WOMEN AND THEIR ROLE IN THE ECONOMY OF PRE-COLONIAL ILORIN, NORTHERN NIGERIA

Dr A.O.Y Raji, Dr A.O. Olumoh, Dr S.T. Abejide
Department of History & International Studies,
Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria

ABSTRACT
The state structure of most pre-colonial African societies relied heavily on the economy which had various components. Women’s role was indeed critical to the proper functioning of such components. The emirate setting to which Ilorin became sub-summed as from the early 19th century was originally designed by the Caliphate leaders to restrict women’s level of economic participation. This notwithstanding, the pre-emirate Yoruba political and economic background of Ilorin where the women folk played important roles in the process of economic relations seemed to have pre-dominated in Ilorin emirate during the 19th century. Based on this premise, this study evaluates the economic peculiarities of Ilorin during the pre-colonial period and the extent to which the women were involved in the promotion of economic growth. By using both primary and secondary sources, the paper argues that unlike the situation that obtained in some emirates within the Sokoto Caliphate where women were kept off the stage in terms of economic activities, the Ilorin women during the pre-colonial period were actively involved in pottery, trade and commerce, cheese production, weaving and embroidery works, blacksmithing industry, bead-making, agriculture and craftworks, etc. The Ilorin women established dominance in a wide range of economic activities that enhanced the sustenance of Ilorin before British conquest. As the efforts of Ilorin women were to compliment that of the men which gave Ilorin economy the strength to support the emirate’s expansionist programmes and its elaborate administration, the study concludes that women’s role was central to the economy of Ilorin during the pre-colonial period.

Keywords: Women, Ilorin Emirate, Economy, Pre-Colonial, Indigenous Industrial Techniques.

INTRODUCTION
The pre-colonial period witnessed the emergence of several polities in the Nigerian region. The establishment and growth of such polities involved an amalgam of diverse forms of contributions made by both male and female folks who were fully committed to the advancement of the cause of the traditional society. The women folk in pre-colonial Ilorin seemed to have engaged themselves in a wide range of social and economic activities that proved quite beneficial to the
state and the citizenry. Some of the major forms of economic activities that engaged the attention of women in pre-colonial Ilorin included trading in form of local and long-distance commercial network, weaving and dyeing, bead making and jewelries, iron smelting, agriculture, craft works, food processing, pottery and livestock production. As a result of the clerical activities of the Fulani Jihadists and the political structure of the Sokoto Caliphate by the beginning of the 19th century, women’s role in governance gradually became restricted. Although the Islamic reform movement also curtailed women’s social and economic activities in Ilorin emirate, most of the pre-jihad economic engagements of Ilorin women continued in the emirate for most part of the 19th century. Thus, at the point of British conquest and the imposition of colonial rule, the women folk appeared quite critical to the process of economic growth most especially in the metropolitan districts of Ilorin emirate.

**ILORIN: PRE-COLONIAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SETTING**

Ilorin tradition holds that it was established as a settlement within the Yoruba country before the 18th century. Apart from agriculture, hunting and iron smelting were associated with Ilorin up to the period when it became a provincial territory of the old Oyo empire (Ajayi and Smith, 1969). It also shared with the Yoruba a wide range of political, social and cultural practices before the introduction and spread of Islam in the region by the beginning of the 19th century.

Ilorin’s emergence as an emirate within the Sokoto caliphate setting was a product of the Fulani Islamic reform activities of the early 19th century. The rapid spread of the reform activities (known as Jihad) coincided with the period when old Oyo empire began to witness severe crises and gradual disintegration (Atanda, 1973). As one of old Oyo’s provincial territories, Ilorin was under the control of that empire until as from the mid-1890s when Afonja, the *Areonakakanfo* (leader of old Oyo’s military forces), colluded with the Fulani led by As-Salih (Alimi) to declare Ilorin independent of old Oyo (Johnson, 1921). Afonja could not follow-up this initial success as Alimi and his followers, who had a completely different political ambition, soon outplayed Afonja and his collaborators, and eventually took over the control of Ilorin. Alimi’s son, Abdulsalam, secured a flag of authority from the Jihad leaders, and became the Emir of Ilorin in 1823. This development was to completely change the socio-cultural and political landscape of Ilorin. Thus, Ilorin became an Islamic stronghold/emirate that owed allegiance to the caliphate (Last, 1967). For administrative purposes, Ilorin was divided into four wards (Gambari, Ajikobi, Fulani and Alanamu) each headed by a *Balogun*. Within each ward were also sub-wards headed by *Mogajis* (Mustain, 1978; Danmole, 1980).

