

Contestations of identity: colonial policing of female sexuality in the Cross River region of Southern Nigeria

Mfon Umoren Ekpo-Otu¹

Department of History & Diplomatic Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria
mekpootu@yahoo.co.uk

Colonial rule impacted profoundly on the lives of Nigerian women and led to a reconfiguration of gender identities, producing sites of contestation and negotiation as imperial ideas of femininity were contested and reconstructed. Through the prism of prostitution using the Cross River region of the present-day Akwa Ibom and the Cross River States as a case study, this paper navigates the landscape of female sexuality in the twentieth century and the colonial government's effort to contain a phenomenon that undermined normative conjugal and family relations and also muddled the packaging of a colonial identity. The optimal utilisation of their colonies by the British necessitated the cooperation of the chiefs and seeking to impose a new moral, economic and social order to facilitate their economic and political control. The British rulers/colonists in collaboration with the local chiefs and elders reinterpreted morality and reconstructed the Nigerian woman in accordance with the Victorian values of what constituted a virtuous and good woman. Prostitution with its thwarting of culturally and morally acceptable expressions of sexuality drew state censorship. In some cases, local actors colluded with the colonial government to police female sexuality and more often than not deepen women's marginalisation. In many other instances, they aided the entry of women into prostitution. Perception and the resulting behaviour of kinsmen and local governing bodies toward the sex trade were tied in part to their benefits from the derivable income which contributed significantly to the survival of rural households. At diverse points and to varying degrees, institutional structures and spaces became sites of contestation as the prostitutes sought to assert their rights over their sexuality.

Keywords: Gender identities, prostitution, female sexuality, morality, Nigeria

Introduction

Colonial law constructed gender and sexuality, thus criminalising what was previously not considered offensive. It was through arbitrations in the coital and conjugal sites that the colonial authority sought to reconfigure female identities. Conjugal relationships became the socially acceptable norm of the expression of intimacy and sexuality was thus confined to the realm of marriage (Pederson 1991; Chacha and Nyangena 2006)

Colonial male-privileging narratives on sexuality conceived women as submissive, operating within the bounds of the domestic sphere and sexually subjugated to man's control. Such discourses produced distinctions of the good/respectable from the bad/immoral women. Women operating within non-regulated spaces like the prostitutes belonged to the latter category.

Interventions in African social organisations and institutions by the colonial authority were not left uncontested. Inaccurate reading of the above resulted in contradictions between colonial desires and women's lived experiences. For instance, the dominant consciousness of the male breadwinner and his dependent, submissive wife promoted by the colonial narrative failed to correspond to reality. The dynamics of colonialism bred: wage labourers incapable of sustaining the family and dependent on the wife's subsistent earnings, female-headed households and independent single women. The colonial experience was fraught with contestations and negotiations as colonial policies attempted to reproduce the tenets of Victorian society in the colonies. Studies draw attention to legal mediations into marriages across colonial Africa that attempted to stamp out practices deemed morally abhorrent or impediments to colonial economic expansion (Mann and Roberts 1991; Masisi 2001). In the process of redefining women's sexuality and social identities, indigenous concepts of female sexuality became criminalised and drew State sanction.

Theoretical framework

In the course of the discourse on colonial studies, new intellectual arenas have opened up, from the concentration in the 1970s on issues on global capitalism to attempts to integrate the colonizer and the colonized into the same analytical framework. This integration is not one of binary opposition, but a hybrid, with one rubbing off on the other. From the 1980s there has been a re-reading of colonial literature, of what constitutes colonial knowledge (Phillips 1989). This post-colonial paradigm, within which this work is anchored, opened a space for voices contesting the production of knowledge and its authenticity, and while acknowledging its importance as a source of historical reconstruction, called for a more

1. Mfon Umoren Ekpo-out PhD is a lecturer in the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

nuanced reading of colonial reports with a filtering out of biases and prejudices that European officials brought to the study of African social institutions (Schler 2004).

Feminist discourse has illuminated the engendering of the colonial experience. Attention has been drawn to the differential impact of colonial rule on men and women and women's double colonisation, first as a colonial subject and secondly as a woman. Stoler (1991:211) points out that the markers distinguishing the colonized from the colonizer were based on sexual policing that delineated positions of power as well as "the personal and public boundaries of race". In an extension of Foucault's argument on sexuality¹ in Europe onto the imperial setting, Stoler points out that in the colonial agenda the cultural identity of the colonisers was enhanced by the objectification and eroticising of the local women. Racial differences were linked to sexual differences and the African woman's voluptuous body was taken as representative of deviant proclivities and promiscuity (Spivaky 1999). Images of the African woman derived from the above enabled the centralisation of the European woman as chaste. As reiterated by Balos and Fellows (1999 cited in Gibson 2003:10), a worthy category obtains its status against the existence and identification of an unworthy category.

