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Nexus International University ISSN: *3007-1704;* 11(2): 105-115

Change and Continuity in Women's Work in Colonial Benin Society, Nigeria

OGHOGHO ORIAKHI
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

Abstract. The paper examines the nature and changes women's work underwent during the colonial period, and also the place of women in the pre-colonial Benin kingdom. The paper discusses the traditional roles that pertain to women in society as presented in various institutions, as well as traditions that exist in traditional Benin society. The incursion of the European and the emerging influences arising from that contact, such as new economic opportunities arising from Western economic policies, affected their industry, agriculture, trade, and entrepreneurial activities. The evolution of the Benin woman from the traditional society to the modern society is recognizable. The skillful adaptation of Benin women in this period of change exhibited their capacity to engage in the process of transformation without completely losing their identity. It is within this context that the paper seeks the transformational history of the Benin woman as one of change and continuity.

Keywords: Benin Woman, Colonial Period, Change, Continuity, Agriculture, Crafts, and Industry.

1. Introduction

The European foothold became solidified in Benin by the 19th century, and all the political and administrative structures necessary for the effective exploitation of the human and material resources of the conquered territory were created. It was a new philosophy of life to the people, and their indigenous institutions were suppressed but not eliminated. The establishment of colonial rule followed the abolition of the slave trade and its replacement by legitimate trade. The intrusion of the white into the land in the later part of the nineteenth century was a new experience for the people. By 1901, colonial rule was established in Benin after various towns had been conquered at different times by the British expeditionary force (Osagie, 2000, 24).

The expenditure in Benin in the latter part of the 19th century was one of the most significant steps taken by the British government of the Niger Coast Protectorate in its drive to gain the political and economic control of the hinterland of what later became the Central and Eastern Provinces of Southern Nigeria. The immediate concern of the British Officers at this period was the exploitation of the economic potentials, the natural resources, and the forest wealth of the "natives" (Igbafe, 1979, 221).

Benin society was rich in forest resources, and the only way the British could get their demand was the use of force and sometimes subtle persuasion to bring the indigenous people to accept the loss of sovereignty. At the initial stage, the British government struggled to show itself as an advocate of peaceful methods. This was because they were instructed by the motherland to do everything in their power to avoid collision with the "natives" and establish friendly relations; at the same time, convincing them by a determined attitude that the government was firmly established and that its order must be obeyed or certain punishment would follow. At the end of the day, it was the only force the British officials could use. Since the Benin people were seen as primitive, the only way they could stop their barbaric practice was through the use of force and the use of their advanced weaponry. In doing this, roads were constructed to facilitate the movement of the raw materials to the motherland. The coming of the European influences was not imposed on the people without opposition; the apparent inevitability of the process of colonial conquest, the defeat which sooner or later overwhelmed all who sought to stem the tide, did not mean that colonialism once established remained unchallenged. How it was challenged was through a different number of local rising. The traditional rulers and their subjects initially did not give the colonial authority breathing space. The women were also part of it. According to informants, when the Europeans came, the natives were happy and at the same time amazed to see some white footless

semi-gods, who had no toes because they were always in shoes, which were strange to the people, coupled with the fact that they were also carried by the black men who accompanied them from the Niger Delta.

They saw the presence of the white men in Benin as a sign of an evil omen on their land, because their presence prevented them from carrying out some of their norms, such as sacrifices, which the white men regarded as barbaric and a total display of their cultural backwardness and primitiveness.
The policy of the British administrators was not in the best interest of the natives. The policy of the British administrators was to be seen in their attitudes and treatment of the natives during the period when they had gained a stronghold on the people.

2. Data Sources and Research Methodology

The data collected for this work was mainly through secondary sources using the historical research methodology. This involved reading extant literature on the role of woman in the colonial economy of Benin and how they were able to excite positive influence that helped to shape and develop their kingdom. The data comprised articles in journals, chapters in edited books and dissertation. The secondary sources were critically analyzed for women's roles in historical narratives. The works of Odejide (1998), Boserup (1970), Denzer (1989) and Mabogunje (1961) were particularly significant for examining the dual economic status of women in Nigerian societies in which women possessed economic power in the development of their societies.

Primary data were collected through oral interview with selected informants who are knowledgeable about the decades of colonial rule in Benin Kingdom and the evolvement of women in their economic activities. The collection of oral information was vital to gain useful insights as not all the information was available in written sources. Oral information also helped in corroborating and validating information from written sources. Other sources of primary data were the Federal Government census of Western Region of Nigeria and archival reports. The oral sources provided useful information that complemented the extant literature. The secondary sources complemented with oral information to present an authentic account of the change and continuity in women's work in colonial Benin Kingdom of Nigeria. Secondary and primary sources were analyzed to obtain their validity and perception as regard change and continuity.

