

EFIK TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RITES – A GENDER PERSEPCTIVE

A PAPER PREENTED BY

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Abstract

This paper investigated Efik marriage rites from a gender perspective. Marriage in Africa is a union between a man and a woman (monogamy) or mainly between a man and women (polygyny), or between a woman and men (polyandry), though this is very rare. In some cases it may be serial polygyny or polyandry, i.e. the case of marrying more than one wife or husband, but always after divorce. Marriage just like other institutions in Africa has rites of passage in which those who intend to enter into it must pass through. Every culture has a sense of peculiarity as to the way in which it approaches this matter. The Efik people are not an exception to this. The question that may be asked is, how gender-balanced are these rites? The Efik people claim to have gender equality, but is this reflected in her marriage rites? Rites are symbolisms of what the actual institution which those rites represent. It is in the light of this that this paper using gender theory critically looked at the Efik traditional marriage rites from gender perspective. The paper realized that, among the Efik people's traditional marriage rites, there is gender imbalance. It proffers ways of having gender balance in Efik traditional marriage rites. Apart from adding a voice to the cry for gender equality and equity, it provides scholarship a resource material needed for Efik ethnographic study.

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Introduction

Marriage is a complex affair with social and religious, (though sometimes with economic and political) undertones which often overlap so firmly that each undertone cannot be separated from each other. The Encarta 2010 defines it as, “legal relationship between spouses: a legal recognized relationship, especially by a civil or religious ceremony, between two people who intend to live together as sexual and domestic partners.”¹ It further defines marriage as a, “specific marriage relationship: a married relationship between two people, or somebody's relationship with

his or her spouse”. On the other hand, Thompson and Wright define marriage as “the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group.”² Among the Efik, marriage which is called *ndo*. It is heterogeneous and sometimes polygamous in nature, though in recent times, polygamous marriage has been reduced due to the influence of Christianity and Western education.

This paper seeks to look at Efik traditional marriage rites from a gender perspective. The Efik have a claim of gender equality, but the question is, is this applicable in their marriage rites? How can the marriage rites be viewed from a gender perspective? This is the focal point of this paper using gender theories. Due to limited written documents on this institution, the research resorted to gather some of the information for this work from oral interview and from his grandparents who are part of the custodian of the Efik culture.

A Brief Overview of Efik Traditional Marriage

To the Efik, the essence of marriage is mainly procreation, though other social, economic and political reasons may also be important in some marriages. Hence, the adage which says, “*oto mkpon oyom mbo, odo anwan oyom eyen.*”³ Without procreation, marriage is incomplete, because this is a unity which attempts to recapture at least in part the lost gift of immortality in the Efik concept of immortality. It is a religious obligation by means of which an individual contributes to the seeds of life towards human struggle against the loss of original immortality. Ekpo E. Efiok points out that “husband and wife are reproduced in their children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity and that, the Efik believe that if one dies without an offspring, he/she will not be remembered.”⁴ This is in line with Mbiti’s question, “if you don’t get married and have children, who will pour out libation to you when you die?”⁵ The number of a man’s wives depends on his

means and social statuses. A man's wealth depends more on the number of his wives and children. This brings to the fore, the Efik adage, "*okuk ikpikpu, ofong ikpukpu, owo edi inyene*" which means, "money is nothing, cloths are nothing, and human beings are the real wealth". So the Efik are polygamous because, it is the source of having many children and by consequence many people.

Marriage is also viewed as an affair not only of the husband and the wife, but as belonging to the whole community. This is clearly shown during the traditional marriage rites. "The whole community – the living, the dead and those yet unborn meet there."⁶ Just as it is in other African communities, all the dimensions of time meet here and the drama in which everyone is an actor or actress not just a spectator is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Above all, "each of the two partners in marriage is in a social relationship."⁷

According to Udobata Onunwa, "the Igbo people practice 'levirate marriage', widow-inheritance, remarriage occasioned by divorce, death or former husband or separation,"⁸ but this is unlike the Efik people where wives are not hereditary. This is rightly pointed out that, "albeit, Efik widows never marry their children, or those of their deceased husbands since it has never been part of their custom, not even to marry a close relation of the husband's family."⁹ Irrespective of this, there is what is usually refer to as '*ndo ufok ufok*' i.e. marriage among close relatives – e.g. marriage between cousins of third generations, uncle and nieces etc. This is mainly among noble families to form a closely inter-married group of kinsfolk with the sole essence of keeping the Efik ethnically, socially, politically and culturally intact.

