Opha Ceremony: An Instrument of Enhancing Sex Ethics among Teenagers in Urhobo of Delta State Nigeria.

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Abstract
The Opha ceremony is a socio-cultural institution rooted in the tradition of the Urhobo people of delta state in Nigeria. The opha institute defines it locus within puberty or adulthood it is a level of transformation from the young age of childhood to new and mature age of adult with social responsibilities that are attached to it. This ceremony is only performed by young girls with high level of sexual ethics. The general notion is that if girls who are not virgins should partake in the ceremony, they would face repercussion from the divinities and the society. This serves as a check on promiscuity among the girls and disgrace to the family and future suitors. This paper therefore, will examine the Opha institution, the ceremony, its role in curbing sexual immorality, the efficacy and the effect of modernization on the institution.

Keywords: Opha Ceremony, Enhancing Sex Ethics, Teenagers, Urhobo, Delta State, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

According to Van Gennep:

*The life of an individual in any society is a series of passage from one age to another and from one occupation to another….In such, (semi civilised) societies every change in a person’s life involves actions and reaction….to be regulated and guided so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury. Transition from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social, puberty, marriage,*
fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupation, specialisation, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another, which is equally well defined (Arnold Van Gennep. 1960:2)

The ceremonies are termed *rites de passage* and they include: ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious society, funeral, Van Gennep further indicated that:

*We should ... include among ceremonies of human passage those rites occasioned by celestial changes, such as the changeover from month to month (ceremonies of the full moon), from season to season (festival related to solstices and equinoxes), and from year to year.* (Arnold Van Gennep. 1960:3)

*Rites de passage* also include rites which mark the transition of whole group from one state to another “as when a whole tribe goes to war, or when it attests to the passage from scarcity to plenty by performing a first fruit or a harvest festival. (Nabofa, M.Y 1994:56)

Van Gennep pointed out that *rites de passage* involved three sub-categories (i) rites of separation or preliminal rites. (ii) Rites of transition or liminal rites and (iii) rites of incorporation or postliminal rites. (Arnold Van Gennep. 1960:3). Speaking about *rites de passage* involving individuals, rites of separation involve symbols, which function to detach the individual from his previous state; rites of transition involve symbols which indicate that the individual is in an ambiguous period, a period which belong neither to his present state or the future state, a period which is transformed; rites of incorporation involve symbolic acts which establish the individual in the new state, which is early defined with right and obligation and where he is expected to behave in accordance with certain norms and standards approved by the society.

Rather than consider the whole range of *rites de passage* we will limit ourselves to initiation rituals, more specially the ritual which effect the transition of an individual from the world of childhood to the world of adult hood. These rites are often puberty ritual and this term is useful provided that one recognized that the
rituals are social puberty. One of the exuberant ritual ceremonies of Urhobo cultural practices among young girls popularly referred to as *Opha* (bride). It is a circumcision ceremony, a rites of passage that the Urhobo have established for centuries. Despite the fact that it has gained extensive popularity for which the Urhobo people are particularly proud for its aesthetics, it is doubtful if much documentary work has been done. But the age-long traditions which other neighboring ethnic groups such as the Kalabari, Ijo and Ibibios practiced have enjoyed wide publicity positively and negatively. (Agberia 2001:41)

In Urhobo context the Opha is a socio-cultural institution of significance in several ways. Literally, it is identified with the symbol of radiant beauty, an appellation which a girl acquires by virtue of his or her beautiful qualities which include, among others, intrinsic attributes of virtuosity, hard work, discipline, respect for elders both within and outside the home, (which perhaps endears her to her parents, relations and everybody in the community over time). To this, the people would acclaim:

- Opha Oyoyovwi me na (my beautiful bride)
- Omote Oyoyovwi me na (my beautiful girl)
- Ovie Omote Oyoyovwi (most beautiful girl)
- Ovie Omo (most princely child) (ref)

In understanding these terminologies within the female gender, boys whose foreskins are removed are made to undergo some of the ritual processes of circumcision. Although this circumcision rite attracts minimal cerebration and it is done when the boy is just a few days old from birth, it is however symbolic of a boy transforming into manhood. By its character and distinction, the Opha institution defines its locus within puberty or adulthood, a rites of passage in the Urhobo society as a level of transformation from an Omote (girl) to aje (woman). Characteristic of its social import it is the fledging identity that typifies uncleanness of uncircumcised to a pure and clean state. This is a transition from the young age of
childhood to a new and mature age group with social responsibilities that are attached to womanhood. This ritual ceremony is often the rigorous exercise of emete-yanvwo (clitoridectomy).

