

## **Thorn in the Flesh: Women and Indigenous Liberation Ideologies**

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**Abstract:** *The struggle for gender equality does not begin with the inter-cultural exchange between Africa and the other parts of the world. Women in Africa have developed both philosophical ideas and ideological strategies to back up the struggle for reckoning. This study is part of the unearthing of various indigenous philosophies and ideologies that have shaped and guided the struggle for gender equality. With the use of the sociological approach to criticism, the study draws illustration from several oral narratives, traditions, customs and views of the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta to argue that the development of the philosophical and ideological aspects of the struggle for women emancipation and liberation in the Niger Delta precedes the contact with the West. Some of these philosophies and ideologies include the Urhoro world view, occupational delineation, the Avwebo and Awwierovwe mystic, and the feminine genital discourse taboo. Through the use of flashback, foreshadowing, labelling and contrast techniques, the indigenous women liberation philosophies and ideologies are objectified. More so, the study discovers that with the motifs of struggle, polygamy, abomination, freedom and change, the indigenous women liberation philosophies and ideologies are transmitted through oral narratives, customs and traditions. At the end, the*

*study recommends that the embrace of western feminine theories in local cultures should be firmly anchored on the foundation of indigenously crafted women liberation philosophies and ideologies.*

**Keywords:** Ideology, Indigenous, Struggle, Liberation, Equality

## **Introduction**

The focus of this paper is that before the contact with foreign cultures, there are several indigenous strategies employ by the women in the western Niger Delta in their struggle for gender equality. Thorn in the flesh is a metaphorical expression used in the Bible book of 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 part of which reads that “lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a *thorn in the flesh*, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure...”. In this vein, the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origin* (2010) explains that *thorn in the flesh* means “a source of continual annoyance or trouble” (Cesswell, 2010 p. 444). The disquiet generated by the activities organized by women geared toward gender equality is referred to in this paper as thorn in the flesh.

The struggle by women for gender equality does not stem from the contact between Africa and the Arabs or Europeans. However, the dominant theories and ideologies of women liberation movement popular today are those imported into the African continent. These include theories like feminism and its variants like the mainstream feminism, anarchist, cultural and eco-feminism. African-American theorists have also developed variants of feminism like womanism. It must

be affirmed that these theories and ideologies are mostly academic in nature. For the uneducated African woman, the practical implication of these feminist theories and ideologies is vague. This is because they lack local content and are not tailored to suit the indigenous women struggle for gender equality. This is the thrust of this paper. This work argues that the development of women liberation philosophies and ideologies in the Niger Delta dates back to pre-colonial times; indigenous philosophical strategies for the struggle for gender equality have been in existence before the contact with the foreign feminist ideas. Through the use of the sociological literary theory, this paper explores some of the indigenous philosophies and ideologies that form the basis for the struggle for gender equality and their representation in the oral arts of the people of the western Niger Delta. The narratives of the Urhobo people will be used to illustrate the development and aesthetics of these indigenous philosophies and ideologies. But the implications can be generalized to suit the cultures of other indigenous people in the African continent.

The preoccupation of Africans with the excavation of indigenous knowledge has been a reoccurring research issue. Adeeko (2007) argues that the need to formulate indigenous set of ideologies and theories for the criticism of African literature is borne out of the response “to global encroachments” and not “whether or not they offer profoundly original theories of art, whether or not they propose a thoroughly new poetics of culture, whether or not the exclusivist and specificist language of some of the nativist is self-defeating” (p. 240). Also Ogundipe-Leslie (1996) argues that “certainly more research is needed to discover what

African women themselves, particularly, the working classes and the peasantry think about themselves as women, what ideology they possess and what agenda they have for themselves, daily and historically” (p. 548). In this vein, it must be noted that the sets of indigenous women liberation philosophies and ideologies that are explored in this paper are indigenous to the women of the Urhobo area of the Niger Delta. If there is any correlation with western women liberation ideologies, then it may have been cross-culturally transmitted after the contact.

