

Women and Warfare in Pre-Colonial Akokoland

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ABSTRACT

In pre-colonial Akokoland, the most conspicuous fact about its political economy and peace was security challenges and mismanagement through internal and external manipulation. This paper analyses the role of women in warfare in pre-colonial Akokoland as a potential to integrate Akokoland, a multi-cultural community for productive and sustained effort to promote economic development in the region. Thus, the paper is conceptualised on historical objectivity. The paper argues that one of the ways of dealing with the scale of insecurity in the society is to assimilate historical thinking into the intention of the security agents (women warriors).

1.1 Introduction

There were wars in pre-colonial time, but the focus of this paper is on women and warfare in terms of their contributions to prevent insurgency in their respective places in Akokoland. Thus, women's role in warfare, particularly in Akokoland can be described as a measure of severing diplomatic relations with their neighbours or enemies, wherever their aspirations influenced insecurity. In Akokoland, the theme of women and warfare is, therefore, historically important to be examined because many women warriors were from regimented families or had background in hunting. The art and practice of womenfolk in warfare were not learnt, but it was a professional engagement that was carried out by warlike families. In this respect, the study discusses outstanding women in war prosecution. Intrinsically, warfare can be described as an endeavour and source of wealth, although it threatened the existence, destroyed and displaced helpless villages, while rural dwellers, farmlands and domestic animals were carried away as war booties (Falola and Law 1992: 1). The genesis of warfare can be traced to the desires of rulers of kingdoms, towns and villages to exploit or fight for spoils to keep his growing population or even defeat for wealth, fame and for political authority over weakened and conquered neighbours by way of territorial expansionist policy.

Different views had been posited on the course and causes of internal strife. Thus, S. Johnson (Johnson 2001: 131-132) argued that in the earliest times, war expedition was not meant only for slave raiding and slavery, but war booties and perquisites were shared between Chief Balogun and his lieutenants. Interpreting women's participation in warfare in Akokoland contrasted Johnson's argument that war was not meant for exploitation. Meanwhile, R. Smith (Smith 1976: 51-52; Falola and Law (eds.) 1992: 4) posited that enslavement and slavery for domestic use further aimed at engaging in warfare. He argued that slaves were used as currency in which political subservience was paid for maintaining and enforcing political authority.

The case of warfare in Akokoland was historically interesting due to the participatory role of women in warfare. In the pre-colonial period, warfare was a fundamental component for community growth and development informed by collective efforts. The intention of this study is, therefore, to reiterate on the women outstanding role in warfare and diplomacy in the history of Akokoland. Also, the study demonstrates that women in Akokoland, as indeed elsewhere, participated in inter-state relations or warfare as a way of resolving insecurity challenges in the society. On this note, women brought different tactics in warfare, which were not easily divulge; unlike men warriors whose chauvinistic tendencies were display of self-ambition usually characterised inter-warfare to fail.

War prosecution was the concern of the traditional *elite*, including women who mobilised their indentured workers and slaves under the control of their leader, *lyalode* to fight war. Thus, women in Akokoland employed subtle manner to seek peace, and often, patriotism was not honoured when it came to prosecuting warfare in Akokoland under the control of women. Women warriors were more vigilant. Hence, the concept of wealth in warfare to rule over war and controlled the conquered and vassal states, had cast a gloomy shadow over the

expected end of the warfare due to the problem of vision on the part of men warriors. In spite of S. Johnson's examination of the distinguished women warriors in Yorubaland (Johnson 2001: 391-394; Awe & Olutoye 1998: 127-129), attention had not been given to women and warfare in Akokoland. However, no specific reason was given, except mere neglect; perhaps it was due to lack of documentation. As a result, examining the contributions of women in warfare in Akokoland had shortcomings. The problem of chronological arrangement was the major problem of the study of pre-colonial history of Akokoland. Fragmentary of sources, notwithstanding, it is interesting to mention that women used ingenuity and managed warfare in Akokoland.