**Background**

Urhobo is made up of twenty-two socio-political units and they found in Delta state of Nigeria. (Otite: 2003:21) According to the 1991 population census, they consist of about over a million people and classified among the ten major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Among the Urhobo people the Opha ritual is age-old and rooted in the traditions of the age-grade social system. The Urhobo women’s age-grade social structure, according to Otite (2003:329) has three district organized grades of *ekpako-eya* (old women), consisting of ages 40 and 50 years above. The second category consists of *eghweya* (middle aged women) of married women of between 14 years and 40 years bracket. The third stratum, however, comprises of *ernete* (young unmarried girls). Their age ranges from 14 years and below. Otite has however pointed out that the age of members within these categories varies from village to village, community to community. Similarly, he cautions: that differences could exist in age delimitations as well as specific names that are applicable within the Urhobo states.

As an Omote (girl) grows into puberty, about the age of 14 and found to have matured to be married, this important ritual is compulsorily organized for her. She is circumcised, a process often known as *eyanvwon-omote*. Her Ubieko (labia minora) is excised from her body once it is observed that her menstrual cycle has begun, as this can constitute a problem in her sexuality and sexual life. This rites of passage becomes a precondition for her to have her first childbirth. This is so because the tradition frowns at an uncircumcised woman, often regarded as unclean, a taboo which must be avoided. If a girl defiles her body to become pregnant before the exercise, she is punished by ostracizing her and her family from the community for violating the rules as they are held sacrosanct in the entire community in honour of deceased ancestors and for those living as suitors. Husbands or the betrothed. She could however be given some clemency where she takes immediate reparatory steps before childbirth to cleanse herself. Often these phorhoma (cleansing) exercise takes place in designated shrines particularly devoted to ancestor worship.
The Opha rituals are sub-divided into two distinctive phases. The first phase articulates eyanvwo-omote (clitoridectomy), while the second stage discusses the eki-eruo (bridal procession,) the stage of exhibition to spectators. This art transcends the question of beauty for its sake, as it is often the avenue for assessing the aesthetics and values of both the suitors and parents during the carnival. This is evaluated on the basis of how the Opha is decorated bodily form and the gaiety of her movement). It to the viewing public.

These rituals climax in a debutante dance by the celebrating young maidens who successfully accomplish the rites with a focus on chastity. The practice is expensive, as not every household can afford to undertake the two stages of the rituals concurrently. Some families are compelled to put off the eki-eruo as a result of its financial implication to a more convenient time when they can afford it. In some cases, the reason may not be financial. It could be that the health of the girl at the time of the ritual may not be good enough to undertake the rigorous process that involves blood loss and anxiety. But where all is well and the entire family is assured of God’s presence and protection, the family is notified for the emete yanvwon. Although Modernization and western medicine frown seriously at the practice. The second part of the ceremony is still being practice as rite of passage for young girls metamorphosing from omote to aye.

**Phase I: Oniote Eyanvwo (Clitoridectomy)**

After a young girl has had her first menses and could cope with other domestic responsibilities, a suitor then requests the girl’s parents to arrange for her circumcision. This request is expected by custom as the on-going traditions to be made three times. At the third request, a date is fixed. The intervals between the first request and the third would tenable both parties to adequately prepare themselves financially and spiritually. When a date is agreed to and fixed, it is often kept secret from the girl, although some very smart ones, are able to know the impending signals, particularly when the circumciser visits the family more regularly than ever before. For some others, it is difficult for them to guess correctly.

The operation of clitoridectomy is performed by an Oya ‘emete (circumciser). She is usually assisted by the girl’s brother and about four trusted women believed to be free from witchcraft. They should be strong enough to grip the girl firmly during the operation to prevent unwanted mistakes. The exercise begins with
the removal of the labia minora in which the Oyan eniete touches the girl’s stomach ritualistically with emaren (grated yam) mixed with palm oil and spreads the rest outside to placate the ikimueinu (evil spirits).

Once the labia minora is removed it is buried with the head of a fish in a hole outside the house but within the compound. By this time sympathizers, especially the girl’s former companions, hearing her mate and friend’s scream during the exercise, would surge dramatically into the compound and make mock attempts to object to the ritual as they realize that this will ostensibly ostracize the girl from their age-grade.

