MARRIAGE DIPLOMACY IN INDIGENOUS ESAN LAND

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Abstract
This study examines the context of marriage diplomacy in indigenous Esan. It seeks to go beyond the often emphasized reasons for marriage such as procreation and economic advantages, rather, the study examines marriage as a means of diplomatic manoeuvring to restoring peace and tranquillity in once fragile intergroup relations. The study engaged the historical method of data collection and interpretation of facts, in its analysis. The study found that before the advent of colonialism, Esan people had developed a system of intergroup relations that was based on marriage alliances. This was made possible by the practice of exogamy, whereby intending couples are forbidden from getting married within their immediate localities or clans (Idumu or Egbele). The wisdom behind the act was to foster inter-communities' social cohesion.
Keywords: Marriage, Diplomacy, Esan, Procreation, Intergroup relations

Introduction

Marriage is often described as the oldest social institution[45]. This is buttressed by the fact that the three related religious groups of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam ascribed the origin of marriage institution to God. Their historiographies argued that the creation of the first man (Adam) was afterward followed by the need for a companion of a woman(Eve) that eventually originated a family unit. . Marriage according to the biblical injunction is God's idea. The bible begins with marriage in (Genesis 2:24) "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother

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[45] Micheal Bethmann, Dirk and Kvasnicka, 'The Institution of Marriage''', *Journal of Population Economics*, vol.24.No. 3 (2011), 1005–32.

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and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'.[46] To that end, the institution of marriage remains a significant means of propagating human societies. Thus, the emergence of marriage arguably laid the groundwork for the emergence of nations, kingdoms, and states in their varied forms throughout human civilization.[47] From time immemorial, it has taken various forms as a social institution in various cultural contexts. According to Izibili, marriage means different things for different people depending on how the concept is viewed.[48]

Marriage in pre-colonial Esan was primarily designed to fulfil two goals: the production of offspring and the cultivation of amicable inter-group ties[49] The second objective of marriage falls neatly within the scope of this paper. Marriage diplomacy, a modern kind of cultural diplomacy, has long been linked to the goal of improving intergroup relations. For instance, power politics in England and France was commonly represented through marriage diplomacy by the late fourteenth century. A good example is the marriage of Richard 11 of England and Isabella, the daughter of Charles 1V of France, which resulted in a ceasefire between the two once-enmity countries.[50] Even so, some African kingdoms, such as the Kanem-Bornu Empire (c. 700–c. 1750), practiced a form of marriage diplomacy with their neighbouring communities.[51]

In pre-colonial times, the various communities in Esan practiced some form of exogamy, in which a man had to find a wife outside of his clan. This act necessitated a significant source of inter-community relations. Consequently, the study is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, key concepts will be clarified. The third section discussed the Esan people's early history, including their geographical location and economic and socio-political institutions. The fourth section is dedicated to traditional marriage in Esan, while the fifth section is the work's core, marriage diplomacy in Indigenous Esan, and the final section is concerned with the study's findings and conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

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[46] (The Holy Bible, King James Version, 2012:4)

[47] (Orukpe and Omoruyi, 2018)

[48] Matthew Izibili, *Marriage on Hire Purchase in Esan Traditional Thought: An Abuse of African Morality*, ed. by M. Ihensekhien (Ekpoma: ASUD, 2012).

[49] P.S Olumese, 'Socio-Cultural Relations in Pre-Colonial Esan', 2017 <http//:www.ewohimi.com > [accessed 10 September 2021].

[50] (Black, 2010:26)

[51] (Watkin, 2018:1)

Diplomacy

Diplomacy is derived from the ancient Greek term diploun, which referred to diplomas (special documents carried by religious envoys that were supposed to ensure a safe journey).[52] Diplomacy developed as an institution in reaction to the harmonious cohabitation of peoples from disparate origins. According to Nietzsche, the concept of "diplomacy" can never be completely defined due to the inherent ambiguity.[53] Bull's definition of diplomacy as "the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and through peaceful means".[54] This definition has continues to be the most commonly accepted among diplomatic academics. This definition has the benefit of reflecting a key aspect of diplomacy, namely its peaceful approach to resolving conflicts between geopolitical entities. In this context, indigenous Esan interpreted marital diplomacy to be a means of lubricating previously antagonistic ties while also safeguarding already established congenial relationships. Accordingly, Sharp noted rightly that as long as the human relations is defined by pluralist, rather than solidarist, views of who we are and how we live, interactions between disparate entities will continue to flourish. These interactions must include some form of communication and representation. These two aspects may take different forms throughout time and in different locations, but they are all necessary components of diplomacy. [55]

