

THE EVOLUTION OF ORAL TRADITION ON DIGITAL SPACE: CASE OF NKWERRE *IGBA NKWU* ON TIK TOK, 1999-2025

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Abstract

In recent years, digital media has played a significant role in reshaping the expression and interpretation of African oral traditions. This paper explores how *Igba Nkwu*, the traditional marriage ceremony of Nkwerre in Imo State, is being reconfigured through its representation and circulation on TikTok. Drawing on Walter J. Ong's concept of secondary orality, this paper examines how short-form digital media, especially on TikTok, reshape the presentation, circulation, and interpretation of *Igba Nkwu*, the traditional marriage ceremony of the people of Nkwerre in Imo State. Using a qualitative approach grounded in digital ethnography and interpretive cultural analysis, the research combines 15 semi-structured interviews with elders, recent ceremony participants, diaspora viewers, and media practitioners with a close analysis of a 25-second TikTok video posted by @chuksebuka4 on 14 January 2025 and of 781 audience comments. The findings show that TikTok compresses the extended ritual process into brief, visually compelling highlights, especially the palm-wine presentation, dance, and crowd reaction, while minimizing less visible but culturally significant stages such as negotiation, prayer, and family deliberation. At the same time, the platform expands *Igba Nkwu*'s audience by enabling diaspora participation and creating new forms of digital witnessing through comments, affirmations, and debates over authenticity. The paper concludes that TikTok simultaneously preserves and transforms Nkwerre marriage tradition by increasing cultural visibility while reconfiguring ritual meaning through platform logic, algorithmic circulation, and selective representation.

Keywords: *TikTok, Nkwerre, Igba Nkwu, Oral Tradition, Digitisation*

Introduction

Marriage constitutes a near-universal social institution that extends beyond the union of two individuals to encompass the creation of kinship ties, the preservation of cultural continuity, and the reinforcement of broader social structures¹. Across diverse societies, wedding ceremonies serve as expressive sites where cultural identities are performed, transmitted, and publicly

¹G. P. Murdock, *Social Structure*. (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 2.

validated through highly codified rituals and symbolic practices². These ceremonies are not merely personal celebrations but collective enactments that articulate shared values, social hierarchies, and communal belonging. Within African contexts, marriage practices are frequently characterized by symbolic depth, extended temporal duration, and intensive collective engagement. Ceremonies often involve prolonged family negotiations, bride wealth exchanges, and public rituals that underscore the union of families rather than individuals alone, thereby fulfilling critical social functions including alliance formation, status recognition, and intergenerational continuity³.

As Ichie Michael Okafor, a titled elder from Nkwerre, explained during an oral interview conducted for this study: “Marriage is not just for the man and woman; it is the joining of two families, and everything we do in the ceremony shows that unity”⁴. This perspective underscores the fundamentally collective orientation of African marriage systems, in which individual desire is situated within broader networks of kinship obligations and social expectations. Nigeria’s remarkable cultural diversity is reflected in its varied marriage systems, which differ significantly across ethnic, regional, and religious lines. Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, traditional marriage ceremonies are highly structured and symbolically dense, emphasizing family consent, communal participation, and public validation as prerequisites for the union’s social recognition⁵. A defining feature of Igbo traditional marriage is the ceremony known as *Igba Nkwu*, commonly translated as the “wine-carrying ceremony.” This ritual represents the culmination of an extended marriage process, during which the bride publicly identifies her groom by presenting him with a cup of palm wine before assembled kin and community members. The act signifies her formal

² Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University press, 1992).

³ Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., and Daryll Forde, eds. *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. London: Oxford University Press, 1950.

⁴ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025

⁵ Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

acceptance of the union and constitutes its definitive recognition within the community⁶. Reflecting on the significance of this moment, Chioma Okonkwo, a recent bride from Nkwerre, observed: “When I carried the wine, it was not just about finding my husband; it was about showing everyone that I accept him before my people”⁷. Her testimony illustrates the performative and public dimensions of *Igba Nkwu*, which transforms private consent into communal affirmation.

The specific focus of this study is Nkwerre, a community located in Nkwerre Local Government Area of Imo State, southeastern Nigeria. Situated within the Orlu senatorial zone, Nkwerre is distinguished by its vibrant cultural heritage, historic craftsmanship traditions, strong community institutions, and sustained adherence to traditional practices. The community has preserved a longstanding connection to Igbo marriage customs, rendering it a particularly meaningful site for examining the evolution of *Igba Nkwu* performances across changing social and technological contexts. Within Nkwerre, *Igba Nkwu* occupies a prominent position in cultural life, characterized by elaborate attire, ritualized performance sequences, musical accompaniment, dance, and extensive participation from extended family networks. The ceremony functions not merely as a marital rite but as a comprehensive public affirmation of lineage identity, communal values, and social belonging. As Chief Emmanuel Nwosu, a community leader in Nkwerre, emphasized: “*Igba Nkwu* is where the whole community witnesses and confirms the marriage; without it, the union is not complete in our eyes”⁸. This statement underscores the indispensable role of communal witnessing in conferring legitimacy upon marital unions within Nkwerre society.

⁶ Victor C. Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 92.

⁷ Chioma Okonkwo, 29, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 28/09/2025.

⁸ E. Nwosu, 51, business man, Nkwerre, Imo State, 14/09/2025.

In recent decades, however, traditional ceremonies such as *Igba Nkwu* have increasingly entered digital spaces, transforming how cultural practices are documented, circulated, and interpreted. The global proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally altered the dynamics of cultural transmission, enabling the rapid dissemination of ceremonial performances to geographically dispersed audiences⁹. Short-form video platforms such as TikTok have emerged as particularly significant sites for the circulation of cultural content, characterized by algorithmic curation, user-generated production, and high-velocity sharing practices. This transformation aligns with the theoretical framework of mediatization, which posits that media technologies are not neutral conduits for cultural transmission but actively shape and reconfigure the practices they mediate¹⁰. In the specific case of *Igba Nkwu*, digital platforms have become new cultural arenas in which rituals are represented, negotiated, and reinterpreted by both local participants and global audiences.

This shift is not merely technological but fundamentally alters the structure of ceremonial practice itself. Ifeanyi Eze, a young professional from Nkwerre who recently participated in a family *Igba Nkwu* ceremony, observed: “People now plan parts of the ceremony with cameras in mind because they know it will go online”¹¹. This observation points to a significant transformation in which the anticipated digital circulation of ceremonial content influences how rituals are staged, performed, and experienced in physical settings. The presence of recording devices and the prospect of online visibility introduce new performative considerations that coexist with and potentially reshape traditional ceremonial logics.

⁹ Diana Zulli, and David James Zulli. “Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform.” *New Media & Society* 24, No. 8, (2022): 1875

¹⁰ Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 113.

¹¹ I. Eze, 44, event planner, Nkwerre Imo State, 3/10/2025.

Existing scholarship has examined Igbo marriage systems and broader processes of cultural change, providing valuable foundations for the present study. Foundational anthropological work by Victor Uchendu establishes that the “marriage institution is the focus of Igbo social life,” serving as the primary mechanism through which kinship networks are extended, social status is negotiated, and cultural values are transmitted across generations¹². Subsequent studies have elaborated on the symbolic dimensions of Igbo marriage practices, examining bride-wealth negotiations, ritual sequences, and the social functions of ceremonial performance. Meanwhile, scholarship in digital anthropology has demonstrated that digital media are not separate from everyday social life but are deeply embedded within practices of cultural expression, identity formation, and community maintenance¹³. This body of work challenges earlier assumptions that digital and physical domains constitute discrete spheres of social experience, arguing instead for their mutual constitution and interpenetration.

