

IGBO TRADITIONAL RITES OF PASSAGE: A STUDY OF CONCEPTION/PREGNANCY AND BIRTH IN IDEATO-NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

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ABSTRACT

Rites of Passage is a period when a person reached a new and significant changes in their lives. It is something, nearly all societies recognized and often performed. Most rites of passage helped the person to understand their new roles in the society. The significant stages of biological growth and development in the human life cycle entail the assumption of conception/pregnancy and birth. For proper understanding of these rites, the researcher looked into the two phases of rites of passage; such as conception/pregnancy and birth rites in Ideato-North Local Government Area of Imo State and the possible reasons for their institution. In an attempt to accomplish this work, it was divided into some sub-headings. Firstly, the introduction of the study which gave a foretaste to what the study was all about. The research was limited to Ideato-North Local Government Area. The purpose of this study was to highlight and analyze the two Rites of passage; conception/pregnancy phase and birth phase and also to take an in-depth look at the way the new generation of Ideato-North people look at these rites of passage. This study was to suggest or recommend ways of improving the level of rites of passage in Ideato-North, to inculcate sound moral conduct in growing children. The study would serve as one of the cultural documentations of traditional beliefs & practices. The result of this research would also serve as an awareness among Ideato-North people in the way foreign culture affected their traditions. This study is a survey research. The older people were interviewed to identify the state and position of these rites in the past, while the young ones aimed at highlighting the changes, problems and future of these rites. In literature review, the researcher reviewed some authors' works from textbooks, journals, projects and theses. The significance of this study is that it will serve as reference literature to historians, anthropologists, sociologists, students and teachers of Igbo culture who wished to investigate further on the topic. With the coming of Christianity, civilization and social changes, most of these rites of birth were greatly influenced. People's attitude towards birth changed totally from what it used to be. Again, the naming ceremony has been taken over by child dedication or baptism which is done as a sort of thanksgiving to God for bringing forth the new child into the world. The study was not only essential to Igbo people but also to anybody who might be interested in Igbo culture. The findings also revealed that the Igbo people more especially those in Ideato-North L.G.A of Imo State attach more importance to pregnancy and birth as far as marriage is concerned. To them, procreation is the main objective and reason for marriage.

INTRODUCTION

In the Ideato-North traditional societies, sets of complex ritual performances were marked. Such rituals were normally associated with different phases of human life

cycle. The Conception/Pregnancy and Birth of a new child has always been regarded as the most important event in rites of passage. The study was conducted in the seven major towns in Ideato-North L.G.A., Imo State. They were: Urualla, Akokwa, Osina, Arondiizuogu, Umualaoma, Obodoukwu and Akpulu where birth of a child is believed to contribute to the consolidation of the marriage. Therefore, children are seen as the center of family life and a bond that unites husband and wife as well as a continuation of the lineage. In the past, every community had a very strong belief in these rites of passage; but nowadays, civilization and Christianity have changed the people's belief and performance of these rites have faded away.

There is initiation ceremonies for the young adult to prepare them for the most responsible phase of their life which is **marriage** and the **raising of families**. It was believed in many Igbo communities that from the very beginning of human life, God commanded or taught people to get married and bear children. Therefore, marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty which every normal person must perform; failure to do so meant in effect of stopping the flow of life through the individual; hence, the diminishing of mankind upon the earth. Any action that encouraged the destruction or obstruction of human life was regarded as wicked or evil. Therefore, anybody who under normal conditions refused to get married is committing a major offence in the eyes of the community and people would be against the person. In Igbo communities, everything possible thing was done to prepare people for marriage and make them think in terms of marriage, procreation and family life. From the first day after marriage, the man and woman would start to have sexual intercourse, so that Conception/Pregnant and Birth rites would take place.

CONCEPTION/PREGNANCY PHASE OF RITES OF PASSAGE

During the pregnancy stage, the Ideato-North people perform lots of rites. Some of them are performed by relatives of the would-be mother while the young mother performs a lot of rites. Those performed by the relatives are all geared towards protecting the young mother as well as the foetus. The relatives of the young mother included: the parent in law, the biological parent of the young mother and her husband.

