

THE VISION AND VERSIONS OF NWERENDAH (SPINSTER PROCREATION) CULTURAL PRACTICE IN IKWERRE TRADITION; IMPLICATION FOR PROPERTY INHERITANCE

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ABSTRACT

The vision and versions of Nwerendah is a practice in Ikwerre land where a young maiden is advised and encouraged by the parents to remain at home to bear children because of the absence of a male child in the family, reason is that male children are held in high esteem because of the patriarchal nature of the society. These young maidens are allowed to procreate while still in their parents' house either because they do not have male children in the family or the maiden is the beloved of her father. However, the people have high regard for children whose parents were duly married traditionally than children born by single parents especially if it's from a young lady, these children are tagged with a derogatory name amuru-noro or rumu-oryi (born at home) while those born in a traditionally contracted marriage are called rumu-dieli (son of the soil). Hence, the paper looks at the place of the children born out of wedlock amongst the people as well as the perception of the people about these children especially when it comes to property inheritance using the descriptive method. The cultural change theory was used in the analysis of this paper and therefore submits that children born by reason of cultural belief system should be allowed to enjoy the rights and privileges of the community since their mothers were accepted by their family. (Keywords: Nwerendah, Property, Patriarchal, Inheritance, Culture)

INTRODUCTION

The vision and versions of Nwerendah is a practice in Ikwerre land where a young maiden is advised and encouraged by the parents to remain at home to bear children because of the absence of a male child in the family. The children born by the young maiden who still stays with her parents bears her father's name and is considered to be the children of her father, the parents are not interested in the paternity of the child as what is important to them is who will perpetuate their names when they are gone or who will inherit their belongings especially landed properties upon their demise. So, the maiden is free to have sexual relationship with any man but the man will never claim ownership of the children born out of that relationship, hence, the lady is at liberty to have children with different men just to please the her parents by raising children for them. These young ladies are exposed to this kind of tradition due to their parents' inability to bear male children since male children are held in high esteem because of the patriarchal nature of the society. The *nwerendah* practise where young maidens are allowed to procreate while still in their parents' house either because they do not have male children in the family or the maiden is the beloved of her father exposes them to all manner of sexually transmitted diseases; the fact is that they have the liberty to move at will from one relationship to the other as they are not ready to tolerate the excesses or weakness of men who do not meet their needs since they are not bound by marriage. However, the Ikwerre people have high regard for children whose parents were married according to law and custom of the land than children born by single parents especially if it's from a young lady, these children are called *amuru-nuoro* or *rumu-oryi* (children born at home or children born with a boy friend) in order words they are illegitimate children. While the ones born in lawful marriage are seen as legitimate children (Achi 2021), again, children born within wedlock are called *Rumu-Dieli* or *Nwor-Dieli* (son of the soil or real children). Ikwerre is a patriarchal society that places greater value on children especially male children, the absence of children in a home can make a man marry multiple wives just to have children. Reason is that children are believed to maintain the lineage of the family. However, despite the value

placed on children; those born out of wedlock are not given the right traditional status like those born into families where their parents consummated their traditional marriage rites. The name *Amuru nu-oro* or *Rumu-oryi*, as they are usually called places a derogatory tag on them making them feel like second class citizen thereby displacing them on certain inheritance right in the family. Although these children are innocent of the circumstance that brought them into the world they are made to suffer stigmatization during communal occasions like sharing of communal food, appointments into traditional offices as well as land inheritance even when some of these children were born by ladies whose parents asked to remain at home due to the absence of a male child in the family (Chile Woke, 2023 oral source).

The *amuru nu-oro* is made to suffer psychologically because of his status in the community thus tries as much as possible to work very hard to ensure that he does not depend on the communal gains. This is quite different from the female *amuru nu-ro* because she will eventually marry out of the family when she grows into a marriageable age. She does not remain in the family to suffer discriminations which her male counterparts suffer.

It interesting to note that children born by those who are duly married who are called the *Rumu-Dieli* are believed to carry the ancestral blessings which qualify them to ascend ancestral stool, this is because during the tradition marriage it is believed that both the living and dead participates in the rituals of the marriage to release their blessings on their children who has brought honour and joy to them by adhering to the traditions and customs of the land in marriage. This confers on them the status of legitimacy; the legitimate male children are preferred because they are believed to carry on with the worship of the family deity and can ascend the ancestral throne upon the passing on of their father. It becomes worrisome why male children born by a spinster, if mandated by the father to procreate and preserve the family lineage in cases where the father does not have an heir, is limited from inheriting the ancestral stool and honouring of the family deity. Notwithstanding, the topic under discussion will be appreciated if approached in two or more dimensions; such as considering and differentiating between getting impregnated at home out of carelessness (*omunwo-oryi*), and procreating to sustain the family name (*Nwerendah*), following the instruction of a father and other family heads (Wenenda Nwosu, 2023 oral source).