There is the need to situate the indigenous women liberation philosophies and ideologies that are to be explored in this paper and the concept of intellectual indigenous feminism making waves in the Americas and Australia. The major thrust of the indigenous feminism as a branch of the theory of feminism has to do with the reaction of the indigenous women to the consequences of colonialism in the deprivation of the means of production in indigenous societies. Indigenous feminism is also preoccupied with the measures that women have to adopt towards the dismantling of the oppressive systems entrench by colonialism that are detrimental to gender equality (Smith, 2011 p. 37). Thus, there are variants of the indigenous feminism such as the Native American feminism in the United States, First Nations feminism in Canada, and the Aboriginal or Indigenous Australian feminism in Australia (Arvin et al., 2013 p. 25). As such, Aileen Robinson (2020) observes that “indigenous women will have different concrete experiences that shape our relation to core themes” (p. 93).

But the indigenously developed philosophies and ideologies analysed in this paper are not concerned with

the impact of colonialism, since their origin and development predates the colonial milieu. Even when the experiences in the oral narratives used to illustrate the existence of these ideologies in the struggle for gender equality are colonial or post-colonial in origin, the customs and traditions acting as vehicles for the propagation of these ideologies are timeless and immemorial. This is because; there has been the need to reorder the relationship between women and men in the western Niger Delta due the extreme patriarchal system of the area. Thus, in consonance with Daly's (1990) view that "the courage to be logical – the courage to name – would require that we admit to ourselves that males and males only are the originators, planners, controllers and legitimators of patriarchy. Patriarchy is the homeland of males; it is Father Land, and men are its agents" (p.28). This view is corroborated by Morgan's (1970) explanation that "all men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy, all men have oppressed women" (p. 533). These views surmise the extent of male chauvinism in various societies and the need for women to anchor the struggle for gender equality on indigenous liberation philosophies and ideologies becomes instinctual.

### **Representation of Urhobo Indigenous Female Liberation Philosophies and Ideologies**

In the Urhobo area of the Niger Delta, several female liberation ideologies have been in existence for millennia that they have become part of the cosmogonic worldview of the people. One of these is the *Urhoro* worldview. *Urhoro* is the metaphysical region between physical life of the living and the invisible abode of the ancestor. Omoko (2018) explains the *Urhoro* worldview

to mean “the region between *akpo* and *erivwin*; here *akpo* is the physical world of the living while *erivwin* is the invisible world of the dead” (p. 14). In an interview with Chief Julius Babogha (personal communication, 2 October, 2019) the indigenous literary sage explains the concept of *Urhoro* in Urhobo as not necessarily the region between life and death but as a creation myth of the Urhobo people. In his words,

*Urhoro* is the place where the DNA of man is packaged for its life journey on earth. It is where the script of the life of man is written. *Urhoro* is the place where the soul of man is packaged into flesh. This is where man is asked to narrate his/her mission on earth. After the interview with The Maker, who is God, then man is miniature into a nano-organism, compressed into the flesh form and sent to be delivered by a woman through the biological process of reproduction (Babogha, 2019).

The interesting aspect about the *Urhoro* worldview as expounded by Chief Babogha is the aspect of the biological packaging of the soul of humans which are sent to the bodies of women to be delivered as physical beings. The argument here is that the woman becomes the sole vessel for the transmission of the packaged soul of all humans into the material world. This is the implication of the *Urhoro* worldview for this study. This gives the woman leverage over men in the world.

Another interesting angle to the explanation of the *Urhoro* worldview propounded by Chief Babogha is the conflict arising from the sequence of departures from the region of *Urhoro* to the physical world. In this

aspect, the paper will once again rely on Chief Babogha analogy for guidance. According to Babogha (2019),

as a place where destinies are hatched, the *Urhoro* is also a place where the conflicts among humans are conceived. In the *Urhoro*, once a person has recounted how he or she will go about their business on earth, he or she is allowed to leave. The mischief happens when the next person may state his or her mission on earth as to be the antagonist of the person who has just left. Then after some time, such a soul is also placed in the woman-vessel and sent to earth to be born. Eventually, the conflict between the two people which has been programmed in the *Urhoro* is manifested in the world of the living.

