

## The Culture Of Multiple Parenting In Igbo Traditional Religious Society

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### Abstract

The importance of proper nurturing and upbringing of the child in any society cannot be over emphasized. It is as a result of this that traditional Igbo society became aware of the indispensability of the proper upbringing of the child. The society therefore takes nurturing of the child seriously. In order to achieve this, conducive environment was created through their norms and values, embedded in their communal life which give room for the participation of the adult members of the Igbo society in nurturing the child (every adult in traditional Igbo Society is seen as a teacher of morals). This method of nurturing the child, helped the traditional Igbo society in bringing up members who were responsible, making the society to witness minimal societal vices. In contemporary Igbo society, this method of nurturing the child is not cherished much. People seem to have taken to individualistic life style which does not offer others the opportunity to share in the responsibility of nurturing the child. This probably may have led to the increase in societal vices. The paper seeks ways the contemporary Igbo society could adopt Igbo traditional method of nurturing the child. This paper using descriptive phenomenological method posits that though not all the Igbo traditional method could be applied in the present circumstance, the society should be cognizant of the new ways of training the child that are detrimental to proper nurturing of the child. It then advocates that the Igbo people should not neglect the good cultural heritage that can bring about proper nurturing of the child.

### Introduction

In traditional Igbo society, the birth of a child has always been heralded with joy. This joy shown at the birth of the child is as a result of its precious nature. The joy manifests at the birth of a child where in some communities, a kind of ululation ritual is used to herald the arrival of a new born child. Such a liturgical practice (song) may also indicate the gender of the new baby. The song(s) indicate right from birth that the child belongs to the entire society not to an individual. This is a common belief among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. One of the songs is as follows;

*O nuru akwo nwa e-a-e*

He who hears the cry of a child

<i>O nuru akwa nwa me ngwa bia</i>	He who hears the cry of a child should respond quickly
<i>O bughi otu onye nwe nwa.</i>	For the child belongs to all.

The Igbo adage *nwa bu nwa ora* (the child belongs to all) gives strong support to this song.

The cultural and traditional practices of the Igbo society do not allow individual to train the child alone since in their cosmology the child belongs to all. The Igbo society therefore becomes aware of the indispensability of the proper training and upbringing of the child by every member. Adibe (2009:27) argues that “every adult is a teacher of knowledge and morals. Every child is a community pupil. He is educated by every person to do good and avoid evil”. Mbiti (1969:113) avers that “the child is ... public property, it belongs to the entire community and is no longer the property of one person.” In training the child by the members of the Igbo society, the basic cultural and traditional practices are not neglected to ensure proper nurturing of the child. The society does this to ensure that those who may constitute nuisance and security threat may not be brought up in the society. The training begins at the early stage of every child when the child has not been corrupted. It becomes easy to inculcate in them the traditional norms and values that can help the child become a moral being.

The system of multiple parenting in traditional Igbo society gives room for the proper nurturing of the child and helps to bring out the best in every child. This made the society to witness relative peace in traditional days. The societal vices such as rape, robbery, assassination, incest, kidnapping, etc which have bedeviled the contemporary society, was negligible in traditional Igbo days.

It is therefore against this backdrop that this paper seeks to investigate the Igbo traditional religious ways of nurturing the child which ensured slight societal ills in traditional Igbo days. It will also discuss how this can be adopted by the contemporary Igbo society in their method of child’s training and upbringing. Using secondary sources, the researcher posits that adopting multiple parenting could help to produce members whose moral standard of living will influence the present day Igbo society, thereby reducing the current rate of societal vices.

#### **Clarification of Concept**

**Multiple:** The word multiple is “manifold; having many parts or division” (Patterson; 2004:112). It is also “many in number; involving many different people or things” (Hornby; 2005:984). In the context of this paper, it refers to the traditional Igbo society where the child is not trained by an individual (biological parents) alone. It is the adult members of the society that have the enormous responsibility of nurturing the child.

