The Place of Women in the Development of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State, 1960-2015

By

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Abstract

This work examines the place of women in the development of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. As it is well known, men have played a dominant role in the affairs of the world and the men in Nembe and Brass LGAs are not an exception. This domineering posture of men will make many believe that women do not have or make any tangible contribution to the development of their societies. It is for this reason that this study examines the place of women in the development of the said LGAs. Women, the study reveals, have contributed to the development of the LGAs socially, economically and politically. Socially, they have been active in the religious activities of the land and have also encouraged the education of their children. They are also involved in the provision of unorthodox and orthodox medical services to the people. Economically, they took part in the indigenous economic activities and have continued to contribute through trade, tailoring, salons, and restaurants modern times. While women participation in politics has been passive in the past due to lack of awareness and consciousness, this too has changed as they now play active politics. Primary and secondary sources were utilized for this study and it is descriptive and analytical

Key words: Women, Men, Politics, Development, Society

Introduction

The Nembe and Brass people belong to a sub-group of the Ijo speaking people in the Eastern Niger Delta. A linguistic examination and analysis indicates that the Ijo language spoken by the Nembe and Brass people belong to the Niger Congo family of the African languages (Alagoa:2005). Nembe and Brass is made up of several communities. These communities include, Ogbolomabiri, Bassambiri, Okoroma, Twon-Brass, Akassa, Okpoama, Odiama, Sangang, Beletiama, Ewoama, Diema, Liama, Konko, Egwema, Ikensi, Oguama, Otatubu, Ologoama, Iwokiri, etc (Larry, 2019, Ama-Ogbari, 2014).

Brass Local Government Area came into existence with the Local Government Reforms of 1976 (Ama-Ogbari, 2014). The Local Government Reforms of 1976 unified local

government administration in Nigeria. Before this time, Brass Local Government Area was a Division in the then Port-Harcourt Province of the Eastern Region in Nigeria. The then Brass Division comprises of Nembe, Ogbia, Epie-Atissa and Eastern Ijaw clans in the Port –Harcourt Province (Larry, 2019). Subsequently, the original Brass Local Government Area has been sub-divided into Ogbia Local Government Area, Nembe Local Government Area and Brass Local Government Area respectively. Ogbia Local Government Area was carved out of the original Brass Local Government Area in 1991 by the Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's military administration and at the creation of Bayelsa State in 1996, Brass Local Government Area was further split into Brass and Nembe Local Government Areas. (Larry 2019, Ama-Ogbari 2014). Brass Local Government Area has its headquarters at Twon-Brass. It is bounded on the East by the St. Bartholomew's River and widely transverses numerous fresh and salt water swamps, creeks, streams and rivulets. It is bounded on the south by the Atlantic Ocean and on the north by some dry land. While on the west, it is bounded by Nembe Local Government Area (Igba, 2006).

Nembe Local Government Area as mentioned earlier was carved out from Brass Local Government Area on the 1st of October 1996 when Bayelsa State was created. Nembe Local Government Area has its headquarters in Nembe-Basambiri. Nembe Local Government Area is bounded on the East by Akukutoru and Abua Odual Local Government Areas of Rivers State and in the north and west by Ogbia Local Government Area and in the south by Brass Local Government Area (Ama-Ogbari, 2014, Larry, 2019). The area is characterized by rivulets, creeks and canals. Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas are naturally provided with rich flora and fauna that serve as primary sources of livelihood for the people from generation to generation. The land is wet and its ecological environment portrays the beauty and harmony of nature, when unhampered and unadulterated by human civilization and technology. (Degi, 2006). It consists of sandy coastal ridges, blackish or saline mangrove swamp forest, rain forest, fresh water swamp and low land. (Alagoa, 1999 and 2005).

Women and Social Development in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas

Women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have been actively involved in the development of their Local Government Areas in diverse ways. Thus, in this section, I shall examine the social role women play in the development of these sister local government areas. I shall do this by interrogating their role in education, religion and health care delivery.

Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have been actively involved in the education of their children and

relatives alike. As it is widely known and accepted, socialization begins in the family and it is the women that initiate this process of socialization in the family. This act of socializing the children in the family and by extension community is what is referred to as "Traditional Education". Traditional Education is the informal means children are trained in their respective families and communities to become useful citizens in the society. As revealed by Olali (2002), "these lessons begin as soon as a child is old enough to receive instruction". It comes before western education. Traditional education involves teaching children to respect their elders, obedience and performing household chores (Olali, 2002).

As expected, women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have played an important role in this regard. It is under their tutelage that the child learnt to do household chores such as washing of cloths, plates, fetching water, cooking dishes and so on. Specifically, the girl-child is taught how to sit properly by closing her legs in the sitting position, she is also taught how to handle brooms and how to position herself when sweeping to avoid exposing sensitive parts of her body (Olali, 2002). This is in addition to teaching the children how to swim, paddle and engage in fishing which is a predominant economic activity in the area. From the foregoing postulations, it is evident that women have contributed to the development of Nembe-Brass Local Government Areas by teaching their children societal norms and values.

The introduction of Christianity in Nembe-Brass in the 19th century heralded western education in the area. In this form of education, people were taught how to read and write. This led to the building of schools in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas. The first school in Nembe-Brass was built in Twon-Brass in 1868 by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) in collaboration with the King and people of Twon-Brass. This was followed by another school in Nembe- Ogbolomabiri in 1869 under the same arrangement (Olali, 2002).

Olali (2002) further revealed that, the chances of women acquiring western education was very slim in this period. For in the thinking of the people, the traditional role women play as wives and mothers do not require western education. Thus, they refused to send their female children to school even when they were given privileges. However, this attitude had changed, especially from the 1960's when Nigeria gained independence. The number of female children in schools had continued to increase by the year. Female children from Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas now enroll for schools at different levels, ranging from primary to tertiary institutions.

Women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have continued to show concern for the acquisition of western education by their children and relations since the inception of western education in the areas. They assist their husbands and when necessity demands, take sole responsibility of training their children in schools. Besides, they advise erring ones to be serious with their studies so they can live a fulfilled life in future.

Women in Nembe and Brass have equally been active in the practice of traditional medicine. One area they have been effective is the area of traditional birth attendants and midwifery. As traditional birth attendants and midwives, women provided safety measures by massaging and providing herbs and roots for pregnant women to ensure that they deliver safely (Diete, 2021). The women traditional birth attendants in Nembe and Brass, "*Ira Koribo*" not only ensure safe delivery of the child but also takes care of mother and child for weeks after delivery. They also treat some cases of infertility in women. They do this by various manipulations on the uterus. After the manipulations, herbs are given orally. Some of these women get pregnant after such manipulations, thus strengthening the belief in the efficacy of this mode of treatment (Mangete *etal*,1999). Progressively, with the introduction of Christianity and western education in the area, some women of Nembe-Brass origin had become trained officials in orthodox or western medicine. These women together with their traditional counterparts have continued to render health care delivery services to the people of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas.

The people of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have evolved several religious belief systems that are indigenous to them. Consequently, the people worshipped a variety of gods. They also believed and worshipped the supreme God whom they recognized as the creator (Olali, 2002, Ogbari, 2004, Alagoa, 1999). Some of the deities/gods they worshipped include; Ogidiga which is the national god, Kalamayana, Ideye, Peleyai, Sakiapele, Agbalakoko, among others (Alagoa,1995, Olali, 2002, Ogbari, 2014). The deities mentioned above were represented by several totems. For instance, Ogidiga the national god is symbolized by Python, Spider, Periwinkle, and Wall Gecko. Among the Okpoama, the Eagle was revered as a sacred symbol of their deity (Alagoa, 1995, Olali, 2002). These totems were not to be killed or eaten. This explains why some sections of the Nembe-Brass people do not sell periwinkle. It is believed that, those who harm these totems will be punished by the vindictive spirits the totems represent (Olali, 2002).

