

DECOLONIZING NIGERIAN WOMEN: A HISTORICAL NECESSITY

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ABSTRACT: *Nigerian women, viewed from the perspective of the “Colonial mind,” were adjudged weak, oppressed and peripheral to developments in their respective societies. This rather jaundiced perception of Nigerian women was fashioned by several colonial policies and activities spanning several decades of colonial exploitation of Nigeria. This paper seeks to show that Nigerian women were not as inconsequential and marginal to the flow of history as they were portrayed. Indeed, their contributions to the growth and development of society were real, genuine, remarkable and worthy of acknowledgment. To underscore our point, the example of traditional Ejagham women in the Cross-River region of Nigeria would be highlighted with a view to providing a worthy basis for extrapolation with women in other parts of Nigeria in order to demonstrate how Nigerian women as individuals and especially as groups contributed meaningfully to the socio-political and economic development of their respective societies.*

KEYWORDS: Nigerian Women, Colonial Mind, Gender in Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The dominant theme of gender literature in Nigeria suggests that Nigerian women are some of the most oppressed in the world. Nigerian men, it is commonly argued, have designed patterns of oppression against Nigerian women in order that the latter should be seen and not heard. Through a combination of schemes and practices, the Nigerian woman is constrained, restricted and inhibited from self discovery and the socio-political and economic advancement attendant upon it. ¹The very opposite, it is asserted, is the case with the man who from childhood, is made to feel superior to the girl-child and treated as such through a carefully orchestrated and calibrated system of prejudices recognized by the family and the larger society. It is possibly in this regard that Bardwick and Douvan posit that generally, culture values masculine productivity more than female productivity. According to them:

...Masculine endeavors are rewarded and those males who succeed, who acquire money, power and status, who acquire and produce things, are celebrated. But the attributes that are associated with feminism such as the enhancement and stabilization of relationships as well as the female creation of life are not as highly esteemed by men and women alike.²

It is our view that the near total adoption of the foregoing paradigm in the analysis of the contributions of Nigeria women to developments in their respective societies obscures their real worth and undermines the weight of their invaluable contributions to societal growth and prosperity. To drive home our point, we shall highlight the example of the contribution of traditional Ejagham women in the Cross River region of Nigeria to the development of their

society. Predicated on this worthy example, we shall secure extrapolation with a myriad of other cases across Nigeria to consolidate our position.¹

GENDER IN NIGERIA: SOME THEORETICAL CONCERNS

For purposes of expository and analytical clarity, we have elected to proceed by first analyzing, even if briefly, some identifiable schools of thought on gender in Nigeria. The first of these schools of thought is anchored by Chinweizu who in his radical book, *Anatomy of Female Power*, unapologetically dissected the dynamics of female power from a masculinist perspective.³ He maintains that through the powers of a woman's body, womb, the kitchen and cradle, she holds a man captive and manipulates him without fail. For Chinweizu, no man is immune to the manipulative instincts of a woman he loves and that, those who do not appreciate this reality are deceived by the decidedly self-effacing character of female power, efficiently operating especially, in the domain of wife and mother. Women in the light of the foregoing and accordingly to Chinweizu, maximally use the various attributes of this power in their respective homes to control their husbands and children and ultimately, control society since every society is cumulatively an aggregation of the families compromising it. On the other hand, women are wont to bond into different groupings in society and through these groups, maximally impact society one way or another but normally in ways that are not easily discernible to the uninitiated because of the very character of female power. He asserts that throughout history, it has been shown that a woman's body has the capacity of enchanting any intelligent and powerful man to the extent that he becomes stupid and weak; that the woman's womb as the only warehouse that incubates, carries and brings forth a new generation of humanity is another source of female power which would infinitely thrive as long as men harbor the undying desire to raise successors. Furthermore, it is generally held that good food is a sure path to a man's heart. Therefore, as long as the kitchen is controlled by a woman and she almost always does, so is the control of the man's heart. Chinweizu maintains that in spite of the assault of modernization on the kitchen, women are conscious of its importance and therefore, vastly unwilling to let go of its control. Finally, the power that comes from the control of the cradle can not be underestimated "for the way the twig is bent, that way the tree would grow". Chinweizu argues that since the commandant of the cradle is the woman, she ingrains in every child all the basic habits it grows up with and since habits are more powerful than commands and directives, the power of the cradle's commandant can therefore never be exaggerated. It is in the cradle that the male infant is taught to reverence his mother, obey her obsequiously and prepare him to obey other women especially his future wife whom he easily sees as another mother-surrogate. In sum, Chinweizu characterizes female power thus:²

