

## The Challenges Surrounding the “Biaken” Culture in Ogoni Land in the 21st Century

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**Abstract.** Biaken culture is specifically practiced by the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. It is a cultural practice that refuses a girl from getting married, rather they are allowed by their parents to have children with anybody of their choice. It was practiced to maintain the royal blood, to maintain status-quo and to ensure the continuity of the family. The study reveals that the Biaken culture are faced with several challenges, ranging from refusal of the young girls to be initiated into Biaken, the Christians preached against it, the educated girls and parents have also undermined it while most young girls eloped with their would be husbands and finally married in the court without the consent and approval of their parents. The study also reveals that greater proportion of the children born by the Biaken are not educated by their biological fathers, since the culture demands that these children must not bear the names of their biological fathers. The study also finds out that the Biaken culture increases single parenthood which gives birth to improper training of the children, poverty, lack of support, emotional trauma, truancy etc. Therefore, the following were recommended as panacea to the problems identified; the parents should no longer force their children into Biaken, and the practice of Biaken culture should be abolished.

**Keywords:** Biaken, Biaken Conflict, Saaro, Culture and Single Parenthood.

### 1. Introduction

The term “biaken” is a Khana language which simply refers to any daughter that was not given out for marriage by her parents. It was a common practice among the Ogoni people in Rivers State, Nigeria. Ogoni is one of the numerous ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.

According to Wiwa (1983) Ogoni Land is located approximately between latitude 4.05 and 4.30 degree north of the equator and longitude 7.166 and 7.566 degree east. It forms part of the coastal plain terrain which appears as a gently sloping plateau intersected by a few deep valleys which carry water intermittently. The central part of this plateau is about 100 feet above sea level. The Ogoni people occupy about 404 square miles of the coastal plains in the Niger Delta Region with a population of about 500,000 people (Ogoni Bill of Rights 1990).

It is important to point out that Ogoni consists of six clans and one hundred and six villages. The clans are as follows, Ken-Khana, Babbe, Nyo-Khana, Tai, Eleme and Gokhana (Nwideduh, 1997). These six clans are spread into four Local Government Areas in Rivers State.

The term Biaken is called different names by the other three Local Government Areas of Ogoni. In Tai, they are called “Biabe”, in Eleme they are known as “Njuuru”, in Gokhana, they are known as “Gbebe”. In spite of the differences in the name, they all means one and the same thing.

Baridoma (2005) posits that the Biaken culture is as old as Ogoni ethnic nationality. There are no records as to when Biaken culture was first practiced but it could be said that the practice originated from the distribution of economic resources in Ogoni land.

The Biaken cultural practice empowers a father to retain and disallow one of the daughters from getting marriage. Ninyorne (2013) asserts that Biaken culture is meant to showcase the wealth of the family, to demonstrate father’s love, especially in the case of an only daughter. Besides the above, several reasons have been attributed to its practice. The reasons are as follows, to showcase wealth, royalty, to get a large family to support agricultural activities. Above all, many families that were not blessed with male

children used to stop one of their daughters from getting married for the purpose of procreation and continuity of the family name.

Baridoma (2005) avers that a daughter becomes a Biaken by the desire of her father, but it takes some cultural ceremonies and rituals to initiate her. The father begins the process by informing the family members (Pya Yuguote, Zuute or Gan-te) of his intention with a jar of palm wine and a bottle of locally made gin Gan-te are members of the father's extended family (the man's kinsmen).

He buttressed further, that the father presents "to-pee" (customary basket) to them in preparation for his daughter's Biaken initiation. The "to-pee" as the culture requires, contains several tubers of yam, a bunch of plantain, a bottle of palm oil, a bag of salt, a good quantity of pepper and some quantity of "Suuri" (scent leaf), "akue-aka" (rack of aka fish) one bottle of schnapps, a goat and fowl and seven cowries (erebakpigi).

After this rituals and ceremonies have been concluded, the daughter automatically becomes a Biaken, which simply implies that she cannot get married to anybody. However, she is free to raise children with anybody of her choice. The man that exhibited the intention to concubine the biaken must notify the parents by presenting a jar of palm wine, two bottle of schnapps, food, other brand of drinks and in some cases a goat. The father of the Biaken will immediately libate to his ancestors, notifying them of the union or relationship.

