

Study Session 5

NIGERIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE



5.0 Introduction

In this session, we will examine important issues about Nigerian cultural heritage, the meaning of cultural heritage, some aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage and their relevance.



Learning Outcomes for Study Session 5

After you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 5.1 Define cultural heritage (SAQ 1)
- 5.2 Discuss different aspects of Nigerian marriage heritage (SAQ 2)
- 5.3 Identify different types of Nigerian naming ceremonies (SAQ 3)
- 5.4 Appreciate different Nigerian funeral ceremonies (SAQ 4)
- 5.5 Highlight Nigerian cultural heritage of abominations and sacrileges (SAQ 5)

5.1 Meaning of Cultural Heritage

You will observe that cultural heritage implies the aspects of the culture or the way of life of a people that are passed from one generation to another. It is a major aspect of the history and culture of communities across the world.

5.2 Aspects of Marriage Heritage

You will note that marriage is very important among Nigerian communities. An unmarried person of either sex is treated as an object of derision except in some unusual situations. Besides, among many Nigerian communities, childlessness is treated or seen as a calamity. This makes marriage an indispensable part of culture in Nigeria.

We must emphasise that many Nigerian communities follow similar processes in marriage, yet there are differences. In all Nigerian communities, marriage begins with the finding of the bride, introduction to her family, payment of the bride price and the traditional marriage. In all these processes, there are differences among different groups.

Marriage among the Yoruba

You will note that the five stages followed in marriage by most Nigerian groups apply also to the Yoruba. These steps are: the *Ifojusode*, that is, the process of searching for a good wife

material. This normally involves investigation into the background of the prospective wife to ensure that there are no problems or hereditary ailments in the family of the woman. The second stage, the *Alarina* involves bringing in a mediating agent (usually, a woman, but may also be a man) who would mediate between the suitor and the intending bride by introducing them to each other. The third stage is the *Iyojusile* which involves the introduction of the members of the two families. During this period, the consent of the girl and her parents is obtained. The fourth stage is the *Idana*, when the bride price is paid to the girl's family. The issue of bride price varies. In some areas, it is negotiated or fixed but the amount is generally small. Different symbolic items are normally presented to the girl's family as part of the *Idana*. These items include: *Oyin* (honey), *obi* (kola nut), *ireke* (sugar cane), *ataare* (alligator pepper) and *epo* (palm oil).

During the ceremony, a senior member of the girl's family would pray for the couple with the items listed above. The sugar and honey symbolize happiness in marriage; the kola for the couple's protection against sickness; the alligator pepper for them to have many children; and the palm oil for resilience in their marriage. After these, the bride would be escorted to her husband's house by her kin amidst singing and gaiety. In all these stages, the bride's family would entertain the groom's family, friends and visitors.

Marriage among the Akoko Edo

We will now look at marriage among the Akoko Edo which is similar to marriage among the Yoruba and the Edo. The major difference is that among the Yoruba, if the consent of the bride's family is not obtained, the marriage would not take place. If the girl does not agree to the union, the marriage would not take place. In the case of the Akoko Edo, the situation is different. If the parent of the girl do not agree, the girl could be abducted by the intending groom. If her father does not agree and the mother agrees, the mother would aid or assist in the abduction. The intending husband and the mother-in-law would agree on a date. That day, the mother would send the girl to the market or to the stream while the would-be husband would arrange with four hefty men, who would wait for her on the way to the stream or market and carry her with speed to the intending husband's house. The following day, the mother would cook and send food to her daughter. Once she has spent a day in the man's house, marriage is deemed to have taken place and the husband would pay the requirements at his convenience. This practice also takes place among the Edo people. If the girl refuses to go to her husband, she could be captured after her husband has paid a special dowry.

Marriage among the Igbo

You need to know that the choice of a wife is a very crucial issue in marriage among the Igbo. Importantly, the family of the prospective groom makes enquires through trusted friends about the background of the prospective bride and her family. If they are satisfied with her family background, they would then organize visits to the girl's home. The girl would be asked if she has any objections. If she has none, both parties would start negotiating the bride price and other customary things to do. During the second stage, both families would meet in the girl's family home and the young man's family would bring kola nut and palm wine. During the course of discussion, the girl's family would summon the bride and give her a cup of palm wine to identify her husband among the crowd. She would take the cup of palm wine from her father and kneel down and give it to her husband. That signifies her consent to marry the man.

You will note that the third stage is the payment of the bride price. This is crucial in all Igbo marriage systems. If the bride price is not paid, any offspring from such a union would belong to the family of the girl. Once the bride price is paid, the marriage process is concluded.