3. European Economic Policy in Benin Society Nigeria

The geographical location of Benin society to a large extent determined the occupational pursuit of the people. The land was fertile, forested and suitable for agriculture. There was no poverty nor was there any considerable wealth among the natives. The natives were easily satisfied. If "he" required food, he makes farm, if he required clothing, he plants cotton and when it is grown, it is woven into clothes. If he needs cash, he climbs an oil palm tree and gathered its fruits. The oil and kernels obtained from the oil palm would be taken to the nearest trading market and exchanged for cash (Ishan Intelligent Report, 1925). While some engaged themselves in the production of cash produce like cotton, rubber and other cash produce. Rubber was one of the major raw materials that was in high demand in Europe and was in abundance in Benin.

The first definite steps in the post expedition British economic policy in Benin were concerned with the opening up of roads, the establishment of market. During the very early months when British rule in Benin was being consolidated, the overriding economic interests in the new territories were submerged by political and military consideration. With the exile and deportation of the Oba in September 1897, the fiscal frontiers on which a good deal of the customs and tolls that were collected in the pre-British era were abolished and a systematic policy of economic change oriented to European requirement was embarked upon. In this connection attention was focused on rubber which from the European point of view was the most valuable product of the Benin forest. Efforts were directed at the preservation of the rubber forests, general control of the processing, transportation and marketing of rubber and the development of rubber industry. In this regard, attempts were made to check the activities of hundreds of migrants from the colony of Lagos, who inundated the forest of Benin particularly in the Usen region (N.A.I, B.D., 1897).

After the capture of Benin, the activities of these invaders who were mainly in Benin to collect rubber and indulge in the adulteration of forest produce were foiled by the enactment of detailed regulations under the Africa-Order-In-Council 1889 which came into force on 3 June 1897. Under the regulation inspectors were empowered to confiscate or order the destruction of any produce suspected to be adulterated, a penalty of £50 fine or six months imprisonment was prescribed for those convicted. The tapping of rubber in a style to damage the tree permanently or affect the future productivity was prohibited (N.A.I, B.D.,

1897). The earliest assignment for the rubber-inspectors was to visit all villages, explaining these regulations and taking practical steps to ensure their observance. Some of the steps taken included the training of boys in each village by the forestry inspector who would in turn train others on the methods of tapping and processing rubber. The idea was that in this way, the circle of trained people in the process of rubber would get ever wider till all villages were eventually covered. All foreigners were required to pay a 20 per cent tax on rubber worked in Benin; 10 percent of this was to be paid to the owners of the land, the remaining 10 percent was to be credited to government revenue (N.I.A., Benin Division, 1898). The appointment of indigenous rubber inspectors was another positive step for the colonial authority. These inspectors were people with a thorough knowledge of rubber trees and preparation of rubber. They travelled on inspection tour around the area allotted to them, checking improper tapping and supervising the processing of latex to ensure the finished product.

By 1903, efforts exerted in the direction of developing the rubber industry began to yield encouraging dividends. By the end of March 1903 about 15,694 rubber plants had been cultivated in thirty-three plantations and along a few roads. Before the end of the year, one hundred and twenty-six villages had been convinced of the necessity for rubber plantations and they had transplanted about 145,000 rubber plants from their nurseries.

1903 Season Plantations (Igbafe, 1979, 343)

Locations	Number of Villages with Plantation	Total Number of Plants in all Plantation
Siluko Road	29	26,800
Asaba Road	8	6,400
Utesi Road	17	49,000
Gilli Gilli Road	5	5,600
Sapoba Road	27	31,442
Yira Road	16	8,040
Igieduma Road	5	6,400
Isi Road	19	11,400

Men and women were involved in the cultivation of rubber was very cumbersome, by 1912, tapping knives and rubber sheet rolling machines were introduced into Benin land which made the tapping of rubber less cumbersome (Osagie, 2000, 17). In addition to rubber, timber was comparatively one of the most important natural products of the Benin forests. From the period of British rule in Benin, it was recognised that the timber industry had a bright future in the area.

