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THE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS ROLES OF EFIK WOMEN IN PRECOLONIAL CALABAR

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The political and religious roles of the Efik women in pre-colonial Calabar have not received the attention they deserve in the admittedly still meagre scholarship on Old Calabar. Although political and religious life in pre-colonial Calabar seems to have been controlled by the men, women, nevertheless, played vital roles. They contributed significantly to the destiny of the Efik people through the period of migration, settlement, and consolidation of Efik identity.

This paper intends to show the political and religious roles of the Efik women in pre-colonial Calabar and how they helped to shape the present destiny of the Efik people.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE EFIK WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL CALABAR

(a) MIGRATION STORY:

According to one tradition, the Efik people once lived in Uruan in Ibibioland despite series of conflicts between the Efik and the Ibibio. But the quarrel between an Efik woman, Abasi, and, an Ibibio woman, Otung Ema over a broken axe incited the sudden movement of the Efik people from Ibibioland to their present settlements in Creek Town and the Calabar mainland.¹ Although the quarrel between the two women was not with the intention of causing any political upheaval, yet it led to the taking of a far reaching political decision by Efik men. Following this quarrel, the Efik decided to leave Ibibioland for elsewhere. This exodus is seen by many scholars as a major political decision which has given the Efik people a different political and social identity from their Ibibio neighbours. Thus, the pre-colonial Efik women indirectly contributed to the political and social

identity of the present Efik community.

(b) LEADERSHIP

In some rare cases, Efik women assumed leadership roles particularly as heads of Efik families, villages and households, owning vast plantations both in Calabar and Akpabuyo. In the absence of an heir, they inherited these roles from their fathers. Notable examples of Efik women who grew up to assume leadership roles in Calabar were Affiong Umo Edem Ekpo Effiom Okoho, popularly known as Queen Duke; Uduak Basseyy Duke; Effiom Efiyo Ene Eyo also known as Arit Iko; and Mrs. Archibong (Obuma) mother of King Archibong I of Duke town. Since these women were outstanding pre-colonial figures among women-folk, there is need to discuss their activities in Calabar as this will go a long way in illuminating further the contributions of Efik women at this time to the political development of the people.

(i) QUEEN DUKE? - 1888

Affiong Umo Edem Ekpo Effiom Okoho (Queen Duke) was one of the most outstanding political figures of her time. Although her date of birth is not known, what is certain is that she was the daughter of Umo Edem, the head of Umo Edem lineage in Akpabuyo - an Efik farm settlement.

Being the first female child of her parents, she was called Mma Adiaha meaning first daughter. She also earned the name Umo Anwan from her father since he had no male issue.² In addition to these pet names, the name Queen Duke was given to her by the European traders who saw in her such qualities as royalty, elegance, grandeur, towering physique as well as the air of magnificence and celebrity which surrounded her personality.³

Since Mma Adiaha was young when her father died, she was not responsible enough to assume the headship of her father's lineage. Ekpenyong Offiong Okoho (Eyamba V) acted as regent until she grew up.⁴

Mma Adiaha's reign was one of peace and improved relationship with her neighbours. She improved Umo Edem family relations with the Efut and Qua living in Calabar Municipality, and with Otung in Creek Town. This improved relationship came as a result

of marriage alliances between the people of Umo Edem lineage and the already mentioned groups. According to Efut, Qua and Otung traditions, she acquired extensive farmlands like Ndeng and Okure Inwang.⁵ Mma Adiaha also founded villages like Anwa Enang Umo Edem, Ekpene Ikot Umo Edem, Nyomo Idibi Ikot Umo, Esuk Mbat Umo Edem, Ikot Akwa Umo Edem and so on.⁶ Another great achievement of Mma Adiaha was in her ability to maintain the independence of her lineage through Mbiam, an oath which conferred autonomy on Umo Edem family as a full pledged entity in Duke House.⁷

In addition, she ensured the political stability of Umo Edem lineage by founding the Akpan Abasi, a male secret society which carried out executive functions in almost all the villages of the lineage.⁸ Tradition also maintains that women's play, Okom, which provides the link between the women of Ikot Umo in Calabar and other people of the lineage in Akpabuyo, was founded by Mma Adiaha. Indeed her reign has been described as one of "empire building".⁹

