

Women in the Colonial Economy of the Cross River Area of Nigeria, 1900-1950

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ABSTRACT The presence and role of women in the economy of the Cross River area during the colonial period has remained largely unstudied by historians. This is despite the fact that both in terms of their numerical strength and economic importance, women's role in the Cross River area deserves attention. The present paper argues that through their collective and individual activities, the women as mothers, farmers, traders, manufacturers and contractors built enough economic power to contribute significantly to community, state and national developments. This was despite the fact that during the colonial period, the people's efforts and resources were not used for the development of their area but, rather, exported to the metropolitan country, thanks to those government policies that were designed to further the cause of colonialism. And since it was reasoned that a woman's place in the society was the home, the colonial government never thought in terms of encouraging the women to develop their potentials through its administrative and economic systems. Nor was it deemed expedient by government to integrate the women into the development process of their fatherland. The women's reaction took diverse forms, including acts of violence and self-help development efforts, in order to face the challenges of the period. With their economic power, the women were well placed to actively participate in the development of the area now called Cross River State, and the country, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Cross River State is one of 36 states that constitute the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Located within the middle Benue and the lower Cross River Basins, Cross River State is bounded on the east by the Republic of Cameroon; on the west by Ebonyi State; on the north by Benue State and on the south by Akwa Ibom State. It covers an area of about 23,074,425 square kilometres, and has a population of about 2.6 million, widely dispersed over the 18 local government areas that constitute the Cross River State of today namely: Abi, Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Bekwara, Biase, Boki, Calabar Municipal, Calabar South, Etung, Ikom, Obanliku, Obubra, Obudu, Odukpani, Ogoja, Yakurr and Yala (Dada et al. 2006).

The people occupying Cross River State are a negroid African race who might have entered Nigeria from the Middle East via North Africa. They were pushed by later immigrants to their present locations where they are probably the oldest people in the sequent occupation of Nigeria (Udofia and Inyang 1987). Among the ethnic groups in Cross River State are the following: Efik, Qua, Efut, Ejagham, Bahumono, Yakurr, Agbo, Mbembe, Ekajuk, Nkum, Mbube, Yala, Ukele, Yache, Bekwarra, Bette_Bendi among numerous others. The economy of Cross River State was and is still largely agrarian. It is estimated that about 85 per cent of the employed

population in the State are engaged in agricultural production, 15 per cent of these in cash crop, mainly oil palm, cocoa and rubber. The remainders are subsistence farmers (Akpan 1987). Apart from agriculture, the people also engaged in fishing, hunting, animal husbandry and industrial production. It is in this area that the British had pervasive influence with long lasting consequences.

European colonialism and its impact on African societies varied from one area to the other. Using the case of the present-day Cross River State of Nigeria, this paper focuses on the effects of the British colonial administrative and economic systems on the women of the area from 1900 to 1950. Like in most African societies, the British colonial government never embarked on specific policies for the advancement of Nigerian women. This study argues that women in the Cross River area never sat on the fence while the British rule lasted. Rather, through protests against colonial policies and self-help development efforts, the women were able to compel the authorities to reform their systems for the general good, improve themselves, as well as actively participate in the development of their immediate communities, the state and the Nigerian nation.

For ease of comprehension, this paper is divided into two basic parts. The first part provides a brief insight into the origin of the area called Cross River State. The second part examines

the British colonial administrative and economic systems, as well as their effects on the women of that region of Nigeria by 1950, when their developmental efforts were at its height in some of the communities.

The Cross River Region Since 1900

The geographical area which is today referred to as Cross River State was not so known during the period covered by this work. However, there existed a considerable degree of socio-cultural, political and economic relationships between the indigenes of the area and their neighbours. However, it is beyond the scope of this study, to attempt an analysis of these inter-group relations, as these have been detailed in other works (see for instance Afigbo 1972; Northrup 1978; Abasiattai 1987 and 1990; Jaja et al. 1990; Erim 1992; Onor 1994; Tangban 2008).

A perusal of these works gives credence to Uya's recent incisive analysis that: "despite the plurality of its ethnic groups, the Cross River region, from the earliest times constituted a historical unit bound together by waterways, trade and commerce, missionary activities and education, the colonial presence and the struggle for self determination and identity in the post-colonial period of Nigeria's history" (Uya 2006).

