Women in Diplomacy: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The international systems may be described as any collection of independent political entities, which include: tribes, city-state, nations or empires that interact with considerable frequency and according to regularized processes. Whereas diplomacy is the reflection of the values of nations and peoples; their cultural and civilisational specificities, political choices, and their religious precepts and traditions. It is a portrait of the past, a reflection of the present and a vision of the future. Diplomacy in any form is built around the principles governing the political structure of the state it represents; whose interest it serves and whose entity it embodies abroad. It is the whole network of processes applied to bring about peaceful pursuit of these states values in the international community. Diplomacy may therefore represent the interest of a political or economic group or those of a regional or geographical block, the paper examines the extent of involvement of womenfolk in the evolution and practice of indigenous diplomacy in traditional societies; specifically among the Kalabari people. This is based on the assumption that women have been part of the evolution process from time immemorial, and must have contributed their bit in some fundamental ways in all facet of life and living. The paper adopts the Historical Method of data collection and analysis and concludes that women should be given greater opportunity in International relations and Diplomatic practices.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Myths, Women, Beliefs, Culture

Introduction

Despite the now popular belief; and nearly universally acclaimed position of the woman as a 'Weaker Sex', and the role allotted to women as "Second Fiddles", the female sex has occupied germane position in the diplomacy of nations. This feat could be traced in Historiography to various myths of Africa and the Greeco – Roman Empire. Women have enacted no less an important role in diplomacy in pristine African Society as in other civilizations. However, over time, these important roles have been fettered as the men folks assumed greater diplomatic roles.

This however does not negate the pioneering role in diplomacy of women of old in the growth and development of International Relations. This is why the apothegm "Men rule the world, but women ruled the men who rule the world" is most apt. World religions – African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism among others, have assigned to the woman the position of a 'help mate' to the men folk. But, has this always been the case? What was the position of the woman in diplomacy before the advent of these belief systems, and their books of precepts? These questions and the like are fundamental in our understanding of the diplomatic roles of women in times past.

We are aware that in some cultures, women may be heard, but not seen. Yet, several women have distinguished themselves in different fields of human endeavours. There are several others currently at the verge of making history. Yet gender inequality has persisted in diplomatic practice. The dynamic nature of culture and the changing realities of society have conspired to conjure this abysmal image of the women in diplomacy. Society is dynamic; so are the desires of men. The direct consequence of these changes is that moral and ethical standards have degenerated. This accounts for the seeming decadence in society; as society moves from former revered beliefs and value systems (Asimiea and Ikunga 2019)

The masculinity syndrome of several societies as norms have further contributed negatively to the outlook, and the preconception of the roles woman should play in international relations and diplomacy. African Traditional Religion (ATR), as in severally others for instance, has in most cases continued to hold the women as seasonally unclean and as such cannot function in certain capacity in the international space, especially when it border on the beliefs in the supernatural and/or the metaphysics. (Iyalla, 1991; Eboh, 1995)

In this paper, attempts are made to answer the question: What were the roles of the African woman in the development and practice of Diplomacy before the advent of the Europeans?

In an attempt at proffering answers to the above, efforts will be made to delve into the past to establish the diplomatic roles of women in traditional societies in general. Whereas the immediate objective is to trace the role of the woman in diplomacy among the Kalabari people, the paper intends to explore the myths of western civilizations with copious reference to women in diplomacy in the Greeco-Roman empires. This hopefully will make the reader better acquainted with the efforts of women in the development of diplomacy. Further, the paper will present a discourse of the Kalabari woman in diplomatic History of the Kalabari Ijaw of the Niger Delta, Nigeria. The corollary is that, we use as it were, the past to illuminate the present and to allow for comparison.

Women in Greeks Mythology and Diplomacy

Greeks myths like all others, originally related to specific religious, philosophical, cultural and social ideas. The myths offered precedents for, and examples of everything: the difference between bravery and cowardice; what beauty was, how to be proud, noble, sly, long-suffering, to be faithful, a nuisance, a fraud, a hero, among others. The characters of incidents of myth were so multifarious that they were not so much lateral to life as the continuum of life itself, and every variety of human experience and behaviour seemed to be contained in them. In a metaphorical and poetic ways, myths offered not so much answers to particular questions as ways of beginning to think about answers and the questions had to do with the nature of the universe, the relationship between human beings and the supernatural, the reasons for certain ways of behaviour and the self-image of this or that community. For adherents of particular cults or citizens of specific areas, myths offered a communal viewpoint, a focus for thought, and they put people in touch not only with one another's minds but with those of their forebears and ancestors. Myths validated each present moment in terms of a much wider picture, both in time and space – they were a binding force. The close affinity between myths and the culture which create them presupposes, in most cases, that when the culture fades or dies,, the myths are often lost. Only a negligibly few myths – systems as those of Japan, India and that of some primitive tribes of Africa are related to major and living religious practices, and continue to thrive and grow in a process which has lasted and unbroken for millennia.

