

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF WOMEN INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES OF UMUNEDE SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper is to examine the roles women had played in Umunedede both in the past and in the present time. In the past they engaged in a lot of activities, which survived till today although some are no more in practice. These activities ranged from economic to healthcare as well as religious and political activities. The paper will examine the activities of Umunedede women in these areas in the past and the present time and how they have helped in the development of the community. In conclusion, Umunedede women has contributed greatly to the development of the town, ensuring steady food production, effective healthcare delivery, provision of essential products through local industries and maintenance of peace in the society. The paper then recommends that, women in Umunedede should be encouraged by the men especially husbands in their various vocations and activities to develop Umunedede the more. Women, especially girls should be properly guided by the parents and the women folk to enable them contribute meaningfully to the development of the town.

Traditionally, the role of a woman centred around the family of which women in Umunedede are not an exception. The girls who were to be women in the future by virtue of marriage lived in their parents' homes. It is in their respective homes and compounds, that they learn and practice their future roles as wives. They learn the local industries, crafts, medicine, religious and traditional practices of the community. Some of these local industries, crafts and traditional practices has survived and are still practiced in Umunedede, while some are on the verge of fading out.

In Africa, every society has its peculiar methods of teaching and imparting these future roles to the young girls. The responsibility of the proper upbringing of these young girls to become responsible wives, caring mothers, and good ambassadors of the various families and the community that gave them out in marriage, is that of the mothers and the entire women-folk. Women in Umunedede ensure that children, especially females learn how to greet, stand, speak relate with others and perform the house chores. They also learnt local crafts and industries. The women ensure the proper upbringing of the girls that are be married out, as they would want them to be seen as having been properly trained, by their parents and families. The training of the girls is, however, not left solely to their mothers. The women-folk guide the girls in Umunedede to be responsible women in the future. Although the men concentrate more on the upbringing of the boys teaching them farming techniques, their roles as future husbands, local technology etc, they do not spare the girls if they misbehave in their presence. They correct them, thereby helping in their upbringing.

Agricultural Activities

In the recent time because of the challenges of running a home economically, women are not contented with helping the men in for farm work. They therefore engage in trading activities to generate enough fund to run the family affairs in the recent time. The articles of trade has increased from farm products to include textiles, electronic products, diary, household utensils, educational materials, etc. Market centers has now increased to three and trading activities arc carried at these centres on daily bases. This development is as a result of increased in population and the need for people to expend their trading activities. The traders are mainly women.

The women, apart from their primary household duties, aided their husbands in the farm work. "They formed a single productive unit with their husbands" (Lucker, 985). The families usually practice mixed cropping which enables the women to plant cassava, pepper, *okra*, melon, vegetables,

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locust beans etc, as the main crop of the men is yam. The women prepares food for the men in the farm and gathers fire wood which would be used by the family for cooking and for other domestic proposes at home. During the period of harvesting of crops, the women assist in carrying the yams to the barn. According to Pa Okafor (2003) “as the men harvest the yams, the young boys removed the sand on them while the women carried them to the barns.” However, in the present time, women help their husbands in the farm work as time permits them. This is because they now own farmlands themselves. Those not engage in farm work, are seriously involved in trading activities throughout the week. The result is that they have little or no time to help their husbands in the farm work. The truth is that women now try to meet up with the economic challenges of the modern time by engaging in full time farming or trading and not necessarily being a full-time helper to their husbands in the farm.

It should be noted that in as much as a woman help her husband in farm work, a section of the farm is specifically mapped out for her by her husband and her brothers, in their respective farms. This she called her own and is free to plant any crop she wants there. This practice has rather become an exception than the norms especially on the part of her brothers in the recent time. Men are no longer obliged to give a section of their farmland to their sisters. This is because most of the men are not full time farmers as they engaged in other activities and use farming to supplement their income from other areas. Also, availability of cultivable land has reduced as a result of increase in population. Women in Umunede contributed greatly in food production. This was; noted by Davidson (1993) when she wrote that

Cultivable land is the basic resources of meeting food needs and often servicing livelihood. Women were at the centre of subsistence food production, accounting more than eighty percent (80%) in some African countries.

