THE BAKOR MATRILINEAL DESCENT SYSTEM: AN ETHNO-LINGUISTIC MODEL OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT.

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ABSTRACT

The continuous existence of matriliney in several communities particularly in Africa has triggered this investigation into the Bakor matrilineal society the aim of which is to discover the reasons for the people’s continuous reliance on the system in modern society and the parameters for its sustenance. It was discovered that the Bakor language particularly and the ecology of the environment as well as the occupational mainstay of the Bakor people are the major props that sustain the system which is ingrained in Bakor culture and serves as an identity index of the people within the several patriarchal communities surrounding them.

Keywords: Bakor, Matrilineage, Ethno-linguistics, Inheritance, Ecological Environment, and Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION:

Although contemporary research points to the gradual disintegration of matrilineal societies the world over, occasioned largely by economic and other forces of globalization, (see Yonariza: 2012, Bartle: 2014 and Gough: 1962), there are still several matrilineal societies that hold tenaciously to this mode or pattern of descent and inheritance as their cultural identity. Ariel Ben Yishay et al: 2014 observe that:

- Reef density predicts the prevalence of matriliney in a cross cultural sample of 186 societies and in a sample of 59 small scale horticultural fishing communities in the Solomon Islands. We show that this result holds even controlling for common descent by relying on variation within the ethno-linguistic groups in our Melanesian micro sample where matriliney is ancestral.

But Ben Yishay et al go further to submit that small scale fishing on which the people rely for their livelihood can be said to be the major sustaining factor of matriliney and they also add that:

- The majority of existing societies exhibit a large gender bias against female inheritance of land and other assets (p. 1)

No doubt, many matrilineal societies may have disintegrated and succumbed to modern economic pressures and other political and social determinants thus, breaking up their age-old system by which they were originally identified. Despite this seemingly general trend, there are still many matrilineal communities that have clung to their ancestral heritage in spite of these pressures of modern economic or cosmopolitan growth occasioned primarily by the forces of globalization. Yet many other matrilineal societies have adopted adjustment strategies that enable them to absorb modern changes introduced into the environment either through the spread of new religions or social and political exigency (See Jacob Taylor: 2012). Taylor, therefore, seems to counter the hypothesis of disintegration by positing that:

- It is absolutely fascinating how, in the face of globalization and particularly the spread of Islam, many matrilineal animist cultures are just adapting to the new systems and incorporating parts of Islam and popular culture into their beliefs and rituals without entirely losing their old way of life. It’s very cool and shows a strong adaptability (especially in the Tuareg and Minang peoples).

We note here that it is not just the Tuaregs or the Minang people that have demonstrated such high adaptability traits. Among those that have persisted in their old matrilineal ways along with the Minang and Tuaregs are the Moso in China, the Lenape and Iroquois Indians in North America etc. In Africa also, several matrilineal communities still exist among whom are the Sere of Senegal, the Akan in Ghana, the Efiks and Ejagham in Nigeria of whom the Bakor, our area of study, are a sub-unit, tracing their descent from the same matrilineal ancestor and practicing a system of inheritance based on a matrilineage rather than a Patrilineage which seems to be prevalent in most societies of the world today. Contemporary Scholars and Anthropologists generally seem to believe that world economic systems, because of globalization, favor Patrilineage over matrilineage. They prefer Patrilineage, viewing it as the only way to fit into the modern globalized world economy. This view is characteristic of Eurocentric views of social institutions that are alien to western civilization. Often times, they fail to critically examine institutions and cultures in their own right to decipher their merits and demerits and what they can offer to the outside world. We, instead, often expect these other cultures (so-called primitive cultures) to be swallowed up and obliterated according to the Darwinian theory of evolution. It is hoped that this record of the Bakor matrilineal system of inheritance will not only prevent its going into extinction but also ensure its preservation for posterity among the Bakor as well as open it up to the outside world for critical view and comparative purposes. It is, therefore, heartwarming when Jacob Taylor, instead of towing the view of total disintegration, observes that...
One cannot say whether this change prompted by globalization is good or bad, but one can hope that these cultures take advantage of globalization to share their culture, traditions and values on the world stage; perhaps someone else someplace in the world will adopt a practice of theirs and in some small way perpetuate their culture into the future... if nobody documents these cultures, they cannot be revived in the future or even re-incorporated into global culture at some future point. I think that if at some point down the road we have a fairly homogenous global culture, there will be an attempt at revival of older cultures such as these, as a response to the homogeneity. One can only hope that ethnographies of these cultures will be around when or if that time comes.

Because of the prevalence of patriliney, one is inclined to ask the basic questions namely why Patrilineage is preferable in modern society or conversely, why some matrilineal communities hold tenaciously to their preferences if the system cannot withstand the current pressures of globalization and a global economic system. Finally, do matrilineal systems not adequately sustain economies of their communities so that they can adequately adjust to global economic requirements? The challenge to find answers to these questions has necessitated this survey of the Bakor matrilineal system in Ogoja and Ikom Local Government Areas of Cross River State. Here it is observed that though changes are gradually creeping into the society, modernity or economic pressures alone may not determine the total disintegration or even the sustenance of this ingrained cultural attitude which is embedded in the lives of the people and from which the people derive their identity. Blood, they say, is thicker than water; and so the Bakor, like their larger Ejagham brothers, have for centuries clung to their matrilineal practices despite all odds. Strengthened by their ethno-linguistic landscape and literary background which seems to favor this supposed gender disparity or preference of female over male in matters of genealogy and inheritance, it is obvious that the matrilineage descent system may not, after all, be so prone to disintegration among the Bakor as it is speculated by sociologists and anthropologists. It is also obvious that some of the sustaining factors of the matrilineal system in Bakor in particular and Ejagham generally are the language and cosmic beliefs of the people which provide the building blocks upon which the system is strongly foisted.

