

Masculinity and Nigerian Youths

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the masculine views of a cross-section of Nigerian youths or, more precisely, undergraduates, to determine the forms of masculinity among youths. Drawn from different ethnic groups the masculine notions of the category of young men represented in this study show both similarities and differences. Influenced by the university environment, which promotes cross-cultural mingling and exchange of ideas, the views of the study participants are combinations of indigenous and non-indigenous masculine notions but reshaped by the economic and social changes that have taken place in the last two to three decades in the country. Youths aspire to project an ideal masculine identity as they grow older. They regard their educational pursuits as a preparatory phase for actualizing their dream personality. A pointer from this study is that masculine gender expressions cannot be generalized. Individual views can vary widely and are strongly affected by traditional practice as well as environmental and other realities.

Keywords: Nigeria, Youths, Masculinities, Gender expressions

INTRODUCTION

The few studies that exist on masculinity in Africa provide only an inkling of the ideas of especially the older generation of Africans about masculinity; including their expressions of their masculinities (Lindsey and Stephan 2003; Morell and Ouzgane 2005).^{*} In contrast, little is known about the opinion of African youths on masculinity and their masculinities. This study with Nigerian youths tells how this educated and not-too-traditional group defines masculinity and might express their masculinities when they are older.

The present discussion derives from a group study¹ with thirty-seven male and thirty-three female undergraduate students. Participants have been exposed to some years of university education, with its potential to influence the development of a critical mentality, some appreciation of gender issues, and,

^{*} This paper was first discussed at the 2005 Gender Institute of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). My thanks go to all who made useful suggestions towards its improvement.

¹ The Nigerian government regards youths to be males or females from adolescence (from about twelve years) to forty years of age. (Presidential Broadcast marking the 1999 Youths' Day.) The focus group study on which this paper is based took place on 8th June 2005 at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The true identities of the participants have consciously been withheld. I have used pseudonyms instead.

more importantly, differing levels of detachment from traditional values. The students' ages ranged from twenty to twenty-seven. The ethnic and religious groups represented are Igbo, Yoruba, Igala, and Ijaw; and, respectively, Christianity and Islam. Nigeria, a multi-ethnic country, had a wide range of cultures in operation before the commencement of the colonial period in 1884; aspects of which, in spite of external influences and historical experiences, remain evident in the present. Out of a myriad of ethnic groups, the major ones are the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba, constituting 68% of the population. The most populous minority group is the Ijaw, which with the big three make up 78% of the population (CIA 2004). In effect, a considerable population of the country is represented by the ethnic composition of the study participants. There are variations in the cultural traits of these groups but there are also some similarities. The major thread running through all the ethnic groups represented in this study is a predominantly patriarchal social model. The Igbo² have a small matrilineal sector but with authority vested in men, thus causing its matrilineal section to exhibit most features found in patriarchal communities, with the only point of divergence relating to inheritance through matrilineage.

The participants in this study were asked four questions: What does it mean to be masculine? What are the features of masculinity? In what ways can you fulfill your dream of being a man? And, what are the good and bad aspects of masculinity? The responses to these questions in the first instance expose the depth of Nigerian youths masculine gender consciousness and then reveal the extent to which these notions have changed from what they were in an earlier generation.

1. MASCULINITY CONCEIVED BY YOUTHS

Female and male youths both associated "masculinity" with maleness and belonging to the male gender category. They distinguished "man" and "maleness" as two distinct words with different meanings. While "maleness" was used to refer strictly to qualities of being male, in contrast to being female, "man" was identified for what it was: a generic term for human gender categories. A female youth gave this answer:

To be masculine is to be a male man. Every human being was created man. The creation story says that Eve was created from Adam who was a male man. If Eve was created out of Adam - a male man - then she was a female man. When we talk about masculinity we are referring to the male man.³

² Besides the Igbo, the Yako of Cross River State operates a double unilineal descent social structure but largely, power resides with the male segment of the society (See Mair, Lucy. 1974. *African Societies*. London: Cambridge University Press).

³ Information from Uche, 8/6/05.

The suggestion of underlying physical differences between men and women is evident in the choice of the terms “male man” and “female man”. Many youths understood masculinity to be the opposite of femininity but pointed out that the former is culturally superior to the latter. Not all gender scholars regard masculinity as merely the opposite of femininity (for example Wade and Tavis 1998: 164–7). Sattel (1983: 119–124) feels that the starting point for understanding masculinity lies in the asymmetrical dominance and prestige that accrue to males in the society and notes that male dominance takes shape in the positions of the formal and informal power that men hold in the social division of labor. While being male is not exactly the equivalent of being female, the incidence of male privilege and superiority over women observed by Sattel exists among the ethnic communities from which the student participants are drawn. The gender difference in Nigerian culture groups allowed men more power and status than women. Masculine superiority was indicated in diverse forms. In one sense it implied the social placement of men above women and the privileges that accrue to men in almost everything. The association between masculinity with superiority was expressed by a male youth thus:

