

## **Festival Culture and Performance in *Ndashe*, the Kuteb Bridal Festival**

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### **Abstract**

This work examines Kuteb bridal performances to identify changing theatrical patterns occasioned by developing social factors. *Ndashe* refers to a bride among the Kuteb people of East Central Nigeria where *Ndashe* bridal festival is a core aspect of their world view. Wedding ceremonies and related performances take place all year round. The festival, often spanning from four to seven days, is structured in a way that various events take place on particular days and performed by specific players. Performances like the *Kwin kwab* (hoe clanking) and *tsin* (co-wives rivalry) are traditionally considered critical to inducting a bride into her new home. However, emerging trends reveal a tactful aversion to these performances due to cultural differences in intermarriages and the perception that the performances are sometimes manipulated by evil persons. The paper interrogates the social perception of people in Kuteb society on what these changes portend for the values these practices entrench. The study relied on observation, focus group discussions and oral interviews with various participants and Kuteb community authorities. The paper posits that in Kuteb communities, like many African societies, the passion for theatre is intrinsic to their lives but the impact of social change contends with its survival.

**Keywords:** *Ndashe*, Kuteb, Bride, Performance, Festival.

### **Introduction**

A festival carries significance for the spectators' experience as a heightened state of participation and feelings of 'communitas'...the participants of a festival recognize each other as participants and

develop a group identity or group feeling, start to interact and thus enhance the experience of the event. Willmar Sauter (20)

Sauters quote above, sets the tone for discussing *Ndashe* bridal festival and its value among Kuteb. Suffice to say that, Festival performances in many African societies are foundational carriers of the values and belief system of the people from one generation to the next as many of these are not documented in books, carvings, sculpture and other related art forms as seen in some civilizations. These performances could feature in festival observances, burial rites, rites of passage and marriage ceremonies. Almost every event is linked to some sort of celebration and theatricality; thus dance, music, songs, poetry, costuming, masquerade display and wrestling are often key elements in these events. Stagecraft – the theatrical component of Kuteb bridal performances and their dynamism is at the foreground of this paper.

Bridal rites differ according to cultures and marriages are valued in many African traditions. Traditional performances are entertainment for the peripheral audience but have metaphysical quintessence for core participants. The deep meaning is understood by those familiar with the language of the performance. Traditional performances often have solemn spiritual significance, intrinsically connected to the cosmos. In Kuteb societies, the marriage institution is considered an avenue for procreation and continuity of family and community lineage. A high premium is attached to marriages that are contracted in one of the traditionally acceptable ways and particularly with parental consent. Inversely, marital unions that fail to meet the acceptable

standards such as pregnancy out of wedlock or co-habitation are frowned upon and such people are stigmatized in Kuteb society.

When the families have consented to the proposed union of their children, the event is often a major celebration that brings together extended families and entire kindred to share in the festivity. Young girls often look forward to such moments when they will get married to their suitors with dignity and the special treatment a bride is accorded following her wedding event has contributed to social control in the community. Since the belief in reincarnation is a core Kuteb belief, children born into family's are often welcomed with excitement and expectation that they may return as good old family members who had died at one time or the other. The marriage institution is believed to be the avenue through which this can be possible. Careful preparation is often made towards ensuring the observance of right procedures so that the couples, the family and the society steer clear of negative repercussions.

This work overviews Kuteb marriage rites in ancient and contemporary times with particular attention on the changes that are steadily dominating the performances. The theatrical aspects in these performances are undergoing modifications that have the potential of distorting the traditional patterns that are critical components of the festivals. The major concern of this work is to interrogate the group perception of people in Kuteb society regarding the changes arising from the abrogation of certain forms of expression in *Ndashe*, festival performances. Since perceptions are imperfect representations that can be misleading, it is pertinent to engage a systematic process to determine the individual and group impressions about the dynamics in the stagecraft and its implication for the society's stability.

