

Women and Dynamics of Food Security in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: A Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

Women in pre-colonial, Nigeria, played critical and significant roles in their different communities, kingdoms and empires to impact society. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to unravel the inestimable contributions of women to food security of their respective families and societies and to this end Marxist/Socialist and Postmodernist theories were adopted. The paper submits that women played active, beneficial, and positively influential roles throughout Nigeria's history in pre-colonial era, thus, this should motivate present Nigerian to increase their engagements, productivity, and effectiveness in the crucial mission of nation-building. Adopting primary and secondary sources of data, the study employed historical method of analysis. The paper recommends for lessons to be drawn from pre-colonial Nigerian women's efforts in ensuring food security for their society, particularly for the sake of positive gender relations as well as gender equality.

Keywords: *Society, Economy, Food, Family, Women*

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. (Udo,1980:7) 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. (Chukwu,2000: 54) Nigeria has about 250-300 ethnic groups as measured by self-identification or the presence of different languages, (Ikime,1980: 14) 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. Given the diversity of Nigeria's ethnic groups, women's status in pre-colonial Nigeria clearly varied. Despite the fact that patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system were the norm in Nigeria society, women maintained a complementary role to men.

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. (Azgaku 2015 :193) This they did in addition to local industry which they perform in a harsh, hostile and discriminatory socio-economic and cultural environment. Therefore, the perception of them as a helpless, disadvantaged, and marginalized group has hindered their appropriate study, and the myriad crucial roles that women have played in pre-colonial Nigeria have received little attention.

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. (African Leadership Forum, 1993.) 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. (Zulu,1981) 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”. 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. (Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.com>science>) 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. (*Dynamics* Encyclopedia, <https://www.encyclopedia.com>dy...>) 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, refers to everyone always having physical, social, and financial access to an adequate supply of food that is safe, nourishing, and fits their dietary needs. and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.(International Food Policy Research Institute)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” (United Nations Report of the World Food Conference, 1975) 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” (FAO Director General’s Report, 1983). When everyone, at all times, has physical, social, and economic access to enough, safe, and nutritious food that satisfies their dietary needs and food choices for an active and healthy life, then there is food security. 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

The distinction Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir, 1964) made between sex and gender in 1964, when she was hailed as the “mother of modern feminism” was crucial. According to her, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that biology is not destiny” (Beauvoir, 1964). Her idea of women as “the other, second sex” is still significant, even though feminist discussion has evolved beyond her analysis and her supporters have split into distinct ideological schools. 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. Marxist/Socialists believe that gender change necessitates structural

adjustments to the economic, political, and cultural underpinnings of a body politic. Marx felt that in order to comprehend changes in gender relations, class continues to be a crucial analytic category. Gender oppression would disappear once class oppression was defeated. In line with Marxist theories of exploitation, oppression, and labor, socialist feminism links the treatment of women to these issues 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. (McLellan, 1972)

Women, according to Post-modernist feminists, Butler, (Butler, 2006), are an ambiguous category since they encompass a variety of factors, including class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other manifestations of individualism. The idea that "sex does not necessarily conscribe gender" and that it is unproductive to categorize all women as one category or to divide them into two categories based on their sexual preferences are both true. As shown in this work, pre-colonial women in Nigeria was not a socially homogeneous society; rather were distinct and distinctive in many ways, and these variances were expressed.

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. (Afigbo, 1981:129) Land was communally owned (Njoku, 2001:12) and through their husbands or, if relevant, their parents, women had access to land. 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. But the patrilineal character of Nigerian culture highlighted the man's position as the family's head. Still, women believed that ensuring food security for their families met their responsibility as women and citizens.

Women in Agricultural Sectors

Farming

Women contributed significantly to the development of the traditional economy in ways that were not just complementary but truly extraordinary 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 participation of the entire household in the work was crucial to the success of agriculture at the time. The units of labor for agriculture was the family, which included men, women, and children, all were involved in farm work, young and old, male and female, so the idea of a full-time housewife who is solely responsible for taking care of the home was unheard of. (Njoku, 2001: 39)

The success of agriculture during the period depended on the participation of the entire household. According to Afigbo, every Igbo man and woman was a farmer, as a result of the Igbo orientation towards agriculture. (Afigbo, 1981:124) Olaudah Equiano revealed that men, women and children were involved in agriculture. (Equiano, 1794: 14) The family provided the basic unit of labor for agriculture. Thus, it was practically impossible for a man to become a renowned, prosperous farmer without the support of his wife or wives in farming and for the long- term goal of having children who would eventually supply the necessary 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. (Oxford Academic <http://academic.oup.com>gtac047>)

