

**GENDER ROLES AND WOMEN LABOUR  
IN PRE-COLONIAL BENIN**

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**Abstract**

*This study discusses gender roles and women labour in Pre-colonial Benin. African gender scholarship is increasingly gaining traction, and the appropriation of gender to women's history in the Pre-colonial period is substantiated in the right to inheritance, succession, title holding, ritual worship and other cultures. Benin oral tradition is replete with accounts of cultural sensitivity to gender roles and women labour and this has been interpreted by some writings as the masculinization of women's history. The study therefore addresses this phenomenon by explicating the dimensions of gender roles in Pre-colonial Benin, with reference to women's labour as situated in culture. Using primary and secondary sources of data, the study adopts the gender theory to show how women in Pre-colonial Benin negotiated their roles within the ambits of societal expectations. Findings from the study revealed that women generally participated in domestic activities that did not often require any form of specialization. However, as was the case with agriculture, there existed a division of labour according to gender and specialization in manufacture, art and craft production. Admittedly, gender specificity was more prominent in areas of male dominance which were enabled by cultural structures that inhibited female enterprise.*



**Key words:** Pre-colonial, Benin, Gender, Women, Labour,

## **Introduction**

The name Benin represents the major city of the Benin people, which is also the administrative headquarters of the Benin Kingdom, and of the Empire. It also connotes the people, their language and kingdom as well as the Empire status which the kingdom attained during the reign of its warring Obas. The kingdom of Benin which started out as a small community and grew to become a vast Empire was particularly known for its farming skills and artistry. Benin kingdom grew out of the previous Kingdom of Igodomigodo ruled by the Ogiso (kings of the sky), and lasted until it was annexed by the British Empire in 1897. Women's roles in Pre-colonial Benin were highly domesticated and cultural expectations of their social performance were significantly tied to family functions of home care and child-raising. Outside of the family unit, women's economic engagement was in the areas of agriculture, trade and local manufacture. Nevertheless, the nature of the division of labour according to gender in Benin kingdom clearly delineated the areas of specialty of both gender. As a consequence, similar to what obtained in agricultural production; women were dominant in supplying labour in most production activities. Within the context of political, economic and social realities, and even in the arts which appear in symbolic forms, culture was a performative determinant associated with women's roles in Benin kingdom. The study following the introduction uses the gender theory to delineate societal expectations of women and their roles in Pre-colonial Benin. Other areas of the study are on gender roles and women rights to succession, inheritance and title holding in Pre-colonial Benin, as well as, gender roles and women labour in Pre-colonial Benin. The study concludes that the social expectation of women driven by culture defined the level of women's engagement and agency in Pre-colonial Benin.

## **Theoretical Framework of Analysis**



Gender, implies a socio-cultural construct in which meanings are assigned to biology. The sex-gender system is therefore seen as the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity.<sup>1</sup> Masculinity and femininity are seen as components of gender roles which include cultural expectations about behavior and appearances associated with the status of man or woman in the western model of sexes. In the same vein, gender also implies the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being a male or female. It is a cultural construction and system of meanings with multiple dimensions including gender identity, one's sense of self-awareness as a woman, boy or girl; to greater or lesser degrees, and/or as an additional or in-between gender.<sup>2</sup> In gender theory<sup>3</sup>, gender essentialism<sup>4</sup> is used to examine the attribution of distinct, fixed, intrinsic qualities to women and men. The gender essentialist claim of biology theorizes that gender differences are rooted in nature and biology. Historical views based on gender essentialism claim that there are biological causes for the differences between men and women, such as women giving birth and men going out and hunting. Social constructionism<sup>5</sup> is the view that gender is socially constructed. It holds that characteristics typically thought to be immutable and solely biological, such as ability, are products of human definition and interpretation, shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Gender theory creates a distinction in the meaning and usage of the term gender in its contextual forms. It's relation to human biologically assigned status, personal and social identities are its core interest. The theory will therefore help to situate gender connotation in person (either male, female,), based on their reproductive roles and their social identity (the role they play in society and society's expectation of them based on their assigned biology and identity). Gender theory is therefore applicable to this study as it helps to understand how culture assigned meanings and status to roles of the female gender in Pre-colonial Benin.

