

THE PERCEPTION OF SAME SEX MARRIAGE IN IGBO CULTURE.

REVD. FR. DR. CHRISTIAN O. ELE.

**General Studies Division,
Enugu State University of Science & Technology,
Agbani, Enugu State.**

Email: boomdrchris@gmail.com

Phone No: +2348063667566

Abstract

Human sexuality as a private affair is fast becoming history. In contemporary trends, individuals and groups are openly professing their sex identities, choices and tendencies. These dispositions or deviations influence marriage sex preferences. The debate to justify or condemn same sex marriage is sweeping across cultures and continents. This paper investigates traditional Igbo society to find out whether same sex marriage is a fact inherent in it or whether it is foreign to it. The findings will help put gender choice in marriage in Igbo culture in its correct perspective to the outside world. The anxiety that surrounds the future of homosexual or heterosexual choice in marriage is calmed more by enculturation based on Igbo cosmology than by pressure, advertisement and acculturation that tend to promote and enhance sex identities and activities by western influences and prejudices. The methodology employed in this study is historico-descriptive. This means that marriage as a social fact among the Igbo is described and interpreted in the context of the people's cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Perception, marriage, same sex marriage, culture, Igbo culture*

Introduction

The secret or private decorum associated with human sexuality in most cultures and civilizations has been exposed by the currency of contemporary perceptions of human freedoms. The platforms of information explosions have made discussions on and debates over gender issues and sexuality occupy prominent stages in the auditorium of public domain. A lot of issues on human sexuality are no longer secrets nor do they enjoy privacy status anymore. This is one of the consequences of communication technologies at the service of human freedom.

Human sexuality has been expressed variously under the shades of paedophilia, homosexuality, necrophilia, bestiality, voyeurism, lesbianism, rape, exhibitionism, heterosexuality, masturbation, *et cetera*. Each expression has advocates, associates and complexities; each has equally contentious debates over its justification and condemnation. These orientations, dispositions or deviations influence one's marriage choice as either heterosexual or homosexual.

The Igbo of Southern Nigeria have marriage as a critical social institution. Marriage is a way of life among the Igbo. As a social group, marriage is a consistency in

their interactions as a people. It functions the legitimacy of sexual union, familyhood, lineage, parenthood, paternity and maternity. The disturbing question is: Does same sex marriage exist in Igbo culture? This paper strives to offer an answer by its effort to discover whether same sex marital union is a fact inherent in Igbo culture or whether it is foreign to it. To achieve this, the work discusses marriage in Igbo culture and same sex marriage as perceived in Igbo culture. It also offers some recommendations to help uphold the beauty of the original nature of marriage among Igbo people. It finally draws some conclusions based on the entire work.

Marriage in Igbo Culture.

Marriage is a necessary social practice in Igboland.

In the words of Akalonu (1987:9):

Marriage is a very important institution among the Igbo. It is one of the most important events in the life of every Igbo. His birth and his death are significant events but he plays no active part in them. Title-taking enhances his prestige and gives him a high social position-but he is free to take it or not. Marriage for him on the other hand, is essentially necessary for his life. It is not only that human nature demands it, it is a duty he owes to his family and society at large.

Marriage is so vital that when one cannot afford its economic costs, his family and friends help him but when he avoids it, he is deemed irresponsible. Hence perpetual bachelorhood and spinsterhood are frowned at in traditional Igbo society.

In Igbo culture, one can identify monogamy and polygamy as basic forms of marriage. Unlike in Christianity where monogamy is the ideal, polygamy is the ideal in Igbo traditional society. However in practice polygamy is not taken as absolute because only the wealthy can afford it. Besides, some preferred monogamy to polygamy in Igbo cultural milieu even before the advent of Christianity. Monogamy is a credible specimen of marriage whose status is not diminished nor tarnished by the appeals of polygamy. A great number were compelled to embrace polygamy by circumstance of family history such as barrenness. Akalonu (1987:11) apply puts it thus:

Some people are forced to engage in it when a marriage fails, and to fail means that no procreation is possible with the first wife. This situation is sometimes remedied by a form of marriage called “woman marriage”. In this “marriage” a barren but wealthy woman performs all the marriage requirements and ‘marries’ another woman for her husband, she regards the children coming from this arrangement as her own and cares and provides their needs with so much intimacy.

