

THE LAND HAS CHANGED

History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

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CHAPTER TWO

PAX BRITANNICA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURE

On March 15, 1903, British forces occupied the Sokoto Caliphate. A *New York Times* report aptly gave the event this headline: “Big Territory Added to the British Empire.”¹ Frederick Lugard, who was to become the first governor of colonial Nigeria, was heartily congratulated by Chamberlain and other officials of the British Government. In recognition of this feat, the *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote in an editorial: “We have to thank the bold initiative of Sir Frederick Lugard, a typical specimen of the sort of tool of empire building which is, perhaps, the one product of British industry which our rivals cannot imitate.”² This important event, which reflected the sentiments of many in Britain on imperialism toward the end of the nineteenth century, was the climax of the gradual occupation of what was to become Britain’s most important possession in western Africa and an important milestone in the expansion of the British Empire.³

The economic goals were urgent and the mandate clear. The Hon. W.G.A. Ormsby-Gore, parliamentary undersecretary of state for the colonies, on a visit to West Africa in 1926 reiterated the most important economic goal of the British Empire. “The wealth of West Africa lies primarily in its agricultural and forest products,” he wrote, and “the economic progress of the Colonies depends on the development of their vast agricultural and sylvicultural resources.”⁴

Although several parts of what became Nigeria had already been incorporated into the British Empire a decade earlier,⁵ the Igbo of southeastern

Nigeria were only incorporated into the empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. The expansion of agriculture, the transformation of the production system, and the restructuring of the Igbo political system remained the most urgent tasks of the colonial administration for nearly two decades. The expansion of the palm oil industry was at the core of colonial economic policy for the Igbo region and the other areas lying in the palm oil belt. This had important consequences for both the politics and the economy of the Igbo.

Behind the thinking of British officials at the time of the conquest of Nigeria was the idea that the northern and the western parts of the country had achieved higher levels of political development and civilization before European contact. Achieving the economic objectives and control of the region required considerable restructuring of the political institutions of the Igbo. The men who carried out these tasks had a mindset of a dysfunctional political system and evinced little regard for existing institutions. Revenue Commissioner H. P. Palmer, on a visit to Southern Nigeria in 1913, remarked:

The Eastern Provinces is [sic] some centuries behind the countries west of the Niger in natural development. Consequently, the social organization of its peoples is less easy for a European administration to deal with than the National organization of peoples like the Yorubas and Hausa. "Native" ideas, Native laws, and Native administrative machinery are so far remote from their European counterparts, that the destructive force of any European administration at all is proportionately greater than when applied to countries whose conceptions are more advanced and obvious.⁶

These words represent perhaps the most important perceptions as well as goals of the early colonial administrators – the notions of a backward peasantry and a "primitive" political system – notions that would determine colonial policy among the Igbo for the next half century. They also represent what would be sources of frustration for both the British and the Igbo people in the Anglo-Igbo relationship for most of the colonial period. The British sought to reorganize the indigenous polity of the Igbo as part of the economic mission.

REORGANIZING THE INDIGENOUS POLITY

Official British intervention in the area of what became Nigeria started in 1849 with the appointment of a consul for the Bight of Biafra to protect British commercial interests and impose anti-slave trade. Britain dominated much of the trade in the Bight of Biafra and had concluded treaties of “protection” with several chiefs in the Niger Delta, but British control remained very loose and limited to the major trading regions, known as the Oil Rivers, until 1885. The United Africa Company, an amalgamation of all the major British firms trading along the Niger Coast and in the Niger Delta, was also busy signing treaties with the chiefs along the banks of the Rivers Niger and Benue. Establishing effective British control in Nigeria became rather urgent after the enactment of the Berlin Act of 1885. The notification of the creation of the Oil Rivers Protectorate (1885–1893) was published in the *London Gazette* of June 5, 1885, and read in part as follows:

Under and by virtue of certain treaties concluded between the month of July last and the present date and by other lawful means the territory [*sic*] on the West Coast of Africa hereinafter referred to as the Niger District were placed under the protection of Her Majesty the Queen from the date of the said treaties respectively.⁷

