

## WOMEN AND DYNAMICS OF FOOD SECURITY IN PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The attainments of women in pre-colonial Nigeria and their inestimable contributions to food security of their respective families and societies were by no means a homogeneous experience. This is because women at individual and group levels across what is today, Nigeria, played critical and significant roles in their different communities, kingdoms and empires to impact society in a manner worthy of historical attention. The economy was largely subsistence in nature and the women in addition to agricultural production engaged in local industry and trade. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to unravel the different roles played by women during the period under study and to this end Marxist/Socialist and Postmodernist theories were adopted. The paper submits that women across the different epochs of Nigeria's existence, played active, positive and constructively impactful roles in pre-colonial era, thus, this should inspire contemporary Nigerian women to higher levels of participation, productivity and performance in the critical task of nation building. The work employs qualitative research design, adopting historical research method while relying on primary and secondary sources.*

**Keywords:** Society, Economy, Postmodernist, Family, Agriculture.

### Introduction

Nigeria lies between 40N and 140N and it is bounded in the north by the Sahara Desert and in the south by the Gulf of Guinea, an arm of the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>1</sup> The pre-colonial Nigeria was not a static era during which all socio-economic and political system existed in a finished and final form. Apparently, different types of state system and societies existed. There were kingdoms, empires, states, city states and acephalous societies. The different nationalities ethnic groups that were eventually welded together as a political union called Nigeria had existed independent of one another prior to British colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Nigeria has about 250-300 ethnic groups as measured by self-identification or the presence of different languages<sup>3</sup>, most of whom have distinct customs, traditions, and languages. The larger and politically dominant groups include the Yoruba, the Igbo and the Hausa. Other prominent but less numerous groups include the Edo, the Efik, Ibibio, the Nupe, the Tiv and the Kanuri. *The position of women in pre-colonial Nigeria obviously differed in the vast number of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Women in pre-colonial societies held a complementary position to men although patrilineal and patriarchal kinship structures predominated Nigerian societies.*

In pre-colonial Nigeria, women were mainly involved in agriculture as suppliers of labour, food crop and livestock producers, marketers of peasant farm surplus and transporters of farm supplies and farm products between the farm and home.<sup>4</sup> This they did in addition to local industry which they perform in a harsh, hostile and discriminatory socio-economic and cultural environment. Thus, the image of a helpless, oppressed, and marginalized group has undermined their proper study, and little recognition has been granted to the various integral functions that women have performed in pre-colonial Nigeria.

In fact, the contributions of women in economic productions in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors continue to be inadequately recognized and undervalued. Regrettably women have been sidelined in decision making and these power imbalances have impeded the progress of women and their real integration into the society. Nonetheless, the attainments of women in pre-colonial era and their invaluable roles and contributions to food security of their respective societies were quite enormous.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Woman**

A woman is an adult female person, who has passed the age of puberty. Womanhood was defined within the African cosmic order as “a human being endowed with all the capacities and talents required to effectively function and make an impact on all levels of life within the society”<sup>5</sup>. The above African definition of woman implies that human beings are equally created and endowed to effectively participate in the life of the community. In the light of the above, Women were therefore seen in the African traditional context to be effectively and dynamically involved in all levels of the social process as they actively participate in the life of the community. According to Zulu Sofala, the world view underscores the idea that both genders (male and female) have the same divine source even though each has its distinctive roles to play in the life of the community.<sup>6</sup> In essence, one cannot do without the other, and any form of inequality is unacceptable.

### **Dynamics**

Dynamics has its origin in the Greek word dynamics, “force, power”.<sup>7</sup> In physics, dynamics is the study of bodies in motion and changes in that motion, and that idea can be applied to other areas as well. For example, we refer to “group dynamics” as the way people interact and work together. It is a branch of physical science and subdivision of mechanics that is concerned with the motion of material objects in relation to the physical factors that affect them: force, mass, momentum, and energy.<sup>8</sup> Dynamic can also be defined as a process or system characterized by constant change, activity, or progress. It is a force that stimulates change or progress within a system or process. It is the forces or properties that stimulate growth, development, or change within a system or process.<sup>9</sup> Of a person, it is positive attitude and full of energy and new ideas, the forces or properties which stimulate growth, development, or change within a system or process. For the purpose of this article, dynamics will be viewed in this context.

