Women in the Evolution of Ogba Cosmology, the Myth of Female Goddesses and Invocatory Traditional Form

By

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Abstract

In the elemental Ogba setting, women earned for themselves, the prestige equal to that of men. Their accomplishments soared above human expectations such that some of them at death became subjects of deification. It is in this context that this paper sets out to analyse the role of women in the evolution of some forms of Ogba oral traditional worship, the oral poetic forms of invocatory chants associated with them and the myth of female goddesses. The chants made by women in the shrines such as the goddesses of orisa, ali, asisierinnu, ewha and omumu of fertility/childbirth are employed for illustration, but emphasis will be on ewha. Likewise, material evidence has revealed that even some invocatory forms like igo mmo that are now dominated by men were initially and fundamentally influenced by women. The myth of the female goddesses is an apt example of the women's influence in this area.

Keywords: Women, Ogba cosmology, Ogba goddesses, invocatory clemt, myths

Introduction

There is no doubt the understanding of the woman in the traditional setting of today leaves more to be desired. The traditional woman's primary duty as from puberty has been to wait for a suitor in marriage and produce a male heir for her husband. She was also expected to address her biological peculiarities such as menstruation, painful child labour, nurturing infants, and bearing the burden of menopause (if she is unlucky to experience its complication). Some the these strange ideas held as standards, enumerated above, even trigger a higher degree of discrimination or repression against the woman because a process of

menstruation or the after-birth "uncleanness" forces her to stay away from certain events that require "purity". The obstacles the woman faces are legion; even the worst degree of subjugation was believed to be her destiny. This probably is the reason that the anomaly of gender discrimination was not attended to for a long time because it has advanced into a routine in most cultures. But facts about that this traditional belief that women remained confined to the background may not be true: it was only a development of the nineteenth century and a creation of colonialism and of the missionaries of the Christian religion.

Concerning Ogba myth of the female goddesses; "myth as it relates to Ogba people in particular can be understood from the culture. A people's myth reflects, expresses and explores the people's self-image" (Ohia 2018, P.5). To show the place of woman in the cosmology and myth of female goddesses in Ogba, Ogba people conceive of the river goddess and the spirit essence of the river Omoku as a female resulting from a charm (okuh) phenomenon. "To empty itself at this legendary mouth. This mysterious place where it is said Erisi-Omoku, goddess of the rivers, dwells" (Onyedibia, 1997, p.1). Similarly, "the story of Ogba is the story of Ogba River from where it got its name (Ellah 1995, p18).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is informed by the title of the paper and the diverse nature of the data in use. The sociological theory is handy because the cosmology of any culture is rooted in religion. In preponderance, the mass of the data gathered are rooted in religion. Bascom's functionalism is in place because the literary data for analysis are essentially invocatory in nature and are dedicated to the goddess in order to obtain favours from them, among other notable expectations. This paper makes a conscious effort to validate two or the four functions of folklore enumerated by Bascom. The first of them is that, folklore authenticates the oral traditions, the rituals and the institutions associated with them; and the second is that it exercises social control.

Bascom's theory itself was hinged on the outcome of ethnographic findings that were anchored on true events in African cultures and the belief system. Our allusions to feminism here are in refutation of its persistent claims and the misnormer as to the gender inequality against woman in the typical African

traditional society. Our data repudiate the general claims in feminism that women has been relegated in Ogba land as early as time. The paper seems to interrogate this and place on record at some time in the early beginning of Ogba, equality and respect by the women for their husband was the order of the day.

Primeval equal rights of women and the nineteenth century western incursion

Gender equality is not woman having or sharing the same right with the male folk. It is rather the absence of discrimination on the basis of a person's sex in opportunities. "Gender equality is a means by which men and women have equal opportunities to realize their individual potentials to contribute to their country's social and economic development (Otive-Igbuzor, 2006, p.216). Events in ancient Ogba setting, point to the unhindered and beneficial role of women in the growth of the larger society. Oyewumi asserts that gender discrimination against women was a colonial and religion momento, that women's rights movement or feminism was alien to the Yoruba because in the beginning, gender discrimination did not exist so feminism would not have been relevant. She describes that stereotypic imposition of the western patriarchal tradition on African societies in general and Nigeria societies in particular as "the one-size-fits-all (or better still), the western-size-fits-all approach to inter-electoral theorizing (Oyewumi 1997, p.22). Amadiume in a parables study has corroborated this in the Igbo culture in *Male Daughters*. Oyewumi refutes very strongly that any discourse that creates the impression that the pre-colonial Yoruba woman was subject of patriarchy was Euro cententric and misleading. Falola and Akinyemi (2016) vividly illustrate this as follows:

