

PRESERVING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: A CASE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CUSTOMS IN OTUKPO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, BENUE STATE.

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Abstract

Given the rate at which Westernization is eroding this vital aspect of our lives, there is an urgent need to protect and preserve our intangible cultural heritage. Just as it applies to culture, intangible heritage is constantly changing. Although, these changes could be detrimental or advantageous as the case may be. Intangible cultural heritage can therefore be regarded as being under threat if not safeguarded and kept alive. To achieve this, the tradition must be practised regularly and then passed from generation to generation. However, using Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State as a case study, marriage rites are either being modernised to the extent that it is losing their authenticity and value. If care is not taken, in a few years, individuals will just move in with each other without following the proper cultural procedures as regards marriage union between both parties, thereby cracking the foundation upon which very important aspects of human existence such as family and values, lie. This paper is an ethnographic study of some of the changes that have occurred in Traditional Marriage customs in Otukpo as well as some aspects that have continued despite the evolution of these traditional marriage customs. The paper serves as a form of documentation for the future. At the same time, it serves as a call for the dire need to preserve this cultural heritage by maintaining the practices and rites involved in marriage in the study area. The method of research involves primary and secondary methods.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Family, Intangible, Marriage, Values and Westernization.

Introduction

Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural heritage is often expressed as either intangible or tangible cultural heritage (ICOMOS, 2002). Cultural Heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our

ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

As much as not all legacies of past generations are regarded as "heritage" are passed down to generations but are rather a product of selection by society, marriage customs "fortunately" fall within the category of the heritage that has been selected by the society to still be passed on, albeit with too many changes and modifications that have in turn watered down the importance of this heritage. Many expressions and manifestations of intangible cultural heritage are threatened, endangered by globalization and cultural homogenisation, and a lack of support, appreciation and understanding. If intangible cultural heritage is not nurtured, it risks becoming lost forever, or frozen as a practice belonging to the past (ICH, UNESCO).

Cultural Heritage produces tangible representations of value systems, beliefs, traditions and lifestyles as part of human activity. As an essential part of the culture as a whole, Cultural Heritage contains these visible and tangible traces from antiquity to the recent past.

Tangible & Intangible Heritage

Having at one time referred exclusively to the monumental remains of cultures, cultural heritage as a concept has gradually come to include new categories. Today, we find that heritage is manifested through tangible forms such as artefacts, buildings or landscapes and intangible forms. Intangible heritage includes voices, values, traditions, and oral history. Popularly this is perceived through cuisine, clothing, forms of shelter, traditional skills and technologies, religious ceremonies, performing arts, and storytelling. Today, we consider the tangible heritage inextricably bound up with the intangible heritage. In conservation projects, the aim is to preserve both the tangible as well as the intangible heritage.

Cultural heritage includes tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artifacts), intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge-this is where this research comes in), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity).

Idoma People in Otukpo, Benue State

Benue State lies between longitude 7°40' and 10°00'E and latitude 6°30 and 8°24'N. It is bounded by five states namely; Nasarawa to the north, Taraba to the northeast, Cross River to the south, and Enugu and Kogi to the southwest (Kwanga and Kerenku, 2007). Idoma people form part of the occupants of Benue State. The Idoma, whose number is nearly half a million people, occupy areas of land which lie within both the broad valley of the Benue River and Cross River Basin. The main thrust of Idomaland is an

elongated belt of territory from the Benue River to the Northern fringes of Igboland (Erim 1981). As an administrative centre of the Idoma people,

Otukpo Local Government is one of the twenty-three local government areas of Benue State. It is located between latitude 7° North and Longitude 8° East. It is bounded in the North by Apa Local Government Area, in the South East and South West by Oju and Okpokwu Local Government Areas respectively, and in the East and West by Gwer and Ankpa Areas (Anebi 1986 cited in Ogbole 2007).

