

Gendered Sexual Behavior and Marriage in Southeastern Nigeria

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Introduction

In Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, as in many other parts of the world, young people increasingly imagine being in love as a basis for getting married (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Cole and Thomas 2009). Historically, the rise of romantic love as a marital ideal has sometimes been perceived to be associated with greater gender equality, as changes in expectations for and practices in marriage are tied to the erosion of a highly sex-segregated division of labor. In many settings, transformations in the dynamics of marital intimacy have been interpreted as offering women the possibility of utilizing emotional leverage with their husbands to negotiate more equitable domestic arrangements (Collier 1997; Hirsch 2003; Rebhun 1999). But in Nigeria changes in marriage and in the public and private dimensions of gender asymmetry have not occurred uniformly or beyond the continuing influence of powerful kinship systems and structures of inequality. Extended families and their expectations continue to influence young people's selection of a spouse. Further, once a couple is married, kin relationships frequently impinge on contemporary conjugal life, perhaps most overtly with regard to fertility and parenting. A gendered division of labor continues to characterize many spheres of Nigerian social life, even as urbanization, formal education, and broader trends toward individualism produce changes that push against entrenched gendered social organization.

In this paper, I focus on young women's experiences and management of the transition from premarital sexual relationships and courtship to marriage and parenthood in southeastern Nigeria. I examine how love as a relationship ideal changes after marriage and, specifically, how young married women's lives are affected by the reality of a persistent gender double standard regarding the acceptability of extramarital sex. I argue that a significant transformation occurs in the nature of women's agency and in the kinds of leverage they have with their men as their identities shift from single to married. In marriage, women are constrained in many ways they did not experience when they were single, even as they have new powers, having achieved a status that is highly valued. These changes, and the ways women adjust to them, highlight the complex and multivalent dimensions of gender dynamics in the context of contemporary Nigerian courtship and marriage.

The transition to marriage has always been characterized by noteworthy adjustments. Nearly every society marks the onset of marriage with rituals that signify and facilitate these transformations. Nevertheless, marriage in contemporary southeastern Nigeria seems to involve

particularly dramatic adjustments for young women who have absorbed changing ideas about sexuality, marriage, and gender equality, and who have had active premarital sexual lives. As Nigeria becomes more urban and as most young women attend secondary school, a significant majority of young women are exposed to these new ideas. Further, most young women are sexually active before marriage. These young women face considerable challenges as they confront society's expectations for married women. Underlying a more rigid structure of gender roles for women after marriage is the fact that, despite many changing ideas about sexuality, marriage, and gender relations, both men and women still view marriage and parenthood as the *sine qua non* of a life well lived (Fortes 1978; Smith 2001).

Integral to women's experience of the transformation from unmarried to married is a significant ambivalence, especially in contexts where a relationship progresses to marriage based on the promise of love, and where women eventually realize that their husbands are being unfaithful. The ambivalence is multifaceted. Even without the suspicion or discovery of a man's infidelity, many young Nigerian brides experience a reduction in numerous aspects of the autonomy they enjoyed as single young women, with regard to sexuality, mobility, and overall independence. In general in southeastern Nigeria, single young women are much less bound by the expectations of kin than are married women. A single woman certainly faces some social sanctions if she is seen as promiscuous and a young woman's movements are still monitored at a distance by her family. But the expansion of formal education and the economic reality that leads almost all families to encourage young adults to seek livelihoods to support themselves – and often their parents and siblings – have created a situation where large numbers of young women live independently of their kin. Although many young women face both social and economic pressure to have premarital sexual relationships, many also seem to experience their sexuality as a resource (and, of course, often a source of pleasure) that they control (Cornwall 2002; Smith 2002; Luke 2005).

In contrast, married women are made to feel – by their husbands, their families and society – that as persons they are above all wives and mothers, and that their sexuality, their mobility, and their social and economic agency are circumscribed by the fact of their marriage. Indeed, in some respects (and certainly more so by some men than others), women are made to feel that their sexuality *belongs* to their husband and his patrilineage. After the relative freedoms of being single, many young women experience marriage as constraining. But it is imperative to

recognize that women are trading some forms of independence for a status that they themselves value, perhaps above all else: namely, the identity and the experience of being a married woman and a mother. While southeastern Nigerian society has relatively strict expectations regarding the sexual behavior, mobility, and overall independence of married women compared to single women, the same society also richly rewards women socially and symbolically for being wives and mothers. It would be inaccurate to suggest that young Nigerian women are somehow forced to marry against their will, reluctantly giving up the freedom and autonomy of being single. To the contrary, the overwhelming majority of young women seek marriage and parenthood as the ultimate expression and fulfillment of their ambitions for themselves as persons.

But in the context of the rise of romantic love as a relationship ideal for marriage, in a time when global notions about gender equality circulate widely in Nigerian vernacular forms, and in a society where men (and to some extent women) still enforce a system of gender inequality that allows men much more autonomy after marriage – including a powerful double standard about infidelity – these issues have become the subject of significant personal and social preoccupation. As “love marriage” has emerged as something to which most young women aspire and as more and more couples self-describe their marriages in these terms, the reality that men cheat highlights the complexity and contradictions of southeastern Nigeria’s evolving gender dynamics. Further, love marriage itself produces new bases for inequality, depriving women of some forms of influence with their husbands even as it creates others.

Setting and Background

The settings where I conduct most of my research are in the midst of significant transformations that both frame and affect sexual behavior, courtship, and marriage. One setting, Owerri, is a city of approximately five hundred thousand people and the capital of Imo State. Owerri has grown dramatically over the past decade through rural-urban migration, a trend that is broadly characteristic of Nigeria, and all of Africa, which is the continent with the fastest current rate of urbanization in the world. In addition, Owerri has become something of a hub for higher education, with five federal and state universities and well over 100,000 resident students. The city is a magnet for people seeking better opportunities. In Nigerian discourse, Owerri is also known as bastion of extramarital sex, symbolized by the scores of hotels that serve as rendezvous points for overnight trysts. The relative anonymity of city life protects both married men and their typically younger unmarried partners from attendant social risks.

