



**NEXUS BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND IGBO TRADITION IN
MARRIAGE RITES IN IGBOLAND, NIGERIA**

By

ONYEIWU HENRY OKECHUKWU

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

January 2023

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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Marriage is not just a union between a man and a woman, but a tie between two families, and sometimes communities. Marriage is a legal union that is established through the fulfillment of certain requirements. Marriage and requirements for contracting marriage between two parties varies in different societies and cultures. This varies from community to community and even from country to country. In some communities, it is simple while in some others, it is complex. Generally speaking, in Igboland marriage is usually done traditionally and based on Christian marriage rites. However, some individuals choose to do both traditional marriage and Christian Marriage, or either of them, depending on which is more important to them. This has led to controversies in the entire Igboland as to which is more important, while some agree that the Igbo traditional marriage is more important, some believe that the Christian marriage is more important. Thus, this study focused on exploring the nexus between Christian marriage rites and Igbo traditional marriage rites, with a specific focus on Imo State. The aim of this is to understand the similarities that exist between the two, in the view of making contributions to the scholarship which proposes the merging of the two by identifying key similarities between Christian Marriage and Traditional Marriage.

To achieve the objective of this study, a qualitative approach was used, and through semi-structured interviews and observation, data was collected from married people in Imo State. Symbolic Interactionist Theory was used to analyze the concept of marriage.

The findings of the study showed that in Imo state, both Igbo traditional marriage and Christian Marriage are significant, however, the most critical aspect of both Christian Religion Marriage and Igbo Traditional Marriage is the payment of bride price, which is regarded as the main symbol of the establishment of a Marriage union between a man and a woman. Regardless of the preference of the families, either Christian Marriage or Traditional Marriage, the bride price must be paid before the man and woman can be

regarded as married. Also, the majority of the respondents see Igbo-traditional marriage ceremony as an indigenous cultural heritage. On the other hand, the respondents noted that Christian Marriage was introduced by Western missionaries during the colonial period. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the literature of Marriage practice in Imo, and towards the Standardization of Marriage rites in Imo State with the view of harmonizing the religious and traditional aspects of marriage in Imo State.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

HUBUNGAN ANTARA AGAMA KRISTIAN DAN TRADISI IGBO: KAJIAN ISTIADAT PERKAHWINAN DI IGBO LAND, NIGERIA

Oleh

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Januari 2023

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Perkahwinan bukan sekadar penyatuan antara seorang lelaki dan seorang wanita, tetapi ikatan antara dua keluarga, dan kadangkala masyarakat. Perkahwinan adalah penyatuan yang sah yang dibina melalui pemenuhan syarat-syarat tertentu. Perkahwinan dan keperluan untuk mengikat perkahwinan antara dua pihak berbeza dalam masyarakat dan budaya yang berlainan. Ini berbeza dari komuniti ke komuniti dan juga dari negara ke negara. Dalam sesetengah komuniti, ia adalah mudah manakala dalam sesetengah komuniti lain, ia adalah kompleks. Secara umumnya, di Igboland perkahwinan biasanya dilakukan secara tradisional dan berdasarkan upacara perkahwinan Kristian. Walau bagaimanapun, sesetengah individu memilih untuk melakukan kedua-dua perkahwinan tradisional dan Perkahwinan Kristian, atau salah satu daripada mereka, bergantung pada yang lebih penting bagi mereka. Ini telah membawa kepada kontroversi di seluruh tanah Igbo tentang mana yang lebih penting, sementara ada yang bersetuju bahawa perkahwinan tradisional Igbo adalah lebih penting, ada yang percaya bahawa perkahwinan Kristian adalah lebih penting. Oleh itu, kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada meneroka perkaitan antara upacara perkahwinan Kristian dan upacara perkahwinan tradisional Igbo, dengan tumpuan khusus pada Negeri Imo. Matlamatnya adalah untuk memahami persamaan yang wujud antara kedua-duanya, dalam pandangan membuat sumbangan kepada pengetahuan yang mencadangkan penggabungan kedua-duanya dengan mengenal pasti persamaan utama antara Perkahwinan Kristian dan Perkahwinan Tradisional. Untuk mencapai objektif kajian ini, pendekatan kualitatif telah digunakan, dan melalui temu bual dan pemerhatian separa berstruktur, data dikumpul daripada orang yang sudah berkahwin di Negeri Imo. Teori Interaksionis Simbolik digunakan untuk menganalisis konsep perkahwinan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa di negeri Imo, kedua-dua perkahwinan tradisional Igbo dan Perkahwinan Kristian adalah signifikan, namun aspek paling kritikal kedua-dua Perkahwinan Agama Kristian dan Perkahwinan Tradisional Igbo ialah pembayaran harga pengantin perempuan, yang dianggap sebagai simbol utama penubuhan penyatuan Perkahwinan antara lelaki dan perempuan. Tanpa mengira keutamaan keluarga, sama ada Perkahwinan Kristian atau Perkahwinan Tradisional, harga pengantin perempuan mesti dibayar sebelum lelaki dan wanita boleh

