

OMUGWO CULTURAL PRACTICE IN IGBOLAND: A DISADVANTAGE FOR MEN OR ADVANTAGE FOR WOMEN

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Abstract

One can profitably argue that some cultural practices heighten perennial tensions in marriages. One such cultural practice is the *Omugwo* indigenous practice in Igboland, South East Nigeria. *Omugwo*, translated as postpartum care or after-birth care is a notable cultural practice in which the wife's or husband's mother goes to live with the couple immediately after childbirth to care for the new baby and the mother. Some cultural activists have argued that the *Omugwo* cultural practice is a rite of passage for the mother to initiate her into motherhood, especially in a situation where it is a woman's first time to give birth. This interpretation fails to recognize the challenge faced by men whose wives embark on the *Omugwo* trip. The *Omugwo* period lasts between three to five months. During her absence from home due to the *Omugwo* visit, the woman's husband would be alone and left in the care of their children. Through the framework of cultural anthropology, this study argues that the *Omugwo* cultural practice in Igboland confers an undue advantage on women while constituting a huge threat to men. It creates a lopsided conjugal structure which leaves the men frustrated and desperate in their marriages due to the length of time of the *Omugwo*. The practice should be re-evaluated or reduced to one or two weeks. That way, all the arising issues ranging from the death of the man or involvement with another woman as a response to loneliness which leads to the breakup of the marriage would be avoided.

Keywords: culture, *Omugwo*, gender, marriage, infidelity

Introduction

Societies worldwide are strengthened by different cultural practices that people adopt and imbibe to advance individual and collective existential ethos. Conversely, various cultural practices in the modern era weaken or destroy many societies. Therefore, cultural practices in the latter category deserve re-evaluation for equitable social alignment among the people. The Igbo ethnic group in South East, Nigeria is rich in cultural diversity which has helped to uphold and export the people's identity. Onebunne remarks that "the Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. They are socially and culturally diverse. Igbo culture (*Omenala*) includes the customs, practices and traditions of the Igbo people. They have a dynamic and

fascinating cultural heritage that says much about them" (68). One of the many cultural practices in the region is the *Omugwo* or postpartum, afterbirth care in which either the wife's or husband's mother goes to live with the couple to care for the young mother and her new baby. In a situation where either of the mothers is not available due to death or other engagements, an aunt of the wife or the husband could take up the responsibility. According to Anugwom, "the *Omugwo* practice (or puerperium) is a ritual that is observed immediately after the delivery of a baby. It is the period usually measured in terms of native market weeks (in the native calendar, a week is four days which represents the traditional four market days) when the mother of the newly delivered woman comes to stay with the family of the daughter in order to look after the new baby and mother" (155). Also, Odinka *et al* agree that "*Omugwo* is an Igbo cultural practice, in which the mother of the nursing mother, or her delegate, comes to stay with her in the early postpartum period. She takes care of the nursing mother, the baby, and help in the household chores, as well as teaching the nursing mother about baby-care" (2516).

The period of the *Omugwo* practice lasts from three to five months. During this time, the older mother takes care of the baby by helping with bathing, cooking spicy, delicious food for the new mother, massaging her with warm water to dissolve afterbirth blood clotting, allowing the new mother to relax and recover from the stress of childbirth, and gradually easing her into her new role as a mother if she is giving birth for the first time. Without a recognized modern healthcare system that takes care of new mothers or an afterbirth period of recovery for mothers, the *Omugwo* practice provides a suitable, effective period for both new babies and mothers to be pampered and cared for within a specified period. Besides taking care of the mother and the new baby, other cultural practices that constitute a symbolic patch in the life of the new baby also take place during the *Omugwo* period. Anizoba *et al*, observe that "the nursing of the navel stump to heal properly (*otube ida*), circumcision (*ibe ugwu*), naming ceremony (*igu afa*) and tear piercing (*ikpopu nti*) for the girls are landmark events in this period of *omugwo*" (86). These practices are sub-cultural agencies embedded in the people's belief to have far-reaching implications for the growth, success, and well-being of the new baby and the mother. Although the *Omugwo* cultural practice is majorly associated with the Igbo people, it has spread to other parts of Nigeria as a homogeneous culture.

