

TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CEREMONIES AMONG THE IBIBIO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA: A STUDY IN THEATRICS

Bassey UBONG

Federal College of Education, NIGERIA

Abstract. ‘Traditional’ marriage among Ibibio people of Southern Nigeria is as much entertainment as it is serious drama that prepares a couple and their families for a life-long relationship. Although the script may be short, the entire event, from the pre-public ceremony to the post-public, in-house ceremonies is a deft admixture of rhetoric, song, dance, spectacle, character, and thought. The difference is that the event is not an imitation, but a mixture of human action and reaction in real time. The three unities may not apply as action is usually originated long before that special day but each traditional marriage (public) ceremony that precedes, and is seen as being more important than a ‘white wedding,’ can be seen as a complete event in and of itself, taking place at the same venue, within a time frame and milieu, and concluded in one day. The performance lasts a lifetime and binds not just two people, but two families, sometimes two communities and two cultures. Christianity and economics have forced changes but the fundamentals remain

– that the event is verily an admixture of drama and reality aimed at ensuring continuity of society.

Keywords: traditional marriage, theatrics, drama, performance, ceremony

Introduction

The Ibibio people live and function in the South East of Nigeria. Their origins and migration have been a source of speculation, ranging from the fact that they migrated from Israel (Umoh-Faithman, 1999) to their Bantu origins (Udo, 1983), the latter somehow doubtful because Encarta (2006) holds that the Bantus, no longer regarded as a cultural but a language group, actually migrated from Eastern Region of Nigeria between 2000BC and 1000 AD (this migration is regarded as one of the largest in human history).

Marriage is regarded as a complex of social, political, religious, and economic systems in Ibibio land (Udo, 1983). It covers diverse aspects of the society as family and community relationships, sex and sexuality, inheritance, and even political power (as rulership particularly in the past resided in specific and designated families both the secular and the religious).

Given the fact that marriage is a fulcrum in Ibibio society, there are elaborate ceremonies on it before, during, and after the formal handing over of a girl or woman to her suitor. The ceremonies are many, from the initial visit to ‘knock on the door’ (*nkɔñ udɔk*) through the several negotiations and final public ceremony, to the myriad of ceremonies following the birth of a child and the fact that on cessation of the union or life, certain rites have to be executed to ensure sustained bond between the families and communities (if applicable) and even the sustenance of life. This paper reviews some performance aspects of the final, public ceremony of ‘traditional marriage’ in

Ibibio land and provides an appendix – a list of items the groom's family is requested to present to the bride's family.

Theoretical perspectives

Barrenger (2006) distinguishes between drama – the writing of script for the stage, and theatre, the performance of the script. He states:

[T]heatrical texts, often referred to as *drama*, usually provide the vital framework of a performance. Greek philosopher Aristotle, writing in the 4th century BC, thought of drama as the most direct response to humanity's need to imitate experience. The word *drama* has its source in the Greek verb *dran*, meaning "to do," "to act," or "to perform." Aristotle further defined drama as "an imitation of an action." His concept of imitation (*mimesis*, in Greek) begins with the playwright's deliberate selection and arrangement of events, words, and images into a dramatic pattern that makes up a meaningful course of human events. In Aristotle's famous definition, drama is an imitation of an action that is whole, complete, and a certain magnitude or scope.

Classical theory of drama derives in the main from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle had more respect for tragedy than comedy and his six elements of drama were in fact directed at the genre known as tragedy. The six essential elements are plot, character, thought, spectacle, language and melody. Aristotle states:

[N]ecessarily, therefore, there are in tragedy as a whole, considered as a special form, six constituent elements, viz. Plot, Character, Language, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody. Of these elements, two [Language and Melody] are the *media* in which they affect the imitation, one [Spectacle] is the *manner*, and three [Plot, Character, Thought] are the *objects* they imitate;

and besides these there are no other parts. So then they employ these six forms, not just some of them so to speak; for every drama has spectacle, character, plot, language, melody, and thought in the same sense, but the most important of them is the organization of the events [the plot] (*Poetics*, 1982, J. Hutton, Trans.).

