

A Critique Of Isukhure Rite In Legitimising Adultery In Esan Culture

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Abstract: The Isukhure rite is a reality in the metaphysics of the Esan people of Northern Edo State. The practice forms part of the belief systems of the people that is used to remedy the problem of male impotency. Isukhure as understood among the Esan people is a rite performed to absolve and consent assured in permitting a married women to have an extra-marital affairs that would, under normal circumstances without such approval be labeled adulterous and abominable act. Isukhure process therefore legitimizes the act of adultery in Esan belief system. The act seems to be supported by the moral principle of Egoism. To the Esans, they considered any act or behavior done out of self centeredness or personal want or need to be justified on the ground that the consequences of the action is bore solely by the agent. But a critical look on this practice reveals that, irrespective of its long existence and wide acceptance is beset with a lot of flaws and therefore call for change. Change is the only constant stuff of reality as such the act of adultery, no matter the traditional practice it may hide under is universally impermissible since it is adjudged to be an immoral behavior and widely regarded as an indecent act on social and ontological grounds.

In this paper we shall critically examine the process of Isukhure in legitimizing the act of adultery in the situation of male impotence for the purpose of child bearing in Esan culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Another name that is used for adultery is extramarital affair. The act of adultery is generally frowned at by all and sundry in Africa not just the Esan people alone. It is a distasteful behavior both socially and ontologically as it brings both shame and untold hardship, with a possible untimely death to anyone that engages in the act. Hence in Esan land and the entire African continent nobody toil with the act of extramarital affairs because it is deadly and a no-go area.

The impermissibility of the act of adultery in Esan ontology lay bare as a sin against the ancestral gods on the spiritual plane and the husband on the social parlance.

Adultery among the Esan people is one of the most serious crimes because it destruct the ontological structure of the family and the entire community as its consequence can wipe an entire family as well as the community: That is while it's a most dreadful act to toil with. So adultery as an evil act as is being regarded by the Esans of southern Nigeria is a

reality. This position is better explained by Ehiakhamen that: Adultery by a women is a serious wrongdoing among the Esan people that falls within the rubric of taboo morality, a prohibited act that evokes communal sanction when committed. Among the Esans, adultery is known as "ughelemin" or Ugboghele" This act of Ugboghele could be committed in diverse forms, amongst which can take place in such act as:

- ✓ When a man has physical sexual intercourse with a married woman either as kin's brother's wife or not.
- ✓ When a married woman has lustful thought towards a married or unmarried man other than her real husband.
- ✓ When a married woman had canal knowledge of sexual affair with another woman. Whether married or unmarried. Ukpokolo defined adultery as the act of sexual intercourse between a married person (male or female) and someone other than the spouse.' He went further to elucidate thus: other cognate terms associated with the

phenomenon of adultery include “bigamy” “cheating on”, and “philandery”.

Meanwhile, in Esan cosmology men are exempted from the act of adultery. The exclusion of the male counterpart from the act of adultery among the Esan people cut-across the entire Africans. In Africa the male are not culpable in the act of adultery, because the African culture permits men to marry more than one wives so long as he can take care of them. It is the woman that is required to keep complete fidelity to her husband till death. Familusi substantiates this thus: On extra-marital sexual affairs, the woman is duty bound to be faithful to her husband while the rule is loose regarding the man. In fact, women are expected to be calm when their husbands have been found to have been involved in extra-marital sexual affairs.

However, a curious look on the Esan ontology reveals the provision of an alternative options for the legitimization of an adultery in the face of male impotency for the purpose of child bearing. This process in Esan ontology is regarded to as “Isukhure rite”. Isukhure rite is widely used among the Edo State people which comprises the Esans; Binis; Etsakos; Owans and the Afemais. With little variations to the practice: While the essence of the practice remaining the same. The obvious reason for Isukhure rite is to grant a woman the right or freedom to have sexual relationship with another man than her own husband, that would otherwise without the consent, be regarded to as an adulterous and abominable act by both men and divinities.

II. WHO ARE THE ESAN

The term Esan has been applied to the Esan People for years and has been in use before the influx of the European contact with the Africans. The name Esan was originally referred to by many as “Esanfia. The Esan people owe their origin to the Bini people of Edo State in Nigeria.

The Esan People popularly known as “Ebho Esan” are ethnic group of Southern Nigeria that speak the Esan Language. They are traditionally Agriculturalists, warriors and hunters. The present Esan Nation is conceived to have constituted 15th century ago when some of their nobles and princes left the Benin Kingdom for the northeast where they were thought to have established communities called “Eguare”⁵. The Eguare so formed consist of 35 kingdoms which make up the present Esan land included Ewohimi, Ekpoma, Ubiaja, Uromi, Igueben and Ewu.