In 1900, the British colonial government created the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. By this development, the whole of Southern Nigeria (of which the Cross River area was an Integral part), came under formal British administrative control. It is not intended here to catalogue the administrative arrangements that came into force from that period, which have been carried out by some of the works cited above. At any rate, mention needs to be made of some of those administrative arrangements that concern us here, including the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, which inaugurated the provincial system of administration in Nigeria. That administrative arrangement led to the emergence of political units referred to as Old Calabar and Ogoja Provinces, parts of which are covered in the present work. Equally significant to the work was Arthur Richard's Constitution of 1946, which split Nigeria into three administrative regions (Eastern, Western and Northern Regions). Based on that political arrangement, the two Provinces of Calabar and Ogoja were included in the

Eastern Region of Nigeria. Apart from some minor administrative changes that were introduced into the system in course of time, the above political arrangement remained in force until 1960. However, six years later in 1966, Nigeria came under military rule, which also inaugurated the era of state creation in the country. The relevance of that exercise derives from the fact that parts of Old Calabar and Ogoja provinces were included in the emerging Southeastern State, with the splitting of Nigeria into 12 states in 1967. Consequently, Calabar became (and has remained) the state capital. And in 1976, Southeastern State was renamed Cross River State with the creation of more states in Nigeria by the Federal Military Government. In time, some component units of the defunct Southeastern State were incorporated into other states of Nigeria and therefore, lie beyond the scope of this study. The impact of the British colonial administrative and economic systems on the women is now our area of concern.

The Administrative System

One salient feature of the British colonial administration in its African colonies was the non-inclusion of women in the affairs of government. The Cross River area was no exception. Like elsewhere in Southern Nigeria, colonial administration in this area was exclusively an all male affair. This was despite the fact that prior to the advent of British colonial rule in the Cross River area, there were female chiefs and women organizations that took active part in the affairs of their communities. For instance, *Babane Ekpache-Nkomer*, one of the women organisations in Ikom that dates back to pre-colonial times was, in 1832, headed by a female chief, Ma Achi Agbor. She was in 1833, succeeded by Ma Regbu Amba, another female chief. Among the functions of *Babane Ekpache-Nkomer* was (is) the resolution of misunderstanding among the womenfolk, which could lead to a breach of the peace in the community if left unresolved. And by promoting marriages within and outside their ethnic boundaries, the organisation provided basis for intra and inter-group understanding in Ikom area and beyond (Njar 2010).

Elsewhere in our study area, other female chiefs and women organisations performed similar functions. For instance, among the Bendege Ekiem (Etung), a certain female Chief, *Ntu-*

fam Anakai, in her time, functioned hand in hand with the ruling male *Ntufam* and his cabinet, in the making of rules for the peace and stability of the community (Abang 2010). And during the period from 1600 to 1960, a total of 26 women organisations existed in Agbo clan (Abi), spread out in the four Agbo settlements as follows: Itigidi (7); Adadama (6); Igbo Ekureku (4) and Igbo Imeabana (9). (Ecoma 1992). These groups organized as leagues, initiated projects for the good of the entire community. And among the Efik (found in Calabar Municipal and Calabar South), the *Iban Isong* and *Ekpa*, ensured that law and order prevailed at all times. Akoda and Basse (2010), maintain that “pre colonial Efik society had no female chiefs. But *Iban Isong* and *Ekpa* the two women organisations that date back to pre colonial period, attended to the affairs of the community, including the checking of men’s excesses on women, and the use of foul language”.

The common feature of pre-colonial Cross River society was the performance of purification rites (*ekpa*) by the elderly women. In the words of Talbot:

The women dance stark naked the whole night through, and should any man attempt so much as a glance at these mysteries, his strength will ebb away and all his vital powers shrivel up forever (Talbot 1969)

In effect, *ekpa* purification rites were designed to purge the land of all defilement. In this way, certain calamities such as premature death, sterility among women, poor harvest and diverse forms of epidemics were averted (Njar 2010).

From the foregoing, one is not in doubt that the Cross River women functioned effectively for the well-being of the people in their various communities in pre-colonial times. But, with the advent of colonial rule in the area, these women were excluded from the affairs of their communities by the colonial authorities. For instance, from 1900 when the British colonial forces set their feet at Ikom, to 1906 when the machinery of government was set up, all the women, including the title holders had retreated to their farm plantations. Abang asserts that the women fled the town with the active co-operation of their husbands, who feared what the outcome of the contact with the white man would be. Elsewhere in Ogoja area, the story was not different. For instance, when Colonel Trenchard and some colonial forces visited Yala in 1908, only their men were present at the venue of the negotiations.

Their women stood far off, and entertained the advancing troops with dancing, food and water (Erim 1992). And when Ogoja District was later constituted in the same year (1908), the women’s capacity to function was further undermined.

