

# MARRIAGE CEREMONY: THE CLASH BETWEEN TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RITES AND WESTERN MARRIAGE

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## Abstract

*The increasing consequences of the introduction of Christianity, its values and practices in Africa are manifold. Resulting to, clash with pre-existing traditional beliefs and practices. This has necessitated the need to ask; at what point can a young man and a woman who has agreed to marry, be socially described as a married couple? In Nigeria, some Pentecostal Christian churches do not allow the bride to immediately go home with the groom and his people after traditional marriage rite has been performed. Some Nigerian Pentecostals argue they are not husband and wife until white wedding has been performed. Hence, there is need to probe why? This is a qualitative study that employed key informant, in-depth interviews and participant observation to elicit data from respondents. Findings reveal this clash as recent and unnecessary, individual choice should prevail and not church tenets. Sexual consummation should begin immediately after traditional marriage rites but this is unacceptable to some Pentecostal Christian churches. People agreed that traditional marriage rites should be compulsory but performance of white wedding should not be made compulsory by Pentecostal churches. This did not go down well with key informants of both sides of the argument. Study recommends a reassessment of the essence of both ceremonies and compromise to ensure hitch-free marriage negotiations in contemporary Nigerian societies.*

## Introduction

Globally, marriage is one prominent outcome of positive and peaceful human relations and interactions over time. As a social reality most young men and women after interacting for a while often agree to get married, but most times they belong to different faiths and religious inclinations. Conflicting pluralistic faiths, beliefs and religions in Africa are some of the consequences of unsolicited colonial incursion and missionary activities (Ekwunife, 2012). This often forms the basis of severing or continuing marriage relationships in recent times. If we should go by the definition of marriage by Embers (1978, p.320) as a “socially approved sexual and economic union between a man and a woman which is presumed, both by the couple and by others, to be

more or less permanent, and which subsumes reciprocal rights and obligations between spouses, and between spouses and their future children”. It then implies that any marital union must and should be *socially approved*, but the acceptable process and medium of social approval has become a source of contentions, conflicts and disagreements in recent times. The increasing consequences of the introduction of Christianity, its values and practices in Africa are manifold. This has necessitated the need to ask; at what point can a young man and a woman who has agreed to marry, be socially described as a married couple? Is it after African traditional marriage rites has been performed or after Euro-American church-wedding ceremony? Which of these authenticates a marital union or both? This is pertinent because of the contemporary misunderstandings that often ensue after a young man has fully performed the socially approved traditional marriage rites in the girls' home. In Nigeria, altercations often occur particularly when the man and woman practice Pentecostal Christianity and their parents or relatives do not. It is pertinent to highlight that, prior to the introduction of white wedding ceremony in Africa; a man is expected to joyfully go home immediately with his wife after fulfillment of traditional marriage rites in company of his relatives. But this is sometimes not acceptable to Pentecostal Christians as it is believed that they are not allowed to consummate the marriage. They are considered as not yet married until they have performed white wedding where they must be blessed by a pastor/priest. This arguably to a large extent is a clash between tradition and modernization. Put differently, conflict of values and indeed a clash between African heritage and extraneous foreign values. Most societies in the world cherish the marriage institution and have provided modalities to ensure its continuity (Mathaias & David, 2014). Nnonyelu (2008) observed that societies down the ages have established several means and processes through which marriage is contracted and sanctioned or legalized. One prominent way through which marital unions are socially approved, contracted and legalized in south eastern Nigeria is through the payment of bride price or bride wealth (Iffi and Ezeah, 2004; Oke, 2006) as well as in the fulfillment of other traditional rites and crowning it up with *igba-nkwu* (traditional Igbo marriage ceremony). However, the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century precisely 1842 (Onwuka, 2002) marked the commencement of the need to meander through pluralistic values. Missionaries also infused Christian marriage with Christian religion. White-wedding is a type of marriage ceremony in which the bride wears a white flowing dress and a veil and the groom wears a suit, couples make oral promises before a priest and congregation, the union is letter sealed with a ring or bible (Howard, 2006). An African is now faced with the task and social expectation to perform a second marriage which is not without daunting economic and social challenges. These challenges has culminated into the refusal of some 'born-again' Pentecostal fathers of the bride and pastors of Pentecostal churches to allow the man go home immediately with his bride. This has

