

Ebre Dance and the Integrity of Women Among The Ibibio And Annang: Lessons for Development from Pre-colonial to Contemporary Era

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Abstract

Recent researches have opened new aspects of our culture by show-casing how these cultural aspects bring to light the role in moulding characters of people such as the Ibibio women today. Ebre dance specifically is used in the moulding and placing women where they belong in the evolving society. The paper uses survey method in the analysis of the role of Ebre dance in maintaining the integrity of women in Ibibio-South-South Nigeria. The findings of the study indicates that Ebre dance has actually groomed women, maintain law and order, brought about good moral upbringing among young girls who are preparing themselves for adulthood or marriage life. The paper therefore concludes that women should be encouraged to keep to the acceptable societal standards since they form bulk of the members of the society. Besides, women should be role model as they are at the fore-front of bringing up children especially females that would be the future wives. The Ebre dance group has actually maintain the moral sanctity of our forebears.

Introduction

The Ibibio people are the fourth largest ethnic nationality and occupies part of the South-South geo-polity east of the River Niger in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. They are said to have migrated from Ibom, a place quite near Arochukwu in the present Abia State of Nigeria. Edet Udo (1983) noted that the exact origin, migration and settlement is not known. From the historical accounts, the Ibibio people must have settled here even before the 13th century AD. From the oral tradition, Ibibio people are believed to be very intelligent, industrious and civil in dealing with issues and problems.

The main objectives of this paper are to show-case the Ibibio women's communal relationship translated to maintaining integrity oneness. Ebre also encourages the spirit of individual development through *Osusu* (self keeping). *Osusu* is a weekly or monthly financial contributory scheme among members. The contributory saving are given to members on rotatory basis. The study discusses the need to encourage women not only of the Ibibio kingdom to be morally upright and also organize themselves for worth-while development. Development here embraces both the moral as well as economic. Without good moral development the economic may be aborted or dislocated. Moral development means the inculcating in women especially the young ones the moral values such as honesty, truthfulness, obedience, respect for constituted authorities, love for one another and the spirit for manual labour. The economic aspect of development is the weekly or monthly self-keeping of *Osusu*, which are given to contributors on rotational basis. The manner the *Osusu* is obtain is through the love for manual labour – farming and petty trading. Development is a panacea to progress and growth of communities.

Ebre is a folk dance performed predominantly by married and elderly women in the Ibibio and Annang land of Akwa Ibom State. Among these traditional societies, everybody belonged to an age grade or association. The society is homogeneous and simple. Nobody could exist alone in the society except in the company of his fellowman. The Ebre traditional association did not only serve

as an entertainment outlet for these women, but it was equally an institution for the industrial women in the society. It was avenue for these women to regulate on the code of conduct of the women.

Among the Ibibio and Annang, the word "Ebre" means water yam, the name was significantly chosen to represent the role and importance of women in food crop production. While the husbands in these societies owned the yam crop, and also planted banana and plantain in their compounds, food crops like Ebre (water yam), cocoyam, cassava, maize and vegetables such as pumpkin, okro, melon etc belonged to their wives. The better the Ebre (water yam) harvest, the better the present a woman expected from her husband. Ekong notes that:

The Ebre society derived its name from the fact that their meetings and debut usually started with the harvest of this yam variety. Otherwise, the Ebre society was a society for morally upright and industrious women. A woman had to have passed through the fattening room to be eligible for admission into the Ebre society. This of course meant that the woman must have been a virgin at the time she was married. Thieves and women of easy virtue were exposed and expelled from the club and in this way the society served mainly as a control on the morals of women in the society (Ekong; 2001: 211).

The Ebre as a whole celebrates ancient observances and customs; the notions and beliefs of the common people as well as their tradition, superstitions and prejudice. The performance provides a veritable means for ethnographic communication and linguistic practice. These social exchange usually manifested as forms of imitation of goodness. "They also provide explications for the Ibibio self-distinction from greed and gluttony, hatred and maliciousness, adultery, thievery and similar unfitting social misdemeanours" (Noah, 2005: 63).

