

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AGENCY IN PRE-COLONIAL OKPELLA, EDO STATE NIGERIA (C. 1400–1904)

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Abstract

This study examines the economic agency of women in pre-colonial Okpella, a Benin-derived clan in northern Edo State, Nigeria, from the foundational migration of c. 1400 to the eve of British colonisation in 1904. Drawing on oral traditions, colonial records, and archaeological inferences, it traces women's pivotal roles across shifting cultivation, food processing, craft production (pottery, mat-weaving, and ritual masks), livestock rearing, and intra-regional trade via head portage and periodic markets. Gendered divisions of labour, guild organisation, and inheritance patterns enabled women to control resources, expand household production, and sustain inter-group exchange networks with Nupe, Esan, and Ebira neighbours. The analysis establishes a pre-1904 baseline for understanding subsequent colonial transformations in women's economic status.

Keywords: Okpella women, pre-colonial economy, shifting cultivation, craft guilds.

1) Introduction

Every human society had witnessed unprecedented contributions of women to its growth in all facets of life. This is due to the resilience and determination which women exhibit when contributing their quota to the growth and development of the society they live. All over the world women have been able to serve as the oil which lubricates the engine which drives development and empowerment for the overall benefit of everyone. Virtually all sectors of the economy of a society which strives for development experience the monumental contributions of women. In South Africa, between 1911 to 2020, about 58,000 that is, 12 percent of the mining work force were women. When women joined the mining workforce, they began doing the work historically done by men, such as drilling, pounding blasted rock, winching ore to the surface, installing support technologies (such as timber-based support and jackpots, resin-grouted rock bolts, steel bolts and so on) and water and ventilation pipes. (Asanda-Jonas Benya: 2023. 129)

In the mid-19th century California and Australia, narrative of artisanal mining can only be recounted with the proviso that it was deeply flawed, not unlike Greek democracy' indifference to the rights of women and slaves. Artisanal mining in California and Australia represents an historical interlude in which artisanal miners became enmeshed in a frontier nation-building narrative (Deborah Fahy Bryceson : 2018, 42) In Nigeria, study about export with inputs of women had been carried out. This is because the country's export was anchored upon export items like groundnuts, cocoa and palm produce. (Ayodele Samuel Aborisade: 2018) Study has been carried out on how remarkable degree of progress was recorded in some sectors while inevitable setbacks were experienced in other sectors (Victor Osaro Edo and Ayodele Samuel Aborisade : 2012) of the Nigerian economy, all these with the inputs of women. Studies on the importance of import control in Nigeria during the Second World War by both the colonial and metropolitan governments (Ayodele Samuel Abolorunde: 2021,50-51) had been undertaken.

In Enugu Province of colonial Nigeria, British Crown owned the right of coal mining with huge contributions of women. (Ihediwa Nkejika: 2014) The revenue generated from coal mining contributed significantly to the transformation of the pre-colonial economy into an economy that suited the British economic motive of exploitation (Ayodele Samuel Abolorunde:2019) It is important to state that foreign business interests were conspicuous in the various sectors of the economy and this continued unabated in the distributive trade and the production of agricultural products in Nigeria.(Chris B.N. Ogbogbo and Ayodele Samuel Aborisade: 2018).

Many studies have therefore interrogated the roles of women in various societies all over the world. In Nigeria, Study has been carried out on how import control under regionalism was one of the strategies used by the colonial government on the eve of independence in the devolution of some of its economic powers to the

regions through constitutional framework. (Abolorunde, Ayodele Samuel:2019) Study has also been carried on the importance of green economy to the reduction of economic and gender inequalities among nations and individuals all over the world respectively. (Agnes Babugura:2017) Effort has also been made to establish the relationship between the possession of natural resources and its attendant challenges in countries like Italy, Turkey and Morocco (Vanessa Ushie :2013) Study which reveals unpalatable remuneration of mining workers in South Africa throughout the twentieth century without any social value on these workers including women in the 20th century has been undertaken (May Hermanus, Sizwe Phakathi, Nancy Coulson and Paul Stewart:2019)

This paper therefore focuses on Women's Economic Agency in the Pre-Colonial Okpella, Edo State Nigeria (from c.1400 when the people of Okpella were said to have migrated from Benin to Okpella to 1904 when the British imperial patrol moved from Idah station to Iddo-Okpella and formed the Kukuru Division. Scholars have therefore paid attention to the role of women in the mining and other contributions of women to the colonial economy as well as the re-emergence of their contribution to the post-colonial economy of Okpella and Nigeria at large. The exclusion of history of women's economic activities in the pre-colonial Okpella makes this study important to us because it will enable us have a comprehensive understanding of how the colonial and the post-colonial history of Okpella evolved through the interrogation the Okpella society before the erection of the British colonial rule. This will enhance our understanding of the workings of the pre-colonial socio-economic and political structures as well as the important roles played by women during this period. A gap this study intends to fill. The study also brings to the fore the adaptive capacity of the pre-colonial Okpella women to the changing realities of that time.

The main thesis is to demonstrate the importance of women agency in the pre-colonial Okpella society. The conventional wisdom is that, the pre-colonial African societies were dominated with male chauvinism with limited roles of women. However, Abolorunde and Arebamen challenged the conventional wisdom when they argue that the monumental roles of women in the economies of various societies all over the world cannot be underestimated. Their strategic positions in the running of both former and informer sectors of the economy remain important lubricants that help in its growth and development. (Ayodele Samuel Abolorunde and Arebamen Donald Dennis: 2026) This evidence was corroborated by Deborah Fahy Bryceson when she argues that Artisanal mining in California and Victoria, that is Australia represents an historical interlude in which artisanal miners became enmeshed in a frontier nation-building narrative. (Deborah Fahy Bryceson: 2018, 42).

