

The Origin and Nature of Traditional Gender Division of Labour among the Berom of the Jos Plateau in Northern Nigeria

Alahira H.A¹

Abstract

Gender division of labour has been as old as history differing from culture to culture in time and space which has implications for women's empowerment and societal development. This, therefore, necessitates the need for both micro and macro empirical research and study of the gender division of labour in different cultures especially in Africa where gender gap is the highest and academic research is at most gender blind. This has informed our study of the nature of traditional gender division of labour in Berom society. The paper examines and analyses the origin and nature of gender division of labour in Berom society and the extent to which tradition, religion and their general world view influenced gender division of labour and the implication this had on the role and status of women in traditional Berom society. This will provide a general background from which we can understand the changes that took place in gender division of labour in modern Berom society. Such a study will be of relevance not only to academicians but also to development planners, national and international agencies, NGO'S and CBO's.

Introduction

The analysis of the sexual or gender division of labour of the Beron society during the colonial period can only be meaningful by situating it within the general debate and conceptualisation of sexual division of labour. Even though gender or sexual division of labour is as old as history differing patterns have been identified with different historical epochs, classes, ecosystems etc.²

¹ PhD, Department Of History, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria.

² See for example, Baumen Hermann, "The Division of Work according to Hoe Cultures", Africa Journal of the International Institute of African Language and Culture, NO.1, NO.3, 1978; Norma Perchonock, "Family, Class and Modes of Production: Notes on the Material Basis of Women's Oppression, Women in Nigeria (WIN) 2nd Annual Conference, 20-22 April, 1983.

Division of labour by sex has been characteristic of all societies but there is no consensus about the source or origin of sexual division of labour. Some scholars see the sexual division of labour as originating from natural or biological differences between the male and female. According to Engel, "The division of labour was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature; it existed only between two sexes. The men went to war, hunted fish, and provided the raw materials for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared for the house and prepared food and clothing. They cooked, weaved, sewed. Each was master of his or her own field of activity."³

This view has been articulated by structuralisms' theory of origin of sexual division of labour propagated and expatiated upon by different scholars in different disciplines. This is based on the belief that biological differences affect women and men's physiological functions in relation to the psyche, body, intellect and sensuality.⁴ They argued that male and female sexual characteristics start right from the embryonic stage, which is exhibited, in almost every physical variable and increases with maturation.⁵ These biological and physical differences invariably affect men and women's sexual roles in the society. Women subordination is seen as a universal phenomenon that is manifested at two levels: nature/biology social/ patriarchal male authority and subordination to male figures (father, uncles, nephews etc) within the families.⁶ Mies, in her classical book on Patriarchy and Accumulation on World Scale attributed gender division of labour to the emergence of patriarchal societies.⁷ This position has resulted in the emergence of radical feminist women liberation movements that are anti biological functions of women such as pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing. They are anti-men and anti patriarchy because they see these as the source of women exploitation and subordination.⁸

However, it is clear as Mies, Aisha and others have argued that the biological and natural differences between the sexes do not fully explain the differences in sexual division of labour in different societies in time and space.

³ Engels, F. Quoted in Imam, A "Towards the Adequate Analysis of the Position Women" in *women in Nigeria Today*, Zed Press, London, 1985, p.17.

⁴ Clark, S.B, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in the Light of Scripture and Social Sciences*, Servant Books Ann Arbor, Michigan, 980, pp.381-390, 433-434.

⁵ Ibid, p.400

⁶ Ibid, p. 414.

⁷ Mies, *Patriarchy and accumulation on world Scale*, pp 35-73

⁸ See for example, Alahira, H.A., "Women Empowerment: Redefining its Scope for National Stability in Nigeria;" *Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Port-Harcourt, 15-18th November, 998.

This is because cultural practices differ in the way tasks are allocated to men and women. Sexual roles differ in different societies according to:

- a) The degree of women involvement in the economic and political life;
- b) The degree to which men are allowed to be involved in domestic duties;
- c) The primary task of men and women in different spheres such as agriculture.

Thus, male and female differences and sex roles should be analysed not as individual biological entities but as social beings within the social context to which they belong⁹ which could be understood through cross-cultural study and ethnographical research. It is the dialectical interplay between nature/biology and socio-cultural practices that explains sexual division of labour, male responsibility and dominance in public life, women responsibility for domestic life, female subordination and other cultural role differences between men and women in history, including advanced technological societies.

