

**MBUBU RITUALS AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE SOCIAL LIFE OF
THE PRE-COLONIAL IBIBIO WOMEN**

BY

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**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN
BENIN CITY**

NOVEMBER, 2025

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A)
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **COVENANT AHUOMA ODIASE** of the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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Project Supervisor

Date

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Head of Department

Date

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God almighty.

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Most importantly, all glory and thanks to Almighty God for the gift of life, the opportunity and privilege of education till this day also for his grace and protection over me.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

In pre-colonial times the Africa traditional society could be said anchored on the facts that institutional beliefs social orders norms and several practices which are of truth must of necessity be given foundational rites of passage. It can be in form of dance music folklore or drama etc. most often the interpretation are engaged to demonstrate and highlight social demeanor and decorum as it is mirrored in the thought and beliefs of a cherished culture of the people.¹

Among the pre-colonial-Ibibio's typical African settings were not i anyway short of this prodigious admiration in the search of a pleasant society that would systematize pride and prestige. In responding to such need various institutional that are meant to serve and salvage the numerous socio problems were established among is the fattening room institution. The fattening room is one the rare culture the Ibibio people of the southern Nigeria institutionalized solely for the reason of inculcating social order. The ritual is known to them as Mbopo or Nkugho. It is a seclusion process and a standard for girls to pass through before marriage or rather womanhood. It signals a process through which girls are initiated into womanhood equipped with knowledge and skills (like cooking, dancing and music).²

It is a schooling process where young women are secluded and are being taught culturally and traditionally. it is a schooling process that prepared girls for marriage as bride who will be able to take care if their matrimonial homes and to be able to bear and nurture their children through this rite or ritual of fattening room young women are educated about body beautification (Imeh Nse Imoh, "Daughter of seclusion) marital relation reproduction and work the fattening process can last for six months to one year or and above if need be this girls are therefore to as Mbobi. InIbibio/Efik language.³Mbobiis the term which is use to describes their dainty demeanor and feminity during their confinement, order women are hired to massage them with powdered herbs and white chalk daily this is done in order to make the fatter glow and soft to touch and also feed them with foods.⁴It should be noted that in the ancient Ibibio fat is viewed as a sign if wealth fertility and beauty that is to say it is mostly the rich that can sometimes afford to send their daughters to partake of the fattening room rites.⁵ it can also be said that an acceptance into a fattening room was viewed as a privilege which demonstrated the virtue sexual purity and the prove of virginity of a maiden.⁶

In today Ibibio society the idea of fat as a symbol of wealth in the ancient times no longer appeal to women who viewed fat as disease and health hazard as many bride often prefer to look slim and fit and to have the right curves and shapes vice versa was in the case in the pre-colonialIbibio they believed the bigger the woman is the more healthier she is which brought about the case of the

fattening room the process according to Imeh in *Daughter of Seclusion*, was revealed as the seclusion of female Adolescents.⁷

This study therefore examined the geographical location of the Ibibio and their norms and culture. It also therefore analysed the importance of the fattening room to the pre-colonial-Ibibio women as how the rituals gave credence to inculcating social values and etiquette that marriageable girls should process in preparation for womanhood, motherhood and wives. It also revealed the secrecy of clitoridectomy.⁸ It is believed that partial cutting of the clitoris (which was held in secrecy) helps in promoting the morality of a woman. Ulford, and M. Jeffery, "the Nyama society of Ibibio women".⁹

This study further shows the uniqueness in the ancient culture (the fattening room) of the Ibibio people which are probably at its end and how it shapes the lives of many female youth in the pre-colonial period.¹⁰

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to assert the importance of fattening room in the social life of pre-colonial-Ibibio women while the following are the basic objectives

- To examine the geographical location of the Ibibio
- To elaborate on the marriage institution in Ibibio
- To examine the nature and importance of the fattening room in the social life of the pre-colonial-Ibibio women

Scope of Study

This study covers the pre-colonial period of the Ibibio society. A period that examine the effectiveness of the Ibibio tradition in the pre-colonial times which is now at the verge of disappearing. It covers the traditional origin of the Ibibio people. Also, the study examine how important is the fattening room in promotion of morality among the young females of the Ibibio people

Research Methodology

Historical method has been employed to ensure the authncity and originality of this research work this can be viewed as the process of gathering, processing, and analyzing of data. The study relied on data from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources: The primary sources is mostly from the oral interviews conducted and tools likes tapes and videos collected to gather information on the fattening room and also first-handwriting information of the Ibibio culture

Secondary Sources: The secondary sources include books written by well-known author's journal articles and extant studies of the Ibibio culture and people.

Literature Review

There is much literature on fattening culture of the Ibibio society as the review below shows. however there are virtually limited works on the importance of fattening room through the Mbobo institution or the fattening room institution if the Ibibio people of southern Nigeria still received sporadic and uneven

scholarly attention have approached the institution from different disciplines with different theoretical framings mainly those of anthropology and art history. Also available are some articles in newspaper, magazine online posts and pictorial evidences which focus on body fattening as the defining frame of the institution. The intent of this research is to analyze and historicize the wide content of the practice of Mbopo beyond the body. It seeks to contribute to the recent Africanist literature which tried to reflect on the practice of Mbopo as a complex and culturally rich ritual. I draw inspiration in particular from Imeh's stimulating recent study where Mbopo seclusion is conceptualized as "Performative demonstration of love and care (and character) through the public display of opulence."¹⁰

Dorothy A. Talbot, in her book entitled, *In Woman Mysteries of a Primitive People the Ibibio of Southern Nigeria*,¹¹The first systematic published research on the Mbopo institution known as the fattening room ritual came to light in 1915 a year after the amalgamation of Nigeria as a single political entity by the British colonial government, gave an extended description of the institution.

Talbot narration centers on the Mbopo institution. She explains in details the spiritual aspects of the fattening room (Mbopo) institution. She explain that before and after the Mbopo that is the fattening room rites "a sacrificed is to be offered to the water mermaids inhabiting secret pools or streams as an age tree that the people worshipped. She thus sees their sacrifice as a way of appeasing the gods

which to them is popularly known as Eka Abasi meaning Mother of God this is done in order to receive the blessings of fertility and productivity for new crops as the ritual was done prior to the beginning of a new harvest season. Talbot in her work also made us to understand that the fattening room rite was the first great event in the life of an Ibibio maiden though Talbot depended mostly on oral sources by gathering information from locals, mostly from the women and recorded a very important aspect of the institution. She pays less attention on the cultural induction aspect and the social function and educational function which made Mervyn Jeffrey work very important in this study.¹²

Mervyn Jeffrey in his book entitled, *The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women*,¹³ He was a colonial officer wrote on the Ibibio and Efik women's ritual in a book titled he elaborate on the duties and functions of women. In the Calabar society he calls it Nyama¹³. He further expresses how these matriarchs older women of the society are responsible for the process of the fattening room induction.¹⁴ He mentioned that the Nyama society controlled the fattening room rite of seclusion seeing to it participate in the seclusion rite. He is against the coming to an end of this great Mbopo ritual due to the influence of the European on Africa cultures and the introduction of Christianity.

Imo Nse Imeh in book entitled, *Daughter of Seclusion*,¹⁵ A creative sound and powerful thesis in analyzing the dept. of the fattening room is that of Imo Nse Imeh an Ibibio - America scholar with genuine insider/outsider position and with

broader anthropological and art history perspectives, Imeh's 2012 study analysis the concept of the fattening room institution and tries to provide a balanced evaluation and summary of the Mbopo institution and the concept of "UYAI Mbopo meaning Beauty. He further conducted massive fieldwork by interviewing former initiates and also people who are involved in the ceremonial rites. He re-imagines the ritual as "time transformation and translation" of the beautiful bride.¹⁵ He analysis how the fattening room ritual reveals the Ibibio cultural perception of Beauty (UYAI) He further stated that " after so much work and time has been expended in the transformation and re- presentation of the beautiful bride to the world in her final outing ceremony, the bride represent the combination of beauty and power.¹⁶With the solidity of his work, be gives voice to the continuity of the practice of mbopo among the Ibibio people of today.

Uwem Jonah Akpaio in his article entitled, "Law and Public Governance in the Ibibio Traditional Society",¹⁷he asserted that the system of fattening girls. In readiness for marriage was very relevant in Ibibio traditional society. He mentioned that the restraint on the conduct of youth and forestalled the types of free experimentation with sex that is rampant today. He stated that girls allowed into the fattening room are between age fourteen and sixteen, when the sexual urge that accompanied adolescence was becoming a problem. Before settling into a fattening process, elderly women (also see m. Jeffrey work) tested the novice for virginity. If it was found to be "virgo intacta" the process was commenced. He

further explained that the fattening room itself was an agency for formal education. The young girls was given formal instruction on sexual hygiene, marriage and it responsibilities child birth and child care “wife craft” cooking and other relevant matters.

Pamela Brink In her article entitled, “The fattening room among the Annang of Nigeria”,¹⁸ She explain that the Ibibio view on obesity is a positive one, with the perspective motivation for seclusion and in a refreshing view she reiterate the Ibibio beliefs in the stimulus for fattening seclusion. She records indigenous perception on the gynecological role of fatness, since fat could broaden the birth canal for a less uncomfortable delivery of babies.¹⁹ Brink asserts that in the earlier years Mbopo was widely practiced among the Ibibio people, as " part of a traditional religious system associated with marriage and custom of bride price" this is because to the Ibibio/Efik people fertility was regarded as a very important driving force.²⁰ Young marriageable girls were also taught the art of pleasing their husband’s sexually. Yet as insists the ritual had many different social functions, including education about “sex, marriage, procreation, child care hygiene, wife craft, mother craft, home economics and social and cultural etiquette.”²¹

Igor de Garine and N. Pollock in their article entitled, “Introduction: An Overview of Obesity Issues Across Several Culture”,²² they focus on the cultural practice of the Mbopo institution how it took a change, from it being a context of rituality to body size. Around this time, contemporary awareness of the adverse

impact of large body size became prominent in scholarly literature and public debates. In social Aspects of obesity (1995), has been the focus of western scientific discussion for some decades. It went further to state that being obese come with many negative attributes which are all health related. This western perception has to do with the quality of life and the underlining health issue that being overweight brings, some of which are coronary heart disease because of increased body mass. To an Ibibio person, western conceptions of obesity are an inappropriate generalization of understanding body fat without consideration of other cultural context and diversities.²³

This thesis distinctively and firmly looks extensively into the aspects of the fattening room rituals which contributed significantly influencing the lives of youth's most especially young girls of marriage age and by checking the moral laxity and decadence in the society so that male suitors could marry a wife who was well cultured and good mannered, furthermore, this project analysis the tradition of origin of Ibibio society and also elaborate on their marriage institution. This is done through facts from books, journal, articles and most especially oral sources.

Chapterization

Chapter One: Background of the Study

The researcher provides an introduction to the concept of the fattening room among the pre-colonial Ibibio society. She goes on to provide a background to the study while defining the scope of the work. The aims and objectives that inspire the work are emphasized as well as its methodology. It concludes with literature review and chapterization.

Chapter Two: Background Information on the Ibibio People of Nigeria

This chapter looks to discuss the historical background of the Ibibio people by examining the origin, migration and settlement of the Ibibio people, Nigeria's fourth largest nationality who inhabit the Akwa Ibom state in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Chapter Three: Cultural System and Marriage Institution of the Pre Colonial Ibibio

This chapter will treat the concept of cultural system and its classification which are the political, economic, religion and social system and how marriage is down in the Ibibio society.

Chapter Four: Importance of the Fattening Room in the Social Life of the Pre-Colonial Ibibio Women

Chapter four will examine the seclusion space by analysing the fattening room (mbopo), the spiritual initiation, and things that go on inside the seclusion chamber, the female circumcision and lastly the importance of the fattening room.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter scrutinize the general overview of the entire research work. It also observed the dimension of research findings this study has carried out.

