

Colonialism and the Changing Role of Women in Ogoni, Rivers State, 1900-1960

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Abstract: Colonial rule bequeathed profound and indelible legacies to Africa and its peoples, its short period in the long eventful history of Africa notwithstanding. Evidently, its impact varies between gender and from theme to theme in the economic, political, socio-cultural and religious perspectives. This paper, using the experience of Ogoni women of River State, Niger Delta Region, examined and highlighted the changing roles of women during colonial era. Adopting the multi-disciplinary method, the work incisively investigated the two sides of the coin and discovered that the colonial enterprise had more far-reaching effect on the women folk than their male counterparts. The paper has shown that with the adoption of the so-called British concept of “England Victorian”, African women were reduced to the rank of house wives. Women during the colonial period were excluded from the most important segments of the colonial civil service. As a result, they were forced to adjust to the dictates of the new rulers. The paper maintained that, more than any other plausible factors, the colonial situation is responsible for the discrimination African women are facing in the post-colonial Africa. The paper, therefore, suggested that concerted efforts should be made government to give them a pride of place in the society and this project must be supported by men to enhance gender equity.

Key words: Colonialism, Discrimination, Domination, Gender, Women

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Introduction

For sub-Saharan Africa, the European episode had far-reaching implications for the course of African historical development, despite its relatively short duration in the annals of the prolonged eventful history of Africa. As Boahen (1985,p. 806) averred “though colonialism was a short interlude, it nevertheless was of great significance for Africa and left an indelible impression on Africa”. Ostensibly, the real impact of colonialism on Africa and its peoples has thrown up a hotly contested academic debate among scholars, both Afrocentric and Eurocentric writers, to the extent that opinion is sharply divided on how to assess the trajectory of colonialism. It has been

contested by the colonial apologists and their supporters that colonialism was in many ways beneficial to Africa. The African and Africanist school of thought represented by the liberal-nationalist, Dependency, Marxist and Neo-Marxist, Development and Anti-development paradigms vehemently argue that Africa and its peoples hardly gain any tangible thing from colonialism, noting that what they achieved from the European contact were underdevelopment, backwardness, oppression, domination, exploitation, and unequal relationships to mention but a few. Quoting Arundhati Roy, Ebine (2012,p. 796) summed up the debate on the pros and cons of colonialism to “debating the pros and cons of rape”.

What is of utmost interest here is the divergent opinions expressed by scholars and commentators on the positive or negative foot prints of colonialism on the roles, contributions and status of African women, “lasting as it did no more than eighty years anywhere” (Boahen, 1985,p. 809) in the black continent of Africa. For instance, an ideological camp profusely protests that the impact of colonialism on women was that of discrimination, oppression, marginalization, inequality and male-dominance, stressing that African women were excluded from all important political and administrative structures and from the capitalist-oriented economy based on the European model. Another school of thought contends that even though not deliberately planned, European alien administration bequeathed varied transformative legacies to the women in the political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres. For example, African women, who were enslaved and made docile by their people’s traditions, customs, beliefs and philosophy, were liberated by the colonial forces of change to protest against colonial economic, political and administrative policies during the colonial dispensation. The Niger Delta Women War of 1929 is a classic and vivid example.

Clearly, colonialism and its concept of “England Victorian” profoundly affected and phenomenally altered the status, contributions and role of women in diverse ways, forcing them to adjust to the dictate of the new dispensation. Ikpe (1997,p. 258) elaborated that “colonialism was an agent of change. It was not only a system of government but also a way of life. Thus, colonial policies and the colonial situation affected the lives of women tremendously”. Against this backdrop and using the Ogoni women of Rivers State, Niger Delta Region as example, this paper highlights and examines the changing roles of women during the colonial period, noting its positive and negative effects.

The Ogoni were one of distinct earliest inhabitants of the present day Niger Delta Region and the South-South Geo-political Zone (Loolo, 1981). The Ogoni is defined territorially as encompassing over 500 square miles in the mainland fringe bordering the Eastern Niger Delta. The Ogoni occupy the stretch of land running east and west of the Imo River sandwiched by Opobo and Rumukrushe, approximately eleven miles north of Port Harcourt (Holland, 1947). The territory is bound to the north by the IgboidNdoki, the South by the Bonny Opobo, Nkoro and Obolo (Andoni); the Annang/Ibibio to the east and the Garden city of Port Harcourt and the Ikwerre to the west. Ogoni is made up of six main clans, namely, Babbe, Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme. Bori is considered to be the traditional headquarters of the Ogoni people (Igbara, 2009; Kpone-Tonwe, 2003; Igbara & Keenam, 2013).

