CUSTOMARY ISSUES ON WOMANHOOD IN NSUKKA:
A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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Abstract
This paper discusses customary issues on womanhood in Nsukka cosmology and articulates a Christian response to this world view. The perception of womanhood in Nsukka culture exhibits the definitions of patriarchy in the absolute sense. The findings of this paper reveal that Nsukka society nay, Igbo society is largely a male specimen which has some customary issues that do not recognize nor promote the status and dignity of womanhood. A great number of these issues do not belong to the distant past; they are alive and influential in many homes and kindreds even today. At the wake of this reality, the Christian mission in this area includes the evangelization against any obnoxious structures and heinous practices that dehumanize the human person, male and female with the objective of abolishing them. This study therefore recommends the restoration of the dignity and status of womanhood as intended by God. Hence, God created them male and female as complimentary and not contradictory genders. The methodology employed in this work is “Culture Area Approach” which means that the customary issues as studied have contiguous geographic area effect not only in Nsukka but across Igboland as a traditional society with homogenous customary traits.

Keywords: Customs, customary issues, womanhood, Nsukka and Christian Response.

Introduction
The perceptions of womanhood and the essentials of gender roles and distinctions, sex orientations and appreciations in Nsukka culture and indeed across civilizations and continents have been for centuries important points of discussion in multi-disciplinary scholarship. In recent times, there has been an increase in the awareness of the necessity to strike balances between male chauvinism and feminism in its liberal and radical types. As the former celebrates and sustains absolute patriarchy, the latter fans the embers of matriarchy and stretches its exaggerated elasticity for gender equality. However, there is an obvious need to see the complementarity of maleness and femaleness as originally willed by God. This good understanding, today more than ever, gives credence to the remarkable discourse on womanhood as persons and not things in both secular and sacred spheres. We see this deep reflection on the status and dignity of womanhood in elaborate proportions in scholarly reflections and the constant magisterial teachings of the Holy Mother Church. In the Universal Magisterium of Pope John Paul 11, (1988: 1) for instance we read. “The dignity and vocation of women – a subject of constant human and Christian reflection have gained exceptional prominence in recent years”. The Holy Father citing the Second Vatican Council, concluded that “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved”. Womanhood as a focused reality of study wears the characteristic of masculine–feminine supremacy debate and secular-sacred perspectives. Nsukka customary index is a specimen of an extra-biblical culture with definitions of absolute patriarchy. As Ele (2017:147) observed: “In the culture of male dominance, the woman is perceived most largely as a thing and not a person. But the truth is that the woman is a human person to be loved, cherished and celebrated because she is not a thing or a commodity to be accommodated, used and discarded at will for even the most frivolous excuses, baseless suspicions and minutest provocations”.

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The origin of womanhood dates back to the creation narratives in the book of Genesis. The first account says: “male and female, he created them (Genesis 1:27); then from the second account we understand that “Yahweh God said, ‘it is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper (Hebrew ezer). So from the soil, Yahweh God fashioned all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all wild animals. But no helper suitable for the man was found for him... Then, Yahweh God made the man fall into deep sleep. And, while he was asleep, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh up again forthwith, Yahweh God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man (Genesis 2: 18-23). The original intention for the creation of a woman was to fulfill the necessity for companionship and helpmate which Adam yearned for as he could get none from the lower animals, not even the anthropoids in their physical semblances with the anthropos.

