

WOMEN INSTITUTIONS AND FESTIVALS IN AWKA-ETITI UP TO 1955

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Abstract

The study of women's contribution to society remains a very topical issues that accompany interests and responses of diverse degree. The status and roles of women in traditional Igbo society and Awka-Etiti in particular is multifaceted. Women played significant roles as mothers, wives, home makers, producers, social and political partakers as well as community leaders. The diversity and fluidity in their handling each roles emanates from the stance that the human person and in this case, women can play different roles at different time. The poignancy of the esteemed roles of women in the traditional Igbo society reflects in the institutions and festivals exclusive to them. There existed political and titular platforms through which women in the pre-colonial Awka-Etiti accessed power, experienced prominence and established near parity with men. Such were the Otu Odu, Ekwe and Ndindi institutions. These platforms ensured full visibility, relevance and active participation of women in the socio-political and economic setup of the community, thus reducing the inhibitions of patriarchy, redefining sisterhood whilst the women embraced more power. There also existed as a matter of recognition and importance, certain group formations and festivals that championed and celebrated the strength and femininity that marked womanhood in Awka-Etiti. Such were reflected in the Obuba and odunke festivals alongside the Inyom awka- an organization that encouraged cohesion amongst women. However, colonialism under the aegis of Christianity, western education and modern form of government distorted the traditional setup that promoted women and led into extinction some of these institutions and festivals particular to women. Adopting orthodox historical narrative and thematic method for analysis, using descriptive method to analyze oral information gathered from notable respondents, and information from secondary sources, this work aims at surveying the traditional institutions and festivals as practiced by women in Awka-Etiti up to 1955. The work submits that women in Awka-Etiti through such institutions maintained a semblance of autonomy and an in-depth appreciation of womanhood. It is thus imperative that such traditions which promotes positive Igbo cultural values should be restored as festivals are vital store houses in the preservation of history.

Keywords: Women Institution, Festivals, Awka, Anambra State

Introduction

Oral history suggests that the pre-colonial Igbo women were far from powerless and helpless like some modern contemporary literature portrays them and even less docile than their Western counterparts at the time.¹ Prior to the advent of Christianity, Igbo women had explored all available avenues either through group association or individual offices to assert themselves and ensured continued relevance in the scheme of affairs. The women alongside men governed through parallel organizations, with each gender having its separate political, economic and religious institutions. The above view has been advanced and supported by many extant scholars of Gender/Women's Studies, revealed through their works. Zulu Sofola in surveying the status of pre-colonial Igbo women avers that the woman has always had a vital place in the scheme of things within the African cosmology, the most relevant being the dual- sex system of socio-political power sharing developed by African peoples and based on the following perceptions of womanhood: (1) as the divine equal of man in essence, (2) as a Daughter, (3) as a Mother, (4) as a wife.² Niara Sudarkasa equally maintains that except in highly Islamized areas, women in Sub-Saharan Africa, more than in any other part of the world, were queen-mothers, queen-sisters, princesses, female chiefs, and holders of other offices in most towns and villages ³. Similarly, and as articulated by Kamene Okonjo, "the African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant and silent. Rather, African tradition has seen the wisdom of a healthy social organization where its citizens are seen to be vital channels for a healthy and harmonious society" ⁴.

In Awka Etiti, such endeavours reflected in the poignancy of socio-cultural groups exclusive to women such as the *Umuada*, *Inyom di*, *Inyom Awka* and of course the highly revered Ndindi women group. There were also festivals and dances which celebrated not just the girl-child, but also the strength of womanhood. Furthermore, some women of high economic standing and affluence moved the bar higher by taking ostentatious positions via title taking. These titles were akin to that of the men and as such highly celebrated. Women in Awka Etiti hitherto enjoyed the prized and dignified *Odu* (*Igba Odu*) and *Ekwe* titles. Mounwe affirms that such solidarity or cultic groups offered them access to some benefit, which they would not have enjoyed ordinarily in the society as women.⁵

This study attempts a survey of the function and mechanisms of these groups and festivals especially as it affects women in Awka-Etiti, an Igbo community, situated in the present Idemili South Local Government Area, Anambra State. It should

however be stated herein that although some of these groups have long gone into extinction, it is still important to give an account of their existence; to document for posterity what was, describe what is and make recommendations on what should be. The objective of this study rests on debunking literatures that portrays the traditional African woman as a push over, insignificant and powerless albeit using the Awka-Etiti example. It is also a call for the regeneration of vital traditional institutions and festivals that extolled and celebrated womanhood in Igboland, nah Africa.