It is a contribution to the study of the pre-colonial history of Nigeria and moves discussion in new directions. The study is divided into six sections, the first deals with introduction, the second addresses, Traditions of Origin, Socio-Political and Economic Structures of Okpella Geographical Area, (c.1400-1770), the third examines, Pre-Colonial Economic Roles of Okpella Women in Agriculture, 1772-1799, the fourth assess, the pre-colonial economic roles of Okpella women in short and long-distance trade, 1800-1879 the fifth interrogates, Pre-Colonial Economic Roles of Okpella Women in Arts and Craft, 1880-1904, the sixth, conclusion.

2) Traditions of Origin, Socio-Political and Economic Structures of Okpella Geographical Area, (c.1400-1770)

As a way of introduction, a brief history of Okpella would be presented first followed by the geographical location of the land as well as the culture of the people. After which, a proper analysis of the economic role of women in Okpella up to 1904 would be discussed. The discussion of the historical process before 1904 is to provide an account which would be useful as part of the background to the understanding of the evolution of economic roles of women in Okpella during the period under consideration. Okpella is a clan in Afenmai land which is well known for the numerous deposits of solid mineral. The people of Okpella belong to the *Etsako tribe* a group that claims to have migrated from Benin. Despite the migratory account that has been put forward by the people, evidence points to the fact that there was absorption of aboriginal elements referred to as *Ugbami* who were indigenous inhabitants in the region before the arrival of the new migrant. (Bradbury, R.E: 1957)

Every Society today and even in time past are said to have distinct origins. Unfortunately, several African communities' origins were not recorded or documented in writing for a very long time and Okpella was not an exception. In this regard the only means of recording their past were mostly through oral traditions as a result, much is not known about this particular group of people. Their earliest history can be said to be shrouded in obscurity; hence accurate dates of historical events is difficult to ascertain for the more remote phases of their development leading to chronological problems. (Osadolor, Benson, O:2001) However, for proper understanding, the periodization of the history of Okpella People is pegged to the phases of history in Benin a place where the Okpella people migrated from. The first period was referred to as the Ogiso Era dating between 40 BCE (during the reign of Ogiso Igodo) to 1100 AD (which marked the end of the Ogiso era after the death of Ogiso Owodo). (Osadolor, Benson, O: 2001). During this first period the people that formed the Okpella clan had not migrated from Benin hence their activities during this period revolves around the happenings in the Benin Kingdom. While the second period was called the Eweka Dynasty (dated around 1200 to when Oba Ahenzae died without a successor). (Apoola, T: 2016). This second period or phase of the Benin history is significant to the study of

Okpella history as it was the cumulative events that occurred in the Benin Kingdom at that time that led to the migration of the people that came to form Okpella land.

The second period or phase of the Benin history was characterized by the reign of several Oba's who ruled the Benin kingdom from 1200 AD onwards. Some of these Oba's were Oba Eweka who ruled from 1200AD to 1235AD, Oba Ewedo who ruled from 1255AD to 1280AD, Oba Oguola (c. 1295AD- 1299AD), Oba Udagbedo (c.1299AD- 1334AD), Oba Ewuare the Great who ruled around c. 1440's. The contributions of Oba Ewuare to the development of the Benin Kingdom were very important as he helped Benin become more powerful by building up an army which he used in expanding the Benin territory. Records of his expansionist policies indicated that he conquered 201 towns and villages. (Ediagbonya M, Duyile A.W, Aluko Y: 2020.) He was also credited to have rebuilt Benin City by constructing a 16,000km long earthen moat to create a defense around the city and the Royal Palace, hence the period of his reign was termed the 'Golden Age' of Benin History.

The prosperous Reign of Oba Ewuare the Great was characterized by difficult decisions which he made to ensure the stability and growth of the kingdom into an Empire. Some of his reforms included the elimination of political rivalry between the Oba and his Chiefs, as well as the establishment of political monopoly over the exertion of military power. (Osadolor O.B:2001). Some of the strict measures Oba Ewuare and his successors introduced led to the migration of different groups to found new villages, and communities. Some of the notable migrants are the Esan People and the Okpella People.

The generally accepted view was that Okpella is said to have been founded by a man called OkpellaN'Ikpowusa. The name *OkpellaN'Ikpowusa* meant (I give thanks to God) corrupted to Ikpomaza. It is said that he migrated from a place known as Ekae in Benin probably during the reign of Oba Ewuare in 1400. This claim has been buttressed by Haruna H.B when he argues that "the people of Okpella came in contact with the Okhu people in about 1400s when they migrated from Benin. (Harunnah H.B:1990) Ikpomaza was said to have left Benin with his wife 'Eveva'.(Naiwu .O: 2022).

The first tradition stated that Ikpomaza moved away from Benin because the then Oba wanted to seize his wife for himself therefore, he had to move to a far away and secured place where the Oba could not locate him. (Isabemoeh, J. R:1997) The second tradition of origin states that the quest of Ikpomaza to seek economic fortune made him leave Benin in search leopard skins which were exported from Benin Empire to Portugal at that very time, around the 15th century, the forest land of Okpella during this period was known to be the home of leopards.