The Oya ‘emete receives a small fee. In addition she is fed with food and drinks. Today the fee has appreciated running to about N150, including a bottle of locally brewed gin, kolanut and sometimes palm wine. In the Ughievwen division, the Oya’emete is usually a woman. However, the Udu district has an exceptional case where professional men are engaged. In cities like Warri, Ughelli, Sapele, hospitals and clinics have also become Oya centers. This is safer, more reliable hygienically in case of medical risk.

At the end of the operation a decent room is created for the Opha with Iko-Opha (young attendants) who are expected to keep her company, and run errands for her. She takes her bath and she is rubbed with Ugboro or Isele (camwood dye), which is reddish in colour. Similarly, the Iko-opha also rub the same dye.

The Opha’ attire at this stage is a very simple one. She wears new clothes bought by her suitor and ties a single wrapper with or without a blouse, her hair well combed out. The iko-opha are expected to be bare-bodied without clothes except Ikpolo (waist beads). These Ikpolo are in strings numbering about six, depending on the number that could cover the space around the waist region so as to shield nudity.

The Opha is compelled to stay indoors for three lunar moons (2 calendar months). At this time she does no hard work and eats very rich and nutritious foods to develop her fatness. While the Opha is confined indoors, friends and well-wishers pay courtesy visits. This period of confinement or endurance is also when gifts in cash and presents are given to her. She is also educated on domestic chore and how to be a good housewife. The gifts depend on her popularity in the village. Bradbury’s claim that gunshots are fired in the air by the girl’s parents signifying invitation of their friends to come and rejoice with her was not
well accepted by my informants. However, the Opha ceremony includes gunshots during the bridal procession.

After the national outing there follows an open invitation for suitors to cheer up the Opha until she recuperates. As this goes on, feasting takes place; accompanied with music and dance organized by the Opha peer group.

Opha and her iko-pha

Courtesy of Urhobo Historical Society Seminar 2009.at Sapele.

Phase II: EKI-ERUO

The second part of the ceremony eki-eruo (bridal procession) is an elaborate one, full of pomp and pageantry. Periodic forecast of the date and time and the financial capability are of considerable importance in fixing the festival day. It is a social event which involves the entire village and neighbouring communities. In particular, families that are prepared to initiate their daughter(s) into the Ophaship are expected to make advance arrangements for upwards of one year.

The ernete-yawwo takes place in the third lunar month of the year while the eki eruo (bridal procession) is held in the sixth month of the year between June and July. This is when the ahwohwo (town crier)
announces the impending festival. During this time families that would be involved make adequate preparation for the purchase of all articles necessary for the celebration: They range from the best of foodstuffs to cloths and dresses, including ornaments such as beads, hair pin-ups, arm bangles, etc. for the Opha.

The suitor also plays a very important role if he had presented himself to the bride’s family before now. He buys assorted items for presentation to the Opha: a bed, basin, bundles of cloth, head tie, groundnut oil, onion, covered jars large enough to store clothes and other specified items. In addition he is expected to buy *Ugboro* (camwood dye), an umbrella, shoes and other accessories to make life comfortable for the Opha when she finally joins him as wife. As an important requirement the suitor must construct an *Utughe* (a cooking booth) during the festival. The *Utughe* is constructed with palm fronds and sticks. It is usually a temporary structure where all the cooking is done during the festival period and after which time it is pulled down. As the Utughe is getting ready, *Uwevwin ’erha’ro* (house painting) is also being undertaken by the younger sisters of the Opha and other members of the family. Most pre-colonial buildings were constructed with *(Ophie)* laterite soil. The ophie is used in filling up if there are potholes and crevices on the floor and walls respectively. Nowadays cement and paints have almost overtaken ophie. The preference for paint is also a way of giving the walls a decorative accent from the traditional architecture.

As a prelude to the main rites an Opha is expected to *rue-ukpe* (confinement). The *ukpe ’ruo* is a reenactment of the clitoridectomy act. The Opha lies on a mat placed on the floor, the *Oya ‘emete* recites an incantation praying for a successful passage while passing *einerhen* round her head. This is done three times and at the third, the *eniarhen* is thrown outside, signifying the acceptance by the spirits of the maiden into her next status. From this moment she is confined to the room until she called upon to undertake other activities. As party of the Opha’s royal status, an elevated platform (*Igbewaren*) was constructed for her. She would ascend it like a throne by means of a ladder. The Opha slept and took her meals on the platform.
The next morning she is given a clean warm bath as she is not expected to do it herself. After bathing she is dressed with *Ugboro* (cam wood dye) while she is made to sit down on the bed partly dressed. Sumptuous food *ehia oghwo-evwri* (red beans soup) is served. This is usually shared among the family lineage. The festivities continue for three days within which *lgbe ehwarien*, satirical dance performance, meant to ridicule the opposite sex, are performed (Darah, 1986). The Opha still continues to dress in Ugboro but making sure that it harmonizes with the clothes. Since the *Ugboro* is itself a dye, it is a way of preserving and preventing the Ugboro from rendering the clothes after the ceremony.