**Parenting:** The term parenting is from the word parent. Parent means one’s mother or father. Parenting therefore is “the process of caring for your child or children” (Hornby; 2005:1059). The usage of the word parenting shows that the child in

traditional Igbo society has many fathers and mothers who take care of his upbringing.

### **The child in Igbo traditional context**

The child is seen as a precious gift. This is to say that child is priceless; it is not what money can buy. Wealth or status in the society cannot take the place of the child in the traditional Igbo society. This is clearly shown in some of the names which the Igbo people bear. Such names as Nwakaego (child is greater than wealth), Nwadiuto (child is sweat), Nwamaka (child is good), Nwadinkepa (child is necessary), Nwora (child for all), etc indicate the understanding the Igbo people have about the child.

The concept of *nwa bu nwa ora* (child belongs to all) is not only peculiar to the Igbo people. In different cultures across Africa, many proverbs exist which convey similar understanding that the child is for all thus;

in Lunyoro (Banyoro) there is a proverb that says; '*omwana ta kulila nju emoi*', whose literal translation is 'a child does not grow up only in a single home'. In Kihaya (Bahaya) there is a saying, '*omwana taba womoi*', which translates as 'a child belongs not to one parent or home'. In Kijita (Wajita) there is a proverb which says '*omwana ni wa bhone*', meaning regardless of a child's biological parent(s) its upbringing belongs to the community. In Swahili, the proverb '*asiyefunzwa na mamae hufunzwa na ulimwengu*' approximates to the same ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/it\\_takes\\_a\\_village](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/it_takes_a_village)).

The child is esteemed in traditional Igbo society and in order to ensure that it becomes precious indeed and beneficial to the society, all hand are on deck for proper nurturing. It is the duty of the community/village to train the child. Degbey (2011) opines that;

it is common that responsibility for the social and moral development of the child is shared by the members of the community. It is in this respect that it could be said that in traditional system there is hardly the illegitimate child. Even where parents are dead, a child would always have "parents" – a cushion against the odds p.2.

It is pertinent to observe that the shared responsibility is not only made possible because of the precious nature of the child, the pattern of life of the Igbo entrenched in their communalism also makes it possible for the shared responsibility of training the child. The pattern and system obtainable in traditional Igbo society make it obligatory culturally for the society to bear the responsibility of the child's upbringing. In the training cipher, the social and moral norms of the community are defined. This helps to safeguard the material and spiritual norms, customs, and traditions which are used to shape the child into a moral conscious being.

### **Factors that aid multiple parenting in traditional Igbo Society**

The traditional Igbo has a society with cherished values. The Igbo society apart from being a communalistic society, has structures which allow for the shared duty of child's upbringing. These factors shall be discussed at this juncture.

**1. The Igbo family structure** – There is no distinction between the nuclear and the extended family in traditional Igbo setting. Family is simply *ezi n'ulo*. The word *ezi n'ulo* (family) cannot be explain beyond family. Also the Igbo words *nwanne* or *nwanna* may only be rendered sister or brother and includes all relatives. Gyekye (1996) describes the word brother in African cosmology which the Igbo share thus;

within the framework of the understanding of human relationship in African societies, the word 'brother' is used to cover family relationships beyond that among the male children of one man. It includes cousins of other relatives, male or female, linked by blood ties. But the word is also used significantly, by persons between whom there are no blood ties at all p.26-27.

The Igbo understanding of the word 'brother' makes the members of the society to be very close in their relationship, thus family life is central in their worldview. Oyata (1998) posits that;

Family life is very central in Igbo life and thought. One can say that Igbo make a great show of the family; children of their parents, parents of their children, children of their brothers and sisters as well as of other relatives, clans people, and in-law p.31.

The family structure in traditional Igbo society is a tie on the members. The family structure therefore becomes a veritable instrument for the nurturing of the child. Okwueze (2004:242) argues that "right from the family, unceasing efforts are made by parents and other elderly relatives to inculcate the appropriate moral values upon the children of the family" No family would want any of her member to be deviant or bring shame on them. The necessary virtues which help one not to be deviant and irresponsible, are therefore inculcated in every child by the family.

