

**FEMALE VIRGINITY AND MARITAL HONOUR AS VITUOUS ACTS AMONG THE
IJAW PEOPLE IN AKPOS ADESI'S *EBIDEIN-ERE***

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Abstract

This paper attempts a critical analysis of some cultural practices of the Ijaw People in the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria using Akpos Adesi's *Ebidein-ere: The Village Belle*. Focusing on the themes of virginity and heroism, the study reveals that the act of keeping virginity by maidens before marriage is seen as highly honourable act by families and community. The paper also emphasizes the need to recognize elders and heroes for a better society.

The Ijaw People

The Ijaws are a group of indigenous peoples historically inhabiting the Niger Delta area in Nigeria. Many are found as migrant fishermen in camps as far west as Sierra Leone and as far east as Gabon, along the Western Africa coastline. They are believed to be some of the earliest inhabitants of southern Nigeria. The Ijaw people, numbering about 10 million, have long lived in locations near many sea trade routes, and were well connected to other areas by trade as early as the 15th century. The Ijaw people, who collectively form Nigeria's fourth largest ethnic group consists of 40 loosely affiliated groups based along kinship lines and/or shared cultural and religious traditions. As a consequence of the difficult territory which they inhabit, and as a result of the Nigerian politics, these people are further split into different states of the Federation. They live largely in the riverine areas of Edo, Delta, Ondo and Akwa Ibom while constituting the majority in Bayelsa and Rivers States. Their livelihood is primarily based on fishing and farming.

The Play, *Ebidein-ere: A Village Belle*

Ebidein-ere; the village Belle of Agbedi Community, is the central character in this play. She is not just an epitome of beauty but also seen as a price more precious than gold worth contesting for, across neighbouring communities along the creeks. This is made manifest through the Narrator's lines "... In those days in a place called Agbedi lived *Ebidein-ere*, a village belle, paragon of virtue. Her fame spread through the length and breath of the creeks. Oh yes! Our tale like the spider web is woven around her" (25).

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Set in the distant past when the practice of moonlight tales in Ijaw societies was highly revered, the play begins with a group of choral singers who constitute the storytelling team. They pave way for the story to unfold as playmates of Ebidein-ere speak of her beauty and betrothal to champion wrestler/warrior, Okirizi. The playmates' discussions show a mixture of envy, admiration, jealousy and detest for Ebidein-ere and her fate.

Furthermore, the value of this precious jewel, Ebidein-ere is made manifest by her mother who notices a little swell on the lower part of her head while beautifying her and registers her distaste for anything that will smear the beauty of her daughter. To this, Ebidein-ere replies, registering her convictions that beauty is internal not what is found on the surface. While we are yet to grapple with the picture painted of the paragon of beauty, the playwright moves the action into a state of pandemonium as Ebidein-ere mysteriously disappears from home. This leads to general confusion in the community as a result of the impending marriage between Ebidein-ere and the great warrior, Okirizi. The uncertainty and confusion of people in the community invite the presence of Okirizi who brings the scene to an end with a bold and courageous determination that his beloved must be found, not minding the powers or forces behind her disappearance.

Ebidein-ere's father and Okirizi consult the oracle of Agadagba where the priest informs them that she has been kidnapped and taken to the faraway village of Osiana and is in the custody of Esibiri. Armed with this information, Okirizi charges for yet another opportunity to validate his championship and bravery. He goes, sees and conquers Esibiri. Ebidein-ere is then brought back home, resulting to the pouring of encomiums on the warrior in the midst of celebration of victory.

There comes the appointed hour when Okirizi is set to pay the bride price, the marriage ceremony is set to take place but Ebidein-ere refuses to come out for the ceremony despite all that had transpired; the preparations, oration, songs and dances. This was a shock to all gathered for the celebration considering the fact that she was betrothed from birth to Okirizi and they were known to love each other, her mysterious abduction and subsequent release through Okirizi's bravery and payment of her bride price. The events begin to turn sour when she eventually appears and declares her resolution not to marry Okirizi but vows to tie the knot with the man who had deflowered her. This revelation explains the mood she was in at the time of her rescue from her captors made manifest from the stage directions that "however, her face is bland and expressionless", but was neither noticed by her family nor Okirizi. The playwright's use of suspense came in handy as we were made to understand that Esiri, the mastermind of her abduction wasted no time in deflowering her while in his custody.

