



Gender Issues and Space in Esan Festivals and Ceremonies

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Received: 15/06/2021	Abstract
Accepted: 04/08/2021	<i>The paper examines the areas of discrimination against women in Esan cultural activities. It focuses on the spaces in which women are marginalized especially in festivals and cultural ceremonies. To actively demonstrate this sidelined participation of women, the New Yam festival and the Efae ceremony are highlighted. In evaluating the marginal spaces of women, the study adopts the tenets of patriarchy and the feminist theory to see the specific attitudes and instruments of marginalization. It identifies patriarchy, as the major cause of discrimination and also shows that the situation persists till date because women offer no resistance to their plight. The paper intends to incite women to open their eyes to their unpalatable position.</i>
Keywords: Gender, Space, Patriarchy, Festival, Ceremony.	

1. INTRODUCTION

Esan tribe is located in Edo State, Nigeria. The Esan people are mainly agrarian and in addition do some commercial businesses. Culturally, the Esan people have a lot to offer. They believe in gods and God. They run the age grade system where men are divided into age grades ranging from “Egbenughele” aged between 12-25, “Igene” are men of between 25-45 years while “Edion” (Elders) are men from 46 years and above. The oldest man in a quarter heads that clan or quarter and he is called ‘Edionwele’. The entire tribe is ruled by Enijie (Royal Highnesses) and the Enijie are supported by the “Ekhaemonlen” (chiefs) to administer the people. In the above classification of age grade system women are excluded. The reason adduced for this exclusion is that women get married and leave their biological homes and so there is no way they can feature in the age grade system. Instead women are categorized into wives/mothers daughters, Returnees (Okhuan), Arebhoa (women who stay back home to raise children for a father who has no male child).

The classification above goes to show that the Esan woman has no place in the culture of the Esan tribe. She is socially alienated in her community. The purpose of this essay is to examine the role of women in festivals and ceremonies. There are many festivals and ceremonies in Esan land, some of them are; New Yam, New Year, Masquerade festival while the ceremonies include marriage, burial, coronation, initiation etc. These festival and ceremonies are called different names in the different communities of Esan due to dialectical differences. For example while the Ugboha people will call new yam festival ‘Osanon’, the Uromi people call it ‘Ihuen’ - they both mean the same thing. Esan as a language has different dialects, but the dialects are all intelligible by every Esan person who grew up in the environment. This essay will also limit the scope to one

festival and one ceremony for discussion, these are New Yam festival and Efea ceremony that precedes the New Yam festival.

The methodology is a vivid description of the two events and how the women in the setting are limited in their participation. Theoretically, the patriarchy in Africa which places the woman in a subordinate state in general and Esan land in particular, does not regard the woman as important in the grand scheme of things. Therefore, Esan women are never given space in customs and cultural practices of which festivals and ceremonies are inclusive. Patriarchy is defined as a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property (en.m.wikipedia.org).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminism is a movement that states or believes that women should be given equal opportunities in the scheme of things in the society as it applies to men, while patriarchy celebrates men over women. From time immemorial the world has always been patriarchal since very many societies are ruled by men and women are made to play the second fiddle. We note Woolf, 1929 and other numerous essays by women authors and on the cultural, economic, and educational disabilities within what she called A patriarchal society dominated by men that have hindered women from realising their productive and creative possibilities (Abrams and Harpham, 2012, p.14).

Again, feminism is the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, powers and opportunities as men and treated in the same way. It can also be defined as the set of activities intended to achieve this state. Conversely, patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women (www.banglajol.info). Themes often explored in feminist theory include discrimination, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, and stereotypy, etc.

Space in fiction means the domain of setting and surroundings of events, characters, and objects in literary narrative along with other domains (story, characters, and ideology), constitute a fictional universe (www.jstor.org). A literary space again, is seen as an authors model of the world expressed in the language of spatial representation. In a literary world, space models different relations of the world-picture; temporary, social, ethical and others. The literary model of the world-space, sometimes metaphorically adopts meanings of relations in the modelled world-structure that are themselves not at all spatial (Lotman, 1997). Space in this work is used to refer to the domain of marginalization, oppression, and alienation of women folk.

There are limited reviews in oral literature as it concerns gender issues and space in Esan festivals and ceremonies. But suffice to say that a critic like Christopher Okojie stated clearly in his works that women have no place in Esan culture. In his words: “without self-deceit, Esan people in every sphere of life maintain that there is no place for a woman in society. Thus, women have no recognized association. Even if there is a meeting of women in the village, only the recognized married women attend” (57). That is to say, women returnees and Arebhoas are not admitted into such gathering of wives. There is no space for them because the men/husbands see such women (who are their sisters/kinwomen) as misfit and their association with their wives can contaminate them (the wives). We also note the phrase “every sphere” which means all endeavours – marriage, trade, farming, art and culture, etc.