Presently, the area is politically and administratively divided into four Local Government Areas. They are Khana, Tai, Gokana and Eleme. Noted for its super socio-political and military organizations, Saro-Wiwa (2012,p. 72) aptly declared Ogoni before the advent of British Colonialism,as” a very orderly society”. Like other African societies, Ogoni was violently incorporated into the British colonial empire. Having conquered them, they were lumped together with Opobo, Nkoro Andoni and Southern Ibibio to form the Opobo Division and

administered as part of Calabar Province, Eastern Nigeria (Naanen & N-ue, 2016). It follows, therefore, that the advent of colonialism had several and serious repercussions on the people especially the female folk and their endogamous systems.

Colonialism and Ogoni Women

Extrapolating from the foregoing, there is no doubt that the colonial enterprise left a deluge of legacies on the continent of Africa and its people. Women have their own share of the negative or positive impact of the colonial situation as evident in the status of women, system of inheritance, economy, dress and body beautification, sex and marriage, fattening custom, education, politics, indigenous medicine and healthcare and so on.

i. Colonialism and Matriarchy

The Ogoni of the Eastern Niger Delta Mainland, prior to the contact with the colonial system, reckoned their kinship (*gah*) or descent (*manamana*) along the female ancestry (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990; 2003a). This custom, which probably was rooted in the people's feminist cosmological and philosophical concepts of the Supreme Being called KAWA BARI or WABARI (mother god) believed to be the creator of the entire universe, conferred Supreme authority on women and also transferred it from one woman to another. This is called matrilineal succession (Kpone-Tonwe, 2003a; 2003b). To underlie the cultural significance of the matrilineal system, totemism or affinities-the belief in the animal affinity with the human affiliate-was attributed to the each Kinship (*Buaka, Faka, or Buawuga*). "Maternal groups (*Buaka*) made shrines for their animal representations which was usually in a room kept and guided by the eldest man or woman of the maternal group. This shrine was called *Siku-ue*" (Anokari, 1986,p. 87). The belief in totems by each lineage brought unity, harmony and cordiality in the kinship system. To Anokari (1986,p. 87) "it made the people to regard each other as one; and guided their dealings with each other". Loolo (1981,p. 31) buttressed that "Affinities however, are matrilineal, that is, children belong to the affinities of their mother and not their father. For instance, while my father's "were" beast is a python, my own is tiger like my mother's. My children's were-beast will be same as that of their mother". Kpone-Tonwe (2003b,pp.281-282) threw interesting light on the importance of matrilineal descent among the Ogoni:

There is a consensus that a person was better protected and more secure in his maternal home than among his paternal kins. For this reason, children were often sent to their maternal grandparents for care and protection rather than to their paternal ones. They believed that the matrilineage was the line of blood; and security in the matrilineage. This belief was even stronger in spiritual matters. For example, during the rite of *Yaanwii*, which was performed by a man of means and distinction, one of the sacred acts which he had to perform before he could be given the title of *Kabari* (chief), was to make a holy pilgrimage to his great grandmother's home, called *NamaKaama* (Ancient matrilineage) and be subjected to a holy bath (baptism), which was a complete spiritual cleansing, performed by the eldest woman or the priestess of that house. This baptism was supposed to give him his greatest spiritual insulation against external and negative forces and endowed him with wisdom and a sense of rectitude which, was the basis of proper behaviour and actions in the natural world.

Understandably, the ideology and practice of matrilineal system survived for a long time in Ogoni up to the dawn of the twentieth century because of their minimal participation in the Trans-Atlantic trade which was system and its paraphernalia led to the natural death of the matrilineal succession. Generally, Zeleza (1994,p. 11) noted that “with the colonial conquest, African women fell from the grace of egalitarianism into patriarchal clutches of imperialist”. Similarly, Alagoa (2003,p. 40) insisted that the imposition of colonial rule from the close of the nineteenth century brought the matrilineal system into conflict with the patrilineal principles favoured by the new rulers”. Matriarchy had declined and disappeared from the African cultural lexicon and replaced with the European culture of patriarchy, the notion of male dominance.

ii. Colonialism and System of Inheritance

The Ogoni culturally permitted women especially the first daughter (*Sira*) and wives to maximally benefit from the estates of their parents or husbands. Those things willed and distributed to wife (wives) or daughters included property like money, cloths, household utensils, domestic livestock, farming implements, farm lands, plantain plantation, and economic trees and so on. The brothers of the wife controlled groves like raffia palm and oil palm bushes. They only inherited them when they had come of age and must have been culturally tutored the ethos and culture of the people by the maternal uncles. The male including the first son (*Saaro*) got no share of his mother’s wealth and father’s estate.