Inyom Awka

A number of group organizations independent of men and exclusive to women graced most Igbo communities during the pre-colonial period. In Awka-Etiti, Inyom Awka was one of such; INYOM is an Igbo word used in describing a married woman, thus Inyom Awka simply means “married women of Awka Etiti”. The association was an exclusive preserve of all married women in Awka-Etiti irrespective of religion, social status, political ideology and denominational affiliations. It was a veritable avenue where the women not only made their voices heard, but also rallied in a supportive manner, protecting and projecting the interest of the members. G.T Basden in describing the pre-colonial Igbo people made mention of such a group. He affirmed that “in every town there is a sort of committee of women which controls all women’s affairs and exercises great influence in various direction” ⁶. Inyom Awka was of what Basden described and more. Perhaps more aptly captured and closer to the modus operandi of Inyom Awka was M. Green’s observation which goes thus:

There exists among the Igbo a formalized arrangement in which married wives within same place of origin formed a spatially defuse organization of women. These groups were called ‘mikiri’ and were loosely based on urban improvement unions that migrant Igbos formed in many of Nigeria’s large cuties. Their members could set up meetings on monthly basis...functions focused on mutual sociability and aid. Authority and other prerogatives such as sharing were generally allocated on the basis of the relative seniority of the lineage segments of the participating women ⁷.

Georgina Udorji affirm that what M. Green described could pass as the historical Inyom Awka both in organization and function. She noted that although the headquarters of the association was domiciled in Awka Etiti, members residing elsewhere were encouraged to hold meetings and run the association at their various places of residency but in compliance to the general established rules and principle of the association ⁸. The essence of which was to maintain uniformity of

purpose. Today, Awka Etiti women living across the states of the federation and in diaspora has worked on the foundations and principles of Inyom Awka to develop a stronger association, bigger in scope and broader in purpose.

An attempt towards tracing the origin of this association was largely futile because the association predates modern history. Pursuant to this, Madam Pauline Okpalanozie noted that it would be an impossible task trying to ascertain the birth and growth of the association. She opined that;

To trace the origin of the organization would be as good as reconstructing the history of Awka-Etiti. Nobody alive can say how or when it started. Inyom Awka was an age-old association that preceded colonialism... It was both unique in nature and practice ⁹.

Membership of the association was not automatic. For initiation into this organization, one had only to pay a stipulated sum of money; usually a stipend, that way, women of lesser financial standing and capability could afford membership. The money generated from membership registration and subsequent dues were usually used in rendering assistance to members when the need arises and also execute projects that benefited both the community in general and the members in particular.

On the guiding principles or otherwise objectives of the organization, Ngbenkwo Egbosi uphold the view that protecting, representing and enhancing the totality of the lives of the members and of Awka –Etiti at large was paramount ¹⁰. To achieve this, the association regulated and moderated the activities of the members at both home and abroad level. Ngozi Okechukwu on the other hand aver thus;

Inyom Awka was a body that to a large extent regulated the lifestyle and disposition of the members. It was for the longest of time the only umbrella that housed all women of Awka –Etiti extraction and as such played the diverse roles of a cultural organization, political association and a social club. The sense of oneness and unity it created amongst our women remains unrivalled...¹¹

Similarly, Rose Malu asserted that the association laid the foundation for modern developmental groups in the community. She stated thus, “whatever women group we have in Awka Etiti today, be it religious, cultural or even self-help organizations borrowed from the principles of Inyom Awka” ¹².

Inyom Awka exercised various functions which include; settling of disputes amongst members, offering of financial assistance to one another, levy fines to

discipline transgressors of law, organize dances to entertain people and enrich their common purse. They also cater for the religious needs and matters of interest to them all. Men however do not interfere in these meetings without invitation. It is both refreshing and amazing realizing how strongly this association brought about cohesion and co-operation among the women in Awka Etiti who were originally a collection of individuals born elsewhere. As a group, they were only a heterogeneous collection bound together by their marriage into the same community. On this basis, communal action, common sentiments and common groupings arose.

It is disheartening to state at this point, that Inyom Awka despite its unique function and relevance was overtime hard hit by the changes occasioned by Christianity via the creation of faith based women groups in the community. Against this backdrop, Maria Ezennukwu bemoaned thus; westernization is good. No one can refute that. But then it came with a price, some not too pleasant, in this case, it was loss of identity...¹³ Maria's outcry could probably be justified on the premise that for ages, Inyom Awka stood supreme, survived generational changes and memberships, served and nurtured the interest of her members in an all-encompassing manner. It had a more unifying force, broader in scope and bigger in membership than the patrilineal Umuada. The women were all proud to be identified as Inyom Awka. It was the only community-based association they had. Overtime, religious affiliations ranked higher and overrode the spirit of oneness that characterized the group and most women preferred to be identified with their various faith-based women group.

