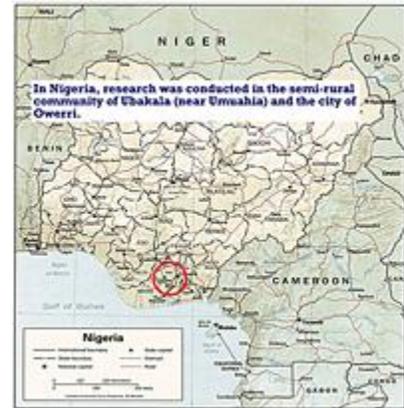


Fieldwork in Nigeria

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Fieldwork Team

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Photos



AIDS Campaigns



Wedding Ceremonies



Couples and Families



Wedding Culture



Love, Sex and Marriage



Social Institutions

The Setting

Fieldwork in Ubakala in southeastern Nigeria began in June of 2004, several months after the rest of the country projects were underway. Like each of the other investigators, I was returning to a setting where I had conducted my dissertation research. My wife is Nigerian and the place I work is her natal community, so settling into Ubakala meant once again living in my in-laws' home. I have visited Ubakala every summer for short stints of research since I completed my dissertation fieldwork in 1997, and things have changed significantly over that period. On the home front, my father-in-law had died in 1999 and since 2002 my mother-in-law has been in the U.S. My wife's two brothers live on the other side of the country in Lagos. Ironically, then, in 2004, I was the only immediate family member living in the village, though the extended family in Ubakala is large and my two teenage nieces came from Lagos for extended stays. Even my wife, tied to her job in Rhode Island, was not with me, except for a brief visit in August.

The composition of my household was not all that had changed in Ubakala in recent years. With the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999 and the creation of new local government areas (the lowest tier of formal government in Nigeria), Ubakala had become a local government headquarters. This meant new infrastructure, a swelling population, and a growing marketplace. All of these accelerated trends already underway in the mid-1990s: Ubakala is changing from a community of 11 rural villages to a semi-rural suburb of the nearby city of Umuahia, which is only about 10 kilometers away. Cell phone service, which had begun in Nigeria in 2001, extended to Ubakala during my 2004 fieldwork, and though the community has no running water and very sporadic electricity, the cell phones added to the community's ever more urbanizing feel.

Ubakala is in the heart of the Igbo-speaking southeast, the part of Nigeria that tried unsuccessfully to secede and create an independent state called Biafra in the 1960s. Igbos are one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria's multiethnic society of 130 million people. They are notoriously migratory and entrepreneurial and almost every adult in Ubakala has lived part of his or her life in a Nigerian city. For this and various other reasons, Igbos seem especially plugged into globalization, and they are often very receptive to social change. Yet they are also fiercely proud of their traditions, including much more recently invented ones, such as their fervent Christianity. All of this proved central to the study.

Early on, I decided to add the city of Owerri as a second site for the study. Owerri is about 60 kilometers from Ubakala. I had lived there for three years from 1989-1992, when I worked on a public health project. I included Owerri partly because I wanted to be able to interview urban as well as semi-rural couples. I also thought that the distance from my in-laws might create different dynamics. On the one hand, being an in-law helps tremendously in creating trust and rapport; on the other hand, with the intimate topics we would be exploring in the interviews, I worried that my "insider" status might inhibit some people's responses. In addition, I identified two fantastic research assistants in Owerri who were not available to work in Ubakala, but I knew they could do excellent work. Although I lived in Ubakala throughout the fieldwork, I shuttled to Owerri regularly, often spending a couple nights a week there.

Summary of Fieldwork Activities

Settling in and training my research assistants occupied a good deal of the first several weeks. Jane, Chinkata, and Lizzy would conduct all the interviews with married women, while Frank and I would concentrate on the men. I will never forget the great discussions generated during the training sessions. We had incredibly candid and amazing discussions about our own marriages, a process that proved crucial in preparing for our interviews with couples selected for the study. Further, those conversations transformed the marriages of my research assistants into virtual supplementary case studies. The marital case studies themselves began in late August and were finally completed in early December, just weeks before my departure. We interviewed a total of 20 couples who represented a range of individual ages and marital durations, a spectrum of typical educational attainment and socio-economic status, and a variety of degrees of urban experience.

