

PERCEPTIONS AND IMPACTS OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CUSTOMS IN ABOH MBAISE, IMO STATE

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Abstract

Traditional marriage bride wealth holds profound cultural significance in the Aboh Mbaise community of southeastern Nigeria. Notably, the practice of bride wealth payment in traditional marriages among the Aboh Mbaise people has been shrouded in misconceptions and exaggerated perceptions, distorting its true cultural significance and creating barriers to understanding. This study aimed to critically examine the perceptions and impacts surrounding bride wealth in Aboh Mbaise traditional marriages. The objectives were to explore the cultural and historical context, understand the processes and rituals involved, challenge prevalent myths, and investigate the impacts of these customs on the community. The study highlighted the variability and contextualized nature of bride wealth negotiations within Aboh Mbaise, and discovers that the notion of high bride wealth held about the Aboh Mbaise people is a mere perception that has negatively affected the young ladies of the communities and prospective husbands, breaking love relationships and ruining lives. Additionally, the study reveals that traditional marriage rites in Aboh Mbaise is not in any way different from what obtains in many other Igbo communities in south-east Nigeria. The study, therefore, contends that this outdated perspective no longer aligns with contemporary realities. There has been a transformative shift, and it is imperative that Mbaise ladies are viewed through this updated lens. The study recommends promotion of cultural understanding, modernizing traditions, fostering accurate information dissemination, and cultivating a more inclusive community where traditional values coexist harmoniously with contemporary realities.

Keywords: Traditional marriage, Bride wealth, Perception, Impact; Aboh-Mbaise

Introduction

This research work began amidst the whispers and judgments that swirled around the identity of Mbaise ladies, particularly the perceived extravagance associated with their bride wealth. Many Mbaise ladies have experienced firsthand the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding their marriage customs. It does appear that men's hesitance to solemnization in the course courtship relationships involving Mbaise ladies is consequent upon the perceived high cost of their bride wealth. The recurring narrative has been the widely held belief that Mbaise bride wealth are exorbitant, perhaps the highest in the entire southeast region. This prevalent perception is rooted in historical narrative that Mbaise parents sought to recoup the investments made in

raising their daughters through bride wealth. This pervasive perception has given rise to a stereotype against Mbaise ladies, with the assumption that their marriages are deterred solely by the alleged costliness of their bride wealth. It is essential to note that these notions are often perpetuated by individuals lacking an understanding of Mbaise traditions, relying on hearsay rather than accurate information. The stereotyping has, at times, created a sense of unease and frustration, prompting reflections on the need to address and correct these prevailing impressions.

This study seeks to investigate the perception surrounding Mbaise marriage customs with the view to matching this prevailing perception with contemporary reality as it concerns traditional marriage custom in the culture area. The misconceptions surrounding high bride wealth in traditional marriage customs in Aboh Mbaise have far-reaching consequences, impacting personal relationships and perpetuating stereotypes. It is against this backdrop that the study seeks to carry out this study in order to address this misconception. The study will further investigate how this stereotyping has affected Mbaise ladies in their in love relationships. This will enable for constructive recommendations in line with contemporary traditional marriage requirements in other Igbo/African culture areas.

Aboh Mbaise in Historical and Cultural Perspectives

Traditionally, Aboh Mbaise was a collection of autonomous villages, each with its own distinct identity and leadership structure. These villages eventually coalesced into a unified entity known as Aboh Mbaise due to shared cultural practices, language, and common ancestry. The community is known for its strong sense of independence and resilience, having fiercely defended its territory throughout its history. Some of the towns within Aboh Mbaise include *Nguru*, *Uvuru*, *Mbutu*, *Okwuato*, *Lorji*, *Amuzu*, and *Enyiogugu*. Njoku, (2003).

