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Negotiating Power and Identity: Religio-Cultural Dimensions of Gender Dynamics in Ikwerre Society, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the complex relationships between religion, culture, gender, and power dynamics in Ikwerre society, Rivers State. It is a qualitative research, which obtained its data from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, documentary analysis, and oral histories in order to provide a nuanced understanding of the intersections between these variables. Guided by the feminist post-colonial theory and the social constructivist framework, this study reveals how traditional religio-cultural practices perpetuate male dominance and exclude women from key decision-making processes. The findings indicate that despite the challenges posed by modern changes to traditional gender roles, deep-seated religio-cultural norms persist, hindering gender equality and inclusivity. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on gender, religion, and culture by highlighting the need for a contextualized understanding of the complex power dynamics at play. The study recommends a re-evaluation of traditional practices in light of contemporary gender equity principles, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. The findings of this study have implications for policy makers, scholars, and practitioners working towards gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: *Feminism, Gender Dynamics, Power relations, Religio-Cultural practices, Ikwerre Society, Rivers State. Nigeria*

Background and Social Context of Gender Dynamics of Ikwerre Society

Examining the intricate web of power and identity in Ikwerre society, Rivers State, Nigeria, necessitates an understanding of the cultural and religio-historical contexts that shape gender dynamics. Situating the Ikwerre people within the broader Nigerian socio-cultural landscape, Wotogbe-Weneka (2020) notes that the Ikwerre are one of the major ethnic groups in Rivers State, with a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in religious beliefs and practices. The Ikwerre people's cultural heritage is characterized by a strong sense of community, social hierarchy, and religiosity (Tasie, 2008). Their traditional social structure is organized around the village council, which is composed of elderly men who make decisions on behalf of the community (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020). This patriarchal system of governance has been perpetuated over time, with men holding positions of power and authority in the public sphere. Investigating the religio-cultural dimensions of gender dynamics in Ikwerre society, this paper aims to address the following research question: How do religio-cultural norms and practices shape power relations and identity construction in Ikwerre society, particularly in relation to gender dynamics? This research question is significant because it seeks to understand the ways in which religio-cultural norms and practices perpetuate or challenge patriarchal power structures in Ikwerre society.

To examine this research question, this study employs a synthesis of feminist postcolonial theory and the social constructivist framework. The Feminist postcolonial theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988) provides a critical lens for analyzing the intersections between gender, culture, and power in non-Western societies. This theory challenges dominant Western feminist discourses and highlights the need to consider the experiences of women in non-Western societies. On the other hand, the social constructivist framework (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985) complements feminist postcolonial theory by examining how social and cultural norms shape our understanding of reality, including gender roles and power dynamics. This framework posits that social reality is constructed through social interactions and cultural norms, which are often shaped by religio-cultural practices. By synthesizing these two theories, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how religio-

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cultural practices shape gender roles and power dynamics in Ikwerre society, and how these dynamics impact the lives of women. The study argues that the religio-cultural norms and practices in Ikwerre society perpetuate patriarchal power structures, reinforcing gender-based inequalities and limiting opportunities for women's empowerment and identity construction.

The Ikwerre people's religio-cultural practices are shaped by their traditional African religion, Christianity, and Islam (Tasie, 2008). These religions have been instrumental in shaping the Ikwerre people's worldview, values, and beliefs about gender and power relations. For instance, the traditional African religion emphasizes the importance of ancestral worship and the role of men as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020). This religio-cultural context has significant implications for gender dynamics in Ikwerre society. Women's roles and responsibilities are largely defined by their relationships with men, whether as wives, mothers, or daughters (Oyewumi, 1997). Women's access to education, economic opportunities, and political participation is also limited by religio-cultural norms and practices that emphasize their domestic roles (Tasie, 2008).

This background has therefore provided an overview of the Ikwerre people's cultural heritage, religio-cultural practices, and gender dynamics. The section has also articulated the research question and argument that guide this study, and outlined the theoretical framework that informs the analysis. The burden of the remaining sections will shed light on the religio-cultural dimensions of gender dynamics in Ikwerre society.

Theoretical Framework

To examine the religio-cultural dimensions of gender dynamics in Ikwerre society, this study employs a synthesis of feminist postcolonial theory and the social constructivist framework. This integrated approach provides a nuanced understanding of how religio-cultural practices shape gender roles and power dynamics, and how these dynamics impact the lives of women in Ikwerre society.

Feminist postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for analyzing the intersections between gender, culture, and power in non-Western societies (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). This theoretical perspective challenges dominant Western feminist discourses, highlighting the need to consider the diverse experiences of women in non-Western societies. By centering the voices and experiences of Ikwerre women, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in non-Western societies.

