Visualizing the Body

Photographic clues and the cultural Fluidity of Mbopo Institution 1914-2014

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my "*uyai mbopo*", Patience Nsima Stanislaus and my lovely daughters, Afonama and Anamakan, whose commitments and sacrifices have helped me to complete this study.

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Abstract

The *mbopo* institution, popularly known as the "fattening room", is a cultural rite of passage for young virgins, who are being prepared for marriage among the Ibibio/Efik people of southern Nigeria. It is a complex cultural institution that marked the change of status from girlhood to nubile womanhood in Ibibio/Efik culture. This study examines the practice of *mbopo* ritual among the Ibibio/Efik people across the previous century. Through an engaged and detailed visual analysis, the study argues that in the first decade of the 20th century, the *mbopo* ritual had a degree of vibrancy with an attached sense of secrecy and spiritual mystery. But between 1920 and the present, this vibrancy and spiritual undertone has been subtly but progressively compromised. A build-up of tension surrounding the ritual as a result of modern forces, not only outside missionaries, but also indigenous converts, set in motion a process that would eventually transform the ritual from a framework of actual cultural practice into the realms of "cultural reinvention" and re-rendering. Feminist critiques of the 1980s and the 1990s led to popular awareness of the damaging impact of clitoridectomy, just one core aspect of the ritual. As a direct result, clitoridectomy was outlawed across the country, leaving *mbopo* to be seen as a morally suspect practice. In recent years, the once vibrant, secret, and spiritually grounded rite of seclusion for nubile women has been reimagined and reinvented through public display, in art, painting, cultural dance troupes, music, and television shows.

Introduction: Visual Clues and Fragments: Changing Interpretations of *Mbopo* Ritual, 1914-2014

In June 2013, in the city of Calabar, six young women participated in *The Fattening Room* reality show. This live TV series, an attempt to remediate and display on television screens the experiences and cultural characteristics of the Ibibio/Efik women's rite of passage called *mbopo*.[1] Young African women were invited to engage in an extended period of rigorous pampering and learning. "The cast consisting of Stephanoe Unachukwu (Nigeria), Rosdyn Ashkar (Ghana), Patricia Kihori (Kenya), Tshepo Maphanyanye (Botswana), Sally Berold (South Africa) and Limpo Funlika (Zambia)," were advertised as being taken through "a journey of self-discovery as they explored the rich Ibibio/Efik marriage custom and tradition for 30 days in the (so-called) *Fattening Room*, a reality show that has its setting in Calabar, the Cross River State capital."[2]

For one month, the reality show was aired live across different African television channels, as these young African women entered the Ibibio/Efik women's seclusion rite embellished with a modern twist.[3] *The Fattening Room* reality show, though realistically staged in a video cast and television format,

1 ThisDay, Nigeria: EbonyLife Brings Six African Ladies to the Fattening Room, http://allafrica.com/stories/201304291435.html, accessed on 14 March 2018.

2 *Ibid.*

3 While I acknowledge the different scholarly arguments that try to suggest cultural differentiations between the Ibibio and the Efik as two distinct sets of people, with different sociocultural settings, history and geographical inclinations, I here use Ibibio/Efik as a common defining identity for these sets of people who practically share close affinities in different aspects of their cultural identities including language. While the *mbopo* festival was a common cultural phenomenon practiced across the entire Cross River region with different versions and cultural specificities, this research focuses on those *mbopo* practices that were common across the Cross River region, and particularly between the Ibibio and the Efik. For the purpose of attaining this objective, I here use "Ibibio/Efik" as an analytical term to tease out those common cultural organs found between Ibibio and Efik people.

was not of course "real." *The Fattening Room* was theatrical, directed towards entertaining its viewers. While trying to entertain, the reality show seemed to posit itself as a visual defense of African traditional culture, tacitly addressing the misunderstandings that surround the Ibibio/Efik female rite in a televisual form. The show tried to present the Ibibio/Efik female seclusion rite, *mbopo*, as more than just fattening-up, but as an all-encompassing female-centred induction process that is culturally friendly and able to accommodate initiates from outside Ibibio/Efik land and Nigeria. The show also attempted to portray the female rite as more than an ancient rite where girls are housed within a secluded area, where they are forcefully fed to the point of fatness to appeal the Ibibio/Efik patriarchal yearning for a voluminous female body. The show rather tried to reposition *mbopo* as culturally fluid, a ritual that can fit into contemporary modernity with some form of acceptance.

While engaging with the show, it prompted my inquiry into the cultural fluidity, inconsistency, or otherwise of West African cultures and, in this case, the *mbopo* ritual of the Ibibio/Efik people of Nigeria. Through the possibilities offered by photography and other visual media as potential forms for historical analysis, this thesis examines the changing contexts associated with the practice of *mbopo* across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It examines other crucial components of the institution that go beyond the body.

What is the *mbopo* women's rite of passage? *Mbopo* is a cultural institution, a rite of passage for young virgins, who are being prepared for marriage among the Ibibio/Efik people of southern Nigeria. It is a cultural induction and schooling process through which young women are secluded, culturally and traditionally coached, and prepared for marriage as brides who are able to manage their homes, are sexually active, emotionally stable, and are able to bear, suckle, and nurture their children to maturity. It is a complex cultural institution that "marks the change of status from girlhood to nubile womanhood."[4] Young, marriageable women are given education about marital relations, body beautification, sexuality, copulation, reproduction, and work. It points to the way the society tries to control the sexuality of young women in an attempt to locally preserve the particularity and uniqueness of each local community.[5] It signals a process through which young girls are initiated into womanhood, equipped with knowledge, skills, and social

4 F. Abaraonye, "Gender Relations in Ibibio Traditional Organizations", *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1997), 218.

5 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion: The Revelation of the Ibibio 'Fattened Bride' as the Icon of Beauty and Power* (New York, Lang Publishing 2012), 2.

and psychological resources that will ensure their identity, and will enhance maximum contribution and belonging to the sociocultural structures of the Ibibio/Efik society.

How do photographs and other media forms generate "visual clues"[6] in order to unpack broader cultural features of the *mbopo* ritual "beyond the body" and beyond the "fattening room" perception? How do photographs and documentary films help to articulate and historicize the cultural volatilities and fluidities, the "continuities and changes" in the cultural practice of the *mbopo* ritual between 1914 and 2014? Is the version of *mbopo* as practiced today, or as presented by *The Fattening Room* show in 2013, essentially the same as the form practiced in 1914 when the female ethnographer Dorothy Talbot undertook a detailed study of the institution?[7] What components of the institution have been jettisoned over the period and why? What components remained? Finally, is there an abiding value in this long-standing cultural ritual when seen in relation to other aspects of Ibibio/Efik society? These are the questions in this thesis I seek to address.

This research is predicated on my position as an "insider". I am an Annang/Ibibio man[8] and have some personal background knowledge of the institution though I am not an initiate. When I was growing up in the early 1980s, it was common for young women to anticipate going through the rite of seclusion, the *ekuk mbopo* rite. This expectation was talked about among peers within my community, both men and women. But the expectation it evokes has widely diminished in recent decades. This research tries to analyse the changes that have attended the institution across a century, beginning with the amalgamation of Nigeria as a British Protectorate in 1914. It also analyses how different historical timelines and epochs, in particular colonialism, the introduction of Christianity, Nigerian independence, and the Civil War, have influenced the practice of *mbopo*, as well as its changing degree of acceptability within the Ibibio/Efik sociocultural setting in contemporary times.

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6 See C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" in Ginzburg, *Clues, Myth and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 96-125.

7 D. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People: The Ibibio of Southern Nigeria* (London: Casel and Company, 1915), 76-95.

8 The Annang group is a subset of Ibibio people. They have a common language with the Ibibios and share almost all forms of cultural affinities. They are believed to have come from the same ancestry. See U. Essien-Udo, T*he History of the Annang People of Cross River State, Nigeria* (Calabar, Apcon Press, 1983).

In traditional Ibibio/Efik culture, as in other African societies, girls who were found to have maintained their virginity until marriage were viewed with pride. Those who were found to have had premarital sex were stigmatized by being debarred from partaking in the *mbopo* institution. They were given pejorative names and were mocked in folksongs and puppetry displays.[9] Girls who were inducted through the *mbopo* ritual were certified by some established indigenous verifiable mechanisms to have been virtuous. The very action of being debarred from participating in the seclusion rite was seen as a means of control against "deviant behavior", and was to instill "decency" in society.[10]

Mbopo is unlike the Mauritanian *lablouh*, the fattening and circumcision culture where young women of reasonably young ages are gruesomely circumcised and forcefully fed to the point of being forced to eat their vomit.[11] It is also different from the girls' circumcision culture of Gabon, which contradicted feminine secrecy as epitomized by Owanto's *La Jeune Fille a la Fleur* exhibition of naked mutilated girls.[12] The *mbopo* seclusion rite emphasizes certain aspects of feminine spirituality, morality, etiquette, character, and vocation. While it involved female circumcision in the past, it was highly secretive. Pamela Brink asserts that when she did fieldwork in the 1970s, no person was allowed to view or to photograph the moment of the operation.[13] The ritual also gave credence to inculcating social values and etiquette that the marriageable girls should possess in preparation for womanhood, motherhood, and their lives as wives. While certain aspects of the ritual like clitoridectomy, the partial cutting of the clitoris, were held in secrecy, other aspects of it, like the "outing ceremony", were highly public displays that involved the family and the community in celebratory parades.

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9 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", *African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1956), 15-28.16. See also J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore in a Nigerian Society", *Central Issues in Anthropology* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1981), 29-50, J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music in the Cultivation of Moral Values in Ibibio Society, Nigeria". *Open Journal of Social Sciences (*2014), Vol. 6, No. 49, and G. Obot, "The Concept of Mbopo in Annang Land", http://www.ibomtourism.org/2017/04/the-concept-of-mbopo-in-annang-land.html, access on 8 June 2018.

10 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women," 15. See also J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music," 51.

11 M. Claire, "Forced to be Fat," https://www.marieclaire.com/politics/news/a3513/forcefeeding-in-mauritania/, access on 8 June 2018.

12 Owanto, "The Forgotten Drawer: Celebrating Womanhood," in *Art Africa*, Issue 10 (2017), 42-51.

13 P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria," *Medical Anthropology* (1999), Vol. 12, 131.

During the seclusion rite in the past, marriageable girls were secluded and pampered for anything between three months and three years. This period of seclusion was not fixed. It was subject to different determining variables like the wealth of the parent of the initiate, the age and health of the initiate, and the uniqueness of the cultural particularity of certain communities within the particular area of Ibibio land. These factors determined how long initiates were secluded. According to Imo Imeh, the *mbopo* seclusion rite accentuated the Ibibio/Efik philosophy of beauty, where beauty was seen not merely as the aesthetics of physical appearance, but also of the beauty of character, based on sound morals. Thus, the corporeal engagement around the beauty of the initiate, the use of ornaments and other beatification materials in the seclusion process signified the expected outcome of *uyai mbopo*, the beautiful bride, "who symbolizes everything that is pure, beautiful, brilliant, resplendent and resilient."[14]

Seclusion presupposes two important factors: one, the family internally celebrates the expected initiate for the honour of fidelity that she has upheld; and two, it epitomizes the absence from the family that the girl will experience following the consummation of her marriage. The young woman is secluded from family interaction, being attended to by female elders who are themselves former initiates. These elders must be past child-bearing age and be members of certain women's organizations like "the *Nyama* women's society.[15] Thus, the initiate is secluded and kept from her family for a period, as she prepares for life without them when she relocates to her new home on the consummation of her marriage.

In pre-colonial and pre-mercantile Ibibio/Efik society, the *mbopo* was a standard ritual that nubile girls passed through before marriage.[16] This was the case before changes emerged that contested its morality and practice. New cultural influences brought about by European contact with the Ibibio/Efik people, particularly during the colonial era in Nigeria, influenced the reception and practice of *mbopo*, and European socio-cultural concepts were presented during the colonial era as being more civilized and better than indigenous practice and cultures. At the same time, the pervasive impact of Christianity in the region contested the practice. The conquest of the autonomous societies of eastern Nigeria (which, before confrontations with the British, depended on the assumed invincibility of their "time-honoured

14 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 8.

15 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music," 51.

16 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76.

gods and medicine men") by colonial forces shook the foundations of traditional beliefs and cultures. And Christianity, which was perceived as the secret of the white man's power, proliferated.[17] Christianity began to gain a foothold in the Ibibio/Efik region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mission stations headed by white missionaries played an active role in social and political change within the region, serving both as havens for indigenous refugees and victims of British devastations, and providing local information for British colonial agents and consuls.[18]

The Church of Scotland Mission (the Presbyterians) led the way in 1846.[19] They proselytized indigenous Christians, who were converted and taught to believe that traditional cultural practices were esoteric, pagan, and idolatrous. They were made to see indigenous practices such as the *mbopo* women's rites as rituals invested with animistic beliefs. Early ethnographies suggest that such rituals were often preceded by sacrifice and libations to *Eka Abasi* (the Mother God), sacred pools, venerated trees, and the ancestors.[20] Though the missionaries also opposed the fattening up of prospective brides on health grounds,[21] they vehemently condemned the sacrifice of animals during ceremonies and rituals. They held that such rituals contradicted monotheistic Christian beliefs and should be considered religious anathemas that must be jettisoned.[22]

The emerging feminist critique in the 1970s challenged what they regarded as "the mutilation of the female body," particularly through female circumcision,

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17 A. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule" in O. Ikimi, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History,* (Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books, 2004), 423.

18 E. Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the 19th Century" in Ikimi, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History,* 254.

19 A. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule" 425.

20 D Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76-78.

21 J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore", 51. See also J. Messenger, "Reinterpretations of Christian and Indigenous Belief in a Nigerian Nativist Church." *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (1960), 268-278.

22 D Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76-95. See also A. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule," where he analyses how the Presbyterians mission, and later the Qua Ibo (1887) and the CMS Niger Mission (1893) had vigorously and radically challenged traditional practices such as polygamy and the killing of twins as being morally inadequate for Christian converts. Again, he establishes how the offer of Western education, which accompanied the proliferation of missions, and which indigenous religion could not offer, was a strong tool and attractive bait for social change and cultural dynamism along prescribed Western lifestyles.

in certain African cultures.[23] The changing social structure of busy city life in contemporary Ibibio/Efik metropolitan centres such as Uyo, Calabar, and Ikot Epene, and the unimagined social transformation attested to by the apparently seamless global connections through the internet and other media routes of the twenty-first century also unsettled the favourable social topography that allowed for the practice of the *mbopo* ritual until recent times.

Despite the contemporary diminishing of the practice among Ibibio/Efik people due to the influence of modernity and the impact of Christianity,[24] the practice seems to maintain some traceable presence, particularly in the interior hinterlands and villages, and even in some metropolitan areas. Imo Ime's recent ethnographic observation of *mbopo* initiates in 2006 shows that the ritual is being practiced among some Ibibio/Efik communities in contemporary times.[25]

Mbopo in historical perspective: A literature review

The *mbopo* institution of the Ibibio/Efik people of southern Nigeria has received sporadic and uneven scholarly attention. Whether colonial, foreign, or indigenous, scholars have approached the institution from different disciplines with different theoretical framings, mainly those of anthropology and art history. Also available are some articles in newspapers, magazines, or online posts, which focus on body fattening as the defining frame of the institution. This is concomitant with the popular nomenclature of "fattening room" or 'fattening house" used to label the institution. For example, an article published on Nairaland.com, a Nigerian online news forum, presents the *mbopo* institution mainly as a *fattening room* where unmarried women are subjected to a miserable three- to six-month ordeal of no-work-and-all-food-and-sleep, to emerge as "obese brides."[26]

Oyeronke Oyewumi calls for researchers to comprehensively analyse African cultures from the standpoint and understanding of local and indigenous

23 Bride Confinement, Fattening and Circumcision: Promoting Violence against Women, https://www.worldpulse.com/en/community/users/celine/posts/23064, accessed on 15 July 2017.

24 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women" 51.

25 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 61.

26 "The Fattening Room of the Efiks", http://www.nairaland.com/2097222/fattening-rooms-efik, accessed on 10 February 2017.

backgrounds.[27] As a follow up to this call, this research is based on my position as an Annang man (a subset of the Ibibio group). Having lived across different Ibibio/Efik communities in Nigeria, and being familiar with this component of Ibibio/Efik culture, I felt a responsibility from a sense of kinship to offer a view, in this case as an "insider," to the body of literature available on the *mbopo* institution.

The intent of this research is to "visualize closely," then analyse and historicize the wider context of the practice of *mbopo* beyond the body. It seeks to contribute to the recent Africanist literature, which tries to reflect on the practice of *mbopo* as a complex and culturally rich ritual: a women's rite of seclusion, instead of the myopic and parochial framework of the "fattening room" appellation epitomized by Western-inspired debates (and recycled in the TV reality show). I draw inspiration in particular from Imeh's stimulating recent study where *mbopo s*eclusion is conceptualized as "performative demonstrations of love and care (and character) through the public display of opulence."[28] It can further be conceived as an inductive and pedagogical process for the development of an Ibibio/Efik bride consonant with their conception of beauty and cultural affinity.

This thesis thus conceptualizes the *mbopo* institution from the standpoint of indigenous practice, and the history and culture of the Ibibio/Efik people of Nigeria. It examines and analyses the cultural volatilities, fluidities, "continuities and changes" that have attended the practice of *mbopo* between 1914 and 2014. It examines and analyses how *mbopo* has evolved over the period, considering the wider sociocultural components that have impacted on the institution. The study examines how "modernity", Christian values, and the emerging discourse on the rights of the woman and children have influenced the cultural practice of *mbopo*.

The literature review here centres on ethnographical and historical studies of the *mbopo* institution as well as theories of photography. It is grounded in the theoretical framework of photographs (and films) that hold possible "clues" that can be used as evidential models for the reconstruction of history as theorized by Carlo Ginzberg.[29] It is further framed around the concept of "cultural fluidity," the theory of continuities and changes in African cultures

27 O. Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2002), 1-5.

28 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 3.

29 C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm", 96-125.

as posited by W. R. Bascom *et al*.[30] Thus, this research engages with literature that cuts across photography, film, and the history and anthropological study of the *mbopo* institution and cultural studies in Africa. Photographs, documentary films, TV shows, and written documents are used to generate "clues" to historicize the complex sociocultural constitution of the *mbopo* institution "beyond the body." It tries to address the cultural changes that have attended the institution from 1914 up till recent times as represented in early anthropological literature on the *mbopo* institution, and as observable through the medium of still and motion pictures.

The first systematic published research on the *mbopo* institution came to light in 1915, a year after the amalgamation of Nigeria as a single political entity by the British colonial government. Ethnographer Dorothy A. Talbot, wife of P.A. Talbot, who was a colonial District Commissioner in Ibibioland between 1914 and 1915, gave an extended description of the institution.[31] Talbot's account is an ethnographic description of a secret ritual rather than a theoretical analysis of its social, symbolic, and semantic signification. Her monograph is structured around a "visual narrative,"[32] consisting of forty-four photographs, to authenticate and illustrate her highly exotic account of a "primitive people." There are photographs of Ibibio "maidens," women, totems, and secret pools, etc., which she took during her ten months of her ethnographic collaboration with her husband. I analyse some of these early photographs by Talbot in close detail in the following chapters.

In *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People: The Ibibio of Southern Nigeria*, Talbot sought to narrate the ethnography of Ibibio communities "from the woman's point of view."[33] She believed that there were aspects of the Ibibio/Efik life to which the white male ethnographer had limited access, and thus it needed a woman to observe and interact with local women without restrictions. In Chapter 6 of her book, *Maidenhood to Marriage*, her narration centres on the *mbopo* institution. While not focused on the body, she elaborates in detail the spiritual aspects of the institution. She frames

30 W. Bascom and M. Herskovits, "The Problem of Stability and Change in African Culture", in W. Bascom and M. Herskovits, eds, *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 1.

31 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 1-15.

32 For an imaginative analysis of how early twentieth-century African ethnographers structured sequences of photographs that represented a "visual narrative," see R. Assibuji, "Anthropology and Fieldwork Photography, Monica Hunter Wilson Photographs of Pondoland and BuNyakyusa, 1931-1950", unpublished MA Thesis, University of the Western Cape (2010).

33 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 2.

her book around James Fraser's concept of non-Western cultures as being shrouded in magic with esoteric attention to allegedly secret societies and "religious cults." Talbot asserts that the *mbopo* ritual was "the first great event in the life of an Ibibio maiden."[34] She argues that before and after the *mbopo* rite, "a sacrifice is offered to the indwelling naiad (water-mermaids)" inhabiting secret pools or streams, and "age-old trees" that the inhabitants of certain communities worshipped. She sees this sacrifice as an act of appeasing *Eka Abasi* (the Mother God) in order to draw down blessings of fertility and productivity for new crops, since the ritual was usually observed prior to the beginning of a new planting season. Thus, *mbopo* was one way through which the Ibibio/Efik people expressed their spirituality, by interceding with and seeking the hands of the divine for fertility and prosperity for a newly formed family and the community at large.[35]

As a novel ethnographic study of the institution, Talbot depended largely on local informants, almost exclusively women.[36] She records a very important constituent of the institution: the spiritual ritualism of the *mbopo* institution as practiced in early decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, she pays little attention to the cultural induction process and other important aspects of the institution, notably its social function in relation to regulating gender roles and its educational function in relation to the training of young women. This mini-thesis addresses these gaps and redirects focus to other cultural aspects of the institution, including the changes that have attended the institution since Talbot's research.

A decade later, a colonial officer named Mervyn Jeffreys conducted a study of Ibibio/Efik women's rituals around Ikot Ekpene district in the then southeastern region of Nigeria. In his much later published ethnographic description of his experience in the 1920s, Jeffreys documented the duties and cultural functions of a women's society that he called "*Nyama*."[37] These women were the matriarchs, female elders responsible for the process of *mbopo* induction.[38] "The *Nyama* society" controlled the *mbopo* rite of seclusion, making sure that only girls who were still virgins were chosen for seclusion. This society, he asserted, contributed to checking promiscuity.

