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Nigerian Women, Colonial Patriarchy and Politics of Nation Building

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Abstract

In the pre-colonial periods, women contributed significantly to the socio-economic and political development of Nigerian societies. They combined motherly roles with the production and distribution of food. In Southeastern Nigeria, women were prominent in the production of palm oil, palm kernel and food processing. In the Southwest, women played crucial role in agrarian system. They planted food crops and vegetables, while some of them were skillful in pottery, dyeing, mat making, soap making and food production, among others. Many of them were long-distance traders. In Northern Nigeria, women played active role in textile and leader production. Politically, women complemented their husbands, who functioned as leaders in the public domain. In Yoruba land for instance, the king (Oba) ruled but assisted by other people including women like Iyalode, Iyaloja and Iyalaje. However, the patriarchal structure which was institutionalized when the Europeans took over the administrative control of Nigeria threatened the roles of women economically, socially and politically. This paper interrogates the effects of patriarchy on Nigeria women and how women resisted the colonial unfair treatment and discrimination. Using historical methodology, this paper establishes that the colonialists relegated women's position, and also reveals how women rose above patriarchy and discrimination. The research concludes that Nigerian women contribute to nation-building at both public and private sectors today despite the inherited patriarchal structure and other barriers that religions and societal beliefs imposed on them.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Disparity, Colonial Policies, Patriarchy, Nation Building

Introduction

In Africa, women contributed to men's happiness, achievement, and psychological and personal needs. They also complemented their husbands in public places. In the agrarian community, women worked in collaboration with their husbands to cultivate land and plant food crops. They planted a variety of root and cereal crops. They cultivated vegetables and were involved in food processing. Women also engaged in other home-based economic activities such as petty trade, gathering and selling firewood and medical herbs, pottery making and brewing, etc. Nigerian women were active in domestic chores; fetching water, cooking, making the house clean and taking care of the family

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(husbands, children and in-laws), among others. They gave unalloyed support to their husbands and contributed to the economic needs of their families.

In precolonial Nigeria, the roles of women were notable and noticeable in the socio-economic and political lives of their society. Men placed much value on their wives, especially in the areas of procreation, assistance and contribution to the socio-economic and domestic needs of the family. Men placed much value on their wives, especially in the areas of procreation, assistance and contribution to the socio-economic and domestic needs of the family. In Northern Nigeria, for example, women and girls were active in the production of textiles; they spun cotton. For instance, in Ilorin and Bida, women were prominent in the production and distribution of cotton through Kano via caravans that originated in Kano.[1] Also in the ancient city of Zaria, women played an active role in the production of cotton and textiles.[2]In addition, Northern women were popularly known for dyeing and weaving. They also engaged in making garments and embroidery.[3] In the emirate of Sokoto, women were known for weaving and dyeing businesses. Leather work was popular in Kano,[4] while men specialised in curing and tanning; women were specialists in dyeing the leather (animal skin), which was used for making bags, cushions, aprons, and saddle covers.[5]

In southeastern Nigeria, women were involved in food processing. For example, in the Niger Delta, Calabar and Oron, women dried crayfish and fish for commercial purposes. On the other hand, women in Okposi, Yala and Uburu were well known as producers of salt.[6] Popular among the Afikpo women were weaving and pottery making, while the Igbo women were prominent in farming and the production of palm oil. It is also worthy of note that fishing dominated the economy of the communities living along the coast, lagoons, and big rivers. In northern Nigeria, for instance, there were professional fishermen among the Nupe, Hausa and Bornu people, especially the Wurbo and Jukun who resided along the Benue River, and the Kede and Kakande who lived along the Niger River.[7] The wives of those professional fishermen sold fish. At Epe, in the present-day Lagos in south-western Nigeria, for instance, many of the women whose husbands were professional fishermen sold fish. In addition to that, some fishermen were skilful in making different types of nets, paddles, and

[1]Akyeampong Emmanuel, and Hippolyte Fofack, "The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications in the Precolonial and Colonial Periods." Policy Research Working Paper (April) doi. 10.1596/1813-9450-6051. Available at, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstResos.23955422

[2] Samson Olufemi Ojo, "A History of Baptist Work in Kaduna Metropolis, 1918-2000," M. A History Dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, 2021, 176

[3]Akyeampong Emmanuel, and Hippolyte Fofack, "The Contribution of African Women…

[4]Toyin Falola et. al., History of Nigeria 1: Nigeria before 1800 AD, (Lagos: LearnAfrica, 1989), 141.

[5] Akyeampong Emmanuel, and Hippolyte Fofack, "The Contribution…

[6]Falola, History of Nigeria…, 141.

[7] Nefi Ainesi Wole-Abu, "Nigerian Women, Memories of the Past and Visions of the Future through the Communication Narratives of the Media" in Global Media Journal, ISSN 1550-7521 2008, vol. 16, N0. 31:33

dugouts.[8] As those items were manufactured by men, women sold them to other fishermen who needed them.