often results to ending a successfully concluded traditional marriage ceremony into a feast of fights, exchange of harsh words and open confrontations between members of both families. In some cases, the young man and wife share similar Pentecostal beliefs while their parents do not. In some other cases, the bride and family members are adherents of Pentecostalism while the man and family relatives are not. The misunderstandings begin with selective fulfillments of marriage list/requirements. Adherents often ask which of traditional rites their Pentecostal faith allows them to perform. Some Pentecostals refuse to provide certain listed marriage requirements such as alcoholic drinks, including palm wine, and beer, tobacco and performance of some marriage rituals associated with Igbo traditional religion. In some areas of the Igbo societies, kinsmen of the bride ask the groom if he wants to fulfill the traditional marriage rites in cash or in kind/material goods. In a bid to avoid buying alcohol, some Pentecostals Christian often opts for performing marriage rites in cash. After payments in cash, the family and community uses the money to perform the traditional marriage rites themselves. By so doing the Pentecostal adherents presumes they have not contradicted their faith. While some others whom people presume to be extremely fanatical about their Christian faith refuse to fulfill the marriage rites in cash in order not to indirectly buy alcohol or tobacco with their money. They often insist that all non-alcoholic items be calculated for them in cash so that they can pay, while alcoholic items should be removed. This often creates frictions tensions, disagreements, altercations and in extreme cases severing the relationship between the intending young man and woman. This is currently becoming a problematic phenomenon in contracting marriage and in forming new affinal (relatives by marriage, Oke, 2006) alliances across contemporary south eastern Nigeria. Following from the above enumerated problems, this study is set to examine:

- Why the clash between Igbo traditional marriage rites and western marriage ceremony in Anaku Anyamelum LGA.
- To ascertain the point at which intending couples can be said to be dully married.
- To ascertain measures to ameliorate or totally eliminate the clash between Igbo traditional marriage (Igba-nkwu) and western marriage (white wedding) ceremonies.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study that employed key informant and in-depth interviews to elicit data from respondents. In-depth interview was conducted on 40 randomly selected respondents and 10 key informants such as pastors, traditional leaders who were assumed to be knowledgeable on the research interest in Anaku community of Anambra state. This clash of values is almost common in this community. This has also

been witnessed in several parts of south eastern Nigeria and Anambra state is not left, however Anaku community in Anyamelum local government was purposively selected for this study. It is accessible from Onitsha (about 45km) and from Otuocha, Aguleri (about 15km) with a population of 29,426 (NPC, 2006). Anaku is made up of three villages, several quarters, and kindred namely Umuria, Ikenga and Umuezeagu. The Anaku people are speakers of Igbo language. Okonkwo (2007) observed that Anaku is richly blessed with great cultural heritages and among them are the traditional marriage rites, customs, festivals and religious practices. However, with the introduction of Christianity into the community, pluralistic values now abound in Anaku community resulting to conflicting values. This study is therefore anchored on the Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) conflict theory. Its main thrust and assumptions is that there is always a division within the society in terms of class struggles between perceived inferiority and superiority, the ruling class and the ruled class, the haves and have-nots. Relating this to marriage practices, there arguably seems to be a battle of supremacy between perceived assumed inferior Igbo traditional marriage ceremony and the superior western marriage ceremony. This tends to bring misunderstandings among Christian faithful and traditionalists on which of the marriage ceremonies authenticates, legalizes and socially approves a marital union. The traditionalists see Igba-nkwu and other marriage rites as the people's heritage that must be sustained, which should be the first but may not be the only marriage rite/ceremony to be performed by intending couples and must not be allowed to go extinct or dominated by white-wedding. On the other hand some Pentecostal Christians see some aspects of Igba-nkwu as ungodly and barbaric which must not be practiced or accepted. Data collected with electronic materials was transcribed and descriptively analyzed based on the study objectives in order to enable adequate extrapolations to be made.

## **Findings**

### **The Igbo Traditional Marriage Rites (Igba-nkwu) and Western Marriage (white wedding) Ceremonies in Anaku Anyamelum LGA.**

This study found that the Anaku community like other Igbo communities has procedures for traditional marriage ceremony marked by performance of some rites and it is believed to be handed down to them from time immemorial by their ancestors. This is locally known by the people as Igba-nkwu. 94.3% of the study respondents sees Igbo-traditional marriage ceremony as an indigenous cultural heritage as observed by this respondents: *“Igba-nkwu is part of our own culture, it is what our fathers did and left for us, it is our cultural heritage”*-(62 years old retired male teacher). Majority (97.1%) of the study respondents however observed that it is the payment of the traditional bride price that authenticates a marital union and not just the Igba-nkwu ceremony. The payment of bride price is the vital part of the ceremony; if you did not

pay the bride price then you are not married yet in Anaku community. It is expected that the bride price must be paid before the Igba-nkwu day and can equally be paid on that same day; but the custom here is that the bride price must be paid before the people in this community will socially approve any marital union-(60years old women leader).

