

Marriage Institution in Ekpeye Culture: Oral Information

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ABSTRACT--- *This work offers a position paper on traditional marriage institution in Ekpeye culture. Although, women are increasing their involvement in economic, political and educational roles, the women in this study are explained from the perspectives of the roles they play at the home front. These roles include the importance of a mother, wife and help mate.*

Roles associated with work, social, community and religion rank less important to this study. Basically, the attitudes in this study are traditionally conceptualized, limiting the woman to a home based institution of marriage.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ekpeye people are located in Rivers State, Nigeria and occupy a landmark of 655.6 kilometers according to Ideozu,(1991). It has neighbors with the Abua/Oduah, Ogba/Egbema, Engenni and the Ikwerre people. It lies between the two major rivers of Orashi and Sombrero. The 1991 census gave its population figure as 178,179.

To most Ekpeye people, marriage was very important. It gives honour and prestige to the man and woman. It provides for procreation and the sustenance of a lineage, thereby giving credence to the past, present and the future. It is generally believed in Ekpeye that without marriage, the link between life and death, the human tree of life shall be cut off. Marriage also provides unity among various descents, lineage and clan, even in the time of war.

Statistics on marriage have fluctuated in response to economic conditions, socialization, promiscuity and changes in life styles, which undermines the core cultural values. These changes reflect a complex set of circumstances which are fairly new to our society. These vices have had interplay with the role of women in our society. Unfortunately, this has given rise to divorce, a situation which was very uncommon in our society.

2. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The Ekpeye nation is barely a known society. Most articles about this people have been written in distortion of the core values by writers who write through interpreters. The fear of this continuous distortion made this writer to undertake an in-house one on one interview about this culture on marriage. The writer has also developed interest in documenting the aspect of marriage institutions in Ekpeye by participating actively in many traditional marriage ceremonies. These interactions have gathered all these information as recorded in this paper.

3. LITERATURE

A woman enters the traditional role of a wife and mother through marriage. This ritual has the passage of either or both traditional and white wedding after the due process of bride price. From this stage in life, she is expected to give up her formal ways of childhood behaviours and take-up the responsibilities of adulthood, a new status of life. The stages and transitions characterizing this change are described in the roles of a wife and mother. The multi-dimensional approach of a young adult becomes a variety of her life styles until death, Lopata (1971).

Education theory and practice is a battleground in any society. Humanism made education central to a social revolution. One of the eventual consequences of this revolution has intensified the developing split between man and his public functions, and woman and her private functions, Aughterson (1995). Thus, even when the content of a woman's work shows desire for equal access to opportunities, those opportunities are only defined in reference to women conventions.

There are perhaps less contrast than many have thought between the assertions of Salter (1976) and others who argue that woman's physiology unites her for intellectual knowledge, and those who argue that she is man's intellectual equal, but that her education must be channeled into the single purpose for which she was created, namely, the work of marriage.

According to Thornes(1979), marriage is viewed as a legal contract and more as a means of developing a deep and satisfying emotional relationship between a couple can be facilitated. Marriage is therefore likely to persist as an institution. None the less, the annual rates of marriage show popular events and has been estimated that 90% of men and women, aged 16 will marry by the time they reach the age of 50 years. OPCS, (1976).

Opposition to marriage, especially parental, indicates that the courtship period with the spouse have been characterized by parent-child conflict, with possible negative repercussions. One out of two surveys has given reason for further parental opposition as a response to protectiveness, Thornes(1979).

It is generally accepted in Ekpeye that failure to marry, especially among the men, involved cutting off the link between life and death, the destruction of a lineage offspring. Mbiti,(1982) had outlined the purpose of marriage as an obligation to bear children, building a family, extending life, passing down the torch of human existence and remembering those departed through prayer and pouring of libation.

Andah (1988) defines marriage as a "means of ensuring the survival of human species". Mbiti(1982) also classified it as " a sacred duty for normal persons". He further described it as a meeting point for the three layers of life, namely, the past, present and the future. Marriage has also helped nations in terms of war from various descents, lineage and clan. The Ekpeye people, because of these considerations encourage marriage.

