

**AKSU JOURNAL**  
**OF HISTORY & GLOBAL**  
**STUDIES**

**Volume 1, Numbers 1&2, 2014**

**ISSN: 199 006X**

Department of History  
& International Studies,  
Akwa Ibom State University,  
Nigeria.

*AJHGS*, Vol. 1 Nos. 1&2, 2014

*AKSU Journal of History and Global Studies (AJHGS)*,  
Volume 1, Nos. 1&2

Published by  
Department of History & International Studies,  
Faculty of Arts,  
Akwa Ibom State University,  
Obio Akpa Campus, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria  
(in collaboration with *Ibom Journal of History and International  
Studies, University of Uyo*).

ISSN: 199 006X

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Printed by Robertminder International Limited.

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

**BY**

**ALAHIRA H. A**

Department of History  
Ahmadu Bello University  
Zaria, Nigeria

E-mail: [piliya@yahoo.com](mailto:piliya@yahoo.com)

GSM: +2348028451131

**Introduction**

The Berom is one of the numerous ethnic groups that occupy part of the Jos Plateau region in North Central Nigeria within the middle belt geo-political zone. Most of the Berom belong to the Benue- Congo group of languages, while others belong to the Chadic group of languages. The Berom are one of the 368 minority ethnic groups in Nigeria 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 labour 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 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. Thus, oral interviews constitute the main source we used in this study focusing principally on narratives provided by randomly selected Berom women as primary subjects of the research. Other primary and secondary sources such as books, articles and archival sources were seldom used but for the general information they provided since the authors did not use gender perspectives in their study and analysis especially works on the Berom. Oral interviews enabled us gather primary and secondary data. This helped us to corroborate library and archival information and also provided us with new information. Individual and focused group interviews were used which provided empirical evidence and the way that women and the wider society conceptualized the problems of women. Individual and group opinions were examined 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. This was examined in historical perspective to see the factors that necessitated changes in social relations and production over time. The households were also examined based on the mobilization and utilization of household labour 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 within the household economy or passive (biological reproductive roles).

Three principal Berom settlements were selected for the oral interviews which were conducted in 1997. Gyel, Du and Rayfield were chosen because they were the most affected by colonial economic administrative and economic policies. Rayfield was the closest to Jos, which initially served as both the administrative and mining headquarter of the Amalgamated Tin Mines of Nigeria(ATMN) and Jos Plateau Province respectively.

A total number of thirty-two respondents were interviewed from the three 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.

Over 90% of the women interviewed were illiterate and semi-literate peasants the leading Berom 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 from which answers were elicited were based on: the role of Berom women in traditional agriculture, gender division of labour in agricultural tasks, home management and agriculture, labour and income, trade, mining, the status of women, handicraft production and other miscellaneous subjects 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 economy 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. There was marked gender division of labour 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. 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 in most of the compound farms must have finished.

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. 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 staple or primary crops, which included all the major cereals like *acha*, millet, guinea corn, etc., and yams. 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. 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. 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. But during the colonial period the cost of grains was much lower than this 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 immigrants and the urban population. Some women accepted the pre-colonial gender roles as natural biological attributes (based on sex differentiation) while others attributed it to Berom culture.

The Impact of the Colonial Economy on **the Role of Berom**

### Women in Agricultural Tasks

All the women interviewed agreed that women began to grow what was regarded as predominantly men's crops and engaged in agricultural tasks that were reserved for men during the colonial period. The introduction of alien culture and western education were regarded as the factors responsible for this change. It increased the burden of women on the farm and in domestic work especially where there were no house helps.

However, the women asserted that western culture, modernization or westernization were the factors that enabled them to control the production of primary products as a result of male absenteeism from agricultural production. The introduction of colonial taxation and the expansion of tin mining on the Jos Plateau forced most Berom male labourers to work in the tin mines. During the Second World War, about seventy thousand labourers were recruited in the tin mines of which the Berom constituted a sizeable number. Taxes were deducted from labourers over a long period of time as a device to keep them as long as possible in the tin mines on meager wages. The migration of male labour into the tin mines meant that Berom women became the main agricultural producers. The traditional gender division of labour was broken down and women began to produce what was traditionally regarded as men's crops. But this 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. The autonomy of some of the women to produce, and market their own primary crops was seen as real progress and those whose husbands collected back the proceeds saw their husbands as enemies of the progress of women. They could not comprehend the fact that they and their husbands were all fettered and enslaved to serve the interest of colonialism and that, therefore, no real independence or autonomy exist where such an autonomy was granted first and foremost to serve capitalist interest. They did not realize that doing extra labour that made them both home providers and managers enabled both the colonial government and

mining companies to pay low wages to labourers and in most cases unpaid forced labour. Several methods were used to coerce peasants to work in the mines for either free or meager wages which included legal instruments, propaganda, heavy taxes and force. Moreover, absence of legislation on minimum wage encouraged mining companies to pay labourers 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 labourers by mining companies when tin mining begun to expand. Mine labourers' wages increased sluggishly throughout the colonial period and in most periods 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 7/- to 11/- a week which was abysmally only 4/- increase in 14 years!! The low wages can be appreciated when compared with the supper 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.

