Traditional Marriage Songs among the Benin People from the Earliest Time to the Present

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the significance of song renditions in Benin Traditional Marriage, also known as customary marriage. While scholars have extensively documented various aspects of Benin traditions and ceremonies, little attention has been paid to the cultural importance of music in marriage ceremonies. Throughout the stages of Benin Marriage Ceremonies, songs and music have played a central role, a custom deeply ingrained in their cultural heritage. Beyond mere entertainment, music serves as a powerful tool for identity expression, communication, and the preservation of history. Whether in religious rituals or secular festivities like dance parties, songs convey messages and encode the rich tapestry of Benin's traditions. Many Benin traditions, particularly rites of passage and rituals, are intricately woven into songs, serving as repositories of historical knowledge. A single verse can unveil volumes about the people's history and values. This study focuses on the songs of Benin Traditional Marriage across its various ceremonial stages, exploring their historical relevance and cultural significance. Employing a historical analysis method, the research integrates both primary and secondary sources to illuminate the role of music in Benin culture.

Keywords: Benin, Traditional Marriage, Bridegroom, Songs.

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the significance of songs in the traditional marriage processes and ceremonies of Benin, spanning from ancient times to the present day. It comprehensively covers the journey from the betrothal stage to the *Ikewu* ceremony, delving into the intricacies of the infant betrothal system across its three distinct phases: *Ivbuọmọ* (initial betrothal), *Iwaniọmọ* (acknowledgment), and *imiọmọ* (giving away) or marriage ceremony (*Ugiorhọnmwẹn*) phase. Throughout history, various methods and patterns of marriage existed in Benin, both before

and after the abolition of the 'infant betrothal' practice by the British in 1934. This paper discusses these methods in detail, shedding light on their evolution and relevance within Benin's cultural landscape.

Throughout history, significant events such as marriage, birth, and ceremonial rites of passage have been accompanied by songs and music. This isn't merely for entertainment; rather, it serves as a powerful medium for cultural expression and communication. Songs convey messages, whether in religious rituals or secular celebrations like dance parties, providing a window into a community's traditions and values. Moreover, songs play a vital role in preserving history. A single verse can encapsulate the collective narrative of a people. Building on this understanding, this paper focuses on the role of Benin Traditional Marriage songs across various stages and phases, exploring their historical relevance and cultural significance within Benin's rich heritage. Additionally, an attempt will be made to delve into the term 'Marriage' to deepen our understanding of the subject matter.

The Definition of Marriage as it is Amplified in Benin Terms

Marriage is a culturally and legally recognized union between two individuals, typically of opposite sexes, governed by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes. These elements prescribe the rights and responsibilities of the partners and confer status upon any offspring resulting from the union.

It also refers to the social structure that grants a child a recognized status within a community, determined by their parentage. In Benin culture, it entails the union of a man and a woman through marriage (orhọnmwẹn), followed by the growth of their family through the birth of children(O. Ero. 2000).

As Ẹbọhọn asserts, marriage is an ancient institution, dating back to the dawn of humanity, as evidenced by its divine mandate in the biblical instruction to Adam and Eve: 'Go Ye And multiply'. It stands as a pivotal rite of passage in the journey of both men and women during their time on earth (Ebohon, 2008)

In the world at large, marriage consists of three types; the Traditional, Religious, and statutory. But this paper is constraint on Benin Traditional Marriage Songs from the earliest times to the contemporary time. Traditional Marriage otherwise

known as customary marriage is a marriage ceremony that is organized under the classical norms and customs of a given culture (of Bride and Groom) most especially to establish a family unit. (N. Sam M.S. Retrieved January 5, 2022, from www.psychologydictionary.org). In Benin, this involves the paying of bride price and exchange of gifts, such as kola nuts (*ẹvbẹ*), palm wine (*udi*), soft drinks, yams (*iyan*), coconut (*ivin*), two antelope legs (*owẹ ẹruẹ*), and palm oil (*ofigbọn*), to mention but a few. In this kind of marriage, the husband is often the only or main breadwinner, while the wife holds main or total accountability for keeping up the household as well as taking care of the children.

The Benin Concept of Bridegroom (*Uvbi-Ọhaẹ*) and its Marriage System

In Benin culture, the term *'Uvbi-Ọhaẹ'* denotes the bridegroom. *'Uvbi*' refers to an unmarried woman or maiden, while *'Ọhaẹ'* signifies an unmarried man or a widow (Aikpitanyi, Personal Communication). While Benin recognizes both polygamous and monogamous marriage systems, it's important to note that its cultural norms only permit polygyny, where a man can marry multiple wives, but forbid polyandry, wherein a woman can have multiple husbands concurrently. Consequently, households practicing polygyny may have a women's harem, as observed in the Oba of Benin palace, among Benin chiefs, and other prominent members of society. Historically, there has been no precedent for a men's harem (Iro Eweka, 2017).

The marriage ritual in Benin serves as a binding social contract between two families, following the voluntary consent of the bride, groom, and their respective families. Although no formal marriage certificate is issued, these unions hold legal recognition in the courts. As Ebohon asserts, Benin customary marriage is deemed self-sufficient and legally binding, symbolized by the presence of ancestors who serve as witnesses—more significant than any certificate—as the union is written in the couple's 'blood and bone' (Ebohon, 2008, p.3).

The Benin Family System

The Benin people adhere to a patrilineal kinship system, tracing lineage through the father's line, with each lineage originating from a specific ancestor. Living in a predominantly male-dominated society, men are traditionally viewed as the natural protectors of women, assuming responsibility for their care due to

perceptions of their vulnerability. The desire for numerous offspring, particularly male heirs to ensure the continuity of the family name and lineage, often leads many men to take multiple wives. A man's social and economic status is often judged by the number of wives and children under his care. In Benin culture, all children are attributed to their father, and the concept of 'bastard' is virtually nonexistent. Adultery is strictly taboo and is met with severe punishment. To uphold these values and deter immoral behavior, the marriage rites-of-passage include extensive oath-taking by the woman, while the man's participation is minimal (Iro Eweka, 2017).

The Benin Traditional Marriage Rituals/Songs

In line with global customs, traditional songs play a significant role in Benin Traditional marriage ceremonies. These songs serve not only to formalize the marriage but also as a means of expression and communication throughout the ceremony. This is especially crucial as marriage is a major event that requires active participation from both the man and the woman, unlike birth and death ceremonies (Igbe, 2017).

The earliest form of Benin traditional marriage can be categorized into three phases, as follows:
Ivbuọmọ - The infant betrothal phase
Iwanịẹnọmọ - The acknowledgment phase
Ugiorhọnmwẹn - The giving away/marriage ceremony phase (O. Ebohon, 1972)

***Ivbuọmọ* – The Infant Betrothal Phase**

When a girl child is born, potential suitors begin to express interest by sending or delivering a log of wood (known as *Imu ikerhan gbotọ*) to the girl's parents. This symbolic gesture initiates the *Ikerhan* ceremony, often accompanied by the presentation of traditional gifts such as a bundle of yams, a jar of palm wine, and kola nuts. Typically, the prospective suitor or his father, whether the suitor is still an infant or an adult male from the suitor's family, visits the girl's parents' house to perform this ritual, proclaiming their intentions loudly (Osagie, Personal Communication).

