

Mbopo Institution and Music in the Cultivation of Moral Values in Ibibio Society, Nigeria

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How to cite this paper: Akpakpan, J. and Akpakpan, M.J. (2018) Mbopo Institution and Music in the Cultivation of Moral Values in Ibibio Society, Nigeria. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 6, 46-56.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2018.65004>

Received: April 28, 2018

Accepted: May 13, 2018

Published: May 16, 2018

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Abstract

In the traditional African society, morality was one of the guiding elements that engineered the social, political and economic spectrums of the people. Music, as well as other traditional institutions, was used in achieving these goals. Mbobo was one of such institutions in Ibibio land. The naturalistic research method was used in this study. The purpose of this study was to assess the role of music in cultivating or promoting moral values in Ibibio society, using Mbopo institution as a case study. In treating this topic, an in-depth assessment of the various activities of the institution was carried out, such as the reasons girls are fattened, the payment of bride price or dowry, functions of the institution, activities carried out in the fattening room. The outing ceremony, the role of music, as well as its instrumental resources will also be looked into. The study examined Mbopo traditional institution from its historical, social and cultural contexts. The study revealed that Mbopo institution was and remains a veritable medium for maintaining morality among young women in the society.

Keywords

Music, Mbopo, Morality, Womanhood, Traditional Institution, Cultural Contexts

1. Introduction

Music in traditional African society is heterogeneous. This is because of the cultural diversity in African. For instance, the country Nigeria has over two hundred cultural demarcations each with its own body of musical practice. In African, music and the people's way of life are almost inseparable. Thus, songs and other music practices are almost always incorporated into every facet of African

traditional people's lives.

It is worthy of note that music in Africa is an art that pervades social life and is also believed to be vital for sustaining community life. According to music of Africa [1], "Music is an integral part of African ethnic life, accompanying many kinds of events, including childbirth, marriage, hunting, and even political activities. Many cultures use song and dance to ward off evil spirits and pay respects to good spirits".

Music in Ibibio as well as other African Societies is believed to intersect with every aspect of life. It helps to bring or link people together in various ways, strengthening the fabric of the community, which in turn reinforces people's commitment to support each other and the community, toward mutual health and prosperity. Music has a vital place in the lives of Ibibio people as it contributes to a balanced development of the whole personality. It has also been deemed an essential part of a good society.

According to Aristotle in Burgo [2] (1993, p. 2), "because music has so much to do with the moulding of the character, it is necessary that we teach it to our youth". Bromley in Tufts [3] (1965, p. 7) adds that "we are only beginning to learn that the right kind of music and singing taught to children while they are young has the power to change the course and destiny of their life". Music has long been recommended as the powerful tool that functions or often associates with the important social, religious, political and recreational activities in the society. To buttress the above, Okafor [4] (1989, p. 15) writes: "No study of culture is complete without a close and corresponding study of the music of the people. Music is the expression of man's deepest self".

No activity or event in Ibibio society goes without music. Music does not only function in social activities but also controls normative behaviour. Sometimes, it serves as a medium for social protest and even sanctions deviant behaviours. White [5] also recommends music and singing as a powerful influence in education and society noting: "The value of songs as means of Education should never be lost sight of. Let there be singing in the school, and the pupils will be drawn closer to God, to their teachers, and to one another" (1947, p. 168).

Moral, aesthetic and spiritual values can be fostered or cultivated through music. Furthermore, participation in various cultural groups such as *Mbopo* Institution can as well provide that effective response which can reinforce the cognitive, helping the youth to further incorporate and consolidate these values. White [5] also adds that "music was meant to elevate, to inspire, to uplift the thoughts (p. 166). Based on the summations above, neglecting music that promotes moral values makes a culture incomplete.

Another area to consider is emotion, which to a certain extent relates to moral values. Being able to control one's emotions and/or express such in a constructive way is the mark of morality. Music is the language of the emotions. It can express feelings and ideas in a manner that words may not. As Hoffer in Burgo [2] States, "music can play a significant role in helping people emotionally". He

continues “Music has value not only because it is an expresser of emotion, but also because it is a releaser of emotions”. Emotion is an important component of behaviour, as we learn how to refine and direct emotions, we find the inner harmony and calm that is part of personal balance.

