



## **THE IMPACT OF WESTERN CULTURE ON IGALA MARITAL SYSTEM**

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### **Abstract**

The impact of western culture on any other culture is usually referred to as “westernism” which is a coinage from the word western and it refers to the act of bringing ideas or way of life that are typical of Western Europe and North America to other cultures. Therefore, western impact connotes the knowledge, belief, moral and way of life of the western world. Before the introduction of Christianity to Igalaland, marriage was viewed as a contract between two families, that is, a man and woman and their immediate families. There were aspect of marriage customs that were peculiar to the Igala, among some other African ethnic groups. For example, negotiations for marriage were undertaken by the parents of the intending couple through the intermediary. As the negotiations were going on, investigations were also being carried out by both families to find out if either of the families had any particular problems such as hereditary diseases or some bad behaviour. When the negotiations and investigations were settled, the intending husband would be required to serve his parents-in-law to-be for seven years for the bride price. However, during this period the suitor and the young lady was not expected to meet for any conversation: this was to prevent them from engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage as it was a taboo to do so. The research found out that Christianity has impacted on Igala marriage both positively and negatively. It has upheld good customs such as abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage, marriage to be based on good morals and religious character as well as maintaining parental approval, and virginity before marriage as a virtue. However, other aspects of Igala marriage traditions have either been ignored or completely



abrogated. These are discovered in the areas of proper investigations of the clans of both families to ascertain if there exist inherited diseases or traits of bad behaviour. Christianity has rejected polygamy but has also replaced it with discriminatory practices in some denominations. This research recommends that while some of the native customs might belittle value in modern times, it is imperative for the contemporary Igala Christian to adopt aspects of both traditions that are capable of ensuring stability of marriage.

### **Introduction**

In order to understand the topic in question, there is a need for a brief description of who the Igala people are. Igala people at present occupy the eastern flank of the confluence of River Niger and Benue on the eastern region of Kogi State. Igalaland is bordered on the north by Benue and Nassarawa State, on the west by River Niger, and on the east by Enugu State. According to Okwoli (1), as early as the 12th century C.E, Igala people were having a centralized state system with law and order to keep them stable in their socio-political life. In their religious setting the people believe in the existence of the Supreme Being known and called *Ojo-odobagagwu* (the Almighty God), or *Ojo-chamachala* (God who owns all things). They believe in the existence of Spirits, gods and goddesses known and regarded as being under the power and control of God the Supreme Being.

According to Okpe, Igala is a socio-cultural group among the settlers within the confluence of two Nigerian Rivers of Niger and Benue. The name Igala represents the language, the people and kingdom itself, and this the only form that is being used by the people themselves. As a language, Igala belongs to kwa sub -group of languages with enormous characteristics of Bantu sub-group of the same Niger -Congo. The kingdom is marked politically by its well established central administration before the European expedition in Africa. Igala is situated in today's Kogi State in the Middle-Belt region of Nigeria, and is in fact, the largest ethnic group in the state. They are a people whose social organization and value system are generally similar and who recognizes one paramount king as their political ruler. The 1991 population commission of Nigeria projected Igala to be approximately 2 million people. Igala is about 8th largest ethnic group of the over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria (29).

In their linguistic setting, the Igala speak different dialects. The differences here are however, not much. According to Okwoli (3), such dialects are the Idah dialect, Central dialect, Dekina dialect with Bassa and Igbira influence, Odolu and Ibaji dialect with Igbo influence. The beautiful side of the matter, however, is that despite all these differences, the people understand each other in these spoken and written dialects, a fact that is not always true in many other ethnic groups. The people have diverse and rich cultural traditions. Among these traditions, marriage stands highly honoured. The aim of this work is to assess both positive and negative impacts of western culture as evident in Christianity on Igala traditional Marriage.

