Ekpo Nka Owo: A Mechanism Designed by Ibibio Elders to Foster the Sacredness of Sex Ethnic in Ibibio Land

By

Aniekan Etim Nana, PhD
Department of Religious & Cultural Studies
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus
revaninana2000@gmail.com
08027425800

Abstract

In Ibibio traditional society, the view that wives should be faithful to their husbands received ancestral sanction by *Ekpo Nka owo,* the Ibibio ancestral spirits or ghost of adultery, *Ekpo Nka Owo* regulated, checked, exposed, and punished infidelity among authentically married women in order to maintain the sanctity of marriage among the Ibibio. Ironically, *Ekpo Nka Owo* did not check and regulate the sexual behavior of married men. This paper describes the nature and character of *Ekpo Nka Owo* and the rituals performed to bring newly married women under the surveillance of *Ekpo Nka Owo.* This work discusses what constitute adultery, its effects and the appeasement of the ancestral spirit when adultery is committed, as well as considering the advantages of the operations of *Ekpo Nka Owo* in Ibibio land. *Ekpo Nka Owo* promoted positive values such as marital fidelity, truth-telling and justice, on a negative note it raises inherent contradictions resulting to gender bias, deception, injustice and lack of freewill. Thus, the institution of *Ekpo Nka Owo* by ancestors of Ibibio traditional society should be seen as sex control mechanism designed by them out of their genius efforts to foster the sacredness of sex and promote sex ethics both within and outside marriage.

Keywords: *Ekpo Nka Owo*, Ancestors, Sacredness, Sex.

Introduction

Ekpo Nka Owo is an Ibibio ancestral spirit that was mostly used to protect marriage between couples. The spirit is said to only attack when a woman commits adultery while in a marriage. It is believed that the spirit torments the wife usually during the birth of a child and it is expected of her to confess to her husband and Ekpri Atata (Spirit of the departed) before she can smoothly deliver a baby. It confession is not made or done; Ekpri Akata the spirit of the departed will either inflict her or kill her.

Ekpo Nka Owo has been known to stir fear among the married women. *Ekpo Nka Owo* was biased, and saw nothing wrong in men's in fidelity but only castigated and went after

women; it was partial and therefore a form of jungle justice. The view that wives should be faithful to their husbands received ancestral sanction by *Ekpo- Nka Owo*… It regulated, checked, exposed and punished infidelity among authentically married women in order to maintain the sanctity and sanity of marriage among the Ibibios. Ironically, *Ekpo-Nka Owo* does not check and regulate the sexual behavior among married men in Ibibio land. *Ekpo Nka Owo* in Ibibio helps to regulate the morality of their people, especially in the case of adultery by married women. This ancestral spirit came into existence as a result of the effort of the ancestors to check sexual immorality. The *Ekpo Nka Owo* punishes any woman who commits adultery. Specifically, the ethics of *Ekpo Nka Owo* were used to regulate the marital activities of the people. In the quest for these effective control of the incidence of promiscuity, sexual perversion and adultery, Ibibio people with the sanction of the gods, made efforts to institutionalize *Ekpo Nka Owo* (Ukpong, 2016). Accordingly, by careful description and systematic analysis, it could be argued that *Ekpo Nka Owo* spirit has the potency to control and tame sexual promiscuity and adultery among married couple, especially in Ibibio land.

Ekarika (2014), opines that "the fear of *Ekpo Nka Owo* has always been the beginning of wisdom for the womenfolk. Inpact, this tradition of *Ekpo Nka Owo* has affected and permeated nearly into all the villages in Ibibio nation of Akwa Ibom State. If any woman dare commit adultery, she will be unwittingly a debtor to *Ekpo Nka Owo* who is not afraid to visit her as a guest.

