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The Nature and Operation of Colonial Education in Benin Province and The Benin Women's Response

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Abstract. This paper examines the nature and operation of colonial education in Benin and how the Benin woman embraced this innovation. The colonial period has been interpreted by Africans as non-beneficial to Africans and portrayed colonial rule as being destructive of the admirable and prestigious status of the Benin woman in the pre-colonial period. The traditions and cultural constraints on women hindered female education in her early days in Benin. Parents saw female education in Benin as a waste of resources and also would encourage resentment and disrespect of parental authority. Education for the girl child during the pre-colonial period was designed to make them primarily an effective mothers and housewives. Hence, girls were brought up in a traditional family set-up to be passive, obedient, and always submissive to men. This paper insists that the inadequate provision of school and security for the girls due to the location of the school by the colonial administration was not the only factor responsible for her formal education, but the delay by her traditional society in accepting female education had a far-reaching effect on her educational status.

Keywords: Benin Division, Native Administration, Colonial Education, Benin woman, Church Missionary Society

1. Introduction

The European influence introduced new ways and values into Benin society; the responses to the influence came in different ways, in which education was one of them. These new influences resulted in the transformation of every aspect of their lives. As women in Benin got exposed to education, their traditional worldview was affected by the gradual exposure of women to education and subsequent urbanization; things began to change for them.

The missionaries saw education as the main instrument of spreading Christianity in Africa. It is not surprising that wherever a mission station was established, there was a school to which young boys and, sparingly, girls were recruited for learning. From the inception of colonial rule, education was a virtual monopoly of Christian missionary societies. To all intents and purposes, the school is the church, and the village teacher is also the evangelist. Until 1898, all education was under the direct control of missionaries.

1.1 Research Methodology

This paper employs a historical research methodology in which the data were collected mainly through primary sources. These data are contained in archival documents about Benin Province and are located in the National Archive at Ibadan. Also, an intelligence report on Benin Division was obtained from the Edo State Archive, Ministry of Local Government and Community Affairs. The study also relied on secondary sources. This involved reading extant literature on the role of women in the family and how they were able to embrace innovations that colonialism came with, which helped to shape their perception of female education. The data comprised articles in journals, chapters in edited books, and dissertations. The secondary sources were critically analyzed for women's roles in historical narratives.

1.2 The Nature of Colonial Education in Benin Province

The local government in Benin province did not participate in education till 1938, when Benin Divisional Native Administration established the first non-voluntary agency primary school in the province at Evboghae. The first native administration secondary school had also been opened in Benin Division in 1937. Even when an inroad was made by the Native Administration to the educational field, the number of schools provided was always very small and inadequate for the population. The Native Administration provided

educational grants to voluntary agency schools, so provided for were twenty-one. With only two Native Administration primary schools in the province till 1944, it is right to say that the contribution of some of the Divisional Native Administrations, namely Esan, Afemai, and Asaba, towards the educational development of their divisions was the grant in aids to these schools, and they undertook the maintenance of government schools in their localities. The Esan Divisional Native Administration assisted four schools in addition to the four government primary schools it had maintained at Ekpoma, Uronmi, Ewu, and Irrua. In 1946, when it established its first school, it had six assisted schools on its roll while the Afenmai Native Administration made a subvention to the two voluntary agency schools (RCM and CMS) in the Division. The amount was €25 yearly, and this remained its contribution to the educational development of its area till 1945 when it established its first six schools at Auchi, Ogbona, Ukpilla, Idegun, Agbede, and Imoekeme in Agenebode. The Asaba Division maintained about three government schools, and there is no record to show the number of schools assisted. It is known that it spends the sum of €150 in assistance to Benin Divisional Native Administration, the only local government with two primary schools till 1945. Apart from this early intervention in education through its establishment of two primary schools at Ewohighae and Igbanke in 1938 and 1939 respectively, it maintained the government schools in Benin City and assisted fiv e voluntary agency schools with a total population of 920. It was estimated that 17% of the school-age population, that is, age 6-14 years, were enrolled in schools. in 1940, 18,000 pupils were enrolled, about 20% of the qualified population.