Despite the splitting of the Eguares, the Esan keep a homogeneous culture which is said to have been influenced by the Benin Empire. The people speak an Edoid language which attest to their interstionship with people of Urhobo, Isoko, Bini and Etsako. The estimated numbers of Esan people who presently dwell on the land are about one million to 1.5 million citizens of Nigeria.

III. ADULTERY IN ESAN CULTURE

All African communities have their essences rooted in their beings-ie culture and tradition. They strongly believe in a

world that is encapsulated in both spiritual and physical realities. The Africans Esan people in particular affirm the superiority of the spirit world as it tends to control the physical existence. “The Esan view of what is ultimately real or, what it means for any thing to be is in many respects similar to what has been theorized about many African cultures. To be real for an Esan is to be fused to, or entangled within, a community of forces, active or passive”. This father Tempels averred in his Bautu’s philosophy about the believe in vital force as African ultimate reality.

Therefore in Esan metaphysics of existence all beings are infused together, one having influence upon another. The humans, animals, vegetables and the nonliving With minerals all by the vital force are interwoven, as such impart on one another. Thus in Esan culture in whatsoever sphere of operation or realm of existence a being is found to either be-Visible or invisible. The commonst element among beings is the possession of force. This is further substantiated in the following manner: “reality is also accounted for by causal relations among entities. When two or more entities interrates, their forces intermingle and produce hybrids in forms of objects and events. Thus explaining the occurrence of illness, joy, pain, death, and other such events involves identifying the interacting forces and what was produced thereof”. The Esan name for force is “etin” and it’s believed that each being has a distinct etin and each etin vary from being to being. The degree of force possessed by a particular etin is determined by the level of existence of the being. The degree of force (etin) which an entity possesses determines the position that such an entity occupies within the structure of beings. This is largely responsible for assigning hierarchy to beings within the African thought system. It is thought that the supreme being who is the creator and sustainer of life and the entire universe occupies the apex of the hierarchy of beings. Followed by him are the divinities. The divinities are deified ministers of the supreme being who have different portfolios and act as intermediaries between the supreme being and the human beings. Below the divinities are the ancestors. Ancestors are intrinsic members of an African community who have properly speaking departed the physical realm of existence to the nonphysical realm. They have completed their course here in the land of the physically living and have gone to the world beyond. Although not all that are dead goes to the world beyond that becomes member of the ancestors in African thought system. There are conditions for a dead person to become an ancestor. Some of which are: He may have lived a community-accepted lifestyle, he must have lived a ripe old age, he must have children breded by himself who lived to honor his death and must have died a good death.⁸ Brown expressed his conception of the notion of an Ancestor in African cosmology thus: Ancestors are next in line to divinities. They are individuals who were once (physically) alive, but are nonetheless still capable of agency. Having agency is to be understood as having a capacity to initiate on one’s own accord, actions that have intended consequences for oneself or for others. It is believed that the awareness of the intention of ancestral spirits provides grounds for understanding physical occurrences.

In African community, the ancestor is intrinsically intertwined with the living. Their consent is sought regarding

family decision and they are appeased when a family member errs. Thus ancestors are themselves still continuing persons. Still very much a part of the living community¹⁰. Following Ancestors in the hierarchy of being is the human being. This being has both physical and non physical features such as the head; mind; heart; and other parts that are physiological as well as having guardian spirits and soul. The human person is usually a project whose life force can either increase or diminished within the existential nature which is influenced by the action or inaction of the person in question. There are basically animals, plants, the earth, things in cosmos and minerals. This category in the hierarchy of beings either have a low degree of vital life or is simply inactive.

The essential point here is that in Esan community there exist interacting cosmic forces that great structure that foster communal harmony. There is the intermingleness between the living and the dead creating a social! spiritual web of kinship relations. Hence interpersonal relationship is necessary for survival of any being in the ontological structure. Ukpokolo expressed Esan ontological structure of Beings thus: In what is perhaps best considered as the conception of reality in indigeneous Esan thought system, there exists a duality of realms-material and immaterial, separable but not always separated. This duality constitutes a whole, a unity or a one. Beings existing in these realms of the material and the immaterial are animated or vitalized by an ontological principle of "forces" called Orion or etin.

This act of Ughelle, the male are exempted from being culpable. Ukpokolo identified this as: Indigeneous Esan culture as one of such example where married males are essentially speaking, excluded from the culpability of adultery particularly when it is between a married male and an unmarried female.