### **The Kuteb People**

The Kuteb are found in Taraba state of Nigeria and concentrated in Takum and Ussa Local Governments as well as Yangtu, a Special Development Area located on 7°00'N 9°00'E. The area shares common geographical borders with Benue state on the south and Cameroon Republic on the East where some Kuteb communities are also located. The Kuteb allude to Egypt as the area from where they migrated at about 1000 BC and reached their present location in 1510. The language spoken by the Kuteb people is also known as Kuteb language and has various dialects which are spoken among their twelve clans. A pioneer missionary who served in the region described the language as being, "full of nasal sounds, plus a great many queer sounds which one can only make by exploding the breath from different parts of the mouth" (Veenstra, 79).

A traditionally agrarian society, the principal source of income for most people is agricultural activities augmented by hunting and fishing in communities along rivers. The area lies in the Guinea Savannah band, located in the middle of the country and the most extensive ecological zone in Nigeria, covering near half of the country. The success of farming activities of the people are believed to be tied with their allegiance to *Rimam*, the creator who controls the seasons and blesses their ventures. Kuteb folk religion and social life are interwoven and the place of theatre is prominent in most events. Their folk religious leaning is set on a tripod thus - the physical world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the spirits where God resides. These spirits are believed to watch over their families, punish erring humans and mediate between men and God (Ejwocwu, 10). The belief in reincarnation derives from this relationship and it holds that good

people who die are reborn into their families. This accounts for the high regard given to marriages and the building of families and procreation is counted as the principal gain of any marital union. In cases of delayed childbirth for new couples, prayers for fertility are common place during *Iki* festivals – an avenue that affords communion with representatives of the spirit community in form of masquerades. The festival is believed to bring about healing and rebirth in Kuteb communities.

The activities of Christian missionaries among the Kuteb, particularly beginning from 1921, significantly impacted on their folk religion and exposed them to the new religion (Ukwen 11). With the establishment of a mission station in Lupwe, Ussa Local Government, the harvest of converts was feasible especially with the establishment of a school and health facility. Many literatures have been published in Kuteb Language, like *Apura*, an elementary indigenous language learning guide for various grades of learners. By 1980, the Kuteb Bible, pioneered by Dr. Robert Koops, was launched. These were long term results of the efforts of some pioneer Christian missionaries like Dr. Kumm, Rev. C. L. Whitman, Mr. William Bristow and Miss Johanna Veenstra who served in the Takum area (Kitause, 70). These publications have significantly exposed the Kuteb people to literacy and new perceptions on religion. Expectedly, they trained priests who helped in expanding the campaign that overturned the traditional structures of folk religion and social lives of the people and gradually emptied the arena of traditional performances. The social change partly occasioned by a new orientation and the inclination to consign folk performances to the antique bin form the base of the discourse in this paper.

### **Ndashe (Bridal) Festival**

The marriage institution among the Kuteb is highly revered. Traditionally, a marriage is expected to be a life time affair terminated only by the death of either spouse. This is why families, rather than individuals, are involved in the choice of spouse. Also, close supervision follows in the rites to establish consent of the families involved. Families are often determined to ensure that a potential spouse for their child comes from a reputable family. A young man who is known to be morally corrupt or has a questionable relationship with females is unlikely to be accepted by the family of the girl he wishes to marry. Same goes for the family of the young man who will conduct investigations on the girl's morals and whether the family has a record of marrying out decent girls or otherwise. Virginity is highly rated and celebrated in Kuteb society. The man's family usually looks forward to seeing the blood-stained bed sheet after the consummation of the marriage. Once they see it, an entourage sets off to the bride's parents' compound with songs, drumming and dances to show appreciation for the excellent upbringing the bride received. They could slaughter a goat and take the meat along to feast and celebrate with the in-laws. What is practiced among the Kuteb today is modern marriage, rather than purely traditional marriage. At least two broad types of marriages were common in traditional Kuteb societies. They are *Ufi* (exchange) and *Yezunkwae* (abduction).

### ***Ufi* (Exchange)**

The *Ufi* (exchange) marriage is a direct exchange of a female for a daughter to another family so as to get their female daughter for a wife. When one needs a wife, or as said in Kuteb

idiom, a drinking calabash, and has a sister, she will be exchanged for a wife for the intending groom if the girls are of the same age. If it is otherwise, he will be required to wait till she becomes ready for motherhood.

