

CULTURAL APPROACHES TO SEXUAL MATTERS IN NIGERIA WITH REGARD TO WOMEN AND GIRLS: FOCUS ON MBANESE CLAN

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Abstract

Cultural Approaches to sexual matters in Nigeria and Mbanese clan in the 21st century undermines the health, dignity, security, and autonomy of women and girls, its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. This paper examines the cultural approaches to issues of child marriage/forced marriage, female circumcision, sexual assaults, widowhood practices and socio-economic violence. It is observed that cultural approaches to sexual matters is a common phenomenon in the society and that the majority of the people in Nigeria and in Mbanese clan in particular do not consider it a problem or crime. While applying Liberal and Socialist Feminist theory in the study, the paper recommends aggressive education and training that cuts across every strata of the society. Furthermore, it insists that a collective measure that comprises all stakeholders such as the local, state and federal government as well as the international agencies are required for the effective eradication of cultural approaches that undermines the women. Methodically, the study was dimensionally eclectic, sequel to the abundance of primary and secondary information.

Keywords: Culture, Women, Security, Society, Tradition

Introduction

Cultural approaches to sexual matters with regard to women and girls, is a global problem especially in Africa where it has in the 21st century, assumed an alarming proportion and dimension. In Nigeria and Mbanese clan in particular, the cultural approaches to sexual matters in relation to women and girls has attained frightening and unacceptable levels. News channels are littered with stories of wife battery, rape of minors, torture and inflicting of serious bodily harm and in fact death of women in the hands of family members, spouses, mistresses and other adults.¹ The statistics are startling but the spiritual damage, the suffering, the pain and hunger cannot be given in figures. Women from different communities, ethnic groups, religious, cultural and social backgrounds: literate or illiterate; rich or poor; in peace time or in war, continue to be undermined and suffer one form of violence or the other at the hands of the community or their own family. It is a fact that gender based violence as a phenomenon is not only on the increase, but also has no respect for age, social status, or geography. It is in the cities even among those who have reached stardom, among the wealthy, the ghetto dwellers and perhaps worst in rural areas. This phenomenon gains support from archaic cultures, backward beliefs and sexist religious teachings that portray women as rewards which men must

appropriate. Not only are these beliefs backward, nativistic, anachronistic, out of touch with the times and also an antithesis of rational reasoning, it is also devoid of civility and human decency.²

It is sad that many of the victims find it difficult to come out in the open to talk about the heinous act or expose the perpetrators. The reasons for such silence are sometimes cultural. A wide range of discriminatory and violent practices are institutionalized in cultural traditions and therefore legitimated as social norms. Thus, this paper focuses on the cultural approaches to issues on child marriage/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, rape/sexual assaults, Harmful traditional widowhood practices and psychological violence. The effects of the above acts on the women and girls are considered and the possible solutions to the problems caused are highlighted.

Conceptual Clarification

Culture

Culture has been defined in various ways to mean a way of life of a people. Therefore, culture is a totality of the customs, traditions, beliefs, behavior, dressing and attitude to life among others of a people which varies from society to society. It is also referred to as a complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.³

Culture has both material and non-material aspects. The material aspect of culture is made up of the physio-socio environment, objectively expressed in things made from inorganic elements including tools, weapons and machines. The non-material components of culture composed of behavior, attributes, ideas, desires, values and norms of a group of people expressed in the form of customs, folkways, mores and language. This non-material aspect of culture tends to determine individual behavior, social structure and social organization.⁴ It also tends to dictate many of the societal social arrangements including gender role ideologies

Culture determines the positions and roles ascribed to individuals in the society and the value and rewards attached to such roles. Most cultures in Africa and Nigeria in particular ascribe various roles to males and females. Masculinity and femininity is defined by culture. The experience in most cultures is that women's position and roles are less valued compared to those of the men. Though this is general in most Nigerian Cultures, the specific realities vary from culture to culture.⁵

Women and girls are born into a culture of male supremacy. This is a feature of the Mbanese traditional society and Nigeria in general which is patriarchal in structure. This structure enables the male to dominate the female and gives him control over female sexuality. There is no doubt that certain cultural practices, in relation to sexual matters, amount to acts of violence.