God made both male and female, Adam and Eve, equal and co-heirs in order of grace as we say in the prayer of Nuptial Blessing. And God said for this reason the man should leave his father and mother and join with his wife (Genesis 2:24); they are no longer two but one flesh (Matthew 19:5-6). If this divine instruction were to be understood literally, one notices immediately that in Nsukka culture and elsewhere, it is the woman who leaves her father and mother and joins with her husband. The question is: At which point did the woman lose her dignity or personality? God created both man and woman in his own image and likeness. Therefore can one safely say that customs of absolute patriarchy re-created the woman to function the whims and caprices of the menfolk in man’s image and likeness? However, it is grossly challenging that women in this culture are divided in their standpoints on the subject matter. The core illiterate ones are sheepish as docility governs their actions and cheap surrendering to the menfolk is the fate to which they are faithful. The second group is made up of the literate ones whose embrace with Western education have set free from the chains that this culture fetter on them. We have the third, namely: those whose perceptions are not based on Western education but on Christian faith. These are liberated by the gospel of Christ. Some in this third group are literates while others are illiterates. The unifying factor which they share is the faith that they have in Jesus Christ and consequently do not have, in context, the challenges of literacy-illiteracy dichotomy, neither in their mental operations nor in their positive Christian actions.

In this paper, we shall strive to give a Christian response to customary issues involving women in Nsukka from antiquity and in her folk religious metaphysics. This response would be an effort to present the evangelizing mission of the Church in those obnoxious structures that tend to dehumanize and diminish the status of womanhood and thus restore the original beauty and dignity of womanhood as intended by God. Nsukka enjoys a geo-spatial continuum and she, as a people is a homogenous cultural fact. They share common values, geography and symbols. They are Igbo by tribe and natives of Enugu State, South East Nigeria. Nsukka is a vast land covering Igbo-Etiti, Igbo-Eze North, Igbo-Eze South, Isi-Uzo, Nsukka, Udenu and Uzo-Uwani Local Government Areas. In Christendom, Nsukka is a Diocese of dual relevance. Nsukka is a Catholic Diocese. She is also Diocese of Anglican Communion. Our study here is from the perspective of Nsukka as a Catholic Diocese. The description, “Nsukka man” refers to anybody from the Igbo Communities which occupy the northern-most part of Igbo land described above with a surface area of approximately 3,691 square kilometers. This description includes individuals and their offsprings either in Nigeria or in diaspora. The current population estimate of the area is in excess of 1,500,000” (Ele, C. O., 2006:35-37). It is worthy to remark that the customary issues that hold women and the girl-child in chains are found also in other parts of Igbo land and in many other societies across the globe. In the next section, we shall articulate those customary issues.

Customary Issues on Womanhood in Nsukka
There are a lot of customary issues on womanhood in Nsukka. Some of them are negative, obnoxious and retrogressive while some are progressive, positive and commendable. Some of them belong to the distant past, one may argue but their relics are still influential in the present time. They are:

i. **Dietary laws:**

There are a lot of dietary laws which women are asked to keep in Nsukka culture and beyond. Such laws include the prohibition of women from eating eggs. The argument from the male perspective held that eating eggs was an evidence of “long throat” – akpiri ogologo, usa, onu uso- lack of control of appetite. The men argued that if women were allowed to eat eggs, it shall reach a point where the fowl species would disappear from the face of the earth since from the eggs one gets fowls and chicken. The men with this standpoint forget that:

a. the women kept the poultry and fowls whereas the men reared the cows, sheep and goats
b. The other name for ndi nwunye (the wives) was oriaku (she who eats the wealth, she on whom wealth is spent) yet there are prohibitions against their access to sources of protein.

Another one is the gizzard. Women do not eat gizzard because custom says it is the portion for the men. The female scholars Nwokoye and Chikwere (2014:67) noted that “Women have been exempted from doing certain things with regards to the tradition of the land. Some of these things include eating some kinds of food like egg, gizzard and the tail of a fowl. They are forbidden from performing certain roles that might be regarded as exclusive to some men. They are also subjected to some traditional rites that are ritually not good for their well being both physically and spiritually”. For another female academic Ikonne (s.d:5), “The humiliation is unending: they are forbidden from eating certain foods – Ovo (a bird specie). egbe (kite), chicken parts like gizzards”. Many women have suffered humiliations, domestic violence and battering just for eating gizzard, misplacing gizzard or even when mistakenly eaten by the kid. Women’s portion are the parts around the waist region or hip while the children go for the legs (okpakiri ukwu okuko) and never the fleshy parts like the thigh (ora) which are meant for the men. Pregnant women do not eat rabbits so that they would not give birth to thieves since it is believed that rabbits steal palm kernel, oil bean fruit, etc from the house. But the men who put them in the family eat.