Thus, the *Urhoro* becomes the cooking pot of the mission of men on earth. Though, the myth of the *Urhoro* varies in interpretation, the point to note is the feminist empowerment of the worldview. It has been utilized by women in the struggle for gender equality as it gives them the leverage of priding themselves as the vessel through which men are brought into the world. Therefore, the extent of male domination in the Urhobo culture is checked as the female figure becomes the mother figure of man.

In developing the philosophy of *Urhoro* explained above, Urhobo women has made sure that it is documented in Urhobo oral arts. The details of the objective deployment of this strategy in the struggle for gender equality find expressions in both motifs and techniques that are embedded in the oral arts of the people. An instance is the utilization of the *Urhoro*

worldview in the motif of struggle deployed to free Princess Oyeghe and indeed other women against arranged marriages and the unequal nuptial bond formerly in existence between humans and spirits. This epic struggle is captured in the narrative titled *Princess Oyeghe* narrated by Chief Cousin Onofekohwo of Kokori town. The story was recorded and translated from Urhobo to English by Godini G. Darah in 1974. The conflict in the tale is generated by the refusal of Princess Oyeghe to follow the cultural norm established by fathers to choose suitors for their daughters.

The discrimination by Princess Oyeghe in the choice of suitor follows the trend of the struggle for the liberation of women from arranged marriages. Having broken the shackles of arranged marriages, Oyeghe falls victim of a marriage to a wicked spirit who deceptively takes her home to be slaughtered. In the process of trying to gather accomplices for his evil plans, a benevolent female spirit decides to help Oyeghe escape from the jaws of death. As the plans by the female spirit for her liberation are at an advanced stage, Princess Oyeghe summons her *Erhi* (spirit). The narrator relates the events this way:

Thereafter, everyone left for the bush to procure the necessary ingredients for the festival dish. Recall the woman who opposed the plan. She started to fill a huge *uluwere* (the Spirit's name for a huge cooking pot). She filled it with yam slices to prepare pudding with which to feed the community's magical alarm gong. The gong was hung at the entrance of the shrine where Oyeghe and the brother were kept ... As soon as all the spirits have left



home; Oyeghe took white chalk powder, blew it into the air and prayed: “Oh, my *Erhi* (Guardian Spirit), when one takes a wrong step, one’s *Erhi* should lead one back home safely. Direct my footsteps aright to redeem me from this predicament. It was ignorance that made me to undertake this misadventure”.

Having prayed, Oyeghe screwed up courage and in a melancholy voice broke out into a song of lament.

Narrator: Oh my *Erhi*, come and witness a challenge

Chorus: *Erhi*, come and bear witness

Narrator: Behold the curse of Destiny

Chorus: *Erhi*, behold a challenge

Narrator: Behold an ill-omen Fate

Chorus: Come and bear witness

Narrator: Behold my life is in jeopardy

Chorus: *Erhi*, come and bear witness

Narrator: Guardian angel, come and witness, witness, witness

Chorus: *Erhi*, come and bear witness ...

The call by Oyeghe for her guardian spirit to come to her aid is reminiscent of the ideology of the *Urhoro* worldview propounded by Chief Babogha. He explains that at the *Urhoro* place, the soul of human is configured into flesh and sent in the womb of a woman. Therefore, as the soul continues to exist in the material form, there is an attachment between the soul and body. This is what is utilized by the narrator to extricate the heroine from the shackles of the male spirit who wants to subdue her. So, in the imaginative folk knowledge of the *Urhobo*

people, the *Urhoro* worldview becomes a tool to be deployed in time of the failure of the physical prowess of woman; and Cousin Onofekohwo, consciously utilized this aspect of the *Urhoro* worldview as a tool for the liberation of women from (figuratively) male's captivity.

