

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIVE  
OF UTEKON VILLAGE IN THE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES**

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**JULY, 2021**

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## CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **IGBINOVIA GODSPOWER ETINOSA** in the Department of History and International Studies (HIS), Faculty of Art, University of Benin, Benin City, under my supervision

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*Date*

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project work to God Almighty for his grace and mercy towards me throughout my stay and struggle in my tertiary education.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With so much joy in my heart, I give all thanks to God for granting me the grace to put this project together.

My sincere gratitude goes to my project supervisor Dr. Mrs. E. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe for her guide, timely responses and valuable corrections toward the success of this project. God shall enrich you and your family amen.

I will not forget the immense and invaluable contributions of my parents Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Igbinovia throughout my academic struggles and my stay in school. Also, my siblings Mrs. Sarah, Mrs. Gladys, Mrs. Esther, Uncle Efosa, Miss Patience I love you all, God will bless and keep you all for me Amen.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

Literature on Nigeria's social-economic and political development is relatively silent on the contributions of women. The awareness about the role of women in development gained momentum in the latter half of the 1980's<sup>1</sup>. However, the contributions of women to the development of states in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. Women have been a huge support to men in the development of states and kingdoms in Africa especially in sub-Sahara Africa. Although several scholars have submitted that the reason for the obvious silence, is because the issue of patriarchy which is still in practice in almost every part of Africa<sup>2</sup>.

During the pre-colonial era, Nigerian women contributed to the sustenance of their immediate family and society at large through collective efforts. Pre-colonial Nigerian economy was basically at a sustenance level and Nigerian women participated effectively in this economy. Apart from being mothers and wives, and taking charge of domestic sector, women contributed substantially to the production and distribution of goods and services<sup>3</sup>. In fact, they were also incharge of subsistent farming of food crops that fed their families on a daily basis. They were involved in pottery making, Bead making as well as weaving, especially in the various communities in Benin kingdom. In northern Nigeria, even the women in Purdah were involved in food processing and also traded with neighbouring states with the aid of their children<sup>4</sup>.

As regards politics, women in pre-colonial Nigeria were an integral part of the political set up of their communities. Most often, they carried out separate functions from the men. These functions were fully complimentary. For instance, pre-colonial women in Bornu played active parts in the administration of the state<sup>5</sup>. They held very important offices in the royal family, including the offices of the Megira (the Queen mother) and the Gumsu (the first wife of the Mai or king). Women also played a very significant role in the political history of ancient Zaria. The modern city of Zaria was founded in the first half of the sixteen (16<sup>th</sup>) century by a woman called Queen Bakwa Turuku<sup>6</sup>. She had a daughter called Amina who later succeeded her as Queen Amina. Also, the significant role played by great women like Emotan and Queen Idia cannot be ignored. These women were amazons who displayed tremendous bravery and strength in the politics of Benin<sup>7</sup>.

In Utekon, a Village in Ovia North East Local Government area of Edo State, power was greatly dominated by men, but in many areas, specific titles were given to the women council. This group was very influential and handled issues that involved women. The group was rightly empowered by members and supported by the elders to issue sanctions and punish offenders (women) in the society. Women with their advice and counselling could influence the decision of the elders in council indirectly through their husbands who by title or age, are members of the Enogie- in- council.

This study therefore seeks to bring to light the role of women not just in pre-colonial Nigeria but particularly, the women in Utekon. Unlike Benin, the Utekon people

may not be able to present names of amazons like Idia, Iden, Emotan and the likes who played various roles in no small measure in the development of Benin kingdom<sup>8</sup> but the visible roles played by women in Utekon village in the social-economic and political development would be enumerated and emphasized in the course of this study.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to understand the role of women in the socio-economic and political development of Utekon Village; in other to achieve this aim, the objectives of the study are;

1. To examine the various traditions of origin of Utekon village
2. To investigate the role of women in the socio-economic sector of the village
3. To examine the various positions occupied by women in the political terrain
4. To correct the stereotypical believe that women were passive or indifferent in the organization and development of states in Africa.

### **Scope of Study**

This study focuses mainly on the role of women in the socio-economic and political development of Utekon village in the pre-colonial period.

### **Methodology**

The nature of this study makes it expedient that historical and analytical research method be employed in carrying out the investigation. The study will make use of both primary and secondary data. The primary data will be obtained through oral interviews which are in form of questions and answers with Elders and people of Utekon village.

The secondary data will be obtained through books, Journal, Newspapers, articles and materials published online.

## **Literature Review**

The Discourse on the Socio-economic and political development of Benin kingdom and surrounding towns is not new. A number of scholars have engaged in researching in different area of Benin, some of their works are reviewed in this study.

Aghama Omoruyi, in the journal “Benin Series, *a new dimension in Benin Studies*”<sup>9</sup> he gave a brief history on Benin and their arts and crafts. He emphasized the importance of Bronze casting in Benin, its origin and influences. He holds the view that Benin kingdom flourished not only because of their military strength but because of their crafts that developed more because of the introduction of the guild system.

Another important book is the work of John O. Igbinkpogie, *The Benin Kingdom historical and environmental perspectives*<sup>10</sup>, which reveals the Benin people and their environment. He eulogizes the rich culture of the Benin people and their immediate environment which he describes as a wonder to behold

In his contribution, Philip Aigbona Igbafe “*Benin under Administration*”<sup>11</sup>, he explained vividly the indigenous background of Benin, he also shed light on how the guild system is organized and the origin of Bronze casting in Benin. According to him, members of guild are divided into three age grade for effective administration.

According to Jacob Eghareveba in his book, "*A short history of Benin*"<sup>12</sup>. He helps to shed light on the foundation of Benin Empire, the reign of various kings in Benin. This helped in the historical background of Benin and the Utekon people.

In his work, Prince Eva Basirai Eweka "*The Benin Monarchy, Origin and Development*"<sup>13</sup>, he gave a vivid account on the Benin People and their culture. This helped to know the role of the Oba in the Benin Political system including the composition of the chieftains in the palace.

Also Nkata and E. N. Arinze, "The lost treasures of Ancient Benin". Also he gave an account on the punitive expenditure of 1897 which saw the looting of Benin Arts in its multitude to Europe and other parts of the world.

Also, P.A Igbafe in *Benin under British administration- the impact of colonial rule on an African kingdom*<sup>14</sup>. This book gives the socio-political organization of Benin. It gives a clear analysis of the role of women in marriages. He emphasized that the girl had no absolute freedom of choice of a husband. Whosoever was chosen for the girl as a probable good husband by the parents and other family members, had to be accepted by the girl. To refuse would antagonize her parents and other members of the family.

P.I. Omorogie in her work titled *Heroines in Pre-colonial Benin, their lives and transformation*<sup>15</sup>. It explains the various efforts and impacts of past Benin heroines, such as Emotan, Ewere, Imaguero and Idia. These heroines contributed immensely to the growth and development of the kingdom.

Also, Osewengie Ebohon, *The life of an African woman; The Benin woman on Focus*. This book gives a clear description on the personality of an African woman<sup>16</sup>. Though Ebohon major focus was on Benin women but his work however gives us a clue on the place of women in the society.

Lastly, O.S.B Omorogie in his novel titled *My Childless Mother*<sup>17</sup> critically examined the life of an African woman. However, the major concentration of the story was on Emotan who is a woman and an icon who contributed to the socio-political process of Benin. An important fact about this work is that it revealed the personality of a woman whose life affected the social and political aspect of the kingdom. She helped to restore one of the most powerful Obas (Ewuare) that ever reigned in Benin.