While the *Omugwo* practice in Igboland offers the opportunity for a mother to take a break from her matrimonial home and mingle in a new environment where she offers domestic succour to her daughter or daughter-in-law, it creates a huge vacuum in the older woman's matrimonial home which questions the fidelity of her marriage vows. When she departs her home for the all-important *Omugwo* practice, her husband is left to care for himself with all the attendant emotional unease. Most of the time, the man is lucky to have grown-up daughters to assist with domestic work like cooking and laundering, but even at that, the presence of these grown-up daughters cannot

preclude the conjugal hiatus created by the absence of his wife. In most cases, the man may not have grown-up daughters, therefore he is left to his inexperienced domestic devices which may inevitably lead him to seek a temporal female replacement. In such circumstances, infidelity surreptitiously creeps in and the marriage suffers a crack which sometimes leads to disintegration.

There are cases where a woman may have up to five daughters. It means that as they give birth, she would travel to their various locations for the *Omugwo* afterbirth care and spend between three to five months. By the time the woman is through visiting all her daughters for the *Omugwo*, her husband would have spent considerable time alone. In Igboland, ninety percent of the populace are devout Christians subscribing to the tenets and teachings of different church denominations including marriage. Thus, marriage is foregrounded in the biblical injunction in the book of Mathew Chapter 19 verse 6 "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder". Given its continual practice and the perverse, tortuous break it creates in marriages, this study argues that the *Omugwo* cultural practice should be re-evaluated in the following ways – the woman and her husband must proceed on the *Omugwo* journey together or the period of the *Omugwo* should be reduced to a week or two. That way, marriages that have lasted for a long time will not experience sudden pressures and most times breakages. Ekweariri underscores the philosophical and traditional classification of gender responsibilities in Igboland by observing that "whereas, the socio-political and cultic spheres in Igbo land are male-saturated, responsibility and service in the man's homes were the exclusive reserve of women" (5). When women embark on the *Omugwo* trip, they inadvertently abdicate their 'responsibility and service in the man's homes' which alters the institutional framework by which they were identified and respected. There are many instances where the man whose wife went for the *Omugwo* practice got involved with another woman and got her pregnant and the wife, aware of the infidelity, left her husband. Many women travel as far as the US, UK, Canada, Asia, and different parts of the world for *Omugwo*, and most times, they spend about a year or more leaving their husbands alone or with helpers and these men sometimes are frustrated.

Literature Review

The *Omugwo* cultural phenomenon in Igboland has attracted different interpretive planks among scholars and researchers with each arguing its necessity, modification or unworkability in the modern era. The advantages of *Omugwo* are numerous, therefore an outright abolishment may not be desirable but given the increasing negative undercurrents associated with the practice and the tensions it raises in marital homes, a re-evaluation and partial modification of the practice is necessary. As a cultural emblem of the Igbo people in South East Nigeria, *Omugwo* underscores the people's tenacious veneration of women especially mothers who require helping hands to recover from the stress of childbirth. Nkemdirim remarks that "the importance of

Omugwo in the life of the Igbo cannot be overemphasized, that is why it is practised by the Igbo people, wherever they find themselves, so long as their children are still giving birth to children. The mothers benefit the most from this culture. It affords them the opportunity to travel abroad, at regular intervals, depending on how many daughters they have abroad" (139). While the preceding observation celebrates the young mother and her mother or the mother-in-law who embark on the *Omugwo* trip, it excludes the man whose wife must embark on the trip sometimes outside the country. Thus, the emphasis is always on the young mother, her mother or the mother-in-law. The focus of this study is not to examine the new mother or her matrimonial home but to critically assess how the older matrimonial home that produced the young mother and her husband fare when the grandmother embarks on the *Omugwo* journey.

