

HISTORICIZING MARRIAGE SYSTEMS IN IKWERRE NATIONALITY OF RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE, 1800 - 2010

Chidi Amadi, Ph.D

chidiamadi70@gmail.com

08036698110

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru

University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10998401>

Abstract: Marriage is an approved union between couples with which legitimate sex is guaranteed with the expectation of children. The paper interrogates the marriage system of the Ikwerre as a panacea for peaceful co-existence, hence, it argues that marriage promotes social status of individuals, bestows cohesion, unity, stability, peace and harmony which are pre-requisite for economic development and nation building. The stages of marriage negotiations such as introduction *okwu-aka-nu-oro*, tearing of friendship agreement for those that engaged in pre-marital affairs *ordor-wa-orkwukwo-oyii*, payment for the bride's parents *ome-ha-nne-nu-nda*, presentation of drinks to kinsmen *rumunda-wuo-ru-manya* and the payment of bridewealth *okwu-onu-erkwu-nwere* were highlighted. The paper explains that adultery is a serious offence among married women in Ikwerre and attracts punishment on anyone caught. Inter-disciplinary approach, primary and secondary sources were explored in the reconstruction of the work.

Keyword: Marriage, Negotiation, Bridewealth, Ikwerre, Peaceful Co-existence

Introduction

Marriage is important in the social life of Ikwerre people. It is not just a union of two-the man and woman but an alliance between two families. Andah (1988:119) opined that marriage ensures individual's social fulfilment and satisfaction. Marriage is an approved relation between couples with which legitimate sex is guaranteed with the expectation of children. Through marriage and

childbearing, life is preserved, propagated and perpetuated. Marriage is the very centre of human existence, reducing and neutralizing the effects of death through childbearing.

Mbiti (1975:98-99) sees “marriage as a sacred duty for normal persons if the flow of life is to continue. Failure to marry cuts off the link between death and life and destroys the offspring meant to grow on the human tree of life”. Thus, Ikwerre people see marriage as reducing and neutralizing the effects of death. The purpose of marriage includes obligation to bear children, build a family, extend life and pass down the torch of human existence. Failure to marry and have children is like committing a sacrilege against traditional beliefs and practices. However, according to Okah (2020), if a marriage was childless in Ikwerre, the man has to marry another wife because, it is mandatory for him to bear children since the flow of life must not end on his own part.

Marriage serves as a way of remembering dead parents which is possible due to the bearing of children, and their belief in the reincarnation of dead relatives. Marriage brings people of different clans and lineages together for procreation. In times of conflict, it brings amity between warring factions in the families and communities. Marriage gives an individual full recognition and status in the society. It confers mantle of full maturity on both men and women among many African societies including the Ikwerre (Andah, 1988:120). Thus, a man in Ikwerre who failed to marry is regarded as *nye-ewhu-ri-ewhu* (foolish, worthless or irresponsible fellow).

Sources and Method

The work is premised on primary and secondary sources of history. Primary sources include oral interviews, with knowledgeable persons in Ikwerre. The use of oral sources requires skill which through the application of the historian’s craft of scrutiny and objectivity were carefully selected, examined and analyzed. Written sources used are found in books, research essays by scholars and archival materials especially intelligence reports left by British colonial administrators.

Inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary approach which permits the methodologies of other disciplines such as sociology and religion was adopted. The difficulties of penetrating the distant past of African societies through oral traditions, literature and ancient artifacts have imposed on African historians the necessity of the inter-disciplinary approach (Alagoa, 1978:13). These sources contributed adequately to the historical reconstruction of the topic under the present study.

Forms of Marriage in Ikwerre

The forms of marriage practiced among the Ikwerre could be monogamy or polygyny. But, marriage was more polygamous than monogamous in Ikwerre because more wives meant more children and more hands on the farm work since their major occupation was farming. Owhonda (2021) explained that the Ikwerre people also practice the levirate form of marriage. This is a type of marriage in which a kinsman takes over the wife of a deceased brother or a son marries the younger wife of his late father. He further explained that this can only be possible if after the

burial ceremony of the deceased, the woman performs the ritual functions of getting another man which stipulates that she provides some items according to the traditional practices of the Ikwerre people such as “*otu owu* a goat, *ijii esator* 8 tubers of yam, *otuu ololo akameru* one bottle of local gin, *ara* salt, *isewere* pepper, *monor* palm oil and a jar of palm wine to perform the rites of re-marriage”. In this form of marriage, there are no bride transfers and children resulting thereof belonged to the deceased husband.