In some cases, this form of marriage is contracted by betrothal at infancy. Upon visiting a home where a baby girl is born, the parents of a young boy could book the baby as a wife for their son. This is usually done by presenting a gift of tobacco as an expression of interest. The father of the boy could express his interest in a joke: "This will be my wife". With the consent of the girl's parents, a beaded hand band is tied on her hand or neck to signify agreement. This may not necessarily be at birth, but when the girl is six to ten years old. In this case, the boy's father could say he has come to get a drinking calabash from the girl's father. If there are many girls in his house, their father could respond, "Which of the calabashes?" When an agreement is reached, the boy's father would present tobacco and a *kicwu* (representative) will be appointed to liaise between the families on matters concerning the marriage. Once this happens, it goes public and as the girl grows up, the males around her do not bother to woo; she belongs to another. Meanwhile, the boy's family continues to do farm work for the girl's father and no record is kept of how often this is done for it is said that, "An in-law's task is infinite". This could be done from time to time after the marriage till perhaps the wife is old and weak. Whenever the in-laws require assistance, the husband will always avail it.

The couple will not be in any form of contact until when they both come of age and are ready to live together. The boy's father will then approach the girl's father and say, "The gourd has ripened and I will come and harvest it". The bride is then brought

to the groom's house. In the evening, the groom will be informed, "This is your wife, take her into your room", and he obeys. Unless they are perhaps neighbours, and recognize each other, they will only know themselves by morning.

The typical feature of this type of marriage is the complications that occur when the union is not blessed with children. The disadvantaged family could demand that their own daughter be returned to them and their daughter-in-law withdrawn since their son's wife is unable to meet their expectations. This has been observed to place the victims in very difficult positions as a woman could keep changing spouses until old age if things go wrong.

### ***Yezunkwae* (Abduction)**

*Yezunkwae*, which literally means to grab and slam on the neck, is a form of marriage that involves laying of ambush by the groom and his friends to abduct a girl. The ambush could be along a route she takes to the stream or farm. If the parents have already taken bride price from the abductors prior to the event, they will only pretend to be disturbed but will do nothing about it. Otherwise, it could turn to a real fight and if the girl's father is stronger, he rescues her but if the abductors are stronger, they will take her into the groom's hut. They will then splash water onto the thatched roof as a sign that the bride has come home. Following this, any other marriage rites are observed. However, if the family whose daughter is abducted has the wherewithal, they will use some animals or money to redeem their daughter and marry her off to the person they want. In some cases, even after abduction, the girl may insist that she is in love with another



person. In some cases, she may be privy to the ambush and abduction, and may be willing to go with the man.

In any of the forms of marriage above, the rites often involves presentation of animals and some form of labour for the in-laws by the family of the groom.

### **Contemporary Kuteb Marriage**

With the changes occasioned by formal education and Christianity among the Kuteb, the pattern of marriage customs have been modified. Consideration is particularly given to letting the couple have the right of choice. This is to the advantage of the girl whose opinion is sought before proceeding with further rites. When two intending persons express their desire to become husband and wife, it becomes an issue involving families. Both families often show concern as to the kind of family their child is marrying into. The man's family thus makes detailed enquiry of the prospective bride's background and character. Conscious effort is made to ensure a suitable choice because the continuous cohesion of the family is dependent on the quality of the wife that will hold it together. The same investigations are carried out by the girl's family to ensure that the prospective groom is capable of keeping a home.

The customary requirements are then enumerated to the family of the groom. Typically, he is expected to build a house for the parents of the bride. Sometimes, the mother gets a kitchen. However time, this has evolved to payment of cash as *ser usok* (house money). This tests the ability of the man to provide a befitting home for his prospective wife while at the same time giving a parting gift to the parents. Further items required are wrappers, under-wears and other accessories in a box for the use

of the girl when she gets married. This is often inspected and approved of by women, mostly aunts of the girl, on the eve of the wedding day. This action is to ensure provision of the clothing needs of the bride in her matrimonial home.

