

Cultural Evolution and the Nkuho (Seclusion) Practice of the Efiks

BasseyNsaEkpe

Department of Performing Arts

Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus

08023612074 mailbassey@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Culture is a group worldview, the way of organizing the world that a particular society has created over time. This framework or web of meaning allows the members of that society to make sense of themselves, their world and their experiences in that world. It is this sharing of a common reality that gives people within a particular culture a common fund of knowledge. The Nkuho practice of the Efiks is deeply rooted in the people's culture. It is an exercise that essentially represents an arena and fundamental resource for nurturing beauty and for preparing young women to face life as wives, mothers, workers and business owners. As an old rite-of-passage, Nkuho facilitates the passage from maidenhood to womanhood and wifehood, as well as help transmit the culture of the Efiks. All Cultures are inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change, Nkuho is no exception to this phenomenon as we are in an accelerating culture change period all around the world regardless of whether we try to resist it or not. The Nkuho exercise as obtainable today, is carried out with a difference, some part of the practice have been dropped while others have undergone modification. This is partly because of change in needs, preferences and style of living. Though the level of participation has dropped the exercise is still in practice.

Key Words: Efik, Culture, Society, Nkuho, Change

Introduction

Efik social organization can be said to have been based on two central institutions which determined and regulated all social practices. Though these institutions later adapted themselves in response to new economic needs, the family and secret societies remained the axes upon which all forms of social practices revolved. The increasing cosmopolitanism of the Efik society had the effect of altering certain aspects of these institutions, but their fundamentals persisted. A study of these institutions provides clear evidence of continuity and change through time, but certain tradition-encrusted practices reveal themselves here and there.

Culture is a set of human-made objective and subjective elements that in the past have increased the probability of survival and resulted in satisfaction for the participants in an ecological niche, and thus became shared among those who could communicate with each other because they had a common language and they lived in the same time and place. Intercultural communication enhances activities that offer shared way of experiencing the world. Shared knowledge gives rise to shared meaning, which are carried in the shared physical environment, social institution, social practices, the language, conversation scripts, and other media.

All cultures are inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change. There are dynamic processes operating that encourage the acceptance of new ideas and things while there are others that encourage changeless stability. It is likely that social and psychological chaos would result if there were not the conservative forces resisting change.

David Tivel (2012) identifies three general sources of influence or pressure that are responsible for both change and resistance to it:

1. Forces at work within a society: invention and culture loss causes change in culture while habit and the integration of culture traits are resistant to culture change
2. Contact between societies: diffusion, acculturation and transculturation aid in culture change whereas ethnocentrism act as a resistance to culture change
3. Changes in the natural environment

Culture

Edward Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (2010: 1). However, J. Abraham describes culture as “the ways by which the interaction of people is effected; It is in fact the interaction of people, and therefore culture can be said to be both the cause and the effect of interaction”(1975:74). It is the cause because interaction cannot take place without the impulse that is generated by the whole complex web of thoughts, beliefs and sentiments which we call culture. At the same time, interaction itself breeds a response which can modify that cultural process originally responsible for it. All progress in thought and invention, all changes in society, can only be explained in terms of the effect of interaction caused by a definite cultural make-up. Culture is the basis on which the social structure rests; it is also the way in which the social structure manifests itself and by which it grows, develops, progresses, remain stagnant or retrogresses.

Raymond Scupin adds that culture is “a shared way of life that includes values, beliefs, and norms transmitted within a particular society from generation to generation”(1995:33).

In tandem with Scupin’s description of culture, Samlovar and Porter (1997) classify culture by three categories of elements: artefacts, concepts and behaviour. The *Nkuho* practice of the Efiks could be categorised under the behaviour element of culture which refers to the actual practice of concept or beliefs.

Everyman is born into a society is the same as saying that every man is born into culture. Society consists of the patterns of relationships among people within a specified territory and culture is the by-product of those relationships. All members of a society are representatives of a certain culture; they transmit it to their offspring, who as Simmel says, is both heir and successor. Culture is at one and the same time taught, learnt and shared.

