

“Oriaku Vs Okpataku”: The Changing Roles of Femininity within the Patriarchal Igbo Tradition in Nigeria

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Abstract: Over time, the ease of access has been to the advantage of men and the disadvantage of women, especially in a traditional society like Nigeria. However, despite the marginalization, it appears that women are beginning to challenge norms, traditions, cultures, and stereotypes by breaking free from the shackles of patriarchy. Hence, this study examines the current perception of femininity concerning employment and income. Specifically, it aimed at understanding how the clamor for gender equality and equity has changed one of the characteristics of femininity from “Oriaku” to “Okpataku” in a typical patriarchal society like Anambra State, Nigeria. Using the Constructionist Theory of representation as a framework, the study adopts in-depth interviews as a qualitative approach. Findings reveal that both men and women are more comfortable with being Okpataku than Oriaku, owing to the recent harsh economic reality in the country. Recommendations were made based on the findings.

Keywords: Femininity, patriarchy, gender roles, Oriaku, Okpataku

1. Introduction

Throughout the world, including in Nigeria, there are still strong social and cultural norms that perpetuate power imbalances between men and women (Bank, 2012). Historically, in typical traditional African societies, such as Nigeria, women are not only perceived as inferior to men but are also marginalized and denied equal opportunities as men. In addition, women are treated as the lower gender or weaker sex (Ejukonemu, 2018) (Nwosu, 2012) (Tayo-Garbson, Njoku, & Etumnu, 2019). One of these power imbalances manifests itself in employment and income. In Nigeria, social and cultural expectations related to femininity have led to what the authors conceptualize as a shift from Oriaku to Okpataku. ‘Oriaku’ is an Igbo word that means ‘the one who consumes wealth’. *It historically originates from the cultural expectations of women as the gender who should enjoy being taken care of by men. It depicts passivity and dependency. On the other hand, ‘Okpataku’, loosely translated, means ‘the bringer of wealth and riches’ and also depicts economic power and independence. It is one of the characteristics of masculinity in a typical Igbo society in Nigeria.*

Femininity and masculinity are both social constructions of expected roles and behaviors associated with men and women at any given time in society (Nwosu, 2012) (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Often, such social constructions fail to depict the lived reality as experienced by men and women, even as both genders groan under the pressures of masculinity and femininity. For (Uzuegbunam, 2017), "Men are also increasingly being crushed under the overbearing weight of masculinity with little or no room for respite because society traps many men in its idealistic, false, and hypocritical sense of maleness and patriarchy—one that makes it difficult to be anything but "strong", "macho", "manly", "brave", "wise" and "successful". The worst hit is femininity, as women are more disadvantaged than men who exercise power through their masculinity (Drydakis, Sidiropoulou, Bozani, Selmanovic, & Patnaik, 2018) (Ejem, 2022). Femininity is associated with empathy, sensitivity, loyalty, and a caring disposition (Heilman, 2012)(Drydakis et al., 2018), homemaking, being dependent on and taking care of the family, and being objects of male attention (Ndolo, Udeze, & Anikpo, 2015). Women are frequently portrayed as the polar opposite of men, and such portrayals also define gender roles associated with male and female expectations in a given society. Gender roles are cultural and personal. They determine how males and females should think, speak, dress, and interact within society (Harcourt, 2016) (Otite & Ogionwo, 2006). According to (Ayorinde, 2019), gender roles vary across societies, and while men and women have equal rights and opportunities in some, men dominate in others, and women rarely control community administration. According to (Cuttingham, 2017), (Dike, Ojiakor-Umenze, & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2019), and (Odeh, 2014), gender roles impact how and whether men and women have access to essential resources and opportunities such as education, information, disposable income, and health services.

