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Adultery in Igbo Society: *Consequences for Women*

By Chuka Odike

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ADULTERY IN IGBO SOCIETY

Adultery in Igbo Society: Consequences for Women

By Chuka Odike · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

In traditional Igbo society, adultery—defined as a married woman engaging in sexual relations outside her marriage—is considered a serious transgression with significant social and spiritual repercussions.

01

Cultural and Social Implications

Adultery by a woman is perceived as a violation of marital vows and an affront to communal values. Such actions can lead to severe consequences, including:

to the ordinary forbidden animals the *Ẹzana* of Awka does not eat eggs, all birds, dog and ewe sheep, bush-buck, civet cat, giant bush rat, bush fowl and yams that it has touched, ground squirrel, and a kind of fish. In one quarter of Awka, however, the *Ẹzana* may sacrifice eggs and eat them, and bush fowl is the only bird he may not eat. In Agolo he forbids snails and a tuber called *qna*, like a yam; he may not eat a cock before it can crow, nor a snake.

If his wives do not wash after going out it means that they wish his death; they may not cook for him; if they commit adultery they must come to the *Ẹzana* and bring cowries, a ram and a fowl and offer excuses; all the quarter join in levying a fine upon the lover.

At Nneni he may not eat anything sacrificed on account of the violation of a prohibition, nor may he cross a river until a sacrifice has been performed by an *Nri* man. The corpse of a dead *Ẹzana* is not carried on men's heads but on their shoulders.

With regard to the shrine of the ground (*ana*), ewe sheep, dogs, cocks that have not crowed, may not be sacrificed, and only such rams as are white or partly white.

At *Nqfia* and *Amañsi* customs of wrestling and dancing are found in honour of the *ana*, but at different times of the year.

Anthropological report on the Ibo speaking people of the Awka district

- **Ejection from Matrimonial Home:** A woman found guilty of adultery may be expelled from her husband's house, leading to social ostracism and loss of status within the community.
- **Denial of Access to Children:** In some cases, the woman may be restricted from seeing her children, further intensifying her social isolation.
- **Spiritual Consequences:** Traditional beliefs hold that a woman's infidelity can invoke ancestral wrath, potentially bringing misfortune or calamity upon her family.

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V.—NSQ ANI.

A characteristic of the life of these Ibo is the existence of numbers of forbidden acts, known as nsq ani, which may conveniently be termed bans, as, strictly speaking, they are not tabus, though that term would be applied to them by many authorities. These bans affect matrimonial relations, and in fact sexual relations generally, the birth and behaviour of children and, among adults, more especially of women; they also deal with animals in their relation to man and in their relations to their own and other species; more rarely they bear upon astronomy or botany. The greater number of them seem to be known wherever I went in the Awka district, though it was difficult to ascertain this with certainty without putting leading questions. In some cases one town permits what another forbids; but this may well be due to the fact that a sacrifice has been offered to the ajana by a man of Aguku, this being the recognized means of varying or abolishing the bans.

As to how they came into existence I got no precise information; At Aguku, the belief appeared to be that they had existed from time immemorial; elsewhere, especially at Mbawku, it appeared that a ban could be established by offering a sacrifice to the ajana and reciting the action that was to be forbidden; as there was no mention of the services of an Nri man in this connection, the ignorance of the Aguku people is perhaps explained. These bans are of importance in two ways: in the first place owing to the amount of infanticide which they cause, in the second place by the destruction of livestock that they cause, firstly, as a direct result of the violation of a ban, secondly, in the purificatory sacrifices enjoined as a reparation whether animals are or are not concerned in the original violation of the ban.

Anthropological Report on the Ibo speaking people of the Awka district.

02

Gender Disparities in Adultery Perceptions

Notably, there exists a gender bias in the perception and punishment of adultery within Igbo culture. While women's infidelity attracts severe sanctions, men's extramarital affairs often receive minimal attention, reflecting a patriarchal double standard.

