Going Home to Mother: Traditional Marriage among the Irigwe of Benue-Plateau State, Nigeria

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The Irigwe marriage system in effect demands that men and women be married to several spouses in differing tribal sections during the course of their adult lives and precludes all divorce. It also ascribes patrivirilocal residence and assigns the paternity of each child a woman bears to the husband with whom she is residing at the time of the child’s conception. Consequently women shift residence from husband to husband several times during the course of their lives, and unless childless they suffer intermittent separation from one or another of their dependent children. Spirit possession cults, involving nearly all the mature women of the tribe, supply both the emotional catharsis and the avenues for social integration to compensate the women for the repeated separations and social disjunctions the marriage system produces in their lives. [Irigwe, Rigwe; Jos Plateau; Nigeria; marriage; polyandry; secondary marriage; spirit possession.]

The Irigwe live about 20 miles west of the towns of Jos and Bukuru in euphorbia-enclosed, extended-family compounds that are clustered closely together to form a belt of almost continuous settlement running north and south for about four miles just above the western escarpment of the Jos Plateau, Nigeria. Numbering around 17,000, they speak a distinctive Niger-Congo language, one not understood by any other group to my knowledge, but clearly closely related to several nonadjacent people to the west. The Irigwe gain their subsistence primarily from a traditional system of hoe agriculture. Each extended family compound has its own proximate seedling beds and garden patches, but most of the farming is done on scattered outlying fields as much as six or seven miles away from the settled area.

Since forceful British intervention in 1905, the Irigwe have refrained from hunting the heads of enemies and have come to accept the imposition of a centralized tribal administration. Hunting and the preservation of the skulls of certain categories of big game, however, remain passionately pursued, dry-season activities of great social and religious significance.

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1 This article is a composite of two papers on aspects of Irigwe marriage read at the 1966 and 1968 American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings. The National Science Foundation funded the field research on which it is based. I am indebted to Lucinda Sangree for her most helpful suggestions and editorial comments.


The Appendices: I (Chart of Irigwe Sections), II (Irigwe/Rigwe Reginal map [1960s]), III (Irigwe/Rigwe Countryside, Tahu-Täegbä Area, 1965), IV (Walter H. Sangree’s Principal Publications on the Irigwe/Rigwe of Nigeria, 2008-1969) were added to this PDF edition in 2009 by the Author.
By 1965 about three percent of the Irigwe had forsaken their traditional religious practices for Christianity. Perhaps an equal number, mostly Christians, had received some formal schooling of British type, but not more than two or three dozen had by 1965 gone on to complete their secondary school education. It had become common practice throughout Irigwe, however, for most of the women and girls to walk to Jos or Bukuru several times a year to sell and buy at the markets there. Many younger men seek occasional employment as laborers in these towns or in the nearby mine fields for several weeks after the farming season is over to earn money to pay the annual poll tax and to buy clothing, kerosene lamps, and the like. In spite of this regular contact with modern urban centers, traditional patterns of lineage and family activities still largely prevail in the ritual, economic, and, to a lesser extent, political spheres among probably ninety-five percent of the population. I shall limit myself in this paper to discussing the traditionalist illiterate majority as I found them in 1963/65.

The Irigwe repeatedly utilize the idiom of generation and sex (i.e., parent-child and male-female) to characterize and classify aspects of their world, both social and geographical. There are twenty-four agnatically based Irigwe subdivisions or “sections,” as the Irigwe call them, each with its own shrine house, rather womb-like in shape, called a branyi. Each Irigwe section regards its branyi as sacred and as its center of strength and regeneration, and skulls and other relics of warfare and hunting are preserved therein. Each branyi is presided over by a senior man of the section’s senior most lineage. The twenty-four sections are grouped into two geographically discrete divisions. Rigwe (Kwon District), the “parent” division, which lies south of the River Ngell, has ten sections, which together control a major portion of the important tribal ritual. Nyango (Miango District), the “child” division, with fourteen sections, is north of the Ngell. In addition sections are regarded as either “male” or “female”. There are seven male and two female sections in the parent division, plus one section that is probably regarded as male (but I remain uncertain about this section). Then there are nine male and four female sections in the child division, plus one section that cannot be clearly classified as either. Each section has its ritual specialization of significance to the entire tribe. Female sections share the responsibility for most of the ritual concerning wet-season planting and crop growth, whereas male sections direct the ritual regulating hunting and most other dry-season activities. Sections in the parent division are felt, with one exception, to have ritual status superior to that of sections in the child division. This one exception is the section called Rae (“Red Earth”), which is the most senior female section and is situated in the child division.