Siwo siwo, (repeatedly) celebration, celebration, celebration

Upon hearing this proclamation, neighbors in the vicinity respond with an exclamation, 'vbọkhin' (meaning 'what is it'). In reply, the man joyfully exclaims, 'Ọyẹmwẹnọ o' (signifying 'it is happiness'). Subsequently, other members of the neighborhood are expected to emerge from their houses and join in the celebration. Amidst dancing and a joyous atmosphere, they sing the following song (Osagie, Personal Communication).

Vbọkhin Ọnyẹmwẹ nọ	what is it, it is joy
Iwe vbọ khin ọnyẹmwẹ nọ	I say what is it, it is joy
Ọnyẹmwẹn ọmọ, ọnyẹmwẹ nọ	the joy of a child, it is joy
Ọyẹmwẹn igho, ọnyẹmwẹnọ	the joy of wealth, it is joy

During this jubilant celebration, another song often rendered amidst the fanfare is

Esiwo siwo, esiwo x2	celebration celebration celebration x2
Agha biọmọ eta ghọghọ	the birth of a child brings happiness
Agha rriokhuo eta ghọghọ	the marrying of a wife brings happiness
Esiwo siwo, esiwo	celebration celebration celebration

After receiving the gifts, the girl's father, with the approval of his own father or elder brother in the absence of the father, grants consent to the prospective in-law (Igbafe, 1979). Subsequently, the girl becomes earmarked for either an older male or a male child within her age bracket (Igbe, 2017). It's important to note that the acceptance of gifts from the first suitor doesn't preclude the possibility of other suitors presenting gifts later. However, custom dictates that in such cases, the girl's parents inform subsequent suitors about the prior interest shown (Osagie, Personal Communication. This practice stems from instances where potential suitors reneged on their commitments or where the girl rejected marriage proposals, aiming to avoid potential disappointments such as death, failure to meet expectations, deformity, scandal, or unforeseen danger. Consequently, it's not uncommon for parents to accept gifts from multiple suitors, while potential suitors may express interest in more than one girl from different families. This practice is rooted in ancient Benin customs, which dictate that each of a man's sons should acquire their first wife through their father (Osagie, Personal Communication).

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As part of custom, the suitor himself or his representative is expected to solidify his interest and relationship with the girl's parents by annually sending a barn of yams (known as *ugi'yan*) and offering services (*ugamwẹn*) to the girl's father in the farm until she reaches marriageable age (Obasuyi, Personal Communication). In cases where the girl dies before reaching marriageable age, her parents are not obligated to refund any previous gifts (Egharevba, 1971). However, there have been instances where the late betrothed girl's sister was betrothed in her place. Similarly, if the prospective suitor passes away, his brother of similar age to the girl may replace him, or the father or representative who initially engaged in the contract with the girl's parents. Although such occurrences are rare, the girl reserves the right to accept or reject the new proposal (Osadiaye, Personal Communication). Historically, until the 1970s in Benin, it was common for females to accept the men they were betrothed to (Osadiaye, Personal Communication). However, it's important to note that Benin girls' consent was typically sought before marriage, with exceptions being less common among families.

Iwanienomo – The Acknowledgment Phase

This phase typically begins with the girl's parents conducting an investigation into the prospective suitor's family. The suitor's family must meet specific qualifications, including being free from disease and scandal, having no history of mental illness or criminal activity, and not being in conflict with the Oba of Benin. During this process, the suitor becomes aware of the arrangement made by his parents on his behalf. The prospective bridegroom is then groomed and guided to cultivate good behavior and discipline in preparation for their future life together (Igbe, 2017). Once the girl reaches marriageable age, the suitor is informed. Ideally, it is the responsibility of the in-laws, either the suitor's father or the suitor himself, to inform the girl's family and begin preparations for the giving-away ceremony (i*miọmọ*) (Igbe, 2017). However, there are exceptions where the girl's parents must notify the suitor's family if the girl's actions raise suspicion or her character becomes questionable (Helen, Personal Communication).

The suitor is expected to bring gifts on his visit to the girl's parents and family, including tubers of yams, coconuts, kola nuts, a large calabash of palm wine, and cowries, the latter valued at four shillings. Accompanied by both his own family and the girl's, the suitor then visits the girl's ancestral shrine to formally inform

the gods of their decision to give their daughter in marriage to him. Following this ritual, the suitor begins to fulfil various obligations to his prospective in-laws, which may include working on the girl's father's farm and providing firewood for her mother. These activities typically precede the final phase of the marriage preparation ceremony, known as *Imiọmọ* or *Ugiorhọnmwẹn* (Ebohon, 1972).

Ugiorhọnmwẹn –Marriage Ceremony Phase

Prior to the Ugiorhọnmwẹn ceremony, the suitor and his family are instructed to return for the girl after a three-month period of notification, known as akia. Subsequently, a message is sent to the girl's father or parents, indicating their readiness to receive their wife for the second time, with an invitation to return in thirteen days. This timing aligns with a Benin tradition that emphasizes the importance of not bringing the bride to her husband on the same day the marriage promise was made (Ebohon, 1972).

During the thirteen-day period, the bride's mother, who has likely been nurturing and preparing her daughter for her new life, takes the opportunity to offer guidance and advice (Ibude) to her daughter regarding the responsibilities and expectations of marriage. In cases where the daughter's behavior has been questionable, the mother may even choose to convey her message through a traditional song

Dọ l'uyimwẹn yi Ọmọ	Be of Good Conduct Child
Na ghẹ le gbe wẹ do gha zan mwẹ	To avoid bringing criticism upon me in
Khianvb'owọdọ{X2}	your husband's house {X2}

This song serves as an admonishment to the bride-to-be, reminding her of the importance of exhibiting good conduct. This belief stems from the Benin people's conviction that a bride who demonstrates impeccable character and manners, in accordance with moral standards, elicits excitement from her in-laws upon meeting her parents, and vice versa.

Before the thirteen days have passed, the suitor presents additional gifts, including a jar of palm wine, two trays of sliced coconut adorned with kola nuts. These offerings are made to the girl's ancestors as a notification and preparation for the upcoming marriage, serving to appease the ancestors for blessings upon the union

(Bradbury, 1957). Following this, the suitor or his father pays the bride price to the girl's father, typically in cowries, which were later valued at 24 shillings. Additionally, gifts are presented to the mother and the youths (Ibiẹguaẹ) in the household. With the payment of the bride price, the marriage contract is officially sealed (Kokure & Osunde).

On the designated thirteenth day, the bride, accompanied by her relatives and maidens, proceeds to her husband's house with the gifts she received from her parents, symbolizing the start of her new life (Ebohon, 1972). As the bridal party leads the bride to her husband's house, they sing the following song:

Ovbiọha z'owẹ rre, gbọ ghọ dọ…x2	Bride take a step forward, majestically…x2
N'udo rri'uwa gbọ ghọ dọ	come and take prosperity, majestically
N'udo rri'u tọmwẹn gbọ ghọ dọ	come and take long life, majestically
Ovbiọha z'owẹ rre, gbọ ghọ dọ	bride take a step forward, majestically
Ovbiọha z'owẹ rre,	the bride takes a step forward
Iwe n'uz'owẹ rre{x2}gbọ ghọ dọ	I say take a step forward{x2} majestically

This song serves as a prayer and expression of good wishes for the bride as she takes a majestic step forward. The bridal party extends their hopes for her long life, prosperity, and a fulfilling marital journey as they accompany her to her new home.