> The British colonial administration's attitude about women in public space was informed by the Victorian nation of womanhood, which it imported to Africa. This was the turning point at which Yoruba women who were until this politically active in the society became less involved in the day-to-day running in the society (p.347).

Oyewumi brings to light further, the conspiracy between the colonizer and the missionary which eclipsed the social, economic, religious and political structures that used to accord women equal rights. The colonial administration consciously deemphasized the education of the female gender in order to reduce their chances

of participating in the colonial public service job. This attitude towards women started in the Victorian era when women has no personhood, they were denied job careers, only middle-class women could do public service job but only to the extent of either being a teacher or a governess. Women has no voting right, could not divorce except they were divorced, could not own property and could not seek legal realness for governances. The colonizer as well encouraged the Christian missionaries to separate women from men in the sitting arrangement in church, forbade women to officiate in worship sessions and prohibited them from becoming priests (p.14).

This was in contrast to the pre-colonial period when women mingled with men in traditional worship and even served as priestesses of some gods and goddesses, indeed some of them were deified upon their death or transition. The practice in the Roman Catholic and the heterodox Christian sects of separating women form men during worship or baring women from priesthood is only a carryover of the practice in the cradle of Christianity-Judaism. In its house of worship known as the synagogue, the mechitza has remained a structural divider, keeping men from men; for the good of avoiding of any distraction from the presence of the female sex. But this rational suffers from the following self-contradiction. A male Jew in every dawning day, expresses gratitude to God "who has not made a woman" (Rickman 2009, p.4). This prayer, which has no scriptural direction, is the cause of dissonance between couples in the homestead and it is hinged on the law conceived and enacted by the male rabbi who has also inhabited the emergence of the female rabbi.

That women has always been accorded the rightful place in the society before the coloniser came did not start or end with the Ogba; there are more parallels across Nigerian cultures. The women being enumerated have right not have achieved the status of deification but the reverence in which there were and are still commemorated, makes them equal to the divinities. Such heroic figures were either empire builders or race saviours; they were the deux ex machina in the precarious history of their society. Moremi was the woman of the Yoruba Ife extraction who allowed her magnetic self to be captured by the enemies, knowing in earnest that her stihetto act would bait the invader who was sure to let slip the secret of the mystery of an unending annihilation of life. Princess Inikpi of the Igala

took the plunge by immolating her royal blood, to pave away for the survival of Igala land. The bini expansionist policy had taken its toll on the Igala kingdom where land and water had been rendered unsafe by the warriors and all human efforts to repel the attack has become mysteriously useless. (Another source on how Inikpi died claims that it was the Jukun that were the invaders at the time). These extraordinary factors surrounded the Inikpi martyrdom, the first was that she was of the royal blood; she was the daughter of the sitting ruler of Igala land. The second was that she was the only child of the attah. Third was that she was a volunteer scapegoat. She was buried alive on the bank of River Niger and her blood was said to have transfigured into a mirage of a wildfire, which dissuaded the advancing army of the Bini, which did not see any military or economic sense reaching a war target that was in ashes already.

Back home in Ogba, Nwagadi Matilda Ukwosah, Ubochi Nwigwe, Agbo Nwaokiriedem, Owa Ojadi and Nwabriegwu Ukwuosah led a protest against the colonial government decree that parents would hence forth pay school fees for their children and ward; this protest ended in a riot, otherwise called women riot *Agha-Iznemgbo* in 1958. It all started when the colonial government led by the then Governor-General, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, saw the need for Nigerians to start paying tax and school fees. The same was the case with their counterparts in the southern parts of Nigeria. It would be regarded that the Aba women riot was a result of the introduction of taxation which the women folk felt was detrimental to the purses of their husbands.

