

THE ENCOUNTER OF IGBO TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE WITH CHRISTIANITY: INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE IN NENI

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Abstract

Before the advent of Christianity in Igboland in 1885, the Igbos had their traditional mode of marriage. The encounter of the traditional marriage with the teachings of Christianity transformed it from its original nature; but regrettably also did not preserve some of the pertinent cultural processes that adorned traditional marriage system. It aimed at divesting it of what it considered to be its heathenish trappings in order to purify and Christianize it. In the case of Neni in Anaocha Local Government of Anambra State, it was through and thanks to Ezeani Obidigbo and Chief Enechukwu Egwuekwe that the Catholic missionaries were received in Neni in 1914. They aided them accordingly in their work of evangelization. With time, the traditional marriage gradually began to change its original coloration. Not minding that encounter with Christian religion, traditional or customary marriage still occupies a fundamental place even in Christian marriage. What is done in the Christian marriage is the sacramentalization of marriage through the use of Christian rite. The researcher through the use of descriptive method explored into the traditional marriage in Neni before the arrival of Christianity with an aim of savouring its original content. Oral interview was also used to gather some essential information. The researcher also employed the analytic method and exposed the elements that the encounter with Christianity brought to traditional marriage in Neni. All in all, traditional marriage is presented as a fundament to Christian marriage.

Keywords: traditional marriage, *iso ebe*, Christian marriage, Neni.

Introduction

The traditional marriage among the Igbo people in general and people of Neni in particular is according to Williams (1987) usually not a mere union of two individuals but rather a union of families. This is because it is believed that the families of the husband and wife by the fact of marriage are glued together in a bond of friendly relationship. Nonetheless, it is not a mere social event but it is fundamentally couched in a religious atmosphere that involves the invocation of the ancestors in prayer.

The religious root of traditional marriage is founded on the fact that right from Creation, God has continued to give man the opportunity of collaboration in the work of creation. Thus the Christian religion in its encounter with the traditional marriage promoted the mandate given to man to be “fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). The human participation in divine operation evidenced in marriage is an opportunity towards continuing and improving on the work of creation. As document by Flannery (1998), the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council established that

the intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. (The Church in the Modern world, n.48)

In this way, man continues to transcend himself and aspire towards the spiritual realm which is his ultimate goal. This divine-human cooperation according to Murphy-O'Connor (1990) is a mode of divine activity inaugurated by Christ. This spirit of working together enhances what Camarinhna-Matos, L.M et al., (2008) called shared creation which involves a process through which a group of entities enhance the capabilities of each other. It more fundamentally, involves mutual engagement of

participants to solve a problem together, which implies mutual trust and thus takes time, effort, and dedication.

In the human society, marriage has remained a veritable way of manifesting this divine-human cooperation. In fact, the institution of marriage and its accompanying conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown. Thus a man and a woman, who, by their compact of conjugal love "are no longer two, but one flesh" (Matt. 19:ff), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day. As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them." (The Church in the Modern world, n.48)

Traditional marriage in Neni was also aimed at procreation and union founded on love that is why necessary measures are taken to see that right partners are chosen.

Essential elements of traditional marriage in Neni

The Igbo society is a co-operate society. The Igbos are not individualistic in attitude, but rather promote communal co-existence. This is natural to them and is grounded on their practice of extended family system. It is based on this fact that Atado (1988:7) opined that marriage is regarded not "as a bilateral contract or as a contract of convenience" (but) ... as a covenant between two "umunna" or extended families ..." Being a religious people, religion permeates almost all their activities, even marriage. On that note, Iwuji (1983:16) maintains that "it is not unusual that before the conclusion of marriage contracts, consultation and sacrifices are made to the spirit of dead ancestors to solicit their approval and blessing for a couple to new marriage." Neni adheres to the afore-mentioned principles. It is patrilocal and practices exogamous system of marriage in that they cut across their group in choosing marriage partners.

However, the essentials of the *status quo ante* of traditional marriage in Neni are to be examined in conjunction with its present status. That will help us to appreciate more the impact. They are to be considered under the following – *iso ebe*, betrothal, preliminary investigation, bride - price and exchange of consent.

