

OF BARRENNESS AND WITCHCRAFT: THE SONGS OF THE LEGI WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

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ABSTRACT

Witchcraft and barrenness are two critical issues that African women have had to grapple with since precolonial times. Therefore, the focus of attention in this paper is the songs of the Legi voluntary association among the Ijò of Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region. The Legi women's group is made up of adult women who are barren and/or have been tagged witches by their community. The women of the association compose songs about their experiences in society and sing them at burials. For the women of the Legi Association, art is a means of showing support for or solidarity with a member of the group whose father or mother has died. Moreover, the members of the association perform their songs at burials that are unconnected with them to celebrate with those who invite them.

KEYWORDS: barrenness • witchcraft • Legi Association • Ijòland • suffering • voluntary associations

INTRODUCTION

The Legi¹ Association is a common interest group composed of women who are barren and/or have been labelled witches by their community. This all-women group is found amongst the Ijò, who are the predominant ethnic group in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region and the fourth largest in the country (Ukiwo 2007; Ukeje 2010). The people, also referred to as Ijaw (the anglicised form of Ijò) or Ijaw, are concentrated in the present-day states of Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Ondo, Delta and Edo and are neighbours of the Isoko, the Urhobo, the Ikwerre, the Etche, the Ibibio, the Bini and some riverine Yoruba-speaking communities.

The Ijò ethnic nationality is internationally known for youth restiveness because of the clashes between Ijò militias and the Nigerian armed forces. Since the 1950s when crude oil was discovered in the Ijò community of Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State, it has been the mainstay of Nigeria's economy. Unfortunately, the Ijò and other minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region which produce this commodity have not seen much of the wealth that their crude oil brings to the Nigerian government. Rather,

it has engendered pollution, obliteration of their hitherto sources of livelihood, death, disease and infrastructure underdevelopment. Because of this, for some decades now, Ijọ youths have been fighting with the Nigerian government for adequate compensation for the devastation and despoliation of the Niger Delta environment (Ejobowah 2000; Ikelegbe 2001; Owolabi and Okwechime 2007; Anugwom 2011).

Fieldwork for the research was carried out in June 2018. At that time, I was a PhD student researching Ijọ traditional poetic forms in the School of Languages and Literatures, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, and was in Nigeria for fieldwork.* The audio tape – which also includes the interviews – of the songs that forms this study is deposited at the Institute for Niger Delta Studies. The data was gathered from four elderly members of the Legi Association. The five women were joined by ten other women in the community. Further clarifications on some points concerning the Association were carried out in November 2020. The songs used for this study are transcribed in the Kolokuma dialect of the Iẗon language. It is also appropriate in this introduction to explain my position towards the respondents of this paper and the ethnic group to which the research relates.

I am a cultural insider: I share the same socio-cultural and linguistic background as the respondents who are the concern of this paper. That itself is an advantage. As noted by Fiona Irvine, Gwerfyl Roberts and Caroline Bradbury-Jones (2008: 37; see also Tillman 2002), “a sound understanding of the cultural norms of the participants under study can allow for insightful interpretation of the research data”. But I have always taken to heart James Bank’s (1998: 5) statement that “objectivity should be an important aim of social science research”. Accordingly, I do not allow the socio-cultural background I share with the respondents to cloud my objectivity in the interpretation of the data. Dusanee Suwankhong and Pranee Liamputtong (2015: 4) have pointed out that “cultural insiders can take many things for granted”. For example, many of them do not ask for further information of symbolic practices and cultural norms because they feel they share commonalities with the respondents in regard to knowledge of cultural forms and practices (ibid.). That, too, I avoided. I ensured that I sought clarification or explanation from the respondents whenever there was a need to do so. As far as I know, the Ijọ are usually happy when they see scholars and students meeting them to research their folklore, especially the forms that caved in to pressure from westernisation. Thus, getting access to the information for this study was very easy for me. However, it is sometimes difficult to get information on folkloric forms that they feel will bring harm to them and the researcher for performing them outside their primary contexts. For example, I found it hard even in my own community when I decided to research a specialised form of Ijọ dirge known as *dųweį-igbela*, songs that are no longer performed (for a study of *dųweį-igbela*, see Williamson 1975).

