
OIL, MIGRATION, RELIGION, AND MARITAL ALLIANCES: INTERMARRIAGE AS A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE NIGER DELTA

Uche Christopher Ohazurume

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy,
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract: *The Niger Delta area of Nigeria serves as an intriguing example of how resource extraction alters societal frameworks. This article explores the connections between oil exploration, coerced migration, religious change, and matrimonial alliances, positing that intermarriage has developed as a tactical reaction to economic upheaval and social disintegration. Based on empirical research carried out in the area from 2007 to 2008, along with more contemporary studies, the article illustrates how local women engage with expatriate oil workers not merely as survival tactics but as strategic endeavours to amass social capital. These connections, nonetheless, yield intricate results - providing avenues for economic advancement while concurrently fostering social stigma, children without fathers, and disintegration of communities. The article additionally examines the dual role of religious institutions in both denouncing and accepting these unions, as well as how ecological deterioration has influenced migration trends that alter marital prospects. Ultimately, intermarriage in the Niger Delta embodies a contradictory approach: it allows individuals to manoeuvre through the inconsistencies of the oil economy while perpetuating the same systems of inequality that displacement has engendered.*

Keywords: *Oil, Migration, Religion, Marital Alliances, Intermarriage, Social Capital, Niger Delta*

Introduction

As the economic centre of Nigeria, the Niger Delta is responsible for the production of crude oil, which accounts for more than 90 percent of the country's total revenue from foreign exchange sources (Janjua, Eduvwie, & Araka, 2025). However, this region is marked by a paradoxical combination of circumstances: there is a remarkable abundance of wealth, but there is also a significant amount of poverty, ecological destruction, and social upheaval. As a result of the discovery of oil in

Oloibiri, which is now a part of Bayelsa State, multinational oil corporations have reaped billions of dollars in profits, while the local populations have suffered from pollution, displacement, and violence (Ojakorotu, 2023). Social institutions have undergone significant transformations as a result of this framework of extraction and dispossession. There has been a shift in migration patterns as young people have relocated to urban centres like Port Harcourt in search of opportunities (Ojakorotu, 2023). This is because they are fleeing ecological degradation and conflict. According to Joshua Project (2024), religious landscapes have been altered as a result of the competition between Pentecostalism and Islam and traditional spiritual practices that are centred on the worship of water deities and ancestors.

According to Gandu (2011), the influx of expatriate oil workers has resulted in a transformation of marriage, which is considered to be the most fundamental of all social structural components. The purpose of this article is to investigate a particular aspect of this transformation, which is the strategic utilisation of intermarriage and sexual relationships as a means of accumulating social capital. Through the utilization of ethnographic research, which includes semi-structured interviews with women, community leaders, and former combatants, the article investigates the ways in which local women navigate the paradoxes of the oil economy through their interactions with foreign labourers. These relationships, which are frequently referred to as survival strategies, also represent efforts to acquire the resources, prestige, and mobility that are made available by the oil economy.

The Historical Context: Pre-Colonial Marriage and Kinship

To comprehend the modern evolution of marriage in the Niger Delta, one must examine its historical underpinnings. Prior to the emergence of the oil sector, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta comprising the Ijaw, Urhobo, Isoko, and Itsekiri upheld intricate kinship networks wherein marriage functioned as a fundamental means of forging social alliances, reallocating resources, and guaranteeing communal endurance. The Isoko community, residing in the northwestern Niger Delta, embodies these customary practices. Their identity has been influenced by migrations, clan affiliations, and reliance on the region's rich agricultural landscape. Family structures were generally arranged around patrilineal units where husbands, wives, offspring, and extended kin collectively managed daily duties (Joshua Project, 2024). Marriage constituted not merely a partnership between individuals but a formal agreement among families and clans, incorporating bridewealth transactions that delineated rights and responsibilities across generations (Tiemo, 1968).

Within the Ijaw community, matrimonial customs were deeply rooted in tradition, encompassing bride price transactions, formalised ceremonies, and defined

marital regulations (Tiemo, 1968). The Arogbo Izon, a faction of the Ijaw, "promote marriages within their tribe and with other Izon factions to preserve their cultural identity and legacy" (Arogbo tribe, 2015). This focus on endogamy highlighted the significance of sustaining social unity and safeguarding cultural identity in an area where ethnic divisions were both malleable and consequential. Notably, pre-colonial matrimonial customs were not immutable. The Iseregwe myth, documented within the Urhobo community, illustrates the permeable distinctions between the realms of humans and spirits in the cosmology of the Niger Delta. In this legend, a human female weds a river deity disguised as a serpent, gaining material riches in return for her loyalty.