Despite the significant level of marginalization and unequal access to resources, there have been significant changes in the traditional role of women globally and in Nigeria, in particular. The socio-cultural barriers of tradition and culture are gradually giving way to new ideas, new values, and practices. Women are making giant strides and breaking new ground in almost every field of human endeavor (Fab-Ukozor & Ejem, 2015). According to the (Bank, 2012), globally, women devote 1-3 more hours per day to domestic labor than men and dedicate 2–10 times the amount of time per day to the care of children, the elderly, and the sick compared to men. A glance across many markets in Igbo Land in Nigeria reveals that a greater number of women are civil servants, entrepreneurs, petty traders, etc. With the effort women are making to contribute to the economic power in their families and the larger society, one wonders if it is right to still perceive them as 'Oriaku' or to acknowledge that they, like men, have become 'Okpataku." This study explores this question. According to (Action, 1995), one critical dimension for advancing gender equality is engaging men and boys. On that note, this

paper also evaluates the readiness of men to embrace a new concept of femininity—one that acknowledges women’s positionality as shifting from dependent to independent. In light of the issues mentioned above, this study explores the socio-cultural concepts of ‘Oriaku’ and ‘Okpataku’ within the overarching patriarchal Igbo society. Using residents in Onitsha, one of the most thriving and central cities in the Southeast part of Nigeria, the study aims to determine the ways in which the clamour for gender equality and equity has changed one of the characteristics of femininity from "Oriaku" to "Okpataku" in a typical patriarchal society like Anambra State in the Southeastern part of Nigeria.

2. Discussion

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the social constructionist theory, which posits that the meaning of things is socially constructed. According to Hall (2000) in (Ojiakor-Umenze, Onebunne, & Ekezie, 2019), meaning is constructed by the individual users of the language. We construct meaning using representational systems such as concepts and signs. Translatability is not given by nature or fixed by the gods. It is the result of a set of social conventions. It is fixed socially and in culture. The main point is that meaning is not inherent in things in the world. It is constructed and produced. It is the result of a signifying practice—a practice that produces meaning and makes things mean certain things.

The rightness or wrongness of an action is dependent on the role and interpretation of such roles as agreed on by a particular set of people. The appropriateness of the behaviors of men and women in each society is usually drawn from gender ideologies, which are also socially constructed (Dike et al., 2019). According to (Ungaretti & Etchezahar, 2013), it is a historical construction whose meaning is derived from each culture or the substrate upon which different meanings are given to the sexes. In this way, societies pigeonhole women and men into stereotypes that seem immovable, building belief systems about masculinity and femininity and, consequently, the types of activities and distribution of occupations that are appropriate for each sex.

From the foregoing, femininity and masculinity are not innate but are based on social and cultural conditions. In relatively recent times, there have been some significant changes in the traditional role of women globally and in Nigeria in particular. The social barriers of tradition and culture are gradually giving way to new ideas, values, and practices. This has seen more women taking up space in almost every field of human endeavor, including those occupations and professions that were once considered the exclusive preserve of men. As a result, some countries, including Nigeria, boast of women doctors, pharmacists, engineers,

politicians, lawyers, bankers, vice-chancellors, military officers, pilots, wrestlers, and even commercial car drivers, among others.

2.2 Methods

This study was designed using the qualitative approach. Specifically, an in-depth interview was employed as a means of eliciting data from human participants (Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekharefo, & Okpanachi, 2017) (Osuala, 2013). The respondents are married men and women aged 26 to 58 years old who live in the Omagba community in Onitsha, Anambra State, with a mean age of 38–51 years. The total number of interviewees was 30, with 15 males and 15 females. The language of the interview was determined by the interviewee, but it was either English or Igbo, the indigenous language of the locality. Even though the participants were residents of the Omagba community, there was a conscious decision to recruit participants from different states of origin across the five southeastern states of Nigeria. The researchers also ensured that each participant had a knowledgeable idea of the concepts of 'Oriaku' and 'Okpataku'. This was ascertained by asking a few preceding questions before the interview started. Participants' responses to these preceding questions determined whether their responses were used for analysis or not. The participants were informed that participation in the study was purely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw, especially if they felt biased or ill-disposed to answer any of the questions. They were also informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes. Care was also taken to conceal their identities in the data analysis. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device and then converted into text for qualitative data analysis.

An inductive approach was used to analyze the qualitative data to identify themes used to answer the research questions raised by the interviews. According to (R. Thomas, 2006), the inductive approach to qualitative data analysis is primarily concerned with condensing raw textual data into a brief, summary format, establishing clear links between the research objectives and the summary of findings from the raw data, and developing the underlying structure of experiences that are evident in the raw data. He further stated that the inductive approach is a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data, in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) also noted that the use of an inductive approach is common in several types of qualitative data analyses. It is based on these submissions that the researchers adopted the inductive approach for data analysis in this study.

