

**ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
DEVELOPMENT OF IBESIKPO IN AKWA IBOM IN PRE-COLONIAL
TIMES**

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BENIN CITY

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this work was carried out by **VICTORIA IBANGA EDET** with Matriculation Number **ART2100429** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Almighty God, the source of wisdom and strength, and to the women of history whose resilience and courage laid the foundation for the growth and continuity of their societies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Almighty God, whose grace, wisdom, and strength have been my constant guide throughout the course of this research and my academic journey. Without His divine help, this work would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The place of women in the socio-economic and political development of African societies has long been a subject of academic interest, particularly in recent decades as scholars seek to correct historical narratives that marginalized women's roles. In many traditional African communities, women were not passive bystanders to history but active participants who contributed significantly to the survival, stability, and progress of their societies. The Ibesikpo clan, located in present-day Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, is a compelling example of such a society. In pre-colonial times, women in Ibesikpo were at the very heart of economic production, social organization, cultural preservation, and even political influence. Their roles were not secondary but central to the holistic functioning of their community¹.

Pre-colonial Ibesikpo society operated on a system of complementary gender roles, where both men and women were regarded as essential, though their contributions were expressed through different spheres. While men held formal offices such as the Obong (chief) and village heads, women exerted influence through trade, social institutions, and spiritual authority. These avenues allowed

them to engage meaningfully in governance and conflict resolution through informal yet powerful mechanisms. The structure of society maintained a balance of power that promoted harmony, equity, and shared responsibility in communal life².

Economically, women were the backbone of subsistence farming, which was the primary means of livelihood in Ibesikpo. They cultivated essential food crops such as yam, cassava, cocoyam, maize, and vegetables, thereby ensuring the food security of their families and the larger community. Farming was not a casual or domestic activity but an essential economic engagement where women displayed skill, diligence, and ingenuity. Beyond cultivation, women were actively involved in the processing and distribution of farm produce. They engaged in the arduous tasks of producing palm oil and palm kernel, which became significant commodities in local and regional trade networks. Their activities in the palm oil industry not only sustained household economies but also contributed to the broader economic wellbeing of the Ibesikpo society³.

The marketplace was the primary arena where women's economic influence in Ibesikpo was most visible and potent. Like many Ibibio communities, markets were largely organized and managed by women, who formed cooperative groups to regulate trade practices, control prices, and uphold ethical standards. These associations were more than economic units; they were powerful social institutions through which women exercised collective influence. By expanding trade networks

to neighboring clans and distant markets, Ibesikpo women facilitated the exchange of goods and enhanced the community's economic standing. The wealth generated from these activities enabled them to contribute to communal projects, support religious festivals, and provide welfare for the less privileged⁴.

Politically, though the formal structures of governance such as the council of elders were dominated by men, women had their own parallel institutions that allowed them to participate in the political life of the community. One of the most significant of these was the Ikpobong (women's council). This council served as a collective voice for women, where they deliberated on matters affecting their welfare and the community at large. The Ikpobong had the authority to mediate in disputes, regulate market affairs, and mobilize collective actions in response to social injustices. It was through such institutions that women ensured their interests were protected and their voices heard in the governance process⁵.

A notable form of political expression was the practice of "sitting on a man," a traditional protest in which women gathered at the home or workplace of anyone who violated communal norms. Through songs, dances, and public shaming, they demanded accountability and upheld justice, making it a potent tool for enforcing moral order. The age-grade system also offered women another avenue for participation, as female groups organized communal labor, festivals, and

development projects. In these ways, women played a vital part in sustaining political balance and everyday governance within the community⁶.

Culturally, women in Ibesikpo were custodians of tradition, oral history, and moral values. Through storytelling, songs, and rituals, they preserved social ideals and reinforced communal identity. As priestesses, diviners, and healers, they occupied revered positions that enabled them to influence community decisions. This gender balance was founded on complementarity, where women's informal institutions were vital to the social and political life of the people. Colonialism, however, disrupted these systems by introducing male-centered structures that marginalized women's authority. Yet, their foundational impact remains etched in the community's memory. This study thus examines women's roles in Ibesikpo's socio-economic and political development, offering a more complete reconstruction of African history that recognizes their indispensable place⁷.

Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the socio-economic and political contributions of women to the development of Ibesikpo in Akwa Ibom State during the pre-colonial period. It seeks to explore the various roles women played in indigenous economic activities, political systems, and cultural institutions, while identifying the structures that enabled or influenced their participation.

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the traditional economic roles of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo.
2. To investigate the political influence of women through informal institutions and social structures.
3. To analyze the cultural and religious functions performed by women in community life.
4. To highlight the forms of collective organization that enhanced women's participation in societal development.
5. To identify the indigenous factors that shaped or limited women's roles in the socio-political and economic structure of pre-colonial Ibesikpo.

Scope of the Study

This study is primarily concerned with examining the socio-economic and political contributions of women to the development of Ibesikpo in Akwa Ibom State during the pre-colonial period. It focuses on the various traditional roles women played within their community, particularly in areas such as agriculture, palm produce processing, trade, market organization, cultural preservation, and informal

political participation. The research seeks to analyze how women, through indigenous structures like the Ikpobong (women's council), age-grade associations, and religious institutions, exerted influence on the economic stability, social organization, and governance of their society. By focusing on these indigenous institutions and activities, the study aims to highlight the integral role of women in sustaining communal development before the disruptions introduced by colonial rule.

The geographical scope of the study is restricted to Ibesikpo, a sub-clan within the Ibibio ethnic group of Akwa Ibom State. While acknowledging broader Ibibio cultural practices where necessary, the research is centered on the specific experiences and structures within Ibesikpo. The temporal scope is limited to the pre-colonial period, thus excluding detailed examination of colonial and post-colonial developments, except where brief references are needed to provide historical context or to contrast indigenous systems with later transformations. The study does not extend to contemporary gender issues or modern political participation, as its primary focus is to reconstruct and analyze the roles women played in Ibesikpo's socio-economic and political life prior to external colonial influences.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design aimed at reconstructing and analyzing the socio-economic and political roles of women in the development of Ibesikpo during the pre-colonial period. The research is based on the examination of historical records, oral traditions, archival materials, and relevant secondary sources that provide insight into the contributions of women within the indigenous social, economic, and political structures of Ibesikpo society. Emphasis is placed on interpreting and analyzing qualitative data that reflects the lived experiences, cultural practices, and societal institutions through which women exercised influence in their communities.

The data collection process involves a thorough review of documentary sources, including books, academic journals, and published materials on Ibibio history and culture. In addition, oral interviews and testimonies from community elders, local historians, and custodians of tradition in Ibesikpo are incorporated to enrich the research with indigenous perspectives that may not be captured in written sources. These oral accounts are essential for conveying the nuances of women's roles, which were traditionally preserved and transmitted through generations.

The method of data analysis used in this study is qualitative content analysis, involving a thematic examination of information to identify patterns and practices that defined women's socio-economic and political contributions. It synthesizes data

from both oral and written sources to provide a comprehensive understanding, integrating oral traditions with historical records to reconstruct a balanced narrative of women's role in pre-colonial Ibesikpo society.

Literature Review

The role of women in the socio-economic and political development of African societies has, for decades, been subjected to historical narratives that marginalized or underrepresented their contributions. However, a re-examination of indigenous African communities, particularly through oral traditions and critical historical scholarship, reveals a far more complex and dynamic picture of women's participation in community development. This growing body of literature challenges the colonial-era portrayal of African women as passive dependents, confined to domestic spaces and excluded from economic and political spheres. Scholars like Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch have emphasized that in pre-colonial African societies, women were not merely participants but essential pillars upon which the survival and advancement of their communities rested⁸.

In Ibesikpo, a sub-group of the Ibibio ethnic nation, women's roles were deeply embedded in every aspect of communal life. Their contributions were not auxiliary but central to the economic, social, and political systems of society. The misconception that African women were historically voiceless stems from Western frameworks that ignored the indigenous institutions through which they exercised

power. Oyeronke Oyewumi challenges these notions, arguing that African societies defined gender by function rather than hierarchy, with roles seen as complementary and equally vital⁹. This perspective helps explain how Ibesikpo women, though absent from formal titles, held remarkable influence in governance, trade, culture, and community organization.

Economic activities formed the foundation of women's influence in Ibesikpo society. As a predominantly agrarian community, pre-colonial Ibesikpo relied heavily on women, who led agricultural production and secured food for both household and trade. They cultivated vital crops such as yam, cassava, maize, cocoyam, and vegetables with remarkable skill and dedication. This was not a passive duty but a structured role that made them central to economic survival. Eno U. Basse's *Women and Economic Power in Ibibio Society* notes that their agricultural work went beyond subsistence it powered markets and trade networks¹⁰. Their participation in palm produce processing further integrated Ibesikpo's economy into the larger regional system.

