

Obiefuna: Cause for Igbo Marriages in Deviance to Bible Teaching on Marriage

Onukwube Alex Alfred Anedo, Ph.D.

Department of African & Asian Studies

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka-Nigeria

ao.anedo@unizik.edu.ng +2348037859249

Abstract

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, it bequeaths a man to get a life partner after he might have undergone several rites of passage. In fact, marriage marks the end of adolescence and initiates one into adulthood among the Igbo notwithstanding ones age. For them, it is a taboo for a grown up man to live without a wife. Therefore, every adult male struggles to have a wife. Surprisingly, it seems Igbo man cannot be satisfied with one woman as one keeps on engaging in several types of marriage hence this study. In view of this, the study intends to unravel what marriage is all about, what other marriages Igbo man engages in and why he does that. It will also find out the merits and demerits of those other types of marriages among the Igbo. The paper will also find out the extent Christians among them are involved or rather, the influence of Christianity on Igbo marriage life. It is expected that the result of this study will change the Igbo man's life concerning marriage and family as they will begin to see children as gift from God. It will also help them to see peace in their families as utmost importance and begin to refrain from marriages other than monogamy; as products of such arrangements end up in crisis when the captain of the family dies. The study covers meaning of marriage, types of marriage, reasons for marriage, steps in marriage contraction, gains and distractions that accompany several types of marriage among the Igbo. The study is conducted in Igbo nation of Nigeria and with random sampling, four out of eight Igbo states and twenty five adult and young individuals were selected and interviewed at their own separate times for collection of data. The responses from the selected interviewees formed the data of this paper which were descriptively analysed to form the result of the research. It was found that most Igbo men engage in many types of marriage in search of an heir. The paper therefore advises that the Igbo and other African men should accept Bible specification for one man, one wife and trust in God in their quest to start a family.

Key Words: Obiefuna, Cause, Igbo, Marriages, Deviance.

Introduction:

The birth of a child into an Igbo Nigerian family is normally greeted with joy and merriments. Such a child is properly taken care of. He is given every care he needs and pampered by everyone. The parents and relations ensure that he undergoes all rites of passage as and when due. All these are to make sure that he remains a full human being and not a minus human being. However if such a family fails to get a male child, the man is advised to take another wife and he continues to do so and goes on to engage in other types of marriage. To Basden, "Marriage has a foremost place in Igbo social economy. It looms upon the horizon of every maid and youth as an indispensable function to be fulfilled with as little delay as possible after reaching the age of puberty." Since the Igbo are a patriarchal people, marriage is deemed an indispensable factor for the continuation of the family line of descent. It has been observed that children occupy the central point in Igbo marriage. Unfortunately, sometimes, children do not come as people expect. When this happens and no pregnancy within three months of marriage, both families become apprehensive. They will start moving from one herbalist to another; from one prayer house to another; from one deity and or diviner to another, inquiring of what must have caused the delay and what must be done to salvage the situation. This is as Shawn Grover and John F. Helliwell assert that People typically enter into marriage with the expectation that their marriage and their relationship with their

spouse will make their lives richer and more satisfying.¹ In the course of searching for the reason and solution to the problems, the woman's position in the new family becomes unstable as the blame for sterility goes to her first. It is either she is accused of being involved in cult of changeling, incurred the anger of a god or in recent time, that she might have got involved in abortion through which her womb might have gone bad. It takes only the intervention of Providence for her to be washed off the accusation by suddenly getting pregnant and giving birth to a baby whether male or female though, male is preferred.

