

## BRITISH COLONIAL INFLUENCE ON BENIN WOMEN, 1900-1960

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### Abstract

This paper assesses the British colonial administration's influence on women in Benin. It examines how colonial policies affected women in Benin and their responses. It explores how British colonial economic policies affected women's economic activities and social status. This paper argues that women's participation in the colonial economy through the production of cash crops and the processing of foodstuffs raised capital to establish small-scale businesses and diversified into other entrepreneurial ventures, thereby contributing to the upkeep of their households. This paper established that the colonial economy transformed women from traditional to modern economic activities, enhancing their economic independence and social status. Using a qualitative research methodology, data were collected from primary and secondary sources. The varied sources were critically analyzed in reconstructing how the British colonial administration's policies had transformative impacts on Benin women through their participation in the colonial economy.

**Keywords:** *British administration, New influences, Economic policies, Benin woman, Change*

### Introduction

European influence introduced new ways and values into the Benin Kingdom, and the women did not hesitate to respond to this new influence, which later resulted in the transformation of the Benin women in every facet of their lives. One noticeable aspect after 1960, as far as Benin women were concerned, was the emergence of women's clubs and associations aimed at creating avenues to mobilize and address issues concerning women's welfare and progress. The women's club and associations were responsible for initiating and sustaining a greater part of the predominant historical, social, and contemporary trends that have come to shape the way women viewed their lives and carry out their roles in society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Faseke, "Women and Governance in Nigeria," in Sylvester Odion Akhaine (ed.) *Governance in Nigeria and the World*, Lagos: Centre for Constitutionalism and Demilitarisation, 2004, 290.

Colonial rule in the Benin Kingdom had abolished or partially abolished certain practices and institutions which British administrators regarded as inhuman, such as domestic slavery, pawnage, forced marriage, and child marriage. The introduction of Christianity and Western education into the Benin Kingdom and the subsequent education of these women would promote progress and enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Colonialism has been presumed to mean exploitation and underdevelopment. On one hand, some writers contend that colonialism was not exploitation, that Nigeria was static and characterised by inter-ethnic wars, insecurity, and a total lack of capabilities to accumulate, innovate, or invest, while to others, it was complete exploitation.<sup>3</sup> But M. Crowder has this to say about colonialism.

Under colonial rule, any economic benefit that may have accrued to the African resulted from accident, not design, a byproduct of the primitive economic system the colonial powers instituted to carry from Africa its raw materials for processing in factories in Europe, in exchange for a strictly limited range of European manufactures. The principal beneficiaries were the stockholders of the companies importing and processing the raw materials, and those that produced the goods exported to Africa in exchange, assorted clothes, tobacco, alcohol, and rice, and, of course, the materials for the development of the transport system that could facilitate the economic regime.<sup>4</sup>

The various policies that were put in place by colonial authority were to enhance their exploitative motive and not for the benefit of Africans, as opined by M. Crowder.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Leith-Ross, *African Woman*, London: Faber and Faber, 1939, 3.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ihonvbere and Toyin Falola, "Colonialism and Exploitation, in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development*, London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987, 1.

<sup>4</sup> M. Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, London: Hutchinson, 1981, 274.

## British Conquest of the Benin Kingdom

The expedition to Benin in early 1897 was one of the most significant steps taken by the British authorities in the Niger Coast Protectorate to gain political and economic access to, and control of, the hinterland. It was not a spontaneous military incursion, however, for since the signing of the Benin-British treaty of 26 March 1892 (popularly known as the Gallwey treaty) in which H.L. Gallwey, the deputy commissioner and vice-consul of the Oil Rivers Protectorate, cajoled the *Oba* and his chiefs into agreeing to place Benin under British protection, the British had come to believe that they had a valid legal claim on Benin territory. But Benin and its environs were rich in forest resources, and Oba Ovonramwen's uncompromising stance frustrated British access to them. Between 1892 and 1897, the British sought to give effect to this understanding of the 1892 treaty, with little success. However, the famed 'Benin massacre' of British officials (led by J.R. Phillips) in January 1897 provided the opportunity to achieve the elusive goal of the treaty. By February 19, 1897, Benin had been conquered after eight days of fighting and British bombardment.<sup>5</sup>

