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## Family Politics

### *Making Patriarchy in a Patrilineal Society*

I must confess that women are not deprived of their rightful status in society, nor, as in other tribes, doomed to perpetual degradation.

—S. Crowther and J. C. Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger* (1895)

Among the Egbos, women hold a very superior rank in the social scale; they are not regarded, as among other tribes as an inferior creation and doomed to perpetual degradation, but occupy their “rightful status in society.”

—Africanus Horton, *Black Nationalism in Africa 1867* (1969)

Allowing for slight local variations, Onitsha and many northwestern Igbo communities have been presented in ethnographic literature as having patrilineal forms of family organization and virilocal forms of marriage. By patrilineal, I mean descent through the line of fathers, and by virilocal, the practice of spouses residing with a husband’s family. The fact that in these societies descent is reckoned through the line of fathers led early British ethnographers G. T. Basden and Northcote E. Thomas, as well as later ones such as C. K. Meek, to represent the societies as patriarchal.<sup>1</sup> Epistemologically, their representations rested on the assumption that if paternity was at the center of kinship formation, then the social and family system must be one in which fathers (men) were the most dominant members of the family. This conclusion, of course, contradicts Cheikh Anta Diop’s contention and Ifi Amadiume’s demonstration that matriarchy was the distinguishing feature of African societies historically and was what separated it from European societies and families.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas, Basden, and Meek's ethnographical representations would be true were it not for the fact that their epistemic schemes derived from and are lodged within a patriarchal framework. That framework treats a wife as incorporated and consolidated into the personhood of her husband, who is her lord and master. As Amadiume rightly noted, "European anthropologists were misled by their own ethnocentrism into insisting on a general theory of male dominance in all descent groups" (1997, 80). There is no question that the Western explanatory system fundamentally influenced the ethnographers' observation of the dominance of fathers, and inevitably reinforced their interpretation that fathers were the rulers of families. In recording what they saw, these early chroniclers of Igbo culture consistently privileged men's experiences, completely respected men's voices and opinions, and methodically interpreted the world through their male-privileging lenses. In neglecting to consider the epistemological consequences of their conceptual framework and the manner in which it may have dictated their research choices and trajectory of investigation, they accepted the veracity of their countless nameless male informants, and pronounced upon the subjugated status of women. But as R. S. Rattray discovered years after his research on the Asante Empire, his acceptance of women's irrelevance, notably the irrelevance of the Asantehemaa, marred his research. Unbeknownst to him, his local male informants were aware that the white man considered women to be inconsequential, and so narrowly tailored their responses to accord with the female dismissive spirit of his questions. This self-administered editing of informants also served to reinforce Rattray's underlying gender assumptions by paradoxically providing for him the natives' own confirmation of the ethnographic "evidence" he desired.<sup>3</sup>

In numerous imperceptible ways, the female-devaluing readings continued as Christian missionary ethnographers and colonial social anthropologists used their own male-privileging epistemic scheme and conjugal models to understand the natives they encountered. Although they took for granted the superiority of the British family system, they nevertheless assumed that fatherhood and motherhood were generic concepts with stable meaning across cultures. Not surprisingly, the single most important difference in their account was that the Igbos were at a more primitive level of development than Europeans and that their notion of parenthood was much more unrefined and crudely drawn. The idea that paternity or paternal relations might not imply patriarchy was not an intelligible one within their epistemic frame. The conception of fatherhood informing the views of early British ethnographers at the turn of the twentieth century was predicated on women's subjection to men and on private property relations. Rooted in the Victorian ideology of late nineteenth-century England, this view of subjection is modeled on the doctrine of coverture that stipulates a wife is completely subject to and the property of her husband. To be an Igbo father then was to be a husband whom

Thomas claims “has considerable power over his wife” (1913–14, 69). Writing about Igbo marital relations, Archdeacon Basden, a Christian Mission Society (CMS) missionary, states that “[a]fter marriage the woman is ranked with the other property of the husband with a proportionate value attached, but little greater than that of the cows and goats” (1966, 69). Meek, a colonial government anthropologist, affirms this view of Igbo wives as property. He states: “There is little doubt that many Ibo husbands do, in fact, regard their wives as, to some extent, a form of property which they can treat as they please” (1937, 279). To secure the validity of their perception, customs were graphically described to conform with and reinforce patriarchal intuitions about native societies. By contrast, the customs that seemed to undermine the thesis of male dominance were either ignored, summarily acknowledged in abrupt ways, or reinterpreted to accord with the patriarchal presumptions of their explanatory scheme.

The ethnographers’ correlation of patriliney with patriarchy raises questions about whether or not societies are patriarchal simply because they are patrilineal. The correlation does not provide a forum for explaining the existence of practices such as *idigbe* and woman–woman marriages that are oppositional to patriarchal relations. When such anomalous practices are encountered and theoretically acknowledged, they undermine the legitimacy of the description of Igbo kinship patterns as exclusively patrilineal and fundamentally patriarchal. They also challenged the validity of Western and African feminist claims as well as contemporary Igbo men’s assumption that Igbo societies were patriarchal prior to colonialism.<sup>4</sup> The possibility of this falsification raises a number of interesting questions such as whether or not the principle of family organization may be other than patriarchal. If so, what is this principle that disrupts the formation of patriarchal relations? Is it motherhood, as Diop and Amadiume hypothesized? What is the status of mothers in Igbo societies, and what does the prevailing conception of motherhood tell us about family organization? If descent through the father’s line does not exclude the offspring of daughters, can such a family still be patriarchal? Is it possible that Igbo societies might not be patriarchal given that the epistemological contour of patriarchy does not overlap with patriliney? If Igbo societies were not patriarchal, as feminists assume, then although patriliney may be a necessary condition for patriarchy, the reverse is not exactly true. How then do we understand Igbo societies?