The Concept Of *Ekpo Nka Owo:* Scholars have developed many concepts to explain *Ekpo Nka Owo*. They include Udo-idem (a ritualistic paramour) and the concept of 'blind god' No single concept has been and may provide exhaustive answers to the question on anti-social and sexual behavior no matter how best it suits the scholar in his attempts to explain the problem of *Ekpo Nka Owo.* The search for the origin and causes of crime and *Ekpo Nka Owo* goes back to antiquity. *Ekpo Nka Owo* may be understood to refer to a spirit in Ibibio among traditional believers in a deity that punishes by death, women who have committed adultery. Difficult pregnancies are seen as the result of such punishment of infidelity, it is believed that women can die at birth unless they name all their lovers to elders in the family. If all the lovers are named, sacrifices can be offered to appease the gods and ancestors whom he represents. (Udom, 2004), avers that "to find out if all the lovers have been named, if egg is thrown on the ground. If it smashes, it is belied that all the lovers have been named, to it does not smash, she is forced to name the remaining ones before the sacrifice of expiation can continue. If she dies in the process, it is believed that she was still hiding some of her lovers, therefore she can die". Generally, death of women in some rural areas are sometime associated with the punishment for infidelity by the gods. Men are untouchable.

Ekpo Nka Owo originated with the human civilization itself. The fear of the unknown and its imagined role in making human day to day life easy or difficult create a strong moral value among married couples in Ibibio land. *Ekpo Nka Owo* is an earth-based religion, and was practiced in almost all the communities and culture across Akwa Ibom state, according to their beliefs and traditions. It was a belief system whose origin predates the majority of well known religion and belief on this earth.

Unfortunately, for the past several years, the image of the *Ekpo Nka Owo* has been associated with the evil, barbaric and unrighteous due to prejudices created by the Christian church. However, some people have began to understand and believe that *Ekpo Nka Owo* is the true religion of god and nature because it helps to maintain morality in the marriage and it promotes family values especially faithfulness in marriage. As the Christian Bible has warned that people should not commit adultery or fornication, so does Ibibio tradition warn both men and women against committing adultery and fornication. The Ibibio people were serious about sexual immorality among its members. They involved the Ibibio ancestral spirit and commissioned it to deal with all married women who committed adultery. The spirit is called *Ekpo Nka Owo* whose assignment was to catch and torment all married women who committed adultery.

Ukpong (2012), opines that ancestral spirits of *Ekpo Nka Owo* came into existence as a result of the efforts of the ancestors to check sexual immorality. They did not want their wives to have sexual intercourse with other men outside marriage, mainly because through sexual intercourse, their wives might bring "foreign blood" into the family. Moreover, it may cause the death of their husbands because if a woman collected something from the man she has an affairs with, she might use if in cooking for her husband. If the husband eats the food, he will die, it is believed that the *Ekpo Nka Owo* is the one that kills the man believing that when women have sexual intercourse with offer men outside marriage, they could not be loyal to their husbands. She may also reveal the husband's secrets to the other men. This may lead to her husband's downfall or death.

The spirit of *Ekpo Nka Owo* works mostly and significantly during child birth and in the labour room. It is believed that when a woman is pregnant, the person that is responsible for the pregnancy is her husband, but if not, there lies a big problem. Consequently, the woman will not be able to give birth and she will die unless she tells the truth of her relationship with other men. The spirit will not allow the child in the womb to come out unless the confess to the crime she had committed. It is believe in Ibibio that if the child birth is "difficult" or hard", something is responsible, if the woman does not want to die, she need to tell the truth, this can only be done in the presence of her husband. If the husband is not there, she will send for him to witness her confession. In some community

in Ibibio land, an egg is used when the women mentioned the names of the people involved. This is not a myth. It is real. During this period, it is a shameful thing to the father and the mother in-law, because of their daughter's confession of sexual immorality. It will be a shameful thing to the entire family of the woman, and even the husband. If she is done with mentioning the names, her husband may invite some elders and sacrifices are made before she can give birth to the child in her womb, if she refuses to confess, she will die during labour. In some cases, when the child birth is "hard" which has no connection with *Ekpo Nka Owo,* the oracle will be consulted to know whether it is the work of their enemy and solution will be proffered immediately and she would deliver the child.