Men are presented as the first in everything even when they are not, and the best also when they are not. They are the king and they are the head. They lead in every matter whether they can take decisions that would be of importance to the society or not. They are made more important than women.⁴

It was not all youths who were able to give a critical evaluation of masculinity, but they were not completely indifferent to the power relations between men and women. For instance, a male youth observed: “masculinity could be used connotatively in many senses and applied to various circumstances.”⁵ In a general sense, maleness is socially enhancing. The correlation between Nigerian societies’ biased depiction of men as always paramount and excellent including when they are not was identified as being responsible for Igbo women’s strategy of doing masculinity by adapting masculine qualities such as being a female husband and the head of their own households in order to attract social and economic advantages to themselves. The explanation was offered that behind the myth of male superiority and social importance in Nigerian societies lies a deeply rooted jealousy towards women.⁶ If we take into consideration Green’s (1964: 176) observation of an Igbo community in the 1940s, we may conclude that this jealousy was borne from the desire in men to remain the privileged group. According to Green, “in time of crisis one became aware of a male-female undercurrent of antagonism or suspicion.” Such jealousy identified by Green among the Igbo is also found among the Yoruba ethnic community, to judge from the story concerning Efunsetan, a rich and influential female chief, at

⁴ Information from Nnebi, 8/6/05.

⁵ Information from Obia, 8/6/05.

⁶ Nnebi 2005.

the end of the nineteenth century. The refusal by Efunsetan on moral and economic grounds to support the military campaigns of Latosa, a war chief, led to rivalry between the two and a conspiracy engineered by Latosa to eliminate Efunsetan, eventually leading to her assassination (Mba 1985: 8). On the basis of the youths' observations, it appears that male-female jealousy has continued to the present day.

Being anatomically male was not regarded by the youths as being masculine; or as expressed in their words "it is not proof of any man's masculinity." Outside the male anatomy, masculinity exhibits itself in specific attributes that are culturally determined, as we shall see later. An important observation on masculinity by a male youth presented it as "a mental phenomenon that gives men a sense of superiority and leads to male chauvinism." This mental phenomenon reflects what Whitehead (2002: 212) may have had in mind when he wrote that a masculine subject becomes one through being positioned in, and positioning itself, within those discourses that speak of, and suggest, maleness or masculinity. Youths who saw masculinity as a mental phenomenon are of the opinion that the perspective from which male subjects view life influence their actions, some of which may not be in the interest of females and men less privileged than they are.⁷ This mental phenomenon, they suppose, can be consciously and individually deconstructed.

A majority of the youths hold the view that attributes of masculinity are not instinctive since male human beings do not begin from birth to manifest masculine characteristics. In their opinion, masculine gender attitudes and roles are learned from infancy and all through the process of socialization. As children become aware of attitudes appropriate to their gender, they groom themselves to manifest these until they become adept at displaying them. Masculine attributes, the youths posit, start manifesting clearly from the onset of puberty and continue until full maturity is attained many years later. In other words, individual expressions of masculinity occur within a time frame: having a beginning and an end, the latter possibly at death. Within this time frame, individual masculinities can vary in their manifestations. Meanwhile, not all men show the same level of masculine attainment. Those whose "deficiency" are particularly marked come under the control of the dominant members of the group and in a sense belong with women as the repressed category, although in more concrete terms they enjoy advantages for their maleness that women may never lay claim to. Again, what emerges is some sort of class elitism among men in their demonstration of their masculinities. It is also obvious that there are differences in the degree to which individual male subjects manifest hegemonic masculinity.

The lens through which youths gazed at the concept of masculinity determined the explanations they provided on it. The obvious ones were the

⁷ The following expressed this view: Iheko, Mefuna, Adoki, and Emedo, 8/6/05. Original names withheld.

traditional (or patriarchal) lens and the religious lens. Many preferred to define masculinity by describing its features.

2. FEATURES OF MASCULINITY IN NIGERIA

There is no single specific description of masculinity proffered by the youths, but the general sense in which it relates to “being male” is evident in their responses. The youths’ catalog of masculine attributes reflects views borne from different social and ideological influences. In general, the youths regard masculine subjects as possessing, or being associated with, certain physical, biological, and psychological qualities, along with elements of personality. These include superior physical strength, firmness, fearlessness, decisiveness, an ability to protect the weak, to be principled, to control, to conquer, to take risks, provide leadership, to be assertive, to enjoy a high social status, and to display versatility in martial arts. Also added to the list are: intelligence, bravery, sobriety, unemotionality, and an absence of smiles. Such markers as body hair, a deep voice, short hair, and a socially approved male attire were commonly mentioned as masculine elements among Nigerian major cultural and religious groups. Of course, the male genitals, the youths observed, are one feature that makes a whole lot of difference and which a woman can never possess, no matter how much she may do masculinity. Words used by female youths in connection with masculinity include violent, authoritative, stoic, independent and fatherly, the latter being associated with caring, being protective, and affectionate.⁸ Strangely, male youths did not associate the role of a father with giving affection but in terms of efficiency in meeting their financial obligations as fathers. With the exclusion of fatherliness, both male and female youths mentioned similar features of masculinity but using different adjectives.

