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Traditional Societies and Social Change in Nigeria: A Study of Ekpe among the People of Cross River State

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Abstract

The paper critically examined the Ekpe society in its indigenous form and nature prior the advent of Christianity, Western education and Western influence. It described the religion, social, economic and political structures of the society as progressive and dynamic. But, Ekpe in the course of the colonial period underwent a wide range of fundamental changes in their structure, roles, status and activities. The attitude of colonial agencies, the tenets of colonial enterprise – Christianity, Western education and commerce and the pursuit of these tenets as well as some activities of the societies themselves, conducted inevitably to a series of measures adopted by colonial authorities to suppress the societies in question. The acts of suppression altered the pattern of relationship of these societies to their communities and people by altering (diminishing) their roles, status and activities. The aim of this paper is to examine the role and activities of this society, its confrontation with colonial authorities as well as its contemporary standing. Essentially, this is an examination of the themes of change and continuity. The methodology adopted in the course of researching is the primary and secondary sources

Key words: Traditional Societies, Social Change, Ekpe, Cross River State

Introduction

Traditional societies or associations were essential features of pre-colonial Africa and inextricably constituted the basis of the organizational platform of the people and provided the stability and socio-political controls of their respective communities through the instrumentality of a wide range of functions – economic, political, social, cultural, religious and judicial.

In most communities, group membership was predicated upon gender differences and this served to enforce male chauvinism and maintain male dominance. Because of their ritual and magical formulas and medicinal concoctions as well as their mysterious relationships to ancestral spirits and the jealousy with which they guarded the details of their internal organizations, these associations were called secret societies, and greatly dreaded by non-members.

Throughout pre-colonial Nigeria, these societies were supreme and even in the early period of colonial rule, nothing detracted from their activities and status. However, in the course of colonial dispensation, the status of these societies was greatly reduced and their roles and activities drastically diminished. This was the result of series of conflicts of interests between those of the societies and the colonialists including missionaries, in which the colonial authorities, acting from a vanguard and super ordinate position, brutally suppressed the societies, forcing upon them, in the process, unprecedented changes.

Consequently, though still existing in contemporary Nigeria, these societies are operating in a much diluted form after much of what made them thick had been destroyed by the colonialists. These societies were numerous and included Ogboni, EkonUbo, Ekpe, Ekpo, Okonkon, inter alia. However, our focus is on just Ekpe, which was the most prominent. Interestingly, this group shared a number of characteristics in common including the ritual use of masks and masquerades.

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The Ekpe Society

Throughout the Cross River region, the Ekpe society has been recognized as one of the most prominent, influential and powerful secret societies. Although the fraternity is widely known as Ekpe, there exist other local names under which it operates – Ngbe among the Banyang of northern Cross River and Mamfe in the Cameroun, Mgbe among the Quasi of Calabar. To the early Europeans, it was known as Egbe. Ekpe in Efik means Leopard. Thus Egbe Society is related to the spirit of the leopard (Beatie1966: 33). Leopard is a brave and uncanny animal believed to be a mysterious and invincible being living in the forest, which is invisible to the uninitiated. As a forest spirit, it was propitiated for the good of the entire community. Ekpe members claim to be interpreting the desires of Ekpe, and they invoke it's authority to support their decisions (Dayrell1911: 23-31).

Origin of Ekpe Society

The origin is still shrouded in mystery. However, oral tradition and available information tend to indicate that it originated from the Ekois; then spread among Ododop, Iffianga, Akwa and Efut to the Efik at Calabar (Alagoa 1980: 56-72). However, Ekpe society is widely diffused over the Cross River region perhaps as part of Efik influence upon the region. Curiously enough it is said that Ekpe was originally a woman's society but was captured by the men, probably about the time that the men wrested the chief power from women, when the Ekois, originally a matripotestal tribe, changed to a patripotestal one.

The Nature of the Society

Ekpe society is a secret society believed to have been originally founded on the worship of a Silvan deity. Even the belief is still held today that Ekpe, the preternatural being of that name lived in Ekpe bush from whence, as occasion demanded, the initiate of Ekpe cult brought the

Ekpe to town, and later the Ekpe was returned at the expiration of the ceremony requiring its presence in town. Ekpe itself is a mystic figure which is never seen by the uninitiated (Udoh). In the pre-Colonial days when the authority of Ekpe was all in all, uninitiated person who permitted himself the indiscretion of seeing either Ekpe or the performance of any of its secret rituals was doomed to capital punishment (Jones 1963, pp. 21-28).