On this day, joy and celebration fill the air as the bride (Ovbiọha) is escorted to her husband's house, accompanied by all her belongings, while her husband and in-laws eagerly await her arrival. Before reaching the groom's house, the women begin a symbolic ritual known as 'Ughunwmun,' where imaginary barriers are observed. The groom is then expected to cut through these barriers using money and kola nuts, a ritual that may be repeated three to seven times, depending on family tradition and the leaders of the bridal procession (Osagie, Personal Communication). Appropriate songs are sung during this ceremony, as follows:

Ikpoba gbo dẹ o	I am being obstructed by *Ikpoba*,
ẹhiọsu mwẹ o	my guardian angel
ọ ma gu mwẹ gbe era o	it is preventing me from proceeding
ẹhiosu mwẹ o	my guardian angel

Another song that may be performed is:

Uki nọ baa na o	this shinning moon
erhiọ vbe baa vbe ẹvbo eghare	shines also in the village of *eghare*
ogbe de gbe odẹ	the palace stands as a blockade
ima miẹ ehe la y'evbuo eghare	I can't find any root to *eghare* village
ẹvbo eghare nẹ okpẹvbuo	*eghare* the great village

The aforementioned songs may be performed repeatedly and continuously until the groom fulfills the expectations of the bride's party by providing money and kola nuts (Princess (Mrs) Ivie B.E. Uwa-Igbinosa, Personal Communication). Amidst the celebration, as the bride is being escorted into her husband's house while pretending to be shy, the women, along with the groom's family, sing the following song:

Ovbiọha mi aho, mi aro…x2	bride is blushing…x2
Erhọdọ ghi ikọ, mi aro	your father-in-law won't be a hindrance to you
Iyọdọ ghi ikọ, mi are	you mother-in-law won't be a hindrance to you
Ivbiọmọ ghi ikọ, mi aro	your in-laws won't be a hindrance to you

Unlike the other songs, this particular song is exclusively performed in the bridegroom's house. The rationale behind this is that a bride typically doesn't blush in her father's house, just as she doesn't encounter the symbolic barrier (Ughunwmun) there (Mrs. E. Obasuyi, Personal Communication). The joy of welcoming the blushing bride may also inspire the groom's family to sing the following song

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Ẹmwẹ ọmọ na yẹmwẹ	I am pleased with this child
Ọnyẹmwẹ s'uki ọ baa la'wa…x2	the moonlight radiates into the house when joyful
Ovbiọha mwẹ yẹmwẹ	I am pleased with my bride
Ọnyẹmwẹ s'uki ọbaa la'wa	the moonlight radiates into the house when joyful

The groom's family sings this song to express their joy, happiness, and satisfaction upon welcoming their new bride. Other songs that may be included are;

Ọna i lele ọna i lele…x2	this is my choice..x2
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice

Ọna i lele ovbiọha mwẹ o	this is my choice of a wife
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice
Ọ gha khọn rue sil'ivie y'egbe	if you like, decorate yourself with beads
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice
Ọ gha khọn rue sil'ẹkan y'egbe	if you like, decorate yourself with expensive beads
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice

The song is also intended to express love and acceptance of the bride, and often, the groom may sing it from the depths of his heart upon receiving his bride.

A mandatory ritual occurs upon the bride's arrival. If she marries into a polygynous family, the oldest wife washes her feet. In cases where she becomes the first wife, the washing is performed by the oldest wife in the family, provided she meets the qualifications of fertility and a stable marriage. This ritual involves washing the bride's feet in a bowl called *uwawa*, containing water and money. Afterward, the bride cleanses her feet with a new head tie. The person performing this ritual either keeps the money or gives it to the bride (Princess (Mrs) Ivie B.E. Uwa-Igbinosa, Personal Communication). The act symbolizes the bride's acceptance into the household, with the money signifying hope for a fruitful marriage. It also signifies the washing away of her previous life, including her spinsterhood. Once accepted into the new family, she no longer has the right to return to her father's house without her husband's consent (Omo Osagie, Personal Communication). This is rooted in the Benin adage, which states that you don't give a child in marriage and expect her to return on time (*airrie ọmọ y'oronmwẹn enawẹ'rre rre rre*). It's worth noting that this ritual became less compulsory for all Benin families as they entered the contemporary era (Osadiaye Alice, Personal Communication)

If the bride is married into a polygynous family with a women's harem, the oldest wife washes the bride's feet and then hands the water to the immediate oldest wife to the bride. This second wife takes the water to the women's harem shrine (*aruolode*) and pours it there, symbolizing the first oath. The guests accompanying the bride are warmly welcomed with festivities, including food, drinks, and gifts. Some guests may also be taken to meet the bride's parents-in-law. After the

celebrations, the bridal party departs, except for one maid and another woman who remain behind for seven days. The maid stays for three months to help the bride adjust to her new environment. Both the maid and the woman must also return home with gifts from their in-laws (Omo Osagie, Personal Communication).

If the bride is married into a polygynous family with a women's harem, the first wife assigns one of the younger wives to pamper her (*khuẹ oha*) for six days. During this time, the new bride is oriented on the customs and rules of her new home (Mr. Aiko Obobaifo, Personal Communication). She is prohibited from engaging in any domestic tasks and is secluded from her husband for either three or six days, depending on her husband's lineage tradition. On the third or seventh day, she is allowed to consummate her marriage with her husband, with the bed covered in a white cloth. If she was married as a virgin, as expected in Benin kingdom, the cloth will be stained with blood.

On the third day, the groom visits his in-laws to express gratitude, while the bride's father visits her at her new home on the fifth day (Egharevba 1971). On the seventh or eighth day, the bride's mother visits her daughter's husband's house to request the cloth from their first sexual union. If her daughter was married as a virgin (O. Ebohon, 1972), she is rewarded with gifts of cloth and money as appreciation for her upbringing in accordance with moral standards.

Prior to the bride's mother visiting her in-law's house, it is customary for the bride's parents to provide breakfast for the bride and groom, typically consisting of pounded yam, the staple food of Benin. However, exceptions may arise if the Bridegroom (Uvbi-Ọhaẹ) does not reside close to the bride's parents. After receiving gifts from her in-laws, the bride's mother returns home rejoicing. Before departing, she engages in a private conversation with her daughter, during which she may inquire about her husband's potency, as it is believed that no mother would want her daughter to marry an impotent man (The Research & Extension Services Division, p.9).