The reference to “fatherly” by female youths necessitated further investigation. Casual reading of the term would place it as out of tune with the dominant patriarchal masculinity of previous generations. By fatherly, female youths, drawing on their home experience, referred to men’s traditional responsibilities toward their families and communities. One indication of maleness in Nigerian societies involved providing for dependents from within and outside one’s extended family, and protecting the weak (and the society at large) from danger at great risk to one’s life. Taking these traditional masculine roles into consideration calls for some re-aligning of masculine features, removing from the list such traits as absence of emotions. For while Nigerian men might not be overtly emotional to the degree that women have been associated with, and male youths failed to associate fatherliness with giving affection, they nonetheless possess and display emotions in their own way. If they did not, what was behind the tendency to protect the weak and whole communities at the risk of one’s life?

⁸ Information from Uche, Queen, Ina, and Ngwu, 8/6/05.

The features of masculinity enumerated by the youths such as fearlessness, decisiveness, protecting the weak, and dominance connote gender attitudinal supremacy: an ascribed high value for male features and a low value for the female's. This can be explained by referring to traditional practice. Male domination was the norm in pre-colonial Nigerian societies. However few records exist on women's concerted attempts to challenge the situation. For instance, there is little evidence that women contested whatever ideologies backed male control even in matrilineal societies (Njoku 2000). Two of the few recorded reactions of women occurred in Yorubaland and Igboland and were against blatantly oppressive rule such as the regime of Latosa, the Yoruba war-chief, towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the oppressive exploitation of colonial warrant chiefs in Igboland in the first half of the twentieth century (Shokpeka 2002: 108–110; Mba 1985: 8). We can infer, in the absence of reliable records to prove otherwise, that there was some acquiescence by Nigerian women in the indigenous values that privileged men, even among the Yoruba who had a long tradition of women sharing political and social visibility with men to a degree not witnessed in other Nigerian ethnic communities. This acquiescence in male-projecting values compelled women to defer to men, thus contributing to the institutionalization of sexism.

In one sense, the presence of female leaders in pre-colonial Yorubaland, Hausaland, and Igalaland can be construed as challenging over-valued patriarchal masculinity in these societies. However, with reference to Edoland, Shokpeka (2002: 111) believes that the ascendancy of two queens in pre-colonial Benin Kingdom was an acknowledgment of their economic success and wealth. After their reign, the male leadership of the Benin Kingdom abolished the reign of female monarchs on the grounds that women "by tradition were not highly rated in society." In that case, our assumption that female access to power challenged ascribed masculine value and consequent dominance would not apply. In many ways, the impression of male attitudinal supremacy has survived. A male youth justified the pervasiveness of male domination in post-colonial Nigerian societies by asserting that "women are just helpers of men; and only a man unwilling to retain his blessings would allow a woman to have an upper hand."⁹ He backed his response with the biblical story of woman being formed from the rib of man, which, he reasoned, is proof that God sanctioned a gender arrangement that placed women lower than men.

The notion held by most male youths that men as a category were naturally chosen to lead and control women is played out in male students' interactions with their female colleagues. Various antics were disclosed as used by male students to control, and where possible, intimidate female students. These acts are based on the logic that "only the violent can get anything by force." The violent image refers to "the strong willed and tough guy."¹⁰ Again, this comment was adapted from the Biblical gospel of Matthew where Jesus is

⁹ Information from Afili, 8/6/05.

¹⁰ Uche, 8/6/05.

credited with saying that “from the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”¹¹ Male students ascribed their own self-serving meaning to this passage. We can regard this scenario as an attempt to enforce what they consider normative in male-female relations: which is male control of women. Nevertheless, the control is not always as absolute as projected, which may be why there were attempts to justify it with scriptural quotes. So far, in two instances, youths from Christian backgrounds linked societal articulations of gender to biblical stories. The range of influences that shaped Nigerian youths ideas on masculinity is evident from the foregoing discussion.

For many male youths, power instils confidence and self-dependence, and gives a sense of control as well as the feeling of esteem. The need to project an image of power motivates them to hide their susceptibilities, especially their physical and emotional weaknesses and to adopt what one of them referred to as “a psychological defense mechanism.”¹² This means “pretending to be courageous when frightened or feigning a quality lacking in one’s personality.” In some ways the burden to be masculine makes young men struggle to behave in ways that society expects of masculine subjects whether they possess the necessary qualities or not and even when they do not see the need for the exhibition of their deficient traits. Perhaps for this reason, many male youths considered submission to a woman, including one’s partner, a non-masculine quality.