However, while these scholarly traditions offer valuable insights, they have tended to treat tradition and digital media as analytically separate domains, examining either the structure of traditional practices or the dynamics of digital communication, but rarely their active interrelation. This study addresses that gap by arguing that digital mediation actively restructures how tradition is performed, interpreted, and remembered. In particular, it extends Walter J. Ong's influential concept of secondary orality, which describes the reconstitution of oral communicative patterns through electronic media such as radio and television, by examining how contemporary platforms such as TikTok introduce algorithmic systems that influence cultural visibility in ways that earlier

¹² Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 50.

¹³ Daniel Miller, and Heather A. Horst. “The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology.” *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 4.

electronic media did not¹⁴. Whereas secondary orality, as Ong theorized it, emphasized the participatory and communal dimensions of electronically mediated communication, algorithmic platforms introduce additional dynamics of visibility, discoverability, and engagement optimization that shape which cultural performances circulate widely and which remain obscure.

This study, therefore, examines the evolution of *Igba Nkwu* in Nkwerre and analyzes how its representation on TikTok reflects broader processes of cultural transformation in the digital age. It investigates three interrelated questions: First, how have documentation practices for *Igba Nkwu* evolved from oral tradition through photography and video recording to contemporary short-form digital platforms? Second, in what ways does TikTok's algorithmic architecture reshape the performance and reception of Nkwerre marriage rituals? Third, how do digital audiences, particularly members of the Nkwerre diaspora, engage with and interpret these mediated representations of cultural practice? Drawing on oral interviews with Nkwerre community members, digital ethnography of TikTok content, and analysis of user engagement patterns, this study adopts a qualitative approach. Through sustained attention to these questions, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations concerning the mediatization of tradition, the transformation of ritual in digital environments, and the negotiation of cultural authenticity in an era of algorithmic circulation.

This paper adopts a qualitative research design grounded in digital ethnography and interpretive cultural analysis. This approach is particularly suited to examining oral tradition as a performative and communicative practice that evolves across different media environments¹⁵.

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 136.

¹⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 135.

Primary data were collected through fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher between September and November 2025, involving community elders, brides and grooms, content creators, event planners, photographers, wedding attendees, diaspora community members, musicians, and a bridal fashion designer. These participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives on both the traditional and digital dimensions of Igba Nkwu.

The interviews were conducted in informal and semi-formal settings within Nkwerre and via telephone for diaspora participants, allowing interviewees to reflect on both lived experiences and observed changes in marriage practices. Elder participants such as Ichie Okafor, Chief Emmanuel Nwosu, and Eze Godwin provided insights into traditional ceremonial structures and historical practices. In comparison, younger participants, including Ifeanyi Eze and Obinna Ekwueme, offered perspectives on the influence of digital media and contemporary adaptations. Recent participants in marriage ceremonies, Chioma and Chukwudi Okonkwo, shared firsthand accounts of navigating both traditional expectations and digital documentation. Professional practitioners, including Emeka Nnadi, Uchechi Raymond, Adaugo Nwankwo, and Ngozi Ekeoma, provided technical and practical perspectives on how ceremonies are currently staged, documented, and circulated.

In addition, the study employs digital ethnographic observation, focusing on TikTok as a primary site of cultural circulation. This method enables the analysis of how oral tradition is recontextualized within digitally mediated environments, where platform structures shape performance, audience interaction, and circulation¹⁶. A purposive sampling technique was used to

¹⁶ Daniel Miller, and Heather A. Horst. "The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology." *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 89.

select one representative TikTok video for in-depth analysis: a video posted by @chuksebuka4 on 14 January 2025. The video was selected based on three criteria: relevance to Nkwerre Igba Nkwu, clarity of ritual representation, and observable engagement patterns. This approach enables a “thick description”¹⁷, prioritizing analytical depth over sample breadth.

TikTok was selected due to its algorithm-driven content distribution system, which prioritizes engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and watch time, thereby shaping cultural visibility and circulation.¹⁸ Within this environment, oral tradition is not only performed but also filtered and amplified through algorithmic processes. As Obinna Ekwueme, a social media content creator from Nkwerre, noted during the interview process: “The platform decides what gets seen. You can post the most beautiful ceremony, but if it does not catch people in the first two seconds, it disappears. So we have learned what works and what does not”¹⁹. The study covers the period from 1999 to 2025 to capture the transition from early digital recording technologies to contemporary algorithmic media environments. This temporal scope allows for a comparative understanding of how modes of documentation, participation, and audience formation have evolved. While Walter J. Ong’s concept of secondary orality²⁰ This study provides a useful framework for understanding the re-emergence of participatory and communal communication in digital contexts. It extends it by examining how algorithmic systems influence the selection, visibility, and interpretation of cultural content.

Igba Nkwu in Nkwerre

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

¹⁸ Aparajita Bhandari, and Sara Bimo. “Why’s Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media.” *Social media + Society*, 8, No. 1, (2022): 3.

¹⁹ O. Ekwueme, 39, content creator, Nkwerre, Imo State, 24/10/2025.

²⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 136.

Igba Nkwu occupies a central position within Igbo traditional marriage systems and represents one of the most visible expressions of cultural identity among the people. In Nkwerre society, located in the Orlu senatorial zone of Imo State, Nigeria, the ceremony serves as the public confirmation of a marital union following earlier stages of family negotiations and ritual engagements. As Ichie Okafor, a Nkwerre elder and traditional title holder, explained: “What people see on the day of *Igba Nkwu* is the public seal of something that has already passed through many family stages. It is the point where both families stand before the community and say yes, this marriage is accepted”²¹. Although church weddings and civil marriages have become increasingly common in contemporary Nigerian society, they are generally regarded in Nkwerre as complementary rather than as substitutes for the customary rites that culminate in *Igba Nkwu*. In Okafor’s words: “You can go to church and sign in court, but in Nkwerre people still look at the traditional marriage as what gives the union its root” In the eyes of the community, it is the successful completion of this traditional marriage process that confers full social legitimacy upon the union.

Chief Emmanuel Nwosu elaborated on the relationship between different forms of marriage: “We do not say that a church wedding is bad or that a court marriage is wrong. Many of our children do all three. But if you ask any Nkwerre person which one truly makes you married, they will point to the traditional ceremony. That is because it is the one where both families publicly agree, where the community witnesses, and where the ancestors are invoked to bless the union. The other ceremonies are additional, but this one is foundational”²². Within this context,

²¹ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

²² E. Nwosu, 51, business man, Nkwerre, Imo State, 14/09/2025.

Igba Nkwu functions not merely as a festive celebration but as a deeply symbolic communicative act through which lineage continuity, communal identity, and social recognition are expressed. Consistent with oral tradition, meaning is transmitted through performance, speech, and collective participation rather than written documentation, reinforcing what Walter J. Ong describes as the communal and participatory nature of oral expression²³.

