

6. SEEING A BABY'S TEETH

"One does not see the teeth in a baby's mouth emptyhanded."

This Igbo proverb means that the first person who notices the erupting teeth in a baby's mouth, and who remarks about it, must give that baby a gift.

A newborn child is not supposed to have teeth, and if he does, it is considered an abomination in Igbo land. In some places in the old days the child would have been thrown away, and an Nri person known for cleansing abominations would have been sought out to come and ritually wipe out the offense.

Similarly, a baby must not grow his upper teeth first-- Igbos take that, too, as something traditionally taboo. In the old days it was one of the many things in connection with their land which the Igbos regarded as abominations.

Newborn children are given special care to see that they grow well. But even though they may be born on the same day their teeth will appear at different ages--some at seven months, some at eight or ten months, and others not until a year or more.

When a child is teething he will show signs of it that will alert his mother. But a new mother may not understand what is going on. She will not know that "whoever eats palm nut which gets stuck in his teeth is saying something."

One indication may be that the baby suffers from diarrhea. Some call this "stomach teeth" or "stomach gums."

The baby's gums are constantly irritated and he will suck them noisily, or he will gnaw the back of his hand and cry. An older woman, wise in the meanings of these things, will suspect that the child is teething and will keep a sharp eye out for developments.

Igbo custom dictates that the first person who sees a child's teeth in his mouth and makes mention of it must give the child whatever custom prescribes on such an occasion. All the members of the child's household try hard not to mention that the child has sprouted teeth. They keep their lips sealed, and children are warned not to tell. They all wait for someone to make the appropriate remark and thus bear the responsibility involved. But if someone sees the teeth and pretends not to have noticed, he can escape responsibility.

After the child has grown a couple of teeth, his mother will try to have him frequently carried by other people so she can get someone to notice what is going on in his mouth. Or, she can carry him herself, playing with him and making him laugh in front of other people so he will open his mouth. Eventually, one method or the other will bring results.

When the child laughs his tiny teeth gleam, and some quick-tongued person, usually a woman, will see them and cry out, "Hey, this child has grown teeth!"

This is a conversation-stopper! "What was sought on the shelf above has been found on the shelf below." The child's

mother, who has been keeping her ears open the whole time, will cry, "Oh, you say he has grown teeth? Is that so?" The person will realize at once that she has been trapped and that she is the first person to see that baby's teeth!

She will then do whatever is prescribed for the occasion in that particular location. Some people do not regard it as anything special and any gift can be given to the baby--perhaps money, clothing, a chicken, or anything else the person thinks appropriate. Around Nnewi, Ihiala, Ozubulu, and Nneobi there are no special observances. The baby is simply given some money.

In other places it is an important tradition about which people have some surprising beliefs. They think that if the person discovering the teeth does not fulfill his obligations, the child will fall seriously ill. If that should happen, a native doctor will be consulted to find out what should be done. Restitution must be made, by taking a chicken and giving it to the child in place of the one which should have been given upon first sight of the teeth.

Similarly, many people believe that failure to speak out on first noticing the teeth will cause the child to bite his mother's breast while nursing. This does not always prove true, because one child whose teeth have been duly mentioned will bite his mother during nursing, while another whose teeth have gone unnoticed will not bite his mother!

It is usually a woman who notices a child's teeth first, because women gather more than men do in places where there are young babies.

Customs in Igbo land pertaining to seeing a baby's teeth

When a child begins to grow teeth, the first one to know is his mother, because she is with him and watches over him more than anyone else.

Around Olu, Aguata, Nkwere and Mgbidi, the mother will take the baby to be carried by the person whom she wants to notice the teeth. Then she will remark that she does not know what is happening to the child's mouth. When that person tries to find out what is wrong, she will see the teeth and cry out, "This child has grown teeth. I am lucky. This is my good fortune." The woman will give the child a hen, or if she has none at that time, she will promised to give it as soon as she can buy one. The child will have that hen in no time.

Later on, if it is around Olu, the mother will carry the baby around the quarter (section of a town or village where particular distinct people live) to show off his teeth. People will give the child whatever gifts they are able to give. In Ngwa, Owere and Mbaise the one who see the child's teeth may share a chicken on a kind of "lend-lease" plan. This means that when that chicken bears offspring, they will be shared with the child.

In Ngwo, in the Udi area, when a baby grows teeth his parents will call in the children of the quarter and prepare a feast for them, to show their pleasure in the appearance of the teeth as a sign of progress in his growth. They also give the child a substantial gift, such as a chicken, and the child's grandmother also gives him a nice gift. The people of the quarter also give various gifts.

In Afikpo the one who sees the child's teeth does not give any special gift. Rather, the parents thank the person heartily for having noticed the teeth. But except for Afikpo, all parts of Igbo land follow the gift-giving custom, since "one does not see the teeth in a baby's mouth emptyhanded."

Nowadays customs like this are not so strong. The one who sees the teeth first can give the child some money to fulfill the tradition, so the proverb quoted above can continue to hold true.

7. MARRIAGE IN IGBO LAND

Marriage began in ancient times, when the world was created. No one knows much about its origins, but the Scriptures tell us that God created man, then created woman to be his helpmate, and blessed them with fruitfulness and plenty. Out of this beginning, marriage entered the world and was practiced from one generation to another. So it entered Igbo land, where legend has it that the Igbos are descendants of the Jews.

In Igbo land, marriage is a tradition of long standing. It is so important that an unmarried man will not be accorded his share of honor and respect and will be called derogatory names like "bachelor" and "nibbler here and there." (Refers to the fact that he has no settled home with a wife to cook for him.)

Why Igbos marry

Our forefathers married for many reasons. They believed that a man should reach a proper age before marrying and should not simply do it whenever he pleased. Igbos today have several purposes in mind when they marry. The first is that they want children. Another is that, being people of various occupations, particularly farming, they need people to help them with their work.

Igbos marry also because it is a way of recognizing a wealthy person. They have a proverb which says, "gidigidi bu uguwu eze" (majority is the power of the ruler).

In the old days, too, there were no banks as we have today for the safekeeping of money, so a man who acquired a lot of money would "invest" it by marrying several women.

Child marriage

Several kinds of marriage exist in Igbo land. In olden times, parents might contract a marriage for a very young daughter while the young man involved was still unable to marry a woman on his own. If a householder had no sons of age, he would go to a place where a daughter had been born and engage her to his son, so that if he died, his son would have someone to marry. Sometimes the people of two households were very fond of each other and used this type of marriage to cement their relationship. This usually happened when one family wanted the girl to leave the friend's family and live with them.

In some towns, such as Nnewi, they call this custom "ilu nwa nzunzu" (hidden marriage), because the prospective bridegroom will go and fetch water where a daughter is born to show that she will be married to him when she has grown up. In other towns, like Ngwo near Udi, they call this "nkudo nwanyi" (setting aside a woman). A man who wants to marry a young girl will take a torch (made from a maize stalk) and go bearing gifts to the child's mother shortly after she has given birth to the child. He also may carry

firewood for the mother while she is still in the post-delivery period, and will visit them from time to time to show that he has pledged to marry that newborn child. Later on, when the child begins to walk, the man may help her family with chores such as planting yams and cocoyams, and cutting down palm nuts. As the child grows a bit, the man may strengthen his position by giving her little gifts from time to time. The parents will not tell the girl until she is about twelve years old that this man is her husband, because they do not want her to be self-conscious and begin to have doubts about her future with him.

This type of marriage is dying out now because of the difficulties it entails. For instance, after the girl is old enough to speak for herself she may not like the man, and this will cause dissension in the household. Again, if the man discovers that the girl is not well-behaved when they live together, he will have a lot of trouble in fulfilling his duties toward her, and when he is asked the reason for his behavior he will say that it is not he himself who married that woman.

Adult marriage

Igbos have several indicators of a young man's readiness for marriage. Around Ngwa, he may be considered mature enough if he has been able to speak in public for about two years, or if he can plant yams and cut palm trees.

In some places a criterion for marriage-readiness is the ability to supervise the father's household when the father purposely leaves it to the son for a week or more. Another is the ability to plant yams and cocoyams and care for the domestic animals which the father provides. The way the young man deports himself, especially in meetings of the extended family, is also considered.

When a young man wants to marry, he first takes some nice healthy kola seeds and goes to his father, if his own father is still alive. He tells his father or the father-substitute what he has in mind--namely, that he wants someone to help him with his farm work. The father will interrogate him about the extent of his possessions, because "one does not go emptyhanded to open the gateway of the spirits." It is true that all the relatives will help out, but "the one who is being carried will not go first ahead of the one who is going to buy at Eke market." Through the young man's answers, the father will determine his intentions.

Although the young man may inform his mother, it is the father's duty to tell the mother what their son has in mind. When the parents are in agreement, they will ascertain whether their son has someone special in mind. If he does not, or if he is considering someone unfamiliar to them (implies their disapproval), they will scout around for information to find a young woman who comes from an acceptable

household. At this point they instruct their son about the type of household from which he should choose a wife.

When the prospective bride is found, there is a certain sequence followed in finding out about her. The young man's father will look for someone suitable who comes from the girl's locale and who agrees to serve as his witness. This witness asks the girl's parents if she is free or if she is already committed; if she is free, he asks whether she is inclined to look with favor on the young man's family. If she is, he will tell the young man's father that the prospects are good ("the mound is full of termites"). But if the girl is not happy about the prospect, the witness will report to the father that the prospects are not good ("the thing that he saw before has not been seen again").

Through the offices of this witness the young man's father sends the first kola nut, which will be a very good lobe, along with a pot of wine. This custom is not universally observed, but Udi, Nkanu and Nsuka are among the places where it is found. When the young man and the witness reach the home of the girl's father, the witness presents the kola nut and the wine. They bless the kola, split it, chew it, and drink the wine. Because this wine carries no weight (in that it does not yet signify the finalizing of any agreements), only the people of the girl's household join in drinking it. After this, the witness

will give an explanation of who it is who has come with him. The young man will then tell the purpose of his mission ("why the cocoyam cries out 'nwii'"). Through all of this the householder is informed that they will come again to do whatever he and his family are inclined to do in the matter.

This "first kola" meeting serves as an opportunity for questioning by both households. It is at this stage that the girl's father tells the young man's people that they want to consult a diviner about this young man in order to find out how the young woman's household will fare and what are her prospects for having children. Someone in the group will then visit the diviner. If it is necessary for the diviner to offer any sacrifice, it will be offered before the young man's next visit.

After a week or more, the young man's father returns, taking a pot of wine, to learn the outcome from the girl's family. Now they will know whether or not the project has been sanctioned.

Carrying wine

This practice varies from village to village. In some of them, the young man who seeks to marry will join in this and other wine-drinking rituals, but in Ngwo this does not hold true. There, this wine is for the relatives of the girl's father. Also, this is the wine which the girl will

taste and then present to the father of the man who wants to marry her, to show that she agrees to the marriage. She does this at the behest of her mother, who instructs her before the future inlaws arrive. After drinking this wine, the girl will accompany the prospective father-in-law to his home that day, taking back his wine container. The next morning she will return to her own father's house. She will take some fish and meat and that night she will use it to prepare some food, which she will show to her mother. From then on, the girl will be coming from time to time to take the evening meal with the groom's family, but she will not stay overnight at his home until the final wine-bringing ceremony for the whole family.

