The Persistence of Polyandry in Irigwe, Nigeria*

WALTER H. SANGREE**

The Irigwe of Nigeria, among whom the author conducted 20 months of intensive field work, are one of several so-called “pagan” tribes on or around the Jos Plateau which prior to British Pacification lacked, or had developed only in rudimentary form, any tribal chieftaincy as such. Instead these tribes based their unity and cohesion principally upon two sets of social institutions. One set was the ceremonials, often regulating the subsistence system, which conferred one or another cluster of ritual responsibilities considered vital for the tribe’s continued welfare on differing groups in the tribe. The other set of social institutions was that regulating marriage and sexual alliances. These, while varying in detail from one tribe of the region to the next, characteristically utilized legitimized plural sexual unions either in the form of prescriptive primary and secondary marriage, or through the prescription of regularized cicisbeo relationships together with marriage, to produce a double set of cross-cutting ties between differing types of major and minor tribal subdivisions (Muller 1973).

The Irigwe have 25 agnatically organized “sections” each with a ritual speciality of vital importance to the tribe, often pertaining to the tribe’s yearly cycle of ceremonials regulating subsistence agriculture and hunting activities. Twenty-four of these sections and their subdivisions are also united by an elaborate two-tiered network of consanguineal and affinal ties including co-husband relationships. These ties result from their traditional marriage system which prescribes both primary and secondary marriages while proscribing marriage between individuals with the same agnatic sub-section lineage affiliation, and proscribing secondary marriage between couples where the woman is already married to someone of the same section affiliation as the man (Muller & Sangree 1973:34-5; Sangree 1969:1050-1); that is, the system prohibits section “brothers” from becoming co-husbands, and also prohibits co-husbands from sharing more than

*The field research on which this paper is primarily based was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation. My particular thanks to Mr. Bre Goji, and Dr. Jean-Claude Muller for aid in gathering information on the new Irigwe marriage law and some of its consequences.

**Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, The University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, U.S.A.

1There are 25 named, ritually discrete, agnatically based sections; two of these sections have combined, however, for purposes of hunting and related ritual, and also function as a unit as regards secondary marriage.

Vol. XI, No. 3 (Summer 1980)
one wife. Traditionally, Iriwge did not recognize divorce; thus all marriages became a source of persistent and more or less permanent social ties.

I. Post Contact Administrative and Judicial Innovations

Following British pacification of the Jos Plateau in the decade prior to the First World War the Colonial administrators instituted some sort of centralized chieftaincy, and then later a court system and tribal council, ideally for each of the ethnically distinctive tribes. These arrangements or subsequent modifications of them have been maintained by the Nigerian Federal government. In Iriwge the British established two District Chieftaincies, Kwol, and Miango, to correspond geographically with the traditional Iriwge ritual moieties of Rigwe and Nyango (Sangree 1970:33-6). To this day [Rigwe] Kwol District, known by the Iriwge as the “parent” division, retains its ritual eminence over the [Nyango] Miango “child” division, but by the period of my field research the Chief of the more populous Miango District had become in administrative matters senior to the Chief of Kwol District and the principal administrator for all Iriwge (Sangree 1972:1241). The British in Iriwge also established a system of sub-districts, each with an appointed headman responsible for maintaining the District Chief’s authority and for carrying out his wishes in the sub-district. In addition they instituted District Courts where the District Chief and his headmen adjudicated breaches of the peace, including the occasional marriage dispute that failed to be settled amicably by traditional means. Then much later, but well before my period of field work there, Legislative Councils were established in each District, with councillors elected from each of the sub-districts. This Council, together with the appointed sub-district headmen and the Chief became a legislative and advisory group that could promulgate new laws for the District, subject to the approval of the Divisional officer who was formerly a British colonial officer and, since independence, a Nigerian civil administrator.

