

Mbopo Initiation Rite in Ibibio: Ibibio Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. In Ibibio pre-colonial time, Mbopo culture was found to be practiced in every family, it was a pride of every young maiden then to be initiated in this cultural institution, without which the person will not be regarded in the society. Mbopo institution was highly rated and esteemed in Ibibio pre-colonial era. The aesthetic aspect of the Mbopo was the fundamental principles found in Mbopo culture. This paper investigates reasons for the sudden negligence this cultural heritage in some of the Ibibio communities which was a pride to the people, in respect to checking the moral behaviour of young girls then. This paper shall equally examine the concept of Mbopo initiation, mode of feeding, fattening preparation and ceremonial outing of Mbopo in Ibibio land. This work shall adopt analytical method in tackling the Mbopo initiation rite. Although the practice has some ill effect, this study recommends that good values should be upheld for the continuity of Ibibio cultural heritage.

Keywords: Mbopo, Rite, Ibibio, Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

The African traditional society is anchored on the facts that institutions, beliefs, social order, norms and several practices, which are of truth, must of necessity be given foundational rites of passage. This empowerment is usually through visual interpretation, which may reflect in several forms of art ranging from dance, music, folklore most often the interpretations 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.

Among the Ibibios, typical African settings were not in any way short of this prodigious admiration in the search for a pleasant society that would systematize, pride and prestige. In responding to the need for such a visual interpretation, various institutions meant to serve and salvage the numerous socio-political and economic needs and problems of the people were established. Among these are “*Ekpe*”, “*Ebre*”, “*Ekong*”, and *Mbopo* etc. Mbopo is one of such rare cultures the Ibibio people institutionalized solely for the reason of inculcating social order, chastity and oral values as a way of life of maidens. In this attempt to give a clear picture of Mbopo institution, Umotuk (1995), wrote “Mbopo is an Ibibio customary way of preparing a young girl for her future role as a woman. This customary way manifest itself through the institution of Mbopo”, from the clarification given above, it is apparent that Mbopo institution establishes women of dignity and respect whose morality permeates through the fabric of society and forms the bedrock of a sustained marital life, full of honour and respectability. This work adopts an analytical method in ascertaining Mbopo initiation rite in Ibibio, which is the Ibibio cultural heritage. Analytical method will help to critically analysed the process of Mbopo and challenge the modern girl child on morality which is absent in today’s society.

2. Mbopo Morphology

Mbopo or Nkoho institution is a conglomeration of several structures and forms, the structure evolving from stage to stage are brought together harmoniously to demonstrate a common strength, beauty inculcate in the young girl, the attributes and responsibilities of womanhood that are ideal to the

norms of social and moral behaviour which are jealously, regarded as well as acceptable to the society.

The institution is segmented into several forms, ranging from initiation rites, institutional education in morals, skills and home craft lessons, body care and house wifery, music and dance entertainment and ceremonial outing and the kinetic invisible and audible tale bearer (masquerade). Music, dance and entertainment and ceremonial outing and kinetic invisible and audible tale-bearer are those veritable forms of Mbopo institution that display some very high level of aesthetic appellation and grandeur. The hairstyles are especially designed to reflect the coming of age in Ibibio-land, virginity is often regard as a mark depicting beauty and of character.

The hairstyle is an epitome of excellent achievement of artistic weaving with indigenous hair attachment. Hairstyle ranges from *Mkpuk Eba, the Mkpum or Eba-Nkaiferi, Ibuot-Ekong, Fiom Inyams Mmonmmon (back view), Mmon-mmon (front-view), Ayo and Iwombo and Idet Ubok, utom Eku Eteine, Otine Iso Inang-Ofri Etine*. The hairstyles viewed as a whole are very advanced and sophisticated; they seek to speak the aesthetical renditions of skill and artistry. According to Okon (1985), the hairstyle and make up can be grouped as standard and romantic in appeal and approach. Body adornment/decoration is regarded as a very important aspect of fashion and wear in Mbopo institution. It is most often classified into two groupings: the temporary adornment and the permanent adornment. The first one is the decorating of the skin, feet, nails and hands.