Levirate marriage exists too in Igbo culture. This is “displayed through widow-inherited marriage – that is, marriage of a brother or other close kinsman of a deceased man to his widow. ‘Taking over’ (*ikuchi nwunye*), as it is called, means that a man, upon the death of his brother, will acquire his brother’s wife” (Iroegbu, 2007:3). Marriage among the Igbo is achieved through some processes described vividly by Iroegbu (2011:1) in these words:

Marriage begins with the seeking stage, expands into the initially approved social exchange transactions and it ends with the rite of

taking a wife home to settle down and begin to live life according to the expected kinship roles and alliances. Marriage in this society therefore finds its foundation in the predominant folk theory of kinship, which brings culturally – designed exchange symbols, beliefs, and gender aspects greatly into play.

Igbo society is one of male dominance. The family structure is largely patrilineal without prejudice to dots of matriarchy found to exist in insignificantly few areas.

Same sex Marriage as perceived in Igbo culture

It is becoming increasingly a phenomenon of interest to investigate the practices and orientations of human sexuality and gender preferences in most cultures in the world. In context, we focus on Igbo culture. The Igbo world view harps emphasis on the essential balances between complimentary duality of masculine (*Oke*) and feminine (*nwunye/nwanyi*) principles. The absence of equilibrium between the two principles breeds havoc, disorder and abnormality. In the words of Nwoye (2011:309):

Igbo cosmology places emphasis on the importance of striking a balance between masculine and feminine principles. The great deities are....Chukwu, the Sky-father above, and Ani, the Earth mother below..... The belief among the Igbo is that the two principles are needed and in the right balance in their contributions to the welfare of humans. In some expositions of Igbo religion, its core is the polarity between Chukwu and Ana (or Ani) – a polarity in which both poles are, necessarily, crucial. In this way, the belief is that cosmological imbalance of male and female, Chukwu and Ani causes drought or disease. This means that for the Igbo both sky and earth must cooperate to bring forth crops.

In the anthropological world, the Igbo identify male and female genders whose balance and complementarity are celebrated in marriage, *Alum di na nwunye*, the union of a man (husband) and a woman (wife).

However, Igwe (2009:1) argues for the existence of same sex marriage in Igbo culture, thus:

In a situation where a woman has no son or no child, if the husband dies, it is culturally allowed for her to marry a wife. And in this case she becomes the husband. Like in every case of marriage, this woman goes out, inquires and gets a wife of her choice. She pays her dowry and fulfills other traditional rites as it is done when a man is marrying a woman. After that, the woman brings her “wife” home and they start living together as “husband” and “wife”. Nobody frowns at it.

In the same vein, Igbanoi (2013:1) reports that:

Under the custom, according to Igbo for instance, a woman who has been married for several years without a child is permitted to choose

a young fertile bride, pay her bride price and ‘marry’ her with the full compliments of a properly traditional wedding. The new bride would then do the bidding of her female “husband”, which is essentially to procreate through her husband. This is said to be common amongst the Onitsha people of Anambra State. Another form of this kind of marriage is when a man has all female children and he gets old, his wife is allowed to ‘marry’ another woman. But in this situation, the woman may start bearing children by other close relations of the family and not necessarily the aged husband.

The customs or cultural practices as cited above have come under serious criticisms which show that they are not same sex marriages. They do not satisfy the character and characterization of same sex marriages as found in those cultures that practice and advertise them. In Igbo society, a woman who “married” another woman has the motive behind her action as the very essence and significance of marriage in Igbo culture namely: *Eziechina, Obiechina, Obodochina, Amaechina, Afamefuna* – family/lineage continuity. It is grossly undesirable among the Igbo to have relational poverty (*Mgbenye* that is, *enweghi mmadu*) where a family has few or no persons for generational continuity. It is an honest prayer of the Igbo person that his/her family line does not go into extinction and neither should his/her “*compound grow weeds*” as it is metaphorically put. She married the “wife” for a man who handles the aspect of the male factor in procreation. She did not marry the bride for her pleasure.