The proclamation and the appointment of a consul-general at Calabar and the posting of consuls and vice-consuls at district levels was a major step in the establishment of effective British administration in southern Nigeria.⁸

The nature of the commercial and political relations between the British and Africans was influenced by the activities of the Royal Niger Company from the 1880s to the first years of the twentieth century.⁹ The expansion of the company’s administrative authority over the Lower Niger and its adjoining territories, from New Calabar to Oguta in the Igbo country, led to a steady curtailment of African economic control relative to European traders toward the end of the nineteenth century. Conflict often occurred between African intermediaries and European traders as the latter, by virtue of the company’s royal charter, increasingly laid claim to what Africans perceived as their market. The company’s regulations, Waibinte Wariboko argues, were “designed specifically to frustrate

the African middlemen competitors.”¹⁰ The attempt by New Calabar traders, for example, to evade these regulations led the Royal Niger Company to expel them from Oguta, Omoku, and Idu in 1887. In 1888, the European agents in Brass observed that the Brass chiefs had “become [greatly] impoverished by the loss of their Niger trade.”¹¹ By 1895, Nembe-Brass’s middleman position had become “a thing of the past,” according to E. J. Alagoa.¹² These developments had a direct impact on the hinterland communities as the delta intermediaries increasingly relocated trading stations to positions closer to the sources of palm produce.¹³

From 1891 onward, London asserted its authority as both British officials and traders began pushing beyond the coast.¹⁴ The pacification of the region, the British argued, was necessary to eliminate internal slavery and expand the production of palm oil. Much of the coast had indeed been brought under British control and the protectorate was renamed the Niger Coast Protectorate with its headquarters at Calabar and Sir Ralph Moore as its first consul-general in 1893. The new protectorate, which covered a wider area and extended further inland than the old one, was placed under the supervision of the Foreign Office in London. The protectorate recorded very significant achievements in the exploration of the hinterland and the expansion of trade, such that by 1896, Major A. G. Leonard, an official of the Niger Coast Protectorate, had travelled over one hundred miles into the hinterland.

The Niger Coast Protectorate became the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria on January 1, 1900. The new protectorate incorporated the territories formerly administered by the Royal Niger Company and the Niger Coast Protectorate. The consul-general became the high commissioner, while consuls and vice-consuls became district commissioners and assistant district commissioners, respectively. The headquarters of the new Protectorate of Southern Nigeria remained at Calabar until 1906 when it was transferred to Lagos. The creation of the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria marked the end of the consular period. In 1906, the Southern Protectorate absorbed the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos. The Southern Protectorate was formally amalgamated in 1914 with the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. With the amalgamation, British political control of what became Nigeria was fully established with Frederick Lugard as governor-general.

Sir Ralph Moore’s tenure as head of Her Britannic Majesty’s Government in the Bights of Benin and Biafra was crucial in the history of the establishment

of effective British administrative control in Southern Nigeria. The British attempt to establish political authority in the region was achieved through military expeditions. In 1900, the Southern Nigeria Regiment, West African Frontier Force, was created and soon launched “military patrols” into many parts of Southern Nigeria. Military expedition beyond the coast began with the Aro Expedition of 1901–1902.¹⁵ In November 1901, the Southern Nigeria Regiment attacked the Aro and the so-called Long Juju Shrine or Ibini Ukpabia – the centre of the Aro slave trading oligarchy and its cult of human sacrifice. The British attack on the Aro was justified as an attempt to end internal slavery and open up the areas beyond the coast to free trade, thus blocking the Aro from the control of trade, including the slave trade, over which they had exercised control for more than two centuries.¹⁶ Although the British were mistaken in believing that they had destroyed the oracle, upon which much of the Aro influence depended, the expedition marked the beginning of effective incorporation of the Igbo country into British colonial territory and a considerable decline of Aro influence in the region. Yet the expeditions against the Aro did not end resentment against British control.