Most importantly, all the children born in this relationship must bear the name of the Biaken's father. In the same vein, the father of the Biaken must share his properties to the Biaken and her children. This cultural practice is enshrined and embedded in the culture of the Ogoni people, therefore, nobody in the family can deny them of their rightful inheritance.

Barine (2014) posits that the Biaken cultural practice is passing through tremendous changes as against the earlier practice. Fathers no longer bother to go through the rigorous rituals that involved rite of passages for "Biaken", as the daughter to be chosen as Biaken was merely pronounced by words of mouth. Once such pronouncement was made with some libations, the chosen daughter automatically becomes a Biaken.

## 2. Conceptual Clarification

The following concepts were properly defined so as to properly understand the concepts as well as eradicating all forms of ambiguities:

**Biaken:** This simply means any girl in Ogoni, who is not allowed or permitted by her parents to marry out of the family. A biaken can raise children with any man of her choice. But not authorized to marry out of the family.

**Culture:** Culture is a very broad term that includes in itself all our works of life, our modes of behaviour, our philosophies and ethics, our morals and manners, our customs and traditions, our religious, political, economic and other types of activities (Shankar-Rao, 2011). Culture is the total ways of life of a particular group of people.

**Challenges:** In this context challenges referred to as the obstacles and hindrances standing against the Biaken people of Ogoni.

**Biaken Conflict:** This simply refers to the conflict that existed between the Biaken and other married women that are poised to protect their husbands from been snatched by the Biaken.

**Saaro or Saro:** It simply means the first son of the family.

## 3. Factors responsible for the Practice of Biaken Culture in Ogoni

The Biaken cultural practice is an intrinsic part of the Ogoni culture and was in existence from time immemorial. In fact, it is as old as the Ogoni ethnic nationality itself. However, this practice appears strange and awkward to some other ethnic groups. Others see it as barbaric and an infringement on the fundamental rights of women. But to the Ogonis, there were several reasons that were responsible for this cultural practice. The reasons are clearly stated and explained briefly below as follows:

### 3.1 Absence of a Male Child

Many parents that were not blessed with male children considered it wise and reasonable to disallow one of their female children from marrying out of the family. Apenu (1995) posits that the reason behind the keeping of first daughter at home was due to the absence of a male child in the family or where the Sira (First daughter) is the only daughter in the family. This is considered most important because Ogoni is a patriarchal society, where inheritance depends solely on the male children. Therefore, the male child produced by the Biaken automatically becomes the heirs to the throne as well as inheriting the properties of the family.

According to Loolo (2001) to avert this most dreaded phenomenon of discontinuity of family lineage, the Biaken culture was instituted. The male child born by the “Biaken” is treated and regarded as the biological son of the family with all rights and privileges. He buttressed further that in case where the male children in the family are weak and the female are more active the parents may force the active female child not to marry. She is to hold and defend the weak family members against any external aggression or internal insurrection.

Leton (2002) avers that “Biaken” culture becomes necessary because of a possible extinction of lineage especially in a family where there is no male child. This is because the people of Ogoni attached so much importance to family name and its continuity. In the same vein, Nsaro (1997) posits that there are some men who only bear the name of men. Such men are quite powerless, weak and unable to push forward in all things such men lack initiative. Quite agile woman was preferred to be at home to keep the name of the family alive.

### 3.2 Preservation of Royal Blood

It is a general belief that the practice of “Biaken” culture started with members of the royal families. Barine (2004) opined that the chiefs of old felt that giving their daughter in marriage may mean mixing up with people of lower class. Hence the refusal to give out their first daughter who was considered as the first blood of the family for marriage. In similar vein, Badey (2019) confirmed the above argument and position, that “Biaken” started among the noble or royal family as a way of maintaining the royal blood. The Biaken cultural practice was highly dignified, honoured and respected hence it was later adopted by other families who wanted to preserve their family blood and lineage from extinction.

### 3.3 The Need for more Children for Agriculture

Ogoni is basically an agrarian society, hence there was the need for more people to work on the large hectares of land. In the pre-colonial era in Ogoni, wealth were determined by the number of children raised, the number of land cultivated, greater number of livestock available, the number of wives that were married, large band of yam, surplus food to feed the family and the extended family members, taking of titles, such as Gbene, chief, and belonging to several cultural organizations especially Awanikpo (Amanikpo or Naa-biradee) Koromo, Karikpo, Iyormabana etc.

