

CHAPTER 2

Bridging Tradition and Agency: Female Nuptial Negotiation Performances of Alago and Yoruba Cultures

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Abstract

African folk culture is rich, diverse and deeply rooted in traditions across diverse cultures. This culture deeply shapes nuptial negotiations, how marriages are formed and understood, making marriage a communal affair. The language of nuptial negotiations in Nigeria is a rich, complex cultural performance, conveyed with respect through stories, proverbs, symbolism and metaphorical language. The study interrogates how women from both cultures transform nuptial negotiations from a ritual exchange into a platform of strategic agency to assert their identity, voices, negotiate their value and desires within a

complex patriarchal tradition. The study adopts qualitative analysis approach; combining electronic recordings and field research data. It finds out that women utilize linguistic strategy, symbolic language, proverbial expressions, persuasive techniques, performative power of praise and prayer to heighten the value of the bride and showcase their creativity, intelligence and wisdom. This study demonstrates how women's negotiations, narrations and performances in traditional marriages not only reveal their individuality, self-awareness and agency but also contribute to the rich cultural traditions of their communities. Contrary to simplistic narratives of female passivity, the paper concludes that the Nigerian woman is a skillful negotiator who uses language to exercise agency and influence.

Keywords: Nuptial Negotiation, Symbolic language, Agency, Oral Tradition, Alago, Yoruba.

Introduction

In African societies, there are traditions and sets of values that guide the behaviour of members in the society. These values and traditions, most often, express culture publicly and help to ensure continuity and stability in human affairs, and pass down cultural heritage from one generation to the other. In any form of expressive culture, cultural heritage is communicated through traditional forms such as ritual, music, dance, nuptial negotiations, praise singing, riddles, myths, proverbs, folksongs, folktales and other performances. All these forms of oral tradition are transmitted verbally and informally, sometimes, through instructions and demonstrations. Embedded in folk and

oral traditions are wisdom of the past and mirror images reflective of expected norms and traditions of societies (Scherub 1975) intended to inculcate requisite social and moral ethical behaviours, acceptable within different traditional African setting. This form of learning transcends other forms of communication as they embody the social learning process that upholds cultural values and conveys requisite didactic messages to the audience, with the aim of engendering social cohesion for the smooth running of the society.

In traditional African society, marriage is considered a valuable institution which every female adult aspires to be. When married, they were valued based on their ability to produce children, cater for their families, honour and revere their husbands. Women in most African societies are obligated to remain under the guidance and control of a man, either their father -for the unmarried - their husbands, for the married, their sons - for the elderly - while being saddled with the role of wives and mothers. In traditional settings, they were expected to work in the field cultivating crops and processing dairies, be subservient, passive, gentle and caring to their husbands and extremely careful in the ways they conducted themselves because of the widespread belief that ‘any act of disobedience (on the part of a woman would portray the husband negatively and also) has negative effects on the society’ (Opara & Mathew 2024). However, amid these tales of subservience and unequal traditional gender roles, some cultures assign some lofty and important roles to women. Given these opportunities, ‘women now recognize and utilize their innate ability and capacity to participate in competitive activities with men, in all fields that were hitherto male dominated’ (Opara & Mathew, 2024 p. 131).

Nuptial negotiations and payment are some of the cultural activities that have come to stay in African culture as steps taken to validate customary marriage. These negotiations mark the beginning of marriage and have become an integral part of marriage ceremonies in African culture. The practice of nuptial negotiations predates the advent of western culture (Nwabude 2022); the nature of these negotiations vary from one culture to another. Series of offers and counter-offers in the negotiation dialogues contain implicit argumentative and persuasive dialogues aimed at reaching a compromise.

This study comparatively examines the role of women in nuptial negotiations and the persuasive use of language by women in Alago and Yoruba cultures during the negotiations. It specifically investigates the intrinsic roles of women in nuptial negotiations, how women are given pride of place to anchor and coordinate the proceedings of engagement ceremonies in Alago culture in the north central part of Nigeria and Yoruba culture in the southwestern part of Nigeria, and communicate cultural values in their discourses. It also investigates the linguistic choices of these women, and how these rich discourses help preserve culture and add colour to nuptial negotiations in African traditional marriages.