Whereas male power is hard, aggressive and boastful, female power is soft, passive and self-effacing. Whereas male power is like an irresistible force, female power is like an immovable object. Whereas male power acts like a storm, full of motion, sound and fury, female power is like the sun-steady, quiet and uncontestable. Against resistance, male power barks, commands

³ Chinweizu, *Anatomy of Female Power, A masculinist Dissection of Matriachy* (Lagos, Pero Press: 1990) pp.9-130.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.22

and pummels, whereas female power whispers, manipulates and erodes.⁴

There is undoubtedly some sense in Chinweizu's postulation. However his conclusions can be safely characterized as extreme considering the fact that in practical terms, the effect of female power on the structure and functionality of society is comparatively disproportionate to the strength his analysis arrogates to female power. Put differently, although female power does exist and can not by any stretch of imagination be wished away, it is nevertheless, not as all-conquering as Chinweizu would want us to believe.³

The second school of thought is that which presents women as victims of co-ordinated oppression and humiliation by the society. This regime of victimization, it is argued, is enforced by ruthless and selfish patriarchal authority that thrives on the subjugation of women-folk who are expected not to be heard, and in some cases, not to be seen at all. In this regime, the invaluable roles women play in the upliftment of society are minimized, just as they are denied rights over their sexuality etc including those rights that are palpably inalienable. Dorathy Oluwagbemi – Jacob articulated this position graphically thus:

...gender relations over the years have been characterized by inequality. An appraisal of this inequality presents one with a regimen of hindrances, barriers, obstacles, and hurdles, which beset the female sex. Tradition, both western and non western perpetuate injustice of assorted kinds against women touching on those elements that make for authentic existence, such as health, education, political liberty, employment and self-respect. Women suffer disproportionately from abuses and denials of basic human rights. They suffer disproportionately from denials and deprivation of economic, educational and political opportunities.⁵

This school of thought admittedly, is the very opposite of the Chinweizu thesis, except for the commonality they share in the extremisms in which both postulations are couched. Put differently, whereas this school of thought upholds the view of a complete patriarchal dominance of society, Chinweizu sees society as entirely dominated by a manipulative matriarchy. We make bold to maintain that both schools of thought attempt to foist upon us, an exaggerated construct that is not in tandem with the reality of history.

The third school of thought focuses on highlighting the role of Nigerian women in development. It dwells on and illuminates the invaluable contributions of Nigerian women in varied forms and sectors with a view to demonstrating how all these contributions expand the horizon of peace and progress in Nigeria. The ultimate goal is to place the role of Nigerian women in proper historical perspective in order to securely construct an inspirational pedestal for contemporary Nigerian women. Stella A. Effah-Attoe, Okpeh Okpeh and Gloria Chuku are some of the shining lights of this school. Effah-Attoe, in her stimulating study, *Women Empowerment and Nation Building in Nigeria*, chronicled the critically important and multi faceted roles played by women in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. She made

⁵ D. Oluwagbemi – Jacob, "Gender, Democracy and Peace Building: Does A Nexus Exist?" *Opcit*, p.3

it clear that women played huge roles in the socio-cultural, economic and political affairs of society throughout these eras. In the pre-colonial era, for instance, she maintained that:

...apart from dominating local and long distance trade, the food processing and cottage industries, and agriculture, Nigerian women extensively provided health care and spiritual services. Most traditional religions featured females as immortal goddesses.