The above administrative innovations, establishing bureaucratic tribal or sub-tribal Chieftaincies, have met with increasing acceptance by the Iriwge; and they have, in effect, rendered the political and peace-keeping aspects of the alliances generated and maintained by the traditional marriage and ritual systems redundant or obsolete for a generation or more. The same has been true for other Plateau tribes. Since 1934 (M.G. Smith 1969) one or another of these tribes, for a variety of reasons, has initiated or has agreed to accept tribal edicts banning or modifying their traditional marriage institutions in favor of marriage laws and practices consonant with those of Muslimized or Christianized groups which are a much less prolific source of inter-group alliances. But the Iriwge were slow to adopt any such changes. During the period of my residence and field work in Iriwge in 1963-5, only about 600 professing Christians, plus several dozen converts to Islam, out of the total tribal membership of around 20,000, had repudiated traditional Iriwge marriage practices and in effect had come to form a monogamous, Christian-endogamous enclave in the tribe. This small Christian minority included perhaps half of the Iriwge with a primary school education or higher, and thus it had disproportionately large representation and influence in
tribal legislative and administrative affairs. It wasn't until 1968, however, that the Christian Irigwe's desire for a tribal marriage reform was met by a judicial edict abolishing secondary marriage and instituting divorce. Thenceforth it became legally mandatory for every Irigwe woman to return to her parents for a time and obtain a divorce from the local court before marrying another man, or even before shifting residence back to a secondary husband with whom she had been married earlier.

This new marriage law, although much more consonant with Christian practices and preferences than the traditional system, was modeled after Muslim Hausa practices long instituted and widely followed in Northern Nigeria. Thus the Christian minority was able to view it as a victory, and the non-Christian majority could also feel it was a major step towards modernization and integration with the mainstream of independent Nigeria rather than capitulation to the Christians.

Unfortunately I haven't been able to return to Nigeria since 1965. When I heard about the 1968 changes in the marriage regulations through correspondence with Irigwe friends in 1968, I started to make systematic inquiries from these friends about the new law and its consequences. An Irigwe whom I employed as a research assistant while he was still a secondary school student in 1964-5, has more recently been my principal aid in gathering information about this new marriage law and its effects. During vacation periods spent with his family in Irigwe in 1968, 1971, and 1975, he made extended inquiries on my behalf, and considerable factual material on the new marriage law and its consequences was gathered by him.

So far as I have been able to ascertain, the principal factor fostering the new marriage regulations was a major reorganization of the structure of the Federal Nigerian government and its components which started in 1967 and led to much stronger outside pressures on the Irigwe to modify their marriage system. The establishment of 12 states to replace the four former Regions of Nigeria brought in its wake administrative innovations right down to the tribal District level. Jos, the nearest urban center to Irigwe, was elevated from a Divisional headquarters to the capital of the newly formed Benue-Plateau State. Kwol and Miango Districts remained the major local administrative units of Irigwe, but the Kwol and Miango Chiefs were both assigned to a new administrative status known as District Head. Furthermore their effective authority within their Districts was diminished to little more than that of chief tax collectors by the dissolution of the Kwol and Miango District Courts, over which the Chiefs had formerly presided. All judiciary functions were removed from the aegis of the District Heads and assumed by a completely new system of Area Courts directly under the authority of the State Ministry of Justice. In other words the judiciary and administrative branches of the government were completely separated from each other, in terms of formal organization, from the State right down to the most local levels, and were placed under separate State Ministries. In addition all tribal police and other local constabularies were abolished and
Journal of Comparative Family Studies

replaced by local offices and officials of the Nigerian National Police, with local officials all being graduates of the National Police Academy, and recruited from anywhere in Nigeria rather than just locally.

The new Rukuba—Miango Area Court started in 1968, was first housed in temporary quarters on the Rukuba-Miango border at Bassa, and has met in a new Courthouse at Miango since 1972. Judgements in this new Court are made by three permanent Court Members. Seniormost of these is the Inspector of Area Courts who must either hold a Diploma in Law, or must have had extensive previous Court experience; he is appointed by the Solicitor General of the Ministry of Justice, located at the State capital in Jos. The Inspector of Area Courts then himself appoints the second and third Court Members, namely a Judge who must have had previous court experience and some formal training as a local level (Alkali) Judge, and a Court Member who typically is an older man with primary schooling and considerable previous local level court experience. State judiciary regulations prohibit anyone of local tribal background from serving in any of these three Area Court Member posts.

