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## Pretentious Performance of Language Use in Marriage Rituals in the Urhobo Culture

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### ABSTRACT

Culture being the totality of the way of the life of the people is full of many intricacies and complexities. The Urhobo people of the Niger Delta is not exempted from this display. Marriage as a union that ties two families together in the tradition as one of the ways to showcase their heritage. Marriage activities in the Urhobo culture are very complex. Complex in the sense that the processes involve are characterized with aesthetic performances that needs a practitioner. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to itemize, review and to analyse the pretentious acts displayed during marriage rituals in the Urhobo culture. It was discovered from the data presented and analysed from the begging to the end of the marriage rituals is characterized with dramatic acts of pretence wherein a lot of euphemistical words are used having pragmatic effects. It was observed that the key two actors (spokesmen) who must be men must be very conscious and knowledgeable in the tradition as to avoid chaos and misunderstanding. It was concluded that the display of these pretentious words in the course of the marriage rituals are not meant to deceive but to show connotative meaning of the words, the beauty of the rituals, the richness of the culture among other things.

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### INTRODUCTION

Language as an instrument is being used by all works of life through signs, symbols, vocal apparatus to communicate ideals, emotions, feelings etc. This phenomenon can be manipulated in several ways because of its nature and being dynamic. Crystal (2015) refers to language as an everyday use term with several different senses. It performs different special specific role in both human and non human endeavours. Its performance is unique as it cut across every society. Most especially, as it relates to social context or situation. This paper tries to review the aesthetic performance of quality of pretentious language use in marriage rituals in the Urhobo culture as it cut across the twenty four (24) kingdoms of the Urhobo Land with the aim to contextualize the pragmatic effects of such language. Data was elicited from some marriages done across the 24 autonomous kingdoms in the Urhobo land through the author who has acted as a spokesman in several of the act.

The Urhobo people are located in nine local governments that made up Delta central senatorial district of Delta State and Ophoni in Bayelsa State of Nigeria with 24 autonomous Kings as the overseers with over three million populations. The name Urhobo is used to refer to the people and the language. Research has shown that the Urhobo

culture is as rich as the Africa culture both in structure and in content. In other words, there is nothing in the Africa language that is not there in the Urhobo language although there may be variations in discussions and analysis. The Urhobo people are very hospitable in human relation.

### Operational Definitions

**Pretentious:** This is the act of acting or presenting an idea known as if one is not aware intentionally. In other words, it is the act of hiding a known knowledge as if it is not known.

**Performance:** Ordinarily, performance is the act of carrying out an assigned duty or the act to execute an action but hear, performance is the ability of a speaker to twist or use a general known knowledge euphemistically to connote something else. Also, the appreciation of the ability of a speaker to manipulate and to comprehend known expressions in distinctive way.

**Ritual:** By ritual we mean the display of words through the power of persuasive negotiation for payment and submission items/monies in a customarily way.

**Marriage:** Marriage according to the Urhobo tradition is the relationship between a man and a woman who are of marriage age which is cemented by the two families involved. According to Eruvbetere in Ekeh (2005), marriage is the state or relationship of being husband and wife which is sacred and capable of tying two independent families together forever especially when they are blessed with children. She adds that marriage is done in a ceremony where both families have to meet at the bride's home to perform the rituals involved. In a similar vein, Cole (2004) says that marriage in the Urhobo and Isoko tradition is the most sacred junctions in life where the people (man and woman) display their cultural awareness of incorporation through marriage rituals. In other words, it is the coming together of a man and a woman to cooperate as one entity through the display of their cultural heritage.

Scott (1928) sees marriage as an exclusive inter-sexual covenant between one man and one woman which is ordained and sealed by God. The Chamber Dictionary defines marriage as the total embodiment of socially recognized and approved union between individuals who are committed to one another with expectations of stable and enduring intimate relationship. Obegor (2016) says that marriage according to the Urhobo tradition, the man has the right to be tied to more than one wife as the case may be but the wife cannot.

Marriage ritual in accordance to the Urhobo culture, demands that there must be key two actors which are the spokesman to the groom's family and the one for the bride's family who stand on behalf of the two families to do the cultural display of the togetherness. These spokesmen (*Etota*) must be men. This is because it is restricted to men folk perhaps; men are the custodians of the tradition. In other words, it is a function that is the prerogative of men folk in the culture. As the visitors visit, after the preambles of presentation, acceptance and reciprocating of kola nut as the custom demands, the nucleus of the event is presented. In this instance, the spokesman to the host (bride's family) will interrogate the visitors (supposed In-laws) spokesman that if they are just passing by or there is an issue to be discussed by both families? Though, the spokesman to the host knew why the visitors are around, yet, he will never refer none address they as in-laws rather, he continues to call address them as *erhorha* (visitors) until the above question is responded to and ascertained by the host. The above question must be asked pretentiously as to stimulate discussion.