Kola nut (cola acuminata) is a ritual fruit in Igbo land. Women are not allowed to pray over it or share it in the presence of men including her boy-child. According to Opata (1998:105 – 106), “… a woman is not allowed to present kola direct to a visitor in the presence of a male even if the male is her small son; a woman was not allowed to take kola from a common kola dish; instead, she was given one; and in extreme cases, a woman did not enjoy the privilege of having even the kola shown to her during the process when kola that has been provided for the group is being shown round for the group to see, etc…. part of the reason she is insulated in getting involved about kola sharing is that she is not to postulate on tradition where the men are”. The agonizing part of this practice is that men do not preserve kola nuts. Women do. Yet these same women cannot share the kola nut in public ceremonies such as the events of hospitality, marriage, funeral, social outings, etc once there is a male presence. However, women are allowed to pray over coconut (cocos nucifera), garden egg (solanum melongena) and bitter kola (Garcinia kola). These harmful conditions against women have survived till this contemporary era. One asks what happens to gizzards and eggs in the growing entrepreneurship of poultry farms by women and the absence of a husband in the choice of single parenthood. Even in Church circles, there are instances where the men –lay faithful insist that women should not break the kola nut – nwanyi ama wa oji. Women do not drink palm wine standing up or sitting down in the presence of the men, she squats or kneels down. She is served a few cups so that she would not be a drunk but the men would empty kegs to their gross satisfaction.

ii. **Right of inheritance**

In most situations, the woman and the girl-child do not have any right of inheritance from their paternal common wealth such as land, industries, economic trees and cash crops. The reason is that they are married off and consequently have “no hand” in or “business” with their father’s wealth. This custom has bred poverty and backwardness in the cultural milieu. It does not stop with the father’s fortune but includes the wealth of the deceased husband. The in-laws stop at nothing to intimidate, violate and maltreat the widow in order to scheme her out of her legitimate husband’s inheritance. In some cases, this is the wealth which she made and built up with her late husband. Under this customary practice, widows most often are left to
care for the children alone. The problem becomes more complex when she refuses levirate marriage (nkuchi) or sexual relationship (oyi, nwulo) with any member of the matrimonial family.

iii. Proverbs

Women are ridiculed in hate speeches, dehumanizing sexist proverbs and foolish sayings by the men. Mmadike (2014:99-100) made a study of this phenomenon in Western and Nigeria cultures and presents some examples like these English expressions:
1. A woman is like a lemon, you squeeze her and throw her away
2. Seven women in their right senses are surpassed by a mad man
3. Women have got long hair and short sense

In Yoruba, he gave examples with these proverbs:

a. Women are climber plants that over run any available space – this means that women have the natural inclinations to be involved in simultaneous multiple affairs.

b. If a lady stays too long in the house she becomes a witch – this implicates long duration of spinsterhood.

In Igbo culture, the examples he cited include:

i. If a woman claims equality with a man, let her urinate upwards – this shows the incapacitations of womanhood

ii. The beauty/prestige of a woman is derived from her husband – But the dignity of womanhood is from God and not from any husband or human being for that matter

iii. A lady after answering whose child will later answer whose wife – One can imagine the extent the search for marriage partner has driven our sisters and daughters crazy into marrying anybody to escape from the harshness of this proverb

Even in Church spheres, when Catholics insist that Catholics marry Catholics or at worse enjoy the privilege of mixed marriage or disparity of cult, our separated brethren coined a proverb that “a girl has no church until she gets married” – meaning that the girl is less a human being whose choice and dignity are dependent on the husband. Again, this is wrong. The girl-child has the freedom of choice and right to her religion or in this case, denomination.