The basis for this optimistic hope lay in the abundance of mahogany and other valuable timber in the Benin forests. It was recognized however that for a successful timber industry, a good system of land transport was a pre-requisite except along rivers and waterways where it was possible to float logs. Like the very early attempt to exploit the rubber resources of Benin, numerous applications flooded the Consul-General's office between 1895 and 1899 seeking authority to carry on timber work soon after the over throw of Benin. The policy that evolved at this stage was that foreigners could only deal with the product of the country under government regulations as well as with the consent of an agreement by the indigenes of the area. The granting of timber concessions necessary for large-scale timber exploitation grew out of this policy. By 1900, the Europeans were displaying tremendous energy in taking out timber concessions and arranging for their effective exploitation. At a time when stringent regulations were coming into force for the working of rubber, and at a time when the imposition of the prohibited dry season for working rubber was being enforced, there was a steady increase in the amount of timber exploited in Benin District (Igbafe, 1979, 350). The new industry absorbs some of the labourers and people previously engaged in rubber exploitation. To avoid the prospect of wholesale deforestation a rule was made fixing the minimum girth of trees to be felled at twelve feet (Igbafe). The effect of the new timber rules drew attention to the danger of forest exhaustion in Benin and the need for conservation through constitution of forest reserve. This situation led to the new timber and rubber rules of 1905, which among other things, provided for the first steps towards the regeneration and conservation of the Benin forests into the face of a very rapid rate of forest exhaustion due to over exploitation (Igbafe).

While a forestry policy was being vigorous pursued and leading to a clash of interests between the Benin People and the British in the early and late twenties of this century, another British economic policy in the area was the encouragement of the development of palm plantations, which did not become very significant till the early thirties. In 1931, the encouragement of palm plantation, palm groves owned by indigenous Benin and all activities tending to enhance the productivity of oil palms were seriously taken in hand by British administration through the

department of Agriculture. Chiefs and farmers were actively encouraged to plant and improve their groves. There was a favourable response from the people generally and application for the grant of land for the purpose became numerous within a short time. A major difficulty encountered by the Department of Agriculture at this early stage in the promotion of oil palm cultivation was the opposition of the Oba of Benin (Igbafe, 1979, 358). The Oba's main objection was that the grant of large number of plots indiscriminately would be taken as granting permanent permission to the ownership of the land whereas all land in Benin was communal and granted annually for farming purpose by the chiefs of a town at their discretion. The land for palm plot would thus become separated from that for general distribution, and there would develop a tendency to regard it as privately owned. The future effects of permanent crops on Benin land tenure were to bear out the Oba's fear. It was for this reason that the Oba refused to grant Chief Ezomo's application for further land in Ekenwan District in 1932, because the Oba's contention was that Ekenwan land was very good for yam and should be reserved for Ekenwan people (Igbafe).

The Department of Agriculture worked out a policy of developing palm plantation. This include giving guidance in planting up small plantations, improving existing palm groves and maintaining central nurseries in different planting districts. By June 1932, nearly 2,000 self-fertilize palm seedlings were distributed to farmers, in July that same year over 36 acres were laid out for planting and over 91 acres were actually planted (Igbafe). One way to sustain the people's interest in palm plantation and also taking sting out of the Oba's objections was to encourage the communal ownership of palm plot which could be placed under control of the Native Administration. There was a decline in the standard of maintenance of old plantations by many farmers who militated against experiments of communal ownership partly because the cultivation of palm trees was a long-term investment or because of the Oba's oppositions. It was a situation whereby only a few saw the need for cultivating oil palm under controlled methods of the Department of Agriculture (Igbafe, 1979, 361).

Benin did not turn out to be a cocoa-producing area like the Yoruba areas of Nigeria, the British made effort at the early stage to develop the cultivation of cocoa, they hoped that cocoa would in a few years play an important part in the revenue of Benin District but this hope did not materialise. By 1909 the growing of cocoa had been introduced, by February 1915 cocoa nurseries were started to ensure availability of young trees. A cocoa plantation was prepared at the Ikpoba river ground, labour mainly supplied by the prisoners (N.I.A. Benin Division, 1915). to improve the cultivation in Benin District, thirty sites were selected for plantations and the owners were specially taught how to lay them out.