The second setting of my research is Ubakala, a semi-rural community of eleven villages about five miles outside Umuahia, the capital of Abia State and an hour's drive from Owerri. Ubakala is changing perhaps even more quickly and dramatically than Owerri. Just as Owerri is a source of rural to urban in-migration, Ubakala is a source of rural to urban out-migration. At least half of Ubakala's population lives outside the community at any given moment, most commonly in Nigeria's cities. Particularly striking is the large number of young people who have migrated. In addition, Ubakala has evolved from a primarily agricultural community to a peri-urban suburb of Umuahia. In the dozen years that I have conducted research there, the commercial center of the community has grown from a sleepy outpost to a busy and vibrant center embedded in Umuahia's urban circuitry. Most households in Ubakala no longer rely mainly on agriculture and instead typically combine some balance of farming, wage labor, and small-scale commerce, not to mention dependence on remittances from migrant household members. Further, many married couples are separated geographically for extensive periods of time by economic strategies that require migration.

The populations of both Owerri and Ubakala are almost entirely Igbo, Nigeria's third largest ethnic/linguistic group. In the literature, and in popular lore in Nigeria, the Igbo are known for their entrepreneurial acumen, their receptivity to change, and their willingness to migrate and settle throughout the country in order to pursue their economic interests (Ottenberg 1959, Uchendu 1965a, Chukwuezi 2001; Gugler 2002). As among other southern Nigerian ethnic/linguistic groups, formal education is highly valued, Christianity has become almost ubiquitous, and many aspects of what is too easily (and deceptively) called "Western culture" have been adopted, such as capitalist-style consumption, including some incorporation of global sartorial fashions, diet, music, and videos.

Perhaps the two most significant demographic facts for understanding the contemporary context of sexuality and gender dynamics before and after marriage are the relatively long period between the advent of young women's sexual maturity and the age of marriage (for most young women this is at least five years and frequently ten or more years) and the high levels of mobility and migration, particularly rural out-migration to cities and towns. As in much of the world, age at marriage in southeastern Nigeria is rising for both men and women. While national averages are now above 20 years of age for women and 25 years of age for men, these figures are skewed by areas of the country that are much less developed than the Igbo-speaking southeast. Among

the population I was studying (a population that was, albeit, even by Igbo standards, disproportionately affected by rural-urban migration, proximity to town, and city life), women tended to marry in their early to mid-twenties and men in their late twenties and early thirties. The intersection of later age at first marriage and high levels of rural-urban migration, including among young unmarried women, has created a situation where young women are less subject to the regulation and surveillance of their families and communities and where married men can engage in extramarital sexual relations in relative anonymity.

Economically, the factors shaping young women's premarital and married men's extramarital sexual behavior are complex. While it would be a mistake to assume that all men's extramarital sexual behavior takes the form of so-called sugar daddy relationships, where young women are perceived to participate in sexual relationships with older married men for economic gain, or to suppose that young unmarried women's sexual relationships can be completely subsumed under this label (Luke 2005), it is certainly the case that such relationships are common in southeastern Nigeria. Some of the dynamics which are typically glossed in both academic and popular Nigerian interpretations under the label of the sugar daddy phenomenon accurately characterize features of the relationships between younger unmarried women and older married male lovers. Age and economic asymmetry feature prominently in both Nigerian discourse about women's premarital sexuality and married men's infidelity and in the actual sexual landscape. But even in sugar daddy arrangements, the motivations of both young women and married men are frequently multifaceted. Although married men who cheat on their wives with young single women are certainly seeking sex, my interviews and observations suggest that men's motives are connected to a range of aspirations related to the performance of social class and the enactment of socially rewarded masculinity for male peers (Smith 2007a, 2008).

For young unmarried women who partner with older married men, economic motivations are prominent. It would not be wrong to suggest that the fact that women utilize their sexuality for economic purposes is a consequence, in part, of gender inequality. But such an interpretation misses the degree to which, for many young women, the ability to employ their sexuality for strategic goals is experienced as agentic. In previous research, I worked extensively with unmarried young people (Smith 2003, 2004a, 2004b). Many young women clearly viewed their sexuality as a positive resource, not as something that demeaned them. In a society where nearly everyone faces significant obstacles to attaining their social and economic goals, women's sexual

agency offers numerous desired benefits, including opportunities to continue higher education, access to employment, and the ability to help kin. Indeed, the young women who are most likely to be married men's partners in sugar daddy relationships are not the poorest of the poor, trading sex for economic help because of abject poverty, but rather a more educated and fashionable group who are more disposed to see themselves as agentive.

The challenge that these young women face is that even as they are able to utilize their sexual desirability to meet educational, economic, and social goals, they must ultimately navigate the marriage market, where society in general and men in particular have different expectations for what they want in a woman. Igbo society expects a wife to be faithful to her husband and devoted to her children. For most men, the idea that a young woman has been something of a free sexual agent, utilizing her body for economic purposes, or even just for her own pleasure, contradicts the ideal-typical image of a good wife. In addition, the increasingly shared expectation that marriage should be based on romantic love is somewhat in conflict with a more strategic notion of women's sexuality. As a consequence, young unmarried women are traversing a complex landscape before marriage as they seek some sexual partners for purely economic purposes while also keeping an eye out for a love match, or at least a man who could compatibly confer the status of wife and mother. How women steer through these perilous currents and how they experience the transformation from agentive single woman to constrained wife, to the point where a husband's philandering is often tacitly tolerated, offers a revealing window onto the unfolding of gender dynamics in the context of contemporary southeastern Nigeria's patterns of transition to marriage.

Research Methods

This paper draws on more than a dozen years of ethnographic fieldwork in southeastern Nigeria, and specifically on two research projects: one that examined the effects of rural-urban migration on the sexual behavior of adolescents and unmarried young adults and another that focused on married women's risk of HIV infection. The first study addressed the question how young people's sexual behavior was influenced by the challenges of adjustment to urban life. The second study, called "Love, Marriage and HIV," examined the complex intersection between changing marital ideals and practices and the impact of these changes on gendered sexual behavior, particularly men's infidelity. My Nigeria research was part of a larger comparative ethnographic project in which I also had colleagues working in Mexico, Papua New

Guinea, Uganda, and Vietnam (Hirsch et al 2007, 2010; Parikh 2007; Wardlow 2007; Phinney 2008).¹