Aboh-Mbaise has rich cultural value. Nguru, in particular, celebrates its *Itu aka Nguru Uboma ahia ise* cultural festival every year in February. *Itu Aka Nguru Uboma Ahia Ise* is held at *Nguru Centre* mostly last Saturday of February each year. The ceremonies start with the *Ike Aka* and continue with the *Egwu Onwa*. *Itu aka Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise* is a celebration that dates back in history. *Itu Aka* means "pointing out" or showing. In the days when *Nguru* and his children settled in *Nguru Land*, farming was the main occupation of the people and was done by shifting cultivation, whereby the people would farm in one area in one year and move to another area another year. The ceremony used to be a religious and traditional ceremony by which the elders and priests of *Nguru* will kick start the planting season by offering sacrifices and "pointing out" or "showing" to the people, which part of the forest they will farm that year. The ceremonies start with the *Ike Aka Ceremony*, followed by the *Igwo Onwa* which comes up one week later, and finally, the *Itu Aka Ceremony* which is the grand finale Njoku, (2003).

Culturally, the Aboh Mbaise people share many similarities with other Igbo subgroups, such as a strong emphasis on extended family ties, respect for elders, and a deep reverence for ancestral traditions. However, they have also developed unique cultural practices that set them apart from their neighbours. One of the most defining aspects of Aboh Mbaise culture is their intricate system of traditional marriage (Agulanna, 1999). Among the Aboh Mbaise, marriage was a significant milestone for a man, as it qualified him to be considered responsible amongst his kinsmen and was the first step towards being considered an elder (other qualifications include age, a wealth of experience, the courage to speak the truth at all times, etc.). It was uncommon to find an elder who

was not married. Even when a man lost a wife to death, he was expected to have other wives, thanks to the practice of polygamy, or remarry if he had only one wife.

In pre-colonial Aboh Mbaise society, marriage was governed by unwritten laws and social norms that dictated who could marry, where they could marry, the conditions, as well as the rights and obligations of the husband and wife, including property rights and inheritance. Marriage held a highly esteemed position, and all adults who had reached puberty were expected to marry. The Aboh Mbaise people, like all Igbo people, did not accept celibacy, as it was seen as contrary to societal and natural laws. Marriage between relatives was prohibited, and great efforts were made to ensure that potential couples had no biological kinship ties (P. Ozoemina, personal communication, April 14, 2024). Undoubtedly, marriage among the Aboh Mbaise represented the foundation of the social structure of society, reflected in the arts, music, and general cultural practices of the people. Marriage defined relationships for both the bride and the groom, as well as for their offspring. Therefore, marriage was regarded as an obligation, a duty to society. A man who was of marriageable age was considered fully responsible when he took a wife, while an unmarried man who passed the age of marriage was considered worthless (*efulefu*) among his kinsmen. If a man remained unmarried until death, he was buried without the traditional rites accorded to his peers. On the other hand, marriage was the ultimate expectation of every "ripe" woman. From the age of eighteen to about 25, a woman was considered "ripe" for marriage. Beyond this age, anxiety and stigma set in not only for the woman but also for the whole family, especially the mother. The anxiety and stigma derived from the belief that females from good and respected families easily attracted suitors. To a large extent, an unmarried "ripe" female was seen as lacking good character, home training, or not being from a good family, which was considered shameful and an indictment on the mother, who was expected to provide her daughter with the expected home training (K. Otuoye, personal communication, April 14, 2024).

Socio-economic Significance of Traditional Marriage Custom and its Criticism in Aboh Mbaise

Traditional marriage refers to a marriage ceremony and union that is conducted in accordance with the established customs, rituals, and practices of a particular cultural or ethnic group. These ceremonies often incorporate traditional beliefs, ceremonies, and symbols that have been passed down through generations. The Aboh Mbaise community has a profound connection to the traditional institution of marriage, and this institution serves as a cornerstone in shaping the social structure of the society.

Bride wealth, also known as bride price or bride token, is a customary payment made by the groom or his family to the family of the bride as part of the marriage process. It is a prevalent practice in various cultures around the world and is often seen as a sign of respect, a way of establishing social bonds, and, in some cases, a form of compensation to the bride's family for the loss of her labour or as a token of goodwill. In Aboh Mbaise culture, as well as in other African societies, the bride wealth represents the transfer of physical currency or goods from the groom to the bride's family at the time of the marriage agreement. This exchange symbolizes the groom's acquisition of rights to the bride's labour and reproductive abilities (Anderson, 2007). Consequently, parental consent, familial involvement, and payment of the bride wealth are universally recognized as the foundational elements that legitimize and fortify the marital bond, ensuring its longevity and

authenticity. The acceptance of the bride wealth not only signifies the mutual endorsement of the marriage by both parties but also underscores the active participation of both sets of parents in its solemnization.