In the savanna area, most people practised animal husbandry.[9] The cattle herders in this region were famous for the milk, butter and skins which they provided. In those communities, women were in charge of producing milk and butter. However, in the southwest, women were popular in the planting and harvesting of food crops alongside their husbands. Some of them had their vegetable farms. They were also good at food processing, like gari, cassava flour (*lafun*) and yam flour (*elubo*). They produced palm oil and processed palm kernel. Palm kernel was processed into a local oily body lotion (*Adi-agbon)*, which was used as body cream. *Adi-agbon* was also believed to be medicinal, especially for the cure of some skin-related infections.[10] Some of the women in the Southwest were also distance-traders. They travelled to the eastern and northern parts of Nigeria for trade and commerce. Education and skill acquisition were considered important. A woman who had no skills or vocation depended on her husband for her needs and was unable to support her husband in the area of family finance. Such a woman had no honour in society; instead, she was considered lazy. However, many industrious women contributed even more than their husbands to the economic needs of their families.

In the pre-colonial period, hunting was practised in almost every society, especially in the dry season when farm work was less and lighter. This occupation was popular in the forest area. Generally, the occupation was mainly men who were believed to be in the custody of charms to overcome physical and metaphysical danger.[11] Women did not hunt for game in the bush, but they roasted and marketed the game. Women complemented their husbands who ruled in their different societies and empires. They supported their husbands in every capacity to ensure their success in the public domain. In Yoruba land, for instance, the king (Oba) ruled, but he was ably assisted by other people, including women like Iyalode, Iyaloja and Iyalaje. Oba's wives play important roles in the reign of the king, most especially the first wife, *Olori. Olori* controlled the activities of all the women in the palace to ensure that there was orderliness in the place.[12] In the political and social arena, the role of women cannot be overemphasised.

Theoretica Framework

Intersectionality theory is found to be applicable and suitable to analyse Nigerian Women, Colonial Patriarchy and Politics of Nation Building. The theory explains how the identity of an individual, such as race, sexuality, class, gender, among others, can overlap and interact to cause unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality was coined and articulated in 1989 by Kimberlé

[8]Falola, History of Nigeria…, 141.
[9] Ibid
[10] Interview with Mama Alice Aderinto in her residence in Ogbomoso on 23 December 2023.
[11]Wole-Abu, "Nigerian Women….
[12] Ibid.

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Crenshaw, a black feminist scholar. [13] It emphasises that people are not defined by a single social category but by multiple interconnected aspects of their identity that can lead to an experience of privilege or oppression. The concept goes beyond examining individuals through the lens of single-axis thinking, like focusing on gender or race alone. Instead, it urges an understanding of how these identities combine to create specific experiences of marginalisation or advantage.

Atewologun asserts that intersectionality is a framework for understanding how different aspects of a person's identity, such as race, class, sexuality, disability, disability, religion, age, colour, or nationality, overlap and interact to shape their experiences of privilege and discrimination.[14] Nigerian women were marginalised as a result of patriarchy that cultures in many communities held on to. This was amplified by colonial policies. Women were not allowed in leadership; the kind of education received was different from the one that their male counterparts received. This denied them the opportunity to work where they would be well-paid. Culturally and socially, women are considered as second fiddle in Nigeria. Culturally, there was a gender stereotype transmitted from one generation to another. This manifested at home, market place and in society. There was gender inequality that was attributed to the patriarchal structure which existed in Africa's traditional institutions. For example, in traditional African settings, women or girls rarely have access to landed property as inheritance. Women, therefore, suffered marginalisation despite their population and socio-economic development in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era.

Prominent Place of Nigerian Women in the Pre-colonial Era

Generally, in pre-colonial Nigeria, women complemented men, and their roles in the economic, social, religious, and political spaces cannot be overemphasised. They were mothers, homemakers, managers and carers. Nigerian women played vital roles in the production, manufacturing and distribution of food in the pre-colonial period. They contributed immensely to the economics of empires and states in the pre-colonial period. Women, like their male counterparts, played an important role in the agrarian system. They enjoyed a considerable level of independence and had direct access to farmland together with their husbands. Many women among the Yoruba and Igbo engaged in long-distance trading. Like men, women played critical roles in their societies, as warriors, as exemplified by Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi of Ife, Ebele Ajaumu in Igalaland, Queen Bakwa Turuk, etc. In the area of politics, women like Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Olufunmilayo Ransom-Kuti of Abeokuta, and Queen Osomari of Igboland had clearly distinguished

[13] Unitedwaynca.org/what-is-intersectionality/text-Intersectionality%20refers%20to%the %20connect/
[14] D. Atewologun Intersectionality Theory and Practice" in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management. https://oxfordre.com/business/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.001.000.1/acrefore-9780190224851-e-48

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themselves. Other women were visible as religious priestesses of Sango, Osun, Obatala, among others.[15]

Traditionally, it was uncommon to have women coordinating their clan, but they functioned as advisers to the clan heads, who were usually men. Depending on the ethnic group, traditional beliefs and cultural orientation, the roles and positions of women differed from one society to another. It was believed that the differing position was as a result of the kinship structure and their role within the economic structure of the society.[16]

Some women distinguished themselves in the areas of healthcare and spiritual services. On the basis of this, some traditional religions immortalised them as goddesses, like river goddesses.[17] These goddesses were believed to have solutions and cures to humans' predicaments, mysteries and problems like infertility, impotence, ailments, mysterious attacks or continuous death in a community, misfortunes and epidemics. Women acted as healers, diviners, priestesses, birth attendants, and custodians of the sanctuaries of gods and goddesses in pre-colonial Nigeria.[18]

