The Feminist Quest of Queen Osunju Jaja

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Abstract

This research examines the story and personality of Queen Osunju Ngabominiagha Jaja. According to oral tradition and recorded evidence, whom despite the male dominated era of her time, made her mark on the sand of time. She became the only female of her era, who changed the narrative, to give Opobo women a place in their history and for posterity. She gave humanity, the hope to live again. Her concept of leadership made her a legend, that is worth emulating. This work, uses Alice Walker's Womanist theory as the theoretical framework to explore the life and times of this great womanist sage, who recreated history and gave her all to Opobo people. Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha, saved King Jaja from assassination, saved vital trading documents from the inferno in Grand Bonny Kingdom that was useful in the founding of the new City state of Opobo and instituted a deity. This made her a and earned her a war canoe house (chieftaincy) status.

Introduction

Opobo kingdom was formally established 25th December,1870 by King Jaja and his compatriot chiefs ,who eluded Bonny with him to save themselves from the humiliation of defeat of war in Bonny kingdom. Although it was recognized as a sovereign state by the Great Britain in 1873 as a City State, Opobo still retain the basic Ijaw culture of the Ibani in all their traditions and customs. The history of Opobo kingdom have always celebrated the contributions and achievements of men within the society with almost not mentioning of the contributions of women,

giving the impression that, there are no women of substance worth celebrating. It is assumed that women have generally contributed nothing to the development and stability of the kingdom.

This is written to redress and highlight the contributions of a woman in Opobo kingdom that changed the course of its history. A woman of exemplary character, foresight and imaginations, who dare challenge and broke the male dominated society of her time. This research will show that her contributions transcend every aspect of Opobo traditional endeavour. She was a heroine of her time and a game changer ,drawing the attention of Opobo children, men ,women ,*Wariseniapu* (elders), Alapu (Chiefs) and ,European traders on Opobo beach and the colonial authority of her time, as a mother ,wife ,Queen, who saved children of her time and made history for women folks. After many years of her transmigration, her influence in the kingdom are still felt and her residuals, still accorded the same respect as if she was still alive. The implication, is that, no matter the age and time, her contributions were revolutionary, though in the context of Opobo historical development.

This research will cover the quest of Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha Jack Jaja, who have made impact in the realm of traditional politics, economy, religious order and development. This Amazon of the era of the legendary King Jaja, who gave her time to serve humanity, left her mark on the sand of time to speak for and represent her, as her shadow of the past. She awakened the consciousness of women of her time, that a women can become what she wants, despite the highly practiced patriarchal society of her time, she became a legend in Opobo. The name Queen Osunju, wife of King Jaja, represent, wealth, power, fame and above all, the only female war canoe house in the kingdom. Amaopusenibo Edwin Pepple asserts that

> '' Aya(Queen) Osunju Ngabominigha Jaja, as I was told by my grandfather, she was beautiful ,adorable, charming with a heart of gold. She was kind to all, especially children as the gods did not give her biological children. As a woman, she was influential in the kingdom, as she had the respect of some chiefs because she played vital role in grooming their young wives. She was a spiritually religious woman, who consults the gods before taking any radical

> action. She is the king's favourite wife, because she has solution to every pressing problems. But above all, she was a genius and the only woman in Opobo kingdom to own a war canoe house (chieftaincy house). She is a legend and the deity *Nwakaaku and Mmininwanyi* is celebrated today because of her effort to restore hope for the children of her time '' (2022).

Theoretical Framework

Womanism Theory

Womanism is a social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of black women. It seeks, according to womanist scholar, Layli Maparyan (Phillips), to "restore the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconcile human life with the spiritual dimension." Writer Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" in a short story, *Coming Apart,* in 1979. Since Walker's initial use, the term has evolved to envelop a spectrum of varied perspectives on the issues facing black women.

Womanist theory, while diverse, holds at its core that mainstream, feminism is a movement led by white women to serve white women's goals and can often be indifferent to, or even in opposition to the needs of Black women. Feminism does not inherently render white women non-racist, while womanism places anti-racism at its core. Both the empowerment of women and the upholding of Black cultural values are seen as important to Black women's existence. In this view, the very definition of "the feminine" and "femininity" must be re-examined and contextualized. While third-wave feminism shares this concern with the more recently coined term, intersectionality, the two concepts differ in the valuation they place on intersectionality within their respective theoretical frameworks. Womanism supports the idea that the culture of the woman, which in this case is the focal point of intersection as opposed to class or some other characteristic, is not an element of her identity but rather is the lens through which her identity exists. As such, a woman's Blackness is not a component of her feminism. Instead, her Blackness is the lens through which she understands her feminist/womanist identity.

Womanist theory grew in large part out of the perceived indifference of the feminist movement towards the concerns of Black women. Early feminist activism around suffrage (first-wave feminism) in the United States largely excluded non-white women, as non-white women were not seen as feminine/female in the same ways as white women and therefore did not merit full inclusion.

