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# ENGLISH- IGBO DOCUMENTATION OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE TERMS

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## Abstract

*Language documentation refers to systematically recorded representations of both spoken and written forms of a language in their appropriate sociocultural context. This research work documents the Igbo traditional marriage terminologies. The research data involve the use of journal papers, the internet, interviews and textbooks. The methodology is simply descriptive. The research paper documents thirty terms associated with Igbo traditional marriage and gives a description on terms documented.*

**Keywords:** English, Igbo, Documentation, Language, Traditional, Marriage.

## Introduction

Language documentation has to do with creating a record of a language, preserving the sounds and the structure of a language. It is any record of language usage. Language documentation has emerged as a response to the pressing need for collecting, describing and archiving material on the increasing number of endangered languages. This paper focuses on the documentation of the Igbo traditional marriage terminologies. Igbo is a major language in Nigeria. Bender (1989) emphasizes that the Igbo language is classified as a Niger-Congo sub-branch of languages or the west Benue-

Congo as noted by Williamson & Blench (2000). The language consists of many dialects which are mutually intelligible. There exist the Anambra, Ebonyi, Imo, Enugu dialects.

The research paper examines the terms used in the different stages of the Igbo traditional marriage, providing their English equivalent. The data used for this research study were gathered through interviews. The researcher also consulted many relevant texts, the use of journal papers and the internet.

**The concept of language documentation**

Himmelmann (2006) defines language documentation as "a lasting, multipurpose record of a language". Language documentation is concerned with the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties. It is a new area within linguistics that has emerged as a response to the growing crisis of language endangerment.

Austin (2007) defines on the other hand sees it as an activity of systematic recording, transcription, translation and analysis of the broadest possible variety of spoken (and written) language samples collected within their appropriate social and cultural context. Marci (2010) says that language documentation implies preserving a language without necessarily preserving the speakers; preserving the sounds, the structure of the language; or making a record of a culture.

For Grenoble and Furbee (2010:3), language documentation acquires language data from many contexts in the best, most transferable and most durable formats. In other word, Austin (2006), Himmelmann (1998) and Woodbury (2003) see language documentation as the systematically recorded representations of both spoken and written forms of a language in their appropriate sociocultural context.

Austin (2006) explains that for language documentation, data collection, representation and diffusion is the main research goal. Himmelmann(2006) notes that language documentation is a field of linguistic inquiry and practice which is concerned with the compilation and preservation of

linguistic primary data and interconnection between primary data and various types of analyses based on these data.

**Reasons for engaging in language documentation**

From a linguistic point of view, there are essentially three reasons for engaging in language documentation as explained by Himmelmann (2006). They are: language endangerment, the economy of research resources, and accountability.

a. Language endangerment: Certainly the major reason why linguists have recently started to engage with the idea of multipurpose documentations is the fact that a substantial number of the languages still spoken today are threatened by extinction. The case of an extinct language, it is obviously impossible to check data with native speakers or to collect additional data sets. Creating lasting multipurpose documentations is thus seen as one major linguistic response to the challenge of the dramatically increased level of language endangerment observable in our times. In this regard, language documentations are important resources for supporting language maintenance.
b. The economy of research resources: Creating language documentations which are properly archived and made easily accessible to interested researchers is also in the interest of research economy. If someone worked on a minority language in the Philippines 50 years ago and someone else wanted to continue this work now, it would obviously be most useful if this new project could build on the complete set of primary data collected at the time and not just on a grammar sketch and perhaps a few texts published by the earlier project.
c. Accountability: Establishing open archives for primary data is also in the interest of making analyses accountable. Many claims and analyses related to languages and speech communities for which no documentation is available remain unverifiable as long as substantial parts of the primary data on which the analyses are based remain inaccessible to further scrutiny.

## Challenges in language documentation

Grenoble (2010) explains some of the challenges of documentation for any linguist include:

- The range and scope of the documentation project: The magnitude of a documentation project can be a challenge. Depending on how much work has already been done, a linguist may need to document all aspects of a language, from phonology of a language to complicated; contextually situated discourse and everything in between or the linguist may be filling in gaps in an existing corpus. It is necessary to be careful in determining the scope of a project.
- Collaborative work with speakers and communities:
- The end products of a project
- The technical expectations of modern documentation and teamwork.