Still on the paucity of research data on women and warfare in Akokoland, the few existing studies are products of oral history. This also accounted for gender (female) differentiation in women's involvement in warfare due to sex disparities and natural categorisation of women as weaker vessels despite their numerical strength in the society. The shortage of materials on women and warfare in Akoko region can also be traced to cultural imbalance of tradition which relegating women to nicety household occupation. It was a bit difficult in making contact with the womenfolk as a result of exclusive preservation or syncretism about the status of women in Akoko society. For instance, among the royal families, women were seldom seen in the public, except around the palace solely identified with the royalty. Even the Muslim *elite's* wives exercised *purdah* (mandatory seclusion of women). The cultural variables on gender relations in the rural society undermined women's participatory role in warfare. In view of the historical importance of women and warfare in the diplomatic history of Akokoland, this study argues on the justification and documentation of this aspect of Akoko history for further inquiry. On this background, this study discusses the role of women in Akoko diplomatic affairs.

The thesis on women warriors in Akokoland is to explain an interpretation of the idea of Akoko people on women status and its significant contribution on security challenges in the process of state formation, integration and urbanisation. Urbanisation, in this context was the spread and extension of their territories over their immediate neighbours in the course of pursuing expansionist policy. The migrants began the acquisition of non-material and material cultures among their hosts in Akokoland. Regardless of diverse origins, the various sub-ethnic groups in Akokoland could integrate together, which influenced their state formation processes and patterns of settlement. The study is sub-divided into five parts. The first part attempts to introduce the paper. The second part clarifies terms in the study. The third section examines the war ethics in Akokoland. The fourth section discusses the methods used in maintaining security in the local place as previewed by socio-economic and political demands, while the fifth part concludes the study.

1.2 Clarification of Terms

1.3 Women

Historically, women are very important because Akokoland is a patrilineal society. The term patriarchy is fitted into the description of social organisation in Akokoland, because it lays emphasis on the male line. It simply refers to the familial unit that is headed by men. However, matriarchy is practised among ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in Africa; for instance, the Akan of Ghana, also among the Yaka of Obubra in Cross River State, Kono and Kaura in Kaduna State, the Butchama and Guyuk at Adamawa State in Nigeria (Erinosho 2006: 17). In a gender ideology, man has every right in spite of the fact that women performed unique role in the prosecution of war. Regardless of historical origin and societal arrangements, this study is concerned with gender's (women) ideologies and performance in warfare (Sesay and Odebiyi (eds.) 1998: 3). As a result, it is desirous for this study to point out that women were as prepared on defending their territorial expansion when occasion demanded as their male counterpart. On this, they resisted any encroachment of their enemies on their borders. Women were very significant in following the trend of safeguarding their frontiers in successive wars. And indeed, women were prominent catalysts that had far reaching effects on the pursuance of peace to seek better political economy. Invariably, experiences in political instability, trading and social relations attracted warfare and diplomatic relations between Akokoland and her neighbours.

1.4 Warfare

The general notion of war is that it is a threat to peace. However, this study enunciates that in pre-colonial Akokoland, warfare was a concept and a task to pursue peace as a means to exchange vision or idea. However, opinion differs on the explanation of warfare. Oral evidence claimed that it was a state of war and strife among towns and villages in pre-colonial Akokoland (Interview: Babadele 2012). Based on proximity of location and availability of agriculture produce; warriors and exploiters from Ibadan, Ijesaland, Ado-Ekiti, Benin or Nupe launched armed conflicts on the people of Akokoland. In other words, warfare in this context was an alternative

to search for peace. The hardship arose from such reprisal; notwithstanding, the territorial expansion for economic growth was the reality of pursuing such war. Talking about warfare and the institution of patriarchy brings into focus the politics in Akokoland, which was grafted in the socio-cultural processes of patriarchy and polygamous institutions. Thus, in the past, territorial defense was driven and spearheaded by men. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the pre-colonial period; women dismissively resisted such misfortunes and vigorously executed warfare. Women in Akokoland formed defensive measure against their rival neighbours.

