

## BEDROOM, KITCHEN AND BEYOND: WOMEN IN THE SURVIVAL AND ADVANCEMENT OF THE IJAW ETHNIC NATIONALITY OF NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*Through historical times, women of the Ijaw ethnic nationality have proven by their activities and aptitudes that the destiny of womanhood goes beyond the confines of the bedroom and the kitchen. This discourse opines that Ijaw women are cultured and have been champions in many endeavours of life. The discourse examines the Ijaw women from ancient to modern times.*

**Keywords:** *Bedroom, Kitchen, Beyond, Women, Ijaw Ethnic, and Nationality.*

### **1. Introduction**

Beyond being homemakers confined to bedroom and kitchen matters, women of the Ijaw ethnic nationality have distinguished and defined themselves as worthy contributors to the sustenance and advancement of their ethnic nation from pre-European times, where the word advancement is synonymous with progress, growth or development.

In this discourse therefore, using selected case studies of some peculiar women of significant achievements, we shall attempt to examine the validity of the position that women have been makers and bringers of progress, and by that explain why women should be celebrated and not relegated, especially by our duty as historians, historiographers and custodians of the records of the heroes and exemplars of our progressive past.

### **Ijaw Femininity and Women in Ancient Times to 1500**

In approaching the first segment of this discourse, it is necessary to note that the word femininity refers to the sum of all attributes that convey or are perceived to convey womanhood, where woman refers to an adult of the feminine gender usually of the suffrage age of eighteen and above in Nigeria. The nomenclature 'Ijaw women' here implies women of the enclaves of the Niger Delta that have been identified as part of the pan-Ijaw group – the Ijaw National Congress. Also, the period classified 'ancient',

herein refers to the era before the European/Christian advent to Ijawland from the mid fifteenth century onwards.

Generally, evidence abounds that Ijaw women have been active and progressive in advancing the course of their ethnic nationality, through their natural disposition as women; as well as by their activities and achievements from ancient to modern times. Clearly, the ancient socio-cultural tradition of majority of the Ijaw groups of the Niger Delta view God as a feminine gender, a phenomenon that obviously underscores the significance of women in their original culture and tradition.

To the Ijaw therefore, womanhood is venerable. Thus, although women are not directly worshipped, they are respected and treated with befitting reverence and tenderness, for even the original idea of God the creator, as has been mentioned, is to most Ijaw, feminine gender and mother. Thus, as Maria Odiwei (1981:26), notes in a study of the town of Kaiama, in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, the appellations for God among the Central Niger Delta Ijaw are – *Woyingi* (our Mother); *Temearau* (She who creates); *Zibaarau* (she who delivers); *Suoarau* (she who dwells in the sky); *Oginaarau* (she who is up); and *Ayiba* (She who gives birth and could kill).

The last appellation, *Ayiba*, is the Nembe word for God the creator. The Kalabari name, *Tamuno*, (also used in Bonny and Okirika), Robin Horton (1984: 84) notes, refers to a female principle, when used in relation to the creation of things from formless material. Also, the Kalabari national deity *Owamekaso*, which is as well referred to as *Akaso* or *Wayingi* ‘Our Mother’, and the national deity of the town of Bille, *Awoba*, all in the Niger Delta, are believed to be feminine.

Accordingly, the foregoing idea of the great respect and tender treatment of women, taken a cue even from the deities, is reflected in the words of MinjibaAteli (1984: 48). In MinjibaAteli’s words:

*“The traditional respect ... in an African society is fully accorded the Kalabari woman. Any public assault or insult to a woman of any age by a man is strongly condemned. And no full-blooded Kalabari man would sit idly by, while his mother or sister is abused or misused by another man – whether inside or outside the home. Generally, a Kalabari woman is shown great courtesy and considerations in public occasions, for while even a chief is expected to stand up and speak, only a woman is allowed to sit while addressing a public gathering. The Kalabari woman is an ornament of great admiration to her menfolk.”*

Although, some aspects of the above statement in reference to respect for the female folk, such as the privilege to sit down while speaking in a public gathering, may not be strictly applicable to all Ijaw groups, recognition of the feminine gender and reverential treatment of women has been a general behavioural phenomenon in all Ijaw kingdoms and clans from time immemorial.