dianggap sebagai berkahwin. Selain itu, majority responden melihat upacara perkahwinan tradisional Igbo sebagai warisan budaya orang asli. Sebaliknya, responden menyatakan bahawa Perkahwinan Kristian telah diperkenalkan oleh mubaligh Barat semasa zaman penjajah. Adalah diharapkan dapatan kajian ini akan menyumbang kepada kesusasteraan amalan Perkahwinan di Imo, dan ke arah Penyeragaman upacara Perkahwinan di Negeri Imo dengan pandangan mengharmonikan aspek agama dan tradisi perkahwinan di Negeri Imo.



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To Dad, God bless your soul.



This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Marriage is defined in different ways depending on the culture. To a lay man, marriage is the legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife while in some cases it is a legal union between two persons of the same sex. Marriage is also referred to as wedlock or matrimony (Adshade, 2014). It is a legal contract or a ritually recognized union between two people that constitutes rights and obligations between the two, their in-laws and the society in general. Generally, marriage can be recognized by a religious body, a state, a tribal body, an organization, a local community or peers. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary marriage is defined as a legal relationship between a husband and a wife (Edike, et al 2014).

Even though there are other definitions of marriage, this study adopts the definition that says that marriage is a union between a man and a woman which is the most acceptable in Igbo land. According to the Pastoral Statement of the Irish Bishops Conference marriage is seen as a relationship between a man and a woman which makes the upbringing of children or a generation possible. Also, the Christians see the family as the most important institution in the society and as a union between a man and a woman. It also sees marriage as a biological process that can lead to the generation of a new (Alexander, 2012).

According to Girgis et al. (2015), marriage is the union of a man and a woman with permanent and exclusive commitment to each other that is naturally fulfilled by bearing children together. Marriage is also seen as a conjugal union of husband and wife, which serves the good of their children, and the society generally (Edike et al, 2014). John Finnis (2017) a professor of law and legal philosophy at the University of Oxford describes marriage as the chosen act of the two people that commit themselves to living as husband and wife, carrying out their commitment and not indulging in things that are not in line with their vow until they are parted by death. Furthermore, he stated that this is essential because it enables both parties to grow as individuals and as a couple by bringing forth another person into existence as an embryo, child and finally an adult fully able to take part in human flourishing. Nnamchi D, (2016) said marriage is a universal institution recognized and respected all around the world. Furthermore, she describes it as a social institution governed by the social and religious norms of the society. Consequently, in the world, the principle of the sanctity of marriage is well- accepted. Therefore, the root of every family and society is marriage (Nkem A, 2016).

Another study, Ganiyu (2015), describes marriage as a legal or social contract between people that creates family ties. According to him, it is an institution in which intimate and sexual interpersonal relationships are explored in different ways, depending on the existing culture or subculture. This union is made formal through matrimony.

From the definitions, we can conclude that marriage has to do with two people, usually a man and woman who agree to marry each other by living together and also producing children with acceptable cultural behavior. However, the purpose of marriage in society keeps evolving over time. Marriage contracts were mainly entered for survival reasons in the very early stage of humanity (Anyebe, 2013). However, Ogiri (2015) indicates that these days, marriages are based on selfish reasons where poor people connect to the rich to pool resources and connect through space and time.