To mark the third or seventh day of marriage, the newlywed bride undertakes several traditional tasks. She begins by sweeping and cleaning her husband's

ancestral shrine, as well as the kitchen, and ensures the maintenance of the *aruewu*—a U-shaped mud structure also known as '*ikewu*,' which features three stones serving as pot rests for cooking. Following these chores, she proceeds to the market to purchase a leg of antelope and other ingredients for soup, which she will prepare for her husband and in-laws for the first time. After enjoying the meal, typically consisting of pounded yam and okro soup, the in-laws offer prayers for the bride, wishing her well in her new matrimonial home. They pray for her marriage to thrive, likening its prosperity to the drawing of the okro soup. This ceremony, known as *ikewu* or *igbikhiavbọ*, holds significant cultural importance. In ancient Benin tradition, failure to perform this ritual rendered a woman unrecognized as a legal wife by her in-laws, and her children were considered illegitimate. Even if accepted by her husband's family, such children were often denied certain rights and privileges (Omo Osagie, Personal Communication).

The ikewu ceremony typically precedes the oath-taking (ihẹn) ceremony, although this sequence may vary. In cases where the bride enters a polygynous family, following the preparation of her first meal (usually pounded yam with okro or egusi soup), the oldest wife partakes in a symbolic act. She takes a portion of the pounded yam, dips it into the soup, and places it atop the *Aruewu*—a U-shaped cooking structure. Subsequently, she carries the dish to the *Aruerha* (family shrine). During this journey, the oldest wife engages the bride in a significant conversation about her past. She poses questions such as, 'Are you still a virgin?' The expected response is affirmative. However, if the bride answers negatively, she is then asked to indicate the number of men with whom she has had sexual relations. Unable to name them directly, she is handed a broomstick to break, signifying the count of her past partners. Following this exchange, the ceremony proceeds to the oath-taking activity (Omo Osagie, Personal Communication)

It's worth noting that the oath-taking ceremony varies among different families in Benin. In some families, the bride may have sexual intercourse with her husband and perform the *Ikewu* ceremony before taking the oath of fidelity (*Ọ vẹn ẹhimwin owa*). However, in other families, she may take the oath before engaging in sexual relations or performing the *Ikewu* ceremony. The oath-taking ceremony itself can occur at various points in the marriage process. Sometimes, it happens while the bride is still being pampered, and she may not receive prior notification. In some

instances, she may be woken as early as 3-4 am and invited to the *Aru'erha* (family shrine) to kneel down and take the oath, which typically includes the following provisions (Mrs. E. Obasuyi, Personal Communication,)

i. That she will remain faithful and respectful to her husband and in-laws throughout her lifetime.
ii. That she will never engage in any activities that may hinder the progress of her husband and in-laws.
iii. That she will refrain from engaging in any activities that may cause harm to her husband and in-laws, and she will not direct or authorize anyone else to do so on her behalf.
iv. If she is the first wife, she will also agree to accept additional wives (mates) chosen by her husband in the future. If she enters a polygynous family, she is expected to take an oath of humility towards the older wives and children already present in the family before her arrival. And so forth

These activities and ceremonies mark her acceptance as a full-fledged member of her in-law's family, confirming her status as a legally married wife whose children will inherit all rights and privileges within the family. She is expected to stay with her husband and in-laws for life, and even in death, her remains are laid to rest in the earth of her husband's household

Alternative Approaches to Betrothal and Courtship

In recent times, Benin's traditional marriage customs have experienced significant shifts and adaptations following the British abolition of the infant betrothal practice in 1934. This shift is intertwined with the broader global cultural landscape, characterized by a persistent evolution of societal norms shaped by accumulated strategies for adapting to one's environment, ultimately shaping the distinct way of life of its people. This cultural evolution has fostered a growing inclination towards granting both genders autonomy in selecting their partners. Consequently, alternative methods of betrothal, which coexisted with infant betrothal in the past and those that have emerged since, are explored in the following discussion.

When a man identifies a woman he wishes to marry, he informs his parents, who then conduct an investigation into the woman's family background. It's not

uncommon for the man's choice to be met with disapproval from his parents. However, in contemporary times, individuals' decisions regarding their partners are influenced by factors such as economic status, nationality, social group, and religious beliefs, all in pursuit of better compatibility. While some aspects of this process have evolved in recent times due to societal homogenization and democratization, education, organization, and increased mobility have played significant roles. If the man's choice is approved by his parents, some families engage the services of an intermediary known as Odibo, who is familiar with both families. Odibo may also serve as an arbitrator in case of disputes and decides on the organization of the marriage ceremony. Subsequently, the suitor's parents, accompanied by a middleman called Osuomwan, visit the girl's parents in the evening. After stating the purpose of their visit, the suitor's father presents gifts such as palm wine, hot gin, and kola nuts through the middleman to the prospective father-in-law. The father-in-law then enquires about which of his daughters' hands is being sought in marriage if he has more than one daughter. The acceptance of these gifts indicates the parents' consent to the suitor's proposal, initiating a relationship that will henceforth be recognized as in-laws (Orhuaẹ), typically preceding the courtship process (The Research & Extension Services Division)

The duration of courtship can vary greatly, influenced by factors such as the readiness of the prospective groom or the preparedness of the suitor's family. If the suitor and the girl are still relatively young, the courtship period tends to be longer, allowing both families ample time for thorough examination and mutual understanding. Throughout this phase, the girl may occasionally visit her prospective in-laws, providing them with the opportunity to observe her character closely and develop a deeper familiarity with her. Simultaneously, the suitor regularly visits his future wife at her father's house, offering his services (ugamwẹn) and presenting gifts such as an antelope's leg, palm wine, kola nuts, and yams during festivals like Igue and Eho. In some instances, the girl's family may allocate a portion of cleared land to her mother for farming, as a gesture of goodwill. It's worth noting that during this period, both the girl and her suitor abstain from engaging in sexual activities (The Research & Extension Services Division). These rituals and gestures serve to fortify the bond between the two

families, setting the stage for the subsequent marriage ceremony, which will be further discussed later.

The initiation of a marriage ceremony process might also stem from the girl's father or parents, who may seek to reciprocate a bond of friendship with a specific family, or to honor a young man who has earned distinction in society (Mrs. E. Helen, Personal Communication).

A practice that was quite uncommon among the people of Benin was the system of pawnship. This form of betrothal occurred during the era of pawnship when individuals given as collateral were sometimes married off by their creditors if the original depositor, who could be the girl's parents or masters, failed to meet their loan repayment obligations. However, this marriage system has faded into obscurity. Evidence suggests that women married through this method often exhibited tendencies to either harm their husbands or flee from their matrimonial homes in the future (K. F. Edowaye).

