

MARRIAGE RITES IN YORUBA CULTURAL PRACTICES: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL APPROACH

By

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Abstract

This study examined marriage rites in Yoruba cultural practice of Ogun State using a Christian ethical framework. Marriage in Yoruba tradition is a communal and symbolic event involving several stages, including bride price (*idánà*), engagement ceremonies, symbolic gift exchange, and family participation. These rites serve to reinforce cultural identity and social values. The arrival of Christianity has introduced new ethical and theological doctrines that challenge certain aspects of these practices. Through qualitative interviews with Christian elders, married couples and laypeople from Anglican, Baptist, and Pentecostal denominations in Ogun state, the findings revealed that non-spiritual aspects, such as the use of traditional attire (*aşo ibilè*), bride price, and symbolic ceremonies are generally preserved, while practices considered incompatible with Christian teachings, such as polygamy (*Ìgbéyàwó púpò*), excessive bride price, and ritualistic requirements, are often rejected. The study concluded that Yoruba cultural practices that do not conflict with Christian ethics should be encouraged to preserve cultural identity, while those that contradict biblical values should be carefully reconsidered. The study therefore recommends that churches provide explicit guidance to their members on how to identify culturally neutral traditions and differentiate them from practices that are incompatible with Christian doctrine.

Keywords: Marriage rites, bride price, Yoruba customs, Christian ethics

Introduction

Marriage remains a deeply revered cultural institution among the Yoruba people. Marriage (*igbéyàwó*) is not only the union of individuals but the alliance of families, clans, and spiritual legacies. Traditional Yoruba marriage rites were not conducted in a single day; rather, they involved a series of stages, including the appointment of an intermediary (*alárinà*), background inquiries into both families, a

formal introduction stage (*mó mi ní mọ ọ*), negotiation and presentation of the bride price (*idáná*), and festive celebrations marked by music, prayer, and symbolic gift exchanges. These rites serve both social and spiritual purposes, signifying respect for lineage, communal consent, and the blessing of the ancestors (Mahmud, 2022). However, the arrival of Christianity in the 19th century introduced new Biblical ethics that challenged these traditional practices (Bienose-Osagiede, 2021).

The central problem lies in the ethical tension experienced by Yoruba Christians in Ogun State as they navigate their indigenous marriage customs alongside their Christian convictions. Christianity, particularly in its evangelical and Pentecostal expressions, opposes certain Yoruba marital rites such as libations to ancestors, divination, polygamy, and excessive bride price and commercialization, viewing them as unbiblical or spiritually dangerous (Esiri, 2021). This has led to widespread debate and dissonance among Christian families: while some believers wholly discard traditional practices, others modify or selectively retain aspects that do not conflict with the Scripture. Such decisions are often influenced by personal interpretation, denominational teaching, and communal pressures.

This study focused specifically on the Yoruba communities of Ogun State, aiming to explore how Christian ethical teachings shape, modify, or oppose indigenous marriage practices. The study investigated how Christians in this region interpret their faith in relation to culture, what rites are maintained, transformed, or rejected, and how these decisions impact their spiritual identity and communal belonging. The objective is to provide a critical and balanced analysis of how Yoruba Christians in Ogun State negotiate the intersection of biblical ethics and cultural fidelity.

Christian Perspective on Marriage

Christian marriage is regarded as a sacred covenant rather than a social contract. God laid this foundation in Genesis 2:24, which states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (ESV). This verse, as argued by Woods (2021), emphasises the spiritual unity and exclusivity that characterise Christian marriage. She argued that such unity has its roots in divine purpose and mirrors the bond between Christ and the Church.

Tully (2021) asserted that marriage in the Old Testament was not only a communal affair but a symbolic act that reflected God's covenant relationship with Israel. He referred to texts such as Hosea 2:19–20 to explain how love, righteousness, and faithfulness were foundational to this divine-human relationship. In the New Testament, this covenant metaphor is deepened through the teachings of Paul, particularly in Ephesians 5:25, where husbands are urged to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Oyebanjo (2024) supported this interpretation by describing marriage as a call to sacrificial service and mutual submission rooted in *agape* love.

The practice of Christian marriage typically begins with a phase of courtship, followed by pre-marital counselling sessions organised by churches. These sessions are designed to address essential issues such as communication, forgiveness, financial management, and sexual ethics (Sunshine City Counseling, 2023). According to Sunshine City Counseling, the aim is to prepare couples for the spiritual and practical demands of marriage through biblical ethics.