Traditional marriage in Nkwere is therefore not a single-day event but a carefully structured cultural process comprising several stages, each with its own rituals and social significance. These stages reflect broader Igbo philosophical ideas about marriage as a union of families rather than simply a private relationship between two individuals. The Nkwere marriage process typically unfolds through a sequence of stages known as *Iku Aka Nuzo* (Knocking on the door), *Iga Di Abali Ano* (The four days marriage visit), *Iga Di Abali Asato* (The eight days marriage visit), *Nwaoka n'Ulo* (Final confirmations and bride price), and finally the *Igba Nkwu* proper, traditionally referred to as *Ri Onu Aku*. As Ichie Okafor recalled: "In our place, marriage does not begin and end in one day. There are steps, and each one tells the families something important about the people coming together"²⁴. Eze Godwin added historical context: "Our fathers were very careful about these things. They knew that marriage joins two families forever, so they took their time. Each stage allowed both sides to learn more about each other before making a final commitment"²⁵. Through these stages, families investigate lineage histories, negotiate social obligations, and gradually integrate the couple into the wider kinship network.

Preliminary Contact and Bride's Consent

²³ W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 31-34.

²⁴ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwere, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

²⁵ E. Godwin, 61, elder, Nkwere, Imo State, 19/09/2025.

The marriage process often begins even before any formal ceremony takes place. Informal contact is first established to determine whether the prospective bride is willing to accept the suitor. Lolo Nkem Ejiogu, a women's group leader and Umuada representative in Nkwerre, noted: "Before the men begin to speak openly, women in the family may already know what is happening. They help to find out if the girl is interested and whether the family should move further"²⁶. In many cases, this initial contact may be facilitated by women in the family, such as the groom's mother, aunt, or elder sister, who are well-positioned to assess the prospective bride's character, upbringing, and disposition. As Ejiogu explained: "A mother or aunt can visit quietly, not as if she has come for marriage talk, but to observe the girl, how she behaves, how she greets, how she carries herself"²⁷.

Chioma Okonkwo, who recently went through the marriage process, recalled how initial contact was made in her case: "My husband's mother came to visit my mother several times before anything was said about marriage. I did not know at first why she was coming so often. Later, I learned she was observing how I greeted her, whether I offered her food and water properly, and how I spoke to my parents. When she was satisfied, she told her son that I would make a good wife. Only then did he approach my family formally"²⁸ Regardless of who initiates contact, the most important element at this stage is the bride's consent, which remains a fundamental requirement in the Nkwerre marriage system. Ichie Okafor emphasized this point clearly: "If the girl says no, that is the end. Nobody can force that matter if she does not agree"²⁹. Chukwudi Okonkwo, Chioma's husband, confirmed this from his perspective: "When my family went for the

²⁶ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

²⁷ N. Ejiogu, 48, 18/09/2025.

²⁸ Chioma Okonkwo, 29, trader, Nkwerre Imo State, 28/09/2025.

²⁹ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

first formal visit, the first thing they asked was whether my wife knew me and whether she wanted to marry me. If she had said no in front of everyone, we would have had to leave immediately, and that would have been very embarrassing. But thankfully, she said yes”³⁰

Iku Aka Nuzo (Knocking on the Door)

Following this informal understanding, the first formal stage of the marriage process takes place. This stage, known as *Iku aka nuzo* (literally meaning “knocking on the door”), represents the official introduction of the groom’s family to the bride’s family. During this ceremony, the groom and a small delegation from his family visit the bride’s parental home to declare their intention to seek her hand in marriage. The bride’s parents, in turn, invite selected members of the extended family, such as uncles, senior cousins, and community elders, to witness the event. According to Okafor: “This is the first proper step where one family comes to greet the other with marriage in mind. It is not yet the full marriage, but it opens the road”³¹.

The delegation from the groom’s side is typically led by the eldest member present, who serves as the family’s spokesperson. This individual may be the groom’s father, uncle, or another respected elder known for his eloquence and knowledge of traditional customs. Communication during the *Iku Aka Nuzo* ceremony is conducted through symbolic language and metaphor, reflecting the Igbo cultural emphasis on politeness and indirect expression. Such formulaic and metaphorical expressions are characteristic of oral cultures, where knowledge is preserved through memorable linguistic patterns.³²

³⁰ Chukwudi Okonkwo, 36, business man, Nkwere, Imo State, 28/09/2025.

³¹ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwere, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

³² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 34-36.

questions about his occupation, family background, and intentions toward their daughter. Chukwudi Okonkwo recalled: “They asked me many questions that day. What work do I do? Where do I live? How do I plan to take care of their daughter? What is my family known for? I had to answer carefully because everyone was listening and judging”³⁵. These dialogic exchanges reflect the interactive and participatory nature of oral tradition, where meaning is collectively negotiated rather than individually asserted.³⁶

Lineage Investigations

The next phase involves thorough background investigations conducted by both families. These investigations are taken very seriously within Nkwerre society because marriage is considered a union of lineages rather than merely individuals. As Okafor stated, “When people say marriage is between two families, this is where you see it clearly. Nobody wants to enter a family blindly”³⁷. Families examine the reputation of the prospective in-laws, looking for evidence of good moral character, longevity within the lineage, and the absence of hereditary diseases, criminal behaviour, or past association with the Osu caste system. Similarly, the groom’s family investigates the bride’s lineage to determine whether women in the community maintain stable marriages and whether family members have good reputations. Ejiogu explained: “People ask quietly. They ask neighbours, relations, even women who know the home well. They want to know the kind of family they are entering”³⁸. For instance, elders may discreetly consult neighbours, community leaders, or relatives who are familiar with the family’s history.

³⁵ Chukwudi Okonkwo, 36, business man, Nkwerre, Imo State, 28/09/2025.

³⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 44-46.

³⁷ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

³⁸ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

Eze Godwin described how these investigations were conducted in previous generations: “In my time, these inquiries could take months. My father sent people to different villages where the girl’s family had connections. They asked about the grandfather and the great-grandfather, and whether there had ever been any scandal in the family. Nothing was rushed because the consequences of marrying into a problematic family would last for generations”³⁹. Historically, these investigations reflected the Igbo belief that the stability of marriage depended largely on the moral standing and social reputation of both families. Romantic love, while not absent, was not traditionally the primary factor in spouse selection. Instead, emphasis was placed on character, responsibility, and compatibility of lineage. Parents, therefore, played a significant role in guiding the marriage process, particularly in safeguarding the union’s long-term stability.

Iga Di Abali Ano: The Four-Day Marriage Visit

Once the background investigations prove satisfactory, the marriage process moves to the next stage, known as Iga Di Abali Ano, meaning “the four-day marriage visit.” At this stage, the groom and a small group of relatives escort the bride to his family home. She usually carries a keg of palm wine or other symbolic gifts as a gesture of goodwill and acceptance. According to Ejiogu: “When she goes, she does not go empty-handed. What she carries shows respect and peaceful intention”⁴⁰. During the four-day stay, the bride becomes acquainted with members of the groom’s household and extended family. She may participate in everyday activities such as cooking, greeting visitors, and assisting with household duties. This period allows the groom’s family to

³⁹ E. Godwin, 61, elder, Nkwerre, Imo State, 19/09/2025.

⁴⁰ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

observe her character, domestic skills, humility, and ability to relate with others within the household environment.

Chioma Okonkwo described her experience of this stage: “Those four days were like an examination. His mother and aunts were watching everything I did, how early I woke up, how I cooked, how I cleaned, how I spoke to his younger siblings. I was nervous, but I also understood why it was important. They wanted to know that their son was marrying someone who would bring peace to the family, not trouble”⁴¹. If the bride is well received, the groom’s family often presents her with gifts, including wrappers, clothing, jewelry, and sometimes small sums of money, before escorting her back to her parental home. The public return journey symbolizes mutual approval between the two families and marks the strengthening of their relationship.

