

## GLOBALIZATION AND PATRIARCHY AS CHALLENGES TO GENDERED TRADITIONAL SALT MAKING: THE UBURU WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract

Women all over the world suffer different forms of repression and underdevelopment due to some patriarchal structures. Patriarchy appears a universal phenomenon and a nightmare to women. In many instances, globalization worsens the already bad situations. Gender-based careers especially those that relate to women are prone to neglect and absence of advancement unlike those that relate to men. This study interrogates the Uburu women's traditional salt industry as a victim of globalization and patriarchy; globalization that saturated local communities with imported and refined salt as a result of the use of modern technologies, and patriarchy that impeded the growth and development of the local salt industry as a result of cultural norms which hold down the women from being exposed to the use of modern technologies in salt making. In this context, globalization aggressively interlocks with patriarchy to weaken the resolve of the women in self-advancement. The result is the collapse of the gendered local salt industry which once was a source of women's economic power.

**Key words:** Globalization, patriarchy, Uburu salt lake, salt making.

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## **Introduction**

Globalization has brought about changes in most human activities across boundaries. This universal experience reflects on ideas, cultures, social interactions, trade relations, exchange of goods and services, and so on. According to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century ends as the world moves towards a new era characterized by a globally integrated economy, where decisions regarding production, consumption and other aspects of social relations increasingly include transnational dimensions (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women 2021). To a greater extent, globalization influences and determines a country's position in relation to other countries, with respect to global trade, balance of payment and other global features. Butale observes that the on-going process of globalization has created opportunities and risks that have been unevenly distributed within various countries and among different groups of people (Butale 2018). Unfortunately, globalization has placed developing countries especially African countries at the rear. This is as a result of the inability of these countries to break into global recognition with their products and services just as most Western countries and some Asian countries did and became global forces. Arowolo – Lawal rightly notes that Africa is indeed bestowed with rich natural resources and related knowledge systems which are useful in developing traditional intellectual properties (intellectual properties based on traditional knowledge systems in Africa). Still Africa is regarded as a poor continent and a weak player in global trade (Arowolo – Lawal 2010). Cultural norms and traditions constitute part of the structures that inherently hinder Africa's advancement in global trade. In this circumstance, women are the worst for it. These cultural norms often undermine African women's efforts to contribute to Africa's economic growth. The cultural norms are dictated by patriarchy which has not fairly taken the interest of women into consideration.

Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most Uburu women engaged in salt making as a means of livelihood. The salt business proved a bulwark in women's negotiations for economic power. Salt making in Uburu is women's affair which is done through local technology. The saturation of the global salt market with refined and imported salt affected the consumption of the local salt and also affected the economic base of the women. Refined and imported salt is now localized while the local salt failed to achieve any global significance. The local demand for the salt is on a progressive decline and the industry is now a shadow of itself. The locals now prefer

imported salt to the local salt. This paper therefore interrogates how globalization and patriarchy interfaced to dim the light of women's economic power, the traditional salt industry in Uburu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Background**

Globalization and patriarchy are the two dominant concepts used as analytical tools in this essay. Globalization is viewed by a former Deputy Director of the IMF, Eduardo Aninat as "the process through which an increasingly free flow of ideas, people, goods, services, and capital leads to the integration of economies and societies" (Aninat 2002). Globalization is not a recent phenomenon as there were traces of globalization in the ancient times, although not all parts of the world experienced it at the same time. Aninat observes in this direction that:

The world has experienced successive waves of what we now call globalization, going back as far as Marco Polo in the thirteenth century. These periods have all shared certain characteristics with our own: the expansion of trade, the diffusion of technology, extensive migration, and the cross-fertilization of diverse cultures... By the end of the nineteenth century, the world was already highly globalized. (Aninat 2002).

Aninat acknowledges the positive impacts of globalization and goes on to note the protestations against it. His view came at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when there were increasing protest against globalization and its negative effects on the economies of developing countries. He further observes that:

In recent years, concerns have grown about the negative aspects of globalization and especially about whether the world's poorest—the 1.2 billion people who still live on less than \$1 a day—will share in its benefits. The beliefs that free trade favors only rich countries and that volatile capital markets hurt developing countries the most have led activists of many stripes to come together in an "antiglobalization" movement. The activists highlight the costs of rapid economic change, the loss of local control

over economic policies and developments, the disappearance of old industries, and the related erosion of communities (Aninat 2002).

