

CULTURAL DIFFERENTIALISM, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE MARRIAGE RITES OF THE KOKO PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE. 1950-2022

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Abstract

Continuity and change in the marriage rites of the Koko people in Delta State, Nigeria, from 1950 to 2022. Koko town is located in a riverine area of Warri North Local Government Area of Delta State, South-South Nigeria positioned off the busy Benin- Sapele thruway. The research explores how traditional practices have evolved over the decades in response to social, economic, and cultural shifts within the community. The study adopted the qualitative research method, the Historical Descriptive approach was utilized. Through a combination of oral histories, archival research, and participant observation, the study reveals a complex interplay between adherence to customary rites and the incorporation of modern influences. Key findings indicate that while core elements of the traditional marriage process, such as bride price and family negotiations, have persisted, there have been significant changes in the rituals and ceremonies, influenced by factors such as urbanization, education, and religious transformation. The research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural adaptation and resilience, highlighting the ways in which the Koko people navigate the balance between preserving their heritage and embracing contemporary practices.

Keywords: Continuity, Marriage, Globalization, Cultural Divergence.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has been conceptualized differently according to societies. Marriage in a layman's understanding is the legal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife.

In some places, it's a union between two people of the same coitus (sex), generally containing legal scores of each person to the other¹. Several reasons have been linked as the reason for marriage practices around the world. Specifically, in old Europe, marriages were made for dynastic reasons, to form alliances between families, and to produce heirs². In modern times, Europeans have other reasons for marriage; people prefer to marry for love, and some abstain from marriage altogether. Also in ancient Rome, marriages were conducted for the purposes of gravidity (procreation), forming ties, and producing new citizens. Societies in precolonial and postcolonial Africa rehearsed Marriages as a way of carrying out family duties, utmost times for purposes of heritage, prestige, love, gravidity, and indeed to maintain patrilineal traditions³. Among the Koko people of Delta State Nigeria, the institution of marriage was largely regarded and, hence, held sacrosanct. Like in most other societies, marriage was believed to be as old as man.

There are different types of marriages rehearsed around the world. These include monogamy which has to do with marrying one woman and polygamy which deals with marring several women at a time, especially to ameliorate the area of labor and to show the capability of the man in terms of wealth, these forms of marriage are substantially common in Africa and Koko land isn't an exception. Marriage is one of the most important events in the life of the Koko people. From the time the boys and girls can think for themselves marriage is set before them as the one object to be attained⁴. Marriage among the Delta is patrilineal. By this, it's a family situation in which status and property are inherited through the paternal line. Women leave their paternal group and live with the paternal group of their husbands. Among the Koko people, marriage has helped to propagate and immortalize mortal life; it's deified and held sacrosanct.

The city of Koko is about 20 minutes' drive from the major city of Oghara, headquarters of Ethiope West Local Government Area of Delta State and birthplace of Chief James Ibori, former governor of Delta State. One of the remarkable histories of the city is that it was home to Nana Olomu, who contributed immensely to its significance and growth⁵. The city lies along the Benin River, in the western Niger River Delta. Koko town has a harborage which is a collecting point for palm oil, palm kernels as well as timber, it can be reached by vessels of 14-foot (4- meters) draft that navigate the 50- miles (80 kilometers) distance upstream to the harborage via the Escravos River entrance (opened 1940, on the creek of Benin) and the Youngtown Crossing. Although its harborage was transcended by Sapele, 20 miles (32 km) upstream, the city still serves as an agrarian trade center for the Itsekiri people, and the executive headquarters of the Warri North local government area⁶.

