Modernization, Women Empowerment and Social Change in Esan Society of Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This work is set to explore the influence of modernization, women empowerment and social change in Esan society. As a historical category, modernity refers to a period marked by a questioning or rejection of tradition; the prioritization of individualism, freedom and formal equality; faith in inevitable social, scientific and technological progress and human perfectibility; rationalization and professionalization; a movement from feudalism (or agrarianism) toward capitalism and the market economy; industrialization, urbanization and secularization; the development of the nation-state and its constituent institutions (e.g. representative democracy, public education, modern bureaucracy) and forms of surveillance (Foucalt 175-177). This highlights the question of agency, space and sexuality. A characteristic feature of the analysis of women education and empowerment in modern Nigeria is to create and affirm women's identity as a display of modernity and empowerment. However, extant works have failed to demonstrate how in some locale, certain practices and codes operate to circumscribe and inflect agency in particular contexts. One of such societies is Esan society, where gender boundaries and societal norms have been defined and redefined by societal norms. An examination of the place of women in any culture is predicated on the relationship between women and men, and this has very deep normative cultural values. This is why the paper is out to examine how modernity and westernization with its attendant Western education has greatly impacted on Esan women in the areas of empowerment, education and socio-economic development in this dispensation. This study is based on critical, analytical, sociological, and evaluative gender approaches.

Keywords: *Modernity, Women Empowerment, Social Change, Esan* Society.

Introduction

The sources for capturing the wide gamut of change in Esan society are wide and varied. This work, utilizing extant sources of reconstructing African history, magnifies the extent of change experienced in Esan society by focusing especially on modernity and empowerment between the advent of colonialism and the period of Nigeria's independence in 1960. This is done by highlighting the overall effects of westernization and change on women's role and place in society. Critical themes addressed by the paper includes the interface of tradition and modernity; Esan women and production, domesticity and, cultural and social roles. All these can only be appreciated with a comparative analysis of Esan people and other Nigerian groups such as the Yoruba (Krase and Sagarin 23-32).

History affirms that women played important roles in traditional Esan society. According to Awe, women had well-defined and recognized roles in all spheres of human endeavor, and the emphasis was on gender-complementary relations (Awa 33-38). Moreover, there is much evidence to show that women in traditional Esan culture dominated certain areas of social life. The Edo woman in history was relatively independent in mindset and

status. As a child, her training guided her toward designated societal roles, which included motherhood, wifely duties, and an occupation (e.g., trading, pottery, or cloth dyeing, basket weaving, hair plaiting). She was tutored in these areas in order for her to attain self-fulfillment. She was required to leave her natal compound to reside with her husband's family at marriage. She assisted her husband on the farm, kept some domesticated animals and birds (goats, sheep, fowls, pigeons), and may have engaged in food processing and trading. The Edo society, like her Yoruba counterpart being a liberal one had policies that enabled individuals to pursue and fulfill their goals (Johnson 115). But while some aspects of these may be true of all Edo societies, in other areas they turn negative. The Benin might be liberal, but certainly the Esan were not. The emphasis was not on gender-complementary relations. On the contrary, the Esan woman unlike her Benin and Yoruba counterparts was not independent in mindset and status. She was tutored to be a good mother and a good and submissive wife. She really does not assist her husband; she worked for him (Aibanegbe Personal Interview; Airoboman Personal Interview; Oluwakemi Personal Interview; Adetutu, Personal Interview).

The characterization of Esan society as traditional or modern in analytical construct represents developments, growth and progress in society as a journey from ignorance to enlightenment. In Foucault argument, he asserts that "Our sense of ourselves as the enlightened subjects at the end of a repressive historical teleology is itself part of the discourse of liberation that characterizes modernity" (12). The history of gender relations in Esan in this work is, therefore, going to be positioned within the modernist narrative framework.

Pertinent to know is that before colonial intervention and rule, the position of women in Esan was guided and regulated by the standards, principles, norms and values believed to have been handed down by the ancestors. But with colonialism and modernity, the process of change engendered by new values, consumption patterns and ideals were expected to conform to the new beliefs and reality. To comprehend the extent of change, the lives and attitudes of women under this new regime would be highlighted. The changes would be informed by their roles in the new economy, power structure, and the new socialization process (Allot 54).