The negative implications highlighted by the activists who protested against globalization in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century still persist around the world, especially in developing countries that are characterized by relatively low technological advancement which obviously reflects on the quality of their products and services. Although globalization has brought countries closer to each other, and products closer to people, raising standard of living and enhancing quality of life, it has however crippled local industries and diminished local products. Local products increasingly find it difficult to break into global markets. Tamer Cavusgil rightly observes that:

“as transactions gain international character, they have a drastic impact on firm performance and industry structure. On one hand, global linkages may shorten product life cycles, create intense price pressures, displace manufacturing, outdate technology or design, or simply cause sales and profitability declines” (Cavusgil). 1993, 85)

Cavusgil’s observations reflect hugely on the situations of many local services, products and industries. Many local products do not fare better within their local environments as they face all forms of competitions, ranging from price, quality, packaging and so on. These products compete from disadvantaged positions and climes as their qualities and packaging represent the levels of technological advancements of their social environments. In this instance, it becomes difficult for such products to compete with the same or related products from countries with advanced technologies. Cavusgil observes further that “the new realities of the global marketplace have prompted business organizations to be constantly in search of enhanced productivity and new sources of competitive advantage” (Cavusgil 1993, 92). Unfortunately, local products from developing countries are often not privileged to enjoy enhanced productivity and such competitive advantage. This makes globalization a double-edged sword; a tool that helps to build at the same time it helps to destroy.

On patriarchy, Sylvia Walby, in *Theorizing Patriarchy*, conceptualizes it as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (1990, 20). Among the six structures of patriarchy she interrogated, culture is more relevant to our present study. Cultural practices remain dominant structures of patriarchy which negatively affect women and their activities. Culture propagates and consolidates patriarchy; this culture is always a male-dominated culture which privileges male control and dominance. Such dominance, in the view of Akung and Nathaniel (2021), will stifle equity and economic independent being essential ingredients for the prosperity of a region or society. Women are negatively affected or even harmed, perhaps without any intent to do that. Mary Becker observes that:

“patriarchy is a social structure, not a conspiracy among men. It is not always intentional; men need not intend to oppress women. Men too are subject to the enormous pressures of a social system that creates paths of least resistance consistent with patriarchy” (30).

This human phenomenon is driven by men’s quest to dominate social relationship of which women are often bruised, although not always intentional, according to Becker. Leah Boyd also observes that patriarchy is pervasive across the entirety of the global political economy, and women all over the world feel its effects in both their public and private lives (Leah Boyd 2018). However, in most African cultures, the pervasive tendencies of patriarchy are acceptable to women as normative social structures. They do not often resist them because they largely believe in the principles and models that explained the place of women in a male-dominated culture. There is often no conflict of interest because both male and female are socialized to accept gender classifications and the associated roles and responsibilities. This echoes Mary Becker’s view that “in a patriarchal culture, there is a strong tendency to deny conflicts of interest between women and men despite obvious inequalities in the allocation of responsibilities and scarce resources” (1999:29). Each patriarchal culture drives structures of inequality; inequality between men and women. The relationship between men and women is often anchored on inequality and reinforced by inequality. Women suffer the pangs of patriarchy in one form or the order in their entire social existence.

The convoluted forces of globalization and patriarchy have interplayed to obliterate local industries, products and services in most developing countries of the world. This is the case of Uburu salt and also the Uburu salt industry.

### **The Uburu Salt Lake in Perspective**

Uburu is a community located in Ohaozara Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. It has a high deposit of salt water which includes a salt lake. The Uburu salt lake which is known as *Mmahi* is a famous salt lake in Nigeria and is as old as the community. The salt lake is believed to have been discovered by *Oke*, the first person who migrated to Uburu, according to oral tradition. *Oke* was said to have come from *Ogwu Agbor* in the present Enugu State, Nigeria. As a hunter, he was always on hunting expeditions and would trek with his dog through thick forests in search of games. On one such occasion, he was thirsty and was searching for water to drink. Fortunately, his dog ran before him and came across a lake; the dog immediately ran back to announce a discovery. *Oke* followed the dog and found the lake. While surveying the area further, *Oke* also saw a tree that has a cornicle of salt hanging on it. He collected both the brine and the cornicle of salt, and went back to *Ogwu Agbor* to show his wife (*Ogodo Chita*) his new discoveries. When his wife tasted the brine and the solute, she felt elated and quickly suggested that they relocate to the place where the collections were found, of which *Oke* accepted.