For some inexplicable reasons, scholars have ignored this aspect of negativity associated with the *Omugwo* practice while concentrating on its positive outlines. *Omugwo* indirectly connotes respect for women by the Igbo people. Emua and Etieyibo observe that "women are respected and valued among the Igbos, in virtue of age, positions, experiences, and achievements. One area where respect for women and their value is evident is in practices such as *Omugwo* (postpartum care), etc" (202). Emua and Etieyibo conceive the *Omugwo* practice as providing the needed platform to celebrate and appreciate women given that the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria is mostly patriarchal, conferring advantages and supremacy to the menfolk. However, while this study reinforces how the *Omugwo* cultural practice confers an advantage on women, it also demonstrates how it threatens the menfolk when the matrimonial home is fractured by the absence of the woman on the *Omugwo* trip. In every study that engages the *Omugwo* culture, there is scant analysis or interpretation of how it constitutes a risk to men and endangers marriage in Igboland. So, there is an avalanche of celebrations which directly celebrate women. Ephraim points out that "*Omugwo* assigns a nursing mother a period of exclusive "convalescence" to regain lost flesh transferred to her baby; to resuscitate agility lost during the gestation period, and to receive special attention from her husband and kith and kin. This restriction to observe this period and to receive both bodily and visitor's attention is not a mute fanfare" (8). Chukwu's celebration of the *Omugwo* culture points to an exclusive period when the new mother is practically pampered by those around her especially her husband and other relations. In this observation, the role of her mother or mother-in-law is not expressly pronounced. This strengthens the argument that the new mother can be cared for by other relations and not necessarily her mother or mother-in-law. The older women can be involved in the *Omugwo* culture briefly, especially if their husbands are still alive.

It negates the principles of the marriage oath in the traditional or modern sense to abandon a spouse for as long as three to five months in the expression and pursuit of a culture. While this practice confers an advantage on the woman, it constitutes a huge disadvantage for the man. Onogwu celebrates the role of women in the *Omugwo*

culture while neglecting how it negatively affects men. According to her “*Omugwo* stands as a testament to the enduring rich traditions of Igbo society and the vital role women play in nurturing the next generation of women. The quality of leadership women demonstrate during *Omugwo* is multifaceted, encompassing physical care, emotional support, and the transmission of cultural knowledge” (3). Onogwu ties the *Omugwo* cultural practice to the contribution of women in upholding their continuity from one generation to another. In other words, *Omugwo* is synonymous with women's generational proliferation, which connotes a skewed, lopsided gender pattern. The preceding idea highlights how the *Omugwo* cultural practice disregards men and ostracizes them from the entire cultural praxis. Ejikeme and Ukaegbu reiterate the same glorification of women through the *Omugwo* practice in Igboland. According to them:

During traditional postpartum (*Omugwo*) the new mother is cared for by her own mother or any other relation/person of her (the new mother) choice. She is relieved of house chores; confined to the house; and eats special food. It must be noted here that the decision to invite another person other than the mother of the new mother takes place on three main grounds: if her mother is dead, if she is sick or if two sisters put to bed at the same period and their mother is taking care of her other sister. Otherwise, it is the prerogative of her mother to co-coordinate the *Omugwo* (78).

Other scholars have explained in details, the process of preparing the delicacies for the new mother to eat. Okpomeshine remarks that “a regimen of herbs and roots is used in a variety of ways. Some prepare hot highly spiced rich broth consisting mostly of fish. Others are soaked in fresh palm wine and administered to the woman at prescribed times” (193). Also, Ezeanyika posits that “aside from the hot water therapy, there is also the stomach-tying remedy. With this method, a cloth is tied around the new mother's stomach to help her get her stomach size back, or at the very least, reduce the size to a reasonable point” (4). In the examples cited above, the ideas gravitate exclusively to celebrating women without any remark or reference to the conjugal union of the woman observing the *Omugwo* practice and the well-being of her husband. While the practice provides the needed afterbirth care for a nursing mother, gradually transiting her into a new role as a mother, it also poses a threat to the marriage institution of the older mother, thus conferring an undue advantage on her. Also, while the young mother takes a deserved break after giving birth, the father of the new baby does not enjoy such luxury, he continues to go to work and carry on with all stressful normal activities. In this way too, men are disadvantaged in the *Omugwo* cultural procedure.