At that time, it became imperative to disallow one of the daughters from marrying so that she can procreate

for the family. The additional children, joined other children to work on the farm for the purpose of maintaining regular supply of food as well as maintaining the status-quo of the family. This implies that famers depended so much on the labour provided by family members since it was difficult to pay workers to work on their farms.

### 3.4 High Infant Mortality

In the pre-colonial era, there was high infant mortality rate in Ogoni, including other ethnic groups in Nigeria as a result of the prevalence of the six infant killer diseases which include, whooping cough, measles, yellow fever, poliomyelitis, chicken pox and hypertitis .

This pathetic and miserable situation forced many families to adopt the “Biaken” culture. This practice enabled the family to raise more children who were faced with the principle of survival of the fittest. In fact, it was seen as a means of raising more children because they were not sure of the number of children that will survive.

## 4. The Challenges confronting Biaken in Ogoni Ethnic Nationality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In the past, Biaken was highly celebrated, dignified and respected in the family but the reverse is the case in this twenty first century. So many things including the culture and the effectiveness of some institutions are undergoing metamorphoses, things are no longer the same.

**Introduction of Christianity:** The born-again Christians are against the “Biaken” culture in Ogoni. According to them, it is un-biblical and should be abandoned. Presently, many daughters and sons of Ogoni who embraced Christian religion have stopped practicing the Biaken culture.

**Education and women liberation movement:** In this twenty first century, the power of western education has affected the practice of “Biaken” culture in Ogoni. So many people are now educated and are no longer interested to stay under the web of dehumanizing culture.

In addition to the above, several women liberation movements sprang up to sensitize and educate the women in the schools, churches and the villages about the negative consequences of the Biaken culture. It is believed that every woman is entitled to

have a husband, anything short of that is regarded as illegitimate means of raising children.

At this juncture, no girl is ready to be a “Biaken” having considered the numerous challenges and negative consequences associated with it. The feminists and Christians exposed the sufferings and pains encountered by the Biaken on daily basis. Desmond (2011) asserts that the pervasive influence of western education has led to the decline in the practice of “Biaken” in modern-day Ogoni. Kponee (2011) puts it that western education in the area brought a different world-view. He contends that the educational training started with the boy child but later the girl child joined in the band wagon of acquiring western education, and subsequently the people began to see the reasons to de-emphasized the practice of “Biaken”.

**Single Parenthood:** The Biaken suffered and struggled with their children on daily basis without assistance from their biological fathers. Most of these men that raised children with the “Biaken” were already married, so they were only concerned about the wellbeing and training of their children and wives.

Smith (1980) succinctly puts that the social consequences of single mother (Biaken) can be seen in loneliness and the lack of social support.

Most of the men who raised children with them don’t assist in training the children because they don’t answer their names. Most of their children do not go to school, especially after the death of the Biaken’s father. Most of them could not give proper upbringing to their children because of poverty and depression.

**Psychological trauma and the status of “Biaken”:** All the “Biaken” suffered from psychological trauma arising from loneliness, depression, abandonment, insecurity, lack of support and other unmet needs. The social status of the “Biaken” is reduced to nothing. They are seen by some people as “free wives for all”, with low self-esteem. They suffered from emotional pains because they are neglected and sexually abused by married men. They are no longer respected among the women folks and the entire society as before. In fact, no daughter is willing to be a Biaken, that is why they are resisting their parents and marrying in the courts without the consent, and approval of their parents.

**The constant conflict between the Biaken and the Saaro:** For the past two decades, there are constant conflicts between the “Biaken” and the Saaro (the first son) in most of the families in Ogoni. These

conflicts mostly occurred after the death of their father, who disallowed the daughter from marrying. Traditionally, the Saaro (the first son) was not supposed to take any property that had been given to the “Biaken” because she is entitled to inherit from the family but the reverse is the case in recent times. In most cases, the first sons are always in constant conflicts with the “Biaken” over landed property and buildings. They have arrested each other on several occasions. Presently, the first son (Saaro) and other male children of the family have forcefully taken away properties that were allocated to the “Biaken”. This situation has increased the misery and the deplorable condition of the “Biaken” in Ogoni land.