34 *Ibid*., 76.
35 *Ibid*., 76-77.
36 *Ibid*., 4.
37 In the Ibibio language, *Nyama* means singer. It could also be a name attributed to certain divinities that were being worshipped among some Ibibio/Efik groups. See M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 15.
38 *Ibid.*, 15.

They also oversaw clitoridectomy.[39] The central argument in Jeffreys' analysis is his critique of the efforts of the missionaries to outlaw this practice. As a British colonial officer in Nigeria during a period when forms of indirect rule were being introduced across African continent, Jeffreys had a political investment in protecting African traditions from outside interference. He lamented that the *mbopo* ritual was diminishing due to the influence of European missionaries.[40]

Around the time that Jeffreys, now a social anthropologist at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, published his narrative of the cultural contests in this colonial ritual, a pair of American anthropologists, John and Betty Messenger, conducted what might be considered as the first professional, modern anthropological study of social change in Ibibioland. They included analysis of changing forms of *mbopo.* In 1951 and 1952, they conducted ethnographic research among the Annang. They focused on religious acculturation and collected a large body of data on folklore and sexuality. They were interested in the "discontinuity in cultural conditioning," and cultural change. Christianity, spirituality, sexuality, and social values in Ibibioland were analysed. They analysed the practice of *mbopo* as a form of premarital engagement and noted that *mbopo* seclusion rites still afforded a space where initiates were taught about the practices and taboos associated with sexuality.[41] They asserted that, among the Annang, coitus was only expected after the initiate had been married in the assembly of her kinsmen and later incorporated into her new home through a ritual. In her new home, the *mbopo* initiate was presented with her first adult clothing and had her first sexual relations with her new husband in the marriage bed.[42]

After Nigerian independence in 1960, the focus on the cultural practice of the *mbopo* institution began to change from the context of rituality to "body size." This was as a result of an increasing perception of corpulence as a societal gauge for beauty, wealth, power, and health among Ibibio/Efik communities. Also, around this time, contemporary awareness of the adverse impact of large body size became prominent in scholarly literature and public debates.[43] In *Social Aspects of Obesity* (19995), Igor de Garine *et al*. assert that "obesity

39 *Ibid.,* 15.

40 *Ibid.,* 15-28.

41 J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore", 36.

42 *Ibid*., 36.

43 N. Pollock, "Introduction: An Overview of Obesity Issues across Several Cultures" in I. de Garine and N Pollock, eds., *Social Aspects of Obesity* (Amsterdam; Overseas Publishers Association, 1995), xiii-xxxiii.

and its pathological consequences" has been the focus of Western scientific discussion for some decades. But in studying groups of people outside Western metropolitan societies, they assert that "moderate fatness, storing energy in the form of fat has indisputable adaptive consequences including successful reproduction," particularly where inconsistent productivity and food scarcity is a threat. To them, Western conceptions of obesity, medical or psychological, are an inappropriate generalization of the understanding of body fat without consideration of other cultural contexts and diversities.

In her essay "Fertility and Fat: The Annang Fattening Room," in the above edited volume, medical anthropologist Pamela Brink develops this cross-cultural analysis in a detailed case study of the *mbopo* ritual. She asserts that the "Annang view on obesity is a positive one, with the perception of 'fat as beautiful'."[44] While centring on body size as the motivation for seclusion, and in a refreshing view, she reiterates the Annang's beliefs in the stimulus for fattening seclusion. She records indigenous perceptions on the gynaecological role of fatness, since fattening could broaden the hips and birth canal for a less uncomfortable delivery of babies.[45] Brink asserts that, in earlier years, *mbopo* was widely practiced among the Ibibio/Efik people, as "part of a traditional religious system […] associated with marriage and custom of bride price." This is because, to the Ibibio/Efik people, fertility was regarded as a very important driving force.[46] Young marriageable girls were also taught the art of pleasing their husbands sexually. Yet, as she insists, the ritual had many different social functions, including education about "sex, marriage, procreation, child-care, hygiene, wife-craft, mother-craft, home economics, and social and cultural etiquette."[47]

The most sustained and creative modern intellectual engagement with *mbopo* has been that of Imo Nse Imeh, an Ibibio-American scholar. With a genuine insider/outsider position, and with broader anthropological and art history perspectives, Imeh's 2012 study analyses the institution and tries to provide a balanced evaluation and summary of the *mbopo* institution and the concept of the *uyai mbopo*, the beauty/character connection. In *Daughters of Seclusion: The Revelation of the Ibibio "Fattened Bride" as the Icon of Beauty and Power,* Imeh adopts the art history method of object/image

44 P. Brink, "Fertility and Fat: The Annang Fattening Room" in I. de Garine and N Pollock, eds., *Social Aspects of Obesity*, 72.

45 *Ibid.,* 81.

46 Ibid., 76-77.

47 G. Obot, "The Concept of Mbopo in Annang Land", http://www.ibomtourism.org/2017/04/the-concept-of-mbopo-in-annang-land.html, access on 8 June 2018.

analysis and elaborates many facets about the cultural practice and aesthetic performance of the *mbopo* ritual among the Ibibio/Efik people. He conducted extensive fieldwork, interviewing former initiates and stakeholders of the institution, both men and women, between 2002 and 2006. He carried out an ethnographic study through personal observation of the *mbopo* initiation, particularly the seclusion and outing ceremony of one Comfort Ukponetto, an *mbopo* initiate in Ediene Atai village in Ibibioland.[48] These experiences helped him to develop a significant and insightful analysis into *mbopo* and how to interpret it from the framing perspective of Ibibio cultural life.

Imeh's study gives voice to the continuity of the practice of *mbopo* among the Ibibio/Efik people in recent times. Using his art history background, and by isolating a visual aesthetics that are uniquely part of Ibibio/Efik culture, he extensively analyses "the materiality of *mbopo* ritual," and how these aesthetic materials define the *mbopo* ritual as "a conceptual art form" that finally produces a woman healthy in her proportions and beautiful in character, representing everything that is pure and magnificent, "an icon of beauty and power."[49] Imeh re-imagines the ritual as "time, transformation and translation" of the beautiful bride.[50] He addresses how the *mbopo* ritual reveals the Ibibio/Efik cultural perception of *uyai* (beauty), which incorporates an element of empowerment. He states that after so much work and time has been expended in the transformation and re-presentation of the beautiful bride to the world in her final outing ceremony, the bride represents the combination of beauty and power.[51]

This thesis distinctively and firmly locates the *mbopo* ritual within visual theory and history. It looks extensively into other aspects of the ritual beyond corporality, about which Imeh has also provided analysis. Furthermore, I analyse social change in relation to other cultural and social features of the Cross River people. This is done through close visual analysis of photographs and documentary films.

48 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 61.
49 *Ibid.*, 9.
50 *Ibid.,* 31.
51 *Ibid.,* 176.

Photographic clues: An analytical resource for the historical reconstruction of *mbopo*

In trying to "visualize closely", so as to generate potential clues for this research, this thesis analyses photographs and documentary films in detail. How can fragments or visual clues help one to conceptualize the context of the whole? Can a photograph become a viable evidentiary base for historical analysis? I draw on Carlo Ginzburg's theory of "clues" and fragments of seemingly insignificant characters as viable pieces of evidence for establishing historical knowledge.[52] Georges Didi-Huberman has called on historians to "imagine" comprehensively, to engage and think historically with images.[53] I argue that photographs (and film images) *can* be used to generate evidentiary clues for historical reconstruction. They can also be used, along with other media and available written documents, to reposition, reconstruct, and re-narrate the history of the *mbopo* institution from 1914 to 2014.

A photograph has the potential to generate evidence for a reconstruction of historical narrative. Carlo Ginzburg asserts that when we engage with a photograph in detail, it is very revealing, showing the detail of content as well as the artistic quality of the image.[54] In his book, *Clues, Myth and the Historical Method* (1989), Ginzburg draws on the concepts of connoisseurship, criminal investigative process, and Freudian psychoanalysis to establish how miniature traces, symptoms, clues, pictorial marks, when studied closely, allow for the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality.[55] Historical knowledge is possible, not by "statistical interpretation of data", but by "indicial" knowledge, based on the collection, analytical conjecturing, and interpretation of clues to attain a general knowledge of a certain reality existent in the past.[56]

Clues and fragments thus possess possibilities that can facilitate an understanding of the whole. A photograph has the potential to preserve events and features caught up and imprinted on surfaces that can be extracted, studied, and analysed as historical evidence. While photographs have often been considered a complementary resource alongside written historical documents, Ginzburg usefully asserts that photographs should be

52 C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm", 98.

53 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of all, Four Photographs from Auschwitz,* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2-47.

54 C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm", 98.

55 *Ibid.*, 99.

56 *Ibid.,* 99.

treated in their own right and not fitted into pre-existing paradigms based on textual forms of analysis.[57] Following this lead, this thesis uses photographs of *mbopo* initiates from diverse sources in an attempt to uncover silences and to open up new understandings of the history of the *mbopo* institution.

Similarly, in his analysis of the various components and faculties within what he calls "the photographic complex," James Hevia states that photography "compressed time and space effectively and efficiently." In his opinion, photography has the capacity to create a concurrent momentary connection between the viewer and the printed image, and, at the same time, can bring a distant remote space (and time) to the visual gaze of the viewer.[58] This assertion is endorsed by Candace Keller. In studying photographic practices in modern Mali, she states that photography can be studied closely to explore the changing sociocultural topography of a people: photographs can preserve clues, narrate history, and negotiate the position of the "social griot."[59] As a "visual griot," the social role of a portrait photographer, and, by extension, the photograph, is to preserve and archive images that present the way in which people live in the past, and, at the same time, historicize everyday activities and changing phases of cultural settings in visual forms.[60]

Photographs carry certain signs and clues that are forms of rhetoric in which history unfolds. These clues are read as indexical signs inherent in photographs. They point to particular events that occurred in the past.[61] In other words, these indexical features lie in the image and the specific moment it catches within its frame. This alludes to the testimony of a "specific time space location" and the existence of the subject of the photograph within the frame. The photographs used in this study direct attention to specific features in the practice of *mbopo* among the Ibibio/Efik people at different times, thereby opening up new possibilities for historical analysis. In this regard, we might note Victor Burgin's assertion that photography should be theorized not only as a technical practice but, more importantly as a "practice

57 *Ibid*., 96-125.

58 J. Havia, "The Photographic Complex" in R. Morris, ed., *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 79-119.

59 C Keller, Visual Griots: *Social, Political, and Cultural Histories in Mali through the Photographer's Lens* (Indiana, IN: Indiana University, 2008), 363-395.

60 *Ibid.,* 363-395.

61 C. Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Press, 1997), 11-16.

of signification."[62] Photography's social and historical significance borders more on its contribution to the production and dissemination of meaning.[63] *Mbopo* photographs that were taken across the last century concretely and comprehensively hold the potency to preserve, generate, and disseminate connotations that form the basis for this historical research when studied in conjunction with other available historical materials.

Despite the obvious challenges encountered by historians in trying to connect fragmentary traces taken from photographs as evidence in relation to the whole, Elizabeth Edwards proposes that photographs offer an alternative framework "to think with." She too sees them as "empirical, evidential inscription for historiographical contemplation."[64] She conceives of the photograph as a dynamic "visual incision" that inaugurates and offers new potential for historical narrative.[65] She demonstrates how photographs have the ability to disrupt and unsettle dominant historical discourse. Photographs are recast as "raw histories" in their "unprocessed form" and in their unique truth-telling function.[66]

Photography thus represents the day-to-day imaging of the sociocultural, political, and personal lives of individual, familial, and cultural dealings in pictorial forms, depending on the collections within the photographic archive. A photograph memorializes events and moments, celebrative and non-celebrative events, trophy shots, real, posed or acted, etc., which, when engaged with as an evidentiary mode for historiographical analysis, opens up new perspectives about the cultural practices and historical antecedents of certain African communities. Photography thus becomes a "kind of writing," imaging and documenting events caught up within a specific time frame, and conjointly creating narratives with other forms of historical "sources." It is from this point of departure that I conceive of the photograph as having agency with regard to historical clues, a "kind of writing," and as "visual griot," communicating valuable historical messages to reconstruct the narratives of the cultural fluidity and changing characterization of the *mbopo* institution.

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62 V. Burgin, "introduction" in V. Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1984), 1-14.

63 *Ibid*., 1-14.

64 E. Edwards, *Raw Histories, Photographs, Anthropology, Museums* (London: Polity Press, 2001), 1-23.

65 H. Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-8.

66 *Ibid*., 1-23.

We also need to be attuned, however, to the archival and textual framings of photographs, the divergent ways in which even the very same images can be mobilized for different political or ideological purposes. In one illuminating case study, Andrew Bank explores how portrait photographs of South African chiefs taken by a German photographer-turned-anthropologist, Gustav Fritsch, between 1863 and 1866, shifted from the "honorific, ethnographic-cultural" mode to a "repressive, physical-anthropological" mode. This, he asserts, was due to Fritsch's later intellectual alliance with the Berlin anthropological community, whose objectives were the assertion through science of European (and particularly Prussian) racial superiority.[67] But even "repressive" images can be re-mobilized in alternative ways. Thus, Hayes and Bank reposition Fritsch's racially repressive photograph of Maqoma on the front cover of their post-apartheid edited collection on *Visual Histories in Southern Africa*. They question whether a Xhosa chief "shot" by Fritsch while in captivity on Robben Island might also again be reframed as "an icon of African military and political resistance."[68]

This reframing of images, they assert, should not inhibit scholars from the task of investigating and historicizing the complexities surrounding how photographs are appropriated.[69] This is because photographs and visual images can offer an entry point into understanding historical events and thus provide sets of evidence read within the context of the historian's subjective representation of the past. It is in this spirit that my own analysis of ethnographic images reproduced in the following chapters of this thesis seeks to reframe and re-imagine with emphasis on rereading visual details – the evidentiary potential of *mbopo* photographs in an Afro-centred re-narration of the history and practice of this ritual.

Although Dorothy Talbot's ethnographic photographs of the *mbopo* initiates in her 1915 monograph may not be bound between any "honorific and repressive" binary, or set within the contradictory context between the image of the subject and the constrained conditions in which they were produced, her images remain trapped within the context of Eurocentric anthropological representation. This study reproduces and recontextualizes these photographs, along with other images, "to think with as evidential inscriptions" and to reanalyze them "in a new moment of historiographical

67 A. Bank, "Anthropology and Portrait Photography: Gustav Frisch's 'Natives of South Africa', 1863-1872" in *Kronos: Journal of Cape History,* Special Issue: Visual History, No 27 (2001), 45.
68 P Hayes and A. Bank, "Introduction" in *Kronos: Journal of Cape History,* Special Issue: Visual History, No 27 (2001), 2, 4.
69 *Ibid*., 4.

engagement."[70] In this sense, I draw upon recent precedents in the dynamic new field of "visual anthropology."[71] In his essay "How the Yoruba See Themselves", Stephen Sprague opines that photography can be used to show the cultural expression, values, and the worldview of a particular cultural group. In studying the Yoruba photographic practice, he establishes how photography has come to function as "literary record, memory device, and an object symbolizing respect and status" as practiced within Yoruba cultural settings.[72] The "traditional pose" adopted by the *Oba,* the king, other traditional elders, and young women in photographs depict status and hierarchy, according to Yoruba cultural values. The beaded objects and crown within the photographic frame opened up space for analysis, expressing the "dignified stateliness" of kings and traditional elders.[73] Likewise, objects that are used by *mbopo* initiates are aesthetically symbolic in Ibibio/Efik culture. Photographs of initiates open up alternative historical analysis and nuance, and unsettle colonial historiography.

Again, in trying to analyse the historical changes that have attended the *mbopo* institution, this study heeds Edwards' calls for historians to engage in analysis of photographs "beyond the surface level evidence of appearance," so as to unravel those historical clues and traces.[74] Furthermore, Georges Didi-Huberman has also called on historians to engage with any available photographs to help redeem the past, which is misrepresented or shrouded in silence. In his thoughtful essay, "Images in Spite of All, Four Photographs from Auschwitz"[75], he engaged with and meditated on four photographs "snatched from Auschwitz" as evidentiary clues and models to untangle intentionally perpetrated bureaucratic silences of a heinous and brutal state system. Provoked by the unthinkable evils perpetrated in Auschwitz, and with the aid of the four photographs, he evocatively re-narrates the histories of Auschwitz sufferers in an attempt to uncover silences that were deliberately orchestrated by the genocidal cruelty of the Nazi SS.[76] He calls on historians to reimagine within the frame of photographs and demonstrates

70 *Ibid*., 5.

71 This field opened up from around 1990 with the establishment of the US Journal bearing this title, allied very closely with the emergence of "Visual History" in African studies during the 1990s and 2000s.

72 S. Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See themselves" in C. Pinney and N. Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 240-259.

73 *Ibid*., 240-259.

74 E. Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 1-23.

75 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 2-47.

76 *Ibid*., 2-47.

how images can be read in productive historical ways. He submits that historians should take a closer look at images, generate clues, and read them in context. The visual historian should therefore bring the entire visual image into consideration without omitting any part of the composition.[77] This study attends to the content of the photographs in relation to other visual media. Such "close-up" engagements with visuals generate clues and connotations in order to problematize the lopsided "fattening room" appellation, and to reposition the history of *mbopo* as a complex and changing ritual.

Photographs of *mbopo* initiates represent the dynamic cultural practices inherent in the ritual. Looking at the entire visual composition it is necessary to include: the aesthetics; the body of the subjects; the surrounding space; and the decorative objects of *mbopo* initiates. The significations they exude challenge the existing misconception of the institution as merely a "fattening room", where initiates are fed to satisfy the patriarchal wants of the Ibibio/Efik man. They show the ritualistic decorative materials that connote the spiritual as well as inductive and educative undertones of the rite. Photographs thus offer a counter-narrative to reposition the parochial narrative of the *mbopo* institution prevalent in some of the literature. [78]

Thinking along with Imo Imeh and Udeme Nsentip about the concept of the beauty/character connection of the *mbopo* institution,[79] colonial photographs, personal photographs of *mbopo* initiates, and narratives within documentary films are analysed to establish the *mbopo* ritual as a seclusion rite of passage that incorporates corporeal beautification as well as spiritual and moral prettification of the Ibibio/Efik nubile woman. The institution is conceptualized as an "educational boudoir" where *mbopo* initiates learn the secrets of womanhood, body beautifications, details about sex, motherhood, childbearing, local songs, dances, artistic practices like wall painting, pyrography on cloths (and on other domestic and ceremonial objects), the moral etiquette of the Ibibio/Efik family, etc. The rite is "consummated" with the outward display and public outing of the *uyai mbopo* (beautiful bride) as "an icon of beauty and power."[80] Photographs are used as analytical tools to detail the changing frame of *mbopo* practice in contemporary times by comparing *mbopo* photographs across time and by analyzing the changes they represent.

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77 *Ibid,* 2-47.

78 D. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People,* 1-15.

79 N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution: Exploration of Forms and Motifs for Decorative Ceramics," (University of Nigeria, Nsukka Research Publication, 2006), 1-8.

80 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 3.

While reproducing these photos in this mini-thesis, due consideration is taken to the sensitivities that may arise around visuals of women. Patricia Hayes has called for greater precision on the visibilities and textualities of photographs by people who work with visuals of women, in order not to replicate or reproduce the "sensitivities and power-laden issues around gender."[81] She thus proposes that an "ethics of articulation" be applied, where greater care is taken in reproducing gender-related materials during research and publication to avoid making them "spectacles of shame."[82] In her exegesis and comprehensive theoretical exposé on the *tondue* photographs in postwar France, Allison Moore argues that the use of feminine visual materials in books should not be seen merely as replications of "feminine sexual betrayal," rather they should be examined explicitly as texts and sites for "critical analysis of the politics of memory"[83] that offer a more immediate and affective elucidation in gender history than text.[84] Working with visuals of female seclusion, this study pays close attention to the above assertion. While guided by the "ethics of articulation", I utilize photos of *mbopo* initiates as analytical tools for deepening our understanding of the history of the ritual.

The concept of visual "clues" can also be applied to film. In this study, I engage with the several episodes of the *Fattening Room* TV show by Ebonylife TV, Nigeria, a live show broadcast in 2013 and aired live on television networks across Africa. The documentary films titled *Uncut: Playing with Life*, *Monday's Girl*, and *Fat Houses* are also analyzed. These films dwell on female initiation ceremonies of indigenous communities in southern Nigeria, and they try to expose the social stigma and health problems associated with female circumcision. They propose a total rejection and jettisoning of any form of cultural practice that mutilates and shames girls in African cultural settings.

The "visual griot" analysis of the photographer put forward by Candace Keller was earlier postulated to be the function of an African filmmaker by Ousmane Sembene. In 1978, in an interview with Francoise Pfaff, Ousmane Sembene, a popular and highly celebrated African filmmaker and novelist, evocatively asserts:

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81 P. Hayes, "Introduction: Visual Gender" in P. Hayes, ed., *Visual Gender, Visual Histories* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 4.

82 *Ibid*., 4.

83 A. Moore, "Memory and Trauma in Photography of the *Tondues:* Visuality of the Vichy Past through the Silent Image of Women" in P. Hayes, ed., *Visual Gender, Visual Histories*, 140.

