

PRODUCERS OR SUBSIDISERS: BEROM WOMEN IN HOUSEHOLD AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN THE COLONIAL ECONOMY ON THE JOS PLATEAU

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ABSTRACT

The paper discussed the nature of Berom sexual or gender division of labour in household agricultural production in the colonial economy of the Jos Plateau in Northern Nigeria. The research methodology was based on unstructured oral interviews. The study showed that the British colonial economy transformed the Berom pre-colonial sexual division of labour in household agricultural production from that of complementary division of labour between the genders to that of independent women producers. Several factors such as cultural change, taxation and the introduction of tin mining during the colonial period were responsible for this change. Even though Berom women gained autonomy as independent agricultural producers it paradoxically turned them into subsidizers of the low wages that was paid to the predominantly male mining laborers by foreign mining companies in the Jos tin mines. This made Berom women to be economically subservient to both the men and British economic interest

KEYWORDS: Agricultural Production, Women in Household

INTRODUCTION

The Berom occupy part of the Jos plateau region in North Central part of Nigeria within the middle belt geopolitical zone. The Berom is one of the numerous ethnic groups that occupy the Jos Plateau and most of them belong to the Benue- Congo group of languages including the Berom, while others belong to the Chadic group of languages.¹ The Berom are one of the 368 minority ethnic groups in Nigeria² numbering about 2.5 million. They occupy an area that constituted the epicenter of tin mining during the colonial period where agriculture was made a secondary economic activity in favor of tin mining by the British. As Berom male labor drifted to the mining fields women were left to take greater charge of and played greater role in subsistence agricultural production in addition to domestic work. This informed the choice of the Berom women for the study because it enabled us to assess the overall contribution of women in domestic and household agricultural production as the traditional economy was incorporated into the colonial economy.

METHODOLOGY

Both colonial and local sources are silent on the actual role that women played in agriculture under colonial rule because studies in African history especially in the pre-colonial and colonial periods have been gender blind and gender biased.³ Thus, oral interviews were the main source we used in this study based on oral information provided by selected

¹ See Plateau State: *The Heritage of hope*, Plateau State Government, 2001, p5, this is corroborated by Greenberg's classification of languages.

² www.How to Nigeria.Com, 07/07 2014

³ See Alahira, H. A, "The Role of Women in the Colonial Economy of Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of the Berom of the Jos Plateau, 1900-1960, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2001, pp xxvi-xxxii

Berom women as primary subjects of the research. Other primary and secondary sources such as books, articles and archival sources were seldom used except where they provided important empirical information. Oral interviews⁴ was conducted with individuals as well as focused group interviews which provided empirical evidence on the way that Berom women and the generality of the society conceptualized the role they played in agricultural production during the colonial period. Individual and group opinions were analyzed within the wider context of the society.

The interviews were unstructured and flexible. This was to avoid mechanical presentation and response from respondents. The households formed the basis for the research being the basic unit of production. The households were also examined based on the mobilization and utilization of household labor and the way that gender division of labor subsidized capital accumulation during the colonial period. We also surveyed the significance of women's productive and reproductive roles within the households. This enabled us to see whether women were active agents and producers within the household agricultural economy and the role they played in the colonial economy.

The analysis was based on data extracted from oral interviews conducted in 1997 in principal Berom settlements consisting of Gyel, Du, and Rayfield because they were the most affected by colonial economic activities especially tin mining. Rayfield was located in Jos, which served as the administrative headquarter of the Amalgamated Tin Mines of Nigeria (ATMN) and Jos Plateau Province. Bachit was included as a non tin producing area in Berom land.

A total number of thirty-two respondents were interviewed from the selected areas, which consisted of elderly women above 60 years of age because they must have had direct experience of colonial rule or at least heard stories of women's experience during the colonial period. This was complemented with group interviews consisting of men and women.

Over 90% of the women interviewed were illiterate and semi-literate peasants except one notorious woman political activists called Mrs. Hannah Princewell. She had a political career that spanned both the colonial and post-colonial periods during which she fought for the political enfranchisement of Berom women. In view of the fact that written sources on the topic are scarce, our analysis was based on detailed and in-depth interview with informants in the field. The key issues in the questions asked during the interviews reflected the role of Berom women in traditional agriculture, gender division of labor in agricultural tasks, home management and agriculture, labor and income, trade, mining, the status of women and other miscellaneous questions relevant to the study.

