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FAMILY MATTERS
Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture

Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu

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In memory of my mother
Veronica Umebe Uwechia
died 12.13.02

erosity of Marilyn Desmond, Chinwe Uwarase, Barry Hallen, Lynn Jones, Tejumola Olaniyan, Micere Mugo, Madonna Larbi, Paul Tyambe Zeleza, Cassandra Vency, Barbara Abou-El-Haj, and many other colleagues and friends too numerous to mention.

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At the foundation of it all is the family. I would like to express my profound appreciation for the unwavering support of my daughters Uzoamaka and Azuka, for whom the book was written, for the encouragement my brother Jide-ifo Uwechia, and for my mother Veronica Umebe Uwechia, who showed me the possibilities that women can attain when they believe in themselves, but who did not live long enough to see this book of her dreams come to fruition. Uzoamaka, Azuka, Jideifo, and Veronica na m nno i'ye were all sounding boards for many of the ideas in this book. *Daku nu o.*

INTRODUCTION

Igbo Family Structure and Feminist Concepts

Feminists have found most forms of family prevalent in history and in the present to be destructive of women's equality both within the home and in all other spheres of life, and sometimes of their basic well-being.

—Susan Moller Okin, "Families and Feminist Theory: Some Past and Present Issues" (1997)

Feminists have conducted a close scrutiny of the family . . . and have seen how oppressive it can be for women.

—Linda Gordon, "Why Nineteenth-Century Feminists Did Not Support 'Birth Control' and Twentieth-Century Feminists Do" (1982)

Contemporary human rights discourse has defined a framework for understanding African families that pits the rights of individuals against the norms of cultures and traditions. The 1986 African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the constitutions of various African nations, and the United Nations Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 12) all protect indigenous cultures under the concept of people's rights while offering strong protection for individual rights. Tensions have steadily arisen between those eager to secure the individual rights of people over the customs and values of cultures that violate those rights. These tensions have coalesced around the rights of women. From the late 1980s, landmark cases in a number of African countries either stripped wives and daughters of whatever rights they had, or determined that they never had any. The 1999 case of *Maggya v. Maggya* comes to mind, in which the Zimbabwean Supreme Court equated the status of adult daughters to that of teenage sons, as well as the 1987 Kenyan case that denied Wambui Orieno the right to bury her husband, Sylvannus A. Orieno (Bigge

and von Briesen 2000, Stamp 1991, and A. Gordon 1995). In both cases, the judges in the two countries defined the boundary of the family in accordance with presumed traditional customary practices, restricting the rights of daughters and wives. In cases as these, where cultural norms are privileged, modern constitutional provisions that guarantee women equal rights with men are eroded. Such contemporary appeals to culture and selective invocations of traditions continue to be used in different countries to entrench the gender subordination of daughters and wives and to curb whatever rights they may have under the constitutions of respective countries. Interestingly, most of this curtailment occurs within the context of the family, specifically under the provisions of family law that rest on customs and traditions as well as on cultural conceptions of the family. These conceptions are historically derived from men's notions of customs, their perceptions of values, and their articulations of the structure of the family.

It is indeed true that the consequent problem of gender subordination in Africa over the last sixty years or so can be traced to European colonial policies and African men's views and constructions of the family. Because this male-dominant view of the family has never been challenged, it has gained legitimacy and paramount importance. Modern prejudices about women underlie this view, and such biases have worked to consolidate and protect men's rights within the family and in the society at large. The consolidation of husbands' and sons' rights has resulted in a patriarchal consciousness in which the subordination of daughters and wives is taken for granted and is assumed to be culturally rooted and based on their natural inferiority. This lends support to the characterization of African societies and African families as historically oppressive to women. Once scholars concede that women in African societies are culturally subordinate to men, it becomes difficult to uphold a human rights charter that simultaneously offers equality to women and safeguards the integrity of cultural traditions. Searing tensions are automatically generated for modern African women seeking to assert their constitutionally protected rights, as this goes against the tenets of the equally protected tradition. Often, to their great chagrin and embarrassment, they face the demoralizing prospect of having their rights struck down in their nations' highest courts by African judges who doggedly privilege the constitutionally protected right of "customs and traditions" over the rights of women in order to keep women in what they see as their culturally assigned roles, that is, in subjugation to men. The rulings of these African male judges have been crucial in configuring the current human rights discourse in Africa as one pitting women's individual rights against the collective right of a people (read: men) to their culture.