The rise of second-wave feminism brought greater inclusivity of non-white women within the movement. However, white feminists equated this inclusion with "colorblindness" and preferred to deemphasize racial issues in favor of focusing exclusively on gender concerns. An inability to reconcile this division ultimately hampered the ability of white and non-white feminists to create a functional interracial movement. As a result of this disconnect between the groups, a third-wave feminism began that incorporated the concepts of intersectionality and womanism.

The historic exclusion of Black women from the broader feminist movement has resulted in two interpretations of womanism. Some womanists believe that the experience of Black women will not be validated by feminists to be equal to the experience of white women because of the problematic way in which some feminists treated Blackness throughout history.[9] As such, womanists do not see womanism as an extension of feminism, but rather as a theoretical framework which exists independent of feminist theory. This is a departure from the thinking of Black feminists who have carved their own space in feminism through academia and activism.

However, not all womanists hold this view of womanism as distinct from feminism. The earliest conception of womanism is expressed in Alice Walker's statement "womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender". Under this rubric, the theories appear intimately tied, with womanism as the broad umbrella under which feminism falls. Due to the fundamentals of this theory, this research has found it worthy to apply this theory as its theoretical framework to explain more about the life and times of the feminine sage, Queen Osunju Ngagbominiagha Jack Jaja,

Historical Background

A lot had been said about Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha Jack Jaja of Opobo kingdom. So much stories of her heroine deeds have been passed from generation to generation. The truth about this Queen who left her mark on the sands of time in the male dominated era, she has become a legend.

Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha was the daughter of Adango, who later became a Chief, a palm produce merchant from the village of Finima, Bonny (okoloama) and her mother Opakirite from Kalabari country, (her main Village unknown). She had her early education in the missionary school in Bonny, with her younger brother Orudobo. She got married to King Jaja, as his seventh wife, at the time when he was the head Chief of Annie Pepple house in Bonny. This is when Chief Jack Jaja Annie Pepple, as an aristocrat needed a wife from his class. Tracing the present location of her paternal compound in Finima, Bonny Island became impossible due to the destruction of old Finima for the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas, project to build a new Finima.

It is also on record that her only brother Orudogbo, the father of Dede Nta Andrew Jaja, the progenitor of Andrew -Jaja's lineage in Opobo , eluded Finima for security reasons to join his elder sister in the new city state. The King also drafted some men both old and young to beef up administration and security in her compound. The following elders were the Queen's administrative council,

i. Idabighte – A eunuch , the Queen's personal body guard right from Bonny and one of her administrative elder. He lost the bid to Chinaka to become Chief, because of his *(Ikule*) deformity (his two ears were cut off). Any man with deformity can not become a chief in Ibani. He was the most senior and number one contender to the stool.

ii. Chinaka who was next to Idabighte in seniority. He was the Queen's principle slave. He was also an administrative elder.

iii. Orudobo, her younger brother. She had her reason for not nominating as her only brother. Since the politics of that time was based on charms and spirituality of Ibani religion. She may not want to lose him to the contest, just like she lost Chinaka.

iv. Opufaghari, also an administrative elder. Oral tradition ,has it that, he was a war price given to King Jaja by the Ibibio people to settle a score.
iv. Osuagwu, an administrative elder.
v. Iwarimie, an administrative elder.

These elders came in and created their own Burusu (domain) under her name, thereby enlarging the population of the compound. It was also on record that newly married young wives to the king, Chief and elders of Jaja house were first brought to her compound for grooming before they are returned to their husbands.

Queen Osunju Feminism Quest

According to Jones M. Jaja, in *Women in Nigeria History, Rivers and Bayelsa Experience,* Queen Osunju was the youngest wife of King Jaja. Her high spirit, friendly nature and playful ways endeared her to all with whom she came in contact with. It was these attributes that made it easy for her to relate to friends and foes (225). Consequently, during the unsettled political situation in Bonny, Queen Osunju was the first female intelligence that helped the Opubo house shape the battle strategy against the Manila house. Oral tradition says, It was Osunju who brought the news of a plot to assassinate and set ablaze Jaja's House. She told Jaja idiomatically saying and knocking on his wall by the window outside the house, saying "this house you are too stubborn, I will destroy you, I will burn you and I will never build you again", a riddle Chief Jack Jaja Annie Pepple understood .This intelligence also changed the face of the crisis in Bonny.

According to tradition ''She was also said to have saved some vital documents relating to House histories and trade in Bonny during the inferno. These documents were proven to be useful in the establishment of the new Kingdom of Opobo ''.

