Same-Sex (Gay/Lesbian) Marriage and Inter-female Hostility in Igbo Society

Ujubonu J. Okide
University of Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

In the light of the contemporary issue of same-sex (gay/lesbian) marriage, our professional concern with inter-female hostility in Igbo society readily stimulates us to ponder on its permissibility or otherwise in the Igbo world. This is because, given our research background and findings on the issue of inter-female hostility in Igbo society, we see that the guiding values for both ways of life – i.e. same-sex (gay/lesbian) marriage and inter-female hostility – are both universally antagonizing and regionally intolerable, with respect to Igbo culture. In Igbo land, it is granted for marriage to exist basically between a man and a woman. However, there are cases where marriage between an elderly woman and a younger woman is permissible. It is important to note at this point that such marriage is not in any way lesbian marriage, even though it is the same gender marriage. This form of marriage is both traditionally and socially acceptable, and it is contracted for the sake of procreation to perpetuate a family name. For such marriages, there is no sexual relationship between the marriage partners as there is certainly no sexual attraction between the ‘female husband’ and the person being married. Such cultural marriages is totally different from the contemporary issue of gay and lesbian marriages under discussion in this paper. For instance, if a woman were to marry a fellow woman under lesbian sexual relationship in Igbo land (as is done elsewhere in the world), how would they cohabit with their “natural” problem of same-sex aggression? Indeed, does Igbo culture and its values even permit such social relations? Can an Igbo woman marry her fellow woman for lesbian sexual relationship? These questions form the crux of our concern in this essay and we shall respond to them within the context of Igbo cultural values, gender provisions and the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. Through brief evidences provided by novels in Igbo sociocultural relations among women, we shall show that inter-female lesbian marriage in Igbo society is culturally abominable. Given Freud’s psychological theory of human personality, we shall also show that the act is naturally impermissible.

Keywords: Same-sex marriage, Hostility, Inter-female, Psychoanalysis, Igbo.
Introduction

This paper has been inspired by a number of factors. First, same-sex (gay) marriage is a burning contemporary social issue which acceptability depends largely on a people’s cultural values and social dispositions. The United States of America (henceforth the US) appears to be the major rallying point for same-sex marriage. Second, given our background and indigenous knowledge of the Igbo culture, the author is aware that the latency of hostility among women in Igbo society and their cultural values prevent same-sex lesbian marriage amongst women from happening. It is, therefore, against the backdrop of the foregoing insights that this paper aims to address the following questions: Can an Igbo woman marry her fellow woman for lesbian sexual relationship? Does Igbo culture and its values permit such social relations? If an Igbo woman were to marry a fellow Igbo woman under lesbian sexual relationship, would their “natural” problem of same-sex aggression allow them to cohabit well? Answers to these questions are contextualized within the author’s knowledge of Igbo cultural values, gender provisions and the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. Accordingly, through brief evidences provided by novels on Igbo sociocultural relations among women, it is shown that inter-female lesbian marriage in the society is culturally abominable. With Freud’s psychological theory of human personality, we also show that the relationship is naturally impermissible. First, however, a few salient terms will be explained, such as Igbo social non-sexual same gender marriage, same-sex marriage, inter-female hostility and Igbo cultural personality, in order to throw more light on the discussion.

Igbo Land Social but Non-Sexual Same Gender Marriage

In Igbo land, it is granted for marriage to exist basically between a man and a woman. However, there are cases where marriage between an elderly woman and a younger woman is permissible. It is important to note at this point that such marriage is not in any way lesbian marriage, even though it is the same gender marriage. This form of marriage is both traditionally and socially acceptable and it is contracted for the sake of procreation to perpetuate a family name. For such marriages, there is no sexual relationship between the marriage partners as there is certainly no sexual attraction between the ‘female husband’ and the person being married. Such cultural marriages is totally different from the contemporary issue of gay or lesbian marriages, as the woman is being married for either the late husband or son of the ‘female husband’, as the case may be. In this type of marriage, the ‘female husband’ do not really go to a lady’s family to seek her hand in marriage. The ‘female husbands’ are always accompanied by male relatives who would be the ones to actually ask for the lady’s hand in marriage from the lady’s family. Yet everybody knows the new wife belongs to the ‘female husband’. It is of note that during the course of marriage rites, the ‘female husband’ stays at the background. In Igbo land, a woman cannot just get up and go to a family and say she wants to marry another woman from that family. This form of cultural and traditional marriage has been in practice in Igbo society for a very long time and has become the norm, hence both parties – the ‘female husband’ and the wife are not stigmatized.
It is important at this juncture to state the reason for this form of socio-cultural marriage in Igbo land. Most women who marry wives are usually elderly and have passed the age of child bearing. In most cases, the woman may have been childless or had just female children. The women’s desire is to have heirs who would take over their property and wealth when they are gone. Also, there is a need to have someone who would perpetuate the family name. In other scenarios, a woman who didn’t have a son could actually ‘marry’ a wife for her ‘fictitious’ son for the same reason of procreation in order that the family name will not go into extinction. Such marriages are covered by native law and must be made in conjunction with the woman’s husband’s relatives. Biological fathers are just regarded as sperm donors because the children produced under this scenario of marriage would automatically bear the woman’s surname. This goes to buttress the essence of marriages in Igbo land during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, since these were not necessarily contracted to unite two lovers but primarily to establish a legal basis for procreation, which because of the emphasis on children, the Igbo society regarded as an obligation to the ancestors (Egodi, 2006).

