



The Changing Roles: An Examination on the Social Status and Roles of Ebira Women of Kogi State

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Abstract		Original Research Article
<p>Traditionally, Ebira women played significant roles in their society, but their social status and roles have undergone changes over time. These changes have brought a shift from primarily domestic, agricultural and relegating roles to increased participation in education, entrepreneurship, and politics among others. This study explores the evolving social status and roles of Ebira women from traditional to contemporary times. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining historical research and interviews the study sheds light on the factors that have shaped the roles of women and how these roles have evolved over time. The changing roles of Ebira women reflect the relationship between tradition, modernization, and gender dynamics.</p> <p>Despite the progress, Ebira women still face challenges like patriarchal norms, limited access to resources, and cultural preservation and gender role perceptions. Given these, the study examines and recommends that empowerment programmes and policy reforms can be put in place to help these women realise their full potentials.</p> <p>Keywords: Ebira Women, Social Status, Historical Research, Changing Roles, Kogi State</p>		

INTRODUCTION

In traditional setting women were believed to be more relevant in the home than in the larger society. Generally, the obstacles to women's recognition are related to social construct of patriarchy and masculinity as well as gender sensibility. The social structure of patriarchy in which men dominated, oppressed and exploited women, promoted the idea that men are in every way superior to women. In most cases, women are likely to engage in low-productive activities and to work in the informal sector, with less mobility to the formal sector than men. For a long time, the general belief is that the role of women starts and ends with running of the home and nothing more. In the words of Ani, women constitute the group at the bottom of the ladder in many developing countries, especially in Africa, in respect to employment, poverty, education, training and status¹

There is now a growing trend of the recognition of women as more efficient distributors of goods and services within the households. Today, women influence several parties and groups in development process. Women now participate in the labour force such that majority of these women work as paid labour in previously male-dominated jobs especially in the field of management². Social and religious barriers in the roles and status of women are giving way for new ideas and new values and these women are increasingly taking giant steps in their recognition both in the formal and informal sectors.

The Traditional Status of Ebira Women

The Ebira women discussed in this paper is the Ebira Tao women predominant in the Central Senatorial district of Kogi

¹ O. A. Ani 2004 *Women in Agricultural and Rural Development*, Maiduguri: Quila

²A. Kroska 2004 "Divisions of Domestic Work: Revising and Expanding the Theoretical Explanations" in *Journal of Family* 25.7:900-932

State. A typical Ebira woman is described as being charismatic, hardworking and humble who equally cares for her husband, children and her husband's extended family. The Ebira woman like in most African setting is expected to be humble and show respect for her husband³.

The traditional status of women in Ebiraland was greatly influenced by the patriarchal nature of the society. This patriarchal setting relegated the Ebira women to the background and shut them out of societal affairs. According to Sani, a typical Ebira man is inherently individualistic who loves to build his own little empire or mushroom of little republics within a given polity⁴ Based on Sani's submission, it is evident that there is a connection between the natural state of mind of a typical traditional Ebira man and the socio-cultural construct of patriarchy.

In these African traditional societies, there are observed role differentiations which are based on gender or sex⁵. This goes in line with Aluko's view that women "must occupy a subservient position in the order of things in the male dominated society"⁶. By implication, the patriarchal setting automatically gives men social advantage above women in all ramifications. Women are only seen as mere human beings who lack any mental or intellectual capacity to contribute meaningfully to social matters. They cannot take any initiative without the approval of men. They are expected to raise children, provide emotional support to their husbands and submit to them.

Oladosu holds the view that this traditional status of women, is only an unwanted exploitation of culture and religion which views women as biological objects who produce and nurture children and serve their husbands. This has undermined the social status of women⁷. This conclusion supports the general notion that men are superior to women who play second fiddle in the community.

Adetunji, as cited by Familusi observes that cultural and gender problem, which African women have been facing dates back to their birth because in many homes the birth of a female child does not receive as much enthusiasm as that of a male. In his observation, when somebody is treated with inferiority right from birth, it may be difficult for such a person not to be perpetually caught in the web of such a treatment⁸. From the views above, the personality and traits of individuals depict how they have been treated or seen in the society in various situations. Some of these women have lost self-esteem in the process and decided to stick to the status quo. Similarly, it is often said that male children are very special and more important to the family than female children and also that the females are other people's properties⁹. This accounts for why some families end up having many children in a quest to having a male child. Many men mount pressure on their wives in order to have more children because of the desire for a male child. So having male children becomes an achievement through which she can raise her head high and feel a real sense of success and fulfilment. There is an age-long importance placed on the male child. It is believed that they tend to lend more hands to the parents as far as general support is concerned and they are also seen as people that will carry on the family name and prestige. There have been cases of men divorcing or punishing their wives when she cannot give birth to a male child.

According to Sani, most of the womenfolk who were generally hardworking were let loose by their poverty-stricken husbands to fend for themselves and host of children they have. Something he termed a classical example of gross abuse of the marriage institution¹⁰. This observation projects the social status of most women in the past and shows that they do not have a say in acts and decisions of their husbands regardless of how they are being treated.

Olorunbunmi giving his view on the relegating status of women, observes that these status was born out of biological determinism, an idea that there is something genetically inherent in the male species that makes them the naturally dominant sex¹¹. From the

³ H. A. Sani 1993 *The Sociology of the Ebira Tao People of Nigeria* Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press

⁴H. A. Sani 1993 *The Sociology of the Ebira Tao People of Nigeria* Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press

⁵I. E Nwosu 2012, "Gender Role Perceptions and the Changing Roles of Women in Nigeria" *Journal of Agricultural and Rural Development*. 15.3:1240-1246,

⁶ T. Aluko 2008 "The Status of women in the Bible: A Re-Interpretation in Contemporary African Perspective", in Uma: Journal of Philosophy and Religious studies 3.2:12-25

⁷ A. O. Oladosu, 2012 "African Traditional and Christian Religious Teachings on Women's Ministerial Service: A Comparison" in *Biblical Studies and Feminism in the African Context*, Ed D. D. Adegbite et al Nigerian: NABIS Western Zone 320-331

