

WOMAN-WOMAN MARRIAGE IN IGBOLAND

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A century ago marriage was a mark of responsibility and a symbol of adulthood in Igboland.¹ It was a group affair and one that involved two unrelated kinship groups. It qualified the actors for full participation in the community and served as a means of forging political, military, and economic alliances. Denise Paulme (1971: 3) called it the imperfect means of concluding alliances. The essence of marriage in Igboland in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods was not necessarily to unite two lovers but primarily to establish a legal basis for procreation, which because of the emphasis on children, the Igbo regarded as an obligation to the ancestors. This was based on the understanding that those born owe the debt of begetting others.

Different types of marriages existed in pre-colonial Igboland. They included the normal marriage contract involving two exogamous families; marriage through pawning, which allowed fathers to use their daughters as collateral for loans but which was abolished during the colonial period by British legislation; concubinage; and marriage by abduction, practiced in Anioma (Egodi Uchendu, 2002: 33). In marriage by abduction, financially constrained young suitors abducted girls of their choice for marriage. This was done with the consent of the girls' parents, although not necessarily of the girls. Two other forms of marriage that existed at the time were marriage by exchange and woman-woman marriage. Local rulers and very influential men contracted marriage by exchange for the purpose of establishing political, military, or economic links (P. A. Talbot, 1967: 193). Marriage by exchange required two men exchanging their daughters in marriage in order to form alliances necessary for the political prestige and the military strength of the chief contractors who often were lineage or community heads.

Woman-woman marriage, the concern of this paper, was a recognized and legal

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form of marriage in pre-colonial Igbo society. (It was also observed among the Kalabari of the Niger Delta (P. A. Talbot, 1967: 196)). Woman-woman marriage was contracted for social and economic reasons. In most cases, women who married fellow women were either barren or had passed the childbearing age without begetting a male child. Others were wealthy and influential women who married fellow women as a means of celebrating their wealth and for economic gains. Woman-woman marriage as a mark of wealth, and, for economic exploitation was popular in parts of Igboland in the second half of the 19th century (F. Ekejiuba, 1967: 637 & Ifi Amadiume, 1987: 31).

The over-riding goal for woman-woman marriage in Igboland was for women to have children through other women for inheritance purposes. Among the Igbo a barren widow or one who had no male child for her deceased husband had no claim to the deceased's property. If, however, she had "married" a wife and had a male child from her, she would inherit from the husband through the male child born for her by her wife. Moreover, the fear that the man's homestead would become extinct in the absence of a surviving male child would no longer exist. This chapter considers the origin of woman-woman marriage in Igboland, its nature and relevance in the past and at present, and the changes that have occurred within the institution. In discussing marriage in Igbo society, it should be borne in mind that any form of marriage in Igboland was less a matter of the particular persons concerned, but, rather a social arrangement to ensure that a new generation appears to take over from the present one, and that its members were brought up to fill smoothly the various established places (Thomas Price, 1954: 23).

ORIGIN OF WOMAN-WOMAN MARRIAGE IN IGBOLAND

Little is known about the origin of woman-woman marriage in Igboland. Individuals interviewed on this practice spoke of its antiquity but could not state when exactly it came into existence. If it is considered that a normal marriage contract has generally been between a man and a woman, we can conclude that the existence of woman-woman marriage or its evolution in Igboland, most likely, must have been the product of cultural innovation that took place within the people's tradition. Social systems and cultural practices, as Jeanne Henn (1984: 1) pointed out were not static during the pre-colonial period due to the interpenetration of different societies and a history of long distance trade with other cultural groups. That woman-woman marriage existed among the Kalabari (an Ijaw sub-group in the Niger Delta) by the first decade of the twentieth century lends credence to the claim of interpenetration of societies. It is very plausible that the Igbo borrowed woman-woman marriage from the Kalabari or vice versa.

Surprisingly, the practice is not known to have existed during the same period among other Ijaw groups of the Niger Delta as it did among the Kalabari suggesting that the Kalabari could have borrowed it from the Igbo. How then did woman-woman marriage evolve in Igboland?