Marriage

Marriage, like many other social concepts, has defiled a universal definition. Even the anthropologists in whose dome the concept primarily resides have been unable to solve its conundrum for decades. According to Leach, no definition could be found that would apply to all of the institutions that ethnographers commonly refer to as marriage. Rather, he suggests that wherever its basic features are associated with what we loosely refer to as marriage, it be so labelled. In this case, Leach's marriage definition is based squarely on the author's chimera, as well as cultural diversity practices. Ducan on the hand, simply defined marriage as "a socially sanctioned sex relationship involving two or more people of the opposite sex, whose relationship is expected to endure

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[52] (Jonsson, 2012:22)
[53] (Halvard, 2016:30)
[54] (Bull, 1977:156)
[55] (Jonsson and Hall, 2005)

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beyond the time required for gestation and the birth of children."[56] However, in Esan land, as Okonoboh noted in Olenin, "there is no single word that can stand for the word 'marriage' in Esan, rather, it can only be described from which its meaning or understanding as about the concept becomes apparent" As a result, marriage is represented in Esan by the terms Ibodo bhia mhen, emhin ikhuo bhiedo, or irea mhen, which mean "the coming together of man and woman to become husband (Odo) and wife (Amhen)."[57] In other words, it is a long-term relationship between a man and a woman, or vice versa. In contrast to the Christian religion and Western marriages, which emphasize monogamy, an Esan man's wealth was measured by the number of wives he married to, and thus polygamy was widely practiced and encouraged.

Early History of the Esan People

The Esan tribe comprised the land and people located in the Edo Central Senatorial District, in Edo State, in the South-South Nigeria. Its situated at longitude $5^031^1 7^0 30^1$ and latitude $5^0 30^1$ north and 7^030^1 east of Benin. The area is bordered in the North East with Etsako, in the North West with Owan, in the South West with Orhionwon and Ika, and in the South and South East with the Aniocha and Oshimili respectively. The land of Esan is approximately 210km² (540 square miles).[58] The name 'Esan,' which translates as 'jump, 'is derived from the Bini word 'Esanfia,' which translates as 'jump 'or 'flee '. According to oral history, the Esan people migrated from the Benin kingdom during the reign of Oba Eware in the 15th century. Who, enraged by the mysterious deaths of his only two sons on the same day, enacted some laws that must be followed as a mark of respect for his departed sons. The hardship that resulted from these laws drove many people to flee to the Benin kingdom and migrate to the northeast, which is now the ancestral home of the Esan people.[59] On the other hand, Okoduwa claimed that prior to the 15th-century migration from Benin, communities of Ekpoma, Uromi, Irrua, and Ughoha people who descended from the plateau area already existed. He said that the 15th-century exodus was a ruse by the Benin people to integrate the residents of Esan. According to Okoduwa, the names Isa, Esa, and Ishan were adopted as disparaging terms by colonial

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[56] (Duncan, 1968:218)

[57] (Olenin, 2016:25)

[58] (Unumen, 2015:217)

[59] (Akahomen, 2019)

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rulers owing to their inability to pronounce the original name "Esan".[60] Esan land is currently divided into five local government council areas: Esan-West, Esan-Central, Esan-North East, Esan-South East, and Igueben. In all, it is believed that Esan has the closest cultural and linguistic affiliations with Benin. Esan's population seems to have grown steadily since the period of our study. The 2006 National Population Census estimated Esan's population at 591,534.[61]

Socio-Political Organisations of the Esan

The Esan are distinct and vibrant people who share a common language, customs, and traditions.[62] Unlike the Binis, who are centrally governed by the Oba (King), the Esan people had approximately 32 established independent and sovereign entities at the time of colonialism. Each of these kingdoms had its own system centred on monarchy, and the capitals where the kings resided were referred to as Eguare or Eguale, depending on the Esan language variation. Due to the patriarchal nature of the kinship structure in Esan societies, the death of the reigning king leads to the installation of the heir apparent, who is the monarch's first son. When the first son dies before the father, the second son is declared heir apparent. The Onojie (plural form) is a constitutional monarch who is held in the trust of society. As such, it cannot be willed or willingly abdicated in favour of any son, brother, uncle, or close friend.[63] The Enijie (plural form) are the supreme divinely appointed kings, wielding enormous power due to the people's belief in their sacred birth. This supported the popular Esan proverb "ABIO OJIE GA," meaning a king is born to serve.

