

Role of Women in the Growth of the Traditional Igbo Economy

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Abstract

The dynamism of women in the growth and development of the traditional Igbo economy would appear to have been obscured by negative and erroneous ideas of two groups of people. The first was the opinion expressed by some European writers such as David Hume, George Hegel and Trevor-Roper about Africa and Africans generally. According to these writers, Africa lacked the ingenuity to develop any form of civilization, science or arts¹. Thus Africa was given a blanket condemnation as a dark corner of the globe. The second biased opinion stemmed from the Igbo culture which was chauvinistic in favour of men, and thus played down on women values and their contributions to the socio-economic development of the Igbo economy. Until recently, the activities of women in the growth of Igbo traditional economy lacked the right attention by scholars; hence the need for this essay to highlight areas the Igbo women had contributed immensely to the growth of the traditional Igbo economy from the pre-colonial times up to the present.

INTRODUCTION

The economy of any nation has to do with the organization of money and resources within it, especially in terms of the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services². The traditional Igbo economy had a productive sector, system of distribution of goods and services as well as the system of exchange which made it possible for the produced goods and services to reach the consumers or those that genuinely demanded them. Igbo women played not just complementary but indeed very outstanding roles in the success of the traditional Igbo economy since the pre-colonial period. Under the production sector of the economy, agriculture featured as the mainstay, while the non-agricultural production or local industries and crafts played supportive roles. Trade and commerce as well as the trade routes and method of transportation of the produced goods and services played key roles in the distributive sector. As noted above women played active roles in the management of the Igbo traditional economy. In this essay efforts will be made to explore and highlight the invaluable roles of the women folk in this onerous task of prosecuting the economy over the centuries.

PRODUCTION SECTOR: AGRICULTURE

The pre-colonial economy of the Igbo was anchored on agriculture, non-agricultural production and trade. In these critical sectors of the pre-colonial Igbo economy, women played very key and indispensable roles. Agriculture was said to be the mainstay of the Igbo economy at the time of discourse. The success of agriculture at the time hinged on the involvement of the entire household in the task. Olauda Equiano revealed that men, women and even their children were involved in agriculture³. The family provided the basic unit of labour for agriculture⁴. Thus, 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 provided the needed agricultural labour in the nearest future.

Igbo agriculture is segmented into land procurement, provision of labour, provision of crops for cultivation, actual cultivation process involving crop plantation, weeding of farm, staking of yam tendrils, and finally the harvest of crops and storage at the barns. In each of these sectors, women played very significant roles as discussed below.

a) LAND PROCUREMENT: Among the Igbo of the pre-colonial period, land, land was communally owned⁵. There was no private or individual land ownership. This meant that prior to or at the beginning of a farming season, the elders of the kindred decided on the land they were to farm. Thus, on an appointed day, members of the kindred trooped to the land so chosen, and each member of this community received a portion of land for farming. Even women and able bodied boys of a given age received a portion of land for their farming.

Married women whose husbands were still alive were not given portions of land. Rather their respective husbands, provided portions of land to them from their share of the communal land. But where a woman was a widow, she received a share of the land in her late husband's name or in the name of her first son if he was still of a tender age. Having procured land, the woman was set for farming activities that farming season.

b) TYPES OF CROPS

A wide range of tuber crops were cultivated by the Igbo farmers in the pre-colonial period. These included yam, cocoyam, aerial yam and trifoliate yam. Other crops cultivated included vegetable crops of wide varieties.

Among these crops, yam, (*dioscorea* spp) was the only crop very closely associated with men⁸. Cocoyam and the rest were termed women crops⁹ for some obvious reasons. For instance, cocoyam which was the closest tuber crop to yam crop in terms of popularity and rating was perceived as woman or female crop. An Igbo myth tried to proffer an explanation on the origin of yam and cocoyam, the two major indigenous root crops in Igbo land. According to this myth;

When Eri died, the food supply (from heaven) ceased and Ndri at Aguleri complained to Chukwu that there was not food... and Chukwu told him, he was to kill and sacrifice his eldest son and daughter... This killing of eldest son and daughter was carried out and the bodies buried in separate graves. Three native weeks later, shoots appeared out of the graves of these children. From the grave of his son Ndri dug up a yam... the next day Ndri dug up koko yam from his daughter's grave... for this reason the yam is called the son of Ndri and koko yam the daughter of Ndri.¹⁰

So, coco-yam was exclusively associated with women farmers. Aerial yam (*dioscorea bulbifera*) originally grew wildly before it became incorporated among the cultigens of Igbo crops. These tuber crops particularly yam, cocoyam and aerial yam, were used to prepare fufu for the usual supper (night meals); they were also boiled and eaten with source, or cooked as porridge for food. Integration of cassava in the 19th century into the crop list of the Igbo was made possible by the women folk.

