

# The 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural self-reinvention: *Mbopo* ritual and the Calabar Festival in southern Nigeria

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“Wisdom consist in knowing oneself and not minding others business...”<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

There is an extensive literature on how Europeans re-invented Africa in tribal or ethnic frameworks with an emphasis on cultural performance, spectacles and even ethnic divide. This literature foregrounds the ways in which Africa was 'invented' or fabricated in the European imagination along traditional tribal lines in ways that suppressed any signs of modernity and exaggerated traditionalism. These inventions were public spectacles whether in the form of museum displays, Africans paraded on stage, or assumed esoteric ritualism. These profoundly shaped a Eurocentric discourse of 'othering' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They contributed to the conceptual categories through which Africa was controlled, dominated and historicized during the imperial and colonial periods.

Yet Africans always represented themselves in different ways using different registers. This paper will examine how important rituals and identities associated with indigenous forms of culture in Nigeria have been re-invented or re-imagined from within as public spectacles designed for television audiences and public viewing. It does so by exploring the complex issues of cultural representations associated with two highly popular cultural performances for Nigerian television (with continental and global audiences) from the 2010s: the first is a re-enactment of the *mbopo* ('fattening room') rituals associated with *Ibibio/Efik* girls' prenuptial initiation ceremonies (televised in 2013 with young women from all over Africa as cultural subjects) and the second is the Calabar Festival and Carnival held annually in December in which the different cultural groups across Nigeria perform their traditional dances in traditional dress for a vast and growing continental and global audience. (They are now advertised as the fourth largest festival in the world.) Based on participant observation and interviews at the Calabar Festival of 2019 and close visual analysis of the 'Fattening Room' television series of 2013 this paper examines the complex issues associated with the staging of African cultural identities in the 21st century within a substantial literature on this subject. How do we assess the degree of 'authenticity' of such rituals? To what extent do they capture and convey to modern public audiences, cultural rituals, traditions and concepts of the past and the present? What is the interplay between culture as entertainment and culture as lived experience in these visualised events? How does the visual language and media of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a rough and incomplete draft. I needed to keep up with the deadline because of my keen interest in this conference. I have since April been bedevilled with unfavourable circumstances that have cumulatively impeded my research work generally, and this paper in particular. One significant challenge I face is the impact of the ongoing pandemic on me as a student. The closure of the University campus in March meant restricted accessibility to work space and to libraries. Again, my work unit (laptop) crashed around April and since then I have been struggling to retrieve my research data. This in itself was a terrible psychological trauma that I only try to recover from a few days back. Please bear with me over any error therein. The second aspect of the paper is still pending as I await the retrieval of my data. Hopefully, a complete paper that will address the thesis of my abstract will follow suit. Thank you!

<sup>2</sup> Mudimwe, the Idea of Africa, 2

television constrain or enable different levels of cultural presentation and performance? And how do these layers of analysis help us in revisiting the cultural history of Africa?

## Introduction

How has Africa been conceptualized? The “idea of Africa” over the last centuries have been a misguided definition of “othering” among people of another geographical enclave. The discovery of navigational technology allowed European conquistadors and explorers access into Africa.<sup>3</sup> In contacts with some African groups, travellers who were unaware and uninformed about the diversities of cultures interpreted African people based on European ideals. In 1640, Nicholas de Graaf, a ship surgeon came into contact with the Khoikhoi of southern African region and defined them as “wild heathens...whose customers were more like beast than men.”<sup>4</sup> Early European writers like Robert Burton had in the 16<sup>th</sup> century defined Africa as “a place of laughable interest.” Relying on “vague recourses to knowledge gained from books and travelogues,” Burton classified Africa as a place where its inhabitants are wretched and miserable.<sup>5</sup> This misconception laid the foundation for what followed after. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly referred to as “the Age of African Exploitation”, European mis-invention of Africa was heightened by travellers who returned to Europe and created an “idea” and an image that represented Africa as a “Dark Continent.”<sup>6</sup> The “imperialists’ propaganda” further accounted for Africa as “a white man’s burden”, “savages with inherently inferior order” a people with a lesser mental and moral capability,<sup>7</sup> who practices exotic and esoteric cultures and rituals and without the knowledge of God.<sup>8</sup> These forms of narratives about Africa prevailed and mutated in different racial categorisations across the centuries, and served as a “European alibi” and a justification for colonial domination.

