

# **Rites Associated with *Ele-Omugwo* (The Care Given to a Nursing Mother and her Child) in Traditional Ikwerre People of Rivers State**

**Rowland Olumati (Ph.D)**  
**Department of Religious and Cultural Studies**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria**

## **Abstract**

*Religious ritual is the foundation of religion in Africa, the bearer of society's ultimate values and the transmitter of its most profound insights. This is because in Africa, religion does not remain at the level of contemplation or speculation, it has to be translated into action, and applied to everyday life by means of ritual practices. Religion demands practical reflection, and society determines the expression of this demand and the shape of the ritual being essentially a social fact). There are two interdependent dimensions of ritual: what the ritual hopes to accomplish and what it asserts about reality. Ritual attempts to control and renew the patterns of life, bringing them in conformity with an idealized conception of the universe. Ray states that "the ritual sphere is the sphere par excellence where the world as lived and the world as imaged become fused together, transformed into reality". Ritual makes visible the invisible and intangible realities of the cosmos. As in most other traditional religious systems of Africa, ritual practices are pervasive in Ikwerre traditional religion. They are observed in the everyday life of the individual and the group from cradle to grave. This is because religion is at the center of culture and per... most of its forms. The focus of this paper is to underscore or explore the rites associated with *ele-Omugwo* (the care given to a nursing mother and her child) in traditional Ikwerre society. The work adopted phenomenological and ethnographic methods. The findings of the work among others show that the rites performed in *Ele-Omugwu* are aimed at integrating the new born child into the family traditional values, thereby strengthening the institution of marriage as a sacred union. This work suggests that irrespective of modern civilization, the good and progressive aspects of African culture should be upheld and incorporated in the educational curriculum of the different nations in Africa for the purpose of teaching both the present and future generations.*

**Keywords:** *Ele-Omugwo*, Traditional Ikwerre, Marriage, Sacred Union, and Rites

## **Introduction**

As Ejizu (1986:55), noted among the Igbo "A man expends his energy and ingenuity to try to sustain the delicate balance between the various orders of his world view, in order to ensure the continued welfare of his life and that of his family", the Ikwerre people like their Igbo neighbours seek the services of the rain doctor (*dibia*) to cause rain to fall on their farm, a diviner to ward off sorcery or witchcraft. This precarious vision induces an ethic of stewardship, care and attention to the unity of all creation. According to Ogbu, (2001:238) "The world is a sacred egg in which humans weave covenants with the good spirits so as to ward off the machinations of the evil spirits". An understanding of this worldview is crucial in order to appreciate how the Ikwerre are able to negotiate with their divinities and the sacred through symbolic libation and rituals which foster communion and communication in Ikwerreland. The focus of this study is on rites associated with *Ele-Omugwo* (The Care Given to a Nursing Mother and her Child) in Traditional Ikwerre People of North Eastern Niger Delta. This study was undertaken after a

careful observation of recent happenings in the Ikwerre communities. The study no doubt, quickly revealed that morality, as it were, is now at the lowest ebb, leading to the prevalent moral decadence all over the places, up to the obnoxious kidnapping of fellow human beings for ransom which was unheard of in the time past. The study therefore advocates for a “back to land” approach by way of reintroducing the teaching of traditional moral education with which the people of old maintained a morally upright society, using this traditional moral pedagogy. It is believed that without this, all attempts at enforcing morality in the now very sophisticated once traditional religious societies of the people will be mere illusion.

This is equally the attraction of educationists like Fafunwa in advocating for the commencement of children education from traditional education such as the use of the mother tongue at an early stage of child’s education. He observed that the traditional education of Nigerian society accorded priority to the inculcation of values of social responsibilities, political participation, job orientation and spiritual and moral uprightness in the citizen.

*Eli* is strongly believed to be repository of the Ikwerre morality. For instance, whenever abominable events occur people will exclaim as they troop out *EliWhulemor Eli Ikwenjoor Eli rulem* which will literally mean “the land is lost”, “land forbid bad or evil thing”, “the land is spoilt” respectively. These expressions are meaningless in theological terms to on-lookers in Ikwerre theology; these expressions actually mean “the earth goddess is lost or finished”, “may the earth goddess forbid evil thing” and “the earth goddess is defiled”, which requires some rituals to put things in traditional shape. Evil or immoral acts are those acts, saying thoughts, which *Eli* forbids. In other words, whoever indulges in them has evoked upon himself the wrath of *Eli* with its adverse consequences.