Our position is that taking any of the two extreme positions between biological and social factors is reductionist and we agree partially with Clark that the social relationships of men and women and the gender roles which grow out of these relationships are not merely produced by a process of socialisation or cultural conditioning but the biological nature of the human race makes a considerable contribution to the development of men's and women's roles.¹⁰ Clark argues that cross-cultural studies have shown that men hold the dominant position in every known society and all men exhibit basic characteristics, which suit them for this purpose while women are suitable for domestic and family life for the same reasons.¹¹ We shall, however, modify Clark's position by stating that both sociological and biological factors to a lesser or larger extent account for the differences in sex roles depending on several variables such as culture, religious belief, the mode of production, technological change etc. Thus, we can only conclude which of the two factors play the dominant role in sex role differentiation based on a critical study of the conjecture of the different variables in any society at a particular point in time. Our intention in this paper is to examine the origin and nature of gender division of labour in the Berom society as a case study.

⁹ Ibid, p.40.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.434.

¹¹ Ibid.

It is believed that traditional and modern technological societies exhibit different characteristics and patterns of sex roles. Traditional societies, which are characterised by subsistence economy, require collective communal labour for production, which makes male and female sex roles less differentiated and complementary. There is also no sharp division between public life dominated by men and private domestic life dominated by women in traditional societies except in predominantly Moslem societies where *pudah* (women seclusion) was practiced. But even though traditional societies have diverse social, political and economic traits and exhibit these universal attributes different from technological societies, they still exhibit unique peculiarities which are demonstrated in the case of the Berom society. In modern technological societies technological developments produced social pattern different from traditional societies, which transformed social relationships, sex roles and the family.¹² In modern societies sex roles are highly differentiated and less complementary. The division between private and public life is more distinct. The introduction of colonialism, modernity and technological change has transformed traditional societies by radically altering their social relationships and consequently sex roles of which the Berom society was not an exception.

Gender Division of Labour in Africa

There is general paucity of literature on the sexual division of work in African societies especially in the pre-colonial period. Baumann's study however provides the general over view of the division of labour by sex for the whole of the African sub regions. A few specific studies of ethnic groups, nations and eco-systems have also been done mostly on the postcolonial period.¹³ But there is hardly any study that has been under taken on the colonial period in Nigeria. Generally in sub-Saharan Africa, women are the primary labour force on the farms.

¹² Ibid, p.469

¹³ See for example: Duncan Beatrice Akua, *Women in Agriculture in Ghana*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Accra, Oppong Christine and abu Katherine *Seven Roles of Women, Impact of Education, Migration and Employment and Ghanian Mothers*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1987; Ngur Nema, "Women in Agriculture in Kaduna, Katsina, Bauchi, Kano and Sokoto States of Nigeria, Review of Available Information", Woman's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), University of Ibadan and Ford Foundation Research Project on Women in Agriculture in Nigeria, December, 1988.

Men carry out the more taxing farm operations like land clearing, ploughing, rigging or hoeing, fencing etc, while women till the soil in some cultures but almost always plant, transplant, weed, applying manure, harvest, process, transport, preserve, store and market the agricultural produce.¹⁴

The extent to which both sexes participate in what is generally regarded as the women or men's tasks as enumerated above depends on the culture, ecosystem and social change. For example among the Kataf, women do not traditionally clear land, plough or make ridges but Jaba women do clear the farm except in cases where the bush is too thick and they also made ridges especially for crops that were mostly produced by women like bambara nuts.¹⁵ Among the Jaba the whole family work on the land each contributing his/her quota. But among the Maguzawa, women produce almost all the food needs of the entire household.¹⁶ Among the Gbagi, men cleared the land while women sowed seeds, transported produce from the farm on their shoulders because it was (and still is) a taboo for Gbagi women to carry things on their heads and they were solely responsible for marketing farm produce. As compensation for the work done Gbagi women receive a bundle of corn from her husband for sowing and one bundle for every four bundles of corn she transports from the farm to the home. This seemingly reward system by the men motivated the women to work as beast of burden so that a woman could carry up to 100 lbs of corn at a time.¹⁷

Baumann linked the division of work according to sex in Africa to the oldest form of patriarchy, which had the most intensive soil cultivation, which was done to a greater extent by men. The most typical of this is the Bobo culture where all agricultural work was done by men including weeding. Women only helped in sowing into a hole already dug by men.¹⁸ But the process of sexual division of labour remains obscure.

¹⁴ Ngur Nema, "Women in Agriculture in Kaduna, Katsina, Bauchi, Kano and Sokoto States of Nigeria: Review of Available Information", Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), University of Ibadan and Ford Foundation Research Project on Women in Agriculture in Nigeria, December, 1988, p.3.

