

**ANCESTRAL WORSHIP AND MARRIAGE CEREMONY IN IGBOLAND: THE
UMUAHIA EXAMPLE UP TO 1896**

By

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Abstract

This paper highlighted some salient points on ancestral worship and marriage ceremony in Igboland: the Umuahia example up to 1896. This paper opined that ancestral veneration in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions was a critical component of Umuahia culture. It instituted social order and sanity in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions. This paper is of the view that marriage was a respected institution in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions. Marriage brought social control in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions. This- paper adopted historical methodology specifically primary and secondary sources. This paper recommended that Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions should be revived and modernized through well constituted legal authority to sanitize her society.

Keywords: Ancestral, Worship, Marriage, Negotiation, Bride-price and Handover.

Introduction

This paper examines ancestral worship and marriage ceremony in Igboland: the Umuahia example up to 1896. Ancestral worship brought sanity in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions. It played vital roles in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions. It was divided into two distinct groups, namely: the priests and the gods. Such gods include: *Ala, Kamaanu, Agwu Umuwaya, Abiam-Nkata Ahiankwota- Ukome* and *Apu Agwu*. Marriage in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions was a recognized way of prolonging the human race and also provided for companionship. Umuahia people viewed marriage as a group affair. It was a union between bride and groom. Igboke succinctly states that:

Before the commencement of marriage ceremony in Igboland, the groom must visit the bride's compound with family and friends to ask the bride's father's permission to marry her. The bride's brother took the place of her late father if she is fatherless. There is only symbolic price to be paid for the bride.¹

This expression proved that marriage ceremony was and still is one of the prominent ceremonies in Igbo pre-colonial social institutions. Before the commencement of marriage ceremony, bride price were negotiated and paid. This paper is divided into nine sub-headings, namely: ancestral worship, marriage, marriage

procedure in Umuahia, enquiry and selections of marriage partner, the bride price, marriage negotiation, significant of goat and final handover.

Ancestral Worship

Ancestral worship provided the Umuahia the opportunity to enforce peace and social order. Power stratification was also encapsulated in this system. The priests worked hand in hand with the ancestors. Undoubtedly, the ancestors played a major role in Umuahia to the extent that they formed part of the Umuahia society although head. What really shaped the Umuahia way of life was the concept of “*Ala, Erim-na- Dfo*”. *Ala* served as the supreme moral sanction. Among the people, the sanction for honest conduct was found in the domain and power of public opinion. Thus, the primary sanction against bad behavior and other mischievous acts is the fear of non conformity, which was marked by the dread of running foul of public opinion and of the gods.

The common reminder of “*Chatekwa Erim-na-Ofo*” reinforced the internal social order and control in Umuahia. “*Ala* shrine” was owned and controlled by every lineage group (*Onu-Obu*), the ward (*Onumara*) and the *Egwu*. On every *Oriete*, the chief priest of *Ala* (*Onye ji Ala*) worshiped the *Ala* who was the agent of social control and of this belief in the *Ala* and its efficacy made people to fear it. Anybody who was guilty of stealing, covetousness or any other act, which could provoke the anger of the gods, was compelled to swear to *Ala* as the final arbiter. Before taking any oaths (*Idu Nsi*) the man’s hair was completely shaved. The oath was administered by drinking from *Udu-Ala*, a big pot with *Omo* tied round its neck. This exercise (swearing) was done either in the shrine or at village square referred to as ‘*Mbaraama*’. There were other powerful and justice personified gods apart from *Ala*, *Kamaanu*, *Agwu Umuwaya*, *Abiam-Nkata* *Ahiankwota-Ukome* and *Apu Agwu*²

Apu Agwu was said to reward uprightness but frowned at dubious characters. The dubious person is punished by being made by *Apu* to face insurmountable obstacles in his trade and, at extreme, run mad. Simply, the gods were said to control dubiousness, cheating and encourage the upholding of justice and fair play. Before the gods punished offenders there was always the sign of a swarm of bees in their house. In the case of *Abiam Nkata*, a rare snake called *Ozugwa*’ or other creatures like crabs, and he-goats (*Ewu-Abiam*) were sent to the offender. If the offenders was stubborn and disregarded the signs, he usually died.

