

European Journal of  
**Philosophy, Culture and Religious Studies**  
(EJPCR)



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AFRICAN SOCIETY: A PHILOSOPHICAL  
APPRAISAL**

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study is meant to appraise philosophically the notion of family in Igbo African society. The study will also show the distinguishing features between the Igbo African society and the western societies in relation to the notion of family. This paper will attempt to discuss the notion of family in the Igbo-African society with a particular interest in analyzing the components that make the family in the Igbo-African society stand out.

**Methodology:** The applicable methodology in any study is determined largely by the objectives or purposes which the study is meant to achieve. For the purpose of this study, the applicable methodology will be a form of review of relative literatures, peer reviewed journals and internet sources which treated the concepts and issues relating the subject matters to be appraised by this study.

**Findings:** The study finds that family is the smallest unit of society. The study also found that the concept of family is part and parcel of man, and it is as old as man himself. Furthermore, the study observed that there is a general assumption that the overall dispositions of conducts and characters in any given society can be traced to the conducts and characters at the family level. The study also found that the notion of family in the Igbo African society is distinct in several features and factors when compared to the one in the western cultures.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** Although several authors have devoted the time and scholarly efforts in researching about the concept of family; there are dearths of scholarly researched literatures which narrows the concept to the Igbo African society. It implies that there are few or no academic publications where the notion of family is philosophically appraised with specific interest to its features, and factors in the Igbo African society. It is on this note that this study comes in to fill the voidness by making a philosophical appraisal of the notion of family in the Igbo African society.

**Keywords:** *Family, Igbo-African, Philosophical appraisal, Western cultures, Society*

## Introduction

The notion of family as it is in our contemporary Igbo-African society cannot be taken as the right notion of the concept of family in the Igbo-African society. There are so many reasons to substantiate the claims. A typical Igbo-African society is built on certain principles; tenets and belief are historically ascertained to be the cultural heritage of the Igbo people. The contemporary notion of family is as a result of infiltration of various western cultures, lifestyles, education and tourist effects (Eze, 2012). The researcher aligns himself with the view of elites scholars that family in the contemporary Igbo-African society cannot be offered and accepted as a scholarly view of the notion of family in Igbo-African society (Nnonyelu, 2009; Nwala, 2010). Therefore, to proffer a better comprehension of the notion of family in Igbo-African society, most parts of the discussion in this paper will be devoted to the notion of family as it was or is in the traditional Igbo-African.

The Igbo-African society is for this paper the people who are generally known as Ibos, whose dialect is Igbo with a mix of communal tongues to distinguish one Igbo community from the other. The Igbo people are predominant occupiers or settlers of the present-day south-eastern part of Nigeria and some parts of the south southern part of Nigeria. Despite the influx of western acculturation, there are components which are peculiar to the Igbo-African Society. The African societies are known for their high regards to patriarchal tradition, as the elders are always at the helm of affairs and issues in the community and day-to-day communal living in the society (Olisa, 2002).

The rate of individual ownership of property (landed property) was at its barest minimum in the Igbo-African societies, landed properties are mostly construed as family property. In the Igbo-African society, male supremacy or son preference plays an important in families and community as a whole (Ugwu &Ugwueye, 2004). Families in Igbo-African societies have greater regards and quest for male children than they do for females. In terms of childbearing and training, families in the Igbo-African society have an absolute style to which issues about childbirth and training are handled. Because the Igbo-African societies have the capital notion “IGWEBUIKE”, which means there is strength or power in numbers or multitude; family size and structure are other crucial aspects of the family in the Igbo-African societies as it is also a form of security and reverence for the family. Marriage is the beginning of a family union. Thus, the concept of marriage was an ideal part of the notion of family in Igbo-African society. Other aspects include but not limited to religious belief and festivals, occupation, among others (Olisa, 2002).