The Efiks

Efik is a tribe in Cross River State, occupying a larger part of the Southern District of the State. The surviving historical documents dealing with the origin of the Efiks present rather disjointed and sometimes conflicting accounts. The most comprehensive of these documents seems to be the report of the commission set up by the government of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria to investigate the obongship dispute. In the report, the Sole Commissioner, A. K. Hart noted at least five different accounts of Efik origin and migrations.

According to Hart (1964), the written evidence submitted to the Sole Commissioner by Etubom Ekpenyong Efiok Asama Ekpenyong Efiok Eyo Honesty VIII, the Efiks wandered from the Sudan into the region of modern Sekoni in Ghana (then Gold Coast). From there they migrated into the district of the Niger Delta where they settled near Burutu and acquired the sobriquet, "Eburutu". Leaving Burutu, the Efik migrants split up, with some settling in Abonnema while others went to Itu-Mbauzo and later to Ibom in Arochukwu. From Ibom, the

Efik again migrated in different directions with some settling in Itu, Enyong, MbiaboEdere and Oku Iboku, near Ikoroffiong. Later, the Oku Iboku group broke up and settled at EsukOdu in Ibibio. There, a great misunderstanding arose between the Ibibio and the Eburutus as a result of which the Ibibio nicknamed them "Efik" or "oppressors." The Efik then migrated to IkpeEne, an island on the Cross River, where they left relics that are still extant.

At IkpaEne, the Efik were joined by their kinsmen who had previously settled at MbiaboEdere while another section of the Efik from MbiaboEdere went and settled at Ikoroffiong before finally dispersing to Ikoneto town. This source maintains that the Efik migrated from Ikoneto to Ndodoghi "from whence the Ibokus – comprising Creek Town, Duke Town, Old Town, and Henshaw Town – went to the present Creek Town from where all other city states were founded.

The above account of Efik origin and migration fits fairly accurately with the account rendered by Etubom Edem Ekpenyong Efiom Ededem (Okoho group) before the Commission, except in one major detail. Instead of being a Sudanic people who migrated into Sekondi before entering the Niger Delta, this account claims that the Efik first settled at Uruan for a long time after they had left their place of origin called 'Niger' though with no definite location. The Efik had trouble there and migrated from the Niger to Arochukwu and settled at Ibom. The Aros wanted the Efik immigrants to worship their long juju called Ibritam or Chuku, but the Efik refused and said that they were worshippers of Abasi Ibom. The Aros asked them to get away from their town if they were not prepared to worship Ibritam and so a religious dispute arose. Following the religious dispute, the Efiks left Arochukwu and settled at Uruan until a misunderstanding arose over a burial practice of the Efiks. Upon the death of an Efik the new immigrants attempted to bury an Uruan man along with the dead. This was strongly resisted and the Efik were finally driven out since Uruan people did not want to live with such burial custom. The Efik left Uruan and settled at IkpaEne, "an island on the Cross River in the Uruan district. It seems that the people of Uruan pushed the Efik out of their district which eventually led to the establishment of Efik communities in Creek Town, from where the city states of Henshaw Town and Duke Town were founded.

The account by Etubom Ededem Ekpenyong Oku (Ambo group) sees the Efik as an oriental people who came from Palestine and wandered through Ghana to Ututu, Ibom and finally settled at Uruan. At Uruan, the Efik were accused of civil disobedience and were compelled to leave after a brief war. The twelve Efik families, originally residents in Uruan, spread in different directions with the main stream of immigrants at IkpaEne, from IkpaEne, the Efik moved to Ndodoghi and then to Creek Town.

The other two remaining accounts of Efik origin and migrations are similar to the ones already recounted above except the account from the Ntiero family, which claims that the Efik originated from Egypt and thence migrated through the banks of the Niger to Umuahia. This account does not mention the Efiks as having resided in Uruan; otherwise the details of migration are fairly similar.

The Nkuho Practice

Marriage was always arranged by the elder members of both families concerned but there were certain lines to follow. Between the age of fourteen and fifteen, the girl according to the custom of the land had to be fattened in preparation for womanhood. She went into seclusion in a well prepared room – the fattening room (*ufoknkuho*). According to EyoAkak (1982) while in seclusion, the girl does not engage in house chores. She painted her body with white chalk (*ndom*) and had her body massaged with some ground roots to make it soft, smooth and

beautiful. Undoubtedly, she became fat and known as *Nkuho* (fattened woman). Male visitors were not welcomed other than the would-be husband, who only appeared occasionally, and relations as well as female friends.

