Ákụ́óyìbó Nsugbe Journal of the School of Languages (ANJOSOL)
Vol 2 No. 1, 2026: 315-326
https://ojs.universityedu.org/index.php/anjosol/index
The official biannual Journal of the School of Languages, Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

eISSN: 3122-0088
pISSN: 3122-0096

Hebrews 13:4 and the sanctity of marriage: A biblical critique of the *Iji-Woku* Ritual in Oshiri, Ebonyi State

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: *Hebrew. Sanctity. Marriage. Iji-woku. Ritual.*

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Abstract

This study critically examines the "Iji-Woku" ritual in Oshiri, Ebonyi State, through the lens of Hebrews 13:4 and its teachings on the sanctity of marriage. The study aims to explore the traditional practices associated with the ritual and evaluate its alignment with biblical principles of faithfulness and marital integrity. The Iji-Wokureveals a gender disparity in which women are bound to strict fidelity, while men are granted greater sexual freedom. Rooted in traditional belief, it enforces moral codes through the threat of spiritual consequences, particularly for women. The study examines the apparent contradiction between these practices and the Christian understanding of marriage. The study problem addresses the apparent contradiction between the ritual's practices and the Christian understanding of marriage as a sacred, mutual, and faithful union. The methodology involves a comparative analysis of the Iji-Woku ritual and the biblical teachings in Hebrews 13:4, exploring how the latter affirms the sanctity and equality within the marital relationship. Through textual analysis and interviews with local practitioners, the study uncovers the socio-cultural implications of the ritual on gender dynamics and marital fidelity.Findings indicate that the "Iji-Woku" ritual perpetuates a patriarchal view of marriage that undermines the biblical values of mutual love, respect, and fidelity between spouses. The ritual's emphasis on female submission and male sexual autonomy is inconsistent with the biblical call for both partners to honor the marriage covenant equally. The study concludes by advocating for a re-evaluation of the "Iji-Woku" ritual in light of Christian teachings on marriage. Recommendations include fostering dialogue between traditional practitioners and Christian communities to bridge the gap between cultural practices and biblical teachings, promoting a more equitable understanding of marriage that upholds the dignity of both men and women as equal partners in God's divine institution of marriage.

Introduction

Marriage, as a fundamental institution in human society, has been subject to various cultural interpretations and practices across different societies. In Christian theology, marriage is viewed as a sacred covenant ordained by God, founded on mutual love, respect, and fidelity between husband and wife. Hebrews 13:4 underscores this sanctity, affirming that "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." This biblical passage highlights the moral imperative of faithfulness and the sanctity of the marital union, emphasizing that marriage should reflect a commitment to mutual trust and honor.In contrast, various indigenous cultures maintain their own practices and rituals that define marital relationships. One such practice is the *"Iji-Woku"* ritual in Oshiri, Ebonyi State, a significant cultural tradition that governs the marital bonds between men and women in the community. The ritual involves a series of rites performed to bind married couples to one another, with a starkly gendered perspective on fidelity and marital roles. While the woman is bound to her husband, subjected to divine retribution if she strays, the man enjoys

greater sexual liberty, free from such spiritual consequences. This ritual raises important questions about the intersection of cultural traditions and Christian teachings on marriage, especially with respect to gender equality, fidelity, and the role of women within marriage.The *"Iji-Woku"* ritual has been described as a form of patriarchal oppression, particularly for women, by limiting their sexual autonomy while granting men more freedom. This imbalance raises a critical question: weather such practices align with the biblical understanding of marriage as expressed in Hebrews 13:4. The practice invites a deeper examination of how traditional beliefs and modern Christian teachings interact, particularly in a context where Christian values on marriage are often juxtaposed with deeply rooted cultural customs. This study seeks to provide a biblical critique of the *"Iji-Woku"* ritual in Oshiri, Ebonyi State, by examining its principles in relation to the Christian understanding of marriage. Through this study, the researchersaim to evaluate the theological, ethical, and socio-cultural implications of the ritual, exploring how it reflects or diverges from the biblical ideals of marital faithfulness and equality. The findings will offer insights into the complexities of integrating indigenous practices with Christian teachings, with the goal of fostering a more just and biblically aligned approach to marital relationships in Oshiri.

Definition of Terms

Hebrews 13:4: This is a verse from the New Testament of the Christian Bible, which reads: "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." Hebrews 13:4 underscores the importance of maintaining the sanctity and purity of marriage, emphasizing that it should be respected and honored in all circumstances. It also warns against sexual immorality, including adultery and promiscuity.

Sanctity of Marriage: The term "sanctity" refers to the state of being holy, sacred, or inviolable. In the context of this study, the "sanctity of marriage" refers to the sacred, divine, and indissoluble nature of the marital relationship, as it is viewed in Christian teachings. It emphasizes faithfulness, commitment, and respect within the union, reflecting the biblical understanding that marriage is a covenant between two people and God, which should be honored and upheld in purity and righteousness.