Indeed, the British colonialists took no account of the women in our study area during the pacification. The same was true when it came to setting up of the machinery of administration. Mba (1997) aptly captures the British official mind of the late Victorian age, as well as that of the Edwardian middle-class, that viewed the home as a woman’s place in society. In Mba’s words:

Women were considered unsuitable for the rigours of public life; hence they were not allowed to vote, to contest elections, to sit in Parliament, or to be employed in the civil service. The British administrators worked for a government in which there were no women at any level, and therefore they did not expect or wish to find women involved in government in Southern Nigeria.

This fact was articulated by the Chief Secretary of Nigeria in 1923, when a delegation from the Lagos Women’s League appealed to him that women should be employed in the civil service. According to the Chief Secretary (Mba 1997):

It is doubtful whether the time has arrived when women could be employed generally in the clerical service in substitution for men. In future they may be employed as telephone operators, counter clerks or book binders.

In the light of the above, women were seen as lacking the ability to contribute to governance and development. This validates Bhattacharji’s recent observation that colonial agents “positions the African woman by European Patriarchal Standard” (2008), standards that deprive the woman of her relevance. In essence, colonial rule used gender bias to masculinize participation in the affairs of government.

A corollary of colonial conquest in Southern Nigeria was the establishment of Native Courts. These were set up by the British colonial authorities in place of the traditional institutions that had played the role of government in the past. In the Cross River area, these traditional institutions included the *Ekpe* society, known also as the *Mgbe* (among the Ejagham); the *Okwa*, *Ebrambe*, *Alohi* and *Alikpe*, among several others. It is not necessary in this study to attempt an analysis of the functions of the ab-

ove named institutions, as this has been detailed in Erim (1992), and Tangban (2008), among others. Although, these pre-colonial institutions were male-dominated, titled women could become members and participate in their deliberations. The case of *Ntufam* Anakai in pre colonial Bendege Ekiem has already been noted. Tangban (2008) also asserts that among the Qua Ejagham and their Efik neighbours, very elderly wealthy women were admitted into *Ekpe* or *Mgbe* society as honorary members. In this regard, these women provided the necessary link between the traditional government and their women organizations, in general.

The situation was different in the Native Court system of government. The Warrant Chiefs, exclusively males, who sat in the Native Courts, usurped the executive and judicial functions hitherto exercised by the traditional institutions. In this regard, they supposedly provided the link between the government and the people. The Warrant Chiefs were often assisted by Court Clerks, Messengers and Interpreters in the discharge of their duties. Women were never included. In effect, the Native Courts were male-dominated. No woman was ever made a Warrant Chief, a Court Clerk, an interpreter or a messenger. Accordingly, women in our study area were excluded from having any say in the affairs of their communities. Available evidence indicates that there were women in our area of study who were capable of occupying any of the posts in the colonial administration. In the *Nigerian Eastern Mail* of October 28, 1939, a columnist who wrote under the pen-name of *Candidus*, lamented the demise, in quick succession, of some illustrious sons and daughters of old Calabar, referred to as “the flowers of Efik manhood and womanhood”. Some of the women included: Mrs. Elizabeth George, Miss Ako E. Nkana, Ne Ete Nyanibo, Ma Iquo Agbo and Elizabeth Beedie, among others (Nyon (Ed.) 1989:218). These women of substance and their counterparts not mentioned here were relegated to the background by a regime that did not think in terms of women in public life.

Little wonder women in Southern Nigeria, like their male counterparts, resented the colonial order. In their resentment, the women often took recourse to the traditional methods and demonstrations. This was particularly true of the women of Umon (Biase). Attoe (in Jaja et al. (Ed.) 1988) states that a powerful women’s or-

ganization in Umon known as the *Egip* often resisted the colonial police whenever the latter came to arrest some men in the area:

The men usually would be hidden in the bush, while the women made up of mainly members of the Egip would remain in the village and put up a strong resistance to the colonial police. The members resisted not with arms, but by parading nude before the colonial police. The colonial officials usually would become so embarrassed that they would immediately leave the village. The women were usually not arrested. This could be seen as a sort of civil disobedience.

Colonialism was viewed by the indigenes of our study with hostility, an evil intrusion into their territory. Accordingly, the traditional *ekpa* purification ceremony was designed to embarrass the colonial police. Secondly, the “parade” was also a ritualistic act of purging Umon area of defilements occasioned by the colonial presence.

