Posthumous marriage in Igbo land, Southeastern Nigeria and its effects on child development and education

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Posthumous marriage is one of the traditional marriages being practiced in Igbo Land, Southeastern Nigeria. This is a type of marriage that offers men who had already died opportunities to have wives and descendants when they have already died even before the marriages are contracted. Consequently, many traditional families use this opportunity to solve the problems of childlessness, male child absence in the family etc. However, much has not been investigated about this type of marriage. This work investigated on the posthumous marriage in Igbo land and its effects on the developments and education of the posthumous children. Descriptive survey research guided the study. The population of the study was all the single parents in Igbo Land. Simple random sampling was used to select 400 respondents from three states in southeast of Nigeria (Igbo Land). Questionnaire and oral interviews were used for data collection. The data were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations, while z-test statistic was used to analyze the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level of significance. The findings revealed quest for male child, continuity of a lineage, love for the dead and others as the reasons for posthumous marriage. The findings also indicated that posthumous children’s moral, social, and other developments and education are adversely affected due to poor conditions and social problems associated with posthumous marriage. The data also indicated that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of male single parents and their female counterparts on the reasons for posthumous marriage in Igbo land. There is also no significant difference between the mean scores of male single parents and the female single parents on the effects of posthumous marriage on child development and education; hence the two null hypotheses were accepted.

Key words: Quest for male child, continuity of a lineage, home keeping, prostitution, poverty, sexual abuse.

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, marriage patterns are arranged by demographic variables such as religion, wealth, culture, class and tradition (Duck, 1999). In Igbo land – Southeastern Nigeria, marriages are arranged to satisfy...
social norms, traditional beliefs and individual needs of the people. One of these marriages is posthumous marriage in which women and young ladies marry in proxy to men who have died even before the marriage proposals. No wonder in Igbo land, time is never too late for a man to marry, hence a dead man or even a miscarried male child can get a wife through posthumous marriage especially for the traditionalists.

Posthumous marriage is a type of marriage in which a woman or a girl is married to a man who had already died by the deceased’s family or relations so that the children raised through this relationship become children of the deceased. According to Free Encyclopedia (2015), it is a type of marriage in which one of the partners is deceased. Ogolla (2015) defines posthumous marriage as a marital arrangement in which one participating partners is deceased. Nnadozie (2013) defines it as a type of marriages where a woman or a girl is married to a man who had already died.

In Southeastern Nigeria (Igbo Land), there is a tradition in some families to marry wives for the deceased so as to raise children for them. In areas where this type of marriage exists, there is no special marriage ceremony attached to it, other than the normal wine carrying, the payment of dowries and other necessary marriage rites. After all these, the woman becomes the spouse of the deceased hence she is accepted and accorded respect as such. Traditionally, she is expected to procreate for the deceased, but she is not restricted by any cultural norms to choose her lover(s) from the immediate family of her ‘husband’ However, she may be expected to be a bit reserved, using her sexuality with self control but shall not be given orders about the number of men she will have sexual relationship with.

Posthumous marriage can be arranged in different forms. A marriage may be contracted for a dead man who had no male child so that his lineage will continue. In this case, it may be his widow, his daughters or relations who will marry a young woman of child bearing age to bear children for him. Secondly, posthumous marriage can take the form of a young lady marrying her boyfriend or finance who might not have started any marriage proposal before his death. In most cases, it is the parents or other relations of the deceased who will start the marriage proposal. Another form of posthumous marriage occurs when a woman marries a wife for her dead son or a miscarriage of a male fetus. This mostly happens in a polygamous family where a widow who has no male child is denied of her inheritance from her late husband by her co-wife with male children. The maltreated woman can marry a wife for her dead son or a miscarried male child (foetus) if there is any. If this wife bears a son, the maltreated woman can now become eligible to inherit her share of her late husband’s property through the posthumous son.

Some people may wonder if it is possible for a woman with all her senses to consent to marry a man who has already died before the commencement of the marriage proposal, and raise children as a single parent for the dead man. However, posthumous marriage just like any other life endeavour has its reasons which are rooted in Igbo traditions and culture. These include, quest for male children. In Igbo land, parents prefer male children to female ones, hence the system of inheritance is patrilineal (Adegboye, 1998; Ugwu, 2001). A family without a male child is believed to have been doomed as the family’s property will be transferred to a kinsman with male children if the father of the family dies. As a result, both husband and wife desire male children to an extent that if they do not have male children and the husband dies, the wife (now a widow) can go to any length to get a male child for her late husband by marrying a woman for him. Through this means, she can inherit his property.