Biblical Critique: A biblical critique involves analyzing a subject, practice, or concept in light of Christian scriptures and principles. In this study, it refers to evaluating the "Iji-Woku" ritual based on biblical teachings, particularly those found in Hebrews 13:4, to assess whether the ritual aligns with Christian values surrounding marriage, gender roles, and fidelity.

Iji-Woku Ritual: The *"Iji-Woku"* ritual is a traditional practice among the Oshiri people of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. This ritual is performed as a form of marital binding, wherein couples undergo specific rites to reinforce their commitment to each other.

Oshiri: Oshiri is a community located in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. It is home to unique cultural traditions and practices, including the *"Iji-Woku"* ritual.

Ebonyi State: Ebonyi is a state in southeastern Nigeria, known for its diverse ethnic groups, languages, and rich cultural heritage. In this study, Ebonyi State serves as the geographical context for the *"Iji-Woku"* ritual and the customs of the Oshiri people.

The Concept of Marriage in Biblical and African Contexts

Marriage, as a fundamental institution, has been universally regarded as a key societal pillar, but its understanding and practices vary significantly across different cultural and religious contexts. In biblical theology, marriage is viewed as a sacred covenant established by God, whereas in many African communities, marriage is equally seen as a social contract embedded in cultural and traditional values. This dual view provides rich grounds for comparison and contrast, particularly in examining the role of gender, fidelity, and communal responsibilities.In the Bible, marriage is deeply rooted in the creation narrative of Genesis, where God establishes the first marriage between Adam

and Eve as the foundation for all human relationships (Genesis 2:24). Marriage in the biblical sense is primarily understood as a covenant a binding agreement between a man and a woman before God. Ephesians 5:31-33 further elaborates on this, emphasizing the mutual submission and sacrificial love between spouses, grounded in Christ's relationship with the Church. For Christians, marriage is not merely a social contract but a divine ordinance, designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:25-27). The sanctity of marriage in biblical teaching underscores its inviolability, as seen in Hebrews 13:4, which stresses that "marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled." Fidelity, mutual respect, and monogamy are fundamental virtues in this conception of marriage, which transcends cultural and temporal boundaries.

In contrast, traditional African views of marriage are often more communal and social in nature. While many African societies share similar foundational views of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, the importance of family, lineage, and community tends to play a more prominent role. Marriage is seen not only as a private relationship but as a contract between families, aimed at ensuring social stability, continuity of lineage, and the exchange of resources and responsibilities (Ajayi, 2020). In many African cultures, marriage involves elaborate rituals, such as bride price payments, community celebrations, and the involvement of elders, which solidify the union and integrate the couple into the broader social fabric (Benedict, 2018). Fidelity is similarly valued, although some African cultures historically permitted polygyny, where men could have multiple wives, a practice that contrasts with the biblical model of monogamy (Olupona, 2017).

According to N. Chukwu (personal communication, 15th September, 2o25)"In our place here in Oshiri, marriage is not something two people do alone. It is a matter of families and the community. Before a man takes a woman as his wife, there are rituals and expectations to show respect for tradition. Fidelity is important, but some customs, like certain rituals after marriage, are meant to prove a woman's purity and obedience to tradition, not necessarily to destroy the marriage." This view reflects the communal understanding of marriage in Oshiri, where cultural rituals are seen as instruments for preserving social order and moral accountability. However, such practices raise critical theological questions when examined in the light of Hebrews 13:4, especially where ritual demands may compromise marital privacy and fidelity as defined in biblical teaching. In some cases, A. Nwali (personal communication, 22nd September, 2o25)"As a Christian woman, I believe marriage should be respected and protected. Some traditions we inherited were not questioned before, but today we see that some of them put fear and shame on women more than men. A ritual that exposes or tests a woman after marriage does not help trust between husband and wife. It can damage the home instead of building it." This perspective highlights the tension between inherited cultural practices and Christian ethical standards. Her comment aligns strongly with the biblical emphasis on honor, mutual respect, and the undefiled marital bed (Hebrews 13:4), suggesting that rituals which disproportionately burden women may undermine both marital sanctity and Christian moral teaching.

Both the biblical and African views of marriage are centered on fidelity and commitment, but they diverge significantly in their treatment of gender roles and expectations. In biblical marriage, both partners are considered equal in dignity and worth, with distinct but complementary roles. For example, while the Bible teaches wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24), this submission is framed within the broader context of mutual love and respect. In many African societies, however, the dynamics of marriage are often more patriarchal, with gender roles that can sometimes limit women's agency, as seen in practices such as bride price and polygyny. These traditions can be viewed through a critical lens, especially when considering contemporary discussions on gender equality and women's rights (Oyediran & Fetuga, 2021).

