

IGBO PHILOSOPHY OF MARRIAGE: TOWARDS THE REVIVAL OF FAMILY VALUES FOR VERITABLE DEVELOPMENT OF IGBO LAND

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Abstract

Marriage as the crystallization of eternal life is also the bedrock of a formidable society. But societies are decaying with the damning pronouncements that they are as a result of failure in family values. Igbo societies are not left out in this trajectory of societal decay. This paper thus avers that the only way of getting back the society to its original purpose is to rebuild our marital institution. But why is marriage very important in the affairs of every society? Is marriage as it is presently contracted expressing the desired ideal for the evolution of human society? Since family is the atomic unit of human society, how responsible should it be to the upliftment of human society? Questions as the above are the motivations for this paper. In the traditional Igbo society marriage was never contracted between two individuals but between two families. But the contemporary notion of marriage as between individuals and not families could be seen as the root cause of the incessant problems in marriages. With the breakdown in marriages and the attendant families therefrom, societal values have nosedived in such a way that things have fallen so much apart. In this work, therefore, my intension is to show that the decay in modern Igbo society is traceable to the jettisoning of aboriginal Igbo marriage pattern for western style. It is my contention that unless we revive our customary marriage institution, we can never extricate ourselves from this total breakdown of values in Igbo land. In order to appreciate the uniqueness of Igbo marital institution, we shall do some little comparisons across cultures.

Keywords: Igbo marriage, customary systems of marriage in Igbo society, Decays in familyhood.

Introduction

Recently, the popular writer Chimamanda Adichie made some notorious claims about marriage in Igbo traditional societies namely that it encouraged lesbianism. This is as a result of certain kinds of marriages where a woman contracts marriage with another woman in order to ensure procreation for her father's family. The misunderstanding of this system may appear as culture

shock. Adichie's claim not only lacks factuality but also is feminism taken to the extreme. This is because there was never sex between two women in Igbo society under any guise. It is in order to correct this erroneous notion that this paper is written. If such a high profile writer does not know this fact of history, then there is justification for this work in order to correct this factual error.

There are two major reasons for marriage from the Western perspective. First it provides society with the guarantee for an organized perpetuation of the humankind and second; the assurance of a secured conviction for the caring of the attendant offspring arising from any marriage. This results from the assumption that the results of procreation, namely children, are the responsibility of these individuals involved such that they are obligated to provide all kinds of supports for their offspring until they are able to provide for themselves. Unfortunately, contemporary society makes child rearing not necessarily the main purpose for marital relationships: thus the institution of marriage has evolved to become an expression of desires to offer or to provide support and protection to those who contract marriage. In this sense marriage is now founded on mutual love, affection and a burning desire to develop a relationship that eschews loneliness and fear.

Marriage therefore becomes a contract of two persons, with each showcasing love, care and succor. What is of prominent relief is that the contract must be mutually beneficial to the partners based on equality and respect for each other. Neither of the partners should claim superiority to the other and neither should have any overriding power over the other. It ought to be truly a shared experience that is fair and mutually responsible. But why is marriage very important in the affairs of every society? Is marriage as it is presently contracted expressing the desired ideal for the evolution of human society? Since family is the atomic unit of human society, how responsible should it be to the upliftment of human society? Questions as the above are the motivations for this paper. In the traditional Igbo society marriage was never contracted between two individuals but between two families. But the contemporary notion of marriage as between individuals and not families could be seen as the root cause of the incessant problems in marriages. With the breakdown in marriages and the attendant families therefrom, societal values have nosedived in such a way that things have fallen so much apart. In this work, therefore, my intension is to show that the decay in modern Igbo society is traceable to the jettisoning of aboriginal Igbo marriage pattern for western style. It is my contention that unless we revive

our customary marriage institution, we can never extricate ourselves from this total breakdown of values in Igbo land. In order to appreciate the uniqueness of Igbo marital institution, we shall do some little comparisons across cultures.

Hindu Philosophy of Marriage

It could be averred that from the beginning of civilization, different societies recognized and enthroned the most basic instincts of all human relationship namely the need for companionship and established the institution of marriage. In Hinduism, experience has shown that life is full of ups and downs and that marriage can help sail over the complexity in lives' difficulties. Hindu patriarchs thus set the Dharma which is its code of conduct to ensure that this institution is a stable one capable of bringing happiness to two young people and also provide a harmonious balance so that the family enjoys the fullness of life.

A. V. Srinivasan brings this out clearly when he asserts that:

If there is one prevailing wish that husbands and wives have for their marriage, it is to be close companions for life. While many men and women know that love is essential for such a lifelong bond, they often don't realize that love without close friendship is only a harmonal illusion. One cannot desire another person over the long haul without really being best friends with that person¹

In the *Mahabharata*², Yudhishtira revealed this "secret" about 4000 years ago. In the Aranya Parva of that great epic of Hinduism, one of the numerous questions that Yaksha asked Yudhishtira was "kimsvin mitram grihesatah?" i.e. who is the friend of a householder? The prince answered "bhaaryaa mitram grihesatah" i.e. the friend of a householder is his spouse. Thus according to Hinduism, marriage is premised on friendship. In Hindu lore, this friendship consists in the understanding, the promise and the commitment that binds a man and a woman. Considerations were never made on the question of the role of a woman, her importance, and her position in this equation that unites the marriage.