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 child bearing 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 the parts of Igbo land in second half the 19th century (Ekejiuba, 1967; 637 & Amadiume, 1987; 31).

**Same-sex (Gay/Lesbian) Marriage**

Same-sex marriage is also known as gay or lesbian marriage. It is the marriage of two people of the same sex who are sexually attracted to each other. It is also the union of two individuals of the same sex in a marital relationship, with the full legal rights and responsibilities allotted to the contract in a given jurisdiction (See “Same-sex Marriage” in http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage). The marriage can equally hold between people of the same sex, either as a secular civil ceremony or in a religious setting (See also “Same-sex Marriage” in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage). Legally, reference to a union of homosexual couples as “marriage” is still a little limited to a minority of jurisdictions for now. However, what is more common is reference to it as “civil union.” And this still covers many of the all-important legal trappings, without the title “marriage” and the religious overtones some think are implied by the word. Furthermore, while supporters of same-sex marriage may refer to it as “marriage equality,” opponents call it “redefining marriage” or “redefined marriage” (See Rationalwiki.org). It is within the confines of the same opposition that the union is popularly also said to be captioned with the scare quote “same-sex marriage” (See also Rationalwiki.org).

**Inter-female Hostility**

Inter-female hostility is simply females’ aggression toward one another. It involves both physical and non-physical harm inflicted on one woman by another over rivalry (actual, perceived or insinuated) at instances of common interest. The aggression entails the trauma (emotional or
psychological) that goes with fright, threat, or consistent terror that can be inflicted on a woman by another over such rivalry (Burman, 2004). Generally, in the bid to survive, human beings contest for resources, especially of common interest. The contest is usually or sometimes characterised by hostility or aggression and there is often a gender dimension to human aggression (Graham & Wells, 2001). For, depending on whether one is a male or female, man or woman, boy or girl, aggression is often more physically and directly overt than subtle and covert. While males are generally considered to be more physically aggressive, females are considered to be submissive (Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible and Meyer, 1999). Indeed, males are seen to personify aggression (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). But are females really submissive?

When hostility is assessed from the perspective of general inter-gender human relations, males appear more aggressive while females are submissive. In fact, males are generally perceived by feminists as those who aggress on or dominate women. However, the situation is different when aggression is assessed from intra-gender relations, as females or women are not submissive to themselves (Campbell (1999). They are often hostile and aggressive toward one other, especially when it comes to provocation or struggle for mutually benefitting interests (Burbank, 1994; Bettencourt and Miller, 1996). The aggression is often characterised by deep-seated hatred and acrimony.

**Igbo Cultural Personality**

Loosely defined, “culture refers to the shared values, beliefs and norms of a specific group of people (Sincero, 2015).” The term “personality”, on the other hand, derives from the Latin persona, which refers to a theatrical mask worn by performers in order to either project different roles or disguise their identities (Cherry, 2015). It involves characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that make a person or group of persons unique (Cherry, 2015). Sociologically, the concept describes an individual’s or group’s mode of inter-relationships in a particular social setting.

Given the forgoing, cultural personality can be deduced as characteristic patterns of behavior that uniquely differentiate a specific group or community of people, say America, from another, say, Asia. In Sincero’s view, culture influences the manner people learn, live and behave. Consequently, many scholars argue that culture is an important shaper and definer of personality (Sincero, 2015). One of the general assumptions asserting the effect of culture to personality is that people who are born and bred in the same culture share common personality traits.

