

MARRIAGE AND LINEAGE SEGMENTATION IN IBIBIOLAND

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Abstract: This article discusses the dynamics of Ibibio lineage structure. It presents ethnographic evidence that fission of maximal lineages (*ekpuk*) into minor lineages (*ufok*) in Ibibioland was principally a function of marriages involving agnatic kin. Such a marriage caused initial disruption in the lineage because it led to the creation of a new minor lineage with a separate ancestral shrine (*iso ekpo*) from that hitherto worshiped by the inclusive unit. The paradox of Ibibio marriage involving agnatic kin, which this article demonstrates, is that the initial disruption is ameliorated by new but sacred kinship bonds arising from the marriage which reintegrate these lineages as exogamous units at different structural levels.

Résumé: Cet article expose la dynamique de la structure du lignage chez les Ibibios. Il présente la preuve ethnographique que la division des lignages majeurs (*ekpuk*) en lignages mineurs (*ufok*) chez les Ibibios était principalement une fonction des mariages par agnation. Un tel mariage perturbait le lignage puisqu'il conduisait à la création d'une nouvelle branche de lignage avec son autel ancestral sépare (*iso ekpo*) vénère jusque là par l'unité inclusive. Le paradoxe du mariage par agnation chez les Ibibios, que cet article explique, est que cette discontinuité s'améliore grâce à des liens familiaux nouveaux, mais sacrés qui réintègrent les lignages en tant qu'unités exogames à différents niveaux.

Introduction

Lineage segmentation or fission is a widespread phenomenon in African societies. It is often attributed to demographic pressure, which causes a lineage to get too large numerically, subsequently splitting into competing (and co-operating) units. In some cases the fission could occur for such economic reasons as pressure on land (Fox 1967:chaps. 1 and 3). In other cases still, lineages could segment for political reasons, as best illustrated by the Nuer of Sudan and the Tiv of Nigeria (Bohannon and Bohannon 1953; Evans-Pritchard

1940). However, the dominant role of marriage as a determinant of lineage segmentation has remained relatively unexplored. This article concerns itself with two aspects of Ibibio social structure—marriage and lineage segmentation. It addresses the following questions. What specific role does marriage play in the segmentation process in Ibibioland? What constitutes an exogamous unit in Ibibioland and what mechanisms exist to foster the re-integration of the segmentary structures in this society?

Methodology

The data for this article were drawn primarily from a field survey in Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1, Nsit Ibom Local Government Area (LGA) in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. However, for comparative purposes, cases collected from other Ibibio communities will be highlighted in the discussion of the data. Because of their greater knowledge of the history of lineage segmentation and its causes, only elders aged 50 and above were interviewed. The snowball sampling technique was used to select these elders in the community.

Location of Study

Forde and Jones (1950) identified six dialect groups in the Old Calabar Province,¹ one of which is the Eastern Ibibio or Ibibio proper. The other groups are Uyo, Itu, Etinan, Eket, Enyong and Opobo. These various Ibibio groups are currently demarcated into distinct administrative units, based on the political expediency of the Nigerian government. Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1 is a village in the Nsit Ibom Local Government Area (LGA) carved out of the former Etinan Local Government Area (LGA). It has a population of about 6436.² The cultural practices of this village are shared by other parts of Ibibioland. This village was chosen for three reasons: (1) it is situated in the core Ibibio settlement; (2) it is accessible from all parts of Akwa Ibom State and other parts of Ibibioland; and (3) compared to other surrounding Ibibio villages, Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1 is more thickly populated and is blessed with a relatively large number of aged people.