In addition to the foregoing, some forests in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas were designated sacred areas and as such, entry into such forests were prohibited. Those who dare the gods by entering into such forests were made to pay with their lives as they never have the opportunity to return. Akurobopiri and Seipiri in Diema-Brass are

examples of such forests as revealed by Sounpre Ethel, an informant. Furthermore, some days were regarded as sacred, known in the local parlance as "*kaka*". People were barred from going to the forests on such days as the defaulters were made to bear the consequences.

The women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have been actively involved in observing these religious practices of the people, ensuring that peace and stability prevailed in the area. First, they ensure that they comply with all the laws binding the worship of the various deities in the area. By this, they ensure that no calamity befall their communities as a result of their failure to uphold the laws. Also of importance is the role women play during festivals. During traditional festivals, which feature in Nembe and Brass communities, women are saddled with the responsibility of preparing dishes for the guests in various occasions. They also entertain the people with songs. By preparing special ceremonial dishes and singing special songs, women help to preserve the ancient nutritional and musical culture of the Nembe-Brass people. By this act, they contribute to the survival of the traditional industry associated with cuisines and music (Grace, 2021).

Another important task the women perform that is synonymous with bringing development to the area is an act of appeasement. This act is called "*Erevuma*" among the Nembe-Brass people. *Erevuma* is performed by some women going naked and walking through the length and breadth of the affected town at night. It is believed that the nakedness of these women drives out evil spirits from the town and it was regarded as a cleaning exercise (Evelyn, 2020). These women are said to ask spirits not friendly to the community and as such causing havoc to vacate the community during the exercise. This was aimed at restoring peace and stability to the affected community.

Women and the Economy of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas

The deltaic nature of the environment of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have made the women to be active economically. They have embarked on several economic activities for the well-being of their families and communities. The economic activities they engage in include fishing, salt making, gathering, thatch making, weaving, farming, trade, etc. For the purpose of this research work, I shall discuss their most significant economic engagements.

It is a well-known fact that, women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas are typical fisher women. This is occasioned by the nature of the environment they find themselves. The Atlantic Ocean and the numerous creeks and rivers contain various species of fishes. Consequently, traditional fishing activities flourish well with high income

yielding capacity (Diete, 2021). With the periodic change of climatic conditions of rainy and dry seasons, the fishing activities also change in their methods and fishing gears. The fishes caught by the women during fishing are used to supplement their diets and the surplus sold to meet other needs of the family.

Salt making was an important economic activity of the women of Nembe-Brass in the past. Salt, which was produced both for subsistence and commercial purposes was utilized for nutritional, medicinal and preservative purposes. It was extremely important to the health and daily existence of not only the women but also the generality of the people of Nembe-Brass (Olali, 2002). The women adopted two methods in manufacturing the salt. This was by boiling the seawater continually until the required salt is produced and by burning of the seedlings and secondary prop roots of the red mangrove tree, collecting the ashes in a container with holes placed on clay pot, passing water through the ashes so that the liquid could be contained in the pot beneath. The liquid so collected was then boiled until the water is completely dried, then the clay pot is broken so that the salt can be extracted (Olali, 2002).

The women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas also engaged in gathering as a means of livelihood. There were several species of arthropods that they gathered. Some of these arthropods are Oyster (*imoba*), periwinkle (*isemi*) water snail, (*egelegboin*) etc. In addition to the foregoing, a wide variety of fruits such as palm kennel and raffia palm fruits were gathered by these women. They also collected grubs, all of which were used as food and as baits for fishing (Olali, 2002). Much of these gathering activities were done in the muddy banks of the rivers during ebb tide, while others were done in the surrounding bushes and forest.

