

Igala Traditional Marriage in Relation to Christianity

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Abstract

Marriage is a sacred and customary duty which every adult Igala is expected to undertake in order to be “fulfilled” in life. As such, somewhat similar to the provisions of other cultures in Africa and religions such as Christianity, there are procedures, limits and some constitutive rules that cater for a normal and sacred nature of marriage in Igala. These include: courtship and the marriage ceremony itself. Marriage can be said to be fruitful in Igala culture if only it brings forth children. Hence an unfruitful marriage can easily break-up. It is believed that at the end of this work, the effects of traditional marriage in the life of Igala people in relation to Christian marriage will be better appreciated. This research employs information from field, books, Journal, oral history, the internet and articles. The research will ultimately add to the body of knowledge on similarities and differences between Igala traditional marriage and that of Christianity. The study finds that truly, the marriage institution among Igala people in relation to Christianity alters the life of the people.

Keywords: Igala, Tradition, Marriage, Christianity

1. Introduction

Marriage is a global phenomenon believed to have been instituted in the life of mankind by God. In Christianity, the Bible in the book of Genesis records the first marriage between the first man Adam and the first woman Eve. According to the Bible account, this first matrimonial solemnization was approved and officiated by God himself. In traditional Africa society, specifically the Igala people of North-Central Nigeria, marriage is also seen as an integral act of societal life. The Igala value Marriage so much and they count somebody who is due for marriage and does not marry as somebody who is not responsible. The Igala’s view on marriage is that, marriage brings about children, and sincerely they look at marriage as something very important. In Igala culture women are to remain with their husbands throughout their lives; she is to venerate her husband as much as possible and remain in her husband’s house until death do them part. It is forbidden for a wife to have a male-friend outside her marriage.

With the advent of colonization and its attending cultural, political, religious and social changes, Christianity has become the religion of numerous African people. While some nationalities are entirely Christian or Muslim, some contain adherents to both faiths; this is Igala case. Consequently, the institutions and sacraments of these religions have been introduced into the lives of Igala and have found a permanent place in their life of which one, is the marriage institution.

However, some Igala being ethnocentric or untouched by the wind of civilization and foreign religions have held on to their age long beliefs and worship of deities. Surprisingly, all these institutions recognize the value of family life and ensure the continuity of mankind through procreation in the sacred institution of marriage. On the whole, apart from the validation of wedlock for procreation (a denominator for the Christian and traditional conception), both religions show disparate philosophies regarding same. For instance, Igala Traditional Marriage allows for Divorce with no stringent conditions while on the hand, Christian marriage tolerates divorce and provides the one ground on which divorce may ensue. Also, while Igala Marriage is not opposed to polygamy, a hallmark of the Christianity is the “one man one wife” principle otherwise called monogamy. In all, it can be safely said that marriage institution is one of inestimable value among the Igala and in Christianity.

2. Clarification of Terms

The definition of terms will help us to acquire good knowledge of this research on comparison of Traditional Marriage among Igala people in relation to that of Christianity. For this reasons, appropriate and adequate clarifications are given to these terms.

2.1. The Igala People: According to Okpe (29), Igala is a socio-cultural group among the settlers within the confluence of the two Nigerian rivers of Niger and Benue. The name Igala represents the language, the people and the Kingdom itself, and this the only form that is being used by the people themselves. As a language, Igala belongs to the *Kwa* sub-group of languages with enormous characteristics of *Bantu* sub-group of the same Niger-Congo. The Igala Kingdom is marked politically by its well established central administration before the European expedition in Africa. Igala is situated in today’s Kogi state in the Middle-Belt region of Nigeria, and is in fact, the largest ethnic group in the state. They are a people whose social organization and value system are

generally similar and who recognize one paramount king as their political ruler. The 1991 population commission of Nigeria projected Igala to approximately 2 million people, which by now (considering the time of writing) could probably be about 3 million. Igala is about 8th largest ethnic group of the over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Okpe (30) further posits the Igala as a homogenous group which inhabits a geographical area with a common language, which though having various dialects, nevertheless creates no problem of understanding among them. The cultural patterns of life are identical, closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions. Igala traditional religion believes in one supreme God, known as *Ojo*, who is responsible for everything in this world and the next.

2.2. Marriage: Marriage has so many meanings in our world today. It is not an easy concept to define. Even though it has some common qualities, it varies from one cultural group to another. Sociologist will say that the American's concept of marriage varies from others because their culture is different. That is basically saying that marriage does not have just one source of universal appearance. Hence, what may constitute a marriage differs in all communities because each of them is independent in its own interpretation of it. In fact, in these contemporary times, marriage has undergone redefinition especially in western societies to mean a relationship between two consenting adults. Therefore, two consenting man and woman can validly be married in some countries of the world like South Africa, Brazil, Britain, united State of America e.t.c. However, in spite of all these, there is just one basic factor which most legal system worldwide have found workable and tenable in constitution of marriage; that is, it is a relationship between one man and one woman.

