**Language and Social Dynamics in the Concubinage System of Igbo Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study**

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**Abstract**

The practice of concubinage cuts across culture and religions of Nigerian people. It is popularly defined as the practice of a man cohabiting with a woman who is not legally married to him. The objective of this paper is to redefine concubinage as a cultural practice in one hand and as a religious practice in the other hand; it will also x-ray its impact and value in Nigerian society where it is encouraged in either of these perspectives. The researchers adopted the sociolinguistic theory of language and power for this study. This theory examines how language is used as a tool of power and how power dynamics shape language practices and attitudes within a society. The data for this research were elicited from non-participant observation and oral interviews while the secondary data were drawn from library and internet sources. The areas of study are Ezaa, Ngwaa, Mbaise and Awka Igbo of the South Eastern Nigeria. The research was limited to these speech communities because of non availability of funding and the need to arrive at exhaustive findings. Hence, qualitative and systematic review methods and content analysis were employed in the data analyses and it was revealed that there are fewer men to women in every community after wars or crises; to rejuvenate life and well being of everyone and boost the population of the society, men are encouraged to go into polygamous and keep concubines and these are institutionalized via language since they require verbal agreements.

**Keywords:** concubinage, social theory of culture, speech community, Igbo

**Introduction**

The institution of concubinage has long been a significant socio-cultural practice in Nigeria, particularly in the Southeast regions. Concubinage involves the establishment of a quasi-marital relationship between a man and a woman, where the woman holds a subordinate position and often has a lower status compared to a legally recognized wife. This system is embedded in complex social dynamics, power structures, and gender relations within communities. Language plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting social dynamics, power relations, and cultural practices within a society. Sociolinguistic research offers valuable insights into how language functions within specific cultural contexts, shedding light on language practices, variations, and attitudes associated with various social institutions. This study undertook a comprehensive sociolinguistic exploration of the concubinage system in Southeast Nigeria, delving into the language practices and communication patterns that characterize this unique socio-cultural institution. These were achieved via examination of the sociolinguistic dimensions of the concubinage system in Southeast Nigeria, investigating language practices, variations, and attitudes within this unique socio-cultural institution. By exploring the role of language and its implications on power dynamics, gender relations, and cultural norms, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the concubinage system and provides insights for promoting linguistic equality, gender empowerment, and cultural understanding within these communities since concubinage system in Southeast Nigeria represents a significant socio-cultural institution with complex power dynamics, gender relations, and communication patterns. Diala (2000) posits that concubinage is a relationship or contract involving married males, females, widows, and/or widowers regarding sexual services practiced in socio-cultural communities where extra-marital sexual services and relations are encouraged. Researchers have proven that there is a growing body of literature on concubinage in Nigeria but there is lack of in-depth sociolinguistic research specifically focused on the language practices, variations, and attitudes within this system in the Southeast and Northeast regions. Therefore, the research problem addressed by this study is the need to understand the role of language and its sociolinguistic implications within the concubinage system in this region. Therefore, a comprehensive examination of the language practices, variations, and attitudes within the concubinage system is necessary to provide a holistic understanding of this complex institution. Understanding the language practices within the concubinage system is vital for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to unraveling the power differentials and gender relations that exist within these communities. Language use and communication patterns within the system may reflect and reinforce these social dynamics. Secondly, exploring language variations associated with concubinage across different communities in Southeast Nigeria can shed light on linguistic diversity and its relationship to cultural practices. Lastly, investigating language attitudes and ideologies towards concubinage provides insights into the social perceptions, linguistic stigmatization, and societal norms surrounding this practice. By addressing the research problem, this study aims to bridge the gap in knowledge regarding the language dimensions of the concubinage system in Southeast Nigeria.

**Objectives, Research Method and Theoretical Framework**

The primary objectives of this study are to explore how the language practices and communication patterns vary within speech communities engaged in the concubinage system; to investigate the language attitudes and ideologies towards concubinage, analyzing the societal perceptions and linguistic stigmatization related to the system in speech communities of Southeast Nigeria. This research also examines how language use within the concubinage system intersect with broader socio-cultural and historical contexts and to determine the sociolinguistic implications of the concubinage system on power dynamics and gender relations in the speech communities. It also provides insights for addressing linguistic inequalities, promoting gender equality, and fostering cultural understanding within the context of the concubinage system.

