MARRIAGE CEREMONY IN TRADITIONAL ACHINA COMMUNITY: A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

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Abstract
Marriage institution is found in every society. It cuts across nations, tribes, creeds, race, cultures, schools of thought, era and so on. It means and portrays different thing for different people and culture. In traditional Africa, communalism is a predominant world view within which various dimensions of life are lived and appreciated. This is particularly true of the institution of marriage and the processes leading to it. Marriage ceremony in the traditional Achina community is greatly tenured by this worldview. It is within this communalist framework that the present work undertakes the hermeneutics of marriage ceremony in the traditional Achina community. This involves particularly interpreting, unveiling and discerning, the underlying meaning and implications of the various rites, processes, rituals and symbolisms of the various stages of marriage in Achina community.
Keywords: Marriage, Achina, Hermeneutics.

Introduction

The family is an integral part of the society. Particularly, it is the nucleus of the society at large. In Igboland, the family is held at high esteem and the behaviour of any individual is traced back to the person's root which is the family. The Igbo society lays so much emphasis on the family and communalism. In the same vein, the Achina people of Anambra State South-Eastern Nigeria are known for their communal living because they relate and regard their relatives as far as they can still remember.

The Igbos so much believe in the philosophy of *onye aghana nwanne ya* and *onuru ude nwanne agbana oso*(be your brother's keeper) to the extent that the community is a place in which there is a place for everybody, where all share both in poverty and in prosperity. (T. Mboya, 1962: 167) Other deep Igbo philosophical sayings and belief systems worthy of mention include *umunna bu ike* (there is strength in brotherhood), *bunu bunu, ibuanyidanda* (there is no problem too much for the community). It is this spirit of brotherhood,

togetherness, and mutual co-operation in traditional African society that Nyerere propagated in his Ujamma as the antidote to extreme individualism of the West and its unfortunate influence on African culture. Of course this must not be understood as projecting cultural essentialism as if communalism is the exclusive to Africans. Hence, Odimegwu (2008:159) reflecting on (African) communalism opines that it is 'a universal theory of human nature, which emphasizes that the human being is characterised basically by community of beings'. A quick explication of the meaning of communalism would go a long way to make the work easy for comprehension.

Communalism comes from the Latin word 'communalis' which implies 'shared', 'owned in common.' Consequently the idea of communalism is all about sharing. So what it implies is that, it requires not only one person but many persons, because one person cannot share alone. This is particularly supported by the Igbo adage which states that *'ori nani ya, afo na eto ya'* (he who eats alone, develops protruding stomach) and for the Igbo, a protruding stomach is a very bad omen. Put differently, when things are shared in common, they could easily be contended with. Ekei (2007: 1) submitted that communalism is "the co-existence and sharing of life".Nze (2007: 30) is of the opinion that "communalism has a unifying strength and it can unite families, towns, countries, continents and world".

It is within this communalist framework that the hermeneutics of marriage ceremony in the traditional Achina community which is the major concern of the present work would be done. This involves particularly the hermeneutics of marital rites, processes, rituals and symbolisms of the various stages of marriage in Achina community.

Brief Overview of Achina Town

Achina is a town in the eastern part of Nigeria located in Aguata Local Government of Anambra State of Nigeria. Achina shares common boundaries with other communities like Umuchu, Amesi, Akpo, Enugu Umuonyia and Onneh. The town is popularly known and regarded as *Achina Idegwu Egbe Vuru Oku Asoghi Anwuru*, because of its famous war exploits. There are quite a number of interesting cultural heritages for which the town is known and these include the famous *igbammonwu* (masquerade) festival, the prestigious Idegwu celebration and the feast of the village deity 'Ezekoro' (the deity of Achina traditional religion). Achina has a very interesting and meaning packed marital rites and rituals which fall within the scope of the present research.