Ikpomaza's settlement was also subjugated to debate as two accounts have emerged one tolled the line that after traveling many months, Ikpomaza's team camped at Umar near Ijah in Akoko- Edo local government area c.1405. "Ikpomaza's and his team camped at Ijiase, there he had his only son ' Okpia' meaning ' man' or to some others 'Good Aroma' ". Soon the name 'Okpia' was later corrupted to be pronounced as Okpella meaning the Unity of 'Okhu'. The term the Unity of Okhu came about as a result of the contact between Ikpomaza and the Aborigines group known as 'Okhu' at Amovie cave and Ekpema at Ekpema rock" between 1405-1480. (Interview with Mrs. Gloria Eshiaghame:2023). The Amovie language was similar to that of Okpella which was an indication showing that they migrated at an earlier period than the Okpella migrants. It was believed that 'Okhu' were the first people to settle down where Okpella occupies today.

The interaction that occurred between the migrant groups and Okhu people around 1405-1480's, made the Okhu people almost lose their original dialect but yet they have different traditions of Origin. The Okhu people who are often referred to as 'pre-okpella' inhabitants are believed to have also migrated from the hills of the Akoko Edo area. The Akoko Edo area was a territory inhabited by the proto-Edoid speaking people. (Harunnah, H.B.1990) Ikpomaza was believed to have been a unique ruler with great leadership qualities which he used in directing the affairs of the migrants groups he brought from Benin as well as subjugating the indigenous inhabitants where he came to settle. He continued to rule the people till about 1482 when he retired.

With time, it was noted that Ikpomaza had already become weak and tired due to old age. Consequently, his son Okpia or Okpella emerged as the 'de-facto' leader of the people and was able to ensure the safe arrival of the migrants in the present day Okpella from about c.1483 (in the fifteenth century). (Harunnah H.B:1990.) The use of coral beaded crowns and beads were evident in the celebration of 'Ethame' festival of which Ikpema music was played. Benin works of art especially wood carving and basket weaving were also carried down to Okpella. These works of art can be found in Ogiriga and Idaetche festival which took place about every (20) Twenty years. The celebration of these festivals was one among other reasons done to remember their arrival from Benin. (Harunnah H.B:1990) Okpella in continuation with this account was believed to have married a woman called '*Ogieumah*' in about 1484. *Ogieumah* was a name reminiscent of the former place of settlement and they had three children--two boys and one girl- namely Ute, Ase, and *Ekuri* respectively. When the boys were of age, they got their wives from neighbouring people and *Ekuri* one of his sons was said to have founded the people of *Imiekuri* around c.1509. (Interview with Mrs. Gloria Eshiaghame:2023)

Ase the second son was very adventurous and while on a hunting expenditure he discovered another place suitable for settlement. 'Eku' the discovered land became the new settlement for Ase and his family around c. 1510-11; Ase was later nicknamed Oteku and lived peacefully ever since then, however, Ase never failed in doing

one thing and that is he always paid regular visit to his parents to the displeasure of his elder brother Ute. Ase or Oteku later had children who in turn became founders of the three settlements in Ukhomuyhio namely (Afokpella), Iddo, and Ogiriga. While Ute the senior son of the family remained with his parents and his children became founders of Awuyemi and Imiegelle. (Harunnah H.B: 1990) .

The second settlement account suggests that Ikpomaza on his arrival from Benin settled at Okhe Uviogbe, this account argues that Ikpomaza had two sons one of them was called 'Aisen' subsequently changed to Atse or Ase also nicknamed Oteku was the founder of the descendants of Oteku sub clan of Okpella around c. 1510-11, while the other son called Ekuri, became the founder of Imiekuri in Okpella. However, there was an argument that Ikpomaza had another son called Omigie who became the founder of Imiegieli around c.1525-30. (Interview with Mrs. Gloria Eshiahame:2023). This tradition has been contested by others who argue that Omigie was clearly up to date a female name. They claimed that Omigie was clearly a female child of 'Ute' and was born during a ceremony hence the name Ute. It could be argued that if Ikpomaza had three (3) sons, according to this account, Okpella would have been divided into three rather than the present two (2) sub clans that it has up till present. (Interview with Mrs. Ejordamen Florence: 2023). No matter the controversy that ensues from these accounts, one thing remains clear all tribes of Okpella was founded by the descendants of Ikpomaza, and all events that unfolded latter on or better put account recorded were all in an attempt to place superiority over each other. It is also important to note that, many Okpella sub-groups spread from the Ogute area, settling in different parts of Okpella Clan before 1600.

The factor that might have prompted the migration of these groups is not certain but custodians of the local history believe that the people probably decided to migrate out of there due to the fact that there was constant intra community rivalry as well as the need to make use of the available fertile soil for the purpose of farming in the neighbouring areas they migrated to. (Harunnah H.B:1990). Irrespective of the condition that precipitated the migration of these groups, the fact remains that by 1600-1750, these communities had settled down to master their surroundings, as well create an enabling environment which thrived on inter group relations ranging from trade, marriage, exchange of the knowledge of art and crafts which were necessities for their survival. Notable among the new communities that were formed are Afokpella, Iddo, Awuyemi, Imieghele, Imiekuri, Imiagbese, Igiriga, Okugbe, Okhu. Interestingly, despite the emergence of new villages and communities, the group that separated through migration continued to regard themselves as one people, deriving their sense of unity and belief that they shared a common historical heritage that bound them together. Hence, they took up the collective name of 'Okpella' a name gotten from the founder of the first settlement while referring to other breakaway settlements as Okpella villages and Clan. (Harunnah H.B:1990)

Like Phillips Steven argues "In spite of refinement in the application of oral tradition to historical writings there is still considerable opposition to any reliance upon them ... However, many non-literate people carefully preserve certain of their own historical traditions by other means. Yet some form oral traditions are subject to constant distortion".(Stevens. P:1978) In line with the above assertion, it becomes clear that researchers of history cannot solely rely on the account given above, but as historians we cannot throw away this aspect of Origin. From both accounts, one fact remains constant: the people acknowledge that their origin lies in Benin. .(Naiwu .O. 2022)

