

Abstract

Title of Dissertation: Gender, Discourse and Cultural Taboos in a Rural African Society:

The Esan People of Nigeria

Genevieve Kikelomo Dibua, Doctor of Philosophy, 2005

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Omar Ka

Associate Professor

Language, Literacy and Culture Program

This study investigates the extent to which gender practices and discourse in political, social and economic spheres are conditioned by cultural taboos and contexts in the rural Esan society of Nigeria. An ethnographic approach was employed in the study. Extensive fieldwork was carried out primarily in the Uromi and Igueben chiefdoms within the Esan community. Additional fieldwork (mainly interviews) was conducted with Esan informants residing in Benin City, Nigeria. The main techniques of data collection were unstructured interviews and participant observation. Supplemental data were obtained through telephone interviews with Esan speakers residing in Nigeria and the United States. I also conducted interviews with visiting Esan parents and relatives in the United States.

Esan is comprised of chiefdoms, each of which is ruled by a male traditional ruler. Age grades, which include only males, play important roles in the political and social administration of Esan villages and chiefdoms. Although women are tabooed from organizing themselves into age grades, they do influence social and political matters through their group meetings.

Data collected during fieldwork show that cultural taboos greatly help in assigning and enforcing gender roles among Esan people in the different spheres. Taboos also shape gender discourse and interactions during ceremonies. Thus, taboos are dual-gendered, thereby restricting the activities of each gender in the various spheres. Nevertheless, my findings show that in some instances, taboos are to some extent more biased against women, even though they do not support the notion, particularly among Western feminists, that women are marginalized, oppressed and voiceless in traditional African societies. While Esan men seem to occupy positions of power in the political arena, this is not strictly the case in the social and economic sectors. In those sectors, and in a few areas of the political sector, Esan men and women have their respective spheres in which they are dominant, and this dominance is enforced through cultural taboos. At the same time, this study shows that the claim by some African feminist scholars that men and women have equal powers in traditional African societies should be made with care.