⁸ O. O. Familusi 2012, "African Culture and the Status of Women: The Yoruba Example" *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5.1:299-313

⁹ E. Egualeona, 2013 "Love from an African Mother: Save My Child," Retrieved April 16, 2021 from <https://www.bookrix.com>

¹⁰H. A. Sani 1993 *The Sociology of the Ebira People* Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press

¹¹ B. Oluronbumi 2015 "Beijing 1995: Its challenges to Women and Development in Africa" in in *Women in*

submissions above, the patriarchal nature of the society are birthed by various factors. The areas of this subjugation are discussed below:

Sexual Purity and Virginity

Sexual purity before marriage was an important aspect of the culture in the past. It was said that on the wedding night, the man would spread a piece of white bed sheet so as to know if there would be blood stain. That would show that the girl was sexually pure and a virgin before her wedding. If she was found to be a virgin on her wedding night, her husband would buy some yards of white cloth and give some amount of money to her mother to show his appreciation but if otherwise she would be publicly disgraced. In some cases, the man may choose to send the wife packing¹². According to Familusi, chastity before marriage on the part of the woman was essential. A woman who did not remain a virgin till the day of her wedding was a disgrace not only to herself, but also to members of her family¹³. It can be deduced from this position that the custom on sexual purity was gender biased and a mere display of patriarchy even in the exhibition of morals.

Widowhood Practice

Some of these women are also blamed for the death of their husbands. When the husband of an Ebira woman dies she is demanded to stay indoors, in a mournful mood for a period of three months. It was more like a taboo for a husband to die before the wife. Any woman whose husband dies while she is still alive, is seen as a witch most especially if she remarries within a short space of time but for the men, it is not so. The society always had excuses for the men. For instance, they argue that such a man needs a partner to take care of the children or help him on the farm. In a situation she was without a child before her death, they claim the man needs children as quickly as possible who will run around the house, help with farm work or sons to carry on his name.

Inheritance

Inheritance in Ebiraland is male centered. It was and still a common tradition for people to give the properties most especially their house(s) to their son or sons irrespective of their position among the siblings in the family. They popularly believe that female children do not belong to them but the husband's home.

Taboos and Prohibitions

There are taboos that forbid them from exhibiting some of their religious roles or participation. Women are forbidden from taking part in the night performance of Ekueche festival. Failure to adhere strictly to this restriction will attract serious consequence. This is to prevent women from having the knowledge on the element of secrecy involved in the masquerade cult and more so masquerade goes around without mask in the night and women are seen as people who cannot keep secrets. The masquerades that come out in the night are believed to be dead relatives or ancestors, who must not be seen by women so as not to tell people what or whom they saw. According to Ododo, women are feeble-minded and cannot keep secrets¹⁴. The other reason is informed by the unclean aspect of women imposed by nature, like the menstrual cycle. The Ebira hold very strongly to this view too. In their belief, potency of charms can be neutralised if a menstruating woman comes in contact with sacred objects. A menstruating woman must not participate in sacrifice or touch sacred objects. Sometimes, for certain ritual observances, men are strongly advised to avoid any carnal relationship with women. They are seen as mysterious and sometimes unclean. This was supported in Ododo by Nzekwu's opinion in his submission that. any meeting between them would have adverse effects on both parties. Much harm would come to the women and masquerades would lose something of their virtue¹⁵. As Familusi puts, "it has been discovered that some of them limit the rights of women and for this reason some taboos have been understood as a way of enforcing

Development, (Ed) S. A. Ajayi & J. K. Ayantayo Ibadan: John Archers Publishers 226-248

¹² F. Sanni-Apaana *Interview Respondent*. Interviewed through Phone Call, on May 22, 2021

¹³ O. O. Familusi 2012, "African culture and the Status of Women: The Yoruba Example" *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5.1:299-313

¹⁴ S. E. Ododo 2019. Women as Iconic Paradox the Ebira-Ekuechi Facekuerade Performance Example. *African Journal of Theatre and Media Studies* at Retrieved May 19 2021 from <https://www.ajol.info> 92-116

¹⁵ S. E. Ododo 2019. Women as Iconic Paradox the Ebira-Ekuechi Facekuerade Performance Example. *African Journal of Theatre and Media Studies* Retrieved May 19, 2021 from <https://www.ajol.info> 92-116

patriarchal dominance”¹⁶.

Education

When education came, they had no equal opportunity or chances like the male children had. While the male children were encouraged to go to school, for example, the female children were given out in marriage at an early age. They were seen as means to an end in many ways and were made to give up on getting education for the male siblings while they join the rest member of the family to work or assist in the farm, go into trading or be given out in marriage. This is evidenced by the fact that there are more educated older men than women in Ebiraland. Whenever the economic resources to train all the children in a family are limited or even if available, the male children are given top priority as far as education is concerned. In this culture the idea about female or women’s subjugation begins right from childhood.

For example Bamidele believes that ignorance and selfishness is the reason for the relegation of women to the background. He says where he is from in Kogi state, women are not sent to school because of the belief that nothing good can come out of them. This mentality continued with him for long. He had an experience in his university days when there was a difficult course, he never believed that any woman could pass it but there was an occasion where a lecturer announced that out of 35 students, only 15 passed. He concluded that those 15 were all male students or at worse two female students could be among them. But to his surprise, all the girls passed the course¹⁷.

Morality and Fidelity

Women are expected to maintain high morality and marital fidelity. This society sees almost nothing wrong with a husband cheating because they believe he can choose to have as many wives and concubines as possible. But an adulterous wife will be called names, hurled with insults and abusive words. Though the actions are not justifiable but this goes a long way to show the demeaning status of these women. This however is not supposed to be gender based but Ebira women are not accorded any social respect or honour at all.