The fight for women's right involves more than a struggle for goals such as equal pay, equal opportunities, and the right to vote. It is more of a fight for the very right to fight (Adesina 12; Ehimeme 5: 1995), the right to a voice and the right to assert one's demands, to declare that one's needs and ambitions are as important as those of men, (Janeway viii) especially in a society where sex had been used to create gender roles (Ogundipe-Leslie 77).

There were certain rights, privileges, duties and codes that remained immutable and non-negotiable even up to the present (Okhaimah, Personal Interview). These peculiarities defined the position of women in Esan society. According to Akhazeta, "Esan women in Esanland can inherit properties such as farmlands and lands from her father, but surely not house. If she must build a house, it must be in her husband's place; the husband can give her a piece of land also in his place as a compensation for being a good wife, and that primarily grant her the permission to erect a house of her own which culture deprived her of doing in her father's place" (Personal Interview). A woman's rights are more pronounced in her husband's house than in her father's. As a first born child, she is socio-politically and religiously relegated to the background in favour of the first male child thereby making her having less voice in her family. She is, however, not denied this voice in her husband's home, even when she is the second or third wife (Aibanegbe, Personal Interview). In matters involving her children, she has a very strong voice. The husband's family does not have the final say on marriage issues and at other times on the education of the children. Things have not changed in the present age in spite of modernity; change and the powerful arm of Western

education, as Esan women's influence in their husband's place still positively hold sway (Ehimeme 13: 2017). While some scholars may have asserts about the weaknesses of Esan women in the spheres of socio-cultural and economic status, some were and are still of the opinion that Esan women in the pre-colonial times were not repressed and subjugated in the real sense of it. However, it is worth noting that the Esan woman, though it seems she was repressed, did not subscribe to this opinion. M. O. Airidu throws light on the position of the Esan woman on the cultural practice which to her seemed unrepressed:

> In the traditional period of our existence before the European arrivals, our husbands according to the norms and ethics of our traditional society always provided us farmlands for our upkeep. Aside this, they also provided us portions of lands to till for them. If we do not do this, there will be trouble. The husband might refused to eat from the wife's pot or better still sent her packing to her parents' house. We worshipped and respected our husbands back then. They do not give us money for food; the farmland was the money for food. We must not eat of the "Farm", and we were expected to feed them and take care of our children from the proceeds of our farmland. Women persevered a lot during the olden days. Where our husbands asked us to stay is where we stayed. We do not talk until we are asked to. The husband is the woman's crown. When I newly got married, I vividly remembered how my husband gladly gave me one of his personal lands for me to work on for him, aside the one he gave me for my own personal use. I planted cassava (*Eran-Ighae*) on that land for four years. At the end of each season, I harvested the cassava and processed it into cassava flour (*garri* or say *Ighae* in Esan) and pounded cassava 'akpu' and sold them at major Esan markets such as Uromi, Ekpoma, Ubiaja, Irrua etc. We also went to the regular every fifth day market in Uromi, Iruekpen, and Ewohimi (Personal Interview).

Airidua further asserts that:

> At this time I was under the supervision of my mother-in-law. She supervised my activities at the farm and the processing of cassava. Whenever I arrived back from the market, I gave all proceeds to my husband. In fact, it was the proceeds he used for building his first house. We did all we could for our husbands because we had been socialized into the belief that there was a great reward for a woman who support her husband. We could get the reward through our husbands or even through the successes of our children. No matter what, there was always a reward. For me, I know my reward for persevering came from my children. I am a home owner, alive today with my children, and grand-children all doing well. I have even lived to see my great-grandchildren. What other reward would I ask of my

> God? The land on which my house was built was given to me by my husband. When I told him I had saved some money and will like to build a house, he did not discourage me. Instead he asked me where I wanted to build. I told him wherever he was willing to give me, I will build. And he got up immediately and took me to see all his lands and I made my choice from what was shown to me. I am glad I persevered as I was taught (Personal Interview).