The Igbo occupy “a vast area of land on the left bank of the Niger, or else on the East of the River Niger (Ekei, 2001; Arinze, 1970)” The area spans Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, and Abia states of present-day Nigeria. As far as the way of life that could be traced to the people is concerned, the Igbo also spread into some parts of today’s Cross River (Old Ogoja province) and Rivers states of Nigeria (Arinze, 1970). On the west of the Niger, the Igbo are also found in the old Asaba and Aboh divisions of today’s Delta State. The Igbo are equally well dispersed throughout the cosmopolitan cities of Nigeria, and even beyond (Basden, 1966). The Igbo are regarded as one of the largest ethnic nationalities in Africa and one of the three largest ethnic
groups in Nigeria (Basden, 1966; Ekei, 2001). According to the CIA World Fact Book, the Igbo population can be put at thirty-two million people today. Their language is classified among the group known as Kwa, found in Central and West Africa. The spoken language is Igbo and it has various dialects.

As far as cultural personality is concerned in Igbo society, human beings take central stage in deciding and interpreting the meaningfulness of life and reality in general (Basden, 1966; Ekei, 2001). Metuh (1985) says of the Igbo that “everything else seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man”. While in Igbo society, there is recognition and respect for the activities of innumerable divinities in ordering the entire cosmos, the relevance of the activities is actually considered to be interpreted by human beings. Hence, divinities are considered to exist only to help individuals better their lot, as people have a functional or pragmatic approach to deities (Oguejiofor, 2001).

Against this backdrop, the Igbo worldview is one of a life-affirming outlook to existence (Oraegbunam, 2010). Thus, life is ‘esteemed’, ‘valued’ and ‘protected’ by all means and there is hardly any room for martyrdom. This is evident in names, proverbs, songs, folktales, etc. Examples of such names are Nduka (Life is greater), Ndubuisi (Life is first), and proverbs like “Ndu kariri ihe eji a zuo ya” (Life is greater than what was spent to sustain it), “A ghalu ndu kpaa aku, onye ilo erie” (If life is lost due to inordinate pursuit of material wealth, the enemy takes the wealth), etc. (Oraegbunam, 1999).

Inter-female Hostility in Igbo Society

Given the foregoing sociocultural personality, because of the Igbo’s predilection for life, they can be said to believe in “this-worldly” nature i.e. acquiring and amassing the things of this world. This is due to the manifest belief in, and actual ordering of their social cosmos in terms of human values and experiences. Thus, an average Igbo person seeks more of “this-earthly” life than that of “the hereafter.” (Oraegbunam, 2010). She is often determined to cling to life and its material cares, fight for supremacy and show to people that she is a force to reckon with. Such determination, needless to say, fosters stiff struggle, contest or aggression among them (women) – as we project in this paper.

Now, this perception of Igbo women can be seen to be supported by a few brief experiences from novels written by authors who are well-entrenched in the culture, such as Nzeako’s Juochi (1981), Onwuchekwa’s Chinagorom (1983), Ofomata’s Dibia Na-Agwo Otoro (2000), and Obidiebube’s Kodilichukwu (2006). In Nzeako’s Juochi, for instance, Adamma is fond of subjecting her maid Jọochi to inhuman servitude. Jọochi’s experience is a case of hatred at first sight by Adamma. In the same work, another female character – Adamma’s younger sister (Oriaku) is indifferent to her sister’s feelings when she becomes pregnant for her brother-in-law, Ikegwụọnụ. She is adamant and shows no remorse about the situation.

In Onwuchekwa’s Chinagorom, the female character Nweke tries to cause trouble for another female character, Chinagorom. Nweke spreads rumors about Chinagorom’s pregnancy, claiming
that she has been unfaithful to her husband. She does this in the hope of seeing Chinagorom ejected from her matrimonial home. In Òfomata’s *Dibia Na-agwo Otoro*, Chioma is the younger sister of Ezinna, who is married to Ngozi. In effect, Chioma is Ngozi’s sister-in-law. Chioma is generally known for her wickedness and vows to deal with her sister-in-law for no just cause. Despite Ngozi’s pregnancy being close to full term, Chioma slaps her because she did not fetch firewood for her mother-in-law. Chioma is diabolical and tries several intrigues to wreck her brother’s marriage due to her hatred for Ngozi.