Also, besides the feminine and maternal idea of God the Supreme deity, the tradition of honouring women in Ijaw society has, since ancient times, been greatly influenced by the pre-European traditional masquerades which are believed to be feminine. Among the Kalabari for instance, Martha Anderson (2009), tells of *Ekineba*, a legendary Kalabari woman who taught her town’s people how to perform masquerades, and after whom the prestigious male dancing institution of *Ekine* is

named in reverence. For the Nembe people, *Owuaya* is 'Mother', being the mother of masquerades. Thus, for this and the previous illustration, as well as the Nembe adherence to the matrilineal descent system for instance, mother is again revered and honoured.

Consistent with the present research, and with the foregoing belief systems and practises, which clearly gave recognition, reverence and respect to the femininity and dignity of women, is the question of the specific achievements of women in ancient pre-European times. Such specific achievements that mark them as having contributed to the advancement of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality shall accordingly be henceforth highlighted herein.

The ancient pre-historic settlement of Onyoama, being one of the earliest villages of the Nembe(Ijaw) people of Nigeria, dating back to about 1275 AD, reveals one of the oldest evidences of women of influence, achievement and significance of the greater Ijaw Ethnic nation, and shall thus be adopted here as a case study.

The pre-history of Nembe speaks of the first wife and daughter of Onyo, the priest-king of the Onyoamavillage, who was obviously a polygamist, as women who were self-assertive and dominating. No doubt, it is apparently logical to infer that similar to other fearless and bold women like them in Ijawland and elsewhere, the self-assertive nature and attitude of Onyo's principal wife and daughter, whom we shall herein identify as Onyota and Onyobau respectively, must have had a profound influence on him. Surely, they might have been physically strong women who became firm pillars of support and encouragement to their husband and father, Onyo – the priest-king, as other stout-hearted wives and daughters did for their husbands.

Accordingly, *Onyota* and *Onyobau* must have, we can confidently infer, assisted King Onyo, the priest-king, in his enterprises of cultivating crops and trading. For, as E.J. Alagoa (1978 – 81:9; 1964:36) notes, sugarcane and pepper were grown at *Onyoama*; and internal trade contacts with the Kula people to the east, which brought prosperity to *Onyoama*, was well underway. Indeed, the scholars, Snyder and Tadesse (1995: 21), in speaking about economic conditions in Africa, also observe what clearly buttresses the economic contributions of the women we have elected to be designated *Onyota* and *Onyobau* to the growth of ancient *Onyoama* and by extension, Ijawland.

According to the scholars: *"Historical evidence indicates that African women's participation in economic life was deeply rooted everywhere on the continent."* Albeit, considering the danger of generalising the African situation on the subject in view, they further observe, *"we can state that in a large number of African societies, the gender division of labour allocated responsibility for cultivation to women, who could barter or sell their excess produce..."* Of course, the observation of women cultivating and bartering produce in Africa, gives an idea of the activities that King *Onyo*'s wife and daughter might have certainly been actively engaged in, by which they have been listed here as early examples of women who contributed to the survival and advancement of Ijawland in ancient times, beyond bedroom and kitchen.

Besides, although, *Onyota* and *Onyobau* were bold and succeeded by assisting their husband and father, King *Onyo*, to maintain the territorial integrity and peace of *Onyoama* for agriculture and trade to flourish, it was ironically, a report given to the king of Kula by an *Onyoama* princess, (certainly not the daughter of the first wife cited

above), whose lover, a Kula prince had been murdered by her father, *Onyo* himself, that led to the destruction of *Onyoama* by a Kula army. Albeit, the fact remains that the influence of the self-asserting and strong-willed women, *Onyota* and *Onyobau*, sustained *Onyoama*, which remained a significant settlement while it existed, and did become a major primordial town, (after its original inhabitants were resettled following the attack by Kula), from which the present Nembe principality would emerge.

Apart from the narrative of women's achievements in the ancient Nembe moiety of Onyoama, the historian E.J. Alagoa, who specialises in the pre-history of the Niger Delta, home of the Ijaw people, notes that the Oyiakiri stock of Ijaw people whose towns are scattered over the Sagbama and Ekeremor Local Council Areas of Bayelsa State, were also identified by the alternative name of Ibeni. According to Alagoa (1999), the name Ibeni refers to the wife of the eponymous ancestor (Oyakiri), and mother of the people. Apparently, we could safely infer that being the wife of the founding ancestor and mother of the group, she must have been very enterprising, influential and famous to the extent that her name became permanently engraved in their memories and mouths as the mother of the people.