Words, musical beats, sounds, parody, custom, mime, imitations, make-up and reverberations are thoroughly integrated during Ebre performances. The performances are usually fresh and

different from previous ones and are diverse and complicated cultural resources handed down through the ages from ancestors to descendants orally. These oral cultural resources include; folktales of animals, men and spirits incantations, gestures, dances, songs, ritual recitations and ceremonies.

The Ebre is a folk dance performed predominantly by married and elderly women in Ibibio land. Their proactive strong and energetic stylish, elegant and feminized dance steps reconstruct in performance, the virtual pride and ambidexterity of womanhood. The pride of being tender at heart, but strong in character (Noah, 2005: 63).

Tallbot (1969) is of the view that the Ebre originated among the Ibibio of present Nsit Ubium Local Government of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Members agree that the word "Ebre" originated from a specie of yam called "Abre". Abre is a very significant food crop in Ibibioland in that it served as an essential part of most of the sacrifices performed by men and women in Ibibioland. It was used in sacrifice to the goddess of fertility before planting season and harvesting for bounty yields. It was also used for ritual before the outing ceremony of Mbopbo (Mbopbo means fattened girl or woman). On the question of "Abre" relation with women, Etuk and Ina (2010) opined that "Abre" was cultivated only by women. The name coincided with that of this perennial social institution thereby signifying the importance of women to a family, community and society as a whole. The association was considered so dignifying and attractive that it was copied by other Ibibio groups. Dress was so beautiful and costly that only rich women were able to join the association. The entrance fee was so high that each woman received financial support from her husband, relatives, friends and well-wishers.

During the time of the celebration of Ebre, husbands presented their wives with Inam (sharp pointed sticks), for the harvest of the Ebre on a certain day of the week, which the women in the village would harvest, the Ebre. The water yam was cooked to entertain the entire family, while a part was given out to friends and well-wishers (mostly men) who themselves would reciprocate such

gesture during the men's yam festival, thus emphasizing the degree of reciprocal gift exchange.

According to Akpan (2008) the Ebre was an institution whereby social norms and values of the society were upheld and checked among the womenfolk. The men in the society had the "Akata" cultural group which use to perform in the cover of darkness/night while the Ebre had its performances displayed in the day in the open for all to witness. In some of their songs they mentioned names of culprits or openly imitated their actions.

All married women who had advanced in age joined the Ebre but they were not to be of questionable character and would have passed through the Mbopo institution (that is, the rite of passage for womanhood/fattening). A member should not be closely related to a thief, or have any past record of thievery or adultery. A mother whose child had been pregnant out of wedlock was automatically expelled.

Ebre Among the Ika (Annang Community)

Among the Ika people of the Annang Community, Ebre was normally held two weeks before the Urua Mbopo (celebration in the market in honour of fattened girls). All Ika women traveled in bands to the Urua Ebre (market for the celebration of Ebre) and they had their bodies stained or adorned with indigo juice. To grace the occasion, every husband made a present of new cloth to his wife before she left for the arena. All married women attended the occasion and palm wine was usually served freely and copiously too. The women later returned to their villages. In the village, the oldest women/head of Ebre sacrificed the Ebre along with other items to the Iso-Abasi Ebre (Ebre shrine) (Umoren, 2008).

Ebre Among the Eket (An Ibibio Community)

Among the Eket sub-group people of Ibibio, the Ebre play was also characterized by rituals during its seasons. The Ebre women moved from the Ata Esien (central village square) to the sacred streams

(Idim Usen Emana or Idim) to fetch water. People were not allowed to fetch water from these streams on certain days and fishing from these streams was equally forbidden. The women then proceeded to Ata Esien, and the water collected was emptied into a sacred pot called Abañ ukpon iduñ (the pot of the soul of the village). None members were, however, not allowed to witness the rituals and rites (Ukpong, 2008).

