Traditional Practices and the Social Responsibilities of Indigenous Women Organisations in 21st Century Nigeria

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Abstract:
Some African traditional practices are inimical to the rights and status of the women folk as free-born in the society. Some of these traditional practices have lingered. Although there exist Pre-contact indigenous women organisations, which were formed mainly to protect the interest of women, a great number of these obnoxious practices are still being perpetrated unchecked, even in 21st-century Nigeria. The pertinent question this paper seeks to address is why these practices still exist despite the economic, psychological and psycho-social effects they bring upon the development of women. The paper utilised both primary and secondary sources. The case studies were based on selected communities in Nigeria. The paper argues that the continuous perpetration of these practices on women, which is a blatant disregard for human dignity and poses a serious threat to women's development, is due to the inability of these indigenous women's organisations to enforce their social responsibility roles. The paper recommends that to ensure substantial contributions by women to the sustainable development of the nation at large, certain debilitating traditional practices against women should be eradicated so that they can explore their full potential.

Keywords: Traditional practices, social responsibilities, indigenous women organisations and development

1. Introduction

Tradition, just like culture, defines a people. It is a set of behaviours, beliefs or customs that is passed from generation to generation within a group or society (Green, 1997). Tradition "embraces all society's practices, its structure of governance, and the social relations which dictate the manner in which individuals and groups organise their lives" (Bunch, 1955). The practice of these traditions is often sustained because of the perceived significance or importance of their meaning and attachments to the origin of the affected people. Generally, they refer to customs or beliefs that have existed from time immemorial (Shils, 2006). They are perceived to be unalterable and deeply important (Hobsbawn, 1992). Irrespective of whether they are explicable or not, a departure from these practices is often feared to bring doom or some evil consequences. The full wrath of which can befall an entire family, village or group. Within the African context, they are believed to be necessities and must be followed and observed. To ensure the well-being of women in pre-contact African societies, women groups and organisations were set up. Especially in these pre-contact years, their purpose was to address imbalances against women in the society. The imbalances varied according to the tenets of the society involved and ranged from widowhood rites to ownership of land or properties. Many of the organisations were small in size and lacked the pomp of today's women organisations. However, they served the important purpose of addressing the psychological, emotional and even financial needs to support the cause of fellow women in the society.

Indigenous women's organisations existed in most parts of pre-contact Africa. In Nigeria, their presence was felt mostly in Igbo land and the Riverine area of Bayelsa and Rivers states also have the equivalent of Umuada. From the Eastern parts, we have the much revered Umuada group, which is an association of the first daughters of the land. Their main focus is the progress of their father's land in all ramifications. The Efik and Ibibio groups have the Nka-Ibanisong groups, which exist purposefully to ensure justice is attained on issues that involve the daughters of the soil. In Yoruba land, the indigenous women groups of Olobinrin Ile-Indigenous Wives Association, Iyale-Iyawo-Senior Wives Association and Omo-Osu-Daughters of the Compound are variants of the Indigenous Women Association in Yoruba land, much as the focus of these women's organisation was on women, they were also concerned with the proper functioning of the society as they believed that women's rights could be secured by addressing the broader issues of human rights of women and men in any oppressive society (Afolabi, 2019). These women organisations, apart from being active in making sure justice was maintained in traditional societies, also supported victims in trial processes and generally pushed gender equity in their activities (Afolabi, 2019). Evidence abounds of indigenous women organisations giving support to fellow women in the societies like, settling misunderstanding between mothers and daughters-in-law, a wife and the husband's family or in

pleading for a reduction in punishments leveled out to erring women in the society. However, it would seem that in the name of cultural preservation, these women organisations have failed in their role of ensuring the well-being of women in their domain by not recognising the need to abolish certain obnoxious practices against women.

1.1. Indigenous Women Organisations and the Responsibilities

Women are an integral part of any society. Their roles are as many as they are diverse. However, the role of nurturing and providing succor seems to be outstanding. This intrinsic aspect of their role led to the formation of groups to protect their general interests, especially those of the vulnerable. Most of these women groups have grown over the years to become formidable socio-political women organisations to be reckoned with. They are known by different names in different parts of Africa. The roles of these women groups within the society are both cultural and social and can be described as dedicated towards advocating human development and social justice and influencing policy-induced change (Kapur, 2019). On record, they have done excellently well. Warham (2001) notes, "Women organisations worldwide have contributed in no small measure to achieving sustainable development" (Warham, 2001). In Nigeria, these organisations exist and have also made their mark in the development of womenfolk socially, economically and politically. As noted by Jidau (2021), "In the Post-colonial Period, Nigerian women began to play very active roles in various aspects of the nation's development, conflict resolution being an aspect" (Jidau, 2021). At the grassroots level especially, the women groups make sure that traditional practices like mourning rites, which have to be performed before, during and after the burial of her husband, are duly observed by women to ensure cultural preservation. This is an aspect of their responsibility role, the maintenance of their culture.

