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## **Women and Economic Development in Nigeria: A history of “Owe” Women and Pre-Colonial Economy.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the role played by women in the pre-colonial economy of “Oweland”. The contribution of owe women to the economic development of the area is as old as Oweland itself. The creative ingenuity of women has allowed them to occupy an indispensable position in the economic transformation of Oweland. But due to the existence of male superiority, the economic role of women has not been given the required attention in the existing literature. As a result of the neglect of the role of women in the economic development of Oweland in the extant body of knowledge, the study is designed to fill this gap. The study focuses on the pre-colonial period. It outlines the role of women in economic development in the areas of agriculture, processing of agricultural produce, local craft and trade during the pre-colonial period. The study supports the assertion that women played significant role in the development of their various societies. While both primary and secondary data are employed, the analysis is done descriptively.*

**KEY WORDS:** *History, Women, Oweland, Economy, Nigeria*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The thrust of this work is to access the role of “Owe” women in the economic development of Oweland during the pre-colonial period. “Owe” refers to the dialect that the people occupying the present day Kabba of Kogi state Nigeria speak. It is located close to the confluence of the two great rivers of Niger and Benue (Niven, 1912). Oweland is surrounded by fertile land and thus was characterized by abundance of food production, because the availability of fertile land facilitated the development of agriculture and thus formed the main thrust of their economic activities. Trade and local craft industry augmented agricultural production. The practice in the pre-colonial period reveals that women were not redundant species. They participated vigorously towards the realization of the economic growth of their various communities. If given the opportunity, they can contribute meaningfully to the development of any economy. During the pre colonial period, men and women enjoyed relative gender equality in Oweland. Women had an edge over men economically since trade was significantly dominated by women. But yet their contributions were not formally recognized as a result of the existence of patriarchy which validates the superior position of men. Thus this work examines some of the various roles played by women in the economic development of Oweland.

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## **STRUCTURES OF “OWE” PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMY: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE**

The pre-colonial economy of Oweland was characterised by agricultural production and trade within and outside Oweland (Apata, 2011:20). Both men and women participated in agricultural production; it was more of a division of labour between the two genders. As they both complemented each other. During dry season, the men embarked on hunting. Hunting “Ode” among the people of Oweland was a highly respectable profession, as the founding fathers of the land were migrant hunters (Okemeta, 1986:7). It was also an important supplement to agriculture, though it was dominated by the men. Women complimented the effort of the men in hunting by preserving the game by smoking, frying or drying for future use. Hunting provided the required meat needed by the people and also provided the basic protein needed for Owe diet. Owe women during the pre-colonial era had a specific place in the lives of their immediate families. They carried out traditional roles which included cooking and serving the food, child care, raising and instilling discipline on the children amongst others. They also worked in the farms – tiling, planting and weeding the lands alongside their husbands. The erection of roofs for the house was basically the duty of the men and this was because it was solely their responsibility to build homes for their families (Ibitoye, 2017). The image of owe women during the pre-colonial period was established through songs, poems, stories and eye witness reports passed on from one descendant to another.

The major occupation of the people of Oweland in pre colonial time was basically farming and trading (Apata, 2011). Women were also seen performing actively in the above mentioned occupation, but despite the vital role played by Owe women, they were never treated equally with their male counterparts, as all their efforts were not valued equally with that of men. This inequality affected gender relations. With women complementing their male counterparts, the economic development of Oweland was sustained.

### **ROLE OF WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMY**

Women worked both within and outside the home, they are versatile, they have always been the architects of most of the economic activities that takes place in the household. (Ekot, 2009:227), women occupy almost 50% of the human race, (World Bank, 2017), yet they are marginalized and this has made women the most contemporary issue in the world. Women in pre colonial societies constituted a dynamic component of their various societies. This important aspect that women occupy in the society cuts across all strata of life. They took active part in the social uplifting of the society, but sadly their efforts towards the economic development of their various societies has not been appreciated as all what they do is seen asa disjointed effort that is not recognized (Ekot, 2009:229). It is in the light of this, that the role of women as well as their effort towards the development of agriculture, processing of agricultural produce, local craft and trade will be discussed.