Of course, the ruling of the judges in cases such as *Magaya v. Magaya* suggests that African women are not really part of the culture, and so could not have a meaningful role in discussing and reforming any parts of the culture.

Their modern demands are deemed transgressive, even though women were sidelined in important conversations on the constitution of cultural norms and laws that took place over eighty years ago, conversations that treated them as social and legal minors and that resulted in their present second-class status. The present discourses on culture, then, are based on a historical, one-sided male construction of customs and cultural practices that must be re-examined. The issue of what constitutes culture and cultural practices raises the much larger question of who decides (and once decided) on which customs are privileged, and why? And, why must the rights of women be sacrificed?

Male judges in different African nations who rule for women's subjugation rationalize their rulings on the grounds that the community is always larger than the individual, and that traditions and cultural values are vital to the identity, well-being, and continuity of the community. These judges and their political supporters trivialize modern African women's insistence on the protection of their constitutional right of equality as an unacceptable commitment to the ideologies of individualism and feminism, which are characterized as antithetical to the African way of life and ill-suited to govern the distribution of power and resources within the family. Any challenge to what is perceived as "African culture" or "African values" is considered by these judges a direct threat to the vital force of African society and to what it means to be African.

The problem with this stance of male judges is that it fails to examine what we claim to be "the traditional African family" and the entitlements that accrue to members, especially given that the ideology of individualism underlies much of contemporary life and that the processes of modernization have radically reshaped and continue to reshape the very "African society" they are invested in protecting. Historical changes, of which modernization is a large part, have given rise to new forms of family relationships, new value systems, and new aspirations that were never part of precolonial societies, including the "traditional" society they constructed in the first three decades of colonization. Tensions and conflict have arisen in families between the newer and older family ideology, leading to family crises that underlie cases such as *Magaya v. Magaya*. The question that arises, then, is how do cultural proponents determine which social features are worthy of preservation as traditional and which are subject to modernization? Because discussions about the rights of women and the legal status of members of the family cannot take place without an understanding of the sociocultural nature of the specific African family under examination in different historical times, it is imperative to open up discussions on these subjects.

This book examines the modern African family and its corollary social vision in one specific region in Nigeria. It does so in light of Western feminist theorizations about the impact of the family structure on women and the impact of human rights discourse on gender equality in modern African societies.

The area of study is northwestern Igboland, which, prior to colonization and contrary to the popular beliefs of Igbo men, was a nonpatriarchal, nongendered society. In the last 150 years (1854–2004), the Igbo family has undergone vast structural changes as it responded to an intense barrage of cultural forces, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade, late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Christian evangelism, colonialism, rapid urbanization, the ideology of individualism and its sacralization of the self, migration to other parts of Nigeria and the world, anticolonial struggles, nationalism, independence, ethnic cleansing, the Nigerian-Biafran war, and contact with various forms of family relationships worldwide. In myriad ways, these economic, social, political, and cultural forces have extensively transformed Igbo families and have shown that the notion and idea of the traditional family is a highly complicated one. In some cases, the impact of these forces resulted in the total disintegration of some family features and forms of conjugal relations, and in other cases it wrenched family relationships grotesquely out of shape. What we are left with today is nowhere close to the late nineteenth-century family structure that predated British colonialism. The questions this book addresses are, what was the impact of all these changes on women's status and their role within the family? And what was the cumulative social impact of these changing family patterns between the second half of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century?