The study of adolescent and unmarried young adult rural-urban migrants, conducted from 2000-2003, included survey interviews with more than 800 Igbo-speaking rural-urban migrants in two Nigerian cities, as well as in-depth unstructured interviews with 40 of these migrants. In addition, with the help of a younger unmarried research assistant, I carried out several months of participant observation in urban venues where young people are employed, where they go to school, where they seek entertainment, and where they tend to meet and socialize with their sexual partners. Much of what I know about the perspectives and behavior of young unmarried women comes from this study, but also from many years of interacting with young Nigerians in a range of informal contexts. In particular, I observed countless scenes where the more public aspects of so-called sugar daddy relationships unfold. Over the past two decades I have had scores of conversations with unmarried young women who accompany married men to bars, eateries, and social clubs. Indeed, it is usually quite easy to do so because in these male-dominated settings the young women are mostly ignored conversationally (even though they are an obvious audience for men's conspicuous spending). However, rather than being threatened by my talking to their girlfriends, many men (especially if they can count me as a friend) seem to like it when I do so. In a sense, I serve as a further form of entertainment that these men can provide for their girlfriends, and with my expatriate/American identity I offer yet another way in which men display their capital – in this case social capital. Much of what I learned through surveys and intensive interviewing has been supplemented, reinforced, and sometimes challenged by what I have observed in the contexts of everyday life.

The study of modern marriage in southeastern Nigeria, and particularly married women's risk of HIV infection in the context of prevalent male infidelity, was undertaken primarily in one period of research. I spent June-December 2004 in Nigeria, living in a household in Ubakala that included a married woman, several children, and a migrant husband, and in Owerri with a young newlywed couple. Four local research assistants were hired to assist with marital case study interviews in both sites, and to contribute to participant observation in Owerri. Two female research assistants conducted the marital case study interviews with women in Ubakala, while I conducted the interviews with men. In Owerri, male and female assistants conducted marital case study interviews with men and women, respectively, and also undertook participant observation

in married households and in contexts related to extramarital sex, such as bars, clubs, and brothels. I conducted participant observation in both Ubakala and Owerri, and was also responsible for key informant interviews in each venue. Key informants included community leaders, religious leaders, government and non-government medical and public health officials, commercial sex workers, and people living with HIV/AIDS. I also collected popular cultural and archival materials related to marriage, sexuality, and Nigeria's HIV epidemic.

Marital case studies were conducted with 20 couples, 14 residing in Ubakala and six residing in Owerri. The couples were selected opportunistically with the objective of sampling marriages of different generations and duration, couples with a range of socioeconomic and educational profiles, and, of course, in both rural and urban settings. People in Owerri and Ubakala are better off economically than in many other regions of Nigeria. While the sample in the marital case studies is skewed to what might be described as an aspiring middle class (most couples were not actually middle class), because of rising education levels and increasing urban exposure that are common in southeastern Nigeria, most Igbo people share many characteristics and aspirations evident in the sample. For individual couples, men were almost always older than their wives (typically 5-10 years) and tended to have higher incomes. However, educational disparities between husbands and wives, while skewed in favor of men, were relatively minimal, reflecting both the overall increase in access to education, and people's preference to marry partners of similar accomplishment. Interviews were conducted in three parts, generally in three sessions, each approximately one to one and a half hours in duration. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately. All respondents agreed to participation after being presented with protocols for informed consent approved by institutional review boards in both the U.S. and Nigeria. The first interview concentrated primarily on premarital experiences, courtship, and the early stages of marriage. The second interview examined in greater depth the overall experience of marriage, including issues such as marital communication, decision-making, child-rearing, resolution of disputes, relations with family, and changes in the marital relationship over time. The final interview focused on marital sexuality, extramarital sexual relationships, and understandings and experiences regarding HIV/AIDS. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. In this paper I focus on couples that were married in the 10 years prior to the interview to enable me to examine the transition to marriage and the ways that women adapt to married life in the cohort most affected by recent and ongoing changes in courtship and marriage.

Promiscuous Girls

Most Igbo men and women enter marriage with premarital experience in romantic and sexual relationships. With later age at marriage and high rates of rural-urban migration that place unmarried young people farther away from the moral gaze of their parents, their extended families, and their communities, opportunities for premarital relationships are common. Further, sexual and romantic relationships before marriage are widely seen as markers of being urban and educated (Smith 2000; Cornwall 2002), but also as a sort of rehearsal for marriage (Smith 2004b).

Of course there are many different kinds of premarital relationships, and whether they serve as a precursor to marriage depends partly on the nature of the relationship. For example, a young woman in a relationship with an older married man would almost never think of displacing the man's wife. The age and life course position of the individuals are crucial in situating the purpose, meaning, and possible outcomes of a premarital relationship. A young woman beginning university would be less likely to be "looking for a husband," as Nigerians like to say, than a woman in her late 20s, whom society views as quickly approaching the end of her marriageable years. Regardless of whether sexual relationships evolve into marriage, premarital experiences create expectations that both set the stage for and contrast with the gendered division of labor that is characteristic of marriage. Of particular interest here is the dynamic between interpersonal intimacy and material exchange – or, more crudely, between love and money.

The intertwining of intimacy and exchange is colloquially captured in the widely recognized saying that there is "no romance without finance." In Nigeria it can be deployed differently by men and women to advance individual or gendered agendas, but is also used as a kind of discourse of complaint. In addition, it stands for a more subtle reality in which the very expression of love involves gifts, economic support, and a range of material exchanges that both solidify and build upon the sexual and emotional dimensions of intimate relationships (Cole 2004; Cole and Hunter 2009; Hunter 2002).

Young unmarried women use the phrase "no romance without finance" to signal to their female peers that they are savvy about men and their motives and to assert agency by announcing plainly that they intend to benefit materially from any man with whom they have sex. Young women in southeastern Nigeria commonly complain that men will make promises they do not keep – particularly with regard to love and fidelity – in order to persuade women to become their

lovers. Especially in the context of urban educational institutions such as secondary schools and universities, young women commonly criticize each other's sexual decisions in terms of whether someone gave herself too easily to a man. A university student, passing judgment on her friend's recently failed relationship, voiced a strand of discourse I heard frequently with regard to the material dimension of premarital sexual relationships: "All he gave her was soap -- ordinary soap. She was swept away by all his rubbish talk about love. But he was just playing her. She did not benefit at all."