Conceptual Framework

Marriage

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife intentionally joined for the purpose of companionship and procreation. In Africa and in Achina community in particular, procreation is a very sensitive and important aspect of marriage. Naturally, every living being apart from trees yearn for companionship and have a natural tendency of regeneration of their specie. Every human being yearns for relationship because we feel that life would not have meaning, if we do not experience love from and towards our fellow human beings. Both men and women need to be loved. (Okeke, 2005: v)

In Igbo world view, "marriage is the avenue instituted by culture for self-fulfilment and actualization for women. (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2015: 24) It is the only source of prestige and honour for them. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015: 25) emphasizes that "no matter the height of achievements made by any woman, marriage offers her the prestige to be regarded as a complete woman". This is in line with an Igbo popular saying - "*nwanyi gafee onye muru, ajubazia ya onyena alu*, (when a girl outgrows the question of whose daughter she is, she begins to entertain the question of whom her husband is). On the other hand, any male adult who has reached the age of marriage and refuses to get married, is seen and regarded as a renegade (*efulefu*). He is not usually admitted into some organisations and gatherings because of his deficiency in his marital status.

The institution of marriage transcends the responsibility and demand which the two parties owe to themselves, Thomas (2000: 84)submits that "marriage is not something to be entered into lightly, it is something to be embarked upon in a spirit of responsibility- responsibility towards one's partner, responsibility towards the children the couple would bring to the world" Marriage is a strong contract and a solid union between families.

Culture

Culture is the sum total of the ways in which a people's way of life and values are transmitted from generation to generation (Alfred, 2005: 5). Culture is an integral aspect of human life and the society. Taylor (2000: 5) avers that culture is defined as the complex totality of man's acquisition, of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs, technology, etc, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation. Stressing on the same issue, Ezeokana & Okoye (2009: 8) summarize culture as being acquired through social interactions; it evolves from generation to generation and the individual

incorporates the culture of his society and develops a personality that is more or less adjusted to the cultural standard of his society.

Abakare (2009: 3) points out that culture does not die with the death of an individual or groups of individuals, rather it may vanish only when such people varnish under mishap as earthquakes. The Africans are known for their high regard for culture. In the Eastern part of Nigeria that is dominated by the Igbos, culture and tradition are held in high esteem. According to Adibe (2009: 7) African (Igbo) traditional religion has recognised traditional values among which is that African people never permit individualism; all life is community oriented. This culture of communalism is so much tied to the traditional Achina marriage tradition.

Marital Rites in Achina Community: Meaning and Significance

Marriage is often viewed in many cultures as the indispensable avenue towards self-realization. In Africa, it is conventionally taken to be the ultimate essence of responsibility and manhood/womanhood (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 20). Ezenwa-Ohaeto (25) suggests that marriage is instituted by culture for self-fulfilment and actualization for women; it is a source of prestige and honour for them and by extension men. They have very rigorous but simple steps to take before giving out their daughter's hand in marriage to her prospective husband. We shall start with an exposition and interpretation of the various marital processes for an Achina daughter. It should be noted that Achina does not joke with *nwada/umuada*, which is very much evident with the way they are regarded and addressed as *ada Achina ji ego* (wealthy Achina daughter). Below are the stages involved.

i) *Nkirishiala/Nkoiri*
ii) *Igbai Ihe*
iii) *Iku Kpam Kpam*
iv) *Iju Ase*
v) *Nkwere Izu*
vi) *Igba Mmanya Izunato*
vii) *Ime Ego*
viii) *Igba Nnukwu Nkwu/ Nluru Nwanyi*
ix) *Igba Oziza*

Nkirishiala/Nkoiri

Nkirishi is a traditional ritual carried out on a maiden who has attained the age of marriage. When a maiden has attained the age of maturity in Achina, the maiden is exposed to the public with *nkirishiala* and *nkoiri. Nkirishi*ala should be best understood in the modern day tatoo that people wear on their body. It is done with an element called *uri* at the various strategic parts of her body: the face, the shoulder, the stomach. The maiden would also be adorned with

nkoiri. This is a hair style that is punctuated with very valuable beads called *ego ayori.*

Significance
The meaning of this pre-stage of marital rite is to let the public know that some set of maidens are ripe and are ready to become wives. It is usually done in groups. The *nkirishiala* and *nkoiri* make the maiden appear appealing to prospective suitors. It is at this stage that people begin to match make by what is regarded as *ikunku*. *Ikunku* is a recommendation for possible union.

