

Abolition of Exchange Marriage System Amongst the Tiv People and its Socioeconomic Implications

Wayas, David Tarhom. Ph.D.¹, David-Wayas, Onyinye Ph. D^{2*}

¹Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Nigeria

²Department of Economics, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author

Abstract:- The paper examines the issues associated with the exchange marriage system amongst the Tiv people. Using historical and analytical approaches, the paper observes that exchange marriage rite was a product of trade by barter practiced during the pre-colonial era. The Tiv people used the exchange marriage system called 'yamshe' as a sign of love, economic empowerment and unity among families. However, it is believed that this form of marriage most often introduces some elements of witchcraft practices. The idea of 'yan ngyor'/giving a daughter to a brother to give out in marriage as a symbol of love and economic empowerment for his livelihood was later seen as a practice responsible for the death of people. The paper also observes that causative agents of death in families revolved around the yamshe practice. The abolition of this practice introduced the kem kwase/ pride price which is seen as an act of cultural evolutions. The economic empowerment and its prospects got phased out while the capitalist-oriented marriage system introduced at the expense of the people. The custodians of cultures (traditional rulers) should as a matter of relevance, appreciate the socioeconomic aspects of the exchange marriage system by setting out traditional regulatory institutions to control the cost of marriage and other extortions.

Key Words: Exchange rite, marriage, Tiv and abolition

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a social contract in which a person of either sex (corporate or individual) in person or by proxy has a subsisting claim to the right of sexual access to his/her partner(s) in which it is culturally acceptable for children to result. From the definition, it is at least clear that marriage involves at least two people (most commonly of the opposite sex) who agree to live together (or sometimes apart) in a relationship capable of producing children who are recognised as legitimate constituents of the society. The object of marriage in society has been changing over time. In the very early stages of humanity, the marriage contract could have been predominantly entered into for survival reasons. The imperative, then could have been to ensure continuity of species since only marriage could have given the couple better chances of making it through to their children's maturity by combining to get shelter, food, water and security. Prior to this, when marriage could have been absent, the lone woman impregnated by a casual contact could have been left alone to give birth, even at the mercy of the elements, beasts and even other humans. Marriage could have therefore given the woman more chances of surviving the hazards of pregnancies

and nurturing children to maturity. Furthermore, human development could have thrown up convenience as an additional meaning of marriage. This was the era of "arranged marriages" in which the poor contracted marriages as a strategy to pool resources and to connect through space and time. The rich could have on the hand, married as a strategy to combine wealth and property. In between these two reasons are other related to sexual gratification, religious obligation (depending) on the societal and economic reasons.

II. THE YAMSHE IN TIVLAND

About five types of marriage systems were known to the Tiv people. These include yamshe, kwase ngohol, kem kwase, kwase yamen and kwase dyako. However, our trust is to look the practice of the exchange marriage system in this paper.

The Yamshe otherwise known as exchange marriage involved the "direct" exchange of sisters and was the earliest institutional system of marriage known to the Tiv. Under the system a father was required to distribute his female children amongst his male children (or brothers as the case may be) who would then use them to exchange for wives. Through this system, each male child had a sister called (ingyor) with which he could exchange with another person for a wife.

In circumstances where angor (plural of ingyor) were not enough to go round, the distribution formula was based on age with the oldest taking their turn before the younger ones. For example, if a father had three sons and one daughter, the lone daughter was given to the first son to exchange for a wife and it was mandatory for the two brothers to wait their turn until their elder brother had daughters from his marriage to give them (for exchange) or suitable females identified in the extended family and given to them in exchange. Because, these two were getting their "sisters" for exchange from their "brothers" instead of their father, they were incurring a debt which they were obliged to pay at a later date by returning one of their female children to the brother who gave his daughter (or sister) for his exchange.

