Women and the Burden of Tradition: The Experience of the Ogoni

By

N-ue, UeBari Samuel, PhD
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
P.M.B. 5047
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
Phone Number: 08037465667
Email: n-ueuebari@iaue.edu.ng

&
B.E. Awortu, PhD
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Faculty of Humanities
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Phone +234-7037142281
Email: beatrice.awortu@iaue.edu.ng

Abstract

The central aim of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of women and the burden of tradition, using the Ogoni as a case study. Adopting the historical methods of inquiry and multidisciplinary approach to research, the work reveals that Ogoni women since the pre-colonial times, have contributed and are still contributing to the development of the area, noting that in spite of these contributions, they continue to bear the brunt of some of the people's cultures and traditions. The study asserts that the burden of Ogoni traditions, which weighs more on the women than that of the men, include but not limited to early and/or forced marriage, denial of inheritance rights, preference for male children, isolation of women who give birth to twins, refusal of widows to re-marry, and the forfeiture of the property she acquired or assisted the husband to acquire before his demise. The work notes with dismay that most of these culture and traditions, which are still in existence, have negatively impacted Ogoni women. The research concludes by stressing, among others, the need to end the ostracization of women who gave birth to twins, and to permit widows to remarry at the death of their husbands.

Keywords: Ogoni, Women, Burden, Tradition, Men

Introduction

The geo-political space called Ogoni, despite its variations in dialect, shares the same culture, tradition, mythology, religious-cosmology and eschatology. The Ogoni regard womanhood in high esteem. Among the Ogoni, God (*Bari* in Khana, Tai and Gokana mother tongue and *Obari* in Eleme parlance) simply referred to the female gender. Accordingly, God was called *Wa-Bari* (women-God), *Waadem* (the mother of creation) and *Kawa-Bari* (mother-God). In the words of Kpone-Tonwe (2003b, p. 281) "*Kawa-Bari* (Mother-God) describes a God; who is not only the creator, but also the mother of mankind. Thus, in Ogoni world view, God is the mother of all mankind. To the Ogoni, therefore, mankind, unlike the world of nature, was born out of God's womb', not made. On the basis of this concept, the Ogoni believed that

human mothers derived essence and authority from *Kawa-Bari* (mother-God), who is the supreme mother of mankind. They believed that this divine essence and the associated authority was transmitted only through mother's womb… Thus, motherhood was seen as a manifestation of this divine essence and authority".

In Ogoni mythology, the people also believed that only one mother perhaps *Kawa Bari* created the whole Ogoni, stating that she *ab initio* resided very close to the people. She later chose to live an unsocial reclusive life because of a historic event that occurred in the remote past. Saale (2001, p. 164) recounts one of the myths that seeks to throw interesting light on why and how the epical, mystical and legendary figure known as *Kawa Bari* decided to live in the sky. According to him:

> The story of how *Kawaa Bari*, who was in close contact with the people at the beginning of the world but later became remotely withdrawn is expressed in their myths. One of which has it that the figure found in the centre of the moon is the representation of *Kawaa Bari.* It is believed that a woman, who went for firewood, split a log of wood on a worship day for the Supreme Being. Kawaa Bari then become angry as she hit by the piece of wood from the woman while responding to the call of the people during worship, hence, the withdrawal from the earth to a remote place in the sky.

The recognition of *Kawa-Bari*, a feminine figure, as the Supreme Being, Omnipotent, Omniscient and above all the mother of creation (Saale, 1985) clearly demonstrate the central place of the feminine idea in the religious and cosmological thought of the Ogoni. Also, the female principle and attributes underscored women importance right from creation.

Women constituted the bed rock of Ogoni society in the past. Oral traditions collected and recorded by Kpone-Tonwe (1990, 2003a, 2003b) indicated that women occupied a pride of place in the political, military, socio-cultural and religious spheres in traditional Ogoni. He provides that women such as Gbene Kwaanwaan, Gbene Nyaana, Zah, Bariyaa yoo and Gbenebeka were famous and powerful rulers in the Babbe area of now Khana Local Government. Gbenebeka. (Beka, the Great), who was said to be the last woman ruler of the Gbenekwaanwaa matrilineal dynasty, was considered to have powers to declare small pox (named after her as *Beka* in Khana and Tai, and *Buka* in Eleme) on any one or community who contravened her order.

Being seen as the mother of the Ogoni, Gbenebeka provided solutions to the people's problems through divination and sacrifices. As a result, she was worshipped, adorned, and venerated by the people. In fact, there was hardly any market place in Ogoni where there were no hut erected to symbolize Gbenebeka's abode. Kpone-Tonwe (2003b, p. 271) avers that "in all Ogoni, from Kono to Akpajo and from Kaa to Kwuri, Gbenebeka is worshipped as the mighty goddess who "invented" the small pox and had power to "spray" individual or town with it whenever her will was contravened", noting that "in Eleme area, the elders pay tribute every year to the priest of Ndowa (*Gbenebeka*) in order to appease her or to prevent her from disrupting the society with the deadly disease" (Kpone-Tonwe, 2003b, pp. 278-279).

Gbenebeka's influence went beyond the pre-colonial era. Gbenebeka was the spine of Ogoni resistance against British colonialism. Gbenebeka sternly opposed the imposition of taxes in

Ogoni when Mr. Nwigo Piam, the chief priest of Gbenebeka deity, threatened to strike any Ogoni man who pays tax to the agents of the British colonializers with small pox epidemic (*beka*). For this reason, Mr. Nwigbo Piam was severally convicted and meant to serve various terms of imprisonment with hard labour at Egwa-nga prison (N-ue, 2018). The British Colonial Intelligence Report documented the following about Gbenebeka:

> Mr. Jeffreys (a British administrative officer) refers in detail to a belief in a common ancestress of divine origin, Gbenebeka, but I am unable to confirm the fact that this belief is universal among all these clans of the tribe (sic). At the sometime, there can be little doubt that the name Gbenebeka is one of very great significance, and her shrine at Gwaara possesses even today a very real importance as being the most important place of sacrifice throughout the country (Gibbons, 1932 par. 4).