Some women in Ibibio have tired all means to stop the spirit of *Ekpo Nka Owo* from performing the duties or functions, assigned to it by Ibibio tradition. They devised several measures in an attempt to stop or decisive *Ekpo Nka Owo* from punishing them, surprisingly, some of these measures adopted by women to flirt around and to deceive *Ekpo Nka Owo* have proved abortive. Despite some of the tactics designed by women to flirt around and to deceived *Ekpo Nka Owo*, some are aborted, others are stillborn. Aborted in the sense that at the end they will confessed before they gave birth to a child who will later die. Mostly, women who are normative and married would not want to give birth, if they know that they have offended the gods of the land by having sex outside marriage. When the time of child birth is near, they would go to their villages and stay there until they give birth. Some women tend to play on the intelligence of *EkpoNka Owo* because it sounds native, barbaric, fetish and outdated. Reasoning from this perspective, some of them are saying, that *Ekpo Nka Owo* should be condemned so that they can be free to flirt around like their male counterparts. Some of them strongly believed that, they can still have sexual relationship with other men irrespective of the fact that they are in their husband houses after all the men do it too. (Ukpong, 2012).

According to Anele (1998), though some of the women know that since they cannot deceive *Ekpo Nka Owo*, they may go as far as calling a small boy of about one year *Ebe mi* (my husband), some may name the male children in the compound *(Ebe mi)* my husband secretly, during pregnancy. When child birth near, she would take an egg, call the child and perform some rituals of confession. The ancestral spirit will accept the rituals but the newly born child will die when it is the age of the supposed *Ebe mi.* To Inyang (2016) (interview), some women in recent times mention a few names and others mention false names that never had an affair with them. This often bring confusion in the family, for women who try to play tricks on the spirit of *Ekpo Nka Owo* by deceiving themselves and running to another place to give birth, immediately they come back home and eat anything, the child eventually die.

African Religion, Women Sexuality and Sex Laws in Ibibio Land

Religion**,** from the traditional African perspective is the recognition of our duties as divine command. Idowu, (1991), acknowledges Kant's by noting that "Religion is the belief which sets what is essential in all adoration of God in human normality… Religion is the law in us in so far as obtains emphasis from law giver and judge over us. It is a morality directed to the recognition of God. Religion affects, and influences almost all facets of human behavior in African society including women sexuality, gender equality or inequality and harmful traditional practices and behaviours against women. Mbiti (1969), posits that "Religion penetrates into all departments of life so fully that it cannot be isolated. Both in tradition (ancient) and modern life… Religion is the strongest element or force and the greatest influence upon the thinking and the living of the people. In Ibibio land, religion is responsible for human sexuality. Religion guides and direct sexuality especially to the detriment of women. Religion directly prescribes acceptable sexual behavior by creating laws, ideas, customs, fantasies and art that should guide sexuality in Ibibio land with supernatural sanctions. This supernatural sanction is responsible for the pains married women are going through in Ibibio land if they involve in extra marital affairs or sexual infidelity (cheating on their husbands).

The Ibibio people like other African ethnic groups are religiously intoxicated in time past there were adherent of African traditional religion. In with the advent of Christianity, the worship of African traditional Religion is drastically becoming moribund. Nevertheless it is imperative to note that even with the advent of Christianity myriad of Ibibio people still adhere to some African practices like *Ekpo Nka Owo.*

There are various ethical codes or principles that exist in Ibibio land and they are seen as norms that guide and control the activities of individuals in the Ibibio community. Hence, sexuality has to do with sex and lies in the heart of every human which most people are yet to understand. Carro & Wolpe (1996), describe Human sexuality as:

> *Grounded in biological functioning, emerges in each of us as we develop and is expressed by culture through rules about sexual contact, attitudes about moral and immoral sexuality, habits of sexual behaviours, patterns of sexual relationships between the sexes.*