However, being that the responsibility role can be defined as the "responsibility of an organisation for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior that contributes to sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society" (Okeke, 2000, pp. 48-63), this paper argues that indigenous women organisations have failed to exercise their full responsibilities, which could help liberate the women from the weight of tradition and allow for their full participation in activities that will lead to sustainable development in the 21st Century.

1.2. Objective of the Study

Although traditions are not entirely oppressive to women, the continuous practice of some of them is inimical to the existence of women as the purpose and intent have become increasingly distorted and abusive, even by fellow senior women and not in the interest of the younger women. This study notes that any attempt to liberate women as particularly maltreated citizens and valid social groups must begin with recognising the responsibility clause of women organisations. Such efforts will help in demanding a reassessment of some of the people's ways of life that formed the traditions in the society. Therefore, this study looks at some of these traditional practices and the failure to exercise the social responsibility role of the women organisations, which has edified and sustained them to provide solutions. It is argued that "the struggle to improve African women's social status and rights cannot be really accomplished without a substantive legal base" (Okeke, 2000, pp. 48-63).

2. Methodology

The study used a qualitative method, and data were collected from selected areas in Nigeria. The selection was based on areas where indigenous women organisations are very active and where traditional practices that need abolishing still exist. The target population is women indigenous organisations at the grassroots that have the sole jurisdiction of women in a specific community. The study used guided interviews, guided observation and secondary/scholarly materials as sources of data. Collected data were subjected to content analysis.

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1. Social Responsibilities of Women Indigenous Organisations in the 21st Century

The 21st century brings a change in the role of women global leaders. This warranted the establishment of Organisations like the African Indigenous Women Organisation (AIWO) with the mission of enhancing and strengthening the capacity of African Indigenous Women through participation, social, economic, and political empowerment, as well as protection of their rights. Another example is African Indigenous Women Empowerment (AIWE), which has been operating as a National Organisation in South Sudan since 2018 in the areas of education, economic empowerment and sexual and gender-based violence prevention. The organisations operate through radio shows, community dialogue and Non-Governmental Organisations. Modern indigenous women organisations in Africa are making their messages of equality and empowerment spearheaded by Agnes Kareo Mgenia from Parakuyo Pastoralist group in Tanzania, the chair of Nalepo, a community-based organisation that support girls from a poor family for schooling and those forced to drop out for marriage. All these groups are working on the injustice that the society imposes on women. We have a thousand indigenous women organisations operating the world over. However, this paper is directly concerned with the grassroots indigenous women organisations and their positive and negative roles, exposing the hardship younger women suffered at the hands of fellow women in the process of implementing the dictates of traditions imposed on them not by men this time around, but by fellow women. These grassroots organisations have women as the sole jurisdiction over the local affairs of the women in a specific community. They are the government, and they recruit members. They have no class consciousness and are not funded by the government. This means that they have control over what can be allowed to happen to the women in their domain and what they can disallow. Consequently, they are the best agency in the

circumstance that can initiate change or abolish outdated and mundane practices affecting women. As stated by Brinks (2019, pp. 348-365), "Simply facilitating access to the standard legal venues has not brought significant or consistent improvement in the ability of indigenous individuals or peoples to deploy the law in the realisation of their goals and aspirations, or the protection of their rights".

This does not portend the fact that there are no good and beneficial traditional practices, but the majority of the time, girls/women are exposed to harmful practices. The situation in Tanzania is similar to other African countries where girls are excluded from decision-making or have no rights to property ownership and suffer from traditional harmful practices (UN, 2023). It should also be noted that the modern indigenous women group developed as a result of the United Nations' concern for indigenous people; hence, local communities and Indigenous Peoples platform web portals were created. The Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC) is also a network of 135 indigenous peoples organisations from 21 African countries, which makes it the largest indigenous peoples' network. It was founded in 1997 during the adoption of the draft constitution of the UN working group on the indigenous people based on the principle that the indigenous people of Africa experience human rights violations and exclusion from decision-making and the political economy (Sudarkasa, 1986).