The colonial enterprise upturned the Ogoni traditional system of inheritance which favoured the female. The alien rulers imposed their most cherished patriarchal system on the people and this gave birth to an entirely new mode of inheritance which transferred the right of inheritance to the first born son (*Saaro*). For the son to have creditably and successfully given his father a befitting burial rites (*Si-ma ge*), he became the major beneficiary of this late father’s estate. Kpone-Tonwe (2003a,pp. 15-16) informed that “at the death of (such) a man, his first born son (*Saaro*) succeeded him as heard of the House, and he inherited the bulk of his father’s wealth. Part of this wealth has however, distributed among the first-sons of other wives”. They are often regarded as one House (*nutor*) of the man dead or alive. They are accorded the rations of favoured family in which no relatives dare contest. The fact is that the new rulers had replaced matriarchy (*Buaka*) with patriarchy (*Gah*), transferring the line of leadership succession from the female to the male. Hence, the decline in the prestige and status hitherto exercised by the female folk in Ogoni traditional setting.

iii. Colonial Rule and Endogamous Marriage System

Endogamy is a social rule requesting a member of a social group not to marry outside his/her culture group. In pre-colonial days, the Ogoni practised matrilineal endogamous or virilocal marriage system. Their ancestors, therefore, prohibited “any inter-marriage except with the Ibibio” (Gibbons, 1932,p. 9) perhaps to maintain their purity and creativity as an agrarian society accustomed to their age-long cherished land surrounded by several rituals and taboos (Gbenenye & Kpone-Tonwe, 2009; N-ue, 2018). Saro-Wiwa (2012,p. 72) further explained that:

The law passed by our ancestors forbidding intermarriage with our neighbours with the exception of Ibibio, whose women Ogoni men were permitted to marry. This served to preserve the purity of the Ogoni, to preserve their language and culture and to stop their absorption or dilution by any of the neighbouring larger groups.

The intensive intergroup marriage contacts accounted for the exclusive preservation of both cultures which were most similar in many ways and the production of effective labour force. There are majority of Ibibio women today in Ogoni and *vice versa*. The Ogoni society was not the only polity in the pre-colonial times that hesitated in giving their daughters out to their neighbours for marriage. An outstanding ethnic group in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria was the Tiv. Fearing that the Udam's (Tiv's Cross River neighbours) practice of female circumcision could result to the death of their daughter in the process, the Tiv declined them to be their in-laws. To the Alago Tiv's northern neighbours, the Tiv loathed their seeming lack of interest for farm work. But the Tiv men usually married their Women (Apenda, 2006).

The people's interactions with colonial rule with its praxis dramatically altered the Ogoni ideas concerning these beliefs and cultural practices. The infiltration of western values: Christianity, education, urbanization, *Pax Britannica*, and so on highly influenced their world view and made them to change from matrilineal endogamous marriage system to patrilineal exogamous marriage system. Exogamy, which is the opposite of endogamy, permits an adult of a given community to marry any person of her choice outside her cultural, political, religious and regional environment. This emancipation offered by the colonial system enabled Ogoni women to choose and marry the men of her dream through "marriage de conveyance". The marriage freedom could explain the presence of Ogoni women in most of their neighbouring communities and beyond today.

iv. **Colonial Episode and Sex and Taboos**

In pre-colonial period, the Ogoni fashioned out customary laws and taboos sanctioned by the gods and deities to regulate the conduct and behaviour of their children. This was premised on the stoic philosophy that children were the pride of the family, expected to take in the stead of their parents and bury them when they breathed their last. For those reasons and many others, mating, incest, pre-fattening pregnancy was controlled through the promulgation of taboos against pre-marital sex, incest and adultery to protect and safeguard the marriage institution. Rules against adultery were established because marriage in the cosmological world view of the Ogoni was an everlasting union. The bride wealth paid by the husband on his wife to cement the marriage bond must be justified. Again, it was meant to enhance social control as most husbands who were easily provoked by his immoral act committed murder, assault, invocation of "Juju" and acts like poisoning and charming of culprits.