Although the Hausa language had long been used in Kwol and Miango District court sessions whenever any of the Fulani or other non-Irigwe speaking minority groups living in the Districts had been involved in the litigation, this new Area Court arrangement has made the use of Hausa a practical necessity all of the time, with litigants, defendants and witnesses utilizing interpreters when necessary. The new Area Court arrangement undoubtedly made traditionalist Irigwe, as well as the Christian and educated minority much more aware how anachronistic their traditional marriage practices appeared compared with those of other more "progressive" Plateau groups, the Hausa, and the rest of Nigeria. The Rukuba had drastically modified their traditional marriage system in 1956 with the abolition of preferential marriage (Muller 1976:85), and after the combination of the two tribes' court systems Irigwe of all persuasions undoubtedly felt considerable pressure to improve their tribe's image and their integration into the new Nigeria by bringing their marriage practices more in line with the prevalent Muslim-Hausa form.

Be that as it may, all available evidence indicates that neither local Irigwe administrators and traditional leaders, nor the Irigwe Christians, nor the pagan population at large were directly responsible for instituting the new marriage laws; they were simply instituted by the new State Ministry of Justice shortly after the establishment of the Rukuba-Miango Area Court, apparently as part of their effort to establish a corpus of fairly uniform civil laws and legal practices through the state that could be adjudicated effectively by the new system of Area Courts. Thus the question is why the Irigwe, including the traditionalists, accepted the new marriage laws, at least initially, with such equanimity.

One factor which may have facilitated acceptance of the new marriage laws by traditionalist Irigwe was their concern, already strong in 1963-5, about occasional cases where a couple violated traditional custom by contracting a secondary marriage when the woman was already married to one of the husband's section
"brothers". I have discussed this problem in some detail in another publication (Sangree 1972:1239-42). It will suffice here to note simply that these custom-defying secondary marriages had been occurring principally in the tribe's most populous section, gravely threatening the political and ritual unity of the section which had become the principal political bloc supporting the Chief of Kwol's incumbency. We have seen that this Chief, the Chief of Miango, was reduced in status to District Head around the same time as the new Area Courts were established in 1968. Thus, the District Head of Kwol, deprived of much of his traditional authority, probably found it expedient to curry favor from the Commissioner in Jos, and aligned himself with the Christian District Head in Miango in supporting a marriage reform that would abolish secondary marriage. At the same time the new codified law proscribed the sort of traditionally-disallowed intra-section secondary marriage wife-taking that threatened the unity of his principal bloc of local tribal supporters. The Head of Kwol may have felt that the new marriage law would in fact seldom be applied to traditionalists, and would remain little more than a threat that he could hold over anyone contemplating intra-section wife-taking. But this proved not to be the case.

Initially few Irigwe took note of the new marriage law, but by the early 1970s a significant number of deserted husbands had instigated legal action through the new Miango—Rukuba Area Court against wives who had gone to other husbands subsequently a ground swell of opposition to the new law grew up in the tribe, particularly among the older traditionalist Irigwe men and among the married non-Christian women. Irigwe women have a deep non-political commitment to aspects of the traditional marriage system which the instigators and supporters of the new marriage laws had not anticipated or had underrated. In order to clarify the nature of this commitment and the manner in which it contrasts with men's involvement in marriages, particularly young childless men, I shall briefly outline some of the differences between primary and secondary marriages both from the perspective of the couples involved and from that of their respective lineages and resultant alliances between them.

II. Traditional Irigwe Marriage

A primary marriage in Irigwe, that is the first marriage individuals normally consummate, usually is arranged by the parents while the couple are still infants or small children. It occurs typically between couples whose parents are either distant kinsmen (including members of differing lineages of the same section) or between couples whose fathers are "friends" (uri). Such male "friends" are non-relatives or distant kinsmen who have agreed not to take each others' wives in secondary marriage, are hunting partners, and act as contact men and go-betweens in initiating secondary marriage overtures with already married women.