Female sexuality in pre-colonial Nigeria

Colonialist discourses on Nigerian female sexuality were underpinned by the particular cultural definition of sex and the female's role in sexual relations in the imperial centre. It erased or subverted in the process alternative forms of sexuality as found in Nigeria, and imposed a universalistic notion of sex and sexuality rooted in Victorian ideology. The organisation of social and sexual relations is contextualised and perceived differently in different societies. In pre-colonial Nigeria, chastity was highly valued and there existed certain traditional rites and customs which acted as a deterrent to the practice of illegitimate sexual liaisons. One of these was the *mbokpo* or fattening rites practised in Southern Nigeria among the Efiks of Calabar in the Cross River State, and the Annangs of Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom State, located further inland to the West of the Cross River State. Still practised by some in contemporary times, *mbokpo* is a passage rite undertaken by young girls prior to marriage. Among other things, the girls are placed in confinement for some months. Among the Annangs this is usually three months. During this time, they are taught the duties of a woman as well as the laws of the land. The girls are also made aware of the heinous crimes of pre-marital sex and adultery, punishable by death through *ekpo nka aqwo* or the goddess of adultery (Nyoyoko 1997: 85-6). Unmarried girls found pregnant were stripped naked, blackened with charcoal and paraded around the village to the shouts and jeers of the villagers. Such stigmatization and social shame, which extended to the girl's parents, served to impress on the act of sex notions of guilt and fear. The 'Umunna' institution in Igbo land served the same purpose (Uchendu 1965:3). The practise of early marriage and child betrothal helped sustain pre-marital chastity.

Sexual discussions were and to a certain extent still remain coded in languages that can only be assimilated by members (Ikpe 2004: 6). In her work Ikpe (2004: 6) has analysed the various forms of sexual relations in Nigeria. Sexual promiscuity was censored through public ridicule in songs by secret societies. Among the Ibibios of the Akwa Ibom State, the 'ekpri – akata', a secret society, taunted guilty parties with songs at night. Marriage as in 19th century Victorian England was the acceptable space for sexual expression. Taboos and deities were used to repress such deviant acts as adultery. In Ibibio land adultery attracted fees as compensation to the wronged husband and offenders could be sold into slavery. The spirit of adultery or 'ekpo nka aqwo' would claim the life of the woman if compensations were not offered to appease the spirit. In Yoruba culture there was the 'magun' usually invoked by an irate husband, that could make offenders incapable of separating in the sexual liaison and sometimes result in death.

Despite the high premium placed on chastity, scholarly writings have shown that more permissive sexual liaisons beyond the borders of conjugal relations existed, sometimes cloaked with societal approval, in other cases tolerated or censored (Uchendu 1965; Ikpe 2004). An example of this was the system of concubinage (Uchendu 1965; Lovejoy 1988). Others included 'iko mbara' existent in certain parts of Igboland such as Awka and Owerri Division (Uchendu 1965; Ikpe 2004). It was a practice which allowed a married woman to have illicit sexual relations with the consent of her husband. Uchendu (1965: 5-6) notes that the husband's approval was sought with a gift of two jars of palm-wine, meat, chicken and monetary gifts among the Igbos in Owerri Division. Such liaisons were common in marriage contracts involving an older man. Similar practices were recorded by Ikpe (2004:17) among the people of Birom near Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. Among the Tivs hospitality towards guests was defined by the gift of their wives for the guests' sexual gratification and constituted another 'alternate' form of sexual expression.

Case studies across Africa demonstrate the inter-dependence of men/women prior to colonial rule. Scholarly attention has been drawn to the important role of women in trade in Africa, particularly West Africa (Illife 1987; Coquery-

1. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, in his *History of Sexuality* draws a link between power, discourse and sexuality. He argues that discourse is imbued with power and bodies and identities are discursively constituted. He refutes the theory of biological determinism and argues rather that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and thus vary over time.

Vidrovitch 1997; Chukwu 2005). The Shebro women of Sierra Leone according to Coquery-Vidrovitch were so successful that they requested British protection in Free Town to facilitate their economic activities. For the Bete women of Cote d'Ivoire, economic activities extended beyond long distance trading to include prospecting for gold (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997:31). Female market activities were also recorded, though to a lesser extent in East Africa, for example among the Kikuyu women of Kenya. The traders were menopausal and they often acted as peace brokers between warring trading comities.

Female identity in traditional Nigerian society was derived from multiple sources: as wives, mothers, breadwinners and producers. Motherhood deriving from a woman's reproductive power and linked to fertility was a vital source of female power. One's ownership of labour rather than land determined her level of agricultural expansion (Strobel 1982: 113). The importance of labour in the traditional agrarian Nigerian society was a contributing factor to the practice of polygyny and woman to woman marriage. Uchendu (1965: 10) notes that the Ngwa women enjoyed a high status, with opportunities for advancement almost comparable to men's.

