

FEMALE ROLE AND POWER IN URHOBORAT ORATURE AND WRITTEN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article investigates exploits of women in Urhobo society by examining the representation of Urhobo women in oral and written literatures. The aim is to establish the fact that women enjoyed a measure of prominence, authority and independence right from pre-colonial through contemporary times. It argues against the frequently projected impression that women have largely been inactive and less vibrant in political, economic, social and religious affairs especially in traditional times. The study adduces this lopsided representation of female power and role in Urhobo society to the dominance and prejudicial perspectives favoured by male chroniclers as well as lack of proper/authentic documentation of the activities of Urhobo women. It concludes that many factors, including colonialism, have almost completely erased female power and role as complements of men's in Urhobo society and recommends a re-examination of the pre-colonial structure of gender relations, rather than the indiscriminate clamour for equality of the sexes.

Keywords: Urhobo women, pre-colonial, orature, female power, principle of complimenarity, gender roles,

Introduction

Urhobo is a major ethnic group in Delta State and the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Urhobo ethnic group consists of “twenty- three autonomous kingdoms that share ancestral and cultural affinities as well as beliefs” (Atake: p. 26). Early European explorers were mainly interested in trade, rather than the

people's history. This accounts for many undocumented records of Urhobo women's exploits. Critical works on Urhobo people from Onigu Otite, Peter Ekeh, Regina Otite and others have traced Urhobo history to ancient Edo or Benin Kingdom where documented evidences of outstanding heroines, female power and leadership roles abound. This article seeks to explore celebrated female figures, priestesses, goddesses and female power in pre-colonial Urhobo history to contemporary times. It argues that there are Urhobo equivalents of prominent female figures of other cultures such as Amina of Zazzau (Zaria), Moremi of Ile-Ife, Emotan and Idia of Benin, Kambasa of Bonny, Inikpi of Igala land, Ogiso Emose and Ogiso Ohorho of Benin, Atebo of Iyede-Isoko, Idolorosan of Itsekiri whose contributions and achievements shape their respective societies. The view that women have always been oppressed by men does not completely reflect the Urhobo women's pre-colonial history. In an oral interview with Chief Anthony Ukere of Urhobo centre, Abraka, he admitted that, indeed, pre-colonial Urhobo women enjoyed some sort of autonomy, comparable to that of their modern-day counterparts.

Orature and the Depiction of Urhobo Women's Role and Power

In Urhobo culture, men are naturally privileged through inheritance, headship of their families and the community. However, women's diverse roles are also fundamental to the advancement of the society. Men and women perform distinct yet complementary functions within the family and community. The patriarchal nature of pre-colonial Urhobo did not always threaten female status or autonomy. Rather, it made room for the principle of complementarity. Urhobo women were not totally dependent on their men for everyday sustenance. Neither were they always relegated to the margins or denigrated as second-class citizens. Apart from their roles as supporters and complements to their husbands, Ikperha Ejaita states that "the survival of the entire family depended on them" (p. 74). Writing on gender relations in pre-colonial Africa, Taiwo Afisi notes that "Traditional African society attached no importance to gender issues because every individual had a role to play both in the family as well as the larger society... there was non-existence of gender inequality. Each role, regardless of who performed it, was considered equally important because it contributed to the fundamental goal of the community's survival" (p. 230). This invariably implies that women's contribution equalled those of men as they played vital roles in their society.

The marital institution is an important cultural organization which ascribes a significant role and power to the Urhobo woman. This is because the practices embedded in this culture bestow much dignity and pride on the Urhobo woman. Thus, once married, the young bride is automatically upgraded to a higher position as she joins the Council of Women known as *Ewheya*. This new role demands more maturity in behaviour from her as she is now not only a role model to the younger and unmarried women but also expected to assume greater responsibilities in domestic and communal affairs. In pre-colonial Urhobo, women were highly committed to marriage. Cases of divorce were rare, especially, when children were involved; hence the very famous sobriquet, *Emoariojake*, meaning “it is because of the children we persevere.” A young maiden who retained her virginity until she was married was considered a virtuous woman and a thing of pride for which even the bride’s mother receives a reward or compensation known as *Ukere*. Marriages are essentially unions between two families and not just commercial transactions. However, in modern times, many now misconstrue the bride price/bride wealth (*Emuraye*) as a transactional medium which allows for the commodification of the woman. But this is not so as in Urhobo culture, women are not viewed as economic entities. This is further affirmed by returning a part of the bride price paid by the groom’s family during the formal ceremony to indicate that the bride’s family did not ‘sell’ their daughter and strip her of her rights and place as a daughter of the family even as she was going away to become part of a new family.