The development of the coca industry continued through 1916 with the maintenance of the model plots on Ikpoba Hill along Agbor Road and the distribution of 2,438 cocoa plants to farmer (N.I.A. Benin Division, 1916). Chief Ine set a good example for the people of Siluko by beginning a cocoa farm there. Most of the people with cocoa plots near Benin City were encouraged to replant in the places of failures of seedlings and to extend their farms. In the beginning of 1920, communal cocoa plantation like communal rubber plantations had started in Benin especially at Egor. The Native Administration paid a few labourers to look after these, by 1921, excellent cocoa was already being produced all over the district (N.I.A., Benin Division, 1916) ensure that the farmers maintained a high standard of production the Department of Agriculture took a number of steps which include the erection of fermentations in Benin under a cooperative cocoa fermenting scheme where the farmers were taught principles of cooperative fermenting with all its advantages over individual efforts. The Oba's council was brought into the scheme so that Native Administration and the Agricultural Department could share the cost of building ferment Aries. Only a few farmers preserved in the face of poor prices offered for cocoa. Because of the poor prospects of sales, many planters did not consider it worthwhile to produce large quantities this led to the decline of cocoa production and cultivation. However, cocoa did not develop into an economic crop during British rule in Benin (N.I.A., Benin Division, 1916)

Before British rule in Benin, the farmers had been used to cultivating cotton under mixed cropping to produce a limited supply for the hard-spinning and hand-weaving industries otherwise known as indigenous industry. The emphasis after 1902 was on the growth of American or Egyptian cotton seed to improve quality. The farmers were taught the importance of not mixing indigenous seed cotton with the introduced variety. In spite of the activities of the British Cotton Growing Association and the Colonial regime, the cotton growing industries like that of cocoa and palm plantation did not achieve notable success in Benin. With much control prices attracted at the purchasing centres at Ologbo and Illushi were never good enough to encourage the farmers. The great deal of deforesting large areas and keeping it clear for cotton cultivation

acted as a deterrent to extensive cultivation (Igbafe, 1979, 365-366)

3.1 Introduction of British Currency in Benin Society Nigeria

British rule in Benin introduced a noteworthy change affecting the economic life of the people. This was in the means of exchange which was complementary to all the other economic changes that colonial rule introduced into Benin territories. The introduction of a money economy was the bases of all other economic changes in Benin (Igbafe, 1979, 368). Before colonial rule, the people possessed a well establish currency system which consisted of brass-rod, manilas, copper wires and cowries. Guns were accepted as a medium of exchange, as in the case of Niger Delta, they were usually valued in terms of manilas. Slaves were also used as unit of account but not as means of exchange. As early as 1522 manila was already in use in Benin (Igbafe). To enhance the exploitation of colonial Nigeria by British, it was necessary for the British to control the monetary system of the colony. The demonetisation of the local currencies was the first step. They replaced "barter" with coin. The local currencies were referred to as "trade good" rather than currencies. The British insisted that all payments should be made in British currency. The people could not get goods without the currency (Falola, 1987, 72).

To make the introduction of British currency effective, they ban the importation of manilas, brass rods and other traditional currencies; and also withdraw the existing traditional currencies already in circulation. As the area of acceptance of British currency broadened and the local currencies circulated within narrower limits, the cowries circulated as a subsidiary currency for the small buying needs for the population was driven out of circulation by British Government through the introduction of British coins in the denomination of 1d, ½d and ¼d to replace cowries. To give the new subsidiary coinage a fighting chance of replacing cowries, it was thought necessary as in the case of manilas and brass rods, to restrict the supply of the shell currency by prohibiting all further imports of this monetary medium. This was accomplished through the importation of Cowries Prohibition Proclamation No. 6 of 1904 (Falola). Paper money in the denomination of £1, 10s, 2s, and 1s, was introduced as part of the colonial currency changes. British currency was meant to complement British trade in the colony in order to enhance their exploitation.

3.2 Women in Agriculture

Women in Benin played major roles in the economy as farmers, food processors, and in petty occupations, which they had pursued before the advent of colonial rule. In addition, many women engaged in various crafts, including weaving, dyeing, pottery, mat making, embroidery, bead making, and local industries such as soap making and salt production. Some of them had the calling for midwifery and herbal medicine (Denzer, 1989, 14). During the pre-colonial period, the Benin people were not only self-sufficient in food production but also had a surplus to exchange for other products. The introduction of cash crops such as rubber, timber, and oil palm into the agricultural life of the people seriously affected the production of food crops. The farmers, especially the men, began to embark on the cultivation of cash crops. Consequently, the men relegated the production of food crops to the background. This led to the scarcity of crops produced by men, such as yams (Helleiner, 1966, 66).