Theoretical framework

The culture, practices, and general ways of living of a particular people define their identities in various ways and cultural anthropology helps us to understand these demonstrable variations. Haviland *et al* opine that "Cultural anthropology (also called social or socio-cultural anthropology) is the study of customary patterns in human behavior, thought, and feelings. It focuses on humans as culture-producing and culture-reproducing creatures" (9). It is committed to unveiling the multifaceted aspects of different cultures in diverse societies to reveal how these cultural practices impact on the general philosophical outlook of the people and their approaches to life with respect to how they interact with other cultures. The relationship between cultural anthropology and literature is interwoven and mutual because literature provides a veritable platform for the interpretation of cultural anthropology as represented in literary texts. Armed with the weapon of analytical parameters which literature provides, various cultures, through the prism of cultural anthropology are examined in-depth to establish cultural boundaries in historical and contemporary times and how these have influenced human behaviour and attitudes. Cultural anthropology rescues the study of culture's traditional and historical modes which seem to have circumscribed the understanding of culture. Culture involves a set of attitudes and responses that determine the procedural, quotidian engagements of people within a specified period. It could be permanent or transient. Permanent cultures could be located in traditional and historical values by which ancient societies were governed and identified for example language. Transient cultures could be categorized as attitudes within a people that fade over time for example fashion. Because cultural anthropology is committed to the study of specific human cultures, it is a concise armament to dissect the *Omugwo* phenomenon as a permanent culture of the Igbo people of South East Nigeria. Weisgrau *et al* observe that "the central concept in anthropology is culture, which consists of ideas transmitted symbolically and intergenerationally about the things people make, their beliefs, and ideas" (5). As a specific culture, the *Omugwo* practice is intricately associated with childbirth because it must certainly follow the birth of a new baby and this is a strong belief of the people transmitted from one generation to another.

The idea that only women can proceed on an *Omugwo* visit is linked to the people's gender stereotype which ascribes domestic duties to only women. Therefore, since *Omugwo* basically involves doing domestic duties and since only women are seen to perform domestic duties in Igboland, only women are allowed to proceed on the *Omugwo* trip. Also, in many parts of Igboland, there are unpronounced cultural beliefs that an older man should not cook, clean, wash, and serve a woman more so when the woman is younger. These cultural beliefs restrict men from participating in the *Omugwo* culture, thus making it an exclusive preserve of women. Although there could be other cultures within Igboland where men cook and serve the table, specifically *Omugwo* culture does not permit men to participate in it as an unwritten rule.

Anthropology studies specific cultures which explain why *Omugwo* is the specific interest of this study. R. M Dilley remarks that "the idea is that anthropologists who interpret social and cultural phenomena do so with reference, therefore, to something called 'context'. This process of contextualisation has had an all too self-evident ring to it; it is a process that has been seen as unproblematic" (2). The reference and context of cultural interest in this study is to highlight how the *Omugwo* practice, desirable and necessary as it is, also constitutes a setback to men whose wives embark on the *Omugwo* trip.

Interestingly, while people have celebrated *Omugwo* in Igboland and all the exciting opportunities it provides for the older mother, the new mother and her baby, the world seems to be silent over the negative implications of the cultural practice on the husband of the older woman when she departs for *Omugwo* activities. Cultural anthropology, through its two major flanks, ethnography and psychological anthropology analyzes *Omugwo* as a cultural emblem of the Igbo people which opens various possibilities for reunion, renewal of relationships between mother and daughter, and more importantly, how it contributes to the collapse of some marriages. Marriage in Igboland is significant in many ways, with the responsibility and place of the husband and wife clearly distinguished. Given the patriarchal nature of the Igbo society, many people believe that husbands enjoy more advantages than their wives do. While this submission may be true in certain aspects, there are also aspects that demonstrably confer undue advantage to the women which may lead to the dislocation of the conjugal union. Onyinyechi Priscilla *et al* argue that "no doubt, marriage among the Igbo is *sine qua non* and mutually reinforcing to women and men. In other words, ideally, marriage is essential and beneficial to both parties in Igboland. However, culturally, men seem to be the ones that benefit more in marriage" (115). A culture like the *Omugwo* which affords a woman the opportunity to travel out of her home for a long period while the man suffers neglect negates the principle of marriage which primordially holds that only death can come between a couple.

