

## Ethnographic Spotlight on Motherhood for Sustainable Human Development in the Niger Delta: The Case of Etche People

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### **Abstract**

Against the backdrop of many feminist scholars pejorative conception of African women in their cultural milieu, this contribution attempts to crystallize the fundamental role of mothers in traditional societies as valuable properties that can be aligned to sustainable human development. With the method of ethnographic study, and oral data from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, and the Etche cultural extraction as our particular reference group, we discovered the indispensable role of women as incarnation and reincarnation channels and mothers of mankind. The Etche conceptualization of this role is rapped up in the sacred phenomenon of life, hence, the human person is through the mother offered fundamental divine relationship on which he/she lives. Motherhood role as culturally practiced, establish strong relationship and affinity between the child and the mother. This state of relationship extends to the motherhood line of descent. The mother cares and stands between the child in all human development necessities and challenges to the child. The traditional Etche mother remains the child's indefatigable nurturer, teacher, counselor, mentor and facilitator from conception till death separate them. The intensity of these cultural roles of motherhood should be encouraged and adopted as part base-line data for early and healthy human development planning in modern time. The overbearing commitment of modern mothers to modern cravings should be reduced. Faithfulness to the traditional role of mothers was the foundation of

social order in our traditional societies and archetypal ages.

## Introduction

Taking premise from the 1923 Santiago league of Nations, through the 1946 Codification of Women issues in the founding documents of the United Nations, to the periodic World Conferences on Women and, the plethora of related Summits and Covenants (regionally and nationally), gender consciousness has systematically and indispensably asserted itself on the priority list of humanity. “The campaign for the advancement of women has stirred wide spread recognition of their indispensable role in addressing the critical issues facing the world” (United Nations, 1995:3). In recent time gender issue is listed as an important perspective of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and the NEEDS.

The wave of this global phenomenon is practically experienced, crystallized and eulogized in Nigeria, where Etche is a sub culture. Gender consciousness, agitations and associations are common properties of our modern social system. For specificity, such issues as equality and empowerment of women in all spheres of our social system, life cravings and chances, top gender discourse. While scholars discuss such subjects, many of them present African women in their traditional and cultural milieu as passive and of little significance and recognition. For Ejituwu (2003:308) African women are puppets on a string. They are also described as weak, solely dependent on men folk with nothing good to offer, (Obah 2003:197). Consequently, there is a gloss over of the fundamental values of women within their cultural backgrounds. This trend has obvious implications. Hence, it is clearly stated that traditional system and patterns of life help to fashion and even lay solid and sustainable foundation for the future. History is shaped by the interplay of sustenance, continuity and dynamism. Traditional facts are functional to many-a modern institution, practices and aspirations. This is more so, as many old and new forms of social organization and customs can be interpreted as direct expression of historical continuity and change, (Munoz 2007:43-44).

An understanding of the traditional patterns of life is necessary as a baseline data for accepting, synergizing and legitimizing the new. Recourse to such ethnography and knowledge of women is not strongly projected in current gender literature in Nigeria. In many studies, women in traditional milieu are more often than not presented in pejorative analytical frame. This is why the focus of this paper is on the fundamental and traditional role of

motherhood as an important premise to appreciating, valuing and eulogizing women towards greater responsibility in the twenty-first century Nigerian society. In view of the current zeal of most women activists and feminist scholars being oriented in Western formulated theories and ideologies and, against the imperative of incorporating traditional values in modern women affairs, we agree with Marx Weber (in Munoz 2007:40); that such “academic prophecy will create only fanatical sects but never a genuine community” hence the imperative of articulating strategies for sustainable human and especially women development.

Our study on the ethnography of motherhood is confined within the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, with the Etche cultural extraction as our specific reference populace. Etche is one of the major ethnic groups located in the upland and Northern part of the present Rivers State of Nigeria. The Niger Delta region lies on the north of the equator, facing the south-east trade wind in one of the areas of highest rainfall (Ashton-Jones et-al 1998). On the east and north, Etche is bounded by Igbo main culture groups of Abia and Imo States respectively. On the west and north, Etche has common boundaries with Ikwerre, a related ethnic group in Rivers State.

### **Incarnation Channel and Motherhood**

One major attribute and value of womanhood is the indispensable biological role of women in incarnation. As channels through which God actualize his creative perfection and design of human beings, women in the Niger Delta and elsewhere in Africa are regarded as progenitors of mankind and the premise of relational interaction and socio-cultural system. This is why the Etche world view on human sexuality uphold that a society without women is doomed to extinction and perdition. Thus, only through women can incarnation and reincarnation be guaranteed. This fundamental value is crystallized in the attribute of motherhood. In the words of Alagoa (2002:35), concerning motherhood in Ijaw land, and as applicable to the Etche, “The divine power to bring life into being is understood in the light of the function of women to replenish the earth”. Hence, it is almost perceived as a divine curse. Motherhood roles are principally directed towards the children. Thus, childless women cannot answer mothers, except in the case of adoption or fostering. This is why barren women usually marry for their husbands, to enable them have children, so that in turn the children of such union would call them mother (*Mma*). Indeed, the position of motherhood is an exalted one in Etche cultural milieu. Similarly, Talbot (1968:15), writes that: “for Ibibio women motherhood is the crown of life therefore ‘Jujus’ thought to

have the power of granting fertility or removing the curse of barrenness are held in greater reverence than all other" (sic).

### **Pivotal Link of Divine Relationship**

Motherhood is pivotal bond, giving its offer to human beings of their first contact with the spiritual and physical world. Therefore the people of Niger Delta, especially the Etche people view motherhood from the perspective of divine essence. The womb is the sacred shelter in which the God of creation perform the work of making man. This indispensable value and role is actualized only in women. Ogoni people amplify this attribute when they conceive that God is the mother of all mankind, forming the bedrock of the exaltation of women's motherhood roles, (Sonpie K, 2002:281). "Without motherhood, there would be no human life and no humanity", (Umoren, 2002:78). This is the belief of the Ogoni. Also, Sorgwe (2002:253), points out the importance of the female factor in Epie- Atissa myth of creation

### **Children and Mother's Line of Descent**

No doubt, Etche and most other Niger Delta cultural extractions are patrilineal, but the affinity between children and their mother's lineage members is always marked with close intimacy. No wonder Etche children are traditionally identified by their mother, grand and, great-grand mother's name. It is on the fundamental basis of motherhood that ethical laws, such as endogamous customs are more strictly observed on the maternal line of descent. This finding corresponds with the report of Onunwa (1990), that in Igbo land a person is prohibited from offending a relative on the mother's side. This also accounts for the prominent role of mothers in the formation of an individual's life. Thus, in Etche, it is a taboo to injure or spill the blood of a child in his /her maternal home. It attracts expensive propitiatory sacrifice and rituals, when violated. Writing on kinship and marriage among the Ashanti, Fortes (in Radcliffe-Brown ed, 1975:263), reports a similar pattern of affinity of the child towards the mother's line of descent. Hence, a person's rank, status, and fundamental right stem from the mother, giving her the attribute of being the most important person in the child's life. In his life, (the child as an individual), his or her mother stands for unquestionable protection and support. Thus, the child's foremost attachment is to his mother, hence the bond between mother and child is always regarded as the keystone of all social relations.

## Motherhood and Child Friendly

The role of motherhood affords Etche women the opportunity of close affinity to their children than the father. It is always rare for a child to do anything without first and foremost letting the mother know what he is about to do. One Etche proverb symbolically portray this meaning: ‘when mother and child are eating in darkness, nobody asks for light’. This proverb depicts friendship and trust between mother and child. This is because, the position of motherhood often brings the women around their children, and in most cases they influence the very lives of the children. The influence of motherhood on children cannot be overemphasized. However, we are not surprised at this finding, especially when we recall the long period of breastfeeding practices by Etche women. Indeed, Etche women are more baby and children-friendly than the topically eulogized modern baby-friendly. In the process of this motherhood cultural role, the children are prone to assimilate more of their mother’s life style than those of their father’s, giving the long scenario of symbolic interaction with the mother. Hobley (1967:280), indirectly recall this Etche virtue of motherhood when he notes that,

the influence of women in fixing a language must not be overlooked, the mother teaches it to her children not actively perhaps but the young child is in closest association with the mother and assimilates her speech.

Again, Fortes (*Ibid*: 262), posits that among the Ashanti people of Ghana, a mother stints no labour for the good of her children, her main duty being to provide her children with food and clothing. No demand upon her as a mother is considered too extreme for her to provide.

The role of motherhood and concern for children is more pronounced in polygynous families. The mothers struggle, compete and fight for the economic rights of their own biological children. The mothers conceive themselves duty bound to seeing that their children are well-fed and are not alienated from their household allotments, or from the entire communal utilities, such as farmlands. In other words, women feel a sense of obligation to facilitate their children’s right, inheritance, care and support. These motherhood attributes of the Etche woman and indeed other Niger Delta cultures find credence in the expositions of Hunter (1979:24), that the influence of motherhood enable women to ensure the settlement of their entire immediate family. When the children are grown, they are expected to reciprocate the gesture in various ways, especially by building a house for

themselves and taking their mothers to live with them, even if they had initially been divorced by their husbands.

At the prime age of marriage of children, mothers are influential. All my informants affirmed that the first person to hear that a maiden is about to marry is her mother, who then relay the information to her husband. If the mother does not like the suitor, she would refuse and stop the move, even before the husband knows about it. Again, for the boys who grow up to the ripe age of marriage, but have no resources for that purpose, mothers do not mind marrying for them. This is more so, when the Etche mother has only one son. Nadel (1954:174) notes a similar practice among the Nupe Kingdom. That the mothers pay for their sons marriage, buy them cloths, luxuries, and as long as the mothers live, the children turn to them for financial help. This is the foundation of Hilda's (in Nadel Ibid: 95), summation that,

the mother is soft indulgent, a buffer between the child and the fathers hardness, and authority. A mother has a strong influence over her children's marriage and will stand out against her husband if he tries to force his daughter into match, which the girl finds objectionable.

Generally, Niger Delta traditional mothers repose the knowledge and, indeed exercise competence in preparing their daughters for marriage and, advising them on how to behave in their matrimonial homes, towards living peacefully in a love relationship with their husbands, in-laws and, on how to take care of their children to be born.

### **Motherhood Caring and Affection**

Furthermore, on caring motherhood gives women the opportunity to determine when to give out their children to other people for caretaking, either as pawns or maids. Again, it is the responsibility of the women to take care of their aged mothers. If a mother's mother is sick or has advanced in age, she may bring her to her matrimonial home. On the other hand, some women (mothers) may decide to send their children to their maiden homes to help their aged parents in fetching water, firewood and other domestic chores. However, the close affinity between mothers and their children as a result of motherhood care make both of them cry on occasions of such departure. The advice given to Chike in Achebe (1979:6), **Chike and the River** lays emphasis on mother-child intimacy and, offers indirect illumination and

credence to motherhood and the influential role women play in Niger Delta societies and, Etche in particular. Leonard, (1968:15-216), indirectly subscribe to this virtue. He writes that:

the position of women however, among nearly all these tribes, among the Igbo and Ijaw particularly is not by any means so degraded as it is generally represented. To a mother by virtue of her natural rights as a reproducer of the ancestral type is as such entitled to and has claims that at once perceptibly raises her position to a higher position.

On the demise of a child, the mother wail and cry hysterically more than any other person. Thus, mothers feel bitter at the death of their children, hence it is their desire to be survived and buried by their children but, never the other way round. Our ethnographic investigation revealed that many women in the Niger Delta, and in particular Etche culture have at different times fallen ill and consequently died, when their most loved and cherished children died. Onunwa (1990:37), captures the situation when he reports a similar psycho-social feeling and practice in parts of Igboland that:

... at the burial of a man his corpse is received by his mother who stands inside the grave as he is being lowered. This last ritual is a reminiscence of the fact that a man is brought into the world by a mother, who must at the end of his life take him out also...

### **Motherhood and Prime Teaching**

Mothers are the first teachers of the children. Basing their teachings on cultural heritage, myths and legends of, and about life, especially within their cultural groups and lineage. Thus, in most evenings, mothers take the pain of narrating to their children all aspects of the world, premised on the people's world view. Etche women use the styles of narration in form of stories, ballads, folklores etc., to give vivid accounts of their subject matter. Hobley (1967:229), puts it succinctly clear that mothers have done a great deal in the development and blending of folklores. Mothers more than any other individual or group handle the folklore of the people, as well as teach them to their children. The impact of the teaching on the children is observed as

children retell the stories among themselves during moon-light or ordinary play times. The children also try to behave according to the lessons drawn from such teachings.

In other perspective of our ethnographic findings, we observed that mothers in our cultures of study are carers. They care for both their children and their husbands. When a child becomes hungry, he or she does not go to the father, rather to the mother who gives that affectionate care. During our field exploration, we observed how mothers who were seriously sick were still being pestered by their children for food. The children couldn't go to their father. Yet, in their sick bed, the mothers still felt concerned and obliged to prepare the children's food. This finding underscores the attribute and role of motherhood in this dimension of life. It is, indeed a good cultural resource premise to incorporate, in synergy for Niger Delta human development, built on sustainability.

## Conclusion

Present dispositions, configurations and institutional frame works of modern societies derive their foundation and meanings from the past and traditional patterns of life. It is on such premise that sustainable development is enhanced and internalized by a people. Contrary to this background is the pejorative conception of most women issues in our indigenous cultures. Conversely, many of our cultural practices such as motherhood configurations and practices in the Niger Delta, and Etche people in particular are relevant in the course of modern life.

An understanding of the ethnographic findings on women's traditional role as mothers, and as discussed in this paper offers a part base line data towards reception, adaptation and synergy of modern ideals, values and dignity of mothers without undermining what makes meaning to us, culturally. Motherhood provision of incarnation channel to mankind, the cultural leverage, and nurture which make women have close affinity with their children should be further esteemed and encouraged for healthy and sustainable development in modern time. Again, the cultural duties and commitment of mothers in Etche, in the Niger Delta, and other African cultures should be considered in planning, and implementation of modern women programmes. Hence, such motherhood roles and values have been the bedrock of stable family institutions, qualitative juvenile conduct and societal order, from the archetypal ages.

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