Most sections in the parent division are regarded as having diverse agnatic origins. The male sections in the parent division are ritually ranked and specialized according to their putative order of arrival in Irigwe. The most senior male section presides over the most important dry-

2 A twenty-fifth culturally and linguistically mixed Irigwe-Chawae section, “Yicüie Tabae”, is situated below the Jos Plateau Escarpment in Chawae District (see Appendix I).
season and planting rituals for the entire tribe. The more junior sections in the parent division have their own relatively minor ritual specializations, which are for the most part connected with dry-season activity. The three female sections in the parent division are all of essentially equal ritual status; one carries out planting ritual for one of the important grain crops; a second has ritual to control the lightning; the specialty of the third remains unclear to me.

*Rae* (“Red Earth”), the most senior female section as noted above, is situated in the child division. The Red Earth section presides over the principal farming and first-fruits ritual for all of Irigwe. Elders of *Rae* recount the following Irigwe origin myth:

Long ago, Weze, the original Red Earth ancestor, descended from the sun to a spot in the child division (Nyango). A descendant of his first brought forth fire from a hole in the rock by the river that separates the parent and child divisions. A later descendant moved south of the river to what is now the parent division area (Rigwe) and met a man named Audu wandering by. He bore the name Audu, which is an Irigwe nickname for Jarawa, because he had come for the Jarawa tribal group situated east of Irigwe. The Red Earth people invited Audu to live with them, and he married and became the original ancestor of the most senior Irigwe male section. Audu came bringing as a gift the fruit of the Inhwiae tree [I was unable to identify this tree botanically], and the Irigwe section he founded is known as Nuhwie in remembrance of this gift. At that time Audu had no crops, his people eating only game, fruits, and berries. The Red Earth people gave Audu crops and asked him to distribute them among his people. They agreed to respect each other as mother and son and as man and woman (which also means husband and wife in the Irigwe language). Then, combining their hunting and gathering and farming skills, they together founded the Irigwe tribe.

With the passing of time the tribe grew to have quite a few sections, some arising from the incorporation of immigrant groups and others being formed by the splitting off of patrilineages from already established Irigwe sections. Then a great migration took place. A man from a junior male section led members of his own lineage, together with offshoots of other male and female sections, to the north side of the river where they formed a new “son” section not far from where the original Red Earth ancestor had descended from the sun. Very soon afterwards the entire Red Earth section followed this new son section to the new settlement. Several other lineages from male and female sections came later. The descendants of all these migrants now comprise Nyango, the child division of Irigwe.

With the exception of the Red Earth section and two offshoot sections from it, each section of the child division recognizes its origin from a “parent” section in the parent division and serves as its ritual subordinate. Thus a section in the child division is regarded as “female” if it is derived from a female parent section and as “male” if it is derived from a male parent section. It is noteworthy that the elders of Nuhwie, the most senior male section, do not accept the Red Earth origin myth given above and dispute the seniority of the Red Earth section. They assert that Nuhwia was the first Irigwe section and insist that the Red Earth section is merely their daughter (a rather ungrateful daughter at that) on whom they have bestowed female ritual leadership through the magnanimity of their paternal affection.

Most Irigwe sections are subdivided into several exogamous lineages (*énûcié*). Although extended family compounds of any particular lineage and section tend to be spatially clustered, there are many cases of compounds that adjoin or are surrounded by compounds of other lineages or even other sections. Thus it is not possible to identify either a compound’s lineage or section affiliation solely by its location. Sections vary greatly in size; the largest comprises ninety-nine
Irigwe hunt all during the dry season, principally in groups organized on a section basis. The highlight of the hunting season is a three-day tribal hunt and celebration (Zaraci) at the end of the dry season presided over by Nuhwie, the most senior male section. It is in the organization and ceremonial arrangements of this big hunt that one sees the parent and child divisions most explicitly counter posed. The Irigwe’s passion for hunting finds its principal ceremonial expression, however, after this great hunt, early in the rains when planting is just beginning. At this time each section in turn holds a three-day ceremonial to purify and praise its hunters who during the preceding season have brought heads of big game (and formerly human enemies) to their branyi. Only heads of certain dangerous game are preserved as relics, thereby qualifying their takers as ŝ us (“heroes”) to be thus honored. In recent decades big game has grown very scarce, and in several instances some of the small sections, tired of waiting many years for a member to bag the requisite game before holding a ŝ iia ceremonial have paired off with other sections to hold the ceremonial jointly thus making bigger and more frequent ceremonies possible for each.

