



Kpakpando Journal of History and International Studies

Women Contribution in Developmental Processes in Igboland: 1925 – 2020

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Kpakpando Journal of History and International Studies: Vol. 1 no. 4 July, 2024. ISSN: 2437-1750

Abstract

This work represents one of those responses to the call of Frederick Engels who stated that all history must be studied anew. In Igbo society, the contribution of Women in the developmental processes needs to be revisited as part of the academic and as members of the society whom their activities forms the historical development of the people. Among other things it seeks to address the Nri mythology upon which all credit about the socio-economic and political development of the Igbo society are placed and all credit goes to male gender. To that effect, the present writer seeks to use this work to join his voice to that of early scholarship before him to demonstrate women's contribution in area of commerce, agriculture, craft and manufacturing. This is because as farmers, traders, potters and weavers, these women were able to translate their economic success into the society thereby contributing to the transformation of the socio-economic and political development of Igboland. The clear possible example was the economic crisis of Igbo society from 1970s onward that reveals the foundations upon which Igbo masculinities were built and how it has shifted gradually as women become important actor in political and socio-economic stage of the society.

Keywords: Women, Contribution, Developmental Processes, Igboland, Society

Introduction

In a holistic view society is dynamic in nature and changes that occur in them affect economic and socio-political life of the people living in them. Change in this context means passing from one stage or conditions to another. In every human society and at every stage of its evolution there are constant movement and changes in response to the internal and external factors that made the changes to occur.

Historical evidence attested to the fact that such change began in Igboland over a decade of time before the advent of European colonialism. From all indication, the quest for overall development has remained a constant pre-occupation for which the Igbo society is among. And the point made here, is that the changes which occur in Igboland affected both men and women alike and the development that the change came with also affected both.

Therefore, in the developmental processes in Igboland women were among those that contributed to its [Delete-for such development to] occurrence. In the developmental processes in Igboland which cut across all human endeavours women will be seen as a unique potential source of economic social and political focal point of power. While acknowledging the fact that the contribution of women in the developmental processes in Igboland is essential, for proper understanding of Igbo women history from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, the study will focus on

four thematic areas of their contribution. They are as follows:

Economy – Political – Social and Technology.

Objective of the Study

This research study aims at evaluating the contribution of women in the developmental processes in Igboland. In pursuance of this therefore, this work hopes to achieve the following objectives:

1. To trace the areas in which the women were involved in the developmental processes of Igboland.
2. To document the women's participation in economic, political and social development of Igbo society.
3. To identify and examine the factors that had made the contribution of women to be silent.

Scope of the Study

This work examines on the women contribution on the developmental processes in Igboland from 1925 – 2020. This period is historically significant in Igbo society because it encompasses the period of colonial and postcolonial administration in the eastern parts of Nigeria. The basis of covering this period of time is to assess the level of women contribution especially in the early time of colonial policies and also to ascertain more records of women's participation within that period of time and aftermaths.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this work is Functionalist theory which according to Kendall (2003) is based on the assumption that society is stable, orderly system. This stable system is characterized by societal consensus, whereby the majority of [the] members share values, beliefs and behavioural expectations. According to this perspective, a society is composed of inter-related parts, each of which serves a function and contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, institutions ... that persist, because they play a part in helping society survive. These institutions include the family, education, government, religion and economy. The functionalist therefore, maintain that women naturally assume the expressive emotionally supportive role that free men for instrumental tasks. It was on the above basis that the present writer anchored theoretical frame work to bring to the fore, the huge role the female gender play in the development of the Igbo society, contrary to the Nri mythology which placed them in shell, and at a disadvantageous position.

This because according to Gilder (1986) as noted in Obi Emeka (2018), [Delete-which stated that] “Women provide for the socialization of the next generation, if they fail, society’s moral fabric will decay” [1]. [Please, reconconcile your referencing style: Are you using Turabian or APA? Specify and use one]

Research Methodology

The research work intend to make liberal use of primary and secondary sources which includes, interviews, books, newspapers and other electronic sources for the research. It will also look at some documentaries strictly on women’s contribution on developmental processes in Igboland within the stated period.

The Contribution of Women in Developmental Processes in Igbo Economy

This period could be said to cover some parts of colonial and the postcolonial period. And the economic hub of the era was agriculture. Agriculture in colonial period in Igbo society formed the economic base of the people.