Marriage

Marriage was seen ordinarily as a cultural concept that sanctioned parenthood and provided a stable background for the care and rearing of children. This expression buttressed the fact that marriage in Umuahia was agreement to live together by a man and woman and with the consent of their families. This was, however after the fulfillments of the necessary traditional rites and testified by the same members of the kingship group. It was also the recognized way of prolonging the human race and also provided for companionship. Umuahia people viewed family and marriage as a group affair. It was an event between

principally the brides and grooms families and available kin of each party. The practice of marriage is very sacrosanct in Umuahia tradition.

Marriage for the Umuahia man was celebrated within the context of the kin- group. The communal nature of marriage among the people was connected around first; the wife and man and the brothers of the husband. This emotional close relationship symbolized the duties and expectations. It was expected that the wife serve food to the brother-in-laws (husbands). She in turn expected them, the brothers-in-law to protect her in times of trouble. It must be stated here that it was taboo for a brother-in-law to have sexual relations with *Nwanyi* (wife to their brother).

Unmarried men were not conferred with chieftaincy titles and were not let into the secrets of the land. If any unmarried male or female was desirous of sexual relationship, he or she was advised to go and get married. A man who was old enough to get married but remained unmarried was looked upon as an irresponsible man. An unmarried lady was also forbidden from joining the married women in their meetings. The appropriate way was the payment of the bride-price that was reinforced by the all-important breaking of kolanut (*Iwa oji-na-ose*). Failing to do this meant, that the relationship was not marriage but cohabitation.³

The relevance of marriage could not be over-emphasized. It was of great importance as a knot in the network of kinship link that bend lineages together. It helps in recruiting new members in a line of descent and at the same time created alliance between these lines. Perhaps, the Umuahia believed in *Ime-Ogo-gba Ikwu* (Extending bonds to the in-law) That is, once the marriage was contracted, every person involved was, and still is seen as related and addressed as 'Ogo' (in-law).

Marriage Procedures in Umuahia

There existed institutionalized ways of contracting marriages. Namely, enquiring and selection of marriage partner, the marriage negotiations, the bride price in Umuahia; the significance of the goat in Umuahia customary marriage, and the final handover ceremony.

Enquiring and Selections of Marriage Partner

In Umuahia, under the Igbo customary law, a young man or a young woman were meant to seek the consent of his or her parents. Before a man was revered, he was adjudged ready for marriage and reached the acceptable age of about 20, belonged to an age grade and had a visible means of livelihood. As custom permitted, when a young man sought, and got the consent of a girl, he reported to his father and relatives. This report usually set up action in progress. The relatives from both sides would set up a secret enquiry (*Ajuju*). They embarked on a serious investigation into the girl's or the boy's background to enable them finds out the moral and health situations of their inlaws. Among the dreaded socially reprehensible behaviours and health conditions were stealing, epilepsy, leprosy and mental illness.

The girl's genealogy was traced to the nearest maximal extended family to see if she in any way belonged to the boy's maximal extended family. Her rectitude with particular reference to whether she had a baby in her parent's home was of great importance, because conception outside marriage was not culturally approved in Umuahia and therefore nobody wanted to be associated with the social stigma it carried. The girl's relatives were not indifferent to the character of the man and the background of his family. They equally set up a secret enquiry. The girl's father and relatives among other things, enquired about the parentage of the young man. If his family was of the *Diala* (aborigine) status, they enquired if the young man had an occupation and whether the family had property such as land, palm trees and other sash crops. However, after the investigations, the marriage negotiation could go on but could be terminated for some reasons, which may include: prohibition based on affinity and consanguinity. That is, if the spouses affinal relations or inlaws, and or were found to be related through blood; and on the ground that one of them had socially unacceptable diseases. The enquiries were made through consultations with the elders, chiefs and other knowledgeable persons in the community. Customarily, truth was not hidden.⁴

When one of the two of these problems existed, the parents of the spouses disapproved of the marriage. The boy dating negotiations had a man elderly enough 3S marriage broker (*Onye-mbawu*). This person was first to be contacted to give information about the spouse in question. The information from this traditional procedure was often supplemented by the opinions of the general public about the girl or boy. In as much as the go-between (*mbawu*) was enthusiastic in doing this work, he tried to be very objective knowing very well the implication of a biased assessment on his personality and reputation. Under the custom of the Umuahia, the go between had a very significant position in any marriage contract. This important position was of course rewarded.

Marriage Negotiation

The marriage negotiation was usually divided into three broad parts. First part was the consenting (*Ajuju*), second, was the bride-price negotiation (*Ihu-aku*) and third is the actual handing over of the woman (*Ikponwanyi*). The first step in the marriage negotiation was the first visit by the young man in the company of his relatives. This visit was the first in the series of visits to seek formally the hand of the girl in marriage. It was locally referred to as *7bu Nmayi Ajuju Nna-Nwa*. During this visit, the young-man's group was required to come with palm wine and kolanuts. The visitors after being offered kolanuts stated their mission. The girl's father would ask the visitors to give him time to discuss with his daughter.

