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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RITES IN ETCHE, SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the significance of traditional marriage rites in Etche South-South Nigeria. The paper contends that in Etche marriage rites such as iju-ajuju (to enquire or to investigate) into the would-be wife family history, iku-akanamgbo (knocking at the door to which Etche people often refer to as opening talks with the family of the wife to be), ishi-onyeukwunwanyi (the handing over of the middleman to the husband to be),ijeabaliano (four days visit undertaken by the wife to be to her would-be husband family), to study him and to familiarize herself with the family, ibungwo-umunna (the carrying of the family male relations wine and that of the kinsmen, and finally, ikwu-ugwonwanyi) (the payment of the bride - price to the girl's parents) must be performed by the husband before the woman finally comes into his house as his wife. The paper posits that these rites are intended not only to confer full traditional rights on the husband over his wife and children born into the marriage, but also to enhance the status of the girl in the society. The methodology adopted was oral interviews (report of the custodians of Etche customs and traditions and Handed down tradition) and secondary sources (Published materials). The study also adopts phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the rituals associated with marriage rites. Findings from the study reveal that marriage rites as an essential aspect of Etche customs and tradition still remains sacrosanct and that it has helped for the sustainability of indigenous Etche cultural practices.

Keywords: Significance, Traditional Marriage, Rites, Etche People, Etche Culture.

Introduction

In Etche, marriage is regarded as union between a man and a woman who are committed to spend the rest of their lives together for the purpose of raising off springs. So, for the people, marriage is not only inevitable but also a serious venture a man is expected to undertakes in his life time; hence it marks a transition from childhood to adulthood. This explains why marriage rites are so significant in Etche culture and as such one of the practices relating to Etche custom and tradition. Some of these rites include, *ijuajuju* (making inquiry or investigation into the would-be wife family background and history), *ikuakanamgbo* (knocking

at the door often refer to as opening talks with the family of the girl to be for formal declaration of intention by the would-be suitor), *ijeabaliano* (a four day visit undertaken by the girl to the man's family in order to study his life style and to attuned herself with the family members) and lastly, *ikwuugwonwanyi* (the payment of bride-price to the girl's parents which is the most important).

Customarily, these rites must be performed by the husband before the woman finally comes into his house as his wife.

Background of the Study

Etche is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas that make up Rivers State. It is Located at the Northern part of Rivers State having boundaries with Ngor – Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State in the North, as well as Abia State in the East (Nwiyi, 2012, P.68). According to Etche Socio-Political organization, there are five outstanding clans. The clans are, Mba, Okehi, Ozuzu, IgboAgwuruasa and Ulakwo Umuselem. The essence of this, is for ease administration (Amele, 2000, P.I).

As for their economic life, the people of Etche are predominantly farmers. They engage in production of palm oil, cocoyam, etc but the most important ones are yam and cassava which are planted in large quantities. As a people located within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, they experience the normal Niger Delta climatic condition with two main seasons namely, the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season take place between March and November. The dry season occurs between November and February (Amadi, 2019, P.104).

With regards to their religious life, there is a strong believe in the existence of a Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Etche, like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly rather He is approached and worshipped through the pantheon of divinities.

Statement of the Problem

The place of marriage rites in the development and sustenance of Etche socio-cultural practices over the years cannot be overemphasized. Marriage rites, has helped not only to bestow full traditional rights on the husband over his wife and children born in the marriage, but also enhance the status of the girl in the society especially in this contemporary society. However, as important as marriage rites seems to be in Etche custom and tradition, the ceremony appears to have continued to escape the attention of scholars, leading to dearth of scholarship in such a significant socio-cultural phenomenon. In consequence of this, the custodians of Etche customs and traditions appear to be phasing out in undocumented formats. The need to document these socio-cum cultural practices is therefore paramount. Therefore, this study will document for posterity, the beliefs and practices relating to marriage rites for education, information and sustainability.

Two factors induced the researcher's interest in pursuing this study. The first, as earlier stated, was to document for posterity the beliefs and practices relating to marriage rites in Etche especially in this era of rapid change and cultural globalization and the second was to examine the role of marriage rites in Etche and to see how this has helped to confer traditional rights on the husband over his wife and children born in the marriage.

Methodology

This study was carried out as an interview-based research. Two types of oral investigation procedures were utilized viz;

i. Reports of custodians of Etche custom and tradition about beliefs and practices relating to marriage rites.
ii. Handed down tradition about meaning of beliefs and practices relating to marriage rites and secondary sources (Published materials).

There were certain issues that were taken into account in selecting the interviewees and some of the considerations are: the position of the informant in the society; the cultural organization he/she belongs to and the position or title he/she holds; the level of the interviewee's cultural affinity. Those who were culturally rooted in the practices of the Local Community were found to be better versed in the tradition and cultural practices of the people.

Marriage in African Culture: An Overview

Oguejiofo (2009) writing on marriage among the Igbo posits that marriage is the coming together of a man and a woman to begin a family for procreation and continuation of the human race. According to him, "prior to the contact with the Western World Igbo marriages were characterized by highly detailed cultural practices and symbolisms that knitted marriages together and guarded social sanity and morality (P.15).

Similarly, among the Elele-Alimini, Ofurum (2008) also describes marriage as an agreement between a man and a woman to live together as husband and wife. According to her, marriage as understood by the Elele-Alimini people is indeed a social institution governed by religious beliefs and performed under certain laid down rites. These rites for must be performed by the husband before the woman finally comes into his house as his wife (P.33).