Apart from morality enforced/induced by *Eli*, the principal divinity of the people, other moral control agents include *Chiokike* (Supreme Being) and other supernatural agencies which are believed to be controlling definite spheres of Ikwerre society in the theocratic governance of the universe. As Mbiti (1969) remarks, most African people accept or acknowledge God as the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical codes. Therefore, the breaking of such order, whether by individual or by a group, is ultimately an offence by the corporate body of society, others are the elders through their gerontocratic government and the influence of one’s age grade are always the constant reminders to the people of the imperative morally, socially acceptable life pattern.

In the Ikwerre past also, citizens were from time to time subjected to moral oath taking with the emblems of *Eli* the people’s divinity of moral and social control. This took place when rampant cases of social misdemeanor and evil were noticed or being reported. This oath swearing is called in Omagwa clan *Okpnunkpuru, nyemarurunhejemeibhea, agbaragbu* (whoever that knows or shall partake in actions that will harm his fellow citizens, let the earth goddess strike him dead). In actual fact, a number of the morally depraved ones had died after this oath swearing meant for community cleansing in the past.

The language of religion is often coloured with rites and symbols. Man, the homo religious, has in every age and culture, in his horizontal and vertical relationship with the sacred and the human, evolved means of communicating and expressing his sentiments and belief patterns. Patent and evocative, as they may be, rituals in symbolic forms have remained a rhythm of significance in his response to the sacred and his experience within the ecosystem. Configured in icons and expressed in metaphors, religious symbols and rites convey a people’s religious consciousness, thought-logic and worldview.

Turner (1967), after a painstaking study of the Ndemhu ritual symbols, concluded with this striking caption in one of his works: *The Forest of Symbols* thus, as it is with the Ndembu people, so it is with the Mbuti pygmies of Zaire; as it is with the Ashanti of Ghana, so it is with the Yoruba and Igbo of Southern Nigeria. African indigenous religion is a groove of symbols. The Ikwerres like their Igbo counterparts, as most other Africans, are very religious by nature. It has been said of them: “they sing religiously, dance religiously, play religiously, eat religiously and even sin religiously”.

To state concisely, their religion is their culture and their culture is their religion. The weaving of the one into the other and the other into the one is a symbiosis of a worldview. This is often evident in the sacred symbols. What is called the “sacred symbols of culture”, otherwise called by some scholars “dominant symbols”, “core symbols” and “key symbols” operate in both the social and spiritual dimensions of a culture (Onwubiko, 1988:43). Sacred symbols” are the clearest visible expression of the corpus of Igbo belief systems and religious experience. The people’s ritual life largely coheres around them (Ejizu 1986:15).

Olumati (2012:41), avers that among the Ikwerre people, the personality of a man is achieved and only understood in the ritual symbolic expression of the libation which is a prayer, communication and communion with the sacred. There is a network of relationships in every ritual symbolic form. From the individual to the extended family, the clan and the entire community with the living - dead ancestors and the deity of the land, a cybercosmic network of relationship is established through ritual symbols of libation which brings integration and social harmony in the society. This is precisely what libation does or achieves at the end of a communion or rite.

The attainment of this status involves sacred actions. These sacred actions are part of the totality of ritual symbols which also include gods, ancestors, or objects which in the traditional setting, provide a network of symbolic form uniting social, ecological and conceptual elements into locally bounded systems (Ejizu 1990:3).

Rituals are patent behaviours organized for special events, sacred or secular, to celebrate some important occurrence in the life of a group in a given society (Ejizu, 1986:2). To be ‘patent’ implies that the action is well structured, formal, organized and patterned and can be repeated. This is in contrast to an unconscious informal act of doing. Ritual as a religious or sacred action, does honour to the religious being. Ritual presupposes action as its basic feature. According to Uzukwu(1998), ritual “is a programmed way of acting that characterizes an ethnic group so that participants express their being part of the group through the ritual gesture”.

Turner (1967:23), identifies and connects symbol with ritual action. In his words: the symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains its specific properties of ritual behaviour, it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context. Ritual, as a symbol, generates group identity and establishes a code through which a particular group expresses its insertion to the world. The basic features of rituals, which are repetitive, rigidity and conservativeness apparently, reveal the structures that are found in a socio-cultural group, Turner (1967:32). Like symbols, rituals can be “source documents” of any people.

Monica Wilson in (Onwubiko, 1988:50), on rituals is further appreciated:

Rituals reveal values at their deepest level... Men express in ritual what moves them most and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed Onwubiko, (1988:50)

The study of rituals for Monica Wilson (2000:32), is the “key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies”.