Interestingly, Catherine Okonkwo noted that although the Inyom Awka was no longer active in the home branch, some urban branches such as Lagos, Sapele and Enugu did not allow the association to wither completely; she averred that "at Sapele, we continued to hold meetings even when it would appear that we don't do much anymore. Interestingly the monthly meetings of the association provided avenues for communal cohesion and bonding amongst us here in Sapele" ¹³. The gradual erosion of the general Inyom Awka in Awka-Etiti left the town with no women association until 2008 when it was rebirthed, modified and wears the new look of Awka Etiti Improvement Union- Women Wing.

Otu Odu

Otu Odu is an elite socio political and economic group exclusive to women of high economic standing, women who have distinguished themselves in their respective areas in life and have been found worthy in character. *Odu* means elephant tusk and *Igba Odu* simply means the wearing of tusk. *Odu* are cylindrical sections cut

from ivory tusks and used by men and women for decoration or ornamental purposes. They are worn on the wrist, (*odu aka*) and/or legs/ankles (*odu okpa*). *Otu Odu* is a group of women formally initiated in the *otu odu* system after satisfactorily meeting the conditions laid down for membership. Women that belong to the institution were referred to as *ndi odu*. Ogbukagu opined that the Igbo people regard the eagle as king of birds and elephant also as the king of other animals, hence the wearing of ivory tusks and eagle feathers by Igbo men and women who are highly placed in the society ¹⁴. Elephant tusk is significant because it is rare in quality and possession, ornate and expensive. Till date, tusk is still precious, a symbol of wealth, regal beauty, used to depict class and authority.

In Awka Etiti, *Igba Odu* was the highest and most prestigious institution for women with membership based on achievements and financial capability. It was the female version of *Ozo* institution thus only for the privileged. It involved wearing of elephant tusk on both legs measuring about one foot. Women who wore *Odu* walked with grace; they were never in a hurry as the *Odu* was weighty and delays speedy movement.

Initiation into the institution starts with formal declaration of interest. This step enables the executives of *Ndi Odu* to set up a fact-finding process to ascertain the eligibility or otherwise of the would be “*onye odu* (initiate). It involves enquiries into the character, personality and integrity of the person. An intermediary who is member of *Odu* society, who also knows the intending member well is appointed as a mediator in the process. Speaking on the need for such thorough investigation before initiation, Emeka Asuzu submits that it was to ensure that only women credible and morally balanced became members ¹⁵.

In Awka Etiti, *Igba odu* was formally done and celebrated on the *Ogu* feast day amidst display of wealth, food, merriment, cultural dances and then the actual conferment ¹⁶. Most families do not spare expenses when preparing a mother or wife for the conferment, as *Igba Odu* was the apex of a woman’s socio cultural and political growth. Women belonging to the *Odu* society made ample use of the privileges accruable from the society to further the course and interest of the generality of women in Awka-Etiti. The institution gave these women prominence and brought them at a near parity with the men. The beneficiaries fall within one of the decision-making organs in any given Igbo community to cater for the wellbeing of the womenfolk.

However, as time went by, Christianity with her faith/denominational based societies and groups gained momentum in the community. The total embrace to

the teachings of the new religion and subsequent forfeiture of age long cultural institutions led to the eventual collapse of the *Odu* title taking and institution. G.O Akajiobi noted that;

Igba Odu title taking stopped around 1945 when Christianity took a strong hold in Awka Etiti. It was cumbersome to wear them to the church. Adherents of traditional religion had to pull off their Odu. And many did so. Gradually, the title faded out as there was no new initiate as most Awka Etiti people had converted to Christianity ¹⁷.

Ekwe Society

Another social cultural institution that prevailed among women in Awka Etiti was the Ekwe title taking. Ezeudenna and Enemo observed that Ekwe title taking was not as embracing and as rigorous as the *Igba Odu* or *Ichi Ozo*. Enemo wrote that “being a married woman is(sic) the determinant factor in being initiated into the Ekwe Society” ¹⁸. Initiation into the *Ekwe* consisted only of brief ceremony unlike what is obtainable in other communities. Prior to initiation, an initiate must abstain from sleeping with the husband for three market weeks i.e., 12 days. It was considered an abomination for such a woman to conceive within the first 12 days of initiation. If it happened, and became a common knowledge, the resultant baby would be thrown into the evil forest ¹⁹. The current research is yet to establish the reason behind such law and subsequent punishment. The leader of the *Ekwe* was usually the oldest initiate of the society called *Agba Ekwe*. Members of the society enjoyed certain rights and privileges that placed them in a position only beneath the *Otu Odu*.