Wilson (1991) opens his book *The Theatre Experience* by indicating that there is more to theatre than what takes place on a formal stage. He also notes that the theatre experience is universal, taking place all the time in every tribe, tongue, time, and clime. He states:

[T]he impulse towards theater is universal. It has occurred wherever human society has developed: in Europe and Asia, throughout Africa, and among Native Americans. In virtually every culture recorded in history or studied by anthropologists, we find rituals, religious ceremonies, and celebrations that include elements of theater. One element is a presentation by performers in front of an audience – a ceremony, for example, conducted by religious leaders before members of a community.

A typical traditional marriage ceremony in Ibibio land meets these elements, as there are performers executing certain rites that have evolved over time and are known as part of a process that leads to legitimization of the human relationship between a man and a woman. There is everything in drama in a traditional marriage rite.

The Ibibio - controversial origins and controversial composition

Amoah (1992) has done in-depth work on the Ibibio people of Southern Nigeria but he, like others before him, dwells extensively on the controversies that relate to the clan component of the Ibibios. Amoah (1992)

like Udo (1983) documents the major clans in the Ibibio tribe as Ibibio, Annang, Efik, Oron, and Eket. He adds some communities along the estuary of the number one river in the area – the Cross River – described by Portuguese explorers as Rio Del Rey.

The Ibibio is regarded as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Ibo (*cf.* Amoah, 1992). Some writers, particularly British historians as detailed in Udo (1983) regard the Ibibio as closely related to the Ibos particularly as the first landing point from the claimed migration from Israel or Egypt was at Arochukwu, an Ibo community. The snag is that some people feel the people of Arochukwu descended from the Ibibio. Whatever the origin and whatever the composition, the Ibibio people remain a subject that should be studied particularly in the cultural aspects.

It is necessary to put on record that the Ibibio was the first ethnic group in pre-independent Nigeria to call for creation of states (loose federalism) and the first to realize the pivotal role of tertiary education and so sent seven of their sons to the United States of America on group scholarship for university education. Interestingly, the seven beneficiaries came from the “Greater Ibibio” comprising all the ethnic groups that currently claim independence.

Ibibio traditional marriage rite as drama

Although Aristotle concentrated on tragedy, the six elements or principles as well as his thesis on the three unities of time, space and action are used to denote the principles of drama generally – which included comedy among other genres – and for all intents and purposes, a traditional marriage ceremony is a comedy. The script may be shallow (as in an one-page ‘programme’), nevertheless, a typical traditional marriage is a deft admixture of rhetoric, song, dance, spectacle, character, and thought. The difference is

that the event is not an imitation, but a mixture of human action and reaction in real time. The three unities may not apply as action is usually originated long before that special day but each traditional marriage ceremony can be seen as complete in itself, taking place at the same venue, within a time frame and milieu, and concluded in one day.

A typical ceremony starts with a plot, that is, an elaborate arrangement of events that has to be guided by a Chairman along with the Master of Ceremonies. Because people are involved, character and thought of the individuals are brought to bear on the actions that are seen in the ceremony. How a particular ceremony turns out depends on the actions and reactions of the *dramatis personae* in a particular event.

Diction and song are of great significance in a traditional marriage ceremony. Each head negotiator ('Chief Spokesman') is usually carefully selected by the two families. What they require most are negotiating skills, a wonderful command of language particularly figures of speech (what Aristotle described as "embellished language), and bagfuls of jokes and repartees. At present, professional Masters of Ceremonies and even clowns have taken over from the 'Chief Spokesmen' of the past. Song and dance are interspersed, in the past by cultural troupes, at present by a combination of cultural troupes and band set, depending on the size of the purse of the bride and groom's families.

Aristotle describes spectacle as the *manner* in a theatrical performance in *Poetics*. Spectacle is more and more being linked to visual effects and devices including mechanization of the stage or performance which started in the days of Euripides who introduced the *dues ex machine* as a prelude to the dénouement of some of his plays. Forms of spectacle in Ibibio traditional marriage ceremony are modern, and include most recently, special tents and seats for the bride and groom, elaborate decoration of venues, and a few cases of fireworks.