Impact of colonial rule on gender relations and sexuality

The re-ordering of gender and sexual relations in colonial Nigeria and its negative impact on women has received much attention from scholars (Korieh 2001; Allen 1976; Amadiume 1987). Women, it is argued, lost their power under the male-privileging capitalist colonial economy which ascribed more value to male skills. Women's economic and reproductive skills were devalued and relegated to the domestic sphere. Chukwu (2005), in her study of Igbo women and the economic transformation of the colonial period, notes that colonial institutions influenced by the Victorian gender ethos favoured men. Technological innovations aimed at enhancing agricultural output such as the mechanised graters in the cassava industry and new techniques in the oil palm industry that targeted men, resulted in the loss of women's monopoly of the production and marketing of these products. In the same vein Korieh (2001:119) has argued that women's exclusion from agricultural extension and support services extended by the Colonial State encouraged the separation of economic roles by gender. Denial of access to credit and capital accumulation were some of the debilitating factors faced by women. At the same time the female's unremunerated labour and her role as reproducers of the labour force were pivotal to the colonial enterprise. Fundamentally, the entire gamut of the colonial economy marginalised women. Capitalist structures such as the coal and tin mines, the railroads, and the ensuing wage labour were male dominated. Alongside these were the demographic changes arising out of male emigration into urban centres for wage labour. It created a pool of single men and a market for commercial sex trade to flourish.

Prostitution devoid of all emotion is an economic transaction in which sex is traded for money. It therefore requires the existence of capitalist accumulation, an economy of money exchange. In pre-colonial Nigeria, structured by ties of kingship relations and a system of reciprocity, sex was devoid of monetary value. Extra-legal sexual liaisons rather than prostitution could be said to have pre-dated colonial rule.

The colonial experience became a site of contestation and negotiation for both the European and local actors as the new gender ideology of colonialism facilitated changes in gender roles and female sexuality in Nigeria. Prostitutes rewrote the patriarchal Victorian script of a woman's place in the domestic arena where her reproductive skills can be appropriately harnessed. By utilising the space opened up by colonial rule for material accumulation, prostitutes contested prescribed sexual identity. The body no longer became the last frontier subject to patriarchal control but could be utilised by the woman herself. Commercial sex was for some the more profitable means of economic survival in a capitalist money economy which subverted women's earning power.

Prostitution and the colonial policing of female sexuality

Prostitution in colonial Nigeria was a consequence of the socio-economic dislocations effected by European colonisation. It flourished in cosmopolitan centres such as Lagos, Kaduna, and Enugu where capitalist structures were well entrenched and had facilitated a high level of industrialisation and urbanisation. Ediba, Itu, Ikot Ekpene and Eket, where European companies like United African Company [UAC], Miller Brothers and John Holt had opened factories, also attracted migrant labour. This pool of wage-earning single males created new markets for sexual services. The Cross River region was a major source of prostitutes, particularly in the Upper Cross River region including the Ogoja Province. The official statistics of the Obubra division in the Ogoja Province show that 12% of the female population in the Nta clan were involved in prostitution. In the Bahumunu clan, about 15% had emigrated for purposes of prostitution, while in Nnam the number constituted about one-third of the adult female population (Naanen 1991:60). Indeed, by 1948, prostitution had become so endemic in Agwagune [Akunakuna] that its name became synonymous with prostitution (Naanen 1991:60). For instance, amongst the people of the Benue State, located to the north of the Cross River region, the word for

prostitute is akuna (Ochefu 1989:7), and in the Ibo-speaking areas to the west of the Cross River region prostitutes are referred to as akwunakuna.

An important feature of prostitution in the Cross River region during this period was its transnational network. The colonial era witnessed the proliferation of transnational prostitution along the African coastline to the Gold Coast (Ghana), Equatorial Guinea (Fernando Po) and Cameroun (Duala). The commercial centres in the Gold Coast (Ghana) – Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi and Tamale in the northern territories – were common places for prostitutes from the Cross River Basin to ply their trade. Private letters from serving soldiers to the colonial authorities revealing locations of wives who had migrated to the Gulf of Guinea for sex attest to this¹. In the 1940s, official statistics put the number of prostitutes practising at the Gold Coast to be 532². Such was the intensity of the Gold Coast-Nigeria sex trade that in 1939 the Gold Coast branch of the Nigerian Youth Movement commented that “the Gold Coast men and women who have not travelled further than their area believe that all Nigerian women are harlots and that (it) is a recognized custom in Nigeria”³. The lax anti-prostitution laws in the Gold Coast was one of the motivating factors for the sustained emigration of Nigerian females. The Gold Coast Criminal Code Section 435[1] persecuted only non-West African prostitutes. By implication, any West African including Nigerians could engage legally in the sex trade. The rationale behind this, as enunciated by Carina Ray (2007: 67), was to ‘protect white women from the alleged depravities of African men’. The preponderance of Nigerian sex workers in the Gold Coast was widely reported in the media.