The third day, the *Epha* (p1) are expected to go for *isele-ephien*. This is the cleansing and washing away of the local fast dye. After this ceremony they could continue with the use of the imported *Ugboro* which is less fast than the local. In fact the local *Ugboro* is manufactured from *Isele-ebo* (from fruits of certain trees). As days pass, the *osevwe* (dressing) of the *epha* becomes more elaborate. This is when they wear *ibi-egba* (arm bangles of brass) hair and anklets with a small waist cloth. Before now, only waist beads are used. When they are well dressed, the Opha could visit the eki-otete (small market) symbolizing the first outing, testing confidence and acceptability of spectators before the major outing usually called Eki—Ode Eruo. During this visit each *Opha* are accompanied by the attendants. As they walk, there is a small chant that is echoed after them and cheers & *iii iyee! Iii..iyee...!!* until they return home. As this phase is winding up Oje (the driving away of the aimless spirits) begins almost automatically in Udu but the Ughienvwen do this at the end of the whole ceremony. The Epha are expected to participate in the Oje race for four days until it is over.

**Eki-eruo (Bridal Procession)**

When the Oje is accomplished the eki begins the next day. The day is usually brightened with colours that ‘are fine enough to catch the attention of the spectators. Visitors from neighbouring villages, in-laws and relations who attend the ceremony are often excited to see their Opha gaily dressed. An Opha is expected to be gorgeous, radiant and charming, characteristics or qualities that make her a rare jewel. She is also

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expected to be well fattened with the rich food provided for her during seclusion. An Opha should exhibit a smooth and glittering skin, charming face, robust hips and hind sides of the S-shape and an overall sensuous body. The sheen is achieved by first rubbing the Ugboro on the skin of the Opha. When it is getting dry, the vegetable oil (amibi) pressed out of palm kernel is sprayed on the skin. When it is properly soaked, it glitters.

**Oghwa — ekron (Gift Presentation)**

There are two levels of gift presentation (1) By the suitor and (2) By the family. Suitor before the Opha steps out, the suitor now presents his gifts in front of the Opha. As part of the tradition, while doing this he is smeared with the *Ugboro*. The convoy begins with a long cloth measuring about seven metres to shelter the Opha from the scotching rays of the sun as she is believed to be too tender to bathe in the scotching heat. For more than one Opha a forty-five metres cloth is used. The cloth must be of very high quality befitting a beautiful Opha as it is the expression of the wealth of the parents. More Epha join in the parade which forms a lengthy stretch. As they are “sprayed” with money, especially by the Opha’s suitor during this display, an Opha should never laugh.

The next day the Epha go out for *orna avworhen* (body exhibition) with brooms to sweep the *Afen-odibo* or community courtyard. They are also expected to visit the market to greet known faces. Having accomplished this, the Epha stay at home for three months before going to *ehware* (spouses’ home). They are expected there to present gifts to their patrilineal kinsmen before returning home. Before their return home, it is also customary that the *Utughe* should be dismantled. In the spouse’s place, the Opha is required to sweep the environment, mend houses (brick houses have taken over from mud and thatched roofs) and in addition wash anybody’s clothes that are dirty. The symbolism of washing clothes gratis is intended to remind the bride of domestic responsibilities which she will encounter at her husband’s home. It is also to test her humility. After spending a week at home they could then go finally to their matrimonial home and should not come back unless during another festival.
Aesthetics and sexual ethics of Opha

The concept of Opha in Urhobo land is beauty. Although the criteria of judgment are not clearly defined, however, for the purposes of analysis Opha, is understood to have some distinctive elements based on human idealization of beauty. These elements are a constant reminder during the ceremonies. Physical attributes of a beautiful maiden include very well developed breasts which have to be balanced with equally prominent hind sides. On top of this ‘S’ shaped torso stands rings of flesh. The mass of body is carried by a pair of strong, straight and equally full legs. From this type of generously formed structure, the Opha is the expected to grow bigger and fuller as she matures into motherhood; what Demas Nwoko refers to as the ‘matron’ look. By this character the body should show evidence that it has been well-fed, the belly has to show that many children can be nurtured in it by exhibiting folds of flesh acquired through constant expansion during pregnancies (Nwoko 1979:4).