Performance in Ibibio traditional marriage ceremonies

Going through a traditional marriage ceremony is a trip in theatics. A typical traditional marriage ceremony is a study in aesthetics and in particular, drama, with ‘wordsmithing,’ dance, music, and even subtle chicanery playing a part. Playing ‘games’ and 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 (*ndø odo mbre*). Each stage has its dynamics but generally, certain events must take place for a traditional marriage ceremony to be regarded as complete and successful. Five of the stages are described herein because of the theatrical qualities associated with them.

Opening entertainment – the groom’s direct entourage (rather than all invited guests) is escorted by maidens or women of the bride’s family to the sitting room in the family house. There an array of foods are displayed, ranging from roasted palm fruits (aduek eyop), palm kernel seeds (isip), and boiled and sliced cassava chippings (edita iwa) to cassava *fofo*, pounded yam with assorted soups and in the modern era, fried rice garnished with salad. The essence of such opulent display is to assure the groom and his entourage that the prospective bride knows a lot about food and will thus feed her husband well. A knowledgeable woman then elaborately presents, explains, and tastes each food item before the groom’s entourage is served.

Negotiation phase – two friendly but ‘warring’ parties are arranged opposite each other as the negotiating teams of the bride’s family and the groom’s family. What the bride’s family takes into the house in terms of quantity and quality ultimately depends on skill of the chief negotiators on either side rather than on the “List” earlier submitted and even discussed in private by the two families. This phase is usually the most exciting and one

must say exacting because of the need for profuse employment of proverbs, repartees, tropes, fables, jokes, anagrams, and once in while outright clowning. Unfortunately modern trends have gradually cut on time used for negotiations in the past decade to the present time when it has been completely eliminated. Everything requested, given, and accepted are done days before the public is invited. Professional masters of ceremony fill the gap with jokes, repartees, and choreography.

The search – the bride, being a very precious being, is ‘hidden’ from view much of the ceremony till the scenes regarding requests, offer, and acceptance of items in the ‘List’ have played themselves out in full. The groom’s team, about now becoming impatient and getting restive, openly demand the appearance of the subject of their mission – the bride. They are told to organize a search party, during which a woman in the bride’s family will be persuaded to lead the search team. She makes demands, makes at least two trips, appearing with females other than the bride (usually an old woman and later a little girl). By the third trip, the bride is escorted by a long dance train comprising females of her age group, friends, and family. The bride is usually elaborately dressed and decked with trinkets and bracelets from the hair to the ankles. It is a triumphant moment for both parties after a long battle of wits.

The Mock Resistance – while the process of exchange of drinks and pledges among the bride, groom, and parents of the two is being arranged, in some parts of Ibibio land and particularly in Oron, a mock resistance is put up by a young man from the bride’s village or if both spouses are from the same village, from another family or another village. The interloper declares that he had earlier expressed interest or at least had eyes on the girl and would on no account allow the groom to take away the dream of his life. Brief negotiations

follow, after which the defeated suitor (interloper) weeps out of the scene, with an enriched purse and some spirits under his armpits in tow. This performance is described in Bassey Ubong's *Lovelorn* (2009).

The Nuptial dance - what is usually described as the “first joint public activity by the new couple” usually marks the end of the ceremony of joining a young man and a young woman in an everlasting union of two persons, two families, and sometimes two villages or two tribes, or two cultures. The new couple dances to music supplied by a band set or traditional dance group. They are “sprayed” with coins (in the past) and currency notes of which this has currently been prohibited by the Federal Government of Nigeria in a bid to “give respect” to one of the country’s national symbols – the Naira.

Other performances

Other less elaborate performances include “blocking” the entrance to the village (if the groom is not an indigene) by young men who would inform the groom’s entourage that “people keep this village roads from weeds” and people protected the girl about to be taken out of the village or a family. Items usually taken from the groom include one football, a packet of cigarettes, a bottle of spirit, a bottle of wine, and cash as negotiated.

The intermission that gets the audience to watch the couple and their families is in itself a rite. Wine is popped, drinks are poured, sipped and exchanged among the bride, groom, and their parents. Pledges of good behavior and ‘to love and to cherish’ are made. In some case (and recently) Pastors or religious leaders are brought to pray and confirm the traditional performance.