Entry into prostitution was driven by poverty. Colonial rule engendered new forms of poverty which heightened women’s marginalisation. Direct taxation imposed on the people of the Eastern Provinces in 1928 was an essential prerequisite for integration of the domestic market into international trade (Naanen 2006:2). The basis for tax assessment proved disadvantageous to the rural peasants: it was on the basis of provable income, the wage earners whose income could be ascertained were charged a tax rate of 1 percent per annum, while the local peasant producers whose income could not be determined were charged a flat rate of 2-5 percent (Naanen 2006:6). As noted by Naanen, the palm belt attracted a heavier tax rate because of its relative prosperity. Ikot Ekpene Division whose calculable farmers’ income was estimated between £19-8s attracted a tax rate of 7 shillings per annum relative to that imposed on Aba Division where farmers’ income was estimated at £16.

Colonial rule saw the gradual erosion of rural standard of living exacerbated by the long worldwide economic depression of the late 1920s to 1930s. The slump in the world economy led to declining terms of trade and as noted by Martin (1989:77), during the 1920s the barter terms of trade for cocoa, groundnut and palm produce failed to reach 1910-1914 levels. Palm produce exporters suffered most in this economic recession: the volume of exported palm oil rose by 112 percent from 1909-13 and 1926-30; palm kernels and copra by 89 percent and cocoa by 256 percent (Martin 1989:77). The Cross River region which comprises part of the palm belt was most adversely affected since the people were dependent on palm produce for cash income. Naanen posits that the ability of the people to pay tax and their economic well-being was subject to activities in the world market (Naanen 2006:17). The displacement of the manila currency by the British West Africa currency further deepened rural poverty. Hitherto the manila had been the medium of exchange for local transactions, but with the introduction of direct taxation payable in British West Africa currency, the need for acquiring cash income became more pressing as it was needed not just for paying taxes but also for buying imports (Martin 1989; Naanen 2006).

Falling prices of palm produce led to increased output in an attempt to boost trade. The local farmers forced to concentrate more wholly on cash crop production became major markets for staple food items supplied by communities beyond the major palm belt. The effect was an integration of the local food prices with those of palm produce and by 1938 the impact of declining export prices had extended to other sectors of the economy (Martin 1989:80). Women who controlled local trade came to be adversely affected by fluctuating export prices (Phillip 1989; Illife 1987).

Male migrations, occasioned by various factors including attempts to evade taxation and the need for money income, resulted in the increase of female-headed households and were an important source of female poverty. One means of survival open to the woman was prostitution. Several studies on prostitution have also drawn a relationship between abandoned women or female-headed household and prostitution as illustrated by Van Onselen’s (1982) study of prostitution in South Africa and Ssewakriyanga’s (2004) study of female sex workers in Kampala. In the Nigerian context,

1. Obubdist 4/1/71 OB: 197, 1948, National Archive Enugu (thereafter NAE), “Complaint from Samuel Enyi Awara”, 21st July: No 259/86/1947, 1949, “Re: Madam Jenny Ofem-Wife of Ayep Nkanu” NAE 23rd April.
2. OB:503/2, 1941, *Cross River Harlots*, NAE 7th February.
3. Cadist 3/3/238, 1939, “Nigerian Prostitutes in the Gold Coast”. Letter from the Nigerian Youth Movement, National Archives Calabar (hereafter NAC), 28th June.

Ochefu's (1989) work on prostitutes in the Benue State of Nigeria as well as Naanen's (1991) exposition of prostitutes in the Obubra division of the Upper Cross River further substantiates this link.

The low level of development in the Upper Cross River region as noted above was an added impetus to the growth of prostitution. With the integration of the domestic economy into the global market, Nigeria became an enclave from which surplus was expatriated to the 'mother country'. Focus was on the production of cash crops to boost the revenue base of the colonial government. As a result, there was considerable regional variation, relating to degrees of integration into the global money economy (Naanen, 1996; Rodney, 1972). The tendency was for socio-economic activities to decrease in areas of limited economic importance to the colonial government. Attention came to be focused on the palm belt of the Owerri, Ikot Ekpene, and Calabar Province. Beyond this rich palm belt in the region of Nsukka, Abakaliki and Ogoja, the rate of development was slow (Ikime 1980: 11).

In this economic stagnation, women in a patriarchal society, where their labour was less valuable than that of men, were the hardest hit. The result was a growing resentment of the traditional patriarchal system which 'exploited' women; the creation of new tastes, values and status symbols occasioned by the colonial economy and which could not be sustained by the local economy (Naanen 1991: 64); as well as the lack of alternative means of earning a money income, made a large number of the female population turn to prostitution as a means of sustenance. This development was not peculiar to the Upper Cross River women, but was also noted among the Idoma women of present day Oturkpo, Okpokwu and Ado local government areas of Benue State (Ochefu 1989: 2). Similar circumstances of migrant labour and its demographic distortion of the economy, together with economic underdevelopment, also pushed women into prostitution.