The earliest known Igbo legend that spoke of the existence of woman-woman marriage was that recounted to Amoury Talbot between 1914 and 1915 when he was gathering information on the indigenous customs of groups in southeastern Nigeria (Talbot, 1967: 92-93). The tradition was woven around two female deities in Igboland – Ogugu and Wiyeke. According to the story, Ogugu, the chief female deity in Ohambele and neighboring towns in the Owerri District, was popular for giving children to its female worshippers. In another town, Akwete, resided another female deity, Wiyeke. At one point, for undisclosed reasons, Wiyeke courted Ogugu as her wife. Ogugu agreed to the marriage on the condition that Wiyeke would come and live with her at Ohambele. Wiyeke accepted the condition and thus joined Ogugu as one of the female deities of Ohambele, assuming the status of Ogugu's husband. The reasons for this legend, which seems to give credibility and divine sanction to woman-woman marriage in Igboland is unknown. However, woman-woman marriage was popular in towns in the old Owerri and Aba Districts and in most parts of northern Igboland, around the Awka, Udi and Nsukka areas before the 1930s.² In addition to the religious sanction given this form of marriage using the legend of Ogugu and Wiyeke, certain social values made woman-woman marriage acceptable to the Igbo and could have led to its institutionalization in Igboland.

The Igbo mainstay in the pre-colonial period was agriculture and women were its backbone. Successful Igbo men were known for the number of their yam barns and the overall turnout of their farm produce. As a result, the Igbo favored polygynous marriages because it allowed them to have as many wives as possible. The wives, and sometimes with the children, made up a man's labor force. Men who for any reason were unable to marry more than one woman were in some cases assisted in acquiring a second wife by their first wives. A woman would marry a wife and give to the husband to be his second wife in order to ease her domestic burden as well as to have assistance with farm work. It was partly because of this practice that Thomas Price (1954) wrote that any African marriage was a social investment, absorbing some resources and with prospects of replacing them at last. Although polygyny provided a man with additional outlets for sexual gratification, it was also a status symbol and an investment that enabled him to expand his agricultural output, the proceeds of which he could utilize in acquiring social titles that entitled him to an honored place in his community. Women who married wives for their husbands for the reasons stated above engaged in woman-woman marriages,

which because of its various advantages to the men gained the support and approval of the society.

A second factor that possibly led to the evolution of woman-woman marriage in Igboland was the high value the Igbo placed on children and especially on the male child. It was the belief of the people that male children were indispensable for the continuation of the ancestral line and for retaining a family's ownership of whatever belonged to it. The reality of family extinction cannot be ducked where children are not forthcoming (Ada Mere, 1973: 93). Such a situation was regarded as an abomination. The Igbo family was the most fundamental and the primary social institution that for reasons of sheer survival must be sustained through the male child. It is for this reason that Igbo women expressed their desire for children with the following song:

Olisa nye m nwa nye m ego
Olisa nye m nwa nye m ego
karia I ga awo m nwa wo m ego
mgbe nwa m toro ego m abia
mgbe nwa m toro ego m abia

Translated, the song says:

God give me a child and give me money
Instead of denying me a child deny me money
When my child grows up, money will come

The importance attached to children was also reflected in the names they were given, for instance, *Nwabueze* ("a child bestows kingship") and *Nwabuba* ("a child is wealth").

Barren women and women who gave birth to only daughters made efforts to marry wives to have children, preferably sons, for them. This was particularly so since the social status of Igbo women was hinged on their ability to reproduce and give birth to male children. A childless woman in pre-colonial Igboland was certainly at the lower rung of the social ladder and enjoyed no enviable status in the society. Her inability to reproduce was looked upon as a curse while she was sometimes treated with ignominy. To make women's social distinctions obvious in pre-colonial and early colonial Igboland, a wife might not wear anything valuable until after the birth of her first child, while a childless woman was forbidden to dress her head in the elaborate manner allowed only to mothers (Talbot, 1967). Women, therefore, resorted to woman-woman marriages as a way of getting out of the dilemma of barrenness or the plight of giving birth to only female children. The Igbo were not alone in their love for sons. In traditional Korean culture, the desire for many sons existed although it did not derive from the need to

preserve the family structure but to secure more manpower (Joungwon Kim, 1977: 25-26).

