



Research Paper

## **Ikwerre Women and Conflict Resolution in Contemporary Rivers State, 1958 - 2010**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to document some of the outstanding contributions of Ikwerre women in conflict management. It adopts the theories of liberal feminism and gender complementarity, each of which explains the relevant and complementary roles of women for the society to thrive successfully. It is premised on the multi-disciplinary approach and relied on primary and secondary sources particularly oral evidence using historical and analytical methods of data analysis. The work espouses the various ways through which Ikwerre women have maintained peace and promoted harmonious living in their communities especially in Rukpokwu, Ibaa, Ubima, Rumuekpe, Omuanwa, Ogbakiri and Omademe. The women used some kitchen utensils such as mortar and pestle sometimes while naked to invoke the powers of the gods against anyone who would indulge in stealing, kidnapping, cultism and killing of any community member, whether indigene or non-indigene. This pattern of conflict resolution used by Ikwerre women has over the years prevented conflicts and criminality. The paper further revealed that the indigenous methods of conflict resolution adopted by the women brought fear on the perpetrators, and so guaranteed lasting peace in the communities. It further observes that women have intervened in settling of minor disputes such as boundary disputes and allegations of homicides through poison bishi. The paper argues that Ikwerre women have left more permanent foot prints in socio-economic development of Ikwerre such as building and completion of classroom blocks in some schools, building of staff rooms, conveniences for staff and students, health centres, maternity homes among others. These amenities provided by the women have helped to engage the youths positively thereby reducing the crime rate within the society. The study therefore recommends inclusion of women in conflict resolution panels within the communities of Ikwerre in particular and Rivers State in general to prevent total breakdown of law and order. Furthermore, the use of indigenous conflict resolution method for peaceful coexistence and regular meetings by the women to resolve some issues before they get escalated, should be encouraged.*

**Keywords:** Women, homicide, conflict, resolution, peaceful, co-existence.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Women are crucial in the existence of any group of people within the society. There is a popular Chinese proverb which says “women hold half the sky” (Ebong; 2003: 58). This is an indication that women have tremendous amount of power and wisdom to accomplish set goals such as resolving conflicts as well as aiding developments in the society. In this regard, Ikwerre women have been very responsive over matters affecting their various communities especially in critical periods when the communities are infested with several issues such as youth violence, cultism, killing and kidnapping. Women from such communities, those married within and outside have always rallied within the village to find ways of handling the problems which have surpassed the men folk.

Ikwerre ethnic nationality of Rivers State encompassed four Local Government Areas namely; Ikwerre, Emohua, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt. The area is bounded by other ethnic groups, to the north and west is the Ogba-Egbema, Ekpeye and Abua/Odual, to the south are the Kalabari and Okrika of the Ijo, to the south west and east are the Tai/Elemo, Etche and Oyiabo, and to the north east are the Umuapu and the Ohaji of Imo State. Ikwerre is blessed with vast land which has always been a major factor of their occupational life. Due to

the fertility of the soil, Ikwerre produces a number of crops such as yam, cocoyam, cassava, maize, native beans, three leafed yam, pepper and okro as well as several vegetables.

The ancestors of Ikwerre developed oral laws and methods of conflict resolution which centres on the maintenance of social order and harmony and were apt to include women organizations on the rung of the ladder. This is an indication on the relevance of women in conflict resolution for peaceful co-existence in Ikwerre. Chinweizu (1990:14-15) notes that women play significant roles in the communities such as conflict resolution, control of the womb, control of the kitchen, control of the cradle and management of finance. Onwuzirike (2005:60) affirms that the traditional society understood the indispensability of the women folk. To him, without the women, life would be dull, tasteless, brutish and short.

Consequently, Ikwerre women in most conflict ridden communities have variously embarked on self saving missions. In Rukpokwu, Ubima, Ibaa, Ogbakiri, Omuanwa, Omademe to mention but a few, women have risen to their responsibilities. Where verbal "talk" was not able to control the dissident youths, they have used the indigenous methods of invoking the gods by carrying mortar and pestles while half naked along major roads, junctions and streets imprecating curses on anyone who indulges in killings, kidnapping, cultism, stealing among others. Peace, harmony and tranquility have in those communities been maintained through the intervention of the women as people go about their normal businesses. In a case of assassination or sorcery, the women marched through the streets of the village or community wearing the "back of black clothes" imprecating curses against the perpetrators and anyone planning a fresh one.

