

'Foundational fictions'

Variations of the marriage plot in Flora Nwapa's early Anglophone-Igbo novels

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Be you as beautiful as a mermaid, the beauty
of a woman is to have a husband.
Be you one who has been to the land of white
people, the beauty of a woman is to have a
husband.
If a woman does not marry, her beauty declines.
One who is beautiful is best to be in her
husband's house.
When you get to your husband's house, have
A baby.
After you look after the child, the child will
look after you.
*(Igbo marriage song, transcribed and translated by Ifi
Amadiume in Male Daughters, Female Husbands,
1987, 72)*

The Igbo marriage song recorded by Ifi Amadiume (1987) in her influential ethnographic study of the Nnobi in Southeastern Nigeria is a reminder of the cross-cultural, trans-historical significance of some form of marriage in the establishment of some form of family as the foundation and guarantor of survival and stability of the social. One might cite any number of world socio-anthropological studies, or, more to the point, innumerable African studies which support the contention that marriage, conventionally considered, is the cornerstone upon which the social is constructed.¹ It is a convenient research 'shorthand', however, simply to refer to John S. Mbiti (1975) whose magisterial overviews seem usually to capture the fundamentals. Mbiti suggests that:

It is believed in many African societies that from the beginning of human life, God commanded or taught people to get married and bear children. Therefore marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty that every normal person must perform. Failure to do so means in

effect stopping the flow of life in the individual, and hence the diminishing of mankind upon the earth.

(98)

This view of marriage, given the integration of Africa into globalised economies and globalised culture, of course, is subject to multiple variations. Late-modern Anglo-American social and cultural transformations, notably contraception (separating sex from marriage) and medical technologies (separating parenthood from marriage), have led to the decline of marriage traditionally considered, but where marriage has been replaced by a range of new, fairly flexible family arrangements (Lewis 2001). (Through globalisation, such social transformations in the global north doubtless will impact the wider world in locally complex ways.) In the context, however, of Southeastern Nigeria that comes most under focus in this chapter through the setting of Nwapa’s novels, changes in interpersonal relations have not yet led to a drop in the marriage rate. Daniel Jordan Smith, doyen of the study of contemporary transformations of Igbo intimacies, finds that as a consequence of urbanisation, among other factors, even though premarital sex has vastly increased, ‘the overwhelming majority of young women seek marriage and parenthood as the ultimate expression and fulfilment of their ambitions for themselves as persons’ (2010, 126).²

The Nnobi song used as an epigraph also acts as a convenient index of the most significant concerns of *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), the early novels of Flora Nwapa, the first major Anglophone African woman writer. The song identifies women in what for constructivist approaches would be considered essentialised conceptions of both wifehood and motherhood. The refrain, ‘the beauty of a woman is to have a husband’ presents marriage as an inevitability and a duty which, at the same time, is framed as a desired, albeit gendered, dimension of self-realisation. In the song in translation, the word ‘beauty’ may be read expansively, I believe, to encompass individual physical attractiveness, but, more significantly, social moral fulfilment through the status of marriage. In a few lines, the song captures the most important stages of female rites of passage which echo, in an Igbo context, the cycle of life in most cultures across time. Procreation, furthermore, is presented as the crux of married life – ‘[w]hen you get to your husband’s house, have / A baby’ – where the future generation is one’s ‘insurance’ against the infirmities of old age – ‘[a]fter you look after the child, the child will / look after you.’ (This age-old assumption is radically destabilised in the transformed social landscape presented in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Buchi Emecheta’s very well known novel, which interpellates *Efuru* (1966), Nwapa’s first novel. Emecheta’s novel will be referred to again later.) The life cycle described is not one that is inward looking. The woman who has been to ‘the land of the white people’, whether literally through travel or figuratively through mental and conceptual expansion of consciousness, is a woman who, by implication, is more experienced and wiser than the woman who has not ventured out. The song also, in the opening line, alludes to Mammywater (or Mami Wata), the contemporary designation of the pantheon of water goddesses linked with the deity, Idemili, who lies at the heart of Nwapa’s extended creative project, and who is referred to in her fiction for adults and children variously also as Uhamiri, Ogbuide or The Lady of the Lake. One of the benedictions for the bride for whom the song is sung is that she be as ‘beautiful as a mermaid’, conjuring up visual images of Mammywater, siren-like in her loveliness, half fish, half human, sometimes with blonde hair, embraced by the sacred python. Although the wedding song would appear to endorse and enforce strict gender roles, the import of Ifi Amadiume’s study of the Nnobi is to show the flexibility or adaptive intelligence of Igbo cultural norms, a tradition of flexibility that Nwapa creatively expands in her fictions. Amadiume shows that even though the Nnobi system of social organisation was based

on a strict division of gender roles and institutions, nevertheless, gender concepts were manipulated and mediated, allowing the unexpected categories of, for example, 'male' daughters, who could continue the family line in the event of procreation failure, and female 'husbands' who married wives allowing accrual of wealth and status among leading women in a celibate marital arrangement.

