

# Globalization and the Business of Marriage in Eastern Nigeria: A Study of Traditional Marriage Rites in Awkuzu, Anambra State and Irete, Imo State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper is structured to give a detailed analysis of the marriage custom in eastern Nigeria, taking into consideration the modifications in custom as a result of globalization spanning from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It aims to analyse marriage ceremony as an activity that manipulates bodies in time and space, taking into cognizance the social process involved in the production of this activity, according to the precepts of the native social group (Kaepler, 1999). The understanding of marriage in this context stems from, Ameh's (2002) position on gender and male domination in Nigeria, and Bourdieu's (2003) theory of cultural and social capital in relation to marriage as seen in alliances and family networks built through marriage. Also select articles on globalization and its effect on culture have been used for their theoretical relevance. The aim is to contribute to knowledge on the effect of globalization on cultural practices like marriage in Nigeria. Research data was gotten from observation, participation, interviews and past experience in the field.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Globalization, Aso-ebi, Nigeria, Bride price.

## 1. Introduction

Being born and raised as an Igbo, I have experienced how marriage is paramount in Nigerian (especially Igbo) social world as many youths in Nigeria are raised with the ideology that marriage is 'almost compulsory' and look forward to it (Akpan, 2003). Based on my observation and living experience, the social status accorded the married is high, irrespective of the age of marriage and the importance of marriage can be linked to the essence of the family in the society. These factors and more have led to the high competition in the present day 'marriage market' in Nigeria (Becker, 1974). Gary Becker, an American economist, theorises a 'market' in marriage process constituted by negotiations in an attempt to find the best mate, which is subject to some imposed conditions.

In this essay, marriage will be understood as the lawful union of two people, to build a family. Ukaegbu defines marriage as 'the ceremony prescribed by law or custom which establishes a union between persons of opposite sexes which involves rights and obligations fixed by law or custom' (1976). He also opines that in times past in Nigeria, the concept of marriage sprang up from, and was usually dependent on, the agreement between two families; of the bride and the groom and until both families had consented, the union was recognized as illegitimate traditionally in their birth communities (Ukaegbu, 1976). Eno-Obong Akpan, a Nigerian lawyer, women's rights advocate and gender activist posits that 'from the perspective of culture, marriage is almost compulsory. Every female is expected to marry' (2003) and up until late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been observed that marriage has predominantly been contractual in Eastern Nigeria. In most situations, there was a mediator/intermediary who served as a link between the bride and the groom during the "courtship" period. The mediator was usually either from the lineage of the bride/groom, a kinsman or a fellow community member. Usually male, the mediator was the one who spotted a suitable bride and made preparations to visit her parents with the consent of the groom (Eluchie, 2013, Nduneri, 2014).

The concept of a mediator has been modified in recent times, because the 21<sup>st</sup> century youths are opportune to meet via various platforms and social groups that allow for the presence and direct interaction of both genders in a common space. Women have also gained more rights to education and social interaction as compared to earlier decades when they were highly marginalised and discriminated against as Akpan states that 'the Nigerian society is predominantly characterised by a patriarchal and patrilineal social system, with beliefs and norms legitimising and perpetuating unequal treatment towards women. There are indications that the society's expectation for every woman to be married is a product of patriarchy, which determines the role that females should play in society; that of marriage, childbearing, and 'home keeping' (2003). The mediator has been overthrown by effects of globalization and modernization as the groom himself finds his wife, since love and individuality has become the bedrock for marriage (Smith, 2001).