The immediate concern of the British officers was the political settlement of the affairs of Benin as a prelude to the exploitation of the economic potentials, the natural resources and forest wealth of the "natives".<sup>6</sup> Having finally achieved their primary objective of political control of Benin territory, they sought to entrench peace (for further conflict would defeat the purpose of economic exploitation). They therefore persuaded the people to accept the loss of sovereignty. At the initial stage, the British government struggled to show itself as an advocate of peace. This was because the motherland instructed them to do everything in their power to avoid further

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<sup>5</sup> P.A. Igbafe, "The Fall of Benin : A Reassessment" *Journal of African History*, 11(3) 1970,385-400

<sup>6</sup> P.A. Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom, 1897-1938*, London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979, 221

collision with the people, establish friendly relations with them, and at the same time convince them by a determined attitude that the colonial government was firmly established and that its orders must be obeyed; otherwise, certain punishment would follow. At the end of the day, it was only force that the British officials could use, since the Benin people were seen as primitive, and the only way they could stop their 'barbaric' practices was through the use of force.

### **British Economic Policies in the Benin Kingdom**

Agriculture, with particular emphasis on food crop production, had been the mainstay of the people of Benin Province before the inception of colonial administration. The immediate concern of the British officers after the capture of Benin City was the economic exploitation of the kingdom's natural resources and forest wealth. The first definite steps in the post-expedition British economic policy in Benin concerned the opening of roads, the establishment of markets, the conduct of route surveys, and the ascertainment of the state of trade in Benin and its environs.<sup>7</sup> The search for a cheap and steady supply of raw materials for British factories, market expansion for the mass production of manufactured goods, outlets for surplus capital and employment of labour were key economic reasons for the colonization of Benin.<sup>8</sup> The raw materials sought included cotton for British textile factories, rubber for tyres and other products, palm oil and kernel for soap and margarine, groundnut for manufactured oil, hides and skins for leather products, timber for furniture, tin and coal.<sup>9</sup>

The establishment of Reserves was not uniformly extensive in all the divisions. Benin took the lead, being the only one with Native Administration Reserves at the beginning of 1938; the Native Administrations were encouraged to carry out a policy of Forest Reserves. The idea

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<sup>7</sup> P.A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration*, 338.

<sup>8</sup> Okwudiba Nnoli (ed.), *Path to Nigeria Development*, Dakar: Codesria, 1981, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Nnoli, *Path to Nigeria Development*, 1981,92.

was to prevent these valuable sources of timber and rubber from being destroyed by the indigenes turning them into farmlands and to ensure a regular supply of these raw materials for British industries. The cash crops that could be grown in Benin Province were rubber, oil palm, and kernel.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the forties, the policy of forest reservation continued in Benin Division despite opposition from the people. The frightening shortage of food in 1945 led to expressions of doubt over the continuing maintenance and retention of forest reserves in the Division. The people decided to defy the consequences, and numerous encroachments on farmland occurred in the reserves. The courts were reluctant to order the destruction or confiscation of the food crops in these farms.<sup>11</sup> The Native Authority now saw the truth that the “forest policy will operate mainly for the benefit of European firms.”<sup>12</sup> There was a rethinking of the entire idea of forest reservation, and the Native authority also echoed the people’s perennial complaint that the extent of forest reservation was excessive and that insufficient land had been left for farming.<sup>13</sup> An old chief in Benin also told the authority boldly that “we chop yams and corn, not timber and rubber.”<sup>14</sup> In 1951, a total of 44,928 acres of timber were under natural regeneration treatment. Of this, 6,477 acres were added during 1951 in the Ohosu and Iguobazuwa Reserves.<sup>15</sup>

By 1960, the Benin Division had become the home of timber, and the diversion from food-crop cultivation was never complete. By 1943, in the Benin Division, Rubber production had reached a very large scale. The Native Administration’s agricultural assistant had the sole responsibility of going round farmers and teaching them how to carry out all processes properly, from tapping the trees to drying the prepared sheets, so that a maximum of grade 1 sheets and a

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<sup>10</sup> N.A.I. Ben Prof 1, Bp 41/Vol. VI, Annual Report, Benin Division 1937, 200.

<sup>11</sup> N.A.I. Ben Prof 1, Bp 41/Vol. IX: Annual Report, Benin Division (1945), 115.