Engagement is usually formalised through family gatherings or church announcements, which culminates in the wedding ceremony. Christian weddings are officiated by pastors and include components such as the reading of Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13), exchange of vows and rings, prayers, and a sermon on marital covenant (Bible to Life, 2022). These elements reflect the sacred nature of the union and affirm its recognition before God and the faith community.

Christian ethics, as Adu (2023) pointed out, firmly opposes practices such as polygamy, excessive bride price, and premarital sexual relations. He asserted that such practices undermine the biblical principle of marriage as a monogamous and faithful partnership, highlighting the theological imperative for purity and covenant fidelity.

Yoruba Marriage Traditions

Yoruba marriage is rooted in communal values and is not perceived merely as the union of two individuals, but rather as a strategic alliance between two extended families. According to Omotayo (2023), the practice reflects the Yoruba understanding of marriage as a social institution that strengthens inter-family bonds, promotes cooperation, and reinforces the communal structure of society. She was of the opinion that this collective dimension of marriage is what sustains its cultural significance across generations.

The process leading to marriage is extensive and begins long before the official ceremonies. Balogun (2023) asserts that the first step involves the use of an intermediary or matchmaker, known as *alárinà*, whose duty is to initiate contact between the families discreetly. This person facilitates discussions, gauges compatibility, and ensures that both parties are willing to proceed. Following this, as Omotayo (2023) explains, both families carry out detailed background inquiries on the prospective spouse's moral standing, health condition, and social status, often relying on trusted members of the community to provide accurate information.

Once the families are satisfied, the "introduction" ceremony (*mọ mi ñ mọ ọ*, meaning "let me know you") takes place. This formal meeting brings both families together to declare their intentions publicly and begin negotiations. Bolaji (2023) notes that during this stage, agreements are reached on the *ìdáná* (bride price) and the presentation of traditional gifts. This is followed by the engagement ceremony, which features the exchange of letters of consent, prayers from elders, and symbolic offerings such as kolanut (*obi*), signifying goodwill and unity.

The celebration is marked by cultural displays including *aşo ibílẹ̀* (traditional attire), drumming, singing, dancing, and communal feasting. These elements, according to Badru, Ogunniran, & Hamzat (2024), embody the joy, social approval, and unity surrounding the marriage. The entire process not only affirms the couple's union but also strengthens the intricate web of relationships within the Yoruba community.

Ethical Tension between Yoruba Marriage Rites and Christianity

The intersection of Yoruba marriage traditions and Christian ethical teachings often produces points of tension, as both systems draw from distinct values and ideologies (Aina, 2025). According to Bassey (2025), while Yoruba marriage rites emphasise communal involvement, ancestral heritage, and elaborate rituals, Christian marriage is primarily defined as a covenant before God between one man and one woman, guided by biblical precepts such as Genesis 2:24 and Ephesians 5:25. This

divergence results in practical and theological conflicts for Yoruba Christians seeking to honour both cultural identity and religious conviction (Williams, 2021).

One significant area of contention is polygamy, a practice historically accepted within Yoruba tradition as a symbol of prestige, economic capacity, and lineage expansion (Abhulimhen-Iyoha, 2023). In contrast, Christian ethics uphold monogamy as the ideal marital model, reflecting Christ's relationship with the Church (Evangelical Alliance, 2025). This difference creates a moral dilemma for converts from polygynous families or for men expected by custom to marry multiple wives (Anyingor & Ayantayo, 2025).

Another point of ethical tension arises from the bride price (*idáná*). While the Yoruba regard it as a symbolic gesture of respect and goodwill between families, some Christian leaders caution against excessively high demands, arguing that they commodify marriage and contradict the biblical principle of mutual giving (Ademiluka, 2021). Excessive material requirements can also delay or prevent marriages, creating socio-economic pressure inconsistent with Christian values of equity and stewardship.

Ritual elements such as libations and ancestral blessing during engagement or wedding ceremonies present a theological conflict. Abilawon and Ajisope (2025) note that these rites affirm the presence and blessing of ancestors over the union, reinforcing Yoruba cosmology. However, Christian teaching generally rejects ancestral veneration, viewing it as incompatible with exclusive worship of God (Deuteronomy 18:10–12). As a result, many Yoruba Christians omit these elements, replacing them with prayers and blessings led by pastors or church elders.