THE BAKOR MATRILINEAGE SYSTEM: ITS STRUCTURE AND DESCENT PATTERN

Jacob Taylor: 2012, describes a matrilineal descent system as

- A kinship system where a descent group traces their ancestral lineages via the maternal (uterine) side of the group. This does not exactly flip patrilineal descent systems on their head, such that women are the more powerful gender, but it can (see Moso of China). Women often share power equally with men and occupy some of the more powerful roles in society (often alongside men). Matrilineal groups also pass wealth through the female line, and women often own or control land and production. The wealth stays at their dwelling—male status and property pass through to their sister’s sons, rather than their own. The [matrilineal] uncle of the children is who “distributes goods, and administers inheritance and succession rules” in a residence.

This copious quotation aptly represents the Bakor matrilineal descent system within which wives and children are excluded from inheriting a deceased property which go, either to the brothers or to his sister’s male children who are also entitled to care and sponsorship over and above a man’s wife/wives and children. The predominant agricultural mainstay of the Bakor community encourages polygamy with its consequent multiple breeding. A man can, therefore, marry between two to six wives and breed between ten to thirty or more children who all belong to the wife’s matrilineage and depend on them for their welfare while the man often times reneges on his duty to them as is often the practice in polygamous homes.

BAKOR MATRILINEAL STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION

The Bakor matrilineal descent system is organized along a multi-tiered segmentary structure with the matrilineal clan at the apex followed by major matri-lineages and finally minor lineage segments which can be regarded as nuclear families but with a father who exercises authority, not in his immediate family structure but within his own matrilineage. Within this structural organization, the Bakor consist of eight (8) matri clans namely: Nkım, Nkum and Ekaļuk in Ogoja Local Government Area and Nnam, Abaniyom, Ntaa, Nselle and Ndeh in Ikom Local Government Area all of Cross River State. (see Ganyi: 2009 and Majuk: 1995).

The Bakor are a sub-group of the larger Ejagham nation (see Sandy Onoh: 1994) that spans across the Northern most parts of Cross River State; specifically covering Ogoja, Ikom and Etung in Northern and Central Senatorial Districts respectively, to Akamkpa, Odukpani and Calabar Municipal Councils of Southern Senatorial Districts. Within these eight (8) matrclans are several major matri-lineages or wards (Abanghe-Nnap) which can be further sub-divided into minor lineage segments (Atali-Nnap). At each level are recognized heads belonging to minor lineage segments but chosen to head the major matrilineage. Clan Chiefs and village Chiefs are chosen from any major matrilineage and given authority over the clan or village. Specifically, in Ekaļuk matrilineal community which consists of a population of about sixty eight thousand (68,000) inhabitants (see the Joshua project: 2015), there are at present thirteen (13) major matri-lineages namely:- Esham-Njok, Esham-Nfung, Esham-Erah, Esham-kpen, Esham-Mbruv, Esham-Nlul and Esham-Eju. Others include Agba, Ntwong, Ntkpu, Ntame-Elu, Akpabughu and Nkum. The first group, prefixed by “Esham,” which name also denotes the ancient administrative headquarters of Ekaļuk clan, constitutes the original matrilineage that settled at Esham. They are therefore prefixed by “Esham” to designate their identity as belonging to this larger or major Ekaļuk matri-clan. The other seven clans of Nkım, Nkum, Nnam, Abaniyom, Ndeh, Ntaa and Nselle as well have their major matrilineages which go by different names from those of the Ekaļuk though Nkım, Nkum, Ekaļuk and Nnam have the same names for the major matri-lineages which presupposes their descendence from the same matriarch or matri-line. Esham-Njok therefore means Esham of the Elephant, Njok, the Elephant being the totemic insignia of their matri-line. In the same vein, “Esham-Nfung” are Esham of the Buffalo, “Esham-Mbruv” is Esham of the Dog, “Esham-Kpen” the worrisome Esham, “Esham-Nlul” the Bitter Esham, “Esham-Erah” the struggling Esham and “Esham-Eju” the slave Esham. These original
matri-lineages coexisted and interacted with each other as one family and one community for a long time with Elders of the major lineages acting as rulers and judges over the entire matri clan. However, disagreements over inheritance and intra-lineage quarrels started creeping in among members of the respective lineages leading to fissures that culminated to major splits. Among the Bakor generally, denunciation of a lineage or family member i.e. a brother or sister or even parents requires a simple procedure. All that is required is the young yellow palm frond which is then split apart by the aggrieved individual in front of the other lineage members or brothers and relations and from that moment on, the aggrieved individual ceases to be recognized as their relation. The splitting of the yellow frond symbolizes severance from the umbilical cord that represented the filial bond existing between and uniting the individual to a particular matrilineage. Only very expensive ritual sacrifices can reunite those concerned and in many instances these are never performed. The result is that the individual and his followers or sympathizers now form another minor matri-line within the major matrilineage. This is the kind of fission that resulted in the creation of the other six matri-lines in Ekajuk namely: Agba, Ntuwong, Nitkpuu, Ntame-Elu, Akpabugu and Nkum. Notice that these matri-lines do not prefix their names with Esham the original abode of all the other seven matri-lineages before the split signifying that these cleavages occurred after the movement from Esham. Also, note that each split creates a new matri-line or minor segment with a new matrilineal head (Eptal-Nnap) and members who now trace their descent through a woman who once belonged to the older or major matrilineage. The new lineage Elder is now entitled to a “symbolic stone” or “Eptal Nnap” within the larger matrilineage.

