

## **Male Chauvinism And Socio-Religious Equilibrium In The Niger Delta: Implications For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria**

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**Abstract** :- The Niger Delta is a man's world. Patriarchy characterizes their perception of the universe. Wives queue behind their husband, daughters behind their father and sisters behind their brothers. In the Niger Delta like some other parts of the world, women suffer various form of discrimination, this includes; widowhood practice, inheritance rights, the land tenure system and female genital mutilation. This study focuses on male chauvinism and socio-religious equilibrium in the Niger Delta. It discusses male chauvinism as a cultural construct in the Niger Delta. It also considers the ripple effect of this custom on the female folk.. Finally, it considers the impact of the practice on the value orientation of the people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To facilitate our discussion, the comparative phenomenological approach is adopted. The paper concludes that male chauvinism has denied the female folk their right to self expression and identity.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Niger Delta is a man's world. Here, patriarchy characterizes their perception of the universe. Wives queue behind their husband, daughters behind their father and sisters behind their brothers. This region covers the geographical area of the South-South in Nigeria. According to Oku (2014) "the geographical Niger Delta covers a total land mass of about twenty-five thousand six hundred and forty square kilometers. It lays between latitude 4<sup>o</sup> 3<sup>1</sup> to 4<sup>o</sup> 50<sup>1</sup>N and longitude 7<sup>o</sup> 5<sup>1</sup> to 7<sup>o</sup> 35<sup>1</sup>E respectively. The Niger Delta is inhabited by people of diverse cultural background. However, they share many things in common. These include: social, economic, historical, religious and political. The area is criss-crossed by many rivers, creeks and rivulets. It also has thick mangrove swamps and virgin forests good for both trees and cash crops. Here, crop and fish farming in addition to carving, weaving, sculptor and lumbering dominate their economic life.

As it were, the socio-cultural cum economic activities in the region are male dominated. Survival largely depends on physicality. Men also dominate sea fairing and hunting, women make their mark in agriculture and other socio-cultural activities such as pottery, weaving, painting and decoration. Women till the earth, cultivate the field, harvest and preserve produce. They feed the home and society, give birth, suckle and educate children. They transmit the societal norms, values and morals to the younger generation.

Various attempts have been made to define chauvinism. Accordingly, Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines chauvinism as an "excessive or blind patriotism undue partiality or attachment to a group or place to which one belong, an attitude of superiority towards members of the opposite sex". While dictionary.com defines chauvinism as "zealous and aggressive devotion to any group, attitude or group, attitude or cause the denigration, disparagement and patronization of either based on the belief that one sex is inferior to the other and thus deserving of less than equal treatment or benefits".

In the Niger Delta like other parts of the world, women suffer various form of discrimination. Aganwu (2011) quoting Osakwe (2010) contends that "women's discrimination include deprivation, oppression, powerlessness, poverty and hopelessness". Nigeria's gender policy listed the discrimination against women to include widowhood practice rights, inheritance rights, the land tenure system and female genital mutilation, among others" (FGN, 2006). Obodoegbulam (2011) hold that "gender stereotype is a cultural creation which places one sex above the other". This study focuses on male chauvinism and socio-religious equilibrium in the Niger Delta. It discusses male chauvinism as a cultural construct in the Niger Delta. It also considers the ripple effect of this custom on the female folk as it relates to marriage, widowhood, title to land and inheritance custom. Finally, it shall consider the impact of the practice on the value orientation of the people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To facilitate our discussion, the comparative phenomenological approach shall be adopted. The paper opines that male chauvinism has denied the female folk their right to self expression and identity.

### **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The argument of this study hinges on the "Gender Scheme Theory" of Sandra Ben, 1981. This theory was introduced as a cognitive theory to explain how individuals becomes *genderized* in the society and how sex

type characteristics are maintained and transmitted to other members of the culture. Ben 1981 contends that “there are individual differences in the degree to which people hold these gender schemata”. In her submission, these are manifested in the degree to which individuals are sex-typed.

According to Ben, (1981), core gender identity is tied up in the sex-typed that an individual undergoes. This can be influenced by either the type of child rearing or cultural transmission. Ben identifies four categories in which an individual may follow. “Sex-typed, cross sex-typed, androgynous and undifferentiated.

### **III. MALE DOMINANCE**

According to some scholars, male dominance is a trait and not just a culture. Ali and Nasiru (1992), quoting Aristotle writes that “the male is by nature superior and females by nature inferior”. He goes on to argue that while the male chauvinists arrogate to themselves wholesomeness and general acceptance, women make due with their described secondary position.

The different cultural activities in the Niger Delta polarize the society into two, the male and the female world. This invariably imposes a culture of silent context for superiority on the people. Throughout the diverse ethnic groups of the Niger Delta, there exist structures which support male dominance in many spheres. These range from their cosmology to the visible tangible world. Even in those cultures like Kalabari, Okrika and Akassa, where females are recognized to have played dominant function in their religious lives, male superiority is still in place to make them be on the same pedestrian with what is the general perception of the Supreme Being in the neighbouring cultures.