**2. The housing structure** – The pattern of traditional housing, reflects their understanding of family. In Igbo traditional setting, a compound may accommodate the family members of more than one brother. They may or may not be of the same parents. Generally, traditional Igbo society lives in huddle. This way of living knit them in such a way that one seeks not only for his own good, but also the good of other people. Every individual pursue what brings about peace and harmonious living. This they do by bearing in mind that adequate nurturing of the child is a key to achieving it. With or without the presence of one's parents, every adult sees himself as being responsible for the training of the child. This method of living affords the parents the opportunity to gather the children especially at moon light for folk tales. Folk tale is a set of people's norms, beliefs, traditions and culture expressed through stories, myths, music, dance, proverbs, riddles, jokes, pithy sayings and legends which teach morals that are transmitted from one generation to another. Nwala (2010:300) posits that Igbo folk tale is the "bearer of the moral

values and wisdom of the community”. Nwala (2010) and Ugwu (2010) opine that stories are told and lessons drawn in Igbo folk tales. The folk stories help in molding the moral life of the child.

**3. Occupation** – Occupation is simply job, vocation, business or profession. The traditional Igbo society has varying occupation which includes; farming, hunting, fishing, craft work, pottery etc. Hard work is a virtue in traditional Igbo society. In view of this, it is the desire of the Igbo society to make every member become a hard working and responsible member. This they do by ensuring that every child acquire the skill and occupation available in their society. The parents in particular do not shy away in teaching their child the family skill and occupation. Where a child does not want the father’s occupation, it is easy to find someone in the community with another skill who could train the child. Since idleness and laziness are not only frowned at but abhorred, every child tries to acquire any skill and or occupation that could make him become a hard working and responsible member of his society.

**4. Religious festivals** – Festivals “are annual gathering at which the whole community meets to honour and give thanks to God, the divinities and the ancestors” (Quarcoome; 1987:87). It is also “any special occasion, observation or celebration which is generally marked by merry-making, performance of music and the like” (Ugwu & ugwueye; 2004:98). Eze (2012:54-55) sees festival as “various feasts that are celebrated in Igbo land at various time of the year to mark events”. It has been observed by Onuigbo (2009:141) that “... there is no feast or festival that is commonly celebrated in Igbo land in the same day”. However, some of the festivals such as new yam feast (*Iri ji ohu*), title-taking, masquerade festival etc are common feasts in Igbo land. All the feasts in Igbo land are connected with their god and therefore religious. Oyaba in Emeri (2003:50) argues that; “festivals are used to energize the spirits and renew covenants with these gods”. Every member of the Igbo society participates so that the blessings of the gods may not elude them. However, the deviants who participate only incur the wrath of the gods. In order that one is blessed during festivals, moral life is maintained. This is achieved through proper and adequate nurturing of the child.

#### **The Essence of Multiple parenting in Traditional Igbo Society**

The importance of proper training of the child cannot be over emphasized. In traditional Igbo environment, the indispensability of proper training of the child stems from the fact that every parent wants to be taken good care of at old age, and also to maintain good family name and lineage. Opata (1998:31) avers that “parents have great regard for their children not only because such children would continue the family name and tradition but perhaps more importantly because such children would take care of them during their old age” The children are the gratuity, pension and old people’s home. The possibility that parents who fail to train their children

may not have anyone to take care of them at old age spurs them to plant in their children what will be harvested at old age.

In order to maintain good family name, the family nurtures the child. A good child brings honour and joy to the family, while deviant child brings disgrace and shame to the family. The family nurtures the child well in their traditional values to enable the child know what is the demand of his environment. This way the child behaves well and saves the family and himself the shame, punishment and calamity that may come from the community and the gods if he becomes deviant.

More so, the community suffers if it produces deviants. Deviants are nuisance not only to the parents, but also a threat to the peace and security of the community. Nwala (2010:262) posits that; “a community can be made to suffer because of the bad conduct of any of its members; therefore, it is the responsibility of the whole community to control the conduct of its members”. The suffering may not be only physical and psychological injury given to the deviant child, it may come upon a community from the gods due to deviant acts committed by the members of the community. In order to avoid it, multiple parenting is applied to inculcate in the child the appropriate moral standard expected of him by the community, which is embedded in their norms, traditions and values.