As already mentioned, the name Queen Duke was given her by English traders for her pomp and pageantry. She is invoked at libation and remembered in folklore and tales. Perhaps her realisation of her natural appeal explains why the Queen often left her breasts bare; Eba Mama: Mama's breasts is today the catchword for Akpan Abasi initiates. As a testimony to Mma Adiaha's influence, it has been observed that Umo Edem family or lineage which was formally in the name of her father, now answers Umo Edem- Queen Duke family.¹⁰

Mma Adiaha Umo Edem's name has been immortalized not only in Akpabuyo, but also in Calabar where a street off the present Goldie Street still bears her name. Significantly, also, an enlarged picture of herself adorns the palace of the Obong of Calabar.

Adiaha Umo Edem died in 1888 without an heir. The circumstances surrounding her death are obscure though tradition claims that she died of shock. However, Queen Duke will forever be remembered as one whose political contributions serve as a source of

inspiration to Efik women.

(ii) **UDUAK BASSEY DUKE**

Although not much has been written on Madam Uduak Bassey Duke, the district Officer's Report of 1924 recognised this female personage as the village head of Ifiang Orok, an Efik settlement at Akpabuyo.¹¹

Madam Uduak was said to have inherited this village after the death of its village head, Chief Bassey Duke - her brother.¹² Ifiang Orok, also known as Ifiang King Duke was once a very flourishing village and about the largest when in its prime.¹³ She also inherited Ikot Orok village from Chief Bassey Duke's mother although there were series of land disputes over ownership between Ikot Orok and Ikot Okon Ndem.

(iii) **EFFIOM EFIO ENE EYO**

Madam Effiom Efiyo Ene Eyo, generally known as Arit Iko, was the recognised head of the Ene Eyo family of Duke House at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Described as a woman of considerable personality and intelligence, she was said to have inherited this headship and ruled over the Ene Eyo family villages among which were Ikot Ene Abakot and Ikot Ene Ikot Adiaha, the latter being one of the most prosperous and rich villages.¹⁴

(iv) **MRS. ARCHIBONG (OBUMA)**

One of the most outstanding female figures in pre-colonial Calabar was Mrs. Archibong, mother of King Archibong I who died in 1852. Obuma was said to have possessed both political and economic prowess. She was well respected and feared in the town, and commanded a lot of influence. Mrs. Archibong had large plantations both in Calabar and Akpabuyo with a large number of slaves working on them. An eye witness and a Reverend Missionary stationed at Calabar, Rev. Anderson, stated that on the 12th of January 1854, when he went on an excursion up the Qua River, he

noticed that at a small creek, about a mile below Esuk (Obutong (Obutong Beach),

there existed two new cottages, the inhabitants of which are employed in clearing ground for a new plantation. The people, houses, and the plantation (which is to be) belong to Obuma, the mother of the late King Archibong of Duke Town.¹⁵

Reverend Hope Waddel, in his book, Twenty Nine Years in the Indies and Central Africa, gave his readers an insight into Mrs. Archibong's personality and influence in Duke Town (Old Calabar). She was said to have maintained political control particularly when the men of Duke Town went to war. In 1846 when Duke Town went to war against Umon, the women led by Mrs Archibong acted as the police of the town.

Describing her as "a lady of age and rank", Hope Waddel noted that she was the gouvernante, and that "a black man dare not walk the streets".¹⁶ She organised the women who marched around the whole town carrying with them sword bearers, drums and colours. For several days these women paraded themselves as the caretakers of the town.

Mrs. Archibong's leadership role even became more pronounced at the death of her son, King Archibong I. She became more influential and "seemed to reign as queen of the town".¹⁷ She not only assumed political control, but on her orders subjected, her daughters in law to the poisonous 'Esere' bean trial, accusing them of killing her son through witchcraft. Obuma went against the law by putting many slaves to death for the deceased king. Ironically, she vehemently refused to be tried, and when called upon, threatened to blow up Duke Town with gun powder.¹⁸ She actually prepared to carry out her threat by assembling six casks of gun powder that were in her house.¹⁹

Indeed, there was great fear and pandemonium in the whole town and among the supercargoes; Obuma had held the town to ransom. This was the kind of power Mrs. Archibong wielded.

