

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE AS AN ACHIEVEMENT AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite modern ideologies and thoughts that seem to have enormously watered down the relevance of social structures and institutions, particularly marriage, Africa, by and large, has remained impervious to the full hit of these ideologies. Therefore, institutions like marriage, which have now come to be ridiculed by some as not being an achievement, are still greatly valued in Africa. For Africans, family is very important. This is why marriage is not seen as something one chooses or not; it is considered something that one must choose. It is a condition *sine qua non* for being seen or considered a full-grown adult and a member of society. It is in light of this that this paper, with a focus on the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, seeks to explore the concept of marriage in Africa. This is aimed at highlighting the significance of the institution as the bedrock of African society, which makes it an achievement for the average African. To do this, the paper raises the following research questions: What is the concept of marriage? What is the significance of marriage among the Igbo? The paper adopts a critical expository approach to answer these questions. It also heavily relies on secondary sources like books, journals, and the internet to exhaustively carry out the discourse.

Keywords: Ideology, Igbo, Marriage, Family, Africa, West.

Introduction:

The communitarian nature of African society makes the family its bedrock. It is through the family that the communitarian spirit is built and nurtured. This is why the institution of marriage is indispensable in Africa, as it is the veritable means of ensuring that families are sustained. On the back of this, it is easily deducible why despite foreign ideologies such as extreme feminists' thoughts, which often gear towards watering down the family institution, marriage, and childbearing, have been unable to crack into the core of African mentality. Family and marriage are the two wings with which the African communitarian spirit flies. Once they are scraped off, Africa dies. This is why marriage for a typical African is an achievement. It is not just a commitment or social function, but a stage that confers on one the crown of a full-grown adult with all the attendant privileges.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, marriage occupies a fundamental and indispensable position within the fabric of their socio-cultural and economic life. It functions not merely as a personal milestone but as a vital institution upon which communal identity and social legitimacy are constructed. The centrality of marriage in Igbo society is underscored by the perception that it is taboo for an adult male to remain unmarried. This cultural imperative situates marriage as a non-negotiable rite of passage, and its absence is often viewed as an aberration of natural and social order. As Chukwuokolo (2015) observes, celibacy is alien to the Igbo worldview and is regarded not only as unnatural but as a form of foolishness that defies communal expectations. The unmarried are subjected to societal scorn, often labelled with pejorative epithets such as *oke-okporo* (effeminate man), *akanogholi*, or *oke ikpa*, while unmarried women are referred to as *Ndabili*, a term that connotes worthlessness. Regardless of chronological age or economic achievement, such individuals are not accorded full adult status within the community.

The social stigma attached to remaining unmarried extends into death. Unmarried individuals are denied full burial rites and are typically interred on the day of death, unlike their married counterparts, who are ceremoniously laid in state. Such burials often take place in the so-called "evil forest," accompanied by

ritualistic prayers aimed at preventing their reincarnation within the familial lineage. The unmarried daughter bears an even heavier burden of marginalization, often perceived as a liability within her natal home and embroiled in conflicts with her brothers' wives over maternal property. It is within this cultural context that marriage becomes a paramount concern for every adult Igbo, a preoccupation eloquently captured by Basden, who noted that “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.”()

Marriage, therefore, holds significant relevance in Africa. It is in light of this that this paper, with a focus on the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, seeks to explore the concept of marriage in Africa. This is aimed at highlighting the significance of the institution as the bedrock of African society, which makes it an achievement for the average African. To do this, the paper raises the following research questions: What is the concept of marriage among the Igbo? What is the significance of marriage among the Igbo? The paper adopts a critical expository approach to answering these questions. The study is significant in that it gives insight into the basic underpinnings of the exalted place of marriage among Africans and why, despite the strong waves of foreign ideologies, marriage for the Igbo is a life force.

Towards a General Understanding of the Concept of Marriage

Marriage is conventionally defined as “the union of a man and a woman who agree to live together as husband and wife” (Egwuonwu, 1996, p. 8). This traditional understanding has, however, come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, particularly in light of the advocacy of the LGBTQ+ movement, which challenges the heteronormative framework of such definitions (Gushee, 2004, as cited in Ugwu et al., 2014). Despite emerging contestations, marriage has historically been conceptualized as a heterosexual institution—a lifelong commitment grounded in mutual responsibility and cooperation. Agha (2003) reinforces this perspective by 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 conception underscores the complementary nature of the marital bond, emphasizing both emotional intimacy and the practical responsibilities shared by the couple in their union.

Waya and Okanume (2015) offer a comprehensive exposition of the concept of marriage, framing it as a social contract in which an individual, whether acting in person, through a proxy, or as a corporate entity, holds a recognized claim to sexual access to a partner or partners. Crucially, this contractual relationship exists within a cultural framework that deems the procreation of children as socially legitimate. Their definition underscores that marriage typically involves at least two individuals, most commonly of the opposite sex, who consent to a shared life in a socially sanctioned union capable of producing and raising children recognized as legitimate members of society.