In the pre-colonial period, Umunede women not only engage in farm work but were also involved in poultry and animal husbandry. They kept poultry and reared goats, and sheep in the home. They used the free range method in keeping their birds and animals. They took from their stock to offer sacrifices to their gods when the need arises and also to cook for their guests during ceremonies. They sold some to generate revenue for the family. Radcliff (1993) noted the effort of women in animal rearing when she stated that “the valuation of women’s knowledge of habitats and productive techniques has been documented in a number of cultural context.” In the recent time, Umunede women have poultry farms. They also have goat rams and according to Oppong (1981) “women have gone into full time poultry farming and animal husbandry to generate more revenue for the family.”

Local Industry

The men also carry out the laborious and dangerous task of climbing palm trees in order to cut down bunches of ripe palm fruits. These Palm fruits arc gathered and carried home to be processed into palm oil and other by-products by the women. They also help to process the farm products for preservation, for them not to be ravaged by insects and weather. The cassava tubers were not processed into garri during the earlier period because garri, a bye product of the cassava was not a staple food in Umunede in the pre-colonial era. The processing of garri was borrowed from neighbouring groups in the colonial era. The processing of cassava into garri is done by women.

Women in pre-colonial Umunede engaged in food production through the processing of raw materials into finished products. This was done through local productions. These local productions are hereby examined. When the Palm fruit. is cut down, the palm nuts are removed from the bunches. They are left. for some time to ripe so that when processed, the red oil could come out easily. The palm nuts are picked and boiled in a big pot. After the boiling, the palm nuts are turned into a mortar, pounded and then pressed with hands in order to extract the oil. The extracted oil is boiled in order to separate the water in it. The palm oil obtained in this way is used for cooking, making of native black soap etc. The processing of palm oil has been modernized. The women now process the palm oil in the oil mills. The heating of the palm nuts and extraction of palm oil is done by machine. This has increased the volume of palm oil produced by the women in Umunede in the modern time. Also,

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more women both the high and the now engage in palm oil production which is easier through machines in the oil mills.

The palm nuts are gathered and dried in the sun. They are later cracked to removed the shells. The kernels are heated in an earthen pot to extract the oil. The kernel oil which is black in colour is used as pomade. It is also used for making the local soap call '*ncha ude*' (Oily black soap). The soap is used to bath and wash clothes and cooking utensils. It is sold in the local market as one of the articles of trade. According to Igwubor (2010) "Mothers buy and keep it in the house as it is considered medicinal in the treatment of common ailment such as convulsion in children and as laxative to empty the bowels". It is also considered medicinal and used, in the treatment of skin diseases such as rashes, dandruff, dried scalp, wounds and open sores. The medicinal value of the palm kernel oil is still appreciated by the people who continued to make use of it for the treatment of ailments and as a vital ingredient in the preparation of traditional medicine even in the modern time. Before the coming of the Europeans to the Nigerian coast and subsequent introduction of modern soaps of various kinds, Umunede women had produced the black soap by mixing various local materials.

The making of black oily soap was popular in Umunede in the pre-colonial era and even in the modern time. The women after removing the palm fruits from the bunches, as we have earlier explained, left the bunches to dry in the sun. they later burn them together with coconut fibres into ashes whose by product is caustic ash (caustic soda) used in making soap. "The caustic ash is packed into a pot and mixed with water and allowed to ferment for days into an alkaline base through filtration". (Dieyi, 1992). These materials are further mixed with palm oil. The concoction is heated on the fire and turned around in the pot for the materials to be well mixed and properly blended. The end product is the black soap (*acha-ude*) which the people use daily for washing and for other domestic uses. The production of the black soap is still in existence in Umunede. The women teach their daughters how to produce the soap and it remains one of the local industries in Umunede in the modern time.