In the same vein, an Urhobo wife who dies is not normally buried in her husband’s house or place. According to Regina Otite, this is because she is not regarded as a slave, but a freeborn married person living amongst members of another filial group. Her membership of her husband’s family is, therefore, regarded as somewhat temporary, however long it may take; hence upon her death, she is brought back to her natal home for burial (p. 25). Regina Otite states further that “an Urhobo woman exercises a high degree of independence and autonomy and can return to her patrilineage as an *omotogbe*... the fact that the bride price is not paid in full and its acceptance from the groom constitutes a key aspect of legality of an Urhobo marriage” (p. 42). This implies that the Urhobo woman enjoys the privilege of making decisions for personal benefit and control of her life; an area which has often been ignored or glossed over when examining female role and

power in Urhobo society. This latter practice which has its roots in traditional society has no connection with the often-touted modern notion of radical feminism; the practice as it was based on personal choice and voice by women who felt it was imperative to make such decisions at that point in their lives for their physical and mental health.

Polygamy is an integral part of traditional Urhobo marriage custom. Much as modernity frowns on it, the practice has practical benefits that cannot be totally ignored. It benefits older wives who are free to concentrate on their businesses and accumulate wealth for themselves because they can delegate duties to the younger wives and ensure the smooth running of the home front while at the same time finding personal fulfilment and financial empowerment beyond domesticity. Some enterprising women travel faraway to neighbouring towns and villages where they establish very lucrative trade routes with outsiders. We can learn about a people's culture by looking at their neighbours. Writing on women's status in pre-colonial Iyede- Isoko, a close ethnic neighbour to Urhobo, Ogbomo and Ogbomotion notable women traders such as OdubuEridiOvie, Avegheheho and Etsasuekho. OdubuEridiOvie traded in fish and was said to have had a substantial number of men and women who worked for her. Etsasuekho paid off the debt owed another community by Iyede people from the proceeds of her trade. These women, through trade and hard work became very influential and enjoyed equal status with men who acquired their status owing to the accident of birth (p. 433). Like these precolonial Iyede women, Idiarhevwe of Ughelli, IreseAghwaretefe of Uhwokori, AduwayeIyara, ErukainureUbiesha, Janet OmotogorIbru, Alice EminokanjuObahor and Agnes Agbaza are few among notable Urhobo women who, through their entrepreneurial skills and roles rose to prominence and recognition in their Urhobo societies.

In the economic sphere, women in pre-colonial Urhobo operated a kind of partnership with their husbands. Farming, fishing and trading were the main occupations of pre-colonial Urhobo men and women. Apart from cultivating crops like cassava, pepper, beans, maize, cocoyam and vegetables, activities like harvesting of palm fruits (*edi-esuo*), was done through combined effort. The men cut down palm fruits, while the women gathered them and extracted the oil for sale. Women also produced soap and body cream with the fruit carriers (*igbedi*). They sold excess farm produce and yams harvested by men in the local markets

and, most times, controlled the profits. It was the responsibility of men to allocate cleared portions of land to their wives, who, in turn, fed the family from the proceeds of their farms. The intention was to discourage laziness and encourage economic independence and hard-work in the womenfolk. A woman could decide to stay away from the farming pattern of her husband and engage in trading. Ogbomo and Ogbomo observe that “male ego appears to have been messaged by giving men status offices, seeing them as a symbol of authority, while women in pre-colonial times did not feel oppressed because they controlled a major part of their lives and exercised more power in economic and religious spheres. As controllers of food supply and wealth, they wielded a mighty weapon over men” (p. 433)