In some other areas the prospective bridegroom goes along when the girl is first approached, and he is interrogated. The girl presents wine to him also after she has tasted a bit. Some of the places where it is done this way are Oba in Isiuzo, Okposi in Ohaozara, Ngwa, Odume in Ogu, Umuhia, Owere and Nnewi.

Around Utu in Nnewi, the marriage customs are slightly different. The young man does not take kola nut to go and approach the girl as they do in Ngwo and Nsuka. There, the first step is for the young man and his witness to take wine and go to make inquiries about the girl. When this wine

has been drunk, indicating that the project will succeed, the girl's father will say to the group, "May the pleasure of the wine go with you." In Owere they say, "If the wine produces this, let it also produce something else." This means that the suitor is free to come again. Thus the two households can discuss the young man's intentions and the girl's father may tell him that "One who goes to the public with his thoughts also goes to the public with his questions."

When the young man returns to learn what his prospective inlaws are asking of him, he tells them when he will come again to reckon up the bride-price or to perform the ceremonial trip to market. This second time he brings a bit more wine than he did the first time, in case the negotiations between him and the girl's people are successful. (In such a case, more people would partake of the wine.)

The day the bride-price is fixed the girl's father tells the young man how much dowry is expected. When they have come to agreement on the price, the young man will give whatever amount of money he has with him on that day, because it is said that "one never finishes paying where women are concerned." Now the girl will go home with her husband's people to stay a few days, so that she and the husband can learn about each other's ways. From this time on, various practices are begun, at the end of which the girl may enter into a period of puberty observances. In some places four or eight trips may be made--

whatever local customs dictate--before finally bringing the large amount of wine and paying the bride-price. All these things will be completed before the woman finally goes to live with the man

The witness

From the time of the initial inquiries until the couple starts to live together, the witness has many different tasks. When the bride-price is paid, money is given also to the witness. He is the arbiter between husband and wife when arguments occur, and a peacemaker among the inlaws. If some marital disagreement causes the woman to return to her father's house, the witness tries his best to settle things peacefully, because if the couple end up by divorcing, the witness' testimony will be among the factors used to judge between them.

One important function of the witness ^{arises} ~~if employed~~ in some areas when a married man dies young and has a brother who will take over the marital duties. It is the witness' job to acquaint the brother with the status of the relationship the deceased had with his inlaws. He will explain to the brother what is taboo to the inlaws, so that no trouble may ensue from the new marriage.

Procuring a wife for another person

In many places in Igbo land, a person may procure a wife for someone else. There are several reasons for this. If a man is mature enough for marriage but cannot marry because he has not been able to save enough money for the bride-price, his relatives and age mates may counsel together to see to it that he does marry. They usually do this for the type of person who works very hard but is dogged by bad luck. Someone close to him may promise before his relatives that he will find the means to get this person married. The man in question is told to find someone he would like to marry, and then the relatives will make the necessary preliminary trips until the matter is settled up to the point that there remains only the bride-price and the bringing of wine. Now the one who promised the money will produce it, the relatives will bring the wine, and do everything else necessary to get the man married. When the wife has been brought to the husband, the friends and relatives will withdraw and leave everything else up to the bridegroom, such as clothing and feeding the wife. If the man seems unable to do these other things properly, his relatives will ask him, "When one buys you a wife does one also have to buy you a mat?"

Another occasion for outside procurement of a wife may be when a man is mature but is such a womanizer that he spends

his time running around after women and does not give any thought to marrying a wife of his own. His relatives will advise him to marry for their sake as well as his own, because it is said that "if a person's brother dances like a fool, his own eyebrow itches." (Refers to embarrassment over the brother's behavior.) If the man keeps on refusing to listen to advice, his relatives may go and make a commitment with a woman and take the necessary steps to commit the man. If the man is out of town, they send him a message to return and claim his bride. The Igbos believe that procuring a wife for a person like this is the way to settle him down.

In some places in Igbo land, marriage may be contracted with a girl who is not yet of marriageable age. She is usually pledged to someone around her own age. In these cases, the boy's parents will bring them both up until they reach an age when they can live on their own as husband and wife. This is done mostly around Ohafia and Abiriba where a marriage is regarded as the most important thing a father can provide for his son before he dies, because their practice is to accord rights to the woman. Others who contract marriages for their sons before they are fully grown are the people of Nsuka, Ngwa, Udi, Utu in Nnewi, and Mbaise. In such places it is not obligatory for a father to do this for his son; however, it is done by those who have the means to do it.

Sometimes a woman may provide another wife for her husband if she and her husband have lived together a long time without producing any children. She would have to be a very good person to initiate something like this. After making certain that she and her husband are agreed on the matter, she will set about selecting someone she approves of who she thinks will also be acceptable to her husband. Often it will be someone close to her, like a sister or a friend. She makes the usual trips for discussion with this woman, but one thing different is that the bride price is supplied by the woman who is procuring the bride. After the new marriage has taken place, the new wife will be showing respect to the first wife as well as to the husband.

A woman may also marry another woman in some places in Igbo land. This is usually done when the husband dies without having fathered a son. In order to see that a son is born to take his place in the compound, the wife can go and marry another woman in the name of the dead man. She does this in the hope that the new one will bear a son, because the Igbos say that "one who has no son in his household is totally blocked."

Providing a replacement wife or deity's wife

In some places in Igbo land, such as the Anambra State towns of Isiuzo, Njikoka, Idemili and Abakaliki, one may provide a replacement wife for a man, or one may provide a wife for a deity.

In the old days of frequent tribal wars and kidnappings, a man's wife might be killed or spirited away. After a war, when it was time to enter into peace negotiations, the people on the victorious side would be required to produce replacement wives for those whose women they had killed. This would be made a provision of the peace settlement. Also, a man who killed another man's wife might give him his own wife as a replacement. Sometimes the general populace of a town might provide a replacement for a man whose wife they kidnapped during a war.

There was a similar practice in places where there were deities. These deities might announce that they wanted some women to serve them, so the townspeople would fan out to other areas and would kidnap or purchase women to present to their deities. These women might then become "osu" (people dedicated as slaves to the service of deities) and would belong to those deities.

In Oba, which is in Isiuzo, there is a certain powerful spirit called "Ochegu Oluwa - O gbuo o kwara ngwongwo."

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If this deity kills a person who has sworn an oath to him, then all of that person's family will be taken and given to this deity (Ochegu). The women among them will then become his property--deity women. The deity's priest will marry these women in the name of the deity.

Maternal claims

There are some places in Igbo land where the father is considered the owner of his children, and female children can always return to their father's house. But in other areas there is no such custom. These places are Ohafia, Afikpo, all groups surrounding Abam like Umuhu Abam, Ameke Abam, Ndiebe Abam, Ozu Abam, Ndi Mmeme Abam which is under Bende (local government). In these places the people observe the custom of maternal claims. What this means is that the mother's father or the mother's relatives will love her children and will take them as their own more than will the relatives of the father. It will be their responsibility to see that the children are well taught in school or in a lucrative trade.

By the same token, a young boy will know that the place where he has the most influence, respect and honor is with his mother's kith and kin. He will have a high regard for his mother's people and will act as though he and they were both of the same parents in the same place. It is said that "one who eats the testicles of a ram owes a debt to hydrocele," meaning that the boy knows that it is his responsibility to align himself with his mother's rather than his father's people.

The children a married man owns are the females. These are the ones whose sons will go back toward their maternal grandfather, and will pay homage to him. For his part, the

grandfather will regard those children as though he had sired them himself. This custom is widespread today in these towns.

In some towns like Ameke Abam, the maternal claim is such a strong custom that it causes a son not to take the name of his blood father. Instead he takes the name of his maternal grandfather. Only the girls take the name of their blood father. The people here favor this custom--"Firewood is found in the place where the food is being cooked."

Substitution of a woman

Sometimes through some ill fate a man will not have any sons, and thus will have no one to take over as head of the household when he dies. In some places such as Ihiala, Oru, Nnewi, Aguata, Umuahia, Olu, Orumba and Isiuzo, such a man can leave one of his daughters at home to see whether she can bear him a son (note: the daughter's choice of a father for her child apparently is not important here). This is called "ihachi nwanyi" (substitution of a woman).

This means that the daughter's children will answer to the name of their mother's father, as if it were their mother's father who were her husband. This type of tradition is dying out now since the church and the court are performing marriages and advocating marriage between one man and one woman, for better or for worse until death parts them. Churchgoers believe that this "substitution" is not a good custom because it contradicts the teachings of the church.

The "ojonkijo" marriage custom

There are some places, such as Eha-Amufu in Isiuzo, Igbere, Abiriba, Item, Alayi in Bende and Ohafia, where young women get married in age-mate groups. This takes place in August and is accompanied by a big feast. But there is one thing the Ohafia people do differently. This is known as "ojonkijo."

If the young women in an age group have completed their marriage arrangements and there are still a few unmarried ones left, these latter will run away from their fathers' houses on the day that the others go home with their husbands. The townspeople will then take a special census to enumerate the young women as well as the men who have not been able to marry. The men will take wives from that free group. Before these women are sent to their husbands, the men will be notified, and by the same token the women who are to be married off will be informed before the appointed day arrives.

It is not only unmarried women who are matched with husbands on that day. All women who run away from their husbands will be spoken for on this "ojonkijo" occasion. If a man wants a woman to be assigned to him from among those who have left their husbands, this will be accomplished on the "ojonkijo" day. In Ohafia a special dance is done on the day the women are led home to their husbands. The townspeople teach the women the dance and they perform it while they are being led to the husbands.

On the appointed day the townspeople hold a special celebration for this, and then they beat out the dance rhythm while the women are being led to the men, who are usually those who are seeking wives or those who have not been able to marry because of bad luck or some other types of problems.

The "ojoṅkijo" tradition is not observed as a regular thing. The last time it was done in Oḥafia was during the Nigerian war in 1969. One important effect it has is that it discourages women from abandoning their husbands capriciously. The Oḥafia people regard it as a tool for preserving marital harmony.

It is hard to say whether this practice still survives, because it is called up only when deemed necessary to prevent trouble. It appears to be a rarity, or like the firewood found in the area where it cooks the food. It is an example of a custom occupying whatever place any particular group of people wishes to assign it.

Divorce

Divorce occurs when husband and wife separate and each chooses to live alone. When people marry and start life together, they begin to learn about each other's ways. We know that a new marriage is like a package from the market--no one knows its contents until it is opened.

Divorce is not widespread in Igbo land but it seems more common in Umuahia, Nsuka, Oru, Olu, Owere, Mbaise and Arochukwu. In towns like Ngwoo, if the man indicates that he no longer wants the woman, enabling the woman to marry another man, the first man will not seek to have the bride-price returned. But customs like these are not observed frequently because women are told before they marry their husbands that nothing will part them except death.