The new emirate which was surrounded by hostile neighbours had to engage in series of military expeditions for the purpose of territorial expansion, to secure economic gains, and to achieve dominance in the region. Despite the defeat which Ilorin forces suffered in c.1838 at the battle of Osogbo, Ilorin still pursued her expansionist programme in the Yoruba country for most part of the 19th century (Johnson, 1921; Ajayi and Smith, 1969). The Ilorin emirate authorities equally pursued series of political reform programmes aimed at promoting integration and political stability (Olumoh, 2007). Such imperial activities as well as other reform programmes of Ilorin that engaged the support of all active men in the emirate naturally required the women folk to be
more actively involved in the task of keeping the domestic front intact while their men faced the rigour of open warfare. The women in 19th century-Ilorin thus engaged themselves in various forms of economic activities in order to have adequate provisions with which they sustained themselves, the children and the aged at a period when most of the active male population were mobilized to defend and project the image of Ilorin in constant military expeditions.

**Features of Ilorin Pre-colonial Economy**

As was the case with most of the societies in pre-colonial Nigeria, the Ilorin emirate in the period before colonial rule was characterized by series of economic activities. These included trade and commerce, manufacturing in various forms, agriculture, bead making, cloth weaving and dyeing, pottery, craft works, iron smelting, etc. The diverse forms of economic activities in pre-colonial Ilorin certainly engaged the support and services of the citizenry, and the survival of the state was based on the strength of its economy. We can argue that the involvement of women folk to a large extent enhanced the successful conduct of most of these economic activities in the pre-colonial Ilorin. For example, evidence shows that such economic practices provided the state, individuals and groups with the resources to establish control over the society and contribute to its advancement, provided the ruling elite with a power base to exercise their authority effectively, and gave the right stimulus to the process of establishment and promotion of inter-group and inter-state relations.

**Role of Women in Pre-colonial Ilorin Economy**

For most of the kingdoms in the pre-colonial Nigerian region, the women folk occupied an important place in the political economy of the state. They participated in various forms of economic activities including those that involved production, manufacturing, catering service as well as exchange i.e trade and commerce. As Clarke (1972) rightly observed during his visit to Yorubaland in the 1850s, the women folk were actively involved in virtually all forms of economic activities that were conducted in the emirate. It is therefore relevant to state that Ilorin women equally accounted for the high rate of economic growth witnessed by Ilorin emirate during the 19th century and indeed up to the era of British rule (Gavin, 1977). The women played an equally important role in the process of economic transformation of Ilorin as their participation in various forms of commercial activities did compliment the efforts of the men by which the emirate’s economy was able to rank high both among the pre-colonial Yoruba kingdoms and also among the emirates within the Sokoto Caliphate setting especially during the 19th century. Some of the important economic development fields where Ilorin women featured prominently and contributed meaningfully toward the attainment of a stable economy for pre-colonial Ilorin are as follows:

**Agriculture:** Among the most important forms of economic practices in pre-colonial Nigeria was agriculture. It engaged the services of the larger proportion of the working populace, and constituted a major thrust on which the economy of most of the pre-colonial Nigerian states was based. Apart from farming to raise food and cash crops as well as vegetables for domestic use and exchange, agriculture also involved fishing, livestock production, animal husbandry and cattle rearing, manure production etc. Most of the agricultural practices in pre-colonial Ilorin
were conducted with the involvement of the women folk. The Ilorin women participated in specific aspects of agricultural production such as planting, crop tendering, harvesting, and farm produce marketing; they also cultivated varieties of crops such as vegetables, pepper and tomatoes all-year round through the traditional mode of irrigation. By providing the labour requirements in certain areas of agricultural production, and through direct participation in such practices that were peculiar to production relations within the agricultural sector as already identified, the women folk contributed to the growth of indigenous crop production process, and thus became quite important to the agricultural industry in pre-colonial Ilorin economy (Raji, 1998).