In responding to the above question by the spokesman of the visitors, he will present his case in

a pretentious manner where he will say that; it is the home of the host that they came that they saw *Ododo* (flower), *Ubiديوwawware* (a ripen palm seed) etc that brought to their home. (*Ododo* and *Ubiديوwawware* connote a lady in this context) not as a flower or ripen palm seed. In other words, they will not just present the issue in a straight forward manner rather; he presents it in a euphemistical way just as it was presented to him by the spokesman to the visitor. Presenting the idea in this manner, adds colour, decoration and also to beautify the lady they are seeking her hand in marriage.

Again, when it comes to bride price payments/submission of items, this act is displayed by mentioning the amount and items exaggeratedly. This is done intentionally as the rite demands in order to test the visitor's patience. When this is said, the groom's spokesman knows that this is done pretentiously and he uses his power of negotiation to bring the price down. In doing this, he says it in the reverse way pretentiously considering the fact that the Urhobos believe that humans are not cheap commodities that should be priced. So, instead of saying *siobo kpotor* that is, "reduce the price", he says pretentiously *siobo kpoenu* meaning increased the price with a plea.

In presenting the gin to be tasted by the kinsmen of the bride, the taster will be asked three consecutive times if the visitors came with the right gin? He will pretentiously say that the visitors came with *ame* "water" or fake gin and on the third time, he suddenly say it is gin.

At another stage of the rituals, the bride will be escorted to the gathering by the women of the bride's family. During the escort, a lot of eulogical terms/statements are used to present the bride pretentiously. Some of these statements are not the real characteristics of the bride but they are said to connote that their daughter is of good manners and shall be good for house wife. Some of the eulogical terms they used include; *omote re avware na ododo* "our daughter is a flower", *wo da mre vwe obaro, wane obaro* "when you view her from the front she is ok", *wo da mre vwe obuko, wane obuko* "when you view her from the back she is ok", *okporua oyen o nurhe* "she is from a great family", *ubiako royen ovo ekpaogban* "one of her teeth worth millions", *ekebe royen onine* "her buttocks prestigious" etc. Again, all these may not be true about the bride.

Having escorted the bride to the gathering, the spokesman cleans his month pretentiously and says to the bride that these visitors came to ask of your hand in marriage and they brought all these drinks, monies and other stuffs for us; before we taste and collect anything, your family said I should ask you if you are interested in the proposed marriage? Meanwhile, they

might have been eating and drinking. This choice making by the bride is done pretentiously because, in some instances, it is the parents that did the match-making for the bride either consciously or unconsciously. After her concept is sought, the bride's father prays and celebrations continue.

Still on the pretentious act, the bride's family will then invite the *usuopha* "middle man or best man" as the case may be to come and take back part of the money paid for bride price (like twenty naira) to the groom to show that the bride's family is kind but with the following implications:

- i. That their daughter is not sold
- ii. That in case of death, the corps of their daughter must be brought home
- iii. That when anything happens in the bride's family such as death of any relatives, from that money the groom will spend to pay condolences, training of her relations etc.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Pretentious Act of Referring to the Inlaws as Erhorha (Visitors)*

In the Urhobo tradition, when a visitor visits known or unknown, the Urhobo man entertains his visitor by way of showing hospitality. When the man does that and the visitor reciprocate that gesture by a way of doubling what the visitor presented, it is then glaring and done on the host that the visitor came with a purpose and usually, it is only on the occasion of marriage rite that the proposed visitor will reciprocate by doubling whatever that is presented. It should be noted that in most cases, before such Inlaw visits, the intention of the visitor is known to both parties but the spokesman to the host will pretentiously present and receive whatever that is presented by referring to the proposed inlaws as *erhorha* "visitors"; saying that *erhorha de bro owho rhe ka gho* meaning, "when a visitor visits, we entertain". In other words, the intending Inlaws that he is aware of their coming and intentions, he is still referring to them as visitors.