The objectives and meanings of marriage within society, however, have evolved. In the early stages of human existence, marriage was likely driven by survival imperatives. During this period, the marital union may have primarily functioned as a mechanism for ensuring the continuity of the human species. The partnership offered practical advantages such as shared responsibilities for securing shelter, food, water, and protection—factors crucial for the successful rearing of offspring. Before the institutionalization of marriage, a woman impregnated through casual contact may have faced pregnancy and childbirth alone, vulnerable to environmental dangers, wild animals, and even threats from other humans. Thus, marriage provided a structure that enhanced the chances of maternal survival and the successful nurturing of children to maturity (Waya & Okanume, 2015).

Marriage, as a socio-cultural institution, manifests in two principal forms: monogamy and polygamy. Monogamy refers to a union in which a man is married to a single wife, while polygamy, also referred to as plural marriage, involves a man having multiple wives. A less common but notable variant of plural marriage is polyandry, in which a woman is simultaneously married to multiple husbands. Between these

predominant models exists a broad spectrum of matrimonial arrangements shaped by diverse historical trajectories and cultural contexts. The manner in which marriage is contracted also varies widely across societies. In some cultures, matrimonial unions are established through the reciprocal exchange of sisters, while in others, the payment of bride price or dowry formalizes the agreement. These practices are further influenced by cultural prescriptions regarding endogamy and exogamy. Endogamous marriages are those contracted within the same social or kin group, whereas exogamous marriages involve individuals from distinct social or kin groups (Waya & Okanume, 2015).

Despite cultural diversity, all human societies, irrespective of whether they are endogamous, recognize the taboo of incest and universally prohibit marital and sexual relationships between individuals deemed too closely related by blood. Commonly proscribed relationships include those between siblings and between parents and children. However, the specific definitions of incest and the corresponding sanctions for violations vary across cultural landscapes. Another dimension that highlights the complexity of marriage practices is the set of residency rules that determine post-marital living arrangements. Each marriage system is characterized by its norms regarding the residential patterns of newly married couples. Anthropological studies identify at least seven distinct forms of residence: neolocal, patrilocal, matrilocal, matrifocal (centered on the mother's household), avunculocal, ambilocal (flexible residence with either family), and natalocal.

In the context of neolocal residence, the prevailing norm requires that both spouses establish a new and independent household, separate from their respective parental homes. This new dwelling serves as the foundational unit of a nuclear family. Neolocal residence patterns are commonly observed in complex societies characterized by high levels of geographic and occupational mobility, as well as in some hunting and gathering communities where nomadic movement constitutes a core element of the subsistence strategy. Under the patrilocal residence system, the married couple resides in the household of the husband's father. In this arrangement, their children are integrated into the broader extended family, which, over time, develops into a patrilineage. The most basic form of this pattern involves the woman relocating to her husband's home at the time of marriage—a practice also referred to as virilocal residence. In contrast, matrilocal residence entails the husband's relocation to the wife's place of residence upon marriage. Children born in such unions are affiliated with the maternal extended family, which may eventually evolve into a matrilineage. A specific variant of this arrangement is uxorilocal residence, in which the husband joins the wife in her place of birth. Going further in their explanations, they note:

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. Natolocal 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).

Central to the various definitions and interpretations of marriage is the understanding that it constitutes a fundamentally social contract between two individuals—and, by extension, their families—established for procreation, mutual protection, and companionship. As Ugwu, Okoye, and Agbo (2014) 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 variations inherent in the institution of marriage, a nuanced understanding must be contextually grounded in terms of cultural tradition. Such a contextual foundation is essential for a comprehensive appreciation of the institution’s role and significance within Igbo society.

The Igbo People of Nigeria and the Concept of Marriage

The Igbo understanding of marriage is intrinsically linked to their broader conception of human existence. For the Igbo people, marriage transcends the personal desires or emotional inclinations of two individuals; it is viewed not as a discretionary act but as an essential rite of passage. It is a societal obligation that every adult is expected to fulfill. In Igbo society, marriage is seen as a requisite for attaining full adulthood and is integral to one's status as a responsible member of the community. According to Igbo ontology, an individual cannot be considered fully mature until they have entered into marriage. In this context, an unmarried adult is often regarded as having failed to meet societal expectations (Ebo, 2012).