The Igbo nuptial song, which is used synecdochically to suggest the cultural ubiquity of marriage virtually throughout time, may be contrasted with the overriding impression one gleans from reading many European novels where there is no 'classic' novel of happy marriage,³ and the novel where happy marriage is a formal element of closure is twinned at the outset with the novel of marital breakdown in adultery.⁴ In some ways, as we shall see, in Nwapa's early works the marriage–adultery dyad is not an inevitability in the late and uneven engagement of modernity figured in Nwapa's novels – in fact, marriage seems to be paired not with its dissolution in adultery, but instead with procreation failure. The dyad that emerges in Nwapa's early novels is a marriage–procreation, rather than marriage–adultery dyad. The well-represented novel of unhappy marriage in the Anglo–American tradition, beginning in the late nineteenth century, may also be contrasted with parts of Nwapa's first novel *Efuru* since the causes of unhappiness are different. Unhappy marriages in the Anglo–American novel are the outcome of oppressive, hierarchical, gendered relations, while the most significant cause of marital tension in Nwapa's novels is procreation failure, exacerbated by transformed social contexts.

Plotting marriage: Anglophone-Igbo approaches

Analysing the gender dynamics of marriage is a focus of a vast number of feminist studies of African literature. Isidore Okpewho in 'Understanding African Marriage: Towards a Convergence of Literature and Sociology' (1987) contrasts the picture of marriage that occurs in African cultural expression (ranging across oral and print forms), with marriage as it emerges in anthro–sociology. Okpewho finds that African literatures and oratures significantly complicate the somewhat rigid and reductive picture of African marriage contracted exclusively for structural social reasons that emerges in anthro–sociological scholarship. The work of Senegalese author, Mariama Bâ, has encouraged attention specifically to marriage through her meditations on monogamous, plural and intercultural marriages in her novels *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (originally published in 1981) (Makward 1986 and Nnaemeka 1997 among others). African literary representations of marriage have, furthermore, been put into diasporic comparison in the study of Francophone African and Caribbean writing by Cécile Accilien (2008). This chapter seeks to further develop these approaches, which in the main foreground women's self-realisation through a feminist lens, by a closer attention to the formal implications of inflections of the marriage-plot in Nwapa's early novels, which establish a paradigm for subsequent Igbo–Anglophone, and West African novelists more generally.

Flora Nwapa, often designated the 'mother' of African literature, was the first African woman writer to be published internationally, as she was the first woman to establish a publishing house, namely, Tana Press. Nwapa was well acquainted with Chinua Achebe, who was the editor of the Heinemann African Writers Series at the time. Nwapa sent the manuscript for *Efuru* to Achebe, which then was published in 1966, eight years after Achebe's now canonical *Things Fall Apart*. Nwapa, as one of the second wave of Nigerian writers (Peters 1993, 13), portrayed in her work a complementary representation of female subjectivity as a response to the more male-centred fictions of male writers like Achebe, who had preceded her. Nwapa's first two novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* (1970), continue the tradition of what Judith Gleason in *This Africa* (1965) was the first to identify and term the 'village novel'. The 'village novel' is a well-

exemplified sub-genre in Nigerian literature, but for the purposes of the focus of this chapter, I would like to juxtapose Nwapa’s village novels with those of only two other authors, namely, Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi. The contrast with Achebe will be brief and the comparison with Amadi a little more detailed since Amadi’s and Nwapa’s novels have significant commonalities. *The Concubine* (1966), the first novel of Elechi Amadi’s village trilogy, is remarkably similar to Nwapa’s *Efuru* both in plot structure and characterisation. By contrast, marriage is not the central concern of Achebe’s village novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or *The Arrow of God* (1964). But marriage is part of a very well-defined social backdrop, especially in *Things Fall Apart*, strategic to Achebe’s ‘writing back to Empire’, through the intimations of Igbo/African social life through nuptial rituals, and especially through the dynamic of the network of the polygynous and extended family. Romantic love may easily be overlooked in Achebe’s first novel, embedded as it is in the pre-history of Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife, who abandoned her husband for Okonkwo, her first love and *grande passion*. Okonkwo’s wives, who are secondary characters in *Things Fall Apart*, become the focus of attention, and are writ large in both Nwapa’s and Amadi’s village novels where affect in relation to marriage is the centre of narrative attention. Thus romantic love, which was treated only incidentally in Achebe is underscored in the work of the later authors. James Olney, who compares Achebe’s fiction with Igbo autobiography on the questions of ‘Love, Sex and Procreation’ (1973, 157–203) reinforces the centrality of procreation in marriage in Achebe’s village novels, superseded completely by the love–marriage ethic in *A Man of the People* (1966). Olney is not, however, alert to the references to love and marriage in the incidental subplots in Achebe, which is a focus that Nwapa’s fiction expands.