After the climax of the ŝ iia ceremonial when the heroes are anointed and ritually cleansed while seated before the branyi, senior representatives of every section of the tribe sit down to a feast, and girls of the host section dance and sing songs of praise, honoring past and present heroes. Although the food and beer are supplied by the host section, representatives from guest female sections help make the final feast preparations, and elders from guest male sections actually distribute the food and drink. Then as they eat and drink, a spokesman from each section in turn comments on the skulls and their takers. As the speeches drag on and the beer flows, verbal skirmishes and sometimes fisticuffs arise over slights or departures from protocol. Finally peace and reconciliation is sought and usually achieved with shouted admonitions that all the sections are one family and that man and wife and parents and children should help and support each other. Anyhow, by that time the elders are too full of beer to care very much, and the younger men and women, girls and youths, are dancing around the big drum (bí), or are off trysting. Thus we come at last to the principal focus of this paper, the Irigwe marriage system. During the dry season men bend their sporting energy to chasing down game; but the beginning of the planting season, when the rains are just starting, is the time above all times for making off with other men’s wives.

Published material on the Irigwe4, and also the mimeographed administrative reports I was able to find, reiterate three aspects of Irigwe social life, namely, the “looseness” of the marriage system, the high incidence of spirit possession among the women, and the large number of Irigwe female “native doctors.” My own field research in Irigwe, carried out between September 1963

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3 See Appendix I: Chart of Irigwe Sections

and June 1965, generally confirms these observations. I am led, however to characterize the rather unusual Irigwe marriage system as mobile rather than loose. Also I have reason to believe that this mobility of marriage and the high incidence of both women’s possession and woman “native doctors” are closely interrelated phenomena.

There are two basic types of Irigwe marriage. One type, arranged by the parents of the couple prior to their adolescence, is known by the men as *fo’wena* ‘taking a girl,’ band by the women as *nynira* ‘a from-to.’ The other type, initiated usually by the couple themselves, is called *fo mbru* ‘taking a woman or wife’ by the men and *vwevwe* ‘sing-sing’ by the women. I shall simply call the former type “primary marriage” since it usually starts a couple’s conjugal career, and the latter “secondary marriage”5.

Arrangements for primary marriage are initiated by the boy’s family usually when he is still very young or even an infant. The father of the young son may approach a friend who has a daughter about the same age and ask if he and the girl’s mother are willing for the girl to become engaged to his son (*á kwē  wēna*, they become engaged). If they both give their assent the boy’s father sends the girl’s family a white hen for her mother and an iron bracelet (*angrá*) for the girl. Occasionally a new calabash is presented instead of the white hen, and in recent years the substitution of a small cash payment has been coming into favor. Sometimes a boy’s mother or grandmother may initiate the marriage plans. I know one case where the boy’s paternal grandmother arranged for his engagement to the granddaughter of one of her co wives (a granddaughter by one of the co wife’s other husbands, it should be noted). A boy’s family may contract more than one primary marriage for him, but usually only one such arrangement is made for each son. Although a girl is never engaged for primary marriage to more than one boy, it is common (and held to her credit) for a popular girl as she reaches puberty to become engaged for secondary marriages to several other men even prior to the consummation of her primary marriage.

When the boy is old enough to do a good day’s hoeing in the fields, and when the girl’s breasts are beginning to grow, the boy’s father visits the girl’s father and is shown fields for his son to prepare for planting. Early the next planting season the boy with the help of perhaps a dozen of his lineage brothers does about twenty-four man-days of work on the fields assigned by his father-in-law-elect. A great deal of the annual preplanting field preparation is carried out by these work bees of youths and young men of the same lineage helping with the bride-service of their younger members. Usually after three or four years of farm service, but never before the girl is well into puberty, the marriage is consummated by her taking up residence with her espoused in his father’s compound. Sometimes the marriage is consummated before the boy has reached puberty; I am well acquainted with two such cases. After this no further work is due the father-in-law. Since primary marriages