A study of Greeks mythology should begin with a consideration of what political and religious systems existed in Europe before the arrival of Aryan invaders from the distant North and East. The whole of neolithic Europe, to glean from surviving artefacts, myths and literature, had a remarkably homogenous system of religious ideas, based on worship of the marny – titled Mother-goddess, who were also known in Syria and Libya; and international intercourse was according to the dictates of the goddess. Diplomacy rested on the pleasure of the Queen.

Ancient Europe had no gods. The Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent; and the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought. She took lovers, but for pleasure, not to provide her children with a father. Men feared, adored and obeyed the matriarch; the hearth which she tended in a cave or hut being their earliest social centre, and motherhood their prime mystery. (Grave, 1955)

The moon's three phases of new, full, and old recalled the matriarch's three phases of maiden, nymph (nubile woman), and crone. Then, since the sun's annual course similarly recalled the rise and decline of her physical powers - spring a maiden, summer a nymph, winter a crone -the goddess became identified with seasonal changes in animal and plant life; and thus with Mother Earth who, at the beginning of the vegetative year, produces only leaves and buds, then flowers and fruits, and at last ceases to bear. She could later be conceived as yet another triad: the maiden of the upper air, the nymph of the earth or sea, the crone of the Underworld - typified respectively by Selene, Aphrodite, and Hecate. These mystical analogues fostered the sacredness of the number three, and the Moon-goddess became enlarged to nine when each of the three persons-maiden, nymph, and crone-appeared in triad to demonstrate her divinity. Her devotees never quite forgot that there were not three goddesses, but one goddess; though, by classical times, Arcadian Stymphalus was one of the few remaining shrines where they all bore the same name: Hera (Tierny, kegan and William, 1967).

Once the relevance of coition to child-bearing had been officially admitted - an account of this turning-point in religion appears in the Hittite myth of simple-minded Appu - man's religious status gradually improved, and winds or rivers were no longer given credit for impregnating women. The tribal nymph, it seems, chose an annual lover from her entourage of young men, a king to be sacrificed when the year ended; making him a symbol of fertility, rather than the object of her erotic pleasure. His sprinkled blood served to fructify trees, crops, and flocks, and, his flesh was torn and eaten raw by the queen's fellow-nymphs - priestesses wearing the masks of bitches, mares, or sows. Next, in amendment to this practice, the king died as soon as the power of the sun, with which he was identified, began to decline in the summer; and another young man, his twin, or supposed twin - a convenient ancient Irish term is 'tanist'-then became the queen's lover, to be duly sacrificed at midwinter and as a reward, reincarnated in an oracular serpent. These consorts acquired executive power only when permitted to deputize for the queen by wearing her magical robes. Thus kingship developed, and though the sun became a symbol of male fertility once the king's life had been identified with its seasonal course, it still remained under the moon's tutelage; as the king remained under the queen's tutelage, in theory at least, long after the matriarchal phase had been outgrown. Thus the witches of

Thessaly, a conservative region, would threaten the sun, in the moon's name, with being engulfed by perpetual night.

There is, however, no evidence that, even when women were sovereign in religious matters, men were denied fields in which they might act without female supervision, though it may well be that they adopted many of the 'weaker-sex' characteristics hitherto thought functionally peculiar to man. They could be trusted to hunt, fish, gather certain foods, mind flocks and herds, and help defend the tribal territory against intruders, so long as they did not transgress matriarchal law. Leaders of totem clans were chosen and certain powers awarded them, especially in times of migration or war. Rules for determining who should act as male commander-in-chief varied, it appears, in different matriarchies: usually the queen's maternal uncle, or her brother, or the son of her maternal aunt was chosen. The most primitive tribal commander-in-chief also had authority to act as judge in personal disputes between men, in so far as the queen's religious authority was not thereby impaired. The most primitive matrilineal society surviving today is that of the Nayars of Southern India, where the princesses, though married to child-husbands whom they immediately divorce, bear children to lovers of no particular rank; and the princesses of several matrilineal tribes of West Africa marry foreigners or commoners. The royal women of pre-Hellenic Greece also thought nothing of taking lovers from among their serfs, if the Hundred Houses of Locris and Epizephyrian Locre were not exceptional (Rice, 1976).