## Terminology

According to Anyaehie (1997:1), terminology is the science that is concerned with form and meaning of terms defined as units of reference in the scientific, technical or other special domains. To him, terminology specifically deals with the concept "terms", their meanings and the domains they are been used, since every domain has its own specialized group of words it uses in expressing that domain. Terminology gives a transparent insight of what a term is all about; how to use it; when to use it and where it is not suitable to be used. For instance, the word "recommendation" is similar to the word "prescription," but prescription is more suitable in the medical domain.

A term from the point of view of Ananiadou (1994) is a word that contains linguistic characters, and systems. In the words of Crystal (2008), it as a unit of expression which has universal intuitive recognition by native speakers, in both spoken and written language. For Gelinas-Surprenant and Hussman (2015), terminology is a discipline that deals with the collection, processing, description and presentation of terms which are lexical items belonging to a specialized subject field (e.g. medicine, law, engineering, library science or art history.

Dubuc (1978) expresses that terms are special registers made for a particular field. A term according to him, must be a noun or of the nominal group and terms are created to satisfy the needs of people in order to communicate from one language to another. Hartman and James (1980) see a term as a word, a phrase or alphanumeric symbol used by practitioners of a specialized technical subject to designate a concept. For Baker (1992), a term is a discrete, conceptual entities, properties, activities or relationships which constitute the knowledge space of a particular field.

**Igbo traditional marriage**

According to Ogbalu (2006:14) , Igbo marriage ceremony consists of

(a) initial enquiry by the man's parents and relatives about the girl, her moral character, ability to work hard, intelligence, good behavior and home-making ability, e.t.c.

(b) Consultation of the Afa man as to whether the marriage is agreeable to the gods.

(c) Determination and payment of dowry. Dowry is the bulk sum of money paid by the husband to the girl's parents and it is refundable at whatever stage the marriage fails and the woman has another husband.

(d) Ceremonies marking fulfillment of all that is customary e.g. ibu nkwu nwaanyi. This involves the Umu- nnas and in some cases the entire villages of the husband and wife and other friends and relatives. For Iroegbu (2012), is the final ceremony to take a wife home and it takes place in the bride's family compound. Here, the entire extended family relations, friends, colleagues and co-workers are invited. Some communities specify items that the groom must present to the bride's family like: kola nuts, palm wine, hot and soft drinks, onions, tomatoes e.t.c. The bride's family will also give the bride presents like cooking utensils for her new home in order to show their love and care for their daughter. Igba nkwụ starts with the arrival of groom's party and the bride's family comes out to greet their in-laws. The bride and her

maids will also come and greet the in-laws after which, the groom's party will present their assigned gifts to the in-laws who will check to make sure that they are in accordance with their list. The bride will later be blessed by the father who pours a palm wine into a cup and hands it over to the daughter to give the groom. Both the groom and the bride now go before each of their parents to get their prayers and blessing. After this, merry-making and presentation of gifts begins. At the end of the party, the bride joins her husband's party as they make their way back to their place.

(e) Performance of Ndu-oku custom: At the end of the entertainments during ibu Nkwu nwaanyi, the parents, relatives and friends bring out presents of all sorts ranging from the cow to broom and in modern homes, motor cars to their daughter. This is carried away when her husband's people leave her home to her husband's place at the end of the ibu Nkwu ceremony.

**Data presentation and Analysis**

In this section, the data on Igbo traditional marriage will be presented followed by the analysis. The terms used in traditional marriage include:

1. ịchọ nwaanyi: This is the act of searching for a life partner. In this case, parents will assist their child in searching for a wife. Some of the things they look out for while searching is the family of the person whether they die prematurely, whether the spirit of the dead is disturbing them e.t.c.

