THE EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM ON AFRICAN WOMEN

HLW333
Marriage, Family, and Kinship in Colonial Africa
25 April 2019
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Introduction

Colonialism impacted numerous countries across the globe between the 15th and 20th centuries. Compared to the colonial periods of other countries, “colonial rule came late to Africa” and was “relatively brief.”¹ Despite its brevity, European colonization of Africa affected multiple facets of African life, changing the workings of African economies, politics, social hierarchies, and interpersonal relationships. Africa also experienced colonization by an unusually large number of European powers: Britain, France, Portugal, Germany, Italy, Spain, and King Leopold of Belgium.² Because of the diversity of colonist and native African cultures, colonialism affected individuals differently; Africans experienced colonialism and its effects in unique ways.

Gender played an important role in how Africans experienced and adapted to colonialism individually. While both men and women benefited and suffered from colonialism in various ways, colonialism heavily impacted women through its alteration of African marriage, family, and kinship. Studying academic and fictional literature on colonial Africa shows how the indirect rule utilized during colonialism affected African politics, economy, and society. These changes in turn shifted the functions and definitions of marriage, family, and kinship in Africa, revealing how deeply intertwined African politics and economy were with marriage, family, and kinship. Looking at how the changes in African society and relationships affected African women indicates how significant the changes to the areas of marriage, family, and kinship were in the lives of African women during the colonial period and offers a comprehensive way to understand

² Parker and Rathbone, African History, 94.
African women’s experience of colonialism. Furthermore, it emphasizes the resilience and adaptability exhibited by African women during the colonial period.

**Effects of Colonialism on African Power Structures**

Africa’s large size, unfamiliar terrain, and diverse peoples posed challenges to European colonizers. Imposing European rule on African territories was not easy, and “rulers were confronted with the stark realities of administering vast tracks of territory and diverse, often recalcitrant peoples on shoestring budgets.”³ To address these problems, colonizers utilized systems of indirect rule, an approach through which colonial officials used existing African rulers or placed native Africans in positions of authority to help establish and enforce European rule. For example, during its process of colonizing the French Sudan, French “colonial administrators continued to be torn between supporting ‘customary practice’ and eradicating practices that were ‘contrary to French civilization.’”⁴ Soon, “administrators on the ground, such as district commandants and their deputies, realized that social order rested on working relationships with local leaders and male elders.”⁵ Indirect rule, utilizing existing African institutions of power, proved a more successful method of establishing systems of European authority than did destroying or ignoring those institutions.

Indirect rule changed African political and social power structures in many ways. It disrupted existing forms of African rule, which varied throughout different regions. Some African societies were more egalitarian than others and were ruled by the will of the majority. Other societies kept power within one family in a more monarchical structure. This type of

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⁵ Burrill, “Returned Soldiers and Runaway Wives,” 82.
society is seen in Book I of the novel *Kintu*, which discusses the numerous, and often treacherous and violent, transfers of the rule of Buganda between members of the same family.\(^6\) The succession of African monarchical-structured regimes depended on lineage and familial kinship; European indirect rule undermined the family-based inheritance of power in these monarchical regimes, especially through European colonial administrators’ appointment of new authority figures over current African rulers. Even when colonizers left current African power-holders in authority positions, they still disrupted all types of African rule by redefining what type of power and how much of it individuals in power had.

Furthermore, colonial attempts at setting up systems of African rule that acted per European colonial officials’ direction overlooked women completely and strengthened patriarchal structures of political and social power. In Libreville, Gabon, “French personnel appointed elder and often illiterate men to preside over administrative and territorial units.”\(^7\) The European instinct to select of elder African men to hold positions of power reflected European patriarchal ideals, showing how “colonialism’s assumptions, as well as its architects, were largely patriarchal.”\(^8\) African societies were patriarchal prior to colonialism, as seen in the case of African societies in Gabon, where “there is no evidence that women held formal political roles or traded actively,” but colonialism made African patriarchal structures even more patriarchy, especially through its influence on marriage and relationships.\(^9\)

