

LEGENDARY WOMEN IN ILAJE FOLKLORE OF ONDO STATE, SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gender space is an integral and interesting aspect of folkloric literature and cultural studies. While some cultures enshrine and entrench gender parity, some thrive on the sheer glorification of gender chauvinism or repressive gender politics. Gender equilibrium has been a kernel of many research studies across multidisciplinary dimensions, but the portrayal of women in Ilaje folklore has not been thoroughly engaged. This study undertook a thorough examination of the above research gap with a view to unearthing the portrayal of women or feminine selfhood in Ilaje-morphic folklore. The study employed primary sources such as oral interviews, direct participation, or first-hand knowledge of Ilaje folklore and secondary sources such as textbooks and electronic materials for data collection. The data were transcribed and critically scrutinised through the theoretical lens of the Womanist brand of feminism. The theory was considered suitable largely because of its focus on attributes and the essence of womanhood in Ilaje-centric folklore from an Afrocentric perspective. The study found that although Ilaje society is characteristically phallus-centric and patriarchal in nature, the essence of womanhood and motherhood is enshrined in Ilaje folklore as indispensable partners in historical progress. Besides the primordial and negative stereotypes that conceived "the mothers" only as witches and principalities, women asserted their heroic "self" and patriotic roles towards the rescue of males through feminine energy, which earned them places of historic pride. The study also showcased women who demonstrated courage, creativity, and dexterity in their skills or universal human endeavors, either to edify or challenge patriarchy to become the heroines of their kinsfolk. The study concluded that women in Ilaje folklore are typical of ancient and modern women who demonstrated that women can succeed alongside their male counterparts against all odds if patriarchy enables them. The study recommended the immersion of GenZ girl-children in the study of Ilaje folklore in order for them to draw inspiration from the folkloric heroines.

Keywords: Ilaje folklore, gender politics, phallus-centric, feminism, Afrocentric perspective.

Introduction

Every concept or aspect of the belief system of a people is portrayed in a particular way that is culture-specific and unique to that culture. Power, marginality, femininity, masculinity, patriarchy and matriarchy are examples of such complexes of the belief system which have become creeds or liturgies of daily living. Like what obtains in the foreign religious beliefs or civilisations in which the other gender is repressed or reduced to dross or dolls, only to be seen, counted during elections, used as sex toys and baby machines but not to be heard as

active social actors whose opinions matter on critical issues, Ilaje's case is different. Every social actor such as men, women, children and so on, is a critical figure and their individual or collectivised ideology is taken into account in every societal phenomenon. Ilaje culture, which is an integral part of the larger Yoruba generic culture or ethnic affiliate has respect for both male and female genders.

Although, there is a subtle gender politicisation in some quarters or some cultural complexes such as ritual or festival, there is immense respect for feminine gender and whatever the gender exemplifies both in broader and narrower spectrums. In Ilaje folklore, the elders are of strong belief that through sexuality, nature has destined a woman to kneel to her husband before his kinsfolks at noontide while nature destines man to not only kneel but to prostrate for his wife regularly at dusk during mating. This position may, however, now need modification due to the evolution of the doggy coital style and the radical or postmodernist departure from the missionary style. This is a typical exemplification of mutual respect or gender parity in Ilaje society as exemplified in Ilaje folklore. Although, patriarchy is cardinal to Ilaje culture and in Ilaje folklore, the place and roles of women as harbingers of sweetness without which the world cannot survive are unreservedly harped. The cultural designation of women or strong females is not just about the negative pattern of stereotyping them as "awon iya" (the mothers or the witches); it is also a religious way of hallowing and reverencing them as the mother of the world including the males (motherhood/girlhood); the guarantors of continuity and companionship. That is why it is often said that "obinren bi oro, sugban, ee ma Oro" which is translated to mean "a woman begets oro (cult) but does not recognise same. This study is, therefore, not just about the representation of women in Ilaje folklore but also about re-presentation of women in positive light based on demonstrable heroic deeds and historic accomplishments. The study examined the positive roles of women in Ilaje folklore. In this way, it foregrounds a radical repudiation of the primitive and conservative perspective which had to do with seeing women from being dolls and subservient puppets in the hands of men who employed them as just inconsequential vehicles of sexual pleasure and child-bearing. In the context of this paper, women are those who were created or with the natural anatomy of female genitals and other female reproductive organs, not the transgender, cross gender, cross dresser, lesbian gay or bisexual as we have in the contemporary LGBTQ domain. This is because Ilaje culture only recognised two genders: male and female (man and woman), not even natural hermaphrodite.