Though Ekpe cannot be seen, being a spirit, it has a number of messengers or lesser spiritual disciples, called Idem Ikwo by the Efik, who carry out its orders. The Idem is the costumed figure of the society. At Ekpe bush, the forest home of Ekpe, the Idem puts on its gadgets-multi-coloured raffia costume. It carries a bell around its waist that sounds at intervals to announce its approach and carries a long whip with which it thrashes the uninitiated who stands on its way. When the Idem is fully costumed, it masquerades itself as the supernatural representatives of the great Silvan deity, the Ekpe. And with such awe, it is regarded by the populace, that an Ekpe edict is usually received with absolute obedience (Lieber 1971, pp. 12-20).

Membership

In Ekpe communities, membership appears to be open to all men, bond or free. But the slaves were confined to the lowest of its several grades. In the 19th century women were specifically allowed membership, without participating in the ceremonies or secret rituals of the society. Ekpe is a graded society. A new entrant pays fees appropriate to each grade between at least twelve months intervals. Each grade has its peculiar rituals, its dress and dances, and to the novice, successive mysteries are shown, proper and peculiar to the grade (44-45). Members of grades are also distinguished by items of dress; cock's and peacock's feathers worn by members of first, second, third and fourth grades while from the fifth to the eight grades, ostrich feather is worn (Offiong 1989: 55-59). The higher one ascends in Ekpe hierarchy the more influence one has both within and outside the society; and as the fees for purchasing the titles are fixed, it follows that only the most influential could rise to the top. However, the position of the head priest of Ekpe – Eyamba among the Efik and Masungu in old Ekoi, is the most important. It came to be associated with the development of kinship in the Efik State of Calabar, for there was usually only one Eyamba at any one time throughout the Efik country.

Qualification for Admission and Initiation

Admission into the various orders above depends on a number of factors amongst which are the following – nobility of birth, general comportment, good behaviour, affluence and the ability to keep secret (Parkinson 1907, pp. 11, 16 & 32). Initiation takes place in Ekpe shrine especially built for Ekpe meetings. There is a big piece of stone (Ekpe stone) and stepping on it signifies admittance into membership at the initiation, the secrets relating to the particular grade or grades are revealed to the initiate (Itobong). The new member now leaves the shrine dressed only in wrapper or loin cloth, his body marked with white stripes with a peacock feather pin on his head. He carries a special drum that he beats as he moves round the village announcing to the people that he is now an Ekpe member. People rush out to see him while Ekpe members salute him with Ekpe slogan and then exchange greetings with him, this initiation rite is meant for those who do not acquire all of the titles, and there are more elaborate rites for those who acquire all the titles (Aburu). All these involve series of sacrifices calling on the ancestors, to share with them and to protect the initiate from all harm.

Ekpe Language and Signs

Ekpe society attained such a degree of sophistication that it developed a complicated language system known only to the members. Members communicate to one another using the secret

language. The symbol of the language is in a written form and this symbol is called Nsibidi. Suspecting that non-initiates may impersonate members in faraway places, Ekpe society adopted and communicated with signs and every member is required to know, depending, of course, on one's rank.

Functions of Ekpe Society

Ekpe society in pre-colonial and to an extent in the colonial period exercised wide range of functions in all its communities but especially in the State of Calabar. It is our opinion that Ekpe society attained its highest organizational and functional status in the State of Calabar, and contributing tremendously to this was the complex combination of forces and events in the environment. These functions including political, economic, social and religious are examined below.

A. Political Functions

Before the advent of the British and the conquest of Nigeria, the political authority of the cult was supreme; it acted as and was virtually the government of the day. Its rules and regulations were law which could not be flagrantly flouted without serious repercussions. This was so in all Ekpe communities especially the city of Calabar. Here the political functions of Ekpe shall be itemized into the legislative, executive and judicial.