The biological parent of the woman goes to any length to ensure the physical health for their daughter during the pregnancy period. Some of the rites to perform for protecting their daughter includes; consulting diviners, necromancers (communicate with the spirit of the dead) and performing sacrifices to the deities and divinities so that their daughter would be taken care of during the pregnancy.

On the part of the parent in law, they would also do what the biological parent of the would be mother did in her maternal home. Both parents would give promises to deities, divinities and ancestors and the promises would be fulfilled immediately the young mother delivered the baby.

The would-be mother must perform a lot of rites to ensure that the foetus is very well-moulded and to ensure that the foetus acquires certain physical features which will enhance his/her dignity. Basden (1966(a):168) says, "Any account of child's life in the Igbo traditional society would be incomplete without first noticing some of the curious

ideas pertaining to the ante-natal stage”. Some of the things which the would-be mother should not do include that she would not allowed to:

- eat certain things – food abhorrence
- feel or touch certain things – touch/feel abhorrence
- see certain things – sight abhorrence
- hear certain things – audio abhorrence
- smell certain things – smell abhorrence

i. Food Abhorrence

The Ideato-North people believed that a would be mother should not eat snails during pregnancy. Though snail is a good delicacy among the Igbo people, yet a pregnant woman has to avoid eating it because it was believed that the child after birth would have plenty flow of saliva like snail. According to Basden (1966(a):169) “...the eyes and nose of the child will stream with water, and it will dribble”.

Pregnant women are to abhor enjoying the meat of monkey and bat which are seen as ugly animals. This is so because the Igbo people believed that the foetus would acquire the ugly face of the monkey and bat if the mother ate them during pregnancy and the whole body of the child would be covered with hairs just like that of a monkey.

Again, a pregnant woman does not eat *Okazi soup* (a greenish plant with tough stem and leaves). It is believed that if she does, the umbilical cord or the navel cord of the baby would be very difficult to fall. Where the pregnant woman has eaten the soup already, the veins of the *Okazi* would be kept until the woman delivers. These veins were then ground after three days and mixed with palm oil and ash from bread fruit chaff. This has to be kept in an *aju* (earth-ware container) and it would be warmed and applied to the umbilical cord with feathers which must last for 12 days.

An expectant mother must not eat the meat of grass-cutter because she would be faced with prolonged and severe labour. Where the woman has already eaten the grass-cutter, she would be given the bone of the grass-cutter during labour which she retains in her mouth until she gives birth. It is believed that the grass-cutter usually had prolonged labour, so any pregnant woman that eats it should have prolonged labour too, that is, she would suffer the same fate. According to Basden (1966(a):169):

This animal has peculiar habit of running forward and stopping suddenly. If the pregnant woman eats of the flesh, when the time of her delivery arrives, the child will come forward and then slip back. Delivery will be checked, and the danger to both mother and child thereby increased. Should there have been an infringement of this rule, when the time of delivery draws near, the woman is given a piece of the meat to eat, or a bone of the animal to suck. This is supposed to be an antidote against the effects of the sin committed.

Basden is supporting believe of the Ideato-North people about the prolong labour.

ii. Touch/Feel Abhorrence: There are many things which an expectant mother should not touch/feel during pregnancy. The only reason behind it is that feeling any ugly thing or any good thing during pregnancy could have negative or positive effect respectively on the physical structure of the fetus. Touch/feel abhorrence include: ugly people, deformed people, masquerade, and ugly animals like bat and monkey

etcetera. A woman on the verge of motherhood should not pass along a path crossed by a line of soldier ants, she must not step over them less her unborn baby would be marked with a bold line round the head which resembled the ant-path or the body of the child would be shivering like a line of moving soldier ants. In line with this, Basden (1966(a):170) states, "...for a pregnant woman to cross a line of ants will mean that her child will suffer from fits of trembling and be of nervous temperament". Again, "the umbilical cord will encircle the child and strangle it". To avoid this, she must first pick large leaves and lay them over the spot where she would cross. Next, she would collect sand and strew it over the leaves before she crosses.

iii. Sight Abhorrence

A pregnant woman should not see certain things because it was believed that such things might have influence on the child, not only the character of the child but also the physical features. For instance, pregnant women are not allowed to see dwarf, ugly masquerade and ugly people of all sorts. For example, in the Bible (Genesis 30:27), "And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thy eyes, tarry: for I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake".

