Advocacy for Women: Opobo Women Welfare Association Experience, 1971 – to the Recent Past

By

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Abstract

Advocacy for women examines the activities of women in Opobo from 1971 – present. It also took general overview of the pre-colonial women activities. The Opobo Women Welfare Association which is the main focus of this paper was considered with particular attention on the achievements of the past and present Presidents of the Association. The holding of court sessions without fear or favour with judgements that were accepted by both the winners and losers alike was very unique. The paper adopts the use of mostly secondary sources to achieve the full investigation and reconstruction of the history of the women. The paper recommends more research in other areas of women's endeavour like women who founded independent churches and ministries, local midwives, fish traders etc.

Background

The changing roles of Opobo women in development in the home and larger society transcends the home front where she was seen as a wife, mother and caregiver to not just her immediate family but also the extended family.

Womanhood is an aspect of the traditional and cultural features of Opobo Kingdom. Moreover, Opobo is a class society and women are not left out in this scheme. The process of achieving womanhood in Opobo starts from the age of 15. By this age, the parents had set out to groom the girl child for the task ahead of becoming a wife. Its significant lies in the fact that projecting her will attract potential suitors, without which some girls may not be known to have attained the marriageable age. The first stage is the egenebite ceremony. After marriage, at the age of forty, she was expected to mature into the exhibition of the potentially of managing her home effectively and comfortably for her husband to further endow her in the ceremony of the Bibite (change of wrappers) from the heavy woven wrappers to the light Indian George wrappers. At this point she was recognized as a full-fledged woman with all the attributes of womanhood. From now on she has separated herself from the other women that had not performed this ceremony and now elevated to

higher social and leadership status. For a woman to be said to have completed the Iria ceremony, she has to pass through the stages listed by Bell-Gam as follows – Kala-Egenebite, Opu-Egenebite and Bibite (Hope Bell-Gam, 2020:24).

Literature Review

The observations Prof. Bolanle Awe, as a guest speaker in 2000 at the University of Port Harcourt during the workshop on "Women in Nigerian History: Rivers and Bayelsa States Experience" that the failure of the earlier historians, Prof. Kenneth Dike, Prof. E.J Alagoa, Prof. T.N.T. Tamuno to pay attention to the contributions of women had made women invincible in community histories in Rivers and Bayelsa states; that the history of men is not necessarily the history of women and that African historians have perpetuated the masculine-centred view of history and assumed that the male experience is the norm for all human beings (Awe, B. 2003). Prof. Ejituwu (2003) puts the Niger Delta women in three social classes of upper, middle and lower, he was oblivious of the fact that in the Eastern Niger Delta, with the peculiar war canoe house system, all the women in a particular trading state came under one umbrella organization. In Opobo they were referred to as Opubo Ereapu Kubiri (the assembly of women) and any information received by the President of this assembly got to the upper, middle and the lower classes at once. Following this arrangement, all the different group of houses also have their executive members.

The role of each of these arms compliments the other (Awe, B. 2003) and the interest of the women in the Kingdom is taken care of. For instance, the bigger Ibani clan (Bonny and Opobo) from inception had featured the activities of women and the roles they played as mothers, wives and caregivers. To strike a balance in African Historiography, which is the object of every historical discourse, the roles played by women should be reflected. Ejituwu (2003:103) warned that every element of subjectivity should be eliminated in historical literature and Eurocentricism (Segman, C.J. 1930) as quoted in Ejituwu (2003:104). Awe, B. (2003) asserted that there are fewer writers on the contributions of women to Nigerian society. Since after this observation, Historians became aware of the limitations given to women contributions as an object of history. In response to this call, a book titled, *Women In Nigerian History*: *The Rivers and Bayelsa State Experience*, proved worthwhile.

Jaja (2002: 220) made his contribution in this all important first attempt at projecting the political, economic and religious aspects of Ibani Women in History. Considerations were given to the first generation of women in the history of Ibani clan (Bonny and Opobo). His take off point was Queen Kambasa (Edimini Ba-Kamba) as the only woman who ruled Bonny Kingdom. Her achievements included the establishment of a palace guard called

Okpuapu, the formation of Owu Ogbo Society (Masquerade group), and the formation of a warrior outfit. The sacking of Opuoko, an Ogoni trading post, was the climax of her military power as a ruler.

Queen Okuru was the second Ibani Woman of fame who was linked with the intriguing transfer of the throne from King Awusa Halliday to Perekule (Jaja 2003: 22). Queen Osunju was said to have protected and guarded King Jaja's box containing treaty papers and other vital documents to Opobo from being guttered by fire in Bonny. Because of this singular act, King Jaja was said to have rewarded her with a war canoe house.