Marriages

Many young girls are given out in marriage to much older men. They are denied education because the feeling then was that the family would not benefit from the gesture but the husband while some see it as a way of breeding women who will turn out to be disrespectful. She is only expected to take instruction from her husband because she is seen as one who is incapable of making her own decision and will need guidance. That is why Obijole concludes that in marriage and life, the status of men and women differs and is not treated on equal terms¹⁸. A married man is seen as one who initiates decisions with or without the consent of the wife or wives. In the woman’s inability to bring forth children, she is blamed for barrenness and if the problem is male child, she is blamed as well and the man may choose to marry another wife who will give him male children or children in the absence of none.

From the observations above, it is noticeable women were relegated in the past to the background judging from some unfavourable practices of the African culture vis-à-vis denial of education, forced marriages, fetish and unpleasant traditional rites, subjugation among others. Even in the enforcement of moral laws, the women were still at the receiving end.

However, despite the discriminatory status, Ebira women were accorded some social honour directly or indirectly some of which are still in practice today. They are accorded the special honour of being called onyi which means mother but literarily means “owner” while the fathers are called ada which literary means “partaker” or “has a part”¹⁹. The Ebira culture called the woman ‘the owner’ to stress the importance of women as it relates to her relationship and position in the lives of her children.

Another aspect is on the Echeane festival. Though the women are not allowed full participation in Ekuechi festival, but it was during this the Echeane as the name suggests, which means the female festival, that people celebrated the young girls and it was only during

¹⁶O. O. Familusi 2012, “African culture and the Status of Women: The Yoruba Example” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5.1:299-313

¹⁷ C. Efele. 2002. Culture-Nigeria: Male Child Remains a Family Pride and Honour. Retrieved April 17, 2023 from <https://www.ipsnews.net>

¹⁸ O. O. Obijole, 2018“Christianity and change in Women’s Status: The Nigerian Church Experience” in *Journal of African Society for the Study of Sociology and Ethics of Religions (JASSOSER)* 3&4:1-19.

¹⁹ H. P. Enesi 2015 “African Culture and the Status of Women: The Place of Women in Ebiraland, North-Central Nigeria” in *Themes in Women Studies in Africa: Perspectives from Nigeria* (Ed) OkpkehOkpkeh 328-342

this period that betrothed girls were given away in marriage to their suitors in the past. That is why the festival is called 'Eche-ane' (women festival)²⁰.

The practice of 'isewere' which is a gift of tubers of yams, fish, red oil and salt is usually being handed over to soon-to-be bride's mother or guardian. The woman had exclusive right of distributing the gift items to family members. This is also one of the ways women were honoured. All these show that some level of reverence are bestowed on the women even in a traditional setting.

The Traditional Roles of Ebira Women.

The roles of women in Nigeria differ according to religious, cultural and geographical factors. Their roles are primarily understood as that of mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. Additionally, such are in accordance with ethnic differences and religious background. Omilusi submits that African women have always been into agriculture, trade and other pursuits. He sees women as guardians of their children's welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially²¹. They are household managers who also attend to provision of food. Olutayo citing Bandinter observes that women are dependent beings who are subordinated to the imperatives of motherhood, would be in charge of reproduction and expressive task²².

In spite of all the revered and dignified status of women as seen above, the general notion about the traditional roles in the past was weak and low, when compared to their men folks. That is why Aluko observes by citing Tenuche that the value differences between the men and the women are reflected in the gender roles that have been created by our culture at all levels in our communal relationship, and as such males have been urged by that standard to excel at the detriment of the women²³. Traditionally, most societies in Nigeria prescribe different economic and social roles for men and women. This situation has more or less remained. Generally, it is a woman's duty, as defined by tradition, to cook family meals, do housekeeping work and carry out most of the activities required for children's upbringing, as well as work in the farm and carry out most food processing and preservation work required for home needs and for sale²⁴.

Evidently, women had not so much important roles in Ebiraland in the past. It must be noted, however that some Ebira women from time immemorial, take part in the day to day chores and maintenance of the home (family), agricultural activities, pottery, weaving of cloths and mats, trade. For the purpose of this work their past traditional roles will be seen from four different aspects, the domestic, economic, political and religious aspects of the traditional roles of Ebira women.

Domestic Roles

Essentially, the traditional Ebira women had two major domestic roles, that of a wife and, especially if she had children, of a mother. This meant that the primary focus of her concern was on marriage, her matrimonial home and her children. As a mother, she was the primary custodian of the cherished values of her society, principally through the life-preserving activities of procreation which meant having as many children as she possibly could. For most, however, many of them have suffered from infant mortality in an attempt to fulfil this task of child bearing. Many of these women died in the venture (or soon after) because of bad health suffered from much stress of child bearing. Besides, if one woman was unfortunate or unequal to the task, then another was easily brought in to carry on from where the first one had failed or died. By implication, in the Ebira traditional setting, as a mother, the designed primary role is procreation.

While it is the primary and singular role of Ebira men to provide for all the family needs, the Ebira woman in her natural role as a

²⁰ M. Ola-Lawal 2019. "Tribes and Culture". Retrieved May 20, 2023 from www.muzzammilwrites.wordpress.com

²¹ M. Omilusi 2017 "From Breastfeeding to Breadwinning: A Theoretical Exploration of Nigerian's Economic Recession and the Changing Gender Roles in the Family" in Gender Based Violence in Contemporary Nigeria, Ed A. O. Isaac 43-61 Ibadan: John Archers Publications.

²² M. A. Olutayo 2017 "Masculinity, Changing Roles in Families and Violence: A Theoretical Framework" in pp in Gender Based Violence in Contemporary Nigeria, (Ed) A. O. Isaac. Ibadan: John Archers Publications. 31-42

²³ T. Aluko 2008 "The Status of women in the Bible: A Re-Interpretation in Contemporary African Perspective", in Uma: Journal of Philosophy and Religious studies, 3.2:12-25

²⁴ N. G. Egbue 2009. "Gender Division of Domestic Roles: Implications for Social Equality in Nigeria" *The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 7.1:13-29

helper and homemaker assist the husband in the farm and other areas that will assist in the harmonious coexistence in the society²⁵. The help they rendered in the farm accounted for why a lot of them married many wives in those days. What is evident from all this is that Nigerian society has prescribed to the woman the narrow role of helpmate and mother?

The domestic obligations of the wives on the other hand, consists among others cooking, sweeping the compound and tending infants. When a woman is married she does not share equality with her husband who regards her as a subject. They play the roles of mothers and wives that will bear and rear children for the up-keep of the family and society at large while they are hardly allowed to show their potentials. Child rearing task was considered their exclusive role.

This is not far from the practice of polygamy which was part of their culture and many of these men cannot fend or cater for the family. Having many wives and children was like a form of competition and the ability to boast among friends. They therefore leave the care of these children in the hand of the wives to care for or support. These women are forced beyond their control to play the role of the breadwinner. They were into bringing forth and raising children for their husbands. From the foregoing, with regard to the domestic sphere, the usual practice in almost all cultures is for women to bear the primary responsibility for child caring and other care roles and for domestic chores and Ebiraland is not an exception.

Economic Roles

The Ebira as a people are naturally economically self-reliant and concentrated on their economic activities more than cater for their domestic needs²⁶. Generally, their economy was based on agriculture, crafts and trades of various forms. In agriculture, these women play extensive and varied roles. These usually included picking of firewood for sale, going to farm to grow crops so as to sell them and earn some money. In some cases their husbands are at home doing nothing because of the traditional structure of patriarchy practiced as a custom. Some of them were engaged in animal husbandry for both domestic and economic purposes. Ebira women are known for their industrious nature and they play essential roles in economic activities.

In crafts, they were prominently known for quality cloth weaving. The Ebira women were famous for their woven clothes known as itinochi in many places both within and outside the State. Besides this weaving, women engaged in other crafts such as making of mats, hats, baskets, hand fan, brooms etc and they sell these products to earn extra cash to sustain themselves and support the family. In the past most of the textiles woven by Ebira women used locally made wooden machine-spun yarns. With the greater part of the output taken to the market place. These women were seen spinning, nearly every home in any community. Women could be seen producing cloths, using hand looms. It was customary for every female child growing up in this area to learn cloth weaving as this was one of the industries that engaged the women and they profited from it. In the opinion of Sanni-Apaana, a good number of them were into weaving of traditional cloth which are no more as common today as it used to be²⁷.

Pottery making was also another major economic activities of these women, in Ebiraland, pottery is almost the exclusive right of women, as they produced pots for cooking and water storage as well as perforated pots for incense burning, plates and ornaments like candle stands amongst others. They made local safe for saving, clay vases for flowers and decorations as well.

Their trade included food processing for sale, popular among these food were the local foods like garri, apapa, iniavi and ewa. The apapa and ewa were the two major breakfast for drivers, farmers and traders in the past. According to Ihealetu, one of the major food processed is the palm nut which is processed into palm oil, black oil from the kernel nuts and the back of the kernel is used to make black soap. Soap was made from palm oil and ashes which when boiled together produce a valuable material that aids people's hygiene. Sorghum and millet were processed into making local beer for sale²⁸. Few were engaged into trading like buying and selling of farm produce such as garri, yams, melons, locust bean etc.

They were central to trade and major figures in long-distance trading. Some of these women travel to the west and far north to get merchandise for sale while some of them take the woven clothes to sell in the neighborhood. These activities earned a lot of them titles in the past like the og'ohu and oyinohu. Ihealetu citing Adan quotes that during pre-colonial trade, Dr. Henry Barth noted "the superiority of the Ebira woven cloth can be compared to other regions in the Kurmi international market, Kano". In essence, trade as an integral part of their economy promoted internal trade as well as external trade. They see the market as a place for women that should not be accommodated by men. This aspect shows the industrious and hardworking nature of the Ebira women. Hence, it can be concluded as seen above that they are economically self-reliant.

²⁵ E. Ihealetu 2012 "Women and Development in Adavi". Retrieved May 18, 2023 from www.academia.edu.com

²⁶ E. Ihealetu 2012 "Women and Development in Adavi". Retrieved May 18, 2023 from www.academia.edu.com

²⁷ J. Sanni-Apaana, *Interview Respondent*. Interviewed through Phone Call, on May 15, 2021

²⁸ E. Ihealetu 2012 "Women and Development in Adavi". Retrieved May 18, 2023 from www.academia.edu.com

Political Roles

Generally, the political roles go with their total way of life. Their culture is in line with politics or political lives. Speaking of the traditional political roles of the women, their religious roles are synonymous with their political roles. For instance, in African traditional societies, kings are political, religious and social leaders. Such is the case in Ebira socio-cultural setting. The religious leadership is synonymous to political leadership. In the case of the political roles of women, the religious leaders also perform traditional political duties or roles like the Epahi. She wields power and respect in the community even among kings. She is so powerful that the king cannot neglect her advice. It is customary that all kings in Ebiraland have the epahi in their midst. By implication, all clan heads in Ebiraland called the Otarus all had the Epahis in their domain to give them wise counsel. The 'Iya-Ebe' who was the mother of Atta Ibrahim Onoruoiza, one of the past Ohinoyi of Ebiraland held a very powerful political position in the land²⁹.

The Onokus are also women who have played political roles in the past. They are organized in female secret societies. Onukos have acted as political and religious leaders. Irikidi is not an exception to this political powers too. She plays the female political head in the cult of Ora masquerade too.

Onyabara, AuduEromi were into the local music called onyimiruwe and ikede. These people exercised a little of political power because of their talents. They had subjects too who were under them and takes orders from them. Another set are the market women leaders popularly known as the og'ohu or onyiohu. In their respective markets and places of trade they see to the smooth running of the activities, organise parties and help to render support to any member in need. In case of any form of misconduct in the market place, they mete out punishment to offenders.

Religious Roles

There are parts of their religious roles that were highly respected and revered. Some of them were leaders in their religious activities, though they may still be subordinate to that of their male counterparts. They were leaders in area that involves rituals, sacrifices, and possession rites. However, in this religious activities, a clause is attached; women who are currently menstruating are not allowed to carry out this religious acts or touch any sacred objects, because the blood here is considered impure. The highest leadership position is reserved for the men.

Women are not in any way insignificant in specific religious activities, their prohibition during menstrual period notwithstanding. Some of them were assigned roles in religion as chiefs, priestesses and functionaries. They were active in some religious festivals. These festivals feature some activities of these women like the popular Irikidi of popular ura masquerade cult and ori deity. The onokus play major roles in Ekuechi festival. The onokus were allowed to see the masquerade because they are seen as special beings. A woman called Irikidi was a prominent member of the Masquerade cult of ora. She was a deified being who was respected and revered in the cult and the ori worship. She played diverse religious roles among which were the ritual of putting local powder (uru) on the head of the masquerade, and it was important that the masquerade dressed in her presences before going out³⁰.

The women, in as much as they were not allowed full participation in the masquerade cult, were responsible for the waving of the Eku's costume, cleaning of the surroundings, household and the inner chamber in readiness to receive visiting ancestors. They prepared the feast with which the ancestors were hospitably received³¹.

Women were also responsible for the weaving of the Ubaneito used by the Ekus (Masquerade) because the original supernatural powers Ebira cosmology ascribes to women was perceived to manifest in the cloth and therefore rendered it difficult to associate men with the weaving³². Another clothe called the Itokueta (all cotton handwoven cloth stripped horizontally in variations of white, black,

²⁹ H. P. Enesi 2015 "African Culture and the Status of Women: The Place of Women in Ebiraland, North-Central Nigeria" in Themes in Women Studies in Africa: Perspectives from Nigeria Ed OkpohOkpoh 328-342

³⁰ J. Sanni-Apaana, *Interview Respondent*. Interviewed through Phone Call, on May 15, 2024

³¹ S. E. Ododo 2019. Women as Iconic Paradox the Ebira-EkuechiFacekuerade Performance Example. *African Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*. 92-116. Retrieved May 19, 2023 from <https://www.ajol.info>

³²S. E. Ododo. 2001 "Theatrical Aesthetics and Functional Values of Ekuechi Masquerade Ensemble of the Ebira People in Nigeria" in African Study of Monographs. 2.1:1-36. Retrieved May 19, 2023 from <https://doi.org/10.14989/68202>

red and indigo colours)³³ were and are still woven by them.

There is also the role played by some prominent women like Onyeiza or Onyiahe who is considered to be the back bone or pillar of the masquerade. A masquerade cannot go out without the special blessings of the Onyeiza as the Onyeiza spiritually protects the masquerade throughout the outing. The Epahis in traditional religious settings are spiritual leaders. The *Epahi* is a woman who traditionally is the protector of the king they act as the spiritual guides and wise counsel of kings in the Ebira traditional setup³⁴. The onokus are known to be born under special circumstances with privilege and status to enter religious spaces typically prohibited against women. The senior among them performed priestly roles for the community like divination, healing and medical care. They dressed in white attire with traditional accessories like beads, parrot feathers, and fan. They give spiritual support to masquerades by prescribing some sacrifices and rites to be observed to avert imminent danger³⁵. From the positions of their traditional political and religious roles, it reveals that the two roles are almost inseparable because their religious roles translates to their political leadership. It is worthy of note that despite the subordinate position the society place on them, they still have some level of importance in the society. Profoundly, women have some elevated traditional roles that is significant in the society.

THE CONTEMPORARY STATUS AND ROLES OF EBIRA WOMEN

The status and roles of Ebira women have been evolving and seen a shift from what it was traditionally, in the past. Therefore, this chapter discusses the contemporary status and roles of Ebira Women.

Contemporary Status of Ebira Women

Until recently, women were treated as second class and were under-represented in vital sectors and major decision making institutions³⁶. In relatively recent time, there have been some significant changes in the traditional roles of Ebira women as elsewhere in Nigeria. Nigerian women and Ebira women in particular, for their part are gradually becoming more educated and exposed to opportunities and making positive contributions. Several factors necessitated the changing status of women generally. Nwosu points out that education has facilitated and enhanced women's social status; which has equipped them with knowledge and competences to compete favourably with men in different professions and to assume roles outside their domestic domain³⁷. Closely supporting this, is Falola's submission on women. He submits that the most powerful agency of change for the modern woman has been Nigeria's formal education system, from which a large number of elite women have emerged. Intelligent, educated, and confident, they can be found in all leading occupations; they now challenge many aspects of patriarchy and are gradually organizing to ensure that the political arena expands sufficiently to accommodate them³⁸.

From Nwoye and Falola's submission, it can be seen that formal education is a primary reason for the emergence of elite women, which is an evidence of changing statuses, who are leading in all spheres of life. An interview respondent viewed that there are changes in the status of women because of westernization, she further explains that westernization brought in civilization and other factors that have aided the change in the statuses of women³⁹. Her statement shows that there are other forces that facilitates and transforms the status of women.

During the last few decades, profound changes have occurred in the social and economic status of women that have reduced gender

³³S. E. Ododo. 2001 "Theatrical Aesthetics and Functional Values of Ekuechi Masquerade Ensemble of the Ebira People in Nigeria" in African Study of Monographs. 2.1:1-36. Retrieved May 19, 2023 from <https://doi.org/10.14989/68202>

³⁴H. P. Enesi 2015. "African Culture and the Status of Women: The Place of Women in Ebiraland, North-Central Nigeria" in Themes in Women Studies in Africa: Perspectives from Nigeria (Ed) OkpehOkpeh 328-342

³⁵S. E. Ododo. 2001 "Theatrical Aesthetics and Functional Values of Ekuechi Masquerade Ensemble of the Ebira People in Nigeria" in African Study of Monographs. 2.1:1-36. Retrieved May 19, 2023 from <https://doi.org/10.14989/68202>

³⁶ Y. A. Aluko 2016 Change in Status of Women in Nigeria: A Dialectical Framework for Understanding in *Sokoto Journal of the Social Sciences* 6.2:217-228

³⁷ I. E. Nwosu 2012, "Gender Role perceptions and the Changing Role of Women in Nigeria" *International Journal of Agricultural and Rural Development*. 15:1240-1246

³⁸T. O. Falola, 2007. "The Role of Nigerian Women". Retrieved April 10, 2023 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/role-of-Nigerian-women1360615>

³⁹ N. Abdulsalami *Interview Respondent*. 9th June 2021

disparity⁴⁰. The various concepts through which the status of Ebira women have been examined include:

Family Income Contributions: Ebira women no longer depend on their husbands again, even if he is wealthy enough to take care of them. Some of them are even breadwinners in their homes. For instance, Omilusi opines that women have recently, taken on more responsibility of contributing to family income⁴¹.

Professional Achievement: Along this line Aliyu observes in Olujinmi and Jegede that the new era ushered in new roles for women as they find their places in politics, nursing, medicine, engineering, law entertainment and the likes. Their performance in these fields and areas of challenges are quite commendable⁴². Though it cannot be disputed that the initial denial of women education still have some effects on their professional achievements. Some professions today are seen as male oriented and for a fact that they also see some as peculiar to the females. Supporting this, Familusi and Oke observe that, “the fact that women did not have same opportunity with men when education was introduced affected their representation in many professions at the initial Stage” That notwithstanding, the Ebira community today, can boast of women doctors, pharmacists, engineers, politicians, lawyers, bankers, vice chancellors, academics and military officers, among others.

Sense of Fulfilment: In the past, these women were not given the chance to be what they wanted to be. Somehow many believed that the place of the woman is her husbands’ home and believed that it is a waste of time and resources training a woman. But recently the trends have changed and the reputation of these women is now favourably regarded. Women now show up more at different institutions at all levels (education, religion, infrastructure, economy, etc).

Access to Western Education: The very recent access to knowledge is synonymous to education. Education is said to be a vehicle that break the shackles of poverty thereby leading to transformation, development and progress⁴³. It also has the potentials to bring about important changes in the status of women by enhancing their productivity not only in the market work but also in the household work and childcare.

Power and Control of Material Resources: Ebira women are now getting power even in rural areas. Many of them now own landed properties and control men in places of work and worship. Education has made women independent and they are no longer dependent on men to lead their lives. Areas that were once controlled by men are now controlled by them, they now handle the affairs in many places⁴⁴. In essence, Ebira women now have the ability to empower themselves economically and socially by going to school, or engaging in productive and civic activities.

The contemporary status of Ebira women are reflected in all these as stated above. However, an interview respondent stated that irrespective of the changes that are taking place the status of the women as mothers and wives remains unchanged, hence, women were and still are viewed to be mothers, nurturers, household caretakers and caregivers⁴⁵.

The Contemporary Roles of Ebira Women

The roles of women in any society depends on the status accorded them by that society. The roles often change when the status changes. The changes are in continuity hence the phase changing roles. Similar factors necessitate the changing roles, like; **Civilization, Acculturation;** basically, acculturation is the process of cultural changes that take place as a result of contact with other cultures. Through the process of having contact with different cultures, especially the western culture, changes were made in roles of Ebira women, and **Western Education;** time has shown that educating a woman is not a waste of time. Education is normally seen as the true basis of the society which brings African women economic wealth, social success, and political stability.

Domestic Roles

Generally, domestic roles or duties are tasks performed inside a household in order to ensure that the basic needs of its

⁴⁰ A Udeka and L. Raimi L. 2016 “Work-Family Role conflict and Job Performance among Women Bankers in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja” in Nigeria International Journal of Development and Management Review (INJODEMAR) 11:103-119

⁴¹ M. Omilusi. 2017. “From Breastfeeding to Breadwinning: A Theoretical Exploration of Nigerian’s Economic Recession and the Changing Gender Roles in the Family” in Gender Based Violence in Contemporary Nigeria, (Ed) A. O. Isaac Ibadan: John Archers Publications 43-61

⁴²B. Olujinmi and O Jegede 2012, “Women, Peace Promotion and National Development: Portrait of Abigail as an Effective Communicator in the Bible” in Biblical Studies and Feminism in the African Context, (Ed) D. D. Adegbite et al. Nigerian: NABIS 283-301

⁴³ U. D. Ikoni, 2009 “The Challenges of Poverty in a Globalised World: Perspective on the Nigerian Situation”. Retrieved March 24, 2021 from www.inecnigeria.org

⁴⁴ A. Salihu *Interview Respondent*. 9th June 2024

⁴⁵ L. Mike. *Interview Respondent*. 10th June 2024

members are met, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children or older adults and other dependent family members. As at 1975 it was reported that 70% of all domestic and household chores are performed by women⁴⁶. This trend has not changed except that women now take additional roles outside the home.

According to a respondent, the bulk of the changes lies in the fact that Ebira women unlike before are involved with the formal sector and they share roles with their husbands while she in turn now has a dual role. Pretty much before now, Ebira women were confined to the domestic space: raising children, taking care of household affairs and grooming their young daughters to find husbands⁴⁷. Another respondent stated that the domestic roles are still almost the same as elsewhere as she is expected to care for the family, bear children, attend to their husbands and children, and maintain their households⁴⁸. Supporting this, Familusi and Oke submit that women are still important element in the family but in a very different facet. Their roles in reproductive activities are inalienable and exclusive. Therefore, they remain partners in progress in respect to child bearing⁴⁹. However, it is believed that with education some of these domestic roles take a more refined form. For instance, a respondent viewed that women have now adopted the dual role of mother and worker based on a salary-paying job outside the home, and with education, most of them are able to put some things in order so as to cope more effectively. She further explained that her own advancement and exposure, have helped her to be a more responsible mother⁵⁰.

The wives are expected to be good home keepers who would work and raise their kids with the best hands. They should know how to multitask, just as their husbands naturally expect them to see to the affairs of the home while they are busy trying to make money. The woman performs the roles of wife, partner, organizer, administrator, director, re-creator, disburser, economist, mother, disciplinarian, teacher, health officer, artist and queen in the family at the same time.

Economic Roles

In both formal and informal economic sectors, there are changes in the roles of Ebira women and they are now well recognized even in the formal sector of the economy. In the informal sector, they are still very much into trading, but with some modernization and advancement. In the area of trading, these women still dominate the market place where they sell agricultural products. Some of them are also employers of labour. They are increasingly earning income outside the home in both formal and informal sectors. According to a respondent, Ebira women have always been active in trade, agriculture and other economic pursuits, but majority were in the informal sector⁵¹. It is essential to say that economic activity is an important aspect of the personality of an Ebira woman and this has a strong influence on the women as they engage in various economic activities. In the opinion of Joseph, changes in the family structure and functions which resulted from the process of rapid urbanization had brought women into the mainstream of the Nigerian economy and business world⁵². The opinion of Joseph is in consonance with the changes in the economic roles and activities of Ebira women in recent times.

They are increasingly earning income outside the home in both formal and informal sectors. An interview respondent posited that Ebira women are now into a more modernized form of economic activities. According to her, in the past many women were into a local drink processing called “echeaku”. But due to changes of different forms the economic activities that involves drinks have taken a different form⁵³.

Inasmuch as many of them are still into petty trading of all kinds, many of them are now into a more sophisticated form of economic activities. Before now, they were majorly involved in taking the local woven clothes to other places to sell, but the reverse is now the case. Not very many of them are into the local fabrics, and some travel out of the state to get other things to sell in their various

⁴⁶ I. E. Nwosu 2012, “Gender Role Perceptions and the Changing Role of Women in Nigeria” *International Journal of Agricultural and Rural Development*. 15.3:1240-1246

⁴⁷ D. Sanni. *Interview respondent*. 7th June, 2024

⁴⁸ L. Mike. *Interview Respondent*. 10th June 2024

⁴⁹ O. O Familusi. and P. O Oke 2015 “Changings Roles of Yoruba Women as an Issue in National Development and Family Stability Discourse” in *Women in Development*,(Ed) S. A. Ajayi& J. K. Ayantayo Ibadan: John Archers Ltd 303-319

⁵⁰ F. Peter *Interview Respondent*. 13th June 2024

⁵¹ J. Sanni-Apaana. *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

⁵² E. O. Joseph 2020. “The Impact of Christian Religious Organisations on Women’s Entrepreneurial Activities in Nigeria.” *Journal of African Society for the Study of sociology and Ethics of Religions (JASSOSER)* 7.8:123-146

⁵³ F. Sanni-Apaana *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

communities.

Economically, some of these women are now breadwinners in their homes. It is imperative to mention that in traditional Nigerian societies, the father is seen as the family breadwinner while the mother is the nurturer and homemaker. These roles have evolved over the years with more women accepting the role of paid employment in their lives by⁵⁴. Women in formal employment may likely increase the economic status of the family. In view of this, an anonymous respondent stated that there was a time she was the breadwinner in the house because her husband as at then was an applicant, and was like the stay-at-home father. So to make ends meet she had to get involved in buying and selling of fabrics even if she is a civil servant so as to sustain the family. Though times have changed in her family now, but it shows what many women are facing today and thereby taking on the economic roles and leadership in their homes⁵⁵.

Just like their male counterparts, they are increasingly taking advantage of economic opportunities in the government establishments, commercial outfits and in the private/industrial sector. Very many Ebira women are involved in the formal sector of the economy today. Bankole and Adeyeri view that “one of the prominent sectors where women have made tremendous inroad is the formal sector employment, particularly the highly competitive and volatile banking industry”. However, Aluko points out that, although the number and types of women who work have changed dramatically, numerous other aspects of women’s work have remained impervious to change⁵⁶.

Political Roles

Politically, involvement of Ebira women is no longer traditional which was mixed with religious roles. They are now involved in politics at different levels. Some of them may not be directly involved in partisan politics, but they endorse directly or indirectly through rallies held in market squares. One of the interview respondents submitted that the women are more involved politically now than what it used to be when she was younger. Because they now participate in elections and also play prominent roles in campaigns⁵⁷. From the opinion of one of the interview respondents, Ebira women now lend their voice to governance (politics), they are not just home makers or caregivers but they are now out there taking part in governance and leadership⁵⁸.

An interview respondent viewed that there are lots of women who are doing well politically these days from leadership to just playing some roles. All the parties in Ebiraland recognize the role of women and created leadership role for women leaders. Many of them now contest for the post of ward counsellors, local government chairpersons, state house of assembly. Some of them at some point were special advisers or supervisory counsellors⁵⁹. Another, observed that it is evident from numbers of Ebira women in politics, they contribute to stronger attention to women's issues. Women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy. It facilitates women's direct engagement in public decision-making and is a means of ensuring better accountability to women⁶⁰.

Today many Ebira woman are involved in both local and international politics. There are many of them who have contested for one political position or the other, and some were given political appointments, the likes of Natasha Apoti, HajiaRaliAjanah, HajiaFuraretu and a host of others⁶¹. Most interview respondents had a lot to say about Natasha Apoti who is a well renowned female politician in Ebiraland. Nwosu agrees that “however slow, there has been a steady progress, though slow, in the roles played by women in politics”⁶² and this is not an exception in the place of Ebira women. Profoundly, Ebira women are more aware politically, as far as modern and contemporary politics is concerned and to a large extent, has a great impact on the developmental success.

⁵⁴ A Udeka and L. Raimi L. 2016 “Work-Family Role Conflict and Job Performance among Women Bankers in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja” in Nigeria International Journal of Development and Management Review (INJODEMAR) 11:103-119

⁵⁵ Anonymous. *Interview Respondent*. 13th June 2024

⁵⁶ Y. A. Aluko 2016 Change and Status of Women in Nigeria: A Dialectical Framework for Understanding. In *Sokoto Journal of the Social Sciences* 6.2:217-228

⁵⁷ L. Oluwatoba *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

⁵⁸ A. Salihu *Interview Respondent*. 9th June 2024

⁵⁹ B. Dauda *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

⁶⁰ F. Peter *Interview Respondent*. 13th June 2024

⁶¹ J. Sanni-Apaana. *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

⁶² I. E. Nwosu 2012, “Gender Role perceptions and the Changing Role of Women in Nigeria” *International Journal of Agricultural and Rural Development*. 15.3:1240-1246

Religious Roles

The coming of the Western religions, Islam and Christianity religions made many converts of these religions leading to reduction in African Traditional Religion thereby changing their roles religiously. Worthy of note, the religious roles of these women in both religions are somewhat controversial or not same based on denomination and religion. This goes in line with Familusi and Oke's position on the status of women in Christianity "the status of women in Christianity is shrouded with controversy"⁶³. For instance, an interview respondent, points that she is an Anglican Church member and though the leadership roles of women is relatively restricted in most denominations women are exempted from priesthood, this further confirms our submission. However, there are still some recognized roles played by them and her as a person is Women Wing Christian Association of Nigeria (WOWICAN) President⁶⁴.

Another respondent who is a Muslim, observed that leadership roles or major activities in Islam are restricted to the men but in Ebiraland there is an Islamic woman leader known as the Seida, whom people revere a lot. Though her religious influence is traceable to her husband who was a popular Islamic scholar⁶⁵.

Today, in some Pentecostal Churches, there are many ordained Pastors, Evangelists and Reverend and Ebira women General Overseers of Churches who established their own churches. In the view of another respondent, when the contemporary religious roles of these women are considered, one will notice that they are now major front liners. She backed her position up with the place of education which breeds better understanding, and the fact that her denomination ordains female ministers, hence they allow female leadership in the church⁶⁶. However, another respondent took on another dimension on the religious roles of women considering their religious roles, she stated that women are not as committed as they were in the past⁶⁷. It can be deduced that some religious denominations and religions place some form of restriction on the women. In spite of this, the few changes that have occurred are still of immense importance on the impact on development.

Challenges

In the past, they were faced with unfavorable situations that contribute to or constitute barriers to their advancement and empowerment. Recently, the changing status which translates to changing roles helps women in tackling some unfavourable traditions and conditions, like widowhood practices, issues of inheritance, childbearing etc. For instance, Nwosu opines that through legislation and other legal reforms, there have been some noticeable changes in the traditional role of women in Nigeria. It is through these processes that some of the obnoxious practices against the women were stopped⁶⁸.

However, challenges of various forms still exist, for example the issue of family stability. An interview respondent viewed that the contemporary roles of Ebira women have altered some of their attitudes or dispositions towards their domestic roles⁶⁹. This poses harm to family system. Meaning, expectations around domestic roles and responsibilities persist. There are families today, who are not stable due to some of the roles the wives are involved with. Instability can arise in the family when the mutual roles needed per time are not made available. From the finding, there is a clear indication that, there is a conflict between career advancement and family because of the multiple roles Nigerian women fulfill. It is evident that the roles may have a lot of effects on family.

There is also the case of Patriarchal norms, limiting women's decision-making power and autonomy. Lastly, some are still faced with domestic violence, sexual harassment and discrimination.

Recommendation

Addressing the challenges and promoting empowerment programmes will help in tackling the issues. There should be targeted interventions to promote women's autonomy, economic empowerment and social justice. These can include; initiatives

⁶³ O. O. Familusi and P. O. Oke 2015. "Changings Roles of Yoruba Women as an Issue in National Development and Family Stability Discourse" *Women in Development*, (Ed) S. A. Ajayi & J. K. Ayantayo Ibadan: John Archers Ltd 303-319

⁶⁴ A. Alonge *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

⁶⁵ S Adulmalik *Interview Respondent*. 11th June 2024

⁶⁶ F. Peter. *Interview Respondent*. 13th June 2024

⁶⁷ L. Oluwatoba. *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

⁶⁸ I. E. Nwosu 2012, "Gender Role perceptions and the Changing Role of Women in Nigeria" *International Journal of Agricultural and Rural Development*. 15.3:1240-1246

⁶⁹ G. Sunday. *Interview Respondent*. 12th June 2024

promoting economic empowerment and skill development, policies addressing gender inequality and the establishment of organisations providing support for women at various spheres of life.

Conclusion

Women's status and roles in society is a topic of importance, the significance is perhaps best indicated by the fact that there are visible contributions they make to societal development. The social status and roles of women have been a major concern and Ebira women are no exceptions. The examination of this status and roles reveals the narrative of transformation and resilience. Though faced with factors that limited their opportunities in the past, they have struggled to redefine their roles. Even with the continuous changing roles of women, child care and other care roles for domestic chores, are reasons they talked about women being important elements, though with a different way of exhibiting such.

LIST OF INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS

S/N	Name	Age	Profession	Religion	Date
1.	Evang. (Mrs.) Lydia Mike	43	Civil Servant/Clergy	Christianity	June 10th, 2024
2.	Miss. AishatSalihu	28	Civil Servant	Islam	June 9th, 2024
3.	Rev. Dele Sanni	61	Clergy	Christianity	June 7th, 2024
4.	Mrs. Favour Peter	33	Entrepreneur	Christianity	June 13th, 2024
5.	Mrs. Esther Sunday	41	Artisan	Christianity	June 12th, 2024
6.	Mrs. AjinotuAlonge	59	Civil Servant	Christianity	June 11th, 2024
7.	Anonymous	62	Retired	Christianity	June 13th , 2024
8.	Mrs. Florence SanniApaana	58	Civil Servant/Trader	Christianity	May 22nd and June 12th, 2024
9.	Mrs. Lucy Oluwatoba	32	Trader	Christianity	June 12th, 2024
10.	Evang. Job Sanni-Apaana	61	Retired Civil Servant/ Clergy	Christianity	May 15th and June 12th, 2024
11.	Miss. SidikatAbdulmalik	28	Entrepreneur	Islam	June 11th 2024
12.	Mrs. Blessing Dauda	31	Banker	Christianity	June 12th, 2024

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