2.3 Results

A total of 30 interviews with 15 married couples (male and female) were conducted. The interview covered the main aspects of the study as guided by the research objectives. They are:

1. Perception of the concept of Oriaku
2. Perception of Okpataku
3. Dominant preference between Oriaku and Okpataku
4. Perception of women as Okpataku as a threat to patriarchy

2.3.1. Perception of the Concept of 'Oriaku'

There is overwhelming evidence that interviewees are very aware of the concept of Oriaku and Okpataku. From data from 30 responses, it appears that there is uniformity in the definition of the concepts.

Beginning with Oriaku:

Interviewee (M) has this to say about Oriaku:

"In Igbo custom and tradition, Oriaku means and refers to married women generally but specifically to women married to rich men. For there to be an Oriaku, there must be an Okpataku.

The term 'Oriaku' is specifically meant for women who have been traditionally recognized by the community as married women. Such privilege is not for single ladies, as can be deduced from the response of another male interviewee, who posits that "the title of Oriaku is not for single ladies as the full pronunciation of Oriaku is Oriaku di ya, which means consumer of her husband's wealth".

In the same vein, another interviewee (M) has this to say:

"Oriaku is an Igbo title for women. It is a special title synonymous with the word 'wife' among the Igbos. Loosely translated, it means 'consumer of wealth'. In what can be said to be a uniform definition, a female interviewee saw Oriaku as "a person that stays home and waits for someone to provide for her needs. It can also be a pet name or endearment by a husband to his wife". However, another interviewee (F) introduced another dimension in the narrative by including men in the definition. According to her, "Oriaku in my own understanding is one who enjoys wealth in the family. It can be a male or female, especially in this time and age. It is a position of luck to fortunate ones. Traditionally, it refers to a married woman." Another interviewee (M) seems to be on the same page when he said that "in the past, it was for women but now, anyone can be Oriaku since ori is 'a consumer of' while aku is 'wealth". For this interviewee, times can make a man become Oriaku if the gods financially favor his wife more than him. When the woman becomes the provider of wealth, the man automatically becomes the Oriaku although he cannot be addressed as one in public.

What this means is that Oriaku is a name for women both within and outside the home but can be considered culturally derogatory if a man is explicitly addressed as Oriaku in public. In answer to the question on the general definition and the gender associated with the name or title 'Oriaku', data revealed that it was mostly reserved for the female gender. In Igbo culture, the female gender is described in several ways. For instance, when married, she is a wife. When she procreates, she is a mother; otherwise, she is simply a woman. For a wife, there are two scenarios: first, when everything about her life and her being revolves around her husband (the householder, or 'Dinweuno," which means 'master of the house'), such a

woman can be called Oriaku. "Ori" is a consumerist kind of role where the person only eats and does not earn or gather. For an Oriaku, her role revolves around taking care of what the husband brings, preparing it for the entire home, and being nourished by it. In other words, you cannot speak about her involvement in helping her husband grow or nurture wealth. Such a wife is not considered a helpmate but a consumerist figure. From responses from especially the male interviewees, such a wife cannot contribute anything in terms of ideas, finances, or security since she is entirely dependent on the husband, and without him, the wife is nothing at all.

One can now see that Oriaku makes the woman have a kind of borrowed existence and therefore cannot be called a self-realized wife. Her husband is her realization since the husband projected himself on her, and through the husband's self, her own self is realized. The implication here is that whatever good or bad happens to the man automatically affects the woman since she is cornered into a passive role. Therefore, Oriaku is a cultural position for Igbo women in Nigeria that plays into a patriarchal power relation and works to subjugate women to a life of dependence and subservience. It limits women's self-realization and existence in the contemporary world.