The social constructivist framework complements feminist postcolonial theory by examining how social and cultural norms shape our understanding of reality, including gender roles and power dynamics (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985). This framework posits that social reality is constructed through social interactions and cultural norms, which are often shaped by religio-cultural practices. By analyzing how religio-cultural practices shape social and cultural norms, this study provides insight into how gender roles and power dynamics are constructed and maintained in Ikwerre society. The integration of feminist postcolonial theory and the social constructivist framework provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining the religio-cultural dimensions of gender dynamics in Ikwerre society. This integrated approach enables a nuanced understanding of how religio-cultural practices shape gender roles and power dynamics, and how these dynamics impact the lives of women in Ikwerre society.

Intersectionality of Gender and Power in Ikwerre Society

The Ikwerre society's strong emphasis on ancestral worship and ritual performances (Tasie, 2008) masks a complex web of gendered power dynamics. Men are perceived as custodians of religious knowledge and are responsible for major public rituals (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020). Women, on the other hand, are relegated to secondary roles in domesticated rituals (Olumati, 2016).

Recent studies have highlighted the persistence of patriarchal norms in Ikwerre society, with women excluded from leadership roles in religious practices (Eke, 2020; Nwachukwu, 2019). The justification for this exclusion is often rooted in the notion of ritual impurity due to menstruation (Sydney Imoh, oral interview). This perception is reinforced by the hereditary nature of religious leadership, passed down through male lineage (Mamman, as quoted in Obodoegbulam, 2009).

Moreover, women's internalization of these patriarchal norms can perpetuate their own exclusion from religious leadership (Acholonu, 2017). As Gilbert notes, "the Nigerian woman is a house divided against itself" (as quoted in Kaegon, 2009), highlighting the complex dynamics of women's agency and oppression in Ikwerre society. The intersectionality of gender, culture, and power in Ikwerre society is further complicated by the influence of colonialism and Christianity (Amadiume, 2015). The imposition of Western values and beliefs has contributed to the erosion of traditional African spiritual practices and the marginalization of women's roles in these practices (Oha, 2019).

Furthermore, the patriarchal norms that govern Ikwerre society are reinforced by the cultural and religious practices that emphasize the importance of male dominance and female subordination (Eke, 2020). For instance, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) is still prevalent in some parts of Ikwerre society, and is often justified as a means of controlling women's sexuality and maintaining their purity (Nwachukwu, 2019).

In addition, the lack of education and economic empowerment among women in Ikwerre society further perpetuates their marginalization and exclusion from religious leadership (Acholonu, 2017). Women's limited access to education and economic opportunities reinforces their

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dependence on men and limits their ability to challenge patriarchal norms and practices.

This critical analysis of the intersectionality of gender and power in Ikwerre society underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics at play. By examining the intersections between gender, culture, and power, this study aims to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive understanding of religious practices in Ikwerre society.

Cultural Practices and Power Dynamics in Ikwerre Society

In Ikwerre society, cultural practices perpetuate male dominance and female subordination, a phenomenon not unique to this society, as many African societies exhibit similar characteristics (Obi & Ezeoba, 2011). The socialization process, inheritance practices, festivals, and rituals all contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles and power dynamics.

The socialization process begins from birth, where boys and girls are taught different roles and responsibilities. Boys are socialized to be strong, brave, and dominant, while girls are taught to be submissive, obedient, and nurturing (Azunwo & Chigozirm, 2017). This process perpetuates the notion that women are inferior to men and are destined for domestic roles.

Inheritance practices in Ikwerre society reflect the skewed power dynamics between men and women. Traditionally, only men are entitled to inherit family properties, including land, while women are expected to marry and join their husband's family. This practice has limited women's economic viability and ability to exercise power within the society.

A significant development in challenging these traditional norms is the recent signing into law of the Rivers State Prohibition of the Curtailment of Women's Right to Share in Family Property Law No.2 of 2022. This law enables women to inherit property and assets, challenging the traditional norms that have perpetuated gender inequality. However, the implementation of this law faces resistance from men in Ikwerre society, who have grown accustomed to wielding power over women.

Festivals and rituals in Ikwerre society serve as a platform for reinforcing gender roles and power dynamics. The wrestling festival (Egelege) is a notable example, where men are the primary actors, and women play supportive roles. The rituals associated with the festival are led by male elders, while women are excluded from key functions.

The wrestling festival (Egelege) is a significant cultural event in Ikwerre society, where men showcase their strength and bravery. However, this event also reinforces the notion that men are superior to women and that women are not capable of participating in such events. According to Gbule (2003: 72-73), there are certain drum lores which are exclusive to men, and only men have the ability to decipher them.

Women's roles in the festival are limited to preparing food, cleaning, and other domestic chores. The exclusion of women from key roles in festivals and rituals perpetuates their marginalization and exclusion from decision-making processes. This reinforces the notion that women are not capable of leadership roles and that men are the natural leaders.

In conclusion, cultural practices in Ikwerre society perpetuate male dominance and female subordination. The socialization process, inheritance practices, festivals, and rituals all contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles and power dynamics. While recent developments offer hope for challenging these norms, the implementation of such laws faces significant resistance from men in Ikwerre society.