Defining Folklore

The portrayal of women in Ilaje-morphic/Ilaje-centric folklore polemically conceptualised as womanist selfhood/personhood in the folklore of the Ilaje people of the southern belt of the present-day Ondo State southwestern Nigeria. The representation of women in quotidian customary practices is an aspect of every culture. Like festivals and other customary lores, portrayal of women, womanhood or sexuality falls within the province of what people do as a habit or liturgy of daily phatic communion. Isidore Okpewho (4) sees folklore as an offshoot of Orature /Oral Literature and he believes that it (oral literature) cannot be reduced to folklore alone. Isidore Okpewho conceptualises folklore as etymologically comprising two words "folk" and "lore". (5) Folk, according to him, refers to the rural people who still inhabit their indigenous habitations and have not allowed European civilisation or Westernisation to erode their native cultures and traditional values. They are the indigenous or native dwellers of rural

villages, settlements and communities who are perennially connected to their cultural and traditional roots.

Paredes and Bauman (1972); Farrer (1975); Babcock (1987); Stoeltje (1988a) & (1988b) have also broadened the scope of folklore and have also done the specification of who should be called a "folk" even though there is prejudice in their opinions. "Folk", according to them refers to the supposedly unrefined "peoples" anywhere in the world. According to Okpewho as cited above, "lores" are divided into: what the people do and, what the people say. "What the people do" covers perennial customary practices and ceremonies. It also involves their indigenous occupations, vocations or creative artistry such as carving, sculpture, mat or raffia weaving, hair plaiting, body adornments, dancing, mural arts, drumming, festivals, ceremonies, rites and rituals, to mention but a few. "What the people say" encompasses chants, incantations, invocations, dirges, praise-poetry, oracular corpuses, bridal renditions, or nuptial poetry, folktales, folksongs, wailing, proverbs, saws or indigenous wise sayings and other customary acts that have to do with vocalisation and amplification of a collective identity and shared communal philosophy. From this Okpewho's position, Kiriji (royal funerary rite of the Ilaje-Etikan people) and sexuality or portrayal of women in broader social spectrum fall within the domain of "what the people do" primarily and secondarily "what the people say" since the name applies to both the rite of passage in honour of a departed monarch and other aesthetic accompaniments infused into the rite to make it lively and ceremonious in nature.

Masuku opines that "folklore is as old as mankind" (6). This opinion may be brief but it expresses a universal truth about folklore. The folklore of a people cannot be severed from the people in terms of age because people who have never been have never practised any lore. So, according to Masuku, folklore is defined as "those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung whose composition and presentation are in the people's tongue". In trying to define folklore, Krappe (1965) has advocated for caution in order not to confuse the people that we seek to educate on the topic. According to him,

Before we can give a definition of what folklore is, it is appropriate to give the background origin of this term because its origin was surrounded by a lot of controversy. The term folklore was coined in 1846 by the English antiquarian William John Thomson, to take the place of the rather awkward expression, Popular Antiquities. The word has been approved by most European countries and is now current in many languages other than English (xv).

The coinage of the term folklore, according to Krappe is sequel to racially motivated prejudice towards the African Oral Literature. Little wonder, the term is shrouded in controversy. African Oral Literature or even its offshoot is not by any standard, synonymous with antiquity. That it originates from "other" culture outside European culture is not a potent reason to outright degrade it as an act of the inferior race or act of the children of the lesser god. This is a postcolonial polemics. Since the coinage of the term, it has since been used by scholars interchangeably with orature, oral Literature, traditional and folk literature. This was however done by Eurocentric theorists to discredit the existence and aesthetic value or viability of the African Oral Literature and all that concern it. Their belief is that materials or text which exist in oral forms cannot be accepted into the fold of "World Literatures". This position has been debunked by Isidore Okpewho, (4). This he does because he believes that

the African Oral Literature entails more than its oral performance, serves the same purpose with and possesses same aesthetic quality or value with the print literature across the world. Every print literature or the so-called sophisticated Literatures of the world first existed naturally in oral and raw nature.