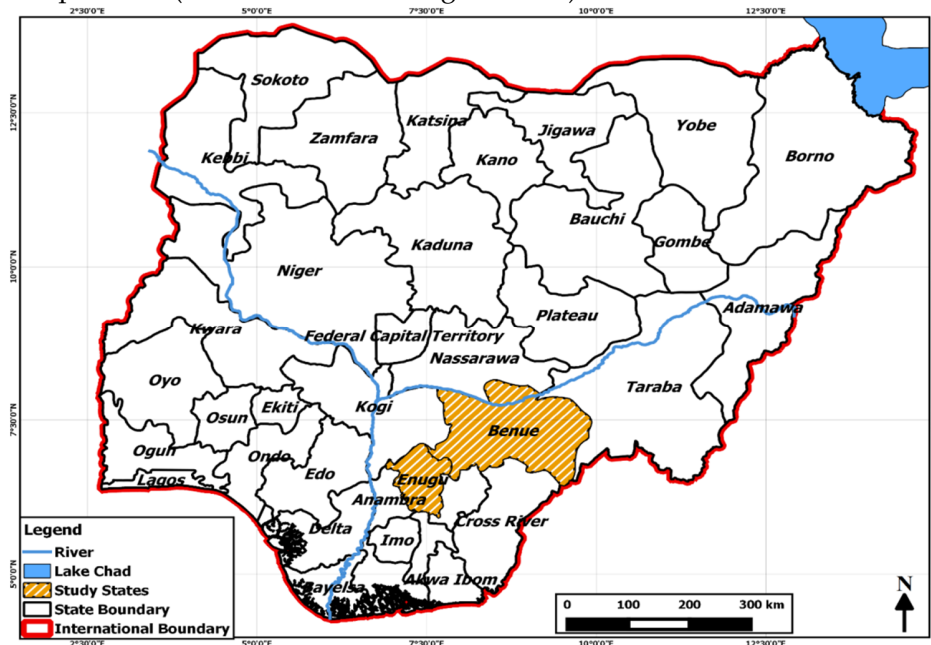


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria, Showing Benue State.

Source: Global Administrative Boundaries (<https://gadm.org>)

Importance of Marriage

The importance of marriage cannot be overemphasized as it is seen as a basic institution in every human society and is a recognized social institution not only for establishing and maintaining the family but also for creating and sustaining family ties of kinship. An appropriately cultured marriage is a viable catalyst for the meaningful societal transformation of a people, State or Nation (Ogbole 2007). Marriage is generally described as the union between a man and a woman (or women as the case may be) and is seen as a bridge between not only the two persons involved but their families and communities as well. It is also seen as an avenue through which societal and cultural values are preserved and passed to the coming generation.

In Kenya, Ogutu (2007) observed that the act and consummation of marriage transform an individual into a wife/husband or daughter/son to a household, a homestead, a clan, or a nation. As a result, the woman was invariably referred to as Chi Chuore (wife of her husband), Chi Ot (wife of

the household), Chi Pachó (wife of the homestead), and Chi Oganda (wife of the clan). In other words, marriage is not a husband-and-wife affair among the Luo. It involves the entire extended family. Its goal is to integrate couples into a specific social system, the complex Luo network of extended family relationships. The woman became an integral part of her husband's family and clan (Ogutú, 2007). Ogutú also mentioned the exogamous nature of the Luo marriage system. The woman is not from the family or clan. The Luo do not marry blood relatives, no matter how distant they appear. As a result, the wife has been a stranger who must be fully integrated into the family to which she is married. She owns everything, including land, livestock, and household goods. Her rights and privileges include full membership in the family and the right and privilege to have a say in the upbringing and future of her children. The Luo hold widows and orphans in high regard. Taking care of and protecting others was thus, a noble and respectable responsibility (Ogutú, 2007).

According to an archival report by Moore (MAKPROF1953) the customs which are to be found in Idoma are in essence, similar throughout the division. The reason for marriage in general in the great majority of cases is the procreation of children. However, many couples without children tend to argue that this may not be the case but companionship (could this be as a result of the predicament in which they have found themselves?) Sadly, some people see marriage as being profitable to the man and not the same to the woman. Moore (1953) buttresses this point as he further posits that "marriage throughout Idoma is a civil contract... it is an investment on the part of the man who reaps his annual interest in the form of children". However, as much as the reasons for marriage differ, the basis and essence remain the same procreation. Again, according to Moore (1953) "But if the basis of Idoma marriage is everywhere the same, the superstructure of premarital duties and post-marital rights varies widely from district to district and from clan to clan. Here, again, however, there have been no great changes since the Pre-British period..."