Closely linked to the high value placed on children as a factor for woman-woman marriage, was the system of inheritance in Igboland. In all parts of Igboland, women inherited from a deceased spouse if they had given birth to a male child in his name. Inheritance passed from father to son and never from father to daughter or from husband to wife. The latter applied also in Ohafia, Afikpo and Ihechiowa communities, all of which were (and still are) matrilineal. The exception with the matrilineal groups was that the property of a deceased man first of all went to his brothers from the same mother and then to his sisters by the same mother, in their order of seniority, and finally to the children, male and female, of his eldest sister by the same mother (L. T. Chubb, 1961: 22). This was only possible if there was enough to go round. Among the patrilineal communities, a wife who had a son could only hope to share in his son's inheritance but not necessarily to inherit directly from her husband. Her husband's brothers had a better chance of inheriting his property than the wife. It is in the system of inheritance that the Igbo markedly differ from the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani of southern and northern Nigeria respectively, the other two major ethnic groups in the country. In both of these groups, the entrenchment of Islam some centuries ago gave women rights of inheritance, though limited. Such rights of inheritance by woman did not exist in Igboland.

In pre-colonial Igboland when no authority existed above that of the male elders of a community, Igbo women had little opportunity for redress when confronted with cultural practices that discriminated against them such as the inheritance rights. To circumvent their plight, women married fellow women to have children for them. It was only through this medium that a childless widow could claim any form of inheritance from her husband's family. Where a widow had daughters, one of the daughters might remain unmarried in the hope that she would have a son for the family. Any son she gave birth to was accepted in the family as her father's and the deceased's property rightly became his. Through this arrangement, the daughter succeeds in retaining the property of the father and ensured that her father's family did not treat her widowed mother shabbily.

Retaining a daughter in the family to raise male children for her parents was widely indulged in by the Igbo on both sides of the Niger. In Nnobi in the 1920s, a father recalled his daughter from her husband's home for this purpose (Ifi Amadiume, 32-33). Fathers wishing to retain one of their daughters at home to have male children for them presented palm-wine to their immediate male family members and informed them of their decision. From then onwards the matter was accepted and the lady in question would be treated as a man for the rest of her life. This was the idea behind the existence of "male

daughters" in parts of Igboland. Sometimes, too, fathers kept their most beloved daughter at home in order not to part with them.

The communalistic nature of the Igbo society would have contributed to the institutionalization of woman-woman marriage in Igboland. Pre-colonial Igbo society placed emphasis on the community rather than the individual. Consequently, moral obligations were regulated by the demands of the moral codes, tradition, and custom of the people and not by the exercise of individual judgment and conscience. The individual's responsibility in the society was very clear and never shirked because social expectations and values were commonly observed and the social ethos of any Igbo community was jealously guarded (Edmund Ilogu, 1974: 22). This made it difficult for a woman to take a stand, which the wider society might consider incompatible with the over-all good of the people. The childless woman who failed to marry a wife to have children on her behalf, therefore, stood the chance of living a very lonely life and forfeiting the comfort of being properly looked after in her old age. In general, woman-woman marriages featured more prominently then when the idea of *in vitro* fertilization, and, child adoption were unknown to the Igbo. It met needs in the society that these options are meeting today.

Woman-woman marriage in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods was contracted like normal marriages. Potential wives were sought for from distant communities from those of the would-be female husbands. The conditions under which women accepted to be wives to fellow women at the time are unknown to the present writer because of the paucity of documented materials on the matter, but inferences can be made based on the situation prevailing in the present.

Female husbands paid the bride-wealth of their wives as men did when marrying women. Having a wife had its advantages. Besides the prospect of begetting children through another person, it enhanced the status of a daughter and qualified some to become heads of households. This was particularly so where a female husband herself had had children. In Nnobi, Onitsha, Ossomari and some other Igbo communities, there was a direct link between the accumulation of wives by women, the acquisition of wealth, and the exercise of power and authority by women (Ifi Amadiume, 45; F. Ekejiuba, 637-8). A female husband found a man to meet the sexual needs of her wife but she played the role of mother to her, and claimed her services from which she increased her wealth and affluence. The marriage was undoubtedly economically rewarding hence some wealthy women married as many as nine wives. The exploitative nature of this relationship was the reason why the people of Nnobi regarded it as *Igba ohu*, meaning slavery.

A woman who had a wife enjoyed the status and customary rights of a husband over his wife as would a man. The wife on her part was also accorded her customary rights in the society, while the children were not subjected to any political or social disadvantage on the basis of their parentage or of the circumstances of their birth. They were accepted as belonging jointly to the female husband and her wife but the children inherited property from the husband of their mother's female spouse or her father, if she had no husband.