Evidence shows that women in the Cross River area, like their counterparts elsewhere in Southern Nigeria, reacted against colonial policies that affected their interests, by both peaceful and violent demonstrations. The exclusion of the women from all levels of the administration was stoutly resented by them. The women felt rightly that they ought not to be ignored but, rather, be accorded their rightful position like their male counterparts, in the government of their fatherland. The reaction of government to these “disturbances” included the setting up of Commissions to inquire into their causes, and the making of recommendations. This fact becomes clear as we examine some British colonial economic policies in the Cross River area, as well as their consequences. The exercise will necessitate an analysis of some political events, whose origins have been traced to certain economic measures.

The Economy

In formulating most of its colonial policies, the British government was guided by imperial needs. Consequently, the British colonial political and economic systems in the Cross River area, like elsewhere in Southern Nigeria, were premised on the above principle. To ensure the realization of their economic objectives, a number of legal enactments came into force. These

included the Roads and Creeks (Rivers) Ordinance of 1903. According to this Ordinance:

...the High Commissioner could at anytime declare that a water-way or road was to be maintained by Chiefs of the village through which it ran, and the Chiefs would have the power to call any man or woman of specified ages, residing in their areas of authority to work on the water-way or road for any length of time not exceeding six days in a quarter (Afigbo 1967).

The above enactment inaugurated forced labour and the carrier system, as means of providing cheap labour for most government projects. While the Ordinance remained in force, able-bodied men in the Cross River area were often conscripted to do odd jobs like the construction of roads, bridges, court and rest houses; or be made to carry loads for the colonial officials to distant places.

These jobs usually took the men away from home for days, thereby compelling the women to take over the men's responsibilities, both at home and in the farms. This meant added responsibility which the women detested, especially as the men received little or no pay at all, for all the odd jobs which they were conscripted to do. The women aversion for the Roads and Creeks (Rivers) Ordinance was heightened by the punitive measures which were meted out to those men who failed to turn out for recruitment. They were often arrested and prosecuted by the Native Courts, and jailed on conviction, or fined in lieu of imprisonment. The execution of the Ordinance in the Cross River area was, in many instances, sabotaged by the women. Undeterred by the punitive measures which the colonial administration imposed on defaulters, many men hid in the bush during the recruitment seasons, with the active co-operation of the women, who visited them in their hide-outs with food and other supplies.

An Obudu informant asserted that Obudu Hill was a haven for tax evaders and other people who ran away from colonial agents. And no colonial official took the risk of pursuing those who took refuge there, for fear of being crushed to death by huge stones which could be rolled down the hill by those being pursued. But, the women unfailingly brought food and other necessities of life to the men regularly, irrespective of the duration of their stay on top of that hill (Nawa 2010). Similarly, Attoe (in Jaja et al. (Eds.)

1988) posits that colonial officials who were resident at Umon, or passing through the area to Arochukwu, usually commandeered their able-bodied men to paddle canoes or carry their loads for them to distant places without any prior notice. To protect their men from the white man's harassment,

...on sensing the arrival of any white man, the women would withdraw their canoes to some streams within the locality... Thus, by the time the white colonial officials arrived the beach, there would be no canoe available to ferry them across the river.

The women action in this regard was an effective way of expressing their aversion for an economic system that sought to exploit both their human and material resources. This Ordinance not only separated families but, also, imposed additional burden on the women. Its repeal in 1928, following the introduction of direct taxation into the Eastern Region of Nigeria was, without doubt, a big relief.

Meanwhile, prior to the above development, the British colonial government attempted to encroach on the economic base of the women. This followed the enactment of the Market Ordinance in 1924, by which means government had sought to take over the administration of the markets. For instance, rule No. 7 of the said Ordinance provided for the payment of tolls in the main markets in Calabar namely, the Beach (Marina) and the Watt Markets. Accordingly, the sum of one shilling, six pence per month was fixed for the use of the stalls erected by the Local Authority; while the sum of one penny per month was to be paid by casual traders (Jaja et al. (Eds.) 1988). The exclusion of women from all political and administrative functions left the local market places as the only area where the traditional women organisations could exercise their authority. Therefore, the Market Ordinance usurped the responsibilities of the women organisations in an area regarded by them as their exclusive preserve. Besides, the Native Administration was yet to erect lock-up shops and open sheds where the women could display their wares. In the circumstance, they saw no justification in being asked to pay for amenities which were not in existence. The women therefore refused to pay the market tolls. They felt they should have been adequately consulted before hand. Several unsuccessful attempts by the women to make representation on the matter to

the District Officer, sparked a riot on April 1, 1925.