In Obidjebube’s *Kodilichukwu*, Ujuaku is fond of maltreating her stepson Kodilichukwu, just because he is her husband Odumodu’s first son. Kodilichukwu is a source of unbearable pain to Ujuaku because he reminds her of his mother Oluchi (Odumodu’s first wife) and is the heir apparent to a major portion of Odumodu’s wealth. Through Kodilichukwu, Oluchi, although long gone from Odumodu’s life, seems to be present and, thus, contesting with Ujuaku for affection and relevance in Odumodu’s life. And Ujuaku would not have that.

Indeed, these stories are evidence of inter-female hostility among Igbo women and offer a fair idea of the latency of the behavior in Igbo society. Thus, the research questions may now be answered.

**Is Same-Sex Union Permissible in Igbo Society?**

For emphasis, the research questions are asked again:

1. Can an Igbo woman marry her fellow woman?
2. Does Igbo culture and its values permit such social relations?
3. If an Igbo woman married her fellow woman, would their “natural” problem of same-sex aggression allow them to cohabit well?

The answer to these questions is an emphatic “NO”. This is because, given the above expositions, both the cultural values and inter-female hostility latent in the society do not permit such a social relationship.

Igbo society, like most other African societies, is collectivist in culture (Ruch and Anyanwu, 1981). Accordingly, the communal way of life and values supersede individual values and interests. Communalism, according to Ruch and Anyanwu, is “perhaps the most cherished common heritage which characterizes an African (Igbo) in his (or her) being, and mode of life as a whole” (Ekei, 2001). It thrives on principles of unity, harmony, “symbiosis, mutuality, integration, sharing, caring, moralizing, empathizing, sympathizing, involvement, commitment, co-existence, belongingness and cooperation.” It is also based on the philosophy of “I am because we are,” where the individual lacks the morality of personal expression of self as a discrete, isolated or separate entity. Society, in Igboland, is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals’ interests as such (Ekei, 2001). Igbo people interpret their actions along
the dictates of communal values. Jim Unah has thus observed that “the way and manner in which a person carries on his social actions is the concern of the community” (Unah, 2002). For, “whenever an action is performed by an individual, the perfect harmony between the physical, social and religious dimensions of life is overshadowed by the impact which his act will have on the existential harmony of the group” (Unah, 2002; Ruch and Anyanwu, 1981). For instance, if an individual performs a bad action, the act “…will automatically result in some physical effect harmful to the individual, his relatives or the clan as a whole…there will be sickness, deaths, drought, storms or other disasters, unless these evil effects are thwarted by opposite and more powerful magical rites” (Ruch and Anyanwu, 1981).

All these run against the grain of Western culture, which is anchored on individualism, a way of life that places people’s personal interests above communal values. Individualism signifies isolation, separation, distinction, distinguishing, discreteness, class, compartmentalization, departmentalization, and fragmentation. According to Herbert Spencer – an outstanding American proponent of individualism – the values of individualism are favourably compared with the values of the scientific principle of natural selection and survival of the fittest – a way of life that permeates Western culture. Spencer justifies this by saying that there is “much progress in society when individuals are permitted to work out their own destiny without governmental regulation or assistance, meaning that only the fit will survive.” (Ekei, 2001).

In Igboland, same-sex marriage is an abominable act; in fact, it is a taboo to even speak of it (ikwu aalu), not to talk of practising it (ime aalu). It is considered unnatural and impracticable. The social order in Igboland is “simply a microcosmic image of the ontological order and harmony of the universe” (Unah, 2002) i.e. there is a social/close relationship amongst the people. Only relationships that conform to the acceptable order are permitted. Since heterosexual relations are the predominantly natural form of relations known by the people to replenish and sustain the universe, anyone who goes against that order by relating with another person homosexually engages in an unnatural course that can disrupt the ontological equilibrium of the forces that sustain the society: rain, health, fertility, etc. Marriage is therefore permitted only between different sexes. Accordingly, it is because the West is individualist in its cultural orientation that homosexual relations and marriage thrive.

Marriage, that is, a heterosexual one, is regarded as a very important, noble and sacred union in Igboland. It goes with a lot of rituals meant to unite not just the two people involved but also their families and clans. It marks the starting point of the intimately lived social order. It is “…the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born…” Marriage is a drama in which everyone must participate. Hence, it must be contracted properly, according to the communal dictates.