Between 1881– 1900 another very prominent woman of valour, Queen Kampa seized the opportunity of being involved in the Ibuno war to subdue Annag and Ibibio that posed a threat to the flow of trade along the river. After the war, she sent a message to King Jaja that she did not intend to return back to Opobo. Through to type, she purchased a piece of land from Elile people of Andoni and built up a settlement which she eventually named after herself. She became the first woman who founded a settlement of her own in Andoni territory. (Adagogo-Brown, Edna 2020)

Prof. Cookey recorded that between 1875 and 1881, King Jaja sent three expeditions to that area namely the Okpu-Uro war, the Nkpirikpo war and the Ibuno war to confirm the above assertion.

Opobo Women and the 1929 Women's War

Almost five decades after the Queen Kampa-led war of 1881 with the Ibunno people, Opobo women got involved yet in another war in 1929 known in history as Aba Women's war (Enemugwem 2003), the major cause of this war being the introduction of direct taxation in the Eastern province. Women were said to have been enumerated for taxation as well as men. This process of counting women in preparation for tax payment led to mass protest everywhere in the Eastern Provinces. The protest degenerated into war and the women clashed with the police. Opobo women at Egwenga joined the war. The clash between the colonial police and the women led to the death of about sixteen Opobo women and thirty-one of them wounded. They are as follows: Mary Nzekwe, Regina Cockey, Orugba, Regal Jaja, Oroni Jaja, Josphine Jaja, Mba Uranta, Nwanwa Waribo, Suyi Dappa, Virginia Ubani, Adline Toby, Mary Tatare, Elizabeth Black Fubara, Adline Black Fubara, Esther Strongface and Abigail Minima. Meanwhile the Amanyanabo of Opobo, King Arthur Mac Pepple, Jeki III, was a member representing Eastern Province in the Legislative Council in Lagos. As Opobo women got involved in the war, several of them were killed. The women in Opobo on hearing of the progress of the war and the involvement of the

branch, they volunteered to join their comrades at Egwenga. It was at this point that King Arthur Mac Pepple, Jeki III, raised alarm by preventing other women from crossing to Egwenga to join the war through a town crier, when the news filtered out to the Opobo Women in Egwenga that the King had stopped further movement out of Opobo Town. In anger, they destroyed the Native Court, Dispensary and the staff quarters with clubs and bottles. In order to calm the nerves of the women, the legislative Council passed a bill amongst other things, to vote out money for the development of the areas affected instead of putting tax burden on women. A colonial grant was eventually released for infrastructural development of the area. Without the active participation of the women, the change that came would not have come.

After the 1929 women war, the Legislative Council discussed the way forward for the colonies, and at the end, arrived at a bill for colonial development across the country. When it was passed into law, it attracted £6,500,000 to the area.



The grave of the unknown woman at Opobo Division, 1929



A session of the women after one of their meetings in preparation for the protest Opobo Division Egwenga, 1929 (Women War museum Egwenga 2017).
Source: Women War Museum Egwenga, 2017

Opobo Women Welfare Association 1971 -

Awe (2003) asserted that one important element in Social History is the insistence on the importance of the experience of various groups. These various groups include the women. For instance, Nigerian women were involved in the Affirmative Action Programme of the First Ladies of all Africa countries' Conference under the theme "Women, Peace and Humanitarianism in 1999" in Abuja. Their activities centred on the need for gender Sensitivity and "Affirmative Action" in favour of women (Ejitiwu and Gabriel (ed) 2003: iii). While the Nigerian women, promoted the interest of the generality of the Women, at Abuja, the Opobo Women Welfare, were at the other hand promoting the interest of their Women at the local level. Before the end of the last quarter of the 19th century, women had been very visible in Opobo history. For instance, the Oruku wives (principal wives) of the King and Chiefs as foster mothers performed motherhood roles to purchased slaves and adopted sons. Jones (1963) described them as greater wives and that they performed the ritual of the shaving of heads of such sons with ereji (small sharp knives) and after this ritual, the boys became sons and the girls, daughters. These sons and daughters grew up eventually in the burusu (kitchen) of the greater wives (Jones, G. 1963).