Kappler (1965) defines folklore as

an historical science, "historical" because it attempts to throw light on man's past; a "science" because it endeavours to attain this goal, not by speculation or deduction from some abstract principle agreed upon a priori, but by the inductive method which, in the last analysis, underlies all scientific research, whether historical or natural (vx).

Kappler's view of the folklore is more elaborate in the sense that he sees folklore as being scientific in nature. I agree with him based on my conviction that folklore derives its materials from empirical and verifiable contents. So, folklore gives room for open-minded analysis of the folkloric elements and formulas. It does not dwell on speculations and deductions from abstract principle. This could have been what Vladimir Propp (1928) had in mind when he wrote *Anatomy of Folklore*. One talks of anatomy where there is a biological or scientific object.

Ruth Finnegan sees folklore as the "generic term to designate the customs, beliefs, tales, magical practices, proverbs, sayings, spells, songs etc; in short, the accumulated knowledge of a homogenous unsophisticated people" (50). Finnegan's theorisation here is almost reductionist in scope. The scope of the African folklore is wider than being just a "term". Reducing folklore, a vast field of human knowledge, to just an ordinary term reeks of fallacy. That folklore is "the accumulated knowledge of a homogenous unsophisticated people" also sees Finnegan pitching folklore against sophistication or even civilisation. Her submission there could have been more acceptable if she had said that is an accumulated knowledge of a people. Everywhere in the world, whether sophisticated or unsophisticated, folklore is the natural knowledge-base of the people. So, it is necessary to establish that the people who practise folklore are not savages, ignoramuses or unsophisticated people.

Britain and America, with their sophistication, have their home-grown folklore which forms the basis of their globally celebrated "sophisticated" literature. Every segment of a people's life is riddled with folklore as "the unwritten lore that has assumed the status and statute of law" in every human society whether sophisticated or unsophisticated. Before the advent of printing and publishing technology, which resulted in the birth of print literature or cell literature, every society once had modes of entertaining and moralising their members. These modes we're elements of the folklore which according to Masuku (6) is as old as the people and humankind. Even, In the face of modernism and the period of post-modernism, the people manage to marry their folklore with their sophistication or civilisation thereby resulting in cultural hybridisation. The strength of Finnegan's opinion here is that it sees folklore as the totality of a people's ontological being. It represents all that the people practise or do to perpetuate their existence and societal values. In all frankness, it is the trado-cultural identity that has come to be with the people from the beginning of their existence till the close of age.

Nicole Kousaleos (23) has divided not only American folklore but folklore in general sense into anthropological and literary branches. His belief is that folklore can be studied from both anthropological and literary standpoints. Studying folklore anthropologically avails the researcher of the opportunity to do an in-depth analysis of the societal practices, the society and the people that practise it. Literary folklore enables the researcher to study the folklore using the binoculars of literature. It also enables the researcher to study what constitutes aesthetic beauty and values in the folklore. Ben-Amos & Kenneth (1975) identify the three basic elements or features of the folklore forms as follows: the cognitive feature, pragmatic feature and the expressive feature of folklore.

Cognitive feature of folklore is that which makes it appeal to our senses and cognition. The pragmatic feature deals with the application of the folklore on functional praxis. It has to do with the utilitarian and quotidian exploration of the folklore in the existence of the people. Expressive feature are the elements that form the aesthetic kernels and literary beauty of the folklore among the people. To drive home my point, I want to add that folklore is the totality of the rural people's unique cultural elements that form parts of their quotidian life which have been with them from the beginning of their existence till they cease existing. It covers their traditional vocations, skills, artistry and "the things they say" as oral surrogate accompaniments rendered during the practice of the skills and vocations. It involves all sacred and profane practices of the people. It encompasses all the aesthetic creations and orchestrations which the rural people used in entertaining, integrating, sermonising their members and propagating the ideals and even the history of the society.