Most goddesses in Nigeria were portrayed as river goddesses, fertility goddesses and earth goddesses. This is a reflection of the roles and power Nigerian women wielded during the pre-colonial era. In the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, for instance, women provided music, songs and dances required during religious activities. Women also officiated as priestesses, mediums, diviners, healers and often times, as custodians of sanctuaries for gods and goddesses.⁶

Effah-Attoe posits that the relevance of women in Nigerian society as reflected in the foregoing pre-colonial picture came under severe attack under colonialism. Expatriate firms such as John Holt, United African Company (UAC), Lever Brothers etc discriminated against women by evolving policies targeted at disintegrating the small market economy hitherto controlled by women. Women were alienated from land ownership through the adoption of English laws while multiple barriers were erected against their participation in the acquisition of education. In cases where women were allowed participation, their curriculum was largely skewed to enable “girls to become good housewives, rather than income earners for a living”. Women were sufficiently alienated from politics and hugely disfranchised.⁷⁴

It is however gratifying to note as a Effah-Attoe pointed out, that in spite of these barriers, Nigerian women fought for recognition and for their rights as individuals and as groups. For instance, Chief(Mrs) Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Chief(Mrs) Margret Ekpo and Chief(Mrs) Janet Mokelu remain shine examples who at the individual level soared beyond colonial barriers to gain recognition and acquire accommodation within the colonial establishment.⁸ The Aba women’s war of 1929 on the other hand, continues to resonate as a potent example of how women as groups stood up to be counted in the fight for their rights under colonialism.⁹ So much has already been written about the war, thus we do not intend to detain us here by regurgitating what in our view, is already properly digested material. Suffice it to say however, that we intend to presently raise a few hopefully new questions which should serve to affirm the capacity of Nigerian women even at that time. These questions should also serve to explode the myth that Nigeria women were at any time, completely held captive, oppressed and silenced by one form of patriarchy or another as some scholars would gladly want to project. The questions include (a) Did these women (Wives, Mothers, Sisters and Daughters) get the approval of men before prosecuting the Aba Women’s war? (b) Did the men believe in the capacity of the women to prosecute the war? (c) To what did the women owe their success at the end of the day?⁵We hold that, the women obviously had the consent of the men to proceed

⁶ S. Effah – Attoe, *Women Empowerment and Nation Building in Nigeria* (Calabar, University of Calabar Press: 2004) p.7

⁷ *Ibid*, pp.1-18

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

on the enterprise and this was so because the men were already familiar with the fact that the women had the capacity to succeed. The women had time tested networks and structures for socio-cultural and economic mobilization, and it was certainly through these established arteries spanning the entire region, that the war effort was efficiently and effectively prosecuted. In sum, Nigerian women as early as that time had a voice and the accompanying capacity to assert themselves.

Okpeh O. Okpeh, Jr, has on his own part “deconstructed the hegemonic idea that Women in Nigeria as elsewhere are the passive double victims of war and post-war conflict, peace and reconstruction”. In a paper entitled “From Passivity to Stakeholding: Interrogating Gender, Conflicts and Peace Building in Africa” Okpeh has ably demonstrated that the “victimology perspective” fastened by most scholars on African women in war and post-war situations undermines their enormous roles in war and peace times. Citing a myriad of cases across Africa, he has shown that women play invaluable roles in the war and peace times:

...Women were involved with providing directions, navigating displaced populations to safe havens (in refugee camps) and generally catering for the displaced on transit. In the refugee camps, women also assumed diverse, complex and most times challenging roles, including (i) being responsible for most domestic and service-related activities which were both time-consuming and, in the refugee context, very dangerous (ii) Compulsorily coping with changes in family structures and roles as heads of households with no husbands or older children to support the families, and put up with daunting changes in parent/child relationship arising from uprooting; And (iii) becoming principal maintainers of traditional cultural practices which were sometimes at variance with the pressures and exigencies of their situation and resulted in intergenerational conflicts within camps.¹⁰

To take his point closer home, Okpeh highlights the role of women in Nigeria’s oil rich Niger Delta as a model on how women defy victimhood and fight for their rights and the rights of all those who agitate for fairness and equity in the area. He particularly brought to the fore the example of women in the hitherto quiet community of Ugborodo who “invaded the Chevron/Texaco Escravo tank farm to protest environmental degradation and insist on the cessation of violence and destruction”. The women’s protest yielded fruit after an eleven day siege on the company’s facilities as the company yielded to a truce that provided a framework for sustained peace in the community.¹¹⁶

Finally, Gloria Chuku in her article; “Navigating the Colonial Terrain through Protest Movements: A Discourse on the Nigerian Women’s Motives”, highlighted the tenacity of Nigerian women in the fight against colonialist and their Nigerian collaborations. She focused, for instance, on the Abeokuta Women’s Anti-Taxation Demonstrations and particularly threw light on the leadership role of Chief (Mrs) Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti and her Abeokuta

¹⁰ O. O. Okpeh, Jr, “From Passivity to Stakeholding: Interrogating Gender, Conflicts and Peace Building in Africa” Lead paper presented at the Second International Conference organized by the Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, September 21st-24th, 2016. pp.11-12.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.22-23.

