One step forward, two steps back:

What impact did the British colonization have on the development of women rights in Igbo culture?

F A C H A R B E I T

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1. Introduction

The quote “Nigeria […] totter[s] like a Big Man with spindly legs of a child” is what I found most striking when reading Adichie’s novel “Purple Hibiscus“ (Adichie 2005, p.11). I began to wonder what might have caused these circumstances and began my research.

I came across a paper published by Dr. Iyela, in which she pointed out that the cultures of today’s Nigeria used to be fore-runners in terms of women’s rights (cf. Dr. Iyela).
At this point I should probably mention that growing up, I have always been interested in women’s rights and never understood why people even differentiated between boys and girls in the first place. I was able to do the same things as my male best-friend: I could do sports like he did, I was better at math than he was and when he was scared I was the one protecting him. Still, people assumed me to be inferior to him.
The more shocked I was when I found out that, in some places of the world, women were equal to men centuries before I was even born. The place or rather culture I am referring to is the Igbo culture. Since the first occurrence of the Igbo people in 1000 BC (cf. Achebe 1996), the culture has been one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria (cf. Amadi 1991). Today its people constitute 18 percent of the overall population [15]. Against common belief, these “[…] acephalous […]“ groups had laws which granted human rights to their fellow men. In his paper, Amadi describes human rights as “[…] a significant concern of [the native Igbo] society“ which laid the basis for human rights[1] in present time (Amadi 1991).
Since Nigeria consists of numerous cultures with tremendously different perceptions of gender and thus women’s rights, i am going to focus on the Igbo culture. Furthermore, this paper is going to summarize the main ideas of the culture and consider exclusively the rights of cisgender women in Nigeria. Despite other gender identity’s oppression and hatred against them, including all identities would be too extensive and one could not elaborate on any of those in detail.
When I figured out the rough extent of my paper, I s, started watching documentaries, reading journals, and binging Nigerian literature. During that process I also found out that, before the colonization by the Britons, Nigeria used to be more advanced than most European countries. That is when I asked myself in disbelief: How come Nigeria did “one step forward [and] two steps back“?

2. Women's rights before colonization

Originally, the majority of the adherents of Igbo culture settled east of the river Niger in the regions of Anambra and Imo. They usually populated tiny states in West Africa where they

[1] The United Nations (UN) defines human rights as fundamental rights including “[…] the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion [etc.]“ [16].

lived in small communities. Precolonial Igboland consisted of a rag rug of 200 separate groups rather than one people, which lead to different dialects being spoken and thus traditions being embraced even though all Igbos followed the same core belief. Therefore, it is crucial to conclude that the peculiarity of women's rights within Igbo culture might differ between those settlements (cf. Achebe 1996).

Even though in literature women were typically depicted as inferior to their male counterparts, they contributed to the community by playing a significant role in social and economic activities [3] [8].

2.1. Women's role in the society

2.1.1. Definition of gender

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender as a social construct which relies on stereotypes of masculine and feminine behavior and "gender-specific" features (cf. Kalu 1991). However, gender does not imply having certain genitalia and chromosomes. Also, unlike the sex of a newborn, gender is not assigned at birth [18].

Current human rights movements such as the Christopher Street Day (CSD) demand an official distinction between gender and sex by legislation [19], a concept which has been a fundamental part of Igbo culture as far as recordings date back (cf. Sudarkasa 1987). In contrast to today's social constructs, the indigenous Igbo society predominantly put more emphasis on seniority than gender (cf. Dr. Iyela) as "traditional culture […] and intragender patterns of comportment" suggest (Sudarkasa 1987).

Moreover, when scrutinizing the Igbo language, an absence of gendered personal pronouns becomes apparent: The English pronouns "she", "he" and "they" all translate to "o", which can therefore be described as gender-neutral [10]. To add onto that, the Nigerian author and critic Chinua Achebe points out that the idiom "uwa umu-nwanyi" can only be vaguely translated to English since its translation differs in its meaning. On the one hand, the phrase can be interpreted as "the world of women". On the other hand, it could, however, also denote "the world of women's children." As a result, the linguistics of the Igbo language place women "at the center of human existence": People are living in the "world of women's children" (cf. Achebe 2017).

The lack of emphasis laid on gender in the language itself, suggests similar social constructs within the indigenous population. One of the most striking examples is that if a mother does not bear a son, who will grow up to be the heir to the family's property, her oldest daughter, the "Ada", will be appointed to be a son. People could "switch" their gender in order to replace the missing laborers. In the course of that practice, female leadership increasingly emerged [11].

