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„*Eyen mi nyamkkenyam, nnọ ke ndọ...*’: Deconstructing Some Stereotypic Views on Marriage in Efik Culture

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### Abstract

Stereotypes within any society have consequences that are sometimes harmful and also affect targeted group of persons or ethnic group in a common way. One of the cultural stereotypes about Efik women is that they hardly believe in ‘...till death do us apart’ promised during monogamous marriage rite, that is, they walk out of marriage when conditions are unbearable. The misinterpretations of some exhortations given to the couples at Efik traditional marriage rite seem to support this claim. For example: ‘*Eyen mi nyamkkenyam, nnọ ke ndọ; ebot ebot edi unyam. Mm’ ifonke mendiyak, abang okubomo ikim okuwaha utong*’. This exhortation is translated as: ‘I have not sold my child but given her to you in marriage; only goat is for sale. If she is no longer good for you bring her back. Let nothing malevolent happen to her.’ This implies that the life of one’s daughter is priced over marriage. One of the aims of this article is to investigate the context of this statement and how it has shaped people’s perception of marriage among the Efiks in Nigeria. In addition, this paper seeks to deconstruct some of the stereotypical views on Efik traditional marriage with regard to the female gender. Theories of Correspondent Inferences and Attribution in Social Psychology are used in understanding how women in Efik culture respond to marriage. Data from quantitative analysis of questionnaires and oral interviews threw more light on how cultural changes influence marriage institution among the Efiks. The findings of the research show that intermarriage, education, peer group influence, Western religious cultures, socio-economic conditions, etc., have necessitated the reconsideration of stereotypical views on marriage in Efik culture.

**Keywords:** Women, Stereotypes, Marriage, Efiks, Cultural Values, and Women.

### Introduction

This paper treats two related themes, namely, gender and social psychology with regard to stereotypic behaviours. Both areas are rooted in cultural attitudes. Gender related behavioural patterns are often culturally motivated, *ipso facto*, they are not written on steel – they can change! Thus, Ridgeway avers that gender system remains a social category shaped by cultural beliefs that influence social relations and groups in societies across the world (56). In their studies of themes in Social Psychology, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell indicate the existence of a critical connection between individual and collective attitudes that form and inform certain

behavioural patterns (42-43). The collective attitude in question is a recreated social category nurtured by the norms and mores of the society (Turner 76). Brewer and Silver consider this critical link between the individual and the social group which one belongs to as the building blocks of assumptions that influence behavioural patterns and social identity theory (176). This means that individuals who interact with others within specified social group share with them common social categories like culture, approach to sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, etc. that affect the production and reproduction of their socio-personal identities. This symbiosis shapes the individual's sense of the self and social perception of the ethnic group or nation that one belongs to or is identified with. Thus, through long processes of social evolution and stabilization of mores that inform this people's pattern of behaviours certain assessments could be made concerning them: these could be exogenous or endogenous. When these assessments are at variance with the so-called moral standards that prescribe acceptable behaviours, exogenous or endogenous perceivers react to them. Through these reactions, bad stereotypes are gradually formulated. Along this line, the perceptions of how women in Efik culture relate with the institution of marriage has, over the years, left a bad taste in the mouth of some Efik people and those who have interacted with them.

Thus, deconstruction of some stereotypic views on women in connection with the marriage institution among the Efiks consists in 'breaking down' of ideas or attitudes on the subject that were hitherto taken for granted or going behind 'preconceived notions' on this matter in view of knowing why certain perceptions were cultivated and how they are perceived today. The main task of deconstruction is to 'destabilize' fixed meaning of concepts, ideas and things so that their current meanings may unfold themselves (Derrida 31). When one applies this to stereotypical attitudes, deconstruction aims at constantly challenging 'stabilized' preconceptions, perceptions and misconceptions concerning people or group and ethnic group so that their imposed categories should be questioned and, if possible, overturned. The spirit of deconstruction scrutinizes all stereotypes in view loosening the fixed boundaries that categories have created. With this, new meanings and possibilities are re-given to social interactions towards a holistic integration of the society.