The Okpella people occupy the rocky terrain or rocky northern flank of Etsako territory, the early inhabitants of Okpella were people described to have marks on their forehead known as '*Ikpo*'. Okpella language is a dialect of Benin and to a very large extent; the language remains the strongest prestige of the Edo Legacy and heritage. Okpella was considered to be the third largest clan in Etsako Land.(Dauda G, Baasi D, Moronkola O:2020.) Okpella clan was sub-divided into Western and Eastern Okpella while Western Okpella comprises five villages, Eastern Okpella was made up of three villages. The remaining village represented the descendants of earlier settlers from Benin who were culturally dominated by Okpella. Traditions of autochthonous peoples persisted in both Eastern and Western Okpella. (Borgatti J.M:1976)

In historical studies of a territory, the essence of identifying its geographical location cannot be overemphasized and, in this context, it is important to know the specific location of 'Okpella'. Okpella can be found in the Northern fringes of Edo State, it lies between latitude 7°degree and 7.25° degree North and Latitude 6.15 degree and 6.38-degree East covering an area of 231.2 square kilometer. Earth Scientists Ogunyele, A. C., Obaje, S. O., and Akingboye, A. S. note that Okpella area is the eastern extension of the Igarra Schist Belt, Southwestern Nigerian Basement Complex they further explain that the area comprises granite gneiss, Metasedimentary rocks and Pan-African intrusive. Metasedimentary rocks occurring in the area include garnet-biotite schist, marble and calc-silicate gneiss, quartzite and Banded Iron Formation (BIF).(Ogunyele, A. C., Obaje, S. O., and Akingboye, A. S:2018)

To the North and North East of the clan is Okene Local Government area, as well as villages of Ososo, Oja, Dangbala, Ojirami, and Atete. To the south is Uzairue clan while to the south east are the two Northern Ibie clans or also described as Okpella and the three Ibies.(Borgatti J.M:1976). It as well borderspresent day Kogi State and it is one of the major gateway to the Northern part of Nigeria. An extract from the Native Authority Ordinance gives an insight of the colonial geographical structure of Okpella (previously spelt *Ukpilla*).

in the pre-colonial period, the mode of administration of the various clans of Etsako (particularly Okpella) lacked a clear distinction between political roles and economic, social or religious functions.

There were rules and regulations, some very well entrenched in the people traditions and customs, which conditioned peoples conduct, and corrected or punished infringements. This was why the roles of the executive, judiciary, legislature and general running of the affairs of the community were more or less vested in one body. (Erhagbe E.O: 2005) Although in some places there were spelt out functions for certain groups or individuals in the administrative set-up. From 1750-1755, a remarkable feature of the political and social development of the Etsako after their migration from Benin was that they did not generally develop monarchical traditions and in most cases, they did not exhibit traits of the practices that obtained in their original Benin home. Thus, whereas the pre-colonial political organization of Benin centered on the Oba and three groups of senior title holders, the social and administrative structure in the Etsako area was essentially gerontocratic and not based on monarchical traditions.

The Etsako traditional geo-political organization was hierarchical in structure with the 'Elo' which implies 'the family' can be referred to as the smallest administrative unit and the clan as the highest one. The main units were the *Elo* a family, *Ede* a conglomeration of families (quarter). *Ewo* (The village) which was a combination of multiple *Ede* or Quarters and the clan which was formed by a cluster of villages. In each of the units identified above, the administration was the collective responsibility of all, with individuals being entrusted with specific functions, especially based on age. Basically, councils were formed of the oldest members in each unit for supervising their affairs. The position of the head of the council was reserved in most cases for the oldest man in the assembly. (Erhagbe, E.O:2005). Borgatti J.M points out that although the British established the position of paramount chief shortly after the turn of the century, the pre-colonial political system remained in Okpella. (Borgatti J.M:1976).

Historically, the Okpella people believed in a supreme deity, Eshinegba, creator of all things in the material world (Agbo) and the supernatural world (Ilimi). (Borgatti, J.M:1979) A feast was usually held to celebrate the "Esi or Oshinegba festival". In fact, it has been recorded that "of all the feast, this was quite unique because every member of the village was sure to offer sacrifices to God his maker after the elders of the village had made sacrifices for an *Ogege* or *Iyotor* tree which was trained or made to grow on the market roads or any street which they regarded as God" (National Archives Ibadan, K.D 247B). As at 1755-1765, Men, and some women, belonged to one or more cult groups or masquerade societies whose focus was the control of anti-social forces, chiefly witchcraft. Ilukpekpe, a night society and paramount ritual authority, was found in all Okpella villages. (Borgatti J.M:1976). Metaphysics in Okpella had been described as a lived metaphysics this was because the people seemed to practice in the words and gestures as well as actions of everyday experience. Metaphysics was so distinct that it did not accept or even think of a dichotomy between the world of experience (our physical world) and the invisible, which was believed to be the world that lies beyond the physical world. Hence, Anthony A. Asekhauno and V.A. Inagbor describe it as a metaphysics not founded on '*physika*'. the following excerpt from their work supports this claim:

Etsako thus conceive of man as possessing a finite, corruptible body, on the one hand, and as an infinite, incorruptible soul, on the other a sort of dualism, and even 'trichotomy'. A 'person' long pre-exists before birth and he is "believed to have finally emigrated from the super-sensible world to the natural physical world" (Anthony, A. Asekhauno & Inagbor V.A :2012).