Despite the kings' arrogated powers, they were not autocratic in their day-to-day administration of the kingdom. The Enijie were helped by (Ekhaemon) chiefs, who came in two varieties: hereditary and thank you chiefs. The hereditary titles were patterned after the UZAMA NIHIRON of Benin, with minor differences; for example, some titles that are hereditary in Benin are not in Esan kingdoms; this was done to accommodate the people's peculiarities. [64] Among the hereditary titleholders, the Oniha, Iyasere or Iyasele, and Ezomo had the distinction of exercising both executive and judicial powers in the course of their

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[60] (Okoduwa, 1997:15)

[61] ("Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette," 2009:B27)

[62] M.O Omo-Ojugo, 'Esan Language Endangered? Implication for the Teaching and Learning of Indigenous Language in Nigeria', in *Inaugural Lectures* (Ekpoma: Ambrose Alli University, 2004).

[63] (Okojie, 1968:63)

[64] (Okojie, 1968:58)

duties. The Thank You chiefs, on the other hand, were given at the discretion of the reigning king.[65] This could be given as a result of a person's achievements or assistance to the king. Overall, the role of the (Ekhaemon) chiefs cannot be overstated, as they served as a bridge between their communities and the palace city.

Furthermore, for administrative purposes, the various Esan kingdoms were divided into EGBELE, which were subdivided into IDUMU (quarters), and further subdivided into UELEN, which happened to be the smallest social unit that comprised a man, his wives, children, brothers, and his yet to marry sisters, his mother, and father. [66] The Egbele are led by Edion Egbele, the village's oldest man. He is the village's supreme leader, both politically and socially, in all matters affecting the entire community. He was assisted in carrying out his statutory duties by the EDIONENE, which was made up of the next three EDION. It is critical to understand that inter-marriage between Egbele and Idumu is not permitted in any circumstances. The act is motivated by the fact that all Egbele members are of the same ancestral origin, as well as a desire to broaden the scope of relationships within the confines of a single community. Marriage rituals in indigenous Esan communities were primarily the responsibility of the Idumu (quarters), but the Egbele were encouraged to participate, emphasizing the Esan proverb "OTUO KPA MHAN LON OMON," which means that a child is collectively owned rather than individually owned.

Marriages in Pre-colonial Esan

Marriage in Esan land, like in other African cultures, originated from the people's traditional beliefs and was thus governed by custom. As a result, marriages that fell short of the traditionally accepted standard were ridiculed and socially stigmatized by the people.[67] Marriage was a highly respected social institution in indigenous Esan, and it required much consideration before starting on it. As a consequence, it was the right of the parents of prospective spouses to search for suitors for their children. As a result, the young boy or girl has little or no say in who marries whom. This act was not intended to cast the would-be couple as non-existent beings, but rather was a practice of which both were products. In this sense, Ranke was correct to regard every era as being "next to God,"

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[65] (Okojie, 1968:58)
[66] (Okojie, 1968:50)
[67] (Oghi, 2014:54)

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implying that past practices should not be evaluated by contemporary standards.[68] As a result, the Esan people had indigenous marriage practices that were distinct from other cultural backgrounds. Some of these practices, however, have been eroded by the infiltration of colonialism, which has permeated the people's economic, political, and socio-cultural systems. Prior to colonization, there were four main methods for a girl to marry, but only two were very popular: marriage by betrothal (Ebee) and the dowry system. However, inheritance marriage and pawning or pledging were seldom mentioned.