When they got to Uburu, they visited the location of the lake, roasted yam and ate it with the brine. They thought of many things, including what actually could have made the lake to be in the form it was. Their wandering in thoughts led them to consult the gods through divination and the gods told them that the lake was a divine gift to the land. Some rituals were required by the gods which included the offer of a female virgin to the gods. All the sacrifices required were performed and the lake expanded beyond expectations. The discovery of the salt lake by a patriarch and the offer of a female (not a male) as a sacrifice to the gods in order to secure the salt lake is the anchorage of the subsisting patriarchal control of the natural resources. That women were made in-charge of the production of salt was expected. The production involves cooking the brine and cooking role is heavily gendered in *Uburu* community just as in many African communities. It is the responsibility of women to cook. It is therefore unfathomable that men could be assigned to cook the brine. In the

distribution of gender roles, it is convenient to assign any role that has to do with cooking of food or related activities to women. Salt production and other associated activities in the area are the responsibilities of women.

Only women are entitled to salt production and also performances of patriarchy-guided rituals. Among the rituals is a special haircut which a select number of women wear during the festival of the lake. This style of haircut is called *Ogonwevi*. The feast of the salt lake is celebrated in a month known as *Onwa Ogwu*. It takes place between the months of February and March. It is observed to honour the lake's goddess as it is believed to be guided by a female spirit. The feast also signifies the end of salt production for the year. Salt production in Uburu is seasonal; it is usually prominent during the dry season. The southeast Nigeria has two main seasons: the wet season and the dry season. The feast is hosted and presided over by *Ogwu* village, the particular village *Oke*, the founder of the salt lake hailed from. Other villages and communities could also join in the celebration. *Ogwu* village plays a significant role in the celebration and this is responsible for the recognition of the month also as *Onwa Ogwu*. During the celebration, selected beautiful girls and women are beautified further with beads and ornaments, to the admiration of enthusiastic spectators. They would file in a queue to the salt lake as they creatively offer special renditions and songs that lay emphasis on the significance of the event. On getting to the lake, they would fetch the brine with specially decorated earthen pots. This act marks the end of salt production for the year which is often the beginning of the wet season. Apart from this, other cultural and religious rituals are also performed in the lake to honour the goddess of the lake. Younger women would usually accompany older women to the lake to assist them. It is an avenue to master the art of salt production among the younger women; it replicates the *Igbo* traditional apprenticeship system. Women do not step into the lake to fetch the brine while menstruating; it is part of the cultural norms.

Before the late Twentieth Century, economic activities of most elderly and middle aged women in Uburu revolved basically around salt business. Salt production and marketing undoubtedly sustained the livelihood of the women and their families. There are different categories of women in the traditional salt business. There are women who produce salt and at the same time market their products. There are women who deal only in salt production while there are women who deal only in salt marketing. There are also another category of women who deal in different

traditional implements and tools such as earthen pot (*nja agba*) used in salt production. The Uburu traditional salt industry and the salt production cycle largely revolve around women.

### **Traditional Salt Making Process in Uburu**

Although there are many methods through which salt could be produced, Uburu women have a peculiar method of salt production. Salt producers across the world use different methods and technologies. Apart from producing salt through brine, salt can be mined. There is also rock salt. Morton Salt, an American food company based in Chicago, identified three methods used to produce salt: solar, evaporation and rock mining. It further categorizes evaporation method into two: solar evaporation method and vacuum evaporation method and observes that solar evaporation method is the oldest method of salt production which:

has been used since salt crystals were first noticed in trapped pools of sea water. Its use is practical only in warm climates where the evaporation rate exceeds the precipitation rate, either annually or for extended periods, and ideally, where there are steady prevailing winds. Solar salt production is, typically, the capturing of salt water in shallow ponds where the sun evaporates most of the water. The concentrated brine precipitates the salt which is then gathered by mechanical harvesting machines. Any impurities that may be present in the brine are drained off and discarded prior to harvesting (<https://www.mortonsalt.com/salt-production-and-processing/>)

It further states that the vacuum evaporation method is “the evaporation of salt brine by steam heat in large commercial evaporators, called vacuum pans”; according to the company, the “method yields a very high purity salt, fine in texture, and principally used in those applications requiring the highest quality salt” (<https://www.mortonsalt.com/salt-production-and-processing/>).