Virility was named as an important indicator of masculinity by more than eighty percent of male and female youths. Virility must be shown, according to the youths, through marriage to a female partner and through the ability of the male to impregnate the latter. In contrast, the non-virile male’s masculinity is questionable. Such a disadvantaged male will not command respect in his society, unlike his favored colleagues. Merely possessing male genitalia does not accord privileges; rather, the dividends from such possession do.

The connection between masculinity, marriage, and being able to impregnate a woman forecloses the acceptance of other forms of sexual manifestations besides heterosexuality. With the global march toward diversified sexual orientations, Nigerian youths, it would seem, appear rigid in interpreting the link between masculinity and sexuality by disassociating masculinity from non-heterosexual sexuality. Yet all of the youths are themselves heterosexual: rather, their views on virility derive in part from indigenous customs and dominant religious tenets on proper masculine sexuality.

An Igala comment that an unmarried male adult is not yet a man (“*Enekele du ki ma noyan che n eke le no*”), the Yoruba statement that a man without responsibilities and challenges cannot call himself a man (“*Eni ija koba kip e rare ni okunrin*”), and an Igbo proverb that a man without a wife is irresponsible

¹¹ The rendering of that verse from Matthew 11:12 is taken from *The New King James Version*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982.

¹² Obia, 8/6/05.

(“*okokporo n’enweghi nwunye bu ofeke*”) speak of the cultural connection between a man having a family composed at least of a wife and children and his masculinity. The Igala and the Igbo would neither trust nor take an unmarried man seriously. Marriage has long been the standard that legalized sexual behavior in male and female subscribers to Nigeria’s indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity. It was an important social condition in traditional Nigerian societies (Johnson 1968; Uchendu 1965; Smith 1964) that allowed men to demonstrate their leadership potentials in the smallest social unit – the family. By and large, it was the pre-condition for much of men’s social and political responsibilities in the wider society. Not being married undermined a man’s social status. On the basis of this, most youths concluded that a non-married male in Nigeria’s present democratic dispensation is not man enough to be the president of the country. This opinion may be contested especially when the constitution did not stipulate that a presidential candidate must be married, widowed, or single. Major-General Yakubu Gowon’s selection for the office of Head of State in 1966 would also contradict this view, regardless of the fact that the military typically operated above the law. However, the truth lies in the reality that most ethnic groups in Nigeria regard married men as the actual men, even in cases where the marriage suggesting a tendency toward a heterosexual inclination does not eliminate active homosexuality or bisexuality as the example of Hausa Muslims of northern Nigeria indicates (Gaudios 2005: 47–8). Homosexuality has been known to thrive in some Nigerian all-boys’ secondary schools where student life is regimented and female partners not easily available. In addition, the “public” popularity that heterosexuality enjoys in Nigeria does not annul the practice of homosexuality and bisexuality among university male students.

The impression that an unmarried male cannot exercise political power is as strong among youths as it is among older persons in Nigeria.¹³ Marriage to a female partner was for men a means of exhibiting their competence to lead and control. The man who successfully coordinates the affairs of his family is assumed would be a successful leader in the society. These views on marriage borne from long established practice give the impression that the natural need for companionship is an unimportant prerequisite for entering into marital relationships.

Closely linked to the above discussion is the connection between the power of the penis and constructions of masculinity. To return to the youths, some

¹³ A couple of incidents demonstrate this. Three years ago at the University of Nigeria, an unmarried professor was not voted into a desired office because he was not married. Faculty and staff members who openly dismissed his candidature were heard saying: “let him get married first. When he has ruled his family he can then rule us.” In another instance, some eleven years ago, the town of Okpaligbo in northern Igboland needed a paramount chief after three years of the office being vacant. Among the candidates vying for the office were some wealthy, potentially capable, but unmarried men. The selection committee carefully and subtly disqualified all unmarried candidates and selected the most qualified candidate from among men who were married and had children. Discussions with Ngwu, Okpaligbo, 28/6/05.

contended that a woman may act as a man but inevitably remains a woman. In other words, regardless of how well a woman may adopt certain culturally permitted masculine positions such as marrying a fellow woman for social, economic, and political advantages, she would still be regarded as a woman. The denial of full masculinity to such women touches on their presumed anatomical inferiority – their lack of male genitalia. Nigerian proverbs depict women's genital inferiority vis-à-vis men and emphasize it as one of the reasons for men's domination of women. The Yoruba express this anatomical advantage and social superiority thus: “if a man walks while urinating and a woman also walks while urinating, one will have more urine behind the legs than the other” (*Bi okunrin ba to atorin, bi obinrin na ba to atorin, enikan a ni omi l'ehin ese ju ara won lo*).