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5 Here I am following the terminology used by M. G. Smith, (Smith, M. G., Secondary marriage in northern Nigeria. Africa 23, 1953: pp. 298-323).
are characteristically arranged between families that are distant agnates or between families linked by friendship (ne ūrì) it is important to the girl’s patr kin that the marriage be consummated without mishap. An Igwe girl after she reaches puberty may feel inclined to defy parental authority and go to live with one of her secondary marriage suitors even before she has consummated her primary marriage (secondary suitors have inevitably attained puberty); thus a prudent father hesitates to postpone his daughter’s primary marriage much after she reaches puberty even though additional years of farm labor are at stake. A girl’s mother, on the other hand, free from many of her husband’s pressures of family or friendship, may counsel her to drag her feet a bit and postpone leaving home at least until her primary fiancé has grown up a bit. A mother’s control over her children, both male and female, is reinforced by the Igwe belief that the matrikin, that is the mother and her patrilineage (né tekwe), are the best source of aid in case of illness or any other mishap, and a child learns early to heed the counsel of his mother and her agnates. Thus although the mother lacks formalized rights of control in the matter, it is often she who decides when her daughter should take up residence with her primary husband; indeed a substantial gift in cash or kind from the boy’s family to the mother usually shortly precedes a girl’s consummating her primary marriage. It should be noted that in those cases where a girl takes matters into her own hand and goes to a secondary suitor first, she inevitable feels obligated minimally to fulfill her parents’ primary marriage commitments by later taking up residence with her primary husband for at least several weeks.

The initiative in arranging a secondary marriage, in contrast to primary marriage, is taken by the suitor himself. He generally uses a male friend as a go-between when first sounding out a girl (or woman), and she may either refuse or encourage his overtures. If encouraged the suitor must seek out her father (or marriage guardian) to ask for his consent. The father usually agrees after checking with his daughter unless he finds the union would be prohibited by custom, that is unless it would violate an Igwe rule of incest or exogamy.

Primary and secondary marriages are prohibited between lineage-mates, between cognates with a common great-grandparent, and between persons born in the same compound regardless of kinship. Marriages into one’s mother’s compound and marriages by a man (and by another man from his compound) with more than one daughter of a compound are also prohibited; also men from the same section may never marry the same woman so long as both men are alive; nor may a man marry a widow of his own lineage until she has first gone to marry a new husband of another lineage. The section is not an exogamous unit, and primary marriages in particular are often contracted between distant agnates as well as between other distant consanguines.

Secondary marriage suitors cannot be members of her living husbands’ or husbands-elect’s sections. As Igwe men put it, “You can take a girl (wena) but never a wife (mbru) from your own section.” In addition a man cannot take a wife from his mother’s section or his mother’s mother’s natal compound, that is he cannot contract a secondary marriage with a woman who is already married to these categories of his kinsmen.
Secondary marriage arrangements are, by Irigwe custom, formally concluded and become binding when the suitor makes a marriage payment to the father or marriage guardian; the amount of the payment is generally thirty to forty shillings cash. After that the girl's committed to leave her prior husband and spend a night with her new secondary husband at his compound. Usually she does this within several months’ time. Unless, however, the girl’s mother also favors the union and, as with primary marriage, has been given a gift of perhaps ten shillings, the girl can be expected to postpone going to the secondary husband indefinitely. After an Irigwe father has granted permission and received marriage payment for two or three of his daughter’s secondary marriages, it is usual for him to select one of his lineage brothers to be her marriage guardian (bae bi nva) and oversee and receive payment for her future secondary marriages.

When a woman goes to a secondary husband she leaves behind everything except the clothes and jewelry she is wearing. (Occasionally an older woman will take one or more of her younger children with her.) Generally her prior husband fetches her back the morning after she has forsaken him for a secondary husband. On a subsequent visit, however, the woman may choose to stay and take up residence with her new husband. The husband receiving her must be prepared to supply her with a hut and everything she needs for housekeeping if he expects her to stay more than a night. If a woman stays with a husband from planting time on through the harvest season he can be counted on to give her grain for her dry season cooking needs and her own small granary to store it in. Young girls who have just consummated their primary marriages go off to their secondary husbands any season, although they favor the hunting and early planting seasons when drumming and dancing are allowed. But once a woman has stayed with a man long enough for him to have given her a granary and grain, she seldom leaves him for a secondary husband before the beginning of another farming season when she has already used up the grain.

