

IGBO TRADOCULTURAL VERSUS CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE PROCESSES: TOWARDS INCULTURATION

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Abstract

Igbo Traditional and Christian marriage rites exist as two distinct ceremonies in African/Igbo society. The two ceremonies appear to be some sort of duplication or multiplication of rite. This paper seeks a way to blending the two ceremonies together as one, more so because the Church has always implicitly recognized matrimonial institution as a cultural product. The answer to the above question is located in the whole issue of inculturation; a process that successfully flourished in the Western civilization and consequently influenced the teaching of the Church on marriage. The answer to our question seeks to establish a marriage rite where couples will genuinely experience the happy marriage between culture and Church; a marriage rite that will fulfill both the traditional and Christian demands. As a qualitative research, the researchers adopted the primary and secondary sources of data collection and culture area approach for data analysis. The study recommends an integration of Igbo traditional and Christian religious beliefs into marriage processes through mutual dialogue of synthesis and hybridization of the good elements of each of the culture rather than using extreme acts of mutual extinction.

Keywords: Tradocultural, Marriage, and Inculturation

Introduction

African traditional marriage and Christian marriage have several differences, primarily in their customs, rituals, and beliefs. African traditional marriage is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of the specific ethnic group. It is a communal affair, involving not just the couple but also their extended families. The process often begins with the man's family visiting the woman's family to ask for her hand in marriage, a practice known as "knocking on the door." This is followed by a series of negotiations on the bride price or dowry, which is a significant aspect of African traditional marriages. The dowry, usually in the form of money or goods, is given to the bride's family as a token of appreciation (Okonkwo, 2022).

On the other hand, Christian marriage in Africa, while also involving the families of the couple, is more centered on the couple and their commitment to each other before God. The process typically begins with a proposal from the man, followed by an engagement period. The wedding ceremony is held in a church, officiated by a pastor or priest. Unlike in traditional marriages, there is no negotiation of bride price in Christian marriages. Instead, the focus is on the exchange of vows and rings, symbolizing the couple's commitment to each other. The processes involved in the two marriages are very significant especially in the role of religion. In African traditional marriages, the rituals and customs are influenced by the ethnic group's traditional beliefs, often involving appeasement of ancestors and various gods. For instance, in some cultures, there are rituals to cleanse the couple of bad luck or evil spirits. In contrast, Christian marriages are guided by the teachings of the Bible, with emphasis on love, respect, and mutual submission between the couple. The ceremony often includes prayers, hymn singing, and readings from the Bible (Nwufo, 2018). However, the thrust of this paper is that the two types of marriages should be blended as one to avoid duplication of processes and to reduce cost. Though some differences exist in the two marriages, the church and family which play significant roles in the marriage processes, from the negotiation of the bride price to the wedding ceremony can agree to blend the two ceremonies either in the church or in the family compound. After all, the marriage is seen as a union between two families, rather than just between two individuals. In contrast, while the extended family is also involved in Christian marriages, the focus is more on the couple and their commitment to each other.

Steps in Igbo Traditional Marriage

Seven steps of Igbo wedding are the required traditional process steps that couples complete to be considered married in Igbo land before their religious/church wedding can take place. Even if engaged couples, get married civilly at a courthouse; they are still required to complete these steps in Igbo culture. Some of these steps will differ from one Igbo village community to another, but they are still similar in nature. Also, the parents and elder members of the two families play the major roles during this process.

Step 1 – The First Introduction/Knocking on the Door (Ikụ Aka n' Uzo)

Following the engagement announcement to both families, the groom visits the bride's family and informs them of his intention to marry their daughter and his wish to bring his family to see them. On the agreed date, both families meet for the first time at the bride's home. According to E.U. Uzoezie (personal communication June 10, 2024), the groom's parents, elders, and few family members will accompany the groom along with some alcoholic drinks to the bride home. While the bride's parents along with a few family members prepare and wait for their potential new in-laws to arrive. When the guests arrive, the bride's family welcomes and presents them with Kola-nut (the official Igbo welcome

gesture). The groom's father will make his son's intention known for their visit, and the bride's father will acknowledge and says he will get back to them upon speaking with his daughter. It's customary that the groom family will not expect an answer for their visit during the first family meet up. However, both families will enjoy some drinks and food before parting ways. Once the guests leave, the parents of the bride will discuss with their daughter about their visitor's intention; if or not to proceed with the marriage request and her answer is usually yes.

Step 2 – The Family Background Investigation (Iju Ajuju)

The primary purpose of the investigation step allows both families to learn more about each other through outside inquiries of people who know the families within the villages and towns where each life. Even if the bride and groom met and are getting married abroad, the investigation will still take place back home. The two families conduct their investigation separately without the bride knowing and often the groom starts his investigation before proposing engagement, and before the first family introduction visit. The bride's family usually starts their investigation after the first introduction visit with the groom and his family, and after the family conversation with the bride. Still, the bride might never know when the investigation takes place. The investigation helps the families to uncover where each family comes from, the village locations, each family character, family standing in society, the family dynamics, religious practices, including family general health information, and even blood type (Udeoji, 2017). The outcome of the family background investigation can affect and determine the next step in the marriage process. Also, it's customary either family can stop or delay the marriage process at this stage because of their investigation findings.

Step 3 – The Follow-Up Visit for The Discussion of the Bridal List (Ihu Isi Nwanyi)

After the families complete their investigations and are happy with their findings, they will be happy to proceed with the marriage process, and then the families will schedule a follow-up visit. The follow-up visit is for the discussion of the Bridal List required for the marriage process. The List contains items the groom will bring to the bride's parents on the Traditional Marriage—Wine Carrying Ceremony day.

Before the discussion of the Bridal List, the bride's father will call her to come and greet the guests; and in the presence of the guests, her father will inform her of their guest marriage proposal—should they accept or decline. Tradition demands the bride's family give the Bridal List requirement to the groom's family. The Bridal list includes items for the bride's parents and community; the men (Umunna), the women (Umuada) and the young adults (Umu ntorobia). The Bridal list may differ from one Igbo village community to another. But the exact number of specified items required will depend on the traditions of each community.

Step 4 – The Dowry Negotiations (Ego Isi Nwanyi)

Back in the day, the dowry by tradition is any specified amount of money the bride's parents give the groom to pay for asking their daughter's hand in marriage before the traditional wedding ceremony. Both families can/might negotiate the amount specified, while some might not. The two families will meet and discuss the dowry amount as tradition demands. There is no set amount for the dowry as it's up to the two families to decide when the dowry discussion comes up. Thanks to modernization, this aspect of the Igbo marriage process has faded out in some village communities and slowly fading out in others. Today's parents understand their daughter is not for sale and thus, the discussion of the dowry is more of a gesture. Or the bride's parent may request a small amount to fulfill traditional requirements. Any amount given, the bride's parents add it to their preparation expenses for the traditional wedding ceremony set to take place in their home.

Step 5 – The Traditional Wedding Ceremony (Igba Nkwu)

The Traditional wedding ceremony is an open event and the only part of the Igbo marriage process the public can attend at the bride's family home along with both families, friends, and well-wishers in attendance to witness the union of the couple. In Igbo culture, the traditional wedding is called Igba Nkwu (The Wine Carrying Ceremony) and it's an important part of the wedding process when the bride carries the wine from her father to look for her groom. Also, in some Igbo communities, the traditional wedding ceremony is more important than the civil wedding or religious wedding, which is more western in style. For some couples, once they complete their traditional marriage ceremony, they may decide to have a civil wedding or church/religious wedding for legal reasons with the government or not. Some couples may opt for big traditional marriage and church/religious wedding, or a big traditional marriage and small scale civil wedding or church/religious wedding; or vice versa. The choice is for the couple to make.

The preparation for the traditional wedding day is the responsibility of the bride's family. Both families will invite extended family members, friends, their communities, and well-wishers to come and witness the marriage of their children. The preparation includes a lot of Igbo foods and drinks for the guests, music, dancing, and other entertainment for the celebration. The bride, with help from her family, will select some of her unmarried girlfriends and female family members to serve as her Asoebi (the bridal train). These women will dress in matching Asoebi outfits to accompany the bride in processions during the ceremony. While the preparation is going on, the bride will hide inside the house, getting ready for her big day until she is called to come and greet the guests.

