

Women as Agents of Political Change and Social Governance: A Critical Analysis of Eweya, Isoko Women's Group of West Africa

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Abstract

Women deal with patriarchy, gender restrictions and social expectations, African women confront poverty, child bearing and sometimes help in bread winning, this happens despite the categorization of women as weaker sex. Additionally, Isoko women encounter gerontocracy, a system of government and social order that dictates, not just men but elders' rule. *Eweya* is Isoko women organization, where they come together to deliberate on personal and social issues. Through *Eweya*, Isoko women circumnavigate gender concerns, and confront social agency to achieve social relevance. *Eweya's* ontological activism enables women to achieve social change, as they deploy the cosmic force of justice, to scale obstacles, become stake holders, and achieve self-actualization. This paper used the framework of *Ubuntu*, Bantu theory of force and *Nguni* notions of togetherness to interrogate *Eweya*. The objective is to examine Isoko women's ontologico-communal approach that helps them navigate gerontocracy, it critically analyses how Isoko women bridge the gender concerns, and confront agency, to attain social relevance. The paper employed literature review, ethnographic debates and critical elucidations. It recommends and concludes that women can continue to replicate ontologico-communal activism, by employing their body as a tool of social change. It advocates that women stimulate their nature for social intervention and active restoration. As *Eweya*, and other women organization understand the force of body not for objectification, sexuality and gaze, but as a means of restorative social change and progressive development in Africa.

Keywords: *Eweya. Women-activism. Isoko. Body. Gerontocracy*

Introduction

Western philosophy and researchers explore and study the human body in many ways. The mind and body theories spiral into debates about body as performance, body as an object of the gaze and body as an expression of sexuality. But for many Southern and indigenous people, bodies, particularly, women's body serves other purposes, with different approach, as a means of influence. Though, socio-cultural and patriarchal notions make it difficult for women to be without her birth family and husband, yet the problem with this socio-cultural setting means that they must find other ways and means of existence.

When navigating issues that confront women, Isoko women have several approaches, they

navigate family support through division of labor (Ekeocha 2021) and deal with patriarchy, gerontocracy and eldership rule as their lived experiences. *Eweya* Isoko women group is a machine through which women air their voices and compel other agencies to pay attention, by listening to their concerns. Through *Eweya*, women influence men and demand policy changes and agency intervention. This happens through the consciousness of cosmic justice, the belief in ontological bodies and the consequences of disturbing social harmony. The lived experiences of indigenous people show women's approach to be effective, as many dread this method of women activism. Thus, the need to explore this type of women organizations for impact, and necessarily interrogating the significance of indigenous people view of women's body, for its metaphysical significance of how women can explore togetherness for growth, influence and development.

During general gathering Isoko women do not have a voice, they air their views through interpreters, *Otota*. This cultural requirement means the spokesperson helps with negotiation and exchange of ideas. In this view, indigenous women employ the power of togetherness to make their voices heard, participate and become stake holders. Other studies indicate that indigenous women contribute to the survival of our communities (Lawrence, Bonita, and Anderson, 2005). Women's grouping creates a sense of belonging, encouraging interactions and social relationship. Thus, such indigenous interest grouping has the capacity of evolving into political parties, feminists' movements, and rights organizations. Hence, external women's organizations often connect with such groups to promote empowerments, female social and political leadership. Additionally, (Lawrence, et al 2005) explores the ways and practices of indigenous women group, their influence and development, including how women groups were appropriated and reinterpreted. Showing that women's lived experiences evolve from their understanding and respect for the cultural particularities of indigenous communities.

As social agents, *Eweya* engage with their capacity to produce changes in the lives of women. Their method is similar to Bantu theory of force; this is Isoko notions of cosmic justice. In this wise, *Eweya* challenge injustice, confront abuse of power, and deal with poor governance. This cultural view is embedded in ontologico-comunalist approach to bodies, as force in togetherness. In a similar view, *Nguni* the theory of 'togetherness' enables *Eweya* to mobilize other women to collective action and political resistance.

This research is significant and relevant for its contribution to knowledge, particularly, the different approach to women's body, not just for sexuality but as means of influence, tool of social change, that attracts respect and dignity. In this way, *Eweya* and such women organizations serve as a tool of checkmating government excesses. It demands accountability, and compels men to listen. *Eweya*, when strategically structured can contribute positively to political reforms and social change in Africa.