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CHAPTER TWO

IBIBIO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

Introduction

This chapter provides the historical background of the Ibibio people. It examines the origin, migration and settlement of the Ibibio people, Nigeria's fourth largest ethnic nationality who inhabit the Akwa Ibom state in the south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The present day Akwa Ibom area occupied by the Ibibio's was described by colonial authorities as the six Ibibio district of Calabar province consisting of Abak, Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Itu, Opobo (New Ikot Abasi) and Uyo.

The ancestors of the Ibibio people are believed to have occupied the central Benue valley along with other population upon their arrival from 'further North' while in the region, they evolved the proto-bantu language and other religious and social institutions, including the conception of God² from the central Benue valley, they dispersed to Usak Edet region on the Nigerian side of the Cameroonian mountain from where they accessed present day Ibibio area via the sea from this point a section of them migrated and settled at Ibom in present Abia State, established a functional socio-political organization including the much-revered Ibritam Inokan (the long juju of Arochukwu)³. After many generations, scarcity of land triggered conflict between the Ibibio and Aro Igbo. The Aro Igbo sought an alliance with a group of mercenaries known as Akpa. The alliance resulted in the defeat and

expulsion of Ibibio from Ibom. The arrival of the new wave of migrants triggered massive dispersal within Ibibio land.

It should be noted that every group in Ibibio has also mixed up some other groups. The Ibibio themselves were also part of some other group or groups before they broke off to establish over many centuries, a distinctive identity of their own today.



Figure 1: The Ibibio Map

Origin and Migration

The Ibibio of Nigeria are one of the oldest Benue- Bantu tribes of sub Saharan Africa Talbot in Noah written account are generally silent on subjects of the Ibibio origin expect vague testimonies of their antiquity in the present location, information on the Ibibio origin is scanty and very speculative. Thus, Talbot cited in Noah states that the origin occupied by the Ibibio with its forest abounding wild fruits, its water teeming with fish and salt to be obtained from the mangroves and sea water, may have been inhabited from very early times. Accordingly to be observed that the Ibibio are the most ancient descendants of the semi- Bantu people in Nigeria.⁵

Noah observes that recent scholarship has increasingly landed to reinforce the belief that southern Nigeria has been peopled for a very long time. According to him, persuasive speculations have been made both by Armstrong and Posnasky that based on antiquity and continuity of the major linguistics groups of southern Nigeria, population movements and migration into the area might have involved small groups of people trickling through the forest belt over a longer period of time ever before the expansion of the Bantu- speaking peoples. In this regard, Noah cites Talbot as arguing that by 7000 BC from foundations of some of the ethnic groupings in the area had begun. Talbot records that ‘in origin the Ibibio language even other than the yaws.’⁶

Due to the archaeological work carried out in the Ibibio area, very little was found on the Ibibio people. The archaeological finds have been mostly accidental and unprocessed with the result that they have not yielded dates known to scholars. In a study of the clusters of languages of the upper cross river region, Streck asserts that based on the degree of cognancy between the language migrations into the area might have happened about 2500 years ago. Noah therefore reasons that judged by his postulation and if indeed the Ibibio were one of the earliest settlers in southern Nigeria and given the speculated dates of 4000BC for the ijaw and 2500years for the upper cross river peoples a tentative date of 8000Bc for the Ibibio settlement in Nigeria seems prudent. Thurstan Shaw's excavation have revealed evidence of Stone Age inhabitation in the forest regions of southern Nigeria with radio carbon dates ranging between 9000Bc and 1000Bc.⁷

Though the tradition of origin do not provide firm dates of their migration from the present location to present location, there is a consensus that the Ibibio came from the east of their present location- the area around Nigerian/Cameroun border the available evidence on the origin and migration on the Ibibio people which are the oral written, structural and conjectural tend to support the fact that the Ibibio people evolved somewhere in the area around Uska Edet about 8000 BC. Talbot notes strong similarities between the Ibibio and the Bakoko people of southern Cameroun.⁸

Noah draws attention to the thesis stating that migration at this early period did not necessarily involved tens of thousands or even thousands of people, rather “the pioneers” may have been few in number, who achieved their success through rapid reproduction. This suggest that Ibibio people had been gradually migrating in trickle from the Cameroon highland over the centuries and through variety of routes settled in various parts of Ibibio land including Ibom, Eket, Oron and the estuary of the cross river now known as Calabar as well as other places this appears as natural facts because to suggest otherwise would carry the un natural implications that there was date line on which migration was supposed to commence.

Notable Ibibio historians such as Monday Noah, Edet Akpan and Monday Abasialti unanimously collaborate existing written evidence by colonial and missionary sources that prior to the Ibibio migration to Usak Edet region of present- day Cameroon they had lived in the central Benue region the “cradle land of Bantu expansion” Edet Akpan Udo write that:

The Ibibio speaking people belong to the semi- Bantu stock whose cradle has been located in the central Benue valley to this group belong Boki, Gayi, Yakoro, Akunskuns, Abine, Yakuri, Asinga, Ekuri, Ukelle, Opoto, Mteze, Olulomo--- from their cradle land to the Cameroon area south westwards through the equatorial rainforest to the savannah grass land using as they did the cross river and its tributaries, they reached Ibom now in Arochukwu and later Itu in modern Ibibio land¹⁰

Abasiatto has offered some explanation for the movement of the ancestors of the Ibibio and other proto-bantu people from the central Benue region in search of other home lands citing the position of pre- historian he stated that after 2500Bc, the Sahara region, lither to, supporting vegetation and some population at advanced stages of hunting, gathering, fishing and possible agriculture began to desiccate. This forced its population to move outwards, northward towards the Maghreb and southward toward the guinea savannah and forest fringes those moving southwards must have pressed on the proto- Bantu speakers in the central Benue region which eventually precipitated explaining further,¹¹

Abasiatto states that:

In course of moving from the central Benue woodlands into the forest region, the ancestors of the Ibibio further developed their method of procuring food, their language, Religion, and socio organization and micro lithic technology they have consolidated their hunting and gathering and possibly verge cultural techniques into agriculture during the first century A.D. when similar agricultural developments are known through archaeology to have occurred among the Bantu people, who dispersed into central Africa their technology also advanced to include the use of iron.

In this context, Noah remarks that:

The Ibibio are Afaha people whose original home was at Usak Edet in the Cameroons upon leaving the Cameroons the Ibibio seem to have migrated to their present location. One group reached Nigeria, perhaps by overland route and settled at Ibom in Arochukwu probably about 8000Bc where they established the

famous shrine now known as the long juju of Arochukwu. It was from that point the Ibibio people in Abak, Uyo and Ikot Ekpene migrated and this is the area described as Eastern or Ibibio proper there were others who reached Ibibio mainland by sea these seaborne Ibibio people upon arrival moved northwards and eastwards until they come up against the eastern Ibibio expanding south ward.¹³

During this period of movement of the Ibibio people apart from smaller Ibibio communities several large centers of concentrated Ibibio populations emerged known as Ibom, where the various grouped lived. One of such Ibom was reported in the Obans forest. In the present day cross river state, being the eastern Ibibio migration route, another Ibom as noted above was located in the present Arochukwu district while Usak Edet and Ikot Oku Ikono and Ibeno districts grew on the Ibom settlement principles. Later day manifestation of these principles was the naming of some Ibibio clans after Ibom(Efik) indeed that Abasi Ibom(the supreme God) is named after Ibom indicates that the Ibibio had established at least one Ibom settlement in common in the central Benue region or after leaving the region before their southward movement bifurcated.¹⁴

Settlement at Ibom

Naoh stated that at Ibom in Arochukwu, the Ibibio had seethed, established their shrine popularly known among historians as the Ibritam Inokon {the long juju} or the Arochukwu orcales.¹⁵

Shakland Assistant District officer for Arochukwu notes as follows:

It seems fairly certain that before the coming of the igbo{into Arochukwu}the Ibibio had a juju, "ibritam" situated by a little stream not far from the present town of ibom. What particular property or power was attached to the juju in those early days will be ever uncertain but certain it is the long juju survived the {Ibibio}war and was before long to become the most famous shrine in Nigeria , indeed on the west coast.¹⁶

Further population pressure by the advancing Igbo, the quest for land and other conflict with the Ekoi led to warfare and social tensions. According to oral traditions one of the reasons why the pro-Ibibio war occurred was that an Ibibio man at ibom named "Uruk Nta" the later became the principal instigator of the Ibibio Igbo war during which the Igbo hired Ekoi mercenaries to fight and drive the Ibibio {expecting some remnants} from Ibom. Significantly Uruk meaning "sympathy" is the Annag or (Western Ibibio) version of the word Uduk in (Central Ibibio). This implies that, the principal personality in Aro-Ibibio war was most probably an Annag man this point further shows the extent of Ibibio ethnic solidarity in Ibom, since Igbo tradition since Igbo tradition refers to the war as the "Ibibio war".¹⁷

Aro confederacy consisted of three groups of the Ibibio, the Igbo and the Akpa the last named were of Okoyong origin"being a fragment of a Cameroon' 'tribe" now long resident in Calabar division. Even though the Ibibio were the earliest settlers and indeed the owners of Ibom country, the arrival of the Igbo made the ethnic configuration complex. As noted above, driven by land

hunger, the Igbo came into collision with the northern fringes of the Ibibio and this resulted in the war.¹⁸

Shakland add that:

At the beginning of the institutes it would appear that the Igbo met with no outstanding success in the struggle with their opponents until the third tribal element appeared from the scene traditions is agreed throughout the Aro towns that at this juncture the igbo sought the aid of the Akpa mercenaries.¹⁹

Noah provides a significant insight on what followed therefore thus:

After having left the Cameroons, the Akpa are reported to have settled in Akamkpa which was the center of the Okoyong clan. This advantageous location Akpa had brought them into contact with the European creek town which enabled them to acquire arms in the course of slave trade ‘ a few blunder buses of primitive type’ led by two notorious war captains, Osim and Okuma, the intervention of the Akpa on the side of the Igbo tipped scale against the Ibibio.²⁰

Percy Talbot also assents to the fact that the Akpa whom the Aro used to overrun the Ibibio use firearms. In the process,²¹ having lost in the Ibibio war, the bulk of the Ibibio migrated to join their kinsmen. In the mainland Ibibio some of who had settled there for centuries before the Ibibio war. Noah strongly noted that some Ibibio had peopled the estuary of the cross river and parts of the mainland long before the Ibibio war and the Ibibio had lived in their present location for several millennia long before the Ibibio war. He adds that the Ibibio expulsion from Ibom occurred in the 16th century.²²

What is obvious is that Akpa fought and dislodged the Ibibio from Ibom with firearms which they obtained from the Portuguese at Calabar. Efik historians, Effiong Ukpong Aye collaborates this point thus;

In 1472 the Portuguese arrived on the Calabar river in three amstedships, they brought a kind of cloth which became identified by that name. They saw the Efik dressed in Ikpaya, a Raffia cloth that was locally woven and as the Portuguese cloth attracted the attention of the native so did Ikpaya, the strangers. It was this incident that gave rise to Efik expression: Ikpaya ndise; itu itu ndise {Ikpaya an object of spectacle, itu ita an object of spectacle} but the friendly commercial dealing were married when in 1530. Alfonso, a Portuguese NAME "CALABAR" kidnapped the first Efik sans away it is possible name 'Calabar' is said to have been derived from the Portuguese words 'cala-barra' {the river is silent} for Harry Johnston, consul for the bight of Biafra in the 1880, remarked that at the entrance of the old Calabar river, unlike all other river mouths there is no perceptible bar and consequently no noise of breakers.²³

The above revelation which has been documented in European records indicates without any doubts that the Portuguese had arrived Calabar in 1472 and started transaction with the Efik a section of Ibibio who dispersed from Uruan area to their present day abode in the cross river state}. This confirms by Ibibio people that Ibibio land had been inhabited for centuries by Ibibio people who accessed the present locale from Usak Edet region. Since the Igbo- Ibibio war at Ibom, Ariochukw is believed to have taken place in 1550 A.D ²⁴. It is very obvious that the Ibibio had settled in present day abode and that the 'Ibom episode' is a recent event. It also shows that it was after the Ibibio had settled in

Ibom land {present day Akwa Ibom that the Portuguese arrived in Calabar in 1472. It was after this period that slave trade began and Akpa got the firearms that they used to collaborate with the Aro to dislodge a section of the Ibibio at Ibom land to live with fellow Ibibio who moved in earlier to settle from Usak Edet region of Cameroon.

