



# The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications Part I: The Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods

## Citation

Akyeampong, Emmanuel, and Hippolyte Fofack. 2012. "The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications Part I: The Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods." Policy Research Working Papers (April). doi:10.1596/1813-9450-6051.

## Published Version

10.1596/1813-9450-6051

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# **The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development in the Precolonial and Colonial Periods: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Bringing together history and economics, this paper presents a historical and processual understanding of women’s economic marginalization in Sub-Saharan Africa from the pre-colonial period to the end of colonial rule. It is not that women have not been economically active or productive; it is rather that they have often not been able to claim the proceeds of their labor or have it formally accounted for. The paper focuses on the pre-colonial and colonial periods and outlines three major arguments. First, it discusses the historical processes through which the labor of women was increasingly appropriated even in kinship structures in pre-colonial Africa, utilizing the concepts of “rights in persons” and “wealth in people.” Reviewing the processes of production and reproduction, it explains why most slaves in pre-colonial Africa were women and discusses how slavery and slave trade intensified the exploitation of women. Second, it analyzes how the cultivation of cash crops and European missionary constructions of the individual, marriage, and family from the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sequestered female labor and made it invisible in the realm of domestic production. Third, it discusses how colonial policies from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reinforced the “capture” of female labor and the codification of patriarchy through the nature and operation of the colonial economy and the instrumentality of customary law.

**Keywords:** Colonial economy, gender production, resources extraction, wealth in people

**JEL Classification Numbers:** I30, J16, N30, N37

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article appeared as a World Bank Policy Research Working Paper (WPS 6051) in April 2012. We are grateful to participants at the GAP Development Seminar Series, organized by the World Bank in the Spring of 2011, for their helpful comments. We would also like to thank Nihal Bayraktar, Shanta Devarajan, Meghan Healy, Renosi Mokate, Blanca Moreno-Dodson, Nathan Nunn, David Owusu-Ansah, Richard Roberts, James Robinson and Xu Liang for helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. The sequel to this article focuses on the post-colonial period and is available as World Bank Policy Research Working Paper WPS 6537 (July 2013).

## **Introduction**

Over the last few decades, the contribution of women to economic growth and development has been increasingly recognized in both academia and policy circles. This growing recognition reflects the active participation of women in various aspects of growth, both through formal and informal production in recent years. More recently, a number of researchers have drawn on neoclassical and overlapping generation models to show that the potential contribution of women to growth would be even more significant in the absence of household occupational constraints, often exacerbated by the absence of or poor state of infrastructure in low-income countries (Agénor, Canuto and Pereira da Silva 2010; Fofack 2012). These infrastructure constraints tend to lower the productivity of women through sub-optimal time allocation and use. This rather long lag in the recognition of women's contribution to growth and economic development, particularly in academia, is largely driven by statistical artifacts, most notably the non-inclusion of home production in the estimation of gross domestic products and more generally the challenges related to estimation of home-produced and consumed goods (Deaton 2001; Stiglitz et al. 2011). Moreover, the delimitation of the time frame and span of the analysis to the post-independence era in the overwhelming majority of empirical studies, though dictated by the availability of data, may not fully capture the contribution of women to economic growth and development. Equally important, the absence of a historical understanding of the processes by which women's economic contribution became subsumed under the category of household production and their labor formally unaccounted for undermines policies that seek to strengthen women's economic roles.

A number of key questions have informed recent studies on gender and development in Africa: (i) how gender discrimination manifests itself; (ii) why gender-based discrimination is still happening; (iii) the possible economic costs and welfare implications of gender discrimination; (iv) the origins of gender-based discrimination in Africa; (v) what triggered that process; and (vi) what sustains it. Scholars have addressed the first three, and works including those by Collier (1994) and Baah-Boateng (2010) have examined discrimination in access to formal employment and productive assets, while a number of theoretical models have shown that gender discrimination tends to lower the average productivity of workers and the equilibrium wage for males and females in the short run and may adversely affect long-run growth through the disinvestment in human capital, especially for female workers

(Esteve-Volart 2004). Fewer works have sought to analyze the origins, dynamics and persistence of gender discrimination over historical time (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001; Alesina, Giuliano and Nunn 2011), or what happens to gender discrimination in the context of economic growth (Forsythe et al. 2000; Stotsky 2006).

This article in its focus on the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and its contextualization of the centrality of women to production and reproduction in Sub-Saharan African societies sheds important light on the dynamics that have resulted in the capture of female labor. Though it is difficult for a huge continent with a paucity of sources for its early periods to pinpoint the origins of female exploitation or gender-based discrimination, historical and ethnographic scholarship enables a careful reconstruction of the historical contexts in which the exploitation of women operated. It should be pointed out that although this article relies heavily on the West African historical record, it also draws upon cases from other regions of the continent. However, the major historical developments in West Africa and themes discussed below find parallels elsewhere in Africa where gender and economic growth are concerned. We provide a historical layering of key institutional developments in kinship, commerce, nascent capitalism and colonialism that have disadvantaged women. Patriarchal alliances struck between various colonial administrations and African chiefs and elders resulted in the systematization and codification of patriarchy across African societies, even in segregationist and apartheid South Africa where Belinda Bozzoli has commented on the “patchwork-quilt of patriarchies” (Bozzoli 1983). Following the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduction of cash crops, which though utilizing female labor were gendered male, while subsistence or food crops were gendered female, scholars have concluded that the socio-economic status of African women were worse off in the colonial period than in the pre-colonial period. There is some truth in this as avenues for female political representation were closed off during the colonial period, and the colonial wage economy was essentially a male one. Drawing on historical and ethnographic accounts, this study shows that if pre-colonial Africa was not an era of perfect gender parity, colonial Africa clearly emerged as an era of institutionalized gender inequality.

Although sexual division of labor in the primary agricultural production system was somehow altered by the introduction of plow cultivation, which marginalized women, other critical factors with long-term consequences for gender relations shaped gender production in

the region. The contours of the colonial production system which excluded women from the cash economy and the gender-biased educational system introduced by missionaries are among some of the most critical determinants of persistent gender inequality in the region. Ultimately the intersection between the colonial economic structures and gender-biased education systems shape the production parameters and nature of factor input, even when agricultural production no longer depended exclusively on plow cultivation. The gender-based colonial constructs and codification of gender roles discussed in this article had significant impact on the dynamic of gender relations with long-term consequences for gender production. To the extent that the contours of the production system in the region and gender production continue to reflect the sexual division of labor established during the colonial period, these colonial constructs may just be as sticky as pre-colonial social norms and cultural beliefs. Furthermore they may explain counterfactual evidence from economic dependency models, which have found that breadwinner wives continue to perform more housework than linear dependency models would predict (Brines 1994; Greenstein 2000).

We commence with important observations about Sub-Saharan Africa's physical environment, community and economy in the pre-colonial era, noting patterns in agriculture, women's labor, marriage and kinship. Through the concepts of "rights in persons" and "wealth in people" we discuss the premium communities placed on women's labor and procreation. It is not surprising then that most people held in bondage in pre-colonial Africa were women, and that pawnship which expanded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when slavery was abolished by colonial rulers was increasingly feminized (Robertson and Klein 1983; Falola and Lovejoy 1994). Missionary presence in Africa from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, their endeavors to remake African families monogamous and nuclear, and their encouragement of African participation in the market as a civilizing influence fed the embers of individualism and fathers secluded women in the domestic domain under the Christian discourse of "respectability." The attractiveness of these missionary and colonial processes for African chiefs and male elders in their gender struggles provides the backdrop for the normalization of processes that were then unfolding and the invention of customs and traditions that backdated the triumph of men. African chiefs and male elders argued alongside missionaries and colonial officials that African women did not belong in towns, collaborating from Sierra Leone through the Gold Coast, the Copperbelt and the Witwatersrand to deny women space in towns in the face of long-standing traditions of female industry and entrepreneurship (Little 1973; White 1987; Bradford 1992; Allman 1996; Parpart 2001). Longue durée studies

of poverty (Iliffe 1987; Kalu 2006), violence and warfare (Reid 2007, 2010), disease (McNeil 1976; Packard 1989, 2007; Akyeampong 2006; Iliffe 2006) and other major themes have deepened our understanding of these phenomena in contemporary Africa. This article is a similar undertaking in the sphere of women (gender), production and development in Africa.