Monday Noah asserts that “one motive behind the ceremony was to afford the girl’s father opportunity of demonstrating to the husband-to-be that he was capable of maintaining his daughter even without him and that the prospective husband should follow his footsteps in insuring and maintain the good health of his daughter after marriage”(1980:21). While it must be conceded that plumpness was a mark of beauty among the Efiks, fattening represented the last rite separating childhood from adolescence. Cardi Comte (1899:566) adds: “during the period of seclusion, the girl would be initiated into certain mysteries of the female secret society”. According to Noah, the most fascinating aspect, and perhaps one for which the rite was justified was that the period of seclusion served as a kind of educational workshop when all the best female brains would be summoned to prime the girl for married life. It was the final stage in the indigenous educational system designed to prepare the girl psychologically and otherwise for life in a new home. Thus it served as a training period almost exclusively for prospective brides, and the training was more elaborate than what the girl had been accustomed to.

Akak, in tandem with Noah, adds that the training given to the girls during the *Nkuho* exercise attracted specific interest to the practice. The training was all about domestic science in which case, other married women, young and old would come out voluntarily to teach the girls cookery and house-keeping. The girls were also taught how to live with their husbands, make them happy and endear themselves to them and their entire families. The old women added their pieces of advice as they related to the girls their own experience in life. Efik culture played an important part in the training, which embodied cultural dances, folklore, folktales, songs and other forms of entertainments. Sewing and needle works were also included in the training as well as production of artistic designs on calabashes and other similar materials. Summarily, home economics and child care formed the subject matter in preparing the would-be house-wife for womanhood.

Arit Ema (1987) claimed that at the end of the seclusion period, a day would be fixed for the outing ceremony of the fattened girl. On that day, the whole village would congregate at the village square and the fattened girl with her body artistically decorated with black dye (*okukin*), her breast bare and under the cover of an umbrella decorated with silk cloths or headties would be escorted in by her parent for exhibition. Efik dances, mostly *ekombi* and other forms of entertainment feature prominently in the outing ceremony. Feasting and merriments continue throughout the day and night. Families, friends and well-wishers express their joy and happiness by presenting gifts and donations to the fattened girl. Finally the girl would dance along with her husband until both dance towards each other and embrace themselves – the climax of everything indeed.

According to J. Cotton (1905), when the period of seclusion was over, the girl was ready to join the husband. Whatever the prospective husband might have contributed before this time was regarded as unofficial but expected; and oftentimes it was even demanded that he subscribe to the fattening rite (*nkpoufoknkuho*). He further explained that before the girl would join the husband, he was expected to pay some dowry, the amount of which was determined not only by his wealth but also by custom. R. Cohen (1970) points out that the significance of the dowry lay in the fact that women were traditionally considered to be of economic value to the prospective husband. Once the girl had been given out in marriage, it became expected that the husband should compensate the family that gave up the girl for the loss in labour force that it sustained.

More so, the girl's value also lay partly in her fecundity as a child bearer and partly in her contribution to the work force of the group she joins through marriage.

Culture and Change

Our mobility, increased contact among cultures, global economy and marketplace, and the emergence of multicultural organizations and workforces require that we develop communication skills and abilities appropriate to a multicultural society and to life in a global village. We are now a mobile society among ever increasing mobile societies. Numerous events have caused major changes to occur both worldwide and locally. These changes have transformed the world into the global village forecast by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s. From an intercultural communication perspective, Samovar and Porter (1997) identify the events leading to the development of the global village to include improvement in transportation technology, development in communication technology, globalization of the economy and changes in immigration patterns.

