

THE CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN IDUWINI AND KOU COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Nigeria is generally a male dominated country. In many parts of the country, women are relegated to the background. They are hardly allowed to express themselves in public or to play prominent roles in community affairs. Women, as wives, are simply expected to live quietly under their husbands. In this article, our focus is on the Iduwini and Kou Ijo groups in the Western Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The article x-rays the status of women in their communities in the past and present. And the conclusion is that the situation of the women folk in these communities has improved considerably over the years, starting from the 1980s. Iduwini and Kou women now hold meetings on their own and speak their minds on community issues, even though they seek approval from the male folk before implementing their decisions; own property and engage in personal businesses without necessarily rendering accounts to their husbands. Some have even ventured into politics, and have done fairly well. This is not to say, however, that they can now rub shoulders with their husbands and other male members of their communities. The men are still mainly in charge of affairs. For the situation of the women folk to improve further, it is advocated in this article that they should embrace western education to keep them informed of developments outside their environment, and be more involved in politics to bring greater enlightenment to the area.

Iduwini and Kou communities can be easily described as egalitarian communities because they do not possess rigid class structures with restrictions on the interaction of different groups (Ezeze, 2010 a&b). In these communities, any free-born indigene can ordinarily aspire to become what he/she wants to be without hindrance. The only significant index upon which social stratification is based is age.

Based on age, free-born indigenes of Iduwini and Kou communities can be roughly divided into three groups, namely, the *okosuotu/okosuabu*, *kalaposi*, and *kalaowou/kalaogou*. The *okosuotu/okosuabu* are the oldest men and women of about sixty years of age and above. They are the traditional leaders of thought and are generally regarded as the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people. The *kalaposi*, the next group to the *okosuotu/okosuabu*, are the young and vibrant men and women of average ages, ranging from about twenty to fifty years and more. They are the people commonly known in our political vocabulary in Nigeria today as the youth. Being better educated in terms of western education, and more widely travelled and exposed, these young men and women are constantly struggling to wrest authority from the elders. The last group, the *kalaowou/kalaogou*, comprises of the very young boys and girls. They are generally viewed as innocent people, and are easily forgiven even when they commit fairly serious offences (Ezeze, 2010 a&b).

It can be easily understood from the definitions and explanations given above, that people in Iduwini and Kou communities do not permanently remain as *kalaowou/kalaogou* or *kakaposi*. As an individual grows and matures, he/she graduates from *kalaowou/kalaogou* to *kalaposi*, and from *kalaposi* to *okosuotu/okosuabu*. In spite of these clear demarcations, however, members of the different groups mix freely, joke and play together; there are no formal restrictions. The younger people were simply expected to respect their elders. Nothing, other than age, keeps an individual in any lower group or moves an individual from a lower group to a higher one. This simple social set-up has invariably affected their political life. Though the people have traditional rulers, Iduwini and Kou communities operate more or less like gerontocracies. The traditional rulers do not have very firm control over the affairs of the communities. In fact, the day to day administration of the communities

is done by elected chairmen and their executive committees, which are heavily dominated by the youth or *kalaposi*.

Although the age-grades or social groups outlined above include the female folk, a careful examination of the economic, social and political fabric of Iduwini and Kou communities reveals a slightly different picture – that the egalitarian culture of the people applies mainly to the male folk. The women were seriously relegated and marginalised. This situation has however started to change in recent times.

The Situation of Women in Iduwini and Kou Communities in the Past

In the past, as already stated, women in Iduwini and Kou communities were seriously relegated and marginalised. They were, in most cases, not consulted before decisions were taken on important community matters except those that specifically concerned them. Such matters were often taken to the *osobu* (where masquerades were made) to discuss. Women and children were traditionally barred from entering the *osobu*. The women were only informed of the decisions already taken, if need be, and made to pay the required levies, if the matter was one that involved money. The general impression among the male folk, as in many other Nigerian communities, was that women like children, were a flippant lot who could not be entrusted with secrets (Onabamiro, 1980; Akama, 1998).

Though highly marginalised, Iduwini and Kou women carried a lot of burden at home in the past. Almost all domestic chores were performed by them with little or no assistance from the men. The women washed clothes, fetched water, bathed the children, collected firewood, smoke-dried or roasted fish, and prepared the meals. It was unthinkable in the past for an Iduwini or Kou man to be engaged in any of these domestic duties. A woman could only obtain help from her children, especially her female children, her sisters-in-law and other female relations.

Before now, Iduwini and Kou men usually married many wives. The major justification for this development was that fishing, the main occupation of the people involved a lot of work. The fish caught had to be dried. To do this, firewood had to be collected. Many of the fish caught in the area were scaly, and on very many occasions, the catch was usually plentiful. Many hands were, therefore, required to remove the scales and perform other fishing operations. It was also expected that if a wife had gone to the river or sea with the husband to fish, there should remain at home at least another wife to prepare the meals, look after the children and take care of the fish being smoke-dried, if any.