Gender roles and expectations within Yoruba marriage rites sometimes clash with Christian teachings on mutual submission and partnership. Traditional Yoruba systems, as Ogunleye (2024) observes, emphasize that male authority in decision-making is sacrosanct in Yoruba culture, whereas Christian marriage ideals emphasise sacrificial love and mutual respect (Ephesians 5:21–25). This can lead to tensions in households where cultural hierarchy and biblical egalitarian principles collide.

Eze (2025) asserts that navigating these tensions requires careful cultural negotiation, retaining neutral or morally acceptable customs, while respectfully discarding practices that contradict Christian convictions. For many Yoruba Christians, this process results in hybrid marriage ceremonies that preserve cultural identity while adhering to scriptural mandates.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the ethical interaction between Yoruba marriage rites and Christian teachings in Ogun State. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving fifteen (15) participants purposively selected from four major Yoruba towns in Ogun State: Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ijebu-Igbo, and Sagamu. These locations were chosen because they represent key cultural centers within Ogun State where traditional Yoruba practices and Christian influences strongly coexist.

The participants comprised Christian elders, pastors, married couples, and lay members drawn from Anglican, Baptist, and Pentecostal denominations. Selection was based on participants' knowledge of Yoruba marriage customs, personal marital experience, and active involvement in Christian faith communities. This ensured a balanced representation of both cultural custodians and Christian practitioners.

Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that focused on Yoruba marriage rites, Christian ethical perspectives, areas of conflict, and strategies of adaptation or rejection of certain cultural practices. Each interview allowed participants to freely express their views on practices such as bride price (*idánà*), polygamy, ancestral rituals, and the role of the church in guiding marriage decisions. Interviews were conducted in English and Yoruba, depending on participants' preference, to enhance clarity and authenticity of responses.

Data collected were transcribed and analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and ethical concerns across participants' narratives. The analysis focused on how Christian ethics influence the retention, modification, or rejection of Yoruba marriage rites. Biblical texts and relevant scholarly literature were used to interpret the findings within a Christian ethical framework.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by omitting personal identifiers, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The following analysis summarizes thematic insights from participants' responses to interview questions. Each extract illustrates real-life perspectives on how Yoruba Christians interpret, retain, reject and adapt cultural traditions related to marriage rites. The analysis links participant narratives with biblical ethics, highlighting the negotiation between spiritual beliefs and ancestral customs.

Emerging Themes

A. Retention of Traditional Marriage Practices

Participants valued several Yoruba marriage practices as expressions of cultural identity and social cohesion, retaining those that align with Christian ethics. Non-spiritual elements, such as gift exchanges, traditional attire (*aṣo ibílẹ̀*), and communal celebrations, were widely accepted, while spiritually incompatible practices were replaced with Christian alternatives.

Extract 1: A woman from Abeokuta, Ogun State, said, "We still do the engagement ceremony (idánà) and bring gifts like kolanut and wine, but we don't pour libations or invoke spirits. We pray with our pastor instead."

This response suggests that cultural symbols like gift presentations and ceremonial gatherings are preserved as expressions of respect and unity. The replacement of libations with prayer aligns with Christian teachings, allowing participants to honour their heritage while remaining faithful to their faith (Adewale, 2025). Participants emphasized that practices like the introduction ceremony (*mó mi ñ mọ ọ*) strengthen family ties without conflicting with biblical principles, reflecting a contextual approach to cultural engagement (Oyemomilara, 2022).

B. Christian Ethics and Bride Price

The practice of bride price (*idánà*) remains a contentious aspect of Yoruba marriage among Christians in Ogun State, valued for its cultural significance but criticized when it becomes excessive or transactional. Participants acknowledged bride price as a gesture of respect and appreciation for the bride's family, reinforcing

communal ties and honoring lineage (Bassey, 2025). However, concerns arose when high demands for bride price were perceived as commercializing marriage, conflicting with Christian ethical teachings that emphasize marriage as a sacred covenant.

Extract 2: A respected elder in Ogun State stated, "The bride price is not a sale. We see it as a way to honour the family. But if it's too much, it becomes a problem."

This perspective aligns with Christian teachings in 1 Peter 3:7, which urges husbands to honour their wives with understanding, not ownership. The elder's concern about excessive bride price reflects a broader ethical tension, as Ademiluka (2021) notes that overemphasis on bride price in Nigeria can commodify marriage, undermining its spiritual significance. Participants frequently cited the need to moderate bride price to align with Christian values of mutual respect and covenantal love, as opposed to a transactional exchange.