### **Igala marital system before the Advent of Western Culture and Christianity**



Before the introduction of Christianity to Igalaland, marriage was viewed as a contract between two families; man and a woman and their immediate families. Negotiation were undertaken by the parents involved in the first place while the extended family members were involved later. Usually, the choice of life partner was the responsibility of the parents, particularly the father. When the father of a young man who was old enough to marry noticed a particular young woman, he would approach the father of the young lady to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage. This process could even be embarked upon in the absence of the couple to-be. Before going further, both member of the two families began investigations concerning each other's family. This had to be done on behalf of the couple to-be because they were young and inexperienced. Also, it was the older parents who knew the historical background of their families and clans. The said investigations were, however, carried out secretly and in strict confidence. These investigations were to find out if either of the families had any particular problems such as hereditary diseases, whether each family was industrious and could manage home economically and morally, if either family's forefathers were outcasts, cursed, hard - hearted or had some other bad character.

After these inquiries, the father of the young man then took his son to the father of the lady with hoe and machete. The young man would be required to serve his parents in-law to-be for seven years for the bride price. During this period the young man was expected to carry out a lot of work on the farm, to harvest palm fruits, pound yam, fetch firewood in large quantities and carry out many other domestic activities. Sometimes he was asked to carry out these activities for a long time in the day without food or drink. This was done to test if the young man would be industrious, loving and tolerant enough to keep their daughter as wife. When food was made available to him he was expected to eat much of it in order to ascertain if he was a man who could feed his wife well or not. During this process too, the couple to-be were not expected to meet for any conversation. For them to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage was a taboo. It was believed that if they did it would incur the anger of the guiding deity (*ebooji*) to which the young lady was dedicated at birth.

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

According to (Onuche 5), in addition to the assessment of the young man's capability, there was a process of greeting. Similarly, Faruna, Onuche, Idakwo and Kadiri (2013) affirm that this process of special greeting was part of the marriage traditions. The young man must get up at 5 O'clock every morning to greet his father in-law to-be while the latter was still in bed. The young



man would prostrate at the door of the man with his forehead touching the ground but was allowed to see the person he was greeting. He would greet saying, "*Ache ele?*" which means "will you give me your daughter free as wife? The father of the lady would respond, "*Ache ele*" which means I will give her to you as wife free without a bride price in cash. This process of greeting continued until the lady was finally released to him, after meeting all the traditional requirements. According to Macha and Uwodi (21), it was confirmed that if this process of formal greeting was not properly done, the father of the lady could refuse to give his daughter to the suitor, despite all recommendations from other people as regards the suitability of the young man. It is important here to point out that the lady involved was not yet told officially that the man was going to marry her. It is traditional that both the suitor and the young lady had no option, as they must obey the dictate of their parents. Whatever was decided by both parents concerning marriage must be accepted as correct.

Although it was the responsibility of the father to look for a wife for his son, he had to go through a friend or his close relative who was living in the same area with the parents in-law to be and who could testify to their character and family background. Investigation did not stop with close relative but included a trustworthy person chosen to be the intermediary (*atogba oya*) as well as other relevant categories of people. It was only when these investigations were completed without doubt that the father of the young man would have courage to begin the process of marriage for his son. These investigations were usually carried out without the knowledge of the couple to-be until they were completed. The main reason for hiding the process from them was to keep them apart so that they would not have sexual intercourse with each other before the lady was traditionally married and handed over to her husband. Omachoko and others (22) maintained that if they were introduced to each other at the early stage and they happened to play and the girl touch the private part of her suitor, the young man must offer a goat to appease the lady's ancestors or deity to which she was dedicated at birth.

There were differences in some parts of Igalaland as regards this tradition. In Ogugu, Okpo, Imane, in Olamaboro Local Government Area and parts of Dekina and Ankpa Local Government Areas, the major focus was not to labour for seven years as it was done in other parts. What was required was that the suitor should pay the bride price and appease family deities. The bride price was not much but it was traditional that cash had to be paid depending, however, on relationship, love and commitment between families in the various communities. The process of marriage in these areas was not hidden from the couple to-be. It could be the father or the young man himself who discovered the lady to be married.

Despite these slight differences, marriage was a community affair throughout Igalaland. Both families of the young man, the lady and the entire community members were all involved, particularly the adults who were conversant with the marriage traditions. It was believed that the new union was going to increase the population of the community by procreation, hence this co-operation. This was why the death of a husband did not normally terminate marriage; neither did the death of the wife end the bond between them except where there was problem of barrenness.