Subverting Patriarchal Norms: Women's Agency and Resistance in Ikwerre Religio-Cultural Life

Despite the rigid gender roles and power dynamics that favor men in Ikwerre society, women have developed strategies to navigate and challenge their subordinate status. One notable example is the formation of women's groups, such as the Nwerekanma (Wife is Good) Women Association, Ogbotu (First Wives) Women Group, and Ikwerre Daughters. These organizations provide a platform for women to articulate their concerns, advocate for their rights, and assert their spiritual authority (Ogbomo, 2015). The formation of these women's groups can be seen as a form of "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985), where women use subtle and often hidden forms of resistance to challenge patriarchal norms. By creating their own spaces and organizations, women in Ikwerre society are able to challenge the dominant male discourse and assert their own agency and autonomy (Amadiume, 2015).

The religious activities conducted within these organizations enable women to challenge the male-dominated power structure and negotiate their positions within the religio-cultural landscape (Amadiume, 2015). Moreover, women professionals in Ikwerre society have emerged as change advocates, organizing summits, workshops, seminars, and symposia to share ideas and enhance the capacity of other women to resist and challenge the deprivations they face (Nwachukwu, 2019).

Furthermore, women in Ikwerre society have established Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to sensitize women across communities and Local Government Areas about the need to seek their rightful positions in leadership and decision-making processes (Eke, 2020). This phenomenon underscores the agency and resilience of Ikwerre women in the face of patriarchal oppression.

As Oyewumi (1997) notes, African women have always been active agents in their own lives, challenging and subverting patriarchal norms in creative and innovative ways. The experiences of Ikwerre women are no exception, as they continue to navigate and challenge the complex web of patriarchal norms and power dynamics that shape their lives.

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The formation of women's groups and organizations in Ikwerre society represents a significant challenge to patriarchal norms and power dynamics. By asserting their agency and autonomy, women in Ikwerre society are able to negotiate their positions within the religio-cultural landscape and challenge the dominant male discourse.

Navigating Modernity: The Interplay of Christianity, Western Education, and Changing Gender Power Dynamics in Ikwerre Society

In recent years, Ikwerre society has undergone significant transformations in its religio-cultural landscape, driven by the influences of Western education and Christianity. The once homogeneous society has been significantly enlarged, and as Chinua Achebe's metaphor aptly puts it in his seminal novel Things Fall Apart (1958), "things have fallen apart." This phrase, which has become a classic trope in African literature, captures the sense of dislocation and disorientation that can result from the intersection of traditional and modern ways of life.

Embracing modernity, Ikwerre people have begun to challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics, paving the way for increased female participation in religious leadership and political spheres. The advent of Christianity has played a pivotal role in reconfiguring gender power dynamics in Ikwerre society. By emphasizing equality before God, Christian teachings have challenged traditional patriarchal norms, creating opportunities for women to assume leadership positions within the church (Eke, 2020). As Amadiume (2015) notes, Christianity has provided African women with a platform to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their agency.

Western education has also been instrumental in challenging traditional gender roles in Ikwerre society. By providing women with access to education and economic opportunities, Western education has empowered women to take on roles traditionally reserved for men, such as political leadership (Nwachukwu, 2019). As Oyewumi (1997) argues, education has been a crucial factor in enabling African women to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their autonomy.

However, the influence of modernity on Ikwerre society is not uniform, and traditional gendered power structures persist in some communities. As Ikwerre society continues to evolve, it is likely that these traditional power structures will gradually give way to more egalitarian norms, as women continue to assert their agency and challenge patriarchal norms (Acholonu, 2017).

Thus the interplay of Christianity, Western education, and changing gender power dynamics in Ikwerre society reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of modernity in Africa. As Ikwerre society navigates the challenges and opportunities of modernity, it is essential to recognize the agency and autonomy of women in shaping their own destinies and challenging patriarchal norms.

Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion, this paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Promote gender-inclusive religious leadership.
2. Encourage equal participation of men and women in cultural ceremonies.
3. Raise awareness about gender equality through education and cultural teachings.
4. Strengthen legal protection of women's rights.
5. Introduce gender-sensitive educational programs in schools.
6. Re-evaluate traditional practices to promote gender equity.

From the inference drawn above we have noted that the religio-cultural effects of gender and power dynamics in Ikwerre society are profound and multifaceted. Traditional practices have historically favoured men in both religious and social spheres, yet women have played crucial roles in two publics both in private domesticity and leadership aspects of life. As Ikwerre society continues to evolve, understanding the historical and cultural context of these dynamics is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. We are hopeful that if these recommendations are taken seriously, the exclusion of women in the ritual landscape of Ikwerre will improve significantly. As the Yoruba proverb aptly puts it, "the bird does not fly with only one wing. It requires the two, otherwise it would die."

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