Data for this research were elicited via observations and document analyses and interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the concubinage system, including concubines, legally recognized wives, and other community members. Some of whom were not willing to speak to the researchers. These interviews allow for rich data on language practices, variations, attitudes, and power dynamics within the system. Interviews were audio-recorded, reviewed and analyzed systematically. Non-participant observations were conducted in relevant community settings to observe language use, communication patterns, and social interactions within the concubinage system. These provide contextual insights into language practices and power dynamics.

Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, and documents) was employed to enhance the credibility and validity of the research findings. Multiple perspectives and data sources were compared and analyzed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics within the concubinage system.

The sociolinguistic theory of language and power provides a valuable framework for analyzing the sociolinguistic dimensions of the concubinage system in Southeast Nigeria. This theory examines how language is used as a tool of power and how power dynamics shape language practices and attitudes within a society. Applying the four aspects of the theory (Language as a Marker of Power, Linguistic Stigmatization and Marginalization, Language and Negotiation of Power) to the study of concubinage shed light on the power differentials and social hierarchies within the system.

The language and power theory emphasizes that language serves as a marker of social status, privilege, and power. Within the concubinage system, language can be used as a means to reinforce and maintain power differentials between the man, the legally recognized wife, and the concubine. The study explores how language choices, linguistic behaviors, and access to language resources may vary depending on the individuals' positions within the system. The study examines how language is used by individuals within the concubinage system to negotiate power, assert their identities, and challenge or reinforce social norms. It explores the ways in which language use and communication strategies may reflect or contest power imbalances and gendered roles within the system. Language and power theory also highlights the role of language planning and language policies in addressing linguistic inequalities and empowering marginalized groups. Hence, this study inform interventions and policies aimed at promoting linguistic equality, empowering concubines, and challenging linguistic stigmatization within the concubinage system.

**Language and Social Dynamics of Concubine System in Igbo Land**

Language plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting social dynamics, power relations, and cultural practices within a society. It is known to be the vehicle that carries the culture and other elements of culture in any given human society. Igbo language, together with the norms and values of the Igbo people, are transferred from one generation to another through language and communication. Language is the commonest tool of communication. Moreover, language plays an important role in concubinage. Relevant documents such as oral narratives, songs, proverbs, and local literature which reveal and teach linguistic patterns, cultural norms, and ideologies associated with the concubinage system and other aspects of Igbo belief systems are made available for the younger generation through language. Simbolon, Wibowo and Suherman (2022) state that the changes that happen in societies can be in the form of social values, social norms, community behavior patterns, community institutions, etc. The idea of concubinage was an acceptable social norm in most Igbo clans and communities; just like marriage, it is anchored towards multiplication of humanity. Simbolon, Wibowo and Suherman (2022) identified four processes of social dynamics. They include diffusion, acculturation, assimilation, and accommodation.

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The Igbo concubinage system, just like other cultural practices in the land, was diffused and accommodated. All the participants revealed that all parts of Igbo land have different ways of encouraging population growth outside marriage. The typical Igbo traditional society is one without orthodox medicine and one which encourages the survival of the fittest though interpersonal and intercommunity relationships are sacrosanct. Because of high infant mortality rate and the desire of every clan to ensure that their human capital does not diminish or go extinct, concubinage was initiated by few communities and it was diffused from one individual to another, from one group to another and from one clan or culture to another. This diffusion occurs because of the interconnection between these communities. After the diffusion of concubinage system in the land, it was accommodated as a way of life. Simbolon, Wibowo and Suherman (2022) aver that ‘accommodation refers to human efforts to relieve conflict or actions to achieve stability in social interactions.’ The process of acculturation encourages mixing borrowed cultures with indigenous one; that was not the case of Igbo concubinage system in the traditional Igbo society. Assimilation, on the other hand, arises from the existence of groups of people with diverse cultural backgrounds who interacted directly and intensively over a long period so that the culture of that community group will change its distinctive character to become elements of a new culture that is different from the original one. Hence the Igbo concubinage system in the traditional Igbo society adopted the process of diffusion and accommodation but in recent times, after the advancement of Christianity, the concubinage system is threatened by acculturation and assimilation of the western culture which arrived in the name of a new religion and civilization.