Although this Association had been in existence before the 1929 Women's war (Enemugwem 2003), the militant action of the women at Egwenga (Opobo) during the war, prompted the Amanyanabo of Opobo, King Arthur Mac Pepple, Jeki III, to suspend the activities of the Association in order to stop further loss of lives. This action by King Arthur

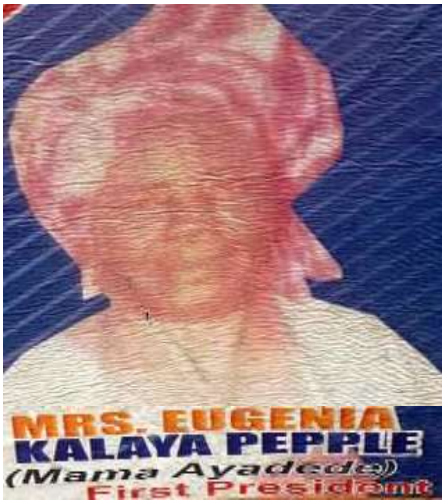
Mac Pepple was misconstrued by the Women to mean that his support for the taxation of women in the District. According to Enemugwen (2003), "the women spoke with one voice and asked for the deposition of the Amanyanabo". But it appeared that King Arthur Mac Pepple was acting in two capacities, first, as the Amanyanabo of Opobo and second, as a member of the Legislative Council in Lagos. It might have been possible for the women in the District to ask for his removal as a member representing the Eastern Provinces in the Legislative Council, in order to prevent him from further support of colonial policy making processes. According to an informant, the women of Opobo are knowledgeable enough not to join issues concerning the deposition of the Amanyanabo of Opobo Kingdom as suggested by Enemugwem (2003) rather what seemed to have happened at this point, the women may have asked for his removal from the Legislative Council. But for the women to ask for his deposition would be to take this matter too far. The Opobo women do not seem to have such a voice in the political history of Opobo to demand for the removal of an elected monarch.

During the colonial period, the women of Opobo, were organized under the egis of Opobo Women Congress, an umbrella body covering the whole of Opobo women. They retained this name throughout the colonial period (Jaja M.J. 2003:233). After Independence, women actively started to assume indigenous outlook to reflect the new national status and also to link their activities to the rest of the world. Very prominent Opobo women namely, Mrs Eugenia Ayadede Pepple, Queen Rosabel Arthur Mac Pepple, Madam Sussanah H. Epelle and others set out to found a new Organization with the name Opobo Women Welfare Association. Mrs Eugenia Ayadede Pepple was elected its first President. On 17th August, 1971 the organization was inaugurated at the Court Hall Opobo Town by King Douglas Jaja Jeki IV. He advised the women to take the welfare of the Women of Opobo very seriously and not be distracted. The executive members cut across the fourteen different groups of houses in Opobo Kingdom. The foundation members of Opobo Women Welfare Association in 1971 may not be acting in isolation but may be responding to a worldwide phenomenon which was famed as feminism. At that time, the multi-media – radio, newspapers and other sources of information could have influenced this all important movement. Juliana Okoh agreed with Lerner that "the process of creating feminist consciousness has something, but by no means everything to do with the quest for women's rights, equality and search for autonomy…". Autonomy means moving out from a world in which one is born to marginality, to a past without meaning and a future determined by others into a world in which one acts and chooses, aware of a meaningful past and free to shape one's future. (Lerner 1977:xxiv).

Come to think of it, the founders of Opobo Women Welfare Association were mostly married women including the wife of King Arthur Mac Pepple. The question is, what were these women looking for aside their homes? Were they dissatisfied with the treatment meted out to women in the community? To answer this question, Juliana Okoh posits that feminism is a way of thinking, an alternative perspective from which to understand the world as well as a social movement to effect changes in the prevailing structure. Infact, when one looks at the different arms of the Association including police headed by Madam Charity Stewart, you will immediately know that autonomy is what they were looking for. One will also see a group determined to act and shape their future without interference. Interestingly also, all their offices are by nominations and elections, without which no member of the association can act in any capacity.

Another area to scrutinize is the revenue, on yearly basis, the revenue were divided into three parts, two parts was retained by the Association while one part goes to the Polo that hosted the meeting. There seems to be transparency and accountability by the handlers of the Association's funds because there has not been any protest to suspect embezzlement of the Association funds. Generally too, the Association has not recorded any mismanagement crisis or conflict since its inception, meaning that there is harmony amongst the different arms of the Association. It is also observed that from inception, there has not been any abandoned project started by the previous executive. For instance, it was Amaopuroubo Hilda Fubara that completed the Craft Centre started by President Eugenia Pepple.

