RUTH AND NAOMI (RUTH 1:16-17): PARADIGM FOR RELATIONSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY FAMILY LIFE

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Abstract
Oftentimes, the relationship between mothers-and-daughters-in-law (nnedi na nwunyenwa) is described in less than positive terms. The caricature of the mother-in-law in cartoons amplify the adverse relationship setting up some women to approach marital state with trepidation. Positive images of the relationship between in-laws that can be appropriated for contemporary family life abound in the Scripture, of which, the narrative of Ruth and Naomi is emblematic. This positive image of the female in-law relationship in the book of Ruth questions the default assumption of the antagonistic relationship between mothers-and-daughters-in-law. Ruth, a multilayered tale in the Hebrew Scripture, captures succinctly the themes of steadfast love, solidarity, friendship, life, covenant, community, among others, themes that further positive and secures family wealth, aku, be it material or non-material. The narrator employs metaphors, drama, and innuendos to tell in a terse form, the resilience of women in bringing about life in the midst of poverty, deprivation, misery, and even death. The desperate condition of life in most areas of contemporary Nigeria, and family crises, closely resembles the historical context of the text under study, and as such underscores the significance of the investigation. Although levirate-like marriage in the tale resonates with traditional African family life, however, family relationship, secured in ḥesed (steadfast love), within a homestead, resonates more with the contemporary audience. On this relationship rests the argument of this paper. The essay employs cultural and feminist hermeneutics, new historicism, and literal reading as methodological tools to show that insight from the book of Ruth remain pertinent to and as well challenge modern women, particularly female in-laws in forging enduring constructive relationships for the well-being of the family.
Key Words: Ruth and Naomi, solidarity, nnedi, nwunyenwa, relationship, family.

INTRODUCTION

The desperate relationship between mothers-and-daughters-in-law *nnedi na nwunyenwa*, continues to create tension in family life across many cultures of which Nigerian is not an exception. Although not widely spoken about, but more or less taken for granted, female in-laws' relationship unlike male in-laws is often described in negative terms. Even so, a literal reading of the Gospel according to Luke 12:52-53 appear to support the assumption. While noting potential division among members of a household, "For from now on, five members of a family will be divided, three against two and two against three; father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-

law against her daughter-in-law." The passage is silent on the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law, a silence that tends to suggest a conflict-free relationship between the male-in-laws. Regardless of primordial or social factors that produce as well as sustain the assumed antagonistic relationship between female-in-laws, the situation is redeemable. The Scripture, particularly the book of Ruth, provides insights that can be appropriated for a more nuanced positive *nnedi na nwunyenwa* relationship for the security and wellbeing of the family. In the exquisite short tale of Naomi and Ruth, which instructs as well as delights, is woven in a universal and timeless value of fidelity, solidarity, loyalty, friendship, love of family, justice, and generosity towards strangers. The timelessness of the story remains encapsulated in the values it communicates, which is reinforced by African Christian ancestor, St. Augustine of Hippo. St. Augustine ranks friendship and justice as primary values in spiritual life and moral life. Worthy of note are other positive representations of friendship between in-laws in the Scripture such as the bond between David and Jonathan. David was the husband of Michal, daughter of Saul, and Jonathan Michal's brother. Though both Israelites families, Jonathan and David were not of the same ethnic group, Jonathan was a Benjaminite and David a Judean.

Although most marriages in Nigeria occur between persons from a similar ethnic group, the female in-law dilemma still abound. Regardless of ethnic origin, the adverse relationship between mother-and- daughter-in-law, produces tales of woes on both sides of the family. Consequently, the women trapped in the retrogressive rather than being life-affirming, become life-denying agents in the immediate and extended family, a situation that tends to jeopardize family life, its *aku* and overall wellbeing.