84 P. Hayes, "Introduction: Visual Gender", 5.

> The African filmmaker is like the griot who is similar to the European medieval minstrel: a man of learning and commonsense who is the historian, the raconteur, the living memory and the conscience of his people. The filmmaker knows the magic of words, sounds, and colors and they use these elements to illustrate – the past- and what others think and feel.[85]

In a collection of essays published in 1995, Robert Rosenstone foregrounds "how a visual medium, subject to the conventions of drama and fiction, might be used as a serious vehicle to think about our relationship with the past."[86] For Rosenstone, a film can be considered historical, when it "engages directly or implicitly, the issues and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history." He asserts that, just like history books, film is entangled with subjective underpinnings, yet needs to align with historical arguments that are already known.[87] He asserts that, since images can transmit ideas and information that words cannot handle, many filmmakers by "giving voice to the voiceless […] have created a filmic equivalent of a New Social History." Such films treat the past more as a site of social meaning than of adventure.[88]

Robert Toplin carries the argument further. In *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (2002), he claims that, even though films may be inferior to books "as a source of detailed information and abstract analysis," historians should develop a more open-minded view of cinema. He opines that, although filmmakers tend to leave out many details in order to make their film short and understandable, films "can communicate important ideas about the past." The two-hour movie "can arouse emotions, stir curiosity, and prompt viewers to consider significant questions."[89]

Chapter outline

To conclude, I will give a brief summary of the central arguments in the chapters that follow. Chapter One: The "Seclusion Room": Visualizing the *Mbopo* Ritual beyond the Body, begins by analyzing the cultural practices other than fatness

85 F. Pfaff, "The Uniqueness of Ousmane Sambene's Cinema, *Contribution to Black Studies* (1999), Vol. 11, No.3, 14.

86 R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of the Past,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

87 *Ibid.,* 72.

88 *Ibid.,* 8-9.

89 R. Topline, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood,* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2002), 1.

that were associated with *mbopo.* It shows that "the fattening process" of the initiate did not depend only on sumptuous feeding. Vigorous massaging and skin treatment with herbs and oils, and the use of locally made bamboo beds were believed to facilitate fattening within the stipulated seclusion period. The chapter looks into history to reveal how other pre-seclusion practices, like affirming the virtuousness of the initiate and consecrating the initiate through rituals of sacrifice, were important components of the ritual process. These include spiritual ritual, induction, craft training, beautification, and training in womanhood and health practices. I conclude with my analysis of the debate about female circumcision, contrasting indigenous concepts concerning control over female virginity with recent notions of "genital mutilation."

Chapter Two: *Mbopo* Ritual: Social Change and Cultural Continuity, 1914-2014, examines how *mbopo* practices have changed over time. *Mbopo* has transformed from a necessary religious/spiritual engagement, which was the core motivation in the earliest historical record, into a practice more concerned with aesthetics and a means of demonstrating the wealth and social status of a family or a clan. It follows the shifting trend of the institution as an important ritual to a practice, after the Nigerian civil war, that was grounded in aesthetics and shows of wealth. These changes are seemingly influenced by Christian values, the sociopolitical situation in Nigeria, and the emerging feminist debate of the 1980s, which sees female circumcision as an act of injustice against women and an abuse against the body and the rights of the girl child. The chapter concludes by analyzing the film, *Uncut: Playing with Life*, a documentary that was part of a campaign for the abolition of Female Genital Mutilation and which has deeply influenced the view of the *mbopo* practice in recent times.

Chapter Three: "The Re-Invention of Tradition:" EbonyLife TV Show and other Recent Recreations of *Mbopo*, 2008-2014, shows that while the general perception of Ibibio/Efik people about the practice of *mbopo* ritual has changed over the years, *mbopo* has been firmly appropriated, reimagined, and supposedly reinvented within the realms of the media, arts, and culture. This highly public image is evoked through TV shows, dance troupes, music, and visual and graphic art exhibitions. I provide close analysis of *The Fattening Room* reality TV show of 2013. Engaging with 22 episodes and with screenshot images from the TV series, the chapter establishes the idea that the "reality show" was an attempt to create an illusion of how the *mbopo* seclusion ritual was practiced in the past. It argues that the reality show was a mixture of some strands of cultural practice within the larger

context of activities that were influenced by contemporary hyper-modernity. The chapter ends by analyzing other activities like cultural dance troupes, music, and graphic and visual arts, etc. as other forms of expressions of this "reinvention of tradition."

1 "The Seclusion Room": Visualizing the *Mbopo* Ritual beyond the Body

Contemporary scholars and students of art history, whose work I find energizing and useful and have drawn on extensively in this study, have attempted an aesthetic analysis of *mbopo* by looking at other components of the ritual than "fattening". Based on their object/image analysis, an art history approach, they use photographs and other art images as a basis for their argument. They concentrate more on analyszing the representations of objects and images connected to *mbopo* as cultural motifs, and the depiction of the initiate as "an icon of beauty and power."[90] While they offer a very persuasive analysis of the *mbopo* institution as it resonates with the Ibibio/Efik philosophy of beauty, they still frame the ritual in aesthetic terms, which, arguably, reinforces emphasis on the corporeal. While corporeal attention for the *mbopo* initiate during seclusion (which includes corpulence, ornamental decoration, cicatrization, tattooing, tooth filing, the use of local herbs, oils, dyes and chalks on the skin, as well as the performance of extravagant femininity through the plaiting of decorative and elaborate hair styles)[91] was an important part of the seclusion rite, this does not represent the whole.

This chapter analyses visual images to establish the different kinds of extra-corporeal activities that occurred in the seclusion space, while also trying to show the changes over time within the practice of *mbopo* ritual. The chapter provides a glimpse into the seclusion space by analysing photographs, documentary films, historical texts, ethnographic data, and reported information from former initiates as contained in a number of the written sources I use for this study. This is to "look into" and visualize the seclusion space "from the outside." This is in order to be able to analyse *mbopo* ritual as an educational space, where the expected bride was temporarily removed from familiar persons and activities and secluded for the purpose of cultural education. This approach will help to clearly decipher those activities that took place within the seclusion space, and to define the *mbopo* institution more as a learning and transitional space than as a site of bodily transformation.

90 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, xix.

91 *Ibid.*, 3. See also P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria," 132.

I provide close visual analysis of photographs from the historical texts of anthropologists and more recent works in ethnography and art history. I have also sourced select photographs and documentary films from the internet in an attempt to create "a visual archive" that resonates with this chapter's objectives and this study in general. These photographs are reproduced and repositioned, and the videos analyzed here in ways that afford space for my reconstruction of a narrative of the changing context of *mbopo* practices from around 1900 to today. A close scrutiny of these images, in relation to other photos of *mbopo* rituals, will allow us to unpack some of the layers of engagements and activities that took place within the *mbopo* institution beyond the body and beyond fatness.

J. A. Green "Akenta Bob," Bonny, 1898

I begin the analysis of the dynamism of the cultural frame of *mbopo* institution in history with a sophisticated and studio-like portrait of a Kalabari bride taken by Jonathan A. Green in 1898.[92] According to Marta Anderson and Lisa Aronson, Jonathan Green was among the few Africans who took up photography as a profession in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Nigeria. In a remarkable body of work, he produced hundreds of photographs "depicting everything from imperial events to local scenes, as well as portraits of both African and European men and women."[93] Over 300 of Green's photographs are held in different museums and archives all over Europe and in the Americas.[94]

Green worked along the coasts and harbour towns of Bonny in Southern Nigeria[95] and was reputed to have taken the photograph of the popular 19th century Benin Monarch, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, who was exiled to Calabar and imprisoned by the British Colonial Government in 1897.[96]

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92 M. Anderson and L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer Hiding in Plain Sight", *African Arts*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2011), 38.

93 *Ibid*., 38.

94 *Ibid.*, 38.

95 Nigerian First Indigenous Photographer, Jonathan Adagogo Green hits Limelight, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/entertainment/artsbooks/258794-nigerias-first-indigenous-photographer-jonathan-green-hits-limelight.html, accessed on 5 September 2018.

96 Online Collections, British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1412729&partId=1&images=true, accessed on 5 September 2018.

Photo 1.1
J. A. Green "Akenta Bob in wedding dress, c.1898," Source: Anderson and Aronson[97]

The photograph on the left of Akenta Bob (Photo 1.1), a young Kalabari woman, was supposedly taken during her marriage ceremony. Though Anderson and Aronson make no mention of "Akenta Bob", it may be that she was the daughter of one of the rich Kalabari merchant chiefs who had established themselves as active middlemen and fostered business relations and contacts with European merchants in the 19th century.[98] Members of this elite frequently patronized Green's photographic studio. According to Anderson and Aronson, most of Green's photographs that feature African women were targeted at recording female initiations and rituals.[99] Anderson and Aronson use this photograph, together with fourteen others, to analyse Green's enormous contribution to African portraiture, a genre of colonial photography in Africa. They further suggest that this photograph may have been taken by Green after "Akenta Bob" had completed all the stages of her seclusion ritual.[100]

Though the image is not specifically a portrait of an Ibibio/Efik bride, the spatial and cultural proximity between the Kalabari people, a neighbouring riverine community in the Niger Delta, and the Ibibio/Efik community of the Calabar River set along the same Niger Delta terrain, suggests close cultural similarities and affinities. I choose to draw from this photograph as a related semiotic image of an early Ibibio bride based on how the aesthetics, the composition of the supposed bride, and the decorative materials she is adorned with resonate with my knowledge of the ritual. The image brings into view several aspects of the history of seclusion rites in southern Nigeria.

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97 This photograph is published in M. Anderson and L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer Hiding in Plain Sight" and is said to be held at Unilever Art Archives in Port Sunlight, UK. They assert that the photo eventually appeared as a postcard circulated during colonial times.

98 M. Anderson and L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer", 39, 43. For a detailed historical analysis of the creative effects of the European transatlantic trade with the states of the Niger Delta see, E. Alagoa, "Long-Distant Trade and States in the Niger Delta", *Journal of African History*, Vol. 11, No 3 (1970), 319-329.

99 M. Anderson and L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer", 43.

100 *Ibid.*, 43.

It portrays how the Kalabari people, and by extension the Ibibio/Efik people, celebrated marriage. It bears witness to the level of confidence that such celebrations imbued new brides with. It resonates with how, historically, people of the Cross River Basin valued and revelled in nuptial seclusion – *mbopo* – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

At this time, marriage celebrations among the Ibibio/Efik people took place in public with an open bridal parade. Such celebrations were a social precinct reserved for girls who had gone through seclusion and who were deemed qualified by virtue of keeping their virginity intact before marriage.[101] It was important for girls to pass through the *mbopo* rite of passage before they were married publicly to their suitors. Initiates were "closed in", i.e. secluded and attended to within a defined space with the aim of gaining spiritual, corporeal, vocational, sexual, and social development.

Unlike several other women's rituals of passage in some parts of Africa, where women or girls were secluded separately in a space detached from the family dwelling place, *ufok mbopo*, the ritual space for seclusion, was generally a room in the family home or a separate hut within the family compound, which was converted temporarily for the purpose of the seclusion ritual. The room was normally sealed off and cordoned from unwarranted persons. Strangers and the men in the family, including the father, were barred from accessing this space.[102] In the process of seclusion, arduous close observation, attention, and training were implemented by cultural matrons, former initiates themselves, who were elderly women with close family ties or who had been contracted for this purpose.[103] At the end of the rite, the initiate was expected to metamorphose from an uninformed and inexperienced young woman into an attractive and well-schooled Ibibio/Efik bride ready to access womanhood.

The subject of this photo (Photo 1.1) represents the kind of Ibibio/Efik bride who may have celebrated a public marriage after the seclusion rite. She seems to have been bountifully pampered and made ready for her nuptial engagement. The "Kalabari bride" looks confident and calm, exuding the mien of an accomplished young woman. The face is young and robust. She possesses the figure of one who may have just been inducted through the seclusion rite. Her decorative and ornamental adornments and her corporeal

101 J. Messenger and B. Messenger "Sexuality in Folklore", 34.
102 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 34, 61.
103 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 15-16.

composition do not simply denote normal beautification, but announce her engagement as the after event of an important celebration of a female rite of passage: in this case, a marriage that comes after the seclusion rite.

Anderson and Aronson propose that the photograph might have been taken by Green after the initiate had completed all the stages of her seclusion ritual. But they also suggest that the image may be a staged reenactment of a female pre-nuptial ritual by Green for a family album.[104] The woman does not appear plump around the abdomen, which may have provoked Anderson and Aronson's claim that the photographs could have been staged at a later time, after the seclusion rite. However, having studied Talbot's field notes of 1915, Brink asserts that there were cases of *mbopo* initiates who "show no sign of obesity" or fatness.[105] The composition in the photograph seems to resonate with outcomes of *mbopo* initiation, post-seclusion. She is plump in her cheeks, with a glowing skin, and elaborately beaded from the head down to her ankles.[106] She has a lavishly decorated coiffure and a wound wrapper, which were consonant with *mbopo* garb post-seclusion and that are today reimagined and represented through the *abang* cultural dance troupe.[107] Her posture radiates the disposition of a well-tutored young woman who might have gone through a kind of *mbopo* seclusion successfully. Her portrait speaks to the wealth of her family or her suitor, the expertise of her cultural matrons and the vicissitudes of her development during the rite of passage to become a capable Ibibio/Efik bride.

This photograph was taken in 1898, about two decades before Dorothy Talbot's 44 ethnographic photographs reproduced in *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*. When read in relation to Talbot's photographs, they reveal the dynamism that was intrinsic within the Ibibio/Efik cultural economy and the Cross River Basin cultures in general. Both Talbot's photographs of "fattening house women" and Green's photograph of the Kalabari bride represent post-seclusion photographs, and point to the elaborateness of the activities within the seclusion space before the outing ceremony and the marriage public debut. Talbot in her book uses 44 different photographs to illustrate the so-called esoteric cultures of the Ibibio women.

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104 M. Anderson and L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer", 43, 46.

105 P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang", 132.

106 A detailed analysis of the significance of beads and other decorative materials used in the *mbopo* seclusion rite is given in Chapter Two.

107 The *abang* dance troupe garbs themselves with the kind of bogus wound wrapper seen in this photo and represent one of the ways the Ibibio/Efik reminisce about the beauties of the *mbopo* institution. This contemporary reminiscence is analysed in Chapter Three of this study.

Photo 1.2
"Fattening House Women". Photo D. A. Talbot (1915)

Photo 1.3
"Fattening House Women". Photo D. A. Talbot (1915)

Among Talbot's 44 photographs, which I find very important and stimulating for this research, only two represent the "fattening room women" directly. Other photographs by Talbot, some of which are also reproduced here, have auxiliary illustrative connotations, which relate to the cultures of Ibibio women in general. The two "fattening house women" photos (Photos 1.2 and 1.3 above) seem to have been taken at the same site but from different focal angles. Through a close reading of the photographs, we can locate them as photographs that were taken of the same site and on the same occasion using both frontal and side portrait techniques. Bank argues that frontal portraits and side portraits were part of the language of ethnographic and anthropological photography of the time, and featured in numerous anthropological studies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[108]

A close reading reveals similarities in the two photos. The box and the armchair feature in both photos; and a part of a person wearing a wrapper on the waist and standing on the right angle of Photo 1.3 can also be seen in Photo 1.2 at the far-left side with his/her arms on the waist. Talbot uses the

108 A. Bank, "Anthropology and Portrait Photography," 43-45.

photo in Photo 1.2 as a frontispiece to transport her anticipated readers to what should be expected in the pages that follow. The initiates appear half naked and, viewed from the side, they embody the signs of seclusion. Their oily skins and plump bodies resonate with the "fattening room" appellation. This photograph presents the viewer with a mix of dressed and undressed people, a sign of cultural hybridization. Thus, the photograph, rather than speaking specifically to the so-called fattening room ritual, visually amplifies the whole context of the eccentricity and primitivism of the Ibibio cultural economy compared to that of European civility. The image also relates to the femininity of Talbot's research objective, "from the woman's point of view," where she claims that the particularity of her research focus could only be addressed by a woman researcher at that time.[109]

The second photograph (Photo 1.3) used in Chapter Six of her book to illustrate the secret practices of "fattening house women," lacks any aesthetic appeal. The initiates confront the camera with an apathetic look, and are adorned with very few decorated ornaments. There is no specific analysis that accompanies the photos in her text except for the caption "Fattening house women." In a more general analysis, Talbot's photographs are used in her book to illustrate, and to reiterate to readers what "fattening house women" looked like in the early decades of the 20th century.

The frontal view of this photograph (Photo 1.3) engages our view. It draws attention to the rounded stomachs and rotund breasts of the initiates that foreground their experience of being fattened-up in their seclusion space. The armchair and the box symbolize the moment of honour when the initiates would take a sitting position at the centre of the market square. This position represents prestige and honour for the initiates. Hierarchy was highly valued in the patriarchal and endogamous Ibibio/Efik society of 1915.[110] The box could be an improvised seat provided for the younger initiates, to depict the seniority of the elder initiate who might sit on the armchair in a more

109 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 2.

110 Contemporary Ibibio/Efik society is more of exogamous than endogamous and cultural frontiers and clan affiliation no longer determine marriage engagements. Just like their neighbouring Igbos, who were immediately susceptible to change when they first encountered the Europeans in the last decade of the 19th century, the Ibibio/Efik have gradually changed in their cultural worldview, deeply influenced by Christianity and the emerging modern sociocultural parameters. Messenger et al. suggest that, by 1919, the Ibibio/Efik people were still endogamous, but by the 1950s the community had become almost exclusively exogamous. J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore", 35. See also S. Ottenberg, "Ibo Receptive to Change" in W. Bascom and M. Herskovits, eds., *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 130-143.

exalted position. The fattened girl on right side in the photograph is bigger and taller, and appears to be the elder sister or relative of the other. Their facial resemblance suggests they are sisters or relatives, perhaps from the same polygamous family. During the early 20th century, and through to the 1980s, it was customary to find two or more sisters or relatives being secluded simultaneously, perhaps for the purpose of managing resources and organizing time.[111] This can be deduced because we have photographs of *mbopo* initiates appearing in twos, and a few of them have been reproduced in this study.

The photographs reveal certain commonalities that were inherent in Ibibio/Efik cultural practices. When put into context with other photographs of *mbopo* initiates from different periods and different parts of the Ibibio/Efik communities, they generate visual clues to understand the activities that went on in the seclusion room. At the same time, they historicize "the ever-changing dynamic sociocultural climates"[112] that materialized within the *mbopo* practices and between the urban and village settings in the Ibibio/Efik nation across the century. While the urban photograph in Photo 1.1 indicates the use of elaborate beads and hair decoration to honour and beautify the subject, the "fattening house women" in Photos 1.2 and 1.3 use metallic leg bands, waist beads, and polyester cloths that serve as flywhisks to make bodily beautification and to represent status.[113] The sparseness of ornamentation of the "fattening house women" in Photos 1.2 and 1.3 might indicate their relatively modest economic situation. At the same time, it points to the high value and worth that was attached to *mbopo* seclusion rite up till the first few decades of the 20th century as a female rite that should be upheld irrespective of one's economic circumstances.

From the above photographs, it is evident that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, some communities in the Cross River Basin preferred an elaborate loin cloth around the waist for initiates during the outing ceremony, or during marriage, as in the case of the Kalabari bride. Other communities, particularly in the Ibibio/Efik hinterland far from the harbour towns, preferred only beads with very little cover at the front during their coming out. At that time, girls in some Ibibio/Efik communities wore beads around the waist

111 Jill Salmons, "Foreword", in I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion: The Revelation of the "Fattened Bride" as the Icon of Beauty and Power*, xv.

112 C. Keller, "Visual Griots," 369.

113 In his book, *Daughters of Seclusion*, Imeh suggests that the flywhisk held by the *mbopo* initiate is an emblem of power and status that the initiate garners during their outing debut, at least at the moment of their celebration. See also I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 218.

and ankles before puberty, and were called *nkaiferi*: uncovered girls.[114] The miserly use of cloth on the *mbopo* initiate was intended to foreground her virginity and to present to the viewers the richness of her bodily fineness and corpulence after seclusion. According to Imeh, her body was seen as the site of inspection, rumination, and the performance of beauty.[115]

Again the rudimentary studio setting with white backcloth in the first photo above (Photo 1.1), which was supposedly taken after a marriage ceremony, cuts out the natural landscape and, seemingly, allows the subject to readily prepare and set herself up, to create and preserve the particular identity that she wanted to portray in the photograph.[116] She is extravagantly decorated with beads from her head to her neck, breasts, waist, and on her ankles. Her lavishly worn beads and layered skirt or wrapper depict an initiate who exhibits some elements of wealth and ostentation that she gets either from her father or her suitor. This kind of cultural garb points to how the Kalabari and the Ibibio/Efik brides, and other Cross River communities who practiced women's pre-nuptial seclusion rites, adorned themselves for the post-seclusion outing ceremony and during marriage, particularly in the emerging urban areas of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Judging from the facial dispositions of the "fattening house women" in Photo 1.3, there is the possibility that the subjects of Talbot's photographs were still experiencing pain from the circumcision. Jeffreys asserts that, up to the 1930s, certain Ibibio/Efik communities still practiced mid-seclusion circumcision, where initiates were circumcised towards the end of the seclusion and prior to the outing ceremony.[117] The photographs point to the difference between how life was conducted in the emerging Ibibio/Efik urban areas, particularly around the harbour towns, colonial headquarters, and administrative posts, and the interior hinterlands in Ibibioland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The "Akenta Bob" photo was taken at Bonny, in an urban township setting, where the photographer J. A. Green had his business.[118] It showcases a growing consciousness of aesthetic appeal and displays of wealth that were possible among urban dwellers. By contrast, Talbot's study was probably focused on the interior hinterlands, where the background shows luxuriant

114 J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore," 36. See Photo 2.2 in Chapter Two below.

115 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 107.

116 C. Keller, "Visual Griots," 368.

117 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women," 20.

118 M. Anderson and L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer," 39.

vegetation, but the women are stripped of lavish adornments, possibly on account of their relative poverty.

