

liberation and inculturation processes in those countries. Leaving them out would make their offspring theologies look superficial. Again, some essential Third World theological issues like pluralism, liturgy, prayer, Cross, human suffering, divine suffering, and the Suffering Servant of God are regrettably left out. It is to be hoped that future editions will take note of these omissions. These limitations, notwithstanding, this dictionary is a necessary reference book for all peoples interested in the Third World theologies. The list of selected English-language Journals on Issues in Third World Theologies attached at the last pages of this dictionary is of much value.

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Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere. *Women In Igbo Life and Thought*, Edited with a foreword by Shirely Ardner, London and New York: Routledge, 2000. xxvii + 188 pages.

Every artist reproduces her likeness in her work. This may apply to this book by the late Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere. Unfortunately her book is published posthumously. The author passed away two years before its publication. If she were alive today she would have loved to present to a live-audience, especially scholars, women with university education and in the academia, her views on the Igbo woman and on Igbo customs and traditions contained in greater detail in her doctoral thesis. Fortunately, before her death, she had completed the final draft of the book, drawn from her doctoral thesis, and confided the editing to her friend Shirely Ardner who also wrote a biographical note on this great Igbo woman.

The book is a portrait of the 'authentic' Igbo woman. It is also a portrait of Joseph-Thérèse. This statement may appear contradictory in view of the fact that the author chose a life of celibacy in a religious congregation rather than celebrating the peak of adult maturity as a person and as a woman in marriage. But those who knew her as a nun and an educationist testify that every inch of her bore witness to the portrait of serenity and influence that is the role of the woman in Igbo tradition and culture. To G. T. Basden's disputable comment that for the Igbo 'Celibacy is an impossible prospect' she replied, "Such an interpretation stands in question in the light of a development – that is, the phenomenal

growth ... of the number of young Nigerian women who have embraced the religious life, a key aspect of which is ‘celibacy’. Interestingly, this phenomenon is associated more with Igboland than with the rest of Nigeria”. [p.94] No wonder the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary honoured the memory of this remarkable Igbo woman by publishing her book produced in hardcover and paperback.

Right from the introduction of the book the author signals that the cultural conflicts created by the dual heritage of the Igbo – the traditional culture and modernity – have to be resolved only by being deeply rooted in the dynamic patterns of the tradition very much alive in Igbo village. As a matter of fact Agbasiere believes in the overriding influence of the village culture on Igbo women. In these times of feminist or womanist revolution, women power or influence, according to Agbasiere should not simply be located or appropriated in the overt expression of power but rather in the covert or implicit domain of human activity. This does not make the influence or the exercise of power less real; indeed the impact is fully felt and acknowledged because of the covert nature of this power. And Agbasiere subtly distances herself from women liberation movements that may overlook creative aspects of culture and context by indicating that the women liberation movements may draw more dignified or calm vitality from the wells of tradition: “I argue below that the Igbo traditional belief-system, especially the aspect of it which deals with the notion of the ‘person’, shows that Igbo womanhood is an eloquent testimony to ‘the will to arise’”. [p.4]³ The wood carving of an Igbo maiden which dates to 1939 and which dominates the front and back cover of the paperback edition of Agbasiere’s book eloquently displays the serene influence or exercise of power by Igbo women despite the great trials they encounter in life.

Agbasiere was an anthropologist and a culture-bearer who was not more than an educated informant. She was a woman, and one who was emotionally involved in her culture, especially in regard to its “sensitive zones”.⁴ Her painstaking study of women metaphors and kinship idioms made her set aside claims by anthropologists studying African women in

³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro together edited in 1992 the provocative collective work *The Will to Arise. Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis

⁴ The dilemma of the anthropologist who is a culture-bearer is well exposed by V.C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, p. 10.

general and those who focused on the Igbo in particular that women dominant metaphors derive from their sexual and reproductive status. She was able to show the matrifocal orientation of the basic Igbo kin idiom, and corrected earlier anthropologists, especially Basden, Meek, and Green, who failed to explore the full implications of the roles of lineage daughters [*umuada*] as opposed to lineage wives [*ndinyom*]. This led her to conclude that the woman is primary in the Igbo scheme of things.