Challenged by these questions, we will examine, in this chapter, the historical period between 1890 and 1930, during which time matrilocality and the maternal principle in families were downgraded and patrilocality and the idea of fathers as rulers gained ascendancy. I shall argue that prior to colonial tinkering, Igbo society lacked patriarchal features and was not exactly patrilineal. Using the perspective of *isi ada* (senior lineage daughters) and the concept of

motherhood, I establish that the necessary conditions required for the transformation of the society into a patriarchal one did not exist. Although fathers were a vital part of Igbo family life, the Igbo concept of paternity and its structure of family relations did not embody the conditions and powers that would have made them patriarchal. Fundamentally social, the Igbo notion of kinship as consanguineal overshadowed the principle of conjugality that governed members' personal life. The family was not the conjugal unit but the kin group. In the late nineteenth century, social roles and ideology shaped kinship relations within which families were situated, and our understanding of familial relationships and social organizations must accurately reflect that fact. After setting the conceptual parameter in part 1, I will clarify the character of Igbo family so as to lay bare the complex diffusion of power in Igbo families that defines the family as nonpatriarchal. In part 2 I will reconceptualize the two conceptions of fatherhood and wifehood in light of the dynamics of the northeastern Igbo family. In part 3 I will examine in detail the role of motherhood in defining a different social dynamic as well as how the idea of mother's social dominance undermines the early British ethnographers' own theses. I will conclude by considering how patriarchal thinking reconstitutes the northeastern Igbo family and society.

#### Setting the Conceptual Parameter

Clear terminology is important in setting the stage if we are to avoid past epistemological errors of mischaracterizing families and collapsing patriliney into patriarchy. "Patriliney," a widely used term given ample explication in social anthropology, refers to a system of family organization in which descent is traced through the father. This descent may be traced on the basis of biological fatherhood or genetic blood ties, so that all descendants are progeny of the same ancestor or father. This definition of patriliney draws from a notion of family in which fatherhood is conceived of as a biological act, and biological descent is the determinant factor in genealogical reconstruction. Although this is the prevailing definition in the field of African studies, it contrasts with the Igbo notion of fatherhood which emphasizes the social nature of kinship ties rather than the biological nature of ties between fathers and children. This will be explained in due course.

It is useful to make a crucial distinction between patriliney as a form of family organization and patriarchy as the locus of power in families. "Patriliney" does not really identify the locus of power in families because there are different conceptions of father and different patterns of power distribution in families. "Patriarchy," on the other hand, assigns power to fathers and describes a family with one dominant center of power. It bestows exclusive authority in fathers and fosters a social organizational scheme that treats men-as-a-group as

having power and rights over women-as-a-group (Lerner 1986, 212). Under patriarchy, women's sexual and reproductive capacities are commodified and controlled by men, and whatever privileges or power women have is dependent on their singular attachments to men (1986, 213–214). Clearly, women lack autonomy within a patriarchal system, and as Lerner points out, even when property relations within the family have developed “along egalitarian lines than those in which the father wields absolute power,” the public realm of institutions and government are still structured by male dominance (1986, 216–17). For Lerner, patriarchy is the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance in society in general.

Other feminist analysts of patriarchy agree that the single most determinant feature of the system is its culture of male domination. Sylvia Walby sees patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (1990, 20). She argues that construing patriarchy as a “social structure” undermines the supposition that every individual man must be in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one. She contends that it is immaterial that some men lack power and some women have power, because patriarchy is not a thesis about the social location of individual men and women. It is one in which men as a group are uniquely privileged and women as a group are distinctively disadvantaged.

In her own contribution, Carole Pateman cautions against understanding patriarchy as paternal right, since this literal interpretation misses the other dimensions of that system of power and male domination (1991, 54). She states that the modern variant relocates the basis of men's rights from the family to the political arena of civil society and the state (1991, 59). Modern patriarchy is based on contractual, not natural relations that uphold a masculine right rather than a father's right (1991, 59). This sexual basis of the contract positions men and women in superordinate and subordinate positions based on a system of male domination. At the family level, the system requires husbands to provide protection and access to property to passive, dependent wives who, in turn, consent to provide sexual and housekeeping services to husbands. The personal sexual nature of this contract, agreed upon in and governing the private realm of men's lives, established the doctrine of coverture that limited women's roles and creative powers to private domestic space.

Even if we accept all these refinements and the idea that there are different historical and cultural variants of patriarchy, the question remains, as to whether Igbo society at the turn of the twentieth century was a patriarchal society with a society-wide system of male domination, as the feminist viewpoint states? Did it possess the features of a patriarchal society? I argue that it did not. At the family level, which is the focus of this examination, we will find that its family system of organization together with its extensive diffusion of rights,

powers, and obligation between the sexes is antithetical to the sorts of familial and societal relations that patriarchy prescribed. Indeed, to be a patriarchal system, the Igbo patrilineal system required an additional set of practices, customs, moral schemes, and structures about power and control. The four key required system-wide features are, first, the concentration of powers in the hands of men over women as a group; second, the division of a society into public and private spaces and the restriction of women to the private space of the home; third, the domestication and exploitation of women, including the control of their sexual and reproductive powers; and last, the systemic devaluation of women. These features were absent in Igbo societies prior to colonization. In the face of massive female opposition, all four features were subsequently injected into Igboland through missionary activities, colonial administration, and education. The fact that women opposed the ensuing changes is proof that these features were not an intrinsic part of the culture.<sup>5</sup>

## PART 1: THE CHARACTER OF THE IGBO FAMILY

### Archeological Excavations: Recovering the Slave Trade History

Aware that misdescriptions arise when one adheres too closely to standard anthropological viewpoints about African societies and families, critical scholars have called for a radical rethinking of the theoretical framework within which scholarship on Africa is conducted. Nigerian sociologist Peter P. Ekeh charges that kinship terms and categories are imprecisely defined in African studies.<sup>6</sup> He argued that early social anthropologists tended to deploy terms without “historical examination of societies to ascertain the nature and character of kinship” (1990, 669). Treating “kinship as constant over time in African societies,” these theorists rarely probed “how long it has been in existence, why it was so dominant in Africa, or whether it was related to the slave trade that ravaged Africa before European colonization” (1990, 669). Ekeh’s point is that in a bid to advance the professional legitimacy of anthropology and to secure the goals of colonialism, early social anthropologists failed to attend to the specific logic of African family systems.<sup>7</sup> Once they laid the theoretical bedrock, future generations of ethnographers built on those foundations without closely examining the assumptions, presuppositions, and conceptual framework on which their theories were based. The result has been that the categories of kinship articulated by the pioneers of the discipline and their successors have raised practical and theoretical problems for understanding African families.

Before we begin an analysis of the character of Igbo family, we must explicate the type of family that existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before Christianity and the policies of the British colonial ad-

ministration wrought their changes. The explication will enable us circumvent the problem of mistaking an ideological model of family for a social one. Early in the nineteenth century, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had created a turbulent region marked by incessant kidnappings, Igala- and Aro-engineered slave raids, vast movements of people fleeing the raids in search of refuge, and families' heroic efforts to cope with the devastating disappearances of family members.<sup>8</sup> Even though the trans-Atlantic European slave trade officially ended in 1802, the trade still continued unofficially until the end of the century, when the British naval blockade curtailed the activities of other European slavers. Elizabeth Isichei noted that the internal trade in slaves continued because its internal structures were not dismantled (1973, 62–63). Because the process by which captives were procured were by raiding and kidnapping, a state of siege pervaded Igboland. Recognition of this infamous history compels us to attend to the deep psychological scars and extensive social chaos that defined the trade. We have to recognize that the slave trade corrupted social practices, coarsened human sensibilities, and marked a sharp dichotomy between the more peaceful pre-slavery period in which Igbo men and women freely moved around to establish communities<sup>9</sup> and the slavery period that was marked by fear, moral turpitude, and the devaluation of human life. Awareness of this sharp historical divide requires that we examine the strategies adopted by families to deal with an unending attack on their existence.<sup>10</sup> At the very least, such an examination forces us to avoid treating the “olden days” as idyllic, or of reading the present history of social stability and Christianized, patriarchal values back into a chaotic, turbulent period of history.

Historical attentiveness would help us avoid misconstruing families as static and unchanging when improvisation and adaptation were the two dominant principles that families had to deploy to survive. Viewing families as dynamic systems enables us to integrate the nature of Igbo response to the two centuries-long period of regional threat, suspicion, and fear. Igbo families were not the static, cohesive, male-dominant systems early European and modern Igbo male writers have represented in the literature. They were dynamic organizations that ingeniously devised strategies of survival to respond to the protracted period of slavery. In the process, they radically modified their structures in myriad ways to survive. From the late eighteenth century, Igbo families in northwestern Igboland fought for their survival as the Aboh, Igala and Aros expanded their riverine and internal trade in slaves until they were forcibly halted in 1929. From late nineteenth century, they also fought against economic exploitation by rogue free traders and officials of the Royal Niger Company, and in some areas, they endured naval bombardment and military campaigns. Between 1890 and 1920, families were caught in the grip of two opposing economies—the internal slave trade and the oil palm trade. They had to live with two very conflicting demands, and so they devised creative ways

to cope with these disruptive events the best way they could. In some communities, families responded to the depopulation of their numbers by socially encouraging and privileging high birth rates, while others boosted their numbers and continued their line by absorbing children and adults whom they had purchased in slave marts. Many communities and families also assimilated adult immigrants (*nmatambili*) who settled with them and continued to do so as late as 1950s. In other cases, small families merged with other families when numbers dropped precipitously, and sometimes entire communities moved to merge with bigger or better-armed neighbors.<sup>11</sup>

The assimilation of immigrants entailed resettlement on other communities' and other families' land. These resettlements occurred without "undermining the very foundations of indigenous socio-political organization and kinship solidarity," as S. N. Obi had misleadingly insisted would happen if a daughter's son and husband were to inherit from her family (1966, 74). The reason why no such foundational erosions occurred was that prior to colonialism, land had not acquired commercial value, as historian A. Adu Boahen noted, and families were not committed to excising daughters from their families as they do today (1987, 100). Prominent and wealthy families of the period were made up of immigrants, domestic servants, and slaves, as well as *nwa afo* (child of the womb) who were part of the direct line of descent.<sup>12</sup> Over time these various annexes fused to become part of the host's family, village, or ward. Communities that merged with others shared their hosts' narratives of origin, their history, and their identity. This was very much so in Onitsha, where the Egbema, Aboh, Igala, Akpoto, Ikem-Nando, Ogidi, Ozubulu, and Ojoto immigrants merged into and became Onitsha indigenes. The importance of this assimilationist history is its epistemological impact on the notion of kinship. It created a socially constructed notion of kinship as families repaired the physical and psychic assaults in their lives. They created a semblance of normalcy and stability through social kinship ties that were seemingly modeled on biological ties to give meaning to their newly constructed interpersonal relationships. The emergence of these types of families gave a new meaning to consanguinity or kinship.

### The Logic of Consanguinity

From 1850 to 1940, the dominant family principle in northwestern Igbo was consanguinity. The family was a consanguineally based, complex, multigenerational lineage system made up of agnatic kins. The minimal lineage is often referred to in anthropologically inspired texts such as Obi's *Modern Family Law in Southern Nigeria* as the extended family. This raises the question of what they are extended from. George Peter Murdock, who first articulated the terms "nuclear" and "extended" families, stated that the extension is predicated on the



nuclear family, which in his view was the elementary, most basic form of family (1949).<sup>13</sup> This implies that any construal of the traditional Igbo family on the nuclear model collapses the discussion into the Western ontological scheme that treats a husband, wife, and children as the normative structure of families. But construing the late nineteenth-century northwestern Igbo families as extensions of, or deviations from, the Western nuclear family imposes conjugality as the dominant principle of family organization, even though the Igbo conception of family is fundamentally a social constructivist model of consanguinity. Equally, too, privileging conjugality as the norm for family relations, as some Igbo scholars have done, misconstrues the peculiar nature of the Igbo family system and imposes an inappropriate logic upon it. Insofar as late nineteenth-century Igbo families in the northwestern region were formed from consanguineal kin groups, all matters about conjugality or derivations from conjugal unions, such as nuclear or polygamous family, male or female husbands, or subordinate wife or dominant husband/fathers, should recede to the background.

Discussions of the Igbo family must be conducted on its own terms. These should occur outside of the regulatory principles of the nuclear family and of conjugality that the twentieth-century Western episteme upholds as the standard for any discourse on family. Serious discussions of Igbo family systems cannot presuppose or continue to draw upon a standard that imposes patriarchal tendencies into the society being studied. Critical researchers cannot simply interrogate history and recover facts; they must subject the recovered facts and the operative concepts and principles of their epistemological scheme to critical analysis as well. When this happens, they will find that they have to avoid treating the conjugal unit as the basic form of Igbo family.<sup>14</sup> They will have to initiate a discourse that centers the principle of consanguinity as the operative principle for analyzing the Igbo family.

Once the consanguineal logic of family descent is given epistemic priority in understanding Onitsha and northwestern Igbo families, two parallel lines of kin immediately emerge into focus. These are the line of *umuada* (daughters/sisters) and the line of *umu okpala* (sons/brothers). At the head of the sororal or female line is *isi ada* (first-lineage daughter), and *di okpala* (first-lineage son) is the head of the male fraternal line. Descending in a hierarchal order are a multitude of generational nodal points among which are *umunna* (all adult children of the lineage), *umuada* (all adult lineage daughters who may or may not live within the family compounds), *okpala* (adult lineage sons), *umu agbo* (young unmarried girls), *umu ikolobia* (young unmarried boys), and *umu aro* (little children). Within this dual/symmetrical family system, power, duties, and responsibilities radiate out along multiple intersecting paths, coalescing along seniority lines. As heads of the family, *isi ada* and *di okpala* were consulted and their approval secured in matters affecting the family. The assumption that

the traditional Igbo family was politically male dominant is wrong. The Igbo consanguineal family system did not assign power to fathers and husbands exclusively. It was not a homosocial, masculinist space. The voices of *umuada* carried weight because their line was a constitutive part of the family socio-political structure. [I will intermittently use the Igbo word *ada* (singular of *umuada*) rather than daughters and sisters or daughters/sisters because it best captures the culture's conception of a daughter with its implicit connotation of a sister].

Adhering to the logic of consanguinity, we will find that prior to Christianization, Westernization, and the colonial injection of patriarchal ethos, the Igbo family was the sum total of siblings born into the family/lineage. This family or lineage may have either a father or a mother as the dominant ancestor. Where the father was the dominant ancestor, the siblings were known as *umunna*, and where the mother is the dominant ancestor, they were known as *umunne*. Within either of the lineages, all agnatic kin or in-group members were *nwanne* (a gender neutral term that means "child of the mother"). Kin referred to themselves as *nwanne*, even though they had different mothers and sometimes different fathers. Some of them were the children of unmarried adult daughters and others were the children of women whom the sons had married. Linguistically, the terms "sister," "brother," "aunt," "uncle," "niece," "nephew," and "cousin," as well as the relational family separation they defined, did not exist in Igbo language and society. Structurally, there were just two kinds of kinship categories: sons (*okpala*) and daughters (*ada*). These categories created a fraternal and sororal form of family administration in which sororal members weighed in on matters that affected the family. This form of administration was necessary because daughters, like sons, were considered integral members of the family. This explains why the bodies of married daughters were returned at death to be buried with their kin. Okafor Anyegbu contended that if "they were buried outside their people's land, it would be like making them strangers in other people's land" (cited in Isichei 1978, 47).

The principle of consanguinity fostered a consciousness in which members were siblings regardless of who their mothers or fathers were, how they were conceived, and what the conjugal union of their parents was. They were siblings not simply because their bloodlines directly traced back to a particular ancestor, but also because they were part of the legal and moral responsibilities agreed to by this collective of kin at the time of the children's birth or their assimilation into the family. To maintain family cohesion, the organizations of *umuada* (daughters) and *umu okpala* (sons) in either an *umunna* (children of the father) based lineage or an *umunne* (children of the mother) family group functioned as systems of family unification. Senior members of these organizations decided which ancestral line and which personage would receive prominence, which to ignore, and which uterine unit or *usokwu* (the mother

force) governed real family relations. These organizations authorized versions of lineage histories that were remembered, retold, and revised in light of changing family needs. It was not unusual that these histories were full of inconsistencies and contradictions, given that they served political objectives and were revised to serve these ends.

Although the common term that describes lineage members, "*umunna*" (children of the father), gives preeminence to the fraternal side of the line by suggesting that all ancestors were fathers, not all founding ancestors were male. The suggestion mistakenly lends weight to the idea that families can schematically be represented with concentric circles in which *umunne*, kin of the same mothers, is the inner core and *umunna*, kin of the same father, is the outer larger circle. The supposition that the mother's circle is the inner circle derives from the idea that Igbo families are polygynous, hence the inner family circle is made up of a number of mothers and their children. Within this polygynous system, the father becomes the overarching figure who unites the children of different mothers, and at the higher level, the ancestral father brackets the families of the different sons. The basic assumption here is that the *umunne* subgroup is always subsumed under the superordinate *umunna* group. This hierarchical structure would turn all mothers into wives and make them as a group structurally subordinate to fathers as a group. The error with this father-dominance structure is that the implicit view of family is predicated on the principle of conjugality rather than on consanguinity. Insofar as this dominance of *umunna* is an argument from conjugality, it does not capture the consanguineal nature of the Igbo family system, and thus must be rejected.

Some prominent families and communities were established by mothers or on a mother's *usokwu* (maternal center), and so a different explanation is required. When families trace their genesis to a common ancestral mother or a mother's *usokwu*, the term *umunne* has a similar epistemic function as *umunna*. It points to the maternal figure as the overarching figure who unites families, wards, and communities. This maternal figure may not have been a wife. She could have been an *idigbe*, the dominant figure in a connubial male–female relationship, and she could have married wives of her own. The functional equivalency of *umunna* and *umunne* is consistent with the principle of consanguinity rather than with conjugality, in which a wife is subordinate. The *umunna* group does not always subsume the *umunne* group; it is sometimes subsumed by the latter. Thus, it cannot always be assumed that *umunna* defines a superordinate relationship to an always subordinate *umunne*.

The idea that *umunna* is the more dominant relationship comes from unconsciously invoking the patriarchal ideology embedded in the Western epistemic scheme underlying African studies scholarship. Many female ancestors of communities are being written out of history as families and communities succumb to the fashionable male-privileging view of history and revised their

history to de-emphasize the role and authority of mothers. The inadvertent deployment of the patriarchal concepts of this Western episteme assumes erroneously that the Igbo conception of mother and father corresponds to the Western variant, and is similarly embedded in the same type of superordinate-subordinate relationship that holds in a nuclear family type relation.

Prodded by this male-privileging principle of history, most contemporary discussions of so-called patrilineal families simply reproduce the male-dominant view of families. They rarely address the consanguineal character of family relationships between *umuada* (daughters) and *okpala* (sons/brothers). They generally take conjugal units as the point of departure, as if conjugality and marital relations constituted the normative basis of Igbo families. Such an approach misconstrues the organizing principle of the Igbo family and completely blocks out the proper sphere of female salience in families. Rather than focusing on the daughter identity of women, it mistakenly focuses attention on the wife identity that is a subordinate identity within a lineage. This lends credence to the false idea that all women are wives and that wifehood is their enduring identity. What is missed is that the wife identity is terminable, and is terminated at various points in a woman's life, such as when she shifts to any one of her multiple identities—social, occupational, mother, or natal; or when she ends her marriage. Consequently, the assumption of a one-dimensional identity for wives falsely imposes an enduring, uni-dimensional, subject identity on all Igbo women, and enables researchers to conveniently ignore the political role of *umuada* in family spaces and in founding families and communities.

The Onitsha social system did not foster a family system that assigned a one-dimensional identity on daughters and treated women as a group as subordinate to men as a group. Instead, it devised a parallel system that equally affirms both daughters and sons, and allowed them to assume different substantive identities. As the history of Olosi, Usse, and sections of Obikporo lineages in Onitsha demonstrate, *umuada* contributed to the expansion of their consanguineal family either, by becoming *idigbe* and/or by marrying wives of their own.<sup>15</sup> To become an *idigbe*, these women chose a paramour with whom they had children who remained in their custody and who became members of their own consanguineal family. Those who divorced their husbands and married wives, as did Felicia Ekejiuba's aunt, expanded the number of people in her kin group. Blocking out these actions of some *umuada* makes it seem that all *umuada* married male husbands, and that all their children belonged to the husband's or genitor's consanguineal family. Within a lineage, adult sons and resident *umuada* whose children lived with them in family compounds were in the peculiar position of simultaneously being fathers or mothers as well as siblings (that is, brother/sister) to their own children. By contrast, "away" daughters who lived in their marital homes and adult sons in *idigbe* unions would simply be senior sisters/brothers to the children in their natal lineage, since their own

children belonged to other lineages. The point here is twofold. The first is that the children of some sons (and those of some daughters) were not part of their own natal family. And the second is that, regardless of the conjugal choices of lineage members, or of their paternal/maternal relationship to the children in the lineage, all consanguineal kin were first and foremost siblings who shared a common allegiance to generations of siblings who had gone before them and to those yet to be unborn. It is this community of siblings that is misrepresented as fathers by ethnographers in order to justify a reading of families as patrilineal.

Also, blotting out the fact that some *okpala* (sons) functioned as paramours or genitors made it seem that they all married wives and that their children belonged to their own consanguineal family. Underplaying this fact comes from illicitly upholding the principle of conjugality and placing the father at the center of the family system. It is a strategy of exclusion; one that excludes practices and conjugal forms that do not accord with the logic of patriliney. The exclusion of the lives of daughters from the Igbo family system channels theoretical analyses along pathways that facilitate the construal of families as patrilineal and entails the substitution of consanguinity for conjugality as the basis of family formation. The substitution succeeds only because researchers were responding to the underlying patriarchal ideology of their theoretical framework, and have ignored the consanguineal principle of family formation that had provided options to daughters to remain at home either because they had entered *idigbe* unions, their marriages had collapsed, they were widowed, or they had married wives. Moreover, the substitution also conceals the fact that adult sons who were in *idigbe* relationship had children who were not part of their own family but rather belonged to their mother's family. It is important to underscore that the reason for all these misreadings is the operative Western episteme that privileges conjugality, but it also comes from overemphasizing the fraternal line and the fatherhood role of adult male siblings on which patriliney is grounded. This occurs at the expense of the motherhood role of adult female siblings, and of the tie of consanguinity that allowed the children of daughters to be full members of their mother's family once the mothers were not formally married.

The patriarchal intuitions of Western episteme percolated into the bodies of theories in ways that limit the possibilities of daughters as well as the consanguineal implications of the lineage family system. That Richard N. Henderson was operating with such a patriarchal model in his seminal book on Onitsha society is evident in his construal of *umuada* as pollutants, whose sons must be cleansed of their mothers' impurities before they can become part of her consanguineal family. He states, "The maternal linkage in descent is impure, but that impurity can be rectified through dedication to *nze*" (1972, 425).<sup>16</sup> He goes on to discuss how to obscure any public statement that such a person was a daughter's child. Henderson's interpretation of events clearly ig-

nores the epistemological significance of the principle of consanguinity. He comes to terms with the socially and theoretically disruptive concepts of *idigbe* and of woman–woman marriage by representing them as rarities and aberrant. Given the patriarchal assumption embedded in his epistemological framework, the concept of *idigbe* could not sit well within the male-privileging episteme of his scholarship. Every effort was therefore made to bury it together with any social practice that was antithetical to the patriarchal logic. After all, to acknowledge an *idigbe*'s existence would be to acknowledge that daughters had real and tangible stakes in their consanguineal families and that their children have similar rights to the children of sons. Because the postulates of *idigbe* and woman–woman marriage do not cohere with the validating ideas of Henderson's conceptual structure, that is, with the postulates of patriliney, the Onitsha family could not have been both patrilineal and patriarchal.

The theoretical banishment of *idigbe* provides a convenient way for declaring that the presence of a daughter's children in her lineage is anomalous, even though they were not in the historical period under discussion. By failing to give such "anomalous" social practices the theoretical attention they deserve, their nonexistence was established. Lacking evidence of their existence, younger generations of scholars would swiftly rule that such practices never existed. The circularity in reasoning is easily ignored because it serves political ends. Respected Igbo scholars would go on to insist that Igbo "women have no right to remain permanently unattached (by marriage) to a man and his family" (Obi 1966, 74). In making matrimony the norm for women, all females in the family are then mandated to marry, and all women are easily represented as wives and not really as part of their agnatic family. Female kin are consequently denied their lineage rights on the ground that marriage had extinguished those rights. This definition of women solely in terms of their roles as wives is achieved by falsely explaining consanguineal families on the patriarchal conjugal model, and by making the marital arena the pre-eminent sphere for a discussion of *umuada*'s identity and rights. This explanatory model transforms all *umuada* into wives and permanently locks them into a sexualized identity that necessarily places them as a group beneath superordinate (male) husbands and male patriarchs of the family. The formal proscription of the practices of *idigbe* and woman–woman marriage, in the early decade of the twentieth century, also served this political purpose. It obliterated the rights of adult daughters in families and their stakes in family property. The logic seemed to be that if it can be established that "customary laws did not allow daughters to remain permanently unattached" (Obi 1966, 74), then it could justifiably be argued that there was no provision in the culture for the transmission of interest in family property through women (either daughter or wife) to their children. Having brought families and women under a general theory of male dom-

inance, early ethnographers and later scholars of Igbo culture established the platform for characterizing the family as patriarchal and patrilineal.

Prior to this tampering with the Igbo conceptual and social schemes, the consanguineal structure of family formation corresponded more to a dual-descent structure of family in which daughters or sons could be founders of families. It allowed for a range of sororal practices and spousal unions that gave flexibility to *both* the male and female side of the family. Both daughters and sons could marry wives, both daughters and sons could be in relationships in which their children belong to their partners' lineage, and both daughters and sons could establish relationships in which their children were members of their own family. Under the Igbo consanguineal principle, some lines of descent were based on mothers, who may have been living in their lineage as widowed, divorced, or *idigbe* daughters, or they may have been wives in their marital lineage. Under the terms of *idigbe*-ship, Igbo families could not have been patrilineal in the mode that is conventionally described. It is not just that patriliney could not account for all the forms and practices within the Igbo family system in the late nineteenth century, but that the male side of the family did not exclusively control the affairs of the family. The assumption that sons totally dominated and oppressed their sisters is untrue given that the operative principle of consanguinity in Igbo culture did not posit a superordinate/subordinate relationship between sisters and brothers, and given that not all daughters were married or stayed married and that wifeness did not define their sole social identity. Thus, contrary to modern-day representations of Igbo family, the *di okpala* and other male elders of a line (*umu okpala*) did not historically have overall political right and authority over the *isi ada* and the collective body of *umuada*. The relationship that existed between the two sexes was quite radically progressive and postmodern. It was consultative and collaborative. As a group, *umuada* participated in the collective body of family administration, checked their brothers when they acted irresponsibly, negotiated peace treaties before warring communities, and managed their own affairs without the authority of anyone.

In summary, we should note that the family-system feminist concepts most appropriately describes is the nuclear, conjugal family in which husbands and sons were the dominant kin, and mothers and daughters were subordinate. This contrasts sharply with the consanguineal family system that offers complex lines of descent and multiple power centers that does not give males dominant power over females. Within this system, daughters as mothers, daughters as wives, and daughters with wives have founded families, much in the same way that sons did. At the very least, feminist concepts and theories about female subjugation and male dominance are inapplicable in analyzing this family system.

## PART 2: RECONCEPTUALIZING FATHERHOOD AND WIFEHOOD

*Nna* as Social Fatherhood

The interesting question that consanguinity raises for feminists and Africanist scholars is, how do we understand fatherhood? Can there be patriliney with a different notion of fatherhood that does not conform to the notion of father within the nuclear family? The short answer is, yes. There are different varieties of fatherhood according to the family system we are dealing with. Fatherhood in numerous Igbo cultures was not defined biologically, or on the basis of a biologized notion of patriliney, so there is no reason why it should conform to the nuclear family's notion of father that pervades the discipline of anthropology. Besides, it is also well known that Igbo families absorbed wives' children that were not fathered by their husbands as well as children who were not fathered by sons. "Ezelagbo" (one who came from and with the genealogical traits of another family) and "Omenazu" (one born at the back or after the demise of the father) are names that were usually given to children who were not conceived by their mother's husband. A biological notion of fatherhood, therefore, is exceptionally narrow and cannot explain the range of relations that the Igbo notion of fatherhood covers. Using it would have resulted in the end of many families during the traumatic period of kidnapping.

A socially constructed notion of fatherhood enabled families to continue to rear children and to deal with the disappearances of fathers, husbands, and brothers and to regenerate themselves in new ways. The expansive notion of fatherhood overcame the built-in inflexibility of the biological conception of fatherhood by focusing on the rearing of children and fostering the replacement of kidnapped or deceased fathers, husbands, and brothers. This typically occurs when a wife married wives to have more children in the name of her husband; or when she preserved the memory of her deceased or kidnapped husband by having children in his memory.

The forces propelling the development of this flexible notion of fatherhood brought into existence a societal model of fatherhood that families adopted and upheld. Quite unlike the biological fatherhood of the nuclear family system, *nna*, or social father, was a remarkably expansive and noncontrolling being. He might be the most senior brother or uncle in the family who exhibited custodial qualities toward other members of the family both male and female rather than ownership or tyrannical tendencies. Nothing in this definition suggests that *nna* is a biological father, nor does it suggest that all brothers or uncles are *nna*, nor does it stipulate that all males in relationships are fathers. Only the oldest sons, brothers, or uncles are *nna*. Male paramours of *idigbe* do not have custody of their biological children and so do not count as the father of the child. Furthermore, the children of all married males do not neces-



sarily refer to their fathers as father. Within a consanguineal compound, they may call their father by his name while treating the oldest uncle or grandfather as father. This is because *mma* marks seniority and elderhood.

In a context in which a father was not tied to reproductive capacity, *mma* was a protective figure who may or may not have had direct biological ties with the families or conjugal units that were under his protective influence. He was not necessarily a husband (when his protective influence extended over homes that had lost their husband or father), but he was one in his own home. It is a mistake to treat the two—husband and *mma*—as the same, since the category of *mma* does not neatly overlap with that of husband. As an elder kin in the lineage, *mma* does not have spousal relations with the widows and the wives of disappeared men who were within his sphere of protection. On occasion where a widow elected to remarry from her affinal family, the chosen sibling must be the junior of her deceased or kidnapped spouse, not his senior, which minimized the possibility of *mma* marrying his junior siblings' widows and compromising his guardianship status. Because the categories of *mma* and husband do not overlap (even within his own conjugal unit<sup>17</sup>), a *mma* was not a patriarch, given his relationship with his *anasi* (his first wife), who as his confidante was the controller of his conjugal family and compound.

Contrary to ethnographic claims, the status of *mma* as a protector did not diminish the importance of *anasi*, who remained the more formidable figure in the conjugal compound. Because of the manner in which powers were dispersed in consanguineal family systems, *mma* or social father, did not have the moral authority to run both the conjugal and consanguineal families as he pleased. He was first and foremost a coalition builder, and he worked with a collaborative scheme rather than an authoritarian framework. In this position, he attended to his *anasi's* concerns; he responded to the pressures, concerns, and views of his own agnatic male and female kin; he considered the interest of in-laws, who stood in a superordinate position over him and his family; and lastly, he responded attentively to the *inyemedi* (lineage wives) who always used group pressure against the object of their animus. The intricately balanced diffusion of powers and social responsibilities undermined the formation of an autocratic framework and a superordinate ego, the very consciousness that is crucial to the development of patriarchal relations. Without the material conditions for the development of this egoistical streak, *mma*, or the Igbo social father, never became a patriarch.

This concept of social fatherhood and the custodial powers that go with it prevailed for many generations, because other factors too sustained it. One of these would be that prospective in-laws, who needed to ensure the safety of their *ada* (daughters/sisters), would only sanction a marriage that gave her the protective space she needed to preserve her personal autonomy. Parents were not interested in sending their daughter to homes where there was no protec-

tive *ma* or father figure and where she would be vulnerable to abuse.<sup>18</sup> Given the regional state of insecurity, brides' families were averse to marriages that either required their *ada* to live far away from home or to join families whose integrity they could not always gauge.<sup>19</sup> They knew that there was a very high probability that a disgruntled or an avaricious husband might connive and sell an intemperate wife to Aro slave traders.<sup>20</sup> Concerns about such possibilities prompted communities to develop marriage norms that minimized potentially egregious actions and to sanction the emergence of *ma* model of fatherhood.

Because fatherhood is not necessarily fused to biology, the prevailing notion of social fatherhood sanctioned the idea of wives or daughters being able to have children for themselves in the name of deceased or kidnapped fathers or husbands, and for husbands, whether or not he was the genitor.<sup>21</sup> Affinal families were appreciative of this practice because it meant they could forestall the closure of their sibling's lines by encouraging a widow or the wife of an abducted kin to have children in his name. For this practice to work effectively, wives had to have sexual autonomy even after marriage. In authorizing this autonomy, societies tied fatherhood to marriage and invalidated the parental claims of a nonspousal genitor. This meant that it was not the act of impregnation that made one a father, rather it was marriage.<sup>22</sup> A child belonged to the family that had received the legal and moral writ to the product of the bride's womb from her family, following her consent. This grant of writ did not cover the entire personhood of the bride; it was restricted just to the child. Setting up matters this way had social implications for fatherhood as well as for wives. First, it detached sexual exclusivity from the institution of marriage; second, it placed wives' sexuality outside the purview and exclusive control of husbands; and third, childbearing became the most important thing that both affinal and consanguineal families cared about. This reproductive responsibility of wives turned childbearing into a prominent social duty for them. For Western readers, this child emphasis may cast wives in the unflattering light of baby producers. We should note, however, that producing children provided them with the basis of their sexual autonomy and the socially authorized pathway to move to an elevated, empowered social level. Women's desire to be mothers was rooted in their positive experience of motherhood, in the social validation of their reproductive labor, and the emotional needs having children satisfied for them.

Onitsha and most northwestern Igbo communities created the right social environment for women to become mothers. They developed social norms and reproductive expectations that authorized wives to procreate whether or not their husbands were around, and whether or not their husbands were capable of impregnating them. They had the right to select partners when husbands proved to be infertile, sexually inadequate or dead; or to opt out of a marriage without foregoing conjugality. In the latter case, the institution of an

*idigbe* became the viable alternative. She could select and live with a paramour, changing him for another according to her needs. The moral framework defined by this practice required a different understanding of marital morality and spousal faithfulness. Faithfulness was tied not to spouses' bodies but to the lineage; it was concretely expressed in activities that reinforced and facilitated the growth and expansion of the lineage. Wives, too, benefited from this moral framework, as it did not privilege only the sexual rights of husbands. It accommodated both. Wives (specifically daughters) were assured that no obstacle stood in their quest to become mothers.<sup>23</sup> Somewhat affirming this sexually progressive worldview is an Onitsha maxim that counseled fathers, as late as the 1970s, to "not ask about who impregnated one's wife, but to rejoice that one is the father."

If we center our discourse on the principle of consanguinity, we would have to change our theoretical language and expectations to emphasize both male and female kin in the family. More pertinently, we would be attentive to how social practices and categories shaped the Igbo notion of fatherhood. We would come to realize that the conception of the social father, as a custodial figure, was consistent with the principle of consanguinity because it values all children—both *ada* and *okpala*—both those he sired and those he did not. But the fact that *nna* was a protective figure did not mean that he had exclusive authority over everyone, that his *anasi* and other wives were irrelevant, or that they were valued just a little higher than "cows and goats," as Basden claimed. Although wifehood is a subsidiary category, *nna* was well aware that the marriage norms subordinated husbands as a group to in-laws who had sanctioned the marriage of their daughters to them. This subordinate relationship of husbands to in-laws wrested immense autonomy for wives, whose natal families functioned as a protective bulwark against abuse from husbands and the affinal lineage.<sup>24</sup> We see this in the way Amaeze Obibi community threatened hostilities if their daughters were mistreated or abused. That *nna* did not neutralize the personal autonomy of wives is evident too in the way Victor C. Uchendu's mother combatively challenged her husband's eldest brother even when her husband could not do so (1965, 7).

Scholars in the domain of African studies generally assume that the logic of patriarchy is simply about paternal right of fathers over children. They consequently affirm patriarchy because they believe that children are naturally subject to their father's authority and that a wife is subject to the authority of her husband, who is also the paternal figure. But this is not what patriarchy is about. This construal is erroneous because it confuses a father's parental obligation to his family with a father's political right to dominate his family. This idea of political domination is antithetical to the Igbo family system. In the landmark book on the sexual contract underlying civil society, Pateman makes clear that parental right is not synonymous with patriarchy. She cautioned

against this understanding because it misses the dimensions of patriarchy that are truly about male dominance.

Patriarchalism was defined in seventeenth-century Europe as the rule of fathers. This definition married paternal right with political rights, thereby vesting only fathers with political rights and vesting paternal obligation with much more than parental responsibility. Pateman argues that this rigged-up version of paternal rights possesses a greater subset of rights than are normally conceived of as parental rights. On the patriarchal scheme, paternal rights carried the parental power of discipline as well as the subjection and control of a wife. This state of affairs was surreptitiously embedded into what ordinarily passes for political rights to achieve the political goal of women's subjugation, to render them rightless, and to delegitimize them as political actors. The effect was the transformation of politics into a masculine activity. But much more insidious was the extension of the state political system into the home and the configuration of power relationships in the home to accord with the structures of the state.

Pateman further explains that the political right of fathers did not merely derive from fatherhood. A whole set of structures and conditions were required to sanction and make it possible. Because "sons do not spring up like mushrooms" (2001, 126), somebody had to be the mother for there to be sons, which means that in a patriarchally structured society somebody's rights had to have been appropriated by a sexual contract to produce sons for a patriarch. With the appropriation of wives' rights, and the total erasure of a wife's personhood, patriarchy was born. Patriarchy and patriarchal rights lie in sexual rights, that is, in conjugal rights, or in a man's sexual access to the body of a woman and in his control of her personhood. Thus, the foundation of European patriarchal power is rooted in a deeper level of domination, which goes unnoticed because women no longer appear as political beings.

If, as Pateman argues, sexual rights were the basis patriarchy, we need to ascertain the kind of cultural codes that warrants this right. What is the political nature and conditions of this European notion of sexual rights that so clearly differs from the Igbo model of marriage and fatherhood? The underpinning cultural codes of European marriage and patriarchalism appropriate the reproductive capacity and creative essence of wives by defining them as passive or non-beings; "empty vessels for the exercise of men's sexual and procreative powers" (Pateman 2001, 127). Husbands controlled the sexuality of their wives to maintain the purity of their descent line, which resulted in codes of virginity, pregnancy, and illegitimacy that, Barbara Katz Rothman states, ensured "that no other man's seed entered [a wife's] body . . . that she came to the marriage bed unimpregnated . . . [and] that she could not destroy the seed" (1998, 22). These codes bestowed exclusive power over the wife on the husband demonstrating his exclusive control of *his* family. Pateman asserts that the