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Colonialism foisted European ideas of sexuality and marriage on African marriages and relationships, which were the main avenues through which women could wield any political and social power. One way through which Europeans affected these power structures was the colonial court system, where colonial judges devalued women’s positions as wives and consequently reduced the social power women gained through marriage and gave it to men. Because of Europeans’ racist hesitancy to expect complexity from African societies and because European marriages were fairly standardized, colonial courts struggled to accurately understand the numerous unique engagement and marital processes in Africa. African marriages sharply contrasted with religious-based European marriages. For example, Asante marriages fell into roughly six categories: “marriage between a free man and a free woman…concubinage…marriage between a free man and a pawn…marriage between a free man and a slave…levirate marriage…and sororate marriage.”\(^\text{10}\) During colonialism, courts often oversimplified and misconstrued the complexities of African marriages and relationships, which were foreign to Europeans; “concepts such as ‘wife,’ ‘marriage,’ ‘lover,’ and ‘adultery’ became increasingly problematic…because indigenous practices were not commensurable with these categories of colonial control.”\(^\text{11}\)

An example of the courts’ confusion over marriage exists in the graphic novel *Abina*. Abina pled her case in court to free herself from enslavement under an African man named Quamina Eddoo but she failed to make the court understand her situation. During the story, Abina claims to already be married and cites her husband’s symbolic gift to her of beads as proof; Eddoo refutes Abina’s assertion, saying that Abina is betrothed to another man in his


\(^{11}\) Hawkins, “‘The Woman in Question,’” 118.
service because he gave her clothes. These two different marriage-signifying exchanges confused the colonial court, and that confusion, combined with their confusion in other areas of the case, led to Abina losing the case.12 Abina’s story also exemplifies how “the courts became a battleground where women challenged patriarchal authority.”13 While women’s use of the courts in this way was short-lived and soon created backlash from colonial authorities, it shows how women took advantage of the fleeting opportunities given to them to strengthen their positions in an increasingly changing and patriarchal society.

African women’s “social identity as wives, upon which social practices had been predicated, was replaced by a proprietorial concept of women’s belonging to husbands. In the courts women went from being wives to husbands to wives of husbands.”14 Europeans sometimes struggled to distinguish between African marriage and slavery; “some colonial ideologies… cast the institution of customary marriage among Africans as ‘slavery in disguise.’”15 Colonial courts undervalued the societal importance of African wifedom and, by placing women under husbands as property per European ideals, they decreased women’s rights as individuals and the political and social power they held through household positions. Overall, colonization “created a bureaucracy of rule that was constituted exclusively by men and entirely devoid of personal, familial ties. That process rendered women’s domestic roles incompatible with the exercise of political power.”16

14 Hawkins, “‘The Woman in Question,’” 133.
Effects of Colonialism on African Economics

In addition to altering African political and social power structures, colonialism changed the African economy. Europeans relied heavily on native Africans’ assistance in early colonialism and utilized relationships with African women to survive and to strengthen their economic success:

African women were the primary conduit through which European men accessed indigenous medical knowledge and care during their frequent illnesses…[relationships with local women] also allowed European men to cement profitable commercial and political alliances with local families whose social, political, and trade networks were opened only to trusted strangers whose loyalty could be assured.\(^\text{17}\)

While some considered the African women who entered into relationships with Europeans to be in positions of greater economic and social power, this was rarely the case. Furthermore, “the women who acquired wealth and power through their relationships with European men typically did so because they were willing to treat others, just as they had once been treated, as tradable commodities.”\(^\text{18}\) As Europeans became more established in Africa, relationships with native Africans became less important and Africans came to rely on European employment.

Also, as colonialism progressed, the type of goods and services produced in Africa’s economy changed. Europeans increased exports from Africa, enlisting cheap African labor. In Niger, for example, “the economy…shifted away from primary emphasis on grain production and regional trade in goods such as cotton, leather and tobacco towards the production and export of peanuts for the international market.”\(^\text{19}\) Colonial officials implemented taxes in African colonies, introducing Africans’ new need for cash. In Libreville, Gabon, “the mid-1920s ushered

\(^{17}\) Ray, *Crossing the Color Line*, 33.
\(^{18}\) Ray, *Crossing the Color Line*, 34.
in the decline of an economy in which Africans controlled their terms of engagement and work into an ‘economy of exploitation’ in which African laborers lost the means to determine the nature, duration, and remuneration of their labor.”

