ORAL FIELD TECHNIQUES AND WOMEN'S HISTORY: THE CASE OF OWAN, NIGERIA

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Following the impact of the world-wide women's movement, greater attention is being paid to women's issues in African historiography. However most studies have focused on the colonial and post-colonial periods.[1] The pre-colonial period remains woefully neglected generally, but even more so when one thinks of the role of women. Very broadly two approaches might be considered. First, the researcher can focus on what might be called women's issues. This historiographical approach deals with themes normally overlooked in the past because they were primarily concerned with females and therefore were not thought important enough to draw the attention of the historian. The second involves giving equal attention to both genders, showing that in themes well recognized in history, females played an important if not always equal role with men. This approach considers both women and men and their relationship over time. In my research the latter approach has been adopted.[2] This follows from the need to write a pre-colonial history of Owan[3] and at the same time give attention to the roles of both genders.

This essay discusses my field experiences. I argue that retrieving women's past in a patriarchal society as Owan is very difficult because of the tendency of male informants to be selective in what they are prepared to tell about women's contribution to society. The point is also made that in reconstructing women's history, male narratives cannot be relied upon for a clear perception of women's lives. For as Edwin Ardner argues in his 'muted Groups' theory, "the dominant groups in society generate and control the dominant mode of expression. Muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies."[4] Moreover, the essay notes that while narrative traditions obscured Owan women's roles and position in society, I was able to overcome the problem by applying non-conventional research tools such as totemic observances, shrine and goddess traditions. Lastly the paper points out that traditional oral methodology must be restructured to enable researchers retrieve women's past.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ISSUES

The general thrust of Owan traditions of origin suggest the people migrated from the highly centralized kingdom of Benin. Among

other neighboring peoples of Akoko-Edo, Etsako and Esan, the outward migration from that kingdom has invariably been explained in terms of the growing autocratic power which the kings sought to exercise over the subordinate chiefs. Many people resented it, were persecuted by it and moved away. In other words the explanation becomes political.

My own research suggests that while the kings of Benin might well have sought greater powers in the political process, gender struggles were also prominent with males seeking greater authority using an ideology of patriarchy. Sometimes the autocratic rulers were employing patriarchal doctrine to their advantage and some males were opposed to it. Many migrants into Owan appeared as much like refugees from patriarchy as from chiefly oppression. The two, of course, were closely inter-linked. Once settled in Owan the new migrants were divided, some desiring to perpetuate patriarchal beliefs and carry it to the acceptance of chiefs, others - the majority - rejecting it. Those who favored matriarchal ideology and gender equality refused to tolerate chiefs because they represented the crowning achievement of patriarchal ideology. Thus it is probable that the acephalous political organization[5] in Owan arose out of the gender struggle. In Owan there were unsuccessful attempts to introduce chiefly and centralized political institutions. As I have argued elsewhere that the failure of centralization of political authority in Owan can be attributed to the determination of favorites of matriarchal beliefs who were opposed to chiefly dominance.[6]

There is a contradiction in the older theory which stressed chiefly oppression as the reason for the exodus of Owan migrants from the Benin kingdom. Traditions of other Edoid groups such the Esan, Urhobo, Isoko and Etsako people of Nigeria, claim they migrated from Benin because of chiefly oppression in the kingdom. However the contradiction lies in the fact that the same migrants who were supposed to be escaping chiefly oppression, having moved to their present locations in Esan, Urhobo, Isoko and Etsako culture areas decided to establish centralised political entities which emphasized chiefly authority. It would seem that migrants attached to patriarchal ideals became the Esan, Urhobo, Isoko and Etsako; and while those with strong matriarchal inclinations or more egalitarian tendencies migrated to become the chiefless Owan. In the explanations as to why migration occurred, invariably the issue involved inter-gender problems, especially where members of the Benin royal family enforced rules to justify their exclusive rights over sexual relations with women. For instance, J.U. Egharevba reported that following the death of Oba Ewuare's two sons (possible heirs apparent) "He ... made a strict law forbidding anyone in the land of either sex to wash and dress up, or to have carnal intercourse for three years. This law, however, caused

great confusion for a large number of the citizens migrated to various places."[7] While the above explanation for migration pointed to chiefly oppression, it is also obvious that the rulers in Benin were equally imposing patriarchal ideology on the people.

For a long time acephalous societies were categorized by patriarchs as having achieved a lower form of organization than chiefly ones. They had not evolved to the chiefly or kingdom stage. The Owan migrants had experienced chiefly and patriarchal rule in Benin - had lived under it for centuries, found it oppressive - and preferred a non-chiefly form. Since the Owan migrants halted the elaboration of patriarchal doctrines, it suggests that they were possibly seeking a higher form of social and political organization which would guarantee egalitarianism. Unfortunately the introduction of British colonialism ended this move quite abruptly. Following British occupation of the area early 1900s individual males were granted warrants which conferred on them the status of chiefs. From then on male members of society achieved prominent positions over their female counterparts, a position which eluded them in the pre-colonial period.

