

INDIGENOUS UKPIOVWIN WOMEN OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA: THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT

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The village of Ukpiovwin is located in the Udu Clan of Udu Local Government Area of Delta State, southern Nigeria. It is surrounded by rivers and creeks, several of which also run through the land of the village.

The approximate population is three thousand. The population of women and children outnumber that of men. The people belong to the Urhobo group, and Ukpiovwin land falls within the Urhobo region, and is bordered by Ijaw and other Urhobo clans on all sides. Petroleum, the backbone of the Nigerian economy, is exploited from Urhobo land.

In Africa, the physical land is also equated with the people. To us, our identity is tied to our saying that the earth hardly rejects its own.

The major language spoken is Urhobo, of the Ughievwen or Udu dialect, which has a musical lilt that differentiates it from other Urhobo dialects. Pidgin English is also a major form of communication in the village.

The status of women in Ukpiovwin

Present day Ukpiovwin women are culturally alienated. Pidgin English has eroded much of the Urhobo language spoken in the land. Although the location is Ukpiovwin, Urhobo folklore and tradition face the threat of extinction because our women and mothers no longer tell to children, those stories which formed the traditional psyche of children in times past. We have therefore to face the fact that the customs of our people are indeed signposts to a sustainable future.

The Ukpiovwin women practise the African traditional faith and Christianity. Shrines to indigenous Gods are still visible today in Ukpiovwin even with the presence of about six churches of different denominations.

Ukpiovwin children enjoy early childhood education, but boys benefit more than girls because the drop-out rate is higher among the latter. The major factor responsible for the high drop-out rate among girl children, earlier than boy children, is not really poverty, but early marriage. It is not strange to find girls in their teens married off in order for parents to secure bride wealth from in-laws.

Male control of female sexuality through genital mutilation or female circumcision is still practised in some lineages. A woman's moral status in her marital home is predicated on whether genital mutilation was carried out on her before the delivery of her first child or not. A different kind of control is evident in the pressure on wives to bear male children for their husbands.

Again women hardly inherit property as daughters, where there are sons. One area where gender-sensitivity occurs in Urhobo land is in the area of traditional titles of authority. Yet, Ukpiovwin women are seldom accorded recognition by the giving of community titles. The fact that women have titles, like the *Okpako Eya* or Head of Women title does not mean they have enough authority in the land or village to take many decisions. They are still subordinate to men in the village. There are also women who are accorded recognition as mothers of the village due to their age and status. This recognition makes them to be regarded as *Oni*, or mother. Other forms of recognition are linked with cultic hierarchy. Even when they bear titles, women, however, still do not affect the patriarchal power structures of the land. The extended family system is still dominant in this sleepy rural community.

Widowhood practices adversely affect our women. Fellow women (in-laws) inflict indignities on bereaved wives.

Women in the village have been at the receiving end of inter-communal clashes in the area for some time. Peace options should be entrenched in the local politics of Ukpiovwin Land. The perpetrators of conflicts are men, the profiteers are men, but the women and children are victims, often dispossessed.

Seeking to overcome

This background informs the status of wives, mothers and other women who form the totality of indigenous Ukpiovwin women. Marriage is seen as an instrument of patriarchy because through it, many women, who in ordinary circumstances would not do so, subjugate their will to those of their husbands, fathers and other male members of the clan.

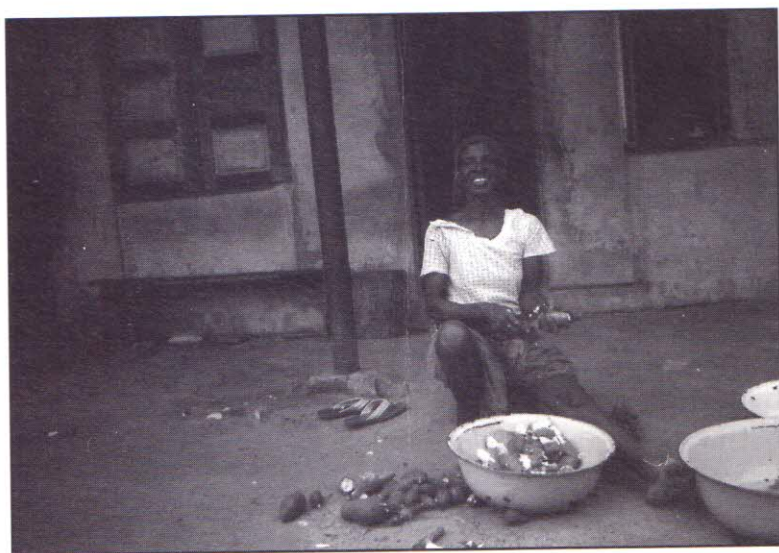
The general work of Ukpiovwin women is controlled by men. It is a fact that Urhobo women are acclaimed for their prowess where work is concerned. Polygamy has greatly encouraged women to work because of family (children) security. Even when their work is domestic, women do more work than men who enjoy more periods of leisure than women do in the village.

