

AN EXAMINATION OF FEMALE HUSBANDS AND GHOST HUSBANDS AS A TALETELL OF THE CENTRALITY OF CHILDREN IN IGBO MARRIAGES

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Abstract:

Marriage sits at the very heart of Igbo life. It is an important aspect of the life of the Igbo that once one reaches a particular age, he or she is expected to marry. So, despite the contemporary trend seeping into Africa, which has seen to the trivialization of marriage as a mere contract, a choice, and not an achievement, the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria have been largely impervious to the poisonous fluids of these ideologies. For the Igbo, without marriage, one is incomplete. Hence, for the Igbo, marriage is not a choice; it is a duty that must be fulfilled. It is as a result of the overwhelming relevance of the marriage institution among the people that apart from the common polygamous and monogamous marriages present in the culture of the people, we see other forms of marriages such as ghost marriages, where a wife is married for a dead man; and female to female marriages or female husbands, where a woman traditionally marries a fellow woman. It is in light of this that this paper seeks to investigate the overwhelming relevance of marriage among the Igbo and why they would go to any length to get married, even to the point of marrying the dead. Hence, the paper raises the following questions: What is the central purpose of marriage among the Igbo? Why do the Igbo go to the extent of engaging in ghost marriages or female-to-female marriages? Adopting a critical analytical method, the paper, the paper seeks to explore the ghost and female husband's type of marriage among the Igbo. It is in discovering the reason behind such marriages that we can exhaustively explore the above research questions. The paper, relying on sources such as books, journals, articles, and the internet, seeks to exhaustively explore the above questions. The paper is significant in that it sheds light on the core underpinnings of Igbo marriages.

Keywords: Marriage, Ghost marriage, female husband, Igbo people

Introduction:

Marriage constitutes a fundamental pillar of human society, with its universality underpinned by its existence across races and cultures. As Ugwu et al. (2024) observe, marriage remains one of humanity's most enduring and significant institutions. In contrast to contemporary ideological shifts that seek to diminish the relevance of marriage, often portraying it as an outdated or inconsequential achievement, African societies, particularly the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, have remained largely resistant to such narratives. This resilience stems from the centrality of family in Igbo cosmology, where marriage is regarded not only as a social expectation but as an essential life experience. As Ugwu et al. (2024, p. 62) affirm, "in Igbo traditional society, marriage is an ideal experience for all involved."

Despite the growing influence of modern constructs such as the “reproduction revolution,” same-sex unions, and cohabitation, each posing fundamental challenges to long-held socio-cultural values, the Igbo community has maintained a firm commitment to traditional marital structures. This enduring relevance of marriage within the Igbo worldview reflects its deep integration into the society’s cultural and moral framework. Chukwuokolo (2019), in his work *Igbo Philosophy of Marriage: Towards the Revival of Family Values for Veritable Development of Igbo Land*, aptly underscores this point by highlighting the elevated status of marriage in the Igbo conception of communal well-being and development. In his words:

Marriage has a foremost place in the Igbo socio-cultural economy. It captures the psyche of every maid and youth as an indispensable attainment of life, with as little delay after reaching the age of puberty. Celibacy finds no place whatsoever in Igbo socio-cultural milieu: to Ndi, it is regarded as foolishness, and utterly contrary to the law of nature. One must thus remember that among Ndi-Igbo, celibacy is an impossible prospect. It is due mainly to this world view that an unmarried Igbo adult is called by many derogatory names, namely oke-okporo (male-woman), 'akanogholi' or 'oke ikpa'. An unmarried woman is not left out as she is regarded derogatorily as 'Ndabili', meaning good for nothing. These categories of citizens are not regarded as full-grown adults in the community, regardless of their age and financial status. In the event of death, they are not given full mourning or burial rites. They are buried on the same day (unlike a married man who is expected to lie in state in his house for at least a day) in an evil forest with all sorts of prayers aimed at barring them from reincarnating in the family line. It is worse off for an unmarried daughter who is regarded as a burden to the family. Such unmarried daughters are always in conflict with their brothers 'wives over their mothers 'inheritances (p.129).

Building on this perspective, Chukwuokolo (2019) contends that, for the Igbo, marriage constitutes the focal point of existence. It represents the culmination of communal belonging, serving as the intersection where the living, the departed, and the unborn converge. Within this cultural framework, marriage is not merely a personal choice but a communal obligation—an essential rite of passage mandated by the collective society. Participation in marriage is thus viewed as a moral and existential duty.

The profound significance of marriage in Igbo culture is further evidenced by the diversity of marital forms practised within the society. In addition to the common monogamous and polygamous arrangements, unique variations such as ghost marriages, where a woman is married on behalf of a deceased man and female-to-female marriages, in which a woman takes on the

role of a husband, also exist. These forms underscore the cultural imperative placed on fulfilling marital obligations, even beyond conventional norms. In light of this, the present paper seeks to explore the enduring importance of marriage among the Igbo and examine the social and philosophical motivations that compel individuals to pursue marriage, even in extraordinary forms such as marrying the dead.