The research objectives of reconstructing the past of the Owan people and at the same time giving attention to female contributions, were certainly ambitious for a society about which very little has been written. However I soon realized that in order to achieve my set goals I had to overcome three historiographical problems. They included scarce written sources, poor oral mechanisms of preservation of the past and little attention to women in the pre-colonial period in existing literature about Owan and other neighboring communities. I had to devise techniques to solve each problem. I have discussed in another article how the first two problems were dealt with during the research.[8] In brief I had to rely almost entirely on oral data supplemented by limited written sources. The lack of written sources became a factor in opting for oral history techniques. Additionally, I felt women's views could only be represented correctly if they were able to speak for themselves. In the words of some feminist scholars, "Oral history is a basic tool in our efforts to incorporate the previously overlooked lives, activities, and feelings of women into our understanding of the past and of the present. When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the "truths" of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories".[9]

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD EXPERIENCES

The methodology of pre-colonial historical research in Africa has been relatively well developed for centralized states and small-scale segmentary polities. In earlier historical writings on large kingdoms and

empires such as Ghana, Songhai, Mali, Lunda-Luba, Oyo, Borno, Buganda, and Benin, historians relied on royal chronicles and relatively abundant Arabic and/or European written records. Furthermore, many of these polities had several mechanisms for preserving oral historical data such as griots and praise singers in the royal courts, poems, reenactment ceremonies and designated chroniclers. But for acephalous societies such as the Igbo and Owan there is little documentation and limited methods of preserving the oral historical record. For Owan the history of the communities are kept by all or no one. In carrying out a research there, I had to rely on everyone, both male and female, to retrieve the past. In order to achieve one of the research objectives - giving prominence to women's voices - I set out to ensure that there was a balance in the number of female and male informants. If numbers are a reflection of success, the research fell short of its goals. Out of 262 informants interviewed in 234 interview sessions, 220 were males and only 42 were females. The factors responsible for this involved the uncooperative attitude of male informants, who would not allow their wives to be interviewed. Male informants argued that "men are the custodians of history". Basically the contention was an attempt to deny women any sense of history. Experience in the field, however, proved the argument spurious that women do not have and do not keep history. Clearly in spite of the fact that very limited number of female informants were interviewed, the result confirmed that not only do they have history, they demonstrated gender consciousness in recalling the past. Having realized that the average male informant would not allow his wife to be interviewed, after careful review of the situation I opted to interview older women especially widows who were no longer under the influence of husbands. In one of the communities a female teacher assisted me in interviewing younger women whose husbands would not readily approve.[10] Because of limited research funds I could not hire full-time female or male research assistants. In any feature research female assistants must be employed as a matter of necessity.

At some point during the fieldwork, I agonized over the fact that my gender may have affected data collection in relation to female informants. As one scholar noted, "a single male researcher is viewed as a threat and cannot be alone with a woman for interviews during the field research."[11] While this might be a hindrance to research, I find it difficult to believe that most men in Owan were concerned about the "safety" of their wives. The use of group interviews and the very nature of African village life, makes it extremely difficult to be alone with a woman. In many instances during my fieldwork, interviews were interrupted by neighbors and relatives visiting my informants. As the research progressed it became clear that male informants were more concerned about women telling their story, which was inevitably a way

of empowering the oppressed gender. The very sensitivity of males, their touchiness and fear, suggested that gender struggle was not far from the politics of community life.

My interaction with the women I was able to reach opened up a mine of information which ordinarily would not have been offered by male informants. For instance, there is a tradition in the Owan communities for women to curse in times of trouble. When, for example, there was famine, drought or epidemic the women went out at night to curse with the female genitalia whoever was responsible for the problem. During this ritual the men were expected to be in hiding. And they were. Any man found to have infringed the law was punished. In the course of gathering data, male informants interpreted this as a religious role which women were expected to perform for the community. However, from the response of female informants, it came out clearly that they could also utilize this ceremony as a political and disciplinary weapon. It was undeniably one of the avenues through which women checked the excesses of males with exaggerated patriarchal ideas of dominance and ownership. The manner in which both genders presented the information brought to light the concept of "standpoint epistemology" in feminist research. According to Joyce MacCarl Nielsen,"standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged positions."[12] Elaborating on the concept Nielsen pointed out that:

> ...members of more powerful and less powerful groups will potentially have inverted, or opposed, understandings of the world. ... the dominant group's view will be "partial and perverse" in contrast to the subordinate group's view, which has the potential to be more complete. The dominant group's view is partial and perverse because, ...so long as the group is dominant, it is the members' interest to maintain, reinforce, and legitimate their own dominance and particular understanding of the world, regardless of how incomplete it may be.[13]

In support of Nielsen's argument it is important to consider another example of standpoint epistemology. In one of the colonial intelligence reports based on orally collected information in the 1930s H.F. Marshall asserted that:

> Although women were accorded no recognized position in the management of affairs, they were not without influence, and when their interests were at stake they would undoubtedly have themselves heard. Council meetings were always held in public and women were permitted to listen, and a woman who was known to be sensible might even be allowed to give her views.[14]

In every respect this assertion represented both Marshall's Euro-centric bias and what his male informants wanted him to believe. He fell for both. It is true that women did not attend village and community council meetings regularly, but this did not mean they attended only at the wish of the men or, as Marshall put it, "women were permitted to listen, and a woman who was sensible might be allowed to give her views." Marshall implies that few women were sensible and that their concerns were narrowly focused. All issues before the council would directly or indirectly impinge on women.

