

Mothers but not Wives: The *Biakē* Custom and its Implications on The Ogoni Contemporary Society

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v13i1.4>

Submission: Nov 17, 2023 Acceptance: Apr 7, 2024

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Abstract

The *Biakē* custom, an ancient practice among the Ogoni indigenous people, refers to a system by which certain girls or women are not allowed to marry, but are legitimately allowed to raise children for their parents or family, because of some peculiar circumstances of the household, thus the idea of ‘mothers but not wives.’ However, the *Biakē* practice has been misconstrued with the malapropism called ‘*Sira*-Custom,’ implying a system in which the first daughters are not given out for marriage. This study focused on the philosophical foundation of *Biakē* and its implications on the Ogoni contemporary society. The study discovered that there was never a time in Ogoni history when *Sira* (first daughters) was denied the right to marry out. Every Ogoni daughter is eligible for marriage. The study argues that though the philosophy of *Biakē* emphasizes the continuity of the family/lineage, women serving under *Biakē* and their children may experience psychological trauma due to the absence of a “father figure” and other unmet needs. Using the prescriptive method, this paper advocated for the promulgation of laws, and regulations to modify the *Biakē* custom to accommodate the Ogoni modern-day reality.

Keywords: *Biakē*, *Gbeabe*, *Biabe*, *Sira* Culture, Marriage, Ogoni Religious Philosophy.

Introduction

The philosophy of continuity is more important than survival among the Ogoni indigenous people. Thus, getting married is seen as an opportunity to contribute freely, through procreation, to the continuity of family lineage and the community at large. As a result, every Ogoni marriage is predicated on the birth of offspring. The Ogoni are not satisfied with just a child; there must be children in male and female combinations. It is a taboo to be childless in Ogoni marriage setting and that is why celibacy is never a viable option in Ogoni socio-cultural and religious philosophy.

Consequently, the *Biakē* tradition was established to avoid the most dreaded phenomenon of family lineage discontinuity. The practice of *Biakē* (to remain at home) is an ancient practice of the Ogoni indigenous people that projects and preserves the continuity of the family system, regardless of the circumstances that threaten it. It is a system that deprives or prohibits certain girls or women from marrying. Under this custom, any man who fancies a *Biakē* (a woman serving under the *Biakē* custom) would inform the parents or relations of his

intention to keep or co-habit with the girl or woman. As soon as the family members and the girl or woman accept the man's proposal, he would be required to provide customary items to the girl's or woman's family (LOOLO, 1981). The male child born by the *Biakē* is recognized and regarded as a biological son of the family, with all rights and privileges. As such, if the family's male offspring are weak and the female are more active, the parents may compel the energetic female child not to marry. She is responsible for holding and defending the weak family members against any foreign aggression or internal uprising. *Biakē* custom thus, becomes necessary because of the risk of lineage extinction, particularly in families without a male child (LETON, 2002). This is because the people of Ogoni attached so much importance to family name and its continuity. In the same vein, Nsaro Egor (1997) asserts that there are some men who only bear the name of men. Such men are powerless, weak and incapable of moving forward in any situation. They lack initiative in everything they do. To keep the name of the family alive, a very nimble woman would be asked to be at home.

However, there have been several stories on the custom of '*Biakē*' among the Ogoni indigenous people. The *Biakē* practice is sometimes misconstrued as '*Sira-Custom.*' The *Sira-Custom* wrongly assumed to mean a system where the first daughters are not given out to marriage. This misconception and over-generalization of the *Biakē* institution to involve all forms of non-marital birth in Ogoni has been popularized by Gberegbara Solomon Sungagele in his doctoral thesis at the University of Port Harcourt, entitled [The Impact of Christianity on Gbeabe Custom of Ogoni, Rivers State] (2012) which happens to be the first documented literature on the concept of *Biakē* as other Ogoni scholars only mention the concept of *Biakē* in the passing. Obodoegbulam Agi Otto (2017) corroborates this view when he asserts that though the *Sira-Custom* guarantees the first daughter a mark of honour, such practice encourages single parenthood, especially of daughters, to solve the absence of a male child in the family. Some social critics like Patrick John and Angel Ugwu (2013), and Bight Ikechukwu Bethel, Esther Esi Uchendu, and Stella Favor (2019) identify the misinterpreted '*Sira-Custom*' as a source of gender-based violence in Rivers State. According to them, the '*Sira-Custom,*' is a set of cultural norms in which the first daughters are prohibited from, or not given out for marriage, but are instead compelled to live a licentious lifestyle, with the concomitant consequences of single parenting and mental anguish. This, therefore, raises the following posers: What is the Ogoni religio-philosophical foundation of the *Biakē* custom? Is there such culture as the '*Sira-Custom*' in Ogoni? What are the differences between '*Biakē,*' '*Biabe,*' and '*Sira-Custom*' in Ogoni? What are the implications of *Biakē* on the Ogoni contemporary society? Through the descriptive research design, this study is attuned to answer the above questions.