The expansion into Igboland met significant local resistance. Don C. Ohadike’s *The Ekumeku Movement: Western Igbo Resistance to the British Conquest of Nigeria, 1883–1914*, captures the spirited resistance of the Western Igbo (Anioma) people to British colonialism. His work demonstrates that some of the strongest African opposition to British rule in Nigeria came from small communities.¹⁷ In 1896, a punitive expedition was sent against Obohia and Ohuru in the Opobo District. In the same year, Sir Ralph Moore sent an expedition to Akwete for the opening of friendly relations with its chiefs and people. The extension of the British colonial frontier in the Igbo country was not a coordinated and orderly advance, but a spasmodic struggle for control of Igbo societies. Repeated waves of resistance by the Ekumeku movement had to be put down forcefully in 1902, 1904, and 1909.¹⁸ Other military expeditions included those to Orokpo (1901), Uzere (1903), Etua (1904), Ezionum (1905), Ahiara (1905), Ezza (1905), and Achara (1905).¹⁹

Generally, the British conquest was difficult and unwelcome, and pockets of isolated resistance continued throughout the period of British colonialism in the region. For over a decade, following the first incursion into the Igbo country, the British could not claim control of the region despite their often

bold attempt to extend colonial authority far into the interior. Yet there were some parts of Igboland where people resigned themselves to the presence of the British in their lives rather than face a British punitive expedition and a no-win situation.

THE IGBO AND INDIRECT RULE

A major characteristic of British colonial government in Africa was its decentralized structure characterized by indirect rule or native administration.²⁰ Indirect rule was conceptualized as an indigenization of the colonial administration – a process that allowed Africans a certain degree of internal self-control. The system, which was elevated to a political ideology by Sir Frederick Lugard, was applied vigorously throughout Nigeria from the 1920s onward. Lugard, the first colonial governor of Nigeria and often regarded as the model British colonial administrator, emphasized:

If continuity and decentralization are, as I have said, the first and most important conditions in maintaining an effective administration, co-operation is the key-note of success in its application – continuous co-operation between every link in the chain, from the head of the administration to its most junior member, co-operation between the Government and the commercial community, and, above all, between the provincial staff and the native rulers ... with as little interference as possible with native customs and modes of thought.²¹

Despite the ethnocentric and racist views expressed in *The Dual Mandate* and other writings, Lugard recognized the practical realities on the ground, including the shortage of European personnel and funds. Indeed, not all colonial subjects found colonial rule an encumbrance as the British did not readily dismiss African institutions upon conquest. A 1928 circular from the secretary, Northern Provinces, to all Residents in the area, which outlined the methods for training of junior officers in the implementation of indirect rule, is informative on the rationale for the policy. As outlined in the

circular, indirect rule was adopted because Lugard realized that he “could not effectively administer the enormous area to [*sic*] the Northern Provinces with the utterly inadequate staff at his disposal, and that therefore he must enlist the assistance of the Native Chiefs.”²² His initial policy, the circular continued, “was carried on by his successor Sir Percy Girouard, ... and especially the present Lieutenant-Governor, Northern Provinces, to whom, among other important matters, was due the creation of native treasuries, the most essential corollary to indirect rule.”²³ The pressure of economic development, according to the secretary to the Northern Provinces,

... makes it increasingly necessary to utilize the productive and energising capacity of all native institutions (which is very great) to the full, and to avoid arbitrary or empiric changes of method to which the people are not accustomed and which may produce discontent and dissatisfaction or ultimately inefficiency in the essential duty of keeping order.²⁴

The British conquest of Northern Nigeria curtailed the power of the old aristocracy, but Britain did not embark on a project of dismantling the Islamic structures and social institutions of the caliphate. As part of the compromise, the emirs accepted British authority, abandoned the slave trade, and cooperated with British officials in creating a new administration. Consequently, some structures of the caliphate, including the legal system, particularly matters relating to marriage, property, inheritance, and divorce, were incorporated into the colonial bureaucracy.²⁵ Through this process, the British generated patriotism among some elements in colonial Northern Nigeria and reduced local resistance.²⁶