Isọ ebe – This is a rite of passage. This rite of passage marks when a person is entering a new stage of his life. William (1994:350) affirms, "rite of passage is a ceremony held by nearly all societies to observe a person's entry into a new stage of Life". Akpudo (1989) identifies three kinds of rites of passage in the life of the Igbo people namely: rites of initiation/incorporation, rites of transition and rites of separation. According to Udeze et al. (2012) rites of initiation or incorporation are rites which are performed to welcome a person into a new phase of life e.g naming ceremony. Rites of transition/passage are those rites that help the individual to move well into the next phase of life. In fact, Eliade (1989) opines that it is the celebration of a new outburst of life in the existence of an individual or community, and the acknowledgement of divine intervention in the process of this outburst in the growth and existence of the individual or community here on earth. In the same vein, the rites of separation are performed to separate the individual from any contact or relationship he had enjoyed before e.g birth and death rites.

Isọ ebe falls under the rite of transition/passage. It initiates the process of marriage. According to Mbiti (1975:104), marriage as a rite of passage "... fulfills the obligation, the duty and the custom that every normal person should get married and bear children". For through marriage the living torch of human existence is handed down. In fact, Enechukwu (1985) maintains that *Isọ ebe* is an indispensable rite for young maidens. It prepares them for marriage and launches them into adult life with all its attendant challenges. Mbiti (1975:94) corroborates that fact thus: "The mysteries and secrets of married life are normally revealed to the young people at this point, to prepare them for what is soon to come".

According to Onyekelu (2012:171-172)

Ebe rite being a rite of passage for girls could also be claimed to serve as fertility rite; hence, the non-conformists were believed to be infertile wives. Planting season begins immediately after the initiation into *Ebe*. This time, of course, the land (Ala) was believed to be ritually pure and happy to accommodate and facilitate the plantings. Land (Ala) deity plays an important role in *iso-Ebe* because the initiation took place on no other place but on a portion of land (Ala) specially set apart for the purpose and it is called *Ebe*.

This is the fattening period. At this time, the bride does no work but she is treated to sumptuous dishes, and beautifies herself. It marks the attainment of womanhood. This ceremony is done together by all the newly married girls of a particular period. During this period, they wear only the *jigida* (beads) thereby displaying the outer parts of their body. At night, they go out and play together.

It must be significantly noted that *iso ebe* has its moral demands on the maidens. As Onyekelu (2020:72) remarked that,

Another quality for initiating into *Ebe* was that the candidate would be a virgin because *Ebe* is a sacred ritual and would be kept sacred. It is the first ritual title taken by the young girls in their life. There was a need for them not to be defiled. This question on virginity preservation before marriage is widely emphasized among the Igbo people.

They usually sleep together at a designated compound. No man sleeps with them there. "*iso-ebe*" lasts for approximately *izu-asaa*" (28 days). Onyekelu (2020) maintains that at the end of one month when *Ebe* rite came to an end, the girls looked more mature and appealing to the extent that any man who came across them would be attracted. This was why after the initiation; most girls who had not gotten married would marry. Anybody who failed to be married after the rite would be looked down upon and villagers would make fun of her.

Betrothal (*ikū aka*)

According to Marcus (1997:73) this is "public declaration of intent" which a fiancé makes to a fiancée in a tentative manner till the preliminary inquiries are made. It is the declaration of intention to marry made primarily to the parents. This is very fundamental to the whole process. It is important to note as Marcus (1997:73a) maintained, "religious ceremonies however important they may be are secondary to the making of a social compact by the two persons. The customs, traditions and ceremonies which have become associated with this making of a compact are there to give an expression of the seriousness of the undertaking."

Formerly, it was the father who marries for his son in the sense that he pays for the expenses and represents him in the negotiations. Both (the son and the girl) may be betrothed at a very tender age, and be left to reach maturity of age. This betrothal is done with a jar of palm-wine which the father of the boy carries with few close relatives to the house of the prospective in-law. After drinking the palm wine, he declares his intention. This indicates that the girl should not be betrothed to another person; unless any impediment is later discovered. Otherwise, when they have attained the age of maturity, the rest of the ceremony continues.

But currently, a boy and a girl become eligible to marry if they have been initiated into manhood and womanhood respectively. Initially, years were not counted for life is sacred. As such issuance of birth certificate was not in vogue. Rather, there was belief in age-group (*otu ogbō*) and marriage was done according to age-group. This initiation implies maturity, ability to bear marital responsibility with its tensions and conflicts, to fend for oneself and be independent of parental support economically. However, this has gradually shriveled away with the advent of Christianity.

It is usually regarded as abnormal if one does not marry when his age mates are doing so. Such a person is regarded as "*Akalogholi*" (worthless person). That is why according to Mbiti (1982:133) "failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return". But this is no longer happening today due to uncertainties of life. So,

under normal circumstances, a man declares his intention to get married to the parents who then initiate the preliminary inquiry.