From the above therefore, marriage can be defined as a relationship between man and woman who have made a legal agreement to live together as husband and wife except where traditional or customary African Marriage is mentioned in which case, it may involve a man and more than a woman.

Marriage can also be defined as a union, which creates new social relationship, roles of right and obligation not just between the spouses or partners, but between the kinsmen on both sides of the marriage partners.

Marriage is one of the institutions that give the family institution the desired shape, it exists in all communities but it takes different form from one community to another. Marriage as the recognized union of husband and wife is the basis of the conjugal family.

Marriage is an intimate personal union which man and woman conceive and continuously nourish with sexual intercourse and perfected in lifelong partnership of mutual love and commitment. Marriage is also a social institution regulated by the Bible, legislative enactment and traditional laws and custom, which a community develops to safe, guard its own continuity and welfare.

For Africans, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet; the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Therefore, marriage is the duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and rhythm of life in which everyone must participate.

It is noteworthy that there are points that are essential and common to marriage. Firstly, there must be mutual consent on the part of those involved, that is to say, there must be an agreement to take the step of getting married between the woman and the man involved. This obviously eliminates any type of "forced" marriage as were common in pre-colonial times in some part of Nigeria. There is freedom in entering marriage. This mutual consent begins with the engagement period which, means that two have an appointment to gain society's consent on a given day and physically consummate their marriage, an act which they intend to fulfill for the rest of their lives.

Marriage is God's premeditated and calculated divine institution designed to form between man and woman, as husband and wife for a life time. Marriage therefore is an emotional relationship that exists between a man and woman. This emotion is love, which is also the essence of marriage. People can legally be married but "in essence" not really married. If a person is unable to fulfill this emotional relationship for any reason, there is no marriage or simply put, marriage does not exist.

2.3. Traditional Marriage: In Abah's view (23), Traditional Marriage is marriage conducted in a setting that is accepted in a given community. Marriage in Igala traditional setting is viewed as a conduct between two persons, a man and a woman and their families. Negotiations are undertaken by the parents involved. This process can even be embarked upon in the absence of the prospective couple. Both monogamy and polygamy are traditionally practiced, but the most common is the polygamous type. According to Okwoli, this is a sign of one's recognition in the society. Like it is in many part of Africa, Nigeria and Igala in particular, the number of wives and children a man has determine his social status and fame (45).

2.4. Christian marriage: In the Christianity, marriage is viewed as lifelong union of a man and woman before God. One commonly used text is from the gospel of Mathew, 19:5-6 quoting from Genesis 2:24 thus: "For this

reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together let no man separate”.

Christian Marriage is seen by Paul the Apostle as paralleling the relationship between Christ and the church. This is the theological view which is a development of the Old Testament view that saw an analogy between marriage and the relationship between God and Israel. The Catholic Christian views Marriage as one of the seven Sacraments, usually considered as celebrated by the spouse. It is the basis of the family, the fundamental unit of a community. Marriage represents a special form of being human in Christ that is based on baptism. It is also a special form of sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The first marriage ceremony took place in the Garden of Eden and God himself was the officiating minister. God stated:

The lord God said, it is not good for a man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the best... But for Adam no suitable helper was formed. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into deep sleep then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman for she was taken out of man (Gen 1:18-23).

According to John W.R. (2), Christian marriage is an exclusive heterosexual union between one man and woman ordained and sealed by God. It is preceded by public leaving of parents, consummated on sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutually supportive partnership and crowned by the gift of children.

God, who administered the first wedding, is the author of marriage. Marriage is a holy union, a living symbol and a precious relationship that needs tender self-sacrificing care. It is God's idea and not a derivative of any culture. It is a gift from God.

The higher our thought of God's meaning for marriage and the family, the more devastating the experience of divorce is bound to be. Marriage which began with tender love and rich expectations now lies in ruins because of wrong concept of it. Marital breakdown is always a tragedy as it contradicts God's will and concern for marriage.

3. Igala Traditional Marriage in Relation to Christianity

In the first place, in both Christian and the Traditional Marriage of Igala, they exist a period of courtship. At this period of time, the intending partners are not expected to have sexual relationship with each other. In other words sex before marriage is highly prohibited as the intending partners are to keep themselves pure throughout this period of time. Beside that in Christian Marriage, especially during the period of courtship, a period of time is provided to enable the intending partners know themselves well, make their decision to marry each other known to their parents, the church and to the close relation. This is also found in the traditional marriage of Igala (Okpe 220).

In Christian Marriage, all procedures should be undertaken and marked with the Christian or church wedding before such a Marriage is recognized as a real one. Similarly in Igala Traditional Marriage unless all the procedures regarding marriage are undertaken and marked with the traditional rituals, that marriage cannot be recognized as a real marriage.

