

Reassessing the Igbo Kinships System

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Abstract

A relation is not someone another is acquainted with it. The dominant assumption which occupies the minds of each individual is the bloodline factor. It left many people to commit to undertakings within their capabilities. It is thus a common identity that unifies. It had made people secure. It conveyed the message that they were protected by their common ancestry. It gave people access to the opportunities of the vastness of its space. It was a force that held people together. Everything was set aside to honor its causes. As people started moving in different directions, people's perceptions of one another changed. The colonial cultures also diluted the cohesion among the people. Present realities have even weakened the entire structure. The new beliefs have worn away the essential elements that held the people together. The writer is experiencing quite a departure of what transpired in the past. Caught between two worlds, he can evaluate the past and the present, believing that the past can be partly restored. This is cultural studies that examines the size of the blood relations now and in the past. Guidelines are provided how relationships can be improved. Obviously, DNA can be used to detect how an individual relates to a group. It is a welcome development, but we keep this study within the traditional method of accounting for groups and subgroups in the large family tree.

Keywords: Uncle, Sibling, Honesty, Kinship Pattern, Generations, Apprenticeship.

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INTRODUCTION

Igbos are being indifferent to a problem that is affecting the well-being of the people. It is a gift the people over the centuries have given to themselves. It was a structure that was built along blood lines, with generations enjoying its benefits. Relationships were not interpreted the way they are currently. A non/Igbo woman married into an Igbo village found herself being referred to as our wife. But it only sent a message of how she was considered, as the females also identified her in the same manner. By the time a child became conscious of the world around him or her, the child's uncles and aunts are presented to him or her as father while the mother's sisters are mothers. The uncles and aunts do not retain these designations anymore. Mother's brother's son or daughter has undergone a change and is now cousin. This thus reflects the influence of colonialism on the people. Anichi supports this view when states thus.

The impact of capitalism and such related forces of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, transportation and communication and western education, have all tended to effect great changes in

socio-cultural life. Extended family is giving way to the nuclear family in this modern time, especially as a result of hardship. European contact has tended to drastically modify our socio-psychological states, as well as our values and belief systems. (248)

With the disappearance of this phenomenon, all the networks and protection it provided are being lost. Sensor from the circle of relations has ceased, making people to shun virtuous lives. Young people are unrestrained in their conducts. The dishonesty that is the norm today where people would have been held accountable for their actions by large family is making life uncomfortable.

The state of the household has been a recurring theme in cultural studies. The cultural norms of the Igbos are imperilled. A literary journey through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* reveals how the idea of kinship has shrunk with the passage of time. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo leaves Umuofia for Mbanta and is received in the second place by the entire clan that sees him as one of them (Achebe 142). Once that is noted, it will provide him with all the rights of the nwa nwa or son of a child of the

community. He can not only participate in their activities, but has the responsibility of reaching out a hand of assistance to anyone in the community should he be positioned to assist.

Currently, many people have fallen for the attractions of the new ways that are alien to Igbo land. Some have set the limits of what they consider family. Others have been influenced by social media, acculturation by European or English culture as well as what read and see in foreign literatures and films. The social media has modified how people perceive one another. Primary and secondary private schools now indulge in practices that further negatively affect how people relate with one another. We must provoke debate on how kinship boosts the health of a society.

What is Kinship?

Kinship is the bond people have with one another through blood relationships. When it is close, we talk about the links we have with our parents, parents of our parents, the parents of those parents in that order. It also refers to our siblings and their children. Aniche puts it this way:

Kinship is the relationship between individuals based on blood ties or marriage, adoption or any other means by which a given society recognized such. In sociology, [...] the term kinship has two aspects, namely; (a) The biological point of view in which kinship is a relationship which is obtained through two major means like blood or descent. (b) On the other hand, the socio-cultural aspect of kinship is manmade. From the point of view of biological aspect, two people are kinsmen if one is descended from the other. In other words, two people are kinsmen when the two are the descendants of a common ancestor or ancestress. (24)

Another arm are our half-brothers and half-sisters, where such exist. Our parents' siblings and the offspring are counted as well. In Igbo land, it extends vertically and horizontally. In very inconceivable ways, people link up one person to another. One would have it described thus: "My grandfather and your grandfather's great grandfather were cousins (modern cousin)." When Igbos want to tie the knot, this aspect comes to play. People draw the chart to make sure the two people are not related by blood for as long as human memory can capture.