### **Pre-colonial Africa: An Era of Gender Parity?**

The distinguished historian of the Akan and Asante, Ivor Wilks, describes the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Akan history as the “era of great ancestresses” (Wilks 1993: 66-68). Akan oral traditions place women at the leadership of migrant groups and nascent communities that would later form the nucleus of Asante. According to Asante oral traditions, the very land on which the capital city of Kumase stands was bought from a woman with the incoming Oyoko clan group led by a matriarch (Akyeampong and Obeng 1995). The first government anthropologist appointed to the Gold Coast in the 1910s, R. S. Rattray, authored a trilogy on Asante religion, art, law and constitution that have become foundational texts for the study of Asante. In this matrilineal society with a paired male (chief) and female (queen mother) leadership, represented by stools as symbols of office, Rattray was informed that:

In fact, but for two causes, the stool occupied by the male would possibly not be in existence at all. 1. The natural inferiority of women from a physical standpoint. 2. Menstruation (with its resultant avoidances). In other words, a woman besides suffering from disability, cannot go to war; but for these two facts the Ashanti woman, under a matrilineal system, would, I believe, eclipse any male in importance (Rattray 1923: 81-82).

Akyeampong and Obeng (1995) have linked chieftaincy and the ascendancy of men in Asante to the advent of warfare and the creation of the state. Akan state formation intensified from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as Akan groups, drawn into the dual international trading networks of the trans-Saharan and the trans-Atlantic, competed over mineral resources (gold), trade routes, land and subjects. Women remained indispensable to the reproduction of communities in Asante, for their bloodlines in this matrilineal society defined the transmission of both office and wealth. As one queen mother told Rattray: “If my sex die in the clan then that very clan becomes extinct ...” (Rattray 1923: 79).

It is crucial not to equate matrilineality with matriarchy, and the politics of patriarchy cuts across gender. But the gender dynamics traced for the matrilineal Akan and the ascendancy of men through warfare have parallels in East-Central Africa from about 100 BCE to 1900, as

documented in a recent work by Christine Saidi (2010). Saidi contends that matriarchy was a viable sociopolitical form in matrilineal societies in East-Central Africa, and she draws on linguistic and archaeological evidence to suggest women's strong social and political authority across the region until warfare and political centralization endowed men with greater authority on the eve of colonialism. Saidi argues that across the sub-continent, women's basic dominance in agricultural production meant that, even in the most entrenched patriarchies, "female labor was necessary labor – the labor from which surplus could be derived ..." (Saidi 2010: 15). Women's prominence in agriculture in Africa did not necessarily endow them with economic or political influence, however. The next section explores kinship as a social and economic organization that exploited the labor and sexuality of women.

### **Production, Reproduction, Accumulation: Kinship and Exploitation**

Warfare, state formation and political centralization elevated men over women, but even in non-centralized states the processes of production and reproduction in kinship networks subordinated women to men. Pre-colonial Africa was characterized by abundant land and scarce labor, though not all the available land was fertile. Igor Kopytoff has described Africa as a "frontier continent" and the stage for many population movements of different dimensions such as the sub-continental spread of the Bantu. He also discussed a second kind of frontier within Africa, the existence of politically open areas nestling between organized societies, what he called an "internal" or "interstitial frontier" (Kopytoff 1987: 8). It is in this situation of open land and sparse populations that scholars of pre-colonial Africa have observed that the reach of polities or jurisdiction was marked by people and not territory (Herbst 2000). Established societies in pre-colonial Africa were surrounded by lands that were open politically or physically or both. This context was conducive to mobility, explaining the frequent migrations that characterized pre-colonial Africa. Groups moved out over political differences, in search of fertile lands or hunting grounds, and could easily set up their own social order in the institutional vacuum between settled societies or join an established polity. Settled communities were eager to attract settlers and grow their numbers as a defense measure, and to strengthen the viability of their communities through extending farmland. This is the context of "wealth in people", where people other than material belongings – in communities with little material differentiation – constituted wealth (Guyer and Belinga 1995). Wealth and influence were reckoned in following. Max Gluckman indeed

opined that the vagueness of succession rules in Africa was a response to the internal frontier situation and mobile populations, as it encouraged constituencies to stay together rather than hive off to create their own social orders. The presence of rival princes encouraged constituencies to rally around contending princes to the throne, and not reject kingship itself or opt out of the polity (Gluckman 1963: 125-6).

Though labor was abundant relative to land in precolonial and colonial Africa, scholars such as Gareth Austin point to the seasonality of labor demands, which resulted in labor shortages and gluts. The rainy season coincides with the preparation of land and planting, generating heavy demand for labor and creating labor scarcity. Labor was “relatively abundant in relation to the currently usable natural resources” during the dry season when demand for labor was minimal, if any (Austin 2008:12). Recognizing the seasonal variation of labor scarcity has two important implications for the gendered economic processes examined in this article. First, it explains why the cash crop revolution during the colonial period was both difficult and incomplete. Tosh has argued that the difficulty in expanding cotton output in many African colonies was precisely because cotton had to be planted at the same time of the agricultural year as food crops (Tosh 1980), and thus would compete with food crops for labor. Female labor was crucial for both cash crop and food crop cultivation, the latter often designated as the responsibility of women. Second, the relative labor abundance during the dry season facilitated the diversification of non-agricultural economies by allowing people to participate in textile production, pottery making and mining when the demand for agricultural labor was low. The relative abundance of labor in the dry season may shed light on why West Africans chose more labor-intensive techniques such as the narrow loom in cotton weaving (Austin 2008: 33).

The physical environment in Africa has been a challenging one, and John Iliffe speaks of Africans as frontier people who have colonized an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race (2007). Except in areas of recent volcanic like the eastern African corridor, Africa’s soils are old, have thin top soils, are acidic and leached of organic content. These soil conditions and erratic rainfall would doom several colonial mechanized agriculture projects in both French and British colonies to colossal failure, and the career of the Office du Niger has been documented by Monica van Beusekom (2002). Survival was central to kinship networks and women were indispensable to the economic and social



organization of production and reproduction. For the French anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1981) there is a need to investigate the basic function of kinship beyond its role as an expression of reproduction.

If we are to understand how the domestic society operates, reproduction must be taken into central consideration. The domestic community is indeed the only economic and social system which manages the physical reproduction of human beings, the reproduction of the producers and social reproduction at large through a comprehensive set of institutions, by the ordered manipulation of the living means of reproduction, that is: women (1981: xii-xiii).

Kinship as an ideology constituted a means of reckoning relations of adhesion, providing a mechanism that demarcated age, sex and functional categories related to productive activities and regulated the sexual unions that underpinned reproduction.

Anthropologists have noted patterns between types of agriculture and lineage systems. So planting agriculture – marked by the planting of tubers (yam, cocoyam) and shoots (plantain) as distinct from the broadcasting of seed in cereal agriculture – is often associated with matrilineal systems, and here women dominated in agriculture when the hoe was the major farming tool. The produce of planting agriculture cannot be stored for long, and being heavy and bulky such foodstuff is stored in the fields, often underground. This is what made cassava, a not very nutritious source of starch, an important crop in West Africa during the Atlantic slave trade, as it grew in hardy soils and could be kept secure underground from raiding parties who also lived off the land. Preparing food from yams and plantains was a long and tedious process requiring a good deal of energy. This was also the realm of women. Cereal producing cultures in grassland areas are in turn associated with patrilineal systems (Boserup 1970, Goody 1976, Meillassoux 1981). The produce was easily stored and granaries were usually controlled by men. Boserup noted, and Goody concurred, that in agricultural systems where the plough was utilized women did little work compared to men. The lapse between planting and harvest, the need for the farming group to stay together through the agricultural cycle, the measured distribution of food between harvests, responsibility for non-productive mouths, these were logistical issues kinship dealt with as agriculture mandated social organization.