In other Igbo towns various things cause husbands and wives to separate, such as adultery or prostitution. If something like that happens, the man who wants a divorce will call together his relatives, reveal to them what his wife has done, and state that he no longer wants to be married to that woman. The Igbo regard adultery as reprehensible. The relatives, when they discover that the man is telling the truth, will stand by him. They will summon the woman and provide a witness who will take her back to her father.

Before a couple separate, the elders will investigate the quarrel to find out if the woman's guilt really demands a separation.

If the separation results in the man sending the woman home, her father will not repay the bride price until the woman remarries because it was the man who initiated the divorce. But if the woman initiates the divorce, she and her father will

at once repay the bride price to the husband, regardless of whether she has another husband, because the Igbo say that "one who seeks a husband from Asaba must learn to swim, since the one who collected the ant's firewood tells the lizard to come to his feast."

If the couple's children are grown, they will stay with the husband. But if they are still young, they will stay in the wife's care until they are old enough to go and live with their father. While they are at their mother's house the father will be donating money or other things the mother can use in raising them, until such time as they have grown up and then he summons them.

Another thing which can cause divorce is illness. If the husband or the wife should come down with an incurable illness, either of them can separate from the other. If the woman falls ill like this, the bride price is not returned to the man.

Another cause of separation in Igbo land is barrenness. This poses a problem. If a man divorces his wife because she has not borne him children, he will not get his bride price back even when she remarries. Thus, many times a childless couple will decide to bring in another wife rather than resort to divorce.

Disadvantages of divorce

Divorce is frowned on in Igbo land. It is a sad day when a husband and wife who have lived together reach a decision to part. Divorce causes inlaws to shun each other. Igbos believe that the inlaw relationship is threefold, because when a man marries his townspeople, his own kith and kin, and the kith and kin of the bride all become acquainted with each other. A number of different people begin to interact as inlaws. But after a divorce, the inlaws regrettably can no longer behave the same toward each other in eating together and maintaining friendships in the names of the married couple, because the divorce inhibits them.

Divorce also causes the spread of adultery, because when a woman has no one else to marry her she has nothing to do except loiter in the streets.

If the divorced couple have children, the children will not be trained properly because the parental strife will cause them to hate one parent and love the other. Good child-rearing is easier when mother and father live together in peace, jointly training their children as they ought to be trained.

Marriage as we know it is an ancient and honorable institution in Igbo land. It is not considered right for a mature man or woman to be without a mate, because it is said that "the bat does not come out at night to do good things."

Some bad marriage customs are waning in Igbo land. For example, it is to avoid the practice of maternal claims that the people of Ohafia leave their homes and go to other towns to marry. Likewise, giving women in marriage to deities is dying out.

Through this research, we see that marriage customs vary from town to town; but one thing common to all of them is that a man always brings wine when he goes to obtain a bride!

8. CIRCUMCISION IN IGBO LAND

Circumcision is one tradition which is prevalent all over Igbo land, from the shores of the Atlantic to the interior regions, wherever Igbos live. Its origin and purpose are baffling to the present generation. If you ask someone why he is circumcised he will answer that "since the days of our ancestors all Igbos have practiced circumcision; we did not learn it on our own, so one may think that the white people brought it to us; but I can not explain what caused us to start practicing it." Thus, all efforts to discover how circumcision began and why it is practiced among all classes of Igbos turn out to be futile (like throwing salt into the ocean).

Some writers believe that this tradition is among the factors prompting people to say that Igbos are descendants of the Jews. These arguments are not important, because the child says, "The reason the one who likes to carry his father's cup is always wanting to wash his hands is that the smell of the rat may not cling to his hands."

What is circumcision?

When a baby is born it is examined to determine its sex, to see if there is any abnormality and, in the case of a male child, to see if there is a difference between him and a strong young circumcised man. Usually there is some flesh

there (at the tip of the penis) which is unattractive to the eye. It is the cutting off of that flesh which is called circumcision. The people of Amanduḡba, Uḡuaka, and some other towns surrounding Olu call it "ikwa ukwu" (removing the foot).

There are certain people who specialize in circumcising, and they are known to the public. They do their work two weeks after the birth of the child. In many parts of Igbo land circumcision can be done by both men and women -- whoever wants to learn it -- but in places like Mbaise only women do this type of work. However, whoever does it must be a person who is careful and meticulous in everything he does.

Circumcision must be performed with a special tiny knife. The people of Mbaise, Ngwa and others call this knife "aguwa;" those of Onicha province call it "aguba;" and some people in Uḡuahia call it "nsọ."

Before the child is a week old his father, or his messenger, will go and engage someone who performs circumcisions. The latter will spell out what he must be given as remuneration, although many times it is not necessary to name a price because "it is something the ant and the lizard already know about." The things he requires are not very difficult to obtain. In some places these items are counted in groups of four.

When the appointed day arrives, the circumciser comes in with his equipment and sets to work. Before he begins, he

digs a small depression in the ground where the child's blood can collect, and he boils some water to use in bathing the circumcised area. He will also tie up various ingredients to spread on the wound to speed its healing. During the operations the child will be held still by someone other than his own mother, especially if he is her firstborn. Usually her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law, her neighbor or some other older woman holds the child. Sometimes the mother is not even allowed to stay and watch, because it is thought that she will be too distressed by the procedure. A mother's heart draws her to her crying infant.

In Okposi they tie the flesh with string before the cutting, so it will be easier to grasp. After the flesh is cut off, the child's mother will tie it up together with the afterbirth and give it to her husband, who will go and bury it in the ground on any farm he chooses. From that day on that land will belong to the newborn child. After he is grown, no one will try to claim it or to persuade him to share it with them after the father has died. The people of Etiti, in Okigwe, and the people of Ubomiri, in Mbaitoli, do the burying at the foot of an oil palm tree. That tree then becomes the child's property. The mother will take care of the tree for him until he grows up.

The people of Owere, Olu, Uzuakoli and Umuahia and some other places do not follow the practice of giving gifts to a child when he is circumcised.

When the circumciser has finished his work he is given whatever payment is due him according to local custom, the items often being counted out, as we mentioned, in groups of four. In Umunze, which is in Aguata Division, he is given two kinds of yam in groups of four. The first one is called "male yam" and the second one "female yam." He might also receive 40 kobo (coins), 4 kobo, 4 kola nuts, and food and drink to sustain him while he is there. In the old days Owere people gave twenty or thirty strings of cowrie shells (used for money). The Umuahia people give six kobo, kola and wine, while the Mbaise people give two yams, two pieces of money, wine and other food and drink, etc. After the circumciser finishes eating and drinking, he thanks them for their hospitality, and gives them medicine to use to dry up the wound. He will be returning from time to time to check on the condition of his handiwork.

In places like Etiti Division in Okigwe, circumcision is not performed in any place where many people can look on. When the operation is over they take a cloth and cover it so it will not be seen, especially by pregnant women, because if that happens they believe the wound will begin to bleed again and will not heal quickly. The Udi people take banana leaves and place them in the doorway of the child's house in such a way that one must step over them in order to enter.

These leaves are believed to neutralize charms which may be employed by people who enter the child's home. They also believe that there is a certain type of person whose touch will keep the circumcised wound from healing quickly. However, if the banana leaves are in place and such a person steps over them as he enters, they cause his powers to be ineffective. Beliefs like this are found in certain places but are not widespread.

In places like Mbaise, after the operation is performed the circumciser will give the child's mother a certain preparation to use whenever she does hard work. She must rub it around both her breasts any time she finishes working and before she nurses the baby. This is believed to prevent the child from absorbing pains from the mother's hard work! The name of this medicine is "abakala nwa." (Apparently some type of chicken fat -- very rich.)

Circumcision in Igbo land is not the type of ceremony celebrated by drinking wine and feasting. Only those who happen to be around when the circumciser is fed will join him in eating and drinking.

Nowadays, whatever a person earns is his only income. If he is a woodcutter, he knows that his woodcutting income must supply the wherewithal for him to marry, build a house, ~~buy~~ a car and educate his children. This has caused all

prices to soar. No one person can be blamed, because, as our friends the Oriental Brothers (popular singers) say in their song, "Everyone wants good things." This is one reason why today, if you summon an elderly circumciser in your town to come and perform a circumcision, he or she will name a fee which arises out of his or her need for money at that particular time. In some places today circumcisers are receiving from one to six naira (paper money) or more. If you question some of them, you find that they will not name a set price. Some will be foolish enough to tell you to give them a white cock. Many babies today are being circumcised in hospitals, thus undermining the circumcisers' business so that they become discouraged and say that "if a man is deprived of something he uses for good purposes, his usefulness is destroyed." They are therefore angry and bitter toward the hospitals. But "one who eyes his superior with contempt is only looking in vain." Since circumcision is painful, people no longer have strong feelings about their children being circumcised at home. The places where circumcisers are still respected these days are the rural villages where there are no hospitals.

In the old days both boys and girls were circumcised, but today, because of medical discoveries, female circumcision is no longer practiced. It is said that lack of circumcision

is no disadvantage for a woman--on the contrary, circumcision brings them all kinds of troubles. Some people believe that male circumcision is not necessary, either, but others say that it enhances the attractiveness of the male body and helps the man to keep himself clean.

In Igbo culture nothing would be denied to a man on account of lack of circumcision. It is not regarded as an abomination, as it is in Jewish tradition. However, it does bring a feeling of embarrassment, especially as the child grows older. It will cause him not to follow the example of his friends in going naked until the age of maturity.

Adult circumcision

Adult circumcision is a custom showing that anyone who undergoes it has truly become a full-grown man and can do anything with other men. Although people of various tribes circumcise their children at birth, there are some who circumcise adults. They simply do it the way that seems best to them. "The firewood in a town cooks the town's food." This adult circumcision takes place after the person has grown to adolescence.

Places which practice adult circumcision are Akagbe and other towns surrounding it like Nkanu Local Government, Ezaa and neighboring towns in Abakalike Local Government. In these places there is no talk at all of circumcising in childhood.

Other towns which used to follow this practice but stopped it not so long ago are Nike, Nkereefi, and Nkanu.

Sequence of events in adult circumcision

In Akagbe circumcision is performed in age groups. It goes along with marriage requirements, hence calls for careful preparation. A young man or woman knows that the ordeal awaits him or her, as surely as threatening rainclouds will not fail to produce rainfall.

Female circumcision takes place when the woman is ready to join her husband, or when unmarried girls start their puberty training periods. Thus the girl will be circumcised when she enters the place of confinement, and from then on she will proceed to carry out the other requirements.

Much more is involved in male circumcision. The process takes about seven weeks. The man ceases all hard work, and starts taking a nourishing diet. Although he does not stay indoors like the young woman in puberty training, he does take very good care of himself. His friends and relatives bring him meat and other foodstuffs to help him prepare for this important undertaking.