In the first section, the study presented a brief background on the Ogoni as a people; with detailed clarification on the concept of *Biakē*. The second section focused on the religio-philosophical foundation of *Biakē* custom, and its appealing factors. In the third section, the study revealed how the *Biakē* practice has been misconstrued with the malapropism called '*Sira-Custom,*' and, as such distinguished the differences between the practice of *Biakē* and *Biabe*.

In the fourth section, the study reflected on women's experiences serving under *Biakē*. In the fifth section, the study explored the continuity and discontinuity amidst modernization and its agents. This was followed with recommendations and conclusion.

The Concept *Biakē* in Ogoni Traditional Custom

The origins and migration of the Ogoni indigenous people are a source of significant debate among scholars. While many link the origin of the Ogoni to the Ghana/Namma Theory, some simply see them as a westward expansion of Benue-Congo speakers, while others hold the Aboriginal Theory. The above speculations among scholars are attributed to the near absence of written sources that serve as the foundation for conventional history and the near absence of reliable oral traditions that could shed light on the origins and migration of the Ogoni (DEEZIA, 2020). Consequently, each author's perspective on the source of migration for the Ogoni stock would be different because there has not been a thorough archaeological examination that would pinpoint a particular source of migration for the Ogoni. However, "the Ogoni indigenous people, who currently occupy the Eastern part of Niger Delta Nigeria, are said to have settled in the six kingdoms of Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyor-Khana, Tai and Oyiigbo including Ban-goi special unit" (DEEZIA, 2020, 110). In Ogoni cosmology, community life embraces the living and the dead, thus emphasising the continuity of family lineage through the *Biakē* custom.

The word *Biakē* (among the Khana-Ogoni), or *Gbeabe* (among the Gokana-Ogoni), or *Njuuru* (among the Eleme-Ogoni) as used interchangeably in this study all means the same thing (to be retained at home). Etymologically, the word *Biakē* can be divided into two parts, and as such project two ideas: *Bia/Gbea* meaning 'to remain' or 'to be retained' and *kē/be* meaning 'home' or 'family.' *Biakē* or *Gbeabe*, therefore, means to be retained at home or in the family. When *Biakē* is used in the Ogoni traditional family setting, it refers to a woman or girl who should not be given out for marriage, but is legitimately allowed within the Ogoni family system to raise children for the family of their parents, thus institutionalizing the idea of 'mothers but not wives'. The *Biakē* custom answers any adversity that threatens the continuity of family lineage in Ogoni traditional society. *Biakē* does not apply to male members of the family (GBEREGBARA, 2012), but only to female members of the family. These women are not to be given out in marriage but should remain in the family to bear children.

In other words, the *Biakē* custom, which operates throughout Ogoni is a compulsory practice, particularly in households where the parents have no male children, and all their progeny are female. In this case, to ensure continuity of the father's name, family, and lineage, the first daughter or any of the female daughters (the first, middle or last daughter) must be retained in the family. Before traditional ceremonies and rituals are performed, the girl to be retained in the family must meet her father's desire-being very energetic, brave and good at domestic work etc. (DEEZIA, 2020). It is important to note that children from *Biakē* belong to the girl's or woman's family.