But the protagonist of the book of Ruth emerges from a family setting unlike that of Naomi, *nwunyenwa*, her mother in-law, moreover, the disparity in age as well as experience, marks the sterling quality of the novella. *Ḥesed*, was the motivating force as well as the anvil of the exceptional relationship between the two women of rather strange backgrounds—Naomi, an Israelite, and Ruth, a Moabite. Traditionally, Israel and Moab were sworn enemies (Judges 3:12-30; Deut. 23:4). However, the historical setting of the book of Ruth reflects a time of relative peace between the two nations. Moreover, the story of friendship between Naomi and Ruth, expressed in the writing is best understood in the historical context of the peaceful milieu, "In the days when the judges ruled" (Ru 1:1). Given the scholarly range of the book of Ruth, which extends to such as feminist views, xenophobia, immigration, refugees, among others, the present essay focuses on in-law relationships within family life, a contemporary burning issue in the context of this investigation. Although Ruth is most read from the perspective of the Torah, advocacy criticisms offer possibili-

ties of other readings of this Jewish wisdom writing, which the study adopts. The essay facilitates a constructive mother-and-daughter-in-law relationship. First, we offer a brief discussion on the background of the text. Next comes a discussion on the surviving members of the family of Elimelech, namely, Orpah, Ruth, and Naomi. The contextualization of the study follows with a conclusion.

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF RUTH

Written in rhythmic prose in about the 5th century B.C., the book of Ruth, a fiction set in history, is the only biblical work named after a gentile, and a woman, Ruth the Moabite. The gentile woman designation indicates its subversion,[1] pointing to an exception that questions the rule. Ruth's subversion in its liberal interpretation of the Torah, insisting that Torah is *ḥesed* (fidelity), and not the law, a *ḥesed* that redeems everything, in unexpected circumstances. Traditional Judaic adherents read the book of Ruth during the annual feast of *Shevuot; Shevuot* celebrates the gift of the Torah (on Sinai).[2] The motivation for the reading of Ruth during the festival remains connected with its theme of *ḥesed*, convent fidelity, characterized in the central characters of the novella, Naomi and Ruth and later, Boaz. This Second Temple piece of work can be read as a political parable relating to the issues around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when intermarriage in Israel had become controversial (Ezra 9:1; Neh 13:1). The writing moderates the religious isolationism propagated by Ezra and Nehemiah during the period. As for authorship, André LaCocque notes, Ruth is "a feminine book from beginning to end,"[3] and these four chapters and 85 verses narrative, was probably authored by a woman.[4] Undergirded by mutual love between Ruth the Moabite and Naomi, her mother-in-law, the tale is rooted in a condition of a family in dire need for survival. Driven by famine and potential death, from his native Bethlehem (meaning, house of bread), in Judah, Elimelech (meaning, my God is King) took his wife Naomi (meaning, charming, pleasant), and their two sons, Mahlon (meaning sickness) and Chilion (meaning wasting), settled in the land of Moab as economic refugees. Both sons married Moabite women, Ruth (meaning to water, satisfy) and Orpah (meaning back of the neck). Elimelech died, Naomi was left with her two sons Mahlon and Chilion, and their Moabite spouses. Later, the sons also died leaving the family with three widows, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. The author of Ruth spares no details applying the meanings of the names into this masterful testimony of the literary genius of ancient Israel. This study, however, excludes the particularities of names, which has already been explored in another work.[5] When bread returned to her home, Bethlehem of Judah though, Naomi bereaved of husband and sons, including ten rather "hollow" years of economic exile,

prepares to return home to Bethlehem alone and "empty," without *aku* to take back to *ulo*. The Ruth story then begins with Naomi deciding to end her economic exile and return home to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ru 1:22) the Passover period. Ruth's *ḥesed* etched in her unilateral declaration of allegiance even beyond death to Naomi (Ru 1:16-17), her mother-in-law, drives the short story.

RELATIONSHIP IN THE FAMILY OF WOMEN: ORPAH, RUTH, AND NAOMI

Stooped by age and bereavement, Naomi, the once charming wife of Elimelech, prepares to return home to Bethlehem dejected: "I went out full but the LORD has returned me empty" (Ru 1:21), loosely translated, *ebun aku puo ma gbara aka lota*, a harsh experience that prompted a name change, from Naomi (pleasant, charming) to Mara (bitter). It is instructive to note the willingness of the two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to return with her to the land of Judah (Ru 1:7) as a mark of fidelity and friendship an opening and pointer that can be remotely characterized as a *ije aku*, journey of wealth, back home.