In Benin Division, for instance, out of a total of 153 primary schools, only eight were up to standard six in 1947. There were two Native Administration schools at Evbohighae and Igbanke, and six others belonging to the missions (RCM and CMS). Five others were known to be up to standard, leaving the rest below this standard. Apart from the poor quality of education at these schools, the hardship experienced by the pupils who had to travel long distances to places where schools were available was of no concern to Native Administrations. Despite the high demands from the villages of the different divisions in the province, which would have served the Native Administration as a signal that the existing schools were inadequate, the Native authorities did not respond. The fault was not so much theirs as that of the colonial government. Whatever pressure the Native Administration mounted in the face of the strict colonial control, especially during the war years, the administrative officers did not give way, as their pressure alone was not sufficient to make an impact on the district officer.

The second issue associated with the establishment of schools in the province was the employment of the products of these schools. It should be recalled that the Colonial Government's policy had been to reserve the local government domain exclusively for illiterate chiefs, and the education envisaged for Nigerians was not expected to give any position higher than that of a clerk. He could be a messenger or an interpreter to the government administrator or other functionaries of government at whatever level for those who could not speak the local language of the area where they worked. All other positions, which were within the reach of the local people, as cleaners, sanitary labourers, cooks, and stewards, did not require education since the number of clerks, interpreters, and messengers that the Native Administrators could absorb was limited, and others did not require education.

The colonial Native Administration and their propellers did not recognize the fact that the provision of literacy education to the individual was a basic step in the self-development of that individual. It was a colonial government established for the interest of the colonial authority. The question of jobs for the product of the standard six primary schools would have posed no problem as the shortage of teachers was still very prominent till 1954. It was this problem which provided the excuse for the Native Administration not to open up new schools and even upgrade the existing ones in the forties. This excuse only served as a support for the officially undisclosed policy of not educating the indigenous people. The number of untrained or uncertified teachers was higher than that of trained teachers in Benin Division. If Benin, with all its resources, had more untrained teachers between 1947 and 55, the position in other divisions could well be imagined.

All schools, including Native Administration and private or voluntary agencies, were fee-paying. This means that if the Benin provincial Native Administration had built schools, they would have been self-supporting even in terms of teachers' salaries, in view of the stipend the teachers were paid. The Benin Native Administration's salaries for the teachers of its first two schools were fixed on an incremental scale within a maximum of €72 per annum, which was a maximum of €6 per month. School fees were not uniformly fixed for all Native Administration areas, but the fact was that they all paid fees. The total grant which the government sent to schools in the province stood at €40,000, and in 1952, it was €80,000. The Native Administrations enjoyed and encouraged the situation where their educational responsibility was profitably usurped by

missions and private individuals. Even the establishment of Divisional Education Committees did not change the Native Administration's attitude. Apart from the fact that the local government in Benin province could not deviate from the policy of the colonial government, it would be unusual for a government that could not provide primary schools on account of its complaints of lack of funds to be found to provide secondary schools. In the whole country by 1934, there were only thirty-four secondary schools provided by both the government and voluntary agencies. from 1937-1954, when the Native Administration system came to an end, there was only one Native Administration secondary school in Benin province, while all others were provided by the Missions (RCM and CMS), and there was none by the government. This was the only one in Benin province. Edo College was established by the Benin Divisional Native Administration in 1937 with an initial population of seventy-two boys, twenty-two of whom were in the boarding house. The school was officially opened by the Chief Commissioner on August 17th, 1937. It consisted of classes 1 and 11. As for teacher training colleges, neither the Native Authorities nor the government provided any in the province till 1953, when the different divisional Native Administrations jointly provided one at Abudu. The RCM had built one at Ibusa in 1928, and to it added another, which was opened in 1942 at Ubiaja. In Benin Division, where Native Administration schools had been established, the need for trained teachers arose, and with neither Native Administration nor Mission nor private teachers' training colleges available. The Benin Divisional Native Administration turned its attention to Warri province. The first two trained teachers used by the Benin Divisional Native Administration for its schools were produced from the Elementary Training Centre, Warri. In the same year, 1940, another student was sent to the Warri Centre for training for the Native Administration school. The Benin Divisional Native Administration is recognized. It is responsible for providing trained teachers in the Division. In 1941, the Benin Divisional Native Administration therefore sent four mission teachers to the Warri Elementary Training Centre for training for the Mission.