Participant observation took place throughout the research period. The contexts where I consciously placed myself in order to do participant observation included:

- spending time and around peoples homes, farms and shops, where the routine activities and conversations of daily life unfold;
- attending weddings, funerals and other community rituals and events;
- going to church services, fellowship meetings, crusades, and other religious events that are such a central part of the local cultural landscape;
- observing and participating in the activities of local non-governmental organizations involved in various dimensions of HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, counseling, care and support, including a group of HIV-positive people receiving ARVs in Owerri who started the city's first support group for people living with HIV;
- hanging out at bars, hotels and other nightspots where some forms of extramarital sex are socially organized;
- socializing and playing tennis at local men's social clubs, where some men socialize with girlfriends and nearly all men participate in a particular form of homosociality that is supportive of extramarital sexual relationships;
- watching and talking to young people at internet cafes and other venues where young folks initiate various kinds of sexual and social relationships.

Key informant interviews were conducted with religious leaders, community elders, government and non-government officials working in public health, doctors with large HIV-positive patient populations, academic colleagues, commercial sex workers, university students, and people living with HIV.

In Nigeria the archival data collection focused mainly on collecting or documenting cultural materials relating to love, marriage, gender, sexuality and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. For example, I collected as much material from local "wedding culture" as I could, including photographs, wedding invitations, and the range of little mementos that are given to guests, such as plastic buckets, coffee mugs, tee-shirts, and umbrellas, all emblazoned with the names of the bride and groom and the date of their wedding. I also watched and collected many Nigerian-made video films that have various dimensions of love, sex and marriage at the center of their plots. In

addition, I collected many clippings from newspapers and magazines, such as relationship advice columns and both journalistic and tabloid accounts of the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic. I also bought numerous local magazines about sex, love, marriage, etc. — magazines with titles like *Hint*, *Better Lovers*, *Tickles*, and *Single and Married*, and *Vibration*. In Nigeria, these publications are generally considered women's magazines, so I always wondered how my local vendor interpreted my seemingly voracious appetite for them.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary analysis of the marital case studies and the larger corpus of material collected through participant observation indicates that in contemporary southeastern Nigeria, the conjugal relationship between husband and wife, including notions of romantic love, is increasingly likely to be viewed as an important criterion for a successful marriage. Yet modern marriage, with its more frequent presumptions of love, does little to prevent extramarital sexual relationships, particularly on the part of married men. In marriages that could be classified as "modern" (based on such criteria as the degree of individual choice in selecting one's marital partner, the desired or completed fertility of the couple, the wife's education and employment status, and the extent of urban experience), men's participation in extramarital sex was at least as common as in more "traditional" marriages. However, while modern marriage did not seem to inhibit men's extramarital sex, it did seem to create a greater need for secrecy about extramarital sex, both in terms of men's hiding it from their wives and in terms of many women's preference not to know about, or at least not to publicly acknowledge, their husbands' extramarital behaviors. Indeed, it seems possible that modern marriage may be inhibiting couples from dealing openly with the risks of contracting HIV/AIDS via extramarital sex.

But even as the conjugal relationship seems to be growing in importance, the reality of extramarital sex seems to pose only minimal threat to the long-term stability of most marriages. Men's extramarital liaisons are woven into a pragmatic project of marriage and parenthood wherein even ideals of love can be reconfigured to accommodate infidelity. Men and women invoke practical idioms of exchange in assessing both marital and extramarital relationships, situating sex and romance in wider life strategies concerned with economic and social progress. While the notion of romantic love is part of what constitutes a modern marriage, even stronger was the shared idea that couples were embarking on a project of bettering their families and preparing their children to be successful in contemporary Nigeria.