**The conflict between the “Biaken” and other married women**

Other married women are always fighting and molesting the Biaken over their husbands. Recently, several Biaken have been arrested by the married women for causing troubles in their families. They were also accused of using charms and other diabolical means to trap their husbands. All these fighting’s and accusations reduced the socio-status of the “Biaken” as well as discouraging other young girls from becoming a Biaken, on the other hand, the Biaken have also arrested other married women that molested them

**5. Theoretical Framework**

This study hinges on the socio-cultural approach propounded by Ann Oakley, Bruno Bethechen, Enestine friend and sherry B orthner. However, emphasis will be placed on the approach and perception of Oakley (1974) who was the major proponent of the socio-cultural theory.

Oakley postulates that the mainstream culture, belief and practice of a particular society which in most cases are practical is the major setback to women as regards their participation in the activities of the society.

Oakley (1974) in Haralambos and Healds (1980) generalized that it is the culture that determines the roles and responsibilities bestowed on the both sexes. Most culture allowed women to carry out subservient and subordinate roles in the society while their male counterparts engaged in tedious activities that enabled them to dominate (win bread) the affairs of the family. The men were culturally empowered to control, dominate and determine the behavior, actions and roles of the women in the society.

The cultural approach deals with tradition, values, norms and practices that streamlined and influenced

the behavior of people. These socio-cultural practices are learned, shared and are transmitted from one generation to the other.

In this circumstance, the “Biaken” culture is a product of the Ogoni culture and it was imposed on the women by their male counterpart that dominated and controlled all aspects of human endeavour. They have been subjected to hardship, emotional trauma, sufferings and lack of love as a result of unmet needs and a sense of responsibility as well as care from a husband.

#### **6. The Resilience Nature of Biaken in Ogoni Ethnic Nationality**

It is a well known fact that the “Biaken” culture had been facing a lot of challenges in this contemporary society. Therefore, many parents are no longer prepared to stop their daughters from getting married. It is also vital to point out that few illiterates, uncivilized and worshippers of African traditional religion are still observing this unique culture that was handed over to them by their forefathers.

However, greater proportion of the Ogoni people have stopped the practice of Biaken, but few people (parents) that are not blessed with male children are still forcing their daughters to become a “Biaken”.

It is pertinent to point out that most of their daughters have disappointed them while few, fearfully obeyed their parents. Some of the young girls that are ready for marriage usually eloped with their lovers or would be husbands, just to avoid to become a “Biaken”. Most of them got married in the court without the consent and approval of their parents.

Presently, the practice of “Biaken” is responsible for some of the crises in some families today. It causes division between husband and wife, as they no longer speak in one voice.

Most of their girls that are up to the age of marriage have the courage and faith that the libation and other rituals associated with “Biaken” will not have any effect on them because of their faith in God and level of education.

Finally, the Biaken culture has been reduced to its barest minimum, because greater proportion of the parents are no longer practicing it because of its adverse effects on women hood. In spite of the above, very insignificant proportion of the population of the Ogoni are still supporting the practice of Biaken culture. These people believed that it is an integral part of our culture that cannot be abandoned because

of our exposure to other cultural practices. Presently, it is mostly practice by parents who do not have a male child and few illiterate traditionalists.

#### **7. Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

- The practice of “Biaken” should be abolished since it is causing crises in some homes.
- The parents should no longer force their daughters to become a “Biaken”. They should seek their consent and approval.
- The properties that were willed to them should not be taken from them by the Saaro (first son) of the family.
- The “Biaken” usually suffered from psychological trauma arising from single parenthood, therefore it should be abolished.

#### **8. Conclusion**

Biaken culture had been practiced by the Ogoni ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria since time began. “Biaken” is a culture that brought pride to the father, and also enhanced his dignity and socio-status in the society. In the past, every family had biaken, but the reverse is the case in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The “Biaken” cultural practice is facing serious resistance from several quarters. The practice of “Biaken” is against Biblical doctrine, that specifies “one man one wife”. The role of western education coupled with the impact and influence of globalization have actually changed the people’s perception about their world view.

However, the psychological trauma and sufferings experienced by the Biaken and their children were known to everybody, hence so many parents and daughters are no longer willing to practice this culture. In fact, the practiced of the Biaken culture had been reduced to its barest minimum as no girl is interested to become a “Biaken”.

In spite of the above challenges associated with the practice of Biaken culture, few people who are not blessed with male children considered it as the best option for the continuity of the family. On the other hand, few traditionalists and uneducated parents still consider the Biaken cultural practice as an integral part of our culture and cannot be abandoned because of our exposure to other cultural practices.

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