Aside conflict resolution, women have carried out infrastructural development in their respective communities such as building schools blocks, staff rooms, conveniences, hospitals, maternity homes among others. Thus, Ikwerre women have contributed greatly to the overall development of the area and Nigeria in general (Uman, 1998).

### **Statement of the Problem**

There has been no scholarly attention on the history of women and conflict resolution in Ikwerre. There is therefore paucity of materials on conflict resolution especially on Ikwerre women that can examine the peaceful and harmonious co-operation that existed in the past through the indigenous methods of conflict resolution.

Thus, in the realization of this study, questions asked include:

- What role did women play in conflict resolution in Ikwerre?
- How were they able to use these kitchen utensils for the management of conflicts?
- What functions did the women play in the overall development of Ikwerre?

These questions are important as they will create avenues for discussion on the various roles Ikwerre women have played in conflict resolution for the promotion of national unity, peaceful co-existence and the development of Rivers State.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted the primary and secondary sources of data which include the oral and the written sources. Face to face or individual interview technique was used intelligibly for the reconstruction of the work. The eyewitness verbal testimony was of great importance for the work as the risks of distorting the content are minimal.

Written sources also constitute the main sources of historical reconstruction and provides the most precise information about the past. However, it was used cautiously due to its limitations as the work strived to achieve objectivity. The multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary approach was also adopted using knowledge from related disciplines in the humanities and social sciences to generate data. The methods employed in this work led to the generation of data with which the work was reconstructed.

### **Study Area**

The study area is Ikwerre, one of the major ethnic groups in Rivers State, Nigeria. It has four Local Government Areas namely; Ikwerre, Emohua, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt. Rivers State is located in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. Ayolagha and Onuegbu (2002: 19) classified the soils of Rivers State into beach-ridges, saline soils, sombreiro-Warri Deltaic plain and the coastal plain sands. The coastal plain sands occur in Ikwerre, Etche, Ogoni, Eleme and Ogba and constitute the upland soils of Rivers State. Natural levees, backswamp deposits, point bars form the highest parts of the landscape and are more freely drained. The mean annual temperature is high throughout the state with a mean daily maximum temperature of 30°C. the highest mean daily maximum temperature is recorded during the dry season months of February, March and April (Oyegun and Ologunorisa 2002: 53).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory is a set of ideas which claims to explain how society or aspects of societies work (Haralambus and Holborn 2000 cited in Omolulu 2009: 351). The work will be conducted within the framework of the theories of liberal feminism and gender complementarity each of which explains the complementary roles of women in the society especially in conflict resolution. Thus, the two theories suggests that women are ordained to be positive “developers” of society which cannot be totally accomplished by men alone.

The complementarity theory is a mechanism that will help to develop the society and achieve a balance. If men and women will harmoniously complement one another by contributing what each group could then, the law of balance and complementarity on which much that happens around us is based would be achieved. The two indispensable roles performed by women according to him are motherhood and building of the society and which conflict resolution is a part of the society. It follows that no single individual or community is self dependent but are interdependent on one another.

Liberal feminism also advocates the creation of equal opportunities particularly in education and work. Liberal feminists pursue these objectives by attempting to change attitudes to desiring reforms towards women because they are “makers” of society. Udoiden (2006:16) explains that a woman’s expertise is relevant in all aspects of life. But in the traditional Akwa-Ibom society, women who ventured into project beyond the traditional responsibilities of house, farm and market were seen to be wayward and stubborn and were despised in the society.

At present, women in Ikwerre have complementally added their resolution acumen to the overall development of their communities. This is because when conflicts are not properly resolved, they may lead to escalation and violence which in turn, engender destructive consequence and as such no sustainable development can take place (Amadi, 2017).