Romantic love lies at the heart of Amadi’s oeuvre, chiefly in its connection with marriage. *Eros* is alluded to in Nwapa’s *Efuru* and plays a very significant role in *Idu*. By contrast, in both *Efuru* and *Idu* unlike Amadi’s novel, the link between motherhood and marriage is stressed over the connection between love and marriage. Despite the difference of focus, it is almost impossible not to compare Nwapa’s and Amadi’s first novels, as Eldred Durosimi Jones and Eustace Palmer were the first to do in early reviews of the novels. Published in the same year, 1966, and striking for the similarity of their characterisation and the influence of the supernatural, both *Efuru* and *The Concubine* feature heroines who are the apogee of Igbo physical and moral perfection. The heroines of both novels, however, are tragically fated never to achieve happiness in the social world because of prior and privileged relationships with divinities that supersede their marital relationships with mortals.

Nwapa and Amadi have frequently been compared, most often in a valorisation of one author over the other. The comparison at the outset was centred mainly on questions of literary aesthetics. In the feminist retrieval and counter-canonisation of Nwapa’s novels, scholars have often resurrected and challenged the early critiques of *Efuru* by Eustace Palmer (1968) and Eldred Durosimi Jones (1967). Naana Banyiwá-Horne in ‘African Womanhood: The Contrasting Perspectives of Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*’ (1986) and Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), ascribe value to Nwapa’s treatment of female characters, while critiquing their subordinate role and instrumental use in Amadi’s novels. Banyiwá-Horne suggests that Amadi’s female characters are ‘inferior and subordinate to men’ (1986, 123), while Stratton finds that, unlike Nwapa, Amadi projects onto female characters ‘a rabid, dangerous, and ever-present sexuality’ (1994, 86). Curiously, this is not a view endorsed by Nwapa who, in an interview with Marie Umeh, confirms her appreciation of Amadi’s work and commends, specifically, the deep understanding of female subjectivity displayed in *Estrangement* (1986), the novel by Amadi published at around the time that the interview was conducted (Umeh 1995, 27). However, rather than drawing

the selected authors into an agonistic relationship, as scholarship has often tended to do, this chapter will adopt a different approach. In considering West African permutations of the marriage plot, the study will regard the narratives of these two authors, Nwapa and Amadi, as the unique thought experiments of each writer on the question of marriage in a period of unprecedented velocity of transformation of social relations as a consequence of colonial modernity, but will return to Nwapa as the 'progenitor' of a line of novels that alter dominant conceptions of the marriage plot.

In order to bring into relief Nwapa's approach to the marriage plot, her village novels, *Efuru* and *Idu*, will be contrasted with *The Concubine*, the first of Amadi's village trilogy, given the strong similarities of thematic approach, plot and characterisation, noted above. But in order to highlight the specificities of the Igbo-Anglophone novels, it becomes necessary as a counterpoint to compare Nwapa's and Amadi's approaches with marriage-plot conventions in the Anglo-American tradition, even though their narratives in no way are a studied riposte to metropolitan conventions. Both authors were, no doubt, familiar with this tradition through their background in colonial education systems, and integration into British imperial and later global cultural networks by virtue of their exposures through higher education and their positions as members of the Igbo intellectual and political elite. (In fact, Emmanuel Obiechina (1972, 21–23) draws our attention to the fact that a significant number of readers only functionally literate in English would have been familiar with the English 'classics', evident from the allusions to these novels in the popular genre of the Onitsha market chapbooks.) While both Nwapa and Amadi would have been *au fait* with liberal ideals of intimacy spread through what Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) has termed the 'Empire of Love', their work gives no indication of 'writing against', or even in any other way engaging the dominant global normative and normalised approach to marriage. Amadi's thought experiment is even more radical than Nwapa's in this respect since it projects a timeless village, using the narrative conventions of formal realism, that is hermetically sealed off from the influences of colonial modernity, but whose realism extends to the spirit or cosmic worlds. Spirits and gods actively and realistically exist and intervene in the material world to shape the fate of the denizens of the world. The presentation of marriage, in particular the significance of romantic love in relation to marriage is, therefore, in terms of Amadi's thought experiment, wholly Igbo. This contrasts sharply with Nwapa's *Oguta*, where her novels are set in the 1940s and 1950s. *Oguta* is the town situated on *Oguta Lake*, home to the goddess *Ogbuide*, another name by which *Mammywater* is known. Nwapa's *Oguta* is repeatedly represented as experiencing the ambiguous and complex impact of colonial modernity through the tensions created by Christianisation, formal Western-style education, transforming social relations, and colonial legal and economic regimes. Nwapa's village novels do not reveal personal relations as being riven by the tradition-modernity binary, but they do present personal relations that undermine the assumptions of the dichotomy; and they present personal relations in a state of unprecedented flux which, nevertheless, the adaptability of Igbo social norms accommodate.