The appearance of a child in such a family however, ignites love into the already battered relationship among the couple and among the two families. This is visually seen and evidenced in the names given to children eventually born into such family. Such names are *Nwadigo* (Child has come), *Nwabundu* (child is life), *Nwabundo* (child is shadow), *Nwabụwụwa* (a child is the entire world). According to Celestine A. Obi, This name exposes the Igbo man's sentiment and the high-water mark of his ambitions.² Among the Igbo, other things in life rank second to this desire. Such other names are *Nwakasị*, a child is priceless, most precious; *Nwakaaku* or *Nwakaego*, a child out values wealth or money, *Nwadiagu*, a child is desirable, man is literally famished with the hunger for children.³

However, if male child does not come, the man has option of taking another wife or wives. It is on the belief that female child belongs to another family and cannot retain the family's name. It is because no one likes to bring his lineage to a close after him or to allow a stranger who does not know how he and the wife suffered to achieve what they have, to inherit such. It was learnt that bearing of children especially, male children gladdens Igbo ancestors' hearts whereas it annoys them when a woman could not bear a child in continuation of their lineage. It is tantamount to betrayal and sabotage. Of course, for longevity of a family line, it is the male child that makes it happen. This is why Igbo people practice many forms of marriage in search of male children for such family's life span. Such forms of marriage which Igbo people practice are monogamy (*alụmalụ otu nwoke na otu nwaanyị*), polygamy (*otu nwoke na ụbara nwaanyị*), inheritance or levirate marriage (*nkuchi*), replacement marriage (*nkechi*), same sex marriage (*nwaanyị na nwaanyị*), ghost marriage (*mmụọ na nwaanyị*), deity marriage (*alụsị na nwaanyị*), child marriage (*nwata nwoke na nwaanyị*), retention marriage (*nhachi nwaanyị*). Other forms though, not of Igbo but by neighbouring language groups in Nigeria are marriage by stealing, by force and exchange marriage

All forms of marriage are in line with the observation that most studies have found that marriage is positively associated with life satisfaction.⁴

Monogamy (*alụmalụ otu nwoke na otu nwaanyị*):

This is the most popular form of marriage all over the Globe and the form found in the Christendom. This form of marriage has been with the Igbo before the advent of Christianity in West Africa. It is the type that the Igbo people regard the childless practitioner or practitioner without a male child as the weakling, never do well. Before the introduction of Christianity and subsequent westernization of Igbo nation, they see such a man who has only one wife as a poor man. These days, some men go for one wife because of their conversion to Christian religion and due to current economic hardship. However, some people despite their Christian faith, move on to marry more either because they

¹ Shawn Grover & John F. Helliwell HOW'S LIFE AT HOME? NEW EVIDENCE ON MARRIAGE AND THE SET POINT FOR HAPPINESS. NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH. Working Paper 20794. 1050 Massachusetts Avenue Cambridge, MA 02138 December 2014. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20794>

² Celestine A. Obi, *Marriage among the Igbo of Nigeria*

³ Ibid

⁴ Hughes and Briggs Style (1983), Di Tella, McCulloch & Oswald (2003), Peiró (2006) and Frijters and Beaton (2012)

have only female children or because they have one male child and afraid of such a child being taken away by death. In doing this, one has to follow due process.

Polygamy:

In contrast to how people see a monogamist, polygamist is recognized as a wealthy man among the Igbo. In the old time and even today, it is only the wealthy ones that can take care of multiple wives and their troubles. Women are not easy to handle. However, there are reasons why Igbo men get involved in polygamous family. It was told that as farmers, the Igbo people who wanted to expand their farming activities, used to take more than a wife to help them in the farm work because women are good in farm work and not long, their children will grow to start helping. Becker (1974) showed the possibility of marriage increasing utility of both partners through complementarities of inputs in household production. As marriage has evolved over time and women's share of the labour market has increased, the model of marriage where one spouse works and the other attends to children seems to be less relevant to many modern households.⁵ That is to say that man takes to more wives for economic. It was understood that a man must refrain from intercourse with lactating mother or woman once pregnancy sets in. It was also observed that it is hard for a man to stay away from intercourse for a long period and so, to avoid violating the sexual taboos of the land, the Igbo man takes more wives for sexual satisfaction. One needs to know here that many men want change and this leads to Igbo saying that *ofu oṣu na-egbu utu*. That is to say that one virgins is injurious to man's penis. I think this explains being gluttonous among men. Some men can never be satisfied on bed by one woman and so, they go for two, three, four and more. Some marry up to 7, 15, and 28 or more depending on how gluttonous and rich they are. In fact, it was said that one man in a Community called Achala married 41 wives in 1978 alone. Apart from this, women seem to age faster than men and so, they start to lose interest in intercourse earlier than their husbands. When a man begins to experience this behavior, he does not waste time to taking another wife who will be warming his bed and thereby, giving him more children to expand his dynasty.

