

Traditional Marriage Rites among the Gbagyi/Gbari people of Nigeria.

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Introduction

Marriage like any other institution engineered by mankind to perpetuate his continued existence is very vital to the Gbagyi culture and tradition. It is perceived as a social institution upon which an individual family in a socio-cultural context is built; therefore marriage which is known as 'Mula' is a long term institution which existed among the people. Marriage contract is a process in the traditional Gbagyi society which has much significant. It is a cultural event which involves not only the spouses but the entire clan (Midah 61). Though we are in the modern age, the traditional marriage institution continues to enjoy patronage because of the high value attached to it. Church or court weddings are usually done after the traditional marriage rites have been concluded. We shall look at some of these rites and their significance as it relates to the moral life of individuals and the community at large.

Gbagyi people are a large ethnic group that spread across Niger state (Minna, Paiko, Diko), Kaduna State (Zaria, Birnin Gwari, Chikun, Giwa, Kagarko, Chikun Kuyama, Igabi), Nassarawa State (Keffi, Toto, Nassarawa, New Kulo, Gadabuke, Yerwa, Ukyu, Nakuse, New Rubochi), Kogi State (Chika) and the Federal Capital Territory. Invariably, the whole Abuja is considered Gbagyi Territory. The Gbagyi people occupy the middle belt of Nigeria and the area they occupy consists of rolling mountains, fertile highlands, valleys and some swampy grounds. The vegetation of the area is high savannah made up of trees, shrubs, and grasses. (Midah 1).

Pre-Wedding day rites

Season of Marriage among the Gbagyis

Season is a period of a year characterized by or associated with a particular activity or phenomenon. In a year there are twelve months in Gbagyi calendar. They are the twelve lunar months beginning with the new moon when it becomes a visible crescent. The year thus totals approximately 354 days. The Gbagyi calendar year begins in April and ends in March (Nesta 22). However, in Gbagyi tradition the only appropriate and approved season of marriage is the second month of the year which is May. The second month of the year is characterized by or associated with marriage. That is why May is called "Amula-Pya" (Month of Marriages). The Month of the year are as follows according to (Tukura 82).

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| 1. | Mikegyebeyi | April |
| 2. | Amulapya or Fayapya | May |
| 3. | Nyakwo Pya | June |

4.	Kmakokmako Pya	July
5.	Gyibashe pya	August
6.	Chezokwota	September
7.	Snuworg pya	October
8.	Mwamwa pya	November
9.	Bwagyi Pya	December
10.	Wyiku Pya	January
11.	Wyigagyi Pya	February
12.	Pyababwi	March

More so, (Audu 209) further viewed the seasons in a year as follows:

- i. Agmama: The early rainy period, (May/early June).
- ii. Mikagye: Dry season (January to April).
- iii. Ose'sa: Cold harmattan/ winter.
- iv. Osna: The later rainy period (October/November).
- v. Wyepye'sa: Heat period/spring.

It should be noted that among all the names of the months in a year it is only May that is bearing the name of marriage (Amula) in Gbagyi.

Marital Introduction

The expression of interest on a girl is symbolized by the presentation of 'gbepye' to the parents of the girl and this is done when a man sees a girl he wishes to marry. This introductory observance is followed by a kind social relation entered into between the intending husband and the relations of his would be wife. After that the intending husband and wife will be summoned to sit on two mortars outside the prospective wife's parents' house. Guinea corn seeds will be poured on their (boy and girl) heads. Suddenly, a matured cock will be held by an elderly man to feed on the seeds of guinea corn that were placed on their heads publicly. And if the cock feeds on those seeds of guinea corn confidently, then, they (boy and girl) are made to marry. Immediately, the boy will run happily to a nearby stream to take his bath and return back home. Then on the other hand the girl will also walk happily to her house. But if the cock does not feed on the seeds that were placed on both of their heads, automatically, they (boy and girl) cannot marry each other. Sometimes oracles are consulted to ascertain the choice of the spouse.

Labor of love Marriage Rites

In traditional Gbagyi society, especially before the emergence of cash economy, bride price was paid in several installments of farm labor (Ayezhiyifa, Ayeyifa or simply yeyifa) on the prospective father-in-law's farm. In the first year, the fiancé alone joined his in-law's family to work on the farm for the whole day.

In continuation of the marriage rite (yeyifa), the second year required that the fiancé, now in the company of two of his friends, work on his in-law's farm for a whole day. Gbagyi farmers' day's work was calculated from around half-past six O'clock in the morning to sunset (dusk to dawn). At dusk, around half-past five in the morning, when farmers trooped out to the farm, light was provided from a fat bunch of fire-lit corn stalk which also served as source of fire for

cooking the meals on the farm. Subsequently, the number of his supporting friends increased in binary order until the seventh year or when the girl was considered ripe for marriage.

