



# Women in Pre-Colonial Economic Development in North East Yoruba Land of Nigeria

Ekundayo Aduke

Ph.D, Department of History and Diplomacy, Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

**Abstract:** *In the indigenous society, family followed a strict division of labour based on sex and age. Each had its functions defined and they were rigidly adhered to. In this division of labour, the functions of the women were crucial to the maintenance and continuity of the society. Their role in procreation and subsistence economy cannot be underestimated. However, few written literature exist on the role women played in production history in Okun land. Therefore, the major theme in this paper is a survey of women's role in pre-colonial economy of North East Yorubaland. It highlights the various, economic resources and activities engaged in by Women; then making the womenfolk indispensable in economic development. Primary and secondary historical research methodology were employed for the study.*

**Keywords:** *Women, Production, Processing, Economy, Trade, History.*

## INTRODUCTION

North East Yoruba refer to the people of Ijumu, Yagba, Kabba, Bunu and Oworo of Kogi State. They are also collectively referred to as Okun Yoruba/Okun land so in this paper North East Yorubaland and Okun land will be used interchangeably. They are located along latitude 7. 15° to 8 North, and Longitude 5.30° to 7 East, covering an area of about 28,032 square kilometres with a population of about 268,246 (National Population Commission, 1991 Census). The area of study is located near the confluence of the two great water ways of Niger and Benue, thus lying within the ecological zone of the Niger-Benue. It falls in the traditional zone between the forest region of the south and the open savannah of the north. Apart from these two major rivers, the area is blessed with other large rivers which include *Ebba, Efo, Oyi, Are, Ofili*. (Balogun 2011). As it is in other parts of the middle belt, two distinct seasons (dry and wet seasons) characterized the area. The rainy season begins in March and last till October while the period from November to early March is the dry season. The climatic and soil conditions support patches rain forest most especially along the river and stream valleys. This explains the fertility of the land. The land was arable such that the people engaged in farming, its abundant economic resources were harnessed primarily for subsistence and revenue generation.

Economy has always been paramount in the process of development of a place. Economy help people to survive and progress and according to the Marxist school of thought, the character of any society is determined by its economic foundation. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary says economy is connected with the trade, industry and development of the wealth of a country, an area or a society. Can the general theory of development, Okwudiba (1981), views development as a Phenomenon in which the individual and the society interact with their physical, biological and inter-human environment transforming them for their own betterment and that of humanity at large, being transformed in the process. Taken in this context,

development connotes training in the art of using local resources and the creative energy in problem solving. Development is also defined as the general growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary).

Development is often classified into social, economic and political aspects. This classification is often more artificial than real. All forms of development (social, economic and political) are interrelated, according to Falola (1984) “in almost every society there is usually a congruence of economic and political relationships. To isolate one from the other is to create an artificial dichotomy where there is no division at all. Both are not only intertwined but they reinforce each other and the changes in one exert a considerable impact on the other”. This argument notwithstanding various disciplines can still be compartmentalized, hence we can talk about economic history and the role of women in this field.

Economic history is a subfield of historical studies that has been defined by different historians and scholars. Coleman (1981), sees economic history as the study of economic aspect of societies in the past: the history of economic use of resources such as capital, land, labour or the examination of the past performances of economies. To Ama-Ogbari (2009), economic history is the segment of history that highlights the economic growth, development, economic management and their abundant consequences on other sectors of societal endeavour. Looking critically at these definitions one can understand that economic history portrays man’s effort at providing himself and his society with goods and services needed to satisfy the basic needs of life. This made economic activities to be part of man from time immemorial to the contemporary era. In essence economic history has to do with historical events of the past which passionately appeal to our knowledge of economy, and the role of women in this process cannot be underestimated.

Pre-colonial Okun land was divided along gender line, sex was the basis of role-allocation. So economic activities were sex specific, while some were general. However, women formed the bulwark of the pre-colonial economy of the area. They were not only active in farming and processing of agricultural produce, they were very active in other sectors of the economy like craft industries, cloth, weaving, making of clay pots and native soaps, marketing or trading especially in local periodic market which were exclusively dominated by women.

## **Method**

This research work used document analysis to examine the role of women in pre-colonial economic development of North East Yoruba Land of Nigeria.