The Ogoni seriously frowned at pre-marital or pre-fattening pregnancy of their females. Parents, therefore, jealously guarded the virginity of their daughters to take the glory of bringing up their girls in a culturally acceptable manner. The cry or scream of defilement emanating from every newly married woman in the area was a thing of joy and pride to her parents while those who had pre-marital sex and their parents were ridiculed and castigated in songs, jokes and drama throughout their live times and thereafter.

With the influence of western civilization, these customs are virtually non-existent; indigenous customs controlling indiscriminate sex had been flagrantly violated and perniciously rejected. Pre-marital sex is the hallmark of any relationship today. It is argued that sex-before-marriage assist them to select their future spouse because they are physically and sexually compatible. Modern technologies like Mobile Phones, Internet Communication Technologies (ICT), social media communication platforms and network sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, twitter, Snapchat, You Tube, Telegram, Imo and so on greatly facilitate the spread of messages, images/photographs, videos and other information and interconnect young people across the globe. The advent of modern medical science like contraceptives for preventing

pregnancy and committing abortion contribute to the meteoric increase in pre-marital sex, adultery and promiscuity among both the married and unmarried of this present generation. These seem to be the acceptable way of life today.

v. **Colonialism and Body Beautification**

Prior to the colonial encounter, Ogoni women like other women in Africa improved on their natural beauty, prestige, privilege, ego, and marriage chances, using different devices based on the Indigenous Knowledge of their complex environment. These included but not limited to skin smoothing and toning, body painting, tattooing, cicatrizing, face marks and tooth sharpening. Specialized local artists used locally sourced materials like camwood (*doh*), native chalk (*nem*), oil palm (*noo*), and palm kernel oil (*noo-ip*) to make the skin smooth; free of spots and rashes. The local pomade also stopped itching of the body. Women traditionally adorned their body through the method of cicatrization (*Boodua or Biogo*) and tattooing (*Kuanki*) so as to attract prospective and promising suitors or lovers. The body decorations were of varying impressive designs and motifs. Tooth sharpening was adopted to depict a new status and add to their natural beauty. It was also fashionable for women to adopt different hair styles to promote their look. The young girls chose the moderate plaiting pattern with thread or low cut. The maidens and adults usually preferred the Afro, long hair do, and the curly hair style to reflect their class and status. However, special style of hair was made for ceremonies like dance, ritual, outing-dance, etc.

Most of these indigenous beautification techniques were abandoned while some are blended with the traditional styles due to European culture. The colonial enterprise made possible the importation of European exotic goods like bathing soaps, bleaching creams, and cosmetics which flooded the Ogoni markets. Most women adopted make-ups, body painting and decorations of their fingers, toes, eyes, lips and so on after the western model. Women have departed remarkably from the traditional hairstyles to hairdo characteristic of the west. It is common phenomenon today that women dye, perm and fix their hair. Most of them paraded themselves, in fake or artificial apparels in the form of shoulder pad, buttocks, hair, make-ups, breast brazier, finger nails, and etc. What must be stressed is that the traditional beautification devices has not been completely eradicated. Most Ogoni women still go on plaiting, low cut, application of local camwood and native chalk and make-up of the olden days.

vi. **Colonial Enterprise and Fattening**

Another women custom in Ogoni that has declined seriously consequent upon the colonial contact is the compulsory coming of age initiation rite variously called *Koo*, *Bogo-noo* and *Nwikinakoo* in both Tai and Khana dialects, *Bore* in Gokana and *Torchulu* in Eleme dialects respectively. The young girls between 10 and 15 years were confined and secluded from public glare in a room for almost three months. During this period of confinement, they were exempted from any manual work but to be well fed in order to look with a man. It was the duty of experts to anoint the bodies of the initiates with camwood, painted with indigo and robbed with oil palm daily.