It is evident from the foregoing that Ogoni women were not only the power on the throne but also the custodians of the people's culture and tradition. Ironically, with the imposition of colonial rule from the beginning of the twentieth century, matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy. Consequently, the rise of male domination caused the eclipse of matrilineal succession and female rulership. Women were either excluded from the political mainstream or caused to have little say in major decision-making process of even issues that have bearing on them. The control of political affairs by the male gender continued henceforth and became entrenched as the people's accepted custom and tradition. What was more, most of these customary practices, which are gender bias, are degrading and subordinate female rights to the male folk. Hence, the rights of women and female children continue to suffer persistent inhuman treatment and fragrant violations by the male folk. Against this backdrop, this paper scientifically examines some of the customs and traditions of the Ogoni that historically placed heavier expectations and responsibilities on the women folk. To properly articulate this, the paper is fragmented into six closely knitted sections.

The Study Area

The Ogoni are eminently ensconced in the oil-rich Niger Delta, South-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. It "is an entrecote of extra-ordinary biological and cultural diversity… They speak many languages and are spread over an area that – by one commonly used measure – is about the size of Scotland" (Peel, 2009, p. 5). The people, a minority indigenous ethnic group, numbering about half a million occupy the eastern most part of the fertile plateau bordering the eastern half of the Niger River Delta. Approximately 1,300 sq. kilometers in land area, the Ogoni is bounded on the east and north by the Imo River, Ibibio, and Opobo, on the west by Okirika and Port Harcourt City (Ikwerre); and on the South by Andoni, Nkoro, and Bonny. Its population density of 691 places the area as one of the most densely populated rural areas in the world (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990, Saro-Wiwi, 1992, 1995, 1999, N-ue, 2018).

For administrative convenience, the Ogoni are divided into four unequal Local Government Areas. They are Gokana Local government Area with headquarters at Kpor, Khana Local Government Area with headquarters at Bori, Tai Local Government Area with headquarters at Saakpenwaan and Eleme Local Government Area with headquarters at Ogale-Nchia. Linguistically, the people speak closely related dialects of the same language. With a very rich soil, the people were able to grow a lot of valuable food crops like Yams, bananas, cassava and

vegetables. Also, from abundant oil palm trees, they process palm nuts and oil palm which they consume and exchange or sell to their neighbours. Besides, Ogoni is rich in marine resources such as a cocktail of sea food: fish, shrimps, periwinkle, cockles, and Oysters, to mention but a few. Saro-Wiwa (1992, pp. 11-12) affirmed:

> The Ogoni had inherited a precious part of God's earth and did everything to preserve it. The rich plateau soil provided agricultural plenty and the rivers which was the borders of the entire area brimmed with fishes and sea food. The Ogoni seized the opportunity to become competent farmers and fishermen and to transform their territories into the food basket of the Eastern Niger Delta.

What must be noted strongly is the fact that Ogoni is richly endowed with petroleum resources such as oil and gas which incidentally drive the country's petro-dollar economy. The Ogoni is home to six important oil fields connected from 96 oil wells. Interestingly, with the discovery of oil petroleum in commercial quantity in 1958 at Bomo-Gokana, Ogoni became one of the major oil bearing communities in Rivers State, Niger Delta. Suffice to note that the Ogoni had produced a large chunk of the country's oil wealth since 1958.

The Contributions of Women to the Historical Development of Ogoni

It will be incorrect to infer that women are inconsequential in the historical development of Ogoni. They played and are still playing important and substantial roles to develop the area. Their roles will be investigated under the following sub-headings:

Trade

Trade was an important economic activity of the Ogoni in which their women took active part. Trade was necessitated by the fact that no individual or community was self-reliant to the extent of providing all that she/it needed for sustenance. Trade was also stimulated by uneven distribution of resources and talents. Hence, there was the need for exchange of the surplus to get what was needed (Hopkins, 1973, Austen, 1987). The enterprising women of Ogoni participated actively and are still engaging in short distance trade which include both intra-community and inter-village exchanged of goods, mostly agricultural produce and local craft products. The *raison d'etre* for the predominance of female traders, who traded on a part time basis, was based on the fact that local trade was a convenient adjunct to household and farming activities. Hopkins (1973, p. 56) argued that trade was practiced on a part time basis because "it was a supplement to primary domestic occupations".

The market for short distance trade was held in almost all the villages or communities in Ogoni. In the words of Loolo (1981, p. 35) "every village in Ogoni has always had its own market which is usually held either in the morning or in the evenings, when people have returned from farm". Nevertheless, the main market were held in some prominent commercial centres on specific days like Deemua, Deebom, Deezia, Deekor, and Deesor. Today, daily markets exist in Bori, Nchia, and Kaa. Though, without statistical proof, women form the bulk of traders in all these markets. Ogoni women "have now opened new market contacts beyond the Ogoni boundaries in Port Harcourt, Aba, Onitsha, Lagos, Kano, Cameroon, Fernanda Po, Cotonou, etc. these are Ogoni women who travel to Lagos markets at least once every month… Apart from trading in farm produce and sea foods, women are

excelling in areas of textiles, shoe-making, trinkers, provisions, general merchandise and palm produce" (Igbara, 2009 p. 106). They use the proceeds from trade to support their husbands, fend for the family and provide members of the family with basic requirements.

Fishing

In fishing Ogoni communities, women take active part in different aspects of the industry either on full or part time basis. They participated in the less strenuous fishing activities such as picking of periwinkles, oysters, shrimps, and other sea shell fishes within the creeks. They also accompanied their husbands for deep sea fishing. While the men are fishing, the women either paddle the canoe or scoop out water from the canoe. At the end of the day's activities, women process, smoke-dry, preserve and take to the market the catches. These catches, besides serving the need of the family, were used to provide sustainable income which serve several purposes for the wellbeing of the family. Igbara (2009, p. 105) attests "they (women) count the money in the presence of their husbands but they are responsible for keeping the money safe. Their banking system is very secure though without interest. A certain amount is set aside for savings". Evidently, Ogoni women serve not only as contributors to the family source of income but also trust worthy treasurers of the family finances.