Back then, in the pre-literate world, folklore constituted the unpublished encyclopedia of quotidian living of the people which was written in their hearts and not in books. It flows in their veins like blood. It is telepathic in nature because it connects the inhabitants of a rural settlement across religious beliefs and creeds. Concepts such as representation of women in Ilaje folklore and the royal funerary rite of the Ilaje-Etikan people in the present-day Ondo State, Southwestern Nigeria fall within the domain of cultural practices otherwise known as the folklore. They are cultural features that unite both the city dwellers and village dwellers of Ilaje extraction. In line with Okpewho, Masuku, Finnegan and other scholars who have defined folklore above, portrayal of women in Ilaje folklore or sexuality possesses all features outlined for folklore both from African and Western standpoints. All the three features or elements of the folklore spelt out by Ben-Amos and Kenneth (1975) suffice. There are cognitive, pragmatic and expressive appeals in portrayal of sexuality. Portrayal of women is synonymous with sexuality and it is an integral aspect of Ilaje folklore.

Legendary Women in Ilaje Folklore and their Significance in Indigenous Gender Studies

In Ilaje folklore, some certain women epically asserted their heroic selfhood by proving to the universe and the patriarchal society that they were strong-willed and not only good as sex toys and baby machines but are also time-tailored heroines toughened by Providence to defend and protect the men in their lives or even the hegemonic, patriarchal institution, collective heritage and kingdoms of their ancestors. The women showed that their vaginas are not in their brains and should not form the basis for subjugative politics or chauvinistic tendencies towards them. In fact, their vaginas are the vehicles through which the men are brought into the world. This makes them have influence on men. Thus, according to Ilaje Oral

tradition and folklore, a man becomes as vulnerable to the cunningness and control of a woman for as many times as he mates with a woman. Sex, which is the binding covenant as well as unifying force for souls and the reality of conveyance into the world through the vagina make women have spiritual power and metaphysical influence on men. This is a strong emphasis on the power in the vagina of a woman and the concealed inner strength of the woman, the bearer of the pool called vagina, which can build or pull down a man, no matter how powerful.

The power or strength of the woman is discussed in Ajimisan's (2021) poem, "*Never You Try a Woman for Weight*" in *Forty Testaments for Our Dearest Drifting Dome*. They, as well, demonstrated that for the fact that the independent morpheme, "man" is present in the taxonomic nomenclature called "woMAN", there is, therefore, a man in every woman. This duality of taxonomic make-up, nucleus, essence and features makes women stronger, more resistant and capable of withstanding almost all odds that men can withstand. The extract from the old highlife song of Ajao Olomojuni (1970) lends credence to the collectivised ideology and institutionalised perception of the Ilaje on the place of women in Ilaje folklore. The song has its roots in Ilaje folklore and it is one of the numerous instances of contemporary musicians or music drawing contemporary corollaries from initial intellectual dialectics rooted in the indigenous knowledge system and folklore of the people. The text of the song is reproduced below:

Princesses Ifenjuyemi, Ejiba and Sejuruntan: Women in Ilaje folklore I-III

Ifenjuyemi, Oma Alaiku oo,	Ifenjuyemi, daughter of Alaiku
Ejiba Oma Etikan luhi o,	Ejiba, daughter of Etikan of fame
Sejuruntan Oma Olugbo leghe oo,	Sejuruntan, daughter of the Olugbo the great
Oghonne...	The highly revered
Aghoro ghan yii gha orugho eran	The initiates who stole the cow-head
Ilaje gh'ara ojoju.	And Ilaje looked into each other's face suspiciously
Owo Odeleba urun gha,	The matter is in the hands of Odeleba, yes, it is!
uwen o urun gha.	Verity, there are issues!
Uwen, jo o, uwen, uwen,	Verity, please, verity!
ofo Ilaje fo mo fo uwen!	I have spoken in the voice of the Ilaje