## **Food Security**

Food Security, as defined by the United Nations ‘Committee on World Food Security, means that all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.<sup>10</sup> Food Security was defined in the 1974 World Food Summit as “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”<sup>11</sup> In 1983, FAO expanded its concept to include securing access by people to available supplies, implying that attention should be balanced between the demand and supply side of the food security equation thus: “ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need”<sup>12</sup> Food Security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.<sup>13</sup> In a nutshell, food security refers to the availability of food and one’s access to it. Hence a household is considered food-secure when its occupants do not live in hunger or fear of starvation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Simone de Beauvoir<sup>14</sup> described as the mother of modern feminism, made an important distinction between sex and gender when she declared that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that biology is not destiny. Although feminist debate has moved beyond her analysis, and her followers have splintered into different ideological schools, her concept of women as ‘the other, second sex’ is still relevant. Feminist ideologies which include Marxist/socialist and post-modern feminism used in the prosecution of this study although varying in their theoretical perspectives, recognize de Beauvoir’s distinction between sex and gender.

Accordingly, this analysis, although drawing heavily from Marxist/socialist’s feminist thought as well as post-modernist is based on eclectic and critical synthesis of these contending perspectives. For Marxists/socialists, gender transformation requires structural changes in the economic, political and cultural fundamentals, that is, in the substructure of a body politic. Marx felt that class remains an important analytical category in understanding changes in gender relations. When class oppression was overcome, gender oppression would vanish as well. Socialist feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labor and assert that women are unable to be free due to their financial dependence on males in society. They argue that liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women’s oppression.<sup>15</sup>

Post-modernist feminists, Butler, argues that “women are a questionable category, because it involves much more – class, race, sexuality, and other aspects of individualism’... ‘sex does not necessarily constrict gender’, and it is ‘not constructive to separate human beings into one of two choices’ or ‘to lump all women into one group, as if their interests could be uniform’.<sup>16</sup> As shown in this work, pre-colonial women in Nigeria were not a homogenous social group but were, instead, unique and different in many ways, and these differences were reflected in their roles during the period under study.

## **An Overview of Women's Economic Production in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

In the pre-colonial Nigeria, women played a major role in economic production in agricultural and non-agricultural sector. Division of labor was along gender lines, and women engaged in food production, processing and distribution of goods and services.<sup>17</sup> Land was communally owned<sup>18</sup> and women were given access to land through their husbands or where applicable their parents or sons. The economy was largely subsistence in nature and the women in addition to agricultural production also engaged in non-agricultural sector such as mat weaving, cloth weaving, pottery making, soap and palm kernel oil making and trade. However, the patrilineal nature of the Nigerian culture emphasized the role of the man as the head of the family. Still, women believed that ensuring food security for their families met their responsibility as women and citizens.

