

**RE-EXAMINING GENDER, GENDER
ROLES AND IDENTITY IN NIGERIA:
THE FATTENING ROOM TRADITION
OF THE EFIK**
(Report of Fieldwork)

**Akin-Otiko, Akinmayowa
Eshiet, Idongesit
Olokodana-James, Oluwatoyin
Edisua, Merab Yta**



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Idongesit; Olokodana-James, Oluwatoyin;
and Edisua, Merab Yta

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ISBN: 978-978-998-458-9

Published By

Lagos-African Cluster Centre,
University of Lagos, Nigeria

Printed By

University of Lagos Press and Bookshop Ltd
Works and Physical Planning Complex
Unilag P.O. Box 132,
University of Lagos,
Akoka, Yaba - Lagos, Nigeria.
e-mail: unilagpress@yahoo.com, unilagpress@gmail.com
website: www.unilagpress.com
Tel: 07039435625

RESEARCH TEAM

Lagos-ACC Principal Investigators

Akinmayowa Akin-Otiko, Ph.D., is a researcher at the Institute of African and Diaspora Studies (IADS), University of Lagos and has a special interest in the Religions, Cultures and Traditional Medicine of Africa. He has a BA and MA in Philosophy, from the University of Ibadan in 1996 and 2006, respectively. In 2013, he defended his Ph.D. in African Religion and Belief System, from the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. Over the years, he has engaged in research and discourse in the area of African Traditional Culture. He has written books, contributed chapters in academic and research volumes, as well as published in different academic journals. His current research interest includes bioethical issues in African Traditional Medicine and this has earned him a Fellow of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies (BA). His interest falls within the Knowledge and Morality Research Section of the ACC. He takes a particular interest in the religion and culture of Africans.

Oluwatoyin Olokodana-James, Ph.D., is a prolific scholar, dancer, choreographer and three-time recipient of the Lagos State Scholarship Award from the Lagos State Government (2008-2011). She is a lecturer in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. Her research interests are in African Studies with a special focus on Dance Ethnography, Gender Identity Studies, Film Studies and Criticism. Dr. Olokodana-James is also an Associate Fellow of the Institute of African Diaspora Studies (IADS), University of Lagos and Member/Principal Investigator of the African Multiple Cluster Centre of Excellence, Bayreuth, Germany.

IADS Cluster: Gender, Culture and Identity (Team Lead)

Idongesit Eshiet, *Ph.D.*, is a Sociologist with a research focus on Gender and Development Studies. Dr. Eshiet is an astute researcher who has participated in many local and international research projects. Her work on ‘Voice and Accountability in the Primary Healthcare Sector in Nigeria’, which argues for good health governance through civic engagement, won the 1st Prize of the Belinda and Bill Gates Foundation sponsored Writing Fellowship Award on ‘Investing in Human Capital as an Effective Strategy for National Development in Nigeria’ (2019). Dr. Eshiet is an alumnus of Brown International Advanced Research Institute, Brown University, Providence, Rhodes Island, USA, where she was exposed to a Comparative Analysis of Development Theory and Practice in the global North and South. This experience has broadened her horizon on development issues and as well impacted her research and teaching skills. She is also a Laureate of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Dr. Eshiet has participated and read her works at various conferences both locally and internationally and has published extensively both locally and internationally.

Cooperating Partner (Calabar, Nigeria)

Merab Yta Edisua, *Ph.D.*, is a development consultant, an academic, a foremost Children’s Theatre practitioner in the South-South Zone, a leading development communication NGO activist, a writer, director, performing artist, storyteller, researcher, applied theatre facilitator and church leader. She is a leader and member of many associations, NGOs and Networks. Her skills and areas of interest span Gender, SBCC programming, Tourism, Applied Theatre, Entertainment Education. At present, she is an alumnus of UNDP LDP in Nigeria and has completed the West African Capacity Transfer

Intensive (WACTI) and leads leadership training for UNDP at National and International levels.

Research Assistants (IADS Cluster: Gender, Culture and Identity)

Kehinde Samuel Olukayode is a doctoral student at the Department of English, University of Lagos, Nigeria. He holds a master's degree from the same department. His research interests are Theatre & Performance, African Popular Culture, Cultural Studies and Media Studies. Some of his papers have been published or are awaiting publication in reputed journals.

Abbas Aremu Rahman is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Art & Social Sciences Education, University of Lagos. He is currently a PhD student pursuing a doctorate in Education (Teaching and Learning of Islamic Studies) in the same university. His research interests include educational theories and pedagogy.

Amenaghawon Idawu (nee Abusomwan) holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English & Literature; Advanced Diploma in Early Childhood Education; Master of Arts degree in English Language, and Master of Arts degree in African & Diaspora Studies. She has authored and co-authored academic papers through cutting-edge research and scholarly ideation.

Blessing Chidiebere Emodi is an educationist with a specialisation in Igbo Language. She has her Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE Igbo/English) 2009; B.Ed. Igbo in 2015; Master's in Education (Igbo, 2018); and a Ph.D. in view. Over the years, Emodi has taught as a Class Teacher, Subject Teacher and university lecturer. Her interests include integrating technology and Igbo teaching. She is currently an Assistant Lecturer at the University of Lagos.

PREFACE

This project was hatched in one of the working sessions of the Gender, Culture and Identity Research Cluster of the Institute of African and Diaspora Studies (IADS). The IADS was established in 2017 with a vision ‘to become an Institute for exchange of cultural and social ideas and research excellence in pursuit of knowledge for the development of Africa, the African Diaspora and the world.’ Since then, the IADS has created a platform for researchers to engage in critical reflection.

In 2019, the IADS became a home to the Lagos-African Cluster Centre (ACC). The researchers of IADS were admitted into the Cluster as Principal Investigators assigned to the Lagos-ACC, which is one of the four ACCs in Africa. The ACCs are directly linked to the African Multiple Cluster of Excellence, University of Bayreuth. The Principal Investigators in the Lagos-ACC have won different grants from the Cluster of Excellence as well as the Lagos-ACC. This project, ‘Re-examining Gender, Gender Roles and Identity in Nigeria: The Fattening Room Tradition of the Efik’, is one of such projects that won a grant from the Lagos-ACC.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team wishes to express gratitude to the Cluster and in particular the Director of the Lagos-ACC, Prof. Muyiwa Falaiye, for considering this project good enough for funding after following all due processes. The team is grateful to the Cooperating partner, Dr. Merab Edisua of the University of Calabar, for doing all the groundwork and identifying respondents for the project. The respondents are quite important to the execution of this project and we appreciate their significant contributions and are grateful for their consent and approval to use their contributions in this work. We also duly acknowledge the immense support of Prof. Bernard Sorre during the process of analysis. Dr. Abiodun Bello was significantly and effectively helpful with the proofreading, vetting and quality assurance of the final report. On behalf of the team, I thank everyone who contributed in various dimensions for their critique and input. This we indeed consider a good prelude to more research.

And finally, I want to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under the German Excellence Strategy – EXC 2052/1 – 390713894 for funding this first edition through the African Multiple Cluster of Excellence.

INTRODUCTION

The African universe is typically one whole interconnected commune of existence. Just as the world of the living, the dead and the unborn connect in a transcendental manner, the flora and fauna are closely connected to the general and overarching cognition of the natural African person. It is in this very sense that 'we are what we eat', an idea that reflects the significance of dietary content to people's general well-being and sociocultural outlook. For the Africans, therefore, food is life! By extension, in the circle and context of education, we can equally posit that 'we are what we are taught and what we read'. To this end, the very essence of the Fattening Room practice among the Efik is to make women into what the society wants them to be. In this outlook to life and the world, the rites of passage through the cyclicity of life must be unbroken. Different commentaries already show that, as far as connubial relations are concerned, an average Efik woman has the requisite native education and training needed to hold onto a man and make a lasting home.

For a long time, society, especially outside her natal context, has described the Efik woman as 'promiscuous' based on these qualities. But such commentaries are, to a large extent, a reflection of assumptions that are based on a long history of socialisation and far-reaching popular orientation, often based on what people outside the Efik culture were taught. In the fattening room, an Efik woman is groomed and moulded to know how to care for her prospective husband and what it takes to look after her future home. If learning takes place properly and is practised by the book, men who encounter such women as possessing this orientation, are most likely to fall in love with them. This mix of acquired values and public disparagement

form the background for the research into the Fattening Room Culture of the Efik people.

Regrettably, the fattening room practice among the Efik is fast waning. The field trip confirmed that the practice is weakening and disappearing, thus giving this work very strategic importance. This is because essential information disappears with a waning culture. The findings of this study show that, while the practice in its entirety is not extremely bad, some aspects of the practice, such as female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM), that the government has banned, make the practice important to examine and evaluate in a research context.

In the main, there are four reasons the fattening room practice is found to be waning. First is the classification of female circumcision as a criminal offence. The second reason is the perceived not-too-healthy act of overfeeding the bride or the maiden in the fattening room. The third reason is the traditional length of time for which maidens are expected to stay in the fattening room, which varies from one month to seven years, while the fourth is the fact that many have linked the *Anansa* river goddess and *Egbe* ritual to the fattening room practice. This has occasioned a reality in which many who are Christians are seen to frown at the age-old fattening room practice, considering it as evil and fetish.

However, respondents tend to appreciate what can be learned in the fattening room. Some described it as a school where a lady is moulded into a good mother, a wife, a person with an overall good character, and one that is attractive to men. For these reasons, all the respondents think highly of the fattening room practice, but wish for some constructive and progressive adjustment.

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This research is distinctive because it is a blend of three different views. The first group represents the older generation who supports the practice of the fattening room as it is presently done because they feel it is a longstanding tradition of the Efik. The second group comprises mostly members of the younger generation who applaud the focus of the fattening room practice with significant adjustment and elimination of some needless parts of the practice. They also requested the possibility of upgrading the programme into a formal curriculum, where ladies can go and learn voluntarily to become better persons, whether married or not. More so, they are of the opinion that a similar programme or rite should be developed for men to prepare them for marriages.

The third group represents a few members of the community who do not support the practice of the fattening room at all. These are of the opinion that there are other possible ways by which a woman can be taught the basic things to prepare her for marriage. The third group is perceptibly hostile to the idea of the fattening room practice in its entirety because they perceive it from the point of view of gender imbalance. As a result, they ask questions such as: Why should it be a woman? Who is preparing the man for the woman? Why should only women be prepared for household chores? What is the place of the woman in the society? Why should a woman's body be made to become appealing to a man? What are the health concerns that go with being very fat? These questions describe the concerns of the third group.

This report, which assumes a deliberate polyphonic approach, represents field data gathered in view of laid-out objectives for the project. The study examined the core notions of culture, morality, and femininity among the Efik, as exemplified in the fattening room practice. The study addresses the existing

knowledge gap by going beyond earlier studies on the advantages and disadvantages of the fattening room practice among the Efik people, to observing the fattening room tradition, highlighting the content of the learning processes, evaluating the practice, and examining its heuristic value. These were done against the backdrop of the changing notions of femininity, gender roles, and identity in contemporary times.

The multivocal style of the report provides an adequate ground for the researchers to strengthen the voice of respondents and interviewees in a manner that underscores the role of gender and gender perception from the perspectives of direct cultural actors in the context of the Efik fattening room tradition.

Methodology

This is a nine-month research that included fieldwork in Calabar, in southern Nigeria. The first part of this project had researchers engage in library studies to review literature. Discoveries at this stage of the study showed that the fattening room practice among the Efik was waning. After the literature review, the Principal Investigators (PIs) and the research team conducted a field trip to Calabar with the purpose of collecting data for a documentary on fattening room practices and to carry out Key Informant Interviews and focus group discussions with people who had either experienced, or contributed to the fattening room practice. To achieve the objective of the research, researchers worked with a Cooperative Partner who is female and knowledgeable in the Efik tradition, and the Calabar environment. This Cooperative Partner helped to identify Key Informants. The In-depth and Key Informant Interview methods were used to elicit responses from practitioners of the fattening room practice. Eighteen (18) In-depth Interviews were conducted in the following categories: six (6) maidens; four (4) parents and two (2) caregivers who attend to the maidens; six (6) Key Informants

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who are knowledgeable about the fattening room practice both from historical and contemporary points of view and reside in the locations in which the study would be carried out. There were two Focus Group Discussions (FGD); one with male participants to get the male perspective, and the second with female participants for the female perspective. The documentary part of the project was made possible through a re-enactment of the fattening room practice.

The researchers had the challenge of observing an ongoing fattening room practice because the practice is fast waning among the Efik due to the influence of modernity. However, this challenge was overcome through the documentary part of the project where the fattening room practice was re-enacted with the help of the Cooperative Partner. The fieldwork lasted for 10 days, after which the researchers and the Research Assistants in Lagos, analysed the data collected. The data collected were analysed in accordance with the research objectives. This is provided in the Digital Research Environment of the Cluster/Lagos-ACC. The documentary that shares the title of this report is part of the data that were collected and analysed.

Research Objectives

This section is focused on the analysis of the data collected from the field during the study. The main purpose of the study is to examine Gender, Gender Roles and Identity in Africa, with a focus on the fattening room tradition native to the Efik people of Nigeria. However, there are five (5) specific objectives that will be responded to using the data gathered from the field. These specific objectives include:

1. To investigate the language, symbols, rituals, and shared meanings that characterise the fattening room practice among the Efik. The researchers set out to find out the languages, symbols, rituals and shared meanings that

- characterise the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria.
2. To identify the learning models used in the fattening room practice of the Efik. The researchers asked, ‘What learning models are used in the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria?’
 3. To show the multiplicity of knowledge in gender, gender roles, and identity among Africans. Researchers wanted to identify the multiplicities of knowledge (childbearing, homecare, cooking, sexuality, health, etc.) derived from the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria. The content of the learning processes was derived from interviews.
 4. To produce a narrative of the fattening room practice of the Efik against the backdrop of deducing a theory on gender, gender role, and identity in Africa. This objective generate the question: Can a theory on gender, gender role and identity in Africa be deduced based on the narratives of the Fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria?
 5. To contribute to the Cluster-Knowledge Lab on gender, gender roles and identity in Africa. To achieve this objective, researchers asked questions around gender, gender roles and identity in Africa.

At any rate, researchers found this study important because contemporary discourses on gender are dominated by Western views of femininity and masculinity that currently challenge the traditional notions on gender and gender roles in Africa. Nevertheless, since every culture has a clear understanding of gender and gender roles, which help in shaping the identity of individuals in their societies, it is important that such diversity of views in gender discourse be given equal prominence in scholarship, especially in Africa as a continent notable for multiple cultures and gender notions.

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The findings aid the reflexive aspect of the project by juxtaposing the multiple positions on gender with contemporary ideas from the West with the view to a better appreciation of the strength and structure of gender and identity development among Africans. At the same time, the study self-evaluates the existing African positions on gender, gender roles and identity and consequently produces balanced positions that are better apprehended as a sociocultural dialogue rather than an uncoordinated ethnological and discursive formation on African cultural practices in particular and the African world at large.

Data and Discussion Based on Research Objectives

As already stated, this study is mapped out and coordinated based on a research focus that has been outlined into strategic research objectives. These are systematically worked out into a well-tailored field report as represented in the subsequent sections of this discourse.

Objective 1:

To investigate the language, symbols, rituals, and shared meanings that characterise the fattening room practice among the Efik. The researchers set out to find out the languages, symbols, rituals and shared meanings that characterise the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria.

Findings:

Findings from the study show that the fattening room practices among the Efik are characterised by shared meanings, languages, symbols and rituals. This is to the extent that cultures are generally transmissible by learning behaviours that make them sustainable from one generation to another through established processes of socialisation, including rites of passage. As such, the objective of the fattening room is to make the girl child go through a rite of passage that acquaints and empowers

her with life skills, such as home management skills, relational skills, self-care, etiquettes and good manners, among other teachable skills and cultural ways.

In the process of teaching cultural ethos and virtues to maidens in the fattening room, the caregiver devises a special language and a set of symbols of communication with participants. All the participants in the Focus Group Discussion with women agreed that ‘...there are special languages used in the fattening room.’ In the words of Respondent 4 (R4), ‘...I can tell now but those languages are symbolic and you can’t get it anywhere [*others are in agreement*].’ Respondent 1 (R1) mentioned ‘*nsibidi*’ as an example of a special language used. According to R4, ‘... The hairdo carries a specially made comb from brass...and on that comb, there are some signs written on it, those are the *nsibidi* symbols.’ R2 mentioned that ‘the hairdo for *adiagha*, who is the first daughter, is different from that of the second daughter; and ...the hairdo styles are different types.’

In addition, during the fattening room practice, maidens engage in certain ritual activities that help define the fattening room rite of passage among the Efik. Ritual is taken to mean actions and activities that are done repeatedly and women are said to be a part of the ritual process in the Efik kingdom. In the remark of Respondent 2:

As far as I know, being in Duke Town Church where the English coronations of Efik kings are done, I discovered years back during the coronation of Edidem Iye Ephraim Adam that it is a woman that pours the Mmong Emem (Water of Peace) on the Edidem (King). I also knew [at] that time that the last insult the Edidem receives (marking the last time anybody can insult the Edidem for

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the rest of his lifetime) is the Ikong Edidem Eti, and that is also done by a woman (FGDM, R2).