### **Gender Roles and Women's rights to Succession, Inheritance and Title Holding in Pre-Colonial Benin**



Benin kingdom has traditionally been described as patriarchal and the culture as documented has been interpreted as patriarchal in its overall views of women. Marital, inheritance and succession laws favored men and women existed under much stricter laws of sexual behavior than men. Women in Benin kingdom were always subject to strict purity rules, both ritual and moral. Nevertheless, the validity and appropriateness of patriarchy to designate both families and society have recently been challenged. Multiple sources from third-wave feminists and social theorists have provided compelling reasons for abandoning the patriarchy model as an adequate or accurate descriptor for pre-colonial societies. Recent scholarship accepts the presence of patriarchy in Benin, but shows that heterarchy was also present. Heterarchy acknowledges that different power structures between people can exist at the same time; that each power structure has its own hierarchical arrangements and that women had some spheres of power of their own separate from men. In Benin kingdom, there are hierarchies of queens and princesses. The most senior of the Oba's wives (*Iloi*) have titles (*egie-ilo*) which fall into two groups. *Eghaev*o headed by the senior *Eson* and *egie-egbe* (body titles) headed by *ehioba*. Some of the titles representing parts of the body of the Oba and praises include: *Eson*, *Ohan*, *Ehi*, *Egbe*, *Aro*, *Obazuaye*, *Obazuwa*, *Uhe* and others. The queens, who bore body titles were said to be the most loyal, loved and trusted. In the past they were laid to rest with the Oba on his passing. Each queen knew only her ritual obligations to the Oba and her performance of it was in secret. It was solely the decision of the Oba to award the body titles and number of such to be made. For example, one of queens of Oba Akenzua II was named *Ehi*, signifying his "guiding spirit" and identifying with the part of his body at the nape of his neck, and another queen's title *Ohan*, and the body part associated with her title was the forehead. Akenzua II was known to also bestow titles for his eyes, hands and feet. The *ilo*i did not however, play any overt role in the affairs of the kingdom outside certain ritual contexts. The *Uvbi(s)* are the princess(es) and daughters of the reigning and past Obas. They are forever referred to as *Uvbi(s)*. In Benin when you say *Eson*, that



is the first wife of the Oba, we have other *Eson*, we also have *Ohinokhua*, the most senior daughter of the Oba among other daughters.<sup>6</sup>

This scenario likely creates a gender balance; however, if we acknowledge that Benin kingdom was a gendered society, it is safe to consider gender on two premises: nature and culture, as distinct from heterarchy. Ekhaton-Obogie responds to this assertion. “The generalization that Benin was a masculine society but was not in entirety patrilineal holds truth. Women played roles. Society is termed patrilineal because we align to male heads in the family. In some cases, offspring’s had to rely on their maternal side. If a man left his paternal family to his maternal family, he assumed the roles of his maternal side and this has not been discussed a lot”.<sup>7</sup> While women were not generally in the forefront of public life, women who are mentioned in Benin history are usually prominent for outstanding reasons. There are those who were influential in socio-political structures, queen mothers, like the *Iyoba* (Idia ne Iyoba, the first Iyoba);<sup>8</sup> and Queen Iden, among others.<sup>9</sup> Women were involved in a variety of production activities. These included: domestic work, agriculture, trade and craft production. Women’s reproductive roles were also tied to the reproduction of labour force.<sup>10</sup> Benin indigenous marriages were highly polygamous, a system probably designed to fit into the economic lifestyle of the people. Being mainly subsistence farmers who were used to the methods of shifting cultivation by hand implements; the people needed large family units to provide an effective labour force. Women were married into households and lineages to bear offspring for the pride and prestige of male heads. Both wives and children were social and economic assets to males. As a result, the fertility of a woman was considered crucial for the survival of the household. Consequently, one of the factors that determined a woman’s status undoubtedly was whether she had children or not. Ogbomo observes that it is in the reproductive sphere of the household that the primary relations of subordination and domination between both sexes is located.<sup>11</sup> In terms of gender differentiation, Benin kingdom was gendered and there was a clear differentiation in male and female roles”<sup>12</sup>



Admittedly, women's role as child bearers placed them in a position for male exploitation; be that as it may, it was a recognized fact that without women, there was no possibility of male children who would inherit the patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system, and it was also through childbirth that household heads obtained daughters who were factors in labour power. Ebohon states that "but for the fact that the Benin people know that it is through women they can multiply, the birth of a female child could have been regarded as an abomination"<sup>13</sup> Arguably, it was difficult to measure male recognition of women's importance, nevertheless, women's roles as agents of regeneration of the family was well acknowledged but how this acknowledgement translated into fair treatment of women varied from one family to the other.<sup>14</sup>