Philologists have stressed that the Indo-European root for ritual (*dhe*) stands for “to lay down in a creative way, to establish in existence”. By implication, “ritual behaviour is a laying down of patterns of action that are creative and normative” for existence whether they be ethical or aesthetic.

This pattern of actions collectively in a religious drama is a sacred action, which anchors a people to the referent, the religious being, the “Other”. This ‘Other’ is invited through these actions - signs and symbols, verbal and non-verbal gestures, - “to see, to approve, to complete, to understand and to recognize the ritual action”. *Amadioha* as a symbol of punishment, any Ikwerreman who disobeys the laws of *Ali* would obviously recognize *Ali* divinity as a symbol of punishment.

Since the moral code of the Ikwerre society - religion wise is under the *Ali* earth deity and her consorts, the divinity’s punishment is also the instrument the divinity uses to ensure high morality and proper sanity. In the words of a priest of *Ali*, if the divinities cannot symbolize healing (evidence of health and life) vision (resulting from divination) and punishment evidence of the wrath of the divinities hope in *Chiokike* through time is a waste of time.

The methodology to this study is simply historical and phenomenological. The phenomenological approach to the study of ritual draws the *akwaali* structure “as it is”. This would imply holding back one’s judgment and prejudices. The *akwaali*-ritual symbol would be viewed from the perception of the culture and historical approach. The historical approach puts further exposition to the ritual structure that shall be discussed.

The *akwaali* initiation rite is a cultural phenomenon. Scholars of religion like M. Scheler, Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leew et al, have preferred the phenomenological approach in the scientific study of the History of Religions. Certain reasons have been proffered:

- Phenomenological approach allows the datum to speak for itself; it safeguards against any prejudice.
- It exposes how the various aspects ‘hang together’, and permeates the various levels of the social life. (Ejizu 1986:19),

It is well adjusted to the diffuse nature and structure of the *akwaali* initiation rite as a typical aspect of a cultural phenomenon in Ikwerre. Ursula (1995), is of the view that the phenomenological approach “presents data in a synchronic, classificatory manner, irrespective of any historical sequence”.

Consequently, the need to balance the phenomenological, which is synchronic (stable), is the import of the historical approach, which is diachronic (changing). The historical approach will assist this work to appreciate and appraise the dynamics of continuity and change in the *akwaali* initiation rite of the umbilical cord – *Mgbekwu-owa* of the Ikwerre people.

Drawing a further insight from Ejizu’s works (1986) and taking cognizance of the uniqueness of this work in relation to the interpretation of ritual symbols, V.W. Turner’s (1967) conceptual mode in conjunction with those of Evan M. Zuesse (1979), would be reached out to. Turner advances three levels of interpretation of ritual symbols namely: the exegetical level, the operational level and the positional level.

Evans M. Zuesse (1979), draws up the “transcendental intentionality” which gives “analysis of ritual objects as sacred objects, and as expressions of inner religious awareness and revealers of super natural realities (Ejizu 1986:20).

Since this work deals with a people of oral culture, the study will employ the use of oral interview in its data collection.

Opara in an oral interview (2017) asserts that, the umbilical cord known as *afrotume* is usually buried close to a plantain, banana or coconut tree. The growth of this tree is regarded as a characteristic symbol of the growth of the child and on no account is it to be cut down (unless it bears fruit) or sold as long as the child lives. There is no specified time as to when the umbilical cord will stump, while the umbilical cord (*afrotume*) is yet to stump warm water is constantly applied to speed the process.

Orjikwe in an oral interview (2017), posits that, as soon as the umbilical cord has stumped and is buried, warm water is constantly applied on it so that it can heal fast. At this stage, bitter kola (*abeenu*) is grinded and put in container with little water and given to the child thrice daily. This is believed to prevent the child from having stomach ache as a result of the umbilical cord that has stumped.

According to Nwankwo in oral interview (2017), as soon as the *afrotume* (umbilical cord) has stumped and is buried, herb like *utazi* and bitter leaf are washed and the liquid extracted. This liquid is then put in a container and given to the child once or twice daily. This is explained that it will help to soften the child's system and also enable him/her excrete dirty from his/her stomach. The child's naval is not exposed; it is properly covered at all times so that air will not penetrate into it, thereby giving the child cold and fever.