Hindu wedding ceremonies get to its acme when *Maangalyaddhaaranam* (Wedding) is performed. It allegedly confirms forever and seals the tie between the couples through the tying of a golden necklace around the bride's neck by the groom. Once this is done, ethically and morally it ushers in the sacred moment in

the wedding when they become husband and wife. Immediately after is a ritual that is truly the most significant for the rest of their union. This is because, following after the *maangalyaddhaaranam*, the couple holds their hands as they take seven steps together as husband and wife and walk around Agni, the God of fire while pledging to each other their eternal friendship. It is believed that whatever they say after they have taken those seven steps is the foundation for a successful marriage. Srinivasan captures the import of this in the following words:

Together they chant: sakhaa sapta padi bhava sakhyam te gameyam sakhyam te mayoshah sakhyam te mayoshtah ;“With these seven steps you have become my friend. May I deserve your friendship. May my friendship make me one with you. May your friendship make you one with me.” Anyone who has any question about the role of a woman in Hindu marriage should pay special attention to the charge and blessing by the presiding priest at the end of the sapta padi. He recites: nSamraajni shvashurebhava Be queenly with your father-in-law Samraajni shvashruvaambhava Be queenly with your mother-in-law Nanandaari saamraaj nibhava Be queenly with his sisters Saamraajni adhidevrshu Be queenly with his brothers. Nothing short of the status of a queen is what the scriptures prescribe. Our ancestors went even further: they blessed the bride by saying;“ murdhaanam patyuraroha”.“ May your husband keeps you on his head” meaning “let him respect you”. As a society, we owe it to ourselves to realize the wisdom in these ancient truths spoken by our ancestors. There are in fact two more questions in the Yaksha Prashna where this subject matter comes up. In another question the Yaksha asks Yudhishtira: kimsvid daiva krita sakha? Who is man’s god-given friend? Yudhishtira’s answer was: bhaaryaa daivakrita sakha- a man’s God-given friend is his wife. Again the basis of friendship in marriage is emphasized³.

What is on prominent relief here is that the ideal of marriage in the Vedas, according to Abhinash Chandra Bose “is that of perfect monogamy, the life-long companionship of two people”⁴. It is evident that Vedic sages accepted life and death, life’s struggles and imperfections, the ultimate values- of truth, goodness and beauty, God; but they couched every wish of theirs in the form of a passionate prayer. So in order to understand Hindu marriage one should study prayers that are blended into a Vedic wedding ceremony. In doing this, one would understand that certain Vedic prayers are directed towards acquiring intellectual power, wisdom, efficiency, spiritual vigor, higher talent etc. thereby acquiring what is known as ‘*Brahmateja*’ meaning the radiance of the intellect.

Prayers aimed at strength, valor, spiritual power, conquering power, fearlessness and other qualities of heroism known as *Kshaatraveerya*- the physical prowess- are also offered.

From the above, it could be seen that to succeed in life according to the Vedic lore is to lay a solid foundation in marriage. Even the true goal of life which is freedom from attachment, freedom from our lower selves that brings such joy that cannot be equated to the usual kinds of joy most recognizable in life is attached to marriage. Thus, for the Hindu, fulfillment in life comes when one accomplishes four aspects of life known as *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama* leading to the fourth- the complete release of bondage and to total freedom known as *Moksha*. *Dharma* as we have noted earlier is the very core of Hindu philosophy. The inclusion of *Artha* (financial aspect of life) and *Kama* (aspects of retribution) as aspects of Vedic thought brings to fore that the demands of *Artha* and *Kama* in the life of couples are in apparent conflict with the dictates of *Dharma* and *Moksha*. How does Hinduism resolve this contradiction? In other words, how can a householder who is involved in the struggle for good life by seeking *artha* and *kama* in raising a family and in service of community not find himself/herself in conflict with *Dharma* and how can he/her attain *moksha*? In the Vedas, *Artha* and *Kama* are safely sandwiched between *Dharma* and *Moksha*. Therefore, if liberation is to be the goal of life, Hinduism advocates that by all means one should participate fully in the affairs of the society, raise a family, enjoy the good life in a responsible way, and serve the community- all within the dictates of *Dharma*.

In effect the only one way to extricate oneself from this is to align oneself with *Dharma*. Again, Srinivasan offers a summary of this view:

When dharma and one's wife are in harmony, then dharma, artha and kama are reconciled." That means, a person, in order to keep that delicate balance among the attributes of arttha and kaama, has to have a spouse who is dhaarmic. It is that protection coming from such a spouse, that torch light, that spirit of friendship and cooperation and sacrifice that gives a reasonable chance for a couple to succeed in meeting this challenge of conflicting attributes.⁵

Thus far, in exploring the Hindu philosophy of marriage, we have established that marriage is that, that there is in attaining fulfillment both in this worldly and the other worldly conducts. Therefore, society is as good as its conjugal relationships. One can make bold to say that if society becomes sick, it can only

be cured by healing the family through consummate marriage institution that is in tandem with the tradition of Hindu Vedas.