Politically and traditionally, women were integrated into their various communities. For instance, in Bornu, women were skilful and vast in state administration. As a result, they played a vital role in the royal ancestry. These included *Megira*(Queen Mother) and *Gumsu* (First wife of the Mai or King).[19] Oral accounts revealed the political prominence of women in some communities in pre-colonial times. For instance, it was also established that modern Zaria was founded by a woman named Queen Bakwa Turuk in the first half of the 16th century. Worthy of note was the succession of her daughter, Queen Amina, who was reported to have been a powerful and proficient warrior. She built a wall around Zaria to prevent external invasion and attacks. With her military prowess, she was able to extend her territories to places like Bauchi, Katsina and Kano. Consequently, Kano and Katsina people paid her tributes yearly.[20] Queen Aminat was a distinguished empire builder who subdued the area between Zazzau, Niger and Benue rivers, absorbing the Nupe and Kwarafastates. She made Zaria a commercial centre that attracted many traders.[21] Ebele Ajaunu was another reputable woman who founded and developed the Igala kingdom.

In Yoruba land, the *Oba* (king) ruled and was ably assisted by other chiefs. Among those chiefs were women: *Iyalode, Iyaloja and Iyalaje.* These women

[15]Falola, Toyin, The Power of African Cultures (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 263.
[16] Kemi Adesina's lecture on "Gender and Development" (HIS 909, at Redeemer's University, Ede-Osun State), on February 23, 2025.
[17]Wole-Abu, "Nigerian Women….
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid
[21]Samson Olufemi Ojo, "A History of Baptist Work in Kaduna Metropolis, 1918-2000," M. A History Dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, 2021, 182

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were headed by *Iyalode.*[22] They helped in mediating and settling conflicts in their various wards and compounds. In other words, women in the precolonial period assisted in the maintenance of law and order among the Yorubas.[23] Women also assisted and complemented their husbands in the political space. Oba's wives in Yoruba land played an important role in the affairs of the state. For example, the first wife of the Oba (*Olori* or *Aya'ba*) was in charge of all women in the palace.[24]

Oral accounts recognised the leadership roles of some women, like Madam Tinubu, who became a political ruler in Lagos between 1830 and 1887. She used her political influence to support King Akintoye when Kosoko was warring against him.[25] Other prominent women in Yoruba land in the pre-colonial times included Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan and Moremi of Ife. To show the leadership role of women in Yoruba land, for instance, wars such as the popular Kiriji war demanded the services of both men and women. In the war, women were able to rise to the challenge. They were rewarded with greater responsibility in the case of the Egba and Ibadan Iyalodes. There were situations where women were instrumental in influencing external policies in some Yoruba states. The example of this was the case of Moremi, who exposed the secrets of the Igbo people to Ife.[26] The role played by Queen Emotan in the politics of the Benin kingdom, as well as Princess Inikpini, was also notable in Igala land.

Colonialism, Patriarchy and Marginalisation against Women in Nigeria

The penetration of the colonialists into Africa, particularly in the 19th century, had significant effects on the history of Africa. After they forcefully gained economic and political control of Africa, they introduced alien policies for their selfish economic gain. The imposition of alien policies that negated African traditions and beliefs affected the economic, social and political lives of Nigerians, women included. Under the new policies, the roles and status of women were undermined as the capitalist economic structure was initiated. The imperialists initiated the production of cash crops to meet the demands of the Industrial Revolution in Europe.[27] Colonial policies were generally biased against women. The policies were sexist and harmed the traditional occupations of women. This was because the policies were export-based. Many of the local markets that women dominated disintegrated because of their inability to compete with expatriate firms introduced by the colonialists, like

[22]Adepoju O. Johnson-Bashua, "African Religion and the Sexual Exploitation of Women" in Toyin Falola and Bessie House-Soremekun (eds.), Gender, Sexuality and Mothering in Nigeria. (Trenton, New Jersey, 08638: Africa World Press 2011), 291.
[23]Johnson-Bashua, "African Religion…
[24] Adesina Oluwakemi's lecture on "Gender and Development" (HIS 909, at Redeemer's University, Ede-Osun State), on February 23, 2025.
[25] Wole-Abu, "Nigerian Women….
[26]Samuel Johnson, TheHistory of the Yorubas (Lagos: C.M.S. Bookshop, 1921), 125.
[27]Laniyan, Sarah and Adesina Oluwakemi A., "The Nigeria Woman and Gender Equality" in Adesina A.O and Bawa, A. B and Oladejo M.T., (eds.), The Odyssey of the Nigerian Women, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024

Lever Brothers and United African Company (UAC).[28] To paralyse women's economic strength, they were denied access to loans, either small, medium, or large-scale.[29]

The roles of women changed, and their status was seriously undermined. Gender disparity was introduced in education, healthcare services, and personal autonomy. Colonial policies favoured men (to some extent), but were detrimental to women. At the political level, for example, male colonial officers were pleased to associate with Nigerian men as political leaders, serving in different capacities, such as Native Authorities, tax collectors, police and soldiers.[30] However, Nigerian women were sidelined, making them lose their political relevance and power. The Colonial period was, therefore, an era of inactivity and silence for women. Colonialists intensified patriarchy in Africa, which was sentimental and gender biased. Women were discriminated against and were prevented from contributing substantially to the social, economic and political advancement of their society.[31]

