

MARRIAGE BRIDE PRICE AS A WOMAN AUTHORITY AND THE IMPLICATION OF NON-PAYMENT OF BRIDE PRICE IN MBAISE

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Abstract

In Igboland, bride price payment is symbolic in Igbo traditional marriage which pronounces man and woman husband and wife. It does not matter how much to be paid; especially in Mbaise of Imo State, the official amount paid as bride price is sixty naira (₦ 60) till date. However, non-payment of bride price poses a threat in the community, especially after the death of a woman whose bride price has not been paid. The study aims to ascertain the payment of bride price as women's authority in Igbo marriage and the implication of non-payment of bride price. The study adopts survey design and oral interview for the collection of data. The data were collected from a sample of adult citizens from the three local government areas of Mbaise town, all in Imo State. A total number of 40 adults (20 women and 20 men) were involved in the study. The analysis of the data is based on the interpretation of answers, statements and comments of the respondents and not based on quantitative variables. The finding reveals that bride price payment is an honor to a woman among her women folk, including the entire community, and the power to become an authorized member of the community into which she is married and the payment of bride price is not in any way for the commercialization of a woman. The finding also reveals that non-payment of bride price in Igbo marriage is seen as equivalent to stealing. The study recommends that marriage bride price should be paid before man and woman cohabit as husband and wife, to avoid wanton disturbances emanating from non-payment of bride price.

Keywords: Bride price, commercialization, culture, marriage and women authority

Introduction

Payment of bride price gives women the authority to be bonified members in her husband family, village or community. It is a symbol of women's authority, dignity, respect, value and legality of marriage. Marriage is not just a union, but a legal union between man and woman to be husband and wife. What made the union legal is the payment of the bride price and the fulfillment of all the demands of the bride's family by the groom's family. Since marriage is patrilocal, the payment of bride price gives the woman the authority to be a bonified member of her husband's family, village or community. The concept of payment of bride price of woman amongst others accord respect to the woman and dignity to the couples, this also legalizes and establishes the legitimacy of children from such marriage. However, non-payment of bride price reduces couple's value in the community and causes disjointed relationships. Divorce can easily occur at a slight provocation, due to weak ties of both families, caused by non-payment of bride price and can cause wanton disruption of burial rite which can lead to communal crisis and conflict if not controlled.

Concept of Igbo Marriage

Marriage amongst the Igbo people is not only for the co-habitation of man and woman as husband and wife, but also creates a strong tie between two families and communities. Igbo marriage is a family or communal affair and not a personal or individual affair. No Igbo man marries without the consent and approval of both families and their communities. The first-time a man goes to the family of the woman with the intention of marrying her, after informal introduction and declaration of his interest, the father of the woman or the eldest son of the family always ask these questions. "Do you have parents? Do you have family members? If yes, come with them, because marriage is not meant for boys and girls, it is between two communities". This first step is considered informal declaration, because the prospective groom is not accompanied by elderly men and women of his village or community; thus, considered this visit as unserious and not formal.

Marriage in Igboland follows a long process that may run into months and years which is done in stages or step by step. Each stage or step involving both the family members, friends and community members of bride and groom. The first step is called “Ihe Ajuju” (enquiry) where each family is expected to enquire more about the families to gain approval for the son and daughter of these two families to be husband and wife. Enquiry is a period mapped out for the prospective bride family and prospective groom family to enquire from the members of the society if there is any questionable character, trait or abnormal genetic condition that will in future pose as a threat to either the bride to-be and her family or groom to-be and his family before marriage. They base their enquiry on investigating the historical background of each family, or kinship affiliation, the state of moral values exhibited by each family and the abnormal traits or genetic diseases suffered by members of each family. After approval by both families to continue with the marriage rites, the second stage of the marriage rite would be fixed.