The obvious fact is that the above-mentioned indigenous organisations apparently expressed and partly represented the voice and aspirations of the real indigenous women; rather, this work is concerned with the grassroots indigenous women organisations directly and not the elite group that represents their voice in the form of non-governmental organisations. Such indigenous women organisations have been identified as:

- Umuada in Igbo land
- Omo-Osu, Olobinrin-ile and
- Iyale-Iyawo in Yoruba context

The unique quality of this paper is that responses were elicited from the grassroots directly based on interaction with real indigenous women. The major difference between pre-contact and contemporary women indigenous organisations is the formality in terms of vision, mission, stated aims and objectives, registration and modernised mode of operation. However, the pre-contact indigenous women organisations were arbitrary in terms of membership, roles and involvement: such were not formalised, but they remained as part of the unwritten culture and practices notable among some communities in Nigeria. Nzegwu (2003) noted that membership in the pre-contact era was open to women of that specific community regardless of their class and educational level. However, leadership among the indigenous women were based on both seniority and assertion.

3. Literature Review

The notion that African women are characterised as jurally minors falling under the guardianship of their father and later of their husband and lastly under the guardianship of their children was debunked by Sudarkasa after conducting research among the Yoruba in Nigeria. The observation was that women were conspicuous in high places, e.g., queen-mother, queen-sister, princess, chief and holders of titles and offices in the town. They were also occasional warriors (Sudarkasa, 1986).

In sub-Saharan Africa, women's roles as mothers, wives and educators extended to crucial roles like farmers, businesswomen, managers of household food supplies and innovators, while men are presented as leaders and supervisors based on the traditional perception of male gender roles. Women, therefore, seem to be imprisoned in domestic injustice, having six mountains on their backs, namely:

- Oppression from outside-colonialism,
- Tradition-fundamental slave communal structures,
- Underdevelopment,
- Man,
- Her colour – her race and
- herself (Odeleye, 2020)

Hence, five are from outside and one from herself and infer to her fellow women who are yet to be convinced of the need for empowerment of women against all other oppression from outside and within, as well as the willingness to free herself from oppressive acts in the name of culture. The true definition of development would be a reduction in poverty, unemployment and inequality before the consideration of an increase in Gross Domestic Product. The existence of development measured by the Human Development Index will presumably not only bring a change in women status but also the clash of traditional interest between the seemingly educated women and the indigenous women whenever there is an opportunity to ascertain the latter's status as the custodian of culture (Odeleye, 2020). Considerably, the most vulnerable of this group are widows. The full description of the circumstances of the widows is summed up in the statement on International Widow Day by the UN in 2014, cited by Peter Lloyd-Sherlock et al. as "Absent in statistics, unnoticed by researchers, neglected by national and local authorities and mostly overlooked by civil society organisations– the structure of widows is in effect invisible" (Lyoid-Sherlock, Gorso & Minicuci, 2015). However, until 2012, the body of research about widowhood, deprivation and vulnerability remained insignificant, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ban Ki-Moon also reiterated in 2014, "No woman should lose her status, livelihood or property when her husband dies, yet millions of widows in our world face persistent abuse discrimination, disinheritance and destitution." Dube (2022) provides insights into the different national contexts of widowhood and the consequences of widowhood for various aspects of socio-economic status, health, and well-being and explores pathways between widowhood and deprivation. Such interacting disadvantages include denial of inheritance, limited mobility for economic participation,

prohibition on re-marriage, and restricted social participation. Poorer and less educated women may be more exposed to the deprivation. However, surprisingly, educated women are now deeply affected because the period seemed to be a payback time for evading a number of cultural and traditional activities before the experience of widowhood. The research was conducted among the low-resourced communities of Binga district in Zimbabwe. The paper concludes that women are exposed to extraordinary isolation after the death of their husbands. A study carried out on a sample of 300 women, 155 widows and 145 non-widows, found out that the majority of the women lived their lives on meagre resources to satisfy their basic needs (Nodim, Albet & Isife, 2012). The non-widows enjoyed a better livelihood than the widows.

The statement pronounced by the United Nations Women that Women's and girls' human rights are universal and indivisible in December 2022 established the gold standard for dignity, freedom and justice for all people and that "In too many spaces, human rights and especially women's and girls' human rights are harshly denied or restricted. These losses of human potential diminish us all and directly impede recovery, resilience and sustainable development" (UN Women, 2023). United Nations further stressed the importance of widows by declaring 21 June 2021 as International Widow Day based on the fact that there are more than 258 million widows around the world; they have been historically left unseen, unsupported and unmeasured in society (UN Women, 2023).