The entire system, because of its complexity, allows for duplicity, double standards and sometimes favoritism in the dispensation of property by lineage Elders which culminates sometimes in several litigations. However, what is worthy of note and praise is that these litigations are contained within the matrilineage and settled during funeral obsequies of a deceased member of the matrilineage. No matrilineal dispute goes to orthodox courts as it is forbidden for a matrilineal dispute, regarded as a family dispute, to be taken outside the matrilineage for settlement. This will be regarded as washing family dirty linen in public. If a dispute defies settlement within the matrilineage, it leads to splits which result in the proliferation of minor lineage segments within the major matrilineage. Again, it is worthy of note that minor lineage segments do not defy their original ancestral matri-line but belong and are accepted into the major matrilineage. The leader of the minor lineage simply becomes “Eptal-Nnap” or “lineage stone” within that major matrilineage. He, thus, assumes political, social and ritual headship of his segment of the larger lineage. He can now offer sacrifices to the ancestors of his minor lineage and intercede on their behalf for blessings upon the members of his segment of the lineage. Also of paramount importance here is the fact that all minor lineage segments trace descent and inheritance from one ancestral matriarch never a patriarch.

Bride Wealth in a Bakor matrilineal system is never collected by the biological father of the bride but by the Eldest member of the matrilineal segment to which the biological father belongs. Other functions of the matrilineage span the entire gamut of political, economic, social and religious lives of the matrilineage members. The kinship unit therefore constitutes a kind of corporate body which assumes the authority of a legal entity exercising various rights of adjudication over the entire matri-line. Among the Bakor, there are no fixed succession rules within a matrilineage which enables Elders of a particular lineage to dispense of procedures when the need arises in order to honour a senior member of the lineage group whose children are given particular recognition or favours within the matrilineage and sometimes titles to choice farm lands of a deceased matrilineage member. The primary occupation of the Bakor is farming i.e. Agriculture while hunting and fishing are secondary engagements. The Bakor people also possess a rich cultural heritage evident in their famous stone monoliths at Nkarasi, Alok and Esham. There are also numerous folktales which serve as means for the dissemination of information on Bakor knowledge systems while several other material cultural items are created by both men and women.

THE AMBIVALENT POTENTIAL OF THE BAKOR MATRILINEAL DESCENT SYSTEM

Although the Bakor are very strongly matrilineal, i.e. tracing descent lines and inheritance from a matriarch rather than a patriarch, one still notices that the entire Bakor and their Ejagham brothers are also very strongly PATRI-LOCAL. The man, though losing authority to his wife in terms of tracing descent of his children, is recognized as the authority and father figure in his homestead. This authority is evident in several situations. First, a man who is of age does not leave his homestead to the father-in-laws to take residence. He must establish a homestead of his own or be regarded by his mates and the society generally as “a woman” and incapable of procreation because as the Bakor say “a man does not marry a wife without a homestead” or “a man does not beget children to live in his father-in-laws or his biological father’s homestead.” One of the signs of maturity is ownership of a homestead where a man wields authority or be regarded as having been “married by a woman” if you relocate to your father-in-law’s homestead. Therefore, despite the tracing of ancestry or descent from one’s matrilineage, the man’s authority in his homestead is incontestable. However, in Ekajuk matrilineal community, it is the matrilineal uncle (the mother’s eldest brother) who wields authority as the primary male figure in the matrilineal descent group. A biological father often times cannot exercise control over his offspring yet he remains the primary male figure in his homestead while exercising control over the lives and activities of his sister’s children. The man therefore remains important, if not in his immediate or nuclear family, at least to his matrilineal family. The denial of descent or inheritance rights to a man’s children and his wife in the nuclear family arises out of the fact that in the matrilineal setup, a man’s biological children belong to his wife’s i.e. their mother’s descent group but the man is conversely granted authority over his sister’s children. The result is the fact that among the Bakor and Ejagham, marriage bonds are very weak. A man therefore owes more allegiance to his matri-line and supposes that his wife and children belong to a different matri-line and so are entitled to care from their matri-line not his. In spite of all these, however, the Bakor still have a proverb that eulogizes the strength of the man and emphasizes his authority. In contemporary dispute situations, or when a wife attempts to assert her authority over her children in other to derogate her husband, the community immediately takes sides with the man and reminds the wife that “a poor man begets children he does not buy slaves,” which is in keeping with or protective of a modernist patriarchal or male chauvinistic attitude. The connotation here is that even a poor man who may not have money for the purchase of slaves has the capacity for procreation which
is God given and serves as a reminder to the wife that the man too has his matrilineage to control. Also, in cases of death of a child, it is only the man or in his absence his matrilineal relations who decide where a child is to be buried. This decision does not go to his wife’s matrilineage and is never contestable unless where the deceased is grown up and has established his own homestead. To protect the man’s rights therefore, a personal homestead is a major requirement