Sexuality

Sexuality can be referred to as the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours of individuals. Its dimensions include the anatomy, physiology and biochemistry of the sexual

response and reproductive system; gender identity, sexual orientation, roles and personality; as well as thoughts, attachments, physical and emotional expressions, and relationships.⁶ Sexuality encompasses nearly every aspect of our being, from attitudes and values, to feelings and experiences. It is influenced by the individual, family, culture, religion/spirituality, laws, professions, institutions, science, and politics.⁷ Feminists argued that women's sexuality is socially shaped in ways that sustain men's social and political dominance. For example, the view of women's sexuality as being oriented to pleasing men or driven by a maternal instinct reinforced the idea that women's appropriate social role should be that of wife and mother. In short, women's sexuality, like men's, is not fixed by nature but shaped by social forces and circumstances, by factors such as economic independence, social values, peers, or family culture.⁸ With the above exposition on culture and sexuality, and the position of women and girls under the Nigerian culture, certain sexual matters in relation to the women and girls are considered from cultural perspectives.

A Geographical Description of Mbanese Clan

The geographical location of Mbanese is important in the understanding of the present analysis. Indeed, as Professor J.C Anene has pointed out, "the historical experiences of a community is generally written in its geographical features".⁹ Mbanese is comprised of five communities namely Osumenyi, Ezinifite, Utu, Ebenato and Akwaihedi in Nnewi South Local Government Area in Anambra State. Mbanese shares boundaries with Amichi on the North, Abatete and Oraukwu on the South. It shares boundaries with Ogbodi and Unubi on the Eastern side and it is bordered on the Western side by Ekwulu. The climate is fairly hot, the hottest period being February and March while the coldest is in raining months of June, July and September. There is usually a little break towards the end of July or the beginning of August. Mbanese is situated on a plain, a relatively upland rising very gradually from all corners towards a central terminating point in Osumenyi. The clan is endowed with natural springs among which includes Ochi, Ngwuja, Nwota, Ahammiri, Iyioku, Ulasi and Ugwa. Ugwa flows through Akwaihedi into Ulasi river in Ezinifite. The Ulasi river flows through many towns including Ukpok and Okija on its way to the River Niger through Oguta. The soil of Mbanese is of fair fertility because of overuse and lack of proper manuring. Mbanese is accessible from all corners. It is some thirty-five kilometres from Onitsha through Nnewi, less than thirty-two kilometres to Awka (the Anambra state capital) through Igboekwu and about eight kilometres to Uga in Aguata Local Government Area.

Theoretical Guide

It has become imperative to situate historical research on relevant social theories for a clearer understanding of the phenomenon and dynamics of the events. On this note, theoretical framework provides a particular perspective or lens, through which a topic is examined. This study is anchored on Liberal and Socialist Feminist theory. Feminists and gender scholars have rationalized various theories on women, which are often situated within the boundaries of physiology/biology, tradition, culture, materials and modernity. Feminism is a social theory or political involvement that supports the equality of both sexes in all aspects of public and private life, specifically, a theory or movement that argues that legal and social restrictions on females must be removed in order to bring about such equality. The major assumption of feminist theory

is that the gender differentiation and hence relegation of the women to the background is caused by the socialization process. Most Feminists, therefore, argue that re-socialization and awareness of the marginal position of women in the society is the key to gender equality.