The foregoing method appears similar to the Uburu women’s normative method and technology largely because it relies on heating the brine to produce salt. It is also similar to the Japanese method that uses salt concentrate from seawater and then heating the concentrate to crystallize



the salt. According to the Salt Industry Centre of Japan, “this method is necessary because there are no salt lakes or rock salt in Japan and because salt production using natural solar evaporation is not suitable in the Japanese climate of heavy rainfall and high humidity”. (<https://www.shiojigyo.com/english/method/>)

The method of salt production in Uburu requires an individual producer to get a space (a small portion of land) called *Onu-ebe* which is used for the filtration and concentration of the brine. The space is usually located at the bank of the lake where some earthen pots are uniquely positioned. The number of earthen pots therein is dependent on the strength of the producer. Although the *Onu-ebe* is usually located at the bank of the lake, some women could choose to have it near their homes. Those pots are supported with relatively big stones underneath and clay soil is accessed and used in fastening the pots to the stones. Not every earthen pot can be used for the filtration. The pots are molded of clay with perforations at the bottom. They are called *ofufu* in the Uburu dialect and usually made by the people of Agba in Eastern Nigeria. The pot is generally known as *Nja-agba* (earthen pot from Agba) and is used in storing the brine and also for filtration and concentration.

After the arrangement of the pots, fetching the brine to fill the pots begins. While filling the pots, filtration would have begun through the already perforated holes underneath the pots. It helps to drain off impurities. This process is regarded also as a process of concentration. The brine would drip slowly into smaller earthen bowels and could last for some days before the earthen bowels will be filled. At this point, the taste of the brine is altered, becoming bitter. It is usual for the brine to become bitter after this process. The concentrated brine which is called *ochichi* would be transferred to metal containers and subjected to heating to produce crystal of white substances known as salt. The foregoing process usually takes place at the homes of the producers. The heating process could last for four days, at a very high temperature before the white substances known as salt could be produced. This is the most popular process through which Uburu women produce salt. A few women who consider this process cumbersome could circumvent it by getting the brine from the salt lake and taking it straightaway into metal containers for heating. Producing crystal of salt through this process takes a longer heating process because the brine is not concentrated. The firewood used for heating in the foregoing process can be enormous. The locals call this

process *oshi n'oyiri*, which is contextually a euphemism for impatience, a derogatory parlance for women who lack the vigour to follow the normative process and traditional technology.

### **The Uburu Salt Industry and the Global Salt Market**

The presence of salt lake in Uburu and the resultant salt production attracted salt merchants from different parts of Nigeria. The women whose responsibility it is to produce salt also transported their product to different parts of Nigeria where markets already existed for it. In this case, the traditional salt industry was generating huge returns on investment as the women who were involved in salt and associated businesses were economically emboldened to take up huge family responsibilities. Some of the women used the economic strength provided by the salt business to train their children in high schools and universities. Uburu women's salt industry is similar to the New Zealand Designer Fashion Industry which is dominated by women (Larner and Molly 2009). Uburu women salt industry provided employment opportunities to the people of Uburu, both men and women, the young and the old. Transportation thrived as a ready market existed for Uburu men who were transporters. Salt merchants were also coming to Uburu to buy the famous Uburu salt. The market proved very handy and useful especially during the Nigeria-Biafra war when scarcity of salt was generally experienced due to the subsisting crisis at the time. It was common for parents in the war-torn Biafra to source for Uburu salt in the treatment of their young children who suffered severe malnutrition and kwashiorkor. It is still widely believed that Uburu salt is medicinal. This is because all the chemical components are complete; none has been removed as it does not undergo refining which usually involves addition of preservatives and additives. The Uburu salt is in its natural state; ironically, that is largely why it lost patronage. Before the global salt market negatively affected Uburu salt, there was a high demand for the salt in different parts of Nigeria. This encouraged salt production and reinforced the traditional salt industry.