When the shortness of the king's reign proved irksome, it was agreed to prolong the thirteen-month year to a Great Year of 100 lunation in the last of which occurs a near-coincidence of solar and lunar time. But since the fields and crops still needed to be fructified, the king agreed to suffer an annual mock death and yield his sovereignty for one day - the intercalated one, lying outside the sacred sidereal year - to the surrogate boy-king, or *interrex*, who died at its close, and whose blood was used for the sprinkling ceremony. Now the sacred king either reigned for the entire period of a Great Year, with a ***tanist*** as his lieutenant; or the two reigned for alternate years; or the queen let them divide the Queendom into halves and reign concurrently (Leaky, 1961). The king deputized for the queen at many sacred functions, dressed in her robes, wore false breasts, borrowed her lunar axe as a symbol of power, and even took over from her the magical art of rain-making. His ritual death varied greatly in circumstance: he might be torn in pieces by wild women, transfixed with a sting-ray spear, felled with an axe, pricked in the heel with a poisoned arrow, flung over a cliff, burned to death on a pyre, drowned in a pool, or killed in a pre-arranged chariot crash. But die he must. A new stage was reached when animals came to be substituted for boys at the sacrificial altar, and the king refused death after his lengthened reign ended. Dividing the realm into three parts, and awarding one part to

each of his successors, he would reign for another term; his excuse being that a closer approximation of solar and lunar time had now been found, namely nineteen years, or 325 lunations. The Great Year had become *a* Greater Year.

Throughout these successive stages, reflected in numerous myths, the sacred king continued to hold his position only by right of marriage to the tribal nymph, who was chosen cither as a result of a foot race between her companions of the royal house or by ultimogeniture – that is by being the youngest nubile daughter of the junior branch. The throne remained matrilineal, as it theoretically did even in Egypt, and the sacred king and his tanist were therefore always chosen from outside the royal female house; until some daring king at last decided to commit incest with the heiress, who ranked as his daughter, and thus gain a new title to the throne when his reign needed renewal (Rice, 1967).

Achaean invasions of the thirteenth century BC seriously weakened the matrilineal tradition. It seems that the king now contrived to reign for the term of his natural life; and when the Dorians arrived, towards the close of the second millennium, patrilineal succession became the rule. A prince no longer left his father's house and married a foreign princess; she came to him, as Odysseus persuaded Penelope to do. Genealogy became matrilineal, though a Samian incident mentioned in the Pseudo-Heroditus's *Life of Homer* shows that for some time after the Apatoria, or Festival of Male Kinship, had replaced that of Female Kinship; the rites still consisted of sacrifices to the Mother goddess which men were not eligible to attend.

The familiar Olympian system was then agreed upon as a compromise between Hellenic and pre-Hellenic views: a divine family of six gods and six goddesses, headed by the co-sovereigns Zeus and Hera and forming a Council of Gods in Babylonian style. But after a rebellion of the pre-Hellenic population, described in the *Iliad* as a conspiracy against Zeus, Hera became subservient to him. Athene avowed herself 'all for the Father' and in the end, Dionysus assured male preponderance in the Council by displacing Hestia. Yet the goddesses, though left in a minority, were never altogether ousted - as they were at Jerusalem -because, as Herodotus puts it, the revered poets Homer and Hesiod had 'given the deities their titles and distinguished their several provinces and special powers', which could not be easily expropriated (Schaeffer, 1976) Moreover, though the system of gathering all the women of royal blood together under the king's control, and thus discouraging outsiders from attempts on a matrilineal throne, was adopted at Rome when the Vestal College was founded, and in Palestine when King David formed his royal harem, it never reached Greece. Matrilineal descent, succession, and inheritance

discourage further myth-making; historical legend then begins and fades into the light of common history (Schaeffer, 1976).

Roman civilization is the direct ancestor of the modern western world. From the first conquests of the Roman Republic down to our own days Roman Law and political ideas have had strong influence on the European scene and the entire Western World. Wherever western civilization has gone, it has been marked by the Romans. Rome annexed Greece in the second century B.C, modified the Olympian religion to include their own local gods and practices, but otherwise simply took over Greek stories lock, stock and barrels (Holsti, 1995)). It is however instructive to note that Queendoms existed before kingdoms and women held sway for millennia as long as the concept of fatherhood has not been discovered. What then was the role of the African Women in Diplomacy? This shall be our next point of focus. We shall trace the position of the female folk in the development and practice of Diplomacy among the Kalabari Ijaw, Niger Delta, Nigeria.