### **AGRICULTURE**

The true significance of the economic history of Owelandlies in the growth of agricultural production. During the period of study land was owned communally. Access to land by

various families was through a recognised member of a family who must be a male (Ibimodi, 2005). The system of agricultural production and gender relations went through a number of transitional stages, it went from the primitive stage to a more advanced stage during the pre colonial period. Agriculture provided the people with the needed food requirements for the sustenance of the people of Oweland. Initially the primary concern of the people of Oweland was the production of food for their immediate needs, but because no man can provide all their he needs in his farmland the issue of reciprocity emerged as those with excess farm produce tend to offer their neighbours and vice versa. Gradually other means of getting what could not be produced emerged, and farm products were exchanged by the people. Both men and women were actively involved in agricultural production during the period under study, in most parts of Africa preparing a previously uncultivated land was locally perceived to be the duty of the male gender as it was considered to be very physically demanding (Faluyi, 2013:23). It was a time consuming activity that was perceived as too difficult for women, men principally do it with their wives helping out occasionally. Sexual division of labour was carried over to the disposal of agricultural produce. Agriculture has been observed to have contributed immensely to the economic development of Oweland. Yam was the major food crop produced during the period under study. There were seven major varieties of yam produced in oweland. The planting of yam seedlings demanded huge energy as a result only the strong willed embarked on yam cultivation. Both men and women participate in the planting of yam it was more of a division of labour task, bush clearing was done by both men and women, heapmaking was exclusively done by men while the placing of the yam seedlings on the heaps was done by the women and the planting was done by the men while the staking of the yam vines was done by both genders. The harvesting was done by both while the conveyance of the harvested yams home as well as the preserving was solely the duty of the woman. The production of yam was done by virtually everybody in Oweland. All household has yam plantation, giving of yam as gift was termed an insult because it is believed that only a lazy man will not have yam in excess in his barn. So yam was a surplus commodity during the precolonial period as such excess yams were used for tree roasting in the farm. (Omosayin, 2005). Cotton was also produced by the people this was because the harvested cotton serves as the major item which was used for cloth weaving, this crop emerged as a result of the Peoples needs to cover their nakedness. (Olaoye, 2003). Other crops cultivated include maize, cassava and guinea corn and clover beans popularly called *ekpakurubu*. The women also cultivated other varieties of crops such as vegetables of various species; spinach, waterleaf, bitter leave, pepper, tomatoes and okro. This was done throughout the year hardly will you come across a season where these vegetables will not be available and this is made possible through their perfect specialty in irrigation system. (Oniemola, 1997) Through this their various families enjoys a wide variety of meals with freshly plucked vegetables and pepper throughout the year. As rightly posited by Faluyi (2013: 23), women played supportive role in the farm and all the needs of the people were also met, thus women have been observed to play an indispensable role in the development of the economy.

Women and their children provided the required labour assistance (Hopkins, 1982:21). Thus because the wealth of a man was measured by the number of wives and children he has polygamy was the order of the day. The more wives and children a man has the better for him as they enhanced farm productivity. As posited by Equiano (1794:14), the entire household were involved in agricultural production. Sadly land which was a major factor of production

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was exclusively reserved for men, Owe women just like their counterparts in other parts of Nigeria do not own land but could access land through their father or husband as the case may be (Ochefu, 2007:65). Amidst all odds owe women out of their resourcefulness still performed creditably in agricultural production and thus has contributed immensely to the economic development of oweland.