The marketplace was the arena where women's economic agency was most visibly and authoritatively exercised. Ibesikpo markets were not passive commercial spaces but vibrant social institutions organized and regulated by women. These markets operated as hubs of economic exchange and as platforms for community governance, where women's associations determined trade practices, price control,

dispute resolution, and enforcement of ethical conduct among traders. This intricate network of market associations allowed women to collectively harness their economic power, ensuring that their influence extended beyond mere transactions. Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian's research in *I Will Not Eat Stone: A Women's History of Colonial Asante* illustrates how these economic spaces became strategic centers of female authority, a pattern mirrored in Ibesikpo's own market dynamics¹¹.

Moreover, market leadership in Ibesikpo was not just a role of economic management but a position of social and political significance. Women leaders in the marketplace, often referred to by respected titles within their associations, were key figures in community affairs. Their decisions carried weight not only in economic matters but also in communal development initiatives, conflict mediation, and social welfare activities. Bolanle Awe's studies in *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* underscore that market leadership often translated into broader communal leadership, as economic influence gave women a platform to shape societal norms and community policies¹².

Although formal political structures such as village councils and chieftaincies were largely male-dominated, Ibesikpo women established strong informal political institutions that guaranteed their participation in governance. Chief among these was the Ikpobong (women's council), which acted as a parallel body where women deliberated on communal matters, organized collective responses, and influenced

decisions taken by men. These institutions were not symbolic but functional mechanisms of governance that embodied the community's principle of balance, accountability, and shared responsibility¹³.

The political activism of Ibesikpo women was further expressed through indigenous protest mechanisms such as "sitting on a man." This traditional form of collective action involved women gathering to publicly shame individuals who violated social norms, abused power, or committed acts of injustice. Through songs, dances, chants, and symbolic acts of protest, women used this mechanism to demand accountability and enforce communal values. Judith Van Allen's documentation in "Aba Riots or Igbo Women's War? Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women" reveals how these indigenous protest strategies were potent tools of political expression and social regulation¹⁴. In Ibesikpo, 'sitting on a man' was a recognized and respected form of grassroots democracy that allowed women to assert their agency in community governance.

Beyond their economic and political roles, women were the custodians of cultural identity and moral heritage in Ibesikpo. They preserved and transmitted the collective memory of the community through oral traditions, including storytelling, proverbs, songs, and folklore. These cultural narratives were not mere entertainment but served as educational frameworks through which societal values, historical knowledge, and ethical principles were instilled in younger generations. Ifi

Amadiume's work *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* highlights the centrality of women as cultural custodians, a role that was equally prominent among Ibibio women¹⁵. In Ibesikpo, women's participation in cultural festivals, initiation rites, and religious ceremonies reinforced their status as guardians of tradition and spiritual well-being.

Women also occupied vital roles in religious leadership as priestesses, diviners, and healers. These positions were not only spiritually significant but conferred upon them social authority and influence in communal decision-making processes. In many cases, women's spiritual roles provided a platform for political influence, as spiritual leaders were often consulted in matters of conflict resolution, fertility, health, and communal rituals. Their participation in these religious functions ensured that women's voices were heard in matters of both earthly governance and spiritual guidance.

The framework of gender complementarity offers a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. Nkechi Okoli's article "Gender Complementarity and Pre-colonial African Societies: A Re-examination" argues that pre-colonial African societies were structured on principles of shared responsibilities, where gender roles were functionally distributed to maintain social harmony and collective progress¹⁶. This concept of complementarity rejects the Western dichotomy of male dominance and female subjugation, instead recognizing that African communities like Ibesikpo

fostered systems where men and women performed distinct but equally essential functions.

Additionally, the concept of informal power structures provides a valuable lens for analyzing how women in African societies exercised influence outside formal political institutions. Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba, in their work *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*, emphasize that African women historically utilized non-formal channels such as market associations, women's councils, and protest mechanisms to navigate systems of power and effect meaningful change¹⁷. In Ibesikpo, these informal structures were central to the community's socio-political system. They prevented governance from being monopolized by male councils, ensuring instead a balance maintained by female-led institutions that safeguarded communal values and collective interests.

The neglect of these informal structures by colonial administrators and early historians created a distorted view of African governance, often depicting it as purely patriarchal. Yet, a closer look at societies like Ibesikpo shows that women's absence from formal titles did not mean exclusion. They operated through established institutions that shaped governance, advanced the economy, preserved culture, and maintained social order. Their roles were integrative, ensuring that community decisions reflected a collective consciousness that valued both male and female contributions.

Therefore, the significance of women's roles in the socio-economic and political development of Ibesikpo cannot be overstated. Their contributions shaped the very fabric of community life through active participation in agriculture, trade, governance, culture, and spirituality. Any historical account of Ibesikpo's pre-colonial development that overlooks these roles remains incomplete. Reconstructing such narratives demands a conscious engagement with oral traditions, ethnographic research, and historical scholarship that centers women's experiences and contributions.

This literature review has shown that Ibesikpo's traditional structures promoted inclusivity, balance, and collective responsibility. Women's roles, though expressed through informal avenues, were crucial to the community's economic stability, social harmony, and political vitality. By examining these roles, this study contributes to the broader effort to reconstruct African histories that truly reflect indigenous realities where women were not passive figures but active architects of their societies.

Chapter Outline

This study is chapterized as follows:

CHAPTER ONE: Background to the Study - This chapter introduces the topic, provides historical context, states the aims and objectives, outlines the scope and methodology, and reviews relevant literature and endnotes.

CHAPTER TWO: Historical Overview of Ibesikpo and the Status of Women in Pre-colonial Times - This chapter examines the traditional structure of Ibesikpo society, dives into the history and cultural setting of the community, and highlights the recognized roles and status of women in the pre-colonial era.

CHAPTER THREE: Socio-economic Contributions of Women in Pre-colonial Ibesikpo - This chapter discusses the economic roles of women, focusing on agriculture, trade, and their influence in sustaining the community's livelihood.

CHAPTER FOUR: Political and Cultural Influence of Women in Pre-colonial Ibesikpo - This chapter analyzes the political participation of women through informal governance structures and their cultural roles as custodians of tradition and spiritual leaders.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion - This chapter summarizes the findings of the study and concludes with reflections on the significance of women's contributions to the

development of Ibesikpo in pre-colonial times, offering recommendations for future research and policy interventions.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF IBESIKPO AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL TIMES

The historical development of Ibesikpo cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader Ibibio cultural and social context. Ibesikpo is one of the prominent clans in Akwa Ibom State, belonging to the Ibibio ethnic group, which is widely regarded as one of the oldest and most influential in southeastern Nigeria¹. The people of Ibesikpo trace their ancestry through oral traditions, myths, and migration narratives that emphasize resilience, adaptability, and collective identity. Pre-colonial Ibesikpo society, like other Ibibio communities, was organized around kinship networks, extended families, and village groups, which served as the foundation of social life and governance. Authority was decentralized and rooted in communal consensus, with cultural norms ensuring social order and cohesion.

Within this communal setting, women occupied central positions that went far beyond domestic responsibilities. They were pivotal in agricultural production, dominated the markets, participated in community decision-making, and held recognized spiritual offices. These roles made women indispensable actors in sustaining the material and cultural fabric of society. Rather than being viewed through a lens of subordination, women's contributions in Ibesikpo were structured around complementarity, where gender responsibilities were distinct but equally vital

to the progress of the community². This ensured that balance, reciprocity, and cooperation defined the social relations between men and women in pre-colonial times.

The significance of women in Ibesikpo becomes even more striking when examined against the disruptions of colonialism. With the introduction of Western political and economic systems, indigenous female-led institutions such as market councils and women's assemblies lost visibility and authority. The imposition of male-centered political structures undermined the traditional balance that had given women both voice and power in the community. Nonetheless, the enduring memory of their roles in agriculture, trade, governance, and cultural preservation demonstrates that women were not marginal figures but essential agents of development. This reality reflects a broader scholarly recognition that any serious historical reconstruction of African societies must integrate women's contributions, without which the narrative remains incomplete³.

Geographical and Historical Background of Ibesikpo

Ibesikpo is located in the southeastern part of present-day Akwa Ibom State, forming an integral component of the Ibibio ethnic nation. Its territory is situated within the heartland of Ibibio-speaking communities, bordered by related clans with whom they share cultural, linguistic, and ancestral affinities. Historically, this area has been regarded as one of the most fertile zones in the region, blessed with rich

soils, streams, and thick vegetation which provided the basic resources for livelihood. These environmental advantages shaped the occupational and social life of the people, sustaining their agricultural economy and enabling them to establish lasting trade relationships with neighboring groups. The settlement of Ibesikpo was organized around compact villages and dispersed farmsteads, each tied together through kinship and lineage connections, which not only fostered unity but also formed the bedrock of identity and communal responsibility⁴. Oral traditions passed down through elders indicate that the people of Ibesikpo, like many other Ibibio communities, trace their origin to waves of migration within the greater Ibibio heartland, with settlement patterns gradually consolidating into strong village clusters bound by common ancestry.