> The Ogba women in particular rejected the introduction of school fees for their children as well as the purported fact that prostitutes, business and working class women would also pay tax. They took to the streets on Saturday to protest against this new trend (Ohia & Onyedibia, 2003, p.155).

The sixteenth century Hausa history narrates the strides of Queen Amina, the granddaughter of Sariki Nohit, King of Zazzau. Her knowledge of the science of war and the art of it, her prowess in military tactics and logistics, dwarfed the male counterparts. When she ascended the throne after her mother's death, the border of Zazzau expanded with incredible broadness. Another Amazon in the literal

sense of this word is Queen Kambasa, the only woman that has ever been enthroned in the Bonny kingdom in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. She ended the perennial and lingering conflicts which the kingdom has been witnessing with its different neighbours and went farther to expand the kingdom by strides; she was reputed to have personally led a war to Opuoko where many captives were many captives were slaughtered for a votive bloodletting. This act of savagery can only be justified by her deep association with Ikuba, the local war god. How much more can we say of great women such as Wan Asman, daughter of Usman Dan Fodio, Margret Ekpo, Fumilayo Ransome Kuti and the aba women in 1929, earlier mentioned, who beat the gender barriers to force the colonial government to reverse inhuman policies. The flare of activitism in these women only reminds us of Greek Amazons, a group of notably tall, strong and strong-willed women who mobilised from Scythia (the present day Ukraine) to the Trojan war to reverse the adverse trend and to end a war that was dawdling for ten years.

The pre-nineteenth century Ogba setting reveals an astonishing picture of a society that did not live by gender; difference in physicality was only biological, it was never given any socio-political or economic interpretation or colouration. Women competed with men or their spouses freely without losing domestic harmony; a woman edging a man in wealth and other forms of human accomplishments did not leave the husband uncomfortable, it only earned her additional respect; it did not make her lose her sense of mutual respect for men as well besides women playing the principal role as priestesses to divinities or being deified as divinities themselves, the woman figure also had a generic role to play in Ogba cosmology and symbolism; the female gender represented peace and calm, in contrast to the male gender that associated with "toughness". It is common to pray as followers at the turnover of a new year-aho ohnuonu wiye uru ka iynewna. (May the New Year produce "female" benefits/dividends). That was a connotative expression of the power of fertility or abundance associated with the women/femininity.

For illustration, in the Ogba kingdom tradition, there are four traditional tithes for married ladies of rank. The four titles are "Olori", exclusive preserve of the wife of the Oba of Ogbaland, "Odozni-Akwnu, for the first wife or only wife of other traditional rulers and chiefs, "Oriakwnu", for the second wife of traditional rulers and chiefs and "Ezenwnayna" for wives of non-traditional rulers and chiefs

respectively. Equally there are priestesses that kept controls of shrines for worship and they act on behalf of the spirits. (These titles are still subsisting in Ogba tradition). "Eze-agbra-nwnayna" is the title of any female priestess of the cult and the title is dictated by the birth type of the holder.

The role stock of female personages in Ogba kingdom exhibited above is quite revealing; women preside over men in religion and indeed superintend over the shrine and the people who came for divination and sacrifice. It does not amount to over-saying it that the Ogba culture or religion is more gender-friendly than the dominant religions today.

Agi-Otto (2019) posits with evidence in his study on the primacy of women in the remote Ogba world:

> The ordu deity is the deity in charge of fertility and superintended by a woman. The ritual takes place on the Orie market day (a female day) after the Eke market day which is dedicated to all firstborn (p.103).

Women in the evolution of the abrahamic religions

It would seem that the role of women in the unfolding of religions is consequential, if not obligatory. Without the bit they contributed, it would appear that the religions in focus might not have been or must have been saddled with different histories. The great role of women in the advent of some religions is remarkable and far-reaching. Christianity started with the birth of Jesus Christ, his crucification and resurrection.

