

CHILDBEARING AS THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE AND ITS CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF AFRICA: THE STAND OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Marriage among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria is traditionally understood as a social and spiritual institution with childbearing as its core purpose. Rooted in African Traditional Religion (ATR), this belief holds that procreation ensures lineage continuity and ancestral honour. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria therefore, marriage is deeply rooted in cultural and religious expectations, with childbearing regarded as its primary goal. In traditional Igbo and broader African contexts, procreation is central to fulfilling social, spiritual, and ancestral obligations. However, in contemporary Igbo society, this view faces increasing challenges such as infertility, delayed marriages, modern values, legal changes, shifting gender roles and changing societal norms that threaten this core expectation. This article explores the traditional view of marriage, the importance of childbearing as the principal aim of marriage in Igbo culture, the emerging tensions in modern contexts and the challenges it now faces, and how African Traditional Religion (ATR) addresses, interprets and upholds this expectation. The paper calls for a balanced understanding that respects tradition while engaging modern realities.

Keywords: Childbearing, Marriage, Igbo culture, African Traditional Religion, cultural change

INTRODUCTION

Following the nature of the universe, it indicates that it is the will of the maker of the universe that the world exists continually, thus man and animal alike have the procreative nature. It is in this regard that man a rational and cultural being in the universe established marriage and family life through which the population of the world may continue to grow and the family lineage exists continually. Marriage therefore, becomes a universal and natural phenomenon in the society. Thus marriage is seen as old as the human existence as it was established by the Creator on the same day He created man. Nevertheless, as a universal phenomenon, marriage and the understanding of its purpose differs from one society to the other depending on culture and tradition of the particular society.

Marriage among the Igbo is not only a social contract but also a religious and cultural duty. While affection and companionship are acknowledged, the expectation to bear children remains central. In Igbo society, a union without offspring is often considered incomplete. Yet, with societal changes including urbanization, education, and global influence—this traditional expectation is under strain. This study critically analyses this evolving dynamic from the standpoint of African Traditional Religion (ATR).

DEFINITION OF KEYWORDS

Marriage: Marriage is a socially and culturally sanctioned union between individuals, especially between a man and a woman, recognised by customs, religion, or law for companionship, procreation, and social stability. “Nevertheless, marriage generally is understood naturally as a union established primarily for the procreation and upbringing of children” (Nweke and Mbama, 2022, p.329). Marriage is not a human establishment. “Marriage is a natural institution created by God for man and woman. It is universal in character and defines the mating relationship for the founding of a family... and rearing of children” (Eleanya 2001, 1).

Childbearing: Childbearing is the process of conceiving, giving birth to, and raising children within a marital union. It is the process of conceiving, delivering, and nurturing offspring within a marital context. Childbearing is considered in Igbo traditional culture as fruitfulness and foundation of marriage.

African Traditional Religion (ATR): ATR is the indigenous religious beliefs and practices passed down orally among African peoples, often inseparable from culture and social life. It involves the indigenous spiritual beliefs, manner of worship and practices of African peoples that are passed down orally and rooted in community life. It is the indigenous religion of the Africans and the way of worship found in almost all the activities of the African man (Nweke, 2017, pp. 12-13). According to Omoregbe, African Traditional Religion is a living religion that grew out of African culture and reflects in African culture which believes that there is only one God who is the absolute creator, owner and ruler of all things, and the Father of all mankind. This religion is handed down from one generation to another (1993, p. 152).

Igbo culture: Igbo people are an ethnic group predominantly in the Eastern part of Nigeria, known for strong kinship systems, traditional beliefs, and communal living. Igbo as an ethnic group with a strong African cultural background native to Eastern Nigeria is known for strong moral values, strong value for their language, cultural traditions, and reverence for ancestry.

Infertility: Infertility is the inability of reproduction. It is a situation where a man is incapable impregnating a woman or the incapability of a woman to conceive and give birth to a child. In Igbo traditional culture, infertility is a serious issue that leads to childlessness which is a very big disaster in marriage.