The *Omugwo* Cultural Practice

Omugwo in Igboland follows a procedure that varies from tribe to tribe and region to region. Its practice is peculiar to different communities so there is no consensus regarding its enactment. Lawal *et al* posit that "*Omugwo* is a cultural response to the burden on the mother that arises with the arrival of a new-born baby. While it is not globally widespread as a concept, *Omugwo* has been institutionalized across many Nigerian communities, especially among the Igbos of the South-Eastern region of the country" (10). However, there is an unpronounced consensus that immediately after a woman gives birth, she must be taken care of by either her mother, the mother-in-law or an elderly aunt for a specified period ranging from three to five months. However, it is considered the fundamental right of the young mother's biological mother to take care of her after giving birth. Another woman can only assume this responsibility if for

any reason the young mother's mother is not available. According to Opemipo and Osinem "the Igbo belief in puerperium caregivers stems from right and status, for it is a thing of pride and honour to teach one's daughter how to care for a newborn. Hence, every woman looks forward to being her child's caregiver. It is, therefore, a right that nature and culture have afforded her" (50). Shortly before the young lady gives birth, she identifies and agrees with her husband who will take care of her during the *Omugwo* period. But if her mother is alive and they have a good relationship, then the responsibility falls on the older woman.

The chosen woman for the *Omugwo* practice is informed ahead of time and would accept or reject the offer. She could reject the offer on the grounds of other engagements or health issues. But most times, mothers readily jump on the offer. Immediately after the young lady gives birth, her husband will visit the in-laws who had agreed to embark on the *Omugwo* trip. The husband goes alone or is either accompanied by a relative or a friend. On the visit, he would go with gifts which must include assorted drinks such as brandy or a local jar of palm wine. He would state clearly his mission for coming on the visit, which is to plead with the father-in-law to allow his wife to come for the *Omugwo* and take care of the daughter. In all cases, the father-in-law must allow his wife to embark on the trip even if it is not convenient for him. Refusing to allow the wife to embark on the trip could be seen or interpreted as wickedness, indifference, and lack of respect for the daughter's family and this would not be good for the family relationship.

Most times when a man refuses to grant his wife permission to embark on the *Omugwo* trip, the woman, spurred on and encouraged by her daughter, could defy her husband and travel for the *Omugwo* practice. So, the man is arm-twisted to allow his wife to embark on the *Omugwo* trip. After the agreement between father-in-law and son-in-law, a date would be fixed for the journey. If the son-in-law does not have the time, he could send someone to bring the mother-in-law. If there is no one to send, he would give the mother-in-law some money to cover her transport expenses to his house. During the *Omugwo* period, the mother-in-law takes care of the young mother and her new baby by cooking special local delicacies for her, spicy soups believed to help dissolve after-birth blood clotting, bathing the new born-baby and massaging it, and doing other household chores that would allow the young mother to relax and recover from child-birth issues. Dike avers that "among Nigerian women, culturally-based beliefs in pregnancy and birth dictate what is presumed acceptable about food, drink, daily activities of living, employment, self-care and access to healthcare" (41). This means that the *Omugwo* culture is strictly associated with certain kinds of food which the new mother must eat whether she likes it or not. These kinds of food are for health benefits, to help the young mother nourish her body, produce adequate breast milk, and regain strength lost during childbirth.

In addition, the older woman advises the young mother on the best ways and importance of breastfeeding her new baby. She teaches her how to handle the new

