

## IDENTIFYING THE DIDACTICS AND THEATRICAL DIMENSIONS IN TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CEREMONY IN ARONDIZUOGU

**Emmanuel O. Iroh, Ph.D**

Department of Theatre and Film Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

[e.o.iroh@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:e.o.iroh@unizik.edu.ng); [irohemmaogbo@gmail.com](mailto:irohemmaogbo@gmail.com).

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8377-8078>

**DOI:** 10.13140/RG.2.2.33952.39688

### **Abstract**

*Drama is the representation of life. A lot of dramatic elements are embedded in the African traditional marriage. Marriage is universal as almost all races marry and are given in marriage. Marriage ceremony is part and parcel of the traditional African society. It is a consummation of love where two young adults (male and female) are officially joined together as husband and wife and they live together as one to procreate. It is celebrated with pomp and pageantry. This study therefore seeks to expose and highlight the drama in African traditional marriage as well as the lessons derivable from the ceremony. The work is hinged on the postulation of Peter Brook's Theory of Empty Space which propagates for the conversion of any empty space to stage. According to him, instead of waiting for a comfortable theatre building adorned with curtains, lights and seats, we should convert any space available to be used as a performance space since there is no boundary between life and theatre. This is because, theatre is life and life is theatre. The work is qualitative and it used ethnographic research approach of participant observation as well as the library to explore the dramatic elements in African traditional marriage. The data was analyzed through the descriptive analysis. The result of the study acknowledged that though traditional marriage ceremony in Arondizuogu is a cultural ceremony for perpetuating life, embodies didactic lessons of communal coexistence and love as well as dramatic elements of dance, costume and make up, setting, properties, languages; it also attracts large audience from far and near to make it a total theatre. The study concludes that African traditional marriage is a total theatre with full compliments of dramatic elements of performance space, dance, costume and make up, properties, dialogue and a large audience from far and near. It is also a tool for teaching community values, norms and ethics.*

**Keywords:** Didactics, Drama, Theatre, Traditional Marriage, Ceremony,

### **Introduction**

Have ye not read, that he, which made them at the beginning, made them male and female. And said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they shall twain be one flesh/ wherefore they are no more twain but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder (Matthew:19: 4-6).

Generally, in Igbo land, traditional marriage is a communal and social affair that cannot be held by an individual or his immediate family alone. This is because, the Igbos believe that the child does not belong to the immediate family but to the whole kindred and village. This holds true with the general saying that “Oha nwe nwa” literally interpreted as “the child belongs to the community”.

There may not be a generally accepted definition of marriage as every community sees marriage as part of their culture. According to Odejebi Odejebi (2013) cited by Alowolodu O. Odunayo, Olusanya, O. Oyewole, marriage is “a social institution that unites people in a special form of

mutual dependence for the purpose of finding and maintaining a family. It is a culturally sanctioned union between two or more people that establish certain rights and obligations between them, their children and their in-laws” (23).

Ryan T. Anderson asserts that “Marriage is based on the truth that men and women are complementary, the biological fact that reproduction depends on a man and a woman, and the reality that children need a mother and a father... Marriage exists to bring a man and a woman together as husband and wife to be father and mother to any children their union produces” (1). This is corroborated by Onwuka, who avers that marriage is an integral part of the social circle through which every boy or girl (man or woman) as far as not sworn to celibacy is expected to pass (219). Oti E.O agrees that marriage is “a union of a man and a woman” (99). Contributing, Aaron A. R. Nwabude submits that “In Africa, especially in Igbo land; marriage is the only known and acceptable incubator for the raising of socially balanced and functional moral society (Children)” (225). Furthermore, Microsoft Encarta Dictionary gave an elaborate definition of marriage as a “legal relationship between spouses: a legally recognized relationship, established by a civil or religious ceremony, between two people who intend to live together as sexual and domestic partners; marriage ceremony: the ceremony in which two people are joined together formally in wedlock” (np), while tradition is defined as “custom or belief: a long-established action or pattern of behavior in a community or group of people, often one that has been handed down from generation to generation; body of customs: a body of long-established customs and beliefs viewed as a set of precedents”(np). Tradition can be explained to mean a way of doing something that has existed for a people from generation to generation. Marriage is important in African society. It is the foundation of family system. Memunat Olayemi Mahmud accepts that “In Africa, especially the Yoruba social cultural semiosphere, marriage is regarded as a sacred institution, therefore, solid foundation, based on traditional ethics and values attached to it must be deployed in all the processes” (40). This is further accentuated by Ogoma Daniel who submits that:

Marriage occupies an important position in the affairs of Africans, especially in the past. Without marriage, there is no family, and without a family, one could not bear children. The connection between marriage and family can hardly be separated among the traditional Africans” (95-96).