The swampy (deltaic) nature of the Nembe-Brass environment which is characterized mainly by mangrove forest, only gives allowance for little portions of arable land. This made the women of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas to be subsistence farmers. These women carryout their farming activities mostly within their compounds and surrounding bushes. Some of the food crops produced by these women are plantain, banana, cassava, pepper, scent leave, okra, sugar cane, etc (Ateimie, 2021).

Another area the impact of women is continually felt is in the area of trade. The women of Nembe-Brass have traded within themselves and outside their environment over the years. In other words, they have traded among themselves and had established trade relations both with their immediate and remote neighbours. They bartered and when currency was introduced, sold to and bought goods from their neighbours. From the 1980s, trade in

Nembe-Brass took a new dimension. Trade in this era was not limited to the exchange of or sale of locally produced goods such and fish and salt but included other goods such as food stuffs, provisions, tailoring materials etc. As a matter of fact, there is no community in Nembe-Brass that you will not find a woman selling provisions. Women, including housewives now utilize every available space in their domains to sell goods, the quantity notwithstanding in order to support their families.

This increase in the volume of trade is partly necessitated by the introduction of local engine boats which substituted the hand dug canoe. With "local boat", as it is fondly called, women go on trade expedition to Port Harcourt. They spend about 12 to 14 hours to get to their destination. The construction of a motorable road to Ogbia and recently Nembe has also contributed to the increase in the volume of trade. Many women now prefer to trade or buy their wares in the Ogbia market as that route is faster and less expensive. Besides trading in Ogbia, they now have an easy access to Yenagoa, the Bayelsa state capital where they buy certain goods they were buying in Port Harcourt (Aboye, 2021).

More so, there are some women hair specialist in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas. These ones operate hair dressing salons where they treat and dress women's hair. There are also tailoring stores owned by women in these Local Government Areas. Some of these women have become so successful that they employ others, thus making them employers of labour. Consequently, people come to these women to learn their trade as apprentices. These apprentices pay a certain amount of money to their "madam" with drinks before they commence their training. Thus, there is a circular flow of income as monies come from customers and apprentices to the madam and from the madam to her employees. The resultant effect of this development is that, more money is infused into the economy and the Nembe-Brass people are the beneficiaries. (Africanus, 2021). Furthermore, some women of Nembe and Brass origin are gainfully employed. Thus, by engaging in the aforementioned economic activities, women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have contributed to the development of the Local Government Areas by assisting the men in providing the basic needs of the people such as food, shelter, clothing and finance.

Women and Political Participation in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas

The participation of women in the politics of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas in the past has been passive. This was due to the lack of awareness and consciousness on the part of the women folk and the monopolistic tendencies of men over the political activities in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas (Degi, 2006). The women were even dominated by men in the village assembly. In other words, they were not active, if at

all they participated in the governance of their communities. In fact, they were not represented in the council of chiefs that performed executive, legislative, and judicial functions. Consequent upon the foregoing, the men made, enforced, and implemented the laws for the community and the laws when made were to be obeyed by the women whether advantageous disadvantageous (Degi, 2006).

The implication of this was that women lived under the rules and regulations that were made by the men. A good example of such laws was the one on divorce which stipulates that if the wife initiated the process of divorce, she had to return the bride price to her husband immediately. If the process of divorce was initiated by the husband, the wife was at liberty to return the bride price to her husband when she is prepared to do so. Put differently, the wife was given the freedom on when to return the bride price if the husband was the one that initiated the divorce. This provision of the law according to Degi (2006) was unfair to the women as it only benefited the husband whether he initiated the divorce process or not.

In addition, a woman in this situation was expected not to meet with any man until she returns the bride price to her ex-husband. If this law was disobeyed, it attracted a fine from her would-be husband. More so, the women were mobilized by the men to partake in some of the activities in the community such as the general cleaning of the communities occasionally as stipulated by the rules and regulations. This was the trend of traditional politics in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas till modern times. The modern political era in the history of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas can be traced to the introduction of the Macpherson Constitution in 1951 as revealed by Degi (2006).