**Pottery:** The pottery industry was as one of the dominant forms of indigenous industrial enterprises which predominantly engaged the services of the women folk in Ilorin during the pre-colonial period. The industry mostly produced both domestic and industrial utensils in clay forms which were usually fashioned into objects such as cooking pots, water cans, trays, storage tanks, weavers/dyers pots, and other items of various grades and sizes. The products were also used for spiritual activities by herbalists, diviners and other traditional medical practitioners especially in Yorubaland. The production of pottery was popular at Ebu Dada in Okelele ward as well as in Oloje, Ita-Amo, Isale-Asa, Kankatu and Abemi areas of Ilorin during the 19th century. The pottery industry which was first started in Ilorin by one Hasana Ebu, had remained dominant in these areas during and after the colonial period (Saidat Awero, 2011). The major raw material used for production in Ilorin pottery industry was clay which had two varieties namely ‘amon’ and ‘ayan’. Ilorin pottery industry provided gainful employment for several groups of women and was a source of revenue for the emirate’s treasury during the 19th century. The demand for products of the Ilorin pottery industry was high in the pre-colonial period as the industry received patronage from customers who engaged in commercial relations at the different markets within the Yoruba country, and also in parts of the Nupe region as well as in Hausaland.

**Trading:** It is evident that one of the most lucrative economic activities that engaged the attention of the women folk in pre-colonial Ilorin was trading. This was also one of the important forms of economic activities of the women class in pre-colonial Yorubaland. Trading has remained the main occupation for the women folk in every part of contemporary Nigeria. The specific forms of trading practiced by the Ilorin women included the long distance trading, short distance trading, domestic trading, wholesale and retail trading, and hawking or street trading. Most trading activities were often conducted in the major market centres at Oja-Oba, Gambari market, Oja-Gbooro and other indigenous markets in pre-colonial Ilorin. The articles of trade were house-hold goods, farm produce, imported items, jewelries, implements and other products of the blacksmithing industry, woven cloths, plates, craft works, oil, fish and vegetables etc.

**Weaving Industry:** The weaving industry represents one of the most vibrant and important industries in pre-colonial Nigeria, and where the women folk had a considerable measure of participation. It is also obvious that one of the notable industrial engagements characteristic of pre-colonial Yoruba economy was weaving. It was an industry that engaged the services of the women population in such aspects as cotton picking, processing, spinning and ginning etc in pre-
colonial Ilorin. Weaving was a major occupation among the women folk in Ilorin as was the case with most of the settlements throughout Yorubaland before British conquest. As Olaoye (1996) suggests, the weaving industry provided employment opportunities and means of livelihood for a large proportion of the women population in different wards of Ilorin. It also stood as one of the most important and flourishing indigenous industries in pre-colonial Ilorin.

The Ilorin weaving industry is also widely believed to be one of the most ancient indigenous industrial establishments in the region. The practice of weaving seemed to be as ancient as Ilorin settlement itself. As a region where cotton was produced in substantial quantity (Clarke, 1972), cloth weaving was an important economic venture or industry with readily available raw materials. Weaving was popular, widespread, and was dominated by the women folk in pre-colonial Ilorin, and this probably explains the prevalence weaving centres in the notable wards of Omoda, Isale-Aluko, Okelele, Ode-Afanda, Ita-Amo, Adabata, Oju-Ekun and Alanamu where women weavers produced varieties of traditional cloth materials (Aso-ofi) that were in high demand both within and outside Ilorin. Such traditional woven materials were always used at festivals, wedding/engagement ceremonies, naming, coronation, installation, outings, anniversaries and other related festivities, most especially in pre-colonial Yorubaland. According to Clarke (1972), weaving was women’s predominant occupation in several Ilorin wards by 1856. He stated further that the good quality production standard which the industry commanded at that period made the products of Ilorin weavers to flood major markets in different parts of the Yoruba country. This help to explain that the import of the Ilorin weaving industry stems from the fact that the products of the industry had continued to be of relevance to the economy as the industry had always attracted patronage during and after colonial rule.