Within those years of 'yeyifa' (labour of love), the fiancé was expected to present one large bundle of sorghum each year to the girl's father until wedding was solemnized. In the wedding year, which was determined by the girl's age of maturity, the fiancé was expected to be accompanied by a large crowd of friends to his in-law's farm. This extraordinary demand serves as a test of popularity for the young men. A hardworking, skillful and popular young man always attracted many youths who would be ready to accompany him. But a lazy farmer might count himself lucky if he got the support of four young men. In a wealthy family, the maternal uncle of the fiancé could employ a cooperative farming group (Aye) to participate in the labor of love as his own contribution to his nephew's marriage.

On satisfactory completion of 'yeyifa', the girl's father would request from the boy's father a cock (pise nugbayi) for the marriage ritual. However, a wealthy in-law might purchase the cock, perform the ritual and only inform the boy's parents afterward.

Marriage Day

Marriage Day Ceremony

The girl's parent determined the date of the marriage, through this ritual, after which a messenger would be sent to the boy's parents to announce the date of the marriage. Adequate notice was given to allow for other preparations to be concluded on both sides. On the girl's side, her mother would purchase cooking pots, beautifully decorate calabashes, axe, and some dresses as wedding presents for her daughter. The girl's friends would assist her to fetch substantial quantity of firewood from the forest. Some of the firewood would be used to brew local beer (eje or luka) and to prepare food for the numerous guests who would grace the occasion. The father would provide sorghum, the main ingredient for the preparation of 'burukutu' and other raw food items, especially yams and dried mushroom which symbolizes meat. Similar preparations for food and drinks would be made from the boy's side.

On the wedding day, boys and girls converged in the girl's house to eat and drink. Girls would offer drinks to the boys they admired. An amiable boy might receive offers from several girls and could become drunk as a result. Whereas a not-so-attractive boy would hardly receive any offer.

Meanwhile, the girl's father would make special efforts to pacify her mother as he seeks her understanding to give her daughter away in marriage. Such an approach was merely a matter of courtesy because the woman really had no say in the matter. In the evening of the wedding day, the link man (bwoshiyi) would proceed to accompany the bride and her train to the husband's house. Prior to this, the bride would have plaited her hair in a special style, washed and rubbed a local cream consisting of a mixture of 'eza' and shear-butter oil. To complete the make-up,

'tosei' (tozzali in its Hausa version) would be applied on the eyelids in place of the modern eye pencil. A locally made hand-woven cloth, *gbadvi* (fari in Hausa), would be wrapped around the bride's chest with a smaller one on her head to complete the bridal dressing.

As soon as she arrives her husband's compound, the Gbagyi bride would drop her maiden name and pick up a new name that will become her identity for life. In this regard, names were selected to depict the day of the week that the wedding took place. For instance, the mother of the husband will change her name for instance, from 'Shekwoyemi' to 'Teni' indicating that she was wedded on Monday. So was it that other name such as, 'Naba' wedded on Wednesday, 'Lami' wedded on Thursday, 'Juma' wedded on Friday and 'Asibi' wedded on Saturday. And the wedding must take place in the month of May "Amulapya", which is the second month of the year according to Gbagyi calendar and season of marriage.

These names have become popular among Gbagyi women and in the course of time their maiden names are completely obliterated from the minds of the people around them. For instance if a woman decides to marry for the second time, she must drop her other name. (In addition to her surname which she has dropped in the course of the first marriage). If she goes for the third marriage, she must drop yet another of her names, thus for subsequent marriages, the second and in a few instances the third, the Gbagyi woman was not expected to take on another name: an indication that in the course of history, Gbagyi society frowned at divorce and second marriage but now, the practice has become quite popular (Aliyu 38).

The wedding celebration continues from the day of the bride's arrival until seven days without eating substantial food but drinking only locally brewed wine (eje). After seven days celebration, the bride's friends will leave and remain only the chief bride maid. And she will stay for three months assisting the bride in running errands and other domestic activities. The chief brides' maid must not sleep in the same room with the bride and the groom in her staying. The simple reason is just because the new couple are naturally expected to be in the honeymoon mode for the first three months and thus need no third party in the room at night. The expectations of a bulging stomach (pregnancy) for the new bride is very high, so the every night the chief brides made must vacate the room.

Inextricably, the substantial quantity of fire wood that was earlier fetched by the bride's friends, half of it will be shared to old and physically challenged women in the village or town.