These agricultural patterns mapped onto marriage as Boserup and Goody observed. So, where the plough was used and men did much of the work in agriculture, polygyny was

minor and the girl's family usually paid dowry as the wife was largely dependent on the economic provision of the husband. Where women are the primary agricultural workers such as in planting cultures, polygyny is valued and men marry many wives. Marriage involves very little material transaction, and women are valued as producers and reproducers, whereas in cultures where women did little agriculture and were dependent on husbands they were valued primarily as reproducers. In Africa hoe farming and female labor predominates. Control over women became a central feature in political power both in kin groups and at the community level, and male elders regulated marriages within and between communities. These were processes that were intensified by warfare, state formation and slave trade. In pre-colonial Anlo in present-day southeastern Ghana, Sandra Greene (1996) has shown how women were used to define the boundaries of Anlo ethnicity from the 1650s, as the influx of war refugees created concerns about access to Anlo land. Foreigners were denied access to Anlo women – and the opportunity of becoming “insiders” -- and consigned to marginal lands. Though these processes will be discussed in more detail later on in this paper, let us note in one case study how the layering of these processes increased the pressure on women in one planting society to reproduce.

Akan women in the forest areas of Ghana and the Ivory Coast have some of the highest fertility rates in the world (an average of seven children per woman in Ghana), a phenomenon explained by a complex history. The unremitting toil required to keep the forest at bay has been documented by many Akan historians (Wilks 1993, McCaskie 1995, Akyeampong and Obeng 1995). A little lapse in labor in keeping paths clear and the bush quickly reclaimed paths. The expansion of Akan settlements in the forest in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries placed a demand for labor that the Akan met through imports of slaves when the Portuguese established a trading presence on Elmina from the 1470s. It is instructive that the Portuguese in the early years in the Gold Coast would supply slaves to the Akan from the Bight of Benin and the Angolan coast and not the other way round. Sickle cell entered the Akan genetic pool as early as 700 AD according to the work of geneticists like Livingstone (1958, 1967). A coping device in malarial environments, malaria remained a major cause of high infant mortality in the Akan forest. The advent of the Europeans on the Guinea coast introduced new diseases to the Akan, such as measles, rubella, the common cold, smallpox, and other childhood diseases that we now immunize children against. These diseases, Norman Klein (1996) argues, became endemic due to crowding because of the insecurities of slave trade.

Assailed by old parasitic and new viral diseases, Akan communities put pressure on women to increase reproduction to offset high infant mortality. Cultural values celebrated mothers with high fecundity, while female outsiders were also imported to supplement the fertility of Akan women. In short, demographic pressures were countered through the further exploitation of women.

This section is an important building block for our understanding of gender roles in contemporary economies. In a recent working paper on the plough and the origins of gender roles, Alberto Alesina, Paola Giuliano and Nathan Nunn (2011: 4) show “a very strong positive correlation between pre-industrial female participation in agriculture and female labor force participation today.” They find that among second generation immigrants to the United States now living in a society with common institutions, markets and policies, women from cultures that historically used the plough “have lower rates of labor force participation in the US” (2011: 3-4). Instructively for the historian, they go on to remark that:

Although the link between gender norms and female labor force participation is well-established, little is known about the origin of these cultural differences. Our findings suggest that an important determinant of these differences can be found in traditional farming practices. More generally, our findings provide additional evidence showing that historical factors can shape the evolution and persistence of norms and beliefs (2011: 4-5).

At the heart of our article is the interrogation of the development of these historical factors in Africa that have shaped norms and beliefs about gendered participation in labor. African immigrant women in Europe and North America are noted for their hard work, from Ghanaian women who work in cleaning companies in London, Senegalese hair braiders in the United States, to the more educated professional women who have helped make African immigrants in the United States among the highest income-earning categories (Babou 2008, Alex-Assensoh 2009, Schmidt Sr. et al. 2010). And African women, as this article argues, have worked no less hard in the history of the continent.

### **Gendered Production in Pottery and Textiles: Women’s Work**

Since the place of women in agriculture permeates our entire article, we will focus discussion in this section on pottery and textile production, two crafts or industries in which women have been traditionally significant. In a major study in 1993, Eugenia Herbert examined the history of metalworking and pottery in African societies. She notes that though both are

fundamental to the evolution of complex societies, the male metal worker is ranked socially higher than the female potter (Herbert 1993: 200). Saharan peoples have been making pots from as early as 8000 BCE, and in the Nok region of central Nigeria both iron objects and pottery have been dated to at least 500 BCE. Whereas iron working is almost always gendered male, there are several exceptions where men work on pottery or share the work with women in northern Nigeria and parts of Niger, among some Voltaic peoples such as the Mossi, in Bunyoro and Buganda, and in Ethiopia (Herbert 1993: 203). But by and large, pottery is women's work.

A. K. Quarcoo and Marion Johnson have provided us with a detailed case study of a pottery tradition among the Shai people of southern Ghana (1968). Among the Shai, an Adangme-speaking people, pottery was a distinctly female art and men were rigidly excluded from pottery and clay pits, and it was believed that men who tried their hand at pottery or showed up at the clay pits would immediately lose their sexual potency (Quarcoo and Johnson 1968, Herbert 1993). Menstruating women who attended the clay pits also faced the danger of premature menopause. The craft of making pots was embedded in puberty rituals for females, and the Adangme have elaborate rites for female initiation. In the pre-colonial era, puberty rites could last from two to three years, during which girls were taught pottery. Shai potters made some thirty-five different pots for the market, and each female potter specialized in one type. Shai women thus had access to the market, and the strict feminization of pottery ensured that women had a money income. It is worth mentioning, as an illustration of how far back this tradition of Adangme pottery extends, that archaeologists have established that Bono Manso, the first Akan state established on the boundary of the northern forest in Ghana, had an Adangme potting settlement (Effah-Gyamfi 1985). Bono Manso was in existence by 1500 CE and flourished as an important center of trade to the Mande world until its invasion by Asante in 1722-23.

Women have farmed cotton and indigo, spun, woven and dyed cotton textiles for centuries. In West Africa, Mali and northern Nigeria are two areas with long traditions of textile production, and textiles from these two areas circulated widely in the regional economy (Roberts 1996, Kriger 1993, 2006). Textile manufacture became highly commercialized in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mali under the Maraka, who operated slave-worked cotton and indigo plantations and distributed textiles through Saharan and Atlantic trading networks. Both

French and British colonial governments exploited these indigenous traditions for the supply of raw cotton to metropolitan industries. Kriger in her work on textile production in the Sokoto Caliphate of northern Nigeria provides us with one of the most detailed case studies of an indigenous textile industry in Sub-Saharan Africa. The perception of the indigenous textile industry in West Africa is that women spun cotton and men wove cotton on looms. Reports from Europeans who visited the interior of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Rene Caillé and Heinrich Barth confirmed these impressions. Spinning was also presented as requiring less skill, something women picked up, compared to the greater skill required of weaving.

Kriger in her work on the Sokoto Caliphate before colonial rule shows that women's spinning was highly skilled, and that women also worked as dyers, weavers and managers. She argues that the image of a male-dominated weaving industry comes from Kano, an important town that European explorers wanted to visit, but not that central to this history of cotton production in the Sokoto Caliphate. In Kano cotton weaving was largely done by men on men's looms. But in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Barth visited northern Nigeria, the most important centers of cotton manufacture were south of Kano in emirates such as Bida and Ilorin. The cotton producers of Bida and Ilorin distributed their products through Kano or via caravans that originated in Kano. In these southern emirates women worked as weaver and dyers, whereas men dominated these professions in the northern emirates of Kano and Zaria. A fifth of the 200 types of textiles made in the Sokoto Caliphate were woven by women, and these were done on women's looms in the southern emirates. Here women also dyed cloths in portable, clay-fired pots that archaeologists point out have been in use south of the Niger-Benue from at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Kriger 1993).