### **Women in Agricultural Sectors**

#### Farming

Women played not just complementary but indeed very outstanding roles in the success of the traditional economy in the pre-colonial period. Women had varied and dynamic economic pursuits. Under the production sector of the economy, agriculture featured as the mainstay of the economy. For instance, in Igboland, agriculture was the bedrock in which the community's economic activity was set. The success of agriculture at the time hinged on the involvement of the entire household in the task. Men, women and children were involved in agriculture and the family provided the basic unit of labor for agriculture. The young and the old, male and female, were all engrossed in farm work; thus the western concept of a full-time house-wife devoted to house care was unknown.<sup>19</sup> The success of agriculture at the time hinged on the involvement of the entire household in the task. Afigbo observed that one result of this Igbo attitude to agriculture was that every Igbo man and woman was a farmer.<sup>20</sup> Olaudah Equiano revealed that men, women and children were involved in agriculture.<sup>21</sup> The family provided the basic unit of labour for agriculture. Therefore, it was virtually impossible for a man to become a celebrated wealthy farmer without the complementary role of his wife or wives in farming activities, and for the long term motive of procreating children that would provide the needed agricultural labor in the nearest future. Similarly, in Tupi civilization in Latin America, the women took charge of planting and harvesting crops and of the collecting and preparing the food. They cultivated crops such as maize, beans, yam, pepper, sweet potato, tobacco, pine apple and occasionally cotton. Also, in Inca civilization, women were responsible for some of the most important aspects of Incan life and survival, including agriculture.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, in Igboland, yam was produced in large quantities and mainly by men. A.E Afigbo observed that, "Igbo society is patrilineal, at least for the most part. The relevance of this to our discussion is that yam, the most valued crop in Igbo land, is regarded as male, while cocoyam the next in importance, is considered to be female. This is most dramatically told in the legend on the origin of food crops."<sup>23</sup> Thus, while the men cultivated crops like yam, women grew crops like cocoyam, maize, cassava and vegetables. A wide range of tubers were cultivated by Igbo women farmers in the pre-colonial period. These included cocoyam, cassava and other crops such as maize, cassava and vegetable crops of wide varieties. Cocoyam and the rest were termed women crops and the women planted different species of cocoyam. Onwuka Njoku also notes that "Other crops were regarded and, indeed, treated as inferior or women's crops, and their cultivation was

subjected to the rhythm of yam cultivation”.<sup>24</sup> Nwando Achebe expatiated on the above assertions. According to her,

In the Igbo world, crops were of a gendered nature, and these encouraged categories of crops that were believed to be either male or female. Men principally farmed the male root crop yam, which was also considered to be the “King of crops” while women cultivated female crops like cocoyam, beans, vegetable and later cassava. These so-called female crops, incidentally, made up the staple diet and supported the subsistence need of families.<sup>25</sup>

The categorization of crops along sex lines does not refer to a rigid classification as men cultivate what are generally referred to as women’s crops and vice versa but it means that in resource allocation, the men’s crops are given priority attention to the disadvantage of women’s crops.<sup>26</sup>

Women endeavored to plant subsidiary crops to yam such as beans, okro, bitterleaf, melon, breadfruit, plantain and a host of other crops they required to ensure food security for their families at any given time particularly during the farming period when the yam planting had been concluded and the farmer was practically left with little or no yams for the family. Some very hard-working and ambitious women equally owned their own yam farms. Widows were very prominent in this practice. For instance, from the oral interview gathered, it was claimed that Mgborie Igboanugo from Abba in the present day Anambra state of Nigeria had yam barns measuring about 70 feet by 180 feet.<sup>27</sup> The variety and size of crops available to the women determined the nature and character of the welfare of their families. By engaging in the production of a variety of crops, the women not only averted the incidence of over dependence on yam crop by family members, but equally ensured the availability of a well-balanced diet made up of tuber and vegetable crops rich in protein, vitamin and other nutrients, besides, it tended to enhance the economic capacity of the women. A woman producer of non-yam crops enjoyed the benefit of making bounteous harvest of some or particular crop at regular intervals. This simply meant that her family enjoyed variety of food stuffs regularly and had enough of the surplus for sale to make money to run other affairs of the family. However, among the Yoruba and Nsukka Igbo, women did little farm work, the job being left to men.<sup>28</sup>

As in every other field of human endeavor, there was division of labour. The men did the tedious aspects of the work in the farm like clearing of bushes, planting the yams, staking and harvesting them. Onwuka Njoku described it thus “In most parts of the forest belt, women weeded the farms, usually not less than twice before the harvest.”<sup>29</sup> Afigbo also stated that “the men cut the sticks and tended the yam vines, while the women did the weeding and the planting of cassava.”<sup>30</sup> Weeding was among the most tasking forms of labour. Women made use of small hoes for this exercise. Weeding took place a number of times to reduce the chances of farm crops competing and clamoring for available soil nutrients with wild weeds or grasses in the farm land. In the Jukun, tiv and Idoma areas, women were involved in weeding and harvesting of crops. Among the Katab people of Southern Zaria, Women played important roles in land clearing, seed sowing, harvesting of crops and threshing.<sup>31</sup>