Uchendu (1962) posits that concubinage is as institutionalised as marriage in some African cultures in which extra-marital affairs are culturally-accepted. Most time, people engage in the act of concubinage in order to bear children and have sexual satisfaction, bear a male child (for transmission of a family lineage and for economic gain via partnership and/or acquisition of land, economic trees/plants, and various financial responsibilities. However, all these cannot be achieved without language; the language practices and communication patterns play vital role in communities where concubinage system is practiced. Mansour (2018) posits that ‘when considering language and sexuality, and their relationship to one another, often a certain general conjecture tends to blend two levels of approach that are not necessarily similar. The first is language as a system; old, formal, and grammatical; offering no opportunity for synchronic comprehension. The second is language as performance, deeply-rooted and contingent on meeting; political and psychological.’ In the culture areas where the research was conducted, it was revealed that there are language practices and communication patterns involved in their concubinage system. Concubinage is an Igbo tradition that encourages adultery. It is one of the traditions that unite the Igbo people even though its practices differ in places. It gives men the privilege to have multiple sex partners and thereby increasing the number of people in the society. Concubinage was sacrosanct in the traditional Igbo society because it was a way of ensuring maximum multiplication of mankind in a community where there was high rate of child mortality because of lack of health and prevalence of sickle cell anemia (as was the case then) and other life striking ailments. It was also a source of help to societies where there are fewer men than women (mostly after inter/intra-communal wars/crises) and for the welfare of families where there are no male child to carry or extend the family line.

Before a woman enters into concubinage in the Igbo setting, there must be a verbal agreement about this relationship. This agreement gives the man's and the woman's family a chance to know what their children, husband or father is/are going into and what the family stands to benefit from the relationship. This terms and condition is what makes concubinage institutionalized like marriage. This counters the stance of Basden (1921) which asserts that Igbo “women have but few rights in any circumstances and can only hold such property as their lords permit. There is no grumbling against their lot; they accept the situation as their grandmother did before them taking affairs philosophically, they managed to live fairly contentedly.” Both parties share mutual relationship but the woman involved in the relationship is conscious of the fact that the man is not her husband though she may or may not be the real woman in the man's life since he has wife/wives who are aware of the relationship and have given their consent. And the man himself knows that the woman would have made been an apple of a man’s eye if situation such as condition of war or strange illness have not denied the society more men that would have equate the number of women in the society. Hence, the parties are in mutual relationship guided by respect, dignity and integrity especially as it is made known formally to their families.

According to one of the respondents, here are sayings like: *kpara akwụ kpara akwụ, onye nwe nkwụ nwe isi akwụ.* Meaning that the concubines are not the rightful owners of the palm heads from which they get their fruits rather the owner of the palm tree owns the palm head. But no right thinking woman will willfully deny her fellow woman these important seeds of life and joy knowing full well that it was grace that elevated her from being in the shoes of the former. It was also revealed that married women of those days allowed their husband to engage in such acts because there are no sexually transmitted infections within the communities and the cases of concubinage revolves within the community and everyone knows about the relationships since they are open and acceptable. It was also revealed that most women of those days have less sexual drive/libido compared to women of nowadays since most of them (in the traditional society) undergo female genital mutilation. Since there is no much drive for sexual urge on the side of the women, they encourage their husbands to satisfy their urge elsewhere since there is nothing to be afraid of.

The Igbo culture permits a man to commit adultery with a woman who is not his wife because the Igbo culture supports polygamy. Concubinage is practiced in different places in different ways in Igbo land. Clans such as Mbaise, Ngwa, Ohum Ijebogene and some other communities in Imo and Abia states permits a married man to have a sexual and interpersonal relationship with a woman whose bride price he did not pay. Anderson (2007) asserts that acceptance of bride-price signifies support, involvement and approval of the union by both sets of parents and it is physical cash or money transferred from the groom’s family to the parents or the family of the bride at the time of marriage agreement which signifies the acquisition of the rights by the groom, of the bride’s labour and reproductive ability. Nwabude (2022) adds that the rite of marriage (which he also referred to as contract of convenience) cannot be done without the *ụmụnna* (over 20 male extended family members)of both families. But when there is no such contract of convenience, but a minor contract involving few family members (women inclusive), concubine is birthed. In this situation, the woman becomes a regular visitor or friend of the man's family; hence her status is less than a wife. The wives do not see the concubine as a problem since she is always loyal to both the man and his wives though the women accord her some respect for their husband’s sake. Hence, the concubine appears like a maidservant in one way and as a sex tool in another way though her contribution to the welfare of the family is rewarded. She can beget children for her father from the relationship. Sometimes, children from the relationship are accepted into the family of the man who conceived them, especially when a child (such as a male child) is needed in the family.