It is observed that the notion of family has an impact and reflection on society. This is why it is generally posited that if the society is bad, the families in the society are bad too and if the society is good, the families are credited as being good too; though that is an argument for another day. Though it is generally believed that family is the nucleus of every society, the notion of family and its relative components differ from one cultural settlement to another and from one historical age to another. The embodiments of the family in the Igbo traditional society is not in all fours with the contemporary Igbo society, though the similarities are high; likewise, the notion of family in the Igbo-African Society is not the same with that of the western culture. Some components make the notion of family in the Igbo-African society distinct and distinguished in its way (Nwala, 2010).

## Concept of Family

A family includes a man, his wife/wives, children and any other person that shares any form of consanguinity and affinity with the persons mentioned above (Obi, Nd). According Ogbalu (2006) the notion of family in Igbo society is distinct from the concept of family in the western view, this is because; while the notion of family in the Igbo-African society has to do with the husband, his wife or wives, and children and also, in addition, any other relations ranging from in-laws, uncles, cousins, nephews distant or near or even maids and servants; that of the western culture abhors that, family tend to be more of just the man, the wife and the children only.

Generally, a family can be nuclear-orextended family, monogamous family or polygamous family. The families in the western culture are tilted towards more of monogamous and nuclear formation; while the notion of family in the Igbo-African societies is extended and either form of monogamous and polygamous, depending on one's choice (Eze, 2012).

The Igbo-African society has great value for the family system. The Igbos believe that it is culturally wrong and morally depraving for a woman to have a child out of wedlock. It is believed that such a situation will rob the child of all the necessary elements that would aid his or her upbringing in a manner that will be useful to society. The Igbo-African society also holds that "Brotherhood is key to life"; therefore, isolated living is abhorred in the Igbo African society; and brotherhood is also root or foundation of the family system in the Igbo-African society (Eze, 2012).

This paper discusses analytically, and philosophically, the components relative to the notion of family in Igbo-African Society. The components include but not limited to, the marriage, family size and structure, child and child training, religious belief and festivals, property ownership and authority and occupation, among others.

## Components of Family

### 1. Marriage

Marriage in the Igbo society is seen as a union of a man and a woman, coming together for procreation, companionship and other sociological reasons. It follows that in the Igbo society, marriage can never be between persons of the same sex, it must be between persons of the opposite sex (Man and woman). This information shows that marriage among the Igbo people involves a male and a female. It also establishes that marriage in Igbo land involves both families and relatives of the male and female that are married. Ogbukagu (2008) asserts that in IgboCommunities, marriage is not just an affair between a man and a woman; it connects the whole kindred and relative. That is why one could easily hear amongst the Igbos using the following terminologies:

NwunyeNdim ----- My husband's wife

Nwunyeanyi ----- Our wife

Marriage may be seen as the lawful conjugal living of man and woman originally from different families upon the performance of certain rites. The notion of the family cannot be discussed with the inherent necessity of the concept of marriage. This is because, without marriage, there may not be an ideal form of family. Marriage marks the inception of a new branch in the family tree. In Igbo-African society, a family is likened to a tree that may depend on circumstances start from fore-fathers--Great-grand-parents--grand-parents—parents--children—grandchildren—great-grandchildren. Each level of the family dimension identified above must begin with the joining of a man and woman in the hood of marriage. Thus, if there is

no marriage, there will be no family and consequent termination of family lineage and extinction of the society (Ezenweke, 2012).

Marriage in the Igbo-African societies is an expected honour to not just the man marrying but also to the lady being married. Marriage comes with age. While a lady is growing, people would normally ask “Onyemurunwaoma?” which means: Who gave birth to this beautiful one? As the lady progresses in age, the question would dramatically and unconsciously change to “Onyen’alunwaoma?” which means: Who is marrying this beautiful one? The later question goes to show that such a lady is ripe for marriage. It follows to say that in Igbo African society, female children are known in accordance to who their parents are, and the identification code changes to whose wife she is once she is deemed to have fully grown and has reached marriageable age.

In Igbo African society, there are entitlements that may elude a man who has reached the age of marriage but has not married. Some communities reckon such men as “efulefu” (wastrels). A man that is in this category may not participate in the share of communal or family property and may be denied the opportunity of attaining a number of social statuses in the community, such as Ichie, NzenaOzo, and other chieftaincy titles available in the community. According to Obi (Nd), a man is deemed to have completed his journey to manhood by entering into marriage and such is also the case of a woman.