Historical Background of Oshiri Community in Ebonyi State

The Oshiri community, located in Ebonyi State in southeastern Nigeria, is a culturally rich and historically significant ethnic group. Situated within the larger Igbo ethnic framework, the Oshiri

people have preserved distinctive traditions, customs, and social practices that define their unique identity. Known for their agricultural prowess, social organization, and spiritual beliefs, Oshiri's history is intertwined with the broader development of the southeastern Nigerian region, which has witnessed various shifts in governance, culture, and religious influence over the centuries.The origins of the Oshiri community are largely oral, with historical narratives passed down through generations. According to local tradition, the people of Oshiri migrated from a common ancestral homeland, settling in their current location due to the area's fertile lands and strategic positioning within the larger Igbo ethnic geography (Okoro, 2021). Oshiri's history is marked by its deep connection to the Igbo spirit of community and self-reliance, where social, economic, and religious activities are tightly woven into the fabric of village life. The Oshiri people, like other Igbo communities, have a strong belief in the spiritual forces of their land, and their social structures reflect both traditional governance and the importance of age-grade systems (Eze, 2020).

During the colonial era, the Oshiri community, like much of southeastern Nigeria, was significantly impacted by British imperialism, which introduced new systems of governance, education, and religion. The British colonial presence led to the establishment of local administrative structures that replaced traditional leadership systems in many areas, though the Oshiri people managed to maintain their customary leadership and religious practices, such as the prominent role of elders and the reverence for spiritual rites (Achebe, 2018). Christianity also found a strong foothold in the community, influencing local traditions and intergenerational relations, especially in the areas of marriage, family life, and moral conduct.

One of the most significant cultural practices within Oshiri is the *"Iji-Woku"* ritual, a traditional marriage ceremony that symbolizes the spiritual and social bonds between married couples. This ritual, which is central to the community's concept of marriage, reinforces the importance of fidelity and the protection of the marital bond under the guardianship of ancestral spirits. The continuation of such practices, even in the face of modernization and the spread of Christianity, is a testament to the resilience of Oshiri's cultural heritage (Uche-Egbulam, 2019).

According to C. Nworie (personal communication, 4th October, 2025)"Our people of Oshiri have been here from the time of our forefathers. What we know is that our ancestors moved and settled here because the land was good for farming and living. Everything we do, from farming to marriage, is connected to our tradition and the spirits of the land. Before the white man came, elders and age grades were the ones controlling the community. Even when Christianity entered, we did not abandon our customs like *Iji-Woku* because it is what protects marriage and family among us."This oral account reinforces the scholarly narrative that Oshiri history is largely preserved through oral tradition. The respondent highlights migration, agriculture, traditional governance, and the enduring relevance of rituals such as Iji-Woku, thereby confirming the community's strong attachment to ancestral institutions despite colonial and religious transformations. Similarly, G. Nnenna (personal communication, 11th October, 2025)"Oshiri people respect marriage and family life very much. In the old days, marriage was not just between a man and a woman but between families and the ancestors. *Iji-Woku* was done to show seriousness and faithfulness. When Christianity came, many things changed, but our people still believe that without respecting tradition, marriage will not stand. That is why Oshiri people still value these rites till today." This view provides a gendered and communal perspective on Oshiri history, particularly on marriage and social values. It illustrates how traditional practices coexist with Christianity, emphasizing continuity rather than total cultural displacement, and supports the argument that Oshiri society negotiates modernity without losing its historical identity.

Today, the Oshiri community continues to balance its traditional customs with modern influences. While the influx of Western education, governance, and religious practices has introduced new ways of thinking, many in the community continue to hold fast to their ancestral customs, particularly those related to family life and social cohesion. As with many other Igbo communities,

the Oshiri people find themselves navigating the complex dynamics of preserving cultural identity while engaging with the broader Nigerian society and global trends.

Origin and Meaning of the Iji-Woku Ritual

The *Iji-Woku* ritual, a key cultural practice of the Oshiri community in Ebonyi State, southeastern Nigeria, holds deep historical and spiritual significance in the community's understanding of marriage and social cohesion. Rooted in the larger Igbo cultural milieu, *Iji-Woku* is a traditional marriage rite that has been passed down through generations, symbolizing the binding of a husband and wife through spiritual, familial, and community ties. While the exact origins of *Iji-Woku* remain unclear, it is widely believed to have evolved from ancient customs surrounding marriage and ancestral worship, reflecting the community's values of fidelity, respect, and spiritual protection.