Philosophy of Marriage in Judeo-Christian Culture

Marriage as enunciated by the Israeli culture was according to them a holy union instituted by God (their God-Jehovah) in the Garden of Eden. Accordingly, God created Adam and found out that he was not complete staying alone without a helper. After the creation of all other beings, He felt pity for man as he felt that it was good to find him a helper fit for him. "And the Lord God said it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an helper fit for him"⁶. It could be seen that God's purpose was to give Adam a companion with whom he shall fulfill His unction to them to be fruitful and dominate the earth. After the creation myth, God blessed Adam and Eve thus:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them be Fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living that moveth upon the earth⁷

From the foregoing, it could be said that the foundation at which marriage was built was on the bases of companionship, multiplication of man's species, dominion and subjugation of all the other creatures of God. So then, it could be said that the philosophical foundation of the Judeo-Christian marital institution stood on the tripod of companionship, multiplication of its species and dominion and subjugation of all other species.

In order to attain these lofty heights that God has set for humankind in order to maintain the marital institution, certain rules of engagement were created. To be engaged in marriage, there could be betrothment where by a young girl could be reserved for another young boy until when they are grown of age to understand the intricacies of marriage. Again, it could be contracted between two matured adults. It should be noted that it must be bigamous and between two families. To show the extent of scorn for same sex marriage, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was told. Marriage was regarded thus as a sacred institution enunciated by God Himself and nourished in a puritan context. Any bride who was found to have been defiled before the wedding night attracted societal odium both for herself and her family. At times it was punishable by stoning to death.

Because marriage was contracted between two families, it could be contracted with a proxy thus bonding the two families. It was an abomination for any of the couples to get into unauthorized sexual relationships with any member of the two families; for instance, a man cohabiting with two sisters, the mother of his wife etc and vice versa. Polygyny was allowed but never polyandry. Quarrels were resolved between the families. It should be noted that a man marrying more than a wife had several advantages which the women understood and played along happily and enjoyed her marriage. Divorce was only encouraged on the ground of infidelity; however, women were not entitled to divorce their husbands. They were admonished to be submissive to their husbands. There were lots of senses of responsibility in the sacred union. However, with the entrenchment of Christianity, there was a slant in the understanding of the number of persons who engage in marriage: it was now touted to be between two persons- a husband and a wife. It was seen as abominable to marry more than a wife. Various churches sanctioned those who were polygynous except such a man was in the state of influence and fame. This has led to several pains in marriages that would have been avoided. The Jewish tradition made provision for marriages between family members in the case of the death of one of the brothers. One could assert here that marriage in this context was instituted to lay the foundation for a credible society if the rules of engagement are adhered to strictly. Lets us now examine marriage in Islam.

Marriage in Islam

Marriage in Islam is aimed at a multiple purposed venture namely spiritual tranquility and peace, and cooperation and partnership in fulfilling the divine mandate. Islam – being a natural way of life entailing a total submission to the will of Allah – factors all of genuine human instincts such as physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, et cetera in its scheme.

Although Islam encourages fulfilling one's physical needs in a decent manner it is an ancillary purpose of marriage, and not the sole one. According to the Qur'an, tranquility and peace through a successful union is considered the primary objective of marriage: (Among His signs is that He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another; verily, in these are signs for those who reflect (on the nature of the reality)⁸

In another place, the Qu'ran refers to the relationship between man and woman in terms of partnership for achieving goodness and fulfilling the divine mandate for their lives. (The believers, males and females, are partners of one another; they shall jointly enjoy all that is good and counsel against all that is evil.)⁹

Islam aims at producing righteous individuals as the cornerstones in the social structure of any society. In doing this, it also seeks to establish a sound family, the prime and most cardinal factor in building a good society. It is therefore indisputable that marriage is the foundation that gives rise to the family. Thus, there is no way a genuine family could ever exist out of wedlock, as have been instituted by Allah and exalted be Him.

The Objectives Of Marriage In Islam:

Islam anchors its philosophy of marriage on certain natural principles. According to the divine laws nothing can ever perform its duty alone in optimum capacity. Allah's purpose in creation was that everything will be in need of another of its kind, to enhance complementarities of the others. This is what is known as the union of the contraries: male and female animals have to complement the other in order to reproduce. The Qur'an highlights this universal law in the following two verses: (And all things We have created by pairs, that haply ye may reflect.) (Glory be to Him Who created all the sexual pairs, of that which the earth groweth, and of themselves, and of that which they know not.) In response to this law, Allah, ..., has legislated a sublime tradition for a man and a woman to be united in such a way as befits the lofty status of human beings, namely through marriage.¹⁰

Again, Allah has made man's heart to cleave to that of a woman and vice versa such that each of them is driven by a far more exigent need than hunger or thirst. Each of the couple is filled with this definite sense of emptiness in his or her life that can only be assuaged by their union, namely via marriage. It is only then that stability replaces confusion and reassurance replaces anxiety. The couples find in themselves serenity, love and mercy that enlighten their lives and enrich their souls.