Mrs Eugenia Ayadede Pepple - 1971 - 1987



Mrs Eugenia Ayadede Pepple piloted the affairs of the association for fifteen years, exhibiting unequalled leadership style. President Eugenia Ayadede Pepple, was a woman with an unusual charisma who rendered selfless service to humanity. During her tenure, the Association built Culverts and Waiting Hall and also the Comprehensive Secondary School, Opobo Town, amongst other activities.



Amaopuorubo Hilda Ayayi Jim Fubara - 1987 - 2005

President Amaopuorubo Hilda Ayayi Jim Fubara piloted the affairs of the women for 18 years. She attracted tremendous achievements to the Association during her tenure. She was a pioneer of women's rights and empowerment in Opobo and Rivers State. She led the fight against Women and Child abuse. It was during her tenure as President of the Opobo Women Welfare Association that the Post Office was built and the Craft Centre was completed – An Institution recognized by the Rivers State Government for the training, certification and empowerment of women in Opobo and its environs. She was honoured as Life Membership of the National Council of Women Society (NCWS) amongst others.



2005

By 2005, Amaopuorubo Hilda Fubara handed over the leadership to the incumbent President Amaopuorubo Felicia Sam Annie Pepple. One of the innovations during her tenure was the introduction of an annual convention which attracts women of Opobo willing to add their quota to the development of women and children.

Under her leadership, she initiated some changes which were adopted by the Association. Before her assumption of office, the Association holds one day prayer as an annual activity. Before the commencement of the meeting, all the women would march down to King Jaja Jetty to receive members of Aba Branch, which was the strongest and the most vibrant of all the Branches. The Aba Branch then led the women for the general sanitation of the town, after which they gathered at the Opuwariku (Palace complex) for the roll calls, financial reports and closing. On her assumption of office as the new National President of the Association, she stopped the women from going to the King Jaja Jetty to receive the Aba Women Branch, the reason being that Opobo Town is the Headquarters of the Association and that Aba is only a Branch. The other Branches include: Egwenga, Bori, Queens Town, Kalaibiama, Kalama, Kalasunju, and Opukalama. She also initiated the reading of polo minutes to reflect only the activities of the particular polo (group of houses). Other activities during the Polo meeting include; Health Talk, Gender Issues, Support for Indigent Children and Elders, Scholarship Scheme. The income during the meeting was shared into three, one part for the Polo that organized the meeting, while two parts were handed over to the Association. The group of houses involved in the annual meetings were as follows; Jaja I, Jaja II, Diepiri, Ukonu, Dappa ye Amakiri, Epelle, Kalaomuso, Dapu,

Owujie, Kiepirima, Iroanya, Biriye and Jaja III. Each of the group of houses is headed by eight-man executive members, while the main umbrella body of the Association is headed by the National President, Vice President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Financial Secretary, Treasurer, Public Relations Officer, Assistant Public Relations Officer, Provost, Assistant Provost, Auditor I and Auditor II. The third arm of the association is made up of the unit heads of Prayer and Spirituality, Police, Choir, Culture, Usher and Welfare (entertainment, and distribution of souvenirs).

The Association holds her Annual General meeting in every last weekend in October every year while two group of houses hold their meetings fortnightly in a particular month as scheduled. Roasters were prepared annually to accommodate two groups of houses every month. As indicated earlier, it is only the minutes of the previous year that is read at each Polo meeting. This method helps in reducing the burden of reading and discussing the general minutes of the meetings of the Association round the year. To further reduce the number of attendees to sectional meetings, only the National Executive members that attend Polo meetings. By this measure, the women who were not involved in the sectional meeting would have time for other personal engagements. The general Assembly which is the Opubo Ereapu Kubiri is held once every two years in the last week of October. The activities of the General Assembly include Skills Acquisition, Prayer and Fasting, Drama, Polo by Polo, talk on issues affecting women and girl child, Health Talk. The climax of the Opubo Ereapu Kubiri was the presentation of awards to deserving sons and daughters of Opobo Kingdom as a way of raising funds for the Association. In 2016, the Association presented awards to the following: Alaputa (wives of the Alabo (chiefs) Kalanne A. Pepple, Boya C. Mac Pepple. Dr Obibi O. Jaja, Dr Vinola Fubara, Augusta Owujie, Dr (Dame, Opufiriwangigbo) Christy Toby, Ańuri E. Cole, Gloria Dappa, Garndba John Africa, Ebizi Cockeye Brown, Nnenna G. Sunday Jaja, and Rosabel R. George Cookey. Others include, Dr Hope Bell-Gam, Mrs Sopirinye Epelle, Mrs Victoria Clinton Daminabo, Mrs Cathlene Opusunju, Jeki Opuorubo (Lady) Eunice C. John Jaja, Lady Joy Ebelechukwu T. Epelle, Lady Emilia P. Ogolo, Amaopuorubo Jessey Ogolo, Mrs Randolph Pepple, Mrs Sotonye Fulton, and Mrs Charity M. Fubara. In 2018 Convention, some men were added for the presentation of awards for their financial support to women activities. They include: Amaopusenibo Sobere Diri, Sir (Hon) Senibo Tonye Epelle, Hon Boma Brown, Senibo (Engr) Abraham M. Uranta, Senibo Stanley W.T. Pepple, Warisenibo (Dr) Promise T. Jaja (Jp), Engr. Tonye Matthew Uranta, and Senibo Enyinna I. Jaja. The activities of Opubo Ereapu Kubiri ends with Thanksgiving Service at any chosen Church in the town.