The celebration kicks off once the groom with his family and friends arrives at the bride's family home. The bride's parents and other elder family members will meet up with the groom and his family and warmly greet them and have them seated while the music plays in the background as more guests and well-wishers arrive. The celebration opens with a prayer; the bride's family presents the groom's family with kola nuts and drinks. After some

speeches by both families, the bride will come out and greet the guests. The bride comes out with music and dancing accompanied by her Asoebi ladies to greet all their guests and leaves. The celebration program continues and they serve the guests with foods and drinks, while other entertainment takes place too. Shortly after, the bride will come out again to find and present her husband to her parents. While the groom is hiding, the bride, changed to a new outfit, will dance out accompanied by her Asoebi ladies towards her parents and kneel before her father. Her father will restate to his daughter the intentions of the groom and his family and then gives her wine (i.e. palm wine) in a cup to drink a little and then to find the man she intends to marry and give the rest of the drink to him. With the cup of wine in hand, the bride dances through the guests looking for her groom, who is hiding amongst the guests as tradition demands for the bride to find him. When she finds him, she goes to him, kneels, and offers him the remaining drink to him. The groom accepts the drink, drinks it all; and puts any amount of money in the cup for his bride.

Cheered on by the crowd, the bride takes her groom to her father for blessings. Upon getting to her father, the couple kneels for his blessings. The father blesses the newlywed and offers them words of advice. After the blessings, the couple rise to music and dancing; joined by their family and friends, showering them with spraying money. The end of the traditional marriage day is very emotional for the bride and her family because the bride will leave her parents' house that night with her packed luggage to go home with her new husband and his family.

Step 6 – New Home Sendoff Gifts by the Bride's Parents (Idu Ụlọ)

New Home Sendoff Gifts by the bride's parents is a tradition practiced in Igbo culture, where the bride's family showers their newlywed daughter with house gifts to start her new married life. The gifts vary depending on what the bride's family can afford to gift their daughter such as a fridge, cooking utensils, beddings, air condition, cooking pots, cash gifts, car, new home and much more. A.U. Nnonyelu (personal communication February 9, 2025) it's up to the bride's parents to present their daughter with the New Home Sendoff Gifts the night of the traditional marriage, do so days later or wait until after the religious wedding to present their daughter with the new home sendoff gifts to start her new married life.

Step 7 – Bride's Family First Visit to the Newlyweds' Home (Imata Ụlọ Di)

Few weeks after marriage and the newlyweds are back from their honeymoon (today's modern practice); the bride's family will visit their daughter's new marital home for the first time. This is an Igbo practice for the bride's family knows where their daughter is living in case of an emergency; and to confirm that she is happy and cared for in her new home. On the scheduled visit day, the newlyweds/in-laws will prepare food and drinks and wait for the bride's family to arrive. The visit is very casual and relaxed, and the two

families will have general conversations with one another, or reminiscence about the newlyweds' wedding day. The bride's family might bring a small gift for their daughter, but not required. Both families will enjoy the prepared foods and drinks before the bride's family leaves

Nature and differences between Christian wedding and African traditional marriage

Marriage was created by God. The family is the basic unit of society. When God created man and woman, he said, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one" (Genesis 2:24). When a man and woman marry, they become one. The husband's number-one relative and number one love is his wife. The wife's number-one relative and number-one love is her husband. The husband's number-one relative and number one love is his wife. The wife's number-one relative and number-one love is her husband (Okoli, (2014). Marriage is a reflection of the nature of God himself. God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) created human beings (male and female) in "our image" (Genesis 1:26). Men and women, whether married or not, have a purpose in God's agenda; but should they decide to marry, they should be united in serving the Lord together in their families and in their ministry (Asogwa, 2017). Marriage is the most important relationship one can have with another person. It is an intimate and life-changing social institution. In both Christian and African belief, a person who is married is usually considered to be a mature and responsible adult. Most married people desire to marry and raise children. But some people remain single by choice. Some pious Christians chose to remain single for religious reasons; so that they can spend much time working for God. Others choose to marry so that they can work for God together, as husband and wife (Nduka, 2015).