The leitmotif of this work is principally to deconstruct, as much as it is possible, the stereotypic views conceived about Efik women with regard to marriage: separating the facts from unfounded

claims in view of re-creating psychosocial milieus that benefit Efik people and those who interact with them. The Efiks are found in four local government areas of Cross River State - Nigeria, namely: Akpabuyo, Odukpani, Calabar Municipality and Calabar South. Since this work concerns a specific ethnographic area, questionnaires were distributed to 440 persons with 78.1% return rate. In addition, oral interview was administered to 4 persons (2 Efik men and women) concerning certain realities that were not captured by the questionnaires. In view of achieving the aim of this research, the work is divided into the following sections: (i) Towards An Understanding of Stereotypical Culture, (ii) Theoretical Framework and Methodology, (iii) Women, Marriage and Stereotypes in Efik Culture, (iv) Deconstructing Perceptions and Changing Stereotypes on Efik Women and Marriage Culture, (v) Shifts in Efik Culture and Gender Issues, (vi) Conclusion.

### **Towards Understanding of Stereotypical Culture**

It is common to hear people making remarks about members of a particular ethnic group or race or colour or gender based on particular experiences they may have had with a negligible percentage of them or what other persons have told them. These experientially informed data or adaptive knowledge can be transformed into mental pictures that influence social interactions positively or negatively (Stangor and Schaller 3). Some of these mental pictures are rendered, for example, as follows: in the United States, the so-called Whites consider Blacks to be backward and lazy. Generally, the Germans are touted as workaholics or a hard-working race. Furthermore, in Nigeria, some stereotypic views are equally held: the Igbos are perceived to be astute in pecuniary dealings. As regards public hygiene, the Yorubas are viewed as lackadaisical. The Hausa men are viewed by Southerners as short-tempered. Annang men in the South-East are feared for their dexterity in the use of machetes as instrument of revenge. When these experiences and/or adaptive knowledge are passed unto others, stereotypes become learned conceptual windows of viewing the 'other' that are transmitted further through various means socialization and communication like: families, peer groups, social networks, mass media, etc. It is not the case that these positive or negative representations of people, race or ethnic group will always correspond to the realities of concrete lived experiences. As a result, stereotypic profiling has formed part of social engagement concerning how people are assessed, judged, and encountered. Nevertheless, Schauer is sceptical

of all stereotypical profiling that are not supported by professional authority and scientific evidence because of their possible lop-sidedness (2).

Every stereotypical culture is built upon certain categories that people have developed or constructed as years go by. Hence, categorization of persons in relation to ethnic group or other groupings is an indispensable component of stereotypic behaviour; this remains a complex process that can mirror perceived reality correctly or otherwise. In this process, an individual is associated with a group and vice versa so much that mental pictures and their stereotypical contents can be historicized (Schneider 325). Thus, there are no stereotypes without categories. According to Macrae and Bodenhausen, categorization is the cognitive process whereby perceivers form and inform themselves about reality and through these pieces information they make up their minds concerning a particular group of individuals with regard to specific behaviours (96-97). These categorical representations trigger associated mental pictures that perceivers link to individuals or specific groups of persons when occasion arises. Once formulated, categories influence subsequent judgments made about these persons or ethnic groups. From the foregoing, categories are descriptive labels through which ideas about individuals in relation to a particular group emerge in such a manner that these information become a body of knowledge that metamorphose into rules of engaging with them. Perceivers, sometimes, present categories as 'eternal' truths that remain unchanged and this invariably influences how stereotypes are handled. Nonetheless, stereotypes can be challenged based on appropriate criteria and agreed instruments. Therefore, historical and cultural developments are in themselves critics through which one can deconstruct categories that nurture stereotypes, thereby affirming the fact that realities which inform attitudes and behaviour can change with time and context (Spears and Haslam 206).