As clearly depicted, this was the state of Esan women in the pre-colonial period. The women were in a society where norms, values, morals and ethic held sway without necessarily been oppressed by the male folks. The women subscribed to the continuance of these cultural practices, and have aided its perpetuation through the socialization process, which Western education has in most ways undermined but not completely shattered. In the words of M. E. Eromosele:

> …the Esan culture is distinct and unique to the Esan people because it is the light that guides their paths and mirror which reflects their entirety, and same time reflects in their behaviour everywhere they go and whatever they do. These various cultural practices are being noticeable in the Esan way of family living, marriage, dress code, greetings/salutation, festivals, burial, birth, worship, and even in the economic pursuits, and not to forget, respect for the elderly. Esan as a people have great respect for their culture and same time had great reverend to all institutional frameworks in the society (Personal Interview).

However, with the introduction of modernity and western influence, the Esan people adapted some western values that were not antithetical to their cultural practices and abandoned others. Examples of foreign values adopted were Western education, the 'White' wedding – Church or Registry marriage (Adesina15).

Western Education and Esan Cultural Practices

Education has been defined as the aggregate of all processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes, and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to society in which he live. Education is meant to produce an individual who is well prepared, adapted and or integrated into the life of the community in which he finds himself. According to Fafunwa, the overall aim of education in old Africa was functionalism. In his view, the major function of education was to make individual a functional and useful member of his society (77).

From the above, it is important to know that history of education in Esan society predates the colonial period for it has always constituted as integral parts of the social system of the people. A turning point in the course of education in Esan was the introduction of the Western model. Western education was received as a *fait accompli*, being one of the legacies of European activities in Nigeria. Not only did it introduce unprecedented innovations into the educational system, its implication for social change was equally overwhelming (Enato 9-13)

Western education has engendered social change in revolutionary proportion among the Esan people. It altered the people's perception of their pre-colonial norms and institutional procedures, introducing new values which were in many ways alien to Esan

culture. Being an embodiment of a different value system, Western education could not be grafted on the indigenous model. Both alternatives were remarkably incompatible and in ways dialectically opposed to each other. This presupposes that Western education neither evolved from nor rested on the indigenous model. Rather, it was introduced as an alternative learning system, a 'brighter' beacon of light that was expected to illuminate all the vistas of human activities in Esan, eliminate superstition, recreate moral values and social etiquette, widen the people's understanding of the nature of man and his environment and to introduce logical and scientific standards into educational and health matters (Albert 266).

However, one of the fundamental changes that came with Western education was the school system. The concept of education in Esan was not a missionary or colonial invention. The elementary schools established by the missionaries in Esan before 1955 were tagged 'standard' schools and were usually named after the founding missions. In the first four decades of Christian missionary educational enterprise, mission schools numbered thirty-two out of the thirty-five that existed than. The other three, the oldest of which was Government School, Uromi (1955) were established by government (Office of Statistics) Some of the earliest mission schools include Saint Benedict Catholic School, Ubiaja (1906), Church Missionary Society School, Ubiaja (1928) and Saint Anthony Catholic School, Uromi (1935) (Office of Statistics). Given the central role of education in the spread of this consciousness, the establishment of two teachers' training colleges at Ubiaja by the Roman Catholic Mission, namely, Saint John Bosco's College (boys) and Sacred Heart College (girls) enhanced the social status of the town, vis-à-vis other Esan towns (267).

Western education in actual sense as introduced by Christian missionaries and later the colonial administrators sought not only to increase piety but also to improve the quality of lives of the people. There then began a process of creating new elites and a significant shift in orientation (Ajayi 98-107; Ayandele 107). But as Ajayi notes, "a full assessment of the impact of colonialism on African peoples must, however, be made in a historical context (Ajayi 499)". Pertinent to know is that modernization in Nigeria and among the Esan, as elsewhere, provided the leaders "with an opportunity to compare and contrast two vastly differing cultures (Mahmud 42-43). Thus, the perception of the Esan people about modernity and westernization and its effects on their land and people are collated and analyzed within the context of their culture and society. The system of education inevitably became divided into two – the traditional and the Western. The new way of life demanded a special system of education to serve and perpetuate it; while the indigenous educational way of life continued to maintain its own though in a limited way (Mahmud 48). The most significant social change engendered by the new ways was the creation of a modern school system rivaling the traditional system but not supplanting it.