Apparently, African traditional marriages are typically arranged by the parents of the couple. This is a practice that has been passed down through generations and is still prevalent in many African societies today. The parents, particularly the fathers, have the final say in who their children will marry. On the other hand, Christian marriages in Africa, much like in other parts of the world, are based on the mutual consent of the couple. The couple chooses each other and then seeks the blessings of their parents and the church (Nwandu, 2016). Moreover, the payment of bride price or dowry is a significant aspect of African traditional marriages. The groom, along with his family, is expected to provide gifts and money to the bride's family as a token of appreciation for raising the bride. This practice is less common in Christian marriages, where the focus is more on the symbolic exchange of vows and rings. Being that African traditional marriages often involve elaborate rituals and ceremonies that can last for days or even weeks. These ceremonies are deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of the specific African community and involve various rites such as fertility rituals, ancestral worship, and communal feasting. In contrast, Christian

marriages are usually conducted in a church and follow a standardized liturgy that includes hymns, Bible readings, and a sermon. For Ejesi (2021), the couple in African marriage system is considered married once the bride price has been paid and the traditional rituals have been performed. There is usually no need for a legal certificate to validate the marriage. However, in Christian marriages, the marriage is not considered complete until the couple has been legally registered and a marriage certificate has been issued. Also, being that, the community playing a significant role in the African marriage process is based on the fact that marriage in African belief system is seen as a union between two families rather than just two individuals. This is in sharp contrast with Christian marriages, while the community is still important; the focus is more on the union between the two individuals and their commitment to each other before God.

Understanding Christian and African Traditional Marriage from the Purview of Inculturation

Prior to the introduction of Western Christianity, Africans had traditional marriage, which involved the extended family participating in courtship, payment of dowry, and betrothal. Christianity and Western education introduced two additional forms of marriages: court marriage and church marriage. The court form of marriage is created by the state. The bride and groom and family representatives declare the marriage union before a court registrar and sign a document, authenticating the marriage. The court keeps a copy of the signed document. Christian marriage appears to have a simple wedding with a Christian blessing and fewer guests than the African traditional marriage which are delayed for many years in order to make it as lavish as some of our relatives might want which could lead to temptation to have premarital sex (Ugezu, 2018). Nwokoye (2016) affirms that a church marriage attributes the authority of God over a marriage union. Some Christians view marriage as a sacrament. In a church marriage, a bride and groom agree that God is Lord over their marriage. They publicly declare their marriage vows before God and the church. A church wedding does not have to be an expensive ceremony.

Understanding marriage from African traditional and Christian perspectives varies in sequence. In the notion of African belief, marriage is a commitment before the couple's family and ethnic group. A church marriage is a couple's commitment before God and the people of God, who should agree to support the couple. There is however, no harm for a blending of ceremonies in both traditional and church marriage, because the authority of culture and religion is recognized by the Bible. But only the Bible can define marriage for a Christian. In Genesis 2:24 God created man and woman, a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. With the exception that some Africans traditionally embraced polygamous marriage relationships, in which one husband marries two or more wives. Much less common is polyandry, in which one wife

marries two or more husbands. Neither polygamy nor polyandry is encouraged by the church. Paul tells Timothy to teach that an elder should have one wife (1 Timothy 3:2). Polygamy or polyandry was not accepted as part of holy matrimony, a church marriage. Because marriage was ordained by God, and because the family is the basic unit of society, I.K. Nwozor (Personal communication August 6, 2024) maintains that the church should be understanding enough not to be placing church wedding above the traditional marriage. Furthermore .G. Nwezeoku (personal communication December 12, 2024) insist that both traditional and church's marriage ceremonies should be done one day to save cost. If love, faithfulness, respect, and helpfulness is key in marriage, the church and the traditional Igbo society should pattern their marriage ceremonies to better the people. They should not place any of the marriage rites above the other. The church and the traditional Igbo society should chart a way forward to interpersonal relationship especially as it concerns marriage rites. Both institutions should create an avenue towards inculturation on marriage that will help young couples to be more prepared to enter into this covenant. No matter how well prepared a man and woman thinks they are for marriage; it is wise to receive premarital guidance from a pastor or a counsellor. Such counselling sessions uncover the bride and groom's assumptions about marriage and life together. The church and family as the two significant institutions should ensure that intending couples are properly tutored and counseled on the very essence of marriage. Such counseling should border on understanding who they are, being truthful to themselves, spending time together training and nurturing their children and managing conflicts and disagreements. During such sessions, a couple may learn each other's strengths and weaknesses. If they discover that they are not compatible, they may terminate the courtship. The pastor or counsellor should help the couple through this difficult time.