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THE VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS IN IJOLAND

A voluntary association, noted by James Kerri (1976: 23) as “any private group voluntarily and more or less formally organized, joined and maintained by members of part-time, unpaid activities,” has been a common phenomenon amongst the Ijò since precolonial times. Of particular importance are the all-women “common-interest associations”, as Edward Norbeck (1977: 45) calls these voluntary associations. The most common type of voluntary association in Ijòland is the social group. (For more on types of voluntary association, see Little 1957; Barnes and Peil 1977.) Voluntary associations are widespread in Ijòland. In fact, in their study of the ways in which women are becoming modern in an Ijò community, and another study in Cross River State, Nigeria, Marida Hollos and Bruce Whitehouse (2008: 34) point out that “in both communities, the vast majority of women surveyed of all ages belonged to at least one women’s association”. Women belong to these associations because of the benefits to being a member of a common interest group. Ijò women, especially those in rural areas, do not normally depend on their husbands to buy them items of clothing. Therefore, it is through these associations that they are able to buy the pieces of wrapper and sew the blouses which they flaunt at burial and marriage ceremonies, religious occasions and political gatherings, amongst others.

In his classic and often-quoted study of voluntary associations in West Africa, the English anthropologist Kenneth Little (1957: 584) rightly points out that members of voluntary associations “pay in at regular intervals a fixed sum and the total is given each time to one of the members”. Little’s observation is also true of common-interest groups in Ijòland. For example, each member of an association contributes the agreed-upon fee at the end of each week or month depending on the regulations of that particular group. However, Little’s statement that “the total is given each time to one of the members” does not apply to every common interest group in Ijòland. In any case, from their financial contributions, the women could buy their blouses and pieces of wrapper, although very often members of a group buy wrapper and blouses outside the funds in the group. When a group has been invited to an event, the members will gather and deliberate on the particular piece of wrapper they will tie and the blouse that will be worn on that day. Thereafter, every member works towards raising the money to buy the wrapper and blouse by working in a number of ways from selling farm produce to fishing. It should also be pointed out that a group member can borrow money from the funds in the group to care for some needs and pay it back at a later date.

It could be seen from all this, and as Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg and Tiokou Ndonko (2010) have noted of the Bamileke women’s association in Cameroon, these voluntary associations help the women economically. Voluntary associations are invited on a regular basis to burials and political gatherings. And when they show up at these occasions, the women all appear in the same blouse and wrapper. When a voluntary association is invited to a gathering, its members are expected to appear. Some associations have penalties for those who do not appear at a gathering. Sometimes one can see five women’s voluntary associations at a gathering, although this does not mean that every voluntary association is invited to a gathering. Moreover, in the parlance of these associations, every member has a mother and a father. If a member’s biological parents are already deceased, she uses two of her relatives – an old man and an old woman – to

represent them. The day any member's parent, or someone performing that role, dies, the other members of her association, all wearing the same attire, go to celebrate with the bereaved member. Some of these associations have their own songs which they sing at the occasions they are invited to. The Legi Association, with which this paper is concerned, is one such all-women voluntary association in Ijoland.

Even though I am familiar with voluntary associations amongst the Ijo, I was surprised, and, in fact, struck to see the existence of the Legi Association. Unlike other voluntary women's associations, the Legi Association consists of women of similar experiences: women who are barren and/or have been termed witches in their community. For ethical reasons, I have refrained from mentioning the specific clan – *ibe* – and the community where the Association is. Here is an association of women that sings about their condition without any shame whatsoever. One would have thought such victims of social constructs would isolate themselves in the community and die of the shame that has been brought upon them by society. On the contrary, they are happy singing about their lot before this very society. However, today, the women rarely perform their songs because they are already old, with no new woman with similar experiences joining them. When I went for further fieldwork in November 2020, my respondents insisted there are 15 of them who are still alive even though they were not able to count up to 15. The youngest in the group, as of this year, is 69 years old. None of the women is lettered, so it was impossible to know when the Association was formed.

But why would women who are barren and/or have been accused of being witches come together, compose songs based on their experiences and sing at burials (to which they are invited)? According to them, no one under the sun is free of insults. As their leader puts it, "whether you are rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, people will say something about you" (FM 2018: Legi Association). To these women, it is only one who does not know how the world operates who will ostracise herself from the world and slowly die in her compound as a result of shame. They told me they sing the songs as a show of support to a member whose father or mother has died. Put differently, coming together and singing these songs is seen as a demonstration of solidarity with this member. But the women also perform their songs at burials that are not connected with any of their members, performing at such burials to celebrate with those who invite them. It is important to note that the death of an old man in Ijoland is a celebration.