For them to be fully initiated into certain mysteries of womanhood, a kind of informal educational workshop was organized for them. The best female brains in critical areas were usually summoned to prime the girl for married life. Thus, they were taught how to cook, sow, hair-plaiting, craft works, elementary science, dances, history and culture of their people. at the conclusion of the training, they were paraded around the community, visiting important ancestral places like markets, shrines, etc. after that, they all gathered at the town square (*EetehBue*) where

they thrilled their suitors, admirers, visitors and the community as they danced to the rhythm of *gerepere* (Xylophone). During the process, gifts were presented to them and intending suitors choose their wives (Loolo, 1981; Abalubu, 2011; Igbara & Keenam, 2013; N-ue, 2018).

Colonial forces have relegated this fascinating fattening custom to the background. The educated elite of Ogoni who “admired European culture and went out of their way to identify with it” (Boahen, 1985,p. 803) refused to allow their daughters to undergo the traditional training. For Christianity, education and modern medical practices strived and are serving as vehicles of orientation, sensitization and knowledge. Awortu and N-ue (2018,p. 3) documented that Constance M’maneh Sira Saronwiyo, the first female graduate and foremost lecturer of Ogoni origin as well as the pioneer female commissioner of Old Rivers State “never went through the *Bogo-Koo* institution which prepared women of pre-martial age to be better future wives and mothers... due to the long period of seclusion attached to the initiation ceremony. To be sure, her mother’s preference for western civilization to *Bogo-Koo*” also ensured this. Like Constance, most “modern” Ogoni women do not participate in the initiation ritual. Except in few cases, the *Bogonoo* had died a natural death. No doubt, the once famous Ogoni feminine custom has been thrown overboard by modernity.

vii. **Colonial Rule and Western Education**

There was “training-on-the job” type of education in Ogoni before the inception of formal education. Ogoni, like other groups, imparted skills to the young members of their community through observation, imitation and training methods. The people were not completely without education. The need to raise subordinate administrative staff to power the day-to-day activities of the colonial government and missionaries in Ogoni mid-wifed church schools in the era. The schools especially Sunday school teach people how to read and write as well as interpret sermons. Apparently, these crops of men who received the “light of the new age” emerged as the precursors of western civilization in Ogoniland. At the onset, the acquisition of western style education was the exclusive right of the male. As at then, there was the preponderant belief that the training of a girl child was not a rewarding endeavour (N-ue, 2014). Quoting Saronwiyo (1989), Igbara (2009,p. 102) averred:

A number of actors were responsible for this attitude. First, for them (parents), it was great risk to expose their jewels to the open world. They were highly sceptical about this exposure. What was the guarantee that they would come back home safe and would not be defiled by men of the outside world? Also, it was considered a misplaced investment. To educate a female child, in their opinion was, to say the least, a huge financial waste. It was, therefore, an inconceivable idea as the girl would carry both her knowledge and family investment to someone else’s home, leaving her own family deprived. Where eventually she was reluctantly allowed to acquire education, it was made clear to her that she had chosen between marriage and education. There was no doubt that the situation was a favour of male children who would bring the benefits to the family.

The trend was later reversed when the missionaries opened the floodgate of formal primary education to the women folk for them to carry out the evolving economic, social, administrative

and religious roles in the new dispensation. By 1920, a significant number of Ogoni women had been trained as domestic servants by the missions. They had acquired special skills in sewing, cooking of inter-continental and local dishes, house chores and above all how to read the Bible, as well as sing hymns. Women also progressed beyond primary level to secondary school, elementary teachers training institutes, nursing and other tertiary institutions available at the time. These ones were those who gained employment in the colonial civil service as classroom teachers, nurses, clerks, secretaries, dispensers, etc.

Interestingly, these educated women returned home to educate their fellow women on the values of western education. This was done through adult and evening class (Igbara, 2009). As a point of fact, new skills and knowledge acquired through formal education highly sharpened the women's world view and liberated them from the clutches of harmful tradition, belief, custom, and practice. Kpone-Tonwe (2003b,p. 8) made the point when he said, "Western education change the norms of social stratification in Ogoniland. A certificate in western education became the means of social recognition and a passport to better life... the radio, the TV and the video cassettes have replaced the lectures, teachings and demonstrations by the elders. Gradually, the youths have been estranged from the local traditions and drawn away to the wider world of the cities. More and more parents have been persuaded to send their sons and daughters to school". Western education had actually brought transforming changes to Ogoni women. With the ever increasing number of Ogoni female graduates from educational institutions every year, Ogoni educated women are found in strategic employment and white collar jobs. Even in professions or occupations previously reserved for the male folk. Indeed, women were seen serving as lawyers, doctors, teachers/lecturers, judges, clergies and captains of industries.