The geographical setting of Ibesikpo was vital not only for subsistence but also for interaction with the wider Ibibio world. Its fertile lands supported crops such as yam, cassava, cocoyam, and maize, while rivers provided fish and water for domestic use. These resources made Ibesikpo a major food-producing area, ensuring both sustenance and surplus for trade. The surrounding forests yielded timber, palm produce, and medicinal plants that sustained economic and cultural life. Positioned along trade routes, Ibesikpo became a vital link between inland communities, fostering commerce, intermarriage, and cultural exchange that strengthened its social fabric⁵.

Historically, Ibesikpo's political and social structure reflected the wider Ibibio model of decentralized governance, where authority stemmed from family and lineage systems. Each village was led by councils of elders, lineage heads, and priests responsible for decision-making, dispute resolution, and social order. Though men dominated these institutions, women's voices were integral to governance. Through councils, associations, and spiritual roles, they ensured decisions served the common good. Thus, Ibesikpo's history is best understood not only through its geography but through resilient institutions that promoted inclusivity, balance, and shared responsibility⁶.

Kinship and Social Structures in Pre-colonial Ibesikpo

The kinship system formed the nucleus of social organization in pre-colonial Ibesikpo. Like other Ibibio communities, descent was traced through both patrilineal and matrilineal lines, but patrilineal descent generally determined inheritance and succession to land, property, and family titles. Families were organized into lineages (ufok), which collectively made up the larger village community. Each lineage was bound together by the recognition of a common ancestor, either real or mythical, and this shared ancestry served as the foundation of identity, social obligations, and authority within the community⁷. Kinship ties defined the framework for marriage, inheritance, residence, and communal responsibilities, ensuring that every individual had a clearly recognized place within the broader society.

These kinship structures were more than social classifications; they were living institutions that governed the daily activities and responsibilities of members. The lineage was headed by the oldest surviving male, often referred to as the family head (Ete Uforo), who was entrusted with the management of family land, settlement of disputes, and performance of ancestral rites. However, women were not excluded from the kinship system. Through marriage alliances, they created networks that extended the influence of their families and lineages across village and clan boundaries. Marriages were carefully arranged, not merely as unions between individuals but as strategic alliances that strengthened bonds between families and ensured peace and cooperation among different kin groups⁸. In this way, the kinship system of Ibesikpo was a flexible and integrative structure that connected both men and women to broader social, political, and economic obligations.

Social structures in Ibesikpo reflected a clear but complementary distribution of roles between men and women. Men were typically associated with political leadership, warfare, and protection of the community, while women specialized in trade, agricultural production, and cultural preservation. This distribution was not based on subordination but on complementarity, where each gender's role was essential to the survival of the whole society. Within this framework, age-grades (ekpuk owo) played a crucial role in reinforcing social order and unity. Age-grades grouped individuals of similar age into organized associations with defined duties

such as communal labor, law enforcement, initiation ceremonies, and cultural performances. Through the age-grade system, individuals were socialized into adulthood, given responsibilities in community development, and provided platforms for collective decision-making⁹.

The strength of Ibesikpo's kinship and social systems lay in their adaptability and inclusiveness. By ensuring that everyone belonged to a lineage, age-grade, or family association, the community fostered cooperation, stability, and accountability. Women's participation in kinship alliances, trade, and cultural institutions further reinforced their indispensability to communal survival. Thus, these structures were not rigid hierarchies but dynamic systems that allowed both men and women to contribute meaningfully to the growth and harmony of their society¹⁰.

Status of Women within the Family and Community

In pre-colonial Ibesikpo, women's status within the family and community was both visible and influential, grounded in the indigenous principle of complementarity. Within the household, they were the backbone of domestic life, responsible for childbearing, nurturing, and moral upbringing. As first custodians of values, they taught honesty, diligence, and communal unity through everyday interactions and songs. A mother's role extended into the wider lineage, where her influence strengthened kinship ties¹¹. By managing the home, caring for children,

and supporting agricultural work, women became indispensable pillars of family stability and growth.

Marriage further elevated women's status in the community, as brides were regarded not only as companions to their husbands but also as representatives of their natal families. A woman's marriage created alliances between families and clans, strengthening kinship and political ties. Through this role, women became agents of diplomacy, peace-building, and cooperation¹². The payment of bridewealth symbolized appreciation for a woman's economic and reproductive value—affirming her role as the bearer of lineage continuity and transmitter of cultural identity, rather than a subject of commercial exchange.

Within the wider community, women's status was reinforced by their active involvement in socio-economic and cultural institutions. Women commanded significant authority in agricultural labor, market activities, and craft production, all of which positioned them as visible contributors to the prosperity of Ibesikpo society. Their participation in age-grades, women's associations, and religious groups provided them with platforms to exercise collective power and assert their voices in decision-making processes¹³. While men often dominated the formal political councils, women developed informal but equally influential structures such as the Ikpobong (women's council), which allowed them to deliberate on issues affecting the community and act as a check on male authority.

Thus, the status of women within the family and community in pre-colonial Ibesikpo was not one of marginality but of active participation and influence. Through their economic productivity, marital diplomacy, cultural stewardship, and moral leadership, women secured a central position in the social order.

Marriage, Inheritance, and Gender Relations

Marriage in pre-colonial Ibesikpo was not merely a union of individuals but a communal institution that reinforced kinship bonds, secured alliances, and sustained social harmony. Women played a central role in this process, as marriage elevated their status both within their natal families and in their new households. Through marriage, a woman became a link between lineages, ensuring not only the continuity of family ties but also the flow of obligations, reciprocity, and shared responsibilities between clans. Bridewealth, commonly paid in the form of livestock, farm produce, or local currency, symbolized the high regard for women's reproductive and economic contributions. It was never conceived as a commercial purchase of the bride but as a recognition of her value in sustaining lineage continuity and strengthening social cohesion¹⁴.

Inheritance in Ibesikpo, as in much of Ibibio society, was primarily patrilineal, with property and land passed through the male line to preserve family wealth. Yet this system did not diminish women's economic power. They accessed land through husbands, brothers, or sons, enabling them to farm and sustain both family and

community. Widows also retained rights to remain within their husband's household, maintaining influence over property and child upbringing. Though women did not formally inherit land, their labor and management of resources gave them significant authority in ensuring family stability and prosperity¹⁵.

Gender relations in pre-colonial Ibesikpo were founded on complementarity rather than subordination. Men and women performed distinct yet interdependent roles that sustained the social, economic, and political order. Women's efforts in farming, trade, and culture balanced men's formal leadership in councils and warfare. Far from being silent, they actively shaped family and community life through institutions like the Ikpobong and as guardians of oral tradition. This interdependence embodied the indigenous belief that both genders were essential to the community's survival and progress¹⁶.

Thus, marriage, inheritance, and gender relations in pre-colonial Ibesikpo illustrate a society where women's roles, though often informal, were deeply respected and embedded in the communal order. Women were not marginalized outsiders but vital actors who shaped the destiny of their families and community through marriage diplomacy, labor contributions, and cultural leadership.

Women's Place in Pre-colonial Ibesikpo Society

The place of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo society was deeply interwoven with its social, economic, political, and cultural fabric. Contrary to colonial portrayals of African women as passive dependents, Ibesikpo women held visible and authoritative roles. Their influence extended beyond the household into the wider community, where they served as farmers, traders, mediators, cultural custodians, and spiritual leaders whose efforts sustained social order and prosperity. Through these roles, women emerged as indispensable agents of continuity and development, ensuring the survival and stability of Ibesikpo society.

Economically, women's place was defined by their dominance in farming and trade. They cultivated staple crops such as yam, cassava, maize, and vegetables that sustained families and supplied markets, while also leading in palm produce processing, which linked Ibesikpo to regional commerce. Their prominence gave them both economic independence and social influence. Wealth generated through market groups enabled them to fund projects, support festivals, and aid the needy. As producers and distributors of resources, women were indispensable to Ibesikpo's economic survival¹⁷.

Politically, women's place was upheld through informal yet powerful institutions. The Ikpobong (women's council) provided a platform for deliberation, crisis response, and influence over male-dominated councils, ensuring women's

voices shaped governance. They also exercised agency through protest systems like sitting on a man, a collective act of shaming those who abused power or defied norms. Through songs, chants, and symbolic acts, women enforced accountability and upheld justice, standing as guardians of morality and key pillars of political order¹⁸.