2. Ọha ajụjụ / Ọha mgbajuga ama/ ịgba njụ : It has to do with thorough inquiry / investigation about the bride and the groom. They engage in investigations like:
   a. Whether the families are outcasts that is *osu*.
   b. Whether they are of the families that commit suicide
   c. Are they from the families that are diabolic?
   d. Are they from the families that are armed robbers?
   e. Are they from the families that the spirit of the dead attacks others?
   f. Do they have land for farming, economic trees like palm tree?

3. Inwe nkwekọrịta: it refers to a mutual agreement or consensus of both parties to marry each other.

4. ḷkpaje nkụ: This is done after the investigations i.e. ọha ajụjụ . When the investigations are positive, then, there will be what is called ḷkpaje nkụ that is, fetching of firewood. Here, all the families that have males who are interested in the lady will start fetching firewood, sending coconut, fried breadfruit and palm kernel to the bride's parents. As the males do all these things, the parents of the bride would be keeping those things for some times. At the end of this exercise, the parents of the bride would return the kolanuts, breadfruits and firewoods of those they do not accept as husband to their daughter, while they would eat the ones brought about by the accepted would-be husband.

5. Nkwụ ọrụ: As both parties have given their consent to the envisaged marriage, people from the husband-to-be would go to their would-be in-law to engage in farming which involve clearing of grounds, gathering and burning of the weeds, cultivation and sowing of seeds which may be yam or cocoyam. This is usually done in any of the four market days. For instance, in Nanka town in Anambra state, it is done in Oye and Nkwọ market days as the people go to market on Afor and Eke. This exercise is equally applicable to the people from the side of the bride as they would help the would-be in-laws to carry out similar exercise.

6. ḷdụ ọdụ: This involves the counseling of both couples. Elderly people would lecture the couples on the rudiments on marriage or what marriage entails.

7. ḷkụ aka/ ḷkụ kpam kpam: refers to initial visit by the bridegroom. The bridegroom and his people would come with not less than four kolanuts representing the four market days in Igbo land and for instance, two gallons of upwine. When they arrive the bride's home, they present these items. After these presentations, an elderly man from the bridegroom's side will say that they saw a plantain sucker i.e. *unere* in that family and that they would want to take it to their home.

An elderly man from the bridegroom side will reply by saying that they have so many suckers of plantain and they would want to know the exact one. At this juncture, the bridegroom's spokesman would mention the name of the lady. Then, the bride would be sent for and when she arrives, they would ask the bridegroom whether she is the one and the expectation is that she says yes. Equally, a question will be posed to the lady whether she knows those that have arrived in their place and if the answer is yes, the kolanut should be broken after praying traditionally. Thereafter, a cup of upwine presented by the bridegroom would be given to the lady to show amongst the people, who exactly is the would-be-husband and the girl will carry the cup of wine to the would-be-husband and present it to him after kneeling down. Once this happens, every person present will now know who the would-be-husband is. This exercise equally shows consent by the lady. In other words, the wine should be shared to everybody present.

8. Iwoyi nwa akịrịka n'onu/ ịdonye mmanya: It means presentation of bride. Now, after the *ịkụ kpam kpam* which is the initial visit by the bridegroom, both families will agree on the date for the payment of dowry preceded by *ịka akịrịka* which is haggling or negotiation of bride price.

9. ịka akịrịka/ịgba ọnụ akụ: This is a situation where the amount to be paid by the groom on the bride is subjected to bargaining by both parties. In the olden days, the money paid as dowry is not mentioned. There is the use of an instrument called broomsticks which is used for negotiations and it is referred to as *ịka akịrịka*. On the day of this exercise, as the would-be-in-laws arrives the bride's home, an elderly member of the bride's family would present to the would-be-in-laws a bunch of broken broomsticks indicating the amount of money they are expecting from them as bride price. The would-be in-laws would count the broomsticks and if they find it too much, they would go for *ịgba izu*

10. ịgba izu: that is, secret conversations within the premises and there, they would remove some broomsticks and return the rests. As this happens, if the members of the bride's family are not satisfied with the

number of broken broomsticks, they would equally go for secret conversation known as *ịgba izu*. Then, they would add a number of broomsticks to the bunch indicating what they want to be paid as dowry. This exercise would continue until a balance is struck by both parties. This shows consensus and that amount will be paid as dowry.