At an early stage the diviner will have been consulted to find out if the local spirits are going to give any trouble, and to be assured that all will go well. If there is any hindrance, a sacrifice will be made or the deities

will be propitiated. The young man's parents will buy the equipment needed for the operation, such as a razor, medicine for the wound, a mat, and a covering cloth or blanket which is both wide and strong. Meat and foodstuffs will be provided in abundance.

The day of circumcision

The appointed day has arrived. The circumciser has been informed and is prepared. He is happy because it has been ascertained through divination that he should be selected. The patient himself will also be prepared, because "a lame child will not die in a scheduled war." (Implies that he will be carried to safety ahead of time.) His family will have counseled the patient as best they can, because they know that if the operator becomes confused while doing the job he might cut off the head of the penis and castrate the fellow.

Early in the morning, water is boiled. The circumciser brings various kinds of leaves to add to this water, and the solution will be used to bathe the wound. While this is being done, strong-minded young men will assemble, ready to hold the patient down. The man will emerge, remove his clothes and lie down on a banana leaf, eyes turned upward. The young men come then and grasp him firmly. In the twinkling of an eye the circumciser will bend down and, seated on a

small, low-backed stool, will pull out the foreskin, steady the penis firmly and cut off the foreskin. The blood will run into the hole which has been dug nearby, and then medicine will be applied to the wound. There are no words to describe the excruciating pain.

Caring for the circumcised person

It is the family's duty to find someone to bathe the wound of the circumcision. Of course it must not be one of those people whose touch prevents healing. The patient will stay indoors until the wound has healed, the designated person staying close to him and attending to all his needs. "One does not tell a deaf person that war has erupted." The young man's family will provide him with blood-enriching foods--meat and fish and drinks in large quantities.

After the wound heals, the young man will be fully a man. A feast will be prepared for the occasion. He will now be able to marry, and everyone will now regard him as a mature person.

What is the best time for circumcision?

First of all one must remember that only men are circumcised today. (Female circumcision ended in Igbo land quite some time ago, although there are some old women still living who have been circumcised.) In considering this question

one should take into account the pain and trouble which go along with it and the appearance of the body during childhood and adulthood. Judging from the opinions of the majority of the people, and from the practices of many groups, it would seem that circumcision should be performed in childhood. This will relieve the person of the apprehension, the great expense, and any ostracism which might occur before he is finally circumcised.

The value of circumcision

Circumcision is a tradition--therefore, a man will be circumcised as his group sees fit, so that he can fulfill his responsibilities. An uncircumcised person will be regarded as one not fully mature. In some groups, an uncircumcised male cannot marry. A person will be circumcised in order to avoid the insults, gossip, scorn, and ostracism between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Circumcision is also superior in appearance to non-circumcision.

9. PERFORMING FEMALE PUBERTY CEREMONIES

Origin of female puberty ceremonies

The observance of female puberty ceremonies is an Igbo tradition well known from ancient times. No one knows when it started, but it appears to go back to the very beginnings of Igbo life. The observance is found not only in eastern Nigeria but also among the Mbammiri people, the Yoruba, the Bini, and in East Africa. However, it is not known whether the custom entered Igbo land from those areas or vice versa.

What are female puberty ceremonies?

These are customs designed to prepare an adolescent girl for marriage. When a girl reaches marriageable age and her body has matured, her parents will prepare a place for her to stay before she unites with her husband. If she already has a fiance, he may join in the preparations. In some places, these same ceremonies may also be performed to prepare men for marriage.

Places in Igbo land observing female puberty ceremonies

It is important to recognize that puberty ceremonies are not performed over the entire Igbo area. Places where something is known concerning them are Onicha, Oka, Nnewi, Owere, Olu, Abiriba, Ohaozara, Abakaleke, Mgbidi, Okigwe

and other towns surrounding them. The ceremonies are called by several different names. Around Onicha, Oka, Nnewi and Olu, the name is "iru mgbede." Around Ohaozara, Abakaleke and Okogwe it is called "ikwe ezi," while in Abiriba it is known as "inọ nzuzu." It is one of the ancient traditions which now are dying out. However there are places, such as Mgbidi, where it persists.

Equipment needed for performance of female puberty ceremonies

Requirements for the carrying out of the puberty traditions are not exactly the same all over Igbo land, but a few things exist in common. The first is that it is a time of rest, a time to eat especially good food and to learn things a girl ought to know before she marries. The second is that there is a certain time known as "going to market for puberty ceremonies" or "going to market for circumcision" which marks the termination of the puberty period or the circumcision period.

Reasons for female puberty ceremonies

Parents undertake to fulfill these traditions to show their love for their daughter and to thank her for all the work she has done for them while she lived at home. At this time they allow their daughter to gain weight, become

pleasingly plump, and enhance the natural beauty of her body, so as to make her desirable to men. By this means they inform the townspeople that their daughter has reached marriageable age. In the old days in Ọkpọsi, the puberty customs were also observed by men to show that they were old enough to live on their own and to make their own contributions to certain payments called "akiriiko" or tax. They could also be used in jockeying for position, in that a man who had performed puberty ceremonies took precedence over his age mates who had not done so. On any occasion for sharing, the one who had completed puberty ceremonies would receive his share before those who had not, even if they were older than he. It is expected that anyone who has completed the ceremonies will proceed to marry without wasting time. If a woman in these circumstances does not marry, she soon acquires the reputation of being an undesirable prospect.

How puberty ceremonies are observed in various places

Puberty ceremonies are carried out in various ways in Igbo land. They are described with different names and people follow different sequences in their implementation.

Around Ngwa, Isuikwuato, Okogwe, Bende and Arochukwu they call it "iru mgbede" (). It begins when a girl is physically and mentally mature, and lasts for three months. During this time she will do no

physical labor, she will have servants to wait on her, and will remain in a special house, eating only the best foods, cooked with meat and fish, which her parents will supply.

In some places the young women collect meat and fish bones and chew them during this period. In Mbaise and other places the girl does not leave her special house at all, but in places like Aguata, Okogwe, and Arọchukwu, she is permitted to go outside and walk around. Her servants will be grinding camwood and yellow vegetable dye and rubbin it on her body; and they will be arranging the house and doing things to please her. Wherever she is there will be only laughing and joking. Her duty is only to eat and beautify herself.

While the girl is observing these customs, she will be taking instruction on how to get along with her husband, take care of a household, and raise children properly. Sometimes mothers will bring their children to her so she can get plenty of practice in caring for children. All this is designed to prepare her well for the future life she is expected to live.

At the very first sign of puberty the girl will go and tell her mother. From that day on she will stop shaving her head. This is called "iha isi nwa agboghọ" (allowing young woman's hair to grow). From that time on she will be thinking about plans for puberty ceremonies. These usually take place

after the farmers' planting season. The young woman may start by getting fat, but there is no hard and fast rule about this aspect. In Abakeleke, if the girl gets fat she becomes taboo, and no man will touch her or play with her. After this the girl will enter the puberty observance period. She goes into the special house, has servants, refrains from any kind of work, and eats lots of meat and fish. Her mother will teach and instruct her in depth about everything involved in married life.

While the girl remains in this period, young men and masqueraders will be coming each day that the girl's town holds its market, in order to receive handouts from her, such as coconuts, cooked oil bean seeds, or groundnuts (peanuts) and fried corn. They keep on coming every market day for the entire three months.

In Mbaise the observances will last eight months for the daughter of a wealthy father, but may take only one month or so for a poorer family. The people of Mbaise, Abakeleke and Okposi kill a goat on the day the young woman enters the puberty observance period. In Okposi her parents and brothers will give her one goat each. These animals will be killed to provide her with food during her confinement.

The people of Mbaise have a custom called "iṛo ukwu" (bending the leg). For this practice, a motherly woman

who has adult children and has never lost a child will be called in to do the "leg bending." After she eats the food which is cooked for her, she begins the ritual. She will massage the girl's body thoroughly all over, and say:

From this day on, the world will be kind to you.

You will not suffer the death of a husband.

Your father will not die.

You will bear children and raise them.

Your children will take care of you in your old age.

In Mgbidi, which is in Oru Division, the puberty ceremonies are called "ikwe ezi" (sexual maturity). To them it is a tradition too important to abandon. Some of the others can be dropped, but not this one. People high and low, church people and Europeans, all have made efforts to put a stop to it, but they were unsuccessful. Any girl in Mgbidi territory who does not perform the "ikwe ezi" will not enter into any marital relationship with a man. If such a girl willfully enters into a sexual relationship with a man, "it will be seen what the fire does to the rat's ear." Even if the girl lives abroad and is educated up to the doctorate, if she does not perform the "ikwe ezi" according to custom, she is not considered fully a woman. Her parent-will not allow her to marry nor will they agree to give permission for her to go and join a husband. The law of

"ikwe ezi" involves every girl in Mgbidi--Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, CMS members, Apostolics--whatever her belief, "ikwe ezi" includes her. It is an inescapable debt owed to her town.

In Mgbidi the "ikwe ezi" begins on Afo day and takes seven weeks (Igbo four-day weeks), or 28 days (one month). The girl's father will fire a gun as loud as he can on that day, to mark the beginning of the observance. The girl will enter a small house made of palm branches, called "ntugbe," which has been built for the purpose. She will stay in it for a while, and then emerge. This means that she has matured enough to live in a household and take care of it as women are supposed to. After she emerges, she enters the place where she will stay during the puberty observance period. Here she stays, doing nothing but eating nourishing food--no cassava, but plenty of meat and fish. Her servants will rub her with camwood to make her skin smooth, and will do for her whatever else she needs.

If the girl has someone desiring to marry her, he also will observe puberty ceremonies on his own, eating plenty of meat and fish and other good things, just as she does.

People will be coming to the girl's place every Nkwo day, when they will be eating cocoanut and fish and other things cooked for them. Cocoanut and fish must always be given when "ikwe ezi" is being performed.

Costume for puberty ceremonies

This involves wearing strings of beads around the waist or around the neck, as well as arm bracelets or brass leg spirals. In Abakeleke the girl would wear bracelets and anklets of ivory. The body is marked with "uli" (a plant which, when ground, yields a juice which turns black on drying) and "nkirişiala" (a red substance causing shiny swellings). In Aguata they wear something called "isi ego" (money head) or "isi okpoko" (bird head). This is a carved head ornament with cowrie shells and metal coins embedded in it. It looks like a cock's comb, and derives its name from a bird called "okpoko" (a large, plantain-eating bird). In Okpoşî the girl would have her teeth filed and marks cut in her face. "Uhie" (red dye from camwood) and "edo" (yellow vegetable dye) are rubbed on the girls' bodies, and they chew on a stick which makes their lips red. These days this is called a "love stick."

The girl may take exercise with various recreational activities. She may play games called "ikpo okpo" (strike the calabash) and "oga" (). Or she may play on a flute called "ode" which is made from a piece of wood cut off at both ends. As she frolics she may sing a song such as:

Seek diligently

Seek diligently

The lizard does the "nkwa" drum dance in the rainy season

Dry season comes to the earth and dries it like firewood

Seek diligently

Seek diligently

The girl at this stage will be beautiful to behold. Her body will be soft, glistening, and beautifully decorated, causing the men who look at her to tremble with desire.