<sup>12</sup> N.A. I. Ben Prof 1, Bp 41/Vol. VX: Annual Report, Benin Division 1937, 135.

<sup>13</sup> N.A. I. Ben Prof 1, Bp 41/Vol. VX: Annual Report, Benin Division 1937, 135.

<sup>14</sup> N. A. I. Ben Prof. 1, Bp 41/Vol. XI, Annual Report, Benin Division 1947, 31.

<sup>15</sup> N.A. I. Ben Prof. 1, Bp 41/Vol. XII: Annual Report, Benin Division, 1951, 31

minimum of other types were produced.<sup>16</sup> All other agricultural staff in the department were responsible for reporting farmers who refused to tap trees. At one point in Benin, around the Usen area, women were involved in rubber tapping. Just as people were prosecuted for trespassing on forest reserves, so were they warned and forced to tap their rubber trees when reported. In 1943, about 2000 warnings were issued to owners of untapped trees. Such owners were made to tap their rubber trees forthwith.<sup>17</sup> The rubber farmer had no right to decide when his rubber was due for tapping; what determined the tapping was the need for rubber in Britain. Each year saw the opening up of new areas for rubber cultivation. In 1944, 856 acres of rubber were planted.<sup>18</sup> In 1945, 862 acres of Taungya plantation were cultivated.<sup>19</sup> The cry of the majority of people in Benin Division, who had nothing to gain from the permanent crops system, had become very loud, and it is also saddening to know that before 1945, the Native Administration carried out the most inhuman act of destroying farms and crops planted on reserved lands. Both the rubber and timber magnates, who in some cases were also members of the Native Administration, failed to remember that any money derived from rubber and timber would be useless if there was no food to purchase it with. The British colonial government's policy of exploitation and plunder of farmlands brought hunger to the poor people of the Benin Division. It was from the native courts that the chiefs set orders for the destruction or confiscation of food crops on illegal farms. In 1937, one of the chiefs in the council, kicking against the passing of the permanent crops control order, had said that it was below the dignity of a titled chief to obtain permission from a village chief before converting village land for

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<sup>16</sup> N.A.I. Ben Prof 1 Bp 41, Vol. IX, Annual Report, Benin Division 1943, 81

<sup>17</sup> N.A.I. Ben Prof 1 Bp 41, Vol. IX, Annual Report, Benin Division 1943, 81

<sup>18</sup> Annual Report, Benin Division 1945, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Annual Report, Benin Division, 1945, 115

whatever use.<sup>20</sup> They preferred the indiscriminate conversion of village farms to reserves for rubber and palm plantations. By 1948, the sins they had committed against their ancestors by giving away the communal land to private individuals and converting such ancestral farmland into land for permanent crops were visited upon the whole division through an acute food shortage. In 1951, rubber, timber, and cocoa continued to be planted. From 1950 to 1953, the total area cultivated was 13,052 acres, approximately 20 square miles. Most of these were wild rubber covered by the forest restrictions.<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising that the planting of all forms of permanent crops continued till 1955, when the Benin Divisional Native Administration handed over to elected councils. In 1947, an official statement on the question of food crops in Benin Division had said that “the more the Benin land can be kept under deep-rooted tree cover, the better; that the Benin should make their money from their natural timber resources, making and selling articles of wood and with the proceeds obtain their food from outside.”<sup>22</sup> This statement shows that the British were not interested in the economic lives of the people, who were primarily food-crop producers. They also did not know that the Benin Division had the art of woodworking even before they came, and had survived not only on that skill but also on the combination of several economic pursuits, in which women played a vital role. The specialization process in Benin had been geared towards the reproduction of adult skills and specialties, often lodged in occupational guilds and lineages that were directed towards the production of adults with multifaceted productive skills, so that each was simultaneously a farmer, palm tapper, etc. The British advice was to ruin the economic basis of survival that the traditional socio-political system had prepared for them. In the history

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<sup>20</sup> .NAI Ben Prof 1, Bp 40, Vol. VI: Annual Report, Benin Division 1947, 6.

<sup>21</sup> NAI Ben Prof 1, Bp 41, Vol. XIII: Annual Report, Benin Division 1953, 21.

<sup>22</sup> NAI Annual Report, Benin Division 1947, 11.

of mankind, there is no way people will prefer to buy food crops from outside and abandon farming, except when the land does not permit it, and Benin was very fertile. The colonial power's interests were paramount in their minds rather than the economic survival of the Benin people.