Brides are not sold as property or commodity in the market to be bought and used and handled as the 'buyer' decides. The Efik people view marriage as a life-long relationship but unlike

the Roman Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament which cannot be dissolved irrespective of what reason, to the Efik, marriage is dissolvable on certain grounds. According to Akak, if a wife is found guilty of any of the following,

Adultery (sexual or non-sexual), theft, making charms for her husband with intent to do harm and drunkenness. If a man is found guilty of any of the following, brutal assaults, theft, making charms also with intent to harm the [wife], desertion, and lack of care.¹⁰

Akak further pointed out that “there may be other undisclosed grounds for divorce which may likely remain secret between the two (i.e. the husband and the wife).”¹¹ It is good to note that among the Efik, adultery on the part of the man does not constitute a ground for divorce, since polygamy and concubinage are culturally acceptable norms. Hence the Efik have an adage that ‘*eren owo itreke brusai*’ meaning, ‘a man does not stop flirting’. At the point of divorce, i.e. after all efforts of reconciliation have failed, it is the responsibility of both parents to care for the children which are gotten from the marriage. Though there is room for divorce in the Efik traditional marriage setting, this is always the last resort, when all available avenues to broker peace among the couple have failed and in most cases there is a threat to life. Among the Efik, every daughter who is being married still have inheritance from her parents because, apart from bequeathing it to her children, it will serve as a place for her to return to in case of failed marriage.

Efik Traditional Marriage Rites from Gender Perspective

All the nations and communities have their marriage rites which validate marriage within their cultural context, without which such marriages are declared null and void before the law of the land. The same is applicable to the Efik people; except the traditional marriage rites are performed, marriage bond is not said to have existed. It is this rite that makes marriage valid within

the Efik traditional context. This leads to the examination of the Efik traditional marriage rites in this paper.

Mbup Ndo (Marriage Proposal): The Efik traditional marriage rite starts with what is normally referred to as *mbup ndo* (marriage proposal). This is the duty of the parents of the would-be-couple and not the would-be-couples themselves. The reason behind this is that, marriage in Efik culture is a matter for the families not just the man and woman involve. When a man is up to marital age, his parents will look for a wife for him, when one is spotted (usually within the community), he will be duly informed by his parents (that is, his father or any other male appointee of the family, so appointed to inform him). In most cases he is not obliged to turn down this proposal, because he is expected to abide by what his parents have provided for him. Reason being that parents know who would be a better wife for their sons taking into cognizance different issues like family background of the girl, her character in the community and other like issues.

On the other hand, when a man sets his eyes on a girl of his choice, he will immediately intimate his parents. If the girl is not well known to the parents, the family will have to carry out an enquiry in respect of her family background, life, character, morality, industry, etc. It is good to note that this secret enquiry is always done without the girl's knowledge or that of her family. If his choice is accepted by the parents, they start the marriage rites on his behalf by engaging in what is called *mbup ndo*.

Having been satisfied with the life and character of the girl and her fitness to be a bride of their son, the family of the suitor will send a letter (the first one) through an emissary to the girl's parents requesting her hand in marriage to their son. In most cases this first mail is never replied until the third one is being sent. Reasons for this according to Ekei Oku, "is to ascertain the

willingness and readiness of the man's family to marry the girl."¹² Regina George in another oral interview also pointed out that the reason for the delay in the reply is also to "help the girl's family to carry out their own investigations about the man and his family before they either reject or accept their proposal."¹³ This delay and need for another letter is to show to the suitor that their daughter is not a 'cheap girl' haunting for husband; it also serves a documentary purpose. In all, among the Efik, investigation is done both ways and speaks of the gender balance that must be brought into the marriage union. In essence also, marriage is not to be entered into lightly knowing too well to importance of marital union.