Farm Labour

In Ogoni farming communities, women provided and are still providing additional labour to the family and community at large. In the earliest times, the people practiced division of labour. The men dug holes of about one foot at regular distances during the planting of yam. The women later put back the dugout soil into the hole before a piece of yam is put in the replaced soil. In the process, they built a small mound over the yam so as to protect it from the heat of the sun. As the yam grew, it was the responsibility of the men to cut the sticks meant for staking the yam vines. The women conveyed the sticks from the bush to the farm. The men took charge of staking and tending the yam tendrils.

The women planted crops such as the fluted pumpkins, maize, pepper, okra, melon, sugar-cane, three-leafed yam and cassava after the corn harvest around the farm and in-between the yam stakes. It was the duty of the women and children especially female children to clear the weeds as many times as possible before the yam harvest. To increase farm labour, most men married more wives. The men harvested the yams and the women and children carried them in baskets or basins to their homes. Thereafter, the men sort them into categories, such as those for eating, sale, storage and preservation for the next planting seasons. Finally, the men stacked the tubers in barns for storage and preservation (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990, Burabe, 2003) Igbara and Keenam (2013, p. 47) concur that "the Ogoni women are the most hardworking female species in the Niger Delta, who take advantage of their favourable climate, spending an average of twelve hours on the farm to ensure food sufficiency. Sufficiency not only for subsistence but also to ensure that famine is not known by their neighbours of the surrounding ethnic groups".

It is also interesting to note that eligible women and female children organized reciprocal labour (*Gbo nam* in Khana mother tongue) to augment the scarce and much needed family labour. The practice (*Gbo nam*) was an arrangement in which a group of people, who were not necessarily related by blood but were age-sects joined hands to help each other on rotational basis. In a situation, where a member of the labour arrangement had no urgent need for such

labour service during her turn, she could transfer the labour group to any person in dire need. This could be free or based on monetary terms. Most women had used this practice to improve their financial status, enabling them to cater for the educational needs of members of the family. The implication is that a typical Ogoni woman is an economic asset to her parents and/or husband.

Craft Productions

Women also contributed to Ogoni economy when they engaged in the manufacture of handicrafts such as pottery, weaving, salt making, mat making, etc. Pottery. An example, was the exclusive economic enterprise of women of Kwuri Boue, Kono Boue, Kwaawa, Buan, Luubaara, Bomu, Nama, and Kugba. As Loolo (1981, p. 35) put it, "as a rule their (pots) manufacture is in the hands of the women". With clay or potter's earth excavated from beneath the soil in salt water swamps and creeks (Locally known as *maalaa*), these talented women were able to shape or mould the shreds into pots and bowls of different sizes and shapes.

The economic important of pottery cannot be fathomed because pottery products were the sole source of domestic containers in use before the introduction of ceramic, iron or aluminum wares. These pots served critical functions like water pitchers, palm wine tapping pots, pitchers for storing oil palm, pitchers for carrying water to the farm, cooking pots, bath pots, herbal pots, mini-pitchers for drawing water from wells, and eating pots.

Again, the women potters organized themselves into pot making contribution called *Lera-ban.* Kpone-Tonwe (1990, p. 210) buttresses:

> One day in a week they met at the home of a member and made pots for that member, each member making a given number of the same type of pot. The members did not all have to be at the same place. Some members stayed at their own homes, or chose to stay at the home of a friend who was also a member of the particular pot-making contribution or co-operative, once the name of the pot to be made was agreed upon, the members know all the other details concerning that type of pot. With the details well-standardized a potter could make the same. Type of pot irrespective of where she chose to make them.

The point is that demands for pots was exceedingly high as they were articles of both local and long-distance trade. As a result, they made huge sum of money, making the potters to contribute enormously to the welfare of the family and the overall development of the community.

Ogoni women were also versed in the local craft of weaving. Weaving was an auxiliary occupation among the people. Women in communities along the coast and along Imo River like Luegbo-Beeri, Luere-Beeri, Pue, Luubaara, Duburo and Wiiyakara among others were well known for mat weaving and basket even though they were sometimes assisted by the men in the provision of the raw materials. Kpone-Tonwe (1990, p. 224) testifies that "the weaving of raffia cloths, sleeping mats, fish rackets and ropes or cords, were women occupations". Loolo (1981, p. 35) added that "the men obtain the fibres of palm wine trees from the bush and the women and children weave them into baskets at home in the evenings".

Mat was of immense importance to the Ogoni for many reasons. Mats were used as valuable mattress, door blinds, ceiling, carpets, canopies, and burying of evil doers. Baskets, on the other hand, served as fishing implement, storage of dried fish, drying of items under the sun, sieving of fermented cassava into edible powder, packing and transporting of farm produce like okra, pepper, melon seeds and Ogbono to mention but a few. Like pots, these woven materials fetched huge sums of money to the manufacturers in particular and the society by extension as there were ready markets for them. In fact, they "were highly demanded in the Niger Delta markets, where these goods were needed in bulk by both the regular and the migrant fishermen for use at their fishing locations" (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990, p. 224).