Consequently, in view of the foregoing analytical narrative about the ancient Ijaw women and their contributions to the survival and growth of their ethnic group, the words of Resaldo in Ejituwu (2010:166), is instructive: *"Women are far from (being) helpless, and whether or not their influence is acknowledged, they exact important pressure in the social life of the group. In other words, in various circumstances, male authority might be initiated and, perhaps, rendered almost trivial, by the fact that,... while acknowledging male... authority, the power exercised by women may have considerable and systemic effect."*

### **Ijaw Women in the Era of the Atlantic Trade (Circa AD 1550 – 1900)**

As it was in ancient Ijawland, even more so was it in the era of the trans-Atlantic trade. Women played very active roles in the socio-political and economic development of respective homes, villages, towns, city-states or kingdoms. For in the words of Margaret Snyder and Mary Tadesse (1995: 21), "Besides agriculture, women engaged in commercial activity locally and with European merchants, ... While merchant princesses of West Africa remain legendary for their wealth and overseas trade, it is true that almost all the women in that area engaged in some kind of trade." This statement is undoubtedly true not only to West Africa, but specifically, to Ijawland in the Niger Delta, as the narratives of the lives and developmental contributions of a few but significant women of the greater Ijaw extraction, used as case studies here for want of space would prove. Obviously, the successful careers of these women could certainly be regarded a microcosm of the contributions of several other women of substance and significance to the development of the Ijaw nation in the era under review. We shall examine them sequentially, though not necessarily in any particular order of importance.

### **Queen Ediminiba Kambasa**

Perhaps one of the greatest known manifestations of a woman of substance and achievement, a merchant princess in the Atlantic trade era history of the Ijaw people was Queen Ediminiba Kambasa. She was the first and only woman yet to rule the Kingdom of Bonny, or any other state of the Ijaw Niger Delta. The daughter of King Asimini, she was also called Ediminiba, meaning the daughter of Edimini. Bold and

fearless, she is known to have taken part in the discussions between the chiefs, elders and her father, the king, at a time when women and girls were largely forbidden to speak in a gathering of the chieftains, or to express themselves publicly on matters of administrative and strategic state importance. Described as an effective and significant ruler, Queen Kambasa became accepted as queen by the people when she seized the ivory tusk bearing the name of her predecessor, which was, it would appear, an important royal emblem, perhaps equal only to the mace of the National Assembly in Nigeria today.

On ascending the throne, Queen Kambasa worked hard to ensure the prosperity of Bonny, and to safeguard the kingdom from internal disunity and external aggression. Regarding the economy, the overseas trade is reckoned to have flourished during her reign, leading not to selective elitist prosperity as is the situation in several places today, but to general prosperity in the kingdom. In the socio-cultural sphere, Queen Kambasa introduced order and rank among the priest and nobles. She also established the Bonny national club of masked dance artistes, the *OwuOgbo*, which has its similar variants in the *Sekiapu* and *Ekine* elite masquerade dance clubs of Nembe and Kalabari respectively. Politically, the Queen is known to have established the *Okpuapu*, a brigade of royal bodyguards to ensure the security of the palace and her own safety. She also led the kingdom to battle and was victorious. She fought the Ogoni and seized the strategic inland trade entreport of Opuoko, settled men near the town and named the new settlement Kala-Okò, obviously to protect her kingdom's trade and political interest. She was succeeded by her son – Kumalu (Alagoa and Fombo 1971/2001:8).

### **Madam Saifigha of Nembe**

Certainly the greatest known Nembe woman of the trans-Atlantic trade era, she was a middleman in the trade between the Europeans at the coast and the Ijaw and other communities in the hinterland. Thus, she contributed her own part to the development of Ijaw Ethnic group in the economic sphere, and as we shall discover shortly, politically too. Madam Oweibo-Saifigha (whose name means “a man does not commit adultery”), was of the Chief Duguruyai House of Nembe. She became so wealthy by reason of her enterprising engagement in the trans-Atlantic and internal local trade, that she became not only a sponsor of other traders in businesses that she had interest, but was very philanthropic towards her House and the Bassambiri moiety as a whole (Alagoa 2000:77).