A spiritual initiation: Water goddesses and ancestors in *mbopo* ritual (1915)

What, then, were the basic features or preceding practices that occurred in a specific mbopo bedchamber under the tutelage of cultural matrons, in particular in the first half of the 20th century? Firstly, the *mbopo* ritual, the pre-nuptial seclusion of a marriageable young woman, began with the assessment of whether the girl had reached puberty. There was no fixed age in this regard in Ibibio/Efik social settings. While some communities loosely pegged puberty at between 15 and 18 years,[119] others stipulated some uncertainties and fluidity regarding age. This was dependent upon the peculiarity and distinctiveness of the community involved. But there was a general consensus. In the early period, for example in the 19th and early 20th centuries, certain corporeal criteria were used to ascertain whether a girl had reached puberty and if she was ready for marriage. In 1915, when official birth records were hard to come by, Talbot asserts that "the coming of the new and full breast," referred to as mbobi,[120] was one of the major considerations for a girl's pre-nuptial seclusion rite. This was expected to happen anywhere from the second quarter of the teenage years through to her early twenties. In Photos 1.1 and 1.3 above, the initiates look like late teenagers, in keeping with Talbot's description.

Two dynamic factors played out before actual seclusion took place. In some instances, the girls were secluded when a prospective suitor (or suitors) had indicated interest in marrying them. But girls could also be secluded before an expected suitor indicated interest. Talbot asserts that in cases where the seclusion rite occurred before there was a registered interest by a suitor, certain signs were displayed in public places to signify that seclusion rites were ongoing. For example, fish racks, palm leaves, or a miniature bamboo bed were tied in the market square or at the crossroads as a sign to woo prospective suitors.[121] This system may have changed by the 1970s and the 1980s.

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119 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music", 49.

120 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People,* 76.

121 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People, 82*. Though no mention is made of suitors' intent in Jeffreys' 1930s and Messenger's 1950s research, it seems that Talbot's assertions were held onto and practiced till around the 1980s, when the mbopo ritual took a

Talbot expressly identifies different rituals that preceded the actual admission of the initiate into the seclusion space. For some communities living around coastal regions, sacred streams or rivers were revered. Such pools and streams were said to be inhabited by naiads (water goddesses) who were believed to be responsible for the general well-being of the communities.[122] Talbot asserts that before a young girl underwent the seclusion rite for the first time, they were led down to the edge of the stream where prayers were offered to the naiad for their protection. Photo 1.4, captioned "a typical sacred pool," illustrates her emphasis on *mbopo* spiritual engagements with naiads before seclusion.[123]

Photo 1.4

A maiden immersed in prayers by the pool. Photo: Photo D.A. Talbot (1915)

Photo 1.5

Tree shrine for Sacrifice before seclusion: Photo: D.A. Talbot (1915)

dynamic cultural turn and one could only be secluded when there was a prospective suitor. See also J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music", 49-50.

122 A. Essien, "The Sociological Implication of the Worldview of the Annang People: An Advocacy for Paradigm Shift", *Journal for Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies,* (JETERAPS), Vol. 1, No. 11, 31.

123 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76.

Secondly, Talbot also asserts that, for some communities, prior to seclusion, sacrifices were conducted at the centre of the village, where ancient trees were set aside and revered as the site and shrine inhabited by their divinities, ancestors, and other spiritual guardians (see Photo 1.5 above). Here, sacrifice and prayers were made to divinities, asking for help and guidance for the initiate. These streams and trees were believed to possess cleansing, invigorating, and fertilizing powers of benefit to the initiate, the expected new family she represents, and the community at large.[124] Photo 1.5, which Talbot captioned "Juju tree of the compound shown in the background," is used to illustrate the second ritual possibility that existed among Ibibio/Efik communities, namely, their attempts to appease and consecrate initiates before seclusion. However, the thatched building behind the tree does not look like a living compound; rather, it resembles a community hall of some kind, which was always situated around such a revered site. This is even the case today in some Ibibio/Efik communities.

A closer look at these photographs (Photos 1.4 and 1.5) points to the enduring importance that the Ibibio/Efik communities attached to indigenous spirituality around 1915. The sacredness of the pool and the tree indicates the animistic characteristics of indigenous religion. In Photo 1.4, the initiate is associated with a deep serenity symbolized by the still water and the canopy of thick vegetation surrounding the pool. The reflection of the initiate's shadow on the water surface resonates with the claim that those naiads and the souls of the ancestors who inhabited those pools were all-seeing and all-knowing. The sites of such revered pools were carefully chosen and managed, so that they continuously evoked the aura of the enduring presence of these deified beings.[125] Talbot further asserts that the success of the seclusion was tied to the claim that the ritual was overseen and sanctioned by deities.[126]

The ancestors, who were perceived as spiritual custodians and a source of succour for families, were also invoked and revered during every important family function (including *mbopo*) to garner their protection.[127] In the early decades of the 20th century, and even in recent times, the Ibibio/Efiks and their adjoining communities have maintained a "strong belief in the ancestors (the living-dead)," whom they believe are still alive in some invisible form in *obio ekpo*, the land of the spirits. Ivan Ekong asserts that the Ibibio/Efik believe that the ancestors are still accessible even though they are dead:

124 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 80.
125 A. Essien, "The Sociological Implication of the Worldview of the Annang People," 32.
126 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76.
127 A. Essien, "The Sociological Implication of the Worldview of the Annang People," 31.

"hence the popular Ibibio proverb *Ekpo akpa enyin Ikpaha utong* (It is the dead man's eyes that die, not his ears)."[128] In recent times, the practice of making prayers and offering libations (using a local gin called *ufofop* or *mmin Efik*), in honour of the dead continues. This is carried out among some Ibibio/Efik communities during certain family functions.[129]

In some communities, particularly among the Annang, this spiritual process was repeated *after* the completion of the seclusion process, and just before the celebration of the final parade of the *mbopo* initiate. In 2017, Godwin Obot, who interviewed his grandmother, a former *mbopo* initiate, asserted that a certain sacred day (*usen ibed*) and some significant ritual materials, like the white hen and *nsei* (a local ritual chalk), were used to consecrate and purify the initiate, as well as to thank the deities and the ancestors for guiding, refreshing, and beautifying the initiate throughout the process of the seclusion rite.[130]

Thus, from the early 20th century, the *mbopo* ritual had become one of the means of spiritualizing the initiates, introducing and connecting them to the spiritual worldview of the Ibibio/Efik. This is connected to Ibibio/Efik religious beliefs that have endured. Before the coming of the Europeans and the introduction of Christianity, Ibibio/Efiks communities attributed almost every life event, good or bad, to the workings of ancestors, spirits, and unseen forces.[131] In the seclusion process, the initiate was taught to revere her ancestors, the divinities that they worship in their communities, and *Eka Abasi* (the Mother God), who they believed was the final authority and the creator of the universe.[132]

Inside the seclusion chamber

After the sacrifice and the introduction of the initiate into seclusion, the activities that took place during seclusion need to be explained in detail. The popular perception of *mbopo* seclusion is about fattening, as mirrored in the

128 I. Ekong, "The Ibibio Concept of Peace and Its Implications for Preaching: A Practical Theological Study within the Akwa Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria" (PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2014), 76.

129 *Ibid*., 76.

130 G. Obot, "The Concept of Mbopo in Annang Land", http://www.ibomtourism.org/2017/04/the-concept-of-mbopo-in-annang-land.html, accessed on 8 June 2018.

131 A. Essien, "The Sociological Implication of the Worldview of the Annang People," 36.

132 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People,* 76.

"fattening house women" image (Photo 1.3). The fattening-up process was just one of the activities the initiate went through during her seclusion. It is necessary to bear in mind that the fattening process was not predominantly centred on weight gain as a mark of beauty. Historically, other social factors motivated fattening. Talbot asserts that, in 1915, *mbopo* was thought necessary for the overall well-being of the initiate.[133] This idea prevailed until the 1950s. John and Betty Messenger's ethnographic studies of the Annang during the 1950s affirm that fatness was seen as a means to promote health, longevity, and successful childbearing.[134] The perception of corpulence as a mark of good health was still evident among the Ibibio/Efik up to the 1980s. Pamela Brink's research conducted during this decade reported that, for the Annang (and other Ibibio/Efik groups), fattening was necessary because it created broader hips and a larger birth canal so babies could be delivered more easily.[135] In a society where laborious farming activities were the bedrock of the subsistence economy, and where women were active in farming, fattening was conceived as a way of protecting the would-be bride. It was a kind of pre-marital "bridal holiday" for the expected bride, seen as a reward for upholding virtuous sexual chastity.[136]

Having said the above, it is necessary to find out how exactly the initiates were made to gain weight. The common assumption in most literature is that the initiates were force-fed in order to become rotund. While feeding played an important role in the fattening-up process, other activities speeded up fattening. In the seclusion space, initiates were made to lie on a wooden bed made with rounded bamboo or raffia branches without any bed covering. It was believed that the direct contact of the flesh and skin with the hard bamboo bed massaged the flesh of the initiate, thereby opening up the flesh for freshness and fatness. This practice has endured from the early decades of the 20th century. Talbot asserts that miniature bamboo beds and fish racks were hung publicly to signify an ongoing seclusion rite in 1915.[137] The bed signpost points to the use of a bamboo bed in the past. The matron and her attendants also massaged the initiates daily with a local chalklike substance called *ndom.* Local oils and herbs were also used for massaging, to accentuate fatness in certain parts of the body. Fatness around the hips, the pelvis, the

133 *Ibid*., 76.
134 J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore", 36.
135 P. Brink, "Fertility and Fat," 77.
136 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 3.
137 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 82. See also Brink, "Fattening Room among the Annang", 132.

backside, and the chest, were the main targets, while overall corpulence was considered a sign of a successful seclusion.[138]

Photo 1.6 and 1.7
Young *mbopo* initiate being massaged with white chalk and herbs Source: Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*

The above photographs (Photos 1.6 and 1.7) are taken from Imeh's *Daughters of Seclusion*. The images are screenshot photographs of a filmic scene, and the name Bassey, used by Imeh, is drawn from a documentary film *Fat Houses*, produced in 2012 by Journeyman TV.[139] Imeh uses them among 88 photographs chosen to both illustrate and analyse his art history and aesthetically based analysis. His caption, "Bassey, a maiden of the Efik *nkuho* ritual, having her body massaged during her time in seclusion," suggests that this illustrates how massaging of the initiate was perceived by the Ibibio/Efik as a process of softening, breaking up, and remoulding the initiate corporally. He uses the photographs to affirm the idea that corporal practices, like hand massaging of the initiate during seclusion, translated into an "emotional, intellectual and spiritual reshaping and refining until she (the initiate) emerges as the ideal."[140]

The film and the photographs, whether staged or real, are used here to authenticate the narratives of the continuing residual practice of the *mbopo* seclusion rite in certain parts of Ibibio/Efik land in contemporary times. They also point to the carefully orchestrated attention the initiates received at the hands of traditional matriarchs. The hand of the massager is targeted at specific parts of the body like the chest and the hips. The film shows a progression while massaging from the leg area through to the hips and up

138 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 3.
139 *The Fat Houses*, Documentary Film, 2012, http://www.journeyman.tv, accessed on 15 August 2018.
140 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 131.

to the chest and back. The synchronizing movement of the massager's hands reveals the energy, attentiveness, and importance of massaging. The Ibibio/Efik seclusion matrons conceived of massaging as a complementary ritual to assist the flesh in gaining weight.[141] It was also meant to help tone the flesh and to enhance a sound psychological self-image during seclusion. Local chalks and other herbal concoctions were also used in this process as a form of "softening, breaking-up and rebuilding" the initiates to emerge as iconic women.[142]

The weight increase of *mbopo* initiates in the course of seclusion emblematizes the beauty of character, the ethical formation, and the creative ideas that the initiate acquired in her schooling bedroom. It would be unacceptable for the would-be groom, his family, and the society at large if the secluded *mbopo* did not exude the high moral standard, social etiquette, and work ethic that she was expected to garner during her seclusion rite. Though great care and efforts were taken to ensure that the initiate was made fat, as represented by the massaging in the photographs above, fattening-up alone would not reflect or encapsulate such ethical expectations without other complementary activities, including beauty treatments, merited ethics, and social education. Thus, in addition to fattening, the initiates were taught the art of self-beautification by experienced matrons: self-beautification that would enhance their self-image and that, at the same time, would make them attractive to their husbands and the wider community.

From the early 20th century, skin care was considered as the first target in this beauty regime. Skin care was seen to be very important due to the harsh weather and environmental conditions of the tropical rainforest region, including the sun, which women are exposed to in the bush while farming. In 2012, J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan interviewed former *mbopo* initiates: women who were septuagenarians, and who might have gone through *mbopo* ritual in the 1940s and 1950s. The interviewees asserted that the initiate learned about the different oils, dyes, chalks, and herbs that are applied to the skin for effective protection and a glowing result. They learned how to make a local soap called *atong nkom eyop* with the husk of palm nut, and how to prepare a local oil called *mmem* (soft), a mixture of different herbs and oil in the right proportions, which, as its name implies, helps to soften the skin.[143]

141 *Ibid*., 133.
142 *Ibid*., 133.
143 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music," 51.

This art of skin decoration and beautification endured and continued as part of the *mbopo* ritual until 2012, as reported in the *Fat Houses* documentary film and the *Fattening Room* TV show. It is also evident from Imoh Imeh's ethnographic engagement with Comfort Ukpongetto of Ediene Attai village in 2006.[144]

The hair was another area that received physical attention during the *mbopo* seclusion rite. Hair has been theorized as a "bodily indicator of cultural self-identity and social status" in African history. Several African communities formulate distinctive ways of self-representation and identity through hair styling.[145] Nsentip Udeme asserts that Ibibio/Efik women take pride in the ways their hair is represented. During the *mbopo* seclusion rite, the initiates were schooled in how to weave different hairstyles and what these different styles symbolized. They practiced the performance of feminine beautification through the creation of decorative coiffures and elaborate hairstyles.[146] Historically, young Ibibio/Efiks women of southern Nigeria weaved and plaited their hair distinctively to epitomize their identities and status. Hairstyles would signify, among other things, whether a woman was a virgin, single, married, a widow, a member of a particular women's cult, or a member of a chief's family.

Hairstyling was also connected to concepts of spiritual power.[147] In the early 20th century, hairstyles were sometimes used to reflect and imagine the identity of the naiads that the particular community revered. The decorative materials used and the kind of hairstyle that the initiate wore revealed her spiritual background and what she believed. For instance, it is believed locally that mirrors and reflective materials were worn by those whose deities or *ndem* were naiads that dwelled in streams and rivers. Such reflective items were believed to represent the seemingly unlimited knowledge of the deities and the ostentation attached to the beauty of such deities.[148] This was particularly true in rituals among the Efiks, the Kalabaris, and other riverine chiefdoms located around Cross River and other connected tributaries. The

144 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 26.

145 See for example, T. Miller, "Review: Hair in African Art and Culture", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 103, No.1 (2001), 182-188.

146 N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", 4-5.

147 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 201.

148 See for example, U. Affiah and J. Owan, "A Dramatic Analysis and Interpretation of *Ekombi* Dance of the Efik People of Nigeria", *International Journal of English Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2014), 25-32 where they analyse ndem, water goddesses, as being extraordinarily beautiful and believed to sometimes take on human form by possessing extraordinarily beautiful women.

subject in Photo 1.1, a Kalabari bride, belongs to a community that revered water goddesses. This can be inferred from the elaborate use of mirrors and reflective materials in her hair.

Photo 1.8
hairstyle with facial motif signifying adiaghawo: Source: Nsentip Udeme (2006)

Photo 1.9
Elaborate hairstyles of initiate Source: Nsentip Udeme (2006)

Photo 1.10
Elaborate hairstyle with hair extension and brass comb. Source: Nsentip Udeme (2006)

Photo 1.11
Elaborate hairstyles with beads. Source: Nsentip Udeme (2006)

Working within the framework of visual art, Udeme illustrates the different hairdos customary in *mbopo* ritual, and analyses the meanings they invoke in terms of indigenous identities. He asserts that, among the Ibibio/Efik, hairstyles epitomize aesthetic appeal and the artistic rendition of weaving skills with indigenously made hair extension materials.[149] For the *mbopo* initiates in a contemporary context, hairstyles sometimes emblematized particular forms of bodily representation. For example, there were hairstyles that were called *mkpuk eba* (new breasts), *eba nkaifere* (full breasts), *Idet ubot* (hand weaving without artificial extensions), *effiom Inyang* (crocodile), *wobo* (gather into one bunch), or *ibuot ekong* (the head of a warrior).[150] While they express love and sexuality, they also mark the status of the bearers as well as the elaborate extravagance that the *mbopo* institution attached to hairstyles.

Udeme used the above photographs to simply illustrate the different hairstyles and facial motifs customary to the *mbopo* initiation. They are reproduced and repositioned here and captioned differently to resonate with my line of argument, as Udeme's captions reference different hairstyles and face motifs. No mention is made of the sources of the photographs and when they were made, but we can infer from certain characteristics of the photos that they might have been taken around the 1970s, after the Biafran Civil War. It was in this period that *mbopo* initiates began to wear clothing around the chest.[151]

The photographs point to the dynamisms and diversities of practice that accompanied *mbopo* among the different Ibibio/Efik communities and along the Cross River basin. The photograph in Photo 1.7 particularly reveals how, within a patriarchal Ibibio/Efik society, attention was paid to birth status and women were treated differently depending on their position as either the first-born daughter, and so on. Greater respect and special treatment were attached to *adiaghawo*, the first-born daughter in a family. Specific facial motifs, beads, and attire were used to decorate an *adiaghawo* during her outing ceremony.[152] Parents were expected to organize more elaborate festivals in favour of their first daughters. Their suitors were also expected to pay more in terms of dowry.

Cicatricization, tattooing, and skin decoration with chalks, dyes, and special herbs were also prominent bodily practices associated with the ritual. Though

149 N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", 4.

150 *Ibid*., 4.

151 J. Salmon, "Foreword", xv. See also Chapter Two of this study for a historical analysis of cultural change in relation to the *mbopo* ritual.

152 N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", 2.

the practice of scarification was not particularly popular among the Ibibio/Efik, it filtered into some Ibibio communities through their Igbo neighbours. Jeffreys asserts that, in the 1930s, in communities where clitoridectomy was performed in the first part of the seclusion period, scarification was performed immediately after circumcision. This was to allow the skin incisions to heal along with the cut on the clitoris, and particular procedures were observed during circumcision to enhance the effective and quick healing of the scars. Circumcision wounds were treated with herbal concoctions.[153] Unlike other parts of Nigeria, where, historically, elaborate facial scarification was seen as part of physical beautification, the Ibibio/Efik preferred strategically placed dotted or pinched scars on both cheeks or by the side of the eye, which are referred to as *ntoi uyai* (beautiful dots).[154]

Ntoi uyai went hand in hand with elaborate skin decoration. The designs were made with *ndom* and *odung* (local dyes and chalks) and particular motifs signified birth status. Skin decorations and inscriptions, a practice that endured through the century, were not permanent tattoos, but temporary skin inscriptions with local dyes. They were consistently inscribed and later washed off during the course of seclusion. This practice was believed to contribute to enhancing the overall beauty and softness of the skin. The cycle continued while in seclusion and was repeated during pregnancy and during other female ceremonies.[155] The inscriptions and designs were aesthetically patterned and resonated with the Ibibio/Efik concept of marriage. Imeh asserts that the zigzag patterns inscribed on the initiate's skin (see Photo 1.12 below) resonated with the other decorative body motifs that symbolized status.[156] For example, special designs were inscribed on the face if the initiate was *adiaghawo* (the first-born daughter). At other times, facial motifs were used to emblematize a woman' sexual status as a virgin. Decorative motifs also pointed to the Ibibio/Efik concept of beauty and the artistic prowess of women passed down from generation to generation through temporary body inscriptions. These aesthetic motifs and designs were also utilized on pottery, in raffia cloth weaving, as well as wall painting and floor designs made with clay and mud.[157]

153 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 16.
154 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 115.
155 N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", 3.
156 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 155.
157 N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", 4-7.

Photo 1.12

Skin decoration and temporary tattoos with dyes and herbs applied by a matron. Source: Imeh, Daughters of Seclusion (2012)

The above photograph (Photo 1.12), taken by Jill Salmons in 1970, is analysed by Imeh and highlights the intimacy of the relationship between the initiates and the cultural matron. With the image, Imeh further affirms that the tattooing and body painting of the *mbopo* initiate resonate well with the transition of the initiate's social status, from an innocent *nka ifere*, a young girl, to a mature young woman, ready and able to assume womanhood.[158] These body paintings were temporary and needed to be washed away at intervals.

The dark background in the image depicts a serene inner seclusion room where mobility and accessibility were restricted. How did Salmons, a European woman and a stranger, access this space for her photograph? It could be argued that in the 1970s, after the Civil War, cultural injunctions attached to rituals like *mbopo* had begun to be relaxed. As a woman, Salmons might have had a better chance of access to secluded spaces than a male researcher. In addition, *mbopo*'s secretive features have dissipated

158 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 75.

over the years. Imeh asserts that Comfort Ukpongetto's seclusion ritual, a recent *mbopo* initiate whom he was privileged to photograph in 2006, "prods at the notion of family and the community" engagement into spaces that were hitherto private.[159] The public apparently began to engage with *mbopo* activities that previously had been restricted to the inner bedchamber, and had been reserved for the attention of the matriarchs and a few attendants until the consummation of their final public debut. The re-imagination of *mbopo* as reality TV "spectacle," as analysed in Chapter 3, is one extreme expression of this transition from secret spiritual space to a ritual geared to the gaze of wider publics.