From the forgoing, it will not be out of place if one asks about the wider social function that such an association performs in the community, although unfortunately the members of the Association have not been able to make concrete statements or provide leads to that effect. In any case, the Legi Association can be likened to the all-women *Kanyaleng* group – a group that brings together women who are infertile and/or have issues with child mortality – in Tanzania that sees their association and performances as a an "effective support network" (Hough 2008: 258, 261; see also Hollos and Whitehouse 2008). To give the reader an idea of what these women and their like have been going through amongst the Ijo, in what follows I shall consider how barrenness and witchcraft are constructed in Ijo society.

Of the various beliefs in Ijoland, witchcraft – *pou* – is undoubtedly the strongest. Some of the various religious beliefs include those concerning God, the supreme creator, reincarnation, sorcery, the afterlife, deities and ancestors, among others (see, for example, Horton 1962; Okaba and Appah 2013 [1999] for some of the beliefs). To the Ijo, the influence of witches and wizards is unimaginable. The Ijo perception of what a witch (*pou-arau*) and a wizard (*pou-owei*) do is captured perfectly below:

Many atrocities are attributed to witches and wizards. These include spiritual cannibalism and infant mortality. They inflict material loss on people by perforating their pockets and so losing huge sums of money without knowing, turning people into drunkards by placing (spiritually) bottles of gin around their necks or tins of kerosene in their stomach. Witches are the authors of accidents, destructive thunder blasts and tornadoes. They could cause abortion by feasting on the pregnant woman's foetus. They are credited with causing impotence in men by removing their testicles. (Okaba and Appah 2013 [1999]: 160)

To the Ijo, any misfortune that happens to someone is caused by someone somewhere. The phenomenon in Ijoland mirrors the situation amongst the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria where belief in witchcraft is noted to extend “from the illiterate up to the most educated and elite members of society” (Okonofua et al. 1997: 211). Moreover, this belief affects even members of some of the Christian denominations. Witchcraft is so strong that one can easily say the day somebody is tagged a witch or a wizard, is the day the person stops living a normal life in the community, especially in rural areas. It can be very simple for an old grandmother or mother to become a witch in the eyes of a son or daughter: only two unfortunate happenings in the extended family are needed. I say two because often there is little pronounced fuss about the first occurrence in terms of directly pointing accusing fingers at someone. When it repeats itself in another form, the person who is supposedly behind it becomes an outcast.

In the past, witchcraft was so strong that when someone who was under suspicion of being a witch died, the corpse would go through a ritual called *obobo bi* (‘asking the ladder’) in order to confirm the suspicion (for the ritual see Leis 1964 and Anderson 1987). If the suspicion was true, the corpse was buried close to the river like children. In a situation where the truth was not ascertained before the burial and the person was truly a witch or wizard, then, as the belief goes, they would come back, as it were, to haunt the children and members of the extended family by killing them until the truth was found out and the corpse exhumed – even after many years –, booted and thrown into the river. Even today, some families still use other means to ascertain whether a deceased was a witch or not before interment.

When I met my respondents again in 2020, I asked them whether belief in witchcraft is stronger now than it was in the past, and they confirmed it is. For one thing, the advent of modernisation has made some people wealthy and some poor. Modernisation also means that the breadwinner of a family can lose their life in a road accident or plane crash. The problem of unemployment means a university graduate could stay without a job for many years while their young friends or relatives might have built mansions and bought impressive vehicles. Extended families attribute this misfortune or inequality to witches and wizards.

Barrenness too is a major problem amongst the Ijọ. As noted by Hollos and Philip Leis (1986: 406) in their anthropological study of two Ijọ communities, “a barren woman in Ijọ society is an unfortunate thing”. They share the same mentality with some ethnic groups in The Gambia that “becoming a mother and bearing many children is a central aspect of the adult female role” (Hough 2008: 257). In fact, the issue of barrenness or childlessness is not peculiar to the Ijọ and ethnic nationalities in Gambia. For example, Hollos and Whitehouse (2008: 32) have pointed out that “becoming a mother has long been regarded as a crucial step from girlhood to womanhood in Africa and around the world”. Therefore, in Ijoland, as in other places, it is by giving birth that one attains respect in the community. Moreover,

the sign of success in a man’s life, and to some extent a woman’s too, is the number of children and grandchildren who attend a person’s funeral. Economically, children are important in establishing claims to landholdings in the community in competition with other sub-lineages. (Hollos and Leis 1986: 405)