Other striking preliminary findings have to do with the importance of Christianity as an idiom through which people conceptualize and talk about their marital and family lives. While the influence of increasingly popular "born-again" Christian churches seems to provide a religious basis to challenge infidelity, it is not clear that Christianity is actually empowering women. The relationship between religion, morality and behavior is one of the questions I will continue to explore as analysis progresses.

Southeastern Nigeria has a long history of sex-segregated social organization. In our field research it was striking how much continuity there is in that regard. Sex-segregation remains an

important dimension of social life, even as co-ed schools, more women in the workplace, and the increasing importance of conjugality in marriage push toward greater integration. Sex-segregation seems to play a significant role in facilitating men's extramarital sexual relationships by facilitating specific patterns of homosociality.

It proved very difficult to get married women to talk about or even admit to their own extramarital relationships. People talked freely about others' behavior, frequently in the form of gossip and rumor, but almost no women in the case studies acknowledged being in such relationships themselves. This finding speaks to continuing gender inequality, manifested in strong double standards about sexuality.

One of the most interesting preliminary findings emerged from interviews I did with people living with HIV. The people I interviewed were all enrolled in Nigeria's pilot ARV treatment program. Most striking was the degree to which these people moved from considering their test results to be a death sentence to trying to continue with a life project in which marriage and fertility were central. Many people put the priorities of getting married and having children (or even just having more children) ahead of protecting themselves and others from further infection — and this was even sometimes the case for sero-negative persons aware of their partners' HIV-positive status. The tremendous importance of marriage and child-bearing, even (perhaps especially) when one has been diagnosed with HIV is another finding that I will pursue as we continue our analysis.

Intervention Activities

The primary intervention activities carried out under the project were in support of the preventive, counseling, care and support activities of a Nigerian NGO, based in Owerri, called Community Youth Development Initiatives (CYDI). Under the leadership of an incredibly committed and dynamic director named Benjamin Mbakwem, CYDI is undertaking some of the most innovative and successful HIV/AIDS programs in southeastern Nigeria. Jane, Frank and I all worked directly with CYDI programs. Jane and Frank worked directly with youths in preventive education and with people living with HIV/AIDS, providing counseling and support. I worked mainly with Benjamin on grant-writing. We produced a number of different proposals, including one that was funded by the World Bank to strengthen CYDI's counseling program and extend its outreach activities to reach a larger proportion of young people who have dropped out of school and are employed in various sectors of Owerri's formal and informal economies.

In addition, we also worked directly with ASPOCA (the Association for Positive Care), the first support group in Imo State formed by people living with HIV/AIDS. In cooperation with CYDI, we offered mentoring in organizational development, nutritional education, and counseling. In the summer of 2004, I sponsored two Brown undergraduates to come and work directly with CYDI through internal funds from Brown University and supplementary funds from the National Science Foundation.

Finally, in all the interviews, including in Ubakala, each of the interviewers provided respondents with up-to-date HIV/AIDS information, including information about local testing facilities and government and non-government agencies that could provide further information.

Recent presentations and forthcoming publications

- **A Culture of Corruption:
Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria**
[*Forthcoming from Princeton University Press*](#)
- "Modern Marriage, Extramarital Sex, and HIV Risk in Southeastern Nigeria", forthcoming, [American Journal of Public Health](#)
- [American Public Health Association, December 14 2005, New Orleans](#)
- African Studies Association, November 2005, Washington, DC
- American Anthropological Association, December 2005, Washington, DC
- National Institutes of Health, December 1, 2005
- [Brown University, Population Studies and Training Center, March 2, 2006](#)

Smith, Daniel. "Love, Marriage, and the Social Organization of Extramarital Sex in Southeastern Nigeria." Presented at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association, in Washington, D.C., November 2005.

Smith, Daniel. "Modern Marriage: Masculinity and the Risk of HIV in Nigeria Center Center for AIDS Research (Lifespan/Tufts/Brown), Providence, Rhode Island, February 3, 2006.

Smith, Daniel. "Marriage, Masculinity and HIV Risk in Southeastern Nigeria." Presented at the annual meetings of the Population Association of America, Los Angeles, CA, March 30, 2006.

Local collaborating agencies

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