In the late Victorian era, a period when Africa was forcefully ripped apart in “soul and territorial space,” European anthropological schools, in Britain, France and Germany collaborated with imperial agencies and further promoted this “deformed” image of Africa through their academia, the museum, public spectacles and public displays and ethnological shows. Through anthropometric science, ethnological fables, artistic representations, mythical ethos, physiognomy, eugenics and biology, Africa was seen in body and mind as

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<sup>3</sup> B. Lindfors, introduction, *Africans on Stage*, p. i

<sup>4</sup> Z. S. Strother, display of the body Hottentot, in *African on Stage*, 3

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 9

<sup>6</sup> B. Lindfors, *Africans on Stage*, p. i

<sup>7</sup> A. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*,

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pathologically disordered, socially abnormal, morally deviant and culturally primitive.<sup>9</sup> Coombes asserts that the collection, display and classification of African material culture in collaboration with ethnological exhibitions of Africans in Europe and the Americas evoked spectacles of bizarre racial categorization and polarization<sup>10</sup> propagated by colonial subterfuge, as a way to heighten slavery and justified colonialism over Africans. Different scholars have responded to these forms of imperial/colonial inventions and generational misrepresentations as a “[re]construction of vague recourses to knowledge,”<sup>11</sup> as well as “willful misunderstandings” that can be qualified as “collective hallucination”<sup>12</sup>

From the early part of the twentieth century through to the beginning of post-colonial Africa, another form of discourse emerged. Given the enormous heterogeneity of Africa, the discourse on ethnicity became prominent and a central concept in social science during the post-World War II era, particularly given the fact that the discourse of race became intensely problematic in “the shadow of the holocaust”.<sup>13</sup> The attendant political turbulence that bedevilled Africa in the post-colonial period drew attention to the supposed “victimhood” of Africa as externally driven “inventions of tribalism”<sup>14</sup> African diversity, that is, ethnicity, was seen as a “created” instrument, an entity invented by missionaries and colonizers, in collaboration with African elites. In other words, ethnic affiliation was a mere tool for “political manipulation in both colonial and pre-colonial times.”<sup>15</sup> Ethnic identity was said to be invented and constructed by powerful European imperial and political brokers, who mobilized them to pursue their self-seeking politico-capitalist objectives.<sup>16</sup> Ethnic politics was conceptualised as the framework for British colonial policy of “divide and rule.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, both the instrumentalists and the constructivists lay emphasis on the “materiality of Africa”, with a cultural processes of identity being “creation” from without: a subtle propagation of the idea of the “Hamitic hypothesis.” This discourse accentuated the conceptual categories

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<sup>9</sup> Coombes,

<sup>10</sup> Coombes, 3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>12</sup> Strother, 1

<sup>13</sup> H. Macmillan, ‘From Race to Ethnic Identity: South Central Africa, Social Anthropology and the Shadow of the Holocaust’ in *Social Dynamics*, 26, no. 2 (2000), 87-115.

<sup>14</sup> L. Vail, ‘Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History’ in L. Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 1-19

<sup>15</sup> B. Ibhawoh, ‘Beyond Instrumentalism and Constructivism: Towards a Reconceptualization of Ethnicity in Africa’, *Humanities Today* 1, no. 1 (2010), 221-230.

<sup>16</sup> L. Vail, ‘Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History’ in L. Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 1-19.

<sup>17</sup> B. Ibhawoh, ‘Beyond Instrumentalism and Constructivism: Towards a Reconceptualization of Ethnicity in Africa’, *Humanities Today* 1, no. 1 (2010), 221-230

through which Africa was controlled, dominated and historicized during and across the imperial and colonial periods.