Women's Union (AWU) between 1945 and 1949. With a membership of over one hundred thousand, the highpoint of AWU's struggles was the dethronement of the Alake of Abeokuta, Ademola II on the January, 3, 1949, on account of his despicable role as a collaborator with the colonial regime in respect of taxation of Egba Women. The colonial government was accordingly forced to initiate women friendly reforms in the wake of the Alake's abdication including the replacement of the Native Administration Council with Egba Interim Council with four women as members.¹²

⁷The net effect and meaning of all the analyses made so far in respect of the third school of thought is that those scholars who regale in painting the picture of a totally oppressed, humiliated and silenced women folk in Nigeria, may not be casting our women in the exact mould that history avails them. This is not to mean, by any stretch of imagination, that there were no established patterns of oppression and/or facts and evidences of discrimination against women across Nigeria. The point being made is that Nigerian women from the earliest times, had the capacity and momentum at the individual and group levels to rise above the "glass ceiling" and contribute their quota to societal advancement. It is our submission that this rather positive side to the story of women in Nigeria deserves greater illumination as it provides more constructive and positive launching pad for the aspirations of women in contemporary Nigeria. Indeed, it is against this backdrop that we would proceed by telling the story of traditional Ejagham women in the Cross River region of Nigeria in order to drive home our point and throw up a worthy pedestal for extrapolation with a myriad of other women and women groups in Nigeria.

THE EXAMPLE OF EJAGHAM WOMEN IN THE CROSS RIVER REGION OF NIGERIA

The Ejagham are a matrilineal people. In traditional Ejagham society, identity characterization and inheritance are all traceable to women. Put simply, women are central to the very existence of traditional Ejagham society. Accordingly, it has since been shown that amongst the Ejagham:⁸

The family was founded on ties of common ancestral affinities. Every true member of any family was accordingly, expected to be able to trace his/her roots within the context of common genealogical tree. In this situation, all family members were bound by chords of consanguinity to one another, having roots that were collectively traceable to a common ancestral figure. This common ancestral figure was usually a woman.¹³

Women power amongst the Ejagham radiated into and permeated almost all facets of traditional Ejagham society. In the socio-religious sphere for instance, women played a pre-eminent role

¹² G. Chuku, "Navigating the Colonial Terrain Through Protest Movements: A Discourse on the Nigerian Women's Motives", Revised version of paper presented at a Two-day symposium in honour of the memory of the Late Professor Don Ohadike on "Power and Nationalism in Modern Africa", Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 22nd-23rd September, 2006.

¹³ S. O. Onor, "The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria" (Makurdi, Aboki Publishers: 2016) p.109

as priestesses and custodians of gods and shrines. This point was ably made by P.A. Talbot in his ground breaking study, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, when he noted *inter alia* that:

... The river itself is magical, and bold indeed would be that man or woman who should break an oath sworn on its name. For somewhere in its depths dwells Nnimm - the terrible – who was always ready, at the call of her women worshippers, to send up her servants, the beast that flock down to drink and bath in her stream, to destroy the farms of those who have offended. Nnimm, is above all, the object of the women’s devotion. She manifests herself sometimes as a huge Snake, sometimes as a crocodile. Her priestesses have more power than those of any other cult, and the society which bears her name is strong enough to hold its own against the dreaded “Egbo club” itself...¹⁴⁹

R.F. Thompson, writing several decades later, agreed completely with Talbot when he maintained that “it was the Ejagham female who was traditionally considered the original bearer of civilizing gifts” in Ejagham society. Indeed, writing on the Nnimm in particular he held that:

...Nnimm women moved, as the forest moves, as the sea moves, in a swaying, chiming mass of fibres, bones and shells. Beyond disruption, the image of the Nnimm woman was a multitextured manifestation of potentialities, resisting the pigeonholing of women as purely instruments of labour...¹⁵