The success of indirect rule in Northern Nigeria, officials argued, was “so striking and the development of the Native Administrations was so rapid that the Colonial Office have adopted it as the basis of administration in every tropical African dependency where it is still not too late to introduce it.”²⁷ It became the model for other European powers. A year before the outbreak of the First World War, Dr. Solf, the German colonial minister, who had visited Northern Nigeria, ordered that the Northern Nigerian model of administration be adopted in German Cameroons. This was followed by a visit to Kano

by Von Raben, the German resident at Dikwa, to study the system. General Lyautey, a French administrator in northern Africa, followed the Northern Nigerian model in developing what was seen as one of the successful colonial administrations in the French African colonies.²⁸ The success of indirect rule in Northern Nigeria and its extension, with remarkable results in parts of the Southern Provinces, including Oyo and Abeokuta, was reason enough to attempt to replicate it in the rest of the Southern Provinces.²⁹

Officials were convinced of the efficiency of the model. One such official noted: "It is not likely, in view of the results achieved, and of the backing of the policy by the distinguished officers mentioned above, that there could be anything wrong with the theory of indirect rule."³⁰ Another official concurred: "The policy of Lord Lugard in the Northern Provinces, of governing through the Fulani Emirs appeared so successful from the outset that the British Government decided to adopt it throughout Nigeria."³¹ Lugard had argued that: "Principles do not change, but their mode of application may and should vary with the customs, the traditions, and the prejudices of each unit." The Lugardian ideology held that:

The task of the administrative officer is to clothe his principles in the garb of evolution, of revolution; to make it apparent alike to the educated native, the conservative Moslem, and the primitive pagan, in his own degree, that the policy of the Government is not antagonistic but progressive – sympathetic to his aspiration and the guardian of his natural rights.³²

It was Lugard's view that the so-called primitive tribes should be allowed to develop self-government and institutions along the line of those of the Muslim states without compromising their own local independence.³³ In fact, a delegation of the Empire Parliamentary Association, after visiting Nigeria in 1927 and 1929, recognized the inherent problem in enforcing colonial rule but also agreed that indirect rule offered the best prospects.

The great problem of co-operation between European and non-European races also arises in Nigeria. It is being tackled there with at least as great energy and freshness of outlook as anywhere in the British Empire. The guiding principle is that known as indirect

rule. This envisages the extension everywhere of executive African administration, building on the units of African government evolved locally by traditions and custom, and on the foundations which Africans themselves have in the past laid down.³⁴

The need to expand indirect rule to the rest of Southern Nigeria was not in doubt, but the problem was how and when to do it. The British had the good fortune to encounter centralized political institutions in northern and western Nigeria that allowed the successful implementation of the policy of native administration. Although there were those who assumed that the chieftaincy system, including village war leaders, which made the northern Nigeria experiment very successful, “existed with modification throughout Africa,”³⁵ this idea was proved wrong among the Igbo and other societies in southeastern Nigeria, where the British imposed the indirect rule system in a radically different context.

The Igbo, whom European ethnographers described as belonging to stateless societies, did not share identical social forms, as existed among the inhabitants of the northern and southwestern areas. With no hereditary chieftaincy institutions, save for a few exceptional cases such as that of Onitsha, the British created the warrant chief system. Native authorities were created by the regrouping of minor, less organized, units into provinces (divided into divisions) headed by Residents.³⁶

But Alex J. Braham, a district agent of the Royal Niger Company (1898–1902), noted in his memoir that “Chieftaincy amongst the Ibos is rather based on commercial principle, than on any courage, or special fitness of the leadership of men.” He observed that “Any freeborn man possessed of land merely has to acquire sufficient wealth to make certain presents, and arrange a fetish feast; to which he invites the existing chiefs.”³⁷ Although Braham confused the acquisition of an honorary status such as *ozo* with chieftaincy, a lack of centralized political authority dominated by a single individual was the norm. Ormsby-Gore observed:

There are no outstanding rulers of any importance, and it is not certain whether this state of affairs among the Ibos or Ibibios is due to the decay of a higher type of organization or whether they had ever evolved any organized form of government. As things are

now, they live in villages, and no one village bears any relation to, or recognizes any affinity with, the people of the next village who may be only a few miles away.³⁸

The task of the government, Ormsby-Gore suggested, was to cultivate among these people “a sense of common interest sufficient to enable a native administration to be set up, bearing, if possible, a definite relation to the structure of the tribal institutions.”³⁹

Some British officials who worked among the Igbo echoed similar sentiments. Edward M. Falk, District Officer for Aba, noted that the so-called pagan, unlike the Muslim, had

... no institutions of which he is proud and jealous; he is being moulded like wax by his European teachers, he is as imitative of them as a simian and will retain little of his pre-twentieth century self but the vices which are inherent in the negro character to which are being added those of his conquerors.⁴⁰

These biases lay deep even in the ivory towers of imperial Britain. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge played their part in the preparation of the administrative cadre by offering Colonial Service courses. An important component of the colonial officers’ training was the acquisition of African languages. Hausa was the language of choice and it remained the lingua franca, even in the Nigeria Regiment as late as the Second World War.