Ultimately, by her enormous wealth of human and material properties, and by her philanthropy and fame, Madam Saifigha became involved in the politics of that era, by furnishing a War Canoe. Obviously, she did so in order to protect her trade and the city-state where necessary, and to effectively contend with her competitors in the advanced merchant society that Nembe was. In Nembe, as in other Ijaw city-states with similar traditions, the war canoes furnished by each Chieftaincy House under the House System of administration increasingly came to admit members by an open criterion of selection in which acculturated captives, slaves and strangers were also welcome. The War Canoe protected the economic interest of the chief and his House and of the city-state during concerted state battles. All members of a War Canoe House are identified by its name and they promote the interest of its chief. To that extent, the War Canoe House could be likened to a modern political party that strives

to be elected not only to protect the political and economic wellbeing of the state, but to ensure the protection and prosperity of its members as well.

For Madam Saifigha, the conditions of the political culture in Nembe of her day would not permit that a woman should be installed a chief. Several years after her death however, the Nembe (Bassambiri) Chiefs' Council granted her request on the condition that two War Canoe Houses be established in the names of her maternal brothers, Iga and Opuene.

Consequently, a mausoleum was built in the joint memory of herself and her brothers. The Saifigha Mausoleum is divided into two parts. The larger section is dedicated to her and all mothers, while the smaller section is in memory of her brothers – Iga and Opuene, who are of course her representatives in the Chiefs' Council (Okorobia 2011: 34–35). Indeed, Madam Saifigha was a rare woman whose enterprising activities contributed not only to the progress of her native Nembe, but to other parts of Ijaw and other lands as well.

### **Madam OrupumbuTariah of Kalabari Kingdom**

Born in Buguma in Kalabari Kingdom in the nineteenth century, Madam OrupumbuTariah was a prosperous palm oil trader in the trans-Atlantic trade. She contributed to the economic growth not only of Buguma, but of the entire Kalabari Kingdom and other parts of Ijawland in the Niger Delta. This was so because she was apparently engaged in the exchange of palm oil between the Atlantic coast and the Niger Delta hinterland.

Having amassed enough wealth through trading, Madam Orupumbu attempted to become a chief, but her request was denied by the Chiefs' Council, which also passed a law banning women from taking chieftaincy titles in Kalabari Kingdom. The law was passed when the chiefs noticed that many more women, who were of course achievers in their own rights, began to apply in their numbers to be installed as chiefs.

Undoubtedly, the fact of denying Madam Saifigha, Orupumbu and other women as narrated above, the right to become chiefs; and the act of dedicating a part of the mausoleum to all mothers along with Madam Saifigha, narrated earlier, seem ill motivated with a tendency to scuttle and make her fame obscure. Such discriminatory tendencies on the part of the policy makers in Saifigha and Orupumbu's day and subsequently, is consciously counter-productive and obviously inimical to the celebration of women of substance and achievements, who lived beyond the bedroom and the kitchen, as this discourse advocates.

### **Madams Adeline Iwowari and Madam Akeme**

Indeed, there is no contention about the fact that the women mentioned above, and other clearly heroic personalities like Madam Adeline Iwowari of Bassambiri, Nembe, and Madam Akeme of Otuakeme in Ogbialand, all contemporarily in Bayelsa State of Nigeria, contributed to the growth of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality. Madam Adeline is known to have acquired western education in the nineteenth century; participated in the epic defence of the Bassambiri moiety of Nembe in the Nembe/British war of 1895, and testified against the British in the post-war enquiries. For Madam Akeme, she founded Otuakeme town in Ogbialand in Bayelsa State, in circa 1700 A.D. This was following her migration from Oloibiri in Ogbialand, to the

present location of Otuakeme, a few miles away from Oloibiri. She led the migration in company of her sons who in turn founded other neighbouring towns.

Indeed, the above stated and several other women not recorded here or yet to be discovered, contributed immensely to the advancement of Ijawland in virtually all spheres. We shall now turn to the colonial era which we have here branded as the post-Atlantic trade era.

### **Ijaw Women in the Post-Atlantic Trade Era (Circa AD 1900 – 1950)**

The post-Atlantic trade era is here synonymous with the era of colonial governance in Ijawland, Nigeria and the African continent, as the dates on the caption reveals. For yet again according to the scholars, Snyder and Tadesse (1995: 21–22 ), the growth of the international economy in Africa resulted in a major setback to women's meaningful and favourable participation in the local economy in which they had been majorly engaged as cultivators and traders. This Snyder and Tadesse hold, was caused by male migration to mines, plantations and towns, by choice, necessity or force, leaving their women behind to care for many dependants, among who were children, the aged and the infirm, without enough hands to complement their efforts, as their husbands had done before the era of emigrational occupations.

