

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON IKA MARRIAGE RITES

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Abstract

Without doubt people are known by their way of life, their acts and arts that give them value, real identity and integrity. One such thing highly revered among the Ika people of Delta State, Nigeria is the Marriage institution. The Ika people thrive significantly as-an energetic people in their rich cultural heritage. Culture which is a way of life of a group of people includes their beliefs, language, Marriage and others. Western influence brought in by Christianity reflected in the Marriage system. Christianity advocated and encouraged monogamous Marriage as opposed to the important polygamous nature of the traditional Marriage system in Ika. Marriages conducted in churches meant Marriages under the Holy Ordinances. Coverts to Christianity who had more than one wives were advised to marry only one wife under Christian Marriage without regard to other wives already married in traditional way, Christianity greatly eroded the traditional Marriage Rites in Ika. The paper therefore examined the types of Marriage in Ika, the advent of Christianity and the Impact it has made on Marriage in Ika in culture. Historical-descriptive approach was adopted in this study to achieve its objectives. The paper concluded that the influence of modernity brought about by Christianity has serious Impact on Marriage in Ika Culture. It therefore recommended that there should be a new approach to traditional marriage in Ika.

Keywords: Impact, Christianity, Marriage. Rites, Culture

Introduction

The culture of Nigeria is multi-ethnic in nature as a result of many ethnic groups. This culture is being valued by Nigerians which many ethnic groups have shaped. At different places, various communities have overtime develop methods ways and means of strengthening their continual living in the settings they find themselves by setting up cultural standards that would assist in ensuring continuity. Culture, customs and social institutions are *important* part and parcel of the traditional religion. In the primal society, Banwune (2016) observed that “religion controls the social life of the people from the cradle to the grave”. Religion and culture cannot be separated. Thus, customs as trial by ordeal, oath taking, birth and burial ceremonies are religious in nature. The same is truism of the institution called marriage.

Ika culture in generally has bowed so much to the influence of Western civilization brought in by Christianity and significant changes had taken place with regard to marriage. As generations after generation of *Ika* people come under the influence of Western civilization brought in by Christianity, they invariably cut away, and gradually forgot their traditional way of life. The end-result is that many present day *Ika* people have little or no cultural foundation about marriage. According to Onyepeze (2023) Christianity came and preached against polygamy and promoted monogamy. The resultant effect was that Christian converts who were having more than one wives were putting out other wives, to have only one wife under Christian marriage law with recourse on how the other women would be catered for and their children. This showed that a lot of them that were uneducated did not know the implications and responsibilities that followed Christian marriage ordinance. With this, the nation of polygamous marriage was giving way to the concept of monogamous marriage under Western influence brought about by Christianity. Nwaogadu (2020) asserts that the advent of Christianity in the Southeastern part of Nigeria in the 19th century saw many of the people converting to Christianity which tried to erode some religious practices for better religious status. This was more pronounced on the idea of marriage rites.

The crucial problem in this paper is the encounter between marriage in *Ika* culture and Christianity. As can be seen above, most people in *Ika* land tend to think that the advent and progress of Christianity had eroded the traditional marriage in *Ika*. Against this backdrop, the paper therefore tries to examine the various types of marriage in *Ika* culture, the advent of Christianity to the area and critically assess the impact of Christianity on marriage in *Ika* culture. In this way, we can realize the potential benefits while minimizing the potential harms. Historical descriptive approach was adopted in this study.

A Brief History of Origin Of *Ika* People

Ika is one of the ethnic groups in Delta state of Nigeria. It occupies an area of approximately 564 square kilometers. The *Ikas* live in eleven separate clans in North – East and South Areas. They are Akumazi, Idumuesah, Igbodo, Mbiri, Okotokpo, Owa Umunede, Ute – Ogbeje, Ute – Okpu, Abavo and Agbor clans. A clan is an independent community with its kingship. Many towns or villages come together to form a clan. They are united together by the tie of common descent from a common ancestor. The rulership of each clan rests on the Obi, (Echenim, 2009). *Ika* tradition, *Odi-na-ali Ika* means what takes in *Ika* land, is a bundle of rules and regulations handed down orally from generation to generation. *Ika* people have rich cultural heritage, running through marriage and burial of the dead.

