

Nweke Kizito Chinedu Has Christianity Marred Or Made The Gender Realities Among The Igbos Of Western Africa?

In pre-modern times, the Igbo whether male or female, usually grew up very certain about their gender identity. They were connected with their spiritual being (*chi*) and their cultural being through the kinship system (the *umunna*) and the tradition (*omenala*). Accordingly, the prevailing climate was that of mutual co-existence and complementarity of the sexes rather than competition. With the advent of Christianity, however, the Igbo nowadays experience confusing suggestions that blur the distinctions of gender identities and the consequent devaluation of the gender balance that previously existed, at least in seed form. On one hand, the pseudo-Pauline injunction that the man should “love and respect” the woman, and the woman should “be obedient” to the man suggests a clear separation of marital responsibilities based on gender. On the other hand, the prescribed submissiveness of the one (female) to the other (male) is not what is meant by obedience. So, the male who was proclaimed the head of the family, with the responsibilities of protecting and caring for his family is entangled with a female who may or may not be independent of these responsibilities. At present there is an influx of certain confusing gender-related ideas and practices coming from the same cultural background as that of those who originally evangelized the Igbo; the same people the Igbo has leaned on for justification and assessment of rights and wrongs. Estranged from their *chi* and disconnected from their *omenala* and *umunna*, the Igbo might have lost a clear concept of the relevance of gender equality and complementarity. For instance, there were priestesses (*ezenwanyi*) and priests (*ezemmuo*); the council of men and the women council (the *umuada*). Although things were never perfect, they functioned effectively. In view of present day realities of challenging child-upbringing, high rate of divorce, notions of gender orientation, etc, this paper will explore the questions: How has the missiological approach to the conversion of the Igbo affected their gender orientation? How can the Igbo live authentically in the family and society; staying faithful to their culture and Christianity?