Music plays a vital role in the culture of any society. Music is generally defined as the art of organizing tones into meaningful patterns of sound, or the art of combining sounds in a manner agreeable to the ear. However, Tagg (2012) [6] defines music as: “Music is that form of interhuman communication in which humanly organised, non-verbal sound is perceived as vehiculating primarily affective (emotional) and/or gestural (corporeal) patterns of cognition”. It is a source of expression and communication which is present in all cultures. No society in man’s history has been without one form of music.

Consequently, the prevalent trend in the society today—urge to acquire—has created indiscipline, lack of respect for elders and constituted authority, armed robbery, prostitution, and neglect of our customs leading to immorality.

In order to curb these, there is the need for us to assess the role of music in the cultivation of moral values in the society. There is a great concern for morality and purity. The people of Ibibio community believed that *Mbopo* traditional institution is one of the agents of socialization in the community, in that it inculcates some high moral standards in the life of the people.

There is an alarming trend nowadays of young girls indulging in actions capable of destroying their virginity and of course womanhood. The questions are: Why is it so? Is the level of exposure responsible for these trends? Could this be curbed? Is it as a result of the present economic crunch that their height of morality fluctuates? These and other questions need answers which could only be provided in a study of this nature.

2. Method

The naturalistic method was used in this research. The participant observation method and interviews were used in sourcing for primary data while library and internet resources formed the basis secondary information collection. Selected male and female elders endowed with information on the norms and traditions of the people were interviewed. Recordings in both video and sonic forms were carried out. The video and sonic recordings gave the researchers opportunity to study the basic practices in *Mbopo* outings and Music. Although *Mbopo* institution is widespread in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, this study was carried out in Ifianyong, Uran Local Government Area.

3. Material

3.1. *Mbopo* Institution

Mbopo, according to Akpabot [7] (1975) is the initiation of young girls into womanhood. It is closely related or associated with marriage, which is the institution that shapes the forms and actions or activities of the association known as

the family. *Mbopo* is the greatest ceremony in a girl's life, whereby a girl is taught home management, as well as how to behave in the new home. In the traditional society, the customs require that before a girl is given out for marriage, certain cultural rites must have to be performed on the girl. One of such is fattening (*Mbopo*) this is done when the girl is about 15 - 18 years which is considered as the age of puberty.

3.2. Admittance to the Fattening Room

The word "Mbopo" means "maiden" or, in another word "fattening" and refers to the initiation of young girls into womanhood which is the greatest ceremony in a girl's life. Mpobo traditional institution is closely related or associated with marriage. "Marriage" as defined by Hoebel [8] is,

The complex of social norms that define the control the relations of a mated pair to each other, their kinsmen, their offspring and the society at large. It defines all the institutional demands, rights, duties, immunities, etc; of the pair as husband and wife. It is the institution known as, the family.

Before colonization, there was no age limit for either male or female, the marriage of a girl could even begin from the womb during her mother's pregnancy, when a prospective husband would notify, a pregnant woman that the child in her womb, if a girl, would be his wife and if a boy, his friend. Although children were married in the womb by proposed husband, girls were prohibited from having premarital sex since pregnancy before the initiatory rite of *Mbopo* was an abomination.

In Ibibio society, it was customary to perform certain cultural rites on young girls before they were betrothed. One of such rites was fattening, that is, she has to go through a period of seclusion before marriage. This was done at puberty, which was usually marked or determined by the girl's breast being noticeable. At this stage, the girl was adjudged to be well-developed for marriage and to take up the responsibility of womanhood. If the girl to be admitted is already married as it is normally the case, this ceremony is to make her more beautiful for her husband. If unmarried, then she has to be a virgin before she is qualified to be admitted.

It is the custom of the people to get a girl betrothed while young because she would fetch a reasonable dowry for her parents. But if a girl grew up to be about twenty or more years old without anyone asking her hand in marriage, she becomes a source of embarrassment to her parents. Really, fattening rooms as the name suggests are places where girls are deliberately overfed to make them grow fat.