All of the works reviewed in this study, shows that no study has been done on Utekon village, more so no work has been done on the socio-economic and political contribution of women in Utekon village, this study intends to fill this gap in the historiography of Benin kingdom.

### **Chapterization of Study**

This Study is divided into five chapters.

#### **Chapter One: Background to the Study**

This chapter introduces the study, sheds light on the aim and objectives of the study, the Scope of study, Methodology, Literature Review and discusses the Chapterization of the study.

## **Chapter Two: Oral Tradition of the People of Utekon.**

This chapter discusses the tradition of origin, the political system, religious belief, social activities.

## **Chapter Three: The Role of Women in the Social Life of Utekon Community**

This chapter examines the role of women in the social life of the people of Utekon.

## **Chapter Four: The Role of Women in the Economic and Political Lives of the People of Utekon.**

This chapter examines the role of women, in the political sphere of the community, it reflects how the women played their role in the politics of the Utekon people.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion.**

This chapter concludes the study.

## Endnotes

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- p. O. Ebohon, *The Life of an African Woman: The Benin Woman on focus*”, Benin: Ebohon Publications, 1996, p. 17.
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## CHAPTER TWO

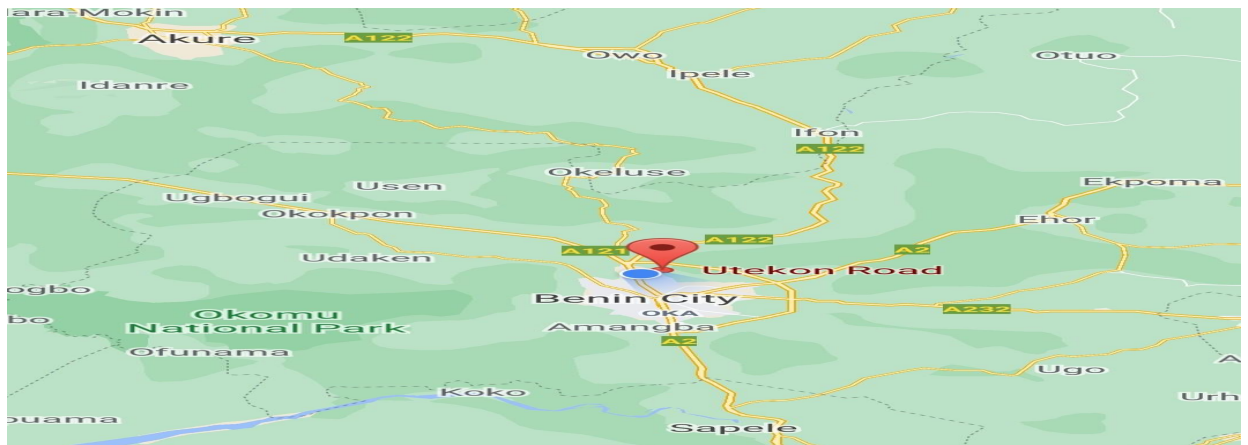
### TRADITION OF ORIGIN OF UTEKON

#### Introduction

This chapter takes a holistic view of the various traditions of Origin of the Utekon village and the general description of the socio political life of the people in the pre-colonial times. The chapter also covers the festivals as well as rituals performed by the people of Utekon.

#### General Description of Utekon Village and the Tradition of Origin

Utekon Village is located in Ovia North East local government area of Edo State. Utekon is bounded to the East by Iyowa community to the North by Evbuomore Community by the west by Ekiadolor and Okun by the South.



Map showing the place of Utekon in Edo State

Utekon community is made made up of four major streets namely;

1. Oke- Ize
2. Oviomon
3. Iduwe
4. Uhron

Each of the above named street has its own *Odionwere* (Street Head) and *Oguedion* (Shrine) as well as a central *Odionwere* there and central *Iguedion* (Shrine)<sup>1</sup>.

Utekon is an ancient community, it was said to be established in the days of Oba Ozolua in 1481 AD<sup>2</sup>. However some of the groups in the various streets have different view about their origin.

The people living in Oke Ize, street claim to be the earliest settlers of Utekon village while those living in Oviomo claims to have migrated from Ibiwe as a result of over population<sup>3</sup>. The major tradition of origin holds that one of the ancestral founders of Utekon village is Ise Ne Utekon who was said to be sword bearer at the palace, the Oba that was on the throne during this period was Oba Ozolua<sup>4</sup>. As at that time Oba Ozolua usually jeer at Ise Ne Utekon, that he is going to defeat Utekon and return through Okun, Utekon and Okun were said to be brother and sister (Brother and sister in this context is used to illustrate closeness and proximity)<sup>5</sup>.

However, Ise ne Utekon being a forceful individual responded that he cannot just be defeated, that he is going to defend himself and his people, following this ,one of the chief at the oba's courtier re-emphasized, Ise ne Utekon statement and as a result, Oba Ozolua bid to test Ise ne Utekon's prowess requested Ise ne Utekon to raise the royal sword (Umozo) which is very heavy; at once Ise Ne Utekon raised the royal sword and he made a statement to the Oba that it has not gotten to that point of war. In light of this, Oba Ozolua told Ise Ne Utekon if he can carry the royal sword on his hand without looking back or taking a rest, until he gets to Utekon which is their present abode by doing that he will be sure that Ise Ne Utekon is ready to go to war with him<sup>6</sup>.

However, after sometime during farming season, when the necessary farming activities have been completed Oba Ozolua and his troops came to the community and engaged in a fierce battle with Ise na Utekon.

In the battle Ise Ne Utekon was defeated by Oba Ozolua; But the Oba owes his victory over Ise Ne Utekon to Orimworia who betrayed Ise Ne Utekon into the hands of the Oba to be killed, Ozolua thanked him warmly at first but when Orimworia was bragging about it , Oba Ozolua had his head cut off<sup>7</sup>.

### **The Political Organization of Pre Colonial Utekon Village**

According to Oral interview conducted with Mr Vincent Amadasun, a 57 years old farmer who resides in Utekon village, he holds the view that the earliest form of political

organization in the village was the Odionwere rule (a form of Gerontocracy; a rule by elders or old people) (the Odionwere Administration is a system of political governance whereby the oldest male in the community is given the authority to pilot the affairs of the people. It should be stated that the Odionwere, is subject to the Enogie and the Enogie is subject to the Oba. The office of the Odionwere was not transferable by way of primogeniture but after the death of one Odionwere the next oldest man takes the office.) The Odionwere was directly below the Enogie authority in Utekon Village, he was the head of council of elders, which consist of the members of Edion (age-grade). This council was central to the executive legislative and judicial administration of the village. They were saddled with the responsibility of creating laws and managing the affairs of the village. Their job description also includes ensuring that the customs and traditions of the village were enforced and preserved. They also placed sanctions on people who were found guilty of offences. It is therefore important to note that they are four Odionweres in Utekon village that assists the Enogie to carry out his functions. The Odionweres were drawn from the four major streets in the Village namely;

- 1 Oke- Ize
- 2 Oviomo
- 3 Iduwe
- 4 Uhron

The Eldest among the Odionweres presided over the council of the Odionwere (Iko Odionwere). One key factor for selecting the Odionwere includes whether the man was born in the area. Odionwere headed the Edion council. However below Odionwere was the Edion, it is therefore important to note that the Edion may act in the Odionwere's absence. (Edion here means Elder). During this period, the Edion was exempted from physical labour that may be considered compulsory for all. It is important to note that Edion together with Enogie makes the final decision as to who would be the Odionwere during this period.