Nwapa's and Amadi's marriage plots may be contrasted with the Western marriage plot, explored in most detail by Joseph Allen Boone (1987). For Boone, the novel is the form in which the literary ideal of romantic wedlock may be most clearly tracked, symbolised by the novelistic happy ending in companionate nuptial harmony, exemplified most distinctly in the novels of Jane Austen. But for Boone, the mutualism implied in the happy ending masks a hierarchy based on male dominance and female suppression that gets challenged in a counter tradition, which in various ways tries to show up or escape marriage as a 'primary shaping influence and potent symbol of order in the novel' (5). In the novels of the late eighteenth-century British novelist Jane Austen, however, the idea of love as the *sine qua non* for marriage

achieves its normalised European Enlightenment modern apogee, albeit with the hidden subtext of the inescapability of exchange relations, which are generally held to define and critique ‘utilitarian’ marriage in a non-modern context – expressed bluntly, Austen’s heroines always marry for love, but they also always, very conveniently, marry for money. (And marriage for money seems to fall outside the range of self-reflexive critique of Austen’s irony.) The romantic marriage plot that for Boone exerts the strongest influence on the form of the novel thus, by affirmation or rejection, tracks the protagonist’s courtship, beset by obstacles both external and internal that constitute narrative drive, until closure in companionate marriage, proclaiming a unity in mutuality. (The study of the marriage plot in Nwapa’s early fiction forms part of a larger project that considers romantic love in African cultural forms more generally. The project engages a broader cross-cultural and trans-historical backdrop against which to identify the specificities and universalities of African approaches to *eros*.)

The move tracked in the novel that makes romantic love the only acknowledged basis for marriage in the modern West is supported also in the sociological studies of, among others, Lawrence Stone (1977), Niklas Luhmann (1986, 2008), and Anthony Giddens (1992). The geographical expansion of the love-marriage ideology has been extensive, and its impact is widely attested (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006), and it has had significant influence in the cultural context of Southern Nigeria (Okonjo 1992; Smith 2010).

Amadi’s *The Concubine* and the embedded love-marriage plot

What contrasts do the Anglophone-Igbo village novels present to the Anglo-American love-marriage plot? And in what ways are Nwapa’s variations on the pattern distinct from Amadi’s? Amadi’s *The Concubine* is the story of the ill-fated heroine, Ihuoma, who, it is revealed at the end, unknown to herself or anyone else, is in fact a water divinity married to the Sea-King. Since she is the favourite wife of the polygynous aquatic god, her act of disobedience, which sees her ascending to the world of mortals, displaying her curiosity and agency, is leniently punished by the Sea-King. She is destined on earth only ever to be the concubine or mistress of mortal men since she remains wedded to the god. Although the brief plot summary gives the novel the air of a folk tale, its narrative style is defined by a meticulous formal realism, a realism that extends to the depiction also of the supernatural, which unlike in Nwapa’s novels, where Mammywater is alluded to in the background, the Sea-King in *The Concubine* very actively intervenes in the human world. The narrative opens not with the encounter of the hero and heroine, as one comes to expect of the Anglo-American romance novel, followed by courtship and finally marriage, but with Ihuoma’s very happy marriage to Emenike. Like Nwapa’s heroine, Efurū, Ihuoma is the epitome of Igbo conceptions of beauty, virtue and grace. Unlike Nwapa’s heroines, Ihuoma’s misfortune is not that she is unable to have children – she is surrounded by her children in her happy home in the opening scenes of the novel. Ihuoma’s curse is that the jealous Sea-King strikes down any man that marries her. Shortly after the narrative opens, Emenike dies under somewhat mysterious circumstances, possibly as a consequence of a fight with Madume, the village bully and longstanding rival for Ihuoma’s affections. Madume moves to marry the widowed Ihuoma and is himself killed when poisoned by a spitting cobra. The greater part of the narrative, however, is dedicated to the budding romance between Ihuoma and the son of a neighbour, Ekwueme. This portion of the narrative bears great similarity to the classical Anglo-American love-marriage plot, following the template established in the novels of Jane Austen, and perpetuated in contemporary romance literature. But unlike the normative romance novel, the hero dies at the end subject to the dictates of the vindictive Sea-King. *The Concubine* does not ‘write back’ to Empire either by rejecting or claiming as

autochthonous the love-marriage plot. Instead, it embeds a transformed love-marriage plot into a complex network of affective relations informed by an Igbo epistemological approach to its worlds. The love-marriage exists cheek-by-jowl with 'utilitarian' forms of marriage which apparently serve only social ends rather than the fulfillment of individual desire.

Thus what we see in *The Concubine* is a transformed conception of the love-marriage, which, while not the primary form of marriage in this culture, nevertheless is accommodated in a flexible extension of norms rather than the alternative of confrontation and inevitable collapse of social conventions. The love-marriage plot, furthermore, is embedded in a wide network of alternatively construed intimate relations, which include polygyny in the world of humans, and polygyny and polyamory in the realm of the Igbo gods and goddesses.

The marriage-procreation plot in Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*