Contemporary Perspectives

Modern influences, including legal frameworks and human rights advocacy, challenge these traditional practices. There is a growing call for gender equity and the protection of women's rights, prompting a reevaluation of customary laws that disproportionately penalize women for adultery.

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infantry child, descending from Heaven, said that unless the chief revoked the juju it could not [be] let out from its mother. So both would die. I was present when the woman delivered the message. Chief Amakiri was very grieved when he received it. We begged him to revoke the juju. Then he sent her away to Minama where she bore the child. She had been cured [from the effects of the juju] before she gave birth.'

At Obokohia (Ikwerri Ibo), should a member of a club or 'age class' be proved guilty of adultery with the wife of another member, the fine was paid to the club. A remnant of this custom still survives among Ibibio, while with the Atamm Ekoi even at the present day a wife is regarded as the property of her husband's age class, and any man who refuses to allow a member of his 'company' to have access to her is punished.

'Among Ibo, in olden days, best friends often swore juju together, after which they could exchange wives without damage. In such relationship there was no shame.'

In speaking of the various cults, secret societies and clubs in vogue among his countrymen, Obi, the Awka-Aro already quoted, said :

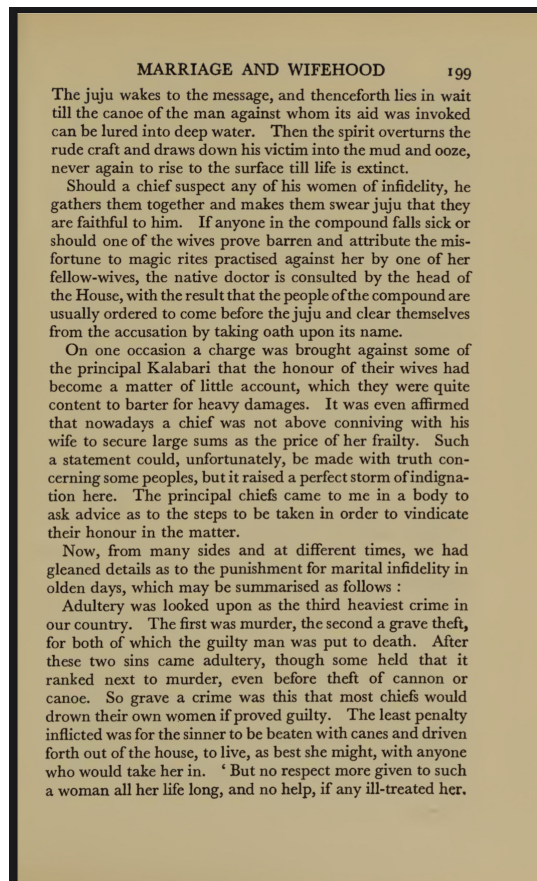
'In our part there is one very strong juju called Akpotap. He tells all country when a man is new married and his wife sleeps for house. Then the husband's company comes and knocks and says to him : "Want your wife." Husband says : "All right," and gives tombo. Then they go inside. . . . The juju orders this, because it makes a woman bear plenty piccans. There is no shame in such a thing, either for the woman or for her husband ; for such is the law of that juju.'

Although it is, unfortunately, a matter beyond dispute that women are less chaste in the present day than in former times when penalties were more severe, yet, though some appear shameless, many of those of this region are by no means without shame when discovered in infidelity. Some, indeed, prefer death to life after their frailty has been found out. In one case (No. 866) brought before the Native Court at Degama, Thompson Don Pedro claimed £50 damages

Tribes of the Niger Delta

Conclusion

Adultery committed by a woman in Igbo society carries profound social, spiritual, and familial consequences, underscoring the community's emphasis on marital fidelity. However, contemporary movements toward gender equality are fostering critical discussions aimed at reforming these traditional norms to ensure fairness and justice for all individuals, regardless of gender.



Tribes of the Niger Delta

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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