- (i) **Legislative** – in the pre-colonial era and even in the early days of colonial rule, it was Ekpe which made laws. In the State of Calabar, even the missionaries and the British Consul enlisted Ekpe's support to enact laws, such as the law against human sacrifice in 1850 (Talbot 21).
- (ii) **Executive** – Ekpe served as a police force to enforce the laws. For instance, in Calabar, all Heads of Houses, Clans and even the Obong of Calabar were necessarily senior members of Ekpe, through which they enforced their authority, disciplined and punished their subjects (Talbot 1912: 34-36). Previously, the Efik political system lacked executive staff, people capable of implementing the orders and decisions of the elders of the community. But the introduction of Ekpe, there were agents who either by their capacity as members or disguised spirit of the community executed the orders of the elders. With the authority of Ekpe behind these agents, anybody who disobeyed them faced grave consequences (Frank 1929: 65-69).
- (iii) **Judicial** – Ekpe was the supreme judicial body. It collected debts; stopped fights between individuals and groups disciplined slaves, and generally kept peace. Ekpe disposed of a range of sanctions as wide as its functions. It could place an offending individual or community on interdiction, boycott or ostracism. Ekpe could impose a fine, detain or arrest an offender, and on occasions, even execute a criminal (Reports of Enquiry 1964: 44-48). Ekpe adjudicated between wards despite the colonial administration and missionaries. Ekpe could impose a curfew and could destroy a person's property, including his house. Indeed, Ekpe was the final court of appeal.
- (iv) **Unity** – Ekpe was one institution that brought together all leaders and freeman of wealth and influence; that is, all those in the same state with a common interest in peace and prosperity. In Calabar, this unity was useful in two ways. Firstly, it gave the people an advantage in their dealings with the European sea traders. Secondly, it helped to prevent in Calabar the type of disruptive political struggles

that occurred in the Eastern Delta States. For instance, despite the succession disputes, the Calabar State did not break up in the 19th century the way Bonny and Elem Kalabari did, little wonder the elders invoked its authority to back their legislative and judicial decisions (Ukeme).

B. Economic Functions

Ekpe performed a wide range of economic functions in all its communities. Such functions included:

- (i) **Debt Recovery** – The society was particularly useful for the recovery of debts, especially from an outsider. As for a debtor who failed to pay, Ekpe would wreck his house or belongings and seize any of his property or it would ‘blow Ekpe’ on his compound by which action he and his family would be confined to the house without assistance or help from anyone.
- (ii) **Protection of Property**– Among the Ekpe communities of Obubra, Akamkpa and Ikom, the society had the important function of protecting the property of its members. A member whose farm or economic estate for example was being trespassed by the public would place or tie Ekpe insignia on a conspicuous part of the property and anybody who willfully tampered with the property was punished by the society.
- (iii) **Regulation of Trade** – Apart from the fact that trade at Calabar depended heavily on credit the supercargoes relied upon Ekpe to recover their debt (Cultural Magazine of Nigeria 1955: 2-6), Ekpe regulated the trade and through it the Efik were able to unite together to enhance their bargaining position with the supercargoes (Cook 1985:5).
- (iv) **Tax Collection** - Ekpe was/is an effective solution to the problem of tax collection and levies for traditional community development.

C. Social Functions

- (i) **Recreational and Relaxational Activities**–The society offered members and the general public an opportunity for recreational, relaxational and entertainment activities. Whenever an Ekpe play was/is thrown open, apart from the initiates who partake in the drumming and dancing, the un-initiated matched excitedly, clap and sometimes join in the general dancing. Again on festive occasions such as celebrating an anniversary etc. the streets were lined with members and masquerades performing all kinds of acrobatics, entertaining all and sundry (Achike).
- (ii) **Inter-group Relations** –The wide diffusion of Ekpe over the Cross River region gave members of Ekpe immunity and privileges whenever they went out among other Ekpe members. Thus, Ekpe became an instrument of inter-group authority. Again, if a deviant or an offender escaped from one community to seek refuge in another, such a person would be extradited and sent back to the community where he committed the crime, because Ekpe was a fraternity.
- (iii) **Social Status** – Whenever a member of the community did something worthy and outstanding, he was initiated into the cults as a mark of appreciation for his contributions to the progress of the community at large. This conferred some honour and distinction on the individual concerned. This practice still continues

and even non-members of the community could be so honoured as was the case with the late Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Tafawa Balewa, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Michael Okpara and Sir Adetokunbo Ademola. However, in this case, the individuals are superficially initiated. But in this, the society serves as a medium of inter-group integration.

D. Religious Functions

Ekpe society also served a religious function. In the Ekpe shrine sacrifices were regularly made and rituals similarly performed. So the shrine was believed to possess supernatural powers. Members swore by it to keep secret, the secrets of the society, not to harm each other, among other things. It was believed that the shrine was efficacious enough to detect liars and punish them to death. This acted as a bond among members as well as among the people of the community generally (Uduak). So the Ekpe shrine was a common totem for the people.

