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The Economic Role of Igbo Women in Pre-Colonial Igbo Society

By Idenze Ezeme

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Wealthy Market women in Onicha. G. F. Packer, 1880s. Pitt Rivers Museum.



Igbo women played significant and powerful roles in pre-colonial Igbo society's economy. They supported not just their families, but through the control of the food, craft and market industries, they contributed immensely to their community developments. This article will lead you to the contributions of Igbo women in agriculture, local industries and market activities, which were the backbone of an average Igbo economy.

Agriculture and Food Production

The foundation of the Igbo economy was agriculture, and Igbo women were the backbone of its success. Igbo men cultivated most of the yams, while Igbo women cultivated most staple foods, such as vegetables, cassava, cocoyams, maize, grains, legumes, castor oil beans, palm oil, palm kernel oil, melons, tomatoes, and peppers. These foods were very important for the sustenance of every Igbo household. According to Chuku (2005) and Amadiume (1987), farming methods like intercropping, which helped preserve soil fertility and maximise land, were employed by women.

Contrary to the belief that Igbo women never cultivated yams, some women did, though not as much as men. This mostly happens when widows, female fathers, and female husbands become household heads, as they often take full responsibility for yam farming. This aligns with Esther Boserup's portrayal of African women as exceptional farmers.

Igbo women also processed food by turning raw crops into marketable products for more profit. They processed palm fruits into palm oil, palm kernel oil, and soaps (ncha) and made brooms from the dried fronds of the palm tree. Well-processed palm oil could last over a year, while sun-dried palm kernels, which paired well with tapioca during times of famine and food scarcity, remained viable for years. Igbo women did not just trade locally but across other regions in their proximity. With food as the backbone of the economy, control over it also meant control over economic stability.



Girls Separating Palm Kernels from the Fibers at an Oil Mill ~ Gloria Chuku

The origins of markets in Igbo society can be traced back to the beginning of settled life. Many studies have confirmed that markets are as ancient as agriculture, with the Igbo people believing God institutionalized trade by creating the four traditional market days: Eke, Oye, Afọ, and Nkwọ, which make up the Igbo four-day week (Izu).

The markets and trade were the Igbo women's domain, allowing them to exhibit exceptional skills and independence. According to Amadiume (1987), the Igbo market system empowered women to operate autonomously as traders and market leaders because it was structured as a dual organization. Local and long-distance trade was highly developed long before European contact, with women dominating local trade and men excelling in long-distance trade.

Igbo women also served as intermediaries between rural producers and urban markets as they engaged in long-distance trades. These economic activities gave them the financial independence and social mobility to challenge the traditional gender hierarchies (Nnaemeka,



1997).

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Read: Anioma Market Priestess: The Economic and religious Power of the society

The craft industry was another area to which Igbo women contributed immensely. Through their creativity and expertise, Igbo women dominated salt production, weaving, and pottery industries, which contributed to both household needs and cultural expression (Chuku, 2005; Achebe, 1958).

In the pre-colonial era, the Igbo region's major salt-producing centres were Ohaozara (Okposi and Uburu) and Abakaliki (Enyigba), with Okposi being the most famous due to the high salinity of its salt lake. Salt production was exclusively managed by women, which was deeply rooted in tradition and governed by strict rules, including:

- Only women could fetch and process brine, with menstruating women prohibited.
- Participants underwent initiation and used traditional tools, such as earthen pots.
- Men were barred from salt lakes, except for the chief male priestess, and certain actions near the lake, like urination, were taboo.

These customs preserved salt production's cultural and economic significance in Igbo society.



Ishiagu Pottery Products. Gloria Chuku – Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960

Pottery, the oldest industry in the Igbo region, dates back thousands of years. Archaeological excavations at Afikpo in 1975 uncovered over 20,000 pot shards, resembling the pottery still produced today. Pottery, a women-led industry in the Igbo region, was prominent in places like Ishiagu, Afikpo, Umuahia, Nsukka, Isuochi, Inyi, Okigwe, and Udi. It operated on a small, household-based scale and was guided by taboos, such as barring menstruating women from clay pits. For most women, pottery was a part-time activity.

Weaving in Igbo society was predominantly a women's craft, which included mat-making, hand fan and bag weaving, and cotton cloth production. Key cloth-weaving centres in the pre-colonial Igbo region included Nsukka, Abakaliki (Ikaki cloth), Asa, Ndoki (Akwete), Asaba, and Ubulu-Uku, with Nsukka having the oldest weaving tradition based on archaeological evidence. Mats were used for sleeping, house curtains, and burials (Nsukka Irikpe), and they brought significant income to Uturu women, who were famous for their mat-weaving.



They sourced screw pine leaves from swamps, carefully removing the spikes for use.



Uturu mat. Gloria Chuku – Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960

Cultural Context and Gender Dynamics

To understand how these things were possible for Igbo women, understand that Igbo society practices a flexible gender system that values contributions based on one's ability instead of strict gender roles. As seen in the roles of female priestesses and market leaders (Omu), in pre-colonial Igbo societies, women could own lands, inherit properties, and hold leadership positions in various communities.

While patrilineal descent predominated in pre-colonial Igbo society, some subgroups, like those in Ohafia and Afikpo, practised matrilineal or dual-descent systems. In Ohafia's bilateral descent, matrilineal groups managed agricultural land, while patrilineal groups controlled residential property.



The immense contributions of Igbo women in pre-colonial Igbo society's economy were vital to the region's prosperity. They ensured the economic sustainability of their communities by excelling in agriculture, trade, and crafts while challenging societal patriarchal norms through their resilience and innovation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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