2.1.2. Growing up in Igbo culture

Since seniority played a significant role in the hierarchy in Igbo villages (as elaborated above), children are educated to not question their parents and elders and to always willingly obey them (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.4, p.5).
The basic unit of political organization was the family, the "uno" (Engl. House (cf. Achebe 1996)). In order to pay respect to their unit, children, especially girls, were assigned tasks such as providing for their families in terms of cooking (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.9) as well as filling the "[…] water pot […] every family had […]" for daily hygiene (Emecheta 1976, p.16).
As the girls grew up and hit puberty, their role in the community changed. During their period, adolescents were seen as "unclean" and therefore restricted in their actions. For instance, they were not allowed to go swimming in the river Niger (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.42, p.49). Moreover, men, who showed interest in marrying the young adults started to visit them (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.2, p.42). On Christmas, 15 year old girls performed a dance called "aja", since most of them will be married within the following year (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.53).

2.1.3. Marriage

The Igbo joke which is "[…] used to tease girls who are childish - 'What are you doing? Don't you know you are old enough to find a husband?" (Adichie 2018, Sixth Suggestion), suggests that marriage is of importance for girls from a young age on (cf. Adichie 2014, p.25, pp.28f). Adolescents often get married as soon as they get their first period, and are therefore able to bear children (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.2, p.42).

Since most marriages in Igbo villages were arranged marriages, men had to pay their future parents-in-law the "Bride price" (cf. Adichie 2005, p.64). The parents were the ones to decide whether or not they would accept the offer. If they had received several proposals, they usually would have accepted the highest offer. Thus, girls were often married to wealthy men (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.2, p.3). Exclusively, daughters of prosperous families had the privilege of choosing their fiancé due to their families not relying on the Bride price (cf. Emecheta 1979, p.12). The Bride price was part of "the proper ceremonies" to leave their fathers house since the given money granted their parents the opportunity to provide for their younger children (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.2, p.3). To add onto that, the faithful believed that if the bride price had not been paid, the bride would die in childbirth (cf. Emecheta 1976, p. 73).
In case men were not able to afford to pay the Bride pice, they would cut off a piece of a girl's hair, in order for her to belong to him. That "betrayal" was despised by society and seen as a misfortune for the girl (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.42, 60).
In marriage, women were expected to be "[…] pure wives […]" and have sexual intercourse with their signifying other. In cause they would not sleep with their husbands willingly, they could be pinned down by his friends (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.62). The morning after their first

intercourse, which was usually the first day after the marriage had taken place, the husband's family would visit the parents of their daughter-in-law: "If a bride was a virgin, her new family had to bring her father wine. If she was not a virgin, they brought an empty pot." (Emecheta 1976, p.61) This quote emphasizes the significance of virginity as a social construct (cf. Adichie 2014, p.32; cf. Emecheta 1976, p.47).

Briefly after their marriage, young women were expected to bear children. Having numerous children was crucial to the Igbo community. Sometimes people even made sacrifices to celebrate the mother. Women that had at least ten children were esteemed and solemnly entitled "Lolo" [11]. However, in case women were thin, they were termed as "ogbanje" (Engl. living death) due to people excepting them to die during the induction of labour (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.33). The position of a young wife improved as she "[…] grew older, bore children, and earned approval from the older members of the village […]" (Dr. Iyela).
Despite women being esteemed in society, in some cases they were treated similar to objects: According to the law, if a man dies, his brother "[…] inherit[s] everything [the dead person] owned […]" including his wife (Emecheta 1976, p.23, p.31). The widow had to stay in a so-called "[…] mourning hut[…]" for nine months after her husband's death. During that period of time she "[was] not allowed to leave […], or have a bath, or cut or comb her hair. […]". Due to inheriting wives, men oftentimes had several wives (Emecheta 1976, p.26). Within the family, senior wives did not only have to look after the younger ones since they had authority over them, but, they also had a voice on many issues [3].

Another essential part of indigenous Igbo culture is same-sex marriage, which was mostly practiced by esteemed and/or wealthy women. These Igbo women were able to marry brides for themselves as well as for their relatives. Due to the act of marrying a women, they were considered to be men and thus respected. Since marriages were mostly arranged, they had to pay the bride price for their fiancée. By that, the women's social status was significantly increased, enabling her to enjoy the same privileges as men. [8]