Ordinary, act of reciprocating and doubling whatever that was presented by the host, is a signal to the host spokesman who would have ordinarily coded the reason for their coming but he continues to act as if he is ignorant of the entire thing intentionally. This act is viewed to be pretentious. He continues with the act and he will ask the *erhorha* "visitors" if they are just passing by or they have anything that brought them to their family? This is seen from the pictures below showing both families and their spokesmen presenting and discussing the rituals that are involves in Urhobo marriage culture



Figure 1: Showing the Bride's family (Host)

Figure 2: Showing the Groom's family (Visitors) Spokesman to the Host  
spokesman to the Visitors

### *Pretentious Act of Referring to the Bride as Ododo (Flower)*

In responding to the question if they are just passing by, the visitors (Inlaws) spokesman will respond that they have found an *Ododo* "flower", *Ubiediovwavware* "ripen palm fruit" in their house hence they are here. *Ododo* or *Ubiediovwavware* is used to represent the bride which means that the bride is beautiful. Again, these terms are used in the Urhobo setting to indicate that something is extremely attractive, appreciative, beautiful etc. In other words, the *Ododo* or *Ubiediovwavware* are not just "flower" or "ripen palm fruit" as presented rather, it is used connotatively or pragmatically to mean attractiveness or charming in the language. It should be noted even if the bride is as ugly as anything, these eulogical words are used to further buttress the fact that the beauty of the woman is in the eyes of the beholder. This also indicates that the bride is presented pretentiously not minding the character, the complexion and the features of the person involved.

### *Pretentious Act of Choice Making*

At a time in the process of the marriage rituals, the bride is being invited to the gathering to make her choice. Before the arrival of the bride, the spokesman to the host who had been eating and drinking cleans his month and says to the bride that these visitors came to say that they want your hands in marriage. They brought all these monies, drinks, foods etc for them because of you. And before we can eat and drink, your family said I should ask you if you are interested in the marriage? This question is asked to seek the consent of the bride to demonstrate our

definition of marriage as earlier said that it is the agreement between two or more parties. It also implies that in the urhobo culture, technically, the choice of marriage is made by the bride and that she is not force into the marriage even if the match making is done by the parents. The spokesman cleaning his month to show that they have not ate and drank, before inviting the bride to make a choice of which she cannot say otherwise shows pretentious act attribute to the rite. The picture below shows when the bride was invited and after her choice making the father prayed and the bride takes the prayer to her husband



**Figure 3: Showing the Bride making a choice**

#### ***Pretentious Act in Payment of Items/Bride Price***

In the Urhobo tradition, when a woman given into marriage dies, the corpse is been returned to her family home for burial rites. Base on this consciousness and believe, formed the basis that their daughter cannot be sold for anything including giving her into marriage. This background formed another display of pretentious act in payment of items and bride price as demonstrated below:

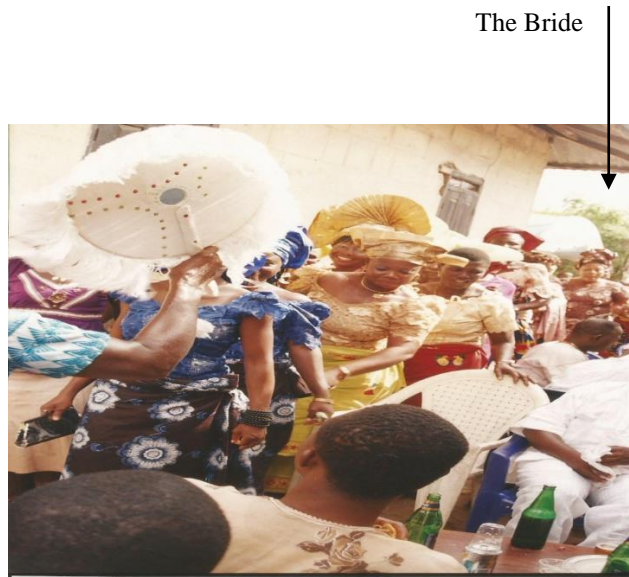
There are fixed items/prices for each of these things to be done and pay during the marriage rituals that are very specific but these items and payments are been exaggerated pretentiously to indicate that the proposed Inlwas cannot buy their daughter. e.g, the payment of the bride price that is fixed within the range of **twenty to one hundred and twenty naira** as the case may be, across the families in the Urhobo culture will be presented pretentiously to be within the range of **Twenty to One Hundred and Twenty Millions Naira** respectively. And in the process of negotiation by the two parties involved, another pretentious act is displayed. Instead of saying that reduces the price as supposed in market pricing, you hear the Inlwas saying “*siobo kpo enu*” meaning

“raise the price up”. Meanwhile, the intention is to say bring the price down. This is because human beings are not commodities that should be priced to be reduced hence the pretentious act of the proposed Inlwas saying that the price being raise up instead of saying reduced it. In this instance, you see both parties trading words of negotiations pragmatically and all of a sudden, the **twenty million naira** mentioned will be agreed on to be **twenty naira** and this brings excitement to both parties and they will be eating and drinking rejoicing especially the groom’s family.