2.3.2. Perception of Okpataku

Okpataku literally means the bringer of wealth. The opinions of the interviewees were sought not only regarding the definition of Okpataku, but also the gender associated with the concept. Below are a few excerpts from their responses as used in the study:

- *"Okpataku is an afterthought to mean the opposite of Oriaku. It is not used to address anyone...Of a truth, both men and women can be Okpataku but naturally, it is the responsibility of the man to provide for his family and this is the rightful person to be called Okpataku"* (M).
- *"Okpataku is the direct opposite of Oriaku. It is the Igbo version of the English word for Mister. It literally means the cultivator of wealth. For me, anyone can be Okpataku although I do not like both Oriaku and Okpataku labels"* (M)
- *"Okpataku refers to the male gender precisely a married man"* (M).
- *"Okpataku refers to a hustler and provider of financial things in the house. It can be a man or woman depending on their capacity to provide needs in the house"* (M)
- *"Okpataku is a name formed by millennials to mean a hardworking woman who makes her own money rather than being dependent on her husband for everything"* (M)
- *"In an Igbo family setting, wives are Oriaku while men are naturally Okpataku. Now if there is no Aku (wealth) to eat, if the Okpataku is incapacitated either by nature, mental or physical inability, or the natural Oriaku has fortune smile on her either by dent of luck,*

inheritance or special skills or connections, the role changes. However, it is a taboo for a woman no matter how successful she might be to become Okpataku. In the same vein, a man does not become an Oriaku no matter how lazy, dull or indolent he is” (M)

- *“Okpataku is the one who brings food into the family. His/her job is to go out, hustle and provide for the family. What I am saying is that it can be both male and female gender”. (F)*
- *“Okpataku is a hustler who makes money and provides food and is usually reserved for a man” (F)*
- *“Okpataku in traditional Igbo society is a man but the current trend is that women are now breadwinners too, while men now relax to watch the women hustle”. (F)*
- *“Okpataku is the man as it is even stated in the Bible that the man must suffer to feed his family. Thus, the man is the provider but with the current reality in the society, both men and women are now Okpataku”. (F)*

According to the various responses above, the thread of 'aryanna' is that Okpataku earns the wealth enjoyed at home. While many people associated the term with men, few thought it should be broad enough to include whoever brings in the money, regardless of gender. If one is to take a position, the term Okpataku refers to men because, prior to the harsh economic realities that forced many women out to work and few men back to the house, men were the primary earners. This lends credence to the earlier assertion that men are Okpataku and women are Oriaku. This finding also lends support to (Uzuegbunam, 2017) definition of patriarchal masculinity.

2.3.3. Dominant Preference Between Oriaku and Okpataku

Following the different responses on the definition of Oriaku and Okpataku and the gender implications associated with the terms, the researcher sought to measure the interviewees' preference between the two. The researcher sought to gauge if women were comfortable being Oriaku and if the men were willing to continue living with Oriakus or Okpatakus.

- *“I will like her to be Okpataku too so that she will help me. If she is just Oriaku, then I will die from overthinking of how to provide for the family” (M)*
- *“I want to be both Oriaku and Okpataku to avoid insults from anybody. Too much begging can lead to insult which I will not tolerate. That was what forced me to become a tailor” (F)*
- *“I will prefer my wife to be Oriaku if I have excess wealth and I want to show off. At times as a result of class projections, the female Okpataku can be a mutual thing and appreciated. But the man should try to at least live up to expectations” (M)*

- *“Personally, I don’t have a choice. I address my wife as Oriaku notwithstanding that she makes her own money because the original meaning of Oriaku is Mrs. Again, even though she makes her own money, the basic onus of taking care of the house financially lies on me as the man. Rather she is a soulmate and partner whom I am supposed to love and care for and not the other way round” (M)*
- *“My wife can become an Okpataku but not by name or title, but design. If things change for a once prosperous man and the woman whom he might have set up in the good old becomes the Okpataku, there is nothing wrong with that. However, I will prefer my wife to be known as Osodieme (one who does with her husband) meaning the wife assists the husband in gathering the wealth (M)*
- *“Nnem (my dear), I will rather be a giver than a receiver to avoid insulting my entire existence and generation. In the present society, no woman is valued unless she is economically independent. Her husband and in-laws will never consult her on any issue because she has nothing to bring to the table. However, I will still love to receive love and gifts from oga (husband) regardless of how successful I become (F)*
- *As a man, I will like to be Okpataku as the head of the family and one entrusted with the responsibility of fending for the family. I will also like my wife to take care of the domestic works such as cooking, taking care of the children, etc. (M)*
- *If not for the harsh reality, I would have loved to be Oriaku but will still engage ns something no matter how little just to stay busy. I will also advice my daughters to be Oriaku and Okpataku even if it’s on a small scale (F)*
- *I will like my wife to be herself, whoever and whatever she wants to be. She is first of all a human being before any Oriaku or Okpataku title. (M)*
- *I will like myself and my daughters to be Okpataku so that they can afford to train their children to their taste. The cost of training 5 children in time past is now presently used to train one child. Thus, a woman needs to be earning extra for survival and to support her husband (F)*
- *Frankly and honestly speaking, in a family where the wife is Okpataku and not Oriaku, doom looms around, trouble is a welcome guest, pugnacity, altercations and diabolical schemes are all available. The natural role is for a man to be in charge. But how can one be in charge of another’s wealth. A woman cannot bring the wealth and the man comes to answer Nnayiukwu (my Lord). No, his name should change to Nwokea (that man) or Papa Okechukwu (Okechukwu’s father) if the name of his first child is Okechukwu” (M)*
- *Every man would naturally want his wife to be Oriaku because doing so gives sense of fulfillment and goes to show that he is hardworking and can take good care of his wife and children. (M)*