Hence, the paper raises the following questions: What is the central purpose of marriage among the Igbo? Why do the Igbo go to the extent of engaging in ghost marriages or female-to-female marriages? Adopting a critical analytical method, the paper, the paper seeks to explore the duo of the ghost and the female husband's type of marriage among the Igbo. It is in discovering the reason behind such marriages that we can exhaustively explore the above research questions. To effectively address these questions, the paper is divided into three segments: The first segment focuses on conceptual clarification of marriage and the notion of marriage among the Igbo. The second section is focused on exploring the concept of female husband and ghost marriage. The final section will be a critical analysis of female husband and ghost marriage among the Igbo to understand the reason behind them and so, explain the overwhelming importance of marriage among the Igbo. The paper is significant in that it sheds light on the essence that underpins Igbo marriage.

Conceptualisation of Marriage

Marriage is traditionally defined as “the union of a man and a woman who agree to live together as husband and wife” (Egwuonwu, 1996, p. 8). However, this conventional understanding has faced growing scrutiny in recent years, particularly with the rise of LGBTQ+ advocacy, which challenges the heteronormative assumptions underpinning such definitions (Gushee, 2004, as cited in Ugwu et al., 2024). Despite these evolving debates, marriage has historically been conceptualised as a heterosexual institution—an enduring partnership anchored in mutual responsibility and cooperation. Agha (2003) echoes this view, describing marriage as “a close partnership of two different people of opposite sex who have concerted to live and work together as one entity” (p. 97). This perspective highlights the complementary roles within marriage, emphasising both emotional connection and shared obligations.

In his examination of the concept of marriage, Chukwuokolo (2019) turns to the Western tradition, identifying two principal motivations that underpin marriage in that context. These reasons, he argues, offer valuable insights for expanding the discourse on marriage. He outlines them as follows:

First, it provides society with the guarantee for an organised perpetuation of humankind, and second, the assurance of a secured conviction for the caring of the attendant offspring arising from any marriage. This results from the assumption that the results of procreation, namely children, are the responsibility of these individuals involved, such that they are obligated to provide all kinds of support for their offspring until they can provide for themselves. Unfortunately, contemporary society makes child rearing not necessarily the main purpose for marital relationships; thus, the institution of marriage has evolved to become an expression of desires to offer or provide support and protection to those who contract marriage. In this sense, marriage is now founded on mutual love, affection and a burning desire to develop a relationship that eschews loneliness and fear. Marriage, therefore, becomes a contract of two persons, with each showcasing love, care and succour. What is of prominent relief is that the contract must be mutually beneficial to the partners based on equality and respect for each other. Neither of the partners should claim superiority over the other, and neither should have any overriding power over the other (p.120).

Way and Okanume (2017) present a nuanced understanding of marriage as a social contract through which an individual—whether acting directly, by proxy, or as part of a collective—secures recognised sexual access to a partner or partners. Central to this definition is the cultural validation of procreation within the union, rendering any offspring socially legitimate. Their perspective emphasises that marriage generally involves at least two individuals, typically of the opposite sex, who voluntarily commit to a socially endorsed partnership aimed at cohabitation, reproduction, and the upbringing of children acknowledged as legitimate within the community.

The objectives and significance of marriage have undergone considerable transformation over time. In the earliest stages of human society, marriage was largely shaped by the imperative of survival. It served as a practical arrangement that facilitated the continuation of the human species through cooperative living. The marital bond offered mutual support in securing essential resources—such as food, shelter, water, and safety—thereby improving the likelihood of raising offspring successfully. Prior to the formalisation of marriage, a woman who became pregnant through casual relations often faced the dangers of childbirth alone, with heightened

vulnerability to environmental hazards, predatory animals, or human aggression. Marriage thus emerged as a protective social framework that increased maternal and child survival (Waya & Okanume, 2017).

Marriage, as a socio-cultural institution, is primarily expressed through two dominant forms: monogamy and polygamy. Monogamy entails a marital union between one man and one woman, whereas polygamy, commonly termed plural marriage refers to a man being married to multiple wives. A less prevalent, though culturally significant, form is polyandry, wherein a woman is concurrently married to multiple husbands. These marital structures exist within a broader continuum of matrimonial arrangements shaped by distinct historical developments and cultural specificities. The methods of contracting marriage also differ considerably across societies. In certain cultures, unions are established through the reciprocal exchange of sisters, while in others, the transaction of bride price or dowry serves as a formalizing mechanism. Such practices are further mediated by cultural norms surrounding endogamy and exogamy. Endogamy prescribes marriage within a specific social or kin group, whereas exogamy necessitates marital ties between members of different groups (Waya & Okanume, 2017).

Despite cultural variation, all human societies—whether endogamous or otherwise—share a fundamental prohibition against incest, universally forbidding marital and sexual relationships between individuals considered too closely related by blood (Waya & Okanume, 2017). Relationships between siblings or between parents and their children are among the most commonly proscribed. Nonetheless, the specific parameters of incest and the corresponding social or legal sanctions for its violation differ markedly across cultural contexts. Another element that underscores the complexity of marital systems is the set of post-marital residency rules, which determine where newly married couples reside (Waya & Okanume, 2017). Each marriage system is defined, in part, by its normative expectations concerning residence. Anthropological research identifies at least seven distinct residential patterns: neolocal (establishing a new household), patrilocal (residing with the husband's family), matrilocal (residing with the wife's family), matrifocal (centered on the mother's household), avunculocal (residing with the maternal uncle), ambilocal (residing with either family), and natalocal (remaining in one's natal home) (Waya & Okanume, 2017).