'Motherhood' is a concept that has come under intense scrutiny in the scholarship of African society and literature. Debates on motherhood form part of many feminist socio-anthropological studies, but two key edited volumes specifically on the topic are *Marriage, Fertility and Parenthood in West Africa* (Oppong et al. 1978) and *Gender, Sexuality and Mothering in Africa* (Falola and House-Soremekun 2011). The general debate in the broader literature shuttles between the absolute valorisation of biological motherhood as a source of power in, for example, Catherine Acholonu's idea of 'motherism' (1995) as an African alternative to feminism, and critique of such notions which highlight the role of racist and patriarchal discourses in figurings of the 'black mother' (Lewis 1991). Obioma Nnaemeka's edited volume, *The Politics of (M)othering* (1997), is probably the best known literary engagement of the question of the mother in Africa, while Carole Boyce Davies addresses the question in the context specifically of early Igbo writers (1986). But perhaps it is the work of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí on age-inflected (rather than gender-inflected) Yorùbá conceptions of personal roles and status, and the significance of 'matripotency' as a concept wider than procreation that is most pertinent here. Oyèwùmí asserts an alternative Yorùbá epistemology that is not grounded in biological gender. She suggests further that it is the empowering, non-somatocentric concept of motherhood that defines Yorùbá personal positionality. Thus for Oyèwùmí motherhood is the salient nexus in Yorùbá society rather than Western feminist contestations around the subordination of wifehood in monogamous marriage (see Oyèwùmí 2015). Although Nwapa's cultural context is Igbo rather than Yorùbá, where gender roles appear to be more clearly defined (though flexible) than Oyèwùmí's presentation of a largely non-gendered Yorùbá world, the foregrounding of motherhood in her marriage-plots suggests significant overlap with the thrust of Oyèwùmí's study. In contrast with Oyèwùmí, Nwapa highlights the tensions that arise when biological motherhood fails. Nwapa's early novels are 'foundational fictions' in the sense that they link marriage with the obstruction of failed procreation (rather than romance and its obstruction leading to marriage) in a transformed marriage plot in the genre of the novel. (The expression 'foundational fictions' is borrowed from Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991) which shows how nineteenth century romance novels played a significant role in the nation-building projects of modernising South American countries.)

Nwapa, like Amadi, does not challenge the love-marriage plot, so much as to destabilise and re-frame it completely, without appearing to write back to the neoliberal 'Empire of Love' (Povinelli 2006). Unlike the 'autological' subjects of the European novel, Nwapa's heroines remain 'genealogically' embedded in the social and ethical horizons of their constitution. In other words, Nwapa's heroines do not imagine they transcend the tradition and culture in which they are formed as subjects, and they continue to defer to the shared, but transforming,

precepts upheld in common. I shall use these terms, 'autological' and 'genealogical', in the sense of their use by Povinelli, where autological refers to the cultural trajectory privileging self-making, sovereignty, individual freedom and contractual relations, while genealogical suggests cultural traditions where the social constraints of various inheritances are acknowledged by embedded persons. Unlike the traditional pattern of courtship, and obstruction finally resolved in marriage, *Efuru* and *Idu* begin with the heroines already married and, in both cases, narrative drive is provided by the 'obstruction' of infertility, rather than the obstructions to the union of lovers first identified in the seminal study *Love in the Western World* by Denis de Rougemont (1939). The problem presented in both novels by Nwapa is the problem of procreative failure, instead of obstacles to love.

Efuru, the daughter of a wealthy Igbo man of status, stretches the conventions of her community by eloping with a feckless, inconsequential fellow because she has fallen in love – a classic case of love at first sight:

One moonlit night they went out. They talked of a number of things, their life and their happiness. Efuru told him that she would drown herself in the lake if he did not marry her. Adizua told her he loved her very much and that even the dust she trod on meant something to him.

(*Nwapa 1966, 7*)

The focus of the novel, however, does not fall on the impediments to love, as it does in most other love stories involving a transgression of accepted boundaries and a challenge to parental and social authority. The couple is at liberty to elope with relative rapidity and ease: 'They were going to proclaim themselves married and that was that' (7). In this context, Efuru enjoys the autonomy that allows her to fulfil personal desire relatively easily, but significantly, as we shall see, it is a pursuit of happiness accepted only grudgingly by her family and community and, more importantly, one that nevertheless observes social conventions through the absolute requirement that her bridewealth be paid. In fact, it is only some time later, when the necessary nuptial rituals are performed and the dowry is paid, that 'the two felt really married' (24). Efuru thus, in her love-marriage, appears to place affect, privileged in liberal economies of sociality, above exchange, the impetus for marriage of genealogical societies, which autological societies retrospectively constitute through the modern historical break where exchange as one basis of marriage is wholly rejected. It is only when love becomes the only acknowledged, but usually not sole basis of marriage, that, by contrast, the prior marriage regime is cast as utilitarian. Effaced utilitarian concerns, however, remain the subtext of the autological marriage. But Efuru subsequently (and only paradoxically if one accepts the dichotomy of socialities at face value) insists that her bride price, an index of a genealogical conception of marriage, is paid, suturing the social breach, and ensuring, when later the marriage breaks down, she has 'insurance' allowing her to return to her father's household. Ironically, Efuru's bride price is essentially paid by herself, again confirming the convention in its contravention, since Efuru is a gifted trader, acquiring the wealth her husband cannot.