While women in textile manufacture had a long history in the area that became the Sokoto Caliphate, the imposition of an Islamic caliphate introduced new strictures on female industry. Thus women were barred from training as tailors and garment embroiders to make the most luxurious and profitable men's robes. The state confined women to spinning, the phenomenon that European visitors observed, putting a curb on female accumulation. This was especially problematic as slaves used the proceeds from textile manufacture to purchase their freedom, something that became more difficult for female spinners who were less rewarded than male weavers. In northern Nigeria slavery would die a "slow death", as

Lovejoy and Hogendorn (1993) have described. Under the section on colonial policies, we will explain colonial reticence when it came to slave emancipation.

### **State Formation, Slavery and Slave Trade, and the Work of Christian Missionaries**

Our earliest historical sources on Sub-Saharan Africa come from Arabs, who documented the existence of the state or empire of Ghana in the West African sahel by the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. The successor states of Mali and Songhai that flourished between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE are better documented, being among the countries visited by the intrepid Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta in 1352-3. Ghana, Mali and Songhai were territorial empires, and Arab sources mention their ability to conduct raids on horseback hundreds of miles away from their capitals, often under the thin guise of jihad. Meillassoux (1991) sees these as little more than *razzia* or slave raids against weaker polities in the south. Along the East African coast a Swahili civilization flourished between 1100 and 1500 CE (Spear and Nurse 1985, Pouwells 1987, Horton and Middleton 2000). In Central Africa Bantu groups from about 1300 CE began to coalesce into more centralized units and proto-states, stimulated most likely by competition for increasingly limited resources as polities mobilized to supply ivory and copper to the East African coast. By 1400 CE the Luba between the Upper Kasai and Lake Tanganyika had organized into a state under Nkongolo. The early history of the Luba state is marked by persistent dynastic struggles, and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century rivals within the royal clan moved off to found their own state among the Lunda to the west. The Portuguese on their arrival on the western coast of Africa met the Jolof Empire in a state of decline and break up into the constituent states of Baol, Walo, Cayor, Sine and Salum in the Senegambia, the state of Benin was well established in present-day southern Nigeria, and the strong kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo in west-central Africa (Ryder 1969, Curtin 1975, Miller 1976, Thornton 1992).

The slave trade loomed large in the political economies of many of these states. For Ghana, Mali and Songhai, historians have talked of a slaves-horses cycle, as these cavalry states exchanged the captives from raids for horses through merchants who arranged the logistics of war for military aristocrats and took their war captives off their hands. For the Akan states and Dahomey that emerged within the 17<sup>th</sup> century context of the Atlantic slave trade, similar descriptions of a slaves-guns cycle exist, as the introduction of European firearms fed into an indigenous revolution of warfare and the military ascendancy of possessors of this new

technology. Meillassoux (1991) traces a gradual transition from warrior slavery to mercantile slavery in the West African sahel and savanna before 1500, foreseeing what would have been the eventual displacement of warriors by merchants who invested in slave production rather than the sale of captives like the warriors. Slaving and slavery were concomitant, and already novel uses were made of slaves, especially in Songhai, where slaves provided opportunities for political centralization independent of the constraints of kinship networks. Slaves were settled on farms to produce for the royal court, used as administrators, and most of the *askiyas* or kings of Songhai in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were the sons of slave concubines.

These realities informed the famous debate between Walter Rodney (1966) and John Fage (1969) in the pages of the *Journal of African History* on whether slavery in West Africa predated the arrival of the Europeans. Rodney, drawing on his work on the Upper Guinea coast, argued that before the Portuguese arrival slavery was not an indigenous West African institution and could not therefore constitute the basis for the subsequent Atlantic trade in slaves. Fage pointed to a long history of state formation in West Africa before the advent of the Portuguese in which slavery as a mode of production was vital, indeed drawing a correlation between highly centralized forms of political power and slaving. Three decades later, Joseph Inikori (1996) returned to the categorization of slaves in pre-colonial Africa, and applied the standard definitions of “slave” and “serf” in the socioeconomic conditions of medieval Europe to pre-colonial Africa. He argued based on ethnographic descriptions that many of the servile villages labeled as slave plantations in pre-colonial Africa more accurately fit the description of serf villages. He concluded that: “It is incorrect to say that the pre-existence of widespread slavery in the coastal societies of Western Africa made possible the growth of the transatlantic slave trade” (Inikori 1996: 61). The 1990s witnessed another major debate between two leading scholars of pre-colonial Asante, Ivor Wilks and A. Norman Klein, over whether captives acquired by the Akan from the late 15th century should be classified as “slaves” or just “unfree labor” (Klein 1994, Wilks 1994). Considering that these captives were assimilated into early Asante society and reference to their unfree origins legally forbidden, the debate was not just a matter of semantics, but about the very nature of early Asante society.

In a seminal study of slavery in Africa, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977) examined how kinship as an ideology and social system strained to accommodate the tensions

introduced by slavery. Kinship became an ideology that marked inclusion and exclusion, and insiders or kinsmen and women were seen as “belonging in” the kin group, while slaves were seen as “belonging to” the kin group, or constituting the wealth of that group. Slaving and slavery had complicated social dependence, and Miers and Kopytoff identified for the pre-colonial period a spectrum of dependent statuses: slaves belonging to the kin group, wives in whom the groom’s family had vested rights, and even kinsmen who could be sold in times of corporate crisis, as the dictates of the kin group overrode that of the individual. They described this as the concept of “rights in persons.” The influx of imports through international trading systems transformed the material context in pre-colonial Africa, fusing notions of wealth in people and wealth in things as these became interchangeable (Guyer and Belinga 1995). Scholars have sought to explain the phenomenon where Africans who reckoned wealth in people, mobilized to sell millions of captive Africans to Europeans over a 400 year period. For Patrick Manning (1990: 32-34) the rationale was economic. In traditional African societies, he argues, a person was valued for his or her productive capacity or the value of goods they could produce. Due to low productivity in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Africa, the price Europeans offered for an African slave was higher than the productive value of an African in Africa.

The irony is that Africans mobilized to supply male captives to European slavers, not the women they valued, and slave exports to the Americas were in the ratio of two males to one female. Male captives in warfare, who were difficult to assimilate into host societies that lacked standing militias that could police large classes of slaves, were sold to slave ships and carried off to the Americas. It is then not surprising that another seminal study on slavery in Africa by Claire Robertson and Martin Klein (1983) would disclose that most of the slaves held in Africa were women. The preceding discussion of production and reproduction has outlined the context for this. The expansion of indigenous slavery witnessed even male individuals circumventing the obligations of kinship by marrying female captives. They then owned their wives and their children. Unique states like Segou and Dahomey emerged in the era of the Atlantic slave trade, whose entire political economy was based on slaving. With its permanent war footing, the ruling aristocracy in Segou chose to reproduce their polity through incorporating captives and not natural reproduction (Roberts 1987). Dahomey would be the first state in West Africa to utilize slave women as soldiers in warfare (Bay 1998). Coastal entrepreneurs invested in farms using female slave labor to provision slave ships with food.



The interaction of the transatlantic and the trans-Saharan trade expanded the volume and variety of trade in the West African interior and merchants such as the Maraka of Soninke origins in present-day Mali set up cotton and indigo plantations for a textile industry that supplied cloth as far as Saharan communities. Polygyny increased as kin groups expanded their ranks through the incorporation of servile women as wives and concubines, and families came to have two distinct lines: one of free ancestry the other servile.