Furthermore, there is also woman to woman marriage in some parts of Ikwerre especially in the Obio axis. A woman could marry a wife of her own especially where the woman was barren. The children from that marriage bears her maiden name to enable her have heirs in the family. The female husband determines the manner of allocation of her wife sexual favours by screening and approving the male partners. Sometimes, the female husband goes for the negotiation of any man of her choice with a bottle of local gin *akameru* or *kaikai* without the consent of the female wife. This is to enable her to be very sure of the type of children the wife was going to produce for her. Andah (1988:120) posits that in woman to woman marriage, woman serves as a Pater to the offspring of the wife but the physical father is an assigned lover. There are instances in some communities in Ikwerre when an assigned lover finally took the full responsibility as the husband of the woman by paying the woman’s dowry in her family, thereafter, the wife now becomes his own as she moves to his compound. Consequently, this arrangement often resulted to strained relationship between the woman who originally owned the wife and the assigned lover. In this case, dowry was usually refunded to the first woman as it happened in Rumuagholu when a woman who brought a wife to bear her children was taken over by an assigned lover earlier solicited to impregnate her (Amadi, 2012).

Another form of marriage in Ikwerre is the *odazi eteke nu oro* (stay alone in the house). This is a form of marriage which allows the girl to have as many children as she wishes in her father’s house especially on the decision of the father. She remains in the father’s house and her lover comes in whenever he wanted as he was fully recognized by the parents of the girl. The children are her father’s legal children with full customary rights in the family. But most Ikwerre communities do not give them the *owhor* title but they can rise to the position of a titled chief in some communities. This idea is usually born when there are few or no man in the family. There was also the marriage between two couples *orgbo-gbor-nshi-nu-nwere*, a male being the husband and a female, the wife. This has been the most accepted marriage negotiation in Ikwerre.

Stages of Marriage Negotiations in Ikwerre

Several stages are involved in marriage negotiations in Ikwerre. The first stage is the initial introduction of the man and his intention – *okwu-aka-nu-oro*. This introduction is normally done with 2 bottles of hot drink, 2 kegs of palm wine and kola nuts with a negotiated amount called *manya-akayi-oka*. When this is done, the man and his family undertake a preliminary investigation into the girl’s family background which must be under caution, tact and secrecy.

According to Amadi (2021), this is to ensure that the girl does not have any inherited diseases like madness, epilepsy and no trace of sudden death in their family. Physical beauty is important in marriage but the girls manner, sense of duty, hard-work, honesty, resourcefulness, character were more important factors in the investigation. Similarly, the bride's family also carried out their own enquiry on their future son inlaw and family. Settlement *ome-ha-nwere* commences if the inquiry is proved favourable. Nworgu (2020) notes that in the pre-colonial period, young girls, maidens were generally confined to a special treatment by their parents. They were to stay in the house for about six months to one year without any form of work. This practice is commonly known as *ojiji* fattening room. The parents of the young maidens hired older women to cook and cater for them. They rubbed cam wood *ihie* and native dye *ire* to make them, glow with bright skin. They will become so beautiful that after the practice of *ojiji*, there would be several suitors asking for their hands in marriage. This practice is common among the Obio/Akpor axis of Ikwerre. On the final day of their outing, they wore heavy bronze curled rings on both legs *echi-orchi* with the *ojongo* hair styles. They tied very short cloth and several lines of beads *mgbaji* as suitors will begin to search for wives among the set of the *ojiji* maidens.

On the contrary, if they were involved in traditional courtship *oryii*, the intending suitor has to tear the agreement of friendship *adorwa-orkwukwo-oryii* with a negotiated sum of money in the bride's family before commencing on marriage negotiations. Other items for *odorwa-orkwukwo-oryii* includes a goat, 8 yams, pepper, salt, palm oil with a keg of palm wine and a bottle of gin *akameru*. Still in the family level, the groom's family would be introduced to a spokesman *nzu-mi-ize* who has to be a close family member of the bride. He directs and mediates between the two families in course of the marriage negotiation and conveys his mind to the kinsmen. What the *nzu-mi-ize* demands as his payment is also negotiated between him and the groom's family. There is no fixed amount of money to that effect. He is also a reference point in the case of disagreement between the husband and wife when fully married.