There were two main reasons why the women dominated the planting of agricultural crops other than yam. First was the issue of patrilineage character among the Igbo as well as the issue of men chauvinism which placed over emphasis on the dignity of the men folk¹¹. Thus men who ventured to cultivate crops other than yam were viewed and rated as effeminate in character. It was this feeling of superiority over women that influenced the entire gamut of the Igbo culture, making it men prone and men oriented. For instance, the essence of polygamy as a predominant culture among the Igbo was to satisfy both the economic (labour) and sexual needs of the man¹².

A second reason was the woman's desire to meet the feeding demands of her family. We have noted above that men concentrated mainly on yam cultivation. Besides, no man would freely allow his yams to be indiscriminately consumed by people including members of his household. This was his capital base and thus he saw it as a duty to minimize the rate of yam consumption by his family members. He had to regulate the quantity of yams consumed per day or per four day native week. Some farmers in the bid to avoid unnecessary exertion on their yam barn, fished out dented yams which they made available to their families while preserving sound tubers for planting in the following farming season or for sales¹³.

As mothers of their families, the women endeavoured to plant subsidiary crops to yam such as cocoyam, bulbils, trifoliate yam, cassava, cowpea and a host of other crops they required to meet the food needs of the families at any given time particularly during the farming period when 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 and women husbands were very prominent in this practice. Even the women living with their husbands had the need to have yam farms no matter how small the size might be. The variety and size of crops available to the woman would determine the nature and character of the welfare of her family. By engaging in the production of a variety of crops, the woman not only averted the incidence of over dependence on yam crop by the 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 woman. 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.

c) LABOUR

As noted above, the basic unit of labour in Igbo land was the family¹⁴. Apart from this there were other sources of labour available to the farmer. For instance there were co-operative labour force as well as the clientage labour. By the later part of the 19th century cum the early part of the 20th century traded and migrant labours had commenced¹⁵. Women were part of these forms of labour. A variety of duties were involved in agricultural tasks. These ranged from bush clearing, mound making, crop planting, weeding, yam staking and crop harvesting. Among these variety of duties, women specialized in crop planting, weeding and harvesting of crops. Women too assisted in conveying harvested crops from the farmstead to the homestead where they were stored and preserved in the barn for the next planting season. It is necessary to mention here that although women for some obvious reasons undertook the above agricultural duties these tasks were never exclusive to them. Some men could also be involved in such duties. Weeding was among the most tasking forms of labour. Women made use of small hoes for this exercise. Weeding took place about three or four times in a year. This reduced the chances of farm crops competing and clamoring for available soil nutrients with wild weeds or grasses in the farm land.

For a widower to undertake this job of weeding was always a source of reminder to him and anyone around him about the sorrow of losing his wife; Even where a man had to undertake the job of weeding he did that using a cutlass, not a weeding hoe⁶.

Crop planting was another form of labour undertaken by the women. Apart from yam planting undertaken by men and sometimes assisted by their wife or wives, planting of other crops were mostly undertaken by the women folk. We have already noted above that yam was seen as king crop cultivated mainly by the men folk. Other crops were planted by the women folk. Most often than not, planting of yam crop involved women who assisted their husbands to carry out this task. This assistance became inevitable where the husband was a large scale or wealthy farmer who had large quantities of yam to plant. Planting of cocoyam, cassava, cowpea, aerial yam, local beans (*Azima* or *odudu*), fluted pumpkin and maize among others were perceived as tasks for the women folk.