In Igbo African societies, marriage is a sacred institution which absolute care is taken by intending parties to find out salient issues about their potential husband’s family history or potential wife’s family history. This is referred to as “Ijuasee” (Making enquiries). It is through this process that certain things which may void the marriages are found, instead of entering into the marriage and separating afterwards. The practice where marriage is contracted for children by their parents is also part of the marriage institution in the notion of family in Igbo-African societies. The parents of the man play a great role in finding a suitable lady for their son. It is argued that such practice helps in eliminating family feuds in the future (Nnonyelu, 2009).

Marriage does not just happen in Igbo-African society. It is a systematic process. It does not start with the man and woman and end up with them. It involves both families. A man who wishes to marry any lady has to inform his own Parents (or persons acting in loco parentis); who would then inform the larger family. This would be followed by investigation and inquiries into the family history and background of the lady in questions. If the findings are favourable, the man’s family will proceed to the lady’s family to do what Igbos call “IKU AKA N’UZO” (Introduction). Through that, the lady’s family is informed of the intention of the man’s family to take their daughter as a wife for their son (Ogbukagu, 2008). Usually, answers are not given in this stage; the lady’s family would welcome their potential in-laws and tell them that they would inform them of the outcome of their journey. This is to allow the lady’s family to carry out a background check and investigation on the man’s family.

After the later investigation has been concluded, and the feedback is positive, the marriage rites are performed, and the lady would be handed over to the man’s family as a wife. The Igbos also have the practice of second bride-price. This is ideally done by the husband if upon knowing the wife biologically ascertains that she had remained flowered before marriage. It is argued that the practice of second bride-price steadied and enhanced the level of sanity and morality in the Igbo-African society (Ogbukagu, 2008). May, I pause to ask: Who ascertains if the man had remained flowered till marriage?

## 2. Socialization and training

According to Chukwu (2013), the root of the family is the man (husband) who is the head of the family. He represents the interest of his family in the community. In the family setting in Igbo-African societies, there

are specific roles and responsibilities meant for each and every member of the family. These roles and responsibilities are not written down as codes in any document or memorials. They are unconsciously imbibed and inculcated into every family right from when the parents of the immediate family were in their childhood in their own parents' houses. It is on this note that it is said that family in the Igbo society is an agent of socialization.

While the father provides basic amenities such as shelter, food and clothing, the wife or wives and children have their roles too. It is the responsibility of the Woman (mother/wife) to prepare meals or cook for the family, taking care of her husband and children and other members of the family. It is also the responsibility of the woman to keep custody of the household or domestic property (Odoziaku), making the home and the children to be kept. Whereas it is attributed to both parents to train the children morally and make them develop good manners and show respect to others, the father is seen as the chief disciplinarian of the family whom he fails to instil discipline in the children. He may be deemed to fail as a father. The mother is the chief trainer of the girl child; thus, where a girl child is not well behaved, the blames are always on the mother (Ogbukagu, 2008).

Children in the family also have their roles to play. According to Ogbalu (2006), Children learn by observing their parents or elderly ones. In the Igbo-African society, there are distinct etiquettes which are expected of male children and female children respectively. Whereas the female children are to be trained on simple trading, domestic skills, food making and preparation, cultivation of vegetable crops, farm weeding, and basic hygiene; the boys are to a large extent under the exclusive tutelage of their father or any other elderly male family relative in the absence of the father.

Ogbalu (2006) posits that the male children are trained in different farming skills, hunting, fishing, family history and any other form of virtues expected by the society for a person of his gender. Both male and female children learn craftworks, but the girls concentrate more on the domestic crafts, like bead making, weaving, pottery, basket, broom, among others, the boys concentrate on blacksmithing, carpentering, etc. The Igbo-African society believes that a man must be brave, strong and courageous; on this note, male children may undergo training and initiation to confirm their masculinity. Any male child who shies away from masculine activities is deemed a wastrel (Chukwu, 2013).