Woman-woman marriage suffered a set back midway through the colonial period primarily due to Christian missionary activity in Igboland. Early Igbo converts to Christianity were encouraged to ignore and distance themselves from local marriage customs that had no parallel either in the Bible or in the British family system. Polygyny among church members was frowned upon and the Roman Catholic Mission, in particular, denied communion to polygynists (Nina Mba, 1982: 53). The displeasure with which the Church handled polygyny was also visited on woman-woman marriage (Thomas Price). Consequently, the preponderance of woman-woman marriage gradually whittled in Igboland. Until the 1980s, persons negating Church ordinances conducted themselves with utmost discretion and were careful not to flaunt actions that were unacceptable to the Church. Women with wives concealed them and the knowledge of their existence in order to protect themselves as well as the male consorts of their female wives.³ But, women who were unwilling to go underground left the orthodox Churches for the syncretic groups that were more accommodating of woman-woman marriage and other indigenous cultural practices.⁴ Excluding the attitude of the Christian Churches to woman-woman marriage, modernization with Western education contributed to the dwindling of the practice. Also, within the last two decades, the gradual conversion of the Igbo to Islam became another factor challenging its existence in Igboland as Igbo Muslims regard it as loathsome.⁵

WOMAN-WOMAN MARRIAGE IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY

The growing incidents of woman-woman marriage in Igboland suggest a resuscitation of the practice. Nevertheless, it is still not enjoying the popularity attached to it in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods when it was described as “the custom of the time” (Ekejiuba, 637). From the rough estimate done for the purpose of this discussion, it was discovered that persons who in one way or the other are presently involved in woman-woman marriage - either as female husbands, female wives, or as male consorts to female wives - are not highly educated. Many, actually, did not progress

beyond the primary school level. The majority of the female wives were discovered to be dropouts from the primary school or not to have attempted school at all.

Woman-woman marriage in contemporary Igbo society is still contracted like any man-woman marriage. This implies that a female wife was sought for and wooed as any young girl would but in most cases not by, and for, a man but by friends of the prospective female husband for the latter.⁶ Interviews with some of the female husbands revealed that women wishing to marry fellow women appealed to their female friends to search for a suitable girl for them. They did this because many young women would not willingly accept a marriage proposal from a fellow woman. In Amawbia before a woman undertakes to marry another woman, she first kills a goat for her community, an act that confers on her the status of a man. With her ascribed male status, she proceeds to marry a fellow woman.⁷

To ensure the chances of getting a willing wife, individuals assisting an intending female husband sought for young girls with one social disability or the other and whose chances of marrying men of their choices seem to have been impaired or are slim as a result of their disability. It is this assumed social disability that intermediaries emphasized and used to cajole young girls into woman-woman marriage relationships. In the case of Justina Obianyido of Obollo-eke and of Regina Nweke of Ovoko, their wives were from very poor homes and completely uneducated. Justina's wife, Priscilla, was born in 1969 to a father who until his death believed that girls should not be educated because such an investment financially drained their natal families, which also cease to benefit from the investment once the girls are married. With this idea, Priscilla and her sisters were not sent to school. A decade after the death of their father, Priscilla's mother abandoned her children and went into prostitution, a socially unacceptable profession in Igboland. After the death of the father and the desertion of the mother, Priscilla was hard put to fend for herself. This predicament and her slight physical deformity from ricket rendered her a prime candidate for woman-woman marriage.

Priscilla's female husband, Justina, on her part, had become blind in 1989. Prior to her loss of sight she was a successful small-scale businesswoman. She reported that since her blindness, members of her family were not forthcoming with the sort of help she needed. Her husband, a professional farmer, who earlier married a second wife because of Justina's childlessness, sought medical help for her until her disability was confirmed irreversible. The Nigerian society has no credible social services for handicapped people. Justina's alternative was to look for a fellow female to assist her and her best option was a female spouse who will show more commitment than a hired assistant and who may possibly give her the children she was unable to have. By the time of our interview,

Priscilla has lived with Justina for ten years and has given birth to a girl and three surviving boys.