Stereotypical culture, prejudice, and discrimination are concepts that are closely connected in social or experimental psychology because they all have some negative effects on individuals associated to a particular group or class. Yet each of them is distinct because of their functions in social groupings. In the past, stereotypes were, by default, viewed as negative perceptions of individuals by the very fact that they belong to a particular social class, race or ethnic group. This profiling of persons premised upon pre-conceived judgments of their social class has equally twisted reality because a change in social context can engender attitudinal shift in people's behaviour from what was known hitherto. Stereotypical perception of others is not always negative

and contemporary scholarship has done a lot on this. Thus stereotypes should not be conceptually reduced to badness of behavioural patterns (Ashmore and Del Boca 16). This is partly because categorizations that come with stereotypes within a specific social group can serve as self-enhancement for its members (Hamilton and Sherman 6). Consequently, stereotype is equally a benign set of beliefs held about personal traits or attributes of a group of people. For example: medical doctors are intelligent group of person, students from Princeton University are exceptional thus can hardly be unemployed, clerics are well-behaved, Efik (in Nigeria) women cook very well, etc.

Furthermore, there are also endogenic and exogenic patterns in stereotypical culture; this has to do with the treatment that some members or non-members of a particular group give to their own kind. Hence, endogenic (among the Efiks), exogenic (among non-Efiks) dimensions of stereotypical behaviour are important in this unfolding discussion. Some people are of the opinion that Efik women do not believe in the indissolubility of the marriage bond, *ipso facto*, they can walk out of marriage when the conditions of marital life become unbearable and life-threatening. When the matrimonial home becomes inhabitable because of serious marital problems like maltreatment by their spouses, some Efik women do have critical engagement with staying till death separates them. The endogenic prejudice towards Efik women by Efik men has been observed by the Patriarch of Efik Kingdom, the *Obong of Calabar*, Edidem Ekpo Okon Abasi Otu V. He stated in an oral interview that: “Some Efik men prefer to marry from other tribes because of some marital attitudes noticed among some Efik women. We are concerned about this, and I have directed the Committee on Efik Culture and Traditions to come up with ways of sensitizing our people and correcting these challenges.” (12th August, 2017). The next section will examine one of the exhortations given at Efik traditional marriage rite that has shaped gender relationship in Efik culture.

#### **‘Eyen mi nyamkkenyam, nnọ ke ndọ...’: Meaning and Relevance to This Work**

Marriage in Efik culture brings together the bride’s and the groom’s families. It is celebrated in the bride’s family house so that, *inter alia*, the groom and his family may witness that the former comes from a ‘home’ and should be treated becomingly. But before the dowry is given to the groom’s father, series of exhortations are given to the couple. One of the most outstanding

statements addressed to the groom runs as follows: '*Eyen mi nyamkkenyam, nnọ ke ndọ; ebot ebot edi unyam. Mm' ifonke mendiyak, abang okubomo ikim okuwaha utong.*' This can be translated as follows: 'I have not sold my child but given her to you in marriage; only goat is for sale. If she is no longer good for you bring her back. Let nothing malevolent happen to her.' In an Oral Interview, Mrs. Eme Manga stated that: 'originally this exhortation was common among parents from royal houses or well-to-do families who can afford to take of their daughters. But gradually, it was popularized across families of all social status.' (10/11/2017).

First, '*eyen mi nyamkkenyam, nnọ ke ndọ*' (I have not sold my child but given her to you in marriage) has many implications. The daughter given in marriage still belongs to her family of origin hence should not be treated as a slave. The fact that a family had been given their daughter in marriage and has not sold her out as a property to the husband means that she is welcomed home any time. And it seems that this might have influenced Efik inheritance laws wherein female children equally inherit their parents' properties. Concerning the relationship between assurance of inheritance and readiness to vacate matrimonial home in times of crises, this question was asked: 'Do you think that inheritance laws in favour of women in Efik society has influenced their perceived sense of independence? The response to this question varied across gender and ethnic groupings. Among the Efiks, 79.4% of the women said yes, while only 20.6% of the men said yes. For Non-Efik respondents: 63.5% of men said that favourable inheritance laws make Efik women to have high sense of independence that might influence how they manage matrimonial crises, while 36.5% of women said no.