As with other acephalous peoples the primary gerontocratic feature in pre-colonial Owan was the stratification of the male population into age grades. While there were no age grade organizations for women, pre-colonial socio-political arrangement in Owan provided for different women's organizations which were based on marriage status and position within the lineage system. These include the *Idegbe* (association of daughters of the family) and *Ikhuoho earle* or *Ikposafen* (wives of the lineage or married women). The *Idegbe* association was made up of unmarried and married daughters of a household and lineage. Through these organizations women were able to address all their concerns about the affairs of lineages and the community.

Within patrilineages the *Idegbe* were able to exert political power because they were considered "males" by their fathers, uncles and brothers. In addition, wives in a patrilineage regarded the *Idegbe* women as "husbands." The *Idegbe* could also adjudicate cases between their fathers, uncles and brothers on one hand; and their wives on another. The interactions which the *Ikhuoho* earle or *Ikposafen* organization offered married acted as avenues through which they formed and expressed opinions about community issues. Usually having met as a group they then presented their views through their representative, *Odion Ikhuoho* to the village or community council. Since they acted as a group it was difficult for men not to listen to them. As stated by female informants, group action was more effective than individual women presenting their cases before the council.[15] Furthermore, because of the rule of consensus the single female representative could halt any policy that women opposed. Thus, they demonstrated a greater gender consciousness and political effectiveness

than Marshall would admit. An understanding of the workings of the women's organizations, no doubt, reveals the place of women in Owan society.

Unquestionably, women took active part in the entire decision-making process. When Marshall claimed that women were not accorded recognized positions in the management of affairs, it is as if he is implying that Owan society had centralized political institutions whereby authority was vested in individual males. The task of governance was shared between male age grades, female organizations and kin groups. Owan women were far from passive. Thus, the claim of female passivity was only a reality in the minds of colonial officials and their African male allies. Marshall and his administrative cohorts were in the process of creating male chiefs supported by a host of male office holders. He was bent on establishing a full-fledged patriarchy, a task admired by many African males. He was doing for them what they had failed to do for themselves over three centuries. For instance, in the 1600s men attempted to introduce Ife chiefly institutions into Owan communities as a way of reducing female political power. As a consequence of female resistance, this attempt ended in the introduction of titles for both genders. Furthermore, as stated earlier, it is my view that one of the causes of the exodus of migrants from Benin was to escape patriarchal influences which were predominant in the kingdom.

Coming back to the question of whether men can engage in meaningful feminist research, my initial reaction had been that since men will always create obstacles, male researchers have no business becoming involved in such research topics. But as time went on in the field, I discovered that all aspects of the research created unique difficulties, the gender difference being merely one of many. Consequently, it became clear that the solution was not to run away from problems. If anything, I felt a sense of accomplishment when I surmounted an obstacle in the field. A major consideration which prompted my resolve to hear the women's side of the story, no matter how limited, was the realization that the more researchers delay in recording such views the less the chances of securing them in the future. Since pre-colonial Owan history essentially is in oral form, there remained the danger that the death of an informant invariably led to the loss of a wealth of information. In a way, the old cliché that "half loaf is better than none" became my watch word. Despite the gloomy picture painted above about patriarchal control of information, there were men who were willing to arrange interview sessions between the interviewer and their mothers or wives.[16] However, they were the exceptions rather than the rule.

Although female informants were targeted by the researcher for attitudes on a whole range of issues, men were also interviewed in order

to obtain male and patriarchal perspectives, and also to assess the extent to which male informants were prepared to deal with details about male-female relations. As Jane Parpart rightly points out, "if we seek an understanding of gender relations, then the opinions and feelings of men and women, both about themselves and each other, are important".[17] My research revealed that there is an underlying gender struggle in contemporary Owan society which stretches back before colonialism, even though evidence suggests that in pre-colonial times the genders were equally balanced. While women resorted to different avenues for conflict resolution with their male counterparts in the pre-colonial era, any attempt by the researcher to probe into these "hidden facts" met with resistance from male informants. For instance, such questions as "What powers did women exercise in pre-colonial times?" or "How powerful were women in the past?" elicited negative reactions from male informants. One male informant argued: "Women do not have powers in this society." "Have you not read from the Bible that women were made by God from men's ribs?" This statement is suggestive of a cover up. It is surprising that in a society with as many shrines to outstanding ancestresses as to ancestors of the past, a male informant felt compelled to bring the ideology of an alien religion to the support of patriarchy. His and other male responses revealed male concern about giving the impression that they were weak in comparison with women. The reluctance to accept that women wielded significant power and influence was also a consequence of the realization on the part of men that information control was a real weapon in securing advantage in the gender tussle.

