

**BRIDE PRICE: SECURITY FOR WOMEN IN MARRIAGE AMONG
IKWERRE PEOPLE OF NIGER DELTA**

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Abstract

Women whose bride price are not paid are not traditionally recognized in families among the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta, irrespective of the number of biological children they have with their assumed husbands. Hence, they and their children are treated with disregard, denied communal privileges and can be asked to leave the family at any time especially on the demise of the perceived husband. Thus, bride price which is believed to be an appreciation of the parents of the bride by the groom for properly guarding their daughter up to the age of marriage as well as an open recognition and acceptance of the bride by both families is highly revered. This appreciation is not just limited to the immediate family but to the extended family too, due to the communal nature of the people. Bride price therefore, provides security for the young maid who is going to a completely new home where she is not familiar with the people. Being a novice in her new home, she can be exposed to undue danger of denial of what she traditionally deserves if security measures such as the bride price is not paid on her behalf to protect her from undue harassment and intimidations among her mates in the new environment she finds herself by reason of marriage. Using the African Cultural Perspective and Ethnographic approach, the paper made use of qualitative analysis to establish the fact that despite the ravaging economy; the Ikwerre people are bent on fulfilling the traditional rituals of bride price in order to earn the benefits therein.

Keywords: Bride Price, Security, Women and Marriage

Introduction

Marriage is one of the cultural values that is highly esteemed among the Ikwerre people of Niger delta. It is a union that is believed to promote the lineage of the family as well as promote the status of men and women amongst the people. This is because a person is believed to be responsible only when the person is married, Lawrence-Hart (2018). Marriage amongst the Ikwerre people is different from mere co-habitation. A recognized marriage in Ikwerre land is that which is blessed

by both parents and the payment of the bride price has been made to the parents of the bride. Couples, irrespective of how peaceful and loving they are to each other cannot be addressed as married people within the Ikwerre cultural milieu if the traditional rituals of marriage especially bride price has not been paid.

Reason been that bride price confers on a maiden the status of a married woman, security and a sense of pride in a new status thus every parent craves for it. Payment of the bride price makes the woman a recognized member of the new family that she is married to, this recognition earns her respect and makes her a beneficiary of all the fortunes of her new home. Aside being a beneficiary, she feels safe and secured in her husband's house because nobody in the family including her husband will just wake up and ask her to go back to her father's house without going through certain recognized traditional rituals.

Consequently, bride price is like immunity on the woman because it makes her feel safe as well as keep hope alive such that she is assured of her security; thus she can work hand in hand with her husband and contribute to the growth of the family knowing that she will partake of the goodies in due course. More so, even though the woman commits adultery while the husband is still alive her security in the family is guaranteed, although it is a disgrace and shame to her husband, relatives and friends; since her personal image is smeared by her action, she still has a place in her husband's home. The only thing that can make a woman lose her pride of place in her husband's house is, if the bride price is returned to her parents and kinsmen, else even if she is driven out by her husband for an inordinate act, her children can rise up one day and bring her back to their father's house when they become adults.

This work therefore intends to bring to the fore the importance of bride price in marriage among the Ikwerre people of the Niger Delta; especially at this time when the economy has made some persons co-habit and have children who are not recognized within their family circle. The worrisome aspect is when the so called couple have children and part their different ways due to reasons best known to them; thereby, subjecting the innocent children to stigmatization as a result of non-payment of the bride price (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020).

Ikwerre People of Niger Delta

The Ikwerre people of Niger Delta, occupies a central position in Rivers State as it spans through four Local Government Area of the state. They are; Port Harcourt, Ikwerre, Obio-Akpo and Emohua Local Government. However, the Ikwerre

people are always erroneously associated with the Igbo. Consequent upon this, there exist three school of thought concerning their origin and migration, the first is the Opko-Wagidi school of thought which posit that the Ikwerre people migrated from Arochukwu to Isiokpo which formed the birth place and gradual spread of other towns and villages in Ikwerre. Next, is the Akalaka-Ochichi school of thought whose position is that the people migrated from Benin Empire as a result of the misrule by Oba of Benin Kingdom in the 10th Century. The effect of the maladministration and sudden death of the son occasioned the swift escape of Ochichi the father of the Ikwerre people and Akalaka the father of the Ekpeye (Ahoada) people. Suffice to say that the Ikwerre and Ekpeye people are related as they were siblings who escaped for the safety of their lives. Lastly, is the Akpo school of thought which maintains autochthony; this implies that the Ikwerre people were created by God and placed on their present location (the Ikwerre Land). For this last group of thought, the people did not migrate from anywhere and are not related to any ethnic group in the Niger Delta; for them, the issues of language similarity to other ethnic group is as a result of proximate locations to each other.