Mbiti (57) affirmation in this regard is applicable, namely that, "This is an important African view of marriage, that it is not an affair between two people together with their families and relatives. This has grown out of the view that a person does not exist all by himself, he exists because of the existence of other people. I am because we are and since we are therefore, I am. Hence, Ahmed is right when he says that traditionally, Igala people used to believe that marriage, particularly the polygamous type, strengthened the relationship between the contracting families and the community in general (18).

In places where the suitor was to labour for seven years before the wife was finally given to him, the choice was for him either to settle permanently with his parents in-law for life or go back home. If he chose to stay with them, he would be given a portion of land to build his own family house and if he decided to go back home, he would serve his father for one or two years before he could be allowed to go and settle on his own. In either case, he was allocated a big portion of land for farming to enable him cater for his family adequately. During this time there was elaborate celebration involving the two families as well as relatives and friends who were invited to be entertained lavishly with plenty of food and assorted drink such as gruel (*Obiolo*), native liquor (*Obulukutu*) and palm wine (*Otekpe*). On this occasion, gifts were lavishly given the husband and wife to help them settle in their new house. Also on this occasion which was the final celebration called traditional wedding, and before the wife was legally given to her husband, elderly people from both families would specially be invited to come and offer prayers for procreation, good living, love, obedience and genuine commitment to each other.

In some parts one major deviation in Igala Marriage lay in the choice of partner. In places such as Ankpa and Olamaboro areas the choice of marriage partner was determined by the individual intending to marry. This happened probably because these areas share common boundaries with the Idoma and Igbo ethnic groups who had that practice. The young man was duty bound to go out in search of a lady he would want to marry. On the agreement of the lady, he would approach her parents before coming back to his own father to inform him of the girl he had discovered and his intention to marry her. It was at this juncture that the parents of the young man began the process of their son's marriage with detailed investigations as required by tradition.

The first step was for the parents of the young man to approach the parents of the lady with Cola nuts (*Obi*) and palm wine (*Otekpe*) to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage. Most often the request would not be granted that same day because the lady's parents would want to find out some details about the family of their daughter's husband to-be. After thorough investigations were carried out to their satisfaction, they would declare their interest and willingness to release their daughter to the suitor's family for marriage. When their consent was given in this way, the young man's parents would look for suitable mediator (*Atogba oya*) who was capable of representing both sides. His roles involved being trustworthy and fair during settlement of the bride price. He also ensured that there should be cordiality between the two parties as well as making certain the process of appeasing the family or clan deity to which the young lady was dedicated at birth. In some parts of Igalaland such as Idah, Ofu and Dekina areas, the family god





was appeased only if it was discovered that there was secret sexual intercourse between the boy and the girl before marriage. In other part of the land such as Ankpa, Olamaboro, Imane and Ogugu, whether there was such relationship or not, the family deities had to be appeased. This was done by sacrificing a tortoise, he-goat or cock to the family god. This practice was observed to request the deity concerned to take care of all the preparations before and after the marriage ceremony. After all the requirements had been met, the intermediary (*Atogba oya*) would ceremonially take the lady by hand and give her to the young man's father who would in turn give her to the husband. On this occasion there was feast within the family circle when food and drinks were moderately provided.

The people of Ibaji Local Government Area had a unique practice as far as marriage was concerned. According to Ojobo and Ogwo, before marriage, all ladies must engaged in concubinage in which the young men pretended as if they were going to marry them. They brought gifts to the ladies and their parents, did some work on the farm, pound yam food, cut palm fruit and did many other things that tradition required. They did all these in the interest of deflowering these ladies for their own enjoyment. In doing this, these young man had to appease the family and clan deities. Hence, when ladies were matured enough, their mothers would release them to their concubines for sexual intercourse. This practice continued not unknown to the real suitor of the lady. If and when he was able to meet all the marriage requirements the concubine would then inform the legitimate suitor of the fiancé's maturity and officially release her to him on the order of the lady's father (25).

