

## **Mother-in-law visits in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough***

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*Abstract.* This paper considers two explanations for why the main character of Flora Nwapa's novel *One is Enough* does not answer the question of how many times her mother-in-law has visited. One of these is a variation on the surprise exam paradox.

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*“Above her level is one who thinks more,  
So I'm training my mother-in-law”*

This is the opening of chapter 2 of Flora Nwapa's novel *One is Enough*:

Obiora's mother continued:

‘Tell me, my son's wife, since you married my son, six years ago, how many times have I visited your home? Go ahead and tell me how many times.’ And she paused so that Amaka could reply, but Amaka said nothing.

‘Well, since you cannot answer me, I will tell you. This is the sixth time I have visited you.’ Amaka swallowed, and shifted her position, and said to herself:

‘Well, I asked for this. Six times indeed!’

‘Did you hear me?’ her mother-in-law continued.

‘Yes, Mother, I heard you. You said you had visited six times since we were married six years ago. I can hear you very well, Mother.’ (1992 [1981]: 13)

Why does Amaka not answer her mother-in-law? There are various explanations one might offer. I shall present two, both “intellectualist” I should warn readers.

*Which answer?* It seems as if there is a norm: the mother-in-law should visit once every year following marriage. So Amaka is not sure which answer to give her mother-in-law: “Six times” or “As many times as you should.”

*A surprise exam paradox answer.* Imagine that the norm is not just that the mother-in-law should visit once every year following marriage but also that this visit should be a surprise (Strathern 2005). Amaka does not answer, because she is puzzled over how these conditions can be met. If it reaches the penultimate evening of a year, a Thursday say, and there has still been no visit, then she will be able to predict that her mother-in-law will visit tomorrow – the final day, Friday – so the visit will not be a surprise on that day, so Amaka can rule out a visit on that day. But then, on the evening before the penultimate evening, i.e. Wednesday evening, if no visit has yet occurred, she knows that her mother-in-law will not visit on the final day of the year, which only leaves tomorrow for the event. But then it will not be a surprise on that day either. By repeating this process of reasoning, she concludes that her mother-in-law cannot meet the conditions of the norm. And yet it seems she does! Amaka is silently contemplating this problem.

From these two, I would like to think the explanation is the first one offered, but I don’t think it especially unlikely in this kind of situation that there is some elaborate, and probably unreasonable, explanation for silence like the second, accompanied even by a reflection: “This woman will never reach the higher levels of thought.”

## References

Nwapa, F. 1992 (originally 1981). *One is Enough*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press.

Strathern, M. 2005. *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.