Also in payment of items, eg the tasting of the gin drink, one of the kinsmen will be invited to taste the drink. In the process, you hear the taster saying that the proposed Inlwas brought *ame* “water” or fake gin pretentiously and after a while, he suddenly changes his month to say it is now a gin after being tipped

#### ***Pretentious Act in the Escort of the Bride***

At a stage in the marriage rituals as mentioned earlier, the bride will be escorted and presented by the women of the bride’s family to her husband and to be prayed for by her father as a way of blessing her and her husband. In the course of the escort, you hear the women using all manners of good adjectives both the one the bride possesses and the ones she does not have pretentiously as a way to market her and to make her presentable to the husband. The act of pouring these praises and eulogical words on the bride euphemistically make the event very colorful and rich rituals. Some of the words they used are as follows; *omote re avware na ododo* “our daughter is a flower”, *wo da mre vwe obaro, wane obaro* “when you view her from the front she is ok”, *wo da mre vwe obuko, wane obuko* “when you view her from the back she is ok”, *okporua oyen o nurhe* “she is from a great family”, *otegbane re omote* “she is sufficient to behold”, *omo re avware wian riarie kire ughojo* “she works all round like the clock”, *ubiako royen ovo ekpaogban* “one of her teeth worth millions”, *ekebe royen onine* “her buttocks very prestigious” etc. all these may not be true about the bride. These words have a lot of pragmatic and connotative effects as they are being said which makes the whole rituals pretentious. The picture below shows when the bride is being escorted by the women of the her family.



**Figure 4: Showing the escort of the Bride**

#### ***Pretentious Act of Refunding Part of Money***

The last data to be analyzed in this paper is the pretentious act of refunding back part of money paid to the groom's family as mentioned earlier on. The bride's father who is entitled to the bride price fees refunds part of it to the groom through his *Usuopha* "middleman" and says 'give it to my son's Inlaw to make use of it judiciously'. The refunding of this money implies the following pragmatically in the tradition;

- i. That their daughter is not sold
- ii. That in case of death, the corpse of their daughter must be brought home
- iii. That when anything happens in the bride's family such as death of any relatives, from that money the man will spend to pay condolences, training of her relations etc. In other words, the grooms' family cannot stop paying homage to them.
- iv. And giving the refund through the *Usuopha* (middleman) means he is a witness to the fact that the Son's-Inlaw consented to fulfill all the implications as mentioned above. All these are done and presented in a pretentious manner that in most cases, one does not put into considerations all these during the rituals. This cultural display makes the culture to be very rich and effective in its heritage.

## **CONCLUSION**

Marriage celebration is one of the key traditional displays of the Urhobo people that is very unique and robust. It is a thing that is done publically and socially because; it is a step that qualifies both the bride and the groom to another sphere of life and a ticket to benefit so many things from the family and the community of both parties. Eg, it removes humorous names from their heads, their children and families. This vital virtuous act of the people is characterized with aesthetic performances that are dramatic and pretentious in nature. From the beginning to the end of the rituals is full of euphemistical and pragmatic effects. No wonder when it is marriage issue, the category of those that are involved are very selective and classified starting from the spokesmen to the least persons that will partake.

Cursory look at the data presented and analyzed, from the first appearance of the proposed visitors (Inlaws) to when the bride is invited, escorted and presented till when the bride price is paid to the refund of money is full contentious languages (words) that with ordinary knowledge of semantics denotation of the language, one may not able to comprehend the bone of contentions. Pretentious used of words are not meant to deceive anybody as the case may be rather; it is a way to show the connotative meanings of these words. The beauty of these verbosity in the marriage rituals is to see if both families have the ability to tolerate each other and also to showcase the richness of the Urhobo culture display. It may interest you to know that this is how it is done across the 24 autonomous kingdoms in the Urhobo land.

It was observed among others that this kind of eulogical, euphemistical, pragmatic and pretentious use of words makes the marriage rituals very rich and prestigious to the people. This also led to the fact that it must be those that have and know the knowledge of the culture before you can be involved in the process. Again, it was observed that this pretentious use of language is unique to marriage issues/setting in the tradition which is demonstrated through discourse analysis of turn-taking.

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