Social induction beyond the corporeal: Sexuality, home management, literacy, and industry

The *mbopo* initiate was expected to learn special values and skills while in seclusion. These skills and values were to enhance her effectiveness as a wife and mother, empower her to bring up her children, enhance her economic engagements, and, at the same time, enable her to be able to socialize effectively with the rest of the community.[160] While many forms of learning took place in this educational bedchamber, a few important aspects are worth probing here. These are practices that, according to my reading, have endured from the first quarter of the 20th century until recent times. The practices were among the "woman's mysteries" that Talbot and Jeffreys encountered in the 1910s and 1920s. The anthropologist John Messenger documented these aspects (particularly with regard to sexuality) more fully in the 1950s. As a wife to be, the initiates were intentionally taught about sex: sexual mannerisms, including how to speak peaceably and alluringly; how to be "romantic" in order to excite and please their husbands sexually, and so on. The idea of "sexual education and techniques" being transmitted to the initiates within the seclusion chamber was entrenched in the belief and claim that women were the repository of sexual knowledge. They were expected to know a lot about sex in order to pass the knowledge to their husbands.[161]

159 *Ibid*., 155.

160 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music," 51.

161 J. Messenger and B. Messenger, "Sexuality in Folklore", 34-36.

Within the seclusion bedchamber, initiates were also told how to manage the outcome of pregnancy before and after conception. Though there were professional midwives called *abia uman*, the seclusion rite offered the initiate basic knowledge on how to manage pregnancy and childbirth. Messenger, Brink, Imeh, and Akpapan all highlight the fact that the *mbopo* ritual prepared initiates for fertility, conception, delivery, and the successful suckling of their babies.[162] While the Ibibio/Efik believed that an ample female figure was necessary for fertility and eventual suckling of their offspring, the *mbopo* initiate was also taught the necessary herbs that could reduce labour pain and that would induce milk secretion for lactation.[163]

The Ibibio/Efik continue to attach great importance to fertility. Today, considerable efforts are made to have children and there is severe judgement, even ostracization, of women who cannot have children. In fact, in the past, a certain form of seclusion rite known as *nwo-nwo* was prescribed as an attempt to cure a married woman diagnosed with infertility.[164] The *mbopo* rite thus offered the expected bride a site for sex education and fertility induction before marriage.

Nutrition is a central aspect of this learning ritual for potential Ibibio/Efik wives. In her study of food among southern African cultures, Audrey Richards asserted that "[n]utrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex. It determines the nature of the social groupings and the form their activities take."[165] Her observation is equally applicable to West African societies. The Ibibio/Efik attach great importance to what they eat and how it is cooked. The initiates were given some culinary lessons by an experienced elderly woman. These lessons were learned in two ways. While they had the privilege of feasting daily on sumptuous and delicious meals like *ekpang nkukwo*, *afia afere ebot*, etc., which are rich in starch, vegetables, seafood, and animal protein, they were also taught the technicalities of preparing them. Yet, for the Ibibio/Efik, food, nutrition, and sex are interlinked. They believe that the road to the heart of a man is the mouth, thus the saying in Annang, *Awonwan ano afere ibok, inwanake anwan ebe*: a woman that can cook well does not strive to own her spouse. This idea is held tenaciously held by the Ibibio/Efik today. While other components of the ritual have been subjected

162 P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria," 139.
163 *Ibid*., 139.
164 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 6.
165 A. Richards, *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A Functional Study of Nutrition among the Southern Bantu* (London: Routledge and Sons, 1932), xvii.

to cultural changes, I would certainly claim that culinary interests are still deeply valued by the Ibibio/Efik.[166]

Invariably, a woman endowed with excellent cooking abilities was thought to be able to keep her husband from possible infidelity. She could secure her marriage with her cooking skills and she would receive compliments and support from her in-laws.[167] *Mbopo* seclusion therefore afforded the initiates the space to learn specific types of culinary preparations in order to gain competence in cooking delicious and healthy food. This would put her in good standing with her husband, her in-laws, and the community to which she belonged. This aspect is visually articulated in the *Fattening Room* television show, which I analyse in Chapter 3.

The *mbopo* ritual helped initiates to learn vocations that could be perfected within the stipulated period of seclusion. This vocational training and the type of crafts they learned were culturally specific, depending on the communities to which they belonged. Some groups, for example, specialized in basket weaving or clay wall and floor painting; others were skilled in making raffia mats, cloths, and roofing rafts, etc. The Efiks specialized in comb making, embroidery, and how to make a symbolic cloth called *mbufari*. According to Imeh, *mbufari* cloth originated from initiates' innovations within seclusion and points to an Efik cultural phenomenon that was primarily decorated with the *nsibidi* ideogram.[168]

Other forms of cultural education and literacy occurred within the seclusion chamber. Initiates received lessons in folklore, folksongs, and stories that carry strands of history, moral lessons, and cultural literacy. *Nsibidi*, a highly secretive hieroglyphic form of writing specific to southeast Nigeria, was particularly popular with powerful men's societies like *ekpe, ngbe*, and *ekpo* men's societies; it also resonated with the *mbopo* ritual.[169] According to Imeh, *mbopo* initiates received some measure of literacy in *nsibidi* from experienced elderly women.

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166 This idea was clearly enunciated in my Bachelor's thesis: "Imagining Home and Identity: Narratives of Members of the Ibibio/Efik Ethnic Association of Cape Town, 2014-2016" " (Unpublished Bachelor's thesis, History Department, University of the Western Cape, 2016), 50-51.

167 For its role in a diaspora Ibibio/Efik community, see N. Udo, "Imagining Home and Identity", 47-63.

168 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 77.

169 *Ibid.*, 75.

The image in Photo 1.13 below is used by Imeh to analyse the artistic literacy and "practices that reveal female agency in learning and reproducing important designs" within *mbopo* ritual space. The image, photographed by Percy Talbot in 1912, is repositioned by Imeh to show the aesthetic prowess of *mbopo* initiates through "youthful rumination and imagination."[170] The mural shows that the seclusion period was not a period of inactivity, rather the initiates were engaged in reproductive thinking, and were trained in the art of writing, body decoration, and drawing, as well as learning how to recreate the *nsibidi* writing patterns.[171]

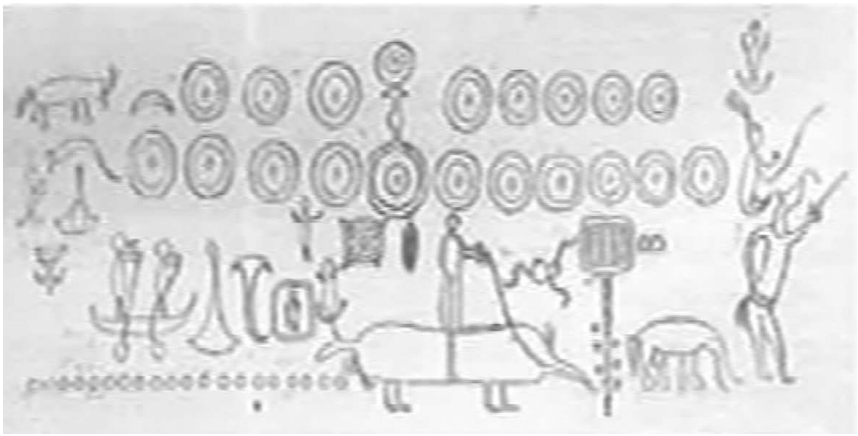

Photo 1.13
***Nsibidi* wall drawing by mbopo initiate, c.1912. Source: Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion* (2012)**

Mbopo initiates could document the activities and period of their journey in seclusion through murals and the writing of signs. The various images in the mural (Photo 1.13) appear as symbols of the society to which the initiate belonged. The men riding in a boat on the left hand side of the drawing, the different kinds of animals, and the beast of burden in a central position possibly denote the complex economy, based on fishing, farming, hunting, and pastoralism, that the initiate came from. The images might also point to the different kinds of meat and fish that garnished the initiate's meals, referencing a society that also hunted a lot of game within the Ibibio/Efik tropical rainforest.[172] The three human images can be said to represent the

170 *Ibid*., 56-57.
171 *Ibid.,* 75.
172 Successful hunting for game and wildlife was a laudable and corporate service among the Ibibio/Efik people until the early 20th century. It was therefore worth memorializing the kinds of game one feasted on during seclusion. Talbot also features a photograph of a "hunting

different kinds of men's masquerade cults, i.e. the *ekpo*, *ekpe*, and *ekong*, who were responsible for maintaining social order in society.

The triangular-shaped images and the guitar-type symbol (centre right) might be a reference to musical instruments in the Ibibio/Efik land. We can discern the *nkruk ubok*, the hand gong, and the *ikon etto*, the xylophone, both of which were instrumental in producing sonorous music for initiate during their outing ceremony. Akpapan and Akpapan have shown how music was utilized as a form of learning, entertainment, and transmission of moral values to the initiates during seclusion.[173] Practical lessons on dance and songs were also rehearsed. The practice of music and dance was reproduced in the *Fattening Room Show*, in which the participants had repeated sessions where they learned local songs and dancing steps.[174] In general, the mural fuses pictorial images to record the diverse experiences of the initiate during seclusion, and the sociocultural features of the society that she belonged to at that time.

Female Circumcision/Clitoridectomy

Female circumcision or clitoridectomy was a common component of the *mbopo* ritual. Talbot's ethnography mentions clitoridectomy being practiced among Ibibio/Efik people in 1914. Throughout the Cross River Basin, there were different practices that defined *mbopo* initiation. But corporeal corpulence, character training, and female circumcision seem to be the unifying factors that defined the seclusion rites across the region. Jeffreys, however, asserts that clitoridectomy was not practiced among all Ibibio/Efik communities in the 1920s. For those who practiced it, he continues, the operation could either be performed at childhood or some time after puberty, when the girl is considered nubile, either at the beginning or towards the end of her seclusion rite. The timing of the operation was very important, and mutilation of the clitoris took place shortly after menstruation,[175] as this supposedly ensured the healing of the scar before the beginning of the next

scene", taken around 1915, in her book. A kind of a "trophy shot" in which about 40 indigenous hunters pose with their sharp hunting spikes, machetes, and javelins with a hunted wild pig or an antelope lying in front of them. Having the opportunity to feast on varieties of wildlife and domestic meat during seclusion was a great achievement attributed to the hunting prowess of either the father or the expected suitor. It was worthy of memorialization. D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive Tribe,* 13.

173 J. Akpan and M. Akpan, "Mbopo Institution and Music," 51.

174 *Fattening Room Show*, Episode 10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFpFQ9VQiNA, accessed on 24 July 2018.

175 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 16.

menstruation cycle. In the 1980s, indigenous informants told Brink that scarring from such a wound could hardly be seen once it had healed.[176]

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines circumcision as Female Genital Mutilation/Cut (FGM/C). It is further defined as "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons."[177] It classifies FGM/C into four broad categories, namely: I. Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce. II. Partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora. III. Narrowing of the vaginal orifice by cutting and bringing together the labia minora and/or the labia majora to create a type of seal, with or without excision of the clitoris. IV. All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization.[178] The Ibibio/Efik clitoridectomy can be located in the first category of the WHO classification.[179]

The Ibibio/Efik believed that female circumcision, the partial cutting-off of the *eyen itit* (child of the vagina – the language they used to describe the clitoris), had significance in terms of fertility and could aid child bearing.[180] It was believed that clitoridectomy had a social value, allowing for the survival of a clan by controlling promiscuity. It was also perceived as a symbolic bodily inscription for the celebrated virgin girl – "the sign of a blameless maidenhood."[181] This idea was encapsulated in the language used to describe the operation. The surgical knife was called an *udiong*,[182] which means to repair, to decorate, or to make beautiful. Only certified virgins were allowed to participate in the *mbopo* ritual, and clitoridectomy was seen as the stamp that decorated such virtues. Though the operation was highly secretive, and the scar was not meant to be flaunted publicly, its social relevance was embodied in the experience of the *mbopo* ritual itself. Those who flouted the social order of sexual fidelity through premarital sex were exempt from participating in both the *mbopo* ritual and circumcision. Jeffreys claims that

176 P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria", 139.
177 Female Genital Mutilation Primer, https://www.qunomedical.com/en/resources/female-genital-mutilation-primer, accessed on 8 August, 2018.
178 A. John, *Countless Dangers of Female Genital Mutilation, https://calabarreporters.com/566/the-countless-dangers-of-female-genita,* accessed on 8 August 2018.
179 "Sexual and Reproductive Health: WHO Classification of Female Genital Mutilation", http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/, accessed on 7 August 2018.
180 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 16.
181 *Ibid*,, 16.
182 *Ibid.*, 17.

in the 1920s such delinquents were stigmatized through folklore and ribald songs, and given derogatory names like *erut* (to draw) or *asangha ayan* (walk long distance).[183] Uncircumcised women were denounced because they were considered to be promiscuous and loose women who walked long distances in search of men to satisfy their sexual cravings.[184]

In the 1990s, however, campaigns were launched by non-governmental organizations and government agencies against the practices of clitoridectomy in Nigeria. Activists identified clitoridectomy as a social ill and a harmful practice that violates the human rights of girls and women.[185] They outlined the negative health implications attributed to female circumcision.[186] Researchers submitted data to suggest that among the 28 African countries still practicing female circumcision, Nigeria was the most severely affected. They claimed that 28.7 per cent of Nigerian women aged between 15 and 49 were subjected to female circumcision. They further asserted that about 20 million Nigerian women and girls had been mutilated or were at risk of being cut.[187]

The campaign gained momentum from a 46-minute documentary film titled *Uncut! Playing with Life* (1995). This film (which will form part of my analysis in Chapter 2) was directed by a Nigerian activist Chuck Mike and set in Benin City in Nigeria's Edo State. The documentary is a blend of a very disturbing episode of child genital mutilation, interviews, a theatre piece, and voice-over narratives. It sought to affect "cultural revolution" in the practice of clitoridectomy in Nigeria.[188] It resulted in significant activism after it visually amplified the abuses entrenched within the practice of female circumcision. It is significant that in November 1999, the Edo State House of Assembly passed a bill criminalizing the practice of clitoridectomy in the state.[189] This pioneering effort was followed by similar laws in another

183 *Ibid.*, 16.
184 *Ibid.,* 16. F. Abaraonye, "Gender Relations in Ibibio Traditional Organizations," 205-222.
185 *Country Profile: FGM in Nigeria, October 2016*, 11, www.28toomany.org, accessed on 25 August 2018.
186 Nigeria: Current information on the practice of female genital mutilation; state protection available to those being targeted and for those ethnic groups in which it is prevalent (June 2001-October 2003), http://www.refworld.org/docid/403dd2080.html, accessed on 25 August 2018.
187 *Country Profile: FGM in Nigeria,* October 2016, 3, www.28toomany.org, accessed on 25 August 2018.
188 "*Uncut! Playing with Life*", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsJTZcCoJSc. A documentary film accessed on 25 August 2018.
189 *Ibid.*

eight states in Nigeria. Thus, in July 2000, Cross River State, where the Efik and a number of Ibibio are resident, also passed a bill criminalizing the practice.[190] Finally, on 25 May 2015, the new and overarching Federal Act, the "Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, (VAPP)" was passed into law. Consequently, the protracted efforts of the gender-based NGOs, both locally and internationally, the responsive actions of Cross River State and the Nigerian government in general, set a new paradigm for the practice of *mbopo*. While maintaining the fattening up, cultural induction and aesthetic appeal, the ritual of circumcision became obsolete, unpopular, and eventually discarded

Conclusion

The popular "fattening room" appellation limits our understanding of *mbopo.* While attention was given to corpulence, for the purpose of beauty and the ease of carrying and suckling children, care was also given to other forms of physical wellness and prettification. While in seclusion, initiates received treatments and training on skills to enhance skin and hair. They were also taught practical skills with respect to different patterns of extravagant ornamental decoration. Beads, reflective materials like mirrors, etc., locally dyed ribbons, locally made hair attachments, local chalks and camwood, dyes and different kinds of oils like palm oil and shear butter, etc. were utilized for the *mbopo* initiates' corporeal care and enhancement.

The *mbopo* seclusion rite was a route for instituting social order and decency in the society through the use of a celebratory reward mechanism before marriage. Nubile girls, who have attained a certain level of maturity, were intentionally secluded, cosseted, and, at the same time, schooled in crucial components of the Ibibio/Efik sociocultural dynamics: aspects that would help them in the transition to womanhood: first as wives and mothers, but also as members of the community. Apart from corpulence and other forms of corporeal beautification, initiates were also schooled in important aspects of sociocultural, sexual, and health education, particularly on how they could manage themselves before, during, and after pregnancy. They were taught knowledge of herbs that could enhance easy delivery of their babies, and other local remedies that were necessary to induce milk to suckle their children.[191]

190 "Nigeria: Current information on the practice of Female Genital Mutilation", http://www.refworld.org/docid/403dd2080.html, accessed on 25 August 2018.

191 P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria," 139.

Before the seclusion rite, other preparatory measures were observed. Initiates had to be checked by designated matrons to certify that they were virgins and to ascertain their maturity for the ritual. Furthermore, initiates were spiritually consecrated to their deities and ancestors through rituals and intercessory libations performed around pools, streams, or beneath ancient trees revered by a particular community as their site of spiritual affinities. Initiates needed the support and blessings of these deities and ancestors in order for a ritual to be successful. A successfully concluded *mbopo* ritual was perceived as an indicator for the well/being of the new family, and pointed to a good and productive farming season ahead.

There have, of course, been significant changes in emphasis regarding these different aspects of the *mbopo* ritual. Early ethnographies from the 1910s and 1920s suggest that the secretive and spiritual emphasis was very strong in a period when colonial agents and missionaries were documenting and challenging indigenous cultural practices. Professional anthropological studies by the Messengers and Brink, from the 1950s and 1980s, respectively, point to diverse bodily and social components of *mbopo*. But the revolutionary break came in the mid-1990s, with the feminist critique against clitoridectomy, a practice claimed to dehumanize and demean women. The global and local campaigners, including a highly disturbing documentary in 1995 against what was now termed "Female Genital Mutilation/Cut", had direct legal consequences. Nigeria was identified as the most serious offender in relation to what was seen as patriarchal and health-damaging "inflations." Between 1999 and 2015, eight state governments (including Cross River State, home region of the Efik and many Ibibio) and the federal government established laws that outlawed and criminalized the practice of female circumcision (FGM/C) in Nigeria.

This awareness set in motion a dynamic change in how *mbopo* was perceived and practiced. The ritual could no longer be associated with clitoridectomy, but was recast in much more public and fantasized forms, such as a beautification process. In 2013, for example, the *Fattening Room* television show did not mention circumcision as one of the components of *mbopo* seclusion. The ritual became more closely associated, including in dynamic new scholarly work, with aesthetics and was seen as a means of demonstrating the wealth and social status of a family or a clan.

2 *Mbopo* Ritual: Social Change and Cultural Continuity, 1914-2014

Over the years, the culture of the Ibibio/Efik of southern Nigeria has experienced dynamic changes and acculturation. Its ideas, customs, philosophy of life, worldview, and social behaviours have been modified. These modifications are the result of its encounter and contacts with external forces and, necessarily, its own internal dynamics over time. Nonetheless, certain aspects of its culture persist, thus producing a modified version that is perceived as culturally normative. Bascom *et al.* submit that "there is no African culture which has not been affected in some ways by European contact, and there is none which has entirely given way before it."[192] While African cultures continue to respond to external and internal dynamics, they also maintain strong residual elements that define their unique identities and connect them with their ancestry.

The *mbopo* ritual, a sociocultural institution that predominantly defined marriage among the Ibibio/Efik societies before the post-modern era, has witnessed some dynamic and traceable changes in its practice. European contact, Christianity, the emergence of feminist and social activism against female circumcision and related child rights, as well as internally generated developments like the Nigerian Civil War, have instituted modifications in the performance of the *mbopo* women's rite. In this chapter, I will examine the period between 1914 and 2014 as a timeline for analysing "change and continuity" in the seclusion rite. Photographs and videos form part of the analytical tools that offer clues to unpacking these changes and continuities in this chapter.

192 W. Bascom and M. Herskovits, "The Problem of Stability and Change in African Culture", 3.

Mbopo seclusion rites: Challenges and changes, 1914-1960

The year 1914 presents an important point of departure for the historical analysis of the cultural fluidities of *mbopo*. It signalled the amalgamation of Nigeria as a single, British colonial entity in which Southern Nigeria was administered together with the Northern Protectorate and the Lagos Crown Colony.[193] British imperial control now stabilized following several decades of anti-colonial skirmishes and British wars of control over ethnic groups in these regions. Southern Nigeria, moreover, had begun to feel the greater impact of Christianity. [194]

By the early 20th century there were well-established mission stations across Ibibio/Efik land. For example, the Church of Scotland, through a "policy of concentrated evangelization" had introduced Christianity to the people by providing both spiritual and circular instructions within the compounds of different family heads. It established a self-governing colony in Duke Town and Creek Town on the fringes of Calabar, and the religion spread to other parts of Ibibio/Efik land.[195] The spate of evangelization and proselyting had increased during the 1850s when Christian emigrants, Christianized liberated slaves, began to return home from Sierra Leone.[196] The "European religion" that had filtered into the region had consolidated its influence by the late 19th century. Missionaries now directed their efforts towards challenging the indigenous spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Ibibio/Efik people.[197]

Mbopo was one of the rituals that was targeted in this period. In 1926, when M.D. Jeffreys served as a British colonial officer and magistrate in Southern Nigeria, he reported that the traditional customs of *mbopo* seclusion and other women's rituals were breaking up under intense missionary pressure.[198] Through missionary education and religious proselyting, the missions were creating a new clan of young, literate Christians.[199] These indigenous Christian men and women and some of their Christianized parents became

193 T. Tamuno, "British Colonial Administration in Nigeria in the Twentieth Century" in O. Ikimi, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, 393-394.
194 *Ibid*., 393-394.
195 E. Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta and the Hinterlands", 254.
196 T. Gbadamosi and J. Ade Ajayi, "Islam and Christianity in Nigeria" in Ikimi, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, 349-350.
197 A. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule", 423-425.
198 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 24.
199 A. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule", 423-425.

the social and cultural front used by missionaries to challenge the validity of the practice of *mbopo* rituals in line with their new-found faith.