The “wife” so married maintains the decorum and ethics associated with marital status in Igboland. She maintains the male sex partner as arranged in order to achieve the purity of family blood in the offsprings. In same sex or gay marriage properly so called, procreation is ruled out and they marry each other for pleasure exclusively. In Igbo culture, the woman does not marry her fellow woman for herself-it is for a man who is either alive or dead, who is the husband. The children born under this arrangement bear the name of the man even when he had died.

There are instances where a friend, a relation-man or woman have helped a poor man contract or covenant marriage in Igbo society. The bride does not become the wife of he, she or they who paid her dowry or bride price rather she is the wife of the poor man in whose name she was married. A dimension of this is seen too in the examples of marriage by proxy. In like manner, the woman who married her is not her husband even if she cares for the children as a responsible man would do. The offsprings of the marriage do not bear the name of either the one who paid their mother’s bride price or the name of the person who put their mother in the family way but the name of the man in whose name the marriage was sealed. And as such, it is in his lineage that they take their legitimacy. So in Igbo traditional society, there is no traditional marriage between a woman and a woman *qua tale* but between a man and a woman. Same sex marriage is not an affair that concerns women only. Men too are involved in gay marriage. In Igboland, a man does not marry a man.

In Igbo traditional society, it has never be seen, heard or known that, a man married a man. In line with this fact and reacting to Igwe’s position cited above, Mezu (2013:2) wrote:

Leo Igwe is definitely wrong in suggesting that there is a tradition of same gender marriage in Igbo land. In my short life and I am nearing

seventy years, I have never seen, heard or witnessed or even read about the union of a man and a man in traditional Igbo society not in fairy tales, not in real life, not even in dreams. We must rush to denounce Leo Igwe's mis-characterization of Igbo society and marriage. The union of a man and a man does not exist in Igbo society. That notion must be swept under the carpet, in fact, buried deeply under the earth with the indelible sign: **DO NOT EXCAVATE.**

It is an abomination (*aru*) in Igbo culture for a man to become pregnant. It is a taboo (*nso ala*) for a man to marry another man as homosexuals and a woman to marry another woman as lesbians. According to Murray (2012:4):

A woman marrying another woman for her husband is not the same as a woman marrying a woman and sleeping with her, or a man marrying a man and sleeping with him. That is an abomination. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of homosexuality-a perversion. If God wanted two men or two women to marry each other, he could have created Adam and Steve.

Strictly speaking, since Adam and Eve, human cultures and civilizations abhor same sex marriages. It is not human cultures nor natural justice but human laws that approve same sex marriage. In Nigeria recently, the federal Parliaments resisted pressures from western countries and passed law against same sex marriage. The strongest argument against same sex marriage is culture-based. The majority leader in the House of Representatives, Hon. Mulikat Adeola-Akande (PDP, Oyo) argued that: "it is alien to our society and culture and it must not be imported. Our religions abhor it and our culture has no place for it" (Nwosu and Akunn, 2012: 2). The Federal Government of Nigeria has outlawed same sex marriage and prescribed 14 years imprisonment for offenders. Those who witness, assist or support such marriages are criminalized; those who make public displays of identities, choices, orientations of same sex relationships and gay affections are liable to jail terms. Same sex marriage is foreign to Igbo culture; it is illegal, immoral and abhorred in Igbo traditional society.

According to Onuche (2013:98), same sex marriage is incompatible with the inherent nature of marriage. Unitive and complimentary components of marriage cannot be satisfied by gay unions.

In his words:

Two constituent parts reside within marriage. The first is unitive, when two become one. Homosexuals cannot, by definition, satisfy this requirement. Secondly, marriage includes openness towards procreation. Homosexual sex violates the law of complementarity, whereby male and female, while sexually different, are indeed complementary. Homosexual sex has no procreative value, and thereby negates marriage's second component. Marriage is based on the fact that we are male and female – two halves of a complete, life-giving whole – and that this life-giving power is inherent in heterosexual intercourse. This ability to transmit life is what invests marriage with its transcendent, moral, cultural and social significance.