Regulations concerning those who do not observe puberty ceremonies

In Abakeleke they use divination to ascertain the type of circumcision to be performed on a girl who is going to undergo puberty rites. This can take place during either the rainy season or the dry season. If a girl should become pregnant before she has been circumcised, her parents will make sacrifices to appease the spirits and the people of their land, after which the girl will be circumcised publicly.

In Mgbidi, if a young woman becomes pregnant before entering puberty rites, she is regarded as having committed an abomination. Her parents will have to make amends. They will buy ten goats and 500 yams to pacify the anger of the

spirits and the townspeople. In addition, the girl will be banished and will be obliged to go to another town to live. Her mother will take a broom and sweep her house thoroughly to show that she has swept out that girl and all of her influence in their home. She is no longer their daughter. If the girl disobediently reenters that town, the people will stone her. This tradition is very strong in the Mgbidi area even today.

In other towns they do not banish such a girl, but they do consider such a pregnancy a disgrace. The girl's age mates will be critical of her and she will be overcome with shame. She will seclude herself in her mother's house, brooding over her condition. Behavior like this will give the young woman and her family a bad reputation that may last for generations.

Market ceremony for puberty rites

What is the market ceremony for puberty rites?

This is a special trip to the market which takes place on the day the girl emerges from her place of confinement. It is planned for the village's regular market day, but they make something special of it. It is a universal custom wherever puberty ceremonies are observed, serving to demonstrate publicly that the girl fulfillment of her obligation can never again be questioned.

Preparation for the market ceremony

While the girl is staying in her special house, her parents (and possibly her future husband) are buying all the utensils and ingredients needed so she can have her cooking done, eat, be massaged, and grow fat. At the same time they will be looking ahead to the ceremonial trip to market. They will notify their kith and kin, associates and friends of the day the celebration will take place, and instruct them all to be ready to come and lead the girl to market. Of course, everyone born in the area will know which day is the ceremonial market day for puberty rites, because they use such things as devices for counting years and for honoring Igbo customs.

Another thing the parents will do is to buy or borrow large numbers of beads or beaded waist bands. The number of necklaces or waist beads the girl wears is an indication of her parents' wealth. In addition, everyone knows that an expert in body painting is always available, ready to answer a call.

Plenty of meat will be bought, or a goat will be killed, to prepare a feast on that day, and yam and fish and many small items such as are used for celebrations in Igbo land will be acquired. In some villages such as Achina in Aguata, one must kill a mature goat which is also fat, because the

fat will be removed for use in the market day ceremonies. After all these preliminaries, the one who is the center of attention will be ready to come out to the market.

The day of the market ceremony

When the appointed day arrives, you can imagine what hustle and bustle there is in very compound which has a girl or girls scheduled to make the ceremonial trip to market. Kith and kin, friends and associates assemble along with other young women who have not yet undergone their puberty observances, whose work is to cook food, assist the girl, and lead her to market. Cooking begins early; people are fetching water, cooking pepper, fish, melon seeds, etc. The thumping sound of the pestle in the mortar is heard, as fufu is prepared. Children sweep the compound and outside path so they will be clean for the guests. After the food is cooked guests begin to arrive, and the food, meat and oil bean begin their journeys. The men drinking wine in the obi will be throwing their heads back in satisfaction. All this goes on until about mid-day.

In the afternoon, the market will be crowded with shoppers as well as people who came specifically to ogle the attractive young women who will be emerging from their confinement. A musical din breaks out in the various households where the rites are being celebrated. It comes from

the young women who are performing their special dances for accompanying the honorees to market.

The young celebrant's trip to market

Before the girl is led out, she will have bathed thoroughly; the decorations painted on her skin will be glittering; and her body will have been rubbed soft as the heavenly clouds. No man can look at her without wanting to touch her. Her waist is covered with beads; her earrings and necklaces are eye-catching. In some towns she might wear leg bands which are used as noisemakes when dancing. The other girls who lead her to market prepare themselves in the same way. Indeed, they have lost all resemblance to girls born in that town.

The girl coming out to the market ceremony will not be wearing any clothing except for a waist cloth which will end at the knees--but her skin will be more beautiful than any clothing. In some places like Achina, which is in Aguata, they go stark naked front and back except for the beads worn around their waists. This is so that they can be looked over to see if they are pregnant--a condition which on such an occasion would be considered an abomination. In Mgbidi, near Olu, pregnancy before puberty rites is such a taboo that the people do not allow their daughters to associate with men at all before undergoing puberty ceremonies.

After all the preparations are completed, the honorees, with their female companions beating their drums, start out toward the market. Other people come out of their quarters and follow them, also beating drums. All the kith and kin accompany the girls of their own families, so as to give them confidence and let them know that they have people supporting them.

In the towns where fat goats are killed, as mentioned earlier, a raw bunch of the fat is taken and skewered on a stick and carried like a flag in the procession, to show the kind of goat which has been killed for the ceremonial trip. Meat from other goats is also cooked and taken to market, where it will be cut and given to anyone who makes a donation to the girl while she dances. When it touches their mouths it makes them very oily.

When the parade reaches the market, there will be so many age-groups doing their own dances that one will not know where to look first. People throw money to the honorees, and plates or calabashes are provided to collect it all so that people can see how much honor, respect and family backing the girls have.

Young unmarried men will be staying off to one side, admiring the young women and their beauty, and looking for unmarried ones so they can approach them after the dancing is over.

The young women's return from market

When darkness begins to fall and people get tired, the dancers start to gather up their belongings and return home, singing just as when they came. The onlookers start home, exchanging notes about what they saw. The young men discuss those who looked beautiful to them and those they would like to marry or be friends with. The whole town is excited. The older men remain apart, considering whether the celebration that year was more exciting than others in years past.

At home, another big festival awaits. The guests who accompanied the market celebrants home begin to gorge themselves on the food that was cooked and partly eaten before the trip to market. After dark the noise of the eating and drinking going on among the girls' families is heard loud and clear. The parents, as well as the girl's husband, are pleased; people are shaking their hands and praising them for what they have accomplished -- furnishing all that meat that their daughter ate while in puberty confinement, killing all those goats and other animals, and making all those elaborate preparations for her. It is a wondrous thing!

Late at night when the feasters have gone home and the girls who came to help have cleared away the festive paraphernalia, the young girl herself will eat her own meal and then go to rest. All talk is cut off. Beginning the next day she will be just like her age-mates again and will go about like any other girl in that town.

In some towns, if the girl finishing her puberty ceremonies is betrothed, she will go to her husband on that night. But even if she does not have a husband, she is regarded as having emerged from childhood, and her family can build her a house of her own in her father's compound. In some areas she is no longer allowed to live in the same compound--rather, a house is built for her elsewhere and she can return on visits.

Advantages of puberty ceremonies

The Igbo people, as we know, do not engage in any business which is unprofitable, so we can be sure that these traditions bring them many benefits.

They indicate that the girl has matured enough to marry and to bear full womanly responsibilities. Because of all the resting and nourishing diet her body will be soft and beautiful. If she is dark-skinned, her darkness will shine like a light. If she is fair-skinned, her fairness will be more marked. It is said that "beauty makes the eyes come alive." The young woman in this state will cause young bachelors to look at her with "marrying eyes."

Without conventions such as this, there would not be a good opportunity for the parents formally to show the girl to the public.

Also, this is a good opportunity for marriage-training. Married women and those of her mother's age-group will be

coming to teach her the behavior of a married woman. This is not something to be taken lightly. They instruct her in how to please a man, how to live in peace by having patience, how to keep a house clean, how she and her husband's mother, father, wives and brothers will get along together, and how to take care of guests. They also include the care of children, because they expect motherhood to follow soon after marriage. In places like Abiriba they bring the girl a few children to take care of while they are at work, sometimes without feeding them, so that the girl must take full care of them until the mothers return.

Again, this period of confinement provides an opportunity for the girl to meditate about the future. She will prepare herself for the good and the bad in it. Whereas up to that time she has been too busy running errands, she now can pause and think about her new life.

In places like Azummiri in Ukwu Division, puberty rites in a sense constitute the girl's right to be having intercourse with a man after she finishes the puberty period. If there is only one female child in a family she must not have intercourse with a man or get herself pregnant before completing the puberty ceremonies. If she does become pregnant, there will be less gossip and disgrace if it happens after completing the rites.

When a girl is well-behaved her parents will seek to have the puberty ceremonies performed. Men are quick to engage themselves to well-behaved girls and then take over the sponsorship of the puberty ceremonies. Through these rites the parents show their love for their daughters and their gratitude for their help in running errands for them. If a girl is not very beautiful, the parents use this time to enhance her looks.

Puberty ceremonies give a man time to get his household and his "obi" ready for the young woman who is going to enter her new life there. This preparation will be conducive to marital harmony.

These ceremonies also contribute to the town's well-being by preventing the disgrace of bad behavior. A man will not consider having intercourse with a woman before she emerges from puberty confinement, because this might get her pregnant and then she will be too ashamed to participate in the special market ceremonies. A woman who becomes pregnant before entering the rites knows that all these things have been denied her. Thus the girls try to preserve their virginity before the puberty confinement so that they can participate in all the activities with their friends.

In places like Abiriba these young women will be putting on wrappers and going to the stream to wash with cold water. They do this to accustom their bodies because they do not

know what sort of place they will be going to when they marry. It may be a place where boiling water is for men only, or boiling water may be a difficult thing to accomplish (scarcity of firewood, for instance). Some of them put marks on their abdomens to indicate that they will endure the pain of childbirth, since they may not have any other opportunity to speak for themselves about their endurance. Things like this are not done at any other time.

In places like Abakeleke, the girl is circumcised at the time of puberty ceremonies, to show that she has grown to be a woman. In some places in Igbo land, no woman will be able to take any title if she has not undergone puberty ceremonies.

Causes of the decline of puberty ceremonies

Puberty ceremonies are among the traditions which have declined in Igbo land, for many reasons.

The coming of white people to our land was beneficial to us but was also detrimental in some ways. The advent of the church contributed to the decline of puberty ceremonies. One thing the missionaries taught women was how to take care of a household. There was a place for this kind of training at Egbu, near Owerre, and any man who joined the church in the old days would send his wife to be trained at Egbu. She would be taught such things as how to read the Bible, how to take

care of a household as white people do, and how to take care of children. The people of Mbaise and other towns around Owere used to come there for that teaching, and wherever such training took place, the puberty practices declined.

Through literacy young women were enlightened, so that no one wanted to wear necklaces or waist beads and take part in the market ceremonies. If a girl really tried to perform puberty ceremonies, she would be too ashamed to go naked in public and dance so that the audience would throw money and gifts for her.