On his part, the groom also mobilizes his friends to work on the girl's father's farm to test his ability to work and provide the food for his family. The groom does so to prove that their daughter will not starve since she is not marrying a lazy fellow. The groom also cuts down firewood for use by the bride's mother as well as the bride's aunts whom the family may list out for him. He also pays a token as *ser ndae* (bride price) and brings a stipulated number of bags of salt. The salt is used by the bride's family as invitation to all their kinsmen to attend the ceremony. As food seasoning and preservative, the salt, the group claims, is a sign of kinship ties and readiness for consumption, thus the expression *chi kang mbae ti ndae* (partake of a lady's bridal wealth). The invitation is not only honoured but contributions towards the success of the ceremony are brought along.

In the Kuteb cosmos, female children at birth are believed to bring good luck to the family. A common expression when news is received that a female child is born as first child to the couple, the mother (referring to the baby girl) has arrived first. It is believed that continuity of the lineage is guaranteed. The baby then gets a pet name that refers to her as mother. Taiwo Makinde observes that in Yoruba culture, a woman as a child has double value and a couple who has a girl as their first child is considered lucky because they will experience blessings (168-169). Part of the token paid on the bride in Kuteb culture is used to procure certain kitchen utensils and household items for the bride to take along to her home. These utensils (plates particularly) will form key gifts

that she will offer to various members of her new household. She serves food (her first assignment) in the plates the first morning following the wedding. This is a symbolic statement of reporting for duty and formal assumption of office.

The days preceding the wedding ceremony are usually marked with preparations. Both households witness a constant influx of people and preparations. Food and assorted local drinks are prepared continuously to entertain well wishers. These will keep coming and going mostly not without their token in cash or kind as a show of solidarity. This moment is the real celebration and many will rather miss the short-lived moment of the wedding than this feast. Among the Ichen people of Taraba State, a traditional nuptial ceremony holds in the King's palace with a symbolic breaking of kola nut. Among the Hausa people also, the *sadaki* (bride price) is often announced in a ceremony in front of the compound of the bride's father. These actions symbolize agreement by members of both families and the sealing of it in the presence of the community or religious leader.

### **Theatricals in *Ndashé* Festival**

Dance is central to festivals in Africa and Robin Horton argues that it features prominently above other art forms in certain parts of Africa (112). Dance patterns abound in Kuteb society, each with its purpose and audience and singing is prominent as well. Songs are composed for specific events with well defined the themes and the names of characters involved in the performances well crafted in the verses. Reenactment and detailed gesticulation often enhance the meaning of songs accompanied by skilful drumming.

In contemporary Kuteb wedding ceremonies, a performance often takes place when women who are married in the same family occupy the seat meant for the bride and groom and refuse to vacate until they are given a token. The bride and groom approach their seats dancing, only to discover the development. Patiently, they wait, still dancing, as the grooms' friends approach the women and engage in a usually long and tough negotiation on what to offer them as ransom in exchange for the seat. This action indicates a kind of mock jealousy over the arrival of a new wife in the family who will share their husband (brothers often address sisters-in-law as wives and vice-versa). This is often done with fun and much dancing after which the women embrace and welcome the bride. The women's negotiation could earn them wrappers instead of money. The women could also stand in the way of the bride by the entrance of the bride's room in some cases. When the bride finally steps into the house, a deafening blast is sounded from a dane gun, similar to the ceremonial military gun salute, symbolizing happiness at her arrival.

The symbol of welcome into the family in Kuteb tradition is the musical clanking of two metal parts of a big hoe used in ridge-making, along with drumming and singing. The presentation of a farming implement, the hoe, demonstrates the active farming state of the household. The act represents the bride's entitlement to a portion of the family's farmland for her cultivation. In some cases, the bride's family will insist on a new hoe, pointing out that their daughter is not an old woman. This sort of request is connected with the bride's status as a virgin especially when her parents can vouch for her character. These will then be placed on the ground for her to step upon and enter her new compound.

Her in-laws usually place some money on the hoe before the bride steps on it. The action means recognition of the bride as a full member of the household with customary rights and privileges of a married woman. The action of escorting the bride, according to the group, symbolizes an approved ceremony. This bears similarity to the culture of the Asaba people of Delta State who perform the *Ayugba* dance to escort the bride to her husband's house in the night. Some other cultures require washing of the bride's feet at the entrance to her matrimonial home (Iyeh, 19). Among the Hausa, the bride remains covered by a veil upon entering the new home until the *budan kai* (unveiling) is performed by the groom's relatives, signifying that she is welcome. Various actions common to particular societies show the honour given to women as they enter matrimony.