Having a macho image is one of the important representations of masculinity for Nigerian male undergraduates. Most youths of both sexes idolized this quality. Some do not regard it as the sole preserve of men but insist that macho women lack the appeal that macho men exude. The study participants analyzed the macho image to include broad shoulders, muscular body, physical prowess, bravery, above-average height (some who said this are themselves barely above average height), and an intimidating facial expression. The important thing here is the presence of muscles and the image of might that it bequeaths. Otherwise, there is no obvious difference between the features of a macho and the general features of masculinity outlined in previous pages. “Macho” is used widely to represent multiple masculinities and these have been discussed by Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994: 12–17). In this study the participants used “macho” subjectively and in reference to a perfect male body and the possession of, or the suggestion of the existence of, intense virility. The emphasis on virility speaks of sexual conquests among youths. Macho personality represents one dimension of their ideal image of what masculinity should be excluding, of course, qualities like gentleness, humility, non-heterosexual sexuality, and all forms of domesticity. Male study participants admitted spending hours at the gymnasium “to build their muscles, have a tough look, and acquire the macho image.” Together, male and female youths considered the martial qualities, real or imagined, of the macho male to be of immense social and political advantages. In their reasoning, macho males are more likely to ensure order and make things work during social gatherings. Their popularity as bodyguards and thugs for Nigerian politicians was not lost on the youths. Lips (1991: 20) has shown that the most positively valued masculine traits have to do with activity and competence. The macho personality of Nigerian youths, however, has global parallels. In contemporary America, it is categorized as one form of hegemonic masculinity

defined by physical strength and bravado, exclusive heterosexuality, suppression of “vulnerable” emotions such as remorse and uncertainties, economic independence, authority over women and other men, and intense interest in sexual “conquest” (Trigiani 1998: 22).

Nigerian youths acknowledge that certain women especially athletes can possess characteristic male features, including macho-like features. In this regard, equating masculinity with being muscular and physically strong undermines it as a solely male quality. Today's woman who is muscular, strong, and with a deep voice may be regarded as "masculine" for manifesting some phenotypical masculine traits but without any intention of denying her femaleness. Nevertheless, the idea is not widely popular among youths that women with male features should be accorded masculine identity or status.

One other indication of masculinity mentioned by male youths is finesse. Male youths regarded masculinity to be incomplete without refinement, poise, beauty, and a keen dress sense: what we may regard as personal grooming.¹⁴ Few added that gentility towards women and an appreciation of women's strengths and contributions to a man's success completes the packaging for finesse. These qualities are necessary for enhancing their appeal with females and for sexual conquests. Finesse and proper grooming were linked together. Male youths displayed considerable familiarity with foreign products for body grooming although quite a good number cannot lay hands on the necessary commodities at present. But it did not deter them from desiring such products as compositions of a masculine body identity whose impact lie in the feeling of power and success that they bequeath. There is no homogeneity in dress styles but when people put clothes and other accessories on their bodies as Hollander contends (in Bastian 1996: 97 and 115), they are primarily engaged in producing images of themselves to suit their own eyes. Prior to the 1970s little effort and money was spent by boys on clothing and personal grooming. The need to look especially appealing was almost non-existent (Dihoff 1970: 115). It was the norm in Nigeria to equate masculine appeal solely with wealth represented in actual funds and material acquisitions (Bradbury 1973: 266). Local proverbs emphasized this connection. The youths' fondness for finesse is an indication of some shift away from this social value. The primary association of wealth with cash no longer seems as tenable as once believed. Money is relevant as will be seen later but personal grooming would appear equally important to the youths.

The features of masculinity outlined by youths are not specific to Nigerian societies alone but are found in some non-African societies (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Trigiani 1998). They hint at some global similarity in notions of masculinity. Nevertheless, it is not enough to lead to the conclusion that masculine gender expressions are uniform globally.

3. ATTAINING "IDEAL" MASCULINE IMAGE

Wade and Tavis (1998: 100) report that in many cultures people regard masculinity as something boys must achieve through strenuous effort. Males

¹⁴ Information from Oro, Nnebi, and Adoki.

must pass physical tests, endure pain, confront danger, and must separate from their mothers and women. When these tasks are successfully completed, then the adolescent male has become a man. Before the 1970s, the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group was known for enduring pain to mark the transition to puberty, from which time onwards an adolescent male assumes a masculine identity that reaches a level of stability at marriage. The Beating ceremony performed at puberty was proof of a youth's bravery. If stoically endured, it qualified him to marry one of the most beautiful girls in his community (Dihoff 1970: 31–33).