Arowolaju (2005) observed that "among the Yoruba, marriage is between families and not just individual man and woman who met somehow and think that they can just live together. Strong (1989) though sees marriage as "a union between man and a woman". They however perform a public ritual which is socially recognized. They are united sexually and also cooperate in economic matters. If they have children, their children will have certain legal rights.

Bride price in marriage, some have called for its outright abolition, on the ground that it adds nothing tangible to the institution of marriage. While Thornes (1979) has said, throughout the history of marriage, societies have not regarded divorce as beneficial, either for society or for the individuals.

4. TYPES OF MARRIAGE INSTITUTIONS IN EKPEYE

There are currently six forms of marriage institutions in Ekpeye:

They are:

- a. Monogamy
- b. Polygamy
- c. Early Marriage
- d. Woman to woman Marriage
- e. Child Marriage
- f. Widow Inheritance

4.1 Monogamy

This is the form of marriage in which a person has only one spouse at a time. It is distinguished from polygamy. Monogamy is the most common type of marriage in Ekpeye land in modern times. Perhaps, this must have been influence by Christianity. However, this form of marriage permits divorce and re-marriage, though with some forms of peculiarities.

These peculiarities can be distinguished in the following ways; namely,

- i. When the woman in marriage is dissatisfied and decides to pull out, either formally or informally, her parents will be required to immediately refund her bride-price even before she remarry, in order to enable the man gets a new wife.
- ii. When the divorce comes from the man, the issue of refunds in bride-price is delayed until when the woman finds another husband, this type of divorce does not pose any challenge to the parents of the bride.

4.2 Polygamy

This form of marriage permits a man to be married to more than one wife at a time. In Ekpeyeland, this privilege does not extend to a woman, and the women are usually prepared to welcome a co-wife. A co-wife does not only provide companionship, but will also participate in the family economy. Indeed, the principal function of a polygamous home is to increase both the wealth, family lineage and the social responsibility of the immediate family.

4.3 Early Marriage

In Ekpeyeland, there are three forms of special marriage identified as early marriage. These are namely early marriage of ages between 15-19 and Ages between 20 -29

- i. In the past, Ekpeye parents usually encourage their daughters at ages 15-19 years to get married. This type of marriage helps poor parents to reduce their burden and also acquire wealth associated with marriage. This type of marriage is also allowed to the boy child whose parents are not privileged to have many children. This is done in order to ensure the lineage posterity.
- i. The second group is called active marriage. They are for women who are between ages 20-29 and men, between 20-34 years. This is called active because at this age, both parties are matured to face the challenges of marriage, from the perspective of finance and decisions.

4.4 Woman to Woman Marriage

This form of marriage allows a woman to initiate the marriage of another woman either for herself or husband. She initiates it for herself when she is un-married and bears no children. She could as well initiate it for her husband if she was married but bears no child for her husband.

In the case of the second marriage, according Ojikpo to (2013) her husband becomes the husband to the new wife and also claims the children of the up springs', while in the first case, the woman claims every children of the upspring. These customs are strong and in vogue because the Ekpeye people do not believe in adoption, but biological children.

4.5 Child Marriage

Child marriage is also another type practiced in Ekpeye custom. In this group of marriage, a little girl, as young as age 2 is given out for marriage. Although the girl stays with her parents until she becomes a young adult. She grows-up at the watchful eyes of the husband and all his relations. No other man has rights over her, either for courtship or marriage.

In this type of marriage, when there is an agreement between the two families, either with or without the girl's consent and approval, some small traditional marriage rites are performed. This include, a coin of Nigerian currency dropped in calabash water as a symbol. This coin is removed only on the day of actual and final marriage rites performed.

There is also another type of marriage which is used to settle debts. If a parent is unable to pay his debts, he may require his creditor to choose among his girls for marriage, Egbe (2013). If this is accepted, a girl child can also be given out for marriage in Ekpeyeland, with or without her acceptance. If she was not matured, the creditor will wait. These are done, not only to settle debts, but to also have a link with wealthy families.