The only secondary school that was built by the Native Administration in the province till 1954, when its tenure of office expired, was Edo College. It was built entirely from the funds of the Benin Divisional Native Administration. Edo College received its staff and other consumable equipment, and also science apparatus from the government till 1947, when it was finally taken over by the government. It was the only secondary school in the province till 1946. By this year, two other secondary schools were opened in the province by the Catholic Missions, and their standard was middle four. Until their term of office ended, the promise to provide secondary school was not fulfilled. Besides this, at the beginning of 1941, the government doubled the school fees, and a good number of the students withdrew from studies. This action was to ensure that the acquisition of advanced education by the people in Benin province was delayed. The government knew that many would not be able to pay for the continuation of this secondary. It was an effective weapon with which the government checked the educational development of the few who found their way into the school. In 1940, for instance, three of the pupils who passed the middle IV examination in Edo College were offered places at the Government College Ibadan; one of them could not accept the golden opportunity for lack of financial support. If the school rate were normal, such a person would have struggled to finish their course of study.

2. Benin Woman and Her Response to Colonial Education

It is interesting to note that female education in Benin is a recent phenomenon. This is because parents denied their female children the opportunity of education during the colonial period. If any female child had to go to school, it was the most stubborn child as a way of punishment. It was believed that parents who sent their daughters to school faced a lot of criticism and obstacles. According to an informant, when a female was sent to school, attacks and discouragement came from every quarter. According to her, her father was seen as somebody who poured water into a basket because he sent his daughters to school, he was seen as a man who had nothing to do with money by sending his daughters to school, when she gets married, she will drop her father’s name and as such, there was no need wasting money on her, moreover, they lacked employment prospects in colonial society. The missionary agents also worsened the situation by seducing and violating females in their schools and churches. Many parents in the colonial period believed that the education of female children encouraged disrespect and resentment of parental authority by females, especially as the missionaries supported them in their opposition to infant betrothal. Marriage of a female child was a prestigious and lucrative business for her family, especially if she remained a virgin until the day of her betrothal. The parents saw their female children through the preparation journey of the betrothal, as she was not to compromise her virginity before marriage. Most often, the suitor’s family started the marriage preparation from the day the girl child was born. It is said that "when a baby girl is born, suitors approach the parents of the girl by sending a log of wood and a bundle of yams". This is *Ivbuomo*,

asking for a child". In other words, the family of the husband-to-be dropped a log of firewood at the back of the house of the wife-to-be to stamp his influence on the life of the child and to prevent others from trespassing. Quadri (1995) recognizes child betrothal as the oldest and most common form of marriage in Benin.

