

BEYOND STEREOTYPES: GENDER AND POLITICS IN IRON SMELTING SOCIETY OF LEJJA, NIGERIA

Opata, Chukwuma.¹ and Eze-Uzomaka, Pamela.²

¹ Department of International Studies, University of Nigeria, & ² Department of Archaeology and Tourism, University of Nigeris, Nsukka, NIGERIA.

ABSTRACT

There is general yet erroneous consensus that women are underrepresented in the fields of science and technology. The underrepresentation is assumed to be one of the causes of the imagined than real marginalization of women in social, economic and political spheres. As iron smelting has a lot to do with science and technology, this paper intends to debunk such views using Lejja, an ancient iron smelting community in Nigeria as a case study. To do this, attention was focused on the relationship between iron smelting and politics in the community. Gender-specific roles that depict power sharing and division of labor during smelting will be discussed. Questions to be answered include but are not limited to the role of women in the transfer and legitimizing of power from one village-head to the other, the implication of women of every lineage paying some respect to a diseased man of their lineage during the dance of Igede music and the nexus between such actions and iron smelting. Given that, it would help to correct wrong notions about iron smelting and power playing between both sexes and the role of women in the iron smelting industry.

Keywords: Gender, iron-melting society, politics, stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) published a book titled, *Gender, Science and Technology: Perspectives from Africa*. The editor of the work is Catherine Wawasi Kitetu. In one of the articles written by Kenneth O Nyangena, he observed that “there is a worldwide consensus that women are under-represented in the field of science and technology and that this under representation is one of the causes of the continued marginalization of women in the social, economic and political spheres” (Nyangena, K.O, 2008). Speaking of the political dimension of women marginalization, Jeanne Munn Bracken observed that the study of history usually involves learning about generals and battles, the dates and the military strategies. Except for Helen of Troy or Joan of Arc, who led troops into battle, “women are generally assumed to have been sitting back home, wringing their hands and worrying about the fate of their men (Bracken. J.M, 2009: 5). The above generalizations have no room for specific exceptions, which the Lejja example provides, hence the need for this work.

Gender, Iron smelting and Politics in Lejja

The very first sign of the link between gender, iron smelting and politics in Lejja is manifest at Otobo Ugwu Dunoka. Otobo Ugwu serves as their parliamentary square. It has a large assemblage of iron slag blocks with a lot of rules as well. One relates to gender and seating arrangement. Men sit facing the East, where the house of the traditional masked spirit is located. The house itself is shaped like a furnace. Women on their part sit facing west, but are seated at the base of the masked spirit house. Rationalizing this sitting arrangement, Iduma observed that the furnace is the “kitchen where stone is cooked to form iron” (Iduma, 2007). He went on to state that women sit at the base of the furnace-shaped masked spirit house because they are the ones who own the kitchen and have the powers of giving food to the hungry. “Food” and “hunger” as used by Iduma are euphemistic. Whereas food refers to political power, hunger refers to the quest for political power. In giving “food” to the ‘hungry’, women and iron smelting play very important roles in Lejja traditional political system. The symbol of authority in all the villages held by the eldest male is called *arua* (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: ARUA

Arua is made of iron. The handing over of *arua* to any village head (*Onyishi*) is done by women whose fathers are from the same village with the said *Onyishi*. Prior to the official handover, the *arua* is transferred from the house of the dead *Onyishi* to that of the new one by *Umuada alu nna* (married women from the said village of the late village head) after divination. This divination was done after the burial of late village head. Before the burial of the dead village head, the women (*Umuada alu nna*) performed some rites which are linked with smelting. The very first rite is called *Omii Ozu* (literarily translated as drying the corpse). During this exercise, the body of the dead *Onyishi* is placed on a local bed which is made of clay, deleafed palm fronds and stones (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Ogodó (local bed)

Within the clay part that forms the stand of the bed, a hole is created from which heat is supplied to the heat up the deleafed palm fronds that were used in weaving the bed. The three sides of the square hole created are laced with hematite at the eastern, western and northern sides leaving the southern end with none (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: Stones attached to three sides of the wall

Firewood used in generating the heat is limited to *akpaka* (*pentaclethre macropylla*) and *ahaba* (*Aciona bateri*) (See Figure 4).



Figure 4: Wood fuel sourced from *akpaka* and *ahaba*

The heating was done overnight or for some days depending on the market day the *Onyishi* died or if he took a revered title that does not warrant his burial on eke market day. This is meant for those who took *idi* and *ozo* titles (Ogbungwaya, 2009; Onyengwuja, 2009; Ogidija, 2008).

Rationalizing this rite, other informants explained that the *Ogodo* (locally made bed) represents the furnace, while the hole represents the tuyere. The choice of the firewood is same with those used by smelters, those woods that could hold embers of fire for a very long time without turning to ash. The three stones (hematite) used in forging the hole from where heat is supplied to the bed not only represent the major raw material in smelting (hematite) but its number (3) represent Lejja as a unit. Each stone stands for each quarter and Lejja is made of three quarters viz Ejuona, Uwani and Akaibute (Iduma, 2007; Igwe, 2007; Nwaonyedi, 2009). All these informants are male). The main idea behind the drying the dead *Onyishi* is to ensure that when he reincarnates, he would continue with the practice of smelting.

The second rite is called *Ogbu Ugodu* characterized by tying around one's waist with a length of cloth and passing same in-between the thighs. During this rite, the woman are dressed with tattered cloths and some even cover their nakedness with leaves or even going naked, moving from one compound to the other in village concerned bearing twigs. While moving, they would be singing a song which runs thus:

Onye asole ihere
Onye asole ihere
Adada gbu onye obu
Omaba gbu onye obu
Oku regbu onye obu

Whoever fells shy, who ever fells shy

May adada kill the person
May omaba kill the person
May the person be burnt by fire.

A second song runs thus:

Ugodu, Ugodu
Ugodu maru uma
Ugodu Onyishi
Ugodu maru uma

Traditional wears, tradition wears
Traditional wears are beautiful
Traditional wears of the eldest man
Traditional wears are beautiful

As they sang and moved from one family to the other, they were presented with gifts of yam, wine and of late money. Most men abhor seeing these women or coming into contact with them. Such men would handover whatever they have to offer the women to their wives or place them by the doors of their house. The nexus between this rite and smelting is that:

- (a) The attire of the women depicts antiquity of the profession of smelting in the community which was done before men began to wear cloths.
- (b) The movement from one family to the other is to replicate the time when the community is engaged in sourcing of materials for smelting and stock-piling food to be used during smelting (Ekenyi, 2007)
- (c) Most importantly, the nakedness represents labor during child bearing. Smelting is seen as a time of conception, with the furnace serving as the womb (Igwe, 2009, Agbo, 2009).

After singing and moving around the village, the women came back to the house of the dead *onyishi*. They brought down the late *Onyishi's* meat storage device, a basket with cover (*ngiga*).



Figure 5: Ngiga

The dry meat inside was used in cooking the food items gotten during *Ogbu ugodu*. This episode is seen as mobilization of resources during smelting and brings home the fact that enjoyment comes after labor.

After eating, burial follows. Then, the actual transfer of staff of office to the new eldest man's house begins. The woman who the gods of the land have chosen for the job through divination led the rest of the women. The transfer is done at night. While taking the staff of office to the new leader, the women sang songs of praise for the new leader and the staff of office called *arua*. The *Arua* and a metal gong (*Ivom*) (See Plate VI) are tied together and carried by the person so chosen.



Figure 6: Ivom

At the main entrance to the new elder's compound, the women were met by sons and relatives of the new elder and offered drinks (*Igboo-uzo*). When they got into the compound, the staff of office (*Arua*) was hidden and was never seen by the new elder until after seven native weeks (twenty-eight days). The male relatives or sons of the new elder take custody of the *Arua*. That night, a goat which must be an adult female goat and must have weaned many kids was slaughtered for the women. Rationalizing the choice of the goat, the people said that it is done to remind the new leader (eldest man) that he is now the lead person in the industry (smelting) and must be productive like the goat he slaughtered. In the very olden days, before Christianity and western value overtook traditions, the goat was skinned, dried in a mock drying practice and shaped like a tuyere-to point to the elder that he has to assume duty instantly (Orefi, 2008).

After twenty-eight days, the woman who took the *Arua* to the house of the eldest man of the village came back to his house in the morning. While coming, she must bring with her a fowl

(cock), Palm oil, alligator pepper (*ose eya*), kola nut (*oji*), yellow ochre (*odoo*) and *nzu* (white chalk)(See Figure 8).



Figure 7: Odoo



Figure 8: Nzu

According to local accounts, smelters in performing pre-smelting and post-smelting rituals used these items. Implicit in this exercise is the notion that women played very crucial role in the ritual aspect of smelting-providing the item. Before the *Arua* was brought out and handed over to the woman who is to hand it over to the eldest man, the eldest man must live his house for his

ancestral meeting house (*obu*) (See Figure 9) or the shrine of the ancestor of that village (*onu ndushi*) (See Figure 10).

While handing over the staff of office to the *Onyishi*, the *Onyishi* will be seated on a mound like structure shaped like a furnace (*okpo*) if the handover is to be done in the ancestral meeting house or on iron slag block, if done at *Onu ndushi*. The woman will also be seated. The reason why the handover is done at these two spots is that they are the meeting places of the departed ancestors who are to act as guide to the new leader. Also the item he sits on is a perpetual reminder of the smelting industry. After the handover, the new leader entertained the entire village inside the *Obu* where another adult female goat was slaughtered. While going home, the woman that handed over the staff of office to the *Onyishi* would be given food items that she would use in worshipping her personal god (*chi*) (Agbo: 2009). This is because it is assumed that it is her God who made it possible for her to be the choice person for the job out of the lot. This is in tandem with the local saying “*mkpume chi kedoru n’ erashi manu*”-a stone well created by god licks oil”.



Figure 9: Obu

Another, event that depicts women involvement in the smelting industry is witnessed during the funeral ceremony of men. One of the funeral rites is the dance to the tune of *Igede* music. All married daughters of the deceased man’s lineage participated in the dance and must offer money to the men who produce the music. This episode represents promotion of guild of smelters through patronage. *Igede* is a music beaten by a select few who have taken the title. The chief instrument of the music is called *Aroo*, an extra large metal gong (See Figure 11).



Figure 10: Onu ndushi (Onu ezelenyi umuoda-eze village, lejja)



Figure 11: Aroo

CONCLUSION

Lejja provides a good example of a community where both sexes are involved in smelting. It is pretty obvious in the politics of the community. Even though primogeniture is still in vogue, the male elder cannot assume office until a woman hands over the staff of office to him. The staff of

office is made of iron. The process undergone before the handover is the same with those undergone by smelters before smelting. The items used in the handover are similar with those used in pre and post-smelting rituals, same goes for the fire wood used in supplying heat to the body of the dead village head. It is done only to the body of the eldest person which is instructive. It shows that smelting was a communal affair and that women played vital complementary roles in the society and industry rather than being marginalized as stereotyped. What we have in Igbo land is binary synthesis (Opata, 2009). From such underpinnings, it would be apposite for gender scholars, especially feminist scholars to have reevaluate and ask whether women marginalization is part of traditional African culture or it is a colonial creation. Until this question is asked and answers are provided, the stereotyped notions on women marginalization would continue to exacerbate.

REFERENCES

Bracken, J.M. (2009). *Women in the American Revolution*, Boston, Massachusetts: History Compass.

Nyangena, Kenneth O, “Early Scientists were Men; So Are Today’s: Perception of Science and Technology Among Secondary School Students in Kenya” in Kitete, Catherine Wawasi (ed) (2008) *Gender, Science and Technology: Perspectives from Africa*, Darkar, Senegal: CODESRIA. 88-96.

Opata, Damian U, “Binary Synthesis, Epistemic Naturalism and Subjectivities: Perspectives for Understanding Gender, Science and Technology in Africa” in Kitetu, Catherine Wawasi (ed) (2008) *Gender, Science and Technology: Perspectives from Africa*, Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA. 30 -57.