

BEYOND THE KITCHEN: TOWARDS A BIOGRAPHICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF EXCELLENT WOMEN OF THE IJAW ETHNIC NATIONALITY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is predicated on the need to regenerate the debate on how much and how well or otherwise, women have been celebrated in Nigeria in general and in the Ijaw Ethnic Nation in particular. In the prefatory statement of the book “Women in Nigerian History: The Rivers and Bayelsa Experience,” Ejituwu and Gabriel (2003), posited that the book is a theme in feminism and derives from the fact that, although women contribute immensely to the development of the Nigerian society, their contributions are hardly ever reflected in historical literature*

KEYWORDS: **Biographical Encyclopedia, Women, Ijaw Ethnic Nationality**

INTRODUCTION

This paper is predicated on the need to regenerate the debate on how much and how well or otherwise, women have been celebrated in Nigeria in general and in the Ijaw Ethnic Nation in particular. In the prefatory statement of the book “*Women in Nigerian History: The Rivers and Bayelsa Experience*,” Ejituwu and Gabriel (2003), posited that the book is a theme in feminism and derives from the fact that, although women contribute immensely to the development of the Nigerian society, their contributions are hardly ever reflected in historical literature. Quoting the word of one analyst, they stated that Nigerian history is written in a way that suggests that the society is made up of men only. Similarly, in her treatise on Women in Development in Nigeria, Stella Effah-Atoe (2004), advocates that the role of Nigerian women in Development in Africa and in Nigeria was given only little attention until the closing years of the twentieth century.

Although, there has been a remarkable improvement in the volume of research regarding the feminine gender, not a few scholars would agree that there is still much to be desired as the literature regarding particularly, the achievements of women by way of their excellent contributions to society, is still largely elusive when compared to the literature generated in celebration of the masculine gender. It is against the backdrop of this glaring fact, especially as it relates to the documentation of the achievements of Niger Delta women, and specifically, women of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality, that this paper finds credibility.

Definition of concepts

The word ‘Kitchen’ as used in the title simply signifies the role of the woman as a homemaker; her role as the mother who prepares the meals, and ensures that the family is nourished and nurtured, even as the home is kempt and kept. The title – ‘Beyond the Kitchen: Towards a Biographical Encyclopaedia of Excellent Women’, points to the possible role of women beyond and above their natural culinary and home-making skills, to levels of excellence in societal development at international, national, regional, state or local government area levels.

Here, the word ‘excellence’ is defined by distinction, by superior and outstanding performance in a chosen career, vocation or endeavour, as distinguished from mediocrity and obscurity.

The levels of excellence herein implied, should be resounding enough to be recorded in respected encyclopaedic chronicles. Indeed, a recent study by this writer reveals that there is in fact no prominent encyclopaedia dedicated to the celebration of excellent women in Nigeria, much less in the Niger Delta of the Ijaw nation or in Bayelsa State. Arguably, the case is not significantly better at the international level, thus making this question about the obscuring of great women achievers a problem of global magnitude.

Distilling the significance of chronicling excellent women

In conducting a diagnosis of the lacuna that exists in the chronicling of women achievers, it is only necessary to know why it is important in the first place, to chronicle female achievers. Evidently, the answer to this question is analogous to asking why history itself is significant as a phenomenon. For history has been defined, and appropriately so, as the record of human group experience, which if ignored or forgotten, relegates man to the level of bestiality and leaves him to grope in darkness in search of his own identity. And the fact is self-evident, that if history is the record of human group experience, it must take into cognisance all human beings, regardless of gender disparities, and their experiences as part of the group experience. History must thus, retain its most important quality being the virtue of objectivity. It must be free of any iota of bias, be it gender, class or racial prejudice, that would make it fall short of what it should be as the study of the past in the living present.