While there have been notable changes and shifts in the pre-colonial Benin traditional marriage system compared to contemporary practices, particularly concerning requirements, ceremonial attire, and hairstyles to some extent, the overall marriage processes have undergone significant transformation. What was once a family-centric affair has evolved into a public event, encompassing family members, relatives, friends, and well-wishers, and is now characterized by open celebration. Nevertheless, Benin still upholds the sanctity of its traditional marriage customs, despite the emergence of a few ostentatious innovations that deviate from tradition, as will be explored further below

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Items for the Different Stages/Ceremonies/Activities in the Benin Traditional Marriage Ceremony

Essential Items for the Introduction Ceremony

In pre-colonial Benin, the following items were supplied

Pre-colonial Era

1. 14 Kolanuts
2. 1 bottle of hot drink

But the following items are now required

1. A bowl of 40 kola nuts
2. 1 bottle of hot drink
3. Assorted soft drinks

Essential Items for the Giving Away Ceremony
Pre-colonial Era

1. 8 kola nuts
2. Kegs of palm wine (up-wine)
3. 14 tubers of yams
4. 1 tin of oil
5. 1 bottle of honey

But now the following items are required

1. 40 kola nuts
2. 1 bottle of gin
3. 1 carton each of assorted drinks
4. 2 cartons of stout
5. 1 carton of malt drink
6. Creates of assorted soft drinks
7. 1 keg of palm wine
8. 40 tubers of yam
9. 2 bunches of unripe plantain
10. 1 tin of palm oil
11 1 bag of salt
12. 1 bag of rice
13. 1 bag of gari
14. 1 bottle of native honey
15. 1 packet of sugar
16. 1 leg and hand of antelope

While the specific items on the family list may vary, the following items are universally provided in all Benin Traditional Marriages. Each of these items holds ritual and ceremonial symbolism; for example,
Kola nut (*Evbẹ̀ẹ̀*) and palm wine (*Udi – Ukhunmwun*) are offered as symbols of respect and honor.

Yams (*Iyan*) represent fruitfulness, multiplication, and the promise of procreation within the marriage.

Palm oil signifies that the union will lack nothing (*Obọ ọsẹvbika*).
According to a Benin adage, honey (*Owọn*) implies that "honey never prepares a sour soup," suggesting that the marriage will be smooth and free from hardship.
It's important to note that in pre-colonial Benin, traditional marriage ceremonies didn't include any form of introduction ceremony. If a girl was betrothed, the groom and his family would provide various forms of assistance to the bride's parents, both financially and with goods (O. Ebohon, 2008). The ancient custom of "imu ikerhan gbotọ" has been supplanted by the introduction ceremony, during which palm wine, yams, kola nuts, and other items are presented
Items for Welcoming the Groom's Family
Pre-colonial Era

1. 14 kola nuts
2. Uru-ọgọ (Calabash of up-wine or palm wine)
3. Pounded yam, already prepared, served with a hand and leg of an antelope in the soup

But now the following items are required

1. A bowl of kola nuts
2. Two bottles of hot drinks
3. Assorted soft drinks
4. Beer.

In pre-colonial Benin, the girl's family would prepare pounded yam for their in-laws, as they believed these guests might have traveled from a distant village, given the absence of transportation means. The groom's family, having trekked such a long distance, were expected to be exhausted, thus prompting the need for lavish entertainment. This tradition persists in contemporary Benin, with some bride's families still generously entertaining their in-laws during the introduction ceremony (O. Ebohon, 2008).
Items Required for Igbẹriguẹ
In the Pre-colonial Era

1. 8 kola nuts

2. 1 keg of palm wine
3. 7 coconuts broken and sliced in the bride's family house
4. *Ugianmwẹn* – N6.60K

But now the following items are required
1. 8 kola nuts
2. 1 bottle of hot drink
3. 1 keg of palm wine
4. 1 bowl of sliced coconuts
5. *Ugamwẹn* – no stipulated amount

Items Required in the Groom's House
In the Pre-colonial Era
1. Kolanuts
2. Palm wine
3. Pounded yam

But now the following items are required
1. 1 carton of beer
2. 1 carton of stout
3. 1 carton of malt drink
4. 1 bottle of hot drink
5. 1 bottle of wine

Bride Price

The bride price is the sum paid by the groom's family to the bride's family during the giving-away ceremony. According to oral tradition, in the past (during the *ivbuọmọ* era), bride price wasn't assessed in monetary terms because it was believed that the suitor fulfilled this obligation through annual or periodic gifts and services (*ugamwẹn*). However, due to cultural shifts and evolution, bride price eventually became a practice. Notably, Benin culture doesn't impose a bride price for giving away daughters in marriage, reflecting the adage *'igho ọmọ ẹghi giaro'* (the cost of raising a child is immeasurable) (S. Igbe, 2017).

During the marriage ceremony, the bride price is presented on a traditional plate. Initially, it was paid in cowries (*ikpigho*), initially set at 20 cowries, then valued at twelve English Pounds Sterling, later pegged at twenty-four naira (N24), as incorporated in Benin's native laws and customs. It's customary for a serious suitor to fulfill both the payment of the bride price and provide other requested items by the bride's family (K. Agibe, 2014, p.5). However, in contemporary Benin, the specifics of these items vary, lacking uniformity (O. Ebohon, 2008). Interestingly, in the Royal Family (Oba of Benin), bride price isn't mandatory in the traditional marriage ceremony, as the king selects the individual he deems worthy to marry his daughter

The Outfit and Hairdo

The evolution of Benin culture is evident in the attire of the bridegroom, showcasing an innovative shift. In ancient times, there wasn't a standardized outfit for such occasions. However, through interactions with neighboring kingdoms and the wider world, a distinct mode of dressing emerged. In pre-colonial Benin, the groom typically wore a white wrapper around his waist, accompanied by beads adorning his neck and wrist. Meanwhile, the bride adorned herself with a white wrapper around her chest, complemented by beaded hair (*okuku*) and multiple neck and wrist beads. Yet, with modern influences, their attire has adapted to align with global fashion trends. The marriage attire and procedures have undergone enhancements to accommodate the contemporary era. Suitors are now formally introduced to the parents and family, a ritual integrated into Benin's marriage customs. According to Chief Emovon, this introduction ceremony now symbolizes the ancient tradition of infant betrothal (*amukhuẹ*)

Days of Marriage

Since ancient times, the Benin people have adhered to their traditional calendar, which remains significant in their daily lives. This calendar, comprising four days in a week and thirteen lunar months in a year, has shaped their cultural rhythm. It aligns with the agricultural cycle, reflecting the number of moon appearances throughout the farming year. Consequently, while the Western calendar spans twenty-four months, the Benin calendar encompasses three years. This traditional calendar not only dictates the passage of time but also orchestrates various ceremonies within Benin culture, including marriages, burials, festivals, and other

significant events. Moreover, it governs the scheduling of markets and ritual religious ceremonies, underscoring its central role in Benin society (O. Ebohon, 2008, p.14).

1. *Edẹ Ekioba* – Oba market day
2. *Edẹ Ekẹnaka* - Ekẹnaka day
3. *Edẹ Agbado* – Agbado day
4. *Edẹ Ekẹn* - Ekẹn day

Marriage, naming ceremonies, and other human-involved rituals are strictly reserved for specific days in the Benin calendar, namely the first and third days known as *ẹdẹki*. Conversely, the second and fourth days, referred to as *ẹdẹbo*, are dedicated to the worship of the supreme God and subordinate deities. As such, conducting marriage ceremonies on these days is prohibited. Social and ceremonial activities, including marriages and naming ceremonies, are strictly forbidden on the second and fourth days of the Benin calendar (O. Ebohon, 2008).