Descent, Kinship and Lineage

The social structure of Ibibioland is built on a patrilineal system. The Ibibio trace their descent through the male line only to a common known ancestor. The father is primarily the head of the household and he is also a disciplinarian. Children born into the marriage succeed to offices and property only in the patrilineage, though they enjoy some privileges in the mother's patrilineage through complementary filiation. One does not have to contest for offices or rights to property in one's mother's lineage. Children may live in the mother's village, but it is preferred for children to live in the father's village. An Ibibio proverb which says that "*Ayin ase odung ke ndon ete*" (a child nor-

mally lives in his father's compound) reminds every Ibibio child that the only appropriate place of abode is in the father's village.

The lineage in Ibibioland is segmented into "*idip ete*" (minimal lineage), "*ufok*" (minor lineage) and "*ekpuk*" (maximal lineage). The "*idip ete*," which literally means "father's belly or womb," approximates the nuclear family with the father, wife or wives and children as members. The father, "*ete*," superintends all economic, religious, social and moral activities. A collection of "*idip ete*" makes up the "*ufok*." "*Ufok*" literally translates "house" or "home." The oldest man in the *ufok* is always the head. The third and most inclusive segment is the "*ekpuk*" (maximal lineage). "*Ekpuk*" literally means "knot" and consists of all patrilineally related minor and minimal lineages. The oldest man in an *ekpuk*, as a rule, is its head. Agnates are addressed as "*ndito ete*" (lit. children of the father) because they trace descent to a common male ancestor.

Each of these segments constitutes a political, social, religious and economic unit. But the more distant genealogically a lineage segment is from the nuclear centre of its *ekpuk*, the weaker the influence of the *ekpuk* over its members. Thus "*idip ete*" is the strongest segment of the Ibibio lineage in economic, religious and disciplinary matters, while the *ekpuk* is very strong as a political unit but weak in those matters where the minimal lineage is strong.

Apart from the consanguineous kinship arising from common descent, marriage creates a web of sacred kinship in Ibibioland. The wife-giving and wife-receiving groups, for instance, constitute "*ukod*" (in-laws). *Ukod* cannot be literally translated, but it refers to a sacred kinship alliance between the two groups involved in marriage exchange.

Children of a marriage are known as "*ayeyin*" (lit. child's child or grandchild) in the mother's patrilineage. They are to be treated with special care because they are very "sacred" beings and also are "*ibet*" (taboo) to the mother's people. They are called "*owotakpa*" (lit. kill and die). This gives them social immunity in their mother's patrilineage. There, a child enjoys intimacy, love, familiarity, permissiveness and unlimited liberty. This inexhaustible freedom in its relationship with the mother's patrilineage also earns the child another name—"ino ukot" (palm wine thief). The *ayeyin* is at liberty to seize and drink palm wine from the mother's side without restraint. His curse is dreaded because it is believed to have a lethal effect on any of his targets. *Ayeyin* constitute a strong kinship bond between the two exogamous units who gave or accepted the parents in marriage. The child is acknowledged as a peacemaker in the two units. He is not to be maltreated or penalized under any circumstance, even if he commits a serious offence. Rather, he is to be persuaded not to indulge in such activities in future. The *ayeyin*, therefore, is free to tread where members of the mother's patrilineage dread to step. Like the *ayeyin*, the *ukod* is also a sacred being in Ibibioland, in addition to being a

peacemaker. Unlike *ayeyin* kinship, the *ukod* relationship thrives on symmetrical reciprocity. Kindness and generosity from one side must be reciprocated by the other side, or the relationship could break down economically. Even if this should occur, the spiritual or religious aspect of the bond lives on.

Lineage in Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1

In every Ibibio village most maximal lineages, *ekpuk*, are agnatically related. Their founders were sons of the apical ancestor who founded the village. In some few cases, however, migrants from other Ibibio villages were absorbed into these villages and subsequently founded maximal lineages. Such absorption was encouraged particularly if the stranger had a peculiar function to perform in that village which could not be performed by agnatic kin. In Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1, for example, Nung Obong, Nung Abia, Nung Ede and Nung Ikpené maximal lineages in the Okpok Odok segment of the village were founded by sons of the eponymous ancestor (see Table 1). Only Nung Esu was founded by an immigrant—an Ibibio man brought from Ekit into the village to perform the function of a priest of the village deity, *Anyang*, whose origin is in the village stream. Even now, Anyang priests in Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1 must be descendants of the founder of Nung Esu maximal lineage.

Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1 is divided into two parts: Okpok-Odok and Obio Nsit. Each of these parts has five maximal lineages (see Table 1).

The table shows that all the maximal lineages in Okpok-Odok except Nung Ikpené are segmented into *ufok*. The Obio Nsit part of the village has only three of the maximal lineages segmented into *ufok*. The explanation for this is that lineage segmentation in Ibibioland is principally a function of exogamy. Marriages within the *ekpuk* break lineage solidarity and create a situation of fission and segmentation. The number of *ufok* in Ibibio *ekpuk* is a measure of the number of exogamous units and therefore of the incidence of intra-*ekpuk* marriages. Ordinarily an *ekpuk* would retain all its membership as a single exogamous unit if it permitted no such marriages. This situation may arise, as suggested by the culture bearers, because of demographic failure. Nung Ikpené in Okpok-Odok, Nung Okpo and Nung Ekpa in Obio Nsit are cases in point. Their single exogamous units have compensated for their weak numerical strength.

Table 1 presents a paradigm of the situation in most Ibibio villages. In terms of lineage exogamy some Ibibio villages exhibit a predominant Nung Obong or Nung Abia syndrome with many *ufok*, while others exhibit Nung Ikpené or Nung Okpe syndrome with no fission. In Okpok-Odok, for example, the two large *ekpuk*, Nung Obong and Nung Abia, are segmented into six and eight exogamous units (minor lineages), respectively, while Nung Ikpené, with less numerical strength, is not segmented at all. Nung Akpan Obo, Nung Anung

Table 1
Showing Maximal and Minor Lineages in the
Two Halves of Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1

<i>Ekpuk</i> (maximal lineage)	<i>Ufok</i> (sub or minor lineage)
<i>Okpok-Odok</i>	
(1) Nung Obong	(i) Nung Antuen (ii) Nung Akwaowo (iii) Nung Ekwere (iv) Nung Itoon (v) Nung Ubo (vi) Nung Nkento
(2) Nung Abia	(i) Nung Akpan Abia (ii) Nung Akpe Abia (iii) Nung Akpa Uko (iv) Nung Etok Afia (v) Nung Etok Afia Obubit (vi) Nung Umo Akpa Akpa (vii) Nung Abia Abasi Umo (viii) Nung Ubon
(3) Nung Ede	(i) Nung Akpa Umana (ii) Nung Umo Ekwere (iii) Nung Ntung
(4) Nung Esu	(i) Nung Uba (ii) Nung Ekpun (iii) Nung Etuk Udo Uko
(5) Nung Ikpenne	Nil
<i>Obio Nsit</i>	
(6) Nung Akpan Obo	(i) Nung Akwang (ii) Nung Udo Inyang (iii) Nung Ide Ekpo
(7) Nung Anung	(i) Nung Udo Otong Udo Umo (ii) Nung Udo Inyang (iii) Nung Abia Ekpenne
(8) Nung Uso	(i) Nung Ndem (ii) Nung Efiok Udo Udo Akpa (iii) Nung Inyang Ubo Osio Ntung
(9) Nung Okpo	Nil
(10) Nung Ekpo	Nil

Source: Field work.