Berom Pre- colonial Gender Roles in Agriculture

In the pre-colonial period, the crops that were produced in the household subsistence agriculture ranged from root crops (*Kyit, bijye bidang, vat*), cereals (*acha, chun, gai*), pwana and vegetables (*leng, kwon, orun*, etc.). Women were the sole producers of vegetables and a few local staples like *pwana*, beans and cocoa yams while men grew almost all the cereals and root crops.⁵ There was marked gender division of labor where women did the planting, weeding, winnowing, transportation (by head), and food processing while men did clearing, ridging and harvesting of main cereals and tubers.⁶

⁴ For studies on oral traditions, see for example, Jean Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, Roulledge and Kegan Paul, London. 1961. For information and oral traditions on the Jos Plateau see Iseichei, E (ed), "Jos Oral History and Literature Texts: Mwahavul, Ngas, Njak and Mupun Oral History", 1981.

⁵ Group interview at Gyel, 17-11-1997

⁶ Ngo Kumbo Jang, 84 years, Du, 04-12- 1997

Men and women played complementary roles on family or house hold farms but women maintained personal compound farms near homes as opposed to bush farms far away from home. In theory, whatever was planted on the compound farms was regarded as women's crops but in reality the proceeds were used for family consumption during the dry season while the harvest from the bush farms was used during the rainy season or hungry season when food supply from the compound farms must have finished.⁷

The division between what was regarded as men's crops and women's crops was not strictly based on who produced it but rather on who exercised authority or control over the production, consumption and marketing of the products.⁸ Thus, what was regarded as men's crops such as *chun*, *acha*, yams, guinea corn, millet etc was actually cultivated by women but on men's farms or farms owned jointly by members of the household. It was only vegetables that was produced, owned and controlled solely by women.

The Berom regarded men's crops as the primary crops, which included all the major cereals like *acha*, millet, guinea corn, yams e.t.c.⁹ The women's crops were regarded as secondary crops because it had low exchange value compared to men's crops. Every woman produced the secondary crops so that almost every household had it in abundance.¹⁰ Therefore, there was little exchange of secondary agricultural products such as cocoa-yam, beans, and vegetables, which were produced mainly by women compared to primary products (mainly grains and yams), which were regarded to be predominantly men's crops. Grains, which were controlled by men, were exchanged with livestock.¹¹ A basket of grain was exchanged for a goat during the colonial period, which was equivalent to between one thousand two hundred to one thousand five hundred naira.¹² But during the colonial period the cost of grains was much lower than this¹³ because low prices were imposed by the colonial administration which compelled the peasants to work in the tin mines to get more cash which they used to pay taxes. Pre-colonial Berom women battered secondary crops within the households which had relatively lower cash equivalent. It was only during the colonial period that some of the vegetables grown solely by women acquired market value due to increase in demand by mining laborers, immigrants and the urban population.¹⁴ Some women accepted the pre- colonial gender roles as natural biological attributes¹⁵ (based on sex or gender differentiation) while others attributed it to Berom culture.¹⁶

The Impact of the Colonial Economy on the Role of Berom Women in Agricultural Tasks

The nature of the colonial economy and colonial economic policies transformed the Berom traditional gender roles in agriculture. Among the main factors that had far reaching effect on women were the monetization of the economy, taxation, tin mining and nationalization and privatization of land which resulted in the migration of predominantly male labor to the mines leaving women as female headed households in charge subsistence agricultural production. All the women interviewed agreed that women began to grow what was regarded as predominantly men's crops and engaged in

⁷ Ngo Garos Dung, 82 years, Rayfield, 02- 12- 1997

⁸ Ngo De Toma Jang Davou, 98 years, Du, Jos, 05- 12- 1997

⁹ See responses to oral interview.

¹⁰ Ngo Bang Chuwang Mata, 90 years, Du, 14-12-97.