One of the major advantages of inculturation in the Christian and African traditional marriage rites is that it is capable of building a healthy marriage relationship. Marriage is a complex relationship, and building a healthy marriage involves facing many challenges. This is why the commitment a husband and wife make to each other before their family and ethnic group, before a representative of their family and before God and the people of God is so important. T. O. Nwankwo (personal communication January 8, 2025) says that a healthy marriage is such that a couple becomes useful to themselves, the society and to God. They should learn to withstand difficult times and bear their burden together; fidelity to one's spouse, true love, and good communication being the key ingredients that will give stability to their marriage. According to Nwokedi (2010), achieving inculturation in African and Christian marriages will breed a healthy marriage such as where the mother and father both spend time with the children. They would not be too busy with their job such that they would not have time to talk with their children. They would be encouraged to make friends

by being kind. Help their children to be better citizens and show them how to contribute meaningfully to the society and in their respective churches.

When the church and the society collaborates in joining couples together, it will strengthen marriages and makes marriages become less stressful. For instance, a husband's mother may try to rival his wife for the affection of the husband. However, in joining them they would be made to understand that the husband's number-one love should be his wife. Sometimes fathers make unrealistic demands on their children causing tension with their wives. And children seem to instinctively know how to play one parent against the other. Parents should not show more love to one child than to another. Mothers-in-law should help build the marriages of their children and daughters-in-law should learn to respect and trust the mother of their husband as their own mother (Nwokedi, 2010). The church teaches that if a man chooses to marry, he must love and be kind to his wife (Ephesians 5:25-33; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7). If a lady chooses to marry, she must love and respect her husband (Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18). African families should practicalize in their daily living. When this is done, a Christian and African traditionalist can conveniently co-habit in a marriage relationship. In this way a spouse may end up converting a partner to one's faith through a good moral conduct. The Bible is very clear on that when it says that if one is married to an unbeliever, he/she should not divorce the partner. The apostle Paul says that the spouse who is a Christian "brings holiness" to the marriage and that the unbelieving spouse "might be saved because of him/her (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

In some African cultures, the community provides emotional, psychological, financial, and moral support to a couple to build stability in marriage. The church as well should as well provide succour by taking the role of a counsellor and being a pastor for care and professional advice. Marriage was ordained by God, and the family is the basic unit of society. God's intention is for marriages to be permanent. These principles are vividly presented in Malachi 2:15-16, which includes these words: "Didn't the Lord make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. The church and traditional African families emphasizing this teaching will strengthen many marriages that are at the verge of collapse. Couples should realize that to divorce one's spouse is to overwhelm him/her with cruelty. African families in collaboration with the church should vehemently discourage divorce. Mbogu (2012) declares that divorce is on the increase in Africa. When divorce happens, the family and children suffer. It sometimes creates special difficulties for the woman because African cultures are often male dominated through patriarchal structures. The male spouse may easily get remarried, but the female divorcée sometimes finds it difficult to do so.

Conclusion

African society would be strengthened when the church and African cultures iron their differences as regards to marriage. The church's major responsibility is to create an enabling environment for the people under their care. Inculturation is being proposed as a key player in blending the Christian and African cultures together. The paper upholds the fact that the churches should carefully balance the scriptural command to hold individuals accountable to God for their actions in marriage (1 Corinthians 5:1-13) with compassionately supporting adults and children who have been hurt by divorce. The way a man and a woman are joined together to become one "is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way the church and the society blends themselves to achieve this task. In conclusion, Africans would enjoy lasting marital relationships when the church and African families achieve inculturation in marriage rites.

Appendix

Interviewers' List

S/N	Name	Occupation	Age	Date Interviewed
1	Augustine Uzundu Nnonyelu	Farmer	78	9/02/2025
2	Eugene Uzoamaka Uzoezie	Trader	66	10/6/2024
3	Ikechukwu Kingsley Nwozor	Retired Civil Servant	70	8/8/2024
4	Geophrey Nwezeoku	Land Agency	67	12/12/2024
5	Timothy Osondu Nwankwo	Retired Teacher	65	8/1/2025
6	Dr. Boniface Ekweremadu	Lecturing	69	5/8/2023
7	Mr. Enem Ignatius	Tailoring	54	6/7/2022
8	Sir Ogbonna Emmanuel	Trader	58	3/2/2024
9	Rev, Canon Timothy Okonkwo	Priest	43	8/9/2023
10	Chief Raphael Ojike	Native Doctor	68	21/12/2020

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