The normative model of family embodied in colonial and nationalist policies and labor relations is radically different from what existed in Igbo society. These policies completely redefined women's identity as that of wife, and produced a developmentalist discourse and a series of nationalist and postcolonial policies that supported a dependency status for wives. This study grapples with the impact of cultural change in Igboland as it studies the norms, beliefs, and ideals that regulate the lives of female and male members of the family in different historical contexts. It recognizes that there is a push-pull relationship between an idealized notion of family and real-life families. It also notes that a similar relationship exists between codified (lawyer's) customary laws and the living customs of the people and between contemporary customs and those of the late nineteenth century. As such, this book is not a study of the idealized family and codified customary laws, nor is it one that idealizes the family and present customs or makes an emotional plea for their relevance. Although it acknowledges the importance of families and customs in the political, social, economic, and emotional life of Africans, it recognizes, too, the dysfunctions of real-life families and customs, the compromises that families require of women, and the customs that regulate these compromises. This study of families broadens out to explain the social structure within which families are embedded and to articulate the sort of male-female dynamics that they define. The objective of this articulation is to raise the question of the nature

of equality that exists in such a sociopolitical structure and to contrast it with the intrinsic notion of equality in Western societies—a notion privileged by feminists.

Because there is no single model of family, this book deals with different forms of family relationships, notably, the consanguineal, nuclear, mixtures of the two, polygamous, matrilineal, patrilineal, dual-descent, matrifocal, patrifocal, patriarchal, and matriarchal. A consanguineal family construes the family as composed of kin, while the nuclear treats the family as composed of a man and his wife and children. Polygamous families are made up of a male or female husband with multiple wives. A matrilineal family traces descent through the mother, while a patrilineal one traces descent through the father, and a dual-descent family traces descent through both the mother and the father. Matrifocality describes a family that is based or focused on the mother, whereas a patrifocal family is centered on the father. A patriarchal family is one in which the father has the dominant power in the family, and a matriarchal family is one in which the mother has the dominant power in the family.

In the general field of African studies and the subfield of African philosophy, very little attention is paid to families, and interest in the subject pales in comparison to interest in national politics and the political state. Questions of governance, democratization, the viability of civil society, the importance of rule of law, and the securing of people's provisions of human rights dominate the discourse. I appreciate the importance of these investigations, but I also recognize that the stability of a nation state depends on stable, functioning families. Where families are in turmoil, or displaced to refugee camps in regions of Africa that have experienced civil wars, or ravaged by HIV/AIDS, the result has been widespread post-traumatic stress disorders; collapse of some social institutions; moral meltdown; breakdown of law, order, and security; senseless violence; massive social problems; and a severely overburdened social infrastructure. Because there is a connection between family well-being and a healthy nation, and because family destabilization attacks the very foundations of societies, we ought to accord higher priority to discussions of the well-being of the African family.² Greater attention should, therefore, be devoted to understanding the sources of this destabilization as well as the impact of contemporary global policies and adopted values on families and how these, in turn, feed social pathologies that are an anathema to good governance.

In setting the parameters of this discussion on the family and its related social vision, it is important that we do not proceed with conceptions of the African family and society that have their roots in definitions offered by early British ethnographers and anthropologists who worked within the subjugation ideology of imperialism (Basden 1966, Thomas 1913–14, Leith-Ross 1965, Green 1964, and Meek 1937). As is well known, the conceptual scheme of that ideology is antithetical to the precolonial Igbo cultural scheme, which was

characterized by a different social vision that emphasized assertiveness and empowerment. As such, it is imperative that we go beyond the familial descriptions that these ethnographers produced to serve colonial objectives, and, that still inform contemporary descriptions of the Igbo family. Earlier definitions are flawed not because they were written by white men, but because they misrepresent the precolonial Igbo family. This family was not under the dominant control of men, nor was it one in which the sole duty of women was to minister to the needs of men. Early Western ethnographers, Christian missionaries, colonial anthropologists, and educationists viewed Igbo families and society through their patriarchal lens and the male-privileging value scheme of Western epistemology. Propelled by their interpretive scheme, they made patriarchy the organizing principle of the Igbo family and society and generated ethnographic descriptions that reinforced their interpretations by misrepresenting Igbo families as conjugal units. Consequently, they overemphasized the role of conjugal units, focusing on husbands as heads of households and treating daughters, sisters, and mothers as socially, politically, economically, and religiously irrelevant in the scheme of things. Perceiving all women to be dependents of male heads of households enabled them to define women's roles in terms of three principal tasks: the provision of labor, the production of children, and the provision of sexual favors for men.