Orpah

Orpah a Moabite and widow of Chilion, son of Naomi and Elimelech was persuaded by Naomi, her mother-in-law to return to her family regardless of her willingness to return to Bethlehem with her. An emotionally packed scene (Ru 1:7-15), witnesses the return of Orpah to her "mother's house" (Ru 1:8), to her people and, to her gods, to continue with life. Orpah, the back of the neck as the name suggests, describes how she turned her back on her mother-in-law and returned to *bet immah*, her mother's house, *Usoekwu nnem* or *mgbala* (in Igbo).[6] *Mgbala* represents the soul of the household, where life is nurtured, hurts healed and the future delicately fashioned, at the mgbala, a child learns to morals and values, a transformation that takes place in this sacred space, the *mgbala*, translates fine adulthood.

Naomi's use of the term "mother's house," in a decidedly patriarchal society, instead of the established "father's house," is significant. A note would elucidate the point further. In most agrarian cultural settings, such as ancient Israel, the mother's house remains a child's most secured space as the following paragraph explicates.

After an encounter with the servants of Abraham, young Rebecca runs off to her mother's household with the news of the visitor in connection with marriage to Isaac (Gen 24:28). Another wisdom writing, Song of Songs, twice sights "mother's house." The female lover would have no

respite until she had brought her lover to her mother's house: "I would lead you, bring you into the home of my mother" (S of S. 3:4; 8:2). Furthermore, there is an allusion to the significance of the mother's house in William Ross Wallace in his 1865 poem titled "What Rules the World: The Hand That Rocks the Cradle is the Hand That Rules the World." In essence, Wallace points to the *mgbala* as the source of a child's socialized ethics that shapes hers or his imagination about how to understand herself or himself. Here also the child learns how to experience life and death, success, and failure, love, and betrayal,[7] and the intricacies of *aku ruo ulo*. It could then be said that Naomi's feminine instinct, directs her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, back to the very foundation from where they could rebuild their lives with dignity and contribute more effectively to society.

Furthermore, centuries of a literal reading of the book of Ruth in a way negatively portray Orpah as a deserter. She has been read as one who abandoned her mother-in-law, an older woman in a dismal situation, a disloyal *nwunyenwa*. But Laura A. Donaldson's Postcolonial work titled, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," exonerates Orpah of the accusation of abandoning her mother-in-law, Naomi; rather Orpah is applauded for returning to her *bet immah*. Donaldson insists that "Centuries of reading vilify Orpah. But a native reading by the Cherokee (Indian), applauds Orpah's action[8] for not abandoning her people, she returned home "empty" as it were, widowed and childless but a sense of dignity. Although her loyalty to Naomi was extraordinary, she, Orpah, acted justly. For a native reader, however, Orpah rather than her sister-in-law, Ruth, is the heroine of the tale, for she did not abandon her people and her god. Ruth, possessed by *hesed*, however, cleaved to her *nned*i and returned with her to Bethlehem. To Ruth, we now turn.

Ruth

The peculiar character of Ruth the Moabite as subversive emerges from several angles. Her marriage: a Moabite maiden, marries an outsider, a Judean, while still with her people, Moab; her clinging to an older widow, who had nothing to offer her are but a few examples. From the onset, this anti-establishment character of Ruth was positioned as detribalized and a bridge builder as well. Her marriage to Mahlon, son of Naomi and Elimelech, was without progeny. Widowed in Moab, Ruth nevertheless, attaches herself unconditionally, to an older widow, her mother-in-law, Naomi, and determined to return to Bethlehem in the land of Judah with her. Naomi persuaded Ruth and her sister-in-law Orpah, to return home to their families: "Go back each of you to your mother's house . . ." (Ru

