

## Politics in Pre-Colonial Niger Delta: Reflections on the Role and Contributions of Women

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**Abstract.** Women all over the world are active members of society who have contributed immensely to the growth and development of their societies. In the Niger Delta, women have contributed in no small measure to the political development of the region. This paper therefore examines politics in pre-colonial Niger Delta with a focus on the role and contributions of women. In the Niger Delta, women seem to have been deprived of some political privilege in the past due to the patriarchal nature of the society. However, some prominent female personalities in pre-colonial Niger Delta played significant role in the development of their societies. This study adopts the use of primary and secondary sources of data in generating the required data. The multi-disciplinary approach was used and knowledge from related disciplines enriched the available historical data. The study reveals that women in the Niger Delta were actively involved in politics. Some of them held chieftaincy titles, served as priestesses to deities, served in the military and above all discharged political duties in their communities. Women also made their political contributions by indirectly influencing their husbands and male relatives on important matters and decision making. However, women in pre-colonial Niger Delta politics were not granted equal political opportunities as their male counterparts which negatively impacted on the overall participation of women in politics. The study therefore recommends equal political opportunities for both male and female folks in the region and political consciousness on the part of women.

**Keywords:** Women, Politics, Niger Delta, Pre-colonial

### 1. Introduction

Political organization in the pre-colonial Niger Delta societies was direct rather than representative. Most would agree that power was more evenly distributed and spread in direct democracies, as practiced in the pre-colonial Niger Delta societies. In representing democracies, only a minute fraction of the population sits in positions of power while in direct political organization or democracies every eligible member can directly influence decisions.

Woodburn (1982) asserts that greater equality of wealth, power, and prestige was achieved in pre-colonial societies. In his consideration, this equality is an opinion because pre-colonial societies have direct, individual access to resources, means of coercion, and mobility. All these factors equally limit imposition of control by one individual or another. Pre-colonial Niger Delta societies allowed much more participation of women in politics. However, in pre-colonial Niger Delta societies there was no operation like a general assembly where all members of the group can present an opinion on any discussion and attempted to sway the other members through persuasion. A leader in a particular situation may have no weight given to his or her opinion but he or she did not have any formal authority and cannot force the other members of the group to comply with his or her wishes (Awortu, 2018).

Moreso, the only potential stratification in political life was through age and sex. Regarding age, it was the older members of the group who often have more influence in informal discussions. Older members often have various suffixes added to their names which were an indication of leadership (Lee, 1979:349). Regarding sex differentials, Lee, (1982) noted that women participated less than the men did in group discussions, with men doing two third of the talking.

It is plausibly argued that although men did appear to have more influence in public matter, men and women were relatively equal in decision making (Lee, 1981). Nevertheless, there were some sort of violence against women in the society that might curb women's political participation, women were able to take up a leadership role and there were no conspicuous male solidarity adults. Members with better oratory skills or who were considered to have wisdom sometimes did have more influence in informal discussions. Since there was extremely weak sexual division of labour, women did enjoy higher status positions confirmed by their political presence and their participation in decision making with their husbands and took equal role in leadership during discussions. Bell (1993) asserts that women in pre-colonial societies would have had more actual power than we have known emphasizing in the separation of male spheres and the presence of female rituals. This assertion corroborated the finding of Horton, Kpone-Tonwe, and Okorobia (2003). The existence of female power in rituals and the separation of spheres would have given women more power in societal decision making.

## 2. Pre-colonial Niger Delta Politics

According to Awortu (2018) in pre-colonial Niger Delta of the earliest period, there were no formal separate and explicit political institutions and roles. However, what was important and available was a general consensus of the possession of governments-the mechanism for controlling societies by all of the Niger Delta. These mechanisms that help to maintain or create internal co-operation and cohesion like rituals, ceremonies or procedures that ensure a

periodical or occasional renewal of societies constitute the instruments of political action. An understanding of this concept of the nature of political action would demonstrate the useful content of the analysis of the women's political role which was usually exercised through informal mechanisms. Women's political roles, influence an authority in any society did definitely appear conspicuous or implicit in their involvement in the social, economic, and religious activities of the society as well as their explicit political roles (Awe, 1984).