Among the Bakor and unlike the Akan or the Asante where a man can double as leader of his matrilineage and head chief of his community, a man cannot be matrilineal head and community chief. Once an individual is chosen to be installed community chief (Ntul Ejabe) he loses his title to the matrilineage headship (Ntul-a-Nnap) and in fact, seizes to practically or formally belong to a matrilineage. To the Bakor, a community chief is regarded as “a slave”, which explains why people seldom accept to be chiefs except on coercion. It also accounts for why, on his demise, a community chief’s palace is completely razed down and property looted by citizens, a practice which is lamentable in modern dispensation. To this extent, a community chief is revered and pampered which is somewhat paradoxical because in matrilineal contexts like the Bakor, the women wield more powers than even the community chief. The chief exercises conjugal rights over every woman in his community and could take any citizens wife for himself by simply sending a horse whisk to her through his palace guards. The woman so chosen has no choice but to relocate to the chief’s palace as his wife. Despite this honour and reverence and immense authority wielded by the community chief within his domain, his authority does not supersede that of a matrilineal leader or the women in the community. The matrilineal leader can therefore muster women of his matri-line to uncap and dethrone a community chief. The Bakor matrilineal descent system can therefore be said to be largely modeled after what Phil Bartle (2012) and particularly W. Bleek (1975b) have variously described as “Appearance and Reality”, because even though globalization seems to favor and recognize Patrilinyeage over and above matrilineage hence women tend to lose power to men or subjugate themselves under men in the present global economic dispensation, the truth is that the power of the woman is incontestable in the several spheres of Bakor life thus authenticating and encouraging matrility in several places. This means matrility may not be easily eroded by present day local economies.

In spite of this supposed superior position of the woman which enhances matrility in Bakor society, however, the strength of the man is still recognizable in several areas of communal and even matrilineal leadership as a male-figure in a matrilineage is overtly more desirable and weightier than an all-female matrilineage. This goes to strengthen modern observations that women tend to subsume their authority under men (Bartle:2014 and Gough:1962), but this is only as it relates to societal leadership. Beyond this, the women assume complete leadership and authority in matters of societal cleansing, descent and inheritance. The Bakor, therefore, assert proverbially that the scrotum is superior to the vagina because the vagina is scared of heights and so cannot produce palm wine or palm oil. This is a jibe at matriliny because women only process and market palm produce which is brought down the palm tree by men, but are forbidden to climb the tree themselves to harvest the nuts. It is also observed that the establishment of homesteads (ala-ega) is the exclusive preserve of men such that even when women are prosperous enough to build houses of theirs, they never own personal homesteads but build in their male matrilineal relations homesteads or purchase land in the name of their male matrilineal relations. No woman establishes a homestead even if unmarried yet women could be highly economically independent. This situation is what I refer to as ambivalence but which could, in part, be regarded as empowerment.

**BAKOR MATRILINEAL SOCIAL ORGANISATION**

Among the Bakor as earlier mentioned women wield more power and control when it comes to family matters in the matrilineage. Here the women reserve the right to accept or reject the decision of even a male matrilineal elder and can lead their children to disobey that decision. This is because in reality the man has no children of his own to exercise control over. The man’s power is therefore latent and is only actualized at the behest of the women of his matrilineage. Furthermore, the fact that the Bakor woman owns farmland of her own, usually inherited from her matrilineage, endows her with economic independence as she does not depend on her husband to feed her or her offspring even though it is obligatory for him to do so not so much because they belong to him but because they work for him and cultivate his farmlands. Here again, even though the man of the house is the male figure and supposed owner of the homestead, he has very minimal control over his biological offspring as earlier stated because they are more inclined to obey their biological mother. This is because the man is a stronger figure in a matrilineage context.