Women developed cassava agriculture. It was introduced from Latin America by the Portuguese to the Nigerian coastal towns to provide easily storable food for their slave ships. Its use as a storable crop began to spread after the seventeenth century throughout Southern Nigeria. Cassava was considered a woman's crop, subordinated to the yam cultivated by men (Denzer, 1989, 16). As the British discovered that the cultivation of cassava did not in any way close down the production of cash crops like palm, they did nothing to discourage its cultivation. In 1944 they introduced five varieties of hybrid "mosaic disease-resistant cassava" (Osagie, 2000, 24). Due to the encouraging results, cassava stems were distributed. It was from this channel that the disease-resistant hybrid cassava found its way into farms. In the 1940s, women were massively cultivating cassava on separate farms. Cassava was successfully cultivated alongside the production of oil palm produce because its cultivation was not labor-intensive.

To meet the high demand for garri, women stopped production, especially those in the rural areas, and processing by adopting a form of specialization in different aspects of production. While some devoted themselves to cultivation, others specialized in its processing (Osagie, 2000, 24). By the end of the colonial era, women farmers, processors, and traders had firmly established garri as one of the most important food items throughout southern Nigeria. The workload of women in rural areas increased due to the increase in labour demands, resulting in the expansion of cash crops (Denzer, 1989, 16).

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the introduction of legitimate trade in Africa, there was a great demand for palm oil, which was used as a lubricant for machines and for making soaps and candles. Palm produce (oil and kernel) was one of the major Nigerian exports to

Europe. Duke concluded that:
With the increasing population at the time of the Industrial Revolution in Britain came changes in social and industrial requirements, as the British people's demand for soap rose considerably, and palm oil was the chief constituent in the manufacture. The substitution of metal for wooden machinery and the development of railways caused a rise in the use of oil as a lubricant. West Africa's palm oil was found to satisfy these needs (Dike, 1956).

Palm kernel was also demanded in Europe for its use in the manufacture of margarine, candles, and pharmaceutical products, while the residual cake was a valuable livestock feed. Due to the high demand for palm oil and palm kernel in Europe, there were concerted efforts by British officials and merchants to ensure increased production in Nigeria. The oil palm produce exported from Benin in the early decades of colonial rule was that obtained from palm groves that grew wildly and luxuriantly in the forest. The quantity of palm produce obtained at this time depended largely on the oil palm harvested from the forest. The men did the climbing of the trees and cutting of palm fruits. From the collection and extraction of oil to the cracking of kernels was done by women. This is why it has been asserted that traditional oil extractions were and still are a woman's industry (Onimode, 1983, 43). After collecting the fruit from the forest, the woman began processing by first having them cooked. The soft fruits were then poured into a large wooden vat and mashed with their feet. After the fruit had been thoroughly mashed, water was poured into the vat, bringing the raw oil to the surface while the nuts and shafts remained at the bottom of the vat. The oil was then collected into a large pot and boiled over the fire until the water had evaporated, leaving only the oil, which was then skimmed off, leaving the palm nuts. The nuts were collected and kept in the sun to dry before they were cracked to remove the kernels. This cracking of the palm nuts and picking of the kernels from the shell were solely done by women and children. The expansion of trade with Europe in palm products after 1950 greatly affected women's workload in the production of palm oil.

Palm oil production estimates, palm oil and palm kernel exports, Nigeria, 1900-1944 (tons)

YEAR	Total Production Estimated Palm Oil	Nigeria 1900-44 Exports Palm Oil	Palm Kernel
1900-4	117,358	53,729	120,778
1905-9	115,770	65,177	130,241
1910-14	154,876	77,771	174,236
1915-19	164,060	80,485	184,567
1920-4	180,463	90,352	203,021
1920-9	227,084	124,716	255,469
1930-4	244,070	122,302	274,584
1935-9	296,889	139,000	334,000
1940-4	248,889	134,377	320,613

Source: *Nigerian Handbook 1936, and Nigeria Trade Reports 1939-45*. Lagos Government Printers (Ekundare, 1973, 167).

Rubber was also one of the major raw materials in high demand in Europe, which was in abundance in Benin. The high demand was a result of the transport revolution in the late nineteenth century in Europe, which had profound effects on the demand for natural rubber from Nigeria. The high demand for rubber in Europe accentuated the need for natural rubber growing widely in large quantities in Benin. With the introduction of para rubber into Benin, both men and women were to engage in its cultivation and tapping. It was not cultivated as a sole crop on any farm; the seedlings were transplanted into yam and cassava farms in the last years of cultivation before the farms were abandoned in the rotational shifting cultivation system. The farmers, men and women, continued to maintain the farm along with other crops until all the crops were harvested, leaving only the rubber trees. The farmers were left with clearing the bush around the rubber trees till they were mature for tapping. Indeed, several women participated in the development of rubber plantations, but not all women participated in its tapping. The women who were involved in the tapping of rubber during this period were found around the Usen areas of Benin (Osagie, 2000, 18).