The Religio-Philosophical Foundation of *Biakē* Custom

Indigenous philosophy is as old as African culture. This is because man in all cultures has the capacity or innate power to philosophize. There is no part of the world where humans do not reflect on basic questions about the human person or about the physical environment. The outcome of this conscious reflection and one's belief, wondering at the nature of the universe, the stars, ocean, birds, life, death, growth, decay and so on gave birth to philosophy. The Ogoni religious philosophy, therefore, articulates and critically reflects on the way or ways, for example, the Ogoni perceives reality. It explores how the Ogoni experience and interpret nature, society, religion, human beings, God and human conduct. It relates directly to history, culture, and being and represents a significant moment in the intellectual respect of Africans and the challenges of Western civilization (HOUNTONDJI, 1983).

The philosophy of Ogoni existential cycle connotes continuity, as death is considered as a transitory stage in the continuous cycle rather than a destruction of life. In other words, death does not mark the end of life; rather, it marks the beginning of a new phase of existence after the physical aspect of human life has ended. Thus, the struggle to maintain such cyclic relationship between the dead, the living and the unborn forms the philosophy of the *Biakē* custom. This implies that the relationship between the dead, the living, and the unborn probably gave rise to the practice of *Biakē* among the Ogoni. This is due to the belief that there must be living members of the family, particularly the males, who must not only perform their filial duties to the ancestors and deities, but also ensure that the names of the departed are maintained by birthing children into the family. As such, the philosophy of *Biakē* custom lies at the center of the Ogoni ideology about the family system, which emphasizes the continuity of the family lineage from generation to generation.

The girl or woman kept under *Biakē* custom is expected to give birth to children under the *Biakē* system, as she is permitted to co-habit with any man of her choice. It is expected that from the children, a male child must come up to carry on the tradition of pouring libation to venerate the ancestors. However, Gberegbara (2012) observes that in cases where the woman is unable to give birth to a male child, one of the female children of the woman is kept at home to produce children that will keep the family name. Family continuity through the *Biakē* custom is held in high esteem because it is believed that the lineage must not be cut off. Sequel to this, *Biakē* custom was the only accepted method of adopting children with known biological backgrounds for the continuity of the household. These children were adopted to provide stability and care for their parents as they grew older. Such a daughter was regarded as one of the housewives, and her children shared the home's inheritance equally with other children. The woman in this position was not expected to be morally loose. She was expected to behave as though she was a married woman, and her father had to give his approval before she could get into any relationship. In appreciation, the suitor presented the father drinks. He performs the role of a husband, complete with marital rites, but the father is ultimately responsible for her overall welfare (IGBARA & KEENAM, 2013). In the case of disengagement, there was no refund of expenditure incurred

by ex-partner. When the *Biakē* father dies, the girl or woman in such a position performs all the widowhood rituals as any other wife in the home.

The desire for male children is another important factor behind the practice of *Biakē* custom among the Ogoni. When a family is anxious for male children and they are not forthcoming, but only female children are born into such family, one of the daughters (which could be the first, middle or last daughter) will not be allowed to marry, as customs demand. In this case, the parents choose which of their daughters to be retained at home. They placed a high premium on male children because they would carry on the family name and perform religious functions for the family, lineage, and community.

It is often assumed that members of the royal families were the first to pursue the *Biakē* custom. According to Barine Tanee (2004), chiefs of old were concerned that giving their daughter in marriage would lead to her associating with lower-class individuals. As such, they refused to marry out either their most cherished first, middle, or last daughter who was considered the family's first or best blood. In a similar spirit, Badey Mene (2019) backed up the above argument and position, claiming that *Biakē* began among the noble or royal family to preserve royal lineage. Because the *Biakē* custom was highly dignified, honored, respected, and recognized, it was eventually copied by other families that desired to maintain their family's blood and heritage.