When it became obvious that women-centered questions prompted disapproving responses from male informants, I decided to restructure the questions. This strategy worked very well. For example, when I asked "What contributions would you say women made to your society?" responses were candid and sincere, such as: "In a number of ways women have contributed to the growth and development of our community. In social, political and economic terms they have made valuable contributions," When another informant was told, "I learned that your grandmother was a very prosperous trader," he was very willing to describe in detail the trading exploits of his grandmother. But male informants were only forthcoming on issues which were not controversial or had something to do with their personal, family, village or community pride. To questions which were interpreted as empowering women and having nothing to do with perpetuating male hegemony, responses were negative and rejected as not true or declared as fabrications of those who did not understand the society's history and culture.

NARRATIVE TRADITIONS VERSUS NON-CONVENTIONAL SOURCES

Despite my determined effort to change unworkable interviewing methods, there remained certain limitations to the narrative traditions. For example, narrative traditions were not able to reveal complex political and gender relations in the past. Furthermore, there were occasions when informants deliberately denied past kinship relations because of current political exigencies. To go beyond superficial answers, it became necessary to utilize non-conventional research tools such as totems, shrine traditions, reenactment ceremonies, festivals, myths and legends. A "totem is an animal, plant, or natural object which serves as an emblem of a clan or family by virtue of an asserted ancestral relationship".[18] In some societies they are not killed or eaten because the soul of the community ancestors or ancestresses presumably reside in them.

Historians of pre-colonial Africa have applied totems as an interpretive and corrective device to narrative traditions. Hence, it has been observed that totems "in combination with other evidence, ... can assist the researcher to sort out origins and trace the clans in neighboring ethnic groups."[19] In my research totems became a methodological device to trace the origins of the Owan people. In analyzing totemic data I assumed that plant totems were associated with an earlier matriarchal and/or matrilineal phase in Owan history. Analysis of totems revealed that those communities which exhibited a predominance of plant totems also had pantheons of goddesses which pointed to a matriarchal/matrilineal past.

Before I proceed, it is important to explain the concept of matriarchy as it has been employed in my research. In contemporary feminist literature there exist two opposing views as regards to the concept. While the anti-matriarchy scholars argue that there are no known matriarchal societies, the pro-matriarchy intellectuals postulate that the phenomenon was a major stage in human development. The controversy surrounding the existence of matriarchies in the past arises from a misunderstanding of what the term stands for. For instance, in rejecting the belief Joan Bamberger argues that, "Not even the Amazons of classical reference, those single-minded, single-breasted warrior maidens, could account for an enduring political system in which women were the de facto rulers."[20] For Bamberger the key argument is that a society has to consist of all female rulers before it can qualify as a matriarchy. However, Evelyn Reeds points out that:

> The resistance against accepting the matriarchy is due in part to a false image of "female rule" over men, an

> inverted version of modern male domination over women. This conception comes from a failure to take into account the diametrically different nature of the two social orders...Neither sexual nor social inequalities could exist in the matriarchal epoch when society was both communalist and egalitarian.[21]

Thus, the concern of pro-matriarchy groups is that of showing that contemporary gender relations are not a true reflection of the past. If anything, the existence of pantheon of gods and goddesses in a particular society point to gender equality, rather than the supremacy of one gender over the other. However, centuries of transformation of society has tilted the balance in favor of men. This is one of the issues I set out to examine in my research.[22]

In this essay the term matriarchy refers to the existence of several factors: 1) matriliny - tracing kinship relations through the mother; 2) A pantheon of goddesses which appears to relate to early female authority figures; and 3) Matrilocality where settlements are made up of related female kin, the married males being strangers. Matriarchy did not, in Owan society, refer to female chiefs just as patriarchy did not refer to male chiefs. Although there were short unsuccessful attempts to introduce male chiefs, the Owan people remained acephalous.

The analysis of totemic and goddess traditions are central to understanding gender relations in pre-colonial Owan society. In the Uokha community for example, there is a tradition of a female goddess called Oron, whose "husband" Odion was said to have been its founder. Uokha has three community totems one of which is *Ihie* (a type of bean). In the same vein, *Ihievbe* which also has a plant (*Ihiekpa - a* type of bean) as a community totem, has a tradition of a ward goddess. In Ozalla, another settlement with a goddess tradition, there is a community totem *Akhatiti* (a type of cocoyam). A careful examination of these totems and the goddess traditions point to a possible era dominated by plant totems in which women were authority figures. Furthermore, the existence of these plant totems may well be emphasizing the visible involvement of women in social, economic and political affairs before patriarchal values became strengthened. This follows from the argument that women invented agriculture in the prehistoric period. In essence, plant totems might have come from women's early involvement in agriculture. Thus, a combination of totems and goddess traditions became the basis on which the researcher was able to interpret a possible matriarchal/matrilineal past which was not mentioned in narrative traditions.

As with totemic evidence, the analysis of shrine and goddess traditions helped in placing female roles and positions in perspective.