Preliminary investigation (*ijū ese, ijū ajuju*)

The preliminary investigation/inquiry is necessary for any marital relationship to be contracted so as to determine the marriageability of the persons involved. This marriageability is majorly determined by the absence of deadly disease, premature death, and unbearable character on the side of the prospective wife. The process of this inquiry is aimed at eliminating the elements that could damage the husband's lineage. In the words of Udeze et al. (2012),

Inquiries (*ajuju*) are conducted concerning the woman's character, whether she has been engaged before, and if so to whom. The groom's parents would try to find out about her manners, whether she was respectful to elderly people, obedient to her family, sociable with her friends, clean and very productive. If she is a grown up woman, it must be found out why she had stayed unattached for a long time. Any serious sickness or deadly diseases suffered by the woman such as leprosy, epilepsy, small pox, or other types of illness that might affect her marital life and child bearing, were investigated. Inquiries are also made about her family background to find out if there had been any history of premature death, twin births, divorce, theft or murder and what social class the family belonged to; for instance, if they are outcasts such as *Osu* or *Ohu*, and if the family kept and respected the rules of exogamy. Furthermore, there were inquiries about social behaviour, if they were debtors, if they practiced witchcraft (pp.151-152).

It is important to note that the preliminary inquiry is not one directional; rather it has a dual movement. Ogbalu (1979:14) affirmed this when he wrote, "usually bilateral investigations as to the lineage, morals and qualities have to be carried out through different channels by either party and if everything proves satisfactory, the people concerned will give their consent." This is usually done by the parents of both sides in a subtle and private manner. On the side of a man, Atado (1988:26) avers,

investigations are conducted to determine whether the members of the man's family have a good reputation in the town ... committed any "*alu*" (abomination) that might adversely affect children born in the family ... whether the man's family has a history, of dreaded diseases as leprosy, epilepsy, insanity etc.

In the same vein, such detailed investigation according to Akalonu (1987:20) is also made on the side of the girl.

Inquiries are made about the family whether they are good and peace loving people. Whether there are bad people like thieves among them ... special investigations are made about the girl herself and her mother. It is sought whether she is hardworking and whether she has good reputation in village, people also ask about her mother's character.

More important and without prejudice to the present day misplacement of value by prospective husbands, Uchendu (1965) remarked point blankly that generally the qualities desired in a bride are her manners; physical beauty is secondary "*agwa bu mma*" - Good manners constitute beauty. Any impediment observed in the process be it consanguinity or affinity, or whatever it may be terminates the investigation immediately and consequently the marriage. No impediment is negotiable. Neither is there room for friendly compromise; for since marriage is a life-long affair, any impediment swept under the carpet can eventually mar the lineage. However, if at the end both sides are satisfied with their findings, other procedures can then follow.

If the preliminary inquiry is hitch-free, then there would be a marriage witness "*onye-ifu/ onye aka-ebe*" from the bridegroom side who will lead him and his relatives to the prospective bride's father so as to make their intention known. This is traditionally called *iku aka n'uzo*. The "*onye-ifu/ onye aka-ebe*" observes what goes on so that should any misunderstanding ensue, he will be there to pacify, or say what and what should be paid back in the case of divorce.

Bride-price (*ime-ego*)

Before this stage, the parental consent especially of the father as the head of the family, or of the guardian as the case must be obtained. The reason, Atado (1988:36) affirmed are quite obvious and incontestable: “in the absence of parental consent, there is no one to receive the bridal money and there will be no official handing over of the bride to the groom.” Such a marriage is thus inclined to fail. But with parental consent they can comfortably and hitch-freely talk of bride-price.

Bride-price also called bride-wealth, bride-gift, bridal-payment, marriage prestation, marriage payment and dowry is a poor and derogatory rendition of what the Igbo people including the people of Neni call “*ime ego-nwanyị*” (woman's wealth). The derogatory nature of bride-price stems from the fact that it has a commercial connotation which the Igbo people and the people of Neni in particular unreservedly frown at. The bride is in no way at all a commodity subject to the principles of demand and supply, and haggling. Rather bride-price in the words of Radcliffe-Brown et al., (2015:293) is “a cultural institution or practice supported by valid social reasons. Its effect ... extends to marriage negotiation, conjugal relation, legal relationship and the children to be born of the marriage.”