1.5 Pre-colonial

The period is very significant in the socio-political history of Akokoland. It was the period that women actively participated in warfare by forming socio-cultural and commercial associations headed by *Iyalode* (Johnson 2001: 77). It was asserted that during this period, women had been participating in warfare long before the evolution of gender politics which predated colonial era. To understand the peculiarity of women's participation in warfare in Akokoland, the pre-colonial period is necessary to be scrutinized in this study.

In the pre-colonial period, women were neglected. Against this backdrop, the events that took place were not regarded by European writers as historical landmarks, as argued by O.E. Uya to the effect that the history of Africa was ridiculously distorted. Uya's observation was demonstrated in David Hume's write-up where he claimed that "I am apt to suspect the Negroes . . . no arts, no science" (The Nigerian Chronicle 1974: 8). Thus, the Eurocentric writers regarded pre-colonial as uneventful, this assertion was based on lack of written records and fragmentary evidence. However, this study dissociated from the Eurocentric position because written sources also have its shortcomings. Akokoland was and is still an egalitarian society and thus, appreciated women as crucial agents to enhance peace and effective security management; as their role is not that physical combat at the battlefield. In that regard, this study reiterates that pre-colonial period in Akokoland was not a dull moment for women. They were combatants and concerned about the defence of their domains. The study is then situated on the thematic approach to reconstruct and analyse the unique role of distinguished women in warfare during pre-colonial in Akokoland.

2.1 The Ethics of War in Akokoland

Women priest (*Iyanifa*) consulted *Ifa* divination on behalf of *Iyalode* before engaging in warfare. Thus, in pre-colonial Akokoland, taboos were exercised by women in order to engage in war or strife. At the emergence of war, women engaged natural power (medicine). Thus, in the past, it was on its efficacy that aged women, divorcees, widows and those women that had sworn on an oath not to have sexual intercourse were conscripted soldiers in *Iyalode* troop (Interview: Oluwasola 2012). Realising the devastating effects of monthly menstrual period on medicine influenced the recruitment of that category of women into the local army.

Notwithstanding the non-comprehension of the use of *juju* (heritage) as handed down by cultured forefathers, its effectiveness could not be over-emphasised in time of war. Experience showed that *juju* practices were solely engaged by women to tackle the task of war against their enemies (Awolowo 1939: 30). The application of *juju* was kept profoundly secret by *Iyalode*, because it might be divulged to their enemies by any traitor, in spite of the oath taking. The betrayal of such oath usually led to death of the traitors. Rarely, treachery was guided against, but speaking the word only prevented harm and defeat. For instance, women made *sigidi* (bulky, short-limbed little image of about 4-6 inches in height) made of clay was invoked and possessed evil spirit to do inhuman task at the battlefield according to the dictates of *Iyalode* (Johnson 2001: 121).

Apart from this, women showed ethics and secrecy in *apeta* (call to shoot), non-exposing to murder one's enemies or used *afose* (decree that come to pass) (Awolowo 1939: 31). Tactically, the *adahunse* (the general practitioners) prepared *juju* and kept it across the border of their enemies and whatever was pronounced came to pass immediately against the enemies in order to win the war. The *adahunse* (Johnson 2001: 122) was distinguished for her proficiency in providing (secret medicine or poison) upon their enemies as required by the *Iyalode*, who was under the protective mercy of the *Oba* (king). The king's service should be expectedly delivered as required to perform dangerous effect on the enemies.