The fourth step in the marriage process is the traditional marriage called *Igba Nkwu* in some parts of Igbo land. On that day, the girl would be beautifully dressed. Family, friends and well wishers would bring her gifts. She would kneel down before her father or the most senior member of her family for prayer and blessing. This would be followed by her departure to her husband's house. The departure is usually emotional as the bride cries all the way. All her age mates would accompany her to her husband's house amidst singing. At her husband's house, the age mates would receive gifts and finally leave the couple alone.

We must emphasise that during the pre-colonial period, as soon as the young lady came to her husband's house, she would be made to reveal all those with whom she had any intimate relationship since her betrothal. She would make such confessions before the senior daughters of the village, who would assemble for such a purpose, holding a fowl before the family god. The fowl was later killed for cleansing. At this period chastity before marriage was highly valued, but now things have changed.

Marriage among the Fulani

There are two groups among the Fulani – the town Fulani and the cattle Fulani. Marriage was and still is a rigorous process among the Fulani. A young man that has reached a marriageable age must pass the manhood test called *sharo*. The people would assemble in a market place and the young man would declare that he was old enough to marry. Suddenly, a challenger

would appear brandishing a leather whip. He would bring the whip down across the back of the prospective groom with force. There would be a burning sensation, but the victim would not show any sign of pain. If he does, the marriage would not take place. If he endures, everybody would dance and go home for a prospective husband has emerged. Also all the young ladies, the prospective wives, would gather at the venue to watch the event.

We must emphasise that after the young man had gone through the process for the choice of a wife, another rigorous process would start. This involves scrutinizing the character of the would-be-bride. She must be hard-working and be able to run the home during the long absence of her husband. After the choice, the bride price would be negotiated and paid in cattle, dresses and other items. The prospective husband would fill a box with dresses for the new bride. After this, the bride would go to her husband's house

You will note that the final test of the Fulani marriage is chastity before marriage. On the first night of the marriage, a white sheet would be spread on the bed. If it is stained with blood, the bride and her family would be highly respected, for that implies that the lady was not defiled before marriage.

Marriage among the Edo

You will observe that marriage among the Edo is in some ways similar to marriage among the Yoruba and the Igbo, though there are variations. Marriage begins with the search for a wife, then betrothal, and payment of bride price. There is also the circumcision of the girl and subsequent integration into her husband's family.

Another point you will note is that the search for a suitable bride is usually done by parents of the boy who would contact the parents of a girl of their choice, even if she is a minor. Should she refuse to go through the marriage process, a special present called *Ugbo Ogba* or the strong foot would be given to her father or brother to persuade her to go through the marriage process. If she still refuses after the father has accepted this offer, the father would permit the other family to arrange and capture her.

If the boy finds the girl himself, the normal process of inquiry would take place. If the family of the young man are satisfied with their findings, a formal contact with the girl's family would be established. Then, the bride price would be paid and the marriage concluded.

We must emphasise that after this process, circumcision takes place and the girl is joined to her husband and would go to him. The family of the boy would slaughter a goat and the blood

collected. The couple would stand and hold hands at the entrance of the house with each foot on the door step. They would dip their big toes into the blood of the goat as prayers are said for their marital journey. The man would give his father-in-law money to buy a goat to be used to offer sacrifices to the ancestors to bless the marriage. On the seventh day, the girl would visit her husband's ancestral shrine with kola and wine. She would be made to confess any relationship she had with any man since her betrothal. In some Edo communities, the new wife would be sent back to her family at conception and she would remain there till delivery. Then, her husband would present oil and fish and take her back.

Marriage among the Ibibio

We begin this discussion by noting that like many other Nigerian communities, marriage among the Ibibio begins with the search for the bride and once she is found, the young man would send an intermediary to the father of the girl. If he agrees, the young man would visit the family of the girl and render various kinds of service during the courtship. After this, the bride price would be negotiated and paid.

You will note that after the payment of the bride price, fattening begins. This marks the passage from girlhood to womanhood and qualifies the lady to marry. During the period of fattening, the girl is also circumcised. Thirty days after fattening, the young woman would emerge from her confinement and join the company of adult women. She would be presented with gifts, cash, cooking utensils and thereafter, she joins her husband.

Another point you must know is that marriage also varies among the Ibibio. In Ikot Oku Nsit, if a man wishes to marry from a particular family and could not find a grown up girl, he could approach a pregnant woman from that family and draw a circle with a white chalk on her belly. Should a baby girl be born, a piece of raffia would be tied to the baby's hand signifying the choice of the girl as a marriage partner.