One is intrigued how the author tests some anthropological notions among the Igbo. For example some anthropologists hold that “a people’s conceptual categories of the body reflect the particular people’s pattern of social interaction” [p.73-74]. Among the Igbo, Agbasiere narrated, there is the division of the human body as head-centre-end [*isi-afo-ukwu la aka*]. The head or upper extremity denotes the male leadership, the centre or trunk denotes the complex role of the woman, and the end or lower extremity denotes the minors within the kinship. Agbasiere notes that in her place of fieldwork [*Ibi*] meat of animals ritually slaughtered is divided in a kindred or family in that pattern. The interest is not limited to the anatomy of the human person, which the author develops in detail in her study of the notion of person, but in laying down the anthropological principles for family and social organisation. I think that this provides traditional [conservative and yet dynamic] principles which may form an interesting basis for conflict resolution in family and social life. In addition fine points about the kitchen – the domain of adult womanhood – about good and bad food, Igbo menu, about eating well and not eating well, about agricultural products of the Igbo which find their way into the kitchen, form part of the palm oil with which this book is proposed to the public.

Even in the area of cosmology, very well researched by theologians and experts in Igbo traditional religion, Agbasiere has her say. She focused mainly on the fertility divinities led by *Ala*, and especially on the cult of *chi*, the principal focus of women ritual, which may be the most popular cult after *Ala* among the Igbo. She however inexplicably omitted relevant literature in the discourse of the cult of *Chukwu* which she claimed is absent among the Igbo. Metuh’s findings in this matter are totally ignored⁵. Metuh does not even feature in her bibliography. She

⁵ See E. Ikenga-Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, London: Chapman, 1981; in the 1999 new edition of his book Metuh restates his thesis on the cult of *Chukwu* among the Igbo and refutes the positions of Donatus I. Nwoga in his

nevertheless makes an interesting contribution in listing and classifying, plants, animals, minerals [especially in the area of colour classification], which will benefit researchers in various fields.

While not giving the author an image of a propagandist or a crusader who proposes to the discontented modern [university educated] Igbo woman and women in the academia that the traditional notions of womanhood [dominant in rural Igboland] is complex, creative, dynamic and adaptable, one will not fail to note a certain missionary angle to the whole book. Agbasiere wanted to address not only Igbo educated women but all women, and possibly create an “awareness of the need to re-examine current approaches to the study of women” [p.8]. Modern Igbo women complain that the woman is valued only as mother and helpmate. Agbasiere counters that patient attention to the context, like in the Ibi village-group she studied, reveals the woman as wife, mother, daughter, and sister. Her multiple roles make her enjoy honour and prestige, the grains of the valuation of person among the Igbo. In contradistinction to the views of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, not mentioned by Agbasiere, who insisted in *Daughters of Anowa, African Women and Patriarchy*, that the many myths, legends and practices found among Africans show that women carry the burden of life and are supposed not to complain: “Women are expected to be the custodians of the positive qualities of the whole community. A person who supports the community’s survival, but does not demand applause and acknowledgement is admired by the African community because, after all, ‘it is one person who kills the elephant for the whole people to feast on.’ While this indeed is expected of men, it is *demande*d of women.”⁶ Agbasiere preferred a positive interpretation of woman as “‘gift’ to society, an ethical being who confers some status on man, one who is an upholder of morality”. [p.8] The concept of ‘gift’ is the key to Agbasiere’s understanding of authentic womanhood.

The woman is valued and has influence as daughter [*nwada* – collectively *umuada*] and sister [*nwanne*]. Our author corrects earlier inaccurate notions of missionaries and anthropologists in this area. It is misleading to project the role of women in the political, economic, social and religious domains as purely subjected to the men. The status of the

The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought, Ahiazu Mbaise: Hawk Press, 1984.

⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, pp. 26-29, 33.

woman as daughter that makes her belong automatically to the collective lineage daughters [*umuada*] makes her wield influence in her lineage. The *Umuada* have right of arbitration in practically every matter beyond the power of male relatives to settle, they discipline disobedient relatives' wives, and they may ostracise incorrigible lineage relatives.

In her analysis of the intricate and subtle Igbo kinship terminology, Agbasiere successfully relates the classificatory *nwanne* [lit. child of mother – i.e. 'brother'/ 'sister'] to the matrifocal; a kinship term that is female oriented, evocative of human fertility and motherhood which are overriding values in Igbo life and thought. She concludes that "*nwanne* is a primary kinship idiom" [p.80]. "To speak of kin as descended from a mother, rather than a father, emphasizes the importance of the mother in the kinship system. It shows that while men often trace their descent line through a male (*nna*), they base their immediate links through a woman (*nne*). Even though people designate themselves in terms of patrilineages (*umunna*), still the idea of relatedness is traced through a matrifocal idiom to the one woman at the apex through whom are descended all the members of patrilineages who regard themselves as *nwanne* (collectively *umunne*)" [p.82].

The subtlety of the kinship idiom, a major anthropological contribution of our author to Igbo studies, places her on firm grounds to question the exclusive claim that Igbo are patrilineal. As a matter of fact the lineage or "a social unit consisting of a group of people who can trace actual descent from one ancestor" is made up of *umunne* (brothers and sisters) that form "two distinct categories of members" – "brothers" [*umunna*] and "sisters" [*umuada*]. Both have claims on and obligations to the conservation of the group's identity: this involves ownership of land and property and especially authority and decision making within the lineage [p.90].

The summit of the author's design to project authentic Igbo perception of womanhood is found in her treatment of marriage which is "a fundamental ritual which serves as a religious definition of adult existence"; "the married state itself is seen as the right context for cultivating and disseminating the truth of traditional norms – a task believed to be chiefly associated with the woman's office or life vocation" [p.94]. It is "the greatest and most fundamental ritual act of human existence" which gives one a distinct identity [p.95]. Agbasiere moves beyond the narrow definition of marriage as contract by Igbo and foreign anthropologists to emphasise status and change, conferment of

office, and vocation – a reality that is predominantly female oriented because the woman occupies a central place in the marriage relationship.

Agbasiere tells the story from the female perspective and is very informative about the processes and perspectives of female education. There are two basic divisions – maturity for marriage [*erumogo*] and actual process of marriage [*iludi/ilunwany*]. From the female perspective maturity comes with first menstruation that calls for seclusion and passage rites varying from village-group to village-group. The actual process of marriage begins with preliminary consent of the young woman; then follows the enquiries, tests, scrutinies, the exposure of the young woman which goes with expanding relationship and emerging from the security or protection of the mother's home to a novel environment – the Igbo practice very strict exogamy. The final rite of entering the husband's home not only captures the ideal of a woman's office/mission in marriage but also sums up the authentic female or wifely gesture and the culturally prescribed attitude in male-female roles – “entering in a stooping position into the home of the husband”. She stoops to conquer.

Each step in the marriage ritual process is not only a journey [ordeal] for the girl but also for the mother who shares the blame for any failure of the daughter. Stooping to conquer or to enter the husband's home implies wifely duties towards the husband – going from feeding the husband to protecting the husband's reputation (honour and prestige are the main purpose of marriage). It involves being dutiful and diplomatic in the relationship to the mother in law, co-wives, *umuada* [sisters of the husband], males of the lineage, and especially rearing the children. Curiously the woman is blamed for the misbehaviour of the children – the woman trains children – but hardly gets the praise for their success.