Contemporary Marriage Rituals and Ceremonies Among the Benin People

The Introduction Ceremony

A significant shift in the Benin traditional marriage system is the recent addition of an introduction ceremony preceding the traditional marriage rites. This ceremony, now a pivotal step, mirrors the *Ivbuọmọ* and *Iwaniọmọ* phases of the pre-colonial infant betrothal system. Unlike before, it occurs after courtship and precedes the formal marriage (*Ugiorhọnmwẹn*) ceremony

The Benin introduction/traditional marriage ceremony continues to take place at the bride's family home, where her family awaits the arrival of their prospective in-laws. Upon arrival, the groom's family is welcomed by their hosts, who present them with the following items (E. Aisien, 2015).

A bowl of kola nuts
Palm wine (which is now an optional practice)
And recently soft drinks were also included.

The guests, represented by their spokesman, convey gratitude to their hosts for the warm reception, accepting the gifts and revealing their purpose (seeking the daughter's hand in marriage). Subsequently, the eldest among the guests offers a

prayer with the kola nut, seeking the fulfillment of their wish. Kola nuts and drinks are then served to all present (both guests and hosts). Following this, the guests present the following gifts: Kola nuts, Palm wine (now optional), Assorted drinks, and A bottle of gin (E. Aisien, 2015).

These gifts are presented as the guests reaffirm their purpose to the host household. This exchange is often accompanied by lighthearted banter to 'enliven the occasion,' and sometimes, guests may even enhance the atmosphere with a song;

Ediọn ediọn o	Elders, Elders
Ediọn mwẹ si mmwi en'ọnya owa	my Elders protect the landlord of the house
En'amiẹ la vb'ẹdọ vbe he isẹ	to enable us to have access to it on another day Amen
*En'amiẹ la vb'ẹdọ vbe he isẹ...*x2	to enable us to have access to it on another day Amen

The song mentioned above serves as a prayer by the guests, entreating the Elders and ancestors to safeguard their hosts (the girl's parents), ensuring they remain accessible for future events, such as the marriage ceremony (O. Manfred, Personal Communication). Subsequently, the host once again extends a warm welcome to their guests through their spokesman. They inquire whether the guests can identify the girl they seek among the daughters in the house. The guests affirm their recognition, mentioning the girl's name. At this point, the girl's father or the Ọkaẹgbẹẹ invites the girl to join them and confirms her familiarity with the guests. The father then briefs her on the guests' purpose and instructs her to identify the suitor among them who seeks her hand in marriage. Upon identification, the girl steps forward to acknowledge the suitor.

An appropriate song accompanies this activity, and its lyrics are as follows;

Ọghọ ghọ nọ o	it is happiness
Ọghọ ghọ n'ima ye	we are happy
Ọghọ ghọ ma ye (repeated)	we are happy (repeatedly)

The guests, now representing the prospective husband's family, joyfully sing the aforementioned song amidst jubilation and dancing, expressing their happiness

and contentment. Following this, the girl and the man step forward, positioning themselves in front of the *Ọkaẹgbẹẹ*, who offers prayers for the prospective couple and both families using kola nut and gin. He then breaks the kola nuts and shares them with all present. Subsequently, the prospective groom is introduced to the youths (*Ibiẹguaẹ*), who are admonished to always grant him access to the prospective bride whenever he visits. The engaged couple and the groom's family then inform their prospective in-laws that they will provide further details on the marriage plan and date, advising them to give ample notice for the ceremony. Entertainment of the guests ensues, typically preceding the actual marriage ceremony (O. Ebohon, 2008). Before the proposed marriage date, it is customary for the girl's family to conduct an investigation into the suitor's family background. They ensure the family has no history of mental illness, infectious diseases such as leprosy or epilepsy, criminal records, enmity with the Oba of Benin, and that they belong to a reputable lineage (Mrs. E. Obasuyi, Personal Communication)

Benin Traditional Marriage Ceremony (*Ugiorhọnmwẹn*) in the Contemporary Era

On the appointed day, the bride's family gathers in her father's house, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their guests. In cases where the girl's father is deceased or does not own a house, the venue shifts to the *Ọkaẹgbẹ's* house. Upon arrival, the groom's family is seated directly opposite their hosts and warmly welcomed by the bride's family. Gifts, including kola nuts and others previously listed, are presented to them. Before accepting these gifts, the spokesman representing the groom's family articulates the purpose of their visit to the bride's family. The spokesman from the bride's family acknowledges and takes note of this. Subsequently, the assembly renders the following song: (Personal Observation)

Vba ghi ru vb' ediran o	what is are we doing over here?
Ugiọmọ ma do vb'eran o {x2}	it is the celebration of a child that we are doing here {x2}
Ugiọmọ ma do vb'eran o {x2}	the celebration of a child that we are doing!
Ugiọghọghọ ma do vb' eran o	celebration of happiness that we are doing!
Ugi'orhọnmwẹ ma do vb'eran o	it is the celebration of marriage

The song, performed by the groom's family, serves to reinforce their purpose for visiting the bride's family's house, creating awareness in a lively manner. Upon hearing the song, the bride's family acknowledges the mission and urges acceptance of the gifts. The groom's family graciously accepts the kola nuts and drinks offered to them. The eldest man among them leads a prayer with the kola nuts and drinks, invoking blessings upon both families. Following this, the groom's family reciprocates by presenting kola nuts and other listed items to the bride's family. During these exchanges, light-hearted jokes may be shared, such as a humorous anecdote about a family seeking a wife who encountered another family enjoying a meal of pounded yam, a staple food of the Benin people. Despite being invited to join, the second family insisted on disclosing their purpose first. Eventually, it was revealed that both families sought a wife among the daughters, leading to a humorous contest. The bride's family humorously decided in favor of the second family, as they had specifically come for the pounded yam, highlighting the jovial atmosphere of the occasion (O. Ebohon, 2008).

Before accepting gifts from the groom's family, the bride's family requests to know the identity of their guests. This initiates the introduction of the groom's family members, where they share their names, villages, Local Government, and state, particularly if the prospective groom is not from Benin or Edo State. In turn, the seated members of the bride's family introduce themselves, each stating their relationship with the bride. The bride's family accepts the drinks under the condition that they will seek the consent of their daughter. They may have already asked the groom's family if they can identify her among the other maidens present, to which they respond affirmatively. The method of seeking the girl's consent varies among families. Some families invite the girl into the gathering to seek her consent before accepting the gifts, while others send members of the bride's family to seek her consent where she is being prepared for the event (Personal Observation). Alternatively, some families choose to seek her consent after the parade and identification of the bride by the groom's family. The girl's acceptance of the groom’s family request typically evokes joy and jubilation among the attendees, often accompanied by the rendition of a celebratory song;

Avba en'ẹvbo, Avba en'ẹvbo na khaa	who are the people, who are the people in question
Ima mwa nọ o{x2}	we are the ones
Oko, ma ọ'ẹyiotọ nọ ma giowa de	please, we are the foundation that prevents the house from falling

The song mentioned above is performed by the groom's family amid dancing, as they sing praises to their family. They believe and are convinced that the bride's acceptance of their request stems from their esteemed reputation in society. Additionally, the bride's family may also perform songs, such as [Insert example here], reflecting their perspective and sentiments (Personal Observation)

Oghọghọ nọ Oghọghọ nọ o	it is happiness, it is happiness
Oghọghọ nọ o, n'ima ye	we are in happy mood
Ovbimwẹ rri'ọdọrre…x2	my daughter is here with her husband…x2

T

he bride's family may also choose to perform this song as a way to express their joy and satisfaction, particularly when they are deeply pleased with the family that has come to seek their daughter's hand in marriage.