Contexts

Alago people are indigenous to Nasarawa State of Nigeria. According to oral tradition, the Alagos originated from the Jukun of modern Wukari division, north of the middle Benue plain, a considerable distance from their present home land (Ose-Agbo 2018 p. 26). Temple (1945) in his own account recorded that Alago people migrated to Nigeria from the Middle East together with the Jukun, Igala, Gomai and Idoma and they formed the famous Kwararafa Empire.

Nasarawa State where they are predominantly found is located in the central part of Nigeria otherwise known as the Middle Belt. Alago people are found in eight out of the thirteen Local Government Areas of the State. Alago language has two main dialectal variations recognized by Alago Language Development Committee namely the Eastern and Western variations (29). These dialects share the same grammatical features but differ slightly in their lexical and phonological details. Unlike most Nigerian cultures, nuptial negotiation in Alago land is handled by women. The *Okikpo* is a female negotiator from the groom's family.

Yoruba people, on the other hand, are a West African ethnic group that inhabits part of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. They constitute more than fifty million people in Africa. They are said to have originated from Lamurudi, one of the kings of Mecca whose offspring were Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yorubas, the kings of Gogobiri and Kukawa, two tribes in the Hausa nation (Johnson 2011). There are different accounts concerning the origin of Yoruba people, however, most scholars believe the Yorubas originate from Ile-ife with Oduduwa as their progenitor (Akintoye, 2010). Yoruba is a member of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo Language family. It is spoken by about 28 million people. Most Yoruba speakers are concentrated in south western Nigeria with over twenty distinct varieties which can be grouped into three major geographical dialects - northwest Yoruba, southeast Yoruba and central Yoruba. The data for this study was taken from the central Yoruba.

Nuptial Negotiations in Nigeria

Over the years, societies have established several processes through which marriage is contracted and legalized. Payment of bride price or bride wealth and

the fulfillment of other obligations are some of such established processes (Oke 2006) which have become acceptable ways to seek the consent of the bride's parents for their daughter's hand in marriage.

In Nigeria, traditional marriage custom places great significance on parental consent and family involvement in the choice of one's life partner and makes it mandatory for intending couple to go through the traditional stages of marriage. The stages of most traditional marriages in Africa begin with bride price negotiation; it is an essential requirement for a valid customary marriage in Nigeria (Alowolodu 2016). The negotiations involve the parents of the intending couple and the immediate family members who meet officially to know themselves for the first time on an agreed date, where the negotiating team of the bride's family with the groom's family meet and face each other with profuse employment of proverbs, repartee, tropes, fables, jokes' (Ubong 2010 p. 337) to win the hearts of the bride's family. Today, bride price payment is an established practice in Nigeria and it is 'accepted as a cultural norm' (Sambre et al 2013 p.65) in most African countries. Among the Alagos, the female nuptial negotiator, usually drawn from women married into the groom's family, is called *Okikpo* while the Yoruba counterpart, usually one each from the bride and groom's families, are called *Alaga Iduro* and *Alaga Ijoko* respectively.

Nuptial Negotiations as Persuasive Argumentation

Every "persuasive argumentation lies at the heart of negotiation and embodies the dynamics of negotiation" (Sycara 1990:203). Negotiations are persuasive arguments, a conventionalized genre of communicative activity in which the interlocutors start from a conflict of interest and typically aim at a mutually

accepted compromise by exchanging offers and counter-offers which often incorporate argumentation (Van Eemeren 2010, pp. 149-151). The family of the groom deploys all available loci to persuade the bride's family that they are worthy, capable and sincere in their intentions to love and care for the bride, and also respect the bride's family and their tradition. The bride's family, on the other hand, persuades the groom's family that their daughter is highly valued and appreciated. By giving her out in marriage, they are entrusting the groom's family with a great responsibility. These exchanges reinforce that negotiation dialogues are constructed as persuasive argument which justifies the purpose for which the families are gathered, not to win an argument but to achieve a harmonious outcome.