Human are influenced by their attitudes and beliefs about a particular thing, positions about sex are as a result of place and time and are constantly changing. Sexuality is being influenced by family, culture, religion and even individual experience. Sex laws among Ibibio ethnic groups are given based on issues that concern all aspects of human sexuality and the behavior of humans in Ibibio land. These laws relate to communities, it varies on

issues of consent, how one is married, fidelity and premarital sex issues, extra marital affairs, homosexual, lesbianism etc. Every society is bounded by customs and traditions which is wrap up in the traditional beliefs and practices, modes of life, behavior and prohibition which guide the society. These traditions cover the whole gamut of natural order, human existence and interaction, beliefs about life and the universe and to basic human activities and simple conduct (Ekeopara, 2011). In Ibibio land, such customs and traditions is believed to have been ordained and communicated by the gods of the land and through the ancestors. Thus, any conduct, actions or happenings that are contrary to the laws of the land are regarded as abomination (taboos), Mbiti (1969), also rightly asserts that there are manylaws, customs, set forms of behavior, regulations; rules or observations and taboos constituting the Moral code and ethics of the a given community or society. Some of these are held Sacred, and are believed to have been instituted by God. Any breach of this code of behavior is considered evil, wrong or bad, for it is an injury or destruction of the accepted social order and peace.

Sexual Laws in Ibibio Traditional Society

In Ibibio traditional society, there are some sexual laws that when an individual breaches, it will definitely affect its citizens, the society and the community as well.

(a) Taboo: It is the prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behavior is either too sacred and consecrated or too dangerous and accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake. In Ibibio land, certain actions and activities such as having sex in the bush/farm and a woman lying on top of a man during sexual intercourse are seen and rated as a Taboo, while infidelity among married women is another example of Taboo which is checkmated and punished by *Ekpo Nka Owo* deity in Ibibio society. A taboo is a prohibition in a particular society with a supernatural and social sanction. In most traditional societies like Ibibio, taboo was used as punitive, a method of ensuring conformity and obedience to social custom in societies (Nana, 2020). Taboos are also connected with the behavior and conduct of individual lives in the community. Each kind of taboo had its own corresponding punishment. The following types of taboo exist in Ibibio, (a) murder, (b) killing the sacred totemic (c) suicide by hanging (d) defecation in the shrine of the divinity or sacred place, (e) having sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman (f) giving birth to twin (g) a man intentionally breaking the wife's pot. Taboo may mean to checkmate the excess of the individuals in the society, keep a healthy relationship with the ancestors and the divinities, and preserve the customs and traditions of society.

(b) Incest: This is the crime of having sexual relationship with a parent, child, siblings or grandchildren. It is an immoral attitude, and is forbidden in the society, and is seen as abomination (Nana, 2020). This is one of the sexual taboo in Ibibio land, it involves not just

sex between brothers and sisters, but sex between cousins, in-laws and even distant relations. In Ibibio land, Incest is a forbidden sexual relationship between family members that is considered as grievous taboo (sin) against the deities (gods), family and society as well. In Ibibio land, there are strict laws forbidding sexual relationship between people with close blood tie such as cousins and siblings. If the act is discovered, the perpetrators are severely punished and in most cases banished.

(C) Adultery: This is a voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and someone other than his wife or between a married woman and someone other than her husband. Adultery is prohibited in the community because it is against the customs and traditions of the land, and because it is an unethical behavior. Thus, in some part of Ibibio land, when a man sleeps with another man's wife and is caught, there are certain rites that are to be performed to appeal the gods of the land else the woman will die on the process of child birth. The child might also die as a result of *Ekpo Nka Owo* (Nana, 2020). The Ibibio ancestral spirit or ghost of adultery, if a woman who commits adultery and refuses to admit her infidelity for possible cleansing, she dies during childbirth or lose her children. The sexual life of ibibio women revolves and centers on their husbands, fornication and adultery were severely sanctioned as taboos punishable by *Ekpo Nka Owo.* In Ibibio land, if adultery is not cleansed, leads to death of either the man/woman or both parties. Husbands who suspect their wives of sexual infidelity have right to bring her case to the family head who will pour libations to the ancestors or deities of infidelity which is *"Ekpo Nka Owo"*. It was a preventive measure that *Ekpo Nka Owo* was introduced to checkmate, regulate the sexual behavior of their women.

(d) Homosexuality: this is sexual attraction to the same sex, either male to male (gay) or female to female (lesbian). The Ibibio strongly frown at this Homosexuality just like every other society does. Such acts are not to be heard of, and are rarely associated with Ibibio societies. This is because the laws and institution of marriage which is between man and woman and the need for procreation hold sway in the communities of Ibibio land.