Crop harvesting, too, was done by women. Apart from the yam crop which was harvested by men, women undertook the harvesting of other farm crops. These crops were stored at various corners within and outside the woman's hut, while the men harvested yams and stacked them in the yam barn. In the course of yam harvest, women had roles to play. It was the job of the women to collect the tubers of yam dug out from various mounds within the farm and packed them at one or two collection centres 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. The family as a basic unit of labour could undertake the task particularly if the farm of the house hold was of small size. But where the farm was a large one with large quantities of yam tubers, women groups were usually consulted for assistance. This was made possible due to the docile nature of the Igbo women, their diligence and spirit of handwork, as well as their amenability. The diligent character as well as their invaluable contributions to the growth of the traditional Igbo economy were also demonstrated in their control of the economic productions in the non-agricultural sector of the Igbo economy as shown below.

ECONOMIC PRODUCTIONS IN NON-AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Women, too, were in control of major economic activities in the non-agricultural sector of the Igbo economy. This sector, involved economic activities such as smithery, sculpture, pottery, mat-making, salt-making, cloth weaving, cloth dyeing and fish smoking 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, salt-making and sleeping-mat making. Those jointly undertaken by both sexes were cloth weaving, cloth dyeing and fish-smoking. This essay shall investigate and discuss the role of women in the prosecution of each of these traditional crafts in Igbo land and in addition highlight their contributions to the development of the Igbo economy since the pre-colonial era.

a) POTTERY INDUSTRY

Pottery is said to be the oldest traditional craft in Igbo land¹⁷. The origin of this industry is not exactly known, but archaeological evidence revealed that by the Late Stone Age, pottery products had been in use in Afikpo¹⁸. Afikpo pottery may not be the oldest in Igbo land since there was a claim that Afikpo people acquired the pottery skill from Ndiagu, a neighbouring community, who later migrated to the present location of Ishiagu, another proficient pot making community in Igbo land¹⁹. Igboekwu culture of 9th – 11th centuries also had evidence of pottery craft²⁰.

Even though the skill did not spread across every community in Igbo land, for some obvious reasons, virtually every Igbo family made use of pottery items for one purpose or the other. Communities in Igbo land where the skill took place included Afikpo, Ishiagu, Okigwe, Nsukka, Isuochi, Umuahia, Inyi and Udi²¹.

In some non-Igbo communities such as Kano and some other Hausa communities in northern Nigeria, pottery was undertaken mostly by men²². But in Igbo land the craft was an exclusive, reserve for women²³. As noted above, the craft took place only in few Igbo communities. There were reasons for this. Some enabling conditions must be available for the craft to thrive. One of these was the availability of clay deposits in an area. This was the needed raw-material for the successful prosecution of the industry. The second essential requirement for the industry was the availability of skill. This was the technical know how or the personnel factor to harness the entire resources for the industry to ensure success, where any of these essential elements of production was lacking or even in low supply, it became very difficult if not impossible to run the industry successfully.

Perhaps, if the craft had been open to both men and women, the unnecessary monopoly of the trade by women would have been avoided. But a labyrinth of taboos heaved around the craft kept the men out of the business. A number of reasons for keeping men out of the business were given. One was that women went into the clay pit naked and so the presence of men could lead to rape and other sexual abuses²⁴. Another reason was in response to an oracular voice and wish. This was the case in Ishiagu community where there was a myth

explaining the reason why only women were engaged in the trade in the area. According to the myth, there was a deity in the community known as *Okpara Eke*. She instituted the pottery craft in the area through a woman called Ada Eke. The woman was childless, kind, and popular in the community. One day, she got missing mysteriously. Owing to her good character, the entire community went in search of her for three good days without success. But the following day she re-appeared from the domain of the deity where she was kidnapped by the spirit force and kept in seclusion all these days she was searched for. Though she reappeared dumb, she was able through signs to communicate to the women folk the lesson of pottery craft taught her by the spirit deity. One of the taboos handed out by her to the community was that the craft was exclusively for women and no man should attempt to take part²⁵.