Young women are collectively skeptical about men's pronouncements of love, knowing full well that many men will use the allure of romance not only to secure sexual access, but also to skirt the widely shared expectation that a man should provide material support for his lover. Sometimes women seek emotional satisfaction in one relationship and economic support in another. A common situation -- and certainly the common story in everyday discourse about unmarried girls who keep more than one lover -- is that a woman will have an older (often married) lover from whom she seeks mainly monetary support and a younger man (perhaps a fellow student) for whom she has romantic feelings.

But it is not simply between kinds of lovers that emotion and economics compete, it is also within specific relationships. Many young women have only one boyfriend. In their relationships, men and women frequently engage in both subtle and fierce negotiations about the relative importance of love and money. At its simplest, sentiments of love can often make up for a lack of material support and vice versa.

Seeing feelings and finances as in competition or as substitutable elements in sexual relationships, however, obscures the extent to which they are -- in most relationships and in most people's minds in southeastern Nigeria -- inextricably intertwined. Love and material exchange cannot be easily separated in practice. One particularly Nigerian example is revealing. When young women in southeastern Nigeria speak of the way that men deceive them in sexual relationships, they commonly use the phrase "He played me 419." 419 is an expression connected with Nigeria's notorious scam industry, which depends on deception. Applied to the arena of sex and romance, it implies that a man did not deliver on his promises of love and material support (Smith 2007b: 79-84). Young women can tolerate less money if there is more emotional support and affection and little or no emotional intimacy if there is a lot of money. But

ultimately almost every woman wants both. Love is only perceived as real love if it is backed up by a man's best effort to provide material as well as emotional support.

In premarital relationships young women exhibit a considerable degree of agency in their dealings with men. In sexual partnerships that are more economically oriented, such as with sugar daddies, young women frequently keep more than one lover (albeit usually unknown to the men). Similar to what Hunter (2002) observed in South Africa, I heard many young Nigerian women allude to having more than one sugar daddy, each of whom might be encouraged to play a different role economically – a fact underscored by the playful use of the terms Commissioner of Education, Commissioner of Transportation, Commissioner of Housing, and Commissioner of Finance to describe a particular man's contribution. Men too recognized young women's economic strategies and their power in extracting resources. Indeed, I sometimes heard married men describe their young lovers as “razor blades,” an allusion to the capacity of these women to bleed men of their money (Smith 2002). The relatively recent advent of cell phones in Nigeria as an almost ubiquitous aspiration of modern consumptive identity has produced a wave of female demands for this technology (and the pay-as-you-go credit necessary to make it work). It has become a necessary element of any stable sexual relationship as well as a concomitant discourse of complaint among men about women's increasingly voracious material demands (Smith 2006).

But women's agency in premarital sexual relationships extends well beyond their capacity to negotiate the interconnections between sexual access and economic support in their favor. It also extends to the realms of love, emotion, and sexual fidelity, and to relationships that are less overtly economic and more likely to be precursors to marriage. Most young women expected fidelity on the part of romantic lovers in a way they obviously could not with sugar daddies, and they could enforce these expectations firmly using methods that, arguably, a married woman cannot. Fundamentally, this is a consequence of the fact in a premarital relationship a woman can opt out with few consequences. Igbo society does not see a boyfriend as having any rights to a woman's sexuality and, unlike in marriage, if a woman opts out she faces little or no social or symbolic penalty. As a result, young Igbo women commonly leave unfaithful lovers, and use the threat of doing so to curtail their boyfriends' potential unfaithfulness. While I know of no quantitative data that can support the claim, it is my observation that men who were courting potential wives were more likely to be faithful, or at least to be concerned about the appearance of fidelity, than typical married men. Part of this may

be attributable to unmarried men's different life position and a real commitment that many feel to their prospective spouses. But I am suggesting that their behavior is also partly the result of unmarried women's agency in these relationships. Single women can much more easily punish a philandering man than a married woman can -- simply by opting out.

Women's premarital experiences prepare them for the negotiations over love, money, and fidelity that will unfold in their relationships with their husbands. But the gendered division of labor (both economic and emotional) changes in marriage and with it the dynamics among love, money, and infidelity are also transformed. More and more Nigerian women marry for love, but of course not only for love. They expect their husbands to be good providers, responsible fathers, and socially competent men who represent their marriages positively to the wider community. While a man's infidelity undermines a woman's hopes that romantic love is the enduring foundation of their marriage, women must navigate a number of intersecting goals, values, and social expectations in crafting their responses to a cheating husband.

Changing Marriage

As I have suggested, in Nigeria, as across Africa, evidence indicates that people are increasingly likely to select marriage partners based, at least in part, on whether they are "in love" (Obiechina 1973; Okonjo 1992; Smith 2001). But the emergence of romantic love as a criterion in mate selection and the increasing importance of a couple's personal and emotional relationship in marriage should not be interpreted to mean that romantic love itself has only recently emerged in Nigeria. When I asked elderly Igbos about their betrothals, about their marriages, and about love, I was told numerous personal stories and popular fables that indicated a long tradition of romantic love. A number of older men and women confessed that they would have married a person other than their spouse had they been allowed to "follow the heart." Scholars have documented the existence of romantic love in Africa long before it became a widely accepted criterion for marriage (Bell 1995; Plotnicov 1995; Riesman 1972, 1981). Uchendu (1965b) confirms the existence of passionate love in his study of concubinage in traditional Igbo society. Interestingly, both men and women were reportedly accorded significant socially acceptable extramarital sexual freedom. As Obiechina notes: "The question is not whether love and sexual attraction as normal human traits exist within Western and African societies, but how they are woven into the fabric of life" (1973: 34).

Exactly when Nigerians in general and Igbos in particular began to conceptualize marriage choices in more individualistic terms, privileging romantic love as a criterion in the selection of a spouse, is hard to pinpoint. In some parts of Igboland and in many parts of Nigeria the social acceptance of individual choice in mate selection is still just beginning. Certainly these changes occurred first in urban areas among relatively educated and elite populations (Marris 1962; Little and Price 1973). Obiechina's (1973) study of Onitsha pamphlet literature indicates that popular Nigerian literature about love, romance, and modern marriage began to emerge just after World War II. Historical accounts suggest that elements of modern marriage began even earlier in the twentieth century (Mann 1985). By the 1970s, a number of monographs about changing marriage in West Africa had been produced (e.g. Oppong 1974; Harrell-Bond 1975). Most of these accounts focused on relatively elite, urban, and educated populations.