Achievements of the Opobo Women Welfare Association

1. The building of Culverts and Waiting Halls
2. The building of Opobo Post office
3. The building of the secondary school for the take-off of the Comprehensive Secondary School, Opobo Town
4. The building and equipping of Women Craft Centre
5. The women conference hall
6. Award of Scholarships to students and pupils
7. The caring for the less privileged in Opobo Communities
8. Adjudication and maintenance of peace among the women of Opobo Kingdom

Peace Building Efforts by Opobo Women Welfare Association

Conflict is a permanent feature of every human community and settlement. Janowitz sees conflict as a social phenomenon drives from a clash of goals both personal and social. (Janowitz, M. 1970: vii). If we agree with Janowitz assertion that conflict is a social phenomenon, then, the part played by the Opobo Women Welfare Association would be commendable. Opobo Women Welfare Association were able to resolve a lot of issues involving men, women and young people in Opobo. They hold Court Sessions as part of their activities. All categories of persons, women, men and Seniapu (elders) approach the women court to obtain judgment without delay. The Association entertained all genders complaints, held court sessions and delivered judgments until December, 2018, when the Alapu Council summoned the women and limited the cases they could handle to only those pertaining to women.

Conclusion

In the social organization of Opobo Kingdom, the women in many ways, have complimented and not competed with their male counterparts. They support the men in all ramifications and adopted non-confrontational attitude, to maintain sanctity of womanhood and motherhood in their activities. Their interest is the general protection of women. Nobody is regarded as inferior in Opobo Kingdom as observed by Onwuzirike (2003).

Onwuzirike also supported the fact that the male dominated institutions had female parallel organizations. He listed the Ebre Society among the Ibibio, Ohandom among the Ibo, Egbele,-Ereme among the Kalabari, Aman-Obolo among the Andoni and I add the Opubo Ereapu-Kubiri among the Ibani. The Opubo Ereapu Kubiri is open for all cadres of women respective of status.

The 1929 Women's War brought Opobo women into the colonial struggle which successfully ended in their favour through the response of the colonial administration. From all indications, the women have continued the promotion of Opobo legacy through leadership par excellence. By 2005, when Amaopuorubo Felicia Sam Annie Pepple assumed the leadership of the Association, her initiatives in development attracted accolades from well-meaning Opobo sons and daughters within the country and in diaspora.

In Opobo tradition and culture, women compliment the men in all endeavours. They are never in competition with the men and have made their marks on the sands of time. Since 1870, the women have collectively improved their social functions and usefulness to the admiration of their male counterparts.

Her Majesty, Queen Prudence Dandeson Douglas Jaja has been a huge pillar of support to the welfare of women and children in Opobo Kingdom. She has given impetus to the rising accomplishments of womanhood and motherhood. She stands tall, has capacity and ability to respond to issues affecting women. She has also impacted on the less privileged women and children by giving financial support and scholarship to the indigents.

By this paper, Opobo Women had added to the rising profile of Nigerian Women in History and with more research in different fields, the efforts of women would always be appreciated.

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Informants

Amaopusenibo Edwin Sam Annie Pepple – Elder Statesman – Retired Civil servant - 2017
Jeki Opusenibo Boma Dick Jaja – Elder statesman, Business Mogul - 2017
Mr Sampson Benjamin Pepple – Business - 2017
Senibo Benedict Bruce Pepple, Retired Head Master - 2016
Senibo Gilbert Jaja, Deputy Chief Kampa Village - 2017
Mrs Peggie Ibinye E. Pepple – Woman of Substance - 2017
Mr Daniel Pepple – Businessman, 2018