Culturally, women's place in Ibesikpo was deeply significant. They served as custodians of oral tradition, preserving community memory through stories, songs, and proverbs that educated, entertained, and transmitted moral values. Women also led cultural festivals, rituals, and ceremonies that fostered social unity and identity. Through these roles, their influence extended beyond the family into the public sphere, shaping the cultural essence of Ibesikpo society. As cultural custodians, they ensured that the ideals of unity, respect, and collective responsibility remained vital to the community's survival.

Spiritually, women's place was elevated through sacred roles as priestesses, diviners, and healers. These positions gave them direct influence over fertility, health, and communal welfare. They were often consulted before major decisions, as they were believed to mediate between the people and ancestral forces. Their ability to offer sacrifices, interpret signs, and heal made them vital to maintaining both physical and spiritual balance. Thus, women's place in religion was not marginal but authoritative, uniting material survival with spiritual wellbeing¹⁹.

Women's place in pre-colonial Ibesikpo society was not marginal but indispensable. They were active agents whose roles encompassed economic production, governance, cultural preservation, and spiritual leadership. Their presence influenced every aspect of community life, ensuring that values and resources reflected collective responsibility. To overlook this is to present an incomplete history, while recognizing it offers a fuller understanding of how Ibesikpo endured and prospered across generations.

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CHAPTER THREE

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL IBESIKPO

The socio-economic history of pre-colonial Ibesikpo cannot be understood without recognizing the central role of women, who were the true engines of production, trade, and survival. Far from being confined to domestic duties, they actively shaped the economic rhythms that sustained the community. Their work complemented that of men, creating a balance that enabled society to prosper. Women farmed, processed produce, traded, and ran cottage industries, providing the foundation on which political and cultural life depended¹. To study Ibesikpo's pre-colonial development, therefore, is to acknowledge women as indispensable agents of its transformation.

Agriculture was the foundation of Ibesikpo's economy, and women's role in it was both visible and indispensable. As a largely agrarian society, farmlands provided food and surpluses for trade. Women cleared fields, planted yams, cassava, cocoyam, and maize, and handled harvesting and processing. Their knowledge of soil fertility, planting cycles, and preservation methods ensured food security and continuity. Equally vital was their role in palm oil and kernel processing—laborious but profitable activities that connected Ibesikpo to regional trade. Through tireless

agricultural work, women not only sustained their families but also generated the wealth that supported the wider community².

The arena of trade and marketing further showcased the resourcefulness and organizational skill of women in Ibesikpo. Markets were spaces of vibrant activity, managed largely by women, who ensured stability and fairness in economic transactions. These markets were not only commercial sites but social institutions, where women formed associations that established rules of trade and resolved disputes. Importantly, women's trading activities created inter-communal networks that tied Ibesikpo to neighboring Ibibio clans and even to more distant markets. Through these connections, women facilitated the exchange of goods such as foodstuffs, palm produce, textiles, and handicrafts, thereby enhancing the economic stature of their community and strengthening its bonds with the wider Ibibio nation³.

Cottage industries and small-scale crafts also provided another avenue through which women expressed their socio-economic ingenuity. Women were skilled in producing mats, pottery, weaving textiles, and fashioning domestic tools, all of which held both practical and commercial value. These products supplied household needs but also provided additional income when sold in markets. In this way, women's economic activity extended far beyond personal survival to serve the collective good of the community. Their crafts were interwoven with cultural practices, as items produced often carried symbolic meanings and reinforced

traditions, thereby linking the economic and cultural spheres in a way that highlighted the holistic role of women in Ibesikpo society.

Taken together, these diverse contributions demonstrate that the socio-economic life of pre-colonial Ibesikpo was fundamentally dependent upon women's labor, creativity, and organization. Agriculture, trade, and crafts were not peripheral activities but central to the survival and advancement of the community. Women's involvement in these domains provided stability in times of scarcity, prosperity in times of abundance, and resilience in the face of external disruptions. Their socio-economic roles were dynamic, constantly adapting to the needs of the community and opportunities presented by inter-communal exchange. Any historical account of Ibesikpo's development must therefore place women at the heart of analysis, for they were not passive participants but active architects of communal life⁴.

Women in Agriculture and Food Production

Agriculture was the foundation of pre-colonial Ibesikpo's economy, and women stood at the center of this foundation. Their labor on the land was not confined to the margins but lay at the heart of food production and the community's survival. Farming in Ibesikpo was a collective enterprise in which women worked alongside men, but their contributions were often greater in scale and consistency, particularly in the cultivation of staple crops that sustained daily life. They cultivated yam, cassava, maize, cocoyam, and vegetables, using indigenous farming knowledge

passed down orally from generation to generation. These skills reflected not only practical experience but also a form of scientific expertise embedded in tradition, making women indispensable actors in the agricultural economy of Ibesikpo⁵.

In addition to food cultivation, women played a central role in crop processing, which was essential in converting raw produce into edible and tradable forms. Cassava, for instance, required careful peeling, soaking, fermenting, and grinding before it could be turned into garri, fufu, or flour. These processes were time-consuming and labor-intensive, yet women carried them out with skill and efficiency, ensuring that families were supplied with food for both immediate consumption and storage. Palm oil production, another area dominated by women, provided an economic lifeline that linked Ibesikpo to wider trade networks. Palm produce was not only a staple in the local diet but also a valuable commodity for inter-communal and regional trade, giving women a strategic role in expanding the economic reach of Ibesikpo beyond its immediate borders⁶.

The agricultural responsibilities of women were not limited to their own households; they also supported the collective welfare of the community. Farming was frequently organized in cooperative labor groups, where women worked together to cultivate each other's farms in rotation. Such cooperative labor also strengthened social bonds among women, as they used these gatherings to exchange news, resolve disputes, and pass down knowledge to younger generations. The

cooperative spirit embedded in women's agricultural work demonstrates that farming was not only an economic pursuit but also a social institution that reinforced community cohesion and collective responsibility⁷.

The wealth generated through women's agricultural labor extended far beyond the immediate supply of food. Surpluses from farming were sold in local markets, providing women with income that enhanced their financial independence and allowed them to contribute to household expenses and community projects. In this way, agriculture provided a pathway for women to exercise economic autonomy and demonstrate their capacity as breadwinners and benefactors. Their agricultural contributions thus had both private and public dimensions, strengthening not only family livelihoods but also the economic stability of the broader Ibesikpo community.

The significance of women in agriculture cannot, therefore, be overstated. They were the planters, harvesters, processors, and distributors of the food that sustained life. Their knowledge of crops, soil, and seasonal changes reflected centuries of accumulated wisdom, while their cooperative labor practices underscored their central role in building social solidarity. Through their agricultural productivity, women ensured not only the survival of families but also the economic resilience of the entire community. Farming in pre-colonial Ibesikpo was thus not simply a means of survival; it was an arena where women expressed their agency,

asserted their indispensability, and laid the foundation for the economic and social strength of their society.

Women in Trade and Market Organization

While agriculture formed the bedrock of subsistence and survival in pre-colonial Ibesikpo, trade and marketing offered women an opportunity to transform that subsistence economy into systems of prosperity, wealth, and extended social networks. The market was not simply a place of buying and selling; it was a central institution in which women exercised visibility, authority, and independence. Trade in Ibesikpo was a sphere almost entirely dominated and regulated by women. As such, the market became one of the most important avenues through which women carved out their own space of influence and autonomy, ensuring that their voices were consistently heard in both the economic and social life of the community⁸.

The sophistication of Ibesikpo's market organization reflected the capacity of women to transform collective activities into structured systems of governance. Women did not merely gather to sell goods; they formed powerful associations that functioned as regulators, protectors, and leaders of the trade system. These associations established and enforced price stability and intervened in disputes among traders. Market leadership often fell to women of seniority or demonstrated ability, who gained authority not only within the trading space but in broader communal affairs. In many cases, the marketplace thus operated as an extension of

women's political organization, a place where decisions reached by associations influenced village harmony, social order, and even governance⁹.

Ibesikpo women also expanded the reach of their trade beyond the local boundaries of their villages, engaging actively in inter-communal and regional trade. They carried agricultural surpluses, particularly palm produce, vegetables, and other farm goods, to neighboring Ibibio towns and further afield, where they exchanged them for items not produced locally such as salt, fish, textiles, and metal products. In doing so, they served as the primary agents of external relations, creating networks of exchange that not only enriched Ibesikpo materially but also politically. A successful trader often rose to prominence not only because of her wealth but also because of her ability to represent her community effectively in the wider networks of exchange¹⁰.