### **The Role of Adult Daughters, *Rumurinya* in Conflict Resolution**

Adult daughters *rumurinya* constitute a powerful force to reckon with and have helped to resolve disputes in their villages and communities by rallying enmasse from their various homes. *Rumurinya* in Ikwerre include women or daughters married outside the community, those married within as well as those who are unmarried. In a case of private offence such as allegation of homicide *bishi* through poison, they intervened between both parties of the same lineage group. Failure to accept their decisions could lead to mass boycott of their corpses during burial.

Nevertheless, in a case of assassination, cultism, stealing and sorcery, they marched through the streets of the village or community wearing the back of black clothes, imprecating curses against the perpetrators as it happened in the case of Rukpokwu community in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State in 2008. During this period, there arose assassinations of renowned and well meaning indigenes of the community. There was the issue of a piece of land bought by Mr. ThankGod Ikwegbu, a retired senior staff of Total Nig Ltd from Mr. Ogwundu who denied with his entire family of receiving any payment from Mr. ThankGod Ikwegbu. In the midst of the arguments, Ogwundu’s son called Awariwa was invited to a popular hotel, Samtex Hotel for collection of revenue for the community and was killed (Obochi, 2019).

The aftermath of it was the reprisal killings of chief Charles Azubunye, Graham Ordu, ThankGod Ikwegbu and Mr. Nduka, a man from the Rebisi area. They believed that these aforementioned people connived in one way or the other to favoring Mr. ThankGod Ikwegbu, whose bought land was denied and were also responsible in the death of Mr. Awariwa. In 2008, assassins stormed into the palace of chief Charles Azubunye at midnight, held their triggers and shot on the air to scare the villagers. When he was finally seen in his bedroom by the assassins, he was shot, wrapped with his mattress and burnt to ashes. Mr. Graham Ordu was killed by unknown gunmen in his wife’s business place at Rukpokwu, while Mr. ThankGod Ikwegbu was kidnapped and carried away. The kidnappers later demanded for ransom which was adequately paid but they never brought Mr. ThankGod Ikwegbu back. After several months of waiting, it was established through traditional means that the man has been killed. Mr. Nduka equally was shot and killed in his house at Rukpokwu between 9-10pm. His own sin was that as the owner of Samtex Hotel, they believed that Awariwa Ogwundu was killed on invitation in his hotel while they also alleged that the game plan for elimination of some people was carried out in his hotel (Nleanya, 2019). However, it is appalling that Mr. Nduka should die because he operates a hotel. It is glaring that he may not have seen or met any meeting about the assassination of these prominent sons of Rukpokwu.

As a result of these killings, people became afraid and were relocating to other communities. Businesses were halted and shop owners could not open for their normal businesses. From 6pm in the evening, you hardly finds anybody along the roads and streets of Rukpokwu. People were afraid and doubted the ability of the leaders to protect their subjects. It was this dilemma that spurred the *rumurinya* daughters of Rukpokwu to rally enmass in order to find the way forward. On the appointed day, and through information, all the *rumurinya* converged at the general playground in Rukpokwu. They wore the back of black clothes with some ritual items such as *mgbam* made from bamboo stick and some kitchen utensils such as mortar and pestles. As

they moved from one street to the other, one junction to the other, they imprecated curses on anyone who would act or in connivance with another person to carry out such inhuman crime. Sometimes, on provocation, they raised their wrappers and rolled their naked buttocks on the ground which the Ikwerre people calls *Osu-Otula-eli*. This was considered very serious and was expected to be accompanied by sudden death of the suspects whose corpse was buried without formal funeral rites (Wobasi, 1993:38). With this rituals, peace returned to the community and since then the members of the community have been living in brotherly love. Businesses are also thriving and those who packed out of the community have since returned.

Also, in Ibaa, *rumurinya* called a meeting of the conflicting parties charging them to change and embrace peace in the interest of their own good. They did not stop at this as they always warned the people especially the youths on the devastating consequences of allowing the disputes transform into violence. When there was no progress towards peaceful management of the conflict, the *rumurinya* decided that both parties would go for oath-taking to stop further plans for violence which gradually resulted to peaceful co-existence in Obelle-Ibaa (Ezekwu, 2018). *Rumurinya* had a good number of functions they performed in the community. *Rumurinya* in Ibaa have resolved allegations of *bishi* homicide through poison amicably through their gentle and expertise methods of handling conflicts. During the chieftaincy crisis in Ibaa, *rumurinya* also helped to calm the violent situation by appealing to the chiefs concerned on the need for peace to thrive in the communities of Ibaa (Obile, 2018).