The term *Iji-Woku* can be translated as the marriage binding ritual. This ritual is believed to have originated as a way of safeguarding the marital bond by invoking spiritual forces to ensure the faithfulness of both partners. In this context, *Iji-Woku* serves as a public and sacred affirmation of the marriage covenant, with symbolic elements meant to reinforce the gendered expectations of fidelity within the union (Uche-Egbulam, 2019).At its core, the *Iji-Woku* ritual is designed to solidify the marriage relationship under the watchful eyes of the ancestors and spiritual entities. The ceremony involves a ritual performed by the couple in front of an elder, during which symbolic actions such as the display of the couple's legs, the use of a chicken, and the marking of the four market days (*Eke, Orie, Afor, and Nkwo*) take place. These elements are deeply symbolic, with the chicken representing the life force and spiritual presence that binds the couple. The ritual's performance such as the woman extending both legs while the man extends only one signifies the gendered nature of the marital bond: the woman is spiritually bound to her husband, with consequences for any infidelity, while the man retains the freedom to marry additional wives without facing similar spiritual retribution (Uche-Egbulam, 2019; Okoro, 2021).

According to O. Nwanchor (personal communication, 18th October, 2025)*"Iji-Woku* is not something we copied from anywhere. It came from our forefathers to protect marriage. In the old days, marriage was sacred, and the ancestors were invited to watch over it. The ritual was mainly to make sure a woman respects her husband and does not bring shame to the family. If a woman commits adultery after *Iji-Woku*, sickness or death can come unless proper cleansing is done. For men, our culture allows another wife or having affairs with other unmarried women, so the ancestors do not punish that. That is how it has always been in Oshiri." This account reinforces the ancestral and spiritual foundations of the *Iji-Woku* ritual, highlighting its function as a moral and spiritual mechanism for preserving marital fidelity. His explanation clearly reflects the gendered structure of the ritual and supports scholarly views that link *Iji-Woku* to ancestral surveillance and patriarchal norms within Oshiri marriage practices. Additionally, N. Eze (personal communication, 25th October, 2025)"When I married my husband, *Iji-Woku* was done for me. We were told that it binds the marriage spiritually. As a woman, you are always careful because they say the gods will punish you if you are unfaithful. But men are not under the same fear. Even when people are now Christians, many families still insist on *Iji-Woku* because they believe it protects the marriage and the children." This testimony provides a lived female perspective on the ritual, emphasizing its continuing relevance despite the influence of Christianity. Her statement underscores the fear-based spiritual control imposed on women and affirms contemporary critiques that view *Iji-Woku* as reinforcing unequal gender expectations within marriage.

The *Iji-Woku* ritual is steeped in a worldview that connects marriage to ancestral forces and the community's collective moral fabric. Adultery and infidelity are considered serious transgressions, invoking divine or spiritual penalties that emphasize the importance of sexual exclusivity and loyalty. For women, the ritual's spiritual sanction serves as a deterrent against

extramarital affairs, while for men, the practice grants the freedom to engage with other women without incurring spiritual consequences (Uche-Egbulam, 2019). This gendered disparity reflects broader socio-cultural norms that prioritize male autonomy while constraining female sexual agency within marriage.The *Iji-Woku* ritual, while significant in its historical and cultural context, also faces criticism in modern times, particularly from gender equality and human rights perspectives. Scholars such as Uche-Egbulam (2019) argue that the ritual perpetuates patriarchal structures, undermining the equality of spouses and reinforcing harmful gender norms. Nonetheless, the ritual continues to play a central role in the Oshiri community's understanding of marriage, embodying both the spiritual and social dimensions of this sacred union.

Procedures and Significance of the Iji-Woku Ritual

The procedure of the *Iji-Woku* ritual begins with the couple sitting before an elder, usually the eldest man in the family or community. This elder acts as the officiant, guiding the ritual and invoking spiritual elements to bless and bind the marriage. During the ceremony, the woman is required to extend both of her legs, while the man extends only one. This display signifies the gendered nature of the marital relationship, where the woman is bound to her husband in a spiritually and socially enforced union. The man, on the other hand, is permitted sexual autonomy, as symbolized by the extension of only one leg. This unequal representation reflects the ritual's reinforcement of patriarchal norms, where the woman is confined to sexual fidelity within the marriage, while the man retains freedom to engage with other women (Uche-Egbulam, 2019).

A local chicken (*Oku Odoh*) is then used in the ritual. The elder touches the couple's extended legs with the chicken, symbolizing the four market days of *Eke, Orie, Afor, and Nkwo,* which are significant in the Oshiri calendar. After the chicken is slaughtered, it is cooked and served to the couple and the community members present. The act of sharing the meal solidifies the marriage bond in the presence of the community, highlighting the communal and social aspect of marriage in Oshiri. However, the ritual carries a profound moral warning: if particularly the woman, violates the marital bond through infidelity, divine retribution is believed to strike, and the spirit of the land will punish her until she confess her wrongdoing (Okoro, 2021). According to N. Chukwudi) (personal communication, 2nd November, 2025)*"Iji-Woku* is not an ordinary marriage rite for us in Oshiri. When the man stretches one leg and the woman stretches two, it is a sign that the woman has given herself fully to the man. The chicken we use is to call the four market days to witness the marriage. Once that ritual is done, especially for the woman, if she commits adultery and hides it, the land will punish her until she confesses. That is what our fathers taught us, and it has kept marriages strong." This account confirms the symbolic and spiritual meanings of the ritual elements, particularly the unequal leg extension and the use of the chicken. His emphasis on supernatural punishment supports the belief that *Iji-Woku* functions as a moral control mechanism, especially directed at women, reinforcing the patriarchal nature of the ritual. In addition, C. Eze (personal communication, 11th November, 2025)"When I did my Iji-Woku, I was afraid because they told us that once a woman is married through that ritual, she must not cheat on her husband. People believe that sickness or death can come if a woman breaks the oath. But men can still move around, and nothing happens to them. Even though it brings fear and respect for marriage, it is harder on women." This testimony highlights the lived experience of women within the Iji-Woku system. Her statement reveals the psychological burden placed on women and underscores the gender imbalance embedded in the ritual, aligning with scholarly critiques of its unequal moral expectations.