11. Ọjị ọsọ: This refers to the presentation of kolanut to show that one is welcomed. Here, the bride's family presents kolanut to show that they welcomed the bridegroom's family because in Igbo land, the presentation of kolanut signifies welcome or acceptance.

12. Ọjị odoniigwugwu: On the day of ịgba nkwụ, certain items must be presented to the members of the bride's family by the ụmụnna(kindred); ụmụọkpụ or ụmụada(married female members of the bride's family); inyomdi(the women being married by the male members of the bride's family); ndị agbataobi(the neighbours) and ụmụagbọghọ (the unmarried girls). On that day of ịgba nkwụ, after presenting the required items to these groups, then, the groups in turn will present kolanuts to the in-laws. The only exception is the unmarried girls (ụmụagbọghọ). Before the ceremony comes to an end, there must be traditional prayer by the eldest man from the bride's family and the eldest man from the bridegroom's side. In doing this, four kolanuts each are presented to the eldest man to the family of the bride and that of the bridegroom's side. Naturally, the man should pocket two kolanuts and use one to say a prayer after which they break the remaining two kolanuts. After that, the other party will also carry out the same exercise and finally, the kolanuts will be shared to everyone.

13. ịda ịya/ iji ana: This means suing for audience. In this particular exercise, a young man from the bride's side should run, jump, demonstrate and bind his feet on the ground and there should be chorus of "*yoo*" by the crowd and when they feel that it is okay, people should rush to the young man giving him money meaning that he should stop. After that, the eldest man should pray traditionally and break the kolanut and as he says the prayers, people there will spray him money from different denominations. The same thing should be

applicable to the other party. A young man should also draw people's attention through ịda ịya.

14. Nnu ayọnaa na mmanụ: Once both parties have agreed on an amount to be paid, this expression is made to indicate that both parties have come to a consensus.

15. ịsekpụnaga obene: At the end of the dowry section, the bride must follow the would-be-husband to their family carrying the gourd with which they brought wine to the bridegroom's home and she should be there for about four days helping the mother of the bridegroom. After about four days, she should return to her parents before they wait for the ịgba nkwụ and she goes finally with them.

16. ịsọtọsi aka: This is the act of settling the ụmụnna(kindred); ụmụọkpụ or ụmụada (married female members of the bride's family); inyomdi(the women being married by the male members of the bride's family); and ụmụ agbọghọ (the unmarried girls) by giving every group their requirements or due.

17. Nnene uno: It is one of the preliminary things. It is a situation where the lady in question, goes to the would-be-husband's place to study the place whether she can make a living there or not. This involve studying the people, their way of life, finding out if there is any secret about the people that were not exposed during the enquiry or investigation section. After these, if the lady is satisfied with the environment, she can give her consent.

18. Ntị ayị dịzikwe n'ama ụnụ: This is an expression made in a situation where after the bridegroom's people have gone to the bride's home to declare their intentions, normally, the bride's people would say that they have heard what the bridegroom's people have said but that a reply should be given after due enquiry or investigations.

19. ịjụ mmụọ ese/ ịgba afa: It refers to the consultation of a native doctor for the success/confirmation or otherwise of the union or marriage. If the consultation turns out to be positive, then, the marriage should be

consummated, but if otherwise, then the person should be told that the gods do not agree and that will be the end of the proposed marriage.

20. Ego nkpụrụ ụkpaka: This is an entitlement to the mother of the lady being given to marriage. After paying the dowry, the suitor owes it as an obligation to present money to his mother in-law in respect of "*nkpụrụ ụkpaka"* which symbolizes the sufferings the mother encountered in raising up the girl child.

21. Onye oke /onye aka ebe: He is the middleman that is, an intermediary through which information/errands could be passed to both parties. During traditional wedding, the intermediary is entitled to one tuber of yam and one fowl. It is pertinent to mention that in time of trouble/when there is disagreement between the couples normally, the intermediary should intervene.