The first issue of contention was the spiritual and ritualistic connotations of the *mbopo* institution. Before the subtle but progressive changes that attended the *mbopo* ritual, like many other Ibibio/Efik customary practices, *mbopo* had very strong spiritual connotations expressed through sacrifices and libations.[200] In 1915, Dorothy Talbot observed that "from a cord round the neck of each of the initiates dangled a live chicken, freely fluttering against the bare brown breasts of its bearer."[201] It is interesting that Talbot has no photograph to illustrate this. These dangling chickens were animal sacrifices used as a spiritual channel to consecrate the initiates to their deities and ancestors.[202] Jeffreys' description of a *mbopo* outing ceremony in 1926 portrays an initiation rite that was overwhelmingly grounded in Ibibio/Efik spirituality.[203] He describes how the arena for *urua mbopo* (the market square for the outing ceremony) was sited alongside shrines and altars for different ancestral deities. He asserts that there was only one ceremonial entrance into the arena, which consisted of a constructed arch with an array of different kinds of *juju*, concoctions used as mediums for spiritual invocation, tied around it. He further asserts that the *mbopo* initiates had materials hanging around their necks. Their ankles were decorated with a number of "fluffy newly hatched white chickens," which were still fluttering their wings having been partly severed through the neck with a knife. According to Jeffreys, he witnessed signs of animal sacrifice that still littered the ground, as the venue had to be consecrated with sacrifices the day before the ceremony.[204] These were spiritual insignia used to consecrate the initiates before and after seclusion, and to appease the ancestors, seeking their support during the ceremony.

These spiritual rituals and sacrifices did not find favour with the missionaries and the emerging Christian community. Indigenous Christians came to believe that these kinds of indigenous spiritual and cultural practices were marks of paganism and idolatry.[205] They were made to see indigenous

200 P. Brink, "Fertility and Fat: The Annang Fattening Room," 75

201 D. A. Talbot, *Women's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 83.

202 A. Essien, "The Sociological Implication of the Worldview of the Annang People," 36-37.

203 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 21

204 *Ibid.,* 21.

205 On the missionary discourse of African idolatry with particular emphasis on its ritual representations, see Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Black in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

practices like the *mbopo* women's rite as rituals invested with animistic and non-theistic beliefs. Their new-found faith, coupled with the benefits accrued from Western education, strengthened their conviction to resist practices that confronted their faith and allegedly undermined the dignity of women.[206] Yet, at the same time, they also longed to harness themselves to practices that defined the uniqueness of their identity.[207] The result was a progressive modification of the *mbopo* seclusion rite. From the first quarter of the 20th century, European contact, and particularly the proliferating Christianizing project of the Western missionaries, led to cultural hybridization within the Ibibio/Efik sociocultural economy.

Apart from the sacrifices and the spiritual connotations of the *mbopo* seclusion rite, other traditionally established aspects of the rite began to be challenged by the missionaries and their converts. For example, *mbopo* was grounded in certain established ritual forms. Seclusion was specifically designed around *usen ibed*, sacred days, and periods for performance of the rites. It was also stipulated when the initiate should be unveiled at her outing ceremony. Talbot plausibly insists that specific significance was attached to the ritual when the initiate enters or emerges from seclusion.[208] This continued up to the 1920s and 1930s. Jeffreys holds that for those Ibibio groups in the Ikot Ekpene region, *anantia* season (a stipulated ceremonial period that began around the month of July after the ritual ceremony of *Nyama*, a women's matriarchy cult), was set aside for entry into seclusion.[209] Since these days and periods were dedicated to certain deities and localized naiads, Christian converts who were interested in modifying the seclusion rite began to challenge the authenticity of such days and periods.

The missionaries condemned *mbopo* as a "barbarous and hurtful custom."[210] Among their contentions was the perception of the seclusion process as being centred mainly on "fattening," and thus harmful. In addition, they claimed that the naked parade of initiates during the outing ceremony was a show of uncivilized sensuality and barbarism.[211] The indigenous people claimed that nakedness in the context of unmarried virgins was for them a sign of "blameless maidenhood." The missionaries' unrelenting campaign against traditional spirituality and "esoteric" sacrifices, the fattening up process, and

206 A. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule", 425.
207 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 21.
208 D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 85.
209 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 24
210 *Ibid.*, 27.
211 *Ibid.*, 27.

the custom of nudity of younger unmarried girls – with particular emphasis on the naked parade of *mbopo* initiates being a social abuse against the dignity of women – set a different tone for the practice of *mbopo*.[212]

The missionary campaigns against *mbopo* became expressed in intergenerational tension within Ibibio/Efik communities. Jeffreys records that, between 1926 and 1932, he received several reports by local chiefs who complained that some of their countrymen were not willing to seclude their children on *anantia*, but proposed instead to celebrate their daughters' seclusion rites over Christmas. They claimed that "it was the Church who altered the season."[213] The Christianization of indigenous people therefore slowly modified indigenous beliefs and produced a continuously changing version of *mbopo* that tried to accommodate Christian concepts, while trying to maintain some form of indigenous authenticity. This was not possible without sociocultural tension.

From the early 20th century, tensions began to build up between conventional traditional practices and an emerging social consciousness motivated by Christian ideals that proposed either a discontinuation or a modification of such rituals. Young Christian converts experienced tensions with their parents, who were deeply attached to traditions and rooted in their beliefs and thus refused to submit to the "white man's religion." The intergenerational tensions were intense. Talbot, for example, reports that, from around 1915, there were numerous court cases involving fathers who had assaulted, threatened to kill, and sometimes even killed their unmarried daughters for "disobeying them."[214] Jeffreys describes how, in 1930, a Christian girl attending the Scottish mission school refused to become an *mbopo* initiate and undergo the circumcision proposed by her parents. The *Nyama* women's cult in charge of the process, supported by her parents, forced her to submit her body to female circumcision. These tensions were brought before the newly established colonial court by Christians who preferred this venue to the Native Court presided over by local chiefs.[215]

The colonial government and their European agencies were in favour of some of these practices as long as they did not challenge colonial administrative proceedings. This sometimes brought the colonial government into tension with the church. The Colonial Court was always careful about how it mediated

212 *Ibid.*, 27.
213 *Ibid.*, 25.
214 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 89.
215 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 25.

matters that were connected with cultural practices. Jeffreys records that, in 1930 and 1931, he was asked by the Nigerian Colonial Government to write reports on the *mbopo* seclusion rite and the practice of clitoridectomy by Ibibio women, in response to the petitions forwarded to the central government by missionaries. "Missionaries take great exception to this practice […] But it must be remembered that the Ibibio people are a long established and flourishing people. This custom, far from proving inimical to the community, is one that thrives and increases."[216] The colonial government responded by suggesting that the missionaries' condemnation was the result of a misunderstanding of the Ibibio/Efik concept of virginity and marriage. They supported the continuation of the practice, which they perceived as useful and effective as a social tool for "Indirect Rule", where local chiefs were empowered by the colonial government to keep the people obedient. Upholding aspects of African traditions, thereby avoiding tensions, was an attempt to work with chiefs to consolidate colonial rule and authority.[217]

Photo 2.1
"Chief Daniel Henshaw with his family" Photo: Dorothy Talbots, (1915)

216 *Ibid.*, 26.
217 T. Tamuno., "British Colonial Administration", 398-399.

Photo 2.2
"Ibibio Chiefs with Attendants", Photo: Dorothy Talbot (1915)

The above photographs are representations of the cultural hybridity that had started to occur in the early decades of the 20th century. Photo 2.1 is a photograph of "Chief Daniel Henshaw with his family," taken by Dorothy Talbot in 1915. Talbot uses this photograph to illustrate the appearance of a civilized Efik family. Her text reveals that Chief Daniel was a member of the new elite. He was also one of Talbot's key informants. She claims he was more knowledgeable about secret information regarding rituals than his kinsmen. She describes him as a Native Political Agent, suggesting that he was a government-sanctioned chief. Chief Daniel is seated in the centre of the family portrait between (what I take to be) his wife on his left side and perhaps his eldest daughter on his right side. He was also a traditional ruler, head of one of the seven ruling families of the Efik dynasty.[218] Hence he is dressed in traditional regalia. His *bidak*, a locally woven hat that is normally crested with porcupine spikes, and the wrapper, usually worn by chiefs and elder statesmen, symbolize his chiefly status.

The women and the young girl seated in front are all fully robed in well-tailored Western-style dresses with no sign of traditional adornment. The

218 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 8.

man standing behind Chief Daniel is dressed in a suit and bow tie. He may have been the eldest son or one of the relatives. His garb, purely Western, represents the kind of dress that marks the family as Christianity converts of the early 20th century.

Chief Daniel (perhaps a septuagenarian) and his family thus represent the emerging modern Christianized family of the early 20th century, the kind that would challenge some aspects of the *mbopo* institution but who did not want to disconnect completely from their traditional identity. The chief's biblical first name, "Daniel", clearly marks him as a new-generation Christian proselyte. He would have witnessed the earliest stages of Christian proselyting, including the first baptisms, undertaken by missionaries around the mid-19th century.[219] He would have been rechristened by missionaries, perhaps during a baptismal ritual. His family represents a mixture of identities: a Westernized African family that would have resided in Calabar urban township, but showing an attachment or affiliation with their indigenous culture and identity. The backdrop of the photograph may well be the Calabar River that runs through Creek Town, where passenger ferryboats from Calabar have been berthing since historical times, and where missionary stations were first established in Calabar.[220]

The second photograph with the caption "Ibibio Chiefs with Attendants" (Photo 2.2) is equally instructive. Though no specific elucidation is given by Talbot about the photograph, except for the short caption that I have cited, the image reveals the complex cultural composition of an Ibibo/Efik community in the early twentieth century. Here, the social group is also set against a natural backdrop, in this case a village house with a thatched roof, but alongside an array of thick and lush tropical vegetation. The domesticated raffia and plantain trees in the background confirm that those photographed are members of a subsistence-based rural community.

Although there are signs of Western influence in their dress, these chiefs are more obviously grounded in this traditional way of life (than the aforementioned Chief Henshaw). The chief, who is directly under the umbrella in the centre foreground, is attired in traditional regalia, yet wears a bowler hat and holds a walking stick. This *esang ubong* is a staff symbolic of a ruling chief in a particular constituency; he might even be a paramount chief. These objects set him apart from the other two men who are seated. The men

219 T. Gbadamosi and J. Ade Ajayi, "Islam and Christianity in Nigeria", 350.

220 *Ibid.*, 350. This is based on my personal observation of the region and river.

on his left-hand side represent subordinate chiefs. One of them dresses in a similar fashion to the paramount chief, though does not hold a *esang ubong* or a walking stick. The other man, seated at the right end, wears no hat, which implies that he is of lower status, and appears younger.

Equally striking are the young girls standing on the chief's right-hand side. They are naked above the waist, which suggests that they are teenagers and unmarried. They were typically referred to as *nka iferi* (naked girls). Although this practice of upper-body nakedness among young women is not common today in the Ibibio/Efik society, this appellation still holds. Younger, unmarried are still referred to as *nka iferi*.

Felicia Abaronye suggests that women's public nakedness should not be seen as a form of sensuality, as the missionaries liked to suggest, nor should it be considered simply as an expression of patriarchy.[221] Rather, it was a marker and symbol of etiquette, even of women's resistance. In studying the gender role of women's traditional organizations among the Ibibio, Abaraonye argues that walking naked in public certified a young girl's virginity or it was a spiritual sign of a terrifying omen for an elderly woman.[222] The naked appearance of an elderly woman in public in particular was a sign of resistance and stirred up strong female bonds expressed in the women's matriarchal cult.[223]

The women's matriarchal cult, she argues, also played judicial roles in the Ibibio/Efik community. Abaraonye affirms that it was an abomination for a woman to bare her sexual organs to a man in public.[224] Doing so was believed to render the victim impotent and worthless for the rest of his life. It was regarded as taboo for a woman to invoke a curse on a man with her naked body, except in extreme cases.[225] If any man was found guilty of rape, or meddling with underage girls, or even ridiculing women's nakedness in public, he would be banished from his village and could even be sentenced to death.[226] Thus, while nakedness symbolized virtue for young marriageable girls, it was also a social device used by women to protest and resist.[227]

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221 F. Abaraonye, "Gender Relations in Ibibio Traditional Organisations", 212.
222 *Ibid*., 212.
223 *Ibid*., 214.
224 *Ibid*., 212.
225 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women", 25.
226 F. Abaraonye, "Gender Relations in Ibibio Traditional Organisations", 221-222,
227 G. Murunga, "African Women in the Academy and Beyond: Review Essay," in O. Oyewumi, ed., *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 400.

Let us now consider the dress and adornments of the young women in the photograph in more detail. The single strand of beads worn on their waists represents girls that have not yet been secluded in the *mbopo* institution.[228] One of the girls wears a wrapper round her waist and holds something that resembles an animal horn, with loose beads as anklets. In traditional Ibibio/Efik politics, animal horns were insignia symbolizing membership of men's cults, like *Inam* or *Mbio-owo*. A virgin girl, often one of the younger daughters of a chief, typically acted as a cultural "amour bearer," carrying the insignia.[229]

The late colonial era brought other changes. In his 1950s study of religious acculturation among the Annang, American anthropologist John Messenger shows the social changes in Ibibio/Efik cultural life, particularly in the area of religion. In 1951, Messenger estimated that over half of the population of the Annang, and perhaps all of the Ibibio/Efik had converted by mid-century. He reveals that some Ibibio/Efik groups, particularly the Annangs, preferred to maintain their cultural practices along with their Christian confession; others practiced their culture in secret, beyond the gaze of the missionaries.[230]

In an attempt to effectively analyse the Annang's response to religious proselytizing in the 1950s, Messenger undertook a focus group study and divided his Annang sample into three age groups, namely, "men and women who were past middle age in 1919; the second, those who were young adults and middle-aged at that time; and the third, those born after intensive acculturation had commenced."[231] He asserts that despite the apparent evidence of intensive acculturation, Annang culture, and by extension Ibibio/Efik culture, was best expressed by men and women who were of adult age in the early decades of the 20th century.[232]

Cultural transformation and the revisualization of *Mbopo*: 1960-1980

The Nigerian state gained its independence from British colonial rule in October 1960, an event that set in motion a new political dynamic now

228 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 176.
229 O. Akpabio, *He Dared: The Story of Okuku Udo Akpabio, the Great Colonial African Ruler*, (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing, Indiana, 2011), 131.
230 J. Messenger, "Religious Acculturation among the Annang Ibibio", 291.
231 *Ibid*., 293
232 *Ibid*., 293.

woven around competition between heterogeneous ethnic politics.[233] In the early part of the post-independent era, the Nigerian state was accused of corruption, nepotism, and ethnic-driven patronage in the government's delivery of basic social services.[234] The accusations climaxed in 1966, when disgruntled military officers staged a military coup. Though it failed, this coup set the stage for the crippling economy and eventually led to the bloody Civil War from 1967 to 1990.[235] For three years, between 1967 and 1970, the whole of Ibibio land was in a state of turmoil.[236] Entire villages were wrecked.[237] Cultural practices were not priorities in a context dominated by survival and a search for safety. Precious traditional artifacts that had survived the missionary onslaught were reduced to piles of rubbles. The ruined or ransacked materials included cement sculptures, indigenous shrines, and cultural moulds.[238]

People tried to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the war. They rebuild houses, schools, farms, and hospitals and raised revenue for economic sustenance. According to Jill Salmons, a leading researcher of Nigerian cultural history, "the 1967 Civil War was a cultural watershed, and traditions that had existed for hundreds of years were abandoned in favour of a more modern life."[239] Salmons reports that, during her fieldwork in Ibibioland in the 1970s, she witnessed what she calls a "compromised" version of *mbopo* seclusion where girls were secluded, not during *anantia* or Christmas as before the war but during summer holidays. Villagers now insisted that the *mbopo* initiates wear traditional attire rather than having a "naked upper body" when appearing in public for their outing ceremony.[240]

There are signs that the popularity of the seclusion rite declined in the post-war period. Pamela Brink asserts that during her fieldwork trip to the Annang community between 1974 and 1975, she did not witness any *mbopo* seclusion

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233 N Akingbe, "Creating the Past, and Still Counting the Losses: Evaluating Narrative of the Nigerian Civil War in Buchi Emecheta's DESTINATION BIAFRA", *Epiphany*, 01(2012), Vol.5. No. 1, 31-51.

234 See D. Smith, *The Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

235 N Akingbe, "Creating the Past, and still Counting the Losses", 31-51.

236 P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland,* (Nsukka: Great App Publishers, 2009), 35.

237 J. Salmon, "Foreword", xv.

238 *Ibid*., xv.

239 *Ibid*., xv.

240 *Ibid*., xv.

rites among the villagers, despite her efforts to find sites of seclusion.[241] The tensions that arose in the aftermath of the war had further changed the perception of the people around cultural practices. As some travelled to cities for greener pastures, they apparently became disconnected from cultural practices. For those who were left behind in this region, they were more engaged with the responsibility of rebuilding a new society.[242]

The second historical-cultural factor that impacted on the *mbopo* ritual was the emergence of colour photography in Nigeria. It shifted the way *mbopo* was visualized. The ability to achieve a photographic record in colour was a long process. In 1907, Autochrome, an early colour photography process was developed, patented, and marketed by the Lumiere Brothers.[243] It was only in the 1940s that Kodak released their first colour film, "Kodacolor". Progressive improvement in quality, time of exposure, affordability, and accessibility to the public made Kodacolor popular among amateur photographers, and thus popularized colour photography from the 1960s onwards.[244]

From around the 1970s, colour photography gained ascendency in Nigeria, led by an indigenous studio in Lagos called StudioLand.[245] *Mbopo* photographs, which had hitherto been only in black and white, were now re-visualized. Among the collection of photographs and images used by Imeh in his 2012 study, *Daughters of Seclusion*, is the colour photograph reproduced below (Photo 2.3) of two seated *mbopo* initiates flanked by attendants and admirers. Imo Imeh uses the photograph to symbolize "a new imaginative moment" in the honorific celebration of initiates. He points to the seated position of the initiated, the parasols held to shade them, the staff gathered in their honour by the woman elder to their right, the group of attendants that flank them, which can be compared to the routines of powerful traditional chiefs and

241 P. Brink, "The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria", 131.

242 P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction,* 35.

243 P. Connes, "Silver salts and standing waves: the history of interference colour photography", *Journal of Optics*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 154.

244 A Quick History of Colour Photography, https://photography.tutsplus.com/articles/the-reception-of-color-photography-a-brief-history--cms-28333, accessed on 28 August 2018.

245 Vanguard Newspaper: Interview with Reuben Ajayi, one of the first Nigerian photographers to be trained in Colour Photography Technology by Agfa-Gevaert School of Photography, Germany in 1966. He started working with Studio Land in Lagos in 1969, training other photographers in colour photography and also managing the Colour Laboratory. It was around this period that colour photography moved to other parts of Nigeria, and eventually to Ibibio land in the 1980s, https://allafrica.colour om/stories/200612070898.html, accessed on 4 September 2018.

paramount rulers who were treated with honour and prestige in traditional African cultures.[246]

This honorific re-narration of the *mbopo* resonates with Stephen Sprague's statement, in 2003, that photography functioned as "literary record, memory device, and an object symbolizing respect and status."[247] The spiritual connotations in Talbot's and Jeffreys' ethnographies are absent in Imeh's art history re-rendering. He sees *mbopo* as attuned to corporeal beautification and aesthetics. This kind of consciousness is enhanced by the availability of coloured photographs from 1970s and the 1980s, which allow for yet another visual re-imagination the of *mbopo* institution.

Photo 2.3

Two decorated *mbopo* initiates seated in the midst of admirers. Source: I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion* (2012)

Imeh's description of the left image (Photo 2.3) is replete with colour. He depicts the umbrellas as red and white, the staff as decorated with red, white, and other colourful ribbons. He refers to the red and glow of the initiates' skin, "which have been doused and massaged with camwood."[248] Though the image is presented as a greyish black-and-white photocopy in Imeh's book (as it is reproduced here), his description evokes the colour-based original. This photograph was not dated by Imeh. He does not claim to have taken it. Since the photograph is a colour image, based on Imeh's description above, we can assume that the photograph dates from the 1970s or later, when colour photography became popular in southern Nigeria. For the purpose of this chapter, I now will take a "close-up gaze" at the image as its details resonate with the cultural changes that have attended *mbopo* after independence.

The photograph reinforces Salmons' claim that, after the Civil War, elderly women insisted that *mbopo* initiates should be garbed in a manner that

246 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 188.

247 S. Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves", 240-259.

248 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 188.

covered their bodies. The initiates, who are seated in the image, are covered around the chest with half-cut wrappers that are normally tied at the back. Unlike in Photo 1.2 and 1.3, where the initiates were almost completely naked and presented themselves bare-chested, here the initiates are covered, particularly the sensitive parts of their womanhood, showcasing the changes over time in the practice of this seclusion rite. After the Biafran War, the earlier cultural narrative of nakedness as a sign of virtue and a deterrence to patriarchal delinquency had begun to crumble. Women's voices also contributed to revisualizing and repositioning *mbopo*, and redefining a version that portrays women's bodies in ethical ways.[249]

The initiates in Imeh's image are seated on wooden armchairs. The choice of the armchairs shows their dignified status. They are lavishly decorated with exotic beads around the neck and waist; beads that reconnect them with their history. Beads are decorative materials for ritual initiates, whether male or female, all over southern Nigeria and Africa in general. Some beads signify sacredness and status, and are commonly worn by traditional chiefs and matriarchs. Others symbolize aesthetics and wealth. The more lavish the beads, the more they speak to the wealth of the family of the initiates or their suitors.[250] Their legs are decorated with *awok*, heavy, brass metallic rings worn like socks, rising from the ankle in ringlet form up to the thighs. This *awok* points to the metallurgical technology that existed in Ibibio land and adjoining Igbo communities for many centuries. On some occasions, when the rings are very heavy, simply lifting or raising the legs is arduous work. The legs of such initiates would also be lubricated and massaged with herbs and local oils to enable them to bear the weight of the *awok*.[251] The legs might also be decorated with *odung*, *ndom*, and *iduot* (local chalks, dyes, and herbs) before the *awok* is worn.[252] The *awok* and the decorative materials added to the beautification and grandeur of the celebrated initiates. A brass *awok* was very expensive and could only be afforded by wealthy families. As such, it symbolized affluence and ostentation; it also symbolized the health and well-being of the initiates who had just graduated from their seclusion rite. Being able to walk with the heavy metallic ringlets without limping was seen as a sign of an auspicious seclusion experience.