Women naturally concealed the war tactics to benefit their domains in accruing war booties. It was meant to advance the development of Akokoland. In that manner, trade colony known as (*Isale Tapa*) in Ikare-Arigidi axis was highly organised to control trade; where a number of commodities were exchanged and their prices were determined. The *Iyalode* mobilized the market guilds and discussed the types of agricultural goods to attract taxation both in cash and in kind to maintain the welfare of the local army. The commercial organisation showed

the self-consciousness of women association that explained who women were in the executing of warfare in pre-colonial Akokoland. She was as well involved in the procurement and distribution of luxuries in order to protect the commercial and expansion interests of the people of Akokoland. Nevertheless, the subservient role of women to the royal families cannot be over-emphasised (Interview Giwa: 2012). Added to their logistics and strategy in managing security challenges, the instances of market flood, monitoring the movement of external traders from Ilobu, Osogbo, Benin, Warri, Ibadan and Ekiti bloc were supernaturally guided to avoid spies and unexpected attacks on them. By and large, the market forces were managed by the heads of the market-place (colony) by obtaining the supports of co-market leaders. Meanwhile, the structure encouraged war ties with their enemies and scale of insecurity was sometimes averted.

2.2 Women and Warfare in Pre-colonial Akokoland

This part engages discussion on the structure, methods and tactics applied by women in warfare and security management in pre-colonial Akokoland. In pre-colonial Yorubaland, particularly in Akoko society of northeast Yorubaland, no such important women's role in warfare was considered, despite their membership of communal and cultural associations singularly represented by *Iyalode*. She controlled the social and judicial affairs and sometimes played active role in diplomatic affairs of Akokoland. Thus, in pre-colonial Akokoland, women served as one of the major reasons that caused war or strife in pre-colonial period. It was as a result of their cardinal role not to be in oblivion that this study engages in discussing their participatory role in warfare in Akokoland.

In the palace organisation, women had singular representation of women, the *Iyalode*. It was a title given to the most distinguished lady in Akokoland and elsewhere in Yorubaland. To balance the structure of administration and display the ingenuity of women in protecting and preserving the cultural heritage of communities in Akokoland against external invaders, the *Iyalode* and her lieutenants such as *Otun* (right), *Osi* (left), *Ekerin* (fourth) commandeered the veterans among other principal chiefs. The *Iyalode* commanded a force of powerful warriors and thus contributed her quota in the military affairs of her domain (Johnson 2001: 77).

At this juncture, it needs to be stressed that the *Iyalode* prosecuted the war on behalf of the king, because the culture of the traditional Akoko society gave vulnerabilities and opportunities to men and reinforced the position and status of men to the disadvantage of women warriors in pre-colonial period. Ironically, in terms of power and defense; a good number of outstanding women were not displaced in war expeditions. Hence, their role in war cannot be over-emphasised; this is against the traditional philosophy that women were only pre-occupied with production and reproduction in the domestic chores (Johnson 2001: 132).

In analyzing warfare, the role of women was well defined. Women played key role in their admittance to cult membership like *Ogboni*, *Sango*, herbalist, and institution of witchcraft, *Obatala*, among others. The institution provided avenue for them to offer sacrifice, offering and propitiate to the gods to prevent misfortunes at the battlefield. The gods were exemplified in the course of sacrifice to the gods of *ogun* (iron) to granting the access of women to win the war having avoided committance of taboo(s) (Sesay and Odebiyi (eds.) 1998:3). For effective warfare and orderliness in the discharge of duties, the *Iyalode* mobilised female opinion in support of their views and human resources to win the war. Her duties and responsibilities were to effectively supervise her contingents and sometimes advised the war commanders either through rituals performance or the keeping of covenants on the success of the war. On this, it was observed that women's ritual activities revealed valuable information about the outcome of any war during the pre-colonial period.