Ikwerre Ethnic Group

Ikwerre is made up of four local government areas namely; Port Harcourt, Obio-Akpor, Emohua and Ikwerre in Rivers State; south-south geopolitical area of Nigeria. They are located in the upland of the Niger Delta, made up of different clan with each having her own paramount ruler (Wotogbe I.H 2017). However, the people are very hospitable and friendly to their visitors. The people known as Ikwerre today are originally known as Iwhnuruohna but the name was corrupted by the foreigners who in course of trade deals with the people had an interpreter of the Igbo stock who often times asked the Ikwerre people if they agreed with the negotiation as presented by the foreigners by saying Anu-kkwerrile in response to the questions they will always reply akwerrilem. The foreigner on the continuous hearing of Akwerrilem decided to address them as 'Ikwerre people' although people view Ikwerre people as a sub-group of the Igbo stock; they are descendants of Akalaka from the ancient Benin kingdom. They have different language which distinguishes them from neighboring tribe like the Ijaws and Ibos. (Amadi 1993)

The Idea Behind Nwerendah

Onuwor (2023. oral source), explained that in time past amongst the Aluu people of Ikwerre ethnic group, the gods of the air, land, water and the dead were highly honoured. These deities were to render protection and prosperity to its adherents if they continually paid allegiance to it. As people migrate from one place to another to settle down with their families, they were confronted by powerful spirits that claimed ownership of the virgin and arable land mass. This could be likened to the exact experience of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, when Almighty God appeared to them to demand worship and promised a relationship for protection and prosperity (Genesis 12:1-8). Thus,

when these traditional Ikwerre men keep to these covenants, the gods preserve their vows on protection and prosperity. Onuwor further noted that in the beginning of time, the Ikwerre people experienced low productivity rate, what he explained as human scarcity. The people worshipped the gods with sacrifices at specific times. Some spirits relate to the male children alone. Therefore, when the man dies without a son it becomes a challenge for whom to continue the worship, this makes male offspring special, as the females cannot go to the shrine to pour libations and offer sacrifices, as discontinuing the ritual of worship will be dangerous to future generations. This is usually a heavy burden on family leadership, thus, compels a man to have a son at all costs and means.

Consequently, those without sons declare their daughters unmarriageable in order to have a son through them. But have to formalize the process by informing his kinsmen with heavy entertainment and libations to the gods of the land. It is never unceremonious, hence the name "*nwerendah*". When he dies the daughter's son takes the lead. He inherits all the wealth and responsibilities, which includes worshipping the ancestral deities, ascending any throne, owning land and personal fish ponds of the father. The mother's father which is meant to be his grandfather is seen as his biological father, he does not know any other father except the mother's father thus, enjoys all the rights and privileges of a *Dieli*. If there is an ancestral stool in such family, the son of *Nwerendah*, will ascend the throne and the gods will be with him in protecting and prospering the clan. No other man can go to that family shrine to offer sacrifices. Such person will die as he will be considered an intruder; the deity will fight for him since he is recognised as a legitimate child. The son cannot also jettison that duty for any reason. He will die or live in perpetual ill health up to his children and grandchildren if he trivialises his traditional duties. However, in contemporary Ikwerre milieu, reverse is now the order of the day, as greed and wickedness is believed to have taken over such practice. These children suffer a lot of challenges especially with respect to succession (Oduche, 2006)

The Concept of Nwerendah

Nwerendah (father's wife) is an age long Ikwerre religious practice, believed to help perpetuate a family name or inheritance from being catered away by strangers. In primordial Ikwerre society, women who fall under the category of being instructed not to marry in order to retain the family name were often referred to as "*Nwerendaa*" or "*Oryi-ndaa*." "*Nwere*" according to the language of the people denotes "wife", and "*Ndah*" refers to father, or "*Ndaa*", which means her father. Therefore, "*Nwerendah/Nwerendaa/Oryi-Ndaa*" can be translated as "her father's wife or father's friend." Connotatively, the term "*Nwerendah*" was used to identify and categorize these women within the social structure of the community. They were recognized as individuals who remained unmarried to preserve the family name and lineage. This term distinguished them from other married women who would adopt their husbands' names and be associated with their husbands' lineages. Although, *Nwerendah*, can pass as a female given name too, owing to the meaning of the word and the belief in reincarnation amongst the people of Ikwerre.