At dawn after a man has received a new secondary wife the women of his compound announce the fact with shrill ululations. Before long the prior husband, or one of his brothers, show sup to call her back. She then promptly returns to her prior husband’s compound, accompanied by a stream of ululating girls if she herself is still a young girl. The prior husband tarries at the wife-taker’s compound to drink his fill of the beer that custom demands must be offered him. It is considered bad manners for a prior spouse to sulk or give direct expression to his annoyance at this time, but he never misses a chance to criticize the quality of their beer, while at the same time encouraging lots of people from his own compound to follow him there to drink up as much as possible. Later in the day the girls from the wife-taker’s compound, if the wife has come to him for the first time, announce his success by begging pennies at the compounds of his friends and from others of his section.

A woman is not obliged to sleep with a secondary spouse for more than one night, and she must return to her prior husband when he comes for her. But her reputation will suffer and she may incur the wrath of her father or marriage guardian if she isn’t willing to go to the secondary husband two or three times. She probably won’t go to him a fourth time, however, unless she has
decided to shift her residence from her prior husband to his; at that juncture the prior husband usually doesn’t bother to call her home to him any more. In any case the prior husband isn’t served beer by the secondary husband except the first time he calls her back. The traditional Irigwe marriage system has no divorce. A woman’s prior marriages are never formally terminated by her switching residence to another spouse; she may return to any of her spouses at any time and usually finds herself welcomed back and given a hut and everything else she needs for housekeeping.

In order to be a real success at the secondary marriage game a man needs to have two or three reliable friends outside his own section who, being able to move freely and partake of festivities in compounds where he would be suspect, can sound out possible secondary marriage alliances, carry messages for him, and the like. The *quid pro quo* of such friendships is to give reciprocal aid in courtship and never to take wives from each other’s compounds. Friends may, however, marry daughters from each other’s compounds. Women, for their part, depend heavily upon their co-wives, including their husbands’ siblings’ wives, when planning and carrying out secondary alliances. Indeed the Irigwe word *uri* means just two things: “a man's friend,” as described above, and “co-wife.” Two people calling each other *uri* (both two men who are friends and co-wives) often in later life further consolidate their relationship by arranging for a primary marriage between each other’s children or grandchildren. Exogamy rules, however, strictly circumscribe the opportunities for arranging such a primary marriage.

Irigwe men have much to gain and relatively little to lose by contracting many marriages. The initial expenses of procuring a wife are offset probably within a year by her domestic and agricultural labor if she can be induced to stay that long. It will be seen later, however, that keeping a wife resident for a number of years is generally quite expensive for the husband. A man receives a lot of kudos from others in his compound and section and from his friends for taking many wives, especially if he can also keep a number of wives resident at the same time. When a wife leaves him for another husband both the example and counsel of his section peers exhort him to cool his anger, be civil towards her other husband so as not to annoy her, promptly call her back, and seek further to regain face by endeavoring to marry someone else’s wife. From the husband's point of view every new marriage means minimally another woman who will cohabit with him, always at his own compound, for at least two or three nights, and who may settle with him more or less permanently and bear him children.

An Irigwe woman, as mentioned earlier, always has the right to refuse any secondary marriage proposal prior to the marriage payment from the suitor to her father or marriage guardian. She is never able, however, to contract a marriage without her father’s or marriage guardian’s consent; few Irigwe women will risk the epithet of *mbrinjê* (promiscuous woman), and the accompanying loss of further desirability as a wife that sexual relations without this paternal permission quickly brings. A woman always has someone in her lineage who has the inalienable right to bestow her as a legitimate sexual partner; if her father and the marriage guardian he chose
for her both die, her lineage selects another marriage guardian for her. A father or marriage guardian, of course, never grants exclusive sexual access to this marriage ward; since there is no divorce a husband competes with his wife’s other husbands, both present and future, for her sexual favors.