The girl's family having been satisfied with their investigations sought the girl's consent (which in most cases, she is bound to accept). In most cases this is only a formality of intimating her that there is a suitor. As at the time of this proposal, she may be between 12-16 years old and may not have any relationship with any man as it concerns marriage/love relationship. According to Regina George, "traditionally, it is the duty of the family to choose a life partner for her, she has little or nothing to say."¹⁴ It is good to note that this case may be different with those who are re-marrying or who may have lost their virginity and become pregnant.

On the fixed date for the discussion after the bride's parents have replied the letters inviting the parents of the groom for marriage discussion, the bride and the groom are not expected to be in attendance at this first meeting (but where the man is present, though in very rare cases, he is not expected to have a say in all the proceedings). On arrival of the groom's parents, they present their host with what is normally called *min ukong usung* (drink for the knocking of door). This drink symbolically means that the guests are at the door knocking and seeking permission to enter the house of their host. On entering the house, they present another drink called *min akam* (drink for prayer). This drink is used in pouring libation which is the Efik traditional prayer. In the

libation, the ancestors, gods and deities are invited into the ceremony since marriage is both for the living and the dead communities. The Efik people strongly believe that for a society to exist, there must be synergy between the living and the dead – the dead being fed by the living while the living are being protected and directed by the dead.

Libation having been poured, the would-be-groom's family presents *min ukop iko* (this is the drink given to enable the host listen to the guests) and then state the purpose of their visit. On accepting the guest's request and both parties having reached a favourable agreement, the girl will now be introduced to her would-be-in-laws and her left wrist is tied with a fresh palm frond (*ekpin*) by the would be father-in-law signifying engagement. This represents the modern-day engagement ring. A date is fixed for the official marriage ceremony and then the guests present *min ekom* (an appreciation drink). The whole event is rounded up with refreshment provided by the host, and this in most cases is meant to show the hospitality of the Efik people.

It is good to note that in the Efik traditional marriage rite, especially in the marriage between two Efik children, there is no list given to the would-be-groom's family, because it is expected that each family knows what the standard requirement for marriage among the Efik people. In event of where the suitor is not from Efik (either paternally or maternally), they are given a list of requirement in preparation for the marriage ceremony.

Ukpe Nkpo Ndo (The Marriage Ceremony): Going through a traditional marriage ceremony is a trip in theatrics and the Traditional marriage ceremony is a study of aesthetics and in particular, “with ‘word smiting,’ dance, music, and even subtle chicanery playing ... creating a most relaxing atmosphere is so much a part of the process or procedure that the entire exercise is often seen as a game.”¹⁵

The Efik marriage ceremony is done in stages. In the first stage, the date having been fixed, invitation being sent to people, the ceremony takes place at the compound of the bride's father or her family head (i.e. the Etubom of the family) or a senior uncle (as the bride's family may choose). In this first stage, certain key players are involved, and one of the most important is the woman who acts as the go between both families and plays both the mediatory role and the mistress of ceremony. It is her duty to welcome everybody present and lead the proceedings of the day. In the sitting arrangement here, the bride family sits at the table on one side while that of the groom sits also on another side differently. She then on behalf of the groom's parent presents *min akam* (drink for prayer) which is being used for libation after which *min ukop iko* is being presented just as it was done during *mbup ndo*, but *min ukong usung* (drinking for knocking of door) is not given again, on the ground that the guests are not strangers again to the compound.