The traditional marriage customs of the Aboh Mbaise people have had a profound significance on various aspects of the community's social, cultural, and economic life. These significances are multifaceted and extend beyond the immediate context of marriage itself. Socially, the traditional marriage customs have played a crucial role in reinforcing the intricate web of familial and communal bonds within the Aboh Mbaise society. The practice of bride wealth, for instance, serves as a symbolic and tangible link between the families of the bride and groom, fostering a sense of unity and cooperation. Furthermore, the various rituals and ceremonies associated with traditional marriages strengthen the community's sense of identity and cultural pride.

Culturally, the traditional marriage customs act as a repository of the Aboh Mbaise people's rich heritage, values, and belief systems. These customs encapsulate the community's worldview, spirituality, and respect for ancestral traditions. These factors, particularly the bride wealth, hold immense significance in the context of a genuine Aboh Mbaise traditional marriage. They epitomize the complete realization and preservation of Aboh Mbaise cultural heritage, serving as prerequisites before the bride and groom can be formally recognized as husband and wife in accordance with native customs and laws. The bride wealth therefore, stands as the singular marital right universally acknowledged in Igbo tradition to formalize marriage; without it, a marriage is deemed incomplete. Its symbolic importance is such that children born of the union are not acknowledged by the groom's family until the bride wealth is settled. Furthermore, the bride wealth acts as a ceremonial purifier, cleansing any stigma or dishonor from the woman upon her legal union with her husband. It bestows upon her a sense of honor and communal worth within her husband's household and family circle. It also provides a sense of security and respect, as she cannot be arbitrarily expelled from her marital home except in cases of extreme marital discord, where the bride wealth must be returned to the groom's family before she can consider remarriage. Even in situations of abuse, the woman's departure from the marriage hinges on the return and acceptance of the bride wealth by the groom's family. Failure to accept the refund may lead to legal complexities, where any children born of the woman thereafter are still considered legally affiliated with the first husband. By adhering to these customs, the Aboh Mbaise people ensure the preservation and transmission of their cultural legacy to future generations, safeguarding their unique identity in an ever-changing world.

Economically, the practice of bride wealth has had a significant impact on the financial dynamics within the Aboh Mbaise community. While the bride wealth itself is not intended as a commercial transaction, the exchange of valuable items and cash has influenced economic patterns and resource allocation among families. Additionally, the ceremonies and festivities associated with traditional marriages have created opportunities for various economic activities, such as the production and sale of traditional crafts, food, and beverages.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the significance of traditional marriage customs in Aboh Mbaise is not without its challenges and criticisms. This cherished practice has become ensnared in a web of misconceptions and stereotypes, specifically concerning the bride **wealth**,

leading to a complex problem that warrants comprehensive investigation. The primary criticism under scrutiny in this study is the perpetuation of misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding the cost of bride wealth in traditional marriage customs among the Aboh Mbaise people. A pervasive belief exists, both within and beyond the Aboh Mbaise community, that bride wealth in this region is exorbitant and financially burdensome. Historically, Aboh Mbaise parents are believed to want to recoup their investments in their daughters through high bride wealth. These Misconceptions and myths surrounding the cost of marrying an Mbaise lady have proliferated, blurring the line between reality and fiction over the years. Some argue that the perceived commoditization of women through bride wealth perpetuate gender inequalities and reinforce patriarchal structures within the community. This exaggerated perception may deter potential suitors from seeking marital relationships within the Aboh Mbaise community and consequently hinder the forging of cross-cultural bonds. Again, there is a failure to recognize the significant variability in bride wealth within the Aboh Mbaise community. Bride wealth varies based on factors such as the families involved, their socio-economic status, and the negotiation process. However, these misconceptions often disregard the dynamic nature of these customs and present a one-size-fits-all narrative. Furthermore, these misconceptions have a profound impact on personal relationships and marital decisions. Potential suitors may be dissuaded from pursuing relationships due to these exaggerated perceptions, thereby undermining the potential for meaningful unions and cultural exchange. The problem extends to the perpetuation of stereotypes that paint an incomplete and often inaccurate picture of traditional marriage customs in Aboh Mbaise. These stereotypes may further hinder cultural understanding and cohesion. The problem is compounded by a lack of accessible and accurate information that could serve to dispel these misconceptions. This information gap contributes to the perpetuation of these stereotypes and inhibits potential suitors from making informed decisions.