*Rumurinya* in Ikwerre are very relevant in the burial of a member of their village especially the function of bathing of corpse. This reveals that they are a group to be reckoned with especially in conflict resolution. In Ubima, disagreements, among the *iceland*, *dewell* and *degbam* cult groups arising from cult supremacy and political alignments generated confusion and insecurity in the community. If for any reason a targeted member of opposing cult group escapes any member of his family will be killed (Otuka, 2018). People were killed and some were kidnapped on daily basis. Many people became afraid of going to their farms. Shop owners closed down their businesses and ran for their dear lives. Raping of young girls and women became the order of the day (Wobodo, 2018).

The activities of these cultists incited Ubima *rumurinya* adult daughters to perform a ritual to ensure that peace and security is returned in the community. The ritual was performed by the women while half naked. They used mortar and pestles to pound at all the junctions every market day for eight market days in company of the community's chief priest. The women imprecated curses on anyone who would kill anybody whether indigene or non-indigene (Igwe, 2018). After the ritual performances, the situation was controlled and peace returned to the community. Recently, the cult boys have embarked on kidnapping of innocent people for ransom. They may have realized that kidnapping for ransom was not covered in the ritual and so found a loophole to carry out their unholy act. Perhaps, the Ubima *rumurinya* daughters should re-convene and re-activate the ritual while including this important aspect that will guarantee the safety of people (Princewill, 2018).

In Omuanwa, *rumurinya* has been a rising force in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. They have used their influence to settle several cases of land disputes, cultism as well as some minor quarrels. They strictly advised parents to control their children and if for any reason anyone was caught in cult activities, his father's house would be burnt and the person ostracized from the community. They got the consent of the chief who promised that the younger age grade must enforce the decisions so that Omuanwa people can sleep with their two eyes closed (Amadi, 2018).

Omademe also had same experience. From the 2015 election cultism was on the increase. These cult boys carried AK 47 rifles openly in the community and could decide to kill whoever they perceived as opponents or the parents of their opponents. The cult groups, comprised of *iceland*, *degbam* and *dewell* refused to respect anyone in the community and were very proud in smoking Indian hemp along the streets and major road in Omademe (Amewhule, 2018). This generated violence and insecurity and farmers could not go to their farms anymore. Hunger became a factor of migration to other places especially to relatives who are working in Port Harcourt.

Consequently, the *rumurinya* adult daughters of Omademe converged at chief Ogundu Wali's palace and decided to apply the indigenous methods of imprecating, curses with some traditional items such as mortar, pestle, and palm fronds along all the streets and the major road of Omademe against anybody or group of people that will steal, kill or kidnap anybody. With this, peace has returned in the community as people go about their normal businesses.

However, these measures taken by the *rumurinya* in some conflict ridden communities of Ikwerre has engendered peace and harmonious living in the communities concerned. The efficacy of the indigenous methods is not in doubt. Whosoever has not eaten what is pounded in a mortar with pestle should attempt to violate. The consequences will be so grave on such a person as the gods and ancestors of Ikwerre always listened to the cries of their daughters promptly (Omaranma, 2018). Sometimes, where men fail in conflict management, the *rumurinya* weighs a big stick and have performed excellently well. They are recognized as great arbiters, peace brokers and enforcers. They have the experience by their nature as women to calm down hot situations and

make two groups come to a resolution. The roles which *rumurinya* plays are so enormous. No wonder an Ikwerre proverb which says *nwor-rinya-buru-oma*.

### **The Role of *Nde-nwerenzi*, and other Women Groups in Ikwerre.**

The married women *ndenwerenzi* occupy important position in village administration especially, taking cognizance of the fact that they formed the assembly of all the married women in the village. They are charged with moulding the character of the children in the community and are the bedrock of peace. They intercede for the betterment of the community. They settled disputes among themselves and referred serious cases to any other organs of administration. They performed community duties such as weeding the markets and collection of periwinkle shells to fill the pot holes.