The economic benefits of prostitution cannot be overlooked in the drive to engage in commercial sex trade. The high remuneration earned sex workers the name 'itinerant gold mines' (Naanen 1991). In the Obubra Division in 1942, calculable remittances by prostitutes amounted to 6,791. This figure represented more than a 100 percent over the public revenue of 3,325 accruing to the Obubra Division from 1937-1938 (Naanen 1991:64). In the Ogoja Province, remittances from prostitutes abroad from January to July 1943 totalled 4,534 (Naanen 1991: 64). The wealth accruable to migrant prostitutes is underscored in the context of the high level of impoverishment of the Upper Cross River region. Illife (1987:152) reports poor relations in Yako Village offering their services in exchange for a payment of yams. Transnational prostitutes came to number among the wealthiest class in the Upper Cross River region, and could influence decision-making in their communities. Income derived from prostitutes directly and indirectly through levies, taxes, remittances and gifts became an important source of capital accumulation in the region (Naanen 1991:64-5).

Prostitutes controlled their sexuality and derivable income from the sale of their sexual services. The absence of pimps contributed to this self-assertion although colonial reports reveal the utilisation of their 'town-boys' by the prostitutes for errands. They acted as part-time brokers for the prostitutes, in addition to working in the shipyards as casual laborers. The relative independence of prostitutes is also reported by Emmanuel Akyeampong (1997) in his study of prostitutes among the Akan of Gold Coast. The prostitutes developed collective strategies with shared responsibilities to protect their interests. Social networking was one of the ways they could negotiate and contest sites of oppression. Social and personal networks aided migration of trans-national sex workers and facilitated access to employment opportunities.

Colonial action on prostitution was not devoid of rumblings in the imperial centre. It was a manifestation of the impact on the domestic scene of norms and standards originating from the international arena. Calls to end prostitution could therefore be fitted into a wider platform built on patriarchal notions of a woman's proper place in society. This concern with welfare itself resonated from the post-World War II global reconfiguration: the politics of decolonisation; activities of the United Nations; and the policies of the newly elected Labour Party in Britain, and resulted in a landscape of regulated prostitution (Fourchard 2006; Aderinto 2007).

The 1940s reforms were predicated on British intervention in the lives of working class families in Britain who were said to breed destitute and needed to be properly trained and civilised. It was, as Foulchard (2006: 131) said, a 'transfer of British reform philosophy and practices into the colonies'. In the case of the latter, however, implementation became subject to contestation and negotiation as the reach of the colonialists into the Nigerian socio-economic milieu was fractured.

Media publications sensitising the public to rising criminality in Lagos; the danger of girl hawking, which not only led to prostitution but subjected them to molestation (Fourchard 2006; Aderinto 2007) and the linking of prostitution with the spread of venereal disease among European and African military personnel in Nigeria were significant in drawing the colonial government's attention to the need for regulating prostitution. In 1942, the city council of Lagos passed a law banning street hawking. This was followed the following year by the Children and Young Person's Act Ordinance. Policing of female sexuality with particular reference to prostitution cannot be divorced from the labour question. Family stability

was necessary for the creation and maintenance of a stable, responsible and responsive labour force especially in the aftermath of the 1940s strikes in British West-Africa (Cooper 1996). It became unprofitable to encourage prostitution in mining camps and other industrialised centres. Such considerations informed attempts by the state to assert moral and marital norms, as well as to instil a code of sexual morality.

Prostitutes thwarted culturally and morally acceptable expressions of sexuality, and prostitution opposed the cultural discretion expected in sexual matters. Such unpacking of dominant narratives provoked public censorship reinforced by politico-cultural and religious narratives (Esiet *et al.* 2001). Colonial schools were sites for the production and regulation of the local 'other' (Izugbara 2004).

One of the measures for regulating prostitution was the issuance of an exit permit. The Immigration Office of the Nigerian Police made it imperative for emigrants to procure a travel certificate and an exit permit. The former was to be issued by the local superintendent of police as a pre-requisite to the issuing of an exit permit by the national body of the Nigerian Police¹. The difficulty of ascertaining the purpose of travel militated against its success. The tightening of emigration laws stimulated a rise in the illicit "canoe traffic" between Nigeria and the Gold Coast².

Repatriation was another policy measure by the Nigerian Governor in collaboration with his Gold Coast counterpart. Repatriation took the following form:

[R]efusing admittance to women from Nigeria (a) when no good reason for entering the Gold Coast is advanced, and (b) repatriation to Nigeria of prostitutes and any other person connected with the profession, when they are known to be of Nigerian origin³.

The cost of repatriation was to be borne by the Nigerian government. However, this legislative measure was soon discontinued and the Governor of Nigeria noted that: "... it is doubtful whether even with unlimited extra staff, any control by the use of exit permits or by any other system would be feasible."⁴ Colonial authorities' perceived challenges to regulating prostitution derived from racist assumptions about the sexuality of Nigerians – of the eroticised and promiscuous female incapable of controlling her deviant desires (Stoler 1996; Aderinto 2007; Ray 2007).