As the demand for rubber increased, women not only tapped rubber owned by their husbands, they also rented plantations on which they paid rentage fees on a monthly, quarterly, or yearly basis. Some prominent women in Benin even bought plantations from the proceeds, which they realized from their trading activities. These plantations were, in some cases, rented out, while in others, the women employed

tappers (men and women) to tap them. Some other women bought rubber sheet rolling machines, which they rented out to big and small rubber tappers at prescribed fees (Okhionkpamwonyi, 2021).

3.3 Women in Craft and Industry

In the sphere of craft and industry, Benin women made and sold a range of craft goods. The most important were clay pottery and soap, followed by weaving and dyeing of cotton, basket mats, and beads. Textiles used for clothing and as ceremonial objects had profound cultural meaning. Different patterns and types were used for particular purposes (rituals). The most symbolically important kind of weaving was done only by women. Clothing could also represent a group or identity; women's associations commonly appeared in public wearing similar clothes or head-ties. Cotton had traditionally been grown in small batches by individual families for their own use and local sale. After the bolls were picked, cleared, and spun, the thread was woven into cloth. If the cloth was to be coloured, either the thread or the woven cloth would be dyed with indigenous materials (Okhionkpamwonyi, 2021).

During the colonial period, indigenous handicrafts faced increasing competition from factory-made goods. Initially, wares were first imported from Britain, but later were also produced in Nigerian factories. In some cases, craftswomen responded by experimenting with new techniques that enabled them to produce their items more quickly and efficiently, but those changes were not enough. Many craftswomen were less able to hold their own crafts as the colonial period passed (Mantogh, 2009, 164). The growing availability of assorted white soap put most traditional soap makers out of business while potters faced equivalent problems as containers made of enamelware and plastic became available in local markets (Mantogh, 2009). Some weavers began to use imported European threads, which were already coloured rather than employing local dyes. Conversely, some dyers bought white European clothes to colour. Craft women at first profited from their ability to access thread, cloth, and credit from foreign trading firms, becoming independent producers of their tie-dyed cloth called “adire," which was popular throughout Nigeria and along the West African Coast. A survey of Abeokuta in 1926 listed 1,064 adire makers and 1,094 dyers. But from the 1920s onward, the adire industry suffered a steep decline due to falling commodity prices. The export price for Nigerian cloth in 1932 was only one-third of its value in 1920.Whereas European traders and merchants were able to use privileges based on class, gender, and authority of the colonial state to protect their own economic positions, while African women were vulnerable (Mantogh, 2009, 166-167).

Most colonial policies in Nigeria seemed to have been gender-blind, as no role was envisaged for women in the agricultural or industrial sectors. The assumption must have been that whatever benefits accrued to the male household head would ‘bide down’ to its female members (Boserup, 1970, 133). While it is true that women's role in the industry under colonial rule has declined, some studies of women's economic and social history in Nigeria show that they made some substantial gains in economic opportunities under colonialism. How much gains were made depended on the nature of the pre-colonial society in which they lived, as well as their intellectual and economic capacity to take advantage of new opportunities (Odejide, 1998, 124). As Etienne and Leacock observed in their collection of cross-cultural studies, the impact of colonialism depended on “the precise strategies of exploitation employed by the colonisers and the strategies of accommodation or resistance adopted by the colonized” (Etienne, 1980, 122).

The interest of the British government during colonialism was mainly to exploit materials as well as develop new sources of raw materials for the 'home' industries. This system only favoured a few middlemen, while traditional industries like crafts, cloth dyeing, and soap making suffered. The change in consumption patterns could also be responsible for the decline. Access to more remunerative occupations seemed to have also accounted for the decline in some indigenous industries. (Tunji, 1992, 20). Tunji corroborates this trend in Ekiti North, where he observed that pottery, soap making, basketry, and mat weaving also declined in the face of competition from imported commodities from Europe and later from locally manufactured goods. Enamelware, metal pots and plates proved far more durable than pottery or baskets, while those who could Afford the higher cost of linoleum and carpets preferred them to mats. Nevertheless, these women's industries, though reduced in scale, still serve a sizeable market up till today.