In Nigeria, marriages are primarily contracted based on religious or traditional doctrines and practices. Specifically, in Igbo land, marriages are done either based on Christian doctrines or Igbo traditional practices, or even the two combined.

Regardless of the variances that cut across the marriage norms of different Christian denominations, the religious nature of Christian marriage remains the same all through denominations. The variations found in the denominations are rooted in the varying marriage doctrines. Most importantly, in all denominations, marriage is considered a divine institution. However, in the Catholic doctrine, marriage is seen as a sacrament as well as a divine institution (Ezeanokwasa, 2019). In contrast, other denominations consisting of Anglicans, Evangelicals and Pentecostals consider marriage to be a divine institution, but not a sacrament.

Based on the Code of Canon law states in canon 1055 'the marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between the baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament'. In this same Canon it is stated that a valid marriage cannot exist between baptized persons without its being by that very fact a sacrament. Meanwhile, according to the Canons of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) [CCNAC], which is the regulatory code of the Church, Marriage is a Divine institution in which a lifelong exclusive union and partnership is entered into between one man and one woman. Its law and regulations are based upon this belief. Based on the definition of marriage based on the church doctrines, Christian marriage has specific features including: being a divine institution, being a partnership (man and woman become partners).

Based on the provision of Canon XVII (1), CCNAC, the laws and regulations that govern marriage are to be based on the facts that marriage is a divine institution, life long, and partnership between one man and one woman. Also, in the Anglican denomination, the bishop oversees the Solemnization of Holy Matrimony of members of the church based on the Rites of the Church, which states that marriage should be contracted between two baptized people. However, if the marriage is to be contracted between a baptized and unbaptized member, then the Bishop must grant a dispensation for the solemnization of Holy Matrimony to be done based on marriage rites of the church. This means that in Christian marriage the authority to join a man and woman in Holy Matrimony lies in the hands of the church authority.

According to Daniel Durojaye, traditional marriage is a type of marriage based on the practices and customs in a particular culture. It is the established form of marriage recognized in a given social group, country, religious group or society at a given time. It also involves the exchange of gifts and visits by both families. This helps keep both families united (Ganiyu, 2015). A non-governmental organization known as Family Watch International headed by Sharon Slater, describes traditional marriage as important to a healthy society across all cultures and throughout human history. Therefore, traditional marriage is a union of a man and a woman essentially for the purpose of creating, protecting and promoting the family (Anyebe, 2013).

It is important to see it as a social institution that provides some essential societal social needs to fully understand the importance of marriage in the society. A 'social institution' is the network of shared beliefs, meanings, expectations, definitions and understandings held by the members of a society. The behavior of the members of the society is governed and guided by marriage. It determines what is socially legal and. Marriage is one of the major social institutions. Since the rising generation is the future of any society, marriage focuses on children and what is best for them. Adshade and Brooks, (2014) describes marriage as one of the original institutions that unites men and women in household production and genetic reproduction. Thus, traditional marriage inculcates values, expectations, guidance, and sense of what is legal through the symbols and stages involved in the process of traditional marriage.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The main problem to be investigated has to do with marriage in the light of scriptural disclosure as it relates to Christians in Nigeria. Regardless of religion, Igbos hold on to their traditions strongly, because the traditions existed even before the coming of Christianity. Just like in every aspect, Igbos hold on to traditional marriage rites. Issues regarding marriage in Igbo land need to be assessed in order to understand the nexus between the two, and in turn find ways through which the two can be done to accommodate each other, while preserving the uniqueness of both Christian and traditional marriage.

Igbo Christian relationship is evaluated using the standards listed in Matthew 19; 1-12. Jesus reminds the Congregation that marriage is called into being by God and given extraordinary reason and importance (Martin 2004, p. 9). Jesus' citations begin to illuminate to us that marriage is a perfect organization and should last. Consequently, because of the heavenly idea of marriage, Jesus earnestly holds that God made them male and female, and that a man will leave his dad and mom and be joined to his significant other, and the two will be one substance (Genesis 1:27). So, at this point they become one not two anymore. What God has joined, let nobody separate.