Paradoxically, the abolition of the European export slave trade, first by the Danes in 1803, then the British in 1807, the Americans in 1808, followed by other nations changed very little of the internal situation in Africa. The introduction of “legitimate trade,” so called in contradistinction with the previous slave trade, opened up the African economy to participation by commoners, whereas the slave trade had privileged the military aristocracy and merchants. But chiefs and merchants still came out ahead, transferring the capital earned through the slave trade, and their possession of slaves and other dependents to the cultivation of palm oil and groundnuts. Scholars such as Beverly Grier (1992) and others have commented on how the transition to cash cropping in West Africa was accomplished on the backs of women as farmers and porters. And this is where the convergence of African male acquisitiveness, European missionary activities, and colonial policies worked together to further distance women from the expanding market opportunities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Though the oil palm grew naturally in the West African forest belt, the preparation of the harvested product involved heavy labor and was the work of women, conveniently seen as an extension of domestic chores involved in the preparation of this traditional crop. Women were also used as porters to convey oil palm to buying depots. Cracking palm kernels and the oil that could be extracted from it was women’s profit, until a European market opened up for palm kernel from the 1860s as an ingredient for margarine. Women were consequently dispossessed of palm kernels, especially as the world market prices for palm oil dropped sharply from the 1870s due to a glut in fats and oil (Lynn 1997). This set the pattern for other cash crops that were introduced over the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and rubber and cocoa all came to be seen as male crops. In addition to laboring on men’s tree crops, women also had the responsibility for food or subsistence farming that fed the household. Tree crops like oil palm and cocoa generated interest in owning the land as distinct from use rights. Women were relegated to marginal lands for food farming. The de-privileging of women in access to land

in the context of cash crops was reinforced by the central role of men in the codification of customary law under colonial rule (Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts 2006). Polly Hill (1963) has documented how Krobo and Akuapem farmers in the Gold Coast migrated in search of farm land for cocoa, propelling the economic revolution that made the Gold Coast the world's leading producer of cocoa in 1911. Women's contribution to this feat has been discussed in key works by Christine Okali (1983), Gwendolyn Mikell (1989) and others (Austin 2005). But the cash went into the pockets of men. For Sub-Saharan Africa in general, Jean Davison has observed that: "As selected crops became commoditized for export production, women's control over all aspects of production and allocation continued for some food crops, while for others that obtained a cash value women's control was increasingly limited to allocating labor tasks such as hoeing, weeding, harvesting and processing; men largely pre-empted women's allocation rights over crops grown for a cash value" (1988: 13). In Asante in the 1920s and 1930s, many women opted to create their own cocoa farms instead of working for their husbands, the withdrawal of their labor precipitating a crisis in marriage that has been studied by Allman (1996). Others went to court to challenge the rules of matrilineal inheritance that excluded them from the benefits of their labor.

Missionary activities and the desire of European missionaries to remake African families into monogamous and nuclear units unwittingly contributed to the sidelining of women's earning power and their ability to claim the proceeds of their labor. The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a proliferation of missionary societies in Europe and North America as part of the larger evangelical revival that made the abolition of slavery such a popular cause. European missionaries sallied out to Africa in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eager to help atone for centuries of European slaving. But their understanding of Christianity – strongly influenced by their cultural perspectives and coming in the form of Victorian Christianity, continental pietism, and French Catholicism with a huge dose of racial prejudice – served to undermine African institutions, culture and gender relations. Through the church, the school, and residential patterns in "Salems" or Christian quarters, European missionaries worked to divorce African converts from their cultural mooring. Disturbed by the heavy labor done by women, they strove to remake African families into units where men worked and women were wives and mothers in charge of the domestic realm. Mission education for girls emphasized domestic skills with the goal of marriage and motherhood in mind, while men in addition to literacy lessons learned skills such as carpentry and masonry that prepared them

for the wage labor market. Convinced that participation in the market was a civilizing influence, the Swiss-based Basel Mission Society in West Africa set up a trading company and trading stations, experimented with crops such as cocoa and coffee that became cash crops, pioneered some of the first savings and loans schemes, urged their converts to emancipate their slaves and experiment with wage labor, and made monogamy a requirement (Haenger 2000). The Bremen Mission Factory was among the first trading companies established among the Ewe in southeastern Ghana and Togo (Greene 1996, Akyeampong 2001). These were processes that were replicated all over Sub-Saharan Africa and have been variously documented, and in South Africa involved missionaries introducing men to the plough while pushing their wives into the domestic realm as wives and mothers (Comaroffs 1991).

In urban contexts, Christian wives may have withdrawn into the domestic realm over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with new notions of “middle class” respectability as documented in Ghana by Opong (1981), in colonial Lagos by Mann (1985), and in Natal by Healy (2011). By the 1930s mission schools in Yorubaland were running “marriage training homes” to prepare girls interested in marrying into the emergent educated elite (Denzer 1992). The result in rural Africa was more a sleight of hand: women’s labor was too significant to be withdrawn from the labor force, it was just rendered invisible. Men mediated household relations with the colonial and the capitalist infrastructure, paying taxes, receiving monies for produce delivered to markets and buying depots, and purchasing supplies for the rural household. Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts highlight how colonial rule was “essentially a male project, an undertaking in which European men employed, collaborated with, and confronted African men” (2006: 26). In towns such as Accra with a tradition of market women and long distance trade in foodstuffs such as fish organized through female households, Robertson (1984) pointed to the hemorrhaging of resources and labor from these female industries. Daughters educated by the proceeds of their trading mothers chose middle class marriages that took them away from “family businesses” instead of investing their education in assisting and scaling up female trading activities. Colonial policies and the colonial economy reinforced the historical appropriation and marginalization of female labor.

### **Colonial Policies, Colonial Economies: Gendered Impact and Implications**

Colonial penetration in Africa was accomplished by European governments in partnership with European missionaries and merchants. European merchants had been present along the African coast from the era of Portuguese maritime exploration in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century merchants played a leading role suggesting territories for annexation that were commercially viable, and serving as consuls. The role of German merchants in annexation of Togo and Cameroon, where they had operated previously within the ambits of British informal influence, has been documented. The first British consuls in Lagos in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were merchants, and the story of modern Nigeria would be incomplete without George Goldie. Nor would that of Senegal or French West Africa be complete without C. A. Verminck, who would go on to form C.F.A.O. Missionaries were enthused by official rhetoric that colonial imposition in Africa would end the three evil trades in slaves, liquor and guns. In the 1885 General Act of the Berlin Conference on Africa, Christian missionary presence was described as an important part of the European civilizing mission, setting the platform for a partnership between missions and colonial governments.

To the extent that the connection of pre-colonial African states to the rest of the world was largely dominated by the slave trade, the colonial period is often defined as a simple extension of the exploitation and unfair trade regime that governed the relations between Europe and Africa over a sustained period exceeding four centuries (O'Connell 2010). Legally, colonization effectively started in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when European governments decided to take the administrative controls of the region under the framework which emerged from the Berlin Conference in 1884. In theory, it ended with the waves of independence which started with Sudan and Ghana in the late 1950s and continued in the early 1960s. Under that connection and appendage to European nations, colonial policies and institutions were established to secure the appropriation, extraction and export of resources—human and natural—in support of the expansion of manufacturing base and production in Europe. With the industrial revolution, the demands for natural resources, both agricultural commodities and minerals, increased exponentially to fuel the production of manufactured goods in Europe in a context of increasing productivity and shift from labor to capital-intensive industries and production.

But how do we explain the dynamics of translating alien rule through indigenous elites, except in settler colonies, and the differential gendered impact of the valued processes of

production and the conditions that facilitated production? This section seeks to address these dynamics and impacts on gender relations and gendered production largely through a review of the colonial abolition of slavery (as distinct from the export slave trade at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the creation of different types of colonial economies though all driven by an extractive agenda, the forging of patriarchal alliances that underpinned colonial rule and became institutionalized in practices like Indirect Rule in British colonies. The patriarchal assumptions of European colonial administrators and missionaries enabled African chiefs and male elders to orchestrate a social coup that systematized the subordination of women and became routinized in colonial and missionary education.

