



Women and their Socio-Economic Roles in the Pre-Colonial Igbo Society

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ABSTRACT

Women in the pre-colonial Igbo society played a very great role in the Socio-economic activities of the area. During the colonial and the post-colonial period, women were looked upon as a substitute to the men. This was not the same as in the pre-colonial period. Women those days of the Igbo society played a wonderful in the economic and social developmental activities during the period. Some of the activities that dominated the economy of Igbo land in the pre-colonial era were dominated by women which has many literature to its proof. They were not wanting in the core economic life of an Igbo man that cut across Agricultural activities, Local manufacturing and non-Agricultural productions. This paper therefore x-rays the various aspects of the socio-economic activities of igboand that were engaged by women to the development of the society during the pre-colonial period.

Keywords: Women, Colonial, Igbo Society, Economy, Activities.

INTRODUCTION

The identity of women had being from on set a very dicey one. There had been male-female demarcation on every segment of life. In Igbo society men's position has always attracted an esteemed honour while that of women or female was and is still to a certain extent taken as a secondary matter. There was an established stratified identity between the male and female in the Igbo society in the pre-colonial period which stood as a significant feature in its social and economic organization.

In all aspect, there is no doubt that women were very significant in the social and economic development of the Igbo society during the pre-colonial era. The role of women in the economic and social development of many Igbo society cannot be over emphasized. Women during the pre-colonial period participated actively in both the production and distribution aspects of African economy¹. Besides, they were discriminated against been seen as a weaker sex in spite of there much contributions. Igbo women were active and dedicated to whatever they were committed with within the pre-colonial period. Their contribution towards trade and local industry were still significant to the present Igbo society. They were not isolated in any part of the Igbo society when it comes to economic activities. Females were only discriminated when it comes to issues of sacred societal norms and values that tend to take women involvement in some communities as a taboo like Igba Mmanwu. Without this inhibition, which was put in place by the ancestors according to myths and legend, and was meant to by upheld in honour and respect of the gods. Apart of these, they were actively involved in trade, child bearing and rearing, labour and enterprise. These and many others form, the much celebrated economic development which men in isolation could hardly achieve anything²

The Pre-Colonial Economic Position of Women in Igbo land

An Igbo women cannot but be described as a person with multifaceted talent, which cut across different sectors of life ranging from home maker to political icon if allowed to. The structure of Igbo political setting on its own restricted women to the kitchen, thereby limiting their political

participation and amiable contribution to the society. Igbo world is a male dominated society with little provision for women. In general, women in either the patrilineal or matrilineal societies were under the control of men both in the family unit and in the wilder Igbo society³. Nevertheless Igbo women were not without political rights and privileges. Like their male counterpart, they took part in local leadership that was essentially female focussed⁴.

Igbo women have enormous economic impact in the society since pre-colonial period. They were the back bone in Agriculture and trade. They made notable contributions in labour to facilitate the economy of the Igbo society. The economic activity in Igbo was characterized in the pre-colonial period by women economic wheel. Women involved actively in agricultural production throughout the Igbo land and in all season. It was not an overstatement that Igbo women during the pre-colonial and even during the colonial feed the society. According to Gloria, feeding the family includes food processing and production, harvesting, water and firewood collection, and food preparation⁵. They can engage more time and hours on the working days to various agricultural activities than most men, especially during the farming season. Women agricultural activity and production in this area include planting of certain food crops and vegetables, weeding and harvesting. They produced palm produces, cocoa-yam, plantain, pepper, garden egg among others. They Nsukka women were the major producers of the yellow pepper we have even in the contemporary period and the garden egg, about 80percent of them engaged in the production of this products. Ngwa women can be said to produce about 70percent of the green garden egg in the former Owerri and Ogoja province. Cocoa yam was majorly the sole production of Igbo women. The Okigwe division women were celebrated for their outstanding production of cocoa yam. In addition to these regular production and routine family house work, women maintained a vegetable garden around the home to augment family income⁶. They women engaged in the production 7 hunger-resistance and less laborious crops like cassava and maize that became there prominent during the colonial rule.

Apart from working in their own farm and field which every Igbo woman don't play with, before the advent of the colonist, women assist in their husbands farm. Men, than were the sole or king makers on the farming of yam which they will help in tilling the ground and women were responsible for its weeding. The role of women in agricultural activities of the Igbo society in the pre-colonial period justified the participation during the colonial rule. This was seen in their engagement in the production of cash crops that was the main attraction of the colonist in the colonial agriculture⁷. However, the cultivation of vegetables of all species was dominated and is still by women.