In traditional Igbo marriages, emotions played a relatively minor role. The primary focus was on procreation, with the expectation that a man would produce male offspring to perpetuate his lineage and ensure its continuity after his death. Failure to marry was seen as forfeiting one's rightful place among the ancestors, as even the ancestral spirits would regard such an individual as a failure (Ebo, 2015a). Social considerations were also paramount in Igbo marriages, as marriage conferred immediate respectability and social status. Additionally, practical reasons such as companionship and social security played significant roles in the institution. Ebo (2012) further underscores these points, asserting that:

Among Ndigbo, a man’s insurance against old age is his children. Children are expected to care for their parents in old age. Not getting married entails facing the risk of not getting the desired care in old age. Unlike Western Europe, where marriage is purely based on the expression of affection between a man and a woman, Ndigbo conceive marriage primarily as a social duty. The Igbo marriage is strongly communal. The extended family and the clan are prominently involved. Western marriage is more or less a matter for the couple and their families. The community has little or no say in the making of the marriage (p.50).

In Igbo society, marriage is regarded as a socially sanctioned union between males and females, and its primary purposes include the establishment of a household, the initiation of sexual relations, procreation, and the care and nurturing of offspring. A distinguishing characteristic of marriage in Igbo society is the involvement of a third party, highlighting that marriage is not solely an individual matter (Ugwu et al., 2014). As noted by Nwaogaidu (2015), while a man may choose a woman for marriage, this choice is subject to his parents' approval. It is considered improper for a man to propose directly to a woman; instead, he must first inform his father, who in turn consults with other family members. These relatives, in secrecy, inquire about the woman's family background before any formal steps toward marriage are taken.

In this context, marriage in Igbo society is inherently communal. This aligns with the 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" (Nnabugwu, 2004, p. 195). Chukwuokolo (2015) effectively captures the communal essence of Igbo marriages, stating that:

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, dissolving a marriage is a complex process, as it extends beyond the couple to involve both families and the broader community. Traditionally, marriage was viewed as an ideal and sacred institution for all parties involved. Most Igbo adolescents understood the nature of marriage, recognizing it as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, encompassing shared living arrangements, sexual fidelity, and the raising of children within a structured family environment. They anticipated the role marriage would play in their lives, aware that it would shape and, to some extent, limit their decisions as adults (Nwaogaidu, 2015). The Igbo conception of marriage is aptly encapsulated by Chukwuokolo (2015), 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 above explicitly announces the overwhelming importance and significance of marriage. This is why for an average Igbo man or woman, marriage is a huge achievement. With this understanding of marriage among the Igbo, it becomes pertinent to understand the types of marriage prevalent among the people and the marriage rites involved.

Types of Marriage among the Igbo

Among the Igbo people, there two major types of marriage, Polygamy and Monogamy. It between these two types that other forms emerge. For this study, we will look at the types and forms.

Polygamous Marriage: Polygamy, defined as a marital arrangement in which one husband is married to two or more wives, was historically viewed as an esteemed practice in traditional Igbo society. For many Igbo men, the aspiration to become a polygamist was considered highly desirable, and, given the means, a man would continue to expand his household by marrying additional wives until old age limited his capacity to do so. As noted by G. T. Basden (cited in Chukwuokolo, 2015), the goal of every Igbo man is to attain the status of a polygamist, adding to the number of his wives as circumstances allow. The number of wives a man had was often seen as a symbol of his social standing and, to some extent, a reflection of his affluence, with each wife considered a valuable asset or investment. In the context of Igbo society, polygamy held significant importance. The high rates of infant mortality prevalent at the time further reinforced the practice, as it was believed that polygamous households provided greater security and stability than monogamous ones. This is particularly evident when considering the socio-

economic and familial stability of households, which in Igbo land were often seen as more secure in polygamous arrangements, largely due to the larger number of children that could contribute to the household's well-being and continuity (Chukwuokolo, 2015).

In traditional Igbo society, polygamy was generally embraced by the affluent, with the key criterion being the husband's ability to adequately provide for his wives and their children (Ebo, 2012). The practice was inherently costly, and thus, only men of considerable wealth could afford to take multiple wives. There was no set limit on the number of wives a wealthy man could marry, as long as he was capable of maintaining them. Each wife was expected to remain faithful to her husband, and in return, the husband was obligated to fulfill his marital duties to each wife equitably. The most senior wife held a supervisory role over the other co-wives, a position that carried both authority and responsibility within the household. The marriage ceremonies for a woman entering a polygamous household were essentially the same as those for a woman in a monogamous marriage. It is important to note, however, that in the context of Igbo polygamy, the wives did not share a collective marriage contract. Rather, each wife had an individual marital relationship with the husband, meaning that the wives did not have marital obligations to each other (Ebo, 2012).

Monogamous Marriage: In Igbo society, monogamy is the more common form of marriage, typically involving the union of one man and one woman. However, in the context of Igbo monogamous marriage, formal vows are not exchanged. Instead, the woman is expected to remain exclusively committed to the man, while the man retains the possibility of marrying another wife if he can afford to do so. It is important to note that the Igbo conception of monogamy does not view it as a permanent or immutable state. Traditionally, no Igbo man is required to commit exclusively to monogamy as a lifelong arrangement; rather, it is seen as a flexible and modifiable state of marriage (Ebo, 2012).