As widows experience grief and trauma over the loss of their husbands, they are also exposed to economic insecurity, discrimination, stigmatisation and harmful traditional practices on the basis of their marital status. They may be denied access to the bank accounts of their late husband, which will have serious financial implications for them and their children. Children who are given into marriage before the age of eighteen and whose husbands die soon after their marriage experience multiple rights violations. Child widows have been estimated to be 1.36 million of the approximately 258 million widows (UN Women, 2023). Beatrice Moring traced the history of women and children's assistance in Northern Europe to industrialisation and urbanisation, which encouraged migration and the loss of kingship and village ties. Rural-urban migration brought families under the situation of labourers' households and at the death of the husband, the widow faced a difficult situation in the Nordic Countries, which informed the support from the poor relief authorities between 1890 and 1910 (Moring, 2012). Rather than traditional practices, modernisation was the force behind the widows' poor condition in Northern Europe.

4. Theoretical Explanation
Two theories are relevant in this study.
- First, Martin Seligman's Positive Psychology Theory and
- Second, Martin Seligman and Steven Maier's Theory Learned Helplessness Theory of Psychology

The first aims at the scientific study of human actions. It flourishes and focuses on individuals' and communities' positive aspects and strengths as a path to well-being. It points out that individuals have three basic psychological needs: to feel positive emotion, engage in activities that give life meaning and have positive relations with others. Seligman's theory of learned helplessness, on the other hand, postulates a situation of inflicted helplessness, the situation by which social context and indigenous factors inflict the victims with "helplessness" (Gerontol, 1979). In this case, it is a situation of inflicted helplessness. It is a state that occurs after an individual has experienced a stressful situation repeatedly and therefore comes to believe that he or she is unable to control or change the situation, and so, they give up trying. The reality here is that if some widows had a choice, they would have preferred to go out and get involved in economic activities that would improve their well-being. Also, if, for example, in the Yoruba scenario, the incoming bride had a choice, they would not want to accept a lower status for a two-year-old child she meets in the house. This subsumes that the situation is often beyond the women while their sufferings and difficulties are inflicted upon them by the society.

4.1. Case Study 1
Women are a formidable part of the Igbo society. Despite the paternalistic domination and decreased access to resources, they contribute a lot to the economic, political, religious and social developments of their societies. They have many forums designed to present and protect their interests. However, the most powerful of these groups is the Umuada group. The Umuada is an indigenous women group in Igbo land. It is an association of the first daughters of a community. It has been in existence since pre-colonial times and has transformed over the years into a socio-political body involved in peace-building and development.

As a women's group, they actively engage in structured and regular meetings where they articulate their issues and protect the group's interest over communal and economic issues, such as market rules, the prices of goods, and other market processes (Afigbo, 1972). Until the present day, any discrimination, especially against fellow women, has been frowned upon; even in spaces where it was pronounced, such as in the domestic or the community space, women would engage whether invited to or not. The word 'Umuada' is a combination of the word 'Umu', which means people or children, and 'Ada', which means the first daughter in Igbo language. However, the Umuada in some communities encompasses more than the first daughters to include every woman in the community, married, unmarried, divorced, or separated (Joy, 2012). Their functions comprise peace-building, maintaining order in the society, and ensuring that laws are obeyed in order for sanity to be maintained. "They originated from the traditional belief of the veneration of Ala, the Earth goddess in Igbo land, and so were expected to be honest, morally sound, courageous, truthful and peace-loving to effectively carry out their duties to the land. So they are representatives of the spiritual functions of Ala" (Eze, 2020). In carrying out their duties as custodians of their traditions towards fellow women, we ask if all that is being done in their line of duty is in tandem with 21st-century realities.

4.2. Case Study 2

In an Oral interview, Madam Hamdalat Yusuf, a member and the head of an indigenous group, the Olobinrin-ileIya Eko in Iseyin, described the position of Iyale-Iyawo as the association of senior wives among the Yoruba people of Iseyin origin in Oyo State. It is an association that you do not register but arbitrarily belong to as a wife in a family immediately after another wife comes in, though not necessarily of the woman's husband. This makes the last wife become the active Iyale-Iyawo. All other senior wives are passive Iyale-iyawo, but they all have roles to play. The active Iyale-iyawo will be in charge of familiarisation and adaptation of the new wife to the family. The roles are categorised as: Needs, Social-relation and Advisory.

- Needs - Food, hygiene, clothes and the like within the first two weeks
- Social-relation – Introduction of members of the family and their relations, providing advice on the conduct of the wives and related matters, inviting the bride in case of social functions in the larger family, enforcing the traditional rules as occasion demands and making contributions towards financial support during celebrations, for example, Naming, Marriages of Children and Funerals of parents.