Regina Nweke's wife, Ngozi, also came from a poor family. Her parents are subsistence farmers who did not generate enough income to enable them appropriately care for their children or train them for any vocation. Ngozi is still in her twenties but has given birth to two girls and a boy, the oldest of who was six years old by the time of our interview. Regina, her female husband, is not entirely childless. Of the thirteen children she gave birth to, a male and two females survived and these have all married. Regina's main reason for marrying was to have companions who will run errands for her and stay home with her in case of any happenstance. It has always been her desire, she confessed, to have another male child, since, as she pointed out, "a lone tree does not make a forest".⁸ Both Regina and Justina justified their marriages with the argument that lonely persons die early. Woman-woman relationship, to them, was among other things a panacea for loneliness.

The third case of female husband/female wife relationship encountered in the course of fieldwork involves Chioma from Ovoko whose female husband is from Uzo-Uwani, all in northern Igboland. Chioma was an unmarried expectant mother when she was wooed for the marriage. The Igbo even up till the present are not very accommodating of pregnancy outside marriage although young girls enjoy pre-marital sexual relationships. While such adventure may not be too welcome, many parents will overlook it as long as it does not result in conception. Among the Nsukka Igbo, girls are allowed discreet sexual adventure but once they are married such a conduct is seriously frowned upon.⁹ For a young and unmarried girl like Chioma to be compromised in that manner was enough to impair her chances of marriage to a suitor of her choice in spite of the fact that she completed her primary education. Chioma's predicament is best appreciated when considered that she is one of seven siblings whose father had died and whose mother is a petty trader. Chioma's female husband is a middle-age unmarried and childless professional prostitute. She married Chioma to have children for her. That Chioma was already pregnant by the time of their marriage was a bonus for her female husband. She gained Chioma as a wife and the baby as her child.

The cases discussed above reveal some of the variegated reasons for woman-woman marriage in the present time. This form of marriage has extended beyond having children for childless women and women without male issues to include serving as a medium for companionship for lonely or aging women; finding an aide for the handicapped, a service that the state should provide; and acquiring mourners in preparation for one's death.¹⁰

To demonstrate the decline in the popularity of the alliance in the present time, women aspiring to be female husbands do not marry wives from their community or from places where they are well known. Girls are sought from distant towns and in some instances are not informed of the true nature of the relationship, that is, that they would be wives to fellow women. A male accomplice is usually presented as the person interested in the girl while the actual "husband" remains concealed except to the parents or guardians of the girl. Ironically, in the cases of woman-woman marriages encountered, all the female wives had lost their biological fathers and surrogate fathers approved their marriages, attracted by the material benefits associated with it. It is worth investigating how supportive one's biological father will be of such a marriage.

Certain parents who accepted their daughter's woman-woman relationship appealed to the female husbands not to disclose the true nature of the relationship, to conceal as much as possible their identity as the "husband" of their daughters. This suggests that among those directly or indirectly involved in establishing the contract all are not proud of woman-woman relationship. Nevertheless, it is the family members of a female wife who are most eager to conceal the details of the marriage. When asked why she married Priscilla, Justina quickly corrected me and replied that she is not the one marrying Priscilla but her husband's brother. This was before she conceded some information on their marriage.

The man who is brought forward during the marriage negotiations in many cases will eventually be responsible for the sexual needs of the wife. We can from this regard woman-woman marriage as a partnership between a female husband and a male consort for the good of the former. All expenses for the marriage rites, however, are borne by the female husband. Once the bride-wealth is paid the young wife is released by her family to join her husband in accordance with the system of patrilocal residence practiced in Igboland. Some female wives were considerably surprised on realizing that their actual husbands are women. Since Igbo wives live with whoever paid their bride-wealth, such wives will under no circumstance remain in their parents' home unless their marriages have been dissolved. Meanwhile, the major actors in the contract would not allow a wife to back out of the contract without evidence of serious provocation from the female husband.

Woman-woman marriage in Igboland does not connote the existence of sexual relationship among women similar to lesbianism. It is by no means a homosexual affair and cannot also be regarded as a plain heterosexual union. Where a female husband did not arrange for a male consort for her wife, she allows her the freedom to choose a man of her choice to mate with. In parts of Abia State, such as Umuahia, wives of female

husbands are allowed to choose men of their choice for sexual gratification but it must not be an individual with questionable character. In Nsukka and its environs, it is the female husband who selects the man to do the honors. Care is taken to ensure that whoever is chosen for this role has an acceptable public image and is neither a social outcast nor a profligate. Some married female husbands like Regina may give their wives to their husbands for her sexual needs but not as a co-wife. Their unmarried colleagues will choose a man from their extended family or from elsewhere for their wives. The male consorts must visit the women in their female husband's homes.