The second stage is called “Ihe Mbuzu Mmaya”. In this stage, the prospective groom and his family are expected to visit the prospective bride’s family with cages of palm wine and other marriage items as stipulated by the bride’s family four times especially, for every Eke market day. After completion of this stage, it makes way for them to fix the third stage which is called “Akụ Amaala”

The third stage is called “Akụ Amaala”. It is a day fixed for the prospective groom’s family to bring all marriage items. This stage is split into two; men and women groups. Each group demanding what the groom is expected to pay. After fulfilling this rite, it calls for bride price payment “Ego isi Nwanyị”. The fourth stage is called “Ego isi Nwanyị” (payment of bride price). This stage involves the groom and his parents and bride’s parents. There they bargain and agree on a specific amount to be paid as bride price which the groom parents pay and a receipt is given in some areas. After fulfilling this rite, it calls for the final state called “Igba Nkwụ Nwanyị”

The fifth and the final stage is called “Igba Nkwụ Nwanyị” (Traditional marriage). This is the ceremonial aspect of the marriage, where the bride will present her husband to the crowd that came to witness her marriage. This is followed by the prayers and the blessing of the marriage by the parents of the bride.

It is worthy to note that before a prospective groom pays the bride price of his wife, he must have fulfilled all that is required of him to do from the first stage of the marriage to the fourth stage, before he will be allowed to pay the bride price. In this context, payment of bride price is the fulfilment of all the marriage requirements of the family and village of the bride by the groom’s family, starting from the first stage of the marriage “Ihe Ajuju” to the payment of the bride price “Ime Ego isi Nwanyị”. So, payment of the bride price in this context is the fulfilment of all the marriage requirements beginning from the first stage to the last by the groom’s family.

Statement of the problem

In this recent times, man and woman cohabiting as husband and wife without the payment of bride price is in increase. This has been causing wanton disturbances in many families, which have led to the denial of people’s right in the communities, communal crisis between two communities, brought enmity between two communities, and causes destruction of properties which may lead to loss of life and long-term hatred. These and others are the major problems of this study which the researcher wants to proffer solution to these challenges.

Methodology

The method adopted for this study is survey design. The researcher also adopted oral interview for the collection of data. The study population comprises of adult citizens in Imo State. However, due to the large population size, time, and money constraints, the researcher based his study only in Mbaise of Imo State. For easy collection of data, structured interview was administered to 40 adult citizens (20 women and 20 men) who were randomly selected from the communities of Mbaise town. The analysis is based on the interpretations of the answers, statements and comments of the respondents and is not based on quantitative variables.

The significance of bride price payment to the Igbo people of Mbaise

Bride price payment in Igbo traditional marriage is a universal phenomenon. In all African races and Igbo ethnic groups, for example, bride price payment is sacrosanct before a marriage is said to be consummated. Culturally, this aspect of bride price payment differs slightly amongst different parts of Igbo land. Usually, the amount of money paid as a bride price is relatively small and can be as little as 20 -40 naira. In part of Enugu and Anambra States, each denomination of Nigerian currency will be requested to be given as bride price, the money will be later handed back to the groom by the bride's father. This shows that their daughter is not for sale.

In Mbaise of Igbo, the bride price is seen as the bridal wealth. It is not only signifying the amount of money after beginning, paid to the bride's family by the groom as bride price. But includes all valuable items presented to the family of the bride by the groom which include: money, animals, food items, drinks of different forms, body ornaments, etc. The presentation of bridal wealth is done in two categories (men and women categories). Each category has a list of items to be presented as bridal wealth by the groom. A man is said to have paid the bride price of his wife after fulfilling the request of the two categories as requested by the bride's family which is done in the presence of the two families, communities, and relatives. The negotiation of the token of money to be paid to the bride's father by the groom which is solely between the parents of the bride and groom.

The bride price signifies sincerity, love, and commitment the groom has for the bride and a prove that the groom will always take care of the bride as long as they live as husband and wife. Falana (2019) speaks of certain cultural values attached to bride price that made the practice very significant, such as being a sign of sincerity, commitment, and marital faithfulness which are akin to the wedding and engagement rings used in modern times.

Bride price payment also signifies spiritual connectivity between the family of the bride and the groom. It is believed that as the communities gather for their daughter's marriage, so also the dead ancestors gather to witness the ceremony. It is after the fulfillment of the marriage rite and the payment of the bride price that the parents of the bride bless the couple thereby connecting the union to both ancestors of both parties. These prayers and connections go a long way in cementing the harmonious relationships between the in-laws and their children. In addition, Oboko and Ifeanyichukwu (2021) agree with researcher that bride price payment has a spiritual connotation which makes it not just a mere transactional exchange but a tacit approval from the elders of the land.