Political Sphere

The contribution of women in the development of Ogoni in particular and Rivers State in general was not limited to the economic sphere. They played important roles in the political sphere. As stated earlier, women in Ogoni were an integral part of the political development. They were not only power behind the throne but also powers on the throne. Kpone-Tonwe (1990, 2003) observes that the first ruler of Ogoni was a woman called Kwaanwaa. After the death of Kwaanwaa, the succession did not pass to her son but to her first and only daughter by name Bariyaayoo who ruled at Luawii. After Bariyaa's reign, the mantle of rulership went to Gbeneyaana, a great granddaughter of Za. The last of these royal ancestress was Gbenebeka whose stool was situated at Ka-Gwaara. The *Kabia* (i.e. council of women) existed in most parts of Ogoni. The *Kabia* is synonymous with *Pya Kabaari* (Council of Elders). The *Kabia* and *Pya Kabaari* in most cases worked together to achieve social order. Although, the *Kabia* never openly spoke on crucial matters discussed at the town square but they indirectly took part when they cajoled their husbands to accept their viewpoints. During the pre-colonial period, they mobilized women to keep the farm roads and markets clean.

Since the creation of Rivers State on 27th May, 1967, some Ogoni women have demonstrated their relevance on the political chess board of the state. This is true of the pioneer Ogoni and by extension old Rivers State Commissioner, Chief (Dr.) Constance M.S. Saro-Wiyor. She served at various times as Commissioner for Special Duties and Economic Development and Planning during the Second Republic of the Late Chief (Senator) Melford E. Okilo led Rivers State Government. She served from 1979 until the military seized power on 31st December, 1983. In recognition of her contributions in politics and socio-economic development in Ogoni and state, Chief Dr. M.S. C. Sarowiyor was honoured by the late King (Dr.) Mark Tsaro Igbara, the then Gbenemene of Babbe Kingdom with the prestigious chieftaincy title of *Tuago Neewa Babbe,* meaning First Eagle Lady in 1982 (Igbara, 2009, Awortu & N-ue, 2018).

Jully Nuka Wika served in the capacity of the Head of the Rivers State Commission for Women from 1997-1999. Also Mrs. Sarah Kpayor Ntor-ue exemplified herself as an administrator par excellence when she served as Director of Mass Mobilization for Self-Reliance, Social Justice, and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) in the former Khana/Oyigbo Local Government Area. From 1999 to May 1999, Mrs. Sarah Ntor-ue served as the First Female Commissioner for Education in Rivers State. Prof. (Mrs.) Roseline Konyan also demonstrated her worth in politics when she served as Acting Chairman, Rivers State Civil Service Commission (1995-1996) and chairman in 1997. Later she was appointed as Commissioner for Information in the Government of Dr. Peter Odili (2003-2007) and His

Excellency. Celestine Omehia (May 2007-October, 2007) led Rivers State (Robinson, 2005, Pandem, 2013). She also served as the Pioneer Commissioner of Environment (2003-2007). She was also a commissioner for environment in the government of His Excellency Barr. H.E. Wike. Princess George Tenalo served as the first Ogoni Woman Commissioner in the Local Government Civil Service Commission. The fact is that they used their exalted positions to better the lot of Ogoni women in particular and Rivers women in general.

Aside from the above, Ogoni women are into active partisan politics. Most of them contested elections with their male counterparts and emerged victorious. This was the case with Hon (Mrs.) Felicia Taneh who contested on the platform of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) into the State House of Assembly, Rivers State. She won and became the first female law maker from Ogoni. She also became the first Ogoni Chairperson, Committee on Women Affairs in the Rivers State House of Assembly. (Bob Agbozi and Mark Mbakonor, Oral Interviews on 21-01-2026). The political history of Ogoni and Nigeria at large cannot afford to ignore the role played by Mrs. Pyale Wifa. She aroused the political consciousness of women in Ogoni and Nigeria when she desired to be the number one citizen in Nigeria. Accordingly, she obtained nomination form that qualified her to be voted for as the presidential flag bearer of the National Republican Convention (NRC). She failed and Alhaji Bashir Tofa emerged as the flag bearer of the party in the June 1993 presidential elections believed to have been won by the Late Chief M.K.O. Abiola. Okorobia (2003, p. 190) posits:

> For the first time in Nigerian history, a River's women, Mrs. Pyale Wifa of the N.R.C. from the old Khana Local Government Area, was among the 300 presidential aspirants that began the race to secure the people's mandate for the presidency. Although, she failed to make any significant impact, there is no doubt that she had taken a step for which history will continue to remember her.

There is a plethora of Ogoni women who have served as Vice-Chairmen of the four Local Government Areas and councilors who represented various wards in the area. All these Ogoni women in the corridors of power have directly or indirectly provided educational facilities, scholarships to exceptional children and orphans, organized seminars to educate women and counseling sessions for pupils and students on proper behaviour, leading to women empowerment, and human capital development in Ogoni. This is a pointer to the obvious fact that women's education does not end in the kitchen and proved undoubtedly that "when you educate a woman, you educate the nation".

Entertainment

Ogoni women are also into the business of entertainment. They formed various dance groups according to grades or seniority. Accordingly, women keyed into their respective age-sects. Expectedly, these dance groups entertained people during the New Yam Festival (*Dua or Zua*), coronation/installation of Chiefs, Conferment of chieftaincy titles to deserving members, in-laws, friends and lovers of the community, and the visit of important guest. The dance groups also teach and instill virtues of life such as dedication, hard work, honesty, faithfulness and perseverance through the effective use of sarcasms, riddles, proverbs, and apropisms. Normally, they composed songs to lambast and ridicule crooks, philanderers and slothful and to extol the achievements and sterling qualities of great men and women who distinguished themselves in their various careers of life (Mercy Ndolo and Aking Deesor, oral interviews on

29-01-2025). Madam Rachel Adebue (oral interview, 28-01-2026) authoritatively revealed that the good for nothing and flirters in the Ogoni society were constantly attacked through songs composed purposely for them until they turned over a new leaf. Also, some of the renditions revealed the history of the community, pointing out memorable events, heroes and heroines. In contemporary Ogoni, women entertain people during historic occasions like political rallies, birthday parties, crusades, and naming. Wedding and burial ceremonies among others. Some of the prominent Ogoni women musicians/entertainers include but not limited to Monica Kinasi, Sonata Lagodam, Joy Mene, Barisi G. Emmanuel, Mrs. Abigail Yorkina, Sarah L. Lonee, Mrs. Blessing Daughter Nwisualo, Barinnadaa. Clara Amos, Blessing Keeke, Mrs. Joanah lema and Edith Chujor (Joseph Olaka, Obari Nwite and Gami Dorathy oral interviews, 02-02-2025).