While the new bride dresses in new clothes, the senior wives will also put on new clothes to show that they are also worth celebrating and the husband must not desert them because of the new wife. They usually go to the market in the evening with their best attire. On their way to these markets, men in the society will make jest of them, saying that they should not be too envious and overdo things like adding too much water to their soups/stews. There is usually an unfound solidarity among the senior wives whenever a new wife is married. They acquired the name Iyale–Iyawo on the arrival of a new wife, while the real name of the indigenous wives association is OLOBINRIN–ILE, meaning the women of the quarters. The same groups of people have social roles to play in case there is a rancour between the husband and the wife. The new wife may even pitch a tent with some groups of the old wives as part of the politics of the extended family. In case the husband dies, the same group of people will have a role to play in the mourning process (Madam Hamdalet Gbola Yusuf, personal communication, May 5, 2023). From experience, some of these women would have passed through the same stage and believed that the treatment/suffering given to them by their seniors must also be inflicted upon the new widow. The other important group that is common to the Yoruba people in Oyo, Ogbomoso, Osogbo and Ibadan, including Iseyin, is Omo-Osu. Among themselves, Omo-osu plays the social, economic and advisory roles. The connection between them and the Olobinrin-ile is the fact that their mothers, step-mothers, and sisters-in-law are the members of Olobinrin-ile. The latter gives the same respect that is accorded to their husband to the members of Omo-Osu and in return, Olobinrin–Ile usually extorts money from the members of Omo Osu during celebrations and festivals. Men in the quarters have the equivalent of omo-osu as 'omo-ile', meaning the children of the house, probably because the omo-osu members would have been married into another family.

5. Results and Findings

Omo-Osu is to the south-west what the Ummuada is to the Igbo people of South East Nigeria. Apparently, the advisory and complementary roles for celebrating and socialising the new bride are parts of the socialisation roles expected of the elderly ones in typical African society. Such roles must be emphasised rather than the monitoring roles on restrictions and infliction of suffering on women. This study has identified two areas that encourage the observance of obnoxious traditions. These are: (i) Seniority and (ii) Widowhood rites.

- Yoruba concept of Seniority: Traditional rules assigned age seniority according to the order of entry into the lineage either by birth or by marriage and respect earned through seniority (Bascom, 1942). Seniority is determined by the type of individual affiliation either by marriage or by birth with the patrilocal unit called agbo-ile e.g. an 'in-marrying bride' is junior to all members of the groom's lineage, not only to the older wives but also to all children no matter the age. Hence, rather than age, the chronology of the bride is reckoned from the day they enter into the family and not their age.
- Yoruba culture of widowhood: In Yorubaland, the widow is supposed to appear in a black outfit without ornaments, must wear a sober look, must not be involved in public talk events and must stay indoors throughout the period, must not have a regular bath except on Fridays and cannot put on other wears, e.g., shoes, dress, and a portion of the house will be separated for her to avoid unnecessary wrangling with others, must sleep on the mats, although from house to house, there exist variations.

These restrictions are usually enforced by the senior wives. Hence, the majority of the widows would be advised to have the widowhood period spent in the old house setting so that the restrictions would be monitored. In African society, there are no cultures of men observing widower rites; rather, men are usually consoled with early marriages on the occasion of losing their wives, which shows that the rites are inherently gendered (Adeyemo, 2016). The reflection of cultural imbalance is observed in the practice and rites of widows and widowers.

In some indigenous societies, women are saddled with the responsibility of economic subsistence, transformation and progress. If such women are subjected to economic incapacitation in the name of widow's rites, the economy of the society will be deeply affected. Consider the example given by Aransiola and Ige (2010) of women working in modern industrial sectors. A woman in widowhood cannot exercise her voting right and may not be allowed to go out to vote. Women's emancipation has not really found its way into the thinking of the indigenous women who would want to enforce the restrictions or the social alienation of considering a widow as an outcast within the period as if she were the cause of the husband's demise. Obviously, some of these practices are being curbed by some women in modern times, but the fact remains that women who are situated in the indigenous setting still suffer these harsh treatments as widows.

6. Conclusion

The United Nations' position on women's development is clear. They are captured in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a target period of the year 2030. SDG five (5) is especially focused on women and girls. It aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Hence, suggestions are made in the area of access to restorative justice support, education, pension and resettlement, truth and reconciliation, as well as justice to end all violence against women. The intervention of this study is the addition of legislation that will ensure the reality of all these wishes. Most importantly, the study advocates for the implementation of such legislation to be spearheaded by the leadership of indigenous women organisations as a fulfillment of their social responsibility role.

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