The next stage is the ceremony of *ome-ha-nda-nu-nne* payment for the father and the mother of the bride. This is an elaborate ceremony. The bride's parent invites some members of the community to witness their daughter's acceptance of the man for marriage. The payment of the negotiated amount is made with some items such as in the case of first daughter to each items to be brought are usually into seven places, what is referred to as *esarwu-esarwu* seven, seven, which includes seven bottles of locally distilled gin *akameru* and seven (7) kegs of *manya ngwo* palm wine, seven hands of goat, *aka-owuu-esarwu ijii* yams, *araa* salt, *isewere* pepper and *monor wiri* palm oil while the second daughter remains – *iseh-iseh* five, five which means that each item will be brought into five places, which includes, five bottles of locally distilled gin *akameru* or *kaikai*, 5 kegs of *maya ngwo* palm wine with other items. The mother of the bride will be ushered gifts as demanded by the tradition. The women also gets their own items, which later will be shared among them such as rice, yam, palm oil, salt, pepper, cream, soap, powder, milk,

tomatoes, onions and groundnut oil among others. Any child conceived of and born within this period is legitimate and belongs to the man's family.

The other stage of marriage is presentation of drinks to kinsmen known as *rumunda-wuo-ramaya* and the payment of bridewealth *okwu onu ekwu-nnwere*. They serve as the traditional wedding day, which is usually celebrated by both families, relatives, friends and well-wishers with gifts of all kinds presented to the new couple. The bride usually make two outings on the same day during the ceremony with different outfits. The first outfit was usually beaded while the second one is in form of two wrappers with a big head tie. Nowadays, traditional wedding cake in form of a calabash has been introduced to give the occasion some colour. The groom also wears the *workor* style of cloth. The *workor* is a Kalabari outfit but has permeated into Ikwerre culture. However, the father of the girl acts as the priest at the final ceremony by mandating the bride with a glass of wine to search for her husband and if found returns with the man to the father, to the interest of the crowd. The dowry or the actual bridewealth is actually paid in this final stage. Prayers and libation are offered for the couple by family members and kinsmen for fruitfulness and blissful marriage (Wagbara, 2021). In the pre-colonial period, there was also the arrangement of working in the farm of an inlaw for agreed number of years as the payment for bridewealth. This is possible especially when the groom is not having money for marriage especially in the Akpor, Rumuekpe, Odegu, Rumuodogo, Emohua and Ogbakiri axis. In support of this, Andah (1988:122) posits that marriage is not consummated until the bride wealth this is paid, because when not paid, the couple may be said to live in concubinage in some parts of Ikwerre including the Obio, Port Harcourt, Akpor, Emohua, Odegu and Ogbakiri axis. The institution of bride wealth is still widespread in Ikwerre, despite the incursions of western influence. Bride wealth legitimizes the children and it is not usually a one way process. In Ikwerre, the bride is taken to the husband's family with lots of household or domestic utensils such as cooking pots of various sizes, tripod stand, plates of different sizes, spoons of various sizes, drum for water, kitchen chair, frying garri pots, garri filters, broom, hoes and bicycle. In recent times, couples are ushered with gifts such as freezers, television, beds, foams, electric fans and even a motor car. These items and other valuables will in no small measure help in setting up the home for the new couple.

Among the Akpor, Rumuekpe, Odegu, Rumuodogo, Emohua and Ogbakiri in the pre-colonial period, a man could live in the house of his prospective father inlaw for an agreed number of years working for him in his farm. On completion, he is asked to go home and bring his people with the required drinks. By the formal introduction of the man to the members of the girl's family, he is allowed to go back with the girl as a wife. Nevertheless, this only happens when the man does not have the money to marry a wife.

In the Ubimini area of Ikwerre, the marriage system especially in the pre-colonial period was that when "a man wanted to marry a wife, the parents of the bride and bridegroom normally agreed

as the groom's parents officially goes to the family of the would be wife and merely drops manila or "awai" in the water and automatically, they grow and become husband and wife". The bride will start attending to the needs of the inlaws by doing some minor jobs and running subsequent errands (Wigwe, 2020).

As the wife grew to adulthood, the husband in agreement with members of his family will send a keg of palm wine and five manilas or *awai ise* to solidify the marriage. If this happens, no other man deserves the customary right to affect a divorce as she automatically becomes his wife. The marriage to one's sister or relation is forbidden and so, there are many laws that guided against incest taboo in Ikwerre. Where marriage was considered to be no longer valuable, and is terminated, bridewealth was usually refunded. There is unconscious evidence which shows that divorce existed among the Ikwerre from very early times.

According to Kpone-Tonwe (1990:88) such evidence appear in reports about marriage in which a woman was said to have been married together with her child by a previous husband. From this piece of information, we are able to draw a certain conclusion that marriage and divorce were regular features of Ikwerre social life from very early times. Divorce *Owur kwasi iwa* entails that the woman family pays back her bride wealth to enable her to remarry. But if the family cannot refund the bridewealth paid by the previous husband, the new husband if any, was required to refund the bridewealth. Expenses on food, cosmetics, jewelry, cloths or anything that went for the make-up of the woman was not refunded in addition to the other preliminary stages of the marriage. In Ikwerre, what was actually refunded is the actual bridewealth.