This practice became so pronounced that if a lady was met as a virgin by her lawful husband, she was branded as foolish and uncivilized. After a lady was lawfully married, the said concubine must not venture to its attendant repercussions. Sometimes the lady had enjoyed her concubine for such a long time that they became used to each other and would not like to separate. In such situation, some girls were forced to marry people who were not their choice and this caused a lot of rancour and acrimony in many homes. In addition to quarrels and fighting, many had to divorce their husbands leaving their children in hopeless condition. In other instances, parents might have become so used to their daughter's concubines that they would not want them to separate even when the daughter got a real suitor she wanted to marry. Many ladies in such situations would flee from their homes.

The traditional wedding ceremony must be celebrated in the compound of the lady's parents when two families invited their relations and friends to come and celebrate the wedding of their children. At the occasion, palm wine (*Otekpe*), native wine (*Obulukutu*) and other assorted drinks as well as food were available and invited guests were entertained lavishly, gifts were also presented to the couple. The most important item was palm wine (*Otekpe*) without which the wedding would not be highly honoured. It was on the wedding day that valuable instructions and pieces of advice were given to the couple. The elderly who had long marriage experiences took the lead while others present followed. It was a requirement that the father of the bride would hand over her daughter to the father of the bridegroom, who in turn handed her over to his son as



wife. At this point the young woman would be summoned to kneel down before the most elderly person in the family and before all that had come to grace the occasion. This elderly person would demand for a payment of an amount of money called (*Obiagalama*). This was brought along with three cola nuts as tradition required. At this point the bride would be severely warned neither to have sexual relationship with any other person apart from her husband nor behave contrary to general accepted norms as that would cause sickness, which might lead to her death. It was generally expected that this warning would keep the lady submissive and committed in matters of sex. The matter of virginity was viewed very seriously in most parts of Igalaland. Virginity until marriage was regarded as a virtue of a woman. It could lead to instant divorce if the new wife was not met as a virgin on the wedding night. The truth of this matter could be ascertained by spreading a white cloth on the bed. There was no problem if the cloth was stained with blood during the sexual act. If she was not met as a virgin she was sent to the mediator to be handed over to her parents. At this juncture divorce was likely to occur.

Marriage institution is one of the cultural strongholds in Igala community. The reason behind this facts are, Igalaland as an agrarian society needed what Ayandele calls, the living tools to make progress on their farm lands. Therefore in the absence of merchandized farming systems then, many wives obviously needed to produce more hands on the farms (Akoh, 163).

### **The Impact of Western (Christian) Culture on Igala Marital System**

The missionaries, on their arrival made a preposterous regulation that polygamists who wanted full membership and privileges of the church must first divorce all their wives but one, forgetting that even in the Holy Bible, God says that He hates all divorce (Malachi 2:16). This regulation was inimical to the economic development of the people as it led to a state of imbroglio, as the children of the divorced relationship were disrespectful and disorderly.

The pre-colonial period under review witnessed some absurd prohibitions, sequel to the changes, which are neither biblical nor theological. Furthermore, native songs, traditional artistic expression (e.g. the hair do, and the body beauty decorations) became a taboo because they were associated with heathenism. Even traditional names in so many instances, were frowned at. Hence we appraise Tasie's position as he posited that Christianity was introduced to African as a prisoner of European culture (85).

It is to be wondered sincerely about where Jacob the progenitor of Israelites and King Solomon, the wisest King of Israel are now, whether in heaven or in hell, for according to the Biblical record, they married four (4) and three hundred (300) wives respectively (Akoh, 162-163).

Christian activities began on Igala soil around 1857 through the effort of Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the church Missionary Society (CMS), who became the first African Bishop (Belgrave 20). This was followed by many other denominations such as Church Missions in Many Lands (CMML), Qua Iboe Mission (QIM), Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) and many others. Among



many of their Christian activities they introduced the system of Christian marriage in accordance with the New Testament norm. The early Missionaries to Igalaland, as to other parts of Africa, did not take due cognizance of the traditions of the people but viewed them as fetish or something to which foolish excessive respect was given. In the area of marriage what they regarded as accepted was very minimal.