In pre-colonial Umunede, the women invented local methods through which they preserved farm products for future use, especially during the period of famine. This was done by processing the products into dried form. For instance, yam which is the main agricultural product of the people is peeled and sliced into pieces by the women and dried in the sun for a period of time. After drying, it is pounded in the mortal and sifted into powder. In those days. There were no machines or blenders to grand the dried yams into powder form, hence the women laboriously pounded the yams themselves. The product is the yam flour used in feeding the family. The yam flour is stirred in boiled water and it formed a black brown mass called "*Nni Ulubo*". In Umunede today, the women use grinding machines and blenders to grand the yams into flour which is used to produced "*Nni Ulubo*". It is a local food highly enjoyed by the people as the *Urhobos* enjoy starch food.

Umunede women pressed the locust beans which they used as food condiment in place of the present day magi cube, curry etc. It is called "*Ugba*" by the people. In processing the locust beans into "*Ugba*". The women plucked the seeds from the locust bean tree, gather them and remove the seeds. The seeds are washed to remove the yellow coatings on them. They were then boiled in a hot water to soften the hard coat that covered the seeds. The beans are brought out from the pot and its coat removed. The seeds are boiled again to soften it further and get it ready for consumption. In the pre-colonial period, the business flourished among the elderly women. In the modern time, the business has dwindled due to deforestation that has resulted in its high cost in the market today.

Okra as it is well known is a perishable commodity if not immediately consumed. Okra which is a traditional crop of the women are produced in excess during the period of harvesting. In order to preserve it, the women sliced it into pieces and dried the slices in the sun. The dried okra is called "*Ikaka*" and it is used to prepare soup especially in the dry season, when its production had stopped. The women who had the bulk or it, sold them in the local market. The production of the

dried okra (*Ikaka*) had survived in the modern time and it is commonly seen in Umunede during the dry season.

Social Roles

Umunede women in the pre-colonial era, cared for their homes. Her social function in the community still remains the same today. Marriage is considered sacred by the people. The women protect their marriages in spite of all odds, difficulties and uncertainties. They care for the family and keep the home clean. They teach their daughters the roles of women as future wives. Under the tutelage of their mothers, girls learn farming techniques, home management and local industries. Umunede women today have not departed from these roles.

Health Services and Healthcare

In the area of health and traditional medicine, Umunede women in the pre-colonial era specialized mostly in traditional gynecology and midwifery. According to Onyekpeze (2002) "native gynecologists dealt with all women and children ailments, including taking deliveries." They made use of natural methods, and herbal medicines in the treatment of women diseases; pregnancy disorders and complications, birth control, infertility and delivering of babies by their mothers. They also handled the post natal (after delivery). They handled children ailments such as convulsion, measles, common cough etc. These they treated with local herbs which they collected from the bush/forest. This practice has survived amongst Umunede women in the modern time.

It should be noted that over the years, these women had helped their patients using traditional family planning devices such as herbs, the menstrual circle, breast feeding etc to control child birth. In Umunede today, such traditional maternity homes exist where services mentioned above are rendered to willing patients. These services rendered according to Okafor (2009) "is mostly based on humanitarian principles and considerations." They could use herbs which they had great knowledge of through their parents to cure diseases as constipation, sores, ulcers, dysentery, malaria etc. They carried out circumcision of new born babies. They also come from time to time to treat the circumcision wounds until they are satisfied that it had finally healed. Circumcision is part of the custom of Umunede people and as such these women ensured that it is properly done. The hospitals today hesitate to perform circumcision. The people therefore turn to these women for such operations which they professionally carry out.