Iga Di Abali Asato (The Eight Days Marriage Visit)

A similar stage, known as iga di abali asato (“the eight-day marriage visit”), traditionally follows. During this stage, the bride spends a longer period, traditionally eight days, in the groom’s family home. The extended stay allows her to interact more closely with the groom’s extended family, neighbours, and community members. It also deepens the social bond between the two families and familiarizes the bride with the social environment she will eventually join. In contemporary times, however, the full observance of the eight-night stay has become less common due to modern economic and social circumstances. Emeka Nnadi observed: “What elders describe from before is not always done in full now. Many couples are working in cities, so some families shorten it or perform it more symbolically”⁴². Many couples now shorten the duration or

⁴¹ Chioma Okonkwo, 29, trader, Nkwere Imo State, 28/09/2025.

⁴²E. Nnadi, 43, event planner and videographer, Nkwere, Imo State, 08/10/2025.

symbolically observe the stage due to work commitments, urban living arrangements, or time constraints. Ifeanyi Eze, a young professional who recently attended a relative's wedding, confirmed this trend: "My cousin who got married last year could not stay for eight days because she works in Lagos and her leave was limited. So she stayed for three days, and everyone understood. The intention was still there even if the exact number of days was different"⁴³.

Nwaoka n'Ulo and Onu Aku (Final Confirmations and Bride Price)

Another important stage in the Nkwerre marriage process is *Nwaoka n'Ulo*, a gathering where both families publicly confirm that the couple genuinely consents to marry. During this meeting the bride's father or a senior male relative hands her a cup of palm wine and instructs her to identify her intended husband among those present by presenting the wine to him. This ritual serves as a preliminary confirmation of the union and foreshadows the final ceremony of *Igba Nkwu*. Okafor described it as "a way of making the matter open before everybody, so no one will say the girl was not willing or that the family hid anything"⁴⁴. It is during this stage that negotiations for the bride price known as *Onu Aku* also take place. In earlier times these negotiations involved symbolic items such as cowries or counting sticks. In contemporary practice, however, the bride price is usually presented in Nigerian currency. Despite its monetary nature, the bride price is not intended to represent the value of the woman. This principle is reflected in

⁴³ I. Eze, 44, event planner, Nkwerre Imo State, 3/10/2025.

⁴⁴ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

the Igbo maxim: *"Anaghi akwucha ego isi nwanyi akwucha"* meaning that the worth of a woman can never be fully paid.

As Okafor explained: "The money is not the price of the woman. It is a sign that the families have entered into a relationship"⁴⁵. Chief Nwosu added, "When you hear people say we sell our daughters, it shows they do not understand our culture. The bride price is symbolic. In most families, the father accepts only a small portion and returns the rest. What matters is the relationship, not the money"⁴⁶.

Negotiations are typically conducted through spokespersons who employ careful language and traditional etiquette. The bride's family often accepts only a portion of the proposed amount, emphasizing that the payment symbolizes the establishment of a lasting relationship between families rather than a commercial transaction.

During this stage, several extended family rites are also performed. These include Ihe Umunna (rites involving the male lineage), Ihe Umunwanyi (rites for the women's group), and Ihe Nne Nwa (rites involving the bride's mother). Ejiogu noted: "Different parts of the family have their own place in the marriage. It is not something done by only the father and mother of the bride"⁴⁷. Gifts such as wrappers, drinks, food items, jewelry, and livestock, often including a goat, presented to the bride's father are offered as part of these rituals. These exchanges reinforce kinship solidarity and highlight the wider family's collective participation in the marriage process. Once these requirements are met, a date is set for the final ceremony: the Igba Nkwu.

⁴⁵ M. Okafor, 43, 12/09/2025.

⁴⁶ E. Nwosu, 51, business man, Nkwerre, Imo State, 14/09/2025.

⁴⁷ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

The *Igba Nkwu* Ceremony

The *Igba Nkwu* ceremony traditionally takes place in the bride's family compound. This location symbolizes her rootedness in her paternal lineage and her family's responsibility to formally release her into marriage with dignity. Even when couples reside in urban areas such as Lagos, Abuja, or Port Harcourt, the ceremony is often held in the ancestral village in Nkwerre, reaffirming ties to family heritage. Chika Ahaneku remarked: "Even if people live far away, they still want to come home for this ceremony because home gives it meaning"⁴⁸. Ugochukwu Mbakwe echoed this sentiment from his diaspora experience: "When my brother got married, he flew back from Houston two weeks early to make sure everything was prepared in the village. His wife, who is also Igbo but not from Nkwerre, said she had never seen anything like it. For us, the village is where these things must happen"⁴⁹.

The physical arrangement of the ceremony reflects the social organization of Igbo society. The families of the bride and groom are seated opposite one another, symbolizing the union of two lineages. Elders occupy prominent positions, while age grades, women's associations, and community members sit in designated sections. Okafor emphasized: "Where people sit is not random. It shows order, respect, and the place each group has in the life of the community"⁵⁰. Ngozi Ekeoma, who manages these arrangements as a master of ceremonies, added: "Part of my job is making sure everyone knows where to sit and when to speak. The ceremony has a structure, and my job is to guide it properly so that nothing important is skipped or done out of order"⁵¹. In this last stage, the man is free to call his family, relatives, kinsmen, kindred, friends, and well-

⁴⁸ C. Ahaneku, 35, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/10/2025.

⁴⁹ U. Mbakwe, 52, doctor, Owerri, Imo State, 10/11/2025.

⁵⁰ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

⁵¹ N. Ekeoma, 47, master of ceremony, Nkwerre, Imo State, 15/11/2025.

wishers to accompany him to his wife's village to bring her back home. In the same way, the bride gathers every member of her family, kin, and kindred to come together and give their daughter away in marriage. As Ejiogu put it: "It is a day when everybody who matters to the family comes out, because marriage is a public matter, not a hidden one"⁵².

Prayers and Libations

During the *Igba Nkwu* ceremony in Nkwerre, several elements of oral tradition are prominently featured. The ceremony begins with prayers and libations offered by the family patriarch or a designated elder from the bride's family⁵³. These prayers invoke the blessings of ancestors and spiritual forces upon the union. Delivered in the Nkwerre dialect, the prayers often contain proverbs, repetition, and rhythmic invocations that enhance memorability features central to oral performance tradition⁵⁴.

For example:

"Ala nurukwa mmanya. Nna na nnanna anyi ha site na ndu ruo na mmuo, bianu nuru mmanya. O huru anyi ebe, anya mmiri akola ya uko n'anya." (Earth Goddess, take wine. Our fathers and forefathers, from the living to the spirit world, come and drink. Whoever sees us in this place, may they never lack joy.)

Okafor explained that such prayers "call the living and the ancestors to witness what is happening, so that the marriage will stand in blessing and peace"⁵⁵. Eze Godwin added context about the

⁵² N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

⁵³ O. Edet Uya, *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspective* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1984), 47.

⁵⁴ W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 36-38.

⁵⁵ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

spiritual dimensions: "When we pour libation, we are acknowledging that we are not alone in this world. Our ancestors who married before us, who built our families, who gave us our names they are still present. We invite them to witness and to bless because their blessing carries weight"⁵⁶.