### **Cultivation and Production of Cash Crops for the Colonial Economy**

After the conquest of Benin in 1897, Britain restructured Benin's economy from royal-controlled trade to export agriculture to British industry. The cash crops cultivated were palm oil, rubber, timber, and cocoa, and men cultivated them. As for oil palm, several farmer unions formed for mutual assistance developed into cooperative societies to enhance the cultivation and production of palm produce. All Native Administrations provided funds for the maintenance of nurseries of selected oil palm seedlings at Ogba, which were sold to local farmers. Individuals were encouraged, at the expense of food crops, to take part in the development of the palm plantation. In 1939, there were seventy-nine new palm plantation owners, and the total acreage of palm plantations rose to 37,711 in the Benin Division.<sup>23</sup> All forms of encouragement given were to ensure high production of palm oil. In contrast, women were the ones involved in the processing of this palm oil, which was one of their major industries in the pre-colonial period, and continued but more intensely as a result of the high demand in Europe; they paid less attention to other food crops they used to cultivate on their husbands' farmland. The various economic policy measures, such as the abolition of the Royal trade monopoly, taxation, production policy, and land policy, affected women in many ways. This was largely in the organisation of production and distribution of goods and services. The forced labour laws and

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<sup>23</sup> NAI Ben Prof 1, BP 41, Vol. VI: Annual Report, Benin Division 1938, 61.

practices of no wage-labour protection, labour for cash crop expansion and restrictions on worker mobility and organization, which continued into the 1930s, played a crucial role in initiating these changes that affected women's production activities. The colonial state used the laws to mobilize labour for both private and public works within and outside the division, to the extent of turning the division into a labour reserve and supply zone. It was common during this period to find a lot of communities without their men who had been conscripted into various labour gangs.<sup>24</sup>

In 1916, when taxation was monetised and taxes were paid in British currency, various households were required to pay tax in farm crops and livestock. The production of the necessities required to reconstitute the household production unit, and the payment of tax, fell largely on women in the absence of their men. The inadequacy of female labour alone for agricultural and handicraft production led to food shortages, especially of the staple yam crop produced by men, and shortages of locally produced textiles.<sup>25</sup> The colonial forest reservation policy and the increasing private cultivation of agricultural raw-material crops led to a land shortage, necessitating a change in the organisation of agricultural production. The women could no longer engage much in palm oil production since they lacked the capital to obtain an exploitation license and were dominated by non-Benin. The colonial state discouraged the production of indigenous cotton, imposed income tax on artisans, and saturated the market with imported textiles, destroying the pre-colonial textile industry dominated by women. The demand for food crops within and outside the division was intended to influence women to increase their involvement in food crop production. The innovation by women was manifested in their

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<sup>24</sup>NAI BD 364/1914 Conservator of Forest, Benin City, to Commissioner B/P, 1914.

<sup>25</sup> NAI BD 13/21, Quarterly Report on Benin City district for 1906 and Report on Trade 1908.

adoption of new crops like cassava and, more recently, varieties such as imported cocoyam, in addition to other food crops.<sup>26</sup>

The marketing of these food crops in the village markets falls largely on peasant women who lack the capital to transport them to urban markets, where higher prices are obtained because the available roads were constructed to link railways; only areas of interest had roads.<sup>27</sup> This disability enabled a few Benin-based urban women and many other non-Benin women with the capital to make a profit through underpricing. Rubber tapping depended largely on migrant labour and was despised by Benin, but some poor peasant women around the Usen area did engage in it during and after the Second World War. When mechanization was introduced into agriculture, the female labour force was neglected because both the colonialists and the male peasant farmers shared the belief that men were superior at using modern farming techniques.<sup>28</sup> The inevitable result was that men used modern methods to produce cash crops, while women used traditional methods for food crops.<sup>29</sup> When technological innovation was introduced into a predominantly female area, it suddenly became mechanized and staffed by men, thus edging women out of their traditional roles. Even where some technologies are available, rural women have comparatively less access to them. The denial of such delivery services that are important to women has, since colonial times, kept women at the bottom of the occupational ladder in economies. The women have therefore become the last in line to receive the benefits derived from technological advancement. The loss of women's land rights is the result of land reforms