Cultural Differentialism

Adopted theory for this research work is cultural differentialism. This theory was propounded by Hutinton (1996) and Bauman (1998). Both opined that among and between cultures, there are lasting differences that are largely unaffected by globalization or by any other bi-, multi-, Inter-, or transcultural processes. In the words of Ritzer (2010) cultures that are largely unaffected by them remain much as they always have been'

(p.580). Baylis and Smith (1997) as well mentioned that culture differentialism views culture diversity as the survival of national identities and solidarities thriving in the contemporary globalizing world. Nevertheless, the theory was critically discussed particularly the contribution of Ritzers which focuses on cultural convergence, it certainly does not argue that this is not all what is happening in globalization, or that local cultures are disappearing completely or even necessarily being altered in some fundamental way. Rather the argument is that the global process is bringing the same or similar phenomena to many parts of the world which is knowingly or unknowingly interject cultural convergence. In Koko, there have been progressively radical changes in the nature and patterns of marriage which were brought about by three major factors namely, the extensive contacts which the Delta had within the Niger Delta region with other ethnical groups that led to increased artistic infusions; the influence of Christianity and Western education, and; their occupational influence⁷.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative research method, the historical descriptive approach, in that the method involves critical analysis, contextualization, and the establishment of chronological frameworks that discern patterns, causes, and effects in historical developments. This was achievable through a combination of oral histories, archival research, and participant observation, the study reveals a complex interplay between adherence to customary rites and the incorporation of modern influences. The goal is not only to narrate events but to interpret their significance and express the paradigm shift in acceptance of this historical marriage rite practice by the Koko people.

Historical Overview of the Koko people

The Koko people are part of the Itsekiri ethnic group in Nigeria. Their tradition of origin revolves around the legendary figure of Ginuwa, who is revered as the progenitor of the Itsekiri nation. According to Itsekiri oral tradition, Ginuwa was a prince from Benin (part of the Edo people) who fled to found his kingdom. Legend has it that Ginuwa left Benin due to a power struggle and arrived in the region that would later become the heart of the Itsekiri kingdom. He is said to have married a local woman named Euphrates, cementing his ties to the land. Their union and descendants are believed to have formed the foundation of the Itsekiri people. Ginuwa is credited with establishing the Ginuwa dynasty, which has ruled the Itsekiri people for centuries. The tradition surrounding Ginuwa's migration, marriage, and leadership forms a significant part of the cultural heritage and historical identity of the Itsekiri people, including those in Koko⁸.

The people of Koko are among the Itsekiri people who adopted a prince (Ginuwa) from the Kingdom of Benin as a monarch, and quickly merged into a kingdom under his rule in the 15th century. Invariably, the modern history of Koko dates from the late fifteenth century when the Itsekiri people adopted a prince from Benin Kingdom as their monarch. Prior to this time, Koko people lived independently in different communities that included

Irigbo, Ureju, Omadino and Ugborodo. With the arrival of the prince and adoption of the monarchy. These communities coalesced to become a Kingdom⁹.

Koko was first founded by a man called OJOMBA - an Ilaje - thought or claimed to have migrated from Ode in Ijebu area of the defunct Western Region of Nigeria, Koko had been described by some Authorities or Writers as a Pre Ginuwa Settlement¹⁰. Thus it is argued that actually Koko was founded in about 14633. However, Ojomba packed away and deserted Koko completely as he left neither anybody nor anything there apart from a field of cocoyam which his servants planted along the shores of the Benin River which attracted the name AJIKOKO. It is believed that Ojomba lived for up to or over 160 years before he died. Ojomba's wife Oluebirenaye gave birth to only a female child for him whose name was MOGBEYITSEWOFUN. It was this female child who grew up to marry the OlogbotsereEyinmisanren for whom she begat two female children – AMEREN the elder and IWEROKO the younger. While AMEREN married an Ijaw man and begat only one son called MEBAGHANDUN abbreviated to MEDUN - for him, Iweroko was married to Asoruku of Udefi origin from Ugbolokposo for whom she had six children namely EBURU (m), EBIWANYE (f), AKEKO (m), EGBELE (f), OLOMU (m) and OMAWUMI (f). These seven children from the two sisters are jointly referred to as UGOGO MEEJE FAMILY OF KOKO today¹¹.

Other history sources like the Niger Delta rivalry written by Obarokkime, reveal that in several waves of migration before the 15th Century, and some a little later, groups from Igala in Nupe country came in through the creeks; Yoruba from Ijebu-ode, Akure, and Owo found their way into parts of the kingdom and a group from Aboh also came in. Some along the coast came in through Gulani/Amatu¹². Koko is as old as the oldest community in the Delta area of what has come to be known today as Nigeria. Importantly, Koko has no significant meaning order than a geographical nomenclature to mark out a unique and distinct set of people from the general¹³.