More so, the Odionwere possesses considerable administrative and religious power and it was such that the Odionwere had his own shrine where he worshipped distinct from the collective shrine of the whole community however below the Odionwere were the *Ighale* grade (Youth), which falls between the ages of twenty-five to thirty. Their function during this period was more of executive function this also includes performing of tedious tasks such as building of markets, roads, and serving as village police for the protection of life and property. They also execute decisions made by the Odionwere.

Below the *Ighale* was the *Irogbae* and their major duties include such task as sweeping open spaces clearing bush path constructing path way, fetching water. Below this was the family level headed by the oldest man known as the *Okaegbe*<sup>8</sup>.

## **Social Organisation**

The family was the basic unit in social organisation, of utekon village. Every member of the family belongs to different Age grade which include the *lroghae*, *lghele*, and *Edion*. The family is made of the father (husband), mother (wife or wives), children (sons and their wives, unmarried daughters) and slaves. The father is the head of the family and the representative of nuclear family at the ward (clan) level. The eldest man in the ward is known as the *okagbe*, he is the general head of the clan and the representative of clan in the Elders (*Edion*) council of the village.

Religion was a key part of the life and thought of the people of Utekon in pre-colonial time as every house had a shrine (Ebo) which served as a medium of worship and as a connection to the spiritual world. The various shrines and gods were believed to be subject to the supreme deity known as Osanobua (who is the creator of the world), the shrines in the houses of villagers in Utekon contains wood, cowries and chalks<sup>9</sup>.

One of the ancestral worship includes the worship of Ise (the ancestral gods). They had a shrine were they carried out religious functions and perform sacrifices. Every Clan during this period participated in the worship of this ancestral god. During this period in Utekon Village, several acts of purification were carried out, which involves

sober rubbing of ones face with black charcoal and holding of leaves, as well as reciting of some words of incantation to invite ancestral spirits.

Another major act of purification during this period, was the passing of hens and other small animals and throwing it between the legs, more also during this period, ancestral cult occupies key places in the lives of the people.

One major cult that the people participated in and were fully involved was the Ovia cult. Till date, the shrine of the Ovia Cult still exists in Utekon Village. The Origin of the Ovia Society is traced to a beautiful maiden named Ovia who lived in a town called Uhen. Her beauty attracted many men who wanted to marry her but she had earlier informed her parents that she was still very young that when she comes of age she was going to marry a noble. However, the king of Oyo came to Benin and he heard about her beauty, he visited her parents to give her hand in marriage; they agreed and started to make serious preparations for Ovia to follow her suitor to Oyo. When she was ready for her trip her father gave her some gifts (water pot, a dog and a parrot) according to Oral traditions he gave this gifts because with his spiritual powers he has seen the end of the marriage from the beginning. He encouraged her to use the pot as a route to come home should her husband maltreat her. The palace of the Oba of Oyo received her with joy, and her room was the one next to the Oba. The room had an adjoining door with the room of the Oba this was to ease their meeting as Husband and wife. She grew to become the

favorite of the Oba. This did not go down well with the other wives who were sad because of the love the king showed to his supposed last wife (Ovia)<sup>10</sup>.

One day the eldest wife planted intrigues against her in order to destroy the king's love for her, it was told that the senior wife accused Ovia of having an abominable infection that causes consistent haemorrhage. She warned the king to be careful because he might be infected too. The king sent for Ovia and made her remove her outer clothes, the white cloth she always wear underneath indeed had a reddish stain, the co-wives laughed at her, she ran into her room locked herself and wept bitterly. Later the king pitied her and had changed of mind, he went to her door but she refused to open by the time the king forced himself in, he saw her already melting away in her tears, she fell into the pot her father gave her. She however told her father that no woman should ever be allowed to know her secret because it was a woman who caused her to leave her husband's house. It is important to know that Ovia is worshipped by all and sundry. Although restrictions are placed on women from participating on some certain ritual activities.

The ritual of Ovia society was mostly accompanied by songs and dancing. The leader of the Ovia ritual was usually addressed as Erhama (our father). The main mask of the society is known as mother mask. All male that celebrated it were initiate of the society. More so members of the Ovia society carried out annual festival which normally begins at the onset of dry seasons, the village initiate usually go into seclusion into the

bush a for an entire month to prepare for the festival. During this period no sexual relationship is allowed<sup>11</sup>.

## **Festivals**

According to Merriam Webster, festival is viewed as a periodic celebration or programme of event entertainment having specified focus<sup>12</sup>.

The people of Utekon carried two major festivals. Although in most cases the people of Utekon join the Benin kingdom in the celebrations of what is known as general festival called Igue which is celebrated annually at the end of the year and usher in a new year. According to the Binis the Igue festival comprises of Ague which is period of fasting and prayers and a period of thanking to God for all he has done. The people of Utekon are actively involved in all the activities<sup>13</sup>.

## **ISE FESTIVALS**

This was a ceremony carried out in praise of their ancestors for guidance, protection and provision; the ceremony was thought to keep the people alive. The Ise festival ceremony is usually for the purification of the land. During this period, everyone is expected to go to the Ise shrine to perform the ritual ceremony which involves the sober rubbing of charcoal on the face, carrying of cutlass which is used for a mock battle that stands as (remembrance of the fierce battle fought by Ise Ne Utekon and Oba

Ozolua). However, the festival was carried out when the necessary farm activities were completed<sup>14</sup>.

On the particular day of the festival, the priest of Ise shrine, known as okakuo would be dressed with the necessary attire, then everyone will proceed to the Enogie's palace. The elders, Edion would sit down and entertained with drinks and kolanut, then the edion will make prayers for the enogie. From the enogies palace, the people will proceed to the Ise shrine. However, before that time the youth would be sent to clear and maintain the Ise shrine. Moreso, when the priest and the people arrive at Ise shrine, the Okakuo would carry Ise sword "Umozo". From the shrine, the men and women will begin to dance and sing song of praise. This was after some words of incantation had been pronounced in summon of the ancestral spirit. They then proceed to the village square. Before arrival at the village square, they stopped at Uhron street to perform ritual activities associated with the festivals which involves the use of cutlass to fight mock battle in memorial of the fierce battle fought between Ise Ne Utekon and Oba Ozolua<sup>15</sup>.

Another major festival carried out by the people of Utekon is the Ovia festival. The festival was carried during farming season when the necessary farming preparations have been made. It was mostly carried out by initiates of Ovia society. The ritual involves men and women, in Utekon community during the commencement of the festival. It marked the act of purification to maintain the safety return of the initiates. The Ovia festival was celebrated on annual basis. One fundamental item involved for a worthwhile

and highly enhance festival is the Ukhure (a carved wound) which symbolizes the ancestral staff of the forerunner masquerade known as Ilevbo. The ancestral staff was expectantly held by the masquerade while offering prayers for the people.

There are some observations made by Ovia cult worshippers in Utekon during this period of festival. The key of which is done when the festival is about to commence, it involves all the members of the Ovia cult mostly men to go into seclusion into the bush which lasted between one week to three months. It was done in preparation for the festival. During this period of festival, sexual intercourse and other pleasures are prohibited. As part of the festival, masquerades come out during the night to dance. One of the most revered masquerade was “Erinwi”. The dance was vigorous and the dancers were mainly men. The dance was carried out in the honour of the ancestors. Secondly in honour to the priest of Ovia shrine more so in honour of the senior priest assistant and also for the appreciation of women and mothers and wives. It was also carried out for the good of the society. The dancers are usually accompanied by songs usually sung by female onlookers. The songs are full of praise to their ancestral spirits for protection, guidance and provision<sup>16</sup>.

