

Nigerian “Fattening” Rooms

Reinventing the Total Woman

The preparation of young women for successful marriage, motherhood and socioeconomic survival in parts of southern Nigeria is preceded by an elaborate process loosely described as the *Fattening Room* ceremony. Variations of this ceremony exist in present Akwa Ibom State among the Ibibios, in Cross River State among the Efiks, in Rivers State among the Ogonis and Ikwerres and within other cultures mostly spread throughout the south. Ibibios refer to participants in this rite-of-passage as *Mbopo*, Efiks as *Mbobi*, Ogonis as *Koo* and Ikwerres as *Mbede*.

In Ogoni culture the ceremony could last up to 3-5 years and targets females between the ages of 6-18. However, the more popular version involves women in their pre-marital years (teens to 20s) and lasts from about 1-3 months. During this period the young women are confined to a secluded home designed for that purpose and are attended to by elderly matrons, some of whom may be relatives of the participants. They are not allowed to do strenuous work; are provided elaborate meals rich in starch, carbohydrates, vegetables and meats; and are frequently massaged, bathed and rubbed with shea butter and other local ointments in order to make their bodies smooth and shiny. In all, the ladies are pampered but prevented from wandering too far from the *fattening* home.

Beyond being *spoiled*, the elderly women also help the young women to improve on their overall domestic and interpersonal skills, which include trading, cooking, decorating the home, cloth weaving, hair plaiting and/or braiding as well as knowledge of certain crafts. Because beauty constitutes a key aspect of the process, they are also taught to dress themselves flamboyantly and to apply makeup in a manner that constantly ensures their attractiveness. Regarding their health and the health of their future offspring, they receive instructions on how to achieve sexual fulfillment, how to adopt proper nutritional habits at the fetal and post-birth phase, how to stimulate milk production for breastfeeding and how to identify herbal remedies for labor pain. They also receive training and/or retraining on the moral values, customs, mores and taboos of their community.

The *Fattening Room* is therefore a school of sorts where young women are educated on subjects that cover biology, psychology, sociology, culture, home management, cosmetology, fashion design and other skills enhancement. In some instances the ladies also learn new dance steps since the end of the ceremony often involves their performance of dances in what is typically referred to as the “outing ceremony.” This usually takes place on the streets and commonly ends in the village or town square. At this time the participants are showered with gifts from relatives, would-be suitors, loved ones and well-wishers.

If there is anything *fattening* about this ceremony, it is the fact that the celebrants are enriched – “fattened” in the areas of physical beauty, good health, skills development, sexual satisfaction and a reinforced appreciation and understanding of the traditions of their society and of their future roles as wives, mothers and merchants. True, these young women are likely to gain some weight on account of the nature of the process, but, in the end, because they are also quite active they do not emerge obese or indolently overweight. Even so, it is important to reiterate that fairly large, especially in the hip area, is considered a form of feminine beauty in a number of African communities. This is socially and psychologically significant as a vital counter to the definition of beauty that often excludes and stigmatizes big women, and provides another channel for the celebration of beauty from various perspectives and in various forms.

The *Fattening Room* tradition may not be as popular as it once was, particularly in urban centers, but it is still practiced widely. When I was an Assistant Lecturer at the University of Calabar in southeastern Nigeria, one of my colleagues went through a *fattening* ceremony just before assuming her position as Graduate Assistant. She was about 25 and I recall the colorful photos she shared of her experience. While she had gained a little weight, she, like her fellow participants in the photos, was not fat. Professionally, she remained as active, agile and focused as the rest of us. Even though she was a graduate and lived in the city, she had apparently not been deterred from willingly going through this initiation exercise.

So-called *Fattening Rooms* in parts of Nigeria should not be confused for obesity-producing factories. They essentially represent an arena and fundamental resource for nurturing beauty and for preparing young women to face life as wives, mothers, workers and business owners. As an old rite-of-passage, they facilitate the passage from maidenhood to

womanhood and wifehood, much like several male rituals facilitate the passage from boyhood to manhood, and prepare young men to be future husbands, fathers, warriors, workers, entrepreneurs and providers.

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