In this portion of the Bible where the power of sight helped Jacob to get many cattle, when he was working for his father in-law is in consonance with Ideato-North people sight abhorrence. The Ideato-North people believed that seeing beautiful and decent things can influence both the character and the physical features of the fetus.

iv. Audio Abhorrence

Pregnant woman is also not expected to hear certain things especially indecent words, harsh voices and bad comments. It is believed that the foetus could hear the things said to the pregnant woman which can influence the formation of the baby negatively. That is the main reason why the Ideato-North people go extra miles to protect a pregnant woman.

vi. Smell Abhorrence

An expectant mother should not smell certain things because any bad odour she smells would affect the fetus and also might cause the pregnant woman to vomit.

These are some rites of pregnancy in Ideato-North communities:

- i. *Iru Obọ*
- ii. *Ufe Ahụ*
- iii. *Uli enyi*
- iv. *Ima nshị*
- v. *Isa isi (Isa ishi)*

i. Iru Obọ

Iru Obọ is a patch of tiny red spots on the skin. It appears anytime one eats what one is not supposed to eat during pregnancy. It was believed that certain food eaten by the pregnant woman has some effects on the child as it relies on the mother for its food. Some food like pears, banana (*unere nwanchi*) and *agidi* (cooked maize flour) cause *Obọ* (boil) and so at a certain period of a woman's pregnancy, she goes to a native doctor for *Iru Obọ*. The native doctor then brings a bag of soldier ant and some medicinal herbs with frog eggs, fish and palm nut and rubs them on the woman's belly.

After this, the woman must avoid eating pears, *agidi* and banana less the *Obọ* will come back and affect the child.

ii. **Ufe Ahu**

This is a sort of liquid medicine that lightens the body of the pregnant woman when she feels heavy. A pregnant woman goes to the native doctor with a number of ingredients like pepper, salt, dried fish, and etcetera. The native doctor accepts these from her and boils them with some medicinal herbs, then pours the liquid into a bottle and gives it to the pregnant woman. She goes home with this and uses it as medicine. Basden (1966(a):171) adds that, "This consists of a mixture of chalk (*nzu*) and a stimulant to make her 'light and strong' (*ogwu-ufe-aru*). Also the medicine is sometimes taken to prevent elephantiasis (*Nsi-ulu-enyi*)". In the olden days, there were no hospitals or ante-natal course for pregnant women so they relied on native medicines. The pregnant woman drank these medicines any time she felt that her body was very heavy. She continued this way until she delivers.

iii. **Uli enyi**

When an *ekwe enyi* – a type of wooden gong, is beaten in front of a pregnant woman's house, her legs got swollen. Again if this *enyi* is robbed on whatever a pregnant woman should eat, e.g. vegetable and if she eats it, her body would be swollen. So *Uli enyi* serve as an anti-biotic that destroys the adverse effect of *enyi* and makes it ineffective. It is a medicine which a pregnant woman rubs on whatever things she is going to eat, to destroy the *enyi*. It is a great abomination for a titled man to beat this *ekwe-enyi* in front of a pregnant woman's house.