¹¹ Response from field work at Gyel, DU and Rayfield

¹² Ngo Chundung Chuwang, 88 years, Rayfield, 02/12/ 1997.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Group interview at Gyel, 17/ 11/ 1997

¹⁵ Ngo Gyang Tok, 80 years, Ray field, 05/12/1997.

¹⁶ Ngo Chundung ,Chuwang, 88 years, Rayfield, 02/12/97.

agricultural tasks that were reserved for men during the colonial period. They also regarded the introduction of western culture and education as the factors responsible for the change in their traditional gender roles because it encouraged individualism and competition which increased the burden of their workload in agriculture and domestic work especially where there were no house helps.

In spite of this, the women asserted that the introduction of western culture and modernization enabled them to control agricultural production. The introduction of colonial taxation and the expansion of tin mining on the Jos Plateau forced most Berom male laborers to work in the tin mines.¹⁷ During the Second World War, about seventy thousand laborers were recruited in the tin mines of which the Berom constituted a sizeable number. Taxes were deducted from laborers over a long period of time as a device to keep them as long as possible in the tin mines on meager wages.¹⁸ The traditional gender division of labor was broken down and women began to produce what was traditionally regarded as men's crops¹⁹ which provided the opportunity for women to control the production, consumption and marketing of agricultural products. Most Berom women exercised greater autonomy and independence from men especially their husbands.²⁰ The women regarded their autonomy to produce, and market their own primary crops as progressive and beneficial to them.²¹ However, the colonial government and mining companies exploited this to their advantage to pay low wages to laborers and in most cases used forced labor because women supplied the household needs almost for the whole year which they did only during the dry season in the pre-colonial period. Women's labor subsidized the low wages paid to men and at the same time it enabled the mining companies make super profits. Thus, several methods were used by the mining companies in collaboration with the colonial government to coerce peasants to work in the mines for either free or meager wages which included legal instruments, propaganda, heavy taxes and naked coercion. Moreover, absence of legislation on minimum wage encouraged mining companies to pay laborers wages below subsistence level so that minimum wages was not introduced until the 1940s. Wages increased from 6 to 9 pence a day between 1908 and 1912 as a result of competition for laborers by mining companies when tin mining begun to expand.²² But thereafter mine laborers' wages increased sluggishly throughout the colonial period and it actually stagnated in most periods. Between 1930 and 1935 wages increased from 1/6d to 1/8d a day which was only 1d increase a year! Between 1935 and 1953, wages increased from 7/- to 11/- a week which was abysmally small which were only 4/- increase in 14 years!!²³ The low wages can be appreciated when compared with the super profits made by the mining companies. In 1941, for example, the mining companies paid only £82,303 wages as against the profit of £1,357,917 made by the mining companies.²⁴

The conventional explanation that has been given for the massive profit made by the mining companies was as a result of cheap labor. But the explanation is incomplete without due consideration to the changing pattern of gender division of labor as discussed above. Increased involvement of women in agricultural production as a result of predominantly male labor migration into the tin mines turned women into both main producers and subsidizers of capital

¹⁷For detailed discussion, see Hanatu Alahira, *Colonial Ordinances and Capital in the Jos Tin Mines in Northern Nigeria: An Analysis*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2011, pp 84-95.

¹⁸ Ibid, p 93

¹⁹ Ngo Caros Kim, 81 years, Du, Jos, 04/12/1997.1

²⁰ De chungung. mandung, gyel, Jos, 18/11/1997

²¹ Group interview at Gyel, 18/11/1997

²² NAK: JOSPROF, 1910/1912

²³ Alahira, H.A., op. cit., p 98.

²⁴ NAK: ZARPROF, 2018, Vol. 1, Mines Labor Supply.

exploitation in the tin mines. The mining companies could afford to pay minimal wages below subsistence level, that is, below the minimum required by the laborer to sustain himself and his family, because the women with the help of child labor produced the needs of the family. For example in the 1940s unskilled laborers earned only 2/4d which was well below the 2/11d medically recommended food ration for a week. A laborer earning a minimum wage of 11/- in 1954 required 12/1d for feeding alone excluding toiletries, medical bills, taxes e.t.c.²⁵ This meant that women were responsible not only for the members of households and the extended family but also for their husbands' welfare in the tin mines. There was reversal of gender roles in the household agricultural production during the colonial period in which men became the primary producers for the colonial government while women were both the primary producers in the household economy and subsidisers of capitalist exploitation of male laborers in the tin mines. But Berom women could not understand that capitalist economic interest and exploitation especially tin mining and not western culture was the real reason for their "autonomy" and that their autonomy in reality subsidized the exploitation of their husbands' labor in the tin mines. This reflected the situation of almost all peasant laborers working in colonial economic ventures be it agricultural plantations or mining.