Ibibio Settlement in Present Day Akwa Ibom

Abasiattio's account in this respect is that the mainland part of the state (present day Akwa Ibom) by the Ibibio was a gradual process. He adds that the dispersed was:

Considerable expatriated by the Igbo-Ibibio war at Ibom. The subsequent migration of new waves of Ibibio into the mainland following the war caused further pressure on Ibibio people already concentrated in the Ikot Oku Ikono district and in turn triggered massive dispersed from this district in all directions over the Ibibio war at Ibom has been variously dated. We shall base our dating on available Efik king- list, applying a mean regin of 11.8 years suggested by some researchers for the 25 Efik 'kings' who reportedly 'reigned' between the Efik { and other Ibibio} dispersals from Ibom and 1834, this places the war at about 1534 or between 1500 and 1550 by relative dating. The subsequent major Ibibio dispersed over the mainland continued till well into the eighteen century²⁵

The subsequent dispersal of the Ibibio from Ikot Iku Ikono centre otherwise described as the 'the fanning out model of expansion' by G.I, Jones, a colonial officer who extensively served in Eastern Nigeria, and also conducted extensive research and wrote some path-breaking books on the area was triggered by war.

In Igbo-Ibibio this respect he submits that:

A study of the present distribution of the Ibibio tribes suggest an earlier of Ibibio over an area extending from Arochukwu in the north, Ika in the west and Oron in the south. This was followed by a massive dispersal north and south from a center somewhere and differentiation into Annang (western and eastern Ibibio). The dispersion is clearly preserved in the tribal traditions, all but a few tribes in the extreme north, south and west tracing their origin and present territorial distribution to this movement.²⁶

A Nigerian major historian, C.C. Ifemesia re-echoes Jones ‘‘fanning-out model

‘of the Ibibio at Ikot Oku Ikono area with some modifications thus:

The present distribution of the Ibibio indicates an early location over the area extending from Arochukwu in the north to Ika in the west and Oron in the south, there is an area called Ikono, situated between Abak and Uyo and surrounded by a ring of villages, each of them the parent of a group of Ibibio villages. Most groups of the Ibibio expect perhaps the Oron, Eket and Ika-trace their origins and present distribution to the dispersal from this area of reported dispersal of Enyong or northern Ibibio from the high ground now occupied by the Ibu and the Arochukwu Igbo, it might be stated that such a movement might not be earlier than that such a movement might not be earlier than the sixteen century. Since the raiders who came up stream along the cross river are said to have been equipped with firearms.²⁷

The above explanation confirms the fact that Ikot Oku Ikono which is indeed the area of Ikono’’situated between Abk and Uyo and surrounded by a ring of villages each of them a parent of a group of villages’’ such as Iman, Nsit, Etoi, Offot, Itam, Ibiono, Oku, Itak etc. is the dispersal centre of the Ibibio war, did not take place earlier than the 16th century also another crucial confirmation of the fact that the Igbo Ibibio war is a recent event that happened centuries after the

Ibibio described as a people of hoar antiquity had settled in their abode is the fact that Akpa raiders used firearms to accomplish their operation.

Indeed this stance that the Ibibio people land dispersal from a location near Uyo after their arrival from Usak Edet region has been documented by the Ibibio people in ‘‘Ibibio state union memorandum submitted to professor G.I. Jones commission of enquiry into the position, status and influence of chiefs and Natural Rulers in the Eastern region of Nigeria stated that:

The Ibibio people belong to one common ancestral or stock Ibom that the various clans spread. In search of fresh and fertile land, games and dominion and wandered into many areas carrying their culture and tradition where they went Ikono elements are formed in Ikot Epene, Abak Uyo and Ibekwe division and their deity, Etefia Ikono has replied in all these places. The original home of Ikono seems to have been in Uyo division from where they shot off in their great trek. The same applies to Ibiaku and Ukpum kindred of which are in nearly all the six division. It will be observed further that each clan was a unit of administration.²⁸

Conclusion

Discussion in this chapter focuses on the historical background of the Ibibio people who are a hoar antiquity who have inhabited the present local in south eastern Nigeria for thousands of generation. Their fore bears migrated from the central Benue valley after their arrival in present day Nigeria from ‘‘farther

north'' before they dispersed to the Nigerian side of the Cameroon boarder where they settled at a place known as Usak Edet (Edik Afaha). After living in Usak Edet region for a long time using the cross river estuary.

Other's moved to Ibom in Arochukwu region of present day Abia state and established them there. One of the legacies the Ibibio left behind at Ibom was the famous Aro oracle known as Ibritam Inokon (the long juju of Arochukwu). In about 1550, resource conflict between the Ibibio and the Aro –Igbo resulted in the Igbo-Ibibio war. To achieve victory, the Aro aligned with the Akpan group, a warlike group that first had access to firearms in cross river region following the arrival of the Portuguese with this advantage; the Ibibio were defeated in the war. This resulted in massive dispersal of new wave of migrant into present day Ibibio land. It should be noted that the new set of migrants met those who had already settled around Io Oku Ikono in present day Uyo local government area. This area is referred to as the ''ancestral home of the Ibibio''

There is need for extensive research on the Ibibio origin and migration using the inter-disciplinary related to the Ibibio especially the ethnic nationalities in present day northern Nigeria, this is very needful particular clannishness are posing serious challenges to National Integration and Development.

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CHAPTER THREE
THE CULTURAL SYSTEM AND MARRIAGE INSTITUTION OF THE
PRE COLONIAL IBIBO

Introduction

The culture of a people is what marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity. Culture as it is usually understood entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people. These peculiar traits go on to include a people, language, dressing, music, work, art, religion dancing and so on. It also goes on to include a people's norm, taboos and values. This show that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or

unknowingly during process of social interaction. Even though there are many definitions of culture as there are writers, there is an element of similarity that runs through them all. This singular underlying characteristics is the attempt to portray and capture culture as the entire or total way of life of a particular group of people, Etuk.

Therefore, culture is to be understood as the way of life of a people and can only be passed on from generation to generation. This further presupposes the fact that there can be no people without a culture. In this chapter, we shall be dealing with pre-colonial Ibibio culture and marriage institution. It can be said that, the Ibibio do have a rich cultural system similar to her neighbors who are the Efik, Annang, Kalabari and the Igbo but the pre-colonial Ibibio cultural system has its own uniqueness which comprises of moral values, norms, language, modes of dressing, beliefs and so on and this culture could also be seen as an embodiment of different system which can be classified as follows:

- Political system
- Economic system
- Religion system
- Social system

which further gives us a perfect insight of the pre-colonial Ibibio marriage institution.

Pre Colonial Ibibio Political System

Before the colonial era in Nigeria, the Ibibio had a simple but strong political system similar to their Igbo neighbors. In the absence of a large scale machinery of political organization among the Ibibio, such as existed among the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba of Northern and southern Nigeria, the British invaders concluded that the Ibibio had no political and legal system that was worthy of preserving.² Udo the Ibibio society consisted of villages, each of which belonged to a larger political unit known as a 'clan' which was often named after the original founder of the 'tan's first village each Ibibio village equal status.³

According to Udo, the Ibibio political organization consisted of six administrative divisions augmented by clubs, which included:

Idip Ete literally translated to mean father's womb
Ufok, a collection of families (Idip Ete)
Epkuk, a collection of families (Ufok) who trace their origin to one father, a modern lineage, or extended families
Obio or Idung (village), a collection of lineage (Ekpuk)
Oduk (village groups or sub-clans): a strong sub-clan can easily become a clan as time goes on:

And the apex Ikpaisong (clan) a collection of village groups who trace their origin to one village in the clan.

Idip Ete: A Political unit Among the Ibibio

An Ibibio family unit, consisting of a man, his wife, or wives and children is distinguished by term Idip by Fordes and Jones. The Idip Ete coincide with the family unit of the western world, except for the fact that it was polygamous. This polygamous nature of the Ibibio society resulted in very large families Noah. ⁴

In the Idip Ete political division the father and husband was the head. He together with his senior wife (Akamba Anwan or Atai Anwan) his eldest son, and a few others intelligent members of his Otung Ekwere or Ebiet (compound) formed an irregular/ adhoc committee which tried cases that involved members of the family. They apportioned blame to the guilty and praised the deserving, their fines include drinks, chicken and goat but in most cases, corporal punishment though their decisions were not upheld by legal sanctions, they were promptly obedient because such decisions are backed by the norms of the Ibibio society and sense of collective responsibility for the family.

Ufok: A Political Unit among the Ibibio

The increase in population of a particular Idip Ete gave rise to the formation of Ufok,⁵ which consisted of a man's nucleus families and his brothers. As a political unit of the Ibibio society their judicial functions were mainly the settlement of disputes within the extended family, especially such disputes that the nucleus family (Idip Ete) neither could nor settle or disputes that involved two or more nucleus family- mainly matters concerning marriages, deaths, birth, festivals and farmland. Again Udo states; in terms of political organization, the oldest man among the members was the head and his title was among Ufok(the head of the house). Together with some senior members of th Ufok, the formed Esop Ufok (house assembly or council} ,met as occasion demanded at the compound of the Obong Ufok. observes that the house political structure in the

Ibibio past conformed to what was obtained in an early Israeli family system called “near kinsmen” (Lev.25:49:Ruth 2:1, 3:12, Deut. 25:5-10).

Ekpuk: A Political Sub-Division Among the Ibibio

The third political division in the Ibibio cultural society was Epek (lineage), which literally means knot. According to Udo, it was so called because it binds all the members together. Umoh-faithman affirms; “As the third Ibibio past, Epek was the maximum of the Ibibio Man’s family’. He argue further that no matter how big and numerous a village in the Ibibio land may have been, it had not more than seven Ekpuk and there is no hope of increasing Ekpuk (lineage), in any village in Ibibio land resent times⁶ . But this argument can be challenged as many new clans and villages are springing up daily in modern Ibibio political society among the Ekpuk. Udo reacting on what he regarded as distortion of fact from the European who wrote on political structure of traditional Ibibio society argues;

Ekpuk is the modern extended family. Due to lack of adequate knowledge in the indigenous political administration in the Ibibio the British colonial administration who carried out ethnographic surveys of the Ibibio land between 1932 and 1936 erroneously concluded that “Ekpuk was the lowest administration unit” in the Ibibio land. As a matter of fact, Epek was the highest political administration unit of the lineage {extended family} and lower rank only to the village, village group and clan councils.⁷

The oldest man in each ekpuk was the head and was always known and addressed as “Obong Epek”. In political, social, economic, religious and judicial matters, Esop Epek treated matters which Esop Ufok could not solve.

Udo Maintains

No dispute, no matter how trivial or grievous was permitted to be taken to the village council (ESOP OBIO) without first being cleared by members of this council. Any regarded by a member was considered a serious offence by the other members of the Ekpuk. The Ekpuk remains a vital instrument for maintaining peace and order within the Ekpuk.⁸

Obion or Idun (Village): As a Political Sub Division among the Ibibio People

In a traditional Ibibio society, Obio or Idung(village)was the fourth political division and was made up of a number of Ekpuk (lineage)which varied in number from village to village. To put it differently Fordes and Jones (1950:71) affirms “village (idung) comprising a number of wards sharing a common meeting place, which is the traditional centre of local control and having a recognized leader among the heads of lineages known as Obong Obio, Obong Idung (village head) or Ete Idung (father of the villages)”

The primary function of the Obong Idung/Obio was to see to the overall well-being of the village. Politically, it was his responsibility to preside over ESOPIdung or Esop Obio(the village council). Each village had a number of other subordinate chief who assisted the Obong Idung (village chief). In the daily administration of the village, Edet A.Udo holds that subordinate chief could be called minsters.⁹ their functions and importance attached to them varied from village to village. Although the Obong Idung permanently presided over the village council, he was merely primus inter pares, without any individual

authority expect in his capacity as a mouthpiece of the ESOP Idung-the ultimate authority in the village. The functions of the ESOP Idung included, among others, decision on the time to commence farming and the particular area to be cultivated each year, to see to that they fixed a period when no palm fruits might be collected and a date for the collection to regulate the cutting of yam stakes for the training of yam vines and th confinement of livestock to prevent depredation of crops.