1:8), Orpah did but Ruth would not return to the land of the Moabites. Rather, she clings to Naomi as a man clings to his wife (Gen 2:24) and much more, even after death; she commits herself to the God of Israel thus:

> 'Do not press me to leave you
> or to return from following you!
> Where you go, I will go;
> Where you lodge, I will lodge;
> Your people shall be my people,
> And your God my God.
> Where you die, I will die—
> There will I be buried.
> May the LORD do thus and so to me,
> And more as well,
> If even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16-17; NRSV)

A vibrant young widow, Ruth, true to her name, which means "to water", "satisfy," commits herself unconditionally to *nnedi ya*, Naomi, an older widow who has practically nothing to offer her. In verse 16, her decision to leave everything compares to Abraham (Gen 12). Her extravagant resolution led to a voluntary change of identity "your people shall be my people," and religion, "And your God my God." To understand the impact of Ruth's commitment, one must realize that in ancient Israel, as it remains true in some Nigerian cultures today, a woman has hardly any social standing. Her personhood is defined socially by either her being her father's daughter, her husband's wife, or her son's mother. Outside this parameter, a woman is a non-entity. She can neither take a loan in her name nor witness in court. Against this background, a widow has little or no social status. In the light of the foregoing, one begins to appreciate the courage, the audacity of Ruth, a Moabite, who left her gods, family, friends, and country to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to the land of Judah. Ruth's commitment to Naomi in verse 17, goes beyond this present life, it implies that even if Naomi ceases to exist, she, Ruth will not return to her home country, Moab, but would continue to remain in Bethlehem and, indeed be buried in the land of Judah. Burial places remain sacred and significant for biblical characters (see, Gen 25:16-20; 50:13, 24-26; Josh 24:32) as well as many African peoples. In effect, Ruth became a naturalized Bethlehemite and her "naturalization" would become part of the grand narrative of the Jesus event in the New Testament.

Why did Ruth sacrifice so much for Naomi? The answer can be found in the wide range of sensitivity entrenched in *ḥesed*. Ruth seems to understand what awaited her mother-in-law on her return to the land of Judah[9]

and would not let the old widow suffer alone. Moreover, it does appear Ruth's marriage into the family of Elimelech could be nothing other than a self-gift. A self-gift expressed in her determination to convert the emptiness of Naomi's ten years of exile into fullness. On this basis emerges a new kind of family, mediated by Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer, for the family of Elimelech, a family not borne out of lust but *ḥesed*, a fidelity that embraces the entire community, the living, the yet to be born, and the dead. Alice L. Laffey echoes other scholars in recognizing levirate marriage "made possible the perpetuation of a patriarchal line in those families where the husband died before his wife had conceived any offspring."[10] The reason being that in ancient Israel, the notion of life after death was nonexistent, consequently, one continues to live through one's children. That is to say, the absence of children meant total annihilation.[11] For unlike the Christian tradition, "sex" was not a dirty word in Judaism, neither is it so in some indigenous cultures such as the Igbo; the author of Ruth, in order to protect the dignity of sex, employs innuendoes and metaphors, to further the narrative in the encounter between Ruth and Boaz. One must not, however, downplay the levirate-like marriage shrewdly orchestrated by Naomi to achieve their goal, continuing the family of Elimelech. In this regard, a close reading of the text presents an understanding of Boaz marriage to Ruth as more ritual and legal than marital. In risking all to fill the emptiness of another woman, a widow, who wrote her off, Ruth challenges the community to practice solidarity, a solidarity expressed by Boaz, and the women of Bethlehem (Ru. 4) after Ruth's birth to Obed, the grandfather of Israel's greatest king, David (Matt 1:5).