Within a neolocal residence system, the normative expectation is that newlyweds establish a separate and autonomous household, distinct from the homes of both sets of parents. This arrangement typically forms the basis of the nuclear family structure. Neolocality is particularly prevalent in complex, industrialised societies characterised by significant geographic and occupational mobility. It is also observed among certain nomadic foraging groups, where mobility is integral to their subsistence strategy (Waya & Okanume, 2017). In contrast, patrilocal residence dictates that a married couple reside within the household of the husband's father. This arrangement integrates their offspring into the broader paternal kin group, eventually contributing to the formation of a patrilineage. The fundamental expression of this practice involves the woman relocating to her husband's familial home at marriage, a form also known as virilocal residence. Conversely, matrilocal residence requires the husband to move into the wife's household, with the children affiliating primarily with the maternal extended family. Over time, such familial structures may evolve into matrilineages. A specific variant, termed uxorilocal residence, involves the husband settling in the wife's natal home. Expanding on these typologies, Waya and Okanume (2017) further observe:

The matrifocal arises when a woman and her children and daughters' children have to establish a home without their husbands or adult men. Matrifocal residences are often a result of war or situations when the husband(s) are unable to support their wives. It is therefore not a common residence rule in most cultures. Avunculocal residence rule is a two-stage rule. The first stage involves the virilocal rule, in which the wife joins her husband in his father's place after being married. The second stage is when their children are mature and the couple is required to relocate their family to live with their mother's brothers, who together with them make up an avunculocal extended family. Avunculocal residences are characteristic of matrilineal societies. In the ambilocal residence rule, the couple decides to either join the wife's parents or the husband's parents. Whoever they agree to join, an ambilocal extended family is created. In the last residency rule, non-local partners to the marriage remain apart. Each with his/her parents. Children, for obvious reasons, remain with the mother. Natalocal residences are characteristics of matrilineage societies, and in societies like the Ashanti, where the rule is common, settlements are in large towns where husbands and wives can be within reach of each other (p.17).

At the core of diverse definitions and interpretations of marriage lies the recognition that it is fundamentally a social contract between two individuals, and by implication, their respective

families. This union is typically entered into for procreation, mutual support, and companionship. As Ugwu, Okoye, and Agbo (2024) observe:

Marriage is a social institution carved out to meet specific societal needs by performing certain functions. It is a universal institution, but its patterns and structures differ from one society to another. For instance, the contracting of marriage in Igbo society differs from that of Hausa and Yoruba societies. Nonetheless, there are some standard features across all cultures. The most common of all these features is marriage, a union between one man and one woman” (p. 64).

Given the complexities and cultural variations that define the institution of marriage, a nuanced understanding must be anchored in the specific traditions and values of the society in question. Within the context of Igbo society, such a culturally grounded approach is essential for fully grasping the social functions, symbolic meanings, and enduring significance of marriage as both a personal and communal institution.

The Igbo People of Southeastern Nigeria

The Igbo are an ethnic group indigenous to southeastern Nigeria and represent one of the country's largest and most culturally rich populations. While the precise origins of the Igbo remain uncertain, archaeological evidence indicates a continuous presence in their present-day homeland for several millennia (Nwobodo, 2024). Various theories have been proposed concerning their migratory history, with some suggesting movement from the north and possible ancestral ties to the Nri region. Historically, Igbo society was organised into decentralised and autonomous communities, each governed by a local council, chief, or king, and supported by age-grade systems and other sociopolitical structures. The Igbo are particularly noted for their republican ethos, in which governance was largely participatory and consensus-driven, with councils of elders playing a central role in communal decision-making. Economically, traditional Igbo society was sustained through a combination of agriculture, trade, and skilled craftsmanship.

The Igbo were historically accomplished agriculturalists, cultivating essential crops such as yams, cassava, and a variety of vegetables. In addition to agriculture, trade constituted a vital component of Igbo economic activity, with long-distance trade networks linking Igbo communities to other regions across the African continent. The Igbo also possessed a complex religious worldview, anchored in the worship of a pantheon of deities and ancestral spirits.

Central to this belief system was the recognition of a supreme deity, referred to as *Chukwu* or *Chineke*. Religious life was further organised around a priestly class and sacred groves dedicated to specific deities. The Nri Kingdom, in particular, held a prominent role in spiritual and religious leadership within the wider Igbo cultural landscape.

Contemporary Igbo culture reflects a dynamic synthesis of tradition and modernity. Despite the pressures of globalisation and sociopolitical change, Igbo language, art, music, dance, and festivals remain vibrant. The masquerade tradition, with its elaborate costumes, symbolic performances, and spiritual significance, continues to be a prominent form of cultural expression. The historical trajectory of the Igbo people reveals a pattern of resilience, adaptability, and a sustained commitment to cultural identity and pride (Nwobodo, 2024).