The elder blesses the bride, asking for a fruitful home and protection:

"Nwam, gi na di ga-abu ndi agoziri agozi. O ga-adiri unu nma eshi Eke, eshi Orië, eshi Afor na eshi Nkwo. Unu ga amu omumu nwoke na omumu nwanyi. Udo na ihunanya, ogologo ndu na ahuisi ike, aku na uba ga-abu nke unu. Isee." (My child, you and your husband are blessed. It shall be well with you on Eke day, Orië day, Afor day and Nkwo day. You will be fruitful. You will bear male and female children. Love and peace, long life, good health, and prosperity will be your portion. Amen.) As Chinua Achebe notes in *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo proverbs serve as "the palm oil with which words are eaten," providing rhetorical elegance and cultural depth to ceremonial speech⁵⁷.

Music and Dance

Music and dance constitute equally important components of the Nkwerre Igba Nkwu. The ceremony features traditional musical ensembles that may include instruments such as the ekwe (wooden slit drum), ogene (metal gong), oja (wooden flute), and igba (membrane drum), accompanied by communal singing, particularly by women's groups who perform songs welcoming the bride into her new home. Ejiogu explained: "When women sing in marriage, they

⁵⁶ E. Godwin, 61, elder, Nkwerre, Imo State, 19/09/2025.

⁵⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 7.

are not only entertaining people. They are welcoming, advising, blessing, and sometimes even joking in ways everybody understands"⁵⁸.

Nnamdi Oguike, a traditional musician who plays the ogene at ceremonies in Nkwerre, described his role: "The ogene sets the rhythm for everything. When I play, people know it is time to dance or time to be quiet and listen. Different rhythms mean different things. There is a rhythm for when the bride enters, a rhythm for when she searches for her husband, a rhythm for when she finds him. People who know our music understand what is happening just from the sound"⁵⁹. The beat of Igbo marriage songs is articulated through dancing, rhythmic gestures, instrumental percussion, and hand clapping, all of which enhance the linguistic features that make these performances culturally resonant. These songs are not merely ornamental but serve functional roles in signaling transitions in social status⁶⁰. This is evidenced in the linguistic structure of the following songs performed during Nkwerre *Igba Nkwu* ceremonies:

Song: *Ọ naa ọ naa be diya* (She has gone to her husband's house)

Call: Ọ naa (She has gone)

Refrain: Ọ naa be diya (She has gone to her husband's house)

Call: Ọ naa (She has gone)

Refrain: Ọ naa be diya (She has gone to her husband's house)

Call: Chinenye a naa (Chinenye has gone)

Refrain: Ọ naa be diya (She has gone to her husband's house)

Song: *Meghele ya ụzọ* (Open the door for her)

Call: Meghele ya ụzọ (Open the door for her)

⁵⁸ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

⁵⁹ N. Oguike, 33, musician, Nkwerre, Imo State, 05/11/2025.

⁶⁰ John Odo Onu and Priscilla Eberé Ugwuoke, "Analysis of Language and Linguistic Features in Igbo Traditional Marriage Songs: A Functionalist Approach," *Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 4 (2022): 218.

Refrain: Meghele ya uzọ na ọ nata go (Open the door for her; she has returned)

Song: Chinye ya igodo (Give her the key)

Call: Chinye ya igodo (Give her the key)

Refrain: Chinye ya igodo na ọ nata go (Give her the key; she has returned)

These lyrics utilize repetitive call-and-response patterns to emphasize the bride's incorporation into her new lineage. According to Okon Uya, songs are important carriers of historical knowledge, preserving events, identities, and collective experiences of the people⁶¹. Oguike explained the significance of these specific songs: "When we sing 'Give her the key,' we are telling the groom's family to accept her fully into their home. The key is symbolic; it means she is now part of that household, she has authority there, and she belongs⁶². In contemporary ceremonies, this traditional musical foundation often blends with modern popular tracks such as "Ada Ada" by Flavour, "Roju" by Chike, or music by Umu Obiligbo. Emeka Nnadi observed: "These days, families still want the traditional sound, but they also like songs people can dance to easily and post online. So you see a mixture of old and new"⁶³. Oguike offered his perspective on this blending: "I have been playing ogene for over thirty years. In the past, we played only traditional music throughout the ceremony. Now, after the formal parts are done, they bring in speakers and play recorded music. Some people say this is bad, but I think it is natural. The important rituals still use our traditional music. The modern songs come later, for entertainment"⁶⁴.

The selection of these specific tracks is rarely accidental; they are chosen for their trend-friendly nature, possessing rhythmic hooks and high-energy choruses that are easily adaptable to

⁶¹ O. E. Uya, *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspective* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1984), 48.

⁶² J. O. Onu and P. E. Ugwuoke, "Analysis of Language and Linguistic Features in Igbo Traditional Marriage Songs: A Functionalist Approach," *Spring Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 4 (2022): 219.

⁶³ E. Nnadi, 43, event planner and videographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 08/10/2025.

⁶⁴ N. Oguike, 33, musician, Nkwerre, Imo State, 05/11/2025.

social media challenges. This fusion demonstrates how cultural traditions adapt to changing social environments, moving from purely oral communal rituals to technologically mediated forms of expression. Captured and circulated on platforms such as TikTok, these performances extend beyond the physical community to virtual audiences, reflecting what Walter J. Ong terms secondary orality, a mode of communication where oral expression is reconstituted through electronic media.⁶⁵

The Palm Wine (*Mmanya Ngwo*) Presentation

The climactic moment of the ceremony occurs when the bride carries a cup of palm wine and searches among the assembled guests for her husband. Often accompanied by her bridesmaids and female relatives, she dances gracefully around the gathering while guests cheer and musicians play lively rhythms. Ejiogu described the atmosphere: “That moment carries joy and suspense together. People already know who the husband is, but they still wait for the bride to go to him, and that is where the happiness rises”⁶⁶. Eventually, she locates her groom and kneels before him to present the wine. Once he drinks from the cup, the crowd erupts in applause and celebration, marking the formal recognition of the marriage. Okafor noted: “When he drinks, everybody knows that the marriage has been publicly sealed before the people”⁶⁷. Chioma Okonkwo described her experience of this moment: “I was nervous and excited at the same time. Everyone was watching me, cheering, calling my name. The music was loud, and my heart was beating fast. When I finally reached my husband and knelt to give him the wine, I felt both relief and joy. It was the moment everything became real”⁶⁸. Her husband, Chukwudi, recalled: “When she knelt before me, and I

⁶⁵W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 133-36.

⁶⁶ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

⁶⁷ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

⁶⁸ Chioma Okonkwo, 29, trader, Nkwerre Imo State, 28/09/2025.

took the cup, I looked around and saw both our families together, everyone happy. That was when I truly felt married, not because of any document, but because our people had witnessed and blessed our union”⁶⁹.

The traditional attire of the bride and groom on the *Igba Nkwu* day depends on the individuals involved, as there are a variety of choices. Adaugo Nwankwo, the bridal fashion designer, explained the range of options: “Some brides want to look very traditional, they wear the wrapper and blouse with heavy coral beads, the style our grandmothers wore. Others want something more modern, so they come in elaborate gowns that still incorporate traditional elements like the beads and the head tie. My job is to help them find something that feels like them while still honoring the occasion”⁷⁰. Whatever they decide to wear is usually complemented with beads and ornaments that enhance the beauty and ceremonial dignity of the occasion. The groom often appears in an *isiagu* top, red cap, and traditional accessories that signify status and cultural pride. As Ejiogu observed: “The dressing may change with time and taste, but people still want it to look cultural, rich, and worthy of the day”⁷¹.