baby, feed, bathe, and clothe it. Sometimes too, the mother could intervene if the young couple quarrelled or got into a fight. At the end of the agreed period of the *Omugwo*, the mother would inform the young husband of her readiness to return to her home. By that time, the young mother would have recovered from childbirth and be strong enough to care for herself and her baby. The husband, according to custom, must buy clothes, and other items for the mother-in-law to compensate her for her stay and hard work in his house. He must also give her some money. In most cases, the husband would accompany the mother-in-law home and thank her husband for allowing her to embark on the *Omugwo* trip. If the husband does not have the chance to accompany her home, he could delegate someone to do so on his behalf. On arrival from the *Omugwo* trip, the mother-in-law would invite her fellow woman in the village to celebrate with her. When these women arrive, the woman would entertain them with food and drinks as a mark of the healthy status of the couple she went to visit. For the first week, the woman returned from the *Omugwo*, she must dress well and appear healthy to demonstrate to the public that her *Omugwo* trip was a successful one. Some critics have argued that the *Omugwo* cultural practice is not an exclusive socio-cultural routine where all the parties involved happily agree to undertake the process. Sometimes, a woman in an abusive, stressful marriage sees the *Omugwo* occasion as an opportunity to escape from her husband and may never return to her matrimonial home. Iheanacho argues that “experience has also shown that in Nigeria, older married mothers take comfort in their grown-up children and if their children were married, the advantage of taking leave for a while to assist their nursing daughters (what the Igbos call, 'omugwo'), has a lot of soothing effects and a break from violent husbands” (3). Running away from her matrimonial home in the guise of embarking on the *Omugwo* trip as a reaction to tension in a marriage may not be the best approach to upholding a peaceful conjugal union unless all other methods have failed. Thus, the *Omugwo* practice as an escapist route for a dissatisfied married woman easily provides a leeway for the breakup of a marriage. While the woman moves on to a new environment, the man is stuck in the old environment and must negotiate his way out of a lonely alley.

The Need to Re-evaluate *Omugwo* Cultural Practice

Omugwo plays a symbolic role in fostering unity and togetherness within the immediate and extended family. Most importantly, it provides an opportunity for a young mother to learn the rudiments of motherhood and how to take care of the baby as it grows older. While the Igbo society has embraced this culture for its numerous advantages, the people have ignored the danger it poses to the institution of marriage especially the marriage of the older woman embarking on the *Omugwo* trip. For a woman to embark on the *Omugwo* trip, it means that she would be away from her matrimonial home for the period the *Omugwo* would last. Her husband, being lonely, may sometimes get involved in extramarital affairs as a response to his loneliness. Generally, in Igboland, the culture of the people assigns domestic duties to women so

that men do not get involved in such affairs. Therefore, when a woman whose responsibility is to cook, clean the house, keep the man warm, and do laundry immediately leaves the home for some months, it creates a huge lacuna in the conjugal structure which may lead to the eventual breakup of the marriage. Also, there have been cases where it was reported that the older woman who went on the *Omugwo* trip got sexually involved with the young husband of the young mother. This has also led to the breakup of marriages because the younger woman either calls for a divorce or moves out of her matrimony home in protest. Although the former case is more rampant than the latter, both cases are attributed to the *Omugwo* phenomenon as posing a great danger to the marriage institution. In Africa, marriage is venerated as forming the basic foundation of a harmonious, successful family. Therefore, anything that threatens a marriage is abhorred and avoided by all means. Nwobodo affirms that "Africans have a high respect for marriage and family values at all times and this creates the sacredness of this institution to the social functioning of individuals and society members. Despite various socio-economic, social, religious, political and cultural changes, the marriage and family institutions remain quite auspicious for society functioning" (170). No aspect of culture must supersede any aspect of the social foundation because, without a functional society, culture cannot exist.

Given the danger posed to the institution of marriage by the *Omugwo* cultural practice, it is expedient that the custom be re-evaluated and repositioned to ensure healthy family growth for all the couples involved. For example, the period of the *Omugwo* practice should be drastically reduced to one or two weeks, maybe one month. Within this period, the nursing mother should learn the necessary domestic skills to care for her new baby and rest enough to recover from the stress of childbirth. That way, the older husband would not be abandoned for too long or be in dire need of a domestic helper. To contract a female domestic helper for an older man while the wife is away at the *Omugwo* practice is a recipe for disaster. Adultery is one of the greatest threats to the institution of marriage. It is unjustifiable both culturally and spiritually. P.F Nwankwo states that "many reasons have been listed as why people indulge in adultery. These include impotency, sex maniacism, frigidity, lust, lack of self-control, inequality of sexual desire leading to dissatisfaction, an act of revenge, lack of care and affection" (35). In the preceding outlines, 'lack of care and affection' is easily enthroned and initiated by the absence of the older wife when she is away at the *Omugwo* practice. Although there is no spiritual or cultural justification for infidelity, married men and women must endeavour to avoid or give room for it to occur in their marriages and any culture that creates that possibility should be re-examined. A cultural practice that upholds one stratum of humanity while destroying another operates at cross-purposes with social tenets and therefore should be revisited.