Ifenjuyemi, (daughter of Alaiku, the ruler of Aikulope; Ejiba (the beautiful princess of Etikan, daughter of the then Olikan who was the vice president of the Erun-omi and Sejuruntan (daughter of the Olugbo of Ugbo Kingdom and the president of the Erun-omi (Ilaje Confederacy) were caught up in the web of insubordination or alleged conspiracy against the Erun-omi. In the folktale, the three beautiful belles referred to as folks characters in this paper were daughters of three prominent traditional rulers Ilaje in the pre-colonial era. They were given the task of cooking the cow-head for the entertainment of the Erun-omi who were holding annual confab at Ode-Ugbo. The male folks who asked for their hands in marriage or love affairs which they turned down, connived against them and stole the cow-head as a way of male implication of the females in order to incense the wrath of the Olugbo and members of the Erun-omi mehan (the 9 confederates).

In those days, the Olugbo, as the president of the Erun-omi had the power of life and death in his mouth. That is why he is praised as "Ofo, a-foma-fore" which means the one who could kill the child and the father as ritual punishment without being reprimanded by anyone. The

Olugbo was the president of the Erun-omi, the highest judicial and central decision making body of the era while the Olikan of Etikanland was his voice president. The Olugbo was unquestionable. These facts show the supremacy of the Olugbo and the facts also help to understand the gravity of the allegation stealing the cow-head of such very powerful institution without option of appeals. The ladies refused to cowed by those men into submission and they refused to be seduced into untimely or premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy. They also refused to become "oloshos" (subtle sex workers/ladies of easy virtue) because they treasured their virginity and pride of womanhood. Here is another lesson for the GenZ girl-children who sees premarital teenage sex as nothing but fun and can offer it to just anyone at any cost and without recourse to morality. In the face of intimidation and threat to their lives, they remain dauntless in their resolve not to confess to a crime they never committed. This made their fathers vouch for them that could not have summoned that type of courage to involve themselves in the sacrilege. By the insistence of the ladies that they never stole or sold the cow-head, Ilaje began to look suspiciously into one another's eyes before they acquitted the ladies. In the verse "Owo Odeleba urun gha..." which means the mystery of the matter lies in the hands of Odeleba underscores gender underpinnings and undercurrents.

Odeleba was a male senior title holder saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that food or food stuff are appropriately served during traditional festivals or rituals. He represented a patriarchal agent of male persecution and subjugation of the females. If he was not the one who stole the cow-head, certainly, those who did so, did with his connivance. However, like the story of the adulterous woman caught in the act in the book of John Chapter 8 in the Bible in which the people who claimed to catch the woman in the act never named her male sexual accomplice, no one bothered to mention or query the Odeleba for his perceived complicity in the crime of meat racketeering. These are some of the numerous symbolic instances of state-sanctioned or institutionalised toxicity against women. This story is also of polemical significance to gender studies.

Princess Mafemiwa: Ilaje Women in Ilaje Folklore IV

Princess Mafemiwa fondly praised as "Mafemiwa okin oloja-egwa, o-ji-fuwa-rire-role-iba-bi-ako" (Mafemiwa, the peacock, queen of beauty who defends her father's kingdom with good virtue like a man) was an Etikan princess. Etikan Kingdom is one of the four oldest kingdoms in Ilajeland, in the southern belt of the present-day Ondo State southwestern Nigeria. In the praise poetry of Mafemiwa. The allusion to beauty in the praise poetry of Mafemiwa is not just about cosmetic, superfluous and outer beauty but an allusion to inner beauty, tantamount to good character and virtue, which is mother of all beauty. The story of Mafemiwa is a well-known history among the people of Ilaje-Etikan. In the history of Etikan, there was a period of desolation that almost sent Etikan into extinction with no one to the rescue. The oracle prescribed a propitiatory ritual to be performed by a woman who was still within the child-bearing age. The men refused to surrender their wives and daughters. Mafemiwa took a patriotic step by asking the people of Etikan what they would do for her if she gave herself to the ritual which would eventually claim his life. They promised her that her children would have equal right with those from the male lineage including the throne of Etikan. She gave Ladebi, her only daughter to her father and saddled the entire Kingdom with the responsibility of watching over her since she was sure she would not be alive afterwards. She undertook the ritual task and died. Afterwards, her only daughter, Ladebi married Awodohun and begot Areyingho, Omajurun Odonmobo and Iyofa. Oba Adedoyin Adeleke

Oyetakin, the immediate past (22nd) Olikan hailed from the lineage of Omajurun of Mafemiwa Ruling House. In the history of the entire Ilajeland, Mafemiwa Ruling House, one of the four ruling houses in Etikan Kingdom is the only female after whom a ruling house in a first class kingdom was named. She won this through her fearlessness and patriotism and it remains till this day. This is also of great significance to contemporary gender studies modern young ladies have also got a lot to learn from her.