Through its elaborate stages, symbolic rituals, and communal participation, *Igba Nkwu* continues to function as a comprehensive social institution in Nkwerre society. It legitimizes marriage, strengthens kinship bonds, and preserves collective identity. In the words of Okafor: “This ceremony is not just about celebration; it is how the family, the kindred, and the community acknowledge that a new home has begun”⁷². Even amid modernization and digital transformation, the ceremony remains a powerful expression of Nkwerre cultural heritage and communal values.

⁶⁹ Chukwudi Okonkwo, 36, business man, Nkwerre, Imo State, 28/09/2025.

⁷⁰ A. Nwankwo, 26, fashion designer, Owerri, Imo State, 08/11/2025.

⁷¹ N. Ejiogu, 48, women leader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/09/2025.

⁷² M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

As Ahaneku reflected from a diasporic perspective: “When we watch it from outside home, it still reminds us who we are and where we belong”⁷³. Mbakwe added, “No matter how long I stay in America, when I see a video of an Nkwerre wedding, something in me responds. It is in our blood, in our bones. The ceremony connects us to everything that makes us who we are”⁷⁴. At the same time, its increasing mediation through digital platforms signals a transition from primary orality to secondary orality, in which traditional performances are preserved, restructured, and reinterpreted within technologically driven communicative environments.⁷⁵

Evolution of *Igba Nkwu* in Digital Space in Nkwerre

In Nkwerre, *Igba Nkwu* has long functioned as both a marriage ceremony and a public performance of kinship, identity, and communal belonging. Like many African societies in which oral forms of transmission historically preceded extensive textual documentation, knowledge about marriage customs in Nkwerre was largely sustained through memory, observation, and repeated participation in communal life. Walter J. Ong argues that in oral cultures, knowledge is preserved through embodied and participatory forms rather than through fixed textual storage.⁷⁶ This framework is useful for understanding how younger members of Nkwerre families traditionally learned the meaning and sequence of *Igba Nkwu* by attending ceremonies, observing elders, and listening to explanations embedded in ritual action rather than consulting written

⁷³ C. Ahaneku, 35, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/10/2025.

⁷⁴ U. Mbakwe, 52, doctor, Owerri, Imo State, 10/11/2025.

⁷⁵ W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 134-36.

⁷⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*..., 31-32.

guides. As Eze Godwin, an elder and community historian, explained: “In those days, you did not learn marriage from books. You followed your parents to ceremonies, watched what the elders did, and gradually understood the meaning of each step”⁷⁷.

This mode of transmission relied heavily on intergenerational presence and direct observation. Chief Nwosu recalled his own experience: “When I was young, my father would take me to every family ceremony. He would explain quietly what each thing meant, why the elder pours wine on the ground, why the bride searches for her husband, and why certain songs are sung at certain times. By the time I became a man, I knew these things without needing anyone to write them down for me”⁷⁸. This pattern of embodied learning characterized Nkwerre marriage knowledge for generations before the arrival of recording technologies. The transition from oral transmission to visual preservation became more evident with the spread of photography and video recording in southeastern Nigeria. As Ong notes, technologies of recording alter not only how events are preserved but also how they are remembered, because memory becomes increasingly externalized into material and technological forms⁷⁹. In the Nkwerre context, the documentation of *Igba Nkwu* through photographs and, later, wedding videos transformed the ceremony from an event recalled mainly through family narration into one that could be repeatedly viewed and archived.

This shift is especially significant for rituals whose meaning is tied to sequence, gesture, costume, and public recognition, since cameras made it possible to preserve these elements beyond the day of performance. Uchechi Raymond, a photographer and videographer who has documented

⁷⁷ E. Godwin, 61, elder, Nkwerre, Imo State, 19/09/2025.

⁷⁸ E. Nwosu, 51, business man, Nkwerre, Imo State, 14/09/2025.

⁷⁹ W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 135-136.

weddings in Nkwerre for over fifteen years, reflected on this transformation: “Before, people relied on memory and storytelling, but now every important moment is captured, and families can go back to watch the ceremony again and again. I have seen elderly people cry watching videos of weddings from twenty years ago because they see relatives who have passed on, they hear the prayers that were offered, they remember things they had forgotten”⁸⁰. This externalization of memory through recording technology has fundamentally altered how *Igba Nkwu* is preserved and transmitted.

Emeka Nnadi, who works as both a videographer and event planner, traced the technological evolution he has witnessed: “When I started in this business around 2005, we used big cameras and recorded on cassette tapes. The videos were long, sometimes three or four hours, and families would keep them carefully. Now we use digital cameras and phones, and the videos can be any length. But what has really changed is where the videos go after we make them; before, they stayed in the family; now, they go everywhere”⁸¹. The expansion of internet-based communication further transformed how *Igba Nkwu* in Nkwerre could be experienced. Digital media have enabled cultural events that once remained locally bounded to circulate across distance and sustain relationships among dispersed family networks. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller show that digital communication technologies enable families separated by migration to maintain a sense of presence through the exchange of images and videos, as well as ongoing mediated interaction⁸². This is particularly relevant to Nkwerre, where migration and diaspora connections

⁸⁰ U. Raymond, 31, photographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/10/2025.

⁸¹ E. Nnadi, 43, event planner and videographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 08/10/2025.

⁸² M. Madianou, and D. Miller. *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia*. (London: Routledge, 2012), 3-5.

have made online circulation an important means of keeping relatives abroad linked to ceremonies at home.

Chika Ahaneku, a member of the Nkwerre diaspora community living in London for over twelve years, described how digital media have changed her connection to home: “Before smartphones and social media, if you missed a wedding, you missed it. Maybe someone would send you photographs months later, or tell you about it when you visited home. Now I can watch my cousin’s *Igba Nkwu* as it happens. My sister will video call me so I can see the moment the bride carries the wine. It is not the same as being there. Still, it keeps you connected in a way that was not possible before”⁸³. Ugochukwu Mbakwe, another diaspora community member based in Houston, Texas, offered a similar perspective: “I have not been home in six years because of work and visa issues. But I have watched every family wedding online. When my younger brother married last year, they streamed the whole ceremony on Facebook. I was watching at two in the morning Houston time, but I did not want to miss it. My mother even made sure the camera showed me when she was dancing, so I could feel like I was part of it”⁸⁴. These accounts illustrate how digital circulation has extended the boundaries of communal witnessing beyond physical presence.

Wedding photographs, highlight reels, and short clips now allow members of the Nkwerre diaspora to witness key moments of *Igba Nkwu* without being physically present at the bride’s family compound. As Uchechi Raymond further explained: “Many families now ask us to share clips quickly because they have relatives abroad who want to see what is happening almost immediately. Sometimes during the ceremony itself, someone will come and ask me to send a

⁸³ C. Ahaneku, 35, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/10/2025.

⁸⁴ U. Mbakwe, 52, Medical Doctor, Owerri, Imo State, 10/11/2025.

particular moment to their brother in America or their sister in London. The expectation has changed; people want to see things in real time, not weeks later”⁸⁵. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and, more recently, TikTok have also reshaped the aesthetics of the ceremony itself. Digital anthropology emphasizes that media technologies are not neutral channels; they become embedded in everyday social life and influence how people stage identity, visibility, and social relationships. Daniel Miller and Heather A. Horst note that digital media are intertwined with how people present themselves and structure social interaction in contemporary life⁸⁶. In Nkwerre, this helps explain why some aspects of *Igba Nkwu* now appear increasingly stylized for visual capture.