It is as well worthy of note that in this matrilineal system, even though men are generally regarded as male figures, and in agricultural production, regarded as the producers of major food and cash crops like yams, rice, cocoa, maize, etc. the women equally produce these crops on the same scale if not more. Women also produce other cash crops regarded as exclusive to them because they are considered female crops. These include ground peas, melon, ground beans, okra, palm kernels which is a byproduct of palm fruit produced by men who only claim the oil and discard the kernel for the women. The result is that often women become more economically prosperous than men which enhances their power and sustains the matrilineage system. As an outcome of this prosperity and as if to celebrate their independence, most Bakor and Ekajuk women in contemporary contexts, own their own houses away from their husbands homesteads and often on their matrilineal family land since land in Bakor is communally owned while each matrilineage is entitled only to those patches of land on which family members cultivate their farms. Anybody, male or female, who has the where withal can purchase a piece of land for his intended use. As proof of the potential power of women in Bakor community, only women have the power to uncap and dethrone the community Chief. When a community chief becomes despotic and uncontrollable, elders of the matrilineages who are the ruling elders in the community and constitute the Chief’s governing council, summon the women of their matrilineages and request them to march to the Chief’s palace, force him to surrender his insignia of office i.e. the sceptre and his red cap, all of which serve as identity and immunity from insults. From the
moment these instruments are collected by the women, the Chief loses immunity and ceases to be regarded as the community Chief. The most potent control over the excesses of the community Chief in Bakor are the women against whom he has no powers and is forbidden to fight in any form. The Bakor Chief does not therefore appear in a market place or funeral grounds; places where women predominate for fear that anybody he has wronged can employ the services of women to uncap and dethrone him out of jealousy or for vengeance.

Bakor women are also traditionally endowed with spiritual powers of cleansing the land from curses or evil supposedly brought upon the land through wicked acts by individuals. This is believed to ensure societal growth and harmony. On the whole, the roles of women in the matrilineage system seem endless and invaluable yet the man is still regarded as head and male figure, valuable to every matrilineage. His duties are however restricted to defense and maintenance of peace, agricultural production, procreation and to a large extent ritual or sacrificial. Thus, to this writer, the Bakor matrilineal system presents an ambiguous or ambivalent relationship in modern parlance in terms of power sharing or authority between men and women in the matrilineage. The hidden authority of the woman in a matrilineage descent system will continue to be jealously guarded in the perpetration of that system thus, making it difficult or impossible for modernity to easily obliterate the system. Perhaps one should also note here that within this matrilineal system, the contemporary nuclear family, as we conceive of it today as father, mother and children has no place and cannot be a close-knit unit or building block that can exercise economic independence from the matrilineage nor can it be completely federated or incorporated into the matrilineage of the father since it has very strong ancestral ties. The nuclear family thus, remains only as a complementary unit of a large matrilineal descent group that forms what we can regard as a Bakor federation of clans that trace their descent and ancestry from a primordial matriarch.

**BAKOR MATRILINEAL CHARACTERISTICS**

Generally, therefore, the Bakor matrilineal descent system can be said to be characterized by the following features

1. **Descent group formations which are structured in accordance with the female line of descent.** The children belong traditionally to the mother and not the father. This is believed to be age old and spiritual as Carmeline Utsalo (nee Ganyi: 2006) records that a Bakor Elder, Nshor Awup Akobi, in response to a question why children are regarded as the offspring of a woman and not their biological fathers opined

   - Children! Well, children belong to their mother, who gave birth to them. That is how we came to meet it and that is how we practice it.

   Carmeline further adds that another community Elder, Nshor Mowang Moshe, now deceased, who happened to be present during this interview of his neighbor elaborated further by adding that

   - Blood cannot be the means of tracing relationships especially inheritance. If that were so, everybody in Ekajuk will be your brother or sister since we all come from the same stock and have intermarried into other families from outside. All of us will be related in one way or the other but even if blood were to determine inheritance, we are even surer of the woman’s blood not the man’s own. How am I to know that I pregnated even my own wife in today’s society where young people are very promiscuous.

   Again, Nshor Awup, in answer to another question posed by Carmeline as to why a wife or children cannot inherit their husband or father retorted

   - A wife and children are what a man acquires outside. They are not part of him. He came from his own family i.e. matri-line and the wife came from her own family or matri-line that is where they belong

2. **A Bakor matrilineage usually owns property communally which property is shared within the members of the lineage according to age and degree of relationship on the demise of the lineage member.** Farmland is lineage property and can therefore not go to a wife or children of a man but is held in trust by a lineage member who farms on it or rents it to family members or even the public to bring income to the lineage.

3. **Authority in the matri-line is entrusted to the eldest maternal brother or son in the matrilineage and does not reside in the father in a particular nuclear family.** Rather, the father in a nuclear family could be the Elder in his matrilineage and therefore, exercise authority therein.

From the foregoing, one can surmise that the matrilineal descent system in Bakor provides distinct advantages for the women to perpetuate the system even in the present global economic dispensation. The system perpetuates itself based on inbuilt structures and balances which ensure its endurance whatever the challenges posed by current global economic configuration e.g. the system of land ownership, that is, communal ownership which does not pose a threat to the extinction of the system. What one observes is a kind of silent power sharing principle in the sense that the man is a very valuable member of the matrilineage in terms of the duties allotted to him particularly ritual or religious performances and defense of the matrilineage which functions are not allowed women. The woman on the other hand reserves the right of precreation, descent and inheritance which accentuates her relevance in the matrilineage and explains why the Bakor value women more than men in order to maintain continuity of the matrilineage. A matrilineage without women easily goes extinct. In spite of this, the man remains the male figure and in recognition of this, the Bakor say “no matter how powerful or rich a woman is, she cannot urinate into a bottle”. To contrast male and female power in the community the Bakor refer to a valorous person, animal or object as “nnum nyi” meaning “the male one” while referring to a coward or weak person as “nkal ebol bol” meaning “the rotten female,” who is useless, but the invaluable position of the woman is aptly
represented in the Bakor aphorism – “njiel jo shu abonebe, ngum-a-nenkai shu ebing-ebe” meaning “the productive woman castigates her offspring but the barren woman castigates her body.”