## **Social Activities**

### **Market**

The people of Utekon subscribe to the market structure of the Bini kingdom which include Aijo, Agbado, Eken, Orire (Eki oba). The Eken is regarded as the day set aside for rest and household chores and for holding communal functions or town village meetings. However it important to note that during Eken market days burial and marriage functions are prohibited.

Eki-Oba (Oba market) are often chosen for important function in the land such as conferment of titles, marriages, foundation of new buildings, for customary burial ceremonies musical traditional ceremonies and other activities. Market day played very significant part in planning of major ceremonies.

In the order of important markets the second in the list after the Eki –Oba market day is the Agbado market day, however marriages are not scheduled to hold on this day.

The third in the list is the Ekon market is also very important as it is on this market day that the Oba festival is usually celebrated known as Igue<sup>17</sup>.

## **Birth**

The activities carried out during child birth in Utekon Village, goes thus; Following the birth of a child in Utekon, the seventh day is usually the naming ceremony where family members and very close friends gather to pray to God for long life, good health and prosperity for the child and its parents.

However, the eldest in the family names the child after the father. The family and those present go as far as consulting the oracle, and this ritual is usually in phases. They go as far as dedicating the child to the gods of the land for the purpose of protection and provision for the child.

Later same evening, the main naming ceremony takes place where all family members and elders are present. The ingredients for performing the ceremony includes kolanuts and wine (local Gin) these items are used for prayers for the child and also for thanksgiving to the gods and plead to the gods that a drunk will not harm the child. The chalk and palm wine used during and after the prayers are symbols for happiness. The prayers include that the child should be happy all the days of his or her life. They is also the use of coconut and honey are used for prayer, these items symbolizes the duality of life which are good and bad experiences, sweet and sour. Prayers are offered to the child to experience sweet things in life and have good qualities. The coconut is broken and given to all present and the party starts fully with singing and dancing and food sharing. The next day, the child is circumcised and this circumcision is carried by the old people in the environment<sup>18</sup>.

### **Burial Rites**

The people of Utekon village subscribe to the Burial rites of Bini kingdom; from time immemorial there have been different modes of performing traditional rite of a Bini man. Which in these parts did not bring about any acrimony as they were carried out strictly, for the purpose of clarity and to avoid any controversies.

Following the death of a person in Utekon, his or her oldest surviving son with his brothers and sisters will perform the funeral rite of the deceased parents for the family; this means that all the funeral ceremonies and other funeral rites are left for the Okaegbe to decide who is the oldest member of the family.

It is however important to state here that the burial rites are divided into two parts. They are first

1. First ceremony
2. Second ceremony

The first ceremony includes ritual perform includes ritual performed the actual interment of the deceased.

Second part may follow immediately after the first part or later date will be fixed for it. All of this depends on the level of preparedness on the family and the children of the deceased.

The burial rites take seven days for ordinary people and fourteen days for Enogie. First after the death of a person, the body is washed and laid on the bed inside the house and embalmed and prepared for interment while the corpse is been prepared the grave is dug and the body is lowered into the grave and prayers are offered<sup>19</sup>.

### **Economic Activities**

The Economic activities of the people of Utekon revolves around agriculture both arable and cash crops. Although farming in Utekon village is still at the subsistent level

as the use of machines was not in use. Some of the arable crops in Utekon include Yam, cassava, Maize and Okro, Plantain Bananas, Pineapples, coco yams.

The farming system in some part of the village is more like mixed farming which is the cultivation of crops and the rearing of animals. Animals they rear in Utekon village include goats, Chikens, ram, Rabbits etc.

## Endnotes

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**CHAPTER THREE**  
**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIAL-LIFE OF THE PRE-COLONIAL**  
**UTEKON**

**Introduction**

It is germane to mention that one cannot fully discuss the life of a people without a critical mention of their social life. The social life of a particular community refers to the aspect of their lives that involves interacting with others, their way of life and the general method through which they relate.

This chapter focuses on the social life of the people of Utekon and the role of the women in the pre-colonial era. The women with no western educational knowledge did not get dissuaded rather they contributed their quota in the building of a formidable social life for the people of Utekon<sup>1</sup>.

The role of women is however discussed in the following areas;

3. The Educational sector
4. Health sector
5. Religious sector
6. Cultural activities ( Festivals and Marriage)
7. Conflict resolution/ diplomacy.

**The Role of Utekon Women in the Educational Sector**

The informal kind of education includes those teachings adopted to increase social and general knowledge, like when a child is taught to prepare a meal, ride a

bicycle, how to sit as a lady, how to speak the local dialect and so on. With that said, informal education refers to education that is not undertaken during class hours. It is not planned and does not follow any learning methods. It can be easily learned by mere observation.

We also can say that education in pre-colonial Africa which Nigeria is not excluded, did adopt the informal educational method and they enjoyed its benefits which include creating situations whereby people can learn, explore and enlarge their experiences, and make changes in areas that needs adjustments. The informal educational method also served as a method of transmitting morales and good behaviours that sharpen the children who are the future leaders. This method of informal education also helped in the responsiveness of the people in their interaction with their environment, thereby making the learning and teaching possible with the individual to learn without any obligation or restriction<sup>2</sup>.

In pre-colonial Utekon, the women were the front liners in upholding or the teaching of children basic etiquette, such as how to sit down. The mothers took special interest in making sure their daughters comport themselves very well, when they are before adults and before males. The normal house chores such as how to sweep the house, how to cook are also the duties of the mothers. It should be added that the mothers take extra time to teach their female children how to cook their father's favourite delicacies and also how to serve the food<sup>3</sup>.

The women of Utekon take special interest in teaching their children how to speak their local dialects, folk songs and folk takes which is also a way of cultural preservation.

### **The Role of Utekon Women in the Health Sector**

No human society is mundane to healthcare delivery method. Apparently, the process of healthcare delivery depicts the extent of the social development of a particular society. However, the healthcare delivery process in Nigeria from the pre-colonial era attained a new paradigm by shifting from the practice of traditional medicine to the western styled patterns. Since the colonial Nigeria, both the traditional and western medicine has been dependable sources of preventive medicine for the Nigeria populace. In spite of the outright condemnation of the traditional healthcare practices, it received unbridled patronage by a larger Nigerian populace, thus the post-independent Nigeria witnessed a paradox of health care delivery.

Healthcare delivery system is an enormous aspect of any human society from time immemorial. This brings to one's understanding that the African traditional healthcare delivery system was a notable practice in the pre-colonial Nigeria. As such, the practice of medicine was indigenous to the people of Nigeria<sup>4</sup>. Hence, it is erroneous to believe that medical services came to Nigeria with the advent of British colonization. Accordingly, health service in Nigeria today is to a large extent based on orthodox healthcare delivery system, yet it can be said that the African traditional medicine is unconsciously a part of the world from which most of the modern medicine has evolved. This simply posits that the traditional medical practice is pivotal to the discovery of what

became known as modern medicine. Hence, western medicine seems difficult to be separated from the traditional medicine. Nevertheless, western medicine is observed to have had an overbearing influence on the African traditional medicine.