Substantial farm labor is performed by the groom-to-be's agnatic lineage for the girl's father over a period of several years prior to the marriage's consummation. The parents do this despite the fact that primary marriage unions seldom lead to co-residence of more than a few weeks, and nearly all off-spring
result from secondary marriages. In short, they seldom develop, even by Irigwe standards, into fruitful or stable co-residential relationships. Thus the parents of the groom supply all this farm work—approximately 24 men-days a year for three years—with full knowledge that the resulting marriage is unlikely to bring their family more that the fleeting residence and domestic and sexual services of a very young wife. Nevertheless some ambitious fathers arrange and give farm work for two or three primary type marriages for each son, though a man must never arrange for more than one primary marriage for each of his daughters. The real payoff for the boy’s family from a primary marriage is the kinship or friendship alliance it helps affirm and strengthen with the girl’s father and family, and the augmented prestige the boy’s family receives in the eyes of the community at large as a group of hard-working farmers whose sons and daughters are fit prospects for secondary marriage. Also the communal farming involved serves to announce to the boy’s male kinsmen that the girl he will marry—as well as his future secondary wives—will be off limits to the rest of them as secondary wives.

Secondary marriages, in contrast, involve minimum expense, and are initiated by the couple themselves. The man, after getting his prospective secondary spouse’s assent, probably with the aid of a “friend” go-between, must then obtain permission for the union from her marriage guardian. He then must pay the marriage guardian (who is initially the woman’s own father) a relatively small prestation (30 to 35 shillings in 1965), plus a smaller gift of 5 to 10 shillings for her mother. It is the marriage guardian’s responsibility to make sure his ward agrees to the match and that it does not break any of the established rules of exogamy. Once the prestations have been made to the marriage guardian and the mother, the prospective secondary wife is obliged sometime thereafter to go and cohabit with her new husband for a minimum of three, or four, not necessarily consecutive, nights at his compound, but she is not obliged to him for more than that.

The woman’s role in secondary marriage arrangements is neither passive nor is it autonomous; it is expected that a daughter will take some initiative and demonstrate her filial affection by accepting engagements to several suitors of whom her father approves; and people say a good and devoted daughter will attract and accept engagement to a half dozen or more secondary husbands during her early and middle teens. Even prior to taking up residence with her primary husband a girl may become engaged to other youths and young men, but the consummation of these secondary marriages usually is postponed until after she has resided at least a few days with her primary husband.

Girls characteristically start this round of marriages soon after puberty, and usually a year or more passes before they first become pregnant. During this period each new marriage brings a girl not only kudos from her pleased father but also the plaudits of her female age peers, and probably an increase in the number of young men desirous of marrying her. If a young wife doesn’t get pregnant within two or three years of first marrying, or if she suffers poor health during this time, moving on to more husbands is the stock remedy initially
suggested. The possibility of witchcraft, sorcery, or intervention by some other evil force is investigated only if this remedy fails to bring the desired results.

Once see finds herself pregnant a wife is expected to remain with the husband she is then residing with until after the infant's successful delivery, that husband becoming recognized as the legitimate father. Thenceforth, if their child lives, the woman's pattern of marriage mobility changes; the infant's health, and that of subsequent infants she bears, becomes the principal concern directing her future marriage alliances as well as her choice of which husband to reside with at any given time. But this does not bring an end to further marriages. Usually during her first pregnancy a girl is “given” by her father to one of his lineage brothers as a marriage ward (Muller & Sangree 1973:32-4), and even though she may already have contracted and consummated a half dozen or more secondary marriages for which her father acted as the marriage guardian, filial duty now demands accepting two or three more secondary marriages overseen by her new marriage guardian. She may no longer feel inclined to accept these, or consummate those she has agreed to accept for this new marriage guardian, but when the first major or persistent health crisis occurs with one or another of her small children she usually feels compelled to do so.