Marriage among the Efik

Let us explore marriage ceremony among the Efik. Marriage among the Efik begins with the search for the bride. Once she is found, the process of meeting the family, the negotiation and payment of bride price takes place. After all these, fattening commences. As soon as fattening ends, the bride would go to her husband.

We must emphasise that the Efik of James Town have a more elaborate fattening process done in two phases. The girls are circumcised between the ages of five and seventeen before going

for fattening. The fattening would last for one year. During this period, fresh palm leaves are tied over the door where the young girl resides to prevent wicked water spirit *Ndem* from entering. During the period of fattening, the girl is thoroughly massaged all over her body to improve its texture.

You will note also that the second period of fattening brings the lady into womanhood. It would last up to five years depending on the wealth of the future husband or the family. After this, the bride price is paid and she would go with her husband.

Marriage among the Igala

Our next focus is on marriage among the Igala, which is similar to the marriage culture of some other Nigerian communities. It begins with the search for the bride. When she is found, there would be an introduction to the family of the girl. Thereafter, there is the negotiation of the bride price. When these are done, marriage is concluded.

You will note that there is a variation in the Igala marriage system. Among the Nigerian communities, it is the family of the girl that entertains the in-laws, friends and well wishers, even though it might be sponsored by the husband. Among the Igala, it is the family of the man that entertains everybody. They bring all necessary things from firewood, food items, plates, cups and spoons to the bride's family. They also bring those who cook and served the food. The girl's family would only look on and be served like other visitors and never render any assistance.

You will note also that during the feasting, the bride would disappear and her husband would organize a search party to look for her. After a rigorous search, they would find her and her mates and friends would demand a certain amount which the husband must pay. Her friends also check if the items presented by her husband are complete. If not, they would wait until it is completed. Thereafter, the bride would leave with her husband.

Marriage among the Urhobo

We will now discuss marriage among the Urhobo, which is similar to the marriage culture of the Bini though there are slight differences. You will note that in the Urhobo system, marriage is linked with the spirit world. After the traditional marriage has been performed, the girl's family would take her to the ancestral shrines to lift her spiritually, ask for blessings on her behalf and cut off any ancestral link she might have had. As soon as she arrives her husband's house, she would be taken to the ancestral shrine of her husband's family to pray for blessing,

protection, and guidance. This hand over to the ancestral spirits resembled that of the Benin. Unlike the Benin system, the bride in the Urhobo system undergoes circumcision in the seventh month of her first pregnancy.

Marriage among the Tiv

Another notable marriage to discuss is among the Tiv. This usually begins with the search for the wife as is done in other parts of Nigeria. After finding the wife, formal introduction to the family takes place. We must emphasise that unlike other parts of Nigeria, the bride price is never discussed in terms of cash, because according to them, the lady is not being sold. The amount to be paid is determined by the quantity of broom sticks agreed upon. Each broom stick represents a specified amount of money to be paid. The payment of the bride price is not completed at once.

We must emphasise that in situations where the young man cannot meet the requirements of the girl's family, the man could capture the lady without recourse to the family. After some days, the family of the boy would go to the girl's family and beg for acceptance. But the young man marrying the girl would not go in person to the girl's family for fear of attack. Once the girl has stayed a day in the house of the young man, marriage is deemed to have taken place.

You will also note that there is also bride exchange among the Tiv, which is not practiced among other Nigerian communities. Families with grown up daughters and sons could exchange their daughters in marriage. A young man with a mature sister could exchange her for another girl.

We will emphasise that the Tiv also cherish chastity before marriage. If a girl is not found to be a virgin at the time of marriage, the husband would send a special message to her family. He would buy a small block of moulded salt, make a hole in it and send it to the family of the girl or he could use a piece of cloth and cut a hole at the centre and send it to the family of the girl. That shows that their daughter was not a virgin before marriage. It would be a great shame to the family and a loss. If the girl is a virgin, the husband would buy a goat and send it to the mother-in-law, who would invite all the women in the community and slaughter the goat with great rejoicing. In situations where the family of the girl does not want the shame from their daughter's action, they would buy the goat themselves and invite the people as if their daughter was a virgin.

5.3 Naming Ceremonies

We will begin the discussion on naming ceremonies by saying that child birth brings joy and happiness, not only to the parents of the child but to family and friends. If child birth occurs under certain circumstances, it could be given different interpretations. Among the Ibibio, if a child is born at night, any appearance of a shadow from the moon is interpreted as a bad omen.