Another type of concubine found in Igbo land is the one that is established when a woman and her husband agree to bring in another woman (a concubine) into their family to act as a maidservant to the wife. The concubine does have sexual relationship with the man but she is not considered as a member of the family but sometimes the concubinage contract may also include her birthing a child for the family. Though the concubine is the biological mother of the child who might be the apparent heir to the family success yet the concubine does not have right of inheritance in the family except she is given. Most times, children conceived from this kind of relationship are raised to treat their biological mother with disdain hence the legal wife is considered their mother though she could be offered something that can raise her social status or that of her father’s family. Such things include piece or parcels of land, palm tree or other commodities that can raise her financial status or that of her father. Hence there are sayings thus: *ihe onye nwere ka o ji eme ọjị; aka nri kwọọ aka ekpe, aka ekpe a kwọọ aka nri* meaning you cannot offer what you do not have; you use what you have to get what you want. This reveals the power of language and communication patterns in social dynamics. A situation where a child will treat his own biological mother like a nobody and treat a foaster mother with much respect and sometimes may never bond with his mother. Since such life style was accepted in the society as a norm, no one sees it as anomaly.

Our respondents from Ezaa, Ikwo, Izii and some other parts of the Old Abakaliki Block of Ebonyi state revealed that a woman can introduce a fellow woman into the concubinage system: as a married woman or as a single or divorced. The initiator of this system, if married, can initiate the system while her husband is alive or dead, especially if the initiator is childless. She does this to ensure her sweat of life (wealth/possessions) are inherited by people she can proudly call her descendants. This is done when the initiator of the concubinage process on approval of her husband (if still alive) marries another woman (the concubine) as her wife following the institutionalized marriage system of the supposed concubine’s culture area. Hence, the concubine is seen as the wife of her fellow woman though she would be having sexual affairs with the woman’s husband for procreation but her association with the man is partially controlled by the legitimate wife. Hence, the woman brought into this situation becomes a bride of lower status, or better still a concubine, though she performs all responsibility deemed fit of a wife for their husband but her loyalty lies with the initiator (i.e. the main wife) though their husband reigns supreme. The woman, however, can become a full fledged wife to their husband if and only if the initiator dies before her husband. And if the man dies first, the initiator automatically assumes a patriarchal position in the family though not seen as a masculine by the same *ụmụnna* that paid her bride price. On the other hand, an elderly single woman or one divorced as a result of childlessness can return to her paternal home and perform the rite of patriarchy and then is seen as a masculine being among the *ụmụnna* of the family (though with limitations since she squats or opens her two legs wide open to urinate). After that, she can proceed with marriage of a fellow woman (concubine) who then becomes her wife. The marriage contract gives the concubine the opportunity to give birth to children for the family through sexual affairs with a man who may be a member of the extended family or an outsider. The difference between the type of concubinage system seen in the Abakaliki area and the ones seen in Imo and Abia is that those of the Abia and Imo name theirs as concubine without any form of marriage rite involving the *ụmụnna* but those of the Abakaliki area is initiated via a marriage ceremonial rite which gives the children produced from the relationship right as heirs/natives to the family that married their mother though as a lower wife or concubine; the family of this bride, most often, do not feel very comfortable to reveal the condition of their daughter's marriage; that is why most of such marriages are often between people of distance geographical location.

**Social Implication of Concubinage in Igbo Land**

Sexual satisfaction seems to be one of the reasons why the traditional Igbo society encourages concubinage. That is not completely true since men who have over five wives, who are eager and willing to satisfy their husband’s urge based on the family arrangements in a polygamous home, still keep concubine. Hence, outside sex and its component drives, there are more to reasons why men keep concubines. One of the reasons is to show off. One of our respondents revealed that men in the traditional Igbo society argue and brag on who has dominion over certain class of women; hence the number of women at the beck-and-call of a man determines the prestige and dignity of the man among his peers in the society.

In another’s view, these concubines are helpmates to their men and their family though they have their own interest and gains; because of the patriarchal nature of the society in those days it is better for an unmarried lady to have a man whom she/ the society sees as hers/her lover or risked being forced into some kind of sexual harassment. The women here, are simply means to an end or a channel for the achievement of the lineage preservation. In the Igbo ethnicity, most times a girl is questioned to ascertain the paternity of the child for whom she bears and failure to address that will attract grave consequences. Even if the family of the girl needs the child, they often confirm the paternity of the child because it is believed that genes are very powerful and would have great effect on whatever the child would become in future. A child therefore, is legitimate in Igbo land if the biological father is known by the family of the woman who gets pregnant in her father's house. This child when he is born is regarded as *Amadi* or *Nwadiani* meaning son of the soil. Nwanyị *anaghị enwe nwa n'ala Igbo.* This means that a woman does not own a child in Igbo land, hence if the child is not her husband’s, it will eventually be her father’s.