A childless woman is, therefore, not respected in the community. In addition, she is isolated and stigmatised, as with barren women in Tanzania (Hollos and Larson 2008), most of whom do not stay long in the houses of their husbands. They are pushed out by the husband’s family as they are “useless”, to borrow the word of Winnie Koster-Oyekan (1999: 22), contrary to Hollos and Leis’ (1986: 405) view that “regardless of whom a woman marries, if she does not become pregnant her kinsmen will persuade or force her to leave her husband”. For one, a woman is always taken as the cause even if the problem might be with the man. Thus, such women move from one man to another (Hollos et al. 2009: 9, 12). In many instances, a woman who is barren is termed a witch in Ijoland. A similar phenomenon has been observed amongst the Yoruba: “barren women are under suspicion of being a witch” (Koster-Oyekan 1999: 23; see also Pearce 1999). No wonder then that all the infertile women interviewed by Hollos and her colleagues (2009) averred that they would forgo all their material possessions just to have a child. The worst thing that happened to a barren woman in traditional Ijọ community, as I got to know in my November fieldwork, was that when she died, her abdomen was torn open by other women before her corpse was taken to be buried. The large cut from her navel down to just where her ‘opening’, as it were, started on her body was to remind her constantly not to forget to come with children when next she came back to be amongst the living. Even today, barrenness is still a major issue. In an interview, Tuemi Tudou Asuka, an Ijọ sociologist of education at Niger Delta University informed me that even in this era the Ijọ will see a person who decides not to have children as mad (FM 2021: Asuka). Similar comments were made to me by Austin Epide, a widely travelled 63-year-old man (FM 2021: Epide). The challenges faced by barren woman are best imagined when one considers this lullaby which foregrounds the special place the Ijọ give to children in their affairs:

<i>Bei ọkpo ì nana ye ì nana ye</i>	Whatever thing I have in this world
<i>Tọbọ kị ebidejìn ye</i>	A child is the best thing
<i>Tọbọ ìmbeḷe mị</i>	Oh! A child is sweet
<i>Tọbọ ìmbeḷe na sịlì dejin</i>	A child is sweeter than money
<i>Tọbọ ìmbeḷe mị</i>	Oh! A child is sweet
<i>Tọbọ ìmbeḷe na kị sịlì dejin</i>	A child is sweeter than money

Tòbòu ìmbèlẹ̀ mì
Tòbòu ìmbèlẹ̀ na kẹ̀ sẹ̀lẹ̀ dẹ̀in
Aan tòbòu ìmbèlẹ̀ mì

Oh! A child is sweet
A child is sweeter than money
Yes, a child is sweet

(Armstrong 2017: 121–122)

In fact, the situation barren women and those who have been labelled witches find themselves in is so bad that if they were literate enough, and if they had the money, they would apply for asylum in foreign countries as some others do who are under the suspicion of being witches elsewhere on the African continent (Luongo 2015). I now turn attention to exploring how the songs of the all-women Legi Association reflect the twin issues of barrenness and witchcraft.

THE SONGS OF THE LEGI ASSOCIATION

I shall begin this section with how the members of Legi Association compose their songs. As earlier noted, the women have meeting days on which they gather to discuss issues that affect their Association. On such days, a new member tells the women how she has suffered at the hands of her in-laws, relatives and the community. Thereafter, the *dumatuunaraṣ* ('singer') of the group tells the other women to come up with songs based on the plight of the woman. It is not that the other women in the group are not singers. In many – if not all – of the women's groups in Ijoland, there is always a woman known as the *dumatuunaraṣ*. She is the cantor as well as the best singer in the group. The *dumatuunaraṣ* has the last opinion about composing songs and has the liberty to add new words and phrases to a song while singing. Moreover, in many instances, she is the one who raises or starts a song at occasions. The *dumatuunaraṣ* is often regarded as the owner of the group and the one to whom other members of the group refer fieldworkers because of her encyclopaedic knowledge of songs (she was one of the respondents on the two occasions I met the members of the Legi Association).