Feminist point out that all of us step into the world as men or women, regardless of the economic system. Our gender identity is not superficial part of our lives, but shapes the personal and social aspects of our lives in important ways. Feminists view gender as a social identity and a set norm that guide behavior. We are not men or women but acquire these gender identities through a social process of learning and sometimes coercion. Feminist believe that our sexual desires, feelings, and preferences are imprinted by gender. Feminist say that individuals acquire a sexual nature as they develop a gender identity.¹⁰

Liberal feminism conceives of freedom as personal autonomy, living a life of one's own choosing, and political autonomy being co-author of the conditions under which one lives. Liberal feminists hold that the exercise of personal autonomy depends on certain enabling conditions that are insufficiently present in women's lives, or that social arrangements often fail to respect women's personal autonomy and other elements of women's flourishing. They hold also that women's needs and interest are insufficiently reflected in the basic conditions under which they live, and that those conditions lack legitimacy because women are inadequately represented in the processes of democratic self-determination. They also conceive that autonomy deficits like these are due to the "gender system" or the patriarchal nature of inherited traditions and institutions and that the women's movement should work to identify and remedy them and the state can and should be the women's movement ally in promoting women's autonomy.¹¹

The Liberal perspective on feminism applauds the importance of equality, it seeks individualistic equality of men and women through political and legal reform without altering the structure of the society. The main contribution of this strand of feminism has been to show how much modern society discriminates against women by insisting that women and men must be treated differently. Liberal feminist theory is of the view that biological differences should be ignored in order to achieve gender equality. Women and men should be treated in a gender-neutral manner, especially under the law.

The Socialist Feminism argues that women's oppression is caused by their economic dependence and economic production system of sexuality, childbearing and childrearing and care for the family. The Socialist feminism also expanded the ideas of Marxist feminism beyond the family and the economy. Socialist feminism argues that gender inequality is not just the result of women's oppression as an unpaid worker for the family and as a low-paid worker in the economy. There are broader injustices from the effects of gender and class and gender and racial ethnic status.¹² Socialist feminism calls for a redistribution of economic and social power sharing of family work which would give women the opportunity to accumulate the economic and social power monopolized by men, thereby having access to high-paying jobs and positions of power. This paper therefore adopts the liberal feminism and socialist feminism, because if made practicable in patriarchal societies, it will enhance the contributions of both sexes to the socio-economic development of the society and by so doing the socio-cultural and economic imbalances that hinders women will be addressed.

Forms of Cultural Approaches to Sexual Matters in Mbanese Clan

Cultural approaches to Sexual matters manifests in various forms in Mbanese and Nigeria in general, depending on the geography and cultural setting of the people. This paper shall discuss a few of the forms and attempt to highlight particularly the harmful aspects of the cultures that shield these practices that go on daily while the public turns a blind eye.

Physical Violence

Traditional or cultural practices that are out of sync with reality and the times have continued to form platforms that are used to hold down women in various ways in Nigeria. These constitute the foundation upon which other wrong assumptions are built. Some of the harmful and humiliating physical violence experienced by women in Mbanese clan include: slaps, shoves, hits, punches, kicking, twisting of arms, chocking, being stabbed. These various types of inhumanity occur daily inside homes in Mbanese clan and Nigeria in general. As have already mentioned, some of these crimes are supported by cultural and religious beliefs that place women at vulnerable positions. Women are seen as assets, gifts or rewards; perhaps for ignorance or illiteracy rather than as humans who deserve protection and support from the society. With this mindset, the girl child is seen first and foremost not a human being but as someone's wife. Often times, parents do not consider it worthwhile to educate girls because doing so amounts to expense and not investment. These are very common practices in Mbanese clan¹³ and across Nigeria. Women are daily beaten and are also treated as family assets that can be given away at will and without their consent.

Harmful Traditional Widowhood Practices

Under the guise of culture and tradition, widows are subjected to all sorts of inhuman and evil practices such as being forced to drink the water used to bath the corpse of their husbands. Apart from being compelled to drink bath water, these windows are often subjected into sleeping with the corpses, sitting on the floor and eating from an unwashed and/or broken plates etc.¹⁴ All these evil practices are imposed on the women who are often accused of killing their husbands. While the poor women are being forcefully passed through hell, the relations of their husbands share the assets and whatever the deceased has left. It seems, the richer the deceased, the likely the possibility the wife killed him. In fact, the richer the deceased, the more cultural rites and practices the widow must pass through.