Arising from the above trend and other related factors, the colonial system is evidently adjudged to have favoured men with education, employment and access to resources. And even worse, was the land consolidation and settlement schemes which gave title deeds to men as 'heads of households' even as majority of them, Snyder and Tadesse notes, were absent from the farm. This trend they further noted was often in direct contradiction to customary economic practises that encouraged women's productivity. Added to these antecedents, the colonial government's introduction of the cash crop economy, and their often successful attempts to acquire the most fertile lands to cultivate the cash crops, directly affected the traditional subsistence farming of local women and their ability to sustain their households, as well as the move of the colonial government to tax them upon their hard earned income, made difficult by the colonial system itself, led to widespread rebellion and protests in virtually all parts of Africa – Cameroun, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Uganda.

While the contention between women and the colonial government in the countries mentioned above was mainly over the introduction of cash crops, the confrontation of the colonial government by women of the then south-eastern Nigeria, which was inadequately dubbed 'Aba Women's Riot,' but should rightly have been tagged 'South-Eastern Nigerian Women's War', was an anti-tax war. The nomenclature – 'the Aba Women's Riot', is here considered wrong and inadequate because although the war also spread to the town of Aba, it neither started nor gained its climax there. Rather, it was in Ijawland, at *Opuboama* popularly called Opobo Town that it reached its climax and had its most casualties. In all, there were thirty-two deaths in Eastern Ijawland. Of these, 12 were from Opubo; 9 from Nkoro; and 2 Andoni. Apart from the dead, official records also shows that thirty-one women were wounded. Of the wounded, twenty-three were Ijaw, since 13 were from Opobo; 1 from Andoni; 1 from Bonny; and 8 from Nkoro. The remaining ten women were from outside Ijawland (Okorobia 2000: 102).

Certainly, both the dead and wounded Ijaw women accounted for above, and many more who were not reflected in the records of the colonial government, with its

characteristic antiques of falsifying official casualty records, are the heroes of what we will here rename the Ijaw Women Anti-tax War, instead of the 'Aba Women Riot' terminology preferred by the British colonial government. But how does the action of the women who took part in the Ijaw women anti-tax war translate into being a tool for the advancement of the Ijaw Ethnic nationality. The British colonial government set up a commission of enquiry, after the war, as it always does after each crisis caused by its activities and policies.

The reports of that enquiry actually encapsulated the reason for the action of the women that evolved into a war. Consequently, as a result of the Commission's findings, the British Colonial Office re-organised the political superstructure of the different administrative units in Ijawland and all parts of the then Eastern Nigeria. In the end then, the Ijaw women who took up the placards of protests by their peaceful cries and shouts, in Anti-tax war, were national heroes in the struggle to ensure the economic, and by extension, the political justice, that was vital and indispensable to their survival, to the prosperity of the Ijaw nation at that time, and to the sustenance of their descendants in the future. Those women could indeed be regarded as a group of nationalist equal in status to all the socio-economic, cultural and political nationalists before them in the same or earlier centuries.

However, besides the militant women that engaged the British Colonial government in the Ijaw women anti-tax war, there were elite women that contributed immensely to the growth of Ijawland in the era under survey. Here again as before, since this discourse does not pretend to be an encyclopaedia, we shall only mention a few cases of such women to drive the point home. Certainly, there must have been more of such women, who were albeit few in comparison to the population of Ijawland and Nigeria at the time when female education was not encouraged but rather discouraged.

One of such enterprising women was Mrs. Ruth Ayebaiwoyoyaimakwo Nyananyo (nee AlansoWari), daughter of Chief Alanso of the Iwowari War Canoe House of Nembe (Bassambiri). At a time when attending secondary school was not seen as a priority even for male children, she, having performed creditably in her standard six exams, was sent to the famous CMS Grammar School (then a Seminary), Lagos, in about 1913. On returning, she became a teacher at the prestigious Saint Luke's School, Nembe, where she taught many people who became men and women of substance.