Thus, even though Berom women were almost invisible in their participation in cash crop production, their role as producers for subsistence in the household economy was not only substantial but very crucial to the sustenance of the logic of colonial exploitation. They subsidized the low wages that were paid to men and even subsidized the subsistence of the poor peasants that remained within the household agricultural economy – their poverty being caused through high taxation, high prices of imported manufactured products and payment for colonial services such as education, health care, etc.

When asked whether modernization had a positive or negative impact on peasant women, over 90% of them said it had a positive impact because some of the women could now own land²⁶ after the break down in the communal land ownership. But the women had limited access to labor and capital to develop the land. Others said it was both positive and negative. It was positive because some women through hard work were able to save money to buy small pieces of land from sales of their farm products which was no longer controlled by men. But it was negative to women who could not acquire private land. The general impact of male migrant labor was that men started to abandon home (not just in the physical sense of their absence) but in their failure to send regular financial help to their families²⁷ hence women were left to fully take charge of family responsibilities. Thus, in spite of the small measure of autonomy gained by women, women's position and status obviously worsened during the colonial period.²⁸

The women did not know that even though privatization of land enabled a few of them to acquire land it was also responsible for creating the conditions that made men irresponsible to their families and communities. Moreover, the women failed to understand that it was one thing to own land and quite another thing to have sufficient capital to develop it. One of the respondents lamented that:

Before Europeans came, there was enjoyment, no hunger, and no scarcity of anything. People gave to those who lacked. But now women suffer, women get older now and suffer because of hunger. Hence some women have taken to

²⁵ See Alahira, H. A., op.cit, pp 96- 110.

²⁶ Ngo B. Nyem, 76 years, Rayfield, 2/12/97

²⁷ Ngo Gyang Nyam, 76 years, Du, 5/12/97

²⁸ Mrs. Hannah Princewell, 90 years, Jos, 14/12/1997

drinking...²⁹

Not many of the rural women understood the paradoxes embedded in capitalist development and consequently not many of them knew the solution to their problems. A major impact of the colonial economy on the Berom was the breakdown of the household economy and communal labor as a result of migration of male labor from household production to the tin mines, while the women were left to take charge of hitherto male jobs. But there were about 10 per cent of households and villages like Bachit in the colonial period that were not engaged in tin mining outside the household economy.

In such areas women still played a crucial role in agricultural production and carried greater burden than men in spite of the fact that the men did not engage in tin mining.³⁰ Women and children prepared the nurseries; did the transplanting, weeding etc. Even though women were regarded as the weaker sex and did all the domestic work, they still did the difficult and time consuming tasks because the number of women and children was more than men especially as a result of polygamy. Men's tasks also such as land clearing and ridging were difficult but took less time both as a daily task and in the farming calendar. Land clearing and ridging took place once or at most twice in a year but weeding was done at least three to four times a year which consumed more time. The burden of high colonial taxation however forced men to increasingly participate in women's tasks especially transplanting seedlings and weeding. But without women and children's labor, it was impossible for men to maintain the farms and be able to pay their tax and other social obligations. Thus, men rated women's tasks and their overall contribution in farm labor to be very important and not as marginal or insignificant. For the whole of Africa, 70% of weeding job was performed by women and 30% by men in the pre-colonial period.³¹

The significant difference in the role of women in agriculture in the tin producing areas and non-tin producing areas was that women in the former became sole producers and exercised control over the proceeds while in the latter they played complementary roles with the men but did not have autonomy and control over the products. However, during the colonial period women increasingly played greater role in household production in both areas.