Within Igbo society, the institution of marriage held a deeply revered status. As in many other cultures, marriage was considered a foundational social institution, believed to be as old as humanity itself. Among the Igbo, it was valued not only for its role in the propagation of life but also for its cultural and existential significance. Marriage was regarded as a sacred and indispensable mechanism for sustaining lineage and reinforcing communal identity. As Nwoko (2012a, p. 76) asserts, “marriage represented the instrumentality for the realisation, preservation, and the accentuation of the Igbo essence.” It is this cultural and philosophical grounding that informs the next section of this paper: an in-depth exploration of the Igbo conception of marriage.

Exploring the notion of marriage among the Igbo people of Nigeria

The centrality of marriage in Igbo land and its conception among is aptly captured by Chukwuokolo (2019), who remarked that:

For the Igbo people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the summit of membership of any given community where the departed, the living, and those yet to be born meet. Thus, marriage is a duty, a responsibility from the corporate society, and a requirement of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he is an outlaw and an anti-law, who is not only abnormal but 'sub-human'. Anybody who fails to get married under normal circumstances has rejected society, and society will reject him in return (p.129).

The Igbo conception of marriage is deeply embedded within their broader ontological understanding of human existence. Among the Igbo, marriage is not merely a matter of personal

preference or emotional fulfilment; rather, it constitutes a fundamental rite of passage and a non-negotiable social imperative. It is perceived as a communal obligation that every adult is expected to fulfil in order to attain full societal recognition. Within this framework, marriage functions as a critical marker of adulthood and is indispensable to one's identity as a responsible and mature member of the community. From the standpoint of Igbo ontology, an individual remains incomplete or socially immature until they have entered into the institution of marriage. Consequently, unmarried adults are frequently perceived as having fallen short of communal expectations (Ebo, 2022).

In traditional Igbo society, emotional attachment played a relatively marginal role in the institution of marriage. The predominant emphasis was placed on procreation, particularly the expectation that a man would produce male offspring to sustain his lineage and ensure its continuation beyond his lifetime. The failure to marry was interpreted not only as a personal shortcoming but as a profound social and spiritual failure, effectively excluding the individual from ancestral recognition. In this worldview, even the ancestral spirits were believed to regard such an individual as having neglected a fundamental obligation (Ebo, 2018a). Beyond procreation, marriage served crucial social functions. It conferred immediate respectability and elevated one's status within the community. Practical motivations such as companionship and social security also played significant roles in its establishment and maintenance. Within the Igbo cultural framework, marriage is understood as a socially sanctioned union between a man and a woman, whose principal aims include the founding of a household, the legitimisation of sexual relations, procreation, and the upbringing of children.

A notable feature of Igbo marriage customs is the essential role played by third parties, underscoring that marriage is not merely a private arrangement but a communal affair (Ugwu et al., 2024). As Nwaogaidu (2017) observes, although a man may identify a prospective bride, his choice is ultimately subject to parental approval. It is culturally inappropriate for a man to propose directly to a woman; instead, he is expected to inform his father, who then consults other family members. These relatives discreetly investigate the woman's family background to assess suitability before any formal marital proceedings are initiated.

In this context, marriage in Igbo society is inherently communal. This understanding aligns with Nnabugwu's (2004, p. 195) assertion that "African marriage is not simply an affirmation between two people, a man and a woman who decided to be husband and wife, but rather a marriage between two families or even between two clans, which continues even after the death of a spouse." Chukwuokolo (2019) effectively captures the communal essence of Igbo marriages, stating that it is a social institution rooted in collective participation, where families, rather than individuals play the central role in negotiating, validating, and sustaining the marital union. In his words:

Traditionally, marriage is contracted not between two persons but between two families or two umunna (extended family), and sometimes between two villages. Marriage results in a web-like relation amongst villages, thereby enhancing peace amongst communities where such relationships have taken place. Members of the two families become 'ogo' (in-laws) to each other. This new relationship of 'ogo' becomes as deep as blood ties. Hence, the Igbo saying that 'ogo mmadu bu nwanne ya' (A person's in-law is his brother also). This makes for the widening of social links where the couple and their people are at home in one another's place. The attendant children from the union become 'nwadiana', or nwa nwa, in their mothers' home with lots of rights. Marriage thus changes the social status of all those who enter into such a tie (p.129).

In Igbo society, the dissolution of a marriage is a highly intricate process, given that the marital union is not solely between two individuals but encompasses their families and, by extension, the wider community. Traditionally, marriage was regarded as a sacred and ideal institution, commanding deep respect from all parties involved. Igbo adolescents were generally socialized to understand the gravity of marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman—one that entailed cohabitation, sexual fidelity, and the joint responsibility of raising children within a stable familial structure. They approached adulthood with a clear awareness of the pivotal role marriage would play in shaping their identities and circumscribing their life choices (Nwaogaidu, 2017). This underscores the profound importance attached to marriage in Igbo culture, which is why, for the average Igbo man or woman, entering into marriage is regarded as a significant personal and social accomplishment.

Among the Igbo people, two principal forms of marriage prevail: polygamy and monogamy. In the case of polygamy, a single husband is married to two or more wives. Historically, this marital arrangement was highly esteemed within traditional Igbo society. For many Igbo men, the

aspiration to become a polygamist was both socially desirable and indicative of status; consequently, a man who possessed the necessary resources would continue to expand his household by marrying additional wives until advancing age constrained this practice. As G. T. Basden observed (cited in Chukwuokolo, 2019), the ultimate goal for an Igbo man was to achieve polygamous status, incrementally increasing the number of his wives as circumstances permitted.