In the course of yam harvest, women had roles to play. It was the job of the women and in most cases assisted by their children to collect the tubers of yam dug out from various mounds within the farm and packed them at one or two collection centers forming heaps of yam which were subsequently conveyed to the barn for stacking. During a farming season, the task of conveying these yam tubers in barns back to the farm were undertaken most often by women. As a matter of

fact, one of the most tedious works in farming is that of weed control, which constitute over 40% of the operational cost of farmers.<sup>32</sup> In the Yoruba region, cocoa farms, for example, are weeded at most twice a year; food crop farms, for example, are weeded at most twice in a year; food crop farms, in which women are mostly engaged present a different scenario. Some of them are to be weeded up to four to ensure maximum output and to control rodents attack. Women also spend more time in harvesting food crops. Oluwasola noted that 75% of harvesting done in western and central Nigeria were done by women.<sup>33</sup>

Also, in Igboland, by custom, the men owned most of the palm trees and it was the men who cut the fruits when they were ripe, the women plucked the fruits of the stalks, pounded these in the mortar and extracted the oil used for family consumption while the surplus was sold in the market to generate revenue. Although women in pre-colonial Nigeria are however not prominent in the harvesting of tree crops, but women and children were virtually involved in the transportation of farm produce to the homes in the rural areas. They do this via head portorage as there was no functional transportation. In the Northern part of the country, however, the use of beasts of burden like the camel and the donkeys reduce the amount of work the women have to do in this regard. However, men have a complete monopoly of the use of these animals to the exclusion of women who will still carry farm products or fuel wood from distant farms. As demonstrated earlier, they also have the duty of adding value to farm products by processing them.

### Animal husbandry

Animal husbandry was another aspect of agriculture women in pre-colonial Nigeria especially in Igboland engaged in. Animals domesticated included dwarf humpless cows, goats, sheep, pigs, dogs and poultry. Livestock constituted one of the major sources of protein for the people. They developed considerable skill in animal husbandry. The small poultry huts had wood ash dumped into it to provide warmth and sanitation for the birds. Goats were kept in one corner of the compound and fed with fodder. Livestock was maintained, apart from grazing on the scanty grass of the compounds, by fodder provided by the *ogbu* tree which has heavy moist foliage, and other forest foliage which is collected from the forest, the animals were taken to the forest to graze. The *Ogbu* tree is specially cultivated for the purpose. Some women reared these to increase their revenue by selling the livestock in the market in addition to the benefit of providing their households with a more diverse diet through the consumption of meat, eggs among others.<sup>33</sup> In other areas of pre-colonial Nigeria such as in Middle belt of Nigeria, Women reared goats, sheep, cows and thus contributed in livestock production.<sup>34</sup>

### **Local Industry**

Women in pre-colonial Nigeria just like their counterparts in other areas such as the Inca and Aztec civilizations in Latin America, were involved in major economic activities in the non-agricultural sector of the economy. This sector, involved economic activities such as smithery, sculpture, pottery, mat-making, broom making, soap making, palm-kernel oil production, cloth weaving, salt production, wood work, leather and ivory working among others. Few of these crafts were exhaustively undertaken by men, while the majority of them were indeed handled by women. Some, too, were open to both sexes. Crafts exclusively for women included pottery, soap making

and cloth weaving. Similarly, in Inca and Aztec civilizations, the women were often recognized in their civilizations as professional weavers and crafters.<sup>35</sup>

Those jointly undertaken by both sexes were sleeping-mat making, basket and broom making while those exclusively for men included smithery, sculpture and wood carving. Iron-working was treated as a man's job in most parts of Nigeria. But the actual work of obtaining ore is left to women" in parts of Sokoto area. In fact, any man coming across the women at work was fined.<sup>36</sup> As a result of the hard working nature of the women, they were involved in the processing of food. Fish drying was done in the coastal areas of Calabar, Oron and the Niger Delta.<sup>37</sup> The resourceful nature of these women enabled them to contribute to the sustenance of their families.