Upon her family's slaying of the python, she metamorphoses into an electric fish, and those who consume her flesh are transformed into catfish (Ifie, 1999). This legend, as posited by Egbe Ifie, embodies the conviction that "humans wed aquatic deities or engage with them on various life matters regularly" (Ifie, 1999, p. 45). These spiritual unions, akin to their earthly equivalents, encompass the transfer of resources, status, and safeguarding. The remarkable aspect of these pre-colonial patterns is their integration within frameworks of reciprocal duty. Marriage constituted not merely a personal exchange but a societal institution intricately woven into extensive networks of familial ties, spirituality, and communal administration. This interconnectedness would be interrupted by the emergence of the oil sector and its exploitative rationale.

The Oil Economy and Forced Migration

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta marked the beginning of a transformative process, the effects of which are gradually becoming more apparent. There has been a significant amount of ecological damage caused by the pursuit of oil exploration (Ite, Ibok, Ite, & Petters, 2013). This damage includes oil spills, gas flaring, and contamination of water sources. According to the findings of an investigation conducted in 2025 on the Ogale Community, seventy percent of oil spills were not addressed, which led to communities being relocated and people moving from rural areas to urban areas (Nweke-Love, Efe, Durojaiye, & Ekwebelem, 2025). Over seventy-four-point five percent of the participants had their homes taken away from them, and eighty percent of them reported that they did not receive adequate compensation from either corporations or governmental organizations (Nweke-Love, *et al.*, 2025). Agricultural and fishing are two examples of traditional occupations that have become unsustainable as a result of ecological degradation. In the same study, it was discovered that 49.6% of the participants were dependent on jobs that were no longer viable for subsistence (Nweke-Love *et al.*, 2025). A significant number of people have been displaced as a result of the outcome, both locally and internationally.

As stated by Ojakorotu (2023), "economic difficulties, joblessness, poverty, and the pursuit of better opportunities abroad are the driving forces behind migration" (p. 3). According to Ojakorotu (2023), "persistent assaults and confrontations between militants and the Nigerian government regarding oil" in the Niger Delta are a factor that contributes to the escalation of these elements. The phenomenon that Oshokunofa (2024) refers to as "ethnic ambivalence" is a circumstance in which migrants "ultimately exhibit ethnic ambivalence" towards their native land (p. 592). Environmental contamination has been acknowledged as a factor that contributes to this phenomenon. This duality is expressed in a variety of complex ways: migrants may feel a sense of longing and duty towards their native communities, while at the same time harbouring resentment for the ecological degradation and societal upheaval that compelled them to leave of their homes.

Oshokunofa (2024) observes that the connections that endow human life with significance are consequently "fizzling," which leads to the formation of diaspora communities that are characterized by ambivalent ties to their place of origin (p. 594). As a result of environmental displacement, the consequences have been particularly severe for women and young girls. According to Ojakorotu (2023), oil-related disputes and ecological deterioration "intensify the involvement of uneducated young girls and women in migrating or being trafficked to urban areas as child labourers and sex workers both within and beyond Nigeria" (p. 5; cf. Chukwudi, Ojakorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). As a result of the elimination of subsistence livelihoods, a gendered vulnerability is created: women, who have traditionally relied on fishing and agriculture for their livelihoods, lose access to these sources of income and are forced to adopt alternative methods of survival (Jemimah & Ike, 2015).

Sexual Liaisons and the Strategy of Social Capital

In the milieu of ecological devastation and economic upheaval, romantic entanglements between indigenous women and foreign oil labourers have surfaced as a notable social occurrence. These connections are not merely transactional in nature, although they exhibit certain similarities. According to Gandu's (2011) study, sexual encounters are "not conventional prostitution or straightforward transactional exchanges of sex for currency" (p. 127). They function within an ambiguous realm that intertwines transactional sex, romantic relationships, and strategic partnerships. Participants in Gandu's (2011) research differentiated between commercial sex work and intimate encounters with foreign oil labourers. A participant articulated: "The interaction between foreign oil workers and our local women does not constitute genuine ashawo work; it resembles a romantic relationship akin to that of a boyfriend and girlfriend or a husband and wife; it is a permanent fixture, and there is nothing

we can do to impede it" (Gandu, 2011, p. 133). The terminology of courtship and partnership holds importance in this context: it implies that these connections, although driven by economic factors, are also perceived within the paradigm of romantic or marital unions.