In traditional Esan land marriage by betrothal was the most common type of marriage. This system required the man to provide years of service to the girl's parents, sometimes from birth until the girl was of marriageable age. Okojie observed that in Esan communities such as Ebelle, parental consent to this request is typically given when the baby is three to four months old, on the day of the hair-washing ceremony (Ihoetoa). On this day, the mother's hair is ceremonially washed with Ekasa, a yellow native soap, and the child is permitted to put on her first adornment. He maintains that "the man invited to help pound the foufou (native food) for the ceremony is the one accepted to marry the girl, and could later come and formally ask for the girl's hand in marriage".[69] A variation on this system was for a child to be given in marriage, with the husband caring for the child-wife under his roof till she was old enough to perform contractual duties.

The dowry system, in which a potential future husband paid a sum of money to a girl's parents once the girl was mature, was the second method. Okojie, however, observed that bride price marriages were extremely uncommon in Esan at the time. Only rich individuals can afford to wait for their daughters to reach maturity before marrying them off. Thus, for fathers who could muster the patience required, this marriage system was very profitable. However, it was costly for suitors because families typically demanded a higher bride price for a full-grown woman.[70] Akahomen correctly acknowledged this when he stated that, due to the cost of pride price, it could take 20-30 years for a married couple to pay off their debts. He used his father and mother as examples, saying that he was already an adult, married with children, when his mother's kinsmen were still demanding items hitherto waved during the marriage ceremony.[71]

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[68] (Tosh, 2002:iv)
[69] (Okojie, 1994:140)
[70] (Okojie, 1994:143)
[71] (Akahomen, 2000)

Also, marriage by inheritance was another form of marriage in pre-colonial Esan. According to Okojie ths was usually the case, "When a man died, the wife, if she was not an Onojie's daughter" (the daughter of a traditional ruler), was "inherited after the due burial of the father by the first son,".[72] The reason adduced for this, according to Okojie, is that the Onojie was a dignified monarch in those days; he took no bride price from his sons-in-law; the princesses married for love.[73]Another was the system of pawning or pledging. In this system, a man could pawn his daughter to raise funds when he needed money for a particular venture or to pay creditors.

In all, marriage in pre-colonial Esan was not just a relationship between two people, but an effort was made by all stakeholders, that is, the bride and the groom, their parents, grandparents, extended relations, as well as the communities involved, to ensure continuous intergroup relations. By extension, marriages in pre-colonial Esan were meant to widen the bonds of friendship among communities as well as strengthen solidarity and unity among people who would have otherwise been hostile to each other.

Marriage Diplomacy in Indigenous Esan

The core of diplomacy is rooted in its capacity to create agreeable relationships, eliminate irritants, and promote mutual understanding. Marriage is a vital institution in pre-colonial Africa, as it is essential to the survival and flourishing of the entire community. As a result, it fosters greater and mutual social ties between the couple being married and their families and clans. In indigenous Esan culture, the death of a spouse does not always mean the end of a marriage partnership, as it does in the New Testament scriptural setting. As reflected in (Romans 7:2) "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband" and)1Corinthians 7:39) "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord".[74] Rather, in indigenous Esan land, it is expected that woman be remarried to her brother-in-law or another male relative, or the deceased's eldest son if the widow is not the biological mother. The children born in the new relationship are counted as the late husband's

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[72] (Okojie, 1994:121)
[73] (Okojie, 1994:121)
[74] *The Holy Bible, King James Version*.

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offspring. This practice may appear repugnant and arcane in the modern era, but it was intended to provide the widow and her children with the necessary protection against external forces that may have wanted to take advantage of the home's vulnerability. In the same vein, Oseghale stated that the act was put in place to ensure harmony between the woman's and her late husband's families. He claimed that the marriage generosity was only extended to virtuous women, not all widowed women.[75] Aptly, this informed Mbiti's assertion that, "

> For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator.[76]

In indigenous Esan communities, marriage was not an arrangement between individuals rather it was an alliance between two extended families. According to Igbafe, it was basically because of the interest of the two connected families in the alliance that the girl had no freedom of choice of a husband.[77] Parents make proposals on behalf of their children and ensure that care is taken of them morally, in matters of skill acquisition and other related areas. The would-be in-laws strive to demonstrate their loyalty to the family This takes various forms from fetching of fire woods for the mother of the girl, provision of sizeable tubers of yam especially in festive periods, organizing young men to help in the law to be farm, providing for the upkeep of the growing girl as their economic power could take them.[78] With such marriage proposal and the eventual marriage itself an "eternal" path has been established according to Igbo saying, " the path that links in-laws is the path to the stream from which a people draw water. It never closes nor is it ever allowed to be overgrown with bush".[79] The links created by such marriage engendered a peaceful inter-group relations that is anchored on marriage diplomacy.