A husband also, in effect, competes with a wife’s other husbands for the paternity of the children she bears. In contrast to the rights of bestowal of sexual access, which remain always with the woman’s father, his appointee, or his lineage heirs, the father surrenders all control over rights in geneticam early in a woman’s marriage career, at a ceremony called sa tese (literally, “putting outside”) usually held about the sixth month of her first pregnancy. Thenceforth the question of paternity is settled and legally confirmed by the actions of the woman and her spouses. It may be adjudicated by the Irigwe elders, and sometimes today by the District Court, but this is seldom necessary. A child’s paternity is usually bestowed without contention upon whichever husband the mother was residing with when she was pregnant and when she bore the child. A woman seldom shifts to another husband while she is pregnant. If it turns out a wife went to another husband about the time she conceived, the prior husband’s paternal rights to the child are not disputed provided he called the wife back to him promptly, and provided he took responsibility for the baby’s infancy rites. The infant’s permanent section affiliation is the same as the pater’s, that is, it is reckoned agnatically.

When a wife makes it clear that she is shifting her residence to another husband, the husband she is leaving generally asserts his right to keep all the children she bore him except for those under three or four years of age whose return he may later demand, and then he puts out the welcome mat for her return. Wives come and wives go, but a man lives on in the familiar surroundings at his ancestral home with the company of his sons and unmarried daughters. In his old age he is supported by his sons and cooked for by their wives if he has no resident wives of his own, while he turns his energies to ritual and judicial affairs that include looking after the marriages of his daughters and/or marriage wards.

All older Irigwe women have had a plurality of husbands. In a complete census I took of five compounds, totaling over 250 people, every girl pubescent or older had had a primary marriage arranged for her; all women past their teens had at least one secondary spouse, and most had had two or more; fully half of the women middle aged or over had borne children for two or more husbands. A girl’s primary marriage is merely her marital debut whence she usually leaps into a round of secondary alliances, gaining thereby not only the excitement and pleasures these afford, but also the admiration of both peers and parents. Fathers are pleased and proud to have a daughter who has four or more secondary marriages to her credit, and co wives admire such a woman. Some young women, however, soon become very attached to one or another secondary - or even their primary - spouse and go on to take other husbands only to avoid annoying their father or marriage.

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guardian; for it is believed that a father’s annoyance, even unexpressed, may lead to his daughter’s barrenness, illness, or even to the illness of her children.

It is usual for a woman to settle down for a relatively protracted period with a husband for whom she has borne a child or two. Sooner or later, however, she almost inevitable moves either back to an old or on to a new husband. Often she is prompted to do so by a diviner’s diagnosis that her own health or that of one of her children needs the change. The Irigwe consider it a prime duty of both parents to go visit any of their children who have fallen seriously ill and then to stay on until the child’s health improves or until the funeral. In this society about half of the infants healthy at birth die from illness before their sixth birthday. Thus sometimes her own health, but more frequently the health of her children, becomes a prime factor sometimes in abetting and other times in inhibiting a mother’s marriage mobility. “Spoiled stomach” (owie ‘dzio) is the Irigwe idiom generally used to denote grief, including homesickness and bereavement. On several occasions I saw just that literally occur to a child upon the departure of the mother for another husband, and once I saw the child get sick enough so that the mother postponed her planned shift of residence.

The Irigwe have a belief they use as the basis of a sort of litmus paper test to whether or not a man should consider taking any particular woman as his secondary wife. The belief is that if a man who is ill or injured is visited or aided by a man with whom he has shared a woman’s favors (if, for example, he is visited by a co husband) he will take a sudden turn for the worse and probably die. This belief enjoins men to be particularly sure they know all a woman’s husbands before taking her in secondary marriage, so they can avoid inadvertently becoming the co husband of anyone such as a friend or section-brother with whom casual and friendly relations are desired or ritually prescribed. It also leads a prudent man to choose his hunting partners with care; and whenever he is hunting with people from other sections he feels it wise to seek out a “friend” or close uterine kinsman to stay nearby and lend him assistance if he should accidentally be injured. It will be recalled that it is both rude and poor strategy to express hostility openly towards a man who married your wife. Thus it is not surprising to have had the belief arise that co husbands are dangerous to have around in times of illness.

Open accusations of witchcraft or sorcery in Irigwe, although they occur, are rare, and I have no cases of their arising between rivals for a woman. On the other hand, fights between hunters over division of game, especially between men of different sections and rivals for the same women, are very common and resultant bodily injury occurs all to frequently. I never, however, was able to uncover an example of intratribal homicide in Irigwe, and elders claim that there was no traditional compensation, retribution, or punishment for murder or homicide within the tribe. There are strong sanctions, mostly ritual in nature, militating against a section’s bifurcating. Elders, however, can recall several instances of this happening within the last sixty or seventy years. Sometimes a dispute over the division of game was cited as the cause of the split, and in other instances a man’s taking a wife of a member of another lineage of his own section was put forth as the start of the
division; all agreed, however, that the taking of wives of section members of other lineages confirmed the splits even where they did not initiate them.