When it became apparent that narrative traditions could not provide answers to a number of historical puzzles, I decided to investigate alternative traditions. It was not possible to analyze all aspects of pre-colonial gender relations from available narrative data because male informants were bent on pushing through their contention that patriarchal values had always predominated. An evaluation of Owan gods and goddesses revealed that women had a more impressive past than male-fostered narrative traditions would admit. For example, one priestess of a shrine to Ovbiagbede, a prominent woman of the past, claimed She had been deified and memorialized because "She (Ovbiagbede) was a woman who fought for the welfare of other women and challenged the power of men.".[23] Here was a priestess deeply conscious of her cultural roots with no command of English, no apparent connections with the modern feminist movement and certainly quite unconscious that she might have "come from a man's rib" stating not only what Ovbiagbede had been, but how she saw her own role as the keeper of the shrine.

Consider, for example, the tradition in Eme-Ora where a shrine had been established in honor of a female figure named Ome. The people regarded Her as their mother. According to tradition, Ome came from Ozalla and married in Eme.[24] Tradition claimed that She gave birth to four sons named Ara, Dato, Ekpenafi and Erokho.[25] They became notable warriors in the community. It was said that during a war between Eme and Egoro in Esanland, Ome made a charm (*ogbele*) which She tied round Her waist as protection for Her four sons. In addition, She placed a tuber of yam rapped with a charm on a fire . The yam tuber was employed as a device to determine the exact time Her children would return from the war.[26] But as fate would have it, Ome's children failed to show up at the expected time. Consequently, She became disturbed. Having waited for a considerable length of time, Ome stated She would prefer to die instead of Her children. Following this declaration, a loud noise was heard from a distance, Ome fainted and subsequently passed away.[27] Later news came to the village that Eme had won the war. But Ome had thought the noise was an indication of tragedy - that is the death of Her children. Consequent upon Her death, the Eme people unequivocally chose to deify Her. From that point Ome became the goddess of Eme-Ora. Whereas narrative tradition credits the foundation of Eme-Ora to two male figures, Uguanroba and Ofeba, the same tradition claims the village of Eme was named after Ome. In the same vein, the tradition reported that the goat which was Ome's totem was adopted as the village totem of Eme-Ora. The narrative tradition taken alone obscures the role of Ome as a founder heroine. According to the male tradition, She married Uguanroba, a grandson of a prince of the royal family of Benin, which revered the leopard totem. To the

patriarchs, marriage indicated the submission of the woman to the man and satisfied their male egos. From the analysis of the goddess and totemic traditions, all evidence points to a possible matriarchal/matrilineal past in Eme-Ora. Furthermore, the fact that Ome's goat totem was adopted as the village totem of Eme-Ora indicates that She was the founder of the village as opposed to the two male figures narrative tradition would have us believe. Strangely enough, since patriarchy required descendants to adopt the father's totem, why does no leopard totem exist in Eme-Ora? Either the marriage was a fabrication to link the matriarchs to the male immigrants, or it occurred but failed to yield the results the patriarchs anticipated.

Consider another example. In Uokha, community narrative tradition reported that Odion, the founder, migrated from the Benin kingdom in c. 1320-1347. His wife was named Oron.[28] She was said to have worshipped at a shrine which became the community institution after Her death. While narrative tradition points to Odion as the founder, his genealogy does not stretch back to Oba Eweka, c. 1320-1347, in whose generation Odion was reported to have left Benin. Since the genealogy does not stretch back to Eweka when this was said to have occurred, it seems more likely that the female Oron initially established Uokha about c. 1320-1347. She might have been a child of Eweka. The community was a true matriarchy by the definition offered above, with exclusive plant and snake totems, matrilocal and matrilineal with a female authority figure or leader. In Uokha there exists 84% non-animal totems and 16% animals. Not surprisingly, the story of Odion comes from one of the only two wards in Uokha that revere animal totems. Significantly, the tradition was picked up by the male royal chronicler of Benin, Egharevba, and through early publication given wide currency.[29]

Following Oron's death, her people established a shrine to Her memory. There is every likelihood that females might have been the authority figures in Uokha from the time of Her death until the advent of Odion c. 1568-1600, two hundred years later. Moreover, it could be argued that matriarchal societies either lacked the means to perpetuate their history and genealogies or they permitted the incoming patriarchs gradually to discard the tradition of female roles in society. When Odion arrived from Benin, c. 1568-1600 according to his genealogy, his descendants harmonized his tradition with Oron's, arguing in the interest of unity that he had been the husband of Oron. But male generated narrative tradition has not answered the question why there is no shrine established in honor of Odion, as was the practice in the area for founder heroes. As with the Eme-Ora case, while patriarchal narrative tradition in Uokha gives preeminent position to a male figure, shrine and totemic evidences indicate that female figures were hardly

passive members of society. Although a number of feminists reject a theory of ancient matriarchy, an analysis of shrines and goddess traditions reveal that they represent more than imagined deities or symbols. Males do not cry out when it is argued that the Omoikhi shrine in Emai community is dedicated to the founder of the ward Ivbiomoikhi ("the children of Omoikhi")! Why then focus upon and question Ivbiaro ("the children of the female, Aro") or Eme-Ora, (the children of the female Ome) as if somehow they are male efforts to degrade women? Quite the contrary, if men could, they would convert Aro and Ome into males. The best they can do to reduce their power involves marrying them to late-arriving founder males, thus suggesting a superior-inferior relationship. There is no doubt that the deployment of non-conventional research tools act as checks on traditional narratives, which serve male interests and perpetuate patriarchal values.