Put together, the people believed that man (Oya), the 'being-with-intelligence' had physical body and spiritual aspect referred to as (Orege in the Etsako language). It is also believed that there were places in Okpella which were generally referred to as spectacular sites where ancestors who were warriors experienced the divine (while some other warriors experienced transcendental powers in such places, as river Oile, Utukue-Afasio, etc.). (Anthony, A. Asekhauno & Inagbor V.A :2012).

With the knowledge of the fact that the people believed in the corruptible body of man, they developed some justice system to correct obvious mistakes to avoid repetition in future. From 1765-1770, in cases of theft, offenders were expected to pay back the stolen article to the injured party and in addition, they were expected to pay certain articles to the members of the council that tried the case **in cases** of murder, the offenders were usually punished by hanging in a market place, to act as a deterrent to others. In minor cases such as assault, the defaulter was made to pay fines known as 'oko' usually in food items or drinks. (Erhagbe E.O: 2005). In debt cases, the debtor had to refund the debt and if he failed to do so his goods and properties were forfeit to pay the debt. While if the situation had to do with food poisoning, the offender would be treated the same way as murderer and the accused was required to hang himself. (Erhagbe E.O: 2005).

3 Pre-Colonial Economic Roles of Okpella Women in Agriculture, 1772-1799

In the pre-colonial period, most women played major role in social and economic activities. Moreover, division of labour was along gender lines and women-controlled occupations such as food processing, Mat weaving, cooking, pottery, and trading. These occupations date back to 1772 when evidences of such occupation can be found.

During the second half of the eighteenth century (c.1775- 1785) a woman's position varied according to the kinship structure of the ethnic group she belonged to and the role of women within the economic structure of that society. Common factor among women of different ethnic groups however included the domestically oriented jobs and the range of economic activities that the society reserved for women. However, land was communally owned and women had access to it through their husbands or parents even though a man was the head of the household in patrilineal system older women had control of labour of the younger family members. (Falola,T.O:2007).

The position of the younger wife improved as she grew older thus allowing her to spend less time in the home and more time engaging in activities outside the household such as farming, crafts making which allows her to provide the needed resources to support her family. The economy of Okpella just like every other African society, is classified into three categories namely agriculture, manufacture, and trade. In all these sectors, Okpella women as well occupied a strong position within the traditional economic system. (Borgatti, JM: 1979)

One of the most important economic practices in pre-colonial Nigeria was Agriculture largely because it involved a large number of the working populace and served as a driving force on which most of the pre-colonial Nigerian economy was based. The participation of women in agriculture and the role of women in the preindustrial period were remarkably different across ethnicities and strongly related to the type of agricultural technology adopted historically. (Giuliano, P: 2014)

From the year 1785 to about 1790, the sexual division of labour was broadly associated to two technological regimes one of which was shifting cultivation. The regime of shifting cultivation was such that the majority of agricultural work was done by women. While the other regime known as the plough cultivation was a system mostly dominated by men. As a result of the significant contribution of women in the agricultural production process of shifting cultivation, polygamy was more common in societies with shifting cultivation. (Giuliano, P: 2014). Since 1790 farming was one of the most important economic activities in Okpella. Agriculture was so relevant to the extent that A.V Scallan who became the District officer of Kukuruku division affirmed that “when considering Kukuruku, the first fact to be borne in mind was that it is mainly agricultural and in any classification of natural resources Kukuruku should be scheduled as a food producing area”.(NAI, K.D 995).

While making use of traditional farming implements the people cultivated crops such as cassava, yam, maize, groundnuts, cowpea, rice, cotton, melon, pepper, okra and garden eggs, (women were mostly involved in the production of tomatoes, melon, pepper, okra and garden eggs). Palm trees on the other hand grew wild in forest and along waterways while some towns like Imiekuri a largely agrarian community within the Okpella clan was known for large production of cash crops such as cocoa and palm oil. (Interview with Mrs. Gloria Eshiaghame:2023). Women in the rural household were responsible for production, consumption and investment activities such as carrying out many crop operations, particularly weeding, harvesting, threshing and storage. (Interview with Mrs. Gloria Eshiaghame:2023). By 1793, food processing became an integral part of economic activities in pre-colonial Okpella society. The food processing industry was dominated mostly by women who put effort in processing different kinds of food for family consumption and to sell the excess in the markets. Some food mostly processed were yam and cassava flour, locust beans,vegetables and fruits, palmoil and palm kernels, corn and sorghum flour, smoked fish, pepper etc.

Given that all the clans in Okpella were patriarchal and patrilineal, sons, particularly the first born, occupied preeminent positions in matters of inheritance and succession. The eldest son inherited all the properties of his deceased father after performing the funeral rites. His obligation was to cater for the infant children (including girls) until they married. (Isibor, P.O:1999). Hence, women aided their husbands to expand the boundaries of his farm because the extent of the man's farm was usually used as a yardstick for measuring his importance in the society, and his importance in the society also influenced their status as women amongst peers. (Erhagbe E.O:1982). More so, the women were expected to give birth to more children particularly (male) kids so as to boost production on the farm.