Orature and Representation of Urhobo Women in Politics

Pre-colonial Urhobo operated a democratic, non-centralized political system of government. Power was acquired based on age grade (gerontocracy) or wealth (plutocracy). Power, in Urhobo, as it was in pre-colonial Yoruba, was based on seniority, not gender (Bakare 3). Traditional political structure in pre-colonial Urhobo was female inclusive. Ukere observes that women organizations were based on age grade, marriage, and lineage. Among the age grade were the *Ighene* (young girls), *Emete* (daughters of the lineage), *Ewheya* (wives of the lineage), *Emetogbe* (old married or unmarried women who have returned to their roots). The most vibrant and influential of the group was the association of wives (*Ewheya*). They acted as check and balance in the community.

According to Onigu Otite, “In many Urhobo towns, *Ewheya* have their own *Ehovwore* (palace), where they meet to discuss matters affecting women and settle them” (p. 27). In areas where women were not consulted on matters affecting their welfare, they engaged in collective, nonviolent protests, and, in rare cases, exposed nudity to ensure compliance with their demands. The oldest of the wives (*Okpako-Ewheya*) oversaw their affairs. She was assisted by a spokeswoman (*Otota*). “Men sometimes consulted them on important issues affecting the whole community” (Emekpe 44). Their revolts were successful due to the strong support of *Emete* and *Emetogbe*. According to Terisa Turner, “*Ewheya* is the only council powerful enough to resist the *Ovie* and his council of chiefs” (p. 499).

Further studies of female power in Urhobo oral traditions reveal that women exercised direct and/or indirect influence in the affairs of their respective communities. Some were eponymous founders whose names the settlements bear. Some of the prominent ones among them are discussed in the following sections.

Chief Idiarhevwe, the *Oniemo* of Ughelli

Chief Idiarhevwe, bore the title of *Oniemo* (mother) of Ughelli and was once the most famous woman in Ughelli kingdom. She was born into the royal family of Ovie Akporoba of Ughelli. *Oniemo* was the first woman in Ughelli history to be conferred with the *Ohovwore* (chieftaincy) title. She was first married at Ekakpamre where she established herself as a resourceful trader along Ekakpamre seaport with early European settlers. She was said to have acquired several male and female slaves who helped carry out her business and made her very rich in cowries, cannons, beads, expensive ornaments and slaves.

Oral tradition has it that *Oriene* deity appeared to *Oniemo* as a spirit several times, appealing that she leaves Ekakpamre for its worship. After several calamities, *Oniemo* acceded to the demand of the deity. She moved, first, to Afiesere and later founded a town called Orobasa. The fact that she was a woman was no hindrance to her strength and ability to lead. With the help of *Oriene*, *Oniemo* developed her settlement into a well-fortified city that became popular in all of Urhobo land.

As a woman with outstanding commercial prowess and influence, she became a member of the Ovie's(King's) council and was later conferred with the *Ohovwore* title based on her laudable achievements. *Oniemo* displayed a high degree of intelligence, opposing male *Ilorogun* (chiefs) so much so that she was perceived as a threat to them. In 1894, a plot was hatched to exile *Oniemo* to her father's maternal home in Okpe–Olomu. *Oriene* plagued her enemies with series of misfortunes and diseases to the extent that they practically begged her to return. Her political status and riches were also restored to her.

Still, two prominent chiefs, Eyube and Ekure of Gbogidi were envious of her success and the power she wielded. They, therefore, sought foreign assistance to eliminate her. In 1908, Orobasa, *Oniemo*'s city was attacked under false allegations and destroyed by the British District commissioner of Warri Consulate,

Major Copland Crawford. The attack was so sudden that the city fell without any resistance. It was said that the commissioner discovered, to his amazement, several houses stocked with arms and ammunitions, as well as a well-fortified trench dug at the entrance of the town. *Oniemo* refused to run away and abandon her people. She was captured, tried at a British court, discharged and acquitted. Her enemies were severely punished. Upon her return, *Oniemo* extended her trade to palm produce with the Royal Niger Company. She became wealthier than before. She enjoyed her wealth and later died at old age.