2.1.4. Women's Associations

Within the Igbo culture there have been separate unions for men, "Umu Ikom", and women, "Umu Ada" and "Umu Inyom", which ensured support for their members. The latter accepting exclusively married women. Also, members of this community have to follow a number of guidelines. If they act according to these, "Umu Inyom" will grant a safety system. For instance, "[…] domestic violence by […] men, child abuse, or ill-treatment against any wife, woman or child […]" will result in punishment and retaliation meted out by the "Umu", the eldest women and therefore the head of the association [8] (Achebe 1996). On the other hand, "Umu Ada" consists of the two Igbo terms "umu", the people, and "ada", which

translates to the (first) daughter, and can be classified as a socio-political group which is open to women, whether married or unmarried. Both associations endorse the empowerment of women. [11]

2.2. Women's role in the economy

2.2.1. Trade

Before the foundation of the Nigerian state was initiated by the Imperialists, the territory consisted of a rag rug of various indigenous communities such as the Igbos. The over 250 different cultures had their own beliefs and languages impeding communication between them [14]. Nevertheless, there were trading routes between those different regions in today's Nigeria. The main commodities among those regions were "guinea corn, palm oil, salt [and] cam wood […] " (Dr. Iyela). Against popular belief, women "[did] not only […] farm and trade before British colonialism, trading was exclusively done by women in some parts of Igboland." (Adichie 2018, First Suggestion), highlighting their importance in the economy.

Girls learned about trading activities from a young age from their mothers or other relatives. Therefore, the senior wives, who did most of the trading themselves, were in charge of the younger ones, who were producing the goods (cf. Dr. Iyela). As soon as these adolescents got married, their "[…] husbands gave starting capital [to them] to engage in independent trading." While said capital enabled young women to make money themselves, it created a dependence on their husbands (Johnson 1966).
In Igboland, most of the intra-regional trade was done by women, including "[selling their] cooked food" on urban markets as well as through doorstep trade (Dr. Iyela). Their goods were of significance for daily life (cf. Sesay 1998). Their male counterparts, on the other hand, mostly engaged in inter-regional trade, which was more profitable (cf. Dr. Iyela). However, in certain parts of Igboland, women also did extensive "long-distance trading" (Johnson 1966), to provide the material resources needed to care for their family (cf. Dr. Iyela).

2.2.2. Agriculture

Although agricultural work was divided along gender lines [3], women still played an essential role: Men were responsible for the preparation of the soil e.g. "[…] clearing of land, hand-tilling and sowing […]", while women "[…] performed the task of fetching of water, crop cultivation, harvesting of crops and transportation of farm produce" (Dr. Iyela). Afterwards, they were in charge of trading the farm produce (cf. Sesay 1998). Therefore, they expanded the "labour on the family farms".

On the one hand, women were able to assure their position in the economy by gaining profit from the farm produce. As Dr. Iyela concludes “[they] played important roles in the economic development […]“. On the other hand, most families were lacking the necessary man-power, which resulted in child labour and compulsory work (Dr. Iyela). Some even had to rely on slaves in order to maintain their capacity (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.40).
Despite women playing a significant role in family farms, “[they] could not own land“ and even the acquisition and ownership of trees was restricted. Thus, “[they] could only hire palm trees, but did not own them“ (Dr. Iyela). Since the land was owned by the community, women gained access to it through their husbands or parents [3].

2.2.3. Manufacturing sector

Even though Igbo women were mainly active in trade and agriculture, their role in the manufacturing sector should not be underestimated. The female population coined the textile manufacture and cloth dyeing market. Similar to their male counterparts, they were active in the processing of products including beer, pottery, natural oils as well as cotton. Moreover, the salt industry is described to be “[…] solely in the hands of women“ (Dr. Iyela).

3. Development during British colonization (1882-1960)

3.1. Women rights in Britain during the Victorian Era

The British policy concerning women’s rights during the Victorian Era was characterized by contradictories [2]. Women neither had the right to express their opinions and own property, nor were they allowed to vote [20]. Moreover, there was an active exclusion of women from public life [3].
Given the fact that the ruling monarch of the British Empire, Queen Victoria, was female herself, not only the female population but also politicians such as William Johnson Fox were criticizing the legislation. However, Queen Victoria herself never got attacked by those uprisings, despite her being an opponent of women’s rights movements. Most of her opposition was expressed in private and became public after she had died. For instance, the Queen announced to her uncle, King Leopold of Belgium, in 1852, that “[…] women are not made for governing: And if we are good women, we must dislike those masculine occupations”, in which she deliberately included herself [2].
In 1870, the married women’s property act was passed in Parliament, allowing married women to be the exclusive proprietor of their owned property [1]. As a reaction to that, the Queen expressed her “[…] strongest aversion […]“ to the Prime Minister and entitled the women’s rights movement as an “[…] unchristian & unnatural […]” as well as an “[…] alarming danger”. The most striking quote from the monarch concerning women’s role in

British society is: “Let women be what God intended; a helpmate for a man […]”, which she expressed in 1870 to her Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone [2].
17 years after Queen Victoria had passed away, women over the age of 30 were granted suffrage by the Representation of the People Act of 1918 (cf. Turner 2013) and on the second of July 1928 the Equal Franchise Act granted suffrage to all adults over the age of 21 [21].