iv. Marriage

According to the custom of Nsukka people, marriage is heterosexual and patrilineal. One good aspect of this custom is that women are married (a na – ala nwanyi ala), they are not sold (anaghi ere ha ere). This custom therefore gives zero-tolerance to same sex marriage. As Ele (2016:240) observed “It is an abomination (aru) in Igbo culture for a man to be pregnant. It is a taboo (nso ala) for a man to marry another man as homosexuals and a woman to marry another woman as lesbians. In the anthropological world, the Igbo identify male and female genders whose balance and complementarity are celebrated in marriage, Alum di na nwunye, the union of man (husband) and a woman (wife)”. Nwoye (2011:309) agrees that Igbo cosmology respects this complementarity of genders where the sky (Igwe) is male while mother earth (Ani) is the female. Along this thought line, Okafor (s.d:4) wrote that “Another important aspect of Igbo cosmology that connotes womanhood is Ani, the earth goddess. Like a mother she is the nurturer, the regulator of codes of conduct of her children, and the enforcer of the laws through sanctions”. So man and woman are equal and complement each other as human beings (Mmadu, Onyene). Therefore, this divine Will ought to be respected at all times and in every culture.

Marriage in Nsukka as it is across Igbo land could be monogamy, polygamy or levirate. However, most marriages if not all according to this custom has a lot of harsh and harmful properties that torture the wives. They are highlighted thus:

1. The woman must give birth to a boy-child. The number of girls born without a male issue amounts to zero.
2. She must keep the rules of fidelity. She must not commit adultery. But the men, their husbands can commit adultery at will. In fact, some approval is given by the custom for the wife weaning her baby to get a mistress, mgboto for the husband.
3. She must not support her paternal family in need from her matrimonial means even when it is vastly rich without an express permission from the husband. This permission is often denied
outrightly or as some believe through ancient charms that make the wife who violates this rule go mad.
It is painful to note that in the face of this rule, the man helps his own family with even the wife’s wealth as he wants, even without her permission, because he enjoys full liberty protected by the so called custom.

4. There are strict mourning rules for the widows which widowers do not keep as such. The widowers violate the mourning rules and nothing happens to them. This paper makes a case for Obukpa women. In Obukpa, the mourning period for a widow is four (4) months. But in order to liberate those whose mourning period used to be one (1) year or more, the Diocese regulates that the mourning period for all should be six (6) months. This paper wishes to observe that the Diocese should moderate the rule to be from four (4) to six (6) months in order to remove the shackles of a two month period for Obukpa widows. This understanding in Obukpa folk Religion was already a logos spermatikos and praeparatio evangelica in the light of the good news of Jesus Christ.

5. Unfortunately, in Igbo culture, gods could marry women. The wives of deities belonged to the priests of those deities. This was one of the worst customs on marriage in some communities. However, with the advent of Christianity, these women have been set free from the captivities of these gods.

6. Polygamy: One begins to wonder if polygamy is hell for the women involved because it has harsh elements. Over and above the desire for a large family to work in the farm in pre-technological traditional societies, it is like pitching camps of one wife against the other (ichiko ike nwunye di). The type of competition and rivalry among co-wives is to the advantage of the man. They cook varieties of food and present to him and he makes his choice yet he did not bring money for the menu (O da ddg ashi). Again, the access to marital sex is not always satisfied as needed because sex is rationed or even sometimes a total denial. For some men, sex starvation is a tool for punishment when it should not be. He has other wives to satisfy him, so he could punish this or that particular wife with it. These are some of the evils associated with the custom of polygamy.