Princess Iriwidide of Ughelli Kingdom

Iriwidide also known as *Idide* was a warrior, princess and a priestess of an Ughelli deity called, *Orevwo*. She was childless, but respected for her outstanding military tactics, bravery, courage and war-like disposition. According to Urhobo folklore, *Idide* was not just a religious leader and military commandant; she was reputed for always being at the forefront of every battle involving her people. It was reported that *Idide* never lost a battle because of her mystic powers. She usually invoked the powers of *Orevwo* who appeared in the shape of a deer (*Orhua*), to direct her and her people to victory. The animal also gave signals of impending defeat by appearing from the left to the right. In such cases, the people retreated in order not to suffer defeat. As a result, the deer became a sacred animal in Ughelli clan. *Idide* had requested that, upon her death, she should be deified and rewarded through the *Iyeri* festival. Today, *Idide's* memory is kept alive in Ughelli clan through the *Iyeri* festival celebrated annually in the month of September.

Madam Udu

According to a version of the folk history of the udu people to the east of Warri, a woman called Udu played a prominent role in the early settlement of the people. Oral accounts have it that Udu was the wife of one *Olirhe*, a migrating warrior from Benin, who died on his way to their settlement. According to *Muesiri Ashe*, “Udu was a politically vibrant and sociable war-like woman. She, therefore, took over headship of the group” (49). Another account has it that Udu migrated from Udo in ancient Benin territory and became the leader of her group due to age and experience. According to *Eghere*, “Udu is a contrition of the word, “*Omote Udu*” meaning; “an Udu girl”. This account presents Udu as an Urhobo lady who

migrated with her group from Udo. However, another account of Udu history traced it to one Olirhe, whose Ijaw wife was named Udu. Olirhe died shortly after he founded the settlement. His younger brother Ovo became a tyrant and began to kill his brother's kinsmen. Madam Udu, the widow of Olirhe devised a plan that eliminated Ovo and restored peace to the kingdom of Olirhe. Udu became revered as a great woman for her role in liberating the people. The name of Olirhe was gradually erased and the town became known as Udu (Mouth Piece). All the accounts traced Udu history to the heroic deed of a woman. It is interesting to note that a statue of Udu stands at Otor-Udu roundabout in her honour.

Orogun

The story is that Owhowha (Oghwoghwa) had four children who were in order of seniority: Ogor, Ughelli, Agbarha and Orogun. While the first three were all males, the youngest among them, Orogun, was a female (Emekpe: p.7). Another account states that Ohiara was the only female descendant of Oghwoghwa. She was married to one Efe with whom she settled at Ndoni near Aboh. Orogun was one of their many children. She was a warrior. During this period, the Aboh people sought the support of Orogun people in a battle with the Oba of Benin. With Orogun's effort, the Oba's commander was defeated. However, the Obi of Ndoni cast a spell on Orogun people for fear of their prowess in battle. Orogun left Ndoni for Arhagba and eventually founded the settlement which is known as Otorho–Orogun (Egere: p. 53). Egere sums up Orogun's history thus: "when one traces the history of Orogun from Ohiara, Orogun could be regarded as a woman. But Orogun, whose name the polity bears was actually a man" (p. 53). This complex history of Orogun calls for further research. However, all the informants interviewed on Orogun history agree that Orogun was a female warrior and a woman of outstanding qualities.

Ovieya of Ughelli and Queen Ezezi of Okpe Kingdom

Ovieya (the king's first wife), in Ughelli kingdom, exercised much influence in the acquisition of the *Ohovwore* chieftaincy title. She was the sole custodian of

its woolen cord. Her role was as significant as that of the *Izomo* and *Iyasere* (male chiefs). Intending candidates for the title must pay homage to the queen for keeping and releasing the cord to him/her. They must give her a specified amount of money after which she joins the procession, leading the new *Ohovwore* to the presence of the *Ovie* for further ceremonies.

In the case of the Okpe kingdom, King Ezezi's favourite wife is remembered for her role as the liberator of her people. She helped Okpe people get rid of her wicked husband. Historical records of ancient Okpe kingdom state that between 1770 and 1779, the *Orodje* (King) of Okpe, Ezezi I, was an autocratic tyrant. Male chiefs devised various means to eliminate him but failed. Tired of his wicked ways, the people enlisted the assistance of his favourite queen. They secretly dug a pit covered with sticks and mats and placed the king's chair over the pit. Ezezi's favourite wife lured him to the pit.