Perceiving the Igbo political and economic system as primitive and archaic, colonial officials argued for a different rate of assimilation into a modern society for them. In the officials’ view, the lack of chieftaincy and centralized political institutions among the Igbo called for a more measured approach to the task of incorporating the Igbo into the colonial state. Palmer remarked:

It is true that permanent Chiefs comparable to the Emirs of the North or the Alafin or Oba of Benin do not exist. This is however not to be expected among people still in the “clan” stage – where the (Chief – Eze in Ibo) like the Arab Sheikh or Tuareg Amanokel is little more than the elder brother of the clan, the experienced

senior who is consulted in important questions, but not necessarily obeyed.⁴¹

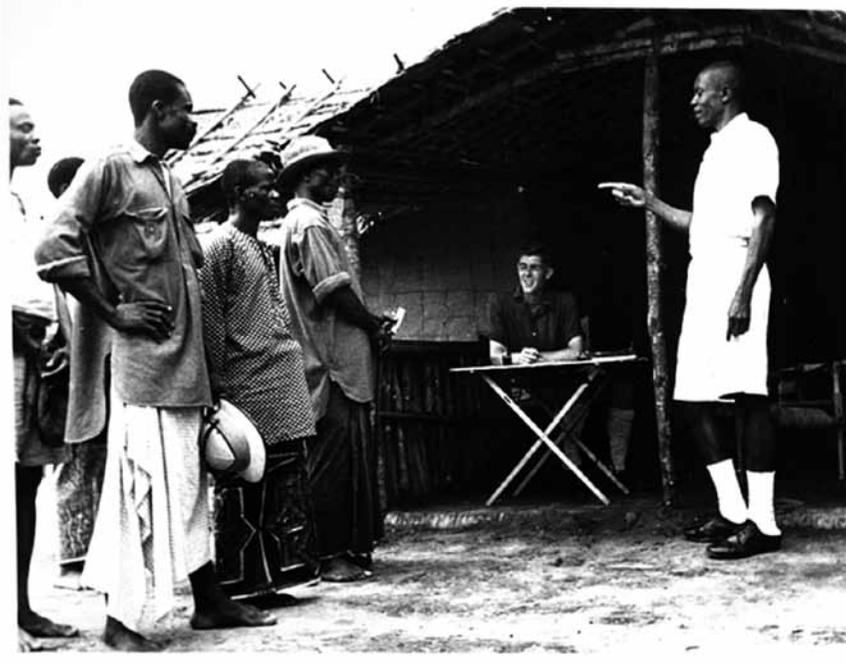
Yet Palmer observed rudimentary forms of chieftaincy institutions among the Igbo that would serve as the basis for more rapid progress in the establishment of colonial institutions in line with existing traditional political institutions. “That there are Eze (Chiefs) of this nature all over the Ibo country is beyond question,” he wrote. He maintained that

The septs which make up the clans are the so-called “towns” or “countries” – The various towns in a clan speak of each other as “brothers,” and invariably acknowledge one of their members as elder brother i.e. head or senior town. It will usually be found that the head of that town was the acknowledged leader of the clan in war, and entitled to certain perquisites when the clan went hunting and was the arbitrator in land disputes.⁴²

Some colonial officials admitted the difficulty of implementing the system, yet they were more concerned with applying the idealistic philosophy of the native administration project than dealing with the contradictions inherent in the Igbo political system. Indeed the confrontations that would occur between the British and the Igbo when the system of warrant chiefs was imposed from the first decade of the twentieth century onward did not arise from a cultural misunderstanding on the part of officials, but an avowed prosecution of an imperial policy that had been elevated to the status of ideology.