Onyedikachi (2017), in an oral interview, asserts that within eight days of birth for baby girls circumcision takes place as well as the ear piercing (*Ikpapu-nti*) ritual. These are the two most painful rituals which the female child undergoes before the end of the *Omugwo* period with her mother. The circumcision (*Ibe-ukwu*) of the girl is usually done by a specialist. During this circumcision ritual, the clitoris is exercised with a sharp blade/knife. After circumcising the child, the *Ikpapunti* (ear piercing) is the next. A specialist massages the ear with a vaseline jelly and uses force to pierce the child's ear with a strong pierce of broom, she does this to the both sides of the ear lobe. The broom is left on her ears for a couple of days or weeks until it heals. According to her, circumcision of a girl child is optional; this is because not all families circumcise their daughter. In this case, the clitoris is pressed inside rather than severing it, by constantly massaging the girl's clitoris with warm water and by applying a vaseline jelly.

Obiwuruotu (2017), (oral interview), further adds that, for baby boys circumcision takes place seven days after birth and this is done by an expert preferable male, in this case the foreskin of the child's penis is removed with a local sharp knife, so as to give it a desired shape and increase his sexual urge. After the circumcision ritual is completed, warm water and vaseline jelly is constantly applied on the penis.

Nnawuihe (2017), in an oral interview, posits that, the reason why female children are circumcised is to reduce their sexual urge whereas the male children are circumcised so as to satisfy their wives sexually. Another ritual that also takes place is the cutting of the tongue tie known as ankyloglossia. This is usually carried out on the first day after birth by the traditional birth attendant. This ritual is done to both sexes, the tongue is cut with a finger, it is explained that if the ankyloglossia is not cut off, the child might not pronounce words right or say what people can hear.

### **Phases of *Omugwo***

*Omugwo* is a traditional practice of the Ikwerres which means the care given to a nursing mother and her baby by her mother or mother-in-law as the case may be. The *Omugwo*

phases/stages is the period set aside for such special treatment to both the nursing mother and her baby.

Chidubemin an oral interview (2017) posits that, as soon as a mother receives the goodnews that her daughter has given birth, she is overwhelmed with joy, such that she comes out and announces it to the community with songs (*Ibi-oro*). Anyone that hears the *ibi-oro* (song) comes towards the direction it is coming from, those around celebrate with her. She is helped with other older women to prepare the *mmiriokujinwa* (yam pepper-soup for a new child), the yam is sliced in big quantity. Everyone eats and makes merriment, when the merriment is over, the new grandmother can now set out for the *Omugwo* visit. As she is going, she carries a native fowl, two or three tubers of yam and some food stuffs along with her to welcome the new child.

Peters in an oral interview (2017), observes that, as soon as a woman is delivered of her baby, the first thing given to her is lots of warm water; this is to enable her regain the strength lost during child birth. After she has drunk lots of warm water, her mother, mother-in-law or any female relative of hers or the husband prepares the first *Omugwo* dish. This first *Omugwo* dish is called *mmiriokuji* (yam pepper soup) and it is specially prepared with its own unique ingredients such as: dried fish (especially *azumangala*), oil (*mmanueri*), crayfish, salt, stock fish (*okporoko*), *uziza* leaf, grinded and prepared (*oseiakworoakwo*), *ulda* and *ulda* seed. This is prepared adding lots of pepper to make it peppery and is either served with fufu or pounded yam.

Onougha (2017), oral interview, opines that, the nursing mother is fed with the yam pepper soup so that her breast milk will not dry up. It will also help in cleansing her stomach from dirt that may be dangerous to the baby, and to avoid swollen legs or face of the nursing mother. This is because it is feared that, as soon as a woman gives birth, there are still blood remaining in her system that did not flush out immediately and so the *mmiriokuji* (yam pepper soup) helps to flush out the remaining blood and also strengthen her womb for more children.

Durueke (2017), in an oral interview avows that within the first three weeks to one month, the child is usually bathed with warm water. This, being the period the child needs to be thoroughly massaged to avoid any form of deformity in any part of his/her body. The mother of the nursing mother massages the baby with a small towel dipped in warm water. She brings his/her hands over to the front and does this two to three times. She also does this to the both legs, massages round the head so that it will have good shape. After that, she massages his/her breast, buttocks, back, knees, stomach and all over the body. More so, close attention is also paid to the naval cord, clitoris for baby girls and the penis for baby boys; especially after the child has been circumcised as described above. After bathing the child, the two legs are held tight and turned downwards. The child is flipped for three to four times and finally turned upward and is thrown into mid-air. This practice is believed to remove fear of height and anxiety from the child.