249 J. Salmon, "Foreword" xv.
250 O. Akpabio, *He Dared*, 131-135.
251 *Ibid*., 131.
252 *Ibid.*, 131.
253 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqy6oCi18ig, accessed on 2 October 2018.

In my childhood, I observed that where initiates could not afford to buy *awok*, alternative decorative ornaments made of woolly materials and decorated with beads and small bells, as seen in Photo 2.4, were used for leg decorations. Here, we have a screenshot of the leg of an *ekombi* dancer performing in a music video by Sir Wilker Johnson; an indigenous Efik musician.[254] Since *ekombi* dance is reminiscent of *mbopo* performance, the attire used for the dances are identical to those *mbopo* initiates wore during their outing ceremonies. The small bells are used to imitate the metallic clamping sounds that an *awok* makes while the initiate is dancing. The clamping sound from the small bell synchronized systematically with the steps and movements of the initiate or, in this case, the *ekombi* dancer.

Photo 2.4
Decorated leg bands worn in the place of *awok*[253]

One image too many: Protests against female circumcision in *mbopo*, 1990-2014

From around 1990, new forms of social consciousness emerged to challenge traditional practices globally. One example was an internally generated but foreign-sponsored feminist movement to outlaw female circumcision in Africa, including in Nigeria where it was still widely practiced. Activists campaigned and raised public awareness by describing female circumcision as gender-related abuse and a violent crime against women and girls. As discussed in the previous chapter, this awareness was fanned by global organizations and NGOs who pushed for the total eradication of female circumcision in Nigeria.

One leading organization in the campaign was the Performance Studio Workshop. Chuck Mike, a Nigerian theatre activist and the founding director of Performance Studio Workshop, used theatre presentations and provocative visual images through his SISTER HELP (Synergizing Information Systems toward Enhancing Reproductive Health and Eradicating Ligate Practices) initiative to document the damaging consequences of female circumcision

254 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqy6oCi18ig, accessed on 2 October 2018.

in the very communities that had most tenaciously promoted the practice in earlier decades in Edo State in Nigeria.[255]

Chuck Mike and his associates used the combination of theatre activism and "visualizing brutality" – borrowing the concept from the notion of "picturing atrocity" theorized by Jay Prosser *et al*.[256] – to strike at the very core of traditional beliefs and cultural practice. In 1995, influenced by Chuck Mike's video, Stella Omoregie, a once active and resilient traditional circumciser from the Benin Royal Family, publicly came out as a convert. She encouraged other traditional circumcisers to form an indigenous practitioners' platform to lead the anti-female circumcision campaign by going from village to village in Edo State, educating their kinsmen and women about the dangers of circumcising girls and young women. Combined with Mike's theatre presentations in public spaces, which later formed part of a documentary film, they called for the total eradication of female circumcision in Edo State and in Nigeria in general.[257]

Uncut – Playing with Life is a documentary film that blends real-life scenes, interviews, voice-over narration, and staged theatre in order to dramatize the abuse and social and health consequences of female circumcision. The film includes a disturbing scene featuring the real-life genital mutilation of a baby girl of about one year old. Interviews are conducted with Stella Omoregie (the lead protagonist), Chuck Mike (the director), Bunmi Lana (the associate director), some groups of traditional circumcisers, traditional chiefs, the head-priest of Benin Kingdom, medical doctors, and legislators in the Edo State House of Assembly.[258]

Following Robert Rosenstone's assertion that visual media that are cast within the framework of drama and fiction can be useful resources for thinking about the past as long as they engage directly or implicitly with the issues and arguments of an ongoing discussion of history,[259] then *Uncut – Playing with Life* becomes a historical exposé and a resource that elucidates how female circumcision was practiced in the mid-1990s. In theorizing about *Picturing Atrocity*, Jay Prosser asserts that there are times when "pictures of atrocities

255 C. Mike, *Uncut – Playing with Life,* (1995), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsJTZcCoJSc, accessed on 24 August 2018.
256 J. Prosser, "Introduction" in G. Batchen *et al*., eds., *Picturing Atrocity,* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 8.
257 C. Mike, *Uncut – Playing with Life,* accessed on 24 August 2014.
258 *Ibid*.
259 R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past,* 3.

are more powerful than the words that describe them." He further opines that, in this age of multimedia hyperactivity, the "still iconic photographs" – whether taken from a sequence of other photographs or film footage, or maybe a frozen screenshot from the scene of a film (as I have done in reproducing the image below, Photo 2.5 – may be used to represent the whole. It has "a momentous and memorable way of representing the pains of others." [260] Theorizing about the "wounding aperture," Kylie Thomas asserts that photographs of violence, though difficult to visualize, should not deter us from engaging with them. Reading photographs of violence) – in her own case study, the violence perpetrated during and after apartheid in South Africa) – as "wounding apertures" allows us to recognize the depth of the pain of others.[261]

Photo 2.5

A genital mutilation of a baby-girl, screenshot from *Uncut-Playing with Life* (1995)262

The above image comes from one of the most excruciating scenes in the film. Here, Chuck Mike narrates that in one of his early visits to Stella, he witnessed her attempts to circumcise a one-year-old girl. He tried to persuade her and

260 J. Prosser, "Introduction", 8.

261 K. Thomas, "Wounding Apertures: Violence, Affect and Photography during and after Apartheid", in *Kronos: Journal of Southern African Histories* (2012), Vol. 38. No. 1, 207-209.

262 This disturbing image is difficult to view, but it is reproduced here for the purpose of this thesis. I am aware of the major ethical issues around reproducing this kind of image, but I choose to include the image, hopefully to graphically represent my analysis in this section.

the mother of the child to discontinue the practice. They bluntly refused, for cultural reasons. He offered to record the events on video. In the image are the "bloody fingers" of Stella Omoregie, holding a blade and cutting through the edge of the baby's tender and immature clitoris. Towards the right are the fingers of the baby's mother who tries to steady the baby's legs, collaborating in the traumatizing of this innocent child. The baby's echoing cry is followed by interviews with young girls who experienced female circumcision, asking their mothers why they allowed their daughters to go through such a painful ordeal.[263]

Mike slotted the clip into the film as one of his numerous haunting visual narratives. The scene strongly evokes Prosser *et al.*'s assertion that "picturing atrocity has a momentous and memorable way of representing the pains of others."[264] Moreover, the photograph above, a screenshot from the scene, is an "iconic" representation of the trauma and pain of multitudes of women who have been "cut" or who are/were going to be cut. The iconicity of this image, the scene of the disturbing cry during the circumcision of the baby, and indeed the entire film, generated intense social protest that shook the foundations of female circumcision, as well as the practice of *mbopo*, from the 1990s through to the 21st century. A combination of real-life and staged scenes in the documentary film with activists speaking out against all forms of practices that dehumanize women. The campaign culminated in the legislation that abolished female circumcision, as discussed in Chapter One.

The campaign against clitoridectomy, one of the unifying performances and the essence of seclusion, contributed to a diminishing interest in *mbopo* in the 1990s. What remains is perhaps a small pocket of practice of the seclusion rite in some interior villages of Ibibio/Efik communities, peradventure with the exclusion of female circumcision. There have, however, been attempts made to "reinvent" and "reimagine" the practice over the last decade, as I will explore in the next chapter. In a culturally nostalgic sense, *mbopo* is still celebrated by dance troupes, theatrical performances, arts and crafts, music, and a staged "reality show" called the *Fattening Room* that was broadcast in 2013.

263 C. Mike, *Uncut-Playing with Life*, accessed on 24 August 2014.
264 J. Prosser, "Introduction", 8.

Conclusion

The modifications that have attended the practice of *mbopo* are the culmination of a series of historical events. Messenger, in studying religious acculturation among the Annang, submits that extensive changes have occurred in all aspects of Ibibio/Efik cultural life when compared with cultural traditions prior to European contact. In 1914, when Nigeria emerged as a single, amalgamated state, Christian missionaries exerted a growing presence on people's customs and beliefs. Many indigenous people were attracted to Christianity, given its educational and health benefits. A new generation of young converts, along with their missionaries, constituted a formidable social front that contested what they represented as the esoteric ritualism and excessive sensuality that accompanied *mbopo* practices. The photographic record of the early 20th century includes symbolic group portraits of Westernized chiefs within African communities.

This acculturation process was not without tension. Indigenous elders who were bent on maintaining their traditional system felt threatened by fellow citizens who had converted to Christianity. Jeffrey reveals that in Ikot Ekpene, during the 1920s and 1930s, such tensions resulted in brutality and even death.

The political situation in Nigeria in the 1960s further impacted the changing context that led to modifications to *mbopo*. The three-year Civil War, just seven years after independence, devastated the Ibibio/Efik land and other regions, fundamentally disrupting cultural traditions. In the 1980s, the return of social stability allowed for a degree of cultural revival. *Mbopo* was again celebrated and re-enacted among the Ibibio/Efik, although this came to be short-lived, due to the emergence of another strong opposing social force.

In 1995, Chuck Mike and his SISTER HELP initiative utilized the powerful effect of "images of atrocity" to publicize the consequences of what feminist activists termed "Female Genital Mutilation/Cut." As we have seen, his campaign created a cultural revolution that altered the practice of female circumcision and eventually resulted in the *mbopo* institution being radically adapted. The scene and the image of a real-life mutilation of a baby girl was "one image too many," and a decisive moment in the battle against the practice of female circumcision in Nigeria. Between 1999 and 2015, state and federal structures criminalized all forms female genital mutilation in Nigeria. These laws, coupled with an emerging social consciousness, generated through the global networks of communications, radically changed contemporary

perceptions about a once deeply entrenched Ibibio/Efik cultural ritual. Today, *mbopo* rituals have almost been confined to the annals of history, only to be reimagined by new media cultures and in contemporary performances of art and culture that actively seek to "re-invent traditions."

3 "The Re-Invention of Tradition": EbonyLife TV Show and other Recent Recreations of *Mbopo*, 2008-2014

The practice and perception of *mbopo* as an institution that precedes marriage has shifted dramatically among the Ibibio/Efik people in the 21st century. It has been firmly appropriated within the realms of the media and the arts as it is culturally reimagined and reinvented through TV shows, dance performance, music, visual and graphic art exhibitions, etc. Moreover, the *mbopo* ritual has been reimagined and reinvented in new ways in an attempt to satisfy a cultural nostalgia and to maintain some strings of connectivity with the past. While the *Fattening Room* reality TV show in 2013 represents one of these new ways of reimagining and recasting, cultural dance troupes like *abang*, *ekombi* and the "maiden dance," which are mostly staged among Ibibio/Efik communities during important functions and towards *ukaparisua*,[265] are other public expressions of this process of reinvention. Music performances that resonate with the concept and ideology of *mbopo* seclusion are also staged. Contemporary visual and graphic artists have also utilized the concept of *mbopo* to graphically evoke portions of its rich history in an attempt to "advance the general conversation about the ritual's tenets into conemporary circles."[266]

How can "Reality TV" be used as a resource for historical writing to explore the fluidity in cultural perceptions of *mbopo*? Neal Saye proposes that the term "Reality TV is oxymoronic." This is because, no matter how Reality TV shows are depicted as being real, the general assumptions are that any programme presented through the medium of television is based on entertainment, which is "the supra-ideology of all discourse on television."[267]

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265 *Ukaparisua* is a period of each year around December when festivities, cultural functions, cultural debuts of myriads of masquerades and dance troupes, and cultural dance competitions are organized both at home and in the diaspora communities.

266 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 261.

267 N. Saye, "No 'Survivors', No 'American Idol', No 'Road Rules' in 'The Real World' of 'BigBrother': Consumer/reality, Hyper/reality, and Post/reality in 'Reality' TV", *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 27/ 2, 9-11.

He further states that "Reality TV," which is commonly set within a "family-style arrangement," is characterized by using ordinary people instead of professional actors with no predetermined plot. Such media, he argues, can sometimes be directed towards "understanding the ongoing social struggles over the sign of culture and the definition of social reality and its preferred meaning at any given historical moment."[268]

Most films, documentaries, or Reality TV shows that are historically or culturally grounded are based on the interpretation of historical events through an engagement with a combination of documentary, visual, and oral sources, reworked in an experiential interplay by the film-maker. Interpretations are therefore acted out and represented in a filmic form through the subjectivity of the film-maker.[269] According to Francoise Pfaff, the history film-maker can function as a "visual griot," "a historian, a raconteur, a living memory […]" of the culture of the people.[270] Films, documentaries, and Reality TV shows that are targeted at streaming "past and present realities" are loaded with scenes that resonate with history. They therefore have the capacity to offer "visual clues" as to how events in the past unfolded. This positions them, as I do in this study, as an interpretative resource for thinking about history.

While subjecting screenshot photographs from the *Fattening Room* TV show and other online videos to close visual analysis, this chapter argues that, in contemporary times, even though there is residual evidence that points to the continuing practice of the *mbopo* ritual, its mainstay is cultural nostalgia, reimagined and reinvented through the genre of play, entertainment, and the media. I show that the Ibibio/Efik, both in Nigeria and in the diaspora, used different platforms to stage performances that connect them with the main values of *mbopo*, even when the actual seclusion ritual is not performed. Yet, this process of reinvention is highly selective and is so tailored to modern audiences and entertainment that any sense of cultural "authenticity" is sacrificed in service of public display.

The Fattening Room Reality TV Show, 2013

In 2013, EbonyLife TV staged a reality show, *The Fattening Room*, which was aired live on several TV stations in Nigeria and in some parts of Africa.

268 *Ibid*., 9-11.
269 R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past,* 3-5. See also V. Bickford-Smith and R. Mendelsohn, "Introduction," 1-3.
270 *Ibid*., 14.

The show hosted six "feisty, modern, single" African women from Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, and Kenya.[271] *The Fattening Room* show staged a re-enactment of the *mbopo* seclusion ritual. These young women were hosted for 30 days within a hut-based village compound, around the fringes of riverine topography in Creek Town, Calabar.[272]

The cast were between 22 and 32 years old. They were put through rigorous and unfamiliar experiences and trained in body beautification, body massaging, cooking lessons, and other domestic and craft-enhancing skills training. These were interspaced with lavish feeding bouts. This was an attempt to create an illusion of how the *mbopo* seclusion ritual was practiced in the past. The young women were secluded under the watch of an Efik cultural matriarch, Edak Totsman Etoty and her assistant, Ekanam Knight, along with a host of other attendants-in-waiting. Edak Etoty, a domineering and imposing figure, fondly called "Aunty Dakki" by the cast members, and her assistant were themselves former initiates. This was one of the means of authenticating the "reality" claim of the show. They drew on their past experiences to supervise and build the structure of the show so that it aligned with the purported "fattening room" ritual, as a means of keeping alive this history. This is because in the past it was unacceptable for a non-initiate to perform the duty of *mbopo* matron in a seclusion rite.[273]

Photo 3.1
Advertisement shot of The Fattening Room "girls": Ebonylife TV Show, 2013

The photograph on the left is one among the series of photographs that Ebonylife TV used in the advertisement reel for the reality show. It was the first image to appear in every episode of the reality show. This and other similar photographs that are not reproduced here were taken at the same site showing participants in similar attire. They were used to visually announce the show on TV stations. This composition is designed to awaken the viewers to the dynamism and sophistication that is expected to unfold during the show. It is a sensational visual presentation of six "feisty

271 "Meet the Cast", http://ebonylifetv.com/programming/ebonylife-homegrown/reality/fattening-room/, accessed on 13 September 2018.
272 *Ibid.*
273 M. Jeffreys, "The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women," 27.

young women." The advertisement reel that announces this photograph is presented in a fast-paced mode that is used to draw viewers' attention to the show, and to evoke a sense of curiosity in order to persuade a viewer to keep watching with the show.

Set within the pre-colonial architecture of an Efik elite family house in the tropical topography of Calabar, the photograph connects with "a traditional rural" historical backdrop, while still being fixed within a modern aesthetic. The subjects are dressed in elaborate and dazzling "French" novelty gowns. Their probing gazes into the camera suggest their readiness to face the unfamiliar but exhilarating cultural encounters they are set to meet. Robed in a manner far removed from the cultural practices of *mbopo*, "the fattening room" inscription on the photograph insists on their historical connection with the ritual.

The "white skin" of Sally, the South African, creates a colour effect for the staged composition. Stephanie, the Ghanaian participant dressed in a purple gown, takes the centre stage. With her arms planted firmly on her waist, she draws attention to the slimness of her physique. Her slick figure undermines the notion of "fattening." The photograph resonates with Imeh's notion of "staging as a concept of the modern-day interpretation […] and performance of traditional rituals within the framework of entertainment, pedagogy and collective memory."[274] At the same time, some elements of "reality" were played out during the show. Some of the "girls" mentioned that they did observe some dimples around their waists, a sign that they did really gain some weight during the show.[275]

The cultural structure that was strictly identifiable with parades of partially naked young girls as a show of virtue is here re-enacted with persons of a foreign background garbed in Western-style dresses. *Mbopo* is now represented by exquisitely and elegantly dressed multicultural inductees in a moment of fantasized reimagination. A practice that was grounded in strict cultural injunctions (including ascertaining if the inductee-to-be was a virgin, performing female circumcision, with sacrifices and rituals targeted at consecrating the expected initiate to divine deities, etc.) in 1914 was staged a century later without any of these restrictive cultural orders of the past.

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274 Imeh, *Daughters of* Seclusion, 254.

275 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QVJXnMWnq8&t=537s, accessed on 20 September 2018.

The photograph above and the TV show it represents evoke the lifestyle of today's Ibibio/Efik young women entwined with some strands of cultural affinity to the past. The influence of modernity from different strands of the society and the locally generated desire to remain connected to one's cultural origin has produced Ibibio/Efik young women who pursue modern sophistication in dressing and lifestyles, but who are also connected to their culture through food, music, dance, arts, and nuptial etiquette.

The 22 episodes of the show run from10 to 25 minutes each with a voice-over narrative and sometimes indigenous Efik music in the background. The show makes no reference at all to most of the basic components of the ritual like circumcision, sacrifice, or the certification of sexual virtues, which were essential to the ritual practice in the past. The show is a colourful blend of selected indigenous cultural practices with a lot of modern cultural inventions. The inductees meet with certain professionals including female fashion and beauty consultants, music instructors and singers, and career consultants. They attend the gym and jog. They engage in multi-tasking management and presentation exercises, and some of the activities and games that define a modern society woman. On the other hand, a few activities resonate with *mbopo*, particularly in the area of learning certain crafts and home management skills from matrons. Most are blatantly fictive, like reciting poems, music competitions, being blindfolded before being taken to certain locations, and going out for teaching exercises in a primary school.

The show is loaded with scenes that show the interplay between sophisticated modernity and culturally determined practices. The "seclusion village," where the inductees were housed for *The Fattening Room* show, is different from *ufok mbopo*, the *mbopo* ritual's seclusion room in the past. Unlike the *ufok mbopo*, which used to be a temporary converted restrictive room or hut for the few months of seclusion, the show's "seclusion village" was a spatially arranged "resort," where inductees moved freely around all facilities within the village. While in "seclusion," the cast were dressed in attire consonant with that of *mbopo* initiates after the Civil War in 1970. They were constantly rubbed with local chalks, oils, and herbs. They were treated to body massages, and fed sumptuous Ibibio/Efik delicacies and palm wine. They were also treated to a cocktail of packaged fruit juices and Western snacks, particularly when they were outside the "seclusion village" and within the parlor setting.

Every morning, while in the village, the "girls" were awoken by the banging of a local gong, supposedly reminiscent of the "oramedia," an enduring system of communication in Africa, where word of mouth accompanied by the

sounds of a gong, trumpet, or drum were used to disseminate information in communities.[276] The gong was a call to assemble at the centre of the village or at the River Deck house (where a meeting hut was situated along the riverbank). Here, Aunty Dakki addressed the "girls" on the expected events of the day, and inquired about their progress. Each day began with a wash with locally made toiletries: a body sponge made from plant fibres and natural black soap "with about 11 secret natural ingredients."[277] The inductees washed their bodies in a locally constructed open-roof and raffia-walled makeshift bathroom. They were dressed in costumes. They were then taken through a sequence of body massages, body decorations, and adornment. After this, they were treated to a sumptuous meal. They now received lessons on cultural functions like how to cook indigenous meals and how to dance. They learned some tips about the Ibibio/Efik language, folklore, and history, and how to sing indigenous love songs. These activities depended on what the schedule of the day was, as proposed by the matriarch.

Photo 3.2

Sally the South African with body painting and a raffia necklace. *The Fattening Room,* Episode 9, 2013

276 B. Okon et al., "The Documentation of Ibibio Oramedia," *Kiabara: Journal of Humanities,* (2007), Vol.23, 1, www.academix.ng/search/paper.html?idd=3300014700, accessed on 18 September 2018.

277 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QVJXnMWnq8&t=537s, accessed on 18 September 2018.

The photograph above is a colour screenshot photograph from one of the scenes in Episode 9 in which the inductees were treated to elaborate and lavish body painting and decoration. They also had intensive massaging with local chalks, oils, and herbal concoctions, and drank litres of water "to loosen the body up so as to be fat."[278] This resonates with the skin decoration, skin care, and massage exercises that initiates experienced during the *mbopo* seclusion rite.