The above statement is reminding us of the sacrosanct position Africans placed the institution of marriage in the past. It was an abomination for young girls to get pregnant outside marriage. Such misdemeanor was meant with serious consequences like banishment from the community or death.

From the above, traditional marriage is a people's way or method of uniting young couples in a traditional manner to live as husband and wife to fully accomplish the creators mandate of procreation. However, man being a social animal of high order, does his things in an orderly way. One of these ways is the traditional marriage ceremony. The ceremony usually brings joy and contentment to the parents of the girl to be married. This is so because, pregnancy out of wedlock is highly condemned in every Igbo land so much so that unmarried girls who get themselves pregnant are seriously reprimanded by the society. Thus parents feel fulfilled and happy that their daughter has done them proud by keeping herself to be lawfully given out in marriage.

The ceremony attracts relations, (maternal and paternal), friends of the bride and groom, men and women from the community, visitors, friends and well-wishers. It is celebrated with great

display of spectacle. Beyond the pomp and pageantry associated with the celebration of traditional marriage ceremony, lie some theatrics and didactic lessons which this work aims to expose.

As earlier stated, drama is the representation of life on stage, screen for educative, entertainment, information, purposes. Drama teaches us about life and how to handle or manage life situations. We learn about our culture while watching or are engaged in drama. Values of our society, culture and religion, are also treated in drama. A lot dramatic elements are embedded in the African traditional marriage.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is hinged on Peter Brook's "The Empty Space" theory. According to Brooks any space that is convenient should be used for or as performance space for the dissemination of theatrical message for the good of mankind, instead of waiting for a comfortable theatre building adorned with curtains, lights and seats since "everything is potentially theatrical, theatre is about life, and life about theatre, then there is no boundary between them". According to Brooks, any space can be converted to a stage and used for performance provided there are actors walking across such stage and spectators watching them. Brook submits that "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. Yet when we talk about theatre this is not quite what we mean. Red curtains, spotlights, blank verse, laughter, darkness, these are all confusedly superimposed in a messy image covered by one all-purpose word" (7) Commenting on the value of the Empty Stage theory, Negin Djavaherian asserts that "with his notion of 'empty space' Brook redefined the fundamental principles of theatrical space and laid down a path for discovering the invisible that leads to enhanced spectator experience" (np). What the above means is that spectators will now have more opportunities for performances to be taken to them and more opportunity for them to participate.

### **The Didactics and Theatrics in Traditional Marriage Ceremony in Arondizuogu.**

Arondizuogu is the largest and most dynamic of the numerous ARO settlements outside Arochukwu, their ancestral home from where they migrated. According to oral history, Arondizuogu may have been founded around the early eighteenth century by Izuogu Mgbokpo, a great merchant and warrior; a grandchild of Oke Nnachi, one of the founding fathers of Arochukwu. His father, Akuma Nnachi migrated from Utughugwu, and founded Amankwu Amangwu. He had six sons including Izuogu as the second son. As the process of migration and expansion continued, Izuogu was allocated another area, which he developed and called Amanku Akuma Nnachi. Thus, he became the founder of Amankwu village Arochukwu as well as Arondizuogu. Izuogu's mother Mgbokpo is from Ohafia. Aro-Ndi-Izuogu literally means the Aro of Izuogu's people. Presently, it is in three local Government Areas of Imo State, namely Ideato North, Okigwe and Onuimo Local Government Areas.

According to Ndubuisi Iroanofe, "In Arondizuogu, marriage ceremony is an important exercise and before a man and woman who are not related are declared husband and wife by custom and tradition of Arodizuogu, certain conditions must be fulfilled" (62). In other to fulfill these conditions and obtain approval for the traditional marriage, there are many traditional marriage obligations and stages/phases the intending in-law must conclude before the bride is finally handed over to him as his legal wife. Some of the include ibu-mmanya- ajuju or iku aka n'ibo/ uzo (knocking at the door), ipia akirika (settlement of the bride price) ibu mmanya or igbankwu (wine carrying) but this work will concentrate on the final phase leading to the handing over of the bride to her husband which is the ibu mmanya or igbankwu (wine carrying).

Usually, traditional marriage starts with knocking on the door (*iku* aka *n'ibo/uzo*) by the prospective in-law. This is to familiarize himself with his prospective in-laws. The next ceremony will be to ask for the things to be done. He schedules for the *ipia akirika* separately or he combines it with *ibu mnaya*. He collects a list of requirements for the traditional marriage ceremony (*igba nkwa*). Tentative date may be chosen but not made public until the plans are concretized.