In contemporary Igboland, the ideal that marriage should be based on romantic love has spread well beyond urban elites. Young people across a wide range of socio-economic statuses increasingly value choosing their own spouses, and individual choice is widely associated with the notion that marriage should be based on love. It is of course important to recognize that ideas about what constitutes love are culturally inflected and individually variable. But in southeastern Nigeria it is fair to say that when people talk about the importance of love for marriage they are generally signaling the value accorded to the personal and emotional quality of the conjugal relationship. People recognize that strong bonds can develop in more traditional marriages not premised on romantic love, but when people talk about marrying for love – as they frequently do – they mean a kind of love that is associated with an increased emphasis on a couple's personal and emotional relationship.

In a village sample of just over 200 married women of reproductive age that I collected in Ubakala during my dissertation research in 1996, over 60 percent reported that their marriages were choice marriages (a category that overlaps with, but is not isomorphic with love marriage) rather than arranged marriages, and, not surprisingly, the percentages were higher among younger women. The expectation to choose one's spouse is almost universal among young persons still in school. In a sample of 775 students drawn from 19 secondary schools in the Umuahia area during the same year, over 95 percent said they expected to choose their marriage partners themselves, and the expectation was universal among 420 students I surveyed at Abia State University. Although my more recent research on marriage did not entail sample surveys,

every indication from participant observation and popular culture is that the ideal of love marriage has continued to grow.

The nature of social change driving these shifts in marriage is too extensive to fully account for here, but intertwining factors include economic diversification and labor migration, urbanization, education, religious conversion and globally circulating ideas about love, intimacy, sexuality, and marriage. Contemporary economic strategies hinge on rural-urban migration. As larger numbers of families move to the city in search of better education, employment, and other economic opportunities, family structure is changing. Modifications in family organization induced by economic and demographic transition have been complemented by moral, ideological, and religious trends that also affect the institution of marriage.

The marriages of young couples in contemporary southeastern Nigeria are clearly different from their parents. Describing the differences between her marriage and her parents' marriage, a 30-year-old woman married for three years said: "My father had three wives and 14 children. Often it was every woman for herself. My husband and I have a partnership. We decide things. There is love between us." Perhaps the most concise way to contrast recent Igbo marriages with the past is to note that young couples see their marriages as a life project in which they as a couple are the primary actors, and where the idea of being in love is one of the principal foundations of the relationship, whereas their parents' marriages were more obviously embedded in the structures of the extended family. The differences are most pronounced in how husbands and wives resolve marital quarrels and in decision-making about contributions to their children's education and well-being. In each of these arenas people in self-ascribed love marriages tend to emphasize the primacy of the individual couple and their personal relationship, often in conscious opposition to the constraints imposed by ties to kin and community. For example, a 43-year-old teacher reported:

For me and my wife our marriage is our business, whereas in my parents' time everything was scrutinized by the extended family. If they had any little problem everyone might become involved. We try to keep things within the married house. If we have any problem we handle it ourselves and maybe pray over it, but we don't go running to the elders broadcasting our problems here and there.

His comment highlights the perceived importance of the conjugal relationships vis-à-vis other kin relationships.

But it is important not to exaggerate these trends. Even in these new forms of marriage, ties to kin and community remain strong, and the project of marriage and child-rearing continues to be a social project, strongly embedded in the relationships and values of the extended family system. Scholars of West African society have long recognized the pronounced social importance of marriage and fertility in the region (Fortes 1978; Bledsoe and Pison 1994; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999). People's stories about courtship, about the resolution of marital disputes, and about decisions regarding child-rearing reflect the continued importance of marriage and fertility in the community and couples' concerns about social and familial expectations for their relationships. The choice of a future spouse based on love is, in almost all cases, still subjected to the advice and consent of families. The fact that marriage in southeastern Nigeria remains a resolutely social endeavor creates contradictions for younger couples, who must navigate not only their individual relationships, but also the outward representation of their marriages to kin and community. Most couples seek to portray their marriages to themselves and to others as being love marriages, but also as morally tied and beneficial to their extended families. The tension between being living up to new and old standards plays out powerfully as young women manage the transition from being single, where they are freer to pursue and display their independence, to being married, where society has much greater expectations that women behave morally as good wives and mothers.

How Promiscuous Girls Become Good Wives

It is often quite easy in southeastern Nigeria to know whether a young woman is married simply by observing her manner of dressing. Sartorially, single women, particularly in urban settings, tend to dress in more liberal and sexually provocative outfits, which fit tightly to reveal the shape of breasts and buttocks and often show significant amounts of bare skin. Indeed, young women's dress is a topic of great passion in Nigeria, with elders, newspaper opinion pieces, school principals, university administrators, and politicians frequently decrying what is known in Nigeria as "indecent dressing." Indecent dressing is blamed for all sorts of social ills, including (presumably male) students' poor performance in school, high rates of premarital pregnancy, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and married men's philandering. Obscured in a discourse that blames

young women's dress, and by implication young women's morality, for these social problems is the fact that women dress in these styles in part because they know that men like it.

The reasons young women dress the way they do are multiple. Certainly attracting men is one reason, but so too is the desire to be fashionable. The audience in this regard is more likely to be fellow women. Young Igbo women judge each other's dress with a ruthlessness that is perhaps familiar to young women in many societies. While young women's dress is clearly highly attuned to and motivated by a concern with social appearances, it is also important to acknowledge that women experience considerable agency and pleasure in their sartorial performance. To emphasize too exclusively the imperative of appearances would miss the degree of personal expression that is part of young Igbo women's performance of style. These sartorial performances stand for the larger scope of agency that young single Igbo women experience in the arenas of mobility and sexuality.

Married women are also greatly concerned with being fashionable, but married women's dress is, by and large, completely different and the difference is best described as a minimization of sexuality. Married women's outfits are expected to cover completely areas like the thighs and the stomach and their clothes generally fit much more loosely or are layered in ways that hide the most feminine and sexual aspects of a woman's shape. Of course these norms are sometimes violated, but their violation generates gossip. A married woman who dresses too sexually is suspected of being interested in and available for extramarital sex. Married women's more constrained dress code is directly related to the more circumscribed mobility and sexuality they are expected to observe as wives and mothers.