22. Nne ọmụmụ: It is used to refer to the mother of the bride.

23. Ụtụrụ ọhụ na-abọ nkụtụkọ nkụtụkọ na ọgọ bụ chi onye: This means that the two families are not almost the same and should cooperate with each other.

24. Ego isi: This is the money paid on the bride.

25. Ịgọ ọfọ: It is said to be the traditional prayer.

26. Ọ nwere onye ọ nọọrọ? /aka o ji ya?: These are part of the questions that the bridegroom's family will ask the bride's family. They are used to enquire if the lady in question is engaged to anybody. The expression "*ezi gara"* means that the lady is free that is, she is not engaged.

27. Idu obu: This is a time when the parents of the bride present her with various items or gifts for starting a new family.

28. Ndị ọgọ : it is referred to as the in-laws.

29. Ọgọ bịa mara be: At the end of the ịgba nkwụ, the suitor invites the bride's family to his home and entertain them with food and drink.

30. Ilo ihe: It means the enumeration of the marriage items.

**Table 1:** Igbo traditional marriage terms and their English equivalents.

| S/N | TERMS | ENGLISH EQUIVALENT |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | ịchọ nwaanyi | Seeking for a wife |
| 2 | Ọha ajụjụ / Ọha mgbajuga ama/ ịgba njụ | Enquiry or investigative period |
| 3 | Inwe nkwekọrịta | Agreement |
| 4 | ịkpaje nkụ | Fetching of firewood |
| 5 | Nkwụ ọrụ | Testing the cooperation and patience of the parties |
| 6 | Idu ọdụ | Counseling the couple |
| 7 | ịkụ aka/ ịkụ kpam kpam | Introduction |
| 8 | Iwoyi nwa akịrịka n'onu/ ịdonye mmanya | Paying of bride price |
| 9 | ịka akịrịka/ịgba ọnụ akụ | Haggling for the bride price |
| 10 | ịgba izu | Secret conversation |
| 11 | Ọjị ọsọ | Expression of reception of the would-be in-laws in tangible terms |
| 12 | Ọjị odoniigwugwu | kolanut presented to the suitor by various members of the bride's kindred |
| 13 | ịda ịya/ iji ana | suing for audience |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 14 | Nnu ayọnaa na mmanụ | An expression indicating success |
| 15 | ịsekpụnaga obene | The girl in marriage accompanying the suitor to their home where she stays for about twelve native before returning to her home |
| 16 | ịsọtọsi aka | Fulfilling the marriage requirements |
| 17 | Nnene uno | The bride going to the would-be-husband's place to study the place and to know if it is habitable |
| 18 | Ntị ayị dịzikwe n'ama ụnụ | Full of expectations |
| 19 | ịjụ mmụọ ese/ ịgba afa | Consulting the idols |
| 20 | Ego nkpụrụ ụkpaka | Money given to the bride's mother for raising the child |
| 21 | Onye oke /onye aka ebe | Intermediary |
| 22 | Nne ọmụmụ | Bride's mother |
| 23 | Ụtụrụ ọhụ na-abọ nkụtụkọ nkụtụkọ na ọgọ bụ chi onye | Full cooperation with others |
| 24 | Ego isi | Dowry |
| 25 | ịgọ ọfọ | Traditional prayer |
| 26 | Ọ nwere onye ọ nọọrọ? /aka o ji ya? | whether or not the lady is engaged |
| 27 | Idu obu | Settling the bride with the presentation of gifts |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 28 | Ndị ọgọ | In-laws |
| 29 | Ọgọ bịa mara be | The bride's family Visiting the groom's home to know where their child is married to |
| 30 | Ilo ihe | Marriage items enumeration |

The table above illustrates the different Igbo traditional marriage terms and their English equivalent.

## Summary and Conclusion

Terms are specific to a particular domain. The Igbo culture presents interesting aspects as reflected in its traditional marriage setting. The terms which were documented above can go a long way in sustaining traditional marriage ceremonies and other Igbo festivities. Igbo scholars can further develop a handbook on Igbo cultural practices to enable people understand the Igbo cultural setting and heritage.

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