Marriage in Islam also aims at reproduction. This is the natural outcome of marriage that serves to prolong man's existence. This must be attained via a

pious progeny that succeeds him. This could be seen as one of Allah's bounties which He grants man by given man wives of his own kind, and from the wives, sons and grandsons.

It is through reproduction that nations grow and multiply; they also make use of their potentials and manage to combat their enemies. Few would dispute the fact that multitudes and masses of people are reckoned with when considering world power. This is why Islam recommends jihad of population. It is therefore through reproduction that the entire human species all around the world are preserved until the point when life comes to an end.

Marriage helps in the consummation of one's faith, sparing one lusting at other women, thereby preserving his chastity and offers one a lawful means to satisfy one's sexual desire which according to Islam is central to man's being. Adultery is, therefore, no longer an option but abominable.

Marriage in addition to helping a Muslim preserve his faith, it is also the zenith of worldly happiness. Islam encourages its followers to enjoy this in order not to be distracted from the ultimate goal of life namely uplifting their souls and attaining high degrees of spirituality. This is summarized in the saying that the whole world is pleasure, and the best pleasure of the world is the righteous woman.

Social relations are bolstered with the help of marriage; family expands to include his in-laws and his children's aunts and uncles. This increases the feelings of amity, love and social closeness and to include more and more people. Allah purposes that the relations by marriage be just as strong as kinship relations.

Marriage creates a maturing tinge of man's character through the responsibilities he has to shoulder, as a husband and a father, and similarly for a woman's character via the responsibilities she shoulders as a wife and a mother. Many people who refrain from marriage could be said that they wish to live as grown-up children with no responsibility ties to bind them, no family to unite them. Islam believes that such people are not fit to live; they epitomize irresponsibility. Marriage could thus be understood as a strong commitment and a shared responsibility between a man and a woman immediately they contract the union.

From the fore-going, it could be said that Islam also understands very well the role of a credible family for the development of the society. This could also be appreciated if look at their role for women: women are supposed to be in the house to carter for the children, the man's resources and care for him. This is to enable the man to concentrate in all that he does without exception. Women are not to be seen outside the compound to avoid their being a source of temptation for men. They should be kept in *pudah* and a man is permitted to marry as many as four of them in order to have full enjoyment of them as one of the social pleasures that Allah has given to men in the world. Islamic jurisprudence appreciates the power of lust in women that makes women culpable in any adulterous act. Thus they are always punished alone without the man since they are seen as possessing this allure from Allah that men can hardly resist. One could appreciate the rationale for the wearing of the *hijab* for women so that their bodies will not be seen by any other person except their husbands. Unfortunately, Islam had factored humanism only to its adherents but left non-believers at the mercy of the Muslims. This has often been carried too far including in killing non believers for flimsy reasons; otherwise its philosophy of marriage would have been good. In effect, its inclusivity and lack of universalism is its bane.

In exploring the marriage institutions across various cultures we have brought to prominent relief that family that ensues from marriage is appreciated by all cultures to hold the key to veritable survival of societies in all its ramifications. What is left for us now is to explore the Igbo customary marriage institution to analyze why it has lost its allure and place in the development of society.

Igbo Philosophy Of Marriage

Marriage can be seen as a contract entered into by the close kin of the man and woman, in particular by their respective lineage kin, with regard to the paternity of the wife's children. It is seen as one of the most important events/ rites of passage in the life of the Igbo as this is set before them as the one ambition to be achieved from birth. Marriage among the Igbo is patrilineal which means a family situation in which status and property are inherited through the paternal line. It is also associated with virilocality when women leave their paternal family and reside with the paternal family of their husbands. However, in Ohafia, Afikpo, Edda and Arochukwu are recorded the system of matriliney; a situation in which status and property are inherited via the maternal line. Although this type of extended family structure is normally associated with

uxorilocality – a situation where the man is expected to pack to the family of his wife- yet, these communities are still virilocal as in the patrilineal systems of the other Igbo land. Since the majority of Ndi-Igbo operate patriline, we shall focus on it as something more common and more original to the people. The contracting of marriage in Igbo society is a process reality where some procedures are followed before a man and a woman will live together as husbands and wife.

II. The Igbo Notion Of Marriage

1. Igbo Emphasis on Married Status

Marriage has a foremost place in Igbo socio-cultural economy. It captures the psyche of every maid and youth as an indispensable attainment of life with as little delay after reaching the age of puberty. Celibacy finds no place whatsoever in Igbo socio-cultural milieu: in fact to Ndi- Igbo it is regarded as foolishness, and utterly contrary to the law of nature. One must thus remember that among Ndi-Igbo, celibacy is an impossible prospect. It is due mainly to this world view that unmarried Igbo adult is called by many derogatory names namely *oke-okporo* (male-woman), '*akanogholi*' or '*oke ikpa*'. An unmarried woman is not left out as she is regarded derogatorily as '*Ndabili*'; meaning good for nothing. These categories of citizens are not regarded as full grown adults in the community, regardless of their age and financial status. In the event of death, they are not given full mourning or burial rites. They are buried on the same day (unlike a married man who is expected to lie in state in his house for at least a day) in an evil forest with all sorts of prayers aimed at barring them from reincarnating in the family line. It is worse off for an unmarried daughter who is regarded as a burden to the family. Such unmarried daughters are always in conflict with their brothers' wives over their mothers' inheritances.