Change in performance

Skolnick (2006) submits that two important changes in theme and influence in marriage in western societies are increased equality between the partners (hitherto skewed in favor of men because of the patriarchal structure of the society) and shift of emphasis from social reproduction to intimacy as the primary motive for marriage. Although cursory view would reveal considerable shift in the status of wives in Ibibio land (from those to be heard at the backhouse, to persons now actively participating in business discussions involving third parties), equality of the sexes is greater in educated families and families where religion encourages partnership rather than servile relationships. It however appears traditional religionists and the less educated do not still see women as equal partners in marriage.

There is no doubt that with higher levels of education, higher levels of exposure to liberating literature, and with more time for leisure, there is greater tilt towards intimacy in marriages in Ibibio land as against the past when farm work from dawn to dusk would leave both partners too tired for sexual relationships for mutual satisfaction rather than for procreation. Nevertheless, procreation remains the principal reason for marriage.

What has changed significantly in marriage in Ibibio land has to do with performance and that during traditional marriage ceremonies. Imperatives such as ending the function at night, altercations arising from conflict during negotiations on anything from the quality and quantity of items on the ‘list’ to size of bride price, have all but disappeared. At present, negotiations take place between the two families in private and all the things to be given and received are concluded prior to the public ceremony. On the other hand, “white wedding” has changed very little beyond increased sophistication and cost.



Fig. 1. Traditional boat-on-land dance. The lady is from the riverine community



Fig. 2. Assorted food to welcome groom's family



Fig. 3. Gifts o the groom's family at the end of the ceremony



Fig. 4. Bride and groom before their families for teeing of knot and blessings

Summary and conclusion

The Ibibio people of Southern Nigeria have elaborate ceremonies for the legitimization of a nuptial union between a man and a woman. The ‘traditional marriage’ ceremony, currently the culmination of a series of activities and closed negotiations between the two primary families in the transaction, demonstrates elements of drama in the classical Aristotelian mould, to wit, plot, character, language, thought, and spectacle. These are expected to fall into the ambit of the three unities of time, space, and action, i.e., discounting the series of negotiations pre-dating the public ceremony.

Each traditional marriage ceremony is a complete outing and is usually an event eagerly expected and much cherished by all parties to it – the bride and groom, their immediate and distant families, the community, and guests and friends. Although there have been elements of change in line with economic and religious expectations, the fundamentals remain; the ceremony will continue not only as a cultural but also as a social event that provides participants with varied rewards and memories.

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APPENDIX

Sample of Bride's Family 'List' (From Oboyo Ikot Ita, Nsit Ibom Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State)

Mbup Ndø Ayin ("Asking for the woman's hand")

1. Ete: Ekpeme Schnapp ked [Father: One bottle of Schnapps (Seaman's) wrapped in a loin cloth}
2. Eka: Ekpeme wine ked ewañ ke զֆօն isin (Mother: One bottle of wine wrapped in a loin cloth)
3. Carton beer ked (One carton of beer)
4. Crate memmem mmin ked (One crate of mineral water)
5. Uman ebot ked (okop usem) (One native nanny goat)

Mkpø Ndítø Ete (Extended Family)

1. Carton beer ked (one carton of beer)
2. Crate mmem mmem min ked (one crate of mineral water)
3. Iwot unwօն (one 'head' or sheaf of tobacco)
4. Ete ibօն ked (one pod of native kola nuts)
5. Okuk usiak ibօն (cash for breaking of the kola, varied, from N200.00)
6. Ekpeme ufօfօp ked (one bottle of native gin)

7. Okpo ukot okook ked (one keg of palm wine)
8. Ekpeme whisky ked (one bottle of whisky)
9. Ebot nditø ete (one nanny goat for the extended family)
10. OkAk nditø ete (cash for the extended family, varied, ranging from N5, 000.00)
11. OkAk itøñ ebot, (cash on the ‘neck’ of the goat, varied, ranging from N500.00).