The role of women in influencing foreign policy decision as individuals exemplified in the case of Queen Amina of Zaria or women groups as in the 1929 Aba Women Riot, and the cases of the Amazons of Dahomey who physically took part in warfare are well documented. Among the Kalabari Ijaw for instance, the woman is bred from infancy in preparation for her diplomatic roles. Such preparation were marked by ceremonies and festivals of passages that herald the various stages of growth to wmanhood (Ateh, 1984), Talbot, (1932), Ateh, (1984), Suku, (2013) have identified some as *ikuta-de*, *Konju fina, Bita sirama, pakiri inwanyi* among others. It should be noted that these ceremonies are performed pre and post menstrual ages of these women. Some of the early trainings in diplomacy may include; but not limited to manner of speech, personal conduct and negotiations.

All through the life of the Kalabari woman, she is surrounded with several rites of passage. First at her birth, she is wrapped in real india (injiri) as the first mark of reception into the Kalabari society. She grows up through much of childhood wearing nothing. Just before puberty, the girl enters into another stage of her life signalled by the ceremony of *ikuta-de* (bead decking). At this time, she is adorned with beads round her waist and gracefully walks round the town for about a week, showing off her supple female body. To match this traditional outfit is the hair-do patterned in ringlets called **ononga** which is fitted with decorative combs (*angra*). The body of the girl is also rubbed with native camwood (*awu isi*). During ikuta-de which permits the covering of the pubic region with a small piece of cloth the size of handkerchief, no cloth is worn other than the beads. All other parts of the young girl's body are completely bare. The girl, in this outfit, also calls on the chiefs' wives to receive their blessings and approbation for conforming to tradition. Next, is the

ceremony of **pakiri inwanyi** (tying of half cloth) which occurs around teenage years. Here, the girl's pubic area is covered up with half piece *(pakiri)* of traditional cloth of assorted types like *onunga* and *engene bite* down to half way above the knees. The half cloth is complemented by artistic designs on her body made with indigo *(buruma).* The girl undergoing this ceremony also holds an umbrella in her right hand and has a scarf tied round her neck. In her left hand, she holds a saucer in which cash gifts may be dropped by her admirers. Her breasts point out uncovered to form an aesthetic attraction to the men folk as she gracefully saunters about town.

Konju fina (covering the buttocks) is the ceremony which marks the next stage and entails tying of important tradition attires like ***sinini bite, engene bite, loko bite*** just above the knees. It precedes the **bite sira-ma** stage. Next, the young woman undergoes *bite sira-ma* (full length clothing) to denote her full adolescence. All these stages require the girl to show herself to the wives of the chiefs for approval,. It is worthy of note that in all these stages, the girl is confined to the fattening room, to be fully catered for by her family without her involvement in any domestic chores. She is expected to feed fat and come out very robust. Moreover, undergoing these rites traditionally projects the girl as getting ripe for marriage; so suitors could start making advances. But strictly speaking, the girl must remain undefiled throughout these stages. During these periods, she could be betrothed to a man/boy who could only have intimate relation with her after their marriage. The Kalabari woman from infancy is apprenticed to her parents and members of the extended family, especially the women. She learns to sit in the proper way befitting a girl; she learns to sweep properly, by handling the broom and bending properly; she learns to walk properly; even her eating manners are supervised and scrutinised. She learns to speak decently and according to custom; certain words are not used publicly by a Kalabari woman. In fact; virtually every conduct of the female child comes under the surveillance of her elders. It is significant to mention that acculturation in Kalabari is the responsibility of everyone in the society for the Kalabari believe that **tubo iyibo iyi ama pirim** (parents bear a child for the community). Therefore, any disgrace a child brings reflects not only on its family but on the entire society.

Roles of African Women in Diplomacy

The Kalabari Ijaw women in Diplomacy cannot be discussed in isolation. This is because the position and role in Diplomacy of the woman in the larger African society was largely the same, though with silt variations. The woman occupied a pride of place, and a highly esteemed position in the traditional African society. Among the Kalabari, women are widely consulted both in times of interstate harmony and dispute. Their opinions were highly considered in decision making. Women foster amicable relations between states

and in other times, they bind nations together through inter-state marriages. In times of hostilities among states, women serve as agents of initial informal negotiation and truce-making before actual peace moves were made. Women were involved in several instances in Public Diplomacy as they launder the image of their states in foreign lands – an act of diplomacy needed as a prelude to genuine reconciliation (Asimiea, 2020). Women rule the hearts of men who were battle tasty by engaging in Diplomacy of Peace Building.