Extract 3: A pastor from Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, explained, "We advise families to keep bride price modest. It's a token of appreciation, not a purchase. The Bible teaches us to value love over wealth (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)."

This extract underscores the influence of Christian ethics in redefining bride price as a symbolic act rather than a financial burden. Participants noted that some churches in Ogun State provide guidelines to cap bride price, ensuring it remains affordable and consistent with biblical principles of love and humility. Mahmud (2021) supports this, arguing that Yoruba Christians often negotiate bride price to balance cultural respect with economic realities, particularly in urban areas like Abeokuta and Ijebu-Ode, where modernization has increased financial pressures.

The tension surrounding bride price also reflects broader socio-economic changes. Participants highlighted how urbanization and economic constraints in Ogun State have led some families to demand exorbitant bride prices, creating barriers for young couples. This prompted Christian communities to advocate for simplified ceremonies that prioritize scriptural values over material demands, aligning with Ademiluka's (2021) call for contextual theology to address contemporary cultural challenges.

C. Christian Monogamy versus Polygamy

Participants unanimously supported Christian monogamy, viewing it as a biblical mandate that contrasts with the historical acceptance of polygamy in Yoruba tradition. The shift to monogamy was seen as a redefinition of marital roles, emphasizing exclusivity, fidelity, and covenantal commitment, rooted in New Testament teachings.

Extract 4: A deaconess from Sagamu, Ogun State, affirmed, "Polygamy was in the past. Christ said one man, one wife. That's what we follow."

This view echoes Genesis 2:24 and Ephesians 5:31, which describe marriage as an exclusive, permanent union between one man and one woman. Maselesele et al. (2025) notes that Christian ethics, particularly through Pentecostal and evangelical movements in Nigeria, have redefined marital commitment, promoting monogamy as a reflection of Christ's relationship with the church. Participants frequently cited these scriptures to justify rejecting polygyny, viewing it as incompatible with their faith.

Extract 5: A married man from Sagamu, Ogun State, shared, "In my family, polygamy was common before Christianity. Now, we follow the Bible's teaching of one wife, one husband, because it brings peace and unity (Amos 3:3)."

This extract highlights the transformative impact of Christianity on family structures in Ogun State. Participants noted that monogamy aligns with Christian values of unity and mutual submission, reducing conflicts associated with polygynous households. Oluwatobi et al. (2024) supports this, arguing that Christian teachings have shifted Yoruba marital norms toward monogamy, particularly in urban Christian communities. However, some participants acknowledged that polygyny persists in rural areas or among nominal Christians, indicating ongoing cultural tensions.

The emphasis on monogamy also influenced marriage ceremonies, with participants favoring church weddings that incorporate biblical vows and pastoral blessings over traditional rites that might accommodate polygyny. This reflects a broader trend of indigenized Christianity, where believers adapt cultural practices to align with scriptural mandates (Abilawon, 2025).

D. Faith and Participation in Traditional Marriage

Participants emphasized maintaining cultural identity through non-spiritual elements of Yoruba marriage rites while rejecting practices that conflict with Christian doctrine. This selective engagement allowed them to honour their heritage while remaining faithful to their religious convictions.

Extract 6: A youth from Ogun State commented, "We wear traditional clothes and dance, but the pastor prays. No ancestral rituals."

This reflects a process of contextualization, where culturally significant practices like traditional attire (aṣo ìbílẹ̀) and communal celebrations are retained, while spiritually incompatible elements, such as ancestral invocations or libations, are replaced with Christian practices like prayer and scriptural readings. Nnatuanya and Nwokocha (2025) describe this as indigenized Christianity, enabling believers to affirm cultural dignity without compromising doctrinal purity. Participants noted that traditional attire and dances, such as those performed during engagement ceremonies, symbolize joy and community without conflicting with biblical principles.

Extract 7: A woman from Abeokuta, Ogun State, stated, "We still do the introduction ceremony (mó mi ñ mọ ọ), but instead of libations, we invite our pastor to bless the union with prayers and a Bible verse like Psalm 128."

This extract illustrates how Yoruba Christians in Ogun State adapt traditional rites to align with their faith. The introduction ceremony remains a valued cultural practice, but its spiritual components are reinterpreted through Christian lenses, such as replacing libations with blessings. Aina (2025) notes that such adaptations are common among Yoruba Christians, who seek to preserve social cohesion while adhering to biblical standards. Participants also highlighted the role of churches in facilitating these adaptations, with pastors often officiating engagement ceremonies to ensure alignment with Christian ethics.