Cultural change: Cultural change is a situation that takes place in a particular culture when there is a culture contact. Any culture that encounters another most times adopts certain things from such culture and in a process makes some changes in their culture. For example, since the contact of Igbo culture with western culture, the Igbo culture has never remain the same. That is why Idoko (2023) opined that whenever there is development or culture contact, there is always interpolation

of some cultural heritages either for the improvement of the cultures or because a particular culture or tradition is drawing the other back.

IGBO WORLDVIEW

According to Nweke (2017), “At the core of every person’s being lies the worldview that constitute the control box of culture that determines thinking, acting or doing and determining values” (p.101). Ossai (2020) also observed that Religion of African sums everything about the Africans; their ideas, customs, attitude, symbols and the entire world view.

The Igbo worldview is therefore a view of how they understand the world: their culture, their religion and belief systems, how they perceive health and illness and their interpretation of the world in general. According to Mbama (2020) The Igbo worldview has always linked the social and cultural even the political activities with the spiritual world. Thus, the Igbo worldview is holistic and spiritual. Life is interconnected between the living, the dead (ancestors), and the unborn. Children are seen not only as blessings but as a link in the chain of existence. Every adult is expected to contribute to the continuity of the family and community by producing offspring. Without children, one’s legacy is at risk, and ancestral honour may be considered incomplete. Thus, the Igbo worldview is cyclical and spiritual. Life is viewed as a continuum involving the living, the dead (ancestors), and the unborn. Every adult is expected to marry and bear children as part of fulfilling their duty to their lineage and ancestors (Mbiti, 1991). A childless person is often seen as lacking fulfilment in both personal and spiritual dimensions. This is why Nweke (2017) strongly believe that worldview exerts strong shaping influence and power on a peoples’ life and activities.

NATURE OF MARRIAGE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

In ATR, marriage is a sacred duty tied to spiritual and ancestral obligations. It is not just a private affair but involves the families and communities. The ancestors are believed to participate spiritually in marriages, and procreation ensures the continuity of the lineage. A childless marriage is seen as a break in the ancestral cycle, and often interpreted as spiritually defective. That is to say, in ATR, marriage is a sacred institution that involves the consent of the two individuals (man and woman), their families, the communities and the ancestors. It is both spiritual and social, ensuring community continuity and spiritual alignment. Procreation is seen not just as a personal joy but as a duty to the ancestors and a means of guaranteeing future generations (Gyekye, 1996). Therefore, “In the ordinary sense the primary objective of every marriage in Africa is to have children for the continuation of life” (Nweke and Mbama, 2022, p.329).

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL CULTURE

In Igbo traditional culture, it is believed, and, in fact an obligation “that every normal person should get married and bear children” (Mbiti, 1975, p.104). However, marriage, in Igbo tradition, is not merely a union of two individuals but a covenant that unites families and generations, the living and the dead. Although love, care and companionship are not neglected in traditional Igbo

marriage, the ultimate aim is procreation. The Igbo worldview, deeply shaped by ATR, sees children as the link between the living, ancestors, and the children yet to be born.

Among the Igbo, marriage is contractual and communal. As an elaborate and communal activity, it involves multiple rites and stages such as, inquiry (iju ase), introduction (iku aka), bride price (ime ego), and traditional rites (Igba Nkwu). The union is not fully recognized until the wife gives birth. The family of the groom expects children, especially male heirs, to carry on the lineage. Beyond the ceremonies, the true validation of marriage lies in the birth of children. A woman who does not conceive is often subjected to social pressure, and in extreme cases, a man may marry a second wife to "complete" the marriage (Okonkwo, 2004). Thus, polygamy, levirate marriage (widow inheritance), and surrogacy (through relatives) were traditionally accepted ways of ensuring procreation.

THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL CULTURE

“In the ordinary sense, the primary objective of every marriage in Africa is to have children for the continuation of life. Thus, an Igbo adage says, “*Ife eji anuta nwanyi bu ka- amuta nwa*”- the purpose of marriage between man and woman is for childbearing” (Nweke and Mbama, 2022, p. 329).