The school system established provided European-style education for aspiring elites while the traditional system of indoctrination also continued apace. But as will be seen later, the mutually exclusive educational system would create a dichotomized culture that has persisted into the present. This is because a series of changes began to modify the people's attitude to life and ways of doing things. Even then, there was limited scope for a male child's educational attainment. Not only this, preference was given to the male child in educational pursuits. This accounted for the preponderance of boys in schools in general and post-primary schools at the time. Apart from this, post-secondary school employment prospects for girls and women were slim in those days (Akinyeye 38). Nevertheless, and as it later occurred, a school of thought developed to champion women's education as a way of advancement and of ridding indigenous cultures of many customary practices. While the older generation of women and men were already too old to be induced into this new ways, however, a younger generation would partake of the new development. This ultimately bred

in the average Esan man and woman two distinct mentalities and two ways of thinking – one modern, and the other traditional (Odiagbe, Personal Interview).

The modern school system established began to attract young Esans. But the modern educational system while thoroughly presenting a modern view of education did not develop the capacity to over-ride traditional values and experiences. The Esan in several instances used their own cultural framework to re-interpret the concept and meaning of school and the philosophies imposed on them. For instance, at the primary school level while the English language began to play an increasingly important role in the children's communication, the Esan dialect remained the speech stock of the children. However, there also began the grammatical coalescence between English and Esan. This began the process of code-switching and code-mixing that can today be defined as the characteristic of the educated Esan. It became an expression of modernization (Ayeomoni 90). Also, the Esan situated formal education within local authority structures of duty, obedience and obligation. The fact that one was in school did not connote one should abandon Esan ways in preference for modern ways (Ehimeme 7). Thus, sexes in Esan society re-defined interactions between them within the confines of the Esan prescribed notions of feminity and masculinity.

The 'Modern' Esan Woman: Considerations of Sexuality and Agency

Gender relations in colonial Esan would be defined within the context of new values and ideals enthroned by colonialism. Several changes arose from the spread and intensification of colonial rule in Nigeria in general and Esan in particular. Fr. Green, Luke; Dr. Styles, Simpson; Fr. Rafferty, Luke and Fr. Cavagh, all priests and colonial agents River between 1936-1943, while commenting on the situation in Esan, deeply subscribe to this observation:

> The first [of these changes] was the colonial assumptions that the administration, through its Native Courts and the Police, would guarantee personal safety and liberty and suppress physical force and punishments within the community. This destroyed not only the institution of slavery but also the mechanisms by which the male gerontocracy kept women and young men in line, thereby making unworkable the old extreme system in which powerful old men had many wives and few men married until well into their 30s. The second change was the encouragement to the Native Courts to allow divorce, even dependence of decision-making, to pay their own bride-when initiated by wives…The third change was the fact that from the first decade of the twentieth century rubber [latex] and cocoa growing in Esan, and the consequent availability of paid employment on farms or in other activities that increased as a consequence, or in such economically developing areas as Lagos and Ibadan, allowed young men to earn enough money to gain greater independence of decision-making, to pay their own bride-wealth, and to support a family…(Intelligence Report on Ishan District of Ekiti Division 9)

The changes became widespread and pervasive. In Esan for instance, marital and sexual change was largely a matter of colonial administration and law on the one hand and economic change on the other. From the last decade of the 19th century the colonial

administration and the church ensured that straying wives, even of chiefs (*Edionwele*) or Kings (*Enijie*), had little to fear, as was the case also with their new partners (Caldwell 91-94; Odiagbe, Personal Interview).With the inward movement of colonial administration and the appointment of resident commissioners in Esan as same time applicable to other parts of Western Nigeria, a girl betrothed at infancy could get the district commissioner to annul her betrothal (Ekundare 91-94). The British became very enthusiastic about divorce in Nigeria because they believed it was "a way of freeing women from monstrous marriage arrangements." (Caldwell 93). By the early years of the 20th century, there were significant movements in the Benin-Esan- Ondo area toward the reduction of pawning and child betrothal, the increase in female initiated divorce, and consent marriages (93). In Benin City, women also became freer "sexually and in other ways, because they had less to fear in terms of punishment and because they could get divorces (Eboigbe, Personal Interview). They sought divorce because it was available, because there were lesser punishments to fear, and because there were now young men who could afford to marry them and make repayments of their former husbands (Byfield 29-34; Adesina 17).