The role of women traders extended further into the realm of social welfare and cultural reinforcement. Profits generated from the markets were often reinvested into the life of the community, funding religious ceremonies, sponsoring festivals, and providing aid for individuals and families in times of difficulty. Through these philanthropic activities, women consolidated their moral authority, gaining a respected voice in decision-making processes. In many cases, such women became advisers, mediators, and even pressure voices in informal political decisions, using their wealth and social networks to influence outcomes in the larger community.

Equally important was the symbolic role of the market as a cultural and political hub. Market days were not simply about trade but were central events in the social calendar, attracting people from different families, villages, and neighboring communities. News circulated, disputes were settled, and alliances were created. The vibrancy of Ibesikpo markets was therefore a reflection of women's ability to integrate economic activity with cultural, political, and social responsibilities, turning trade into a multi-dimensional institution rather than a narrow commercial one.

Taken together, the trade and marketing activities of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo illustrate their immense ability to turn economic participation into a foundation of authority and leadership. They transformed the products of agriculture into wealth, expanded communal horizons through regional trade, and established themselves as custodians of fair trade and moral order. Their dominance in the marketplace not only consolidated women's roles as wealth creators but also cemented their influence in shaping the very structure of their community's economic, social, and political life. To ignore the marketplace is therefore to ignore one of the most important platforms through which women defined their power, their independence, and their indispensable place in the pre-colonial history of Ibesikpo.

Crafts, Industries, and Economic Innovations of Women

Beyond agriculture and trade, women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo played a central role in crafts, industries, and various economic innovations that were critical to both household survival and community prosperity. These activities were not seen as secondary pursuits but as highly respected enterprises that sustained livelihoods, generated wealth, and strengthened social bonds within the community. Their crafts also carried cultural significance, reflecting communal values, traditions, and aesthetics. By excelling in crafts and local industries, women were not only economic contributors but also custodians of indigenous knowledge, transmitters of cultural identity, and innovators in adapting their environment to meet both material and social needs¹¹.

One of the most important crafts practiced by Ibesikpo women was pottery. This craft, often passed down from mother to daughter, required specialized knowledge of the local environment identifying the right clay, preparing it, shaping vessels with skillful hands, and using controlled firing techniques to produce durable products. The pots they made were indispensable to everyday life, serving purposes such as cooking, storing water, preserving grains, and brewing palm wine. Beyond their utilitarian function, pottery carried ritual and symbolic importance. The production and sale of pottery also had significant economic implications. Through

pottery, women merged creativity with enterprise, producing items that were simultaneously practical, culturally symbolic, and economically profitable¹².

Textile work and fabric dyeing represented another sphere where Ibesikpo women demonstrated innovation. While weaving was not as advanced among the Ibibio as in Yoruba society, women in Ibesikpo played an important role in spinning threads, dyeing fabrics, and producing cloths with distinctive patterns. Indigo dyeing in particular was highly valued, requiring not only technical skill but also an understanding of plants, dyes, and the intricate processes needed to achieve deep, lasting colors. These textiles were also exchanged in markets and used as items of prestige, reinforcing the status of families and individuals. Their textile production served as an important marker of social identity, creativity, and economic empowerment within Ibesikpo society¹³.

Equally significant were women's roles in processing agricultural products, which represented one of the most vital innovations in Ibesikpo's economic system. Women took raw produce from the farms and transformed them into durable, consumable, and tradable items, thereby extending the value chain of agricultural production. Palm oil and palm kernels, for instance, were extracted through labor-intensive processes requiring knowledge of tools, fire, and preservation methods. By creating products that could endure time and distance, women ensured household survival, contributed to trade, and expanded the wealth base of their community.

Therefore, the crafts, industries, and economic innovations of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo reveal their immense contribution to the growth and survival of the society. They were not passive agents but active shapers of both economic and cultural landscapes. Their pottery provided utility and ritual significance, their textile and dyeing work enhanced cultural prestige and economic trade. Through these activities, women blended tradition with innovation, ensuring that knowledge was preserved across generations while also adapting practices to meet changing needs. Their contributions to crafts and industries thus positioned them at the heart of Ibesikpo's socio-economic development and underscored the indispensable role they played in shaping the material and cultural prosperity of the community.

Women's Cooperative Systems and Communal Support

A defining feature of pre-colonial Ibesikpo society was the cooperative systems developed and sustained by women, which served as both economic strategies and mechanisms of social support. These associations, deeply rooted in indigenous traditions of collective responsibility, provided women with the means to pool resources, share labor, and support one another in times of hardship. They embodied the communal ethos of Ibesikpo society, where survival and progress depended not only on individual effort but on the strength of collective networks. Through these systems, women created safety nets for their households, strengthened

their economic bargaining power, and ensured that no member of the community was left entirely vulnerable¹⁴.

One of the most important forms of cooperation was the labor-sharing groups, where women worked collectively on farms, particularly during planting and harvesting seasons. Known in various Ibibio dialects as ‘esop ‘ or ‘afia work,’ these groups allowed women to rotate labor among themselves so that each household could meet its agricultural demands without being overburdened. Such arrangements not only reduced the strain of manual work but also fostered solidarity, companionship, and social cohesion. This practice demonstrated the women’s ingenuity in combining productivity with social bonding, ensuring that farm work was both efficient and emotionally sustaining¹⁵.

In addition to farm labor cooperatives, women established savings groups and rotating credit systems that played a crucial role in sustaining household economies. These systems, often referred to as esusu or local equivalents, involved members contributing a fixed amount of money or produce into a collective pool, which was then rotated among participants in turn. Such arrangements enabled women to accumulate capital for major expenses such as marriages, funerals, festivals, or investment in trade. By participating in esusu groups, women exercised financial agency, managed collective wealth, and created micro-economic systems that operated parallel to and often more effectively than formal institutions¹⁶.

Communal support extended beyond the economic to encompass social welfare and mutual aid. Women collectively supported widows, orphans, and the less privileged, ensuring that no family was left without care. These acts of solidarity were not viewed as charity but as obligations rooted in cultural norms of reciprocity and shared humanity. The moral authority women wielded in these cooperative roles elevated their status within society, making them indispensable not only as economic actors but as custodians of communal welfare and cohesion.

Thus, women's cooperative systems in pre-colonial Ibesikpo were central to the survival and prosperity of the community. They transformed individual effort into collective strength, ensured the equitable distribution of resources, and upheld the values of solidarity, trust, and mutual responsibility. These systems reveal the depth of women's organizational skills and their moral leadership, all of which made them vital agents of communal development in pre-colonial Ibesikpo.

Impact of Women's Economic Roles on Community Development

The economic contributions of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo went far beyond subsistence or household maintenance; they served as the very foundation upon which the community's growth and stability rested. Agriculture, trade, crafts, and cooperative organizations created by women were all crucial engines of wealth creation and distribution. Women did not operate in isolation but functioned within well-structured economic and social systems. By constantly circulating resources and

reinvesting profits in collective enterprises, they transformed individual labor into shared prosperity. This ability to merge personal initiative with communal responsibility meant that women's economic agency became a driving force of community development, making them indispensable to the socio-economic fabric of pre-colonial Ibesikpo¹⁷.

One of the most striking aspects of this economic agency was women's capacity to generate surplus from their agricultural and trading ventures, which they then redirected into projects that benefitted the wider society. Farm surpluses, for instance, were not merely consumed within households but were used to sustain elaborate festivals, community feasts, and religious ceremonies that brought entire villages together. By financing these cultural and infrastructural developments, women ensured that their economic contributions were not invisible but visibly inscribed into the collective life of the people. These investments reinforced both the cultural identity and the social cohesion of Ibesikpo, illustrating that economic productivity was never an isolated pursuit but one intricately bound to the broader aims of communal welfare and spiritual balance¹⁸.

Women's influence was also keenly felt in the sphere of social welfare, where their cooperative organizations functioned as informal safety nets. Through associations and collective support systems, women provided assistance to widows, orphans, and the less privileged, thereby ensuring that vulnerable groups were not

abandoned in times of crisis. This redistribution of resources fostered resilience and a strong sense of solidarity, allowing the society to withstand challenges such as famine, epidemics, or conflicts. In essence, these cooperatives acted as proto-welfare systems that stabilized society at large, reflecting a distinctly indigenous model of development rooted in reciprocity and social justice. Women's economic organizations thus performed functions that paralleled formal institutions, ensuring not only material survival but also the moral cohesion of the community¹⁹.

Beyond material contributions, women's economic activities carried profound symbolic weight as well. The wealth and influence generated by their agricultural and commercial endeavors granted them visibility and authority in communal decision-making processes. This authority extended beyond the confines of markets and farms, allowing them to play key roles in shaping public opinion, mediating disputes, and guiding community priorities. Their economic leadership therefore provided a template of participatory development, one that ensured progress was holistic, sustainable, and anchored in shared values.