When the man and woman practice Pentecostal Christianity and their parents or relatives do not, it causes altercations. It is also important to state that, before white wedding ceremony was introduced in Igbo land; a man joyfully goes home with his wife after the traditional rites have been fulfilled. He was accompanied by his relatives. But this is sometimes not the case for Pentecostal Christians as consummating before marriage is

not allowed. They are not considered married until they are blessed by the priest. There is a clash between foreign values and African heritage, with so many debates in the church and society as to what is correct when it comes to marriage in Igbo land. This debate has resulted in conflicts sometimes between the traditional society and the church. Many societies value Christian marriage and have provided modalities to make sure it continues (Mathaias & David, 2014). It is based on this problem that the cultural aspects of Igbo traditional marriage (Igba-nkwu) and theological aspects of Christian marriage ceremonies are analyzed in this study.

Again, the Congregation discovers this 'extravagant and fun' as outrageous and inadmissible. Looking at the difficulty confronting the Christian wedding, the researcher investigates how this can be done peacefully in the Igbo communities without affecting the Igbo Christians. These difficulties have ended at the refusal of some 'brought back to life' Pentecostal dads of the lady of the hour and ministers of Pentecostal houses of worship to permit the man return home promptly with his lady, which in addition has resulted into a trade of cruel words, gala of battles and open encounters between individuals from both families instead of an effectively closed normal wedding. This has made it difficult to contract marriages and to form a new affinal (relatives by marriage, Oke, 2006). Even though, a number of studies have focused on marriage in Igboland, some of them have focused on addressing the issues involved in the quest for integrating Igbo traditional marriage from the liturgical, canonical and civil law perspectives (e.g Nnabugwu, 2016), while some have investigated how acculturated the Igba-Nkwu in Igboland have shaped the contemporary social construct of marriage as well as how it articulates with continuities and changes in Owerre-Igbo social organization (e.g. Nwoko, 2020) and some have explored the instrumentality of marriage as a marker of Igbo ethnic and identity consciousness (Smith, 2005). However, none of these studies have focused on analyzing the duality of Igbo traditional marriage in terms of traditional and Christian marriages. Following these problems, this study is set to:

1.3 Research Objectives

- 1) To investigate the understanding of religion and culture in the Igbo community.
- 2) To understand the theological aspects in Christian marriage ceremonies and Igbo traditional marriage (Igba-nkwu).
- 3) To investigate the cultural aspects in Igbo traditional marriage (Igba-nkwu) and Christian marriage ceremonies.
- 4) To determine if the conflicts in Igbo marriages are caused by theological differences, cultural differences, or other external factors.

1.4 Research Questions

- 1) What is the understanding of Igbo community on the concept of religion and culture?
- 2) What are the theological aspects in Igbo traditional marriage (Igba-nkwu) and Christian marriage ceremonies?
- 3) What are the cultural aspects in Christian marriage and Igbo traditional marriage (Igba-nkwu) ceremonies?
- 4) Are the conflicts in Igbo marriages caused by theological differences, cultural differences or other external factors?

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The Symbolic Interactionist Theory: This theory was propounded in 1934 by an American Philosopher named George Herbert Mead. The theory examines the relationship between society and self. It shows that the society is made up through meaningful interactions among individuals. Micheal J. Carter and Celene Fuller revealed Herbert Blummer developed the symbolic interaction in the 1950s. Bummer introduced mead's philosophically-based social behaviorism to sociology, The theoretical orientation towards symbolic interaction by Blumer's is summarized into three perspectives; how human beings act towards things they consider important, social interaction with others reveals the true meaning of things, and lastly meaning are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by a person in dealing with the things they encounter.

On the other hand, Manford Kuhn and Sheldon Stryker see this theory as a process of interaction and see behavior as socially constructed, purposive, coordinated social acts informed by previous events in the context of projected acts that occur. However, Stryker argued that a normative expectation for action among people is set by the interaction with individuals. This theory states that through symbolic interaction with others, human behavior is influenced. The theory also states that social interaction helps to shape people's identity. Societies develop self-concept by observing how others interact and labeling them, self-concept is developed.