On her part, Bridget Inegbebor categorises female characters in Esan folktales and lists them as (i) the oppressed women (ii) women who resist oppression (iii) the un- oppressed, and lastly, (iv) women who dominate other women and men. Her categorization is interesting to us because in it, the plight of the woman is obviously visible. Firstly, women who do not resist oppression suffer and are often called ‘Omiogue’. They suffer all types of oppression and suppression both from their husbands and co-wives and community. They never fight back but in

the end, they are sometimes rewarded by divine mercy, or laws are made because of them. For example, there is a tale in which an oppressed female character 'Omioque' was made to bury her dead son who was killed by another female character 'Anohen' (the over zealous female character). The people in the setting refused to help her bury her dead son because of her weakness. She had to bury her dead son herself. Osenobua (God) saw the oppression, came down to earth to pass judgment, and decreed that on no account should a woman be subjected to such treatment again. From then on to date, women (whether weak or strong) no longer bury their dead children themselves. The young men of the community do that. While the women who resist oppression are called names ranging from being witches to having black power (juju). These negative names are aimed to put them in check. The women who are not oppressed are usually those who are wives of the Kings/Royal Highnesses but even then, they suffer some oppression in the hands of their husbands which are not made public. For the last group, women who dominate men and women, these are special women who are consulted for religious matters. They are usually priestesses who represent gods and divine for men and women alike their future through divination, otherwise, they are like every other woman who has no place in the culture of the people. We have taken time to analyse the categories of women in Esan folktales because the tales are a reflection of the beliefs and culture of the people. This belief system is also reflected in their festivals and ceremonies. Another critic, Wulemat Olorinmoye also analyses the image of women in Yoruba folktales. She divided them into mothers, priestesses, and concubines. She submits that the Yoruba culture and its instruments such as folktales regard the sexes as equal and complementary of each other. This is what it should be, both sexes should complement each other but in Esan festivals and folktales, the women have no space they are marginalized and relegated. They have no voice except when it comes to cooking and entertainment, when they are made to dance and serve the men.

Again, Godwin Eigbe in his essay, "Ukpe festival" discusses the festival from the perspective of economy and entertainment. He notes that the festival boosts home coming of the indigenes of the people and economically, attract tourists to Esan land. On women's participation, he submits that women do the entertainment aspect and also cook the meals for the festival. The ritualistic aspect where women are naturally alienated is not mentioned (godwinpalmer.blogspot.com). In addition, Charles Onomudo Aluede examined the role of women in Esan traditional musical practice and discovered that Esan women play little above nominal roles in their ensembles. The drumming and the songs are done by the men while women do the dancing. Though, occasionally, men also dance but women do not play the drums. Why is there no space for women to play the drums? In Aluede's conclusion he submits that "the reason for the marginalization of women are largely because of beliefs which are not empirical (Published Online 03/10/2017). Lastly, Onaiwu W. Ogbomo in his works discovers that women in Owan in Edo State, Nigeria are also marginalized when it comes to discussing their contribution to the development of their society. He submits that this is as a result of men telling the story instead of the women. What this means is that the men will select what to say about women's role in the development of the community. He uses the "Muted Theory" of Edwin Arder to buttress his point which says "the dominant group society generates and controls the dominant mode of expression." Muted groups are silenced by structure of dominancy and if they wish to express themselves, they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies.

The question is, why are women not given space to tell their own story? Why should men be their mouth piece? Even in this 21st century women are still culturally marginalized? It is observed that the women movement active in modern societies is either inactive or it does not exist in the traditional setting. Even when one tries to stir up such discussion with traditional women, they are uninterested and scared to discuss the issue of marginalization. They see it as being in

opposition and challenging the traditional institution which to them is an abomination. This is the feeling we got through unstructured interview with some women in the community.

In written literature, we also see the roles given to female characters to play. Most especially in the early novels of African male writers like Chinua Achebe, T.M. Aluko, Elechi Amadi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Camara Laye, and Cyprian Ekwensi where female characters are only seen and not heard, or are made to play the inferior role or secondary character. This lack of space for women made early African female writers like Flora Nwapa to create women with destinies of their own. Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba and Zainab Alkali also follow suit in their novels. Even in plays, female characters are also side lined. Oby Okolocha in her doctoral works examined the role of women in drama and submits that women are not given opportunity to excel or take decisions on matters that concern them.

The import of the reviews above is to emphasize the fact that women/female characters have always been marginalized. Our finding is that there is no known reason why they are so marginalized other than the fact that they are of a weaker sex and cannot keep secrets (at least that was what an old man we discussed with told us). On further probing, another man submits that that was how they met it. Women have never been admitted into the culture of rituals involved in festivals and ceremonies in the community. Therefore, it buttresses the point made by Aluede that there is no empirical evidence/reason to show that women cannot be trusted with secrets that are associated with such rituals and that is why they are not given space in the cultural practices of Esan land.