The significance of the *Iji-Woku* ritual lies not only in its role in solemnizing the marriage but also in its enforcement of moral and gender norms within the community. The ritual reinforces fidelity by invoking spiritual forces to safeguard the marriage covenant. While it strengthens the social fabric by publicly affirming marital commitments, it also upholds patriarchal structures by allowing the man greater sexual freedom. The belief in divine retribution serves as a deterrent against adultery,

particularly for women, who are held more accountable for breaches in fidelity (Uche-Egbulam, 2019). In this sense, the ritual serves both as a spiritual safeguard and as a mechanism for maintaining social order, though its gendered nature has been a subject of critique in modern discussions on marriage and gender equality.

Biblical Principles on Marriage, Honor, and Sexual Purity

Marriage, as an institution, is highly valued in the Bible, seen as both a divine covenant and a societal foundation that reflects God's design for human relationships. Central to the biblical understanding of marriage are the principles of honor, commitment, and sexual purity. These principles serve not only as guidelines for marital conduct but also as reflections of God's holiness and His expectations for human behavior.

First, the Bible establishes marriage as a sacred covenant between a man and a woman, instituted by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:24). The relationship between husband and wife is meant to mirror the intimate union between Christ and the Church, as expressed in Ephesians 5:31-32. The Apostle Paul emphasizes that the husband should love his wife sacrificially, just as Christ loved the Church, and the wife should respect her husband. This mutual respect and love form the foundation for the biblical view of marriage, which is not merely a social contract but a divine calling that demands commitment, faithfulness, and selflessness (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Honor plays a critical role in biblical marriage principles. Both spouses are called to honor each other, with the command to "honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12) extending to the marital relationship. This idea of honor encompasses respect, trust, and integrity, requiring both partners to treat one another with dignity and regard. The apostle Peter further reinforces the need for honor in marriage, instructing husbands to live with their wives "in an understanding way" (1 Peter 3:7), recognizing them as co-heirs of the grace of life. In this way, the concept of honor in marriage is integral to the harmony and longevity of the relationship.

Sexual purity is another critical element in biblical teachings on marriage. The Bible consistently upholds sexual purity as a standard for married couples, as well as for individuals before marriage. Hebrews 13:4 explicitly states, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." This verse underlines the sanctity of the marriage relationship and the call for sexual purity within it. Adultery, sexual immorality, and promiscuity are repeatedly condemned in scripture, with warnings that they lead to judgment (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Revelation 21:8). Jesus, in His teachings, elevated the moral standard, teaching that even lustful thoughts are considered sinful (Matthew 5:28), thus urging His followers to maintain purity not only in actions but in thought as well.

According to P.Nwankwo (personal communication, 25th November, 2025)"Marriage is a sacred covenant from God, as in Genesis 2:24, where man and woman become one flesh. Husbands must love their wives like Christ loves the Church, with sacrifice and respect, just as Ephesians 5:25 says, and wives must honor their husbands in return. The marriage bed must stay pure, undefiled by immorality, because Hebrews 13:4 warns that God judges the adulterous." This words affirm the divine origin of marriage and the call for sacrificial love, aligning with Ephesians 5:22-33's emphasis on mutual honor as foundational to a godly union. Additionally, G. Eze (personal communication, 8th December, 2025)"Honor in marriage means treating your spouse with dignity, like 1 Peter 3:7 teaches husbands to understand their wives as co-heirs of grace. Sexual purity is key Hebrews 13:4 says let marriage be honored among all, and the bed undefiled, for God judges' impurity. Even thoughts must be pure, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:28, and we control our bodies in holiness per 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5." This underscores sexual purity and thoughtful honor as reflections of God's holiness, directly echoing Hebrews 13:4 and supporting the biblical standard of chastity within marriage.

The biblical emphasis on sexual purity extends beyond the marital relationship to broader principles of chastity and self-control. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, Paul exhorts believers to abstain

from sexual immorality, to control their bodies in holiness and honor, and to avoid defrauding one another. These teachings highlight the importance of purity as a reflection of one's commitment to God's will and moral order.