### 1.1 Situating the Research

Nigeria has 3 major tribes/ethnic groups, the Hausa (northerners), Igbo (easterners) and the Yoruba (westerners). Eastern Nigeria consists of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. This essay focuses on two different communities in two states in eastern Nigeria. The findings are from the Irete community of Imo state and the

Awkuzu community of Anambra state. Irete is a community in the Owerri-West local government area of Imo state and is located near the city of Owerri, the state capital. It is made up of eighteen villages. Awkuzu which is located in Oyi Local Government Area (LGA) of Anambra State is divided into three main parts: Ezi, Ifite and Ikenga, with each part having sub-villages. Sources of data for this work include interviews, participation in a traditional marriage ceremony in Awkuzu in March 2013, and scholarly articles on marriage. Based on these, some basic foundational steps and procedures that the ceremony is shaped around have been identified. In order to analyse the marriage celebration, it is paramount to be aware of the social process involved, which include the rites and procedures that culminate in the celebration.

## 1.2 Marriage Rites and Procedures in Awkuzu and Irete.

*1.2.1 Iku aka na Uzo-* The means “to knock on the door”. This is significant because the Igbos’ believe that before anyone can/should gain entrance into your home and family, he is expected seek the permission of the elders in the family. This is akin to respect and responsibility. At this stage, the groom visits the family of the bride with few close relations, which would usually include his father, uncle(s) and the mediator. They come with items like gourds of palm-wine, Kolanut, *Utaba* (grounded tobacco) to declare their marriage intentions. In the absence of the mediator, the eldest amongst the visiting group plays the role of the spokesperson (Nduneri, 2014).

*1.2.2 I bula Mbele-* This means “returning the calabash”. If the girl had indicated interest in the marriage proposal, she was asked to follow the visiting group back to their home and spend four days with them. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the bride met the groom for the first time when he came to “knock on the door”, thus she had little/no knowledge of his personality and background apart from what he said about himself on that day, hence the need for their spending some time together to get better acquainted. This also applied to the groom and his family, who needed time to know the personality and character of the girl they wanted to add to the family lineage. Thus, the four-day period was for both parties to access the other. During this period, the bride was put to various tests, which were not always direct. Everyone was observant of her housekeeping skills, farming, and social interactions. After four days, she was returned to her family with some palm-wine. It was here that the father told the groom and family to go home and await his response through the intermediary as he needed time to speak with his daughter privately (Eluchie, 2013).

*1.2.3 Igba Izu-* This means to say something in secret or to have a *tete-a-tete*. The bride’s father discussed with her on her experience with the groom’s family, as he sought her opinion and finally decides either to carry on with the marriage rites or end it here, and based his decision, if positive, a message was sent to the groom, permitting him to proceed with other rites. During this period, the groom also discussed with his family members on their opinion of the girl. Their opinion usually influenced his, as he put it into consideration while making a final decision on the next step. If his interest had not waned after the four days stay, he would respond to the bride’s father’s call to return and proceed further with the rites and if he had lost interest, he ignored it and moved on with his search (Eluchie, 2013, Nduneri, 2014)

In Irete (village in the south-east, see map), when both parties agreed to carry on with the relationship, the groom came to take the bride to spend another eight days with his family, after which he returned her home. He came back again on a different day, to take her for another sixteen days. At this point, he introduced her formally as his intended bride to every member of his family, both nuclear and extended, taking her from house to house, as he showed her off to everyone. Although the bride and groom may have gotten to this stage together in agreement, it still did not give any definite certainty that the courtship, as the stages of taking her home for four days, eight days and sixteen days respectively implied, would eventually lead to tying the nuptial knots. This was because both parties were allowed a change of heart, and this could occur even after a date had been fixed for the traditional marriage ceremony. Because of this, the bride and groom were not allowed to share the same bed, until the proper and full marriage rites had been completed and celebrated publicly. Every time the bride stayed with the groom’s family, she was to share a bed with his sisters or female relations (Eluchie, 2013).