Udo maintains that it was the responsibility of the ESOP Idung to handle matters that the Ekpuku within it domain could not handle, but the principal offences heard by the Esop Idung were cases of murder, witchcraft, adultery with the wife of a village head or an Ekpuk head, sexual intercourse between a man and mother of twins, or between a man and a mourning woman, habitual theft, digging of new yams before the prescribed time, attempted suicide, arson, and serious breaches of other village laws customs and traditions.

Oduk (Sub-Clan): As a Political Division Among the Ibibio People

The Oduk (village group or sub- clan) was made up of a number of villages with stronger affinity. In most cases, these villages may have been far apart, but they had very strong ties. Oduk was the fifth division in the Ibibio political structure. Each clan (Ikpaisiong) may have consisted of two or more Oduk (sub clan). According to Udo geographical location was another factor in the formation

examples; in Nkari, the Enyong creek divided the clan into two, north and south, the Kwa river divided Iman into east and west e.t.c.¹⁰ .

Still examining the fifth political structure as Ession or Esien which means environment, referring to Ana environmental extent of a group of villages of one dilated and socio religious affinity, as in Ekpe and Ndem religious cult. Umoh – faith man may not be wrong, since Ibibio has numerous dialects within the one Ibibio language. For this study, the researcher will make use of the term oduk, which is more popular among the Ibibio people in order to be more consistent.

Udo holds that in the oldest village in each group was the parent of the group and, in most cases, the oldest Ntinya chief (Obong Oduk). In the parent village of the group was the head of the group.¹¹ The sub clan's head Obong Oduk) together with other villages within the sub clan constituted the ESOP Oduk (sub clan council or group council). In modern times called a town council, the main function of the sub-clan council includes the settlement of cases between member villages. Cases that the oduk {sub group council or sub clan council} could not resolve were referred to the ESOP Ikpaisong clan council.

Ikpaisong(Clan): A Political Division among the Ibibio People

Among the pre-colonial Ibibio, the Ikpaisong (clan) is the sixth political and administrative division and its court remains the apex traditional court of the land. Udo holds that the name Ikpaisong was modified over the years originally it was probably called akpkup Isong where Akpkup is typical, the Ibibio word means ‘all

embracing'. To the Ibibio ikpaisong means all embracing land. In fact, the entire land, where people of one parent live. Together and have one common Ndem (deity), one or more common totems and a common destiny.¹²

Udo and Ekong agree that Ibibio clans claimed common ancestries worshiped common deities organized defense against external aggressors and were mutually interdependent, acknowledging common political, social economic and religious codes of ethnics' 'putting it differently, Udo affirms 'clan is the culmination of all symbols and every symbol of authority represented here is practically autonomous.

At the head of each Ikpaisong is the traditional ruler, the Okuku or Obong ikpaisong¹³. Through the traditional institution of Okuku ship or Obong ship is practically the same throughout the Ibibio land with slight difference here and there, methods of installation, functions, status and powers of Mbong or Nkuku Ikpaisong, the Ibibio(clan heads) are generally the same.

Economic Life of the Ibibio People

Similar to other African states, the Ibibio pre-colonial economy was basically a subsistence economy. According to Udo, this economy depended to a large extent on land. He adds that, from time immemorial, the Ibibio have attached great importance to their land. They regard it as their "first mother". It is their mother earth, because the soil is their source of water- the river, sea, and ocean are so much part of their everyday life. Udo maintains that land has become

the very part of their everyday lives and of their communities hunting was part of their economic life. From the forest, men hunt and bring home the meat of the vast variety of wild animals that abound in them.¹⁴ There is no doubt that the main occupation of the Ibibio was farming and fishing. The Ibibio people's other forms of occupation during the pre-colonial era include other seasonal occupation such wood craving and weaving. Although civilization through western education has brought many changes in the modern Ibibio society and many Ibibio people today engage in all manner of professional careers to earn an income, yet due to the high level of unemployment and poverty, a good number of the Ibibio people in the rural area's engage in traditional Ibibio occupation mentioned above as their means of livelihood.

Essen say“ the Ibibio are a farming and fishing people, every year they fight to push back the ever advancing rain forest in order to cultivate their food crops of yams, maize, plantains, cassava and cocoyam.’ Udo holds that the main Ibibio food crop in pre-colonial days was yam (bia or udia), supplement with various species of cocoyam(ikpong or mkpong) and bulbil-bearing yam (edomo), plantain (ukom), banana (mboro), maize(Akpakpa or akpukpa). Three types of beans; nkoti, Nsama and Ibaba and vegetables. For example, flured pumplin (nkong/ikong ubong) other wild vegetable that were not planted but gathered from the bush, included, Editan, Afang, meme, utasi, ntoong, Nyama etc. Today most of all these wild species are planted in home garden. on the other hand all year

round, fishermen go round their numerous creeks, rivers and the open sea in their dugout canoes to harvest fish, crayfish, crabs, periwinkles and other seafood. Udo is not wrong when he asserts:

It is their soil and water so to speak, which bore their cash and food crops----, believe that without t their land they will be dead men, women and children, and would do nothings to profane the land, if this happens, they expatiate the sin by offering sacrifices.¹⁵

The main cash crop remains the palm fruits from which they derive palm oil and palm kernels.

Religious Life of the Ibibio People

The religious of black men, particularly in Africa south of the Sahara has been subjected to various levels of evaluation and criticism by the outside world. Many of the critics have criticized the faith of African, making light of the various religious objects and concepts that they found during exploration and political economics academic or missionary visits to the African continent.¹⁶

The traditional religion of the Ibibio has been described by writers who have studied it from religious philosophical or anthropological views. In his book African religious and philosophy Mbiti states: whenever the African is there is his religion: he carries it to the field, takes it to a beer party, to a funeral and other ceremonies and if he is educated, takes it to school or university, and if he is a politician he takes it to the political arena'. Turaki asserts; 'theologians and scholars have confirmed that generally Africans have a brief in the existence of a

supreme Being there are also concepts and belief about his nature, form, status, and attributes” he maintains that the African traditional knowledge of God has content valuable to our understanding of traditional belief in the supreme Being.¹⁷.

Like other Africans the Ibibio traditional religious and beliefs were based on the supreme deity (the Great Spirit), Abasi Ibom, the creator, Udoh affirms that the name “Abasi was already there before the Scottish missionary arrived. Esen affirms that the supreme God of the Ibibio was Abasi Enyong (God of the heaven), otherwise variously known as Abasi Ikpa Enyong (God of the sky) or Abasi Ibom (the great God) was distinctly recognized as the supreme being –beneficent in character- who is above every other spirit, good or evil. The Ibibio believed that Abasi (God) and lesser spirit (deities {mme ndem} controlled natural phenomena. As such offering of sacrifices and liberation was a normal form of ritual worship among the Ibibio and this ritual was usually performed by a traditional priest or a senior elder.

Udo argues that, although the Ibibio believes in minor deities (spirit called Mme Ndem) and in ancestors and that they build shrines for them, they believe above all, in the supreme God called Abasi Ibom. It is their belief in lesser gods and deities that qualifies the Ibibio traditional religious as polytheistic.

Belief in Ancestors

In the African context, Ancestors are highly valuable. Turaki asserts that the ancestors hold a place of prominence in the traditional society. If they are not

worshipped, they are at least highly revered. Essen argues: the Ibibio's believe that when the venerable patriarch of the family dies he is not dead but protect them and their interest against harm.¹⁸ It is a common belief among the Ibibio that even after death, the dead will still live in spirit among their descendants and continue with the protecting function of their entire family, much in the same way as when they were alive.

Belief in Reincarnation

Reincarnation was, and still is a strong belief among the Ibibio people. It is not only limited only to one's biological grand children or great grandchildren. It is believed that one can reincarnate to be born to sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles, aunts and other extended family. Far back in history, the Ibibio experimented this in their own traditional way, by cutting parts of the body of the dead as a mark to know which person reincarnated.

Belief in Witchcraft

According to Steyenin Turaki, witchcraft and sorcery refer to systems of belief centered on the idea that persons in the community will resort to means to bring harm to others through nefarious supernatural powers. Udo asserts 'All the Ibibio people up till today believe in the existence of witchcraft (ifok), they believe that a witch (ifot) is a spirit and more than ninety percent deaths are said to be caused by witches (ifot) and wizard (uben)¹⁹

Ibibio Socio-Cultural Life

The Ibibio are happy, cheerful people, warm and hospitable to strangers, proud of their homes and heritage, sentimentally attached to the tombs of their ancestors, but they reach out vigorously toward modernization through education.

Umoh Faithman asserts²⁰ in pre-colonial Ibibio social interactions and alliances were formed through four institutions namely: friendship, ally, grandparents/child relationship²¹. He maintained that these social relations united the Ibibio society, helped the people to avoid war and facilitated peace between the Ibibio and their neighbors.

Scholars believe that the Ibibio cultural folklore, riddles, songs, dances, masquerade and wrestling provided a platform for socio-cultural interactions, education and the creation among the Ibibio people. The age grade was another social institution apart from performing the vigilante security functions each age grade helped in the development of the social by sweeping the village, weeding and clearing village roads and surrounding of the stream and others by financing projects such as town halls through communal effort Udo. Other strong socio-cultural institutions were Ibibio secret societies which performed multi-various ranging from social, religious humanitarians, moral to economic, political and judicial exercised a great stabilizing influence on the Ibibio society Udo, prominent among the secret societies both Ekpe and Ekpo remained as vital agencies of law enforcement in pre-colonial Ibibio land.²¹ Social cultural

organization and groups were formed based on gender and age. In other words, men's social groups were separate from women in most cases.

Scholars have identified two main women's organization commonly found in most Ibibio communities. These include the Nka Iban Isong and Ebre clubs. In fact, all married women were expected to join the Ebre club which is both social and judicial functions. The social functions included the staging of plays when a new member joined the club and also during the funeral of a deceased member, among others. While the Nka Iban Isong is an exclusively women's society which is mid-way between freemasonry and a trade union. All objective was to safeguard women against the tyranny of men folk.

Nka Iban Isong

Iban Isong (women of the land or community women) was a strong women's pressure group in Ibibio society. Abasiatai holds that *Iban Isong* is an exclusively women's society which is mid-way between freemasonry and a trade union. Its objective was to safeguard women against the tyranny of the men folk. To put it differently, Okon affirms: "Iban Isong was a secret society for women." Udo argues: "The name *Iban Isong* is a shortened form of *Iban Ison Esit*, literally meaning hard-hearted women, strong willed women." This was because the *Iban Isong Esit* (hard-hearted women or strong will women) were stern in their judicial proceedings and they left no stone unturned until they had brought an offender to complete humiliation and sometimes to death. Okon contends that Udo's

interpretation of *Iban Isong*, to mean hard-hearted women, is an over-ambitious interpretation of the guild. He argues in support of the former view. To him, the emphasis is on land, or earth, a cliché for motherhood. It has to do with women's authority in view of their role in procreation and relationship to nature. It is sad to note how members of *Iban Isong* (women of the land) were grossly misunderstood in the Ibibio society. The researcher strongly argues that the *Iban Isong* were a group of bold Ibibio women, who used indigenous methods in the fight for justice, liberation and restoration of the Ibibio women folk's dignity in a male dominated world.