The number of wives a man maintained was often perceived as a tangible symbol of his social standing and, to some extent, an indicator of his wealth, with each wife regarded as a valuable asset or investment. Within Igbo society, polygamy carried considerable significance, reinforced by the high infant mortality rates prevalent in earlier times. This demographic reality underscored the belief that polygamous households offered greater security and stability than monogamous ones. Such stability was particularly associated with the socio-economic and familial advantages of larger households, where the increased number of children contributed both to the immediate welfare of the family and to the continuity of the lineage (Chukwuokolo, 2019).

In traditional Igbo society, polygamy was predominantly practised by affluent men, with the principal criterion being the husband's capacity to adequately provide for his wives and their children (Ebo, 2022). Given the significant financial demands of maintaining multiple households, only men of considerable wealth were able to afford such arrangements. There was no formal restriction on the number of wives a wealthy man could marry, provided he could sustain their needs. Each wife was expected to remain faithful to her husband, who, in turn, was obligated to discharge his marital responsibilities equitably among all his wives. The most senior wife typically assumed a supervisory role over the other co-wives, a position that conferred both authority and responsibility within the domestic hierarchy. The marriage ceremonies for a woman entering a polygamous household closely mirrored those of a monogamous union. However, it is important to emphasise that within Igbo polygamy, the wives did not enter into a collective marriage contract. Instead, each wife maintained an individual marital relationship with the husband, and consequently, the wives did not bear marital obligations toward one another (Ebo, 2022).

Another significant form of marriage among the Igbo is monogamy. Within Igbo society, monogamous unions—typically involving one man and one woman—are more prevalent. However, unlike some other cultural contexts, formal marital vows are generally not exchanged in Igbo monogamous marriages. Instead, the woman is expected to demonstrate exclusive commitment to her husband, whereas the husband retains the possibility of taking additional wives should his circumstances permit. Crucially, the Igbo understanding of monogamy does not regard it as a fixed or irrevocable state. Traditionally, no Igbo man is culturally obligated to maintain lifelong exclusive monogamy; rather, it is viewed as a flexible and potentially transitional marital arrangement (Ebo, 2022).

Historically, monogamous marriages coexisted alongside polygamous unions within Igbo society, although polygamy was often regarded as the more prestigious form of marriage. This perceived hierarchy stemmed from the belief that monogamy was frequently a consequence of financial limitations (Chukwuokolo, 2019). Despite the elevated status of polygyny, empirical observations indicate that monogamous marriages were practised by a greater number of Igbo families than polygamous ones. Therefore, attributing the predominance of monogamy solely to the influence of Christianity would be misleading. Rather, the selection of a particular marital arrangement was largely contingent upon individual circumstances and personal preferences. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that monogamy does not inherently guarantee greater happiness or more harmonious coexistence compared to polygamy; the success of either marital form is predominantly determined by the character and temperament of the husband (Chukwuokolo, 2019).

With the above understanding of the notion of marriage among the Igbo and the two major types of marriage obtainable here, we now move to explore other forms of marriage partnership among the Igbo, particularly ghost husbands and female husbands.

Ghost husbands (Posthumous marriage).

In Southeastern Nigeria (Igbo land), a distinctive marital tradition exists in some families whereby wives are married on behalf of deceased men to bear children for them. This form of marriage provides a means for deceased men to have wives and descendants, even if they passed away before the marriages were formally contracted. As such, many traditional families employ

this practice to address issues of childlessness or the absence of male offspring within the lineage (Agbo, 2016).

In communities where this custom is practised, no special or separate marriage ceremony is performed beyond the standard rites, which typically include the presentation of wine, payment of dowry, and other customary marriage formalities. Upon completion of these rites, the woman is recognised as the spouse of the deceased and is accorded the corresponding respect and status (Agbo, 2016). Traditionally, she is expected to procreate on behalf of the deceased; however, cultural norms do not restrict her choice of sexual partners to the immediate family of her late 'husband.' While she may be encouraged to exercise discretion and self-control in her sexual relationships, she is not subjected to specific limitations regarding the number of men with whom she may engage (Agbo, 2016).

Posthumous marriage among the Igbo can take several distinct forms. One form involves contracting a marriage on behalf of a deceased man who left no male heir, to ensure the continuation of his lineage. In such cases, it may be the widow, daughters, or other relatives of the deceased who arrange for a young woman of childbearing age to marry in his name and bear children for him. Alternatively, posthumous marriage may occur when a young woman weds her boyfriend or fiancé who passed away before any formal marriage proposals were initiated. Typically, it is the parents or close relatives of the deceased who undertake the responsibility of initiating the marriage proposal on his behalf (Agbo, 2016).

Another variant of posthumous marriage involves a woman marrying a woman on behalf of her deceased son or a miscarried male fetus. This practice predominantly occurs within polygamous families where a widow who has no male offspring is denied inheritance rights to her late husband's estate by a co-wife who has male children. In such circumstances, the marginalised widow may arrange for a wife to be married in the name of her deceased son or miscarried male child. Should this wife bear a male child, the widow then becomes eligible to inherit a portion of her late husband's property through the posthumous son. This practice often raises questions regarding the agency of a woman consenting to marry a deceased man and raising children as a single parent for the departed. Nonetheless, posthumous marriage, like other life practices, is deeply embedded in Igbo cultural and traditional rationales, chiefly the pursuit of male progeny.