ETHNO-LINGUISTIC AUTHENTICATION OF MATRILINEAGE IN BAKOR

Basically, language serves as a means for cultural transmission as well as an instrument for socialization. It can therefore play a central role in the perpetration of social institutions that enhance disparities between men and women in society. Language conditions our consciousness making Jimenez Catalan (2005) to posit that

- By means of language we shape our view of society, we organize our knowledge; we learn new things and, above all, we assimilate the norms and social patterns of our community. (Pp. 209)

The English language which is seen to be the condensation of modernity favours a patriarchal world that values the hegemony of men over women but languages generally reflect and express social attitudes and values – meaning that language has the potential to influence, shape and maintain those attitudes and values which society cherishes. Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2007) testify to this patriarchal propensity of humanity to favour the male gender as revealed in the English language by quoting Graham’s analogy which posits that

- If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is “man overboard”. If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is “man slain”. But, if, she is injured on the job, the coverage is “work-mens’ compensation”. But, if she arrives at the threshold marked “men only,” she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects, it is meant for her (Graham pp. 447)

But the Bakor language seems to be the opposite because the linguistic constructs tend to favour women to the exclusion of men. Language, it is said, is the means for the enhancement of cultural transmission which is why it is sometimes posited that language is the clothing by which ideas are expressed. The Bakor matrilineal system is hinged on and buoyed by the linguistic structures in the community. Edward Sapir (1970) therefore, describes language as

- A purely human and non-institutional method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntary process symbols and as a tool for recording significant experiences.

Language is as such recognized as a product of human beings and the outcome of a thought environment. It would therefore be correct to suppose that the Bakor environment creates and authenticates the matrilineal system which is couched in a language that operates within an ecological environment that sustains it. Language and communication can therefore be conceived of as a crucial factor in social organization through which we can decipher a people’s attachment to a particular institution or knowledge system and its relevance to the people. After all, the importance of knowledge lies in its relevance to, and the degree to which it can lend itself to utilization by humanity. To this extent, J. S. Madumulla (2001) quotes Siran in observing that

- The meaning of a word is not usually complete unless it is attached to other words, [in a particular context] which, together, makes a complete independent expression or statement. The role the word plays in the expression will be determined by the linguistic context... what the context does to it is to determine the use of its applied meaning which, fundamentally, neither deviates from, nor contradicts the basic meaning.

From this perspective, one can posit that the prevalent use of language or linguistic forms that are predominantly mother-compliant in Bakor language predisposes Bakor people’s emotional and psychological outlook towards matrilineage rather than Patrilineage. The basic meanings of matriarchal words cannot, therefore, be anything other than what they are meant for – the authentication and reinforcement of a system which the people accept and admire. The importance of language to the sustenance and growth of any social system therefore derives from its potential to buttress or represent that system and to portray the culture and identity of that system. Coupland (2007) and Cutler (2007) therefore argue, in relation to the English language, that

- What gets globalized is not just “English with an accent”, it is a complex of highly specific and specialized micro-varieties of English – “super-vernasicals” – the main function of which lies in their identity potential.

If the identity potential of super-vernasicals of English fit into desired goals, carry out the required message succinctly and make varieties of English in different situations and contexts acceptable, it follows that the highly technical or specialized forms of a language may not, after all, easily gain currency over linguistic expressions that relate to general practices or aid the sustenance of social institutions and systems that are prevalent in a particular community.

Although the sustenance of culture is dependent on a number of variables identified to include world view, ideology, social institutions, polity, economy and technology (see Bartle: 2014), changes of which affect classes of people and gender differently, the extent to which women are prone to these changes has been vastly recorded (see Yonariza: 2012, Douglas: 1969, and Gough: 1962). To this level also it is supposed, that the extent to which any system or institution that derives or is dependent on women will change is based on the extent to which the women will be susceptible to change. Gough, Yonariza, Bartle and Ben Yishay have, therefore, observed that, for the past few decades, matrilineal systems the world over, have been susceptible to disintegration because of globalization and world economic pressures which have changed the conditions of women and made them more dependent on men or on patriarchal economy. This condition, it is argued, presages or forecasts the imminent collapse of matrilineal communities which will soon be replaced by patrilineal systems throughout the entire universe. Evidence, however, seems to point to the contrary and as few anthropologists have been quick to point out, some of these matrilineal systems have endured the barrages of so called
world economic pressures and have persisted in their different environments (see Jacob Taylor: 2012 and Ben Yishay et al: 2014). A number of reasons could be adduced for this resilience and enduring qualities of some matrilineal systems to include the economy itself, the world view of the people and, most importantly, the language within which the system is couched and transmitted. It is obvious that the ethno-linguistic landscape of a particular cultural entity can favour the perpetration or sustenance of a matrilineal system. From this perspective, one posits that the Bakor language itself has been one of the major sustaining factors of the Bakor matrilineal system. Looking specifically at the Bakor dialect and its Ejagham roots, one finds that the vocabulary tends to be more mother-compliant than father-compliant. One therefore starts to wonder whether it is the matrilineal system that gave rise to this vocabulary or that the primordial vocabulary of the Ejagham language, which forms the root of all Bakor dialects, has given birth to and sustains the matrilineal system. This will require further intense research into the Ejagham language which is beyond the purview of the present work. The observation is, however, pertinent because right from when a child is born and starts being aware of its environment, the influence of the mother is pervasive while that of the father, in contrast, is minimal. The child is vastly exposed to matriarchal vocabulary while the father figure is almost completely absent. The child therefore grows to be closer to its mother than the father and learns more from the mother than the father. This learning is enhanced by folktale rendition which is the major means for the impartation of Bakor knowledge systems and cosmology and is dominated by women who tell tales in the evenings to their children gathered around the fireplace thus, further exposing the children to the immense authority of the women in the community.