The second is the practice of modification of the body part so as to enhance beauty, such as body marks and tattooing, fattening, circumcision and clitoridectomy and also the removal of teeth to create an opening in the dentation. The Mbopo institution made use of both the temporary and permanent type of body decoration and the practice of painting their body with “*Odung*” is very common among the Mbopo. The painting applied directly on the skin with the aid “*Okpo Ayang*” or “*ndukpat*” (broomstick, buck of a bamboo stick respectively). This type of body painting is called and classified as *Okukin* or *Odung* as it is a cherished body painting by the women and for Mbopo rituals. The *Okukin* though it is grouped among the temporary body decoration, has the staining ability to be retained on the skin for upward of three weeks or a month. This body decoration simply defined the aesthetical sense of the decorator and the people atlarge. The use of assorted beads, worn round the neck and the waist

complement the body beautified with *Odung, Okukin Ndom* and *Iduot* to ginger admiration and also inspire the maiden, to be proud and overflow with air of achievement and satisfaction.

3. The Origin Surrounding Mbopo

Historically, it is very difficult to trace the origin of Mbopo. The myth surrounding its evolvement attests to the fact that probably Mbopo institution maybe as old as Ibibio society. In his finding on the origin of “*Nsibidi*” Ubom (1987), suggestively group the Ekoi, Ibibio and Cross River Igbo scripts writing with that of “*Akwansi*” stone figures. Interesting, it is worthy to note that Mbopo institution is also reflected with notation of “*Nsibidi*” symbols. These notations or reflection of “*Nsibidi*” symbols in Mbopo language of communication may possibly induce several schools of thought on how and what led to this involvement.

The available ethnological findings on Ibibio cultural institution are not conclusive on the origin of Mbopotradition. Keith Nicklin (1981), in his ethnographic field work on the Ibibio pottery production conducted from 1971-1978 also observed the need for interest on Ibibio studies about whom relatively little research has been done.

According to him “since the monographs of Talbot (1915), and R.A Talbot (1923), in view of the patchy nature of literature-historical studies of Southern Nigeria tended virtually to ignore the Ibibio”. Nicklin’s findings are of a truth as the facts remains that a lot are still required by scholars to unearth the mysteries of Ibibio institutions. Ibibio society as an embodiment of the larger African society is suffering from the same dilemma that Africa faces today. Lovemore (2005), observed that the dilemma that Africa faces today is that it has been a continent with no tangible history and also in the words of late Steve Bainto Biko “A people without a positive history is like a car without an engine”. It is through a corrected version of Ibibio history that Ibibio can obtain the inspirational references, that will instill confidence in the harnessing and amassing the vigor needed in reaffirming, re-constructing and resurrecting the rich Ibibio cultural heritage that has been distorted, stolen or pushed aside during the nightmare years of slavery and colonialism.

In attempt to proffer a solution, Udo Ema (1978), suggests that “as the march toward African renaissance goes on, there is need for proper documentation of the divers strand of arts, music, dance, sculpturing, crafts and institution that identify

the Africa traditional personality”. He also called for the need of creating a reservoir of information that will facilitate proper understanding and appreciation of African’s cultural past. In the words of Ogbechie and Oyeoku (1991). “Creativity involve an ability to extract order out of the chaos, form out of the none form and thus make meaning out of the variegated level of experience... ability to control the energies inherent in the act of itself which enable the required transmutation to take place”.

An exploration into Mbopo institution can be classified as timely, especially now that in all parts of the black world, particularly in today’s African continent, cultural revival activities is blowing like a breath of refreshing air across the world. The burst of cultural revival and the eagerness with which it is being perused have been unprecedented, from the hamlet to the village, from national arenas to international theatres, the black man is thrusting open the recesses of his glorious cultural traditional past.

4. Mbopo Practice and Functions

Uford (1986), in agreement with Ekwere’s finding remarks that those women in Ibibio traditional culture who are not circumcised are called “*Edu*” that is the they are classified as infamous and infidels and above all, misfit for the society.