Leviratic practices still persist in most cultures in Nigeria. This is a practice where widows are inherited as property. They are not only inherited, their children are severed and uprooted from them and in addition to that, they are denied the right to inherit their late husband's properties. Sometimes they are inherited and left with the responsibility of fending for their own children.

On the death of their husbands, some widows are forcefully ejected from their husband's homes and in the process often maimed, brutalized and are physically assaulted.

Female Genital Mutilation

Perhaps one of the most repulsive restrictions on women's sexuality is the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a process of female circumcision performed on young girls in childhood. Female circumcision is considered a significant custom in dozens of countries across Africa, Asia and Middle East, where girls may be seen as impure and unworthy of marriage if they have not undergone it.¹⁵ In Mbanese clan just like in some parts of Nigeria, the intention of this procedure is to curtail the sexual drive of girls, and to keep them less promiscuous until marriage. Customary dictates justify the process as an indigenous measure improvised to prevent teenage pregnancy and to curtail sexually transmitted diseases which the young girls might be subjected to before they are wise to make rational decisions about sexual relations. The effects of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are numerous, including medical, gynecological, emotional and psychological. Immediate complications such as severe blood loss leading to anemia, infections due to unsterilized tools deployed and even death could result. There are certainly long term implications such as chronic pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility etc. that victims could suffer in life.

Sexual Crimes/Rape

There are myriads of sexual crimes that are committed against women in Mbanese clan on a daily basis. Again these are not restricted to the streets but also take place within families. This means that a woman or a young girl could either be assaulted by someone who is not related to her in any way, in the public or by a family member inside the home. These crimes include incest, sexual harassment in the streets, offices, markets, rape of minors and indecent assault of young girls, child pornography. Rape can simply be defined as having sex with a woman without her agreement, which in law is called consent. According to Section 357 of the Criminal Code and relevant provision of Penal Code, rape implies unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl without her consent.¹⁶ The law recognizes that consent can be obtained by force, fear of harm, by means of false and fraudulent representation as to the nature of the act or by means of threat or intimidation of any kind. Thus, if the consent is induced by any of the aforementioned, the act will still qualify as rape. It is based on this understanding that the issue of rape within marriage can be appreciated. Women's reproductive rights must be acknowledged and respected at all times.

Similarly, adult rapists often threaten their victims particularly the minors with death or false promises of things they would never do. Some of the rapists are close family members such as fathers, uncles, cousins and other blood relations and neighbours. Often times this category of rape is seldom discussed in public because of what is referred to as family secrets. At worst, the victim might be blamed and punished for trying to disgrace the family. Incest constitutes one of the most dangerous forms of gender-based violence because of the silence, secrecy and denial that surround it. Because incest is considered a taboo in Mbanese clan and most Nigerian

societies, the often young victim is not believed, and no attempts made to protect her from her accuser. As a result, incest might go on for a long time unexposed.

Another form of sexual crime is indecent assault which can be referred to as sexual exploitation through force marriage, seduction or prostitution of a young girl below the age of sixteen. Again, religious myths and interpretations are employed to justify this abuse and violence against the girl child in Mbanese Clan. Often times the children are given away to old men perhaps older than their grandparents. For various reasons including poverty, ignorance and inhumanity, the children are forced to marry people they do not even know; these so-called husbands abuse and destroy their innocent lives.¹⁷ The greatest incidences' of VVF are the outcome of this vicious and dangerous violence against girl children.

Although female employees in the government sector receive the same pay with their male peers, female employees in both the private and public sectors face a common problem of sexual harassment in Mbanese clan and in Nigeria in general. Sexual harassment connotes unwanted and unwelcomed sexual advances exhibited towards women. This includes unwanted and unwarranted sexual speech, looks, and gestures targeted at women because wherever these male assailants see the opposite sex, their unchecked rebel emotions go out of control. The uncontrollable lust from these predators ultimately leads to sexual assault, molestation, harassment and rape. Sexual harassment can almost be touched and felt in the street, in the neighborhood, at home and very common in school where young adults and teenagers express their liberties. It is also rampant in workplaces, and other public arenas. Significant effort is required to mitigate the menace of sexual harassment in Nigeria.