Agbasiere carries her crusading views of the authentic perception of the woman into the practice of widowhood – divided into the prescribed mourning period and the state of widowhood [for those who do not take the levirate marriage]. Widowhood has been described in the most obnoxious of languages by authors, male and female. The ordeal of widows in Nigeria and Africa has called for the reform of the customs and practices. Pat U. Okoye in her book with the telling title, *Widowhood: A Natural or Cultural Tragedy*, gives a graphic description of this tragedy from one region of Africa to another, from one section of

Nigeria to another.⁷ But Agbasiere inserts the Igbo practice within the general perception of rites of passage to reaffirm the solidarity of the kinship system. She introduces a creative interpretation of the prescribed widowhood [*ikwadi*] and widowhood state [*ikwa-ajadu*], following Fortes, as taboos that go with office-holders and accountability of office. She noted that elders in Ibi where she did her fieldwork interpret the practice in all its dimensions as *omenala* (customs of the land) while the women interpret the ordeal with the general term of *ijedi* (journey of married life – one of the ordeals of marriage). Agbasiere notes the dependency of the widow during the prescribed period – especially the one native year of mourning [7-9 calendar months]. She narrates the subhuman treatment the widow undergoes. For example “total confinement indoors”, “sitting on the bare floor [that] is maintained for at least 3 months. She may not even get up to fend for herself but is fed by others. Formerly she did not bathe herself during this period, but her face could be washed by the *umuada*”. And for the three months the widow may be wearing as mourning dress “tattered pieces of coarse woven material, covering just the thighs” [p. 147]. All these and more (including the humiliating carping by the *umuada*) our author interprets as *ijedi* – journey of married life, the moral dimension of office, accountability required of office-holders, liminal experience prior to induction into office and needed for reintegration, a gradual re-orientation, reassertion or reconstruction of female identity, and the proof that the woman is life restorer or regenerator [7-9 months confinement].

There is no doubt that these interpretations are interesting for a development of a spirituality of widowhood, but our author has failed to take seriously the resentment of women [and men], of those modern widows with salaried jobs who not only find the long duration of mourning impracticable but the dependency on the brothers-in-law intolerable. Agbasiere has succeeded in explaining the thinking behind the taboos and rituals – accountability to the kindred, to other women, to the earth spirit, etc. – but she certainly has not considered the fact that fundamental human rights of people are at stake in the rituals and practices that dehumanise widows and women. Passage rites for widows to reconstruct the self and to account to humans and spirits about their role or office in society are necessary but the crudity of the practice and the one-sidedness of the experience call for reform and justice. Agbasiere

⁷ Pat U. Okoye, *Widowhood: a Natural or Cultural Tragedy*. Enugu: NUCIK Publishers, 1995, especially pp. 82-88.

has given us the fundamental elements for the confrontation of the traditional with the modern. That adaptations are already in place among many village-groups show the general awareness of the need for reform in this matter.

But we must get back to the project of Agbasiere: from the 1920s women have been ‘watchdogs’ of morality challenging any form of injustice, lack of commitment and accountability in the leadership. Today they should continue to do the same. Her interpretation of the ‘journey of married life’ [*ijedi*] as exemplified in widowhood may indicate moral leadership by example.

This book is about women. Men feature only indirectly. Certain claims need to be clarified or call for more developed study. Also certain omissions in the issue of power sharing need to be addressed by students and colleagues of Agbasiere. One of the most arresting statements is contained in the opening paragraph on the notion of person: “The Igbo notion of the person accentuates a sense of personal responsibility to oneself and for one’s actions. This view is more associated with women than with men” [p. 65]. There is very much emphasis on the responsibility of the women in providing food, in farm work, in nurturing, in arbitration, and especially in upholding morality. What is the role of the men? This may require a book similar to that of Agbasiere and written by men and women. Agbasiere has drawn our attention to the necessity of paying close attention to cultural traditions and how they exist in each context. She has drawn our attention to the fact the women liberation movements need to pay close attention to these cultural traditions. Her position must be complemented by views of other women researchers who insist that those cultural patterns and values when applied to all humans as humans without distinctions as to sex advance the cause for liberation in the community⁸.

This book is a must in the hands of every woman, every Igbo, every anthropologist, every leader. There are eight pages of bibliography to facilitate continued research, and also a good index, 8 plates and 4 maps to facilitate reading.

Elochukwu Uzukwu c.s.sp.

⁸ M. A. Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective", in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994, pp. 174, 176.