In Mbaise, bride price is a certificate that promotes husband and wife to a higher status of responsible men and women in the society. This is because a person is believed to be responsible only when the person is lawfully married (Lawrence-Hart 2022). A man who pays the bride price of his wife is accorded high respect in society and has full rights and privileges in the community. He can take any traditional title of his choice, and qualify to partake in the sharing of all the items gotten from any traditional marriage in his community. In the same way, bride price payment certifies a woman to be a bonified member of such community and thereby qualifies her to take any traditional title, elective position, and introduce herself in any women folk without fear or favour.

After payment of bride price, it is expected for the husband and wife to initiate themselves in men and women folk in their community. For men in Mbaise, it is expected for a man who has paid the bride price of his wife to give his kindred or village one big goat to initiate himself into the men's folk in the community. While his wife is expected to cook some delicacies for her husband's kindred or village women for initiation into the women's folk. These initiations by the men and women wing of the village or community certify the husband and wife to partake in sharing from daughter's bridal wealth in the community. Thus, the bridal wealth of a woman is shared between the parents of the bride and the community members. In addition, Nwanude (2022) states that on the visit for the payment of bride price, traditional Igbo custom demands that the groom takes along with him some gift items, such as kola nuts, kegs of palm wine, cartons of beer, crates of soft drinks, tubers of yam, packets of cigarettes, snuff, tobacco money and probably a goat. These items would be shared amongst the members of the

bride's village. This is because all the activities in Igbo land are done communally. It is a belief that in training a child, all the people in the community contribute to the inculcation of the right moral values to the child whether male or female in essence. It is believed that for a woman to get married, it means that the inculcated virtues in her have been noticed by her suitor which triggered him to insist on marrying her. Therefore, if training a child is jointly done, so also is the sharing of the bridal wealth.

In Mbaise, all the adult males and females in the village or kindred of the bride, who have fulfilled their marriage initiation rite as the case may partake in sharing all the items paid as the bridal wealth. The bridal wealth is always shared in two equal parts, the parents of the bride take half while the community takes half which they share with all qualified members of the village or community. Interestingly, in Afikpo, in Ebonyi State, during the payment of the bride price ceremony known as *Aku*, all unmarried men and those who are living with women and have not paid their bride price are sent out and prevented from observing the rite as well as partaking in the eating of the stock-fish reserved exclusively for those who are validly married. Also, only genuinely married men get N100 (One hundred naira) each from the bride price paid by the groom (Oboko & Ifeanyichukwu, 2021).

It is assumed that if one's bridal wealth has not been shared by her community, such a woman has not been married, so the parents of such a bride will cease to partake in sharing other people's bridal wealth. In case of death, or any other merriment in the community of his in-law, his community members may participate individually and not as a community.

Bride price payment changes the status of maiden to a married woman

Child bearing in Mbaise of Igbo does not change the status of maiden to a married woman, but rather it is the payment of bride price of a maiden that transforms her to a married woman. Chigbu interviewed (2024) in collaboration with Maduka interviewed (2024) obtained that bearing children in man's house does not make a maiden a married woman, it is the payment of the bride price that can only change the status of a woman. In essence, it is the payment of the bride price of a woman that gives her the honor to be called and addressed as a married woman in Igbo society. Even when a woman has cohabited with a man for years and have children both male and female, it has not made her a married woman. Nevertheless, in some cases, such woman facilitates the payment of her bride price in order to be honored as a married woman.

The payment of the woman's bride price is what brings the honor to be called a true married woman. Payment of bride price is seen as the certificate that permits a woman to live with a man as his husband. If by any way a woman cohabite with a man without the payment of her bride price, the family of the woman assumes that their daughter is missing, until when the bride price is paid which permits the man to live with her as his wife. Dike interviewed (2024) said that if peradventure the woman whose bride price was not paid dies while cohabiting with a man, it is assumed that such man stole the woman and must pay all that is required as bride price before the deceased is buried.