The riot was sequel to an attempt by officials of government to implement the provision of the 1924 Ordinance. Over 3000 women belonging to different organisations, which had come together under the umbrella of the Calabar Market Women's Organisation, were involved in the riot. The demonstration was at first peaceful, but became violent following police brutality, when some of the women attempted to snatch their rifles. The irate women forced their way into European factories along the Marina and forced them to close after breaking their windows. Among those affected were the Cobham factory and G. B. Ollivant's trading stores. The women subsequently boycotted both the Beach and Watt Markets, and with the help of their husbands, created their own market at a separate site (Mba 1997).

The acute food scarcity caused by the actions of the women, and the possibility of the revolt spreading to other areas, if the issues at stake were not properly handled became a matter of great concern to the government. This prompted the meeting of April 3rd 1925 between the Resident of Calabar Province, F. N. Ashley and over 800 indigenes of Calabar. These included the *Obong* (Traditional ruler) of Calabar, Chiefs, and market women. During the said meeting, the women grievance was articulated by their speaker, Affiong Edem Archibong, who said, 'the women shared equally with the men matters that concerned the welfare of this country...but the women had never been asked their opinion regarding the market tolls, which concerned them principally' (Akpan and Ekpo in Jaja et al. (Eds.) 1988).

A call was made for an enquiry into the police brutality to unarmed protesting women. Of significance was the petition to the Governor dated April 11, 1925 signed by the *Obong* of Calabar, Chiefs and several Calabar indigenes embodying the following demands:

the building of proper shed, with zinc roofs, before enforcement of the payment of market tolls, and the appointment of a new Advisory Board for Calabar with increased representation of the Obong and the people of Calabar.

For the most part, the representations influenced the course of some events in Calabar. Worthy of note was the visit to Calabar by the Governor of Nigeria, in the company of the

Acting Lieutenant-Governor for the Southern Provinces, to see things for himself. A meeting with the *Obong* of Calabar and members of his Council later gave rise to a memorandum from the Secretary, Southern Provinces dated August 17, 1925 directing that stalls should be erected in the markets. The memo further stated that in future, rules should be promulgated through the Local Authority (the traditional rulers Council). The memo announced the transfer out of Calabar of the District Officer, M. E. Howard (Akpan and Ekpo in Jaja et al. (Eds.) 1988).

From the foregoing, it could be reasoned that the Calabar Market Women Organisation achieved some of its objectives. These included the modification of the market policy, as well as improved market conditions. Also, the revolt resulted in some political concessions to the women. For the first time, there was to be more participation of the traditional authorities in the colonial administration. Indeed, the women's revolt was directed against the economic exploitation of their area by the British, it also signified a rejection of injustice as expressed in their refusal to pay the market tolls and subsequent revolt. The women knew their rights were being infringed upon by the colonial administration, and so demanded for justice and fair-play. This could help to explain the popular belief that the Calabar Market Women's revolt of 1925 shook the foundations of colonialism in Nigeria. In other words, that the revolt sowed the seed of Nigerian nationalism, and also gave rise to another women's revolt that took place in 1929.

Three years after the 1925 debacle, on April 1, 1928, direct taxation was introduced into the then Eastern Region. This fiscal measure was unknown to the people; hence it attracted varied negative reactions from both men and women, even before the actual collection of the tax (Erim 1992). Also, the use of discredited Warrant Chiefs in the assessment, as well as in the collection of the tax, made direct taxation very hateful. No doubt, women were never called upon to pay tax, but taxation still imposed additional burden on them since they fed the family and assisted their husbands in the education of the children. Thus, a good number of women encouraged their men to evade payment of taxes, by ensuring their sustenance while they took refuge in the bush or on hill tops throughout the tax seasons.

After the assessment of taxable adult males in 1927, taxes were successfully collected in

1928. And in 1929, a re-assessment of taxable incomes of adult males, which led to the counting of women, children, economic trees and domestic animals, was taken to mean that women were to be taxed. This suspicion sparked off another mass women reaction of unprecedented magnitude in most parts of Eastern Nigeria. This was the women's war of 1929. It is not intended in this study to examine the causes of this war as this has already been done by Afigbo (1972); Nwabughuogu (1993); Erim (1992) and Akpan and Ekpo (1988), among others. Suffice it to state, however, that the women's war had its roots in the socio-political and economic discontent that was generated in most parts of the Eastern Region by the colonial presence. Women organisations in Owerri, Ikot Abasi and Opobo Provinces where the disturbances were more serious successfully spread disaffection to contiguous geographical areas, including Calabar. Elsewhere in our study area, no other ethnic group is known to have experienced much of the disturbances of 1929. This may not be unconnected with government prompt intervention, which prevented meaningful co-ordination of the violent unrest. But, in Calabar and Aba and some other places in Southern Nigeria, the women were able to mobilize their counterparts for action against the colonial government (Erim 1992). In the course of their demonstration, a total of 49 unarmed Ikot Abasi women (in the present-day Akwa Ibom State), were shot dead by the police. The Ikot Abasi massacre evoked a deep sense of nationalism among their living counterparts in most parts of the Region. Ndem (in Jaja et al. (eds.), 1988) buttresses the above assertion, stating that

The womenfolk...had earlier on resented economic exploitation. The butchering of Ikot Abasi women on that fateful date (in November) was the climax of a surging feeling of opposition to colonial rule. The groundswell of nationalism could not be contained. Their innocent blood was spilt to protest colonial injustice and misrule.