Taking a clue from the Aluu versions, the term *omurinya* is a compound noun formed from two Ikwerre-Aluu words, "*Omu*" and "*rinya*". *Omu*, which denotes children, is a generic plural word, used to describe male and female. While men are addressed as *Omuenuka*, women are known as *Omuenuya*. The second word; "*rinya*" is the alternated form of the word "*Eninya*" or "*nye-eniya*" which means woman. Thus, *omurinya* connotes many female children in a social group having same ancestry. It is worthy to note that women help to complement the efforts of the men in the overall development of their various communities of birth (Nnorum, 2021). In contemporary Ikwerre culture, it is worth noting that these terms may not be widely used or recognized, as the practice of spinster procreation, has become less prevalent and individual choices in marriage are given more consideration.

Spinster Procreation (Omu-nwonu'oro)

In pre-historic Ikwerre society, spinster procreation (*omunwonu'oro*), is a cultural practice in which parents instructed their female children not to marry in order to retain the family name. This practice was based on the patrilineal nature of the Ikwerre society, where family identity and ancestry, were primarily passed down through male descents. According to Nsirim-Worlu(2023), *Omuru nu oro*, is a circumstance whereby an adult female is permitted and blessed by her father and family to remain in her home of orientation in order to beget and raise children who will perpetuate and inherit the family property and lineage without being formally married. The family name held significant importance in the social structure of Ikwerre communities. It represented not only the immediate family but also the extended lineage and ancestors. Therefore, it was believed that by preventing a daughter from marrying and taking their father's name, the family name would be preserved and honoured. Although, among the people of Ikwerre, it is against moral ethos for their daughters to remain single, engage in premarital sex, get pregnant and procreate at home (*omunwonu'oro*). It is more honourable when family, friends and kinsmen gather to give out the hands of a young maiden in marriage. According to Lawrence-Hart (2022), marriage is one of the cultural values that is highly esteemed among the people of Ikwerre. It is a union believed to promote the lineage of the family, as well as promote the status of the women amongst people. A woman is believed to be responsible when she is married rather than choose to make children under her father's roof. Hence, when a maiden in the community gets pregnant without being traditionally joined to a partner by her father and kinsmen, it is believed she has disgraced the family. When people want to refer to her, they address her, they abusively refer to it as "*Ortnuime-nu-oro*."

Ortnuime nu-oro

Ortnuime nu-oro (pregnancy out of wedlock) is a demeaning nomenclature employed by some Ikwerre communities to mean or describe the act of getting pregnant out of wedlock. This is because it is against the culture and tradition of the Ikwerre people for unmarried maiden to become pregnant while still under their fathers' roof. Spinsters that get pregnant without being traditionally married out by the family are believed to have brought shame upon themselves and their family name.

This idea is very distinct from the previous idea of a father mandating the daughter to take charge of the home to perpetuate the family name. Therefore, children born through the practice of *Nwerendah*, should be given equal right and should be perceived as legitimate children of the community.

Notwithstanding, there are strong reasons or guiding rules for the idea of *Omunwonu'oro*, these rules as believed to be the cultural practice of the Ikwerre people, will serve as a guiding principle. Hence, castigating opinions on the definition sway on of marriage does not hold sway, pointing to the triviality of women that are unmarried. Onuwor (Oral discourse), noted that it is worthless without knowing the background reasons for such decisions. By maintaining a family name, the lineage would continue to have a sense of identity, cohesion, and continuity. The practise ensured that the ancestral spirits and deities associated with the family would be properly appeased and respected. It also helped in the inheritance and distribution of family property, as well as the maintenance of social status within the community.

Theoretical Clarification

The cultural change theory was used in x-raying this work as it is appropriate in discussing the subject under review. The cultural change theory according to Vinesta 2022 is a process where the different socio-cultural institutions or culture of mankind are developed or witness changes over a period of time. These cultural changes are influenced by technology and contact with other culture and environment. This theory is apt for this subject because it gives room for changes in respect to growth and development as well as contact with new ideas. Communities which hold firm to the concept of *amurono-oro* should adjust to modern change in line with cultural change theory since the children are innocent hence should not suffer as victim of circumstance. This does

not in any way discourage the young girls from marrying according to their traditional law and custom.

Findings of the Study

Limitations Experienced by *Amurunu-oro* in Ikwerre Tradition?

In Ikwerre tradition, children born out of wedlock may face certain limitations or social challenges due to the cultural norms and values associated with marriage and family. It is important to note that while these limitations were more prevalent in the past, Ikwerre society has become more diverse and accepting, and these attitudes may vary depending on individual families and communities. However, according to cultural perspective, the following are the challenges experienced by children born out of wedlock or by *Nwerendah*.