Christian and Traditional Marriage of Igala have a lot of similarities in many respects but they are also some differences. One of the basic differences that can be found in Traditional Marriage and Christian Marriage of Igala people is Polygamy. In the Traditional Marriage of Igala people, a man or the husband can marry many women that he can maintain. In some cases, the women are to care for themselves and their children. In spite of that it is seen as a way of displaying ones wealth in the society. But Christian Marriage as ordained by God from the beginning of the world is monogamous, by which it is usually one man and one woman (Okpe 221).

Another difference is that in Christian Marriage a couple cannot separate for being childless instead such couples insist on asking God in prayer for the blessing of fruitfulness in the family, as they recognize that only God gives Children. The situation is different in the Traditional Marriage. If partners are not blessed with children, the next thing to do may be to look for ways to have children in family. For instance, in the case of husband of one wife, who might have been married for a long period, could decide to choose another wife, to “test” himself. Likewise, the wife may choose to test herself by marrying another man, should they be a case of infertility on the part of the first husband or wife. This is one of the factors that have lead married men to have polygamous homes in the society.

It should also be noted that Traditional Marriage of Igala people is thought of as marriage rituals in the Traditional aspect of Marriage. At the time of marriage the bride-groom would be responsible for the procurement of a he-goat (Obuko), a hen (Ajuwe), and a cock (Aiko) to be used in the ritual ceremony. In the situation were the testicular of either the he-goat or cock is black, when slaughtered during the ceremony, it implies misfortune. The next step to be taken is to consult a diviner to determine the cost of that misfortune. This is in contrast to the Christian way of Marriage. Christians can only consult God in time of difficulties or trouble.

4. The Fruits of Marriage among Igala vis-avis Christianity

The continuation of the existence by means of children in life answers the law of death. All individual existence is doomed to decay by physical destruction but new existences bring new life and halt the way to extinction. For this to happen, two lives must mingle with each other and there lies the biological significance of sexuality.

From the divine point of view, the union of husband and wife has a significance of its own, apart from the children. One can then speak of marriage as being for two ends; procreation and becoming one flesh. It must be said that in practice, most human beings feel the urge towards the other sex without thinking of procreation, and nurse a desire for children without feeling sexual inclinations. Many people are unaware of the connection between sexual intercourse and procreation. More so, there are girls who want a child but not a man.

This does not alter the fact that sexual intercourse and procreation are intimately involved, and we must accept this as a great mystery. A young couple has no need to ask, do we want children or not? When shall we have them? How many shall we have? This is something we cannot decide by our own desires and inclinations. We are under an order entirely transcending.

Children are the offspring of the parents. They are the apparent fruit of the procreative function of the marital life. God said "Be fruitful and multiple and replenish the earth" Genesis 1:18, 9:1; Ps. 127:3, Ps.128:3, in all the above Scriptures, children are mentioned as the fulfillment of the institution of marriage.

Children are precious heritage from God (Ps. 127:3). They are the gift of God to parents. No man can give children to parents only God can give children. The Psalmist says "Lo children are the heritage of the Lord. And the fruit of the womb is his reward... happy is the man that his quiver is full of them. They should not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate" (Ps. 127:3-5). The wife shall be as fruitful vine by the sides of the house, the children like olive plants around about the table... yea, thou shall see thy children's children (Ps.128:3-6). He maketh a barren woman to keep house, and to be joyful mother of children (Ps. 113:9).

Children are blessing of the family. The presence of children in the family brings joy to the parents. Many are not happy today, because of childlessness. But parents rejoice when a child is born. The Bible says: "A wise son maketh a glad father" (Prov. 10:1). The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice, and he that begeth a wise child shall have joy of him (Prov.23:24, Prov.15:20; 17:6, 1Sam 2:1-10; Job 29:5; Luke 1:39-56)

A wife may be defined only as the bearer of children. Man cares little about beautiful woman. Regardless of whether the woman is crippled, blind or deaf, as long as she is capable of bearing children, the man is satisfied. As a result of this, no marriage is deemed valid and binding until children are born. Thus, an ugly wife with children gets more attention than a beautiful wife without children. A wife is considered beautiful once she gives birth to children; more so, when she gives birth to male children.

Many respondents stated that no matter how good a wife may be, her husband can never be satisfied with her until she bears children. If she fails to bear children, she will not be loved as a wife. Consequently, wives want children for reasons of personal security. If she has children, she cannot easily be sent away. Children are immensely valued in Igala marriage; children are evidence and seal of marriage. Hence a marriage without children is never welcomed. It is only when a marriage brings forth children that it is seen as a fulfilled marriage, and that is why it is very difficult to break-up a marriage that is already characterized by children. In the like manner, a marriage that does not bear children can easily break-up, otherwise other means are sought. This includes, as we have seen, marrying a second wife, if the problem is on the part of the woman.