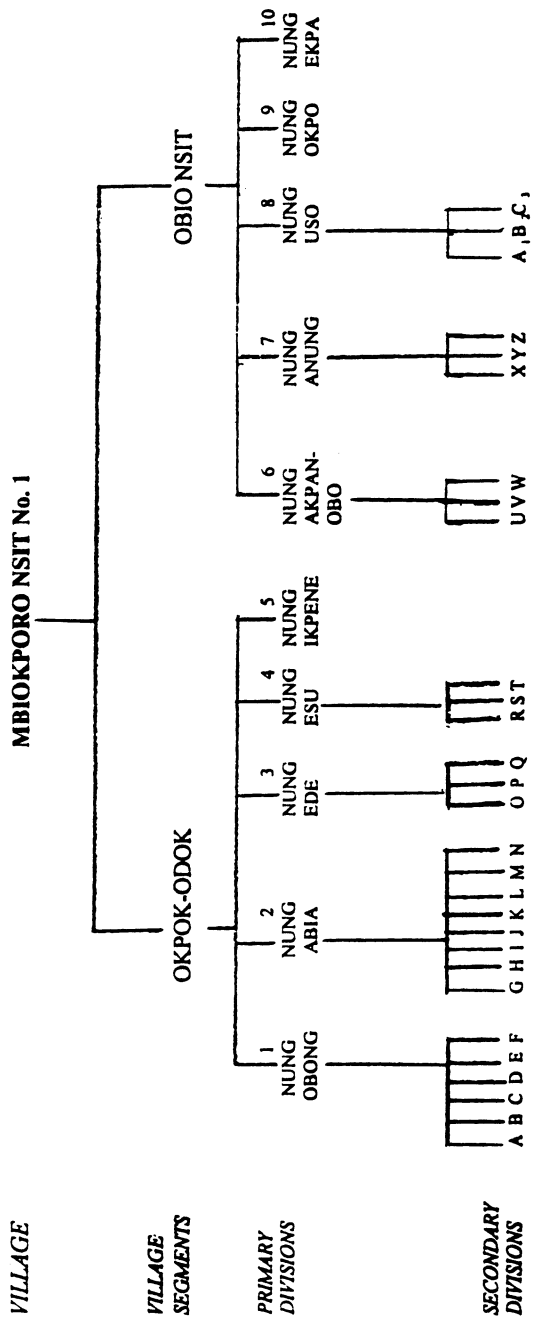
and Nung Uso in the Obio Nsit half of the village have three exogamous units each while Nung Okpo and Nung Ekpa are not segmented.

Figure 1 explains the concentration of these segments in the two halves of the village. As the diagram illustrates, all the *ekpuk* numbered 1 to 10 are exogamous units: people can intermarry across them. Once they are segmented into *ufok*, such an *ufok* becomes an exogamous unit within the *ekpuk*. This means that members of one *ekpuk* in Ibibioland can marry into any other *ekpuk* whose members are concentrated in the same village. Additionally, members of one *ufok* can marry into any *ufok* of their choice. For instance, a member of F can marry into L or V where F is the *ufok* in *ekpuk* No. 1 (Nung Obong), L is the *ufok* on *ekpuk* No. 2 (Nung Abia) and V is an *ufok* in *ekpuk* No. 6 (Nung Akpan Obo). Additionally a member of F can marry into A, a separate *ufok* in the same *ekpuk*. What is prohibited (albeit this proscription may be contravened) is intermarriage within the same *ufok*. Members of *ufok* "A," for instance, should not marry each other. The reason is that people who share the same *iso ekpo* (ancestral shrine) should not intermarry. Thus members of a given *ufok* ritually share a common ancestral shrine and are therefore prohibited from marrying each other. The fission of an Ibibio *ekpuk* into *ufok* was as a result of intentional infraction of this rule by its members. Such marriages create more minor lineages out of maximal lineages and in the circumstances carve out distinct ancestral shrines from the new minor lineages (*ufok*). The new shrines are not derived from the old ones.

