

Criminal and Anti-Social Behaviors Inherent in Ekpo Festival Among Ibibio of Nigeria: A Call for Cultural Reformation

Ojo Matthias Olufemi Dada^{1, *}, Ayodele Abel Olurotimi²

¹Department of Sociology, Crawford University of the Apostolic Faith Mission, Igbesa, Ogun State, Nigeria

²General Studies Unit, Crawford University of the Apostolic Faith Mission, Igbesa, Ogun State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examined the Ekpo festival among Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Survey method was used in the research conducted and the study areas were: Ituk Mbang, Ndon Uruan and Ikono Obio in Uruan Local Government Area and Ikot Udo in Ibeskipo Local Government Area all in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Six respondents were sampled using convenience sampling under non-probability sampling technique. In-depth interviews were conducted as sources of data collection and soft data in form of photographs were also used. The data from in-depth interviews and photographs were analyzed using content analyses. The study investigated the processes involved in the initiation into Ekpo cult and the stages involved during the Ekpo festival were discussed. The functions of Ekpo cult (through Ekpo festival) in entertainment, settlement of disputes and social control were mentioned as the prominent functions of Ekpo cult. The study discovered that malicious damage of farm crops and livestock animals, forceful initiation, beating of women and girls, keeping non-initiates, women and children indoor during the festival, economic retardedness during the festival and fearful looking masks were the criminal and anti-social behaviors exhibited during the Ekpo festival. The paper recommended that Akwa Ibom State should legislate against exhibition of criminal and anti-social behaviors during Ekpo festival and other festivals within the state. State government should re-organize the festival in such a way that it would attract people from other states and outside Nigeria to boost the revenue of the state government and increase the economic gains of the Akwa Ibom State people. Community leaders were equally implored to preach against criminal and anti-social behaviors during this festival, using Christianity and western education as potential tools. These are calls for cultural reformation.

Keywords

Ekpo Cult, Ekpo Festival, Initiates, Masks and Akwa Ibom

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1. Introduction

Festivals are part of the cultural heritages of Africans living in the South of the Saharan. They formed the channels through which these peoples' ideas, norms, values, information, entertainment etc were staged for the people's understanding and appreciation. No society exists in Africa without any festival. However, there are both the good and

bad aspects to some of these festivals. One of these is Ekpo festival among the Ibibio of Nigeria. Ibibio people are predominantly in Akwa Ibom State of South –South part of Nigeria. Ekpo festival is a dominant festival among Ibibio people and most parts of social, political and economic administrations of Ibibio society revolve around Ekpo festival which is duly manifested in Ekpo festival, which is an embodiment of Ibibio people of Nigeria.

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: matthiasolufemiojopublications@gmail.com (O. M. O. Dada), femfemty@gmail.com (O. M. O. Dada), rotabdel.a.la.cass2014@gmail.com (A. A. Olurotimi)

Ekpo festival, like other festivals in Nigeria, is invented to serve some purposes to the people who inherit such festivals – socially, politically and economically. However, there are some aspects of such festivals which consciously or unconsciously promote criminal and anti – social behaviors among these people. This paper, therefore, examines the Ekpo festival among the Ibibio of Nigeria. It examines the Ekpo festival in areas of initiation into Ekpo secret society, the purposes of Ekpo festival and finally the bad aspects of the festival in promoting criminal and anti-social behaviors as long as the period of the festival lasted.

2. Literature Review

Ibibio secret societies performed multifarious functions ranging from religious, moral, social and humanitarian, to the economic, political and judicial (Udo, 1983). One of such secret societies is Ekpo Onyoho which controls Ekpo Onyoho masqueraders. One interesting aspect of Ekpo festival is the parade of different Ekpo onyoho masquerades with different masks which connoted different names and meaning.

