



**Colonial Workforce and Institutionalization of Gender Inequality in Oron Society,
1900-1960**

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of colonialism on the workforce and gender dynamics in Oron society between 1900 and 1960. It argues that the introduction of colonial policies significantly altered traditional gender roles and exacerbated inequality. Before colonial rule, Oron society operated on a system where men and women had complementary, though distinct, roles with women playing a central part equally. This balance was disrupted as the colonial government prioritized male labour for public works, forced labour and the cultivation of cash crops like palm produce, which were deemed more valuable to their colonial economy. This led to a growing economic disparity between the genders, as men's economic power increased while women's was diminished, devalued and marginalized in colonial formal economy. The study employs historical tools of qualitative analysis garnered from data obtained from primary and secondary sources. The study fills a gap in gender studies as it concludes that the colonial period was a transformative era that institutionalized new forms of gender inequality in Oron society by reshaping the workforce and undermining the pre-existing, more balanced gender-specific systems, hence, the legacy of these colonial policies continues to influence gender relations and economic roles in the region today.

Keywords: Gender, Oron Society, Inequality, Colonial period, Workforce.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines how gender inequality as institutionalized by the colonial authority in Oron society in particular and Nigeria in general the socio-cultural substructure of Oron indigenous society. As a result, women were apparently excluded from colonial workforce and western oriented services on various grounds which were equally suspicious of European eurocentric mindsets and missions in the region.

The concept of gender inequality connotes the social, political and cultural phenomenon in which female gender in Oron society were treated unequally on ground of their sex or gender. Such unequal development was accentuated by cultural, biological, psychological and social norms and traditions of the Oron indigenous society. In the colonial era , the concept and practice of gender exclusivity was rigidly entrenched in Oron society in particular and Nigeria in general through the instrument of colonial domination. Europeans were relatively not comfortable with the indigenous socio-cultural practices and injunctions to extra-marital affairs concerning the white foreigners or mmatang whom they saw as usurpers of their traditions. On their part , Europeans never wanted to be inflicted with such agonies resulting from canal knowledge of black women in their offices and workplaces. The colonial authorities' solution was to exclude women from the workforce, thereby discouraging their participation in colonial services.

Europeans were terrified over the African practices like ekpo nkawo, which held sway in the neighbouring Ibibio country. This amounted to a reason the colonizers commissioned their missionaries to preach, soften and undermine those indigenous practices seen as life threatening but morally-oriented and more superior and potent in compliance than European practices. Gender inequality especially in workplaces existed in every society to a certain degree but in conformity with the norms of the people. The prevailing traditional occupations in the pre-colonial Oron society included farming, hunting, fishing ,trading, brace work, blacksmithing and weaving among others.

Nyong (2023) adds that the occupations were generously practised by male and female genders without discrimination, though the females formed such occupational workforce under the guidance and headship of their male partners.

On his part , Osung (2023) asserts that women were hardly alone or without the guidance of men except in few religious practices such as ndem priesthood or salamanda (water gods and goddess) where they acted as priests. This particular situation showed relative subordination of female group to the male genders in area of occupational engagements. It is true that Oron culture placed headship rule on the masculine domain and allowed them to work under men without the feeling of bias, discrimination and disaffection, thereby showing a great difference from what the white man's rule introduced. Atim Emusi (2023) noted that in order to checkmate the excesses against women, a social group called iban isong udung or mmani isong udung (women of the land) existed to help control and protect women against inequality, discrimination in the indigenous workforce before the advent colonialism in the region . She asserted that such practices were halted and destroyed following the emergence of the superior force of colonialism which rendered women segregated against modern employment and services controlled by the colonial authority. At this junction, this research work has the objective of uncovering the eurocentric elements in the colonial workforce. It also attempts to bring to the fore the fact that gender inequality and its attendant problems were introduced into African societies by British colonial administration.