From the foregoing, it could be said that for the Igbo people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the summit of membership of any given community where the departed, the living and those yet to be born meet. Thus, marriage is a duty, a responsibility from the corporate society, and a requirement of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he is an outlaw and an anti-law, who is not only abnormal but 'sub-human'. Anybody who fails to get married under normal circumstances has rejected society and the society will reject him in return.

2. Marriage as a link between families and villages

Traditionally, marriage is contracted not between two persons but two families or two *umunna* (extended family) and sometimes between two villages. Marriage results in a web-like relation amongst villages thereby enhancing peace amongst communities where such relationships have taken place. Members of the two families become 'ogo' (in-laws) to each other. This new relationship of 'ogo' becomes as deep as in blood ties. Hence, the Igbo saying that 'ogo mmadu bu nwanne ya' (A person's in-law is his brother also). This makes for the widening of social links where the couple and their people are at home in one another's place. The attendant children from the union become 'nwadiana', or nwa nwa in their mothers' home with lots of rights. Marriage thus changes the social status of all those who enter into such tie. Because of the system of exogamy and polygyny large numbers of clans and lineages are in this way united for mutual assistance, defense and trade. Lineage or families that have linked themselves through the marriage of any of their children are bound by the legal, moral and ritual obligations geared towards the protection of mutual interest, life and property of all members of the marriage groups. This wide contagion of friendship resulting from marriage also plays some important role in enhancing of relationships between villages and even between village-groups. For instance, supposing war breaks out between two villages tied by marriage, the 'ndi nwa nwa', (sons of the women born in those villages), would come to stop them as none of the parties can kill them. They would take palm spears (omu) and put them between the combatants and make them cease fighting till the case could be judged. This way peace will be achieved.

3. *Kinds of Igbo Marriage*

There are only two kinds of marriages existing in the Igbo cultural areas. They are polygyny and monogamy and take many different forms.

(a) *Polygyny:*

This is the state of marriage in which there is one husband and two or more wives. For the traditional Igbo, plurality of wives is a laudable ambition which given the opportunity, a man would continue to add to the number up to the time that old age incapacitates him. According to G. T. Basden, the ambition of every Igbo man "is to become a polygamist, and he adds to the number of his wives as circumstances permit. They are an indication of social standing and to some extent, signs of affluence, in any case, they are counted as sound investments."¹¹ This kind of marriage was regarded with high level of importance in the traditional Igbo society. For instance, the high infant mortality

rate that was prevalent in Igbo societies seems to favour the existence of polygyny. It is argued that the security and stability of monogamous households in Igbo land would seem to be more unstable than that of polygamous households in socio-economic security and family stability as they are dependent on the number of children in the household.

There is no doubt that polygyny raises the social status of the family concerned. The more wives a man has, the more he feels he has gotten some air of importance. Marriage at this level among the wealthy young men showcases the extent which surplus wealth is invested in additional marriages. This could be seen in the way that Chiefs and wealthy men and especially those who have taken 'ozo' titles had harems limited by the extent of the surplus wealth available.

One other source of pressure for polygyny is the need for a male heir in the family where this seems to be lacking in a monogamous marriage. This is especially if the first wife has no children or has only daughters, the husband must add another wife in order to remedy the state of childlessness. This is because Ndi-Igbo believe that to have only daughters amount to having no heirs- the most important reason for marriage.

Again, when a marriage becomes harmoniously polygamous, orphanage is never severely felt.

If one wife dies, there is naturally another to take over the care of her children and husband. There is thus that mutual help and corporate existence for which family-hood in Igbo land is characterized.

In case of sickness and barrenness, other wives will take her stead for the family even in bearing children for the family, so that the life of the lineage is not extinguished. The Igbo mentality and philosophy of life makes polygyny inevitable. Accordingly, Igbo custom mandates couples to refrain from sexual intercourse immediately after the birth of a new baby at times, from the time of the pregnancy of the wife. It was a taboo or abominable for a woman to bear a subsequent child until the former one is weaned usually after three years. This interval had cogent reasons for its support. This was because a woman needed prolonged rest after giving birth to a child, she must be allowed enough time to recuperate thoroughly. It was therefore wiser to avoid the possibility of another

unexpected child appearing on the scene. In such a case, the man will automatically switch to the other wife to enhance this abstinence.

In examining the above reasons and more in favour of polygyny one sees one central reason running through: the woman is regarded and used as a 'spare tyre'. Most reasons adduced for polygyny are for the benefit of the man; this is because the Igbo society was traditionally a man's world. This is why out of vanity some women opt for polygyny; but it should be noted that it seems that the whole idea is for the pleasure of the man. Basden however, avers that "a woman is not content to remain the sole wife; that an only wife considers herself placed in an unenviable and humiliating position because she is always lonely and bears the whole of the domestic burdens of the household alone"¹²

These days, polygyny is no longer fashionable because of the infiltration of Christianity and economic crunch. Two classes of polygynists exist in this modern era: those who are forced into it due to infertility of the first wife or the incapability of the first wife to bear male children and those who enter into it due mainly out of lust and exhibition of wealth.