The “idea” of Africa has not changed in any marginal way among Europeans and other parts of the globe. Africa has been stereotyped as a dependent third world that deserves a position at the last trunk in the comity of nations. It has been described as “shit-hole” nations that must be delimited from global engagement. Yet Africans always represented themselves in different ways using different registers. This paper will examine how important rituals and identities associated with indigenous forms of culture in Nigeria have been re-invented or re-imagined from within as public spectacles designed for television audiences and public viewing. It does so by exploring the complex issues of cultural representations associated with two highly popular cultural performances for Nigerian television (with continental and global audiences) from the 2010s: the first is a re-enactment of the mbobo ('fattening room') rituals associated with Ibibio/Efik girls' prenuptial initiation ceremonies (televised in 2013 with young women from all over Africa as cultural subjects) and the second is the Calabar Festival and Carnival held annually in December in which the different cultural groups across Nigeria perform their traditional dances in traditional dress for a vast and growing continental and global audience.

### **Mbobo ritual: cultural self-reinvention and media show, 2013**

There is an urgent need for Africa to “decolonise” and look beyond colonial categorisation. Scholars of African history and its affiliated disciplines should pay attention to the different efforts propagated by different aspects of African experience in relation to the decolonizing call for African minds and cultured. In an attempt to do this, we need to heed Oyeronke Oyewumi’s call for researchers to comprehensively analyse African cultures from the standpoint and understanding of local and indigenous backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> This paper is an attempt at reinforcing the decolonizing project of African cultures with an entrenched knowledge of local symbolisms.

Mbobo ritual popularly referred to as the “fattening room” in colonial anthropology was a cultural rite of passage for young women who were being prepared for marriage among the Ibibio/Efik people of southern Nigeria. It was a complex pre-marital cultural institution

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<sup>18</sup> O. Oyewumi "Conceptualizing Gender: the Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2002), 1-5.

which marked the change of status from girlhood to nubile womanhood in Ibibio/Efik culture. Culturally and historically, *mbopo* had its place of fervency and vibrancy among Ibibio/Efik people of southern Nigeria. But during the precolonial and colonial periods, an increasing build-up of tension on the ritual by modern forces: by outside missionaries, colonial exigencies but also of indigenous dynamics weakened the ritual. A new generation of Christianized youths, an emerging educated group and colonially upgraded elite increasingly defined *mbopo* as morally taunted.

However, there has been a dynamic and diverse process of cultural reinventions with differing degree of authenticities. The practice and perception of *mbopo* as an institution that precedes marriage has shifted in dramatic ways among the Ibibio/Efik people in the 21st century. It has been firmly appropriated within the realms of the media and the arts as cultural re-imagination and reinvention through TV shows, dance performance, music, visual and graphic art exhibitions etc. More so, the *mbopo* ritual has been reimagined and reinvented in new ways, in an attempt to satisfy a longing for cultural nostalgia and to maintain some strings of connectivity with the past. *The Fattening Room* reality TV show served as a cultural prop for a celebrity-styled fabrication of rituals of beautification. It represents one of these new ways of re-imagining and recasting culture. It used the medium of visuality, the TV show, as serious vehicle to redefine the past in the present.<sup>19</sup>

How can “Reality TV” be used as a resource for historical writing to explore the re-inventiveness of cultural perceptions of *mbopo*? This paper offers a visual analysis and reading of *the Fattening Room* TV show in tandem with my cultural knowledge of the history of *mbopo* ritual, its authenticity and the material culture of the Ibibio/Efik people. Neal Saye proposes that the term “Reality TV is oxymoronic.” This is so because no matter how Reality TV shows are depicted as being real, the general assumptions are that any program presented through the television is based on entertainment, which is “the supra-ideology of all discourse on television.”<sup>20</sup> He further states that “Reality TV” which is commonly set within a “family-style arrangement,” is characterized by using ordinary people instead of professional actors with no predetermined plot. Such media (he continues) can sometimes be directed towards

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<sup>19</sup> R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of the Past*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>20</sup> N. Saye, “No “Survivors,” No “American Idol,” No “Road Rules” in “The Real World” of “BigBrother”:  
Consumer/reality, Hyper/reality, and Post/reality in “Reality” TV”, *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 27/ 2, 9-11.