Psychological violence

This form of cultural approach to sexuality can include a range of controlling behaviours such as isolation from family and friends, neglect, verbal abuse resulting in deep rooted fear, intimidation, continual humiliation, exhaustion and trauma to the victim, threats against children or being threatened with injury or death. This type of domestic violence is common among spouses, often, the aggrieved husband could starve the wife of food and other basic necessities. This type of violence also manifests in refusal to talk to her, neglect and physical, sexual, and financial abandonment. This type of violence is not immediately discernable except the victim opens up. The essence of this type of violence is more common among polygamous families. It is targeted at starving a partner into submission. Psychological violence is subtle and may not easily be noticed but it is usually a velvet glove concealing an iron fist. It is a situation riddled with acute contradictions.

Financial or Economic Abuse

Another form of cultural approaches to sexuality in Mbanese clan is financial abandonment. This includes forcibly controlling the resources of the woman by the aggrieved husband. It can also involve stealing cash, not allowing a victim to take part in any financial decisions or preventing a victim from having a job. In addition to that, the husband claims ownership of the woman's money and properties as far as he is the head of the family. Thus women are put in

such an excruciating circumstance such that they have to demand money from their husbands to buy basically everything ranging from soap, pepper, body cream among others. This kind of warped philosophy is largely responsible for why women are lowly esteemed and maltreated even by family members.

Factors Contributing to Cultural Approaches Mbanese Clan

Socio-Cultural Factors

Based on the socio-cultural background of African peoples, particularly the fact that most Nigerian societies and Mbanese clan in particular are patriarchal in nature, women are seen as weak physiologically. Women are seen as wives and mothers and no more. At worst, because of the coloration provided by recent religious teachings, women are now looked upon as assets to be acquired and disposed of at will. In Mbanese, particularly among people that think lowly of women, it is common to hear people say things like “women’s education ends in the kitchen”. It is therefore not surprising that much is expected of women in such backward societies. Such reasoning has reserved ordinary chores such as teaching in primary schools, teaching in children’s Sunday school, cooking, receptionist, washing and cleaning, taking care of children and home, knitting etc. These ascribed roles are looked down upon by the men as a result; women who perform them are easily assaulted and abused by men.

Mbanese clan and most Nigeria societies do not give much recognition to women and children. They do not own property like land. They are regarded as slaves and properties of men. They do not participate in decision making even in issues that relate to their own interests, they don’t participate in certain activities, festivals and rituals and must avoid certain foods and meats because of cultural or customary demands. In Mbanese clan, women are not given adequate attention in the area of education except in recent times, parents did not send their daughters to school instead it was mainly male children that were sent to school.²⁰

Poverty and Deprivation

The poorest of the poor in Mbanese clan are believed to be women. Not only are they poor and vulnerable, various cultural explanations and conventions seem to have sealed their fate and apportioned to them the lowest rung of the ladder. Because most women are disempowered economically they are easily assaulted and abused. They are deprived of some economic and financial resources.¹⁸ For instance, it is not news to state that certain cultural practices allow for widows to be denied access to their late husband’s entitlements. This is the worst form of cultural approaches to sexuality in relation to women and its consequences have multiplier effects on the society.¹⁹

Consequences of Cultural Approaches to Sexuality with Regards to Women and Girls

Cultural approaches to sexual matters has led to marriage break ups in Mbanese clan. Investigation has shown that most of the marriage break ups are as a result of violence between the husband and wife or between the woman and the husband's parents or relations. It is also true that issues relating to gender based violence evoke shame and blame, social stigma, and often rejection by the survivor/victim's family. Stigma and rejection can be easily severe when the survivor/victim speaks out or reports the incident. This can lead to divorce and rejection by her family members who may also be battering women. Often, victims and survivors live the rest of their lives with permanent marks as reminders. These may include but not limited to wounds, swollen face or body, mental disabilities, maiming, crippling, blindness, mental derangement or inability to have children.²⁰