Labour an essential factor in agricultural and other economic activities was not beyond women involvement. During the pre-colonial Igbo society, Ogaranya was a highly respected dignity in the society, not because of the person but because of the services that was associated with it. Here the man has no shortfall in the supply of labour because of the number of wives he has that provides unpaid labour for his agricultural and other economic activities⁸. The women and their children were the first point call for labour in the man's yam farm. The man organizes his wives depending on the number he has, and his female unmarried children to assist in tilling, sowing, weeding and even harvesting as had already noted. It was when their services were not enough compared to the demand of the man, that hired labour will be considered. Women in the then Igbo society were the one hired in harvest of maize, egusi-(melon) wherever and whenever there is need for assistant. Weeding was a very arduous work comparing the assertion that men do the arduous work in farming. Weeding was very rigorous when using no better tool other than short-handle hoes that makes more tedious, because the Igbo women will bend down for the most working hours every day when weeding⁹. The job can impose considerable stress on women. It was not a big deal that a woman was pregnant to excuse her, even many at times they gave birth going to the farm during dowse days. This exercise was done two or three times before the season is over, between June and October. When a woman had more farms to weed, some times before she gets to the last plot or farm you find out that the earlier ones has already grown waiting for another attention. Hence a vicious circle was always on ground for the woman. The pathetic aspect of the whole action was her food during the period according to Njoku in the farm was consisted basically of a cob or two of dried maize and dried cocoayam¹⁰.

Women in the traditional Igbo society was seen to be a pillar in various economic activities especially in agriculture as was noted of their role in agriculture. M.M. Green commented on Umuoke of Igbo community as follows:

There are months when men have little, if anything, to do in the farms whereas all the year round, though particularly in the wet season (rainy season) the women are occupied weeding, planting and tending the crops¹¹.

He was supposedly saying the truth when in his report he said that among the women she “Never saw a fat one”¹². This shows not only in that particular community but in the Igbo society in general, Igbo women were active in agriculture and other economic activities. On the same note, P.O. Nsugbe observed and made similar remark about Ohafia women¹³. We can say that the calendar of agricultural activities worked in favour of men and to the disadvantage of women. The men were involved in a serious farm work when or during Unwu while the women were fully stretched during the same and other period¹⁴.

Trade in Igbo society was regarded as central activity that selects no specialty but some areas were more engaged it than others. Pre-colonial Igbo women were seen as a driven economic wheel moving the economy to the best destination. They traded in various kinds of agricultural products both ones mentioned above and those not itemized in this paper. Trade in Igbo land was dominated by women in the pre-colonial times. Their central role in the trade was mostly manifested in the local level. You will not get or see any Igbo community in the pre-colonial, colonial and even beyond without its own market place. Market in the Igbo pre-colonial era were held periodically on the basis of Igbo four-day or eight day, that often evolved a market ring or cycle that operated on the principle that proximity in space should imply separation in time¹⁵.

According to Njoku “women completely dominated local or subsistence trading. To the normal Igbo women, marketing were a passion and can be said to be in the blood”¹⁶. Also on the participation of local trading by women, Basden had this to say

On market days practically the whole female population move in the market place, either to trade or to enjoy the general entertainment such gathering afford. Igbo women cannot keep away from the native market any more than English women can keep away from Regent Street ...¹⁷.

The outlook of the local trade in the pre-colonial period was dominated by women who also took sole responsibility in its organization and justification. Local trade was so organized in that, portion were allotted for different categories of crops. Likewise each kindred in the various local markets had a specific area they cluster for easy contact and group movement. It was a norm for women to move in group especially going back home after the market period.

Every market in the pre-colonial Igbo setting had rules that govern the activities in and around the market. These rules in most occasions were made by women with the help of men to enforce it. Whenever there was an issue or matters concerning the local market, it was the women that deliberate on it, having set respective units that were always headed by women to cater the affairs of the local market. As observed by Njoku” women set a council that made and enforce market regulations, presume exchange rates of local currencies as manila and cowries, and what articles of exchange were forbidden in the market.¹⁸ One of the outstanding positive effect of the dominance of women in local trade was that it was safer and easier for women to move and trade in a state of inter community rivals than their male counterpart, also 80% of the items or produce found in the local market was food crops which was dominant women affair. The commodities were produced by them and are mostly used by them in their kitchen such like Vegetables, Coca Yam, Papers, Salt and Earthen Vessels etc. Such market like eke Alta, Nkwodioka, Eke Ututu and some other were few examples of such market that had dominance of women as its occupants

Likewise, the men during the pre-colonial Igbo period dominated the long distance trade just like the women in the local trade. This does not mean that women were excluded in the trade. Some women were involved in the trade mostly those that their husband had been in the business. This confirmed Equinano observation as he traveled from the Igbo area to the coast “that a number of well built sheds at convenient distances to accommodate merchants and traders who lay with their wives¹⁹ . During the period women from Aro and Ohafia sometimes goes with their spouses in their kidnapping and slaves trading operation acting are nursing mothers to kidnapped children²⁰.

A woman not playing much role or dominance in long distance trade was not that they can't cope, but that long distances trade interfered with the natural role of an Igbo woman as a mother, child rearing

and care, housekeeping and tend to the fare etc. Local trade can be said to function without fictions with these functions

Local Industries/Non Agricultural Production

In the pre-colonial economy of Igbo land, women featured well in the traditional industries of the society. Igbo had an organized and developed local craft and other manufacturing industries as far as the pre-colonial period. Gender division on the local industries was also applicable in the various craft available. Some craft in the pre-colonial Igbo society were exclusively for women. These included salt production, pottery, textile and mat production.