Apart from social and judicial functions, scholars agree that the guild (*Iban Isong*) also had economic, political and religious functions. But the social significance that concerns us here aims at building and sustaining good morals among the women folk as well as the men folk (Udo and Okon). If the right of an Ibibio woman was violated or her dignity abused, she resorted to the *Iban Isong* for justice, as their mode of justice was instant, total and devastating. Narrating how *Iban Isong* fight for the rights of the women folk, Udo says: Any man who abused a woman by talking about her sexual anatomy was deemed to have committed a grave crime against the *Iban Isong* Esit. The aggrieved woman usually took the case to the *Iban Isong* (Esit), who will fix a day on which it will try the culprit. At about 5 a.m. the women arrived the man's compound.

Ordered people in the compound to leave, prevented others from entering the compound. They made the culprit to sit in a central and conspicuous place, while all of them stripped and stood nude before him, forcing the man to look at them. Their faces and bodies painted black and they held objects made in the shape of a woman's uterus ... The women remained in the state of mourning throughout the day, while at the same time they rained curses upon the man. They called upon the supreme God of the sky (*AbasiIkpa onyong*), who had made women and endowed them with the sexuality which enabled both male and female to pass into this world, but which the culprit had disgraced, to kill the man, and not to give him any issue; they called upon the gods and goddesses (Ndem) to kill the man whenever he attempted sexual intercourse with any woman ... such a man would die soon after the visit by Iban Isong, if their demands were not met. It was in this way that the Ibibio women earned respect from their husbands as well as from other persons. From Udo's statement above, one could say that *Iban Isong* Ibibio were groups of women who stood up to fight for peace and justice for the weak and oppressed and, as such, they were seen as agents of social transformation in the Ibibio traditional society in their own way.

Pre Colonial Ibibio Marriage Institution

Marriage is contracted in every society of the world but its mode of contract varies from one society to the other. Among the Ibibio people, according to Ukpong, marriage is a religious, social and economic responsibility on the part of

every human being. It is a part of the rhythm of life which everyone must participate.” The institution is regarded as sacred and without which a family cannot be stated.

In the pre-colonial Ibibio therefore there are stages to the traditional marriage rite and each stages is very significant but before a maiden could go through this stage of traditional marriage rite there are some rituals which needed to be performed.



Two Decorated Mbopo Initiates Sitter in the Midst of Admirers

Seclusion Rituals

Among the pre-colonial Ibibio people, marriage, celebrations in the public with an open bridal parade was a social precinct reserved for girl who had gone through seclusion and who was deemed to be qualified by keeping their virginity before marriage.²² It is important for girls to pass through the rite of passage

before they are married publicly to their suitors. The MBOPO initiate was “closed in” that is secluded and attended to within certain defined space particularly to gain some forms of spiritual, corporeal, vocational, sexual and social development. Unlike several other women’s rituals of passage in some part of Africa where women or girls are secluded separately in a space detached from the family dwelling place, “Ufok Mbopo” the ritual space of seclusion was generally a room in the family house or a separate hut within the family compound which was converted temporarily for the purpose of seclusion ritual.

The room was normally sidled off and cordoned from unwarranted persons. Stranger and the men in the family, including the father were barred from accessing this place.²³ In this process of seclusion, a close arduous, observation attention and training were implemented by cultural matrons, former initiates themselves who were elderly women with close family ties or contracted for that purpose²⁴. At the end of the rite, the initiates were expected to metamorphose from an uninformed and in experienced young woman into an attractive and well-schooled Ibibio bride ready access womanhood, lavishly decorated with both temporary and permanent body modification. Hair dressing, body painting, and body modification are the main focus of body art. While the *Odung* type of body painting is used for event such as marriage, which has a long history in the pre-colonial Ibibio and those products helps their cultural expression in a convenient way.

Intentional fattening of young women is the seclusion hut another is the preparation for marriage. The purpose is to enhance the beauty of unmarried women and prepare her for married life. Once a girl has undergone this ritual, she is considered an Mbopo this term refers to the process of fattening a girl as well as the girl herself. A key aspect of this is the teaching of future bride the details of childcare, motherhood, how to keep a home, and how she is expected to behave after which she undergoes the stages of traditional marriage rites which are as follows;

The first stage is known as "Udiongo Ufok" which means 'to know the home'. During this stage, two or three people are expected to go with the groom to be, to know the lady's home and of course meet her parent. The bride's family is mandated by custom to cook and entertain the groom's family members like special guests. The groom's family on their part is not expected to visit without some gifts, for example; some drink {palm wine} to give to the family.

The next stage is the 'Nkong Udok' which means "knocking on the door" or introduction. At this stage, since the family of the groom had earlier come to know the home, they are officially coming to ask for the lady's hand in marriage. This time, more people from both families are expected to be present at the occasion when or if the lady gives her consent or accept to marry the man, the father of the lady or elders of her family will give marriage list to the elders of the groom family. The list is subject to bargaining by the two families. This stage is

also full of merriment at the bride's family usually provides enough to eat and drink.

The last stage is the 'Uso ro ndo mme edino nkp ndim ufok' which means traditional marriage ceremony, when most of the items on the marriage list have been bought by the groom, a date is usually agreed upon by both families when those things will be brought. This is usually few days to the main occasion and it is so done to save time or avoid delay on the main marriage day this presentation of items usually does not call for much witness or merriment. The traditional marriage day is always very eventful. A joyous day not only for the bride and groom but also the family, members and friends

Conclusion

Discussion in this chapter presents the cultural system of the pre-colonial people. In order to capture important aspects of the traditional Ibibio in their original context their political structure, economic, social and religious life, indicates that from time immemorial, the Ibibio people had a way of using their indigenous knowledge system to ensure well-being, harmonious communal relationships, peaceful co-existence, and the maintenance of law and order among member of their society and through seclusion rite before marriage was an avenue through which social order and decency was instituted in the society through the use of celebrative reward mechanism before marriage.

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CHAPTER FOUR
IMPORTANCE OF FATTENING ROOM (MBOPO) IN THE SOCIAL
LIFE OF THE PRE COLONIAL IBIBIO WOMEN

Introduction

In the traditional Africa society, morality was one of the guiding elements that engineered the social, political and economic spectrum of the people. Mbopo(fattening) as well as other traditional institution was used in achieving these goals. A very persuasive contemporary scholars and students of art history whose work. I find energizing and useful and have drawn on extensively in this study, have attempted an aesthetic analysis of Mbopo by looking at other components of the ritual than ‘fattening’. Based on their object/image analysis an history approach, they use photographs and other art images as a basic to their argument they concentrate more on analyzing the representation of objects and images connected to Mbopo as cultural motifs and the depiction of the initiate as ‘an icon of beauty and power’¹ But while they offer a very persuasive analysis of the Mbopo institution as it resonates with the Ibibio philosophy of beauty, they still frame the ritual in aesthetic terms, which arguably reinforces emphasis on the corporeal. While corporeal attention for the Mbopo initiate during seclusion {which includes corpulence ornamental decoration, cicatrization, tattooing, filling the use of local herbs, oils, dyes and chinks on the skin, as well as the performance of extravagant femininity through the plaiting of decorative and

elaborate hair styles was an important part of the seclusion rite, this does not represent the whole.²

In treating this chapter, an in-depth assessment of various activities of this institution was carried out. This chapter takes a glimpse into the seclusion space by analyzing the reason the historical texts, photographs, ethnographic data and reported information from former initiates as contained in a number of the written sources I use for this study. This is to ‘‘look into’’ and visualize the seclusion space ‘‘from the outside’’. This is in order to be able to analyze Mbopo ritual as an educational space where the expected bride was temporarily removed from the familiar persons and activities and secluded for the purpose of cultural education. This approach will help to clearly decipher those activities that took place within the seclusion space, and to define the Mbopo institution more as a learning and transformation space than as a site of bodily transformation and how it has help in shaping the social life of the pre-colonial Ibibio.

Fattening Room (Mbopo)



Fattening House Women

The preparation of young women for successful marriage, motherhood and socioeconomic survival in parts of southern Nigeria is preceded by an elaborate process loosely described as the fattening Room ceremony. Variations of this ceremony existed in present Akwa Ibom state among the Ibibio's, in cross river state among the Efiks, in river state among the Ogonis and Ikwerres and within other cultures mostly. Spread throughout the south in the pre-colonial era. Ibibio's refer to participants in this rite of passage as Mbopo, Efiks as Mbobi, Ogonis as Koo and Ikwerres as Mbede.

In Ogoni culture the ceremony could not last up to 3-5years and target female between the ages of 6-18. However for the Ibibio, case of study, involves

women in their pre martial years (tens to 20s) and lasts from about 1 -3 monthss³. During this period the women are confined to a secluded home designed for that purpose and are attended to by elderly matrons, some of whom may be relative of a participants or former initiates. They are not allowed to do strenuous work; are provided, elaborate, meals rich in starch, carbohydrates, vegetables and meats and are frequently massaged, bathed and rubbed with Shea butter and other local ointments in order to make their bodies smooth and shiny. In all the ladies are pampered by parents from wandering too far from fattening hut.

Beyond being spoiled the elderly woman also help the young women to improve on their overall domestic and interpersonal skills, which includes tracking, cooking, decorating the home, cloth wearing, hair plaiting and /or braiding as well as knowledge of certain crafts, because beauty constitutes a key aspects of the process, they are also taught to dress themselves flamboyantly ensures their attractiveness. Regarding their health and health of their future offspring, they receive instructions on how to achieve sexual fulfillment, how to adopt proper nutritional habits at the fetal and post birth phase, how to stimulate milk production for breastfeeding and how to identify herbal remedies for labor pain. They also receive training and/ or retraining on the moral values, custom, morals and taboos of their community.

The fattening Room is therefore a school of sorts where young women are educated on subjects that covers biology, psychology, sociology, culture home

management, cosmetology, fashion design and other skills enhancement. In some instances the ladies also learn new dance steps since the end of the ceremony often involves their performance of dances in what is typically referred to as the ‘outing ceremony’. This usually takes place on the streets. At this time the participants are showered with gifts from relatives, would be suitors, loved ones and well-wishers.

If there is anything fattening about this ceremony about this ceremony, it is the fact that the celebrants/initiates are enriched ‘fattened ’in the areas of physical beauty, good health, skills development, sexual satisfaction and r reinforced appreciation and understanding of the traditions of their society and of their society and of their fathers roles as wives, mothers and merchants. True, these young women are likely to gain some weight on account of the nature of the process, but in the end, because they are also quite active they do not emerge obese or indolently over weight.



Green, "Akenta bob in Wedding Dress" C. 1898

The above photograph of Akenta Bob (pic) a young Kalabari woman was supposedly taken during her marriage ceremony through nothing is mentioned about "Akenta Bob". It may be that she is was the daughter of one of the rich Kalabari merchant chiefs who had established themselves as active middle men and in business relations and century⁴. It is further suggested that this photograph may have been taken by Green after Akenta Bob might have completed all the stages of her seclusion ritual⁵.

Through the image is not specially a portrait of an Ibibio bride, the spatial and cultural proximity between the Kalabari people, a neighboring riverine community in the Niger Delta and Ibibio community of the Calabar River set along the same Niger Delta terrain, suggest close cultural similarities and affinities . I choose to draw from this photograph as a related semiotic image of an early Ibibio bride based on how the aesthetics, the composition of the supposed

bride and the decorative materials she is adorned with have resonated with my knowledge of the ritual. The image brings into view several aspects of the history of seclusion rites in southern Nigeria. It portrays how the Kalabari people and by extension the Ibibio people, celebrated marriage. It bears witness to the level of confidence with which such celebration imbued the new brides. It is reasonable with how in history people of the cross river Basin valued and revelled with nuptial seclusion Mbopo around the lake 19th and early part of the 20th centuries.

The subject of this photo represent is the kind of Ibibio bride who may have celebrated a public marriage after the seclusion rite. She seems to have been bountifully pampered and made ready for her nuptial engagement. The ‘‘Kalabari bride’’ looks confident and calm, exuding the mien of accomplished young woman. The face is young and robust. She possesses the figure of one who many have just been inducted through the seclusion rite. Her decorative and ornamental adornment and her corporal composition do not simply denote normal beautification, but announce her engagement as the after event of an important celebration of a female rite of passage; in this case marriage that comes after the seclusion rite.