Among the Igbo, the traditional or conservative view is absolute. In the eyes of her culture and citizens, same sex marriage is abnormal, the orientation is seen as a grave havoc and the behaviour is understood as completely unhealthy and unwholesome. Unfortunately, the opposing liberal view which holds that homosexuality is a normal genetical condition, that gays are born *as gays* and homosexual behaviour is natural for those so oriented has no approval in the social thought of Nigerians. What is held as biological evidence is that same sex unions reveal a disorder and it “represents a tendency to want to use body parts for some purpose other than that for which they were designed” (Onuche, 2013:97).

Again, in liberal terms, homosexuals argue that they should have equal rights with others in the heterosexual orientations. For them any society and governments that legislate against their marriages are denying them their legitimate civil rights. In Igbo land, bad behaviour is not counted as a component of human rights. Same sex union is a taboo equal in pungency with murder, stealing, adultery, incest, etc.

On another line of thought, homosexuals hold that since heterosexual partners who are barren can adopt children, they too can do the same (Milbank, 2013: 1-3). Traditional Igbo society does not celebrate barrenness and neither does she smile at adoption of babies as linked with *technologization of child birth* found in western schemes. Typical traditional Igbo families do not go into heterosexual marriages in order to *rear* other people’s children but rather to *bear* and *rear* their own.

Recommendations

Based on the above discourse, the following recommendations are proffered:

- i. There is need for a strict implementation of the anti-gay laws as made by the federal Government of Nigeria in order to ensure compliance by her citizens or non-indigenes found to live within her territory.
- ii. The traditional institutions in Igbo land and other ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria should uphold the marriage institution as inherited from their ancestors as heterosexual – male and female.
- iii. The social media that advertise gay unions and deviants’ sex choices to people should be totally prohibited and their providers criminalized.
- iv. Religious Leaders in Nigeria, namely: Christians, African Traditional practitioners and Moslems should teach their adherents to follow the divine will in their marriage choices, as God created the first couple as male and female.
- v. The Igbo people and other Nigerians who are in diaspora or who by travels or legitimate circumstances must interact with people from other cultures and civilizations should eschew the illegitimate outcomes of such social encounters such as gay marriages.

Conclusion

Human cultures are dynamic; it changes or can change over time. At a point in the history of the Igbo, twins were killed as their births were seen as a taboo. In the ancient times, suicide victims were thrown into the evil forests. Today, many communities have no forests let alone evil ones, so they now bury those who took their lives by themselves. Similarly, the marginalization of the *Osu* has diminished or has been destroyed in the wake of contemporary understanding. So many are the examples of cultural practices held firmly in the past in Igbo land but today are regarded as obsolete. The dynamism of

culture does not negate the truth or the inherent values which such cultural indices protect. So in the case of same sex marriage, it has no future in Igbo society because it tends to kill the highly esteemed cultural value of procreation that places much premium on offspring, *nwa* (*nwaka*, *Nwaka-ego*, *Nwaka-aku*) (a child is more precious than money, wealth), *mmaduka* (the human person out-values material things), *Nwadimkpa* (a child is important in the family/society) *nwabisi* (a child is very noble), *Nwanegbo* (the birth of a child settles quarrels, wipes out tears), *nwabundo* (a child is a banner/shelter), *nwabuogo* (a child is divine favour, and so on).

The Igbo have from antiquity put structures of tribe's preservation and generation in heterosexual marriage preference to ensure continuity. This cultural index is rooted in her cosmology of complimentary duality of male-female principles. The missionaries who evangelize the Igbo should see heterosexual identities of marriage partners in Igbo culture as *praeparatio evangelica* for the gospel and *logos spermatikos* in male and female, God created them (Genesis 1: 27) which the Igbo practised before they saw and read the Bible.

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