Methodology and Theoretical Consideration

The study adopted qualitative research method as it provides a lens for learning about non- quantifiable phenomena such as people's experiences, language, histories and cultures. (Shagufta et al 2023). Both primary and secondary data were used for this study. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the data. The population for this study is nuptial negotiations in the northcentral and southwestern parts of Nigeria. Data for Yoruba was retrieved from the internet - www.youtube.com/@eniolaalagaiduromc - while data for Alago context was collected from field work. These recorded oral texts and a few works were selected, transcribed and translated from Yoruba and Alago languages into English language. The chosen data conforms to the following criteria: (a) negotiation done by women, (b) persuasive language use, (c) engaging nuptial performances, and (d) cultural relevance.

This study adopted Eemeren's (2010) exposition of Strategic Maneuvering. This concept was introduced by Van Eemeren and Houtlosser in 2002. The concept of Strategic Maneuvering explains how in trying to be effective, speakers 'naturally summons the best available arguments, consider their acceptability with the audience addressed, and try to present or frame them in the best way possible, given the outcome desired' (Van Eemeren 2010 pp. 98-99). Strategic Maneuvering manifests itself in the ability of speakers to choose topics that best advance their interest, create empathy and communion with the audience and ability to deploy strategies to steer the discourse towards the achievement of certain communication and intentional effects (Eemeren 2010)

Data Presentation and Analysis

Scenario 1

OKIKPO: Our son has seen a beautiful flower, a ripened fruit that can quench his hunger. A flower that we look forward to cherishing. You know when the eye sees a good thing, it is not afraid. Our son told us that he saw a good thing in your house, and we have come because of that. Our son is the child of Mr. A and Mrs. B. He is the son of a senator; his grandfather was a renowned educationist. His father Senator A, is a man of impeccable character, he treats women equally, a generous man, a supporter of women, a God-fearing man. He is well known for his humility, kindness and good character. He is the one that gave birth to this wonderful son of ours, because of whom we are here to ask for the hand of your daughter in marriage.

Our son is a respectful and God-fearing young man, the son of his father, whose head did not refuse good home training. He is well educated, generous

and very loving. He is well brought up and understands what it means to take care of a woman. He is a man of impeccable character like his father and as we all know, a horse gives birth to a horse. We are very confident that our son will treat your daughter well, we are confident that your daughter is at home, you will not regret our visit.

Analysis 1

The data begins with *Okikpo's* (the negotiator of the groom's family) topical choice of formally expressing the groom's intention to marry their daughter. This topical choice is well suited as it is the first official meeting of both families. This official meeting is an avenue for the intending couple to understand and appreciate the cultural implications of marriage. The *Okikpo* expresses this topical choice using positive adjectives to describe the bride as a 'good thing'. Employing topical shift, the negotiator deploys proverbial expressions to demonstrate their eagerness to meet the bride's family and seek the hand of their good daughter in marriage. The proverb '*when the eye sees a good thing, it is not afraid.*', also doubles as an indirect presentational strategy of eulogy to the bride's family who have groomed their daughter well. Employing the presentational strategy of direct comparison, the negotiator likened the bride to a 'flower' and a 'fruit' which the groom's family look forward to cherishing.

These direct comparisons have cultural symbolisms. Culturally, a bride is seen as a precious jewel that is fragile, soft and succulent like a fruit that nourishes the husband, and must be nurtured for her to blossom. Fruits symbolize love, desire and fertility. As a well pruned flower beautifies an environment and

appears where fruits can grow, evoking joy in anticipation of an enjoyable end, she is to be well taken care of by her husband so that she can, in turn, beautify the life of her husband and their home.

These symbolismisms function to express the cultural significance of the formal proposal for marriage. The negotiator says that the groom's family has seen a well-groomed lady in whom their son delights, desires to spend and enjoy the rest of his life with.

As a well-groomed lady, she is expected to exhibit good home training and bring joy to the life of her husband. *Okikpo* stresses that their daughter is an invaluable gift, capable of 'quenching his hunger'. The groom's desire for a wife is metaphorically described as 'hunger' that can be extinguished by the acceptance of their proposal. This is because the bride possesses qualities capable of extinguishing the hunger of the groom. *Okikpo* uses the adjectives 'beautiful' and 'ripened' to qualify the nouns 'flower' and 'fruit' to describe the attraction that propelled their visit and proposal.