This is while actions are seriously guided by the community. Action and interactions that promote peaceful coexistence are encouraged while those that will lead to disharmony are seriously frowned at. This is the reason why adultery is not condoned in Esan community. This can be succinctly disclosed thus. "Moral culpability or the actions deserving of blame by an individual within an Esan community is communally determined to the extent that the action deserving blame has distorted the community order and harmony".

This is true as wrong acts are not admitted from an individual level to that of the entire community. The community becomes the highest level of determining moral culpability. To this end adultery in Esan land is a serious wrongdoing that falls within the rubric of 'taboo morality', a prohibited act that evokes communal sanction when committed. Among the Esans, adultery is regarded to as "ughele" or "ugboghele". Ukpokolo went further to aver that Among the indigeneous Esan people the act of adultery is not just frowned at but completely resented and absolutely condemned particularly when it has to do with a married woman. The fact of its being an injustice to the husband and compromising the good of the children constitute a major moral or ethical problematic: It is characterized by falsehood and cheating which are immoral dispositions. Any individual found to have such character is regarded as lacking in integrity; the person is corrupted by the immorality and has

brought grave metaphysical injury on himself and his community.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILD BEARING AND THE ISSUE OF MALE IMPOTENCY IN ESAN CUSTOM

Child bearing is one of the categories that makes up personhood. Every human being long to produce his own kind. Therefore child bearing becomes one of the most essential elements in an African familyhood. The reason behind the marriage contracted in African setting is primarily for raising of children. A person becomes regarded as such when he can foster children. Ehiakhamen portrays this in the following words: "True manhood or womanhood can only be confirmed by the reality of reproductive success. The esteemed position given to child bearing in majority of considerations relating to traditional African family life explains the reasons why not being able to bear children after marriage leads to a strong social stigma". Anyone who does not bear children in an African (Esan) community cannot possibly have peace of mind because of the various talks from both family members, friends and side neighbours alike are mind trumbing and disturbing. All this leads public embarrassments at social gatherings with the derisive or insulting words from some members of the society.

However, in the face of this derisive situation encountered by a barren woman or an impotent man a lot of efforts are geared towards finding remedy to the unpalatable situation. There exist countless numbers of solutions in redressing unbearable or malignant problem of bareness/male impotency. They range from prayer intercessions in either churches, mosque or spiritual houses or visiting clinics or Hospitals, witch doctors homes or Herbalist homes.

In Africa, Esan community in particular women carry the biggest blames for couples inability to produce children the derision and side-talks and laughter are on the women than the man, because to the Africans infertility is largely blamed upon the women folks since they are the bearer of children. So, they tend to carry the blame than their male counterparts irrespective of knowledge of the existence of male impotency the derisions are majorly directed to the woman. This goes to indicate the reason behind the barren woman bearing the burden of childlessness than the man and so implies the reason why they seem to ever be in the fore-front in search for solution than their male counterpart when faced with the stigma of childlessness.

In understanding the legitimacy of adultery in Esan ontology the problem of male impotency is a veritable tool for analysis in the application of Isukhure rite for the purpose of child bearing. When it is obvious that a man's inability to reproduce is as a result of impotency in Esan land the first line of action is to find the root cause and the course of remedy is to seek natural explanation i.e empirical grounds, but when this fails to yield the needed results the supernatural dimension is sought for. It is on this level that the application of Isukhure processes becomes relevant. This does not eliminate other possible solutions to the problem such as health care services; the consultation with the supernatural forces through patronizing the chief priest, pastors, witch doctors e.t.c.. when

all these have been consulted yet no known reason behind the problem of impotency as the cause. It becomes obvious that the man in question cannot father a child. Base on the fear that if something is not done drastically his lineage could be wiped out without offspring especially male child, then an alternative measure is sought by the woman. This alternative measure revolves round the concept of Isukhure rite which we are about to turn.

V. THE PLACE OF UKHURE IN THE FAMILY AND CLAN CIRCLE

Ukhure as understood in Esan community is a deity or shrine that is worshipped or served in the community or in a family by male elders especially the older ones. The Ukhure is symbolised by a stick and cowries tied around it. It is mainly found in front of the house or at the back of the door of the house. This deity is often found in every quarter of the community in Esan. The chief priest who serves or represent this deity is the eldest male child of the family, or the eldest person in the community. In some parts of Esan the "Ukhure" is regarded to as "Ohana".