Oral traditions maintained that the importance of those documents were realized when king Jaja remembered the box of the treasure papers with the Europeans, half way out of Bonny, and ordered some boats to return to Bonny to retrieve them, no matter how, when Osunju acclaimed "My Lord I have them, I am sitting on them". This singular act, coupled with her youthfulness and good nature, helped

to explain the important position and favour, she enjoyed in the life of the King and in the history of Opobo. Tradition says, ''the King gave her his word saying "for this act of yours I shall make you a man when we get to our destination".

She became the rival of Queen Ogbolo the first wife of the King and the mother of the crowned Prince Saturday Jaja, and was said to have used diplomacy in containing Queen Ogbolo, thus ensuring that succession to the throne came from her line. She did this through members of her household who accused Queen Ogbolo of Witchcraft, a grave crime in the Kingdom during the time. Queen Ogbolo had to go to **IBINIUKPABI**, the Long Juju of Arochukwu, to clear her name as was customary in those days. That was the greatest mistake Queen Ogbolo had ever made in her life by consenting to go to Arochukwu, although she was cleared of the crime, exonerated and given an eagle feather as a sign of her innocence. Queen Osunju made sure she never returned to the kingdom, she did this by carrying out a propaganda against Queen Ogbolo, of the danger her return to the Kingdom poses. This would have resulted in a civil war by supporters of the two Queens.

The consul had to take the immediate steps of requesting Queen Ogbolo to reside temporarily at Calabar until the circumstances were investigated, but she never returned to Opobo, Queen Ogbolo died and was buried at Calabar. Queen Osunju succeeded in diplomatically containing Queen Ogbolo, her powerful rival. The result was that since 1891 when King Jaja died, successive monarchs to the throne had come from Osunju line. Oral tradition has it that Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha because of her privileged background, and was the first female to acquire western education, as brought to Bonny by the missionaries and supercargoes, that is why ,she knew the importance of the documents she saved for the King.

It was on account of her contribution to the founding of Opobo Kingdom that a war-canoe was approved for her in principle in 1875. She became the first woman to win such an honour and privilege.

According to Sibidabo Owuogbo , Warisenibo Kelvin Manilla

> ''Tradition forbids a woman from sitting with chiefs, man a war-canoe and even perform the ritual of libation and *Sibipele* ,so ,that is why Queen Osunju Jaja, nominated her principle slave, Chinaka Osunju Jaja, to stand in her name and hold the chieftaincy on her behalf. Her influence gave her the right for a man to bear her name as part of his nomenclature. All necessary conditions for the establishment of the Osunju Jaja War-Canoe house, had been fulfilled with the exception of the state banquet (Dinner)'' (2021).

Unfortunately, Chinaka, the chief elect, became stricken with a highly contagious ailment which put the banquet in abeyance. Queen Osunju died in 1893 (222).

Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha Jaja, during her lifetime, though never had biological children but was a mother to all. She played a very important role in the lives of children in the kingdom, especially around *Kpokpokiri* area of Opobo. Oral tradition had been passed down from generation to generation with proof throughout *Kpokpokiri* area ,that there was when a great epidemic ravaged and threatened the existence of children in great number. Because of the shrill cry of mothers who lost their children to the epidemic, Queen Osunju, out of pity and concern to preserve the next generation, went to the Igbo hinterland, to bring and institute *Nwakaaku* and *Mminin*w*anyi* to stop the epidemic. By Ibani tradition, women cannot bring institute a deity, but she defied that process because of her status.

The much celebrated *Nwakaaku* , meaning in Igbo language, children are greater than wealth and *Mminin*w*anyi* ,meaning in Igbo language , water of women , were as at then, the only remedy to curb the epidemic ravaging Kpokpokiri children.

These children deities were the only saving grace of Kpokpokiri next generation. *Oral* tradition maintained, that *Nwakaaku* was buried in all the compounds around Kpokpokiri area of Opobo, in earthen pots while *Mminin*w*anyi* was buried together with *Nwakaaku* in one earthen pot in the Queen's compound to serve as the spiritual centre point. An orange tree was planted at the spot to raise a shrine where children go to worship and offer sacrifices as demanded.

Conclusion

Queen Osunju Ngagbominigha Jaja, the matriarch of Opobo Kingdom made a name for herself at the time when women were seen as domestic tools, not to be heard but seen. Her name ,became a symbol of feminine authority and sign of wealth. Her name ,has become, a symbol of royalty and feminine stability. Her name ,is associated with success, good fortune The life and times of Queen Osunju Jaja, in Opobo kingdom has been deitified, has left an everlasting relics , as a sign of her authority over women folks and over her male subjects. She has become a role model for Opobo women, who want to surpass her achievement , especially in these modern time, where women have endless opportunities to showcase heir talents. According to Amaopuorubo Felicia Stephen Pepple ''Due to her achievement during her life time, especially ,having her war canoe house and producing successive kings of the kingdom from her line, her story shall always pass from one generation to another as long as Opobo Kingdom exist''(2021).

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