Bride price qualifies a woman to be a bonified member of his husband's family or village

Bride price is the only authority a woman has to be reorganized as a bonified member of the family where she is married into. This implies that the major factor that gives a woman power to be a bonified member of her husband's family, is not the ability to bear children, especially male children as the case may be; but by the payment of bride price by her husband. Onuoha interviewed (2024) in collaboration with Anyanwu interviewed (2024) said that payment of the bride price in Igbo marriage is the reason why a woman leaves her father's house and go to live with the family of the husband forever and have equal right with other members of such family. In addition, Lawrence-Hart (2022) states that the bride price is like immunity for the woman because it makes her feel safe as well as keeps hope alive such that she is assured of her security; thus, she can work together with her husband to contribute to the growth of the family, knowing that she will partake of the goodies in due course.

Payment of the bride price gives woman equal right amongst women folk in the community

Payment of bride price gives a woman authority to have equal right amongst the women folks. Igwe interviewed (2024) in collaboration with Iwuchukwu interviewed (2024) said that women whose bride price were not paid were not given equal rights and privileges with those whose bride price were paid. For example, those that their bride price were not paid are not allowed to partake in the sharing of any marriage gift or items pending when her bride price will be paid by her husband. In some areas, she will not be allowed to be part of the executive of the women wing meeting.

Payment of bride price brings respect and dignity to the woman and her family

The notion of the bride price payment shows respect and dignity to the woman and her family. Uchegbu, interviewed (2024) said that bride price payment accords dignity and respect to the woman and her family. It makes her to raise her shoulders high as a virtuous woman. In addition, Emiola & Aremo (2020) said that the bride price therefore is a blood cleanser that removes shame and insults from the woman the moment she becomes legally married. They went further to say that the bride price gives her honor and a sense of community value amongst her peers in her husband's home and family. Society holds her and the family in high esteem for good training and behavior impacted on her to wait patiently until her bride price is paid, rather than living with a man without bride price payment which is against the cultural practice of the Igbo society. The society sees a man who cohabit with a woman without the payment of her bride price as a wayward and irresponsible man and the society assumes that the children produced by such union would be wayward and irresponsible. Odoemena interviewed (2024) in collaboration with Anorue interviewed (2024) said that it is uncultured for a man who does not pay the bride price of his wife to ask for his daughter's bride price. The ideal thing is for the man to pay before asking for the bride price of her daughter.

Payment of the bride price legalizes and establishes the legitimacy of children

In Igbo, the custody of children produced by any woman is not determined by the blood or gene of the father, but rather determined by the person who paid for the bride price of such woman. That is why children produced after divorce is assume to belong to the man that paid the first bride price, until his bride price is returned. Nevertheless, Iwuanyanwu interviewed (2024) in collaboration with Mba interviewed (2024) and Onwuliri interviewed (2024) said that children whose parent's marriages were not properly consummated according to the traditional rites and customs are mildly treated as not indigenous and irresponsible as no inheritance or traditional title is conferred on a son whose mother was not properly married, irrespective of how wealthy the person might be. This is because, it is the bride price payment that determines the owner of children. Okereke interviewed (2024) in collaboration with Eleaka interviewed (2024) said that some persons who have risen to prominence in society, but their mother's bride price was not paid, sponsors the full traditional marriage and payment of the bride price of their mother in order to maintain their rightful place in their father's house and community at large.

Misconceptions of bride price payment in African society

Notwithstanding the important of bride price payment as a cultural practice in Igbo and all African society has been misunderstood by some feminist scholars such as (Kaye, 2005, Ezeifeka, 2016, Lowes & Nunn 2017 Adichie, 2018, who argued that the bride price gives the impression of commercialization of women, some said that it contributes to gender inequality, while others said that it a right for a man to sexually abuse her wife without permission, etc. These misconceptions of bride price payment are discussed in the following order:

Bride price is not for the commercialization of women

During the negotiation of items to be presented for bridal wealth, it is usually repeated by the bride's family that "we are not selling our daughter" (Anyị adighi ere nwa anyị ere). So also, the groom's family repeatedly says "We are not buying your daughter" (Anyị adighi azu nwa unu azu). This implies that the negotiations on the items for the payment of bridal wealth are unconnected with the commercialization of a woman. What is been presented as the bride price can never be seen as the cost price of a woman. All the respondents interviewed during the data collection said that there is no amount

of wealth presented as the bride price of a woman that can be equated with what the parents used in training such a woman.