## 3. Reflections on the role of women in pre-colonial Niger Delta Politics

In pre-colonial Niger Delta, women participated actively in politics to the extent that some of them took leading roles in their communities and kingdoms. For instance, In Itshekiri Kingdom women attained and demonstrated high ranking political power and positions. Princess Idocorusan, with the support and assistance of one of the head slaves, set up a council of state made up of mostly members of the royal family and prominent commoners. She presided over the council that appointed governors and consequently appointed a regent in the person of Prince Eri to the Itshekiri throne following the death of the governor. It is therefore important to assert that a woman played a crucial role, though she did not occupy the highest political office in the land which was actually barred to women, in the Itshekiri history.

According to Alagoa (2003), politics was one area which the men maintained open dominance in the Niger Delta and almost complete exclusion of women has sometimes been claimed. However, women made immense contributions in some Niger Delta societies. In public meetings of the Houses within the Eastern Delta city states, women expresse their community opinion and influence decisions. For instance, mothers and sisters of chiefs and kings played vital roles in determining the emergence of chiefs, warriors and in taking critical decisions. Alagoa (2003) opined that:

*King Ikata's war against Jike of Bille is stated to have been instigated in part by the taunts of his sister.*

In order to assert greater influence in the politics of their kingdoms and communities, women organize themselves into socio-political groups. The Egbele-Erema (women past the age of childbirth) was very influential in Niger Delta politics. According to Talbot (1932:30) in Okrika these women who had acquired the power of men, prevailed on the men to stop the ordering of women. In Kalabari kingdom according to Da-Wariboko (2003), Akaso constituted Egbele-Erema, to her cult as praise singers and divinely appointed her male priest who worked with a group of male attendants as assistants in her shrine. The males took charge of the ritual cooking and sacrifices while Egbele-Erema took care of the sanitary aspects. They also guided the female folk of the Kalabari society on Akaso laws, rites and taboos and did not hesitate to protest against any malpractice against the land by the male folk.

The Akaso religious influence in Kalabari made her to be particularly relevant and from time to time influence decision making processes. The spiritual powers acquired by Akaso also necessitated the respect she commands in Kalabari kingdom. Furthermore, Temena-Aro of Tema, Gbolodoka of Krakrama and Boloba of Kula were female spiritual leaders in their communities who contributed in no small measure to the religious and political spheres of their existence.

They were all women in various reputes and became deified heroines of their respective communities. They exerted their norms and taboos on the people and were not hesitant to punish offenders whenever any of their institutions was broken. They controlled both male and female folks in their communities (Da-Wariboko, 2003 and Sokari-George, 2006).

The Kalabari and Okrika examples as discussed above are clear testimony that women were very active in Niger Delta politics as individuals and groups. This corroborates the submission of Onwuzurike (2003) as thus:

*“The issue of politics and warfare fell squarely on the shoulders of men. However, the women also had women organizations and institutions through which they exerted some political*

*influence and protected the interest of both male and female in their societies”.*

Furthermore, in Kalabari, prominent female figures such as Okuma the mother of King Amakiri influenced Kalabari politics through her son’s position as king. Madam Oruguta of Iju-Jack House of Abonnema who competed with Kalabari men, founded her own War Canoe House and also established a chieftaincy stool. Ayimba-Orupumbu of Tariah House of Buguma who out of the proceeds of her trade, established her own House and chieftaincy stool and greatly influenced the politics of pre-colonial Buguma (Sokari-George, 2003).

Sokari-George (2003:321) further stressed that: *“By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Buguma, some women wielded enormous influence in the traditional political system. They include; Amadiba, Aguba-Boni, Ngeleba-Orubiyan and Sukuta. These women exercises large measure of authority not only on women but also among the male folk”.*

In Bille kingdom, it is recoded in her history that a woman founded the kingdom. According to Syer-Digbani (2003), Bille tradition credits Queen Ikpakiaba with the founding of Bille kingdom. Queen Ikpakiaba a brave warrior settled at Okolo-Bille with her husband King Okolokolo. With time factions developed around King Okolokolo and Queen Ikpakiaba and there were several unsuccessful attempts to dispose each other. Eventually, Queen Ikpakiaba murdered King Okolokolo and later led group of men who founded the present Bille town.