### *Colonial Abolition of Slavery*

One of the early sources of tension between missionaries and colonial governments was the latter's reluctance to abolish slavery and the liquor trade, the former having enormous significance for African women. Facing difficulties imposing direct taxes, import duties on liquor quickly became an important source of revenue. On a tight budget, colonial rule had to be parsimonious. This placed premium on alliances with indigenous elites as mediators of alien rule. For these African elites, slaves constituted the most important form of private property. French and British colonial governments worried that the emancipation of slaves would collapse the colonial economy because of the significance of slave production. With missionary insistence and unwelcome metropolitan domestic attention, the British moved to abolish slavery in Africa.

The British decided against the costly method of emancipation in the Caribbean, where they had compensated slave owners for the liberation of their slaves. In Africa they either pointed out that the territories were "protectorates" and not colonies, and thus not subject to British legal interference in matters of native custom. Or in the Gold Coast, where a British colony was declared in 1874, the "Indian Model" was adopted. The British abolished the "status" of slavery but did not enforce emancipation, thus not making the government liable for compensation. The onus was placed on slaves to come to British courts of law to request their freedom. The social revolution the British had feared on the abolition of slavery did not materialize for two reasons. First, most of the slaves as we have noted were women. Since slave owners claimed access to slave women's sexuality, female slaves were often presented as "wives" and "concubines" and British colonial directives were that officials not interfere

in domestic relations. Moreover, many former slave wives or concubines would not leave their children behind in freedom, as these “belonged to” the kin group of the master. Second, emancipated slaves needed a means of livelihood. The colonial economy was essentially male, and the minority male slave population on emancipation could leave their masters and move to colonial towns to work on railways or in mines. Female production was tied to land, and access to land was through kinship. Former slaves stayed with their masters and redefined their relations, becoming junior kinsmen and women. Female slaves who left their masters’ households substituted one male dominated household for another, as Rodet (2010) demonstrates in the French Soudan. Even the abolition of slavery had failed to sever the cord that subordinated women to men and held them captive within the domestic realm.

One of the remarkable incidents of mass slave exodus as feared by colonial governments took place in the French Soudan or present-day Mali. Maraka Muslim merchants domiciled in Mali practiced plantation slavery. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the slave raids and wars of warriors such as Samory Toure of the Mandingo and Tieba of Sikasso had produced a flood of captives, many of whom ended on Maraka plantations. On Maraka plantations in 1905-6, thousands of slaves left the slave agricultural villages when word reached them that the French had abolished the legal status of slavery since 1903. As most of these slaves had been recently captured, they knew where home was, and the imposition of French colonial peace in that larger region encouraged the exodus of 1905-6. It is estimated that by 1908, about 200,000-500,000 had abandoned their masters (Roberts 1981).

The scramble for Africa had taken place in the context of European economic crisis in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and European merchants who agitated for more formal control of African territories envisaged economic relief from colonialism. For starters, African competitors, often chiefs, would be sidelined. The numerous taxes, duties, and gifts (“dashes”) that made the conduct of business expensive on the West African coast would be eliminated, as well as the problem of trust in credit networks. With the advent of colonial rule proper, African economies divided into four types: settler, concessionary, mining and peasant. In all four economies, despite the different labor dynamics, the structure of the colonial economy was similar. Albert Sarraut (1872-1962), Colonial Minister for France from 1920-24 and 1932-3 best captured the structure and intent of the colonial economy.

Economically, a colonial possession means to the home country simply a privileged market whence it will draw the raw materials it needs, dumping its own manufactures in return. Economic policy is reduced to rudimentary procedures of gathering crops and bartering them.

Moreover, by strictly imposing on its colonial “dependency” the exclusive consumption of its manufactured products, the metropolis prevents any efforts to use or manufacture local raw materials on the spot, and any contact with the rest of the world. The colony is forbidden to establish any industry, to improve itself by economic progress, to rise above the stage of producing raw materials, or to do business with the neighboring territories for its own enrichment across the customs barriers erected by the metropolitan power (Fetter 1979: 109).

However, all colonial economies weighed heavily on women and the countryside in the unwillingness of capitalist interests to reproduce the labor force. From settler colonies like South Africa and Kenya who had shunted Africans onto increasingly impoverished land reserves to peasant economies in Gold Coast, colonial governments and expatriate companies argued that their male laborers were temporary migrants in towns and did not need permanent dwellings for families or a living wage that would support families because they retained their ties to rural economies and the domestic domain. In South Africa under segregation and apartheid, labor hostels were built for single men, who were expected to return to their rural homes at the end of their labor contract. Women were viewed as out of place in towns, hounded by the authorities, who turned a blind eye to the deepening poverty in the countryside that was pushing women to towns. On mines in South Africa and the Gold Coast, underground mine labor chewed up vibrant adult workers and spat them out into the rural countryside when they contracted diseases such as tuberculosis (Crisp 1983, Packard 1989, Dumett 1998).

Meillassoux, always keen to point out the contradictions in capitalism, noted the double contradiction in capital’s interaction with the domestic domain in Africa: it takes labor from the rural areas or countryside, simultaneously preventing the penetration of capitalistic relations into the countryside in order to sustain the exodus of labor. It pays wages lower than the cost of the social reproduction of labor power. Meillassoux concluded that capitalism is imposed on the domestic community in an amorphous manner with women bearing the brunt of this imposition (Meillassoux 1981: 138-144). He hinted at the radical effects the “liberation” of the female labor force would have in terms of capitalist growth. The vision of empowering women through education and drawing them into the formal labor force would receive more momentum after World War II. Before this period, however, the colonial state,

capital, missionaries and African chiefs and elders all believed the domestic domain to be the place of women, and they collaborated in unusual patriarchal alliances to ensure this.

*Patriarchal Alliances and Customary Law: the Invention of Custom*

One key avenue for the codification of the subordinate status of women in the colonial era was through customary law. Colonial rule introduced a dual legal system of European courts based on common and civil law and native courts under the jurisdiction of chiefs. Matters of custom or family law were delegated to native courts or tribunals, including marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance, and land tenure, in effect the domestic community and the matters that most affected women. Under British Indirect Rule, that sought to strengthen the hand of chiefs as partners in governments, colonial administrators strove to put native tribunals and native treasuries on a firm foundation, so that they could assume some of the responsibilities and the expenses of local government. Literate interpreters and clerks were attached to native tribunals, who were now required to keep a written record of legal proceedings, so that the colonial government would acquire a case book of customary law (Channock 1985, Mann and Roberts 1991, Gocking 1990; 1993). Similar arrangements were pursued in French West Africa from 1903, when a dual legal structure – European law for citizens and customary law for subjects – evolved (Lawrance, Osborne and Roberts 2006). In areas of Islamic law, Alkali courts were set up by the British in the Cameroonian Grassfields from 1947 to administer customary law among Muslims; and Muslim assessors were attached to French courts in cases involving Muslim subjects (Ginio 2006, O'Rourke 2009, Jeppie, Moosa and Roberts 2010). What colonial officials seemed not to have been aware of was the fluid state of gender relations, and the political, economic and social opportunities that women had had in the pre-colonial era. African chiefs and elders, unsettled by the changing political dispensation under colonial rule, and a colonial migrant economy that privileged young men, used the codification of customary law to cement as tradition their ideal resolution to what was a contested situation. They reified African patriarchy, highlighted their control over women and juniors, and converted marriage transactions into cash to benefit from the new income of migrant young men. In Muslim areas, scholars have noted how under colonial rule Shari`a, “a concept historically understood to be a moral and ethical code regulating the private and public domains of Muslim life – was increasingly designated as a positive ‘Islamic law’” (Jeppie, Moosa and Roberts 2010: 15). Just as in African customary law, colonial officials were interested in a codified, usable body of Islamic law for



administrative purposes. In French West Africa, the 1903 colonial legal reform set the context for the codification of custom, and it would view Muslim family law as one of the many customs operating in colonies (Jeppie, Moosa and Roberts 2010: 35).