At the direction of the *dumatuunaraṣ*, the women of Legi will come up with different songs. She listens carefully to all the songs and takes some of the words and phrases in the songs of her fellow members, adding to what she has in mind to fashion a song. She can come up with two to three songs about a woman depending on the episodes of suffering, as it were, in the woman's life. Songs are composed spontaneously too when they are at a gathering. However, as the *dumatuunaraṣ* told me, when a member composes a song on the spur of the moment, but it does not go well she is told to put it in the locker (FM 2020: Legi Association). After the occasion, the song the member was trying to come up with will be brought out from the locker and fine-tuned – if it can be.

Moreover, as they said, they could learn how to sing new songs in dreams. In different terms, a member can be taught to sing a new song by someone in a dream (FM 2018: Legi Association). In this case, at the next meeting, the woman could say she was taught so-and-so song in her dream and all of the women will practice it. Furthermore, women who are neither from the community nor members of the Association but who share similar experiences with the women approach them and tell the Association to compose songs about their plight and sing them wherever they are invited. It is also important to state how the respondents discussed the songs for analysis here with me.

When they finished singing a song, I would ask them the meaning, which they would tell me. In addition, the women would go on to tell me some of the issues that the subject of a song faced and what later happened in the subject's family – something which is not captured in some of the songs. Here is one such song on the subject of witchcraft for analysis:

<i>Ebiere egberi ama-o</i>	Stories about Ebiere ²
<i>Bei mọ sẹ Ebiere egber' ama</i>	All these are stories about Ebiere
<i>"Ebiere pou-oo"</i>	"Ebiere is a witch!"
<i>Zi sei ki a lejimọ pou weri bi ma yo-o</i>	It's bad-birth life that turned her into a witch
<i>Ebiere egberi ama-o</i>	Stories about Ebiere
<i>Bei mọ sẹ ebiere egber' ama</i>	All these are stories about Ebiere
<i>"Ebiere pou-oo"</i>	"Ebiere is a witch!"
<i>"Warị bọ tọbọu kị dọn kpọ gbana a dјakumọ-o"</i>	"Don't tell her when a child is sick in the house"
<i>Ebiere egberi ama-o</i>	Stories about Ebiere
<i>Bei mọ sẹ Ebiere eber' ama</i>	All these are stories about Ebiere
<i>Ebiere gbaamo warị bọ kịmị kị dọn kpọ a kịrịkị bangido-o</i>	Ebiere said she is the one to be killed when someone is sick in the family
<i>Ebiere egberi ama-o</i>	Stories about Ebiere
<i>Bei mọ sẹ Ebiere eber' ama</i>	All these are stories about Ebiere
<i>"Ebiere pou-oo"</i>	"Ebiere is a witch!"
<i>Warị bọ yei kị dọn kpọ a kịrịkị banga yo</i>	She is the one to be killed when the husband is sick
<i>Ebiere egberi ama-o</i>	Stories about Ebiere
<i>Bei mọ sẹ Ebiere eber' ama</i>	All these are stories about Ebiere
<i>Ebiere gbaamọ Tari mu</i>	Ebiere said: "Oh! Tari, ³
<i>la yọ mọ sẹ ị tuun-o</i>	sing about me anywhere you go"
<i>Ebiere egberi ama-o</i>	Stories about Ebiere
<i>Bei mọ sẹ Ebiere eber' ama</i>	All these are stories about Ebiere.

In the song, the victim, who is from a different *ibe*, approached Tari and told her to sing about her ordeal anywhere her Association was invited. As I was told by the members of the Association, the woman who is the subject of this song went through much pain and sorrow because life was not fair to her (FM 2018: Legi Association). She gave birth to many children. However all but one died in infancy. She was called a witch in public by her half-brother because of this when she became old. As shown in the song, she was not to be told when any member of the extended family fell sick. In addition, each time the husband fell sick, she was the cause. In the end, the people of the community found out that her half-brother who had called her a witch, was the wizard in the family.

The next two songs for analysis are on the subject of barrenness:

<i>Ebiere-oo yei piri kpotumo</i>	Ebiere was driven out by her husband
<i>Izon egberi</i>	It's a true story
<i>Ebiere zigha bimein yei piri kpotumo</i>	Ebiere was driven out because she had no child
<i>Izon egberi</i>	It's a true story
<i>Ebiere-oo beikpo uya!</i>	Oh Ebiere, what suffering!
<i>Izon egberi</i>	It's a true story
<i>Ama Tari bo i bari youwo</i>	Oh Tari, come and weep with me
<i>Izon egberi</i>	It's a true story
<i>Izon bo Legi ogbo 'tu mo bo i bari you-a</i>	Come weep with me, members of Legi Association
<i>Izon egberii</i>	It's a true story.