However, despite the adverse influence of Christianity on Igala marriage traditions, some of its tenets tally favourably with the traditional set-up. Christianity emphasizes strongly that there must be abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage for the purpose of purity and holiness. In the traditional setting this was maintained not only to avoid the wrath of the clan or family deity but also to maintain healthy living with all the attendant social and spiritual harmony. In this way, Christianity, in agreement with the traditional norm accepts that marriage should be based on good moral and religious character to boost better relationship with God and the society.

The matter of parental approval features prominently in Christian marriage and agrees with that of the traditional norm of the people. Parents in the traditional marriage had to agree to give their daughter to her suitor for marriage. All the traditional rites had to be met. On the marriage day, people had to gather and prayer for procreation had to be offered by the elders, and the parents had to officially give their daughter to her husband as it is done in the Christian circle. As discussed earlier, maintaining virginity until marriage was highly honoured as a virtue in Igala traditional marriage without which marriage became questionable. This aspect tallies favourably with the biblical practice. The matter of virginity helps to keep many ladies pure until the day of marriage. In addition, parental obedience is highly emphasized in both contexts not to live long according to the biblical norms but also to build young couples for their future homes.

One positive influence of Christianity, particularly in Ibaji area is the stoppage of concubinage. This is because the Bible condemns fornication. Although it took a long time for the people to accept the Gospel and stop this unchristian practice, today it has stopped in favour of Christian principles. Those who still engage in it are considered as sinning against God.

However, Christianity has also affected Igala traditional marriage negatively in several ways. In Igala traditional setting, it was the responsibility of the father to marry a wife for his son, as mentioned earlier, and before doing that he had to go into proper investigations of the clan or family from which he was going to take a wife for his son. It was also mentioned that these investigations were mandatory, and that the purpose was to find out whether or not the clan had an inherited diseases or some bad character. Christianity lacks this aspect but bases marriage on faith in God, beauty, love and charm, educational background and perhaps on status. In addition, some people consult prophets and pastors for prayer in preparation for marriage instead of the traditional practice. Perhaps, it is due to the negligence of the traditional investigations that there are so many marital problems today in Nigeria, and among the Igala in particular.

As discussed earlier, in Igala traditional setting any contact between intending couples was prohibited. If the girl had to visit her suitor before marriage, she must do so in company of a





faithful female relation and the two must sleep together to avoid sexual abuse. Today, this restriction is hardly seen in any denominations. It is common to see some churches engaging in programme that bring boys and girls together and even allow them to sleep together in some cases. In Many Christian homes, would-be couples are allowed to sleep on the same bed and nobody cares to say anything. This practice has led many into temptations of committing sexual immorality.

On the practice of polygamy the influence of Christianity has been both positive and negative. In the traditional setting where many children assisted their father on the farm and thus contributed to the economy of the family, polygamy was beneficial, but the practice had it attendant evils which are common knowledge. Hence, Christianity positively impacted on Igala marriage by reducing the practice of polygamy. However, in cases where the practice still subsists Christianity discriminates against polygamist. In some churches both second wives and their children are not recognized, they are denied sacraments such as baptism. In some denominations polygamous men cannot be elders or deacons, in some others they cannot even pray in the church.

Foreign religions, especially Christianity and Islam, have played no small role in emphasising the significance of the Igala religion. Many converts to these religions have been indoctrinated against the religion which is derogatorily designed as paganism, idolatry, heathenism and fetishism, and kafiri in Islam (Akoh,174).

### **Conclusion**

Western culture (Christianity) has impacted on Igala marriage both positively and negatively. Christianity has upheld good customs such as abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage; marriage to be based on good morals and religious character as well as maintaining parental approval, and virginity before marriage as a virtue. However, other aspects of Igala marriage traditions have either been ignored or completely abrogated. These are discovered in the areas of proper investigations of the clans of both families to ascertain if there exist inherited disease or traits of bad behaviour. Christianity has rejected polygamy but has also replaced it with discriminatory practices in some denominations. In the view of this researcher, while some of these customs might be little value in modern times, it is imperative for the contemporary Igala Christians to adopt aspects of both traditions that are capable of ensuring stability of marriage.

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