She has a lavishly decorated coiffure and a wound wrapper which were consonant with Mbopo garb post seclusion and she is plump in her cheeks with a glowing skin and elaborately beaded from the hand down to her ankles.⁶ Her posture radiates the disposition of a well-tutored young woman who might have

gone through a kind of Mbopo seclusion successfully. Her portrait speaks of the wealth for her family or her suitor, the expertise of her cultural matrons and the vicissitudes of her development during the rite of passage to become a capable Ibibio bride.

A Spiritual Initiation: Water Goddess and Ancestors in Mbopo Ritual (1915)

What then were the basic features of preceding practices that went on the specific Mbopo bed character under the tutelage of cultural matrons across history particularly around the first and second quarters of the 20th century? First Mbopo ritual, the pre-nuptial seclusion of a marriageable young woman began with the assessment of whether the girl had attained puberty. In this regard in Ibibio social communities loosely pegged puberty at between 15 and 18years⁷ others stipulated some uncertainties and fluidity regarding age. This was dependent upon the peculiarity and distinctiveness of the community involved. But there was a general consensus. In the early period, for example in the 19th and 20th centuries, certain corporal criteria were used to ascertain if a girl had attained puberty and if she is ready for marriage. In 1915, when official birth records were hard to come by, Talbot asserts that 'the coming of new and full breast'. What was referred to as mbobi⁸ was one of the major consideration for a girl's pre-nuptial seclusion rite. This was expected to happen around the second quaker of the teenage years through to his early twenties, in the fig above, the initiates look like late teenagers, in keeping with Talbot's description.

Two dynamic factors played out before actual seclusion took place. In some instances, the girls were secluded when prospective suitors had indicated interest in marrying them. On the other hand girl could be secluded before an expected suitors indicates interest, Talbot assert that in case where the seclusion rite occurred before there was a registered interest of a suitor certain signs were displayed in public to simplify that seclusion rites where ongoing. For example, fish racks, palm leaves or a miniature bamboo bed were tied in the market square or at the cross roads as a sign to prospective suitors.⁹ this system may have changed by 1970s, and 1980s.

Talbot express identifies different rituals that preceded the actual admission of the initiate into the seclusion space. For some communities that lived around coastal regions, sacred streams or rivers were revered. Such pools and stream or rivers were said to be inhabited by some naiads (water goddess) who were believed to be responsible for the general wellbeing of the communities.¹⁰ Talbot asserts that before a young girl underwent the seclusion rite for the first time, they were laid down to the edge of the stream where prayers were offered to the 'naiad' for spiritual engagement with 'naiads' before seclusion.¹¹



A “Maiden” Immersed in Prayers by the Pool

Secondly Talbot also asserts that some communities, preceding sacrifices before seclusion were conducted at the center of the village where some very old tress were set aside and revered as being the rite and shrine inhabited by their guardians. (Seepic above), here sacrifice and prayers were made to divinities asking for help and guidance for the initiate, these streams and trees were believed to possess cleansing in vigo rating and fertilizing powers of benefit of the initiate. The expected new family she represents and the community at large.¹¹ Talbot captioned 'juju tree of the compound shown in the background' is used to illustrate the second ritual possibility, that which existed among Ibibio

communities in their attempts at appeasing and consecrating initiates before seclusion. However, the thatched building behind the tree does not like a living compound. It resembles a community hall of a kind that was always situated around such revered site even up till the present in some Ibibio communities.

A closer look at the photograph above points to the enduring importance that the Ibibio communities attached to indigenous around 1915. The sacredness of the pool and the points to the animistic characteristics of indigenous religion. The initiate is associated with deep serenity symbolized by the still water and the thick vegetation canopy surrounding the pool. The mirroring of the initiates shadow on the water surface resonates with the claim that those naiads and the souls of the ancestors who inhabited those pools were all seeing and all knowing the site of such revered pools were carefully chosen and managed, so that it could continuously evoke the aura of the enduring presence of these deified beings.¹² Talbot further asserts that the success of the seclusion was tied on the claim that the ritual was overseen and sanctioned by deities.¹³

The ancestors who were perceived as spiritual custodians and a source of succour for families were also invoked and revered during every important family function (including Mbopo) to ensure their protection.¹⁴ In the recent times, the Ibibio and other adjoining communities still maintain a 'strong belief in the ancestors (the living dead)' whom they believe are still alive in some invisible form in Obio Ekpo, the land of the spirits. Nan Ekong asserts that the Ibibio

believe that the ancestors are still accessible even though they are dead; hence the popular Ibibio proverb ‘Ekpo akpa enyin ikpaha utong(it is the dead man’s eye that die, not his ears)¹⁵. In recent times, there is a continuing practice of making prayers and offering libation using a local gin called ufofop or mmin efok in honour of the dead. This is carried out among some Ibibio communities during certain family function¹⁶.

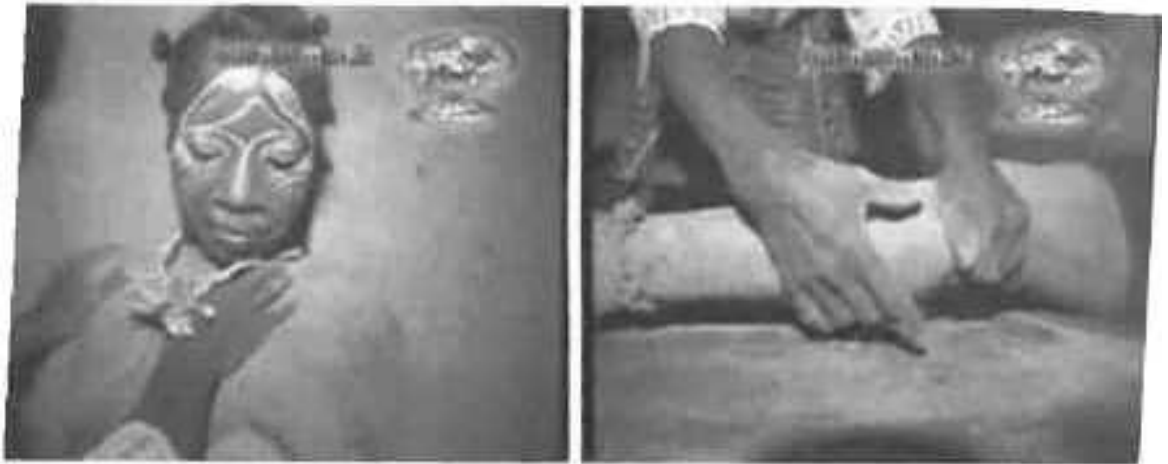
In some communities particularly among the Annang this spiritual process was repeated after the completion of the seclusion process, and just before the celebration of the final parade of the Mbopo initiates. In 2017 Godwin Obot, who interviewed his grandmother that a certain sacred day(Usen Ibed) and some significant ritual chalks) were used to consecrate and purify the initiates as well as to thank the deities and the ancestors for guiding, refreshing and beautifying the initiate over the process of the seclusion rite¹⁷.

This from the early part of the 20th century, Mbopo ritual had become one of the means of spiritualizing the imitates introducing and connecting them into the spiritual world view of the Ibibio. This was in connection with Ibibio religious beliefs which have endured. Before the coming of the Europeans and the introduction of Christianity Ibibio communities attributed almost every event of life, good or bad, to the working ways of the ancestors, the divinities that they worship in their communities and Ek Abasi (the mother God), who they believed was the final authority and the creator of the universe¹⁹.

Inside the Seclusion Chamber

After the sacrifice and the introduction of the initiate into seclusion, the activities that went on the seclusion need to be explained in details. The popular perception of Mbopo seclusion is about fattening as mirrored through the ‘‘fattening house women’’ image (fig 3.1). The fattening up process was just one of the activities the initiate went through in her seclusion while analyzing the fattening process, it is necessary to bear in mind that the fattening process was not predominantly centered on weight gain as a mark of beauty. Historically other social factors motivated fattening in 1915; Talbot asserts that Mbopo was thought necessary for the overall wellbeing of the initiates.²⁰ This idea prevailed among the people up to the 1950. John and Betty messenger’s ethnographic studies of the 1950 among the Annang affirms that fatness was seen as a means to promote health, longevity and successful childbearing.²¹ The idea of perceiving copulate as a mark of good health was still evident among the Ibibio up to the 1980s. Pamela Brink reported on the research she conducted in the 1980s, that for the Annang (and other Ibibio group) fattening was necessary because it created broader hips and larger birth canal so babies could be delivered more easily²². In a society where laborious farming activities were the bedrock of the subsistence economy and where women were active in farming, fattening was conceived as a way to protect the would-be bride. It was a kind of a pre-marital ‘bridal holiday’ for the expected bride, seen as a reward for upholding virtuous sexual chastity.²³

Having said the above, it is necessary to find out how the initiates were made to increase weight. The common assumption in most literature is that the initiates were force fed in order to become round. While feeding played an important role in the fattening, in the seclusion space, initiates were made to lie on a wooden bed mad with rounded bamboo or raffia branches without any bed covering. It was believed that the direct contact of the flesh an skin on the hard bamboo bed aided in massaging the flesh of the initiate. Thereby opening up the flesh for freshness and fatness. This practice had endured from the early decades of the 20th century. Talbot asserts that miniature bamboo bed and fish racks were hung up as a signpost to signify an ongoing seclusion rite in 1915.²⁴The bed signpost seclusion points to the use of a bamboo bed in the past. The matron and her attendants also massaged the initiates daily with a local chalk like substance called Ndom. Local oil and herbs were also used for massaging to accentuate fatness in certain parts of the body. Fatness around the hips the pelvis, the backside and the chest were the main target while the overall corpulence was considered as a sign of successful seclusion.²⁵



Picture of Young Mbopo Initiate Being Massage with White Chalk

The above photographs are taken from Imeh's *Daughter of Seclusion*. Imeh uses them among 88 photographs chosen to both illustrate and analyze his art history and aesthetically based analysis. His caption, 'Bassey a maiden of Efik Nkuho ritual, having her body massaged during her time in seclusion'' suggest that this illustrates how massaging of the initiate was perceived by the Ibibio as a process of softening, breaking up and remolding the initiate corporally. He uses the photograph to affirm the idea that corporal practices like hand massaging of the initiate during seclusion translated into an 'emotional, intellectual and spiritual reshaping and re-finishing until she {the initiate} emerges as the ideal'.²⁶

The photograph pointed to the carefully orchestrated attention the initiates received at the hands of traditional, matriarchs. The Ibibio seclusion matrons conceived of massaging as a complementary ritual to assist the flush in gaining weight.²⁷It also meant to help tone the flesh and to enhance a sound psychological

self-image during seclusion were also used in the process as a form of ‘softening breaking up and rebuilding’ the initiates to emerge as iconic woman.²⁸

The weight increase of Mbopo initiates in the course of seclusion enable fatigue the beauty of character, ethical formation and the creative ideas that the initiate acquired in her schooling bedroom. It would be unacceptable for the would-be groom, his family and the society at large if the secluded Mbopo did not exude the high moral standard, social etiquette and work prowess that she was expected to gather during her seclusion rite. Though great care and efforts were taken to ensure that the initiate was made fat, as represented by the fattening-up alone would not be to reflect not encapsulate such ethnical expectation without other complementary activities. These included beauty treatments, merited ethics and social education. Thus in addition to fattening, the initiates were practically taught the art of self-beautification by experienced matrons: self-beautification that would enhance their self-image, and at the same time would make them attractive to their husbands and wider community.