In addition to being curious as to how women manage and experience this transition to the expectations of marriage – a transition that looked to me like a diminution of agency in areas where single women seemed to experience significant liberty – I was also perplexed by how men understood and reconciled what they observe in the general behavior of single women with what they expect from their own wives. In particular, I wondered what men thought about their own fiancées' sexual pasts when they decided to marry them. Did they assume that their brides were exceptions to the larger social phenomenon of premarital sexual freedom, about which nearly all men are blatantly hypocritical – eagerly seeking the sexual favors of unmarried women while condemning the sexual moral decay of Nigerian society? Or did they know about their wives'

sexual pasts, but believed they would change with marriage? Or was it a continuing source of anxiety? The answer, I found, was some combination of all of these and more.

In the middle of the “Love, Marriage and HIV” study I raised this issue with one of my best friends in Nigeria, a person I consider a remarkably astute observer of Nigerian society. My friend Benjamin was then in his mid-thirties and with a serious girlfriend that he seemed likely to marry in the near future. I remember trying to be careful in how I broached the subject, because while I very much wanted his perspective I did not want him to think I was alluding to his particular situation. I wormed my way around the awkwardness of the question by making it clear that I was thinking of young women who had many sexual partners in their unmarried years. How did they manage to leave behind their past reputations? Did their husbands know? And, of course, could such women actually be trusted to be faithful wives?

I was relieved that Benjamin did not seem in the least to assume I was asking about his own situation (I was not), and he immediately told me a story. Benjamin runs a small NGO that works in HIV prevention. Recently, his NGO had been running a program with local churches to utilize religious leaders and institutions in AIDS prevention efforts. One evening he went to meet with a pastor in his residence. Benjamin was hospitably received by the reverend and his wife, a woman who seemed to be about fifteen years her husband’s junior. She dressed conservatively in a traditional West African outfit with a double wrapper that in Igbo society signifies being married. Her behavior was humble and deferential. In every way, Benjamin said, she acted like the good wife of a pastor. But Benjamin noticed a hint of recognition, both in how she looked at him and in her features. Suddenly it dawned on him that he knew this woman from his university days, and, what is more, she had been one of the wildest girls on campus, known for her multiple sexual partners and escapades. Benjamin said, “I smiled inside but did not say anything. But at a point I said that I thought I recognized her and asked whether she had not been a student at the University of Port Harcourt during my years. I could tell she knew exactly who I was and how we knew each other, but she played it cool and only acknowledged that she had indeed been a student. I remarked at the coincidence and said no more. The Reverend Father was also pleased at the coincidence and seemed proud that his wife was a university graduate.”

Benjamin then said to me, “Man, if that girl could become a pastor’s wife, anything is possible.” I suspected that Benjamin himself had slept with the pastor’s wife when she was a university student, but I did not ask. I did ask whether he thought that the pastor knew of his

wife's sexual history, and more broadly whether most Igbo men are aware of their wives' premarital sexual pasts. Benjamin's view was that while most men no longer expect that their wives will be virgin brides, women are careful to minimize what potential husbands know about their sexual histories. Young women are quite conscious, he insisted, of the shift they must make from being a "promiscuous girl" to a "good wife."

I certainly do not mean to suggest that all young Igbo women have many sexual partners before marriage, nor do I mean to imply any moral judgment about women's premarital behavior by using the word promiscuous. But I do mean to signal that in the minds of people in southeastern Nigeria, young women's premarital sexual behavior is considered morally problematic. Further, the incentives for premarital sexuality are so great that I am quite sure the phenomenon I am examining is exceedingly common. The reasons why women feel not only obliged but highly motivated to marry and to transform themselves from promiscuous girls to good wives have been alluded to already. Marriage and parenthood remain the paramount markers of a life well lived for both men and women, and for women the achievement of this status comes with many benefits as well as many constraints.

But the questions remain: how are young women able to manage their self-presentation for men as they make the shift from single to married; how is the transformation experienced by women once they are married; and how is all this experienced by men? The demographics of courtship and marriage and the social process by which they occur provide a big part of the explanation for how such a dramatic transformation is possible. Two demographic factors are paramount. The first is migration. While migration is part of what enables young women to experience significant sexual freedom, it also protects them. For most women who have led what Nigerians describe as promiscuous premarital sex lives, their sexual behavior occurs in the context of migration away from their (mostly rural) places of origin. As such, many, if not most, young women are having premarital sexual relationships in cities and towns or in secondary school and university settings where they live away from the monitoring and supervision of their parents and extended families. The second factor is the age asymmetry that characterizes many young women's premarital sexual relationships. To the extent that young women are considered sexually promiscuous, it is frequently in the context of their relationships with older married men, with whom they are seen as trading sex for economic support. These sugar daddies are not potential suitors for marriage and young women do not risk alienating a potential husband if they

appear sexually eager, aggressive, or adventurous in these relationships. It is my impression that young women are more careful about managing their sexual self-presentation with single men who are closer to their own age, particularly as they approach the point in their lives where they are “looking for a husband.”

But it is the typical pattern of how Igbo people marry that is by far the most important factor in explaining why it is possible for women in southeastern Nigeria to construct identities as good wives, no matter their sexual histories. While women’s premarital sexual behavior tends to occur most often away from their natal communities, the process of marriage usually runs back through a woman’s (and a man’s) place of origin. Although most Igbo communities are patrilineal and marriage is always lineage exogamous, in a wider sense Igbo society is highly endogamous. In Igboland there is a strong preference and expectation that people should marry from neighboring communities with whom their families and communities have reliable and long-term ties.

High levels of out-migration and the mixing that is the result of urbanization, co-educational schools and universities, and livelihood strategies that take even rural residents to far-flung destinations has put pressure on this endogamous pattern. More and more young people seek to marry spouses from far-away communities, and families are beginning to recognize that in the era of economic transformation, this can be a good strategy. Nevertheless, most marriages among people who have otherwise circulated widely in Nigerian society during their young adulthood still occur between people from the same regional areas in Igboland. Future spouses are often introduced to each other on visits home during the Christmas period, when all Igbos are compelled to visit their places of origin. Further, when young Igbos meet potential spouses in cities it is often through introductions by people from their same area of origin, as everyone is mindful of the norm that such ties make the most stable marriages. The practical consequence is that many young people know very little about each other when they begin to court, and it is quite possible for a woman to hide any history of sexual relationships from a potential husband.