In pre-colonial Akokoland, women at war were to cater for food for their husband at the warfront. They also provided first aid to the injured soldiers. According to oral traditions, the genesis of *Iyalode* could be traced to Ibadan. The people of Ibadan rewarded Subuola Iyaola for her contributions to war efforts in the 1830s (Falola and Law 1992: 83). To say the least, in Akokoland, *Iyalode* of Akokoland was a distinguished woman, representing women for military exploits. At the theatre of war, women were led by the *Iyalode* (a lady of high rank). In her strategic skills, her associates or followers raised the war alarm and put the inhabitants on the alert and the troop in readiness for the defence of the communities in any attack, especially sudden invasions.

Women warriors attended to both physical and psychological needs of their husbands. During war, warriors' wives prepared *aadun*, *akasu eko* (maize pudding) and an oily cake made from beans ground and fried (*akara lapata*) were taken by the soldiers at the battleground (Oke 2001: 5). Thus, a cursory glance at the history of the

career women warriors cleverly reveals that the utilitarian value placed on women by the Akoko communities was very great.

Sometimes they engaged in diplomatic efforts to forestall war(s). *Iyalode* used to participate in the various negotiations directed at ending warfare. For instance, F. Afolayan claimed that dynastic marriages became an effective tool or means of stopping war and maintaining peace (Akinjogbin 1998: 81). Remarkably, there were war brides, captives from enemies or in some cases marital unions were voluntarily entered into with men of valour from conquering armies. As a strategy, dynastic marriage system represented a form of cultural diplomacy among Akoko communities in pre-colonial period. For instance, dynastic marriages were celebrated between the *Oloba* of Oba and the *Olukare* of Ikare, also between *Owa* of Ogbagi and *Onirun* of Irun, and *Akala* of Ikaram and *Oluwade* of Akunnu (Akomolafe 1976: 21-22). In essence, the trend of cultural diplomacy, played integrative role and cemented better inter-communal relations and there was hardly any dynastic changes during warfare in Akokoland.

Incidentally, it was evident that no external invaders in Akokoland could seize the throne, except that through dynastic and inter-marriages with uncles and cousins; at the end of Nupe hegemony in Akokoland, their cousins invited members of heroic Nupe family warriors and they were able to establish themselves over some towns such as Arigidi and Ikare in Akokoland. The penetration of Nupe, of course changed the political landscape and chieftaincy structure of Arigidi and Ikare. The throne titles of both towns were changed to Nupe or Arabic language. The claim here had been controversial because both Ikare and Arigidi monarchies asserted that their thrones had no historical link with Nupe emirate. Also, the unions prevented further conflicts between or among them in pre-colonial period and beyond.

In addition to F. Afolayan's claim, as in every town and village, the *Iyalode* became an undisputed figure that was behind the success of many war chiefs in Akokoland. In that circumstance, it is essential to investigate the crucial influence of the *Iyalode* in diplomatic relations in Akokoland. In a war, it was a title exclusively reserved for women of note and most distinguished lady in Akokoland. The chieftaincy was not hereditary. It was created because of the potent force of the women and to honour those women who had contributed to the building of Akokoland. As a sort of queen and person of much influence, she was called upon with much respect. She was the principal female chief, who had a voice as a member of council of chiefs. The *Iyalode* commandeered a force of powerful warriors. Through the *Iyalode*, women made their impact both in safety and upholding cultural heritage.

In this respect, women were involved in peace-keeping, conflict management or resolution and as power brokers. Women in the pre-literate Akoko society used different methods to express or checkmate the spread and aftermaths of wars. Women also formed pressure group, like *egbe ayaba* (association of women) to influence war leaders and change community policies. It is, therefore, pertinent to say that women usually resorted to verbal assault and physical abuse. The composed songs sometimes divided the vanquished warriors and provoked wars, apart from influencing decisions on war (Hinderer 1872: 97). The following is an example of war song:

A ran o a I ja ikolo (2ice)
Ogun wa a I ja ikolo (2ice)
Ku ro'gun, ogun wa,
a i ja ikolo. Ogun ahun,
a i ja ikolo, a wa para.