Oloyiya Jima: Women in Ilaje Folklore V

According to Ajimisan (2016) Ilaje people are conscious and aware of the fact that a girl-child or the female folk are as important to the society as the male folk. Biripo songs show this universal truth that both the male and female children are supportive to the society and the parents. The Biripo text that is supportive of this fact goes thus:

Oma ne okonren gbe ne –	Our male children defend us
Oma ne obiren gbe ne –	Our female children defend us
Oloyiya re gbe Jima –	It was Oloyiya that defended Jima

According to Semilola Poroye (2026), Jima was a king (the tenth Olikan) who had rift with the then Olugbo (his brother). Oloyiya was his hairy and pretty daughter. Oloyiya played prominent role in quelling the rift between her father and his brother which could have cost her father (Jima) his throne or grievous sanctions from the Erunmi (the then highest judicial body in Ilaje land). This text shows that the Ilaje society had been conscious of the theory of feminism before the advent of colonialism and contact with western feminism. In the text, Oloyiya, a female character has played a vital role in the continuity of the folk's existence and liberation of the father the way the male folk could not do. This is an interesting feminist dialectics because while the men were sleeping and snoring in the bosoms of their wives and concubines, Oloyiya woke up, defying the male-instituted curfew and terror of the night, to divulge a heinous plot against her father to him. This is not just patriotism but heroism.

Modern women who live in this period when betrayal is praised as smartness have got a lot of lessons to learn from her bravery, patriotism and loyalty to her father and his throne. The reference in the opening and closing lines is to the effect that a girl-child can defend her father's throne the same way a male can do. In this case, a woman did better and history did not let the deed and the spirit behind it slide. It is like most of the stories recorded and regularly re-told in the Bible, other holy books, colonial mythology and sacred scriptures. Most of the colonial deeds taught to our fathers in colonial history were not greater than this. The story demonstrated how a woman acted as a *deus ex machina* to quell the destructive plots of the males (symbols of patriarchy) in an unrepentantly andro-centric society. Oloyiya did not just gather intelligence for her father, she acted decisively to rescue her father and his throne instead of pressing phone like the GenZ girl-children to whom nothing matters. Instead of being inviolably narcissistic, Oloyiya believed more in the legacy of being the saviour of her kingdom thus making her a worthy epitome of sacrifice and selflessness to her kingdom. Her life of service and selfless sacrifice is also worthy of study for ladies of postmodernist era who forget their parents as soon as they are in the comfort of the home built with a married man.

Jima, the Wife of One of the Olugbos: Women in Ilaje Folklore VI

At about the time when Oba Jima often alluded to in the folksong "Oma ne okonren gbe ne, oma ne obinren gbe ne, Oloyiya re gbe Jima" (the 10th Olikan of Etikan Kingdom), the 12th Olugbo of Ugbo Kingdom was on the throne. He was highly revered, very wealthy and his imperial influence spread outside Ilaje as far as Benin, Itshekiri and Owo. He was said to have married an Owo woman whose name was also Jima, a coincidence with the name of the 10th Olikan which often resulted in people mistaking the Jima in the song above as Aya Olugbo (wife of the Olugbo) which is not true and verifiable. The Jima that was the wife of the Olugbo was reputed as a very excellent cook. Her cooking ingenuity was alluded to in the folksong below:

"Ayon obe lo,	Sweet soup is gone
Jima olobe yiyon lo n'Ugbo!	Jima, the excellent cook is gone out of Ugbo
Jima f'oyin h'obe,	Jima cooked soup with honey
O fi odudu se adiro..."	She made the nymphs/gnomes her tripod stands
Jima, olawo-oyin lo	Jima, the owner of honeypot is gone
Ayere n'Ugbo!	Only to be remembered in Ugbo