Paraphernalia of Ebre Cultural Dance

Aban Ebre (Ebre Water Pot)

The Ebre club was symbolized by a well decorated and well polished water pot carried by a member of the group during its ritual dances. Among the Ibibios and Annang, a woman's soul was believed to be intimately connected with her water pot. The pot was chosen as a befitting symbol for the Ebre association. The pot was/is a fragile object. The breaking of the pot symbolized an irreparable damage done to a woman who had breached the women's moral code. It emphasized the need for a woman to safeguard her character and integrity most jealously. During the period of the celebration of Ebre, each member drank from the ceremonial pot. It was believed that the spirits of the ancestors and the gods had been ritually invoked into the pot to punish offenders of the women's code. If a woman who had breached the women's moral code drank from the water pot or swore falsely on it, she would die as proof of the guilt (Akpan, 2008).

The Akpan Ebre (Ebre Basket)

The Ebre club also had a symbolical basket. The basket had inside it a knife with a white cloth tied around the handle. The basket represented the industrial requirement of a woman as a housewife as well as the secrecy which surrounded some aspect of a woman's life. During the celebration of Ebre, each member symbolically put the Ebre tuber into the Ebre basket. This indicated her industry and commitment to the women's cause.

The Nkuon (Gong)

The Ebre also had a gong which members beat occasionally as they sang. The gong is made up of carved wood, conical in shape with one end covered with hides of either goat or cow. A small stick of about one foot usually accompanies the gong. The stick is used for beating the gong.

Functions of the Ebre

The main function of Ebre was to safeguard the honesty, integrity and industry of women. Thieves and harlots were expelled from the club as were women whose daughters became pregnant before fattening and eventual marriage. A thief among women would be disgraced publicly by the smearing of her body with charcoal and parading her along the streets of a number of villages amidst jeering songs and gossips before being expelled from the Ebre. A child of a known thief could also be beaten to death if he/she stood or passed by at the time the Ebre play was performed, such a child would be greeted with shouts of *eyen ino, Uka idighe afo adi* (that is, the child of a thief why are you here when your mother is nowhere to be found around here (Johnny, 2008)).

During the Ebre dance, the women sang about the behaviour of women in the society, mentioning the incidence which took place and even the names of the women involved in such incidence. They sang about young women with unhealthy characters such as women who could not cook, keep a home, and women who had stolen or committed adultery. The Ebre association was an institution which also served as a co-operative society for industrious women. The husbands usually gave farmlands only to their wives in the past. These women knowing they were only getting stipends from their husbands, concentrated on their Ebre (water yam) cultivation from where they could cater for their children from the proceeds and equally care for themselves, materially (Akpan, 2008). The club also served as an entertainment outlet for these women. The members were able to relax and sing

together, exchange pleasantries and show off their products as well as exchange these products.

In the days when the Ibibio and the Annang had no forms of Western educational institutions, the Ebre women assisted in educating the younger women in the society. These women gave training to the younger women on how to farm, cook, manage a home and they equally cared for the Mbopos (fattening girls). The Ebre women used to inculcate morals on the younger women and generally educate them on the ways of life. Some Ebre women were also the midwives in the society. They cooked for younger nursing mothers, massaged their bodies, bathed them, and gave them instructions on child care. Members of this association served as the watch dogs of the society, keeping tabs on every woman's activity in the community and this put a check on the women's behaviour. An Ebre woman was completely dedicated to her husband and her marriage and as such was able to withstand the different trials in her marital home. The husband may decide to marry another wife but this was not an excuse for her to divorce him or be unfaithful.

The Ebre and the Iban Isong

Among the Ibibio and Annang people of Akwa Ibom State, before modern judicial systems came into existence, law and order, social norms and values, conflict resolution was usually maintained by traditional associations. The men had the Akata, Ekpe and the Ekpo society to keep law and order in the community while the women had the Ebre and the Iban Isong (women of the land). Ebre added value in the keeping of law and order in the society, that is, they assisted the Ekpo in the maintenance of law in the society. The Iban Isong constituted a sort of women's government in every village community. Its members were also members of the Ebre. The judicial body was presided over by the Eka Iban (mother of the women), who could also be the head of the Ebre. This made it difficult to distinguish the Iban Isong from that of Ebre. It has been suggested that at the beginning Ebre did not exist in all the villages but with time every village imbibed the culture of Ebre. In such

cases, the functions of the Ebre were completely taken over by the Iban Isong.