The Ubuntu Theory of Force and Isoko Notions of Cosmic Justice

Ubuntu, a theory made popular in Bantu philosophy by Placid Temples, is the philosophy that emphasizes the relationship between everything in the universe. The theory indicates that existence of everyone and everything is interconnected and interrelated. The theory emphasizes community, and mutual respect, insisting that "I am because we are." Ubuntu applies to morality, social acts, and organizing forces for stability, reconciliation, and shared humanity. Many scholars researching the theory found interrelations with like indigenous theories, hence Ubuntu is a deeply-held African notion, which ideals extends to personhood and being, rooted with others. In application Ubuntu recognizes that every individual's behavior has a cause and effect (Mbigi,

1997) identifies solidarity, survival, compassion, respect, and dignity as the five fundamental values of Ubuntu.

Following from Bantu theory of force, is *Nguni* “I am because we are.” While Ubuntu stresses that a person's humanity is critical to the existence of others and nature. It does not support the contemporary view of aloneness but aims to bridge the gap of inequities, by eliminating discrimination and injustice in the ecosystem. *Nguni*, stresses that a person's humanity is bound up with the community, insisting that everyone's well-being depends on the well-being of others. In practice, Ubuntu means caring for one another, sharing resources, and showing moral responsibility as collective value rather than purely individual attainment, an ontologico-communalism.

In this wise, when properly examined, the Bantu notion and its Ubuntu expression, rightly relates and connects with Isoko view about the force of cosmic justice. This Ontologico-communalism, is an aspect of *Eweya* movement that is guided by communal duty and solidarity, not just abstract rights, but addressing social concerns and seeking change through communal responsibility rooted in Ubuntu. The Bantu worldview, is a theory much explored amongst African scholars and it continues to be relevant for indigenous discourses that “everything in the universe is seen to be a vital force by Bantu “(Weidtmann, 2019). Accordingly, essences from Bantu world view shows that “force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force” (Temples, 1969) thus, the view that force as the basis of African ontology.

Progressively, indigenous African researchers and scholars connect with the Bantu theory, for its diverse expressions in their cultural notions, they defend the vital force theory of the meaning of life. For instance, (Agada, 2023) explores vital force focusing on the transcendentalist dimension'. He examines the naturalistic account of meaning but insisting that “the naturalistic framework also compromises the transcendentalist framework of vitalism”. Again, Ndumiso, (2017) explores Ubuntu as lived and living philosophy of the indigenous people, indicating Ubuntu-inspired movements in the history of the wars of resistance and the struggle for liberation ongoing 'since 1652.' There are several explains of indigenous people activating the theory during war and for effective influence.

Again, when it comes to interconnectivity of humans and the naturalistic framework, Isoko people hold the same view strongly, and Isoko women know how initiate nature reaction, showing a similarity and the unconscious allusion to Bantu philosophy, Ubuntu and through the notion of cosmic justice. Here women intentionally act in ways that deter others from acts that disrupt social harmony, with dire repercussions. *Eweya*, Isoko women's groups understand the consequences of turning a blind eye to social ills committed by others, individuals, community agencies. Hence, for Isoko women, to reduce the impact of cosmic repercussion, women stand in the gap to resolve such provocative actions, like abominations.

Though, women activism and organization encounter resistance, undauntedly, many still dare, Willaim, (1993) reviews the difficulty that women encounter in these interventions, since their societies has a contrary view of women, and what women should be doing, he explains that “feminists/womanist connection” are neither smooth nor free of tension, even as they have not developed a standard method of resolving those issues. The research shows that indigenous women have different approach to such socioc-cultural matters, and this is true for many women organisations like *Eweya* and other women organisations dealing with cultural challenges and gender obstacles.

Historical and Cultural Foundations for Femaleness in Isoko

The idea of femaleness could be argued from the theory of nature, or psychology depending on the individual who is expressing the idea and their lived experiences. While cultural views impact on lived experiences, people's convictions can hardly be separated from those cultures. For instance, many people have strong convictions about gender, they have a clear perspective of gender roles and role plays. The belief is that femaleness is always natural, however, new debates about psychology of gender subscribe to gender training. Argument and the debates about gender and “theories of performance” nature are some justifications for the second position. In this discourse (Butler, 2013) and other scholars like (Brickell, 2003) indicates that performing roles includes gender categories, associated traits, and the subjective nature in the performance of gender, including the “mimetic aspects of gender performance”. Clearly gender performative theories show that gender characteristics can easily be taught. However, it is

unresolved whether performance equals nature. There are clear aspects of gender and nature that would not be easily manipulated just by performance, (Linke, 1992) alludes to notions like manhood, femaleness and reproduction. Naturally only those who were females have the capacity of conception and birthing children, just like only natural men have the capacity to produce sperm. And, this aspect has been accompanied with the cultural beliefs of the capacity of women and the place of women. It's a metaphysical and ontological belief that science and social agency cannot change by allusion, believing or performance.