We must emphasise that among the Ibibio, naming follows immediately after birth. The choice of names is governed by the order of birth and other circumstances at the time of birth. The names could also relate to other members of the society. The first son is usually named *Akpan*, the first daughter *Adieba*, the second son *Udoh*, the second daughter *Unwa*, the third son *Ufot* and the third daughter *Udunwan* while twins are named *Mfon*.

Naming Ceremony among the Igbo

We will note that naming ceremony among the Igbo takes place on the eighth day. Circumcision is performed on the baby between the third and the eighth day. The privilege of naming a child is reserved for the eldest man in the compound. Two or more names could be given to a child at once. Most Igbo names begin with *Nwa* and often followed by the market day depending on when the child was born. *Nwa* means son or child and could be followed by a market day—*Nwaeke*, *Nwaafor*, *Nwaorie* depending on when the child was born. The naming of a child could be according to the order of birth. The first son is named *Okpara*, the first daughter *Ada* while the last daughter is named *Ulu*. In some families, the second child could be named *Ulu*. In most communities, *chi* referring to God is used for names – *Chi-gozie*, God blesses, *Chi-nyere* God has given, *Chi-emeka*, God has done well.

Naming Ceremony among the Yoruba

You will note that naming among the Yoruba is similar to naming among other Nigerian communities. Traditionally, naming takes place on the seventh day for a baby girl and the ninth day for a baby boy. However, as a result of modernization, naming ceremony for both sexes is now fixed for the eighth day after the birth of the baby. A child could be named based on the peculiar circumstances of the birth. A child could be named to reflect the parents' desire for the re-incarnation of a departed parent or family member. Thus, the Yorubas have such names as *Babatunde*, *Babawale*, *Babajide* (*My father returns*), *Iyabode*, *Yejide*, *Yetunde* (*My mother returns*), etc. A child could also be named after the gods or deities, such as *Ogunsanya*, *Ogunyinka*, *Ogunsiji*, *Ogunmola*, *Sangosanya*, *Sangodele*, *Oyafunke*, *Oyawale*, *Fashina*, *Fabunmi*, *Fawole*, *Oshunfunke*, *Oshunkoya*, *Oshuntokun*, *Eshubiyii*, *Eshugbayi*, *Orishabunmi*, *Orishatola*, etc. Names such as these are given by adherents of the different gods

or deities to demonstrate their belief in the gods. In Yoruba land, children may also be named based on peculiar circumstances of their birth or to express the sentiments of the parents regarding certain happenings in the family at the time of the birth. For instance, a child born during festivities will be named *Abiodun*, while a female child born when the parents are financially buoyant may be named *Abiola*, *Mojisola*, *Omobolanle*, *Eniola*, etc. In naming a child such items as honey and kola are offered for prayers.

5.4 Funeral Ceremonies among the Yoruba

We must note that death evokes different reactions among Nigerian communities depending on who died and in what circumstances. In all Nigerian communities, the death of a young person is greatly mourned. In Yoruba land, parents do not see the corpse of their children because children are expected to bury their parents and not the other way round. Death of children is associated with witchcraft and other forms of evil. When a non-titled man dies, the family presents seven pieces of wrapper for his burial. The corpse would be folded with the wrapper but at the time of interment the clothings are removed.

You will note that if a hunter dies, there would be gun shots to announce the death. Other hunters organize general hunting for him and any animal killed would be eaten by the community. His fellow hunters would remove his gun and machetes which he used in hunting as well as dangerous charms. We must emphasise that titled men, war heroes and chiefs are normally given special burial. Women and non- title holders are not expected to come out during such ceremonies. Most of them are buried in their compounds.

Funeral Ceremonies among the Ibibio

You will observe that the Ibibio believe that no child or young man dies without the involvement of either enemies or the spirit world. If a child dies, the body is mutilated to prevent his re-incarnation. If a young woman dies during delivery, it is believed that she did not confess her unfaithfulness and did not disclose the men with whom she committed immorality. The death of a child is ascribed to witchcraft. Only the death of old people is accepted as normal and therefore accompanied by feasting and rejoicing.

We must emphasise that the death of a chief is not announced until the family has made all necessary arrangements. In some areas, the death is never announced until after three months. Among the Akwa Ibom, the death of a chief is announced by beating a drum on top of his house.

You will observe that among the Utit Urian, members of secret societies such as Ekong and Ekpo are buried in special ways. They are dressed and seated on the chair in their sitting rooms. A staff is placed on their right hand and metal drum instruments on their left hand. A member of Ekpo is usually buried with his slaves, and after interment a mask is hung on the side of the grave. Old women are buried with jubilation and elaborate entertainment.