The Negative Sides of Ekpe

Despite the above functions of Ekpe, the society was also characterized by a reasonable dose of evil practices. Such negative effects could be seen in the aspects or forms of:

Discrimination – Ekpe discriminated against the slaves and the poor particularly in Calabar. It thus created class differences tending to polarize rather than integrate. Unlike the Delta States, Ekpe ensured that slaves were not integrated into the social and political system. This element of discrimination led to the nearest thing of a slave revolt in Calabar in the rise of the blood men – organization of slaves and the poor. The Order of the Blood men was formed by slaves in the plantations who took a blood covenant to defend themselves against the practices of sacrificing slaves at the funerals of kings and lineage heads (Aye 2000: 32-37). In other words, Ekpe society contributed to the discrimination among ethnic groups in contemporary Nigeria.

Barbaric Practices – Ekpe involved in barbaric practices. In 1850 Consul Hutchinson referred to the practice at Calabar, sanctioned by Ekpe law of permitting a masked man to go about the town on Ekpe days with liberty to whip all slaves, uninitiated men, women and children whom he may meet (Nair 1972: 65).

Cruelty – Ekpe was a cruel society. It thrived on substitutionary punishment, ordeal by poison of the *eserebeans*, human sacrifice and capital punishment as well as immolation of slaves and inter-alia (Aburu).

Colonial Rule and the Changes in Traditional Ekpe Society

Traditional Ekpe society in the course of colonial period underwent fundamental changes. These changes were reflected essentially in their gradual diminutive status and corresponding diminutive role in traditional setting and the colonial framework, the three societies under consideration inclusive.

Generally, the encounter between traditional African society including its institutions and Europe (Colonial administration), and the assessment of the impact of such encounter, have been a matter of polarized debate along Afrocentric and Eurocentric frontiers, with each side wanting to tilt the argument to its favour. Thus, while Europe could justify the encounter and its impact on the platform of efforts to live out a civilizing mission, to a primitive and backward people, in African context, Europe came just to perpetuate its greed, racial prejudice and exploitation (Itoro).

While this work is not in furtherance of the debate which is tainted by unrestrained subjectivity, it is the opinion of the writer that views and conclusions about the relations and their impact between the societies under discourse and colonial administration should be subject to careful intellectual and empirical scrutiny for a more balanced opinion.

Perhaps it is safe from the outset that under colonialism, conflict and change was inevitable. The encounter with Ekpe society under consideration and colonialism was a most inconvenient one involving two alien and parallel cultures and authorities having different motives, explanation and dispositions, operating in the same environment and competing for loyalty over the same subjects. Herein lay the inevitability.

Africanist writers have berated Europe for her role in and attitudinal disposition toward Africa and anything African, generally and the impact of both on the people. True, Europeans were not fair to Africans. They castigated Africans and treated with contempt anything African and their attitude toward the African was one of racial chauvinism, ethnocentrism and contempt with the attendant desire to eliminate it. It was this general European mind-set that influenced developments in Nigeria. By implication, Europe's attitude towards Africa predated formal colonial control, for colonialism, in our opinion, was the cumulative process of a series of interactions and consideration between Europe and Africa, essentially economic, spanning several centuries, during which period, some myth about Europe's racial superiority and all its theoretical framework, all to maximize economic exploitation of Africa, were designed.

In the peculiar Nigerian case, the British decision in 1898 to establish and maintain a colonial state in Nigeria was a long process that involved a number of measures including the removal of all visible opposition to the imposition, expansion and consolidation of British Central Authority over the territory later known as Nigeria (Green 1949, pp. 213-219). This provision makes certain that Ekpe was already billed, perhaps unwittingly for at least suppression, for they were surely going to constitute an impediment.

Nevertheless, the British to an extent appreciated the traditional societies, employed their services and they (traditional societies) contributed their quota to the success of colonial enterprises and the colonial administration and their suppression, to our mind, is beyond racial interpretation but has other empirical undertones. In other words, the British alone should not be blamed for their attitudes toward Ekpe and the changes these societies underwent but the activities of these societies should be re-examined to determine whether the changes forced upon them were out of place or not.

Many writers including Offiong, while acknowledging the atrocities of the societies under consideration have blamed colonial administrators but especially the missionaries for their actions against the societies (www.efikdc.org 2017). While not justifying Britain in her disruption of traditional Nigerian societies and institutions, such blame, it is submitted, served to justify or legitimize illegality or atrocity. While the positive role of Ekpe is not disputed, it is further submitted however, that the negative role of these societies was by no means grievous and this stood anti-thesis not only to Nigerian progress but also to the success of colonial enterprise. In the pre-colonial era the atrocities of these societies were endured because their authority was unquestionable, under colonial era it was a different ball game.