The birth of Jesus would seem to be by parthenogenesis but Christian adherents dispute this claim because there has been no reported case of parthenogenesis in mammals in the history of nature. Rather they stick to the belief that it was a divine process beyond any scientific explication. Jesus was a baby born outside the usual process of procreation; Mary, the mother of Jesus was a virgin. Science through carbon dating and DNA testing ancestry of "The shroud of Turin" has since authenticated this; the DNA of Jesus the Christ obtained from his winding sheet

has revealed twenty-three X chromosomes of the mother, and no single Y chromosome of the father (Ghose np; Merino and Benford, 2015, p.8).

While the ministry of Jesus lasted about three years, a recurring assurance he gave the disciples was his resurrection. Whereas none of the twelve believed that, after the manner of his crucifixion like a common criminal, the women, the mother of Jesus with Mary Magdalene, absolutely waited for the resurrection with double assurance. And Mary Magdalene was the first to see the revived Christ Jesus at the tomb (Matthew.28:1-10). Even when the awakening from death took place only the women were the first witnesses, for lack of faith and patience, the men missed it. The apostles particularly Thomas, has relegated the prophecy to wishful thinking (Luke.24:1-12; John.20:24-29). In Catholicism today, the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, is regarded as the mother of the church today; in 1969, the Roman Catholic dedicated July 22 to Mary Magdalene.

The birth of Islam reveals the woman's role without whose part its history would have been written in a different narrative. When the Angel Jubril (Gabriel) first directed the Holy Prophet Muhammad to start "reciting" the Holy Quran, he hesitated in his confusion because of the strayeness of the kind of encounter, the terrifying experience and the dilemma over the authenticity of the command. It was his only wife at that point, Khadijah bint Kauwaylid who assured him that it was a divine message he should not have run away from. The holy prophet heeded her advice, returned to Hira cave, on mount Jabal on Nour, near Mecca, and that was how Islam began. By virtue of that event that followed her advice and the coming into light of first follower of Muhammad the holy prophet.

In Islam, there is no divine direction, discriminating against women, nor did the holy prophet pronounce it throughout his life. Analogous of the experience in Judaism stated above, the female gender setback in Islam remains the construct of the leadership; it post-dated the holy prophet Muhammad. In Hinduism and in its offshoot, Buddhism, there is no restriction to priesthood, monks and nuns (Swamini) rival in numerical representation.

Women in Ogba traditional religion and the myth of female goddesses

The idea of goddesses in Ogba belief system only presupposes the roles women played in the primordial and deification eras in Ogba cosmology. Ogba traditional region reputes the Eurocentric claim of polytheism; it strongly contends that there is only one supreme God and that divinities or gods and goddesses are not entities in themselves but intermediaries between the supreme God and humans. A sizeable number of brands of Ogba traditional religion and the commensurate poetic forms have female ancestry; a very good example is *Ali*, the earth goddess, *Ordu*, the goddess of fertility and the invocatory chants dedicated to the worship of the goddesses. Dissimilar to the experience in Christianity, the goddess in focus were not midwifing any religions, they become subjects of deification and godheads themselves when they transited out of terrestrial realms. In the larger Ogba oral society, there were other deified women who where rivals to other spirit of the land and water: *Erisi*-Omoku, *Iyi Oji Odaekpe, Ema Ka Dikne* and others. *Erisi*-Omoku or *Edemini-Ukwu-Oriebulu* is the goddess of River Omoku, the wife of *Oghamini Oguta* of Oguta Lake. They are worshipped across Ogba land and beyond, because of their wider spheres of influence.

Ewha/Ita Corpus

The great roles of women in the activities of humans are reflected even in the contents of ewha corpus. Ewha divination is the foremost oral traditional poetic form among the Ogba. It is a major kind of inductive divination designed to manifest the destinies of those who consult it for direction or insight into the past, the present and the future. Ewha is a divination system in which a client raises a puzzle or makes an inquiry concerning his prevalent problem, and the *Dibia-Ogba-Ewha* or diviner casts some lots, using the sacred cowries, lobes of kola nuts or the divination chain (Ugbakiri shell), the signs that emerge are interpreted by the priest, ending with a "referral" to one of the cowries or lobes of kola nut.

