criteria. They identified ten men and ten women who were recruited to form the second and the third focus groups respectively. They are members of the respective villages that they are representing in the ruling cabinet. They were all within the age range of 60-90, and voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. The reason for having the age range of 60-90 was because Igbo people believe that old age, or what they call grey hair, is a sign of wisdom. Those within such age range have deep knowledge of the culture and tradition of the people and they are known as "ndichie" (Achebe, 1958, p.12). Each of the three focus groups were interviewed in the town hall separately, while the individual interviews of each member of traditional ruler's cabinet took place in their homes and, or offices. A total of 31 individuals were interviewed in the study.

The main instrument used for the collection of data was a semi-structured and semi-formal interview that was audio taped. The semi-structured interview consisted of a predetermined set of questions that were geared toward exploring the characteristics of Igbo culture that limit career choice among female 12th grade students. It also traced the historical perspectives of Igbo culture in relation to careers. The questions were open-ended so as to give the subjects enough room to give detailed description and characteristics of their culture in relation to career choice. After transcribing the first audio taped interview, the researcher conducted a second interview as a reaction to probing questions that arose from the first interview. This was equally a primary source data.

The other data analyzed was a secondary source. It included some artifacts and documents obtained from literature review such as published research work by Nigerian counselors on job aspirations and career choice among Nigerians; other academic works and resource books published over the years on Igbo culture, gender sensitivity and Igbo family life. The data was analyzed, sorted, and emergent themes identified for those elements of Igbo culture in relationship that influenced the career choice of female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.

## Results

From the data, the following emerging factors coded 'i' through 'xvi' were classified into two groups, namely; the cultural factors "A" and the non-cultural factors "B". The factors from "i" through "viii" were cultural, while "ix" through "xvi" were non-cultural factors that also influenced the career choice of female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. The groupings are shown below.

### Group A: Cultural Factors

- i. Patriarchal and in-egalitarian nature of Igbo culture
- ii. Schooling into the patriarchal and matriarchal stereotypes
- iii. One's position in the family – "Okpala"[first son] and "Ada" [first daughter] Syndrome
- iv. Continuation of the family lineage – (Ezi-echina & Afam-efuna syndrome)

- v. Belief that woman's honor lies in her husband (being married and having children)
  - vi. The gender roles differences & Socialization according to gender
  - vii. Size of a family
  - viii. Right of inheritance - male affair
- Group B: Non-cultural Factors
- ix. Ignorance of various careers
  - x. Money –yielding prospects or Desire to get quick money
  - xi. Parental Influence
  - xii. Prestige attached to job
  - xiii. Subjects offered & Personal interests
  - xiv. Academic ability
  - xv. Peer influence
  - xvi. Influence of Mass Media

However, since the researcher was dealing with the characteristics of Igbo culture that influence career choice of female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, only the cultural factors in “Group A” were considered. These Igbo cultural characteristics mentioned in “Group A” were further collapsed into three categories because of their similarities. X = Patriarchal and in-egalitarian nature of Igbo culture, Y = Gender roles stereotyped and Z = Child's position in the family among other siblings – the “Okpala” and “Ada” syndrome. It was believed that whatever cultural influence one may have, it takes its root from any of these three factors.

The researcher observed that males wanted to use every aspect of their culture to dominate females to and then maintain their authority and supremacy over them. For instance, the issue of breaking of kola nut [oji] in Igbo culture, and participation in masquerade cult were specifically male affairs (Achebe, 1958). Also Igbo society was also patrilineal, whereby inheritance, authority and children's surnames were traced mainly through men. As Curry (2000) rightly pointed out, inheritance was basically a male affair. As stated by one of the participants; “the youngest son of an Igbo family has right to inherit the ancestral land and economic trees while the oldest daughter of that same family had not.” Concomitantly, the patriarchal structure and gender inequality limited even the willingness of people and agencies in Igbo society to help females who fall victim to such a kind of cultural hegemony. The main contention was that due to the patriarchal nature of Igbo culture, men used whatever means possible to maintain and reinforce their status in the family and society. Their primary goal was to attain and preserve all of the privileges that the patriarchal society accorded them as males.