A set of Irigwe ideological beliefs relates a child's soul disposition and general health to the mother's continuing good relationship with her patrilineage, particularly to her father and marriage guardian (Sangree 1974:45-8). (The personal and social investment an Irigwe father has in bestowal in marriage of his daughters was not abrogated simply by a change in the Area Court sanctioned marriage laws.) Other factors are also considered of great importance to a child's continued good health, foremost among these being occasional continued cohabitation of the child's mother with its father, and the general amicability of the co-wives where the mother and child are residing at any particular time. (Nor were these concerns abrogated by the new marriage laws). Thus the decision to shift residence from one husband to another continues to be triggered for most women by a health crisis of one or another of their younger children where a diviner has ascertained that the illness is principally rooted in the child's poor “soul state” which can be improved by shifting residence quickly either back to another or on to a new husband. The new marriage laws don't allow such quick marriage mobility, and thus it is not surprising they have been so frequently ignored.

From the preceding we can perceive the plurality of interlineage links through matriliation that fruitful secondary marriage forge. In conclusion, however, I should like to point out another interesting aspect, a by-product, so to speak, of Irigwe secondary marriage, namely the bi-modal nature of co-husband interaction which prior to pax britannica was of major significance to the maintenance of Irigwe inter-section peace and tribal solidarity. On the one hand competition for secondary wives fosters hostility between sections; on the other hand the co-husband relationship stabilizes this competition by constraining the hostility engendered. Irigwe men are suspicious of men from other sections because they might
take their wives in secondary marriage, and they are quick to pick a fight with anyone they have reason to believe is after one of their wives. But once one of a man's wives has gone to cohabit with another man in secondary marriage he treats that new co-husband most circumspectly because of a deep-seated Irigwe belief that a man can cause the death of any one of his co-husband who is ill or injured, merely by his presence. Thus co-husbands (they have no special term for this relationship, simply referring to it as "my wife's husband") avoid entering each other's compounds unannounced, avoid hunting or other dangerous activity in each other's presence, and are very cautious and polite when they meet in public places. Co-husbands in effect are in a perpetual state of anti-alliance of truce; they prefer to avoid each other because they believe that above all they must avoid stumbling together into something as dangerous as fighting and becoming injured in each other's presence.

III. Conclusion : The Persistence of Irigwe Polyandry

It is easy to understand the willingness of a young Irigwe husband to go to the new Area Court in order to try to stop his wife from going to another husband. Also if unsuccessful in keeping his wife with him the plaintiff can thereby have the satisfaction of getting back at his new co-husband (or ex-wife's new husband) in an impersonal safe way, and also perhaps discourage other or future wives of his from being willing to leave for other husbands. But it seems reasonable to suppose that traditionalist Irigwe husbands with children, as well as their wives, would come to have grave doubts about such constraints on marriage mobility once they experience the belief that the very health of their children is thereby endangered. One can't easily do away with a marriage procedure sanctioned by offsprings' illness and death, especially if these are attributed to something as salient as anger generated by the abrogation of time-honored Irigwe paternal rights over one's daughters, and one's daughters' concurrelate filial duty. Perhaps a law mandating the Muslim faith or the Christian religion for all Irigwe would cut, or be a key to untying this Gordian knot, but the new marriage law included no such mandate. More likely the greater availability of effective medical facilities particularly for infant and children care, together with an increasing ease and frequency of young people taking up residence in Jos and other areas outside of Irigwe, will effectively neutralize these traditionalist sanctions that keep the old marriage practices alive. All that can be said is that time will tell.

By 1974 the Miango—Rukuba Area Court had become so swamped with Irigwe marriage litigation, and the complaints from traditionalist Irigwe about the marriage law had become so numerous and vociferous, that the Court judges pronounced a new interpretation of the law, namely, that it should apply only to those Irigwe who elected to be married under the new law, with their marriage thus registered at the Court. All those married simply in the traditional manner could no longer have recourse to this new law against wives leaving them for other husbands. To my knowledge that is how the matter stands at present.
REFERENCES

Muller, Jean-Claude

Muller, Jean-Clade and Walter H. Sangree

Sangree, Walter H.

Smith, M. G.