In agreement with this remark, Respondent 4 added that:

My brothers have already said a lot in this matter, but I also want to bring in one other point. Efik people love beautiful things. In the government of the Efik, we believe in Oku Ndem, the overall power. The Mbiam Nfat (the juju makers) were the messengers and implementors [sic] of what the Oku Ndem said. The Oku Ndem were people from the water. Those that travelled to the waters saw how beautiful the people there were. So, when they came out of the water, they tried to make their daughters as beautiful as the people [in] the marine world because, if your child was accepted by Ndem, she would be rated higher. The process of making her that beautiful is to take her through this process and preparation... [*He however asserts*] But first and foremost, we are descendants of the Jews and we take from God's instruction that circumcision is a must, but we here do it to both male and female... But because the people from Ndem usually prefer female to male children, our people beautify the female child to look as closely beautiful as possible to the girls in the marine world so they can be acceptable to the men in the marine world. That beautification happens in the fattening room... (FGDM, R4).

As an attempt to aid an understanding of the rituals in the *nkuho* tradition, R4 further identified some of the underlying reasons for the tradition in these words:

The first phase of *nkuho* is to make the girl-child know all that she needs to know about managing a household, proper behaviour, etiquettes, etc.

The last phase gives her the final preparation and releases her to practice the things that she has learnt (FGD MEN, R4).

Another participant who agreed with the above comments also passionately added her own assertion, that:

Though I pass through it, right? But I think it was a rite of passage, preparing you to become a woman. Because I think that their belief was that before a girl child is sent out, she should be well cultured (FGD WOMEN, P4).

As observed, the *nkuho* happens before marriage and some of the women explained part of the ritual that usually takes place before the marriage in *nkuho*.

I think [that], about a week before my marriage, I was just not allowed to go out, friends could not come to see me and I have a senior matron or relative, somebody in the family and they [would] just bring food for me to eat and then they [would] massage me with the traditional ointment (FGD WOMEN, P3).

Another participant in this group, in a rejoinder, added the following comment:

Yes, I will answer that question, if you call that ritual because, in the house, you are being confined. Nobody comes in there except your caregiver. And, on the door, there is this soft palm front, like [a] fresh, one and they

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put it there; that is, to give the information to some other person that someone is inside that room and nobody should come in there. So, if you call that a ritual, I will agree with you (FGD WOMEN, P4).

On marriage and its related rituals, Idi who had participated in the *nkuho* shared a broader perspective on the subject of marriage to complement the contributions of other participants in the group:

R: Right at that teenage age, a suitor or a family might eye you as [that point] and decide to come notify the family, 'We are interested in this girl [just] in case you would want us to [have] her hand in marriage.' That is '*nkuho eyen owon*'. After that, you will be removed... That is the rite of passage for the girl.

I: Okay

R: And it is agreed that, at that time, you don't know what a man is, right!

I: Okay.

R: It is from that age of 15 or 16, that they will now mutilate your female genital organ... After that..., now you've entered your rite of passage, and you are proceeding to become an adult, right!?

I: Okay

R: At the age of 18, this suitor who has already indicated interest, the family now would have started making a move into coming to ask your parents for your hands in marriage. That's where the real *nkuho* now comes in because you have to stay another year... it could be two or three or more depending on how capable your parents are to keep you in the house, feed you ... because you don't have anything to do [other] than to eat and sleep (P 1).

It is important to note that, during the above discussion on the recurring subject of *nkuho*, the subject of female circumcision during the rites also came to the fore. As far as the general cultural awareness of the participants goes, the rite was incomplete without the circumcision ritual:

Before I was put into the fattening room, in fact, I was circumcised, Yes! And that was the first stage. (FGD WOMEN, P2).

While explaining the process of the circumcision, it was further highlighted that:

... then you go to the backyard where they have plantain trees. They cut some fresh plantain leaves which they use as a mat for you to lie naked. Your legs are held by two people, then a native nurse comes with scissors and a razor, after which they massage the clitoris to make it soft before cutting it (Maiden, 1).

On the part of the caregiver, the following explain the question on how to become a caregiver, if there was an initiation process:

- I:** ... is there any sort of initiation that these caregivers would have to go through? We are not talking about forbidden [things] now...
- R:** No no no no no..., there is initiation
- I:** No ritual processes?
- R:** No ritual processes. There is practically nothing... They just look at you as an elderly woman, that you have the traditional knowledge; they pick you. It all boils down to you accepting... your interest (P. 1).

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On shared meaning during the fattening room process, the researchers noted with interest the following point as articulated by one of the participants:

I want to agree to a large extent with what you have said. In a way, when you look at it with the lenses of gender, yes! When they go into this fattening, they are told this is what you must do: as a woman, you must be submissive to your husband; this is what you must do to your in-laws, and things like that. Not as if they really train them to be confident and free. Then, another aspect of the fattening room which we have not mentioned here is the circumcision aspect (FGD WOMEN, P.3).

No, it is just a notice that somebody is in the house, and their belief too, depending on the family. It used to be believed that if a lizard or wall gecko came in and peeped [during the circumcision rite], it would reduce your body or the flesh so that, no matter how [they] ate, they wouldn't get the curves that they wanted. So they put that [i.e. leaves from the plantain sucker]. Some used to put a grass that is *nkim enang* and they tied it with half-burnt firewood and [kept] it by the door, so that in case anybody – an elderly woman might want to come and see you or your mother friend may want to come and see you. In case they have any bad intentions or negativity, it will be neutralised. (FGD WOMEN, P4).

Providing clarification, another participant added:

No! It was just for you as a girl-child... your pride [*P2 re-echoes 'your pride'*] and for the family; just your pride. If you come out, you will look down on other girls that have not gone through that process as if they are not your mate (FGD WOMEN, P4).

Yes, it gives complexity to the other girls. Because you need to see how this ceremony is, especially [on the day the maiden is coming out]. It is usually a big festival [where] the whole people will gather. So it gives you that confidence and class (FGD WOMEN, P1)

... I think a normal Efik girl will be proud if she is put in a fattening house and taught how to cook. Some don't even know how to cook what we call *edikan Ikong* soup because there is [a] difference between *edikan Ikong* and vegetable soup [*other participants concur*]. So a girl will be happy if she is taught how to cook these special delicacies of the Efik – what *edikan ikong* really is, so those practices can continue. But let the circumcision be removed because it was not a palatable experience [*Three participants agreed that the circumcision should not be included but P2 believes it should still be part of the fattening room tradition*] (FGD WOMEN, P4).

I don't think it is completely going out because most people now cannot just do the wedding without doing the traditional [wedding] and in the traditional [wedding] you will go through some of those things (FGD WOMEN, P1).

Out of experience yes, because most times you are not hungry and you are forced to eat. The early morning food that is *garri* soaked overnight [*Others agree and laugh*] to make it soft and they put plenty [of] water in it, and it is given to you to drink and you are tired of it, but you are forced to drink it because they want your curves to come out. It is believed that if you are well-fed, your curves will come out and your body will be glittering and that one has not finished. Around 10 or 11am, they bring

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you another one and this is ... sometimes *ekpang* or *ortor* in a big tray again. That aspect was not very sweet [*All agree*] (FGD WOMEN, P4.)

No! It did not. The 12 pounds remain the 12 pounds and all the item *mmin ukung usung* (drinks for knocking door), *mmin akan* (drinks for prayer), *mmin ekom* (drinks for greeting)... Everything remains the same till today, nothing has changed. It is just the greedy parents these days. Even then, there was nothing like *mkpo ete* (gifts for father). It was strictly *mkpo eka* (gifts for mother). But, as we speak now, *mkpo ete* is even higher than *mkpo eka*. They will just give *mkpo eka* peanut, except the groom's family are rich that they will now enhance *mkpo eka*. But *mkpo ete* is up there [meaning on a high side] (KII, 2).

For the *nkuho*, like I told us earlier, we have *nkuho* in three stages. The early one is to keep the child on point, make her focus. You know education was by the way. But, when the Whites came in, it was pertinent that the girl-child should go to school. That is why circumcision at that school-age – that is, 7 to 8 years – was very pertinent, very very popular. As at that time, it was just to do the circumcision (KII, 5).

Yes, it was then year 6 or 7. The child was expected to start Elementary One. There was this general belief that we all have feelings, that even a child has feelings and they were careful not to let somebody touch the child in an unpleasant place so that she would not feel anything. There was this belief that once circumcision is done, all feelings are gone. And some married women then suffered it because they were denied what it means [to

have] feelings for your husband. They were denied what it means for a woman to cum when she is having sex with her husband. They were denied all that. All they knew was just go in there, do the needful to become a mother. But to enjoy sex? Zero (KII, 4).

At *nkuho* preparing you for *ndo* (marriage), you will be taught all these things [that] we have mentioned. But, for making you an *akwa nwan* (full woman), it is expected of us that, as we are sending out our daughter, we are not just selling her, so that no husband tomorrow will ask you, ‘When you came, what did you come with? [From] everything in this house, show me what you came with.’ Not from our tribe. From our tribe here, [when] sending you off, we are sending you off fully. They will give you a full parlour setting. They will give you a kitchen set. They will give you a full-room setting as you are going to your husband’s house and they will give you good money. Good money [has been] seen inside the seclusion room. So everybody that goes into the seclusion room – in fact, the girl in question that is secluded – has been taught and given something to say if she dares sights it: ‘*nnugho mbe nnugho*,’ meaning, ‘monitoring spirit I monitor you first’ [*laughter*]. Because it is believed that the wall gecko is coming to take everything that the girl has eaten, ... so once the girl sees it or if anybody that is there sights it, they will make that exclamation. So, culturally, like most of the cultural artefacts are brought out on the outing ceremony to decorate the *nkuho*’s seat... Most of the artefacts there, depending on the family – like in my royal home, we will bring out our golden gong, our golden panes, our silver spoons, our canon. My father had a canon that was used in fighting the war. Our artefacts from years of slave trade, the palm

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fronts, the [golds] that were collected during the early stage, depending on the family. Sometimes families borrow. You can borrow from some other families [artefacts such as] golden lanterns, the traditional long guns, the Dane guns, heads of Carmel, heads of lions that [a family member] had killed. And this differs from one family to another. So families do borrow these things to enrich their canopies. So it all depends on what you want to showcase, depending on your level of affluence (KII, 2).

Based on these complex preparations, a family that has any interest in a maiden being already groomed and now wants her as a wife in their family, may now go into possible pre-nuptial negotiations with the maiden's family, often without her knowledge. This is the second stage in the chain of processes. In the third process, once the maiden in question has been removed from the traditional fattening home, she goes to the church dressed in her gown. The day after is usually the market day and the lady is dressed in another attire as she makes a public appearance on such a day.



Plate 1: A maiden freshly out of the fattening room

The participant provides a further description of that occasion in this narrative manner:

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They now take her to the market... because she has to go through the market. People have to appreciate the work [the efforts] of her parents – how they were able to feed her, massage her [and] how beautiful now she looks... Oh! She has now become...she is going to be a woman. And the suitor there now has seen [her] and he's happy. People now come... keep giving her many gifts – many gifts – all the apparatus, and even the food- stuff, right! And then she goes back to the fattening room to now become a woman for the next four years making seven good years. So, she stays there and learns whatever trade... My grandmother was a seamstress. It was inside there that they taught her how to cut and sew. Then it was [the era of] the hand-sewing machine. There [were no leg-pedaled] machines. So, they bring the [maiden] there. She goes out to learn to cut and sew and they have all these crocheting [designs and patterns] ... they teach her how to crochet all that... what [designs] she'll be doing to put in the back chair... These antimacassars in the chairs and on the table...

Illustrating this further, the participant provided more details:

Like now that we have the Obong, right? You know the queen... Except if she wants to go to the kitchen, she has everything there. There are housekeepers. There are maidens who do everything. So, in the case of my grandmother, there were so many slaves in the compound who did everything for her and the mother. So, except there is a particular food the father wants to eat, it is then the mother enters the kitchen to supervise the cooking.

And as a queen, you want her to come and sit and train her child? So, she has somebody who is capable of doing

that. She employs that person. That's when the caregiver comes in. The caregiver is well taken care of. The king has a lot of things. Is it money or wealth? The caregiver is well taken care of monetary wise and wealth wise...

Assuming you are put in a fattening room, and you have an arrangement between you, your caregiver and your suitor or your male friend...and you are inside your fattening room – remember you've been circumcised so it's a license now that you can have fun or have sex – and maybe your caregiver is not around, your parents are not around, and your guy sneaks in and in the process, you become pregnant – when your caregiver notices that you are pregnant, you will not stay up to the day that you are supposed to, and the traditional rite of bringing you out, putting you on the podium for people to watch, to come and give you gifts will not be there. They will expel you from the fattening room (IDI, 1).

This is the extent to which the *nkuho* traditional practices can be adjudged to be self-regulating and self-correcting.

Of Symbols and Meaning in the Context of the Fattening Room

The distinct context of the fattening room inscribes within its space the presence of special symbols which also encode in themselves meanings that are understood only within this interpretive community by participants. These could have loose meanings and at other times may be complex. Participants in the Focus Group Discussion recalled and rehashed some of these ideas as presented further:

Sorry, I want to disagree because I don't think they stay that long in the fattening room and there is a certain age

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when you are 12 or 14 when you are approaching puberty, you don't stay there up to a year in the fattening room and then the issue of circumcision is not a problem [*some participants disagrees*] (FGD WOMEN, P2).

Some people do it – as I attended a traditional marriage in London. You need to see the processes even in London. People were telling them how to dress [even there] in London and it was a beautiful experience and it gave this empowerment you are talking about in all ramifications and is giving you self-pride and confidence and I was so proud of it. I took pictures and I said, Ah! So this thing can be taken to London. It is good (FGD WOMEN, P1).

[*The speaker chuckles*] You know at that age I was told and I did not understand and I went through it, and like she said the pampering, everything, the care, you were taught how to do this and that (FGD WOMEN, P2).

Yes! Because they want your curves to come out when you come out of the fattening room you will be figure 8. (FGD WOMEN, P4).

...we call it '*uwang idem*' because, while you are there, you don't wear clothes. Just a little piece on your waist they call it '*mkpin*' and since your boobs have started coming, there is a small piece tied on your boobs region (FGD WOMEN, P4).

It is assumed that if you wear clothes, it ties your body and you will not be as fat as they want. So, you won't wear it so that you will be free and, as the massage is going on, you will give them what they want (FGD WOMEN, P4).

I think it is a common one. You use your ‘*ofong-ukot anwan*’ (something like women’s pants/trousers), the beads – all those things are symbolic. And I am ‘*oduwan*’, that is, the second daughter and there is a bead for that and hairstyle and for the ‘*adiagha*’ too – she has a special bead and hairstyle, depending on your position in the family (FGD WOMEN, P2).

Yes! While they were in the fattening room, the *nkuho* attendants could use the white cloth to give a certain design [*shows the interviewer the symbol*] – this serpentine movement that, as you are leaving this fattening room, life is not a straightforward thing. Life is not a bed of roses. As you are going out there if you think marriage is just a straight line thing – no, marriage has so many challenges and those challenges were interpreted with this [*shows the symbol again*]; so don’t expect any straight line pattern of life in your marriage. You will see curves all over and when those curves come you have to develop a thick skin to withstand them so that your marriage will stand. That is one. Two, the flowery pattern on their faces, teaches them that you must always package yourself, not [only] when you are seen. You were a sweet-looking girl. But just [by] one drop, you turn yourself to *ekaeka* (i.e. grandmother or old woman). From there your husband that was not supposed to be looking outside when he comes back you are there tying a wrapper on your boobs. You have now turned into an old woman – no! Still, maintain yourself and your husband will not go looking right, left, back, and front. And they do that through the facial design [which they] make on them. And you talked about the brass trays. Most of those designs are also encrypted on the brass plates that you use in serving guests when they come –

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that you use in decorating your house. All of them have codes of love, codes of fairness about life, codes of being straightforward in life, codes of harmonisation in life. Without these codes [as they will teach you] you may not really succeed in life and your marriage (KII, 5).

I heard, ‘Marine, marine, marine,’ in the morning. I did not want to interfere, because what they brought in was bringing in *ekanem-abasi* (name of Efik marine deity) into *ndo* (marriage). We are Efiks and we know Anansa Ndem Iboku, Ekanem Abasi Ibodio – they are all spirits that... They are seers. If a king is about to be nominated, Ekpenyong Odusu, Ekanem Abasi, in particular, Ekanem Ibodio are consulted. [So and so name] has been nominated for enthronement. Is he qualified? Those are the duties of Ekanem Abasi; that is one. On the other hand, if the parents have stayed there five years, seven years, ten years, fifteen years and there is no child and they decided to consult Ekpenyong Abasi and they consulted Ekpenyong Abasi and Akanem Abasi in the power that God has given her was able to manipulate and help them have a child. These deities will not give [to] you and you just go away. You must return to them. So that is where those things come to play. But, in the free ones, no, no. And those deities – the good ones – are like guidance angels. We have guidance angels in the church. We have prophetesses in these newborn churches, the likes of Father Mbaka. They are all everywhere. They will tell you it is like this, it will be like that, it will happen like this. Those are the roles of Ekpenyong Abasi... (KII, 5).

Everything is symbolic. In the coming-out ceremony, for instance, [with respect to] the Efik hairdo, there is the

one that is done for the 'adiagha', that is the first daughters. There is the one that is done for the second daughters. In the coming-out ceremony, this hair that they have there is a length for the first daughter. There is a length for the second daughter. So you dare not make the mistake of giving the firstborn a shorter hair or the second daughter a longer length.

Considering the number of combs also, the first daughter has seven combs; the second daughter cannot have more than five combs from four, three down, [but] not more than five, you know. So they are all very symbolic. For the dance the coming-out costume itself. The short rapper that is tied – the *mmpin* as you call it, or the *oyonyo* that you wear – will all show that day whether you [are] betrothed or not betrothed. For instance, if the *nkuho* girl comes out with a longer *oyonyo*, it means that, before she went into the fattening room, somebody had already betrothed her. So, you can't see all [of] her – you know everything she has to offer – again. You can only see as much as you can see because somebody had already betrothed her. But, if she has not been betrothed, she will tie just the other small clothes on her waist and chest so that you can still admire her and get desires. So everything is symbolic. The songs are symbolic (KII, 2).