Okotie revealed that the people of Koko migrated from Ebrohimi which is a town on the Benin River founded by the great Olomu, Governor of the Niger. Olomu who was from Jakpa, moved with his siblings to establish Ebrohimi as the headquarters of his very successful commercial trade empire and it became a very beautiful and sprawling town. However, they were forced to flee Ebrohimi following the British expedition against Nana Olomu who succeeded his father as Governor of the Niger. With the fall of Ebrohimi in the British invasion, the people scattered in different directions, and a large number of them found their way to present day Koko and resettled there. Finding the place very conducive, the settlers reached out to their kith and kin who had dispersed to other places to join them in Koko. These first settlers who are descendants of the original seven siblings at Ebrohimi constitute the seven Families or Ugogomeje which is in charge of the traditional administration of Koko till date. The seven families in order of seniority were;Eburu,Abiwanye,Akeko,Egbele,Olomu,Medu, and Omawumi.

Following the growth and development of Koko, other groups of people came to settle there in due course among which is the Duwelyatsere family who descend from the famed Ikaye of Ologbo family. The Ebrohimi war was in 1894¹⁴.

Politically, the traditional governance structure of the Koko people, much like other Itsekiri communities, exhibits a combination of indigenous customs, leadership roles, and societal organization that have persisted over generations. At the apex of Koko's political institution lies a traditional monarchy. The traditional ruler, titled the Olu of Koko, serves as the paramount leader and custodian of the community's customs and traditions. The Olu of Koko oversees the affairs of the town, symbolizing continuity and preserving the cultural identity of the Koko people. The position is hereditary, often passing from one generation to another within a ruling dynasty, tracing its lineage back to the legendary Ginuwa¹⁵.

Specific traditional institutions of the Koko people are the age group, Among the Koko, women and men are separately organized. Men are organized into four major age groups: Ekpako, Iwvraghwa, Otuorere, and Imitete. The Ekpako (Elders) age grade is made up of men of about 60 years and above. They are saddled with the day-to-day administration of the Koko town. They are the trustees and custodians of their history and culture. The Iwvraghwa Age Grade consists of men between thirty and sixty years, who form the largest workforce, and are of the age required in precolonial societies as warriors and executors of orders that emanate from the elders' council. The Otuorere Age Grade which assists the older age grades in doing heavy jobs such as building communities, shrines, houses, and wooden bridges. The Imitele Age Grade made up of children of circumcision age. They are usually of the age ranging from 6 to 15 or 20 years. They assist the older age grades in doing minor jobs and going on errands, such as cleaning the towns, clearing bushes, sweeping the streets and compound, and acting as town criers¹⁶.

Evolution of Marriage practices of the Koko people

Marriage practices in Koko town align with the marriage practices of the Itsekiri. This is because Koko town was founded after other Itsekiri towns like Ugbolokposo, Ureju, Jakpa, Ebrohimi, and Obonteghareda. Uwatankun.¹⁷ The entire Itsekiri Kingdom has a singularly unique Marriage Custom that must neither be violated, ignored nor side-tracked by any Itsekiri town. Children under the age of 17 years are strictly forbidden to marry. This native Law applies to both sexes - i.e., male and female alike. No boy under the age of 18 years can take on any girl whatever her age as a wife. Conversely, no girl under eighteen (18) years can also get married to any boy or man, however qualified the boy or man may be, the two of them must either clock 18 or surpass it before they can be joined together as husband and wife.¹⁸

In Koko also, no two relations of the same blood or family can be allowed to get married legally.¹⁹ There is always no limit to the period of courtship. The marriage ceremony normally takes place in the residence of the bride's father and nowhere else.²⁰

Marriage among the Koko is known as Temotsi. The Koko people just like the wider Itsekiri people regard Temotsi as a family affair and as such, when an Itsekiri person marries another Itsekiri or someone from another tribe, it is believed that the union is between the families and not just the couple.²¹