Regrettably, this continuous debate which has on origin has resulted to lack of harmony in the common descent of their ancestral fathers. More so, the Ikwerre people up till date do not have a paramount ruler which they can look up to as people of the same ethnic group. Thus, to handle this issue of disharmony, the people formed a socio-cultural group called Ogbakor-Ikwerre which provides a platform where they come together as brothers from the same ancestral lineage.

Interestingly, the Ikwerre people are very hospitable and receptive to visitors both within and outside the state. They host major in institutions and infrastructure of the Rivers State Government like the State Secretariat, Rivers State University, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, etc. Despite the fact that some of the Ikwerre villages have been overtaken by development, the people are still deeply rooted in their culture and traditions, this is seen in their constant display of different cultural exhibitions like masquerades, festivals, traditional wrestling, marriages according to law and custom of the people, etc. they are still intensely involved in their fishing and farming which constitute their major occupation since they are blessed with both land mass and water.

Geographically, the Ikwerre people occupy a mainland area of 32,000 square of land in Rivers State and a Population of over 777,503 people according to 1963 census. They are bounded in the North by Ahoada, on the South by Degema, on the East and on the West by Abua-Odual Local Government Areas.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of marriage is universal, however, every culture and society has its own acceptable approach to actualizing it. Thus, what is acceptable in society A might not be acceptable in society B. for this reason, this research made use of African Cultural Perspective in examining the topic under discuss. This is because the African Cultural Perspective is a concept that holds that cultures and traditions differs from place to place, hence, cultural practices should be viewed from the lenses of the cultural group under study in order to avoid generalization and distortion since individuals are shaped by their environment, social and cultural milieu which is expressed in their lifestyle. For instance, Dance, art forms, music, marriage, etc. these cultural practices are deeply ingrained in their daily activities which has formed their way of life (Wariboko 2018). Again, it is important to note that the concept of what constitute acceptable marriage is not a cross-cultural phenomenon which implies that cultural practices are not the same everywhere. Therefore, viewing it from the African Cultural Perspective will make a scholar appreciate a people's cultural values.

Consequently, this concept validates the imperativeness of looking at the high value placed on bride price amongst the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta and how it serves as a catalyst in motivating men and women to marry within the acceptable norm of the society despite the harsh economy in recent time. Although, to the non-Ikwerre person the subject under discuss may not make sense but a typical Ikwerre man will work hard to ensure that he performs the marriage rites of his wife so that he will not be labelled as a man having a "credit wife".

We shall as well analyze this study within ethnographic framework because it gives researchers the leverage to study the people in their cultural milieu. The essence is to avoid sweeping statements or imposition of a foreign culture on another because a people's life is holistically dependent on the aspect the researcher may choose to study. It could be their marriage, religion, cuisine, religion, etc.

Conceptual Clarification

Marriage

The concept of marriage has been viewed in divers' ways by different scholars. Marriage, also called matrimony or wedlock is a culturally recognized union between people called spouses. It establishes rights and obligations between them as well as their children and their in-laws. It is considered a cultural universal phenomenon, but the definition of marriage varies between culture and religions

and over time. Typically, it is an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually sexual, are acknowledged or sanctioned. In some cultures, marriage is recommended or considered to be compulsory before pursuing any sexual activity. Thus, Carnel 2012, asserts that marriage is an institution that meets the need for love and being loved, meeting both individual, biological, social, psychological and motivational need as well as raising new generation into the world. In corroboration with this assertion, Yavuzer 2012, maintains that marriage is an institution where intimacy and fellowship is expressed, children are raised in safety and gives freedom for sexual intercourse. In the same vein, Pinar (2008) asserts that marriage is taking responsibility and sharing organized and happy lives. While the trio of Curren, Litley and Muraco (2010) posits that marriage signifies commitment, love, fellowship, trust and family. For Ozguzer 2001, marriage is the core unit of the society irrespective of the fact that its dimension and scope have changed over time in human history. From another flank, Ersanli and Kalker (2008) sees marriage as a special association given shape by social rules and laws as well as affects individuals development and self-realization.