Irigwe is a segmentary society that brings its own refinement to the use of marriage as a social mechanism for establishing ties between segments. In many segmentary societies in Africa cross-cutting ties are forged by “marrying your enemies,” i.e., by marrying the daughters of outsider clans. The Irigwe system, however, serves directly to reinforce intrasegment solidarity while also forging intersegment links. The Irigwe marry their friends and distant kinsmen in primary marriage, and then they marry their enemy’s wives in secondary marriage, with most of the secondary marriages being between partners from different sections.

Often in her old age a woman returns to live her last days in a compound where she has a grown son. If she is without surviving sons, she may choose so spend her declining years either with one of her surviving spouses, to contract a new marriage with an elderly man, or to return to her paternal compound “to retire.” An Irigwe woman takes an active, but not central, role in the mortuary rites of her husband if she is resident with him when he dies, and vice versa, but within a month she moves from her deceased husband’s compound back to her paternal home whence she later may be married to a new husband of another section. Irigwe spouses are never buried in the same grave, indeed they even fear going near the graves of their deceased spouses.

Irigwe old men are prone to wax both sentimental and possessive about the daughters of their section; I remember overhearing an audible reverie of some old men basking on a rock in the evening sun, about “those wonderful daughters of our section, all of them belonging to us, all of them!” An Irigwe section may lose daughters’ children to other sections, but they always retain the right to bestow each of their daughters in marriage again and again. And when a woman dies, the husband or son she was resident with may choose to bury her in a crypt of his lineage, but her lineage of birth can always intervene and demand the body back if they feel the burial arrangements are in any way unsatisfactory. It would seem that Irigwe men draw an intense satisfaction from holding veto power over the whereabouts of their daughters, a veto that contrasts greatly to a man’s limited power to keep a wife with him, and to a child’s inability to hold onto his mother (except by getting sick).

As my fieldwork in Irigwe progressed I grew more and more troubled about Irigwe marriage because I couldn’t see how women, not to mention the children, could stand a life that was such an interminable succession of separation experiences. Irigwe men, of course, must also endure frequent separations, first as children from one or another parent and extended family group and then as adults from a succession of wives, sometimes parting temporarily, sometimes permanently. As adults, however, Irigwe men may derive whatever solace can be drawn from remaining resident in their paternal compound, from regular participation in their compound’s and their section’s yearly cycle of economics, and from leading their daily lives always with the same core of male patrikinsmen. Irigwe women, in contrast, must not only endure frequent separation from one or another of their husbands and children but must also experience concomitant changes
of residence and of women with whom to pass their work-a-day lives. From my earliest weeks in Irigwe I frequently attended women’s possession dances and saw women cry, speak in tongues, and flail about after the frenetic drumming, dancing, singing, and rattling leg irons had induced a dissociated state in them. From my census I found that over ninety-five percent of the women past their middle twenties felt themselves to be afflicted with troublesome spirits they call rije, which if not brought out and assuaged from time to time cause illness. In contrast less than two percent of the men were so afflicted. It wasn’t until over a year of fieldwork had passed, however, and I saw a woman whom I had come to know well in the agony of a sudden and protracted state of dissociation, “struck,” as they say, by her rije, that I made the connection between the Irigwe marriage-go-round and women’s possession.

Two aspects of this woman’s seizure led to my new insight. First, her behavior was in such striking contrast to her usual gay and confident manner. Normally she was the most self-possessed and affable of three young resident wives of a widely liked young man who was generally viewed as a model husband. She had borne him one child then about three years old. Her co wives had noticed that she has been moody since she had had a miscarriage about a month before, and then suddenly she had been overcome while making beer. Possession specialists, both male and female, were immediately called in, and by the time I arrived on the scene they and perhaps a dozen members of the compound were trying to humor and calm her as she lay sobbing and groveling on the floor of her hut. It was fully two hours before she calmed down, quite exhausted by then, and was able even to recognize her own child. The second aspect was the nature of the seizure itself. Her flailing about while possessed, her barely coherent demands for this and that emitted between heart-rending wails, reminded me all too forcefully of two- and three-year old children I had seen in my own culture reacting to one or another major frustration. In contrast, silence, listlessness, and quite often “spoiled stomach” are Irigwe toddlers’ characteristic responses to a severe frustration or trauma such as the departure of the mother. Irigwe children learn very early to suppress, indeed to repress the felt need for violent emotional outbursts. They find that tantrums usually bring tongue-lashings and abrupt shooings from their elders, whereas in contrast the silent and wan or the clearly ill child is endlessly snuggled and whispered words of affection and reassurance. Thus it appears that only under the cultural guise of being possessed by rije may Irigwe usually give vent without castigation to their repressed feeling of anguish arising from their repeated separations from loved ones, separations first occurring in infancy and childhood, and later a major aspect of married life, especially the married life of women.