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> A. Olanrewaju, "The Infrastructure of Exploitation: Transport, Monetary Changes, Banking in Toyin Falola (ed.), Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development? London: Zed Books Ltd, 1987, 70

<sup>28</sup> C.A. Egbugara, "The Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women in Agriculture and Traditional Technology". Being a Paper Presented at the Symposium of Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) on the Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women, Institute of African Studies, Ibadan, 1989, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Egbugara, "The Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women in Agriculture and Traditional Technology" 1989, 7.

introduced by the colonial administration.<sup>30</sup> By the early 1950s, some of the peasant women had accumulated capital through food crop trade, the rubber boom, “Osusu” thrift and mutual assistance societies (locally called Emitin) to start “Eki Chata” (involving the chartering of lorries for trading in foodstuffs to major urban markets). Only a small proportion of urban women traders in Benin, especially those connected to government-appointed title holders and other colonial functionaries, were able to accumulate capital from commerce and invest in land, plantations, and timber.<sup>31</sup> In this situation, where the majority of women still had no access to land, they were unable to engage in profitable agricultural raw-material production and in commerce in imported commodities. Only an infinitesimal number of women in Benin achieved economic independence.

### **Colonial Social Policies**

The colonial state's social policies also affected the majority of women in Benin. European Christian values and the social dislocation caused by conquest combined to influence the colonial states' legislation against certain pre-colonial restrictions imposed on women. Christian missionary campaigns against infant betrothal and marriage of Christian women to non-Christian men had a gradual effect. The legislation was largely abused as marriage became commercialized.<sup>32</sup> Polygamy, which is closely related to economic conditions, and one of the strongest appeals of polygamy to men in Africa is precisely its economic aspect, for a man with several wives commands more land, can produce more food for his household, and can achieve a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Ebugara, “The Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women in Agriculture and Traditional Technology”, 1989, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Usuanlele, “The Impact of Colonialism on Bini Women of Benin Division, 1897 – 1960” ...,13.

<sup>32</sup> Usuanlele, “The Impact of Colonialism on Bini Women of Benin Division, 1897 – 1960” ...16.

high status due to the wealth which he can command,<sup>33</sup> because in many cases they use their families to cultivate their farms, an additional wife is an additional economic asset, which helps the family expand production. In female farming communities like Benin, a man with more than one wife can cultivate more land than a man with only one wife. The institution of polygamy is a significant element in the process of economic development,<sup>34</sup> but it was campaigned against by the Christian missions. British laws prohibiting child marriage and forced marriage, establishing a more lenient definition of what constituted adultery, and permitting easier access to divorce for women allowed women more freedom than they had before.<sup>35</sup> Women quickly took advantage of the situation to end unwanted marriages and make more advantageous ones. Divorce, which was rare in pre-colonial times, became common during this period.<sup>36</sup> The colonial state abolished the payment of dowry in gifts and labour services and legislated cash payment by men before they could marry. This legislation was largely abused as marriage became commercialized, as dowry rose continuously over fifty pounds during the rubber boom of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>37</sup> Legislation was promulgated to enable women to obtain a divorce and terminate an infant betrothal marriage on the payment of an amount not exceeding ten to twelve pounds.

Ishan women in Benin Division who wanted a divorce left their towns, usually to trade, and then posted a £10 money order to the district officer with a statement explaining their reasons for seeking a divorce; most of them were granted.<sup>38</sup> It became the practice of some parents and guardians to trade with their daughters. At the same time, some husbands neglected

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<sup>33</sup> Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, America: St. Martin's Press, 1970, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, 39

<sup>35</sup> La Ray Danzer, "Women in Colonial Nigerian History: An Appraisal", Being a Paper Presented at the Symposium on the Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women, Ibadan, Institute of African Studies, 1989, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Danzer, "Women in Colonial Nigerian History: An Appraisal", 1989, 27

<sup>37</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Bini Women of Benin Division 1897 – 1960"...,15.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Edomwonyi Efe, Female (80+), Farmer/trader, Eko-Nabore, 15/10/2011. With Odigie Iyobo, Female, (85), trader, Benin City, 15/10/2019.

their wives to the extent of driving them into adulterous acts to collect damages or dowry refunds. Most women who could not pay their divorce fees, court summons fees, and taxes before 1927, and also meet their necessary needs, made many of them vulnerable to seduction, especially of wage and salary earners.