Having dealt with the cultural dimension of the impermissibility of same-sex marriage in Igboland, the issue of inter-female hostility is next addressed. As observed earlier, we recall mentioning that an average Igbo woman fights for supremacy, trying to show to her fellow women that she is a either an equal or a more superior force to reckon with. It becomes very
questionable if there is anyone among them, therefore, that would submit to another in the sort of relationship that same-sex marriage requires. The question is necessitated due to the stiff struggle, contest or aggression that is expected to hold among them, since everyone would try to outdo the other. It must be borne in mind that in Igboland marriage requires submission.

Although the inter-female hostility aspect of the impermissibility of same-sex marriage in Igboland has a cultural dimension, it is equally buttressed by Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis. Freud theorized a rather natural dimension to the impermissibility. Accordingly, there are both psychological and biological factors that delimit easy contraction of such relations and marriage. From a psychological dimension, Freud starts by noting that the human mind comprises the conscious, preconscious and unconscious realms of being. While the conscious consists of all elements of current thought and activity, the preconscious consists of all elements of memory and the unconscious is the repository of all wishes, instincts and impulses. Freud describes the unconscious as determining the structure of human personality (Freud, 1920).

Freud also itemizes three personality dynamics – psychic energies – corresponding with the three psychic structures of personality. These are the Id, Ego and Superego. Freud believes that the inner life of every individual is a big struggle between the three “psychodynamic apparatuses” (Freud, 1923). While the conscious corresponds with ego, the preconscious corresponds with the superego and the unconscious corresponds with the id. Because Freud focused on activities in the unconscious, he emphasised the relevance of the id.

The ‘id’ refers to an instinctual unconscious drive that motivates all primary emotions. It always seeks immediate satisfaction of biological needs. By so doing, it is governed by the ‘pleasure principle’. Freud alludes to the emotional, materialistic and polygamous nature of man as that being controlled by the id. The id comprises two kinds of biological drive complexes that naturally shape human behaviour: Eros and Thanatos. Eros, or the ‘life instinct’, helps individuals to survive. It directs life-sustaining activities such as respiration, eating and sex (Freud, 1925). The energy created by Eros id is called Libido. Thanatos, in contrast, is a set of destructive forces present in all human beings (Freud, 1920). When this energy is directed outward, onto others, it is expressed as jealousy, aggression and violence. When it is directed at the self, it is expressed as suicide. Thus, the activities of Thanatos are more relevant to this paper.

The activities of eros and thanatos are given concrete biological validation with a psychosexual developmental association, where different emotions and body parts are shown to predominate in a child at different stages of growth, with effects persisting through adult personality traits. Accordingly, Freud postulates that children often develop ‘romantic’ feelings towards parents of the opposite sex and ‘aggressive’ feelings towards parents of the same sex (Freud, 1920). However, at some point in life, upon maturity, the feelings are repressed as ego and superego begin to order the personality. Consequently, all human beings can be said to possess aggressive drive from birth, which, together with the sexual drive, contribute to the personality development that finds expression in later behavior. For male children (who grow into men), Freud posited
that the repression of the same-sex aggression in early childhood is a result of the Oedipus Complex; and for female children (who grow to be women), it is a consequence of the Electra Complex.

Considering the focus of this paper, the Electra Complex will now be discussed further. A female child, around the age of five, begins to develop an intense sexual attraction for her father. This is because she grows to understand that her mother, like her, lacks the penis (phallus), which her father has. And she desires to own or know what it feels to own a penis. Hence, she develops phallic (penal) envy for the father, which motivates the attraction and rejects her mother. An internal conflict arises in the young girl and persists through maturity until she begins to regard her father as an inappropriate love object and ultimately to identify with her mother as one who understands her emotions more.

However, as the girl matures the aggressive instinct plays out again when she has to contend with other women for sociopsychological fulfilment and relevance. Thus, in Freud’s view as we understand it, it is the manifestation of the unconsciously repressed Electra instinct in every woman that is responsible for the natural psychobiological inter-female hostility that has been identified in this paper. If this is so, it is doubtful if same-sex marriage can thrive among women.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have interrogated the issue of same-sex (gay) marriage and its chance of permissibility in Igbo land within the framework of Igbo cultural values (as provided by novel-evidences, literature, and personal knowledge), gender provisions and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. It was concluded that both ways of life – same-sex marriage and inter-female hostility – are universally antagonized and regionally intolerable or naturally impermissible and culturally abominable with respect to Igbo society.
References