The negative or atrocious acts already mentioned in the preceding pages, shall be briefly summarized:

- a. Evil Practices – biennial human sacrifices, immolation of slaves, substitutionary punishment, ordeal by the person of *eserebeans* etc.

- b. Constant harassment – Christian converts and missionaries were constantly harassed.
- c. Actual killing – actual killing of people was rampant.

Monopoly of native authority and injustice – members of these societies dominated native authorities established by colonial administration. In this vantage, it became practically difficult for non-members of these societies especially Christians to get justice in the courts. In fact, this led to a colonial officer, T.C. Cheetham to report in 1915 that “the most effective way in which these societies were affecting the country was through the Native Courts” (Monday 1978, pp. 7-31).

From the foregoing, it is deducible that whatever positive role the societies played was quite marginal to the success of colonial business but that their negative role was a major obstacle. It hindered the spread of the gospel, instituted fear, terror and insecurity and stood diametrically contrary to the colonial agenda in its entirety.

The negative role of the societies created such an intense antagonism between them and the missionaries especially, resulting in their suppression by colonial authorities which instituted the changes that characterized their contemporary existence. In these changes the entire Nigerian society has been transformed, at least for the better (Ajato1970: 21-30). This transformation, in part, is seen in the purging of the societies of most evil practices and their amenability to the modern world.

Traditional Societies in Contemporary Nigeria

Ekpe in the course of the colonial period underwent a wide range of fundamental changes in their structure, roles, status and activities. The attitude of colonial agencies, the tenets of colonial enterprise – Christianity, Western education and Western commerce and the pursuit of these tenets as well as some activities of the societies themselves, conducted inevitably to a series of measures adopted by colonial authorities to suppress the societies in question (Latham 1973, p. 28). The acts of suppression altered the pattern of relationship of these societies to their communities and people by altering (diminishing) their roles, status and activities. These were changes that resulted in the contemporary standing of traditional societies whose operation is at best, diluted. The state of the society shall be briefly examined as it is today:

- a. Politically – With the introduction of modern political institutions, the societies no longer maintain political authority in their communities as each village now has a village council whose membership is based on conditions other than membership of traditional societies. This however, does not imply that these societies have died altogether politically. Rather evidence is that members of these societies are still being consulted in matters of politics (Monday 1966/1967, pp. 29-35).
- b. Social Status – In pre-colonial times Ekpe was the basis of elevated social status to which one could aspire. Today this has been replaced by academic certificates, good job and other achieved life chances (Intelligence Reports on Calabar1897, p. 21). This however, does not negate the fact that membership in these societies is still a reality.
- c. Operationally – Operationally, these societies have been purged of most of their atrocities including human sacrifice, immolation of slaves, ritual murder and ritual cannibalism, etc. However, these practices have not completely died away. In fact in Calabar, Owerri, Lagos etc, ritual murders are occasionally experienced (Afigbo 1970, pp. 21-31). Also, Ekpe masquerades still harass women, children and non-

members and during the period of their operations, people are confined to their houses. This is against the constitutional provision of freedom of movement.

Despite the above, these societies still serve as a uniting force as people still meet to interact. Again, they still help to entertain the society by the acrobatic displays of their masquerades, their songs as well as feasting on special occasions such as New Yam, Easter, etc.

Conclusion

Traditional associations, in pre-colonial Nigeria, were an unparalleled force, with their impact, both negative and positive, felt in every facet of society, very much inclusive. Colonialism, to a great extent contrasted remarkably with the aims, approach and tenets of these associations whose negative tendencies coupled with the colonialists' preconceived racist prejudice and ethnocentric against Africa, between them, initiated a conflictual relationship, resulting in fundamental changes being forced upon the associations.

Consequently, Ekpe is robbed of much of its original (pre-colonial) form and shape and *ipso facto*, operate in much diluted form today. The positive aspects of this society notwithstanding, empirical evidence is that much orientation is still needed to shape its character in line with the contemporary Nigerian political and social order. This orientation could involve individual association's re-examination of its conduct as well as intervention – by government and society at large. This orientation and the willingness of these and other associations to yield to change, in our opinion would establish their relevance in a greater dimension.

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