What drives women to engage in these relationships? Respondents in Gandu's (2011) study referenced a multifaceted array of influences. The majority hailed from disadvantaged economic circumstances, motivated by what one articulated as "attribute the fault to poverty, not to us" (p. 136). However, additional motivations surfaced: "the urge to seek enjoyment," the aspiration to wed an expatriate with the expectation of "being relocated internationally," and social influence to imitate women who had effectively married foreign labourers (Gandu, 2011, p. 137). A participant remarked:

Certain underage females do not exclusively originate from impoverished households. Certain individuals engage in ashawo with foreign oil labourers as a strategy to emulate other 'prominent women' who have ventured into this and successfully wed expatriates. Consequently, there exists significant peer influence on teenage girls to imitate those who have 'successfully' dated foreign oil workers (Gandu, 2011, p. 138).

The demographic of women engaged in these relationships is varied. The majority possess a minimum of secondary education, with some being university students or graduates who are currently jobless. The majority originate from disadvantaged economic circumstances, although a few hail from relatively affluent households. The age spectrum includes underage schoolgirls, married women, and those over 45 years old (Gandu, 2011, p. 139). Their commonality lies in the pursuit of resources, prestige, and prospects within an economy that provides limited options. For certain women, the objective is matrimony. A prosperous relationship is one that concludes with marriage to an expatriate, a scenario referred to as a "success story" that elevates the woman's status and provides resources for her family (Obuah, & Keke, 2022). For some individuals, the objective is to amass wealth: "acquire funds and reinvest them in the educational development of your siblings, support your parents and offspring" (Gandu, 2011, p. 141). Certain women utilize monetary assistance from overseas partners to initiate entrepreneurial ventures, especially within the fast-food sector.

However, the allure of social capital frequently proves to be deceptive. One participant noted: "Approximately 90 percent of the women engaged in transactional sexual relationships with expatriate oil workers experience negative outcomes. Merely

approximately 10 percent of them emerge improved and enhance their financial situation" (Gandu, 2011, p. 143). The predominant number of women are deserted by their expatriate partners, frequently left with bi-racial offspring to nurture and lacking financial resources. These women encounter societal exclusion from their communities, being "excluded by women's groups" and experiencing "diminished self-worth from the community" (Gandu, 2011, p. 145). The offspring of these unions, termed "fatherless children," encounter unique difficulties, being marginalised and overlooked due to their classification as "fatherless" and perceived as deviations from the family structure (Gandu, 2011, p. 147).

The Religious Dimension: Tradition, Christianity, and Islamic Influences

Within the Niger Delta, the perspectives of individuals regarding intermarriage and sexual relationships are significantly impacted by religion. Throughout the course of history, the people who lived in this area adhered to indigenous religions that included the belief in a supreme deity, ancestral spirits, and elemental forces (Ottuh & Omosor, 2022; Onimhawo, & Ottuh, 2007). The Isoko culture was characterized by the practice of "faith being manifested through rituals, divination, and clan-oriented ceremonies, particularly concerning agriculture, fertility, and communal safeguarding" (Joshua Project, 2024, paragraph 3). This conventional viewpoint is exemplified by the legend of Iseregwe, which asserts that unions with deities and spirits are not merely possible but are also subject to specific norms and responsibilities (Ifie, 1999). At the moment, Christianity is the predominant spiritual force that can be found throughout the region. According to the Joshua Project (2024), the majority of families participate in church activities such as worship, prayer, fellowship groups, and community service. Anglican, Catholic, and diverse Pentecostal churches are particularly influential in this regard. This spiritual evolution has resulted in the development of novel ethical frameworks for evaluating sexual behaviour and marriage responsibilities.

According to the research conducted by Gandu (2011; cf. Ottuh & Omosor, 2022; Onimhawo, & Ottuh, 2007), community and religious leaders in the Niger Delta consider sexual relationships to be a social, economic, cultural, psychological, and religious "evil" that continues to plague their societies. They contend that "despite the tangible advantages gained by Niger Delta women and girls from sexual relationships with foreign oil labourers, such advantages cannot mitigate the extensive drawbacks faced by the region" (Gandu, 2011, p. 157). Children who are not raised by their fathers, young people who are shunned by society, and young women who are driven to madness and psychological distress are all examples of these negative outcomes (Chukwudi, Ojakorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). Nevertheless, religious organizations not

only support but also occasionally promote marriages between people of different faiths.