Following this, the bride's father emphasizes that there are many marriageable daughters in the household and proceeds to inquire about the groom. At this point, the groom, who may have been waiting outside the gathering, is invited in. He kneels before the bride's family, and then, upon their request, stands to his feet. The bride's father then asks the groom's father once again if they can identify their prospective wife among the maidens present, to which they respond affirmatively. This marks the beginning of the parade of eligible maidens from the household, each introduced one after the other accompanied by songs. An example of such a song is: [Insert song lyrics here] (Personal Observation).

Ovbiọha z'owẹ rre, gbọghọdọ…x2	Bride take a step forward, majestically…x2
N'udo rri'uwa gbọghọdọ	come and take prosperity, majestically
N'udo rri'u tọmwẹ gbọghọdọ	come and take long life, majestically
Ovbiọha z'owẹ rre, gbọghọdọ	bride take a step forward, majestically
Ovbiọha z'ow ẹrre,	bride takes a step forward
Iwen'u z'owẹ rre {x2} gbọghọdọ	I say take a step forward…x2 majestically

The fake brides are ushered in one by one, each wearing a veil as they enter the gathering. The groom's family, who are already acquainted with their prospective wife, politely reject each imposter until the true bride-to-be arrives, typically as the third or fourth candidate. As she enters the gathering, various songs are sung in celebration, such as: [Insert song lyrics here] (Personal Observation).

Ovbiọha mwẹ de…..	my bride is coming….
Ovbiọha mwẹ de o	my bride is coming o
Ọ ye vbe n'vbu tuo	is like the pouring of the dew

This song is sung by those accompanying the bride-to-be as she enters the arena, praising her beauty and unique attire, distinct from the other maidens previously paraded. Additional songs that may be sung include

Ovbiọha mwẹ z'owegie	My bride takes a royal step
Z'owẹ n'erha zẹ, zowẹ n'iyuẹzẹ	like that of your father and mother
Odafẹn ovbiọha z'owegie o	bride's husband, take a royal step
Z'owẹ n'erha zẹ, z'owẹ n'iyuẹ zẹ	like that of your father and mot

This song is also rendered by those ushering the bride in as they encourage her to take a royal step into the arena.

It's important to recognize the significance behind the custom of parading up to three maidens before presenting the bride in the arena. This practice holds symbolic meaning: firstly, it signifies stability, akin to how an object supported by three props remains steady; secondly, it represents the support of the four guiding forces — the groom's family, the bride's family, the ancestors, and the community *(Evbo)*-land — which ensures the success, longevity, and fertility of the married couple (O. Ebohon, 2008).

The groom's family joyfully identifies the bride-to-be as their spokesman approaches and unveils her, declaring to all present that she is indeed the one they have come to seek in marriage. They shower her with praise, affirming her as the worthy life partner they envision for their son. Subsequently, the bride approaches her father, kneels, and greets him. He then asks if she recognizes the faces seated behind her, briefing her on their mission and proposal. The spokesman of the bride's family directs the bride to confirm the identity of her suitor. With resolve,

she rises, approaches the groom-to-be, and touches his shoulder, signifying her willingness to accept him as her husband. With newfound confidence in their successful mission, the groom's family reiterates their desire and request. Additionally, the following song may be sung by the groom's family amid the atmosphere of joy and jubilation: [Insert song lyrics here] (Personal Observation)

So mwẹ obọ n'dede mwẹ Uvbi	shake my hand and hug me bride
So mwẹ obọ n'dede mwẹ o	shake my hand and hug me
Uvbi o, he he	bride o, e e
Uvbi o, he he	bride o, e e
So mwẹ obọ n'dede mwẹ o	shake my hand and hug me

The song mentioned above may have been sung to the bride-to-be by the suitor during their courtship, yet it retains its relevance for performance during this event. It's customary for the groom-to-be and his family to sing this song, aiming to encourage the bride to embrace their family, affirming their worthiness of her acceptance (Personal Observation).

The bride's family, through their spokesperson, announces their consent to the guests' request and gives final approval for the marriage rites to proceed. The groom's family is then invited to meet the household youths, known as the *Ibiẹguaẹ*, who are the young male members of the family (excluding the bride's siblings) from both paternal and maternal relations. During this visit, the groom's family presents the previously highlighted gifts along with an unspecified amount of money. Upon receiving the gifts, the *Ibiẹguaẹ* return to the gathering and inform the bride's family, seated through their spokesperson, that they have been acknowledged. This custom, as described by O. Ebohon (2008), often includes the rendering of songs by the groom's family;

Atatabọ n'eghele ye o {x2}	the surface of the palm is what determines the strength of a youth
atatabọ n'eghele ye o {x2}	the surface of the palm is what determines the strength of a youth

The groom's family renders this song to convey their worthiness of acceptance by the bride's family, often emphasizing their financial capability to support the bride

as a wife (Personal Observation). Following this, the groom's family, through their spokesperson, also arranges to settle the bride's mother. During this visit, the groom's family approaches the bride's mother, who is typically seated among her siblings and other family members in a room. Songs are often sung during this procession (Personal Observation)

Iyọmọ rr'igho rr'igho rr'igho	Bride mother enjoy wealth, enjoy wealth, enjoy the wealth
Ẹgbo n'u na s'u sẹ igbiragia v'inhue x2	while you were suffering (to raise the child), prostitutes made mockery of you

The song is performed as a gesture of appreciation towards the bride's mother, while also encouraging her to enjoy the fruits of her labor now that her child, whom she diligently raised, has grown. It reflects on the sacrifices she made, enduring mockery from both a childless woman and others in the community, during the upbringing. The listed gifts are then presented to the bride's mother, including an unspecified amount of money within a beautifully covered plate, as everyone present respectfully prostrates before her. Following tradition, the bride's mother asks one of the women beside her to unveil the plate and count the money (Personal Observation). After the count, she retains a portion for herself and returns the remainder to the groom's family, advising them to use it to support her daughter. In gratitude, the groom's family prostrates once more and proceeds to sing the following song;

Iyogie o e…x2	great mother…x2
Iyogie ghi vbi'ẹgbo	great mother does not spend the night in the forest
Iyogie o he	great mother
Iyogie ma vbi'ẹgbo	great mother never spend the night in the forest
Iyogie o he	great mother

Amid jubilation and fanfare, the bride's mother is showered with praises and honored with various royal titles by the groom's family. Through their spokesperson, she acknowledges this recognition. Adding to the joyful

atmosphere, the groom's family sings a song in appreciation (Personal Observation)

Ẹgbe ovbiọha mwẹ sẹ mwẹ lele khian	my bride family is enough for me to walk with
Ọ gha sẹ mwẹ lele….	is enough for me to walk with
Ọ gha sẹ mwẹ lele. (repeatedly)	is enough for me to walk with

The groom's family presents this song as a heartfelt expression of gratitude to the bride's family. Following this, the spokesperson directs them to offer the bride price (*igho* uhun). This is typically presented alongside kola nut and an unspecified amount of money, often with twenty-four or twenty-five naira placed on top, all elegantly arranged in attractive Chinaware, before the *Okaẹgbẹẹ* and the bride's father. Upon receiving the presentation, the bride's father, or in the event of his absence, her eldest brother or the *Okaẹgbẹẹ,* takes charge. The money is then counted by a relative seated beside the bride's father, who removes the twenty-four or twenty-five naira as customary, before advising the groom's family to retain the remainder for the upkeep of their daughter. Traditional songs, significant to the occasion, are also sung by the groom's family throughout these proceedings (Personal Observation).