However, if by any means the woman acquired some properties like buildings in the compound of the previous husband, such properties remains the previous husband properties. If at the time of the divorce, the woman dies in her parent's house, her remains were returned to her divorced husband's compound and buried especially if she had male child(ren) there. The *owur-kwasi-iwa* refund of bridewealth was done in the presence of the *nye-nwe-eli* chief or the *nye-kwaga-eli* priest of that community (Egeonu, 2020).

Marriage negotiation could start on any of the days of the week and was usually conducted at night. This is because, the people had to return from the farm or market, have enough time to relax before the marriage. With the introduction of Christianity some of the traditional marriage systems have undergone changes. Polygyny, a part of the Ikwerre culture was affected as the Christian doctrine preached the theory of one man one wife. Marriage still has its pride of place in Ikwerre (Eke, 2020).

On adultery, the Ikwerre people accept it as a serious offence especially among the wives. A man cannot be disgraced on adultery in Ikwerre because the Ikwerre tradition supports polygyny. An adulterous woman was usually disgraced by her family and the husband's family and sometimes may lead to divorce.

J. G. Mackenzie writing on the Emohua clan in 1935 stated some customary punishments for crimes including adultery. He classified it as, if it was done in the bush, compensation to the husband and payment of a goat and fine for sacrifice to *eli* god of the land. If it was done in the house, then compensation is paid to the husband only and the amount varied in different villages.

1st Outing of the Bride



2nd Outing of the Bride



Cake made in Calabash Form Priestly role by the father of the Bride

Marriage and Conflict Resolution

Marriage cements relationship among families, villages and communities. Marriage is a human institution for maintaining stability, cohesion, harmonious living and peaceful co-existence in the society as it is a union of two group of people rather than just husband and wife. It is not consummated based on the bride and groom alone but also among the families and villages concerned. Marriage is a social construct that involves everybody within the vicinity.

Marriage has brought amity among warring factions in the families, villages and communities. Wagbara (2021) posits that the marriage of his daughter to Adiku's family in Owhipa, Choba brought an agelong conflict to an end. After the marriage ceremony, her daughter was taken to her husband's house. But before their wedding, she had been briefed about the disagreement and consequent enmity that was in existence among the families in Owhipa for quite some time.

The next morning after her arrival to the community, she visited the houses of those in conflict with the husband's family for greetings. The resultant effect was that an old man among the warring factions assured her that for a small girl like her to come for greetings even among the perceived enemies of her husband family, then it was time for them to resolve the conflict. He

immediately promised the newly married wife that he will personally go round to meet all those concerned for negotiations. Soon, peace returned to the warring factions in the community.

During marriage ceremony, people are invited not only from the immediate community but also from the neighboring communities thereby cementing friendship and relationship. Inter village or intercommunity marriages have been used as conduit pipe that have resolved conflicts and brought peace among the Ikwerre people and some neighboring communities. In Bakana, there was a feud generated during wrestling match between Rumuagholu people and Bakana in the colonial period. What led to the end of the conflict was the marriage between a daughter of Rumuagholu to Mr. Iwor of Bakana. Through the marriage, the perceived crisis was resolved and Bakana people resumed the normal cultural wrestling with Rumuagholu whenever they were invited (Godson, 2021).

Continuity and Change

Continuity and change has been a major land mark on the culture of a people especially on marriage. In Ikwerre, some of the marriage traditions have changed over time while some still exist. In the pre-colonial period, the practice of fattening room *Ojiji* where the young maidens were confined for some months with adequate care before a potential suitor indicated interest has gone obsolete. Nowadays, there is no more room for *ojiji* because most of the girls from Ikwerre are in higher institutions of learning pursuing their education in realization of their dreams. Thus, they cannot be confined in *ojiji* fattening room while their education suffers.

There is the problem of lack of fund to carry out such an expensive venture on their girl child. Some of the said girls are aspiring to be lawyers, doctors, engineers, nurses, teachers among others. Keeping them idle or confining them to *ojiji* fattening room means that their life wishes may not be achieved.

Christianity have changed some of the cultural practice in the form of libation and sacrifice carried out in the pre-colonial period during marriage negotiations. The collection of “list” written by the community’s marriage committee is a new innovation imported from other ethnic groups especially from Igboland and not an Ikwerre culture (Wosu, 2022).