At times, the *Urhoro* worldview is used mischievously by some women against other women in the struggle for gender equality. This is especially true when the struggle for equality pitches two opposing women's camps against each other. This is what is objectified in the story of *Avwebo* and *Avwierovwe* (Favoured and Unfavoured Wives) by Mrs. Sarah Abohweyere of Olomu clan. In the plot of the story, the two wives with opposing views of women liberation are pitted against each other. *Avwebo* fanatically believes that in the struggle for women liberation, there should be total victory ending with the domination of the man. But *Avwierovwe* is mainly concerned with overall liberal gender equality with the man still holding the reins of leadership. Therefore as *Avwebo*'s radical ideology towards the liberation struggle is threatened by the conservative vision of *Avwierovwe* and her daughter, *Ubiurumagbe*, *Avwebo* resorts to the *Urhoro* worldview to eliminate *Avwierovwe* and her daughter.

In this tale, the Oba (King) who is polygamous has married another wife. She prefers to be known as the *Avwierovwe* (Unfavoured Wife). After some time, the *Avwierovwe* becomes the mother of a beautiful girl while the other Oba's wives are still barren. This turn of events catapulted *Avwierovwe* from the position of an unfavoured wife to the most favoured in the Oba's harem. Through the device of foreshadowing, the events are narrated in the tale thus:

All was quiet after hearing this threat. From that moment, the Oba's unfavoured wife became the favoured one. He and Avwierovwe were rocking on the chair in romantic embrace. Within another two months, Avwierovwe got pregnant again. While exercising his authority, the Oba fumed saying, "You crazy wives who gave birth to monsters. My darling wife you maltreated is pregnant again. Avwebo was furious in disappointment, saying: "Is Avwierovwe going to give birth to another human while we are bringing forth snails? Mr. Tortoise, how are we going to tackle this challenge?" Tortoise replied thus: "We have not face any puzzle like this before. What are we to do?" Avwebo assured him of a plot thus: "We will say we went to an oracle which revealed that the child is destined to kill the Oba. On account of this, they will kill her and all the children Avwierovwe will bring forth will be killed subsequently". Soon after, Tortoise went to the Oba saying: "There is something I want to tell you". "What is it?" the Oba asked. Tortoise told the Oba that Avwebo went to consult an oracle which disclosed that the fate of your daughter is to kill you"... "... Who consulted the oracle?" They (Avwebo and Tortoise) answered, "It is an oracle."

They (the Oba's council) asked further, "Was it in this town belonging to the Oba?" They answered in the affirmative. "Go bring the diviner", they directed. "Bring the diviner so he can consult the oracle", they ordered.

Tortoise said there is no need as he can consult the oracle and the court agreed, saying: "This is even a quicker solution".

They urged Tortoise to cast the lots. Tortoise brought out the lots and hit them *ko-ko-ko-ko-ko-ko-ko-ko*. He invoked the powers of the oracle thus:

"Oba's daughter Ubiurumagbe said she would cause the father's death. My oracle, is it the forecast?" *Ghwra-aaaaa*, he casts the seedlings.

The oracle said, "It is not true"

Confused, Tortoise retorted, "Are you dreaming."

He resumed the casting process...At this point, Avwebo exclaimed: "Ha, Tortoise, you don't know how to cast lots again. This was not how you cast them the other time."

"You come and cast them yourself. Avwebo said she knew how to cast lots. Did we even cast lots?" Tortoise said angrily...

"Was not you who came to me to say that the destiny of Ubiurumagbe was to kill the father?"

Avwebo has hoped to utilize the aspect of Urhoro worldview where person will state his or her mission as the antagonist of the person who has gone into the physical world before him or her. But the unraveling of the plot to kill Avwierovwe in the tale above backfired and leads to the fall of Avwebo from grace. At the same time, Avwierovwe becomes the liberated woman or the new Avwebo in charge of the affairs of state.