Quite often, the barrenness of the first wife leads to taking a second, in conditions namely, where great value is placed on posterity. One understands this as the Igbo people love having children and take children as assets. When a marriage has proved fruitless, then another woman, (at times one already pregnant outside marriage) is sought to redeem the situation. If the husband fails to or delays before taking a wife, he sets the ball of gossip rolling. Often people advise him to act quickly. "Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it, if it is not fruitful? One year is enough for any woman who would have a baby to begin making one". Obi observes:

A second wife may also be taken if the first becomes impossible to live with. Both will now compete to win the good favour of the husband. We have also seen cases where the first wife led the way in marrying a second wife into the family. It is not only for economic reasons or to have children that have made polygamy to flourish as it did in Igbo land. Many people, especially Chiefs married for social prestige. Just as it is the custom that among the Lango people of Uganda, there is no limit, so also among the Igbo there is none either. It is not uncommon to find a man with 5 to 10 wives or sometimes even more.⁶

This is understandable as no man wants to die untimely. When a woman proves difficult to live with, a man who wants to live, gets arrival for the woman. The funny thing in this situation is that once another woman comes in, the difficult one tends to be good. And that is the escape root for the man.

⁵ Becker, G. (1974). A theory of marriage. In Schultz, T. (Ed.) *Economics of the Family: Marriage, Children, and Human Capital*, 299-351.
<http://www.nber.org/chapters/c2970.pdf>

⁶ Obi A. Celestine. unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to Pontifical Urban University, Rome 1970

Same Sex (woman to woman) Marriage:

Recently, some European and American cultures have legislated and made same sex marriage legal. In this situation, a man has a right to marry a fellow man and a woman has a right to marry a fellow woman. Unfortunately, this relationship negates the concept for which marriage was understood especially among African people. In Igbo culture, same sex marriage can only occur between two women and never between two men. Marriage has been associated with heterosexual couples throughout most of human history. As indicated, one reason for having the institution of marriage is to protect children, as human experience has proven that, in general, children are better off being raised by loving parents instead of being abandoned or raised by the State itself.⁷ However, the case of Igbo differs from the understanding of the west in the sense that for the Igbo, the marriage is between a married woman and a spinster and they never attempt exchanging sexual intercourse whereas in the case of the West, the marriage is between two spinsters who at will, satisfy each other sexually whether by carnal or by oral.

One needs to understand this as the device whereby a sterile woman tries to render her supreme service to society, thereby strengthening her position as a useful and responsible member of her husband's family. She pays for a new wife on behalf of her husband, or she provides him with the necessary funds for a new marriage, with a view to raising children for her husband by proxy as one may put it. Among the Igbo, a woman who could not bear children to her husband stands to be thrown out once another woman comes in. Therefore, for her to secure her position, she needs to act fast and get another woman whose responsibility is to secure the husband's family name for the good of all of them. In another development, if a woman after spending her child bearing age is without a child, particularly male child, and her husband is advanced in age to marry a second wife or is no more, she may decide to marry another woman who will bear children on behalf of her husband to maintain his lineage. When the woman gets in, she has no business in satisfying the other woman sexually. It is the responsibility of the owner of the house to impregnate her. However, if the husband is late and she marries another woman because she could not bear children before the husband's death, she hires or allows the lady to choose an outsider to be coming in to make the babies for them. This paper needs to state here that the babies out of this practice, do not belong to the hired man and he is not responsible for their training. Reason is that, among the Igbo, babies made out of wedlock, do not belong to the visiting man. And this is why the Igbo say that "*oyi ekete nwa*". That is to say that boy friend does not have share in a baby made from the friendship. The only thing that makes a man to claim a pregnancy in Igbo culture is when such a man pays bride wealth on the girl and goes on to perform the rites of taking home his wife.