Beyond fears of immorality in the Cross River region, issues of sexuality were tied to the internal structure of British rule. It helped to maintain racial borders. Sexual control was utilised as a fundamental tool for class and racial distinction and was implicated in a wider set of relations of power [Stoler 1996: 213]. This was not peculiar to Asia upon which Stoler's work is based, but was an important aspect of the internal structure of British rule in all her colonies including Nigeria, though to a lesser extent, and in varying locations. With the sustained presence of the Europeans in the colonies, sexual prescription by class, race and gender became increasingly central to the politics of empire and subject to varying scrutiny by the colonial power. Thus sexual politics in colonial Nigeria was important to the construction of imperial supremacy. The British tolerated concubinage as long as imperial control was not in question. Administrative reasons were proffered for this tacit encouragement of sexual access to local women. It served British interests by permitting the settlement and rapid growth of colonial personnel by a cheaper means than the importation of European women. Preference was given to bachelors in recruitment to the colonies and extra-marital relations were promoted (Ming 1983: 69).

In policing sex workers, the ambivalent roles of traditional and native authorities need to be interrogated. The overarching concern of these local actors seemed to be centred less on imposing morality and more on the generation of income by tapping into the wealth of the prostitutes as members of the family or through sanctions and levies on the prostitutes. The high levels of remuneration placed sex workers among the affluent members of society. A tremendous amount of income filtered into the coffers of the local governing body from fines imposed on prostitutes. The division's official report lucidly demonstrates this:

It is not an exaggeration to say that in certain areas of this division (notably Bahumunu, and between Afunatam and Bansara) ... all the elders of the areas mention ... openly admit of taking a "harlot fee" of two pounds from every woman prostituting on the Coast⁵.

1. Z.P. 1/XVII/3168, 1943, "Letter from Principal Immigrant Officer", NAE, 10th December.

2. O.B. 197/56, 1943, "Prostitution", NAE 10th December.

3. No.36005/116, 1941, "Traffic in Women in the Gold Coast", NAE, 26th September.

4. No 36005/116, 1941, *ibid.*

5. OB. 503/2, 1941 *op cit.*

Struggles over access to property and labour were implicated in attempts at regulating prostitution. The employment of matrilineal ties in the inheritance of properties circumscribed husbands' control over wives (Naanen 1991: 67), and meant that the benefits accruing from the sex trade were largely enjoyed not by their spouses but the prostitutes' relations. Colonial data provides evidence of complaints by men of mothers and brothers encouraging their daughters/sisters to emigrate for prostitution for economic benefits.

Access to labour cannot be divorced from the agitation of the chiefs for a legal sanction against prostitution. As shown by Phillips (1989: 43), the colonialists operated in collaboration with the local chiefs. It was the responsibility of the chiefs to supply the local labour needed to further the colonial aims. The joint emigration of young boys to the Gold Coast as an illegal source of cheap labour to the prostitutes depleted human capital and posed a problem for the chiefs as guarantors of labour. Aside from the inability to supply labour, the depletion of the population caused by the sex trade hindered revenue collection. Colonies had to be self-sufficient, thus funds for development projects had to be locally sourced. The economic viability of the colonies depended on the boost of trade and consequent development of enterprises that could be taxed to accommodate administrative costs. At the same time, the dynamics of the colonial economy had rendered communities in the Upper Cross River region remote and underdeveloped. With a population deprived of a large majority of the income-generating group, the capacity for public works was greatly reduced. In a letter of complaint to the Obubra division District Officer, the 'Egbism Quarter' in Agwagwune, a group of elders and members of the Egbism Improvement Union lamented that:

Our taxable males are few and for that sake our taxable money is so little that it does not suffice for use for general improvement of the town ... even the school fees which the church of Scotland Mission (sic) requests for the proper maintenance of the school is hard to be collected¹

Women's changing status brought about other changes. Most importantly, it reduced men's right over women. Income accruing from the sale of sex made the women financially better off than the men. They became the breadwinners in the family and with this role came authority. Although agitation by the menfolk against prostitution derived partly from the disrupted family life, a lot of it also derived from the fear of the change in power relations within the family in favour of the women.

An investigation of women's letters during the colonial period provides some evidence of the terms in which the prostitutes themselves made sense of their experiences. Prostitution was engaged in as an economic activity, and approached and undertaken as such. In the Gold Coast and other locations of work, some of the prostitutes had to work long hours to pay back transport debts incurred in the emigration process.

The women's letters allow one a glimpse of the hazards of the job. In a letter to her husband, in which she sends him money, twenty-two pounds to build a house, Elina Obinowo, a practising prostitute at the Gold Coast narrates her ordeals at the hands of one of her clients to her husband Eze. This man kicks her in the stomach for her refusal to take him as a lover. One assumes here that the request was to be an exclusive client as the letter points to a previous sexual relationship. According to her,

"At times one part of my body is dead right down. No quarrel bet[ween, me] and him, only he ask me to take him as my love ... I am trying for treatment."²

Disparaging remarks about other prostitutes give a hint of the rivalry involved and it was not uncommon for charms and amulets to be made use of by the girls. These charms were brought from the girls' communities through the help of their relations. To help her recover, and in accordance with her request, Elina's husband Eze Omeji procured medicine for her from a native doctor³. Elina's letter further highlighted the strong and pervasive matrilineal bond and buttresses the complaints by husbands and members of the local councils about male siblings and their deep involvement in the management of the prostitutes' finances. In her letter, Elina sent 10 shillings to her brother to assist in the maintenance of her daughter. The brother was also directed to assist her husband in the building of a house⁴.