The practice of marriage diplomacy is deeply rooted in many civilizations. As noted by J.K Hoffmeier, marriage in the then formative Jewish nation served as a means of diplomatic engagement, this happened through the desire to forge a

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[75] B.E Oseghale, *Personal Communication* (Ekpoma, 2017).

[76] (Mbiti, 1969:133)

[77] P.A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration* (London: Longman, 1979).

[78] (Izibili, 2012:137)

[79] (Chukwudike and Eminue, 2017:40)

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friendly alliance with another king by giving the daughter in marriage. He maintained that this might have been the literary connection between the wife-sister stories and the treaty at Beersheba that accompany them. Marriage diplomacy has long been a major strategy for cultivating alliances between dynasties.[80] As was the case in many areas of pre-colonial Nigerian culture, established relations were expressed through marriage diplomacy as well. Pre-colonial Esan society was not exempt from this norm. While the nature and importance of such marriages have varied considerably, some aspects have remained consistent.

Marriage diplomacy in pre-colonial Esan served as a reliable guarantee of peaceful coexistence of two previously hostile communities. A case in point, was the marriage between princes Ozedu one of the daughters of Onojie Ediale of Uromi and Uabomen, Onojie of Opoji. Prior to this marriage engagement the kingdom of Uromi and Opoji had had a turbulent relationship that span a long period, but with this marriage alliance the two kingdom entered into a non-aggression pact that saw unparallel cordial relationship. Princes Ebuade was the mother of Omokhua who became the Onojie of Opoji about the year 1835.[81] This alliance, which arises from the bond of marriages perhaps succeeded because in-laws are highly regarded, that is why there is a saying in Esan that: "Aigbo ruan oria rhamude, onogbe, ogbe ehiole" (One does not fight his in-law, he who does so fights with his own destiny)".[82] It is imperative, to understand that in-laws, as mentioned above encompass not just the immediate family of the couple but both communities. In a related development, the marriage between queen Ebuade, the daughter of the Onojie of Ugboha and the Onojie of Irrua, created a peaceful and friendship ties between Ugboha and Irrua.[83] The tranquillity enjoyed by Esan people during the period of study was facilitated by a representative of the bride family known as Osomhan. He was an effective ambassador that has a strong good managerial skill, a resilient negotiator, and a respected representative of the wife's family, that her husband and his family could easily confined in. His duty was to ensure that the acrimony that may arise between the husband and the wife was quickly resolved be it escalate beyond measure. To this end, the purpose of diplomacy is inclined

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[80] James. K Hoffmeier, 'The Wives' Tales of Genesis 12, 20 & 26 and the Covenant at Beer-Sheba', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 43.1 (1992), 81–100
<https://legacy.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/Library/TynBull_1992_43_1_04_Hoffmeier_WivesTales_Gen12.pdf>.
[81] (Okojie, 1968:74)
[82] (Izibili, 2012:134)
[83] C Okojie.

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toward negotiation to achieve agreements and resolve issues between groups. Marriage diplomacy in indigenous Esan land have provided the people a viable platform to have nurtured cordialities between hitherto hostile communities.

Conclusion

Diplomatic marriages between nations, city-states, communities, and peoples of diverse cultures are well documented in historical archives. Despite its variations according to cultures and historical backgrounds, the overall picture that emerges from its understanding is that it was used as a means of establishing and solidifying relationships. Diplomacy, as seen from the forgoing discussion, has experienced continuity and changes over time. However, the cores of communication and representation have remained unchanged over the years. The exigency of its reliability has enabled the Esan people to have a fair share of its practices through marriage diplomacy, which ensured social cohesion among the various communities in this part of the world. It would be counter-productive in modern international relations to continue relying on hard diplomacy based solely on economic and military prowess; instead, cultural diplomacy should be encouraged as a complementary means of engendering peace in the global system.

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