Clitoridectomy is practiced severally in some part of the world, it is not only in Africa, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Human Rights Information Pack (HIP) are currently organizing several campaigns and research on the adverse effect of female genital mutilation (FGM) and male neonatal circumcision (MNC). Currently, some exponent of the practices in several other countries supports the continuity of the practice. Njeri (2005), observed “Circumcision makes women clean, promotes virginity and chastity and guards young girls from sexual frustration by deadening their sexual practice”. According to Amnesty International (2004), in its campaign to eradicate violence against women, it was observed that the available data on the short and long-term medical effect on FGM could not be reliably estimated. But all the same WHO has instructed countries where FGM and MNC are in practiced to make laws that will put a stop or discourage the continuity of the practice. For the Ibibio, Ekong (1983), while writing on the sociology of the Ibibio, observed that September was most generally accepted as the month or period prospective brides (maiden) went into the Mbopo fattening room for seclusion. Usually the “Annang” speaking Ibibio normally refers to the month as “Anantia”. The

maidens maybe kept in the fattening room for three months or may be extended to nearly three years of seclusion.

Jeffery’s (1950), work provided a clue on the time of circumcision (Clitoridectomy), who does it and how it is done. He observed that, usually, it is done toward the end of the Mbopo seclusion rather than at the beginning by a member of a certain society namely *Njama* or *Ndam* society. Okon (1985), explained further the purpose of Mbopo institution to include other functions other than circumcision and fattening. He emphasizes the fact that Mbopo serves other purpose in the preservation of social and moral rectitude among the girl-child. It provides facilities for relaxation, a system of formal education, which trained the brides in childcare, mother craft and domestic science and in the traditional norms and etiquettes.

5. Mbopo Initiate

Mbopo initiate is a young girl who is put in the house of seclusion for fattening, which involves preparing the girl for marriage and her future life under native laws and customs. Before a girl is fattened, it means she has come of age (puberty). It was a rule that a girl must be fattened before marriage. The fattening period lasted for three to six months depending on the wealth of the parents. The girl continues to stay with her parents, she was not to do any domestic work because her main duty was to eat, wakeup and eat. If the girl is betrothed, the girl’s would-be husband with his friends has to build a fence called “Atang Mbopo” behind the mother’s in-law’s yard to seclude the fattening section called “Etuk Mbopo”. The function of “Etuk Mbopo” was to keep the girl out of other people’s view even if they come into the yard, tins of palm oil have to be provided by the would-be husband for the oiling of the girl’s body. The fattening girl will have young girls around her as maid to assist her.

According to Antia (2005), the fattened maiden will choose and invite about two to four young girls to serve her as attendants throughout her period of confinement. They were called “Udo Mbopo”. A strong elderly and experienced lady will be invited by the Mbopo’s mother (Eka-Mbopo) to bathe, massage, oil and advise the Mbopo. She was called “*Ayed Idem Mbopo*” (Mbopo tender). Mbopo’s parents also made sacrifices requesting for the protection and good health of the girl throughout her seclusion and confinement period, all these sacrifices are offered to village deities and dead ancestors.

6. Fattening Preparation

During the period of fattening, the girl is being kept away from her family and friends. They are not allowed to do strenuous works; she is provided elaborate meals rich in starch, carbohydrates, vegetable and meats; and she is frequently bathed and rubbed with shea butter and other local ointments in order to make her body smooth and shiny in all, the ladies are pampered but prevented from wandering too far from the fattening home. She is being cared for by older women and she is not allowed to come in contact with other people. She is put in a room where on a daily basis, she is massaged at least three times and make sure she has a sufficient sleep or rest, Esemma (2002), affirms that; “this process ensures the bride to get a healthy waistline, according to the Ibibio traditional belief, a woman who is full figured with a healthy waistline was said to be beautiful”.

William (2009), also add that; beyond being spoiled, the elderly women also help the young women to improve on their overall domestic and interpersonal skills, which include trading, cooking, decorating the home, cloth weaving, hair plaiting and for braiding as well as knowledge of certain crafts. Because beauty constitutes a key aspect of the process, they are also taught to dress themselves flamboyantly and to apply make-up in a manner that constantly ensure their attractiveness regarding their health and the 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 breast feeding and how to identify herbal remedies for labour pain. They also receive training and/or retraining on the moral value, customs, more and taboos of their communities.

The fattening room is a school of sorts where young women are educated to subjects that covers biology, Psychology, Sociology, culture, home management, cosmetology fashion design and other skills enhancement. In some instances, the ladies also learn new performances of dances in what is typically referred to the “Outing Ceremony”. This usually takes place on the streets and commonly ends in the village or town square. At this time the participants are showed with gifts from relatives, would-be suitors, loved ones and well-wishes. They essentially present an arena and fundamental resources for nurturing beauty and for preparing young women to face life as wives, mothers, workers, and business owners. As an old rite of passage, they facilitate the passage from maidenhood to womanhood and wifehood, much like several male rituals facilitate the

passage from boyhood to manhood, and prepare young men to be future husbands, fathers, warriors, workers, entrepreneurs and providers.