Another element that contributes to the practice of *Biakē* custom in Ogoni is some parents' unguarded affection for female children. According to Nwideede (oral interview, 2021), this unguarded affection could be due to the girl's brilliance in home affairs. In that instance, the girl may be extremely perceptive in the kitchen and around the house. With such sound understanding, the parents may be so enamored with her that they believe she can take care of the entire family even better than their boy child in their absence. This understanding could evolve into reality over time, and one day, the parents will determine that such a daughter should not be married out. It could be due to the pragmatic attitude to issues, education, and other forms of socializations in modern times. In some families, the girls appear to be more intelligent than the boys. In such circumstances, the parent could be persuaded to keep the female child at home.

The pre-colonial Ogoni, as well as other ethnic groups in Nigeria, had a high infant death rate due to the presence of the six baby killer diseases: whooping cough, measles, yellow fever, poliomyelitis, chicken pox and hypertitis. Many families were forced to adopt the *Biakē* custom as a result of this pitiful and wretched circumstance. This approach allowed the family to have additional children, all of whom were subjected to the survival of the fittest concept. In fact, because they were not sure of the number of children that would survive, it was considered to raise additional children.

Another important and appealing factor that contributed to the wide acceptance of the *Biakē* custom, and its continued existence in Ogoni's land tenure system is that in Ogoni, at the death of a father or the man who was the head of the family, the family's land is shared to members of that particular family unit. On a permanent basis, each male child receives his own portion. If a woman is serving

under *Biakē* custom in that family, she is entitled to the same portion as the male children (GBEREGBARA, 2012). Each person will transfer or share his/her portion with members of his/her family unit as their inheritance. The land will only be shared among the deceased man's children after his death, not any other family members. In the case of a deceased man with only female children, one of the daughters will be retained at home to inherit the late father's properties and raise children who will bear the father's name.

Because Ogoni is primarily an agrarian society, more people were required to labor on the large hectares of land. In Ogoni pre-colonial era, wealth was determined by the number of children raised, the number of lands cultivated, the number of live-stocks available, the number of married wives, large bands of yam, surplus food to feed the family and the extended family members, taking of titles, such as Gbene, Mene, and belonging to several cultural organizations especially Amanikpo or Naa-biradee, Koromo, Karikpo, Iyormabana among others. At that time, it was necessary to prevent one of the daughters from marrying so that she could procreate for the family. The additional children joined other children to work on the farm to provide a steady supply of food and maintain the family's status quo. This implies that because it was impossible to employ workers to work on farm, farmers relied heavily on the labor provided by family members.

The Malapropism called 'Sira-Custom' in Ogoni.

The Ogoni indigenous people are deeply religious, and religion play a vital role in their daily lives. It takes care of the unknown and creates pacifism in human affairs. At the pinnacle of their religious beliefs is a monotheistic Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being) whose abode is in the sky, from where She monitors human activities, as well as the whole universe. Because Kawaa-Bari is believed to be feminine, She is referred to as 'God the Mother,' or the 'Mother of Creation.' Kawaa-Bari is also believed to be the mother of all nature, and the womb of all life, from which all creatures emanated.. She is also believed to have conceived the planet in her womb and oversee all human endeavors (DEEZIA, 2020). The general feminine perception of Kawaa-Bari is undoubtedly a reflection of her creative nature and Ogoni matrilineal tradition. Kawaa-Bari is regarded as the final arbiter of justice to whom last appeal has been made. Although, there is no shrine for Kawaa-Bari, but in some villages and communities in Ogoni, certain grooves were dedicated to her. No sacrifice is made to Kawaa-Bari. The notion of polytheism manifested in the existence of numerous intermediaries beneath the Kawaa-Bari. Each village has a protective deity that is traced to the spirit of founding fathers. At the lineage and home level, the Ogoni have various spirits, ancestors and minor gods, which are also venerated.

Consequently, women in the pre-colonial Ogoni were respected, and entrusted with important roles, duties and responsibilities in the communities and kingdoms. The feminine conception of Kawaa-Bari (God) is also manifested in how the *Sira* (first daughters), who are thought to be descended from Kawaa-Bari, are treated and placed in the Ogoni traditional society. This conception has given

the *Sira* (first daughters) a special place within the Ogoni family system, as they are seen as female goddesses manifesting in human form. Unfortunately, nowadays, the *Biakē* custom is sometimes confused with the malapropism called '*Sira-Custom*.' Some wrongly assume the *Sira-Custom* to mean a system where the first daughters are not given out to marriage.