The outcome of the creation of plural legal systems could be as bizarre as the events in rural Asante in the late 1920s and 1930s, when chiefs and male elders threatened by young women who chose to be single and invested their labor on their own cocoa farms or in trade instead of working for their husbands, as chiefs would have desired, arrested them. These spinsters were rounded up by native authorities and brought before chiefs' tribunals. They were to be released if they agreed to marry, named a suitor, and paid a "release fee" (Allman 1996). This was a rather liberal application of the jurisdiction delegated to chiefs under the category of custom. Following the strengthening of chiefly rule after the Native Administration Ordinance of 1927, chiefs evidently felt confident enough to round up spinsters. Gocking's work in the Gold Coast for the early decades of colonial rule, on the other hand, documents the liberating effect of the dual legal structure in the Gold Coast for women, who took cases of divorce, maintenance and custody before colonial courts, aware that colonial administrators were more sympathetic towards cases of abandonment and neglect (Gocking 1990, 1993). In the previously mentioned case of Maraka settlements that witnessed a mass exodus of slaves from 1906, Roberts (2010) shows large numbers of slave wives appearing before the new native courts established in the French Soudan from 1905 seeking divorce on the grounds of abandonment. This reflects the growth in slave agricultural villages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when slave owners found spouses for their slaves and settled them in agricultural villages in an era of cash crop cultivation. He notes the influence of Islamic law on native custom in non-Muslim parts of the French Soudan, and how indigenous women valued the Islamic understanding of the contractual, material nature of marriage that obligated husbands to provide materially for their wives and children.

#### *Education in Colonial Africa: Women Outmanned*

The last aspect of colonial policy we want to examine deals with the sphere of education, where missionaries had enormous influence and used this to shape perceptions of gender and family in profound ways. Though Islamic education preceded Western education in Africa, the social and cultural expectations of females limited their access to Islamic education. So even though Islam requires basic religious education for all Muslims irrespective of gender,

the amount of time it takes for the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and experiences for one to become an educated scholar did not accommodate the social status of females, who were expected to be married off by the end of their teenage years. Hence the itinerant Muslim scholar, the cleric, and the long-distance trader extensively documented in the history of pre-colonial Africa were all male (Goody 1968, Sanneh 1976, Owusu-Ansah 1991). It is not surprising then that the African Muslim assessors attached to colonial courts in French West Africa and those assisting in the codification of customary law were all men (Ginio 2006, Jézéquel 2006).

Education is a key area, instrumental in colonial understandings of the role of the colonial subject, and for independent governments the role of empowered citizenry in developing nations. Lord Hailey's magisterial African Survey, revised in 1956, provides an important overview of education in colonial Africa. He points out that in colonial Africa, as in Europe centuries earlier, popular or mass education was the purview of Christian churches. He charts broad directions in education for British, French and Belgian colonies, noting the long-term influence missionaries had on education in British colonies, and Roman Catholic supervision of schools in Belgian Congo as an arm of the state. The French system, especially in French West Africa, was more independent of mission control, and was characterized in Hailey's opinion "by a greater precision of objective and unity of method." Differences between French and British educational systems reflected different ideologies of rule, and the French acknowledgement that the African colonies were an integral part of France (Hailey 1957: 1135).

The British deferred responsibility in education to the missionaries, and absorbed the products of missionary schools in the lower echelons of the colonial bureaucracy. This left room for missionary assertion, and when the British set up an Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies in 1924, it was even in response to missionary prompting that the colonial office should take more interest in African education (Hailey 1957: 1166). This was the context in which a rather minor American organization, the Phelps Stokes Fund, came to wield enormous influence on educational policy in British Africa. The Phelps Stokes Fund commissioned two surveys of African education, the first in 1920 and the second in 1923, building off its growing reputation in American Negro Education. Berman points out how the Fund succeeded in "perpetuating the belief that the educational methods which had been

hammered out for the freed slaves in the post-bellum period were particularly relevant for black Africans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Berman 1971: 132). The Fund emphasized the utility of industrial and agricultural aspects of education in America versus “academic” schools, and suggested a similar approach for Africa. The British Colonial Office needed a policy on education in Africa but had little relevant experience to draw on, and so turned to the Fund and its apostolic educational director Thomas Jesse Jones. Jones would author two reports on Africa for the Colonial Office, his commitment to agricultural and technical training providing the British with a pedagogy, “but also with a creed which would complement Whitehall’s political philosophy of Indirect Rule” (Berman 1971: 134-5). Jones brought the model of the Hampton and Tuskegee schools to Africa, and pioneered the establishment of Jeanes schools.

But American influence manifested itself in another form, primarily in South Africa, where the American Board of Foreign Missions had been active since the 1850s. Through its American Zulu Mission, American Board missionaries founded Adams College for boys in Natal in 1853, and Inanda Seminary in 1869 also in Natal as South Africa’s first all female African boarding school. Meghan Healy (2011) highlights how for both the American missionaries who established and taught at Inanda and South Africans who sent their wards to the school, the “family” – marriage and motherhood – circumscribed the world of women. Heather Hughes analyzes a shift in Inanda’s mission from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how it became an elite institution by the 1930s, determined to “provide African girls with the sort of educational opportunities which were becoming unobtainable anywhere else” (Hughes 1990: 219-20). It would become the premier boarding school for African girls in South Africa through the 1980s. Healy examines the dynamics through which Inanda survived the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which closed other mission schools such as Adams College in 1956. She explains why and how under the segregationist and apartheid regimes of twentieth-century South Africa the school came to be seen by even officials as an exemplary school for girls. She places this success within the context of the politics of social reproduction, of how Inanda graduates’ central place in the professions of teaching and nursing and the feminization of these professions under the apartheid regime made the discriminating lower salaries offered to black women highly attractive to the apartheid government. Paradoxically, when a settler state embraced girls’ education that transcended training in the usual domestic skills, it was to exploit them in the social reproduction of

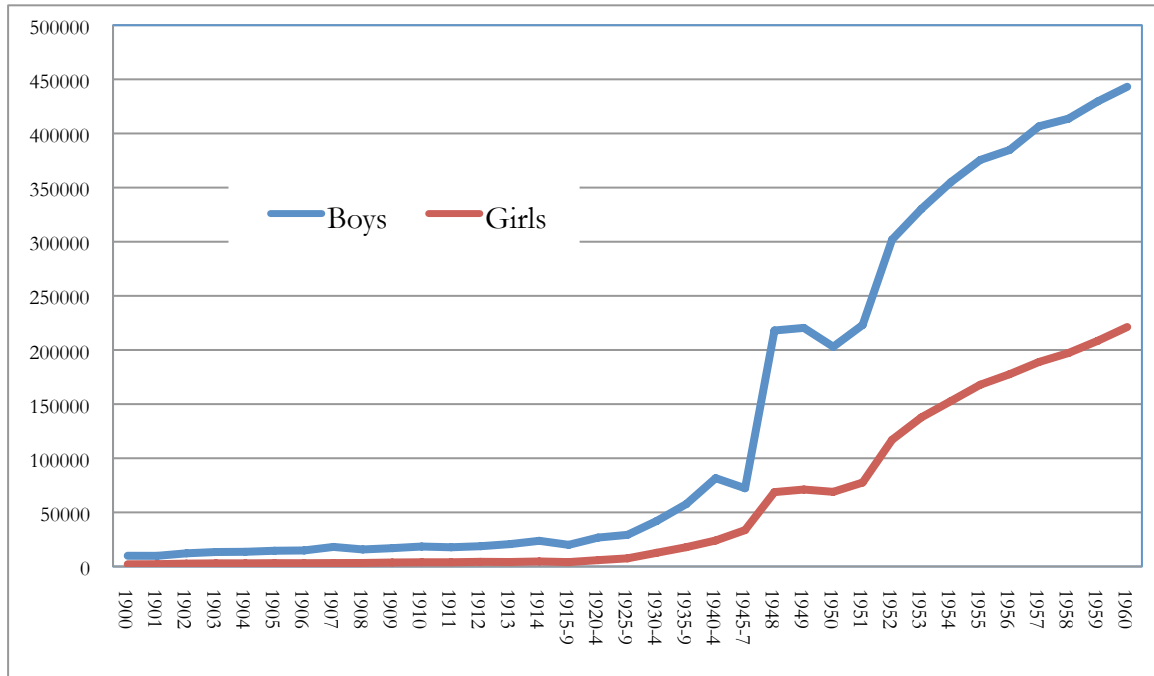
African communities in an agenda not so different from those discussed earlier on in this paper.