Old Traditional Marriage Customs in Idomaland

The different geographical zones in Idomaland have their slight differences and peculiarities when it comes to marriage customs. For instance, in the western district (comprising Edumoga, Owukpa, Otukpa, and Orokam), the marriage customs differ from that of the northern, southern and eastern districts. A brief overview is detailed below. According to Moore (1953) Traditionally, the marriage negotiations began as in most societies, by discreet enquiries on the part of the suitor as to whether the girl of his choice is married or not, followed by a formal enquiry of the girl, her father and her mother, each of whom was presented with kola and two brass rods. Assuming that the answer was satisfactory, a proposal of marriage was then made to the girl by taking three brass rods and kola nuts in a basin to her. This would be accepted by the girl if she agreed to the marriage.

In the northern district (comprising Onyangede, and Agatu), both traditional and modern customs are delightfully straightforward. In the pre-coinage era, the suitor would give the girl one brass rod and if she agreed to marry him, a gift of five more. After obtaining the parents' consent, the man would work for six on the father's farm in the morning and on the mother's farm in the evening. He could live with the woman whilst completing this duty. He pays £10 to the father and £5 to the mother to complete the marriage. In the Ochekwu district, marriage is similarly simple. The only difference is that the value of a wife is £25 compared to £15 in Agatu (Moore 1953). Going by the change in currency in present times, we would like to assume that the currency mentioned above was in shillings and not dollars as it is today. In the Onyangede district, courtship was more prolonged. The suitor in the first instance would go to the girl's father's house to sleep and work on his farm during the day. After three days, the suitor's father would visit the girl's father and inform him that he would like the girl to marry his son. He would then offer the girl's father two brass rods which would be taken if the proposal was acceptable and two more to the girl and her mother would seal the necessary arrangement.

There are other procedures involved which summarily include the suitor asking the girl's father to fix the marriage days, the suitor and his relations going to the girl's father's house to meet her relations over food and drinks thereby cementing the relationship between both families, '*owo*' and '*ajabi*' sacrifices are made, a black cloth ('*opa*') is presented to the girl's father to be used as a shroud upon his death, presentation of the main dowry-60 rods and a slave to the father then 60 rods and no slave to the mother; before the girl goes to live in the husband's compound.

In the eastern district (comprising Igedde), after making the usual enquiries (as described above) via a relative as to whether or not the girl is married, and after receiving a satisfactory reply, a brother of the suitor takes him to the girl and introduces him, henceforward acting as the middle man. After the middle man has left, the middle man ('*oleru*') speaks with the girl, her father and her mother to elicit their consent, whereupon he informs the suitor and asks him to bring money to the father. There is no fixed amount. It is up to the suitor to bring as much as he can, be it £10 and if it is insufficient, the father informs him so and suggests that he brings more. This is known as '*okobo*', and part of the money is used by the father to buy cloth for his daughter.

Other procedures are involved, which in summary involve one man representing the father and one woman representing the woman (the '*unyewe*') who escort the girl to her husband, but first, she is taken to the house of a relative and her husband is sent for, and he arrives with gifts of drinks or money to greet the marriage assembly. Amidst firing guns, they accompany the couple to the house and after playing in anger at the inadequacy of his house, the bride is persuaded to enter. When everyone has drunk to his fill of '*etra*', the marriage wine, they depart carrying gifts to the

girl's father. The marriage process ends the following day with the husband giving his wife a fowl to sacrifice to 'ohe' (the god of husbands), after which it is eaten by him, his wife, and her father. It is believed that this ensures fertility.

Old Traditional Marriage Customs in Otukpo

The above description depicts the traditional marriage customs as practised in different geographical areas in Idomaland before modernity brought about some changes. Below is a description of the old marriage customs in Otukpo which is of interest to this paper.

Of note is the fact that the traditional marriage system in Otukpo is exogamous. The woman is from another family and there are rare cases of relations marrying themselves. According to Moore (1953), a man upon the decision that he would like to marry a girl immediately, or when she reaches maturity, grinds tobacco into snuff and gives it to one of his friends to take it to the girl's father. This may be repeated on four or five occasions until eventually the father informs his daughter and enquires whether she would like to marry the suitor. Given the consent of the girl, the suitor accompanied by a brother or friend then brings palm wine ('*ejeusuku*') which may be up to one calabash or two in quantity and together, they drink the wine.