(Armstrong 2020: 118–119)

<i>Zigha uya ni 'fiemi ya-o!</i>	What suffering you are going through for being barren!
<i>Ebiere-o bei kpọ zigha uya ni 'fiemi ye!</i>	Oh Ebiere, what suffering you are going through for being barren!
<i>B' ọkpọ zigha otu mo bein e nein ki bọlọ waa?</i>	There are many barren women in the world; is yours the first?
<i>Ebiere-o bei kpọ zigha uya ni 'fiemi ye</i>	Oh Ebiere, what suffering you are going through for being barren!
<i>Ogboinbi bi zigha otu bein e i kirike bọlọ wa-oo?</i>	There are many barren women in Ogboin; ⁴ is yours the first?
<i>Ebiere-o bei kpọ zigha uya ni 'fiemi ye!</i>	Oh Ebiere, what suffering you are going through for being barren!

(Armstrong 2020: 19)

For ethical reasons, many things will not be said about the two songs so as to protect the identity of the woman. The two songs refer to the same woman, who belongs to the Legi Association. She did not give birth at all. All kinds of ugly names were used against her. She was driven out from the home of the first man she lived with. Her second and last husband had children from other women that she cared for when their mothers had no time for them. Because of this the husband loved her so much that he did not succumb to the pressure of his people to divorce her until his demise. Fortunately for her, some of the children she raised treat her as if she was their biological mother. The first song sings of how she was treated and thrown out of the home of her first husband. She calls on the members of her Association to weep with her. It is a true-life story, as the singers (including her) say.

The second one also tells of how much she has suffered. In fact, it is double suffering. For one thing, infertility, especially the barren type, as rightly noted by Carolyn McLeod and Julie Ponesse (2008: 126), might in itself be “an agonizing experience”. Perhaps, we may imagine her pain in the light of Hollos’ and Leis’ (1986: 406) submission that in an Ijo “polygynous family a woman and her children constitute a matrifocal unit, eating,

sleeping, and working together". Her co-wife eats in the compound with her children, but she eats alone. She paddles her canoe to her farm without a child sitting in it unlike her co-wife. She fetches water and carries firewood by herself. Add that to the pain and agony caused by insults from her co-wife and other members of the community for being barren (Hollo et al. 2009). No wonder, the woman and her friends ask whether she is the only barren woman in the world. They sing that there are other women who did not give birth even in Ogboin *ibe*.

Here is another song that expresses this same subject of barrenness.

<i>Zigha-oo</i>	Didn't give birth
<i>Ebiere ma zigha-o</i>	Ebiere didn't give birth
<i>Zigha k' a leimọ bala toboṣu suḍoṣu</i>	It's childlessness that turned her into a child
<i>A boṣoṣu yei mọ toboṣu ziwereṣi ya</i>	If she had given birth with her first husband
<i>Ara toboṣu bemi siḱsi pasị doṣu</i>	Her child would now have passed primary six
<i>Mamu kara mọ yei mọ toboṣu ziwereṣi ya</i>	If she had given birth with her second husband
<i>Ara toboṣu bemi bo liḱ kpọ gbeindọṣu</i>	Her child would now have been able to climb a palm tree
<i>Zigha-oo</i>	Oh! didn't give birth
<i>Zigha-o</i>	Oh! didn't give birth
<i>Ebiere ere zigha-o</i>	Ebiere didn't give birth
<i>Zigha k' a leimọ bala toboṣu suḍoṣu</i>	It's childlessness that turned her into a child.

(Armstrong 2020: 120–121)

In Ijoland, some believe that when they see someone's child, they will be able to tell whether the child's mother or father is young or old. Therefore, childless women or women who have given birth at a time they were old enough to be carrying their grandchildren on their backs, are seen as young forever, as it were. Even someone who was carried on the back will be considered older than a childless woman. For that reason, the song is saying that barrenness has turned Ebiere into a child in the eyes of her community. It was somebody from another community who approached the *dumatuunaraṣu* of the Association to compose a song and sing about her plight.