Subsequent systematic inquiries revealed that instances such as the one just described are very common. When a woman is first struck down by her rije the people on hand call in an expert diagnostician who quickly establishes which of several varieties of rije have afflicted her. The diagnostician then blames the presence of the rije for some recent disaster in the patient’s life such as a miscarriage or illness. After the woman has recovered from this initial attack she must seek treatment at a compound “owning her rije,” that is, owning the medicine and ritual to control them.
There she is inevitably advised that if she ever wants to escape the ill effects, and in time perhaps gain control, of the *rije* that have come to reside in her she should as soon as possible have a major ceremonial held for her called *nyi rije* (“making rije”). The *nyi rije* ceremonial is very expensive. All the patient’s paternal and maternal kin, and all of the kinsmen of the husband with whom she resides must be invited and served beer. Also a hundred shillings or more worth of grain must be supplied as payment to female ritual practitioners of the compound owning the *rije*, and additional grain must be given to elder women of other compounds also possessed by that type of *rije* who come to help preside. The services of perhaps a dozen possession drummers and singers (always men) must be paid for. Finally, and most costly of all, the practitioners, interpreting the babblings of the possessed women, inevitably assert that the *rije* possessing the patient demands cloth, lots of expensive cloth, some of which must be given to the patient prior to the ceremony, and some afterwards, to assure its effectiveness. Usually it takes an Irigwe husband a number of months, or even a year or more, to raise the capital and finish arrangements of one of these ceremonials. And that’s generally not the end of it. Most women need repeat ceremonials every several years to keep their *rije* under control. Happily *rije* can be “placed” (*sa rije*), that is pacified temporarily, by holding relatively simple and inexpensive all night possession dances requiring only the services of one or two drummer-singers whom the women can find money to reimburse themselves. In the case of the big *nui rije* ceremonials, however, most women are dependent on the larger resources available only to the men folk. A wife will, if necessary, keep leaving one husband for another until she finds now willing and able to hold a *nyi rije* ceremonial for her. A husband soon develops a reputation among womenfolk as stingy or generous in such matters, a reputation that strongly affects his subsequent success in marrying wives and holding them resident.

A woman in middle age may develop skill in calling forth her *rije* (*hurae rije* ) and becoming possessed by them at will. She will then be sought after to help preside at *nyi rije* ceremonials and novices afflicted with her kind of *rije*, and she will receive payment for her services. Some older women learn to call and utilize their *rije* as a source of divinatory and curing power; a few build up a large clientele of patients and even become independently wealthy through fees received for their services. Thus it would seem that many years later and in a displaced and disguised form a woman may receive substantial compensation for the psychic stresses she has suffered from workings of the Irigwe marriage-go-round.

The Irigwe language is replete with ambiguities, and puns are a favorite form of Irigwe humor. The expression *nje na ridae* me and “I am going courting,” i.e., looking for a secondary wife. But it also means “I am going home to mother.” Never sure whether I’d miss a subtle phonemic distinction or a crucial toneme, I asked again and again about this ambiguity, and usually for an answer I got a laugh followed either by a shrug, or a terse retort, “It’s the same thing.” Thus in closing may I suggest that it is a meaningful metaphor to speak of an Irigwe man’s life and loves in large measure as a continuing quest for his wandering mother? Bearing in mind the part of the Red Earth origin myth where the Red Earth section followed a son section to its present locale
in Nyango, and also that a son’s compound is indeed the favorite place for a woman’s “retirement” in old age, is it not fair also to say that an Irigwe woman’s life can be viewed as an ongoing quest for her son?

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APPENDICES

I
III

Irigwe/Rigwe Countryside
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IV

Walter H. Sangree’s

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