The many wives were also believed to enhance the social status of a man. Before the advent of the Europeans and the introduction of Christianity and other alien values into the area, a man who had only one wife was often derided by his mates and relations. Such a man was seen as a man of no authority; being controlled by the wife. His children were also ridiculed by their mates and others for not having half-brothers and sisters, who were traditionally considered to be very important. A man was therefore socially compelled to marry many wives even when there was actually no need for that. But in most Iduwini and Kou families in the past, it was the women who actually took care of the children. Many of the men who had married many wives could not adequately cater for the needs of the many children produced by them. It thus became the responsibility of each mother to take care of her own children. Mothers who complained and requested for assistance from their husbands were viewed as lazy women.

In addition to being engaged in fishing activities with their husbands, some Iduwini and Kou women were also engaged in such lesser occupations as weaving, salt-making, and petty trading. A few of them even fished on their own. They individually or jointly did fish fencing (Ezeze, 2009). These women were however expected to declare their earnings at the end of the season or year to their husbands, who gave or paid them whatever amount they deemed fit. The good wife, as we have stated elsewhere (Ezeze, 2010a), was therefore the one who quietly served under her husband. A self-assertive wife, no matter how industrious she was, never earned good compliments in Iduwini

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and Kou communities. In all Iduwini and Kou communities, no man played a subordinate role to a woman in any form.

Even the general customs and beliefs of the people placed tougher sanctions on female offenders than their male counterparts. For instance, among the Iduwini and Kou, the animals in the cat family-the tiger, lion, leopard and the cat itself are equated with human beings. The eagle, though to a lesser degree, is also classified with this group of animals by the people. And so, anybody who killed or ate a tiger, lion or leopard is considered to have killed or eaten a human being, which is one of the highest taboos in Iduwini/Kouland. But whereas a man could intentionally or unintentionally kill or eat any of these animals, it was (and still is) totally forbidden for a woman to do so. A woman who killed or ate any of them (including the cat in their case) was taken as one who had killed or eaten a human being. Such a woman was doomed to die; there was no remedy. This punishment was said to have been decreed by the national deities of the two groups - *Osueghesu* for the Iduwini, and *Ebiekere* for the Kou (Erezene, 2010 a&b).

But an Iduwini or Kou man who killed a tiger, lion or leopard, though treated as a man who had killed a human being, only performed some rituals to live on. Such a man was required to sleep for seven days in the open playground or field (*seikiri*) of his clan or national deity at the ancestral headquarters. This ritual was believed to take away the effects of killing the animal from the man's eyes. At death, he was given a hero's burial. His burial rites included the *igbu* and *adugubai* dances. During the *igbu* or warrior's dance, the coffin bearing the corpse of the man was carried round the community, and anything found outside was destroyed. Domestic animals such as fowls, ducks, dogs, goats etc were also killed to show that the dead man was a warrior during his life time. No payment or compensation of any kind was made to owners of the things destroyed or animals killed.

The *adugubai* on the other hand, was a peaceful dance performed in the evening by a single woman selected for that purpose. The songs sang were not just the usual songs sang at funeral ceremonies. They were songs specially composed, recounting the exploits and achievements of the man during his life time. As can be easily seen, whereas a woman who killed or ate a cat, tiger, lion, or leopard paid dearly with her life, a man who did so was, in a way, honoured (Erezene, 2010a).

In the political arena, Iduwini and Kou women also suffered greatly. They could not be made community leaders, no matter how hardworking they were. They could not even be appointed or elected as overseers of quarters (*idumu*). These positions were the exclusive preserves of the men folk. Even the queens (the wives of the kings or *pere*) were not accorded much respect in Iduwini and Kou communities. As already stated in this article, in the past (and even now), the *pere* (kings) of the Iduwini and Kou wielded very little political influence. In fact, the men the Iduwini and Kou referred to in the past as *pere* were merely the high priests of their clan or national deities, locally known as *Orusibewei* or *Orukariwei*. These men were "selected" by the deities themselves and they carried out functions that were essentially connected to the worship of these deities. In such a situation where the *pere* themselves were not highly respected figures, one can easily imagine the socio-political status of their wives. The women folk in Iduwini and Kou communities seemed to have been also discriminated against by the national deities of the people. Although there were many priestesses and prophetesses of lesser spirits and gods, no woman has ever been "selected" as high-priestess by the national deities of the people.

It needs to be stated by way of concluding this section of our discussion that as the women were relegated and marginalised in Iduwini and Kou communities, so were their girl children. As was the case in many other parts of Nigeria, and indeed Africa and the world over (Onabamiro, 1980), Iduwini and Kou girls were expected to be quiet and less self-expressive than their male counterparts. While a young Iduwini or Kou man could, for instance, choose the type of girl he would like to marry, girls in Iduwini and Kou communities rarely had that privilege. Girls were, in most cases, betrothed to men (young or old) of their parents' choice even before they came of age. As they grew up, they had no choice than to marry these men, no matter their situations in life. Even when western education

was introduced into the area, the girls were kept back at home; it was only the boys that were allowed to go to school. The Iduwini and Kou were good examples of people who believed that a woman's place was in the kitchen (Obabamiro, 1980).