Employing the strategy of topical shift, the negotiator introduces the topic of evaluation of pedigree. She employs this topical choice to reveal the family history, showcasing the impressive lineage of the groom. The groom's father is a senator in the Federal Republic of Nigeria and his grand-father was a former governor in Nigeria. This information magnifies the fact that the groom is from a wealthy and reputable family. This strategy is intended to assure the bride's family that their daughter will not only be in safe hands but will be well catered for. *Okikpo* switches topics to cultural beliefs. She deploys proverbial expressions to convey the cultural belief that 'a horse gives birth to a horse'.

This statement justifies the value placed on the bride. If she is a ‘horse’ from a noble ‘stable’, then the dowry is an investment in a guaranteed future. This reveals significantly that the groom’s family is securing a woman who will produce children that will strengthen their own lineage. This speaks of the bride, not as a commodity, but as a very important cultural investment. *Okikpo* uses this presentation strategy to reassure the bride’s family that the family of the groom understands and upholds the cultural importance of character and a good name.

Employing the strategy of topical shift, the negotiator switches topic to the reputable character and good name. She refers to the groom as a child “whose head did not refuse good home training” which is the reason he turned out to be responsible, well educated, kind, generous, loving etc. Deploying the presentational strategy of eulogy, she praises the groom for replicating the father’s values, as every well-groomed child will do and live up to the expectations of the parents. Based on the groom’s reputable character and the pedigree of the family, the negotiator uses audience adaptation strategy of appeal to character and reputation to further assure and give confidence to the bride’s family that their child is in safe hands.

Scenario 2

Speaker A--*Alaga Iduro* (The female negotiator for the groom’s family)

(song)

We are here because of your child

We are here because of that ripe fruit

We are here because of your child

We are here because of that ripe fruit in your house

We are here because of your child

The child is good when carried at the back of the mother

What is in my hand as you are talking, I can see it

We did not borrow money to do this

We thank God, we did not borrow money to do this. (end of the song)

(Dialogue)

Speaker A--*Alaga Iduro*

Because we are a happy, loving and caring family and our house is lovely, accommodating and warm, the people outside want to come into a happy, loving and caring family. The family of A and B from Ibadan and Ilesha town said they are here on behalf of your trained child, your well-trained child. She is beautiful, gorgeous, elegant and beautiful in and out, industrious, fearfully made, she is everything. We have travelled far and wide in search of someone with such qualities, we have finally found her here. We have travelled to different places, but couldn't find a wife. We even travelled the whole world, even to Boko Haram zones, thinking someone is our wife there, but our search proved abortive until we got here. God bless this family for keeping this damsel for us. Now I begin to search left, right and centre, please don't say it out o, are we expecting the bride's family?

Speaker B-----*Alaga Ijoko (The female negotiator for the bride's family)*

Before I will give you a response, you need to pay some money to transport the response from my mouth to your ears.

(song)

The errand you sent me o, I will collect my payment before I deliver the message.

Husband family show your colour and prove yourself

A lion cannot change its colour like a leopard

I know you are equal to the task, show your colour

Family of the groom, show your colour in front of the negotiator

Please show your colour by spraying more money

Now you people have to greet us properly

Speaker A ----Alaga Iduro (Kneeling down with her team)

We greet our mummies, we greet our daddies, we greet our sisters, we greet all the children, we greet the pregnant women, we greet the unborn babies.

Analysis 2

The negotiations open with a theatrical display of two female negotiators. It begins with a song by *Alaga Iduro* (the negotiator for the groom's family) stating the purpose for their visit. The song expresses the topical choice which is a formal proposal for marriage. This formal proposal is very important because the consent of the bride is needed for the families to proceed on the engagement. The negotiator employs singing as a presentational strategy to communicate the purpose of their visit: "we are here because of your child".