Another reason for posthumous marriage is for continuity of a lineage. In Igbo land, if a man dies before getting married, the next of kin or a relation may decide that the deceased’s family name will not go into extinction. The only way to help the situation is to marry a woman for the deceased to raise children for him. Through this means, the deceased will have descendants, and his lineage will have continuity.

Home keeping is another reason for posthumous marriage. In many rural areas in southeastern Nigeria, many families have relocated to the cities due to employment and urbanization, leaving their family houses deserted. Subsequently many families lose their property to thieves and strangers. In order to protect these properties, posthumous marriage may be used to get a woman to stay in the family house to look after the property and give situational reports to those in the cities. The woman is usually married for the dead head of the family. Love for the dead is also a reason for posthumous marriage. It has been revealed through oral interview and observation that some girls marry their boyfriends or fiancés who have died prematurely even though there has never been any marriage proposal prior to the lovers’ death. Many girls who engage in this type of marriage according to Copart (2010) do so to show their strength to overcome the emotional trauma of their lovers’ death. Although posthumous marriage has helped a lot of families to have descendants, and wiped the tears of many women who have marital problems by legitimizing their children and allowing them to have access to their late husbands’ inheritance, it has serious adverse effects on the all round developments and education of the posthumous children. For instance, posthumous marriage encourages prostitution. In Igbo Land, Southeastern Nigeria, a posthumous wife is free to exercise her sexuality as she likes in order to raise children. In doing so, she will be involved in silent or micro prostitution which may lead to high rate of sexual immorality and lack of discipline among the children who may see prostitution as normal and imitate their mother. This has adverse effect on children’s moral development.
Poverty has a female face in Africa (Ubek, 2010), more especially among posthumous wives. This is because majority of the woman who consent to this type of marriage are illiterates and school drop outs without adequate job skills. Furthermore, single parents find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. With all these pathetic conditions, posthumous children from pre-natal stage are plagued with impoverishment, malnutrition and finally, lack of education. As the children grow up they are forced to fend for themselves (for those whose pre-natal malnutrition did not destroy completely) and take to the street as street gangs, hawkers, beggars, robbers, and what more, they are sexually abused, lose interest in education and finally are emotionally and morally murdered.

Absent father syndrome (AFS) is another serious problem associated with posthumous marriage. Studies according to Awake (2002) and Nwachukwu (1995) reveal that boys raised without a father or father surrogate in their lives show insecurity about their gender identity. The boys also show high rate of identity diffusion, low self-esteem, lack of interest in social and school activities. As they grow up, the boys may have trouble in forming intimate relationship, and may face many unanswered questions about their background. These may lead to depression, worry, anger and so on. All these may expose them to emotional and physical risks such as behaviour disorders, high rate of chronic health problems and psychiatric disorders (Awake, 2002). Sexual abuse is another factor to be considered. Fatherlessness among posthumous children results to increased dangers of sexual abuse. Children of single parent families lack adequate parental care and supervision. Furthermore, the presence of multiple partners and other unrelated transient males in the families of posthumous wives increase the risk of child sexual abuse that results to unwanted teenage pregnancies, sexual transmitted infections (STI), and Human Immunodeficiency virus infection and Acquired \ Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). All these can disrupt the development of children and terminate their education, and lives.

Statement of problem

In Igbo land, southeastern Nigeria, male children are highly valued and the more they are in a family, the more respect, and recognition the society accords that family. The reason behind this, is because the Igbos have tradition that only male children have the right to inherit the family property, occupy the family house, and perpetuate the lineage.

It is based on this tradition that almost every family is desperate to have male children for continuity of the family name. It is this tradition that pushes some families that lack male children to opt for posthumous marriage.

Unfortunately, families who engage in this type of marriage do not have the interest of the posthumous children at heart. The families do not consider the fate of the posthumous children who have no fathers to cater for their well being. Worse still, the posthumous families are mostly uneducated, as the posthumous wives are illiterates, unskilled school dropouts who live in an abject poverty.