The introduction of new innovations in agriculture reduced men's tasks in agricultural production more than those of women. The introduction of ploughs and later tractors by the colonial government reduced farm labor performed primarily by men especially ridging but their roles in women's tasks still remained supportive. Men were very slow to adopt agricultural innovations that lightened women's tasks such as the use of herbicides because of the availability of free women and children labor to do the work. Men's adoption of labor saving innovations relating to women's tasks such as weeding was much slower than those that affected men's tasks.

On the whole, the use of new technology in farming by both men and women was very low on the Jos Plateau because of land shortages, lack of capital and the high cost of new technology.³² But it was worst for women because the

²⁹Kachollom Polloh, 90 years, Du, 27/9/1997

³⁰Group interview with women at Bacit, 14th December, 1997

³¹Olayiwole, C.B. "Women in Agriculture", Workshop on Women in Development by Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures, Abuja, 14th-16th September, 1987

³²Ngo Von Delyop, Gyel, 70 years, 18/11/97 and Ngo Naomi Dangzang, Gyel, 18/11/97

land tenure system was very disadvantageous to them in both pre- colonial and post- colonial periods.³³ Most of the women said the use of fertilizer had negative impact on the already poor soils of the Jos Plateau which was as a result of poor application of fertilizer due to ignorance.³⁴

The new crops and vegetables that were introduced under the colonial agricultural schemes such as Irish potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, cassava etc did not benefit Berom women because they did not own sufficient land, capital and skills especially in the production of crops that required irrigation such as vegetables. The men took control of the production of the new crops, which had greater market value while women were left to grow the traditional vegetables.³⁵

Women saw their roles as domestic workers and subsistence producers as complementary and indispensable but it restricted them from engaging in cash crop production. Thus, most of the women wanted a situation where gender division of labor will be eliminated completely to enable them produce crops that have cash value. They desired this independence in spite of the fact that men usually took advantage of the economic independence of women to abandon their family responsibility³⁶. But a minority of women wanted a complementary gender division of labor, that is, to reinforce gender division of labor to ensure men and women had specific roles to play in spite of the fact that gender division of labor was not equitable.³⁷ Their decision was based on cultural value judgments rather than economic ones. But the fact was that gender division of labor in the colonial economy failed to provide and enforce control mechanism that ensured that men did not abdicate their social responsibilities as was the case with Berom men who engaged in tin mining because such gender relations served colonial economic interests. Thus gender roles and relations under colonial rule turned women into main house hold producers for the Berom society and subsidizers of capitalist exploitation of male labor as shown above.

As long as the socio-economic, ideological and political colonial structure existed which eroded the fundamental basis of the unity and cohesion of the family, women's economic independence was meaningless. We have seen in the case of the Berom that whether with less or greater gender division of labor in agriculture, women bore greater burden of agricultural production in both pre- colonial and post- colonial periods. The major difference was that while the products of their labor were used for the family in the pre- colonial period, it was used to subsidize capitalist exploitation under colonial rule.

Thus, economic independence of women could only be advantageous and meaningful based two parameters – a viable economic system and equitable gender relationship. Thus, enhancing the status and role of women in agricultural production will depend on the extent of the use of appropriate labor saving technology to reduce women's labor in farming and gender relations and division of labor that are equitable and not just complementary within strong family relationships devoid of exploitation. It was demonstrated in this paper that these conditions were either neglected or eroded during the colonial period by the colonial administration and mining companies.

CONCLUSIONS

We analyzed the colonial agricultural policies and the impact this had on women's role in agricultural production. We observed that colonial agricultural policies served the interests of the British by laying little emphasis on the

³³Ngo Gao Kim, Du, 81 years, 77/12/97.

³⁴There is need to do more research into Berom traditional methods of farming.

³⁵Hurot Pam, 97 years, Gyel, 18/11/1997

³⁶Group interview, Gyel, 18/11/1997

³⁷Ibid.

modernization of the agricultural sector.

Women played a marginal role in the production of cash crops because the British were more concerned with the tin mining industry. Tin mining withdrew mostly male labors from agriculture to work in the tin mines under forced labor or on meager wages that were below subsistence. Thus, women became the primary agricultural producers in the household economy in addition to their traditional roles in the domestic sector. The implication of this was that women's labor in agriculture was increased and exploited as they became subsidizers of colonial economic exploitation.

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