- *“See, a woman must accumulate the wealth before she can be a consumer. To sustain the wealth, she needs to step out of the role of Oriaku. She can move out into the realm of Osodieme and Osodieriaku. It is to the advantage of the family. For example, if the man goes bankrupt or sick, the woman can support the family. With Okpataku, a woman expresses more self worth and realization. She stops being a property and reduces the chances of physical, verbal, and emotional abuse” (M)*
- *“These days, everyone needs a helping hand. No sane man should feel comfortable allowing his wife to be a housewife rather a co-Okpataku. The reason includes the hardship in the society making real men who can solely take care of their families rare to find (M)*

From the different responses, most men are grudgingly willing to see their women as Okpataku as a means of surviving the harsh economic reality in the country. From the excerpts above, one can deduce that financially stable men are willing to allow their wives to remain Oriakus while the middle class is willing to compromise for the sake of survival. It is also noteworthy that a few of the male interviewees support women to be economically and financially active for their self-worth, protection, self-respect, and self-realisation.

Coming to the female responses, many will prefer to be consumers and not co-earners. However, they are forced to break away from the shackles of femininity for some form of independence and in the quest for respect especially from spouses and in-laws.

For majority of the male interviewees, in Igbo custom, a reasonable and culturally minded woman does not brandish her wealth. No, she hides under her husband because ‘ugwunwanyibu di ya’ (meaning that the pride of a woman is her husband). In most traditional societies in Nigeria, women’s success is linked to their husbands. According to their responses and logic, successful spinsters do not claim title regardless of their wealth. A wealthy single lady desiring a title easily marries a husband and pays the bills, but the man takes the glory of being the provider and head of the home. Similarly, wealthy married women obtain titles for their ‘unfortunate’ husbands and attach their honour to such titles as ‘Lolo’ (wife of a titled man).

2.3.4. Perception of Women as Okpataku as Threat to Patriarchy and Masculinity

- *“No! A man is a man, a woman is a woman. Any woman who challenges the headship of a man because she is richer is senseless. Some women do it but it is not right at all” (M)*
- *“The man is the head and Okpataku while the woman plays a supporting role even if she is the major contributor in the family” (F)*
- *“No! A man is the head of the family regardless of his economic status unless if the man is stupid. A stupid man is the man who doesn’t make any effort to provide for his family. It is*

different to hustle without success than to sleep and lazy around all day waiting for the woman. Such a man is stupid and not worthy to be called a man” (F)