Most of the colonial laws were unfavourable and meant to control every aspect of women's lives, including their sexuality, economy, political participation and fertility.[32] Furthermore, colonialism made Nigerian women subordinate to men. The restriction placed on them changed their positions and made them inactive. This was contrary to how Nigerian women functioned in the pre-colonial societies.[33] Colonial policies strengthened gender inequality, making women look like second-fiddles. The patriarchal structure subjugated the roles of women and made them appendages to their husbands. Colonialism reduced and subjugated the economic, political, and social roles of women in society. As a result, men perceived women as weak beings who were not capable of leading.[34] The belief that women should be restricted to domestic work and home affairs was entrenched in the colonial period,[35] and the post-colonial state inherited it. Available literature on gender and development established that inequality and marginalisation against women became evident and entrenched in the colonial period with the promotion of a male-dominated social system and structure. Women were denied access to loans, good healthcare services, technology and good education like their male counterparts. The kind of education girls received was different from boys'.[36]

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[28]Adepoju O. Johnson-Bashua, "African Religions and the Sexual Exploitation of Women" in Toyin Falola Falola and Bessie House-Soremekun (eds.), Gender, Sexuality and Mothering in Nigeria (Trenton, New Jersey 08638: Africa World Press 2011), 292.
[29]Johnson-Bashua, "African Religions…
[30] Falola, The Power…, 264.
[31]Fwatshak, Sati U., "Breaking the Walls of Traditions: Male Brteaders in Nigeria" in Toyin Falola and Nana Aku Amponsah (eds.), Women Gender, and Sexuality in Africa. (Durham: North Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 252.
[32]Johnson-Bashua, African Religion and the Sexual Exploitation…
[33]Fwatshak, Sati U., "Breaking the Walls…, 251
[34]Lewu, Yetunde Alaba, "Nigerian Women in Politics: A Study of the Role of Women in President Obasanjo's Administration, 1999-2003", In Toyin Falola and S. U. Fwatshak (eds.), Beyond Tradition: African Women and Cultural Spaces. (Trenton, New Jersey 08638: African World Press, 2011), 331.
[35]Fwatshak, Sati U., "Breaking the Walls…, 252.
[36]Lewu, Yetunde Alaba, "Nigerian Women in Politics…, 327.

The constitution drawn by the colonialists for Nigeria entirely disenfranchised women. The Clifford Constitution of 1922 disallowed women from participating in politics. As a result, the Nigerian political space became male-dominated and monopolised. This was the situation of Nigerian women until the 1950s. However, in the 1950s, women in southern Nigeria were given the franchise, probably because of pressure mounted by women as a result of the discrimination against them. Three women were given political appointments into the House of Chiefs, namely Chief Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Chief Mrs Margaret Ekpo, and Mrs Janet Mokelu.[37] This was the period when the pressure for Nigerian independence was at its peak. The colonial administrators refused to recognise female political officeholders and associations of women. As a result, women's political roles in the precolonial era 'faded into the background'. In fact, women in Northern Nigeria were denied their franchise in colonial times, despite the efforts made by Hajiya Sawaba Gambo, a prominent and articulate woman from the north.[38]

Impacts of Colonial Economy and Social Policies on Women

After the Berlin Conference of 1884, colonisation began officially in West African Countries when the British took over the administrative control of Africa, including Nigeria. As a result of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, there was an increase in the demand for both agricultural commodities and natural resources that served as raw materials for the production of manufactured goods in Europe. This was responsible for a shift from labour-intensive to capital-intensive industries and production that was like a 'knock-out' for women. In addition, cash crops were introduced, and farmers' attention shifted to the production of cash crops when European currency was introduced as a means of exchange for cash crop production.[39]

Most men abandoned farming and worked for the Europeans, especially with the aim of earning European money, which was introduced to replace cowry shells that were in use in precolonial times as the means of exchange. The newly introduced currency was said to be prestigious and easy to carry from one place to another. Bamigboye[40] says,

> "…During the construction of the railway lines, most people (men) went to work as labourers with the Europeans to construct the railway lines. Their wages were paid in a new type of currency: farthings, half-pennies, shillings, and pounds. This money was easier to carry around when compared to the heavy cowry shells. The labourers were proud of earning European money. Therefore, parents

[37]Laniyan, Sarah and Adesina Oluwakemi A., "The Nigeria Woman and Gender Equality" in Adesina A.O and Bawa, A. B and Oladejo M.T., (eds.), The Odyssey of the Nigerian Women, (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024).
[38] Bolanle Awe, "Women in Politics in Historical Perspective" in J. A. Ayoade, Elione Nwabuzor and Adesina Sambo (eds.), Women in Politics in Nigeria (Abuja: Malthouse Press Ltd., 1992), 28.
[39]Bamigboye, A. Ezekiel, The History of Baptist Work in Northern Nigeria, 1901-1975. (Ibadan: Powerhouse Press and Publishers, 2000), 51.
[40]Bamigboye,The History of Baptist …, 52.

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> encouraged their young men to go out to look for European jobs. As the railroads were constructed from the south to the north, labourers started to move with the rail line construction to the north to enhance their economic status.