It is important to note that, contrary to what some scholars have claimed, there was never a time in Ogoni history when *pya-Sira* (first daughters) were denied the right to marry out. Every Ogoni daughter is eligible for marriage. However, depending on the peculiar circumstances of the household, some may be asked to stay at home and bear children for the family. The father could perform a marriage ceremony for any of the daughters that may be found energetic to perpetuate the household. It was also linked to a parent's greater love for a *Sira* (first daughter), *Nuā* (middle daughter) or *Maē-kae* (last daughters) who takes the *Biakē* status. This implies that the *Sira* status in Ogoni has been misinterpreted, misrepresented and completely misunderstood as there is no such tradition in Ogoni that denies or restricts every *Sira* (first daughter) from marrying.

Does *Biakē* cover all forms of Non-marital Birth in Ogoni?

This study disagrees with the speculations that *Biakē* custom is an embrative terminology that covers all forms of marriage denials carried out by the Ogoni people, without considering the difference between *Biakē* and the derogatory category referred to as *Biabe* in recent times. *Biabe* refers to women who, for one reason or another, have been unable to find a spouse and have therefore remained unmarried. They have no special standing in the home and are only considered for left-over inheritance. Their status may change if they are fortunate enough to find a suitor.

Situations abound in Ogoni, where some girls conceived early in life before marriage. The girl is sometimes abandoned by the man responsible for the pregnancy following the non-marital birth. As a result, children born from such non-marital relationships are left with their biological mothers, as the Ogoni matrilineal system forbids a man from claiming any child born outside of a legally binding marriage custom and tradition. These children end up bearing the name of their mother's fathers. When such girl is unable to find a suitor, she becomes *Biabe* (she has remained herself at home). Although those children are accepted as family members, they can only be considered for the remnant of inheritance, and their mother cannot be considered as serving under *Biakē* custom.

Apart from people who are physically challenged from birth, there are those who have had mishaps such as fire, traffic accidents, industrial accidents, serious wounds or cuts during communal disturbances, and so on throughout their lives (GBEREGBARA, 2012). As a result, many unmarried girls and women have been unable to locate a suitable suitor because of their conditions. They stay in their father's family, cohabitating with any man they choose. However, children born in such a union bear their mother's name rather than that of their biological father's. It is important to note that this category of women is not considered as *Biakē*, as such, they become *Biabe* (she has retained herself at home) with the feelings that they have been denied the right place or consideration in society.

There are also women who are possessed by spirits (WOTOGBE-WENEKA, 2020). When proof of a deity or spirit possession is found in the life of an Ogoni girl or woman, the person behaves too differently. They engage in non-marital relationships, but find it difficult to get a suitor, and finally become *Biabe* (she has retained herself at home). Children from such non-marital relationships are accepted into their mother's families, but these women are not considered to be serving under the *Biakē* custom.

Impact of *Biakē* Custom on the Ogoni Contemporary Society: A Critical Analysis

The lack of masculine influence in some homes affects children's discipline and morality, making some of them a nuisance in the community. This implies that when children's social environments are depleted, they experience lower self-esteem, economic insecurity, and feelings of inadequacy, all of which are signs of underdevelopment. The absence of a male presence (father figure) in the family can also have an impact on the boys' identification with the masculine role, and places the primary responsibility for the child's socialization on the mother. If their daughters survive, some are forced into early marriage, jeopardizing their future chances. Consequently, women serving under *Biakē* can only be the best mother, not both mother and father. They can simply be a good mother to their children and trust God with the rest.