A logical outcome of women's childbearing role was the assignment of the job of childcare and the complex activities associated with the daily maintenance of the labour force through domestic labour.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, it does account for the nature in which women's work was highly demanding but regarded as unpaid labour. Hence the domestication of women's activities was considered of less value as when compared to male engagement that attracted some form of compensation. In any case, for women, economic rewards are good, but the wellbeing of her family was paramount. Other categories of women who enjoyed relatively distinguished status within the household were grandmothers, mothers-in-law, midwives, healers and diviners. Ekhaton-Obogi says "there were women priests, herbalists and gynaecologists".<sup>16</sup> On priesthood Benjamin Naziegbe asserts that "in the area of ancestral worship, men were in charge but religious rites and deification was not restricted to a particular gender, both genders had their role to play. Priesthood was the right of both sexes in Edo culture. There was no absolute separation in this regard. It was thus possible to find both gender acting as native doctors, priests and priestesses".<sup>17</sup> The Iguezigbon (Chief Palace Diviner) of Benin Kingdom assents that most of the shrines in Benin kingdom are headed by women, because the power is bestowed on them by the Oba.<sup>18</sup> Ben Omuemu corroborates that there are priestesses in charge of shrines



in Benin kingdom and they come to the palace on the request of the king. In certain shrines for the Oba, women are in charge, not men. Only women can perform certain things that we cannot talk about, they are very important.<sup>19</sup> Edugie Iyama commenting further opines that female priestesses work hand in hand with the men, but when they are needed to perform their rituals, they are invited, they don't have their section in the palace. They are outside of the palace. It is the male priests that are resident in the palace.<sup>20</sup> Among women in the ritual and spiritual world like priestesses, some were traditional midwives and herbalists and they treated the female worshippers. There were women attached to the palace like the royal singers. They chant various traditional songs and music when the Oba is having ceremonies. Some were not priestesses but were just traditional singers. Some of them get titles not as Benin chiefs but within the society they belong to in the palace.<sup>21</sup> Midwives were respected for their significant role in childbirth and some of them combined the function of delivering babies with that of circumcision surgeons. For their services, they were paid with yams, cocoa yams, pepper, palm oil and other products.

Women were also believed to command considerable informal influence and authority over their children. It was common to see a mother disappointed when a child was not living up to her expectations. In such circumstances, women did exercise the power of motherhood to ensure compliance on the part of their children. Omoregbe emphasizes that language was a form of educating children by the women. Mothers warned their children not to steal, as anyone who was found stealing would be disgraced with a ring of snail shells around the person's neck, hitting the gong and chanting *oyi* (thief), and because of the stigma associated with such, mothers employed the use of the Benin language as a form of communication to instill discipline in their children.<sup>22</sup> Hierarchy and dominance was also a crucial point for women in the household as there was clear differentiation in age and class. Benjamin Omuemu speaks of this assertion, he concurs that "women play their roles and there are hierarchies of queens and princesses, and also in the



family unit”.<sup>23</sup> Older women enjoyed a higher status as they were in a position to control the labour of younger men and women. For instance, senior wives in a polygamous home encouraged their husbands to marry younger wives so as to free them from the burden of taking care of members of the household. Younger brides were put in the care of one of the senior wives who became her mistress and her activities were completely regulated by her mistress. Under a system of primogeniture, succession rights to property, hereditary titles and ritual duties pass to the eldest son. A woman cannot be crowned King or Oba. A woman cannot be titled an Odionwere or the community head. A Benin adage says *Okhuo i rhioba vbe Edo* (a woman cannot be crowned king in the kingdom) A woman cannot be selected or nominated as a member of the elder’s council. In traditional Benin society, women were not to be heard but to be seen. Women were by the norms to remain under the control of their husbands.<sup>24</sup> Omuemu confirms that women are not conferred with titles in Benin. Women are presented with beads by the Oba as a sign of honour.<sup>25</sup> The Iguezigbon of Benin Kingdom argues that “in some cultures women are given titles, they sit among the men, but ours is quite different. That is why the woman is honoured in Benin. Women don’t talk randomly whenever they are in the midst of men, it doesn’t mean they don’t know how to talk, but it was to safeguard their dignity as a woman”.<sup>26</sup> Ebohon’s writing has it that aforetime, women in Benin were regarded as ‘inferior class of citizens’ as after the death of Oba Ewuare, almost everything became women tabooed.<sup>27</sup> He claims that even though these taboos seemed to have been eluded, there were still restrictions that time, events and even European incursion did not remove- which explains why women can never be enthroned monarchs. The natural law that women should not rule in Benin came into existence about 1473.