Far more critical in this misrepresentation of the Igbo family as a gendered space that is governed by unequal relations of power is the methodological root of this epistemological problem and construction of society as patriarchal. Early European ethnographers, Christian missionaries, and educationists failed to recognize the ways in which their own conceptual schemes and ideological beliefs influenced their work. They did not see how their Christian beliefs about the family influenced their assumptions and interpretations about the Igbo family. Nor did they grasp the myriad ways that colonialism and colonial education pitted the interests of men against those of women in the first half of the twentieth century. These misperceptions resulted in the articulation of a static and erroneous model of Igbo family and society that ignored important relations of power, tensions, and figures of authority that fell outside the Western researchers' conceptual scheme. I hope to avoid the flaws of past studies by centering the Igbo ontological and ethical scheme, as well as the consanguineal logic of family relations, in an understanding of the political nature of the society, and the distribution of rights, duties, and entitlements in the Igbo family and society. Additionally, my study analyzes the family and society from the standpoint of multiple female members of the family, principally, that of *isi ada* (first lineage daughter), *umuada* (daughters), *ndi nne* (mothers), Ikporo Onitsha (Council of Onitsha Women), and *inyemadi* (wives). These multiple and shifting perspectives are seamlessly woven together, revealing crucial issues of family and social life and providing a kalei-

doscopic picture of the family and society in their ungendered form. Within Igbo family, all consanguineal kin are treated as persons with rights and powers who are engaged in dynamic interactions with each other. This epistemological standpoint is rooted in the view that adult family members—both females and males—have agency and clearly defined rights and powers within the Igbo social universe. At the social level, this results in the formation of a symmetrical system of governance. The study's location within that universe highlights and critically integrates into theoretical discourse important features that were missing in current and early descriptions of the Igbo family and society, and also offers another way of dealing with the political issue of women's rights.

Feminist Concepts and Methodology

In the past thirty years, mainstream Western feminists have undertaken a similar task to mine, rethinking earlier descriptions of the family in Europe and the United States.³ The objective of their project was to re-envision the family in light of capitalism, industrialization, and the First and Second World Wars—major historical events that have radically affected familial relations in numerous ways. Reflecting on the impact of these social forces on the structure of the family, white middle-class feminist theorists and philosophers have confronted the pervasive gender inequality and the limiting nature of their notion of motherhood, as well as the limited range of roles for women in the family and their society at large (Jagger 1977, Daly 1973, Okin 1989, and Pateman 1988; Thorne 1982, Nicholson 1986, Ruddick 1989, Nelson 1997, and Hansen and Garey 1998). They consequently raised fundamental questions about gender roles and family boundaries, after decomposing the family into its constituent parts of sex, gender, and generation. Focusing attention on the obvious gender-based inequality in the family, they challenged the idea of a monolithic family that privileged the nuclear family. They also began the exploration of the subjective experiences of power relations and of wives' contributions to the family (Hansen and Garey 1998, Nelson 1997, Thorne 1982 and 1992, and Okin 1989).

Speaking largely about European American families in the United States, including Western European and Jewish families, white feminist political theorist Susan Moller Okin (1997, 14) and white feminist historian Linda Gordon described the ways in which the traditional arrangement of relationships within the nuclear family are “destructive of women's equality both within the home and in all spheres of life” (Gordon 1982, 50). Driving home their point, white feminist sociologists and legal theorists pointed to the unequal power relations between the sexes and the privacy codes that allowed incest, rape, and wife battering to go unchallenged in their families. They also

showed the ways in which Western family experiences are determined by gender. To their lasting credit, white feminist scholars and activists in the United States spearheaded radical reforms in the family as they sought to establish more egalitarian relationships between the spouses. The global impact of their efforts has been the profound reshaping of global family histories, the introduction of new concepts governing relations in families, and ideas about how families the world over are to be viewed. Part of the underlying objective of this study is to ascertain the relevance and applicability of some of these feminist concepts, rooted in Western social structures, to the study of African families rooted in African social structures and, in the last century, modified within the crucible of imperialism and colonial racism.⁴

So what are these concepts? A review of the writings of white feminist scholars in the United States identifies a range of concepts that were used to problematize the family. These include, but are not limited to, patriarchy, gender, individualism, sexuality, reproduction, equality, motherhood, labor, household, the public and private spheres of life, and the notion of the family as composed of "breadwinner and full-time wife." Although these concepts are used in other disciplines too, they function differently in feminist contexts than they do in nonfeminist ones, where their hidden assumptions about male-female relations are highlighted. The issue, then, is what is feminism and what makes these concepts feminist when they are appropriated by feminism?