¹⁵ Olayiwole, C. "Rural Women's Participation in Agricultural Activities: Implications for Training extension Home Economists, Ph.D, College of Home Economics Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, quoted in Ngur N., p.12.

¹⁶ Ngur N., op.cit , pp.12-14.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.15

¹⁸ Bauman, p.298.

He associated men's work in the Sudan and East Africa with patriarchal agricultural civilization where cultivation is pre-dominantly done by men compared to the relatively latter women hoe culture of West Africa and the ethno-geographical women hoe culture of the forest zone of Western and Central Africa.¹⁹ But it is not yet conclusive whether the women's hoe culture was adapted into men's patriarchal hoe culture or there were new developments that transformed patriarchal men hoe culture into matriarchal women hoe culture.

Baumann concedes to the view that the emergence of men's hoe culture with the corresponding patriarchal social system was relatively newer development.²⁰ But our study of the Berom economy during the colonial period also suggests the possibility of the change from men hoe culture to that of women. Thus most of what Baumann identified as women's hoe culture in Africa could be of relatively newer development from men's patriarchal hoe culture due to either internal or external social, economic, cultural or political changes.

The pre-colonial Berom society exhibits some of the features of what Baumann describes as men's hoe culture within a patriarchal social organisation where there was a high level of division of task according to sex both in the domestic and Agricultural sphere. In the domestic sphere, men build, maintain and repair houses while women processed and cooked food, washed, fetched water, firewood, soup ingredients, cared for the sick and elderly and reared children. In farm work the women did most farm work except threshing *gai* or millet and making ridge for yam and millet. Even though men participate in less farm tasks than women, patriarchal male members of households had direct access to land and ownership of the produce from the land. Thus, even though it was a communal society, ultimate ownership of property including labour was under the control of senior male patriarchal members of the households or clans. In fact even women especially the married ones were so to speak "owned" by their husbands or *Njem* lovers.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.300.

²⁰ Ibid, p.308

However, the division of tasks though different was seen to be complementary. As a result farms were not strictly divided into men and women's farms as in the case of the Maguzawa where women's farms *gayauna* were independent farms solely owned and controlled by the women but on which she produced almost all the entire food needs of the household. The men helped only when the woman's proceeds was exhausted. Proceeds from men's farms was used to pay taxes, buy farm implements and meet other general social obligations such as marriages etc.²¹ In the case of Berom women however, even the compound or backyard farms which were kept by women (on which early crops were grown) were managed as part of the general household farm. The social organization of labour among the Berom revolved around the family farm in which the work of all the other members of the household (male and female) was seen to be complementary.

The Gender Role of Women in Berom World View and Belief

Berom women's labour and tasks was highly appreciated and not looked upon as secondary or insignificant by the society. The great importance attached to women's tasks and labour is evident from the Beroms' worldview, norms and beliefs associated with agriculture. The Berom traditional belief is anthropocentric in which man is given a central position from which he attempts to manipulate the material and supernatural world around him.²² They believe in the interaction and interconnectedness between the super natural and material world as a means of maintaining a balance and harmony in the universe and the social order.²³ In order to accomplish this, the Berom society was expected to observe all the taboos in order to appease *Dagwi* (God) and the spirits (including ancestral spirits) in order to obtain their favour for protection and general progress of the society. For this reason every area of Berom's life and socio-economic activities was characterised by rituals. We are going to examine the rituals associated with agriculture and the role that women played in it.

²¹ Ngur N. op.cit, pp.13-14.

²² Jacobs, C.C. Berom Traditional Religion, unpublished manuscript. For detailed discussion on the Berom see Alahira H.A, "The Role of Women in the Colonial Economy of Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of the Berom on the Jos Plateau, 1900-1960" Ph.d Dissertation , Ahmadu Bello University , Zaria , Nigeria, December, 2001.

²³ Ibid, p.39.

The Role of Women in Berom Rituals Associated with Agriculture

The examination of the roles of women in Berom rituals in connection with agriculture will enable us to understand the origin and the role played by Berom women in agriculture. The Berom were attached to the land both spiritually and economically hence they had many rituals to protect and safeguard the land and the crops.²⁴ The whole of the Berom agricultural calendar was marked with the performance of prescribed rituals, rites and festivals dedicated to the spirits. Berom women played prominent roles in such ritual, which indicates the important roles they played in the economy of the Berom society. Some of the major festivals with the attendant rites include the *mandieng*, *Nshok (Badu)*, *worongchun*, and *uwana*, which signifies rain rites, fertility rites, first fruits etc.