In examining the diverse correspondences of this period, one notes the near absent refusal by husbands of practising prostitutes to re-absorb them into the household. What were prevalent were rather agitations for the colonial government to institute steps to force the recalcitrant wives back. For instance the protestations by Mr Samuel Enyi

1. Egbism Quarter, 1948, "Letter from Egbism Quater, Agwagwune", NAE 3rd April.

2. Obinowo, E. 1943, *Letter to Husband Eze Omeji* NAE 26th August.

3. Omeji, E. 1943, *Private Letter* NAE 2nd March.

4. Obinowo, E. 1943 *Letter to Brother James Enyi* NAE 10th January.

Awara, working in Sekondi about his wife prostituting in the same area and requesting the District Officer, Obubra Division, to enforce her repatriation¹; in the same vein Mr Ayep Nkanu of the same Division complained of being left alone at home for two years to care for four children while the wife ran away to be a prostitute in the Gold Coast²; there was also Mr John Okon's objection to his wife's participation in the sex trade at the Gold Coast³.

Despite these remonstrations, the men all show a willingness to take back the "fallen" women. This opens an interesting analysis in trying to understand the underlying motives in the sex trade. One of these could be economic motives, the need to tap into the wealth accrued by their wives as prostitutes. It should be noted that wages earned by African labourers were very low. At the same time, this was happening when the Colonial government was attempting to create a more stable labour force (Cooper 1996). This encouraged the emigration of families to join their husbands at their places of work or stations. It generally tried to ferment a more stable family perceived as necessary for a more effective and productive wage earner.

Another way of analysing men's acceptance of their prostitute wives could be through a gender lens. As women through niches opened by colonial rule became masculinised, there was a turning of gender ideologies. As the women of the Cross River region became breadwinners, the authority of the men over them was greatly reduced. Collaboration with the Colonial government in policing prostitution could be read as attempts to re-assert their authority through the help of the state. Women in a patriarchal setting are defined within the realm of domesticity and a distinction is made between the public sphere, designated as a space of socially valuable activities and male, while the private is drawn as the women's space (Tamale 2004: 20). The repatriation of the women from the Gold Coast, served also to wrest them from the public sphere back to the domestic space, where they are biologically equipped to look after children and keep the home.

Conclusion

Colonial narratives eroticising the Nigerian 'other' were employed in the colonial 'civilising mission' of moulding 'proper' women out of the primitive, sexually uncontrollable Nigerian woman. It was in the conjugal space that colonial interventions brought the most profound changes. In reconfiguring indigenous sexualities, the Colonial discourse silenced alternative expressions of sexuality, ascribing criminality to such indigenous social relations like polygyny, woman to woman marriage and concubinage. Utilising the prism of prostitution, this paper has shown how the prostitute body became a site of the contestation of prescribed sexual identity. By asserting her sexuality, the prostitute thwarted the hegemonic control of colonial dominant consciousness.

Acknowledgement

The archival evidence used in this research has been primarily derived from the National Archives, Enugu (NAE) and to a lesser extent the National Archives, Calabar. The paper forms part of a larger body of work on prostitution and child labour in Southern Nigeria. I am grateful for the insightful comments gleaned at several international conferences on gender, including the CODESRIA Gender Institute, Cairo.

References

- Aderinto S. 2007. 'The Girls in Moral Danger: Child prostitution and Sexuality in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria 1930s-1950'. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* Vol.1, no. 2: 1-22.
- Akyeampong, E. 1997. 'Sexuality and Prostitution among the Akan of the Gold Coast 1650-1950', *Past and Present*, Vol. 156: 14-73.
- Allen, Judith V. 1972 ' "Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women'. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 6, no. 2: 165-181.
- Amadiume, I. 1987. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books.
- Chacha, Babere Kerata and Nyangena, Kenneth. 2006. "Globalisation of Sex and the Problematics of Gender Identities in Africa: From Human Rights to Women's Rights to Sexual Freedom" *CODESRIA Bulletin*, nos.1&2:29.
- Chukwu, Gloria. 2005. 'Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in South-Eastern Nigeria 1900-1960' in Molefi Asante (ed.), *African Studies History, Politics, Economy and Culture*, London: Routledge: 237-246.
- Cooper, Frederick..1996. *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge: African Studies Series 89.
- Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catharine. 1997. *African Women: A Modern History*, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Esiet, U.E., Adebayo, C.O., Bello, M.V., Booth, R., Esiet, I. I., Esiet, N. and Yusuf, B. 2001. "Sexuality in Nigeria", *The International Encyclopaedia of Sexuality*, viewed 10 February 2012, from www.hu-berlin.de/sexology.IES/Nigeria.