Akin to the point above, nature and nurture (culture) arrogates some powers on men over women. Some of our respondents revealed that the same act committed by a man and a woman favours the man more; the society approves a married man having affairs with a single lady but disapproves of a married woman having affairs with a single man. Children belong to man's ancestral lineage. It does not matter whether the progeny is a product of marriage or concubinage, what matters is the acceptance of the man for the ownership and responsibility of the pregnancy and then the child at birth also. This view brings to light the dynamics of power between the man and the woman and by the man over the woman. The Igbo human society explains this dynamics of power with the influence men have over their wives, concubines and children.

However, the progeny of concubinage does not matter but if it were a male child, especially when the woman in the marriage had no children or had female children only, the woman in the concubinage will be seen as a blessing from God or simply God sent. In some cases, this woman will be loved more than the woman in marriage and may even be treated with more respect and care from the husband. If eventually the man decides to pay her bride price immediately, to make her second wife or even third, as the case may be, it will be the case that this woman that has brought forth a male child will have more romantic and quality time with the husband, over and above her co-wives, who have been in that marriage many years before her. Everybody at this instance forgets that biologically, the man should be blamed or held responsible for the sex of the child given birth to. The family will deify this last woman that brought forth the male child claiming or insinuating that other wife(s) that could not bring forth a male child is/are bad luck, misfortune or cursed. So, it is not just unfortunate that women are not meant to choose their men or be in concubinage with many or different men but also unfortunate that the biological responsibility of men to determine the sex of the foetus and child is blamed on women.

Some of those scenarios which were considered the social norms in the past have changed significantly over the years. Social norms are now based on objective or subjective grounds considering the believe system and self esteem of the women in the society. The wind of change came from Christianity, western education and civilization which brought a widespread behavioural regularities, beliefs and culture which seem to contradict the traditional ways of doing things in the Igbo society. Individuals, men, women and children alike started repetition of interaction experienced when they came in contact with the western religion and culture. Hence there is assimilation of culture which has gradually eradicated the idea of concubinage and introduced lesbians, gay, bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) etc. which do not increase the world population. However, some still pray that such life style should be acculturated in the life of the Igbo younger generation. Hence, the churches’ method of fighting in favour of marriage has changed since some churches abroad now wed LGBT’s with the hope that they will live as couples and will never have children for procreation. The same church that strangle polygamy and concubinage is now doing this wonders and possibly hoping to bring them in full force to Igbo land.

**Summary**

We have carefully studied the role of language and other social behaviours that result to concubinage system in the Igbo society. Reduction in the population of men as against women in traditional Igbo Society is often caused by war, disaster and other challenges keeps women at a disadvantaged position at the mercy of fewer men. Other women who knew that it was a privilege to have a man they call their own (as it was always in a polygamous setting) believe it is by grace. Because most of them also do not always find themselves in the mood for copulation because of the mutilation their female genital organs and there is scarcity of sexually transmitted infections, they too encourage their husbands to get a helping hand elsewhere. The society generally is not left out since concubinage system results to greater number of pregnant women and child births in the society. The idea was population growth. Hence concubinage is a win-win project for everyone. Language is vital in initiating and strengthening the business of the ‘babe-magnets’ and ‘bedroom eyes’ who do anything within their reach to have formal verbal agreement for the approval of the cohabitation in the presence of their family members. Concubinage systems are initiated by different category of people in different ways and in different places with the sole target of satisfying each person’s need. Some are initiated by lovers, married women, patriarchal women etc. The greatest proceed from the system are children who end up being the possession of men. Their surname/ family affiliation often is be that of their biological father, foster father or grandfather as the case may be, leaving the woman with nothing much. Sometimes, these women are even paid off not to be part of the life of the child they bore; the Igbo culture arrogates some powers on men over women. This paper therefore supports the call for abolition Female Genital Mutilation to enable married women take good care of their husbands especially nowadays that STI’s are commonly deposited and monogamy is the order of the day.

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