The Igbo and Edo had influence in the culture of *Ika* people. The Igbo influence is obvious be as a result of strong missionary and commercial role of Igbo people whose presence and impact were extensively and deeply felt among Ndiowa (part

of *Ika* people). The Edo influence had to do with the language and culture. For example, Idumu (Owa), Idumwun (Bini). Edo influence is also quite pronounced in the area of festivals (Iguen) and title such as Iyase, Adolor and also with the use of certain concepts with import and social and metaphysical connotations (Echenim, 2009). Mokwuye (2017) opines that *Ika* community is a geographical area with a homogeneous population in which individuals greatly share or respect common fundamental values bound by place, customs and ethics.

Conceptual Clarification

Christianity: It is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Central to Christianity is the goodnews, the teaching that humanity has hope for salvation through the message and work of Jesus and especially, his atoning death on the cross and resurrection (Obeng,2012). According to Banwune (2016), Christianity is a universal religion founded by Jesus Christ of Nazareth, with its teaching of eternal salvation to humans and ethical norms valid for its followers.

Culture: It is a way of life of a group of people. It also involves their beliefs, language, religion, marriage rites among others. According to Whawo (2011), culture is that complex whole which entails knowledge, beliefs, Arts, morals laws customs and any other capabilities and behaviours acquired by man as a member of a society. Abudah (2007) defines culture as the complex way of life of a man in a society, which can be showed and passed from one generation to another.

According to Mokwuye (2017), *Ika* people thrive very well as an energetic people in their rich cultural heritage; based fundamentally on customs, norm, values, association, social relationship, religion, festivals and above all marriage. The *Ika* people have respect much on orderly procreation and respect for human dignity. basically, they believe that the essence of procreation, continuity of human community and perpetuation of family line, there has to be the union of two persons- man and woman.

Ika: *Ika* as used here connotes all the clans, towns, villages that make up *Ika* North-East and *Ika* South Local Government Areas of Delta State of Nigeria.

Marriage: Webster Dictionary defined marriage as the social institution under which a man and a woman live as husband and wife by legal or religious communities. Obi (2013) on his part defines marriage as the coming together of a young man and a young woman who have no blood or kinship affinity whatsoever for the purpose of procreation or raising children, or in defiance of procreation may adopt a child. Marriage by definition has the same features in any ethnic consideration, be it rural or civilized.

One such thing highly cherished among the *Ika* people of Delta Sate, Nigeria is the institution of marriage. It is highly respected and held in high esteem that it is guided by conditionality in the various clans that comprise the *Ika* land. Basically,

marriage in *Ika* land is culture based and greatly revered. It is seen as a sacred institution. *Ika* people see marriage as a union of one man and one or more woman, that means monogamy and polygamy are both recognized and practiced, (Okoh, 2016), Fundamentally, *Ika* people believed that for the purpose of continuity of community and perpetuations of family line there have to be union of two persons (man and woman) in the family (Agboifo, 2006).

Bawune (2016) refers to it as a cultural diplomacy of marriage overture usually understood by matured minds. He called the traditional marriage in *Ika* “the funfair that adds glamour to the whole marriage.

Polygamy: It is the practice of one man having wives legally married to him. It is not only accepted but often desirable system of marriage in *Ika* culture.

Marriage in *Ika* Culture

Marriage has a special place in a social life of the *Ika* people, as in Igbo. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), a man who fails to marry when he is old enough to marry is regarded as irresponsible. In a similar way, a girl who is not married when she is old enough to be a mother is looked down upon by the society. Marriage is not just an affair between a man and a woman. It involves the whole family and to some extent, the whole village. Therefore, the choice of a wife is not the concern of the man, it is that of the whole family whose approval must be obtained.