The whole process was designed to guide against "loss" in the family. By exchanging fertile sisters (with a capacity to work on the farm), continuity of the family was assured and the productivity of the entire compound preserved. Though the woman had "little" say in the exchange process, the status of the exchange wife was very high. She

had complete control over food supply in the house and her control over domestic matters was virtually total. Her position was also enhanced as the true “replacement” of her husband’s sister (*ingyor*) who would raise children and carry on the direct line of her husband’s sister. Because the young depended on their parents (elders) to give them *angor* with which to exchange for wives, the elders had an efficient social control value with which to hold the society. Exchange marriage also provided an excellent guard against the disintegration of the society since no one could opt out of the group and still have a chance to marry from within. As pointed out by Makar (1975), exchange marriage (and other related forms of marriage) was social ingredients functioning to hold society through group alliances linked by corresponding obligations which each party to the exchange was bound to respect. Children of the exchange marriage were not only a special link between their father’s kinsmen and their mother’s kinsmen in time of stress but also highly respected emissaries of peace.

The actual process of marriage by exchange started when a person identified a woman outside his lineage he wanted to marry. He then introduced himself to the father of the woman or her brother (*tien*) who normally requested him to come a second time if he was really serious. On his second coming, the initiator of the process would then invite the person whose daughter (or sister) he had seen and admired to come over to his place, to also have an opportunity to meet his daughter or (*ingyor*). After the second man to the exchange might have seen and consented to the arrangement in principle, each party to the exchange was required to identify a witness, normally one whose mother came from the same lineage with the partner (*anigba*). This witness thus became the main broker to the exchange or “*Or sughur Ishe*”. As a broker, he was required to lead his mother’s kinsmen to the father or (*tien*) of the woman to be exchanged. By this time, the man was allowed to sleep together in the same hut (*yough*) with his intended wife. If in the course of the night the man was able to sleep with the woman, he wrote her off as a flirt and had reason to reconsider the whole proposal. If on the other hand, the woman refused his entreaties for love making, the man was elated at finding a good wife and proceeded on the final lap of the exchange.

On the final lap, he was required to take his *ingyor* to the other partner to the exchange through the broker. He was normally accompanied by the woman’s mother (*Ngo kem*) at least a kinsman and a composer whose main task was to announce the object of their coming through songs. On arrival (normally timed for the night) the host *tien* was required to give a token present to the wife brought for him before she could sit down. This token gift was called “*tile shisha*” literally meaning ‘stand up’. Similarly, the girl was required not to eat until her “mouth was opened” by another gift from the host *tien* called “*ivende ruam*” – literally meaning, refusal to eat food. While all these gifts were collected by the wife (to be) they were actually intended for the mother in-law (*ngo*

kem). On the following morning, the host invited his kinsmen particularly those in the primary endogamic circle (*iyé igo, ikoko genga or iye ingyor*) to witness the actual exchange at which both women were required to publicly consent to the exchange and asked to embrace their husbands. After the embrace, the host was required to kill a chicken (*mtanshe*) and prepare food for his visitors, who after eating could decide to take their wife and leave. Some people however returned and requested their host to also bring his sister (*ingyor*) and give them in their own place.

To ensure that the chain of life and fertility remained intact (Rubingh 1968) through the generations, each husband after the exchange, was required to erect a fertility *akombo* by the door (on the left as you entered the hut) of his exchanged wife’s hut. These fertility *akombo* as identified by Akiga (1963) are *Ihambe* and *Twer*. The erection was on the left because this is the side the couple sleep, and the idea is to ensure peaceful sleep by the couple and forestall the couple having bad dreams. *Ihambe* is a “two leg” *akombo*. The first leg (*ihambe i chigh ki ityough*) is erected using two wooden posts. One of these has a pointed end while the other has a blunt end. The post with the pointed end is called *Ihambe* while the one with a blunt end is called *mtam*. These posts are erected within a circle of *Borasas eathopus (akuv)* together with three vegetable plants – *ichigh, ikarika* and *ator*. The ‘second leg’ of the *ihambe (ihambe I onmbango)* is erected in a similar way to (*ihambe i chigh ki ityough*), the only difference is in the propitiation, for while the first leg is propitiated using a male animal, the second leg is propitiated using a female animal. The *akombo twer* on the other hand are erected using stones placed in a circle (called *twer*) within which is a wooden figure of a human being (called *mtam twer*) carved out of the *gbaaye* tree (*proposis oblonga*). The *ikarika* shrub is also a component of the *twer* normally planted in the circle of stones.