Igbo 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 litres for wedding and festive occasions. 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, the Igbo potters also produced very fanciful and well adorned pottery products that could compete favourably with European made products. Thus an admirer of pottery products of Igbo women remarked:

Ishiagu women are potters of great experience, dexterity and imagination as manifested in the finess and finishing of Ishiagu pots.²⁶

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. Thus they rendered some financial assistance to their husbands in settling wages of their farm workers. Also, when engaged in pottery tasks and could not undertake the weeding of the farms which was her traditional obligation, she hired the services of other women for the purpose. Out of the proceeds from the sale of her pottery items she paid the workers.²⁷

Until the colonial and post-colonial periods when foreign made goods came into use, earthen wares served the popular needs of the people. Continuous demand for the products was sustained by a number of factors. One of these was a wide range of uses the products were applied. Secondly, the fragile nature of the product. Any careless handling of the product would result to damages. Also, there was the issue of absence of close substitute. 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. So to a large extent this trade controlled by women aided the growth and development of the Igbo economy over the centuries.

b) SLEEPING MAT-MAKING

Although mat-making was not a common occupational skill in Igbo land, the use of the product was a common practice in the area. Unlike pottery items that had very high durable quality and whose age could be determined through carbon dating method, sleeping mat lacked any atom of durability because the material was so fragile that once it was exposed to rain and sunshine it was bound to decay and lose all its texture to the maggot. So, there is no reference to the age of sleeping mat in any archaeological reports on Igbo land.

However, it is likely that the use of sleeping mat in Igbo land pre-dated the advent of the European contact with the Igbo since the Atlantic slave trade era from the seventeenth century onwards. There are indications that the few communities that engaged in the skill had settled in their area of abode long before the Atlantic Slave trade era. Such communities would include Uturu in the present Abia state, Ezza and Afikpo in the present Ebonyi state, Nsukka in Enugu state and Oguta in the present Imo state, among others.

In these areas, sleeping mat-making skill was exclusively for women. One of the reasons why the skill was not a common one among the Igbo was the scarcity of the plant used as raw-material for the craft. Uncommon nature of the technical skill for the craft was another factor that inhibited the spread of the skill across Igbo land. Even in the communities that engaged in the production of the item, the skill was not open to all the women in the community. Cartels were formed to control and protect the skill from undue spread and publicity. New entrants were made to pay for their apprenticeship.

Apart from the producers, there were other groups of women from within and outside the producing communities who traded on this product. They specialized in buying the item in quantities which they carried to other Igbo communities for sale. Mat-making process fell into stages. The first stage required the maker to get into screw-pine palm plantation to cut the long and thorny leaves of the palm. The mat-makers could even engage the services of men to cut the leaves for them. These leaves were tied in bundles and conveyed home by the mat-maker or someone paid for the services. At home, the mat-maker commenced the second phase in the

process of making the mat. She had to remove the spikes which were the thorny part of the leaves located at the middle of the leaf from its base to the top tip. This exercise led to the split of the long leaf into two long parts which were subsequently kept in the sunshine to dry and become lighter for use in the crafting.

Next, strands of the dry leaves were arranged on the floor in a vertical and horizontal positions, criss-crossing each other. The mat-maker skillfully wove the strands of the dry screw-pine leaves starting from the centre to the edges of the strands, forming a sleeping mat.

Sleeping mats were of various sizes. The larger size measured about 6 metres in length and five metres in width. A retired mat-maker, Ude Okoronkwo said such size of mat would cost one shilling in the 1940s²⁸. A medium size mat measuring 5m by 3m would cost nine pence while a small size mat would cost about 6 pence²⁹. According to her a woman who made full load of each size was sure of going home with at least one pound sterling every eight day market. A bundle or load of mat was about 20-24 mats³⁰.

With this kind of revenue, mat-makers became part of the elites of the society; they used the revenues generated from this source, to aid their husbands and relations in their farm works, and title-taking of various types. They also earned for themselves honours through their various contributions to the socio-economic developments of the society. Another group of Igbo women that made serious impact in the socio-economic development of the society were the cloth-weavers whose activities we shall discuss subsequently.

c) CLOTH WEAVING IN IGBO LAND

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 ones nakedness. This was a non-woven textile³¹. Another effort to produce clothes made use of non-spun fibers such as the 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 body³².

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 ones nakedness.

It was in spun fibre weaving enterprise that women featured prominently since the pre-colonial era. This was possible as a result of a number of factors. Cotton was commonly available in parts of Igbo land. A spinner and weaver, Josephine Ojeh commented on the operation of this industry at Issele – Uku since the pre-colonial era. There, the women provided the needed skill. The raw-material, cotton, was planted in large scale during planting season. They were later harvested and spun into threads and then preserved for use up to the following harvest season³³.