Precisely, Atado (1988) insists that bride-price symbolizes the marriage covenant. It seals the sacred relationship. It is the legal instrument which authorizes the couple to cohabit and procreate and which constantly reminds them of the permanence of their union.

It is against this background that any child born before the bride-price is paid is regarded as illegitimate. Consequently, it belongs to the woman's family.

Modality of bride-price in Neni

In the olden days as well as nowadays, determining the bride-price is one of the crucial moments of any marriage. The prospective bridegroom with his parents and some elders go with a jar of palm wine to the prospective bride's father's house.

After the ritual of breaking of kola nut with its accompanying prayer, the process of determining the bride-price commences. This is not rushed for it is a friendly encounter which detests rigidity from any side. Therefore, through the gradual ceremonial process of addition and subtraction a consensus is reached. At that time, the bride-price was paid with cowries. However, it is strongly believed that one cannot finish paying the bride-price; as such it is usually paid by instalments.

Owing to the fact that women are not property, bride-price should not be discussed in monetary terms. Recently, bride-price was highly inflated thereby making marriage unaffordable to the nubile. On account of this, many marital aspirations could not be realized.

Nonetheless, consequent upon the current economic down-tum which resulted in astronomical increase in bride-price, marital engagement reduced drastically. Girls who nursed hope of engagement were met with disappointment. As a result, only the well-to-do could shoulder the expenses of marriage ceremony. Some not well-to-do who risked it started their marital life on seemingly empty purse. What a bad beginning!

Having carefully considered this ugly economic development punctuated by instability, Neni Town Union together with Igwe-in-Council with a view to giving everyone a fair opportunity resolved that: “Amount payable as bride price shall not be more than five thousand naira” (*Regulations on Funerals, Marriages and allied matter in Neni* (2011:2). Moreover, items to be presented to the “*umunna* (kindred), *umu-ada* (the bona fide daughters of village marriage either in the same village or elsewhere), *inyomdi* (daughters from other villages or towns marriage into that village) as part of marriage expenses after the bride-price were also curtailed to a manageable quantity so as to reduce financial burden on prospective bridegrooms.

Wine-carrying ceremony (*igba nkwu*)

It is the final ceremony which cuts the girl off finally from her father's home and inserts her fully into her husband's home. The new husband goes to his in-law with nine jars of palm wine (*udu mmanya*

teghete) and also bunches of cowrie. These are to be given to the *umunna* and other close relatives. Unless this final rite is performed, any marital quarrel between them is settled at the father-in-law's residence. If it is performed, it can then be settled at her husband's residence.

As it is now, the exchange of consent which is the crux of the ceremony is formally done within "*igba-nkwu*" ceremony. In this new dispensation of the reformed system of marriage ceremony, amidst the gathering of relatives and friends from both sides, the following as enshrined in *Regulations on Funerals, Marriages and allied matter in Neni* (2011:3) are presented to the father of the girl: four cartons of beer; one jar of palm-wine (*ngwo*), two gallons of up-wine (*nkwu enu*), five crates of mineral, two cartons of small stout, *ihu-nna*: 8 big tubers of yam for the girl's father, *ego nne mu nwa* (for the girl's mother - Two thousand Naira). The *umunna* (clansmen), *umuada* (married daughters of a particular clan), *inyomdi* (all the married women of a particular clan) receive their own items in their stipulated numbers. Each group eats, drinks and makes merry.

Exchange of Marital consent

The exchange of marital consent is done within the *igba nkwu nwanji*. It is on consent that marriage as it were anchors. It is presently designated as *igba-nkwu* (wine carrying ceremony). Absence of marital consent terminates the marriage. The exchange of consent is carried out amidst the gathering of relatives of the two families involved. Usually, the father of the would-be husband declares the *raison d'être* of the visit to the father of the girl - a wish to marry her daughter. If the girl approves of this, the exchange of consent is demonstrated in a symbolic manner. The father of the girl gives her a cup of palm wine and asks her to sip it and give the remaining to her intended husband. She sips it, makes a ceremonial search for the prospective husband and when she discovers him, she kneels down and hands it over to him. At this juncture, there is jubilation. It is important to note that the handing over of the cup of palm wine depicts freedom. If the girl refuses, the ceremony ends at that point. This ceremony is usually concluded by untying the *udu mmanya e gelu omu* jar of palm-wine tied with tender palm fronde) before the shrine by a diviner signifying their fertility. This ceremony usually starts in the evening and lingers into the night. Finally, she goes with them carrying the empty jar amidst a joyful entourage. With this, the traditional marriage ceremony ends and family life begins.