Did Esan society resemble the rest of the Edoid speaking region in manifesting such profound changes? Such changes in sexual license described above neither manifested in Esan society in the early days of colonialism nor made any appearance in that society for a long time. If the circumstances described above never appeared in Esan, what kind of change took place in men-women relations? If the pattern and practices were different, how did the society meet the demand for change imposed by modernization in every aspect of life?

Esanland was much more insulated from the modern cash crop economy. This seemingly succeeded in reinforcing the continued adherence to traditional customs, values and practices. Marriage betrothal also became influenced by modern structures. Esan women began to utilize the privileges conferred by modernity to select their own choice of men for marriage. An incident worthy of mention was the intending marriage between Miss Florence Ihonre and Iwagbosoria Itua on 3rd April, 1953. The young woman of twenty- two years school teacher at the Central Primary School, Iruekpen was engaged to be married to a teacher at the Modern School (Intelligence Report of Ishan Division of Benin Province 247). However in a memo to the Registrar of Marriage, Rev. S.O. Odekhian wrote:

> I appeal to protest to the intending marriage between the two parties named above for the said lady Miss Florence Ihonre has been betrothed to me in 1948 and I have paid dowry on her. She is the one who suggested I took transfer from my previously station in Ibadan Diocese to her District leaving all the amenities behind. The said Mr. Ibhagbosoria Itua was a family friend and neighbour to her and behind me got her pregnant. And in midst of the issue she eloped with him but parents of the lady and myself strongly opposed to the intending marriage…the case is however pending at the Magistrate Court (Intelligence Report of Ishan Division of Benin Province 249).

But the more things changed, the more they remained the same because no one can alter change being the only force that either transform or deform natural and artificial events (Enato 16). The stranglehold of custom and culture on the marriage institution remained unassailable. The framework of domination became amplified through the court system. The British policy in this regard was in consonance with their system of indirect rule. But like in the other parts of their territories where the system was practiced, the indigenous people were governed with their own institutions though streamlined to achieve imperial purposes

(Crowder 168). The reality of marriage issues going to courts for adjudication, therefore, surface in the Esan area in the colonial period. But by placing the courts in the hands of the "local potentate leaders" it became obvious that women would have a difficult time in getting their cases through. Information revealed that only a negligible few of the cases that transpired were reviewed in a particular year (Adesina 18).

So the nature of Esan indigenous customs and tradition precluded women from taking matrimonial cases beyond the confine of the family. But with the advent of the English Court System the practice changed (Midwestern Ministry of Information 3). Women took advantage of this to settle their marital and domestic affairs in spite the fact that they were still subjected to Esan customary practices in a roundabout way (Elias 119-129: 1956). The society was organized in check by strict adherence to socio-cultural values and ideas. A case in point was the use of Esan music and dance to teach the cherished societal virtues and to condemn vices which are anti-social (Olumese 58-59). Olumese further is asserting that, "Promoting morality in the society, music and dance was done through the *Ikhio* dance. This dance was by women only. Unlike, the *Igbabonelimin* which cut across the confines of local community, *Ikhio* was internally organized. The dance was nocturnal and these women used songs to satirize women and men with criminal tendencies in the society and the songs were meant to ridicule the "criminals" and their families" (59).

The effect of this in actual fact was to serve as a deterrent against one's involvement in anti-social acts. By and large the *Ikhio* nocturnal dance was expected to serve as a social control mechanism in the Esan society of old. It was intende3d to streamlines peoples' actions in accordance to the norms of the society (59; Ufuah, Personal Interview; Obinyan, Personal Interview, and Ikhoria, Personal Interviews). The gender character of some of the music has been combined with strong social and political currents, which emphasized the nature of the Esan society.

Women, Education and Capital Formation

Esan women were farmers and traders. For the Esan woman in the contemporary period, the existence of large area of palm oil plantations in Esan has remained a significant factor in both capital formation and social relations. Esanmen have paid no attention to the large expanse of palm trees in their locale except to search for paid labour on palm plantations established by the government (Adesina 19). The Esan was, and still is, contented being a farmer of food crops while collecting rent from the Ogoja, Igbirra, Yoruba's and Urhobo's exploiting the vast oil palms. The indigenous engagement with the oil palm rested with the women who harvested it solely for domestic purposes. The women collected the palm fruits from young palm trees which had not attained a height above the stretch of the arm. The fruits are boiled and processed in palm oil for domestic consumption (Evuarherhe 13; Adesina 19). Therefore, oil production like in the Yoruba and Benin societies was regarded as a task for women while the men were contented with the collection of rents on the land (Adesina 19; Shokpeka and Odigwe 63-65).