Clothing was one of the essential needs of man, world over. In Igbo land various efforts to satisfy this need had taken place. One of these was that which made use of bark of trees for clothing. Barks of trees were cut and beaten to make it high and flexible for use to cover one's nakedness. This was a non-woven textile. Another effort to produce clothes made use of non-spun fibers such as raffia palm fiber. When these materials were collected they were thoroughly beaten, trashed and squeezed until they were soft and fibrous. Subsequently, they were processed into strips of fabrics for use in covering the body particularly the private genital organs of the body.<sup>38</sup> These were the early attempts to provide cloth to cover one's nakedness. The technique of spinning and weaving had not taken place at this early period. At the same time both sexes took part in this exercise primarily aimed at devising ways of covering one's nakedness.<sup>39</sup> It was in spun fiber weavings enterprise that women featured prominently since the pre-colonial era.

Weaving was a viable source of income, and among the Igbo, cotton cloth was widely produced especially in the chief producing clusters of Akwete, Ndoki, Anioma, Nsukka, Udi and Abakaliki. In these clusters, as indeed Igboland in general, textile production was the preserve of women, a profession they pursued with zeal. In the Benue valley, many communities, such as Igbira and Nupe, women were engaged in a prosperous cotton textile industry. Unlike among the Igbo, but as in Yoruba, cotton production among the Nupe was carried out by both sexes. But while the women wove on broad looms, the men wove on narrow ones.<sup>40</sup> Revenue from weaving aided the women to ensure food security for their families. Some weavers assisted their husbands financially in their farm works by paying for labour and sometimes they supported their husbands financially during title-taking ceremonies.<sup>41</sup> However, with the influx of cheap European cotton goods into the different communities from the nineteenth century, the cloth industry could not retain its vigor well into the colonial period and subsequently declined.

Women were also engaged in local soap production used for bathing and washing purposes. In addition to that, palm kernel oil was produced which was extracted from palm kernel. It has a black colour with a strong smell and was used for body unguent and hair lubricant. It was also used to treat convulsion in children and to reduce the effect of epilepsy attack; massage babies after their delivery as it was traditionally believed that it removes body odour; treat minor ailments such as cough, cold, constipation and wounds; treat Arteriosclerosis, cardiovascular ailments and other heart diseases as the oil was believed to be rich in unsaturated fatty acid. However, the demand for the local soap and palm kernel oil declined during the colonial era as a result of the influx into the market of foreign fragranced body pomades and soaps.<sup>42</sup>

Pottery making was popular among the Afikpo, Inyi, Ishiagu and Ibeku women. Other producing centres in other parts of the country included Oshogbo, Oyo-Ile, Abeokuta and Ilorin in

Yorubaland; Jebba Island, Baro, Badagi and Bida in Nupeland; and Rahama, kwom, Naraguta, Birom and Abuja in the northern areas. In many areas in pre-colonial Nigeria, women were the main potters. For example, women were the main potters in the areas such as in the Gwari speaking area in the plateau, Kano, in Ojoba, Oshogbo, Abeokuta in Western Nigeria, Nsukka, Afigbo in Igboland and in Wukari where the pottery was done by professional women known as Ba-Zimi.<sup>43</sup> Pots were made for cooking, storage of grains, water among others.

Women potters produced a wide range of earthen wares for various uses. There were pots of various sizes, such as cooking pots of various sizes and shapes, water pots of various sizes and shapes too. There were ceremonial pots used for storing palm wine up to 80-100 liters for wedding and festive occasion. The women also manufactured plates known as *Oku* in Igboland used for eating. Also there were small pots for use at shrines of deities. Earthen kettles and flasks for infants as well as large pottery vessels for cassava fermentation and palm oil processing were also produced. Apart from the above, Women potters also produced very fanciful and well adorned pottery products. Although pottery industry was undertaken on low scale production rate, it enhanced the resources of women potters. Revenue from the sale of their earthen wares helped to diversify their revenue base.