The circumstances surrounding Prophet T.B. Joshua, who was the founder of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN), are instructive regarding the situation. As soon as "all the requisite familial rites" were completed, Joshua tied the knot with Evelyn, a woman who was originally from Ukala-Okpunor in Delta State (Osuyi, 2021, paragraph 5). Through his marriage to a woman from the community, he was able to establish connections between a prominent religious leader and a community that was relatively unknown, which culminated in the community gaining tangible benefits. In addition to providing 1,200 bags of rice for distribution, Joshua made a contribution of N5 million to an initiative that aimed to improve access to electricity (Osuyi, 2021). The example demonstrates that intermarriage can serve as a means of constructing social capital within the community, rather than serving solely for the benefit of individuals. Joshua was referred to as "a commendable son-in-law to the kingdom" by the Obi of the Ukala Kingdom (Osuyi, 2021, paragraph 8; cf. Chukwudi, Ojakorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). This association was not only personal, but also political; it established a connection between the community and a significant religious network, which resulted in tangible benefits.

Gender, Generation, and the Disruption of Kinship

The evolution of marriage in the Niger Delta has significantly impacted gender relations and intergenerational interactions. Women find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they face criticism for participating in sexual relationships while simultaneously being hindered by an economic system that provides limited options. A participant noted, "the failure of fathers or spouses to meet fundamental family requirements ... compels these women to engage in sexual relationships initially" (Gandu, 2011, p. 148; cf. Chukwudi, Ojakorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). The repercussions reach beyond individual women to encompass families and communities. A notably touching account originates from a female contributor who recounted the story of a young spouse who deserted his wife following the birth of their bi-racial offspring.

A young man married a young woman in the church within this community. He was unaware that the girl had been involved with a foreign oil labourer. Following a gestation period of nine months, he transported her to the maternity facility. She delivered a child of Caucasian descent. The youthful spouse was discontented. Subsequently, this boy departed and allied himself with militant youths in the waterways (Gandu, 2011, p. 149). This account demonstrates how sexual relationships undermine family establishment and social unity. The female character in this narrative is held responsible for the relationship, the husband's reputation is tarnished,

and the child faces social stigma. The spouse aligns with extremist factions, a reaction that the contributor indicates is prevalent: "If you enquire, you will encounter analogous narratives such as this" (Gandu, 2011, p. 149).

The alteration of conventional marriage norms generates a cohort of young individuals incapable of establishing stable families. Women who have participated in sexual relationships struggle to locate local spouses, as one individual expressed: "I am unable to find a Nigerian husband. No one is prepared to enter into matrimony with me. I lament all my actions" (Gandu, 2011, p. 150). Adolescent males, unable to rival the assets of foreign labourers, find themselves marginalised and discontented. This exasperation contributes to the perpetuation of violence in the Niger Delta. A spokesperson for a militant organization articulated:

Our young men are discontented with the fact that their prospective spouses are troubled and forsaken. Consequently, we assault oil platforms, abduct international oil personnel, and sabotage oil pipelines. This conflict transcends mere oil interests. It pertains to safeguarding our cultural identity and dignity as a community (Gandu, 2011, p. 151).

The connection between altered marital trends and militancy is not simply a matter of rhetoric. The individual who recounted the story of the spouse who allied with militants also noted: "These forsaken children, including my three offspring, represent the future insurgents in the Niger Delta" (Gandu, 2011, p. 152; Oluwasanmi, 2023; Chukwudi, Ojkorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). The offspring of sexual unions, ostracized by society and deprived of educational and job opportunities, represent "both the primary 'combatant force' and 'reserve contingent' of militant organisations" (Gandu, 2011, p. 153).