In ancient *Ika*, traditional marriage was influenced by many factors. One of such was wealth. It contributed immensely to polygamous marriages in the family (Onyekpeze, 2003). It was synonymous with the size of the man’s farm and produce. Wealth also meant assiduousness as the ancestors believed that an industrious man would be able to feed his wives and children. Another factor that was of paramount consideration was the nature or caliber of ancestors that the man or woman had. Were his ancestors courageous and good farmers? The family of the intended wife would ask. It did not stop there. They would take steps to verify this. The same thing applied to the family of the man, if the intended wife’s ancestors were very productive or fertile. Other aspects were social standing and physical characteristics (Onyekpeze, 2003).

Types of Marriage in *Ika* Culture

According to Gbenoba (2015), in the olden days, wives were secured for sons by parents initially through intermediaries who would carry out investigations on the moral and medical state of the family concerned – are they thieves, witches/wizards, lazy and indolent, dirty, promiscuous, susceptible to particular hereditary diseases. The general belief was that genetically, moral and medical histories run through some families *Eri agbo eyi agbo*.

Betrothal: In the ancient *Ika*, man traditionally betrothed his daughter, at time, before she was born. In this case, as soon as the girl was given birth to, she would be formally betrothed. Other times, a man could, during a friendly visit to a house

where a new baby girl was born announce his wish to marry the little girl. As he was an older man the girl then was to be married to one of the sons. This was known as *Ibedon nwunyen*. Right from the day of the parents' acceptance, the girl was nurtured and trained for the family of the man. This baby girl was declared a member of that family until she was mature to be sent to the, would-be husband. there was no fixed bride price for this type of marriage. It varied from one to another.

A long standing friendship between heads of two families could result to this type of marriage. In other words, a family head could decide to betroth his daughter to a man from the family as the "fruit" of their relationship. Furthermore, a man could see a small girl from a good family and ask for betrothal. Some reasons have been given for this type of marriage. Parents betrothed their daughters in order to live in families considered famous in the community. Again to restrain their daughter from being defiled before marriage. Another reason advanced was that men took pride in marrying for their sons as the final reward for their services from childhood to puberty (Gbenoba, 2005).

Marriage by Courtship: The intended husband would start the courtship by paying regular visits, mostly at night to the girl's place. This period was to be marked with awe and the relationship kept secret and sacred. After sometimes, the family of the boy would delegate some of their relations to contract the girl's family. This was known as *Ienmgba*. On agreement, a token sum of money would be paid towards the bride price. The remaining sum of money was to be paid alongwith the other ceremonies to be performed before the girl would be tattooed and declared ripe for marriage.

There were a lot of customary functions which the prospective husband and his father performed annually or occasionally to honour the girl's parents. The would-be husband helped the girl's father in his farm work. The boy was forbidden from having sex with the girl. Virginity at this time of *Ika* culture was highly valued and reward by the husband. Any boy who defiles his prospective wife committed a crime known as *Agango* or *Iyechu-ime* (Gbenoba, 2005).

Marriage by Abduction: *Igi okpoko kwa di (Nwunyen)*. It is marriage by coercion (Agboifo, 2006). This took place when the man might not have the means to meet up with financial demands of the girl's parents. On insistence from the girl's parents to complete necessary requirements, the man could arrange with his people to look out for the girl anywhere in town and kidnap her. The climax of it was the firing of a gunshot to inform the town's people that a young wife had been gotten.

Some Taboos and Sacrifices Associated with Marriage in *Ika* Culture

Marriage in *Ika* culture has been seen as sacred and as a result of this, parents had to sufficiently prepare their children before entering into marriage. As soon as the girls were married, they were to observe very religiously, the taboos associated with marriage. According to Onyekpeze (2003), it is forbidden for a married

woman to flirt. This is known as *Izoye oku ofia*. The woman is exclusively reserved for the husband. She is forbidden to sit on the same bench with a male adult other than her husband. She is also forbidden to be held on any part of her body, even shaking of hands. Any behaviour of the aforementioned was seen as defilement known as *Imeru or Igwaru* of a married woman for which she had to confess and perform a sacrifice of killing a goat *Igbu ewu ifi* to atone for her sins. Another offence which attracted the killing of a goat *Ig u ewu ifi* by a married woman was that of staying in the house while under menstruation, *igi or iji eze no lo*, thereby defiling her husband and ancestral shrines. Having sex relationship with a member of the family up to the third degree kindred and possibly beyond was a taboo culture.