From the early 20th century skin care was considered as the first target in this beauty regime. Skin care was seen to be very important considering the harsh weather and environmental conditions of the tropical rainforest region where woman are exposed to the sun in the bush while farming. In 2012, J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan interviewed former Mbopo initiates: women who were septuagenarians and who might have gone through Mbopo ritual in the 1940s and

1950s, interviewees assert that the initiates learned about the different oils, dyes, chalks and herbs that are applied on the skin for effectiveness. Skin protection and a glowing result, they learned how to make a local soap called Atongkom Eyo with the husk of palm-nut and how to prepare a local oil called mmem(soft) a mixture of different herbs and oil in the right proportions which helps to soften the skin, as its name implies.²⁹ This art of skin decoration and beautification endured and continued in the Mbopo ritual, as reported in the fact houses documentary film and fattening room TV show. It is also evident from Imoh Imeh's ethnographic engagement with comfort ukpongetto of Ediene Atai village in 2006.³⁰

The hair was another area of physical attention during the Mbopo rite of seclusion. Hair has been theorized as a "bodily indicator of cultural self-identity and social status". In African history several African communities have their distinctive ways of self-representation and identity formulated through hair styling. Nsentip Ideme asserts that Ibibio women take pride in the ways their hair is represented. During the Mbopo seclusion rite, the initiates were practically schooled in how to weave different hairstyles and what these different styles symbolized. They practiced the performance of female beautification through the creation of decorative coiffures and elaborate hairstyles.³¹ Historically, among the Ibibio of southern Nigeria, young women weaved and plaited their hair distinctively to epitomize their identities and status. Hairstyle would signify

among other things, whether a woman was a virgin, single, married a widow, member of a particular woman's cult or a member of a chiefly family.

Hairstyling was also connected to concepts of spiritual power.³² In the early part of the 20th century hairstyle sometimes were used to reflect and imagine the identity of the Natads which the particular community revered. Decorative material used and the kind of hairstyle that the initiate wore revealed her spiritual background and what they believed. For instance, it is believed locally that mirrors and reflective material were worn by those whose deities or Ndem were naiads that dwelled in streams and rivers. Such reflective items were believed to represent the seemingly unlimited knowledge of the deities and the ostentation attached to the beauty true of such deities. This was particularly true in ritual among the Efiks, the Kalabari: bride belongs to a community that had an attachment to the reverence of water goddesses. This can be inferred through the elaborate use of mirrors and reflecting materials in her hair.



Pic. A

Pic. B

Udeme illustrates the different hairdos, customary in Mbopo ritual and analyze the meanings they invoke the terms of indigenous identities. He asserts that among the Ibibio, hairstyles epitomize aesthetic appeal and artistic rendition of skills of weaving with indigenously made hair extension materials.³³For the Mbopo initiates in contemporary context, hair styles sometimes emblemized particular forms of bodily representation. For example, there were hair-styles that were called mkpuk eba(new breast), eba nkaifere(full breast), Idet Ubot(hand weaving without facial extensions) Effion Inyang(crocodile) wobo(gather into one bunch) or Ibuot Ekong(the head of a warrior) while they express love and sexuality, they also mark the status of the bearers as well as the elaborate extravagance that Mbopo institution attached to hairstyles.

The photographs point to the dynamisms and diversities of practice that accompanied Mbopo among the different Ibibio communities and along the different river basin. The photograph particularly reveal how written a patriarchal Ibibio society, attention was paid to birth status and women were treated differently depending on their position either as the first born daughter in a family, and so on. Greater respect and special treatment was attached to Adiaghawo, the first born daughter in a family. Specific facial motifs, beads and attires were used to decorate Adiaghawo during her outing ceremong.³⁴parents were expected to

organize more elaborate festivals in favour of their first daughters. Their suitors were also expected to pay more in terms of dowry.

Cicatrization, tattooing and skin decoration with chalks, dye and special herbs were also prominent bodily practices associated with the ritual. Though the practice of scarification was not particularly popular among the Ibibio. It filtered into some Ibibio communities through their Igbo neighbors. Jeffrey asserts that in the 1930s in communities where clitoridectomy was performed in the first part of the seclusion period, scarification came immediately after circumcision this was to allow the skin in scission to heal along with the cut on the clitoris as particular procedures were observed during circumcision to enhance effective and quick healing of the scars. Circumcision wounds were treated with herbals concoctions. Unlike other parts of Nigeria where elaborate facial scarification was seen as part of physical beautification in history. The Ibibio preferred strategically placed dotted or pinched scars on both cheeks or by the side of the eye, which are referred to as *ntoi uyai* (beautiful dots), which came along with elaborate skin decoration with design made with *ndom* and *odung* (local dyes and chalks), signifying birth status through particular motifs. Skin decoration and inscriptions, a practice that endured through the century were not permanent tattoos, but temporary skin inscription with local dyes. They were consistently inscribed and later washed off during the course of seclusion. It was believed to contribute to enhancing the overall beauty and softness of the skin. The cycle continued while

in seclusion and was repeated during pregnancy and during other female ceremonies.³⁵



Skin Decoration and Temporary Tattoos with Dyes and Herbs Apply by a Matron

The above photograph above was taken by Jill Salmon in 1970 is analyzed by Imeh in highlighting the initiates of the relationship between the initiates and the cultural matron with the images he further affirms that tattooing and body painting of the Mbopo initiate resonate well with transition from an innocent nka ifere, a young girl, to a mature young woman. Ready and able to assume womanhood.³⁶ These bodies painting were temporary and needed to be washed away at intervals

Female Circumcision/Clitoridectomy



A Genital Mutilation of a Baby Girl

Female circumcision or Clitoridectomy was a common component of the Mbopo ritual. Talbot's ethnography mention Clitoridectomy being practiced among Ibibio people in 1914. Across the cross river Basin, there were difference practices that defined Mbopo initiation. But corporal corpulence characters training and female circumcision seem to be the unifying factors that defined the seclusion rites across the region. However, Jeffreys assert that clitoridectomy was not practiced among all Ibibio communities in the 1920s. For those who practiced it, he continues the operation could either be performed at childhood or sometimes after puberty when the girl is considered nubile, either at the beginning or towards the end of her seclusion rite. The timing for the operation was very important and mutilation of the clitoris was shortly after menstruation for effective management of the scar.³⁷This supposedly to ensure the healing of the scar before the beginning of the next menstruation cycle In the 1980s indigenous informants told Brink that scarring from such a wound could hardly be seen once it had healed.³⁸

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines circumcision as female Genital mutilation/cut (FGM/C). It is further defined as ‘‘all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons. It further classifies FGM/C into four broad categories namely;

Partial or Total Removal of the Clitoris and / or the Prepuce

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora. Narrowing of the vaginal orifice by cutting and bringing together the labia minora and the labia majora to create a type of seal, with or without excision of the clitoris. All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example, pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization. The Ibibio clitoridectomy can be described within the first category of the WHO classification.³⁹

The Ibibio believed that female circumcision the partial cutting off the Eyen itit (child of vaginal the language they used in describing the clitoris) had fertility significance and could aid child bearing. It was believed that clitoridectomy had a social value allowing for the survival of a clan through checking promiscuity. It was also perceived as a symbolic bodily inscription for the celebrated virgin girl- ‘the sign of a blameless maidenhood.⁴⁰ This idea was encapsulated in the language used in describing the operations. The operation knife was called Udiong, which means: to repair to decorate or to make beautiful only certified virgins were

allowed to partake in Mbopo ritual and clitoridectomy was seen as a stamp that decorated such virtues through the operation was highly secretive and the scar was not meant to be flaunted for public display. Its social relevance was embodied in the experience of Mbopo ritual itself. Those who flouted the social order of sexual fidelity through premarital sex were exempted from participating in Mbopo ritual as well as not being circumcised. In fact, Jeffrey claims that in the 1920s such delinquents were stigmatized through folklore and ribald songs, and given derogatory names like erut (to draw) or asangha ayan(walk long distance). Uncircumcised women were derogated because they were considered to be promiscuous and loose, women who walked long distance in search of men to satisfy their sexual craving⁴¹.

Importance of the Fattening Room in the Socio Life of the Pre-Colonial Ibibio Women

The Mbopo initiates were expected to learn special values and skills while in seclusion. Those skills and values were to enhance her effectiveness as wife and mother empower her to bring up her children, enhance her economic engagements and at the same time, enable her to be able to socialize with the rest of the community efficiently. While many forms of learning went on in this educational bed chamber, a few important aspects are worth probing here. These are practices that on my reading had endures from the first quarter of the 20th century. These are among the woman's mysteries: that Dorothy Talbot and Jeffrey's encountered

in the 1910s and 1920s. The anthropologist John messenger documented these aspects (particularly on sexuality) more fully in the 1950s. As a wife to be, the initiates were intentionally taught about sex, sexual mannerism including how to speak peaceably and alluringly, how to be "romantic" in order to excite and please their husband's sexually, and so on. The idea if sexual education and techniques" being transmitted to the initiates within the seclusion chamber was entrenched in the belief and claim that women were the repository of sexual knowledge. They were expected to know much about sex in order to pass the knowledge to their husbands.

Within the seclusion bed chamber initiates were also told how to manage the outcome of pregnancy before and after conception. through there were professional midwives called abia uman, the seclusion rite offered the initiate some basic knowledge on how to manage pregnancy and childbirth, messenger, Brink, Imeh and Akpapan all highlight the fact that the Mbopo ritual prepared initiate for fertility, conception, delivery and successful suckling of their babies.⁴²While the Ibibio believed that an ample female figure was necessary for fertility and eventual suckling of their offspring, the Mbopo initiate was also taught the necessary herbs that could reduce labor pain and that would induce milk secretion for lactation.

The Ibibio attached great importance to fertility and still do so. Today efforts are made to have children and there is severe judgment, even ostracization of the

barren. In fact, in the past, a certain form of seclusion rite known as nwo-nwo was prescribed as an attempt to cure a married woman diagnosed with infertility. The Mbopo rite then offered the expected bride a site for sex education and fertility induction before marriage.

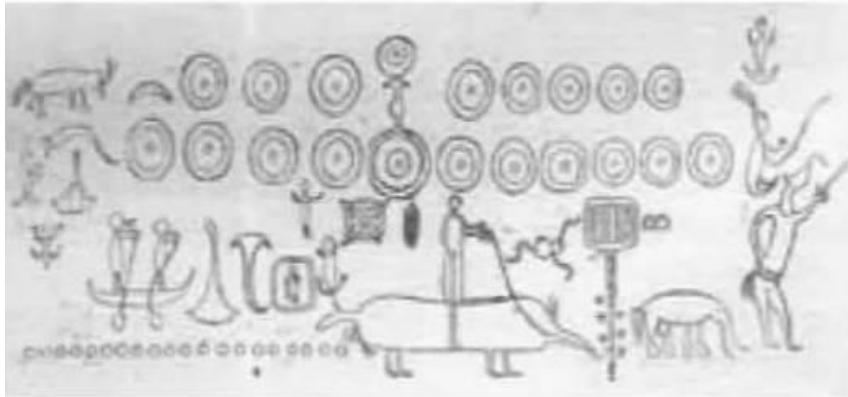
Nutrition is a central aspects of this ritual of learning to be an Ibibio wife. In her study of food among southern African cultures, Audrey Richards began by asserting that “Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex. It determines the nature of the social groupings and the form their activities take. Her observation is equally applicable to West African societies. The Ibibio attach great importance to what they eat and how it is being cooked. The initiate were given some culinary lessons by an experienced elderly woman. The lessons were learned in two ways. While they had the privilege to feast daily on sumptuous and delicious meals like ekpang nkukwo, afia afere ebot etc. Which is rich in starch and vegetables, seafood and animal protein. They were also taught the technicalities of preparing them. Yet for the Ibibio, food nutrition and sex are interlinked. They believe that the road to the heart of a man is the mouth, thus the saying, Awonman ano afere ibok, inwanake anwan ebe: a woman that can cook well does not strive own her spouse.

Invariably, when a woman is endowed with excellent cooking ability she was thought to able to keep her husband from possible infidelity without a struggle. She could secure her marriage with her cooking skills as she would receive

complimentary appraisals and support from her inlaws.⁴³ Mbopo seclusion therefore afforded the initiates the space to learn specific types of culinary preparations in order to be very competent in cooking delicious and healthy food.