After that, they come every morning to dress you up. They use the native pot, the small one, which they heat and add oil, then water and something else. When this mixture is ready, they use a chicken feather to dip in and rub you, instead of their hands. After they have used warm water to massage the wound, they use the chicken feather, dipped in palm oil to put on the surface of the wound (Maiden 1).

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To these extents, it can be seen that the language, symbols, rituals, and shared meanings as inscribed within the fattening room practice, are not simplistic in their significations, as they indeed constitute important cultural aspects that engender internal cohesion and coherence for the native Efik people.

Objective 2

In this section, the main focus is to identify the learning models used in the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria. The researchers asked ‘what learning models are used in the Fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria?’

Generally, the learning models of the fattening room stems from the informal educational tradition, where nothing [like a] curriculum or timetable is scheduled for the teachings. The teachings and learning are basically [apprenticeship-like] in approach. The subject matters, including moral, health, homecare and similar teachings, are vocationally inclined – this is, the learning models that pervade the findings.

Identification of [the vocational method] as the general learning model is evident in the response of a member of the men’s focus group discussion. He explained:

Just like it has been said earlier, where you have all forms of vocational training, she is trained on how to dance, how to cook, how to make beads and mats and other crafts plus many other training including behaviour and proper interaction with people and how to plan for [her] future (FGDM, R1).

Following the nature of the vocational method of teaching, everything was learnt by doing and practising. A participant in

the female focus group discussion, who is also a maiden – that is, a ‘graduate’ of the fattening room – gave the details in this manner:

So, in my own case, the caregiver really took time to teach me how to prepare the *ekpang*. You have to grate the cocoyam so that it does not stain your hands. She tells you if it does. ‘What if your husband happens to pass by and sees you and all your hands are messed up with cocoyam?’ He might decide not to eat that food because he will feel that you were not well-groomed. So you have to make sure that those things do not come into play. And they show you how to tie it with cocoyam leaves and how you place it in the pot. You are shown what you have to put first under the pot, what you put in the middle and then when to put crayfish, when to put fish and when to put oil. You sit down and watch how they are doing it (Maiden 1).

Also, some of the teaching and learning were artistic in nature. This model is a form of vocational training that involves storytelling, teaching of proverbs, singing, dancing, attire dressing, carving and weaving. This was made known by a male Key Informant in his response that:

In the fattening room ... there is a lot of storytelling, especially at the first stage. They teach them songs [*sings in efik dialect – Ekpe ino ebot mi, mmangha ti mmagimag*] at that level. So that is where we have storytelling... (KII: 5).

This submission was also affirmed by a female Key Informant:

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So, you are taken through all that process and it is very artistic. And the way and manner she does whatever she is doing – the massage is very artistic (KII, 4).

Complementing the learning models used are the various types of knowledge received in the fattening room. These are discussed in the next objective.

Objective 3

In this section, the objective is to show the multiplicity of knowledge in gender, gender roles, and identity among Africans, in this instance as enshrined in the cultural practices of the Efik. Researchers wanted to identify the multiplicities of knowledge (for instance, about childbearing, home care, cooking, sexuality, health, etc.) derived from the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria. The contents of the learning processes were derived from interviews.

The findings revealed that a multiplicity of knowledge was received in the fattening room. This is analysed and presented under such discrete themes as childbearing and motherhood, home care, cooking, sexuality, health, skills, and morality.

Childbearing and Motherhood

Childbearing and motherhood in the context of the fattening room are characterised by teachings on the art of mothering. It involves the care of self and that of the baby – How to put the baby to sleep, bathing of the baby, breastfeeding, and the teaching of the children – forms the basic knowledge under childbearing or motherhood. This could be inferred from the responses from the female Key Informants, two of whom explained, in part, that:

There is an aspect that, when you become a mother, there are certain things you must do. Of course, you have to keep your baby clean. Apart from your own personal hygiene, the children must be clean. You must teach your children how to respect elders. So it is all part of it. A mother should be able to impart that knowledge on her child (KII, 2).

And the other:

... so that the storehouse will never deplete. So, the most important part of that seclusion process is the social education, the social character moulding where the women selected to do this work will be coming every day to teach her how to breastfeed a child. They will be checking her weight, how to carry a baby (KII, 5).

Nkuho, therefore, like many other African traditions, underscores the importance of adequate preparation or preparedness for motherhood as well as the roles that come with it.

Homecare

Homecare is another form of knowledge in the fattening room. This is all about the management of home and house chores as explained by a member of the male focus group discussants:

It is all about training your daughter or girl-child on home management, to be able to cater for her home when she gets married to her husband. In the fattening room, she will be taught how to run home chores (FGDM, R3).

Homecare teaching involves how to make the home neatly [and make it] properly arranged. The clothes in the bedroom must not

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be scattered all over. The sitting room must also be accommodating. Visitors should find one's home open and hospitable. A key informant and focus group discussant elucidated:

When your in-law comes around, this is how to treat them. When they come, welcome them. Always have food. Your home should be a home where your door is always open and people are always welcome. You know those kinds of thoughts (FGDW, R3). Two, they also teach them how to cater for [their] home. You don't scatter things. Your [living room] must look good. Your bedroom must be good. Your husband's bed must look clean – the bed sheet clean, everywhere clean, fine smell [good] (KII, 5).

Also, care of the husband is one core [aspect] of homecare. Cooking for the husband and the children; getting bathing water for the husband; setting the table and kind treatment of one's husband are homecare contents. Some of the maidens interviewed revealed their experiences in this regard:

I have said it. I [learnt] how to cook [from] inside there. I [learnt] how to take care of my husband. Nobody [taught] me. I learnt it there and ... it is making my marriage sweet (Maiden 2) ... They will teach you when you leave here and go to your husband's house, how to welcome him... In the morning, how you put water for him to wash his hands, wash his face, small things [like] you putting a chewing stick for him to chew, [washing] his mouth and how you keep water for him to bath (Maiden 2).

Accordingly, knowledge of how to cook different traditional meals for husband, children and relatives could not preclude teachings in the fattening room. Findings revealed that Efik people have three-course meals and special delicacies. One of the caregivers explained that:

Then they will tell you: for your husband to love you, these two things must be in place. One [is] his stomach so you must be knowledgeable in cooking all cuisines. Before you leave that seclusion, you are taught how to cook all kinds of dishes. You can cook this one today and you take it to your aunty or mother to taste first. She will teach you how to cook it. Then, the next day, she will drop all the ingredients and tell you [to] cook. If you make a mistake, she will correct you. [The] next day, it is another food, [and the] next day another food, until you are taught all the cuisines. And then the most difficult is ‘*anyan ekpang*’ (a morsel-type of a meal prepared with cocoyam and eaten with *Banga* soup) and ‘*efere abak*’ (*Banga* soup). They will tell you to cook it and sit down [to watch] you. In those days, our mothers could start from morning to prepare ‘*abak*’ (*Banga* soup) and ‘*anyan ekpang*’ till 4pm. So they [would] teach you all kinds of cuisines. After that they [would] teach you how to serve it. They [would] teach you the first-course meal. The Efik people have a three-course meal... The Efiks have what we call starters that is ‘*ekpuba*’ (specially prepared pork) and ‘*edita iwa*’ (slithered cassava, or tapioka) or *unam mbakara* (pork meat). They [would] tell you [to not keep waiting] your husband [when] you are about to prepare food. Put something in his face so that he can be busy, you know. And then, if it is not *edita iwa*, it can be ‘*nnya*’, that is garden egg and groundnut; or ‘*ntokon ibong*’, that is a special kind of

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pepper source used in eating kola nut and garden egg. They [would] show you how to prepare it. You don't give it to him while he has started eating, no! You give it to him while you are cooking and if there is a good fish – we call that kind of fish '*ayara iyak*'; that is fish that, during drying it, you remove the fatty part of it and keep the real fish part – then you put pepper on it and give him to eat. After that, when the food that you are preparing is ready, you serve him. Immediately after he finishes eating, you have to give him fresh palm wine to drink and that fresh palm wine does not go alone but with a little fish. Therefore, you may never know [in case] his friends are around. So, you don't always give him one cup. Bring cups [just] in case anybody is walking past and sees *ete* drinking palm wine and wants to join him (Caregiver 1).

From the above, serving the food is a major component of the culinary knowledge expected from *nkuho* training.

Sexuality

In the fattening room, the teachings about sexuality are all about how to make one's husband happy sexually. In the Efik tradition, hygiene is key to sexuality. So, the maidens are taught to be neat all through, even during their menstrual cycle. Then, no woman should deny her husband sex. On this aspect, a maiden revealed as follows:

About sex ... there is a white cloth that they will give you. They call it '*ufung Idak abed*' or '*ufung idak mmkpana*', which means 'under pillow cloth'. They will give you and [say], when you meet your man, how to use it and clean yourself and they will teach you how to wash it, how to keep it clean and even when you are

menstruating. They will teach you your cycles. They will teach you how to use clothes. Like me, my grandmother taught me how to use [the] cloth when menstruating and that one was even better than this pad. After using it, you will wash it using hot water and sterilise it and fold it neatly again and fold it and cover it for next time. Yes, they teach you that you should not deny your husband sex, as many times as he needs you, you should not deny him (Maiden 2).

Thus, being appealing to one's husband with sweet words and how to be romantic and nice-looking have also been identified as complementary to being sexually attractive. In the description of one parent:

And when you have finished taking your bath, dress very well. Carry your fine nightgown and wear it so that, when your husband turns to look at you, he will be attracted to you (Parent 1) ...A girl-child who is from Efik – I am not saying Akwa Ibom; I am not saying Ibibio, but Efik – can open her thighs without an odour coming out from her. The reason is that, from that first seclusion, you are taught how to insert your hand into your vagina so when you later have a girl-child and the girl child has a swap inside her vagina which God has put it there and the smell there is like onion and [whatever] comes out is whitish; it is not cream; it is not green; it is not red. So, by the time you fail to have this colour, it means you are sick. You put your hand every day in your body when you take your bath and bring out the swap and check. They will teach you that, whenever that swap changes from white to another colour, [you should] tell your mama. Maybe you have been infected from the toilet. They teach them to put their hand in their

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body. Even till tomorrow, an Efik woman will put her hand in her body to clean it. They will also teach you that you are not supposed to leave hair in your armpit. They tell you that it will bring odour – unwanted odour – and then your private part; you bring it down and wash it very well not just to take your bath *wuruwa! wuruwa!* – that is, in a rush – and go away. You will take time to wash your private part very well; take time to care for that part. ... And they will teach you that the moment you have sex with your husband – there is a cloth during the marriage ceremony that will be given to you, a towel, you will take it and wipe yourself. That cloth is always underneath the pillow and they will teach you that, when you finish having fun with your husband, use that towel and dab yourself and immediately you finish and your husband has gone out remove it and go and wash it, dry it, fold it and put it back there (Caregiver 3).

For the Efik, there is no denying the significance of sexual education in the rites of coming-of-age. This preparation is deemed to serve a functional purpose in the overall cognitive process of the girl-child or bride-to-be in the world of the Efik, indeed as far as matrimonial responsibilities and expectations are concerned.

Health

Another teaching in the fattening room is on health. Findings revealed that there are usually talks on a healthy lifestyle. This is basically through good hygiene and the use of traditional medicines, like the white chalk, to beautify and treat rashes on the body. These are parts of health knowledge as evident in the excerpts below:

In the fattening room, I was taught not to keep my armpit and pubic hairs. I was taught how to bathe in the morning

and evening, how to brush my teeth and I do them to keep myself hygienic (Maiden 4). I had vegetable soup, which they say is good for the body... In fact, I just ate most of the dishes, I won't lie. I can't remember what I was told, but that *otor* (grated water yam) helps in blood circulation especially as it's spiced with scent leaves, *uyayak*, and other spices. That mostly, when we put to bed, we would be made to take plenty of it and other slightly peppery foods with spices to help flush the system and boost the breast milk flow. But then, I also ate it even though I was not breastfeeding. They showed me how to make it and enjoy it (Maiden 3).

This is to the extent to which folk education on health goes in the equipping of the maiden in the fattening room. Though the preparation around personal health may be perceived or appreciated from an individual-centred rite, it is, in a futuristic sense, an aspect of education that will become hands-on in the bride's future matrimonial home, and, by extension, as a potential future caregiver in the fattening home and the Efik society at large.

Skills Acquisition

Based on the findings, there are various skill acquisition teachings in the fattening room. Maidens are taught language, craft carving, knitting, dancing, inscription-making, trading and cooking skills. This is evident in a Key Informant's description below:

Another aspect is the craft aspect. They teach you how to weave. We have our local *ndam* (wool). They will teach you the process of knitting *ndam*; from *ndam* wool to other things so that, at the end of the day, you don't just believe in buying here, buying there. You are able to

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do your thing and save money. On languages, they will teach you the regular *emesiere* (good morning greeting), *ete omoyong* (welcome sir), *mma omoyong* (welcome madam), *idem fo?* (how are you?) *Amadia mkpo?* (have you eaten?) *Mmagha iso fo odo...* (I don't like the way you are keeping your face). She will try to straighten up her face because she has heard *mmagha iso fo odo*. *Ndito idem mbufo..o* (Children how are you doing?) *Ah! Grandma idem mi usung* or *Idem mi isong ke* (Grandma I am feeling well or I am not feeling fine). They will teach them that. Because most children never knew those things and their meaning, it is there at the fattening room that they were taught [this language skill] (KII, R5).

[The making of] special, very special tray covers [is also taught] and I know that in some other places women were also taught how to carve the chewing stick. You know the Efiks have a special way of carving chewing sticks and these were all thought in the fattening room (FGDW, R3).

So, one major advantage of the fattening room is the [teaching of] technical knowledge. All of these bring about creativity [for the maiden and intending wife].



Plate 2: The research team and cooperative partners displaying sample design of textile weaving from *nkuho* skills acquisition training

Morality

The last set of teaching as categorised in this report is morality. One maiden and another member of the female focus group discussant confirm to the research team what happens in this process:

I love the fattening room because it broadens the child's intellect. There are certain things you can never learn outside but you will learn them there. I learned personal hygiene, social training, self-discipline, cooking, emotional control, anger management, communication with your mate, communication with adults and elders, and home management skills. It was just an institution where you learn all that you need to know as a woman (Maiden 5). How you can endure pain, how you can listen more and talk less, how you can be observant of all the things around you and learn the lessons, and how you can take care of yourself emotionally (FGDW, R4).

Consequently, in this process, the spirit and character of endurance, respect, self-esteem, emotional stability, mental alertness, and so on, are instilled in them.

Objective 4

This section aims to produce a narrative of the fattening room practice of the Efik in Nigeria, against the backdrop of extrapolating a theory on gender, gender role, and identity in Africa.

The fattening room exercise was one of the ways the Efiks preserved ancient beliefs, values, and customs. It was a cultural rite of passage that nurtured the young Efik female from girlhood to womanhood in a secluded room. The cultural characteristic of an ideal Efik female is signified in a young

virgin who had been pampered, ‘schooled’ with social and psychological resources, and forcefully fed with large portions of food to attain massive body size, curvaceous hips, and fleshy waistlines. Focus group discussions with men and women, and narratives of maidens, parents, caregivers, and key informants produce narratives which further establish this context:

In my community, men usually go around scouting for maidens who are going through [the] *nkuho* institution (FGDM, R3).

The *nkuho* in Efik tradition, as far as I know, goes by two aspects of life. Number one: When a girl-child is born and grows to the age of between 5 and 10, she is circumcised. That's the first *nkuho*. Number two: When the girl-child is of age or maybe, there is a suitor interested in her, the parents can decide to put her in a fattening room. From the fattening room, she is sent out after a specified time to her husband. It is a very beautiful cultural perspective in Efik land (FGDM, R5).

You will be in a particular room after the circumcision... [in] the first one week, you will experience pain. When I was in the fattening room, I didn't do much. In the morning, I would eat, I would sleep, I would wake up and eat again. They would be petting me... When I woke up in the morning, I would take my bath. They would now massage my body with native chalk – that white chalk – before I even bathe. They would be using that on me.... After that, I would take my bath and they would use that same white chalk to rub my body. There is one yellow [thing] that they also use. I have forgotten its name. They would use it, mixed with that white chalk – I didn't use cream – and camwood to design my body. In

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fact, when you eat in the morning, it is for you to lie down and sleep... They will cook 'otoh', *ekpang nkukwo*. That first stage early in the morning I don't always like because, early in the morning, they will give you *garri*. This *garri* they will soak overnight. Then, the following day, the *garri* will be so soft. They will put water in, and you drink it like water so that it will make you fat. You will be so fat. The food used to be plenty... They [would] put food in a big bowl. If it is rice, they will put it in a tray. If it is *garri*, there is a particular plate for that – a big plate. You must finish it. But, for me, I used to put a plate under my bed, when nobody [was around], I would turn it into that plate and hide because, if you didn't finish it, they would talk to you in a way [that] you would not like. There used to be a time [when] they would teach me something... [When it is] the end, you know when they throw the water, so you enter. That day, there were some people, about 5 or 6 or 7 or 8.... And when they throw the water you run and enter and, in short, that day, it was merriment and they drank this *ogogoro* (ethanol dry gin) and when I was inside, I was hearing a kind of celebration. [There were] not many people, but the few people that were there... they will just buy this *ogogoro* and drink it. They use a cup and throw it on the roof and when the water [comes rushing] down and touches you, then you run into the house ... That evening – you know in the neighbourhood there are other *nkuho* – then, I used to pass through the backyard to the other side to meet my colleagues. Sometimes they knew, maybe three of us would be in the house. We would talk, we would laugh, we played, and then they would go or, me too, I would return back. So, the night that I would come out, they would throw that water again and I would go out before coming into the room again... because now, I am free

after coming out. So I can go anywhere now. On Sunday, I went to church. They bought me new clothes. They called people, they cooked. That Monday was the market day, so as I dressed to the church on Sunday, the same way I dressed to the market on Monday (Maiden, 2).