Membership of *nde-nweresi* was necessary and compulsory which meant that a woman became a member at marriage. A member could be punished or disciplined if she had committed any crime. Like every other institutions, the leader of *ndenweresi* is called *nyerishi-nde-nweresi*. For one to qualify for this position, one must be the most elderly in the order of marriage. These people are highly respected in Ikwerre because they nurture the incoming generation through the development of human capital in their children. Women are a rallying point in Ikwerre; the strong pillar upon which everyone leans.

A good example was the steps taken by the women in Obelle and Rumuekpe towards peace process. The women who had earlier ran out of their communities due to insecurity felt that it was time for them to go back to their various communities because of the hard bite of poverty and hunger. The women of Obelle-Ibaa were courageous enough to confront the *iceland* for peace talk which gradually fostered peace in the community. They converged at the community playground invoking the powers of the gods and the ancestors against any trouble shooter, killer or kidnapper in the community (Eferebo, 2018).

In Rumuekpe, the married women spoke against assassinations of eminent sons of Rumuekpe along the streets of Port Harcourt and Elele. They appealed to the different warring camps of Friday Edu and S.K. Agala to stop all of these killings This contributed in fostering peace in Rumuekpe (Tarkah, 2018).

In 1958, Ibaa women through peaceful demonstration showed their discontentment with the colonial government over high rate of corruption, misappropriation of fund and mistrust among the agents of government. Eberé (2018) posits that the women marched peacefully in organized manner, composed songs and marched to Ahoada. The direct result of this demonstration was that the appointment of warrant chiefs within the native administrative system was later discarded and Ibaa began to experience several infrastructural development by the colonial government. This shows the ability of the women to peacefully change the decision of the colonial government (Ofege, 2018).

During the 2006 chieftaincy disputes in Ibaa, the married women were vocal in telling the chiefs who are contesting for the position of *nye-nwe-ali* Ibaa to be careful not to plunge the entire community into confusion. In Elele, the women also intervened by identifying an early warning signal which would have plunged the village into crisis. The problem was the death of a young man whose body was butchered and laid along Obelle road in 2012. The women employed the indigenous methods to determine who the perpetrators were. Their fairness on the issue led to the resolution of the conflict (Uchendu, 2018). The violation of spiritual invocation by any member of the *nde-werenzi* after it has been dispensed could lead to death of such person.

In contrast, some women in Ikwerre had helped to trigger more conflict situations in their communities. By way of showing sympathy, some women sent food to their cult sons in their different hideouts. They also hid their children that are involved in violence whenever security agents come for them. This action has affected the women as good conflict managers (Emesiobi, 2018). Some women aided and abetted some dissident youths in causing mayhem in Ogbakiri. They provided their houses as operational base for the warring factions and have always provided safe haven for the violent youths. Some young girls were also hired to bring in weapons into the community inside bags of garri and rice (Weleh, 2010:95).

On this note however, the role of women in training their children becomes an illusion considering the negative roles they played in some communities. This negative attitude by the women has been frowned at while admitting that prior to the Ogbakiri conflict women were noted for peace, love, unity and respect for everyone. What is playing out now and responsible for the change of norms and values on the part of women is the wave of civilization or what could be termed as “Women Liberation” which has so exposed them positively and negatively.

However, the role of women in training their children positively will help in curbing the rate of conflict in Ikwerre. Instilling the culture of peace building as well as teaching them the danger in destructive lifestyles will be a panacea for ending violent conflicts in Ikwerre and will help to breed a new generation of peaceful children in peaceful atmosphere needed for development of Ikwerre.

There are other women associations such as Ogbotu Social Club, Achama Social Club and Agwabunma Social Club. These social clubs also settles conflict among their members as well as between the members and non-members. Their leaders are experienced women married in Ikwerre over the years and have

good acumen for peaceful resolution of conflicts. With the wisdom bestowed on their leaders by the ancestors of Ikwerre, they have been able to calm down “boiling” situations.