It is important to note that this particular of presenting wine in the accompaniment of a friend or brother to the girl's father is still on although it has now generally been converted to modern bottled grape juice as against palm wine even though a few people still use palm wine. Some days later, the same quantity of palm wine ('*ejeorinenonya*') is brought to the mother. After each of these occasions, the daughter is then informed that her parents have drunk the wine. The two gifts, once accepted, are evidence of parental consent to the marriage and constitute in effect, the formal betrothal.

Summarily, other procedures include calling the suitor to meet and entertain the bride's father, his relatives and friends with palm wine ('*ejeolonya*') that would fill about four calabashes, with an adequate supply of snuff. '*Ejeogbo*' is also given to the mother, her relatives and her friends. The marriage procedure continues with the suitor buying a mat for the girl ('*otulola*') with a few shillings and then he can sleep in her hut although intercourse will not be allowed as the girl is not mature at this stage. The girl sacrifices a goat to the '*egiri*' juju and provides meat and drinks (at the man's expense) for the family to ensure that she will produce many good children for her husband and thus make the marriage happy and lasting.

It is interesting to note that part of the responsibility of making the marriage a happy and lasting union has been bestowed on the woman also as it is seen in the Bible where it is stated that every wise woman builds her house but the foolish woman pulls it down with her hands (Proverbs 14:1). Also of note is the inclusiveness of women in the processes involving marriage customs. It is observed that when the suitor visits the girl's father with a gift of either palm wine or cash, the same is done with the girl's father.

Another observation is the act of sacrifice made to the respective gods of the communities for fertility. This seemed prevalent in the different geographical zones in Idomaland. Going further in describing the old traditional marriage customs in Otukpo, Moore (1953) states that when the festival of 'egbidogi' arrives (annually in May or June), the man makes a payment of £3-£5 to the father or pays each year at this time until the payment is completed. A down payment however is preferred. The woman can then go to live with her husband who provides yet another feast of yams, meat and wine. The parents then request payment of the dowry which is divided into three parts: 'ejeadoyi' (£5-£8) and 'ejeenoye' (£4-£6) is the portion of money given to the father and mother of the bride respectively for wine; 'onono' amounting to about £3 is also shared equally between the father and the mother and lastly, the main dowry which is paid entirely to the father. The amount varies according to the attractiveness of the woman and the status of her parents.

In conclusion of this section, note that the sequence described above may not be followed in detail. After the preliminary introductions and friendship parties have been held, a down payment of £25 is made for the lady whose family is royalty and £15 for the daughter born to a non-royal family. There are different types of marriages in Idomaland which are no longer practised due to the influence of Christianity/modernization. Although it is not the bane of this paper, Ogbale (2007) identified a few types of marriages, including:

Polygamy - marriage between one man and more than one wife. It is important to state here that although this has not gone out of practice, it is gradually going out of fashion especially due to the present economic hardship more than it is due to Christianity.

Arranged marriage - where the parents of the man choose and pay the bride price of a lady on behalf of their son (and even in his absence). This was a very popular practice in times past but changed over time when young people started to choose for themselves and go into courtship before the marriage rites are performed. Interestingly, there has been a turn of events as this now seems to be preferred practised in recent times especially going by the high rate of divorce which was not the case when partners were chosen on behalf of their children. Divorce, on the other hand, is not permitted among the Luo people of Kenya unless the man has proven to be impotent or a glutton (Ogutu 2007).

Captives of war - as the name implies, where the woman is seen as war booty and brought back from war to become the warrior's wife. In this case, no dowry is paid and no rites are performed even though she is also seen as a bonafide wife of the man, with equal rights as every other woman in the house. This practice has also changed due to the absence of wars as it was in the old days.

Sororate marriage - a situation where a man marries the sister of his deceased wife. This practice has been frowned upon in recent times but some people still do not abhor it.

Levirate marriage - when a man dies and one of his sons (from another mother) or the younger brother is allowed to marry the youngest wife. Ogutu (2007) noted that marriage was a legally binding contract between the spouses and their extended families among the Luo. The attendant transformation rites, also known as life crisis rituals, bind the spouses. This is why, in the event of either spouse's death, the deceased's family was obligated to provide a replacement. When a woman died, it was the responsibility of her family to find another woman to care for her children (if she had any) or her husband. This was a common practice among the Luo (referred to as husband inheritance). Unfortunately, when discussing the Luo marriage system, this marriage arrangement is rarely mentioned.