Ariel Ben Yishay et al: 2014 have therefore posited that

- The rules of human social organization, in general, and inheritance in particular have been described as the evolutionary outcome of a process of vertical descent, in which norms are inherited from parents and parent’s societies with adaptation to ecological conditions.

It would therefore hold true that predominant matriarchal influence and the prevalence of mother-compliant linguistic constructs in Bakor culture can serve as a conscious or unconscious authentication of the culture of matrility within that community. Ben Yishay et al again point out that the ecology or ethnology of an environment can, in fact, sustain a particular institution or system which derives its life blood from the world view of that environment. They posit that

- Matrilineal inheritance has several robust ecological correlates. It is prevalent in horticultural societies, but it is rare in agricultural societies that rely on plough use and virtually absent in societies that have domesticated large animals.

The Bakor and Ejagham matrilineal societies will here serve as exceptions to Yishay et al’s rule because they are a largely agricultural society that practices matrilineage as a system of descent and inheritance; but this is normal since Yishay et al did not rule out the possibility of matrilineage in an agricultural setting. They only supposed that it is rare apparently because they were not aware of the many African agricultural and nomadic matrilineal societies. Perhaps this can go as part of the ambivalence observed in modern contexts because these societies exist as strongly matrilineal communities against the general principles espoused by anthropologists for such societies.

To return to the question of language and its effect on matrility, one can submit that with a situation where a child grows up within a prevalent matriarchal environment, knowing the supremacy of the mother and knowing its mother’s relations first and not the father and his relations, a possibility exists that the child’s consciousness validates matrility and abhors patriline which situation holds greater potential for the perpetration of matrilineage than Patrilineage in Bakor community. Specifically, the Ejagham language of Etung Local Government Area has such matriarchal expressions as

1. Njim-nyen i.e. mother’s side or mother’s relations.
2. Oya-biet i.e. one womb or same mother.
3. Anne-nyen i.e. mother’s people
4. Ndip-nju-nyen i.e. mother’s matrilineage
5. Mmoni-nyen i.e. mother’s child but which expression means brother, sister and all maternal relations.
6. Okpa-nyen i.e. mother’s first born child. This is very important because the first born child is a potential matri-line leader.
7. Efun-nyen i.e. mother’s paternal brother or sister but this is inconsequential because being of the same father but different mothers has no importance in the matrilineal system. This individual is therefore not recognized as the child’s relation instead the child’s maternal uncles, aunties and even cousins are recognized as his/her brothers and sisters.
8. Eyabe i.e. suckled the same breast. Another significant expression for brother or sister from the same womb.
9. Nyen-nkue i.e. grandmother. This expression is, however, more potent from the matrilineal perspective because the maternal grandmother wields power and control over a woman’s offspring but the paternal grandmother only has power within her own matri-line.

In the case of the Bakor language, this kind of vocabulary is even more pervasive. Among the Ekajuk Bakor group in Ogoja Local Government Area such matriarchal words or phrases that predominate early child upbringing and validate matrility include