As was the case with the goddess of *Ani* and *Agbala* priestess in Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, women in pre-colonial Urhobo societies exercised some control over men in the religious sphere. Irese Aghwaretefe of Uhwokori was an enterprising woman whose skills in trading and religious position as chief priestess made her prominent in Agbon kingdom. Irese was said to be highly respected as the priestess of *Ogidigbo* shrine of her native land of Uhwokori.

Other prominent Urhobo women who lived through colonial and postcolonial eras include Chief Janet Omotogor Ibru, the celebrated matriarch of the Ibru dynasty. Omotogor was a resourceful business woman from the famous Osadjere family of Ovwor in Olomu kingdom. Omotogor was the first Urhobo woman to own a storey building. In her life time, she protected the business interests of her children, played a prominent role in the Ibru organization and stood behind her son, Olorogun Michael, who pioneered the business of frozen fish in Nigeria. The idea of Ibru fish came from Omotogor's commercial prowess in fish business which her eldest son expanded. One of her sons, Olorogu Felix Ibru was the first elected governor of Delta State in the early 1990s. Yet another son, Goodie Ibru is a lawyer and chairman of the Sheraton Hotels in Lagos and Abuja and the Federal Palce Hotels, Laogs. Dr. Alex Uruemu Ibru was the publisher of

The Guardian, one of Nigeria's leading newspapers. The name, Ibru, is known all over the world. Omotogor Ibru was fondly called the mother of millionaires.

Urhobo Women in Written Literature

Nigerian literature is said to portray women as “weak, choiceless, invisible or incestuous” (Tobrise: p. 1). This negative stereotype of women, particularly by some male writers, belies the active and unique role of women in the pre – colonial era. Urhobo women have a history which scholars of Urhobo traditional folklore and culture reflect even in their writings. Some literary works of J.P. Clark, Neville Ukoli, Isidore Okpewho, Tanure Ojaide, Godini Darah, Ben Okri, Onookome Okome, Hope Eghagha, Mabel Ewuerhoma and others explore oral tradition and folkloric practices of legendary Urhobo figures and historical characters, including women. Ojaide, for instance, refers to Urhobo pantheon of gods which are binary in nature (Orhero: p. 5) to infer female deities were admissible and were part of that supernatural assemblage. His presentation of women as brave, industrious, virtuous and devoted in his written poetry aptly describes aspects of traditional Urhobo women's roles and influence within the family which is the primary setting for education and acculturation in any society.

Ojaide makes frequent references to Amreghe, his grandmother, whom he fondly called “mother hen” in his autobiography titled *Great Boys*. He is in awe of her repertoire of Urhobo oral tradition and folklore which he gained much from and also forms sources of his subject matter in his poetry. Ojaide also dedicates an eponymous poem to the mythical “Ayayughe”, the dedicated mother figure in Urhobo folklore. One of such references is shown below in a short excerpt culled from his poem in the *Delta Blues and Home Songs* collection where in appreciation he declares, “And for you Ayayughe / Let motherhood be daily blessed (p. 58)”.

The concept of Ayayughe in Urhobo is a metaphor for a wife and mother who is committed to improving and developing the well-being of her family. She is a multitasker who pulls in all her resources even against all odds in ensuring her children are taken care of and protected against the vicissitudes of life. She is the quintessential mother hen who not only fiercely defends her children from internal and external aggression, but is also literally lay down her life and die for them. It is in recognition of her role as “the folkloric woman of iconic statuswho makes

great sacrifices for the sake of her children and by extension her society” (Ojaruega:p. 147) that she is applauded as a woman of fulfilling an impressive role and wielding significant power in traditional Urhobo society.