Another tradition has to do with a river goddess called Orhueren in Ozalla community. Three festivals are celebrated annually in Her honor. Eghe festival, for instance, recognizes that all the children of Ozalla come from the goddess, and that She was, therefore, the mother of them all, despite the narrative tradition that Orhueren died childless.[30] On the other hand, the Obo festival performed by unmarried girls was conceived to demonstrate their dedication to Orhueren as well as testifying to their sexual purity. The third festival (*Ivbamen*) in honor of Orhueren is celebrated by male age groups who carry water from the river to the town.[31] Every year a different age group performed this ritual. Ozalla tradition reported that Orhueren was once married to a man in Egoro-Amede a neighboring Esan speaking community. Upon Her death, Her corpse was not returned to Ozalla by Her husband's relatives.[32]

Ceremonial re-enactment also suggests that Orhueren was not merely a single outstanding authority figure but was possibly the founder of a line of female leaders. Tradition has it that the senior daughter of the senior man of Iraede village held custody and control over the ceremonial sword of Ozalla. She married a man in Igbidin village. The woman who held the ceremonial sword, "which was not to be given over to any other person except in case of death,"[33] determined the timing of the various festivals held to honor Orhueren in Ozalla community. In Benin Kingdom, where the majority of Owan migrants came from the Ada and Eben (swords) are symbols of royal authority. Curiously enough, the man for whom Ozalla was named, Uza, was said to be related to the royal house in Benin. From this royal connection and the symbolism of the sword, there is the possibility of a queen in ancient Ozalla.

I am aware that some feminists do not take kindly to "the tendency of some [scholars] to treat the myth as historical fact."[34]

Admittedly myths are not historical facts, but they represent symbols of a people's consciousness. As cultural symbols, myths say more than what is possible in terms of rational interpretation. As Carl Jung argues:

> ...cultural symbols often express the human quest for meaning, the desire for connection to a wellspring of life power and creativity deeper than that offered by modern science. ...modern life was truncated by a slavish adherence to rationality and ... people needed to be open to an irrational and mysterious dimension of life in order to find meaning.[35]

Arguing along the same line, Thomas Spear states: "Myths are not the products of sheer invention. The values expressed in traditions, the structure delineated, and the idioms and models used are all cultural products of history."[36] If Jung's injunction is taken seriously, Ozalla's tradition that the woman who holds the sword determines when festivals are celebrated in the community suggests the possibility of considerable female power in the past. Unfortunately, narrative tradition is silent on whether there was female rule in ancient Ozalla. Even if female rule never existed, the researcher believes the reenactment ceremony is suggestive of a more egalitarian past.

Thus, researchers should not discount myths for the reasons advanced by Bamberger,[37] namely that they, more often than not, have been aimed at discrediting women. In Owan, males do not argue that women once ruled but made such a mess of it that men had to take over. More subtly, they drop the early record and begin history with the arrival of the patriarchs, usually bolstered by some prestigious origins as from the royal family of Benin. The emphasis becomes less on maleness as a criterion for rule and more on exalted blood lines. Researchers should employ myths in a more positive sense, especially in making the point that women in their own right have been actors and not mere subjects in human development. In order to make effective use of myths and legends for meaningful feminist scholarship, researchers should adopt positive attitudes towards them while still subjecting such sources to rigorous scrutiny and interpretation. In any case, the sword of Ozalla becomes less mythical since it is a ritual which still exists and involves what appears to be a reenactment of the founding of Ozalla by an enterprising woman and an event by which the two community totems came into being.

Documents sometimes aid researchers in determining lines of questioning in the field. During my investigation I discovered that existing narrative traditions in Otuo community make no reference to a matrilineal descent pattern which the people once practiced. However, a

local historian had documented a matrilineal past in Otuo community.[38] In asking male elders questions which were directed at confirming Lawani's claim, initially one elder tried to deny the existence of matriliny in the pre-colonial era. When the researcher pointed out the story had been recorded in one of the local historian's books, the elder then said "that practice was a long time ago." The issue was not whether it had been a long time ago but whether it existed at all. Two points should be noted. Lawani demonstrates that male historians can uncover the female past and that some male elders are seeking to bury that past as rapidly as possible. In the 1940s the tradition remained alive for Lawani to record, by the 1990s it is in the process of being buried by selective memory on the part of male informants. What might therefore be expected of Ome, the founder of Eme-Ora, or the sword bearers of Ozalla, who can be dated to c.1500 to 1600, is that soon they may also be forgotten from the oral record. Consequently, male informants deliberately forget those facts which do not aid their cause.