After the death of Ewuare the Great, his eldest son Ezoti who was to be crowned was hit by a poisoned arrow on his coronation day. Owere, the eldest son of Ezoti was murdered by Ozolua the third son of Ewuare in order that he, Ozolua might be crowned Oba. He was banished and Olua, the second son of Ewuare refused to be crowned for fear of being





assassinated.<sup>28</sup> It was on the ground of the succession tussle that the Binis decided Edeleyo, the eldest daughter of Ewuare should be crowned Oba. On her investiture with the title of *Edaiken*, the first ritual step of the coronation, she was clothe in full royal regalia on her way to *Uselu*, however, she fell very ill. She was covered by the guards, to avoid exposure that the Oba was subject “to illness of mortals” the spot of her death is honoured as the *Ogbe-Edeleyo* (Edeleyo’s shrine), a sacred legendary shine, to which every *Edaiken* must pay homage to. It was after her death, it became a rule by tradition that no woman should ever reign in Benin.<sup>29</sup> In the case of Edeleyo who was to be crowned an Oba, “on her way to Uselu, she began menstruating. Something happened to her which is forbidden to be told. She was believed to have polluted the place because the regalia and ornaments she had on were all ritual and spiritual embodiments that one should not corrupt”.<sup>30</sup> The rule of descent is patrilineal. Children are affiliated to the person to whom their mother is married or betrothed; from whom they inherit, and to whose title, if any, the eldest surviving son succeeds. An exception to this rule is found in some cases where the holder of a title has daughters but no sons. By arrangement with the senior daughters’ husband, one of her sons may be adopted by her father and made his heir and successor. Although not a universal rule, in many instances the title passes in the absence of sons, to a brother or more remote agnate of the deceased holder. It was however a common practice for sons-in-law who had a number of sons to send one of them to their wife’s father to be brought up by him and to act as his servant but that did not usually affect his affiliation to his father’s lineage.<sup>31</sup>

Speaking on inheritance, Bradbury asserts that a man’s food and cash crops, movable goods and wealth were divided between the senior sons of his wives who were expected to make gifts out of them to their own full brothers. The house in which the father lived passes to the senior son who validated his claim to pass it on to his own son by bearing the greater part of the cost of his father’s mortuary rites.<sup>32</sup> Bradbury further asserts that the senior son had no legal obligation to share the inheritance with



any of his siblings, though he was morally expected to make gifts out of it to them.<sup>33</sup> Widows who had children were generally free to return to their families or to marry whom they chose. Those without children were inherited in the same way as ‘movable property’ and the senior son inherited his father’s rights as a suitor. Where there were no sons, a man’s younger brothers became his heirs. A woman’s property was also inherited in the same way except that her daughters could receive a share in her household utensils, clothes and if she had no children, her brothers and sisters were her heirs. A woman cannot succeed her late father in terms of his position in the family or act in her father’s stead by virtue of whatever title he holds in public space. The reason is because females were groomed for marriage and that transcends to the impression that she is now of another family with her children.<sup>34</sup>

### **Gender Roles and Women Labour in Pre-colonial Benin**

Women in Pre-colonial Benin were very industrious even though the burden of homecare and child-raising was on them. They engaged in cloth weaving and hair plaiting.<sup>35</sup> Women were excellent in pottery and they covered a wide range of it. They could craft the shape of humans; make water pots, cooking, and spiritual pots with shrine decorations, but with different variations. Apart from pots, women made beads, calabashes and maracas.<sup>36</sup> They also did raffia works and wove caps like was done in other tribes. They were great farmers, some would plant cassava, some were creative in making home utensils and they became famous for it. They cultivated crops like pepper, groundnut, garden eggs, and they processed cassava into garri and starch. According to Ebohon in an interview, “the Benin woman is equal to three and a half European women” he gave reasons. “The woman pulls a string of children, may be pregnant at the same time and caters to the needs of her husband and family while working”.<sup>37</sup> The native butter for the treatment of various ailments including whitlow and boils was made by women. It was made out of fermented melon seeds. It could be used in delicacies such as *owho*. It was also used to mellow the harshness in soups. Women made black



oil from palm kernel. It is highly spiritual and was used to treat different ailments, the *edi*, coconut oil which was the only known body lotion, although black oil was also applied on the skin with a very pleasant aroma were women's creations.