In other words, the nationalist sentiments among the womenfolk found expression in violent assaults on government property and institutions which, to them, were the bastion of colonialism. The Warrant Chiefs and other government officials became targets of attack by the irate women because they were regarded as the perpetrators of injustice and exploitative acts.

The Warrant Chief system of government collapsed in the wake of the war of 1929.

Regardless of the degree of violence that characterized the women's war of 1929, certain advantages emerged from that incident. Worthy of note was the setting up by government, of Donald Kingdom's Commission of Inquiry (1930) which investigated causes of the unrest; and whose findings and recommendations set in motion, extensive administrative reforms, in the 1930s and 1940s, throughout the Eastern Region. These facts have been detailed elsewhere (Afigbo 1999; Nwabughuogu, 1993; Erim 1992). What needs to be stressed is that (like in the case of the 1925 debacle), women were effective agents of the administrative and economic changes that took place in this region of Nigeria during the 1930s and 1940s. Equally significant were the Native Authorities which were constituted in 1933 to conform with indigenous customs. The system took cognizance of modern trends and thereby brought about increased participation of the menfolk in the colonial administration. The Donald Cameron's system of Native Administration thus inaugurated the incorporation into the machinery of government, of both the indigenous institutions of the people and the educated elements that had been hitherto relegated to the background. Furthermore, there was greater disposition on the part of government towards the socio-political and economic development of the people and their territory, as long as such development was consistent with the overall economic aim of colonial rule (Erim and Ajor 2010). The events of 1929, like those of 1925, thus strengthened the foundations for the fight for Nigeria's independence. Jaja (in Jaja et al. (eds.) 1988) buttresses the above assertion, stressing that

...the Women Massacre that resulted at Opobo (Ikot Abasi) and in various other locations represented to Nigerian women then alive their own sacrifice to the cause of the development of Nigeria. For them, the blood of the martyrs of November Days in 1929 had done no more than watered the soil of freedom movement in Nigeria.

Thus, at a time when most Nigerian men were yet to articulate their thoughts, their women counterparts had already laid their lives in their struggle for the rights of all.

Meanwhile, the determination of Nigerian women to stake their lives for their rights also lay at the root of the Obubra women's revolt

of 1934. The bone of contention was insufficient land, and the continued restrictions of the 1916 Forestry Ordinance and Regulations on their economic activities. That Ordinance led to the constitution (1916-1928) of 10 Forest Reserves in the former Ogoja Province, of which old Obubra Division was an integral part. The Ukpon River Forest Reserve (717 square kilometres) lay in Obubra territory. But, when the Ordinance was relaxed in 1932 and some land returned to their owners, the restrictions on free felling of trees for timber were not removed from the "freed areas". The women felt that the amount of land released to the community for farming and habitation, was insufficient and unsuitable. Thus, in 1934 the women felt they had been pushed to the wall. Over 1000 of them held two days violent demonstrations, requesting for the removal of the cement boundary pillars used in demarcating the reserves. The women refused to be intimidated by truck loads of police reinforcement from Enugu. Instead, they attacked the village heads, destroyed their property, accusing them of 'selling their land for reserves to the Forestry Department'. Peace was only restored when government promised to look into their grievances (Erim 1992).

Like the two women's revolts cited earlier, Obubra women were prepared to resist unto death, any economic measure that was designed to subject them to economic deprivations and poor conditions of livelihood. The women's action was born out of their natural love and affection for their men and children. The same spirit was discernible in other areas of the women's economic activities elsewhere in our study area. As earlier indicated, women were not taxed, but the colonial taxation which involved compulsory and regular payments of cash, brought financial hardships for the women. Tangban (2008) asserts that in the 1930s and 1940s, tax rates in Ikom and Calabar Divisions were fixed at seven shillings six pence, and eight shillings, respectively. And in the 1950s, the rates rose as follows: Ikom Division nine shillings; Ogoja Division eight shillings; Oban Division seven shillings and Calabar Division ten shillings. These rates were considered high. However, women rose to the challenge by embarking on extensive cultivation and sale of diverse cash and food crops, to assist their husbands in the upkeep of the family. And in some instances, women made tax money available to their sons who could not afford to pay (Njar 2010).