(b) *Monogamy*

This system where one man is married to one wife is another kind of marriage practiced by the Igbo.

It was existent side by side with polygyny, in the olden days and was regarded inferior to polygyny, in that it resulted mainly due to poverty. Although polygyny was regarded higher than monogamy, yet, it was factual that more Igbo families were monogamous than polygynous. It would thus be an aberration for anybody to claim that Christianity made Ndi-Igbo monogamous rather it was choice that determined the one anybody entered into. It could as well be said that monogamy does not guarantee greater happiness and peaceful co-existence than polygyny. It depended on the character of the man: a weakling like the biblical Abraham who could not muster enough courage to take over his son Ishmael will become a disaster to the future generation. As a matter of fact, the crises in the world today could be said to be rooted in this laxity of Abraham where he left his son Ishmael and his descendants to grow wild in the wilderness haven lacked manly upbringing.

A. Marriage Procedures Among The Igbo

Marriage by engagement (Inu nwanyi na nwatakiri): There is a practice among Ndi- Igbo that is wrongly called 'child marriage' because it is contracted in childhood and for want of adequate terminology. By this practice, a child may be engaged at the early age by his or her parents. Different reasons are adduced as motivating different parents into this act. They may include; strengthening an old friendship, to express gratitude for a favour received in the past, and the desire to marry from a good family (specie). A parent who sees a new born baby girl might decide to preserve the girl for his or her son to marry her in the future. He performs some betrothal rites which differ from community to community. In my own community, Mmaku in Awgu LGA of Enugu State, the parents of the male would make their intentions known with a thigh of a cow (utaku efi), kola nut and at least two gallons of palm wine. It is known as a mere expression of intent which means that if the female's family accepts, they will be training the infant for the male's family until the girl grows. Sometimes this intention of the parents materialize as the two children grow up to be husband and wife; while at another times, they grow up not to have enough feelings to marry each other.

In other areas, the parent concerned might indicate his or her interest to engage the little girl to his or her son by advancing a certain amount of money which is known by some communities as 'ego obara mmiri' (the money put into the drinking bowl of the child). In either of the cases, when the girl grows up to a certain level of maturity, she is made to know of the engagement. In the traditional setting, she is bound by parental obedience like the priestly canonical obedience to accept that engagement. In some communities also, this sort of marriage is the ideal as such children see it as expression of parental love and wisdom over and above that of the children. Elders are believed to know such issues more than the children via experience.

Wives Married by Women:

In Igbo land, there are circumstances where custom permits a woman who has no male offspring or who is wealthy to foot the bill or whose father had no male child to 'marry' a wife. In the case of a wealthy woman and the woman without a male issue, her husband looks after his wife's wife. But in the case of the woman whose father had no male, a responsible man is chosen to be siring her to avoid getting bad specie of offspring into such family. Custom also permits a woman whose husband died when she has no issue to 'marry' a wife and in that case she chooses the man who sires her. At this junction, we should note that though women marry or make arrangement marriage in any of these

circumstances, Ndi-Igbo did not anticipate or support lesbianism. This was never heard of as all these arrangements were made for child bearing. It is the lack of understanding or mis-interpretation of this system that led Adichie to make the negative claim of lesbianism in Igbo traditional societies.

Marriage by Inheritance: ('ikuchi nwanyi'): Igbo tradition like its Jewish counterpart allows for marriage by inheritance. Most times it occurs when a man dies and leaves a widow behind. Tradition permits that such a widow is inherited by any interested member of the deceased man's family, provided the woman is still at the age of child bearing, she is a potential wife of members of the family; this is known as 'ikuchi nwanyi' (to inherit a wife). In some Igbo societies, any offspring of this marriage by inheritance automatically belong to the original husband. But in some other circumstance this union is contracted as a separate marriage altogether, hence, the children belong to the new husband. One could appreciate that these marriages succeeded simply because marriage was believed to be a union between two families and not between two persons. In any case the responsibility of training the offspring of the deceased man rests on the new husband.

From the above samples of marriage one can assert that the essence of getting married is the search for offspring. The Igbo in these regards show that they enter into these arrangements for the sake of male offspring. The premium placed on male issues can never be over emphasized. It is worthy of note to state that while the Igbo emphasize a family choice of wife, it does not negate individual acceptance of the wife to be. In other words, even though the family must assent to the choice of wife for any prospective man, such a man is allowed full choice of all that he wants in a woman. The family only contributes and directs him in the choice of a consort that will be easily amenable to the family ethos and values.

IV. Igbo Marriage Procedure – Betrothal And Courtship

Marriage starts with inquiries on both families: once both families are satisfied with their inquiries, the actual marriage negotiation process begins. Usually the formal betrothal is the first step, and it goes through the payment of the bride price (ngo nwanyi) and ends with the communal merriment where all and sundry are invited to bear witness that such marriage took place.