It is important to note that whether marriage by betrothal or by request, there was a bride price attached. In the pre-colonial period, before the advent of a standardized exchange rate, farm produce and other products served this purpose. Before the marriage proper, the girl's family conducts a series of investigations into the background of any suitor; such a family must be disease-free, crime-free, debt-free, and witchcraft-free for parents, marriage was a kind of relationship between two families, and not just the individuals involved. Unlike the western notion of marriage as a contract that is essentially a "voluntary agreement between two consenting adults" many parents did not see this as a welcome development for their female child, as they believed education would encourage resentment of parental authority. Even the small number of girls who were privileged to complete primary education had no access to post-primary education since facilities were not available in the division till the 1950s, and parents were not willing to allow their daughters to attend schools unprotected by them outside the division. It was only in 1944 that the colonial state awarded a scholarship to a Benin girl after passing a competitive examination at Queen's College, Lagos, whereas boys had been provided by the colonial state and the Native Administration. The CMS and RCM at this time established a girls' primary school only in Benin City. Before this time, the CMS had started domestic science classes for females in Benin City, which taught knitting, crochet, sewing, cookery, hygiene, and homekeeping. It was only the CMS that temporarily abolished school fees payment by girls in rural schools to encourage attendance. The sending of female children to school during this period was done mainly by their mothers, who were traders and could afford to pay the school fees of their daughters. The stay-at-home mothers were unable to send their daughters to school because they were unable to afford the fees. However, the runaway wives were able to send their daughters to school since they didn't need the permission of their husbands anymore on what and how to raise their daughters, especially the ones the men didn't know about. Kaplan described runaway wives as "women who were given in marriage without consent, and forced to submit to their husband's even if they were ill-treated and unhappy in the marriage, but they ran away over time due to ill-treatment. Such women ran away with their children to another neighboring town, where they started a new way of life and decided what and how to raise their daughters. Farmers and traders among such women were able to afford the school fees of their daughters. Many parents feared that girls would become infertile if allowed to attend school, as the time spent in school would affect their reproductive age. With the boost in primary education in 1954, which came with the new regional government, they introduced a system whereby products of primary schools that could not afford or find places in the few existing secondary schools took a three-year course in the secondary modern schools. This was a relief for mothers who could not afford to pay fees for their daughters, although it was not a solution to the shortage of secondary schools. The number of schools provided was soon pruned down due to their unpopularity and poor management. In Benin Division, nine were opened in January 1955; by 1956, five had been closed down. The provision of the unpopular secondary modern schools that gave no academic credit or benefit to their products was therefore a useless and wasteful venture. It did not solve the problem of lack of secondary schools; it was supposed to solve the problem, as many who went to these schools again found their way to secondary or teacher training schools later, for those who could afford it. There is no record of any of the other Divisional or District Councils in the Province providing secondary schools for their people. What the Administrative Officer was to the Divisional Native Administration in terms of control was the Minister of Education to the council.

In this regard, there had not been much difference in the provision of these educational institutions by both council and native administration; one would indict the two bodies for failing in their responsibility. While the Native Authorities were willing and could have been able to finance these educational institutions, including teacher training, they suffered under the strict colonial control. The councils, on the other hand, had financial problems to contend with; a series of regional governments' legislation gradually denied them their revenue. The absence of finance and a measure of autonomy, both essential ingredients for the proper funding of the schools in the province, the Council and the Native Administrations before them found themselves incapacitated. With this situation, it will be difficult to find any local government that will be able to provide the primary, secondary, teacher training, and technical schools required by their areas of authority for their educational development. The failure of both Council and Native Administration to provide educational institutions for their people shows that they did not fulfill their obligation to their people. This situation created the importance of the provision of scholarship by the local government to its citizens to avail themselves of the educational opportunities that their local governments cannot

provide otherwise. The different Divisional administrations in Benin Province were known to have sponsored some of their students in the various educational institutions. The scholarship schemes among the Native Administration and council operated at three levels. The first was the sponsorship of teachers in training institutions for both Mission and Native Administration Schools, in which Benin females benefited. The second was candidates for secondary, technical, and other institutions other than universities. The first attempt to sponsor a candidate at Edo College was made by the Asaba Divisional Native Administration in 1941. In Benin Division, that same year also saw the award of a scholarship to two of the Edo College boys to continue their education at Government school Ibadan. By 1942, the number of scholarships rose to eight, six of which were earmarked for mission schools, one for Native Administration schools, and the remaining one for the *Oke* Co-operative society school.