Commenting on the effects of women battering, the WHO agreed on this point that women suffer from gynecological problems, chronic pelvic pains, permanent disabilities, headache, miscarriage, sexual dysfunctions, suicide among others.²¹ Effects may also include diseases such as gonorrhea, HIV/AIDS or Vesico Vagina Fistulae(VVF), forced isolation, broken personality, prostitution etc. In addition to physical effects, women also experienced Psychological trauma. Over thinking on the part of the woman has often times resulted to health issues such as stroke which can lead to death.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to put into perspective the devastating and traumatic experiences suffered by women and girls in Mbanese clan just like their counterparts in other parts of Nigeria. Though cultural approaches to sexuality is common and grave in effects, response by society and law enforcement agencies like the Police, Legal practitioners, religious organizations, family members and friends, has been rather disappointing. Survivors and victims of the crimes are instead often blamed for their plight. When a woman is battered by her husband it is often considered private or family matter even by family members or neighbors. Sometimes victims are blamed for lack of submission. The influence of culture has really affected women's responses to violence against, even when they feel aggrieved at having been dehumanized, they choose to live with the situation rather than opt not to tolerate. Women battering is usually under reported even though it is a criminal act. For instance, disputes within the family and different forms of physical abuse are not seen as criminal acts by the perpetrators, the victims themselves or by the legal system. Some women are battered regularly by their husbands but they hardly report these cases because in many cases, they are further humiliated by security agents under the pretense that it is a minor offence. Similarly, sexually abused girls in the home (victims of incest) are often not believed when they report. Instead they are reprimanded for telling lies. Rape victims are often accused of dressing provocatively or behaving in manners that suggested to the rapists as though the victims were in heat. Widows are also maltreated and ill treatment meted out to them while the public turns a blind eye. By so doing, no attention is paid to the perpetrators (suspect) for the fact that a crime has been committed.

Recommendations

Considering the fact that cultural approaches to sexuality with regard to women and girls has become a major cause of stress, psychological breakdown and in real cases death, the need to re-engineer the social reality in conformity with the changing times cannot be overemphasized. While condemning the perpetration of this deleterious phenomenon on women in Mbanese clan, it is pontificated that such practice which is socio-cultural which violate the rights of women must be eliminated. There exists the dire need to engage the process of bringing about change in behaviors and attitudes, policies and practices with regard to cultural approaches to sexuality with regard to women and girls. This can be achieved through sustained advocacy. Government should organize workshops and seminars in both urban and rural areas. Also non-government organizations should make wider their sensitization projects to the rural areas through electronic and print media. To ensure that the awareness of cultural approaches to sexuality which undermines women and girls permeates the grassroots, non-governmental organizations should work with Ministry of Social Welfare and Women Affairs.

Women access to government facilities such as loans should be increased. This will provide a better opportunity for women to engage in productive ventures that will boost their economic base, promote good health, raise their emotional behaviours, standard of living, give them sense of belonging, and above all assist them to compete with men economically and socio-politically especially in education. There should be institutional mechanisms where women and girls who are victims of violence can feel free to report acts of violence against them in a safe and confidential environment. Again, there is need for counselling centres to be established and adequate provisions should be made to eliminate violence in Mbanese clan and in Nigeria in general. In addition to that, government and non-governmental organizations should make efforts to establish these agencies that deal with violence against women in the rural areas. This will enable women in the rural area to have access to these agencies and equally benefit from their services just as women in the urban area. Lastly, victims of domestic violence and gender based violence in general should avoid the culture of silence and not reporting their cases to these agencies. They should be eager to visit these agencies in order to alleviate their problem and not to resign to their fate. Lastly the harmful cultural practices meted out to the widows should be abrogated.

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