The introduction of representative government in Nigeria by the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 ushered in a new sense of political consciousness and awareness among the women folk in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas. By the provisions of this constitution, each region was to have a regional House of Assembly and elections into these Houses was through the electoral college. The members of these electoral colleges were to be elected through direct elections by the people (Ikime, 2006). In this political era, the Nembe and Brass people were under the Eastern Region.

At the initial stage of this political era, the women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas were still relegated to the background as they were only mobilized by the men to vote for their choice of candidates in the elections. Women were not given the chance to fully participate or exercise their political rights. It was basically the men that did the whole election (Afuro, 2021). The reason for this development was due largely to the fact that the

Nembe-Brass area was still dominated by male politicians. Put differently, there were no female politicians whose political consciousness was strong enough to challenge the male dominance in politics. In the local government area elections too, the role of women was that of mobilization. All those voted to represent Nembe-Brass in the County and District Councils respectively were all males. This was the position of women until the collapse of the First Republic on January 15, 1966.

However, the Second Republic brought a change in the place of women in politics in Nembe-Brass. During this period, there was an increase in the participation of women in politics in the area. Women became registered members of political parties. In the light of the above, women in Nembe and Brass no longer sit down to be mobilized by their male counterparts but they were also part of those who were given the work of mobilization. From the elections in the Second Republic and beyond, women in Nembe-Brass now mobilize their fellow women to support and vote for their respective parties.

More so, political parties now have women as women leaders who mobilize women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas. In addition to the foregoing, different committees formed by party stalwarts in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas now recognize the importance of the role and position of women and make them an integral part of such committees. Prominent women politicians in Nembe and Brass include; Hon. Remi Kuki, Hon. (Mrs) Marie Ebikaki, Mrs. Mercy Alagoa, Mrs Gariba, Hon. Enemo Karina, Hon. (Mrs) Rubi Benjamin (late), etc. These dynamic women politicians had held and are still holding different political positions at the Local, State, and Federal levels of government.

Hon. Remi Kuku, for instance, rose as a local level politician to occupy the exalted position of Commissioner during the administration of His Excellency, Chief D.S.P. Alamieyeseigha, the first Executive Governor of Bayelsa State. Hon. (Mrs) Marie Ebikake was the first female chairperson of Brass Local Government Area and indeed Bayelsa as a whole. Hon. Ebikake performed so creditably during her tenure as chairperson (1997-1998). Though her tenure was short lived due to incessant litigations, she empowered both men and women in the Local Government Area as opined by Johnson, (2021). Hon. Enemo Karina was a one-time chairperson of Okoroma / Tereke Development Centre. Hon. Rubi Benjamin was a Special Adviser to Dr. Goodluck Jonathan and later became member of the Bayelsa State House of Assembly. The list of strong women politicians in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas is growing. Thus, with the above exposition, it is safe to say that women have contributed to the growth and development of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas.

Conclusion

This work is an examination of the role of women in the development of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas. Socially, the work reveals that the women of Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas have been actively involved in the religious practices of the people. They ensure that they comply with the laws binding the worship of deities and when, Christianity was introduced, they supported the church. Similarly, they encourage the process of educating their children by inculcating morals on them and when western education was introduced, they have been instrumental to its growth by their material and moral support. The same goes for their involvement in healthcare delivery.

Economically, it is recorded that, women had participated in the indigenous economy by embarking on several economic activities. They have also continued to contribute to the development of the area through trade, tailoring, operation of canteens and restaurants, hair dressing saloons, etc, in modern times. It is further recorded that, women participation in politics in the past was passive because of the lack of awareness and consciousness, coupled with the monopolistic tendencies of men but that it has changed, especially from the Second Republic and women in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas now play active roles in the politics of the day with some of them elected into sensitive political offices.

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