Ultimately, the impact of women's economic roles on community development in pre-colonial Ibesikpo was both practical and transformative. They sustained households through farming, expanded wealth through trade, innovated in crafts, and strengthened social harmony through cooperative welfare systems. Their productivity shaped cultural festivals, sustained spiritual institutions, and reinforced

political structures, making them central to community life. To study its development without acknowledging women's roles is to present an incomplete history, for women were not just contributors but true architects of progress.

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CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL IBESIKPO

The pre-colonial society of Ibesikpo, like that of the wider Ibibio, was a community bound together by kinship, religion, and tradition, yet within this fabric both men and women contributed in unique and complementary ways to the survival and progress of their people. While political leadership in the formal sense was often associated with men, women were far from excluded from the exercise of power. They operated through established channels such as women's assemblies, lineage groups, and powerful market networks, which gave them a collective voice in the affairs of the land. This shows that the political life of Ibesikpo was not the exclusive domain of men but was instead shaped by a shared responsibility in which women, though sometimes indirect in approach, played decisive roles in maintaining justice, peace, and communal balance¹.

At the same time, women were the lifeblood of cultural life in pre-colonial Ibesikpo. They were entrusted with the preservation of customs, the teaching of moral values, and the transmission of traditions that defined the community's identity. From childhood, every individual was socialized largely through the influence of women, who taught not only the practical skills of farming, trading, and household management but also the ethical codes of respect, discipline, and

communal responsibility. Through stories, proverbs, songs, and rituals, women instilled in the younger generation a strong sense of belonging to their lineage and village. These cultural activities were not mere entertainment; they were vital instruments of social cohesion, and women, as the main custodians of such traditions, ensured their continuity across generations².

When viewed together, the political and cultural roles of women in Ibesikpo reveal a society that, though often described as patriarchal, actually relied on a system of complementary gender relations. Men and women alike were guardians of order, each with responsibilities that balanced and reinforced the other. This interdependence highlights that women were not passive observers of history but active makers of it, exercising visible and invisible powers that shaped the destiny of their people. To fully appreciate the development of Ibesikpo in pre-colonial times, it is therefore necessary to give attention to the ways women influenced politics, safeguarded culture, and ensured the stability of their society. This chapter will thus examine these dimensions under five broad subheadings, tracing how women contributed to traditional political institutions, conflict resolution, spiritual authority, cultural preservation, and the symbolic legacy that their roles left behind³.

Women in Traditional Political Institutions of Ibesikpo

In the traditional society of Ibesikpo, politics was not simply a matter of chiefs, lineage heads, and male elders sitting in councils; it was an all-encompassing system of relationships that bound men and women together in a shared responsibility for the welfare of the community. Although the outward face of political authority appeared to be male, with men serving as heads of families, leaders of age-grades, or spokesmen at village councils, women were never excluded from the mechanisms of governance. They carved out distinct avenues of participation which, though less formal, carried immense weight in the functioning of society. Chief among these were the women's assemblies, sometimes convened at the level of the village or lineage, where women gathered to deliberate on issues of pressing concern. These ranged from questions of morality and child upbringing to the regulation of trade and the resolution of disputes between families. Importantly, these assemblies did not limit themselves to "women's issues" in the narrow sense; whenever decisions of male leaders threatened the peace, wellbeing, or survival of the community, women's assemblies rose to action. These actions served as a moral check on male political authority, ensuring that power was not exercised arbitrarily. Far from being informal or secondary, these assemblies were respected institutions that embodied the collective will of women, a force so significant that no council of men could ignore it without risking disorder and resistance⁴.

The authority of women was also strongly felt within the lineage and family structures, which were the very foundation of Ibesikpo political life. Each lineage traced its ancestry through generations, and at the heart of these lineages were elderly women who possessed unrivalled knowledge of genealogies, customs, and precedents. Their voices were indispensable in deliberations concerning inheritance, land distribution, and marital arrangements, for they were regarded as the custodians of ancestral wisdom and the guardians of family honor. Senior mothers and grandmothers, because of their age and experience, enjoyed moral authority that even the most respected male elders could not dismiss. In some cases, women of exceptional character or spiritual insight were called upon to take part in broader village deliberations, particularly in moments when discord threatened to divide the people. What emerges here is that pre-colonial Ibesikpo governance was not strictly patriarchal but rather operated on a principle of complementarity, in which men held visible offices but women, as the custodians of morality and tradition, ensured that decisions were legitimate, balanced, and consistent with communal values⁵.

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of women's political influence was through the markets, which were not merely centers of economic activity but powerful institutions in their own right. In Ibesikpo, as in much of Ibibio society, markets were organized and dominated by women, who acted not only as traders but also as regulators of commerce, overseers of fairness, and protectors of the economic

wellbeing of their families. The market was a political space where decisions were made collectively about prices, trading days, and acceptable conduct, and those decisions affected the entire community. Through their control of trade, women held a powerful lever of influence over political leaders, for any chief or council that enacted policies detrimental to the people's welfare could be confronted by market women. In this way, women turned their economic strength into a form of political authority, one that compelled male leaders to govern with the interests of the community in mind. The market therefore stood as a living reminder that women's power in Ibesikpo was not hidden in the background but was deeply woven into the very fabric of governance⁶.

The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

In pre-colonial Ibesikpo society, the role of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding was both strategic and indispensable. Far from being passive observers in times of tension, women were central actors whose authority stemmed from their moral standing, their role as mothers and wives, and their influence within social institutions. Disputes were inevitable in any human society—ranging from quarrels within families to disagreements between villages—but in Ibesikpo, women had evolved a sophisticated system of intervention that ensured disputes did not escalate unnecessarily into violence. Their involvement was not merely an auxiliary role; it was an integral part of the political and cultural fabric of the community⁷.

The authority of women in peace building was also expressed through formal institutions such as the mbobo society and the collective power of elderly women's councils, who were respected as custodians of wisdom. These institutions often acted as arbiters when disputes arose, particularly in sensitive cases involving marriage, inheritance, or accusations of witchcraft. Women understood that the disruption of harmony could ripple through the entire community, destabilizing trade, agriculture, and social life, and so they approached conflict with the dual responsibility of fairness and compassion. Elders often emphasized that women had a 'cooling effect' in disputes, as they were regarded as mothers to all and thus had a natural capacity to soften hearts. These cultural practices placed women not only at the heart of the peace process but also as living symbols of harmony within Ibesikpo society⁸.

In situations of inter-village tension or looming warfare, women often organized collective protests, ritual demonstrations, or strategic acts of non-cooperation that compelled men to reconsider violent choices. For example, through public singing, drumming, and dance, women could shame warriors into withdrawing from unnecessary battles or remind them of the devastating consequences of bloodshed. This was not an act of chaos but a socially sanctioned method of restoring order, for the shame inflicted carried the weight of the community's disapproval. By these means, women acted as guardians of social

morality, reinforcing that peace was not a sign of weakness but a communal value that guaranteed prosperity⁹.

Furthermore, women's peacebuilding roles extended beyond immediate conflict mediation to long-term reconciliation and the cultivation of unity. Once peace was brokered, women were responsible for restoring trust between families through exchanges of food, shared rituals, and intermarriage arrangements that reinforced bonds of kinship. Their songs and oral traditions also preserved the memory of past conflicts, ensuring that future generations would learn from them and avoid repeating destructive mistakes. Their ability to weave reconciliation into everyday life underscored the fact that peace was not simply the absence of war but the active presence of harmony, justice, and communal solidarity¹⁰.

Religious and Spiritual Authority of Women

In pre-colonial Ibesikpo society, religion was not just a matter of personal belief but the very foundation upon which community life revolved. The people understood the world as one deeply shaped by unseen forces, where the gods, spirits, and ancestral powers were believed to influence every aspect of daily survival. Within this framework, women held a prominent position in spiritual matters, serving as custodians of shrines, mediators between the physical and metaphysical realms, and guardians of sacred traditions that regulated society. Far from being excluded from ritual spaces, women were actively engaged as priestesses, diviners,

prophetesses, and keepers of ritual knowledge, a role that earned them profound respect and influence in their communities. This cosmological view conferred on them both reverence and responsibility, making them indispensable in the maintenance of spiritual order and harmony in Ibesikpo society¹¹.

The importance of women in spiritual affairs was most clearly demonstrated in their role as priestesses and diviners, who were entrusted with the responsibility of interpreting the will of the gods and ancestors. In moments of crisis — whether war, famine, epidemic, or political uncertainty — it was often women who were consulted to seek divine guidance. Priestesses officiated sacrifices, led communal rituals, and performed cleansing ceremonies to protect the community from malevolent forces. Women who acted as diviners, often through the use of cowries, kola nuts, or trance states, were deeply respected as channels of supernatural wisdom. These roles also gave women an important voice in decision-making since no major political or economic venture could be undertaken without first consulting the gods through their spiritual intermediaries. In this way, women's religious authority intersected with the political sphere, allowing them to exert influence on matters that extended well beyond the shrines. The role of women as ritual leaders thus demonstrates that spirituality in Ibesikpo was not a marginal domain for women but a central avenue through which they actively shaped the destiny of their people¹².

