

BOOK REVIEW

David Uru Iyam. *Shaping Tradition: Women's Roles in Ceremonial Rituals of the Agwagune*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021. 160 pp. \$79.95. Hardback. ISBN: 9780299334406.

David Uru Iyam divides his text, *Shaping Tradition: Women's Roles in Ceremonial Rituals of the Agwagune*, into six chapters. The text captures the impact of women in constructing and reconstructing Agwagune, a southeastern community in Nigeria. Iyam argues against the patriarchal dominance inherent in Agwagune, even when women labor for the existence and progression of the community. The Agwagune women only experience their dominance in the collective economic power of the Great Women's Meeting, known as *Aka-e-Mitin Aneba*, a space they created rather than being discouraged by their exclusion from male spaces. In the meeting, crucial cases and punitive measures against defaulters of the community's law are deliberated. This Great Women's Meeting is not the only enforcer of the law; there are other groups like the Abu and Ebrambi. The Abu festival, which takes place every seven years, is an initiation ceremony where every Agwagune male becomes a member after passing rigorous processes. Such processes occur among the Ebrambi, the military arm of the people. Agwagune ceremonies foster solidarity, regulate social behaviour, and reward the upright. Iyam posits that the Agwagune women are barred from participating in certain Ebrambi-related activities. For instance, they are forbidden from preparing food for young intakes during their initiation, singing the men's songs, and mentioning the performers; if found guilty, these women face enormous monetary fines. Though women are excluded from being initiated into Abu and Ebrambi, they enforce the regulations enacted by these groups through *Aka-e-Mitin Aneba* and other women's sacred associations. They also checkmate the powers of these male groups. The continuity of secrecy and rituals in the men's group resides in the women who hold it sacrosanct, providing necessary items for the ceremonies. They also constitute the dominant audience, cheering and judging men's performances.

Aside from enforcing the laws of the land, women also contribute to the financial strength in Agwagune. They rely on their control over labour and income, which they claim to model after the goddess of fertility, Erot Edok. They also interfere in cases such as spousal abuse and non-payment of fines. The women's ceremony formed in honour of Erot Edok, Edok Ivin, attracts the largest crowd to Agwagune. The ceremony fosters morality and communality in society. Also, it emphasizes the prominence of certain items; the sacredness of yam, used to measure wealth, is reinforced in the Edok Ivin ceremony. Agwagune women arrange the Edok Ivin ritual, which includes capturing and dressing the maiden

who would lead the procession down to entertaining their guests. The men have little responsibilities in the ritual; all attention is focused on the maiden. Some female dancers wear male attires to show their readiness to transcend the constricted cultural designated role by playing the roles of both male and female gender. The cultural perception of women trivializes their contributions to the society. Their performances portray unity, and their labour, as Iyam avers, shows their tenacity as “the sustainers of the lifeline of the society” (81). However, the Agwagune people regard their women’s bodies as sacred and powerful to lay curses on their unruly children. Also, people believe that femininity neutralizes masculine potency. For instance, the woman’s nakedness serves as a tool for correction; rubbing it on a recalcitrant male is interpreted as taking away his manhood. In warfare, women play a perilous role as forerunners by preparing the warpath with their medicine and, in some unverified cases, enticing their opponents with their femininity. The women are at the forefront of events where they serve as a great source of entertainment through the Egup dance, an association all women belong to by birth.

Iyam highlights the flexibility of training a girl-child in comparison to her male counterpart. This training has enabled the female gender to coordinate their affairs in correspondence with the trends of change experienced in Agwagune. Civilization has brought about Christianity, education, civil war, politics, and migration that have distorted the people’s cultural practices. Circumcision and fattening, which are cultural practices for marriageable females, are not left out. The women stopped circumcision and restructured fattening to accommodate city dwellers and modernity; the perception of fattening has changed from femininity to resting/vacationing from office and farm work. Unlike the women, the men find it challenging to adapt to changes as the younger ones degenerate to the level of disrespecting the elders and ancestral powers to move power from the old to the younger generation. In all, the women remain the major custodians of the Agwagune cultural belief and practice system, as the onus of passing down the people’s culture resides in their closeness to Agwagune and her children.

Iyam adopts *otherness* not to exclusively depict the distinction in social identity between men and women but to comparatively distinguish women as the driving force of cultural implementation and social order in the Agwagune society. These women’s strength lies in their resilience to surpass the minority position assigned to them by establishing their own space to affirm equilibrium in societal conformity.

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