“understanding the ongoing social struggles over the sign of culture and the definition of social reality and its preferred meaning at any given historical moment.”<sup>21</sup>

Most films, documentaries or Reality TV shows that are historically or culturally grounded are based on the interpretation of historical events through an engagement with a combination of documentary, visual and oral sources, reworking in an experiential interplay by the film maker. Interpretations are therefore acted out and represented in a filmic form through the subjectivity of the film maker.<sup>22</sup> According to Francoise Pfaff, the history filmmaker can function as a “visual griot,” “a historian, a raconteur, a living memory...” of the culture of the people.<sup>23</sup> Films, documentaries and Reality TV shows which are targeted at streaming “past and present realities” are loaded with scenes that resonate with history. They therefore have the capacity to offer “visual clues” as to how events in the past unfolded. This positions them as interpretative resource to think about history, as I do in this study.

While subjecting to close visual analysis on screenshot photographs from the *Fattening Room* TV show and other online videos, this paper argues that in contemporary times, even though there is residual evidence that points to the continuing practice of *mbopo* ritual, its mainstay is cultural nostalgia, reimagined and reinvented through the genre of play, entertainment and the media. I show that the Ibibio/Efik people used the TV platform to stage performances that connect them with the main values of *mbopo* even when actual seclusion ritual is not performed. Though this process of reinvention is highly selected and is tailored to modern audiences and entertainment that some sense of cultural “authenticity” is sacrificed in service of public display.

In June 2013, in the city of Calabar, six young women were hosted to participate in *The Fattening Room* reality show. This was a live TV series, an attempt to remediate and display on television screens the experiences and cultural characteristics of the Ibibio/Efik women’s rite of passage called *mbopo*.<sup>24</sup> Young African women were invited to engage in an extended period of rigorous pampering and learning. “The cast consisting of Stephanoe Unachukwu (Nigeria), Rosdyn Ashkar (Ghana), Patricia Kihori (Kenya), Tshepo Maphanyanye (Botswana), Sally Berold (South Africa) and Limpo Funlika (Zambia)”, were advertised as being taken through “a journey of self-discovery as they explored the rich Ibibio/Efik

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-11.

<sup>22</sup> R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 3-5. See also V. Bickford-Smith and R. Mendelsohn, “Introduction,” 1-3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> ThisDay, Nigeria: EbonyLife Brings Six African Ladies to the Fattening Room, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201304291435.html>, accessed on 14 March 2018.

marriage custom and tradition for 30 days in the (so-called) *Fattening Room*, a reality show that has its setting in Calabar, the Cross River State capital.”<sup>25</sup>

For one month the reality show was aired live across different African television channels, as these young African women entered the Efik/Ibibio women’s seclusion rite embellished with a modern twist.<sup>26</sup> *The Fattening Room* reality show, though realistically staged in a video cast and television format, was not of course “real.” *The Fattening Room* was theatrical, directed towards entertaining its viewers. While trying to entertain, the reality show seemed to posit itself as a visual defense of African traditional culture, tacitly addressing the misunderstandings that surround the Ibibio/Efik female rite in a televisual form. The show tried to present the Ibibio/Efik female seclusion rite, *mbopo*, as more than just fattening-up, but as an all-encompassing female-centred induction process which is culturally friendly and able to accommodate initiates from outside Ibibio/Efik land and Nigeria. The show also attempted to portray the female rite more than an ancient rite where girls are housed within a secluded area, where they are forcefully fed to the point of fatness to appeal the Ibibio/Efik patriarchal yearning for a voluminous female body. The show rather tried to reposition *mbopo* as culturally fluid, a ritual that can fit into contemporary modernity with some form of acceptance.

These six “feisty, modern, single” African women staged a re-enactment of the *mbopo* seclusion ritual for 30 days within a hut-based village compound, around the fringes of riverine topography in Creek Town, Calabar.<sup>27</sup> The cast were between 22 and 32 years old. They were put through rigorous and unfamiliar experiences and trained in body beautification, body massaging, cooking lessons, and other domestic and craft-enhancing skills training. These were interspaced with lavish feeding bouts. This was an attempt to create an illusion of how the *mbopo* seclusion ritual was practiced in the past. The young women were secluded under the watch of an Efik cultural matriarch, Edak Totsman Etoty with her assistant, Ekanam Knight, along with a host of other attendants-in-waiting. Edak Etoty, a domineering and imposing figure fondly called “Aunty Dakky” by the cast members, and her assistant were themselves former initiates. This was one of the means of authenticating the “reality” claim of the show. They drew on their past experiences to supervise and build the structure of the show that could align with the purported “fattening

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

room” ritual, as a means of keeping alive this history. This is because in the past it was unacceptable for a non-initiate to perform the duty of *mbopo* matron in a seclusion rite.<sup>28</sup>



Fig.3.1: Advertisement shot of *The Fattening Room* “girls”: Ebonylife TV Show, 2013.