Mkpø Etebom mme Ekaete (Grandfather and Grandmother)

1. Uman ebot ked (one nanny goat)
2. Qføñ isin, qfoñ idem, qføñ iwod ked ked (one piece of loin cloth, one top, one head tie for the grandmother)
3. Qføñ isin, qføñ idem, itam, esañ ked ked (one each of loin cloth, top, hat, and walking stick for the grandfather)
4. Okposoñ mmin ked (one bottle of spirit)
5. Ekpeme uføføp ked (one bottle of native gin)
6. Ekpeme wine ked (one bottle of wine)
7. Iwot unwøñ ked (one sheaf of tobacco)
8. Akañ (limestone)
9. Ete ibøñ ked mme usiak ibøñ (one pod of kola nuts plus N200.00)
10. Udia ition (5 yams)
11. Okpo ukot økøk ked (one calabash or keg of palm wine)
12. OkAk etebom mme ekaete (cash for grandfather and grandmother, negotiable, say about N5, 000.00)

Mkpo Ndø Ete Ayin (Father)

1. Asaña nta whisky mme English wax (one bottle of 3-in-1 whisky wrapped with English wax loin cloth)
2. Ebot ete ayin – okop usem (one native nanny goat)

3. Akamba ọfọñ idem mme English wax (one ‘chieftaincy’ top with English wax loin cloth)
4. Esañ, itam, ikpoukot mme stokin, ufʌkeyo, ked ked (one each of walking stick, hat, umbrella)
5. Siöt, sinkin, nkanika ubòk, ked ked (one each of shirt, singlet, wrist watch)
6. Ọfọñ ukuoko idem (one bath towel)
7. Whisky mme schnapps carton kedeked (one carton each of whisky and schnapps)
8. Carton beer duop kuto kuto (10 cartons of assorted beer)
9. Crate mmem mmem mmin duop (10 crates of mineral water)
10. Ufɔfop ke ufa otu [native gin in a new (ceramic) jar]
11. Ukòkòk unwọn (ground tobacco) mme akañ (limestone)
12. Ibøñ mme usiak ibøñ (a pod of native kola nuts plus cash)

Mkpo Ndø Eka Ayin (Father)

1. Ebot eka - okop usem, ked (one native goat)
2. Ekpeme brandy ked enwañ ọfọñisin – English wax (one bottle of brandy wrapped with loin cloth)
3. Ọfọñisin – George, Hollandis ked ked (one each of George and Hollandis)
4. Itoñ ọfọñ iba – lace (two lace blouses)
5. Ubøp eba, ọfọñiwot, ọfọñ adaha idem, iba, ñkpø ubòk mme ñkpø itoñ, iba iba (two each of brassiere, headtie, underskirt, lingerie)
6. Nkanika ubòk, ufʌk eyo, ikpa ukot, ked ked (one each of wrist watch, umbrella, pair of shoes)
7. Okposoñ mmin carton ked kuto kuto (one carton of assorted spirits)
8. Beer carton ition (5 cartons of beer)
9. Mmem mmem mmin crate ition (5 crates of mineral water)

10. Aman akama ked mme ukop (one big metal basin with a cover)

Mkpø otu owo (General)

1. Nsuan nsuan mmin (assorted drinks for the guests)
2. Okuk ibeñe (cash for entertainment, negotiable but should be reasonable)

Mkpø Okpøñø (Name sake)

1. Ebot okpøñø (one nanny goat)
2. Oføñ isin, oføñ idem, uføk iwod ked ked (loin cloth, top, headgear, either male or female)
3. OkAk okpøñø (cash for the namesake, negotiable)

Observations:

1. The things for the extended family are listed before others, emphasizing the place of the extended family system in community life.
2. Any requirement for cash is negotiable including bride price.
3. Items for the grandmother and mother are usually bought by the bride although with money from the groom
4. Demands for material things are made because after marriage, the woman, brought up and educated by her family, will generate wealth for the husband's family. She is therefore an investment with returns lasting a lifetime.

✉ Bassey Ubong
Federal College of Education (Technical)
PMB 11, Omoku, Rivers State, NIGERIA
E-Mail: basubong@yahoo.com