Until the colonial and post-colonial periods when foreign made goods came into use, earthen wares served the popular needs of the people. Until the advent of exotic products, the people had no viable alternative or substitute to pottery products. Hence the demand for the products was ever sustained. Besides, even with the advent of the foreign made substitutes, there were aspects of the peoples' culture and traditions that insisted on the use of earthen products.

Although the men dominated in the area of mining of metals, women played important role in salt mining especially in the lower Benue salt mines except in Borno where, men did most of the job. The salt industry was a major economic pillar of the producing communities, especially the women of Ohaozara, Uburu in Igboland and in the Benue basin. Other leading salt mines includes inter-alia Akwama, awe, Jebjeb and Bomanda. The salt industry was solely in the hands of women, the role of men being limited to performing religious rites without which it was believed, the women would have little or no salt. Women in Okposi, and Uburu were known for salt production. Minor production areas existed in the low wet land near Birin Kebbi, Ogoja district and Ekoiland in the northern Cross River district.<sup>44</sup>

## **Trade**

Trading was another important aspect of the economy of pre-colonial Nigerian women just like some of their counterparts in other areas such as the Incas civilization where the women ran much of the local market.<sup>45</sup> In pre-colonial Nigeria, trading went hand in hand with agriculture and was all about buying and selling of various items or commodities by traders. "Hidden trade" was engaged in by Muslim women whom the Koran forbids to trade in the open.<sup>46</sup> There were two types of trading during the period under study namely, local and long distance trading and in these types of trading, process of exchange of commodities between sellers and buyers, was made possible by the introduction of media of exchange. First, barter trade was applied, but later transitional currencies came on board as legal tender shortly before, during and after the colonial rule. In Igboland, A. E Afigbo rightly pointed out that *Although subsidiary to agriculture, trade was nonetheless an important aspect of Igbo economic activity*<sup>47</sup> O.N Njoku has argued that trade



was in consequence, a crucial component of the economy, also that it is through trade that disparities in productive capacities between communities are bridged.<sup>48</sup> The production of agricultural produce and industrial goods went beyond the subsistence needs of the producers. Although most households produced most of their basic needs in the pre-colonial era, the economy was nevertheless, very much market oriented. The existence of specialist producers of certain items arising from variations in natural and human resource bases, dictated economic inter-independence.

### Local Trade

This was the commercial transactions that took place among members of a given community usually at a popular market place. In this type of market there was no room for high demand or supply of any commodity. Sales and purchases were predominantly food items produced locally. These included yams, cocoyam, maize, cassava and a host of vegetable food items. Other products on display at the local market included products of smiths (cutlasses, hoes, arrows, traps, kitchen cutleries), and products of sculptors such as pestle and mortars, hoe handles, wooden spoons and wooden handles for cutleries and cutlasses. Woven cloths, baskets, sleeping mats, salt jars, pottery products, palm wine, goats, sheep, fowl and palm oil among other items were also on display for sale. In Igboland, the markets are designated by the name of the day in which they were held viz Eke, Oye, Afo, Nkwo. Njoku noted that periodicity varied according to culture areas; but four-day, five-day, eight-day periodicities were wildly spread. On the days of the market and on its turn (fourth-daily), the market was always full of activities. Typical of what G.T Basden described as “haggling over prices, the shouting, the hurling of epithets, the incessant clatter of tongues created din that can often be heard a mile away”.<sup>49</sup> Charles Meek saw the devotion of Igbo women to petty trading as the most striking feature of Igbo life.<sup>50</sup> On her own part, M. Green perceived trade as the breath of life among the Igbo, while she admitted the role of women as great petty traders.<sup>51</sup>