Naomi

Naomi (meaning, charming, pleasantness) is the widow of Elimelech and mother of their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Naomi's ten-year sojourn in the land of Moab, as an economic exile, dispossessed her of three male relatives, a husband, and two sons. Stooped by age and bereavement and blinded to the gain of two vibrant loving daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem without the two women. But why would two vibrant young widows consider spending the rest of their lives with their *nnedi*, who had practically nothing to offer them. A response could be found in the fuller meaning of the name, Naomi—charming, which connotes a sweet gentleness she undoubtedly etched deeply in the lives of the daughters-in-law during their years of marriage. But Naomi rejects her daughters-in-law's voluntary offer to return home to Bethlehem with her. Bitterness marked her life at the time of the return (1:20), hence the self-name change to Mara, "call me Mara" (meaning bitter), she tells the women of Bethlehem, who came out to welcome her

back. Naomi's shrewdness is manifest in the astute deployment of her daughter-in-law, Ruth, "water" in order to "satisfy" her deepest desire, which is keeping her husband's lineage open. Here, Ruth and Naomi's agenda meets—bringing forth new life in the midst of death. The neighborhood women of Bethlehem praises Naomi's good fortune in her daughter-in-law, Ruth. For them, nothing but the expression *aku ru ulo*, could describe Naomi's good fortune. In an attempt to quantify Ruth's love for her mother-in-law, the women praise- singers compared Ruth to the worth of seven sons: "for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons" (Ru 4:15); Ruth leaves the story exalted above the ideal number of male children, seven sons.[12] With the birth of Obed, bitterness gives way to joy for Naomi.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

The social system that governs marriage in Nigeria and most parts of Africa keep couples and parents-in-law in close proximity. In a patrilocal or virilocal marriage, couples reside with or near the husband's parents, which accounts for an apparent lack of privacy in the new family. Thus, mothers-and-daughters-in-law seem to practically circulate within the same sphere, physically and emotionally. In addition to operating within the same domain, female-in-law conflicts appear to have roots also in competition for the attention of the son/husband—two women liking the same man, son, and husband, respectively. In some extreme situations, narcissistic mothers-in-law, regardless of their status, never let go of their sons emotionally. Perhaps the practice of securing a spouse for a son offers the would-be mother-in-law some degree of control over the daughter-in-law. Female in-laws unfriendly attitude cuts across social status; such behavior can be found among, lettered as well as unlettered women, urban as well as rural women. Some mothers-in-law hardly allow the young couple to become independent as a nuclear family. Such control is unlike Naomi, who literally, attempted to push out her daughters-in-law, to seek their independence. Although Naomi could also be criticized for being self-centered, buried in her disappointment while rejecting the offer of new life in Ruth, the water that satisfies.

Similarly, some daughters-in-law leave no stone unturned in determining their legitimacy in a patrilocal homestead. Freedom from in-law interference often force many young couples to break bounds with cultural expectation of living within the homestead, they take up residence in locations far from the prying eyes of their mothers-in-law. To avoid faceoff, these young couples rarely visit their home even during festivals. Moreover, the social and cultural loss of the negative relationships on grandchildren is incalculable. Issues bordering on fertility more often than

not remains a source of conflict between female-in-laws regardless of medical history. The list and scenario of such undesirable attitudes among female in-laws abound, they cannot be exhausted in this essay. Most importantly, the female-in-law problem among Christian women, questions an understanding of the biblical "mother's house" elucidated above. In such a tension-packed scenario, one may question the sense in which family is understood in Nigeria, particularly the place of *ḥesed* in family relationships.

Conflicts exist in other aspects of family life but that of *nnedi na nwunyenwa*, is mostly trumpeted. Even a plant species is designated "mother-in-law's tongue," on account of its elongated tongue-like shape, a term associated with a breakdown in the female-in-law relationship. Notably, the plant species, *sansevieria trifasciata* is of the family *Asparagaceae*, native to tropical West Africa from Nigeria east to the Congo. It is most commonly known as the snake plant, mother-in-law's tongue, and viper's bowstring hemp, among other names.[13] Worthy of note is how overwhelmingly the relationship between mother-daughter-in-law empties the woman of her life securing role in the family. The author of Ruth understands this point clearly in harmonizing the desires of Ruth and Naomi to safeguard the community. The need to safeguard life is more pronounced in a time of economic and political crises such as exist in contemporary Nigeria. Mutual support undergirded by *ḥesed* remains the default mode for survival amid apparent life-denying circumstances.