In view of the above position, the words of the Professor of history – Nkparom Ejituwu is apt. He notes: “Nigeria is a plural society and the various social components, micro and macro, including the women-folk, should be reflected in historical literature for the history to be considered a reflection of reality.” The distinguished female historian – Professor Bolanle Awe, notes: ... it is clear that the omission of women from the historical record distorts the perception of past events; its inclusion broadens the topics examined and enriches our knowledge of the past.” Also, the historian A.M. Okorobia writes: “... if we must have a clear picture of the past challenges, opportunities, struggles, triumphs and failures of an individual, group or society, attempts must be made to ensure that ‘historical injustice’ is done to all without regard to sex and other subjective criteria. Apart from promoting our knowledge of history, gender-based research also has the potential of enhancing national unity. This is because gender transcend ethnic, religious, political and other sentiments and cleavages that divide the populace.”

Indeed, apart from the historical significance and the ability to foster unity, an adequate encyclopaedic documentation of the experiences and exploits of women – past and present, would help to debunk the old palous mythology that the place of women is in the Kitchen.

Dilimiting the paucity of biographical research about women

From the above and several other existing treatises, (not stated here for brevity), on the significance of historical and biographical research on women, it is clear that there must be reasons for the paucity of literature on the achievement of women in historic and contemporary times. But how exactly do we know that there has been a scarcity of research that chronicles the significance of women in the world as in Nigeria and the Ijaw Ethnic nationality? The following analytical narrative presents an obviously acceptable position of the paucity of historical literature that celebrates the excellence of women.

In the contemporary Christian Biographical collection – *Courageous Christians: Devotional Stories for Family Reading* (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2000), only twenty women were chronicled out of sixty persons. That represents a ratio of two men to one woman. This is especially interesting because the book was written by a woman –Joyce Vollmer Brown, who certainly should have had her constraints in choosing her characters, the general encumbrances, as we shall observe subsequently. The biographical classic, *Shaping History: 100 Great Leaders from Antiquity to the Present* (Arcturus Publishing Ltd., London, 2004), features only eight female entries out of ninety biographies. A breakdown of the number of entries reveals the following: Statesmen – 32 males, 5 females; Military Commanders – 16 males, 1 female; Religious Leaders – 14 males, no female; Reformers – 4 males, 1 female; National Liberators –15 males, 1 female; Revolutionaries – 6 males, no female; Explorers – 8 males, no female; Industrialist – 5 males, no females.

The seminal book of speeches entitled: *“Speeches that Changed the World: The Stories and Transcripts of the Moments that Made History.”* (Quercus Publishing Ltd., London, 2005), entered just seven speeches by women, and forty one speeches by men. Back home in Africa, in Nigeria, and in Bayelsa State, the paucity of female entries in biographical publications is no better than the aforementioned situations. For instance, a seasoned female Professor of history – Bolanle Awe, observed in an article published in 2003, that the eight volumes of the General History of Africa published by UNESCO in 1981, has little to say about women’s contribution to that history. She also noted in the same article that the ground-breaking book, the standard text on Nigerian history, *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Macmillan, 1980), written by many renowned Nigerian male historians, says only very little about the part that women played in that history.

Significantly, Professor Bolanle Awe is not alone in her observations about the poverty of literature celebrating the achievements of women in Nigeria. Albeit, she as others, agree that there has been some improvement in literature chronicling the excellence of women in Nigeria. Accordingly, Okorobia in Ejituwu and Gabriel (eds., 2003), notes what we shall be compelled to quote in details for its wealth of information regarding the subject. In his words: “While there is no disputing the fact that gender issues have remained a largely neglected theme in the historiography of Nigeria and the Niger Delta, it has to be conceded to some extent also that at least from the middle of the twentieth century, but more especially from the 1970s, efforts have been made by both African and Africanist historians and social scientists, to document the contribution of women in society, albeit scantily.”

Significant among the works, Okorobia notes are: S. Leith Rose’ African Women London (1939); R.A. Le Vine’s ‘Sex Role and Economic Change in Africa’ in J. Middleton (ed.), *Black Africa: Its Peoples and Their Cultures Today* (Macmillan, 1970); E. Boserups *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (New York, 1970) and a few others. In Nigeria, Okorobia, cited three books salient amongst which is Professor Bolanle Awe’s *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* (Ibadan, Bookcraft Ltd., 1992).