In support, Nwankwo in an oral interview (2017) observes that, when bathing the nursing mother a small towel is dipped in a warm water and some wringed out. This is used to press her stomach inside and then rubs it down, this is to help flatten her stomach and reduce the pain incurred during delivery. After this is done, she is made to sit on a bucket of warm water and covered with a wrapper, to help her womb set fast. She is made to sit there for some minutes and then she sits on a wooden stool while her mother bathes her. As soon as she finishes taking her bath, she is given a cup of palm wine to drink for her breast milk to flow well before she will be served with *mmiriokuji* and pounded yam. For the first two to three weeks she is not allowed to sit on her bed to eat nor breastfeed her baby; she is advised to sit on a wooden stool. This is because the wooden stool will help her close her legs properly whenever she sits down and also

to avoid air entering into her body, thereby making her to constantly experience farthing without control. She further adds that, as a way of flattening her stomach, a stainless plate is placed on her stomach and tightly tied with wrapper. She lies with her stomach facing down and can only untie it whenever she wants to eat, bath or if it becomes too painful for her. The duration of the *Omugwo* period is usually two to three months (*onwaabuo or onwaato*).

### **Significance of *Ele-Omugwo* to the Nursing Mother and Her Child**

The *Omugwo* period is beneficial to the nursing mother and her child in many respects. According to Peters during oral interview (2017), after giving birth, the woman enters the period of *Omugwo* a period of intensive care and protection for the mother and the new life. The *Omugwo* is usually very expensive but it is joyfully borne because of the new child and the fact that the woman has proved herself fruitful. The nursing mother during the *Omugwo* period is exempted from all works and even from going to the market. This is to enable her recover fully from the stress of childbirth, also being indoors will help her to avoid protruded tummy because the woman undertaking the *Omugwo* will massage her tummy, twice daily (morning and evening). During the whole period of *Omugwo*, it is customary that the mother of the nursing mother or her senior sister or mother-in-law takes care of her, stays with her, cooking her food, looking after her and assists her in bathing and feeding the new born baby. At times other elderly women from the kindred group drop in to give a helping hand. It is actually a fattening period, all these are done to ensure that the life of both the mother and the new child are protected and properly cared for.

In line with the above, Azunnain an oral interview (2017) opines that, the *Omugwo* period is a period of special eating. Nothing is spared in feeding her and the child well. This is the period that most women show up their husband's wealth and that pride that they are being well taken care of by their husbands. Any woman who comes out of the *Omugwo* period and does not add flesh, look fresh and still has a big tummy is gossiped by other women. Some will say she does not have a good heart, others that she was not fed well, some more that she was not at peace with her husband or her mother did not take care of her because she was not married fully. The nursing mother and her child is shown great love and affection by people around her. Many people visit her and the child during the *Omugwo* period. She and the baby are seriously showered with gifts and praises. A visit to newly born baby is very much appreciated and desired that it is regarded as a sign of ill will and lack of love not to visit a nursing mother around you.

Thompson (2017), also, in an oral interview, posits that, the nursing mother is usually weak and overwhelmed to properly take care of herself, the new baby and the family, and so needs ample time to rest from all the rigours of pregnancy and labour and also for her body to recuperate. The *Omugwo* is also very important to the nursing mother especially if it is the first time she is giving birth. She might be confused concerning how to handle some things pertaining to the baby and this is the period her mother puts her through. She is taught how to hold the baby's head, bathe the child; massage him/her and reasons for it, how to sit when breastfeeding the child, things she is supposed to eat etc. It is also the period her mother not only gives assistance but also passes on parenting knowledge or information. The mother also helps the new mother regain her body. The nursing mother is so much pampered and cared for like an egg. She is kept company, and not allowed to hear any bad news. Another significant feature for the nursing mother is the permanent company and attachment with the new baby. The child has a direct contact with the mother at this period in time and this gives the new baby a deep sense of

security. The mother and child lay on the same bed; keeping the child apart from the mother is seriously frowned at, as this portrays a lack of care and regard for one's duty as a mother.

The *Omugwo* period is usually a period that a mother becomes so attached to her child that even when her breast milk becomes so full and heavy, she feels the child is hungry. This period helps the nursing mother to understand each sign the child gives to indicate that he/she is hungry, uncomfortable, wants to sleep, is in pains or wants to be carried.