In Udekama a coastal community of Delta Edo group of language in Rivers State, women did not enjoy equality with the male folk, but could make political influence through institutions. Gabriel (2003) argues that; “the political system of the Udekama, though monarchical, provided women the opportunity to contribute significantly to the synthesis of the people’s way of life (Gabriel, 1994). Udekama Women attended meetings at the compound, family and town levels where they made useful contributions to issues debated upon and influenced the process of policy formulation to

their benefits. Women were appointed female spokesperson and representatives to the community general assembly and were granted equal opportunities as their male counterparts to speak on issues of community interest. Although the council of chiefs takes the final decision, women must be consulted before such decision is taken. During peace and conflict resolution, women were appointed into the peace emissaries and negotiations. Women with outstanding qualities and others who made outstanding contributions within the communities were well recognized as they complimented men's roles. Such recognition wielded an indirect influence on the male folk making their ideas readily considered during meetings at the various levels of Udekama politics (Gabriel, 2003).

Furthermore, it is pertinent to add that Udekama women also participated in religious activities which enabled some of them to serve as custodians of the powers of very powerful deities in the community. Gabriel (2003:172) corroborates the above when she argued that:

*“Women upheld the traditional religious practices of the Udekama in which they played important roles and ensured the continuity of the women's festival (Eyai Ivitam). The men folk did not consider the goddess Iziba and the ceremony as inferior. It was believed that the deity had solutions to diverse problems, most importantly that of fertility”.*

The priestess of Iziba deity was very powerful spiritually and politically. The chief and his council of elders always consult the priestess for important issues of community interest and development. This afforded the priestess some political powers to influence decisions in the community. It is pertinent to state that any individual or collective attempt to undermine the decisions of the priestess and the women celebration spelt doom on the community. Women to a large extent use the opportunity of the Iziba festival to influence and hold sway over the male folk. It was forbidden for men to see the women during procession on the first day of the celebration. Any defaulter had to appease the deity in order to avert unpleasant consequence such as blindness (Gabriel, 2003:172). Such misfortune from a deity under

the control of a woman as priestess made the male folk to consult women on political matters especially throughout the festival period.

In the Ijaw societies of the Niger Delta, a social structure of stateless village based societies existed before the Atlantic trade led to the development of the war-canoe house system (Jones, 1963), which Alagoa (1971) argues developed from the internal long distance trade. Among these societies, the war canoe house heads became far more powerful than any lineage or village head (Mba, 1982). There were never any female war canoe house head since women did not participate directly in the slave trading economy. Although they played substantially important roles in the war-canoe house system, it was not based on entirely membership of the same descent group but absorbed outsiders and slaves into it and got them assimilated (Mba, 1982:33) and women constituted the main sources and primary means for the assimilation process.

A very important question, how did the women constitute the primary means of assimilation? Predominantly, war canoe house heads married many wives to enhance the provision of enough women to do an adequate job of looking after the young slave brought into the war-canoe households (Horton, 1967:48). These adopted sons became close to their “mothers' kitchen houses” such that the mothers could further the fortunes of her house. The continuous development cycle of the war-canoe house system was deeply entrenched in the process of segmentation so that the greater households was divided into several sub households under the effective tutelage of each of the wives until the sons grew up and proceed to expand their own personal households. Thus, although women neither occupied the high political offices nor take part directly in the assembly of house heads, the highest decision-making and judicial body, they did exercise a significant indirect influence over those who make the decisions. However, Bonny presented an exceptionally different picture of women's involvement in political participation in pre-colonial Niger Delta contravening the conception or rule that women had never been monarchs or heads of houses.