Another component of the *twer* is a drum (also built from the *gbaaye* tree) covered with the skin of a he-goat (*kper ivo*). During the propitiation of the *twer*, the drum (*gbande twer or gbande mtam*) is hung on the *mtam twer* after which it is taken inside for upkeep. Because *twer* is a fertility *kombo*, it is normally propitiated in order to correct sterility in the couple.

The importance of exchange marriage was underscored by the special position of male children. Only these could aspire to both temporal and spiritual leadership in the community. They were the only initiates of *akombo a ibiam* and were also the only people who could aspire to erect a “*poor biam*”. Given this importance, every exchange aimed at a balance. If in a particular exchange, one party was blessed with more children, the husband whose wife had less children went and got one of his sister’s daughters and used her to exchange for a second wife.

Most courtships according to Akiga (1933) started at the communal pond (*ijor*) where the man waited (in the morning) for his intended wife to come for water. On

identifying her, he requested for water to wash his face, once the girl accepted, it was signal enough for the courtship to commence in earnest. From that point onwards, the men (and the friends who accompanied him) were obliged to follow the girl anywhere she went extolling her virtues and giving her reasons why he was the preferred marriage partner. This process dragged on for days on end and because it was expected that the woman and the man (including those who accompanied him) would not eat in front of each other through, out the initial days of the courtship, the woman had her first opportunity of eating every day in the night after the man might have retired to rest (and also eat) at the broker's place. The idea was to pile sufficient pressure on the girl (and her family) into accepting the hand of the man in marriage. The woman's acceptance (though confidential) came by way of *ibumun* — a token gift of the woman to the man which was anything ranging from a bangle to a necklace. The gift signified that the woman was ready to even elope with the man.

Typical elopement in Tiv culture takes place either in the afternoon or the early hours of the evening. On elopement, the new wife is normally taken to the husband's brother's house or his age grade (*or kwagh*) who has the responsibility for the ceremonial reception (*kwase kuhan*) welcoming the woman to her new home. The host is required to kill a fowl (*ikyegh avure*) and the only people permitted by tradition to eat it are the new husband and other married couples.

During the course of the reception the blood of other animals (particularly goats) killed for the entertainment of the new couple and guests is sprinkled on the two sides of the entrance (*igburhunda*) leading to the hut housing the new couple. In the meantime, the new husband (*or kwase he*) was required to distribute gifts (*ichegh*) to his friends and age grades. At the end of the reception, the host was required to accompany the new couple to their house where depending on whether the man's father was a man of means, another elaborate reception ceremony called *genga* – (*amar a kwase*) was organized for the couple.

III. THE ABOLITION OF EXCHANGE MARRIAGE

Exchange marriage was abolished on 15th July 1927 following a council meeting of District Heads at Abinsi with the British colonial administration. It was substituted with the *kem* system of marriage. Though, the impression is created in colonial sources that the abolition was a consensus decision of the District Heads, it is clear that it was actually a conspiracy by the colonial administration and the missionary bodies operating in Tivland – especially the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM). For while the colonial administration wanted to transform traditional socio-economic structures to align with the objectives of the colonial enterprise (see Atagher 2001).

Missionaries claimed that exchange marriage had advanced immorality and was making it difficult for their younger converts to marry when they wished to. Thus finding

a meeting point and getting the support of the youths whose eyes were beginning to open to the opportunities of the cash economy, every tactic including blackmail and intimidation was used to secure the elders "support" for the abolition. This point is underscored by the fact that just before the Abinsi council meeting, Tor Ugba was arrested and exiled to far away Kaduna due to some minor infraction. No District Head could therefore hope to oppose the proposal for abolition and return to his domain, not when there were reports of "strange vehicles" at the venue of the meeting and threats by those close to the administration that elders opposed to the abolition would be hoarded in the vehicles and taken into exile. Though the elders saw the abolition as the beginning of the collapse of their heritage – and called for its reconsideration repeatedly up to 1932, the development was applauded by the younger generation including women who felt that once "freed" from the clutches of the elders they could take advantage of the cash economy to marry as they chose. No man could wait indefinitely to find an *ingyor* for marriage nor could women be forcefully given into marriage to old and sometimes deformed men against their will.