Civilization is gradually affecting this type of marriage as the girl child may now prove difficult in management. There was no study to determine the success level of this type of marriage. However, observations show that due to parental respect in the past, brides usually conditioned themselves and stay happily in the marriage.

4.6 Widow Inheritance

This custom of marriage allows a woman whose husband is dead to remarry another man within the lineage. When this happens, the new man will not have to pay another dowry. This practice allows a young adult to stay within the family and bears more children, while also looking after her young ones, Anamakiri (2012).

This tradition is carried out seven days after the burial of her late husband. It is however to be noted that widowhood is rapidly becoming a social problem in Ekpeye. Some women re-marry men much older than them or children below their age.

5. EKPEYE BRIDE PRICE CUSTOMS

Bride price is paid in cash on every girl child before marriage is assumed to have taken place. This money is paid in stages and cannot be paid at once in one visit for several reasons. The first stage begins with the man and woman who after getting the approval of both parents, meet at the man's best friend's house for an initial introduction, which is called "Back Drink". The bride will thereafter take the drink to her parents as a formal announcement of marriage.

The second stage is the "Front Drink" which is a bigger ceremony. In the past, this ceremony takes a whole day, but now modified to accommodate other issues in the marriage process. These issues include "Front Drink, Lineage Drink, Extended family Drink, Parents Bride Price, First Son's bride price and the family bride price. These payments are done in segments. Although today, the issues listed are gradually being considered. There are other issues on the marriage such as cleaning of table, late coming, fixing of marriage date, service charge, etc. Some other amounts of money are paid in bits and segments, including drinks, snuffs, cigarette, etc before the final payment of "Head Money", Ejie (2012). The head money is the most recognized and can be refunded in the case of divorce.

6. BRIDE EXCURSION

Payment of bride price ends with the family bride price. The groom's wish determines the next line of action. If he wants a fanfare excursion, then another process begins. If he does not want any fanfare excursion, the bride is then allowed to formally depart and live with the husband.

Bride excursion is usually avoided in Ekpeye because of its high cost. The groom at this stage is required to settle for many other things for his wife to be escorted with gift items. However, there are compulsory gift items and non-compulsory items.

At the groom's family house, a big ceremony is organized for the reception of the new bride and her entourage. These include young adult women, spinsters, and boys. After a day of this visit, they will all return back home, while at least seven spinsters will stay with the bride for another one week, helping her in customary domestic affairs.

7. FAMILY INITIATION

This whole process of marriage makes you a man after initiation. Usually, you shall not be accepted for initiation if you have not paid the completed bride price.

Family initiation is a formal introduction of your wife to everybody in the lineage. Food and drinks are made available to groups in the lineage. These are men group, women group, youth group, boys, and girls and the children. Until every group has said they are satisfied, the ceremony cannot be over. A sign of acceptance is done by singing made in groups, especially the children group who shall raise a praise song in your name, Edema (2013).

When also these have been said and done, the couple shall be seated before the most elderly man and woman shall be seated for marriage blessings. This marriage blessing can be done traditionally or by prayers. Shortly after this special blessing, young men shall lift the man, while the woman shall be carried by women to their room. Both of them shall be locked-up in their bedroom where they shall remain until day-break. Their special assistants shall see to the end of the programme.

8. CONCLUSION

In Africa, marriages require the woman to leave her parents for her new home. This system also applies to Ekpeye people. Marriage confers on the couple the following rights and privileges:

- i. The right of the man over the woman
- ii. It strengthened the relationship between kinship
- iii. It creates fund by the dual enterprises of the family
- iv. It creates new bonds of solidarity to the extended families
- v. It gives the man a right to ownership of property
- vi. It also positions the man to family responsibility

However, it is also of note to know that there are marriage restrictions in Ekpeye. Relationships are usually checked before a marriage is approved by both parents. The Ekpeye people practice patrilineal system. Every child in a marriage belongs to the paternal lineage (Father). Finally, in Ekpeye a marriage is assumed to have taken place when a bride price has been paid to the followings; Back Drink, Front Drink, Parents, First Son, Lineage family and extended family.

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