### ***Processing of Agricultural Produce***

As an economy which was solely based on agricultural production. The aspect of food processing formed an essential part of the economic demeanours of the people. In the area of processing the agricultural produce, women were seen to be more active than their male counterparts; the following items amongst others shall be discussed

#### ***Tuber (yam and cassava processing)***

Yam was the major crop cultivated by the people during the period under study. It was processed into various items. Apart from boiling and pounding into pounded yam which was the best food that any man can offer a visitor in Oweland. Yam is also processed into yam powder, this is done by peeling, slicing and soaking the yam in water for about two days thereafter the soaked yam are brought of the water and drained having done that the drained yam is dried, after drying the yam is pounded with mortar having done that it is grinded on a grinding stone, when the smoothness is achieved it is then stored in container to be used for Alubo (Yam paste). Yam was also used for a local delicacy known as Aepaato achieve this the yam is peeled, boiled dried and slightly pounded and stored in container for onward use. It is prepared by making a watery paste out of it, boiled with ingredients such as salt, peper, locust bean, oil bush meat and dried fish.

Cassava was processed into more than three food items in Oweland during the period under study. They included among others *garri*, *alubopaki* (cassava powder), and *fufu*. Milling garri from cassava was an important development in food processing. To process cassava into *garri*, the tuber was first peeled and grated with perforated flat metal sheets, the dough produced was then poured into a sack which was tied between long sticks; heavy stones were then placed on it to press the water out. This continued for two to five days depending on how fermented the *garri* was expected to be, the fermentation that took place during the period of extracting the water helped to neutralize its acidic content. The grated cassava was then fried in a clay frying pan. A colour variation was achieved by adding palm oil to impart a yellowish colour to the *garri* and to further reduce acidity. A well-fried *garri* could be stored for more than three months without getting spoilt. *Garri* was not so common during the pre colonial period because the people had always had preference for yam, (Ibisagba, 2017). Eba which was prepared from garri was sometimes eaten by the people because it was seen as a quick food that could be prepared within a twinkle of an eye. On the other hand, the *alubopaki* was processed by peeling the cassava and slicing it into water, it was soaked for about five to seven days to remove its acidic content after which it was drained and dried, the dried cassava was then pounded and sieved, and the powder got from the sieved was used for preparing cassava paste. The garri was almost the exclusive preserve of the women folk. The men only assisted in digging out the tubers from the ground (Otitoiyomi, 2017). The processing of the *Alubopaki* down to the stage of consumption was done by the female gender. Through this process women have contributed greatly in putting food on the tables of their family thereby enhancing development.

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***Grains (Maize and Guinea Corn)***

Maize and guinea corn could be converted into a blanc-mange form popularly known as *ogi*. In oweland it usually took about seven days before processing reached a stage where only boiling water was needed to convert it into the final consumable form. The grains are soaked in cold water for between three to five days when it is properly soaked it is grinded sieved and left to settle and ferment there after the water is changed twice daily at this stage the desired quantity may be taken stirred and poured in a boiling water until a thick liquid is obtained, (Abdulrahman and Kolawole, 2006). Guinea corn was also converted into local drinks known as *otineka* (Guinea corn wine). Women became controllers of refreshment shops where this local drink was sold. Also from guinea corn is the production of guinea corn cake snacks known as *akara din dinekait* was achieved by grinding guinea corn and making paste which was garnished with salt and pepper and fried in red oil (Ayeni, 2016). All the above agricultural produce was processed by women thereby preventing wastages and enhancing the economic growth of the land.

***Vegetables (spinach, waterleaf, tomatoes, okra and pepper)***

Vegetables formed part of the diet of the people of Oweland and it was mostly planted by women, hardly will you find a woman during the pre-colonial period that does not have a garden at the back of the house where vegetables are grown (Oniemola, 1997). Vegetables such as spinach, waterleaf and tomatoes are sliced into pieces, boiled for about two minutes drained and dried for onward usage, while okra and pepper are dried and pounded for onward usage. By so doing the vegetables are preserved from getting rotten.