### **Significance of *Ele-Omugwo* to the Mother of the Nursing Mother**

The *ele-Omugwo* practice in Ikwerre is a joyous experience especially to mothers. The joy of motherhood returns to mothers when their daughters who are matured to get married, gets married, becomes pregnant and gives birth. *Ele-Omugwo* is so significant to mothers of nursing mother in many respects. A great importance is attached to *Omugwo* to the extent that homes without female children feel that this practice has eluded them. In most cases any woman who has no female child becomes jealous of others who have; especially when the girls have reached the age of marriage.

Onyedikachi in an oral interview (2017), opines that, a mother whose daughter is matured to get married and is not, is usually bothered. Even mother whose daughter is married and has not conceived is like or become a mockery to other mothers whose daughters have given birth. As soon as the daughter get married, her mother looks forward to hearing the goodness that she is pregnant or has given birth. At the marriage ceremony (*Igbankwu*), gifts presented to her point towards child bearing and the good will that she will soon put to bed after all the marriage rites have been concluded.

Mothers are usually proud whenever their daughter gives birth. This is because her status of being just a mother has changed to a grandmother. No matter how busy or old a mother is, she values *Omugwo* so much that she can abandon every other thing just to go for *Omugwo*. She adds that, any mother who did not go for *Omugwo* as soon as her daughter gives birth is frowned at and gossiped by other women. It is assumed that the daughter's marriage rite was not fully completed. However, some mothers still go for their daughter's *Omugwo*, even if she was not properly married or have birth without any formal marriage rite. As Anthony in an oral interview (2017), will put it, 'Though the *Omugwo* practice is very joyous and enjoyable, it also comes with its own pains and stress. As soon as the mother comes for *Omugwo*, she does virtually all domestic works like bathing both the nursing mother and the child; staying up late at nights to look after the child so the nursing mother could sleep; washing clothes; going to the market; cooking etc. However, the joy is more than the stress.

In any case, there are material benefits attached to *Omugwo* which the mother to the nursing mother enjoys after her *Omugwo* stay. At the end of the *Omugwo* period, the mother is greatly appreciated by her daughter and the husband for her efforts in taking care of the nursing mother and the new baby. Certain items are presented to her. The items presented to her also depend on the economic status of the daughter and her husband. The items includes: quality wrappers (to replace her old wrappers believed to have been torn or worn out during her *Omugwo* stay), other food stuffs like; groundnut oil, palm oil, salt, dried fish, stock fish, tubers of yam etc, pairs of shoes, jewelries, soap, and some amount of money. A bottle of hot drink is also added (this is for the father of the nursing mother at home). It simply shows sign of respect to him as the head of the family.

### **Significance of *EleOmogwu* on Ikwerreland**



It strengthens the institutions of marriage as a sacred union. It gives the child been taken care of his or her pride of place that is, it legitimates the birth and position of the child in the family inheritance and places him or her on a good birth right. Thus, the daughter that was not duly married where marital cultural rites not performed will not be visited by mother in-law in this kind of *eleomogwu* cultural construct. It promotes the cultural identity of the family in particular and society in general by perpetuating the values inherent by the social visit of the women. It dignifies the mother in-law and promotes gender requisites. It enhances cordial relationship between the bride and groom's families and calls for celebration on the birth and arrival of the newly born child, hence integrating into the family social and traditional systems in Ikwerre, hence, elaborate entertainment at the son in-laws place and subsequent of gifts and escort of the women back to her place by the groom's women. It promotes inter-cultural fertilization of ideas, values, beliefs and practices, etc. It further encourages the unmarried spinsters and bachelors to get married legitimately through the observance of traditional marriage rites fully accorded thereby discourages marriage by elopement which is common among young boys and girls of this modern time. Since marriage in Africa involves both the living and the dead, the visible and invisible spirits, *eleomogwu* in traditional Ikwerre is not only done for procreation, companionship and continuity of the family name but the ancestors are involved to participate in the marriage and bless it with good tidings.

## Conclusion

However, marriage and family institutions have undergone changes. In the past, a marriage would be arranged by the parents of the man and those of the girl without the would-be husband and wife having any say in the transaction. Parents were interested in a good family with a reputation for hard work, honesty and good behaviour generally and no records of mental problems, waywardness, laziness, suicide

Defleur (1977), spotlighted the family structure into two types. These include the nuclear family which is the result of monogamous marriages; it is made up of the father, wife and children. Relationships involve husband-wife, father-daughter, mother-son, mother-daughter, brother-brother, sister-brother, each having specific roles to play. The extended family is the result of polygamous marriages, and is characterized by tendencies toward segmentation, fusion and fission. The extended family used to be very important in the traditional society, especially among patrilineal ones. Men regarded their brother's children as their own children and were in turn

Today, the extended family system is declining especially among the educated elite. The emphasis is now on the immediate conjugal family with the man often in paid government employment in the city away from the rest of the extended kin. That is not to say that the extended family relationship has broken down.