The preparations of Gbagyi traditional marriage last for seven years, and all services rendered by the groom to his in-laws serve as the marriage payment, bride wealth, dowry, and bride service. So, Gbagyi traditional marriage does not involve spending of huge amount of money,

rather it involve the ability to work hard in order to show yourself approved that you can feed and take care of your wife to her satisfaction.

Other marital issues

Pro-Creation and Infertility among the Gbagyis

In Gbagyi societies the procreation purpose of marriage is to provide opportunity for the unborn members of the family to spring up. In other words, the chief purpose of Gbagyi traditional marriage is procreation. The person, who fails, for various reasons, to have children, is one of the most miserable members of society. According to Gbagyi tradition such a person will be despised and regarded as the ‘cul-de-sac’ of his family. Gbagyi people thus, value procreation for more than other aspects of marriage such as companionship, love and sexual pleasure.

Infertility in the other hands is seen as a negation of life, the destruction of individual and community (Kunhiyop 197). Gbagyi people believe that both husband and wife are reproduced in their children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity. Anyone who, therefore, has no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life, and becomes forever dead, since his line of physical contribution is blocked.

Rather than enduring the shame of infertility, people will go great lengths to try to conceive. They will consult witchdoctors, herbalists, magicians and all sorts of medicine men and women in an attempt to solve their problems regardless of the cost. If these attempts fail, many will resort to either divorce or polygamous marriage, which may lead to domestic conflicts between husband and wife. So, procreation and infertility have become problematic to Gbagyi traditional marriage.

Fornication among the Gbagyis

Fornication is an illicit consensual sexual intercourse between two persons who at the time of the affair are not married. It is also called pre-marital sex (Bagobiri 132).

Fornication is called “Anagbai” in Gbagyi (Alkawali woiwoi 238). In Gbagyi tradition, any boy or girl that commits fornication and is caught, the boy and the girl involved punishment: both of them will be brought to public naked, to be publicly humiliated. Then, the girl will be allowed to go but the boy will be charged to pay a fine (Anyapa) of he-goat with 2 kilograms of hungry rice (Acha)¹, for polluting the community. And those charges will be given to the

¹ It is also called acha rice or acha. Then, the modern name is “hungry rice”. It was seen as the only special meal as rice is today. It was mostly grown than any other food crops among the Gbagyi people. It is a cereal crop. The seeds are of millet’s in size.

chief and his cabinet in order to appease the gods and to purify the community. But if the girl is impregnated, both the boy and the girl will be banished to live in the outskirts of the village until after birth. The rest of the boys and the girls in the community will compose and sing songs with their names in a mockery way to depict their immoral act. This type of social punishment is called 'azhipmamula', after delivery the boy will be required to pay a fine (Anyapa) of a dog with 2 kilograms of hungry rice, so as to purify his own town or village.

Similarly, if it is was latter in discovered that the boy that was penalized for impregnating a girl was not responsible for the pregnancy, then the man who is responsible for the pregnancy must have to bring all what the former boy was charged alongside with a dog. The dog will be killed and its meat will be cooked and eaten outside the village or town. After eating the meat the elders and the chief of the village will ask the boy to stand while his adversary has the dog's intestine tied to his right hand.

The falsely accused boy will be commanded to give his adversary two good slaps on his cheeks, before washing his hands. That symbolized that they have forgiven each other. This practice is called (amanubayi). The reason for this act of forgiveness is that if an accident should happen to either the boy or the girl caused by another person without consulting a native doctor (beyi), certainly the offended man will not survive; he must surely die. In Gbagyi tradition, pre-marital sex is totally not condoned. Fornication is not allowed, not advised, and not encouraged.

Adultery among the Gbagyi: Adultery can be said to be an illegal consensual affair between someone who is married and another person who may or may not be married (Bagobiri 132). But the emphasis here is rightly placed mostly on the married. In Gbagyi traditional believe, adultery is a grave offence that has serious social and traditional consequences. If a man is caught committing adultery and he is guilty, both the man and the woman involved in the act will be punished. The woman might be disciplined by her husband or her husband relatives but the man must be charged to pay a fine (Anyapa) of a dog and 5 kilograms of hungry rice.

The elders of the village will collect those items (dog and hungry rice). The dog will be slaughtered, cooked and eaten outside the village premises in form of ritual. This is done to cleanse and appeased the gods of the land, it is believed that when adultery is committed the land will be polluted and the gods of the land will be angry. Adultery may cause divorce of marriage, because if a woman is caught, then the husband of the woman may decide to divorce her who is very common and easy compare to when a man is caught, the wife of the man may not even make an attempt to divorce the husband. Adultery indeed causes domestic violence.

Incest among the Gbagyi: Incest involves having sexual relationships between family members, such as between brother and sister, cousin and cousin, uncle and niece, father and daughter, mother and son, stepfather and stepdaughter, grandfather and granddaughter, among others (Kunhiyop 279). According to Gbagyi tradition incest is considered a grievous sin against the society, the gods and the family.