There is a difference between a woman marrying a wife for her husband and marrying for herself. If she is marrying for her husband, she will accept and treat the new wife as a co-wife. The children from the union will be strictly her husband's. Where she is marrying for herself, even if the husband accepts to take care of the sexual needs of her wife, he has no claim to her and her children will remain jointly owned by the two women in the relationship. He may neither rebuke nor discipline the wife's wife when she misbehaves. Also, he will have no obligations to either the new wife or to her family. His relationship with the new wife strictly remains a sexual one. Some husbands, like Justina's, refuse being involved in such an arrangement. In that case, their wives look elsewhere for male consorts for their wives. It is the duty of the female husband to control and discipline her wife. Acts of indiscretion on the part of the wife is reported to her. She supervises her social conduct and ensures that it conforms to the norms of their society.

Rules, which apply to normal customary marriage contracts in Igboland, apply in woman-woman relationships. For instance, Igbo culture permits a woman to stick strictly to one man. It is frowned at if a female wife moves from one man to the other. To check against possible mis-conduct many female husbands restrict their wives to one man by choosing that man themselves.

Female husbands have their own obligations to their wives and to their wives families. It is their responsibility to take care of their wives as a man would his wife. In the second half of the 19th century female husbands were wealthy and influential women. This does not appear to be the case in the present Igbo society. Of all those interviewed, only Chioma's husband and Gladys, an administrative staff in a federal University, would be regarded as somewhat materially comfortable. Since most of the female wives had little or no formal training, their female husbands are responsible for their maintenance. Some of the female husbands interviewed started a small business for their wives to make them financially independent. The profit from such ventures, however, is not such to guarantee the complete sustenance of the women without extra provision from their

female husbands. Even in these cases, part of what a wife realizes goes to her husband. Other female husbands simply co-opted their wives in their own businesses instead of starting them on an entirely new line of business. If we go by this observation, woman-woman relationships can also be regarded as a symbiotic partnership.

The normal relationship between in-laws exists between female husbands and the parents or families of their female spouses. Thus, whenever anything crops up in the family of a female wife, the female husband is informed and she dutifully performs the appropriate roles required. Where an in-law dies, a female husband, on notification, arranges for a condolence visit and provides whatever is customarily required under such circumstances. Anytime a female wife puts to bed, the female husband notifies her parents and receives the mother for the post-natal confinement, at the end of which she sends her home with a lot of presents. During visits to the family of the wife, the wife's male consort may accompany her female husband but this is done to protect the real stakeholders in the relationship.

That woman-woman marriage is at present practiced largely by the uneducated in Igboland reveals the traditional nature of this class of people. They have largely remained unaffected by the popularity of child adoption and the successes of *in vitro* conception in the country. This group, in particular, are wary of adopting children clandestinely abandoned or given up by their mothers for adoption for the simple reason that they cannot say with any certainty what the child's progenitors are like. The circumstances under which children are abandoned in the society has created the suspicion in many that all cannot be well with either or both parents of that child. To make sure that one's child has a good background, very traditional women who need children prefer to get them through woman-woman marriages than through adoption. Another reason why people are unwilling to adopt children is the fear that some of these babies may have congenital problems that may not be obvious at birth. Also, the mother of a baby given up for adoption could be infected with AIDS, which can easily be transmitted to the baby.¹¹ More importantly, the cost of medical treatments for conception and services leading to *in vitro* fertilization is far beyond what lower class members of the society can afford.

CONSTRAINTS ON WOMAN-WOMAN MARRIAGE

Reasons have been adduced for the existence of woman-woman marriages in Igboland. In spite of the advantages and the arguments in favor of this form of marriage, it has its share of abuses. The relationship indirectly encourages a discreet form of

polygamy with its entire social ills and abuse of women. It is also an avenue for unbridled prostitution among young women who are wives to fellow women. It was discovered that it is not in all cases that female husbands carefully regulate the sexual activities of their youthful wives. Thus, some wives are allowed to meet any man they want as long as they have children for their husbands.¹² Giving men access to more than one woman and vice versa promotes the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS, which already is a scourge among youths in Africa.