While singing, she employs the use of symbols, making reference to the bride as a 'ripe fruit'. The negotiator deploys presentational technique of repetition to buttress the importance of the visit - because of their well nurtured daughter. The negotiator employs a proverb to express the topical choice of the importance of home training. The proverb - "the child is good when carried at the back of the mother" - is used to emphasize the aspect of culture that reinforces marital stability. She explicates the importance of home training as a requisite to achieving marital stability. The negotiator explains the cultural correlation, between the nurturing of a child and marital stability. She says that home training begins when a child is tender, and only a well-trained child is capable of understanding the caution from a mother. This caution begins from the tender age of a child, cooperating with the mother, staying calm and well behaved when strapped to the mother's back. As such, being a well-trained child, she is expected to understand the importance of cooperation in marriage which is necessary for couples to enjoy marriage and live in peace.

She acknowledges that the bride is a well brought up child who enjoys parental love and on whom whose parents have impacted high moral values which have transformed the child into a responsible young lady. She uses presentational strategy of indirectness to praise the mother and by extension, the father for the moral values impacted on their daughter. Deploying the strategy of topical shift, she directs her praise to the family of the groom who has demonstrated capacity by not borrowing money for the event, suggesting that the family the lady is coming into has demonstrated capability to take care of her.

During the dialogue that ensues between both negotiators, *Alaga Iduro* continues with the topical choice of eulogizing the groom's family. She deploys

presentational technique of ‘Triple’ to describe the groom’s family. “Because we are a happy, loving and caring family and our house is lovely, accommodating and warm, the people outside want to come into a lovely, happy, loving and caring family”.

This strategy is intended to give a reputable information and to magnify the worth of the groom’s family. The family is projected as a place where people are accepted for whom they are and are loved unconditionally. This presentational strategy reveals audience adaptation strategy of care. This strategy of care gives the bride’s family a level of comfort that their daughter will be loved unconditionally, and cared for by all.

Employing topical shift, the negotiator chooses to speak about the bride as a fortune and a priceless jewel to the groom’s family. Using presentational strategy of ‘triple’, the negotiator described her as ‘*beautiful, gorgeous, elegant, and beautiful in and out, industrious, fearfully made, she is everything*’. She uses the presentational technique of exaggeration to magnify their search for a wife in the entire world, and even in dangerous zones. This is because of the outstanding qualities they desire in a wife. This strategy is intended to magnify her worth and to express that they are blessed to have her as a wife, having searched the entire world. She praises and blesses the family for a job well done and for ‘*keeping this damsel*’ for them.

Alaga Ijoko, the negotiator for the bride’s family, responds with a song too. In Yoruba culture, it is expected that responses from the bride’s family in nuptial negotiation settings are facilitated and transported from *Alaga Ijoko* to *Alaga Iduro*. The transportation fees varies based on the ability of the negotiator to

persuasively and strategically maneuver the groom's family in understanding her role as a negotiator and the importance of the activity being carried out.

Deploying singing as a presentational technique, *Alaga Ijoko* hinges her topical choice on payment for appreciation of her effort as a negotiator. She persuades the groom's family to be generous as they show appreciation.

In Yoruba tradition, the groom's family is expected to demonstrate their willingness to take their bride by their ability to encourage the messenger in whatever way possible. *Alaga Ijoko* persuades the groom's family to spray her a substantial amount of money when she said "husband family, show your colour in front of *Alaga*" so she can facilitate the negotiation process.

Discussion of Findings and Cultural Comparison

The analyses reveal how negotiator chooses strategic language from the available loci that help them convey their topical choices and advance the interest of the party they are negotiating for by using appropriate and effective linguistic tools some of which include the ones discussed below.

Use of symbolic language

Symbolic language is the use of a concrete image to represent an abstract idea. According to Adebayo (2024), symbols serve as powerful tools for conveying deeper meanings and themes. Smith corroborates this view in his submission that symbolic language plays an important role in enhancing understanding, by providing vivid imageries that provide deeper reflection for effective communication (Smit 2019) and they refer' to objects that they denote by virtue of socio- cultural conventions' (Agyekun 2006b p. 122). Instances of the use of symbolic language abound in the negotiations.

Scenario 1

Our son has seen a beautiful flower, a ripened fruit that can quench his hunger.