The above photograph is one among the series of photographs that Ebonylife TV used in the advertisement reel for the reality show. It was the first image that comes up in every episode of the reality show. This and other similar photographs that are not reproduced here were taken at the same site showing participants in similar attire. They were used to visually announce the show on TV stations. This composition is set up to awaken the viewers to the dynamism and sophistication that is expected of the show as it unfolds. It is a sensational visual presentation of the six “feisty young women.” The advertisement reel that announces this photograph is presented in a fast-paced mode that is used to draw viewers’ attention to the show, and to evoke a sense of curiosity that would persuade a viewer to stay with the show.

Set within the architectural background of a pre-colonial Efik elite family house in the tropical topography of Calabar, the photograph connects with “a traditional rural” historical backdrop, while still being fixed within a modern aesthetic. The subjects are dressed in elaborate and dazzling old fashioned “European” novelty gowns, perhaps drawing attention to the “popular” influence of European ideologies in reshaping African cultural ideals. Their probing gazes into the camera suggest their readiness to face the unfamiliar but exhilarating

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<sup>28</sup> M. Jeffreys, “The Nyama Society of the Ibibio Women,” 27.



cultural encounters they are set to meet. Robed in a manner far removed from the cultural practices of *mbopo*, “the fattening room” inscription on the photograph insists on their historical connection with the ritual: a kind of reinvention typical of modern twist.

The “white skin” of Sally, the South African creates a colour effect for the staged composition. Stephanie, the Ghanaian participant dressed in a purple gown, takes the centre stage. With her arms akimbo on her waist, she draws attention to the slimness of her physique. Her slick figure undermines the notion of “fattening.” The photograph resonates with Imeh’s notion of “staging as a concept of the modern-day interpretation...and performance of traditional rituals within the framework of entertainment, pedagogy and collective memory.”<sup>29</sup> It could point to the transforming capacity of the ritual, that can turn a slick girl to robust voluminous bride. At the same time, some elements of “reality” effect were played out during the show. Some of the “girls” mentioned that they did observe some dimples around their waists, a sign that they did really gain some weight during the show.<sup>30</sup>

The cultural structure that was strictly identifiable with partly-naked parades of young girls as a show of virtue is here reenacted with persons of foreign background garbed in complete Western-style dresses. *Mbopo* is now represented by exquisitely and elegantly dressed multicultural inductees in a moment of fantasized re-imagination. A practice that was grounded in strict cultural injunctions (including ascertaining if the inductee to-be was a virgin, performing female circumcision, with sacrifices and rituals targeted at consecrating the expected initiate to divine deities etc.) in 1914 was staged 100 years later without any of these restrictive cultural orders of the past.

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

The 22 episodes of the show run from 10 to 25 minutes each with a voice-over narrative and sometimes indigenous Efik music in the background. The show makes no reference at all to most of the basic components of the ritual like circumcision, sacrifice, or the certification of

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<sup>29</sup> Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 254.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVJXnMWnq8&t=537s>, accessed on 20 September 2018.

sexual virtues, that were essential to the ritual practice in the past. The show was a colourful blend of selected indigenous cultural practices with a lot of modern cultural inventions. The inductee had meetings with certain professionals including female fashion and beauty consultants, music instructors and singers, and career consultants. They attended gym and went out to jog. They engaged in multi-tasking management and presentation exercises, and some of the activities and games that define a modern society woman. On the other hand, a few activities resonate with *mbopo*, particularly in the area of learning certain crafts and home management skills from matrons. Most were blatantly fictive like reciting poems, music competitions, being blindfolded before being taken to certain locations, and going out for teaching exercise in a primary school.