...Every morning, they would soak plenty of *garri* (fried cassava flakes) in water and leave it for hours to rise and be very soft such that you can drink it like a smooth paste. They bathe you and massage you with local white chalks (*ndom*). Sometimes, they mix ashes with the *ndom* to massage you. You are then given the soaked *garri* to drink so that you get fat. If you don't get fat, they continue to keep you in the fattening room until they make sure you get fat. That is why some people are kept in the room for a very long time. After drinking the *garri*, they allow you to sleep. When you wake up, in the afternoon, they give you food again. In the evening, they give you other food... They teach you folk songs and traditional dances... You don't go out... You don't wear clothes, just the local chalk on your body. You can wear a small top if you have developed breasts. They roll your hair in knots called *ikpok ube*. They also decorate your face. Usually, you lay on a mat for you to sleep on. They normally don't want the blood and oil to stain the bed sheet so you have to sleep on a mat... You are given a special seat... a round seat that is meant for you alone while in the fattening room... They also cover your legs with a cloth, since most of it is bare after the shorts. You are taken out as a maiden and dressed in special beads known as *okpono* on shorts. Your breasts are left bare while your wrist is adorned with beads. The seat in the tent is made for your coming-out celebration. The tent is called *mkpoto*, which looks more like what you now

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see in traditional weddings. You dance the dance steps you were taught in the fattening room and people will dance around you. Although some maidens go to the market with someone who covers them [with an] umbrella as they shop for food- stuff, I never went to the market. But I was taken to church. It was for thanksgiving and I was dressed normally (Maiden, 4).

They kept me in the house and fed me very well – you know they want to feed you so that you can get fat. Somebody would come every morning to massage me with *ndom* (native chalk) and [do] my hair. My sisters were big so they taught them how to take care of a home. People would come and sing and play with us in the evenings, teaching us how to sing and dance and so on. If you want to go out, you tell the others, '*onungo mi, inungo fi*' (if you pip on me, I pip on you). Every morning, this woman would come and open our legs and check to be sure everything was okay. After about a month or so, we were dressed and escorted to the market where people gave us gifts. When we were back [at] the house, we had a 'Coming of Age' dance in the evening. After that, we went to church on Sunday to thank God (P2).

[Most of the time], people misinterpret the practice of *nkuho* (fattening room). They think it's just to go there and get all fat. Yes, I'm fat but I know that it is not all about that... Just like the Western education teaches us the Western culture or the Western behaviour in schools, in universities, colleges, the fattening room is an institution. So, my parents noticed that many young girls grow up in certain families where they are pampered and some parents don't find time to teach them those

etiquettes of life. So, my parents wanted to instil more of the cultural practice in their female children. So, we just went in for the experience or the knowledge. It is now very typical of some Calabar girls that they don't know how to prepare the Efik-specific dishes; we have a lot of them – interesting and delicious ones. But there are few Calabar girls that can prepare those meals. And, with the way the Western world is taking over, a lot of our cultural food or practices is fading out of existence... So, my father wanted us to go there and have this culture-specific knowledge on what goes around in our environment... It was when I was 7 years old... as a matter of fact we just went in there to get knowledge. There are three types of *nkuho*. The infant *nkuho*. The adolescent *nkuho* (where young women are groomed by confinement during which they are taught the rudiments of marriage) and the childbirth *nkuho* (allows one to learn about parenthood and all the necessary knowledge on how to raise her child, care and give attention to that child) (Maiden 5).

... as I grew older, I discovered that what was done to my sister on the eighth day was done to some girls in some homes when they're 5, 6, 7 years of age, when they're about to start schooling. At this time, they are kept in the fattening room and fed very well. They are beautifully dressed on the day they are brought out and taken to the market. The women will clap and cheer her with ululation (making the sound as in a demonstration) *Esin okut e nonye* (Give money to her) *E tor enye ndom* (Rub her with Ndom) *Mbok, nonye udia o* (Please give her food o) *E nonye mmong o* (Give her water o). People will appreciate her with those things – money, *ndom*, food items, water, etc. as she is taken round the market.

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Why the market? I don't know. She's taken back to the house and taken to church the subsequent Sunday. The Reverend will bless her and she'll go and start schooling. That's stage one. The next stage is a training school. Like Ete had rightly said, at this time, there's a suitor waiting by. She's isolated and taught how to keep her home, relate with her in-laws, how to take care of her husband in all ramifications – sex, food, petting and other things. In that same fattening room, she will be taught how to make *mbufari* (a tablecloth – it must be included in the items that must accompany bride price), how to cook menus like *ekpang-kukwo*, *obobot ikon*, *afang*, *edikang ikong*... You know, when an Efik girl takes care of a man – maybe a visitor – he'll fall in love with her and you will hear people saying, *Ohh, ononye ibok ima!* (Ohh, she gave him a love potion). There's nothing like *ibok ima*. It is that art of caring and caregiving that 'charmed' the man into loving her. She's not yet a mother, but she's taught the art of becoming a mother which is expected to be soon. When the phase of traditional marriage proper comes and goes, she is sent into a 9-month course. In some homes, she will still be taken back into *Ufok nkuho* (fattening room) where more massaging on her will be done. She's fed with plenty of *garri* soaked and left for at least twenty-four hours to rise and soften. In three months' time, when she's going for christening, she looks plumpy, sweet, fresh, sexy. The teaching of the art of a mother continues through all those phases – how to breastfeed a child and a lot of other things, [in a step by step fashion]. They come out properly trained to do things orderly and correctly, not like it is with our girls of today who do things anyhow. She's brought out at the expiration of three months, celebrated and taken to church (FGDM, R2).

...You know, *nkuho* was divided into three parts. The first part was the circumcision; the second part was the fattening of the woman to make her look plump and healthy. Instructors will come in daily to train her in different areas and fields of endeavour. Finally, In the end, the masquerade is brought in as a symbol of authority and government. Right now, we have the understanding that *Ekpe* masquerade also has some marine connotations. That is why, in some families, rituals involve them going to *Efe Ekpe* (Ekpe Hall) to do libation pouring and invoke some marine powers into those women before they proceed to their husbands' house in marriage. However, this last phase does not apply to *nkuho* generally. It is not carried out in some families. So, the fattening room has the positive side and the negative side depending on the family. But, on the whole, it was a very good school designed for training women on all that was necessary – how to do well in life (FGDM, R1).

We have three categories of *nkuho*...the first is that you are a child...between the ages of 7 and 12 years...The second stage is [between] the age of 15 to 18 years... You don't know a man yet because, if you know a man and they take you and cut your clitoris, you will bleed to death. So, during that period, your grandma will be monitoring you, and the good thing there is, that each time you come back from school or stream, they will use an egg and measure your vagina if it has been tampered with. They will make sure that they monitor you seriously until the third term. You know you have first term and second term in school. They will leave it till the third term when you will stay at home for a month and

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some weeks. So that is when they do it. It will not affect your schooling (Caregiver, 1).

It is indeed against this backdrop that it has been documented – and as also highlighted earlier by this key informant – that:

... there is this *nkuho uto owo ndung ufot* (*nkuho* that gives gifts to the lady). It is not the same thing as *nkuho* preparing you for marriage. Preparing you for marriage is different from making you come of age. At *nkuho* preparing you for *ndo* (marriage) you will be taught all these things we have mentioned. But for making you an *akwa nwan* (full woman). It is expected of us that, as we are sending out our daughter, we are not just selling her, so that no husband tomorrow will ask you: ‘When you came, what did you come with? [Of] everything in this house, show me what you came with. Not from our tribe. From our tribe here, [in] sending you off, we are sending you off fully. They will give you a full parlour setting. They will give you a kitchen setting. They will give you a full room setting as you are going to your husband's house and they will give you good money – good money (KII 5).

... this particular seclusion is in her father's compound.... She will come out in her maiden's outfit in which she is adorned. And she comes out and exhibits her talent... that is on Saturday or Friday. But it is usually done on Saturday so that she can be sent to the market. She has to go to the market where every other *nkuho* [mates] from different places [and communities] that have put their children in seclusion also [at] the same time like her – all the *nkuho* wherever they are – will come together in the market on Saturday. And it is on

Sunday that the father, the parent of the *nkuho* will invite everybody to come. They will give her an umbrella, [have her] wear her socks and gloves, and a small hat and a crown to walk to church – that is, *nkuho* goes to church. First, *nkuho* goes to market. Second, *nkuho* goes to church to thank God. After that is a big ceremony in their compound... where she will come out and dance and dance and dance. Again that is the first. But the second is not like that. [With the second], it is believed that she is put in seclusion to be given out in marriage. It means the first and second letter is given already and they [were] taught [how] they responded, where the father [was to] respond when the girl is put in seclusion (Caregiver, 1).

... it is a rite of passage for a girl-child, you must start at the early age of 10..., between 10 and 18. By 10, we call it, '*nkuho eyen owon*'. That is, as a girl-child, they will put you in a fattening room, separate, to prepare you to become a teen and going into adulthood...And it is expected to be that, when you are there at that time – maybe two, three... assuming you are 10 – you stay there for 3 years. That is, you're 13, you are a teen... You wake up, [and] your caregiver will now come in and be giving you training on how to become a full-grown woman – the food you will be cooking, how to do your laundry, how to dress your house, the cleaning aspects, the sanitary aspects of your own body and the family that you are going in [to], your house, your environment and your dance steps when it is the day that you will be coming out to see people (Caregiver 2).

...I was there. My grandma would take me and bathe me. She would take me to the backyard and she would

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continue pressing the wound...She would massage me. She will use white clay...there is a special leaf – the *Edada mmeme* leaf which she used to massage me. Then you don't go out. They will still put clay inside the water and rub you. Then you will sit on a mat on the floor. So they will bring you food and water. Early in the morning, they will give you *garri* that they soaked overnight to sip and you [are not allowed to] use a spoon. You will drink it in a big bowl [*laughs*] so that you will be fat now. We have a special seat that you will sit on, so nobody sits there...You will be well drilled and taught. And they will make sure that you internalise them...You must sleep, you must eat because it is assumed that, by the time you are to come out from the fattening room, you should be [voluptuous]... They will teach you how to dance different dance steps... They teach you 'nke' [*She sang the song making the sound that was used with her mouth and hands*]. They taught us how to tell stories; poems proverbs and all those kinds of things...When the moonlight comes out, [all you fellow maidens that were circumcised], will come out...When it is close to the coming-out ceremony, they will come around then you will come and sing and dance together and go to the market. When you go to the market, they will [gift money to us]... You just walk around, with an umbrella. You will be well dressed... Immediately they see you they will be hailing you “*o.. nkuho edi udua..o*” (*Nkuho has come to the market..o*)... After coming from the church, first before we move to the market... people will then dash you money ...They will admire you and then, from the market, you will now go home and you come to sit on *mkpoto*...That is when the ceremony will begin and that will happen from around 5:30pm downwards... People will come out and dance...If you are from a royal

home, they will dress in our Efik traditional dress. They will dance. You too, you will dance, too. The mother of the girl will come and she will put this white chalk in water and rub it on the girls, saying ‘My daughter has passed through *nkuho...o* (*mmo no eyen mi nkuho..o*)...(Maiden, 1).

... if we want to discuss *nkuho*, we have to follow it step by step...from the first day and the rites and the last day and the rites. So this for me rounds up the narrative for *nkuho*. You know [how] to prepare your daughter for womanhood in terms of what is expected of her as a grown-up. You start from a process. You know the first process is the seclusion rites ...and the seclusion rites begin with circumcision...So, we have the seclusion house/room prepared, so you have to put her in a seclusion room – a room where nobody can have access to, usually in the backyard. In the configuration of her ancient cultural compound, there are some cultural things that need to be done...You then have to use palm fronds to picket the doors and the room that is going to be used for the circumcision rites... ensuring that it is fortified traditionally by all powers against every power that will want to come and put your daughter’s life in danger... If somebody comes there with an evil mind, he or she should not be able to cross that picket yard to enter the room. The evil must not be able to penetrate that house... Usually, there is a particular plant called ‘*urun*’ in my local language. It must be there at the entrance to that room... So, while this seclusion room is being prepared, also your ban, your storehouse – how many yam tubers have you gathered? How long will they last? Is it for one planting season? How long do you plan to put her in the room? What is/are physiological attributes?

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Nkuho is about eating, feeding, forceful feeding ... There is *ukang ukum* (cowtail plantain). There is *edesi* (rice). There is *edita iwa* (slice cassava or Tapioca)... to make her outgrow her age; to make her outgrow nature; to make her so grown to fulfil somebody's fantasy; to see her beautiful – that is who we are. In my family, [by] 6 O'clock in the morning, you are fed with one bowl of water. By 6:10am, they bring a bowl of *garri*, soaked, and one long big fish. By 6:15am, you are given pounded yam and soup. The food cycle ticks round the clock – at most a ten-fifteen-minute interval. They had their own belief and so the girl-child who must undergo *nkuho* must go through this painful process (of circumcision)... The woman who is vested [with the task of] doing the circumcision would have been there. [she is seen as a] woman walking in with her small girl, holding her bag that contains the implements and her red flag and a round bell and a pot...The girl is pinned down by young men ... She will chop off part of the girl's genitalia and then she stops the blood using native leaves... Because of the traditional things being used, after three days, the circumcision would have dried up and blackened up with the herbs – African traditional herbs that have been used. If, after four or five days, the wound is still fresh, then there is a problem; something must have gone wrong. Within the house, another school begins...for humanity, for people that she will interact with, for the man she will marry, for the society and the people she will live with (KII, 1).

Furthermore, participation in the fattening room exercise provided social integration, personal standards or prestige, statuses, social regulatory mechanisms, and identity, against

which the Efiks regulated their own behaviour and societal expectations:

The parents that get their children through the *nkuho* process are respected for respecting and maintaining the family value. It was a common practice in the 60s to the 80s. But, it is no more popular today because of the changes and the technology of the new world (FGDM, R5).

So, I am a man. I have children [and] I want to showcase my daughters, and I will tell you in the next season or so many seasons to come, it is either I am preparing my daughters for marriage to a king's son, a prince or so. So, like a fatted cow or a Good Shepherd that wants to go for an agricultural show, you want to showcase your 'fatted' or your best cow, your best bull. You want to bring it out for people to see. It comes from deep within; it is a thing of pride to showcase. So, to get to that point where you probably showcase your valued asset to the public to see so that they can begin to price. So, in this case, the *nkuho* is being prepared so that others can come and see. For instance, back in the day, I [could] see a small child, who [would] go to the stream even at age ten and I [could] say, 'Okay I am going to betroth this girl for my son. I believe my son will marry this one', and I do some stuff, the needful. It, therefore, behoves me as a parent to bring up this child in such a way and manner that, every day, as I am passing by, you will be hastening the time laps for her growth, so that they can come and carry her... (KII, 1).

I am an indigene of Calabar, Efik, to be precise. I am from Ikot Nkpam Nkpan. My parents are both Efiks. My

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Dad is a traditionalist, a cultural man. He was interested in the culture of his people. I used to live outside with my parents when my father was alive – he is late. He was a civil servant working with the Nigerian Embassy before he got posted to various countries as his job permitted. We used to accompany him. Since we were seven girls, he wanted us to have a firsthand experience of our culture and inherit something from our culture which is the practice of *nkuho* (Maiden 5).

A typical Efik man will be very proud of marrying a well-groomed woman... Yeah! ...the ego of an Efik man. He wants to see [his] wife serve him very well. So he will really bring out the cash. So he uses the cash to take care of [himself]... He wants to be behind and the wife [who is] in front, [while he] raises his shoulder – this is my pride. (FGDW, 4).

... It is a [thing of] pride...you go through the process and you come out feeling different. You come out feeling you've achieved something. You know, you are ready for something (KII, 4).

[Singing] *Mbre ye afo so, mma mma anwan etete...kpok mbara-ukot, kpok ubok..o, yak edifo etie do, ada enye odo anam asian..o, mbre ye afo so...* This particular song connotes that, anybody who does not pass through the rites of passage has no right to enter where other girls are staying because they will abuse her saying, *mma mma anwan etete* (cut your fingernail, cut your toenails too, but leave your long clitoris to be there, so that you may use it to make love as a man). That will make you run away [as a girl who has not undergone female circumcision]. Anybody in the village [who] does not

pass through the rites of passage – every maiden in the village will abuse her as they sing that [song], nobody in the village will tell them to go away. They will [by themselves] run away (Caregiver 1).

...[*Emphatically*] Then, there used to be this belief that it was only a rich father that could afford to put their daughter in the fattening room, feed her and bring people to teach her. The food the caregivers cook is not only for the girl. [The caregivers] too will take [part of it] away. So, it was only a rich home that could afford that so I had that good feeling (Maiden 6).

As a caregiver, you are recognised in the whole village and being talked about. That is part of [the] compensation (Caregiver 2).