Bride Price

Scholars in their rights have viewed bride price using different lenses, for Anyebe (1985) bride price legalizes and establishes the legitimacy of children, he further stated that bride price is a compensation for the loss to the woman's family of its member, a potential child bearer as well as marriage insurance to stabilize relationship and protect the wife. As a way of commitment, Oguli (2004) maintained that bride price is a contract where material items such as cattle or other animal or money is paid by the groom to the bride's family in exchange for the bride, her labour and capacity to produce children. While Rakhimdinova in Oguli, sees bride price as an agreed sum intended to reflect the value of the young maiden. In another respect, Alupo (2004) asserts that the concept under review symbolizes friendship which in actual fact is the transfer of productive and reproductive service to the man's family, since it involves payment in cash or property by husband and his family to the bride's family. In the same vein, Radcliffe-Brown opines that bride price symbolized as a situation where payment of goods and services is made by the bridegroom to the bride's kin as an essential part of the establishment of legality of marriage.

Traditional Marriage in Ikwerre

The traditional marriage in Ikwerre as discussed here is the marriage according to the tradition and custom of the Ikwerre people which involves the ritual blessings from both the immediate and extended families. This is because marriage among the people goes beyond the bride and groom from the onset.

The marriage process begins when a man finds and proposes to a lady of his choice as well as gets consent from his proposal. Arrangement is made to see the parents of the would-be bride which is called *akwaka nuoro* which literally means “knocking of the door”. The groom goes to see the bride’s family with his parents to make their intentions known and familiarize themselves as well. Although, it is their first official visit, they are expected to go with drinks for introduction. At this point the visitors will be given a middle-man or intermediary called *Nyegaizne*. The middle-man takes up the responsibility of the educating the visitors about the procedures which include relatives to pay homage to, requirements for both the immediate and extended family as well as the community at large. The *Nyegaizne* is very instrumental in the negotiation of the bride price and making sure the would-be in-laws do not make mistakes that will result to paying fine; when all the procedures, negotiations and payments have been settled, then the day for the traditional marriage ceremony *orwor-mayna* will be set (Chika Anele, Bekwele Madumere, Oral Interview 2021)

The *orwono-mayna* is the final stage of the marriage which is usually done in the family of the bride, guests are invited from far and near, the requirements by the bride’s family is presented by the groom’s family. Then actual celebration begins with music and dance, the bride is locked up in a room, to add colour and fun to the occasion, young maidens will be sent to the groom to request for money which they (maidens) will use as transport fair to go bring the bride to him as it is believed that the bride is far away from the location of the ceremony; the young maidens in their attire dance in group to the groom and his kinsmen to inform them that they need money either for flight ticket, boat or special convoy to enable them bring the his bride to him if he wants his bride to come out, this request is done again and again until they (maidens) get sufficient money which they will later share amongst themselves. Having gotten enough from the fun of the day, they will then go into the room where the bride is hidden and escort her out of the room with loud ovation accompanied with melodious renditions and dance by the cheering maidens. The bride is further escorted by the maidens to greet her guest after which she goes to her father who prays for her and hands over a glass of wine with which she is to go in search of her husband, when she sees her husband, she takes a sip and gives him to drink. This action connotes a public presentation of

the bride and groom as they both dance to the parents and kneel for the ritual joining. The prayers by parents and the elders is believed to be loaded with all round blessings, every couple wants to get the blessing from his parents in marriage as it is perceived to be highly potent. Prayers by the parents constitute the main cardinal point why would-be couples seek to strictly follow the rudiments of the traditional process to ensure that they carry the blessing of their parents into their new home, thus, aside the payment of bride price and public presentation cum acknowledgement of the new family, the next is the prayers of blessing which is showered on the new couple. Again, this prayer can only be effective when the bride price is paid because it shows obedience to the ancestral norms which has kept the bond of unity between different villages and families, more so, the entire community and relatives who have eaten from the proceeds of the bride price will shower their prayers on the new family for bringing them together to eat as one big family. The parents of newly established family will be overwhelmed with joy as their children has made them proud by making others eat from their home since they have been eating from other families whose children have gotten married in the past. That is why it is a shame if young people just cohabit without fulfilling the traditional ritual of traditional marriage ceremony which provides a basis for parents to call others to come and join them in the celebration of their children and sharing of the proceeds from the bride price because they have been getting shares from other families. For this reason, traditional marriage celebration which is accompanied by the payment of bride price is held in high esteem due its intrinsic value to the Ikwerre people of Rivers State (Ngozi Wokoma, Chika Anele, Oral Interview 2021).