Odili(2012), points out that some of the social changes in family institutions are: family size, status of divorce and the rise in the emergence of single-parent families, the pattern of authority and division of labour within the family, change in economic functions of the family, change in sexual regulation function, change in the reproduction function, change in the socialization of the family, change in the affectional and companionship function and in the protective functions of the family.

Mbiti (1969), in his book "African Religion and Philosophy explained that marriage in Africa has changed. That marriage institution has become desecrated, so individualistic that it means nothing to the modern African. In other words, the concept of marriage has lost its original

sacredness in African thought form. Now people get married without the consent and blessing of parents; those religious flavours and aura that made it what it used to be, have been secularized and lost. The traditional African would see such marriage (the modern abuse) as becoming unstable. This infact may be responsible for the high rate of divorce today.

It is important to note that as a result of modern changes that have foisted into African culture, some of these rituals to celebrate *ele-omugwo*, being a ceremony of taking care of the nursing mother, are gradually going into extinction, some being modernized and re-adopted to meet changing times. However, these ritual ceremonies of *ele-omugwo* are also celebrated beyond the shores of Africa, for example, Africans in diaspora ask their mother in-laws to meet them outside their homeland or foreign countries to observe some of these ritual of *ele-omugwo* in a modern way in order to celebrate or perpetuate the socio-cultural heritage of Africa.

This work suggests that irrespective of modern civilization, the good and progressive aspects of African culture should be upheld and incorporated in the educational curriculum of the different nations in Africa for the purpose of teaching both the present and future generations.

## References

### A. PRIMARY SOURCES

#### Oral Interviews

Adulphus, O. aged 60, from Choba interviewed 08/10/2016

S/N	N A M E	AGE	OCCUPATION	PLACE OF INTERVIEW	DATE OF INTERVIEW	MODE OF INTERVIEW
1	ADOLPHUS, O.	6 0	Business	C h o b a	8/10/2015	Oral
2	A M A D I, J.	6 0	F a r m e r	Rumueme	12/11/2016	, ,
3	AGBARAMENE, O.	5 9	Herbalist	E l e l e	20/11/2010	, ,
4	AMANDAH, E.	5 0	Teaching	E l e l e	20/11/2017	, ,
5	A D A H, S.	7 9	Farming	Igwuruta	13/08/2012	, ,
6	AGWANWOR, E.	7 8	P r i e s t	C h o b a	13/08/2012	, ,
7	A M A D I, J.	6 0	Fishing	Rumuji	16/08/2015	, ,
8	A M A D I, S.	7 6	Farming	Omerelu	17/08/2012	, ,
9	A N E L E, J.	6 8	Farming	O b e l l e	17/08/2016	, ,
10	A N Y A, W.	5 0	Herbalist	N d e l e	18/08/2012	, ,
11	AMANDA, J.O.	6 0	PRIEST	OZUAHA	12/12/2017	, ,
12	CHINDAH, V.	8 2	Farming	I b a a	18/08/2012	, ,
13	CHUKWU, J.	9 6	Farming	Ozuoba	19/08/2015	, ,
14	EPHRAIM, W.	6 3	Civil Servant	A l u u	28/12/2011	, ,
15	E N Y I, O.	6 0	F a r m e r	Alakahia	10/01/2016	, ,
16	E J I J E, M.	6 8	Business	Emohua	19/08/2014	, ,
17	ESTHER, W.	6 8	Medicine woman	Ubumini	12/06/2017	, ,
18	J O H N, W.	6 2	Traditionalist	C h o b a	2/10/2016	Oral
19	JOHNSON, O.	6 2	Traditionalist	N d e l e	18/08/2013	, ,
20	INNOCENT, W.	7 0	F a r m e r	Rumueme	14/11/2016	, ,
21	I G W E, O.	8 4	Farming	I p o	20/08/2017	, ,
22	AGBARA, M.	1 04	Farming	Rukpokwu	20/08/2017	, ,
23	NWOVIKE, E.	4 2	Teaching	N d e l e	20/11/2015	, ,
24	N N A T A, G.	7 8	Business	Port Harcourt	21/09/2016	, ,
25	OHAKWU, W.	7 4	Farming	Rumukwurushi	21/10/2017	, ,
26	OKEMINI, P.	6 2	Traditionalist	C h o b a	22/10/2014	Oral
27	OLUMATI, K. W.	6 2	Professor	C h o b a	29/08/2016	, ,

### B. Secxondary Sources

Abner, C. (1974). *Two Dimension Way: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in a Complex Society*. London.