Children are considered as prolongation of parental life. This means, they perpetuate the existence of the family. And in this case, according to Okpe, children in marriage are a legitimate concept in Igala: "The marriage legitimizes sexual access and the children which result, giving them an inscriptive place in the society as members of a particular lineage and family. They have rights and responsibilities to their kinsmen because of the parents' union" (227).

For that, it is almost unthinkable that a person will not marry in order to raise children. Children are seen as glory for the family. The more a man has the more his prestige and honor among the people. Furthermore, as we discussed earlier, social and economic reasons contribute to the significance of children in Igala society: "Children are economic resources in traditional Igala society. Hence, the measuring of one's wealth and greatness by the number of wives and, consequently, the number of children one has" (228).

Apart from the above reasons that promote bearing of children in Igala marriage, children themselves play some important roles in the family. As they are taught obedience and respect for their parents and older people, they carry out various responsibilities. Since male children, as we have seen, are the main inheritance of the family, they learn to work with their fathers around the house, in the fields and in different spheres of life. By learning, they acquire the necessary skills that enable them to take care of the family when their parents are no longer capable of doing this due to old age. Female children also help their mothers in the house-holding in various ways. By doing this, they also learn acts in motherhood in their own future family. Sometimes, they help by fetching water, sweeping and cleaning the house, preparing meals, going on errand etc.

Miachi puts the various roles of children based on their sexes as follows: "The male children all work on the farm to produce subsistence food as well as surplus for sale. The female do not work directly on the farm-

tilling the soil but are helpful in harvesting the crops, thus, as their own contribution to the family” (90).

Thus in the family, they are important and social responsibility in almost all African societies. According to Mbiti :

...children are introduced gradually to the physical, economic, social and religious lives of their families. Without them the concept of the family would grind to a halt. For African peoples the family includes children, parents, grandparents, and other relatives such as brothers, sisters, cousins and so on (167).

So it can be concluded, that the obligation of marriage is only complete when children are raised for the social, cultural and economic need of the marriage and family life. This is believed to have its origin from the beginning of human life. Therefore, to shun marriage and have children is tantamount to crime against the tradition. However, because of Igala interaction with other religion especially Christianity, which regard celibacy as important aspect of spiritual life, a more liberal approach has evolved in the understanding of marriage (Okpe 228).

5. Conclusion

This work has analyzed the marriage institution among Igala people in relation to Christianity. It is arrived at that both Igala culture and Christianity view marriage institution as established by God Almighty. Thus, marriage is defined as a relationship between a man and a woman who have made a legal agreement to live together as husband and wife. Within the ambits of Christianity visa vis Igala Traditional Religion, the institution is known as one possessing divine authority; after God made the woman as a helpmate and wife for the first man. This is recorded in Genesis 2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave into his wife: and they shall be one flesh”.

On the part of Christianity, the esoteric mathematical formula expounded by the Bible where a man (one person) plus his wife (another person) still equals one has dazzled many for years - theologians and traditional Igala people. However, its esotericism only goes on to emphasize the fact that the fundamental doctrine of the Christian marriage is the utmost unification of both spouses as one entity. This unification process is sealed by sexual intercourse. This is why adultery is the only sin capable of breaking the marital bond as enunciated by Jesus Christ in the Gospel according to St. Mathew 5 verse 32.

Similarly, Igala traditional belief holds that marriage is a necessity. It is one that every member of the community must participate in. In the Igala culture, marriage is looked upon as very vital and refusal of an adult to marry is seen as sickness, except those dedicated to a deity or oracle. Such persons abstain from marriage and procreation of children.

Just as there are similarities between Igala Traditional Marriage and Christianity, so there are a number of differences. In Igala traditional marriage, polygamy is not forbidden as men are allowed to marry as many wives as they want. This is not so in Christianity where the injunction is one man to one wife. Furthermore, childlessness can break Igala Traditional Marriage while this may not be possible in Christianity. In Igala marriage, a couple without children are allowed to ‘test’ themselves outside marriage to determine issue of infertility. This is not so in Christian marriage.

Some of the traditional values in Igala Traditional Marriage are gradually disappearing due to the advent of Christian and Islamic religions as well as modernization. In Igalaland under study, we found out that a sizeable number of the populations are engaged in Christian and Islamic ways of worship. However, traditional worship still flourishes though not as before the advent of these two foreign religions.

Finally, the fruits of marriage in both Igala culture and Christianity are perceived as children. In other words, Igala Culture and Christianity value procreation as an essential element that depicts successful marriage. For this, marriage without children is not desirable. Children are therefore, gifts to be cherished and promoted with due parental obligation that will generate responsible children.

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