In Nigeria, many women profess the biblical faith tradition, belonging to one Christian women's group or another, Catholics, Protestants alike. They belong variously to: Catholic Women Organizations, Mothers' Union, and numerous Charismatic and Pentecostal women's groups. These groups can take up the task of eradicating what has become a cliché, that is, the mothers-daughters-in-law conundrum.

Presumed cultural constrictions governing *nnedi na nwunyenwa* relationship, notwithstanding, Ruth and Naomi working together achieved their purpose of bringing about new life, they became restorers of hope in the midst of death. Relationship grounded on reciprocal love between the in-laws undergird their actions. *Ḥesed* exemplified by Ruth and Naomi remains the elixir to female in-law quandary. Written over two millennia ago, one can find parallels of the book of Ruth in some contemporary African fiction.

The parallel of the book of Ruth with Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*,[14] is startling in its theme of women as restorers of life in the midst of death. In both tales, women keep hope alive in their mutual fidelity. Women's indispensable role as preservers of life, epitomized in the act of naming. Like the woman who named Ruth's son, Obed (servant), a woman, Beatrice Nwanyibuife, names Elewa's daughter born after the

devastation in Kangan, Amaechina (loosely translated, "may my lineage never become extinct").[15] In the case of Ruth, the women of the neighborhood said to Naomi "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel," (Ru 4:14). Amaechina and Obed in both narratives, function as the biblical "shoots from the stump," (Isa 11:1) that continue the lineage after devastation occasioned by war and by deaths, respectively.

I draw insight from the work of LaCocque to further buttress the parallel in the two narratives, the book of Ruth and *Anthills of the Savannah*:

1. In both stories, there are three men Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion (family members) on the one hand and Sam, Chris, and Ikem (Kangan socio-politics major actors) on the other hand.
2. Both mention the deaths of the three men.
3. In both, it is a question of the role of women in death-dealing circumstances.
4. In both stories the women, Naomi and Ruth; Beatrice and Elewa, seek to resolve the problem of descent.
5. In both, the story ends with the birth of a child.
6. In both women were name givers of the new-born.
7. Both works are subversive, involving a hermeneutic of power, the socio-economic and political system.

In both narratives, two women, Beatrice and Elewa on one hand, and Ruth and Naomi on the other hand worked in solidarity to redeem sterility by bringing back light (Beatrice) and water (Ruth) into a dying realm.[16] Of the undervalued women, particularly widows, Nigerian poet, Ben Okri captures vividly the possibilities and beauty produced by the underrated:

> It would seem a miraculous feat, but the unvalued ones can help create a beautiful new era in human history. A new vision should come from those who suffer the most and who love life the most. This marvelous responsibility of the unheard and the unseen resides in this paradox.[17]

Ruth and Naomi had made brave choices in a circumstance that allowed them no freedom, an intensely patriarchal enclave. They choose, as far as the law permitted, to do whatever would allow them to stay together, without undue penury, or censure by the townspeople of Bethlehem. Aware of their primary responsibilities as bearers of life, contemporary mothers-and-daughters-in-law, drawing from the text studied, can truly

become those hands that rock the cradle, ruling the world with beauty and grace.

CONCLUSION

The practice of *ḥesed* permeates the book of Ruth, a Jewish wisdom writing explored in this work. Although classical rendition offers variant readings of the text, the celebration of friendship between female in-laws underscores the present work. Naomi and Ruth, *nnedi na nwunyenwa*, strong and resourceful women, whose mutual love enables them to survive in a dire situation offer insight that can be appropriate for women's relationship in marriage. Self-giving in friendship catapulted Ruth into fame and etched her name permanently in Israel's salvation history. Ruth is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus as the grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David (Matt 1:5). This wisdom text transcends society's expectation of making in-laws, *ndi ogo* remain strangers and antagonistic to each other. Ruth makes it abundantly clear that the backbone of family life is its womenfolk. It thus means that *nnedi na nwunyenwa* relationship cannot but be life-giving in the service of family and society at large. The story amplifies maternal survival instinct, the lifeline of the human race, insights that can be appropriated in resolving female in-law challenges because any society that has lost its maternal instinct is doomed. Consequently, the story of Ruth and Naomi instructs in more ways than one level of relatedness. The story shows that social ills bedeviling Nigeria today such as corruption, moral decadence, political misadventure, to mention but a few, are redeemable with a commitment to *ḥesed*. Ultimately, Ruth instructs that without God's Word as an anchor, modern women, married, unmarried, or widowed, drift to extremes forgetting that woman, the finishing design of all creation has been created with a unique task to bring forth new life.