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 the consideration of changing pattern of gender division of labour as discussed above. Increased involvement of women in agricultural production as a result predominantly male labour migration into the mines tuned women into both main producers and subsidizers of capital 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 labourer to sustain him, because the women with the help of child labour produced for the needs of the family. For example in the 1940s unskilled labourers earned only 2/4d which was well below the 2/11d medically recommended food ration for a week. A labourer earning a minimum wage of 11/- in 1954 required 12/1d for feeding alone excluding toiletries, medical bills, taxes etc. This meant that 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 subsidizers of capitalist exploitation of male laborers in the tin mines. Therefore Berom women could not understand that capitalist economic interest and exploitation (tin mining) and not westernization or culture was the real reason for their “autonomy” and that if their husbands were enslaved in the tin mines they could never be free independent producers. Their autonomy in reality subsidized the exploitation of their husbands' labour in the tin mines. This was the situation of all peasant laborers working in capitalist 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, forced labour, 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 land after the break down in the communal land ownership. But the women had limited access to labour and capital to develop the land. Others said it was both positive and negative. Positive because some women even had enough money to buy 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 labour 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 families. 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.

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 drinking...

Not many of the rural women understood the paradoxes embedded in capitalist development and consequently not many of them knew the way out of their problems. A major impact of the colonial economy was the breakdown of the household economy and communal labor as a result of the removal of male labour away from subsistence economic production and living the women to take charge of hitherto male jobs. But there was a small percentage (about 10%) of households and villages in the colonial period where the heads of households were not engaged outside the household economy such as tin mining, for example, villages like Bachit.

In such areas the tasks generally being done in farm were many. It involved, among other things, land clearing, ridging, nursery, planting, weeding, harvesting, transportation, and storage, processing and marketing. In the pre-colonial period, men were mostly involved in only land clearing, ridging yam, and threshing of *gai* and *acha*. Women and children did the rest of the tasks with some men helping intermittently.

Men rated women's tasks and their overall contribution in farm labour to be very important and not as marginal or insignificant. The tasks performed according to our respondents were farm work

based on natural abilities or skill. It was not done according to arbitrary gender division of labour. This meant that the tasks that were considered to be mainly women's work were based on its relative importance or significance for men and on the ability of women to perform the task. For example, women and children prepared the nurseries; did the transplanting, weeding, etc. Even though the work was difficult and time consuming, the large number of women and children relative to men (as a result of polygamy) naturally made them qualified to do these difficult tasks.

It has been observed that women were faced with the problem of time constraint because they performed double work both in the domestic and agricultural sphere. They performed the most tedious, delicate and time consuming tasks on the farms because one man could marry as many wives his resources could permit. Women identified weeding, harvesting, transporting and ridging as the most difficult tasks. It should be observed that even though ridging was difficult, it took less time both as a daily task and in the farming calendar. Ridging took place once or at most twice in a year but weeding was done at least three to four times a year and consumed more time. Thus, in essence, women though considered to be the weaker sex did the most difficult and laborious tasks on the farms. Without women and children, it would be impossible for men to maintain the farms because female labour was indispensable. None of the women interviewed preferred to be engaged in weeding to other tasks such as transportation and planting. Even though men were relatively freer because they had limited roles to play both in the domestic and farm work women's contribution in the household economy was merely regarded as as only supportive just because it was primarily a woman's responsibility. For the whole of Africa, 70% of weeding job was performed by women and 30% by men.

During the colonial period the sexual division of labour changed. Women increasingly did carry out men's tasks in addition to their own but men did not do additional tasks. Even when machinery such as ploughs and tractors were introduced which reduced farm labour performed essentially by men, their roles in women's tasks still

remained to be supportive. The use of modern innovations such as the ploughs and tractors reduced the burden men's work such as ridging but it was only the use of motor vehicles that women benefitted in lessening their of traditional work of transporting farm products on their head. Thus, new innovations in agriculture affected men's tasks more than those of women. Men were very slow to adopt innovations that lightened women's tasks such as the use of herbicides and food processors such as groundnut sellers because of the availability of women and children to do the work. The adoption of new technology in these areas 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. But it was worst so for women because the land tenure system was very disadvantageous to them. When asked whether modern innovations in farming had negative or positive impact on agriculture, most of the women responded in the negative because the use of fertilizer, tractor, etc. had negative impact on the already poor soils of the Jos Plateau. This was the case most especially with fertilizer. The poor use of fertilizer due to ignorance of its use especially by women left the soil more impoverished than before.