The Ibibio argue that it is safer to create a new and separate minor lineage rather than maintain an old relationship because of the sacred status of *ayeyin* in their mother's patrilineage. As *ayeyin*, their relationship with the mother's patrilineage is guided by "*abasi ayeyin*" (lit. deity of grandchild relationship). If the taboo on fining, penalizing or harming *ayeyin*, either physically or diabolically, is broken, it is said that members of the mother's patrilineage will die mysteriously. The protracted ailments caused by violating this taboo are believed to be incurable, even after traditional diagnosis by a diviner. On the other hand, agnatic kin who enjoy inheritance rights from the patrilineage are not protected by such immunity and so could be fined, penalized, poisoned or even killed secretly by their agnatic kin without any supernatural sanction on the culprit. The sacred status accorded the *ayeyin* in Ibibio social relations and cosmology is echoed by Esen (1982:135) thus:

Nothing in the social or religious codes of the Ibibio made it an offence for an Ibibioman to oppress, harm, ill treat or in any way subject his blood brother or close relatives to hardship or deprivation. . . . [W]hile the fertile mind of ancient Ibibio invented the three gods of Imaan, Ukot and Ayeyin and set them the task of functioning in the exclusive interest of these semi-strangers, that same mind failed to dream up some god with the specific assignment to care for brothers, sisters and other near relatives.

Figure 1
Showing Village Segments, Primary Divisions and Secondary Divisions of Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1



Source: Field work.

If the *ayeyin* were to be allowed to become part of the mother's patrilineage and therefore inherit from there, such an act would be an unpardonable oversight in the eyes of the Ibibio. The reason is simple. Agnatic kin in Ibibioland are known to be perpetually in conflict with each other because of infighting and tussles for inheritance rights within the patrilineage. Agnates quarrel, fight and in extreme cases diabolically harm each other because of these disputes. If an *ayeyin* were allowed by Ibibio tradition to be a part of such altercations and resultant disbolical acts, the mother's patrilineage would be in danger of being obliterated by the supernatural forces guiding the *ayeyin* relationship. It is safer, therefore, to carve out a new minor lineage where the strained agnatic ties resulting from endogamous marriage would be ameliorated by new but sacred kinship ties of *ukod* (in-law) and *ayeyin*.

The separated units of the intermarrying lineages are taboo (*ibet*) to one another.³ The *ibet* strongly applies in order to keep the hitherto consanguine units ritually separated. Having become *ukod*, the units do not partake or eat of any of the sacrificial items used for the "*ikan*" (ancestors) in adjacent *ufok*. For instance, Nung Obong remained a single exogamous unit until the disruption of agnatic ties by marriages. Before the fission, members were not regarded as sacred beings protected by a deity that guides the relationship between kindreds. No taboo pertained among them because they were nothing but agnates. With the consummation of marriages between agnates and the resulting fission of the *ekpuk*, the *ufok* segments are now *ibet* to each other.

If a man in *ufok* A commits adultery with a woman in *ufok* B and the woman is adjudged guilty, no member of *ufok* A must partake of the goat or chicken slaughtered and the drinks given as fines in appeasement to the ancestors of *ufok* B. Only the members of the husband's *ufok*—in this case *ufok* B—can eat such sacrifices or partake of the fines. *Ufok* A and *ufok* B are therefore ritually separated because they belong to separate and distinct ancestral shrines (*iso ekpo*).

However, despite the fission, the idea of common agnatic descent is still maintained, especially in the political, social and economic spheres. The separate ancestral shrine only creates a new social relationship between the lineages affected. Like the Nuer of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940) they can come together to fight a common enemy, if the situation arises, because they are *ndito ete* (agnates). But unlike the situation among the Nuer, the spirit of unity for a common cause is weak because of the divided interests inherent in a system that permitted marriage between agnates. The creation of fission within the *ekpuk* fragments it, and renders it a very loose and weak inclusive unit, while greater autonomy is granted to smaller units such as *idip ete* (minimal lineages).