The record elsewhere for women or girls' education was not that inspiring. Whereas in South Africa, the Commission of Enquiry into Native Education appointed between 1949 and 1951 discovered that there were roughly equal numbers of girls and boys in lower secondary in the Union of South Africa in 1949, and that there were more females in teacher training colleges (3,019 or 58%) compared to males (2,209 or 42%) (Heal, 2011), in the rest of British Africa in 1950 the statistics even for the lower schools were dismal. Lord Lugard recorded that: "The percentage of girls among the pupils attending primary schools in 1950 was 33 in Northern Rhodesia, 40 in Nyasaland, 27 in Kenya and Tanganyika, 20 in Ugandan, 25 in Zanzibar, 22 in Nigeria, 21 in the Gold Coast, and 30 in Sierra Leone" (Hailey 1957: 1186). In Nigeria only a small proportion of the 22% of girls in primary education would have been from northern Nigeria, where in the early decades of colonial rule the local authority schools encouraged by the British targeted male students and the sons of chiefs (Gbadamosi 1967, Hiskett 1975). Yet Hailey observed that the education of girls was relatively more advanced in West Africa though the increase is more evident in respect of the total numbers and not in the proportion of girls to boys.

For example in 1954, of the 494,334 children in primary schools, 150,118 were girls; of the 8,602 pupils in Government secondary schools, 1,296 were girls. In that year 785 boys and 121 girls passed the examination for the Cambridge School Certificate (Hailey 1957: 1187).

For instance, in Ghana, one of the few countries for which we have education statistics and records over the colonial period, enrollment rates were abysmally low and exhibited a strong gender bias. While primary enrollment rates for boys averaged 0.52% of the total population in 1901, girls' enrollment rates were even lower, less than 0.11%. And over the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the gender gaps in primary enrollment widened, with more boys attending schools (0.84%) than girls (0.18%). Interestingly, that gender gap inherited in the colonial era has persisted over time as illustrated by Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Enrollment in Primary and Middle Schools in Ghana**



Source: Kay (1972: 407-8).

French Africa would witness major educational reforms in the aftermath of the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 and the French Union of 1946, as the French government directed its attention to providing an education that would equip Africans not as colonial subjects, but as French citizens, underscoring their membership of the French Union and its benefits. An explicit commitment was made to girls' education. Considering the fact that state schools outnumbered mission schools in French colonies, the state was positioned to use education in an instrumental way under a new political dispensation.

This observation on the instrumentality of education in development or nation building brings us to the end of our review of the impact of colonial policies on African women. It positions us in the post-World War II nationalist ferment and the eve of independence. The British had consciously jettisoned Indirect Rule or its partnership with chiefs for an alliance with the educated nationalists, replacing the rhetoric of the "civilizing mission" with development as the justification for continued colonial rule in an era when nations in Asia were becoming independent. The French, after the experience of German occupation, when the Free French Government was based in Equatorial Africa, and the Free French Army was an African army, knew the days of Indigenat (summary administrative punishment) were over, and a new page

had to be opened in the political history of Sub-Saharan Africa. In all these conversations, education was central, such as the Asquith and Elliot Commissions on Higher Education in Africa, the latter leading to the establishment of the University College of Ibadan in 1948, another in the Gold Coast, and a third at Makerere. For colonial administrators in the twilight years of colonial rule, and for nationalist leaders, any developing nation could not leave behind half its population, the female half. So the 1950s would witness phenomenal expansion in primary education with two key motives.

In the first place there has been appreciation of the fact that political responsibility in democratic terms is dependent upon an informed electorate. Second, that social and economic development are dependent upon the intelligent and understanding cooperation of the community to implement plans, and upon an adequate supply of skilled manpower (Lewis 1961: 40).

As a new kind of citizenry was envisioned, there was great prospect for the empowerment of women in newly democratic African nations.

## **Conclusion**

Since the adoption the Millennium Development Goals (MDG3) and the belated recognition of the centrality of gender equality for growth and poverty reduction, increasingly more research and studies have been undertaken in the development and academic communities alike to understand the dynamics of gender inequality (World Bank, 2010). These studies have also focused on the analytics and operational parameters that will reduce gender bias and enhance women's economic empowerment. The World Bank Development Report (WDR) 2012 devoted to "Gender Equality and Development" is part of that global effort to fill the analytical gaps in support of gender equality. However, for a number of reasons, including data gaps, efforts to understand the gender inequality dynamics and models developed to that effect have often focused on the post-colonial and post-independence period. Consequently, these models have neglected the deeper historical understanding of processes which have shaped the gender relations and dynamics that emerged in the years following independence in Africa. This myopic approach to research also implicitly assumes that gender relations have essentially followed a uniform path, with men consistently and invariably dominating and overpowering women throughout Africa, irrespective of the historical period.

Drawing on historical, anthropological and statistical records going back to the pre-colonial and colonial periods, this article seeks to complicate the history of gender relations and production in Africa. It underscores the crucial roles of women in production and reproduction, and kinship as the mechanism that facilitates the social and economic exploitation of women. But women were not without social and economic opportunities in the pre-colonial period, as the case studies in this paper have demonstrated in terms of agriculture and crafts. The liberating potential in such 19<sup>th</sup> century and colonial era developments like the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, the introduction of cash crops, the institutionalization of customary law in dual legal systems were subverted where women were concerned because of the interface in the patriarchal assumptions of colonial officials, missionaries, and African chiefs and elders. The reproduction of structural inequities in gender during the colonial period was most notable in the sphere of education. As a result, on the eve of independence, the majority of African women had been excluded from access to schooling and confined to home production and reproductive functions.

The colonial economy stifled global competition by preventing the colonies from engaging in the production of goods that would compete with manufacturing industries in advanced economies and confined African economies to primary commodities and natural resource exports under the resource extraction model of development. One of the direct consequences of that colonial construct which has received a lot of attention in the development community and academia are the excessive exposure of African economies to external shocks and recurrent balance of payment crisis (Akyuz and Gore 2001, Easterly 2002, Fofack 2010). However, the confinement to primary sector production has also come with tremendous welfare and social costs, especially for African women, who continue to exhibit some of the lowest labor force participation rates, even by developing countries standards. This seems to suggest that colonial constructs coupled with socio-cultural norms continue to constrain women's participation and contribution to economic development in the post-colonial era. Empirical evidence has also shown that gender inequality tends to be more pronounced in the primary and agricultural sector. The phenomenal increase in female labor force participation

rates in advanced economies has somehow been largely driven by the boom in manufacturing and service sectors.

More than five decades after independence, the income gap between Africa and the rest of the world – including the developing world – has widened significantly, reflecting Africa's abysmal growth and development performance through the 1990s (Artadi and Sala-i-Martin 2003). Yet Africa's development prospects in the early years of independence were seen as far superior to those of the overpopulated and resource-poor Asian countries by many experts, including Gunnar Myrdal—the 1974 Nobel Laureate in Economics. Why have economic growth and development eluded independent Africa? The past decade has witnessed a growth rebound in parts of Africa (Kasekende et al. 2010, Devarajan and Shetty 2010). Whether this growth rebound is qualitatively different from previous ones Africa has experienced, such as the two decades between the 1940s and 1960s, will determine if some African countries have entered into the take-off phase in economic development with significant implications for the economic history of the continent.



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