v. Violations of the physical self
The female genital mutilation (ibe nwanyi ugwu) is one custom that violates the physical anatomy of the woman. The argument which the men advance is that the practice curbs sexual promiscuity in a woman. This argument is a fallacy because it is self discipline that curbs sexual immorality and not genital mutilation. One other violation is wife battering within the umbrella of domestic violence. Domestic violence could be verbal, manual, psychological, financial and even sexual, etc. Some wives are repeatedly raped by their husbands. Rape is one other dimension to the violation of the woman’s physical Self. These ugly trends suppress the feelings of the woman in many ways. She would not complain but she dies daily. Many research findings hold that Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF), difficulty in giving birth are linked with female genital mutilation while VVF and depression are linked with rape and other forms of violence against womanhood.

vi. Division of Labour and Specialization
In Nsukka culture, women are prohibited from climbing trees such as kola nut and palm trees, to mention but two. The pertinent question is: were they forbidden by God, the gods or by men? Has it any economic advantages or social enhancements for the menfolk? A response from the men is that they are protective of their women from the dangers and hazards of accidents. The risk involved in the women climbing trees is enormous and should better be the challenges for masculinity.

Naturally, there are divisions of labour and specialization. Women become pregnant and men provide for the home. Can the division of labour and specialization stand today? Women now drive taxi and men serve as cooks, men plait the hair of women for money and women operate industry machines. Women are mechanics and men sweep the compounds. The examples are many to buttress the point. There is a reversal of traditional social roles in more areas than one in this contemporary world. This explains why in many families today, men are now the oriaku (bread eaters) and the women are okpataku (bread winners).
vii. Religion

In matters of Nsukka traditional religion, women have their roles which are specific to them. They too function as diviners, fortune tellers, even priestess of shrines and deities. However, matters such as masquerades like Odo, Akatakpa and Omabe are exclusive reserve for the men. It is only at a certain age that a woman could be initiated into the secret knowledge of the masquerade. At this point she becomes Oyima, the friend of the masquerade, that is, one in communion with the spirit. The women also take titles such as lolo anyi, Ochebo Umu ada and so on.

A Christian Response

The above discourse represents largely the Nsukka customs and tradition from antiquity whose relics in parts or as a whole have survived till today in many ways and shapes. The Church came to Nsukka in 1910 and has since then evangelized many cultural practices that violate and diminish the dignity and integrity of womanhood. The first episcopacy of Bishop Francis Ogbonnaya Okobo (1991 – 2013) protected the girl-child and women from the odious forms of Nsukka customs. Homes were built for marginalized widows and scholarships were given to indigent but intelligent children. Some women married to deities and their children were liberated and integrated with their original bio-social families.

The present Bishop, Father Bishop Godfrey Igwebuike Onah (2013 – date) has continued in his second episcopacy to advance the course of womanhood and the girl-child according to the mind of the Holy Mother Church. On one occasion in 2017, I was in a meeting of elites with Father Bishop Godfrey I. Onah. The gathering was drawn from different parts of Enugu State. A female academic doctor wanted to pick kola nut from the plate and a male professor asked her not to do that with the reason that a woman has no right to pick kola nut from the kola dish by herself. Father Bishop G.I. Onah took that opportunity to teach all in the forum about the veracity of gender equality and the evil of gender discrimination. With Father Bishop presiding over the meeting, of course the woman took the kola nut by herself. This is what the Church needs from her children, namely to teach the gospel values at every moment and to every creature (Mark 16:15). It was a good response from Father Bishop G. I. Onah who earlier had written: “Our culture too needs to encounter Jesus. Every culture needs the same transformation that the encounter with Christ brings about in human beings” (Bishop G.I. Onah, Pastoral Letter 2014: no. 25). We articulate the Christian response as follows:

a. *Ecclesia est lux in tenebris* (The Church is light in the darkness). The Church must continue to show the light. She is *Lumen Gentium*, the light to enlighten the gentiles and the Jews (Luke 2:32). The Church is Christ prolonged in history. Christ is the Head of his body, the Church (Colossians 1:18). The light which the gospel of Christ gives should inspire a Christian civilization in Nsukka and in the whole world. This light includes the work of liberation from the culture that distorts the dignity of womanhood.

b. *Proper Catechesis*

As catechists and teachers of the faith, each in his/her own right, should realize that there is need to begin the proper catechesis on womanhood in the family. At the birth of a girl-child, there should be great joy like in the case of a boy-child. Let girls and women be seen as helpers and great companions of the men, mothers of children, wives of husbands, recognized as persons and therefore empowered like their brothers.