Bonny history recorded that Queen Kambassa, the daughter of late King Asimini, returned home from Igboland, seized the Ivory tusk bearing her father's name and was accepted as Queen (Alagoa and Fombo, 1972:11). She launched a successful war against Ogoni over the control of the hinterland slave markets. But then, her successful execution into power and authority did not constitute an index of women's political power in Bonny because there was no other queen or head of households in Bonny or Niger Delta as a whole after Kambassa, while there was a general lack of any organization for the women to channel political activities. Their political participation was limited to the spheres of the domestic individual houses.

Another woman of influence in the Niger Delta was Queen Okuru of Bonny. She was the harem of King Awusa and as such, she used her position to influence and discuss state matters at will. According to Alagoa (1972), Queen Okuru during the Bonny and Andoni war used her influence to suggest to the King to appoint a young man of Bonny origin to lead and finance the wars which the king accepted. With such opportunity she nominated Perekule which the king appointed.

However, Queen Okuru extracted a fiat from King Awusa to abdicate the throne in the event of Perekule's success in the war with Andoni. The war ended in favour of Bonny and the rulership of Bonny was transferred to Perekule. The queen quickly married King Perekule and made herself the chief adviser. According to Jaja (2003), Queen Okuru through diplomacy and state-craft ensured not only that her friend, Perekule, became king of Bonny but that her two sons Fubara and Opubo succeeded to the throne of Bonny. She used her woman power and strong influence to change the political history of Bonny kingdom with the Perekules emerging as the ruling dynasty. Although, she did not emerge as the ruler of Bonny, however, she used her influence to make herself very relevant in Bonny politics. She contributed in no small measure to the social, political and economic development of Bonny as she is celebrated and deified with a shrine in Opobo to present.

In Opobo, Queen Osunji and Queen Ogbolo, King Jaja's wives made significant impact in the politics of the kingdom. However, the diplomatic attributes and friendly dispositions of Queen Osunji endeared her to the King and all those that came in contact with her. According to Jaja (2003), during the unsettled political situation in Bonny it was Osunji who brought the news of the plot to execute and set ablaze Jaja's House. She also saved vital documents of the Jaja's House in Bonny during the blaze. Queen Osunji diplomatically overthrew Queen Ogbolo and emerged as the powerful Queen after the death of Jaja in 1891 and the successive monarchs to the throne had come from the Osunji line. The contributions of Queen Osunji in Opobo kingdom made the people to approve a war canoe house for her. She therefore, became the first woman to win such an honour and privilege (Jaja, 2003:223). Both Queen Ogbolo and Queen Osunji contributed in no measure to the political development of Bonny and Opobo during the pre-colonial era of Niger Delta history.

In Niger Delta in particular and Africa in general it was difficult to separate politics from religion. Both were interwoven and as such those who held religious positions be it male or female, had some political influence on the king or ruler. According to Gabriel (1994) as priestesses and mediums, women promoted cordial relationship between the living, the ancestors, the deities and the "supreme deity". Through prayers and rituals the ancestors and deities were appeased to avert personal and communal crisis. This was the case of Epie-Atissa, Engenni and Ekpetiama in the Niger Delta. Women in these communities contributed to the political development of their communities especially those that served as priestesses of community deities.

According to Appah (2003) in Ekpetiama clan, the High God is Woyengi (our mother) and she is the Supreme Being and oversees all creatures; defends the defenseless and punishes the powerful and wicked. She is regarded as the Almighty, too pure and holy for human comprehension. It is pertinent to note that the Woyengi priestess because of the influence the deities asserts on the people, wielded so much

political powers in the community. With such powers, she controlled the excesses of the king and his council of chiefs and also prevented unwholesome practices that tend to oppress women and the poor in the society.

In Ogoni kingdom of Rivers State, the pre-colonial era of her political history was more of the role played by women than men. According to Kpone-Tonwe (2003), in pre-colonial Ogoni, Gbenekwanwaa, Gbebebyaana, Zah, Baryaayoo and Gbenebeka were all women who facilitated the migration of the people and their spread across their present settlement. The matrilineal system of pre-colonial Ogoni society is the reason why up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century men did not have their own children rather they took care of their sisters children. It was based on this matrilineal arrangement that Queen Gbenekwanwaa died and the succession was passed to her daughter Zah who ruled at Gure as Gbenezah until her death.