Bride Price: Security for the Woman in the Family

The thrust of this work is the security and guarantee which payment of bride price gives to the woman in the new family where she is married to. The Meriam Webster's Dictionary defines Security as the state of being free from danger or threat, this definition gives the right explanation to the researcher's work because among the Ikwerre child bearing is the main reason for marriage, Lawrence-Hart (2018).

This implies that the major factor for marriage in Ikwerre land is neither love nor companion as practiced in the Western world but to bear children, however, this children without bride price paid on their mother does not still place the woman on the right pedestal in her husband's family as it attracts ridicule and shame which is visible whenever there is an opportunity to share the communal cake amongst family members. This may sound strange but true; children are generally

believed and seen as those who will continue the lineage of their parents. Nevertheless, children whose parents' marriages were not properly consummated according to the traditional rites and custom are mildly treated as outcast as no inheritance or traditional title is conferred on a son whose mother was not properly married, that is, bride price was not paid irrespective of how rich the person may be, the person is looked at as what the Igbo people call *osu* though differs in their relationship. So what some persons who have risen to prominence in the society by dint of hard work do, is to sponsor the full traditional marriage and payment of bride price of their mothers in order to maintain their rightful place in their father's house and community at large (Nmenta Worlu, 2020 Oral source).

Another feature that ensures her security is that when bride price is paid, it becomes difficult to divorce even when the couple separates by reason of irreconcilable differences, returning the bride price is not always easy, instead family members advocate for settlement, except cases where there is a new suitor who is ready to return the bride price and become a new husband to the woman.

Her security is so strong that it extends even after the demise of her husband irrespective of whether she had children or not. Ordinarily a woman who has not given birth before the demise of her spouse is bound to go back to her parents and probably get married to another man. This is different from a woman whose bride price has been paid as she remains the wife to the deceased even at death, thus if she gets impregnated by any other man of her choice the children belong to her dead husband, these children will bear the late husband's name and will also be recognized by late husband's family. Although this is not a license for women to be promiscuous or home breakers by running after other women's husbands just to get pregnant through the act, be that as it may, if she (widow) gets pregnant and have children; the children belong to her late husband. The Ikwerre people will say *nye nwe eknu nwe nnwo* which implies he who paid the bride price is the owner of the children.

The woman whose bride price is paid feels so secure even in the midst of glaring insecurity that is a situation where the beloved husband has left her for another woman. She is not perturbed because she has her bride price has been paid, she has authority in the family. The husband's family recognizes her as head wife *RishiNwere* since the Ikwerre cultural settings permits polygamy. The head-wife as they are called is given her due right in the family even in cases where the woman is thrown out or despised because of the coming of the new wife. She still has the right of place in her husband's family. In such cases the woman's children might

even build a new house for their mother in their fathers' compound to ensure their mother remains in the father's family. A woman whose husband has chased out of his house is still entitled to her farm or farm lands during farming seasons because Ikwerre society is agrarian in nature. The act of giving her farming portions despite her problem with her husband is that she is duly recognized in the family and contributes her quota as a married woman in the larger family. The husband has no right to stop her from benefitting from the communal cake.

Another feature of her security is membership of married women guild of the land, this group of women work towards the development and protection of the women folks in the land. They are a strong force in the land. They rejoice when their members are rejoicing and mourn with their members. They contribute money through thrift to support and aid their members to get financial freedom.

The woman whose bride price has been paid is buried in her husband's compound at death. Reason being that she is regarded as a recognized member of the husband's family. Conversely, a woman whose bride price has not been paid before death (the corpse) is sent back to her parents for burial. Although in many occasions the price is paid even at death before the burial. This kind of payment is really painful as the late woman did not enjoy the benefits while alive.

It is based on this reproachful attitude towards her which makes the women always feel unsafe that the research intends to explore on the concept of pride price as a security measure for the married women in Ikwerre land.

Benefits of Bride Price to the Woman.