For instance, she taught Prince Claude Oguara who became a renowned manager in John Holt Nigeria Ltd., now Plc. Coincidentally, she also taught her own daughter, Dame Mrs. Mercy Alagoa, wife of the Emeritus Professor of History, E.J. Alagoa. Before retiring from active service, Dame Mercy Alagoa who herself became a teacher at Saint Luke's School and taught many persons of Nembe and other Ijaw extractions, worked in the Kingsway Stores of the United African Company, where she became the first Nigerian to be promoted manager. In her words: "I dictated fashion in this country." A consummate technocrat, business woman and farmer, she arguably owned the best piggery in South-South and South-Eastern Nigeria in the decades leading unto the close of the 20th century.

Other enterprising girls that were sent alongside Mrs. Ruth Nyananyo narrated above, were Mrs. Sarah Ann Ockiya (nee Olali); and Mrs. Violet Dimeari (nee Ockiya). Mrs. Ann Ockiya was also sent off to the CMS Seminary in Lagos in 1913. On returning to Nembe, they served as teachers at Saint Barnabas School, Twon-Brass, where persons from many parts of Ijawland came under her positive influence. Besides being a teacher with enormous influence on her pupils, Mrs. Sarah Ann gave birth to, and successfully nurtured some very illustrious sons and a daughter, that have contributed immensely to the development of the Ijaw of the Niger Delta. Amongst her sons were: Dr. Kenneth Diete-Spiff, later installed Chief Diete Koki. A top ranking consultant medical practitioner of international repute, his practice in Port Harcourt with a high preponderance of Ijaw people as staff and patients, stands as a major contribution to the survival of the Ijaw nation, at the time between the 1950s and 70s, when good medical care was essential but lacking. She also had a Nigeria Police Chief Percy Spiff a top ranking police officer who undoubtedly, was a voice to the voiceless Ijaw. He was later installed a Chief Kien, long before his recent passing.

But perhaps, the greatest gift of a son that Mrs. Sarah Ann Ockiya gave to the Ijaw nation is Navy Commander Alfred Diete Spiff. At age twenty four, he became the first governor of old Rivers State in May, 1967, and ruled till 1975. Installed Amanyanabo (King) of Twon Brass, Bayelsa State, which was then in the old Rivers State, in 1978, his record-breaking achievements towards the advancement of the Ijaw and of course other people of the then Rivers State, have hardly been surpassed by any governor of Rivers State after him. His older sister, Architect Doris Nwosu, has also contributed to the development of the Ijaw nation through her architectural skills as a career architect in her own right.

The other girl that was trained at CMS Seminary, Lagos, alongside Mrs. Ruth Alanson and Sarah Ann Ockiya, was Mrs. Violet Dimeari (nee Ockiya). The daughter of King Anthony Ockiya, Mingi IX of Ogbolomabiri, Nembe, she married Bishop Ebenezer Tamunoteghe Dimeari, the first Bishop of the Niger Delta Diocese of the Anglican Church. Together with her husband, they preached the enlightening gospel of Christ and nurtured many Ijaw sons and daughters who became great men and women of service for their ethnic nationality and Nigeria in general.

Indeed, the three women highlighted above, and many more like them, were all married, and kept successful homes. Nevertheless, they went beyond the just being wives to contribute to the development of the Ijaw Ethnic nationality in various significant ways. They and others we have not mentioned, since we cannot possibly chronicle everyone here, are indeed the heroic women of the Ijaw nation in the era in which they lived.

### **Ijaw Women in the Modern Era (Circa AD 1950 – the Present)**

An appropriate title for this segment, which is clearly the last in this discourse, could be the Ijaw woman from the 1950s to the new millennium. Here, we shall examine, as the overall title of this discourse suggests, the contributions of a few women as case studies, in the hope that the examples we have chosen will serve as a reliable representation of the general picture of women in the advancement of the Ijaw nation from the 1950s to the present.

But before offering what should be an incisive narrative of the women and their achievements for Ijaw progress, it is pertinent to note what is only factual in line with Professor Stella Attoe's thoughts on the position of women, in the areas of Western education and employment, which was, and still is, vital to women's ability to contribute meaningfully to societal progress. Clearly, even a passing understanding of women's position in the areas of Western Education and employment cannot be ignored in the era under focus here, especially because traditional life and its abilities is rapidly losing its grip in the face of western civilisation, education, technological innovations and employment.