Contrasting Biblical Teachings with Iji-Woku Practices

The *Iji-Woku* ritual, an integral part of the marriage customs in the Oshiri community, involves spiritual rites that bind a woman to her husband, emphasizing fidelity through spiritual and ancestral forces. This practice, deeply rooted in the traditional beliefs of the Oshiri people, has strong implications for sexual purity and marital faithfulness. However, when compared to biblical teachings on marriage, honor, and sexual purity, significant contrasts emerge in both the theological basis and the methodology used to enforce marital fidelity.

The *Iji-Woku* ritual is primarily focused on the spiritual binding of the wife to her husband, where the woman is ceremonially marked to ensure she remains faithful to her marital vows. The ritual's potency is believed to lie in the ancestral and spiritual forces invoked during the ceremony, which serve as a deterrent to infidelity. If the woman violates the marriage vows, it is believed that divine retribution from the ancestral spirits will strike her, as seen in the community's belief that women who breach the vows may suffer madness (Uche-Egbulam, 2019). This form of external enforcement reflects the Oshiri community's understanding of fidelity as a spiritual contract, where the threat of supernatural punishment acts as a deterrent.In contrast, the Bible addresses marital faithfulness through internal moral and spiritual transformation, rather than relying on external rituals or threats of punishment. Biblical principles emphasize mutual love, respect, and sacrificial commitment between spouses, grounded in a covenant relationship before God. For instance, Ephesians 5:22-33 teaches that husbands should love their wives sacrificially, just as Christ loved the Church, while wives are instructed to respect their husbands. The focus here is on the internal transformation of individuals, cultivating love and honor through a personal relationship with God, rather than a ritualistic practice enforced by ancestral forces.

Moreover, the Bible stresses the importance of sexual purity not only within marriage but also in the mind and heart. Jesus' teachings elevate the moral standard of purity by equating lustful thoughts with adultery (Matthew 5:28), a principle not explicitly covered in the *Iji-Woku* ritual. While *Iji-Woku* focuses on the physical act of marital fidelity, the Bible underscores the significance of guarding one's thoughts and intentions, aiming for an internal purity that transcends mere outward adherence to vows. Hebrews 13:4 emphasizes that the marriage bed should remain undefiled, indicating that sexual purity is not only an external matter but also a reflection of one's inner devotion to God.

Another significant difference lies in the role of women within the *Iji-Woku* ritual. In this tradition, women are bound by the spiritual forces of the land to their husbands, with little agency in breaking the vow. The ritual positions the woman as primarily responsible for maintaining marital fidelity, reinforcing a gendered inequality within the practice. Conversely, the Bible calls for mutual submission and responsibility in marriage. Both husband and wife are equally accountable for upholding the sanctity of marriage (Ephesians 5:21-33), where the responsibilities of love, respect, and fidelity are shared.

According to C. Nwafor (personal communication, 15th December, 2025)"Iji-Woku is not something we joke with in Oshiri. When a woman goes through Iji-Woku, it means she has been spiritually joined to her husband by the ancestors. If she commits adultery, the land will fight her. It can make her mad or even kill her. That is why our people believe it keeps women faithful. It is not about love but about fear of the spirits. Even if the husband is bad, the woman must endure because the ritual has bound her."This oral account confirms the ritual's reliance on ancestral fear and supernatural sanctionsas mechanisms for enforcing marital fidelity. It supports the contrast drawn in the section between Iji-Woku's external, fear-based control and the biblical model of internal moral

transformation grounded in love and covenantal responsibility. In contrast, G. Chukwuma (personal communication, 20th December, 2025)"As a Christian woman, I see a difference between what the Bible teaches and what Iji-Woku stands for. The Bible tells us to be faithful because we love God and respect our husbands, not because we are afraid of punishment. In *Iji-Woku*, it is only the woman that is tied spiritually. The man can do anything. But in Christianity, both man and woman will answer to God if they break the marriage." This view highlights the gender imbalance inherent in the *Iji-Woku* ritual and reinforces the biblical emphasis on mutual accountability and spiritual equality in marriage. It directly aligns with the section's argument that Christian teaching shifts marital fidelity from ritual enforcement to shared moral responsibility before God.