IV. SOCIO ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABOLITION

Following the abolition of exchange marriage, Tiv society was rapidly transformed. There was increased monetization of the economy. Since marriage no longer depended on the availability of *angor* but the ability to pay cash, there was a boost in the production of cash crops (to service European industries) to raise money for marriage and taxation. The abolition also encouraged the commodization of labour (which was a further boost to the monetization of the economy). Though, more young people were able to marry depending on their means, and both the colonial administration and the missionaries had finally succeeded in aligning the marriage system in line with their interests, it was clear that the abolition led to the decay of the traditional structure of Tiv society (Atagher 2001).

The fundamental structure, holding the society in equilibrium in addition to underlining core values was either overturned or made redundant. Elders were no longer in control and since the colonial administration (and missionaries) were in conspiracy with the youths against Tiv heritage, the youths begun to openly defy the elders on all matters depending on the protection and support of the administration (and the church). The increased defiance of the youths led to a gradual gap between them and the elders. This gap soon degenerated into a divide between modernity and tradition. Unable to come to terms with these developments, most elders resorted to *tsav* to even scores with "their children". It was not uncommon for a man who gave out his *ingyor* in return for money to discover sooner than later that while his money had finished, his *ingyor* was "multiplying" in her new home. For many, this was enough reason to "finish" their sisters through witchcraft. Increased deaths as a result of these sentiments were reported and there was apprehension

for the future of *kem* as imposed by the colonial administration. The abolition also led to increased monetization of the marriage institution. Hiding under the elastic nature of *kem*, parents begun making exorbitant demands on their daughters. The ability to meet these demands more than anything else was the major determinant of the marriage arrangement leading to all sorts of shortcuts most of which undermined some of the core values inherent in the exchange marriage. Because the wife was no longer “an exchange”, she could be treated anyhow without fear of parallel retaliation. Most women resorted to deserting their husbands at the slightest excuse for divorce could not possibly trigger any retaliatory measures. The situation has continued to degenerate over the years leading to specific changes in *kem* marriage with aggravated and additional consequences.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Tiv people used ‘*yamshe*’ as a sign of love, support, togetherness and unity among families. However, it is believed that this form of marriage must often introduce some elements of witchcraft practices. The major causative agent of deaths of children in Tiv cosmology is believed to be linked to cases of either of the families involved in the exchange rite not being able to reproduce offspring. Also ‘*yan ngyor*’/giving a daughter to a brother (to give out in marriage)

as a symbol of love and asset for his livelihood often turns to serious family dispute that results in death or evil attacks.

The abolition of this marriage system to *kem kwase*/pride price can be seen as an act of cultural evolutions, which led to capitalism in the succeeding marriage systems often practiced by the ethnic group. The custodians of cultures (traditional rulers) should as a matter of relevance, appreciate the good aspects of the exchange marriage system thereby reducing the cost of marriage and its associated extortions

REFERENCES

- [1]. Alkawe A.T (Nd) *A Survey of the Marriage and Burial Institutions Amongst The Tiv of Central Nigeria*. Ph. D Thesis, St Clement University.
- [2]. Akiga, S. (1933) *Akiga's Story*, O.U.P., London.
- [3]. Atagher, I (2001) “The Political Economy of the Abolition of Exchange Marriage in Tivland”, 1st National Workshop on Tiv Marriage and Burial Customs, Institute of Management Consultant, Kaduna PP.9- 44
- [4]. Bergstrom , T.C. (1994) “On the Economics of Polygyny”, Seminar Paper, University of Michigan.
- [5]. Makar T. (1975) “A History of Political and Social Change among the Tiv in the 19th and 20th centuries”, Ph.D. Thesis, ABU Zaria.
- [6]. Wegh F.S. (2001) “*Yamshe* (Exchange Marriage) and Family Stability Among the Tiv”. Paper at 1st National Workshop on Tiv.
- [7]. Waya, D. T. & Okanume, I. (2017). Evaluation of Tiv and Igbo Marriage Systems. IISTE Journal of Culture, Society and Development. 12. Vol. 3.