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The *Avwebo* and *Avwierovwe* dichotomy as a strategy also manifest in another way in women struggle for gender equality. This is mainly obtainable in the marital relationship between women and their husbands and in-laws. Unuajohwofia (2012) observes that “in Urhobo marital relations, the word “Avwierovwe” refers to an unfavoured or neglected wife and “Avwebo” means favoured wife” (p. 89). In her explanation of the marital parlance of *Avwebo* and *Avwierovwe*, High Chief Veronica Eyagomare says that both Avwebo and Avwierovwe are not birth names of any woman. They are fluidic aliases given to housewives according to their behavior and relation towards their husband, in-laws and the society at large. When a housewife is socially amenable, kind and receptive to the husband and outsiders, then she is termed Avwebo. But when the reverse is the case, then she is referred to as Avwierovwe. The octogenarian also notes that the terms are fluidic because the woman that is called Avwebo today can become an Avwierovwe when she changes her virtuous conduct towards the people outside her home. Also, if the Avwierovwe can change her bad conduct and become nice to her in-laws and the community at large, then she is considered an Avwebo (V. Eyagomare, personal communication, October 15, 2019). On his part, Chief Godwin Ewwaraye likens the two terms to “heaven

and hell”. Avwebo is heaven while Avwiorovwe is hell in conduct and submission (Evwaraye, personal communication, October 15, 2019).

As such, the classification is done according to the moral and practical conduct of wives in the marital home. At other times, some women can be an Avwebo at home and Avwiorovwe to the outsiders and vice-versa. In these cases, the inference is that the philosophical undercurrents in these terminologies are used by women to liberate themselves from overtly marital shackles of excessive submission demanded by the husband, in-laws and the people of the community. The import of the two terms to this study is that women may deliberately utilize the designation of Avwebo and Avwiorovwe to counter the undue submissiveness demanded by their husband and their relations. Also, the designation as an Avwiorovwe may also be used as a subterfuge to rebel against the unbearable demand for submission to husband’s relatives that are overly demanding. Lastly, the Avwebo denotation can also be used to put the man of the house into a tight corner where he will not be able to demand absolute loyalty from the wife. In this last scenario, the woman will be Avwebo to outsiders and an Avwiorovwe at home; in such case, the husband will become a pariah and he will be suffering in silence.

The idea of polygamy is projected as a major challenge women have to cope with in the struggle for gender equality. Through the use of the technique of labelling, narrators of Urhobo narratives represent the opposing women in a polygamous setting as the Avwebo and Avwiorovwe. The Avwebo represents the fully liberated woman who has been able to win the hearts of the husband and the people through her conduct. In my communication with Mrs. Veronica Eyagomare, she

asserts that Avwebo and Avwierovwe are labels according to the behavior of wives. As time goes on, an Avwebo can grow so powerful that she gradually becomes the de-facto ruler of the home or the political space in the fictional setting created by narrators (Eyagomare, personal communication, October 15, 2019). This view is demonstrated in the story of *Avwebo and Avwierovwe* narrated by Mrs. Sarah Abohweyere of Olomu. There is a scene about the conduct of Avwebo, the implication of which demonstrates the fanatical stance of Avwebo in the struggle for gender equality. The narrator says:

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Meanwhile, the next day Avwebo makes a frantic inquiry; she went to the other wives saying:

“Who did the Oba invite to his nuptial chambers the previous night?” ... One said, “I was supposed to be the one”. No one knows who the Oba invited. Another wife would say:

“Was it not you he invited?” “It was not me”. Avwebo inquire from all the seven wives. One said,

“Of all the many wives of Oba, how is it that a day was reserved for you, so that it’s only you the Oba sleeps with?” Avwebo charged back,

“That statement is a wrong one, a wrong one”, and she left angrily to the house of the eldest wife to ask.

“Ehen, Our Owner, was it you that went to the Oba’s room last night...”. Avwebo went to the page boy, gave him food and inquired:

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“My child, who did you call for the Oba?”

The description of Avwebo’s behavior in the scene above depicts a woman who is fighting to usurp the power of the husband to control his polygamous family. In essence and practical use, the Avwebo and Avwierovwe codifications are used as indigenous women liberation ideology, and its representation in Urhobo oral arts is sophisticated and complex.