Similarly, if a husband died, his family was obligated to provide another man, usually a brother or cousin, to care for the widow and her children. This is referred to as 'wife inheritance'. What occurs here is a levirate or leviratic union, in which one is required by tradition to take on the widow of one's brother (from Latin levir - a husband's brother) and provide support and protection (Ogutu, 2007).

Modern Traditional Marriage Customs in Otukpo

Ogbole (2007) has outlined the various marriage procedures to include the following; enquiry and investigation, visitation and asking/declaration of intention (*Oka'oda*), courtship (*aha ota*), introductory greetings (*okonuohe*), solemnization which differs from place to place in Idomaland.

Enquiry and Investigation- when an Idoma man is at least twenty-five years old and has the financial, physical and mental capacity to raise and maintain a family, he may search for a woman of his choice who is mature enough to start a family (Akpanga 2018). Although this age is not binding, it goes to show that marriage is not meant for boys and girls but for adults who have attained and exceeded the age of eighteen years. Ogbole (2007) asserts that before marriage can be contracted, the interest to go into a relationship must exist in the man who usually makes his choice and in turn informs his parents. It is at this juncture that the whole process officially begins.

Just as Moore stated in his report, the introduction of a middleman becomes pertinent and his presence at all subsequent proceedings was essential (Moore 1953). He is called *Ogbobu' Ónya* which means the 'go-between'. The *Ogbobu' Ónya* investigates to ascertain that the girl's family has no history of mental illness, epilepsy, or other problems. They even check trends in the marital status of the family and questions include "Do women who are married from this family remain faithful in marriage?" The generality of the family is put under scrutiny to ensure that they know where

they are going (Akpanga 2018). Ogbale (2007) shares the same opinion; he states that these investigations are carried out to ascertain the possibility of any negative traits inherent in either family. These include spiritual cases such as premature death, ancestral curse and witchcraft, anti-social behaviours like murder, stealing, laziness, drunkenness, prostitution, and gossiping as well as diseases such as leprosy, tuberculosis, madness, epilepsy and the like. Sometimes, this enquiry is done without the knowledge of the lady in question.

The enquiries may be conducted by kinsmen of both families and the result of these enquiries is what determines the possibility of the consummation of the marriage between the intending couple. The case of both parties making enquiries happens if the lady's family is signalled about the possibility of marriage, then they will also investigate the prospective groom (*oba'onya*) and his family.

Visitation (*Okonu'ohe*) and Declaration of Intention (*Oka'oda*)

This next stage is dependent on the outcome of the investigations that must have been made by the families of both parties (the bride and groom-to-be). If the enquiry proved positive, then they are encouraged to forge ahead. However, in the situation where the investigation did not yield a good report, the intending groom is advised not to go ahead with the marriage plans. In a situation where he insists, he is made to understand that he is alone on this journey (although this hardly ever happens which goes to show the level of importance attached to the family and its values). Akpanga (2018) reiterates the above statement by stating that if the result of the investigation proves favourable, the prospective groom and his family visit the prospective bride's family with gifts of kola nuts and drinks to show their interest in the bride-to-be.

This declaration of intention is usually done between the parents of both parties but the intending couple may choose to be present to witness the discussion. A date is fixed for the suitor's parents to visit the fiancée's parents and subsequently relayed to the girl's parents who prepare for the visit. The suitor's parents appear on the specified date, not empty-handed, but with gifts such as drinks (this could be soft drinks, bottled wine, or palm wine depending on the case), kola nuts, and so on, accompanied by trusted relative or kinsman who also serves as the intermediary and must be a man of oratory and integrity with the ability to bargain and persuade convincingly.

After pleasantries are exchanged, the visiting team state the reason for their visit by saying that their son has seen a 'flower' and has come to pluck it. The girl's people (her father or a chosen spokesman) ask the girls (and other girls in the house, her cousins, sisters etc) to come and greet and welcome the visitors after which they ask the visitors to identify the flower and the girl in question is called/pointed at. Enquiries are made to confirm if the girl had earlier been betrothed or not. In the most likely situation where

she has not, then her father asks if she agrees to the proposal of marriage by the intending suitor. The girl's agreement to the proposal is welcome and shows she is ready for courtship and marriage after which drinks are served and promises are made for a visit at a later date before they depart.