It has to be stressed however, that the education provided by the missions was discriminatory. While the boys in Ogoni were trained outside the land particularly in Uyo in order to "man the local administration at the lowest ranks" (Walter, 2005,p. 293), the girls were taught entrepreneurial skills like needle work, baking crochet, how to cook and use sewing machines, as well as to read the Bible at boarding schools at home. This disparity in educations was deliberate as it was in tandem with the notion of the Victorian Concept of Womanhood designed to make women perpetual and perfect house wives. The discrimination meted out to women in political, and administrative structures and from the wage economy even with qualifications equivalent to their male counterparts is also worrisome. Post-colonial African leaders have blindly adopted this concept and excluded majority of African women from the development programmes, social and education policies and military institutions of their various states.

viii. Colonial Episode and Mothers of Twins

The custom of killing of twin babies and ostracisation of mothers of twin babies was common in all Ogoni communities. It was upheld that the birth of twin was a manipulation of evil forces and as such it was a sign of an impending disaster or punishment on the community. To forestall this, mothers of twins were banished and their twin babies thrown into the evil forest (*Kuetaa*) designated for that purpose. Also, the land priest conducted sacrifices to the spirits, goddesses or gods of the land as an appeasement and to avert another calamity. The mothers of twin and their babies were stigmatized, deprived of their fundamental human rights and debased. The practice did not spell out any punishment for the father of the twins. He was only expected not to have sexual intercourse with the wife or other mothers of twins because it would reduce the efficacy and potency of their charms.

During the colonial period, the missionaries and the colonial administrators in Ogoni

made frantic efforts to curtail the excesses of twin murder and ostracisation of their mothers. The missionaries provided shelter for them at their various mission premises in Ogoni. These kind gestures coupled with their preaching and teaching of equality and love made Christianity very attractive to the Ogoni people. One thing that should be noted is that the custom did not end with colonialism. Although the twins are no longer murdered today, they and their mothers are still quartered in different areas reserved for them in the community. Also, in most Ogoni communities, mothers of twins and their babies cannot emerge as community and opinion leaders, chiefs and elders. They can only exercise their human rights in the church alone. Women are still de-humanized, discriminated against and hunted in this 21st century.

ix. Colonialism and Economy

The Ogoni economy was well organized to address the needs for food, shelter and other material necessities. Traditionally, farming was their major occupation with yam cultivation as the main crop. By the Ogoni customs, women were assigned the duty of cultivating food crops like, cassava, vegetables, coco yams, three leaves yam, taro-yams. Yam cultivation was given to the male. However, women occupy important place in the traditional economy of the people as they complemented the role of the male folk. The arrival and involvement of the missionaries in the economic activities astronomically increased the pace of economic development in many significant ways. To stimulate the production of raw materials need for Christian Europe, the colonial government and Christian missions supported the cultivation of oil palm plantation. In pursuance of this goal, men were mostly favoured than women in the oil palm plantation scheme in Ogoni. The women were side lined in the teaching of new agricultural techniques and the distribution of seedlings to interested cultivators of oil palm trees. Only the male benefitted from the colonial economy in Ogoni. For example, the most enterprising Ogoni men emerged as private owners of oil palm plantations in the area. This is true of Rt. Hon. Paul N.T. Birabi who established oil palm scheme in Ban-Ogoi, Chief H.M. Dike of Okwali, and Michael Gua in Botem-Tai (Ziinu, 1993). Women were excluded and neglected, yet, they bore the brunt of the oil palm processing. Through the indigenous technology known as *biaba*, Ogoni women poked out the nuts and squeezed the oil from the pericarp with their bare hands. They also extracted kernel oil (*noo-ip*) from the oil palm (Gbenenye, 1988; Ziinu, 1993). Reflecting on the status of women in the colonial economy, Denzer (1988) as quoted by Abasiattai, (1991, pp.574-575) disclosed:

In the new cash economy women suffered more than men from being denied access to mechanisms of capital accumulation, loans, and exclusion from development projects. Thus while women's labour accumulated for a majority of subsistence crop production and for the distribution of produce and commodities, most were not able to enter into the new business created by colonial rule or take advantage of opportunities offered by cash crop production. By and large, men controlled cash crop farming, while women were relegated to the much less remunerative subsistence farming.