The *mandieng* marks the beginning of the rainy season and it is celebrated to appeal to *Dagwi* to send rain and to protect crops against natural disaster.²⁵ But of more significance is the fact that it was a period of contracting marriages when every compound tried to increase its labour force through finalising marriage arrangements.²⁶ The *worongchun* was a planting festival, which was performed in April/May that was celebrated at the family level by the family head. The most significant part of this ritual was that the person performing the ritual who was either the eldest man or the most prosperous man had to be accompanied by his wife.²⁷ In other villages, newly wedded couples that conducted their marriage during the *mandieng* festival performed the rituals. This was because they were considered to be pure and the bride still had high fertility rate. The importance of the woman's reproductive capacity was so crucial in the performance of the rituals of *worongchun* to the extent that if an old *gwom kwit* performed the ritual a young wife belonging to one of his children or relative had to accompany him. In some instances a couple though old but have the largest number of children was selected but the woman had to be below the age of menopause²⁸ to make sure she was still capable of producing children. Thus the woman's reproductive role was directly linked with soil fertility, which the spirits also recognised.

²⁴ Dung, S.D. "Rituals, Associated with Agriculture," unpublished manuscript.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid

Another important aspect of the ritual of *worongchun* was that on the eve of the planting of *chun* (*acha*) the blood of a red or brown cock was mixed with the seeds to be planted by the couple performing the ritual. The man carried the seed and the woman carried the hoe. The woman was then made to make five ridges (a task which women do not perform traditionally) and planted the *chun* seeds sprinkled with the chicken blood. This also shows the significance attached to women in the fertility of the crops. The five ridges signify the minimum number of bans required by the average Berom family to escape the hungry season.²⁹ Thus women's fertility was directly translated into high crop yields by the Berom society.

Once the plants were planted, continuous prayers were offered until the crops were harvested. Certain rites such as the *chiet* rite etc were performed whenever any of the taboos associated with the different rites was broken.

Women hardly played any significant role in such rites except, for example, in case of *iusrie* rite where a boy and girl took animal names and blow the musical instruments and say prayers for a prosperous year and a bountiful harvest.³⁰ The *Bunah/Bwana* festival was the celebration of the first fruits which involved the whole community but young girls specifically dressed and decorated with beads, rings, bangles (*rwei*), anklets (*diyek*), nose and earrings, mahogany oil (*nnei cho*) red ochre (*ti*) etc for the occasion. It was probably during this festival that suitors started the process of contracting marriage for the following *mendieng* festival.

It should be noted that women did not play any role in the rain ritual, probably because the plateau was generally known for abundant rain and it was rare for the rains not to start early. Likewise in the case of *Badushe* (which was a ritual in preparation of the planting of millet) women did not play any active part. The chief priest prayed on bamboo stick, which were then cut into pieces and distributed to family heads that planted them on family farms for good harvest.³¹ These examples show that women only took active part in festivals and rituals that had great importance to Berom economy such as the planting of *chun* and *mendieng* festival which were very important to the Berom.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid.

Millet was a secondary crop, which was probably why the *Badushe* rite associated with it was less elaborate and women did not feature prominently in it. It is very evident, however, that the roles accorded to women in Berom agricultural rituals derived from the importance attached to women's fertility as part of their biological reproductive roles. By extension, the Berom women were seen not only as the producer of human beings but also producers of food for the sustenance of life. Thus, in pre-colonial Berom society sex or biological differentiation between male and female played an important role in the sexual division of labour. Women played an important role in all the most important agricultural rituals as well as in the actual production of crops.

In addition to the active role they played in the production of primary food crops women were also solely responsible for the production of vegetables such as *leng, kwon, vat*, beans etc and other food condiments, such as locust bean (local *magi*), salt etc, which form part of the necessary diet of the Berom society.

But vegetables were regarded as secondary crops because they did not form part of household exchange both at the level of household and local trade unlike salt and locust beans.³² But this did not diminish their importance in the Berom household economy. The women were also solely responsible for taking care of infants, children, the sick, the disabled and the old. In Berom society almost all the roles, which were solely regarded as women's role, were derived from natural and biological explanations rather than social conditioning.