Besides, there were the *Ufa* plants wildly growing in the forest. The bark of the *Ufa* plant contained fabric-like materials out of which threads for weaving cloth were made. This was processed to produce white thread. These threads were arranged in bundles and woven into cloth, using a needle³⁴.

This technique of cloth weaving was undertaken by women of Ibusa, Nsukka, Akwete and Umuahia communities among others. Apart from the availability of the raw-material as well as the relevant skill for the industry, another major factor that sustained the operation of the enterprise over the years was the ever increasing demand for the goods across Igbo land and beyond. Easy access to the producing communities was also an added advantage to the development and growth of the industry. There were no natural barriers limiting the movement of people or goods to and fro the producing communities. Thus, raw-materials and other essential items needed for the prosecution of the trade were easily transported to the areas of production. In the same vein, manufactured goods were easily transported to various parts of Igbo land where they were demanded.

Unlike some other local industries such as pottery, salt-making and mat-making which had a labyrinth of taboos surrounding their operations, cloth-weaving had no taboos around it. It was open to any woman interested in learning the trade. Laissez-faire system practically applied in the entire trade. The business did not end in the manufacturing process. There was also the process of buying and selling. Women were mainly involved in this transaction. They had the skills, tricks and even “sweet tongues” to strike bargains to their advantage.

Both the cotton raw-material as well as the woven cotton cloth were viable commodities of trade which attracted buyers. Women from non-cotton producing communities, who were skilled in the weaving craft, travelled to various Igbo communities or even non-Igbo communities where cotton was grown and made purchases of raw-cotton which they transported home for use in spinning and weaving. Some women embarked on deliberate planting of cotton seed in their farms to enhance their productivity and profit margin in the business³⁵.

Igbo land is a rain forest zone with fertile soil, capable of producing a high yield of agricultural crops including cotton; Nigeria was said to be among the world's highest cotton producers before the oil boom era and

the age of cotton production in Nigeria generally was traced to about 5000 years ago³⁶. Thus the evidence shown above support the idea that Igbo weaving industry was of great antiquity.

There were very outstanding women cloth weavers in Igbo land. Among these were the Akwete women. What is currently called Akwete cloth was formally known as Akuruaku Ndoke and the pioneer weaver of the cloth was known as Dada Nwakata of Akwete³⁷. This skill was traditional in the area, being handed to every daughter of the community by his mother as a way of keeping her busy and controlling her straying character³⁸. Another popular cloth in Igbo land was the Otegwu cloth or Akwa Ocha cloth. This was a specialty among women of the Igbo communities west of the River Niger. This was said to have been in existence in the pre-colonial era. There was also the Oja or Baby-Tie fabric produced by the women of Agbani community of Enugu state³⁹.

Women weavers as well as traders dealing on woven cloths made some positive impacts in the society. Through their efforts various designs of cloths were available at the markets in Igbo land. This helped to inculcate in the people the culture of clothing their bodies, instead of moving about naked. Weaving was a viable source of income. Revenue from weaving aided the women to undertake projects in the interest of their families and communities. Some weavers assisted their husbands financially in their farm works; sometime they supported their husbands financially during title-taking ceremonies. They also helped in training their children in schools and setting up good houses for their families. Another local industry dominated by women was salt-making; it will be discussed subsequently.

d) SALT PRODUCTION

Salt was an essential ingredient of every meal in Igbo land. It provided flavor to food and also served as an agent for preservation of food. Any food without salt was tasteless and unfit for consumption by anyone except on purely medical grounds. Because of its universal demand it was an essential commodity every where every time.

But it was not commonly produced in every community. In Igbo land only in very few communities was it produced. The communities salt was produced included Okposi, Uburu and Enyigba in the present Ebonyi state of Nigeria⁴⁰. Salt production in these areas was made possible by a number of factors. First was the availability of salt lakes and salt streams which were the raw-materials for the industry⁴¹. The second important factor was the presence of the women salt boilers who provided the local skill for the enterprise. According to the tradition, only women were allowed to engage in the exercise; men were excluded from participation⁴². There was also the issue of steady demand for the product. Demand for salt cut across the entire Igbo society and even beyond. The commodity had no substitute. The women were ever busy to cope with the high demand for their product. At Uburu there was a salt stream from where the women collected salt water for boiling. During the rainy season it became over-diluted, losing its salinity such that much wood would be consumed in the process of boiling the water for salt production. At Okposi and Enyigba there were salt lakes from which the women collected water for salt production. These sources of water (lakes and stream), belonged to the kindreds that owned the land housing these lakes. So the salt lakes and stream could only be fetched by women from the land lord kindred's owning these waters. Thus, even women from the same community who were not members of the landlord kindreds, were not allowed to fetch the salt water.

Apart from the above restrictions, there were other taboos regulating the operations of every salt producer in Okposi and other areas. For instance, menstruating woman were banned from fetching the brine. In addition, fetching salt water from the lake was regulated and controlled by the priestess⁴³. These regulations did not allow for free trade in this business. Rather it created room for monopoly among the women approved by tradition to operate the trades.

Salt business did not end up with the production of the product. Its distribution and sales were undertaken by mainly women. Actually, there was no taboo outlawing men or women other than producers from participating in the business of trading on salt. But the general notion was that salt was essentially a kitchen item meant for women's control. So, men were rarely involved in the business trafficking on salt. Uburu market was a popular market where salt from Uburu, Okposi and Enyigba were sold⁴⁴. Uburu market was one of the popular markets in Igbo land where commodities such as slaves, horses, cow and salt were sold. Although the greater quantity of these salts came from Okposi and Enyigba, they were generally called Uburu salt (Nnu-uburu), despite the fact that only a little quantity of the salt sold at Uburu market were produced at uburu.⁴⁵

The high value associated with salt led to its adoption as a transitional currency before the advent of colonialism and use of British currencies in Igbo area. Salt, too, had some durable qualities. As long as it was kept at a fire place without contact with water, it would remain intact, dry and last for years without loss of value.

Given the above circumstances surrounding the production and sale of salt in Igbo land, it became clear and understandable why, women who engaged in the production and sale of the product in Igbo land made some remarkable financial contributions to the socio-economic development of their localities and Igbo land at large. Many women who engaged in this business helped to improve the financial status of their families, helping their

respective husbands in their farm work, house building projects, and popular title – taking ceremonies among other contributions.⁴⁶

So far, our discussions on the above local industries reveal the leading roles played by women. Besides, there were other industries not mentioned here at all. These include fish-smoking, dyeing and body decoration, and calabash-making.

An objective assessment of the contributions of the key players in the socio-economic growth of Igbo land would certainly tilt in favour of the Igbo women. The reason is simple and not far-fetched. Among all the agricultural crops produced, only yam was man's (king) crop. The rest were regarded as women's crop which were indeed cultivated by women. In the same vein the majority of the non-agricultural products manufactured were handiworks of women. That was perhaps why women boasted that they were the bowl of their husbands. Because they (women) produced the bulk of the commodities, they played dominant roles in the prosecution of trade and commerce in Igbo land as shown below.

IGBO WOMEN IN LOCAL AND LONG DISTANCE TRADING

Trade in Igbo land was all about buying and selling various items or commodities by traders. There were two types of trading in Igbo land namely, local and long distance trading. 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 in use before the British currencies came on board as legal tender shortly before, during and after the colonial rule in the area. In the subsequent paragraphs, efforts will be made to examine and discuss the role of Igbo women in both local and long distance trading in Igbo land.

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 at subsistence levels.

Items sold here were predominantly food items produced locally. These included yams, cocoyam, aerial yams, trifoliate yams, 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 etc), 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.

Women controlled the sale of these items at the local trading centers for some obvious reasons. Most of the crops traded here were produced by women. Our discussions on the women contributions on agricultural and non-agricultural production sectors of the Igbo economy aptly revealed this fact. Secondly, to conduct sales at the local trading centre demanded patience on the part of the seller. This was necessary in order to attend to a number of prospective buyers that would make offers for various wares. Women were likely to demonstrate the patience and resilience to attend to all manner of prospective buyers without violence. Men who came to the market to sell or buy were mainly widowers or men who lacked trust and confidence in their wives and thus could not rely on them for accountability and true returns. Commenting on the level of women control of trade in Igbo land G.T. Basden remarked thus:

On market days practically the whole of female population move to the market place, either to trade or to enjoy the general entertainment such gathering afford. They are the most inveterate bargain hunters; indeed marketing together with the preparation of goods constitute the chief occupation... of the women... practically, the whole of the women... Practically, the whole of the trade in the Ibo country is in the hands of the women and they are extremely capable.⁴⁷

The above views were equally shared by Meek and M. Green. Charles Meek saw the devotion of Igbo women to petty trading as the most striking feature of Igbo life⁴⁸. On her own part, M. Green perceived trade as the breath of life among the Igbo, while she admired the role of women as great petty traders.⁴⁹

At the local trading centers sellers were organized in two sitting orders, reflecting either the sections of the village they came from or in accordance with the type, of wares sold at the market. Most often, the buyers and sellers knew each other. Sometimes there could be a coincidence of want whereby sellers knew each other. Sometimes there could be a coincidence of want whereby sellers of different wares could mutually desire and demand products of each other. This most often led to trade by barter said to be the earliest form of exchange. Afigbo noted that there were villages in the Nsukka area which traditionally manufactured cloth dyed blue which they exported to Uburu in Ohazara in exchange for salt. This cloth penetrated the rest of Igbo land as Akwa Uburu⁵⁰. The value of salt as a universally accepted ingredient for food, its stability in terms of demand as well as its durable quality, informed the reasons for its adoption as the earliest form of transitional currency in Igbo

land. Other forms of transitional currencies later came into use. They included cowries, manillas and brass rod. Use of these currencies aided commercial transactions in local and long distance trading in Igbo land before the introduction of the British currencies.

LONG DISTANCE TRADE

Long distance 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 Igbo land. Commodities involved in the long distance trading included slaves, salt, cloth, horses, sleeping and roofing mats, smoked fishes and palm produce. Other items traded were products of smiths such as hoes, cutlasses, fire arms, spear and iron diggers. Products of sculptors were also traded. They included pestle and mortar, hoe handles and masquerade faces.

There were a number of popular long distance trading centres in Igbo land. They included Bende, Uzuakoli, Uburu, Oguta, Onitsha, Aboh, Ibagwa, Nsukka, Nike and Asaba, among others.

Women played major roles in the prosecution of this trade, dealing on almost all sorts of items. For instance, women of Aboh were said to be involved in slave trading along side their male counterparts⁵¹. Onitsha women traders, too, were said to have organized groups controlling markets at the river-side under the control of their queen. The Obi of Onitsha provided them the needed security, thus, making it possible for them to undertake the distribution of various products to and from a number of linked up markets in the hinter-land area⁵². N. Mba opined that 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 advent of European trading firms⁵³. Apart from Onitsha and riverine Igbo communities, women from other parts of Igbo land were involved in local and long distance trading. 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 trades) in our
town is a senseless woman. She is not a woman
at all.⁵⁴

The story is true in virtually every part of Igbo land. However, in the eastern and northern parts of Igbo land, women participation in long distance trade had a limit. Those involved were mostly widows, and women husbands and some women fairly advanced in age. They moved in the company of their men counterparts for protection against kidnappers. Each group was usually led by a man popularly known among the communities within the trade route they passed through. Any group without such a leader stood the risk of being kidnapped and sold into slavery. The participation of the women in the trade helped a lot in sustaining a long lasting interest in the trade over the centuries. It also provided the needed dynamism for the growth of the trade in Igbo land over time. In addition, it afforded the women opportunity to acquire wealth and become influential in the society, make vital contributions to the socio-economic development of their respective families, communities and entire Igbo land over the centuries.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, the noble and indispensable roles of women in the growth of the Igbo economy over the centuries become clear and revealing. In virtually every aspect of the economy, women played some dynamic roles in nurturing and developing the resources and economic potentials of Igbo land to enviable heights. The production process as well as the commercial networks of the economy witnessed steady and remarkable growth under the pivotal strength of the women folk.

A number of factors were responsible for this. The diligent and hardworking character of the Igbo women were important factors. Igbo culture including the religion made provision for freedom of movement, worship, as well as freedom for anyone to undertake any legitimate economic activities. This formed the basis of the competitive spirit among Igbo women. It was this spirit that gingered the women to plunge into various economic ventures with determined spirit of success and excellent achievements. With the above mind-set, coupled with the nature of the socio-economic environment the Igbo found themselves, the women made giant strides in the major economic sectors of Igbo land namely agriculture, local industries and crafts and commerce from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial eras.

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