The Dynamics of Ibibio Marriage

Paradoxically, what seems to bind the different maximal lineages in Ibibio villages is also their marriage institution. These marriages between agnates (*ndo ufok-ufok*) were preferred for many reasons. A father in Ibibioland would rather accept a lower bride payment than allow his daughter to marry far away to a man he does not know much about, even if the man is from a wealthy family. The proximity of the daughter to her father makes for closer ties and it is these types of marriages which provide the close link. These marriages kept bride price low in Ibibioland. For instance, if a man from *ufok* B had married into *ufok* C with or without a handsome bride wealth, members of *ufok* C would encourage their wards to take a daughter from *ufok* B in marriage as a reciprocal gesture. Young men and women, therefore, were encouraged to look inwards for marriage partners because, among agnates, not much was going to be demanded as bride payment. Also, among agnates connected by marriage there would be no fear of poisoning or the manifestation of evil desires in any form because of the “*ukod*” relationship resulting from marriage.

Ibibio elders in adjacent *ufok* would prefer their children to intermarry in order to circulate and redistribute the wealth of the *ekpuk* (maximal lineage) among agnates. What they would not have gained because of their separate *iso ekpo* (ancestral shrines), they stand to gain in their status as *ukod* (in-laws). In this way, land-deficient lineages were able to gain access to land of other land-owning agnatic lineages serving as exogamous units. Ibibio therefore are able to design the mechanism of fission and fusion to work to their advantage. Fission necessarily breeds fusion and the reordering of social relationships. What was originally the cause of fission in the lineage now becomes a strong kinship bond which helps to unite the two sub-lineages through affinal ties.

In Ibibioland, affinal ties are stronger than and superior to ordinary agnatic ties because of the sacred bond uniting the wife-giving and the wife-receiving agnatic lineages. Here, then, lies the paradox of Ibibio lineage segmentation. Through such a mechanism, undivided loyalty is guaranteed within the villages and interlineage squabbles are easily contained through amicable settlement because of established webs of kinship. People in the villages are related at two levels, affinal and agnatic. Through this mechanism, also, economic progress is enhanced and wealth is redistributed.

In places like Itam, Uruan, Asutan and Ikono in Ibibioland, the “physical” carving out of a different *ufok* as it is practised in Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1 does not exist. What obtains in Ikono and Uruan villages, for example, is that while a separate *ufok* is not created with a distinct name, the ritual separation is observed. From the day of such a marriage, members of the two groups know when to exhibit agnatic behaviour towards one another and also when strictly affinal relationships should be observed. For instance, during cases of adultery, members distinguish those who should consume the drinks and slaugh-

tered items collected as fines from those who should not. Therefore, the effect of such marriages on social relationships in Ibibioland remains the same. Those Ibibio villages that give a new name to every segment so carved out only dramatize the seriousness of such deviant behaviour.

Nobody can tell why exactly the intermarriage began, but many explanations have been proffered. One such explanation uses the Bible as a reference source, and argues that it was common in the days of old for consanguine relatives to intermarry in order to maintain group purity and therefore prevent desecration from strange people. Another tradition is based on the advantages of such very close marriages, which have been highlighted earlier in this article. A third tradition is based on an Ibibio idiom which says that "*owogho ke ayeyin asuana*" (lit. it is dissolved after the grandchildren's generation). It means that the Ibibio are less emotionally committed to blood relationship when it passes the third generation. No strong kinship bond is maintained and so marriage could be tolerated. The distance at this generational level also permits some sexual association. The last two arguments seem to offer a more rational explanation for the Ibibio situation than the first. Both perspectives, however, are structural/functional in context. The idiom itself takes its root from Ibibio kinship terminology which is maximally generational-descriptive and minimally classificatory. The sex of relatives of the adjacent or first ascending generation is emphasized. The generational-descriptive nomenclature enables an observer to appreciate the agnatic or uterine relationship in the social network. Siblings of the same father and mother are described as "*ndito eka*" (lit. children of the mother); half siblings connected only through the mother are also addressed as "*ndito eka*." Half siblings with the same father but different mothers are called "*ndito ete*" (lit. children of the father). All agnatic kin are classified as "*ndito ete*" while all uterine kin are called "*ndito eka*."