In Igbo society, a marked preference exists for male children due to the patrilineal nature of inheritance, which privileges sons over daughters (Adegboye, 1998; Ugwu, 2001).

In Igbo society, a family without a male child is often regarded as doomed, as the deceased father's property is typically transferred to a male kinsman outside the immediate family. Consequently, both husband and wife place significant value on having male offspring. In the absence of a male child, and upon the husband's death, the widow may resort to marrying a woman on behalf of her late husband to produce a male heir, thereby securing her inheritance rights. Another rationale for posthumous marriage is the preservation of lineage. If a man dies unmarried, his next of kin may arrange a marriage for him posthumously to ensure the continuation of the family name through offspring. This practice prevents the extinction of the deceased's lineage by enabling him to have descendants.

Posthumous marriage also serves practical purposes, such as housekeeping. In many rural areas of southeastern Nigeria, urban migration leads families to leave their ancestral homes unattended, resulting in property loss to theft or strangers. Posthumous marriage can thus help maintain and safeguard family property (Agbo, 2016).

To safeguard family properties, posthumous marriage may be employed to ensure that a woman remains in the family home to manage the property and provide updates to relatives residing in urban areas. Typically, this woman is married to the deceased male family member. Additionally, posthumous marriage can be motivated by emotional factors, such as love for the deceased. Oral interviews and observations indicate that some women marry their boyfriends or fiancés who died prematurely, even in the absence of any prior formal marriage proposal. According to Copart (2010), many women enter into such marriages as a means of demonstrating resilience and coping with the emotional trauma resulting from the loss of their partners.

Female husbands (Female to female marriage).

In Igbo society, custom permits a woman to "marry" another woman under specific circumstances, such as when a woman has no male offspring, possesses considerable wealth, or if her father died without a male heir. In these cases, the woman assumes the role of a "husband" by marrying a man. When the woman is wealthy or lacks a male child, her husband assumes responsibility for managing her interests. Conversely, if the woman's father had no male heir, a

suitable man is selected to sire children for her, ensuring the continuation of the family lineage and preventing the introduction of undesirable offspring (Chukwuokolo, 2019).

Similarly, a widow without children may be permitted to "marry" a wife, through whom she chooses a man to father her children. This practice underscores the paramount importance of lineage continuity and social responsibility within Igbo culture. It is important to clarify the concept of the "female husband", a woman marrying another woman, which Chukwuokolo (2019) notes is not an endorsement of lesbianism but rather a culturally specific role distinct from sexual orientation. Ebo (2022) further emphasises the cultural differentiation between the marital roles and expectations upheld in traditional Igbo society.

The Igbo female husband marriage is not the same as the Western same sex marriage. This is a situation where a wealthy widow without a child marries a woman in the name of the late husband. It is also the case where a wealthy unmarried woman without a child marries a woman in the name of her late father. In either case, the female husband has no sexual relationship whatsoever with the wife. The union exists essentially for the reproduction of children. The wives get impregnated by biological men... (p.58).

To fully comprehend the concept of the "female husband" in Igbo culture, it is crucial to recognise a foundational principle: among the Ndigbo, fatherhood is conferred exclusively through marriage; mere biological paternity does not establish paternal status (Ebo, 2022). Accordingly, a female husband enters into a marital union with another woman and arranges for a man to impregnate her. In Igbo society, the offspring resulting from this arrangement are regarded as belonging to the female husband. However, this practice was relatively uncommon, given its demanding nature and the socio-economic context. The traditional Igbo agrarian economy was predominantly male-controlled, and few women possessed the resources necessary to accumulate substantial wealth, particularly because customary inheritance practices typically excluded women from land ownership (Ebo, 2022).

Marriage in Igbo culture has traditionally been—and remains—a costly undertaking, rendering the role of the female husband particularly demanding. A woman who assumes the position of female husband is required to maintain her household and take full responsibility for the family established through the union. This institution offers valuable insight into the Igbo social construction of gender. In Igbo society, biological sex does not exclusively determine manhood

or fatherhood. As exemplified by the female husband practice, a woman possessing the necessary social status and material resources can assume the social role of a man, thereby challenging conventional biological definitions of gender roles. Consequently, this practice underscores the Igbo perspective that social roles are shaped less by biology and more by individual capability and resourcefulness (Ebo, 2022).

It is important to note that the practice of the female husband was not a novel phenomenon in Igbo land. However, as previously mentioned, this practice did not entail a sexual relationship between the women involved and was distinct from Western conceptions of lesbianism (Nwoko, 2016). Various explanations have been offered for this practice, but the most significant appears to be the social appropriation of the male child's role, including its associated duties and responsibilities. In traditional Igbo society, consistent with patriarchal norms, a man's genealogy and lineage were perpetuated through his sons. When a man was unable to father a male child, he could designate one of his daughters, often the firstborn, to remain in the family and fulfil the procreative and social functions of a son. Amadiume (1987, cited in Nwoko, 2016) notes that a man without sons could pass land and trees to his daughters if they were ritually recognised. According to her, the transformation from female to male status, along with the inheritance rights of "sons," was achievable and legitimised only through specific ritual practices (Nwoko, 2016).