In addition, Ego-Alowes (2018) concludes that bride price payment does not imply commercialization, rather it connotes dignity and respect for womanhood. The receipt of any commercial product bought by any customer gave him (the buyer) to be the rightful owner of the product and has the right to re-sale the product. But the receipt of the payment for the bride price indicates that the man fulfilled all the marriage rite which gives him dignity and respect in his community. The receipt does not indicate that the husband bought something from the owner, or give him the right of ownership, because he cannot sell the product to anyone. If in any way husband and wife got separated, the new suitor will not go to the family of the husband who paid for her bride price, to ask for her hand in marriage; rather the new suitor shall go to the family of the parents of the woman to ask her hand in marriage. It is after the second payment of the bride price of such a woman, that the parents of the woman with their marriage intermediary returns the bride price to the first family that marries the woman. In conclusion, the payment of bride price signifies sincerity, love and commitment the groom has to the bride and indicates that the groom will always take care of the bride as long as they live as husband and wife.

Bride price does not contribute to gender inequality between husband and wife

Payment of bride price has not in any way contributed to gender inequality of husband and wife in the society, but rather it is what qualifies a woman to be equal with her husband, answer the husband's name, and have the right of ownership or beneficiary of all the properties of the husband. The notion of a man paying the bride price of his wife does not in any way bring inequality between the spouse but rather non-payment of the bride price brings inequality amongst the women in the community which is visible whenever there is an opportunity to share the communal cake amongst family or community members. 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.

The implications of non-payment of bride price in Igbo marriage

Upon the high importance placed on bride price payment by the Igbo people, it was found out that in every village, non-payment of the bride price has been generating socio-cultural challenges that sometimes may lead to long-lasting enemies which do not bring development to the Igbo race. The socio-cultural implications of non-payment of bride price in Igbo marriage is stated thus:

Non-payment of the bride price reduces the couple's value amongst their pairs in society. Igbo society sees any woman whose bride price has not been paid as wayward and irresponsible. She will not be valued or have equal rights with other women whose bride prices were paid in the community. All the respondents interviewed said that such women were ridiculed which is visible whenever there is an opportunity to share the communal cake amongst family members. Sometimes, at the demise of her purported husband, the woman may not be accepted as part of the family especially if they did not have any child.

Divorce can easily occur at a slight of provocation, because the marriage is not properly consummated. Little problems between husband and wife may lead to separation without anybody coming in between them to settle their dispute. The family of the purported wife will not have the boldness to come and settle any dispute between their daughter and the purported husband's family, because they believe that the said husband kidnaped their daughter for the failure of the man to pay her bride price. This situation makes the family of the woman pretend not to be aware of the problem because the marriage is not properly constituted. The persistent problem may lead to separation.

Non-payment of the bride price causes disjointed relationships between the families of man and woman who have been living as husband and wife. Both the physical and spiritual relationships of the two families would not be cordial. all the respondents during the interview affirmed that consummation of man and woman as husband and wife without the payment of bride price leads to disjointed relationships both physically and spiritually. The physical relationships of the two families may not be cordial if the bride price of a woman is not paid. Igbo people as social beings live a communal life. They contribute

and help one another in any situation. Igbo people also believe that an in-law is a brother (Ọgọ mmadu bu nwanne ya), the in-laws always have a harmonious relationship amongst themselves, help and support one another in trying and happy moments. Any family who has not paid the bride price of their wife never enjoys these relationships. Spiritually connected is being connected with the family's ancestors for protection and blessings. The spouse is spiritually connected during the blessing of marriage by the parents of the bride after the bride's price have been paid. If the marriage is not spiritually connected to the family ancestors, they may not attract blessings and protections from the ancestors.

At the demise of the woman whose bride price has not been paid, the man who has been living with her must pay her bride price before her corpse is allowed for burial. If the family of the man tries to bury the woman without the payment of the bride price, it may cause wanton disruption of the burial rite which may lead to a communal crisis.