Oron: Location And People

Oron Nation of the present day Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria is made up of clans or ofokho viz: Okpo,Uquong, Ebughu, Ibigbi, Oki-Usu, Idua (Ilue) ,Efiat, Ubodung and Etta. However, due to geopolitical restructuring and creation of Akwa Ibom State, Oron nation has become fragmented into five (5) Local Government Areas of Udung Uko, Oron, Urue Offong/Oruko ,Mbo and Okobo. Oron people popularly described as one of the nations in the Old Calabar kingdom shares some form of ancestral relationships with the Eket, Ibeno and Eastern Obolo groups in Akwa Ibom State and the Andoni people of Rivers State. Oron is one of the major ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom State and where Ibibio and Annang also belong.

Oron Nation is located in the south eastern fringe of Akwa Ibom State bounded in the south by Ibeno and the Atlantic Ocean. In the West , Oron is bounded by Esit Eket and Nsit Ubium, in the North by Nsit Atai and Uruan while northward she is bounded by Cross River estuary and Calabar.

Emergence of Gender Inequality In the Colonial period.

Gender inequality occurred in Oron region following the advent of colonialism which destroyed the indigenous socio-cultural, economic and political structures. Patriarchal policies and demonization of the Oron systems were imposed by the colonial governments at various times to justify the obnoxious policy (Shifteng, 2023). From the beginning of colonialism, the colonizers punctured and destroyed Oron indigenous societies with their obnoxious laws and reforms which caused women to be treated as inferior even in their marital homes, families of birth and places of work and therefore provided that men must be the exclusive occupants of positions of power and authority (Oyewumi, 1988:88). In the colonial era,Oron and other African women were only known for child bearing and were neither renowned ,distinguished nor admired. She could only be seen through the man and was not to be heard because man was inherently superior to woman in all ramifications. The existence of women depended completely on men because in most cases, some customary laws treated women as minors. In most African societies, a woman must obtain the husband's consent to open or have access to bank account (Kunt, Kalpper, Singer, Ansar and Hess, 2018). Since the advent of colonialism in Africa , the feminine gender had become subjected to varying degrees of discrimination and unequal treatments. Until early 1960s, it was difficult to find women as academic staff or teachers in one of the oldest schools in Nigeria located in Oron : the Methodist Boys High School founded 1905 by the Methodist Mission of Scotland. Also, in colonial companies like Elder Dempster and Mchiever which had their offices in the coastal areas of Oron , it was completely out of place to find women as staff in whatever capacity (Edet, 2013).

Reasons for Gender Inequality During The Colonial Period

Colonial factor:

The colonial conception of gender conspicuously marginalized the women-folk, while it privileged men. Since cultural imperialism viewed Eurocentric religion, ideas and morals as innately superior to those of the indigenous African societies, the resultant changes brought about by this imperial summation were ofcourse, noticeable in relations between both sexes in the continent. Colonialism visibly enabled the imposition of rigid roles including gender perceptions, on our collective consciousness. This perception explains how historical dominance of Africa by Europe became the major, reason for oppression, servitude and marginalization of the African women.

Economic factor:

This supposedly accounts for the origin of the emergence of inequality of in workforce against female gender in Oron society. Trade and economic reason centered on exploitation of the people and their resources for the development of European industries and economies became the cardinal reason for colonialism. As a result, Oron women in particular and African women in general were seen as “weaker sex” and socio-cultural agents of white man’s death, hence, they were excluded from colonial workforce in coal mines, railways, postal services, church administration, army and colonial work-force. They were only used as palm oil and kernel nut carriers by the middlemen who were intermediaries between the interior and coasts of Oron, Efik and Uruan (Katrin: 2013).

Furthermore, the introduction of monetized economy which consequently subjected the people to peasantization and proletarianization through forced labour has adversely affected chances of Oron women. According to Keesing (1985) those activities which required sheer physical strength of the shoulder and arms as well as those activities which required much mobility belonged to the masculine domain while less rigorous activities such as carrying of loads, weeding, nursing and cooking were allowed for the women.