Generally, while the *Iji-Woku* ritual and biblical teachings both aim to promote marital fidelity, they differ significantly in their approaches. The *Iji-Woku* practice relies on external spiritual forces and ancestral authority to maintain marital purity, with a strong focus on controlling the behavior of women. In contrast, biblical teachings promote a covenantal relationship characterized by mutual love, respect, and self-sacrifice, emphasizing internal moral purity and mutual accountability between spouses. These differences highlight distinct cultural understandings of marriage and sexual purity, shaped by theological and spiritual beliefs unique to each context.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the *Iji-Woku* ritual in Oshiri, Ebonyi State, in comparison to biblical teachings on marriage, honor, and sexual purity. The *Iji-Woku* ritual, deeply ingrained in the traditional marriage customs of the Oshiri community, plays a pivotal role in ensuring marital fidelity, particularly among women, by invoking spiritual forces that act as deterrents to infidelity. The ritual's significance lies in its ability to spiritually bind the woman to her husband, with severe consequences for any breach of marital vows. Despite its effectiveness in maintaining traditional norms, the *Iji-Woku* practice emphasizes gendered responsibility, predominantly placing the burden of marital faithfulness on the woman.In contrast, biblical teachings present marriage as a sacred covenant, emphasizing mutual love, respect, and sacrificial commitment between both husband and wife. The Bible promotes internal transformation through a personal relationship with God as the foundation for marital fidelity, where both partners are equally accountable for maintaining the sanctity of the union. Biblical principles call for sexual purity not only in the physical act but also in thoughts and intentions, emphasizing a holistic approach to marital faithfulness that transcends external rituals.The comparison between the *Iji-Woku* ritual and biblical teachings reveals both similarities and stark differences. While both systems aim to promote marital fidelity, they diverge in their underlying spiritual frameworks and the roles they assign to each spouse. The *Iji-Woku* ritual is rooted in the Oshiri community's ancestral beliefs, relying on supernatural forces to enforce marital purity, while the Bible calls for an internal, God-centered approach to marriage, with shared responsibilities for both husband and wife. This study highlights the tension between traditional cultural practices and biblical teachings, urging further reflection on how both can contribute to the ongoing discourse on marriage, sexual purity, and gender roles. As modern societies continue to grapple with evolving cultural and moral values, understanding the intersection of faith, tradition, and gender in marriage practices is crucial for fostering deeper discussions on fidelity, respect, and the sanctity of marriage.

Research Gaps

Gap in Contextual Studies on the *Iji-Woku* Ritual in Oshiri: Despite the growing body of literature on African traditional marriage rites and gender relations, there remains a significant scholarly gap in studies that critically examine the *Iji-Woku* ritual of Oshiri from a biblical and theological perspective. Existing studies on African indigenous marriage systems have largely concentrated on the preservation of cultural identity, the social functions of rituals, and the role of

traditional beliefs in maintaining communal morality. Scholars have also explored the patriarchal structure of many African societies and how such structures influence women's roles within marriage. However, little attention has been given specifically to the *Iji-Woku* ritual as practiced in Oshiri, Ebonyi State, especially regarding its implications for marital fidelity, gender equality, and spiritual accountability. Most available studies treat indigenous rituals in general terms without undertaking an in-depth contextual analysis of the Oshiri experience. Consequently, the unique religious and socio-cultural dimensions of the Iji-Woku ritual have not been sufficiently documented or critically evaluated within academic discourse.

Gap in Comparative Biblical and Cultural Analysis: Furthermore, previous studies on Christian marriage ethics and biblical teachings on marital faithfulness have focused predominantly on doctrinal expositions of scriptural passages relating to marriage, adultery, and sexual purity. While these studies emphasize the sacredness of marriage and mutual responsibility between spouses, they rarely engage indigenous African practices in a comparative theological framework. In particular, there is a scarcity of scholarly works that employ Hebrews 13:4 as a hermeneutical lens for evaluating African traditional marital rituals. Existing literature has not adequately explored the contradiction between the biblical principle of mutual fidelity and the gender-biased obligations embedded in the *Iji-Woku* ritual, where women are subjected to stricter moral and spiritual sanctions than men. This lack of comparative engagement has created a vacuum in understanding how biblical teachings can challenge or reform traditional practices that undermine the dignity and equality of women in marriage.

Gap in Theological and Practical Engagement with Contemporary Society: In addition, many earlier researches on African traditional religion and marriage customs have concentrated more on anthropological and sociological interpretations, with limited emphasis on the practical theological implications of such practices for contemporary Christian communities. There is insufficient research addressing how traditional rituals like *Iji-Woku* continue to shape the worldview, marital relationships, and moral consciousness of Christians living within culturally rooted societies such as Oshiri. Equally absent are studies proposing constructive dialogue between traditional institutions and Christian teachings as a means of promoting a more balanced and biblically grounded understanding of marriage. Therefore, this study fills this scholarly gap by providing a contextual biblical critique of the *Iji-Woku* ritual using Hebrews 13:4, while also examining its gender implications and its relevance for contemporary Christian marital ethics in Oshiri, Ebonyi State.