Second, *Mm' ifonke mendiyak* (If she is no longer good for you bring her back). Even though the wellbeing of the women is paramount in this exhortation, the gender politics implied here indicates that the female folks have a greater blame in marital crises. In this regard Adams argues that where inequity remains prevalent there is relative deprivation in moral and social capital (280). For this reason person or group of persons who enjoy(s) the inequity has the narrative power to decide or determine the outcome of events. In many African societies, women are ethically exploited by men. This is reflected in this social relationship that encourages the man to return the wife to her parents if she no longer 'ethically' good for him. This gender inequality had been prevalent in Efik culture. Accordingly, this unbalanced ethical power play that gives men some advantages over the women does not create fair grounds for moral evaluation in Efik society. So at the very beginning

of marital journey, Efik culture gives benefit of the doubt to the male folk. For this reason, women are likely to be blamed when things go wrong in the marriage. Attitudes like this need to be expunged gradually from Efik culture. This is because men may not be right always and women cannot be always guilty. The above elucidation suggests that male domineering culture can weaken how women appreciate marriage in Efik society. This opinion is corroborated by the response given to the following question: **Do you think that women are treated with dignity in Efik culture?** 60.4% of Efik respondents averred that women are not treated well in their society while 75.1% of non-Efiks said that they are appreciated.

Thirdly, ‘...*abang okubomo ikim okuwaha utong.*’ (Let nothing happen to her). Undoubtedly the Efiks seem to treasure their daughters more than marriage. For them, the honour of marriage ranks less in value to the life of their children. The parents of bride prefer to have her back at home alive rather than being received back in coffin. Thus, when the father of bride exhorts the groom during traditional marriage rites: ‘let nothing happen to her’, it also points to the fact that the daughter is welcomed home if the marriage does not work. For the Efiks, failed marriage is not a shame or taboo! Nonetheless, it is not encouraged. From the above deconstruction of a popular exhortation common at Efiks’ traditional marriage rites, it is clear that Efik women still face gender inequality and related challenges even though for certain reasons they are supported by their families of origin who are always ready to receive them back alive if the marriage does not work anymore. The theoretical framework that explains stereotypical views on Efik women is the next concern of this paper.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Theories of correspondent inferences and attribution in Social Psychology can serve as interpretive key towards understanding (negative) stereotypic behaviours. For both theories as expounded by Edward Jones and Keith Davis as well as Harold Kelley respectively, undesirable behaviours or attitudes of persons are the concerns of perceivers. In correspondent inference theory, Jones and Davies explain that behaviours of persons are attributed to their dispositions, traits or personal characteristics (220). In view of arriving at this observable conclusion, one has to determine if these behaviours or actions are intentional or accidental. In addition to this, the behaviours in question are considered to be undesirable, that is, they do not conform to acceptable norms or mores of the society. Concerning stereotypic perceptions of Efik women in relation to marriage,

the theory of correspondent inference indicates that cultural dispositions such as: favourable inheritance laws, the facts of gender inequality, and family support can explain why some of the women cannot withstand humanly degrading marital conditions.

Attribution theory states that casual or naïve judgements made by people depend on information available to them and the consistency of these inferences (Kelley 198). Three factors are crucial to Kelley's theory of attribution: *consistency*, *distinctiveness*, and *consensus*. First, to attribute certain behavioural pattern to a person or group of persons, the actor should manifest the behaviour towards the perceiver (P<sup>1</sup>) for a considerable number of times. Second, that under comparable conditions, the actor would manifest similar behaviours to perceivers other than the perceiver (P<sup>1</sup>). Third, there should be consensus among various perceivers that the actor manifested a particular behaviour concerning a specific item or person (Wyer and Charlston 181-183). In relation to Efik women and their attitude to marriage, Kelley's attribution theory implies that: (i) there should be high frequency concerning how they walk out of marriage. (ii) Efik men and male of other ethnic groups should confirm that under similar conditions, Efik women would go back to their family house. (iii) There should be a general consensus among those concerned that Efik women respond similarly when facing certain challenges in matrimonial home. The difficulty with Kelley's theory is that: the frequency of consistency, distinctiveness and consensus that will render causal attributions justifiable is not easy to come by.