Marriage, in Igbo tradition, is not merely a union of two individuals but a covenant that brings families and generations together. Love, care for one another and companionship are not ignored, yet, the ultimate aim is procreation. The Igbo worldview, deeply rooted in ATR, sees children as the link between the living, ancestors, and the children yet to come. Thus, the primary goal of marriage in Igbo traditional culture is childbearing, not just the establishment of the foundation and stability of the marriage but also for the continuation of the family name and ancestral veneration. Eleanya noted that

The primary objective of Igbo traditional marriage is to beget children ... For when the fruits of marriage (children) is got, then will the marriage be said to establish strong bonds between the individuals belonging to different families and clans ... For through marriage, the family is created and it is this family that will see to procreation of more children who will be able to strengthen, preserve and transmit life force (2001, pp.31-32).

Little wonder Nweke and Mbama observed that in Igbo traditional culture, “children is seen to be the main reason a man and woman come together to become one, share things in common and form another family outside their own parents’ family.(2022, p. 331). “Here we must note that for the people of Southeastern Nigeria marriage and childbirth are inseparable. Without children, marriage is incomplete” (Okpala 1985, 45). In the same manner, in Igbo traditional culture, “Marriage is seen to be fruitful only when at least one or two children are had by married couples” (Okpala 1985, p.52). Therefore, for the Igbo people, a union without offspring is considered incomplete and a cause for communal concern (Ejizu, 2008). Children are seen as evidence of spiritual favour and marital success, carriers of the family name and providers of labour and security in old age. Without children, the marriage may be considered unfulfilled or even cursed; a woman may face stigma and pressure, and a man may seek additional wives.

REASONS FOR CHILDBEARING AS THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE

First and foremost,

It is worthy of note also that in the African understanding any man or woman who died childless cannot be buried inside the compound. If the man is married but died without having any child, then he has no share in the kinship of his family because he has nothing to be remembered for after he must have died. Despite the richness of an African man who is childless, the wealth is useless because a woman or man who died childless cannot be given befitting burial because he is not going to have a share or say in the community of the ancestors. In fact, in African traditional setting any marriage that ended in childlessness is regarded as to have not existed (Nweke and Mbama, 2022, p. 330).

Generally children among the Igbo provide economic and social security, especially in old age. Large families were traditionally linked to wealth and status.

It is observably clear that Igbo tradition and culture is one of the strongest among the African culture and traditions. As such, Nweke and Mbama (2022) clearly identified 6 reasons (Children are the Precious Gift of Marriage, Children as the Base to Stable Marriage, Children are Assets, Children give the Parents Assurance for old age Security, Children are the signs of Fruitful Marriage in the eyes of the Society, Children are the Hope and Assurance for Kinship and Ancestral Continuity) for childbearing as the goal of marriage among the Igbo people which I will explain briefly at the long run.

Children are the Precious Gift of Marriage: Nweke and Mbama (2022) noted that it is a general notion among the Igbo people that the key reason for a man and a woman coming together to live is to procreate, any other thing is an attachment. This is because a family is formed by a father and a mother with children and there is no man who has no child that can be referred to as father or a woman who has no child that can be referred to as mother. In the observation of Odozor (2001) it is visibly noted that marriage in Igbo traditional culture is not just a matter of two persons coming together to live rather “marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love is ordained to the procreation and education in whom it find its crowning” (p.271) Mba also noted that “Children are the greatest blessing and glory of marriage among our people ... Childlessness in marriage is a very great cross to an African couple” (1980, p.3).

Children as the Base to Stable Marriage: It is well observed by Nweke and Mbama (2022) that “Any married couples that have born children are at least assured of stability in the marriage and that is why every married couple crave for children” (p. 331). In Igbo traditional culture, the continuity and stability of any marriage is not really assured until there is childbirth in it. Otherwise, such marriage will continue to be shaky until the day it will disintegrate.