The processes involved in contracting marriage traditionally are door-knocking where the young man goes to introduce himself to the bride's parents in company of his relatives. This is followed by subsequent visits and negotiations which entail material exchanges of palm wine, breaking kola-nuts, gifts, food items and payment of bride price. The union is then made public through the Igba-nkwu ceremony. A significant aspect of this ceremony is that the bride kneels down, while the bride's father gives her a cup of palm wine to offer her groom in the presence of the public; after which both the young man and woman dressed in traditional attire dances together to a traditional tune. This was/is how marriages are socially approved in traditional Igbo society before Christian white-wedding was introduced into the Anaku community.

On the other hand, the respondents observed that western marriage ceremony was introduced into Nigeria through missionary activities during the colonial period but none of them could say the exact year it was introduced. For instance, a respondent noted that *“Before now our people do not go to church to get married. This issue of church wedding was brought by the white church people right from when they came to this town-(72years old male respondent).* Most of the people (63.3% of the respondents) currently believed that the western marriage ceremony is gradually being preferred and almost dominating the system. For example, a night of St. Christopher stated that initially, in the Anaku community, the western marriage ceremony is left for Christians alone, but right now the opinion of most people is that if you did not do white wedding then you are not among the modern members of the society. This is why western marriage is now accepted and practiced in Igbo land even the traditionalists also perform the white wedding ceremony because they don't want people to see them as primitive, fetish, uncivilized and barbaric-( 56years old retired civil servant and a Knight of St. Christopher).

The above shows that the quest to be publically perceived as modern and civilized necessitated the prevailing practice of white wedding ceremony among people in Anaku community. However, in spite of the above findings, 71.4% of the study respondents still believe that the Igbo traditional marriage is fundamentally more important to the people of Anaku community than western marriage. The response below reflects the degree of importance. In Anaku community, it is customarily mandatory for one to perform the traditional marriage ceremony and rites but performance of the church wedding ceremony is not considered a must or compulsory, it is a thing of choice-(47years old female respondent).

Further findings revealed that 86.7% of the study respondents believed there is no rule stipulating that everyone must perform both marriage ceremonies before a marital union will be socially approved in Anaku community. For instance a respondent opined that performing both ceremonies is not compulsory, it depends on whether both husband and wife wants to perform both ceremonies; but here in Anaku community the traditional marriage ceremonies and rites is the first and it is a must, after which they can chose to continue with the white wedding ceremony or any other type of marriage ceremony they have in mind like court wedding-(60years old female respondent).

One prominent determinant factor is the religious background of the intending couples and their economic capacity and buoyancy to perform both marriage ceremonies. 79% of the study respondents observed that performing church wedding is more expensive than performing traditional marriage rites but performing both is a very expensive adventure. Most times couples after performing both marriage ceremonies go to their new home saddled with huge debt to pay as opined by this respondent the cost of marriage ceremony, be it traditional or church-wedding depends on the couples financial ability, social class and taste, the richer the man the richer/classy his wedding ceremony; but sometimes how exposed, educated, and modern one is and how influential one is, can also be a determining factor-(52years old female respondent).

72.4% of the study respondents therefore opined that the Anaku community lays more emphasis on performance of the Igbo traditional marriage rites than on performing church wedding and ceremony as observed by this respondent in this Anaku community, it is mandatory that you must perform the marriage rites and Igba-nkwu because it is our custom and every member of this community owes the community the obligation of performing it-(55years old male respondent).

78.6% of the study respondents perceive anyone who has performed only one of these ceremonies as partially married depending on which of the marriage ceremony. Also, through a participant observation, this researcher witnessed a baffling scenario in one of the Pentecostal church weddings she attended; it happened that during the joining of man and wife, the pastor requested whoever is giving out the bride to come forward but nobody came out. For over 45minutes members of the bride's family tramped out of the church to beg the bride's father to come forward and hand over his daughter but he insisted he will not because his in-law to be did not fully perform the customary traditional marriage rites. It took series of apologies and instant payment in the church for the father of the bride to come forward and hand over his daughter to her husband. During the sermon, the officiating pastor used the opportunity to warn church members that the church insists that it is compulsory for a man to see/settle bride's parents/family and perform all traditional marriage rites before coming to perform church wedding.

This kind of scenario has a potentially dangerous implication in disrupting peaceful human relations that has existed in families and churches. For instance, the bride was later heard saying she will never forgive her father for disgracing her and spoiling her supposedly happiest day (wedding day). This reflects the type of relationship and interplay between traditional marriage rites and church wedding ceremony. It may not after all be a clash or competition for superiority or dominance but that of which precedes which. It may also be a reflection of determining the actual point at which one could be publically and socially approved as fully married.

**The Point At Which Intending Couples Can Be Said To Be Dully Married.**

The study also found that 81% of the study respondents in Anaku community agree that one is fully married after completely performing the Igbo traditional marriage rites and crowning it with Igba-nkwu ceremony. On the other hand, 71.1% of the study respondents opined that one is not fully married after performing only church wedding without first performing traditional marriage rites. For instance a respondent opined that the issue of performing only the western marriage ceremony is not possible because not even one person from Anaku community no matter the religious inclination will recognize or approve such a union where the parents and family members of the man and woman were not consulted before the union. I think no good church in Anaku community will accept to wed such a couple or even advise its members to do so-(65years old women church leader).

89.5% of the study respondents agreed that the best option is to perform both the western and traditional marriage rites and ceremonies. This will save the couple the problem of been ridiculed in the community. However, people described couples who performed both marriage ceremonies cynically as people who want to show-up, people who are educated, who want to fulfill religious obligation, traditionalists and in some other cases they are positively described as people who are properly married. A respondent opined that Christians are expected to perform the western marriage ceremony as a fulfillment of their religious obligations and they also must perform the traditional customary obligation too in order to fulfill their societal/cultural obligation; by so doing they have given to Caesar what belongs to him and to God, that which belongs to God-(51 years old male priest).

This shows that the interplay between Igba-nkwu and white wedding is intricate and complex in Anaku community. It could be a source of altercations, clashes, misunderstanding, and conflicts between intending couples and parents from both sides and even between community values and Christian church values and practices. There is therefore need to examine measures to ameliorate or totally eliminate the problems associated with performing marriage rites and ceremonies.

### **Measures to Ameliorate or Eotally eliminate the Clash Between Igbo Traditional Marriage Rites (Igba-Nkwu) and Western Marriage (White Wedding) Ceremonies**

Various stakeholders involved in contracting, negotiating and celebrating marriages have some roles to play in eliminating this perceived clash between traditional values and western values. Beginning with parents, they have a role to properly socialize their children on the cultural norms, practices and values. Most young persons are not aware of the basic requirements and procedures for traditional marriages rites in their different local communities. This seems to one of the root causes of deviant behaviours when they are ready to marry. The church on the other hand has a responsibility to ensure that young people get their parents/families involved during their marriage. They must not teach church members that fulfilling traditional marriage rites defiles their faith as captured by this respondent people should learn to respect both the cultures and religions of one another, as this will help to make people see reason to respect a particular person's choice of marriage ceremony and foster peaceful human co-existence across communities-(36years old female respondent).

The policy makers also have a role in revisiting Nigeria's marriage policy and ensure the statuses of the both types of marriage ceremonies are not that of superiority and inferiority. This study also sought the opinion of the people on which of the marriage ceremonies should be banned by government. 1.4% of the study respondents said traditional marriage ceremony should be banned, 1.4% gave no response to the question but felt it is not necessary. 35.7% of the study respondent requested that church weddings should be banned while 61% of the study respondents said none of the two types of marriage ceremonies should be banned. This agrees with Sylvester (2012) who asserted that the only solution to the perceived clash between these two marriage ceremonies is developing an understanding across communities that each of these ceremonies has a part to play in the life of the new couple. People should therefore understand the fact that Christianity has come to stay in Igbo land as part of the religious life of the people. So people should see persons that performed Christian marriage or western marriage as part of fulfilling their religious obligation as Christians and equally see couples that performed traditional marriage ceremony (Igba-nkwu) as fulfilling cultural, traditional and customary obligations as Igbo people. The study therefore calls for a compromise in the practice of both marriage ceremonies in order to avoid severing existing peaceful human relations in human societies.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, we have been able to point out that the Anaku community in Anyanmelum LGA of Anambra state and by extension the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria do not accept or approve any union of a man and woman who performed only church wedding as completely married. The couple is expected to have performed traditional marriage rites such as consulting parents/family, payment of bride's prices and crown it all with Igba-nkwu (public celebration of marital union among the Igbo). Igba-nkwu is a valued rite of passage among the Igbo because it is a set of ceremonies that marks an important stage in one's life (Ezeweke, 2012). This study therefore agrees with Chiwetalu (2012) and Orji (1999) that Igba-nkwu should be seen as the finally ceremony to consummate a marriage in Igbo land. The people also see traditional marriage ceremony as the people's heritage, culture and a cherished practice that must never be undermined by the church in the name of Christianity or modernization. Majority of the Anaku community people do not want any of the marriage ceremonies to be banned but advocated for mutual understanding while practicing both. All over the world the introduction of Christianity through missionary activities has brought lots of changes in most indigenous/traditional societies and this is the root cause of the conflicts of values and the entrenchment of pluralistic values. It appears this unwholesome scenario is not only common or limited to Nigeria but it is evident in other African countries. This study has therefore been able to comparatively highlight the clash between perceived modernity (foreign) and traditional (indigenous) practice/values.

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