Traditional marriages amongst the Koko people of Itsekiri, followed an expected process after which it was considered complete and sealed. Marriage introduction is the first stage in the Itsekiri tradition. This entails the groom traveling to the prospective bride's family, and asking for her hand in marriage. Depending on the circumstances, the groom may be accompanied by close family members such as his father, brothers, sisters, extended family, or acquaintances. Another essential member of the entourage is a spokesman who will speak on behalf of the groom. His responsibilities include properly introducing the groom and informing the bride's family of their intention and why they are at the bride's home.²²

The introduction is frequently followed with drink, kola nuts, and money of any amount, others can chip in, to support the amount provided. Following the completion of the first formality, the bride's family will greet the groom and his entourage and deliver their drinks and other items to support the drink. The bride will then be called by her father or family and is asked if she wants to marry the groom. If she replies "yes," the father or bride's family will legally approve the marriage. Invariably, the first stage of a marriage ceremony in Koko is the introduction. Usually, there will be an Introductory Ceremony during which the name and the identity of the bridegroom will be established by the elders of the family. Then they too will have to name the girl they came pleading to marry for their son. At that same Introductory Ceremony, the bride will be summoned to identify the visitors and tell her own family too that she agrees to marry the suitor.²³ This stage is usually followed by investigations by the bride and groom's family. The investigations are to ensure that the health, character, and suitability of the two families are not jeopardized by deceit from each party. The groom's relatives and the bride's relatives conduct these investigations independently.

If the investigations are successful, contact between the families begins. The Groom's family proceeds to establish a relationship with the bride's family by showering them with gifts. Then the two families have developed sufficient rapport, and a spokesperson for the Groom requests an audience with the family of the bride to set a date for Temotsi. Temotsi, or traditional marriage, is an obligatory marriage ritual that every daughter must complete before being considered a married woman. Therefore, it is an opportunity for the bride's mother to go all out to ensure that her daughter is presented in the most beautiful way possible.²⁴

On the marriage day, all the events are divided into three stages. The first stage is the entertainment of all visitors which starts with the members of the bridegroom family. As soon as they arrive and are given their seats which are usually to the left-hand side of the priest and the parents of the bride, the kola nut and drinks for their entertainment are brought to them. During the Pre-Colonial era, the Itsekiri kola nut to entertain visitors are

never read or known to shake. So, our kola nuts are never supported with money. After entertaining the visitors, they too will provide some kola and drinks to reciprocate this first part.²⁵

At the end of the entertainment, the visitors will be called upon to state the reason for their mission. This is now the beginning of the second stage of the whole marriage ceremony. After presenting one bottle of hot drink, two kola nuts, and two shillings coin, the Spokesman among the visitors will now address the audience.

The three items mentioned above are what the culture or custom of the Itsekiri demands to be presented to secure the attention of an audience for a piece of important information or request. After hearing their request, the first thing to be done is to inspect the structure of the bridegroom's body to announce the number of fingers and toes that he has. Then he is requested to tell the audience his full identity to include what he does for a living. At the end, he is given a seat in the open hall. Next is the turn of the hosts to present three of their daughters for identification. When the first one appears, the bridegroom and his family will be called to identify her. As she will not be the bride they came for, she will be sprayed lightly and asked to return. When the second girl comes too, she will receive a similar mild attention and turned back too. But as soon as the third and final girl appears, the loud ovation and heavy spraying of money will inform everybody that here comes the bride they came for. At the end of the interview, after she agrees to marry him, the woman will be required to take him away for a proper dressing for the marriage.²⁶

Within the twenty to thirty-minute interval, the visitors will be asked to present what they were told to bring for the marriage. Meanwhile, the family Priest who has been dressed ready will be brought to sit in the middle of a chair, the head of the family to his right and the father to the bride on the left. The whole ceremony which starts with the use of the kola nuts and the drinks for prayers ends with the most interesting part of the entire marriage event which combines the handing over of the bride to the head of the groom's family coupled with the OLOKE ceremony which is the kidnapping of the groom by the male and female youths of the Community coupled with the frantic, frenzy and financial struggles to free him. The third and final stage of any marriage ceremony is the issue of a thank you section by the family of the groom. They use their discretion to assemble whatever they can afford to present to the bride's family as well as all those who came to grace the occasion.