Although there is more wealth now than in the old days, money does not buy a lot because of high prices charged. People have many more needs for their money nowadays. The money they have is not enough to provide food for one person for several months or even up to a year as some people used to do for the young woman. The girls now cannot spare the time to come and stay in the village during puberty confinement. Some are working, some studying, and they will not leave what they are doing to come and stay all that time doing nothing but eating. Because of the innovations which entered our land, there is no place now where a young woman could afford to provide all the nourishing food required, except outside of Africa where more food is available. In the old days people did strenuous work--they worked their farms, went to gather firewood, went to market, and wrestled. These things

caused the lean condition of the girls when they entered puberty confinement. People nowadays do not do these things so much-- now, if they want to go wash clothes in the stream they go by car! They manage to find ways to do things in easier ways, and they want to eat less and abandon fattening foods.

As for the red and yellow dyes which are used during the puberty ceremonies, no young woman of today will consent to come and sit down and be rubbed with dyes for a year. Some say that it will spoil their dresses. Also, other products are available which are just as effective in softening the skin, and there are opportunities to apply these things wherever the girls work or go to school.

Because of this enlightenment young men and women do not stay in their villages any more. Many go to the city, where life is lived for enjoyment, so there is no one left at home to undergo puberty ceremonies. Many customs continued these days are adulterated. Older people have begun to die off or have joined their families in the city, so there is no one to ask how these things were done in the old days.

Whereas parents used to use puberty rites to thank their daughters for being dutiful, today they do other things for them instead, such as spending a lot of money on their educations.

In the final analysis, the biggest factor in the fading out of this tradition is that the Igbo people do not regard their traditions as very important. White people came to other lands just as they came to Igbo land, but those people did not abandon their traditions, especially those not involving harmful practices such as killing people. The Calabar people continue their traditions until this very day, and they also were exposed to white culture. The Yoruba practice their customs with vigor. We ought to honor our traditions, especially those which are good, and correct those which are bad.

Thoughts concerning puberty ceremonies today

It is good to review traditions to see if they should be allowed to die out completely or if they should be revived.

In deciding this question, the first thing one will find out is that tradition is tradition. "It is the firewood which is found in the tribe which cooks the tribe's food." If one fails to plant his yams they will decay in the yam barn because it is only when one plants his yams that he profits from them. Igbos ought to know the benefits of preserving their traditions because they are demonstrations concerning their towns, their ways of life, their behavior, their food, their origins, etc. But concerning puberty ceremonies, it is my opinion that they should be continued with the bad things about them changed.

I say this because our land today is retrogressing to a great extent in behavioral matters, especially concerning

male-female relationships. Efforts have been made to stem this tide but they were unsuccessful. Since puberty ceremonies have a bearing on this, it would be good if they were carried on.

Some aspects could be changed, like going naked--the girl could wear a wrapper or something else when coming out to the market ceremony. Or, if in some places the custom is disliked, perhaps it could be observed without the girl remaining confined like a prisoner. A solution will be found if we join hands to "find a black goat before dark."

10. CUTTING FACIAL MARKS IN IGBO LAND

"Ichi" are special marks or cuts made on the bodies of men in Igbo land. Although this marking is not a special tradition per se, nor is it an initiation rite, it is important in various parts of Igbo land with reference to taking titles. There are certain titles such as "oꝛo" or "atako" which a man cannot take unless he has undergone the cutting of "ichi."

It is not a hard and fast rule that, in a town which practices the cutting of marks, every man living there must undergo the ordeal. However, "when the mouth eats the eye stares with hunger." Apart from acquiring titles, cutting marks in the old days placed a person in a special elevated position of honor and respect. It showed that he had a great potential for courage and strength, because "a chicken will become a cock beginning at the head."

Not everyone in a town which practices the cutting of marks will have the opportunity to participate. "If all men became equally outstanding, there would be nothing left to strive for."

Thus an "osu" (person dedicated as slave to service of a deity, or whose ancestors were so dedicated) can never even dream of cutting "ichi" marks, nor can an idler even get so much as a smell of it. These idlers know that they are not

easily obtained (one does not "dance with snuff in the hand"), as the preparation and the special market ceremony demand a lot of money. But any man who knows that there is nothing preventing him from cutting "ichi" marks tries very hard to see that he does complete the process. If he does not, he will be taken as a drifter, a coward, "one who is afraid to snatch the palm kernel from the chicken." In some towns such people are called "one who blunts a wealthy farmer's knife," and their words carry no weight in community affairs.

Only men of good character and upright behavior will cut body marks. Thieves, informers, those who commit abominations, outcasts, or those not owning family shrines do not qualify. But this does not prevent the cutting of children whose fathers have it done so that the children can be eligible to take titles after he dies. This is because in some towns a man does not take the "ozo" title while his father is still living.

To undergo the cutting of body marks but not take "ozo" title is like carrying a gun and not shooting it. Such a man feels ashamed about it. He has cut the marks of a weakling or a poor man.

In Afa, which is in Udi, a man does not have marks cut if he is unmarried. The marks are used to indicate that a boy has become mature enough to participate in male activities in his town, and that he is ready to endure any kind of pain.

Areas where the cutting of "ichi" marks
is practiced

The cutting of "ichi" marks is not customary in all parts of Igbo land. The people around Onicha do it the most, as well as those of Oka, Nnewi, Udi, Igboukwu, Nri, Anambara, Nsuka and other places. It is also seen around Owere, Mbaise, Ifakala, Olu, and Ata. The people of Ngwa, Bende, Obiangwu and Umuhia do not cut marks, nor is it done in several other places around Imo State. Around Nnewi, Amichi, Ukpọ, Utu, Osumenyi, Ngwo and other places, the marks are a prerequisite for the taking of "ozo" title. In Olu, Ozubulu and other places, however, one can take ozo title without the marks.

"Ichi" mark practitioners

There are people whose special skill is to cut marks for others. They come from Umudioka, near Onicha. The people of Nri and Neni also are cutters. These people are known as "oka ichi" -- "ichi" experts. The people of Ukehe in Nsuka are wealthy farmers (strong people?) who cut their own marks. The "ichi" experts know their business well, and people believe that their hands do not inflict much pain. A person wanting marks cut will send for these people when he is ready. Often the experts make the rounds from town to town, cutting marks and filing teeth. The Mgbakwu people, near Oka, do their cutting during the eighth or ninth month of

the year, between the rainy and dry seasons. At that time the experts are as excited as buzzards who have spotted a carcass! Of course they work extremely carefully, because if one of their patients should die, the cutter would acquire a bad reputation.

Types of marks cut

In many places there are two ways of cutting body marks, one involving cutting all over the face and the other only the top of the face. In Mgbakwu, cutting around the forehead is called "iti mma" (beating with the knife). In Mbanesi, near Nnewi, there are three types of mark-cutting. The first involves cutting all over the face. The second is "atumchom," which uses eight small marks among two long camwood (red) lines. The third is "nwata ichi" (children's marks). Before cutting this one, the head is completely shaved. Four cuts are made in the head, and eventually the hair grows over them. This type is usually applied to children.

In the town of Nnewi proper there are two types of cutting-- "nwatinchom" (small strokes?) and all-over face covering. The one who takes the "nwatinchom" marks takes the "Eze" and the "Asachara" titles. The one who takes cuts all over the face takes the "Dara," "Eze" and "Dunu" titles. Only these people can wear brass spirals on their legs. Such people can afterward take the top title in all of Nnewi country, which is

called "Ataka." The person who achieves it is called "Ezeani" (Nnewi). This title requires a lot of money plus something like 20 cows. (There are only two people who have taken this title in all of Nnewi.)

In the town of Igboukwu women wear body marks. Some who have these marks are still living there today. They have the marks all over their faces. Theirs are not for the purpose of taking titles, but to show that they are women of importance who "use fish for thickening their soup."

Differences between "ichi" and other cuttings

"Ichi" are different from other cuttings which are made on the body or on the face. "Ichi" are cut only on the face. But whether it is all-over face cutting, or "atumchom," there is a certain order followed which differentiates it from other cuttings. Women do not have body marks (except in Igboukwu). Women practice a type of cutting called "ity mbibi" or "ity mbubu" (light cutting). It starts over the chest and continues to below the navel. Women also apply tattoos with a needle-like tool. The marks are long-lasting and their sole purpose is beautification.

"Ichi" marks are not just meaningless cuts. They are marks of identification peculiar to the Igbos. No other ethnic group is known to practice the cutting of these particular marks.

Enduring the pain of "ichi" is like enduring a stomach ache, or struggling with a bone when the mouth is toothless.

"The bird whose head is not hard does not go to war with a woodpecker." It is no worse than suffering a wound in childhood, which soon heals and the pain is forgotten.

Preparations for cutting "ichi" marks

Cutting "ichi" marks requires careful preparation.

"One does not probe the eye with the same thing one uses to probe the ear." Neither is it like the improvised soup which the child drinks whenever he pleases. The person who aspires to have the marks cut must prepare well. "One arrow shooting the swallow (striking the target) is better than twenty palm kernels."

In many towns, such as those around Mgbakwu, the person wanting "ichi" marks must first enter a masquerade group and perform the special drum dance (a very demanding dance) in masquerade costume. Around Ukehe in Nsuka, certain indications of maturity are required, such as putting on the loincloth. The purpose of all these prerequisites is to show that the man has reached adulthood and will be able to endure the pain involved in the cutting.

The candidate must also be sure that he has sufficient wealth to carry out the requirements, so that he will not

find himself "out in the cold" unable to complete the ceremonies. The elders have a proverb which says that "the young child who asks what happened to his father finds that the same thing happens also to him." The candidate therefore will lay by various kinds of food to eat while he is undergoing the procedure. He will cut plenty of breadfruit logs to burn for firewood. Breadfruit is used because it does not blaze up unexpectedly while burning, nor does it die out quickly like firewood from the oil bean, tamarind, or bamboo trees. After all these preliminaries, the candidate knows that "the eagle has perched on the target."

The man wanting to have "ichi" marks cut will first call all his relatives together and tell them that he is a young man who wants to "wash his hands so that he can eat with the elders," and that he is like the eagle who is fully grown and capable of flying. His relatives will then have a meeting at which they will drink wine and eat food provided for them by the candidate, and then they will consider whether he is mature enough to have the marks cut. If he succeeds in convincing them, they will tell him to go forward and they will back him up. The candidate will also call together some young men who have undergone the cutting and inform them that he wants to join their group, because "the desires of the pregnant woman are the same as the one

who impregnated her." On the day that he calls this group, he again must provide food and drink in sufficient quantity for all. After this group has listened to him, they will tell him either to go ahead, or not to try it. If they tell him to go ahead, a special type of commotion breaks out, in which they will sing the man's praises in shouts or poems, and this will be carried on right up to the day when the marks are cut. But if they do not agree, they will tell him, "Let the spear stop at the thing which it has already fallen on," and "the bird who has mourned something should not cry about it again." At that time the candidate will realize that "the puppy has bitten his owner playfully." The advice will be taken to heart. The group will return home after they have encouraged the candidate and advised him on how to proceed. They will tell him that they have "thrown out the dog's food" (made a start) and that they will not protect him in his fight with the spirits. The matter is in his hands and it will be up to him from now on.

