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The Concept of the ‘Girl Wife’ in Igbo Society:

Perspectives from G. T. Basden’s Among the Ibos of Nigeria

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**A GIRL WIFE” from ‘Among the Ibos
of Nigeria’ (1921) written by
Anglican missionary G. T. Basden**

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The concept of the “girl wife” in traditional Igbo society, as discussed by Anglican missionary G. T. Basden in his 1921 work *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, provides insight into the social structure and marriage customs among the Igbo people in the early 20th century. Basden's observations highlight a practice where young girls, often before reaching adolescence, would be pledged as future wives in arranged marriages, a custom that had both social and economic implications.

In this arrangement, “girl wives” were often brought into the households of their future husbands at a young age. These young brides would typically live with the husband's family, learning the domestic responsibilities expected of them and gradually integrating into their new community. During this period, they were cared for and trained by senior women in the family. Sexual relations were usually deferred until the girl reached maturity, reflecting a societal respect for her development. This practice was deeply embedded in Igbo culture and connected to broader issues of lineage, social alliances, and the reinforcement of familial bonds.

Basden's account, although shaped by his position as a Christian missionary, captures the layered significance of these marriages. For the Igbo, the “girl wife” tradition was less about individual romantic choice and more about building alliances between families, ensuring the continuity of family lineage, and fostering unity within the community. The custom was intertwined with the Igbo's patrilineal



inheritance system, as well as their belief in ancestral veneration, which emphasized the importance of producing heirs to honor past generations.

Despite his biases, Basden's documentation is valuable for understanding Igbo gender roles and family structures before significant Western influence. His work also hints at the effects of colonial and missionary influences on these traditional practices. The arrival of Christianity and Western education began to challenge the concept of the "girl wife" by promoting individual choice in marriage and altering perceptions of childhood and female agency. Over time, colonial authorities and missionaries, including Basden himself, advocated against early marriages, which they viewed as incompatible with their Christian ideals and standards of individual rights.

By studying Basden's observations, contemporary scholars gain a glimpse into the cultural values of pre-colonial Igbo society and the ways in which British colonial and Christian missionary influences prompted gradual changes in family and marital customs. While some Igbo communities have since moved away from the practice of pledging young girls in marriage, Basden's writings preserve a record of these customs as they were practiced a century ago.

Basden, G. T. (1921). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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