7. Ceremonial Outing

Preparation for the Mbopo outing was always very exciting and elaborate, depending on the financial ability of the two families involved. The outing ceremony, being the day appointed for the public presentation of all the Mbopos in the village was usually very special and it involved the entire community and even beyond. The women are expected to dance with all the dance groups and to dance before the audience. Certain things must have to be cleared from perspective dancers before they can enter the dancing square (Awan Mbopo), such clearance included the mother of Mbopo having to swear to a deity the people they have choose have never caused or assisted her daughter to cause abortion by her daughter while in the house of seclusion. The daughter must have to swear the same thing. Mbopo must not be under menstrual period to enter the square including those who are going to dance with her.

Antia (2005), maintained that during the Mbopo outing ceremony, there are some ceremonies attached to it. These fattening ceremonies are;

Ekpo’s Visitation: About one week before the fattened girl made her first public appearance since she was in confinement, it was customary for Ekpo masquerades to accept her as a messenger of the ancestral spirits to visit all the fattened girls in the village to see and assess how fat, and beautiful they had grown.

Esema (2002), confirmed that, the fattened girls are led out and made to sit on a stool where Ekong Mbopo dances round her and eventually embraces her. He breaks a raw egg over her, a gunshot is fired to signify the acceptability of Mbopo before Mbopo will return into the fattening room.

Utua Ukot Ke Efe (First Public Appearance)

This ceremony always took place at night on a day set aside for it, one group drummers played for all the Mbopo in the village starting from the first house to the last, as they were followed by a group of dancers who came out to show herself in the public. Led by her supervisor, she danced to and from the position of the drummers. A pregnant or skeletal Mbopo was titled *itiitipMbopo* was bored at the crowd while the fat and plumpy Mbopo was cheered and praised.

Nka Urua Mbopo (Market Presentation Ceremony)

Bassey (1966), asserted that all the Mbopo were taken to the market in semi-nudity before they were given to their husbands. Akpabot (1975), maintained that if she is unmarried, this is the time when interested suitors comes forward to ask for her hand in marriage. He also points out that, at the beginning of the presentation, the instrumentalists start with the brilliant musical rendition, the mother of Mbopo, dances to this to the admiration of the audience. The introduction of dialogue by the Mbopo's mother while praising her daughter makes for variation which prompts a higher aesthetic appeal to the audience. Her waist dance which takes her out of the arena still serves as a unit of the aesthetic experience shared by the audience. They brightly costumed maidens attract smiles and admiration from the audience. Their songs heightened the general aesthetic appeal of the performance.

In the market, marketers watched them dance with admiration and gave them presents according to the fatness and beauty. They were usually carried on the shoulders by strong men who were handsomely paid for the job. On this special day known as Urua Mbopo (market day for the virgins), ntung, (rattles) are slide on her ankles and a chicken hung around her neck as sign of purity; tiny cowbells (*nyoro*) are fixed round her waist to signal her approach. She is led in a procession in which her husband (if she is married), fire gunshots, a group of women hold an umbrella over her head and an orchestra featuring wooden drums precede her signing:

Ibibio Mbopo ayaya aboho

nsuto ayen iyaya ntom

English (Mbopo is very pretty, what a pretty maiden this is)

UsoroAdiahaOwo (feast of the first Daughter)

It is pertinent to note that before the Mbopo finally went to live with her husband (if she is married), parents had to perform a great feast. The scale of such feast varied with the order of birth and the ability of the parents. If the daughter is Adiaha (The First daughter), usually had seven cows slaughtered for her by father that even if the father was unable to provide seven cows, in as much as he has made provision for one, that still goes on to projecting the image of the family that a cow has been slaughtered for the first daughter. This is why all the first daughters in every family in Ibibio land is known as "Adiaha Enang Itiaba" up till today. On the feast day, the first daughter had to set her feet placed on the body of a cow whose neck was being cut. Other daughters usually have one, two or no cows

slaughtered for them but all depending on the wealth of their parents.