Funeral Ceremonies among the Igbo

We will start this discussion by noting that there are various kinds of burial in Igbo land – the young, the mature adults, heroes and titled men. The death of children is very painful and parents are not expected to bury their children. The death of close relations and husbands is announced with wailing by the women. The body is laid until arrangements are concluded for burial. The death of chiefs is never announced until the family has concluded the arrangements for burial. Guns are fired and cows slaughtered for the burial. In the olden days, a chief was usually buried with his slaves. During the second burial, daughters of the village would go round the market, dancing and displaying evidence of the man's wealth. In the olden days, first daughters were buried in their father's compounds.

You will note that lepers and those who died of small pox were thrown into the evil forest. Those who died of accidents, lunatics or women who died at child birth were hurriedly buried. Those who died by hanging would not be brought down and buried, until members from a particular village "Umuamadi", who worshipped the god of thunder "Amadioha" came and brought the corpse down and buried it.

5.5 Cultural Heritage of Abominations and Sacrileges

You will observe that a number of offences among many Nigerian communities were considered abominations. A married woman committing adultery was seen as an abomination. In Yoruba land, her husband was free to divorce her. Among the Elulu in Isoko, a married woman who committed adultery without confessing would not give birth to children. In Hausa land adultery would lead to immediate divorce. Among the Edo, adultery could lead to the death of children born by the woman or some serious sickness if she does not confess.

We must emphasise that stealing was considered an abomination among some Nigerian communities. Among the Isoko, the thief had to replace all stolen items and bring yam, local and other items to the community. Among the Igbo, stealing of yam was a serious crime and the thief could die for it.

You will note that in all Nigerian communities, incest is a great sacrilege and different methods are used to deal with the offender so as to discourage the crime.

You will observe that traditionally, among the Ibibio, the mothers of twins were not allowed to step into certain streams or rivers. Among the Igbo, it was an abomination for wives in a polygamous families to give birth the same day. Among the Ibibio, if a crow flew across the roof of the house of a sick man, it implied that his death was imminent. Similarly, if a person tipped the left toe against a stone, it indicated that the person would die an early death. Among the Edo and Yoruba, it would be an abomination to visit some parts of the palace. In Benin, it is never said that the Oba had died, rather it was said that the Oba has been swallowed by the ground. Among the Ijaw, it was an abomination to drown in the river, and such a person would be buried in an evil forest. If an Ijaw drowned in water and did not float, it meant that the water spirit was holding him. Among the Ebiraland, it was an abomination to step across the leg of a pregnant woman. Among the Urhobo, it was an abomination for a woman to push her husband down. Among many Nigerian communities, it was an abomination to go to the farm on certain days. In parts of Igboland, it was an abomination for a free born (Diala) to marry an outcast (osu). In Elelem, Imo State, it was an abomination to have relationship with a woman in the bush.

We will note that certain animals indicated the presence of abomination in parts of Igbo land. In Ngor Okpala, if a lion came out in the night to roar in the village square, it signified an abomination had been committed. In parts of Imo State, if a wild cat or a bat cried behind the house of a sick man it meant that person would die. In parts of Kogi State, it was prohibited to whistle at night for it would bring evil spirit.



Summary of Study Session 5

After going through this session, you have learned the following:

- (i) The meaning of cultural heritage.
- (ii) Aspects of marriage heritage of some Nigerian ethnic groups.
- (iii) Aspects of naming ceremonies of some Nigerian ethnic groups.
- (iv) The funeral ceremonies of some Nigerian ethnic groups.
- (v) Aspects of culture of abominations and sacrileges of some Nigerian communities.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) for Session 5

Now that you have completed this study session, you should assess how much you have learnt by attempting the following questions. You can write your answers in a note book so as to be able to discuss extensively on it with your tutor at the next interactive session.

What would you consider to be the cultural heritage of a country?

Explain aspects of Nigerian marriage heritage.

Discuss aspects of Nigerian naming ceremonies.

Highlight aspects of Nigerian funeral ceremonies.

Explain aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage of abominations and sacrileges.

References/ Suggestion for Further Reading

Beals, Allan R. (1967) *Culture in Process*, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York.

Taylor, Edward B. (1974) *Primitive Culture*, Boston: Estates and Lauviat.

Ejiofor, Pita, N.O. (1984) *Culture Revival in Igboland*, University Publishing Company, Onitsha.