Women's contribution to the pre-colonial agricultural production was greatly needed as they planted and harvested crops such as maize, okra, melon among others, on their husbands' farm while others had their personal farms, they also reared domestic animals such as goats sheep, dogs and poultry products which were consumed by the households and sometimes sold for cash. (NAI:1923). At the end of every harvest season every yam farmer for instance was expected to stack his barns called *Iriga* with sufficient yam (Interview with Priscilia Aliu:2023) the number he could build was very important as a mark of achievement in his occupation. The arrangements of the barns were mostly made by the head of the family, assisted by his wives and his children. They sometimes organized feasts such as *Agbe festival*, and in addition, Cultivation for commercialization was not a rule rather it was an exception. (Interview with Priscilia Aliu:2023)

Land was farmed on the seven years system. It was cultivated for seven years and then rested for seven years. The usual crops grown were Yams, Cassava, Cocoa yams. The latter were always on new land. Native corn was always cultivated. Practically all the minor farm works were done by the women and children and only weapons used were hoes and Machete, and the carrying was

all done in head baskets. The women and old men spent most of the day in the farming season on their farm. Farming was the main industry. (NAI:1923)

Certain festivals were organized in connection with farming activities one of which was the *Esi Festival* which was common in all the villages before the nineteenth century. The nature of this festival was such that it took place at the beginning of the harvesting period and lasted for seven days. (Harunnah, H.B:1990) The aim of this sacrifice to the goddess of earth was to appreciate the high yields and output from the farms for that year hence it could be described as a thanksgiving feast. Some of the food used as sacrifice includes yams, melon, corn, banana, palm-oil and fruits of different categories. (Harunnah, H.B:1990)

Apart from farming to raise food and cash crops as well as vegetables for domestic use and exchange, agriculture also involved fishing, livestock production, animal husbandry, cattle rearing, and manure production etc. (Raji, A.O.Y., Olumoh, A.O. & Abejide, S.T:2013). When it came to livestock production, the years 1793-1797 witnessed tremendous transformation in livestock production as Okpella women also played active role in livestock production. Women in addition to their economic contribution of trading, assisting their husbands on the farms during this period added to the economic fortune of their homes by rearing goats, sheep's, cows, ducks, as well as poultry farms. Proceeds from their livestock farms were used in supplementing the family diets, in addition, whenever there was need to sacrifice any type of livestock during major traditional festivals in the village the women never found it difficult as all they had to do was pick out of their existing holdings. More importantly in situations when the family went bankrupt or was in critical need of financial support, the wife of the home could come to the rescue by selling most times the offspring of their livestock's. (Interview with Priscilia Aliu:2023). The acquisition of these livestock sometimes came as proceeds from hunting expenditures by their husbands, while some others gained ownership of livestock through direct acquisition by gift or purchase. (Egbefo, D.O:2006).

It was very rare to see female hunters during the pre-colonial period particularly around 1797-1799. This was because most women rarely ventured into sophisticated hunting as it was deemed to be an 'occupation for men' rather women adopted their own system of gathering animals. Rather than setting big traps and carrying machete as well as guns like their male counterparts, the women resolved to 'gathering' of small animals such as snails, periwinkles, termites, eggs of birds, small animals caught by their husbands' traps, and sometimes wild fruits, all these they did sometimes while escorting hunters into the forest. Women in Okpella were actively involved in agricultural practices, for a long time and the major reason why farming became the major occupation in time past is not farfetched, Okpella is situated in the rocky and hilly terrain along the ridge popularly known as *Obu and Obe* which serves as irrigation to the already fertile loamy soil.

4 Pre-Colonial Economic Roles of Okpella Women in Short and Long-Distance Trade, 1800-1879

Okpella had inter-group relations with her neighbors and this brought about trade exchange in which goods and services which could not be produced locally were bought. Okpella and her neighbours have been recorded to have trade relations with the Nupe Kingdom. Nupe and the Etsako (of which Okpella is a component part). Including other Afenmai Communities did enjoy some flourishing and symbiotic links of trade before 1800. Haruna H.B notes the following:

“ the Nupe came passing through Akoko into parts of Ekiti and Afenmai. Etsako, Owan and Akoko Edo, Okpella..., advertising such wares as potash, copper, glass, sheabutter, and exchanging these articles for Kolanuts, palmoil, *adin* (palm kernel oil) and *osun* camwood before 1800”.

There were, however, some other important trade goods secured by the Nupe (as long distance and external traders) from their Etsako counterparts, particularly in Auchi, Ikpe-Uzairue, Aviele, Okpella, Okpekpe, Three Ibie, Weppa-Wanno etc. The goods include Ivory tusk, slaves, yams, hoes, cutlasses, traps, livestock (e.g goats, sheep) etc.(Harunnah H.B:1990). Apart from the Nupe people, Okpella traders exchanged goods with other traders from Ishan or Esan, Edo or Bini, the Urhobo/Isoko etc from 1800-1810. Women could acquire capital through inheritance and then increase their holdings through marketing activities. (Borgatti, J.M:1979). For instance in the year 1811 while locally made earthen pots were bought from Ojirami, and North Ibie to Okpella, the Uneme's supplied local metal goods such as cutlasses, spears, and traps which were exchanged for locally produced agricultural products. (Agboegba, B.I:1982).

Okpella shares with neighboring North Ibie an idiosyncratic inheritance pattern that permitted an eldest daughter to inherit her father's wealth if she has no male sibling. Following the rural nature of the economy trade by barter lasted even with the monetization of the economy around 1811-1850, the women still preferred to engage in trade by barter. While the sales of agricultural produce were carried out within Okpella, a large volume of trade was conducted with the neighboring communities surrounding Okpella. Goods produced locally were sold to other neighbouring communities like Ebira, North Ibie, Uzairue, Dangbala, and Ososo; thereby raising the quality of life of the people. Women bought goods such as farm implements, other designs of earthen pots, and products not locally produced in Okpella in exchange for palm oil, yams, and groundnuts.

Markets were usually called by the name of the village where it was located. For example, in Okpella there was the Okpella market, while in Ososo there was the Ososo market. The markets were usually held on specific days,

which were considered sacred because such days were set aside for commercial activities and other communal observances as people were not expected to go to their farms for any form of farming activities, hence the days that fall on the *Ewo and Ekue* were observed as days of rest. (Erhagbe E.O:1982).