Okirizi discovers that Esiri did not die after all, so declares him winner, noting that he (Okirizi) fought and won many physical and spiritual battles but could not win the battle of love. He storms out of the marriage ceremony to usher in the narrator who brings the open-ended conclusion of the play by asking the audience to consider whether Ebidein-ere's action is right or wrong. This play emphatically brings to the fore the traditional beliefs of the Ijaw people with regards to marriage.

At this point, the cultural life of the Ijaw people are analyzed under the following the sub-heading as portrayed in Adesi's play under study.

Language

Adesi uses a simple and straightforward style of writing the English Language which makes for an easy understanding of the play across board. Being based on the Ijaw culture which is an African entity, the language of this play displays a very rich variety of parables which encode the wise sayings of these people. For instance, we hear the character of Furoebi saying "... a cock may belong to one man but its crow is for the benefit of the entire community" (26). This translates to the fact that there is unity in the community. Every happening affects the whole community no matter who is directly affected.

Language is again portrayed in the way the people impart knowledge to the younger generation. Taking the whole play, for an example, we see that Adesi uses the narrative technique to present his story hence the character of the Narrator who is the one telling the story. This indeed is a special artistic practice of the Ijaw people. The oral narrative performance here, in using Sekoni's quotation of Chatman is "a communication system in which a social discourse takes place to examine the dominant concerns of the performer's immediate environment and human behavior and condition in general" (139). The use of narration in the play *Ebideinere* is a cultural technique of inculcating morals in the younger generation practiced by the Ijaw people. As they listen to stories told, they learn while at the same time being entertained. The story of the girl who wanted the most handsome man in the world and ended miserably with a monster who came to marry her off on borrowed body parts (27) as brought in by the character Tariebi is very apt in this instance as it is used to caution the character Katrina who sees nothing good in men from her locality but values men from long distances.

Another very important communicative technique through the kind of language chosen by Adesi is the praise names of powerful characters in the play. These praise names describe the characters. For instance, the main character, *Ebideinere*, is described as "... a village belle, and a paragon of beauty. This really captures and presents *Ebideinere* as the playwright proposes. The Priest in the play is called "Agbaragbururu" which means "thunder". Father is called 'ere ra sa' which means 'a woman's debt', Okirizi is called 'fie da ba' which means 'when the canon sounds' and so on. These praise names reiterate the characters portrayed. The infusion of Ijaw names and exclamations in this play emphasizes the root of the play.

Norms

All societies have ways of encouraging and enforcing what they view as appropriate behaviours while discouraging and punishing what they consider to be improper behaviours. Norms are the established standards of behaviour maintained by a society. For a norm to become significant, it must be widely shared and understood. For example, at a performance in the Nigerian theatre, we typically expect people to be quiet while watching the show. But of course, the application of this norm can vary, depending on the type of performance and the type of audience. People watching a serious and well crafted artistic performance are likely to abide by the norm of silence than those watching a slapstick comedy like those of Baba Sala and so on. In some societies, parents choose life partners for their children while other societies believe that this is the prerogative of such partners. Marriage, also called matrimony or wedlock is a social union or legal contract between people called spouses that create kinship. The definition of marriage varies from culture to culture, but is usually an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged. Such a union is often formalised via exchange of gifts, money and ceremony. Marriages are completed by the payment of a bridal dowry, which increases in size if the bride is from another village so as to make up for that

village's loss of her children (*Wikipedia, 2012*). Although the institution of marriage pre-dates reliable recorded history, many cultures have legends concerning the origins of marriage. The way in which a marriage is conducted and its rules and ramifications have changed over time, as has the institution itself, depending on the culture or demographic of the time.

Various marriage practices have existed throughout the world. In some societies an individual is limited to being in one such couple at a time (*monogamy*), while other cultures allow a male to have more than one wife (*polygyny*) or, less commonly, a female to have more than one husband (*polyandry*). Some societies also allow marriage between two males or two females. Societies frequently have other restrictions on marriage based on the ages of the participants, pre-existing kinship, and membership in religious or other social groups.

In terms of legal recognition, most sovereign states and other jurisdictions limit marriage to two persons of opposite sex or gender in the gender binary, and some of these allow polygynous marriage. In the 21st century, several countries and some other jurisdictions have legalised same-sex marriage. In some cultures, marriage is recommended or compulsory before engaging in any sexual activity.