Ofurum further explains that in most Ikwerre speaking areas, marriage is seen as the focal point of existence. This for her, is because through marriage people procreate and populate their families and lineages (P.33). This, however, explains why Mbiti (1991) generally speaks of marriage as a union of a man and a woman, a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator (P.104).

In much the same vein, Ayisi (1979) in Ofurum (2008) posits the fact that marriage is a matter of interest not only to the parents of both parties, but also to a wider cycle or relatives. According to him, marriage requires the consent of some close relatives or the lineage head (P.34). Similarly, explaining the importance of marriage among the African peoples, Anyacho (1994) describes marriage as a social institution which does not only legalize sexual intimacy between a man and a woman, but also legitimizes the offspring born by the couple. He further identifies two forms of marriage engagements obtained in Africa society. They include Infant marriage and Adult marriage. According to him, infant is the marriage arrangement made between a young boy and a young girl by their parents while adult marriage for him is the type of marriage arrangements between matured adults (P.264). This explains why Akintunde (2005) sees marriage as a social obligation which must be carried out by every young man (P.90). In the remaining section of this essay, we shall be examining marriage rites in Etche culture.

An Analysis of Marriage Rites in Etche

In indigenous Etche, marriage rites begin with *iju-ajuju* (enquiry or investigation).According to our informant, Amadi Alfred, the enquiry seeks to investigate into the girl's family background and history to ascertain if the girl's family is associated with any hereditary diseases, prolong labour, outcast syndrome, barrenness, criminal tendencies, and of good conduct. As he further disclosed, the enquiry is expected to be carried out secretly and cautiously by the suitor's parents without the knowledge of the parents of the girl's family members. Customarily, the investigation is a gradual process since there is no general rule fixed for the duration. But of paramount importance here is that everything about the girl's family history as earlier said, must be thoroughly ascertained to be double sure before the suitor's parents and family members would proceed further (Amadi, A. 05/05/2023, oral interview).

This is followed by *ikuakanmgbo* (knocking on the door) to which the people refer to as opening-talks with the girl's parents and family members by the would-be husband's family members. Another informant, Akanwa John, said that it is at this stage that the man's parents and family members are expected to make public declaration of their intention into the family thus: "we have seen a beautiful female black goat in your house, which we would help nurture", implying that they have come to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage since the girl is old enough to get married. Customarily, items such as *itorla-ngwo* (a keg of palm wine), *ojiano* (kola-nuts)*ose-oji* (alligator pepper), *agwa-kai-kai*(a schnapp bottle of locally distilled gin), *ukwu-anu* (a leg of bush meat), and so on are presented. It signifies permission and acceptance of the suitor into the family by the girl's parents and relatives. Also, it is at this stage that *Onyeukwu* (a middle man/intermediary) is formally handed over to the prospective suitor. His primary role is to go between the two in-laws to be and to ensure that everything goes on smoothly as tradition demands (Akanwa, J. 10/05/2023, oral interview).

In addition to this is *ije-abaliano* (four days' visits). *Ije-abaliano* is a term used to describe the visit of the girl to the family of the would-be husband. She is expected to embark on this journey on the early evening of *eke* (the first day in Etche traditional week) and returns on the early evening of *Nkwo* (the fourth day in Etche traditional week). As tradition demands, the girl does not embark on this journey alone. She is accompanied either by a sister or a friend whom she likes so much to confide in or share her secrets with.

According to our informant, Nwankwo Hilary, the essence of this journey is to enable the girl study very closely the man's life style, his dos and don'ts, likes and dislikes and by extension to familiarize herself with the rest members of the family and lineages (Nwankwo, H. 15/05/2023, oral interview).

Following this is the *ibungwoumuna* (the carrying of the family male relation's wine and that of the kinsmen). To do this, items such as *itorlangwoishi* (six keg of palm wine), *ojiasato* (eight pieces of kola-nuts), *ose-ishi* (six pieces of alligator pepper), *agwa*schnapp*kai-kaiishi* (six bottles of locally distilled gin), etc are presented. Customarily, pounded yam and *okashi* delicacy is served to the guests.

In addition to this is *ikwu-ugwonwanyi* (the payment of the bride-price), which is the last rites and most important. It consists of presenting ego (money) and other items such as *akwa* George (George wrapper), *igbeakwa* (wrapper box), *nkalari* (traditional necklace), *uwe-eze*

(chieftaincy ragalia), *okpu-nwagoro* (traditional cap), *nkpara* (walking stick), *nma-eleke* (sheathed matchet), *nchemiri/nzemiri* (umbrella), *akodu* (pestle), *osube* (mortar), *eki-igwe* (tripod), etcare exclusively presented to the parents of the girl.As my informant, Njoku Kenneth, disclosed, it is at this stage that the husband and the girl receive the blessings of parents and it is complimented with the pouring of libation to the ancestors (Njoku, K. 20/05/2023, oral interview).

As for its significance, it not only gives full traditional rights to the husband over his wife and children born in the union, but also enhances the status of the girl in the society. Furthermore, it not only provides an occasion for the renewal of fellowship among the people, but also renew the bond of friendship and other forms of existing relationships.

Conclusion

In Etche, marriage rites which is one of the practices relating to Etche custom and tradition are deemed significant in the sense that they must be performed by the husband before the woman finally makes her journey formally into his house as his wife. Significantly, they are intended not only to confer full traditional right on the husband over his wife and children born into the marriage, but also enhanced the status of the girl in the society.

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