African men had to find work under Europeans in order to receive cash wages with which to pay taxes. In Libreville, men went to work in the rising timber industry; some men “migrated to northern Cote d'Ivoire to seek labor on plantations in order to enter the cash economy.”

Taxes and the use of cash affected the type of labor women performed, too. Prostitution as an institution grew and, as a form of earning wages, became a form of domestic labor and a way for women to make money without performing agricultural labor; it “was how many women got by.” With rising taxes during colonialism, women’s wage contributions became vital to many families. Among the Fang people of Gabon, wives sometimes prostituted themselves to men traveling for the timber industry, and “the money earned permitted some Fang men to pay the new and perpetually increasing tax requirement.” Prostitution also provided poor women with the means “to create families with themselves as household heads.” Arguably, women gained more agency through prostitution than through entering more permanent relationships with European men. Rarely could women acquire property through interracial marriages, yet “women, in the absence of formal employment opportunities, earned the money with which to acquire property through prostitution.” The rise in prostitution as an industry also fueled existing European “stereotypes of uncontrolled sexuality.”

24 White, The Comforts of Home, 10.
Cash requirements changed African bridewealth payments as well. Traditionally, 

Women [were] able to use gift exchange to define themselves and marriage not simply because the material goods embodied metaphorical statements about women and marriage, but also because the giving of gifts create[d] social debt, and that social debt [would] vary with the qualities of the material goods which created it.  

The shift of bridewealth payments from material goods to cash and continual increases in bridewealth prices made it so that “young men across ethnicities could not afford to marry until later in life.” European men, however, could afford the rising bridewealth, and families sometimes married daughters to European men in return for cash. In the novel *Homegoing*, a pair of African parents marry their daughter, Effia, to a European governor because of his lucrative bridewealth offer: “[The European man] would pay thirty pounds up front and twenty-five shillings a month in tradable goods to Baaba as bride gift. More than even Abeeku could offer, more than had been offered for any other Fante woman in this village or the next.” The change in bridewealth is a strong example of how colonialism’s alterations of the African economy affected African marriages and family. 

**Conclusion**

As noted by historian Rachel Jean-Baptiste, “political and economic transformations shaped gender, marriage, and sexual relationships” during the colonial period in Africa. Colonialism and the use of indirect rule disrupted existing African political and social structures. European officials and courts diminished the already small amount of political and social power included in African wifedom by strengthening the patriarchy in Africa, and women’s agency and independence mostly decreased. With the push for international trade, mainly through exports,

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and the introduction of taxes, colonialism brought cash to Africa, significantly altering African marriages through changes in bridewealth forms and prices. The need for cash also spurred on the institutionalization of prostitution, a means by which women could earn wages and, in some cases, accumulate enough wealth to own property. Families and single women realized the economic value of being a woman; parents married daughters to Europeans for higher-than-usual bridewealths, husbands prostituted their wives, and women prostituted themselves. Even educating women was seen as a pay-off. One of the sections in *Kintu* discusses how African parents “realized that an educated daughter made for a better pension fund than an educated son…she could become a nurse, a teacher, or even a secretary and catch a rich husband.”

Studying fictional and academic literature on colonial Africa provides insight into how colonialism’s alteration of African politics and economics significantly changed African family, marriage, and kinship. Literature on this topic also reveals how impactful the political, economic, and social changes were to African women, especially through the changes enacted upon marriage and family. Studying colonial Africa not only shows the difficulties African women faced in the rapidly shifting environment of colonial Africa. Examination of the colonialism reveals that African women showed remarkable resilience to the mostly negative changes in their societies and homes. Despite the difficult situations in which they were placed, African women quickly adapted to the circumstances and made the best of whatever opportunities they were given.

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