### **The Role of Women in the Infrastructural Development of Ikwerre**

After independence, there was a boom in education for women. Ikwerre women became educated in such profession as teaching, law, accounting and politics. Some Ikwerre women ventured into business, trading, hairdressing, tailoring, manufacturing etc. Although the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) disrupted development, women empowerment campaigns and programmes have been focused on the conditions of women and its improvement. This brought about the 1975 International Women’s year as a way of raising consciousness about the welfare of women. The conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beljing (1995) all deliberated on the advancement of women issues such as; poverty, education, training, health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision making among others (Wika, 2010).

These conferences aimed at eliminating the obstacles to the improvement of the status of women at the national, regional and international levels with greater equality and opportunities for women (United Nations Declaration for the Advancement of Women, 1996). After the Civil War, in the second military era of 1985-1996 and to 2009, few Ikwerre women such as Bibian Uchendu, Eunice Igwe, Josephine Chukwuigwe, Aleruchi Cooky-gam, Dr. Juliet Orlu, Joyce Akaninwo were appointed in government while some contested and won as councilors. They have in their own little ways contributed towards the development of Ikwerre by awarding scholarships, repairing the roads to their villages as well as employing the sons and daughters of Ikwerre. Another woman worthy of mention is Hon Joy Nyeche from Port Harcourt city. She built and donated a standard market for Elikahia Rebisi people as well as repaired some street roads in the community (Azundah, 1999:40).

Also worthy of recognition are the wives of Local Government Chairmen of the four local government areas that make up Ikwerre. They organized the women to seek for the sponsorship of building nursery schools, health centres and also contributed in sponsoring women on agricultural production (Mgbakiri, 2019). Social clubs like the *Nwerekarima* of Aparara, Women Group of Rumuagholu and Awalama have contributed to the development of their communities. *Nwerekarima*, social club of Rumuapara built and donated an office block, classroom blocks and conveniences to Community Secondary School Rumuapara in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. Women Group of Rumuagholu built a standard hospital for the members of the community while the Awalama Women built and donated a standard bus stop (Nworgu, 2019). Elikpokwuodu women under the aegis of Oganuruwhu social club of Rukpokwu, Nigeria built the primary and secondary schools in their community and handed over to the government.

In religious sphere, Ikwerre women have contributed to the growth and development of the church through the formation and membership of Mother’s Union, Women’s Guilds and Youth Fellowship. In some communities, they built and donated a hall for the youth wing and constructed belfry for the church. Worlu (2018) posits that the Rumuokoro Women under the membership of Mother’s Union and Agwabanma social club built the church belfry for the Emmanuel Anglican Church, Okoro-nu-odo Deanery. These amenities provided by the women have engaged the youths positively as some of them are employed in the schools to make sure that these amenities are adequately secured.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Women in Ikwerre have in no small measures demonstrated their relevance in the peaceful co-existence and the development of Ikwerre. They have through their motherly role handled issues and crises which hitherto were not resolved by men and as such had generated insecurity in their various communities. The women through indigenous conflict management methods, used mortars and pestles to imprecate curses on kidnappers, assassins, thieves and cultists. This led to peaceful and harmonious living as everybody go about their normal business. The paper also revealed that Ikwerre women have also contributed enormously to the social development of Ikwerre by putting some infrastructural facilities in place such as classroom blocks, staff rooms, conveniences for some primary and secondary schools while health centres, maternity homes, markets and bus stops were also erected in several communities. All of these are geared towards improving the living standard of the community’s members, and ensuring good health condition for the people.

### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper recommends that;

- The indigenous conflict resolution methods adopted by the women to restore peace should be adopted by the government, judiciary and the Nigerian Police for its potency in conflict resolution.
- There should be monthly regular meetings for all the women including those married outside their communities where early warning signs of conflicts will be identified and resolved before they get escalated.

- The women should indulge in invoking the power of the gods and ancestors every year for renewal otherwise the perpetrators go back to the crime especially when the power of the curse becomes wane.
- Inclusion of women in conflict resolution panels within the communities of Ikwerre in particular and Rivers State in general to prevent total breakdown of law and order.

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