Worthy of note here is the fact that when a male is interested in a particular girl, the mother of the man goes to meet the mother of the maiden; both would discuss it and agree or disagree. The outcome of the discussion opens door for the second step.

Igbai Ihe
This is the very first step towards actualising a marriage union. Here, the suitor together with his father pays a visit to his prospective in-law. The items needed for the *igbai ihe* include: one gallon of *nkwu elu* (up wine) and a head of coconut. The father of the maiden welcomes the visitors and gives them kola, and the intending in-laws would present the palm wine and the coconut, then the girl would be invited to come and see their visitors. Before then, her mother must have intimated her on the purpose of the visit and expects her decision of acceptance or rejection.

If the girl accepts the coconut, they will drink the *nkwu elu* together. The father of the maiden invites one of his brothers around and informs him of the visit, so he would join in the drink. After the drink, the father of the girl greets the visitors and bids them farewell, assuring they would ascertain their daughter's decision.

Significance
Recall that in this first visit, the man and his father never made anything open, but the coconut symbolises their interest in the girl in question. This is simply a way to indicate that they want to start the process of marrying the maiden. The father of the maiden makes a call to his brother because Achina people believe that *ofu onye anaghi enwe nwa, nwa bu nwa oha* (The child does not belong to one person).

***Iju Ase* (Investigation)**
This is an interlude between the first visit and the second one. The two families go into very thorough and critical investigation about the families of both respectively, to look out for negative traits like: stealing, generational

sickness or malady that is consistent with their generation for instance, madness, bareness, imbecility, epilepsy, leprosy and so on, over and above all, their general reputation. The people involved in the *iju ase* are parents of the both the maiden and the man, the brothers and sisters of both family, the *ikwu nne*,(the mother's people), the in-laws etc.

It is important to note that in the midst of all these processes of inquiry (*ijuase*), *ihe mgbata* would still be intact. The girl and the mother would not touch it. If after the inquiry and there is a problem with either family, say sickness or bad reputation, the *ihe mgbata* would respectfully be taken back to the mother of the man by the mother of the girl. But when the two parties are satisfied with the reports and results of the *iju ase*, the parents of the two would agree on a date for *iku kpam kpam* (Introduction).

Significance

Iju ase is the most important and sensitive part of marital rites in Achina community. First and foremost, the relatives of the girl are concerned about the future of their daughter, and as such, would make every humanly possible effort to see that their daughter does not fall into a life problem. On the other hand, the man's family are also conscious of their genealogy, they would not permit a stain to be done to their family stream. Again, the number of people involved in this project shows the degree of its seriousness. Marriage is not a child's play here and as such, the whole relations both nuclear and extended place their hands on deck.

***Iku Kpam Kpam* (Introduction)**

Here, the parents of the maiden would alert his brothers, about two of them and the father of the man would also come in company of two or three of his brothers. Items needed for this include; one gallon of *ngwo* (palm wine), one gallon of *nkwu elu*, soap.

The father of the girl presents kola and the visitors present their palm wine. The girl would be invited and the father would fill a cup with palm wine and gives it to her daughter. She sips it a little and gives it to the intending husband. Afterwards, the visitors would be presented with food. After this section, they would now make open, the intention of their visit in these words 'we saw a beautiful thing on the road that captured our fancy, we followed it jealously and found out that the thing ended up right inside your compound and that is exactly what we have come to ask for.'

At this declaration, the father of the maiden would tell his brothers that these people have been in his house before with a gallon of *nkwu elu* and coconut, now they have come again pointing to this same direction. Then the brothers would tell the visitors that they have heard them, but that they should go, so as

to give them time to ask their daughter to see if she accepted the coconut out of fear, or under undue influence or if it came from her heart. The visitors would at this point be informed to get a middle man *(nwa nduzo*). He shall be responsible for; receiving and giving information to and fro the both families, like the requirements, items and date etc. The *nwa nduzo* might be from the kindred of the girl or from the kindred of the man.

Significance
Here, communalism comes to play and other members of the family are involved in the process. This signifies that the 'ownership' of a girl is not private to the parents alone; again the number of the gallons of palm wine has risen to two, so it progresses as the number of visit progresses too.