The various market days were fixed in normal week of Etsakoland the week consisted of four days and they were, Ekpe, Eyiela, Elumi, and Ewo. Farmers and traders displayed their farm produce on a locally woven tray placed by the roadside without the owners being present; interested buyer's collected the quantities they required, and deposited the money on a tray that would be placed besides the goods without any formal supervision. Money sold remained on the tray until the owner returned to collect his or her money without a penny missing. (Erhagbe E.O:1982).

In later times, when the scheme of things began to change probably around the second half of the nineteenth century (c. 1850's), justices of peace were placed in the markets to render judgment whenever there were problems between traders and buyers. There was a rigid fixation of prices binding all dealers in certain cases cowries known as *Amuokokpgoloor* sometimes spelt *Amikpagor* were used as means of exchange. (Erhagbe E.O:1982). In most cases, it was the women that carried out these trading activities.

The means of transporting goods was mostly on land through the already existing roads in pre-colonial era. These existing roads were mostly footpaths occasionally cleared to link one village or clan together. As at 1851-1861, head portorage was the most readily available means of transporting goods through these roads. W.H Boulton describes portorage as "The carriage of goods by men at the same time as he transports himself walking". The paths satisfied the general functions of transports which according to K.T Healey "...is to convey goods and services from where they were obtainable to where they were needed".(Itsueli B.J.E:2002). Major road links, within Etsakoland and with external economic zones in the nineteenth century included Bida capital of Nupe to Benin City, Bida to Niger, at Patage, Egbe, Kabba, and Okene. One branch went through Ibilo, Igara, Ikpesi-Auchi another branch Okpella, Ogbido, Iyamo-Auchi, BidaAuchi road continued southwards through Agbede and Ewu to Irrua. (Itsueli B.J.E:2002). The commercial importance of these routes to Etsako was enormous because it was through them that leatherworks, long flowing gowns, salt, moulds, beads and horses from Nupe and Hausa sources came into Etsako. Slaves and Kolanuts went north, the Ekhen Oria Benin trading association which had Ehor as its' main depot brought from Benin goods such as guns, gunpowder, and the Europeans imports Ivory from Agbede, Clothes from Okpella, palm oil and kernels from many other parts of Etsako went to Benin. (Itsueli B.J.E:2002).

Surpluses in production formed the basis of local trade and certain products were items of long-distance trade. Women predominated in head loading for various reasons according to Chief A.O Itsueli men were supposed to be armed and free from carrying load so as to be able to defend the family against wild animals and enemies. Secondly, women were more involved than men in local trade exchanges and so had to carry the goods to the market. More so, it was believed that the work of women as porters was an essential household obligation which was owed to men as the heads of the family. Furthermore, while a large group of women entering a town can be regarded as harmless and so enjoyed immunity from attack, an equally large group of men would raise suspicions and perhaps provoke preemptive attacks. (Itsueli B.J.E:2002). In addition, the adoption of human head portorage in the region as at that time was deemed expensive, therefore, to reduce the cost of payable for transporting goods the traders often employed their wives, children and relatives as porters for short distance journey. The cost of the transportation from 1861-1871 was determined by the degree of security on the route, the length of the journey, as well as the weight and value of goods in relation to the distance of the journey. (Egbefo, D.O: 2006). On roads that had very little security, some traders had to employ the service of additional security as escorts particularly to protect goods of high value. While in the case of large volume of goods additional porters were employed to transport the goods to the desired location. (Interview with Mrs. Gloria Tafamel:2023)

One may want to ask how much load a porter could carry, the answer is not far-fetched: porters in Etsako were generally members of one's nuclear or extended family members whom wasn't carrying for profession, but an iota of assistance to his or her family hence the porter carried as much as he or she could carry without any qualms, or proper documentation of the numbers, quantity or volume carried. It is possible they carried from 60lbs to 70lbs as the case may be.(Itsueli B.J.E.:2002). In addition, Etsako tribes occasionally engaged in long distance trade when the need arises, this is not to say however that they never embarked on long distance trade. However, the irregularities in the frequency of external trade made it almost unnecessary to develop another system of transporting goods and services compared to their Northern neighbours that carried out cross border trading activities that prompted them to make use of beast of burden such as Donkeys, Horses and eventually Camels.(Interview with Priscilia Aliu: Affo-Okpella Edo State: 2023)

Women dominated the activities of trading in the urban areas to the extent that the training of women in trading activities usually began early. For instance, from 1871-1879, young girls were taught how to hawk various commodities under the tutelage of their mothers, relatives or guardians. In some situations, husbands gave starting capital to new brides to engage in independent trading. The trading activities of women varied from selling small quantities of food items outside the compound or in the local market to long-distance trading in a very large scale

when need be. Whereas men dominated the inter-regional long distance trading activity, women were active in the intra-regional retail trade. Consequently, women played important roles in the daily or periodic markets, had food stalls, embarked on road side trading and moved from house to house selling their goods. (Iyela, A:1997).

5. Pre-Colonial Economic Roles of Okpella Women in Arts and Craft, 1880-1904.

The craft industry was also an important industry which contributed to the process of economic growth in Okpella. Although most proto-industries were dominated by men, the women in Okpella clan were notable for various articles in which they manufactured some of which were clothes, broom, trays and baskets, mat, earthen ware pot, calabash, basic cooking utensils and most especially the traditional mask used for the annual festival in the land. Women were also responsible for the sale of crafts, articles and goods produced by their husbands to prospective buyers or users in the various market centres within and outside Okpella hence to a large extent this also formed part of the commercial obligations of the women folk during the pre-colonial period. (Interview with Mrs. Favour Mamunat:2023).