Women, in pre-colonial and modern Urhobo are shown to exert power through their collective non-violent *Ewheya* revolt. Ojaide extols their bravery and role in the society where, in rare cases, they:

*Disarm executives
Dancing naked over disappeared sons and men
There is no limit to where victims go for power. (“Castle of Faith”)*

Similarly, in recognition of her sacrifice, courage and bravery, Ojaide, in one of his poems extols the virtues of the tyrant King Ezezi’s wife thus:

*Cast her lot with the victims,
And rid the world of a plaquing spouse
Today praised, she as the first liberator (waiting 20)*

Urhobo women’s revolt in modern times draw from the actions of their pre – colonial mothers and grandmothers. Their collective agitation is reminiscent of those in pre –colonial Yoruba and Igbo with specific references to theEgba women’s uprising that forced the Alake (king) of Abeokuta to vacate the throne in the 1930s to 1950s and the Aba women’s revolt of 1929 against oppressive British colonial taxation. There is no doubt modern day parallels of these traditional female revolt against social and economic injustices in Ogharafe women’s revolt of 1984 against an Amerucan oil company, the Ekpan women’s uprising of 1986 to protest exploitation by oil majors and Ughelli women’s tax protest of 1986 (Turner: p. 499). The successes of women’s agitations in post-colonial Urhobo remind us of female power in pre-colonial times.

J. P. Clark’s play, *The Wives’ Revolt*, fictionally dramatizes the role and power of *Ewheya* in Erhuwaren village in Ughievwen area of Urhobo. The play revolves around the principle of complementarity and women’s rights against the backdrop of the conflict generated by the oil money sharing formula. Okoro and Koko are short forms of the generic male and female or unnamed individuals,

indicating the continuation of the age-long war of the sexes. Although, *The Wives' Revolt* is not a historical play; Clark uses uneducated women from a rural environment that are ignorant of Western epistemologies of feminism or women liberation to tackle and resist male oppression.

Erhuwaren male elders infringed on the rights of the women by excluding them from decisions involving their welfare and imposing a decree of total ban on domestic animals reared by the womenfolk. This is further exacerbated by the unfavourable formula the men adopted for sharing the compensation money paid by the oil company to the community. The women's abandonment of their homes, children and husbands was their way of exercising their power in protest against patriarchal oppression. That they pitched their tent at Eyara, an enemy territory to Erhunwaren's, knowing full well the implications for their men and community, shows the women wanted to hit back at their male folk in a most effective manner. To save face, the men had to reassess their hard stance against the women by reversing the law banning the women's domestic animals as well as committing a part of the controversial compensation money to building public infrastructure for communal use. Clark's message in the play as declared by one of the characters is quite clear and this is that "An idea meant for the common good, if not debated in the public and adopted by consensus can give rise to dissension, and create havoc in a community, right down to the family level, even to the nuclear unit of one man one wife" (p. 58).

Conclusion

Evidences of Urhobo women's participation and representation in the political, social, religious and economic development of their society abound in the oral traditions and written literature. Gender equality hardly featured in pre-colonial gender relationships as many women in Urhobo history excelled along with their male counterparts in various spheres of life. Oral accounts, interviews and written literature show that Urhobo women's status in the pre-colonial era was determined through personal efforts and not necessarily because of their roles as wives and mothers. This implies that they were relatively more independent and accomplished in pre-literate societies even as they played complimentary roles to their male partners. We therefore, recommend that Urhobo women should be

given more opportunities to actualize their purpose in creation as complements and not subordinates to men.

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Oral Interviews

Chief Anthony Ukere, 68 years old, of Urhobo Center, Abraka. The Ofieta of Urhobo Kingdom, August 18, 2020.

Chief Matthew Ovedje Eyuren, 58 years old, from Egbo-Urhie Town, September 8, 2020.

Mr. Odiri, 50 years old, from Otorho-Orogun, 18 August, 2020.

Mr. Etinagbedia, 54 years old, from Ugono-Orogun town, Delta State, September 6 2020.

Mr. Egere, 65 years old, from Ughelli, Delta State, August 14, 2020.

Mr. Emekpe Junior, 63 years from Warri, Delta State, August 12, 2020.

Mr. Eruvwawwe Samson, 58 years from Oteri-Olomu, Delta State, September 2, 2020.

Madam Izu, 83 years old, Ewheya of Izu family, Abraka, Delta State.