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

Every morning, while in the village, the “girls” were awoken by the banging of a local gong, supposedly reminiscent of the “oramedia” an enduring system of communication in Africa, where word of mouth accompanied by the sounds of a gong, trumpet or drum were used to disseminate information in communities.<sup>31</sup> The gong was a call to assemble at the centre of the village or at the River Deck house (where a meeting hut was situated along the riverbank). Here Aunty Dakki addressed the “girls” on the expected events of the day, and inquired about their progress. Each day began with a wash with locally made toiletries: a body sponge made from plant fibres and natural black soap “with about 11 secret natural ingredients.”<sup>32</sup> The inductees washed their bodies in a locally constructed open-roof and

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<sup>31</sup> B. Okon et al, “The Documentation of Ibibio Oramedia,” *Kiabara: Journal of Humanities*, (2007), Vol.23, 1, [www.academix.ng/search/paper.html?idd=3300014700](http://www.academix.ng/search/paper.html?idd=3300014700), accessed on 18 September 2018.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVJXnMWnq8&t=537s>, accessed on 18 September 2018.

raffia-walled make-shift bathroom. They were dressed in costumes. They were then taken through a sequence of body massages, body decorations and adornment. After this, they were treated to a sumptuous meal. They now received lessons on cultural functions like how to cook indigenous meals and how to dance. They learned some tips about the Ibibio/Efik language, folklore and history, and how to sing indigenous love songs. These activities depended on what the schedule of the day was, as proposed by the matriarch.



Fig 3.2: Sally the South African with body painting and a raffia necklace. *The Fattening Room*, Episode 9, 2013.

The photograph above is a colour screenshot photograph from one of the scenes in Episode 9 where the inductees were treated to elaborate and lavish body painting and decoration. They also had intensive massaging with local chinks, oils and herbal concoctions, and drank litres of water “to loosen the body up so as to be fat.”<sup>33</sup> This resonates with the skin decoration, skin care and massage exercises that initiates did experience during the *mbopo* seclusion rite.

The backdrop behind Sally, the South African inductee, shows a mixture of cultures with national insignia. We can see the South African flag, which represents her identity and registers her continued loyalty to her motherland, despite the cultural dislocation. Yet the carved monument and the red-minted cyclic print on the clay-painted wall speak to her

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<sup>33</sup> Roselyn Ashkar’s interview during the TV show, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFpFQ9VQiNA&t=282s>, accessed on 18 September 2018.

momentary relocation and immersion into a novel cultural experience: the Ibibio/Efik “fattening room.” The cyclical textured prints on the wall are similar to the *nsibidi* hieroglyphic writing that was common with *mbopo* institution<sup>34</sup> and serve as cultural insignia that connect *The Fattening Room* show with history and with *mbopo* historicity more specifically.

Sally is skin-painted and decorated with local chinks, oils and dyes, and dressed in a manner that reflects the ways *mbopo* initiates were dressed in the past. While her body functioned as a canvas to showcase the beautiful design and artistic initiatives of Ibibio/Efik femininity, the *mmong-mmong* motif on her face (see Chapter 2) portrays her as a member of a riverine-based community in Ibibio/Efik land. From the tip of her nose, the design symbolizes a flowing river that expands across her forehead. The flow splits into two channels on the right and the left cheeks, and empties into the rest of the body as droplets. This facial motif echoes an enduring belief and reverence attached to particular rivers and streams, which are seen as the source of vitality and fertility in some communities in Ibibio/Efik land.<sup>35</sup> There are many facial designs like this that echo the different identities and status of the initiates. But this kind of motif is also replicated through movement: the *ekombi* dancer’s movement, whose dance steps and movements mimic the waves and the motions of the sea, as they connect with the romantic gesticulations of Ibibio/Efik brides.<sup>36</sup>

Learning how to sing and dance was part of the activities that went on within *mbopo* seclusion space in the past. The *Fattening Room* reality show afforded the inductees ample time to learn several Ibibio/Efik songs and dance performances. Professional dancers like the *ekombi dancers* were invited to teach the participants to sing and dance. Through precise body twisting movements and gesticulations, the concept of dance was clearly articulated on how it resonates with love, femininity, family and nature.<sup>37</sup> Music was supplied by a group of indigenous Efik cultural troupes. They drummed and sang sonorously with music renditions that allowed the dancers to respond synchronously to the rhythms of local lyrical music. On some occasions, instrumental music drawn from indigenous or African lyrics was

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<sup>34</sup> I. Imeh, *Daughters of Seclusion*, 75-76.