Tradition is the bedrock for maintaining stability and community in the affairs of the African.. Therefore, it would appear that the real origin of women's role in Kalabari tradition and indigenous diplomacy appears to have been enmeshed in the thicket of myths and legend of the people, and except for the fact that the concept of God, and the National Deity of Kalabari is female, there appears to be very little; if any, by way of authenticated sources. But, Diplomacy reflects the values of nations and peoples, their cultural and civilizational specificities, political choices, and their religious precepts and traditions. It is a portrait of the past, a reflection of the present, and a vision of the future. Any form of diplomacy is built around the principles governing the political structure of the state it represents, whose interests it serves and whose entity it embodies abroad (Altwaijri, 2009). The whole network of processes applied to bring about peaceful pursuit of these state values in the international community is what Satow (2017) refers to as Diplomacy. Diplomacy may therefore represent the interest of a political or economic group, or those of a regional or geographical block, and among the Kalabari the women folk are supremely involved.

Generally, a Kalabari woman is shown great courtesy and consideration on public occasions, for while even a chief is expected to stand up to speak, only a woman is allowed to sit while addressing a public gathering. The Kalabari woman is an ornament of great admiration to her menfolk. To keep them enthralled, she is accordingly groomed early in life in the social graces to 'walk like a woman and talk like a woman and so on.

Besides, the traditional role of wife and mother which she is expected to play, she is allowed to be seen and heard in the wider community. In matters of national importance, a call goes out to the women. Even though her role may appear to be relatively passive, particularly in sensitive areas such as discussions on strategies for national security, the role of the woman in diplomacy is nonetheless, a powerful though subtle one.

As we have stated elsewhere in this paper, women are consulted on all important family matters; even in warfare Kalabari women play very prominent roles, Where as theirs is unlike the Amazons of Dahomey, who physically participate in warfare, Kalabari women

play more leading roles, advising, cleansing and purifying their men both before they set out for battle and on their arrival from the war zone. In cases, when it becomes inevitable for prominent men to disagree over issues of importance, it is normally the female relatives or wives who appeal to them for self restraint. (Ateh, 1984; Ibama 1984).

Among these women in Kalabari Diplomacy are the class referred to as '***Oru koro Ereme***' – women who serve as mediums through whom the ancestral spirit of fallen heroes communicate with the living. These classes of women are involved in Diplomacy as they expressly hear from the deities who in turn dictate when to go to war or sue for peace with neighbouring states. There are also the '***Egbele ereme*** – women who have passed the age of menses. Here, it is a common belief among the Kalabari that this class of women are pure and therefore are looked upon to perform certain sacred functions in times of calamity. They play active roles in purifying the warriors before and after battle. They also make useful suggestion for peaceful intercourse with sister nations. The 'Egbele erebo'' – (singular for the class of women) is active in the installation of a new Amayanabo – (King) among the people.

Conclusion

In sum, it is a trite Diplomacy in the eighth century B.C, when. the princes of the newly formed states in China successfully challenged the power and authority of the Chiinese emperor, thereby putting an end to the Chinese feudal order and the Chou Dynasty of 1122B.C. to 221 B.C. Similarly, in 1648, European diplomats and princes converged in Westphalia to sign a Peace Treaty ending the Thirty Years War. They also declared that from henceforth the leader of the Holy Roman Empire could no longer lord it over the territories of Princes and Sovereigns, and that the latter were in no way obliged to respond to the directives of the Emperor. This act symbolized the emergence of the modern European states system. But, outside Asia and Europe, other groups and continents existed. The international system is described as any collection of independent political entities – tribes, city states, nations or empires; that interact with considerable frequency and according to regularized processes, whereas diplomacy is conceived as the peaceful conduct of relations among the constituents of the international system. It perhaps makes a lot of sense to take the position that pristine societies interacted in some level of peace (diplomacy), long before recorded history, and women have been massively involved in the peaceful conducts of these relations in the international space overtly or covertly as amongst the Kalabari Ijaw of the Niger Delta, Nigeria. In fact, just as the Princes of China and the Sovereigns in Europe were groomed in preparation for the task of diplomacy, so were the female folks of Kalabari prepared for their future roles in Diplomacy.

Recommendation

The female folks have been involved in interstates negotiations and peacemaking processes between feuding state parties with recorded success. They held sway as centre piece of world diplomacy in several cultures before now therefore, modern society should rethink the diplomatic roles allotted to them. More recognition should be accorded the woman; in order to tap from the reserve of their peaceful disposition not only as mothers who suffer the pang of child-birth, but also as mothers of children who perish in wars, and who became the first victims of policy malformation. The paper strongly recommends that women should be given greater opportunity in the scheme of international relations and modern day diplomacy.

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