According to Ayela E. Damilola (2026), the meaning of the song is sweet soup/or its cook had gone, Jima, the owner of sweet soup is gone! Jima cooked with honey and used the nymphs or gnome as tripod stands for her pots! Therefore, the Jima in the first reference could not have been the same Jima that was Olugbo's wife. In the oral tradition of the Ilaje-Etikan folks, Jima was reputed for his equal treatment of both his male and female children which has become a reference point in the dialectics of traditional feminism in Ilajeland. Ajimisan (2016); Ajimisan & Ikuemonesan (2022) jointly agree that are treated with a sense of gender equilibrium and are praised for their great strides in their respective areas of endeavours and expertise. In this tale, the speciality of Queen Jima as the royal cook and Olugbo's favourite wife because of her good cooking skill was recorded in the song-text above and handed down through the instrumentality of orality from one generation to another.

Historical allusion to the delicious nature of her delicacies was drawn and coded in the line which says "Jima fi oyin he one" which means that her soup were characteristically sweet and tasty with much of indigenous broths that were both nutritious and medicinal. Contemporary women who place their careers above preparation of good meals for their families and the GenZ girl-children who do not see any reason in learning how to cook have got a lot of lessons to learn from Jima. In her days at the Palace of the Olugbo of Ugbo Kingdom known as Akodi or Aghofen Oghonne, Jima distinguished herself from other women and endeared herself to the people of Ugbo through her excellent cooking. If she had lived in this era, she would have been a presidential cook or owner of one of the greatest eateries around which would have made her a great entrepreneur through her cooking ingenuity.

Ayelekege: Women in Ilaje Folklore VII

Ayelekege was also one of the great women of essence and substance whose epochal and epochal memories were documented for the purpose of non-formal education in Ilajeland. According to Babatunde Adedatiwa Mafimisebi (2026), Ayelekege was a woman of gargantuan folkloric knowledge whose knowledge, resourcefulness and brilliance transcended African traditional medicine, paediatrics, geography and nautical science. According to Ilaje-Ugbo and oral tradition, there was a period when the intelligent daughter of Oba Olugbo Akinribido fondly known as addressed as Olugbo Duromokun was subjected

to ritual killing because she ignorantly and innocently drifted into the traditional grove in search of her father on one night, a abomination for a female to enter the male-dominated traditional grove. Oba Akinribido had pleaded for leniency but other learned men of tradition and initiates of Oro cult refused to grant his plea, insisting that the rule made to regulate slaves must not be repealed for the sake of the children. The ritual killing of the innocent girl by the instrument of male-dominated and male-institutionalised traditional institution is another instance of male-sanctioned injustice against the opposite gender, worthy of mention and scrutiny in gender discourses. Her death devastated her father, who vowed to avenge the death of her intelligent and beautiful princess. As they set out ashore on one of ritual journeys during Malokun Festival in which prayers must be offered to the deity of the ocean (Malokun) some fathom into the abyss. The story of Olugbo Duromokun had been adapted as a staged play with the title Olugbodomokun by Leke Ogunfeyimi.

Oba Duromokun made sure that he took all the able-bodied men as from 18 years to those old men who could walk on the shore-ward journey. When they were trying to restraining them from travelling further fathom, he insisted that he wanted them to know more about the sea, hence, the name Duromokun (wait and know the sea the more). When he knew that they could not be rescued in case of boat-wreck, he used his charms and metaphysical powers to mystically invoke rainstorm which made their boats capsize. Many of them died. Those who survived could not locate Ode-Ugbo and they eventually swam aground at Ugborodo, Omadino etc in the present-day Itsekiri territory of Delta State. Sequel to this desolation, all those who could perform rites, rituals and Oro/Arubeji cults were all dead. Then came the epidemics or pandemics that devastated Ugbo and they needed male initiates who could perform ritual of cleansing and appeasement but none to be found.