The new money was portable and prestigious. From the wages earned, according to Bamigboye, young men who worked as railway workers sent money to their hometowns to pay their heavy government-imposed taxes. They were also able to marry and pay the bride price of their wives with ease. These were hitherto difficult to achieve as food crop farmers. A new outlook on the social and economic life of people emerged. Their successes and achievements encouraged others to abandon farming and engage in wage-earning jobs. Besides, it was prestigious to hold European money. In the newly introduced European economy, women appeared not to be accommodated. Besides, there was a shift from farming and the production of food crops to white-collar jobs. Those who continued farming became producers of cash crops. Colonial policies and their economic structures reinforced gender disparity. When the slave trade was abolished in Africa, the colonial economy was male-focused. Even the freed male slaves migrated to colonial towns and worked with the white men as road construction workers. Others served as railway workers and miners, while women's production was principally agriculture, and access to land was through kinship.[41] Besides, women were denied loans for their agricultural work.

The legal system introduced by the colonial administration was also unfriendly to women. It was a dual one in which the colonial court was based on common and civil laws. Native courts were under the leadership of chiefs. All matters related to custom, women, family and domestic affairs were under the native courts or tribunals, including marital affairs like divorce, land tenure, inheritance and issues affecting women.[42] All presiding chiefs in the European courts were men, including interpreters and clerks assigned to native tribunals to keep a written record of the legal proceedings. No woman was allowed by the colonialists to preside over, or even work as a clerk in the courts where women's cases were handled.

Due to the shortage of staff, the colonialists introduced an indirect rule system of administration in the British West African country, including Nigeria. It was a system whereby the colonial government used native chiefs and leaders in administering the natives. The administrative officers were men who were subject to the control of the High Commissioner. They were like errand boys, serving the interests of the colonial masters. Emirs in Northern Nigeria who were hitherto the political, social and religious leaders became mere agents of

[41]Emmanuel, Akyeampong, and Fofack, Hippolyte, "The Contribution of Africa Women to Economic Growth and Development: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications in Pre-colonial and Colonial Periods". Policy Research Working Paper, (April), doi:10.1596/1813-9450-6051. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos.23955422.
[42]Emmanuel, Akyeampong, and Fofack, Hippolyte, "The Contribution of Africa Women to Economic Growth and Development: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications in Pre-colonial and Colonial Periods". Policy Research Working Paper, (April), doi:10.1596/1813-9450-6051. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos.23955422.

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the colonial imperialists.[43] They became mere puppets and answerable to the colonial government. None of them was a female. The policies of the colonial administration undermined the position of women in Nigerian society.

Education and Gender Discrimination in the Colonial Era

Before Western education was introduced by Christian European missionaries, particularly in Nigeria, traditional and Islamic education were already in place. Qur'anic schools were established where the Muslim faithful learnt about Islam and the Qur'an. People could learn simple arithmetic and counting of numbers. Traditional education was done in an informal manner. However, in the 19th century, Christian European missionaries introduced Western education. This was an aspect of colonial policy that greatly affected women. The missionaries used Western education to shape the perception of gender and family. The primary aim of Western education was to teach people how to read the Bible, among other things. Western education later became a necessary ingredient to securing well-paid jobs in the private and public sectors. Without Western education, women were not able to get high-paying jobs.[44]

In the colonial period, mission education for girls emphasised domestic, marriage and motherhood training and skills. On the other hand, education for boys included literacy lessons and skills acquisition such as carpentry and masonry that prepared them for high-paid jobs in the labour market.[45] By the 1930s, mission schools in Yorubaland began to run "marriage training homes" to prepare girls who were interested in marrying into the emergent educated elites.[46] Women generally lacked equal access to education as men. Women were sometimes withdrawn prematurely and untimely from schools for social and economic reasons, while boys continued with their education. Women were badly affected economically, socially and politically as a result. Capitalism cheated women through low pay because, without Western education, women lacked the skills to work in highly paid employment. Many of them were therefore limited to farming jobs.[47]

Religions and Marginalisation of Nigerian Women

Before the introduction of Islam and Christianity, women contributed notably to the traditional religious functions, festivals and rituals. They cooked, fetched water, provided music, songs and dances during religious activities, rituals and festivals. Women also officiated as traditional attendants, healers, priestesses,

[43]Samson Olufemi Ojo, A History of Baptist Work in Kaduna Metropolis, 1918-2000, M.A. Dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, 2021, 75.
[44] M. N. Wangila, "Western Religions and Female Sexuality: Engaging Dualistic Thinking in Attitudes to African Women Sexuality" T. Falola and N. A. Amponsal (eds.), Women, Gender, and Sexualities in Africa (Durham North Carolina: Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 107
[45]Emmanuel, Akyeampong, and Fofack, Hippolyte, "The Contribution of Africa Women...
[46] Ibid
[47]Laniyan, Sarah and Adesina Oluwakemi A., "The Nigeria Woman and Gender Equality" in Adesina A.O and Bawa, A. B and Oladejo M.T., (eds.), The Odyssey of the Nigerian Women, (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024), 524

diviners and sometimes as custodians of sanctuaries of gods and goddesses.[48] They helped maintain social harmony and promote traditional religions. The situation was different with both the Islamic religion and Christianity. Islam came to Nigeria before Christianity, but both religions relegated the positions of women.