On the agreed date by both families, the arena is well decorated. A special “stage” is set aside for the bride and groom; some, with raised platform or just fitted carpet. The arena which may be an open field, space in the bride's compound serves as the auditorium or reception ground. It is adorned with canopies and seats for the invited guests who are members of the audience. There is a public address system for music interludes. The arrival of the groom's family marks the official opening of the ceremony. However, as a convention, they do not come into the bride's compound directly. They wait at the entrance until the bride's father as the chief host, accompanied by his kinsmen goes to welcome them into his compound. The waiting further justifies the *igbo* saying that the child belongs to the community (*Oha nwe nwa*). This is where the drama begins.

### **Movement 1**

*(The bride's father accompanied by his kinsmen and women welcomes their guests at the gate)*

Chief Host: My in-laws, you're welcome.

In-laws: (chorus) Thank you.

Leader of the In-laws: We have come as we agreed.

Chief Host: (to his kinsmen): Umunnem, before us are our in-laws from Ndi-Ejezie Izuogu. They said that they saw a ripped bunch on my palm tree and have come to seek our permission to cut it and carry it home.

Chief Host Kinsmen: Nnoonu oooo. You're all welcome. *(They step out for handshake and welcome embrace and dance into the compound to their canopy).*

The chief host, while going to welcome his visitors, called his kinsmen to accompany him. It shows that “*Oha nwe nwa*” (The child does not belong to the biological parents alone. Again, the scene reveals the kind disposal and hospitality of the Arondizuogu community towards their visitors. They welcomed their visitors in a convivial manner, embracing and laughing. It would not have been

### **Movement 2 (At the visitor's canopy)**

The Chief Host presents kolanut and welcome wine to his in-laws, accompanied by two elders.

Chief Host: My in-laws, this is kolanut. And the water (*hot drink*) to wash it down your throats.

Leader of the In-laws: Thank you. The kolanut has reassured us that we are accepted here.

Chief Host: *(Shakes the palm wine, pours a little into a cup and drinks)* I have certified it fit and safe for your consumption. When you break your kola, give me my share.

Leader of the In-laws: *(Stretching his hand into the kolanut plate, brings out one lobe and hands over to him).* As tradition demands, this is your

share of the kolanut (Aka oji).

This scene exposes the importance of kolanut in igbo land in general and Arondizuogu in particular. The presentation of kola nut signifies the official opening of a ceremony. Again, a visitor to your house is not relaxed until kolanut is presented. He does not say his mission until after the presentation of kolanut.

### **Movement 3**

*(The Leader of the In-laws accompanied by some elders, with yam, palm wine (nkwu enu) and a cock goes to the canopy of his in-laws)*

Leader of the in-laws: We thank you for the kola and the water for washing down the kola nuts which you presented to us. You know a person on a journey does not stop until he reaches his destination. We came for a purpose, and that is why we are presenting these items to inform you that we are ready to commence this ceremony.

ChiefHost: *(Receiving the items)* Thank you. *(He hands them over to his kinsmen, who scrutinize them)*. This goat is malnourished. It is not worth our expectation. They should take it back and bring a bigger and well fed one.

Leader of the in-laws: Laughs *(We understand your objections. However, we are augmenting the malnourished goat with this token. (hands some money to the eldest man who counts and reply)*

Eldest man: This is a sign that this marriage will last long. Negotiations and agreements without much stress is the hallmark of staying together. We accept the money for augmenting the goat as a sign of goodwill and healthy relationship with our in-laws.

It teaches that in life and marriage, disagreement must be resolved amicably. Again, we must not be rigid in our thinking or life. That life is a give and take situation. If you bend for me, I bend for you. Life goes on.

As they go back to their canopy, the bride's mother accompanied by her friends come out to greet their visitors. Most times, the popular sweet mother by Prince Nico Mbaraga is played for her. She dances around the canopies briefly before exiting. The bride, accompanied by bridesmaids comes out for the first time to greet her quests. She dances round the canopies as she is appreciated by her guests who spray her money. After her first appearance, she goes back inside the house to change into another costume before coming out again.

This time, she dances straight to her father's canopy where the father will give her wine to look for her husband and bring him to him. This is the climax of the celebration. If she returns the glass with the drink, the ceremony will end abruptly, signifying she rejected the groom, but if she finds him and returns an empty cup with her husband, the ceremony continues. She kneels down with her husband in front of her father to receive the drink:

Father of the bride: *(Pours wine into a glass cup and hands it over to her)*

Adam, take this drink, look for your husband. If you find him, bring him here, this ceremony will continue, but if you return the drink to me, then our visitors will rise and go home.