### **Women, Marriage and Stereotypes in Efik Culture**

Cultural stereotypes on Efik women and marriage is a very complex one. Hence, there is need to look at endogenic and exogenic dimensions as well as gender variations with regard to this claim. From endogenic perspective, men discriminate against women in Efik culture and unfortunately this still happens in contemporary era. Bassey, Ojua, Archibong and Bassey show in their work that endogenic discriminations against women still thrive among Efiks, of Calabar Municipality of Cross River State, which limits their possibilities in the society (242-243). Concerning this, Mrs. Emmanuella Okon Effefiong, an Octogenarian averred in an Oral Interview that: 'Men control everything in the Efik society and this inequality has been established from antiquity, nothing can be done about that!' Thus for those who think like her, gender equality among the Efiks still remains a desire and not reality even in the near future. Furthermore, Mrs. Effefiong opined that

concerning marriage: ‘Female children in Efik society are prepared for marriage in their respective homes. They are made to understand that the success of the marriage depends on them. So, when Efik women are married they put in their best towards a successful marriage. But if the marriage union fails, they are free to come back home.’ (8/11/2017).

Concerning Efik women and stability of marriage, endogenous response is quite revealing. The questionnaire read: ‘**Are bad stereotypical perceptions on Efik women with regard to marriage false?**’ 78% of Efik women responded: It is false to say that Efik women walk out of marriage for sake of convenience. For in most cases, it is the risk of dying that makes them to walk out of marriage. These are Efik women assessing themselves.

From exogenic view, some men from non-Efik culture still categorize Efik women as problematic wife-material despite the fact that they are homely and caring. Thus, when asked: do you think that these bad stereotypes on Efik women concerning marriage are true? Their response is really interesting. 57% of non-Efik males held that even though these stereotypes are not verified, they still make them to develop cold feet as regards contemplating marrying Efik women. This response indicates that categorization is not justifiable reason to take for granted these bad stereotypes that affect Efik women negatively. In the same vein, Jost and Hamilton argue that there are many inferences that one needs to make before considering certain categorization as tenable or not (213-214). Owing to the fact that some of these categorizations concerning Efik women and marriage have been overtaken by cultural evolution and other factors, it is pertinent to look at deconstruction of negative perceptions and changing stereotypes on Efik women and marriage

### **Deconstructing Perceptions and Changing Stereotypes on Efik Women and Marriage Culture**

Categories are not eternal truths. They change according to structural and social developments in the society. Various processes of socialization have changed the context where-in the admonition: ‘*Eyen mi nyamkkenyam, nnọ ke ndọ,*’ (I have not sold my child to you, but has only given her out in marriage) was given. When the Efiks use this exhortation in contemporary traditional marriage rite, it is understood symbolically. This is because a lot has changed including the context it was used in the past. Nonetheless, the Efiks still value their daughters and respect the marriage institution as well.

Some researches indicate that stereotypes are controllable under certain conditions and factors. Hence, they are not eternal truths. Contact with Christianity, western education and civilization have changed the culture of the Efik people including their perception of marriage. Corroborating this claim, Olson and Zanna argue that stereotypes can be suppressed through motivations and intentional resources (127). “This suppression takes time because new constructive memory is needed for this to take place. The *duo* of Western education and Christianity has helped in suppressing cultural stereotypes associated with Efik women and marriage. Rev. Dr. Ubong Eyo in an Oral Interview asserted that: ‘Christianity has truly shaped Efik cosmology so much that at traditional marriages it was customary to give English Bible to the bride.’ (10th September, 2017). With Western education, Efik women are developing new attitudes concerning family life, marriage and other important concerns in life. Education has influenced the socialization process a great deal and this has shaped how young people make their choices today. Given that evangelization of Nigeria has impacted the Efik cultural landscape in many ways, there is no gainsaying that Christianity has influenced how Efik men and women see marriage. The respondents were asked: ‘Has Christian culture positively influenced the way Efik women perceive marriage?’ 85% of Efik women said yes and 72% of Efik men concurred. However, 65% of non-Efik women answered: yes while 60% of non-Efik men answered in the positive. These responses show that, to an extent, non-Efik respondents are still holding unto their stereotypes concerning Efik women and the marriage institution.