Collective Characteristics

Every kinship lays claim to a unique and positive characteristic, in spite of how it is viewed outside. This kinship may run among people linked to a household through maternal connections. It means that any relationship leading to this tree has a common trait. It can be patrimonial, whereby it relates to persons who have a common male ancestor. When people refer to this relationship, they say "Our agburu don't tell lies," "Our agburu don't tolerate injustice," "Our agburu is upright"

or "Our agburu is very progressive," or "Our agburu is made up of fearless individuals." Pointing at a group with moral weakness, it can be said that their agburu is known for stealing or their agburu is wayward or their agburu are frank. Whatever connection they have is taken seriously.

People used to seek assistance under such covers. One could be referred to another one had never met in a strange city. The fellow is welcomed warmly based on this linkage. The assistance was done emotionally and happily. In a lot of instances, it was done without any condition attached to it. When somebody was on uzo ije or sojourning in any new place, and had a little breakthrough, he would take countless people in that order with him. Marriages were executed bearing that in mind. When the blood relationship was as close as relating with a distant uncle, the emotions grew. It became teary, when one beheld an uncle or an aunt. The uncle had the same title as one's own father. The aunts were nothing but mothers to any nephew or niece. Nephews or nieces were nwam or my child. It became sometimes doubtful if these were pretences to convert an aunty to a biological mother.

Roles of Uncles and Aunties

Uncles and aunties sometimes played the roles of the biological parents. They usually lifted the burden of upbringing of children from their own siblings. In the arrangement, every child in the household is the biological child of the mother and father in the household. Discrimination was reduced as much as possible. Uncles and aunties may not really extend the love they have for their children to their nephews and nieces. Whatever the case, every player endeavored to make the process work. Parents still favored their children in veiled manners. The biological child got more than the nephew or niece. Sometimes, upkeep of the household came from parents of the nephew or niece. With exposure to Western ways, cracks began to be apparent. The terms uncle, aunt, nephew, niece and cousin became part of the everyday vocabulary.

McConvell *et al.*, note how some kin term concepts assume new meanings. The terms are connected to the histories of the society under review. it is also linked to how societies forge the terms. McConvell *et al.*, believe that "[s]ome kinds of changes are systematic or 'evolutionary' (maybe adaptive) changes within one of the relevant systems [...] while others seem to be deeper changes (32)." In Nigeria, the term sibling was derived from the English colonizers, but McConvell *et al.*, reveal that the word was alien to the English at a time in English history, referring to it as 'adaptive change within a system' (McConvell 32).

With contact with English culture, they may have considerably adjusted English norms, especially mutual dealings among individuals, which could be

social and resource management and distribution. McConvell *et al.*, explain clearer the reality of this 'large-scale systematic borrowing of terms' when they assert that mother, father, sister, brother, son, son and daughter were derived from 'proto-Indo-European sources' while the accompanying terms uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, and cousin came from French around the 14th century. In the same vein, the model was adapted in "many northwestern European or Germanic systems (McConvell *et al.*, 32-34)."

Linguistic Borrowing

We learn from McConvell *et al.*, how avunculus or mother's brother dominated eventually when, in fact, the avunculus that depicted 'mother's brother and used side by side with father's brother patruus, was linked to father or pater, now is used exclusively, even though Latin kinship pattern leans on the matrilineal tradition. Curiously, the patrilineal aspect was lost and went out of use. The differentiation was discontinued. They make the illustration better with reference to the emergence of corn as an umbrella term. According to them.

A mundane non-kinship illustrative example of extension leading to semantic change as cultural conditions change can be seen in the movement of the word corn from being a general word for grain—as in the English "corn exchange" and in extension to "corned beef" (cured with rock salt)—to its modern narrowed meaning of maize via "Indian corn." The shift reflects not just the encounter with a new grain but also the subsequent economic importance of that grain. And it would appear that the new focus of corn led to some broadening of grain, from small granular stuff to granular stuff in general. (McConvell 32-35)

Changes have really occurred, but one can say that what has happened among Igbos is that many cousins became too slow to realize that others had pulled away somehow. It came with education. Through migration and contact with the rest of the world, new ways of relationship emerged. Uncles, especially, may become bitter rivals of one's father. The concept of rich uncles emerged. It followed that a more fortunate brother was expected to sponsor the education of or support his nephews and nieces. With new realities, this expectation would not be fulfilled. It led to recriminations.