Though the Igbos often make use of this phrase "Nwata di mma, O bu nnaya mere ya, nwata di njo, o bu nne ya" which may also be interpreted to mean that a good child is the pride of the father but a bad child is a disgrace to the mother; the society believe that the training is not solely on the parents of the child. Though the family is the place where the training of the child commences, the whole extended family and members of the community also play one role or the other on the child. The training of a child is as the responsibility of everyone who is a family member because the child belongs to all (nwa bu nwaora). Therefore every adult in the community irrespective of the level of relationship with the immediate family of the child owes a duty to correct and scold a child who is seen misbehaving or engaged in ill conducts. Times, the adult may approach the child's parents to report the child's conduct to them. This concept obtainable in the Igbo-African society helps to keep the family system sound and sane, and the same reflects on society (Ogbalu, 2006).

### 3. Family Size and family structure

Communal living is in the nature of the Igbo-African society, and this is reflected in the notion of family in the Igbo communities. The nuclear family in the strict sense of nuclear family is not an embodiment of the Igbo African society. The structure of the family in Igbo-African society is extended. The Igbo translation of family (Ezin'ulo) implies two elements. Ezi is a noun word in Igbo used to refer to the outer part of a house or compound, while Ulo is a noun that means house. Combination of the two words that family

includes the people in the house and the people outside the house or the people in the outer part of the house. The Igbos strongly believe that such a large family helps in times of need, security and workforce (Olisa, 2002).

A man in Igbo custom and tradition is allowed to marry more than one wife. Thus, polygamy is not alien to the Igbo heritage. What was required is for the man to be able to provide the basics expected of him as the head of the family for the children and wives. An argument has it that the reason for the polygamous marriage culture amongst the Igbos is that farming was the basic work in the early era of the Igbo society, and it believed that more wives imply more children and more workforce for the farmstead and settlements across the community. It is on this basis that the meaning of Nwanna or nwanne (Brother or sister) in the Igbo lexicon means more the male or female child of the same parents. Brother or sister as used in the Igbo family lexicon may be used to refer to a cousin, nephew, uncle, sister, aunt, in-law, distant relatives, et cetera; thus, it is common parlance in the Igbo community for them to refer even a friend as a brother or sister (Ukaegbu, 2005).

#### 4. The child in Igbo traditional context

In the Igbo African society, a family is deemed to be incomplete if there is no child in the family. The woman is said to have no standing at all in the family since she has not had a child of her own for the husband. Even when the woman finally delivered but the child is a girl child, it is said that the woman is standing on foot; as it is only a son that gives a woman full stand in her husband's house. For this and other reasons, a man may be pushed to get another wife for the purpose of having children or just to have a male child (Ugwu, 2010). This is where one may frown at the culture of Igbo society on male preference. This where the practice in the Igbo communities of always asking whenever news is broken that a woman is delivered of a baby; "Nwagini?" which is a form of making an enquiry about the gender of the baby, originated from.

The notion of family in the Igbo-African society is one where a child is given an inestimable value. The worth of a child is much value to the Igbo communities, and that is shown greatly in the names which the family gives the child at birth. The names are stated below:

**Table 1: Igbo names and their meaning**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Nwabuaku	A child is wealth
Nwabuihe	A child is valuable, or A child is light
Nwakaego/Nwakaku	A child is bigger than money or wealth
Nwamaka	A child is beautiful or good
Nwakamma	A child is the best
Nwadiuto	A child is sweet

According to Opata (1998), these names and their meanings help to explain the value at which the Igbos rate children in the family. A woman who wishes to give birth is advised to do good unto children and stay around children so as to gain the blessings of god of childbirth (Chinenyenwa).

### 5. Property ownership

In the Igbo-African society, properties, especially land, are deemed to be owned by the family. Since the property is owned by the family, a single member of the family cannot deal with the property as if it belongs solely to him, unless he is acting directly on the directives of the family members. Every family has a family head usually, the father of the house. In the absence of the father, the most elderly male member of the family is deemed to have inherited the mantle of family leadership as the family head; and to this, he is referred to as (Di OKPA) or (DI OKPARA) which literally means, first child or first male child (Nwala, 2010). Though the authority of the family head resides with the first male child, he cannot wholly exercise such if he is underage, at this point, a paternal uncle will hold the mantle on behalf of the minor till the minor is of major age. It is the Di Okpa in the consent of the principal members of the family and the kindred that allocate land to the family members, either farming or housing settlement. He acts as the custodian of the family property. In Igbo society, unless a land has been ceremonially alienated to any specific member of the family for his own personal use; any use made of the land is to the benefit of the entire family. That is why a house built by a single family member in a family land is deemed to be the family house (Eze, 2012).

### 6. Religious Belief

The Igbo believe in a supreme being who they refer to as “CHUKWU OKIKE ABIAMA” Which some crusaders have termed “The God of Abraham”. The name which the Igbos call this Supreme-being shows that they believe that He is the God that creates all things (Chineke). Aside from the Supreme-being, the Igbos are heterogeneous in terms of the spirituality and religious belief; thus, there are smaller gods whom the Igbos ascribe sacrifices unto and believe greatly in. There is the great Amadioha (One who knows all things and do all things), Ani, (god of land), etc. The Igbos believe that there is a god for every specific thing on earth, this is reflected in their use of the term “CHI” and the names they give to their children (Anyacho, 2005).

**Table 2: Igbo names with ‘CHI’ Prefix**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Chineyenwa	Gods that giveth child
Chineyendu	God of life
ChinekeUmunwanyi	God of women
ChinekeUmuOkorobia	God of young men
Chineke Agha	God of war
Chi n’egbonkpa	God that solves problem

The Igbos have a strong mentality that everyone has their own personal “chi” who guides and protect the individual. Thus, at birth, a typical Igbo would carry the child after the 4 market days and lift the child unto the rising sun and dedicate the child before chukwuokikeabiama, asking him to send a “Chi” for the newborn baby (Ezenweke, 2012). Every family in the Igbo-African society have their own family god “Chi” whom the family reverence; it is the duty of the family to appease the god daily by pouring libation unto the chi. And once in a while to offer a gift of sacrifice unto the chi (Adibe, 2009).



## Conclusion

From the discourse made so far in the paper, one would notice that most things covered would sound alien in relation to the contemporary modern notion of family in the Igbo communities. This is to show how deep the root of “Africinity” in the Igbo society has been gradually uprooted by the western culture.

Following migration, colonialism and its associated acculturation, the Igbo African society has lost some of the flavors that distinguished it from other cultures. There have been argument that notwithstanding the purported development the colonialist brought to the Africa, the advent has done more harm than good to most of positive cultures. The issues of a young man eloping without paying the bride price of a lady and proceed to start a family was never reckoned in the ideal Igbo African society. But that is the practice in vogue, especially in urban centres, and any attempt to bespeak such acts would attract a lot societal murmuring of people and would even see the the man and the purported of wife involving police to shut off their families from ‘interfering’ in their affairs. The influx of western culture is readily observed all around our societies when the current state of affairs are placed side-by-side with the attributes and components of family discussed in this paper.

## Recommendations

A critical look at some of the components of the notion of family in Igbo-African society would readily show that such practice should not be tolerated in the light of crusade against discrimination in all forms, and the upliftment of women’s right and child’s right in the society. The negative practices include but not limited to: Male child preferences, Osu (outcast) system, etc.

However, there are still practices which are parts of the notion of family in Igbo African society which are ought to be upheld and even pass across to other cultures as they are fundamental in the well-being of any society. These practices are not restricted to the one stated below:

1. Inquiries before marriage as that would reduce the rate of divorce, incompatibility and marital murders which are now rampant.
2. Traditional education/socialization: This helps in maintaining a society where morals are held in high esteem.
3. Family size and structure: This is where the Igbo aphorism “Onye aghala nwanne ya” emanated from. The Igbo’s form of communal living helped in reducing communal strives and combats.

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