Among the Itsekiri, legal marriage requires:

Eight (8) Kola nuts (Obi Itsekiri), bitter kola and alligator pepper

Palm wine (Emo-Itsekiri)

12 bottles of local Gin (Ekpeti Gin) or 12 shillings (12 silver dollars, now rated at 1200)

1 carton and 1 bottle of Gordon's Gin

1 bottle of pure water

A bulk bride price of about thirty or forty thousand naira is to be paid privately to the parents of the bride.

4 to 5 cartons of assorted beer and assorted minerals,

1 or 2 cartons of Guinness Stout,

About 6 to 8 bottles of assorted wines and 3 or 4 bottles of local alcohol.²⁷

Marriage is contracted when prayers are said over Kola nuts and palm wine. The Kola nut and palm wine represent kinship; the gin is for prosperity and success, and the water symbolizes purity in the relationship between the families. The Kola nut and palm wine, in particular, are essential for a proper Itsekiri marriage. The marriage is complete when the Olori-Ebi (head of the family) raises and places the bride's hands in the outstretched palms of the Groom and of his father eight times. At the last count of eight (Mejo), the Olori-Ebi for the Bride's family announces, "Di OjoNieEwo," which means, "It shall be well with you". The thank you session ends the whole event as anyone who finishes eating goes home. The only people who will remain will be the members of the bride's family. What they remain to do is the sharing of the carton of Gordon gin, any remaining beer or mineral, and the #1200 Bride Price after which everybody goes home.²⁸

Changes and continuity in the Marriage Practices of koko people

The marriage practice in this community has undergone some changes over time. In the past, arranged marriages were common and the consent of the bride or groom was not considered to be very necessary. In modern times, these cultural practice of arranged marriage has changed as it is no longer common among the Koko people, thus, there is now a shift towards more individual choice and consent in marriage. Marriage among young ones is determined by their choices and the love they have for the individual.²⁹ Marriage Ceremonies in Itsekiri families have assumed a new dimension. Some of the most important and most interesting aspects of the entire event have been changed because of the influence of Christianity. As it was in Pre-Colonial era, all brides used to kneel down on both legs to receive prayers from the ancestors. They also kneel down to call the appellations or their suitors who in turn will have to carry them up from their kneeling position.³⁰ In the past too, there was a practice of kidnaping the groom at his traditional wedding ceremony. The kidnapped grooms were always paraded around the neighboring roads around the venue of the ceremony. This was the traditionally approved practice which officially announced to the public - during OLOKE - that the bride whose name was always called has been given out in marriage to the person they are parading round now. This is no longer done as the groom's family pays a certain amount of money to free him from such stress nowadays.³¹

Another aspect of change observed in the marriage practices of Koko people is, the addition of money during the entertainment of the groom and his family. Prior to this time when the groom's family visit the bride's family, money wasn't added to the plate. Only kola nut and drink were added but now money is being used to support the kola nut. The adding of the money is now introduced due to the association with the Urhobo. The money

being added serves as transportation fare for the groom's family which they have the right to either accept or reject depending on the groom's family.³²

Furthermore, the study observed that marriage ceremonies in Koko used to be in the cool evenings or at night. This practice symbolizes the transition from the darkness of single hood to the brightness of married life, and also it gives time for guests to celebrate and enjoy the occasion since people were predominantly farmers and will be busy with their economic activities in the day time.³³

According to Otis, he observed a change in the marriage prayer being done at Ileje. There is a tray where both families will pray on with hot drinks and kola nuts. It is like a family oat. It is believed that if the prayer is being done there and the woman attempts to cheat, the ancestors would attack her but it isn't so for a man because he was seen to be polygamous in nature according to Africa custom and tradition. This practice has changed because now, nobody uses Ileje for marriage prayers. This change may have been as a result of introduction of Christian religion by the Europeans.³⁴

Also, in Koko the use of invitation cards as a medium to invite people for traditional marriage was not a practice of the people. In Koko, invitation for traditional marriage relied heavily on verbal communication and interpersonal connections, community announcements and symbolic tokens for invitations, rather than formal written invitation like the invitation cards.³⁵