In addition, the fattening room exercise was an intentional attempt to promote chastity, curb pre-marital sex, and prevent promiscuity and extra-marital affairs among Efik females. Thus, female children were coaxed into having their clitorises removed. Female circumcision, therefore, was at the core of the exercise as detailed in the earlier narratives and those following from here:

... when they bring you in during that time they will not tell you that today is your day. In short the day you start seeing them dash [out] food, big meat, big fish, roasted plantain [to you], they want to make your mind settle and be at peace. In fact, you can see your grandma go and bring you fine cloth and dash [it out to] you so as to settle your mind; because, if you know that tomorrow they will temper with [your] genitals, you will run away... you will escape. So, they will pet you, then, early in the

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morning, before 5am, they will trick you to go and take your bath. 'We want to go for morning prayers' ('*Akam Usen ubok*' – early morning prayer) and your head will be [swollen] because they have [gifted] you this and that. And then, when you come out, because you will be happy to follow them, then they will take you out of your room. You must have dressed and worn your pants. Then, my grandma would ask, 'What kind of pants are you wearing? What type of dress is this? Go and change it. Let me give you something that will take you to where we are going.' When you go to remove your clothes and wear a new attire, from there, you will see a man and, before you go to that place, they will do the circumcision. They put fresh plantain leaves on the floor and then they put deadwood on top of it. And then you come and they say, 'Lie down.' And, before you say you want to run, you can't run because this man standing there will grab you and you will be shouting '*ekaeka mi o*' (O my grandmother!) Your grandmother will be telling you that it doesn't [hurt] that she is the one that bought everything for you. 'In fact, if it [hurts], I am going to buy another thing for you.' Then, you will lie down and a man will sit on your chest facing this side so that he won't see [the circumcision process]. Usually about three men... Then, another man will hold your right leg and another your left leg. The man who sits on your chest is handling your two hands and is not as nowadays that they will bring two blades. They bring their instrument and keep it on the deadwood and then they cut off your clitoris. In fact, the Efik people are wonderful. They dissected and removed everything. They have a reason for doing that... According to my grandmother and the Efik people in general, it is to stop promiscuity (Caregiver 1).

The Efik man believed... that a certain physiological element of the female genitalia can lead to promiscuity if not chopped off in the process of this *nkuho*... (KII, 1). I had the experience as a child when I was 7 years old. We were three [girls]. I was the youngest and, that morning, my grandmother told us that some people were coming to see us, to take care of us and examine us. We said, okay. Early in the morning, we had our bath. We were told not to wear our pants. They had plucked a particular leaf called *Eden idoduot*, squeezed the juice out of it, poured the same all over our bodies and gave us some to drink. About seven elderly women came around, took me to the bedroom, pulled my dress and laid me on the ordinary floor. One of the women sat across my chest and the other two held my legs and brought a knife called *akadang*. They told me that they wanted to do something but they would not harm me and that I should not shout; [and that] if I must shout, I shouldn't say *mma akpa o* (I'm dead o) because if I said so, I would die. Then they cut me all over. There was a lot of bleeding but they managed to stop it. When they finished, they told me not to go out. I was a very young person and did not really mind the wound but you would have to keep your legs apart when walking.

The thing is, they did not even tell us about it. We were told that some people were coming to take care of us. It was only in my time that I told my daughters about it before they went into it because they had heard my mother and my grandmother complaining about them. They knew but they were scared. So, I assured them that nothing would go wrong with it (P2).

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It was my parents that forced me go through the process because they felt that they didn't want me to grow like a man. They said, 'When you grow like that, you resemble a man...' That, without your clitoris being cut, you are just like a man – that it grows as your body is growing and some will even grow longer than the body and come out looking like a penis so that, when you are wearing the pants, it would rub on the pants and touch the pants. They felt it would bring sexual arousal. That is why it needs to be [cut]... I don't just sit and feel like having sex like some people say; I don't feel such things until I am being touched by a man (Maiden 4).

But I know that, from what I have seen, most of the girls are able to stay with a man. You could date one person for a long time ... and you are faithful in sexual relationship until you move out of that relationship. But I think, because my elder sister was like that, I am like that and I have other girls who have been like that. You are able to stay in a relationship... (KII 4).

...It was then year 6 or 7 [when] the child was expected to start Elementary One. There was this general belief that we all had [sexual] feelings, that even a child had [sexual] feelings and they were careful not to let somebody touch the child in an unpleasant place so that she would not feel anything. There was this belief that, once circumcision is done, all feelings are gone (KII 5).
...It was my parents' decision. In fact... I did not want to go into it because I have already seen people that are doing it. They used to shout, so I did not want to experience it. But they did it to me when I did not know...I was a kid,... like 38 years ago before I entered my Secondary School [years] ... I was in the fattening

room, say [about] six months... If you are in school, maybe primary school, you might be circumcised when the school is on vacation... because your parents by that time...know that you are a virgin. From the first day before I was even circumcised, I didn't know. My grandma asked me to go and take my bath, clean my body and, after finishing, they [called] men to come and hold me. I wanted to be circumcised because my elder sister did it. And, by the way, when you want to come out from the circumcision the way they treat them will make someone want to do it [*laughing*]. I bathed, then my grandma called me into the backyard for the circumcision. I never knew, they tricked me. As soon as I got to the backyard they had [spread] plantain leaves on the floor. And, the next minute, they called two guys. They came in. One other woman came in and, before I knew it, they asked me to lie down on the plantain leaves...I removed my clothes and they asked me to lie down and one guy sat on my chest ... the other person would hold my legs and the woman who was to circumcise would come in and do what she was asked to do...After that, I went to take my bath, because you won't be able to stand..., they'd hold you. Then the lady would be coming to use hot water to press it until the pain would subside...It is a woman who normally [carries out this process]... a caregiver in the community. It is like you say, for example, home delivery from traditional birth attendants (Maiden 1).

As for my children, I was reluctant to put them through that process. I was literally forced by my grandmother and parents to do it. They [cited] a lot of disadvantages for not doing it, making me see reasons why I must do it. They said without removing the clitoris, the children

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would be wayward, they would have difficulty during labour when giving birth to children... (P2).

...I was thirteen... (I was there) for just one month because it was during my third term holiday, after my primary school...I was going to secondary school. From day one, they circumcised me...A mature woman, a big woman. I think it [was] a woman [who] did not meet a man again, she [was] the one that [was] handling that circumcision... Because, then, I didn't know a man. They did it to me; they cut it. They held my legs. Three men held my legs because I was in fear... because I was lying down like this, you know. I heard the story of it so I was running. I did not want it. So when I got to the village for holiday, I went to my grandmother's place. That was where they did it... very early in the morning. They now pet me and called me. I bathed. It was a planned [thing]. They now told me to go to the backyard. When I went to the backyard, I started feeling something as they called me early in the morning that I should take my bath. So I was feeling something...When I took my bath, they now led me to where they would do the [thing]. Those men were already there...They put me down on the plantain leaves on the ground. I was crying, so they held me...One person was sitting on my chest...I cannot even raise my leg...the woman was petting me as I [went] naked...I was naked. She was pressing my clitoris just talking to me [and] petting me saying don't worry it will not [hurt]. She was doing it like that until she cut it off [at once]. It was painful. In short, at that particular time, it did not [hurt] too much because it was soft. But, after that, I felt the pain. So after that, you will go inside the house. Nobody would see you again (Maiden 2).

It always happens in the morning. On the first day, they wake you by 5:30am or 6am and ask you to have your bath, because you cannot bathe after the circumcision. You have to bathe before the circumcision. Then you go to the backyard where they have plantain trees. They cut some fresh plantain leaves which they use as a mat for you to lie naked. Your legs are held by two people. Then, a native nurse comes with scissors and a razor, after which they massage the clitoris to make it soft before cutting it... It was painful because, in those days, there was nothing like giving you an injection to reduce the pain. It was painful ...it was done in our house, so that [one] can be helped into the room since [one] won't be able to walk on one's own. To reduce the bleeding, there is a leaf that is squeezed into the injury, which stops it. When it stops, they use water diluted in Dettol to clean your entire body and take you to the house. After that, they come every morning to dress you up. They use the native pot, the small one, which they heat and add oil, then water and something else. When this mixture is ready, they use the chicken feather to dip in and rub you instead of their hands. After they have used warm water to massage the wound, they use the chicken feather, dipped in palm oil to [clean] the surface of the wound... To add to what Respondents 3 and 5 have said, I will go a little into the past. I grew up as a child with my grandmother and I had just a sister. When she was born, on the 8th day, the 'baby *nkuho*' that the chief talked about, was done to my sister. As tender as I was, I asked my grandmother why they had to 'wound' my sister. She told me that there was the belief that, if the girl child was not circumcised, she would miss her steps in life. 'Miss her steps, how?' I asked her. She then said something

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about '*Nsan awan*' (street loitering), meaning infidelity or sexual immorality (FGDM, 2).

Indeed, of an interesting significance is the presentation of *nkuho* as a 'school'. Besides teachings centered on improved childcare and personal healthcare, cookery, folklore, songs, cultural dances, homemaking, etc., findings revealed how words and actions framed by the Efik woman culminated in marital harmony.





Plates 3 and 4: Maidens friends during the outing ceremony to mark the end of the fattening room in a carnivalesque display (2021 fieldwork material)

At its core are the stereotypic beliefs which formed behavioural patterns and task specialisation around the female person. Therefore, there are noticeable differences between females who underwent the fattening room and those who did not:

The very first one that I experienced was... about 38 years ago... when my [older] sister's first daughter was put in the fattening room. And so, I was assigned in order to take care of her, train her, teach her what she needed to know; give her the experiences of how to become a woman, because that is a rite of passage for a girl-child (Caregiver 2).

Nkuho is an institution made specifically for the training of the girl-child from childhood to teenage [years] and adulthood. It is all about training your daughter or girl-

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child on home management, to be able to cater for her home when she gets married to her husband. In the fattening room, she will be taught how to run home chores, how to prepare different types of food and pamper, and maybe [get] betrothed to a man (FGDM, R3),

The fattening room is a home for young maidens, and, in that home, special things are provided. When I say 'special things', the grooming, general grooming from the way your home is made up, your meals, the games you play, the massaging, and all other things. So the fattening room is a really, really beautiful place to be in (FGDW, P1).

I see the fattening room as a complete school for the Efik [woman] – just as it has been said earlier – where you have all forms of vocational training. She is trained on how to dance, how to cook, how to make beads and mats and other crafts plus many other training including behaviours and proper interaction with people and how to plan for your future. It was complete training. Looking at it critically, some communities brought in Ekpe masquerade at the end of it (FGDM, R1).

The fattening room is an interesting experience and I wish we could continue to put our children through, because, there in the fattening room, you are not just eating and sleeping; you are being taught some domestic crafts – how to make the cloth to cover the dish you are presenting to your husband; how to design beautiful table cover; how to keep your room clean – in details – not like the one you are teaching a growing child in a hurry. I was taught how to speak to an adult, how to speak to my husband, how to react when he is angry, how to make

dishes, how to present them, how to care for your children when you start having them, how to clean up the child and how to keep the napkins when you are not yet ready to wash. I was taught how to manage my life without a [housekeeper], how to do ‘a hundred things’ at once (*bemused*). It was fun, fun, fun... And then you eat all sorts of dishes. You rest, you clean yourself up (Maiden 6).

...It is very important for a woman to go through the fattening room because that is where she's groomed. That is where she is moulded. Apart from being moulded for her home, she's trained to fit into the society also. She is taught a whole lot of things. She's taught how to be independent in her home and even in her society. So, to me, it is important that every woman should go through that process before going into the society... Well, I don't know who started it, but I know that a decision is taken maybe by the father ... because of infidelity. It was important to get the female child through that process. And immediately after that, she goes into (the room) because everything is together. You are taught to know that you are for one man and then you have to take care of your home (KII, 4).

...Let me use myself as an example: anywhere he is, even if he is going to commit, he will have the courtesy to tell me, ‘O baby, *mbok ndu ke itie ntem ntem...* (I'm here in so and so place.’ Even if he is lying, it is a sign of respect. If somebody does not respect you, they will not lie to you to cover up their sin... Probably you know he is lying but for the fact that he has respected you and not flaunting it, you pretend... And then you treat him well when he comes. Even if he has 1 naira, he will tell you, ‘I have this 1 naira o, I wanted to use it for...’. You

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say, ‘no, o, I think I needed it for this o...’ He will say, ‘Okay na, if you say so’. You know, you're being a baby all the time. He'll say, ‘Okay, take na, take na’. Are you not having more rights? You are having! And anywhere he [is], he will say, ‘Ah, my wife will be worried, she is expecting me.’ He will be longing to get back to his home. And then the people outside will say he has been given a love potion. Every man wants to get back home every time when the home is peaceful and loving, and then the relatives will say, ‘Oh my brother is gone, he has eaten the love potion.’ There is no love potion... and when he knows that it is his wife that will stand to cook his food; he will be eager to come back home... We were also taught that you don't have rights over your body. And the man is human to know when you have overworked and he will understand that you are overworked. So he won't want to come disturbing you. But if nature makes him come asking, don't say no. If you must say no, let it be on [terms of] agreement – let him understand. We were taught not to ever deny him of our body even if [and] when you are quarrelling, it should not [get to] that level. In fact, we were taught that the quarrel should be settled there (in sex) (Maiden 6).

nkuho is one of our most beautiful, intricate, often misconstrued but highly sophisticated [aspects of] culture that we have. In terms of its processes, in terms of its philosophy, in terms of its outcomes... Just a diversion – When I was growing up, I used to hear my uncle that went to sojourn in other places like Lagos say that anybody there that is going to Calabar to work – if you are not from there and you are going to Calabar to work – they will do all sought things. They don't touch the Calabar woman. They will say a Calabar woman is

this, a Calabar woman is that; a Calabar woman – once you eat their food and once you touch her you will not return home and blahblahblah! That is why I say it is often misconstrued because all of the fears expressed, all of the anxieties, all of the uncertainties that – if you go to Calabar [you] don't touch the Calabar woman – once they transfer your child to Calabar you will say, *Chei!* You have lost this child, he will not come back...o [that], even if you are married, [the] Calabar woman will hold your husband. It was in a way a misconstrued [manner] of telling the story of the Efik woman. The *nkuho* tells the story of the Efik woman – a well cultured, well rounded, well brought up, well nurtured, well doctored, prepared Efik woman. In my culture, the Efik woman is supposed to be a rounded woman as you can see from Dr. Edisua (*referring to the Interviewer*). So the Efik woman should be rounded. So *nkuho* is like the Efik pageant that showcases that roundedness of the Efik woman – not these tiny things we see on the television in other cultures [where, if] you are going for beauty a contest, they measure you by the number of bones in your rib cage or the dip valleys on your neck and the thickness of your waist... So that is what goes for beauty in those cultures. But, here in Efik land, what goes for beauty – so to speak – if you say the Efik beauty pageantry, it is an array of *nkuho*, so my family wants to show up. This is *nkuho* from Ekpenyong Abasi family, *nkuho* from Abasi Ita family. So they line up and you sit back and you see. You take pride in the thickness of the cheekbone showing how much you were able to massage, how much work was put in the fattening room. To cut long story short, *nkuho* is our [cultural pride] and depends on the sophistication of the female folk for marriage, for coming of age, for childbirth, for husband

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and for being able to take care of your home and it starts as a process. As a process, it starts somewhere and ends somewhere, from seclusion rite to the coming-out rites (KII 1).

The fattening room makes it possible for the girl-child to learn those things. But, if she doesn't pass through it, she doesn't really have the time. And if she has a mother who didn't pass through also, it is equally very difficult, you know. If the mother didn't go through it, what is she going to teach the daughter? (KII 4)

In the fattening room, you know, there is a lot of storytelling, especially at the first stage. They teach them songs [*sings in efik dialect – Ekpe ino ebot mi, mmangha ti mmagimag*]... at that level. So, that is where we have storytelling. Even in NAFEST these days, we have storytelling for children. CIABAS for this year (2020), we have storytelling for children. So, at that stage, you teach them that and they grow with that and so on (KII 5).

[Sings...] *Nkaka arian ke Ibaka, akparawa ete ndi mma imo... nkedi arian nkedighe ima, epe edi oro ikpidikhe mi, kumba kumba kumba kumba....* It is a form of 'konkoma' that they teach them... It is a love song meaning 'I went to buy oil in Ibaka village. A young man came and asked me out. I told him I came to buy oil [and] not to fall in love, if it was love, I would not have come here kumba kumba kumba kumba... (Caregiver 1).

The folktales have embedded lessons that instruct ...about life, how older people lived their lives and help bring those memories [back] to you. Through the

folktales, they teach you good morals and values – stories that teach you how to live in [the] future and relate kindly with people. Mothers will also come in day by day to impart you positive values...They have impacted me a lot because I really learned how to stay with people, how to appreciate people no matter who they are and how they look. For instance, I am the highest-ranking [person] in this office, but I take everyone as my sister and brother because of how I was brought up....It has helped me to live with people... I am a single mother... I have been able to raise my son who is doing his Masters. He is submissive and responsible. It is not easy to raise a male child; everybody knows that. It was the training I got from the *nkuho* practice that helped me to raise him that way and to even be able to cater for his needs and mine. I modelled a good life for him to follow and he did.... It has impacted much on my life. In the fattening room, I was taught not to keep my armpit and pubic hairs. I was taught how to bathe in the morning and evening, how to brush my teeth and I do them to keep myself hygienic (Maiden 4).