The maiden sips the drink a little so as to let the brothers of the intending husband identify her while the man drinks the remaining content of the cup of palm wine so as to let the brothers of the girl's father to identify and know him too, because they were not all present at the first visit. On the issue of the middle man, it exposes again, the seriousness and importance attached to the institution of marriage in Achina community. Middlemen are usually present in situations where things are ultimately sensitive.

Nkwere Izu (Mmanya Ime Ulo)
Items involved here are two gallons of palm wine. On this day the suitor, his father together with few of his kinsmen meets with his prospective in-law who also welcomes them with few of his close relatives. It is referred to as *mmanya imeulo*(wine for the close family) the Igbo people have a strong belief that *ana esi n ulo diri mma were puo na ama* (charity begins at home). The visitors would be received and presented with kola as usual. The maiden also identifies with her fiancé to whom she offers a cup of palm wine she sips from. The maiden accompanies her husband home in order to help them return their wine jar also known as *obele mmanya* (wine jar). She stays there for four market days at the man's family house.

Significance
The essence of sipping and giving the prospective husband the wine is still for the identification and building the foundation of the expected bond between the prospective couple. The purpose of the visit to the man's family house is to give the girl the opportunity to make a critical assessment of the family in which she is going into for the rest of her life. The same goes for the groom's family. Each party may decide to call off the process, if negative traits are noticed. This goes a long way to show that in Achina community and by extension in the Igbo tradition, *ofu onye anaghi alu nwanyi (*one person does not marry a wife). A collective approval is needed during the marriage procedure. Hence, the wife in Achina is regarded as *nwunye anyi* (our

wife).The concept of the four days visit is taken from the *nkwere izu*. *Nkwere* is to agree while *izu* implies four days in Igbo setting, the four market days across the Igbo tribe.

Mmanya Izu N'Ato

Items involved are eight gallons of *nkwu elu* (upwine) and twelve gallons of *ngwo* (palmwine). In this stage of the visit, the number of people involved would be the whole *umunna* (kindred) of both father and same on the man's side. They present their gifts upon arrival, they would be presented with kola, while they would present their twenty gallons of palm wine. The rituals and rites here are the same as in the *mmanya nkwere izu*. The only difference here is that a good number of relatives from the to-be bride would present their own kola individually ranging from the father, mother, uncles, aunts, *ikwunne, ndi ogo* (in-laws), *umu ada*(daughters), *alutara di*(wives) and so on. The *nwa nduzo* (mediator) between both families does the job of collecting and presenting the kola. The would be in-laws would be asked to collect the much they can finish there, while the left over would be put in their bag, so as to go home with them, as tradition demands. They would then be presented with food and drinks, but they would blatantly refuse to taste anything further, unless they get to the root of why they came. Thus the *nwa nduzo* goes to inform the mother of the maiden to get her ready. When she comes out, she greets the whole assembly and sits by the side of her father or the eldest in the family as the case may be. Her father fills a cup with *nkwu elu* . She sips from the cup and offers the rest of the content in the cup to the prospective husband. The man and his family would at once present gifts to the maiden, while the maids would help her in the collection of the gifts. Now the young boys/youths who came would jump into the scene and make some physical acrobatic called *idaiya* while people around cheer them up.

After this, the visitors would again state why they have come and the girl's father would respond and tell his kindred the various processes that they have undergone to arrive at this particular one. The kindred would unanimously tell the visitors to go, so as to allow them time to ask their daughter some necessary questions.

***Ime Ego* (Bride Price Ceremony)**

This is when the bride price is paid. In Achina community, the bride price is done with little number of individuals from the both families. One gallon of *nkwu elu* and one gallon of *ngwo* alone is used for this function. The family of the bride would ask their prospective in- law to present the money they want to give for the bride price. It is important to note that the bride price is done into two places in Achina: the father's bride price and the mother's bride price (*ego nna na ego nne*). However, a little token would be demanded as a top up on the bride price, if the groom's family complies, it would be accepted, if

not, whatever thing that is given, would be accepted. The bride would then be invited to seek for her consent before collecting the money.

Significance

The bride price is not actually an exchange of an Achina daughter for money, but it is a way of demanding and eliciting commitment on the part of the girl's family and on the part of the prospective in-laws. That is to say that an Achina daughter (*ada Achina*) is a very much priced and is meant to be regarded as such. Again the Achina community believes that *anaghi alucha nwanyi alucha* meaning that, they do not believe in placing a heavy burden on a man who has come to marry their daughter, because there is no how the value of an average *ada Achina* could be paid on a particular day, quite contrary to what is obtainable in other Igbo communities, where you see them levy their in-laws unnecessarily. The implication of this is that the relationship that exists between in-laws is not one that should begin and end in a day.

***Igba Nnukwu Nkwu* (Big Traditional Marriage Ceremony)**

This is virtually the last of all the official visits by the prospective in-laws to the to-be bride's family house. It is the highest point of the wine carrying, because the number of the people involved is unlimited. The number of the jars of palm wine is at least 50 gallons.

When the assembly of witnesses must have gathered, there is a rite called *iluru nwanyi*. The maiden's father would show his in-law the close members of the family, and the in law would give them all, one jar of palm wine each with probably small amount of money as would be directed by the girl's father. This is a very great sign of communalism.

As usual, there is the normal presentation of kola nut and food. Again, the girl for the very last time would be given a cup filled with palm wine, to identify the husband. When this is done, there is usually attendant rounds and rounds of applause. There is acrobatic display by the young men (*ida iya*) and corresponding response by the happy crowd. It is usually a very happy day for the both families because it has become a vision that has come to reality. This is the highest point of the marriage rite.

After the rite, the newly wedded couple would go to the houses of all the relatives that were given a jar of palm wine for what is called *ntutulo obele mmanya* that is, bringing back the jar of palm wine. As they go from house to house, they are given gifts of different kinds like; yam, coco yam, fowl, fish, cassava depending on the strength and level of generosity of the person in question.

The parents of the girl would also give her some items with which to go to her husband's place. Such items include broom, small stool (*nwanyi nodoro ekwu*), male and female fowl, he and she goats, sheep etc. This is called *idu obi.*

Significance

Igba nnukwu nkwu is the highest point in the rite of marriage in Achina community. The increased and unlimited number of people here is to make the union of the couple extensively open. This would make any other young man who has been eyeing the maiden to know at that point that the maiden has been taken. Again, for the other young girls to know that the man has united with a maiden and as such, no room for other thing.

Mmanya nluru nwanyi is the event of showing the man, the various relatives of the family from which he married from. Going to their houses would help identify them one by one, because from that point, the man has become a member of the wife's family. Thus Achina people would say that *ogo bu ikwu ito*(the in-law is an extended relative)

Again the gifts from the parents, is to make available for their daughter, what she would start life with and also to show their in laws that their daughter comes from a family that recognises her and as such, ought to be taken care of by them too.

Igba Oziza

This is a form of thanksgiving done at the various *isi obi* (family head) of the husband's kindred. It is a form of dance setting where the maidens that were newly married into the kindred at that period come to perform. It is usually done on the *orie* day after the *ezekoro* deity celebration. While all the ladies that got married within that year perform the dance, their husbands in company of their friends present them with different gift items.

Conclusion

No doubt, the steps to be taken to make a single marriage contract in the traditional Achina community are very rigorous. The long process would make the people seeking for the maiden's hand in marriage to know that the girl in question is a well valued entity. It is a way of making the husband have a high regard for the wife, and that 'physical violence remains one of the most immediate threats to human life and that the Achina people would not condone that at all, especially when it is meted to their own *nwa ada*. Again, one would notice that the number of witnesses in each of the visits climax as the rite progresses. This is to show that the people of Achina believe so much that *nwa bu nwa oha* (the child belongs to everybody) and as such, almost everybody would be notified that their daughter is getting married and to this particular person. The two families are usually involved in the *iku nku na iju*

ase(inquiry) respectively to show that the wife is going to be theirs collectively and not for the man alone. In summary, no Achina indigene lives his life alone; there is usually a collective and communal way of doing things in keeping with the extended African communalism.

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