In marriage negotiation such as; *okwu-aka-nu-oro* with items like hot drinks *akameru or kai-kai*, palmwine *manya ngwo*, kola nuts and other items with a negotiated amount called *iwai-manya-okayi-oka* are still prevalent among the Ikwerre. The preliminary investigation into both families before marriage which is done under tact, caution and secrecy to determine if any of them have any inherited diseases like madness, epilepsy and no trace of sudden death are still prevalent. The tradition of tearing agreement of friendship if they had defiled their bed through *oryii* still continues by *odorwa-orkwukwo oryii* which is done with a negotiated sum of money with items like goat *owuu*, 8 yams *iji esartor*, pepper *isewere*, salt *ara*, palm oil *monor-wiri*, palmwine *manya-ngwo* and bottle of native gin *kai-kai*.

The tradition of introducing a spokesman *nzu-mi-ize* from the bride's family still remains. His duty is to solicit for the groom's family whenever they come for marriage negotiation. The ceremony of *ome-ha-nne-nu-nda* payment for the father and mother of the bride which is so elaborate with several items including the latest clothes worn by people still exist. The presentation of drinks to the lineage or kinsmen known as *Rumunda-wuo-ru-manya* and the payment of bridewealth *okwu-onu-ekwu-nwere* which serves as the traditional wedding is still carried out till date. The practice is that the father of the bride mandate her with a glass of palm wine to search for the husband and if found returns with him so that the father, the family, elders, chiefs, owhor holders and the youths present will gather in unison as the father ask the girl if this is her husband she wish to live with throughout their life time. Thereafter, they pray to Almighty God and their ancestors to bless the marriage with happiness and children (Mgbakiri, 2020).

Conclusion

The Ikwerre sees marriage as a sacred duty for normal persons. Marriage reduces and neutralizes the effects of death through child bearing. An unmarried man is referred to as *nye-ewhu-ri-iwho* foolish, worthless or irresponsible man. Through marriage, warring families, villages and communities have settled their feuds which has led to peaceful co-existence as the people go about their normal business. Marriage in Ikwerre has fostered cooperative and supportive relationship between not just on the couples but the large community. This have generated robust economy through the enhancement of businesses occasioned by peaceful atmosphere which is necessary for nation building and national development.

References

Primary Sources (Oral Interviews)

Amadi, Nchelem. 51, female, a business woman interviewed in Rumuosi Town, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area on 12/07/2021.

Egeonu, Olu. 68, female, a business woman from Isiokpo and a woman leader in Ikwerre Local Government Area, Rivers State was interviewed on 10/4/2020.

Eke, Monday. 60, female, a business woman from Rumuokoro Town in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. Interviewed on 7/10/2020.

Godson, Omunakwe. 73, male, business man and a community Chief in Ibaa, Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State. Interviewed on 15/7/20121.

Mgbakiri, Joe. 68, male, business man and a community Chief in Rukpokwu, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. Interviewed on 10/9/2020.

Nworgu, Promise. 65, male, a contractor with shell from Rumuagholu Town in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. Interviewed on 10/3/2020.

Okah, Iheany. 69, male, a retired civil servant and a family head in Okani-ali, Elele. Interviewed on 15/06/2020.

Owhondah, Jack. 70, male, a business man and one of the community chiefs in Rumuagholu Town in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. Interviewed on 2/10/2021.

Wagbara, Tonas. 57, male, business man and pastor from Elieke community in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. Interviewed on 12/04/2021.

Wigwe, Edith. 51, female, a farmer and shop owner in Rukpokwu Town, Obio/Akpor and was interviewed on 04/4/2020.

Wosu, Emma. 50, male, a business man and a C.D.C member in Ndele, Emohua Local Government Area. Interviewed on 15/11/2022.

Secondary Sources (Books)

Alagoa, E. J. (1978). "The relationship between history and other disciplines" in Asiwaju, A. and Crowder, M. (eds) *Tarikh: Historical method*. U.S.A Longman.

Amadi, C. (2012). "A history of Ikwerre to 1960". Dissertation submitted to the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, University of Port Harcourt.

Andah, B. (1988). *African anthropology*. Ibadan, Shaneson C. I. Ltd.

Kpone-Tonwe, S. (1990). "The Ogoni of the Eastern Niger Delta mainland: An economic and political history from the earliest times to about 1900", thesis submitted to the University of Port Harcourt.

Mackenzie, J. G. (1935). *Intelligence report on Emohua and Mbu Tolu Clan*".

Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *Introduction to African religion*. London, Heinemann.