To fully realise the significance of the female husband marriage, the female husband assumed the sociological role of father to any offspring produced. These children were considered members of her paternal lineage rather than that of their biological father (Nwoko, 2016). Accordingly, she fulfilled the patriarchal roles of father, provider, protector, and custodian of the family, encompassing responsibilities across physical protection of the household and territory, management of economic affairs, and participation in spiritual and social domains. In theory, the female husband enjoyed a status equivalent to that of her male kin, although this parity was not universally practised across Igbo communities. Among her female peers, the Umuada, she was regarded as a man and often accorded the status of first among equals, Okenwanyi. She was treated as a male figure whose counsel was prioritised during communal deliberations. In ceremonial contexts, she shared privileges typically reserved for men; in some communities, such as Uguta, she was permitted to break kola nut, albeit only among women (Nwoko, 2016).

The female husband combined both secular and spiritual duties, participating in secret rituals and, at times, associating with male elders during communal rites.

In certain Igbo communities, such as Onitsha and its environs, the female husband was permitted to take traditional titles. Where title systems existed, male and female titles functioned concurrently, reflecting the duality inherent in the Igbo pantheon (Ogbomo, 2005, cited in Nwoko, 2016). For instance, in Nnobi, the male title was Ozo, with the female equivalent being Ekwe (Ogbomo, 2005, cited in Nwoko, 2016). Attaining such titles represented the pinnacle of a female husband's manhood. She inherited her late father's property—including farmland, economic trees, and domestic animals—effectively assuming the full spectrum of patriarchal rights and responsibilities. Her lineage was acknowledged equally within the extended family, exemplifying the integration of matrilineal elements into a predominantly patrilineal system.

Nonetheless, her status was constrained by biological and emotional realities. While her wife sought male partners to bear children, the female husband was expected to maintain a male companion, often referred to as a *dinwanna*, who fulfilled her sexual needs and provided support as biological limitations became apparent. It was socially unacceptable for the female husband herself to become pregnant or be publicly associated with a man, as crossing the maternal threshold disqualified her from such roles. Any children born directly to her were considered illegitimate, ostracised, and excluded from communal inheritance, unlike the offspring of her wife, who were fully recognised within the lineage (Nwoko, 2016).

A Critical Analysis of Ghost Husbands and Female Husbands

A critical overview of ghost husbands or posthumous marriages, and female husbands, one easily grasps that the major reason why a wife is married or the dead or a woman decides to marry a fellow woman is primarily because of children. These two forms of marriage reveal the centrality of children in Igbo marriages. It shows that the Igbo do not marry just for companionship, as seen in the West, the Igbo marry primarily because they want children. Love and companionship may come later, but the primary reason is to have children who would carry on with the family name. This is why they can go to any length just to have children. This may also be the very reason why the Igbo lay so much emphasis on male children in marriage. A belief that stems

from the role of the man in being the primary initiator of life. Thus, the terminus a quo and the terminus ad quem of marriage in Igbo are children.

In the Igbo worldview, marriage serves as a vital mechanism for the realisation, preservation, and enhancement of the Igbo identity. Central to this process is childbirth, regarded as the primary means of perpetuating the family and community. Consequently, infertility was perceived as a severe misfortune and, at times, interpreted as divine punishment for moral transgressions or disapproval of a particular union (Nwoko, 2012). Children were esteemed as the greatest blessing and the most valuable outcome of any marriage, a sentiment reflected in popular Igbo names such as Nwakaego (“a child is treasured more than money”), Akuakanwa (“no wealth is worthier than a child”), and Nwabugwu (“a child is the greatest honour”) (Columbia Encyclopaedia, cited in Nwoko, 2012). In many Igbo communities, women who bore ten or more children were specially honoured with the Lolo title, a ceremonial rite celebrating fertility and venerating their childbearing capacity (Nwoko, 2012).

Anedo (2020) highlights the centrality of children in Igbo marriages, emphasising the celebratory nature surrounding the birth of a child within an Igbo Nigerian family. The arrival of a child is marked by festivities and abundant expressions of love and care from both immediate and extended family members. These celebrations also encompass the timely performance of traditional rites of passage, which are intended to nurture the child into becoming a well-rounded individual.

However, in the absence of a male child, the husband is culturally encouraged to marry additional wives and may engage in various forms of marriage (Anedo, 2020). Anedo explains that this practice arises from the belief that a female child belongs to another family upon marriage and cannot perpetuate the father’s lineage. There is a strong aversion to ending one’s lineage or allowing an unrelated individual, unaware of the struggles endured by the family, to inherit its legacy. Furthermore, Anedo asserts that bearing children, especially males, pleases the Igbo ancestors, whereas infertility or failure to produce male offspring is viewed as a source of ancestral displeasure, tantamount to betrayal and sabotage. Ultimately, the continuity of the family line is ensured through male progeny (Anedo, 2020).