The primary division of labour was based on factors other than biology. Uyilawa Usuanlele comments that communal labour permeated most aspects of social life and as a result, the primary division of labour was based on age and sex. Farming was the dominant economic activity of the people. Agricultural production revolved around an adult male. It centred on the production of yams primarily the responsibility of males, while the other crops were the responsibility of females amongst whom the farm was shared.<sup>38</sup> Yam farming was essentially men's work and women assisted in weeding, planting, and the whole labour supply mobilized for harvest. Corn was generally planted in rows between the yams and plantain; cocoyam, okra, rice, groundnuts, peppers, melons, gourds, beans, and other vegetables were generally owned, planted, tended and harvested by women. Some men gave their wives seeds to plant for their own profit, however, from her own crops, the woman was expected to supply the needs of her husband and children but she was free to dispose of any surplus for her own advantage.<sup>39</sup>

On labour, Nazigbe says as it affects farming operations, it could be seen as major and minor. The major farming operations include: clearing the bushes; felling the big trees; burning the farmland and clearing the debris; planting the yams; stacking and clearing the weeds; harvesting the yam and tying them on the yam barn. These are very difficult and strength draining activities, and in reality, women were excluded from engaging in them. Regarding the minor labour which includes: planting crops such as maize, okra; melon, pepper, garden egg, vegetables and potatoes which required less physical exertion, culture required women to engage in such activities, especially to make allowance for women, for the fact that they are mothers who were involved in domestic functions as well as in the upbringing of their children.<sup>40</sup> Some of the above crops could also



be grown by both men and women to supplement household food supplies and for sales in the local market. Women coordinated the short distance trade. Men's roles were to provide security. Women were major traders in domestic trading, they bought the goods, they knew the way to the markets and they knew the market days.<sup>41</sup> There was separation of labour between both gender. Apart from farming, labour generally was gendered. Women did not clear grasses, it was a male activity. They could not cut grasses on road paths or to brush the farm when it was been prepared for farming. They were not allowed to fell trees, nor could they burn the bushes, however, they could remove the debris and the stumps after they were cleared. Omoregbe argues that the exclusion of women from certain traditional responsibilities was because society saw them as natural roles women should not play. The Benin culture reserved women the rights to certain responsibilities that they were naturally endowed to fulfill. So they believed by nature and by creation, some duties were naturally not the responsibility of women.<sup>42</sup>

All men set traps on their farms and most had locally manufactured guns. There were specialist elephant hunters, and other groups had the duty of catching and keeping leopards for sacrifice. The collection of wild bush products and of snails and tortoises which forms an important part of protein diet was in the hands of women. Women and their children were responsible for supplying the household with wood and water.<sup>43</sup> Another sector of the economy that was of critical importance was the production of art and craft. Craft and indigenous production included metal work, leather work, carpentry and carving, textile and fibre weaving, pottery, processing of dyes, cosmetics medicine and food processing.<sup>44</sup> The craft guilds were meant to serve and supply the needs of the Oba. There were the brass-workers (*Igun eromwon*), blacksmiths (*Igun ematon*) and carpenters (*Owinna*), leather workers (*Isekpokin*), doctors (*Iwegie*) and store keepers (*Iweoghene*), drummers (*Ikpema*) and dancers (*Esonokwa*), leopard hunters (*Iviakpen*), butchers (*Ivekpen*) and many more.<sup>45</sup> Outside the royal guild of drummers, there were cases when an individual was to be titled chief, a virgin girl between ages twelve and thirteen