Kpone-Tonwe (1990:77) and Gibboona (1932) opined that Gbenezah ruled Ogoni so well that the people gave her the name “Mother of Ogoni or Mother of the World”. After her death, her famous daughters, granddaughters and great granddaughters were Gbeneyaana, who established the powerful dynasty at Luawii and Gbenebeka, who emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the glamorous beauty Queen with tremendous influence on the people throughout Ogoni land until the colonial times.

The reign of these queens in Ogoni resulted to population explosion, expansion of Ogoni territory, peace and stability, economic growth and strong spiritual powers. The queen that ruled Ogoni prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century wielded strong spiritual and political powers making present day chiefs and politicians throughout Ogoni to seek for strong spiritual powers from them. The matrilineal system ended after the Baan war of the 17<sup>th</sup> century which made women not to live with anyone apart from their husbands due to lack of protection during the war; it marked the beginning of patrilineal system in Ogoni society.

Andoni women also contributed immensely to the pre-colonial development of the Niger Delta

especially through the magical power they acquired. Aman-Obolo a female deity in Andoni has very strong religious and political influence on the people through the priestess. The priestess influences the religious and political institutions. According to Ejitiwu (1991 & 2003) in Andoni during war times women of menopause age were veritable soldiers of Yok-Obolo. Through the performance of certain rituals, she could be a source of strength to the fighting men as well as keeper of the arsenal. These ultimately conferred on such women a quality of warlikeness not different from that of the man. With such powers women influenced the politics of Andoni. For instance, Asakala a very strong aged woman of Unyeada saved her community from the danger of surprise attack from Bonny and she was honoured and made a strong political figure.

Ejitiwu (2003), further stressed that:

*“Aman-Obolo the female deity in charge of women affairs, whose rules governing the relations between men and women in Andoni culture and history, checkmates those of Isi-Ebikan; and in so doing gave Andoni women some room to maneuver politically. The injunction of Aman-Obolo that says women must not be killed in war and men accepted without objection is a case at hand”.*

In Oduval, the various political institutions were dominated by men but such situation did not prevent the women from participating in politics. Women did not attend village meetings except on invitation but made suggestions and influence decision through their husbands. The village assembly was the highest legislative body. Laws made were executed and implemented by the *Ola-ema* and his council of elders to be enforced by the youths and women leaders. Violators were severely punished according to the laws of the land (Michael, 2011). The *Onu-Erol* society provided women the opportunity to be involved in politics. Women as members of these societies played important role in resolving disputes and enforcing law and order especially among the female folk. Apart from the executive role they played, the societies also acted as a final court of appeal in civil or minor criminal matters.

Although women were not allowed active participation in the politics of Odual, prominent women such as Mrs Warigbani Ogiri, and Mrs. Egham Okowa who served as Priestesses of Oba Abo deity in Odual made significant impact in the pre-colonial politics of Odual. As custodians of the spiritual powers, these women influenced the political affairs of their communities. On the other hand, majority of the women who were not privileged to attend community meetings relied on their husbands, women leaders or the town crier (*Otimokele*) for information. Although women were not politically active, they played influential roles as most of the decisions taken and issues raised in town halls during meetings were issues discussed at home between them and their husbands or male adult relatives (Michael, 2016).

#### **4. Contributions of Women to the Pre-Colonial Politics of the Niger Delta**

In traditional Niger Delta society, there was a profound diffusion of political power and therefore power was not concentrated in a single individual or at one level of authority warranting the exercise of political powers and authorities among various socio-political institutions with power bases. This is to contend that traditional Niger Delta societies operated multiple bases of power or multi-polarity concept of power. Among these multiple male dominated power bases or socio-political institutions with political power bases were Ekine Society of Kalabari, Okosutu Owubo among the Izon, Ofiokpo among the Andoni as well as the female counterparts or parallel organizations like the Egbele Erene among the Kalabari, and Amanobolo among the Andoni which performed various socio-cultural and political functions in the governance of early Niger Delta. The predominant women organizations constituted a system of women's government, which in all intent, and purposes did perform political functions. Moreover, the female dominated organizations tend to effectively employ group solidarity and organized pressure methods in projecting the interest of the women as wives, mothers and members of the community (Uneh, 2006).

In Bille kingdom, Queen Ikpakiaba controlled the political and religious institutions of the town. Her political influence on the people was very strong to the extent that the rival folk could not contend with her. She made great men of the town known as Opus to pledge their loyalty to her. The fear of Queen Ikpakiaba was the beginning of wisdom. Her major achievement was the founding of present Bille town and the liberation of her people from the influence and control of King Okolokolo.

According to Awortu and N-Ue (2018) another important organ of traditional government in early Niger Delta political organization where the contributions of the women was significant and popular was the oracles and gods of the land. There were the gods under the control of priests (men) and the goddesses under the charge of the priestesses (women), and the latter performed important rituals for the community as well as being responsible for the cleansing of the land and such sacrifices that ensure bumper harvest. They also decided on the nature of sanctions to be imposed on both males and female that contravenes the rules and regulations of the land or commits abomination.

The traditional importance of women is common when considering the silent influences of the women on their husbands, sons, brothers and sometimes, fathers. Politics, indeed, one sphere of life where men pervades with their unwarranted dominance. Even in the face of this gross open domination by the men, it is recorded in historical studies of Niger Delta communities that women expressed their combined opinion and influenced decisions in the public meetings of the Houses within the Eastern Delta city-states (Alagoa, 2003:41). Such important historical influences of mothers, wives and sisters of chiefs and kings of Eastern Niger Delta city-states are commonly recounted in the traditions of these city-states. In furtherance of his discovery of the exercise of the influence of women on political decisions, in the Eastern Niger Delta city-states, Alagoa (2003) noted that in the Nembe Kingdom, King Ikata's war against Jike of Bille reported to have been due to, in part, the instigation of his sister. Noticeably, female influence became most

effective when it was exerted through organized group. Such was the case of the Egbele-Eremoor women who had attained menopause, whom Talbot (1932) called “women historians who in 1915 in Okrika, acquired the power of men, caused all the trouble, prevailed on the men to halt the advance of colonial agents, ordered the men to perform certain sacrifices to the national deity, *Fenibeso*, which led to the difficulties with the colonial authorities.

There is an important dimension to the role of women in the politics of pre-colonial Niger Delta. It is the argument that women in the political history of the region acted in clandestine manner and controlled the male leaders in their deliberations at city council meetings and decisions taken (Sokari-George, 2003:318) and as clandestine advisers to their husbands, sons, fathers, and/or brothers since the advisory position was not institutionalized. However, the present writer would contend that the perceived clandestine theory is derogatory and also falling out of line, why? It is very pertinent to note that there has not been any historical work that recorded any institutionalized sort of advisory framework in any of the Eastern Niger Delta city-states or societies in the traditional government of those communities so that the leadership was always at liberty to sort out its advisers. Secondly, the writer would also contend that the description of the advisory role of women as clandestine is derogatory because there was no officially appointed adviser or advisers performed the advisory role to the public glare. It is a reasonable argument, therefore, to contend that women performed their advisory functions as the institutionalized framework and in line with societal prescriptions and conditions.

In the light of the above analysis, it is relevant at this juncture, to highlight one or two such roles. In the Kalabari tradition, it was projected that the mother of Prince Seliye-Fubara was the architect of her son’s decline to ascend to the throne of Amanyanabo of Elem-Kalabari in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was partly for fear of early death being aware of the implications of participating in the volatile and sensitive Kalabari Kingship and traditional politics; and,

partly because she did not want her son to venture into the capital intensive endeavour of kingship characterized by regular ceremonies of elaborate rituals, feasting and offerings to appease the gods, goddesses as well as ancestral and water spirits (Sokari-George, 2003:318).