Masks are forms of covering or disguise utilized for the benefit of transforming the wearers from familiar individuals to conventional characters. Masks do two things: First, they take away the person we know and invest the wearers with something awful and non human – a god or evil. Secondly, the masks rehabilitate the wearers' faces and create the problem of identity (Obuh, 2005). Masks are mechanisms which manifest the inner transformation of the wearers (Ganyi et al, 2013). Masks are not form of deceit or just for concealment but a personification of spiritual power and authority (Obuh, 2005). Masked dancing is concerned with the enactment of power, manifesting traditional norms and investing ceremonies with ancestral authority. Masks enhance the status of men's association and symbolize the group authority (Nicholls, 1997). In summary, masks symbolized one facet of Africanism for all indigenous African culture (Obuh, 2005).

Ekpo masquerades festival shows an association between ritual and art (Nevadomsky, 1993). The art part is reflected in different forms of masks normally worn during the Ekpo festival and the ritual aspect of it is manifested during the initiation into Ekpo secret society and during the commencement of Ekpo festival. Ekpo masquerades, like other masquerades in African societies, performed the functions of initiation, adjudication of cases and entertainment. They served as unifying experiences among the people (Ganyi et al, 2013). Apart from serving as unifying experiences, Ekpo society, an association which controls Ekpo festival also serves as a rallying organization for social control (Obuh, 2005). Ekpo cult like other African cults served the spiritual and

social needs of the people and also acted as institutions for social control through the execution of traditional customs, settlement of disputes and the dispensation of Justice (Nyiayaana, 2010). Ekpo society serves as an enforcement arm of village government in Ibibio society (Akpan, 1994). Ekpo society helps to settle fights among the people in the Ibibio communities; assists in the collection of certain dues or taxes and helps in patrolling certain farm roads to prevent people from stealing (Akpan, 1994).

Like other masquerades in African societies, Ekpo masquerades were crime detectors whose main task were making public the identities of perpetrators of social ills and sanitize the society and ensure a crime-free neighborhood. They are the traditional law enforcement agents with epitome of righteousness which operated meticulously and religiously (Umoh, 2011). During the Ekpo festival, visitors to the villages are thoroughly checked by Ekpo to make sure their missions are harmless, while stealing during Ekpo festival carries heavier penalties and quarrels and fights are totally prohibited. (Akpan, 1994).

Ekpo (Ekpo Nkawo) which is a spirit which checks infidelity among married couples, it visits unfaithful partners with punishments, including death. This system helps to save marriage, venereal disease including HIV/AIDS and also divorce, resulting from infidelity (Ekpote, 2009). Ekpo society, in summary, serves the good of general society (Auta, 2013). However, the staging of Ekpo masquerades by Ekpo society often caused fear among women and children. These Ekpo masquerades display very ugly and fearful masks and the masquerades entire bodies are smeared with black charcoal to intensify the frightful spectacle (Ganyi, et al, 2013). In the same way, Obuh (2005) argued that for children, masks are very scary, and pregnant women in some cultures dread the sight of ugly and frightful masks because of the belief that the sight of such awful object influences the physical appearance of their unborn children.

It is quite unfortunate that in some festivals, entertainment has been replaced with notoriety in crime (Ikoh and Charles, 2010). The same way, Ikuomola et al (2014) argued that street carnival created flirting opportunities, sexual exploitation, display of nudity, expression of hooliganism, stealing opportunities and performance of senseless Acts.

It has been observed that some festivals restricted the movement of women, children and uninitiated during the seasons of such festivals. Ekpo festival controlled by Ekpo society among Ibibio of Nigeria is one of such festivals. Udo (1983) argued that during Ekpo festival season, non-members, women and children were usually kept indoors. Women were banned from going near any bush either for collection of firewood or harvesting of food crops, unless

members (initiated) led them into the bush, a practice that has been abused, for some members would not lead such women into the bush unless they have sexual intercourse with them. Similarly, Akpan (1994: 49) wrote in his article: Women and non-members cannot go to the market or perform activities outside their homes: food, water and firewood must have been obtained in advance. Hence, Ekpo festival causes economic retardness and violates the fundamental human right of movement during its season. It was the criminality and the anti-social behaviors of Ekpo festival that this paper sought to explore.