3. THE FESTIVAL AND CEREMONY

The New Yam festival in Esan land comes up between September and October every year. It is done in September when the year is considered a small year and in October when the year is considered a big year. It lasts for a full day. Before the festival, a ceremony is usually held which is called “Efae” in Ugboha of Esan land. Other communities of Esan land have different names for the ceremony that herald the New Yam festival. Efae is used in this write-up because the researcher hails from Ugboha and has firsthand information about the ceremony of Efae. The ceremony is a one day affair. It is during this ceremony that the male members of this community – Idasun inform the Onojie of Ugboha that the new yam festival is a month or two away. On the day of this ceremony that heralds the new yam festival, some rituals are done in a room where the paraphernalia/insignia of the ancestors are kept. The room (which is in the Edionwele’s house) is only accessible to the chief priest and a few men who enter with him. Women are never admitted into the room, whether in season or out of season. Therefore, no woman ever knows what is in that room, they can only imagine. It is believed that any woman who enters the room knowingly to see what is in that room, dies during childbirth and if she enters accidentally, she must appease the gods/ancestors with a she-goat, kolanuts, cowries and gin. After the sacrifice of goat is done in that room, young girls who have not started flowering (menstruation) are invited by the chief priest to join the men to cook the food for the gods and the women are not allowed to eat from the food. Women of the community cook their own food to celebrate the ceremony on their own.

After the eating and drinking, the men, now joined by the young girls who cooked the food, and other great men and women from other quarters of Ugboha proceeds on a dance to Eguare, to the Onojie’s (Highness) palace. Greatness in this context is achieved by birthing twins, triplets, or quadruplets (for women), and for men, it is achieved by killing big animals like leopards, lions, tigers, or elephants. At the palace, certain rituals are again performed by the men and the Onojie. Thereafter, they are entertained by the Onojie and there is great dancing and merriment. This usually comes to an end at early dusk. From that day, the Onojie in conjunction with another group of men from Iduwanbu Quarter meet to fix a day for the New Year festival which comes before the new yam festival. The new yam festival comes up nine days after the new year festival.

they are gifted with drinks and money. The following songs are rendered by the women:

Ghe ma

Ema nomegbe Ghe ma

Ena nomegbe Atutu agada mule Atutu agada mule Yebha ghe ma Atutu Agada mule Atutu Agada mule

See yam

Yam that fits/mould the body See yam fits/mould

Yam that is body Come and see yam

Ime re kharie, ye imen bhan Yerie, eyan vare. Repeated

I was about going home

I am no longer going because Yam has come

Eyan no gbo hu, va re Yam the arrester of anger Has come

Ye men re kharie Ye Imenbhan yerie Eyan no gbohuvare

I say I was going home

I am no longer going home

Yam the arrester of anger has come

The song is repeated severally. From the songs above we can identify Metaphor, repetition, idiophone, personification. The songs are short and repetitive and therefore danceable. The metaphor in the song – yam is personified and seen as a body builder in that when we eat yam with the right condiments, it builds the body. The idiophone is found in Atutu agada mule – there is no meaning ascribed to that line but it enhances the musicality. Yam is seriously personified as the arrester of anger. Yam has come, therefore I am no longer going home.

After dancing round, they go back to their respective homes to cook delicious pounded yam and Ogbono soup or melon soup in large quantity for themselves and visitors that may come.

Heaps of pounded yam and soup full of meat and fish are again taken by the women to the shrine where the men again gather to eat the food. Women are not allowed to eat there. The women are only involved in the cooking and entertainment during the festival and ceremony.

Funny enough, the women do not have a cult which is peculiar to them to which the men cannot be admitted. As noted earlier, the Esan woman has no place in the cultural practices of her people. Even at menopause they are still not allowed to participate in the ritualistic performance of the communities. They are sidelined till death. It is still the same to date and no reason is adduced to this other than, “this is how it was handed over to us and so it will continue like this” and “the women are not clean since they menstruate every month”. One would have expected that when a woman reaches menopause, she should be allowed to join the men in the cultural practices of her community, but this is not so in Esan land. Women are not given chieftaincy title in Esan only men. Women who have titles are affiliated to their husband’s title.

4. CONCLUSION

Our discussion has been on gender issues and space in Esan festivals. From all indications, the Esan woman at the rural level is still marginalized in this 21st century because of her sex. There is no cogent reason to show that she cannot be trusted with secrets of what goes on during

ritualistic performances. That when she marries into another family she becomes the property of that family until she dies is also not enough excuse to sideline her in her culture. And the last reason given that it is the way the culture has been handed over to the men and therefore cannot be changed is also not agreeable to us. We know that times have changed and the only thing permanent in life is change, but to the Esan men, because they have a fixated opinion about women, they have refused to see the women as partners in progress. In Esan, a young male child sees himself as superior to the female adults in his family. So, with this mindset, it is doubtful whether the Esan woman can ever be accommodated into the cultural practices that have to do with festivals and ceremonies that are prevalent in Esan land.

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