Courtship ('aha ota')

The next stage after the families of both parties have met is the period of courtship wherein the suitor and the fiancée get to know themselves better. At this stage, their plans to be man and wife are no longer hidden and they can be seen publicly together. In the words of Ogbole (2007), this period is usually typified by a series of visits to the girl. The man shows a lot of affection and generosity towards the beloved girl at this stage. This is when they know if they are compatible or not. Courtship may discontinue if the duo cannot come to a compromise or agreement. Parents usually observe and guide their wards with advice and counselling since they are aware of the relationship.

Solemnization ('Ijeokpo')

This is the last stage which entails the traditional marriage between the suitor and the fiancée. It is pertinent to quickly state here that going by the slight cultural differences between the different districts/zones in Idomaland, the stage referred to as '*okonuohe*' may be done more than once. To cut costs, Otukpo people tend to reduce the number of visits, making it one of the easiest places to marry from. In the western part of Idomaland for example, after the initial visit, a date is fixed for another visit where the date of the traditional marriage is fixed. It is during this second visit that a list is presented.

However, among the Otukpo people, no list is presented and no second visit is required. Rather, an amount is given to the parents of the bride-to-be which will ease the preparations for the traditional marriage and this amount could range from ₦100,000 to ₦200,000 (a hundred to two hundred thousand naira only). Ordinarily, the said amount cannot cater for the number of guests that will throng to the venue on the day of the marriage. But it is a sign on the part of the bride's parents that they are involved and supportive of their daughter's welfare by contributing to the entertainment of guests during her marriage ceremony.

As succinctly put by Akpanga (2018) on the day of the traditional marriage, the bride's mother is called to say how much she would accept her daughter's hand in marriage. They, first of all, give the groom's family a very high price to signify how important their daughter is; but because the Idoma people do not 'sell' their daughters, the same parents would cut down the money until it comes down to almost nothing. After a moderate bargain through an intermediary, a financial estimate is reached. Sometimes, parents collect as low as ₦150 (a hundred and fifty naira only), even less. At this point, a representative of the groom's father and relatives does all the talking.

When an agreement is reached and all monies paid, the bride would be called upon to come and collect the money from the ground (*'ijeokponmaje'*) as a sign of public acceptance of the groom's family (see plate 1). This action is celebrated by cheers from the people present and some traditional shrill sounds usually made by women as a sign of joy. This is followed by eating and drinking by the guests but before the merriment commences, the father of the bride (or a family representative) takes hold of the bride's hand and places it in the hand of the father of the groom stating that he has handed his daughter to them.

The groom's father again; takes hold of the bride's hands and places them in the hands of the groom saying he has handed her to him so he should take care of her. This is a very significant part of the marriage process and connotes the magnitude of the value placed on handing a whole human to another family out of love. This act is also cheered and merry-making commences. Note that these guests are not the general public but the inner caucus that consists of the groom, his parents and relatives and the bride's parents with their relatives as well. The groom's relatives show appreciation by thanking and praising the bride's parents and relatives for their understanding.



Plate 1: The bride picks a 200 naira note from the tray of money signifying her acceptance of the groom (*ijeokponmaje*)

According to Ogbole (2007), a lot of other formalities continue after the lady publicly accepts the suitor's proposal. Money is given to be shared among the bride's family members and kin. These usually include her grandmother, grandfather, mother, brothers, and sisters. The same applies to her paternal relations and this amount is usually a token but taken very seriously and there can be repercussions if it is not distributed as it should, no matter how small. However, that is not in the context of this paper.

Going by the amendment by the traditional Chief in the person of Chief Dr John Eimonye (binding on only Otukpo people), this group of

people should not exceed six people henceforth. Generally called '6 a side', the inner caucus would comprise the groom's father, his mother and a relative and the bride's father, her mother and a relative. In the proceeding pages, some of the amendments would be elaborated but the processes involved in Otukpo traditional marriage are best described now. All things being equal, this ends the whole process of traditional marriage customs in Otukpo but some new trends have been observed and imbibed from other cultural settings such as the bride coming out to greet the guests a different number of times, in different attires.