Bride price among the Ikwerre people apart from the monetary involvement is believed to be a mark of respect and honor to the parents of the bride. The payment is a thing of joy, pride and actualization by both the families of the bride and groom, as the occasion of this rites provides opportunity for the immediate and extended families as well as friends to come to together in socialization. It also creates avenues for merry making and public notification of the new couple. With this public show, everybody in the community and its environs is made to know about the new family that is born.

More so, with this ceremony again, the bride's family is given the opportunity to share in equipping the new home of the bride especially in the purchase of kitchen and domestic properties for beginners. The parents of the groom is happy because their son can be addressed as a responsible man who is able to raise fund to marry honorably while the parents of the lady feels proud and fulfilled as their daughter did not just follow a man on the guise of love, **this act often** times brings shame

and dishonor to the parents of the girl as it attracts insult from members of the family who at any slight provocation reminds her that she is not yet a wife but a girlfriend who can be kicked out at any time because she is believed to be still standing on one foot thus should be mindful of her conduct (Nene Amadi Oral Interview 2021).

Importance of bride price customary

Bride price validates the marriage: Couples can live together and have romantic relationship for years, have children and stay within their community yet they are not regarded as married people because their marriage has not been consummated with the payment of bride price. Couples are co-opted into the different unit of the community only and after the rituals of marriage through the payment of bride price is completed. Hence, the need for the payment of bride price and fulfilment of traditional marriage rites.

Makes the bride a recognized wife in the new family. Although the man is recognized in his family, his perceived wife who is believed as not to have been properly married due to non-payment of bride price is not recognized in the husband's family. This is noticed when married women of the family is called to discuss issues concerning the welfare and development of the family. These set of women (perceived non-married women) will not be called for such discussion irrespective of how educated and intellectually exposed they are. For this reason, every woman seeks recognition in her place of marriage through the payment of her bride price.

She benefits from the family: Women whose marriage are not recognized within the community are not given share of family farm land or any other benefits which may come up by reason of festive celebration or sharing of proceeds from the marriage of other women in the family. It is often an embarrassing situation when one is excluded from what makes other women happy. Therefore, payment of bride price is inevitable.

Her children are not called bastards but accepted as sons and daughters of the family: Children born outside the traditional marriage rite of the people are regarded as bastards. However, those whose parents were duly married are

accepted and given every privilege that they deserve in the community. They qualify to be beneficiaries of the inheritance from their progenitors because the marriage rites of their parents were duly consummated unlike that outside wedlock.

Her children are allowed to occupy different traditional, political and social positions of the land: Children born in homes where the bride price of their mothers were not paid do not qualify to occupy traditional cum leadership positions in the community irrespective of how wealthy they may be. They may sponsor others but they can never be given the opportunity or be allowed to occupy elevated official position amongst the people. This is one area that they are highly discriminated against because of this, the victim of circumstance (those born out of wedlock) may have all that it takes but the circumstance of his birth has placed him in perpetual denial of his rights. Sometimes those who feel strongly marginalized go ahead to fight for their rights but it has always resulted to crisis and divisions in the family. Those who suffer most are the male children because they will have to live and continue their father's lineage while the girls will always marry out of the family where they will enjoy their freedom.

Her husband's home becomes her home even after the demise of her husband: A woman who was not properly married before the demise of her perceived husband is like a way fairer because she does not have any root in the man's family since the man is no longer alive. She either goes back to her parents' home, remarry or wait for when her children will grow up to go and marry her for their father. If this is not done, the children will suffer serious discrimination even in their father's house (Olunwere Okoro, Angelina Woke, Agwuoma Ejike, Oral Interview 2021).

Conclusion:

From the foregoing therefore, it is evident that the Ikwerre traditional believe on the importance of bride price to encourage stability and dignity in marriage, especially the security of the woman in a time where marriage has been reduced to a common activity which people engage just to satisfy their sexual urge is still held in high esteem. Thus, a woman feels fulfilled when a man becomes so committed in relationship to extent of paying her bride price. This is because her marriage is secured until death. More so, her children are accepted by every member of the family and enjoy the common wealth of the community.

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Chika Anele	65	Farmer	15-2-2021
Bekweri Madumere	72	Basket Weaver	2-4-2021
Ngozi Wokeoma	58	Trader	15-5-2021
Olunwere Okoro	55	Trader	20-5-2021
Agelina Woke	62	Farmer	12-6-2021
Agwuoma Ejike	53	clergy	15-6-2021
Nene Amadi	60	Farmer	15=6-2021

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