iv. **Ima nshi**

After seven months of a woman's first pregnancy, there is what Ideato-North people called the *Ima nshi* ceremony. It is done during the first pregnancy. The husband of the pregnant woman goes to the mother in-law with two hens. The nails of the hen were cut off and then one of them would be given back to the pregnant woman as *Okuko olulu* (jointly owned hen usually presented by a mother to a daughter) while the mother retained the other one. They both look after their different hen until the hen would grow up and produce chicken. That same day, the hair of the pregnant woman would be scattered while she sat together with the maid who carries the *nwa oba* (bowl shaped calabash painted with ashes). Inside the *nwa oba* were *mkpuru ogirisi* used as cult symbols of certain gods, and spirits and ashes. This *nwa oba* was just the similarity of the real would be child. The baby sitter that carries this *nwa oba* was beautified with ashes and *uli* and when anyone enters, probably a woman, the pregnant woman carries the *nwa oba* to her visitor and gives the person some ashes to rub. When she is about to go, she gives some *ego ayolo* (cowries) to the pregnant woman. More people keep on coming and doing the same thing and from this, the pregnant woman would realize a lot of money. She rears this *nwa oba* as if it is a real child for two days. On the third day, a woman from the same clan carries the *nwa oba* along with the pregnant woman and the baby sitter to her own husband's house. There, they cook, eat, drink and dance. In the evening, they go back with some songs of happiness to the pregnant woman's house (*mkpuke*). But before this, a rat and a fat maggot found in palm trees are roasted and given to the pregnant woman and her maid, which they must eat.

One of the songs the women go home with is;

O bughị ma nwa, onye ga-enye m (2 times)
Ichafu isi, onye ga-enye m
Akpa raịsi, onye ga-enye m
O bughị ma nwa, onye ga-enye m, dgwz

Translated thus:

If not for a child, who will give me (twice)
Hair tie, who will give me
Bag of rice, who will give me
If not for a child, who will give me

Another one is;

Oriri, Oriri, Oriri -ee
Oriri biam biam biam n'onu
Oriri kpom ihu ma ogu akpona m

Translated thus:

Feast, feast, feast -ee
Feast fills fills fills my mouth
Let feast face me not fight

According to the research, the belief behind this *ima nshi* is mimicry of what the mother did during her youthful stage. She is now leaving that stage to another stage of life i.e. the stage of motherhood. The *nwa oba* is kept by the pregnant woman as the container for her ashes and *uli*. When the woman delivers, the baby sitter of the *nwa oba* again becomes the baby sitter of the real child. *Ima nshi* also shows that the pregnant woman is now a mother. It signifies the period of passing from puberty to motherhood. She then joins the *inyomdi* in all their activities. She gets her own share as part and parcel of them. Finally, she plaits her scattered hair and beautifies herself. She is now fully initiated as a mother.

v. **Ịsa Íshì (Ịsa Isi)**

Ịsa Ishi is done before the woman gives birth. It is when an elderly woman is called to question the pregnant woman in order to find out whether the pregnant woman had any sexual intercourse with another man apart from her husband before or during pregnancy. The woman must confess the truth. This confession is called *Ịsa Ishi*. If the woman insists that she had no sexual intercourse with anyone except her husband, the husband would be very happy and proud of her. He now knows that the woman is faithful to him. They would call a native doctor to prepare what is called *mmeko* which they would eat with kola nut. The man makes a covenant with his wife in the presence of the native doctor. Then, his wife must deliver freely, and would have no problem in delivery. But if the woman accepts that she had sexual intercourse with another man, the husband would call that man who must do whatever the husband of the woman demands from him. In some cases, some husbands would start treating their wife badly. Some rituals would be done for the woman in order to be deliver her baby without problem. Where the rituals are not done, the woman would have problems in labour.

BIRTH PHASE OF RITES OF PASSAGE

In Ideato-North Communities, the birth of a new child has always been regarded as the most important event in both man and woman's life. The birth of a child is believed to contribute to the consolidation of the marriage. Children are therefore seen as the center

of family life and a bond that unites husband and wife, as well as a continuation of the lineage. So children are admired and the essence of having a family is to continue the lineage. This is why Mbiti (1975:105) says:

Through marriage and child bearing the parents are remembered by their children when they died. Anyone who dies without leaving behind a child or close relatives to remember him or pour out libations for him is a very unfortunate person. Therefore, child bearing is intimately linked up with the religious beliefs about the continuation of life.