Religion

Ogoni women's contributions in the religious circle are equally note-worthy. Women, who excelled as seers, prophetess, and spirit-mediums (*Nwiinaayor*) in many parts of the area, exposed hidden truths, provided solutions to the people's problems such as bad luck, poverty, illnesses, infertility, premature or sudden death, etc most of which were believed to be caused by the evil spirits consciously or unconsciously. In modern times, Ogoni women have continued to play prominent roles, especially in the work of God. Most Ogoni women are the pillars behind their husbands' successes in the vineyard of God. They also help them to preach the gospel, win souls and build churches for the converts. Some of them who are educated serve as Sunday school teachers, heads of the women's Ministry, evangelists etc in all denominations, be it orthodox or Pentecostal.

It may be useful to add that most Ogoni women have transcended the levels of and positions of seers, healers, prophetesses, prayer warriors, Sunday School Superintendents, and Evangelists to Church leaders popularly known as "Mummy G.O.". For want of space, suffice to note that Rev. Esther Owate Nwogu (1935-2011) was the founder and General Overseer, Resurrection Power Ministry Inc., Alesa-Eleme. Until her demise in 2011, the powerful vessel of God was also a strong pillar of several Christian associations, including the Women of Destiny, Alesa Women Forum, Alesa Gospel Ministers, Eleme Ministers' Forum and a host of other organizations (Precious Nworlu and Chu Obo Abbey, oral interviews, 22-02-26). Also, Amb. Bishop/Dr/Lady Lizzy Paul-Obelley (J.P.) is the founder and General Overseer or Shammah Christian Ministry Int'l Inc., Alesa-Eleme. The pioneer co-ordinator/leader, Eleme Female Ministers' Forum is a recipient of several awards. One of such is the UN Ambassador for Peace Award which was in commemoration of the United Nations Assembly Declaration of year 2001-2010 as the international decode for peace and non-violence (Israel Osaro and Abbey Obo, Oral Interviews, 21-02-2026). In point of fact, Ogoni women ministers have really touched positively the lives of many Ogoni people in the spiritual, social, political and otherwise.

Education

The Ogoni women have also made significant impact in the education sector. Although, Ogoni women received minimal western education at the beginning, but the few early educated ones worked assiduously to transform Ogoni women from their illiterate to literate class. This was noticeable following the establishment of Marian High School, Bane in 1973 by the slain environmental activist and human right activist, the late K.B. Saro-Wiwa. The school was

exclusively for girls and it was the first of its kind in Ogoni. They further organized adult education and evening classes for women in Ogoni to gain access to western style education. To be intellectually honest, through their efforts, most Ogoni women were not only able to read and write both in Khana and English Languages but also solve simple arithmetic which is very essential in commerce.

The importance of women education to the development of Ogoni cannot be over looked. With their attainment of education, Ogoni women are contributing substantially to the economic wellbeing of their families in particular and the area in general. Some of them are now teachers, lecturers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, midwives, secretaries, clerks, cleaners, messengers, etc. Accordingly, they formed various socio-cultural organizations and co-operative societies which are deeply involve in different self-help and charity projects in the area. Indeed, education has greatly transformed and repositioned them as bread winner's philanthropists, community advocate, leaders, politicians, and mothers. From the foregoing analysis, it is crystal clear that Ogoni women have contributed hugely and are still contributing to the development of Ogoni in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. In the next segment of this work, attempt will be made to scrutinize some aspects of the cultures and traditions of the people with the view to revealing the gender who bears the brunt.

Ogoni women and the Burden of Tradition

Ogoni is endowed with long standing mammoth customs, beliefs, behaviours, inherited patterns of thought or actions passed down through generations locally called *Doonu Kuneken* (in Khana mother tongue). In this segment of the work, effort will be made to systematically examine a few of these traditions and customs and the gender who mostly bears the weight.

The Ogoni Marriage Worldview

Marriage is very important in Ogoni life. Unmarried women (*Biabe*) were objects of derisions. The people perceive marriage as the socially sanctified union between a man and woman or between a man and women, usually regulated by customs and beliefs that prescribe the rights and duties of the couples. They see marriage more than just a relationship between the husband, wife (wives) and children. Nkiwe Bale (oral interview, 23-03-2005) notes that marriage in Ogoni transcended the relationship between husband and wife (wives) to spouse's parents and relations, insisting that apart from sex, the wife relates and humbles herself before them. She is also expected to provide welfare services to the basic genealogical unit, including friends. This aspect of Ogoni marriage custom is lost to modernity as marriage now is now widely seen as the relationship between husband, wife (wives) and children.

Also, in Ogoni marriage custom, marriage is viewed as the total ownership of the wife (wives) by the husband. A married woman in Ogoni completely belong to the husband up to death. At death, according to Gbenemene Godwin Apere and Atumaa Brown (oral interviews, 30-03-2025) the corpse of the wife (if not divorced) is not released to her parents or replaced by any destined beasts but buried in the husband's compound or home. "For most Ogoni, marriage, was for lifetime" (Loolo, 1981, p. 28). Implying that the she is the property of the husband she married until death.

Also what must not be glossed over is the philosophy of virginity. Generally, in the traditional Ogoni society, morality was held in a high esteem. They believed that "there was a demarcation between holy life and a profane life. A holy life would be successful but a profane life would be doomed" (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990, p. 42). To enhance and sustain morality, the people prohibit unholy sexual intercourse in unapproved places like in the streams, evil forest, shrines, markets, and churches. They also forbid sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period. Above all, virginity was highly valued. The practice was for the family of the groom to have evidence that their newly married wife was not defiled before marriage. The most common evidence was a white stained bed sheet. If the wife had indulged in sexual activity before the first nuptial night, the husband would be unhappy and the parents would wear a mournful look of betrayal and disappointment.