Despite the civilization, the custom of fattening has not been completely abolished today in Ibibio society. This norm is somewhat minimized because of the economic factor underlying the practice in modern time. The quest for education has taken many girls away from their homes. Thereafter, they further seek for greener pastures in the cities, therefore; the possibility of being subjected to

this custom becomes slimmer. The non-reference to sex taboos has also led to promiscuity so that whether married till in school or employed in towns, many girls become pregnant with no one caring to know the men responsible to putting them into family way. In the olden days, if a lady became pregnant without getting married, she was a source of shame and embarrassment to her family and her community at large. Modernization has given way to another method of fattening. It may be called fattening of mothers. This fattening is very common in Ibibio society today; it takes place after the young lady has given birth to a baby. A month or two is considered enough to fatten her. At the completion the fattening session, there is usually a stage public function in her parent's compound where the husband is expected to give his parent-in-law the traditional presents such as plantain, Banana, firewood, oil, basin, cassava, fruits, yam, cocoyam.

3.3. Payment of Bride Price

Again, as fattening in Ibibio community is associated with marriage, the payment of bride price is important. Ibibio society regards the payment of bride price to be:

- Compensation to her parents and lineage for the loss of the young lady.
- Compensation for the services she would have been rendering to her parents and lineage.
- Compensation to her parents and lineage for its loss of a legal claim to the children that she would bear.

The bride price payment is not only to the parents of the married woman. The husband is told to give gifts in cash and kind to the relatives of the bride especially after the girl was fattened and ready to be sent to her new marital home. These gifts help cement the marriage. Its negative aspect is that those who received these gifts usually regarded the husband as a "good man" and so forced the woman, even if she was badly treated to remain and marry the man. It is worthy of note that in contracting a marriage in Ibibio society, the most important consideration is the payment of bride price, without which, no marriage is binding on the two parties.

3.4. Activities in the Fattening Room

The length of stay in the fattening room differs from place to place; but normally, it is three to four months, depending on the financial position and the ability of the parents to afford the costs. During this period of confinement or seclusion, the initiated girl, apart from being taught the activities which give grace to the body, like balancing a pot of water on her head, walking up the hill and how to walk gracefully like a lady, takes no exercise but just to eat and sleep. She is also made to drink gallons of water.

According to Akpabot [7], (1975, p. 49), "every morning, she is bathed by those in charge of her and at night her pelvis is massaged because it is believed this would make childbearing easier at a later date". Before bedtime and early in

the morning she is rubbed with the oil called “*Mmem*” prepared locally. It has a distasteful odour to discourage any man including her husband, if she is already married, from sneaking into her room either by day or night. Sometimes, local white chalk called “*ndom*” and even cold ashes are used to give her body smoothness and a glow which most modern cosmetics cannot give.

During an oral interview with one Madam Affiong Udo Etukudo [9] (2011) of Ifianyong in Uran Local Government Area, who had passed through the initiation process during her youthful days, now a prominent adviser on initiation ceremonies narrates:

My daughter, initiation of girls into womanhood, though a long and elaborate process is an interesting experience. I passed through it and we regarded it as a kind of school. Really it is like the white man’s school you people are attending because here, the young girl is taught many things that would enable her to succeed in her home when she eventually settles in her husband’s house. She is taught indigenous dances, folk songs, folk tales, and the culture of her people, as well as the history of her family. Walking gracefully like a lady. (Affiong Etukudo, aged 65 years).

Another elderly woman who also believes in tradition Obonganwan Mrs. Akon Akpan Udo [10] (2011) had this to say:

The seclusion period is a marriage training school for *Mbopo* (maiden) even though it is rare these days. Here in this village we still practice it but you may see one happen, say after three or four years. Old women who have passed through it will lecture her on how to live peacefully with her husband, her parents-in-law and relatives. She is also given lessons on the nursing and caring for her children pending when she would have them. The teachers are usually the mother and other older women (Obonganwan Mrs. Akon Akpan Udo; aged 63 years).

Since this is regarded as a special school, no girl is expected to be pregnant while in the fattening room. If this happens, Arit Udoakang [11] said; “it is a source of disgrace and shame not only to her parents but to herself, as she will be immediately banished by the women of the society making up satirical songs of insult and abuse to discredit her”.