This first stage having been completed by the giving of *min ukop iko*, the presentation of the request which was made to the family before is now made open to the entire public, then the bride's family will request to see the groom. At this point the groom is ushered in accompanied by his friends with traditional dance and he displaying traditional dance steps. He dresses traditionally holding a staff (*esang*) to show that he is now a man ready for marriage. This stage is always a joyous moment as friends, relatives and all present heralds his coming into the family. On presentation of the groom by his parents, and having been accepted by the bride's family, they now request to see their bride. This is another major point in the theatric of Efik traditional rites; she dresses in traditional outfit called *ofon ukot anwan* (a wrapper tie just a little above the knee, which speaks of her innocence as a young girl) with corresponding accessories of beads, other such items and a special hair-do called *etinghe*. She comes in from the inside of the house (not from outside because she is a child well groomed from the house and was seen in the house not in

the street). The significant of this is that she is a child well trained, properly cultured and belongs to a family. Dressed like a queen with splendour, supple and looking stunningly beautiful, dancing *ekombi* (Efik traditional dance) accompanied by her maiden, she is herald with pomp and pageantry. It's always a sight to behold and the desire of every young girl among the Efik people.

The high point of the ceremony is set in with the question put forth to the groom's parent asking, 'is this the flower that brought you here?' That question, they don't normally have an answer, so they in turn ask their son, if that is the girl she wants to marry; on his positive answer, they in turn respond accordingly to the bride's family. Her consent will also be sought and obtained publicly. Ekei Edem points out "that this is only a formality, since she cannot reject this marriage proposal once she has come out."¹⁶ It needs to be noted that the groom coming out first before the bride signifies that it is he who is taking the initiative in the marriage and not the bride. This is the normal procedure in most African marriage rites.

At this juncture the bride and the groom are given seats while their parents present the customary requirements for the traditional marriage. The groom's parents present *mini ekom* (appreciation drinks). This is in appreciation to the girl's parents for taking good care of her. These drinks are *ekom ete-eyen* (greetings to the father) accompanied with *nkpo-ete eyen* (something for the father) and *ekom eka-eyen* (greetings to the mother) also accompanied with *mfon eka eyen* or called *nkpo ufop iso* which today is referred to as *nkpo eka eyen* (something for the mother). Akak points out that "this is a gift to the mother for burning her face while cooking for the girl and consisted of clothes, rods and drinks."¹⁷ In the opinion of Ekei Edem *nkpo eka-eyen* is normally "one pound, one shilling and assorted kinds of drinks and that recently, some families feel that this amount is too small, so the groom may give more money according to his capability and willingness." She further added that "it is a mere appreciation, acknowledging the woman's care

towards her daughter up till that day.”¹⁸ The climax of presentation comes with the presentation of the *ekebe ndo* (i.e. marriage box). This is an air tight metal box for clothing and related things. The contents are clothing of different types, under wears, dowry, wedding ring, Bible, assorted drinks, etc. All these items have different parts to play in the matrimony.

Firstly, she is expected to make public outings with her husband after the marriage ceremony and therefore needs to dress no more like a single girl but as a married woman. Thus the husband provides her with those clothes to avoid embarrassment. One of the clothes called *onyo-onyo* is what she will change into when she is ready to dance with the husband and go to the next stage of the marriage rites, because at this point, she has to appear as a married woman. Secondly, the dowry here is usually twelve pounds. This money may be given in the current exchange rate with Naira, or the first exchange rate of Twenty-four Naira. There is a slight point of conflict over who claims the dowry among the contemporary Efik people. To some people, it is the family of the bride while to some it is the bride. According to Immaculata E. Eyamba, who shares the view of some of the contemporary Efik people she said “my dowry was taken by my family and not given to me,”¹⁹ while the older generation opined that, “though this money is being received by the bride’s parents, it belongs to the bride herself.”²⁰ The essence of this is to serve as an economic capital for her to start up a business while in her husband’s house. Ibok E. Ekpenyong throws more light on this saying that, “my dowry of twelve pounds in those days was what I used in trading, which later yielded interest I used in buying my sewing machine.”²¹ The reason for giving this dowry to the bride is that, the bride who is now a wife and has come into full womanhood is not expected to depend totally on the husband for everything. This shows that the Efik started women empowerment very early. It needs to be pointed out that, there is no corresponding gift from the woman to the man, and this presents the woman as a weaker vessel who must always be provided

for by the man. He who plays the piper detects the tune. This traditional rite may also have accounted for the men always treating their wives as their subordinates, since they are the ones who seemingly do all the spending during the marriage rites.