Scenario 2

We are here because of that ripe fruit

We are here because of that ripe fruit in your house

The data analysis shows that in expressing the topical choice of formal proposal for marriage in both cultures, female negotiators maneuver strategically in their topical choices through the use of symbolic depictions to convey the cultural expectations of couples in marriage

Culturally, a bride is expected to be mature before getting married, having learnt all that is required for her to excel in marriage. The symbol of a ripened fruit reflects the maturity of the bride and the associated beauty that accompanies maturity. The data further reveals the attractiveness and endearing beauty of a mature bride (the ripened fruit) and the desire for her husband, the owner, to have her all to himself. Also, the symbolic use of flower represents the fragile nature of woman which, by extension, communicates the cultural expectations that a bride is to be pampered and treated with care and love.

Proverbial Expressions

Proverbial expressions are didactic sayings, reflective of the culture and worldview of a group of people, used to express truth and beliefs. The use of proverbs plays vital roles in communicating a memorable, persuasive and culturally accepted positions. They are ‘repository of native intelligence, code

of moral laws and philosophy of both life and social justice’ (Alimi, 2012 p.122). Proverbial expressions are handy in guiding action, clarifying a situation or inducing a feeling or attitude as seen in the contexts above. They are deployed by the negotiators to express the topical choice of the importance of pedigree, family name, reputable character and home training.

Scenario 1

‘A child whose head did not refuse good home training’

‘a horse gives birth to a horse’

Scenario 2

‘The child is good when strapped to the back of the mother’

The proverb ‘A child whose head did not refuse good home training’ used in scenario 1 reveals the truth about the participatory role of a child in his upbringing. The negotiator expounds on the willingness on the part of the groom, to accept the good training given to him by his parents. This is a further demonstration of his character as a good son who has made his parents proud.

The second proverb “a horse gives birth to a horse” shows the cultural expectations of parents in nurturing their child in a manner that the child replicates their values wherever he finds himself. The proverb in scenario 2 explains that a well-trained child is capable of understanding the importance of cooperation in marriage having gone through the training of cooperating with the mother from birth. These proverbs are a justification that the groom has a reputable character; he is from a responsible home and he has lived up to expectations as a worthy son.

Eulogizing Expressions

The negotiators use the language of eulogy to express the purpose of their visit. This language use is a demonstration of appreciation and acknowledgement of all the investment of hard work, guidance, love education by the bride's parents on their daughter. The language of eulogy meets the emotional need of being valued and cared for (Zhao et al 2017)).

Scenario 1

'His father, Senator A, is a man of impeccable character, he treats women equally, a generous man, a supporter of women, a God-fearing man. He is well known for his humility, kindness and good character.'

In Scenario 1, the groom's father is praised by the negotiator for his impeccable character and for being a God-fearing man. By this expression, the negotiator expounds on the topical choice of a good name. This topical choice extols the importance of good values and communicates the values upheld by the groom's family which has given the family a good name in the society. Also, in scenario 2, the family of the bride is praised by the negotiator for nurturing their daughter to become a responsible young lady with good morals. In the same vein, the family the family of the groom is also praised for being financially capable to handle the marriage ceremony.

In both negotiation scenarios, the negotiators apply certain strategic audience adaptation tools to put "the audience into a certain frame of mind' (Demirdugen, 2010 p. 190). The tools include language of appeal (which encompasses appeal to character, appeal to reputation and pedigree, emotional appeal and more), use of songs, repetition and use of exaggeration.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a gendered linguistic analysis of nuptial negotiations in Alago and Yoruba cultures; it also shows the important role of language in the expression of culture. It brings to the fore women's agency in a male dominated terrain. Nigerian nuptial negotiations are a refined cultural institution where persuasive argument is used as a tool for building consensus and alliances engineered through various persuasive strategies.

The study further demonstrates that women use language strategically in negotiation and persuasion.; this presents them as active performers in nuptial negotiations in Yoruba and Alago traditional marriage rites. This strategic use of language reveals female agency and strength that she exudes in communicating cultural norms and values. Furthermore, it has also drawn attention to the similarity in an aspect Yoruba and Alago cultures.

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