Equally significant was the role of women in maintaining the ancestral cults, which formed the very backbone of Ibesikpo cultural identity. Women performed daily libations to ancestors, tended sacred groves, and safeguarded ritual objects, ensuring that the vital bond between the living and the dead remained unbroken. In fulfilling these duties, they served as cultural transmitters, instructing younger generations in the proper ways to honor ancestors and preserving continuity in communal belief systems. Beyond ritual responsibilities, many women were renowned as healers, combining spiritual insight with extensive knowledge of herbs, roots, and incantations to treat illnesses believed to arise from spiritual imbalance. These healing roles reinforced their indispensability, offering both physical relief and spiritual reassurance to the community. By integrating religious authority with practical service, women demonstrated a holistic contribution to communal survival, translating spiritual influence into tangible social power. Their voices, far from peripheral, remained central in shaping moral order, cultural continuity, and political legitimacy in pre-colonial Ibesikpo. The religious influence of women thus transcended ritual practice, standing as a foundational pillar of social cohesion and governance¹³.

Cultural Roles of Women in Socialization and Preservation of Customs

In pre-colonial Ibesikpo society, women were entrusted with the vital responsibility of socialization, guiding the transmission of the community's values, norms, and customs to the younger generation. From early childhood, daughters were nurtured under the supervision of mothers, grandmothers, and senior women, who acted as the primary custodians of knowledge in domestic and cultural spheres. In the absence of formal education, learning was predominantly oral and experiential, with women serving as the principal conduits through which cultural continuity was preserved. Girls acquired practical skills essential for daily life—cooking, weaving, trading but equally important were the ethical lessons imparted: respect for elders, loyalty to kin, diligence, and adherence to communal obligations. Through lullabies, folktales, proverbs, and songs performed during moonlight gatherings or collective work, women transmitted histories, moral teachings, and collective memory. This process of education was deliberate and structured, reflecting the profound understanding women had of their role in shaping identity and sustaining social cohesion. By molding the values, behavior, and knowledge of children, women laid the moral and cultural foundations upon which Ibesikpo society continued to thrive across generations¹⁴.

The role of women in cultural preservation extended beyond the household to the wider community, particularly through their involvement in festivals, rituals, and

ceremonies that reinforced social cohesion. Women were active participants and sometimes leaders in organizing traditional dances, initiation rites, and seasonal festivals celebrating fertility, harvests, and ancestral reverence. Initiation ceremonies for young girls into womanhood, for example, were often supervised by older women, who taught the responsibilities of marriage, the virtues of chastity, and the sacredness of fertility. These rites reinforced the position of women as custodians of the values that bound society together. By preparing and transmitting ritual knowledge, women preserved customs defining Ibesikpo identity. Equally important, they used artistic expressions body adornment, folk songs, and storytelling to reinforce societal expectations and collective memory. These cultural activities, though sometimes undervalued in historical accounts, served as a powerful medium of resistance against cultural erosion, safeguarding indigenous traditions from being supplanted or forgotten. In this sense, women did not simply pass down customs passively but actively curated and reshaped them, ensuring their relevance across generations¹⁵.

Moreover, the cultural authority of women manifested in their role as moral guardians of society, acting as interpreters and enforcers of communal standards of behavior. In Ibesikpo, moral order was preserved through both the formal authority of male chiefs and councils and the informal but powerful oversight of women. Elder women, particularly mothers and widows, corrected deviant behavior, instructed

younger wives in expected conduct, and mobilized female groups to censure actions that threatened community stability. Women's associations such as age-grade groups and market unions reinforced moral education by demanding integrity, fairness, and responsibility from their members. Through ridicule, satirical songs, or open rebuke, women exercised a social check on arrogance, corruption, or negligence. In this capacity, women were not merely transmitters of tradition but its protectors, ensuring that customs were upheld and community values remained intact despite external pressures. Thus, the cultural roles of women in Ibesikpo were inseparably tied to their authority in shaping, guarding, and perpetuating moral and social order, making them indispensable to the preservation of identity and cohesion in pre-colonial times¹⁶.

Symbolism, Status, and the Cultural Legacy of Women in Ibesikpo

In the cultural life of pre-colonial Ibesikpo, women were not only active participants in social and economic roles but also embodied a symbolic essence representing the moral, spiritual, and cultural foundation of the community. Traditions, myths, and oral histories elevated them as preservers of life and guardians of morality. Women were depicted as the link between the visible and invisible world, serving as custodians of fertility, family honor, and ancestral continuity. This symbolic positioning reflected the recognition of women's indispensable contribution to the survival and identity of society. The cultural

memory of Ibesikpo consistently presented women as more than individuals they were icons of motherhood, strength, and continuity, shaping how values and customs were transmitted across generations. In this way, the symbolic legacy of women became deeply ingrained in Ibesikpo heritage and cultural expression, enduring even amidst external pressures of colonialism and missionary encroachment¹⁷.

This symbolism was reinforced in practices that placed women at the center of rites of passage, community celebrations, and representations of fertility and prosperity. Festivals and rituals highlighted women as carriers of communal blessings, particularly in agricultural cycles where their nurturing extended to the fertility of the land. Songs, folklore, and proverbs preserved in oral tradition often compared women to rivers that never dry up, trees that provide shade, or the earth itself — sources of nourishment and sustenance. Through these associations, women embodied resilience and continuity, representing the unbroken chain of life. Their elevated status was recognized not only within families but also institutionalized in broader society, as their symbolic roles justified authority in councils, rituals, and the adjudication of moral conduct. Thus, their cultural legacy cannot be divorced from the ideals upon which the social fabric rested, offering guidance and inspiration to younger generations¹⁸.

Furthermore, the cultural legacy of women in Ibesikpo was preserved through their role as storytellers, poets, and keepers of oral history. Women were the memory

of society, ensuring that customs, taboos, and ancestral wisdom were never lost. In evening gatherings, mothers and grandmothers passed down folktales with moral lessons that both entertained and instructed the young in acceptable behavior, communal solidarity, and respect for traditions. The symbolic power of these stories lay in their ability to transmit identity across generations, with women serving as narrators and interpreters of cultural values. In this way, women stood as living archives, linking past and present and preserving the ethos of Ibesikpo against erosion. Their voices carried authority not merely because of age or gender, but because they were seen as natural transmitters of sacred and cultural wisdom — a function that elevated their symbolic status beyond domestic roles into guardianship of tradition¹⁹.

Finally, the enduring cultural legacy of women in Ibesikpo is seen in how their symbolic roles became part of the collective memory. Shrines, myths, and songs commemorated their deeds, embedding their contributions into the community's identity. Even today, echoes persist in cultural ceremonies, clan histories, and respect for maternal authority. This continuity shows that women's status was not merely symbolic but expressed through tangible cultural markers of authority, identity, and legitimacy. Their influence combined social, spiritual, and historical dimensions, making them timeless figures whose presence preserved Ibesikpo's identity across generations²⁰.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This research on the role of women in the socio-economic and political development of pre-colonial Ibesikpo shows that women were far more than passive figures; they were dynamic agents shaping the economy, politics, religion, and culture of their people. In the absence of modern economic systems, women formed the foundation of subsistence and trade, ensuring not only household survival but also community prosperity. They cultivated food crops, processed agricultural produce, and engaged in local and regional markets, guaranteeing food security and facilitating exchange networks that connected Ibesikpo to the wider Ibibio hinterland. Through market control, they wielded both economic and political influence, as collective boycotts or protests could paralyze the economy and compel male leaders to respond. This demonstrates that women were indispensable engines of production, distribution, and economic resilience, without which society could neither prosper nor sustain itself¹.

Beyond the economy, women were prominent in the political life of Ibesikpo. Although formal offices were largely male-dominated, authority was never exclusively patriarchal but functioned through complementary gender participation. Women's assemblies, lineage gatherings, and associations allowed them to influence community affairs. Through symbolic protests, withdrawal from duties, or sanctions

like “sitting on a man,” they checked male leaders’ power. In conflict resolution, women often acted first as mediators, using moral authority, persuasion, ritual, and symbolism to restore peace where male elders’ influence fell short. Thus, women were active participants in maintaining justice, harmony, and balance within Ibesikpo society².

Equally significant was the religious and spiritual authority of women. In a society guided by divine and ancestral forces, women served as priestesses, diviners, healers, and custodians of sacred groves. Regarded as spiritual mediators with unique access to the divine, their status was linked to fertility and continuity of life. Their rituals and pronouncements influenced politics, as no major decision on war, famine, or community crises occurred without consulting them. This fusion of religion and governance gave women an indispensable voice in shaping the community’s destiny. Their healing roles, combining herbal knowledge and spiritual insight, further reinforced their guardianship of both physical wellbeing and spiritual harmony³.

Culturally, women were custodians and transmitters of community identity. They socialized the young in values of respect, discipline, and communal responsibility, supervised initiation rites, organized festivals, and used storytelling, song, and dance to preserve collective memory and moral codes. Elder women acted as moral guardians, sanctioning deviance and enforcing conformity. Symbolically celebrated as mothers, nurturers, and preservers of life, women’s status was

reinforced in proverbs, myths, and oral traditions, translating their symbolic weight into tangible cultural authority that bound the community together⁴.

Taken together, these findings show that pre-colonial Ibesikpo was neither a society of male monopoly nor one in which women were voiceless, but a society based on complementarity, where men's and women's contributions balanced and reinforced one another. Ignoring women's roles in earlier accounts distorts the past, overlooking that they were active makers of history. Their economic labor sustained livelihoods, political interventions preserved justice, spiritual roles upheld divine order, and cultural authority ensured continuity of identity. The story of Ibesikpo is therefore incomplete without recognizing women's contributions, for they were co-builders of the community's survival, progress, and legacy⁵.

Finally, the broader implication of this study is that the history of Ibesikpo offers lessons for contemporary society. Recovering the agency and influence of women in pre-colonial times challenges assumptions that confine women to marginal roles and highlights a historical precedent of gender complementarity. The resilience, leadership, and creativity of Ibesikpo women show that gender equality is not a modern invention but a deeply rooted reality in African societies. Recognizing this past enriches our understanding of history and underscores the need to expand women's roles in politics, economy, and culture today. Their legacy in pre-colonial

Ibesikpo remains both a historical truth and a call to create a future grounded in balance, justice, and inclusivity⁶.

Analysis of Women's Contributions in Retrospect

A retrospective look at the role of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo reveals that they were central to the survival and progress of the society. Their influence spanned political, economic, religious, and cultural spheres, making them active participants whose labor, wisdom, and authority shaped the community at every level. Through their contributions, governance was balanced, trade thrived, spirituality was preserved, and customs were transmitted across generations. To understand Ibesikpo's history without acknowledging these multifaceted roles would be to present an incomplete picture, for the society depended as much on the leadership and resilience of women as on men⁷.

One of the clearest dimensions of this contribution is seen in the economic sphere, where women were the backbone of agriculture, food processing, and trade. Farming was often shared between men and women, yet women bore primary responsibility for ensuring that surplus produce reached the markets. These markets were more than centers of commerce; they were powerful institutions governed by women, who controlled prices, regulated trade, and ensured fairness. Their economic authority translated into political influence, as they could suspend trade, boycott markets, or withhold food when male leaders made decisions that threatened

communal wellbeing. In this way, women leveraged their economic position to shape political outcomes, ensuring accountability and responsiveness. This capacity to combine productivity with political leverage underscores the indispensable role of women in sustaining Ibesikpo's prosperity and stability⁸.

Equally important was women's role in governance and conflict resolution. Although men often held visible titles as chiefs, elders, or council heads, women were never excluded from political life. Through assemblies, lineage groups, and age-grade associations, they deliberated on issues of morality, trade, and community welfare. In disputes, women acted as mediators, drawing on their maternal authority to restore peace between conflicting parties. Their involvement was vital, for a fractured community threatened both present wellbeing and the security of future generations. In times of political crisis, women could protest through song, ridicule, or ritual demonstrations, effectively compelling men to act justly. These actions show that political order in pre-colonial Ibesikpo was never exclusively male but relied on women's balancing influence, whose moral authority and collective action sustained communal harmony⁹.

The religious and spiritual authority of women further reinforced their central role in society. As priestesses, diviners, and custodians of shrines, they mediated between the human and spiritual realms. In times of famine, epidemic, or warfare, women were often consulted for divine guidance, and their pronouncements

influenced the decisions of leaders and communities. Their healing roles added a practical dimension, combining spiritual rituals with herbal knowledge to restore health and protect against unseen forces. Through these functions, women shaped not only spiritual life but also political and economic decision-making, since no major undertaking could proceed without divine approval. Their position as custodians of ritual and ancestral bonds shows that spirituality in Ibesikpo was never a male monopoly, but a shared domain where women's contributions were decisive and indispensable¹⁰.

Finally, the cultural and symbolic legacy of women stands out as one of their most enduring contributions. They were primary agents of socialization, teaching children the customs, stories, and values that shaped communal identity. Through songs, proverbs, folktales, and moonlight storytelling, women transmitted the collective memory of the people across generations. Their symbolic status as mothers and nurturers elevated them as cultural icons, often portrayed as embodiments of fertility, continuity, and resilience. This authority reinforced their practical roles, ensuring their position in society was both recognized and celebrated. Shrines, myths, and oral histories immortalized the deeds of exceptional women, embedding their influence into the community's identity. Women, therefore, were not only active participants in history but also guardians of heritage, whose legacies defined the character of Ibesikpo society.

In retrospect, these diverse contributions show that women were not passive observers but active shapers of pre-colonial Ibesikpo. They combined economic strength with political authority, spiritual leadership with cultural guardianship, leaving their mark on every aspect of communal life. Gender relations were based on complementarity rather than exclusion, with women and men working together to maintain order, prosperity, and identity. To ignore women in Ibesikpo's history is to overlook the very foundations of its survival, for they were central to its political balance, cultural resilience, and historical continuity.

Implications for Contemporary Society

A careful reflection on the history of women in pre-colonial Ibesikpo shows that their contributions were not marginal but central to the survival of their society, and this realization carries profound relevance today. The political, cultural, religious, and economic authority exercised by women proves that they were not passive figures but active shapers of their communities. In an age when governance remains male-dominated, the example of Ibesikpo women reminds us that inclusivity and balance in leadership are indigenous African values, not foreign imports. Their assemblies, market unions, and lineage influence provided accountability that complemented and often corrected male authority. For contemporary Nigeria, where corruption and gender inequality persist, these examples show that inclusive

governance ensures justice and stability. When women lead, governance becomes humane and accountable; when silenced, society risks imbalance and decline¹¹.

Equally significant are the cultural implications of women's roles, especially in safeguarding identity and transmitting values across generations. In pre-colonial Ibesikpo, women ensured that children were taught respect, discipline, and loyalty through stories, songs, and rituals. They served as living archives of communal memory, preserving the traditions that defined their people. In today's era of globalization, this historical role highlights the urgent need to empower women as custodians of cultural heritage. Folklore, proverbs, and oral history should be valued as legitimate educational tools that enrich civic learning and reinforce communal ethics. By integrating women's traditional teaching roles into modern education, society not only preserves its heritage but also builds a moral framework for the future showing that cultural preservation is not mere nostalgia but a path to ethical survival¹².

Finally, the legacy of women as peacebuilders in pre-colonial Ibesikpo carries direct relevance to Nigeria's present-day struggles with conflict and disunity. Whether in local disputes, inter-village tensions, or crises of morality, women historically acted as mediators, drawing on their maternal authority and moral standing to prevent violence and restore harmony. Their use of symbolic acts, such as offering palm fronds, withdrawing from communal obligations, or shaming

wrongdoers through collective protest, demonstrated that peace was not just the absence of war but the presence of justice and reconciliation. In modern Nigeria, where ethnic clashes, political unrest, and religious conflicts continue to destabilize communities, these indigenous strategies of women offer alternative models of peacebuilding that are deeply rooted in cultural practice. Women's capacity to approach disputes with empathy, to appeal to the conscience of warring groups, and to rebuild relationships after reconciliation remains a powerful but underutilized resource. Institutionalizing these principles by giving women greater roles in local peace committees, national reconciliation efforts, and conflict mediation frameworks would not only honor their historical legacy but also provide more sustainable solutions to Nigeria's contemporary challenges. In this way, the past becomes a guide for the present, showing that women are not supplementary actors in peacebuilding but indispensable guarantors of justice and harmony, without whom no society can thrive¹³.

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Edidem James Ekpenyong	86	HRM. Paramount Ruler, Ibesikpo Asuntan L.G.A., Akwa Ibom State	Akpa Utung	26th December, 2024
Obong Awan Nsidibe Etuk	69	Wife of Clan Head, Ibesikpo-Asuntan L.G.A	Nung-Udoe	27th December, 2024
Princess Joseph Bassey	60	First Lady Afaha, Ikot Obio Nkan	Afaha Ibesikpo	28th December, 2024

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