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There is also the ideology of occupational delineation through which women has also been able to limit the power of men over women in the Urhobo society. Occupational delineation as used in this paper means the structuring of occupations or careers using the gender factor. Onwuejeogwu sheds some light on this ideology among the people of the lower Niger that, in small-scale societies, women are the controllers of agriculture. The husband does the hard farm work of preparing the land for cultivation and the wife does the planting and weeding. The farm produce is controlled by her, and the husband is responsible for the sales, especially externally. The woman has to obtain all she wants and sell everything through her husband. Women are farmers because of the religious beliefs about fertility: since women are fertile they should do the farmwork. Women are therefore looked upon with high esteem in Africa (p.24).

Contributing to the discourse on occupational delineation as it is factored into the gender equation,



Onyima asserts that “women/wives plant nursery, weed grasses, and tends the crop to maturity” (p. 7). The import of these views from the two scholars is that there has been an occupational delineation along gender lines especially in the lower Niger area. As far as this study is concerned, the division of labour along gender lines is beneficial for the female gender as it becomes part of the indigenous female liberation ideology. This is of utmost importance as it imbues the women with the material dialectics to pursue the female liberation agenda.

In the Urhobo area, the ideology of occupational delineation as a tool for women liberation is fully deployed. In an interview with High Chief Veronica Eyagomare of Ovorie-Ovu, she argues that the women folk are very importance in the sustenance of peace in the society. Among the ways the women demonstrate their sagacity is in the area of occupational delineation. She recalled the saying in Urhobo land that “cassava farming is the occupation of women”. Moreover, she cited the instance that in the time past, women do not rely on men for their material upkeep. She explains that even though the men are responsible for the clearing of the farm, it is the woman that does the cultivation, weeding and the harvest. This makes the women to be financially buoyant so as to be able to sustain themselves materially. This creates a source of independence for the women; in turn, this creates avenue for the pursuance of gender equality.

Apart from farming and commerce, in the areas of the arts and religion, women have also been able to carve out careers for themselves and have delineated such careers along gender lines. Among these is the *igbe-emete* art. Omoko defines the “*igbe-emete* (maidens’ dance-song)” as a “dance-song form that is

performed as folk art usually by young maidens/women” (p. 115). There is also the position of the *akpine* (lead vocalist) in the *Igbe-Ubiesha* religious movement which is the exclusive preserve of women. Most importantly, the role of cleaning a new-born child has been the exclusive preserve of women till date in the Urhobo area. In these occupational roles, women have been able to project them as the exclusive careers of women. Though, at times, some men do venture into these areas of human endeavor, such is viewed as aberration.



Source: Okofu Ubaka 20/10/2019

*Fig.1: A woman selling liquid substances along the creeks of the Niger Delta*

The motif of freedom is utilized in the projection of indigenous women liberation ideologies in the oral arts of the Urhobo people. In the quest for gender equality, some of the female characters in the narratives of the Urhobo people are portrayed as independent-minded in the area of material dialectics. An instance is found in the legend of Madam Otti narrated by Prof. Johnson Adjan, an *Opiri* singer from Orhoakpor, in

Ethiope-East. Madam Otti is one of the wives of Francis Onororakponaene from Okurekpo-Okpara. She is a priestess of Igbe-Ame denomination of the Igbe Religious Movement founded by Ubiesha Etarakpo of Kokori. Madam Otti is also an herbalist. After the death of her husband, Madam Otti chooses to remain in the husband's compound even when the husband's family grants her the leave to move on if she wishes to do so. Instead of leaving, Madam Otti utilized the freedom granted by the family to stay behind and develop her healing career to a viable traditional hospital. She became materially well-off and independent. She also employed a lot of men to work in her healing home. The argument here is that through industry, women have been able to become materially independent and have used this strategy in their struggle for gender equality. As such, through the use of contrast between the other wives of Onororakpoene who went back to their parents' house after the death of their husband and Madam Otti who stayed behind to whole handedly raise the children of her husband, the motif of freedom for liberated women is established in the area of material dialectics.