In the history of mankind, agriculture will be said to be the base upon which such culture or race stood for the developmental process. And Igbo race was among such race and culture that their economic development started from agriculture processes that later became diversified. In the foundation of Igbo economy, agriculture has proven to be the curial factor in the entire processes of the economic and social change in colonial period.

The agricultural revolution in Igboland is linked to [Delete-also owned to the facts to] the improvement in traditional farming implements, and the development in other areas that aided to the economic foundation of the society. And for historical authenticity of the fact on the contribution of women on the developmental processes in Igbo

economy, some eminent Igbo historians have stated the facts about the women's contribution.

According to Catherine Coquery as noted by Chima J. Korieh,

... It was women who worked in the fields, among the Igbo. In Igbo Land, gender division of labour was underlying principles that structured the production relations among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria. There was ample flexibility in the tasks performed by men and women ...²

Again, from Equiano's description as noted by Chima J. Korieh, the most important source of energy (human labour) among the Igbo remained [is reactively or relatively?? unchanged into contemporary era Equiano, wrote in his autobiography.

... our tillage is exercised in a large plain or common, some hours walk from our dwelling, and all the neighbours resort thither in a body. They use no beasts or husbandry, and their only instruments are hoes, axes, shovels and beaks or pointed iron to dig with. Women and children carried out important farm operations, Such as clearing the land at the beginning of the farming season, weeding, planting and tending certain crops such as Melon (egusi), maize, coco yams and cassava...³

The above narrative of Equiano, showed how division of labour was fashioned in Igboland to suit the economic and demographic relations of the people and to distinguish how family did its work in Igbo society.

According to Achebe, as he noted in his classic work 'Things Fall Apart' he stated thus: "As the rains become heavier the women planted maize, melon and beans between the yam mounds. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late"⁴

In this regard, agricultural practice in Igboland involved division of labour. Men prepared the mounds and also measured the soil for yam stands, while women weed the land after the crops had been planted. According to Afigbo, in his words he stated thus:-

"Igbo man and woman was a farmer. Most families produced enough of such staples as yam, cocoyam, cassava and vegetables to last them all the year"⁵

According to Dr. Yehuda Karmon as pointed out by Afigbo, "The Igbo originated farther north in the forest – Savanna interface. They moved into forest to overwhelm the Ijo and the Ibibio who preceded them there". And to compliment the above Afigbo was of the view and stated thus:-

... If this was so, it would lend weight to the argument that Igbo agriculture is older than hitherto suspected for only cultivation could have had the dramatic effect on Igbo population that would give them such numerical advantage over their predecessor in the forest. In that case, it is significant that the Igbo agriculture had become so advanced that it could support the civilization with which the Igbo-Ukwu finds have been associated.⁶

Therefore, the above passages [delete-from all the things been said,] indicated the place of women in Igbo agriculture which remains [delete-stated to be] the most important economic activity of the people.

The Place of Women in Commerce and Industry

Agriculture no doubt laid the foundation of the Igbo economy, however it has also been complemented by commerce and industry.[Delete- It also pointed out the role of women in that capacity. On the other hand, commerce and industry can be discuss. Let's dig deeper to know their contribution on the developmental processes in this capacity.] As a matter of fact, commerce and industry which involved trade cannot be discussed in Igbo society without involving both the men and the women. There is indeed an increasing body of opinion as well as evidence supporting women involvement in the area of commerce and industry that brought about the transformation in economic and social change of the Igbo society especially those industries that are considered to be women industry such as pottery, salt production and weaving? These industries contributed meaningfully in the economic development of the Igbo society in pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial.

On account of trade, Afigbo observed that it "was nonetheless an important aspect of Igbo economic activity"⁷. In terms of commerce and industry the role of women was important to the early history and political economy of Igbo society. Women had showed their effort in trade with quantum of evidence.

... the fact that palm oil had little commercial value for either men or women prior to its commercialization at the end of slave trade in the ninetieth century. And women remained important in both production and marketing from the late nineteenth century onward. They were not only entitled to some palm oil they were entitled to the kernels, which became quite important in the export market. The evidence from the late ninetieth and early twentieth centuries confirms the important role played by women in the commercial economy of the transition era.⁸

Corroborating the above assertion, Adolphe Burdo, a member of the Belgian geographical society who visited Igboland in the late ninetieth century for example, as noted by Chima J Korieh, described Onitsha women who "traverse the country to collect palm oil and Ivory"⁹. Basden as noted by Chima J Korieh, reported that "women traders dominated the trade in palm produce and imported goods into Onitsha from the turn of the twentieth century until the depression of 1929"¹⁰.