Afterwards, the ceremony for friends and relatives (*ife ikwu-na-ibe*) comes up. The *Neni Town Union regulations on Funerals, Marriages and allied matter in Neni* (2011:6) stipulates thus: "The parents/guardians of the girl and their relations shall visit the new son-in-law's home to acquaint themselves with the new home of their daughter." The ceremony involves simply eating and drinking in appreciation of the fact that their daughter has got married. A common denominator however, in the two ceremonies is that there is usually an "*onye-ifu*" (witness). Akalonu (1987:21) adds that, "he is usually a man known to both families who has to be present in all the negotiations to serve as a witness to all the proceedings." More so, Ogbalu (1979:14) maintains that,

he serves as liaison between the parties and even when the marriage had taken place, he settles or assists in settling any dispute between the wife and the husband or their parents and relatives. He takes record of the expenses incurred.., on the wife so that in the event of the dissolution of marriage they would be refunded to the husband.

To crown it all, an elder offers prayer on behalf of all gathered for the good of the newly married couples.

The impact of Christian religion on traditional marriage in Neni

The people of Neni embraced Christianity in 1914 and with that their marriage tradition experienced a mixed transformation. Mixed because some rich cultural heritages were hurriedly abandoned in order to embrace the Christian culture; and some good Christian tenets regarding marriage were also adopted. Nonetheless, the central message of Christianity is the belief in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who went about doing good without any preferential treatment and summarily preached the Gospel of love of God and neighbour. He eventually suffered, died and rose from the dead. Christianity has thus made noticeable impact in traditional marriage system in Neni. In fact, Udeze et al. (2012:158) affirms that "with the introduction of Christianity in Igbo land, the missionaries also introduced Christian

marriages in the church and encouraged their newly converted Christians to marry in the church, while abandoning their traditional marriage system of marriage in which the Igbo people played a significant role.”

In the context of marriage, Christianity preached the gospel of monogamy founded on indissolubility of marriage. In spite of the fundamental difference in name and bent in belief, traditional marriage especially in Neni has felt some impact of the Christian religion in diverse segments of it namely: marriageable age, pre-marriage inquiry, impediments, place of marriage ceremony, exchange of consent, and nuptial blessing.

Marriageable age

The Catholic Church provides in the Code of Canon Law (1983:c.1083 1^o) that, “a man cannot validly enter marriage before the completion of his sixteenth year of age, nor a woman before the completion of her fourteenth year.” This seems to be based on the fact that civilization arrived very early in Rome which is the seat of Catholic Church. As a result of that, they became much acquainted with documentation and keeping records of age.

On the contrary, before the advent of formal education, though the people of Neni were not keeping written records due to lack of formal education, but still based on their informal education, they were able to calculate weeks, months and years. Hence rite of initiation into adulthood showed maturity and ability to shoulder serious responsibilities like marrying a wife or owning a farm. Usually before one attains this last initiation he or she must have exceeded sixteen or fourteen respectively. So it was approximately the same as Church regulation only that today people marry at an older age due to lack of economic stability in life hardship.

Pre-marriage inquiry

Both the traditional and Christian marriages require the existence of preliminary inquiry. It is the premarital investigation that helps to ascertain whether there are impediments that can obstruct the marriage. In the Catholic Church, the official way of doing it is by publication of banns. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigerian (1985) stipulates that the preliminary inquiry is:

1. The traditional way of making the Catholic Community aware of the coming marriage and of giving the community the opportunity of manifesting reasonable objectives to the marriage and of informing the pastor of any impediment.
2. The banns are to be sent to the home parish of the parties to be published for at least three consecutive Sundays in the church of the town of origin of the parties also in the church of the place where the parties are actually residing.

This mere formal inquiry has watered down the preliminary inquiry within the traditional marriage in Neni. In the traditional context, there are middlemen who investigate into the family background and personal lives of those about to marry. This traditional inquiry usually yields more concrete result.

Impediments

Impediment is the circumstance which renders a marriage either illicit or invalid. The Code of Canon Law has a number of impediments ranging from impotence, consanguinity, affinity, sacred orders etc. In customary marriage, the parents from both sides, with the help of some middle-men or women who make thorough investigation regarding consanguinity, insanity, character of the persons about to marry, and their family as a whole. No impediment is condoned or excused away; lest a deadly legacy is handed on.