Social environmental conditions affect the life-span of stereotypes. This environment has re-shaped the social imaginations of young Efik men and women. For this reason, stereotypes have transmuted as well. Similarly, one cannot underestimate the influence of peer group in this regard. Young Efik men and women who grew up in different cultural environment among people of another culture are likely to behave differently on many counts. The research of Banaji and Greenwald supports this claim especially as regards the influence of new cultural context, learning other cultural patterns and peer groups on social groupings (65-66).

Following Kelley’s theory as stated above, the frequency of consistency, distinctiveness and consensus with regard to Efik women who are not willing to endure the inconveniences of matrimonial home can hardly be established. People are still peddling the tales of the past told by their friends or third parties. On another note, the effects of globalization and de-Africanization of

traditional societies when viewed from the barometer of the so-called Western civilization points to Africa's experience of the post-modern condition with attendant departure from traditional African values (Janis 109). This forms part of the reasons for marriage and family crises. Therefore, the challenge of fluidity in connection with indissolubility of marriage in traditional African societies is not peculiar to Efik culture and women. It is a reality that every society has to face because of the societal changes that have taken place.

### **Shifts in Efik Culture and Gender Issues**

The shifts in cultural patterns and context have significant influence on people's social traits. On this note, culturally motivated stereotypes can be suppressed when those factors that encouraged them are no longer active. Culture can be described as a learned system of existence that defines and prescribes values, beliefs, practices and ethics of a particular group of persons which is can be handed on to another generation (Surber 5). This description of culture validates the claim concerning change in context and mutation of culture as well as suppression of stereotypes.

Shifts in cultural patterns occur when those traditional vehicles on ways of life do no longer benefit contemporary social groups as regards meeting their basic survival needs. It is important to note that cultural shifts happen according to existential needs of the community though with difficulties posed by those who oppose such developments (Matsumoto 1301). With changes in standards of living, many aging parents can no longer support their children who were handed on in marriage. If it was really the case that inheritance law influenced the independence of women in Efik culture, the *sitz im leben* has changed. Some parents do not even have properties to share among their children and some have to take care of themselves. The current social conditions do not tolerate failed marriages for obvious socio-economic reasons; it rather favours managing of marital crises well as much as it is possible.

Western acculturation has also changed the self-perception of women in African society and Efik culture in particular. Contemporary Efik women know the fault lines of cultural patterns that hindered their self-determination in the past and they are working towards eliminating them by asserting their rights within a male dominated culture. Among contemporary Efik women, return to their fathers' house, at instances of irresolvable marital crisis is not an option. When asked:

**‘Would you return to the family house, if your marriage fails?’** 92% of contemporary working class Efik women said: No! This response indicates that the shifts in contexts are shaping the way Efik women see themselves. Perhaps some of them have no place in the family house. May be some have other options if marriage fails. The fact is the change in cultural context affects cultural behaviour which in the long run suppresses stereotypes held about them.

### **Conclusion**

The deconstruction of stereotypic views on marriage in Efik culture is an onerous one. Yet this work has shown that cultural stereotypes are not immutable truths. In as much as these stereotypes were occasioned by human beings within a particular culture and context, they can equally mutate according to survival strategy of those concerned. The change in context has an enormous impact on the self-perception of Efik women as regards dependence upon family support, management of marital challenges, and indissolubility of marriage. The socio-economic conditions of contemporary Efik families influenced by post-modern economics give latitude to the women to handle matters by themselves. The influence of Western education on Efik men and women is telling and this has changed their attitudes concerning family life and other cultural attitudes. Since contemporary Efik men and women professed themselves to be Christians, Christian understanding of marriage seems to erode the weak valuation of ‘till death do us apart’ that was culturally entrenched in their traditional understanding of marriage. Given that so much has changed in the mind-set of Efik men and women, they have the tasks of communicating these cultural developments to those outside their grouping. This can be promoted through production of Efik films that highlight these changes so that endogenous and exogenous audiences will re-orientate themselves on Efik culture, family life and marriage. Indeed, the Patriarch of Efik Kingdom, the *Obong of Calabar*, Edidem Ekpo Okon Abasi Otu V mentioned in an Oral Interview that there is dire need for Efik kingdom to educate other about itself so that some of the bad stereotypes about it could be correct (12th August, 2017).

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