3.4 Women and Trade under Colonial Rule

Throughout the colonial period, trading continued to be the most important economic activity for women, even though most women remained petty traders selling small quantities of foodstuffs or other goods at very low-price margins. Some well-to-do women took advantage of the practical credit system introduced by colonial rule and offered by the European firms that

had established shops in the main commercial streets of the towns to boost their trade (Mabogunje, 1961, 14).

In the southern part of Nigeria, Benin precisely, the expansion of trade with Europe in palm products after the 1850s greatly affected women's workloads, for in these areas, men owned the palm fruits and the oil made from them, but their wives processed oil, head-loaded it to the market, and sold it. Throughout this period, women in Benin continued to play an important part in the economy as farmers, processors of food products, traders, and skilled craftswomen. They exploited new opportunities in wholesale and long-distance trade. Whatever their occupation, they made calculated choices about their careers based on their perceptions of what new opportunities offered in terms of their needs and objectives as well as their prospect. Many women changed their line of work or extended it into other areas, taking into account cultural codes of acceptable behavior, their family responsibilities, their skills, education, their finances, and new techniques (Odejide, 1998, 125).

In addition, (Odunlami, 1989, 15) found that in the 1940s, women refused to continue to process cotton, cocoa, or take jobs as porters, because of the low profit and low pay offered. Instead, they turned to more remunerative activities such as trade. Mothers urged their daughters to take up trading instead of weaving because it was more lucrative (Elisha, 1990, 6), especially for their daughters who were not educated. There is no doubt that trading became an increasingly attractive proposition for women throughout the colonial period, especially in the urban areas.

Women in Trading in the Southern Provinces 1952-1953
(Source: Census of Western Region, 1952)

Western Region Province	Trading	Percentage
Abekuta	53,835	16.8
Benin	33,399	7.3
Colony	55,100	22.9
Delta	23,724	7.8
Ibadan	127,451	15.6
Ijebu	30,249	16.7
Ondo	66,360	13.7
Oyo	63,110	15.9

The table above shows the activities of women in trade during the colonial period. The new British laws and regulations introduced far-reaching changes in customary marriage patterns by allowing women more freedom and choices of mobility. In the course of colonial rule, Benin women became the main producers of palm oil, kernels, and foodstuffs, which were in high demand during this period. Although one would have expected that this high demand would attract high prices, this was not the case, as European traders and firms continued to buy the commodities at prices not commensurate with the labour of these women. Colonial government unilaterally fixed prices for foodstuffs without taking into consideration the cost of agricultural inputs and labour expended by women in the cultivation and processing. This attempt was abandoned because it drove foodstuffs out of the market (Osawaru, 2021).

The proportion of women (wives) in the labour force increased by half from 1940 to 1944, marking the beginning of a remarkable reorganization of women's life patterns. In fact, 75 percent of the women were wives (Moen, 1992, 11). Surprisingly, there was no mass exodus to the kitchen; there was a brief turnaround. These changes in women's activities during the colonial period did not significantly alter the primacy of women's family roles. The family work of child care, husband care, housework, and emotional 'work' still preoccupies and restricts women's lives. Most women in Britain were active in all these areas only after their children were of age. So long as their children were young, women's principal functions continued to be caretakers and homemakers (Moen, 1992, 12).

It is well known that African women were farmers, traders, and crafts producers in different parts of the continent. It is equally well documented that their economic roles were both public and private. Women worked outside the home to meet the responsibilities placed upon them in their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, members of guilds, or citizens. In the economic sphere, more than in any other, it is easy to show that women's activities were complementary to those of men, and those women producers and traders were not subordinate to men. In most African societies, as elsewhere, the division of labour along sexual lines promoted reciprocity of effort. If men were farmers, women were food processors and traders. Where women and men were engaged in the same productive activity (such as farming and weaving), they produced different items. Among the Ibo, females and males grew different crops; among the Yoruba, the female and male weavers produced different types of cloth on different looms. Where both females and males traded, there was usually a sexual bifurcation along the commodity line (Sudarkasa, 1989, 34-35). In the management and disposal of their incomes, the activities of African women and men were also separated but coordinated. With the conjugal family unit, women and men had different responsibilities that were met from the proceeds of

their separate economic pursuits. A husband might be primarily responsible for the construction and upkeep of the home and the provision of staple foods, while the wife (or more probably wives) assumed responsibility for non-staple foods and the daily needs of the children (Sudarkasa). The separate management of the "family purse" definitely appeared to be a response to situations in which the members of conjugal units had independent obligations to persons outside these groups. Women played "neutral" complementary; rather than subordination/super-ordination; it more accurately describes the relationship between certain female and male roles in various pre-colonial African societies (Sudarkasa, 1989, 36). In considering women and work, we might wonder what sorts of influences are responsible not only for inhibitions in work but also for good functioning (Applegarth, 1989, 227). The new economic order that came with colonial rule introduced a monetary system of exchange, which influenced women's thoughts about work.