In relation to this study, symbolic interactionism is used because it is a theory through which patterns of communication, interpretation and adjustment are analyzed. The theory provides insight on the manner in which individuals interact with one another through the meanings of symbols (Stryker, 2006). Symbolic interactionism emphasizes on meanings of symbols. Based on this theory, marriage can be seen as a symbol that is interpreted in different ways, meaning that marriage can have different meaning to people. Marriage conveys a lot of symbolism to different people. It may mean one thing to people of a given cultural background and a different thing to people from another cultural background. This meaning can also vary according to religion. This is the rationale behind the use of this theory to study the cultural and religious aspects of marriage in Imo state. According to this theory, marriage rites may be different in the

Christian religion and it may mean something different in the context of Igbo cultural practices. For example, in the Christendom, marriage is regarded as a sacred union between a man and one woman. It also symbolizes love, and the union is ordained by God, while on the other hand, in most African traditions polygamy is allowed, and as such marriage is seen differently, and can mean the union between a man and one or more wives. Thus, the meaning which Christians give to marriage can influence their interaction with traditional marriage. This can also explain why some Igbos believe that traditional marriage is enough for them, while some believe the traditional and Christian marriage should both be done.

Even though the symbolic interactionism theory has continuously been used to explain human interactions, it has been criticized for different reasons such as its failure to address micro issues, and its reliance on people's interaction to explain sense-making (Stryker and Vryan, 2006). Due to some of the limitations of the theory, it has been used together with other theories to explain human behavior.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study seeks to make findings that are both practical and theoretical significant. Theoretically, findings from this study will increase the existing knowledge on dual religion in Igbo land and how it affects the rite of marriage. The findings of the study will assist other researchers in examining the change in pattern of the Igbo marriage, for the purpose of comparative study and future research.

It is believed that the findings of this research will assist other researchers that are interested in investigating the effect of the cultural interaction between the Igbo culture, European culture and other cultures on traditional marriage.

The study will help to reveal some practices in Igbo traditional marriage that has changed due to educational exposure and changes in time.

And lastly, the study will help to find solutions to the problems rising from the change in marriage patterns as a result of modernization and its effect on Igbo people and the society at large.

1.7 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to the available evidence of Igbo people rites of marriage, tradition and religion in Imo state. The scope of this research is limited to Imo state in Nigeria. Other correspondents include some youths of marriageable age (who are still unmarried) of the contemporary Igbo society irrespective of their state of origin in Igbo land and some randomly selected modern couples. Therefore, it is hoped that this study would depict the general situation found in all Igbo societies.

1.8 Research Plan

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one includes the general introduction that describes the context of this research, the technical and conceptual designs.

A panoramic presentation of the rites of traditional and Christian marriages respectively is presented in chapter two. Here, the two marriage ritual celebrations will be examined with the intention of highlighting their docility for intercultural relationship and enrichment.

The study of marriage between the Igbo traditional marriage and the Christian marriage will be developed in chapter three. An intercultural relationship between the two religious cultures will also be shown.

Chapter four presents the discussion of findings, where the findings of the study are discussed and analyzed based on supporting literature on traditional marriage and Christian marriage. The last chapter includes the general conclusion and some issues for further discussion are.

Theoretically, it is strongly believed that the findings of the study will add largely to the already existing knowledge on the nexus between Christian religion and Igbo tradition on rites of marriage. The findings of the study will help fellow researchers in the examination of the trends of the changing patterns of the Igbo marriage, for the purpose of further research and comparative study.

1.9 Definition of Key Terms

Wedding: A wedding is a collective name used for all the ceremonies and rituals that take place to give social acceptance to the relationship between two people (Patterson & Larry, 2016).

Marriage: on the other hand, marriage is a relationship that involves only the two spouses and to depend entirely on their satisfaction with each other (Durkheim, 1906). It is regarded as a lifelong institution that begins after the wedding.

Traditional marriage: traditional marriage is the joining of a man and woman in matrimony based on the classical norms of a specific culture with the aim of establishing a family unit (Sam, 2013). Thus, Igbo traditional marriage is the joining of a man and woman in matrimony based on Igbo marriage traditions and practices.

Christian marriage: "Christian marriage is a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God and People," (Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, 1979).

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