The theology of sex and gender, the evil of gender discrimination, the right of widows and the girl-child, the dignity and integrity of womanhood should be taught in the Church and schools. We must learn from the Popes and Bishops who have reflected on these issues in their Universal and local magisterium and consequently do our own parts. The good re-reading of the creation narrative and Christ’s relationships with and respect for women in the Holy Scriptures should inspire our catechesis. The Popes’ pre-conciliar, conciliar and post-conciliar magisterium and our Bishops communiqués and pastoral letters on the subject matter and related issues should inform the topics for our catechetics.

c. *Education*
The Church advocates that women must go to school. Education is light and knowledge is an asset. When women acquire formal education, they will know their rights and moral values. Many women in our communities have eyes but they do not see, ears but they do not hear due to lack of exposure and power which quality education gives to the properly informed minds. Education is a sure way to self actualization.

d. Empowerment
The Church teaches that the empowerment of women is a necessity. Times are changing and they should be empowered politically, socially, morally, culturally, religiously and economically. Empowerment has the forces of courage and personal growth. Some of the trappings against women come from poverty and lack of economic security. The Church in Nsukka Diocese has empowered women variously through her Justice, Development and Peace Caritas/Commission (JDPC). This is on going through co-operative societies, revolving loan scheme, creation of jobs, education for the girl-child and skill acquisition, scholarship scheme for the intelligent but indigent girl-child, mediation against unjust judgment and conflict resolution in the crises which affect women, and so on.

Recommendations
In view of the above discourse, the following recommendations are made:

1. The female gender should be seen from the mirror of the divine original intentions. The perception of womanhood as inferior or less human is foundational to the grave misconceptions and culpable misguided actions against women by many male persons and societies of absolute patriarchy. Women should be respected as persons and not to be used and dumped as things.

2. There is need to strike the balances between male chauvinistic tendencies and elastic feministic exaggerations in order to have a society where human dignity and inalienable rights are respected.

3. The menfolk should strive to abolish the customary practices that tend to support them even when they are on the wrong side of the truth or pitched against the gospel values in view of the eschatological reality which does not respect maleness nor fameleness but rewards those who loved and served God.

4. The Holy Mother Church should continue in her magisterial calls against gender discriminations and thus harp the desired emphasis on the status and dignity of womanhood as a divine gift.

5. Governments at all levels and the traditional institution should illegalize all obnoxious practices against the woman and the girl-child and the offenders punished accordingly.

Conclusion
The woman is a human person. She and her daughter are persons and not things. The woman is imago Dei (Image of God) as the man, her husband and son. The first man fashioned from the earth (Adam) needed one like him. God gave him Eve, the mother of the living, the first woman from his rib. They failed in the rules that God gave them. The effect of this disobedience and fall made the man to recreate the status of womanhood. Igbo culture has given the menfolk some freedom even for wrong actions such as suppression, oppression and infidelity. Hence, Nwoke, o gbaa n’ ulo, O gbaa n’ ezi, o puta ana-ajuya, kedu maka ezi na ulo gi? The liberty which men enjoy in the culture of absolute patriarchy which does not obey God nor reflect the values of Christ and his Church is an eschatological jeopardy. Therefore, men should help in the mission of making sure that all the positive elements of our customs are upheld but the negative ones should be stopped. The women too should help liberate themselves by taking seriously the light of Christ which the Church gives and their lives guided by this light for positive affirmations which would help them become the best versions of themselves.

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