In another dimension, Susan Martin as noted by Chima J Korieh, "... argues that the key to man's success in commercial palm production lay in control of women's labor. Women Martin maintains did most of work in palm processing as in yam cultivation"¹¹

K.O. Dike went further to expand the frontier and stated thus:

“Palm oil, major product of the tree, prior to this period was basically only a food item with a very little commercial value, except for domestic production of pomade (elu aki) and soap. Processing of food (oil) pomade and soap was controlled by women”¹²

What is clear from the above assertion is that women have left indispensable footprints in the commerce and industry in the economic and social development of the Igbo society. More importantly, Basden went further to note that:

“Practically, the whole of trade in Ibo country is in the hands of the women, and they are extremely capable. To be successful in trade is a signal for generous congratulations. By this a woman’s value is calculated... a man considers it in the choice of a wife, and , a husband’s favour is bestowed or withheld largely according to the degree of his wife’s success in the markets”¹³

In spite of attempts records that adopted? Nri mythology to place the women at the disadvantage, they have persisted and maintain their vitality which formed part for the reconstruction of the economic social and political historiography of the Igbo society. In addition, the women were [did] not only involved in trade, they also produced article of trade and at the same time created trade routes.

Accordingly, Afigbo, was of the view that “Niger waterway was the main axis of trade

of Igboland west of the Northern Igbo Plateau, that its use and level of development as trade route in those far off days would suggest the existence of a trade network”¹⁴. Afigbo, went further to point out that the items of this trade most likely were salt. In his words he stated “Salt popularly known as nnu okposi or nnu uburu was from here most of the Igboland got its salt”. Going by what was made available by historians, and other investigation and interviews carried out by the present writer, the Uburu salt lake was to be fetched by women. In that regard, the production of the salt are to be handled by the women.

In another instance, was the case of Ndoki Akwete cloth. Akwete weaving were among the prominent weavers in the ninetieth century. From the historical account of the Akwete weaving, it was stated that the industry involved itself or associated itself with women. Which according to Igbokwe C.C, “It is imperative to state that weaving in Ndoki is purely women occupation. It is evident from the study that men were not barred by tradition from cloth weaving in other parts of Nigeria as the case was in Ndoki Eastern part of Nigeria where it was a taboo for men to engage in weaving”¹⁵.

As mentioned earlier, the women did not only produce the article of trade, but they also aided in creating trade routes that linked the Igbo and their neighbours and thereby drew the attention of historians to the importance of the study of inter-group relations in Nigeria.

In stating the fact on inter-group relations in Nigeria, Affigbo stated it clear that trade and

commerce was among the factors making for inter-group contact. In his words he stated that, “trade and commerce ... was the most important single factor making for inter-group contact”. He further buttressed his argument on the importance of trade as a factor of inter-group relations and the place of women industry and how those products went far to establish movement of goods and culture items from one culture group to another. In his words Afigbo stated thus:

...Weaving industry in pre-colonial period especially among the Anam and the Nsukka, and much of this still thrives in spite of the completion of cheap European cloth. Some slave captains who visited the Bight of Biafra knew of the fame of the Igbo woven cloth and referred to it in their narrative. ... cloths which were exported northwards through the Igala and Idoma found their way to the banks of the Benue¹⁶

Having traversed on the place of women in commerce and industry it is pertinent to point out on women social formation which cut across education and politics.

The Place of Women in Social-Formation Education

In the context of Igbo society, education is a social institution culturally developed and defined as necessary to accept and cherish cultural norms, values, customs and traditions of the society. Education of every child is said to start from home and most often women take the lead. Prior to the advent of the western education, children were taught in areas like dance, music, folk traditions and festival in respect to the

traditions that laid emphasis on kinship, major events in life, such as birth marriage death and burial. All these are done using stories that portrayed the lives of eminent personalities even animals with good character who have helped to develop the community. In substantiating the fact about the role of women in social formation the editorial of historical flashback of January 15th 2014, clearly stated as follows: “girls were expected to stay back at home to learn domestic and other chores such as cooking, sweeping, hair weaving, decoration of body, dye production among other things from their in mother”¹⁷

In recent time, some of those things mentioned were among the things that were generating funds and boost the economy of the society. And that was the mode of education adopted in pre-colonial time. But in colonial and post-colonial, women adopted scholarship method to improve the society, socially, economically and politically.