People marry for many reasons, including legal, social, libidinal, emotional, financial, spiritual, and religious reasons. These might include arranged marriages, family obligations, the legal establishment of a nuclear family unit, and the legal protection of children and public declaration of commitment. The act of marriage usually creates normative or legal obligations between the individuals involved. Some cultures allow the dissolution of marriage through divorce or annulment. Polygamous marriages may also occur in spite of national laws. Adesi's play opens up a window to the Ijaw community and their norms. Their marriages are contracted in two major ways. The first is a situation where two people are betrothed to each other by their parents without their even knowing themselves as in the case of Ebideinere and Okirizi. Ebideinere was betrothed to Okirizi from birth and according to her, "betrothal from birth are bonds sealed by the gods themselves" (28). Another kind of marriage by the Ijaw people suggested in this play is that which is by choice of the partners concerned as revealed through the dialogue of the maidens including Tariebi and Katrina (27).

Values

Although we have our personal set of standards which may include caring, fitness, cleanliness or success in whatever endeavours; we also share a set of general objectives as members of society. Cultural values are those collective conceptions of what is considered good, desirable and proper in a given culture. These would indicate what people prefer, as well as what they see as being morally right or wrong. Values may be specific, such as honouring one's parents and owning a home or they may be more general such as health, love that are generally or uniformly shared by all (2005:63). Marriage falls into the specific which involves preparing and owning a home. In the African context it also falls into the general because it involves family or communal love that is shared by all. Marriage could therefore be used as an index to showcase the values cherished by the Ijaw people even as it is being revealed in Adesi's play.

As it is stated above, betrothal is the highest valued beginning of marriage, possibly because it promotes chastity and ensures that the bride remains a virgin until she is finally

married to her betrothed who will be proud to receive her as a virgin, thereby ensuring that she and her parents will be forever respected by members of the society and their marriage revered by all. Ebideinere is a virgin, having been betrothed to Okirizi from birth. Her parents are proud of her and she is the focus of positive discussions in her community of Agbedi and surrounding villages. She is seen as a symbol of beauty both within and outside her community and she is well groomed by her mother in anticipation of her marriage to Okirizi. The beauty within is virtuosity, chastity and an amiable character. From her (Ebideinere) dialogue, "... Did they not say that real beauty is internal?" (28), it is revealed that real beauty is that which one exudes from within. She is a model to the maidens who see her as a virtuous and therefore, a blessed one amongst them. She is the envy of many in the likes of Katrina. The outward beauty is the physical which mother emphasizes thus "Beauty is the ornament and seasoning that serves to nourish men's appetite for women" (28). Here, Mother wants to ensure that there is no blemish on Ebideinere's physique in order not to distort her beauty. The Ijaw people believe that a smooth and well rounded woman is beautiful. In addition, the character and chastity of the woman accords lasting beauty and respect to her.

Virginity, being the state of a person who has never engaged in sexual intercourse is mostly demanded of females not males among the Ijaws. There are cultural and religious traditions which place special value and significance on this state, especially in the case of unmarried females, associated with notions of personal purity, honour and worth. Like chastity, the concept of virginity traditionally involves sexual abstinence before marriage.

The first act of sexual intercourse by a female is commonly considered within many cultures to be an important personal milestone. Its significance is reflected in expressions such as "saving oneself", "losing one's virginity," "taking someone's virginity" and sometimes as "deflowering." The occasion is at times seen as the end of innocence, integrity, or purity, and the sexualisation of the individual. Traditionally, there was a cultural expectation that a female would not engage in premarital sex and would come to her wedding a virgin, which would be indicated by the bride wearing a white gown, and that she would "give up" her virginity to her husband in the act of consummation of the marriage.

Adesi recaptures, succinctly, this glorious value of the Ijaw people in the character of Ebideinere, who has kept herself in accordance with the norms and values of her society awaiting her marriage. Even when she is wrongfully deflowered, she insists on marrying the perpetrator of this harm to the chagrin of others but in respect and surrender to the dictates of her culture. To her, it was a resolution that she shall only stick to whoever deflowers her and to marry Okirizi will be a violation of herself because she was deflowered by Esiri.