... the behaviour of a girl-child that has passed through the rites of passage is different from a child that has not passed through the rites of passage...If you put two of them together, the one that has passed through the rites of passage will take it all because she knows what is involved in taking care of the home. She knows what it takes to take care of herself. She knows the traditional education that she passed through. She will exhibit it in her home, whereas this other one that has not passed through it – let me say the woman or girl of today – will sit and say, ‘Honey, when coming home bring me Mr Biggs.’ She will sleep until it is time for her husband to

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go to work. One Zee World is on play ... African Magic is on. 'Honey, please, please, please I don't want to miss this and the house girl now becomes the madam.' Why won't the house girl have sex with your husband because it is the house girl that cooks, washes clothes.... Therefore, the house girl has the opportunity to [serve] the husband. If the house girl has the opportunity to serve my husband, the house girl that knows everything and does everything... Therefore, the one that has passed through the rites of passage won't allow you [to] serve the husband. You can prepare everything for her but she is the one that turns the soup. Waterleaf, you pluck it. She is the one that washes the leaves, and if you wash the leaves and bring them, she will have the final say... (Caregiver 1).

...The few persons that I have known who are within the age range of my mother and went through the process are all still living with their husbands or, at least, I have not seen any of them leave their husband's home. I know a girl, about 17 years of age who was circumcised, living with me. I haven't really asked her about the duration she stayed in the fattening room. You seem to see her act differently from a lot of other girls in my environment. She is more cultured. Yes, some girls may not have been in the fattening room but still cultured – she is very conscious of herself and her environment. When she sees you and greets you, she just seems to disappear. She sits with her legs closed, she's mindful of the things she says... I attribute those qualities to her experience in the fattening room, especially when I compare her with the other women around (who didn't go through the fattening room) (Maiden 5).

...When I was seven, my parents [would] take us to the village and we would meet some of our cousins. These cousins showed great skills in how they cooked and managed the house, going about their respective chores. When I went to the village and met children of my age doing things I could not do – like carrying 25L of water on their heads, while I who grew up in town and pampered could barely carry 10L – seeing them washing clothes at that age and selecting leaves and they're doing it so well – I got interested in knowing how they were able to do that at their age...For us, it was an amazing thing really and this made us decide to have the *nkuho* experience (Maiden 5).

Largely, symbolic representations with the traditional white chalk, facial paintings, and ornamental designs were also tools for schooling in the fattening room as earlier stated and as a key informant iterated:

...While they were in the fattening room, the *nkuho* attendants could use the white chalk to give a certain design (*shows the interviewer the symbol*)... serpentine movement [meaning] that, as you are leaving this fattening room, life is not a straightforward thing. Life is not a bed of roses, as you are going out there if you think marriage is just a straight line thing. No, marriage has so many challenges. ... so don't expect any straight line pattern of life in your marriage. You will see curves all over and, when those curves come, you have to develop a thick skin to withstand them so that your marriage will stand.... Two, the flowery pattern on their face, teaches them that you must always package yourself – not [that], when you were seen, you were a sweet-looking girl, but, just one drop, you turn yourself to *ekaeka* (that is,

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grandmother or old woman)... Still maintain yourself and your husband will not go looking right, left, back and front. And they do that through the facial design [that] they make on them. Most of those [brass tray] designs are also encrypted on the brass plates that you use in serving guests when they come. That [is what] you use in decorating your house. All of them have codes of love, codes of fairness about life, codes of being straightforward in life, codes of harmonization in life. Without these codes – as they will teach you – you may not really succeed in life (KII 1).

As mentioned, the duration of the fattening room was dependent on two main factors, namely the economic status of the maiden's parents, and the window of school holidays as revealed by Maiden 1:

It depends on your parents and it depends on your age or the family you come from. Someone can stay six months. Someone has stayed six years. Someone has stayed three months.... Automatically, the time depends on the school vacation period.... Before you put the child in seclusion, you must consider when the school is on vacation and when it will resume and then put the child in the fattening room (Maiden 1).

The significance of culture, beliefs, superstitions, as well as its implications, are also evidenced:

Before you become a caregiver, you must have been initiated into the cult of womanhood... You must have been circumcised; that is, you must have passed through the first circumcision (Caregiver 1).

You can't wear any other clothes. It is the *ufong ukot anwan*. The *ufong ukot anwan* is an attire. I saw a role-play. They (*referring to the research team*) have already gotten it. It is our traditional maiden outfit which comprises 'ekpaku', the Efik-worn hand-band and the throng beads. That is what is used to dance. (Caregiver 1).

...Apart from the Efiks, the Yorubas have their culture. The Ibos have their culture> Every other person, the Hausas have their culture and they train their daughters even though they do not pass through the rites of passage. And [as] the girl-child, they will train you on cuisines – their own types of cuisines. You know I grew up in Yoruba, I was privileged to be with Hubert Ogunde's wives because I am an artiste, pioneer artiste of the National Troupe of Nigeria. We were groomed in Ozaza. You need to see these women. You know the Yorubas – they have adages and then, in my quest to want to know, by the time their wives are ready in the kitchen, they will send you.... (Caregiver 1)

Well, what I heard is that they took it to the backyard. They put it and then they planted plantain in that place.... At that time, I did not know. But what I know is that – because I noticed they keep it there – it was after they said, 'Oh, that is where they put *mmama mbobi* something. So the plantain will be growing and they will say 'that is mmama's plantain'. After that, they will put you in a particular room that nobody will have access to you, nobody...for the whole month... without seeing anybody. But, sometimes, when my mother [went] to the market, I would come out and [be] peeping. And, when she was going out, she would say, 'Don't go out...

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because when you go out, your body will go down. [That is] because my body then was [plump]. I was so plump that she [would say] that [if] I went out, my body would go down. So, I would not go outside. So that somebody would not see me, I would just be doing everything inside the house (Maiden 2).

This is how you will know the girl who was having [sex] before that time of circumcision because the wound would refuse to heal (Caregiver 1).

Gender Roles for the Efik Male and Female

Gender discourses present a vast topic of research that has been pursued within different theoretical frameworks. They have, over time, produced numerous empirical insights. Thus, responses about gender roles and their implications with regard to the fattening room experience extend the existing perspectives on the effects and influence of traditional gender roles, which develop as society observes male and female behaviours and their corresponding tendencies. In a traditional African society such as Nigeria, men and women are variously assigned social roles because of humans' sexual dimorphism or evolved physical sex differences. Given these physical differences, certain activities are assumed to be more efficiently accomplished by one sex or the other. However, these task specialisations or gender roles produce alliance between women and men among the Efik as they engage in what seems to be a division of labour (or roles), which also deepens the interests of the community as narrated in this instance:

Before now, the girl-child was seen as one that should be in the kitchen, helping [her] mother to put the family's domestics in place. But, these days, as we have seen, they are now learned. The girl-child that we knew then was

different from the girl-child [from the girl-child that] we know now, who is learned and [is] aspiring for greater heights in life. So, there is a lot of enhancement and improvement educationally and otherwise, for the Efik girl-child (FGDM, R2).

To add to what the last speaker said, I want to clarify a little on how the Efik see the girl-child, what he said is normal as obtained in this modern age. But before the coming of the Europeans, we took our culture from what God Himself did. Our women had been seen the same way the men are seen – our partner in life. A man cannot live without a woman, so, we regard both men and women as equal. What is good for the man is also good for the woman. When the Europeans came, education came. And because we regard women as delicate and not able to withstand insecurity and threats, there we are not allowed to go out and access or receive education... A woman cannot fight a lion when the lion approaches her. So we always put them at home and only the men go out. Let me tell you that the main reason women were not sent to get education at that time was that they did not have equal strength like men to withstand the rigours. So, they were to be in the house, preparing the house, while waiting for the man that went out hunting for the feeding of the house (FGDM, R4).

More so, assumptions around gender roles arise because of society's observation of female and male behaviour, which almost always result in a dichotomy in gender-specific environments. Thus, men and women are thought to possess attributes that equip them for sex-based or gender-based roles. At any rate, the fattening room exercise of the Efik presented gender roles that are responsive to their cultural and

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environmental conditions and expectations – such that equip the women for extensive socialisation, and promote personality traits and skills that engender role performance as the ‘homemaker’, ‘nurturer’, etc. as reported below:

...During the time you are in the fattening room, formal education is out of the question because it was believed that, as a woman, you should manage the home. Assuming you stay in the house for seven years, from 16 that you are being put in the fattening room, when are you going to be [attending] school in order to learn to be educated? So, I think that is a disadvantage. (FGDW, P4).

...You know that, generally, it is believed that women are homemakers and, to be a homemaker, you have to be groomed to achieve that for the family. So that is why school is so important for women and not men. You know it is believed that it is women who groom the family and not men. Maybe that is why school is there for the women (FGDW, P1).

...I think the fattening room is for the benefit of men because women are being polished to be able to take care of men; so they do not play any major role [*general laughter*] (FGDW, P4).

... You are the one to help him remove his shirt or singlet and then he throws a towel on his shoulder. Take the towel, remove his singlet because both of you are friends. Tell him, ‘your water is ready’ and, when you keep his water, you also keep his food and you are patting him ‘*ete mmen edem for di*’, meaning, ‘bring your back’...You are patting his back for him while he

is eating. Should he cough while eating, immediately you get up and put water for him to drink. And, the worst of it, in the course of eating, let the man fart, you have to tell him, 'Papa sorry, oh papa how are you feeling? ... So, these are [some of] those things that make the outsiders think that, if you go and leave your husband for a Calabar woman, that the Calabar woman will take him, that they have '*Kop nno mi*' (love potion). These were the only love potion because, if you have women who passed through that – not today's women of course – if there are women that pass through this traditional training – they can't let go any man, because not [due to] medicine, but [because] they want to exhibit what they [had been] taught (Caregiver 1).

...In fact, women in those days – our mothers – didn't visit you and they banned you from visiting: '*aka itong*' (you are going to exhibit gluttony). In fact, the worst is that – let them give you something there and you collect it and eat – they would see you ... They would not say anything... They would prepare that same food and keep it for you. You won't know that you have erred. They will wait for you [to return home]. The big women in the compound will wait for you ... They will start petting you like my maternal and paternal grandparents.... They will start giving you all sorts of sweet names. Unknown to you food is going on – that same food you ate in that compound will be waiting for you and they will be petting you: '*O mama*'. They will call you [into] the room and tell you it is time for us to go into storytelling, even when it is not yet night (Caregiver 1).

You pamper them...It will make you happy. I am happy when he is happy (*general laughter*) (FGDW, P2).

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It is also noteworthy that *nkuho* is a gender-specific exercise intended for Efik females only:

...They don't do *nkuho* for men... (Maiden 1).

[*General laughter and P3 cut in*] Well, I don't think there is any finishing school for boys in the world...I have never heard of any finishing school for boys.... The men have their own way of going through their rites of passage and grooming... like the *Ekpe* society (FGDW, P3).

Maybe I can add that they did through their fathers. They went to the farm with their fathers. They went hunting with their fathers and talked about the *Ekpe* society. I think that is where the men were also trained and taught to be strong, to be men and fathers (FGDW, P2).

Though not formal like the young ladies being put in the fattening room, they have their age grades where their fathers will usually initiate them into and you will find out that this is where they have this wrestling. That is where they go to test their muscle, their strength. And, here too, the young women will gather to watch and they can also pick their friends there. So, though not formal like the fattening room, it was good for them because, if you follow your dad to hunt and you follow your father to the farm, there, you will exercise your strength through the landmass you can clear, right! And the kind of animal you can hunt and bring home for your wife and children will now determine your manhood (FGDW, P4).

[*General laughter and P3 cut in*] Well I don't think there is any finishing school for boys in the world... I have never heard of any finishing school for boys ...The men have their own way of going through their rites of passage and grooming... like the Ekpe society (FGDW, P3).

Maybe I can add that they did through their fathers. They went to the farm with their father, they went hunting with their father and talked about the Ekpe society. I think that is where the men were also trained and taught to be strong, to be men and fathers (FGDW, P2).

Although deeply rooted in culture, gender roles, as already observed, vary in different societies and can be changed over time since social values and norms are not static. Thus, beyond the expectations of men to be economic providers of the family and women to be caregivers as observed in other cultural contexts, Efik women occupied positions, shared privileges and/or participated in what would have been exclusively male responsibilities/benefits in other cultures. Few narrations from participants in the focus groups also emphasize this claim:

As far as I know, being in Duke Town Church where the English coronations of Efik kings are done, I discovered years back during the coronation of Edidem Iye Ephraim Adam, that it is a woman that pours the *Mmong Emem* (Water of Peace) on the Edidem (King). I also knew that the last insult the Edidem receives (marking the last time anybody can insult the Edidem for the rest of his lifetime) is the *Ikong Edidem Eti*, and that is also done by a woman... They have roles to play during coronation (FGDM, R2).

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...[though] not in equal numbers but we give reverence to women. They must be represented because, even in the parliament or any other meetings, there are roles reserved exclusively for women. Without a woman being there in the council, those roles will suffer (FGDM, R4).

...The Efik – from my experience that spans decades of my interactions... in my community – respect women. Several activities have revealed that we the Efik value our daughters to the extent that, when we give our daughters out in marriage, we take so little from you. Almost nothing is taken from you to drum it into your ears that we are not selling our daughter to you. If, by circumstance or any event of life, you don't find her compatible anymore, please kindly return her to us. Don't touch her. Don't beat her. Don't harm her. Don't torture her. Just bring her back to us, and then the small palm wine we took from you. We will gladly return it to you. Of course, culturally, this [varies] from family to family depending on the extent of your agricultural prowess and the extent of your kind merchandise or your wealth, so to speak. You will find out that, even when we are giving you our daughter, what we call "*mkpo nduk ufol*", we give you so much. We are bringing her to you with so much – with a truckload of stuff so that you will know that this girl is coming from a home, a people. So that when you see the items that accompany her to your house, you will give her respect and, even if you have planned [to maltreat] her, you will change your mind. From the festivity, from events, from the thousands of people that have come from far and near; from families that have come to hand her over to you, you will know definitely that, here, we value our daughters; we value

our women. Even in the [event of] demise of husband and spouses, we don't despise them. Unlike other cultures that will want to throw them out of the house and uncle and others confiscating things, we don't do that like [some] other cultures. Even this other diabolic cultural practice in some cultures, [in which] we have husbands who have complexes and are not sure of themselves, that will want to go to diabolical means to put stuff into their wives body; here, it is not like that. We value our women, even in the compound, in the farmyards, in the estates. Their rooms remain even when they are married, wherever they are... So the Efik does really value [their] women (KII, 1).

...To a large extent, Efik women do have rights in their communities. If you compare the Efiks to other cultures, you will see that the women have more rights than women in other cultures. For instance, the right to inheritance – Efik women inherit property. With respect to the focus of the Efik families, I think honour is given to the firstborn. A lot of honour is given to the firstborn irrespective of whether that firstborn child is a female or a male. So, where the firstborn child is a female, the firstborn has a lot of responsibilities. There are lots of things that rest on her shoulders, especially if the firstborn is a female. In Efik, we do not say because you are a female, you don't have a say. Efik women have a say in their families. They take decisions and responsibilities are on them [as well] (KII 2).

...Women play major roles here from the family to the society, they are not looked down upon here. The Efik woman has her pride [and] has her dignity. She doesn't play a role of a second fiddle because she wasn't brought

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up that way in the family, and she [grows] up knowing that she can take decisions, you know. She's equal to anything and anyone. So, the Efik woman is a woman [who] has her self-confidence (KII 4).

...Like I said, it depends on how affluent individual families are... Before now, we used to have this thinking that you must look for a male child so he will take over from you. It wasn't because this male child you were looking for is supposed to take over everything. The male child was just to answer your name in what we call the naming culture because we believed that the male child would extend your name beyond you; whereas your daughter would bear the names of the husband [from] where she would be married [into]. But when it comes to property acquisition, distribution, arbitration or acquaintances to siblings, the females, our daughters, are also given their rights. They have every right, now more so with the [level of] awareness, even in the Obong's palace where we have a lot of female high chiefs sitting in the palace – that are in council – which is not obtainable elsewhere. If you go to the Obong's council, we have a lot of women high chiefs who are sitting there in-council. So you know, this allows women or females lots of latitudes... Then, in families where we don't have males at all – just females – so who will you send their property to? We don't allow uncles to take over the estates and maltreat our children, even when they are females. It is true that depending on how much you have to bequeath to your children, women have their own rights. They have the right to have [or own] land. They have the right to property and all of that (KII 1).

Yes, there are roles. For instance, let's say a father passes on. For the burial, there are roles that each child – depending on your birth position – has to play. So, wherever you fall in, you play that role, whether you are a male or a female.... It depends on your position in the family. If you are the first, you take up the role of the first in the family – sex [or gender] doesn't matter... (KII 4).

...the first daughter is the one that controls and shares the property of the parents after their death, even if the one directly following her is a male (P1).

Efik women, just like [their] men, have equal rights to own property, unlike in other societies and cultures. In fact, in other cultures, you will discover that after marriage, she ceases to own anything in that community. But, it is not so in Efik land. Here, women are allowed to own property, especially first daughters. So, they have very prominent roles to play in our communities (FGDM, R1).

In Efik families, there is no discrimination in property sharing between men and women, especially the first daughters. But, in some other cultures like in some parts of Akwa Ibom and, maybe some parts of northern Cross River State, a woman won't have land or property. But in the Efik community, even as the women are going out to be married, they're told, 'If that marriage does not favour you, please come back home. We still have a place for you.' So, there's that protection for the girl-child in Efik communities; they are even overpampered (FGDM, R1).

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Buttressing further, a key informant stressed:

Yes, there are roles. For instance, let's say a father passes on. For the burial, there are roles that each child – depending on your birth position – has to play. So, wherever you fall in, you play that role; whether you are a male or a female. ...It depends on your number in the family. If you are the first, you take up the role of the first in the family. Sex doesn't matter... (KII 4).