The reliance on government and voluntary agencies for the provision of primary schools and teacher training colleges was again showing its face in the issue of scholarship awards. In the Agbor District of Asaba Division, the operation of the scholarship scheme of the Native Authority appears to have started in 1941. By 1942, a student at Edo College and another at Iwo Institute were studying under this scholarship scheme. The Benin Divisional Native Administration added one scholarship award to the existing ones in 1944 when it awarded a $20 scholarship to Patience Ukpomwan of C.M.S. school, Benin City, to carry on a course of study at the Queen's College, Lagos. The lack of a comparative number of girls in any of the Native Administrations or Mission schools in the province has always been a matter of concern for the District Officers in the Divisions. Encouragement was given by the Native Administration to bring more girls into schools. Education was made free for all girls willing to avail themselves of educational opportunities provided by the voluntary agencies and the Native Administrations. When it became necessary to charge fees for female education, the amount was considerably lower than what the boys paid. In Benin Division, the population of girls in schools, as compared to the boys, was small. In 1944, for instance, in the twelve Catholic Mission Schools in the Division, there were 1,248 boys while the girls were only 41. One of the first scholarship awards made by the Benin Native Administration to secondary schools was given to a girl. By this award, the total number of scholarships handled by the Benin Divisional Native Administration rose. A few awards were also given by the Native Administration in 1946 to teacher training colleges; this included a scholarship to Edo College, United Missionary College, Kudeti Girls' school, Ibadan, and the Immaculate Conception College (ICC), Benin. The Benin Divisional Native Administration had eleven teachers in elementary training centres and seven in higher elementary training centres, while fourteen other teachers were added to these. These were distributed in the various colleges, which included the Government Training centre, Abraka, with one slot, nine in Abudu Elementary College, two in the Elementary training, and two in the Elementary Training Centre, Evboneka. The Benin Divisional Council, like all others, did very well in this scholarship scheme. The scholarship scheme was managed for educational advancement in Benin Province, demonstrating their awareness and value for education. The Native Administration is to compensate for their lapses in the provision of educational institutions in the province by sponsoring students in the schools within the limit of their resources. The Native Administration laid the foundation for educational development in the province. Whatever is achieved today in educational regard was made possible by their contributions. The pioneer recipients of western education in the province were produced by the Native Administration directly by providing schools or indirectly by providing grants and other forms of assistance to the voluntary agencies that almost exclusively handled education in 1946.

One reason for the slow advance of girls' education in colonial Benin was not as a result of a lack of educational institutions provided by the Native Administration in Benin province, but because they refused to see the value of educating their daughters. This was the underlying reason for the slow growth of female education in Benin province. They believe that it was wiser to invest in educating their sons, who would remain in their household and presumably care for them in their old age, rather than a girl who would move to another compound when she is married. The custom of marriage in Benin meant that girls had to leave for marriage at a very early age to take up their domestic responsibilities in their new homes. Education for girls faced more cultural resistance in the Islamic north. The rulers and people were slow to accept Western education. The first Western schools for Muslim girls were not established until the 1930s, when the Emirs of Kano and Katsina agreed to establish girls' schools in their palaces. Both Christian and Islamic ideas about the duties of women as wives limited their autonomy and encouraged economic dependence on men. Education was seen as a competing factor to this idea of women being part of a man's household, as women's status in society was that of second-class citizens. Even within the family, women remained largely subordinated to their men. The impact of Colonial Rule, with its introduction of Western education, shaped women's choices and opportunities in Benin. The Mass education

programme, or the adult education programme, which the Native Administration vigorously executed for the regional government, was to widen the population of those who could read and write. The traditional chiefs who were the main functionaries of the Native Administration, in terms of their commitment to the educational development of their people, must be given credit, irrespective of the fact that they were illiterate; they encouraged their people to utilize the scholarship provided by the Native Administration, and many of their people benefited from it.

However, in the present dispensation, people in Benin, including men and women, have come to terms with the fact of sending their daughters to school. They have come to believe that educating a woman is educating a generation; they have come to realize that education is the foundation for success, and the growing tendency is for a woman to seek a greater degree of independence by getting educated. With the continuous development and sustainability of educational standards and opportunities it provides, most men in Benin are beginning to see the value of education for their wives, and they have even allowed their wives to acquire more degrees in the colleges of education to become school principals and headmistresses. This opportunity is more available to urban women than to those in rural areas. The rural Benin women prefer to educate their daughters now and not themselves, as they feel their role is to protect their female daughters and support their husbands. Economically, to enable them to send their daughter(s) to school. This delay in accepting female education in Benin society has a far-reaching effect on Benin as she is trying to stamp her feet among her contemporaries from other societies.