The colonial government promoted the cultivation of export crops such as palm produce, cocoa, rice, and rubber, as well as the rearing of livestock. Prior to 1930, the colonial economy was not diversified; hence, for long, palm produce was the main cash crop. And long before the introduction of modern techniques of produce processing, palm oil and kernel extraction was handled mostly by women. For instance in Yakurr area of old Obubra Division, some notable women, including Mma Okpata Ubi (1892-1960) and Mma Okoi Ofem (1910-1980), during the periods showed against their names, produced and traded extensively in palm oil and kernels. Their trading links which cut across ethnic and geographical barriers enhanced intergroup relations in the Cross River region (Ewa 2010). In Calabar Division, according to Akoda (2010) "Mrs. Martha Antia (Mma Nkoyo), Madam Arit Ekpo and Mrs. Effiom Tete Ekpenyong were engaged in big time produce business in the 1950s with the United African Company Limited". By 1931, two European firms namely, Messrs United African Company (UAC) and John Holts and Company had established trading stations and warehouses throughout the Cross River area. They were wholesale buyers and exporters of cash crops and retailers of imported merchandise (Erim et al. unpublished). In the absence of family statistics, it could be inferred that these women may have derived immense benefits from produce trade, to have remained in the business for that length of time. Obviously they may have impacted positively on the life of their family members and immediate communities, for them to have been so remembered.

Cocoa was another important cash crop whose production was promoted by government. Tangban (2008) asserts that cocoa farming was introduced into Etung, Oban, Ikom and Obubra areas in the 1920s. And to promote production, government raised cocoa nurseries and supplied cocoa seedlings to farmers free. In time, a good number of women in the above mentioned areas became big time cocoa farmers and merchants, with the co-operation of their husbands and fathers. Indeed, the land tenure system never favoured women in our study area. Here, women had no title to land whether for farming or building; this resource was the exclusive preserve of the menfolk. Thus, whatever farmland a woman could call her own was by the goodwill of her

husband or male children if she was a widow. This explains how some Ikom women from 1941 to 1950, inherited cocoa plantations from their fathers and husbands, to become wealthy cocoa farmers and traders. These women included Ma Agbor Esija, Ma Ojong Mber-Etta, Ma Amba Nkang, Ma Getrude Njar and Ma Agbor Mgboki, among others (Njar 2010). These women competed with their male counterparts and sold dried cocoa beans to the UAC at the rate of £168.7^s per ton (Erim 1992). And given the standard of living in those days, this was a good earning. The wealth derived from cocoa, in particular, enabled most of the families to build houses with concrete walls and corrugated iron sheets, as well as educate some of their children in the universities both in Nigeria and outside.

Unlike in the case of export crops, the colonial government never promoted the cultivation of food crops such as yam, cocoyam, maize and legumes, among others. The cultivation of most of these food crops was undertaken by women. In many Nigerian communities, yam production is regarded as a male preserve; but a good number of women in our study area were big time yam farmers. For instance, in Ekajukland (Ogoja), women like Monkpe Mogbu of Nwang, Moku Abing of Mfom and Mawah Ntul of Ekuaro, were big time yam farmers (Majuk 2010). Annual report for Ogoja Province (Riley 1942) has shown that yam tubers purchased at £2.10s per ton at Ogoja and Obubra were sold £6 or £7 at Calabar. These brought good earnings considering the standard of living at the period. Men who owned large yam farms encouraged their wives to inter-crop the yam with cocoyam, to enable them care for both food crops through weeding at the same time. This was true of Ma Agbor Esija and Ma Regbu Amba-Nkang said to be among the important cocoa farmers/traders from 1941 to 1950. Njar asserts that these women became big-time cocoyam farmers and traders from 1934 and 1936, respectively; and that they traded extensively with people in distant places like Afikpo (in the present-day Ebonyi State), Calabar and Mamfe (in the Cameroons). And in Bendege Ekiem, another informant (Ajijie 2010) claimed that one Ma Eli Nkle Tiku also cultivated and traded extensively in cocoyam and became one of the richest women of her time. In Calabar and Afikpo, a large canoe load of cocoyam (particularly the red cocoyam) was sold for one pound; seven shillings for a medium-si-

zed canoe load; and six shillings six pence for a small canoe load. In all probability, the women found the business lucrative. Ajijie maintains that Ma Eli Nkle Tiku was so rich that she was nicknamed *nnekai akpugha* (wealthy woman) by her peers. The money she made trading in cocoyams is said to have enabled the family to build several concrete houses with corrugated iron sheets at Bendege Ekiem, as well as educate their children and grand children in institutions of learning. (One of the grandsons who was educated in the Philippines is well known to these writers).