As Yirakina (2010, p. 91) aptly observes "if by the virtue of the first sexual intercourse with a wife, it is discovered that the girl (now bride) had been disvirgined, multi-questions are asked on the experience. The man (bridegroom) will feel very sad and thus may lead to divorce". Loolo (1981, p. 29) recalls:

> Every (Ogoni) parent waited anxiously during the first night that their daughter wants to sleep with the husband for the bang on their door during the night. The bang was to signify if their daughter held a handkerchief soaked in blood or a bottle of illicit gin returning her as having been earlier defiled. When it happens that she had had premarital sex, the parents would lose the unpaid balance of the bride price (bride wealth) and the girl would have to cook a fowl for the husband as an appeasement.

In stating the obvious, the custom of the people did not prescribe any penalty for a man who was defiled before marriage. It has to be admitted here that western civilization has hugely contributed to the death of this male favoured custom. If their today's daughters were to go through this tradition, it is plausible to infer that only very few of them would successfully marry in the Ogoni tradition.

Another important marriage philosophy of the Ogoni is the belief that wives are the tree that bear fruits. In marriage, the people regard a married women as a linchpin of child bearing in the family. The production of children is the primary role of the wife (wives). If the wife failed to bear children, it was solely the fault of the wife. In Ogoni, the pride of every marriage is the ability of every married woman to procreate and reproduce so as to keep the name of the family going and produce additional labour force to the family. The number of children produced in a marriage determined the strength of the household. Madam Margaret Adoo-ee (oral interview, 21-02-2025) maintains that until the intervention of western influence which checkmates the number of wives and children, an Ogoni's wealth was measured by the number of children in a family, noting that children are worth more than money. That is *Nwii éé kpughi.*

The inability of a wife to reproduce, even when the fault is not hers, as a driving force for a prospective Ogoni man to marry additional wives. It also served as a good parameter for a barren women to marry another woman for her husband as wife. This process called *ii-wanedam* was for the second/new wife to bear children in order to generate happiness in the family. In any unproductive marriage, the wife is always the prime suspect. Even as at that,

she is not customarily permitted to have extra-marital affair outside marriage. The people's tradition did not spell out any punishment for an impotent man or to find out whose fault in any unproductive marriage. Accusing fingers are always pointed at the wives, forgetting that it takes two to tangle.

Marriage systems/Practices

There are a number of variations in the practice/systems of marriages in Ogoni that place more burden on wives, or women, thereby shaping their roles. Let us consider some of them in the following order:

Forced or Early Marriage

It was the practice of Ogoni parents, who were not relatively wealthy, to compel their daughters to marry any prominent or wealthy man in the society. It was done to enable them bury their late parents or loved ones in a befitting way, indemnify the debts owed a creditor or as a gift to a bosom friend, faithful servants, and champion wrestlers. The funeral rites which accompanied the burial of Ogoni prominent men and women are often very elaborate and capital intensive. Loolo (1981, p. 30) affirms that "funeral rites are so expensive that where funds are not available, it is usual to give out one of the deceased daughters to any rich man for marriage".

There is also a practice whereby a kinsman forcefully or traditionally takes over the wife of a deceased kin. In this case, where no new bride wealth is paid, the children from the marriage belong to the deceased husband, and in that respect, bear his name and not that of the second father. Igbara and Keenam (2013, p. 65) state that "marriage was for the life time between both partners, as it will be that only death could separate the couples. Remarriage after death of a husband was not permitted. It will not be too much to add the *biaken* custom. This is another Ogoni custom whereby the father prevented any of his most loved and industrious female children marrying outside the home. This justifies the name *biaken* which literally means remain on the ground. The point is that it is not necessarily the first daughter (*Sira*) who is disallowed from marrying. The practice became necessary if a wife gave birth to only one female child and the dire need to carry on the name of the dynasty or lineage. Igbara and Keenam (2013, p. 66) clarify that "every Ogoni daughter was eligible for marriage. However, depending on the peculiar circumstance of a household, the father could actually perform a marriage ceremony for any of the daughters that may be found to be energetic to perpetuate the household". To authenticate this practice, most fathers placed a curse on whosoever contravenes their wishes. For fear of the unknown, the daughter designated never made attempt to disobey their fathers' wishes even after their deaths.

The caveat here is that there is no sexual intercourse between the father and the chosen daughter. She is free to love and to have relationship with any man of her choice but no marriage contract between them. The person so designated was treated as one of the wives of her father and so she and her children enjoy every right in the home. Nevertheless, if a man is interested in her, he will perform the customary rites of *Miigah* (drinks for concumbineage) to the father and family members for recognition and acceptance. The offspring from the union belong to the father of the mother (pater) not the biological father (genitor). The genitor "performed the roles of a husband including conjugal right… disengagement did not attract any refund of expenditure incurred" (Igbara & Keenam, 2013, p. 67). Oddly and regrettably,

the girl child was not consulted or her consent sought. She was never given the opportunity to make her choice or have a say before the union was consummated. Many thanks to western civilization for the disappearance of most of these customs.

Mothers of Twins

The birth of twins was an anathema among the Ogoni. Twins were believed to have come from the evil spirit. Hence, they were called *Nwii-taah* in Khana parlance. As a result, the babies were either killed or thrown into evil forest. The mother was isolated or banished to another community. Investigations also revealed that most traditional rulers or titled men in the area do not have sexual intercourse with their wives because they gave birth to twins. As Yirakina (2010, p. 91) bluntly put, "titled men in Ogoni do not sleep with a woman under menstruation or mother of twins".