Furthermore, in Igboland, yam was produced in large quantities and mainly by men. A.E Afigbo observed thus, "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." (Afigbo, 1981:127). So, while men grew crops like yam, women grew vegetables,

maize, cassava, and cocoyam. 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 broad kinds of vegetable crops. Women planted many species of cocoyam, which were referred to as women's crops. According to Onwuka Njoku, "Other crops were regarded and, indeed, treated as inferior or women's crops, and their cultivation was subjected to the rhythm of yam cultivation" (Njoku, 2001: 127). 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. (Achebe, 2015: 111)

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. (Azgaku, 2015:197)

Women endeavored to plant subsidiary crops to yam such as beans, okro, bitterleaf, melon, breadfruit, plantain and a variety of different crops were needed, especially during the agricultural season when the yam planting was completed and the farmer was essentially left with little to no yams for the family. Many ambitious and hardworking women had their own yam barns. Women played a significant role in this practice. For example, from the oral interview gathered, it was claimed that Mgborie Igboanugo from Abba in the present day Anambra state of Nigeria had huge yam barns that were about 70 feet by 180 feet in size. (Ozo, Interview cited). The type and size of crops that were accessible to the women affected the welfare of their families. By growing a variety of crops, the women not only prevented family members from becoming overly dependent on the yam crop, but also ensured that a well-balanced diet that included tuber and vegetable crops rich in protein, vitamins, and other nutrients was available. In addition, it tended to increase the women's economic capacity. A woman who grew non-yam crops benefitted from having a plentiful harvest of a certain crop at regular intervals. This only meant that her family routinely consumed a variety of foods and had enough extra to sell to generate income for other

family expenses. However, among the Yoruba and Nsukka Igbo, women did little farm work, the job being left to men. (Njoku, 2001: 12).

The division of labor existed just like it does in every other human activity. The men worked on the farm, removing bushes, planting yams, staking and harvesting them, among other laborious tasks. Onwuka Njoku described it thus “In most parts of the forest belt, women weeded the farms, usually not less than twice before the harvest.” (Njoku, 2001: 12). 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.” (Afigbo, 1981:129) One of the most challenging types of work was weeding. For this workout, women used tiny hoes. To lessen the possibility of farm crops battling with invasive weeds or grasses in the farmland for available soil nutrients, weeding was done on a number of occasions. Women helped with agricultural weeding and harvesting in the Jukun, Tiv, and Idoma areas. Women were essential in clearing land, planting seeds, gathering crops, and threshing among the Katab people of southern Zaria. (Greene & Ryan, 1975)

Women had the responsibility during the harvest of yams. It was the responsibility of the women and in most cases assisted by their children to gather the yam tubers that had been dug from the farm’s numerous mounds, pack them and then carry them the heaps of yam to the barn for stacking. The task of transporting these yam tubers back to the farm was typically performed by women during a farming season.

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. (Oluwasola,1998: 64) 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.

Additionally, according to tradition, the majority of the palm trees in Igboland were owned by men, who were also responsible for harvesting the fruits when ripe. The women, however, collected the fruits from the stalks, pounded them in a mortar, and extracted the oil for use in the household while selling the excess in the market to make money. 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 portage 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 participated. Goats, sheep, dwarf humpless cows, pigs, dogs, and fowls were among the animals that were domesticated. One of the main protein sources for the people was livestock. The women acquired a great deal of expertise in animal husbandry. To keep the birds warm and clean, wood ash was deposited inside the little poultry shelters. In one area of the compound, goats were housed and fed with grass. In addition to grazing on the sparse grass within the compounds, livestock were kept alive and well by being taken to the forest to feed on fodder given by the *ogbu* tree, which has dense, moist foliage. The *ogbu* tree is specifically grown for the purpose. Some women raised these in order to boost their income by selling the livestock in the market, in addition to the advantage of giving their homes a more varied diet through the intake of meat, eggs and dairy products. (Ezedinachi, 2019: 52) Women raised goats, sheep, and cows in other parts of pre-colonial Nigeria, such as the Middle belt, and contributed to the production of animals in this way.

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 economy's non-agricultural sector. This industry included manufacturing processes for mat-making, sculpture, pottery, smithery, broom making, soap making, palm-kernel oil production, cloth weaving, salt production, wood work, leather and ivory working. Most of these manufacturing were handled by women. Few men engaged in them fully. Also, some were accepting of both

sexes. Pottery, soap making and cloth weaving were all crafts reserved for women. Similarly, in Inca and Aztec civilizations, the women were frequently acknowledged as skilled artisans and weavers in those cultures. (Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.yachana.org>conquest>)