Little wondered, therefore, that women in the former Easter Region sternly protested against the introduction of pioneer oil mills. In Ogoni oil mills, which were located at Gure, Bean, Nyokuru and Kaa, all in Khana Local Government Area, Nwenbiara in Gokana Local Government Area, Ban-Ogoi in today's Tai Local Government Area and Ebubu in present day Eleme Local

Government Area, were to extract the oil palm and crack the nuts. They contested that the advent of the mechanized process would further reduce their minimal role in the capitalist economy and deprive them of their source of income earning (Abasiattai, 1991).

Craft productions which were the preserve of some skilled crafts Ogoni women also depreciated both in value and in production during the colonial period and beyond. The major female cottage industries in Ogoni were pottery, mat weaving, basketry, and salt making, to mention but a few. The capitalist economy introduced by the colonial system made women to de-emphasise local industries and moved to cash-related activities that would guarantee the sufficient flow of money. Besides, the introduction of formal education provided better opportunities for gainful employment as workers than the tedious local industries. What is more, the products of the more technologically advanced Europe like ceramic, plates, spoons, metal pots, iron and plastic buckets and so on rendered the use of female locally made ones less attractive. The position of Derefaka (2002,p. 229) on ceramic industry is very relevant and instructive here:

The reason for the decline of this important industry is the introduction of western education, culture, and alternative, cheaper and more durable receptacles and utensils from the period of European contact. Another contributory factor may have been the continued use of often hearth firing technique and the non-adopting of the potter's wheel in the formative process. With the emphasis on western education for girls and the availability of paid employment and easier economic ventures, daughters became reluctant, if not unwilling to learn the trade from their mothers and so the manufacture of ceramic products has virtually ceased in most communities..., which were famous for ceramics product in the past.

In all, Ogoni women who were excluded from the main stream of the colonial economy, suffered marginalization, deprivation and neglect more than their male counterparts who were afforded more privileged and advantageous positions.

x. **British Colonial System and Politics and Administration**

In Ogoni during the periods before European contact, women wielded exceptionally powerful influence as key players and leaders in the traditional political organization of their people. Like in ancient polities and states like Oyo, Benin, Kanem-Borno, Hausa, to mention but a few (Stride & Ifeka, 1991; Crowder, 1973; Isichei, 1983) Ogoni women occupied exalted position as political, military and religious leaders. Oral traditions of the people collected and recorded by Kpone-Tonwe (1990; 2003a; 2003b) indicated that Ogoni women in the past exercised enormous power and influence over the people in varying degrees and diverse ways. Kpone-Tonwe (2003a,p. 13) instructively noted that:

The first rule of Ogoni was a woman by name Kwaanwaa. After the death of Kwaanwaa at Gure, the succession did not pass to her son but to her first and only daughter, Za. After the death of Za, succession also passed to her own first daughter by name Bariyaayoo, who ruled at Luawii. After Bariyaayoo, the succession

went to another daughter, a great granddaughter of Za byname Gbeneyaana, whose seat of rulership was at Ka-Gwaara. The last of these royal ancestresses was Gbenebeka, who succeeded in the Ka-Gwaara stool in the sixteenth century.

Though it may be argued that this happened in a non-centralized polity and virtually small area, women were actually the power behind the throne and the real ruler of the people. In this present circumstance, men did not rule for women by proxy. These Ogoni communities operated true matriarchal system in which women held and wielded real power in all ramifications. Most of those extra-ordinary women added *Gbene* (literary meaning Great) prefix to their names like Gbenekwaanwaa, Gbeneneyaana, GbeneZah and Gbenebeka as mentioned above. More than the male-folk, some of these women had the mysteries of the gods and became goddesses of the communities as founder-heroines. Consequently, they were worshipped and deified.

The colonial situation, which consciously emphasized and encouraged gender-inequality, bred irritation, and anti-colonial feelings by Ogoni women. Ogoni women were not found worthy to become warrant chiefs, interpreters, “Key holders” to the Central Treasury at Bori, or to serve in the Native Authority Councils. Ogoni women, like elsewhere, suffered political relegation. In fact, they did not fare well in the new government. Collaborating this assertion, Denzer (1988) observed: “In politics women lost their former establishing new government and legal institutions. Women became invisible in the sense that their influence was overloaded and their opinions discounted” (quoted by Abasiattai, 1991, p. 572). Being worried by the burden of direct taxation and their tactical neglect in the colonial economic system, Ogoni women closed ranks with their Nkoro, Andoni, Bonny, and Southern Ibibio colleagues to wage “war” against the colonial authorities in December, 1929 at Egwanga. They categorically informed the government of the day and announced that there was “no more government” (N-ue, 2018, p. 245). The Niger Delta Women War of 1929 went down in recorded history as secondary resistance against British oppressive rule.

