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Colonial Impact on Igbo Women's Economic Activities (1900-1960)

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Women Going to a Rural Market

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The coming of British colonialism brought deep changes to the socio-economic structures of Southeastern Nigeria. Igbo women, who had been central and vital to the pre-colonial economy, lost opportunities and faced challenges as colonial policies, which were anti-women, disrupted their traditional practices to introduce new economic systems. In the article, we explore the effects of British colonialism on women's role in Igbo society's economy.

Colonial Policies and Land Tenure

The British colonists introduced a land tenure system that transferred land ownership to male household heads, marginalising women. This shift in society excluded women from direct control over agricultural production, even though they remained the labourers who were the primary producers of food crops. (Amadiume, 1987).

Land ownership became tied to the newly introduced colonial money, favouring men who had greater access to it and were recognised as household heads. This left women with minimal land ownership. Some inherited lands as female sons, female fathers, or widows, while others purchased land using wealth earned through trade and economic activities. The loss of farmlands due to British land alienation disproportionately affected Igbo women.

Impact on Trade and Market Systems

The introduction of cash crops like cocoa and colonial monetisation greatly altered the trade dynamics. Even though women had

traditionally been in control of the markets, men began to dominate through large-scale trade because of their access to early colonial education and the administrative roles they were given. Under British indirect rule, colonial administrative systems prioritised male authorities and created male-dominated institutions, like the Warrant Chief system, where such structures were previously absent. Igbo women were disregarded, which marginalised women in governance.



A Typical Urban Market Showing Men Occupying the Shades and Women Selling Their Petty Goods in the Open.
Gloria Chuku

An example is the Igbo people of Onitsha, where a dual-sex governance system existed with the “Obi” as the male leader and the “Ọmụ” as the female counterpart. Colonial rule converted the Obi role into a salaried position, while the Ọmụ was disregarded, leading to the disappearance of the Ọmụship after Ọmụ Nwagboka died in 1888. This change reinforced male dominance and the exclusion of women from key sociopolitical roles.

Despite these hostile takeovers from men, Igbo women still thrived in petty trading. They continued to adapt to the new society by forming

cooperative groups to counter male dominance in the markets. (Nzegwu, 2006; Njoku, 2001).

Technological Advancements and Gender Disparities

The colonists introduced mechanisation in industries such as palm oil production and cassava processing, which excluded women as mostly men were trained to operate them. This sidelining of women disrupted their traditional roles in local industries (Chuku, 2005).



Fermented Cassava Pulp Under an Iron Press. Gloria Chuku

In as much as colonialism brought opportunities for Igbo women, it undermined their traditional roles in agriculture and trade. Women were deprived of significant sociopolitical roles not only due to economic factors but also because of European racial and gender biases. It looked down on their dignity, resilience and capability to maintain an economic presence. By forming cooperative groups and diversifying their activities, women continued to play a crucial role in the economy of their communities.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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