The bride's first duty to the family and the kinsmen in Kuteb culture is the cooking of a meal to be served many people. After the bride sets up fire for the cooking, the eldest woman in the household puts money into the bride's palms. She then holds the bride by the hand and led her to touch the tripod stones one after the other. New wrappers would afterwards be brought by the other women and wrapped around her amidst ululation as she begins the cooking.

In the few days or weeks that follow a wedding in Kuteb culture, the bride plays the role of a mime performer particularly to her in-laws until they pay to hear her voice. For the period preceding their action, she will only listen and nod answers with her head bowed, avoiding constant eye contact. The payment is often a live chicken (a pledge often suffices and is redeemed later) or a token instead of it. This symbolizes the status of a queen in a

new home and respect for her in-laws. Her value, the group claims, is emphasized by these actions.

Song compositions by various talented artistes among the womenfolk are prominent features of preparations for Kuteb marriage festivals. The songs often have didactic themes, specially composed for particular marriage events with the names of the couple woven into the songs. The varieties of these songs, sometimes by different composers, could be prayers, goodwill messages for the couple or satiric jesting. The forms of these artistic expressions also vary from songs with call and response pattern to short poetic verses said in form of prayer. Finnegan refers to certain similar examples of Swahili poetic verses in which a mother instructs her daughter as to her religious duties, her duties to her husband and household management (171). This role in Kuteb marriage rites as the avenue to inform the bride of fundamental tricks required to keep her home free of problems common to new marriages. The bride is taught respect for her husband, her parents in law, the extended family and maintaining active kinship with fellow women. An example of a song to reinforce value for the bride is follows thus:

*Shaye ye pu re (3x)*  
*Chap riki wae mba wuni re,*  
*Shaye wow re, chap riki wae*  
*Mba wuni sha ye nda ra sup nde topa'a*

### **Translation**

You have made the best choice (3x)  
It will displease some people  
You have made the best choice of wife, it will displease  
some people

Young man, your choice of this woman breaks some people's hearts.

This song is a way of reminding the groom that he is privileged to have the girl as wife, especially when she has many good qualities that also attracted other suitors. This is meant to add to increase the groom's respect and appreciation of his wife. The song also criticizes the attitude of girls who choose suitors based on their wealth and turn down good prospects only to later regret.

Most contemporary marriage rites among Christians of Kuteb origin culminate in a religious ceremony in a church and a wedding reception thereafter. On the whole, marriage ceremonies are not passive events but are rather carefully observed in all detail to remind performers and observers of the gravity of the actions involved. The traditional aspects of Kuteb marriage are observable in contemporary marriage ceremonies. This suggests a determination to sustain social values that contribute to the establishment of new homes even though marriage in its traditional form had been de-emphasized. The rites emphasize the value of women in Kuteb society.

### **Entrenching Social Values through *Ndashe* Festival**

Family values among the Kuteb are considered paramount because the family is the foundation of the society. Families often consider good home training of children as part of their responsibility to the society. The first meal the bride cooks for the family is a symbolic test of her ability to handle the responsibilities in her new home. She will be keenly observed by the older women and she gets commendation when she does it well. This aspect inspires other young girls who aspire to marry to prepare

themselves for this part of the ceremony in order to avoid criticism when it is their turn to marry. It teaches young girls to imbibe positive values of home making.

It is common to identify a deviant person in the society and associate him/her with a family. Negative reputation is avoided by families thus encouraging and promoting acceptable moral standards and preserving societal values. Promiscuity and co-habitation is frowned upon in Kuteb society. The negative light it puts the families in question makes it a practice that many young people strive to avoid in order to remain acceptable among their peers and sustain respect for their families. Unfavorable incidences relating to co-habitation have instilled considerable social control in Kuteb society regarding adherence to the sanctioned procedures in marriage.