Nkuchi nwaanyi (Levirate) marriage:

This is a marriage by inheritance. It is marriage between a widow and her brother-in-law after the husband's death especially where the husband has no male child. Basden acknowledged that this was widely practiced in Awka Province.⁸ He says that, a man by this practice takes over his dead father's wife or dead brother's wife where there is no heir or male issue or if the heir is a minor. However, the woman has to consent to the idea after which, all rites will be performed. But this depends on the woman's age and the man's ability to maintain her. What it means is that her previous marriage was not terminated by the death of her husband rather, it continues with this heir who has inherited her. Apart from raising up children or rather, male children which the dead husband could not, the practice gives protection to the widow and secures her late husband's property. This type of marriage, apart from giving protection to the widow, helps her not only to continue staying in the family and enjoying the husband's property but dissuades her from living a way-ward life and bringing unacceptable blood into her late husband's family.

Nhachi Nwaanyi (Retention marriage):

Among the Chinese in the Yunnan Province, when a family is rich and does not have a male child, they would not like the lineage to come to an end. So, what they used to do before "one child

⁷ Ruth Mitchell. *Same-Sex Marriage—and Marriage a Position Paper From the Center for Inquiry Office of Public Policy*

⁸ Basden, G.T. *Niger Ibos*. Ibadan: University Press

policy” was to approach a poor family that has enough male children pays groom wealth on the guy and marries him off. From that moment, the guy ceases to be a member of his parents’ family but belongs to the girl’s family. He thereafter forfeits his father’s name and assumes the girl’s family name and every child out of the marriage, belongs to the girl’s family.

In Igbo land, it is a source of humiliation and worry for a family not to have a male child. The consequence is that whenever the female children of the couple are married off and their parents eventually die, all their property go to a stranger who does not know how they toiled and achieved those things. To safeguard this and see that their family name continues, parents normally, choose one of their daughters who will like to stay behind without getting into marriage so as to bear children on behalf of her father. Because marriage is one of the ‘basic civil rights of man’...the freedom to marry, or not marry⁹, once the girl’s consent is secured, the father goes on to inform his kinsmen about this decision. He will then proceed to pay the bride wealth to his kinsmen and perform all rites as done in normal marriage situation. The exact number of items required depends on tradition of each community or town. The rites qualify the girl’s children born out of such arrangement to be legitimate children. The woman therefore assumes two statuses: as a man; takes part in all men affairs in the kindred and as a woman, she takes part in co-wives meetings and sharing in the environment. She selects lovers with whom she cohabits to beget children on behalf of her dead father. The children, thus raised, would succeed to heir her father's property.¹⁰

Ghost marriage:

Sometimes, a family may be unfortunate and their only son may die when the couple is too old to bear another child. It is really painful to witness such in a family life. Because this is a hopeless situation, the couple has no choice than to marry a wife for the deceased son. Some families tell the maiden and her family about the demise of their son and that they want to marry the girl to bear children. Some do not tell but there is never a time the girl will not know. However, it is left for the girl to find lover whose responsibility it is to impregnate her with the consent of the parents-in-law. They have to know the man to be sure that she doesn’t bring in wrong blood into the family.

Nkechi nwaanyị (Replacement) marriage:

It is said among the Igbo that “*ogburu onye na onye so ala*” and that is to say that no one wastes blood and go scot free. It is a taboo among the Igbo to take a fellow man’s life. Who does that has to hang himself or he will be hung. However, if it is manslaughter whereby the death is due to accident, the killer instead of being hung has to hand over his or her daughter or sister to the family of the deceased in marriage without any payment of bride wealth. The girl stays as a replacement to the deceased and will bear children for the family. She is not free to quit the marriage.