When, however, wage labour became pronounced in Nigeria with the spread of modernity engendered by colonial rule, there was little expectation that husbands would act as exclusive providers for their both nuclear and extended families (Adesina 19). Before the advent of colonialism, labour roles and capital formation processes had always been gendered. Esan society in truth is one fascinating place to study gender roles in the days of colonialism since the vast majority of the Esan population had remained engaged in non-wage activities. (Obobhagba 52-54).

With however the introduction of Western education through the primary education system in Esan between 1906-1960 (Enato and Ajayi 82), women embarked on mass production of cassava and yam. At the end of the year, a woman was always able to boast of

between £10 to £15 from the sales of yam and cassava. This afforded her the opportunity to pay her children's school fees which was about two to four pounds per annum. It was the responsibility of the woman to pay for her children's fees at this time because her polygamous husband usually had quite a number of children and would usually take the option of either paying the fees of his first child alone irrespective of if the child was male or female, or he might pay the fees for his male children only. Thus, a woman who had all girl children and who wanted her children educated had to work hard to realize this lofty dream (Enato and Ajayi 85-86). This portrayed the Esan woman as resourceful, active and energetic.

In spite of this, however, the Esan woman remained, to all intent and purposes, dependent. The economic pursuit of the Esan woman like her Yoruba counterpart has received some attention in the literature. According to Fadipe, the Yoruba woman was economically independent of her husband and could dispose of her resources at will. Every Yoruba woman worked and engaged in some economic ventures to augment the family's financial and domestic needs (88). However, unlike her Yoruba counterparts, the Esan woman was not economically independent (Okoduwa 94-95). The land she farmed was not hers but that of her husband's and as such she could not dispose her resources at will, not without the consent and permission of her husband (Aibanegbe, Personal Interview). Unlike the Oyo-Yoruba where the active roles of women in the family confer an independent status, particularly where they were dynamic traders and entrepreneurs, the Esan woman remained subservient and dependent (Adesina 19). The patriarchal nature of Esan culture precluded the Esan woman from aspiring to be independent even when she had acquired enough capital to do so. The capital so acquired remained her husband's (19).

There has continued to prevail what Akingbemi referred to as the "hierarchical order of sharing things." (1).To achieve its aims, the society has overtime developed an ingenious set of communication processes, which transmit messages about age-old cultural behaviours and expectations. Even though some of these have been lost to modernity, a sizeable portion of the customs still persists enough to affirm the cultural traits of the Esan. A woman must, thus, be able to recognize her position both in the family and in the society well enough not to go beyond a specific boundary. A multiplicity of "traditional sanctions" was rolled out for a recalcitrant woman (Aibanegbe, Personal Interview; Adesina 20).

It is obvious that not only were the women expected to remain the preserver of family values and welfares (Airoboman, Personal Interview), the manual labour that they provided in the chain of production was regarded as being instrumental to the maintenance and progress of domination. Rather, it was a purification process and the transformation of the concrete world; one that enhances their relevance and empowers them in their own homes (Okhaimah, Personal Interview).

The Esan Woman and Domestic Justice

Esan society existed as a polygamous society. Polygamy in this present age is fast adapting to new conditions. It has been alleged that it recorded a decline due to both ideological and structural factors (David and David 11).Nonetheless, it remained a strong feature of several societies. But even then both in the monogamous and polygamous settings among the Esan, the woman's body and mind remained sites of power contestation and control. In the traditional environment, happiness in a domestic environment was dictated by the man and enforced to the letter. In the polygamous house, the women were expected to maintain an *entente cordiale* and encouraged to become friends (Adesina 20). This was enforced to the letter. But even when there were rivals outside, such as concubine, either in the monogamous or polygamous houses, the husband's dominant position dictated that the women at home must not be antagonize the woman outside in any way. To do so would attract severe sanctions. This approach to life served to reinforce the Esan man's dominant

position and familial position power (Airidu, Personal Interview). To go against this was subversive (Elias 34: 1967).