*Ndashe* festival promotes the desire to attain womanhood with the pride and respect that comes with the rites associated with the ceremony. Most girls look forward to the time when their rights are transferred from their father's house to their husband's. It is often said that *mbiya* (sister) will stay outside the fence when she visits her father's compound. This means she will not have a say until her opinion is sought on a matter. Conversely, in her own home and before her husband's family, she is entitled to certain privileges as a married woman.

The festival enhances inter-family relations as days of feasting and familiarization bring people together. Women who are married in other communities have opportunity to reunite with their parents and their mothers particularly use the time to exchange vital information about home management. They relate challenges and the experience of the mother affords her the privilege of advising her daughters accordingly.



Relationships are valued to infinity by in-laws and family ties remain intact even when the couple is old or one of them is deceased. A husband could arrange his friends to go and work on the farm of his father-in-law even when his wife is very old. This means that responsibility does not fade with age. The *Ndashe* festival rites also promote value for womanhood as observed in the traditional inquisition when a married woman dies. The activities related to the festival gives marriage contract a high status if the procedures are followed correctly and it promotes social values.

### **Dynamics in *Ndashe* Festival and the Implication for Stagecraft**

Societies respond to the influence of modernization in various ways. The response could manifest in attempting outright resistance or adapting to the changes. This section examines bridal festival over the years. *Ndashe* festivals among the Kuteb are regular events as people contract marriages on a regular basis. In traditional Kuteb societies, prospective couples, especially the females have little or no control over the choice of spouses. These were mostly arranged by parents who particularly look out for responsible families from which to marry wives for their sons. There are significant changes in wedding procedure in the present time when compared to the ancient time. These include dating and courtship, patterned after the culture of advanced societies which has become the norm in Kuteb societies. This affords prospective couples time to study each other and make personal decision before marriage.

The pattern of these festivals has not remained constant despite a common thread that runs through them. Individual clans and in some cases families often introduce some variations in the

festival. Some marriage rites, like the clanking of the hoe as a sign of welcome, cooperation and conjugal rights, are often skipped when the marriage holds in large cities, especially when enthusiasts of the cultural rites are not present. The drama around the bride's entry into her new home is an important function exclusively performed by women to ensure social stability in the society. These two instances of stagecraft in *Ndashe* festivals are waning due to social changes, particularly the fear of negative effects on the couple. Some couples are thought to have experienced childlessness because someone took advantage of the performance to cast some evil spell on the couple. Such orientation has made some to avoid all situations that will create the opportunity for such performances in their weddings. Socially though, marriage ceremonies that skipped important rites were thought to be susceptible to having domestic challenges. The rites in marriage ceremonies such as escorting the bride to her new home and clanking of hoes are considered critical to a woman's honour. Abrogation of this and other rites are believed to rob the woman of the knowledge of her rights and privileges leading to abuse by an uncultured husband.

The gift of a live chicken to the bride to open up communication with her in-laws and other people is also not given consideration outside the traditional home setting. The action, which is a symbol of economic empowerment for the new bride, is therefore not observed. Brides who pass through this rite are thought to be prudent and imbibe a sense of diligence when they care for the animal. In most cases, the domestic animal will be a small one that will require to be reared to maturity and to subsequently reproduce. The animal will particularly be female, creating an intrinsic link with the bride's gender and the care she

will enjoy in her home until she conceives and births children. She is often expected to also give out the offspring of the animal she has reared to some of those who gave her the gift as a proof that she has been a diligent person.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges posed by social change and the pressure on traditional human relations is not receding yet maintaining valuable social roles in the society is critical.

The perception in Kuteb society is that the relegation of observation of traditional marriage rites will be detrimental for posterity and stifle the survival of theatre as an integral part of the lives of people in the society. The rising rates of divorce in Kuteb society is believed to be the result of ignorance of social values learnt during marriage rites. If the avenue for orientation of newlyweds is truncated or skipped, the repercussion of unstable families will eventually affect the society one way or the other. Also, there are perceptions that the suspicion and distrust that leads to abrogation of some important rites are offshoots of distorted ancient traditional tenets. The theatre ought to be given unrestricted latitude to play its didactic and entertainment role and contribute to the healing of socially bruised society.

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