Biakē women have sexual needs. Tenderness, warmth, touching, and caressing by a husband are all important aspect of Sexuality. While a woman's sexual urges and ability remain active as long as she is healthy, some men believe that all a *Biakē* needs is sex. They pursue a *Biakē* and offer her their sexual services. They believe she is worried and will be a pushover as a result. Consequently, the *Biakē* continue to breed children in their father's house, expanding the size of the family. In his Presidential Address at the Synod of Diocese of Ogoni held at St. Peter's Yeghe in 2006, Solomon Gberegbara stated:

Women under Gbeabe [*Biakē*] custom continue to breed children that have little or no fatherly care. These children merely increased the population of their various families throughout Ogoniland. The leadership of these families in Ogoniland is in support of this custom and this has gone a long way to fan this custom to survive from generation to generation. (GBEREGBARA, 2006, 194)

Marriage is often seen as a symbol of achievement for women. Thus, when a woman is denied marriage, for instance, those women serving under *Biakē*; it becomes easy to subordinate them to failures, especially in contemporary times. Such woman's social status could be reduced, resulting in a loss of self-esteem. No one can truly contribute to community development if they have lost their self-esteem. As a single mother trying to provide for her children, the *Biakē* is often distracted with her problems and may be unable to properly serve as community development agent. The *Biakē* also suffer loneliness, melancholy, abandonment, uncertainty, lack of support, and other unmet needs. The *Biakē*'s social standing

could be affected, especially in contemporary society. Nowadays, some people regard them as “free wives for all,” with low self-esteem. Some of them could experience emotional distress as a result of being mistreated and sexually abused by men.

Another major effect of *Biakē* is poverty. According to the United Nations (2004), poverty is primarily a denial of freedom and opportunity and a violation of human dignity. It implies not being able to feed and clothe a family, not having access to a school or clinic, not having landed property on which to grow food or a job to support oneself, a living, and not being able to obtain credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness, and marginalization, among other things. It involves being vulnerable to violence, and it often entails living in marginal or vulnerable surroundings with limited access to safe drinking water or sanitation. On the other hand, peace of mind, perfect health and safety, freedom of choice and action, and the ability to associate in a community are all examples of well-being. Well-being also entails a solid income source and a trustworthy revenue source, among others. When none of these things are present, the *Biakē* cannot possibly contribute to community growth. Because there is no partner to complement her efforts, this practice, therefore, could have a significant negative impact on women’s economic standing.

Consequently, many children born out of the *Biakē* custom receive little or no attention from their biological fathers. While some are with their mothers who owned them, others are left to fend for themselves. As a result of hunger and hardship, many women serving under *Biakē* co-habit or engage in non-marital relationships. They bear children with some of these men just to make ends meet, without considering the source of their wealth. The end result is that children whose biological fathers have questionable characters are produced.

Biakē custom results to violence against women. Other married women are always fighting and molesting the *Biakē* because they are jealous of sharing their husbands. These fights and accusations could reduce the socio-economic status of the *Biakē*, and deter other young girls from becoming *Biakē*. In many Ogoni families, there have been continuous fights between the *Biakē* and the Saaro (the first son) over family properties. Traditionally, the Saaro (the first son) was not expected to take any property that had been given to the *Biakē* because she is entitled to inherit from the family, but this is no longer the case, the first sons and the *Biakē* are constantly at odds over landed property and structures. This circumstance has worsened the *Biakē* agony and poor living conditions in Ogoni land.

Continuity and Discontinuity in the Practice of *Biakē* Custom: A Proposal

In the Ogoni contemporary society, modernization and its agents- Christianity, Western education- have affected the practice of *Biakē* custom. Many people have become educated and are no longer interested in remaining trapped in such culture. In view of the foregoing, various women’s liberation initiatives arose to educate and sensitize women in schools, churches, and communities about the effects of the *Biakē* custom. Every woman is thought to be entitled to a spouse, and anything less is considered an illegitimate way of raising children.

As a result, many women are not prepared to be a *Biakē*, given the multiple hurdles and negative consequences that it entails;. Thus, the decline in the practice of *Biakē*. Western educational training started with the boy child, but later, the girl child joined the bandwagon of acquiring Western education, and subsequently, many people began to see reasons to de-emphasize the practice of *Biakē*. To avoid becoming a *Biakē*, some of the young girls who are ready for marriage usually abscond with their partners or would-be husbands. The majority of them married in court without their parents' knowledge or approval. Presently, the practice of *Biakē* is responsible for some families' woes 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 *Biakē* will not have any effect on them because of their faith in God and level of education. However, while the majority of Ogoni people have abandoned the practice of *Biakē*, a small number of people (parents) who do not have male offspring continue to force their daughters to become *Biakē*.