3. Methodology of the Research

This study adopted survey design. The collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions was involved (Schutt, 2004). The study areas are: Ituk Mbang, Ikono Obio and Ndom Uruan in Uruan Local Government Area and Ikot Udo in Ibesikpo Local Government area, all in Akwa Ibom State. The study populations were the Ibibio in the above mentioned Ibibio communities. The communities of study were purposely selected because they serve the interest of this research work. It was based on the judgment that they will facilitate the investigation carried out in this study (Neuman, 2003; Adler and Clark, 1999). The respondents were sampled (six respondents) using convenience sampling. They were the respondents readily accessible to and therefore convenient for the researcher (Adler and Clark, 1999). In-depth – interviews were conducted with the respondents as a method of data collection. Photographs also formed method of data collection. The data from the in-depth interviews were analyzed using content analysis (manual). The samples of materials to be included in the analyses were decided. After this, the categories that are going to be measured were defined. Finally, the recording units (each item in its entirety) were chosen (Johnson et al, 2001). The photographs that formed part of the data collection were also analyzed using the same content analysis. Conclusively, ethical issues were given strong consideration. The consent of the respondents was sought before the commencement of the interviews. The respondents all agreed that their identities be disclosed in the writing of the report of the study.

4. Discussions of the Findings

It is impossible to wear Ekpo masks during the Ekpo festival or to take part in any of Ekpo activities without being initiated into Ekpo secret society or Ekpo cult. Hence, the discussion during the in-depth interviews started on how

people are initiated into Ekpo cult and different organizations within the Ekpo cult.

According to Mr. Okon Williams of Ndon Uruan, Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, cult is divided into different organizations thus:

Awad Ekpo, Ekong Ekpo, Ikpe Ekpo, Akpan Obobom, Inyoon Ekpo (cripple), Eka and Ette Ekpo, Okpok Ododo Okom and Inven Ekpo (Bird). Among all these organizations, Awad Ekpo was the commonest Ekpo cult group that any male can join provided he can afford the cost of initiation.

Regarding the initiation into Ekpo cult, we have two types as explained by Mr. Victor Samuel (20 years) of Ikot Udo, Ibesikpo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State:

We have two types of initiation (Forceful initiation and Voluntary initiation). There was always a law during the season of Ekpo that non- initiated should not go out of their houses to do anything outside. Any person (male adult) who goes out would be forcefully arrested and made to be a member of Ekpo cult. He has to give all the items required for initiation and pay also the required money for initiation. After this, he becomes an initiate whether he likes it or this is against his will. For the voluntary initiation, this is when a person voluntarily goes to the Chief and requires being an initiate. He would be asked to bring all the items and money required for the initiation before he can be eventually initiated.

According to Mr. Ime Okon Etim of Nung Ikono Obio (40 years) of Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State:

It is a must for the people who want to be initiated into Ekpo cult to go to the Chief's compound to present palm wine, animal and money for the initiation.

The process of initiation involves swearing an oath of secrecy as related by Mr. Efeiong Umoh of Ituk Mbang, Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State:

When a person wants to become an initiate of the Ekpo cult, the person will be taken to Akai (the forest) and he will swear on Utok Ekpo (the oath of secrecy) and will offer palm wine and an animal (as specified) and money. Everything given by the new initiate will be shared among the old initiates. Hence, the person becomes a full initiate of Ekpo cult.

However, the items and money collected during the initiation from the new members may vary from one organization of Ekpo to the other as duly explained by Mr. Okon Williams of Ndon Uruan in Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State:

The initiation is done through the collection of items such

as palm wine, animal and money, the collection may differ considerably in each organization (the cost being higher) for instance in Ekang Ekpo, the cost of initiation is higher than that of Awad Ekpo and due to this high cost of initiation, some men and young boys are disqualified from being initiated. In Ayara Ekpo, the initiate to be gives all the items like fish, crayfish, yam and other ingredients needed. Women will then be taken to the palace of the Head of Ekpo cult, who will cook and pound the yam. The fish that is used for the cooking is wrapped with plantain leaf and all the initiates would be invited to the Chief's palace to eat. The new initiates would wear masks (masquerades), go round the village and thus become full and notable initiates of Ekpo cult. The main determinant of the initiation into any of these organizations is the collection of items and payment of prescribed money.