While the Ebre group exposes activities of women which were contrary to the stipulated behaviour, norms and moral standards of the society, they also brought their crimes to the knowledge of the whole community through the means of songs, mimes and dances. The crimes committed by these women were usually referred to the Iban Isong forum, where they were tried and appropriate punishment meted out.

When these women (Iban Isong) met as a judicial body, they had the right to impose any form of sanction or fines on offending members and such sanctions would be acceded to by the village head. When the group functioned as Iban Isong Esit (hardhearted women), their operations were usually directed to men who have insulted one of their members or denigrated womanhood generally. Such operations involved curses, abuses and destruction of property or exacting of heavy fines.

In Ebre, performances are enacted around songs that lampoon deviant human behaviour in the society and also songs that upholds the norms of the society. Veritable examples include the following:

1. **Annang**

Ebe ete nyong
ami nti nyongo
ebe ete nyongo
kpan iko nyongo
nyong nkpon ayen ida
nyong nkpon ebe ida
kpan iko nyongo (x)

English

My husband says I should go, in earnest I cannot go
I can't go and leave my child
And I can't go and leave my husband
(dedication to marriage).

Annang

Ami nkidoho ebe nno uyai
ami ndo nno usen akpan nkpo
nango adodo ebe ada nkim edem (2x)

English

I did not marry my husband just because he is handsome,
But I married him because I know
he will always be there to support me in need
(security in marriage).

Ibibio

Iban ema esian (2x)
eyo ama asiere
oyom etok mmon eyie,
oyon etok mkpo adia

English

Women love to be clean
Early in the morning
First tidy themselves up
Then they find food to eat.
(Cleanliness).

Ibibio

Anwan ufok ebe onyong kusiere
Ado ebe onyong ke usere (2x)

English

A married woman comes home in the morning
She is married yet she comes back home
in the morning
(marital immorality/adultery).

Ibibio

Ebe in okobo nwongo mbiam nsin eyen

Akpaniko nwongoke mbiam nsin eyen
Isua mma mkpa eyen anam ikpo

English

My husband asked me to swear an oath on my child's life
I can never swear an oat on my child's life so that
When I die, my child would be alive to bury me
(value of a child).

6. **Ibibio**

Ebe eke nno nnaira ooh
Ndop nda okuk
Nnaira akem nso?
Ndop nda okok
Mme ekem inung efere
Ndop nda okuk
Mme ekem iyak efere ndop nda okuk

English

My husband gave me money
Money that can't afford anything money that can't buy salt
for soup
Money that can't buy fish for soup.

7. **Ibibio**

Uma ukop uyo mkporo
Kuk udok sin idem
Iban ubim imaha ino
Kuk udok sin idem

English

When you hear the drums of Ebre
Hide yourself in the house
If you are a thief
Ebre women do not want to see a thief.

8. **Ibibio**

Ebe ete iya ikido ufa unwan
Ami nte enye kedo di
Ufa anwan asian idem
Nwam nnyin kusian idem
Ke ebe nnyin ekere ndaraka

English

My husband wants to marry another wife
I have given him a permission to bring
in a new wife. The new wife should not
be over excited but should have it in mind
that our husband may still want to marry
another new life someday.
(marital trials/endurance)

9. **Ibibio**

Ukama eyen ikake eka
Yak nka udua nkedep Ebre
Mma dim ban nteme ekpang
Yak nka udua nkedep Ebre

English

A mother is not ire to caring for her child
Let me go to the market to buy
Ebre so I can prepare food for my child.
(child care)

10. **Ibibio**

Okpodo obo ku udoho ino
Kad ubok ise
Bo ku yikpe kad ubok ise.

English

If you say that you are not a thief
Spread out your hands for
All

Conclusion

The Ebre dance existed in pre-colonial times to regulate the conduct of women in the society. The staged dance provided entertainment for the community and is open to women from all walks of life especially those who were mere appendages in the society since the Ebre women were active and vocal. With their dances and their activities in their cultural society, they contributed as well as contributing significantly to the development of the Ibibio especially within the women. In the Ebre the women performed well in the upbringing of especially women, preparing for adulthood – in the process inculcated the food moral values and ethics of the community. In the Osusu contribution, there was room for self-development. Dance became an institution and performs an educational role for Ibibio women for more than a century.

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