E. Role of Churches in Guiding Cultural Integration

Participants underscored the critical role of churches in Ogun State in guiding Yoruba Christians to integrate cultural marriage practices with Christian ethics. Churches provide teachings, premarital counseling, and guidelines to help believers discern which practices align with Scripture, fostering a balanced approach to cultural engagement.

Extract 8: A pastor from Ilaro, Ogun State, noted, “We teach our members to embrace Yoruba culture where it aligns with Scripture. For instance, wearing *aṣọ ibilẹ* shows pride in our heritage, but we reject practices like consulting oracles for marriage decisions (Deuteronomy 18:10–12).”

This extract highlights the deliberate discernment process facilitated by churches, which evaluate cultural practices against biblical teachings. Kur (2021) argues that African theology enables such discernment, allowing Christians to maintain cultural pride while prioritizing faith. Participants reported that churches in Ogun State offer premarital counseling to guide couples in navigating cultural expectations, such as moderating bride price or replacing ritualistic elements with Christian practices.

Extract 9: A young woman from Ogun State emphasized, “Our church helps us understand which traditions are okay. We can respect culture without worshipping it, using the Bible as our guide (1 Thessalonians 5:21).”

This perspective reflects contextual theology, as described by Adeoye (2025), which encourages African Christians to root their faith in biblical truth while honoring cultural identity. Participants noted that church-led initiatives, such as workshops and sermons, promote practices like communal feasting and gift exchanges as neutral and compatible with Christian values, while rejecting rituals involving ancestral worship as idolatrous. This guidance strengthens Yoruba Christians' ability to balance cultural fidelity with faith, contributing to a maturing African Christianity (Masoga & Nicolaides, 2021).

Conclusion

The study concluded that Yoruba Christians strive to balance cultural traditions with Christian ethics, especially in marriage rites. Elements such as engagement ceremonies and traditional attire are retained, spiritually conflicting practices such as libation, ancestral rites, and polygamy are rejected. Participants demonstrated a desire to uphold faith without losing cultural identity, often reinterpreting customs through biblical principles.

Recommendations

- i. Yoruba Christian groups need to promote contextual biblical teaching that allows Yoruba Christian believers to interact with cultural practices such as Yoruba marriage rites without abandoning their faith.
- ii. Church leaders need to provide clear directives on how to distinguish between spiritually neutral traditions and those incompatible with Christian teachings, such as libation.
- iii. Religious scholars need to educate church leaders through contextual theology and cultural discernment training to distinguish culture from religion.

- iv. Christians should be encouraged to maintain Yoruba cultural elements such as attire, music, and communal gathering, when these are consistent with biblical values.

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Appendix

The following table provides details on the 15 interviewees referenced in the study. Names are included with participant consent for transparency and to honor their contributions, while pseudonyms were not used to maintain authenticity.

ID	Name	Role	Location	Denomination
1	Mrs. Adeola Ogunleye	Married Woman	Abeokuta	Anglican
2	Elder Samuel Adebayo	Respected Elder	Abeokuta	Baptist
3	Pastor Olumide Fasola	Pastor	Ijebu-Ode	Pentecostal
4	Deaconess Funmi Afolabi	Deaconess	Sagamu	Anglican
5	Mr. Tunde Oladipo	Married Man	Sagamu	Baptist
6	Miss Grace Bolaji	Youth/Lay Member	Ijebu-Igbo	Pentecostal
7	Mrs. Yetunde Balogun	Married Woman	Abeokuta	Anglican
8	Pastor Ezekiel Olwale	Pastor	Ijebu-Ode	Baptist
9	Miss Christiana Adekoya	Young Woman	Sagamu	Pentecostal
10	Mr. Kolawole Adesina	Married Man	Ijebu-Ode	Anglican
11	Elder Grace Ojo	Christian Elder	Ijebu-Igbo	Baptist
12	Mr. Oluwasegun Adewale	Lay Member	Abeokuta	Pentecostal
13	Mrs. Bose Ige	Married Woman	Sagamu	Anglican
14	Deacon Johnson Akindele	Deacon/Elder	Ijebu-Ode	Baptist
15	Sister Semilore Adegoke	Lay Member	Ijebu-Igbo	Pentecostal