Therefore, to understand Eweya approach to society requires and understanding of Isoko view of the genders, particularly women. A historical review of 'the making of an Isoko woman' necessitates research into their cultural beliefs and lived experiences. Isoko people, located in the Delta Region of West Africa, in Nigeria. Ikime, (2005) an agrarian society, involved in fishing and farming. just like many indigenous African societies located in the Niger Delta region, Ekeocha, (2021) explains that Isokos believe in strict gender categories and operates firm lines, here have and know their place, from birth. Ekeocha further points to the practice of division of labor. This indigenous practice means that men have tasks assigned to them and women have theirs too. In this culture, women constantly share bread winning roles with their husbands. Traditionally, women farmed their lands and men engage in hunting or fishing. Both bring home their loot or rewards of their labour, and put everything together, for wholesome meals.

Isoko women accomplish co-breadwinning along with other task assigned to their femaleness. However, these women do not always play the scripts, as they circumvent patriarchy and elder's rule Onoyona-Ekeocha (2025). Gerontocracy, is the system of government where the oldest people in the society rule, this elderly approach bestows the place of governance to elders, and men. (Agba, 2020) explains further that “Gerontocracy is leadership that is strongly based on

seniority derived from age”. He confirmed that in this system of government, old people or group elderly govern the community for the greater good of the community. Agba believes that age and elderhood owe from the notions of elder siblings caring for the younger ones. Thus, kinship compels such practice in some communities. Elders rule is accepted as ideal, assuming that it equals to good leadership. However, when elders act erroneously, they are called to order, by others, particularly women. In this vein, political leadership amongst Isokos is largely male and elder's forte. Undeniably leadership by elderly citizens is a common feature in African countries, but Isoko is among the few African cultures where the practice is indigenous. Deductively, these indigenous women have a lot of socio-economic and political situations hurdles to cross, as co-breadwinners, leadership by men and elders. And where their voices could only be heard through

interpreters.

In this culture men flaunt their masculinity, *Oza* is the Isoko word for man, and as it attains in other indigenous African cultures, the idea of masculinity is a very strong notion amongst Isoko; its form of identity is being researched, as it pertains to transition and transgenderism. (Ekeocha, 2021) explains that *Oza* amongst Isoko, is expressed as the alfa male, with all its attributes and characters traits. She claims that being called a man is a thing of pride, which explains why, a boy quickly takes on the label, referring to himself as '*Oza*' man at every slightest chance he gets. Ekeocha indicates that *Oza* gladly rub their masculinity on the face of women. While *Oza* is easily attainable, *Aye*, woman does not come easy, it is not bestowed, it is a process.

For Isoko, the criteria for being called a man is a boy's penis, but the qualification, *Aye*, has social conditions, requirements and rites of passage, before girls can be labelled as women. The passage of rites usually happens during marriage, when circumcision takes place, and bridal rites fulfilled. Hence, while nature confers manhood, it is agency confirms womanhood. *Aye*, womanhood implies circumcision rite, paid bride price, and dowry. In this culture, bride price is different from dowry. Cultural beliefs indicates that bride price, one the one hand, compensates the bride's family for losing her labor, it reimburses the bride's family for her upbringing and loss of her service. On the other hand, dowry is an investment made on the new bride's household, for financial support and security. However, Isoko women have two existences, one as girls growing up, the other evolving as a woman. This lived experience of those who did meet these cultural requirements, is the loss of self-esteem, another cultural hurdles. Yet, through *Eweya*, women overcome limitations. Thus, examining *Eweya's* method is critical to understanding 21st century women approach to their socio-cultural and political world.

The Ontological of Nakedness in Cosmic Justice.

African womanist theories subscribe to women connection to nature, theories that combine material and metaphysical body for identity. In this wise (Ekeocha, 2021) explores identity theories by reviewing the two main positions, John Locke's memory or psychological theory popularly known as the mind theory of identity, and, body theory of identity, where (Fearn, 2005) explores John Perry stance that the soul could not be responsible for personal identity through time, subscribing to this notion, is William Bernard's view that 'we identify more closely with our bodies than our minds'. (Fearn, 2005) concludes that both mind and body were necessary for identity through time. Again, this believe in the significance of mind and body for identity, is similar to Isoko culture views.

In Isoko cultural view, both mind and body are important for identity, and this is supported by the cultural belief that elders don't die, they pass from the material world to immaterial, thus body has material and immaterial existence. It is this view that explains Isoko women's identifying with their bodies, which becomes a tool of activism. The act of employing ontological notion of

body for certain function is common amongst several African cultures; this is the case when they consider the popular Bantu theory of force, where everything is connected, in this view, it becomes difficult for indigenous people to draw a line between mind and body, as their beliefs show the interconnections and intertwining of both.