Historically, monogamous marriages coexisted alongside polygamous ones, though the latter was considered more prestigious. This hierarchy arose from the belief that monogamy was a result of financial constraints (Chukwuokolo, 2015). While polygyny was seen as superior to monogamy, it is evident that more Igbo families practiced monogamy than polygyny. Thus, it would be misleading to attribute the prevalence of monogamy among the Igbo to the influence of Christianity. Instead, the choice of marital arrangement was largely determined by individual circumstances and preferences. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that monogamy does not necessarily ensure greater happiness or peaceful coexistence than polygyny; the success of either form of marriage largely depends on the character and temperament of the man (Chukwuokolo, 2015).

With the above understanding, we explore other forms of marriage partnership among the Igbo.

Female Husbands: In Igbo society, there are specific circumstances in which custom permits a woman to "marry" another woman. This typically occurs in cases where a woman has no male offspring, is wealthy, or if her father had no male child. In such cases, the woman is allowed to take on the role of a "husband" by marrying a wife. If the woman is wealthy or without a male issue, her husband is responsible for looking after her interests. However, in the case of a woman whose father had no male heir, a responsible man is chosen to sire her to ensure the continuation of the family line and to prevent the introduction of undesirable offspring into the family (Chukwuokolo, 2015).

Similarly, a woman whose husband has died and who has no children may be permitted to "marry" a wife. In this situation, the woman selects a man to father her children. This custom reflects the importance of lineage continuation and social responsibility within Igbo culture. It is also necessary to address the concept of a "female husband," where a woman marries another woman. Chukwuokolo (2015) clarifies that the Igbo do not condone or support lesbianism; as such practices do not align with traditional Igbo values. Ebo (2012) further emphasizes this point, highlighting the cultural distinction between the roles and expectations surrounding marriage within 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 further understand the concept of the "female husband" marriage, it is essential to recognize a key principle within Igbo culture: only marriage confers the status of a father. Simply impregnating a woman does not make a man a father among the Ndigbo. By this logic, a female husband enters into a marriage with another woman and arranges for a man to impregnate her wife. In the eyes of Igbo society, the children born from this union are considered to belong to the female husband. However, this practice was not widespread, as it was demanding and difficult to achieve. The traditional Igbo agrarian economy was largely male-dominated, and few women had the means to accumulate significant wealth, especially since women traditionally did not inherit land.

Marriage in Igbo culture was, and continues to be, a costly endeavor, making the role of a female husband particularly challenging. A woman who chose to become a female husband would need to maintain her own house or compound and assume responsibility for the family that would result from the union. The practice of female husband marriage also provides insight into the Igbo social conception of gender. In Igbo society, biology alone does not define manhood or fatherhood. As demonstrated by the female husband institution, a woman who possesses the requisite social and material abilities can assume the social role of a man, defying the traditional biological expectations of gender roles. Therefore, the female husband practice highlights the Igbo view that social roles are not solely determined by biology, but by one's ability and resources (Ebo, 2012).

Levirate Marriage: Marriage by inheritance, known as *ikuchi nwanyi* in Igbo tradition, is a practice similar to that of the Jewish tradition, where a widow is inherited by a male relative of her deceased husband. This practice occurs primarily when a man dies, leaving behind a widow who is still of childbearing age. In such cases, a male member of the deceased's family has the right to inherit the widow, thereby taking her as a wife. The children born of this union typically belong to the original deceased husband in some Igbo societies, whereas, in other contexts, the children are considered the offspring of the new husband, as the union is regarded as a separate marriage.

Ebo (2012) elaborates on this practice, explaining that among the Igbo, the young wife of a deceased husband could be inherited by the deceased man's oldest son, provided the son is not begotten by the woman. This situation is particularly relevant in polygamous marriages where the deceased had multiple wives, including those who may be younger or of the same age as his eldest son. As Ebo notes, this inheritance practice underscores the cultural importance of continuity and lineage within Igbo society, ensuring that the deceased's family remains intact and that his descendants continue to be cared for by members of his kinship group.

The first son takes over the responsibility of being a husband to them. The woman has a choice, however. She could refuse if she is not interested. The purpose of the inheritance is to fill the gap created by the demise of the husband. The children begotten in this marriage belong not to the deceased man but to his son, who has inherited the wife. His son, who inherits his father's wives, does not have to pay another bride price on them or perform any ceremony to mark the inheritance. They are regarded as part of the responsibilities the first son inherits as a result of the demise of his father (p.57)

In justifying the practice of marriage by inheritance, Ebo (2012) contends that the Igbo sought to alleviate the hardships associated with widowhood through this tradition. For men, the loss of a wife did not present significant challenges in terms of remarriage. A man was typically required only to mourn his wife for a prescribed period, after which he could easily remarry. However, the situation for women was more complex. Women generally endured a longer mourning period and faced the additional challenge of caring for children from the deceased's marriage. The idea of starting a new life and family elsewhere, without their children, was both emotionally and practically burdensome. Moreover, Igbo culture does not permit a woman to bring her children from a previous marriage into a new union. If a woman chose to remarry, it was expected that she would leave her children behind, a condition that made remarriage particularly difficult. In Igbo society, men typically preferred younger, unmarried women without the added responsibility of children. Through the practice of wife inheritance, Igbo culture aimed to mitigate the harsh realities of widowhood, ensuring that women and their children were not left destitute or socially marginalized.

Marriage by early betrothal or engagement (Inu nwanyi na nwatakiri): In Igbo society, there exists a practice that is often mischaracterized as "child marriage" due to its occurrence during childhood, but it is more accurately described as a form of betrothal or engagement. This practice involves the parents of a child, typically a girl, entering into an agreement or arrangement for her to marry at a later stage, once she reaches the appropriate age and maturity. Various motivations can prompt parents to initiate such engagements, including the desire to strengthen existing family ties, express gratitude for past favors, or secure a future marriage from a respected family. For example, a parent might decide that a newborn daughter will be engaged to a son of a close friend or relative once she matures (Chukwuokolo, 2015)

The engagement involves the performance of certain rites, which can vary between Igbo communities. One common rite is the presentation of money known as 'ego obara mmiri,' which is a symbolic amount placed into the child's drinking bowl. This act signifies the parents' intention to bind the child to a future union. Once the child reaches a certain level of maturity, the engagement is disclosed to her, and she is expected to accept it out of respect for parental authority, much like a priest's canonical obedience. In many communities, such engagements are regarded as expressions of parental wisdom and love, where the elders' judgment is considered superior to that of the children. This betrothal is seen as an intention or promise rather than a marriage itself. The girl's family agrees to raise her with the expectation that, when she matures, she will marry the boy from the other family. However, the outcome is not always guaranteed; sometimes, the two children grow up to marry as planned, while in other cases, they may not develop the necessary feelings to marry each other, highlighting the flexibility and evolving nature of this tradition.

Retention marriage (Nhachi Nwaanyi): In Igbo society, there is a significant cultural concern around the inability to produce a male heir. It is seen as a source of humiliation and worry for families, as the male child is considered essential for continuing the family name and inheriting family property. In the traditional Igbo setting, when daughters marry and eventually leave their parental home, their parents' property passes to their husbands, which can result in the family's wealth and legacy being transferred to outsiders who may have little connection to the family's history or struggles. To avoid this and ensure the family lineage is preserved, parents often choose one of their daughters to remain unmarried and bear children on behalf of her deceased father.

This practice is rooted in the belief that marriage is a fundamental civil right, a freedom to marry or not marry, and it is expected that the daughter's consent be obtained before proceeding with this arrangement. Once consent is given, the father, or the family, informs the kinsmen of the decision. The father then proceeds to pay the bride price to his family members and performs all the necessary marriage rites, much as he would for a typical marriage, although the exact number of items required may vary depending on the traditions of the specific community. These rites legitimize the children born from this arrangement,

giving them the legal status as heirs to the father's property. The woman in this arrangement assumes dual roles. Socially, she takes on the role of a man, participating in men's affairs within the kindred, while also fulfilling her role as a woman in the household, participating in co-wife meetings and sharing in domestic life. She selects lovers with whom she cohabits to bear children for her father. The children raised in this arrangement inherit the father's property and continue the family lineage, ensuring that the father's name and wealth are preserved within the family.

This form of marriage, while present in Igbo society, is not unique to the Igbo people. A comparable practice exists among the Chinese in the Yunnan Province. In instances where a wealthy family lacks a male child and wishes to preserve its lineage, especially before the enforcement of the "one child policy," the family would approach a poorer household with an abundance of male offspring. They would then pay a groom price for one of the sons and effectively "marry" him into their family. Upon completion of this transaction, the man ceases to be a member of his biological family and is integrated into the family of the bride. He relinquishes his father's surname and assumes that of his wife's family. All children born of the union are considered legitimate heirs of the bride's family. This practice, much like the Igbo counterpart, reflects the underlying cultural emphasis on lineage preservation and the flexibility of social roles in the face of demographic or familial concerns (Anedo, 2010).

Ghost marriage: In cases where a family loses its only son, often when the parents are too old to have more children, Igbo custom permits marrying a wife on behalf of the deceased son. This practice seeks to preserve the family lineage. Sometimes, the woman and her family are informed of the son's death and the intention behind the marriage; other times, the full details are not disclosed immediately, though the truth eventually comes to light. With the consent of the deceased man's parents, the woman is allowed to choose a lover to impregnate her. The man must be approved by the family to ensure the integrity of the lineage is maintained (Anedo, 2010).

Deity Marriage: Before Western contact and the introduction of Christianity, the Igbo people worshipped numerous deities—some male, others female. In certain instances, these deities were believed to demand a wife from their devotees. Failure to comply could bring dire consequences. To fulfill this, worshippers would procure a woman, often from a distant community, and present her as the deity's wife, with the chief priest serving as her symbolic husband and, in practice, the one who impregnated her. According to a respondent, Iwegbune Ekwemeze, this form of ritual marriage is believed to have contributed to the origins of the Osu caste system. Children born from such unions typically belonged to the priest's lineage, inheriting his name and property in the absence of legitimate heirs (Anedo, 2010).

Replacement marriage (Nkechi nwaanyi): Among the Igbo, it is commonly said that *ogburu onye na onye so ala*—meaning that he who sheds blood must follow the victim to the grave. This underscores the cultural taboo against taking a fellow human's life. Murder is considered an abomination, and the perpetrator is expected to take his own life or face execution. However, in cases of manslaughter, where death occurs by accident, the consequences differ. In such instances, the offender is required to give a daughter or sister to the family of the deceased in marriage, without the customary payment of bride wealth. This woman symbolically replaces the deceased, bearing children on behalf of the bereaved family. She is not permitted to leave the marriage (Anedo, 2010).

From the various types and forms of marriage discussed, it is evident that marriage occupies a central and enduring place in Igbo culture. Its embeddedness in social, spiritual, and economic life suggests that it remains resilient against external ideologies that may seek to diminish its cultural importance. With this understanding of the forms of marriage among the Igbo, attention now turns to the processes and rites involved in traditional Igbo marriage, which constitute the final section of this paper.

Igbo Marriage Rites and Processes

The conduct of marriage ceremonies among the Igbo is not a single-day event. Rather, it involves a sequence of ritualized stages, each with its specific requirements and symbolic significance. While some stages may be combined and performed on the same day, others must be observed separately due to their cultural and procedural importance.

The traditional Igbo marriage process typically begins with an initial contact with the prospective bride, primarily to secure her consent. This preliminary contact need not be made by the groom himself; it is often facilitated by a third party acting on his behalf. In many instances, women, particularly the groom's mother or an older sister, are entrusted with this task. The rationale is that, as women, they possess better insight into the character and disposition of other women and are therefore better positioned to identify a suitable partner for their son or brother. This informal interaction, once the bride's consent is secured, initiates the formal stages of the marriage process (Ebo, 2012).

The foundational step in the Igbo marriage process is the stage of inquiries. As Chukwuokolo (2015) explains, "Marriage starts with inquiries on both families: once both families are satisfied with their inquiries, the actual marriage negotiation process begins. Usually, the formal betrothal is the first step, and it goes through the payment of the bride price (*ngo nwanji*) and ends with the communal merriment where all and sundry are invited to bear witness that such marriage took place" (p. 134). Once a young man expresses interest in a woman, his family undertakes a detailed investigation into the background, character, and lineage of the prospective bride and her family. If the outcome of these inquiries is favorable, they proceed with the marriage negotiations. However, should the findings raise concerns, the family is likely to withhold their approval and begin the search for another potential spouse (Chukwuokolo, 2015).

Upon receiving a favorable outcome from their inquiries, the family of the prospective groom proceeds to initiate formal contact with the family of the bride-to-be. This initial official visit, led by the groom's parents and other close relatives, is undertaken to formally seek the consent of the girl's family. At this stage, customary items such as a large jar of palm wine, a bottle of dry gin, tobacco, and four kola nuts are typically required, symbolizing respect, sincerity, and goodwill.

Traditionally, the groom-to-be does not accompany the delegation. Rather, it is his father who formally articulates their marital intentions to the prospective bride's family. Responses are not given immediately; as the bride's family is granted time to carry out their investigations and consultations. This period of consideration allows the girl's father to make necessary inquiries into the background and character of the would-be groom and his family. Should the inquiries yield positive results, the girl's family gives their consent, allowing the marriage process to progress to the next phase. A date is then fixed for the formal betrothal ceremony. According to Chukwuokolo (2015), it is this formal betrothal that constitutes the official introduction between both families and serves as the foundational step toward the actualization of the marriage.

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The introduction ceremony marks a pivotal stage in the Igbo traditional marriage process, during which the prospective groom formally visits the bride's family to declare his intentions (Dike, 2011). The bride's parents typically inform a few members of their extended family to be present as witnesses to the occasion. By custom, the groom presents drinks and kola nuts, which are symbolic items that reflect goodwill and respect for the bride's family.