As described by Nnagbo (2020), the Bride usually will come out to show herself, dancing, waving, smiling, and welcoming guests. She dances behind her uniformly dressed team of close friends wearing uniformly designed and coloured clothes. They all dance in a row, and she follows them behind, smiling and waving (see plate 2). In some instances, she goes into the crowd of guests to greet, kneel, and hug some, appreciating them for coming. The second outing happens when the bride comes out again. Still, this time dressed in a different, mostly beautiful attire to dance to her family tent, she listens to her father or eldest male member of her extended family for the next directive.

For the Otukpo people, the bride may choose to come out twice or three times as the case may be to greet and appreciate guests for leaving their busy schedules and honouring her special day. For some, the appearance of the bride greeting the crowd more than twice in gorgeous outfits shows the groom's affluence. The guests would also pray for her and bless her marriage as she goes around to greet and thank them. Although this practice is currently being downplayed by several people to reduce the financial pressure that this places on families/couples that cannot afford the numerous outing and their accompanying outfits. After the first outing to acknowledge guests, the bride goes in to change and comes out again but this time dressed in an attire that is similar to that of the husband and then she goes to sit with him. It is at this point the guests dance with them, are entertained and present their gifts which may be in cash or kind. Prayers for fruitfulness, a happy life, and good fortune are made upon the couple as well.

At the end of the ceremony, the groom and his people would leave the bride behind and fix a date when she would be brought to his house in the company of her relatives and friends. However, this is often done that same evening or the next day but not too long after because both parties are eager to start their new life together.



Plate 2: The bride walks out with her friends, dancing and waving to the guests who have come to honour her.

Introduction of Foreign Concepts

Many new concepts have been introduced in the process of traditional marriage customs in Otukpo. On the list would be; the venue for traditional marriage rites, the introduction of *Aso-ebi* (which means wearing clothes of the same material by a group of special people such as family members, colleagues or classmates), the use of MC (Master of Ceremony) and Public address systems, sharing of souvenirs.

Venue for Traditional Marriage Rites

The home of the bride is a standard cultural location where the traditional marriage must happen; however, there have been slight changes/modifications to this as the bride's family may choose another location that is more convenient for all of them but the message is sent back to the village. This is not a welcome idea to the people in the village as they feel slighted by the people in the city/metropolis.

Introduction of Uniform (generally referred to as *Aso-ebi*)

This is a new trend and seems to trace its origin to the Yoruba-speaking parts of Nigeria and is alien to the Idoma-speaking people. This is a situation where the family and or a team of close friends wear uniformly designed and coloured clothes. Perhaps to make them stand out as close members of the couple. Again, this is not popular in the typical Otukpo marriage setting and is being downplayed by several people to reduce the financial pressure that this would place on families/couples that cannot afford to buy the materials (which are usually sold at exorbitant prices, different from the price of the same material in the open market).

The Use of MC

In all fairness, the Master of Ceremony has always been in existence, though not with the name of MC and is none other than the intermediary

who does the talking during the process preceding the payment of dowry. However, the new modification is the introduction of a Master of ceremony with his public address system who is saddled with the responsibility of making announcements, recognising the presence of dignitaries, cracking jokes and generally entertaining the guests.

Sharing of Souvenirs

This is also a new trend that is alien to the traditional Idoma people of Otukpo during the marriage ceremonies of their children. Formerly, after the bride picks an amount from the tray with money in it (*'ijeokpo'* as seen in Plate 1), accompanied by sounds of joy, the guests are entertained with food and everyone goes home well-fed. Now, small gift items are shared and sadly, not shared with every guest present but sometimes with the people in uniform (*'asoebi'*), or friends that are recognised by the people sharing the gifts. This is also being played down as it puts pressure on couples who do not have the wherewithal to share souvenirs. And also because it causes division amongst guests as no guest should be rated higher than the other given that they all left their tight schedules to honour the couple on their special day. This dissatisfaction on the part of guests who were shunned has led to couples being attacked spiritually as has been seen in many cases.

Significance of Traditional Marriage

In Otukpo, traditional marriage is very significant because it is regarded as the base upon which the traditional political structure lies and this structure on the other hand sees the family as its smallest unit; the family is formed as a result of the union between a man and his wife. This traditional political structure consists of the household, the clan and the extended family. In the words of Nnagbo, it is regarded as an act that lasts a lifetime and binds not just two people, but two families, sometimes two communities and two cultures.