#### **Factors hindering the practice of multiple parenting by contemporary Igbo society**

Civilization has brought change in the pattern of Igbo traditional life. Change is part of human existence. Peil (1977) in Anyacho (2005:65) argues that “all societies experience a certain amount of change in their social structure and culture over time”. The Igbo people are not left out in this change. Ottenberg (1959:130) posits that “the Ibo are probably most receptive to cultural change and most willing to accept western ways, of any large group in Nigeria”. Smock and Smock (1969:np) echoed Ottenberg when they averred that “characterization of the Ibo usually emphasize their exceptionally positive orientation toward development and modernization”. This accounts for the fast way the Igbo abandon their traditional cultural heritage.

Civilization brought urbanization. This has made majority of the Igbo people to live in the cities where individualistic life style has become the tradition. Such method of living does not give the opportunity for multiple parenting. Every family stays on its own and does her child’s training the way it best suits it. Lamenting the effects of civilization, Nnadi (1991) posits that;

this strange ways of life created a new image, especially among the modern generation with respect to morals. A new era began which made inroads into the customary ways of life and completely changed the notion of everything traditional. The youths in particular started feeling emancipated from the traditional customs especially those in township where they have alienated themselves from their homes and live free from parental control p.16.

It is pertinent to note that the assertion of Nnadi captures what has happened to Igbo method of training the child. His statement “free from parental control” may not necessarily mean biological parental control, but may mean the communal role the community is expected to play in nurturing the child.

Civilization has changed the understanding and the meaning of family by the contemporary Igbo society. Family relationship now in most cases do not go beyond the nuclear family. One is not give the chance to share in nurturing the child either due to distance or present culture of individual life style.

Civilization has also created many job opportunities for both parents. This makes the parents to leave their home early almost everyday and return late in the evening, leaving the child to become parents of their own or in the hands of maids that may be of the same age with their children. A situation where both parents leave the home and return when they wish to come back, what should be expected of the young members of the family? Of course the children may grow without being properly nurtured. Lack of proper nurturing of the child produces deviant people in the society. Nowadays, most parents do not give needed attention to their children because of the pursuit of money and material things. Wealth and materials are now more precious to most people than the child. The interest and attention one attaches to something, shows how precious it is to the person. Work and career are now taking the attention of many parents to the detriment of their children.

### **The way forward**

In any society, it is not easy to achieve a moral standard that could bring about peaceful co-existence and safe environment. The traditional Igbo society achieved this through nurturing of the child by everyone. This paper having noted that this method is not cherished by the present Igbo society, therefore makes the following recommendations that may be beneficial to the contemporary Igbo society in nurturing the child.

1. The family in their desire to be modern, should emphasize the good traditional norms and practices that promote morality; such as folklores. Folklores teach moral without much negative effects as against home video which exposes immoral acts in its bid to teach morals which children are tempted to practice thereafter.
2. Parents should allow other adult members of the society to join hands with them (especially teachers) in training their child. This is because parents may not be always with their child to correct and discipline him when he misbehaves.
3. The parents should show good examples to their children by living morally upright life so as to inculcate good virtues in them. The children learn easily those things they observe adults do.
4. Parents should bear in mind that children are precious. In as much as it is good to work hard for the up keep of the family, it should not be at the expense of their training. Parents should create time to stay and interact with their children everyday.
5. The state governments in Igboland should ensure that disciplinary measures that are in line with Igbo traditional practices are incorporated in the school system.

## Conclusion

The seriousness attached to the training of the child in traditional Igbo society is gargantuan. This is because of their understanding that early orientation in one's life goes a long way in shaping the moral life properly. Though the present circumstance may not allow for the application of all the Igbo traditional methods of nurturing the child, the Igbo society should be cognizant of the new ways of life that are detrimental to proper nurturing of the child. In their bid to adapt to changes, the Igbo people should not neglect the good cultural heritage which ensures proper training of the child.

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