Sometimes, the young couple cannot afford the material gifts required by tradition for the older woman at the end of her *Omugwo* period. Therefore, the older woman is compelled to stay on while waiting for the young couple to earn enough

money for her material and financial gifts before she returns to her husband and family. In the end, she may stay up to six months and in most cases a year or even more. If the period of the *Omugwo* is reduced, the young couple would not be under financial pressure to compensate the older woman for her kind help because she may not need it after spending a short time. There are cases where older women travel out of the country to different parts of the world for *Omugwo*. Due to travel regulations, these women never return to their matrimonial homes. Thus, their marriages break thereby producing an incomplete, frustrated man. In Igbo culture, a man without a wife is incomplete. It does not matter if he has not been married or he was married and his wife left him. Animasheun and Fatile corroborate the preceding idea by remarking that "every culture of the world recognizes some form of the institution of marriage. In most cultures, (societies) and religions neither man nor woman is considered complete, after reaching maturity, without a spouse" (193). If the *Omugwo* period is reduced to a week or two, the older woman and her husband could go together if the older man agrees. There are cases where the young man and her baby relocate to the older woman's house especially if the older woman and her husband are materially buoyant and financially stable.

Also instead of making *Omugwo* the exclusive preserve of women, there could be a shift in tradition where younger people, for example, the younger relations of the young mother or husband would be invited. This line of argument may not be strong enough because the younger ladies may not be experienced in the art of taking care of a newborn baby or a nursing mother. In the 21st century where communication and information systems provide effective channels of communication, instructions could be passed over the phone from the older women to the younger ladies who are taking care of the nursing mother and her baby. There is the danger of the young husband amorously getting involved with the young lady during the *Omugwo* period. In all cases, it is obvious that the *Omugwo* cultural practice poses a great threat to the marriage institution. Therefore, re-evaluating the practice would reduce the period the older woman will spend on the visit. Also, young mothers can visit their mothers or older women to learn the rudiments of afterbirth care before they deliver their babies. That way, they would not desperately need an older woman to abandon their families and spend long months away from their matrimonial homes. While *Omugwo* has enormous advantages, there are disadvantages too, therefore the practice should be re-evaluated. The re-evaluation of *Omugwo* cannot be achieved through any consensus or collective agreement because it is not written down on any document. The re-evaluation can start with the older husbands and this can be discussed in men's general meetings to be implemented in various homes. Men should wield their authority as heads of homes to ensure that their wives spend shorter time during the *Omugwo* period. That way, the family unit and marriage can be preserved. It is in accordance with Arugu's submission that "the family is the bedrock of the community. Families are of paramount importance to Nigerian society because they are considered to be the

basic unit of society" (381). In any situation where the culture of a people conflicts with the unity and sanctity of marriage, marriage and family should prevail.

Conclusion

This study has examined *Omugwo* in Igboland, highlighting its importance as a regenerative tradition and a rite of passage for the nursing mother into motherhood. The study agrees with many of the cited scholars that the *Omugwo* culture is symbolic of the Igbo identity inexorably tied to birth as a fundamental process of continuity. It also examined *Omugwo* as a celebration of life and womanhood, in this case, the new mother who must be appreciated, pampered and indulged until a time when she can live a normal life and take up her usual domestic responsibilities. However, in addition to all the above, the study argued that many scholars only concentrate on celebrating the *Omugwo* cultural phenomenon and the opportunity it offers women, both young and old without considering the negative effects it has on the man whose wife embarks on the *Omugwo* project. The study further argued that the period of the *Omugwo* should be reduced and the man and his wife should proceed on the trip if the man agrees. This is to forestall the breakup of the marriage through infidelity on the part of the man who may respond to loneliness and abandonment by having an affair with another woman other than his wife. Although *Omugwo* is celebrated as an iconic cultural emblem, its negative consequences on the family must also be addressed to achieve a desired social equilibrium where a famous culture should not constitute a destabilizing quotient in society.

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