Among the women that contributed immensely in the social formation of the Igbo society was Flora Nwapa. She used her wealth of knowledge to contribute on our educational system. She joined the civil service as education officer, Queen’s College Enugu in 1958. Between 1962 and 1967, she served as assistant registrar, public relations unit of the newly established University of Lagos. Flor Nwapa Nwakauche, as a writer used her literacy craft effectively, as she became Nigeria’s first published female novelist. She was the chairman and managing director Tana Press Ltd and Nwamife Publishers Ltd.

In fact, her campaigns brought about a renewed awareness on the part of women in the continent of Africa and at the same time promoted Igbo economy and reduced unemployment. The two companies mentioned, provided employment opportunities for people.

Uche Nwakandu, described her as “a lady of sterling qualities and admirable personality ... a household name a role model for women every where”¹⁸

Another outstanding figure in our time is Dr. Mrs. Catherine Obianuju Acholonu. An ardent promoter of arts and culture, especially Igbo culture to the level of appreciation. A prolific writer who used her sixty-three years she lived on earth to engage herself using her pen effectively in the reconstruction of Igbo and African History. The most significant and acclaimed internationally among all her works was the book with the title “Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano” which took the world by storm and gained her international recognition. A book that has been adopted as a television documentary film on slavery by a popular American television company in Boston.

In 1996, she was among the eleven experts invited from around the World to attend the United Nation’s Expert Group Meeting on Women Population and Sustainable Development at Instraw Headquarters, Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic. She was one of the two Africans invited. According to Uche Nwakandu, she is “an embodiment of

strength and courage, an inspiration to women everywhere”.¹⁹

Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, as a person in literary world and in academic had made outstanding mark that differentiated her by providing an insight into the new narrative to enhance the status of women in the society and open fresh insights into our understanding of the narrative on slavery which she indicated in her first work “Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano, the great slave autobiographer which have left in dispensable footprint in the cultural landscape of blacks and lend credence to the study of Blacks in Diaspora.

In the area of politics’ women of the Igbo descent also strived. Number of scholars and historians have pointed out their impact in Igbo politics as well as Nigerian politics. Pointing out the women involvement in politics, U.D Anyanwu stated that the influence of women were notable.

In his words he stated thus: “... women’s influence was also propped up by their direct involvement in the routine or formal governance of some Igbo communities including Nnobi, Osomari, Asaba and Onitsha. In Nnobi, for instance patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies juxtaposed in the indigenous political structure. This made it possible for women (notably, first daughters) to serve as ritual elites and also become title holders”²⁰

A critical review of literature on Nigeria and Igbo politics will throw more light on women involvement and contribution in politics. Despite the fact that starting from Igbo traditional sector males play the dominant

political role where Igbo women had held numerous traditional checks on them.

Simon Ottenberg, while commenting on women involvement in national politics stated thus:

... “Certain political associations that arose in the town in this period, considerably lived up the political scene. One was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, or the NCNC as it was often called. This was the dominant political party in Eastern Nigeria at this time, strongly associated with the Igbo people everywhere. A women’s branch, the NCNC women’s Association sometimes unofficially called the NCNC Women’s Wing, came into being in 1954, not surprising as women in South-eastern Nigeria have been very active in regional and national politics”²¹

Perhaps, the present writer is concerned primarily with a historical and sociological analysis of the Igbo speaking people of the South-eastern Nigeria.

The work seeks among other things, to demonstrate clearly between time and history as time shapes history just as history helps to shape time; that [Delete-exactly how it happens] in socio-political and economic development in Igbo society, [delete- As] both men and women worked hand in hand, side by side to develop the society. In the words of Chima .J. Korieh he noted that:

“The Igbo past have centered on the question of origin, the agrarian base of their economy, the decentralized and a cephalous structure of their political organization, an

achievement based on social system rooted in their traditional human living, and fluid gender ideology that recognize male and female”²²

Conclusion: The argument of this paper is not that previous Igbo historians have not talked about women’s contribution in Igbo society. But it is an appeal for more academic works to be put up by historians in order to illustrate more on the role and contribution of women in the developmental processes in Igboland. It is the genuine belief of the present writer that the emphasis that laid here and the findings generated will be of fundamental relevance for researchers in the field of Igbo History and culture in the future.

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