1. Awara, S. E. 1948. "Complaint from Samuel Enyi Awara" NAE 21st July.

2. Nkanu, A. 1949. Letter to District Officer (D.O.) Obubra Division, NAE 30th January.

3. Okon, J. 1943. Letter to D.O. Obubra Division, NAE 15th October 1943.

- Fourchard, Laurent. 2006. "Lagos and the Invention of Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria 1920-60", *Journal of African History*, Vol. 47: 115-137.
- Gibson, Lisa. 2003. *Innocence and Purity vs Deviance and Immorality: The Spaces of Prostitution in Nepal and Canada*, MA, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, viewed 19 February 2012, from <http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/GIBSON-INNOCENCE.pdf>.
- Haste, C. 2002. *Rules of Desire*, London: Vintage.
- Ikime, O. (ed).1980, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Hienemann.
- Ikpe, E. B. 2004. 'Human Sexuality in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective' *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series 2*, Lagos: African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre.
- Illife, J. 1987. *The African Poor: A History* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Izugbara, O. 2004. 'Patriarchal Ideologies and Discourses of Sexuality in Nigeria' *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar 2*, Lagos: African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre.
- Korieh, C. J. 2001. 'The Invisible Farmer? : Women, Gender and Colonial Agricultural Policy in the Igbo Region of Nigeria 1913-1954', *African Economic History*, Vol. 29: 117-62.
- Lovejoy, P. E. 1988. 'Concubinage and the Status of Women Slaves in Early Colonial Northern Nigeria' *Journal of African History*, Vol. 29, 2: 245-66.
- Martin, S. M. 1989. "The Long Depression: West African Export Producers and the World Economy, 1914-45" in Ian Brown (ed.) *The Economics of Africa and Asia in the Inter-war Depression* London: Routledge.
- Ming, H. 1993. 'Barracks – Concubinage in the Indies, 1887-1920' *Indonesia* Vol. 35 April.
- Musisi, N. B. 2001. 'Gender and the Cultural Construction of 'Bad Women' in the Development of Kampal-Kibuga 1900-1962' in Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy (eds.).
- Naanen, B. B. B. 1991. "'Itinerant Gold Mines'": Prostitution in the Cross River Basin of Nigeria, 1930-1950" *African Studies Review*: 57-79.
- Noah, M. E. 1978. 'Efik Expansion and European Influence in the Cross River Basin, 1884-1935' *The Calabar Historical Journal*, Calabar: University of Calabar Vol. 2, no. 1: 1-31.
- Nyoyoko, V. G. 1997, "Ethno-Cosmological Survey of Annang Society, *AfE Annang Journal of Minority Studies*, Vol. 1, no. 1: 8-19.
- Ochefu, Y. 1989. 'The impact of Women Colonialism on Nigerian Women: The Case of Prostitution ion Idoma Society' in Institute of African Studies university of Ibadan, *Conference on the Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women* Ibadan, Nigeria 16-18 October.
- Parpart, J. 1990. 'Wage Earning Women and the Double Day: the Nigerian Case' in Shawn Stichtu and J. Parpart (eds.) *Women Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour*, London: Macmillan.
- Pederson, S. 1991, "National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-Making" *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 63, no. 4: 647-680.
- Phillips, A. 1989. *The Enigma of Colonialism: British Policy in West Africa* London: James Currey.
- Ray, C. 2007. 'The Sex Trade in Colonial West Africa (Part 2)' *New African* January : 66-67.
- Roberts, R., and Mann, K. 1991. 'Introduction' in Kristen Mann and Richard Roberts (eds.) *Law in Colonial Africa* London: James Currey.
- Schler, L. 2004. 'Writing African Women's History with Male Sources: Possibilities and Limitations',
- Spivak, G.C. 1999, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Towards a History of Vanquishing Present* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ssewakiryanga, R. 2004, "Sexual Identities and Sex Work – Interrogating the Interface: A Study on Constructed Identities Among Female Sex Workers in Kampala" *Gender, Economics and Entitlements in Africa*, CODESRIA Book Series 2, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Stoler, A.L. 1996. "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia" Joan W. Scott (ed.) *Feminism and History* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strobel, M. 1982. "African Women" *Sign* Vol. 8, no. 1, Autumn: 109-131.
- Tamale, S. 2004. "Gender Trauma in Africa: Enhancing Women's Links to Resources, *Gender, Economics and Entitlements in Africa* .
- Uchendu, V. C. 1965. Concubinage among Ngwa Igbo of Southern Nigeria *Journal of the Internal African Institute* [online] Vol. 35, no. 2, viewed 28 May 2012, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1158231>.
- Van Onselen, C. 1982. *Studies in the Economic and Social History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*. Vol. 1, New Babylon. Hallow Essex: Longman.
- Walter, R. 1972, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London: Bogle-L'Overture.