Varieties of commodities were sold in the markets. Among these commodities were palm oil bread fruit, vegetables, yam, cocoyam, pepper, melon and hand crafts- baskets, mats, ropes and local soaps. Other items such as clay pots, clay plates and cutlasses, hoes knives manufactured locally by the indigenous blacksmith using indigenous technology, the local cup for drinking was also marketed. Such items such as wrapper produced by the Indigenous textile manufacturers and which was used by the people before the textile manufactures of the Europeans were introduced were also marketed. Animals such as goats, dogs, cattle, fowls and ram were available in the market. In the pre-colonial Nigeria, the medium of exchange was trade by barter and was later replaced by cowries as noted by Njoku “of all the currencies in use in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cowrie was the most pervasive.”<sup>52</sup> During the colonial period, Government decided therefore, to introduce a uniform portable currency and to demonetize the existing ones.<sup>53</sup>

### Long distance Trade

In the south eastern part of Nigeria, women were involved in the production of palm oil and palm kernel, their successes in long distance trade in different parts of the country also accounted for the distribution of various food items and commodities. The trade developed as a result of the people’s quest to satisfy their individual and collective wants beyond the level of mere subsistence.

This was made possible by the availability of such goods at various market centers across the different parts of the country. Oral interview conducted shows that during the pre-colonial period, trading especially outside one's territorial limits, was not an easy task. This was because of certain dangers such as kidnapping, and enslavement.<sup>54</sup> Afigbo observed that, "most people never travelled outside their village. And even at the time when the trading system in Igboland was most developed, it was only a small fraction of people who travelled from one region of Igboland to the other for business."<sup>55</sup>

Although these factors tended to be a hindrance to normal trade, yet with the use of certain precautionary measures, these women managed to engage in long distance trade. For instance, the women moved in the company of their men counterparts for protection against kidnappers. Commodities involved in the long distance trading included inter alia, slaves, salt, cloth, horses, sleeping and roofing mats, smoked fishes and palm produce. Other items traded were products of smiths such as hoes, cutlasses, iron diggers, fire arms and spears. Products of sculptors were also traded. They included pestle and mortar, hoe handles and masquerade faces.

In Onitsha area generally, the women were exclusively in control of both local and long distance trading; men only became involved in trade with the advancement of European trading firms.<sup>56</sup> Flora Nwapa commenting on the trading activities in Oguta area, stressed that, "a woman who does not know how to trade (whether in local or long distance trade) in our town is a senseless woman; she is not a woman at all"<sup>57</sup> Even in Yoruba land, the women were also central to trade. Among the Yoruba, they were the major figures in long-distance trade, with enormous opportunities for accumulating wealth and acquiring titles. The most successful among them rose to the prestigious chieftaincy title of *iyaloje* or mother of the market, a position of great privilege and power. Also, Efik and Ibibio women were also vastly involved in trading in a number of other items such as fish, salt, cassava, sweet yam and potatoes. It is remarkable that they combined their trading activities effectively with farming, arts and crafts as well as other essential household chores. In the process, some of these women such as Madam Orupumbu Toria of Buguma and Queen Umo Orok of Duke Town became exceedingly rich and hugely influential politically and economically.<sup>58</sup> Thus, women engagement in trade not only changed them from their agricultural oriented economy to commercial economy but also led to their diversification of their economy.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussions, one can conclude that the contribution of women in food security especially in pre-colonial Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Women just like men contribute immensely to the socio-economic life of their country. In fact, what has emerged from the foregoing analyses is that Nigerian women through the epochs, have always played appreciable roles in the development of their society; sometimes these roles appear visibly critical and significant and at other times, somewhat marginal and peripheral. In all however, it need be categorically stated that there was no time that Nigerian women were so oppressed, humiliated and silenced to the point where they were mere onlookers to the flow of history. Rather, Nigerian women across the different epochs of Nigeria's existence, played active, positive and constructively impactful roles in Nigerian history.

Besides, as controllers of small scale trade and commerce from one epoch to another, women have always constituted the critical network on which societal sustenance is hinged. Thus, the narrative

reflects unequivocally, the reality of the role played by the women in ensuring food security in pre-colonial Nigerian society. This will provides the launching pad for the inspiration of contemporary Nigerian women who must necessarily surpass the attainments of their forebears. In addition, this should inspire contemporary Nigerian women to higher levels of participation, productivity and performance in the critical task of nation building.

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