Incidentally, no Sigma was attached to the father of the twins. He was only prevented from performing most of his customary roles like libations, prayers, incantations, etc. This culture still persists in most Ogoni communities in spite of the advent of Christianity. Madam Abigail Nwika (oral interview, 20-03-2025) states that in Eeken Community, mothers of twins are not allowed to fetch water from *Nyor-maa yor* in order not to defile the water. There are some compounds in Nyo-Khana that women who gave birth to twins are not permitted to sleep. They are only allow to sleep in the compound after sacrifices had been offered to the gods of the land (Adoo Friday and Ewonu Kekor, oral communications, 02-03-2025). The brunt of this custom weights more on the side of the woman than that of the man.

Widowhood Practice

The Ogoni perceive death as an inescapable end of man's sojourn on planet earth. To them, death was not natural. It was caused by a wicked spirit (*yor or toa*) induced by a human enemy. Thus, when death occurs, a necromancer was commissioned to find out the cause. If it was a "holy" death, the spouse was given a benefitting burial. After the burial, the widow is expected to mourn the deceased for at least a year or more, depending on her ability to raise fund to perform the shaving ceremony. During this period, she is expected to perform the customary rite of *Toora Zia dam* by putting on sack cloth to honour and respect the departed spouse. She was forbidden from having sexual intercourse with any man. She is also expected not or take another man to the late husband's bed and to cook for any man (Dumale Dike, oral communication, 04-03-2025). If she disobeyed this custom, the widow would pay heavy fine and offer sacrifice to appease the gods.

The shaving ceremony known as *Lee Ziadam bee* was done by the family or relatives of the husband. It is only after the ceremony that she is culturally permitted to take any man whom she loved but not to remarry. The man was expected to perform the *Miigan* ritual. Any child resulting from this union (*gah*) belong to the late husband and not their biological father. This is "notwithstanding any training their biological father has given to them" (Loolo, 1981, p. 27). In the course of this work, it was gathered that the custom of *Toora Zia dam* is still very strong in most parts of the area despite the impact of western civilization. In Nyo-Khana axis of Ogoni, a devout female Christian of one the fast spreading Pentecostal churches refused to comply with this custom when her spouse passed on. For her refusal to customarily traditionally observe the *Toora Zia dam* ritual, she died mysteriously.

Rights to Inheritance

Another custom that is not completely discarded by the Ogoni is the right to inheritance. In Ogoni tradition, the right to inheritance is always given to the male children, especially the first son (*Saro* in Khana, Tai and Gokana and *Osaro* in Eleme dialects) rather than the widows or female children. This is, inspite of, the widow and daughters contributions to the family's wealth accumulation. In traditional Ogoni, the property included lands (both for settlement and agricultural purposes), livestock like cows, goats, sheep, fowls, economic tree crops and plants such as oil palm, the raffia palm and the plantain plantation as well as barns of yam. Lekia Giami and Baride Nnordam, oral interviews on 02-02-2025) contend that property usually passes from fathers to sons because they always continue the family's name. Besides, the first sons normally inherit the responsibility of maintaining the family ancestral shrines, serving as the custodians of the lineage property. He was to perform the rituals believed to link the living to their forefathers.

Madam Lesi Yorkina and Blessing Deeyah (oral interviews, 01-03-2025) discussed that Ogoni women were excluded from inheriting their fathers' property because it was believed that they could not carry on the family names. They further argued that daughters given out in marriage would transfer the fathers' property to their husbands in another lineage. Investigations revealed that the *Nwi biaken* or *biaken* (that is the daughter who remained at home) is customarily permitted to enjoy or inherit the father's property.

Preference for Male Children

Ogoni culture places a stronger preference for male children. As stated earlier, male children are believed to carry on the family lineage and female children were given out in marriage. For this reason, women were pressurized to give birth to male. In situations where there were no male child, any daughters of the father's choice was designated to remain at home to give birth to male child or children (Alonee Uelee Bari, 20-01-2025).

Again in traditional Ogoni, informal education was given to both male and female children to equip them with essential skills and knowledge so as to survive and function effectively in their environment. While women were groomed through *Bogo koo*, their male counterparts were given *Yaa* training. Within the confinement period, the female children were counseled on matters relating to marriage, womanhood, vocations and live skills. On the completion of the specified period of confinement, the younger girls "came out as trained ladies'. Everything about them tells you that they had been through "a school". Their speech was gentle, their voice was never loud and their manners refined" (Saro-Nwiyo, 1989 cited in Igbara, 2009 p. 102).

With the advent of colonialism with its paraphernalia from the beginning of the twentieth century in the area, there was discrimination against women in formal education. In the words of Saro-wiyo (cited in Igbara, 2009, p. 102) "to educate a female child, in their opinion was, to say the least, a huge financial waste. It was, therefore, an inconceivable idea as the girl would carry both her knowledge and family investment to someone else's home, leaving her own family deprived. Where eventually she was reluctantly allowed to acquire education, it was made clear to her that she had chosen between marriage and education". Okon (2023, pp. 21-22) concurs "the missions were also discriminatory in the education programmes they instituted for both boys and girls. While boys in colonial elite schools were prepared to go to

England to become professionals; doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc, girls in the equivalent schools were to ensure that the girls became a perfect woman modeled after the Victorian concept of womanhood. Hence only few women managed to benefit from formal education". Orugbani (1988, p. 120) brilliantly explains:

> While there were no legal provisions against the education of women in Nigeria at the time, the high school fees charged meant that sometimes families had to decide whether it was the boy or girl that went to school. In all such cases, the boys were favoured. Indeed in some case, the girls were given out in marriage to provide the where-withal to train the boys. Though, there is no statistics, it is reasonable to say that more boys than girls completed their formal education during the colonial period (Emphasis added).