Adenyi, M.O. (2016). "Marriage and Family Values in Africa: Islamic Perspective," *Religions: Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*. No. 1., pp. 177-186.

Algbakwo, J.O. (2013). *The African: His Religion and Cosmology*. Umuahia. Lumen Press.

- Awolalu, J.O. & Dopamu, P.A. (1979) *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje Press.
- Egbucha, G.C. (2007) *Religious Change in Birth, Puberty and Marriage in Owerri*, Assemblies of God Press.
- Ejizu C. I. (1990) "African Personality in Symbolic and Ritual Forms," *Bulletin of African Religion and Culture* (Vol. 2).
- Ejizu, C. I. (1986). *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press.
- Horton, R (1983) "African Conversion" *Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. 41 pp. 85-108
- Idowu, E.B. (1972). "Quoting Julian Huxley in his famous Article "Man, an enigma" in *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 2, pp.70-90
- Ikenga-Metuh, E. (1991) *African Religions in Western Conceptual Traditional Religions*. Onitsha, Imico Press.
- Ilogu, E. (1980) *Christianity and Igbo Culture*. New York: Nok Press.
- Kayode, J.O. (1984) *Understanding African Traditional Religion*, Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press
- Manuokan, M. (1964) *Western African Part 1: Akan and Ga – Adangme People*. London, Watford.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1969) *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann Educational Books (Ltd) Ibadan, Nigeria
- Mbiti, J.S. (1982) *African Religions and Philosophy*. Bungay Suffolk. The Chaucer Press.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1993) *Love and Marriage in Africa*, London: Longman.
- Ogbu, K. (2001) "Sacred Egg: Worldview, Ecology and Development in West Africa," in *John A. Grim (ed.). Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. p. 238
- Olumati, R. (2013), *Ali Deity in Ikwerre Religious Thought and life*. Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation.
- Olumati, R. (2014). "Omu Ngwo" Symbology (Omu-Furled) Tender Palm Frond in Ikwerre, Rivers State. In *Journal of Environment & Society, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt*, Vol. 12 (1&2), 193-202, ISSN: 17346928.
- Olumati, R. (2016) "Symbolism of Burying Umbilical Cord (Mgbekwu-owa) and its Ritual Forms in Ikwerre", Rivers State, Nigeria, in *Ikogho, A Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ikogho Journals*, Vol. 14, pp. 1051-1062.
- Onigu, O. (1979). "Symbolism and Sentiments in Nigerian Politics" in *Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 3
- Opara, N.G. (2017) *The significance of "ile-omugwo" (The care given to a nursing mother and her child), among the Ubomiri People of Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State*: Unpublished.
- Opuko, K.A. (1978). *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEP International. p. 15.
- Radcliffe, B.A.R. (1952) *Structure and Primitive Society*, Cohen and West, London.
- Raymond, F. (1973). *Symbols, Primitive and Public*. Cornell University Press, New York.
- Tasie G.I.K (2013). "The Gods in Elechi Amadi's Concubine," *Journal of Religion and Culture*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2 P. 115-122
- Tasie, G.I.K (2013). *The Gods as Tourist Attractions; A Study of African Indigenous Religions the man stay of Cultural Tourism in Africa* International Journal of Arts and Commerce Vol. 2, No. 3 p. 33-42. UK.

- Uchendu, V. (1965). *The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigerian*, London. Hold Rinehart and Winstrain.
- Uzukwu, E. (1995) *Ritual: A Programmed Way of Acting that characterizes an Ethnic Group*. London. S.C.M. Press: p.6
- Victor Turner, W. (1967) *The Forest of Symbols, Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Utaco Corneil University Press. London.
- Wotogbe, Weneka W.O. (1990) "Ikwerre Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Practices" in Elechi Amaadi's Works (with References to the Concubine, the Great Ponds and the Slave) in W. Peuser and E. Eko (ed) *ElechiAmadi at 53: Poems, Short Stories and Papers*. Pp. 80-88.
- Wotogbe-Weneka, W.O. (2005). *Themes in Comparative Religion*, Hambaz Global Venture Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.
- Zuesse, E.M. (1979). *Ritual Cosmos: the Sanctification of life in African Religions* (Anthens: Ohio University Press), X-256p. (1952). *Structure and primitive of society*.Cohen and West London.