In Gbagyi tradition, any one that is caught committing incest the man or the male party will be charged to pay a fine of dog only, and the dog will be given to the elders of the village to perform some rites of purification of the land and appeasing the gods of the land. Prior to that, if it is a father and his daughter that commits the incest, the mother of the house will leave her husband's house for two to three month. But if it is a mother and the son that also indulge in incest, divorce becomes inevitable. The father will divorce the mother. If the incense happens between cousin and cousin, grandfather and granddaughter etc, then the male parties will be charged as stated above.

Consequently, if the daughter involved in the act of incest is in an open or known relationship, then, the intestine of the dog charged as a fine will be tied to the male party involved and the daughter together. The prospective husband will be given a sharp knife to cut the intestine once. This rite signifies forgiveness. Generally, Gbagyi tradition frowns at an incestuous this act leads to broken homes.

Abortion among the Gbagyis: Abortion means the deliberate and artificially induced removal of an embryo or a fetus from the womb (Shields 237). We are speaking of what takes place when a woman or a girl purposely kills or allows someone else to kill an unborn baby growing in her womb (Garland and Idoko 18). In this case we are not talking about spontaneous abortion or miscarriage, though in Gbagyi tradition abortion (nubozeya) is not common, but what is common is miscarriage (bonyice). However, if married parties perform abortion the punishment is that he will bring a matured cock with a gallon of wine (eje) for ritual. But if it is unmarried parties that execute abortion both will be charged to pay a fine of a dog with a gallon of locally brewed wine (eje).

More so, if the abortion is done by prospective in-laws, that is, in the case of a known courtship as a sign of opposing the relationship, the penalty to the girl's parent is to bring a goat with a gallon of wine for a ritual. But if the abortion is performed by the boy's parents and if known, the punishment is the same with the girl's parent.

Thus, if the girl unfortunately dies in the course of abortion, the penalty to the boy and his parents is that the entire family of the boy will become that of the girl. In other words the boy

and his nuclear family will serve the girl's parents for years, until the girl's parents dismiss or set them free. In Gbagyi tradition, those who perform abortion are equated to witchcraft in the society.

Divorce among the Gbagyis

Divorce is the dissolution of the bond of marriage, between legally married couples. It brings a marriage to an end and it means that persons who were previously husband and wife are no longer so (Shields 215).

Divorce in Gbagyi tradition was very rarely initiated by the husband, because the husband will consider the sufferings and hardship he passed through to marry his wife but still if the husband intends to divorce his wife. Whenever she gets wind of the news that her husband is planning to divorce her, the wife, will go and report the case to (bwoshiyi) (a middle man who serves as her father in that village or town). In some other instances, it is the middle man that the husband reports to in the village that will tell the wife that the husband as initiated a divorce proceeding. The husband and the wife will be called upon to be advised and counseled not to divorce his wife, alongside with his parents and elders of the village. And if he insists, the wife will prepare and leave his house but the wife must not go back to her house alone, she must be accompanied with the relatives of the husband and nothing will be refunded to him. Childlessness in marriage usually is the main cause of divorce.

However, if the wife engineers the divorce to marry another man, the man she intends to marry, must refund whatever the legitimate husband spent in marrying the wife, Including going to farm for seven year, but the seven years farming can be monetized or bring materials of any sort that the former husband charge. The rival must bring those items demanded in a day meaning if it will be cash or materials, must be provided before she can leave her husband's house for the new man's house. It is also possible that there is no other man in the picture but the wife was just tired of the marriage, to opt out, she must do the same thing by refunding to her husband whatever was spent on her in the process of her marriage. Her husband will name the price and she must pay before she will be granted the divorce. More so, if a wife consciously divorces her husband (she thinks she has a good reason to divorce her husband), then, the wife must pay whatever was spent in marrying her in a day, ideally on or before the day of her departure.

So, Gbagyi tradition does not support or welcome divorce, because divorce has so many negative effects on marriage and children. If the parents are separated, the children are usually given an inadequate care and support (Oken 98).

Conclusions

Gbagyi traditional marriage is a major social institution among the Gbagyi speaking people that has pride in their culture. (Dr. Shekwo qtd in Ayuba 61) opines that no matter how old one may be in Gbagyi traditional society, one could still be treated as a child if one is not married. The state of being unmarried could exclude one from many religious ceremonies and initiations into certain religious and cultural practices. So, traditional marriage institution can never be overestimated among the Gbagyis. It takes a sequential steps starting from courtship, marital introduction, marriage rites, wedding ceremony and finally bride's settlement as a house wife.

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