While, as noted above, there appear to be few novels of happy marriage in the Anglo-American tradition, Nwapa presents us with 'one and a half' novels of happy marriage – all of *Idu*, and a significant part of *Efuru*. Adizua is so besotted with his wife that he cannot bear to be out of her company, not even to pursue his livelihood on the farming land some distance from their home: 'he thought so much of her that he no longer wished to be away from her' (20). Domestic happiness in the extended family of the Igbo context of the period in which the novel is set involves not only husband and wife, as in the nuclear family, but also the husband's

extended family relations. Efurú's warm relationship with her husband is equalled by the closeness and the supportiveness of her relationship not only with Adizua's mother, but also his aunt. Unlike the novels of marital stalemate and disillusionment in the Anglo-American tradition, in the first half of the novel, tension is created not through the realisation that the apparently companionate marriage remains hierarchical and patriarchal, but through the misfortune that Efurú cannot bear a child. If Efurú is socially gendered male in paying her bridewealth herself, she is also gendered male through her apparent 'barrenness'. Efurú's actions and the fact of not giving birth are associated with being male not female. The everyday sociality of the exchanges with neighbours allow the reader insight into the norms of the society:

Neighbours talked as they were bound to talk. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman since, according to them, two men do not live together. To them Efurú was a man since she could not reproduce.

(24)

The novel thus confirms what is repeatedly attested in the cultural expression of significant parts of the African continent – namely that procreation is an urgent imperative felt by men, but disproportionately felt and borne by women. In an earlier agrarian context, children were survival, children were wealth, and children, as they continue to do, represented the continuation of blood lineages and generations across material and spiritual worlds. (As noted earlier, some aspects of the value of children are disputed in *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta, a novel which takes its title from the closing lines of *Efurú*, and which continues the foundational conversation begun by Nwapa on the marriage-procreation plot.)

Despite the altered economic and social conditions, which may make motherhood a trial rather than a joy, procreation appears to continue to be the foundation of marriage in the world Nwapa represents, rather than romantic love. The need to bear children is felt so greatly that Efurú would happily consent to her husband's taking a second wife to produce a child, which would be a testament to rather than a betrayal of the love Efurú has for her husband. But Adizua's love appears to be exclusive and monogamous; thus he proclaims after hearing that Efurú has been to visit a *dibia* about their childlessness:

I am happy that you went to see the man. But please don't think that it will make any difference to me whether you have a baby or not. You know I will be the last person to do anything that will hurt you, my wife. You know I cannot exchange you with a wife who would give me twenty sons.

(26)

(We discover later, ironically, that Adizua's monogamous affection is rather suddenly overtaken by what Obioma Nnaemeka in the context of an analysis of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* has referred to as men's 'polygamous instincts', when he enters into an adulterous affair.) Narrative tension in Nwapa's novel is dissipated when in the third year of marriage Efurú gives birth to a daughter, but is generated again when Adizua becomes an 'absent' husband, where neither romantic love nor a child appears to be sufficient to the well-being of the once happy marriage.

From this point on the narrative presents the husband's apparently inherited disposition to be like his father who abandoned his wife, Adizua's mother. On the birth of their daughter, ironically, the bond between the couple is stretched and finally snaps when the husband disappears, leaving Efurú to handle the tragedy of the daughter's eventual death. Thus, given that she has borne a child, it is not the fact that Efurú is barren that causes her husband to abandon

her and take up with another married woman. Bearing in mind the social acceptance of polygyny in this community, the husband's adulterous relationship with a woman who is also an adulterer, is exceptional and scandalous, and is an index of the rending of the social fabric. The marriage breaks up for a number of vaguely defined reasons. It may be in Adizua's 'blood' to be a bad husband, or it may be because of the general male 'polygamous instinct'. The fine and paradoxical balance in the novel between autological love-marriage and genealogical exchange is highlighted when Efuru returns to her father's home, where she is maintained by the bride price she insisted on paying herself despite her elopement.

To the end of the novel, Efuru remains in love with her first husband, but genealogical incentives to marry kick in when she agrees to wed a second husband, Gilbert. Paradoxically, the marriage to the Christianised, Western-educated Gilbert, is a marriage based not on love, as one would expect given Gilbert's exposure to the modern regime of love-marriage, but on social expectations and personal convenience. Love is not once mentioned in this second marriage. Gilbert says to Efuru that he will make her 'happy', that he will be 'faithful' to her and that if 'God wills it', they will be 'rich' (122). Efuru agrees to marry Gilbert because he 'talks so responsibly' (124) and, at a party with his friends, Gilbert is further persuaded to marry since the men praise Efuru for her culinary skills and her astonishing success at trade. Efuru thus marries Gilbert since, unlike Adizua, Gilbert seems steady; and Gilbert marries Efuru since he will have his personal needs met, and since Efuru's trading achievements will guarantee family prosperity. The utilitarian marriage, like the love-marriage, is initially happy, but even the 'genealogical' marriage is tested by procreation failure.

In Nwapa's early narratives it is the conversations that are part of everyday socialities at the stream or at the market that reflect the social 'debates' which identify cultural norms and conventions, their infringements and the limits of their transformation. The mutual joys of the utilitarian marriage are publicly expressed by people's remarks about Gilbert and Efuru's inseparability, especially their affectionate swimming together in the stream. The 'gossip' of the 'people' outlines the social horizon of the culture:

'Seeing them together is not the important thing.' ... 'The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful?'