strapped in white wrapper would carry the *Ube* drum (single membrane drum) on her head and an elderly woman who was past menstruation would beat the drum until they arrived at their destination. Any woman within the age of menstruation could not carry this drum or beat it. It was in commemoration of the occasion of a chieftaincy. It was only carried by a girl once in her lifetime.<sup>46</sup> Transfer between guilds was permitted. For example, if a man from the leather workers guild married a wife from the blacksmiths' guild and had sons by her, he would probably put one of his sons in the blacksmith guild as a mark of respect to his wife. When that son grew up and had sons of his own, he could put one of them into the leather works guild as a mark of respect to his father.<sup>47</sup> The nature of the sexual division of labour within the art and craft industry in Benin kingdom clearly delineates the areas of speciality of both gender. As a consequence, men were involved in brass casting, iron smiting, wood and ivory carving, leather works, and artistry that involved the use of metals and iron. There were both male and female weavers, and females were predominant in pottery. Similar to what obtained in agricultural production, women were dominant in supplying labour in most art and craft production. The arts guild affiliated to the Iwebo Palace society include: the Bronze casters (*Igun Eronmwon*), the Black smiths and Iron workers (*Igun Ematon*), Ivory and Wood carvers (*Igbesanmwan*), Weavers (*Owinna n'ido*), Leather Workers (*Isekpokin*), Beads and Costume Makers (*Enisen*) and Pottery (*Imakhe*). Although there was no guild of potters, it was a major craft that was predominantly engaged in by women.

The associated male dominance in court arts in Pre-colonial Benin (the above listed art guilds of the Iwebo society, with the exclusion of pottery and weaving) were inherent in traditional norms and religio-cultural strictions that inhibited women participation. The restrictions are exemplified with the exclusion of women from certain ancestral rites that preceded the production process but permissible to the headman of the guild council appointed by the Oba. Only the headman of the guild spearheaded his guild members in the worship of the guilds shrine during



ceremonies and festivals where specific deities were appeased and ensured that women stayed away from the production process, and in the event of “female contamination” of the implements, the headman of the guild performed the purification ceremony.<sup>48</sup> The expression “*Okhuo ise eromwon*” in Benin meaning “a woman does not cast bronze” is a referral to women’s exclusivity from metal casting. It is a common saying and it could not be conceived that a woman could even have the courage to handle the melting pot, let alone transgress the taboo which was believed to spell doom for the woman in Pre-colonial Benin. The patrilineal nature of the Benin society is also a justification for this exclusion as inheritance and succession in the guilds was also done along patrilineal lines.<sup>49</sup> Title holdings were also conferred on the male heads of the guild families in the past. Aghama Omoruyi asserts that by hereditary participation, a father was able to pass the knowledge to his children and when sharing properties for children of a deceased father among members of the guild, the instruments for making bronze works were specially taken care of by the family by ensuring that they were correctly passed to the eldest son.<sup>50</sup> Even though women, especially those linked to royalty, were celebrated through court art beginning from Oba Esigie’s reign in the sixteenth century, participation of women in the production of court art such as bronze casting, wood and ivory carving and iron smithing was essentially domesticated (cooking for the men, gathering of coal and wood). Such premium arts were exclusively male dominated and that it significantly tied to cultural proclivities that limited women enterprise.

## Conclusion

This study discussed gender roles and women labour in Pre-colonial Benin. While the study argued that pre-colonial Benin was a gendered society, it established women roles not only on the basis of gender essentialism, but examined the relationship between their natural roles and social expectations which was translated from a cultural perspective. The study also examined the implication of gender in context of sexes (male and female) and how it influenced and affected their roles in Pre-



colonial Benin. Attention was paid to patriarchal dominance enabled by culture, that restricted women agency and the cultural provision that substituted women roles in areas where their personages were considered irrelevant. Women's rights to kingship, succession, inheritance and title holding appeared to be non-existent and in cases where such provisions existed, could only be navigable with the effort of a husband, father or male head. Nevertheless, the economic division of labour according to age and sex did not limit women's agency altogether. Women were found in household and domestic trading, and in some economic activities which men engaged in. However, most of the labour intensive activities especially in the casting, carving and smithing industries were exclusively a preserve for men, The case of gender specificity in economic labour generally applied to areas of male dominance and situations wherein the conditions for engagement could not be attained by women. This was a cultural implication that already permeated Pre-colonial Benin. Research has further shown that beyond the much acclaimed religious and cultural strictures that limited women's economic engagement are: occupational, work and health hazards; patency rights; and the monopolization and privatization of court art which were adequately catered for in the guild system that did not give women agency. The study is significant as it acknowledges women heterarchy; the roles of both genders and presents the limitation of culture on women enterprise in Pre-colonial Benin.

## ENDNOTES

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