The backdrop, behind Sally, the South African inductee, shows a mixture of cultures with national insignia. We can see the South African flag, which represents her identity and registers her continued loyalty to her motherland, despite the cultural dislocation. Yet, the carved monument and the red-minted cyclic print on the clay-painted wall speak to her momentary relocation and immersion into a novel cultural experience: the Ibibio/Efik "fattening room." The cyclical textured prints on the wall are similar to the *nsibidi* hieroglyphic writing that was common in the *mbopo* institution[279] and serve as cultural insignia that connect *The Fattening Room* show with history and, more specifically, with *mbopo* historicity.

Sally is skin-painted and decorated with local chalks, oils, and dyes, and dressed in a manner that reflects the ways *mbopo* initiates were dressed in the past. While her body functioned as a canvas to showcase the beautiful design and artistic initiatives of Ibibio/Efik femininity, the *mmong-mmong* motif on her face (see Chapter 2) portrays her as a member of a riverine-based community in Ibibio/Efik land. From the tip of her nose, the design symbolizes a flowing river that expands across her forehead. The flow splits into two channels on the right and the left cheeks, and empties into the rest of the body as droplets. This facial motif echoes an enduring belief and reverence attached to particular rivers and streams, which are seen as the source of vitality and fertility in some communities in Ibibio/Efik land.[280] There are many facial designs like this that echo the different identities and status of the initiates. But this kind of motif is also replicated through movement: the *ekombi* dancer's movement, whose dance steps and movements mimic the waves and the motions of the sea, as they connect with the romantic gesticulations of Ibibio/Efik brides.[281]

278 Roselyn Ashkar's interview during the TV show, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NF-pFQ9VQiNA&t=282s, accessed on 18 September 2018.
279 I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion,* 75-76.
280 D.A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, 76.
281 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-OUsEJyj8k, accessed on 2 October 2018.

Learning how to sing and dance was part of the activities that went on within the *mbopo* seclusion space in the past. The *Fattening Room* reality show afforded the inductees ample time to learn several Ibibio/Efik songs and dance performances. Professional dancers like the *ekombi dancers* were invited to teach the participants to sing and dance. Through precise body twisting movements and gesticulations, the concept of dance and how it resonates with love, femininity, family, and nature was clearly articulated.[282] Music was supplied by a group of indigenous Efik cultural troupes. They drummed and sang sonorously with music renditions that allowed the dancers to respond synchronously to the rhythms of local lyrical music. On some occasions, instrumental music drawn from indigenous or African lyrics was supplied between the scenes to generate a relaxing mood for viewers as scenes rolled into other scenes.

Photo 3.3

Inductees rehearsing the *ekombi* dance steps that they were taught earlier, *The Fattening Room*, Episode 10

The above photograph is a screenshot from Episode 10 of *The Fattening Room* show. Here, initiates are seen rehearsing *ekombi* dance steps that they were taught earlier by Efik *ekombi* dancers. They hold their hands up and try to sway in imitation of the waves of the sea. The backdrop shows the huts that housed the inductees in the "seclusion village." The roofs are thatched, made of raffia palm branches called "*nkanya.*" The walls are made of clay plaster and are covered with local paints made from a mixture of herbs and wild plants. Behind the "girls," we can see a locally made clay pot and a raffia bamboo armchair. These connect to the feeding and body massaging processes, as

282 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music," 51.

complementary approaches towards achieving corpulence for the inductees. On the far right, we see one of the ladies-in-waiting assigned to attend to the inductees. Her presence in the background resonates with the supervisory treatment that *mbopo* initiates received in the past. Although some of the services rendered to the inductees by the attendants were highly exaggerated.

Photo 3.4

***Ekombi* dancers performing a dance along with inductees, *The Fattening Room*, Episode 17, 2013**

The above screenshot shows two *ekombi* dancers performing on stage with three *Fattening Room* "girls" in Episode 17. While performing, the initiates continued to learn how to sing and dance Ibibio/Efik love songs. The *ekombi* dancers are dressed in yellow woven beads around the neck and the shoulders; colourful beads and heavily beaded waist bands; colourful raffia-made hand and leg bands; half-cut waist wrappers; and decorated faces and *mkpuk eba* coiffures[283] as a finishing touch. Their dress is similar to those of the *Fattening Room* "girls" except for the colour schemes and the beaded necklaces.

In the past, initiates were taught how to cook, make crafts items, and dance. These activities were replicated in the *Fattening Roo*m show. But the way they were played out runs counter to the "traditional" principles that guided their operation historically. For example, male drummers of the kind who appear at the back of the dancers in Photo 3,4 were only supposed to be contracted

283 The hairstyles adorned by the ekombi dancers in Photo 3.4 bear the name mpuk eba, which means "new breast." They were worn by initiates and other young women who were virgins. The coiffure is another identity that symbolizes the sexual status of Ibibio/Efik girls in the past. See N. Udeme, "Mbopo Institution", 4.

for drumming at *urua mbopo*, the outing ceremony. Men were not permitted to access the seclusion space. Men were only permitted to access to the space at the conclusion of the ritual, to admire and appreciate the young initiates.[284]

The sequestering of the inductees in the *Fattening Room* "seclusion village" did not continue to the end of the show. At the end of Episode 10, the "girls' bade farewell to the village and were relocated to more sophisticated and grandiose duplex quarters: though they had intermittent visits back to the village, when their activities had crossed the line of modernity. In the "modern quarters", they were detached from the "traditional" experiences in the "seclusion village." They remained under the mentorship of Aunty Dakki and her assistant.

A break from the "village" and traditional culture and the move into "the modern quarters" as it is called during the episode embodies the kind of movement that *mbopo* practices and perceptions have been through between 1914 and 2013 when the show was cast. *Mbopo* has transcended its former spatial seclusion to be recast in wider contexts. It has moved from serving as a valuable sociocultural tool for marriage into the realm of cultural recreation, imagined through the media, entertainment shows, music, and cultural dance performance. Today, it is symbolized through contemporary dress codes used during marriage ceremonies, where brides, particularly Efik brides, still wear marriage clothes reminiscent of those worn during *mbopo* rituals.

Marital dress, painting, and contemporary reinventions of *mbopo*

The Efik in particular have maintained kept a strong attachment to the *mbopo* adornment of the past. So much so that when girls who may have lived all their lives in cities outside of Ibibio/Efik land, or even outside Nigeria, come home for their marriage rituals, they often adopt a dress code that is reminiscent of *mbopo* initiates. Some adopt the hairdo, the half-cut waist wrapper, the elaborate beads, the flywhisk or staff of office, the face painting and motif, or they wear the *awok*: metallic leg rings. Others adopt one or more of these dress codes that resonate with *mbopo* seclusion in their marriage attire. At the moment when the bride is ushered out to meet the bridegroom, the

284 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music", 46.

audience typically cries out, *uyai mbopo*, ("beautiful maiden"), where *mbopo* symbolizes beauty, corporeal voluptuousness, and the honour of marriage.

Photo 3.5

Koko Ita-Giwa during her marriage in Calabar, 2014. Source: Linda Ikeji[285]

The above image is a photograph of Koko Ita-Giwa, the daughter of Florence Ita-Giwa, a politician and a former Nigerian legislator representing the Cross River South Constituency.[285] It was taken in September 2014 during her marriage ceremony in Calabar. The image was posted online by Linda Ikeji, a Nigerian freelance online photo analyst to celebrate Koko and her mother and a successful marriage ceremony.[286] The hand of a bridal attendant dressed in raffia wool arm bands and the faces of admirers are seen in the left corner of the photograph. Koko is seated on a platform specifically and beautifully decorated like a royal throne in her honour, as the bride. From my experience, this kind of decorated platform is common in Ibibio/Efik marriage

285 Florence Ita-Giwa: Biography and Profile, https://www.manpower.com.ng/people/15899/florence-ita-giwa, accessed on 2 October 2018.

286 https://www.lindaikejisblog.com/2014/09/first-photos-of-sen-ita-giwas-daughter.html, accessed on 2 October 2018.

ceremonies in recent times. Her entire dress pattern resonates with those of *mbopo* initiates of the past. It is similar to how *The Fattening Room* "girls" and the *ekombi* dancers appear in Photo 3.4. She is colourfully adorned with a woven bead necklace and she wears a half-cut wrapper, staff of office, and an elaborate coiffure. This dress code is deeply connected to *mbopo* rituals as we have shown in previous chapters. Through dress, marriage ceremonies thus afford modern Ibibio/Efik brides the opportunity to be constantly connected to the *mbopo* culture, even when the bride has not been through any form of seclusion rite.

Photo 3.6
"Mechanisms in Uyai by Imoh Imeh, 2010." Source: Cover page, Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*

Another way in which *mbopo* has been reimagined in the 21st century is through visual and graphic art. Visual scholars have been fascinated by the idea of interpreting their understanding of traditional forms of the *mbopo* ritual through creative works and through scholarship. This is motivated by an awareness of the decline of the practice and the possibility of it being forgotten among Ibibio/Efik people. Artists and art scholars curate their visual and creative designs and work as a means to "recall and record, and preserve traditional Ibibio/Efik cultural forms."[287]

Above is a reproduction of a large-scale painting by Imo Imeh from 2010, the culmination of his reflection and conception of *mbopo* as producing an "iconic bride." Imeh asserts that in the face of the decline of *mbopo* practice in the 21st century, he used an eight-foot tall canvas to depict the *mbopo* bride as a beautiful, ethical, and spiritual icon that continues to resonate within the aesthetic and ideological framework of the Ibibio/Efik culture.[288] Imeh's choice to use a huge canvas affirms his perception of *mbopo* as a "legendary conceptual dimension of the iconic bride," whose philosophy and ideology is continuously grounded within the Ibibio/Efik sociocultural framework,[289] both at home and among the diaspora community.

287 I. Imeh, *Daughter of Seclusion*, 233.
288 *Ibid*., 272.
289 *Ibid*., 272.

The painting is a complex artistic representation of the diverse and multifaceted activities that were part of the seclusion ritual that reproduces a voluptuous bride, post-seclusion. In its full glare, the painting mirrors the background of an inexperienced initiate who, at the meticulous hands of her matrons, has been transformed into a confident and beautiful bride. Her coiffure references the coiled hairstyles of past brides, whose bodies and adornments were embodiments of feminine pride and prestige. The network of webs that is loosely superimposed on the "fattened bride" depicts the network of activities that were invested during seclusion to produce this "icon of beauty." The "mechanisms in *uyai*" or beauty, as proposed by Imeh, presuppose the cultural aesthetics, moral formations, and spiritual immersion that collectively worked in the seclusion to produce a bride adorned with beads, body motifs, and elaborate coiffure as "accoutrements of power."[290] Through the genre of art, *mbopo* continues to be reimagined and preserved on canvas, through drawing in the 21st century.

Dance and music are other forms in which *mbopo* ritual is reimagined. Akpapan and Akpapan have shown that music was an integral part of the *mbopo* ritual. It functioned as a cultural element to enforce morality, provoke creativity, and encourage social belonging.[291] Some of the vernacular songs and lullabies that are still sung within the home resonate with *mbopo*. Established Ibibio/Efik musicians like Udo Abiangha and Sir Wilker Jackson,[292] and a number of others, directly reference the ritual in their work. Lyrics like *"ami nyonke ndima eboi oh"* (I don't want to fall in love with a promiscuous woman) by Udo Abiangha, and *"eyen Akpabuyo mme-mma ido afo"* (Akpabuyo young woman, I love your virtuousness) by Sir Wilker Jackson articulate the values and the virtues that were embedded in the Ibibio/Efik pattern of marriage in the past. They call for a reconnection with *mbopo* values for the betterment of family life and Ibibio/Efik society and culture.[293] Akpabuyo is one of the Efik riverine communities where the mbopo ritual may still be practiced. In the song titled *Eyen Akpabuyo*, which was released in March 2015, Sir Wilker Jackson uses his lyrics and the visuals in the video to eulogize a representation of Akpabuyo young women who, he claims, are still holding onto sexual virtuousness and modest lifestyles. He asserts that this Akpabuyo young woman refused to be influenced and be corrupted by

290 *Ibid.*, 275.

291 J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, "Mbopo Institution and Music", 46.

292 Sir Wilker Jackson, *Mbembem sio awo, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldiJVuoId-c*, accessed on 2 October 2018.

293 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqy6oCi18ig&start_radio=1&list=RDEMiDza5crckb-voNr69mQkbEw, accessed on 2 October 2018.

the alluring promiscuities and frivolities that are prevalent in the Calabar metropolis. This, then, makes *eyen Akpabuyo* attractive and marriageable.

There are also cultural dance troupes like *ekombi* dancers (see Photo 3.4) and the *abang* dancers whose performances are reminiscent of *mbopo* rituals. These dance troupes are sometimes invited to perform during marriage celebrations and in community-based cultural festivals at the end of every year. The diaspora communities of Ibibio/Efik people are also connected to the cultures of *mbopo* and their homeland through annual convocations of festival gatherings. In an attempt to evoke their identity as Ibibio/Efik people in a foreign land, some import or stage dance troupes that reference the *mbopo* ritual in recent times. Though the dancers may not have been secluded or pass through the *mbopo* ritual, the staged dance known as "maiden dance" is one example of this reimagining *mbopo*.

The Akwa Ibom State Association of Nigeria (AKISAN) in the United States, founded in 1968 to support South Eastern Nigerian students in the US during the Biafran War years, and recently metamorphosed into a broader Akwa Ibom ethnic-based association, celebrate their cultural heritage with Cultural Extravaganza Programs. They stage the "maiden dance" at their annual National Convention as a way of promoting indigenous cultural forms, like *mbopo*, through dance, music, and fashion.

Photo 3.7

Group of dancers performing the "Young Maiden (*mbopo*) dance" in Texas, USA, 2012

The above screenshot image shows young Ibibio women in the United States performing the "maiden dance," a depiction of *mbopo* dance during one of the Cultural Extravaganza programs of Ibibio Communities in the US. This was held during the Mboho Mparawa Ibibio USA Inc. 2012 Annual

Convention.[294] The dancers are dressed in a manner that references *mbopo* outfits. They are dressed in half-cut blouses and knee-length wrappers. The hands, legs, and the waist bands have colourful "furs" made of raffia wool. These are common decorative materials that connect the "maiden dance" and its performance with the *mbopo* ritual. The girls dance to local lyrics that announce the virtues of modesty and celebrate the beauties inherent to Ibibio marriage norms. The dancers moved synchronously to the music, twisting their waists, and shaking their bodies in awkward amorous gestures. These are typical of the music and the dance of *mbopo* initiates at their outing ceremonies, as represented in the performance of *ekombi* dancers in the *Fattening Room* episode.

The backdrop of the image features a community of Ibibio indigenes resident in the United States and robed in indigenous styled regalia. The men are dressed in hats, shirts, and wrappers, while the women are dressed in white lace blouses, wrappers, and high-profile headgear and beads. This style of dress features in Ibibio/Efik cultural festivals. Apart from the US flag that hangs by the wall, one might believe that the event was held in an Ibibi/Efik environment in Nigeria.

While there may be a dearth of the *mbopo* seclusion rite practiced among the Ibibio/Efik community in the 21st century, there is a continual reminiscence around the practice through music, performance, and dance. There is also an enduring connection of Ibibio/Efik people with the main ideals of *mbopo* ritual: the beauty/character combination, where beauty is conceived to exceed the boundaries of physical appeal to the aesthetic sense of sight. Beauty is considered an embodiment of both corporeal aesthetic appeal and the fineness of character and moral etiquette. These contemporary practices and performances that reimagine *mbopo* and connect the people to its conceptual ideology are attempts to reinforce the coveted values and virtues of the *mbopo* ritual and character that are earnestly sought after in many typical Ibibio/Efik families. These values are threatened by what I regard as the "moral porousness" of these modern times.

294 Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio, Virginia, US, is a subsidiary of AKISAN, USA, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q-Xhw6J4co, accessed on 2 October 2018.

Conclusion

This thesis is primarily based on visual theory and history. I have sought to demonstrate how visual materials, photography, and films are powerful mechanisms through which cultural change can be historically analysed. I have identified source materials across a century to piece together a chronology and context for the study of *mbopo*. I self-consciously constructed my own archive of *mbopo* through diverse sources, imaginatively piecing them together to create a historicized and visually oriented reimagining of how we can think about *mbopo* as a cultural ritual, past and present. This archive has been sourced from scholarly books and articles in university libraries in South Africa and in the United States, but also through extensive and in-depth internet research.

I then sought to analyse these visual materials. In this regard, I used close visual analysis of photographic images, screenshots, and film to identify visual details and explore their meanings and symbolisms. I have shown detailed attention to elements within an image but also how they relate to one another in terms of composition, framing, and backdrop. At times, I have drawn on my own cultural history as an Annang man who grew up in Ibibioland to interpret these images. I have sought to ground my readings of particular images in my in-depth "insider" knowledge of items of material culture, motifs, tattoos, body painting, and other cultural adornments. My understanding has increasingly been enriched by the work of artists and scholars in the field of visual studies, primarily Imeh, whose creative effort to re-imagine *mbopo* as an aesthetic form worthy of recollection and reinvention served as a source of inspiration.

In thematic terms, I have constructed a chronology of the ritual that shows the extent to which cultural change and context frames the way we can think about *mbopo* at different periods. I articulate how these changes align with significant historical events in Nigerian politics and in the Ibibio/Efik community. In this sense, I began by reflecting on the ethnographic framework of the 1910s when *mbopo* still had some sense of secrecy and spiritual mystery, a degree of vibrancy. This early ethnographic framework is epitomized by Dorothy Talbot's richly illustrated study of 1914. But already by the 1920s, when Mervyn Jeffreys served as a colonial official in Ibibioland, he reported on a ritual undergoing change. The missionaries and their African converts all too often represented *mbopo* as backward, barbaric, superstitious practice. The professional anthropological studies and fieldworks from the 1930s to the 1950s uncover cultural changes but also deepening cultural

conflicts. I have also reflected on a buildup of tension surrounding the ritual by modern forces, not only the outside missionaries, but also indigenous agents. A new generation of Christianized youths, an emerging educated group, and colonially upgraded elites were increasingly critical of the ritual. They challenged indigenous elders who wanted to maintain the status quo.

During the 1960s, however, there was a more radical rupture with a complete cutting through the spirit of the ritual. We have seen how Nigeria's post-independence government was insensitive to ethnic politics and was riddled with corruption. Above all, three years of devastating war had massive environmental and cultural consequences. Between 1967 and 1970, *mbopo* was physically difficult to perform because of the environmental devastation during the war. With little reprieve, this was followed by the feminist critique of the 1980s and 1990s, symbolized by the visually driven, global and national campaigns to uproot the practice of clitoridectomy as well as *mbopo* ritual with which it was associated.

There is a symbolic moment in 1995 that represents a radical critique of the fundamental elements of *mbopo* from which it could never recover. The SISTER HELP initiative, and in particular mass publicization through the "*Uncut*" video and political campaigns, mobilized against the practice of female circumcision and framed *mbopo* as ethically unsustainable. More fundamentally, clitoridectomy was defined as "Female Genital Mutilation/ Cut." The *mbopo* ritual was seen as morally tainted. The outcome was federal and state legislations between 1999 and 2015 that outlawed all forms of female genital mutilation. This moment redefined the way in which people perceived the ritual, which has not been able to recover in any authentic traditional cultural form. A core aspect of the ritual, clitoridectomy, contaminated the whole concept of *mbopo* and left the long-standing ritual facing cultural restriction.

Between 2008 and 2014, however, there has been a dynamic and diverse process of cultural reinventions with differing degree of authenticities. In some forms, like those of the 2013 reality TV show, *The Fattening Room*, *mbopo* served as a cultural prop for a celebrity-styled fabrication of rituals of beautification. The *mbopo* matrons of old gave way to the beauty products and rampant entertainment of the contemporary world. According to my close reading, other reinventions are authentic, creatively reflecting

or repositioning the rich and aesthetic legacy of *mbopo* in contemporary expressions through artwork, dress, performance and textual description.

Whether in its colonial, late colonial, post independent, or contemporary recreations, the complex and culturally rich visual and performative world of *mbopo* offers a dynamic case study of contestation and conflict in relation to the meaning and legacy of African indigenous ritual. Visual sources, like photographs, videos, and films offer a surprisingly rich archive through which cultural "continuities and change" and conflicts can be recorded.

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This book is based on Nsima Stanislaus Udo's Master thesis 'Visualizing the Body : Photographic clues and the cultural Fluidity of Mbopo Institution 1914-2014', winner of the African Studies Centre, Leiden's 2019 Africa Thesis Award. This annual award for Master's students encourages student research and writing on Africa and promotes the study of African cultures and societies.

This study examines the practice of mbopo ritual – a cultural rite of passage for nubile women among the Ibibio/Efik people across the previous century. Through an engaged and detailed visual analysis, the study argues that in the first decade of the 20th century, the mbopo ritual had a degree of vibrancy with an attached sense of secrecy and spiritual mystery. But between 1920 and the present, this vibrancy and spiritual undertone has been subtly but progressively compromised. A build-up of tension surrounding the ritual as a result of modern forces, not only outside missionaries, but also indigenous converts, set in motion a process that would eventually transform the ritual from a framework of actual cultural practice into the realms of "cultural reinvention" and re-rendering. Feminist critiques of the 1980s and the 1990s led to popular awareness of the damaging impact of clitoridectomy, just one core aspect of the ritual. As a direct result, clitoridectomy was outlawed across the country, leaving mbopo to be seen as a morally suspect practice. In recent years, the once vibrant, secret, and spiritually grounded rite of seclusion for nubile women has been reimagined and reinvented through public display, in art, painting, cultural dance troupes, music, and television shows.

Nsima Stanislaus Udo is a Nigerian. He was born and brought up in Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria. He completed his BA in History and International Relations in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He then proceeded to South Africa where he completed his Honours and Master's degrees at the University the Western Cape in Visual History. He currently lives in Cape Town where he is studying for a doctoral degree in Cultural Studies and Visual History, also at the University of the Western Cape.

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