The generational-descriptive terminology makes Ibibio kinship terminology very cumbersome because every relationship, whether lineal or collateral, must be described by referring to the person as he stands in relation to either the father or mother. The sex of the person so described is not important; rather the sex of the parent is very important. For instance, in Ego's generation kin are described as *ndito eka* or *ndito ete* (children of the mother or children of the father) depending on whether they are full or half siblings. In the mother's or father's generation, relationships are described as follows: *ndito eka eka* (mother's siblings, whether full or half siblings; or children of mother's mother); *ndito eka ete* (father's siblings from the same mother; or children of father's mother); *ndito ete ete* (father's siblings from different mothers; or children of father's father). In the grandparents' and grandchildren's generation the description is more cumbersome in Ibibio. For instance, grandmothers' siblings are called "*ndito eka eka eka*" (children of mother's

mother's mother) while grandfathers' siblings are described as "*ndito ete ete*" (children of father's father's father).

The generational-descriptive terminology makes it extremely difficult to describe kin relationships beyond three generations in both descending and ascending order from Ego. Beyond these generations, Ibibio classificatorily call all uterine kin *ndito eke* and agnatic kin *ndito ete*. This has implications for marriage. This is further strengthened by another Ibibio idiom which states, "*Imaan ama asim ayeyin abiara*" (when kin relationship reaches the grandchild generation it is spoilt). By this, it is meant that strong kinship bonds become more lax when one gets beyond three descending or ascending generations. Marriage could be tolerated and in some cases is preferred.

Conclusion

One is intrigued by a common phenomenon in Ibibio social structure: the maximal lineages (*ekpuk*) founded by sons to apical ancestors in various Ibibio villages have segmented into further exogamous units—minor lineages (*ufok*). The segmentation of Ibibio maximal lineages (*ekpuk*) into minor lineages (*ufok*) is principally a product of marriages involving patrilineal kin. Despite this fission, such marriage had a positive effect of reuniting and reintegrating the groups which it had ritually "separated" because of the creation of separate "*iso ekpo* (ancestral shrines). Over time these segmented lineages became exogamous units into which interlineage marriages were preferred and encouraged. Affinal kinship was superimposed on the agnatic ties and the recognition of this dual function enhanced the integration of the fragmented Ibibio lineages. The paradox of Ibibio marriage is therefore seen in the practice whereby marriage among agnates caused disruption in the initial social relationship and at the same time brought into force another level of sacred relationship which reinforced and reintegrated the disrupted agnatic ties. Intra-lineage marriage in Ibibioland, therefore, divides and unites the lineages at various structural levels. At one level patrilineal kin see themselves as agnates (*ndito ete*) and at another level they regard themselves as in-laws (*ukod*) bound by the deity of in-law relationship (*abasi ukod*) and protected by taboo (*ibet*).

Notes

1. Old Calabar was the administrative unit of the colonial period. It was phased out in 1967 when the government of Yakubu Gowon created twelve states in Nigeria out of four. Presently, Calabar is the capital of Cross River State and Mbiokporo Nsit No. 1 is in Eastern Ibibio in Akwa Ibom State with Uyo serving as the capital.
2. Estimated current population based on 1963 national census figure at 2.5 percent growth rate.
3. *Ibet* (taboos) are restraints or behavioural codes or prohibitions placed on certain persons, things, food items or specific Ibibio days. Such phenomena must be treated or handled with deserved decorum and care because conscious or unconscious (intentional or unintentional) devi-

ation from societal norms or codes regarding the phenomena are believed to attract supernatural sanctions such as edema, madness or even death. *Ayeyin* and *ukod* kinship relations are bound by such behavioural codes and deviants are automatically subject to supernatural sanctions.

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