A notable downside to this practice arises when a man, unable to father a male child and lacking sufficient financial resources, engages in repeated marriages or attempts to have more children with his wife. This can result in a household burdened with more offspring or wives than the man can adequately support. Such circumstances raise critical questions about human dignity, as women risk being reduced to mere childbearing instruments, and female children are often devalued compared to males. However, these issues fall outside the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the very existence of this potential drawback underscores the paramount importance of children within Igbo marital structures. Anedo (2020) effectively encapsulates this centrality and profound significance of children in Igbo marriages when he observed:

The Igbo see a child as an umbrella. To them, one travels with an umbrella in readiness for rainy times, and so, they try to procreate knowing full well that there will be a time when their bones may weaken and they will 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 the opposite sex. However, it becomes embarrassing to them if, after every effort made towards realising such a 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 a 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, comes around to reap where he did not sow, especially one who has been their enemy while alive (Anedo, 2020)

Ebo (2022) further emphasises that among the Ndigbo, children serve as a man's primary security for old age, as they are expected to provide care and support in later life. Consequently, remaining unmarried carries the risk of lacking such care. In contrast to Western Europe—where marriage is often grounded in romantic affection between two individuals—Igbo marriage is fundamentally conceived as a social obligation. It is inherently communal, involving the extended family and clan in significant ways. Whereas Western marriages tend to be matters primarily between the couple and their immediate families, Igbo marriages engage the broader community in decision-making and social sanctioning. This communal nature explains why the Igbo conception of marriage has largely resisted modern trends and ideologies that might otherwise undermine or diminish the institution's cultural significance.

Agbo (2016) provides a critical perspective on ghost marriages, acknowledging that while posthumous marriages have enabled many families to secure descendants and have alleviated the hardships of women facing marital challenges—by legitimizing their children and granting access to the late husband’s inheritance—they also pose significant drawbacks for the holistic development and education of the children born from such unions. For example, posthumous marriage may inadvertently encourage prostitution. In Igbo land, Southeastern Nigeria, a posthumous wife is permitted to exercise her sexuality freely to bear children, which can involve discreet or micro-level prostitution. This practice may contribute to increased sexual immorality and a lack of discipline, potentially normalising prostitution for the children who may imitate their mother, thereby negatively impacting their moral development (Agbo, 2016).

Furthermore, Agbo (2016) identifies Absent Father Syndrome (AFS) as a serious consequence of posthumous marriage. Research indicates that boys raised without a father or a paternal surrogate often experience insecurity regarding their gender identity, exhibit identity diffusion, low self-esteem, and reduced engagement in social and academic activities. As these boys mature, they may struggle to form intimate relationships and grapple with unresolved questions about their origins (Awake, 2002; Nwachukwu, 1995, cited in Agbo, 2016). These challenges can lead to psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and anger, increasing their vulnerability to behavioural disorders, chronic health problems, and psychiatric conditions (Awake, 2002, cited in Agbo, 2016).

Similarly, sexual abuse represents a critical concern in the context of fatherlessness among children born from posthumous marriages. The absence of paternal care often results in inadequate parental supervision, increasing children’s vulnerability to abuse (Agbo, 2015). Additionally, the presence of multiple partners and unrelated transient males within the households of posthumous wives further elevates the risk of child sexual abuse, which can lead to unwanted teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV/AIDS. These factors severely disrupt the developmental trajectory of affected children, often resulting in premature termination of their education and, in extreme cases, their lives (Agbo, 2016). This study concurs with these observations and further asserts that similar risks are present in female-to-female marriages where the woman may engage in sexual relationships with multiple men, thereby exposing children to comparable vulnerabilities.

In the final analysis, while we can already glimpse the essence or the philosophy behind Igbo marriages, which is to bear children, a situation that has led to the emergence of such marriage forms as ghost marriages (ghost husbands) and Female to Female marriages (Female husbands), we have also pointed out that despite their noble goals, they have essential faults and challenges. These faults are noticeable in that we see that in a bid to bear children, there seems to be a denigration of the humanity of women, who are largely reduced to baby-making machines. They are married solely for making babies for a dead person. Also, it shows that, although the Igbo respect and value the life of every individual, the issue of some men going ahead to pick wives continuously, or keep birthing children in search of a male, gives the impression that some lives are indeed more precious than others.

Conclusion

In this study, we have tried to exhaustively explore the concept of marriage among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, with a primary focus on two forms: ghost marriage (ghost husband or posthumous marriage) and female husband (Female to female marriage). In exploring these, the paper discovers that the very foundation upon which all Igbo marriages are built is the goal of procreation. Children are at the very center of Igbo marriages. The Igbo, as we have seen, do not set out to marry solely for companionship or love; they set out to marry to bear children and have successors. This explains the different forms of marriages they engage in. These marriages, as this study has shown, are all geared towards having children. Hence, the Igbo are willing to go to any length to have an offspring. While on the face value, these practices may seem ridiculous as one could readily point out the flaws in them (as we already did in this paper), this is not the focus of the paper. The paper aims to discover the central underpinning of Igbo marriages by exploring such marriage forms as female husbands and ghost husbands. In doing this, the paper has successfully answered the research questions it raised: What is the central purpose of marriage among the Igbo? Why do the Igbo go to the extent of engaging in ghost marriages or female-to-female marriages? In exhaustively answering these questions, the significance of the paper, to shed light on the core underpinning of Igbo marriages, shines out.

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