Unfortunately, however, the story has changed for bad. The scenario is no longer the same. Globalization has resulted in the collapse of the Uburu women's salt industry through the distribution of both locally refined and imported salt. The foregoing echoes Bacchus' view that within the past two decades; globalization has created a tremendous impact on the lives of women in developing nations (Bacchus 2005). Obviously, the

Uburu women's salt industry was/is not prepared to contend with the forces of global salt market and compete favourably with other salt industries at that global stage. This is largely the case with products, goods and services emanating from developing countries. They are often not adequately prepared for global market. This follows (Ibrahim 2004) position as observed in Sheikh-Ali *et al*:

Although it may be argued that globalization creates room for free access to the world market, the truth seems to lie in the assertion that only developed countries benefit from the deal because they put in place protective measures or standards to discriminate the quality and quantity of developing countries' goods and services entering their markets and at same time dictating poor economies to open their markets for foreign goods and services (2012, 2).

The advancement of the traditional salt industry has been aggressively held down by cultural norms which are instruments of patriarchy. The norms are eternally linked to patriarchal structures and control; a system that is not ready to rethink the traditional salt making and yield itself to modern technologies in order to reform the normative processes that have been traditionally regulated over the centuries. The impacts arising from this phenomenon are of negative dimensions. Salt from other parts of the world have risen to prominence as they dominate Uburu local markets. The demand for the Uburu salt has greatly reduced as the local salt industry has gone almost comatose amidst increasing global output. According to *Statista*, the global salt export in metric tons between 2017 and 2020 were as follows:

2017	-	64.51
2018	-	71.47
2019	-	74.7
2020	-	63.2

It goes on to link the large volume of salt that saturated the global salt market in recent time to countries that dominate the global salt market, the major players in salt business:

In 2018, estimated global salt exports amounted to about 71.5 metric tons. In that year, the Netherlands was the major

exporter of salt worldwide with an export valued at approximately 319.93 million U.S. dollars. In 2021, India exported approximately 8.51 billion kilograms of salt worldwide. In that year, salt exports in the United States amounted to approximately 1.08 billion kilograms. (2020, n.p.)

The effects of this sad reality on Uburu women are huge. Their economic base, their greatest source of employment has crumbled. The economic independence of the women has been weakened as most of them are now dependent on their husbands and children for a living. The use of traditional technology by the local women to produce salt in an era salt production is driven by modern technologies has affected productivity and quality of Uburu salt which consequently affected global acceptability of the product. . Gun Tur *et al* observed a similar challenge among salt farmers in Indonesia. According to them, “the main problem of salt production in Indonesia is low productivity and quality because the technology used commonly by Indonesian salt farmers is traditional method” (2018:1). A greater challenge facing salt production in Uburu is the many normative processes involved in salt production which are rooted in Uburu culture and tradition. These cultural regimentations driven by patriarchy are not yet ready to give way to modern technologies.

### **Conclusion**

Globalization is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing to most advanced economies who have benefitted immensely from the opportunities offered by globalization, and a curse to most developing countries whose economies, products, services and industries have been negatively hampered. Patriarchy also has hampered the development of women and careers associated with women. The overdependence on imported and refined salt has diminished Uburu local salt. The gendered salt industry is a victim of the forces of global salt market and also a victim of patriarchal customary norms that immune it against technological advancement. Gender-based industries, especially the ones driven by women are often hit by ravaging global forces and at the same time held down by patriarchal structures that already weakened women against any form of resistance or competitive advantage. Alenuma – Nimoh and Gerstbauer in the following words capture what appears to be the situation of women salt makers in Uburu due

to globalization; they argue that despite the euphoria around globalization, the sad reality is that while it may arguably benefit women, the situation of many of the world's women is deteriorating due to globalization (2011). Globalization and patriarchy have greatly undermined Uburu salt. The women's traditional salt industry has lost its local recognition and currently has no place on the global stage.

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