1. Betrothal

Once a young man declares interest in a lady, preliminary inquiries are conducted and these enable his parents to conduct in depth search into the character and life of the bride-to-be and her people. In the case of positive result of their inquiries, they are bound to give their assent otherwise they withhold it and look for another girl. With a positive stance, the parents of the would-be groom, goes to the girl's parents to start the process. This first official movement to the parents and led by his parents, to the home of the bride-to-be is to formally seek their consent. It is expected that one big jar of palm wine, a bottle of dry gin, tobacco and four kola nuts would be needed at this stage. Usually, the groom-to-be will not be in the entourage but his father was to declare their intention to the bride-to-be's family. Answers were not usually given instantly as time was given for such response. It enables the girl's father to make his own enquiry. In the instance of positive inquiries from the girl's side also, the young man and his relatives are given the green light to start formal marriage rites and negotiations. A day is then fixed for the formal betrothal.

The Betrothal Ceremony: Betrothal is defined as "a formal agreement under customary law between a woman and/or her family on one hand and a man and/or his family on the other, whereby the woman's family agree to give her in marriage to the said man, the man and/or his family, for their part, undertake to have the woman as wife, to pay any agreed bride price and generally to fulfil the usual obligations of in-law'¹³. The ceremony of betrothal shows variations from village to village and from clan to clan. In Mmaku, for instance the following items are expected to accompany the groom's family: twenty-one kola nuts, four small bottles of ground tobacco, eight big jars of palm wine, two bottles of dry gin, and four tubers of yam. On the entourage of the bridegroom also will include members of his kindred (umunna) and representatives of his maternal home and age grade. Before the father of the girl accepts these gifts, his daughter is expected to declare in public her willingness to accept the hand of the young man in marriage. Once this is done by the symbolic sipping of palm wine and passing to either her husband or his representative, her father sees it as the green light to drink the wine and accept the other materials.

In some other villages the method of betrothal may be done by the young man offering a coconut to the girl he intends to marry in the presence of all in attendance. If this coconut is accepted, it is a sign of acceptance of the suitor and thus, he has the permission to start further negotiations. At the end of the

sumptuous feast that follows, the bride is expected to go with the bridegroom's entourage to spend four days. In some communities, she is only expected to send back the jars of wine the following day and she spends only one day. But it is said that the four days stay for the first time is the ideal. This is expected to be the first opportunity to get acquainted with the members of the family of her suitor and other members of the village who normally would be paying visits.

2. Courtship

Courtship, as it is understood in the Western world, based on romantic love, dating and outing, never existed in the Igbo customary marriage. This results from the fact that most marriages were arranged by the parents of the prospective couple sometimes without their consent. What is called courtship in Igbo custom starts after formal betrothal ceremony. This is the period of the many visits which the girl has to pay to the husband's home in order to get her acquainted with her new family. It is institutionally expected that this will involve all the members of the two families involved. In the process presents are exchanged among relations thereby increasing the bond of friendship, and the qualities of the two families are critically observed.

What determines the duration of the period of courtship is the type of marriage in question. Child marriage, usually may last many years but for adolescents, it can last for few months. This is the period which time she is watched for social adjustments in all their ramifications. If the family is satisfied then, it continues to the next stage but if otherwise, the marriage is called off.

V. The Payment Of The Bride-Price

On the return of the bride from her visit to the bridegroom's home, a date is fixed for the third stage of the marriage rites known as the payment of bride price (Ime ego nwanyi). In Mmaku, the ceremony of Ime ego nwanyi also known as ime ihe ummunna is more elaborate than the previous two occasions. On the fixed day, the groom is expected to go along with the following items: sixteen jars of palm wine, twenty-one tubers of yam, four bottles of dry gin and some tobacco. On arrival, some select elders would isolate themselves to do the 'haggling' for the price to be paid. This usually takes some time until a price is agreed upon; once this is agreed and paid, the rejoin the other people and the rite continue. After the day's ceremony, the bride goes home in the company of some of her friends and relation. This is another opportunity for young men to make

choices among the girls who accompany the groom home that night. This enables the two families to get more bonded by more marriages.

Final carrying of wine:

The final stage of wine carrying also known as 'ugbo-evulu' in Mmaku is scheduled after the third stage. The rite could stop at the third stage if the groom does not have lots of money or if the wife becomes pregnant at that stage. Otherwise, on the scheduled date, every member of the community is expected to attend whether invited or not. The groom's family brings items as much as they can afford but not lower than the following: a gallon of palm wine each for all those who contribute to the kindred, i.e, all married men, at least ten jars of palm wine for the entertainment of guest that day, twenty-one tubers of yam, four bottles of dry gin, tobacco, items or wine for the youths and the daughters (umu-ada). Any of these things not done could hamper the movement of the bride to her husband's house. When all these are satisfactorily done, the bride carries all her belongings and follows the entourage of the groom home that night. It should be noted that in all the stages, it is the responsibility of the bride's family to treat the attendees with sumptuous meals. On arrival to her new home, the new wife after the second day fetches water to all the senior wives in the kindred. This is always accompanied with gifts and enables her to know the homes of her co-wives (Ndi-nwunyedi).