The ring shows her absolute possession by her husband and serves as a sign of her marital status. The *ekpin* tied on the bride's wrist during the *mbup ndo* during the engagement which was temporary thing will now be cut off and replaced with the ring worn on the fourth finger. Wedding ring is not a new innovation among the Efik, for copper rod was normally framed and used as wedding rings before the advent of Christianity. The marriage box is given to help her store those items given to her (except the ring which needs to be worn always), to avoid insects invasion which may destroy those materials. Generally, until the dowry and *ekebe ndo* are given the marriage is not legalized. Akak comments that without these items, "the wife at the death of the husband would not mourn him according to the custom which demanded the widows' full confinement, compelling them to remain dirty for years as an expression of deep sorrow."²² In Efik culture, this protracted period of mourning was called *mbukpisi*, a word that is from two Efik words *mbukpo iso* which means 'useless face'. All Efik women were customary to observe this ritual at the death of their husbands, except for those 'married women' who were not given *ekebe ndo* and the dowry. Under normal circumstances, the dowry is not returnable should the marriage break, but if the woman willingly terminates the marriage without having issues, she may decide to return the dowry to the man.

Other things given to the bride are *ukpan anwa* – money given in different denominations to the girl to stop her from lusting after other men. This money is always given to women who have lost their virginity. This is a substitute for *okpono ndidi*. *Ndidi* is weaved raffia used in tying around the waist to show her purity and innocence. The husband now needs to pay and cut off this

raffia to show that he is the person to break her virginity. She is thus expected to have sexual relationship with him alone. Finally, she is given assorted drinks which she will use in entertaining her friends who will visit her after the marriage ceremony. From those drinks she presents one each to her father and mother seeking their blessing upon her marital union.

Having fulfilled almost all the traditional rites, the next people to be settled are the community male youths who are given *Min-mkparawa* (drinks for youths). If any of them had the intention of marrying the girl, he is thus appeased through these drinks. It is also a warning against other who intend approaching her for marriage while making them also the watchmen over this girl in case she wants to commit adultery. Finally, *nsuan-nsuan min* i.e. assorted types of drinks meant for the entire guests are given by the groom's parents to thank them for attending the ceremony. The host at this point provides all the meals for the ceremony to show both the Efik hospitality tradition and the family's gratitude. Worthy of note is the fact that, the rites of *ukpan anwa*, *okpono ndidi* and *min mkparawa* do not have any equivalent for the groom, so he is not bound as the bride to any sexual fidelity. This is because in Efik culture, *erenowo itrike brusai*, which literally means that a man cannot stop having extra marital relationship. It is on this note that an act of adultery is adjudged lightly when it concerns the husband compared to if it concerns the wife.

It should be noted that to the Efik people, pre-marital sex or pregnancy is always frowned at. Hence, if the bride is already pregnant for the groom before the wedding ceremony, he will be required to give '*ebot usong enyin*' – a fine in form of a goat and drinks for having illegal affairs with the girl. This helps to check against fornication. Worthy of note here also is the fact that, the punishment for premarital sex rest on the man who gives '*ebot usong enyin*' while the woman pays no penalty.

All traditional requirements having been fulfilled, the young couple will now be given pieces of advices by experienced couples and other aged people. The whole ceremony reaches its climax when the newly married thank their guests for honouring the invitation and dance to the tune of traditional music until they embrace themselves. After this, the girl may go into fattening room (*ufok nkuho*), if she had not already done that before the marriage ceremony.