For Igala youths, masculinity was traditionally manifested in intellectual, social, and physical prowess. Male adolescents were expected to think independently. They also showed their masculinity by dating girls. A common practice was to build “the house of the youth” – *unyi okolobia* – to demonstrate the detachment, and consequent independence, from members of one's family, especially the female folk. Youths visited each other in their “houses” to initiate and execute ideas while enjoying the occasional drink. Girls and women were prohibited from entering a youth's house because it was an exclusive male territory where such masculine artifacts like masks were produced. It was from this time on that the youth thought about marriage, necessary to prove his organizational ability, and embarked on cultivating other leadership qualities such as oratory. It was also obligatory to begin to participate fully in such male communal activities as joint cultivation exercises, burying the dead, and masquerading. Formal initiation into manhood occurred between the ages of eighteen and twenty or later in the ceremony of *una ewo*.¹⁵

Puberty rites are presently not popular in urban settings and are seldom practiced by the educated; youths or not. However, aware of dominant ideas of masculinity in their social environments, the youths in this study disclosed how they hoped to achieve their ideal masculine identity. Taken collectively, their ultimate ambition is two-pronged: to be successful and to be independent. Success was applied comprehensively though it referred especially to financial success. This would determine the degree of a man's independence, marital success, athletic and career success as well as success in social relations. Financial success is important because it assures “greater purchasing power and makes a man live comfortably with all necessary material comforts.”¹⁶ Ideas on financial success are inseparable from the present economic trends in the country. Moreover, the indices for success differ somewhat from what obtained many decades ago. In the past, wants were few and easily satisfied. Now, however, needs have grown and continue to grow, and the opportunities for meeting these growing wants appear inadequate in a country battling with a distressed economy.

Marital success was not seen solely in terms of a warm and loving relationship with a female partner or meeting the material needs of one's family, but rather in terms of having a wife with whom a male subject can attest to his

¹⁵ Information from Ugbeda, 14/9/05.

¹⁶ Information from Anyanwu, 8/6/05.

virility. In other words, success in marriage means to have children and to exercise authority over the children and their mother. However, the emphasis was made that the ability to care for these dependents was an indication of masculine efficiency. The youths reiterated that marriage completes a man. The father figure acquired through marriage and family life was the end result of the dream of many youthful masculine entities who participated in our study. Only a minority of the respondents disagreed with the overriding notion that success in marriage is integral to the ideal masculine image; the bone of contention being its unspoken exclusion of some unmarried categories especially the Catholic male clergy. These arguments are clues to the existence of varied masculinities and different understandings of the term masculinity.

To attain success, two indices were identified as very crucial: education (where possible, up to university level) and hard work. University education was named the solution to financial dilemmas. Besides its potential for a good paying job, it can also groom a man and, as one participant explained, “it makes a man look nice to the outside world.”¹⁷ It was stressed that youths unable to get to that level should take advantage of vocational education if they hope to earn money regularly and to be independent, and self-confident. The many benefits of modern education set it apart as a vehicle for attaining ideal masculinity. An educated man, the youths claimed, has hopes of a good job that would bring a good pay to finance his needs and meet his responsibilities. The crux of their ambition is financial independence, which seems so crucial to their masculine identity. Educational success, they were aware, requires hard work and commitment.

Identified negative traits that potentially could undermine attempts to achieve fulfillment include excessive obsession with achieving both success and financial autonomy. These could result in crime and, perhaps, subsequently in death. At present the crime wave among Nigerian youths, educated and non-educated, is very high, with money-related crimes taking the lead. Excluding such an extreme consequence, the obsession with achieving success and financial independence can lead to excessive use of one’s body, the end result of which could be sickness or early physical deterioration. It was also pointed out that the male drive for control, especially within the family, creates room for the abuse of the repressed group, which if in the larger society may hinder in particular women’s display of their potentials, thus resulting in some negative national consequences.

4. CHANGING MASCULINITIES

Understandings of masculinity expressed by the youths who featured in this study demonstrate some shift, even if slightly in some respects, from notions of masculinity dominant in the country up to the end of the colonial experience in

¹⁷ Information from Okoh, 8/6/05.

1960. The youths' expressions underscore new perceptions as well as models of masculinity based on certain contemporary social and economic conditions. Six decades ago, the attributes of masculinity would unequivocally have included, in the physical domain, the possession of well-developed muscles, superior physical strength, and above average height -- features that were not primary considerations for men in the second half of their lives. In the public sphere, masculinity was expressed in violence, bloodshed, aggressive individualism, and control over the physically, socially, and politically weak groups comprising women, children, and some men. Male domination was very marked in Nigerian family systems¹⁸ and in the political sphere.¹⁹ Of the Yoruba, Johnson (1968) observes that the father was the master of the house whose "word is law, and his authority indisputable within his compound" and who must be privy to all plots. The proverb "the sauce which the master of the house cannot eat (or which is unpalatable to him), the mistress of the house must not cook" (*Obe ti Bale ile ki ije Iyale e ki ise e*) was used to imply that no one must oppose the wishes of the master of the house. Regarding the Igbo, colonial records testify that the "oldest man in the family unit has complete control over its affairs".²⁰ The power structure existing at the family level was replicated at the higher levels of the society, although for the Yoruba a measure of checks and balances were institutionalized with the intention of guarding against tyranny (Morel 1968).

By customary practice, a man's masculinity displayed in the ability to lead and control attracted respect. Individuals were obliged to respect the man who was the undisputed head and ruler of his family and possibly a member of the male leadership committee of his community. Men who were not firm in ruling their homes were regarded as suffering from inherent masculine-gender deficiency and weakness. Such men were not highly esteemed even though respect was conditional and took cognizance of sex, age, and status in the home and in society.²¹ Largely, men enjoyed more respect than women of the same age category.²² A successful confident male conveying accepted masculine attributes and appropriate behavior commanded respect while another deficient in this regard did not receive more than a superficial confirmation of respect, if any at all. Achebe's (1958) epic story in *Things Fall Apart*, woven around Okonkwo and set at the beginning of the colonial period illustrates this. The message fits the experience of many Nigerian culture groups during that period

¹⁸ At the family level, the domination was by the father of the house. In his absence the right of domination went to the next oldest male. He could be an uncle or the eldest son.

¹⁹ See the following authors: Carroll 1990: 41; Njoku 2000: 24; Johnson 1968: 100; Smith 1964. See References for full details.

²⁰ ASA DIV 8/1 "Intelligence Report on Umunede Clan, Agbor District, Asaba Division by H.C.B. Denton, D.O. 1938-39", p.18.

²¹ See Uchendu 1965: 40; Lloyd 1966: 488 in Mba 1985; Hollos & Leis 1989.

²² In non-monarchical societies like the Igbo east of the River Niger, much older women could sometimes enjoy more respect than much younger men. Gerontocracy was as important as other indices in male-female power relations.

and until the end of the colonial experience, even though it is based on Igbo society.

Okonkwo is a strongly built, hardworking, and very successful farmer. He competently controls his wives and children and his valor, economic, military, and political successes launches him early into the highest circle of male leaders in his community. In contrast his father, Unoka, is an artist, gentle, unambitious, and very emotional. He loves to make others happy. In many respects he is the opposite of his son. Unoka is monogamous and non-materialistic. He is not an exceptionally successful farmer and is castigated for this as a lazy man. He is a notorious debtor and also ill at ease when conversations turn to warfare. The community respects Okonkwo for all that he is worth but scarcely recognizes Unoka. Okonkwo's shame at having a "feminine" and disgraced father and his obsession not to be like his father lie at the root of his determination to succeed as a man in his community at all cost. The extent of his turmoil can be appreciated in his obvious relief when Unoka dies.

Success by men was as marked in the past as in the present but the indices for success have changed between the two periods. Social respect and political advancement were the cumulative rewards of ideal patriarchal masculinity. In the present, material acquisitions ensuring a comfortable existence would be the primary index. Other issues related to patriarchal masculinities emerge from Achebe's saga. Unoka's brand of masculinity is despised by his family and the larger society because it is at variance with his society's expectations. Unoka's crime is to have manifested a masculinity that does not fit into the prevailing patriarchal hegemonic model, yet we see it reflecting a version of contemporary Nigerian masculinities if we go by the expressions of the youths in our study. Various brands of masculinities existed in pre-colonial Nigeria and none was by any means unaffected by change, particularly those induced through international trade transactions end colonialism.

An ingredient of patriarchal masculinities in colonial Nigeria was attitudinal rigidity, which to a reasonable extent derived from the colonial experience. The British colonial power structure introduced in Nigeria from 1900 to 1960 was rigid, unyielding, and repressive. The transference of such a masculine ideal to Nigerians further rendered local notions of masculinity rigid. In his examination of British rule in Kwale-Aboh in the Nigerian Delta region, Ikime (1967) describes the adopted political structure as "a modification and, in some respects, an intensification of the old ways..." Mba (1985: 39) also demonstrates how the social environment from which the British colonial administrators were drawn influenced their attitude towards different segments of Nigerian societies, resulting in the entrenchment of a rigid form of masculine ascendancy. On one hand, colonialism de-humanized Nigerian men; but on the other hand, it was beneficial to them. British colonial officials emphasized male privilege in colonial Nigeria, which continued for many decades afterwards. The areas where this was clearly felt were the educational system and employment in the civil service. The educational system was male focused. Female education in Southern Nigeria, which commenced much later than male education, was

limited to preparing girls to be helpers of their husbands. As a result, a good deal of domestic science was integrated into the curriculum for girls (Denzer 1992: 116)²³. By 1944 there were only seven African women in the clerical and technical services. A decade later there were twenty-three women in the senior civil service. In a 1951 circular on employment the colonial government expressed as follows its resistance to female employment, and by inference female education: “Only in exceptional circumstances should a woman be considered for appointment to senior grade posts in scales F and G.” The exceptions were in the cases of well qualified women which were “unlikely to involve the control of staff or labor not of their own sex” (Mba 1985: 65). Laws on female employment were relaxed in 1955 in anticipation of self government in 1956 but, that notwithstanding, attitudes to female education and employment did not change drastically. In fact, once the people saw how few educated girls received jobs, they were reinforced in their prejudices against female education. Such colonial attitudes permitted men control of the public space to a degree previously unknown and impacted negatively on the Yoruba society where women enjoyed clear public visibility, even if not to the degree that men did (Mba 1985).