2. The Role of the Middleman

The marriage rites and processes show an indispensable character known as the middleman; in Mmaku there are at least two middlemen- one for the groom and the other for the bride. He performs the function of an intermediary from the beginning of the negotiation to the point of death. Usually, it is duty bound for the intermediary to find out all that is knowable about the girl/boy and her/his family, and to report back to the families as the case may be. Marriage rites can only commence if both intermediaries are content with their findings; it is only then that they can in company of one or two members of the kindred of the groom go to the girl's parents and declare their intention. It is the role of the intermediaries to pave the way for the unwilling, or less enthusiastic party. This means that in a negotiated marriage the formal arrangements are organized by the intermediary, to ensure that the girl's father has the assurance that the union has been consented to by the groom's family. This middleman also known as the marriage guide intervenes when demands become excessive especially in reducing the cost of the bride price.

Among the Igbo, it is customary to have intermediaries known as 'ndi aka ebe' (witness) whose serve as liaisons between the families. They also help to settle or assist in settling any dispute between the couple or their parents and relatives. He is also the record taker of the expenses incurred (except entertainment items like food and drinks) of the process, such that in the event of divorce they could be repaid to the husband's family. The bride price is usually passed through them since it is through them that it will be recovered if the need arises. Even in the case of death, the intermediary from the husband's side would carry a dead hen to the intermediary from the wife's side who takes to the woman's family. This is the symbolic method of disseminating the message of the death of the wife. This is usually the last function of the intermediaries; since these functions are done on family representative bases, even if the intermediaries are dead their wards would perform the function in their stead. From the above, it could be averred that the intermediaries are very indispensable in the marriage process.

3. *The Bride Price*

For any marriage to be legal and the attendant offspring who will emanate from it to have 'legitimate' status in Igbo land it requires a series of transactions and formalities in which the two bodies of kin, the families of the couples are involved. The payment of goods, money or services by the groom's family to the bride's kin is a fundamental part of the establishment of legality. This payment, regarded as a typical feature of the marriage rites, is what we refer to as the bride price. It is noteworthy to state at this juncture that women are not commoditized in Igbo world view; hence the rejection of such concepts as 'bride price', 'dowry', 'dower', etc. by anthropologists of Igbo culture. This is because Europeans had misconstrued the payment of money or goods to the family of the bride by the groom and his family for the buying of the bride. In this sense the woman is regarded as a chattel, whose ownership is consummated from one kins-group by the other for goods or money.

This is certainly not so from an informed stance which will convince one that the bride is neither sold nor bought. With the meager amount that can not represent the real value of a woman and the lack of commoditization of ownership of the woman as should have been the case of any object bought by a person, e. g. a slave etc but a dignified status shows that the woman has a different status all together. She retains dual citizenship status of both her own lineage after the marriage, and that of her husband. The essence of the pride price is for the right

of exclusive sexual access to the woman by the husband and to be enabled to bequeath status and property to the children of the union as heirs to the descendants of the husband's group. Sylvia Leith-Ross espouses the importance attached to the bride price, even by the women themselves:

When I tentatively asked, seeing how clearly the women realized all the complications inherent in the dowry system, whether they ever thought of doing without it, they looked at me in shocked astonishment. 'But if no dowry were paid for us, we should be harlots...' (she said)¹⁴.

We shall end this section by re-emphasizing that for the Igbo, three days are significant in the lives of humans namely; the day of birth, the day of marriage and the day of death. Of the three it is only the day of marriage that we can determine by ourselves while the other two are entrusted on us by circumstances beyond our control. It is on the above pedestal that lots of premium and merriment are attached to marriage in the lives of all humans in the society.

Vii. Conclusion

From the beginning of the work, I had set out to establish that marriage was a divine union meant to serve for the propagation of humankind. For the Igbo it is a materialist conception of eternal life by which any man who is able to have an heir and is able to maintain such heirship is said to have life eternal. It is unarguable to state that one of the greatest threats to humans is the issue of death seen as a total annihilation of the man from the surface of the earth. Marriage and the attendant offspring that emanates from it assures of eternal life through the perpetuation of man's being through his wards.

But this is not automatic as wrong values annihilate families. This is why today several threats to the perpetuation of the human lineage are confronting man. There is the idea of the misunderstanding and mis-arrogation of the rights of individuals by modernity. Women now seek for rights beyond what nature has arrogated to them- equal right has become the mantra with increased rate of divorce as the result. Even, the concept of child right has become an anathema to the survival of humankind. Children now are given such destructive rights that are capable of destroying them and ipso facto humanity. This is because any child who is not properly groomed may suffer from lack of ideals. It should be noted at this junction that in the traditional society, the rate of divorce was infinitesimal as the only acceptable ground for divorce was infidelity from the women; any other crises were resolved by the families. This is because marriage

was seen as a contract between two families and not between two individuals. It could be seen that if we reverse to seeing marriage as between two families a lot will be improved in the ailing nature of our married lives.

Finally, it is my convinced opinion that if parents are reminded of their roles, then society will be better for it. It should be recalled that as the smallest unit of society, society starts to decay with the decay in families. If families start to be healed, then society will begin to have its healing. Thus the development of society is premised on the development of the individuals from various families. Society as the product of families cannot do better than the families.

End Notes

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5. Srinivasan Loc. Cit P 11
6. Genesis 2: 18
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