In Southern Nigeria, particularly in the community of Utekon, the women were not left out in contributing their quota in the health sector. Some women in Utekon with their knowledge of medicine served in various capacities in the health sector as;

**a. Herbalist**

Those who administered drugs through the collection of natural leaves and grass known as herbs. The Herbalist also perform the function of helping people with fractured bones or ribs. They help treat patients suffering from ailment believed to be spiritual. This means the women of Utekon who were Herbalist doubles as both Herbalist or as Bone setters, or spiritualist<sup>5</sup>.

**b. Midwives**

The women of Utekon also played the role of midwives, a midwife is a nurse whose area of specialty is to assist women during delivery. The women prescribed food and herbs that will help an expecting mother all through the period of conception. The midwives in Utekon were gifted in the act of birthing children that it is said that by mere touching of the stomach they could tell if the baby was rightly positioned in the womb. The complain of pain during conception by the mother could also give the midwives clue about the sex of the child<sup>6</sup>.

### **c. Local Gynecologist**

The women of Utekon in most cases perform the role of a gynecologist or Obstetricians, these are people who served as modern day Surgeons for the women in Utekon. They help to examine the women, and carry out operation such as Caesarean Section for women. They traditionally help the women to manage life threatening ailment such as fibroid.

### **d. mental health therapists**

Some women in Utekon specialize as therapists, this means that they help people, both male and female, who may be mentally challenged. Apart from those who are mentally challenged, they helped people who were depressed, this means these set of women played the role of counselors<sup>7</sup>.

## **Religion**

Religion is the belief in the worship of a supernatural controlling power, especially a personal god or gods. Religious activities is not alien to the African states, even before the coming of the Portuguese, for example, the likes of John Afonso De Aviero and Ruy De sequera, the Binis already had a system of worship of a supreme god known as *Osanobua*<sup>8</sup>.

Today, the African space is laced with different religious beliefs but the pre-colonial Africa worshiped their deity because they belief that the gods would give them continual fertility of both land and people. The spiritual entities protected their adherents from

misfortune, adjudicated disputes through trials by ordeal or through messages divined by special seers, and punished personal or communal immorality through personal or group failures, sickness, drought, fires, and other catastrophes. Special practitioners were in control of supernatural forces to heal illnesses, counter malevolent intentions by others and/or the ghostly entities, and diagnose witchcraft<sup>9</sup>. Protection against misfortune was strengthened by charms, amulets, and medicinal products sold by the practitioners. In everyday life, misfortune, sickness, inheritance disputes, and even marital choices or the clearing of a new field could be incorporated and explained within this religious framework. Given these beliefs, causal relations were stipulated and explained through the actions of supernatural entities, whose relations to the living involved interventions that enforced morality and traditional values.

The women of Utekon featured prominently in the religious activities of the land. History, via oral tradition, holds that the women of Utekon were selected by the gods as priestess(es) of shrines and also selected to play the role of River goddess.

In Utekon, the *Ovia* Cult society which the people of Utekon hold in high esteem is reputed to have been founded by a woman, who was also said to have turned into a river goddess<sup>10</sup>.

In Addition, people of Utekon have in their shrines objects such as Bell, carved wooden hen, these objects symbolizes maternal love, duty and protection. These objects are placed in shrines that are used by the people of Utekon to communicate with their

dead parents. These shows that the people do not only honour the women but they believe that a mother's love can serve as charm, especially charms used for protection.

The women of Utekon participated actively in the worship of *Oloku*, the god of wealth and fertility. In every generation, a woman is selected to be the priestess of *Oloku*, they build personal altars in their homes, they travel as far as Urhonigbe to obtain objects to put in their altars; this shows their level of dedication to the worship of *Oloku*.

The god of all medicine in Utekon community is called "*Osu*". The people of Utekon have a special day and time for the worship of the god, and the women Utekon especially the professional Herbalists take major part in the ceremony<sup>11</sup>.

The women participate in the ceremony via;

- sacrifice processes
- giving of thanksgiving offering,
- prayer sessions for the gods to continually fortify their herbs.

The name of the annual festival celebrated for the worship of *Osu* is called "*Ehosu*."

### **Utekon Women and Cultural Activities**

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. The Centre for Advance Research on Language Acquisition goes a step further, defining culture as shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group.

Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things. Every culture is filled with symbols, or things that stand for something else and that often evoke various reactions and emotions. Some symbols are actually types of nonverbal communication, while other symbols are in fact material objects.

The women of Utekon were not left out in the cultural activities of the land, they played an important role in the festivals as well as in the marriage rites.

### **Festivals.**

During the various festivals celebrated in Utekon, women played crucial roles ranging from rendering of prayers for provision and protection to thanksgiving made to their ancestors. They also provide the festival celebration with music and dance.

The women were also in charge of food preparation and serving of food to the guests present.

In the celebration of *Ovia* festival, a particular day is given to a particular group of women known as *Awomiewo*, these women go into the bush to lay curses on those who have been committing havoc and other forms of atrocities in the community thereby ensuring peace and continuous growth in the community as the *Awomiewo* group is a dreaded group. Their curses are said to be potent<sup>12</sup>.

The women of Utekon usually embark on fasting and prayers as a form of purification, during this period they abstain from food and sexual intercourse and they prepare for peace and unity in their homes.

During the *Ise* festival, which is another major festival in Utekon, women both young and old, gather fruits grown in their private farms in a basket, they carry these baskets of fruits around the community seeking a fruitful land and bountiful year ahead. This prayer for a fruitful year is usually done very early in the morning.

In course of this particular group, ritual expert, render powerful incantation, for those seeking the fruit of the womb in order to be blessed with it<sup>13</sup>.

The women were also saddled with the responsibility of preparing the local herbs, which is used for the rubbing of the face, this rubbing of herbs on the face is a form of purification.

### **Marriage Rites**

In Pre-colonial Utekon, marriage was a highly valued institution. The social idea was for man and woman to get married. For the man his status was partly judge by the number of wives he had, for the woman the view was that her pride was in her husband. In pre-colonial Utekon, there was the practice of bethrothal<sup>14</sup>. Here, a girl child is promised to a boy whose father meets the girl's father. When she comes of age, the marriage date is fixed and her promised suitor marries her the proper way. There was also the popular dowry marriage. The women during marriage ceremonies sat and observed the entire ceremony. However, they played a role of giving moral support to the mother

of the bride. She is called upon to perform her role known as the “*Iyomo*” rite, this rite is a form of settlement that is usually carried out by the delegations of women from the groom’s family and that of the bride’s mother<sup>15</sup>. They come together and give some amount of money to the bride’s mother as a form of appreciation for raising her daughter well.

Furthermore, the women of Utekon constitutes part of the ad-hoc committee, set up to ascertain if there are ancestral curses or any health challenges or any other family issue in both families that are coming together in matrimony.

### **Utekon Women and Conflict Resolutions**

Conflict resolution is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. Women have been at the forefront of efforts to build peace across the world. Women are often the stabilizing force in the societies in which they exist<sup>16</sup>. This is certainly true in pre-colonial settings where women represent, essentially, the backbone of reconstruction and rehabilitation as well as the re-integration of former combatants and the re-emergence of basic economic activities in a society which is a war torn society, once peace has been achieved.

Long before the recognition of the role of women in peace building process, they had already been very much involved in such activity. As a social group, women have been suitably identified as being pro-peace. Women usually assume the roles of peacemakers in families and in communities<sup>17</sup>.

The importance of women as agents of peace and their role as mothers made it possible that in war time, it is a taboo to kill a woman even if she is armed. This is because women were the mothers of the male combatants. Even when a woman is mistakenly killed during warfare, there must be appeasement to the land. The respect accorded to women during warfare takes its root from traditional African society and further extended to International arena which made provisions for the protection of women in both conventional and unconventional warfare.