Viewing culture as the complex of distinctive attainments, beliefs, traditions and other ways of life constituting the background of a racial, religious or social group, the culture of any society could be described as a complex whole that has the resilience to adapt to changing circumstances. Our culture can offer genuine and lasting solutions to our pressing problems and provide us with respect, sense of purpose, direction, fulfilment and pride which only our indigenous system can bring about and yet it is bound to adapt to changing situations and circumstances. Culture has to be dynamic to cope with phenomenal transformations in the economic, political and social environment of the modern world. It cannot therefore be static. All cultures change through time. No culture is static. However, most cultures are basically conservative in that they tend to resist change. Some resist more than others by enacting laws for the preservation and protection of traditional cultural patterns while putting up barriers to alien ideas and things

Cultural Evolution and the Nkuho Practice

Since culture is the historical accumulation of symbolic knowledge that is shared by a society; it is expected to be transmitted through learning and thus prone to change rapidly from parents to children and from one generation to the next (Scupin). However, people in societies go to great lengths to conserve their culture and symbolic traditions. The persistence of cultural and symbolic tradition is as widespread as cultural change. The cultural evolution of the seclusion practice posits that the history of humanity is pursuing a certain fixed path, most likely that of social progress. The basic idea underlying cultural evolution is progressivism. While change does not necessarily assure progress, progress implacably requires change. Thus, each past event is not only chronologically, but casually tied to the present and future events. Societies exist in complex social environments and adapt themselves to these environments. It is thus inevitable that all societies change.

Society is often viewed as a system in which two interacting components, an internal and external one, are constantly at work. The internal component consists of all the psychological factors which move an individual to act – his will, desires, emotions, needs etc. – and the external component consist of environmental factors. Unless the latter are favourable, no effort of his in the direction of change would be of any use. On the other hand, however favourable they are, unless his psychological drives and dispositions are involved, no change will occur. Put positively, “the cause of change may be said to be an idea which is given concrete expression in

the external world” (Abraham 1975:218). The two, the idea with its cognitive, ideational, emotional contents, and the external world with all that it offers, interact to produce a change.

Most often, only the function, form, or principle is new, but not all three. For instance *Nkuho* is based on the principle that attaining womanhood requires thorough training to ensure physical and psychological preparedness towards the responsibility that comes with womanhood. The function of *Nkuho* is to educate and train prospective brides on how to effectively and efficiently run a home, lend necessary support to the husband and offer utmost care for the wellbeing of the husband in particular and the family in general. The form is being secluded for avoidance of distraction and enhancement of concentration to achieve desired result. Thus, even with modification in how the *Nkuho* practice is now carried out, the change cannot be said to have affected the function, form or principles wholly rather it is an amendment to suit today’s needs, desires and tastes.

Ekpenyong Mbuk, a native of Asang Eniong Abatim asserts that an outstanding feature prominent in the *Nkuho* practice of today is that the girls are no longer bare chest, they are fully clothed which is contrary to what was obtainable earlier (Personal Interview, 2016). In another light, Chief Arit Effanga, of Akwa Ikot Effanga, reveals that the wholesome embrace of western education has affected participation in the *Nkuho* practice but not to the extent of totally eliminating it as some still find it an irreplaceable thrilling experience necessary for every female folk. She made it clear “my niece of about 25 years old, though an undergraduate had apparently not been deterred from willingly going through the *Nkuho* exercise and she had gleefully returned to school to share her exciting experience” (Personal Interview, 2016).

In the view of Chief Effiom Ekpenyong, a native of Obio Usiere, the Efiks are likely to suffer culture loss due to culture diffusion. Gradually, the wholesome embrace of western education which actually consumes time gives no such time for *Nkuho* practice to be carried out as elaborately as was obtainable earlier. Even girls that still opt for the practice spend lesser time in the fattening room so as not to let their education suffer. Thus, the culture might wear out continuously (Personal Interview). Chief Okon Eyoof Ifiang King Duke affirms to this idea when he suggests that “modernization has brought unending alteration to the *Nkuho* practice and through it continuous watering down the culture might be lost” (Personal Interview, 2016). He relates the perceived low sense of morality nowadays as one of the numerous outcomes of discontinuing the *Nkuho* practice as it used to be. In his view, marriage sustainability was also rooted in the practice since on one hand it was a training ground for the would be wife to be effectively trained on how to run a household and take care of her husband and on the other hand, it was no mean feat for a man to pay up for the occasional expenses that would be called for during the period of fattening. Thus the man does not have the luxury of maltreating his wife not to talk of divorce as no parent would give out their daughter in marriage to a man that will most likely maltreat or divorce her. Any man with record of maltreatment or divorce stood a chance of losing favourable rating in the society and would find it difficult to remarry; this was possible then because marriage was being arranged by the elders of both families and based on unanimous agreement.