Regarding the literary celebration of women excellence in the Niger Delta and specifically in the State of Bayelsa, scholars have lamented how decrepit the situation has been. Back in 1994, Professor Bolanle Awe noted that besides Nina Mba’s book on *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, (Berkeley, 1982), there is no full length book on Nigerian women’s role in history. All that we had, Professor Awe stated at the time, are writings on specific subjects and many biographies on women.

Besides Professor Awe's observation, Okorobia observed what is still largely true in the second decade of the twenty first century. In his words: ... And as far as gender-sensitive work in Rivers and Bayelsa is concerned, the situation is even worse. Currently the best known studies are those undertaken by E.J. Alagoa and A. Fombo, *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny* (Ibadan University Press, 1972), which gives a brief account of the career of Queen Ediminiba Kambasa. Regrettably also, Okorobia noted that even the classical biographical work by T.N. Tamuno and E.J. Alagoa, *Eminent Nigerians of the Rivers State* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980), dedicated only one chapter to a woman of substance – Madam Erinwo Wojiewho of Ibaa in Rivers State.

As in Africa, Nigeria and the Niger Delta, so it is in Bayelsa State. The paucity of literature of excellence depicting the achievements of women is still a very present challenge for contemporary 21st century historians and biographers. For instance, the book – *Profiles in Bayelsa History*, (Minson Publishers, Port Harcourt, 2002}, only eight women of excellence are chronicled out of seventy nine entries, which implies that of the seventy nine entries, seventy one are men. Also, the Ijaw concise book of brief biographical references – *Ijo Footprints: Ijo Contributors to Nigeria and the World* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 2009), acknowledged the contributions of twenty one women out of its over five hundred entries. Of the twenty one women, about seven are indigenes of Bayelsa State.

For Professor Ayibaemi Spiff, who obtained her doctorate degree in Chemistry at the age of thirty at the University of Ibadan in 1973, and thus became the first doctorate degree holder in Chemistry in South-Eastern Nigeria, the Niger Delta and Bayelsa State, the book celebrated her life with a paltry three lines. This is pardonable because the book as the authors also readily admit is not designed to give elaborate essays about the personalities highlighted, rather it is designed to be a stepping stone to more detailed research on the personalities that have been featured.

The foregoing defence notwithstanding, the fact remains from the objective evidence that has been stated above, that there is a serious lacuna, a void that needs to be filled as far as the historical chronicling and detailed documentation of excellent women in Bayelsa State is concerned. The question then is, what are the challenges that have been inhibiting the adequate documentation of women and the institution of a proper biographical research initiative for the preservation of feminine history in Bayelsa State as elsewhere in Nigeria and beyond.

Diagnosing the reasons for the dearth of a biographical encyclopaedia on women

As is the case with many historical antecedents, there is no mono-causal explanation to the identified problem of inadequate documentation of the woman achiever, from who younger generations could learn lessons of persistence, failures or success? The problem, it has been posited, is not mono, but multi-causal.

First, some scholars have blamed the identified lacuna of insufficient or unavailable literature dedicated to women, as resulting from the structure of African societies which relegated women and regarded them as secondary to men in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial African societies. Although, there have been different schools of thought in this regard, we do not intend to go into the full length of the debate here. To that extent, the words of Juliana Okoh (2003), a feminist and gender scholar is instructive. Accordingly, she notes: "*The notion that men and women enjoyed equal rights in Africa has been advocated and contested.*" On one hand, Oluwole (1994), Juliana noted, advocated that, the pre-capitalist African societies did

not ascribe values to the natural act of differentiating between categories, while on the hand, Ruth Meena, as several scholars holding the same ideology, contests that women's oppression has been located in the traditional African society, in the colonial system, in the neo-colonial nature of the African states and in the patriarchal ideologies of post-colonial African states.

Whether the debate is for or against, regarding the status of women in Africa, the fact remains established, and cannot be denied, that, some ideologies that relegated women both consciously or unconsciously, existed, and still exist in virtually all African societies and in other societies beyond Africa, at one period or the other of their historical and contemporary experiences. Such ideologies are obviously encapsulated in such popular sayings as "a woman's place is in the kitchen," which reduces the woman to a mere domestic servant; "a woman cannot respectably exist without her husband," which does not indicate the sanctity of marriage, but attempts to reduce the female to the status of an ordinary appendage of the male; "No matter how old a woman is, she cannot break kola-nut or take custody of the family staff of office or headship;" "Women are meant to be seen not heard," which is interpreted to mean that women should have no political voice.