The Paradox of Strategy: Accumulation and Reproduction

A fundamental contradiction is revealed when one investigates the phenomenon of intermarriage and sexual relationships in the Niger Delta territory. Within the context of the oil economy, women engage in these relationships as a means of accumulating social capital in order to acquire resources, status, and mobility that otherwise are restricted. On the other hand, during the process, they frequently reproduce the same frameworks of disparity that were responsible for their susceptibility. On a number of different levels, the paradox operates. On an individual level, women who are successful in obtaining marriages with expatriates or who amass wealth may experience opportunities for upward mobility. However, the majority of

people do not achieve success, and even those who do may experience social stigma and ostracism as a result of their accomplishments. Sexual relationships, on a communal level, result in the production of resources for families and communities. These resources include remittances, presents, and investments that are beneficial to the economies of the communities.

Nonetheless, they are also responsible for the destruction of familial structures, the production of children who are marginalized, and the creation of rifts within societies (Gandu, 2011; cf. Chukwudi, Ojakorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). At the most fundamental level, sexual relationships contribute to the advancement of the petroleum industry's goals. One of the participants made the observation that "these local women pose a security threat to their surrounding communities" because they "gather intelligence regarding the community and its potential actions against oil corporations" (Gandu, 2011, p. 161; Oluwasanmi, 2023; Chukwudi, Ojakorotu, & Olukayode, 2022). A significant amount of information that would be extremely difficult to obtain from Nigerian security forces is obtained from these women by international oil personnel. This information includes crucial security intelligence and insights regarding resistance factions, as well as the strategies and plans of activists (Gandu, 2011, p. 162). In light of this, sexual encounters serve as a method of acquiring intelligence, which in turn helps to strengthen the authority of oil corporations.

On the other hand, these same women might also be acting as double agents and providing intelligence to militant organizations (Oluwasanmi, 2023). According to the participants, there were instances in which certain women took part in sexual encounters specifically for the purpose of acquiring intelligence for militants, which ultimately facilitated attacks on oil installations (Gandu, 2011). A consequence of this is that sexual relationships are "a double-edged sword amidst the turmoil prevalent in the Niger Delta" (Gandu, 2011, p. 163). When it comes to addressing systemic inequality, the paradox highlights the limitations of personal approaches. Females who are involved in romantic relationships with expatriates may experience personal benefits; however, they rarely alter the overarching circumstances that contribute to their susceptibility to the effects of the relationship. According to Ojakorotu (2023) and Nweke-Love *et al.* (2025), the petroleum industry continues to deplete resources and displace communities, ecological degradation continues to devastate livelihoods, and governance shortcomings continue to alienate the people who live in the Niger Delta's communities.

Conclusion

The Niger Delta situation provides significant insights into the connection between resource-dependent economies and societal structures. In situations where

systemic disparities are deeply rooted, individuals formulate tactics to manoeuvre through these inequalities, tactics that may inadvertently perpetuate the very frameworks that limit them. Intermarriage with foreign oil labourers is a strategy that embodies a contradictory form of agency: it provides individuals with access to resources and mobility, while simultaneously subjecting them to stigma, exploitation, and loss. The notion of social capital - the assets and prospects derived from social networks is fundamental to comprehending this dynamic. In the Niger Delta, conventional social capital rooted in familial ties and community has been undermined by ecological deterioration and economic upheaval. Emerging types of social capital, rooted in connections with expatriate labourers, present possible avenues for advancement. However, these novel structures are delicate and dependent, influenced by the caprices of foreign labourers and the assessments of local populations.

The prospects of the Niger Delta hinge partially on the ability of communities to cultivate alternative methods for building social capital methods that are independent of the extractive economy and its disturbances. This may necessitate policy measures: funding in education and job opportunities that provide women with options beyond sexual relationships; ecological rehabilitation that restores customary occupations; and administrative reforms that guarantee local communities benefit from oil revenues. It might necessitate a reassessment of conventional institutions. This article has illustrated that pre-colonial matrimonial customs were rooted in frameworks of reciprocal responsibility that harmonised personal desires with communal welfare (Tiemo, 1968). The Iseregwe myth, illustrating the perils of a fractured spiritual union, implies that relationships transcending boundaries be they between mortals and deities or indigenous individuals and outsiders necessitate meticulous oversight and reverence for commitments. At present, the paradox persists. Females in the Niger Delta persist in their involvement with the oil economy by forming strategic alliances that provide potential social capital, all the while perpetuating existing inequalities. Their decisions are logical reactions to untenable situations, influenced by a resource-extractive economy that has altered the region's social structure. Comprehending these decisions necessitates transcending basic moral evaluations to interact with the intricate interplay of power, disparity, and survival in the Niger Delta.

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