Mbuk further expresses that in recent times girls involved in *Nkuho* take major care to cut down on weight accumulation as eating habits have been influenced by the world view of fitness being associated with low fat. Thus, the girls that pass through the process gain just a little weight, looking healthy and well fed but not necessarily fat. In a personal interview with Oku Okpoene of Creek Town, she mentioned that in recent *Nkuho* practices activities have been introduced and some others modified to ensure the girls rather remain active, agile and focused.

He identified the major factor that has caused change in the practice to be the diminishing role of parents in choosing life partners for their children – though not totally ruled out as it is still obtainable in some communities but unlike what was obtainable in time past.

Mbuk also acknowledged that the *Nkuho* practice has undergone major changes and its appeal greatly reduced. In his view, fatness is no longer appreciated but rather looked down on. In terms of the training offered during the *Nkuho* practice, he stated that the absence of such training among prospective brides who do not participate in *Nkuho* exercise has left no gap in the role women play in home management and taking care of their husbands. This, he said is attributable to the various forms of education now acquired which have helped in shaping women toward fulfilment of certain responsibilities. However, Atim Ekanem, a native of Ifiang King Duke offered a persuasive counterargument as she insists that overlooking the training opportunity and lessons acquired through the *Nkuho* exercise has negative effects. And such is evident in increasing result of women's incapability of running the home properly or taking care of their husbands, she succinctly states: "the habit of cooking at home is fast being replaced by patronizing fast food joint, that is not our culture!" (Personal Interview, 2016). However, she agrees with Mbuk that the fatty nature *Nkuho* turned girls into has lost its appeal because people are now conscious of the health implication attributable to excess fat, thus the strive for healthy living is the order of the day. She claims the practice has both positive and negative impacts and allowing such culture to be lost will be to the disadvantage of the Efiks.

Conclusion

The *Nkuho* ceremony of the Efiks produces prospective brides that are enriched in the areas of physical beauty, good health, skills development, affection building and a reinforced appreciation and understanding of the traditions of the Efik society as well as their future roles as wives, mothers and home administrators. True, these young women are likely to gain some weight on account of the nature of the process, but then modernisation of the practice has put a check on accumulation of excess fat. Even so, it is important to reiterate that being fairly large, especially in the hip area, is considered a form of feminine beauty in a number of African communities. The *Nkuho* practice may not be as popular as it once was, particularly in urban areas, but it is still practiced widely.

REFERENCES

- Abraham, J. H. (1975). *Sociology: A Historical and Contemporary Outline*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Akak, E. O. (1982). *Efiks of Old Calabar: Vol. III. Culture and Superstitions*. Calabar: Akak and Sons.
- Cardi, M. C. (1899). "A Short Description of the Natives of the Niger Coast Protectorate with Some Account of their Customs, Religion and Trade". In M. H. Kingsley, *West African Studies* (p. 566). London: Macmillan and Company.
- Cohen, R. (1970). "Traditional Society in Africa". In J. N. Paden & E. W. Soja (Eds.), *The African Experience I: Essays* (p. 46). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Cotton, J. C. (1905). "The Calabar Marriage Law and Custom". *Journal of Africa Society*, IV, 227
- Ema, A. U. (1987). *Cross River State at a Glance*. Calabar: Government Press.
- Hart, A. K. (1964). *Report of the Enquiry into the Dispute over the Obongship of Calabar*. Enugu: Government Printer.
- Noah, M. E. (1980). *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans 1800-1885*. Uyo: Scholars Press.
- Samovar, L. A. & Porter R. E. (1997). *Intercultural Communication: A Reader* (8th ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing
- Scupin, R. (1995). *Cultural Anthropology: A Global Perspective* (2nd ed.). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Tylor, E. B. (2010). *Primitive Culture: Vol. 2. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tivel, David. (2012). *Evolution: The Universe, Life, Cultures, Ethnicity, Religion, Science and Technology*. Pittsburg: Dorrance Publishing