However, Nigerian women generally have yet to occupy their position in the educational set-up like their male counterparts. The plight of women's education in Nigeria is such that the Nigerian National Policy on Education, in section 1, paragraph 11, makes provisions for improving women's participation in Nigerian education. This section of the national policy states:
With a view to correcting the imbalance between different parts of the country with reference to the availability of educational facilities, the number of pupils receiving formal education, and girls' education, the government has embarked on action to ensure the success and universality of the UPE scheme.

Apart from the provision in the National Policy on education, the Nigerian Government at this level has taken several practical steps to improve women's participation in education. Irrespective of these steps, Nigerian women still constitute the majority of illiterates. However, the introduction of education has transformed the society into two social classes: the enlightened class, which comprises those who take up lucrative jobs and are in the labour market making decisions, while the other social class comprises those who are not educated but are in one way or another contributing positively to the uplifting of the society. It would be said that the clamour of today's woman can be attributed to the influence on women

Education has gone a long way to restructure the roles and values of the Benin woman in Nigeria. With the attainment of education, the minds of women have been liberated, and the idea of women sitting at the back of society has become outdated. The Benin women have rejected the idea that their sole responsibility is to carry out domestic activities. The response to European influences, as far as education is concerned, is a welcome development for the Benin woman. She saw herself as the oppressed group of traditions and quickly took advantage of the opportunities provided by the liberal colonial administration. Gender stereotyping is a prominent feature of Nigerian traditional education. The idea of mainstream education for both men and women was never approved in the traditional educational practices of most Nigerian communities. The under-representation of women in various tiers of Nigerian school system is nothing but a logical development for a society with traditional background of gender inequality in education. the education for women within the traditional society is primarily to prepare them for family life. The success of a girl's education was usually judged by the way she adjusted herself to her duties as a wife or a mother. If Nigerian women are underrepresented in various sectors of the labour force in which Benin is part of, it is just one of the surviving legacies of a traditional educational background that saw housekeeping as the exclusive career of women. Women are gradually pulling down the traditional barriers militating against their adequate participation in education; this process is, however, slow because the forces of tradition often take time to break. The norms of most societies are male-oriented. Such norms dictate that sons take over responsibility from their parents while females are only free to marry out of their family. This form of thinking is heavily enforced by custom; this is why female education in Benin was seen as a waste of time, resources, and encourages disrespect. Women who had the opportunity of sending their female children to school were more likely to be market women who could afford the fees for their daughters. Only a few of them could embark on this unproductive venture as they were referred to as only two markets existed in Benin Division during this period, and these were Agbado and Oba Market, both in Benin City. They were the two major

markets then. Women who traded there then were regarded as wealthy women because they could afford to take up responsibilities without the support of their husbands. Many of the women irrespective of the discouragement from their fellow women especially those in the rural areas not to send their daughters to school, some of them did, and later on, they saw the difference in the life style and prospects of their educated daughters as many of them were able to pursue different carrier later and this encouraged more parents to send their daughters to school instead of marrying them off at infancy.

3. Conclusion

This work has succeeded in examining the nature, operation and the kind of education the colonial authority provided in Benin province and how parents embraced this new innovation especially in the case of the girl child. Parents who could not afford school fees benefited from the scholarship provided. Though many parents initially saw female education as a waste of resources because she will eventually be married away to a suitor at infancy leaving the family name behind, they prefer to educate their male children whom they believe will keep the family name. They saw education as what will encourage disrespect from their daughters and also infringe on their culture. The bold step of female education were first taken by their mother(s) especially those who were traders and runaway wives, that is those who were no longer married to their betrothed husbands and had gained their freedom from the Native Court via divorce were free to take decisions on how and what the children should do as many of them in this category were granted custody of their children. Women who were still with their husbands were not left out as well, many had to sort for permission from their husbands in other to enable them train their female children in school, the expenses were left for the women alone to pay as many mothers did not hesitate to take the responsible and the scholarship scheme fovoured the female child which also ease the expenses for their mothers. It was only later during colonial period that both parents started to encourage female education in both Benin Province and Division. The delay in accepting female education in Benin has a far-reaching effect on the Benin woman.

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