Akinwande in her view, described another change in the marriage practice of the Koko people which is the area of bride price. Previously, the bride price in Koko was twelve ceiling but now it is the equivalent that is paid as the bride price which can range from one hundred- and fifty-thousand-naira (₦150,000) to two hundred- and fifty-thousand-naira (₦250,000).⁸ Also due to the influence of Christianity religion, dry gin which was previously used as a medium for blessing the couple has been replaced with water.³⁶

Akinwande further posits that, change in dressing pattern was also observed in Koko traditional marriage practices. The recent practice of uniform dressing by either the bride's family or the groom's family or both, was not an aspect of the traditional marriage practices of the Koko people. Of recent, uniform dressing is a very serious affair as it has assumed the dimension of competition now. Also, in recent times, females especially the girls and young women prefer to appear in skirts and blouses or gowns instead of the traditional wrapper tying, which they now consider outdated or old fashioned. The females in both families prefer assorted brands of hairdo or plaiting as against the use of head-ties.³⁷

Nana in his response, pointed out a change in music and dance pattern was also observed. In the time past, only the Itsekiri music and dances feature during and after Marriage Ceremonies. But this not the practice anymore as various Musical Orchestras or groups are invited to play during traditional marriage ceremonies in Koko. Disco and open spraying of money is now a common practice.³⁸

Also, in time past, marriage ceremonies were conducted only in the residence of the bride's father. Contemporary traditional marriages now take place anywhere including hotels, playgrounds and club houses¹². Before the introduction of dry gin, the only wine known and used by the Koko was palm wine. Nowadays the availability of assorted bottled wines and the introduction of Christianity have caused the abolition of pouring libation either on the ground or on a platera flat plate.³⁹

Another aspect of change observed by Nana is the use of costly items as gifts to be distributed to all people who are present, and the escalation of bride price beyond the twelve ceilings which was a fixed bride price.⁴⁰

These changes were majorly caused by the influence of Europeans who changes the socio-cultural practices of the Koko people through colonial administration, missionary activities, education, trade and commerce.

CONCLUSIONS

An assessment of the continuity and change in the traditional marriage practices of the Koko people of Delta State, has revealed that, while certain elements have remained steadfast over time, others have undergone significant transformation. Despite modern influences and societal shifts, the core values and rituals surrounding marriage continue to hold profound significance within Koko culture. However, it is essential to acknowledge the evolving dynamics within these traditions and the impact of external factors such as globalization, education, and urbanization.

Recommendations

The study which examined the continuity and change in the traditional marriage practices of the Koko people recommended that;

Efforts should be made to preserve and promote Koko traditional marriage practices through cultural education programs, workshops, and documentation initiatives. This will ensure that future generations understand and appreciate the significance of the people's custom and tradition so it would not fade off.

While maintaining cultural authenticity is crucial, there should also be room for adaptation to accommodate modern realities and changing social norms. This might involve revisiting certain aspects of the marriage customs to make them more inclusive and relevant to contemporary society.

Encouraging active involvement and participation from the community in marriage ceremonies can foster a sense of collective identity and strengthen social cohesion. Initiatives such as community-led discussions, festivals, and collaborative planning can help reinforce the importance of traditional practices.

Efforts should be made to ensure that traditional marriage practices promote gender equality and empower both parties involved.

This may involve revising certain customs or introducing new rituals that reflect the evolving roles and rights of women and men within the community.

Continued research and documentation of Koko traditional marriage practices are essential for gaining insights into their historical significance, evolution, and current relevance. This information can serve as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and community members interested in preserving and understanding Koko culture.

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- 34) Emmanuel Otis, aged 51, Civil servant, oral interview by the researcher 23rd February 2023
- 35) O.J Nanna, aged 85 years, retired civil servant, oral interview by the researcher, 20th November 2023
- 36) Sunny Jeye, aged 60, a business man, oral interview by the researcher, 26th March, 2024.
- 37) BawoAkinwande, aged 60, a fashion designer, oral interview by the researcher, 26th March, 2024.
- 38) O.J Nanna, aged 85 years, retired civil servant, oral interview by the researcher, 20th November 2023
- 39) O.J Nanna, aged 85 years, retired civil servant, oral interview by the researcher, 20th November 2023
- 40) O.J Nanna, aged 85 years, retired civil servant, oral interview by the researcher, 20th November 2023