***Wild plants (Palm kernel and coconut)***

The production of local pomade from palm kernels *adin* and coconut *adinagbon* was exclusively the preserve of women (Omosayin, 2005). A desired quantity of palm kernel is cracked, and put on an earthen pot, covered with a lid and fried for some period of time of about thirty to forty five minutes depending on the absorption of heat. During the frying oil was produced, the black oil that comes out of the palm kernel which was used as pomade was separated from the burnt kernels and stored in a jar for onward usage. In the case of coconut oil *adinagbon* the process was as follows: the coconut fibres and shells were forcefully taken off a cutlass or any sharp object. Thereafter, the edible brownish oval shaped fruit was cut into pieces and grounded into soft whitish product. Water was gradually added to the whitish product and mixed, the mixture was put in a raffia bag and squeezed to extract the water. The extracted liquid content was heated on fire and left to cool the floated oil which is the coconut oil was gradually scooped and poured in a jar. Both products apart from serving as skin care were also used for the cure of convulsion and high body temperature in children; it was also used by adult for hair growth. Women thus became processors of harvested agricultural produce into medicinal essentials and commodities of trade.

**Local craft**

The craft industry was also dominated by the female gender. Our main focus shall be the weaving industry reasons being that the weaving industry was the most important dominant craft of the people during the period under study. Weaving emerged as result of the need to satisfy their urge to cover their nakedness (Olaoye, 2003) as well as the peoples curiosity to device a means of protecting their bodies from harsh weather condition (Faley, 2013)

Weaving in oweland was done by both men and women with variations in the loom used by each gender; the men wove on the horizontal loom while women wove on the vertical loom (Faluyi, 2013:30), the nature of the women loom made it more convenient for them to combine domestic works with weaving as they could leave their weaving for domestic activities and return to it within the shortest period of time, the loom was mounted indoors because it doesn't take up much space. Weaving was enhanced as a result. Generally the production of textile has been an important industry in Nigeria in the time past (Olaoye, 2005). Weaving was the most important craft of the people during the period under study reasons being that the geographical location as well as the climatic condition of Oweland favoured the growing of cotton needed for cloth weaving, all the materials used for weaving was readily available at their immediate environment (National Archives Kaduna) this also aided and facilitated weaving as the weavers need not to go far before getting the required materials for weaving. The people wove cloth of very sophisticated quality which attracted patronage from within and outside Oweland. It thus provided employment for the people thereby promoting their living standard. The technique of the craft was passed from one off spring to another through the process of imitation, weavers mostly women train their daughters to take up the profession after them, besides all girl child is expected to know how to weave before marriage as she is expected after all marriage rites has been fulfilled by her husband to weave a covering cloth for him as her first assignment to her husband. Thus the technique of weaving mastered through a process of imitation, a measurable quantity of cotton was given to the girl child and all processes was gradually carried out through imitation under the supervision of their mother or sister who has mastered the techniques of cloth weaving. Woven materials of diverse types were wove by the women during the period under study they include *asooke, kitipa, keke, eleboto, ifale, oja, ebe and arigidi* amongst others while *Aponuonyin* was exclusively the preserve of the male gender because of its traditional significance (Rene, 1995). It was used for the performance of the burial rite of the highest ranked chief and so had special male who wove it. However all the woven materials because of their quality were always in high demand (Apata, 2011:20), it thus provided a viable source of lively hood to the people as the needed financial backings were provided. Several women through weaving provided additional income for their families. The craft was thus sustained as a result of the frequent demand of the cloths within and outside oweland.

### **Trade**

At first markets were not developed as most people grew what they needed. Scarcities were usually taken care of by exchange with those who has (Ibimodi, 2005). It was only later that a more distinct form of came into being. Hence, markets were established gradually, and the internal trade eventually became dominant, reasons being that it was less cumbersome and not far from home. Trade went on throughout the day. Women were the major participants. The women shuttled about from street to another with goods varying from agricultural produce, woven clothes and arts and crafts. Gradually daily and periodic markets emerged, which made the trade livelier. Amongst the popular periodic markets were the *Odogi* market, *Idiose* market and the *Araromi* market but the *Odogi* market was always well attended by people within and outside oweland. (National Archives Kaduna, 1912-1936). Trade was exchanged through barter system like other Yoruba ethnic groups. Articles were carried by portorage and journeys were made on foot to markets (Apata, 2011:20).