During the ceremony, the bride is invited by her parents and relatives and asked whether she recognizes the suitor. Upon her affirmative response, she is further informed of the purpose of the visit and questioned about her willingness to accept the proposal. If she consents, the ceremony proceeds. Immediately thereafter, members of the bride's family engage the prospective groom in a series of

questions aimed at ascertaining his family background, occupation, and overall eligibility. A background check is subsequently conducted to determine the social and moral standing of his lineage. Several key aspects are scrutinized during this investigation. Foremost among them is the reputation of the groom's family within their community. The inquiry seeks to determine whether the family has a history of criminal behavior, such as theft, or whether there are known hereditary afflictions such as leprosy or other stigmatized conditions. The question of longevity is also essential: Does the family experience recurrent untimely deaths? Another major consideration is the status of the family in relation to the *osu* caste system—despite its official abolition, its residual social implications still bear weight in many communities.

These background investigations are reciprocal. The groom's family likewise conducts inquiries into the character and marital history of the bride's family. They seek to determine whether women from the bride's lineage are known to remain committed in marriage and whether the family upholds values aligned with marital fidelity. In some cases, entire communities are discouraged from intermarrying due to perceived incompatibilities in cultural values, particularly when one community places high value on chastity while another is perceived to treat infidelity leniently.

The underlying philosophy behind the rigorous background checks in Igbo traditional marriage practices lies in the absence of formal courtship in precolonial Igbo society. Unlike Western cultures, where romantic love often plays a central role in partner selection, the Igbo worldview placed minimal emphasis on love as a decisive factor. Instead, character assessment and family pedigree were paramount. Prospective brides were typically young and heavily reliant on their parents' guidance, as they were generally deemed too inexperienced to make such a consequential decision independently. Parental involvement was thus not only expected but imperative, as no parent wished to see their daughter return home in disgrace following marital failure.

Within this framework, the influence of the bride's family was traditionally more pronounced than that of the groom's family. While prospective grooms were usually older and presumed to possess greater maturity and discernment in choosing a spouse, the bride's family exercised deliberate caution in approving a suitor. The bride's parents, motivated by a desire to secure their daughter's well-being and familial honor, played a crucial role in this evaluative process. Following the successful completion of background inquiries, the groom's family returns to the bride's home to collect the marriage list—a detailed inventory of items required for the subsequent marriage rites.

The next significant stage in the Igbo traditional marriage process is the wine-carrying ceremony, which customarily takes place three Igbo traditional weeks after the introductory visit. The Igbo calendar is structured around a four-day week—Eke, Afor, Oye, and Nkwo—making three traditional weeks equivalent to twelve days in the Gregorian calendar. This ceremony, which marks a pivotal communal affirmation of the marriage, must be held at the bride's ancestral home, regardless of whether her family has resettled elsewhere. The ancestral village serves as the legitimate site for conducting this rite, thereby reinforcing the connection between marriage, lineage, and ancestral heritage. During the wine-carrying event, the larger extended families of both the bride and groom—referred to collectively as “the house”—are invited to participate. The groom is typically accompanied by his kinsmen, who represent his lineage and social standing, while the bride's extended family gathers to witness and ratify the union.

At the wine-carrying ceremony, the groom is expected to present specific quantities of drinks to various groups within the bride's extended family, including the men's, women's, wives', girls', and young men's groups. If he fulfills these requirements, he may also choose to pay the bride price at this stage. Once the bride price is paid, marriage is considered legally formalized. The reason for involving the broader extended family in the marriage process lies in the Igbo belief that child-rearing is a communal responsibility. The upbringing of a child is not solely the duty of the parents but is shared by all relatives. Consequently, the act of giving a daughter's hand in marriage is seen as a communal decision, with the entire family participating in the process.

At the end of the ceremony, the bride's father offers prayers for the success of the marriage. Following this, the groom's party symbolically asks the bride's parents for permission to allow the bride to accompany the groom back to his house. This request is made through the proverbial act of asking to help return the groom's emptied calabash of palm wine, signaling the bride's departure to live with her husband. This marks the beginning of the courtship in Igbo culture. In the Igbo worldview, premarital sex is not criminalized but is strictly forbidden. A young man and woman are expected to refrain from any romantic or sexual relationships unless they are legally married. After the three traditional weeks' wine-carrying ceremony, the bride moves to the groom's house for twelve days.

During this time, she is expected to exhibit exemplary behavior. The groom's relatives observe the bride closely to assess her character, while the bride, in turn, observes the attitudes of the groom's family, evaluating whether she can live with them for the rest of her life. At the end of the three weeks, the groom returns the bride to her parents with gifts. If the bride is dissatisfied with the groom or his family, she can express her objections, bringing the marriage process to a halt. In this case, neither the bride nor her family has any financial or social obligation toward the groom. Likewise, if the groom or his family is unhappy with the bride's behavior during the visit, they can also end the marriage process without owing any compensation to the bride's family.