In some instances, an uncle or aunt ceases to be one if he or she is incapable of making a financial input in the lives of the nephews and nieces. When the aunt or uncle is well off, he or she may not be disposed to helping others. The times are changing. The aunt that would usually stop one on the way to enquire about origins has passed on with the art. Such aunt would link all the curves to the hearer's amazement. Aunties now stopped at parents' sisters. They hardly have any charts. They may sometimes be corrected or derided if their behaviors fall short of expectations. Nephews and nieces

no longer tremble before aunties. The days of uncles and aunties are numbered.

Causes

Bonds between people are now weak. Distrust and ingratitude have made people to be wary of one another. People have to notify hosts beforehand. A lot of people have met with disappointment while hoping that a relation will come to their aid. Relations who still cling to the old ways really suffer hurt. They have accommodated blood relations, only to lose fortunes and sometimes face, and threats to their lives. Friends have hurt friendships. There are too many tales of lamentations everywhere. Aunties have burnt nieces' backs with hot metals.

Slowdown in the Economy and Igbo Apprenticeship System

Close kinship partly fed the Igbo apprenticeship system. What is Igbo apprenticeship system? It is a system whereby a young man comes under the tutelage of another person, who is known as the master. The apprentice learns a trade or is in the service of the master, known as oga, for a period of about seven years. The master is expected to provide the basic needs of the apprentice. The apprentice in turn supports his master in business, by contributing in the acquisition of goods, management of the business and sales. It can also be in the area of production of goods. This service is extended to the household, in which case, the apprentice serves as a domestic hand. At the end of the service, the master provides the apprentice with finance and other necessities to enable the apprentice to grow independently.

Sometimes, the relationship may deteriorate, leading to discontinuation of the contract. It could be as a result of indiscipline or theft or questionable behavior or on the part of the underling. It may also be the case of an over-bearing master. The master may search for excuses to skip the responsibility of making provisions for the apprentice's life journey. Obviously, trust is very vital in a venture of this nature. It becomes important to seek blood relations to relate with. A lot of people go outside their family circles to take apprentices. In the past, a man could sponsor over a dozen young people and set them on the stage of life, without expecting anything in return. What has sustained the apprenticeship is commerce, which is undying. Kanu analyzes the obligations and the responsibilities of the parties involved, saying it engenders honesty during the years of apprenticeship as every established acts of theft, diversion of fund and flamboyant use and wastage of business finances terminates the arrangement. Second, while the apprentice does his best to avoid the termination of the apprentice arrangement, the master is also careful to avoid a bad labeling from his community where he has picked the son of a brother or relation. To dismiss the apprentice on grounds that are not substantiated or failing to keep to the terms of

apprenticeship after the agreed number of years of service can incur the wrath of the community back at home. (65)

The system is also enjoying the weakness in tertiary education in Nigeria. Many people graduate without gaining employment. The employed are poorly paid. Yet, the apprenticeship system has not fortified kinship among Igbos.

Competition has not helped. Too many people face competitions from relations, especially on the paternal side. It is uncertain how this started. Suspicion and ego have fuelled it. Many young people are conscious of their dignity. They abhor the shame that may come from being turned down by a successful uncle. The uncles suspect the nephews may turn out to be unappreciative of any help rendered or may surpass their achievements and mock them. These days, there are new opportunities for young people. They are daring. The males and females sometimes embark on journeys across the desert to Europe. They are motivated by the stories of the few successful one who manage to come back on visits from overseas.

Men as young as 18 years now decide to be self-reliant. If they cannot embark on journeys to leave the country, they get involved in internet scam, as the process of fraudulently taking money from somebody. It can be a ploy to freight unwanted domestic pets to animal lovers in the West, whereby the supposed sender receives money covering the costs of delivery while there is non-existent animal. It can be love scam, in love scam, a male in Nigeria may pretend to be female, collecting gifts and monies from the male lover outside the country. It could be a young man who makes an older woman overseas fall in love with him. The amount of money the fraudster can draw from a single person can be staggering. It can also be a false business transaction, whereby, unknown to the victim, the person on the other side impersonates a business partner and cashes hundreds of millions of dollars. Money transfer of a top football club in Europe may be intercepted by a scammer. Some hack into people's accounts in Nigeria or overseas. During the Covid-19 pandemic, about a billion dollars Covid-19 welfare money meant for U.S. citizens were diverted to accounts of some Nigerians. Many of the perpetrators are teenagers. The scheme is a descendant of the contract fraud called 419. 419 fraudsters were much older in their time. Some girls are also part of various schemes, sometimes running their own outfits. A young lady makes money from relationships with multiple men. She can acquire enough to live comfortably and even pay her way through school. Such person would be too radical for the traditional role of nephew or niece. It means that there is a crack in the uncle and aunt and nephew and niece relationship. Besides, some of the young people have tasted independence and turning into secret cult members in schools. Secret cult members are known to be tempestuous and to undertake certain duties and