<sup>35</sup> D. A. Talbot, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People.*, 76

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-OUsEJyj8k>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

<sup>37</sup> J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, “Mbopo Institution and Music,” 51.

supplied between the scenes to generate a relaxing mood for viewers as scenes rolled into other scenes.



Fig 3.3: Inductees rehearsing the *ekombi* dance steps that they were taught earlier, *The Fattening Room*, Episode 10.

The above photograph is a screenshot from Episode 10 of *The Fattening Room* show. Here initiates are seen rehearsing *ekombi* dance steps that they were taught earlier by Efik *ekombi* dancers. They hold their hands up and try to swerve in imitation of the waves of the sea. The backdrop shows the huts that housed the inductees in the “seclusion village.” The roofs are thatched, made of raffia palm branches called “*nkanya*.” The walls are made of clay plaster and are covered with local paints made from a mixture of herbs and wild plants. Behind the “girls,” we can see a locally made clay pot and a raffia bamboo arm chair. These connect to the feeding and body massaging processes, as complementary approaches towards achieving corpulence for the inductees. On the far right, we see one of the ladies-in-waiting who were assigned to attend to the inductees. Her presence in the background resonates with the supervisory treatment that *mbopo* initiates received in the past. Although some of the services rendered to the inductees by the attendants were highly exaggerative.





Fig 3.4: *Ekombi* dancers performing a dance along with inductees, *The Fattening Room*, Episode 17, 2013.

The above screenshot shows two *ekombi* dancers performing on stage with three *Fattening Room* “girls” in Episode 17. While performing, the initiates continued to learn how to sing and dance *Ibibio/Efik* love songs. The *ekombi* dancers are dressed in yellow woven beads around the neck and the shoulders; colourful beads and heavily beaded waist bands; colourful raffia-made hand and leg bands; half-cut waist wrappers; and decorated faces and *mpuk eba* coiffures<sup>38</sup> as a finishing touch. Their dress is similar to those of the *Fattening Room* “girls” except for the colour schemes and the beaded necklaces.

In the past, initiates were taught how to cook, make crafts items and dance. These activities were replicated in the *Fattening Room* show. But the way they were played out, runs counter to the “traditional” principles that guided their operation historically. For example, male drummers of the kind who appear at the back of the dancers in Fig 3.4 were only supposed to be contracted for drumming at *urua mbopo*, the outing ceremony. Men were not permitted to access the seclusion space. Men were only permitted to access to the space at the conclusion of the ritual, to admire and appreciate the young initiates.<sup>39</sup>

The seclusion of the inductees in the *Fattening Room* “seclusion village” did not continue to the end of the show. At the end of Episode 10, the “girls” bade farewell to the village and

<sup>38</sup> The hairstyles adorned by the *ekombi* dancers in Fig 3.4 bear the name *mpuk eba* which means “new breast.” They were worn by initiates and other young women who were virgins. The coiffure was one other identity that symbolises the sexual status of *Ibibio/Efik* girls in the past. See N. Udeme, “Mbopo Institution”, 4.

<sup>39</sup> J. Akpapan and M. Akpapan, “Mbopo Institution and Music”, 46.

were relocated to more sophisticated and grandiose duplex quarters: though they had intermittent visits back to the village, when their activities had crossed the line of modernity. In the “modern quarters”, they were detached from the “traditional” experiences in the “seclusion village.” They still remained under the mentorship of Aunty Dakki and her assistant.

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

The 21st century however, has been a dynamic and diverse process of cultural reinventions with differing degree of authenticities. While other forms of reinventions of *mbopo* in contemporary expressions through artwork, dress, performance and textual description with differing degrees of authenticity and creatively reflecting, *The Fattening Room* TV show of 2013 served as a cultural prop for a celebrity-styled reinvention and fabrication of rituals of beautification as the *mbopo* matrons and inductees of old gave way now to the beauty products and rampant entertainment of contemporary world.

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

and what it represents were in my view intentional “inventions” both by European imperialists and their collaborators in the academia, in the museum, through photography and other forms of spectacle from the media world. While some aspects of this misrepresentation was based on the ignorance, scholars assert that they were It was further propagated by colonial subterfuge, as a way to heighten slavery and then colonial justification over Africans.