Despite these criticisms, the traditional marriage customs of the Aboh Mbaise people remain deeply ingrained in the community's fabric and continue to shape their social, cultural, and economic landscape. As with any long-standing tradition, there is a constant need for reflection, adaptation, and striking a balance between preserving cultural heritage and addressing contemporary societal concerns. Addressing these misconceptions is crucial to promoting a more accurate understanding of traditional marriage customs in Aboh-Mbaise.

Continuities and Change in Aboh Mbaise Traditional Marriage Custom

The culture of bride wealth as one of the most commonly accepted systems of marriage in Igbo communities is usually based on the customs, religion, and traditions of the people. In Aboh Mbaise, bride wealth is a very crucial rite of marriage, without which it is believed that marriage has not taken place. While it is true that bride wealth is a part of the traditional marriage process, this custom has evolved, and a new reality has emerged. Traditional customs and practices evolve over time. While some elements of the traditional marriage process remain intact, others have adapted to modern realities. The practice of bride wealth in Aboh Mbaise continues to evolve in response to changing social, economic, and cultural dynamics. While traditional customs and rituals remain an integral part of the marriage process, bride wealth is negotiated and it has undergone significant transformations over time. In contemporary Aboh Mbaise society, bride wealth negotiations are often conducted through a combination of traditional and modern means. While some families still adhere strictly to customary practices, others may incorporate monetary

payments or other modern assets into the bride wealth exchange. Additionally, the role of women in bride wealth negotiations has evolved, with many brides actively participating in the process and advocating for their own interests.

Despite these changes, the underlying principles of bride wealth in Aboh Mbaise remain consistent. It is still viewed as a symbol of respect, honor, and commitment towards the bride and her family, signaling the groom's readiness to assume his responsibilities as a husband and provider. Moreover, bride wealth continues to serve as a means of strengthening familial bonds and fostering social cohesion within the community. While the practice of bride wealth may vary from one family to another, its significance within the cultural context of Aboh Mbaise remains undiminished. It continues to be upheld as a cherished tradition, symbolizing the enduring values and traditions of the community.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the perceptions and impacts of traditional marriage customs in Aboh Mbaise, Imo State. It has demonstrated the enduring significance of bride wealth as a symbol of respect, honor, and commitment within the community, while also acknowledging the need to address prevalent myths and misconceptions that distort its true nature. The study's exploration of the cultural, historical, and socio-economic dimensions of traditional marriage customs, has underscored the importance of preserving cultural heritage and promoting mutual understanding within the community. Furthermore, the issue of high bride wealth has been established to be contextual, varying between individuals, families, and communities. It is crucial not to generalize these experiences, as they are influenced by diverse factors. The study informs that the ideology surrounding Mbaise marriage customs and bride wealth is not as rigid as commonly perceived. The dynamics have evolved significantly. The study, however, reveals the need for ongoing dialogue and engagements to ensure that traditional practices remain relevant and adaptable to changing circumstances. As Aboh Mbaise continues to evolve in response to modernization and globalization, it is essential to strike a balance between preserving cultural traditions and embracing positive change. Community leaders and elders can encourage a collaborative approach to traditional marriage customs, allowing for more open communication and flexibility within the negotiation process. By fostering open communication, promoting cultural exchange, and addressing misconceptions, we can cultivate a more inclusive and harmonious community where traditional marriage customs thrive alongside contemporary values.

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