1. Inheritance and Lineage: Traditional Ikwerre society places great importance on family lineage and inheritance. Children born out of wedlock may encounter challenges in terms of inheritance rights, especially when it comes to family property and titles. Legally recognized children from formal marriages are often given more rights in this regard. In the sharing of communal gains, the *amuru-noro* is given after every other person has been given, they can only freely share of their perceived biological father's (maternal grandfather) inheritance, that which their mother's father bequeathed to them. However, in some Ikwerre communities like RumuoroOgbakiri, children born out wedlock are given full inheritance without any form of discrimination to avoid crisis and violence which will disrupt the peace of the community but among the Okporowo community still in Ogbakiri, the concept of *nwerendah* is not accepted at all instead the wife is advised to go and marry a new wife for her husband to procreate for her husband in order to inherit their properties and continue their lineage as children born outside wedlock are highly discriminated against. In the event of the death of a husband, the wife can still marry a young maiden who will remain in her house to give birth in the name of her husband. The young maiden is at liberty to meet any man of her choice to raise children for the deceased. This is done to share in the inheritance and perpetuate lineage. (Elder, Philip Ojire 2023).

2. Social Status: In Ikwerre society, a child's social status and acceptance are often linked to the status of their parents' marriage. Children born out of wedlock are sometimes faced with discrimination or exclusion from certain social circles or events. For instance, female *amurunoro* who is intends to get married traditionally, the community will only be invited to come and wine and dine with her in the celebration of her marriage but will not be part of the sharing of her bride wealth as it is done for *rumu-dieli*. The bride wealth will only be shared to members of her mother's family. This implies that only those from her mother's kitchen will give her in marriage. Still amongst the women, the perceived legitimate child is given the privilege to be called '*Ada*' of the family (first daughter of the family) even though she has those that are her seniors who are not seen as legal children. For the men, parents fear to release their daughters to them because of the discrimination they may face in future, hence, most of the men marry outside the community especially from those who donot understand the implication of the *amuro-noro status* (Felix Amadi, oral source).

3. Naming Conventions: Ikwerre naming customs typically include aspects of the child's lineage and family background. Children born out of wedlock may face limitations in terms of the names they are given, as certain prestigious names or family lineages may be reserved for children from recognized marriages.

4. Marriage Prospects: In traditional Ikwerre society, marriage is a significant aspect of life, and the family background of a prospective spouse is often taken into consideration. Children born out

of wedlock may face challenges or limitations in finding suitable marriage partners, as some families may prefer to marry their children into families with recognized marriages.

It is important to reiterate that these limitations are rooted in traditional cultural perspectives, and attitudes have been evolving over time. Many Ikwerre communities are becoming more accepting and inclusive, and the experiences of children born out of wedlock may vary widely based on individual circumstances and the prevailing values of the community.

6.2 Children and Inheritance

Marriage in Ikwerreculture is highly valued, and children born within wedlock are generally considered more legitimate. Hence, the people of Ikwerre place more emphasis on procreation in marriage above love, companionship, and other aspects of marriage. According to Lawrence-Hart (2022), marriage is a union that is believed to promote the lineage of the family as well as promote the status of men and women amongst the people. This is because, a man who has no offspring, especially a male descendant, is believed to erase the family name when he finally joins his ancestors.

In Ikwerre tradition, the inheritance rights of children born out of wedlock have historically been limited compared to those of children born within a formal marriage. However, it is essential to note that these attitudes and practices have been changing over time, and there is no harmonized perspective or practice across all Ikwerre communities. Traditionally, children born out of wedlock might have faced challenges in inheriting family property or titles. In Ikwerre culture, inheritance was often passed down through formal family lines and recognized marriages. Legally recognized children from formal marriages were typically given more rights and privileges when it came to inheritance. That being said, it is not uncommon for families to make individual decisions based on their own circumstances and relationships. Some families may choose to include children born out of wedlock in inheritance arrangements, especially if there is a close relationship between the child and the family or if there is no other direct heir available.

Moreover, it's worth noting that changes in Nigerian law have influenced inheritance practices in recent years. The Nigerian Constitution and various statutory laws recognize the rights of all children, regardless of their parents' marital status, to inheritance and other legal protections.

CONCLUSION

Overall, while there may still be some lingering cultural biases or challenges in certain cases, the inheritance rights of children born out of wedlock in Ikwerre land are not fixed or uniform, and they may vary based on the specific circumstances, family dynamics, and the prevailing cultural norms within each community.

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