- *The present society of modernity does seriously challenge patriarchy. Margaret Thatcher, Sirleaf Johnson and few others have challenged men. Have we ever heard of 1st man of Britain or France? Dr Okonjo-Iweala has been in the public domain for 3 decades now but not much is known about her husband. The truth is that most Igbo men aspire to get a good bargain for their wives but rarely depend on them for social climbing. A serious-minded man will still mind his business irrespective of wife’s achievement. However, to challenge or become jealous is nothing but imbecility(M)*
- *Oriaku remains Oriaku irrespective of the changing roles of most women in the society. It is true that most women these days are breadwinners of their families due to circumstances, but it does not make them to assume headship of their families. The Igbo society still regards and addresses us as Oriaku or Odoziaku (keeper of wealth) as created to be. (F)*
- *A change from Oriaku to Okpataku does not in any way show gender equality. A man may suffer misfortune like job loss or business failure which may momentarily change the nomenclature. A responsible female Okpataku should understand she is just filling the gap occasioned by circumstances. It will be wrong for her to claim gender equality (M)*
- *No! It can’t because in the house, it is certain who the husband is as well as the wife. Their role is publicly defined (M)*
- *No! No! Any man who feels threatened is very myopic (M)*
- *It does not in any way connote gender equality and therefore not a threat (M)*
- *“I think that the basic idea of Okpataku in itself connotes gender equality between sex and was championed as a gender equality ideology by millennial females and as a means of labeling females as lazy by young male millennials who are indirectly seeking for financial support from the females who hitherto were reluctant to give it to the men” (M)*
- *No. Even if the woman is the only one who finances the house, she cannot be called a man. She still has to be under the man. The woman needs the man to be the head of the family and also serve as her shield against intruders. Without a man in the house, the woman becomes vulnerable. The woman can never be rich enough to become a man, it is impossible! (F)*
- *A man is a man while a woman is a woman. Some women may be destined to be the ones to change their husbands from rags to riches. A man should appreciate a woman who contributes to the house instead of using her money to buy latest clothes in the market. Men and women should learn to stay within their limits (M).*

- *“This idea of male folks claiming superiority is meaningless. However, I condemn certain forms of feminism. I rather prefer womanism to feminism” (M).*
- *“There should be a caveat that even when the role changes, a woman is still a woman” (M)*
- *“No because regardless of a woman’s wealth, she doesn’t attend Umunna (kindred) meeting” (F)*
- *“I am not bothered because even though my wife is richer, she cannot climb a palm tree or iroko tree. I will be called for such as a man” (M)*

Data gathered from female interviewees revealed that women are pushing the boundaries to become Okpataku in the interest of their families and not to challenge the existing patriarchal frameworks. Most, if not all the female participants, agreed that a woman remains a woman and under her husband despite her level of success or economic power. This appears not to be so among the male interviewees as half of the males feel threatened and see women becoming Okpataku as a recipe for disaster in the home. One of the male participants who is a lawyer by profession was vehemently against the notion of Okpataku as he thinks that men would be toppled from their cultural positions in the home as the head since ‘he/she who pays the piper dictates the tune’. One would think that the variable of educational status would make a difference in the perceived threat to patriarchy and masculinity, but this does not appear to be the case. After an interview with an uneducated petty trader revealed that Okpataku is a welcome idea to prevent his early demise, the researcher came to this conclusion. Meanwhile, female interviewees, both educated and uneducated, are not interested in ascending the male throne; rather, they want to be a woman in a supposed man's world.

3. Conclusion

The study has evaluated the changing patterns of femininity from Oriaku to Okpataku within the patriarchal Igbo society in Nigeria. Findings indicated that both men and women see the need for a change in economic status from Oriaku to Okpataku. However, further investigation revealed that while women are not bothered by the underlying implications of status changes, most men feel threatened. The findings imply that both labels, Oriaku and Okpataku, are intrinsically problematic. They stem from patriarchy and misogyny. From the data gathered, men are groaning under the burden of patriarchy as it presents and results in many real-life problems. Women are also willing to step out of the confines of the social construction of what it means to be a woman, which reduces them to second-class citizens. Also, there is a new concept of Osodieme (a wife working with her husband to create wealth) and Osodieli (a wife eating wealth with her husband), which makes men and women a bit equal when it comes to bringing and enjoying wealth and economic empowerment and provision.

Furthermore, the era of Oriaku and Okpataku is almost over, and both men and women are comfortably playing both roles in their families interchangeably. This must be recognised and become the new narrative.

It is concluded that neither Oriaku nor Okpataku should be the classic or realistic ideal of how a typical Igbo man or woman—or any other human being anywhere—should be seen or treated. In the world of today, both men and women should be allowed to both earn and enjoy each other's earnings in a loving, equal partnership or relationship. In other words, there should be interdependency where complementarity and supplementarity are the norm.

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