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## External

External trade, which was also important in this period, covered a wide part of Oweland and her neighbours. The people had trade contact with other regions. This is because the external trade brought them in contact with different people from different villages and ethnic groups. The regional trade involved people from more than two states for instance the Ijeshas and the Nupes. The journey to these trade centres was done mostly in groups. There emerged inter regional markets and these markets were unique because of the large number of people and the wide varieties of people that were involved. Important commercial centres of trade were, Lokoja, Shintaku, Agenebode, abugi and Jatu among others. The most important articles of trade were woven clothes of varying types such as *arigidi* and *Asooke*, cotton, tobacco, beads, Sheabutter *Ori* and palm oil. (Apata, 2011:20). Participants of the long distance trade were mainly men. This was because of the distance involved and the weight of the loads carried along the trade route. The women still participated in one way or the other; they complimented their husbands by assisting in carrying the less bulky goods to the place of exchange. The poor transportation system that was in existence during the pre-colonial period greatly obstructed the expansion of the trade. Poor means of transporting items did not only limit the quantity of goods carried but, also constrained traders to few numbers of markets they could attend and few numbers of trips. As a result of this constraint there was the development of strong trading links. The trading links made it possible for an Owe trading group to interchange goods with another in order to control trade. Owe was a major supplier of woven material to Onitsha. However, no serious contacts existed with the far north in trading, due to the distance of Oweland to the far north, poor transport system could also be deduced for the reason why the people of Oweland did not have any serious contact with the people of the far north during the precolonial period. But this is not to say that the people of oweland were completely cut off goods from the far north still got to Oweland through the Ijesha and Nupe middlemen.

The season whether dry or raining dictates the frequency of the market as well as the articles of trade in stock. The Lokoja, Shintaku and Ibon market in Nupeland was mostly embarked upon by the matured women who no longer bear children and could afford to be away from home for a long period of time. The Owe traders after selling bought items such as bush meats, kulikuli, smoked fish, cola nut and bush meat from Ibon market in Nupeland, to be resold at oweland (Omosayin, 2005).

However, given the social and occupational structure of gender relations during the pre-colonial period, the economic roles of women were enhanced through trade as they were able to accumulate wealth that could facilitate their contributions in the economic development of their families as well as their various communities.

## CONCLUSION

The contribution of Owe women to the development of the pre-colonial economy of Oweland can therefore not be neglected. The commendable manner in which they adapted to an environment that gave them limited economic role (such as the one created by patriarchy and their inability to own land) cannot be equaled. They remained economically active by engaging in certain important activities such as farming, processing of agricultural produce,

trading, and local craft industry. They supported their husbands in keeping the homes through the production of food crops and the money they realized from trading activities.

Oweland therefore benefitted tremendously from the economic roles that the women performed during the pre-colonial period.

As a deduction from the foregoing, contemporary Oweland and indeed Nigeria cannot be oblivious of the position of the women in the society. The society has a lot to gain from engaging the women folk in economic activities as their previous performances have shown. What is required is a friendly environment that will enable them to realize their economic capabilities. The government must consciously realize the need to empower women economically. This can be realized by encouraging greater access to educational facilities that will thus open up economic opportunities for them. Again, the factors that tend to pulverize the economic potentials of the women folk need to be addressed. These factors include certain cultural practices, infant and maternal mortality as well as the societal established discrimination against them. More so, observers, writers, analysts and academicians need to begin to incorporate feminine perspectives in their works, especially works that focus on gender and economic development. This holds one of the major keys to the economic transformation of Oweland, and Nigeria as a whole.

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