Despite the dominance of patriarchy, Ukpiovwin women seek to rise above their disadvantaged situation. They farm, fish, trade and engage in cottage industry work but still find themselves caught in the cycle of poverty and dispossession. Ukpiovwin women depend on land and the forest for survival.

As farmers the women of Ukpiovwin obtain land through right of usufruct, inheritance or purchase. But they need to own more land, have rights of tenure, be self-reliant and Land Use policies should be made to favour women. In the company of hired hands or members of their families especially their children, these women cultivate cassava, the major tuber crop. They suffer a handicap because their labour is unskilled and unpaid for. What is produced is mainly for domestic consumption and the very little that is left for exchange for money. These indigenous women have no access to farm input or advice from agricultural extension workers.

In recent times also, farming has become fraught with certain ecological problems like oil spillage from burst oil pipes, gas flaring and the general ecocide perpetrated by oil companies engaged in oil exploration activities.

The few percent of the population engaged in fish-farming no longer see any profitable future in this act. Harsh environmental problems of erosion and pollution have made fish for subsistence difficult to catch. Moreover, these women lack present-day technology to keep abreast modern fishing methods. The use of dug-outs and canoes is dated. Moreover the danger of boats capsizing due to laid out pipes is high. Due to lack of capital, most women even with



*The initial stage in Garri processing: the peeling of the cassava.
Photo: Mabel I. E. Tobrise*

the formation of co-operatives cannot purchase speed boats which can go farther out to sea.

Trading holds many more prospects for the women of Ukpiovwin, although very few belong to co-operative societies. Petty trading is common among the indigenous women, who travel to Warri, a major urban centre in Delta State, for their wares. Trading has so far not been an exciting venture. Most women spend both the profit and capital for the upkeep of their families, their major responsibility. The roads which link Ukpiovwin to Warri, Aldja and other towns in the environs are hardly motorable. Many women resort to trekking when fares are hiked by transporters due to bad roads.

The women of Ukpiovwin also engage in cottage industry, especially in the production of the local gin known as *Ogogoro*, palm oil, *garri* processing (a staple food made from cassava), the making of earthenware for cooking and local crockery and raffia work. But the industries which bring in much capital have been taken over by menfolk. Women now assist or act as saleswomen for their male controllers or managers, a situation which brings women back to their economically disadvantaged position.

Perhaps the role women in the area are most known for is that of being traditional birth attendants (TBA) to the surrounding communities. Because primary health care delivery is absent from the community, female TBA and healers make a lot of money from this and many of them thrive on the peoples' ignorance.

Migration

In contemporary times, Ukpiovwin women have been seen as unskilled workers in factories and industries in Aladja and Warri. They also return in time to cook dinner and/or tend to the families' needs and return to these cities early the following day. The size of their families, the implacability of the environment, especially the land and the sea and their husbands' meagre wages have forced these women to be housewives and workers.

Ukpiovwin women do migrate to the urban cities within Delta State, its environs and even to other parts of Nigeria. They move with their husbands when the reason for migration is work in the organised or unorganised sector. Ukpiovwin women have been found among migrant fisher-families along the Niger Delta. Others relocate to the cities and take up blue-collar jobs or engage in trading.

This brings to focus the lack of government presence in Ukpiovwin Community. For several decades, the government has neglected the village and this is being felt now, more than ever. Government presence in Ukpiovwin should be felt especially in the areas of poverty alleviation, health care, education and indigenous mobilisation programmes.

The backbone of the Nigerian economy is petroleum, most of which is exploited from Urhobo land. The Ukpiovwin people are of Urhobo extraction and they need seriously to benefit from the resources their land generates. This is not so. The irony of the Ukpiovwin situation is that Warri, a major town where 'oil money' is enjoyed by workers in the oil sector, is very near Ukpiovwin, yet in terms of electricity, pipe borne water, motorable roads, good schools, Ukpiovwin is another life, a direct opposite of what such satellite towns should be.

154: The above factors make women ignorant of and even unconcerned about government projects, except during voting exercises. During



*Returning from the forest from gathering fuel wood.
Photo: Mabel I. E. Tobrise*

these periods, so called illustrious sons of the village return home, mobilise women to vote, but when they win elections they return to the cities.

In recent times, women have faced the tragedy of infant mortality due to disease, neglect, ignorance and malnutrition. This has made the attitude to Family Planning Programmes to be one of general indifference on the part of women who do not see the need to space their children or plan their family. This attitude is due to loss of children in their infancy hence women give birth to more children than they can cater for or cope with. Moreover, the indigenous men have great control over their wives' fertility.

Attendant conflicts to the situations above have led to the collapse of many marriages. In these cases, spouses drift apart to the helplessness of both bride and groom families. Sometimes we have to face the situation of absent fathers, where due to poverty, fathers as household heads drift to the urban areas from Ukpiovwin. At other times, you have some Ukpiovwin women heading families as a result of widowhood, divorces or desertion by the household head. But even when males desert their spouses, the extended family of the wife or the absent father still has a male member who oversees the