3.2. Development in Nigeria (1882-1960)

3.2.1. The British colonial rule

During the commencement of the British colonization, the European concept of women belonging at home, raising their offspring, was introduced to Nigeria. Consequently, the Nigerian government and its bureaucracy attempted to regulate women's lives, encouraging their domesticity and the unpaid services they supplied for the family (cf. Emecheta 2014, p.27), despite indigenous civilizations' lack of emphasis on gender. As a result, the vast majority of legislation affecting women aimed to restrict them, even further defining their inferiority and subordination [5].
In 1898, the Warrant Chief system - “an administrative system of indirect rule“ - was introduced to Nigeria by the colonists to regulate legislation in the colony without having the compulsory labour administration to enforce direct rule (cf. Okafor 1973). The most striking about said governmental system is that it relied on the support of the indigenous community [13]. In some cases, people were arbitrarily appointed “warrant chief“, which put them in charge to act in the British’s best interest in their local community.
The newly established British regime disregarded the indigenous culture “with a high-handedness“ since they sook for their own supremacy. Due to the concept of Social Darwinism [17], the Britons believed themselves to be superior (cf. Afigbo 1966) and therefore defined enlightening and educating the “raw [and] uncivilized“ Nigerian people as their god-given duty [6]. To impose their values upon the Natives, the Imperialists used great brutality. For instance, “villages which offered any resistance to […] the British were, when captured, burnt to the ground.“ (Afigbo 1966).
After the “Aba Women Riots“ in 1929, a protest in which the native women expressed their opposition to the „Warrant chief system“ [8], the Imperialists had to impose a form of direct rule in order to maintain governance over Nigeria which restricted the population even more (cf. Afigbo 1967).

3.2.2. Changes in the society

3.2.2.1. Urbanization

Despite the Igbos being determined to stick to their traditions (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.27), their

communities and unions such as the women's associations (cf. Chapter 2.1.4.) fell apart in the course of the British colonial rule. That was due to the destruction of cross-cutting ties by the Imperialists (cf. Achebe 1996). With the enforcement of the European concept of patriotism and capitalism in Nigeria, the process of urbanization occurred in Igboland (cf. Chuku 2009). Igbos "[…] left their village to work in the white men's world […]" as Emecheta describes in her book "The Bride price". As a result, megacities[2] with a high population density such as Lagos developed, unifying various peculiarities of the Igbo as well as other cultures (Emecheta 1976, p.21).

3.2.2.2. Convert to Christianity

In the course of the cultural restructuring, Christianity was introduced. Consequently, going to Church, which was ruled by the "[…] white men […]", established itself as part of the social norms (Emecheta 1976, p.36). Ceremonies such as weddings or funerals usually combined both native Igbo and British traditions (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.14). For instance, wedding ceremonies have often been held twice since the state exclusively recognized marriages held in church (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.13). Since the Christian belief builds on patriarchy, the idea of women having to be "[…] nice and quiet […]" emerged, despite women's power in the indigenous culture (Emecheta 1976, p.17). Children born during the colonial rule were often torn between those opposite traditions (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.36).

3.2.2.3. Education

The Imperialists did not only impose their belief system on the Natives, but also introduced various new establishments such as schools. In precolonial Igboland, children were taught by their parents and elders, that is why the Natives refused to send their children to the Christian schools. They believed the educational system, which taught British values, to be useless (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.36). In order to satisfy the Colonizers without having to change their mindset, the Igbos sent their slaves to school while their own children stayed at home and were educated according to their belief system. As a result, the slaves, however, got well-paid jobs and thus gained impact (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.28).
As Emecheta highlights in her novel, despite indigenous children increasingly attending school, it was still unusual for girls to go to school, especially higher education (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.13). In the school of the protagonist of her novel there were only three girls, of whom the 15 year old protagonist was the oldest (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.34). Thereby, the novelist emphasizes the disparities between sexes in the educational system. Furthermore, since lessons were taught exclusively in English, gendered pronouns were introduced (cf. Chapter:

[2] A large city with a population over 10 million citizens which consists of several urban areas [22]

2.1.1) extending the inequality in Igboland through linguistics.