At its core, white feminist philosopher Sarah Gamble defines feminism as a movement that seeks to change a social paradigm in which "women are treated inequitably within a society [that] is organized to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns" (2000, vii). It is a multipronged struggle, against women's oppression that embodies an anti-female subordination thesis. In this struggle for personhood and empowerment, feminist scholars and philosophers deploy the identified concepts to address issues about gender in relation to the underlying distribution of power in the family in particular, and in the society at large. Their focus is on rights and power relations because they are concerned about the unequal division of labor within the family, and about who in the family possesses the dominant share of power, who is the weaker partner in the marriage and why, and who controls matters of sexuality and reproduction.

In the important essay "Is There a Feminist Method?" white feminist philosopher Sandra Harding provides a fuller discussion of what constitutes feminist methodology and practice (1989, 17-32). Although she argues against the idea that there is a method, she gives examples of how to determine that a chosen strategy is feminist. There are three key features: the utilization of gender as an analytic category of explanation, the focus on women's experiences, and the placing in full view of both the assumptions and beliefs on the same cognitive frame. The first is the most important feature of the feminist method.

Without it, a focus on women's experiences would not rise to the level required for it to be feminist. Harding observes that there are countless studies on women that are not feminist. The use of gender as an explanatory scheme elevates the discourse to the level of feminism because its built-in assumptions are calibrated to detect constructions of masculinity and femininity as well as of female oppression. It will detect any instances of sexual differentiation that are rooted in male dominance. The second feature of a feminist methodology is that it takes women's experiences as a critical resource. For Harding, this means generating "problematics from the perspective of women's experiences" and then using them "as a significant indicator of the 'reality' against which hypotheses are tested" (1989, 14). The third and last feature is requiring that researchers place their beliefs and assumptions about race, class, culture, and gender within the same frame. This allows anyone to apprehend the researcher's concrete beliefs and interests in the analysis, rather than reading him or her as an invisible, anonymous, disembodied voice of authority.

The last feature is not an altogether unreasonable requirement. It is one from which any research method will benefit, as it makes it easier for reviewers to evaluate easily the strengths and weaknesses of a study. Insofar as the second feature is an argument for the legitimacy of generating research problematics from women's experiences, there is nothing theoretically wrong with that position. In fact, it would not have been identified, were it not for the fact that most research themes within the Western intellectual structure of knowledge derive from conceptual schemes that devalue women. If such devaluation were not part of standard intellectual practice, the issue would not even be raised. However, the efficacy of the first feature in ferreting out women's oppression has been both its greatest strength and the basis of its immense popularity with feminists. It is also the source of its greatest weakness. The category of gender crudely reads any instance of sex difference or social hierarchy as an instance of female oppression. It is unable to determine whether an instance of sex difference is the result of some other organizing principle than a legitimate response to the ideology of women's subordination embedded within Western episteme, the possibility exists that it would become redundant if the ideology of female oppression that is operative in both the cultural and epistemological scheme no longer existed, or if there were cultures that did not share that ideology.

So what if the category of gender is absent in certain cultures? Would the feminist perspective still apply in studying families in those societies? Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí has argued that the organizing principle in precolonial Oyo Yoruba culture is seniority, not gender (1997). Elsewhere, I have argued against Ife Adunni that the Igbo society was ungendered and that social phenomena cannot be named as patriarchal in the absence of relevant supporting structures and

practices.⁵ To what extent then will the feminist perspective and related concepts apply in studying family relations in such a different cultural environment? The feminist perspective will not straightforwardly apply as Oyejùmí argues since feminism and feminist theory is rooted in the Western nuclear family that is fundamentally different from African forms of family (2002, 3). Feminism, a priori, injects patriarchy and the category of gender into cultures because its underlying standpoint presupposes the existence of unequal relations of power between males and females. Consequently, it analyzes all relations between males and females as entailing male dominance and female subjugation. Once the feminist methodology is applied, the society is assumed to privilege male viewpoints and concerns, and any instances of sex difference will automatically appear as instances of female subjugation.

This is not to say that questions cannot be raised about social hierarchies, the relationships between males and females and between husbands and wives in such cultures, or about unequal power in Igbo societies.⁶ They must be raised outside of the feminist paradigm if we are not to slide automatically back into and engage in gender discourse. It is not always clear that feminism represents a vision and model of society that is universally true. The mere existence of unequal power relations such as those between father and daughter, senior son and junior daughter, or sometimes between husbands and wives, does not prove gender inequality. Because the focus of this study is on cultural groups, social institutions, and principles and patterns of social organization in different historical periods in a nongendered society, the questions raised in this study will not automatically presume the existence of male dominance. Rather, the operative cultural logic in such cultures will be elicited to provide the explanatory scheme through which family relationships, historical events and judicial decisions will be understood.

Given that the Western intellectual scheme that defines scholarship is imperiled by the ideology of female subjugation, there is need for caution in discussing ungendered societies in a gendered framework. We need to be mindful that theoretical work within Western episteme would surreptitiously install Western concepts and Western cultural dynamic into other cultures, regardless of their differences. Working within a gendered framework robs a researcher or theorist of the requisite flexibility to respond effectively to relations that are not products of patriarchy. The epistemological challenge for this study is to avoid the irresistible undertow of the assumptions and concepts of Western epistemology. Thus, in this study, the gender category will not dictate the terms and trajectory of research so that other rationales and possibilities can be uncovered. The feminist standpoint and its concepts will, however, be invoked and interrogated simultaneously when appropriate. We are mindful that the forces of imperialism exported the ideology of patriarchy to cultures the world over, and as a result, gender has become a legitimate category of analy-

sis for aspects of social life of formerly ungendered cultures that have made the transition into modernity. However, there are cultural remnants of ungendered times that are not susceptible to gender analysis.

A culturally focused perspective is sensitive to historical changes. It attunes us to social and ideological convolutions created by the forces of colonialism and local resistance to them. The merit in this approach is that it guarantees that we adhere first to African social precepts and that we treat complex cultural configurations as central rather than as tangential to understanding. Given that some Igbo cultural institutions—the *Omu* (female monarch), the dual-symmetrical system of governance, the consanguineal family principle, and the multi-generational dispersal of power in families—are absent from the Western ontological scheme, this approach allows us to offer appropriate explanations that the feminist viewpoint and its categories cannot grasp because the truths of those ungendered institutions are outside its frame of reference. Thus, the most important reason for prudence in adopting a gender-explanatory framework of interpretation is that the possibilities the gender discourse automatically closes off will immediately open up.

Even in societies that have always been patriarchal, scholars from marginalized cultural groups have mounted devastating critiques on the explanatory scope of feminist concepts and theories because of the way white feminist theorists efface experiences that challenge their point of view. In the United States, for instance, African American scholars have demonstrated in various ways that the category of race and the ontology of racism complicate the pattern of gender relations in their minority cultural group. In some cases, race challenges the relevance of some concepts that mainstream feminists have upheld as universal. That women are restricted to the private spaces of the home while men work is not a phenomenon experienced by black and Chicano families and poor working-class white families. Attending to the cultural variance between the mainstream and black families, some African American women scholars—Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Nira Sudarakasa, Elsa Barkley Brown, Evelyn Higginbotham, Angela Harris and Cheryl Harris—have narrowed the all-encompassing scope of white feminists' claims about the family.⁷ The value of these interventions is that they highlight the limitations of feminist discourses and the limited scope of feminist concepts when adequate attention is paid to the categories of race, ethnicity and culture. By exposing the fact that family experiences are racially and culturally constructed as well, they force us to see the race and class-bound nature of some of the concepts and issues of white feminism. In white, middle-class discourses about gender, the public-private dichotomy, the role of the mother, and the distribution of power among family members do not cross racial and cultural lines easily. This does not mean that the concepts lack relevance; it may be that they are totally inapplicable, or applicable in some way.