It is therefore important for historians of women's past to employ non-traditional sources in their quest for an authentic "her-story." These include the recording and analysis of songs, poems, observance of marriage ceremonies and festivals.[39] A number of historical truths often surface in these sources. One of the advantages of utilizing them is that they are rarely susceptible to manipulation for political reasons. Since informants do not necessarily know how a researcher intends to utilize non-conventional sources in historical interpretation, they become difficult to distort. Researchers should take the pains to interpret oral sources for hidden meaning. For instance, if a researcher collects poems which denigrate females they may serve the purpose of exposing how men either characterize their women or protest against them. If one is to obtain first-hand feelings and views of women in songs, a researcher must endeavor to attend and participate in activities such as marriage and naming ceremonies where the participants are women. By observing and listening, the researcher can learn much about gender relations in the community.

For example, in Ozalla I attended the annual Obo festival, which is one of the festivals dedicated to Orhueren the goddess of the community. Whereas traditions from both male and female informants in the community see the festival as a necessary stage in the transition from girlhood to womanhood, observing the whole exercise gives the impression that there is an attempt to demean womanhood. For instance, as part of the festival young girls parade the streets of Ozalla naked. The explanation I was offered by both male and female informants was that it was one of the ways young girls demonstrated they were still virgins.[40] But for an outsider and a researcher it went beyond a mere demonstration of virginity. It demonstrated how men

adopted subtle means to control women's minds and bodies in a patriarchal society. Why is it that only young girls have to establish their sexual purity? Why not young boys? The example reveals that relying on narrative tradition alone is not sufficient. If I had not witnessed the ceremonies, a description of the young girls would not have struck me the way it did. Hence, it becomes advisable for researchers to strive to observe as many ceremonies as possible. They remain veritable and striking sources of information which words alone cannot match. See. Observe. Learn.

CONCLUSION

This essay has tried to demonstrate a combination of factors which have militated against meaningful feminist research into women's roles in pre-colonial Africa. It has also explored the difficulties encountered in the field in trying to give attention to women's contributions to Owan society. While showing how the research problems were tackled, I also indicated successes and failures. Researchers must, therefore, focus on how best to deploy research instruments (especially those above and beyond the purely political narrative) to uncover historical truths about women. The point was also made that patriarchal values and interests hamper female-centered research agendas. On the whole, the essay stresses the point that while narrative tradition offers women the opportunity to express themselves, there are inherent limitations of the methodology. Because men are the dominant gender in Owan society, they dominate the mode of expression, the narrative tradition. As a consequence I felt it necessary to integrate non-conventional research tools such as songs, poems, reenactment ceremonies festivals, totems, shrine and goddess traditions in my research. One hopes that other researchers will benefit from my experience.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 A select list includes: Edna Bay (ed), *Women and Work in Africa*, Boulder, Westview, 1982; Nin mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*, Berkeley, University of California Institute of International Studies, Research Series #48, 1982; Jane L. Parpart and Kathleen A. Staudt (eds.), *Women and the State in Africa*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1992; Sharon Stichter and Jane L. Parpart (eds.), *Patriarchy and Class: African Women in the Home and the Workforce*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988.

2. See Onaiwu W. Ogbomo, "Men and Women: Gender Relations and the History of Owan Communities, Nigeria c.1320-1900," Ph.D Thesis Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, 1993.
3. Today Owan people inhabit two local government areas (Owan West and East Local Government Areas) of Edo State, Nigeria. Owan lies between the Yoruba to the west, Esan to the east, Benin to the south and Akoko-Edo to the north. Owan consist of eleven major communities: Emai, Igue, Ihievbe, Ikao, Iuleha, Ivbi-Ada-Obi, Evbo-Mion, Ora, Otuo, Ozalla and Uokha. The eleven discrete communities of Owan speak different dialects of the Edo language, but while colonialism and the post-colonial period have fostered a pan-Owan feeling, the communities can not be classified as having the sentiments of a nationality or "tribe". The eleven communities today stand as the British colonial officials organized them. Nine of them conform to pre-colonial realities. However Evbo-Mion traditionally included six communities and Ivbi-Ada-Obi three, making a total of eighteen independent communities prior to colonialism. The majority of the communities in an official consensus trace their origins to migrations of founder heros from the Benin Kingdom.
4. Quoted in Henrietta L. Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988. p.3.
5. Acephalous societies are polities without chiefs who rely upon principles of kinship, gerontocracy, age grades and consensus as means of governing their citizens.
6. See Ogbomo, "Men and Women.."
7. See J.U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1968. p.15.
8. See "Collecting Oral Tradition in Owan Communities, Nigeria", A paper presented at the Staff/Graduate Seminar, Department of History, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, March 19, 1993.
9. Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Winter, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History", in Joyce MacCarl Nielsen (ed.) *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990. p.95.
10. The female teacher conducted the interviews as if she was the one seeking information from fellow women, hence the husbands of the informants were unable to link her with my research agenda.
11. See George J.S. Dei, "Research Methodology in the Social Sciences", A paper presented at the Graduate Students' Workshop Canadian Association of African Studies Annual Conference, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, May 7-13, 1990. p.5.
12. Joyce McCarl Nielsen, "Introduction" in Joyce McCarl Nielsen (ed.) *Feminist Research Methods*, p.10.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.
14. H. F. Marshall, *Intelligence Report on the Ivbiosakon (Owan) Clans in Ishan and Kukuruku Divisions Benin Province*, 1937. The Introductory Section p.19.
15. Owan Historical Text (hereafter referred to as O.H.T.) #18 Interview with Madam Alikose Okpaise, (75), & Madam Onotanua Aigbodion, (65), Uhonmora, October 12, 1990; O.H.T. #68 Interview with Madam Aita Ohiovbeunu, (90),

Ovbiowun, August 18, 1990; O.H.T. #97 Interview with Madam Agboson Agbekhai, (78), Madam Iyokhuen Otu, (77), Uokha, November 10, 1990.