What must be admitted here is that there is a remarkable change in attitude towards girls' education in Ogoni. Since the post-colonial era, there has been an increase in the establishment of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, warranting the explosion in women's enrolment in the pursuit and attainment of western education. The Ogoni can proudly thumb their chests to say that they now have erudite female Professors and hardworking lecturers, lawyers, doctors, administrators, engineers, civil servants, nurses, business executives, etc.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that Ogoni women have contributed and are still contributing hugely to the development of the area. It was equally observed that, in spite of their contributions, the brunt of some of the peoples' culture and tradition are suffered by women rather than their male counterparts. Most importantly, these traditions have negatively impacted and are still impacting women more than the men. Against this backdrop, this present study strongly contends that, although, these practices are gradually changing for good because of the influence of modernization, there is the urgent need to discontinue all forms of gender inequality, discrimination and oppression against women. It is pertinent to stress, among others, that mothers of twins should not be treated as outcasts, and at the demise of a husband, the surviving wife should be allowed to re-marry if she so desires. These measures, if implemented, would go a long way to enable women contribute maximally to the development of the area.

References

1. **Primary Source (Oral Interviews)**

S/No	Name	Sex	Ag	Occupation	Social Status	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
1.	Godwin B. Apere	M	64	Public Servant	District King	Kaani	30-03-2025
2.	Adooe Margaret	F	67	Rtd Farmer	Woman Leader	Zor-Sogho	21-02-2025
3.	Brown Atumaa	M	56	Public Servant	Legal Practitioner	Kpean	30-03-2025
4.	Abigail Lenu Nwika	F	65	Business	Woman Leader	Eeken/Buan	20-02-2025
5.	Adoo Friday	M	61	Rtd Civil Servant	Comm. Chief	Kono	20-02-2025
6.	Kpugbara Faith	F	58	Public Servant	Nurse	Beera-Gokana	20-02-2025
7.	Alonee UeleeBari	F	52	Civil Servant	Lecturer	Ueken-Tai	20-01-2025
8.	Blessing Deeyah	F	50	Civil Servant	Lecturer	Zaakpon	01-03-2025
9.	Lesi Yorkina	F	55	Public Civil Servant	Healer	Wiiyaakara	01-03-2025
10.	Baride Nnordam	M	60	Rtd Civil Servant	Community Chief	Barayira-Tai	02-02-2025

2. Secondary Source (Books)

Abalubu, T.A. (2011). *Ogoni systems of marriage over time: A comparative analysis*. A dissertation submitted to the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies. University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Austen, R. (1987). *African economic history.* James Cury Ltd.

Awortu, B.E. & N-ue, U.S. (2018). Constance M'manch Sira Saronwiyo (1939-2015): A pride to womanhood in the Niger Delta in *International Journal of African and Asian Studies* vol. 541 pp. 1-8.

Awortu, B.E. (2019). *Gender issues in Nigeria: The Niger Delta perspective*. Emu Integrated Service Ltd.

Awortu, B.E. (2019). The Niger Delta women in colonial Nigeria: Reflection on their economic and political roles. *International Journal of Business School Annals, 6*(1), 74-94.

Gibbons, E.J. (1932). *Intelligence report on Ogoni, Opobo division, Calabar province*. NAE file 28032 CSO 26/3.

Hopkins, A.G. (1990). *An economic history of West Africa.* Longman.

Igbara, P.I. & Keenam, B.C. (2013). *Ogoni in perspective: An aspect of Niger Delta history.* Onyoma Research Publications.

Igbara, P.I. (2009). *The making of a monarch: A biographical account of the life and times of King (Dr.) Mark Tsaro Igbara (J.P)*. LSB Publishing.

Kpone-Tonwe, S. (1990). *The Ogoni of the Eastern Niger Delta mainland: An economic and political history from the earliest times to about 1900*. A thesis submitted to the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies. University of Port Harcourt.

Kpone-Tonwe, S. (2003a). *Youth and leadership training in the Niger Delta: The Ogoni example.* Onyoma Research Publications.

Kpone-Tonwe, S. (2003b). Cult of personages in Ogoni history in N.C. Ejituwu & A.O.I. Grabriel (Eds.) *women in Nigerian history: The Rivers and Bayelsa States Experience.* Onyoma Research Publications.

Loolo, G.N. (1981). *A history of the Ogoni.* N.P.

N-ue, U.S. (2018). *Ogoni and her neighbours during the colonial period, 1900-1960.* A Thesis submitted to the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies. University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Oko, J. (2003). Feminism: An African perspective in N.C. Ejituwu & M.O.I. Gabriel (Eds.) *women in Nigerian history: The Rivers and Bayelsa States experience.* Onyoma Research Publications.

Okorobia, A.M. (2003). Rivers and Bayelsa women and the struggle for democracy in Nigeria, 1985-1993 in N.C. Ejituwu & A.O.I. Gabriel (Eds.) *women in Nigerian history: The Rivers and Bayelsa States experience.* Onyoma Research Publications.

Orugbani, O. (1988). Women in development: The task ahead in S.O. Jaja (ed.) *women in development Cross River experience.* Media Women Publications.

Panden, P.E. (2023). *Rivers State at 46: A compendium.* Fab Anicen Nigeria Limited.

Peel, M. (2009). *A swampfull of dollars: pipelines and paramilitaries of Nigeria's oil frontier.* I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.

Piegbara, I.F. & Tanen, P.D. (2024). *Bodo: Early history & contemporary development* Kanissi Books.

Robinson, K. (2005). *Journeys to success Rivers women of Achievement.* Nduka Printing Ltd.

Saale, K.H. (1985). *Impact of Christianity on the traditional institutions of Okwali people*. A.B.A. project submitted to the Department of History. University of Port Harcourt.

Saale, L.B. (2001). An outline of Ogoni cosmology and philosophy in I.C. Amii-Phillips (Ed.) *History and cultural perspectives of Rivers State.* ISCAP Enterprises Nigeria.

Tanen, P.D. (2005). *Bodo: A perspective of Ogoni history.* Ano Publications Company.

Yirakina, C.P.K. (2013). *The role of culture and traditional institutions of Ogoniland* (history). Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited.