

## AROCHUKWU WOMEN DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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### **Abstract**

This submission is a discussion on Arochukwu women of the Cross River Igbo area of Southeastern Nigeria during the colonial period. This paper relies mainly on primary sources derived from oral information through in-depth interviews with various persons in Arochukwu, and focus group discussions (FGD) archival materials. These interviews constitute vital sources of material.

### **Introduction**

This submission is a discussion on Arochukwu women of the Cross River Igbo area of Southeastern Nigeria before 1970. This distinct linguistic group belongs to the Igbo ethnic group that has historically occupied the Eastern part of Nigeria, once known as Biafra. Arochukwu, situated in Abia State, is a community of more than 30,000 inhabitants<sup>1</sup> and covers 250 square miles.<sup>2</sup> It is positioned on the east bank of the Cross River; some 74 kilometres to Bende and 102 kilometres to Uzuakoli, southeast of Umuahia, the Abia State capital.<sup>3</sup> Arochukwu's neighbours are: to the north and northeast, Ihechiowa and Ututu in Abia State; to the east and south by the Ito of Cross River State; and to the south and south-west by the Ikpanja, Iwerre and Makor of Akwa Ibom State. This paper relies mainly on primary sources derived from oral information (in-depth interviews with various persons in Arochukwu, but especially women) and focus group discussions (FGD). These interviews constituted vital sources of material as few studies have been done Arochukwu women.

The Arochukwu people were said to be of a different racial type from the indigenous inhabitants of Igboland. They were reportedly of fine physique, with delicately moulded extremities and features more nearly approximating the Europeans than even the negroid people.<sup>4</sup> Aro people were said to be mentally advanced, crafty and diplomatic that only European origin could account for such trait.<sup>5</sup> They are highly intelligent than other indigenous races. They take every opportunity to assert superiority over their neighbours,<sup>6</sup> and call themselves Aro Okeigbo (that is the greater Igbo).<sup>7</sup> According to Simon Ottenberg, the Aro did not always regard themselves as Igbo but simply Aro. As he noted, they spoke a distinct Igbo dialect, Igbo Aro, which differed from any other Igbo sub group. This variation of Igbo dialect is tinted with Ibibio and Efik words.<sup>8</sup>

### **Arochukwu before the Colonial Period**

Before the coming of Europeans, the Aro had an organised judicial and administrative structure for regulating domestic affairs. Matters of importance were dealt with by a special body fully representative of the clan.<sup>9</sup> The Aro were first slave traders. When slave trade was considered illegitimate, they diverted to the legitimate trade, especially long distance trading. In the course of their trading, they traversed virtually every part of Igboland and beyond. This accounted for the establishment of various Aro trading posts that later turned into settlements, and eventually became Aro diaspora communities.<sup>10</sup> There was the Aro expedition of 1901/1902 when the British invaded Arochukwu in a bid to destroy the Long Juju, which paved the way for the conquest of Igboland. Economic specialisation in trade made the Aro to relegate other occupations that were unrelated to trade to her neighbours. Farming was rather until very recently neither interesting nor necessary to them. There were no yam farms within

Arochukwu up to early 1930's. A few cassava plantations were the extent of their agricultural pursuit. Because the Aro were too much occupied with trading to have time for farming, their wants were readily supplied by farmers from the rich farm lands of Ututu, Isu and Ihechiowa. When trade came virtually to a standstill in the 1930's, the Aro were hard hit, they began to learn the rudiments of those agricultural pursuits which they had so long despised.<sup>11</sup>

Christianity was first introduced to the Aro by Mary Slessor, who early in 1903 visited the town of Amasu from Itu; but it was not until June 1907 that the church of Scotland Mission sent Mr. Rankin to establish a mission at Obinkita, a large town in the heart of Aro.<sup>12</sup> Since then, the influence of this mission has expanded greatly.<sup>13</sup>

### **Organization of the Community**

The Aro people organised themselves into clans and kindreds (*ezi*). The oldest man became the head (*eze ezi*) of the clan or kindred.<sup>14</sup> There was the existence of the age grade system (*uke*), Ekpe society, and Iyamba, a prestigious association regarded as a secret society for Arochukwu women.<sup>15</sup> Iyamba was an equivalent of the Ekpe society which acts as a system of administration of justice. Iyamba was village based and opened to all adult women. This society had authority over every woman and all ceremonies relating to women and girls. It defined the proper conduct for women and had powers to punish violation of communal codes. Iyamba planned and carried out various dances, rituals and celebrations in which women took part.<sup>16</sup> Aro had female deities like Alezi and Ogbodum, and had priestesses strictly attached to them. There is also the position of Ezenwanyi which some other Igbo sub group refer to as female king, but that is not the case with the Aro people. Aro women's organised system of applying various disciplinary measures to women who violated the laws of the land is known as *Iwusi Nkpo* (i.e. placing heavy sanctions on an offender). The Aro had room for various categories of women's groups like Umuada, Umuakparata and Umugbogho. These women groups had specific functions they performed in the community and they exercised some measure of control on issues that affected them.

### **Arochukwu Women during the Colonial Period**

The role of Arochukwu women during the colonial period cannot be over emphasized. Suffice it to say that a lot of evidence shows that Arochukwu women were involved in several economic and social activities during the colonial period. Despite the subservient role of women in Igboland, Arochukwu women did enjoy considerable freedom and power. Aro women had real powers in deciding issues relating to them. They could trade surplus food for profit. Some of these women became major traders in the market. These included very active participation in trade, agricultural practices, food processing, politics, education, establishment of Arochukwu Women's maternity home in 1945, the establishment of Nzuko Arochukwu women's wing and community development.<sup>17</sup>

### **Arochukwu Women in Trade and Commerce**

In trade and commerce, some Arochukwu women operated as middle men and bulk brokers. They were involved in long distance trading. A typical example of such women was Madam Rosemary Inyama, who traded on gold with a female trading partner from the Gold Coast in 1942. She was also an agent for United African Company (UAC).<sup>18</sup> Arochukwu women dominated and controlled the local Arochukwu markets. They traded with their Efik and Ibibio neighbours as well as with their Ihechiowa, Ututu and Isu Igbo neighbours. Their articles of trade included salt, yam, cocoa yam, processed and unprocessed cassava, crayfish, smoked fish, periwinkle, among others which they bought from the Efik and Ibibio fisher men. Aro women made sure that traders from their Ututu, Ihechiowa, Cross river and Akwa Ibom neighbours were allowed to freely bring in their commodities to the market for sale, thus strengthening their intergroup relationship with these neighbours.<sup>19</sup>

### **Arochukwu Women in Agriculture**

The place of these women cannot be omitted from any discussion on agriculture. Arochukwu women played a very important role in agriculture before 1970. Agricultural practices in Arochukwu were

characterized by gender division of labour, according to the task and crops in question.<sup>20</sup> With the coming of colonialism and the Victorian conception of gender, a process of change was established. This change, however, did not have much effect on the traditional pattern of gendered roles in agricultural production in Arochukwu due to greater male participation in non-farm activities and in the waged employment. As a result, women were found to play an active role in agricultural production in Arochukwu where most agricultural practices like mulching, bush burning, sowing, weeding, harvesting, production of palm oil, processing of cassava and palm kernel oil, became their responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> The women spent more than two thirds of their time on food production activities. Thereby ensuring food security for the community as one of the interviewees disclosed. They have contributed higher percentage of the labour force in food production.

Our women are energetic farmers. They grew food crops like maize, cassava, melon, and as processed palm oil for subsistence and for sale. They performed almost all farm operations themselves, even when such heavy work, like land clearing or ridge making were involved. However, if necessary, they utilized supplementary family or hired labour.<sup>22</sup>

This is *in tandem* with what Basden posited about Igbo women: “Igbo women took full share in farm work, assisting in turning the soil and molding up the yam beds”.<sup>23</sup> However, it is important to note here that the traditional system of ownership of land in Arochukwu deprived women from owning lands, though some portion of lands were allocated to the women during farming seasons for the purpose of cultivation of crops on annual basis or more. In some villages in Arochukwu, the lands are shared amongst the women based on when a woman was registered in their women union within their various clans and kindreds. The registration ceremony of women into the Women’s Union in Arochukwu is known as *Irunyi Nwanyi Aku*. In other villages, lands are shared based on seniority.

#### **Arochukwu Women in other fields of endeavour**

Nnenna Mgbokwo Udo Omiri Okennachi was and still remains the only known female king in Aro history. She is believed to have ruled Arochukwu from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> Not much is known about her because of the scanty records on Aro women in precolonial times. However, a lot of Arochukwu women had wives and functioned as female husbands. This old practice has survived to the present. Other women like Madam Rebecca N. Okwara, the first pupil at Mary Slessor School Arochukwu,<sup>25</sup> Madam Nnaola Orji, Madam Grace Nwaobira Ojukwu, and Madam Anyaku Okoronkwo among others were the early pioneers of community development in Arochukwu.<sup>26</sup> Madam Nwannadiya Okoroji of Agbagwu village popularly known as Daa Nne Mary functioned as a traditional birth attendant. She delivered several babies in her home. She also established Unity Church of Practical Christianity in Arochukwu.<sup>27</sup>

With the establishment of Mary Slessor School in Arochukwu by the Church of Scotland Mission, many Arochukwu ladies enrolled there in order to acquire western education. It is important to note that most of the pioneer pupils at Mary Slessor School ended up becoming teachers. Others became involved in various administrative positions. Among them were those that saw to the establishment and management of Arochukwu women motherless babies home and Arochukwu women maternity home.<sup>28</sup> Some Arochukwu women were involved in politics. One typical example was Madam Rosemary Inyama. She played an active part in Nigerian politics in the 1940s and 1950s, as a member of the National Council for Nigerian Citizen’s (NCNC) women’s wing. She played a leading role in organizing women at Ikot Ekpene and Uyo from the late 1940s to early 1950s to support and vote for NCNC candidates. Her contemporaries were Mrs. Mary Nzimiro, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo and Mrs. Edede. The part played by these women in organizing other women in Eastern Nigeria enabled the NCNC to control the Eastern Regional Government and obtain seats in the National Assembly.<sup>29</sup>

Arochukwu women did a lot towards the development of Arochukwu before the civil war. Madam Rebecca Okwara, Mrs Oti and Madam Rosemary Inyama organized the church women in Arochukwu. These women had a lot of advantages; they were the first of Arochukwu women to be educated by the missionaries at Mary Slessor School.<sup>30</sup> Madam Rebecca Okwara was the first pupil to be admitted at Mary Slessor Home.<sup>31</sup> She later became a traditional birth attendant in Arochukwu women's maternity home established in 1945. She ran the Aro women maternity home at Amannagwu for several years until the government was able to build a hospital in Arochukwu in 1961. Several women delivered their babies in her home. Arochukwu women took over the running of Mary Slessor twin home from the Church of Scotland Mission in the late 1940s.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note here that the British colonial administration started using these three women (Madam Rebecca Okwara, Mrs. Oti and Madam Rosemary Inyama) to organize the Aro women because of their level of enlightenment. Even after independence, these three women continued to perform these roles until after the civil war.

In the late 1946, Arochukwu women were able to secure the services of a trained midwife, Mrs. Ibanga, whose devotion to duty was lavishly praised. Aro women were responsible for all other services including hiring of a ward maid and paying the salary of a second midwife. They raised funds from charging a delivery fee of 51 shillings and a bed fee of 11 shillings per client. The maternity home recorded an average of 200 live births per annum.<sup>33</sup> Undoubtedly, this maternity home provided much needed medical services for Arochukwu people and the neighbouring communities of Ututu, Ihechiowa, Isu as well as their Ibibio and Efik neighbours.<sup>34</sup> Members of Aro women maternity home committee included the following: Madam Rebecca N. Okwara, President, Madam Mgbokwo Ijoma, committee member, Madam Mgboro Iroka committee member, Madam Nwammuo Oleka, committee member, Mrs. M. Ibanga senior midwife, Miss Arit Thomas a British Junior Midwife, Chief Alex Okoroji, committee member representing the native authority, Chief S.U. Okorafor, committee member representing the native authority, and Mr. A. Irogbenachi committee member representing the native authority.<sup>35</sup> Other women like Madam Grace Nwaobiara Ojukwu, Madam Anyaku Okoronkwo, Madam Udo Okoronkwo and Madam Ola Ukpabi, Madam Nwammuo Onwuchekwa, Madam Maria Achinivu, Mrs Onyeador, Mrs Mercy Mgbokwo Onoh, Mrs. Beatrice Nwankwo of Isimkpu, Madam Alice Ijoma of Ammannagwu, Madam Mgboro Iroka of Ujari, Mrs Nkemdirim of Atani, and Mrs Caroline Okoro, organized Aro women so well.

In the local Arochukwu market, Aro women dominated and regulated the activities. They controlled the prices of commodities in the market. Surplus food was traded in the market. In 1929, women protested against the colonial government when their commodities were underpriced by the government in favour of British traders.<sup>36</sup> For example a barrel of oil that *ab initio* was bought for £25 (twenty five pounds) began to be bought at £12 (twelve pounds). Palm kernel which previously was sold for £1.5 (one pound five shillings) was later sold for 14 Shillings. Within this period of trade imbalance between Aro women traders and their British counterpart, there was an urgent need for basic amenities in Arochukwu District. Aro women demanded in addition for the provision of basic amenities and infrastructures like good roads, a government hospital and a resident doctor to be based in Arochukwu. From the letter addressed by the women to the District Officer they argued: if a person falls sick and such a person is in a critical condition, by the time the person will be taken to Itu where the nearest hospital was at that time, the person may have died.<sup>37</sup>

When eventually the Aba women's war broke out in 1929, Arochukwu women were the most organized and were the most influential than other women in any part of the country during the 1920's and 1930's.<sup>38</sup> They maintained a high level of law and order within Arochukwu district as was evident in the letter they sent to the District Officer in charge of Arochukwu Division in 1929, informing him of their collective decisions not to join in the fight and their frantic efforts to stop all those who had wished to join in the fight. When later the District Officer asked them to request for anything they wanted, the women did not use the opportunity to exploit the colonial government or seek for self-reward.<sup>39</sup> These women promised to remain calm until the whole crisis was over. They expressed their happiness on the information they received from the District Officer exempting them from paying tax. Arochukwu

women held several meetings. One of the most important of these meetings was Arochukwu Women's Meeting of 20 December 1929. This can be found on the communiqué of that meeting.<sup>40</sup>

### **Presbyterian Women Training College Arochukwu**

Mrs. Arnot was a Presbyterian missionary in Arochukwu. She established a small industry in 1925. This industry became a trade guild for handicrafts on textile. It created jobs for needy Arochukwu widows and other less privileged women. In this small industry, women were taught embroidery, the production of linen goods and table mats. When Mrs. Arnot left Arochukwu in 1948, Arochukwu women turned this small industry into a cooperative society, which became known as Arochukwu Women Embroidery Cooperative Society. This was the parent cooperative society that gave birth to other women's cooperative societies in Arochukwu.<sup>41</sup> Miss Susana McKennel was another Presbyterian missionary in Arochukwu. She worked in Arochukwu for thirty-six years, from 1915 to 1951. Within the period that she was a resident missionary in Arochukwu, she attended to the needs of several women, both Christians and non-Christians. Records have it that Miss Susana McKennel paid weekly visits to women, providing them with gift items and giving these women words of encouragement. She also organized domestic science classes at Arochukwu, which helped these women a great deal. Mrs. Rosemary Inyama and Mrs. Rebecca N. Okwara attended her classes. One of the district officers in Arochukwu said of Miss Susana McKennel before her departure: "She will leave a gap in the hearts of many thousands."<sup>42</sup> The women looked forward to her weekly visits, with an almost pathetic belief in her ability to buoy the sorrowing and to ennoble the humblest.

With the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967, every economic and social activity was disrupted. When the civil war ended in 1970, Arochukwu women training college Arochukwu reopened. Its catchment area was expanded as it began to admit displaced Igbo speaking students from different teachers' colleges in the both former Eastern Nigeria and other parts of Nigeria. These admissions were done irrespective of the religious backgrounds of the candidates and their gender.

### **CONCLUSION**

With the use of primary source, this paper has systematically examined the various roles Arochukwu women played during the colonial period.

### **Endnotes**

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17. See for example Gloria Chuku, "Mrs. Rosemary Inyama: A Woman of Resilience", in Deborah Klezmer (ed.), *Women in World History* Vol.7. Waterford, CT: York, 2000, 680-681, "From Petty Traders to International Merchants: A Historical Account of the Role of Three Igbo Women of Nigeria in Trade and Commerce, 1886-1970," *African Economic History*, 27(1999): 1-20.
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20. Interview, Madam Ahunanya Ezuma Ucheagwu...
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