

# Igbo marriage: the betrothal and bride price essay



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The Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria practice a very intricate ritual of pre-marriage. The process includes a great deal of participation from others, including much of the extended family, not just the bride and groom. It also utilizes strict rules of progression throughout the engagement process.

Tying into this is a sort of business like practice of exchanging a bride for many things of value. With all of these components coming together they form the Igbo engagement process (“ Igbo Information. ” U Iowa ed. November 1998).

Marriage in Igbo Land is not just an affair between the future husband and wife; it also involves the parents, the extended family and villages of each individual (Widjaja, Michael. “ Igbo insight guide to Enugu and Igboland’s Culture and Language. ” 2007). Marriage can be decided on by the parents before birth; however this was usually only done in highly successful families. The relatives could also decide during childhood that their children would marry when older.

The final way is for the man and woman to choose each other (Wilgenbusch. “ Ibo Marriage and Courtship. ” 2007). Relationships, exchanges, and alliances between the prospective couple also form the main points of the marriage decision for both families (Schwimmer? Brian. “ Igbo Marriage Patterns.

” University of Manitoba, May 2002). The place the bride-to-be is from also plays a factor when choosing who to marry. Wives are often found outside the male’s village to ensure there was no inter-family marriage taking place (Wilgenbusch 2007). The reason for this is that Men and women are

forbidden to marry within their own patrilineage or those of their mother and their father's mother.

This regulation eliminates not only parallel cousin marriage but also rules out cross cousins. As a result, basic lineage groups do not become placed into paired or circular exchange systems as they do in many other societies with basic unilineal descent structures similar to the Igbo one (Schwimmer 2002). When no prearrangements are made for marriage by the elders, the man must propose to a woman. The first step is for the groom to needs to ask his potential partner to marry him (Widjaja 2007).

The groom to be is not allowed to approach the bride, so the proposal is done by the intermediary (Wilgenbusch 2007). Assuming that this is affirmative, the groom will visit the bride's residence accompanied by his father. The groom's father will introduce himself and his son and explain the purpose of his visit. The bride's father welcomes the guests, invites his daughter to come and asks her if she knows the groom (Widjaja 2007). If the answer is yes, the next stage, called the inquiry, begins.

This actually continues through the entire marriage ritual. The family, friends, and gods are consulted on several issues. These are genealogy, social standing of the families, medical history (strange deaths, incurable disease, infertility), and family history (criminal acts, titles) (Wilgenbusch 2007). The gods each family worships and the wealth each family has are also looked at, but they are not as important as the other factors (Wilgenbusch 2007). The bride's price settlement or "Ika-Akalika" starts with

the groom, accompanied by his father and elders, visiting the bride's compound on another evening.

They bring wine and kola nuts with them, which are presented to the bride's father on the next visit (Widjaja 2007). On this second traditional visit the suitor accompanied by no more than five family members and/or friends shall present to his proposed in-law no more than two gallons of palm wine (Nkwu Enu), four gallons of raffia palm wine (Ngwo), one carton of beer, one crate of soft drinks and one bottle of gin, where upon the host shall provide some food and entertainment to his guests. (" Igbo Marriage Ceremony Of Oraifite with Bride Prices. " Oraifite, ed. 2007). After they have been served with a meal, the bride's price is negotiated between the fathers of the engaged.

In most cases there is only a symbolic price to be paid for the bride, but in addition other prerequisites (kola nuts, goats, chicken, wine, etc. ) are listed as well. Usually it takes more than one evening before the final bride's price is settled (Widjaja 2007). The sum of the bride's price is then determined by the negotiations between the two families involved, although a fairly standard sum is usually approximated. It is then divided into installments. The first is advanced at betrothal.

The second is made when the bride moves into the husband's compound, usually under the care of her new mother-in-law. The last and most substantial payment occurs when the formal marriage ceremony takes place (Schwimmer 2002). Sometime after the price is decided, a great feast is held in the bride's family compound, totaling around 70-100 guests from both

families. The last payment of the bride price is paid right before the feast, and upon payment they are considered to be married.

The feast has then become a wedding celebration. This is the end of the marriage ritual for the pre-Christian religion of the Igbo people (Wilgenbusch 2007). There is a strong family involvement that can be seen when looking at the way the Igbo people go about marriage. The process is drawn out and filled with many discussions and time for food and drink.

This helps the families create relationships and alliances between each other, while seeing if the engaged should wed. This is only a small glimpse at the Igbo community and from it we can see that these people that a great amount of thought as a whole, not just the individual, to make essential decisions.