In the same view with Mbiti, Ibewuike (2006:97) also says:

The birth of a new child has always been regarded as the most important event in both a man and a woman's life. The birth of a child is believed to contribute to the consolidation of the marriage. Here, children are seen as center of family life and a bond that unites husband and wife, and a continuation of the lineage.

As soon as a new bride becomes pregnant, there would be joy in the family. Pregnancy in Ideato-North Communities are surrounded by many taboos, some of which are directed against eating certain type of animals or looking at objects that are considered to be ugly. There is also a ban on extramarital sexual intercourse. All these bans are to avoid abnormal birth; to help the foetus to form well and to avoid getting the biological traits of such ugly objects and or animals.

As a rule, children are delivered in the midst of several women at the back of the child's mother's house (*ofe ulo*) screened off with a fence. The woman giving birth would be assisted by the elderly woman of the household, at times by their relatives and family members, and sometimes by a traditional birth attendant. Men are not allowed to be present during child birth.

Women pray and present sacrifices to the gods to help her through childbirth; the husband will also present sacrifices to the gods and the foetus has some rites to perform during childbirth. The child's father informs his mother in-law about the birth of the child and asks her to sacrifices to god of fertility. The purpose of the sacrifice is to ask for breast milk for the born neonate. If this is not done, it might mean a lack of breast milk which could lead to the death of the neonate. If the baby is not born at the expected time, the parent would consult a diviner to find out the reason. If the delay is caused by a god, the mother would be presents a sacrifice, but if the delay is found to have been caused by the witch, she would be told to perform a sacrificial ceremony (*ichu aja*) to drive away the witch.

According to Akpudo (1989:35):

Before a child is born, the mother must had offered various sacrifices to the *Ala* goddess, to the *Chi* symbol of her own mother and to spirit of the ancestors of her husband. These offering of sacrifices were to secure the favour of gods, so as to make the birth easy and the child to be born blessed in advance by the gods.

The neonate has a lot of rites to perform. It is believed in Ideato-North culture that a neonate who did not perform the rites is filled with abomination which is capable of wiping out the community. The importance of the sacrifice is visible when one understands how perilous neonate life is if it fails to perform certain rite at birth. Some of the things expected of the child as a normal birth include:

- Coming into the world on the appropriate day and manner (head first)
- Coming into the world without teeth
- Crying at birth

i. Coming into the World at the Appropriate Day and Manner:

By appropriate day or manner, the researcher meant that the foetus must comply with societal perception of being born properly. For a male foetus in Ideato-North communities, the appropriate day for its birth is *Eke* or *Afọ* days which are owned by the male deities. A male child born on that particular day is regarded to be a true son of the community. In the same vein, if the foetus is female, the appropriate day is *Orie* or *Nkwọ* which are owned by female deities in that community. Such a female foetus whose birth took place in either of those days is a true daughter of the community.

However, it is not an abominable act for a foetus male or female to be born on any of the days which are not set apart for that particular sex. Also nothing serious would be held against the foetus who did not arrive at the “appropriate” day.

The most dangerous aspect of birth rites of passage was inability of the foetus to arrive into the world without conforming to the community acceptable manner or way of birth. The foetus is expected to come into the world with head first. A child who fails to come out with head first is viewed to be an evil spirit who has come to take away the life of the young mother and to wipe out the community. He is also expected to face downward so as to accord respect to the mother earth (*ala*), who is in charge of procreation.

ii. Coming into the World without Teeth:

A child with teeth or more than five fingers or toes is believed to be a monster and an abominable spirit who is capable of wiping out the community. A child is supposed to cut teeth at the age of seven or eight months after birth. Therefore, it is an abominable act for a child to cut teeth inside the mother’s womb.

iii. Crying at Birth:

A child who fails to cry at birth is not regarded as human rather it is seen as an evil spirit who has come into the world in form of human. The natural thing for the foetus is to cry immediately the head comes out to assure the traditional birth attendant that he is really *Mma-ndụ* (human being). The traditional birth attendant would do everything possible to force the child to cry if the child fails to cry. For instance, it would be thrown into the air to infuse fear which would make the child to cry, the child will be given some pains with the finger nails at the vulnerable parts like private part or ear. The traditional birth attendant might harm it on the sole of its feet or palm with candle wax to force it cry. When the child fails all these tests, the life would be terminated and the traditional birth attendant would perform cleansing rites. In fact, “the traditional midwives were given the authority to do away with any neonate who failed to perform any child birth rite of passage”.