Homosexuality is a sexual attraction and romance between those of the same sex, as this may be between the males known as gay or between two or more women known as lesbians. In Ibibio land, homosexuality which is same sex intercourse, same sex marriage are considered taboos and as such forbidden.

The Effects of Ekpo Nkaowo on Ibibio Women

Tracing its origin, the word *Ekpo Nka Owo* is derived from the Ibibio word *Aka Owo*. Historically, *Ekpo Nka Owo* is an ancestral spirit that checkmates the sexual behavior of married women in Ibibio traditional society. This was to help check infidelity among

married women, and it also regulates and punished defaulters in order to maintain the sanctity of holy matrimony among women.

Ekpo Nka Owo in Ibibio land focuses on faithfulness. According to Ukpong (2012), every society in the world has set rules and regulations on sex matters. Sex control is necessary in the family and also in the community as well. Ek*po Nka Owo* as an ancestral fidelity deity had long existed. It is a family deity and not a village or clan deity. And so, *Ekpo Nka Owo* is a traditional being. It was introduced through native invocation, incantation with drinks and animal sacrifice. Some of the punishments *by Ekpo Nka Owo* in time past were revealed by oracle and priest who gave reason behind attacks or sickness that may arise as a result of *Ekpo Nka Owo* punishment. "Illegal sexual intercourse was regarded as an offense not only against humanity but also against the ancestors and the earth goddess (Ukpong, 2012*). Ekpo Nka Owo* is a traditional way of controlling unfaithfulness among married couple. It means "ghost of adultery" as the name implies. In time past, women were the ones who suffered this measure. It is the act of calling and invoking women who had died through this act by pouring libation.

The Ibibio society is a particular one, by imposing *Ekpo Nka Owo* on the married women and exempts the men. For as Ibibio man would say, "One cannot take his money to go marry a woman to himself and she carry his thing of enjoyment to go give another". Adultery by married women was greatly frowned at more than that of men who was protected by the culture. A woman who commits adultery usually dies while giving birth, although those who have ceased to give birth fall sick and loses their head. *Ekpo Nka Owo* punished the women who go outside their home to commit adultery, when pregnancy occurs, she is expected to confess or die. In the case where she confesses, she will be asked to pay a fine of goat, drinks and yams to the husband as the case may be. Some men get affected if they know that their wives are cheating and they refused to expose them, but if their husbands have no sexual relationship with them not eat what they cook, it will have no resultant effect on him (husband). Also, the husband of an adulterous wife is not to partake in eating of another's cleansing item, else he will be afflicted with sicknesses sand eventually dies. In the case where a wife is asked to pay fine, the husband is not to contribute his money in buying those items else he gets stricken. The effect of *Ekpo Nka Owo* on adulterous Ibibio women is evidence in "malaria" (fever) without cure, changes the shape and position of the woman's mouth, pulling off of hairs from the head, inability to put to birth, constant use of hand to open up the vagina in public and partial madness while the defaulter's children will reject food from her, constant crying and sudden death of her children one after the other, physical and psychological trauma and torment. The Ibibio women suffered these ordeals and punishment; women were not regarded as

anything. The man marries more than four wives and uses *Ekpo Nka Owo* to punish his wives who go out to commit adultery.

Conclusion

Ekpo Nka Owo is the Ibibio traditional society was established to checkmate infidelity and reduce adultery on the side of the women who were bounded by the culture not to engage in any form of extra marital affairs. The people's closeness to the supreme deity made many people afraid of committing adultery, as that was easily interpreted as offending the gods and their ancestors. One therefore, will be compelled to be faithful to her marriage because failure will attract sanction from the gods and ancestors. The institution of *Ekpo Nka Owo* in Ibibio society may be seen as unjust, but it guides, directs, and promotes morality and fidelity which are very good and sacrosanct in human culture.

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Oral Interview

s/n	Name	Title	Religion	Age	Occupation	Place	Time	Date
1.	Inyang, A. E	Chief	Traditional Religion	83	Herbalist	Mbiabong Ikot Etim	9.28am	6-3-2021