Socio-Political Roles

"The *Omu* traditional religious cult is a predominantly women cult. They are selected on the basis of their maturity and on their assumed ability to perform traditional rites as the *Olatu*" (Osakwe, 2005). The traditional *Olatu* were the leaders of the various villages, war commanders and the mouth piece of their respective villages. The *Omu* carry out sacrifices and performed rituals on behalf of the people and most importantly, to protect the *Obi* (king) from evil forces, calamities, bad luck and untimely death. They engage in the general purification of the town. They adjudicate on matters that affects women in the community especially as it affects their conducts in the market, marriage and in the public and impose fine where necessary. Today, they still remain the watch dog or women's conduct in the society. This act has helped to check misbehaviours amongst women in Umunede even in the modern time.

The women exercised priestly functions in the society. They were mostly the priest of *Olokun*, the goddess of the river and a harbinger of peace, happiness and fertility. The women erected *Olokun* shrines in a corner of their rooms where they appeased and made sacrifices to it. The chief priest of *Olokun* is known as '*Oheren Iyi*', while a worshipper of the god is known as '*Ohere*'. Most of the sacrifices made to the *Olokun* were done at the river bank and in some cases at the *Olokun* Shrine kept by the women in their homes. As a result of Christianity, the worship of *Olokun* is no longer popular in Umunede. Only very few old women engage in this worship and most of the shrines in homes have been destroyed as a result of Christianity in the recent time.

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The women as mothers help the men to train their children. In the absence of their husbands, they assume leadership of the home, giving instructions and directions where necessary. They punished erring children, especially the girls, whenever the need arises. In the present Umunede, women actively play this role in order to have a disciplined family.

In a large compound where the man married many wives or where the relations lived in a cluster of houses, the oldest woman assume the position of leadership in the absence of the men. She carry out disciplinary measures against any member (wife) that erred or brake the community rules. She gives judgment if the women quarrel. This becomes more severe if they engage in physical combat. The punishment for such offences ranged from serious rebuke, fines of various degrees such as an egg, hen etc. to suspension from participation in women affairs within the compound.

The administration of justice by women in pre-colonial and present Umunede is not restricted to family compounds. The *Omu* cult help the *Obi* in the administration of justice in the town. They try women offenders and punished those who deserve it. They ensure that there is peace and stability in the market. This has help to create a conducive atmosphere for the conduct of economic activities. Women who breached the community's rules in the market are called to order and sanctioned by the *Omu*, who seat in the shrine in the market. The proceed of the sanctions which are in the form of fines and gifts according to Igwubor (2009) "is their reward for services rendered in the market."

The *Omu* also play a significant role in the coronation of a new *Obi*, a role they had continued to play even in the modern time. They consult widely with the oracles and the gods on what to do, before and after the coronation, to avoid any misfortune during and after the exercise. They worked closely with the elders and the *Obi* in-Council to crown the new king. In the villages, they performed traditional rites as the *Olotu*. This is so because in their respective villages they are regarded as the women leaders as such they handled all women affairs.

Conclusion

The available information on the socio-political roles and activities of women in Umunede has brought to light a number of facts that could help us to appreciate the various roles women played in the development of Umunede society. In Umunede, women played active roles in food production through engaging in agricultural practices. They are active in the processing of goods through the local industries. In the health sector they were not left out as they are the local midwives that attends to birth and some were herbalists treating the people of their ailments. Politically they contributes to the growth of Umunede as the *Omu* cult is part of the king makers. They also help to ensure that there is peace and stability in the market and in the town, as erring women are punished and sanctioned.

Recommendations

- Umunede women should be encouraged and motivated in all ramifications in order to contribute the more to the development of the town.
- Social amenities should be provided for the town for improved and comfortable livelihood of the women.
- There should be provision of a credit system for the women for the development of agriculture and local industry in Umunede.
- There should be continuous education through public enlightenment for the women in Umunede in their various fields to enable them develop their skills and contribute more to the development of the town.
- There should be proper upbringing of the girls by their parents and the womenfolk. This will enable them to contribute greatly to the development of the town in the future.

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