(137)

When Efuru is confirmed as 'barren', she encourages Gilbert to take a second wife, and then also a third since she is dissatisfied with the character of the second wife. But, after a series of betrayals by Gilbert, most notably his absence at her father's funeral, Efuru eventually returns to her father's house, dedicating her life to the worship of the Goddess of the Lake, whose acolyte she has always unknowingly been. This accounts for her misfortunes in marriage and motherhood, but success in trade, since the goddess has claimed Efuru as her worshipper. Contrasted with the wedlock plot which presents the teleological progress of the sovereign heroine negotiating various courtship obstacles from her father's house in a *pas de deux* with the hero, culminating in companionate marriage in her husband's house, Nwapa's narrative presents a heroine relatively freely and autonomously leaving her father's house for the houses of her two husbands, where she is the significant breadwinner, to return on both occasions to her father's house, where she is maintained by the bridewealth, in the first marriage paid by herself. Efuru finally solely dedicates herself to the Lake Goddess, who alone in Nwapa's creative portrayal is able to offer the childless woman in this society social standing, personal peace and contentment. Rather than adopting the dominant European love-marriage plot in a different cultural

context or presenting a genealogically driven, culturally inflected alternative to the European love–marriage plot, Nwapa’s disorientating novel destabilises the autology–genealogy dichotomy, reframing the wedlock plot to encompass both freedom and obligation, *eros* and exchange in marriages which privilege procreation, but also provide alternatives when procreation fails.

Nwapa’s second novel, *Idu*, also begins with marriage rather than courtship, and again the narrative presents a happy marriage of devotion and love, to which the entire novel is given over. Again, it is through the everyday socialities of the marketplace and at the stream which accommodate ‘small talk’ that the novel collectively tells rather than shows significant ideas relevant to the marriage plot, in this case revealing the love that exists within marriage rather than the love that precedes marriage. Women at the stream reflect on the affection of the couple after meeting Idu: ‘Sometimes when I see them, I am filled with happiness. Have you ever seen two people so happy before?’ (1970, 2). Again, tension in the novel is generated out of the loving couple’s childlessness, which sees Idu, out of love for Adiewere, her husband, and concern for his well-being, arranging a second wife whom the husband, by various strategies of indirection that make it uncomfortable for the young girl to stay, obliges finally to leave the household. Idu eventually gives birth to a child, a son, who, unlike Efuru’s daughter, survives. When the husband, whose premature death is foreshadowed in the conversations of the women from the beginning of the novel, dies, Idu wills herself to death after him. Some interpretations of the novel suggest that Idu dies in order to avoid the levirate, that is, the system whereby widows are inherited by the remaining patriarchal head of the family. But Idu, it would appear, dies for love, putting love in marriage in this case ahead of procreation, even though procreation remains the *sine qua non* of the marital relationship. The question of procreation is considered also from the angle of male sterility in a subplot of the novel. Reflected in village talk, Idu’s friend Ojiugo is presented as justified in leaving her sterile husband for another man in a plural, very productive marriage, where she soon after has a child. The impact of procreation failure is such that it is understandable when the husband, Amarajeme, commits the abomination of suicide. Nwapa’s novel glosses over the Igbo practice of tacit impregnation by a male relative in the case of sterility of the husband, a practice that has been common elsewhere in Africa, as a creative non-medical resolution for childlessness. (See, for example, the study by L. E. Ugwueye and I. L. Umeanolue (2015) which contrasts Christian and Igbo responses to childlessness.)

Despite the early critiques that Nwapa writes novels with poor plots, closure in *Idu* is expertly managed. Adiewere’s death comes after the disappearance of their child and Idu’s frantic response proves how precious her son is to her. The child, it is revealed, had gone to the uncle’s home. Because of confusion that arises out of the foolishness and general lack of foresight and responsibility of both the brother- and sister-in-law, Idu is not informed of her child’s visit. Adiewere’s death also comes after Idu has ‘adopted’ the orphaned son of her business friend. It emerges that after a long period of infertility, Idu has become pregnant. The plot sequence thus shows that for Idu, the levirate is no option since Ishiodu, her brother-in-law, is incompetent and unreliable – she does not need him even to serve the utilitarian ends of marriage. She objects to shaving her hair as is customarily required of widows, indicating that she does not see herself as permanently parted from her husband, only that she needs to make a journey to follow him to the spirit world. When Anamadi, Idu’s sister, discovers Idu’s corpse, she says, “‘Come, let’s prepare for the funeral, don’t you see she is dead? She kept her word. She has followed her husband to the land of the dead’” (218). The plot thus artfully foregrounds the idea that while children are crucially important in marriage, the importance of the love between two people can sometimes take priority over childbearing. Idu makes her journey to the land of the dead despite having a healthy son, and an ‘adopted’ son, and despite the fact that she is pregnant with another child.