Woman-woman marriage relationship, in many instances, allows some women to disregard the sanctity of marriage. Would-be female husbands in their determination to promote their interest sometimes fail to show concern for the interests of women whose husbands they co-opt to act as sexual partners to their wives. Regina was asked what would happen if a wife objects to her husband meeting the sexual needs of another woman and she retorted that the wife should quit the marriage and find another husband.

Woman-woman marriages have its share of risks like other human relationships. There is no guarantee of permanence in the relationship, just as it is in some male-female marriages. Female husbands do send away their wives for failing to give birth to a male child. Also, female wives could become targets of unwanted sexual harassment from the male spouses of their female husbands. This puts them in an uncomfortable situation and may degenerate into hostility from the man. Added to this is the confusion that results in the family when a male head feels neglected by his wife and blames this on her female wife. Some aggrieved men transfer their frustration to their wives' female spouse and may make life unpleasant for them. This was the situation in Nnennaya and Love's marriage before its dissolution. In this case Love, the wife, and her children were maltreated by Nnennaya's husband.¹³ When Love's predicament became unbearable, she left the marriage with one out of her four children.

It is not in all instances that female spouses co-exist peaceably. Intractable problems between them sometimes result in a wife secretly absconding with all, some, or none of her kids. Once she returns to her family, the female husband loses all claims to her and to the children she absconded with because, in the first instance, the two women jointly own the children. In such a development, the female husband loses most of, if not all, her investments in the relationship. What some female husbands do when they become aware of deep-seated problem in the marriage is to get their wives a separate accommodation while the contract remains in force. This occurred in Regina and Ngozi's marriage. Since their separation, Ngozi only visits with Regina. Whenever she puts to bed and has weaned the child, Regina takes it away and continues the mothering role. As a result of this arrangement Ngozi's children have formed a closer tie with Regina instead

of with Ngozi, their biological mother, and now regard the latter as a friend of the family. This points to another feature of the relationship: the possibility of transfer of natural affection from one's biological parent to a surrogate even when the two are living in proximity to each other.

Children of same-sex couples resent their parent's relationship when they grow up and become aware of the nature of the relationship. Some become rebellious to their mother's female spouse as a means of registering their displeasure and the embarrassment they feel over the union especially for being victims of peer group ridicule. We may not at present ascertain the depth of their psychological trauma but that the relationship is traumatic for children is not in doubt.

In all, woman-woman marriage remains one avenue through which Igbo women take care of their social problems within the limits of their culture and its strong patriarchal structure.

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Notes

¹ The Igbo are found in southern Nigeria. Igboland is divided unequally into two by the River Niger. The Igbo heartland, which covers a larger territorial area, is found in southeastern Nigeria while the smaller Igbo territory preferably known as Anioma is found in the southwest.

² Information on woman-woman marriage in Igboland came from interviews and discussions with the following: Regina Nweke, c. 65 years, Ohagu, Ovoko; Justina Obianyido, c. 60 years, Obollo-eke; Priscilla Obianyido, 35 years, Obollo-eke; Mr. O. Igwegbe, 44 years, Director (Administration), Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Owerri; Eucharia Nweke, 32 years, Ohagu, Ovoko; Mama Uma, 66 years, Ohafia; Nwannedi Ogbu, 80 years, Okiuga, Umuahia; Mr. and Mrs. J. and C. Ogbu, 49 and 39 years, Ihechiowa; Ogochukwu Chukwu, 25 years, Abatete; Uloma Ani, 42 years, Udi; and Dr. C. N. Uchendu, Reproductive Physiologist, University of Nigeria. The interviews were conducted between March and October 2003. All the interviews were tape recorded.

³ An observation I made in early 1980s.

⁴ Interview with Justina Obianyido.

⁵ Interview with Mr. O. Igwegbe.

⁶ Interview with Regina Nweke.

⁷ Sunday Champion, November 17, 2002, pp. 24 - 26.

⁸ Interview with Regina Nweke.

⁹ This information came from a discussion with Dr. M. U. Ozo, 78 years, Retired Chief Health Officer, Enugu, in September 1997.

¹⁰ Interviews with Regina Nweke, Eucharia Nweke, and Nwannedi Ogbu.

¹¹ Discussion with Dr. C. N. Uchendu.

¹² Discussion with Ogochukwu Chukwu.

¹³ Interview with Nwannedi Ogbu.