They appealed to her to groom the budding youths. Out of pity and patriotism, Ayelekege, a princess volunteered not only to groom the growing male youths in the sacred knowledge of Oro/Arubeji cults which was an abomination for women to see, know or participate in. She did the appeasement, saying "ji urun Igharafa maa gbe, ji urun Akuja (Adagbakuja) maa ra" which means to save the heritage of Akuja from going into extinction, she would act. Sanity and prosperity returned afterwards. With time, the youths that Ayelekege taught Oro and Arubeji cults (the peak of secrecy in Ugbo tradition) who had become men and now fully in charge felt that Ayelekege had known the peak of secrecy of the male-dominated cults, feared that she could reveal it to fellow women who could make it a subject of gossip and began to feel insecure. They connived against her and subjected her to ritual killing (Oro fo o). Before she died, she retorted that it was difficult to do good to hear people.

Ayelekege was not just a woman but a symbol of cultural renaissance, cultural and ideological revival, patriotism, ethno-nationalism, national rebirth and generational rejuvenation. She laid down her life for her ethnic nationality and for the purpose of preserving the cultural heritage and identity her father's kingdom. This earned her constant mention while talking about patriotism and cultural ingenuity being discussed. She represented a few of the female folks who thirst for hidden knowledge and mystical mystery of faith for the purpose of ethnic preservation. She earned for herself the title and accolades of a cultural martyr by a dint of inviolable willpower when men of purpose were needed but were not available. She epitomised ethnic renewal, root consciousness and root retrieval like no man had done in the history of her kingdom. The his/herstory of Ayelekege reveals how the male-instituted and

male-dominated tradition plunged her father's kingdom into desolation or pushed it to the precipice of collapse and extinction and how the kingdom went through redemptive process and restoration through a singular act by a member of the supposedly weaker vessel in time and space when the available males could not raise a finger to rescue and restore their fatherland. Her death is symbolically symbolic in that it betokens the ritual of expiation and the dismantling of the burden of sin of vengefulness of man. The ritual murder of Ayelekege by men shows how men again, brought down what a woman of good conscience did for restoration and collective redemption.

Conclusion

This study unravelled how great women in Ilaje folklore were given timeless honour for their courage, heroism and skills. Contrary to the veiled women in Islam or Muslim-dominated North, the subdued gender who must be members of a congregation, only in population but must not raise their voices or opinions within the congregation and those commodified in form of ordinary commodities as a result of early or child marriages, Ilaje folklore features great women of history and influence who defied the stereotypical patriarchy and its attendant male hegemonic politics that subdued women and throttled their voices to make history. Despite the entrenchment of patriarchy and its draconian codes against women in the pre-colonial era, women in Ilaje folklore refused to be cowed and they ended up making history and garnering marked triumph where men failed to tread. There was a gathering wherein a supposedly holy woman of God was mentoring young married women during one Christian Women's Retreat. She openly said "the only thing a woman should raise before her husband is her skirt/gown/wrapper, not her voice". The woman sounded doctrinaire and conservative like a tool of subjugation in the hands of men and andro-centric society or traditional institution.

In line with the women in Ilaje folklore, that type of teaching is not just an apostasy but also a heresy. If Deborah (the wife of Lapidoth had obeyed this type of doctrinal indoctrination or teaching, she would not have brought victory to the people of God in the Book of Judges. This type of uncommon courage and enviable heroism are worth teaching to our girl-children and young ladies. The time has come when we should begin to teach our female children that they can surpass the expectations or limitations which men conceive of them through hard work and courage and that they can become great global figures without necessarily making themselves pawns or sexual tools in the hands of men. The study thus, recommended the incorporation of the type of virtue and courage exhibited by the legendary and folkloric figures in Ilaje folklore as aspects of the curriculum of Civics and National Values. This will help the pupils/students to be immersed into the history of their immediate society very early in life, imitate the virtues of the folkloric figures and also develop themselves ahead of the leadership task ahead of them. The stories recorded in these folkloric tales extol the versatility and inventiveness of the Ilaje women of old as against most supposedly sophisticated ladies or women who do not want to work, who now take to "Olosho" syndrome, subtle digital media beggary and obnoxious billings of the other gender instead of finding legitimate trade or skills that can pay their bills and make them economically self-reliant.

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