The women of Utekon, in pre-colonial times, played a major role in maintaining peace and harmony in the community. The women give opinions that help to foster peace. They constitute themselves in groups and carry out rallies to demand for justice in the land and also they could visit neighbouring community to ask for peace and forgiveness in event where they know a member of Utekon community has done something that has the ability to lead to potential war<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, the role of women towards the preservation of society has been exceeding significant, as they were fully involved in the social aspects, working at keeping social values in order to preserve the laws and customs which was acceptable in the land.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE OF PRECOLONIAL UTEKON

#### Introduction

The roles of women in the Economic and Political life of pre-colonial Utekon were clearly spelt out and there was hardly any case for controversies. Economically, women engaged in cultivation, rearing of animals, trade and industry. Agricultural activities were divided along gender line. For instance, yam which was the king of crops was reserved for the men<sup>1</sup>. But women were allowed to cultivate the second most important crops, which was cocoyam<sup>2</sup>. They also cultivated other household crops like pepper, vegetable, corn, etc. Trade which was an important aspect of the economy was carried on by both men and women. However, there was also clear division in this regard. While the women dominated in local trade<sup>3</sup>, the long distance trade was majorly dominated by the men because of the risks involved in the trade as traders usually have to travel for days, crossing different forests and rivers.

Precolonial Utekon women also engaged in industrial activities like pottery making, tie and dye, weaving, salt making, calabash making, mat weaving, etc. Weaving and basketry were woman's enterprise. They engaged in weaving a number of items ranging from all sizes of baskets and mats. They used special sticks and river side reeds.

Weaving was done throughout the year but more vigorously during and after harvest when the demand for woven items increased<sup>4</sup>.

Politically, though women in Utekon did not feature as chiefs, or Enogie but they clearly utilized the space reserved for them, and thus carried important roles. They were queen-mother (Iye-Enogie), princesses, and head of various social organization which had political influence in the village. It is against this background that this chapter discusses the economic and political roles of women in precolonial Utekon.

### **Utekon Women in precolonial Economy**

The economic life of Utekon people was determined by geography. Utekon is within the rain forest zone of Southern Nigeria under the influence of the rain-bearing south-west monsoon winds for most of the year and has a long rainy season of not less than seven months. The area has a maxima rainfall regime with a short dry season in August, the rainiest months being July and September. In consequences it is possible to raise two crops of maize and vegetables per annum, unlike in the south east where only one crop is possible<sup>5</sup>. The climate of this village is significant, not only in relations to its effect on the character of the vegetation, but also because climate has, by and large, played a dominant role in the ways of life, including the pattern of economic activities of the people<sup>6</sup>.

Utekon being in the rainforest zone was favoured with good soil for agriculture. The rhythm of economic activity which is revealed in the farming calendar is controlled by the incidence and distribution of rainfall as well as by the length of the rainy season is

a critical factor in agriculture where most farmers do not practice irrigation<sup>7</sup>. Agriculture became the most important economic activities of the people. However, they also engaged in other economic activities like trade and even industry. But Agriculture, when compared to other economic activities appeared to be the dominant preoccupation of the people. Women who constitute an important population of the village were able to harness these important economic advantage for production. The role of women in the economy was enormous. From time immemorial the business of production had engaged the attention of women. Women were directly involved in production and exchange. It was not uncommon to find women both in production manufacturing and exchange of goods in markets places independent of the husband's directives.

### **Women and Agriculture**

Agriculture was the main stay of the Utekon people. They cultivated food crops and also rear animals. Trade and other professions such as pottery weaving, cloth-making, basket weaving, blacksmithing and hunting were secondary to farming. A typical Benin man or women was first and foremost, a farmer<sup>8</sup>. Sufficiency in food production only made trade possible. Families with surplus production were forced to exchange their wares for such items they needed in the family

In Utekon and Benin generally, women took part in all agricultural activities. Some of them owned their personal farms but the majority helped to work on the farms of their husbands, parents and masters. Indeed, farms not very far from the city were very

important to the women because, it was from those farms that they had daily supply of vegetables and spices for daily food preparation<sup>9</sup>.

Agriculture was possible because of the fertility and abundance of land. Land was relatively available compared to the population. The village was the basic unit of land ownership. The community land is divided among the various families, which in turn divide it among the male adult. That is, only male children had right to inherit land in pre-colonial Utekon. Women and their daughters did not inherit lands, but when married, they were shown lands to cultivate.<sup>10</sup> For instance, wives are usually apportioned lands by their husbands where they can carry out farming. The proceeds from this usually makeup for their personal needs. In the same way, female children could also farm in their father's lands. But as soon as they get married, they automatically lose right to such land. After married, they are expected to farm in the lands of their new family (their husband's family).

Despite the traditional inhibition on women's right to land, they were able to utilize the little opportunity in the society to show forth their importance. It needs to be noted that the question of land was not really a problem to precolonial Utekon women. Land was something that was in abundance and men would normally approve farm lands for their daughters and wives to offset their personal expenses. However, these women are also duty bound to assist their husbands in the family farm<sup>11</sup>, from which the family is

cared for. Any woman who refuses to follow her husband to farm could be sanctioned or denied some benefits.

Women during this period were more involved in cultivation than harvest because some noble crops such as yams was usually harvested by men because it was abominable for women to harvest yam<sup>12</sup>. However, they were not inhibited from harvesting such subsidiary crops like cassava, maize, cotton, cocoyam, plantain, banana, melon, vegetable, tomatoes, okro, groundnuts and peppers<sup>13</sup>. The honour given to yam according to J. I. Osagie may not have been directed at exalting men over women. It could be explained by the indigenous origin of yam as distinct from import origin of subsidiary crops<sup>14</sup>. Yam was thus regarded as a gift of the earth deity and was so honoured. As the imported crops were not credited with the same divine origin, they could not be honoured. However, Utekon women remained useful in yam production, for they assisted in providing labour in the farm. Thus, a farmer usually had more than one wife, and after a farm had been cleared, the debris burnt, and yam planted, the farmer then divided the farm into plots which were allocated to wives of the family and their daughters for weeding purposes. Each wife planted her subsidiary crops between the yam mounds on the plot allocated to her. It was the care and regularity with which these plots were weeded that determined the quality and quantity of harvests from the land, for it prevented weeds from competing with crops for soil nutrients<sup>15</sup>.

Since women knew that it was from the sale of subsidiary crops that they made their own money, satisfied complementary needs, contributed to the upkeep of the family and by their diligence caught the favourable fancy of their husbands, they worked hard and effectively on their plots. Women also acted as carriers throughout the farming season because tradition forbade married men from carrying load on their heads. In the course of planting, they conveyed seed yams either from the barn located at home or in the old farm to the new farm. After the seed yams had been cut to sizes, the women also assisted in putting them on the mounds for the men to plant. It was also the responsibility for the women to transport harvested crops home and to the market<sup>16</sup>.

Another agricultural activity in which Utekon women were involved was picking of wild fruits like walnuts, oil bean, pear, kolanut, etc and gathering of snails and mushrooms. These women transverse into the forest to gather these products. The products obtained from this venture served as food in the family, while others are usually offered for sale at the market. Gathering was usually carried out early in the morning to enable them return home to continue their activities for the day.