Women also played a significant role in the political administration of traditional Ejagham society. Oral tradition holds that it was Ejagham women who founded the hugely successful administrative institution called *Mgbe* amongst the Ejagham. Christened *Ekpe* by the Efik who later adopted it, it was recorded in early European literature as the “Egbo Club”. There is a clear unanimity of opinion by all researchers on the subject, to the effect that *Mgbe* played a central role in the political administration of Ejagham people and their neighbors, far and wide. The efficacy of the powers of *Mgbe* was to later arouse the jealousy of men, who as the story goes, seized the institution from women. However, this did not deter the women from forming another institution called *Ekpa*, which a number of researchers have argued, was in many respects as potent as *Mgbe*. This fact was deliberately downplayed by colonial officers and scholars who obviously saw the existence of *Ekpa* as offensive to their masculinist mindset. U. Rosenthaler in a recent study put it graphically thus:

...The *Ekpa* institution did not fit into bourgeois European Ideology-the mere thought of women using their nakedness not as an erotic device but as a weapon to punish and even kill men was a provocation. It was certainly much more widespread in Africa than is acknowledged by written sources.¹⁶¹⁰

¹⁴ P. A. Talbot, *“In the Shadow of the Bush”* (Connecticut, Negro University Press: 1912) p.2

¹⁵ R. F. Thompson, *“Flash of the Spirit”* (New York, Random House: 1984) p.235

¹⁶ U. Rosenthaler, *Purchasing Culture, The Dissemination of Associations in Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria* (New Jersey, Africa World Press: 2011) p.217

¹⁷ S. O. Onor, *“The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria, Op cit*, p.147

The potency of *Ekpa* has since been widely documented by many observers, one of whom had this to say:

...Members of *Ekpa* ran maenad-like round the town in nearly naked state; many brandished guns and swords, and looked fierce and wild. The men kept carefully out of sight, though their presence is not absolutely forbidden in daylight, but after dark no man must show his face. The women dance stark naked the whole night through, and should any man attempt so much as a glance at these mysteries, his strength will ebb away, and all his vital powers shrivel up forever.¹⁷

The dynamics that defined, catalyzed and propelled traditional Ejagham economy derived substantial impetus from the womenfolk. Agriculture, for example, was an occupation that “extensively engaged the services of men and women alike”.¹⁸ Both gender played important, specialized and complimentary roles in the agricultural enterprise. In this connection, labour specialization or division along the lines of gender was common. For instance, it was the responsibility of men to forage and clear virgin forest areas for cultivation, in the same way as it was their duty to make mounds and provide stakes on which young yam tendrils found succor. Women on their part, collected all the debris which arose from the clearing process and burnt same for use as organic fertilizer. It was also their responsibility to rid the farm of weeds throughout the duration of the farming season.¹¹

Ejagham women were profoundly artistic and enjoyed the liberty of expressing themselves in a number of centres created specially for the teaching and dissemination of the arts by tutors of their own sex. Their products were held in such awe by their neighbours, far and near, thus eliciting the attention and admiration of early European scholars, some of whom extolled Ejagham women’s “Mastery of outline...far beyond the average to be expected from Europeans”.¹⁹ Pottery, for instance, was practiced by Ejagham women in all Ejagham communities endowed with clay deposits suitable for it. A usually cumbersome process that required a lot of time, energy, skill and patience, Ejagham women were noted for painstakingly following through the process to the admiration of all and sundry. A researcher described the process in these words:

As a rule the manufacture is in the hands of women in some places they nearly all make it, in others the art is confined to a few families. The vessels are usually built up by the addition of successive small pieces or strips of clay; whenever possible the necks of broken pots are kept and used as the basis of the new ones. Sand or crushed pieces of old pots are often mixed with the clay. The surface is polished with a stone and with the hand and it is then laid in the sun to harden. The decoration...is sometimes done before the hardening and almost invariably before the firing, which is as a rule carried out over a small open fire after the pot is thoroughly dry.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.161

¹⁹ R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit Op cit*, p.230

In addition to pottery, there were other occupations that engaged Ejagham women such as basketry, carving and matting. Salt production and rudimentary forms of metallurgy were also embarked upon. Generally, items produced from these myriad of occupations and enterprises were gathered together by these women and sold within and outside their communities. Indeed, it needs to be particularly emphasized that short distance, trade amongst Ejagham communities and between them and their neighbours was freely engaged upon by Ejagham women without any discrimination whatsoever.¹²

OTHER INTERESTING PARALLELS ACROSS NIGERIA.