16. For instance the following interview sessions were specifically arranged by male informants: Owan Historical Text hereafter referred to as O.H.T. #10 Interview with Madam I. Usidame, (71), Eme-Ora, September 7, 1990; O.H.T. #51 & #52 Interview with Mrs Ogoigbe, (62), March 3, 1991; O.H.T. #88 Interview with Madam Abouvbo Akhareghemen, (86), Ogute-Evbiamen, October 5, 1990; O.H.T. #217 Interview with Madam Asimawo Isunuoya, (83), Madam Mamuna Gbadamosi, (74), Ihievbe, September 15, 1990; O.H.T. #218 Interview with Madam Abibat Sadoh, (72), Madam Abibat Atubazi, (73), Ihievbe, September 15, 1990.

17. Jane L. Parpart, "Listening to Women's Voices: The Retrieval and Construction of African Women's History", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol.4 No.2 (Fall) 1992. p.178.

18 .O.W. Ogbomo, "Pre-colonial History of the Owan People: A Research Agenda", *History in Africa* 18, 1991. p.317.

19. J.B. Webster, "Techniques in the Methodology of Oral History: Where Are We Now?", Typescript, p.4.

20. Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society", in M.Z. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1974. p.265.

21. Evelyn Reed, *Woman's Evolution: From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family*, New York, Pathfinder Press, 1975. p.131.

22. A similar argument has been put forward in a study on Nnobi Igbo by Ifi Amadiume. See Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society*, London, Zed Books, 1987. According to Amadiume, "there is strong evidence,... that Nnobi was a matriarchal settlement later encroached upon by patriarchal Nri people. The contradictions and coexistence of gender notions derived from these principles can be seen in Nnobi social organizations and crucial ideologies" (p.19).

23. O.H.T. #76 Interview with Madam Ilekesun Againe, (85), Priestess of Oviagbede shrine, Afuze, September 10, 1990. Madam Againe's view of Ovbiagbede was also confirmed by other female informants in Afuze.

24. Ome's Ozalla origin accounts for Eme's goat totem.

25. O.H.T. #6 Group Interview with Chief Irohio Usidame, (87), Chief Akhagbe A. Izebe, (76), Chief Olorufemi Aruya, (87), Chief Abiodun Ogwai, (64), Chief priest of Ome shrine, September 5, 1990.

26 .O.H.T. #8 Interview with Mrs. Amewie Izebe, (53), Eme-Ora, September 6, 1990.

27. O.H.T. #6.

28. O.H.T. #95 Interview with Mr. Ogbeide J. Jegede, (76), Uokha, November 8, 1990.

29. See Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, p.85.

30. By male tradition Ovbiagbede died childless. Dying childless becomes a convenient male attempt to ignore the traditions. Peculiarly modern females consult this so-called "barren goddesses" to beseech for pregnancy.

31. O.H.T. #137 Interview with Mr. Robert Alufoje, (70), Ozalla, July 28, 1990.

32. By Owan tradition a woman's corpse was returned to her paternal home at death. Any man who dared to keep his wife's corpse was seen as treating his wife as a slave. Owan traditional belief on marriages is that when a man marries a woman, he by custom did not buy her. Rather the woman's family only loaned her to the man to help him raise a family. For a man to keep his wife's corpse he has infringed the understanding between the two families.
33. *Ibid.*, p.37.
34. Joan B. Townsend, "The Goddess: Fact, Fallacy and Revitalization Movement", in Larry W. Hurtado (ed.), *Goddesses in Religion and Modern Debate*, p.182.
35. Carol P. Christ, "Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology", in Carl Olson (ed.) *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*, New York, Crossroad, 1983. p.232.
36. Thomas Spear, "Oral Traditions: Whose History", in *History in Africa*, 8, 1981. pp.170-171.
37. Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy"
38. See S.I. Lawani, *The History of Otuo*, Ibadan, Advent Press, 1947.
39. See Jan Vasina, *Oral Tradition As History*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. pp.46-52; Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1991. Chapter 7 of this book specifically focuses on how Tumbuka women have used Vimbuza (a type of spirit possession) songs "to criticize those in power over women and to suggest alternatives to the marginalization and mistreatment that were so often the lot of women" (p.270).
40. O.H.T. #140 Interview with Mr. Usiobafo Omigie, (76), Ozalla, July 29, 1900; O.H.T. #142 Interview with Chief Ailemen Ilevaedion, (75), July 30, 1990; O.H.T. #144 Interview with Madam I. Elijah, (79), Ozalla, July 31, 1990 & O.H.T. #148 Interview with Madam O. Aisabor, (63), Ozalla, September 27, 1990.