NOTES

[1] André LaCocque, *RUTH: A Continental Commentary*, Translated by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1

[2] LaCocque, RUTH, 80.

[3] LaCocque, 5.

[4] LaCocque, *RUTH,* xvii.

[5] See, Caroline N. Mbonu, Handmaid: *The Power of Names in Theology and Society*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

[6] Caroline N. Mbonu, Women's Religious Culture in Etcheland: A Traditional and Biblical Perspective, in *Interface Between Igbo Theology and Christianity*, ed. Akuma-Kalu Njoku and Elochukwu Uzukwu (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 113-115.

[7] See, Mbonu, *Handmaid*, 39.

[8] Laura A. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 20-36.

[9] The Hebrew term that designates a widow, אלמכה (Greek *chōra*), describes a legal position without parallel in our modern languages." For the Hebrew, this person is: (a) a widow and (b) without a son, son-in-law, or brother-in-law. The widow can inherit, according to all the codes of the ancient Near East except the codes in force in Israel. In ancient Israel as in most modern African cultures, a widow is a prime suspect in the death of her husband and as such treated with indignity. Some Catholic dioceses in Nigeria have progressed in dismantling obnoxious widowhood practices. Port Harcourt diocese, for instance, Msgr. Cyprian E. Onwuli inaugurated a widow's support group called Daughters of Mercy.

[10] Alice L. Laffey, "Ruth," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (India, Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1995), 554.

[11] Mbiti articulates the African notion of community, which closely aligns with that in the book of Ruth thus: The concept of personal immortality should help us to understand the religious significance of marriage in African societies. Unless a person has close relatives to remember him when he has physically died, then he is nobody and simply vanishes out of human existence like a flame when it is extinguished. It remains a duty, religious and ontological, for everyone to get married; and if a man has no children or only daughters, he finds another wife so that through her, children (or sons) may be born who would survive him and keep him in personal immortality. (See, John S. Mbiti, *Africa Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed, (London: Heinemann, 1990), 25.

[12] Phyllis Trible, "RUTH" in *Women in Scripture: a dictional of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers, General Editor, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, Associate Editors (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 146-147).

[13] https://www.thejoyofplants.co.uk/mother-law%E2%80%99s-tongue, accessed, January 26, 2016.

[14] Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Heinemann, 1987).

[15] Uzoechi Nwagbara, "Power Play and Gendered Spaces in Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah: A Cultural Materialist Reading," in *Achebe's Women, Imagism and Power*, ed. Chukwuma (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 2012), 149. See also, Caroline Mbonu, "Revalorizing Women's Agency: Motherhood in Anthills of the Savannah," in *Achebe's Women, Imagism and Power*, ed. Helen Chukwuma (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 2012), 111-127

[16] While Ruth means "to Water," "satisfied," Beatrice means "bearer of light." The symbolism of water has a universal undertone of purity and fertility. Symbolically, it is often viewed as the source of life itself as we see evidenced in countless creation myths in which life emerges from primordial waters. On the other hand, light generally stands for illumination in the metaphoric sense, revelation, goodness, clarity, insight. Light often means a conversion or new understanding. It is a symbol of purity and openness. In the Scripture, water is often depicted as a symbol of God's Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit symbolized by light suggesting a synergy between light and water. See Caroline N. Mbonu, Handmaid: *The Power of Names in Theology and Society*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 81-82.

[17] Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (Great Britain: Phoenix, 2002), 103.