### **Women as Livestock Keepers**

Keeping of livestock such as fowls, goat, pigs and pigeons was mostly a woman's occupation. A woman was allowed to keep livestock within her husband's compound and was usually free to sell the surplus in the market. Within pastoralism and mixed farming systems, livestock play an important role in supporting women in improving their

financial situation, and women are heavily engaged in the sector. An estimated two-third of livestock keepers are women. They share responsibility with men and children for the care of animals, and particular species and this type of activity are more associated with women than men.

Women, often have a prominent role in managing poultry and dairy animals and caring for other animals that are housed and fed within the homestead.<sup>17</sup> The influence of women is strong in the use of eggs, milk and poultry meat for home consumption and they often have control over marketing and income from these products. Female-headed households' are as successful as male-headed household in generating income from their animals, although they tend to own smaller number of animals probably because of labour constraints.

## **Trade**

Apart from the profit motive, trade developed because of the need to dispose of surplus products to where they were not produced. For example, a farmer who produce more foodstuff than his family could consume had to do away with the surplus which was badly needed by the pottery maker who had not produced enough for his family. Similarly, the family needed pottery work like pot for the family, and thus had to be supplied by the pottery maker. As a result of this inevitable interdependence, trading activities developed<sup>18</sup>. While the main occupation of the men is farming, the women were more engaged primarily in trading<sup>19</sup>. Trade during this period involved exchange of

commodities within and outside the village. A woman who had cocoyam and needed pepper could carry her wares to the neighbouring compound for exchange. However, the development and improvement in the use of currency brought an organized system of trade measurement. Trade in Utekon can be divided into two categories- local trade and long distance trade.

Women mostly featured in the local trade because it involved the exchange of goods within the community. Markets were built in strategic positions of the village to enhance easy conveyance. The markets were very well ordered institutions as different items had special areas located to them so that buyers and sellers knew the customary sections of the markets where articles were sold<sup>20</sup>. At each of these markets there were caretakers (*Iye-eki*) who supervised the transactions, settled the differences and quarrels arising from the haggling and lagging of buyers and sellers<sup>21</sup>.

The external trade or long distance trade involved trade outside the village. Because of the risk inherent in this trade, more men than women were involved as men were not willing to expose their wives to the hazards of the trade such as rape and wild animals<sup>22</sup>. However, to enhance security the men had to make in group as a defense against theft and wild animal. These men who formed trading association did this against pirates and wild animals. Members were admitted into this association after the payment of about twelve shillings' worth of cowries, the purchase of a goat, some kola nuts and palm wine for the feasting of members. Collectively, these groups fixed the prices for

their wares and jealously guarded their monopoly right. To attempt a defiance of the organization by engaging in private trade in their areas of operation was to count certain death<sup>23</sup>. Each organization had the name of the items its trade and it was usually headed by the eldest or the strongest in the team.

Trading at this period was carried out first through trade by barter but was later complemented with the use of cowries when cowries became an important means of exchange among the people. The commercial relevance of cowry continued to be felt in most parts of Nigeria up to the nineteenth century<sup>24</sup>. Cowries were used extensively in internal trade, and with the decline of the Atlantic slave trade they became prominent in the overseas exchange, as export merchant began to offer them as part payment for palm oil.<sup>25</sup> The use of cowrie continued until the early twentieth century when the British introduced silver coins into Benin<sup>26</sup>.

### **Craft and Industry**

The industrial activities of Utekon include pottery making, caving, weaving, iron smelting and sewing. All of these activities except ironwork were also carried out by women. Women were engaged in pottery making and weaving of cloths and baskets making. Although these activities are said to be secondary to farming as it was possible for a woman to be involve in farming as well as weaving. Women were compelled to engage complementarily in craft work because of the needs in the family. For instance, women had to make sure they cut palm fronds to make brooms; they also had to engage

in weaving and sewing of cloths for the family. It was rare for women to buy brooms from the markets. However, the most lucrative and popular among Utekon women was pottery making. The clay used in making this pottery was gotten from the Ovia river which is not far from the village

### **Pottery making**

Pottery was the making industry in precolonial Utekon in which women were engaged. The clay used for making this pottery was gotten from the Ovia river. With this clay, the women produced a variety of pots which were used for ceremonial and utilitarian purposes. The variety of pot produced ranged from the very small to the fairly large. The very small ones were used for making sacrifices to the spirits of the ancestors and appeasing witches and wizards (*izobo*) and they are usually deposited at the road junctions and by the side of rivers and streams; the large ones were kept in ancestral shrines or used by traditional doctors for mixing and storing liquid medicines extracted from herbs. Other were cooking pots, dishes for serving food, large jars for storing water, smoking pipes, saucers and a variety of figurines such as the heads of animals and the symbols of some deities, like *Olokun*, the goddess of fertility. As pottery products were important house utensils and objects, they were very much in demand and their products enjoyed good financial returns from their labour. Women who engaged in this industry were usually rich and were respected in the community.

### **Political participation of Pre-colonial Utekon Women**

The position of Women in pre-colonial African societies has been a contested concept between and within Eurocentric and Afro-centric scholars in contemporary times. However, the debate has remained an unending dialogue. This argument is based on the fact that most societies in pre-colonial African were patriarchal. By Patriarchy, I mean a form of social organization in which a male act as the head of the family, household, holding power over female and children. It is believed that men as husbands and father tend to rule with unchallenged authority, the lives of women and children<sup>27</sup>. It is for this reason that the major reference in history have been men. Only male genealogies are recalled and perpetuated and only male achievements are celebrated. Consequently, information on the female gender is either non-existence or scanty on many of the historical sources. This has proved to be a major limitation to any female centred research. However, recent researches carried out by scholars like J.I. Osagie<sup>28</sup>, Justice Nzemeke<sup>29</sup>, P.I. Omoregie<sup>30</sup>, O. Akinwunmi<sup>31</sup>, Gloria Thomas<sup>32</sup> and a host of others revealed extensively the participation of women in the economy and social life of the society. These works have helped to rejuvenate the lost glories of women. But the part which remains wholly contested which perhaps a lot of historians shy away from is the political roles of women in patriarchal societies like Benin in general and Utekon in particular.

Precolonial Utekon women just like in Metropolitan Benin did not directly participate in politics. They couldn't assume chieftaincies, or kingship. But, as important members of the village they were duly represented through their husbands, brothers and even through women's group. Precolonial Utekon women were queen mother, princess,

wives, daughters, priestesses and their influence as important members of the society cannot be swept under the carpet. As queen mothers, they produced princes who would assumed the throne when the Enogie pass on. It was for this reason that Ali Mazrui regarded women *as custodian of earth*<sup>33</sup> whose fertile womb populates the earth. The queen mother or Iye-Enogie, as it was called in Utekon was the most respected among the queens in Utekon. This respect is due to the fact that she is the mother of the king (duke or *Enogie*). Disrespecting her would have meant disrespecting the Enogie, the king. As a queen mother, her influence on her sons cannot be overemphasized. This is because children irrespective of their positions retain strong emotional ties with their mothers. Her son, the king could easily go to her for some advices about the administration of the dukedom. Though, he is not under any compulsion to accept such advice. It is no doubt that the *Enogie* would sometimes find himself doing the biddings of the mother.

The family which is the smallest unit of socio-political organization experienced the influence of women in precolonial times. Though men acted as the head of the family, but the women who consisted of the wives contributed immensely to decisions that concerns that family. The man before taking any important decision would consult the wife. Such discussions usually take place very late at night or early in the morning when the children are asleep. Because of the strong connections that exist between a man and his wife, children would usually go to their mother to relate their demands to her, because they believe she would help convince their father who seem to be much hardened. Most times the desire of the children are meant due to the diplomatic strategies of the women.