Ukhure is not frivolously or trivially served but it is used to solve very important problem(s) that have become pandemic of some sorts. e.g. Issue of childlessness, witchcraft; plague; revoking curse(s) e.t.c In the face of a serious problem either in the family or the community the eldest male in the family or community who is the custodian of the ukhure consults the deity and offers some sacrifice to appease the deity. Such sacrifice may include some food like pounded yam mashed with soup with either goat meat or chicken. While the foods are eaten by the living human being: The ancestor eat some part of the fresh placed on the carved Ukhure stick and the remains of the left over bones.

Some of the imports of Ukhure among the Esan people are;

- ✓ It helps to provide solution to problems in the family through consulting the deity and providing the necessary sacrifice required by the deity of ukhure.
- ✓ It serve as guide to every member of the family or the community where the Ukhure deity is found or located.
- ✓ It plays a vital role during the time of an annual festival.
- ✓ It enhances the chronological tree of every family or community where the Ukhure tree is located.
- ✓ It serve as a god to some indigenes of Esan people especially those that strongly believe in its reality
- ✓ It is a medium by which appeals are made to deities for wrong done and mercy and forgiveness atone for prosperity.
- ✓ It helps to enhance the efficacy of witch doctors.

VI. ISUKHURE: THE REALITY OF LEGITIMATE ADULTERY IN ESAN METAPHYSICS

As said above, when all hope of remedying the problem of male impotency is lost, for the purpose of child bearing and continuity of the lineage of man with impotency when his wife has been diagnosed to be fertile is for the woman to approach the

eldest man in her husband's family or clan to consent to her having extra-marital relationship with any other man and exempt her from adultery by the atonement made for adulterous act in the alter or shrine of the Ukhure. Isukhure as understood among the Esan people Western Edo State is rites performed and consent assured in permitting a married woman granting her liberty to engage in an extra-marital activities, that would, under normal circumstances without such approval, be label adulterous and abominable act in the face of man and divinities. The process of Isukhure is only desirable under the condition that the cause of the impotency is not traced to a known cause and that the extra-marital affairs is ideally for raising children not for fun. That is while the consent is only granted only if it has been proven beyond reasonable doubt that her husband cannot function sexually. Isukhure is practiced when only it is cleared that a man is sexually inactive to satisfy the wife's sexual needs or lacks the ability to impregnate his wife.

When all indication has shown that the man can not actually satisfy his wife sexual urge and more-so he cannot raise children then the woman can opt for Isukhure. Isukhure rite takes the form of: The man is required to inform his kins men especially the most eldest son of his family of his sexual Inactiveness then his wife is invited for confirmation of the state of her husband sexual function. If she is disposed to the option of Isukhure then the rite is performed. The assemblage of all the most eldest man in each family around the community that are his kin's men coming together to consent her lying with any other sexually functional man for the sack of raising children legitimizes adultery and render her not culpable of an adulterous act and therefore absolving her from the consequences that would have be meted on her and her household of an adulterous act.

The reason while the effect of an adulterous act cannot follow the woman by the consent granted is that the assemblage of the eldest men commit their approval to the knowledge of the supernatural forces through the sacrifices made at the shrine of the Ukhure. The staff of authority of the family head. The sacrifice is usually the killing of goat meat soup mashed with pounded yam while the blood of the goat is poured on the Ukhure stick or tree as the case may be.

In a nutshell, the act of Isukhure absolve and free the woman from the punishment which the act of adultery attracts from the various communities of beings to which the Esan people relates with. The community of the supreme being; of the divinities; of the ancestors and of humans and things spiritual and physical.

VII. THE MORAL GROUND FOR ISURHURE PROCESS AMONG THE ESAN PEOPLE

What support the act of Isukhure morally speaking among the Esan people is the moral principle of "Egoism". To them, any act or behavior done out of self centeredness or personal want or need is justifiable on the ground that the consequences of the action is bore solely by the agent. To the Esans they believe that humans are selfish in nature and that humans should act in accordance to these primordial ways; that even if humans try to be courteous to others, we are in reality trying to

benefit ourselves. Thus there is no need to pretend as if we are all time altruistic but rather we should always act in ways that benefit ourselves.

VIII. EFFECTS OF THE PROCESS OF ISUKHURE RITE IN LEGITIMISING ADULTERY

There exist so many consequences resulting from one subscribing to the Isukhure rite. Critics have argued that Isukhure rite in its bid of legitimising adultery has led to the break up of family ties as the hired man through whom the woman who asked for a bailout bears or raises children will end up being mixed blood; thereby eroding children of the same blood breed in the family line. This can create a long term depression; hurt; stress; lack of peace and unhealthy family relationship. It can also lead to ridicule by friends and extended family members.