The reason for this could be due to the Berom religious worldview in which the physical and spiritual cosmologies are integrated. Almost all socio-political, cultural, religious and economic activities are connected to and controlled by spirits. The super-natural and cultural practices are explained as divine sanctions rather than as man-made regulations and mechanisms of social control and social engineering to serve particular interests and to deal with specific problems emanating from interaction with man and nature/environment. With the introduction of European ideas and Christian religion there was a change in the perception and world view of the Berom women which resulted in growing gender and political consciousness of Berom women.

³² Ngo B: Nyam, Rayfield, 76 years, 2/12/97

The Importance of Sex Roles in Berom Traditional Society

There is no society that exists without some form of sexual division of labour. The genesis of gender division of labour emanates from the natural and biological distinction between the male and female gender. The fact is that there are different roles of men and women in different societies as much as there are universals. But the diversity of cultural patterns for the roles of men and women can be accounted for also by the diversity of geographic, social, economic, politico-religious and ideological forces operating in the society which is expressed in four main patterns:³³

- a) Sexual division of labour
- b) Different sphere of primary responsibility
- c) Female subordination
- d) Patriarchy or male government
- e) Cultural expression of specific roles for men and women.

These are believed to be shaped by many factors such as the type of descent, the type of economic system, male absenteeism, social, government and technological complexity and religious and ideological commitments.³⁴ As men and women engage themselves in daily tasks, they may or may not be conscious of the factors shaping their roles depending on their level of gender consciousness, education and the extent to which they come in direct contact with the social realities that shape their existence. The level of gender sensitivity among the Berom women indicates that almost 90% of them associated the tasks done by them in both domestic and agricultural activities to their gender as women.³⁵ To this category of women they are happy to be women and they find complete fulfilment in doing what the Berom regard as traditionally women's tasks. The 10% of the women who regretted their female gender and were at the same time unhappy with the sexual division of labour based their reason on the fact that they were happier with the traditional gender division of labour but lamented the break-down of the traditional gender division of labour because "everything is now left to the women to do."³⁶

³³ Clerk, S.B. op.cit, p416.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Field work among Berom women, September – December, 1997.

³⁶ Ibid.

Interestingly enough, most of the women who were happy to be women were also happy with the new development which forced them into doing what was traditionally regarded as male jobs because in addition to mothering and motherhood "they can also do what men can do". Newly added responsibilities were welcomed by them as long as there was a measure of autonomy they could exercise from men. What they failed to fully comprehend was the short term and long term implication of this for them and the society. Increased women participation in economic production meant increase in work load and exploitation by men as long as men retain the sole power and authority of decision making and control of surplus production.

However, the general conclusion that can be drawn from the response of the women is that gender division of labour does contribute to social stability, self-fulfilment and self-actualisation if it is seen to be just, equitable and in conformity to the general attributes or natural dispositions of the male and female gender but if done otherwise, it could sow seed of discontentment which could eventually break forth into revolutionary liberation movements just as it did in the west with the women liberation movements that started in the 1920s.

Division of sex roles in any society produces either a complementary relationship between men and women or competitive relationship, which manifests in the de-valuation of women's roles and the subordination of women.

Conclusion

In Berom traditional society sexual division of labour was imbedded in their traditional beliefs, world views and agriculture in which gender roles were complementary. In spite of this, women's labour was still exploited by men especially through *njem* relationship. Berom women did not interpret differences in gender roles and relationship to be exploitative even though the economic value of their primary products and labour did not carry equivalent market or economic value to that of men. Women expressed general satisfaction with their sex roles as indicated above and men highly valued the roles that women played in agriculture. In fact 100% of the 30 Berom women of the older generation interviewed stated that in post-colonial Berom society it was more preferable for them to do only domestic work than to engage in farming because it involved double workload.

Women's role in farm work was so complementary to men's role in pre-colonial Berom society that crises or frictions hardly occurred. Even when this occurred from time to time such as when the women were ill, under maternity care or absent for one reason or another from farm work, family support from relatives, neighbours and friends was readily available. Stability in sex role differentiation was achieved under the traditional economy where labour, land and the products were jointly owned but under the direct control of the household head or clan. But this complementary relationship was radically altered by the establishment and imposition of the new colonial structures and new ideologies on Berom society. This resulted in the rapid break down of gender roles especially with the introduction of tin mining which led to mass migration of male labour to the mines. The women who were left behind were forced to take over what was traditionally regarded as men's work. In this way Berom women subsidised capitalist exploitation in the Jos tin mines during colonial rule and remained primary producers in both domestic and agricultural sphere. Their autonomy to make independent decisions and own property was introduced during the colonial period but its further development was curtailed by constraints of the exploitative nature of the colonial economy.

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