Ewha has gone beyond Ogba provenance as it is practiced by other cultures such as Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Urhobo, Igbala, Idoma, Baruba, Ebira; by some West African ethnic groups of the Niger-Congo extraction such as Fon, Ewe, and by the Diasporas in the Americas, the Canary Islands, Santeria, Brazil, Salvador, among others. Ewha/Ita is believably not entirely primordial to the Ogba; the probability that it was a product of a more remote provenance is quite high. As earlier

predicted, the role of women in the fructification of ewha/ita divination in Ogba is conspicuous.

In ritual divination poetry such as that used in ewha/ita system, it is true, the diviner endeavours to recite faithfully some parts of the year, through the difference between one diviner and another may lie in the skill with which the voice and face are manipulated in the process of the chanting.

Example:

Egwnurnu ewno uche	it is senseless hunger
La agwnurnu nwna ewno nne	that affects a motherless child
Nwna ewno nne eriga nwheasi si la ahia	a motherless child does not eat provisions from the market.

Similarly, in Yoruba ifa corpus "the language of ese ifa is therefore not static at all, the ifa priest has some freedom to innovate" (Okpowho 1976, p.43). In the former age of the Ogba, a woman's status was not determined by the success of her husband but what her will power and energy can fetch for her in a gender-free society that does not place a border on the capacity to achieve wealth and power. In content, much of the subject matter in ewha/ita performance comprises the praise worship of the goddesses, ancestral worship with emphasis on the female ones; panegerics addressed to the female group as the epitome of severance, patience, perseverance, moral control, fertility, among other virtues; the praise songs addressed to contemporary women of influence and means; satirical compositions on social deviants; chants on socio-ritual cleansing; and above all, the blessings released by the priestess of the cult which constitute the concluding ceremony of any ritual exercise in the shrine.

The worship of the divinities for the recovery of stolen items and commensurate vengeance by aggrieved persons still subsists today among the traditional Ogba. The divinities would not bow to any mortal as a superior, because of their perceived supernatural power of defending the down-trodden at will. In traditional Ogba domestic setting, *Edemini-Ukwu-Oriebulu*, for instance, as a wife to a god is expected to do chores such crushing pepper on the stone slab and present kola and drinks to guests on her husband's behalf. *Edemini-Ukwu-Oriebulu*

would not yield and if made to do so after some intervention, she would misplace her aggression on a child by beating him to a pulp. The adherents chant thus:

Erisi-omoku egbu ga nwna ka	Erisi Omoku (River Goddess) does not kill her children
Oluni ga mu nde ka ogwnu	She is an avenger to her children
Obuka di oka la ede umu ka di	Her heart is clear for her children
Okpe ga ikpe znirni-ezni, ma buye ni umu ka ego	She arbitrated and her children are wealthy.

Conclusion

There are other traditional oral poetic, invocatory forms, and myths of female goddesses exclusively composed and performed by the female group but they have not featured in the present discourse by delimitation, this is because of their context-free or non-sacred status; they are all-female ensembles but they are not tied to religious worship. The future of both the context-bound oral forms and the context-free ones just enumerated, is in their therapeutic worth or their lack of value. Whereas *Erisi-Omoku-Edemini-Ukwu-Oriebulu,* and the other goddesses may eventually be sacked by western urbanities, the curative oral forms remain in stiff competition with the perpetual forces of western proclivities.

The worry over the vanishing oral forms is not unfounded but their probable extinction is informed by their inability to meet any primary needs of the people, as ewha/ifa divination and divinities worship do. The visibility of the Ogba oral traditions in the African Diasporas of Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States attest to potency of oral forms. It is only logical that any social or religions tradition that provides answers to human problems and purposes will be sustained just as the system that cannot do same will fizzle out of relevance. This is analogous of the Igbo popular proverb that when a god stops serving the purpose for which he is worshipped, he is abandoned. Another source of rescue from extinction is the increasing frequency of traditional festivals with the promotion of other aspects of the oral traditions, either at the individual or community level. A good case that illustrates this assertion is the recent effort at repackaging Asisierinnu (Nuptial Chants) as an entertainment mode by Late Ikechukwu Solomon.

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