*1.2.4 Bridal List-* The next stage is the collection of ‘the bridal list’ by the groom. The bridal list is a document of necessary items that are culturally determined, to be made available by the groom on the day set aside to celebrate the union. The list could be collected on or before the completion of the courtship period (eight days and sixteen days stay). The items on the list are usually compiled by the elders in the community and can be negotiated with the bride’s family. Negotiations are limited and dependent on the flexibility/rigidity of the bride’s father and kinsmen. The items on the bridal list have varied and several categories, which include the different age grades (peer groups) in the community. Some categories are *Umunna* (male elders in the extended family unit to a certain generation) *Umuada* (elderly first daughters in the community), *Ndi Ogbeya* (members of the same peer group as the bride and youths of the community), *Nne-Nwa* (the bride’s mother), *Nke nwanyi a l’alu alu* (things for the bride). From time immemorial till date in Irete, included in the list are different items for the different period of days the bride spent with the groom and family during the courtship period as earlier explained; from ‘*I bula Mbele*’, to the eight days and sixteen days. The items for each stage are a direct

multiplication of the previous. The inclusion of items for the bride in the list is not obtainable in Irete as it is expected that the bride's mother should purchase them for her daughter as she sends her off to her husband's house, and these things are basic household items. At the availability of all the items listed, the *Igba Nkwu* (traditional marriage ceremony) takes place.

*1.2.5 Igba nkwu* day which literally means the wine-carrying day is the day when all friends, relations, well-wishers and members of the community are gathered to celebrate the giving out in marriage of a daughter in the community. It is usually a big jamboree with so many crowds of people from and associated with the lineage of the bride and groom. The celebration takes place in the compound of the bride's family. On this day, kinship relationship of affinity is established between both families. Prior to the celebration proper, at the arrival of the groom and his kinsmen, the elders of the community including the bride's father, go over the items bought, rigorously cross-checking if they meet the ideal specifications, in the presence of the groom and his kinsmen. Listed items are also monetized. After the listed requirements have been confirmed as met, the groom pays the 'bride price'.

Literarily, as the word implies, the bride price is the amount, service or property the groom gives in exchange for his bride, the cost at which she is obtained. It is the money given by the groom to the family of his bride to establish his rights over her and lay claims to her. 'Girls, like their mothers, are seen as the property of male members of the family. They have an exchange value, disguised as 'bride price', fixed on every bride by her family. Bride price has, quite often, been perceived by some parents as a source of wealth to the family, and this tends to make the idea of... marriage attractive' (Akpan, 2013:72). In Igbo land, it also serves as a way of replacing the earning power of the female, even though, a means to check the financial capability of the groom to provide for his family. Contrary to the meaning of the word, the Igbo's have a proverb which says "*Anaghi alucha nwanyi alucha*", meaning "you never finish marrying a woman". This proverb is repeated severally to the groom, to reinstate the fact that the woman is priceless and worth much more than every item and money he has brought and the reason for all the rites is to prove his manhood and capability to manage her responsibly. No Igbo family accepts their daughter as being sold into marriage even though the traditional practice portrays otherwise. This is a conceptual disjuncture as Ameh (2002) posits that 'the negative side of the bride price or bride prize is that it turns the process of contracting to marry into a commodities exchange. The daughter is reduced to goods and chattel. It is a situation in which the woman is handed over to the husband as if she were a cow or a goat, to be bought and sold'.

While all the bridal items are checked, the bride is in hiding and should not be seen by the groom and in-laws. The bride makes her first appearance flamboyantly dressed in native attire and adorned with beads on her waist, neck, wrists and sometimes on her head, with the choice of exposing parts of her body as she deems fit. She dances out to greet her in-laws and invited guests. She carries along with her items like boiled eggs, fruits, sweet, *nzu* (clay sweet) and sometimes perfume that she sprays on guests and gets money in return. The items are displayed in a small basket and carried in both hands and as people picked some of the items, they in return dropped money in the basket for her. This is to ascertain her productiveness and is seen as her first business venture.