engaging in mob fights. The fallouts are killings and reprisal killings. They can hardly be tamed, either by parents or relations. This obviously has led to a lot of conflicts in society.

The moral values in Nigeria have broken down. Older people have abdicated their roles as honorable people, involving in deceit and lies in ways that were unknown. It can also be seen in the lives of office holders. Public officials lie without shame. Government officials publicly make outrageous statements. Many get involved in theft and soil their honor, if they have any. The young people have little respect for older people. People do not live their lives the way it was in the past. A niece can insult and be prepared for fist fight with her paternal aunty, even with the girl's mother's approval. Previously, there would be consequences for such acts, after which the aunty may be reprimanded if she were at fault. Taboos are no longer taboos. The harsh economy has thrown people apart. There has been a high rate of migration to the urban areas. It has widened and spread to different places around the globe. Procreation has been on the increase. Many people go after their own businesses. Therefore, people lose focus of who their relations are.

External Influence

The Igbo society has been influenced a great deal by foreign cultures. In the West and in some Asian countries like China, people may stop counting after the immediate cousins. In some cultures, cousins inter marry. People in the West talk about father, mother and the two or three children or even one child. Igbos embraced monogamy. It also came with reducing the number of children a couple begets. It shaved off the cumbersome extended family. Aunty is known as aunty, uncle as uncle. Hardly any child refers to his or her aunty as mother.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Kinship

It curbs the possibility of marriage. In some cases, observers complain that Igbos go too far in tracing blood relationships. To get married, the couple may never have any foreseeable blood connection. Igbo land being comparatively small, kindreds do not disperse out of hearing distances. Refusal of assent to marriage on this score has been unnecessary in a lot of instances. It has more advantages, though. Among Igbos, getting married among family relations is almost ruled out. Therefore, the unions result in healthy offsprings. Scientists prove that societies where cousins have a high level of deformities in the children. It surely is incestuous. There should be a reasonable gap before coitus can take place between humans. Without the traditional Igbo practice, the case of in-breeding may occur. It takes time sometimes, but it is still beneficial to make enquiries.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that Igboland must have to halt the spate of migration outside southern Nigeria. They can do

this by building industries and putting in place those things that draw people to distant places. People will still move to distant lands, but a people can tame this development if everybody is bleeding from it. A process should be put in place to bring back trust and honor in Igbo society. Dishonest acts must be punished. One who borrows money from a relation must be made to pay back or be remorseful. One who receives help from another must show appreciation for the assistance. Fraudulent acts like internet scams should be condemned. People's means of income must be disclosed to the public. Public office holders should be discouraged from enriching themselves from public wealth. Nephews and nieces should stop discrediting uncles and aunts who are incapable of assisting them. If an uncle wishes, there are ways he can support his other relations without giving out money. Nephews and nieces need guidance. They can be prevented from repeating the mistakes made by the older ones.

Private schools should cease requiring a child to always buy new text books for school. Many people used books handed down from older siblings, uncles and aunts. A child has a bond with the older ones when he sees 'Adaora, St. Ann's Girls' Secondary School, Uzuakoli, 1996. The book may have passed through three hands. Communities should begin a program, where people will re-enact the uncle and aunt discourse. A little can still be done. Aunts and uncles must be compelled to desist from appearing like monsters before the children of their siblings. Some nephews and nieces may be irredeemable. It is to be expected. People can keep to themselves in such instances. Communities should emphasize the importance of this kinship. Nephews and nieces, who think that a poor uncle or niece is useless, must have a rethink. A lot of people may be poor because they lack the opportunities to make their lives better. There are persons who are poor because they live upright lives in a world full of deceit.

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