The importance of *Biakē* custom, particularly in terms of procreation, identity formation, and continuity of family lineage, cannot be overstated. The *Biakē* custom is a cultural pattern that prevents the first, middle or last daughter from marrying and leaving the family. They are allowed to have children from one or more pseudo-husbands, either within or outside the community. The men who procreate the children are not permitted to claim ownership of those children. The psychological pain and hardship endured by the *Biakē* and their children were well-known, and as a result, many parents and daughters are no longer willing to practice this culture. In reality, because no girl wants to be a *Biakē*, the *Biakē* custom is being practiced to its absolute minimum.

It can be argued that *Biakē* custom violates the human rights of those girls or women who serve under *Biakē* to a great extent. In this modern age, the enforcement of *Biakē* custom could tamper with the many rights that address women's status in society. Women are meant to have the right to raise their own families, work freely, and migrate freely, among other things. When a woman is constrained to her immediate family, she is deprived of the opportunity to exercise some of the guaranteed rights by Nigeria's constitution.

Also, there is an indication that contemporary Ogoni men may be abusing the *Biakē* custom. It is easy for such men to perceive the *Biakē* custom as an opportunity to develop sexual relationships with women without having to worry about the children's wellbeing. It is common knowledge that the *Biakē* custom contribute to a high rate of sexual abuse and molestation of local women. In a similar view, some women could use this cultural practice as an opportunity to engage in sexual promiscuity. This is because such custom does not limit the time and number of men with whom a woman is required to mate. As a result, such practice could serve as basis for the display of sexual crime and impropriety. Although some of the children from *Biakē* do very well, many from such unorganized and unstructured relationships could later become a nuisance to the community.

From the foregoing, some strategies are required to transform the situation of women serving under *Biakē* custom. The first involves the community development movement. This movement could function as a social change movement to transform the practice. For example, this strategy could promote women's education in order to provide them with information to assert their rights. Understanding the laws of the state and attaining an adequate level of education is important to empower women. In this way, *Biakē* could become optional rather forced. Women presented with the option of *Biakē* will be in a position to refuse or accept. Where they choose to accept, they could demand certain things for their own protection and comfort or negotiate certain privileges.

Also, laws could be promulgated at the state level to provide for conditions that affected families and legal entitlements of *Biakē* women must meet. In this way, no one would maltreat or deny such women of their rights or entitlements in the family when their fathers have passed on. These laws will also protect children born in such families. Punitive measures may also be integrated into such laws to deter men who abuse the institution.

Finally, economic empowerment of *Biakē* by the affected families and even the men who mate with them could be enshrined into law. Because some women who accept *Biakē* are poor, they become vulnerable to all manner of abuses and neglect. Some women from disadvantaged backgrounds also regard the *Biakē* custom as a means of escaping poverty. When their expectations fail, they become targets for abuses. Therefore, economic empowerment of women who accept *Biakē* is paramount. The Ogoni kingdoms and the state should work together to iron out modalities for incorporating women economic empowerment into the *Biakē* institution. When a woman is empowered to care for her family, she will have little or no need to rely on her immediate relatives or men for assistance. Some women participate in the *Biakē* custom just to have a share of the family inheritance. With appropriate modernization of *Biakē*, women's right to inheritance will be guaranteed in law, and when none is available, she is empowered economically and otherwise to take care of her children and meet her family's needs.

Conclusion

The study does not recommend banning the *Biakē* institution because it serves practical needs with some positive values. However, with radical changes in social institutions since the end of colonialism and the concomitant Western influence, an urgent modernization of traditional practices such as *Biakē* is required. The study, therefore, advocated for the involvement of the community development movement in the transformation of the *Biakē* practice; promotion of women's education and economic empowerment, as well as the promulgation of laws, and regulations to modify the *Biakē* custom to accommodate the Ogoni modern-day reality.

Declarations

*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work

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