THE RELIGIOUS ROLE

The role and status of women in traditional African religion cannot be over-emphasised. Dorothy Talbot and John Mbiti in their different works have illustrated this. According to Dorothy Talbot,

In the old, old days, ... women were more powerful than the men, for to them the mysteries of the god and of secret things were made known.²⁰

Similarly, John Mbiti illustrates his view point with the following words:

In traditional African life, the women play a significant role in the religious activities of society. One of the areas where this role is prominent is in offering prayers for their families in particular and their communities in general.²¹

Mbiti also acknowledges the dynamic role of women as mediums. he asserts that:

In many areas there were (and still are) women priests (priestesses). Almost every where in Africa the mediums (who are so important in traditional medical practice) are nearly always women.²²

The situations described above also applied to women in pre-colonial Calabar society. It is important to note that in spite of the limitations of women and the prejudices against them during the pre-colonial times, women in pre-colonial Calabar played very significant roles in the traditional religion of the society.

In pre-colonial Calabar, there was (and still is) the existence of one supreme God, Abasi, who was worshipped through an intermeditary deity, Ndem Efik (Water deity). Ndem Efik was Efik tutelar sea deity, which was conceived of in feminine terms. The monarch of the divinity was a woman by name Ekanyin (Our Divine

Mother), who, it is believed, when consulted by specialists gives blessings to the people and children to the barren.²³ There were other lesser deities Efik people revered. these included Anansa, Iboku-Anwan, Akpa Uyok and so on.

In order to serve and appease these deities, there was the need for priests and priestesses to offer the prescribed sacrifices. In the distribution of these priestly assignments, traditional Efik religion did not discriminate between men and women.²⁴ It is at this point that the importance of women was greatly perceived. As priestesses of Ndem, these women made sacrifices to Ndem Efik on behalf of the town, in order to cleanse the land as to ensure prosperity, fertility, success and protection of the community.

Ndem women or priestesses also participated in the political life of pre-colonial (and even present day) Calabar, particularly through their role in the coronation of the Obong, the traditional, religious and political head of the Efik people. In this case, there were some aspects of the ceremony which were assigned to women and in which they featured prominently. For example, the Ndem women had the honour of announcing the choice and coronation of a new Efik monarch as confirmed by the water deity. The importance of Ndem in the ceremony lay in the protection of the would-be monarch against evil spirits.

Apart from the activities of Ndem priestesses during the coronation procedures, women from the various Efik royal houses always have a part to play. It is the responsibility of a princess from the Ntiero branch of the house of Edem Effiom Ekpo at Duke Town to sprinkle the ascending Obong with water to purify and make him calm.²⁵ Another princess from Mbarakom in Creek Town anoints the Obong's head with oil as a sign of being the chosen one²⁶ It is the responsibility of the women to carry out these roles because in Efik tradition women are seen as symbols of peace.

Women were also assigned specified roles at the death of the Obong. Before the enthronement of a new Obong, the death of his predecessor must be announced publicly after it had been kept secret for some months. It is at this point that the political and social relevance of Efik women is perceived. The women perform the public mourning or Eyet Anwa which starts in the morning with the sounding of a talking drum from the top of the roof of the late Obong's house

and the central Ekpe shrine.²⁷ A procession of women led by the deceased Obong's first daughter, Adiaha-Obong, wearing a live chicken around her neck and singing a dirge, takes off from the Palace into the town, calling on her father and other ancestral spirits to guide and protect them in their endeavours.²⁸ The women go round the town, lamenting and singing praises of the late Obong and return to the palace at about eleven (11.00) O'clock in the morning. They also recite Ase or the eulogy around the town, announcing the death of the Obong: with their hair plaited in a traditional manner, adorning the long Efik gown, Onyonyo, and holding a plate of native chalk, ndom, on their left hands, they move in a long procession with one of them reciting the praises of the deceased ruler through a talking trumpet while another beats the gong slowly. This is done in the day time, between, three O'clock and six O'clock so that all would listen to the encomiums being poured on the late ruler.²⁹ A casual observer may classify the part played by the women in the funeral ceremony under socials. Such an assertion, however, would amount to a negation of the underlying significance of the entire mourning ceremony, to the Efik. This mourning ceremony marks a watershed between the revelation of the death of a late Obong, the traditional monarch of the Efik people, and the enthronement of a new one. In view of the importance the people of Calabar attach to the mourning ceremony of their political and religious leader, it is clear that, without this ceremony, a new Obong could not be appointed. Furthermore, the ceremony would be incomplete if the women did not perform their roles as highlighted in Eyet Awan and 'Ase'

CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying that pre-colonial women in Calabar were dynamic and participated directly or indirectly in the affairs of the community, be they political or religious. Although they were never made kings or Obong, of Calabar, some of these women rose to positions of leadership as heads of families, houses or Efik villages. Affiong Umo Edem (Queen Duke), Uduak Bassey Duke and Effiong Ene Eyo were women that fell into this category. Efik women also made their mark especially in the coronation and funeral obsequies of the Obong through the important roles assigned to them, and in order to ensure the successful coronation of an Obong these roles

had to be performed. Furthermore, as Ndem priestesses, the Obong could not function without these women. It was through Ndem priestesses that sacrifices were made for the cleansing of the land and the success of important occasions. Indeed these women (priestesses) were the link between the Calabar community headed by Obong on the one hand, and the Efik tutelar deity on the other hand; between the natural and the supernatural.

It is thus clear that Efik women were very dynamic, in other words, active participants in the politics and religious of pre-colonial Calabar. In a society where political, social and religious roles were closely interwoven and intertwined, Efik women could be said to have been critical for the effective functioning of Efik polity in the pre-colonial period.

NOTES

1. E. N. Amaku, Edikot Nwed Mbuk (Calabar: Nelson Publishers 1976), pp. 3 and 4.
2. Effiong Nkpa Ndem: Interviewed on 4th July 1979. Cited in J. O. Okon, "The Calabar and Akpabuyo Relationship" (Unpublished B.A.Thesis) Dept.History, Unical, 1980,P. 35.
3. The name "Queen Duke" was applied officially in 1909 by Justice stroker. Quoted in Intelligence Report, Calprof, 5/10/160, C/508/20, 1922, NA/E.
4. See Suit No. 21/20; Chief Ata Ekpenyong and Asuquo Etim vs Effiom Edem Effiom and others. Intelligence Report, Calprof 5/10/160, C/508/20, 1922,NA/E.
5. Okure Inwang meant an enclosure farm.
6. E. U. Aye; Akpabuyo in Transition. (Calabar: Glad Tidings Press,1993),p.52.
7. J. O. OKON: "The Calabar and Akpabuyo Relationship", p.38.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. E.U.Aye: Akpabuyo in Transition, p.53.

Ibid.

Ibid.

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William Marwick: William and Louisa Anderson: Record of their life and in Jamaica and Old Calabar (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1897), p.291.

Hope Waddel: Twenty Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa (Scotland: United Presbyterian Church, 1862), pp.496-8.

Ibid.

Ibid.

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D.A.Talbot: Women's Mysteries of a Primitive People (London: Frank Cass Co. Ltd., 1915), p.196.

See J.Mbiti "Flowers in the Garden: The role of Women in African, Religious" in J.K Olupona(ed.): A.T.R. in Contemporary Society (New York: Paragon, 19920, pp. 59-72.

Ibid.

E.O.Akak: Efiks of Old Calabar: Culture and Superstition (Calabar: Akak & Sons, 1982), p.293. '

In fact it is believed that there are more Ndem priestesses than priests.

25 W.E.Adam: "The Religious Function of the Efik Monarch" (Unpublished Seminar Paper), Dept. of Histroy, Unical, 1988, p.12

26 Ibid.

27 A.M.Bordoh, "Traditional Funeral Rites among the Efik" (Unpublished B.Sc. Thesis), Dept. of Sociology, U.N.N., 1977, p.27.

28 Ibid.

29 G.I.Jones: "Efik Traders of Old Calabar" in D.Forde(ed), (London: O.U.P., 1960), p.24.