Once a couple decides to marry, their respective families shift into high gear to “investigate” whether the match is a good one, but these investigations are focused almost entirely on ferreting out the social status and family history of the potential in-laws. Typically, a representative from each family will travel to the community of the potential mate’s family and inquire about issues such as economic status, religious affiliation, and any histories of or

reputations for problems like criminality and mental illness. To the extent that issues of sexual promiscuity might come up in such investigations, it would only be in the context of a scandal of women's marital infidelity in the family, but as far as I know these investigations rarely extend to inquiring about a potential bride's sexual behavior while she was an urban migrant or a schoolgirl. As a consequence, in the most typical pattern of Igbo marriage, it is quite possible for a young woman to hide her sexual past from her future husband, his family, and his community.

While this explains how in individual cases young women can marry and become good wives without the risk of a previous reputation haunting them, it does not address how women adjust to this transition, or how men reconcile the knowledge that so many young women had concurrent sexual partnerships before marriage with their expectations that their own wives will be faithful. These were extremely difficult questions to navigate in interviews. What I report emerges partly from what can be gleaned from interviews with younger married men and women, but partly from what I have learned through more informal conversations and observations over many years of participant observation in southeastern Nigeria.

With regard to married men's perceptions of their wives' sexuality, not a single man in the study reported that he thought his wife had ever cheated since they were married. In part this may be a function of the stakes of such an admission for a man's reputation. Most Igbo men will say that if they ever caught their wife cheating they would divorce her. While this may not always be the case in practice, it would be surprising for a man to admit that his wife cheated or even that he suspected so. But I don't think in most cases that this is what explains men's responses. Instead, I think most men find it highly unlikely that their wives are cheating, because they know the social sanctions for a woman doing so are so great. None of the wives in the study admitted that that had cheated on their husbands, though obviously their incentives to present themselves this way are even greater than the reasons men want to see them this way. Yet both men and women told stories about specific married women in the community who were unfaithful to their husbands, so clearly women's extramarital sex is both a reality and a source of considerable social anxiety.

The fact that most men know that most women have had premarital sex seems to be mostly sublimated when people talk about – and even in some cases when they have – marital sex. When I was asking one particularly educated and open man – a civil servant in his mid-forties – about marital sexuality and the kinds of things that he and his wife do to enhance sexual

pleasure, he suggested that while he and his wife experimented somewhat in their sexual relationship, there were some things that a man would be unlikely to do with his wife. This was both a cause and consequence of men's extramarital sexual behavior, he intimated, because men sought novel sexual experiences from extramarital lovers that they thought were inappropriate to request of good wives. Further, even if they were tempted to introduce these practices in marriage (e.g., oral sex, anal sex, or a variety of sexual positions) many men feared doing so because their wives would ask where they learned them.

But the conservatism of marital sex in southeastern Nigeria should not be exaggerated. Many married men and, to a lesser extent, married women reported forms of sexual behavior and experimentation that struck me as quite liberal. And with the change in marriage privileging emotional intimacy, certainly sexual pleasure is something many young couples value. But it is also clear that powerful gender dynamics enforce a code that it is the man who should be the sexual aggressor and innovator.

If it was difficult to get men to talk about marital sexual behavior in interviews, it was even harder to get women to do so, much less get them to discuss the adjustment (or at least the appearance of an adjustment) to marital monogamy after a history of premarital sexual activity. For obvious reasons, married women in the study did not volunteer much information about their sexual histories, even when the interviewers were socially skilled fellow women. While some married women would eventually talk about the importance of marital sexual pleasure, we learned little in the study about what sorts of sexual desires women have that are not fulfilled in their marriages, much less whether they acted on them. But the interviews certainly reinforced what is apparent to any observer of southeastern Nigeria: for Igbo women, being married and having children remains the pillar of adult female identity, and women will go to great lengths to achieve and preserve this status, including, it seems, reconfiguring their sexual behavior to meet social expectations.

While it was my impression that the majority of married Igbo women remain faithful to their spouses, at the very least it certainly is true that they manage their self-presentations vigilantly to appear to be good wives. Nevertheless, it is clear that Nigerian society is at some level anxious about married women's sexuality and the possibility of adultery. This is represented not only in the highly charged gossip that circulates when a married women's infidelity is exposed, but also in the relentless theme of infidelity, including women's infidelity,

in Nigeria's highly popular video film industry. The idea that good wives may be promiscuous girls at heart certainly seems to lurk beneath the surface, and cultural norms, social sanctions, and individuals' self-presentations are strongly designed to make sure that women remain good wives.

Good Wives and Cheating Husbands

For married men the situation is completely different. Extramarital sex is socially tolerated and, in many respects, even socially rewarded. The prevalence of married men's participation in extramarital sex in Nigeria is well documented (Karanja 1987; Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1997; Lawoyin and Larsen 2002; Mitsunaga et al. 2005). The ascendancy of love as a basis for marriage, or at least as an aspect of the marital relationship that is increasingly privileged in assessing the quality of the conjugal connection, intersects in potent and sometimes contradictory ways with the fact of prevalent male infidelity. How Igbo women react to their husbands' cheating depends on a complicated mix of contextual factors that are powerfully inflected by the idea of love. Whether a woman acknowledges or ignores her husband's extramarital sexual behavior, whether she confronts it in private or through various more public means, how it makes her feel, and what sorts of emotional, moral, social, and material means she feels equipped to deploy in order to corral or punish (or cover up) her husband's unfaithfulness must be understood in relation to the varying ways that love is intertwined with other dimensions of marriage. While the ideal of romantic love is undoubtedly more widespread with regard to Igbo expectations about marriage than it was one or two generations ago, other elements of marriage remain highly valued and shape even young women's experiences with, perspectives about, and responses to men's infidelity.

For Igbo men and women, marriage is as much an economic, social, reproductive, and reputational project as it is a sexual and emotional endeavor. Indeed, the priority given to these socially pragmatic aspects of the marriage relationship resounds clearly in the narratives of the married couples we interviewed. Married women are in some ways complicit in enabling men's extramarital sexual behavior. In order to understand women's position and behavior it is necessary to map and explain the interests they have in marriage that frequently trump their aspirations for love and their wish for a faithful husband. Further, and perhaps ironically, as love has become more highly valued as a basis for marriage than in the past, new social expectations about women's domestic roles exacerbate the difficulty of addressing men's infidelity.