Islamic religion, for Islam does not support women pursuing Western education, which would prepare them for political participation and also reduce their chances of economic independence.[49] Christianity, on the other hand, subscribes to male headship and leadership within the family, while women are to submit in everything. Margaret Vogt, quoting Nadia H. Yussef, said, In addition, Islam teaches and supports patriarchy and polygamy, which erode the confidence of women. In Islam, a man can marry up to four wives, and he is allowed to divorce any of them unilaterally and have custody of minor children.[50]

In the same vein, Christianity, though it opposes polygamy and divorce, upholds women's submission to their husbands in all matters.[51] The patriarchal teaching in the Bible is vividly seen in the letter of Paul the apostle to the Corinthian Christians. He wrote, "For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man."[52] In Christendom, headship and leadership are for men, while women are taught to obey and submit to the authority of their husbands.[53] Women are also referred to as 'weaker vessels' in the Bible.[54] To be in that category of "weaker vessel" is to be treated and considered as subordinate to men. It is a known fact that in the Christian folks no woman has served as the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) or the President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). Leadership has been attributed to men while women are to follow.

The belief that women were created for men is also rooted in the Islamic religion. It is established in the Hadith and some Qur'anic verses. For instance, Qur'an 4:34 supports the idea that men have some level of 'advantage' over women.

> Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has made one of them to excel over the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore,

[48]Johnson-Bashua, "African Religion and the Sexual Exploitation…
[49] L. Y Alaba, "Nigerian Women in Politics: A Study of the Role of Women in President Obasanjo's Administration, 1999-2003" in T. Falola and S. U. Fwatshak (eds.), Beyond Tradition: African Women and Cultural Spaces (Trenton, New Jersey 08638: African World Press, 2011)
[50]Wangila, M. Nyangweso, "Western Religions and Female Sexuality: Engaging Dualistic Thinking in Attitudes to African Women Sexuality" in Toyin Falola and Nana Akua Amponsah (eds.), Women, Gender and Sexuality in Africa. (Durhan North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013), 68.
[51]Ephesians 5:23-23 and Colossians 3:18.
[52]1 Corinthians 11:8-9
[53] 1 Corinthians 11:3
[54] 1 Peter 3:7

> the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to Allah and her husbands), and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard (e.g. their chastity, their husband's property). As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct, admonish them (lightly, if it is useful); but if they obey you, seek not against them means (of annoyance). Surely, Allah is Ever Most High, Most Great.[55]

This Qur'anic verse upholds the superiority of men over women and affirms the subordination of women in the Islamic religion. Hadith teaches that a virtuous woman submits to her husband through her obedience all the time.[56] As established in the Qur'an, Islam encourages a man to beat his wife.

The institution of *Pudah* is another system that relegates women in Islam. By this, women are kept in isolation from men and strangers. Through the *Pudah* system, there was a restriction on the free expression of emotion, physical touching, laughter, and insistence on male chaperones for all women.[57] In some communities, wooden bars are used to cross the windows; people inside the room can see those outside, but those outside cannot see those inside. This practice is common in northern Nigeria. *Pudah* is a policy that is part of the notion of *qawama* (an Arabic word that means guardianship and authority). This policy is established in the Qur'an. The verse reads, "Men have qawama over women because of the advantage they (men) have over them (women) and because they (men) spend their property in supporting them (women)."[58] While there is nothing bad in protecting and guarding women, it is, however, bad to isolate them. Isolating women is not healthy for their political, social, and economic empowerment and independence.

Similar to that is the institution of al-hijab or veil. This practice is established in the Qur'an. According to *Sharia* interpretation, women are expected to stay indoors and not go out unless it is important. When there is any need to go out of their homes, women must put on a veil. They must cover their faces and bodies. According to An-Na'im, "Al-hijab tends to reinforce women's inability to hold public office and resists their access to public life. This is because women are not supposed to participate in public life. After all, they are not expected to mix with men, even in public places."[59] The veiling of women is also meant to prevent men from looking at them lustfully. Veils (covering from head to toe) prevent men from seeing the faces and bodies of women.

Muslim women were discouraged from having a Western education. In fact, there is an Islamic sect called *Boko Haram* that openly condemns Western

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[55]Qur'an, Sura 4:34
[56]Wangila, M. Nyangweso, "Western Religions and Female Sexuality: Engaging Dualistic Thinking in Attitudes to African Women Sexuality" in Toyin Falola and Nana Akua Amponsah (eds.), Women, Gender and Sexuality in Africa. (Durhan North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013), 113.
[57] Wangila, "Western Religions and Female…., 114
[58]Qur'an, Sura 4:34.
[59]Ahmed, S. Abdullah An-Na'im, "Human Rights in Muslim World", in J. Steiner and Philip Aiston (eds.), International Human Rights in Context; Law, Politics and Morals. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 214.

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education. The meaning of *Boko Haram* is that Western Education is evil. This Islamic group abhorred Western Education and all related institutions. The group was officially founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. The activities of this group have led to wanton destruction of lives and property in Northern Nigeria. However, Western education is a requirement for securing highly paid jobs in both private and public sectors. This, to a large extent, affected women economically, socially and politically. Islam teaches gender subordination and promotes patriarchy. The example of this is obvious during the group prayer sections in the mosques. Women are not allowed or permitted to lead prayers. They always sit at the rear while men sit in front. No woman is allowed to sit in front during prayer sessions in the mosques. Among the Muslim folks, no woman has become the Chief Imam in any mosque. The religion of Islam doesn't allow it.