1. Nnee i.e. mother, which expression is very pervasive.
2. Ala-anying/ntarr-ning i.e. same womb or same vagina. Used to denote direct brother or sister from the same mother.
3. Ekpidia-ajing i.e. same womb
4. Nnap i.e. major matrilineage. This is the most important societal institution/segment which identifies an individual within Bakor community.
5. Nnap-anneh i.e. mother's matrilineage. This is the most important institution in a Bakor man's life. His identity depends on the matrilineage to which he belongs as one's social standing could also derive from the social standing of his matrilineage.
6. Nnap-a-nshor i.e. father's matrilineage, however, in the ecology of the Bakor, the biological father's matrilineage is inconsequential to a child. He/she is never made to feel the impact of the Father's matrilineage with which he never really identifies.
7. Ebanghe-nnap i.e. matrilineage segment which connotes separated or minor lineage but which still traces descent to the major matrilineage.
8. Mmon-anneh i.e. mother's child but which expression is also used for brother, sister, auntie, cousin or all relations of the same matri-line. A brother or sister are one's mother's children never father's children even in a polygamous marriage.
9. Mmon-anyin i.e. an objective description of someone else's brother or sister but who must be from the same matri-line not patri-line.
10. Egban i.e. a relation from a minor lineage within the same larger matri-line and never patri-line.
11. Ekunu i.e. immediate younger brother from the same womb but which expression also goes for first cousins and second cousins or other close relations from the same matri-line.
12. Nneh-a-nnap i.e. matrilineage member whether minor or major matrilineage.
13. Eyap-bel i.e. Direct brother or sister who suckled from the same mother.
14. Nfun i.e. Paternal brother or sister. This expression only exists in polygamous families but has no importance in the matrilineage since it has no inheritance rights attached to it in the nuclear family.
15. Nyin-nneh i.e. one's mother. This is a very important expression in the matrilineage but it is also counterbalanced by Ndeh-nneh i.e one's father yet nyin-nneh is more recognized and adored or respected than ndeh-nneh.
16. Alung-amig i.e. same blood is traced from the matri-line not the patri-line. The father is not known to contribute blood to the child's formation.
17. Nyin-noh-nkul i.e. maternal grandmother or paternal grandmother but the maternal grandmother wield influence which the paternal grandmother does not have in a nuclear family except in her own matri-line.
18. Eran-ran i.e. the roots, meaning matrilineal roots or family tree which is traced matrilineally never patriarchally.
19. Ejiije i.e. Line/number of children of one mother in a matri-line. This expression counts the children of a mother within a matrilineage.
20. Ninjel i.e. mother of children. She is highly respected within the Bakor matrilineal system and is entitled to ululations and praise in a matrilineal setup. She is entitled to a large share of land or any dividend accruing to the matrilineage as a major contributor to the growth of lineage property.

These expressions create a relationship of matriline that is pervasive in the child's consciousness but the child is never consciously made to realize the father figure in the family. Instead, the father figure is derogatively described as “afongho ebing kunu mmon go eshi” translated as “he urinated sperm on the child’s head” which supposes that the child is formed within the mother’s womb before the father completes the process by “urinating sperm on the child’s head.” It is also believed, among the Bakor, that someone else can complete the formation of a child in the womb hence the expression “yeb ruru ela” meaning “he has completed the pregnancy”. These expressions give the impression that the making of a child is a mother's prerogative and the father only fills what has already been created in the womb. Hence, the child belongs to the mother and her matri-line.

A cursory examination of the language or vocabulary of child upbringing among the Bakor reveals that mothers are in the habit of reminding their children in their early ages, say between the ages of four to ten or twelve, of their relationship with their mother and their mother’s lineage through the vocabulary of conversation or education. Rarely does a mother remind a child that it has a father. The child is therefore to discover a father figure or male figure whom the child either respects of abhors. “Nshor” i.e. “father” refers not only to a biological father but also to all elderly people in the community and does not specifically say which man is a biological father. The Bakor child is constantly reminded about “Nyin-nneh” i.e. one's mother, “nnap” or one's matrilineage which expressions are of paramount importance in a child’s upbringing. Furthermore, such other phrases as “eyap-bel” i.e. suckling the same breast, “mmon-anneh” i.e. mother’s child meaning sister, brother, uncle, auntie of the same matrilineage predominate a child’s learning years. The result is that the child’s brain is conditioned to think about the mother and the matrilineage as the most important institutions in the child’s life.
In Bakor and Ejagham communities, polygamy could also be seen as one of the strengthening factors of matriliney in the sense that in a polygamous setting, the bond between children and their mothers becomes even stronger than that between them and their father. The position of father figure or male figure is sometimes hard on the growing children since the father reneges on his duties but this is counterbalanced by the mother's love and intimacy for her children which alienates the child from the father and his paternal relations. It is also observed that among the Bakor and Ejagham, as earlier pointed out, marriage bonds are very loose. A woman begets several children for different fathers as she can exercise her independence through abandonment of husbands at will. In such cases, the mother remains the bond uniting children from different fathers who may never feel the paternal bond amongst them.

CONCLUSION:

The complexity of the Bakor matrilineage descent system manifests in its ambivalence in the power sharing structure within the matrilineage. Here, the various functions and responsibilities assigned to each segment of the system or to individuals within the system are only evident in agricultural and other duties assigned to but not exclusive to male or female groups while descent and inheritance is specifically matrilineal. This arrangement or recognition of different gender roles as well as lineage segments ensures the strength and continuity of the system as well as the integrity of the entire matri clan. The Bakor matrilineal system therefore maintains a close bond between members of the lineage structure that derive cohesion and unity from a common matrilineal ancestor and an identity which is authenticated by the ecology of the environment. This way, the system ensures continuity and resists modernist intrusions into the system. The result it that rather than being threatened by disintegration and discontinuity, the systems' elastic nature absorbs modernist innovations and adjusts its structures to respond appropriately to the forces of globalization. Within this set-up, even though the authority of the male seems to be undermined in terms of descent and inheritance, he is conversely recognized and feted as leader and decision maker in his matri-line. Here he is recognized as spiritual protector and defender of his maternal relations. The man, therefore, feels compensated and forgets that his authority is only latent or derived from the support he gets from his maternal sisters without which his authority is meaningless. In the modern context, therefore, we tend to recognize the male-figure as head in a nuclear family set-up but in the Bakor traditional matrilineal context, the matri-line is of paramount importance and from it, power and authority radiates to individuals within the community. This way, it seems, continuity is assured while threats of extinction are ameliorated at least in the present global configuration.

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