In Mbaise, payment of bride price is done in two categories, men and women category, each category spearheaded by the father and mother of the bride. In some cases, if both or either of the parent of the bride is late, the groom for any reason fulfilled only the payment of the bride price for one category, either for the men or women category, sometimes it provokes the wrath of the dead parent against the architect of such decision. Okwudiri interviewed (2024) narrated a story of such an event that happened in Oparanadim Autonomous community, where a man whose name is withheld told his in-law during the payment of his daughter's bride price to only concentrate on the men's category. This is because his wife is late, and he wouldn't want some women to partake in sharing the items presented as part of the bride price of his daughter. That same night, the wrath of his late wife befell on him, he starts screaming, begging the spirit of his late wife to leave him, that he will tell the in-law to come and fulfill all that should be done for women category. But the spirit of her late wife couldn't show him mercy, he died the same night.

Another example as narrated by Nwachukwu interviewed (2024) happened during the traditional marriage he attended in his community where the bride's mother was late. In this case, it is the bride who insisted and discouraged her husband not to pay any bride price that concerns the women category. "During the marriage ceremony, some women came asking for their rights, but the bride insisted that nothing should be done for the women category. Because of the enmity between her and her brother's wife. She feels that the brother's wife who would be representing her mother will take the lion's share of the items that would be presented as her bride price on the women category. After fulfilling part of the bride price for men category, she went to leave with her husband. After six months, she came back to her home town mad. It was found out through divination that the late mother sent the spell of madness to her because she refused women participation in her bridal wealth. Till now, she remains in her father's house unmarried".

Conclusion and recommendations

This study discoursed the payment of bride price as a cultural practice that is sacrosanct in Igbo marriage, before man and woman are pronounced husband and wife. This payment of bride price by the groom remains the authority a woman has to be a bonified member of her husband's family and community. It qualifies her to be the co-owner of all her husband's assets and it gives her honor and a sense of belonging amongst her peers in her husband's home and family. However, payment of bride price is not for the commercialization of women, nor contribute to gender inequality between husband and wife, but an authority a woman has to be a bonified member of her husband's family and to have equal right with other women in the community.

In addition, this paper elucidates in clear terms the sociological implications of non-payment of bride price in Igbo marriage. Non-payment of bride price makes couples look irresponsible amongst their peers, causing disjointed physical and spiritual relationships between families and communities. At the demise of a woman whose bride price has not been paid, the man living with her must pay full bride price before her corpse will be allowed for burial. If not, it may lead to wanton disturbances that may lead to a communal crisis. To avoid these challenges, the study recommends among others that full

bride price must be paid before a man and woman begin to cohabit as husband and wife, this will go a long way to remedy the challenges that arise from non-payment of bride price in Igbo marriage.

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INTERVIEW CHART

Name	Age	Sex	Community	Status	Interviewer
Onuoha Boniface	74	M	Chokoneze	Farmer	Princewill
Anyanwu Thomas	62	M	Eziama Oparanadim	Farmer	Princewill
Uchegbu Rosemary	65	F	Umumbiri	Business	Princewill
Igwe Ngozi	58	F	Ogbo	Civil servant	Princewill
Iwuchukwu Theresa	68	F	Isiala Oparanadim	Farmer	Princewill
Iwuanyanwu Benedict	56	M	Ogbe	Civil servant	Princewill
Mba Peter	70	M	Mbutu	Farmer	Princewill
Onwuliri Regina	66	F	Enyiogugu	Business	Princewill
Chigbu Anna	59	F	Obohia	Civil servant	Princewill
Maduka Chikere	52	M	Enyiogugu	Artisan	Princewill
Odoemena Grace	61	F	Obohia	Business	Princewill
Dike Oluchi	65	F	Eziama Oparanadim	Farmer	Princewill
Anorue Eunice	64	F	Mbutu	Business	Princewill
Okereke Ngozi	63	F	Ogbe	Business	Princewill
Eleaka Alexandra	81	M	Chokoneze	Farmer	Princewill
Okwudiri Godspower	57	M	Akpodim	Business	Princewill
Nwachukwu Amaechi	60	M	Akpodim	Artisan	Princewill