Another woman with recorded fundamental influence over her son was the legendary Ine-Okuma, the mother of King Amakiri the first who wielded profound and immense influence on her son Amakiri the first after the political career of the king whose period of reign was identified with territorial expansion and unification of the city-state (Sokari-George, 2003:319). She was referred to as the king mother and her spirit is invoked along with the apical deities as the underpinning powers sustaining life and progress in Kalabari.

However, there existed an inherent traditional system in the Kalabari traditional political history like her neighbours in the Niger Delta that the traditional council of chiefs did not have a space for the woman as well as not having the traditional qualification to do libation for their ancestors or gods and lacked access to the royal shrine where chieftaincy installations among others are done. According to Sokari-George (2003) this is based on the idea that women have polluting and desecrating effect by virtue of their sex. Therefore, women under such trado-cultural constraints could not have been installed as traditional rulers in their houses or communities. This is what Ali Mazrui called “malignant sexism” as pervasive and insidious; it subjects women to economic manipulation, sexual exploration and political marginalization.

Looking at the above political roles of women and the contributions they made in the Niger Delta, Ejitiwu and Gabriel (2003) summarized thus;

*“Women in the Niger Delta judging from the available evidence have demonstrated that they are not inferior to the men. They may be the weaker sex, but that is only strength: spiritual, intellectual, political, mystical, the woman is not inferior to the men”.*

Pre-colonial Niger Delta women, occupied a complementary position rather than subordinate to men. Sex segregation and sex roles existed in

many spheres of society enabling women control their affairs. Right from time, the Niger Delta societies recognized their rights as partners in the administration of the Niger Delta societies giving vent to the dual sex political system commonly accepted by the whole society (Uneh, 2006). It is a point of historical fact without doubt that in the House Rule system in pre-colonial Niger Delta, women of outstanding ability, sagacity, influence, and wealth among the Niger Delta communities could take part in the deliberation of important issues (Uneh, 2006 and Alagoa, 2003). The above pre-colonial political roles and contributions of women have shown that they have the capacity to make greater political impact in contemporary Nigerian Society.

## 5. Conclusion

Our consideration of the role of women in the early political development of the Niger Delta has led to the inescapable conclusion that women's roles in these arenas constituted giant strides and established a framework for historical analysis and explanations. This paper helps to affirm the contention that Niger Delta women created history and demonstrated their potentials as agents of history as well as constituting a powerful force that profoundly impacted significant historical developments on their societies. The paper has shown that the women folk contributed in no small measure to the development of the Niger Delta political economy.

The paper has convincingly demonstrated that early Niger Delta society, beginning from the hunting and gathering period, had a complementary social formation to the extent that whatever was obtained in the society in its development process was the collective involvement of both sexes. Though there was some sort of roles differentiation based on sex, there were no traits of subordination and marginalization.

The study also established that the assumption of the traditional role assigned to women as mothers has been quantified. The influence of women permeated the whole realms of society life. The paper also reveals that the women were

agents of cultural and political integration and innovation, acted as stabilizing agents of society, and vehicles of political development and historical heritage.

The study further demonstrated that women were agents of production and reproduction, and has become appropriate for the retention and continuation of the Niger Delta societies. Women were neither oppressed nor ignored whether they exerted enormous influence and seem protected and their roles venerated. Women were able to accomplish things, attained political heights, achieved feats and performed functions, which seemingly appeared to be the prerogatives of the men.

The thesis established in this study is that sex roles segregation often enabled women to control their own affairs. In the political economy of the early Niger Delta societies, there was no clear-cut sexual division of labour in production and political issues, it was fluid. Politically, however, they were members of the society and would have to subject themselves to communal government. In view of political offices, political decision-making, executive and judicial functions, and political representation, they made significant impact in the politics of their communities. Moreso, the question of equality of both sexes is not relevant to the recognition of the roles and contributions of the womenfolk to the development of the overall Niger Delta Society, which constitute the corpus of this study.

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