"The food being carried to the tribe will drip oil." This means that the relatives and friends of the person aspiring to "ichi" marks will fan out over all the towns where they know there are competent "dibia" (native doctors) and will discover through divination whether this man's "ichi" cutting will please his ancestors, whether he will

withstand the pain, whether anything will happen to him during or after the cutting, or whether he will die because of the ordeal. They do not accept the word of only one doctor because they do not want to end up saying "If I had only known." Upon their return, they meet together and carefully consider everything the doctors have told them, in order to decide whether to go forward or turn back. If they discover some obstacles, they will tell those doctors to come and perform kola nut divination. When the doctor has told them what to use to offer a sacrifice in case someone is practicing divination against them, the sacrifice will be offered, and if there is no divination against them, their journey will be considered successful. When the aspirant sees that the sacrifices and divinations have been completed, he begins to think about practicing the special "ichi" divination.

This special "ichi" divination will not be neglected by the candidate, because it is the means by which his ancestors and local spirits give him the strength to undergo the cutting. For this ceremony he will call in a "dibia" and will buy two large white cocks, two hens, seven big yams, and some other small items which the doctor will tell him to buy. He will use one hen to do the Ebo (oracle) sacrifice, one white cock for the Ajagu (oracle) sacrifice, and will use the remaining

cock and hen for the face-washing ritual, which is similar to the invoking of spirits which the women practice. First, the aspirant will take care of the Ebo sacrifice. The native doctor will do this for him and will also take care of the Ajagụ sacrifice for him. He will split open a small yam from those seven mentioned earlier, and takes the remaining ones with him to eat at home. When he finishes, the aspirant will take the remains of the sacrifice and go to throw it in the "bad bush." On his way there he must not greet man or woman, in fact must not open his mouth to anyone nor even look behind him until he has finished throwing that sacrifice in the place where he has been told to throw it. After accomplishing all this, he knows that the time is ripe.

The next thing awaiting him is the face-washing ceremony. This is the occasion when he announces to all his friends, relatives, kith and kin that he is going to have "ichi" marks cut. He prepares a feast, with food and wine brought in great quantities. On that day, young men trample the earth with their dancing. The aspirant brings out a carved mask (okpesi), which he puts over his face. He kills a cock and a hen, spreads their blood on the mask, and pulls out a feather or some down from the fowl and sticks them on to it. This is to symbolize the fact that he and his future are on good terms as he prepares to have the marks cut. The Igbos believe that

if these things are not done the man may die when the marks are cut. After the chickens are killed the feast begins, with a lot of noise and commotion. The person who will undergo the cutting will also kill a goat, whose head will be well shaved and laid aside for the day of the special "ichi" market ceremony. When the feast is over, they know that "the eagle has perched on the target," "what was sought in the upper storage area has been found in the lower," and "there is nothing to prevent the dog from dying."

Since cutting "ichi" marks causes a substantial loss of blood, the candidate will be getting plenty of rest and nourishing food. The cutters come when they have a large number of candidates accumulated, so that they can go from one job to another. Nowadays, a person will send the cutter a message telling him that all is in readiness and his presence is required immediately.

When the cutter comes, the candidate will give him 400 shillings, strings of cowrie shells, seven germinating sticks full of yams and one cock. He will give 100 strings of cowrie shells to the "mgbodo ichi" (the people who hold him down during the operation). In many towns, such as Afa which is on the road to Udi, everything given to the cutter will be in groups of 81, whether yams, kola nuts, money or other things. On the appointed day all the kith and kin,

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friends and others will gather at the candidate's house. Food will be piled high, wine will be flowing like water, and the din will be deafening. Everyone will eat and drink his fill as though he were in heaven. Men who already have had their marks cut will be praising the candidate in poems and shouts. Indeed, things will be so riotous that "the eye will see what blinded it." The cutting expert will eat special food very carefully prepared ("one washes the hands before cooking") by a special person ("one whose hand does not touch fire," signifying someone who does not usually cook or perhaps one who does not cook for ordinary people). He will drink a small amount of wine--only enough to help swallow his food. (Implies that he wants his hand to be steady for the job ahead.)

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Now, the candidate is alerted. The cutter will tell the people to prepare for his work. They will go and get the leaf of a banana or of a "jioko" (wild forest yam) or a plantain, which has been warmed in the fire to soften it; they will dig a hole where the blood and water will collect; they will take a wide board of the "okwe" tree which has been scraped smooth and lay it across the hole, then take the banana leaf and lay it on the ground. The patient will rest his head on that "okwe" board. Water will be heated and brought out. The patient's head will be shaved until it is

smooth and shining like the moon. They will also bring some decaying banana stalks (usually used to plaster houses), for the cutter to use to brush lightly over the patient (they have a wet, cooling effect). When the cutter knows that the time has come, he takes a pinch of snuff, blows it from his nose, takes his bag of tools, goes to the place where the hole has been dug and arranges his things. He tells the patient to come, that "it is at dawn that the chicken gets a husband."

The patient will come and lie down on the banana leaf and place his head on the board. Strong, tough-minded young men come and grasp his hands and feet so that he cannot twist and turn or clutch the cutter and his knife, because if that happened the cutter would be defiled. Now, the "ichi" expert takes out the medicine he uses which is called "akwari." He prepares this medicine so that absent enemies can not cause the patient to die in that "ichi" hole. There is something called "urū enyi" for which the herbalist mixes together certain tree roots and "ebelebe," charcoal and white clay and various small items, and which is designed to prevent people, especially enemies, from causing the "ichi" marks or the "ulū enyi" to defile the patient. Gaiety is now at a peak; anyone who has the stomach for it can come to view the place where the "chief" lies wide-eyed and ready; the din rises to the sky; the "high priest" has entered his area of

expertise; darkness has fallen. The expert takes out his special razor-sharp knife, quickly drips hot water on the patient, and applies the knife to his face, as a din erupts toward the sky and the earth. The pipers and criers take their instruments and hold on to trees so to keep themselves from shaking and shivering. Some people do a special "mark" dance and go around shaking hands with everyone.

The expert starts his cutting on the forehead and cuts the last mark at the sides of the eyes. As he cuts, hot water is poured over the patient and blood and water collect in the pit. The patient will not not make the slightest bodily movement, not to mention groaning or crying out or shouting. This would cause him to disgrace his family and all the people of his quarter, and he would have to pay the required penalties laid down by the "ichi" expert. After that he would have to pay a fine which his relatives would levy on him, and in addition he would not be permitted to speak in the presence of the titled men of his quarter. But if the fellow is patient, while the cutter is working medicine will be applied and the pain will be lessened by means of a pot of charcoal obtained from firewood of the "ebelebe" tree. After all the face marks have been cut and only those around the eyes remain to be done, the expert, just before he makes the final face cut, will shout loudly,

"The "ichi" have reached the eyes!" indicating that he has come to the most difficult place. Now he begins to sing this song, in which those gathered around will join in the chorus:

The "ichi"-cutting experts offer sacrifices

O Ngororo o

The "ichi"-cutting experts offer sacrifices

O Ngororo o

My knife which cuts sharply, my knife which cuts sharply is in the bag

O Ngororo o

I cut "ichi" marks, my father cuts "ichi" marks,
it runs in the family

O Ngororo o.

Or he may sing this one:

Okeke Okafo "ichi" marks are finished o o o

O wonlele o

The expert skilled in "ichi" cutting has
finished o o o

O wonlele o

Fearsome leopard of a man o, "ichi" marks
are finished o o o

O wonlele o.

This has given rise to the saying, when people have reached a difficult spot in some undertaking, that the "ichi" marks have reached the eyes, because at this point the cutter will

work with extreme care, knowing that if he does not, he may accidentally cut into the patient's eye and blind him. (You will remember that during the whole time that the marks are being cut, the patient's eyes are well covered, and he does not uncover them until the wounds have begun to heal.) When the cutting reaches this point, then, happiness fills the hearts of the patient's relatives, and they start to heave sighs of relief (literally, "throw away the feet of sickness," meaning that they stop trembling with apprehension). They are overjoyed, because they say that "for a bat, two fights are not better than the first fight." They will be shouting and praising their relative in song, calling him by great names, because they have found him to be a strong man who has not disgraced them. When the expert has finished cutting around the eyes, he takes the "urū enyi ichi" medicine and gives it to the patient to lick (or sip?). Then the patient is carried into the house, all the while being addressed by names appropriate to his "ichi" marks and his courage. He is placed on a "door-bed" (?) set up near the fire where the breadfruit firewood is burning brightly. A young man takes a solution made from "nchanwū" leaves and sprinkles it on the patient's face to keep ants away from it, then he covers the face with an "orodu" leaf. If he has borne the "ichi" cutting well, his

brothers will be dancing around in delight because their brother has not publicly disgraced them. Now, this strong young man and his deed can be compared to the python and the thing he has swallowed. My friends, come and see what the hand has cut better than a knife cuts. (?)

Performing "ichi"

One who has just had his "ichi" marks cut performs the "ichi" ceremony. He stays in a place called "mkpu" until his cuts are well healed -- something like 28 days, or 8 weeks. Care of such a patient is work which falls to women.

Around Nnewi, Oka, Aguata, and towns like Nanka, Oraeri, Utu, Ekwulobia, Neni, Mgbakwu, and Umawulu, it is the married daughters who take care of the person performing "ichi" ritual. When the marks have been cut and the patient has been removed to the special "mkpu," the married women of the extended family will gather at the home of the patient. They will be preparing his food, tending him, fanning his fire, and bathing his wounds. They will be grinding camwood and yellow vegetable dye which they will rub on the patient's body. They will be burning the charcoal and "alulu" (medicinal plant) and "ojukwu" palm nuts used for a medicinal solution to bathe the wounds. They will fetch the "orodu" leaves used to cover the wounds. They will be taking care of the patient's house, scrubbing it and seeing that everything is well cared for.

The patient performs his "ichi" ceremony lying in one spot day and night. He does not move around much because if he does, his cuts will pain him. Someone will prepare his fire morning, noon and night. He will be in great agony, burning with fever, and without appetite. The women are careful to give him well-cooked food which will be tempting to a sick person. They fill it with meat and fish, and they see to it that he eats it. There will be one man whose job it is to wait on the patient, to lift him when he wants to eat and when he wants to relieve himself.

The wounds will be bathed every morning, starting from the third day after the cutting. Before the wounds are completely bathed, some elders who have already taken "oꝝo" title will come and take wine and pour a libation to the household god. The god is placed beside the house of the patient until the wounds have completely healed. This wine which is poured for the god is called "strong wine reaching the ground." When the elders pour the libation, they split a kola nut, chew it, spit it on their "ofo," and then say prayers calling on the ancestors large and small, calling for peace and for the "ogwugwu" (a kind of god that is able to impart life) and other spirits in their land to come and help them care for the one who has had the "ichi" marks cut.