Among some communities within Urhobo, Women who are not gifted to have developed generous flesh pad themselves with many layers of wrapper or ikpolo (coral beads) to acquire the matron look, an indication that the concept of beauty is related to the context of situation. Today, because of the dynamic process and changes in culture, padded hind sides are an aberration from the Western mode of beauty. The flashy and slim-tight look seems to be the vogue to some. Other apparent symbols of beauty displayed are the melodiousness of the songs that accompany the Opha to the exhibition ground and back. The songs express the need for a mother to procreate as many as possible as it is innately satisfying to have an Opha. One of such songs runs thus:
Ekí-eruo (bridal procession)

Courtesy Urhobo Historical Society seminar 2009 at Sapele

Omiovwon vwe rhan, inene vwiebun
Ormionvwon vwerhan ‘yo (twice)
Omionvwon vwerhan, omiovwon vwe rhan
Inene vwiebun, 0rniovwerhan
Eh-eh (behold, behold marvelous)

**Meaning**

Motherhood is a blessing
It is happiness when mother bears children of *Opha* (twice)
*Epha* is sweet if mother bears many.
It is sweet to have many eh-eh.

The charm of an *Opha* is symbolic of the people’s aspiration to a paragon of beauty. It has its cultural links in history to the mermaid; the goddess of the sea. The mermaid is believed to have a tender, glossy skin. And because one of the aims of an *Opha* ritual is to imitate the beauty of the sea goddess, honey is judiciously used to create the silky effect. Today, palm kernel oil is gradually replacing honey as it is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive to acquire it.
Another very popular aesthetic quality exhibited during Opha rituals is in the display of measured step marching during their outing. The poetic song runs thus:

ghiabo ghiawo nenimi
ghiabo ghiawo nenivwi

Solemn match

Translation

This, perhaps, helps to display the radiance of the Opha’s forms. The ring-anklets, the breasts at their prime, and the hindsides with rings of coral beads, are shaken to the admiration of the spectators who wave and cheer them up. Another chant is ‘Nuwa dodo-eh, Nuwa naba nuwo!’ In the evening after the outing, there are dance groups which add to the colourful splendour of the ceremony, the suitor is also not left out in the array of exciting song poetry display. A popular ekpa-ebe song runs thus:

Emucha jeje’je something great is coming
Ekpaehbe-echa prosperity is in the corner

The rich aesthetic import of the Opha ritual is anchored on a carnival of escorts carrying foods, animal and clothes displayed in such a pulchritude manner in a way to show the wealth of the bride to the spectators and the in-laws as exemplified by the omiovwon vwerha songs. It also shows that the Opha is free from any moral decadence.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay I have tried to explain the cultural significance of the Opha institution. I have also tried to articulate the concept of beauty as it relates to the Opha institution. Perhaps, of considerable importance is the need to know that despite all the aggressive socio-political campaigns being mounted against clitoridectomy by some of our educated women today, the ritual is still an important experience in the people’s way and life. The institution was Urhobo traditional way of honouring womanhood, checking
promiscuity among teenagers and celebrating procreative powers. It is important to also note that the ritual is a transitional ceremony for young girls into adulthood. This is a significant position in the social functions of Urhobo civilization which deserves studies in Urhobo anthropology. As would be observed, the signs of anti-ophaism particularly from the Westernized variant of gender consciousness, is clearly being witnessed. However, for the new generation already exposed to modern education and Christian ways of life, a progressive social change is expected; for the old generation of people, an imminent threat of extinction faces the Opha institution.

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NOTES

1 My acknowledgement, appreciation and gratitude goes to J.T Agberia who conducted an extensive field trips on this topic among the Urhobo. He conducted a pilot study in 1987 on the Ughienvwen-Udu marriage systems. Some of the major villages visited are Esaba, Ophorigbaia,
Otutuanza, Okwagbe and Otughienwen, all in Ughienvwen, and Ukperheren, Emadadja, Ukpiovwin and Ohwa and Otor-Udu in Udu division.

Similarly, ceremonies of this magnitude mentioned earlier are found among the Okrika Iria ceremony in Rivers State (Nzekwu, 1959) and Irovbode: Coming of Age in Luleha of Afemai Division in Edo State (Wangboje: 1965). Also in this category is the exemplar of Mbopo fattening ceremony among the Efik Ibibio group of the now Cross River and Akwa Ibom States.

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