Posthumous marriage is characterized by single parenthood, and when women of low socio-economic status involve themselves in this type of marriage, their children will suffer a lot of deprivations. It is these poor conditions of the posthumous children that motivated the researcher to investigate on whether posthumous marriage affects the development and education of posthumous children.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate on the posthumous marriage in Igbo land and its effects on the child development and education. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify the reasons for posthumous marriage in Igbo land.
2. Find out how posthumous marriage affects child development and education

Research Question

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the reasons for posthumous marriage in Igbo land?
2. What are the effects of posthumous marriage on child development and education?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study, and were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. HO1: There is no significance difference between the mean scores of male single parents and female single parents on what constitutes reasons for posthumous marriage in Igbo land.
2. HO2: There is no significance difference between the mean scores of male single parents and their female counterparts on the effects of posthumous marriage on child development and education.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive survey research. The population of
the study was the entire single parents in Igbo Land. The Igbos comprise all the five states in Southeastern Nigeria which include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 400 single parents in 4 states, 100 from each state. The instrument for data collection was self structured questionnaire. Mean scores, and standard deviations were used to analyse the data collected from the respondents. The questionnaire comprised of 14 items and had a four-point Likert scale of agree, strongly agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The criterion for mean scores was 2.50. So, any item with a mean score 2.50 and above were accepted, while those below were unaccepted. The z-test was used to test the two hypotheses at 0.05 level of significances.

RESULTS

Research question 1: What are the reasons for posthumous marriage?

The result in Table 1 indicated that the respondents rated No. 1, 2, 4 and 6 out of 7 items as the reasons for posthumous marriage in Igbo land – Southeastern Nigeria, since they have the mean ratings of 2.56 and above. Using the cut-off point 2.50 for agreement, the result revealed that the respondents perceived the 4 items as the reasons for posthumous marriage. This means that quest for a male child, continuity of a lineage; home keeping and love for a dead lover are the reasons for posthumous marriage in Igbo land.

Research question 2: What are the effects of posthumous marriage on child development and education?

The result in Table 2 revealed that the respondents rated all items as the effects of posthumous marriage on the development and education of children; hence they have mean ratings of 2.62 and above. Using the cut of point of 2.50 for agreement, the results revealed that the respondents saw the following: posthumous marriage encourages prostitution that affects children’s morality, lack of parental care and supervision affects children adversely, poverty affects the pre-natal and post-natal development of children. Children of single parents experience poverty and malnutrition that affects their development and education AFS affects personality and social development of children, prostitution among posthumous mothers leads to sexual abuse of their children, and low self-esteem due to posthumous background affects their development as the areas that
children’s developments are affected.

In Table 3, the Z-calculated value of 1.93 which is less than the Z-Critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance indicates that it is not statistically significant. It then means that the hypothesis of no significant gender difference on the reasons for posthumous marriage is thus accepted. Table 4 shows that the calculated value of 0.001 is less than the critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that it is not statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis on the effects of posthumous marriage on child development and education is accepted.

**DISCUSSION**

The data in Table 1 which revealed the reasons for posthumous marriage suggested that all respondents saw quest for male child, and continuity of a lineage as some of the reasons why people engage in posthumous marriage. This is true because Igbo land according to Ugwu (2001) defies gender boundaries and can do anything possible to have male children. No wonder Ogolla (2015) states that Africans do not want outsiders to inherit property in a home where they have no links. The respondents also saw the need to look after family house and property, and love for dead lovers as other reasons for posthumous marriage.

The data in Table 2 showed posthumous marriage as having effects on child development and education. For instance, the respondents perceived that prostitution by posthumous mothers can mar the moral development and education of the children. Poverty affects both the pre-natal and post-natal development of children. This finding supports Ugbor (2010) who opines that devastating effects of poverty on child development cannot be over emphasized. According to Ugbor (2010), a pregnant woman who does not take balanced diet endangers the normal all round developments of her baby as she exposes her baby to visual impairment, mental retardation and many other problems.

The problems may even worsen if after birth and the babies remain malnourished. Single parenthood causes poverty that affects all round development and education of children, so also lack of parental care and supervision. AFS affects male children’s personality and social development. Prostitution in the presence of children leads to sexual abuse that can result to sexually transmitted infections, and death, when children are cajoled due to their posthumous background, they can lose self-esteem.

**Conclusion**

Posthumous marriage, which can also be referred to as necrogamy (Writer, 2010) solves traditional problems of legitimizing children’s births, satisfying the needs of male children in families and others. However, its adverse effects on the development and education of children cannot be over emphasized. Furthermore, there is no genetic link between the deceased and the children. Consequently, Nigerian courts have concluded that all customary practices relating to posthumous marriage are invalid, and unenforceable under the repugnancy principle (Ewelukwa, 2013).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Seeing the effects of posthumous marriage on the well-being of children, the researcher recommends that this type of marriage should stop.
2. Women should be educated adequately to know their rights.
3. There should be laws to prohibit posthumous marriage.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.
REFERENCES