...The first daughter is the one that controls and shares the property of the parents after their death, even if the one directly following her is a male (P1).

Well, I want to look at my family, for instance. I have observed that when compared to other traditions [that] I have seen and interacted with, the female child and the male child in Efik land [present no] difference as such (FGDW, P2).

I agree with what [Participant 2] has said. Generally, in Efik culture, women can inherit. They can own property and they are even part of the council of chiefs, depending on what level... Women are also part of the council. Like in the Obong council, [the king] does have the immediate council of chiefs of which a woman isn't part at all. But the Obong also has an extended and larger council where women are part of it... Not 100 percent... But, they do have rights, unlike [what obtains in] other tribes. They have a good status in the community (FGDW, P3).

There's no Efik community without a woman in the community leadership, none! The women mingle with the male leaders to make decisions in the community.

You cannot make any decision in the Efik community without a woman being in attendance. (FGDM, R1).

Yes! ... she has that right. They can own land...women do have rights. They inherit property... Like in my family, my [mother's] side, especially, it is the same thing.... They will give the first – whether male or female – more. It is not the gender that matters (FGDW, P2).

It was difficult for a woman to rise on her own to make a decision. But, since the world has changed so much, it is permissible for her to make a decision. They are sharper than men sometimes, especially in terms of seeing beyond the nose. Using myself as an example, I copy many things I do from my wife (FGDM, R5).

In the ancient era, women did not have a say in the Efik kingdom. It is in the modern era that women are given the chance to flow. So, even in the Obong's Palace, we have women there who are advisers to the Obong. We didn't have that before this modern era. The ancient Efik men believed women should stay in the kitchen. They did not allow girls or women to go to school because they were considered as nothing where men were. So, right now, Efik women are doing so well academically (FGDM, R3).

... Women grow up and the father shares his inheritance amongst them. Modernisation or not, it is still the same. It has not changed. The female child knows that she has a right in her father's house. Even if she gets married, she can always come back home as she has her place. The father will always say, 'Look...I am not selling my

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child; her room is there, her part of the house is there; it has remained like that. So a woman has an equal right to make decisions. I have seen in some places where, if you don't have a male child, it becomes a problem. But, among the Efiks, it is not like that. The first child can be a female and she makes decisions and everybody will respect that decision. Yes! A female child will be respected [just] as a male child. And the female child – if she is the first – she has that right and nobody can take it away from her (FGDW, P2).

...Over the years, there have been lots of changes. That is why today you have so many women sitting in the council of the Obong of Calabar palace to make vital decisions. They have their say; they have their own decisions to make in the Obong's palace that will affect the Efik society and the community in general. Before now, the men [made] the decisions and they go back to inform their wives what transpired in the palace. But, now, women are fully integrated (KII, 1).

... Being a woman is not a curse. You have the right [to take] control of your life... I happen to be a traditional marriage presenter. You always hear us say we are not selling our daughters. But, that doesn't influence you not to stay in your marital home, not to take care of your marriage. It only boils down to you. You are the one wearing the shoe. If the shoe pinches you, you know where it pinches you and that decision is your own. Your parents will not say, 'As you are going there, if it is bad, bring her back.' No! They will advise you that, as you are going there, you have to endure. Because there are two things in marriage: it has sweetness and it has bitterness. So, you are encouraged to endure when it is

bitter. But, when it comes to violence in your marriage, then you don't expect a woman to sit back and be punched like a bag, attacked with hot water, cut with a machete or cut with a knife. That is when you will see an Efik woman not enduring that, and she will go back (FGDW, P4; FGDW, P2 agrees)

By and large, the autonomy given to the Efik woman seems circumstantial, considering the restrictive nature of its latitude. Hence, there are purported limitations in decision making. Some decisions have been regarded as 'momentary', while others are 'permanent'. Marriage is a determining factor that influenced the limitations as herein reported:

What kind of decision are we referring to? Is it a permanent decision or a decision to solve a momentary problem? If we are talking about a woman taking a permanent decision that affects the household, it will be checked to find out if such a decision contradicts that of the men in the household. Remember, she will one day leave the house to another person's [house; that is, get married], and it is the men who opposed the decision that she made in the household. What will be the fate of that decision? So, when it comes to making permanent decisions in households, the men are allowed to take charge. That doesn't mean we discriminate against women; we have equal rights. But, when it comes to making a decision that affects the total lifetime of that household, the men make it (FGDM, R4).

Furthermore, enquiries about the widowhood rites elicited the following responses to instantiate this cultural aspect further:

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The only thing practised in Efik land is that, when her husband dies, the widow goes in a mourning mood. She shaves her hair, wears all-black dresses as she mourns her deceased husband for a period of time (FGDM, R1).

Well, in the Efik land and tradition, I don't see the widow going through widowhood rites except maybe she is unfortunate to get married into a family that... you know... But, the natural Efik widow, I mean she remains in her husband's house. She's the wife. She is the widow of the man. She's not thrown out – nothing is taken from her, you know. Whether she has children or not, she remains there... (KII, 4).

To add to that, when the husband, who is regarded as the head of the family, dies in Efik land, the woman and the children have to be in a mourning mood within a specified time. But it is different here from some other cultures. For example, in Akwa Ibom State, when the man dies, his family often accuses the wife of being responsible for his death and that's why, in many of their traditions, the woman is made to drink the water washed off the husband's corpse. They do so believing that the water has the spiritual power to kill the woman too, if she's guilty or responsible for her husband's death (FGDM, R5).

Because the fattening room is exclusively for the Efik women, men do not fully participate as already reported, and as captured below:

... Men don't really have a major role to play. The only role they play is the supply of money (KII 5).

Besides God, he was the provider of the money spent on buying the food and everything that was needed (Maiden 6).

The father of the *nkuho* plays a major role because, if I am not mistaken, it is the father's decision. It is the father who decides that his daughter should go into the fattening room [*others concur*] and that's when he is ready, anyway, with money and the rest of the things. So, it is the father's decision to send the daughter into the fattening room. So, the coming-out ceremony is on him too. So, he has to be ready (FGDW, P3).

... No, no, no! They don't. It is the mothers [who] do that. Adiagha (first daughter) may decide to pass through it. Oduwan (second daughter) may say, 'Mummy, I don't have that time... o' (KII 5).

These different exchanges and crosscutting focus group discussions highlight, to a very large extent, the many ways by which the Efik cultural world is intrinsically self-regulating and self-improving. This fact remains unchanging notwithstanding the historical changes and external influences which the Efik has encountered.

Additional Observations and Commentaries

Beyond the perception of the fattening room as already discussed with respect to the process of fattening, circumcision, teachings, and other routine practices/involvements, the following narratives revealed some concluding thoughts relating to the fattening room practice among the Efik:

I think it is the circumcision that has made it unpopular. It is that aspect of the circumcision... I would [like my

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daughter to experience it] because I know I learnt a whole lot and I carried it with me. Even though I did it so early, I had it in me and I grew up like that. So, I would (KII 4).

...In my era, the fattening room exercise had been reduced to the very minimum level. And right now, the government has come in, so the practice is no longer there at all (Caregiver 2).

Maybe, because of Christianity and there could be some things that can be discontinued; but, like I said, I was too young to remember most of the things that were done then. I don't know if, before the circumcision, anything was done. If there is anything like that, they are the ones I would want to be discontinued with... (KII, 4)

... some married women then suffered because they were denied what it means to have feelings for [one's] husband. They were denied what it means for a woman to cum when she is having sex with her husband. They were denied all that. All they knew was just go in there, do the needful to become a mother. But to enjoy sex? Zero (KII, 5).

My mother – God bless her soul – was one person that believed in early marriage. So, I was actually being prepared for marriage at that age (*bemused*). She so much believed in an early marriage that none of her three daughters got married at the age of 20 but before – between 17 and 19. In her wisdom, in quote, she [didn't] want a child to stay for so long until the devil would come to fight a war with her to make her indulge in what was not right. So, she said you just go in there (into

marriage) ... So, our own way of growing up was from childhood to adulthood then to adolescence (*laughs*)... When we had finished with childbearing, we became like children again. So, she was actually preparing me for matrimony at that age... I really think it is a practice that should be encouraged. If it is being encouraged, probably our younger generations won't have to do some of these things we see them do (Maiden 6).

Well, I would want to [have] this practice [kept going]. If I have a female child, I will circumcise her when she's a baby.... Because they just get aroused. If the woman is circumcised, she's less likely to be promiscuous compared to the uncircumcised... I think the fattening room helps a lot since mothers do not really have time with their children (Maiden 4).

Apart from [that], I like [the fattening room tradition] because it makes these girls know [things], because so many of them... don't know anything. Their mothers might not be able to teach them everything. Even in Calabar here, [I who] have entered it... know what it is. Not all mothers [who] know how to teach their daughters to take care of their husbands and be welcoming.... But, if they [had] gone there, people [would] teach them... Yes! Now, even your aunty, your big aunty will come to see you and, as she comes to see you, she will talk to you. She will say, 'Mmama, you see this [and] that. She will be talking to you, teaching you something, you understand (Maiden 2).

...that custom of circumcision should be cut off as the government has already said. It should be waived. But, the fattening room should still be on, even if it is one or

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two months; so that they teach our girls. Most of our girls now, they don't even know how to do things. They don't know how to cook. They don't know how to talk, how to respond. They lack [the] way of manners, ways of approach. They don't know how to relate. They don't know how to help the elders. We were taught that, if you see an elderly person, respect her or him. You saw – when you took us to go and sit down there – you saw I was standing. I asked two of them to sit because they are older than me. That is how we were taught. I may see you now, I will say, 'O [madam], come and sit down.' I am ready to stand there if there is no seat for me to sit in, so, the teaching has really made an impact on me. So, I think that part alone should be brought back. They will buy you clothes. It depends also on if you are from a royal home and you are *adiagha*. They will do *atiai*. They will do *mkpoto* for you...the special hair for you with a special comb ... They will take you to the market; you will go to church for thanksgiving and they will do a ceremony as [though] it [were] a child's naming dedication (Maiden 1).

nkuho is good. You can do *nkuho* when your child is getting married. The way it is done now. You know *mkpoto* (canopy): you put your child there, dress her with *ofong ukot awan* and give her what you want to give to her. Before now, you should have taught her how to take care of her home, children, husband and learn every other necessary thing she needs to know how to do. That is how it is done now without the circumcision and the seclusion in the fattening room... There is no need for the feeding anymore since the girls are not secluded in a room (like it used to be) before we give them out for marriage now. Then, it was believed that she had to be

very fat when she was getting married; otherwise, people would laugh and mock the family, that they [are poor]. Now, those things don't matter anymore. They can go through *nkuho* but without circumcision. Once the circumcision, the seclusion and feeding aspects of it are taken off, every other thing is normal. The parents can train their child and prepare her for marriage (P2).

...the aim was to stop promiscuity in [the] female [child], but they do not [achieve this]. But, then, they actually succeeded in making the female child, the Efik maiden, timid in bed because they deprive them the joy of that sexual experience. But, through [the] internet, you have been able to boost yourself, because I talked to one girl and she told me that, even as she is, she does not feel the urge of sex because the clitoris is not there; that she does not enjoy sex and she can stay even one year without having the urge until when she sees it; and then she knows that it is a must that she must do it. If she sees it, she does it. If she doesn't see it, she can stay [without sex] (Caregiver 1).

My family church, the Church of Christ, does not do any form of ceremony. That is why they normally do the circumcision on the 8th day when the child is still a baby... They want to celebrate it with a ceremony. They want to show people that they have done the *nkuho*. But my father's Church doesn't permit that... Normally, *nkuho* is done to prepare the woman by training and feeding her to make her look physically mature for marriage. Since we did not do that (because of Church doctrine), and since the *nkuho* is no [longer] in practice, 'Coming of Age' is marked during the marriage ceremony. After the payment of dowry, the bride will be

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[adorned] with the *ofong ukot awan* (short maiden dress) and taken to stay in a specially decorated canopy at a choice corner of the marriage ceremony ground to mark the 'Coming of Age'... She does not sweep the house and she does not go anywhere. She just sits down. That stool is only kept separately for her so that other people will not share with her – but, it is not for any ritual purpose. You know some people bleed when they were being circumcised and any other diabolical person can come, sit on that stool and by that have access to cause harm to the maiden. Yes. That is because the maiden usually bleeds, so, the right thing to sleep on is a mat. You know, in those days, when a woman [was] menstruating, she [sat] on the floor and [didn't] go anywhere until she [had] stopped bleeding. That is why it is called, in Efik, *iti isong*. It is not a ritual. No, I don't see any laziness in it because it is like making a person have a rest, just like it is done to women [who] just put to bed. Yes, if he is the suitor, that is, husband-to-be, he can also sponsor part of it or everything from the beginning to the end (P1).

Exclusively, I think if the men play any role (in the fattening room), it is a minor role and that is [usually] the drummers (FGDW, P3; FGDW, P1 agrees).

Today, Agbani [Darego] is in vogue. All our fat girls have decided to start jogging to trim down. No girl wants to add weight let alone agree to be secluded from society for three months where she is confined in just one room. And, in today's digital world, no parents would want to do that to their girl-child. [In those days], they did it happily and willingly, but no more now.... Then, I have not seen much difference between those who went into

nkuho and those who did not, except for the training offered in the *nkuho*. These days, most parents are working-class or [are] businesswomen selling in the market. Their children do not have access to any serious training (FGDM, R2).

...people say that the women go in there to get fat and look desirable for the men. But, I think that is the wrong impression of the whole practice. The way I look at it is that the female goes in there and her prepared for society at large and the whole world. She is prepared to be a better person for herself, her family, the society and the whole world. So, it is not centred on going in there just to please the man or [doing] chores because 'the man is superior'. Yes, going in there mostly leads to marriage, but you learn the virtues of womanhood as a lady and can come out to become a working-class woman. Eventually, a lot of us get married someday and live under a man's roof and, like the Bible says, 'he is the head of that family'. But, in practice, it's not just to prepare you wholly for him alone (Maiden 5).

...We can say that education, culture dynamics, and technology has influenced society so much that it has affected how the Efik man views his wife. Now women are allowed to do certain things. I am blue blood. Back in the day, it shouldn't be heard of, that men would go to the market and price things and come back to be cooking in the kitchen and then go and serve my wife and call her, 'Mma, food is ready.' It mustn't be heard of (*general laughter*). Apart from being a man, my ego, my lineage, my standing in society – but today – if I don't cook...it's somehow because my wife eats better when I cook. So if I want her to eat, then I have to cook. I even [bargain]

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more. She believes that I [bargain and buy] things better than she does. So, a lot of changes have occurred, a lot of cultural mixes, a lot of things have influenced the way we view women now which, to some extent, was not so in the past. In terms of social interactions, in terms of standings and rights, in terms of self-expression and all of that, I can say,...from my growing up till now, that women are faring better than what they were in the past. Today, nobody wants to marry two wives again.... So, this is also a plus for the women, you know; because you don't have to share your husband with anybody. So, women are doing better now (KII, 1).

These observations and commentaries show to what extent culture and tradition can adapt in the face of modernity and acculturations. The many remarks as gathered from the focus groups and interviews are evidence of the inherent capability of a culture to self-correct. Folks in any cultural tradition understand the normative rules, their usefulness as well as such rules, are due to change in progressive ways. As such, the people of a culture occupy a position in that cultural universe which privileges their exclusive place in evolving and advancing theories of gender relations from their peculiar or distinct worldview, however inchoate or fully developed such theories are:

Gender Theories

The theory of knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP) is deduced in the following submissions from participants:

...Maybe modernity has affected the manner of approach so that women are not as submissive as they used to be in the past. There are certain things that I will challenge and will not take, that my grandmother wouldn't say

anything about. So all those factors have to be looked into. All those factors have to be considered (KII, 2).

...Well, the changes may be in marriage. You get married to someone outside of your community; then you now have to be subjected to how it is... For instance, if an Efik woman is getting married to an Igbo man, you know, it will be strange to her what will come to her or what will happen to her [for instance], if [her] husband dies. So those are the changes, because of inter-tribal marriage. That is the only change I think the Efik woman has experienced over time. But, if she remains where she is, you know, an Efik woman knows and understands, [for instance], that '...in my family, I still have the right that my brothers have. In marriage, if my husband passes on, for instance, I have rights to claim and inherit everything my husband has.' But, when she leaves the Efik community and she marries outside, she is now faced with these other strange ways of doing things outside there (KII, 4).

Objective 5

This section aims to identify and extrapolate elements of serendipity from the collected field data. The second is to investigate how the fattening room traditions of the Efik of Nigeria contribute to the Cluster-Knowledge Lab on gender, gender roles and identity in Africa. These include gender as anything outside the fattening room tradition, gender role and contemporary view of the fattening room.

Data Analysis and Findings

How will investigating the fattening room traditions of the Efik of Nigeria contribute to the Cluster-Knowledge Lab on gender, gender roles and identity in Africa? Addressing this question

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calls for a systematic, point-by-point approach which summons the idea of gender as anything outside the fattening room tradition; what constitutes gender role; the contemporary view of the fattening room, and sundry coincidences or serendipity.

Generally, every country, tribe or ethnicity, community and group has its finite network of ideas about gender and its constitution. Often, it is seen as the characteristic idea about women, men, girls and boys as socially constructed. This includes ideas about norms, behaviour and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other (WHO). In essence, gender encompasses both sex differences and the social constructs that give rise to gender differences. To the Efik of Nigeria, the sex of any human being determines the character or duties one is expected to carry out. The *nkuho* tradition is a means by which the virtues expected of a woman are developed. The following excerpts below buttresses this view:

Nkuho is an institution made specifically for training the girl-child from childhood to teenage and adulthood (FGDM, R3).