In Ogba for instance, Obodoegbulam (2007) notes that “the Ogba picture the Supreme Being as made up of two principal elements (*Elu*) and (*Ali*). This arrangement suggests that “*Elu*” is the male consult and “*Ali*” his female counterpart. Among the Isiokpo, Ikwerrri of Nigeria, elsewhere in the Niger Delta, the Supreme Being is presented as a male. The Andoni call him Owaji. In southern Ijaw, the Supreme Being is referred to as “Tamara”. Even among the Kalabari, where Horton argues that the Supreme Being is a female, Tasie a contrary view. In many cultures, man as a socio-religious being, have the innate characteristics of feeling superior. He tries to translate his physicality to bravery in one way or the other.

In the Niger Delta, a man is traditionally the head and the woman his sub-ordinate. The subordination of women in the culture of the Niger Delta is demonstrated in their marriage custom. To marry a woman, a man is expected to pay a certain amount of money to the bride’s parents in the present of his kinsfolk. Ogionwo and Otite (2006) hold that among the Urhobo, a man is required to pay the bride price of his intending spouse to consummate the marriage. This culture equally applies to other ethnic groups of the Niger Delta. In Kalabari, a man does not exercise full title of any child or children from his wife if he has not fully married her (Da-Wariboko, 2006). In Ekpeye, the man who pays the bride price of a woman claims paternity of any offspring from the woman. Conversely, a child might lose his right to inheritance if his mother was not fully married (Da-Wariboko, 2006). The same applies to Ikwerre.

Male chauvinism also manifests in the culture of widowhood practice and wife inheritance. In Ogba, when a man dies, his wife under goes series of mourning rituals including seating at the head position of the deceased to mourn him (Obodoegbulam, 2002). Similar ritual is also found among the Ekpeye and Ogoni Kalabari (Obodoegbulam and Da-Wariboko, 2015). However, when a wife dies, no form of mourning ritual is observed by her husband, Oguzor (2013). The subordination of women is further compounded when she is handed over to either her late husband’s younger brother or eldest son to inherit. (Ilega, 2006, Obowu, 1972, Ellah 1995). This culture does not take cognizance of the right of the woman. What is paramount in the minds of the perpetuators is that the woman is their property and so, can be treated any how (Nyode, 2013). In Gokana and Okrika, a widow is not given the second chance to remarry. She remains the wife of the dead man for the rest of her life (Ilega 2006) Nyode (2013). Here, the widow is left at the mercy of men who may get her pregnant, and all those children, will belong to her late husband. In these cultures, any man who dares to marry a widow pays with his life.

Throughout the Niger Delta region, all issues patterning to land and others relating there to, are made the exclusive preserve of men. Like many parts of the world, all land owners are “men”, hence the assumption that all land owners are “Land Lord” ladies do not own land.

As it were, this culture which domiciles land ownership and control with men follows with some traces of prejudice against women. If a woman does not own land, then her use of it might be somewhat restricted. Yet, women feed the society. This culture invariably restricts the ingenuity and productivity of women. To make use of any land, she has to seek the concert and approval of the male or else, her effort might be thwarted. Being that she has to obtain permission from the man, she may as well not be granted the use of enough land to meet her need at any particular point in time. Despite the fact that the land might not be put to use by the male, he controls its usage to demonstrate his authority over it.

Apart from using land for agricultural purposes, other wealth are derived from it. Since women are excluded from title to land they are not part of the wealth that accrues there from. Women are therefore,

impoverished by some cultural prescriptions which denies them claim to certain common wealth of their society. On rules of inheritance, males are generally heirs to their parents' wealth. It is on rare occasion that women are permitted to share from their parents' bequest. On much occasion, it relates only to moveable items which in most cases, her brothers do not necessarily need. Where she has a little claim in is in her matrimonial home. Here, she inherits her mother-in-law's farm, kitchen utensils, and cloths, among others. However, she will not inherit her own husband's property. She is considered part of the husband's wealth which at last, will have to be inherited by someone else.

Owing to dominance of men on land and landed issues, women are left at the periphery of socio-economic life in the Niger Delta. Men dominate the major economic activities and claim to be breadwinners. Activities like sea fairing, lumbering, carving, distant trading (for instances the oil palm business) are the pre-occupation of men. Ellah writes that "an average house holder in Ogba shuttles his residence at Ali-Ulor and Ogboru, with his small canoe *Ugbo-akri*" In this case, he might station his wife and children at one of the two settlements while he enjoys the luxury of both settlements.

On the religious plane, women are seen as agents of defilement. Women are hedged with rules of taboo so as to prevent them from defiling the male. From the time a woman is born till her death, she is considered as a second class citizen. As they are surrounded with various rules of prohibition, that is not the case with men. Her movement is restricted such that she is not permitted to enter certain places under certain physical condition. For instance, when she is menstruating, her menstrual flow is regarded as defiling to the men. This perception of a menstruating woman constituting agent of impurity equally transcends to the deities. Women of child bearing age, is forbidden from entering the locale of shrines. If she does, (in some cases) her chance of becoming pregnant is remote. Women in the Niger Delta do not function as priests. At most, they can relate divine messages as spirit media. These apply mainly to those within the category of child bearing. In a similar manner, they are forbidden to touch certain ritual object such as staff, yellow palm front and such like.

#### **IV. WOMEN'S POTENTIALS**

All the arguments in support of male chauvinism are based on extrinsic factors while women's indispensability in the society are based on intrinsic qualities. Agbakuru and Opara (2011) argues that "women bear and nurture children who will be future leaders of the nation". Mbiti (1969) contends that any society where the women are not giving birth to children is threatened by extinction. However, this study admits that the process of child bearing is the function of both the male and the female. Obioma (2015) writing on "culture, arts and sexuality" holds that "psychologically, women are stronger than men. According to Obioma (2015), females have a better balanced chromosome XX and men XY. In the event of pre-mature birth, females have a higher rate of survival and when it comes to resemblance, the female gene is often more dominance. Bernstein, Roy, Srull and Wickens as quoted by Obodoegbulam (2008, 2012) contend that "girls are on the average physically strong and more mature than boys". Women have the capacity to absorb shock more than men and easily forgive. Women are more environment friendly than men. Issues relating to environmental degradation are mostly related with male activities than females. Lumbering, deforestation, land, water and air pollution are all associate with male activities.

#### **V. IMPERATIVES FOR EQUITY**

Despite the salient socio-religious qualities of women, they have suffered various discriminations in the hands of men. These include (i) not allowed to post bail (ii) penalty for exercising their reproductive rights as bank staff (iii) sexual harassment by their husband (iv) inability to inherit property (v) considered as an appendage on matters relating to taxation, housing and recruitment. All forms of maltreatments are played down as long as it does not result to physical harm. (Section 241 of the Penal Code). Kamdirim (1995) holds that "masculinity was associated with rationality, autonomy, aggression, and competitiveness". Femininity on the other hand, is associated with "Emotionality, dependency, perceivity, and nurturance" (Kirwan, 2010) without mincing word, all the discrimination against women are not true reflection of their nature. According to Simone De Beauvoir "One is not born a woman, one becomes one".

Obioma contends that "women were associated with less tasking activities, like domestic work. For instance, housekeeping, child bearing, cooking, washing and other house chores".

The cosmology of the Niger Delta society reaffirms the earlier notion that women in the area have never being given a fairer social religious status. Their world view reveals that men are deified and women vilified. In this area, women are generally relegated to the background. They are treated as subordinate to men. Women take instruction from men and have no opinion of their own.

In any case, the fact remains that no two individuals are created exactly the same way. Similarly, no two genders are endowed in the same manner. What might be one person's potential, might turn weak point for the other person.

According to Ben (1981) in her theoretically supposition as discussed above, the negative attitude against women is purely based on the mental construction of males. Their emphasis on sex-roles rather than the innate potentials of different individuals was largely responsible for the subordinate position given to the female folk. In this case, if only the sex-typed individuals should appreciate the unique qualities in nature, it will be noticed that women are as endowed in the same way with their male counterparts. In support of the above position.

Walby (1990) reiterates that patriarchy inhibits the personality and self actualization of the female folk by restricting them from exercising their sexual freedom as is the case of women in the banking profession, until recently.

## **VI. THE WAR FORWARD**

To recreate the Niger Delta society, so that justice, freedom, equity, fairness and even development can thrive, this study makes the following suggestions:

- i) The various taboos against women should be removed.
- ii) Women in the Niger Delta should be allowed to explore their potentials in social, economic, political and cultural spheres.
- iii) The practice of asking for and receiving money or other forms of wealth before giving a girl out in marriage should be discontinued. If parents of the groom do not ask for anything before their son takes on a girl as wife, parents of the girl ought not to.
- iv) Women education should be made a top priority owing to the fact that education changes the mentality of individuals about events and situations.
- v) All the cultural practices which dehumanize the female folk such as genital mutilation, ghost marriage, widowhood practice, wife inheritance should be abolished.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Chauvinism, whether of male or female, is a negative trait. A practice where one individual or specie will pride itself far above the other is counterproductive. It has often been said that no individual is an island. Since no one can successfully count him/her self to be indispensable, to pride oneself or ones gender superior to the other, will generate bad blood and encourage rivalry.

Every individual whether male or female, has a unique characteristics and potential. The society will be a better place if these different potentials are harnessed.

In the light of the above, one may be tempted to think that the under development which the region is currently suffering might be as a result of this male chauvinism since women are shielded from participating fully in social, economic, political and cultural activities in the area. Indeed, it is sad to note that despite the huge natural resources in the region; it is one of the most under developed in the whole world, a situation brought by the culture of male chauvinism.

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