Among the measures designed to diversify the economy was improved care of livestock. From 1951, unemployed school leavers in old Ogoja Province were sent to the Agricultural Farm in Abakiliki (capital of the present-day Ebonyi State) on six weeks of training on livestock farming. Several beneficiaries of the agricultural programme established their own farms and imparted their knowledge to others. They also supplied their products to the people within and outside their communities (Erim and Ajor 2010). This was probably true of Ma Jennifer Agbor said to have introduced poultry farming into Bendege Ekiem in 1959 (Ajijie 2010). Her kinswoman, Ma Anna Mbala Ogar, embarked on large-scale rearing of goats and pigs and, in time, traded her farm products as far away as Jos, Gombe, Sokoto and Maiduguri. Ma Anna Mbala Ogar was so successful in her livestock business that, 'among her friends she was the first to buy a bicycle and rode it like a man to farm and back' (Glorious Exit 2010). A bicycle was a typical index of wealth at the time, and quite beyond the reach of many in our study area.

Women in Cross River area did not always depend on the cultivation of crops and trading for their livelihood; some of them were contractors. Akoda asserts that as early as 1914, one Adiaha Oku distinguished herself as a wood contractor to the Public Works Department in Calabar. Again, women in the riverine areas like Calabar, Creek Town and Akamkpa, or those who owned fish ponds, engaged in fish farming for their livelihood. In the absence of refrigerating facilities, smoking the fish was the only way the women could preserve their harvests over some period of time.

Industrial production was another aspect of the women's economic activity. Salt-making was an important occupational pursuit of Yala wo-

men (Old Ogoja Division). The existence of brine lakes and springs in Yalaland enabled the women to engage in salt production from the earliest times. Yala salt was greatly valued for its assumed medicinal properties; a dietary necessity and an important article of trade. Thus, despite the use of instruments of coercion by the British colonial government and importation of salt from Europe, the indigenous salt industry exhibited remarkable resilience, and has continued to survive to this day (Ayor et al. Unpublished). Like salt making the Bakor pottery industry has remained a speciality of women. Its origin also dates back to very early times, while its production has been sustained by the availability of good quality clay in Bakorland. And like the Yala salt industry, the Bakor pottery industry witnessed a period of boom while colonial rule lasted. This has been attributed to the expansion of trade on the Cross River, which facilitated the spread of the Bakor pottery to spatially dispersed consumers (Majuk et al. 2010). Though hard data are not available, it is reasonable to suggest that Bakor pottery was valued because it was easily affordable by most people, when compared to imported European utensils.

The activities of women in Cross River area were not however, limited to the economic sphere. The women played important roles in the provision of certain essential amenities for the development of their communities. From the onset of British colonialism, the people knew they were dealing with an exploitative government which was least prepared to provide their basic needs. Against this backdrop, most communities embarked on self-help development projects. A group of women in Ikom contributed the sum of £500 in 1951, towards the construction of a maternity home. In the same year, another group of Ikom women contributed the sum of £300 to enable the Ikom Council effect repairs on the roof of an all-girls school (Erim 1992).

Long before then, it had become certain that the revenue which the colonial administration was putting into development would never be enough. Hence, the government follows the policy of encouraging indigenous efforts in the provision of basic amenities such as roads and bridges, schools and maternity homes. Apart from their financial contribution, women also provided building materials like cement, water, sharp sand and the like, while the menfolk provided free labour whenever community-based

projects were to be executed, to uplift the standard of living of the indigenes.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis, it could be rightly asserted that the involvement of women of the present-day Cross River State in the economic development of their area is not a recent phenomenon. Cross River State was not built overnight. That process goes back to pre-colonial through colonial to independent periods. In their diverse roles as mothers, farmers, traders, contractors and manufacturers, the women in our study area were also promoting a process of nation building. Their desire for improved living standards of the people in their families and immediate communities, thanks to the crushing weight of British colonialism, necessitated their involvement with vigour, in diverse occupational pursuits. However, resort was made to violence when it was reasoned that punitive colonial policies constituted obstacles to this developmental process. The women demand for justice and fair-play, alongside their undisguised aversion to colonial rule, were at the root of the three violent outbursts which, to a large extent, shook the foundations of colonialism in Nigeria. The women of the present-day Cross River State, in collaboration with their male counterparts, were critical in rooting out colonialism in their area.

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