Deity & a Lady:

Prior to the coming of the west to West Africa and subsequent conversion of some of them into Christianity, the Igbo people worship a lot of deities. Some of the deities are male while others are female. It was learnt that some of the deities used to demand a wife from the worshippers and when they do not do that, they will face the consequences. So, what they do is to go to a far place and get a wife for the deity while presenting the Chief priest as the husband. It was observed that the Chief Priest is the man

⁹ Ruth Mitchell, *Same-Sex Marriage—and Marriage a Position Paper from the Center for Inquiry Office of Public Policy*, Washington DC: Center for Inquiry, November, 2007

¹⁰ Celestine A. Obi, *Marriage among the Igbo of Nigeria* : unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to Pontifical Urban University, Rome (1970)

in charge of impregnating the deity's wife any way. According to a respondent, Iwegbune Ekwemeze,¹¹ *osu* caste system among the Igbo started through this type of marriage. However, products of such marriage belong to the Priest's family and will take possession of the priest's property and keep his family name when he passes away without his own legitimate children. There are other forms of marriage observed in Nigeria that are not of Igbo language group. These forms of marriage are:

Exchange marriage:

This marriage does occur among the Tiv of Nigeria. It is a situation whereby two friends want to marry but do not have money to marry. Each of them has grown up sister. They exchange the sisters who then become wives to each of them. However, if anyone of them does not conceive while the one wife to the other friend, conceives, the man whose sister conceives, will go and take back his own sister and sends the infertile one back to the brother.

Conclusion:

Having discussed all types of Igbo marriage, one may understand that nothing happens without a cause. The Igbo see child as umbrella. To them, one travels with umbrella in readiness for rainy time and so, they try to procreate knowing full well that there will be a time when their bones may weaken and they could not be able to do everything for themselves. So, by being proactive, they try to prepare for old age. This leads them to getting married as no one man or woman can procreate without sexual contact with opposite sex. However, it becomes embarrassing to them if after every effort made towards realizing such dream fails. That is, if the first marriage fails to be productive. If so, the man may go for a second wife or the woman may marry her fellow woman to beget children for her husband, dead or alive and so, the various types of marriage discussed above erupted as moves to keep a successor. One needs to understand the Igbo very clearly here. The Igbo people are very hard working race and they would not be happy even after life on earth that someone who does not know how they got their wealth, to come around to reap where he did not sow especially, one that has been their enemy while alive. This paper wants to say that the Igbo still have this notion even now and that is why some of the childless or heirless couples who are of Roman Catholic faith, move for the new trend in child adoption thereby acculturating such practice into Igbo culture. This practice is of recent and no one knows the fate of these adopted male children especially, regarding their acceptability among their adopters' kings man after the death of such parents.

References:

- Becker, G. (1974). A theory of marriage. In Schultz, T. (Ed.) *Economics of the Family: Marriage, Children, and Human Capital*, 299-351. <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c2970.pdf>
- Basden, G.T. .Niger Ibos. Ibadan: Univesity Press
- Celestine A. Obi , Marriage among the Igbo of Nigeria : unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to Pontifical Urban University, Rome (1970)
- Ekwemeze Iwegbune is a 89 year old farmer from Ikem, Anambra East Local Government Area.
- Hughes and Briggs Style (1983), Di Tella, McCulloch & Oswald (2003), Peiró (2006) and Frijters and Beaton (2012)
- Ogbalu, F. C. Igbo Institutions. Onitsha: Varsity Press
- Ruth Mitchell, Same-Sex Marriage and Marriage a Position Paper from the Center for Inquiry Office of Public Policy. Washington DC: Center for Inquiry, November, 2007
- Shawn Grover & John F. Helliwell How's Life at Home? New Evidence on Marriage and the Set Point for Happiness. National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper 20794.1050 Massachusetts Avenue Cambridge, MA 02138 December 2014. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20794>

Ekwemeze Iwegbune is a 89 year old farmer from Ikem, Anambra East Local Government Area.