Evbu sọ mwẹ owa o	dew has come to my house
I ghọ ghọ he o, he (repeatedly)	I am happy

Fulfilling their desires, the groom's family joyfully sings this song, likening their new bride to the refreshing dew that now graces their home. Additional songs are also performed to mark the occasion (Personal Observation)

Ọna i leleọna i lele…x2	this is my choice..x2
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice
Ọna i lele ovbiọha mwẹ o	this is my choice of a wife
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice
Ọ gha khọn rue sil'ivie y'egbe	if you like, decorate yourself with beads
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice
Ọ gha khọn rue sil'ẹ kan y'egbe	if you like, decorate yourself with expensive beads
Ọna i lele o	this is my choice

The songs mentioned above serve as heartfelt expressions of praise and gratitude towards the bride's family, who have deemed the guests worthy of acceptance into their family, recognizing them as the ideal choice for a new member. Additional songs that might be sung are also noted (Personal Observation)

Okhuo nọ mwẹ ọdọ ma gbe o	a married woman is a worthy status
Okhuo nọ mwẹ ọdọ…x2	a married woman…x2
Ọ gha s'ugbo ọ rr'inya	When she gets to the farm she eats yam
Ọ gha s'ebẹdi ọ de lo vbiẹ	When she gets to the bed, she falls into it and sleeps
Okhuo n'ọmwẹ ọdọ ma gbe o	a married woman is worthy of a status
Okhuo n'ọmwẹ ọdọ	a married woman

W'ọkpa nya ọdọruẹ	you alone own your husband
Eke n'ọkhọnruẹ y'obọ kanrẹn	you can touch him wherever you like
W'ọkpa nya ọdọ ruẹ (repeatedly)	you alone own your husband (repeatedly)

The aforementioned songs are sung to the bride by both families, serving as reminders of the inherent worth and dignity of a married woman. These songs accompany dancing, jubilation, and joy, reassuring the bride that she holds a unique claim to her husband's affection and loyalty (O. Manfred, Personal Communication).

Following the preceding rituals, the *Igbẹriguẹ* (handing over) ceremony emerges as the climactic moment of the marriage proceedings. Here, the bride and groom are formally declared as husband and wife, a pivotal pronouncement made either by the father of the bride or the *Ọkaẹgbẹẹ*. As part of this ritual, the groom kneels before his father or the *Ọkaẹgbẹẹ*, who lends support by placing hands on his shoulders. The bride's family member then calls the groom's first name six times, to which he does not respond. On the seventh call, proclaimed loudly by the bride's father or the *Ọkaẹgbẹẹ*, the groom responds with a resounding "EE-YỌỌ," signifying his full readiness to accept the gift of marriage. Following this exchange, the bride's father bestows his blessing upon the couple, declaring the union with wishes for prosperity, health, and longevity. This pronouncement seals the marriage, typically celebrated with a collective shout of approval. With this formal declaration, the groom rises to his feet and resumes his seat, marking the conclusion of the *Igbẹriguẹ* ceremony (O. Ebohon, 2008).

Following this ritual, the bride's father, Ọkaẹgbẹẹ, or eldest brother directs his attention to his newly-wed daughter, emphasizing that henceforth, she relinquishes her family salutation (Ukhu) in favor of adopting her husband's family salutation, which extends to all future children born of their marriage. Subsequently, she is guided to greet her father with this new salutation by the Ọkaẹgbẹẹ. Rising from her seat, she approaches her father, kneeling to offer her first greeting with the newly acquired Ukhu. Upon rising, her father, Ọkaẹgbẹẹ, or eldest brother ceremoniously guides her to sit on the groom's father or Ọkaẹgbẹẹ's lap seven times, symbolizing the final act of transferring her to the groom's family. Thereafter, the groom's father symbolically accepts his daughter-in-law by seating her on his lap in one gesture, signifying his successful selection of a mate for his son. He then offers prayers for the newlyweds with gin and kola nut before seating the bride beside her husband. Throughout these proceedings, songs are sung by the groom's family (E. Aisien, 2015).

Kpọn mwẹ Ọba mẹ	Thank the king for me
Ẹguaẹ wẹsẹ. (repeatedly)	thank you palace

This song is a tribute to the king, the Oba of Benin, revered as a semi-divine figure among the people of Benin. He holds a position of utmost respect, believed to be worthy of praise after God and their ancestors.

Following tradition, the groom's family presents "Thank You" gifts to the bride's family, typically consisting of kola nuts and drinks. In some families, additional items such as sliced coconut, sweet palm wine, and honey are also included. These items are shared among the attendees of the ceremony, who collectively offer prayers for the happiness and prosperity of the newly married couple. Meanwhile, the couple is served honey (or sugar), symbolizing wishes for sweetness throughout their marital journey. This ritual usually follows prayers led by the fathers of the bride and groom. To conclude the ceremony, both families join together to sing a closing song (Personal Observation).

Waya wẹ se…x2	Thank you all
Waya wẹ se vbe vbo mwẹ o	thank you all in my community/village
Waya wẹ se…x2	Thank you all
Waya wẹ se vbẹ gbe mwẹ o	thank you all for me

Conclusion

This paper comprehensively explores the role of song rendition in the Benin traditional marriage ceremony, spanning from ancient times, including the infant betrothal stage, to the contemporary era. It underscores the pivotal significance of songs not only within the marriage ceremony but also within broader aspects of Benin culture and beyond. While acknowledging the significant transformations from ancient to modern times, the paper highlights how the traditional marriage ritual, once a familial affair, has evolved into a more elaborate event, resembling a carnival, with occasional deviations since the colonial era. One notable factor driving these changes is the increasing prevalence of cohabitation, a recent development influencing marriage customs. Throughout history, Benin society has exhibited diverse social structures, with chastity traditionally valued, particularly in the context of marriage. However, contemporary marriage practices are witnessing shifts towards more individualized unions, sometimes characterized by the absence of parental involvement and adherence to traditional rituals. This evolution includes a departure from formerly esteemed rites such as *ikewu and ihẹn*, which served to validate marriages.

Furthermore, societal attitudes towards premarital relationships have shifted, with virginity losing its once high status. This transformation reflects broader global influences, including the impact of colonialism and the spread of Western education. Consequently, there is a growing trend of marriages motivated by personal interests rather than familial or cultural considerations, potentially eroding the sanctity and significance of marriage in Benin and beyond

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