Regretfully, as with the *Odu* group, this cultural institution could not survive the wave and strength of Christianity in the community. It collapsed when old members dropped the title and converted to Christianity and there were no new initiates to ensure the continuity.

Ndindi

This is a socio-cultural organization made up of a group of high-ranking council of energetic female leaders in Awka-Etiti. The major functions of the group, among others includes: settling disputes bothering on marriage, marital and family disputes, stray of animals, damages to crops and cash crops; promoting and protecting the customs, cultures and traditions of Awka-Etiti; imposing and collect fines levied on persons or groups found guilty of any of the offences relating to matters mentioned ²⁰ Ezeanubekwe Elizabeth stresses that the Ndindi women

group occupies such a unique position in the affairs of Awka-Etiti to the extent that virtually nothing that affects the interest of Awka-Etiti as a town or generality of its people can be done without consultation and approval of the group

The Ndindi women group is a female socio-cultural organization that existed in Awka-Etiti from the earliest times. It is made up of women representatives drawn from all the kindred in the town, (two women each from every kindred). Each community has generally accepted norms, traditions and ways of life that guide them. However, these customs are entrusted in the care of persons or group of persons with the responsibility of seeing to its maintenance and sustenance. Against this backdrop, the Ndindi women group, a cultural organization amongst other functions is charged with the enormous task of ensuring proper preservation of those customs, cultures, beliefs and practices guiding Awka-Etiti for the overall purpose of ensuring a socially controlled society.

Obuba Festival

The importance of festivals in Igbo land cannot be over emphasized. Each community sets apart certain times in a year to commemorate epochal events. Usually, these festivals offer opportunity for socialization in different forms. In Awka-Etiti, the *Obuba* festival was a feast for young maidens, a ceremony that celebrated fully grown maidens. Only maidens ripe for marriage and those engaged but had not performed the marriage rites were allowed to participate ²¹. Mary J. Anochie opined the festival serves as a means of introducing unengaged girls of marriageable age to prospective suitors ²². Prior to the feast, young maidens learnt new dance steps which they displayed on the festival day. The girls are usually decorated in traditional 'uli' and 'ogaru'. The exposed body parts such as the arms, torso, legs and face were given, various patterns and designs with *uli* (ink from indigo plant) and 'ogaru (caterpillar fluid). Waist beads known as *jigida* were worn around their waists up to the navels and strips of cloth over their breast to cover their nakedness ²³. The girls spare no pains in decorating themselves with elaborate hair styles and beads of precious stones.

On the day of the festival proper, the young maidens would prepare delicious dishes in their homes, assisted by their mothers and congregate in a designated shrine (*Ogwugwo*). Since this is a religious ceremony as well, in preparation for marriage, sacrifices and prayers were usually offered. Ezeudenna and Enemo reported that *Ogwugwo* in pre-modern Awka Etiti was a female deity and was considered the delight of women ²⁴. The above could possibly be the reason the gathering of the young maidens for the *obuba* festival took place in any designated *ogwugwu* shrine.

At the shrine, the young maidens first offer greetings and prayers to the deity. They pray for good husbands and fruitfulness in marriage. Generally, the prayers were usually centered on a successful married life as marriage was considered the hallmark of a woman's life in Igbo land. At the end of the prayers, the maidens would joyfully dance before the deity. From the shrine premises, the girls would move to the village square to continue dancing and feasting amidst cheering from spectators. This has been described as the climax of the festival. At the village square, the well adorned girls dance to draw attention of their spectators who were usually young men in search of brides, friends, relatives or even parents who thronged the arena to watch the event and make recommendations of would-be brides to their male relatives in search of wives. The girls receive gifts and blessings from the people. After the dance, richly prepared foods such as pounded cocoyam, *akpu*, pounded yam served with fish and meat studded *onugbu* and *ora* soup were mostly shared.

Although the festival lasts for just a day, it was usually marked with a beehive of activities before and after the feast. According to G.O Akajiobi, the festival would continue till late in the evening when they would disperse and go home ²⁵. On the relevance of the festival, M.J. Anochie opined that the ceremony is more or less an initiation of a girl into womanhood. A step towards preparing her for marriage. Anochie thus aver that "at the end of the rite, the girl is considered a symbol of beauty, purity, fragility and gentleness, ... symbol of honour, destined essentially for the home ²⁶.