Salt: A biological essential ingredient for human survival, salt production and marketing was one of the most important local industries in the pre-colonial Igbo society. The demand for salt was universal in the entire Igbo land, and its importance was the most spatially restricted industry in Igbo land and tended to be in short supply also.²¹ Salt production in Igbo land during the pre-colonial was synonym to women. Though it was women affair, it had some prominent centers of production in Igbo land during the period. The basic center of salt production in Igbo land in the pre-colonial period was Uburu, Okposi, and Oshiri in old Afikpo division but in the present Ohaozara Local Government Area of the Ebony state. These communities have salt lakes from where the women got the salt water they processed to obtain salt residue, which they mold into blocks or cones and hardened by drying under the sun or kitchen fire²²

Salt production had rituals and tabor that guide it, for example adultery women and menstruating women could not fetch water from the lake. Failure of such taboos incurred the dreadful wrath of the deities.²³ All the measures was in place to secure and protect the lake from being misused and against defilement. Women producer salt always formed themselves into guild, to restrict entry into the industry without due process and exclusion of men from participation.

The economy of Uburu and Okposi was mainly base on salt during the pre-colonial and colonial period. This was proved because it was marketed throughout Igbo land and the beyond; this was also contained in J.W.Wallace observation, that the Uburu/Okposi salt was found as far as North Benue River²⁴.

Women from Uburu and Okposi made substantial wealth from salt industry; with it they maintained and sustained their families at relatively high level of affluence. This was because traders from all other parts of South Eastern Nigeria, troops in large numbers to buy salt from there, Foreign salt though scare, came to Igbo land through the coastal communities during the period, With the money they women of these communities mostly Uburu and Okposi are making through the salt industry, they seems to be wealthier than men.

Pottery: Igbo women were not absent in pottery work during the pre-colonial era. Pottery was a widely distributed local industry for two major reasons, the basic raw material - clay was widely distributed in Igbo land and secondly the fragility of earthen wears made from pottery. It does not withstand long distributions over considerable distances by head portorage as was the metal ware and textile²⁵. In as much it was a wild distributed local industry in Igboland, some communities are outstanding having made fame and name in pottery work.

Communities like Ekwe, Ishiasu, Ohuhm, Eha-Jhemona, Lokpa had made dominance in pottery that transcend their immediate communities. Pottery industry occupied an enviable position in the strata of the economy of these societies. In Ekwe for instance, pottery is said to be the main stay of the economy, almost every household practiced the craft even till today: Likewise in Ishiagu. This industry in these two communalities was described on the main stay of the peoples economy, irrespective of other economic engagement²⁶. Girls are meant to learn it at puberty from their mothers in Ishiagu. It has an annual festival dedicated to clay/ pottery deity called "Okparauro" that also enjoys honorific appreciation, Omechara Nwa Ogbeye, "the redeemer of the poor"²⁷ in Ishiogu.

The industry like others had important associated deities in each of the producing centers. The production processes were also associated with various rituals to attract the aid of the deity to ensure a successful production. Production processes was much demanding while molding and decoration of the clay dishes were the outlet the women exhibits their art and aesthetic creative imagination. Various items like pots and other earthen wares produced by the women differed in size, design and usage. Some were for domestic use like pots for fetching and storing water while others were for

ritual purpose like “ Ite Mmou”. In some parts of Igbo land it was the old woman that was believed to attain a high spiritual development produces Ite Mmuo.

Cloth/Textile:

Women in the pre-colonial Igbo society had been engaged in cloth making even till the early years of 19th century.

Textile production was the preserve of women in Igbo land, a profession they pursued with zeal. ²⁹

This was also observed by Equiano when he recalled that

When our women are not employed with the men in the tillage, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving of cotton, which they wards dye and make into garments ³⁰.

Raw cotton was processed through different stages before turning into cloth. These include Ginning, Carding Spinning, Dyeing and weaving the cotton was spun on a spindle by sharp twists between finger and thumb. Basden stated that “women are expert at this that they can cause the spindle to revolve so rapidly that it appears to be stationary.”³¹ Areas of the Igbo land that cotton was abound in the pre-colonial period are Abakilki, Ndoki, Nsukka and Anaioch but the Nsukka women mostly the Ibeagwa women does better than other because of the closeness to the professional Isala dyers. Ndoki of Akwete was the producing center in Igbo land that excelled beyond other areas in the 19th century. The women of Akwete was known nationwide for Akwete cloth. The production of cotton was not just as economic pursuit for Akwete women but also a way of life ³² . Women were the pillars’ of economy in the pre-colonial Igbo society.

Weaving was another aspect of the economy that engaged to women and they also excelled. Villages like Okigwu, Afikpo, Ohuhu and Uburu were blessed with pandemics palm lute. Hence took the opportunity of weaving various types of mats and other related products. Women of the area harvest the long leaves of the pandamusd palms that grows swamp, cleaned and dread. The women will now weave the leaves to various sizes of the mats and design. Mats were used for different purpose like, Sleeping mat, Ceiling mats, and sometimes Burial mats.

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