The survey conducted investigated the activities involved in Ekpo festival staged by Ekpo cult and the purposes served by Ekpo festival during the Ekpo season. The stages involved in Ekpo festival as compiled from indepth-interviews conducted with Qim Etim (43 years) and Edet Ayim Offiong (79 years) are explained below:

The Ekpo festival is a seasonal festival that usually takes place between the month of August and December in our case (i.e. Nung Ikono Obio Village in Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State). The festival undergoes these stages:

Stage 1

UDAD EKPO (BRINGING OUT THE EKPO)

This is the period the Ekpo Nyoho is brought out of the forest (Udad Ekpo) since it is believed that the Ekpo nyoho live in the forest. Before they are brought, the villagers will be aware of the particular date they would be brought out which is the market day called Edem Etaha. On the night of that Edem Etaha market day, the initiates will sound drums as they march around the village to inform the villagers of the coming of Ekpo nyoho. During this period (in the night), non- initiates will remain indoors to avoid sanctions.

Stage 2

USE MBOPPO (VISITING THE FATTENED GIRLS)

After one week of their arrival, the Ekpo nyoho will pay visits to the fattened girls (Mboppo). This day is always a very big day as this ceremony attracts a lot of viewers from even the neighboring villages. If anybody wants the Ekpo nyoho to pay visit to any of his daughters he will have to pay some money to the Ekpo nyoho chief (Obong Ekpo). On that day the Ekpo nyoho will come in a group of say ten and above and visit the fattened girl, if the girl

is fat and attractive, the Ekpo nyoho will give clay (Ndom), if she is lean and not attractive the Ekpo nyoho will give charcoal (Nkang). This stage is filled with jubilation, merriments, and visiting the fattened girls at the end of the day, marks the end of the ceremony.

Stage 3

EKPO USORO IKONO (IKONO DAY)

On a certain market day called Fiongaran in October, another ceremony takes place which is Ekpo Usoro Ikono (Ikono day) which marks the day the Nung Ikono Obio Villager migrated from Ikono Local Government Area to Uruan Local Government. On this day, the Ekpo nyoho will not disturb the non-initiates, women and children, instead they will be entering people's compound begging for money. During this ceremony most compound that joined the celebration will be filled with drinks and food (particularly white soup), and everybody jubilate and make merry. People do travel from nooks and crannies to witness the ceremony which is always properly publicized.

Stage 4

UKPAD EKPO (RETURNING THE EKPO TO THE FOREST)

Three days to this particular ceremony, which takes place on a certain market day called Edem Etaha (The same market day the Ekpo nyoho was brought out), the Ekpo nyoho will visit the market not to buy anything but to show the people that they too can go to the market like human beings. On the Edem Etaha day (i.e. three days after the Ekpo nyoho have visited the market), the ceremony of the return of these Ekpo nyoho to the forest is held. On this day, a carved image which resembles a woman is brought out for everybody to see and it is escorted to the forest. This carved image is as tall as a palm tree and a basket containing food items is placed and tied to its head which signifies that it is this woman that have been cooking for Ekpo nyoho in the forest. That is why the image is called Eka Ekpo (Mother of Ekpo nyoho). This image is well guarded by the initiates to prevent it from falling because if it falls, the whole ceremony will turn bloody. It is always bloody when it falls because the initiates are trying to prevent the non-initiates, women and children from knowing that it is a carved image since the carved image is always well dressed with cloth. So in that case they will be cutting and wounding the non-initiates who do not run, with machetes and even killing them. But in the case where the Eka Ekpo is well guarded and escorted to the forest, that marks the successful end of the festival till another year.

In a further comment, Mr. Efeifiong Umon of Ituk Mbang,

Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State explained thus:

During the season, the initiates will assemble in the forest, palm wine will be provided and the members would drink and make merry. The masquerades would play and visit other communities. The masquerades are also seen performing judicial functions. During this period, the offences committed are reduced to their minimal levels.

Mr. Okon Williams of Ndon Uruan, in Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State shared the same views thus:

During this season (Ekpo season) the initiates are always happy because they are always making merry and eating food together as a family. Some of the masquerades like Inuen Ekpo and Okpok Odod Okom are always entertaining the people living in the village by dancing around the village. They performed judicial functions and made entire communities proud and happy.