One of the man's basic requirements was clothing, as previously stated. To meet this requirement, there had been a variety of initiatives in Igboland. One of these was the practice of using tree bark as fabric. To cover one's nakedness, tree barks were hacked and hammered into a high, flexible material. Use of non-spun fibres, such as raffia palm fibre, was utilized in another attempt to make clothing. These materials were pounded, trashed and squeezed after collection in order to make soft and fibrous, and then transformed into cloth strips for covering the body, particularly the private genital parts. This early time did not see the development of spinning and weaving techniques. The purpose of the exercise which was simultaneously completed by both sexes, was to come up with strategies to hide one's nakedness. In the pre-colonial period, women have played a significant role in the spun fiber weaving industry. (Okpoko & Igbo, 1999:132)

Making sleeping-mat, basket and broom making was shared by both sexes 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. (Njoku, 2001: 44). The women were active in food processing because of their dedication to their work. In the Niger Delta region of Calabar, Oron,, fish drying was practiced.(Nairaland Forum, <https://www.nairaland.com>wome...>) The resourceful nature of these women enabled them to contribute to the sustenance of their families.

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. (Njoku, 2001: 12) 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 labor and

occasionally, women provided financial support for their husbands at title-taking ceremonies. 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 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. (Ezedinachi, 2019: 61)

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. (Iyela : <https://globalacademicrogroup.com>>...) Pots were made for cooking, storage of grains, water among others.

A variety of earthen product for different purposes were produced by women potters. There were different-sized pots, including water and cooking pots in a variety of sizes and shapes. Palm wine was kept in ceremonial pots with a capacity of 80-100 liters for wedding and festive occasion. The women also manufactured plates known as *Oku* in Igboland used for eating. There were also little pots for use in deity shrines. Large clay jars for the fermentation of cassava and production of palm oil were also produced, along with the earthen kettles and flask for newborns. In addition to the aforementioned, women potters also produced incredibly ornate and elaborate ceramics. Despite having a

minimal scale of production, the pottery industry increased the revenue available to women potters through the selling of their earthen goods.

Despite the fact that men predominated in metals mining industry, women played a significant role in the mining of salt, particularly 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. Men's only function in the salt industry was to carry out religious rites, without which it was thought that women would have little or no salt, thus the women controlled the whole salt industry. 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. (Njoku, 2001: 81).

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.(Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.yachana.org>conquest>) In pre-colonial Nigeria, trading went hand in hand with agriculture and was all about traders buying and selling different goods or commodities. Muslim women, who are prohibited from open trading by the Koran, engaged in Hidden trade (Njoku, 2001: 81). There were two types of trading during the period under study. In particular, the development of means of exchange encouraged both local and long-distance trade. Prior to, during and after the colonial rule, trade by barter was used, however, subsequently, transitional currencies were accepted as legal tender. In Igboland, A. E Afigbo rightly pointed out that *Although subsidiary to agriculture, trade was nonetheless an important aspect of Igbo economic activity* (Afigbo, 1981:129) O.N Njoku has argued that trade was in consequence, a crucial component of the economy, also that trade allows for the bridging of differences in communities' levels of productivity. (Njoku, 2001: 81). The production of agricultural produce and industrial goods went beyond the subsistence needs of the producers. Even though most pre-colonial households produced the majority of their basic needs, the economy was nevertheless largely market-oriented. Due to differences in

the supply of natural and human resources, there are specialized producers of some goods, which necessitates economic interdependence.

Local Trade

This referred to the commerce that occurred among people of a particular community, which were frequently done at a busy market. Locally made food was the main items sold and bought. This included a variety of vegetable foods such as yams, cocoyam and maize. Products from smiths (cutlasses, hoes, arrows, traps, kitchen cutleries) and sculptors (pestle and mortars, hoe handles, wooden spoons and wooden handles for cutleries and cutlasses), among others, were also on display at the local market. Woven cloths, baskets, sleeping mats, salt jars, pottery products, palm wine, goats, sheep, fowl and palm oil were on display for purchase. 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 depending on the culture although four-day, five-day, eight-day periodicities were widely 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” (Basden, 1966:215. Charles Meek believed that Igbo women’s dedication to small-scale trading was one of the notable attributes of Igbo. (Meek1957: 19)

On her own part, M. Green believed that among the Igbo, trade was the breath of life while she admitted the role of women as great petty trader. (Green, 1964: 37) 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 19th century, the cowrie was the most pervasive. During the colonial period, Government decided therefore, to

introduce a uniform portable currency and to demonetize the existing ones. (Njoku, 2001: 104).