In the next visit, the visitors came with palm wine. This time, the members of the extended family *Onu-Obu* (compound) were invited. After the visitors were offered kola, they asked their hosts if their daughter accepted the proposal. The father called in the daughter and in the presence of the members of the extended family and some members of the young-man's family, the girl gave her consent to the marriage by accepting a cup of palm wine from the father, had a sip and returned the wine to her suitor. On the contrary she returns

the cup to her father; it signified that she was not a party to the negotiations. But if on the affirmative, the palm wine drinking continued until the end of that day's visit.

On the third visit the in-laws brought the same requirements, one *Afoigbo Mmai* (two kegs of palm wine). The members of the wider lineage (*Ndi-Ama*) were invited to join in the discussion. These other members of the lineage were formally told about the proposal. They all shared in the drinking that day. The next visit was the beginning of the actual bride-price negotiations (*Mmai Ihu-Aku*). The in-laws were asked to bring one *Afoigbo na-Odoroya* (about 6 gallons of palm wine), and matches. A discreet lineage member was chosen to support his kin group. Moreso, the in-laws appointed four to five members of their kin group for the bidding. There were adjustments of prices during the bidding until finally a consensus was reached. The bidding did not end in a day and it continued after repeated visits with the required drinks, the price is finally settled. It is very important to point out that in spite of the rather misleading economic connotations of the suffix price, and wealth; bride price was never conceived in Umuahia as an economic transaction in the normative sense of the word. Commenting on bride price in Umuahia, Ebere states that:

On the other hand, bride wealth, which is a bride gift transfer, generates a never-ending current of obligations and counter obligations; this payment creates a relationship of give and take. This payment is like natural produce, cowries, brass rods, among others, symbolizes the transfer of rights and acceptance of obligation.⁵

This assertion pointed out that the bride wealth was a right-conferring aspect of marriage which gave the man such jural rights over wife.

Bride -Price in Umuahia

As has been briefly discussed, bride price was and still is, a symbolic payment with legal and social implications made to bring the marriage relationship into a formal being. It was also a token payment and its acceptance by the girls' parents meant their approval of the new relationship. In Umuahia there was no fixed amount accepted by all as bride price. The amount payable was determined by the two parties during the bidding. The father of the girl had the prerogative to choose whether to accept money from his in-law or not. As the bride price was being decided upon, there are necessary incidental gifts like the keg of palm wine, four yam tubers or eight kola nuts and one he-goat (*mkpi*).

Note that before the ritual killing of this goat (*Igbu ewu Ikponwanyi*) there was yet another important visit by the in-laws, that is the visit for the note taking of the visits and the number of kegs of palm wine so brought (*Igu-ogummai*). The inlaws presented, sixteen kegs of palm wine during all the negotiations and twenty-four (24) kegs for the actual marriage ceremony(day) which was called "*Aharaba-mmái*" meaning surplus wine. It varies and will depend on the agreement and the relationship with the village of the in-laws. It must be stated here that men take the lead in the negotiation, while women still get their own due rights.

The Significance of Goat in Umuahia Customary marriage

No marriage was contracted in Umuahia without the goat killing ritual and the traditional pouring of libation to the god of ala (earth) to bear witness to the marriage. The ritual was and still is, important that immediately after it, a suitor could beat his chest in triumph and regarded himself as a married man. It gave the marriage the required social acceptance and established a man's legal right over his wife. It also established legitimacy over the children born out of the marriage. Therefore, a marriage that did not go with this ritual of goat killing was regarded as cohabitation rather than marriage and the children resultant from the union belonged to the woman and her family.