The growing prevalence of divorce and the increase in moral laxity engaged the attention of Native Authorities. They became the subject of discussion at the Conference of Chiefs. Still, there seems little possibility of improving the position until the existence of a legal marriage, legal by the native law and customs, is more easily proved. Then, marriage by native law and custom consists in the payment or part payment of dowry and the handover of the woman to her husband, but these transactions are difficult to prove with certainty. It is still more difficult to prove that the woman is a willing party to the transaction, and British justice cannot and will not compel a woman to go to a husband against her will. As such, there was a need for a legal native marriage to enable them to keep a record in the case of future disputes,<sup>39</sup> There may be unassailable proof that a legal marriage has taken place. The main point of this registration is that after a certain time, no dowry could be claimed in a Native Court unless the marriage had been registered.<sup>40</sup> Some women saw the new trend of divorce in Benin as a breakdown of social order, while to many of them it meant a better chance to take control of their lives.

Most traditional customs and dances performed by women were abolished, except the Igue festival, which was performed mainly by men. Some even became criminal offences,

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<sup>39</sup> See NAI, Ben Prof, 1264 on Compulsory Registration of Native Marriage in Benin Division.

<sup>40</sup> NAI, B.P 1287/52, Annual Report on Benin Division 1943, 44

attracting a fine of fifty pounds or six months' imprisonment.<sup>41</sup> These restrictions on women gradually affected the pre-colonial institution.

Another social institution affected by colonial policy was education. The early colonial government policy was to leave the education of girls to the missions; their emphasis was on moral training and domestic science to produce good wives, and the refusal of their parents to see the value of educating their daughters was one of the major reasons for the slow growth of women's education in Benin. In Benin, parents feared that their girls would become infertile if they did not marry early; they believed it was wiser to invest in the education of their sons, who would remain in the house and presumably care for them in their old age, rather than a girl who would move to another compound when she was married.<sup>42</sup> This notion by parents affected female education in Benin. Only a few girls were sent to school by their mothers during the colonial period. The worst hit in this deplorable educational situation was prevalent in the rural areas and among the urban poor. It was only the C.M.S. (Christian Missionary Societies) that temporarily abolished school fees for girls to encourage girls' education in rural areas and to encourage them to embrace Christianity. Benin women, like their counterparts in Nigeria, have yet to occupy their educational positions; available statistics indicate that Nigerian women have yet to occupy various sectors of the Nigerian educational system.<sup>43</sup> It was only in 1952 that a co-educational provincial Teachers College was established in the division, which, together with the

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Osagie Omosede, (82), farmer, Benin City, 20/12/2019

<sup>42</sup> Denzer, "Women in Colonial Nigerian History: An Appraisal"..., 29.

<sup>43</sup> Kayode Alao, "Women in Nigeria Educational System," in Amadu Sesay & Adetanwa Odebiyi (ed.), *Nigerian Women in Society and Development*, Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House, 1998, p. 83.

few private agency secondary schools established in Benin City, catered for the post-primary education of women.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the missionaries' humanitarian concern, their policies were largely aimed at converts and contributed immensely to the establishment of a capitalist ideological society. Only a few women, mainly petty-bourgeois urban settlers comprising government officials, missionaries, agents, company functionaries, and big traders' wives and daughters, benefited from these social services. From the 1950s, a few educated Christian women from the petty bourgeoisie started establishing private maternities and orphanages. The bulk of the women of peasant, wage labourers, and artisans did not benefit from these social services. They became victims of early marriage and depended largely on petty trading, agricultural activities, and their husbands for their existence. Some of these largely unskilled women of the lower class started resorting to prostitution. This was a new social phenomenon introduced into society by the influx of immigrants and adopted by Benin women.<sup>45</sup> By 1927, it had become a social menace to warrant a petition in which the author listed the names of fifteen Benin women prostitutes, indicted the district Head of Benin City for accommodating prostitutes in his house, and lamented the social problems and bad influence it was creating for younger Benin men and women.<sup>46</sup> The petition had the name of the chief prostitute to be Atiti Uwaifo, who was their leader, and the previous marriages they had been in before resorting to this business.<sup>47</sup> These socio-economic conditions initiated by colonial capitalism still prevail; the social problem of prostitution continues to be exacerbated among Benin women.