The new crops and vegetables that were introduced under the colonial agricultural development schemes such as Irish potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, cassava, etc. did not benefit Berom women because they did not own sufficient land, capital and skills in the production of crops such as irrigation required especially the production of 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 staples.

Women saw their roles as domestic workers and subsistence producers as complementary and indispensable, which hindered them from engaging in cash crop production. Also because of time constraint it was not possible for them to add to their already heavy workload the production of new crops. Thus, most of the women wanted a situation where gender division of labour 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 responsibility. But other women wanted a complementary division of labour, that is, to reinforce gender division of labour to ensure each partner had specific roles to play in spite of the fact that gender division of labour was not equitable. Their decision was based on moral and ethical value judgments to ensure justice and fair play in gender division of labour. But the fact was that whether there was gender division of labour or not, there was the absence of control mechanism that ensured that men did not abdicate their responsibility as was the case with Berom men who engaged in tin mining.

As long as the socio-economic, ideological and political 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 with less gender division of labour in agriculture, women had to bear greater burden of farm labour and subsistence needs of the family. True economic independence of women could only be accomplished within two parameters a viable economic system and stable family relationship. Thus, enhancing the position and role of women, to achieve women's independence depended on the extent to which economic matters were resolved on the one hand and family relationships are strengthened on the other. It was demonstrated in this work that colonial agricultural policies eroded both.

### Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the colonial agricultural policies and the impact this had on women's role in agricultural production. It has been observed that colonial agricultural policies served the interests of the British by laying little emphasis on the modernization of the agricultural sector. Women played a marginal role in the production of cash crops. They became the primary producers of food crops in the household economy in addition to their traditional roles in the domestic economy. The implication of this was that women's security

and economic power was eroded and they became more subservient to both men and the British. Even though subsistence production was almost entirely left in the hands of women, this did not greatly contribute to their economic enhancement because it attracted little cash income.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Plateau State: The Heritage of hope, Plateau State Government, 2001, p5, this is corroborated by Greenberg's classification of languages.
- <sup>2</sup> www.How to Nigeria.Com, 07/07 2014
- <sup>3</sup> 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. Desertation, Department of History, Ahamadu Bello University, Zaria, 2001, pp xxvi-xxxii
- <sup>4</sup> 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.
- <sup>5</sup> Group interview at Gyel, 17-11-1997
- <sup>6</sup> Ngo Kumbo Jang, 84 years, Du, 04-12- 1997
- <sup>7</sup> Ngo Garos Dung, 82 years, Rayfield, 02- 12- 1997
- <sup>8</sup> Ngo De Toma Jang Davou, 98 years, Du, Jos, 05- 12- 1997
- <sup>9</sup> See responses to oral interview.
- <sup>10</sup> Ngo Bang Chuwang Mata, Du, 14-12-97, 90 years
- <sup>11</sup> Response from field work at Gyel, DU and Rayfield
- <sup>12</sup> Ngo Chundung Chuwang Rayfield, 02/12/ 1997, 84 years
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Group interview at Gyel, 17/ 11/ 1997
- <sup>15</sup> Ngo Gyang Tok, Ray field, 05/12/1997, 80 years.
- <sup>16</sup> Ngo Chundung Chuwang, Rayfield, 02/12/97, 88 years.
- <sup>17</sup> For detailed discussion, see Hanatu Alahira, *Colonial Ordinances and Capital in the Jos Tin Mines in Northern Nigeria: An Analysis*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbruken, Germany, 2011, pp 84-95.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p 93

- <sup>19</sup> Ngo Caros Kim, 81 years, Du, Jos, 04/12/1997.  
<sup>20</sup> de chungung, mandung, gyel, jos, 18/11/1997  
<sup>21</sup> NAK: JOSPROF, 1910/1912  
<sup>22</sup> Alahira, *Colonial Ordinances and Capital in Jos...* p.98  
<sup>23</sup> NAK: ZARPROF, 2018, Vol. 1, Mines Labour Supply.  
<sup>24</sup> See Alahira, *Colonial Ordinances and Capital in Jos*, pp 96- 110.  
<sup>25</sup> Ngo B. Nyem, Rayfield, 2/12/97, 76 years  
<sup>26</sup> Ngo Gyang Nyam, Du, 5/12/97, 69 years  
<sup>27</sup> Kachollom Polloh, Du, 27/9/96, 90 years.  
<sup>28</sup> Olayiwole, C.B. "Women in Agriculture", Workshop on Women in Development by Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures, Abuja, 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> September, 1987  
<sup>29</sup> Ngo Von Delyop, Gyel, 20 years, 18/11/97 and Ngo Naomi Dangzang, Gyel, 18/11/97, 77 years.  
<sup>30</sup> Ngo Gao Kim, Du, 81 years, 77/12/97.  
<sup>31</sup> There is need to do more research into Berom traditional methods of farming.  
<sup>32</sup> See response to interview.

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