The women will sing songs invoking the great and small ancestors of the patient. They will continue calling these until the eighth generation. One of the songs they sing is this:

It is someone and someone who lives here o...
Song of the chiefs

It is someone and someone who lives on the moon o...
Song of the chiefs

Oldest son of Ezekori he lives here o...
Song of the chiefs

Nwankwo Ezekafa he lives here o...
Song of the chiefs

It is someone and someone lives here o...
Song of the chiefs

In this way they continue to sing it until they reach the generation of the person who had the marks cut and then they call his name. When they finish this song, they begin to bathe the wounds. This takes a long time because it is not a process which can be rushed through. The one who bathes the cuts must be very careful, as "One does not use the same thing to probe the ear as he uses to probe the eye."

Hot water with a medicinal plant (aluluyu) is used to bathe the wounds, after which oil from the ojukwu oil palm nut (a disinfectant) is rubbed on them, charcoal from the ebelebe tree is sprinkled on, and an orodu leaf which has been held over the fire is applied. In this way the wounds are treated each morning until they heal. The cutter will

continue to return to check the patient right up until the time when he makes his ceremonial trip to market.

This period of "ichi" confinement is a time when the patient's family are living in fear. They do not breathe easily until the time of the trip to market. Because of this, the mother or the father or the oldest sister of the patient will go and have a divination performed, sacrificing to the spirits so that they will protect the patient for them and keep him from trouble. The women take very special care of him during this time. We should know that "one does not tap palm wine carelessly." They stay awake nights watching over him to see that the wounds are not disturbed by the turning of his body, and to stoke the fire for him. When the wounds begin to heal, the fellow will start trying to open his eyes. If he does not do it this way (gradually), it will pain him very much when he does it later. He opens his eyes very slowly and gently -- one does not open "ichi"-marked eyes wide.

The man's friends, inlaws and well-wishers will be coming to visit him during his convalescence. People will be flocking to his house like bats to the iroko tree. They will be singing songs and doing playful things all the time to keep up his spirits.

On the day that he emerges from his special place, a ram will be killed and the meat will be cooked. Plenty of visitors

will be there on that day, including the expert cutter, who will come and pick up the remainder of his instruments and herbs. After eating and giving thanks, the cutter will rub his hand over the patient's face seven times and then blow across the palm of his hand (to get rid of bad medicine). This is part of the preparation for the "ichi" market ceremony. The cutter will then take a large knife and strike the man on four parts of his body, in order to symbolize the strengthening of his body. Now he has been prepared for the market ceremony.

In Afa, a town in Udi, the one who performs "ichi" puts on a small cloth. He does not eat cassava because it is not indigenous food. He eats only yam and foods prepared with yam. Through divination he determines who is to bathe his cuts, and payment is made to that person. At the time that the one performing "ichi" comes out and walks around the village, before he goes to the market he hangs some preventive juju things on his body. His wife will accompany him, carrying a bag of kola nuts, so that if they see a titled person they will give him a kola nut. This ritual is continued up until the day he performs the market ceremony.

In Eziagu Division, they go and stay in isolation in the "ikpa," a piece of land lying fallow. On the day the person

goes into isolation no one must look at him. The drum will be beaten to tell people that the person is going into his place of isolation. Everyone who is at home will then be sure to stay indoors. The man who is going to the "ikpa" will come out of his house very early in the morning, go to the bush and stay there until the time for the market ceremony.

In Ukehe, and in Akụ which is in Nsuka, no one is allowed to watch the person performing "ichi" rites while he is eating. They take palm fronds and cordon off the door of the house of confinement, and whenever it is time for the man to eat a drum is beaten so people will stop coming to visit him. They believe that if someone sees him eating he will die. In addition, that man will not wash his body for eight weeks, nor will he urinate during the afternoon. On the day that he emerges from the "ichi" ritual, titled people will come and open the door of the ceremonial house by cutting the palm fronds which had been used to block the door. His age mates, friends and inlaws will come to visit him. The day the inlaws come will be an especially big day, with all kinds of food being cooked. The food is piled so high that one cannot see over the top of it! The most important of this food is called "food of the inlaws." In those parts, whenever a person receives something unexpectedly bountiful, he says that "this is like food of the inlaws."

The death of a person performing "ichi" rites

In many towns, a man who dies during performance of "ichi" dies a bad death. Titled people do not look at his corpse. They say that it is because of something that person did that he died during the performance of "ichi." Before he is buried, the premature death ceremony will be performed in his house. Sometimes the corpse is carried into the "bad bush" and thrown away there because it has been defiled. Someone from the Nri people will be called to come and cleanse the earth where something like this has happened.

In Igboikwu, one who dies during performance of "ichi" does not die a bad death. He is not taken as one who has committed an abomination. They try to see that everything is completed for that person pertaining to the cutting of "ichi" and the taking of "ozo" title. Then after the ceremonial trip to market they finally bury the person. They believe that if they do not do these things before the burial, the person will afterwards disturb them to the point of their requiring divination to alleviate the situation. This is why they say that one does not bury the "ichi"-marked person without finishing his work for him.

"Ichi" market ceremony or celebration of "ichi"

After seven weeks have passed, the "ichi"-marked person makes his ceremonial trip to market. Now he can begin to enjoy the fruits of what he has done. He makes careful preparations, wanting to look his best. He decorates his body with "nkirişiala" and black dye and wraps a cloth of "olugwo" around his waist. Around Nsuka, Udi and Eziagu, a very small cloth rubbed with camwood dye is worn. On the day of the ceremony the man will be led to market by men carrying guns. The women will wear their best clothes (taken from the bottom of the box!) and dress as beautifully as the person being honored. The leader of the women will take the head of the ram which was killed on the day the patient came out of confinement, and she will impale it on a stick and carry it aloft. The man who has undergone the mark-cutting will hold a small box and a small knife. (Purpose of this needs to be explained.) The people will lead the man to market while singing songs and reciting poems or extravagant eulogies. The men shoot off their guns, hail the hero by praise-names appropriate to his "ichi" feat, and give him money. Some will examine the scars and make admiring remarks, such as "Hey, his "ichi" marks are great. They look as though they have been painted on. This cutting expert has a skillful hand. He has cut his face as though he were marking with

'nkirisiala.'" They will lead the man all around the market area before stopping at the "market house," where the man sits and receives congratulations. Friends will tell him that when he and his entourage leave the market, they should come and visit at their houses. If he has a lot of friends, it will take him a long time to complete this round of visits.

This market ceremony is the final event in the "ichi" procedure. Anyone who successfully completes all these activities rejoices because he has followed in the footsteps of the town's wisest people. It is said that "if a child washes his hands he can join the elders in eating from the same pot."

What are the advantages of cutting "ichi" marks?

It is true that great pain is involved in cutting "ichi" marks, but there is also some profit accruing to the person who undergoes it. A weak person is unable to bear the pain of it. When anyone is able to bear such pain, he is taken for a man who has the strength of a mature adult. When difficulties arise, that kind of person is appealed to, because "if you want to catch a big cow, you need a big man." By this means, an "ichi"-marked man becomes a leader in his community. Many people will look for ways to associate themselves with people of this kind.

The members of the "ichi"-marked person's household are spared a lot of troubles, because people will remember that the head of their household is a strong man and they will be afraid to harass them.

It is usually the "ichi"-marked young men who are elevated to leadership in their age groups. This brings them a good deal of respect and honor. If it is a place where a person takes a special "ichi" name, such as in Mgbakwu around Oka, anyone who has had the marks cut but who has not taken "ozo" title will take whatever name people give him.

In Nnewi, the "ichi"-marked person is allowed to sprinkle chalk on the ground in five ways, whereas one who has no marks can sprinkle it in only four ways. In many towns in the old days "ichi" mark-cutting was a prerequisite for taking "ozo" title. Taking "ozo" title was a supreme accomplishment among many Igbo clans, and anyone achieving had an exalted position in the eyes of the public. Under these circumstances, the person who had undergone the mark-cutting would certainly aspire some day to join the ranks of the "ozo" title holders. In these olden days, anyone who had not undergone the cutting could not even dream of taking "ozo" title.

Anyone who reached a point of readiness for mark-cutting but did not undergo it would be the object of all sorts of gibes from his peers who had undergone it. His opinions would carry no weight with them. It is said that "if a lizard does

not do what lizards are supposed to do, he is called a dry lizard." A person like this is always uneasy and must stay in the background.

In the old days, mark-cutting helped a man to acquire a wife. Women at that time sought to marry up-and-coming men who had made names for themselves in the community. No woman wanted to be criticized because her husband did not conform to the practices of his peers. In Igbo life, the most important thing was to have a household. If a man died without marrying and having a child, he was never heard of again. Everyone wanted something to be remembered by after his death. A person reaching maturity without marrying was taken as a foolish person who did not provide for his own future. His parents would be unhappy at such a state of affairs.

In the old days, too, only the boldest slavers would try to sell someone who had "ichi" marks. This meant that the "ichi"-marked person could travel wherever he pleased without fear.

Cutting the marks is also an aid to saving money, because whenever someone has "ichi" marks cut, those who already have theirs can join in sharing all the bounty.

Is there any disadvantage in having "ichi" marks cut?

Cutting the marks is profitable but it also involves a lot of discomfort. The pain of the knife is tormenting

because nothing can be done to keep the patient from knowing that the marks are being cut (the patient is not anesthetized). Afterward he must suffer with his eyes closed for many days.

"Ichi" causes a substantial blood loss. Some people do not have enough blood for their normal needs, let alone wasting it by having marks cut. Many times such people die after the cutting is completed.

"Ichi" marks spoil the beauty of the face. Sometimes the face becomes pitted, so that it frightens children and they do not want to be held by an "ichi"-marked person.

Nowadays women do not want to marry men who have "ichi" marks. They say that the marks are old-fashioned. This has meant that many men with "ichi" marks all over their faces have been unable to get the women they wanted to marry.

Young men these days who have had "ichi" marks cut as adults often are not happy with the results. They feel embarrassed because most of those in their age groups do not have marked faces like theirs.

"Ichi" marks can also cause eye trouble. The eyes are extremely important and no one wants any trouble with them. But it is dangerous when the cutter takes his knife and cuts "ichi" marks over the eyes. "It is only a blind person who knows that people with good eyes are the ones who enjoy this world."

During times of civil unrest, a person with "ichi" marks cannot hide his ethnic identity. For instance, during the time when the Igbos fled from the north, it was not difficult for the Hausas to know that anyone who had "ichi" marks was an Igbo. This kept many such people from joining their families on their escape journeys.

What is the current situation regarding "ichi"?

Today "ichi" marks are not indications of masculine strength. It is money which elevates a man now. A wealthy person can marry the kind of woman he likes and take any kind of title he likes. Those whose names are best known in any town of today are those who have money.

The cutting of "ichi" marks is not thriving as it did in the old days because people have discovered the various troubles it brings. Also, church people do not allow their members to cut "ichi" because they believe it is like worshipping idols.

It would be a good thing if "ichi" cutting were stopped altogether. If it is absolutely necessary for a man to have "ichi" marks cut before taking ozo title, let him perform all the pertinent customs except the actual cutting of the face. Cutting "ichi" marks is a tradition which should not be encouraged, because, as an Igbo proverb says, "If it is a lot of trouble to climb an oil palm, the present generation will not do it."