With heavy pangs of anger over discrimination in workforce, constant harassment and imposition of taxation on them during the indirect rule policy of the British colonial administration in Nigeria, the Women War of 1929 took place in Ikot Abasi in the present day Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The protest was a nationalistic attempt by women to repel and rise against inequality in workforce, exploitation and imposition of colonial laws and taxes on men and women (Eluwa, Ukagwu, Nwachukwu and Nwaubuni 1988).

It must be emphasized that even in the military arm of colonialism, no African woman was recruited yet African women such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Nzinga Mbande (Lica 40BC), (c.1583-1663) of Mbundi in Angola, Queen Nnanny (c.1685-c.1750) of Jamaica, Yaa Asantewa (c. 1840-1921) of Ashanti, Moremi of Ife, the 1929 Ikot Abasi women rioters and Emotan of the ancient Benin were great African female warriors and leaders (Pitchon, 2022).

Oron (African) Socio-cultural and Religious Factors:

Upon the invasion of Oron Society, the colonizers deployed their foot-soldiers in the guise of missionaries and administrators with the ulterior aim of undermining the people's cultural structures while looting and exported the enviable religious, social and cultural concepts of Oron civilizations such as the ekpu obio, obio ufreh artefacts and Okpo obribong spiritual elements. Accordingly, those colonial policies excluded the Oron women from its colonial armed forces and police service, outlawed women from assuming managerial or public office positions in their establishments for fear of being hunted by their husbands through the spiritual means in the event of any fodetected. It was widely believed among the colonizers that Oron women were harbingers of evil, misfortune and capable of inflicting sicknesses and death against any white man who dared to engage in any form of immoral affairs with an Oron women.

As asserted by Talbot (1918), the mmatang or white people were scared of the laws and traditions protecting the women against the arrogant, randy and promiscuous lifestyle of the European workers and administrators. Such practices as ekpo nkawo among the Ibibio and Annang groups and usiakulor among the Oron people were seen as death-traps by the white-people or mmatang, hence, the stringently discriminatory policy which secluded women from equal working opportunities with men.

Effects of Female Seclusion From the Colonial Workforce

Colonialism and its policies had far-reaching consequences and effects on Oron people in particular and Nigerians in general due to its rigid seclusion policy against women. These consequences received little or no attention aimed at correcting the imbalance even in the post-colonial male-dominated governmental institutions and establishments. At a point, it was a taboo to send female children to school among the parents in Oron. It was from the 1940s when the first female Secondary School in Eastern Nigeria was established that, Mary Hanney Secondary School, Oron opened its doors to female education in the region.

Due to ages of neglect and discrimination in workforce against women, they had no option except resorting to mass movement or migration to urban centres where they were engaged in commercial sex works to be able to survive. Consequently, due to ages of neglect and discrimination in colonial workforce, men in Oron society began to become victims of insubordination. This was the case with Mary Osung who in 1951, left her husband, Osung Osung, in an immoral manner to seek greener means of survival in Calabar where male colonial employees were reasonably found (Nduonyi, 2025).

Again, a number of Oron women found employments in the formal sector such as petty trading, commodity productions like soap, garri and retailing of foods and liquor. Even in their attempts to survive under those informal and subsistent activities and migration to urban centres, they were strictly policed and harassed by different agencies of colonial administrations.

CONCLUSION

Following the introduction of the colonial form of administration by the British government coupled with its unmitigated desire to submit Nigeria to unabated exploitation through trades, oil exploration and other administrative subjugations, the gender inequality became apparently and rigidly applied in almost all facets of Oron indigenous life, especially in their colonially regulated workforce and services.

Though the concept termed inequality in relation to male and female genders has remained a time-honoured phenomenon, yet the extent to which it ravaged the indigenous socio-cultural practices of the Oron People following its introduction by the capitalist colonial Britain, remains a subject of interest and study as it completely resulted in cultural disorientation and economic stagnation, hardship and hindrance to Oron indigenous process of development and harmonious gender coexistence in a model African society like Oron. Infact, the new form of colonial practice in colonial working or labour institutions and environments tantamounted to another form of enslavement and distortion of Oron indigenous socio-cultural orientation whereby communality was the key parimetre of development and progress.

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