The Situation at Present

A close examination of developments in Iduwini and Kou communities in recent times shows that the women folk have started to enjoy some privileges that they hitherto could not even dream of. Iduwini and Kou women now own property, engage in personal businesses and so on. The young girls have also become more exposed and strong-willed, and can now marry men of their choice. Some of the highly determined ones among them are now university graduates in different fields of learning. Women now hold meetings to discuss community matters, especially those that directly concerned them. They, however, make their decisions known to the men folk and seek their approval before implementing them. Before now, Iduwini and Kou women formed mainly dance groups for entertainment purposes. Prominent among these groups were the *Kolikpa* of Agge and the *Abalaere* of Odimodi. They at times performed in neighbouring communities with the permission of their husbands.

It is difficult for one to say exactly when these changes started to take place. This is so because written sources on the Iduwini and Kou are still very scarce. Unfortunately too, the oral traditions of the people hardly discuss such issues. In such a situation, one had to fall back on one's personal observations and recollections. From these observations and recollections, one can say that the fate of women in Iduwini and Kou communities started to change (improve) from about the 1980s. This development was a purely internal one that had nothing to do with the various women liberation movements (WLM) of the twentieth century in Nigeria and other parts of the world (Onabamiro, 1980; Anikpo, 1987; Akama, 1998; Ejituwu and Gabriel, 2004).

It is important to note that the Iduwini and Kou are uptil now very backward people in terms of the acquisition of western education. Between 1992 and 1993 when this writer conducted fieldwork for his Master of Arts (M.A.) thesis on the two groups (Erezene, 1994), it was discovered that all the university graduates in the area put together as at December 1991 were not substantially more than those in the Brisibe family alone of Ojobo in the Operemo Kingdom in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State. At that time, many of the Kou communities-Amazor, Ogbeintu and Orobiri had not produced even a single university graduate. And there was no female graduate in the area that was known to any of the traditional historians in the communities. If there was one, such a girl or woman was, no doubt, far away in the big cities and was not a regular home-comer. In such a situation, it is difficult for one to attribute the change in the status of Iduwini and Kou women in the two closing decades of the twentieth century to developments outside their communities.

The status of Iduwini and Kou women started to change when some fairly influential women (not necessarily wealthy ones) were nominated (by mostly the youth) to accompany their male counterparts to take care of community matters outside. In the Kou community of Agge, for example, one Mrs. Golu Isiyei of blessed memory was often so nominated. When these women returned from such trips, they naturally informed their colleagues back at home of what was discussed. Before long, women, as already stated, started to hold meetings to discuss community matters, especially those that specifically affected them.

What could perhaps be regarded as a major breakthrough for the women folk in Iduwini and Kou communities occurred in 1991. In that year, a young Iduwini lady, Miss Catherine Warri (now Mrs. Catherine Alla) defeated two male contestants in the bye-elections into the then newly created Ekeremor Local Government Area Council of the old Rivers State. She defeated the late Mr. Egypt Kurobokekeme in the primaries, and went on to trash Mr. Iyoroakpo Tarasele in the main election. Before that time, the few educated Iduwini and Kou women with standard/primary six certificates, secondary school and teacher's grade two certificates quietly worked as teachers, clerks and so on. Politics seemed to have been like an area that was reserved for only the male folk in Iduwini and Kou

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communities. Miss Warri's electoral victory, in spite of the undercurrents that made it possible (Erezene, 2010 a&b) was, therefore, a clear testimony to the fact that the situation of women in the area had started to change.

Since the present democratic political dispensation started in Nigeria in May 1999, two Iduwini women have been appointed as commissioners into the Bayelsa State Executive Council. The first of them was Mrs. Janet Alek, a retired Assistant Director of the Nigerian State Security Service (SSS). She was first appointed as Security Adviser to the Bayelsa State Government in 1999 before being made Commissioner for Women Affairs in 2002. On setting up government after his election in 2007, Chief Timipre Sylva appointed the second Iduwini woman, Mrs. Martha London Jenakumo, as Commissioner for Gender and Women Affairs. Both women are indigenes of Aghoro. Although their Kou counterparts have not enjoyed such privileges, those among them that have worked hard politically have been rewarded in many other smaller ways.

Conclusion

It is obvious from our discussion so far that Iduwini and Kou women were highly relegated and marginalised in the past. This situation has however changed in recent times. This is not to imply that Iduwini and Kou women have now achieved equality with the men folk. Iduwini and Kou women still humbly serve as wives under their husbands, but with greater respect and freedom. The men have, with more exposure and enlightenment, come to understand that their wives are their partners in progress. Some men now fetch firewood for their wives and help them to perform some other petty chores in the home that were in the past unthinkable for an Iduwini or Kou man to be engaged in, such as helping to bath the children. For the situation of the women folk to further improve, it is recommended in this article that they should embrace western education to keep them abreast of developments outside their environment. They should also struggle for more political privileges and appointments to bring more enlightenment to the area.

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