Even though Christianity, modernity and economics have forced changes upon the customs of the land, the fundamentals remain – that the event is verily an admixture of drama and reality aimed at ensuring the continuity of society (Nnagbo 2020). This belief is not only peculiar to Otukpo or Nigeria alone but as far as Kenya and as succinctly put by Ogutu, by the Act and Consummation of Marriage; an individual became a wife/husband or daughter/son to a household, a homestead, a clan or the nation...In other words, marriage, among the Luo is not a husband and wife affair. It is the entire extended family affair. It aims to integrate the couples into a defined social system, the complex Luo network of extended family relations. The woman became part and parcel of the husband's family and clan (Ogutu 2007).

Not only is traditional marriage seen as a unifying bond between two families and not just the bride and groom, making the families become one. Also, it makes a man responsible. As soon as a man gets married, his

mentality changes as he knows he is saddled with the responsibility of catering for his wife and children. And because he was now seen as a responsible man, he could be called upon in any decision-making process of his community/village. He can even be considered for chieftaincy titles. It can be seen now that marriage has changed his status in society. The marriage custom equally changes the status of the wife as well.

Traditional marriage in Otukpo is so significant that church weddings and court/registry marriages are seen as optional but not the traditional marriage which is compulsory for any Idoma couple if they want their union/cohabitation to be regarded as traditionally legal. As against what obtains in some parts of Nigeria where a woman is seen as married only if she weds in a church or the court of law, a woman is married as soon as her dowry is paid and has the same rights as the woman who had the church wedding (also referred to as white wedding) and the court registry.

In traditional marriages also, the proper family unit/structure is maintained. It is when a man marries a woman that procreation can occur and the values that are important to man are passed to the next generation. Sadly though, the values attached to traditional marriage and its customs are gradually being replaced by white/church weddings which, although share some values, do not share the same values which need to be preserved. These days we hear of lesbianism, gay couples and what have you (LGBQ...). That was not the reason for which God created man and that was not the plan he had for procreation. If two men marry, who will procreate? Fortunately, these same-sex marriages have not been accepted in Nigeria and we pray it remains so. Going by the fast pace our youths are hinging unto these changes brought by westernization, there is a need to be worried.

Conclusion

There has been a schism in value systems and culture due to our acceptance of everything labelled Western culture. Westernization is good, but it is also more advantageous that it is sieved and the chaff is discarded. Hence, the need to document some of the traditional values that have been of help to man and preserved him as he interacted with his environment. These days, two people meet in the city and start to cohabit without necessarily finding out some basic things such as the family from whence the other partner comes, what diseases exist in their lineage etc. All of these have repercussions for the coming generation. Some couples do not even bother to find out if they are related! Again, the importance of carrying out these marriage customs comes to play.

As stated earlier, these traditional marriage customs bind not only the couple involved but also two communities. This will also help to reduce the conflict that is prevalent today. When we find out that a majority of us are related by marriage, if there is any quarrel it is easily resolved as family members. Furthermore, as is inevitable between two strangers who have come to live with themselves, considering their differences, any marital

squabble is settled by their parents/kinsmen. The performance of these traditional marriage customs gives a sense of belonging to both parties involved.

Politicians have used these traditional marriage customs as an avenue to strengthen and expand their political might as they marry from as many geopolitical zones as possible. If one observes closely, they would rather perform the traditional marriage rites and not marry in the church or court. There are also benefits for the wife in the event of the death of the groom if they abide by the rules as she is now seen as a member of the family but this will not be discussed in this paper. Another question that comes to mind is, is it possible that the dearth/decline of traditional marriage practices is the cause of the high rate of divorce? It is believable because the marriage institution has become very unstable these days as a result of the gradual erosion of the age-old societal values of family upbringing.

This paper is more of an ethnographic report of the current state of the marriage system as we have it today. It has attempted to highlight the old traditional marriage customs as compared to the modern traditional marriage customs. It has also brought to the fore; the new trends imbibed from other cultures and it finally states the significance and value of traditional marriage customs which serve as a training ground for child discipline and moral education. The Idoma Traditional marriage customs form an integral part of the people and so there is a need to hammer the need for the preservation of this cultural heritage as this paper has done in the hope that the sane society we used to know that placed value on human lives, hated conflicts and understood the family unit as it was made originally from inception/creation will be restored.

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