Apparently, whether the foregoing ideological sayings are contested or not, and while we take into full cognisance the fact that women in Africa and in Nigeria have not always been oppressed, but also respected, and in some instances prominent, the fact remains that the visibility of women in the historical literature of Africa, Nigeria and in the Ijaw Niger Delta, has been obscured largely because of the aforestated ideological statements which has been deeply engrained in the psyche of virtually all African and Nigerian societies. The historian – Atei Okorobia agrees with this view when he stated the obvious that: "Men and women have played important roles in their various societies. *But more often than not, it is the actions and activities of the men folk that have been assessed and credited, which has made women and their contributions invisible in historical literature.*" But is the problem of women's invisibility in historical literature mono-causal? The answer is a resounding no. At least one other reason for the problem can be adduced.

A second reason for the dearth in an adequate historical literature sufficiently celebrating the legacy of excellent women of the Ijaw nation as elsewhere in Nigeria and Africa in general, is the attitudes and choices of the women themselves. While the present writer is not in the least an advocate of any measure of feminist agitations, but a strong voice in support of complementarity of the sexes, the biblical model, the advocacy here is that female historians and scholars in general, as well as prominent women of excellence in society, have not done enough to document the history of their significant life experiences either in individual or collective biographical publications. Besides, their collective choice of vocations, which has also not been, for the most part, in favour of the humanities and related pen or writing professions as journalism, etc, has affected their ability to comprehensively document their life experiences. Hence they have largely remained in the kitchen, and have largely had no voice even on issues that they have reasonable things to say.

To this end, Ejituwu (2002) admonished: "*Niger Delta women are fighting against sexual inequality, as well as the idea that they have no existence or essence. One of the ways to effectively fight against it is to give greater support to Gender Studies, for by it, we write Niger Delta women into history and transform them from invisibility to visibility in historical literature.*"

Going by Professor Ejituwu's admonition to which we largely agree, what then is the way forward? The concluding segment of this discourse shall answer.

Determining the way towards the institution of a biographical encyclopaedia on ijaw women

In the segment of this discourse, we intend to determine, and by that recommend the way forward for releasing the Ijaw, and by extension, the Nigerian woman from the kitchen, by instituting a biographical encyclopaedia project in honour of women – living or dead, who have distinguished themselves as excellent in any significant career, vocation or endeavour, from as far back as history can remember.

Indeed, the place of the woman in the extant and ancient history of any society cannot be emphasised. It cannot be disputed that women of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality, as everywhere in the world, have been, in a very complementary sense, instrumental to the successes of their husbands. Conversely, it has also been discovered that some women have also been instrumental to the failure of their husbands through their highhandedness and uncooperative attitudes, as well as misleading counsels. Such women will certainly not find a place in any publication that celebrates the excellent.

Whatever the case may be however, the only way to ensure that the legacy of excellent women is preserved, is to take a cue from some authors cited earlier, and from Lewis and Betty Drummond's book – "*Women of Awakenings: Historic Contributions of Women to Revival Movements*"; and the gold medallion award winning book of William J. Peterson – "*Martin Luther had a Wife.*" Indeed, the treatises in these books successfully unveiled the women featured in them, and as such liberated them from being confined to the story of the kitchen and the bedroom, only emerging occasionally as shadows behind their husbands.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it has been advocated by Awe and Ejituwu in Ejituwu and Gabriel (2003), that women constitute about fifty percent, and in some cases more, of the human population, hence, the need to adequately research into, and document their achievements for the intellectual prosperity of society both at present and in the near and distant future cannot be gambled away.

In Bayelsa for instance, mother is not God; but God is mother, and to that extent, mothers, nay, women, should be treated with respect, dignity and tenderness. The time to institute a biographical encyclopaedia project for excellent women, and indeed, to give them a place of prominence outside the kitchen and the bedroom, is now.

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