Onyekpeze (2003), opines until a girl was declared ripe by the family and tattooed, she was not free to have any sexual intercourse with her husband. If she did, she committed *agagango* or *ituchu-ime*. The woman from the lineage and the entire village usually expressed their disapproval by a moonlight procession on the streets with gongs, summoning all young women to come out for the protest procession. The women to the house of the *agagango* girl. They helped to express the feelings of the society in this regard.

The Advent of Christianity to Ika Land

According to Onyekpeze (2003), Christianity has come to *Ika* land as missionary Religion and has considerable success in displacing much of the traditional faith. The coming of Christianity to *Ika* land was in three phrases. The first was the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which dates back to 1903, followed by Roman Catholic Missionary activities in 1906 and Pentecostal churches in 1970. Banwune (2016) observed that it was Idumuje-Ugboko that provided the main base from where the gospel came to *Ika* land.

At Igbodo the missionary made converts, among whom were Mary Ofuani, Sussana Egbuhinem, Paul Onai, Thomas Onyeaji, Moses Udoba and others. Church was built for a place of worship named St. George's Church. They also built school. Banwune (2016) observes that, "the school introduced by the missionary workers which existed side by side with the new church, gave the new converts a brilliant, smart and uniform outlook". The same lady missionary also extended the missionary work to Umunede in 1903 and made converts also. Therefore, the pendulum of the spread of Christianity swung to Agbor, still *Ika* in 1907 by the church missionary society (C.M.S) members from sabongidda-ora. The military garrison in Agbor equally facilitated the growth of Christianity to Agbor. They also built church and school at Agbor. The church grew in membership, especially with the school population. Baptism and marriage at that time were solemnized at Owa-Oyibu and Agbor respectively.

Agbor obi was the first clan in *Ika* land to receive Catholic faith in 1906, which served as a worshipping station for the people in the hinterland including Boji Boji urban with a visiting priest from Issele-Uku. With Agbor as a base, the mission work spread to Umunede in 1916. This served as a station for the clans. The American Baptist Mission was the first Pentecostal Church that found its way into *Ika* land. The church was founded in 1935 by a Yoruba dispenser, Mr. K.C Wright attached to the General Hospital, Agbor. Eboma in Banwune (2016) observed that the ever-increasing number of Anglican and Roman Catholic Church members earlier introduced into *Ika* land by the missionaries served as incentive to Wright to introduce his denominational religion in Agbor – *Ika*. According to him, his followers were people from Calabar who were of the same Christian faith.

Impact of Christianity on *Ika* Marriage Rites

Banwune (2016) opines that like all other religions of mankind, Christianity is an veritable tool of social change. Its development from the beginning to the present has been reforming. Wherever it has been introduced and welcomed in any given society, transformation follows the life of the people. Marriages contracted in *Ika* have been on traditional level. Now that Christianity has found its feet in *Ika* the community has become very permissive and many things have changed. Many of the traditional obligations with regard to marriage have been stopped, thereby paving way to some imported customs. The traditional marriage was one of the knots that kept the members of the *Ika* community together. This was based on an endogamous system, marrying within a specified group. With cultures breaking through borders, *Ika* people have tried to marry from their neighbouring communities and beyond (Onyekpeze, 2003). This gave rise to dramatic change in *Ika* traditional marriage system.

According to Bienose-Osagiede (2021), marriage was an important, tie and bond that established and sustained kinship within African communities. Marriage was seen as an initiating rite, but Christianity came and changed them. The church marriage known as wedding was introduced as a new cultural experience in which the bridal train put on new clothes, showing the new culture where reception takes place of wining and dining. Onyima (2014) buttresses this by stating that in some Christian families in Africa people are not considered married until they have performed church wedding that will be conducted by a clergy. This is to a great extent, a clash between tradition and modernization and as a result has seriously impacted our cultural identity. The Christian missionaries imposed western culture on the assumption that western culture that came inform of Christianity was the best. *Ika* culture was dismissed and being regarded as pagan,