If the bride price is paid during the three traditional weeks of the wine-carrying ceremony, the situation changes. In the event that the bride decides to discontinue the marriage process, her parents are required to refund the bride price to the groom. However, if the groom decides to terminate the marriage process after the three weeks, he is not entitled to any compensation. If he has already paid the bride price, he must wait until another man marries the bride before receiving a refund. Until this happens, the bride is traditionally considered to still be the groom's wife, despite the discontinuation of the process. If the bride's parents decide to completely sever ties with the groom, they may return the bride price, even if another man does not marry their daughter. It's important to note that the bride price is only a small part of the total marriage expenses. Additionally, while the bride price paid to the bride's father is refundable, the bride price paid to her mother is never returned. This distinction highlights Igbo society's strong aversion to divorce and reinforces the security of marriage for women within this cultural context.

The final wine-carrying ceremony is a major event in the Igbo traditional marriage process, marking the culmination of the rituals. It is the most expensive ceremony, with the quantity of drinks required far exceeding that of previous ceremonies. The rationale behind this is that anyone from the community is welcome to attend and partake in the drinks. In addition to the drinks, other items are often required in larger quantities for the four groups in the kindred, further emphasizing the communal nature of the event. Once all the necessary items are provided, and if the bride price has not yet been paid, it may be settled at this stage. The climax of the ceremony occurs when the bride, after receiving a cup of palm wine from her father, searches the crowd for the groom and hands it over to him on her knees (Bamidele, 2010).

It is important to note, however, that the final wine-carrying ceremony is not compulsory in Igbo marriage traditions, although it is commonly requested. The definitive act that solidifies the marriage in Igbo ontology is the payment of the bride price. If the process reaches the final wine-carrying but the bride price has not been paid, the marriage is not considered legitimate. This ceremony also serves as a ritual to establish familial ties between the groom's and bride's kindreds. Marriage in Igbo culture is viewed as a union that goes beyond the individual man and woman; it extends to their respective kindreds, highlighting the communal and collective nature of marriage within Igbo society (Ebo, 2012).

In summary, the role of the middleman is pivotal in Igbo marriage rites and processes. This intermediary, often referred to as the "marriage guide," is responsible for facilitating the entire marriage negotiation process, from the initial stages to the eventual completion. The middleman's primary function is to gather comprehensive information about the bride or groom and their respective families, ensuring that all necessary details are known before the families proceed with formal discussions. Marriage rites can only

begin once the intermediaries are satisfied with their findings. Once this is accomplished, they, along with one or two members of the groom's kindred, approach the bride's family to declare the groom's intentions. The intermediary also plays a crucial role in smoothing over any reluctance from either side, ensuring that both families are on board with the union. In essence, the intermediary organizes the formal arrangements and acts as a reassurance to the bride's family that the groom's family is fully committed. Additionally, the middleman often steps in when financial demands, such as the bride price, become excessive, working to reduce the burden and ensure that the negotiations are fair and manageable for both families. Thus, the intermediary is essential in ensuring that the marriage process runs smoothly and that the interests of both families are balanced.

In the event of a divorce, the intermediary helps ensure that the bride price is returned to the groom's family, as they are the ones who facilitate its transfer. In cases of death, the intermediary from the groom's side plays a symbolic role in conveying the news to the bride's family. This is done by carrying a dead hen to the intermediary on the bride's side, who then takes it to the bride's family, symbolizing the message of the wife's death. This ritual represents the final function of the intermediaries, who are seen as family representatives. The role of intermediaries is not limited to the marriage process itself but extends to post-marital responsibilities, ensuring that the bond between the two families remains intact, even in challenging circumstances. If the original intermediaries pass away, their heirs or wards are expected to carry out these functions, preserving the continuity of their role within the family structure.

Conclusion

One singular fact that shines out through this presence discourse is that marriage is very important and a significant social activity to the Igbo man. This is the central thesis of this paper. Given the high premium the Igbo places on communitarian spirit and family, marriage becomes a condition sine qua non for achieving the sustenance of the two essentials of its worldview. This explains the meticulousness that comes into the marriage rites and processes of the Igbo. Marriage transverses the passions and feelings two adults have for each other among the Igbo. It concatenates families and communities. So, special care is given in concatenating marriage. With the presence of the different forms of marriages in Igbo land, the indispensable place of marriage in Igbo culture is emphasized. Therefore, even with western ideologies in contemporary world that seems to undermine the relevance and social significance of marriage, often ridiculing it as not being an achievement, a look at the Igbo worldview on marriage waters down these thoughts. The elaborateness of the ceremonies, the joy radiating on the faces of the families and the couples, shows that it is a huge achievement for the people. Of course, marriage in Igboland is not perfect and has its downfalls, but it is not within purview of this paper to focus on it. The central questions the paper raises are: What is the concept of marriage? What is the significance of marriage among the Igbo? This paper has exhaustively answered these questions, thereby heightening its significance, which is to give elaborate insight into the basic underpinnings of the exalted place of marriage among Africans and why, despite the strong waves of foreign ideologies, marriage for the Igbo is a life force.

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