Adaugo Nwankwo, a bridal fashion designer based in Nkwerre who specializes in traditional wedding attire, observed the influence of digital media on her work: “Brides today come to me with pictures from Instagram and TikTok. They say, ‘I want my dress to look like this one that went viral.’ The designs are becoming more elaborate, more colourful, more eye-catching because people know the photographs will be shared online. Ten years ago, a bride might choose something simple and elegant for her own comfort. Now, she is also thinking about how it will photograph, how the beads will catch the light, how the colours will stand out on a small phone screen”⁸⁷.

This visual orientation extends beyond attire to other aspects of ceremonial staging. Uchechi Raymond observed: “Couples now plan parts of the ceremony with visuals in mind, how the entrance will look, how the dance will appear on camera, even how the colours will stand out

⁸⁵ U. Raymond, 31, photographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/10/2025.

⁸⁶ D. Miller and H. A. Horst. “The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology.” *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 4-5.

⁸⁷ A. Nwankwo, 33, fashion designer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 29/10/2025.

in videos. I have had brides ask me to make sure certain decorations are positioned behind where they will be standing because they know that is where the photographs will be taken. The ceremony is still meaningful to them, but they are also conscious of how it will look to people who are not there”⁸⁸.

Obinna Ekwueme, who creates and shares wedding content on social media, described the planning process from his perspective: “When a family hires me to cover their wedding for social media, we plan together which moments will be filmed and how. The bride’s entrance, the palm wine search, and the dancing are the moments that people want to see. I advise them on timing, on music, and on how to make the moment feel exciting on camera. Some families are very traditional and do not want too much interference, but others want every detail to be planned for maximum impact online”⁸⁹. The rise of TikTok marks a further stage in this transformation because it subjects cultural performance to platform logic. José van Dijck argues that social media visibility is shaped by programmability and popularity, meaning that circulation increasingly depends on metrics, algorithms, and platform design rather than solely on social or cultural authority⁹⁰. Applied to *Igba Nkwu* in Nkwerre, this suggests that the parts of the ceremony most likely to travel online are those that fit short-form, emotionally engaging, and visually compelling formats.

Emeka Nnadi explained how TikTok has changed his approach to wedding documentation: “TikTok is different from everything that came before. On Facebook or YouTube, people will watch a longer video if they are interested. On TikTok, you have maybe 10 or 15 seconds to catch someone, or they scroll past. So when I edit for TikTok, I go straight to the most exciting moments:

⁸⁸ U. Raymond, 31, photographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/10/2025.

⁸⁹ O. Ekwueme, 39, content creator, Nkwerre, Imo State, 24/10/2025.

⁹⁰ J. van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10-12.

the bride finding her husband, the couple dancing, the crowd cheering. The prayer the elder offers at the beginning, the negotiations, the serious parts, those do not perform well on TikTok, so they usually get left out”⁹¹. Ngozi Ekeoma, who works as a master of ceremonies at traditional weddings in Nkwerre, reflected on how awareness of digital documentation has changed the atmosphere of ceremonies: “There was a time when I focused entirely on the people in front of me, making sure the elders were comfortable, making sure the families understood each stage of the ceremony, making sure the bride and groom felt supported. Now I am also aware that everything I say and do may end up online. I have to speak clearly, position myself so the camera can see me, and make sure the important moments aren’t rushed.

The ceremony has always been a performance, but now it is a performance for two audiences: the people who are there and the people who will watch later”⁹². Taken together, these developments show that *Igba Nkwu* in Nkwerre has moved from being primarily sustained through oral memory and face-to-face participation to becoming a ceremony that is also preserved, interpreted, and reshaped through visual and digital media. Ong’s concept of secondary orality is especially relevant here because it describes forms of oral expression that are reconstituted through technological mediation rather than existing only in immediate communal settings⁹³. In Nkwerre today, *Igba Nkwu* remains rooted in local custom, family structure, and communal recognition. Yet, its meanings are increasingly produced not only in the ceremonial space itself but also in the digital environments through which the ceremony is viewed, shared, and remembered.

Case Study: Digital Mediation of the Nkwerre *Igba Nkwu* on TikTok

⁹¹ E. Nnadi,43, event planner and videographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 08/10/2025.

⁹² N. Ekeoma,47, master of ceremony, Nkwerre, Imo State, 15/11/2025.

⁹³ W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 136-37.

This study examines a 25-second TikTok video posted by @chuksebuka4 and a set of 781 comments as examples of how Nkwerre *Igba Nkwu* is being reframed through short-form digital media. Rather than treating the clip as a neutral record of the ceremony, it is more useful to understand it as a mediated cultural artifact shaped by platform conventions, editing tools, and audience interaction. Social media platforms do not simply transmit culture; they organize visibility and participation through their own technical and economic logics. José van Dijck argues that platforms shape cultural expression through programmability, popularity, and connectivity, making some forms of communication more circulable than others.⁹⁴ In this sense, the TikTok clip is not just a wedding record; it is a platform-specific reconfiguration of ritual performance.

Narrative Compression and the “Ritual Hook”

The 25-second duration of the video is significant because it compresses a ceremony embedded in a much longer customary process into an instantly consumable highlight sequence. Walter J. Ong notes that oral cultures tend toward additive, participatory, and often elaborative forms of expression, since repetition and fullness aid memory and communal understanding⁹⁵. By contrast, TikTok rewards brevity, immediate visual stimulation, and rapid retention. The jump-cut movement from blessing to climactic recognition exemplifies how platform aesthetics condense ritual time into what may be called a “ritual hook”: a short sequence designed to capture attention quickly and hold viewers long enough for engagement. This compression does not simply shorten the ceremony; it reshapes what counts as meaningful within it. Rather than foregrounding the full progression of negotiation, family exchange, and ritual transition that precedes *Igba Nkwu*, the

⁹⁴ J. van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10-12.

⁹⁵ W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 39-40.

short clip privileges visually dramatic moments that can travel well in an algorithmic environment. In this way, the digital form selectively amplifies climax over process.

The clip's editing style also reflects the standardizing influence of template-based mobile production. Platform-oriented editing apps such as CapCut encourage users to fit local events into globally recognizable visual rhythms, quick transitions, beat synchronization, and emotionally heightened cuts. Lev Manovich observes that digital culture is increasingly structured by software, which shapes not only media production but also the forms of cultural expression available to users.⁹⁶ Emeka Nnadi explained how these production pressures affect his work: "When people want a video for TikTok, they do not ask for the full story first; they ask for the sweetest parts. The prayer, the search, the dance, the moment, people will react to quickly. That is what gets cut together"⁹⁷. He added that software templates and mobile editing tools increasingly shape these choices: "Sometimes the edit follows the rhythm of the template more than the rhythm of the ceremony itself"⁹⁸.

Obinna Ekwueme, who regularly creates and shares wedding content on social media, described his editing process: "I know what works on TikTok because I have been doing this for years: fast movement, bright colors, emotional reactions, and popular music. If a moment does not fit those criteria, I usually leave it out. The prayer an elder offers might be beautiful and meaningful, but if it is just someone talking slowly, people will scroll past. So I skip to the part where the bride is dancing or where the crowd is cheering"⁹⁹.

⁹⁶ L. Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 2-3.

⁹⁷ E. Nnadi, 43, event planner and videographer, Nkwerre, Imo State, 08/10/2025.

⁹⁸ E. Nnadi, 43, 08/10/2025.