### **Weaving Industry**

The presence of weaving in Nigeria is of great antiquity. Archaeological research has revealed that a number of textiles were based on fibres other than cotton and were used in Nigeria in the period C.700 – c.1050 AD (Unumen and Odigie, 2010). Okun land has been famous for Cotton production. This can be attested to by the fact that even as early as 1909, the Cotton industry in Kabba division (Okun land) received stimulus from the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) which established a buying station at Kabba In 1909 under a native clerk who supervised both the cultivation and buying of Cotton on the spot (NAKSNP.178358,1921). Large quantities of these cotton were used by the people for the production of hand woven textiles called “*Kijipa*”. Cloth weaving was the most widespread, popular and most important female industry in pre-colonial Okun land. As a well established industry both young and old women as well as young girls were involved. Cotton turning on the spindle in preparation for weaving activities was done by old women, who could no longer go to farm to work. However, young girls were also taught by their mothers how to tan, spin and weave as soon as they were matured to face the task of running the yarn across the looms on their knees (Omoniyi, 2011). Here in Okun land, there was no strict specialization in the production process as was discovered by Odigie and Unumen (2010) among the women in Pre-colonial Esan. According to them while some women specialized in the spinning process, others specialized in actual weaving. Though a woman weaver could also do the spinning as well (Ibid).

Horizontal weaving were not practical in Okun land rather the most common weaving technique was the traditional vertical looms called (*Gbogboro*) made of raffia palm branches and bamboo plants (Olorunleke 1992). It was usually dug deep into the ground or made to rest against the wall and positioned up-right. There were upper and lower poles which were fastened on to the two wooden uprights. All stages of the manufacturing process – ginning, spinning, carding, dyeing and weaving were done locally. Technically, the weaving process proceeded from the bottom to the top after the yarns have been moved round the upper and lower beams. As the weaver sat on a wooden stool with feet in a knee-deep trench facing the loom, she pushed down into the warps a long bobbin stick on which wefts are wound. By this the required pattern were made on the cloth. The weaver did this continuously until just a few inches remained unfilled, this unfinished part was later cut and the finished cloth was removed from the loom. It had a very turf texture, some with decorations and designs depending on the type of fabrics used in the process. Popularly known and called *Kijipa*, this could be used for occasions such as traditional weddings, funeral or any other celebrations. The *Kijipa* cloth had both utilitarian and ceremonial purposes. The purely white-coloured *Kijipa* known as *Ogbo* was used by the husband as his covering cloth or by the adherents of the traditional gods during celebrations to those gods. (Omoniyi, 2011). Women usually weave for personal use as well as for sale and their work was individually carried out.

### **Dye Production**

Closely associated with the weaving industry was dye production which was locally produced and used to give colour to the hand woven *Kijipa*. It is known as *aro* and could be red, yellow or black in colour. The production process involved the pounding of the roots, stems, bark, leaves, flowers and fruits of many plants. After pounding, the mixture was poured either into pockets of dye pits dug into the ground or kept in suspended pots in solution form. Technically, the dye pits were dug round. And the side of the dye pits were rubbed with cow dung in order to prevent the solution from seeping into the ground. The dye pots could be kept under a tree at the back of the compound or in secluded, shady areas at the back of the house. The *Kijipa* Cloth was then immersed in the solution and taken out to dry. Places like Okeri in West Yagba and Ponyan and Oranre in West, Yagba were well noted for dye production.

### **Pottery**

Another very important pre-colonial industry exclusive to women in North East Yoruba land was pottery. The community well noted for this craft in Okun land was Ogga in West Yagba. Pottery industry, though wide spread in Okun land because the raw materials clay, (mud) was available and easily worked, was restricted to the people of Ogga in West Yagba, due perhaps to their skills. Potters worked individually in their various compounds, children helped their mothers and female relatives in the various stages of the industry, thereby learning the art of pottery themselves. The techniques employed for making pots was by coiling pieces of clay into a desired shape to produce a variety of clay pots. The raw materials (clay) usually gotten from the river banks by the potters was pounded after stones, pebbles and roots have been removed. The mixture was left in the sun to dry. The dry clay was then broken into lumps, kept in a pot with enough water to enable the clay to slake. After staying overnight the mixture was taken out and mixed with a filler to reduce its plasticity in readiness for pot making. Then a lump of prepared clay was put in a smaller object such as calabash or mortar and a hollow is beaten out in its middle.

By way of further processing, the clay was gradually drawn up diagonally by the potter until a tall straight-sided shape was achieved. The potter continually added more clay also using her fingers to make some fluting inside the pot until a spherical shape is made out. Water was then sprinkled on the walls of the pot, the products were pre-heated to ensure proper dryness and there after fired again until they were red-hot. At this point the pots were taken out pushed into a heap of red leaves and later dipped in, while still hot, into a locust bean liquor in order to seal the pores on them (Ibid). The pots were left to cool and ready for the use.