The attainments of Ejagham women in the pre-colonial era and their invaluable contributions to the socio-political and economic development of their respective societies were by no means a unique experience. This is because other women at individual and group levels across what is today, Nigeria, played equally critical and significant roles in their different communities, places and kingdoms etc to impact society in a manner worthy of historical attention. History records for instance, that at the dawn of legitimate commerce in the 19th century and the attendant ascendancy of palm oil trade, oil Rivers women were engaged in the production of palm oil and nuts that facilitated their dominance of small scale trading in the Oil Rivers Protectorate. These women were also vastly involved in trading in a number of other items such as fish, salt cassava, sweet yam and potatoes. It is remarkable that they combined their trading activities effectively with farming, arts and crafts as well as other essential household chores. In the process, some of these women such as Madam Orupumbu Toria of Buguma and Queen Umo Orok of Duke Town became exceedingly rich and hugely influential in the politics and economics of the times.²¹

It is interesting to note that the strength of these women was particularly noticeable in their togetherness. Bound together as women groups and especially as market women with common interests, these women became a dominant force especially in colonial urban centers where the markets virtually became a woman's world.²² With the strength generated from this camaraderie, they exerted tremendous influence on other sectors of the society including politics, culture, religion and women's rights. Membership of these groups, especially of market women Associations, availed protection for these women by ensuring economic privileges and favorable trading conditions through the enforcement of acceptable regulations and values. Furthermore, members were open to a great deal of economic benefits from these Associations as well as other forms of welfare support as the Associations provided a veritable platform for business and pleasure. Little wonder, V.I. Ekpo writing on the subject of "The Role of Market Women in Nigeria's Social and Political History" maintained that:¹³

...Traditionally women had their own organizations and activities aimed at maintaining a system of social control and preservation of the traditional culture. The Ibibio *Iban Isong* (Women's government) was most effective in asserting the social, economic and political rights of women,...Similar were

²⁰ S. O. Onor, "The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria, *Op cit*, p.171

²¹ V. I. Ekpo, "The role of Market Women in Nigeria Social and Political History", Paper Presented to International Association of Student in Economics and Management, University of Calabar, chapter, 1990. pp.1-14

²² *Ibid*

the *Nkat* and *Ajabaja* societies of the Yala women, the *Nnimm* of the Ejagham, the *Ekuruso* and the *Oyonko* of the Yakuur, the *Ebre* and *Nyama* among the Ibibio, the *Ogbo mitiri* or *Otu Umunwanyi* of the Ibo and Rivers women etc.²³¹⁴

It is on record that Nigerian women played huge and significant roles in the politics of their respective communities in the pre-colonial era. In the Kanem-Bornu empire for instance, the office of the *Magira* (The Queen Mother) and the *Gumsu* (The First wife of the Mai) wielded tremendous power and authority. In ancient Zaria, Queen Amina stands out as a distinguished and celebrated leader under whose leadership Zaria witnessed unprecedented expansion, progress and material prosperity. In Yorubaland, the story was not different as women had many roles to play in the politics and administration of Yoruba kingdoms. This was also true in relation to the Benin Kingdom. The case of Moremi of Ife and Emotan of Benin are particularly celebrated examples.²⁴

Colonialism attempted to erode all the gains and attainments of Nigerian women in the pre-colonial era. Colonial policies were indeed antithetical to the politico-economic and social development of Nigerian women. The imposition of an export-oriented economy that promoted large scale businesses and inhibited small scale enterprises threw a lot of women out of business. Furthermore, colonial policies deliberately excluded women from access to medium and large scale loans that facilitated bulk purchase required by the colonial economic establishment. In the process, a few Nigerian male traders and middlemen as well as their expatriate collaborations including John Holt, United African Company (UAC) and Lever Brothers, amongst others, undermined the participation of small businesses and in the process, threw a lot of women who were hitherto doing well as small business owners out of business. Finally, the spread of Christianity has been adduced as one of the reasons that accounted for the relegation of women under colonialism. It is passionately argued by some researchers that the Christian doctrine strengthened the fibre of western preconception of female inferiority which was imported into the Nigerian clime by the colonial government. Be that as it may Nigerian women fought back gallantly at the individual and group levels, for recognition and accommodation by the colonial government, recording remarkable success here and there.²⁵¹⁵