According to Attoe (2004:14),

*"The position of women in education in post 1950 and post-independence Nigeria has not improved much. Only 6% of adult Nigerian women were literate according to the 1981 Population Reference Bureau. By 1979, 72.9% of urban girls and 80.08% of rural girls were not attending schools. University admission figures also reflect a low percentage of female entries in the new era."*

Regarding Western employment in the period under review, Attoe (2004) notes:

*"In 1979, women constituted 4.9% of the agricultural manpower of Nigeria; 1.4% of the Artisans and Craftsmen; and 1.6% of the professional /sub-professional group. It is only in the medical sector that women constituted 84.3% of Dieticians and 80.2% of the Nurses."*

Although, some scholars may be quick to dismiss the above statistics as old, the fact should be remembered that the statistics are relevant to the era we are studying at present, and history does not discard the old, for to the historian, no record is factually obsolete. Besides, it is a generally acknowledged fact that nothing much has changed about women's involvement and participation in just about anything, except perhaps the nursing and teaching professions, which many will agree, seem to have been regarded as feminine occupations.

Accordingly then, it is in the light of the above fact that our entries of women who have contributed to the growth of the Ijaw nation may not be expansive, because the fewer the women in Western professional life in the modern era, the fewer the entries. Albeit, I shall be fast to state that this position does not intend to contradict our earlier stance on the model Ijaw woman that has enhanced the progress of her people. I only intend to restrict the achievements of the 1950s to the present, to professional women, in an era of increasing influence of western education and its useful resultant effects that cannot be ignored or wished away.

Evidently, the period under review has witnessed the emergence of some women who have no doubt contributed very significantly to the survival of the Ijaw nation. We shall here examine only a few cases succinctly, depending almost entirely on preliminary biographical data provided by Fiofori, Daminabo and Tamuno eds. (2009). Then we shall list the rest for further research, since we do not intend to write the full length biographies of individuals here.

In academics, Mrs. Mildred Amakiri obtained her doctorate degree in Soil Science from the University of Ibadan in 1974 and became a Professor in 1989. From Buguma, she has lectured and groomed Ijaw sons and others through her many years

of active academic life. She is the wife of Professor Sotonye Amakiri, the legendary provost of the then Rivers State College of Education.

Professor Ayibaemi Spiff of Nembe got her doctorate degree in Chemistry at the University of Ibadan in 1973. Lecturing at the University of Port, she was promoted Professor in 2005. Indeed, in her many years as an academic, she has taught and mentored many students of the greater Ijaw and other extractions, who look up to her for guidance.

Mrs. Balafama Wilcox-Evwaraye is known to be the first woman to obtain a doctorate degree in the Bonny Kingdom. She obtained a doctorate degree in Botany in 1977. As provost of the Rivers State School of Basic Studies, which has for many years provided remedial studies to numerous Ijaw sons and daughters, as to many others of various ethnic nationalities. She successfully upgraded the School of Basic Studies to the status of a college as the Rivers State College of Arts and Science.

In other fields, the Ijaw nation has had some great women who have obviously promoted the growth of the Ijaw nation. There is Chief (Mrs) A.M. Osomo, a Barrister-at-Law. She served as the Ondo State Commissioner for Commerce, Industry and Establishment respectively. There is also Amal Pepple, who served in various capacities in the Federal Civil Service and was appointed Head of Service of the Federation in 2008. Then in sports, the Ijaw nation has had such women achievers and motivators as Floretta Iyo from Okirika. She was the first overseas trained Athletics Coach in Nigeria; Ethel Jacks from Buguma, Kalabari National Table Tennis Coach; TariTikili from Nembe, first overseas-trained Squash Coach, and Barbara EbiyeOmieh of Odioma, Nembe, who is the only practicing female Cycling Coach in West Africa, as at 2009.

Indeed, all these women and many more, have contributed immensely towards the development of varying sections or all of Ijawland. They have definitively written their names as women who are in majority of the cases, married but decided to live and achieve greater heights beyond the Bedroom and the Kitchen.

## **2. Conclusion**

Thus far, this discourse has offered an explanation of the contributions of various women of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality to the development of their ethnic nationality through their statuses, professions, positions and activities. The vastness of the research question puts the researcher in a difficult position in articulating his arguments, especially in citing examples of specific women achievers from all over Ijawland. In the end however, what is important as significant is that we now know that through various eras of the centuries gone by, Ijaw women have contributed immensely, towards the development of their Ethnic Nationality, in the Bedroom, the Kitchen and beyond.

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