Mr. Ume Okon Etim of Ikono Obio of Uruan Local Government area of Akwa Ibom also supported the purposes of Ekpo festival in area of entertainment and judicial function:

The interesting aspect of Ekpo festival is majorly in the entertainment and judicial functions. During Ekpo festival, masquerades visit the Mbopo ladies with their first male children who were recommended by their families to Ekpo society.

The above shows that Ekpo masquerades perform the functions of adjudicating cases and settlement of disputes, social control and entertainment as explained by (Ganyi et al, 2013, Obuh, 2005 and Nyiayaana, 2011).

The criminal and anti-social behaviors during Ekpo festival were investigated, and they formed the fulcrum upon which this paper stands. The first anti-social behavior is the area of fighting with cutlasses (Ukang). It is an anti-social behavior to do anything that would put others into risk or that may injure them. Ukang (fighting with cutlasses) is one of the anti-social behaviors exhibited during the Ekpo festival.

Mr. Victor Samuel of Ikot Udo in Ibesikpo Local Government area of Akwa Ibom State explained this thus:

During Ekpo festival, all the initiates were usually very happy because of the Ekpo play. It creates awareness in Ibibio communities. During this period the village allows men and boys to use cutlasses to play with one another (Ukang) which may be dangerous.

Mr. Efefiong Umon of Ituk Mbang of Uruan Local Government area of Akwa Ibom explained the criminal and anti-social behaviors entailed in Ekpo festival thus:

During the Ekpo festival, masquerades always ran around

the village, armed with canes and cutlasses. They prevented the non-initiates, women and children from going outside their houses or to do any business. Most especially, women and girls are the main target. Women and girls that are seen outside would be beaten severely with cutlasses and whips. During the season, the masquerades destroy people's crops and killed livestock animals on sight.

Mr. Okon Williams of Ndon Uruan of Uruan Local Government also supported this thus:

The anti-social and criminal aspect of Ekpo festivals are that masquerades go about, preventing the non-initiates from going outside their houses. The Ayara Ekpo commits many kinds of havoc during the Ekpo season. At times, beheading people and animals. The Inyoon cut people plantains, roasted them and ate them in the forest. Crops on farms were also destroyed.

It can be argued, therefore, that Ekpo festival allows the initiates to commit some crime and anti – social behaviors. The entertainment of Ekpo festival allows notoriety in crime as explained by Ikoh and Charles (2014). Non – initiates, women and children that were usually prevented from going outside their houses during Ekpo festival is an anti- social behavior. These people are usually kept indoors during the festival (Udo, 1983 and Akpan 1994). Flogging innocent people during Ekpo festival is a criminal behavior because it may lead to severe bodily injuries. Boys (initiates) often used the opportunity of Ekpo festival to target and flog girls who refuse to date them and the women they previously had conflict with as explained by Abiaka (2004).

It was also discovered that Ekpo festival retarded the economic activities during its season. People were not allowed to go out to do their business or engage in any economic activities. This usually raised the cost of the living during this period and frustrated the people's right to work for their living. Moreover, people's fundamental right of movement was usually violated during the season of Ekpo festival.

Another anti- social behavior inherent in Ekpo festival is the deliberate creation of fear for the non-initiates, women and children. Mr. Victor Samuel of Ikot Udo in Ibesikpo Local Government of Akwa Ibom related thus:

During the season of Ekpo festival men and boys leave their residential homes and live in the forest (Akai). Fear is always instilled into the non – initiates, women and children during this period.

The sight of Ekpo masks always created fear for women and children. Notable among these are masks of: Ukad Ekpo, Ayara (the brave) Ekpo, Ekoon, Ataad, Ukpuru – Arochkwu, Nkita Oku (Fire dog) and Ekpe. Ganyi et al (2013) and Obuh (2005)

explained the fear that Ekpo masks usually created for the children and the women, especially the pregnant women who normally nurtured the fear that the ugly sight of Ekpo masks may affect their unborn children. Figures 1-3 are the examples of such fearful masks which may create psychological and emotional problems for women and children.