Despite the thematic similarities and similarity of characterisation between Amadi's and Nwapa's village novels, a marked difference exists in the style of narration. While Amadi's narrative is marked by tight management of plot and the impression of impersonal, distant control through mostly third person narration, Nwapa's village novels are highly idiosyncratic in their distinctive adaptation of conventional forms of dialogue. Nwapa's innovative use of conversation in her novels has paradoxically been both critiqued and commended. Florence Stratton very ably responds to Eldred Jones's criticism of the language dimension of Nwapa's novels. Stratton rebukes Jones for describing Nwapa's novel as being 'full of small talk' instead of employing proverbs judiciously as Amadi does. For Stratton, 'small talk' is code for the conversations of women, where such conversation is nothing more than 'idle chatter, chit-chat, prattle-prattle, gossip' (1994, 83). By contrast to Jones, Elleke Boehmer reads Nwapa's minutely detailed realism of interpersonal exchange as a formal strategy for portraying a woman's world that uses 'choric language to dramatise and empower her representations' (2005, 96). Boehmer continues:

In this way ... [Nwapa] creates the effect of a women's verbal presence in the text while at the same time bringing home her subject matter by evoking the vocality of women's everyday existence. ... [The novels clear] the space for the elaboration of another kind of narrative entirely – a highly verbalised, collective women's biography, 'transsubjective, anonymous', transgressive.

(2005, 96)

If the marriage-procreation plot is Nwapa's main thematic concern, given the centrality of marriage in the establishment of the social, then the style of the language in the novels, foregrounding the day-to-day conversations of women, highlights the significance of everyday socialities in rehearsing Igbo conventions regarding interpersonal relations. The women's everyday exchange presents what is normative, and the challenges and tensions within these norms, as they adjust in altered contexts. The women's daily conversations in the course of their daily activities stage the possibilities and limits of adaptations of norms within a shared and culturally coherent horizon of accommodation. More to the point, women's 'small talk' in the novels, as we shall see in the analysis below, acts to inform the reader of customs regarding marriage, the ways in which custom is challenged by an era of rapid transformation, and the degree to which Igbo social elasticity may be stretched without things falling apart. The everyday female socialities at the marketplace and at the stream, the daily visits, storytelling, work and other songs act as a barometer of Igbo cultural vitality and adaptability – and also of the limits of change captured in the negative views of malicious gossip-mongers and know-it-alls who feature in each of the novels.

Conclusion

Through writing a culturally alternative marriage plot, Flora Nwapa's early novels present a view which complicates the assumption of a progression of intimacies from exchange to *eros*, presenting exchange and *eros* instead as indivisible parts of a complex and shifting range of marriage practices. The focus in the novels moves from obstructions to the union of lovers and on to the sometimes debilitating demand on men but, more especially women, that marriage must produce children. All of this is set against the backdrop of the everyday socialities of women whose exchanges outline the normative horizon of intimate relations and show the reader how these horizons change in a shared view. The marriage-procreation plot outlined by

Nwapa was extended in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, but plays a significant role also in the work of other Igbo-Anglophone novelists like Onuora Nzekwu, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Chika Unigwe, in whose writing the marriage-procreation plot is foregrounded. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) is probably the most well-known recent iteration of the 'marriage'-procreation plot in an Igbo cultural setting. Since the heroine Olanna cannot conceive, she adopts the daughter of her partner Odenigbo, whose intercourse with a young village girl is cleverly orchestrated by his mother's desire for male progeny to continue the family line. The foregrounding of marriage and fertility has been extended further in the Anglophone Nigerian novel more generally, namely in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Ayòbámi Adébéyò's *Stay With Me* (2017). The marriage-procreation plot emerges also in a wider West African context as a recent study of Gambian fiction shows (Gomez and Ndow 2015). The continued development of the marriage-procreation plot is an index of the centrality of the questions first creatively explored by Flora Nwapa.

Notes

- 1 There are several continental African anthropological surveys specifically of marriage, which gird the idea of the centrality of marriage to constructions of the social. They include the following edited volumes: Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde's *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (1950), Arthur Phillips's *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life* (1953), Christine Oppong, Gemma Adaba, Manga Bekombo-Priso and John Mogeý's *Marriage, Fertility and Parenthood in West Africa* (1978), David Parkin and David Nyamwaya's *Transformations of African Marriage* (1987), Caroline Bledsoe and Gilles Pison's *Nuptiality in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1994), Themba Sono's *African Family and Marriage Under Stress* (1994) and Toyin Falola and Bessie House-Soremekun's *Gender, Sexuality and Mothering in Africa* (2011), which addresses women's concerns in marriage. There are also a vast number of studies of Africa by region or of specific African cultural groupings that reinforce the idea of the importance of marriage.
- 2 Scholarship of Igbo marriage, apart from Ifi Amadiume's study which is cited in the chapter, includes Victor Uchendu's *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (1965) which contains a section on marriage, and Kamene Okonjo's 1992 study, 'Aspects of Continuity and Change in Mate-Selection among the Igbo West of the River Niger'. Most recently Daniel Jordan Smith's work has covered marriage and related topics such as sexuality, romantic love and infidelity in several essays (see, for example, Smith 2000, 2001, 2009).
- 3 A. O. J. Cockshut's study of English fiction across two centuries confirms the absence of the novel of happy marriage in the British context.
- 4 Tony Tanner's influential study of adultery in the European novel observes that the novel of adultery originates virtually contemporaneously with the 'romance' novel that ends in happy marriage (1979, 369–371).

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