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Source: Okofu Ubaka, 2019

*Fig. 2: A woman selling fried beans cake along the riverine communities of the Urhobo boundary with the Ijaws*

Relatively, women have also used the occupational delineation strategy to assume directors of some faculties as new areas of human endeavours are invented in traditional Urhobo society. An instance is documented in the events surrounding the foundation of the Igbe Religious Movement by Ubiesha Etarakpo. Ogute Otan, a classical Urhobo music maestro, documents that the pioneer vocalist of the Igbe group was a woman named Oruru. Then, as the religion develops, the role of Erukainure, the wife of Ubiesha in the development of the religion is a tale of pride for women in Urhobo. In his panegyric for her, Ogute Otan praises Erukainure this way:

*Orhen* (spiritual chalk) called Ubiesha:

“There is a woman called Erukainure in the town,  
She is single.

She is the one you should marry

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Two of you should continue with the establishment of the Igbe religion” ...

Erukainure nene,  
Erukainure, Ubiesha’s wife.  
Erukainure nene,  
Erukainure, Ubiesha’s wife.

The eulogizing of Erukainure is geared towards the edification of the women folk and the role they played in the formation and management of the growth of the Igbe Religious Movement. The feminine genital public discourse taboo is also a philosophical and ideological tool used by women in their struggle for gender equality. It is a taboo in the Urhobo area to engage in discussion of the female genitals in public. Also, it is forbidden for a husband to abuse his wife through the reference to her genitals. When women report such cases of public abuse of their genitals to the women group (*Eghweya*), the man in question is summoned to answer questions about the allegations. When he is found guilty, he is disciplined. Chief Ewwaraye, whom I interviewed, also, corroborated this view. He even goes further to explain that it is also a taboo for a man to beat his wife and exposed her nakedness. This serves as deterrence for the abuse of female genitals. According to Chief Ewwaraye, the only area where there is absolute unity among women is in the protection of their genitals. He cited the example of women who deliver babies in public locations. According to him, before you know it, the women have organized themselves to secure the area and cover the scene from public view. There is also the case of the insane persons. It is rare to see a naked insane woman because the

women will make sure they cover the nakedness of such an insane woman.

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Women utilize this taboo on the public discourse of their genital to protect their feminine integrity. Their unity in this aspect of protecting their reproductive organs is developed to project the woman as a protected person in the Urhobo society. The implication of the ban on the discourse of female genitals is that men respect the right of their wives and other women in that area. The most effective usage of this strategy by women is the degrading of men who violate this ban; such men are subjected to dehumanising process of rectification that makes other men to dread such an encounter. Therefore, in this aspect women are feared by men and the women utilize this fear to project themselves as protected species at home and in public places.

In the representation of the indigenous women liberation philosophies and ideologies in the oral arts of the people of the lower Niger, there is a lack of the female genital public discourse. This reinforces the earlier stance that there is a taboo on the public discourse of anything concerning the female genitals. The motif of abomination in the narratives of the Urhobo people is used to project this taboo. Chief Ewvaraye in our interview puts it that the cooperation of women is mostly enhanced in the area of protecting their feminine organs from the public glare. This conforms to Ogundipe-Leslie's (1996) assertion that "African feminism for me, therefore, must include issues around the woman's body, her person, her immediate family, her society, her nation..." (p. 228). In this vein, the narrators of Urhobo tales, both male and female, respect the ideology of the female genitals public discourse taboo.

## **Conclusion**

This study has been able to demonstrate that there are certain indigenous women liberation strategies existing in the continent before the contact with the Arabs and Europeans. And as the feminine theories from other climes anchor on the continent, the basis for their acceptance and utilization rest on their indigenization and harmonization with the extant indigenous women liberation ideologies of the Urhoro worldview, occupational delineation, the Avwebo and Avwierovwe mystic, and the feminine genital discourse taboo. Therefore, the role of the indigenous women liberation ideologies in the struggle for gender equality cannot be discountenanced. Instead, in the pre-colonial times, both the male and female understand their role in the issue of gender equality. As Aidoo (1998) puts it,

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that the African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism (p.47).

So, in reality, the indigenous women liberation ideologies and indeed, feminism as whole must be geared towards the emancipation and the development of the woman in all spheres of the human endeavor; this

will enhance the successful and continuous integration of gender equation into the traditions, customs and oral arts of the Urhobo people and others elsewhere.



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