Children are Assets: The crown of every marriage and the pride of every parent depend on their children (Nweke and Mbama, 2022, p.331). In the traditional Igbo culture, any man who discovers

that his new wife is pregnant beats his chest that he is about to become a father. It is a thing of brag in Igbo culture to be a father or mother. So, marriage with children in Igbo culture is deemed to have secured a very great asset.

Children give the Parents Assurance for old age Security: Any marriage in Igbo traditional culture that has children believes that they have secured their future. It is seen that their suffering if there will be any, has been reduced for they have gotten helpers of the future. And at least there will be hope of their befitting burial when they die. In view of this, Nweke and Mbama (2022) noted that among the Igbo people of Africa “Old age is seen generally as blessing and a special privilege from God. Yet this old age can be really blessing when there are children to take care of the aged parents, otherwise the old age becomes painful and a regret” (p.331).

Children are the signs of Fruitful Marriage in the eyes of the Society: “In most African societies especially in Nigeria, a marriage is judged as fruitful by the number of children they produced. This is because in Igbo traditional understanding a popular adage which is also a name given to children says *nwa ka ego*- child is greater than wealth” (Nweke and Mbama 2022, p. 332). In fact, in Igbo traditional culture, childbirth is the consummation of any marriage. Any marital union that has no child is not yet consummated and something that can still be disengaged in any near future.

Children are the Hope and Assurance for Kinship and Ancestral Continuity: According to Nweke and Mbama (2022) in marriage among the Igbo, whether in “...Islamic religion, Christian and African Traditional Religion, children give the family hope that their ancestral lineage will not go in extinction. To be childless implies the closure of one family names and lineage. But children are assurance of family continuity (p.332).

CHALLENGES OF CHILDBEARING AS THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY

In modern Igbo society, several factors challenge the traditional emphasis on childbearing. Agaba and Ohahuna (2021, p.33), opined that one of the implications of this childbearing as the goal of marriage in Igbo traditional culture is that the man is often pressurised by society to seek for divorce and get another wife. This has led to the destructions of many marital unions. The current social environment, influenced by modernization, education, and medical challenges, poses threats to this traditional ideal.

Other contemporary factors challenging this ideal include:

- **Infertility:** Due to medical or unknown causes, infertility affects both men and women, yet due to increased cases related to health conditions, environmental factors, or lifestyle, social stigma still often largely blames the woman.
- **Western influence:** Modern values promote companionship and individual choice over traditional expectations. Western influence Promotes marriage for love, companionship, or personal fulfilment over procreation.
- **Legal and ethical limits:** Practices like surrogate motherhood, adoption, and IVF, while helpful, are still culturally sensitive or unaccepted in traditional settings.
- **Delayed marriage:** Education and careers delay marriage and reduce fertility windows.

- **Changing gender roles:** Women are asserting their autonomy in marriage decisions, including the choice not to have children: a trending culture learnt by the contemporary African and most of Igbo women.
- **Urbanization:** Smaller family sizes and economic pressures discourage large families.
- **Modern education and urbanization:** Lead to delayed marriages and smaller family sizes.
- **Economic pressures:** Raising children is now more expensive, reducing enthusiasm for large families.

These changes have led to tension between traditional expectations and modern realities, often creating emotional, psychological, and social stress in families.

THE STAND OF ATR ON THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE

African Traditional Religion maintains that the continuation of life through childbirth is a spiritual duty. Infertility is often interpreted spiritually—linked to ancestral anger, broken taboos, or curses (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979).

ATR maintains a pro-natalist stance. Marriage is incomplete without children. Thus, traditional beliefs still associate infertility with:

- Spiritual causes (e.g., ancestral displeasure or witchcraft),
- Moral failure, or
- Need for ritual cleansing or sacrifice.

Even today, some families consult traditional priests for divination, herbal remedies, or rituals to aid fertility. ATR also upholds alternative family-building within cultural limits—such as levirate unions or community-sanctioned childbearing through relatives. However, ATR does not generally oppose modern medical interventions if they do not violate cultural taboos. The emphasis remains on preserving lineage and ancestral continuity. In its insistence on childbearing as the goal of marriage ATR usually suggest remedies like:

- Spiritual consultation with traditional priests.
- Herbal medicine and rituals.
- Levirate marriage or community surrogacy where allowed.

Nevertheless, Nweke and Mbama in their insistence that African Traditional Religion has its measures of dealing with marriage, childbearing and childlessness even before the advent of scientific medical technologies (2022, p.334) still argue that there has always been cultural means of handling the religious and cultural related problems in African Traditional Religion. “This means that every culture and people have their own local ways to solve their particular problems” (Okoro 2020, p.62). For Okpala, “The first among these traditional institutions for procuring children is polygamy” (1985, p.78). And another is woman marriage and adoption.

Polygamy: In the view of Okpala (1985, p.78) “Polygamy is one of the means a lot of people in Igbo and Ibibio land feel they can resort to in order to solve the problem and dilemma childlessness puts them into in their marriages. However, this method of solution to childlessness is not actually

particular to the Igbo and Ibibio people alone but a sort of generally accepted African cultural and traditional remedy for childlessness. Mbiti (1969, p.143) confirms that:

It is instilled in the minds of African peoples that a big family earns its head great respect in the eyes of the community. Often it is the rich families that are made up of polygamous marriages. If the first has no children, or only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife, partly to remedy the immediate concern of childlessness, and partly to remove the shame and anxiety of apparent unproductivity.

Woman marriage: This is another method by which African Traditional Religion copes with childbearing as the goal of marriage. According to Nweke and Mbama (2022) “Woman marriage is a situation especially Igbo land where a woman who has no child and the husband has died, marries another woman officially to maintain the lineage of her husband and to remove the shame of childlessness in her marriage” (p.334). “A woman, therefore, who is barren, can go on her own to marry a young girl ... Any child got through that process is for the prosperity and continuity of the family. ... the female husband generally employs the service of an *Iko* ‘lover’ for her bride to raise up children in her home ...” (Opkala, 19855, p.82).

Adoption: Adoption in Igbo African Traditional Religion and Culture is not the same as the western or Christian method of adoption. Adoption in African culture is a situation where a man who is incapable impregnating a woman goes to marry a single mother who mistakenly gave birth to children in her father’s house. Or in a situation where a full grown young man died without marrying or having children, the family of the dead young man searches for a young woman (a single mother) who had giving birth to a child or children at home to be married for the continuity of the name of the dead young man. When the bride price is paid “...the children are adopted ...because of the dowry paid to the parents of the girl” (Opkala 1985, p.82). The main purpose or reason for the ownership of the children of the girl according to Nweke and Mbama (2022) is that the family of the dead young man has done the necessary payments on her head (dowry precisely) because “The marriage payments are means of establishing rights over the bride and any child born thereafter. It puts the seal on the contract ... it constitutes the marriage” (Uchendu 1965, p.50).

However, ATR does not reject modern solutions outright. As long as they do not offend ancestral laws, practices like herbal therapy or spiritual cleansing may be combined with modern medicine. The emphasis remains on restoring balance, not just achieving conception.

CONCLUSION

Childbearing remains central to the Igbo understanding of marriage, deeply rooted in traditional culture and African Traditional Religion. However, contemporary realities present new challenges that call for reinterpretation and dialogue. A balanced approach—honouring traditional values while accommodating modern realities can help preserve Igbo cultural identity without dehumanizing those unable to bear children. The voice of ATR continues to advocate for lineage preservation, but it must also evolve compassionately with the times. So, the centrality of childbearing in traditional Igbo marriage, rooted in ATR, has shaped cultural expectations for

generations. Yet, the evolving dynamics of society demand a more compassionate and inclusive understanding. While African Traditional Religion holds firmly to the spiritual value of procreation, dialogue with modern realities can allow for cultural resilience without cultural rigidity. Recognising the dignity of every marital union-whether childbearing is achieved or not, may be the needed bridge between tradition and progress.

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