Nigerian Women Reacted Against Marginalisation and Colonial Policies

In the colonial period, European bureaucracy subjugated African traditions. Women were badly hit by several unfavourable, alien and oppressive policies introduced by the colonialists. As a result of marginalisation against women by the colonial administration, Nigerian women reacted and exerted themselves in the west, east and northern Nigeria. Examples of such women were MrsMargaret Ekpo of the famous Aba women riots of 1929 in the east; in the west were Madam Tinubu of Lagos and Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Abeokuta, and Hajiya Sawaba Gambo of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU)[60] in the north. In other words, during the colonial period, women were not totally inactive or passive. A few of them were privileged to attend Western-oriented educational institutions and worked with the colonial government. Among those privileged educated women, a few of them became active politicians and also formed pressure groups that protested vehemently against the unfair treatment of women. They demanded fair treatment and a better standard of living for Nigerian women.

Among those women were Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa, Oyinkan Abayomi, and Mrs Aina Ademola.[61] Nigerian women did not fold their hands and watch the colonial administration discriminate against them. They reacted against the unfair colonial policies that pushed them back and usurped their political and economic power and rights. They organised a series of protests, like the Dancing Women Movement in 1925, the Spirit Movement in 1927, and the Aba Women Riots in 1929, to mention a few. In 1920, women like Chief Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs Margaret Ekpo and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba protested against the imperialists and demanded political and social rights for women.[62] Along with other political leaders and pressure groups, these women were at the forefront of the relentless struggle and agitation for Nigeria's independence. Lewu Alaba noted that "although women in Southern Nigeria enjoyed some political authority, it was not a general phenomenon. Men had

[60] Bolanle Awe, Women in Politics in Historical Perspective…
[61]Falola, Toyin and Aderinto Rasheed, Nigerian, Nationalism and Writing History. (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 93.
[62]Laniyan, Sarah and Adesina Oluwakemi A., "The Nigeria Woman and Gender Equality…, 525.

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always been dominating the political scene while women had been complementing them." She stresses further that "women's activities were always subordinate and complementary to the existing male-dominated structures."[63]

In various quarters, Nigerian women protested against the unfavourable colonial policies. For example, MrsAlimotu Pelewura, a prominent trader in Lagos, organised a protest in reaction to the colonial policies that did not consider women. According to Falola and Aderinto, though illiterate, Alimotu Pelewura led a protest of about seven thousand market women in Lagos and marched to the Glover Memorial Hall to show their grievances and displeasure against the monopoly in the distribution of foodstuffs during the Second World War, as well as the payment of taxes owed by their unemployed husbands and their male relatives.[64] Chief Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti was also a bold woman who organised a women's protest against heavy taxation and other unfair policies against women in Abeokuta. She was the founder of the Nigerian Women's Union in 1949 and the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies in 1954. Chief Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was also a prominent member of International Women's Movements and the International Democratic Federation (WIDF), formed in 1945.[65] She also collaborated with Chief Mrs Margaret Ekpo, who fought against the colonial policies that maligned women's rights in the eastern part of the country. In the famous Aba Women Riots, Mrs Margaret Ekpo played a vital role. She contended with the harsh British policy of tax payment by women. Other women whose efforts were noticeable in resisting colonial policies included Chief Mrs Bolarinwa and Alhaja Humani Alaga, who also mobilised women to support political parties. Hajiya Sawaba Gambo, in collaboration with other women, staged protests and fought for the franchise of Northern women.[66]

Nigerian Women andNation-Building in the Post-Colonial Period

The post-colonial African nations inherited gender inequality and patriarchy structure from the colonial administration. This structure made women be perceived as second-class citizens. Capitalism and patriarchy continued to exploit women.[67] Despite these obvious realities, Nigerian women refused to succumb to the realities confronting them. They contended with all barriers inhibiting their visibility in the political, social, religious and economic spaces. This has brought great improvement to the position of women in Nigeria.

Many of them are now playing an important role in the public sector. After independence in 1960, Nigerian women in various regions arose politically and economically in order to take their rightful place and contribute greatly to the growth and development of the nation. In Nigeria today, there is an increasing

[63]Lewu, Yetunde Alaba, "Nigerian Women in Politics…, 328
[64]Falola, Toyin and Aderinto Rasheed, Nigerian, Nationalism and Writing History. (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 94.
[65]Hunnam, June, Feminism. (Harlow: Pearson Educational Limited, 2012), 77.
[66]Wole-Abu, "Nigerian Women…
[67] F. T. Akinwande, "Women in Development: The Historical Trends of Changing Roles of Women in African Society" in International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, ISSN 2278-0211. Available online, www.ijird.com

number of women in both the private and public sectors. A number of them are holding administrative offices in different places. For example, women dominate some professions, like teaching and nursing.[68]

Women in their different fields and careers are contributing immensely to national development in various ways. For instance, in the three arms of government, there are women who are making a significant impact, contributing their quota to moving the nation forward. Many women's organisations were formed to mobilise, encourage and support women's participation in politics. As a result, several women are developing an interest in politics. A few among them are now elected as local government councillors and chairpersons. In addition to that, some women are serving in the House of Representatives and Senate. Unlike what it was in the first and second republics, women are now contesting elections. In other words, political awareness is increasing among them. Women are now among the decision-making bodies in Nigeria, contributing to the lawmaking process in Nigeria.[69]

Women are among the executive arm of government. They are being appointed as commissioners and Federal Ministers, while some are serving in the capacity of Special Assistants and Special Advisers to the President. For example, Dr Mrs Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was appointed as Finance Minister from 2003-2006 and 2011-2015. She also served briefly as Foreign Minister in 2006. Okonjo-Iweala served for two terms as Finance Minister. During her first tenure as Minister for Finance in President Obasanjo's regime, she led the negotiations with the Paris Club. The negotiations eventually led to the cancellation of Nigeria's debt.