Craft Works: The craft industry was also an important industry which contributed to the process of economic growth in pre-colonial Ilorin. It was indeed an industry that engaged both youth and adult population in Yorubaland during the pre-colonial period. In the traditional Yoruba society, it was a source of pride for anyone to acquire the potential in one form of craft or the other (Biobaku, 1973). Although the men folk dominated the industry, the women were also quite relevant to the production process in several crafts such as broom making, trays and basket making, carvings and calabash designs etc. The distribution or sale of these craft works with those that were produced by the men to prospective buyers or users in the various market centres within and outside metropolitan Ilorin also formed part of the commercial obligations of the women folk during the pre-colonial period.

Bead-making and Jewelries: The production of beads which the women folk dominated in pre-colonial Ilorin, was meant to meet the ornamental needs of the royalty or the aristocracy and other members of the ruling elites. Both the beads and jewelries were also used as items for ceremonies such as wedding and other social activities in pre-colonial Yorubaland. The bead-making business was popular among Ilorin women especially at Ile-Asileke in Oke-Imale ward where a remarkable level of bead production took place during the pre-colonial period. It is also noteworthy that most of the beads, jewelries and other items of adornment which were produced
in Ilorin, as Ajayi and Smith (1969) suggest, were marketed by women all over the Yoruba country during the 19th century.

**Soap Making:** The art of soap-making was to become an important economic activity for the women folk in Ilorin emirate due to the high demand for local soap and the fact that most of the raw materials required for production in the soap-making industry in Ilorin were sourced locally. It was also an industry that was exclusively meant for the women folk, and it has maintained this characteristic up to the contemporary period. Some of the notable centres of soap production in pre-colonial Ilorin include Adifa, Oloje, Ita-Amo, Ode-Afanda and Ita-Adu etc. The various products of Ilorin soap-making industry competed favourably with those from other regions as the Ilorin local (black) soap dominated the sales in the major markets in both Yorubaland and the Nupe region during the 19th century.

**Operation of Market Cycles:** There were different types of markets that existed in pre-colonial Ilorin emirate. These included the daily markets, the 5-day markets, the 9-day markets, the periodic markets, and the night markets. The Ilorin women folk naturally played a leading role in the operation of such markets as they conducted series of commercial activities in the markets on daily or periodic basis. Several enterprising Ilorin women who had no stalls to operate or goods to sell due to their inability to mobilize enough resources equally registered their presence in the markets for daily survival as they served as carriers, sales attendants, porters, hawkers of farm produce and other petty items as well as artisans/apprentice in one form of trade or the other.

**Food Processing:** As an agrarian economy where various forms of agricultural production took place, the aspect of food processing formed an integral part of the economic activities in pre-colonial Ilorin. The women folk were more involved in food processing than their men counterparts as they dominated the industry especially in Yorubaland during the 19th century. Items of agricultural production which the Ilorin women processed during the pre-colonial period included yam and cassava flour, locust beans, cow milk into cheese, vegetables and fruits, palm oil and palm kernels, corn and sorghum flour, smoked fish, pepper, gari, shear butter and other forms of processed food items (Usman Anafi, 2011). The sale of these processed foods in the daily or weekly markets as well as through hawking was also usually co-ordinated by the women in pre-colonial Ilorin. The task of food processing thus represented an important form of economic activity that engaged the Ilorin women folk through which they contributed to the growth of pre-colonial Ilorin economy.

**Cloth-dyeing and Embroidery:** One of the notable forms of indigenous industrial production techniques in pre-colonial Yorubaland was cloth-dyeing which in itself was an occupation exclusively conducted by the women folk. Within the Ilorin society during the pre-colonial period, embroidery or cloth-dyeing represented an industry that engaged the services of several groups of women who served in various capacities as factory workers, raw material suppliers, carriers, dye makers/mixers, embroidery designers, and hawkers as well as distributors/marketers of finished products. For each of the specialized aspects within the cloth-dyeing industry, the women in pre-colonial Ilorin were gainfully engaged, and through such practices, contributed to the process of economic growth of Ilorin. The dyed cloth materials produced in Ilorin were
distributed across the market centres in parts of Yorubaland and other parts of the Nigerian region. Clearly, this form of economic activity mainly conducted by women, certainly represented the effort of the women folk at contributing to the growth of pre-colonial Ilorin economy.

**Haggling and Negotiations:** The act of haggling was a practice characteristic of Ilorin commercial class. Most of the people that are involved in haggling often secure patronage in the major market centres as they loiter around for customers who would presumably require their services. Several Ilorin women folk, like their male counterparts, were involved in haggling during the pre-colonial period. It is a practice that has remained a peculiarity of the Ilorin economy up to the contemporary period. The haggler’s major task was to provide price negotiation services to customers mostly without request, and once such customer eventually purchased the items or goods so negotiated, the haggler would take his commission from the seller after the customer had departed from the trader. It should be noted that those that are often involved in haggling are usually people that do not have strong capital base to secure shops and stalls, and also those with bilingual or multilingual skills. Thus, beyond their role as price negotiators for prospective customers, the women that were involved in the task of haggling also served as intermediaries between buyers and sellers, and also served as interpreters mostly for non-Yoruba merchants in the various market centres in Ilorin.

**Livestock Production:** It is noteworthy that livestock production represented an important economic activity in Ilorin emirate during the pre-colonial period. The presence of several pastoral Fulani groups in the districts of Ilorin made cattle rearing a major occupation of Fulani and indeed non-Fulani settlers in Ilorin. Apart from cattle rearing, the livestock production industry also involved goat and sheep rearing, poultry farming as well as fishing. The level of Ilorin women participation in livestock production clearly showed that they were actively involved in cow tendering, and were directly involved in sheep and goat rearing as well as poultry farming. The Ilorin women also engaged themselves in the marketing of domestic animals and poultry products/brands such as eggs, hens, cocks and chickens which contributed substantially to domestic sub-sector of pre-colonial Ilorin economy.

**Sale of Foods and Confectioneries:** Within the social and economic setting of the pre-colonial Yoruba society, the task of food selling was predominantly that of the female population. Some of the major foods usually prepared and offered for sale included pounded yam (*iyan*), rice (*tuwo*), yam flour (*amala*), pap (*ogi and eko elewe*), bean cakes (*akara*), yam porridge (*asaro*), etc. Those that were engaged in food selling (i.e. food vendors) often specialized in a particular food, and patronage always depended on quality of food prepared. The practiced was not restricted to any particular ward as several food vendors within metropolitan Ilorin who were predominantly women saw the sale of food as a good economic enterprise during the pre-colonial period. At the initial stage, such foods were always hawked around by female attendants, but with population growth, there gradually arose the need to have permanent selling points called food bay or food centre (*iso / buka onje*). There is no doubt that through the activities of women food vendors, the food needs of the populace were met, and the tolls paid by
such women on periodic basis served as revenue source to the emirate’s treasury, and later to the Ilorin Native Authority by 1900 following the imposition of British rule (Elphistone, 1929).

**Cow milk/Cheese Production:** Within the agricultural industry, cattle rearing represent an important economic activity. As a region with a large proportion of Fulani migrant settlers, Ilorin became a centre for cattle production during the pre-colonial period. While the male folk often engaged in the task of rearing flocks, the women were involved in the extraction and processing of cow milk and other products from cattle. This shows that the cattle business in Ilorin as in other places has a wide range of sub-divisions one of which is cow milk/cheese production. Most of those women that were engaged in the cow milk extraction and processing business were of pastoral Fulani stock while the distribution or marketing/sale of such products in local and distant markets engaged the services of both Fulani and non-Fulani women merchants.

**Production and Marketing of Traditional Herbs:** The provision of adequate medical services was critical to the survival of the populace in any society. For pre-colonial Ilorin, the provision of healthcare services appeared quite important, especially as both the ruling elites and the masses required the services of medical experts for their healthcare needs. The pre-colonial Ilorin populace actually depended on the herb merchants who served as major healthcare providers that were commonly referred to as Alagbo for cure to most of the ailments that confronted the inhabitants of Ilorin. At a period when there were no modern hospitals, clinics/maternity centres, Ilorin people relied heavily on herb merchants who were predominantly women. Such traditional herb merchants also functioned as midwives during childbirths to ensure smooth and safe delivery. The economic value of such healthcare provisions/practices cannot be underestimated most especially when viewed from the perspective that it provided a means of livelihood for the practitioners; it was their primary economic activity; it brought them a stable income with which they could expand their enterprises and maintain their households; it provided healthcare services for the citizenry through which lives especially those of the working populace was preserved to enhance greater productivity; and that it provided gainful employment opportunities for women that were assigned into the health profession in the traditional or pre-colonial Ilorin society.

**The Contributory Credit Scheme:** The guild practice characterized most of the occupations in pre-colonial Yorubaland; it was equally a practice that featured in the commercial activities of Ilorin women. The specialized professions and the specific articles in which the women traded in actually determined the form of occupational guilds they belonged to; and in the same vein, each guild devised a viable contributory credit scheme whereby enough fund is generated for members to conduct their commercial or related activities. The usual practice in pre-colonial Ilorin and throughout Yorubaland was that such fund is accessed by or released to contributors on rotational basis to finance and promote expansion of their business activities (Raji & Abejide, 2013). Most members of the different occupational guilds, as was the case with the merchant class in pre-colonial Yorubaland, made use of the credit scheme provided through the Ajo or Esusu to run their trades and enterprises (Bascom, 1960). The proceeds of such contributory scheme assisted guild members to finance or expand their businesses. Since most of the guilds
were predominantly made of women merchants or entrepreneurs, the contributory credit scheme represented a major source of trade or business financing in pre-colonial Ilorin.

**Ilorin Women and the Blacksmithing Industry:** The blacksmithing industry was an important indigenous industry that engaged the services of different segments of the society and which contributed to the growth of the pre-colonial Ilorin economy. A variant of Ilorin traditions of origin states that the term ‘Ilorin’ was derived from Ilo-irin (that is a centre noted for richness in Iron Ore, and also where iron implements are produced). This gave the settlement of Ilorin its uniqueness and the advantage of establishing a tradition of blacksmithing in the region. It was noted that most communities in and around Ilorin during the pre-colonial period were farmers and accordingly they provide a ready market for these commodities (Abdullai Hameed, 2011).

It has been observed that the women folk often participate in most of the production processes involved in iron smelting. From the commencement of production, women are involved in gathering and setting the wood that were usually placed at the base of the grave’s heap before such is thrown into mud furnace expected to heat for about 4 days after which the slag is detached from the iron for actual moulding of objects such as hoes, knives, machetes, plates, diggers, traps, spoons etc to take place. With the support of the women folk, the industry produced a wide range of items used for diverse purposes. The products of blacksmithing usually start with the very tools they use. For example, they make such articles as hoes and cutlasses, hammer, anvil and chisels which are further employed in making other articles (Gambari, 2002).

In fact, many of the blacksmiths also engaged in agricultural production and sometimes took part in the game of hunting (Olaoye, 1990). It logically follows that the blacksmiths were kept busy all year round with the production of tools and implements. There are other artilleries such as knives (*obe*), and axe (*ake*) used in the home which were all produced by blacksmiths. They also produced weapons like guns, bows and arrows, spears and javelins often used as hunting implements as well as in wars as evidenced by the turbulent periods of the 19th century. The blacksmiths also made varieties of decorative articles, although such articles are not as common as those made in the brass industry. These include (*yeti*) earrings, *ileke* (a round shaped object used as a bracelet of rings) and *kundi* which was another decorative object won on the nose by sections of the society (Omosewo, 1987: 8).

The marketing and distribution of blacksmithing products in pre-colonial Ilorin seemed to have been conducted either in the local or external market centres. The women were always responsible for co-ordinating the sale of the products of Ilorin blacksmithing industry. Among the important markets or distribution outlets for Ilorin blacksmithing products were Ago market, Oja-Oba market, Baboko and Sango markets (Olaoye, 1990). All these markets were situated in metropolitan Ilorin and operated on daily basis. At neighbouring markets like Ganmo, Alapa, Aboto-Oja, Afon, Oloru, Kara, Bode Saadu, Share etc these products were in high demand.

The blacksmithing industry has contributed immensely to the social and economic advancement of those who engaged in it as a profession. The various items they produced as mentioned above enhanced their economic prospects and raised their social status within the pre-colonial setting. It should be stressed that several other occupations also depended on the products of the
blacksmithing industry. In fact, farming could not have been conducted successfully without hoes and cutlasses that were produced by blacksmiths. Thus, the blacksmithing industry in pre-colonial Ilorin appeared to have related with other occupations for the promotion of smooth socio-political and economic relations within the Nigerian region.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing has clearly shown that the process of economic relations in the Nigerian region during the pre-colonial period was co-ordinated by both male and female folks who were fully committed to the development of the traditional society. Although the emirate setting which Ilorin fused into as from the early 19th century was to restrict the women’s level of economic participation, the women folk in pre-colonial Ilorin seemed to have engaged themselves in a wide range of social and economic activities that proved vital to the survival of the emirate and its inhabitants. Some notable economic activities that engaged the attention of women in pre-colonial Ilorin included the local and long distance commercial network, weaving and dyeing, bead making and jewelries, iron smelting, agriculture, craft works, food processing, pottery and livestock production etc.

Perhaps, unlike the situation that obtained in some emirates within the Sokoto Caliphate where women were kept off the stage in terms of economic activities, the Ilorin women during the pre-colonial period were actively involved in various production processes that contributed to the growth and sustenance of the Ilorin economy. By all standards, the efforts of Ilorin women were to compliment that of the men which gave Ilorin economy the strength to support the emirate’s expansionist programmes and its elaborate administration especially during the 19th century. The pre-colonial women’s central role in the economy of Ilorin was to be sustained as the women folk remained relevant to the process of economic relations in Ilorin during and after the period of British colonial rule. Equally noteworthy is that the diverse forms of economic and production activities in pre-colonial Ilorin certainly engaged the support and services of the citizenry, and the survival of the state was based on the strength of its economy. The successful conduct of most of these economic activities in pre-colonial Ilorin depended largely on the women folk. It is also evident that such production processes and economic practices provided the state, individuals and groups with the resources to establish control over the society and contribute to its advancement, provided the ruling elite with a power base to exercise their authority effectively, and gave the right stimulus to the process of establishment and promotion of inter-group and inter-state relations. For Ilorin, and most of the kingdoms in the pre-colonial Nigerian region, the women folk through their high level of commercial activities occupied an important place in the political economy of the state. They participated in various forms of economic activities including those that involved production, manufacturing, catering service as well as exchange i.e trade and commerce. They were in fact actively involved in virtually all forms of economic activities that were conducted in the emirate.

It is therefore relevant to state that Ilorin women equally accounted for the high rate of economic growth witnessed by Ilorin emirate during the 19th century and indeed up to the era of British rule. The women played an equally important role in the process of economic transformation of
Ilorin as their participation in various forms of commercial activities did compliment the efforts of the men by which the emirate’s economy was able to rank high both among the pre-colonial Yoruba kingdoms and also among the emirates within the Sokoto Caliphate which made Ilorin to become an *entrepot* especially during the 19th century (Hogben & Kirk-Greene, 1966). Thus, at the point of British conquest and the imposition of colonial rule, Ilorin economy had witnessed a considerable amount of transformation which had been attained as a result of the active participation of women. Ilorin economy was probably one of the most prosperous among the emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate during the 19th century. Based on their role in various production processes and a wide range of commercial activities, the women folk appeared quite critical to the process of economic growth witnessed in the region most especially in the metropolitan districts of Ilorin emirate during the pre-colonial period.

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