It is important to note that this craft thrived best in the dry seasons because production was carried out in the open. Firing would be almost impossible during the raining season, pots have different names that correspond

with their sizes and the purposes which they served. Some were used for storing water, cooking, bathing, while the small one had ritual values not only for individuals but also for native doctors. The products were marketed by the manufacturers carrying their wares in big calabash and baskets having tied the pots together with rope-nets. With the introduction of colonial rule, the use of pottery lessened due to the importation of European metal ware and enamel wares. This notwithstanding demand for clay pots in Okun land is still very high especially in remote villages not only because of its cheapness but for its domestic uses. Many still preferred to drink water stored in clay pots.

### **Soap Industry**

The soap industry was also an exclusive preserve of women. Raw materials were de-fruited oil palm branches, some special wood and incrustation of coconut. These materials were put into one pot and burnt into ashes. The ashes were collected into a basket, placed on top of a pot as the content of the basket were carefully mixed with water, the solvent drained into the pot. This solvent was later boiled on fire with small quantity of palm oil being added. The producer stirred the mixture on the fire, rigorously sprinkling fresh ashes into the boiling pot to thicken the substance in the pot. When it finally thickened the black was brought down to cool and later fashioned into soap balls of various species generally known as *Ose Dudu (Black Soap)*. This native soap was of great value in pre-colonial days. Its domestic uses include bathing, washing of dishes and cloths and particularly useful for bathing new born babies. It was also believed to have some medicinal qualities which still make the soap very important till date. The soap was also marketed by the producers.

### **Trade**

Another very important economic role of women in Pre-colonial Okun land was trade. So in the area of exchange, women participated in both short and long distance trade within and beyond the borders of Okun land. Buying and selling one can say was indeed an extension of domestic works for women. There were household trade as well as periodic of four (4), five (5) day or even eight (8) day markets in each village. At the household level, trade which was probably the earliest form of trade was carried out in every quarter and street particularly in front of the house. Articles were farm products like yam, cocoyam, groundnuts etc. Women were also responsible for selling of agricultural products, products of craft and the purchase of household items. The particular place of women in periodic markets in Okunland was not strange, this feature appeared to be a common characteristics of most West African markets in pre-colonial period. For instance early European traders like Lander who observed this, commented that women were the most if not the only traders in West Africa (Holder, 1961). Villages were connected by foot paths to enhance exchange of products. The well-used long distance routes included that from Kabba through Bunu country, linking Alele, Oboko, Okoin, Igun and finally terminating at Lokoja. Another passed through Egbe from Patigi linking Isanlu, Ejuku, Ife-Olukofun, Igbagun to Omuo in Akoko and then to Lagos on the coast (Ekundayo, 2010). On this long distance routes, the traders were known to have formed trade guilds. To enforce strict compliance, trade guilds were under the unwritten checks and balances of guild rules and regulations. The lineage also assisted in establishing control over various trade guilds because in some cases members of a lineage followed the same crafts and workers were untied by kingship ties. Prominent among the articles of trade were the locally woven cloths such as *Efu, Kijipa*, palm produce and kolanuts others were potash, pepper and yams.

In some of the principal markets, traders were organized according to their products. Thus there were *Egbe alaso* (guild of cloth traders or sellers), *Egbe Olose* (guild of soap traders), *Egbe alata* (guild of pepper sellers), etc. Good transportation and communications were essential and basic to the exchange economy. So in the absence of beast of burden such as donkeys, camels and horses common to their northern neighbours, women in northeast Yoruba land, not only personally carried their goods but also employed paid carriers (Falola, 1979). The well-established markets in the areas brought people from geographical locations together, thus, helping to foster cordial inter-group relations and enhanced socio-economic development in the area. In general, the pre-colonial economy, though mostly subsistence was buoyant and dynamic due to the selfless efforts of the women.

## Conclusion

The discussion has clearly brought into focus the indispensability of the womenfolk in the economic development of Okun land. Though sex was the basis for role allocation in pre-colonial days, women economic importance was beyond measure. Women were very active in almost all the sectors of the economy. They were not only engaged in processing agricultural products, but dominated the craft industries as well as trading. Thus the women formed the bulwark in pre-colonial economy of northeast Yoruba land. The result and conclusion from the research work revealed that through women's productive role (economic) and the fact that their product were widely sold beyond their local markets, they contributed immensely to the economic survival of humanity. Though economic development is co-operative effort of many, women have and still foster sustainable development.

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