The women sometimes use their irresistible influence on their husbands to achieve the demands of their children. The women also influence the decisions of their husbands at village meetings. Though women are usually excluded from council meetings but their demands sometimes find its way into the resolutions of the council through their husbands.

### **Women group as agents of political representation in government**

As stated above, women did not participate directly and individually in pre-colonial politics. However, an important means of women representation in politics was through a group known as *Awomiebo*<sup>34</sup>. This was initially formed to coordinate women's activities in the market. They settle cases that arises from women's interactions. The group was usually headed by the oldest woman, and so usually enjoys a lot of respect and recognition among the women.

The group is usually consulted by elders in council when important decisions were to be taken concerning women and the market in particular. It was through this group that the women are able to offer their advices on important state matters. Whenever there is need to get women's view on important matters, the Enogie-in-council would request for the women group leader. Before the group leader shows appearance at the council, she would consult members of the group, where everyone is made to air her opinion. Once a consensus is reached, the group leader aggregates and take it to the council. At the council meeting, the group leader is offered a sit. It is important to state

here that sitting at this council does not make her equal with men. she acted more or less as a visiting diplomat than a council member, whose contributions is limited to matters concerning her representation. That is, she could only contribute when matters about her group (the women) is deliberated on<sup>35</sup>.

The importance of this group is reflected on the recognition it gets from the council. Most of the demands of the women are met through this group. However, the council is not under compulsion to accept the suggestions of the group but it happened that the men more than often gave in to their demands. That the women got their demands often is not unconnected to the relationship members of the council have with the women, who are either their wives, mothers, sisters or even daughters.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the roles of precolonial women in the economic and political life of Uteko. The work has successfully contributed to the scholastic debate that women were not passive in precolonial Africa. It argued that patriarchy as a social organization did not completely relegate women to passivity. Women flourished in the domains reserved for them. In the economy, they were involved in both agriculture, trade and industry. However, the area where they exerted influence most was in agriculture. They cultivated household crops like cassava, millet, beans, maize, cocoyam, etc. Though certain crops like yam which was seen as male crop were exclusively reserved for men but women assisted their husbands in its cultivate. For instance, they help to convey the

yam seedlings to the farm for cultivate and during harvest, they also assisted in conveying it to the barn or markets.

In the area of trade and industry, precolonial Utekon women dominated. Women unlike the men were mainly involved in local trade. They carry their surpluses to the market to be exchanged for their household needs. However, when currency like cowrie and Manilla later replace the barter system from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, goods were now offered in exchange for money which was used to purchase household need. Industry was also an important aspect of precolonial Utekon economy. The women were notable in pottery-making. This activity was easy for the women because of the availability of clay, which they got from Ovia river. They molded these clay into pots and objects of different kinds.

In the area of politics, the women only participated indirectly. Their participation was through the influence they have on their husbands, who constituted members of the decision-making body of the village and also the women group. In fact, it was through the women group that the women effectively played politics in the village. The group is usually invited by the council whenever important decision about the women are to be taken.

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35. Interview with Benson Obasohan, 67yrs, farmer, Utekon village

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

The role of women in precolonial African societies have been relegated to the background in history. Development and progress of societies have been associated with men only as if women were non-existence or passive. It was against this background that research studied precolonial Utekon in Socio-economic. The result explicitly revealed that precolonial Utekon women were involved in the development of the community. They played both economic, political and social roles in ensuring the sustainability of community. As revealed in this research, women did not occupy equal positions with men but their efforts were more or less complementary, and they however, utilized effectively the positions reserved for them.

Socially, women were relevant in the Educational sector, Health sector, Religious sector, Cultural activities (Festivals and Marriage), and Conflict resolution/ diplomacy. Women were notably active as teachers to their children. They imbued in them the necessary etiquettes needed to survive in the society. For instance, they prepare their female children to become good wives and mothers when they get married. These they do by teaching them how to prepare good dishes, care for children, respect their husbands as lord of the family. The women also provided medical care to the community. Basically, every woman in Utekon is a nurse who knows how to provide first aid and simple treatment to their family members. They know some of the local herbs to use against mild

sickness like Dysentery, Malaria, Typhoid, etc. However, there were also professional healthcare practitioners like priestesses, and even midwives who attend to the health needs of the community.

Politically, women though not politically equal in the sense that they could not assume equal political positions with men, but their influence as important members of the community were actively felt to the extent that their demands were regularly met. Utekon women gave realistic supports to their husbands in the administration of the family. Decisions are usually taken in the family after due consultations has been made with the woman. It is important to note that the man is not duty bound to consult the wife before taking any decision. But the fact remains that the men saw their wives as partners in the administration of the home. So it was really not an issue for them to consult their wives in any important matter. Most of these discussions are usually held at night or early in the morning when the children are asleep. Though the administration of the village was dominated by men in the council. women were not given opportunity to sit in the council. But they carefully influenced the discussions of the council through their husbands who sometimes discuss what they intend to proffer at the council. So it was common for men to yield to the advices given by their beloved wives. Besides, it was rare for them to take any decision which could negatively affect women who happened to be their wives, daughters, and even mothers. An important medium Utekon women exercised political influence in precolonial times was through their association called, *Awomievbó*. This group was originally created to regulate women's activities in the market. It later

expanded to become an important socio-political group in Utekon. For this reason, the council of elders find it necessary to consult the women group, represented by its leader whenever important decision is to be taken concerning women. This group thus help to aggregate and articulate women's interest in the council.

Economically, this research has revealed that women were very important in the economic life of the people. They participated in every aspect of the economic like agriculture, industry and even trade. However, their influence in the economy was mostly felt in agriculture and trade. Women cultivated such crops like cassava, maize, cotton, cocoyam, plantain, banana, melon, vegetable, tomatoes, okro, groundnuts and peppers. Though they were not allowed by traditions to cultivate yam which is the most important crop in the village, but they offered undeniable assistance to their husbands in its cultivation. For instance, they helped to carry the yam seed to the farm for cultivation, and also assisted to convey harvested yams to the barn or market for sale.

Trade and industry also provided women important opportunities to participate in precolonial Utekon economy. The women were involved in the local trade which involved the exchange of farm produce and industrial wares at the local market. Men often did not compete with the women in this aspect of the economy; they gave free hands to their wives to help them dispose their excess harvest with a mandate to buy the needed things in the family. However, with the introduction of currency, women were now to sell off their wares, with the money returned to the husband who would now

award a part of it for the purchase of house needs. With the introduction of cash crops in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, men became necessarily involved in both local trade and the foreign trade which they had always dominated. They exchanged their cash crops with an agent at the market who offers them cash. It needs to be noted that in spite this change, women continued to dominate in the sales of food crops in the market. The rush at which men drifted into cash crop production, leaving food crops for women was to have a negative effort on the economy in the 1930s when food crops became scarce, particularly in cities.

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Amadasun Vincent	57	Farmer	Utekon	16/01/2021
Igbinosu Isoken	82	Herbal doctor	Utekon	25/02/2021
Ogieva Juliet	61	Business woman	Utekon	24/02/ 2021
Okundaya Comfort	65	Retired Principal	Utekon	27/02/2021
Omogiade Beatrice	52	Teacher	Utekon Community	24/02/2021
Osayowanbo Elizabeth	76	Farmer	Utekon	2/06/2021
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