The coming of modernity created an avenue for the Esan woman, like her counterparts in other Nigerian societies to assert herself and to seek her freedom from the overarching cultural influences. But the structure put in place prevented a self-definition as witnessed in other Nigerian societies. This became a system of contradictions and a complicated set of dynamics. This was because the Esan woman was not expected to reject the obvious gendered roles, sexuality and position epitomized by the ways and wisdom of the elderly women while trying to redeem her or enhance her own ability to reposition or define her (Adesina 20). The pre-established hierarchies and gender relations were left in place (Aibanegbe, Personal Interview). As noted by Mrs. Aibanegbe,

> In marriage, the male folks believe you must submit totally. When a woman was given instructions she must obey. Any attempt to go against the wishes of her husband will be met with severe sanctions. Such a woman was arraigned before the family council. If she was found guilty she must pay a fine – one he goat, one carton of small stout and schnapps. Stiffer penalties were known to have been imposed" (Personal Interview).

The hierarchical nature of the Esan and their strict adherence to cultural practices, most especially in marriage was corroborated by Akhazeta Titilola who asserts that,

> The Esans are distinct people with unique and rich culture, particularly in the aspect of bringing up children in the issue of marriage. The Esans socialize their daughters in the way of submission to their husbands, even when the husband is nothing to write home about. Before a woman gets married she is implored to think well before taking a decision on marrying the person…" (Personal Interview).

In the decision-making process at home, the hierarchical nature of the Esan family is even more highly distinct. The socialization of the Esan woman into the orthodox Esan culture was evident. Even when it was obvious an Esan woman was going through certain tribulations in her home, she must grin and bear it. However, according to Aibanegbe there were some exceptions, "It is only in such cases where the life of a woman is at stake that an Esan family will go and withdraw their daughters from her husband's house, but this is very, very rare. But even then, even the woman they are trying to protect will not cooperate. She will ask that they allow her stay with her children. There are cases where men run away with other women…"(Personal Interview).

Such was the treatment meted out on women even up to the eve of independence. This assertion in Esan was corroborated by Adesina who explained gender relations in Ikale land in the 60's:

> In those days, our husbands always gave us farmlands for our upkeep. Aside this, they also gave us a portion of land called '*Agban*' to till for them. If we did not do this, there would be trouble. The husband might refuse to eat from the wife's pot or send her packing out rightly. We worshipped our husbands then. They did not give us money for food; the farmland was the money for food. We must not eat of the proceeds from the '*Agban*'

> and we were expected to feed them and take care of our children from the proceeds of our farmland. Where our husbands asked us to stay was where we stayed. We did not talk until we were asked to do so. The husband is the woman's crown. My husband gave me one of his land then – *Agban* –to plant cassava and process it into *garri* and *pupuru* which I sold at Atijere market (22).

From the above statements, several common themes emerge about the Esan woman; silence, obedience and conformity. These, for the women, became both a tool of prestige and means of survival.

Conclusion

To this end, the Esan woman can be said to be fatalistic. This, to the feminists is a cultural violence against women which if violated will be tantamount to the breaking of cultural taboos (Lashgari 1). The tendency then is for the Esan woman to be Silent. Thus, the Esan woman remains the quintessential woman referred to by Edwin Ardener as the 'muted group' in relation to the more 'dominant group' (7-12). Silence amongst Esan women is a means of survival in a highly patriarchal and traditional society whose belief is the maintenance of the 'status quo' if stability in family life is to be achieved. This condition has found resonance in Lashgari's opinion when she stated that:

> For any society to get away with persistent systematic violence against those excluded from power, it must impose a monologic definition of truth, and then convince its members that any deviation would risk chaos…because they think it is to their advantage to shut up voices that question, or might make them question their dominator role (1).

To the feminist, the 'Silence' of women in Esan society could be seen as persistent systematic violence, but, what does the Esan woman think? She does not see 'silence' as violence, marginalization, and subordination. To her, 'silence' is a virtue. Silence, while prevalent as weapon did not, however, translate to total underdevelopment of the woman.

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