After the birth, both the mother and the child are separated by performing a **rite of separation** which involves cutting the umbilical cord at the navel. Nobody is allowed to see them except their close relatives who are allowed to see the baby after it has been bathed i.e. when everywhere has been cleared. The mother then stays on what is called *ugbo omugwo* (a wooden platform) for twelve days. Within this period, all the ashes used in the house are not removed until the twelfth day. They would perform the *Igbalu ato ceremony*, which is when the mother and the child are brought out of seclusion into the community by the **rite of incorporation**.

Many people gather for merriment. They would roast yam and eat it with oil bean (*ugba*) and palm oil. This *Igbalu ato* is done by a native doctor who prepares some herbs which he sprinkles everywhere in the compound. This is to cleanse the environment and to enable the neonate live and grow well therein. Then, the mother takes a very good bath for the first time (*Igbu ahụ omugwo*) because from the day the woman delivered, she would not be allowed to bath until after this *Igbalu ato* ceremony. The husband must not go near her and he should not eat anything cooked by her. However, after the rituals and ceremonies, the man and his wife will start living together again.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

From the analyses of the information gathered these traditional rites have been abandoned; *Iru-obo*, *Ufe-ahụ* etc have been forgotten by the Ideato-North people with the establishment of hospitals and churches which brings about by social changes and Christianity. Certain taboos connected with pregnancy especially those related to food are no longer being observed like avoiding eating snails by a pregnant woman is no longer in vogue rather the pregnant woman is encouraged to eat snail as a special delicacy. Even circumcision, which is done in the hospitals these days by the trained nurses instead of at home where crude instruments were used.

The reason to discard some of the birth rites is that the foetus does not know anything about how to come out from the mother's womb and what to do immediately it comes out but should only respond to the circumstances that was around at that time of birth. Therefore, the child should not be punished for any "abnormal" behaviour at the time of birth.

It is suggested that the people should adopt some of these rites in conception/pregnancy and birth rites which had improved both Igbo norms and values in the past. The Ideato-North people should discard rites with negative effects on human person, like terminating the life of a child by traditional birth attendance because he or she does not cry at birth. Again, regarding a child with more than five fingers or toes as a monster is not also good. The Christian church should accommodate some of the norms in the birth of a child where possible, to maintain natural interaction between religion and tradition. Ideato-North people should learn that in the process of modernization there should be guiding principle for sustaining and identifying with norms and cultures, in order not to lose them at the end.

CONCLUSION

Some measures are taken during pregnancy and birth to protect and safeguard the mother and the baby. The Ideato-North people looks at anyone who does not respect a pregnant woman, or beat, or do any harmful thing to her, whether by word or by deed as irresponsible person, because the pregnant woman is carrying two lives that deserve some level of consideration and care. In Ideato-North traditional society, a child is comparably superior to most other cherished values whether a female or a male child; besides the child and some other forms of wealth or values are insignificant. The birth of a child symbolized God's active presence in the community and the long life of the child is also important to the people because it indicated God's abiding presence. Basically, a child, *nwa* means "God with us", so the man of the family without a child will go to any length including marrying more than one wife to fulfil the dream of having a child. This is perhaps the greatest value of a child to the Ideato-North people. There are Igbo names that imply that the ultimate source of a child is from God-Chinenyenwa, Nkechinyerenwa, Nwakaego, Nwadiuto, Nwabugwu, Chiziterenwa, etcetera. This is a firm belief among many Ideato-North people.

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