Secondly, the process of Isukhure is indecent as it can create psychological, and spiritual breakdown of the man whose wife has reported to be impotent. No man under such condition would want his predicament to be disclosed to the third person not to talk of being made public. So, as the rite of Isukhure makes the man's condition open to the family members this will demoralize the impotent man and make him to look as if he were unworthy, second rated and unwanted. This has an untold indelible pain on him. Hence white said philosophers who teach the ethical system known as utilitarianism will be apt to say hurting people is wrong.

Thirdly, the Isukhure rite seems to be sponsoring an immoral act in the society or community by legitimising the act of adultery. The community will be plagued into chaos as the permission of the indecent act engenders immorality into the society by so doing the rubric which holds the society together will grumble and this will give rise to all forms of unethical behavior like masturbation, the use of sex toys, Bestiality, pedophilia; necrophilia and other sexual abuses. The end result will be animal world. Something closed to the state of nature where Thomas Hobbes said is nasty; British and short".

More also, Isukhure process tends to promote religious bigotry in a society that is adjudged "secular". The secularity of Esan community shows that here exist forms of religious beliefs besides that of the animist (pagan) practice of Isukhure. The predominance of Isukhure practice in Esan land therefore portends a form of religious fight and intolerance to other religious belief systems. Like the Christian alternatives of adoption e.t.c this could lead to religious conflict if the tide is not well managed.

Finally, Isukhure rite involves breaking of a marriage vow or promise which itself is infidelity in marriage. This renders the woman unfaithful to her spouse. This makes the Isukhure act unwholesome; impure and out rightly a misdemeanor not required of a pious person. So, Isukhure causes more harms than good as the woman who is duty bound to keep her marriage vow (ie promise not to share her love for her with any other person come what may). Suddenly on account of her husband's impotency gives in to infidelity amount to unfaithfulness this may lead to marriage break up.

IX. CRITIQUE

No matter how the rite of Isukhure is embellished and well fashioned as an aged long belief, the truth remains that the act of adultery is seriously frowned at all over the world as it destructs the ontological structure and can lead to an untold hardship with possible untimely death of both the practitioners and the entire clan or community. It is on this note that the below criticisms are levied against the practice of Isukhure rite. The principle of utilitarianism can be applied to ground the moral dilemma of adultery. To this end we can critique the Isukhure act by the Hedonistic calculus of J.S. Mill to substantiate the wrongness of the immoral act of Isukhure practice in the belief system of the Esan people. The calculus which is based on a set of criteria that measure happiness. The first Hedonist calculus is certainty. This is a measure of how sure we are that the process of Isukhure rite which legitimizes the act of adultery will indeed produce happiness. The next factor is intensity, which shows the extent to which the Isukhure rite will make people happy. The next criticism is Durability, this asks how long the happiness which the Isukhure rite will produce last. The next criticism is propinquity, this asks how soon will Isukhure process produce the needed happiness which the couples who subscribed to the act of Isukhure attain their desired joy. While the other criterion which is fecundity entails question how much happiness will Isukhure process produce by the association between the trio ie the woman, her husband, the hired man and the progeny(ies) that the relationship will produce. The last factor in the Hedonistic calculus of utilitarian school of thought is purity. This asks if there is guilt arising from the act of adultery which the Isukhure legitimizes.

The overall tenet of the principle of utilitarianism is premised on the production of an action "the greatest good for the greatest number of people".¹⁴ When we evaluate the Isukhure process in legitimising the act of adultery we find that, the act of Isukhure and its by product which is adultery do not create greater good for the greatest number of persons. The only people who may have gained in the act is the woman and most probably the hired man. This makes the process of Isukhure base on the hedonistic calculus of fecundity and purity disapproved of the act of Isukhure practice and rendered it an Immoral act despite the fact that the process is an aged long practice.

Therefore spouse who have problem with bearing children by themselves should rather seek a better way(s) of solving the situation rather than, Isukhure process base on the above effects and critique.

X. CONCLUSION

The act of adultery is regarded to as an immoral act among the Esan people of Edo State. It is largely frowned at because it does not only destruct the ontological structure of the community but also cause an untold hardship and possible untimely death on the practitioners. Yet in the same Esan ontology there is a proviso which legitimizes the act of adultery known as Isukhure rite which permits a woman to

have an extra-marital affairs with another man other than her husband in the situation of impotency.

This practice though is an aged long one among the Esan people, but a thorough scrutiny of the process revealed that the practice of Isukhure is not only archaic but also anachronistic. Therefore call for a change as change is the only constant element of reality.

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