The struggle for women recognition and representation continued unabated at the dawn of independence in 1960. From pioneers like Funmilayo Kuti, Margret Ekpo and Gambo Sawaba, to the present crop of highly educated women politicians and entrepreneurs such as Ngozi Okonjo Iweala and Obi Ezekwesili etc, Nigerian women have certainly come a long way in their efforts to maximize their participation and impact on Nigeria's politics and economy. There is no doubt that many challenges have been encountered along the way and obstacles surmounted, which is exactly what makes every struggle worth the effort. In the final analysis, what has today emerged is a louder voice for Nigerian women across the politico-economic landscape, increased participation and impact of women in the polity and a clear evidence of the fact that the future holds undeniably brighter possibilities and prospects for women involvement in the affairs of Nigeria.

²³ V. I. Ekpo, "The role of Market Women in Nigeria Social and Political History", *Op cit*, p.5

²⁴ S. Effah – Attoe, *Women Empowerment and Nation Building in Nigeria*, *Op cit*, pp.8-10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp.10-12.

NIGERIAN WOMEN IN HISTORY: OUR VIEW

What has emerged from the foregoing analyses is that Nigerian women through the epochs, have always played appreciable roles in the development of society; sometimes these roles appear visibly critical and significant and at other times, somewhat marginal and peripheral. In all however, it need be categorically stated that there was no time that Nigerian women were so oppressed, humiliated and silenced to the point where they were mere onlookers to the flow of history. Rather there is ample evidence to show that regardless of the periodic calculated attempts to minimize them, Nigerian women have always risen above the “glass ceiling” to make worthy inputs into the peace, progress and developmental processes in Nigeria.

We submit that there are two basic paradigms from which to interrogate the role of women in Nigerian history. The first can be termed the formal/hierarchical and the other, the informal/social. The former evaluates the role of women from the perspective of their control or lack of control of the commanding heights of the politico-economy of society. Those who measure the worth of women from this viewpoint are more likely to minimize their value in Nigerian history as women generally play roles that are deeper and more fundamental, yet less visible than those of the majority of men who function in the hierarchy of power. The informal/social paradigm on the other hand, allows for the interrogation of the role of women from a “bottom-up” perspective. This enables the researcher to highlight the invaluable role of women as builders of the family, and since every society is the functional culmination of the families that constitute it, the significant role of women in the overall development of society can not be over emphasized. Beyond this is the fact that as controllers of small scale trade and commerce from one epoch to another, women have always constituted the critical network on which societal sustenance is hinged. This fact, in addition to the other critically significant roles that we have highlighted in this study, make women undoubtedly, an integral component of the infinitely unfolding drama called Nigerian history.

It is in the light of the above, that we seek a departure from the narrative that is fixated to showing our womenfolk as passive onlookers at worst and marginal contributors at best to the processes that define our history. This narrative is clearly a product of the jaundiced imagination of the colonial establishment that was clearly anti-women. In its place, a new narrative that illuminates the role of Nigerian women as worthy partners in the evolution of the Nigerian nation need be enthroned. It is this new narrative that reflects the reality of Nigerian history and provides the launching pad for the inspiration of contemporary Nigerian women who must necessarily surpass the attainments of their forebears.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper concerned itself with the decolonization of Nigerian women through the process of deconstructing the jaundiced colonial narrative that presents Nigerian women as peripheral and marginal to the evolution of the Nigerian state. Accordingly, ample evidence was adduced to show that Nigerian women across the different epochs of Nigeria’s existence, played active, positive and constructively impactful roles in Nigerian history. It is our considered opinion that once we wade through the veneer of a formal/hierarchical perspective of history to the profound reality that an informal/social view of historical events avails us, we would begin to see the unblemished evidence of the significant role of Nigerian women as catalyst and purveyors of real development in Nigeria. This new narrative, in our view, would serve to extricate Nigerian

women from the “victimology complex” that the old narrative inflicts on them and enthrone in its place, a new story that should inspire contemporary Nigerian women to higher levels of participation, productivity and performance in the critical task of nation building.

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