The Research's Contribution to Existing Knowledge

Contribution to Indigenous Marriage Studies: This study contributes significantly to existing knowledge by providing one of the few detailed academic examinations of the *Iji-Woku* ritual in Oshiri, Ebonyi State. While previous studies on African traditional marriage systems have discussed indigenous rituals broadly, this research offers a focused and contextual investigation into the cultural, moral, and spiritual dimensions of the *Iji-Woku* practice. By documenting the ritual's procedures, beliefs, and implications within the Oshiri community, the study enriches scholarly discourse on African indigenous institutions and expands the body of literature on traditional marriage practices in southeastern Nigeria. The research therefore serves as an important reference material for scholars interested in African Traditional Religion, cultural studies, gender relations, and indigenous marriage systems.

Contribution to Biblical and Theological Scholarship: The study also makes an original contribution to biblical and theological scholarship by critically evaluating the *Iji-Woku* ritual through the teachings of Hebrews 13:4. Unlike many previous works that treat biblical teachings and African cultural practices separately, this study establishes a comparative theological framework that examines the points of convergence and divergence between Christian marriage ethics and indigenous marital traditions. Through this approach, the research deepens theological discussions on marital

fidelity, holiness, and gender equality within marriage. The study further demonstrates how biblical principles can be applied in assessing cultural practices that conflict with Christian teachings, thereby contributing to contextual theology and African Christian ethics. Its emphasis on mutual responsibility and equality in marriage offers a fresh scholarly perspective on the interpretation of Hebrews 13:4 within African socio-cultural realities.

Contribution to Gender and Socio-Religious Discourse: In addition, this study contributes to contemporary discussions on gender justice, religion, and culture by exposing the patriarchal dimensions of the *Iji-Woku* ritual and their implications for women in marriage. The research highlights the unequal moral expectations placed on women compared to men and critically questions the cultural structures that sustain such imbalance. By doing so, the study promotes scholarly reflection on the need for cultural reforms that uphold the dignity and equality of both spouses in accordance with biblical teachings. Furthermore, the study encourages constructive dialogue between traditional practitioners and Christian communities, thereby providing practical insights for religious leaders, cultural custodians, and marriage counselors. Its interdisciplinary approach, which combines biblical studies, cultural analysis, and gender discourse, enhances its originality and scholarly value within the fields of theology, sociology, and African cultural studies.

Recommendations

Promote Education on Biblical Views of Marriage and Fidelity in Traditional Communities: Given the significant cultural importance of the *Iji-Woku* ritual in Oshiri and similar communities, it is recommended that religious leaders, scholars, and community elders collaborate to educate the people about the biblical teachings on marriage, fidelity, and sexual purity. This could be achieved through workshops, seminars, and community outreach programs that highlight the spiritual and moral principles of marital relationships as taught in the Bible, especially the concepts of mutual love, respect, and shared accountability. By fostering an understanding of biblical marriage principles, there can be an integration of cultural practices with Christian ethical standards, encouraging more holistic and equitable approaches to marriage.

Encourage Gender-Sensitive Reinterpretation of Traditional Practices: The *Iji-Woku* ritual places a disproportionate responsibility on women for marital fidelity, often leading to gender-based inequalities. It is recommended that community leaders and scholars engage in a gender-sensitive reinterpretation of the ritual. This would involve reevaluating the ritual's focus on female accountability and ensuring that both partner's - husbands and wives - are equally bound to the vows and responsibilities of marriage. A balanced approach, which includes mutual respect and shared accountability, would promote gender equality and contribute to healthier, more equitable marital relationships. Community leaders could work to adapt the ritual in ways that uphold its spiritual and cultural significance while fostering gender justice and fairness.

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Name	Age	Gender	Location	Occupation	Date of Interview
Mr. Nworie Chukwu	68	Male	Oshiri Community	Farmer	15th Nov 2o25
Mrs. Agnes Nwali	45	Female	Oshiri Community	Trader	22nd Nov 2o25
Mr. Chukwudi Nworie	68	Male	Onicha L.G.A, Ebonyi State	Farmer	4th Oct. 2o25
Mrs. Grace Nnenna	54	Female	Onicha L.G.A, Ebonyi State	Trader	11th Oct. 2o25
Mr. Okorie Nwanchor	68	Male	Oshiri Community	Farmer and Community Leader	18th Oct. 2o25
Mrs. Nneka Eze	54	Female	Oshiri Community	Trader	25th Oct. 2o25
Mr. Nworie Chukwudi	68	Male	Oshiri Community	Farmer and Community Leader	2nd Nov. 2o25
Mr. Chiamaka Eze	55	Female	Oshiri Community	Trader	11th Nov. 2o25
Elder Paul Nwankwo	68	Male	Abakaliki, Ebonyi State	Church Leader	25th Nov. 2o25
Mrs. Grace Eze	52	Female	Afikpo, Ebonyi State	Women's Fellowship Leader	8th Dec. 2o25
Mr. Chukwudi Nwafor	63	Male	Oshiri Community	Farmer and Community Leader	15th Dec. 2o25
Mrs. Grace Chukwuma	45	Female	Abakaliki, Ebonyi State	Trader and Church Leader	2oth Dec. 2o25