Towards the end of the confinement period, a masquerade known as “*Ekong Mbopo*” goes to examine how she has responded to the fattening room treatment. If he finds her fat and glowing with health, he rubs her with “*Ndom Otong*” a kind of whitish chalk to signify approval for her outing. The masquerade will then go into the village to praise her with songs. If she has not grown fat, the masquerade then rubs her with a kind of charcoal which causes itching and much discomfort. He then goes into the village to scandalize her in a special song which he improvised for the occasion.

This public disapproval meant that the parents are poor and so could not feed their daughter well; a comment that no Ibibio man or woman wanted to receive.

It is through this fear of disgrace that compels parents to employ all sorts of means to get their daughter in and out of the fattening room fat and healthy.

3.5. Final Outing Ceremony

After the total approval by “*Ekong Mbopo*” and subsequent bodies, the *Mbopo* initiate is now set for the market parade. A group of women, one of them holding an umbrella over the *Mbopo*'s head and an Orchestra featuring wooden drums precedes her singing: “*Ami Nkeda Mbopo Nka Urua, ikon mia nno ami nkeda mbopo nka urua, ikon mia nno*”. This means; “*Mbopo* is going to the market, let music from the xylophone play.”

This performance is accompanied by various instruments such as xylophone, rattle, bell, gongs etc. During the dance, villagers and well-wishers come forward to bestow gifts on her, usually in the form of money to meet her fattening room expenses. If she is unmarried, this is the time when interested suitors come forward to ask her hand in marriage. Only elderly women and possible suitors are allowed to attend this ceremony. Traditionally, young girls and unmarried women are prohibited from entering the market as it is hoped, they might jeopardize her chances of finding suitable bridge-groom.

Before dancing commences, certain things must have to be cleared from prospective dancers, including the *Mbopo* herself. The mother of *Mbopo* has to swear to a deity that she has never caused or assisted her daughter to commit abortion and was not in the knowledge of the fact of abortion by her daughter while in the fattening room or house of seclusion. The *Mbopo* must have to swear the same thing, and she must not be under her menstrual period.

After the ceremony, if the *Mbopo* was married, the husband of the *Mbopo* notifies those that were in charge of the fattening room that he is ready to take his wife home. This calls for yet another ceremony. A day is fixed for the occasion. The husband, in the company of his relatives, visits his parents-in-law and presents bride price and drinks. This ceremony calls for more celebration, merriment, dancing, eating and music.

3.6. *Mbopo* Music

Instrumentation: Also notable in *Mbopo* songs (**Appendix**) is the use of certain musical instruments to maintain rhythm and also to add colour to the performance. Some of these instruments are symbolic. For example, xylophone, wooden drums, gong and rattles.

The Xylophone (*Ikon Eto*): The traditional role of the xylophone is to feature at the initiation ceremony of an *Mbopo*—a virgin sent to the fattening room; there was no *Mbopo* music without the presence of a xylophone.

The Slit Wooden Drum (*Ododom*): This is a hollowed-out tree trunk made to produce two tones. It comes in different sizes and is played with two beaters made out of bamboo. It can be played either as a solo instrument by a specialist musician. The wooden drum in *Mbopo* music helps in keeping the instrumenta-

tion smoothly and makes some additional bass (drone-like) part to the music, and the initiate (*Mbopo*) understands and dances to the language of the drum and gives interpretations to them.

The Rattle (*Nsak*): They play a prominent part in the *Mbopo* music among other instruments. The one usually associated with *Mbopo* music is the one she ties to her waist and ankles to announce her presence. When *Mbopo* goes to the market square, the sounds from these rattles and little bells tied around her waist and ankles will announce her presence, other women folk in front of her, singing songs in praise of her beauty and purity.

3.7. Musical Characteristics of *Mbopo* Songs

Mbopo songs are the expressions of *Mbopo* rites, activities and beliefs. Songs used to portray the behaviour of *Mbopo*, also talk about the norms and discourage bad attitudes in the society which bring about high moral values.

Rhythm

It refers to the movement in music. It covers many aspects such as beat, accent, meter, bar line, note value and tempo. The tempo of the music of *Mbopo* is generally slow. The rhythmic structure of the instrument section of the music is organized in compound times.