In Awkuzu and many parts of eastern Nigeria presently, the bride makes her first appearance accompanied by her friends '*Umu agbogho*' (similar to the western bridal train) who are dressed uniformly. The idea of dressing in uniformed materials is a new invention popularly called *Aso-ebi*. It means family uniform and the girls dressed thus are supposed to be singles of the same age grade as the bride. In previous times, the girls dressed in whatever was comfortable for them but had the uniformity of wearing waist beads called *Jigida*. These girls join her in the sale of the earlier mentioned items. Their marital status as singles, allows for them to be seductively dressed (most times exposing their abdomen, legs and upper chest) when they come out to make sales. They dance rigorously as it poses an opportunity for them to expose their physical features, in order to win the heart of a bachelor among the guests and encourage an opportunity for courtship. Sexuality is implicit in this dance. They are also adorned with beads and most of their body movements are characterised by constant rotation of the hips, causing the beads on their waist to produce an enticing sound and this reinforces the idea of 'dance as a medium for instigating beauty' which is embodied (Katz, 2008:16). The consciousness of their body movements under the prying eyes of desiring bachelors gives them a sense of self and embodied beauty.

The bride is dressed by her friends, who are believed to share the same sense of taste and know what is in vogue, nationally and globally. In recent times, professional costumiers and make-up artists are hired to prepare the bride and most native attires worn are still made from the native fabrics but with modifications in the designs, as youths have taken to the internet and fashion television programs and magazines to look out for dress styles with the rising craze of copying western lifestyle. The second appearance of the bride is for the purpose of presenting and serving her husband with the palm-wine. She is usually dressed more flamboyantly this time with little or no parts of her body exposed. She is dressed like a typical married woman in Igbo land wearing a blouse on a two piece wrapper and a head scarf. She would usually wear a uniformed fabric with her spouse. She dances out with her *Aso-ebi* girls once again, but they leave her at the centre stage as they retreat to the background. She

once again greets her father, father-in-law, and returns to kneel before her father, who presents her with a cup of palm-wine and asks her to serve the drink to her husband. She searches him out in the crowd amidst the calls from other interested bachelors seated as guests. She kneels before him as she presents him the wine, after which he puts some money in the empty cup and walks back with her to her father. They kneel before the bride's parents as they pray for them and bless them. They are also openly blessed by the groom's parents. Igbos' believe that the blessings from both parents are important to the success and fertility of the union. After the blessings the new bride and groom take to the dance floor as they celebrate their union.

### 1.3 Globalization and the Business of Marriage

The earlier discussed marriage procedures have been practiced in the written order up till late 20<sup>th</sup> century when the effects of globalization crept in. Present day marriages still have elements of the earlier centuries and some new elements added. While the introduction of the intended groom termed 'iku aka n'uzo' has been kept till present times, the other stages except the collection of bridal list, have been compressed. This is because some Nigerian youths already move in with their fiancé and some spend weekends or holidays even before the marriage proposal. Irrespective of this, some families like that of the Eluchie's as interviewed still include the items for the other stages in the bridal list, even if the bride did not categorically observe those stages.

The Igbos' believe that a child belongs to the community and not the parents alone, thus raising a child is a communal responsibility; hence the need to give back to community and this is the justification for the various categories by age grades on the bridal list. Before the 21st century, the quality and quantity of items on the list were largely dependent on the level of educational background of the bride. That is to say if she was a University graduate, the cost of items on the list would be more expensive than if she was a secondary school certificate holder, and the same applied if she just stopped her education at the primary level. This is because, as observed by Ameh:

Nigeria is indisputably a male dominated society, and this male domination is manifested in home education and in many other ways. Parents prefer to have male children rather than females. They would rather send their sons to school than their daughters. When they are forced by financial circumstances to make a choice, they will even arrange for the early marriage of their young teenage girls in order to use the bride price or bride prize (or in western terms, the dowry) to finance the schooling of their sons (2002).

Hence, there is a business inherent in the marriage practice and cost determination of the list items in communities in eastern Nigeria. The girl child is therefore seen as a commodity/product to be sold, and he who is the highest bidder, takes her home. This is similar to the case of a real estate business and landed properties, where the owner, builds on the property or waits for development to reach the area of location and then sells off the property at an exorbitant price to make profit. Thus, the more developed and exposed she is, the higher the expenses to have her as a wife and adversely the longer it takes her to get married. There have been many cases of financial difficulty on the path of the groom and in such situations, even if the bride out of love offers to help him financially, he is expected to reject the offer as it is regarded as a taboo for a woman to 'finance' or 'co-finance' her wedding and such man is seen to lack dignity and is not deemed fit to be addressed as a 'man'. It is also believed that such situation can cause problems in the marriage, in future, as the woman will lack respect for her husband and will often make reference to her co-financing the ceremony, at every prompting.

'It seems clear to me that globalization has radically redefined what we know as tradition' and culture (Honor Fagan, 2002) as this is evident in the present day tradition of the Igbo culture even in their marriage celebration. Anthropologists and historians have not written much on globalization (Guillen, 2001) whilst many sociologists as well as other scholars have tried to define the term globalisation. Some of the key ideas is the fact that globalization is the process of acknowledging, and the awareness, of the world as a whole, thereby compressing space and time and is characterized by diffusion of tradition, values, practices and technology, which in turn influences the lives of people worldwide (Albrow 1997, Robertson 1992). It involves the interchange of ideas and engagement with different social environments, constant 'flow of information, people and cultures across borders' (Held et al, 1999). One of its agents is the internet and migration to other cities and countries. The concept of a 'global culture', if it is achievable, has eaten deep into local culture especially in Nigeria. Culture is dynamic and globalization is one of the catalysts of change in indigenous cultures as communities are now conscious of their place in the global space. The complexity of globalisation is articulated by Guillen thus 'It is contradictory, discontinuous, even haphazard. Therefore, one needs to be open-minded about its unexpected and unintended consequence' (2001).

Western ideas of romantic love and courtship have influenced marriage system in Nigeria as present day educated youths have empowered themselves with the right of choice of a mate (Ukaegbu, 1976) and Smith reiterates this saying;

Young Igbo men and women in Nigeria are far more likely (...) to insist on

choosing their marriage partners. Increasingly, notions of romantic love and emotional intimacy are important criteria for selecting a spouse. Changes in patterns of courtship, the growing importance of Christian wedding ceremonies, and trends toward establishing urban residences with nuclear household organization symbolize and reinforce an emerging model of marriage that emphasizes the personal relationship between husband and wife. Ideals of romance, conjugality, and companionship are shaping Igbo constructions of marriage (2001).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many youths celebrate their traditional marriage ceremonies in the city where their parents reside and not their place of origin and this can be attributed to the mass migration into the cities. In times past, this was never obtainable and was a slight to tradition. Tradition has been modified to accommodate such inventions, even though some communities still insist on their first daughters celebrating their marriages in their various communities of origin. With the invention of technology, the groom can be in communication with the bride via telephone even at his arrival in her family compound. Also some of the pre-marital rites are bypassed which was not the case before.

Just as Bourdieu theorises marriage as a strategy to 'conserve or expand economic capital' of the families involved taking into consideration the power/social status attained through family ties and connections (Bourdieu, 2003), I propose marriage as a strategy to expand the financial capital of the 'married' via profit making ventures and practices embedded in the present day marriage culture of the Igbo people. This is evident in the use of *Aso-ebi*. Traditionally, *Aso-ebi*- the uniformed fabric- is meant for the maidens who dance out with the bride whenever she makes an appearance during the ceremony. Today, it is worn by singles and married, friends and relations. Though not all of the ladies dressed in these fabrics dance out with the bride, others are seated in various clusters among the guests. This serves as means of reinforcing identity and social status in the event as there is segregation amongst *Aso-ebi* wearers and non-wearers. Different Nigerian made fabrics and wrappers are sold to the friends, relations and age mates of the bride. The sales of these clothes are in various categories, which take into consideration colours, designs, quality and quantity of the materials. The prices range from three thousand naira to twenty thousand naira ₦3,000- ₦20,000 (€14 – €87) and even more, all in a bid to make profit from the "business transaction" termed marriage.

Present day traditional marriage celebration reinforces the general and dominant notion in Nigeria of the Igbo pattern of thought which boards on business and profit-making in almost every venture. This notion has been reinforced by scholars like Elizabeth Isichei (1976), Margaret M Green (1947), Robert Levine (1966) and Daniel Smith who is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, and has conducted long-term research in several parts of eastern Nigeria. Smith states in his article titled *Igbo* that 'in the wider Nigerian collective imagination and in scholarly literature, Igbos are perceived to be economically resourceful and successful and highly entrepreneurial' (2004). However, scholars like Olutayo discredit this argument opining it wrong to accord a particular ethnic group the position of better entrepreneurs than others, even though he still admits that they are good entrepreneurs as he says 'thus, while it is true that the Igbo, empirically, are industrious and entrepreneurial, it is equally true for other ethnic groups' (1999).

During my participation in several traditional weddings including the one in Awkuzu, I observed that the cutting of a wedding cake was included in the ceremony. Cake cutting is a current trend in present day traditional wedding ceremonies. This in my opinion can be attributed to modernization and western influence. In a bid to placate and fit into culture, the cakes usually took the shape of palm-wine gourds, drums, jewelry box, beaded decorations, couple dressed in native attire, kola-nuts among others.

According to Smith (2004), 'The proliferation of formal education, the almost universal conversion of Igbos to Christianity, and the increasing urban influence on people's lives in both rural and urban areas have had significant effects on the organisation' and tradition. The influence of Christianity is evident in modern day traditional marriages as some churches like Deeper Life Bible Church, Nigeria (DLBG) insist on the disuse of alcohol during the ceremony and this is adhered to by their members. Although they cannot determine the items on the bridal list which would usually include alcohol, it is mandated that in place of the palm-wine which the bride serves her groom, soft drinks like Coke, Fanta, Sprite and sometimes milk solution (which has the same colour as palm-wine) is used. This has affected the economy of the people resident, as palm-wine tapping, which is the occupation of many in such localities has not yielded much income in recent times. Today, traditional marriages are also done in rented halls and In order to save cost, both traditional marriage and white marriage are done on the same day.

### 1.1.3 Conclusion

Although male dominated, the Igbo culture has placed a responsibility on the shoulders of females, to generate funds for their families (parents and spouse). The marriage ceremony in itself has evolved into a 'fund raising' venture taking into consideration the strategies deployed by both the bride's kinsmen (bridal list) and the couples (*Aso-ebi*) with dance playing a vital role. The inclusion of traditionally designed wedding cakes in the traditional

wedding culture of easterners and Nigeria as a whole is one of the indicative factors of the influence of globalization on indigenous culture. The consequences of migration, international trading, and shared social spaces worldwide is evident in the cross-cultural deposits of values and traditions in eastern Nigeria. Are these consequences of positive or adverse effect on the Igbo culture? If culture is a continuous process of change and tradition has always been invented, with countries getting involved in construction and re-construction of national identities (Fagan, 2002), then we should embrace the inventions in tradition irrespective of the causal agents, although not losing sight of our native cultural values as we celebrate our unique identities in a global space.

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## Notes

- Note 1. Many images of present day traditional wedding cakes in Nigeria are available at [https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=nigerian+traditional+wedding+cake&biw=1081&bih=615&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAYQ\\_AUoAWoVChMI6N\\_ezdGHxgIVgVkuUCh3KcACP](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=nigerian+traditional+wedding+cake&biw=1081&bih=615&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAYQ_AUoAWoVChMI6N_ezdGHxgIVgVkuUCh3KcACP)

Figure 1. Map of Nigeria indicating the research field