Bride: (rises, accompanied by her bridesmaids, dances around the canopies, looking for her husband. Most of the time she is taunted by some members of the audience who stretch out their hands demanding the drink but she dances away in search of her husband who may have gone to hide in another canopy. This is palpable anxiety if the search becomes long. Eventually, when she finds him, kneels down and hands him the drink. He joyfully drinks the wine as she is still kneeling down and after wards assist the bride in getting up as they dance to his in-laws canopy to be blessed:

*(Bride and groom are kneeling down as the father blesses them).*

Father in law: It is difficult and challenging to give your daughter in marriage. However, since a father will not marry his daughter and it is obligatory, we must succumb to the calling. Today is indeed a great day because it gives a great hope that another family is being made through us to the glory of God.

We are happy and not afraid because by God's grace, we brought her up well. We are confident that she will be a good wife, mother and great companion to her husband, just like her mother is to me. Our prayer is that god will be the foundation of your union. He will bless you with children; both male and female as well sustain you I Jesus name, Amen. *(The both stand up and dance to their seat).*

The final stage of the ceremony is the handing over of the bride to her husband. Significantly, the bride is not handed over to the husband but to a go between, onye aka ebe, who in turn hands over to the father in law or the leader of the team.

Father of the bride: I am handing over my daughter to you as tradition demands. Take her as your daughter and treat her as one of your own. May God bless this marriage in Jesus mighty name, Amen.

Onye Aka Ebe: *(To the father in law or the leader of the team)* Your ears are not blocked. As the tradition demands, I am handing over your wife to you. Take care of her as your daughter. I don't want to be involved in settling quarrels but to share in the joys and happiness of the family. They shall enjoy a peaceful and fruitful marriage in Jesus name, Amen.

Father in law: My in-laws, I want to thank you for accepting and trusting us. This is journey shall be like a flowing stream that will not dry. We shall take care of your daughter and she will take care of us. They shall be fruitful and happy.

The lessons from the above scene are very clear. Instead of handing over his daughter to her husband, she was handed over first to the "Onye aka ebe" (the go between) who in turn handed her over to the father in law. This shows that a woman in Arondizuogu is not only married to her husband but to the whole family. Again, the father in laws has more experience in marital affairs and should guide the young couple to stabilize. Not necessarily interfering in their marital life but act as a role model. The onye aka also made it clear that he will not be interested in being called to

settle quarrels, admonishing the young couples to live in peace and harmony

### **Conclusion**

The research methodology, which is ethnography and the empty space theory, helped the researcher in locating and properly identifying the didactic as well as the dramatic elements in traditional marriage in Arondizuogu. The researcher was present at the marriage ceremony used as case study. The father in laws compound (Empty Space) served as the stage, the arena for the ceremony and reception venue. The invited quests and family members from both families served as the audience. The dress of the bridal team and their accompaniments are the costume, properties and make up. There was music and dance to make the traditional marriage ceremony a total theatre.

### **Works Cited**

- Brook Peter. *The Empty Space*. Touchstone Rockefeller Center. New York. 1968
- Ironafe Ndubuisi. Cultural and Social Activities in Arondizuogu upto 2000. An unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Department of History, Abia State University, Uturu. 2023.
- Mahmud Memunat Olayemi. A Study of the Yoruba Traditional Marriage as a Rite Of Passage. International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions Vol.10, No.1, pp.40-52, 2021. <<https://www.eajournals.org>> Accessed 24/12/23
- Negin Djavaheerian Not Nothingness: Peter Brook's 'Empty Space' And Its Architecture 2012
- Nwabude, A. A. R. (2022). Traditional African (the Igbo) Marriage Customs & the Influence of the Western Culture: Marxist Approach. Open Journal of Social Sciences, 10, 224-239. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2022.102016>
- Odunayo, Alowolodu O., Olusanya, O. Oyewole. "Traditional Marriage Customs and Marital Stability among Married People in Yoruba Ethnic Group" IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 24, Issue 5, Ser. 1 (May. 2019) 23-27 DOI: 10.9790/0837-2405012327 [www.iosrjournals.org](http://www.iosrjournals.org) accessed 12/12/23
- Ogoma, Daniel Ebu. "Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System" Journal of Social Sciences and Public Affairs. Volume 4, Number 1, 2014 <[www.eprints.lmu.edu.ng](http://www.eprints.lmu.edu.ng)> Accessed 05/05/24
- Oti E.O. Nigerian Peoples and Cultures: An Incisive and Analytical Compendium. Social-Edge Associates, Olodi Apapa Lagos 2005.
- Ryan T. Anderson. Marriage: What It Is, Why It Matters, and the Consequences of Redefining It BACKGROUNDER | NO. 2775 March 11, 2013 <<http://www.report.heritage.org/bg2775>>