With the arrival of Christianity which brought about globalization, modern courtship systems deviated from the traditional types. Some ladies now pride in the number of boy-friends they have at a time. As a result, some ladies traded their virtues for mean rewards. Virginity is no longer a criterion for happy marriage. Men are no longer concerned about it. They merely court ladies on the

street, in the hostels, or in private homes. Courtship which used to be sacred and valued in *Ika* land is no longer held in high esteem. Sex is no longer respected as it used to be and treated as a 'dark secret'. Some girls keep night with their boyfriends, even right in their parents' houses before the marriage is consummated. Some prospective couples no longer court for sufficient time to afford them the privilege to know and understand themselves before marriage, most of which crash a few years after marriage (Banwune, 2016).

Parents used to choose husband or wives for their children. But nowadays as a result of Christianity, parents do not choose for them again. They fall in love themselves. Forceful marriages and those by betrothal and inheritance have become a thing of the past in *Ika*. The rule of virginity is no longer observed. Some parents who find it difficult to control their grown-up daughters willingly accept any approach made by young men towards them. They are therefore allowed to go to their husbands without much obligation, provided the grooms can afford their minimum maintenance (Onyekpeze, 2003).

The impact of Christianity has brought about the practice of monogamy in *Ika* Culture. A situation where a man is only allowed to marry one wife, it also makes the marriage ceremonies expensive, because of the modern ideas, methods or styles introduced to the ceremonies. He went to say that as a result of Christianity, no room again for the prospective grooms to work for their intended parents in-law in their farm lands that used to be. Some of the tattoos connected with marriage institution in *Ika* community are no more observed. This was buttressed by Onyekpeze (2003) that some married women have affairs with other men for mean rewards. They cook for and sleep with their husbands while they are under menstruation. They also thus defile titled men and ancestral shrines. Other men who have no biological relationship with their husband even dance and sit on the same chairs with them. Certain social ethics or etiquettes such a sharp and quick kissing, free admiration and touching were abhorred in *Ika* culture are necessary permissive and common practices now.

A woman can have a baby and starts cooking or going to the market before the outing ceremonies are performed. This was an abomination in the olden days. Women emancipation which Christianity brought about, to a large extent, influenced both family unit and the position of the husband in the running of the home. Women can seek for divorce when their needs and demands are not met by their husbands. Before the advent of Christianity in *Ika* land, marital norms and the family regulated the behaviour of women. They could hardly misbehave. Divorce was not a common feature as a result of the older women's continuous preaching of the dignity of staying with one husband, discouraging them moving from one husband to another, *Igbo olo feri olo*.

The peaceful co-existence in the land and the respect that the custom had for the in-laws, made it difficult for women to leave their husbands without rapid response by the elders, women and friends. Local welfare committee made up of members of the bride and groom's families was set up to look into the matter. This quick intervention brought cases of complete divorce to the barest minimum.

Conclusion

No doubt marriage in *Ika* culture has bowed very much to the influence of Western civilization brought about by Christianity. As a result many present day *Ika* people have no culture foundation about marriage. Also, there is an abuse of honesty, trust and esteemed traditional values, practices and beliefs by present-day husbands and wives. For some of them, marriage is a load which should not be put on the head, but rest on the shoulders. When it becomes heavy because of undue interferences from in-laws, it can be put down. Nevertheless, Christianity has helped to refine marriage, especially with the introduction of monogamy, one man, one wife. It is often forgotten that while Christianity had stopped the loathsome element in traditional marriage in *Ika*, it has at the same time refined and elevated other aspects that are wholesome for man and his society.

Recommendations

In order to maximize the potential harms of the impact of Christianity on marriage in *Ika* culture, the following are recommended:

- ❖ *Ika* people who still live by the traditional philosophy be educated into accepting monogamy as Christian way of life.
- ❖ There should be a new approach to traditional marriage in *Ika* which will take into cognizance the social and economic context while seeking to elevate to the status of the ideal home.
- ❖ Traditional and Christian marriages should be upheld in *Ika* Land.

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