The religious practices of the Ijaw people are among their cultural values. They predominantly practice Christianity and traditional worship of deities. Traditionally, they believe in Temara as a god who designs their fate and destiny. In Adesi's play, Father and Okirizi consulted the oracle at Agadagba shrine to reveal Ebideinere's whereabouts and for the gods to guide them successfully into war. Also in this traditional practice is the pouring of libation which, in the play is done by Okirizi and the priest for the gods to guide Okirizi in the fight for his beloved. It is also believed that the gods bless whoever stay s as a virgin as they will attract all the good things. Such people, especially maidens who are to go into marriage are seen as channels of blessings to their home and the husbands' homes. Along these lines, a maiden who is considered pure before marriage is seen as attracting honour to herself, her family and her husband. The *Holy Bible* gives credence to this as stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 "For this is the

will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor”.

Still on the values of these great people from Nigeria's Niger Delta, through the play under study, one gets to find out that every other cultural value is used to celebrate Ebideinere's virginity and marital convictions. These people have a robust artistic culture. They have in practice, dances and songs for all age grades. To arrive at a performance, the artists have set time and venue (the village square) for rehearsal purposes. In the play, one finds traditional choral singing at the beginning to set the mood of the play (25). They have colourful attires for performances; engage in moonlight games and so on. The maidens, before hand, plan and eventually execute maiden dances and songs to herald Ebideinere in on her marriage day. Through the culture of wrestling as past time, Okirizi is discovered to be a champion and this makes Ebideinere very proud and Okirizi too as everyone is of the believe that the best (Ebideinere) is reserved for the champion (Okirizi). Okirizi is also good at the game of hunting and uses his proceeds to take care of Ebideinere in order to keep her healthy for him.

There are socially acceptable practices by the Ijaw people which greatly endear them to visitors. For example, Okirizi is welcomed into Ebideinere's home first with a glass of water to cool his thirst and make him relax. There is a sex typing with regards to training children in the Ijaw traditional society. The male children are trained to be strong, alert and ready for war of defense at all times. They go through training in wrestling, hunting, fishing and so on. This is possibly why Ebideinere's brother, Baralade is seen with fish traps. The females are trained to take good care of their homes. This is why Father frowns at the chores left undone by Ebideinere, which eventually leads to the discovery, that she was missing. Again if a daughter behaves abnormally, they say it is the mother that caused it (39) and the same goes for son and father. Each person's ordeal attracts the attention of everyone. As Ebideinere was declared missing, Tariebi raised an alarm through ululation. This was quickly responded to by neighbours including Okirizi who is set to get back his beloved at all cost. Even when Ebideinere was found, neighbours were still discussing her plight in the hands of her captors and they had great pity for her and chagrin for her captors. Before Okirizi went to get back his betrothed, he did some dance demonstrations with war cries to suggest war. Here again, the arts of these people come to play. The drums sound to accompany Okirizi's demonstration of dance steps where he exhibits acts of valour in response to the talking drum and one finds the drums praising Okirizi and hailing him as a renowned champion. Still on their social life, there is great respect for elders no matter the accomplishment of the younger person. Okirizi, as most powerful warrior, bows in deference to Ebideinere's father both as an elder and his in-law. To this, Bebearowei, the spokesman of the community says “no matter how great a man is, he cannot show his might before his in-laws” (38). Upon all his strength, he never took advantage of Ebideinere but worked hard to pay her bride wealth before taking her home as his wife in respect for culture. Their marriage was not to be despite their sacrifices and adherence to the dictates of tradition because of the intrusion of Esibiri who forcefully stole the virginity, innocence, honour and loyalty of Ebideinere. Even when Okirizi danced in victory over his supposed destruction of Esibiri, the later resurfaces and won the loyalty of Ebideinere having been the one that deflowered her. Okirizi then declares dejectedly.

... Esibiri is the winner... I have fought a lot of battles

but I have seen that what I couldn't win is the battle of love
... I am champion no more, I am ruined, wasted and of no
use to myself nor the community.

Conclusion

This highly enthralling drama encapsulates Ijaw traditional practices. It has revealed a lot about their arts, religion, social relations, language, norms, sanctions and values. Most especially, it uses the value of virginity to show that there are still people who hold tenaciously to their belief in culture and stand to defend it whether in the right or wrong conditions. The play is open-ended to allow for readers' or audiences' views on the concepts discussed and revealed in the play. This does not take from the fact that the main constitution of the Ijaw communities and their cultural values are well represented.

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