The seclusion ritual helped the initiates to learn some vocations that can be perfected within training and the type of crafts they learned were culturally specific depending on the communities to which they belonged. For example, some groups specialized in basket weaving, clay wall and floor painting; others were skilled in making raffia mats, cloths and roofing rafts etc. The Ibibio specialized in comb making, embroidery and how to make symbolic cloth and Mbufari.

Others forms of cultural education and literacy went on within the seclusion chamber, initiates received lessons in folk shore, folksongs and stories that carry strands of history moral lessons and cultural literacy Nsibidi, a highly secretive hieroglyphic form of writing specific to southeast Nigeria was particularly popular with powerful men's societies like ekpe, ngbe and ekpa men's societies also resonated with Mbopo ritual. According to Imeh Mbopo in Nsibidi from experienced elderly women.⁴⁴



Nsibidi Wall Drawing by Mbopo Initiates

Mbopo initiates could document the activities and period of their journey in seclusion through murals and the writing of signs. The various images in the mural appear as symbols of the society to which the initiate belonged. The men riding on boat on the left hand side of the drawing, the different kinds of animals and the beast of burden in a cultural position could denote a complex economy based on fishing, farming, hunting and pastoralism where the initiate came from. The images might also point to the different kinds of meats and fish that garnished the initiate meals, with reference to a society that was also given to hunting a lot of game within the Ibibio tropical rain forest. The three human images can be said to represent the different kinds of men's masquerade cults. Like ekpo, ekpe and ekong who are responsible for maintaining social order in the society.

The triangular shaped images and the guitar type symbol (central right) might be reference to musical instrument in Ibibio land. We can discern the nkruk ubok, the hand gong, and the ikon etto, the xylophone both of which were

instrumental in producing sonorous music for the initiate during her outing ceremony. Akpapan and Akpapan have shown how music was utilized as a form of learning entertainment and transmission of moral values to the initiates during seclusion.⁴⁵ Practical lessons on dance and songs were also rehearsed in general, the mural fuses pictorial images to record the diverse experiences of the initiates in the seclusion and the socio cultural features of the society where she belonged at that time.

Conclusion

The popular "fattening room" appellation limits our understanding of Mbopo while attention was given to corpulence, for the purpose of beauty and the ease of carrying and suckling their young ones, care was given to other forms of physical wellness and prettification. While in seclusion initiates received treatments and training on skin and hair enhancing skills. They were also taught practical skills in different patterns of extravagant ornamental decoration. Beads, reflective materials like mirror set., locally dyed ribbons, locally made hair attachments, local chinks and cam wood dyes and different kinds of oils like palm oil and Shea butter etc. were utilized for corporeal care and enhancement for the Mbopo initiates.

The Mbopo seclusion rite was an avenue through which social order and decency was instituted in the society through the use of celebrative reward mechanism before marriage. Nubile girls, who attained a certain level of maturity,

were intentionally secluded, cosseted and at the same time schooled on the very important components of the Ibibio sociocultural dynamics as members of the community. Apart from corpulence and other forms of corporeal beautification, initiates were also schooled in important aspects of sociocultural, sexual and health education, particularly on how they could manage themselves before and during pregnancy they were taught to learn the knowledge of herbs that could enhance easy delivery of their babies and other local remedies that were necessary to induce milk to suck their young ones.

Before the seclusion rite other preparatory measures were observed. Initiates had to be checked by designated matrons to certify that they were virgins and to ascertain their maturity for the ritual. Furthermore, initiates were spiritually consecrated to their deities and ancestors through rituals and intercessory libations performed around pools, stream or under older trees which a particular community revered as their site of spiritual affinities. They needed the support and blessings of these deities and ancestors for a successful ritual. A successfully concluded Mbopo ritual was perceived as an indicator for well-being of the new family, and pointed to a good and productive farming season ahead.

There were of course significant changes in emphasis regarding these different aspects of the Mbopo ritual. The early ethnographic from the 1910 and 1920s suggest that the secretive and spiritual emphasis was very strong in a period when colonial agents and missionaries were documenting and challenging

indigenous cultural practices. In the 1950s and 1980s professional anthropological studies (messenger and Brink respectively) point to a strong degree of diverse bodily and social component of Mbopo. But the revolutionary break came in the mid 1990 with the feminist critique against clitoridectomy a practice claimed to dehumanize and demean women. The global and local campaigners including a highly disturbing documentary in 1995, against what was new termed "female Genital mutilation/cut" had direct legal consequences Nigeria was identified as the most serious offenders in relation to what were seen as patriarchal and health-damaging "inflation" Between 1999 and 2015, eight state government (including cross River state, home region of the Efik and many Ibibio) and the federal government established laws that outlawed and criminalized the practice of female circumcision (FGM/C) in Nigeria.

Endnotes

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2. P. Brink, *The Fattening Room Among the Annang of Nigeria*, 2012.
3. Calabar fattening Room, Nigeria Curiosity-19 Jul.2007. web, 8, Apr.2013
4. M. Anderson and L. Aronson,, ‘Jonathan A. Green, An African Photographer’, 39, 43 for a Detailed Historical Analysis of the Creative effects of the European Trans-Atlantic Trade with the State of the Niger Delta. See,
5. E.A. Lagoa, Long Distant Trade and States in the Niger Delta’, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 11, No.3, 1970, pp.319-329

6. M. Anderson and L. Aronson, Journal, Jonathan A. Green: An African photographer". 43
7. A detailed analysis of the significance of beads and other decorative materials used in the mbopo seclusion rite
8. J. Akpapan and M. Akapan ,”Mbopo Institution and Music”, p.49
9. D.A. Talbot, *Woman’s Mysteries of a Primitive People*, p.76.
10. *Ibid.*, p.82
11. Essien, “The Sociological Implication of the World-View of Annany People: An Advocacy for Paradigm Shift”, *Journal for Emerging trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies, (JETERAPS)*, Vol.1 No. 11,31
12. D.A, Talbot, *Woman Mysteries of a Primitive People*,p.80
13. Essien, “The Sociological Implication of the World-View of Annany People”,p.76
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16. I.Ekong, “The Ibibio Concept of Peace and its Implications for Presiding: A Practical Theological Study Within the Akwa Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria” (PhD Dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2014), p.76.
17. *Ibid.*, p.76
18. G.Obot,The Concept of Mbopo in Annang Land” <http://www.ibomtourism.org/2017/04/>, the concept of mbopo in Annang land. Html, access on 8 June 2018.
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20. D.A, Talbot, *Woman Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76
21. *Ibid.*, p.76

22. J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in folklore", p.36
23. P. Brink, 'Fertility and Fat, p.77
24. I. Imeh, Daughter of Seclusion, p.3.
25. D.A. Talbot, *Woman Mysteries of a Primitive People*, p.82
26. I. Imeh, Daughter of Seclusion, p.3.
27. *Ibid.*, p.131
28. *Ibid.*,p.131
29. *Ibid.*,p.131
30. J, Akpapan and M. Akapan ,"mbopo institution and music", p.51.
31. I. Imeh Daughter of Seclusion, p.26
32. N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", p.45
33. I .imeh Daughter of Seclusion, p.201
34. N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", p.4
35. *Ibid.*,p.2
36. *Ibid.*, p.3
37. I. Imeh Daughter of Seclusion, p.75
38. P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria" p. 139.
39. M. Jeffreys, "the Nyama society of the Ibibio women", p.16
40. P. Brink, "the fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria", p.139
41. M. Jeffreys, "the Nyama society of the Ibibio women", p.16
42. *Ibid.*, p.16
43. *Ibid.*, p.16.

44. F. Abaraonye, “Gender Relations in Ibibio Traditional Organization”, pp.205-222
45. P. Brink, “The Fattening Room Among the Annang of Nigeria”, pp.139
46. For its Role in a Diaspora Ibibio /Efik Community, see N.Udo, ‘Imagining Home and Identity’, pp.47-63
47. I .Imeh, Daughter of Seclusion, p.75
48. J. Akpapan and M. Akapan , “Mbopo Institution and music”, p.51.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This work distinctively and firmly looks extensively into the aspect of the fattening room rituals which contributed significantly in influencing the lives of youth’s most especially young girls of marriage age and by checking the moral

laxity and decadence in the society so that male suitors could marry a wife who was well cultured and good mannered.

Furthermore, analysis the background information on the Ibibio people of Nigeria by examining their origin, migration and settlement and how they come about being the Nigeria fourth largest ethnic nationality who inhabit the Akwa Ibom state in the south-south geo-political zone of Nigeria. And I went further by providing historical analysis of their tradition of origin or rather, the cultural system of the Ibibio people, giving the definition of culture as the way of life of a people and can only be passed down from one generation to the other. This further pre supposes the fact that there can be no people without a culture and this culture could also be seen as embodiment of different system which can be classified as political system, economic system, religion and social system. I also elaborate on their marriage institution which brought about the importance of fattening room to the pre-colonial Ibibio women because there seems to be a link between them as fattening room to the pre-colonial Ibibio women is seen as a bridge to marriage, whereby a girl of marriageable age has to go through the importance and basic of marriage.

The aspect of the fattening room rituals which is also known as Mbopo as related to the Ibibio people, reinforces my interest in the conceptualizing and analysing the connection between the aesthetics of the body and other extra-corporeal activities embodied in African culture practices. In this sense, I began

by reflecting on the ethnographic frame work of the 1910s when Mbopo still had some sense of secrecy and spiritual mystery, a degree of vibrancy. This early ethnographic frame work is epitomized by Dorothy Talbot's richly illustrated study of 1914. But already by the 1920's, when Mervyn Jeffery's served as a colonial official in Ibibio land, he reported on a ritual undergoing change. The missionaries and their African converts all too often commissioned Mbopo as backward, barbaric, superstitious practice. The professional anthropological studies and field works from the 1930's to the 1950's uncover cultural changes but also deepening cultural conflicts. There was also increasingly build up tension on the ritual by modern forces, not only the outside missionaries but also of indigenous agents. A new generation of Christianised youths, and ritual. They challenged indigenous elders who wanted to maintain the status quo.

During the 1960's, however, there was a more radical rapture with a complete cutting through the spirit of the ritual. Between 1967 and 1970, Mbopo was physically difficult to perform because of the environmental devastation, during the war. With little reprieve, thus was followed by the feminist critique of the 1980's and 1990's, symbolized by the visually driven global and national campaigns to uproot the practice of clitoridectomy as well as Mbopo ritual with which it was associated.

There is a symbolic moment in 1995 that represents a radical critique of the fundamental elements of Mbopo from which it could never recover. The Sister

Help initiative, especially with the mass publication through the “uncut” video and political campaigns mobilized against the practice of female circumcision set Mbopo as ethically unsustainable. Clitoridectomy as much more fundamental defined as “female mutilation/cut”. The Mbopo ritual came to be seen as morally tainted. The outcome was federal and state legislations between 1999 and 2015 which totally outlawed all forms of female genital mutilation. The moment redefined the way in which people perceived the ritual which has not been able to recover in any authentic traditional form. A crop aspect of the ritual clitoridectomy, contaminated the whole concept of Mbopo and left the long-standing ritual facing cultural restriction.

However, the fattening room or Mbopo institution of the Ibibio people of southern Nigeria still received sporadic and uneven scholarly attention. Whether colonial, foreign, or indigenous, scholars have approached the institution from different discipline with different theoretical framings mainly those of anthropology and art history.

The intent of this research is to analyse the wider context of the recent Africanist literature which tries to reflect on the practice of Mbopo as a complex and culturally rich ritual. The researcher drew inspiration in particular from Imeh’s stimulating recent study where Mbopo seclusion is conceptualized as “performative demonstration at love and care (and character) through the public display at opulence” and to employ the resurrection and modernization of Mbopo

institution which in the past is an Ibibio cultural heritage of great significance. It is significant in that the institution becomes the rally point through which social stability is anchored, and also defined marriage among the Ibibio societies. In this institution, beauty is not just attached to facial look rather; beauty is reflected in one's character in relation to morals, orderliness, neatness and productivity which informed the reason for Mbopo institution.

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