Place of marriage ceremony

With the arrival of Christian marriage came the duplication of marriage, that is traditional marriage and Christian marriage celebrated separately. The parish church is the normal and recommended venue for the celebration of marriage; however, in Canon 1118, 2^o it is enshrined that, “the Local Ordinary can allow a marriage to be celebrated in another suitable place.”

Following from this and in the spirit of inculturation, Nnabugwu (2016) calls for the elimination of the dichotomy and duplication of the current marriage rites. A traditional marriage needs be sacramentalized at the same venue. According to Atado (1988:131) “this would have the advantage of integrating Igbo marriage customs and Christian marriage customs. It would also provide a suitable avenue for presenting the Gospel to the people in their own traditional setting.” Definitely, the gospel is not the monopoly of one culture.

Exchange of consent

Marital consent legally and freely exchanged is the zenith of Christian marriage. Traditional marriage is also contracted through consent signified by the handing over of a cup of palm-wine by the bride to the bridegroom. This is done silently without the proclamation of any binding vow. At this point, people clap in jubilation and appreciation. It is here that a remarkable difference lies. Notably, the Christian marriage carries with it the sacramental force of unity and indissolubility which is indicative of the mystical union of Christ with His bride, the Church.

Contrariwise, unlike Christian marriage which totally rejects divorce except by death, traditional marriage permits it though it is when all attempts at settlement have failed. It is also provoked by childlessness. Consent is therefore a feature that both have in common. The difference is in their respective implications.

Nuptial blessing

The ceremonies of Christian and traditional marriages are usually concluded with prayer, calling on God to be with the newly married couple and bless their marriage with constant love and endow them with necessary graces. Though the gift of children is prayed for but childlessness is not a ground for nullity. The Rite of Marriage has thus:

Let us turn to the Lord and pray that he will bless with his grace this woman now married in Christ to this man and that he will unite in love the couple he has joined in this holy bond. Father, ... keep them faithful in marriage and let them be living examples of Christian life Bless them with children and help them to be good parents. (Rite of marriage)

The traditional marriage also stresses among other things on the gift of children, but childlessness could lead to divorce. Echiegu (1984:53-54) presented an Igbo nuptial blessing imparted at a traditional marriage ceremony.

Chukwu Kelu Madu Creator, who created man
Nee aja anyi, see our sacrifice,
Chineke, Onye-okike God, the Creator
Nee umu gi, See your children.
Nee oliaku nwa m, See the wife of my son,
Chekwaba ya. Protect her
Omumu bu ife mbu Child bearing is a man's
Madu n' uwa First on earth.
An' asi na madu ka eji aka, It is said to have children is to be great.
Chineke, Chekwaba di ya, God the Creator, Protect her husband.
Fa muta nwoke o g' adi, If they beget male, he shall live,
Fa muta nwanyi o g' adi, If they beget female, she shall live.
K'ime n'esinalu ike, Let them not have difficulty with pregnancy.

The difference in stress notwithstanding, it remains obvious that both are prayers offered in a marriage ceremony.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that Christianity is a foreign religion. Consequently, most of its tenets are foreign to the Igbo people and Neni people in particular. The early missionaries made effort towards the evangelization of Neni people; though unfortunately they did not make appropriate use of the traditional culture which could have been a very important vehicle for the transmission of the gospel. All the same, Christianity has strongly impacted and still impacting on the traditional culture of Neni people. On that note, Ugwu (2002) avers that "although the imported world religions have brought in some positive influences or possible effects on the Nigerian communities, they have also dealt a staggering blow on our social, economic, religious and political systems." However, Anizoba (2021:2) affirms that,

The impact of Christianity on all aspects of the beliefs and customs of the people may not come as a surprise when it is recalled that the overriding aim of the missionary agents was to suppress and supplant the existing traditional religion and customs, and replace them with the imported religion of Christianity.

Such impact is noticeable in traditional marriage system in Neni as already exposed in a detailed manner. It must be noted, however, that Christianity brought many positive transformation in the process of marriage in Neni like relevant documentation before marriage, compatibility of sexes through genotype test which has reduced issues of sickle cell disease, promoting the rights of both partners to mention but a few. In the words of Metala (2019:28) it also helped in character modification of our children and made our young ones imbibe the Christian virtues. On the other hand, the advent of Christian religion with its Western civilization saw an increase in sexual freedom which saw to the decrease in chastity before marriage and its attendant high rate of divorce.

All in all, there is still need for continuous dialogue between Christian faith and traditional culture especially marriage.

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