In addition to Anochie's explication, the festival imbues positively on the participants. Psychologically, the girl-child becomes aware of her self-identity, feels secure and acquires a strong sense of belonging. Today, *obuba* festival has become history in Awka-Etiti. There is presently no festival or ceremony that celebrates the journey of maidenhood to womanhood. Contemporary, faith-based youth programs in different churches can be argued to be a replacement for the festival. The Catholics and Anglican communion organize annual youth week which wears similar look and intent with the *obuba* festival however, these activities lack the cultural feel potent in the *obuba* festival.

Odunke Festival

This is the highlight of the traditional and religious festivals in Awka-Etiti. The festival celebrates both men and women although it was done at different times. In other words, women had their own festival separately. The *Odunke* for women comes up between seven to ten (7-10) years before that of the men. *Odunke* festival was so important as it was rarely observed among other festivals. The festival was

for the rich, the wealthy and the powerful in the society. It is a means whereby they exhibit the degree of their affluence before their gods. A woman's husbands or children buys her expensive George textile materials and befitting beads as well as big cows or horses for the festival ²⁷. Oluchukwu Orizu opines that such grand gestures signify that the woman is trusted, treasured, and has impressionable wifely qualities ²⁸. A woman would never leave her husband and remarry after this festival is performed on her.

Preparations for *Odunke* usually starts months ahead the actual time. Participants used this period to decorate their houses and embark on long distance markets where they procure expensive beads, textiles and other items that would be used on the festival. At the festival, women appear fully adorned with beautiful body decorations made with *uli* and *ufie*. The festival lasts for many days but the last day of the festival remained the most remarkable. It was considered the actual *Odunke* day. On that day, cows or horses are drawn to the Eke market square by able bodied men for the celebrants. Each participant makes it to the square accompanied by a dancing troop, her relations and well-wishers. At the square, women parade and exhibits their cows with great pride and pomp to the tune of the music, striking their oxen, and gesturing how fat their oxen were.

At the arena, relations and well-wishers gives the celebrants lots of gift, clothes and money. The following day the cow would be killed after removing the entire skin which would be kept as a memorial. The meat would be distributed to well-wishers. Months and years after the festival, stories of those who displayed the biggest cows and horses would still fill the air. Those who participated in the festival would continue to receive gifts and compliments from people.

Though *Odunke* was a display of wealth and success; other women not so wealthy also took part. They would come to the market square beautifully dressed. They are not compelled to display their cows, although one can display if she so wishes. G.O Akajiobi noted that the last *odunke* in Awka-Etiti was held in 1955 where Madam Akajiobi, Mama Omemgbeoji among others emerged the lead women with the fattest and biggest cows on display ²⁹. Akajiobi further argues that as an eye witness of the last *odunke* that the festival had no link to idol worshipping as most participants were Christian. One can easily flaw this argument on the basis that the festival precedes the introduction of Christianity to the community, hence, it hitherto was a traditional and religious ceremony done by the people in praise to their gods for the blessings of wealth and affluence so received.

Conclusion

The survey of the various institutions and festivals that celebrated womanhood in Awka-Etiti up to 1955 when the last *odunke* festival was celebrated revealed that from time immemorial, cultural and patriarchal constraints notwithstanding, women in general and Awka-Etiti women in particular have always been involved in the making of the history of the community. Undoubtedly, pre-colonial Awka-Etiti had practices that were disadvantageous to the female gender, but women also held positions of socio-political and economic power. They explored institutions which not only gave them visibility and prominence as individuals but equally elevated the status of women in the community as a whole. Traditional Awka-Etiti women were not at war with their male counterparts neither did such exalted positions reduced the execution of their sex roles of motherhood and wifehood. The women rather charted their own space and course and made impact through those avenues, enhancing their importance at both the public and private domains.

However, the coming of Christianity to Awka-Etiti in 1904, as an agency of colonialism brought changes that have far reaching impact in the socio-political set up of the community. The resultant effect was the gradual abandonment and later, complete forfeiture of some of these institutions and festivals, replacing them with faith-based associations and positions such as Life Membership in the Catholic Women Organization and the Anglican Women Ministry. Thus marking a shift from a world of ease of visibility to a struggle for retention of power. While some institutions such as Ndindi women group stood the test of time, *Otu Odu*, *Ekwe*, *Odunke* and *Obuba* became eroded, bringing a limitation to the place and roles of women in the making of history. Incidentally, the evolution of other women groups brought a reduction in the sacredness attached to the Ndindi women group. This paper submits that in tandem with the affirmative action that underlines feminist scholarship, there is need for the restoration of institutions and festivals that hitherto celebrated womanhood. Practices considered inimical to modern realities should be removed and modified.

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