Irrespective of all the cash and material items spent by the man during the marriage rites, the Efik people have a saying in respect of the bride that, '*eyen mi idighe uyam, ebot ebot edi uyam,*' meaning, 'my daughter is not for sale, it is only goat that is for sale'. The intrinsic meaning of this is that, though the man has spent so much on the marriage rites, he is not buying the woman, if the marriage does not work out well, she is free to go back. It is on this note that a woman is still given inheritance in her father's house, so that she can still have where to fall back on in case of divorce. It is good to note the fact, though there is a changing pattern in the submission of wives to husband in African in recent times, in Efik culture, "wives must listen to their husbands and are not expected to act in any way against the decision of their husbands or male family leaders."²³

When all the necessary rites have been performed, the act of the bride being given in marriage is by her being handed over from one man (the bride's father or his representative who must be a man) to another man (the groom's father or his representative who must be a man) who will in turn hand over the bride to the groom. This action speaks of the tradition where a man's servants, children and wife/wives are all considered to be his 'personal' property. He can do with them as he likes in most cases. Allen Nilsen, though not writing about the Efik people points out an issue which is also true of the Efik people that, "the [women are] known by his [the man's] name because they belong to him and he is responsible for their actions and [even] their debts."²⁴ Hence, the wife cannot object to her husband marrying another wife (if he so desires), and in rare

cases can a woman institute a divorce against her husband (even if he is unfaithful). This seems to be akin to the Roman Empire's culture in which a woman lives her life under a man. Hence,

A woman exchanges her tutelage from one man to another, from the father to husband in marriage and to a son or guardian in the event of her husband's death. The consent of the tutor was necessary for a woman to buy or sell property, to make a will or negotiate a divorce.²⁵

Summary

Summarily, the Efik traditional marriage rites which are symbolic to the nature of the Efik traditional marriage institution is not gender-balance. Firstly, the fine paid (*ebot usong enyin*) by the groom when the bride is pregnant does not have a corresponding penalty on the bride. It is only the groom who suffers the penalty for a sin committed by both the groom and the bride. Secondly, the giving of bride-wealth by the groom to the bride and tokens to her parents do not have corresponding rites where the bride does the same to the groom and his parents. The danger and implication of these rites, is that it is the man who does all the gifting in the marriage rites, which automatically make him the one who dictates the tune in the marriage. This conforms to the saying that, he who plays (pays) the piper dictates the tune. It is actually the man and/or his family that bears the brunt of the financial involvements in Efik traditional marriage rites. This is apart from the entertaining of the guests by the host to end the ceremony and the giving of household property to the bride in another rite called '*uto ndung ufok*'. Although these gifts are taken to the matrimonial home, the gift items are not compulsory.

Thirdly, the gift of *ukpan anwa* or *okpono ndidi* by the groom to stop the woman from lusting after another man does not have a corresponding rite(s) to stop the man from lusting after

another woman/women. The man in this context is free to engage in extra-marital relationship(s) without any law binding him. This shows another sense of gender imbalance in this marriage rites. The rite of female circumcision limits the libido and sensual pleasure of the woman while on the other hand, the man's sexual pleasure is not limited. Fourthly, the act of handing over the bride from one man (her father or his representative who must be a male) to another man (the groom's father or his representative who must be male) renders the woman to be a commodity which must be handed over from one man to another. The groom on the other hand is not handed over. He has freedom, but the bride is bound to the man (first her father or his representative who must be a male) in the first instance and later to her father-in-law (or his male representative who must be a male) and then to her husband. The man is not handed over in marriage to the woman. This shows inequality and inequity. If this is done, it could have shown mutuality and symbiotic relationship between the husband and the wife. The implication of this is that, women totally are dependent on the whims and caprices of the men-fold.

Conclusion

The Efik traditional marriage rites are not gender-balance and therefore needs to be reviewed in the light of gender equality and equity. Rites like the giving of *ebot usong ehyin* and *ekebe ndo* (bride-wealth/dowry) should have corresponding rites where the bride also gives gifts to the groom and suffers a penalty for premarital pregnancy. On the other hand, rites like *okpono ndidi*, *ukpan anwa*, *min mkparawa*, etc. should have corresponding rites given to the man to stop him from lusting after another woman/women. This will make Efik marriage to have a gender-balance which is required for the welfare of human society.

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- ³ This means, "a person who plants cocoyam is looking for tuber, a man who marries a wife is looking for a child".
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