The main fact for *nkuho* coming in was to build up that girl, her looks, her person, her morality, her industriousness in knowing what will be demanded of her when she is given out for marriage (KII 5).

To cut long story short, *nkuho* is our pride culture and depends on the sophistication of the female folk for marriage, for coming of age, for childbirth, for husband and for being able to take care of your home. And it starts as a process. As a process, it starts somewhere and ends somewhere, from seclusion rites to the coming-out rites (KII 1).

The phrase ‘gender role’ was coined by John Money and implies society’s expectations of people’s behaviour, attitudes and thoughts, based on whether they are females or males. That is, the attitudes, behaviour, norms, and roles that a society or culture associates with an individual’s sex. To the Efik of Nigeria, the male and female have specific roles [that] they are expected to play in their respective homes. The ladies are groomed to take care of their homes while the men are expected to supply the needs of their homes. To the Efik, these roles inflect according to contexts such as political scene, the homes, and the extended family. The following excerpts attest to such context-based gender-role categorisations:

The Political Scene

Responses elicited from participants in the focus groups highlight the views of the Efik with respect to gender role in political scenes as evident in the following contributions:

So, in Efik, we value the first child very much. Every first child – be it a male or female – has its own responsibilities. In fact, when you are the first daughter in the house, your responsibility is even greater than that of the male (FGDW, R4).

It is a woman that pours the Water of Peace (*Mmong Emem*) on the Edidem (King) and gives the Last Insult to him during his coronation. Normally, a woman must be in [the] Efik parliament before it is considered complete and formed, because there are roles reserved exclusively for them (FGDM, R2).

Also, in Efikland, peradventure, there's no male fit in a family, a woman can represent that family to be among

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the Lords of the land in the local parliament (FGDM, R4).

So, even in the Obong's Palace, we have women there who are advisers to the Obong. We didn't have that before this modern era (FGDM, R3).

... the first daughter is the one that controls and shares the property of the parents after their death, even if the one directly following her is a male (Parent 1).

The Home Scene

In the context of home, the genders also have their roles to play:

The Efik women, just like the men, have equal rights to own property unlike in other climes and culture. Women are allowed to own properties, especially their first daughters. So, they have very prominent roles to play in our communities (FGDM, R1).

Efik women have a say in their families. They take decisions and responsibilities are [often placed] on them (KII 3).

Yes o! The first daughter is the one that controls and shares the property of the parents after their death even if the one directly following her is a male (Parent 1).

Yes, there are roles. For instance, let's say a father passes on, for the burial, there are roles that each child, depending on your birth position, has to play. So, wherever you fall in, you play that role, whether you are a male or a female (KII 4).

My mum would always tell us never to do that when we are with our husbands, never to shut him out because he might be fleeing from danger and keeping him shut out can expose him to harm. (Maiden 4).

The Extended Family

The extended family also provides a context for apprehending the nature and scope of gender roles among the Efik:

The place teaches you how to relate with the rest of the world and usually, the knowledge shared there is not also taught elsewhere (Maiden 5).

Contemporary View of the Fattening Room

Different people have their views on what they think should be perpetuated in culture or what should cease to happen in the context of tradition. For the Efik, this view might have evolved from an aggregation of personal experiences, tales or oral history shared by the people who experienced it. To the Efik, the *nkuho* as a cultural institution is subject to debate – whether it should continue or be halted. Naturally, while certain agitators are of the position that it should be discontinued completely, others are of the opinion that it should remain in perpetuity, albeit with the exclusion of certain parts of it. Both schools of thought have corresponding logical reasoning to their respective ends as represented in the excerpts below:

The Argument for the Complete Discontinuity of *Nkuho*

I think it should be wiped off (FGDM, R3 & R5).
I don't even like it again (*laughs*), and our children, they don't like it (IDI).

I think it should be abolished even though we no longer do it here, because you are not only a woman for the man.

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You are still a woman for society. Children are coming that you will have to train (Caregiver 2).

The Argument for the Perpetuation of *Nkuho* Modifications

I think we can still practise the fattening room ceremony, but with some modifications (FGDM, R1). Circumcision should be removed completely from the practice. Remove every other idolatrous attachment to the practice (FGDM, R2). Staying in the fattening room is a waste of the girls' time (FGDM, R4).

...for the fattening room, it should continue and with a reduced period of seclusion, removal of overfeeding, and circumcision (FGDF, R1, R2, R3 & R4).

Nkuho is a beautiful thing ... The social aspect is beautiful but the other animalistic aspects of it are what I don't subscribe to anymore (KII 1).

No! They can go through *nkuho* but without circumcision. Once the circumcision, the seclusion and feeding aspects of it are taken off, every other thing is normal. The parents can train their girl-child and prepare her for marriage (Parent 2).

I don't know if, before the circumcision, anything is done. If there is anything like that, they are the ones I would want to be discontinued. Yes, and I remember that they used to pour libation when you are coming out. Those are the things of course, that I would not want to continue. A modernised version of this practice will be a welcome idea (KII 4).

100 percent yes! Apart from circumcision – because medically they don't want it – but, traditionally we really

know that it really helps a woman to take care of her home; because apart from that, you will not be able to do so many things (IDI).

Then, I would recommend that parents should make their children go through the practice. There are lots of virtues instilled in young women. There are lots of things they can gain from the fattening room. It is an institution – a learning institution – aside being [made] fat (Maiden 5). I think, if I have my way, we will still be practising the fattening room; but seeking daily bread and butter will not afford us that time anymore to take our children through it. But it really helped. It moulded us into proper home managers (Maiden 6).

The Waning of Nkuho and Its Effect on Society

Many of the interviewed respondents share the view that a lot of things are going wrong in society, especially with respect to the gradual extinction of the *nkuho* tradition. To them, if this is allowed to persist, the situation will deteriorate, with attendant negative consequences for the Efik society as well as its future generations. The excerpts below support these concerns and views:

A lot of young girls nowadays – even those who are married and have homes – are not open. They are not welcoming... So, there is definitely a difference (FGDF, R3).

... what I will say [on] the influence of modernity is that, these days, our female children are not ready – I repeat, they are not ready to learn any cultural thing.... Even as they pretend to know fashion, [cooking of] fried rice, jollof rice and so on and baking – most of them are not

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even getting it right, especially fashion. You can imagine a married young lady wearing bum shorts and going to the market (FGDM, R2).

[Western] education is really making some of our sisters rub shoulders with their brothers, I mean [placed] one-on-one [as] classmates, course mates [and] even with their husbands – education. I know you can prove that too (*laughs*)... Because of education, they throw away their humbleness, which is [an important virtue]. They throw away humbleness. No respect. They are just doing things anyhow, talking anyhow. Unfortunately for some husbands, their wives have positions and you see them lording – they want to lord, to decide, you know. A lot of them [are] in this our town (FGDM, R2).

I like it because it makes these girls know something, because so many of them don't know anything. [Their] mothers might not be able to teach them everything. Even in Calabar, where I have [experienced the tradition], I know what it is. Not all mothers know how to teach their daughters to take care of their husbands and how to be welcoming. I will say they should go, so that it will lessen this walkabout [tendency noticed] in our female [children] who cannot control [themselves] (Maiden 2).

I really think it is a practice that should be encouraged. If it is being encouraged, probably our younger generations won't do some of these things we see them do (Maiden 6).

From this feedback, it becomes further clear that many Efik women remain endeared to the cultural values and virtues

offered by the *nkuho* tradition and would like to see this sustained despite the overwhelming influence of Western modernity.

Recommended Modes for Conducting *Nkuho* in Consistency with Modernity

Respondents who participated in the field interviews tend to align in their recommendations that better and more advanced and modernised ways could be sought in the practice of *nkuho* and the fattening home rites. Many of these interviewees tend to believe that the tradition will revive the interest of the present-day Efik children in partaking in the traditional training. Some of the extrapolated responses to this effect are represented below:

By focus group discussions with parents of today, by seminars, presenting good-content seminar papers, making them know the importance of those vocations that today's children don't know (FGDM R2).

I think one of the ways of preserving [this traditional practice] is to take it out of the traditional setting and bring it into a more contemporary setting. I don't think that circumcision should be continued (KII 3).

Other Discoveries Made while Working on the Outlined Research Objectives that will Enrich the Cluster's Wealth of Data

In the course of interviewing the participants, information was obtained from the participants which are not included in the study objectives but which represents a positive contribution to the knowledge bank of the Cluster. Some of these are also presented in the following sequence of field responses:

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I was trying to say that the men have their own way of going through their rites of passage and grooming, such as the Ekpe society (FGDF, R3). Maybe I can add that they did through their fathers. They went to the farm with their fathers. They went hunting with their fathers and talked about the Ekpe society. I think that is where the men are also trained and taught to be strong, to be men and fathers (FGDF, R2). But they have their age grades. They have these wrestling [games]; that is where they go to test their muscle, their strength. You follow your father to hunting and you follow your father to the farm (FGDF, R4).

Yes, there are three types of *nkuho*: the infant *nkuho*, the adolescent *nkuho* (where young women are groomed by confinement during which they are taught the rudiments of marriage) and the childbirth *nkuho* (Maiden 5).

The woman is made to drink the water washed off [her] husband's corpse. They do so believing that the water has the spiritual power to kill the woman too, if she's guilty of being responsible for her husband's death (FGDM, R5).

But when you now involve Ekpe, marine powers will possess the girl and of course, you know that possession is not good for the girl – although, then, it was considered okay because, according to them, the girl would be outstanding, attractive and all that (FGDM, R1).

Some families stay for years without having a child and they go on to dedicate themselves to idols to get a child. That's why they have to [make] sacrifices in those cases.

And, even in the marriage, the woman will be having affairs with [men in] the marine world – she will be having sex in [her] dream (FGDM, R6).

For the *nkuho*, like I [mentioned] earlier, we have *nkuho* in three stages (KII 5).

Because I cannot go for the headhunting, it is just seven houses, seven of us. And if they come, all the family are supposed to present people that will go for the headhunting. But, in my house, nobody is [put forward]. So, to save my family from that situation, I must give a traditional cow (KII 1).

Consequences of Not Following the Right Tradition

There are supposed to be attendant consequences for failing to keep to the traditional rites as the cultural institution demands. Some of these are highlighted in the remarks of participants in the men's focus group discussion:

I have seen a lady run mad because she was given a comb that was not meant for her (FGDM, R6).

Sometimes, the maiden, while in the fattening room, can be chosen by *Ndem* (the marine god). If a marine priest is sent to the parents, that their daughter in the fattening room has been picked by me to be my prophetess, her presentation to the public will be different and will be as directed by the marine [cult] (FGDM, R5).

They will expel you from the fattening room (Caregiver 2).

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The Manifest and Tendentious Egotism of the *Nkuho* Tradition

Nkuho is also believed to be a traditional practice woven around human vanities and ego.

The significance of all those ceremonies is that they show the wealth and affluence of the bride's family (FGDM, R5).

It's just pride and self-value (FGOF, R1).

The child is the means to an end. The end of all of these things – like when I used the word 'vain fantasy' – because of my realisation now is that all of those things were just for ego (KII 1).

Community Support in *Nkuho* Activity

Often and, as typical, the community assumes a moral burden of providing supports for *nkuho* activities, as shown in these responses:

No matter how rich you are, it is the beauty [of the tradition that counts]. No matter how affluent you are – as I am your uncle and aunty coming to see my niece in the seclusion room – and as I am coming to see [her], I am coming with goats or yam or rice and anything I can lay my hands on – vegetable, palm oil, palm wine, anything (KII 1).

Yes, if he is the suitor, that is the husband-to-be, he can also sponsor part of it or everything from the beginning to the end (Parent 1).

Oh yes! Of course, the family of the suitor would assist also, because their interest is here, and they want this particular girl. They have seen that the family of the girl is a good family. They've produced [the maiden]... right. They are hard-working spiritually, physically. So, they support, they do support (Caregiver 2).

The Challenges of Payment of the Caregiver in *Nkuho*

Sometimes challenges or difficulties arise with respect to the payment of the caregivers. This is one development that is most probable since, as already established, families sending their daughters to the fattening room are not of equal standing in terms of their economic power or financial capacities.

The services were not voluntary, but you had to pay for every one of them from Day One. She was paid. She had to be paid because there is the belief that, *ibok idighe ke nfon* (there's no free medication [care]). You have to give them something and when they finish, you have to give them gifts. I know what I gave the one that took care of my children (Parent 2)

As a caregiver, you are recognised in the whole village and being talked about (Caregiver 2).

Counterpositions to Circumcision of the Girl-child in Efik *Nkuho* Practice

In contemporary times, there are contrary views to the Efik belief that, without circumcision, one becomes wayward and sexually overactive:

And now, I do not see how a child becomes wayward if she is not circumcised. My last child was not wayward but, instead, kept herself until she got married. And, till

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now, she is not wayward. So, I don't know where that belief came from. Also, you can teach your child how to take care of a home, take care of her husband, cook and do other things without having to put her in a fattening room (Parent 2).

No Rigid Time Frame for Staying in *Nkuho*

As observation has shown, there are no fixed or rigid time frames for keeping maidens in the *nkuho* practice.

It could be two or three or more [months or years] depending on how capable your parents are to keep you in the house, feed you ... (Caregiver 1).

Criteria for Selecting a Caregiver

Also, there are no rigid criteria for the selection of an *nkuho* caregiver, although age and experience are often considered.

There is practically nothing... They just look at you as an elderly woman, that you have the traditional knowledge. They pick you. It all boils down to you accepting... your interest (Caregiver 2).

Other Training Gotten from *nkuho*

On the fringe of the *nkuho* tradition, and besides its primary objective of preparing a maiden for marriage, there are other character-moulding forms of training that shape the reformation or reconstruction of the girl-child's ethical and moral consciousness. According to a caregiver:

Assuming you were heady – a very stubborn girl – the moment they put you in the fattening room, the stubbornness will be taken away from you by the caregiver. She has the right to beat you. She has the right

to scold you because, if [she didn't] come out [the way that] parents and the community want, she is the one to be blamed. So, she is the one to mould you the way your parents have given her the instructions to (Caregiver 2).

Conclusion

Largely, this study has made significant contributions into reconstructing negative modern or pseudo-modern perceptions and understandings of a cultural practice such as the fattening room among the Efik people. Such misconstructions are negative misrepresentations which emanate as consequences of cultural alterity borne from overbearing external influences such as colonial education, media misrepresentation of African cultural spaces and venerable age-old practices that subsist therein. The study has prodigiously illuminated the African gender space and redirected earlier faulty assumptions about Efik fattening rooms with tangible ethnographic data that were generated *in situ*.

Invariably, the idea of 'coming of age' is fundamental to the rites and practices associated with the fattening room tradition as this research has also shown, but this often gets lost in the narrative of gender and femininity on the one hand and meeting of tradition and modernity on the other hand, as well as the cultural-self-preservation ethos and mores that are nuanced within the cultural commune as epitomised by the Efik cultural practice engaged for this study. The data has significantly shown – from an emic perspective – that people of the Efik stock remain in full awareness of their own cultural traditions and practices. More importantly, regardless of the influence of modernity and colonial legacies, the people constitute in themselves a critical interpretive community wielding the natural power of native intelligence from which they can offer education to outsiders to their culture.

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This observation underscores the significant point that, notwithstanding what Western education and Western education or colonial anthropology offers or suggests, Africans control their own discourse. The current study validates this position, especially where cultural practices are concerned and subsist, indeed as such practices may be deemed to implicate gender and gender discourse in the context of change informed by still ongoing acculturative processes and other forces of cultural and social transformation. The complexities that accompany the fattening room practices and its rites clearly transcend the simplistic view and manner in which the practice has been approached by Western and sub-westernised minds.

Appreciated more critically from the study's data, the fattening room tradition of the Efik offers an important context for understanding the idea of coming of age, through the established customs and rites that define being and becoming within the cultural cognition of the Efik people. Hence, the cultural and ritual performances associated with the Efik's fattening room practice, indeed, speak to and underline the sacredness of the marriage institution as a significant moral, ethical, biological and sociocultural agency of safeguarding the cultural perpetuity and the distinctive identity of the Efik.

Undeniably, the imposition of a colonial administrative superstructure might have ruptured the original and authentic spirit of the fattening room tradition as was in pre-colonial times. Nevertheless, the evidence of a quest for a postcolonial continuity of the tradition and a sense of urgency for effective adaptability of fattening room practices to current reality is an excellent demonstration of its perceived and understood cultural significance to the cultural life of the Efik. This present truth stands to be valued even in the face of fluctuating changes in a globalised world, notwithstanding potential opposition from

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critics who might be judging this longstanding and venerable cultural practice from their Westernised or sub-Westernised dispositions.

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APPENDIX 1

List of Respondents

Caregiver, 1

Caregiver, 2

FGD Female, 1

FGD Female, 2

FGD Female, 3

FGD Female, 4

FGD Male, 1

FGD Male, 2

FGD Male, 3

FGD Male, 4

FGD Male, 5

FGD Male, 6

Key Informant (1)

Key Informant (2)

Key Informant (3)

Key Informant (4)

Key Informant (5)

Maiden, 1

Maiden, 2

Maiden, 3

Maiden, 4

Maiden, 5

Maiden, 6

Parent 1

Parent 2

Parent 3

Parent 4

APPENDIX 2

Additional Images from Fieldwork



Plate 5: Research team with Prof. Dr. Bernard Sorre, during a session of data analysis