Many women described a dramatic change in their relationships with their spouses after marriage, regardless of whether they were willing to talk about their husbands' infidelity. Most commonly, women directly contrasted the period of courtship with the longer-term patterns unfolding in their marriages. The perception of a contrast between courtship and marriage was most pronounced for relatively younger women, who recalled that before marriage their husbands were more attentive and more willing to do the sorts of things that they associated with romantic love – for example, saying affectionate things, buying gifts like jewelry or perfume rather than just commodities for the household, or helping out with domestic work that is socially defined as female. Some women attributed these changes to the relative shift in power that occurs at marriage. During courtship a woman has two authoritative vetoes: she can deny sexual access and she can refuse to marry. In contrast, once a woman is married, the ability to opt out – of either marriage or marital sex – is dramatically reduced. Divorce is highly stigmatized and women are expected to be sexually available for their husbands.

Chetachi, a 34-year-old mother of four, was representative of a lot of younger women in her account of marriage. She described significant changes in her relationship with her husband since they married. In some ways, Chetachi lamented that marriage and parenthood encroached on the quality of her emotional relationship with her husband, but in other ways she relished the benefits and social recognition of being a wife and mother. Asked about the changes she experienced between courtship and marriage she said, “When I married my husband I used to worry all the time about him. Was he happy? Did he still love me? Was he following another woman? Sometimes I would get very jealous, even when there was no reason. See [pointing to the baby on her breast and the three older children playing nearby], now I am married to my children.” Chetachi never openly admitted that she knew her husband sometimes had extramarital sex, but I learned from my interviews with him that he did and that she knew. It was also clear that, like many men, Chetachi's husband viewed his family as his highest priority. Because of this, he was discreet about his infidelity. Despite admitting that he had not always been faithful, he also asserted, “I would never allow anything to interfere with taking care of my wife and children.” Chetachi and her husband seemed to have a tacit agreement that as long as each played gender-appropriate roles in raising their family in a socially respectable fashion, their marriage would be ok.

Women employ a range of strategies to deal with men's infidelity. Although most women did not talk easily about their own husband's infidelity in formal interviews, over time we were able to identify eight women who were willing to speak more informally (without a tape recorder and a questionnaire) about their responses to their husband's extramarital affairs. Women's efforts to address male cheating included a range of tactics, appeals, and punishments. Some women drew on the idea of romantic love, reminding their husbands in various ways of their emotional commitments. With Christianity being almost universally observed in southeastern Nigeria and many families being highly observant, religion and allusions to the Bible were common referents in women's confrontations with philandering spouses. Other women appealed to men's sense of material responsibility for their families. Women frequently punished their husbands when they discovered or suspected infidelity by withholding emotional and sexual intimacy, or by neglecting cooking and other household labor and material support that are typically considered women's duties. Although seemingly less common than in the past, a few women appealed to their kin or their husbands' kin to help persuade a man to stop an extramarital affair. Most women resorted to more than one of these tactics – appeals to romantic love, Christian values, a husband's sense of obligation as a provider and help from kin – simultaneously or serially, but certain patterns seemed to emerge, reflecting the varying influence of romantic love in modern Igbo marriages.

Amarachi, a twenty-nine-year-old married mother of three young children, described her rage when she discovered that her husband, Chukwuma, had a girlfriend. "I discovered my husband had another lady he was interested in. I confronted him and told him I would not tolerate that sort of business. For almost two months I stopped everything. No road. We had no [sexual] relations at all. For a long time I did not even serve him food. He became sober [meaning serious – not a reference to drinking]. He sent friends to beg me. He even recruited my sister to plead for him. Eventually I forgave him, but I put him notice that I would not stand such nonsense." In the extended conversation with Amarachi and in my discussions with Chukwuma it was clear that this couple saw themselves as being in a love marriage. When Amarachi spoke about her sense of Chukwuma's violation it was in visceral, emotional terms. She was hurt. She saw his infidelity as contradicting his avowed love. While she resorted to some time-tested tactics like withholding domestic services, in her depictions of her intent it was clear that she saw his infidelity as a betrayal of love, trust, and intimacy. Chukwuma's eventual rehabilitation in

Amarachi's eyes depended upon his renouncing any intimacy associated with the affair and pledging anew his emotional (and sexual) fidelity.

Conclusion

Few young wives acknowledged the seeming irony that the premarital sexual culture they participated in as single women conflicted with their marital ideals. Marriage and childbearing completely transform a woman's social position and status in southeastern Nigeria, and with it much of her orientation toward Nigeria's contemporary sexual landscape. Married women routinely condemn the very behavior they engaged in when they were single. But perhaps the transition is not as abrupt and jarring as it appears. Even single young women who have sexual relationships with married men show a marked respect for marriage. A married man's young lover almost never expects to displace his wife and conducts her relationship with him in a manner that assists in protecting his marriage. Further, in both premarital relationships and marriage, young women are navigating a complex array of social forces – from economic uncertainty, to peer pressure, to persistent gender double standards – that require steering a careful course between maximizing their individual aspirations and observing society's expectations.

The pursuit of romantic love as an increasingly popular ideal for marriage has complicated and exacerbated some of the challenges young women face as they anticipate, enter, and navigate matrimony. On the one hand, the language of love and the increasing emphasis in contemporary marriages on the personal relationship between husband and wife offers women a form of leverage that they can utilize in negotiating gender inequality. On the other hand, love as a marital ideal comes with its own social consequences, including a diminution in the degree to which women feel it is culturally appropriate to make a scene or call on kin to sanction a misbehaving husband. Indeed, it is not at all clear that the rise of love marriage protects women significantly from men's infidelity, and in some instances it seems to contribute to their silence. But marriage in southeastern Nigeria is by no means all about love. The social reproductive projects of childrearing and family building remain paramount goals and deeply rewarding endeavors for both men and women. While the persistence prevalence of male infidelity in the context of women's growing preference for love marriage would seem to be a kind of crisis – and from the point of view of married women's risk of contracting HIV from their philandering husbands this is true (Smith 2007a) – men and women remain steadfastly committed to the

institution of marriage and the project of parenthood. In this context, the transformation of promiscuous girls to good wives is not only possible, it is socially imperative.

Notes

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