In another song, the women sing:

<i>Ama Ebiere Woyengi ṭonbara ḱi pama yo</i>	Oh Ebiere, it's the will of God
<i>Ama Ebiere Woyengi ṭonbara ḱi pama yo</i>	Oh Ebiere, it's the will of God
<i>Ara ogbo'tu mọ pekei ḱo zimo</i>	Her friends give birth in the morning
<i>Ebiere ma buboru ḱo zidoṣu-o</i>	But Ebiere gave birth in the evening
<i>Woyengi doṣbara ḱi pama yo</i>	It's the way God wanted
<i>Ara ogbo'tu mọ pekei ḱo ziyemo</i>	Her friends give birth in the morning
<i>Ebiere ma buboru ḱi zimo mo</i>	But Ebiere gave birth in the evening
<i>Woyengi doṣbara ḱi pama yo</i>	It's the way God wanted
<i>A ma Ebiere woyengi ṭonbara ḱi pama yo</i>	Oh Ebiere, it's the will of God
<i>A ma Ebiere woyengi ṭonbara ḱi pama yo</i>	Oh Ebiere, it's the will of God

(Armstrong 2020: 121–122)

The subject of this song was infertile for many years. She gave birth, but not when she was young, when she was already becoming old. Many were surprised that she could still give birth at that age, but the song tells her not to worry because it was the way God wanted. The reader can imagine how much the woman went through during the years that she had no child.

The next song is neither on barrenness nor on witchcraft. It is the personal experience of one of the members of the Association. It is one song in their corpus that brings to the fore the Ijò belief in water spirits (see, for example, Horton 1962; Okaba and Appah 2013 [1999]).

<i>Ùya youkùmò-e</i>	Don't weep for suffering
<i>Ùya youkùmò-e</i>	Don't weep for suffering
<i>Zini owei tòbòu ì ma bo ziwèrì ya</i>	When you gave birth to another man's child
<i>nana 'raù ma bo na akagha fangìtimaa</i>	wouldn't the woman-owner come take it?
<i>Ebiere o ùya youkùmò-o</i>	Oh Ebiere, don't weep for suffering
<i>Kìmi tòbòu ùya youkùmò-o</i>	A human being should not weep for suffering
<i>Zini owei tòbòu ì ma bo ziwèrì ya</i>	When you gave birth to another man's child
<i>nana 'raù ma bo na akagha fangìtima-a.</i>	wouldn't the woman-owner come take it?

(Armstrong 2020: 123)

The subject of the song above gave birth to many children, something her ethnic group is wont to do. Sadly, all but two died in infancy. The two who lived on to adulthood were the last pregnancies. The members of her Association tell her to stop weeping and being in sorrow, because the children are not her own, they have marine spirits as their mothers. According to the song text, it is only natural that they will return to where they came from. It is a way of consoling a lady who is perpetually bereaved. When some Ijò say their people are “a water people”, they are sometimes not making reference to their being surrounded by rivers, lakes and creeks; they are rather referring to the claim that they came from water. There are many stories about people coming back after days in the water to regale them with the amazing events beneath the rivers and lakes. It is the said that marine spirits have children who are born by those on land. It is claimed that a marine mother of a child can decide that her son or daughter, born to a woman on land, will return to her after some time. In a situation like this, the child comes and goes perpetually, as in the case of the song above.

As a child, I witnessed a situation in my community where a man, on seeing that the child had died again, picked up the corpse and a machete, put them in a canoe, paddled to a place in the river and cut the corpse into pieces in order to prevent the child from coming back to trouble his wife again. Ijò poet and playwright John Pepper Clark (1976) makes use of this phenomenon of coming and going in the poem entitled “Abiku”.

It must be mentioned that not all the songs of the Association dwell on barrenness and witchcraft. However, even those very few exceptions deal with the personal experiences of the women, as in the following.

<i>Ama ye mò seri o Ebiere Pòdakoṭì langayo</i>	Rise, spirits of the land! Ebiere wants to go to Port Harcourt
<i>Ama ye mò seri o Ebiere Pòdakoṭì langayo</i>	Rise, spirits of the land! Ebiere wants to go to Port Harcourt