In the past, market women had sold household necessities, but a type of modern entrepreneur stepped forth to contribute to the consumer revolution. Colonial rule also revolutionized the nature of the market structures and the kind of goods the women traded due to the demand of customers. The idea of having an abundance of goods took shape gradually among the middle and working classes, who had previously thought in terms of restraint and even scarcity. As consumption became more demanding, given the array of goods and the time entailed in moving from one part of the city to another, women increased their consumer activity (Smith, 1989, 328-329). This constituted a natural extension of domestic activity, but one that moved women outside the home. This situation also changed the lives of rural women. Many peasant women added trade to their agricultural activities, which they were used to, though they lacked the financial means necessary to keep up with the urban women. The word 'New women' (Smith, 330) emanated from this situation.

Working women in the nineteenth century had a complex view of themselves and of their activities. She is a good worker and occupies herself with her household. Women who had work and motherhood in common formed neighbouring groups united by their shared experiences. Socializing occurred in public places rather than in small urban areas (Smith, 165). The negative view of working women and their exploitation led to social investigations, which in turn supported charges of immorality. The new woman was closely connected with modernism. Her singular nearness jolted middle-class sensibilities the way modern art did, and she participated in smodernism's formation. Not all middle-class women followed the prescribed norms scrupulously. Many who made names for themselves did so partly because they broke the social codes governing women's conduct (Smith, 200).

4. Conclusion

Despite the British colonial policy that was unfavourable to the women, a considerable number of Benin women derived significant economic benefits from their participation in the colonial economy. Some of them were able to raise enough capital from the processing and production of foodstuffs as well as from the production of cash crops. Such proceeds were used in establishing businesses and the buying and selling of locally produced and imported goods (Osagie, 2000, 27). This new economic prosperity allowed women to contribute financially to the well-being of their immediate and extended families and the community as a whole. Unlike in the past (pre-colonial period), when women totally depended on their husbands economically. Many Benin women, especially those in urban areas, gained economic independence during this period. Some of them built houses while others acquired landed properties. All this was not possible before the Benin woman during the pre-colonial period, as her custom would not allow her own properties, but rather she could only access farm land through her husband. The situation changed as many of them had to break that cultural code and became what is known as the "New Women". The period revolutionaries, women in terms of education, as well as many of these women who became traders and farmers, were able to send their female children to school, which was not possible before the colonial period. While the men were interested in sending their male children to school because they believed that the male children would be the ones to stay and remain with the family, as the females were betrothed at infancy, leaving them to another family and as such, they saw the female education as waste of time and resources, as education will make them disrespectful to their parents.

The women (mothers) began sending their daughters to school from the money they realized from their participation in the colonial economy, to send them to school to learn viable trades, such as seamstresses. The new system liberated women in Benin as they no longer needed permission from their husbands before they sent their daughters to school, since they are financially stable enough to pay fees for their daughters if their fathers are not willing to support the education of their daughters. It should be noted that

European influence and cultural suppression did not eliminate the African traditional institution, but a new philosophy of life that came to stay and liberated the human mind. As women got exposed to education, their worldview was affected. With the gradual exposure of women to and subsequent urbanization, things began to change. In order to educate their female children, many of the women move from villages to urban centres so as to embrace modern civilization. The trading patterns were also transformed as they were involved in both internal and international trade. A standard marketplace was built. In Benin, two main markets were built: the Agbado and Oba markets and both were in Benin City (N.A.I, Ben Prof, 1952, 57). The Introduction of motor vehicles, which is very fundamental to trade, has reduced the burden of carrying bulky goods from one village to another as well as from one town to another. The induction of portable currency, which replaced traditional forms of exchange, was a uniform currency, easy to carry, it was a faster means of exchange and to the people, and it was a new form of economic orientation and a method of wealth determination (Ekundare, 1973, 84). The economy became a monetized economy. A larger number of women got attracted to this new currency. The new form of wealth brought about trading competitions among women. It is interesting to note that trading from one place to the other made Benin women very influential because, through the process, they interacted with people from all walks of life, thereby creating friendly relations.

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