Long distance Trade

Women were involved in the production of palm oil and palm kernel in the south-eastern region of Nigeria. Their success in long-distance trade in various regions of Nigeria also accounted for the distribution of various foodstuffs and commodities. The peoples' needs to meet their personal and communal needs beyond the level of basic survival resulted to the development of the trade. This was made possible by the products being offered at numerous market locations. 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. (Ezedinachi, Interview cited). 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. (Afigbo, 1981:134)

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, smoked fishes, slaves, salt, cloth, horses, palm produce and mats. Products made by smiths, such as hoes, cutlasses, iron diggers, fire arms and spears were also traded. The works of sculptors were exchange such hoe handlers, masquerade faces and pestle and mortar. Generally speaking, both local and long-distance trading in the Onitsha region was exclusively controlled by women, with men only becoming engaged later with the advancement of European trading firms. (Mbah, 1982: 30-31) When discussing the trading in Oguta area, Flora Nwapa emphasized 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" (Nwapa, 1970: 29) The role of the women in trading was equally crucial. They were the leading figures in long-distance trading among the Yoruba, offering a variety of options for acquiring wealth as well as titles. The most prosperous of them attained the esteemed chieftaincy title of *iyaloje* or mother of the market, a position of great

privilege and power. Women from Efik and Ibibio traded a variety of other goods, including fish, salt, cassava, sweet yam, fish and potatoes. It is amazing how successfully they managed to juggle farming, the crafts and other necessary home tasks with their trading activities. Some of the women like uch as Madam Orupumbu Toria of Buguma and Queen Umo Orok of Duke Town amassed enormous wealth and political and economic power. (Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com> >topic) . 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.

Capacity Building and Skill Acquisition

As an unintended consequence, however, the pre-colonial era facilitated the liberation of Nigerian women from patriarchal rule by fostering environments that made it relatively easy for them to do so. The economic dominance of men over women in certain agricultural sectors was weakened. The era promoted new political, cultural, and social ideals, making it simple for women to reject restrictive customs.

The destruction of the men's economic dominance over women is weakened by economic sectors like agriculture that are dominated by men and women's participation in the informal economy was especially empowering and contained new possibilities for their emancipation. Pre-colonial Nigerian women's remarkable participation in the grass-roots economy was the main vehicle for their social and financial liberation. Women had remarkable tenacity in the informal sector, and were rewarded with rising economic and political freedom. Some women lived independent lives, choosing how to use their labor and earnings without being dependent on their husbands.

Contemporary Nigerian women are encouraged by the pre-colonial women to contribute more actively and more efficiently to the essential task of nation –building. It is generally agreed upon that the status of women improved during the post-colonial period. In numerous instances, women ventured into areas that previously dominated by men, including commercial farming, trading and large-scale entrepreneurial activities, as well as industry. The latter were frequently the losers when the quest for financial independence clashed with marital responsibilities. Basden noted that it is not surprising that this new feminist revolution faced many obstacles and gave rise to a counter-revolution because women are in many respects more visible in economic activity, more

vocal in decision making, and in fact a minority hold position of power. (Baden, S. 1997)

Contemporary Nigerian women had endeavored to use education to combat the discrimination against them. It was a frequent occurrence to see women in very highly placed positions. Some of them worked as physicians' pharmacists, architects, university dons of all ranks including professors, bankers, media women and even business tycoons. In fact, women have ventured into traditionally male-dominated professions like the military and aviation. Access to education influenced the women to realize their potentials. Most women employed in the formal sectors such as federal and state civil service became wage earners and even competed effectively with the men in assisting to ensure food security for their respective families, and in some cases, they became breadwinners of their families.

In the informal sector of the economy, women have contributed to the production, processing and distribution of food crops as well as animal husbandry for instance, in the field of agriculture, supply of seedlings, credit facilities, farming equipment and fertilizer were provided by the families and the government. Agriculture became a money yielding venture being that the soil fertility improved in the process. Contemporary Nigerian women equally became more industrious in skill acquisition such as fashion designing, hair dressing, tailoring and thus equipped themselves with skills to succeed in business and in life. In addition to skill acquisition, women became successful in their small and large scale businesses. Ownership of an informal enterprise enhanced their economic potentials being that the increased markets in food and consumer goods afforded the women traders a far more solid foundation for adjusting to their emancipated status.

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 become clear from the aforementioned analysis is that Nigerian women have historically played significant roles in the advancement of their society even though these responsibilities occasionally seem to be visibly minor, crucial, and peripheral.

Therefore, it must be unequivocally stated that there has never been a moment when Nigerian women have been so marginalized, humiliated, and silenced that they are reduced to being just spectators to the course of history. Instead, throughout the different periods of Nigeria's existence, Nigerian women played active, beneficial, and historically significant roles.

Women have always made up the vital network on which societal subsistence depends since they have always been the managers of small-scale trade and commerce. 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 serve as a spring board for the motivation of modern Nigerian women, who must unavoidably surpass the accomplishments of their predecessors. Additionally, this ought to encourage modern Nigerian women to contribute more actively and effectively to the crucial mission of nation building.

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