The masculinities painted by the youths did not strongly replicate the dominant patriarchal model. They allowed room for appreciation of women’s abilities. Excluding those who spoke about finesse and gentleness towards women, one youth elucidates as follows: “in being the best I can, I should accept my flaws and weaknesses and be open to corrections even from a woman. I must not eat the glory alone. I must appreciate the woman who helps me succeed.”²⁴

Contemporary Nigerian masculinities have a domestic side. This emerged in response to unfavorable economic changes. Domesticity by men within the family set up is a post-colonial development but with its beginnings in the colonial period, when wage labor was instituted and men joined the colonial labor market as domestics to colonial officers. They did not, however, share domestic duties with their wives at home. Male participation in household jobs became obvious following the economic crisis that hit Nigeria, requiring the adoption in the 1980s of the International Monetary Fund’s Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The SAP brought about a re-structuring of the Nigerian economy, the devaluation of the currency, a loss of jobs via retrenchment, job squeeze, and increased unemployment. The aim of the program was to build up the private sector over the government sector in order to reduce government spending (Mandami 1990: 429). The effects of SAP were many: per capita incomes fell by about thirty percent, real wages in the formal and informal sectors declined considerably, and there were cutbacks in essential services and subsidies until the 1990s (Mkandawire 1998: 83–5). Men who since the colonial era enjoyed clear visibility in the economy were particularly

²³ Female education was almost non-existent in Muslim dominated Northern Nigeria until after the Nigerian civil war in 1970.

²⁴ Nnebi, 8/6/05.

affected by these changes, which brought a serious deterioration in the standard of living. Poverty became pronounced. Between 1980 and 1990, seventy-two percent of the Nigerian population were said to be living in absolute poverty.²⁵ SAP undermined the ability of many male heads of households to effectively and independently cater for their dependants. The youths who participated in this study, to varying degrees, have experienced poverty and may still be living in poverty. Under a distressing economic situation, the concept of the male breadwinner whose masculinity hinges on his sole ability to financially provide for his family (Anselmi & Law 1998, 161) was challenged. One advantage this development had on Nigerian male notions of masculinity was the weakening of boundaries around gender roles. Among youths, the need for financial autonomy, whether individual or collective, as a step to survival became reinforced, leading to views that included women in the scheme for financial wellbeing and men in the family domestic sphere. Yet, prior to the end of colonialism, it was a bizarre sign of weakness for an adult male to do domestic work. Referring to this earlier period, Diop (1990: 127) observes:

It is in fact unthinkable, for example, that an African should share a feminine task with his wife, such as cooking or washing clothes or rearing children, any European influence, of course, being disregarded.

It is not only with a wife that an African male could not share feminine tasks but also with a sister (Schlyter 1999: 88). Doing so would lead to losing prestige in the eyes of all. But, with respect to Nigeria, national economic crisis helped redefine this concept. As a solution to the economic difficulties of the 1980s and after, which plunged most men into financial straits, more and more women entered the public labor sector to facilitate the survival of their families. Unemployed and financially distressed husbands were obliged to gradually share in domestic responsibilities partly to ease the strain on their female partners and to complement their efforts. It is becoming more and more acceptable that to survive Nigeria's economic difficulties a man requires the economic support of a capable and financially independent female partner. Perhaps, too, economic difficulties were responsible for the youths' growing appreciation of women, their intelligence and capabilities.

5. CONCLUSION

This group study with Nigerian undergraduate students on masculinity brings several issues into focus. The youths' expressions underscore new understandings and models of masculinity based on certain contemporary social and economic conditions. Their views on masculinity indicate that the social construction of gender puts pressure on individuals to act in certain ways: being

²⁵ 1994 *Human Development Report* reproduced in Mkandawire 1998.

also responsible for the burden on gender relations within (and possibly across) culture groups in Nigeria. Masculinity means different things to different categories of Nigerian youths. For these undergraduates, culture, religion, education, and environment were the indices that determined how they individual analyzed this term. These factors are also likely to determine how these youths would express their masculinities in the years to come. It is worth noting that the unyielding patriarchal masculinities that dominated until the end of the colonial period now co-exist with various other manifestations that are clearly at variance with past expressions, while still retaining aspects of the past. Education played an important role in influencing the youths' views, having detached them from the rural environment where much of the indigenous practices are observed. It will be necessary to examine rural and semi-literate youths' views on masculinity for a more comprehensive picture of the subject under discussion.

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