There are several feminist theories that can explain Isoko women approach to their bodies, being and womanhood. According to (Dove, 1998), African womanism is "An afrocentric theory" that portray nature of care and concern of women. She observes that despite the general experience of

women living in negative relationships with men, women were able to deal with their being and mode of existence without rancor or negative emotions. In this view, indigenous women move on to employing what they have to achieve what they want, which evolves into building their homes, their lives and the lives of others. This is the case for Isoko women, and other women as they accept their socio-cultural status, and scale navigate obstacles to achieve existence. Nah Dove insists that women were deliberate in ensuring the survival of their loved ones.

Thus, in this narrative, sustaining families is the forte of many indigenous women, just like *Eweya*. Isokos, view persons ontologically, who cross from human world to the world of elders. Yet, without physical bodies, their ontological nature is still potent, particularly, when intervention is required. These are the cultural beliefs and values that underpin *Eweya* as a women's institution. Clearly, navigating the male-dominated political institutions in this culture helps them build survival traits. This means that they have capacity to act beyond the normal expectations of women.

Western scholars who study women institutions agree that women operate in male dominated spheres (Galea, Natalie, and Chappell, 2022), navigating “Male-dominated workplaces and the power of masculine privilege”. In conclusion, “overrepresentation of men is linked to

gendered rules that uphold hegemony. However, with Isoko women, such oppressive masculinity explains the evolutions of survival traits, characters that means that women are part breadwinners, as they were more focused on the sustenance of their children (Onoyona-Ekeocha, 2026). This happens along with their concern for cosmic harmony. They act to rectify or restore the state of harmony, when there has been a violation. Therefore, women activism that employs the metaphysical bodies this way, has little to do with the 'gaze' (Snow, 1989).

In these wise, indigenous women also deal with the gaze, but they manipulate the gaze to influence change. This is the case, though their kind of attraction means discomfort for men. As many cannot dare the gaze of women, since body nakedness is employed to fighting oppression. This happens as men understand that kind of nakedness, the cultural beliefs about the sacredness of other women's body. This gaze does not produce desire, it is abominations. In conclusion, as a co-creator with nature, women, particularly African women's belief systems enable them to employ nakedness to provoke cosmic reaction. Ontologically, therefore, women taking off their wrappers could mean transformation, restoration and sustainable African socio-political terrain.

Critical Analysis

Following from the above debates, it is clear that *Eweya* is a force to be reckoned with. Thus, instead of women activating their sex and sexuality to distract, Isoko women and other indigenous women employ bodies for activism. In this wise, *Eweya* and other indigenous women groups like *Umuada*, become agents of social change and political Governance. Therefore, those who believe that this method is archaic are wrong, many are not familiar with this form of women activism because it is not a common practice, but when it is activated, people take notice. Like *ubuntu* and *Nguni* where everything is connected, the indigenous idea of cosmic justice, could not be easily be forgotten or wiped away by Western philosophies, those who believe in it, understand its associate metaphysical force, like many African politicians who employ metaphysical forces to gain political control, thus it is only fair to remind them of the other side of the power and control.

Thus, *Ngunni* serves as a two-edged sword with positive and negative side. Hence, women cannot turn a blind eye to injustice. Other documented movement like Wangari Mathai, Umuada, and the

popular Aba Women's War confirms the nakedness approach. For instance, Wangari Maatha movement of the 90s helped the fight against the oppressive one-party rule. And, Wangari Maatha continued this movement, in agitation for environmental conservation and against grabbing of public land. Maatha's view and Eweya's approach reveal that women activism could serve as models of gender-inclusive governance, aligning with African feminist or political theory frameworks. These indigenous notions embrace sensitivity to social harmony and political justice, emphasizing concepts like Fairness, equality, and impartiality. Therefore, using ontological bodies for protest, is commendable as the fear of retributive justice, becomes a deterrent against corruption and other negative issues in African socio-polity. Conclusively, nakedness and vulnerability as a means to attaining social change, has been proven historically and culturally to be effective, hence incorporating this approach in African womanist theories would be commendable. as naked protest serves as a critical philosophy of justice. This framework is significant for the philosophical, and socio-political African societies in redefining body perceptions, and the purpose of female bodies.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Clearly *Eweya* serves as an example of indigenous women organizations in African, despite the obstacles and limitations, women are not weak. Through nakedness more women organisations should become watch dogs. The belief in the *Ubuntu*, *Nguni* and Isoko force of cosmic justice, clearly demonstrates that women who understand their nature, and employ it to nurture their worlds, are indeed saviours and the hope of salvation for sustainable and progressive African societies.

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