Translation: Soldiers beware (2ice)

Don't you see war? War is coming.
War of tortoise, war has come.
And we shall destroy them.

In Akokoland, the use of *oriki* or war song was chanted as songs, which could make allusion to historical events. In Akoko's norms, songs were rendered for the weary or faint hearted at the battlefield. At times, war songs were derogatory, offensive and enervating to the opponent, while it rekindled the victory at the battle field. Such songs made the opponents virtually withdraw, and thus, contributed greatly to the defeat of the opponents.

In pre-colonial Akokoland, history showed that women through their membership in cults and communal association had largely controlled and maintained conflict management. Not only did women on individual basis exercise political power. Even A. Olukoju's examination of the role of men in warfare, could be described as the most vicious Falola and Law: 104-107), because his view represents a typical male opinion. In contrast, this study examines two examples of outstanding women in Akokoland. First, Adebisi of Afa community in Okeagbe-Akoko. She dominated the military politics of Afa for quite a period of time. She defended and conquered Afa enemies from Ekiti and Benin (Faboyede 2011: 126128). Second, the war period also provided another woman of substance, the *Yeye Idofin* of Ipesi-Akoko, in the area of military and territorial expansion. She engaged in the art of diplomacy to prevent Ajaka, the Owo war veteran leader not to attack Ipesi during internecine warfare. And until this failed, *Yeye Idofin* as a market leader (commercial *elite*) used her considerable resources to support Ipesi-Akoko war effort against Owo invaders, particularly during Ajaka's raid.

In this regard, she played significant role in aiding Ipesi troops to prosecute warfare. Thus, through her loyalty and acquisition of *juju* Ipesi troops conquered Ajaka troops and killed him. She enjoyed unrestrained sexual life with many lovers whom she executed as soon as she had satisfied her desire. Thus, she rose to a position of political authority rubbing shoulders with the war commanders. Oral traditions allude that she used power like any privileged male of her period (Interview: Ayimoro 2012).

3.1 Conclusion

Studying women and warfare in Akokoland was fundamental to the security challenges in pre-colonial Akokoland. The study examines women's role in warfare and their articulated expertise and prowess in the conflict management. The study argues the integration of women into security meetings dominated by men and, thus making use of their suggestions to resolve security problems was a plus as well. In that circumstance, no segment or unit of the society should be prevented under cultural restriction as indeed womenfolk in some places; in spite of problems posed to women, they still distinguished themselves and skillfully performed well at the battlefield. Thus, the paper illustrates the influence, which the personality of women exerted on the diplomatic history of Akokoland during internal strife and revolutionary year in Yorubaland.

On this note, this study has examines the participation of Akoko women in warfare as a model of warlike-women. It was a reaction to the traditional exploitation of women that some skills or careers were exclusively reserved for men. The paper, therefore contributes, among other reason, that the political economy and the identity of every component of the society is to be redefined collectively in the context of culture and values as it were in the pre-colonial period in order to face the security challenges of the recent times.

Following the problem of ignoring the roles of women in community responsibility and their authority in engaging in warfare, the paper finds it significant to look into women and warfare in Akokoland and conceptualise the period. This paper explains and offers a valuable explanation and clarification of women leadership in Akokoland. Upon the importance of women in warfare; followed their neglect, it is remarkable to mention that history is only the tool that can be used to control the problem of security challenges in the society. Learning from the past and refusal to allow history to repeat itself is one of the greatest conflict resolution strategies in Nigerian State. History teaches and reiterates the essence of socio-political values of every unit of the country, Nigeria, particularly Akokoland. Reflecting on the teaching of history, as bedrock, it offers explanation on the mismanagement of political values. Thus, understanding the historical explanation to insecurity problems within the context of diversity in the country, it is time to realise that both men and women, young and old have a collective responsibility towards one another and the differences should not pose threats to security challenges in the society. Women's role in warfare provided new paradigms in the advancement of knowledge about women and warfare in Akokoland.

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