The gender roles stereotypes were among the key factors. In fact, gender was coded into every aspect of Igbo society. Nearly every aspect of Igbo society was based on gender, even in the choice of crops to cultivate (Achebe, 1958). Young girls were brought up to believe that they were only suited for certain profession or, in some cases, only to serve as wives and mothers. Everyone female, young and old were sensitized and indoctrinated in such a way from childhood, that there were no conflicts among them with regard to what was culturally acceptable. Both boys and girls were schooled and socialized into believing in such gender role stereotype through informal education. They achieved this by means of story-telling, folktales, proverbs and idioms. Many women participants stated that they were born into such a system and were meant to accept everything as normal. One woman even said that when she asked her mother why her brother should not help her in the cooking, she was shunned down for harboring such a thought. Another woman reported thus; “I was punished by my father for stretching and placing my leg on a palm tree.” She was told that it was an abomination for a woman to climb a palm tree. Two of the men-respondents made mention of how they were beaten by the members of their age grades when they were young boys. As the said; “the only crime we committed was that we went to our kitchen to get some soup for our lunch by

ourselves.” Only girls and their mothers had the right to do that. They ignorantly crossed the gender role boundary.

Similarly, the “Okpala” [first son of the family] and “Ada” [first daughter of the family] syndrome was also another determinant factor on who has right and on who owns what in the family. The first daughter of the family “Ada” had limited opportunity to education or career choice. She had to stay at home to baby-sit her other siblings and help her mother in the house chores. The first son of the family “Okpala” had also limited opportunity because he had to marry earlier to raise children and continue the family lineage. By virtue of being the first son he automatically had to follow the footsteps of his father and had to inherit his father’s business without hesitation. The case was worse if he was the only child. However, both the “Okpala” and “Ada” had more rights and full authority over their other siblings in the family, especially when both parents were absent. The Okpala would automatically assume the role of the father while the Ada assumes the mother’s role. The Okpala and Ada were privileged positions in any family despite the limitations such positions might impose on the person’s education and freedom of choice of career.

In other words, the issues of continuity of the family lineage, otherwise known as “Ezi-echina” or “Afam efuna” syndrome; the belief that woman’s honor lies in her husband; the size of family; right of inheritance; money-yielding prospects or desire to get quick money, and parental influence, and the gender roles stereotype and child’s position in the family among other siblings - the “Okpala’ and “Ada” syndrome. All of these were rooted in these three basic factors of patriarchal and in-egalitarian nature of Igbo culture. Awareness and proper understanding of the implications of these three key cultural factors on the career choice of female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in particular, and the Igbo peoples in general, may be of tremendous help to contemporary Igbo society.

## Conclusion

The current findings showed that there are some other characteristic features that influence career choice among female 12th grade students apart from some cultural elements found in Igbo culture. One outstanding factor is the patriarchal and in-egalitarian nature of Igbo society. The in-egalitarian economic and occupational structure of Igbo patriarchal society leaves females with very few alternatives in life. In general, the objective and perceived status of occupations and jobs open to women are inferior to those available to male folks. For this and other reasons, in many cases Igbo women earn less than men who are employed in the same jobs. Without having access to “good” jobs, women will continue to be economically dependent on their spouses or partners. Economic dependence is one of the factors that force female folks to continue living in total submission to the male counterparts.

It was important to conduct this study because it could assist the Igbo traditional ruler and members of his cabinet in particular, and the Igbo people in general, to understand such elements in their culture that support male dominancy, promote oppression and marginalization of females as well and reduce the freedom and equal opportunity of females. It should create awareness among Igbo people in general, and female 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in particular about the issue of gender-sensitivity in Igbo culture, the influence of gender on job aspiration and career choice.

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