In the judiciary, women are not doing badly. They are now appointed as Chief Justices at the Federal and State levels. Examples of such women are Justice Kudirat Kekere-Ekun, who was appointed as Nigeria's Chief Justice in 2024, and Justice Maryam Muktar Alooma, who had earlier served in the same capacity. In addition, there are many women lawyers, magistrates, and others who are doing exceptionally well in the judiciary.

Many women are also in the civil service, contributing their quota to the growth of Nigeria. In Nigeria today, there are many women who are serving in the capacity of permanent secretaries, directors, and director-generals in various government parastatals and top civil service positions. In many ministries and local governments, women are appointed to serve in different capacities. In the health sector, there are women serving as Doctors, Nurses, auxiliary staff, etc., contributing to health development. Likewise, in the education sector, women are school teachers, principals, administrators, professors and Vice Chancellors in Universities. In the mass media, the role of women cannot be overemphasised. There are women journalists who render services in various media houses (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other communication agencies).

[68]Hajiya Binta Isiaku Mohammed, A lecture delivered by the Registrar, Hajiya Binta Isiaku Mohammed, FIICAN, MNIM, on "The Role of Women in Public Service" on the occasion of SSANU Women's Week held at Hahmud Tukur Theatre, Old Campus, on Thursday 23th November, 2017.
[69]Mohammed, A lecture delivered by the Registrar…

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In the same vein, women are not left behind in the area of security in Nigeria. There are some women in the security agencies, such as the State Security Service (SSS), customs, prisons, police, navy, military, and immigration, as administrative staff and officers. There are also female staff members in the private sector, such as insurance companies, banks, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In addition, some women entrepreneurs contribute to the economic development of society and create jobs for many unemployed graduates in their communities. In the religious sphere, women are serving in different capacities. Some serve as Church leaders, founders, missionaries, unit or departmental heads or as pastors, among the Christians. Women serve as women leaders in the various mosques as well.

Despite the gender inequality, marginalisation and barriers that women faced and are still confronting, they are working hard to secure gender equality in post-independent Nigeria. Nigerian women are now regaining their rightful positions in the public space economically, socially and politically, after independence. In post-colonial Nigeria, schools give equal education to boys and girls. There is no course in any higher institution of learning that ladies are not studying, be it Engineering, Aviation, Land Surveying, or Physical and Health Education. Parents are now encouraging their female children to study any course of their choice. Admission to study courses in tertiary institutions is not gender based but merit-based. This helps to prepare and enable women to work in both the private sector, like insurance companies and banks, as well as the public sector.

Nigerian women are breaking cultural and religious barriers to becoming leaders in public places. Many of them are breaking new ground in their different chosen occupations, careers and businesses. More than before, women are now active members of political parties, attending party meetings, contesting elections and holding political offices at the local, state and federal levels.

Concluding Remarks

The role of Women in pre-colonial Nigeria was obvious in terms of their visibility; economically, spiritually, socially and politically. They were economically active in agriculture: land cultivation, planting, harvesting, and marketing of farm produce. They engaged in food processing and animal rearing, among others. In other words, they contributed greatly to pre-colonial Nigeria's economy. Politically, women were 'beside' their husbands, playing supportive and complementary roles to ensure the success of their husbands in public, yet they combined these with motherhood and home management. The contact of Africa, particularly Nigeria, with the Europeans was a great threat to women's roles in the economic and political arena. Colonial economic, social and political policies were unfriendly and harsh on the women. Women became second-class citizens in their society as the colonial imperialists introduced policies that marginalised them. Nigerian women were denied the opportunity or access to loans to boost their businesses. They were also denied well-paid jobs because of the kind of Western education given to them, which only prepared them for marriage. It was more or less a domestic and marriage-

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oriented education. The two foreign religions are also male-friendly. Both the Islamic religion and Christianity promote patriarchy.

In the midst of these challenges, Nigerian women fought for their rights by contending with the colonial unfair policies. Some courageous, educated and audacious women like Madam Tinubu, Chief Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Chief Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Hajiya Sawaba Gambo, Chief Mrs Bolarinwa, among others, rose and protested against colonial administration and policies that were against women. Some of them were members of the pressure groups that fought relentlessly for Nigeria's independence.

In post-independent Nigeria, women refused to be trampled underfoot. They rose and pressed to have a voice in public places with the view to contributing to the development of Nigeria. Today, women are found in both public and private sectors. They are more visible in the political, social, and economic spaces than before. However, in the area of politics, women need to do more to have equal representation with men in the House of Representatives and Senate in the near future.

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