3.2.2.4. Exploitation

In 1945, the British Empire waged a war in Burma (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.1). However, the Britons did not fight themselves since they claimed that they were not used to the "[…] hot and wet […]" vegetation. Therefore, Nigerian men along side men from other British colonies were sent to fight for the British [12] (cf. Emecheta 1976, p.4). Throughout the duration of the war, women were in charge of their homes, compensating for the shortage of laborers, which resulted in the reinforcement of their importance in society [12].
Nevertheless, during the entirety of the British colonial rule, women were not granted universal suffrage (cf. Azinge 1994), despite the female population in the British Empire itself gaining the right to vote in 1928 after numerous uprisings in the population [21]. Nine years before Nigeria declared independence, the government granted limited suffrage to women who were paying taxes [4].

3.2.3. Changes in the economy

The British regime changed the role of women in Igbo society and therefore also in economic matters [6] by starting to focus on the economical participation of men and restricting women with the help of legislation [5]. Thus, an increasing number of men began to work in agriculture, while women were pushed into less profitable agricultural sectors such as the production of subsistence crops [3]. Their male counterpart, on the other hand, began to invest in cash crops, specializing in their cultivation, in order to sell them lucratively on the international market (cf. Chimee 2014). Igbo men began to further develop their bureaucratic strategies, enabling them to gain the most profit. Since the land-tenue system, which was established to prevent land alienation, favored those who were prosperous, men had a clear advantage [6]. For instance, the coercive purchase of acreage by the Imperialists made it more arduous for women to access and/or purchase farmland [11].
Due to that shift of intentions, due to the introduction of European patriarchy to Nigeria, the payment gap between men and women extended even more. The previously complementary focuses started to conflict, damaging both [6].

4. Outlook of the post-colonial development

The process of decolonization emerged in Nigeria in the 1940s and 1950s before its irrevocable Independence in 1960, which Igbo women were actively committed to (cf. Lawal 1994). Post-colonial Nigeria was characterized by an unstable and often changing governmental system (cf. Egede 2007): From 1960 until 1966, 1979 until 1983 and from 1999 onwards there was a civilian rule while in 1966 to 1979 and later on in 1983 to 1999

Nigeria was ruled by military force (cf. Dr. Jauhari 2011). Therefore, the approach of women's rights and equality acts was inconsistent, worsening the situation of the citizens (Egede 2007).

Since legislation was in constant change, Nigeria had to rely on British support through Common Wealth (cf. Lawal 1994) and imitated their parliamentary system as a role-model (cf. Chuku 2009). Nigeria thus enforced parliamentary democracy in its first constitution of 1963 (cf. Iweriebor 1982).

Despite colonial rule being terminated, it was still present in daily life. For instance, subjects have been taught in English until the present time. Studies show that younger generations hence experience alienation from their culture and indigenous gender perception (cf. Abidogun 2007). On the other hand, the opportunities for women in education have drastically increased since Nigeria's independence [7].

However, even after Nigeria's independence, it still took sixteen years for women to be granted unlimited suffrage (cf. Azinge 1994) and laws such as Section 228 and 229 of the Criminal Code: "[…] Any woman who [intends] to procure her own miscarriage […] is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for seven years", suggest that women are still fighting for their right to self-determination [7] (Okagbue 1990).

5. Evaluation

"[…[A]] Nigerian women, told [Adichie] that feminism was not [Nigerian] culture […]" (Adichie 2014, p.10) to which she replied that "[people like her] will selectively use "tradition" to justify anything […[and]] that a double-income family is actually the true Igbo tradition […]." (Adichie 2018, First Suggestion) - said interactions leads to the most important question of this paper that has not been answered so far: "What impact did the British colonization have on the development of women rights in Igbo culture?"

In conclusion, one can say that, in pre-colonial Igbo culture, women were thought of to be at the center of human existence (cf. Achebe 2017). They were praised for bearing children [11] and had a fundamental impact on the economic development of the country. Despite they were, however, also likely to be viewed as weak and inferior to men (cf. Dr. Iyela).

The social standards of the Imperialists differed greatly from the indigenous Igbo belief [6], which the Britons did not mind. They imposed their values with great brutality and murdered those who tried to hinder them (cf. Afigbo 1966). Patriarchy and the belief of women belonging exclusively at home, raising their children and obeying their husband was introduced and exacerbated their situation.

Thereby, women were pushed to the margins and are to this day fighting to gain back their rights. Over 60 years after their Independence, Nigeria is still struggling and "[…] totter[s] like a Big Man with spindly legs of a child" (Adichie 2005, p.11).

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7. Declaration of Authenticity

“I hereby declare that I have written the paper at hand on my own and only used the listed references, sources, and aids.”

date: 27.02.2023

signature: