Identity Crisis: An Enigmatic Wrench of Fatherlessness in Igbo Cultural Cosmology in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Conspiracy of Silence*.

Abstract

This article examined identity crisis as an enigmatic wrench of fatherlessness in Igbo cultural cosmology as explored in an African novel, *Conspiracy of Silence*. The research is predicated upon contemporary prevailing identity crisis being experienced by individuals even after such persons have gotten to the climax of their career achievements. Identity crisis is a global phenomenon that stems from fatherlessness but takes a worrisome dimension in Igbo land as Igbo cultural cosmology deconstructs fatherlessness and accommodates some traditional practices that enigmatize it. This study provided elucidation of the concepts of identity crisis and fatherlessness, investigated Igbo cosmological view of fatherlessness, factors responsible for identity crisis and effects of fatherlessness. This research employed Father Absence Theory and critical theory of Deconstruction. While father absence theory indicates a situation where a child has lived part or all his childhood in a house without a biological father, theory of deconstruction expounds the notion that "reality" is a deconstruction and that "truth" is an interpretation. It is discovered that identity crisis which stems from fatherlessness, as a universal phenomenon, and as serious as it appears, is viewed differently in Igbo cosmology as normal reality which does not worth any serious consideration and criticism. The researchers recommend, among others, a review of Igbo traditional practices such as concubinage practice and obnoxious practice of 'woman taking a wife' if the issue of identity crisis and fatherlessness must be addressed.

Key Words: Concubinage, Cosmology, fatherlessness, Identity Crisis, Igbo Culture.

Introduction

Daily, the issue of identity crisis stare researchers in the face. As an anthropological problem, identity crisis challenges the core essence of society while victims of identity crisis pose greater challenge to the society, even to religious organizations. For instance, a story was told about a man in Umundugba, Isu Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria, that could not be given a plot of land to build a house because he was acclaimed fatherless, hence illegitimate and bastard. Similar story was told about a boy that was denied admission into a Catholic seminary school because no man as a legitimate biological father signed referee for him. Imagine the frustration these experiences may cause the victims! Identity crisis is more common in today's rapidly changing world than in Erikson's day (Kendra, 2018). Identity crisis is not restricted to adolescent or teenage years. Different people tend to experience it at various points throughout life depending on individual's experiences. However, it is often experienced at one's particular point(s) of greater change such as starting a new job, the beginning of a new relationship, the end or beginning of a marriage, or the birth of a child (Kendra, 2018).

Identity crisis, researchers say, stem from major life stressors like getting married, getting divorced or separated, experiencing a traumatic event, losing a loved one, losing or getting a job, and new health issues (Browne, 2018). Other causes of identity crisis include improper upbringing, lack of affirmation and demoralizing experiences (Adelesi, 2009).

In literature, identity crisis has, over the years, dominated thematic preoccupation of literary genres. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1729), Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982) and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) thematically explore characters' struggle to extricate themselves from the conflict between who they are and who they are supposed to be. Also, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's *The Wizard of the Crow* (2007), James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and many others largely portray characters' strive in search of their ontological, ethnic, cultural, gender, ancestral, patrilineal, personality and even occupational identities. A person's inability to establish who he/she is and the attendant strive to grapple with the challenges associated with the search snowballs into identity crisis.

Conceptual Elucidation: Identity Crisis and Fatherlessness

To successfully grapple with the compound concept, identity crisis, we need to understand, first and foremost, the term, identity. The term appears in varying fields of study: psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, etc. and as such conceived differently by experts in the above fields. In Psychology, championed by German psychologist, Erik Erikson, identity is described as:

> A subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him, we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given, that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals – with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendship made and first sexual encounters (Erikson, 1970)

This Eriksonian description forms the framework for conceptualization by experts in the field of Psychology. Thus, in Psychology, identity is seen as the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and (or) expressions that make a person (self-identity) or group (particular social-category or social group) (James, 2015; Leary and Langney, 2003 and Bray, 2004). A psychological identity pertains to self-image, self-esteem and individuality. Weinreich (1988) stated:

> A person's identity is defined as one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in future.

Psychologists most commonly use the term, identity, to describe personal identity or idiosyncratic things that make a person unique. The idea of idiosyncrasy or peculiarity snowballs into Marcia's (1980) classification of identity foreclosure, identity diffusion, identity moratorium and identity achievement. On the other hand, sociologists often use the term, identity, to describe social identity, that is, the collection of group membership that define the individual, while anthropologists frequently employ the term, identity, to refer to idea of selfhood, that is, properties based on the uniqueness and individuality which makes a person distinct from others. In philosophy, however, Ricoeur and Blamey (1995) introduced the distinction between *ipse* identity (selfhood, 'who am I?') and the *idem* identity (sameness). For Okere (2004), identity is "that by which any self remains itself…. Identity is something deeper than quality. It is… the self of a thing". It is the sameness, the relation each thing bears just to itself (Williams, 1989).

This brief explication of the nomenclature, identity, takes us to our basic concern, identity crisis. There is no gainsaying the fact that conceptualization of identity crisis varies also as seen in the word, identity. As coined and propounded by Erik Erikson, identity crisis refers to a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. According to Erikson (1970), an identity crisis occurs during the teenage years in which people struggle with feelings of identity versus confusion. For Schultz and Schultz (2009) and Kendra (2017), identity crisis concerns the failure to achieve ego identity during adolescence. The field of psychiatry, which also shares relationship with psychology, defines identity crisis as a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society (Frosh, 1991). Medically, identity crisis refers to a psychosocial state or condition of disorientation and role confusion occurring especially in adolescents as a result of conflicting internal and external experiences, pressures, and expectations and often producing acute anxiety (Browne, 2018). Specifically, identity crisis connotes a feeling of uncertainty about *who* and *what* one is. It encapsulates a situation one is unsure of one's role in life; a condition one feels he or she does not know his or her real self. One seems to be undergoing identity crisis any time one questions one's sense of self or identity. It is not completely out of place to question who one is especially as human beings change through live stages. It, however, becomes identity crisis when it begins to affect one's daily thinking and functioning.

The concept of fatherlessness has emerged at the centre of debate over welfare, poverty, sexuality, divorce, family values and racial disorder (Daniel, 2000; Michael, 2003). As a concept, fatherlessness defines a state of having no father because he is dead or absent from the home (Hornby, 2006). It is the state of being fatherless. The concept conjures the absence of real father figure, that is, the absence of the teaching, guiding, experience-building, correcting and nurturing that a father can bring. It relates to single parenthood; a condition that a mother is made to take responsibility of active care-giver on a child from conception, birth and growth. A single parent (especially, a mother) is a parent not living with a spouse or partner (the husband) who has most of the day-to-day responsibilities in raising the child(ren). A single parent, the mother, is the primary caregiver, that is, the parent the children have residency with the majority of the time. Historically, and basically too, death of a partner (the husband) has been the major cause of single parenting. It, however, also results from separation or divorce of a couple with children, child abuse/neglect, unplanned/unwanted pregnancy and some obnoxious cultural practices as we will see in our case study.

Fatherlessness connotes the absence of the source, the human creator, the generator and progenitor of a child. It is the raising of children without their biological father. It is the absence of fatherhood roles and responsibilities (Michael, 2003). Fatherlessness is synonymous with "father absence", a compound concept used by researchers to indicate that a child has lived for part or all of his childhood in the house without his biological father.

The Igbo Cosmological Conception of Fatherlessness and Identity in the novel

The Igbo people, largely southeasterners of Nigeria, like any other tribe or ethnic group in the world, have their culture, their ways of life projecting their identity, beliefs, characteristic uniqueness, primordial heritage, corporate consciousness as well as the people's foundation and essence of their very existence. All these are encapsulated in the Igbo people's cosmology, also referred to as Igbo world view. Like any other sociological and (or) anthropological entity, Igbo people are remarkable for their distinct cosmological conception of reality, among which are fatherlessness and identity. In Igbo world view, the term, *fatherless* or *fatherlessness*, does not exist. Even if it exists in Igbo language's vocabulary and dictionary, its real conception is quite different from English interpretation or denotative meaning. It is absurd to say that a child is fatherless in Igbo world view even if the biological father is supposedly absent or not traditionally known. Ayo, one of the narrators in *The Conspiracy*… states quite clearly that "fatherlessness is a non-issue in Igboland" (p. 99). The Igbo, however, prefer the nomenclature, legitimacy, to fatherless(ness). Every child has a father but the fatherhood could be illegitimate. Traditional rites of marriage and bride price bestow legitimacy of existence on a child. In Igbo cosmology, "children with no identifiable father, children who do not know or are not allowed to know their fathers" (*The Conspiracy*… p.15) are those referred to as fatherless. They "are not allowed to know their father" because they are considered illegitimate. The identifiability of a father is not in mere physical presence of a biological father but in genuine traditional recognition certified by bride price and other rites of marriage. A relationship between a man and a woman without traditional rites of marriage is said to be an affair of the dark even if it has produced children. Ike is explicit on this in *Conspiracy of Silence* (2001). Such relationship Ike says is not recognized because it "did not receive the seal of tradition and so could not be recognized by the society. It is an affair in the dark, which must not be mentioned in daylight" (p. 39). In fact, "a man who did not pay bride price on a woman has no claim of any child he and the woman make" (p.68). The absence of a father caused by either death, divorce or any other factor does not, in any way, presuppose fatherlessness.

The conception of fatherlessness is rooted in the cosmological placement of priority on human existence generally and male child in particular. The Igbo believe eschatologically in the "procreation or perpetuation of one's life through offspring" (Mbaegbu, 2012), male or female, but the perpetuation is achievable through the existence and availability of a male child. The expression in Igbo language, *ebe nwa siri lo uwa ya hiri* (any means through which a child comes, let he live) encapsulates the belief that the source of a child's procreation is immaterial to the child's final existence. Ike (2001), in the novel states "… Igbo society attaches undue importance to children. A child is seen as a priceless asset; always welcomed no matter from what source" (p.130). Even if the child's biological fatherhood is questionable, the Igbo has a way it imposes legitimacy on the child as "fatherless children had no problem in Igbo society which had evolved successful methods of playing the role of father without a natural father" (p. 70). This 'evolved successful method', however, does not remove the question of legitimacy that gives a child the traditional right of inheritance, as discussed below.

In the same vein, identity, as a concept, in Igbo cosmological view is more community-based than individual-based. In Igbo metaphysics and cosmology, the idea of identity goes beyond anthropological,

sociological and psychological conception of identity as selfhood, self-image, self-esteem or observable quality of a person to communal idiosyncrasies that embody a person. Identity is community property; a personalized community eccentricism and quirk; a community that "shares the basic conditions of a common life" (Edeh, 1985). Edeh (1985) further emphasized that "the life and purpose of the community come … before the individual interests of the members". All these are in relation of general identical characteristics of unceasing hard work, enduring spirit, energetic and industrious (Amadi, 1978; Forsyth, 1969) and a race that operate within the framework of principle of justice, cooperation, hospitality, truth, honesty, fidelity, humility and patience (Onwuanibe, 1995). Though an individual may have self-construal (Weinreich, 1988), such personal identity is subsumed in community perception of reality. For instance, an individual may have his view about procreation and value for children – male or female, but the Igbo's perspective and stand on genealogical continuity and inheritance forces the individual to prefer male child to female child.

The Igbo Cultural Conspiracy in fatherlessness: The Concubinage Question

Concubinage practice is a global phenomenon. Its prevalence and status of rights and expectations of a concubine vary among cultures and religions. The concept, concubinage, denotes a status of a man and woman that live together as husband and wife without being married. It refers to quasi-matrimonial relationship, between a man and woman, that has little or no cultural or legal binding. The man and woman who live together may make marital life but they are not legitimately united in marriage. In modern parlance, the term, concubine, denotes the status of a quasi-wife who is not legally married to a man with whom she lives.

In Igbo culture, concubinage practice is voluntary and is practically meant to make up any deficiency experienced in marriage, especially absence of children. In Igboland, as it is in Judah, children are seen as highest blessing, while childlessness is the greatest curse. In Judaism, legitimate wives often gave their maids to their husbands, at least in part, for their own barrenness. Bible figures like Abraham, Gideon, David and Solomon had concubines. Particularly, Sarah gave her maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham when she felt guilty of her inability to give Abraham children. Ishmael is the product of that relationship (Gen. 16: 2-4).

In Igbo cosmology, childlessness is treated with utmost disdain, "barrenness is detested with passion" (Onwumere, 2014). The cultural issue of childlessness and barrenness dominate African and Igbo feminist novels such as Ifeoma Okoye in *Behind the Cloud* (1982), Asare Konado in *A Woman in her Prime* (2007), Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981). Perhaps, more culturally challenging is the value for male child rooted in cosmological and eschatological belief in "perpetuation of one's life through offspring" (Mbaegbu, 2012), of course male offspring as "only male children have the right to inherit the family property, occupy the family house and perpetuate the lineage" (Agbo, 2016). This informs why an Igbo man "can do anything possible to have male children" (Ugwu, 2001).

The triumvirate cosmological abhorrence for barrenness, childlessness and immoderately overvaluation for male child codify the acceptability of concubinage practice without consideration of its consequences on fatherlessness. There is, however, the extent to which a child from concubinage relationship can be accepted especially if the man has not adequate arrangement for such child. Besides officially notifying his immediate family members of the existence of such child, he must culturally set aside or nullify the already existing marriage with a would-be concubine by returning a bride price paid by late or divorced husband. If this is not done, the child born out of such concubinage relationship belongs to the first husband or the child becomes invariably fatherless. The Warrant Chief's case and a widow in *Conspiracy…* is quite exemplary. After the death of the Chief, the girl born by him with the widow is not allowed to be fully integrated as bonafide child of the royal home. In fact,

> On one occasion, she was told point-blank that her mother was a concubine, not a wife and that children born from such relationships had no claim of the family name or inheritance (p. 22)

This is the unfortunate aspect of concubinage practice that exacerbates the issue of fatherlessness. Often, the aspect of cultural certification symbolized by bride price is not emphasized but greatly discussed and implemented when the man is dead. The Igbo cosmology has not also adequately considered the plight of "young widows who could not produce children before their husbands died, and single girls who did not receive acceptable offer of marriage" (p. 84). In fact, often, "the fortunes of many of such widows and single girls had been dramatically transformed by the fatherless children they had produced as single parents" (p. 84). The purported transformation, in many cases is not recognized culturally hence Igbo cosmology does not give credence to single girl parenthood.

We must state that the bride price which legitimizes marriage and bestows respectability as well as all rights and privileges of inheritance to child(ren) contrasts with Yoruba and western worldview. Thus,

> One important difference between Igbo and Yoruba culture is that Yoruba culture does not … insist that a man must have paid a bride price on a woman before he can claim paternity of any child born to him by the woman (p. 155).

While a Yoruba man, as permitted by Yoruba tradition and culture, can claim a child born for him by a single girl or teenager without necessarily marrying her, Igbo cosmology does not provide such opportunity. This accounts for the noticeable prevalence of fatherlessness in Igbo land; and that, in fact, is cultural conspiracy.

Factors Responsible for Identity Crisis and Fatherlessness in Igboland in the novel

It is quite evident that identity crisis and enigmatic wrench of fatherlessness have, to a large extent, been aggravated by some Igbo cosmological beliefs. In addition to the quandary and dilemma associated with concubinage practice, other traditional and cultural beliefs such as conception of fatherlessness itself, obnoxious practice of a woman taking a wife, negligence of written will and obsession for male heir tend to heighten the prevalence of identity crisis. It is unfortunate, as we have explained above, that fatherlessness, as a term does not exist in Igbo cosmology, as "fatherlessness is non-issue in Igboland" (p.

99), hence "there are no illegitimate children in Igboland. Any child born by *a married woman* is said to belong to her husband, no matter the man she slept with" (p. 112). 'Married woman' referred to here is the one customarily married that bride price must have been paid on her. The fact is that every child must have a father since a woman does not have the biological capacity to produce a sperm, even in the case of Invitro-fertilization. The challenge, however, is the legitimacy of the child's existence. The bride price as the seal of marriage bestows both respectability and legitimacy and positively challenges adult man or young teenager to take responsibility of pregnancy or the child born will be treated "like caste at will" (p. 77). Inability of the man to culturally legalize a relationship via dowries and bride price automatically renders the child fatherless. Quite clearly, Ugo, one of the narrators tells us that "a man who did not pay bride price on a woman has no claim over any child he and the woman make" (p. 68). It is, however, inadequate to use bride price to invalidate life existence which has been made possible by ultimate being, God. While we do not agree that a man and woman should be reckless in a supposedly sacred relationship that needs both religious and traditional process of validation, we emphasize that such cosmological perception is anti-social order. Children declared culturally fatherless or in modern parlance, bastard, could turn to fight a society/community that has demeaned their personality.

The obnoxious practice of a woman taking a wife contributes immensely to a widespread identity crisis. The practice is, nevertheless, different from lesbianism. The primary essence of the practice is to make up deficiency in bearing male child(ren) to ensure a family's genealogical continuity. It happens when a man dies leaving a wife and some female children. An example is cited of a widow from pages 43-48 of *Conspiracy of Silence* (2001). The widow, who perhaps has reached menopause, could traditionally contract a marriage with a teenage girl. The girl, now duly married according to custom, would choose a man to lie with to procreate male child(ren). This must be "done secretly as the identity of the children's father must never be disclosed" (p. 48). The complexity comes if, by any means, the identity of the man is disclosed. The children may reject affinity to a deceased man on whose behalf the marriage was contracted, as they cannot "call a woman their father" (p.48), but accept consanguinity to a man who is truly their biological father. More devastating is the potentiality of breeding disunity in the man's family because "the men had their own wives who would not welcome the thought of sharing their husband with another woman" (p. 48).

Another intriguing example is the case of a mother of an Anglican Canon "that married a wife, and her wife had given birth to seven sons" (p. 48). The canon is said to have been childless after ten years of marriage. The narrator explains:

> His mother's so-called marriage was a clever device to enable the reverend canon to have children without being accused of taking a second wife, which would have cost him his high office (p. 49).

The motive for this marriage could be accommodable, yet, would the consequences not be devastatingly ravaging if "the bishop, everybody, including the children, know who their father was?" (p. 49).

Besides, the negligence of written Will poses challenge to Igbo cosmology and invariably lends credence to the proliferation of fatherlessness. Igbo culture, unlike secular social and conventional law, places less

importance to Will. The only provision Igbo tradition makes of Will is oral declaration which is subject to inobjective tinkering and modification:

> Igbo tradition makes provision for a man to spell out in his life time how his property is to be apportioned when he dies…. He would normally make such declaration orally in the presence of witnesses. But the same tradition also empowers his next of kin to modify his declaration after his death (p. 71-72).

Oral declaration is deficient in the sense that the witnesses may die before the Will is read, but if still alive may be bought over and coerced into denying the fact or accepting to favour a particular son. On the other hand, written wills essentially enable a man or woman to document his or her property as well as other important interests, much of which could be lost at death. It significantly removes unnecessary rivalry among children of a deceased over the sharing of his property. It ensures continuous peace and harmony in the deceased household. On the contrary, however, Igbo cosmology stipulates traditional rules of inheritance from the first son to the least. Igbo people in their worldview have some reservations about writing wills. First, "a will is seen as an open invitation to death to strike" (p. 50). It is believed that there is time for everything, including time to die, only at old age after one has seen his/her great grand children. Even though a man does not have total control of his life as well as supreme right to determine when to die, yet, he does not need to unnecessarily knock at the door of death by sharing his property while alive. In the primordial Igbo society, for instance, a man cannot share his land while he is still alive. It is his kinsmen that do it as stipulated in the custom and tradition. He can, however, give any of his children who have acquired wealth in his presence a portion of land to build a house.

Second, there is "the genuine fear that major beneficiaries of the Will could conspire to speed up one's death to hasten the enjoyment of the inheritance" (p. 50). An average Igbo man agrees with the dictum that "prevention is better than cure". One of the ways of preventing fortuitous and undesirable conspiracy against him by his own children and other beneficiaries of his wealth is to do away with writing will. Ugo, one of the narrators and a typical Igbo man confesses to Ayo, a major narrator,

> Honestly, sir, although I'm too young to be thinking such thoughts, and I don't yet have anything to bequeath to anybody, I'm not sure that I'll want to write a will when the time comes (p. 50).

Another grouse the Igbo people have against Will is its potentiality of exposing and bringing to the public the components of one's wealth. Exposed wealth attracts the good, the ugly and the bad to the affluent and makes him the target of the ugly and the bad. More seriously, writing wills, it is believed, is a way of "playing into the hands of tax authorities who will clamp death duties on your beneficiaries" (p. 50).

Much wonderfully logical as the above cosmological views may appear, they do not reflect most current ideological perspectives, nor do they accommodate the fundamental right of inheritance of girl-child(ren) and that of the adopted male or female child(ren). As a patriarchal society, Igbo tradition does not bestow right of inheritance on a female child owing to the belief that a female child is another person's "property" which rites of marriage endorse. Traditionally, for the above reason, men that are "unlucky" because they bore only female children, no matter the quantity, regard themselves as childless and, in many cases, have disclaimed ownership of wives and female children. This fundamental error in belief system accounts for practice of polygamy, concubinage and a woman taking a wife. The abandoned

wives and beautiful daughters automatically become husband-less and fatherless. Again, adopted children are not cosmologically seen as the "real" flesh and blood of the adopter. In fact, Igbo tradition treats adoption with utmost disdain. It is believed that men are never impotent and so have no justifiable reason of not reproducing his image and likeness. The ignominy and contempt that follow adoption force many a man to resort to polygamy and concubinage. In many cases, adopted child has been on his own after the death of his adopter/father. Cases abound where the kinsmen of the deceased man declared an adopted male child fatherless, chased him out of the community and shared the deceased plots of land and other assets.

The most regrettable determinant to identity crisis and fatherlessness is the inordinate obsession for a male heir. All other factors discussed above are, in one way or the other, subsumed into this fixation and mania. Sexual motivations account for the passion for male child. Opata (1998) stated succinctly:

> No person wants his name to go into extinction, and the surest way to preserve that name in a traditional society was for a person to have male children who would continue with the family name the sense of tradition.

Ugo, one of the narrators, tells us "male child gives assurance of a successor" (p. 46). Beyond the assurance, male child(ren) "look after him [father] in old age, mourn and dress him up when he is dead" (Orabueze, 2010). In *Efuru*, Efuru's friend queries her, "can a bag of money mourn you when you are dead" (Nwapa, 1966). The Gikuyu's in Ghana share similar sentiment and fascination for male child(ren) with the Igbo. It is evident that Gikuyus prefer boys over girls as witnessed in Ilmorogians' reception of Nderi Wa Riera:

> They trooped to the Jecvanjee Gardens and, as they approached the others, the women ululated the five Ngemi usually sung for a male child and a returning victorious hero (Ngugi, 1977).

Farah, in *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), states through Ebla the preference of male child over girl child in her culture as well as good will and extravagant treatment given to a male child:

> The idea that boys lift up the prestige of the family and keep the family's name alive; even a moron-male cost twice as much as two women in terms of blood compensation. As many as twenty or thirty camels are allotted to each son. The women, however, have to wait until their fates give them a new status in life; the status of marriage (p. 3).

All this preference and obsession rooted in the people's tradition are not without consequences, among which is identity crisis resulting from conceived fatherlessness. Barrister Ejindu, a narrator in *Conspiracy of Silence* explains:

> The motivating force behind many actions resulting in the birth of fatherless child(ren) was the age-old desire to maintain the continuity of family line at all costs. When the males in the family are in danger of extinction, a daughter could be prevailed upon to stay at home and *produce babies for the family* (*Emphasis, mine*) (p. 83).

Such babies could be any gender. In many cases, children produced under such circumstances are taunted by their friends who their fathers are identified and they live with them. The ridicule and derision often compel the purported fatherless to confront their mothers and request to know their fathers. Of course, we imagine identity crisis such scorn and confrontation can cause. Again, Chijioke, another narrator, corroborates Barrister Ejindu's claim thus:

> Many fatherless children…were born out of natural desire to maintain the family line and to ensure the stability of the family. Many others, however, resulted from the shocking extent of fornication and adultery condoned by the society (p. 99).

It is, at this juncture, imperative to identify other factors, perhaps universal determinants of fatherlessness. In his true sense of responsibility, Ike in *Conspiracy…* obliges the readers with other factors responsible for global fatherlessness. Inability of a woman (mother), to confess fatherhood; suspected stigmatization such confession may cause, especially if the father is an outcast, hooligan, never-do-well or from poor background or even a relation; religious extremism; insincerity and deception in marriage contract; impotency in man and infertility in woman; and inability of some men to take responsibility of a pregnancy and up bring of a child that resulted from legitimate or illegitimate relationship.

The protagonist of *Conspiracy…*, Dr. Nwanneka, an established consultant paediatrician, is a victim of the first three factors. She is a product of incest between her mother, Ukamaka (Aunty Ukamaka) and her mother's brother, Barr. James Ikenna (SAN). Incest is an abomination before God and man. Cultural and religious doctrines and etiquette condemn interbreeding in strong terms. In Igbo cosmology, inbreeding is not only abominably nauseating, the identified offenders must undergo rigorous ritual cleansing. Because of the repugnance and odiousness as well as the austere ritual cleansing associated with the offense, offenders desist from confession of it. Thus, Barr. Ikenna and Ukamaka in particular (whose gross lust and indiscretion caused the incest) keep the secret perpetually from all relations and public, but for thirty four years from Dr. Nwanneka. Again, religious extremism and social stigmatization could force offenders keep the secret to themselves, and at extreme cases, commit abortion. For Ukamaka, the narrator tells us:

> Her father's family was a Christian family in which premarital sex was denounced and pregnancy outside marriage was a taboo (p. 28).

Since Ukamaka rejected "secret abortion" and, before the public knew about the pregnancy, her sister, Mrs. Obioha, "then took her away to live with her at Enugu during the pregnancy period to shield her from the glare of publicity" (p. 28). Essentially, "it's only a mother who can tell the father of her baby" (p. 28), and if such a mother bluntly refuses to confess fatherhood, then, the child remains unceasingly fatherless.

Insincerity and deception in marriage contract consequentially snowball into identity crisis and fatherlessness. The features editor of *The Voice of the People* is a victim of aberration of marriage contract. His father was a Custom Clerk, and met his mother when he came to process a passport to proceed to United States to study Law. He has promised in writing to marry her. The promise, written and verbal, enables the would-be lawyer to have his way and she becomes pregnant a night he is to depart to London. Unfortunately, none of the promises is kept. The editor's mother is abandoned with pregnancy and he is born fatherless, at least for a reckoned time. The editor tells Ayo:

> I was ten years old when my mother told me who my father was, but she made it clear that she had no intention of re-establishing contact with him. When I pressed her, I discovered she had earlier tracked him down, after reading a newspaper story about him. His reaction to the news of my existence had been so repugnant that she had sworn never to set eyes on him again. From what she had picked up, he had a wife and two children and was a flourishing lawyer (p. 75).

Ngo, a professional woman, also experiences grave deception in her marriage contracts with a young Nigeria doctor in London and an Engineer in Nigeria. With the assurance of marriage, Ngo allows him

make love to her and she become pregnant. Unfortunately, the doctor disappears ten day to the wedding after all the preparations must have been made leaving her with the pregnancy and rendering the child fatherless. A year after having her baby, an engineer with an oil company in Lagos comes into her life and they get married traditionally and have memorable church wedding. One month after wedding Ngo discovers that:

> Her one-in-a-million husband had concealed from her that he had a German wife and two children living in Heidelberg, Germany…. Fortunately, no baby was on the way, so they quietly walked away from each other (p. 70).

Closely related to deception is the inability of some men to take responsibility of a pregnancy that emanates from them and the subsequent upbringing of a child or children that result from legitimate or illegitimate relationship. Gerian's father accuses his mother of infidelity and thus disclaims paternity. Gerian grows up under a *de facto* father who finances his education. Gerian grows up to believe that his uncle who cares for him from infancy is his natural father. Regrettably, his natural or real biological father emerges after his uncle died, and a day preceding Gerian's swearing in as governor of a state. For the years of infancy and education, Gerian remains fatherless despite his uncle's presence and care (pp. 66-67).

Impotency in male or infertility in female is a very serious medical predicament that is capable of breaking up marriage. It can temper with the original essence of marriage – being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth and subduing it (Gen. 1:27-28), as well as agape love that may have earlier propelled the couple to agree to marry. Impotency or infertility renders couple childless. Childlessness makes a family incomplete. A complete home comprises father, mother and child(ren). We have explained above the contempt with which Igbo cosmology treats childless home and its obsession for male child. Polygamy and concubinage practice are momentary solutions to childlessness or male-childlessness. We are already aware with the problems associated with concubinage practice. The point here, however, is that purported impotency or infertility can force a man or woman to engage in indiscriminate sexual spree that may lead to the birth of a child whose fatherhood cannot easily be traced. For instance, in *Conspiracy…* (pp. 72-73), a boy tells a story of how he and his brother become fatherless. Their parents lived happily for years until problem erupts that their mother has to sue for divorce claiming that their daddy is not their father because he is impotent. To prove her point, she names a poet that fathers them. Their dad sues the poet for adultery but the poet

> Denied committing adultery with the woman. He also denied being the father of her two children. All he was prepared to admit in court was that he had donated sperm in answer to a distressed call from a woman who needed children desperately (p. 72).

Their mother later moves out of their home, taking them with her. Thus, the boys suddenly found themselves fatherless.

Consequences of Fatherlessness and Identity Crisis in the novel

Identity crisis which originates from fatherlessness has telling outgrowth on the victims. The crisis of fatherless children is, no doubt, the most destructive trend of the contemporary generation. The

significance of father-figure in the development of a child, in all ramifications, is imperatively inevitable. Researchers contend that a child's positive cognitive, affective and psychomotor development have direct link to a father's presence at home. Quoting Muza (1998), Eizirik and Bergmann (2015) stated the real role and significance of father at home:

> The father appears to be the third indispensable ingredients for the child to work out the loss of its initial relationship with the mother…. The father comes to represent a principle of reality and order within the family, and the child feels that it is no longer the only one to share the mother's attention.

With the above ineluctable significance, one could imagine the devastating effects of father absence in the home. Kruk (2012) listed the disastrous demerits of father absence to the development of children: children's diminished self-concept, and compromised physical and emotional security; behavioural problems of social maladjustment; truancy and poor academic performance, delinquency and youth crime; promiscuity and teen pregnancy; drug and alcohol abuse; exploitation and sexual abuse; physical and health problems; mental health disorders; poor life chances and poor marital relationship.

In *Conspiracy…*, we identify and categorize ripple effects of fatherlessness into psychological, social and cultural quandaries. These tripartite consequences interrelate and produce short term and long term major identity crisis. Earlier in the novel, Gozie, a major narrator, points out that "there are many fatherless children in Igbo society and they're subjected to varying degrees of psychological problems" (p. 18). The protagonist of the novel, Dr. Nwanneka, experiences the worst psychological quandary, even as a professional career woman. Nwanneka tells Ayo with indignation:

> Having had this exposure to the crucial role of a father in my formative years, to be told all of a sudden that I had no father created an unfathomable vacuum in my life and threw me into an indescribable fit of depression (p.53).

The greatest psychological difficulty stems from the fact that she is misled into believing that she has a father with the presence of Uncle Uche and his wife, Aunty Amuche. At birth, Nwanneka is whisked into the family of Uche and Amuche, and she grows up to see them as biological parents owing largely to her bearing their surname and model parenthood they exhibit. It is, therefore, a bombshell to have been told at eleven years old that Uncle is not her natural father. Her worries are aggravated by the initial father-figure rooted in subconscious mind by the presence of Uncle Uche. She insists:

> I believe it would have been preferable to bring me down to earth straightaway rather than to allow me live through my most formative years in a world of fantasy, and then plucking me out of it peremptorily… (p. 55).

Ukamaka's revelation to Nwanneka, "I am your mummy" (p. 5) does not only point to existing but unidentified father somewhere, but more importantly become an indelible expression that constantly deepens her anxiety. It echoes in her the secret that needs to be unraveled. As a young girl, the secret of her fatherlessness cannot but "weighs her down all through her secondary school days simply because it was one secret she could not share with anybody…" (p.56). As an adult and consultant peadiatrician, the traumatic imagery of fatherlessness continues to haunt her. Thus, she implores Ayo, "please, help me to appeal to God to lift me out of the deep depression into which I get thrown from time to time" (p. 96). Dr. Nwanneka is not alone in the psychological dilemma provoked by fatherlessness. The features editor of *The Voice of the People* and Barrister Ejindu suffer the full pang of fatherlessness. The editor laments, "it

was most frustrating having a well-known father, and not being allowed to identify with him. Instead, I was treated as a stray urchin…" (p. 78). For Barr. Ejindu, it is incredibly destabilizing. He speaks:

> I must admit that it was initially shattering to acknowledge that I was fatherless, and that the man I had called father for about forty years was not my father (p. 82).

Fatherlessness also has social consequences. It attracts social demeanor, snide remarks, taunting and deriding comments. Ridiculous utterances reduce a person's social status, even when one has gotten to the pinnacle of his/her life career. A forty year-old women confesses that "she had all things she wanted as a child, except a father" (77). As an adult, "her husband treated her well, and her children are doing well" (77), yet she remains "an unhappy woman because her mother could not tell her where to locate her father" (p.77). Socially, she remains always indisposed "particularly when people called her names because she had no father" (p.77). Again the features editor of *The Voice of the People* experiences demoralization and becomes socially withdrawn when his half-brother, the second son of his father's senior wife makes a snide remark against him. The editor has given his father a dignified burial. Villagers commend him for that and hail him as *O mechara nna ya* (one who truly befittingly buried his father). His half-brother is not happy with the commendation and expresses it with a snide comparison with "a dancer performing zestfully in the public, forgetting that his costume was borrowed". This means that editor's claim of fatherhood with him is artificial and therefore has no original cultural certification.

Culturally, fatherlessness, as we have discussed above, is treated with contempt. Child(ren) with unidentified or illegitimate father is scornfully referred to as "bastard". As such, they are denied some cultural entitlements, rights and privileges, among which are rights of inheritance, conferment of traditional titles like *Nze na Ozo*, chieftaincy and enthronement as traditional ruler. Chief Akaweta is exemplary in this regard. He has taken ten or more chieftaincy titles, (of course from outside his community who do not know the circumstances surrounding his birth), "three of which extol the bottomlessness of his treasury" (p. 110). He is generous to a fault. To three of his brothers, "he had built each of them a mansion and bought each of them the latest model Mercedes Benz car. He was also paying school fees for their children" (p. 111). Unfortunately, when he nurses the ambition of succeeding their late father as the traditional ruler of their community,

> The brothers hit him below the belt by leaking the name of an Agbenu farm labourer who committed adultery with the chief's mother, resulting in his birth (p. 111).

This implies, by cultural standard, that Chief Akaweta is a bastard. He is not in real sense, of a royal blood, a product of infidelity and of poor background. As such, he is not qualified to head a community as a royal father. Another instance is one ebullient hunter-cum-fisherman who conferred on himself the title of "Prince Original" which indicates his royal blood. The appellation, "Prince Original", however, disappeared when the circumstance surrounding his birth is revealed:

> It turned out that the so-called "Prince Original" was conceived after his mother had run away from her royal husband's house to her home-town (p. 122).

Besides the psychological, social and cultural implications of fatherlessness, it can compel a victim to live a pseudo life style rooted in pretences and lies. Major characters like Dr. Nwanneka, Gozie and Chijioke consciously or inadvertently found themselves in such a sham. Igbo cosmology endorses and upholds the compulsory presence of an identifiably legitimate father of a girl-child before she is giving out in marriage. On the event of a confirmed deceased father, a de facto father or male guardian (uncle) is

acceptable. A woman alone, even with the presence of other nuclear and extended family members, does not give out a woman's hand in marriage. It is only the father that receives the bride price. It is, therefore, difficult for a fatherless female child to get married, except such a girl presents an impostor or pseudo father. If it happens, it becomes a marriage contracted under deceit; it can break up if discovered later. Chijioke and Gozie get married under this pretense. The narrator tells us that Chijioke's "ordeal had been compounded by the fact that he had lied to Gozie, and later the children, about his parentage" (p. 109). Nevertheless, they could not break up the union when they discover their lies to themselves because they share the same experiences, but have laid a foundation of lies to their children:

> We are like minds, aren't we? remarked Gozie, holding tight to her husband's hand. Can you believe that I did precisely the same thing, for precisely the same reasons. They hugged and kissed each other (p. 110).

Still worried, Chijioke asks Gozie, and by extension, readers a contemplative question:

> But something is bugging my mind. Do you think there are many other people like you and me who have been driven by fatherlessness into building a fortress of lies around themselves, as we have regrettably done in order to acquire respectability? (p. 110).

The answer is an emphatic yes. Dr. Nwanneka is a typical example. She tells a colossal lie to stop Chike's, a fellow pre-clinical student's and the Tiv engineer's marriage proposals to her. Nwanneka tells them:

> She was betrothed in her final year in secondary school to a young man from her home-town who had subsequently proceeded to University of Hamburg in Germany for studies. The man and his family had been itching for a wedding, but Nwanneka had insisted on qualifying as a doctor first (p. 91).

The same issue of fatherlessness redirects her initial wish for happy married life to remaining "single for life" (p. 91), as well as choice of career as a paediatrician:

> Her fatherlessness had triggered off other brainwaves. Her choice of career as a paeditrician… had began as one such brainwave…. Remaining single for life had also come as brainwave, after she had hit one of the brickwalls in her life as fatherless child (p. 11).

The same applies to Uzoamaka who laments, "How can I talk of marriage? If a man comes to ask for my hand, to whom will I take him when I have no father…" (p. 121).

Conclusion

Checking the incidences of fatherlessness and its attendant identity crisis is needed now more than never before, considering its prevailing psychological, social and cultural consequences, and since career accomplishments in life and the presence of a de facto father do not quench the quest for true genealogical paternal identity. For Nwanneka, a consultant paediatrician; Gozie, an accountant with First Bank; the feature editor of *The Voice of the People*; and Chief Akaweta, an affluent business mogul, fulfillment comes only from sacred boundary of cultural self, not pinnacle of career accomplishment. Although it requires all hands being on deck, it challenges the African culture in general and Igbo cosmological belief system in particular. Identity crisis has ripple effects on both the victim and the society. While it has subjected many a woman and man to pangs of emotional trauma, social complexes and cultural debasement, it has forced many girls into perpetual spinster. All these perplexities and un-bargained difficulties stem, in most cases, from traditional inadequacies as in the case of Igbo people.

Fatherlessness is a global social issue and problem, but its traditional deconstruction makes it anti-human development and progress.

Recommendations

To check the incidences of identity crisis caused by fatherlessness, we cannot but consider these recommendations:

1. There should be traditional/cultural summit involving all the stakeholders in Igbo tradition – the traditional or royal majesties and highnesses, *Nze na Ozos*, *Ichies*, chiefs, experts and academics in African Traditional Religion and culture. The essence of the summit will be to review some cultural practices and restrictions that obstruct human development and choices in life, among which is bride price which is traditionally seen as seal of legitimacy of marriage and children, the desirable fruit of marriage. Another cultural practice that needs to be reexamined is the excess value attached to male children which invariably promotes concubinage, promiscuity and polygamy. Deemphasizing value for male child will promote right of equality irrespective of gender.

2. There should be social and cultural reorientation in which men should be made not only to know but also see the need to take responsibility of the pregnancy and child from their legitimate or illegitimate relationship. The reorientation should include conscientizing women on the desired vitality to muster moral courage to boldly confess the fatherhood of their unborn or born baby. The responsibility taken by men will cover the honest confession made by the woman and engender the possible initiation of traditional rites of marriage, including the payment of bride price. This will gradually stamp out incidences of fatherlessness in the society.

3. The Igbo cosmology should be reexamined and harmonized with current social realities, and there should be evolution of cultural system that would absorb a child whose father disclaims as a member of the woman's family and give him or her the family's name. The evolved cultural system should prescribe terms and items of possible naturalization which will include the child's right of inheritance. If this is done, the concept of "fatherlessness" will be substituted with "familylessness".

4. There should be cultural domestication of all the contents of legal child adoption. This will not only promote permanent solution to childlessness caused by impotency and infertility but also provide ready accommodation to children whose fathers cannot easily be identified. This will ensure legitimacy of a child's existence in the absence of other cultural seals of legitimacy and ownership like bride price and dowries.

5. A married woman should not, under any guise, make a baby with a man other than her husband. This puts a strict restriction against infidelity and promiscuity. On the other hand, Igbo culture could evolve a system, like Catholic Christianity, to pardon or ignore the infidelity and retain mother and child.

6. Lies and pretenses should be deleted in marriage proposal. The bride and groom should be able to tell themselves the truth of the circumstances surrounding their respective birth. Such openness and sincerity will cement the relationship and make it endure as well as remove suspicion and fear that can generate

identity crisis. This will also help couples get over incidents they have no control, so as to forge ahead with their lives.

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