Udad Mbopo nno Ebe (Taking Mbopo to the Husband)

It was noted that on returning from the market place, (if she married) the husband notifies those in charge of the fattening room that he is ready to take his wife home. The man also present gift to the women that were in charge of the fattening room to stimulate and encourage them. This calls for yet another ceremony at which he presents money to members of the household and buys more palm wine and food for the villagers, at the end of all the ceremony, the husband consulted his parents in-laws and fixed a date for his wife to be sent to him. Before she is sent to her husband, the parents, relations, friends and other guests, presented the Mbopo with gifts of different kinds including cooking utensils, beds, yams, food items and other household properties. The amount and qualities of gifts, of course depending on her parent's wealth, dancing and jubilation also accompanied the ceremony. A party from the husband's side was sent to the parents of the Mbopo to carry the wife shoulder high to the husband, members of the party were sumptuously entertained before they led the wife with her belongings to her husband. Dancing and merry-making continues far unto the night before the couple honey-moon period started with a test of virginity of the Mbopo. This test according to the tradition demanded for the couples to spend their first night together on a clean and stainless white bedsheet while enjoying the first fruit of their marriage life officially.

8. Socio-Cultural Implication of Mbopo Institution

Apart from providing an occasion for merriment and entertainment, Mbopo festival comes with a hue of beauty. Unable to understand this aesthetics, the anthropologists gave various inapplicable reasons to the observance of some of these festivals. Mbopo festival affords a form of relaxation and recreation both to the initiate who take part in the drumming and dancing and the uninitiated who watch, clap and sometimes take part in the general dancing and festivities that go along with the festival. Both men and women including children take part in this festival.

By cultural pride, we mean that a girl who has been accorded this high honour in the traditional society was the pride of her family. This high honour was never given to a girl who had sexual intercourse with any man. The interference here is that Mbopo was an

importance social factor to control moral laxity of girls.

It was a time of rest for the well behaved girls. During this time, they ate without cooking. There were people who cook for them, people to bathe them and experience local nurses to make sure that the girls in the fattening rooms grow fatter and lovelier with their bodies very smooth.

Traditional fattening festivity is an affairs of every members of the community and because it is organized at the certain period in the year. For everybody, it could be called the rite of intensification.

Ekong (1983), says “Mbopo” festival is a rite of passage and intensification which is common among the Ibibio communities. The custom requires especially in those days before the eroding influence of agents of social change every parents to put her daughter through the process of seclusion before she goes into her matrimonial family.

This is so because, it is a common belief, generally current among the people that if such a ritual is not carried out certain calamities may visit the whole community. Many societies whatever their sizes and degrees of complexity, need controls to ensure the maintenance of equilibrium and control come in several forms. Mbopo also brings higher status to the family and commands a high bride price. Its role, as tool for transition to motherhood and wifehood, where new behavior is learnt, cannot be overemphasized. Apart from the pride of family, another factor which gives Mbopo a high status was the pomp and pageantry associated with it. Mothers bagged their daughters to bless them by keeping their virginity so they could go into the exalted seclusion. The whole village would ridicule and chant obscene songs in a tradition of eyomouwooh, literally meaning the mockery of a loose girl; this was the way in which de-virginised girls were referred to. The parents and relatives of such a girl, tagged uwooh, would search for and hound the young man responsible for the shameful act until he marries the girl, as no one else would accept to marry her. Despite succeeding in getting the two erring youths to marry, the girl would still be stigmatized and so also her family. Mbopo was and is still one of the bases of our kinship system. By and large, it is very correct to say that Mbopo bring with it general merriment and cultural pride. On the other hand, it is an occasion for traditional religious ceremonies.

9. Conclusion

Today, Mbopo festival is not commonly observed except in some few communities in Ibibio land where the extant practice of the tradition still lingers on education and civilization. Fewer number of men do not even like their wives to grow fat; women now exercise themselves often to be slim. Clearly the Ibibio world has people’s conception about fatness and other attach values to Mbopo institution has changed. All aspects of life including traditional rites have been blown by the turbulent wind of change. Itis considered that the Ibibio have led a civilized life of their own. This paper is therefore a reminder that some measure be taken to bring back Mbopo culture and its aesthetic.

Finally, nearly all the neighbouring communities surrounding Ibibio speaking tribe are now practicing Mbopo cultural norms as a borrowed culture.

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