In the course of the research, the researcher asked the respondents to state ways through which the criminal and anti – social behaviors exhibited during the Ekpo – festival may be curbed.

Mr. Effiong Umoh of Ituk Mbang and Mr. Okon Williams of Ndon Uruan of Uruan Local Government Area emphasized that:

Civilization and the spreading of gospel would curb the behavioral excesses involved during the Ekpo festival.

Mr. Victor Samuel of Ikot Udom in Ibesikpo Local Government Area also gave the similar opinion thus:

The cult of Ekpo originated in ancient pre-colonial era when the worship of idols was prevalent. The fore fathers did this because Christianity was not prevalent and western education was absent. Therefore, western education and Christianity would play a major role in curbing criminal and anti-social behaviors exhibited during Ekpo festival.

For Mr. Ime Okon of Ikono Obiom Uruan Local Government, curbing the criminal and deviant behaviors during Ekpo festival may be effected through giving of stern instruction. He explained thus:

Deviant behavior can be eradicated during Ekpo festival by the head (Obong Ekpo) issuing out instructions to desist from criminal and anti-social behaviors during the festival. Placing sanctions on the erring masquerades would also prevent such criminal and anti-social behaviors.

5. Summary, Recommendation and Conclusions

Ekpo festival plays significant roles in the lives of Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State. Ekpo festival as explained in this research work provided entertainment to the people of the communities and also provided judicial function in area of setting disputes. It also serves as a mechanism of social control. However, the criminal behaviors and anti – social behaviors exhibited during Ekpo festival created the ugly side of the festival. Malicious damage of farm crops and livestock of other people during the festival are criminal. Moreover, the restriction on the free movement of women and children was a breach of their fundamental human right likewise was the prevention of economic activities being

carried out during the festival. Beating of innocent women and girls with canes and cutlasses formed part of the criminal and anti-social behaviors exhibited during the festival. Women and girls are often rough- handled and sexually harassed by the Ekpo initiates. The forceful aspect of the initiation into Ekpo cult raised another fundamental issue. People should not be forced to partake in any rite against their wishes.

In order to solve the problem of criminal and anti – social behaviors during Ekpo festival, we recommend that the government of Akwa Ibom State should legislate laws that would regulate and guide the activities of Ekpo festival and other festivals within the state.

Government should try to re – organize the Ekpo – festival in such a way that it would attract people within Nigeria and outside Nigeria. This would serve as a source of revenue to the State Government and also help in the improvement of economic development of the individuals within Akwa Ibom State. Clarke-Ekong (1997) has explained in details how traditional festivals have assisted in the political economy of the country of Ghana. The same should be emulated by Akwa Ibom State.

The paper also recommends the intervention of Christianity and Western education in re-orientating the Ibibio communities against exhibition of criminal and anti – social behaviors during Ekpo festival. Finally the prominent members of Ekpo cult should caution their initiates against such behaviors during Ekpo festival.

We conclude that Ekpo festival, if re – organized in modern ways, would serve as a potential for socio – economic and political development of Akwa Ibom state, provided the criminal and anti – social behaviors inherent in the festival are duly addressed by the government and community heads in Akwa Ibom state.

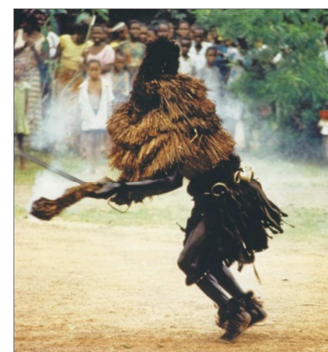


Figure 1. A Ekpo Masquerade Nkita Oku (Fire Dog). The sight of the mask wear by this Masquerade is very scary to children and pregnant women which may cause psychological and emotional problem.

Source: Eli Bentor. (Retrospective views of the lower Niger Delta.24, London UK.).



Figure 2. An example of Ekpo Mask. The mask creates fear for young children in the communities.

Source: Brooklyn Museum (Wikimedia .org)



Figure 3. Ekpo Masquerades with scary masks.

Sources: www.google.com

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