Formal Structure of *Mbopo* Music

Call and response is a prominent characteristic of *Mbopo* songs. The leader of the group is the cantor while others do the response. Other women with deeper voice embellish the chorus. It must be said here that, *Mbopo* songs are words born *i.e.* recitative in nature. In most of the songs, importance is so much attached to the clear interpretation of the word, but not of making the melody as beautiful as in the case of other music like the carol, and of course hymns tunes. In *Mbopo* music the instruments are subordinates while the song texts play the principal role. The listeners are not concerned with the music but the social commentaries which are inherent in the texts.

4. Discussions

The Cultivation of Moral Values through *Mbopo* Music

Mbopo Music is one of the surviving types of women's social control music that existed prior to the advent of Christianity in Ibibio. Morality is Ibibio tradition has always been of great concern, a very high value was placed and anyone caught stealing faced a death penalty from the court of the chiefs and elders.

According to Uchendu (1988, p. 17), African value systems are shaped by their worldview. The basic values found in Africa include respect for elders which derives from the postulate of life affirmation; emphasis on lineal continuity; mutual detergency; transparent living and on maintaining cosmological balance, intense religious. *Mbopo* songs are very useful in the society for social events. This is because *Mbopo* traditional organization was for checking of crimes in the society. Such crimes like stealing, prostitution, and adultery were

checked by the organization. Names of those who fell victims to the above crimes were used in *Mbopo* songs. This helped in making the people concerned to change their undesirable behaviours and thus become acceptable members of the society. It is not only in correcting the anti-social characters but also as a warning to other members of the community who might be tempted to join the unscrupulous characters in violating the laws of the society. *Mbopo* music is also used to educate the ladies on how to live peacefully with their husbands, act of tolerance, sense of discipline and home keeping, etc.

5. Summary and Conclusion

Mbopo institution as earlier stated is the transition or initiation of young girls into womanhood. In Ibibio traditional society, this takes place when a girl reached puberty which is determined by her breast being noticeable, usually around the age of sixteen. Her parents organized for her to be admitted to the fattening room.

A fattening room is a place where a lady is trained for the tough job of marriage, of being a wife and mother; it is where she is groomed for the duties that are expected of her as a wife. She is taught everything she needs to know about her relations with her-in-laws, the community to live peacefully with her husband, nursing and caring of her children. She is being taught on native etiquette on how to serve visitors and craft works.

The fattening process is both a cultural and financial investment, and often girls are forced to enter the room, kept in confined isolation, and girls are overfed with complex carbohydrates. Food such as yam, rice, plantain and cassava must be forcibly digested regardless of appetite. The only visits permitted in the *Mbopo* are those from elder women in the community, who pass on traditional lessons on marital etiquette and accepted social customs and behaviour.

Without music, fattening or initiation ceremony of a *Mbopo* would certainly be incomplete. Really, this ceremony has contributed a lot in promoting and preserving the arts and culture of the entire clan through their traditional music, dancing and drumming, as well as instruments. This institution also served as a medium through which law and order were maintained in the society, especially among women folks. As noted earlier, that music was a means through which the *Mbopo* institution was able to reduce immorality and crimes. People were mentioned and fore-warned in the songs of *Mbopo*. Any behaviour that in our traditional society was not morally valued was exposed to its music.

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Appendix. Some Mbopo Songs

NKEKA NWED

N - ke - ka nwed i - dip dio, — Yom-ke nwed i - dip fon - kan nwed.

EKPEDO OBO KE IDOHO INO

Call Ekpe-do-bo k'i-do-ho 'no, Ekpe-do-bo k'i-do-ho 'no.
Response Kat u-bok i - se. Kat u-bok i - se.

ETOK UNEN

Solo Etok u - nen 'nwon mmon 'no 'yon, 'suk i - nua mmon_ o - wuo - no.
Chorus

5
Etok u - nen 'nwon mmon 'no 'yon, 'suk i - nua mmon_ o - wuo - no.

MFIN MEDI OYOHO OWO

Mfin me-di o - yo-ho 'wo — To-no ke mfin me-di 'yo-ho 'wo —