⁹⁹ O. Ekwueme, 39, content creator, Nkwerre, Imo State, 24/10/2025.

Comment Space as Digital Witnessing

The 781 comments attached to the video function as more than audience reaction; they create a durable and searchable layer of communal response. In the physical ceremony, approval is expressed through applause, chants, blessings, joking, and verbal affirmation, all of which are immediate but ephemeral. On TikTok, a response becomes an archived interaction. This shift is important because it transforms witnessing from a momentary social act into a visible digital record of reception. Several forms of participation emerge in the comment field. One is spiritual participation, represented by comments such as “I tap from your blessings.” Such statements suggest that some viewers do not approach the video merely as entertainment but as a source of transferable blessing and affective connection. In digital religion scholarship, Heidi A. Campbell argues that online spaces can become sites of meaningful spiritual practice and mediated participation rather than mere representations of offline belief¹⁰⁰. In this context, the comment resembles a digitalized form of assent, comparable in function, though not identical in form, to communal affirmations made during live ritual speech. Chika Ahaneku reflected on this phenomenon from her diaspora experience: “When I see a video of a wedding from home and the elder is praying, I find myself saying ‘Amen’ out loud even though I am alone in my flat in London. If I comment, ‘I tap from this blessing,’ it is because I genuinely want to receive what is being prayed for. It is not a joke or a trend for me, it is a way of participating in something I cannot physically attend”¹⁰¹.

¹⁰⁰ H. A. Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 64-66.

¹⁰¹ C. Ahaneku, 35, Nkwerre, Imo State, 18/10/2025.

A second pattern is traditional policing, visible in comments such as “Malt Una use do Una trad?” This kind of response shows that the comment section can serve as a decentralized arena for cultural regulation, where viewers assess whether the ceremony conforms to expected traditions. Here, communal authority is no longer confined to physically present elders; it is dispersed across networked viewers who claim interpretive competence. This aligns with broader observations that participatory media expand the number of actors who can publicly judge, correct, and authenticate cultural practice online.¹⁰² Ichie Okafor expressed concern about this development: “Some of these young people commenting online have never organized a marriage ceremony themselves. They see a short video and start saying this was done wrong or that was missing. But they do not know what happened before the camera was turned on. The elders who were present know whether the ceremony was complete. The comment section does not have that knowledge”¹⁰³.

A third pattern is village or diaspora identification, seen in comments such as “My first time seeing someone from my village.” Such responses indicate that the clip functions as a point of recognition for dispersed Nkwerre viewers, creating a temporary digital gathering around a shared local identity. Digital media scholarship has shown that online circulation can sustain forms of belonging among geographically dispersed communities by allowing users to encounter familiar practices, symbols, and social worlds across distance¹⁰⁴. In this case, TikTok serves as a kind of digital village square where recognition of Nkwerre identity becomes publicly visible. Ugochukwu Mbakwe described his experience of encountering Nkwerre content online: “When you live far

¹⁰² H. Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 6.

¹⁰³ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwerre, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

¹⁰⁴ M. Madianou, and Daniel Miller. *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia*. (London: Routledge, 2012), 3-5.

from home, any connection to your village feels precious. I follow several accounts that post videos from Igbo weddings. When I see one from Nkwere or even from nearby towns in the Orlu area, I watch it multiple times. I read the comments to see if anyone else from home is there. Sometimes I find people I know or people who know my family. It makes the distance feel smaller”¹⁰⁵.

Oral Evidence and Questions of Authenticity

The comment archive also raises questions about authenticity. Because the clip presents only a brief visual summary, viewers often infer the meaning of the entire marriage process from a highly selective excerpt. This can generate tension between circulation and completeness. Short-form media make the ceremony more visible, but they may also flatten distinctions between local practice, broader Igbo custom, and platform-friendly embellishment. Ruth Finnegan reminds us that oral performance is inseparable from context, participants, and social situation; once detached from its original performance environment, interpretation shifts.¹⁰⁶ The TikTok clip, therefore, preserves a ritual moment while simultaneously relocating it into a new interpretive setting shaped by strangers, diaspora viewers, and algorithmic visibility.

For Nkwere observers, this raises an important question: which parts of the ceremony must remain intact for the event to be still recognized as authentically *Igba Nkwu*? Ichie Okafor addressed this concern directly: “People can shorten what they show online, but certain things must remain if it is to be called *Igba Nkwu*. The blessing, the family presence, the palm wine act, the public witnessing, those are not things you remove and still say it is complete”¹⁰⁷. Chief Nwosu

¹⁰⁵ U. Mbakwe, 52, doctor, Owerri, Imo State, 10/11/2025.

¹⁰⁶ R. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 11-12.

¹⁰⁷ M. Okafor, 43, trader, Nkwere, Imo State, 12/09/2025.

added, “What I worry about is young people who only know the ceremony from these short videos. They may think that is all there is. They do not see the months of preparation, the negotiations, the family meetings, the prayers. If we lose those things, we lose the meaning, even if the video looks beautiful”¹⁰⁸.

Ngozi Ekeoma, who witnesses these ceremonies in her role as master of ceremonies, offered a practical perspective: “I have been doing this work for almost twenty years. The core elements have stayed the same: the prayers, the wine, the consent, the blessing. What has changed is everything around it: the decorations, the music, the clothes, the way things are filmed. As long as the essential rituals are performed properly, I consider the ceremony valid regardless of what ends up on TikTok”¹⁰⁹.

Conclusion

This study examined how TikTok reshapes the *Igba Nkwu* marriage ceremony of Nkwerre, drawing on Walter J. Ong’s concept of secondary orality. Using fifteen interviews, digital ethnography, and analysis of a 25-second TikTok video and its 781 comments, the study found that *Igba Nkwu* has shifted from embodied oral transmission to digitally mediated circulation. TikTok compresses an extended multi-stage ritual process which includes *Iku Aka Nuzo* (knocking on the door), *Iga Di Abali Ano* and *Asato* (marriage visits), *Nwaoka n’Ulo* (bride price and confirmations), *Ri Onu Aku* (traditional marriage), prayers and libations into visually compelling highlights, especially the palm-wine presentation and dance.

¹⁰⁸ E. Nwosu, 51, businessman, Nkwerre, Imo State, 14/09/2025.

¹⁰⁹ N. Ekeoma, 47, master of ceremony, Nkwerre, Imo State, 15/11/2025.

This compression privileges spectacle over process and reshapes perceptions of ritual significance. At the same time, the platform expands communal witnessing beyond the village, enabling diaspora participation and producing a comment space that functions as digital witnessing, spiritual affirmation, and authenticity policing. In this sense, the study shows that secondary orality is now shaped by algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics. Despite these transformations, core elements such as family consent, public blessing, bride price negotiation, libation, and the palm-wine act remain central to the legitimacy of *Igba Nkwu* in Nkwerre.

To support intergenerational continuity, the study recommends creating collaborative digital archives that document full-length ceremonies to counterbalance short-form compression. A strategy of platform diversification may also be adopted: TikTok for celebratory highlights, YouTube for extended documentation, WhatsApp for family-restricted sharing, and community-controlled archives for authoritative reference. Content creators should provide contextual captions or voiceovers to enhance cultural understanding. At the same time, future research should undertake longitudinal comparisons between earlier recordings and contemporary TikTok representations to assess how algorithmic circulation continues to reshape ritual performance and meaning. *Igba Nkwu*, therefore, emerges as a dynamic cultural practice continually rearticulated within evolving technological environments.

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