<i>Ara ogbo'tu mọ Englandị kpọ emi</i>	Her friends are in England
<i>Ara ogbo'tu mọ Lagosị kpọ ladọ</i>	Her friends have gone to Lagos too
<i>Ebiere la Korodi ka ara beke mięmi</i>	But Ebiere made Korodi ⁵ her city
<i>Amaye mọ seri o Ebiere Pọdakọti langayo</i>	Rise, spirits of the land! Ebiere wants to go to Port Harcourt
<i>Ama ye mọ seri o Ebiere Pọdakọti langayo</i>	Rise, spirits of the land! Ebiere wants to go to Port Harcourt
<i>Ama ye mọ seri o Ebiere Pọdakọti langayo</i>	Rise, spirits of the land! Ebiere wants to go to Port Harcourt
<i>Ara ogbo'tu mọ Pọdakọti kpọ emi</i>	Her friends are in Port Harcourt
<i>Ara ogbo'tu mọ Ghana beke kpọ emi</i>	Her friends are in Ghana too
<i>Ebiere la Korodi kị akị ara beke mięmi</i>	But Ebiere made Korodi her city
<i>Ama ye mọ seri o Ebiere Pọdakọti langayo.</i>	Rise, spirits of the land! Ebiere wants to go to Port Harcourt.

(Armstrong 2020: 124–125)

This is one song that creates humour. The target of the song is a member of their own Association. In the past, some Ijọ women and men would go to Accra, Ghana, and Lagos, Nigeria, to trade or to dig sand. Port Harcourt, the capital city of Rivers State, is more or less their own because it belongs to the Ijọ and other minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Some older women in rural areas were, and in the case of Port Harcourt, still are invited over to those places by their children to spend a few weeks after the planting and harvesting seasons. They have also heard of England and how big and beautiful it is. However, Ebiere is always in Korodi, which has become her England, Port Harcourt, Lagos and Ghana. It is only the spirits of the community that will help in a matter like this and so they are beseeched to enable her to go to those big and fine places too.

CONCLUSION

What emerges from this study is that an association such as Legi provides an opportunity for some adult Ijọ women who share similar pitiable and sorrowful experiences in life to come together, compose songs and sing about their plight at occasions to which they are invited. The members of this all-women group are not ashamed of singing about their condition, something most people would not think about doing. It must be pointed out that the existence of the Legi Association does not mean there are other such associations in Ijoland where some unfortunate members of society come together and sing about their plight in order to show solidarity to one another, or to support or celebrate with those who invite them. It is very likely that the Legi Association is the only one of its type in Ijoland. For one thing, even in the specific community where the Legi Association is found, not every barren woman or supposed witch belongs to it. In fact, the number of supposed witches in the community who belong to the Legi Association does not make up 2 percent if one considers the popular saying of the Ijọ that there is no family – i.e. extended family – in Ijoland that does not have witchcraft or accusations of witchcraft. It follows then that the Legi Association will disappear into

the past when the remaining members have left this world – the youngest of them is now 69 years old.

One other thing to come out of this study is that even today belief in witchcraft and the issue of barrenness are still very strong amongst the people. Factors such as literacy, Christianity, and social and geographic mobility have had no effect on the peoples' construction of barrenness and witchcraft. They have rather made the issues more pronounced. For instance, Pentecostal churches regularly teem with people on their service days not only in Ijoland but also in the places of other ethnic groups in southern Nigeria. One of the major reasons – if not the major one – is that people wish not to become the victim of the supposed machinations of witches, or they hope to have problems caused by witches removed: death, barrenness, sickness, poverty, non-promotion at work, unemployment, examination failure, amongst others. This goes to show witchcraft's tenacious hold on the people up to this day.

NOTES

1 The name of this women's group was mistakenly written by me as Dudutari rather than Legi everywhere it occurred in the PhD dissertation. The same mistake was also made in the very brief discussion of the women's group in my paper "Traditional Ijo Poetry" in the book *The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* (2021, London: Routledge). I therefore sincerely apologise for any inconvenience the mistake has caused anyone. Legi is the Ijorized form of the English word 'leg'. The women told me the name represents the fact that their legs could take them to whichever community they are invited.

2 I have replaced the actual name of the victim with Ebiere to protect her privacy.

3 Tari represents the *dumatuunaraŋ* of the Association.

4 Ogboin is a pseudonym representing the *ibe* in which the incident occurred.

5 I have replaced the actual fishing and farming camp name with Korodi in order to protect my informant's privacy.

SOURCES

FM 2018: Legi Association = Author's fieldwork materials from June 2018. Materials are kept at the Institute for Niger Delta Studies.

FM 2020: Legi Association = Author's fieldwork materials from November 2020. Materials are kept at the Institute for Niger Delta Studies.

FM 2021: Asuka = Interview with Tuemi Tudou Asuka, January 19, 2021.

FM 2021: Epide = Interview with Austin Epide, January 15, 2021.

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