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<sup>44</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Bini Women of the Benin Division"..., 15.

<sup>45</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Bini Women of the Benin Division"..., 20.

<sup>46</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Bini Women of the Benin Division"..., 20.

<sup>47</sup> N.A.I, B/Prof, 56/27 Petition on Prostitution in Benin Division.

The number of women in politics and public affairs in Benin, like everywhere, was very small. The role of women in political organisations can be defined by their direct or indirect participation in the activities of government, societies, and sub-groups that determine authority.<sup>48</sup> Thus, an all-market women's organisation existed, but only a few women were involved in Benin; if all had embraced it, it would have provided a platform for political mobilisation and action. Benin women, largely peasants whose production was based on individual family holdings, were unable to form a strong union, unlike the Yoruba women, who formed the Abeokuta women's union, because the flat-rate tax and food price controls damaged their economic interests.<sup>49</sup>

The Benin Community Association, which led the various political agitations in the 1930s and 1940s, did not include women in their leadership and administration. This was likely based on its argument that women were subject to their husbands, who had neither pre-colonial administrative women's societies nor the association's recommended qualifications. The successor Otuedo–N.C.N.C. (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) alliance, which established its political hegemony over the division until 1966, was less concerned with the socio-political advancement of women.<sup>50</sup>

This development did not undermine women's contribution to the struggle for democratic reforms and independence. By 1948, when elected representative administration was introduced, women were provoked by the elected male representatives, whom they accused of discriminatory practices against non-members of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (R.O.F), especially in the

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<sup>48</sup> Albertine Ishibilondi Ngoy, "Women's Leadership for Responsible Governance in Africa," in J. Obi Oguejiofor (ed.) *Philosophy, Democracy and Responsible Governance in Africa*, Delta: Delta Publications Ltd, 2004, 537.

<sup>49</sup> Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized, Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria 1900-1965*, 1982, 145.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Omozuwa Ewaen, (80+), farmer, Benin City, 4/4/2019.

allocation of market stalls and imported commodities. They were not happy with the R.O.F dominating the elected administrative council's support for taxing women in 1949.<sup>51</sup> The Benin women's union, consisting largely of illiterates and led by older women, on the other hand, opposed taxation of women with threats and claimed a lack of interest in political offices. The colonial state officials persuaded the salaried women's association to accept taxation with prior notice, while simultaneously promising that taxation of the Benin women's union would apply only to women with ascertainable income.<sup>52</sup> The women could not unite them for political action against the regional government. Women could not come together due to the volatile political situation in the division at the time; as a group, they were politically demobilised. The failure of Benin women to forge political unity during the colonial period was largely due to the discriminatory policies of the colonial state, which made it more difficult for women to achieve economic independence, a step that would have hastened their socio-political advancement.<sup>53</sup> The challenge of the continuing marginalisation of women in Nigerian politics is devising appropriate strategies and tactics, and making a concerted effort by both male and female members of society to enhance women's participation in politics.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

Most colonial policies in Nigeria seemed to have been gender-blind, as no role was envisaged for women. The assumption must have been that whatever benefits accrued to the male head of household would also accrue to the woman, since she was part of the household. While it is true that British colonial rule was male-dominated in Benin, a considerable number of Benin women

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<sup>51</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Benin Women of Benin Division" ..., 24.

<sup>52</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Benin Women of Benin Division" ..., 24.

<sup>53</sup> Usuanlele, "The Impact of Colonialism on Benin Women of Benin Division" ..., 27.

<sup>54</sup> W. A. Olaitan, "Women in Politics in Nigeria," in Amadu Sesay & Adetanwa Odebiyi (eds.), *Nigerian Women in Society and Development*, Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House, 1998, 81.

derived significant benefits. From their participation in the colonial economy, some of them were able to raise enough capital from the processing and production of foodstuffs and cash crops. Such proceeds were used to establish small-scale businesses and also contributed to the family's well-being. Many of them gain economic independence. The period also witnessed a revolution in women's education. While men were interested in sending their male children to school, Women began to use the money realised from their participation in the colonial economy to send their female children to school or to learn a viable trade and vocation such as sewing. It should be noted that European influence and culture suppressed, but did not eliminate, the African traditional institution, introducing a new philosophy of life that came to stay and opened human minds, especially those of women.

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