xi. **Colonial Rule and Indigenous Medicine and Health Care**

Sporadic outburst of deadly diseases and ill-health like malaria, leprosy, convulsion, small-pox epidemics, cerebra-spinal meningitis, the influenza epidemic, yaw and mental illness which were prevalent in Africa were treated successfully with herbal medicine and psychotherapies. Women indigenous practitioners, like herbal doctors, priests, the bone setters, the Traditional Birth Attendants (ABAs), chiropacts and Homeopaths, and the Acupuncturists, blessed with the divine healing power of certain roots, herbs, leaves of plants, barks available in their ambient environment were involved in healing the sick and assist pregnant women to give births successfully.

Ogoni women (*pya dambie*) believed to have supernatural power and equipped with perfect workability of herbs used them to treat the bites of poisonous snakes, stings of bees, boost fertility rate in both male and female as well as cure impotency. They played important role in the traditional birth and maternity care of pregnant women. Those endowed with specialized skills either through apprenticeship or divine revelation served as midwives (*pya meneenwiwa*). They took a great deal care of the pregnant women until they gave births, most of which were without complications. These midwives also taught and trained nursing mothers how to take good care of themselves and the new babies. They often revealed to nursing mothers herbs used for treating babies’ illness like fever, frequent stooling, measles, cold, and aches.

Having mastered these basic health care tips and practices, the nursing mother would later transmit them to other women. Most midwives took the lecture and teaching of child bearing and upbringing, sex, womanhood, functions of different herbs to the participants in the fattening room. The indigenous medicine practitioners skilfully imparted the knowledge of how to train and take care of children to the initiates.

Colonialism greatly and phenomenally influenced Ogoni women in the traditional health sector in multi-dimensional ways. The dispensaries, maternity homes and hospitals established by the colonial government in Ogoni brought about remarkable changes in the medicine and health care needs of the people. Our investigations point out that modern medicine has not completely taken over the pivotal place occupied by the traditional medicine. The latter is still popular among the people due to lack of access to modern health care facilities as such it is highly patronized. This could be exemplified in the traditional birth system, bone setting, and even healing homes hic are affordable by the common people.

Conclusion

This paper has shown profound impact of colonial rule on Africa and its peoples, despite its short interlude in Africa's long history. Unarguably, the European contact contains both negative and positive effects even if the latter was not intended or calculated. The paper argued that the colonial system when critically x-rayed affected women more than their men counterparts. The role, status and contributions of women during the pre-colonial days differed remarkably from those of the colonial period. Adopting the concept of "England Victorian", women were meant to suffer deprivation, marginalization and discrimination as they were reduced to the rank of domestic house wives. Ukpokolo (2007,p. 112) wrote:

Imported ideologies and values more often than not have proved to be detrimental to the African sub-region especially in the areas relating to women issues. For instance, the idea of woman-as-house wife' was imported from Victorian England to Africa. This has undermined the African realities to the detriment of the women, and the continent at large. In Africa, prior to the colonial contact, the division into private and public domains were non-existent as men and women laboured in all areas of production, industries and commerce. Men and women, for instance, were farmers, craft workers such as basket makers, carver and sculptors and so on. Under the colonial administration, however, women were denied employment in the new dispensation, and their reproductive work in agriculture, trade and industry was side tracked and eventually undervalued while men were given prominence through the provision of employment in new capitalist and political systems. Ever since, women have remained a marginalized group in Africa.

The colonial situation which imposed foreign culture more than any other factors, inflicted permanent scars of docility, oppression, exclusion and discrimination on African women. Sadly, too, the post-colonial African leaders borrow these negative cultures wholly from ex-colonial administrators without moderations. Nevertheless, colonial rule and its paraphernalia emancipated women from the yoke of obnoxious traditional taboos, culture, practices, and

customs. With the high level of education attained by women today coupled with their huge numerical strength, the paper suggests that concerted efforts should be made to give them a pride of place in the society. The men, their husbands and relatives, must give them maximum support to enhance gender equity.

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