The ritual killing in pre-colonial Umuahia was regarded as a holy communion. The communion of all those who belonged to what was known as the spiritual commonwealth which included all those who had blood relations of both the living (the dead ancestors) who founded the village. At the peak of the ceremony, libations were poured to invoke the ancestors to join their living brothers and partake in the marriage of their daughter. It was believed that the living gave to the dead all that were their due rights—the kolanuts, drinks, the yams and meat. They were expected to reciprocate through prayers in blessing the marriage especially for fruitfulness. If the marriage was between two Umuahia persons, only one goat is required. But if the marriage was between an Umuahia daughter and a man from outside Umuahia, two goats were required. The extra goat was used for *Igba-ndu* (oath taking) between the Umuahia people and the groom's people. The purpose of this exercise is to make sure that the bride was to be seen, acceptable and treated as one of their daughters without any discrimination, and inhuman treatment.⁶

The ritual was consecrated as follows: When the goat was brought out for *Igba ndu*, and the gullet were roasted, a kola nut that had four lobes (0/7 *Igbo*) and palm oil were made available. The oldest man from the bride's family and the oldest man from the groom's family alongside the middlemen participated in the ritual. The gullets were shared into four places. The man from the bride's side picked one half of the kolanut, share of the gullet which was dipped in the red oil and put in the mouth. Once the ritual was done everybody was free to eat and drink.

The Final Handover Ceremony (*Ikpo nwanyi*)

After the payment of the bride price, the date for the final handover was fixed by both parties alongside the marriage broker or the middleman. It was fixed at their convenience and was usually after so many factors were considered. In deciding the day of the event, the weather condition was considered. The dry season was preferred. It was an aberration for a marriage to be fixed on an *Eke* day. Depending on the date of the last visit, and considering the financial state of the suitor, a date was fixed to suit the suitor.

With all the factors considered, a date was chosen and the entire community was informed. On the night of the final hand over, bride groom and his people were required to come with the following: *Aharaba mmai* ranging from 20-6 keg of palm wine, *Akarama mmai* (two kegs of drink) and eight kola nuts each of four

pieces. The bridegroom and his people, after presenting all these items were welcomed with the presentation of kola nuts and *Afoigbo mmmai*. After the eating of kolanuts, the main business of the day commenced. A man from the host group was appointed to inspect the things brought by their-laws. The inspections were done with a lot of humor but not without seriousness. For instance, if the special leaf from a special species of cocoyam used in wrapping the eight kola nuts was found to be torn somewhere, it could lead to delay.⁷When the inspection was completed, palm wine was shared out. The *Isi-mmmai* (first wine gift) was reserved for the father-in-law and elders of the compound. Again, four out of the eight kola nuts were reserved for the in-laws. Two kegs of palm wine were given to the visitors (in-law).⁸ The remaining was shared out among people who sat in groups. As business went on, the in-laws and others were treated to a sumptuous feast, with food such as *Akpu* and *Ofe- Ukazi* (Ibeku traditional dish) dominating. If all parties to the contract including women were satisfied, the handing over (*Icho Nwanyi*) came up. The bride's father usually handed over the bride to the father.

Conclusion

This paper exhumes ancestral worship and marriage ceremony in Igboland with special attention on Umuahia since pre-colonial times. Ancestral worship in Igboland was and still is prevalent in Igbo pre-colonial social institutions. The ancestors played a major role in Umuahia to the extent that they formed part of the Umuahia society although dead. They are superintendants of their family affairs. The communication with them was made possible except at the spiritual level.⁹ The belief associated with ancestral worship was and still is linked the Igbo metaphysics of man. Ancestral worship in Umuahia pre-colonial social institutions was intimately linked with their value of filial piety. This paper discovered that the Umuahia ancestors in pre-colonial social institutions were the living dead. They brought sanity and social order in Umuahia pre-colonial institutions. Marriage for the Umuahia man was celebrated within the context of the kin-group. The communal nature of marriage among the people was connected around first; the wife and man and the brothers of the husband. This emotional close relationship symbolized the duties and expectations. Unmarried men were not conferred any chieftaincy title.

Endnotes

¹Edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/Africa/09/30/Nigerian.wedding.ceremoy/index.html.

² O. Ugbaja, (78 years), Farmer (Retired), Okwuta, Interviewed on 15/2/2018.

³ O. Chikezie, (46 years), farmer, Okwuta, interviewed on 1/6/2018.

⁴ U. Ebere, *Ibeku a Search for Concesus and Co-operation: An Ethnographic Insight*, (Umuahia: kab Publicity, 2001),Pp 31-37.

⁵ C. Chikezie, (60years), Farmer, Okwuta, Interviewed on 3/6/2018.

⁶ U. A. Ebere (60years), Sociologist Nkata, Interviewed on 28/6/2018.

⁷ A. Igbolekwu (54 years), Trader, Okwuta, Interviewed on 4/1/2018.

⁸ S. Onuoha (78years), politician, Okwoyi, Interviewed on 1/1/2016.

⁹ E.B,Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*,(London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985),Pp179-184.