A major means through which women made economic fortune in Okpella was through the production of masks which were used for traditional festivals like the Olimi Festival. Women were said to own these masks, costume them and accompany them in the diurnal displays of Olimi when they were danced by young kinsmen. (Borgatti, J.M:1976) Sales of the produced masks which was believed to have spiritual contents fetched the female carvers enough fortune as members of certain households who could not produce the masks were compelled to buy the mask. Because it was a major criterion for participating in the festival.

At the end of the year mainly the end of dry season, each compound offered "food-for-the -dead" (known as *Akhilimi*) to propitiate ancestral spirits for the years to come. (Borgatti, J.M:1976) This practice was carried on for a long time until 1880. However, during the Olimi festival titled women achieved their status not only through oracular pronouncement but also by birth (during the two days of Olimi), or more importantly, by economic means; and they were entitled to own and be commemorated by masks, which sharply distinguishes them from the *Oza of Aminague* (a male titled group). (Borgatti, J.M:1976)

By the year 1882, some of the Etsako communities were noted for their manufacture of earthen ware pots especially North Ibie and Okpella. The exceptional quality of products produced in these areas prompted Mr J.A Bey in a letter titled 'Potters wheel' to make the following remarks.

"I wonder whether you have any idea where I could obtain a potter's wheel in Nigeria, the people of this division as you probably know, produce some extraordinary fine symmetrical pots without using a wheel".(NAI. 995/1)

In 1883-1885, hand woven clothes were also produced throughout Etsako Land including Okpella. (Erhagbe, E.O:1982) Occasionally in Okpella women were responsible for soap making and the processing of vegetable oil. The soap were produced from remains of burnt shafts of palm and plantain bunches, palm-oil, residue, and potash with a mixture of water for proper fermentation. The need for the production of soap stems from the fact that soap is essential for bathing and washing in the home. (Egbefo, D.O:2006)

A feature in the economic life of the Etsako people in general and Okpella people in particular from 1885 to 1890 which could be said to be reminiscent of their Benin connection was that of the guild system. Due to the liberalization of economic and productive activities, professional associations or trade Guilds were established and unity was achieved among members of the same profession. "Thus blacksmithing, hunting, leather works, pot making, weaving, wood carving, and cattle rearing were all specialized crafts of which had specific guilds...." (Erhagbe E.O:1982). Traders, producers and Farmers as well came together to form an organized Guild.

The aim and objectives of most guilds established in Nigeria were relatively similar, and the same attributed for the Okpella Women as well as the Faji Market women Vendors guild. Some of the objectives had to do with the following.

"To arrange and regulate market days, the sale of all available goods on market days, the sale of market wares of all classes and descriptions, to regulate and control native weights and measures, and to fix and control prices of foodstuffs amongst the members of the guild.

To promote common understanding, commercial economy and friendship among the members of the guild.

To promote and render assistance to the members in all matters affecting their trade and interest." (NAI. COMCOL 1 248/24- Faji Market Women Vendor Guilds)

The uniqueness of these guilds was that any person or group of persons trading in the market were eligible to become members of the guild on application to the constituted authority and on payment of the necessary fees. On attainment of membership, every member of the Guild must subscribe to the Rules and Regulations of the Guild. (NAI. COMCOL 1 248/24- Faji Market Women Vendor Guilds)

Members found guilty of any offences against the regulations of the Guild might be find, suspended from market, or dismissed from market according to the discretion of the committee. Some identifiable offences were:

the selling of unwholesome foods in the market, creating and making nuisance in the market, causing obstructions in the roads and lanes in the market. (NAI. COMCOL 1 248/24- Faji Market Women Vendor Guilds)

From 1890- 1900 locally produced crafts were done systematically with certain laid down rules and precepts which governed the process of reproduction. In some communities within Okpella clan where it was done on a large scale as either one of their major sources of economic activity, or as a supplementary economic practice, their children were taught the crafts of their parents or forebears in order to carry on with the craft production as well as its trade, creativity, was displayed in a highly structured pattern to bring out the beauty in articles produced both for personal use and for sale. (NAI. COMCOL 1 248/24- Faji Market Women Vendor Guilds)

Excess articles produced were always disposed in the markets which were carried on during specific market days. These wares were displayed for the public to see and an interested buyer picked the product of his or her choice. (NAI. COMCOL 1 248/24- Faji Market Women Vendor Guilds)

However, from 1900 to 1904, changes began to creep into the roles women played for their society and often times this has been associated with the colonization of the country we know today as Nigeria. Consequently, the Economic, Religious and Social lives changed considerably.

6) Conclusion

In retracing the economic lives of Okpella women across five centuries of autonomous development, this study reveals a resilient system of female agency rooted in the rhythms of migration, soil, and market. From the leopard forests of the fifteenth century to the bustling Ewo markets of 1904, women transformed shifting cultivation into household capital, carved ritual masks into symbols of titled authority, and carried palm oil, yams, and earthenware across footpaths that bound clans together. Far from passive dependents in a patriarchal order, they negotiated inheritance, commanded junior labour, and sustained guild-regulated trade networks that linked Okpella to Nupe caravans and Benin depots. This pre-colonial equilibrium where economic power flowed through matrilineal loopholes, craft specialisation, and head portage stood not merely as historical backdrop but as a counter-narrative to colonial assumptions of African women's marginality. As British administration loomed in 1904, the barns were full, the masks freshly painted, and the paths well-trodden: a testament to women's labour as the unseen architecture of Okpella's prosperity.

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