Palmer noted the cautious approach in the introduction of British rule among the Igbo from the early days of occupation:

Those responsible for the administration of the country sought to avoid the wholesome introduction of British Law and European methods. A means was sought whereby “Native Customs” should be applied in the settlement of Native Disputes, so controlled, as it were, by the Government that it should be “pure” and not “corrupt.” District Commissioners felt and still feel the practical necessity of their having power to use common sense and summary jurisdiction in dealing with primitive people. Courts called “Native



A colonial assistant district officer hearing complaints (Reproduced with kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford).

Courts” were therefore designed to be ... “Provincial Courts,” in which the District Officer would always sit, but would not be bound by the letter of the English law when sitting there.⁴³

J.G.C. Allen, who arrived in Nigeria in 1926 and served as a district officer in Eastern Nigeria, recalled in his memoir, “From the Government’s point of view this system had the advantage of being decidedly more efficient than government by a vague and inchoate council of elders.”⁴⁴

Yet the process of selecting warrant chiefs was arbitrary and bizarre in some cases. Often the British appointed willing participants, most of whom had made their wealth in the palm oil business as produce buyers. One official, A.F.B. Bridges, who joined the colonial service in 1921 and became district officer for Onitsha, recalled in his memoir:

It was, therefore the practice, when a Warrant Chief was to be appointed, for the D.O. to visit the town or quarter concerned and hold a public meeting. At this meeting all candidates would be put forward and required to weigh their claims before the public, the D.O. endeavoring to weigh the claims against one another and gauge both the validity of the claims and the degree of support for each candidate. If one of them had some obvious standing as a descendant of the founder, he was likely to be chosen but whatever the claims it was usually the majority vote that decided the issue, unless there was evidence that the meeting had been rigged. Other things being equal, the people tended more and more as time went on to vote for candidates who were literate and knew something of the outside world.⁴⁵

The British approach to elevating the people in Eastern Nigeria in political and economic terms was often contradictory to the philosophy of indirect rule that they sought to implement. Those on the ground realized very early on the difficulties of applying indirect rule among the Igbo. Another official recalled the difficulties of the early days of colonial rule among the Igbo:

The interpreters were either content to tell the Europeans what they thought they wanted to know or to extend a helping and well-greased hand to ... ambitious individuals, and the difficulties of the Ibo language and the timidity of the people prevented the Administrative Officers until many years later from learning the truth. Therefore, at the outset of the British regime each village was called upon to nominate its "Chief" who was promptly presented with a cap and staff of office and a warrant formally appointing him as a representative of the Government.⁴⁶

Other cases did not fit this model. In the case of Umuchieze, a village in Mbaise, Owerri Province, for example, oral sources say that the warrant chief was a twenty-two-year-old man, Philip Eluwa, who, out of curiosity or stupidity, refused to run away when other members of the village took to the bush on the arrival of the British in his village. For this act of "bravery," he was appointed

the warrant chief of the village.⁴⁷ Under normal circumstances, Umudionu, the oldest lineage in the village, would have produced the warrant chief. But Chief Eluwa was chosen from Uhuala, the last in the hierarchy among the four lineages that make up the town. J.G.C. Allen, a former district officer in eastern Nigeria, recalled similar circumstances. In some cases some powerful men “persuaded their people to nominate them but in others the people, fearing a trap, selected the most insignificant individual in the village – in some cases even a slave – in the hope thereby of being freed from official interference with the village administration.” Allen further noted: “The Government, believing that they had won the support of the traditional authorities exaggerated their status and granted them an increasing share in the day to day administration of the area.”⁴⁸

At the centre of the native administration system were the Provincial Courts, operated by European administrative officers, which tried serious offences or any other cases regarded as repugnant to Western moral concepts, even if they were accepted under local law and custom. The native courts, which dealt with offences against customary law or similar civil cases became part of the new administrative changes in Igboland. The warrant chiefs adjudicated cases at the native courts. The new authority given to the warrant chiefs and enhanced by the native court system led to the exercising of power unprecedented in pre-colonial times and challenged the core of the Igbo traditional political system – government by consensus – in which decisions were made by protracted debate and general agreement. The men who became warrant chiefs, one official wrote,

Soon enjoyed power and authority to which they possessed no traditional right or title and most of them created an entirely artificial administrative structure in which the elders were pushed aside and authority was granted to a cadre of “Headmen” whose only qualifications [*sic*] for their position were a tough and ruthless personality and a capacity for blind obedience to the dictates of the “Warrant Chief.”⁴⁹



Chiefs sitting in court with a district officer (Reproduced with kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford).

These headmen known as *idimala* (a corruption of headman) in some areas, became as arrogant as the warrant chiefs and a source of exploitation of villagers. In some areas, the “Warrant Chiefs established a form of personal dictatorship and the traditional administrative system started to disintegrate.”⁵⁰ Their arrogance and intimidation are still remembered. Onyegbule Korieh remembers these men as gods. “They seized other people’s land, bicycle, and took young women without paying bridewealth. Some took other people’s wives or other properties that they fancied.”⁵¹

There were practical reasons for adopting the warrant chief system and for the relatively high level of support given to the new administration by many of the newly appointed warrant chiefs. An official noted that the warrant chief system and the judicial system that was adopted “formed a cheap and expeditious form of justice.”⁵² African officials had some practical reasons

for embracing the system, since it offered opportunities for the accumulation of wealth and the achievement of high status in societies where such desires fitted into the social dynamics of the Igbo. Part of the tax collected went to the native administration and for the payment of the chiefs. The political changes that occurred due to the introduction of native authorities and the creation of the warrant chief system created a class of wealthy individuals by the 1920s. The chiefs, who had become salaried officials of the colonial government, reinvested their wealth in the produce trade and invested in people by marrying several wives and having numerous children. They built mansions roofed with corrugated iron sheets. Court clerks whose “opportunities for talking bribes are great,” as A. E. Cooks, district officer for Owerri District wrote in his memoir, also exhibited their newfound wealth by investing in wives and building large homes.⁵³

Falk, who became the district officer for Aba in December 1920, observed the changes during the decades following European colonization:

Rapidly increasing wealth is everywhere raising the standard of comfort with amazing rapidity. Chiefs who a few years ago could hardly boast of the possession of a decent garment to cover their nakedness now dress in the latest European style complete from sun helmet to patent leather boots and drive about in their own motors. The progress of the people apart from the villagers who still till the soil is corresponding.⁵⁴

Palmer recalled that some form of strong individual authority in the villages was undoubtedly necessary in the early days of pacification, but the administration had not “divined that it had quite inadvertently and with the best intentions imposed on the hapless villagers a form of autocracy entirely foreign to their custom.”⁵⁵ Many colonial officials, like Palmer, admitted that the native courts had, however, “developed in a manner quite contrary to the spirit in which they were designed.”⁵⁶ Indeed, J.G.C. Allen noted that many of the warrant chiefs “led a very precarious existence the perils of which were not always offset by their illicit gains.” Many of them, he noted, “died suddenly in suspicious circumstances and although their bodies were exhumed and examined it was never possible to discover sufficient evidence to support a charge of murder.”⁵⁷

The new administrative structure was very patriarchal, despite the visible role played by women in both the economy and politics. While some Igbo men participated in the local administration as interpreters, messengers, policemen, army recruits, and warrant chiefs, the British ignored women. Colonial anthropologist, Sylvia Leith-Ross, commented on the women and on the failure of the colonial administration to recognize their role in Igbo society:

It is a pity that, from the beginning, some executive local powers had not been given to them. At that time, the men would not have resented it, as it would have meant little more than official recognition of powers the women already possessed. Now, too many vested interests are involved.⁵⁸

This created significant problems for the administration and resentment among the Igbo. The 1929 Women's Revolt and other protests (discussed fully in chapter 4) were largely a reaction to the warrant chief system among other issues, such as taxation and the Great Depression.

Overall, some officials, notably Palmer, acknowledged the ideological consequences of native administration on societies such as those of the Igbo. In his view the attempt to preserve native custom "have so far resulted in steadily destroying it and among these relatively primitive peoples full Europeanized individualistic government is being introduced.... The Government machine is steadily grinding to powder all that is 'Native' and transforming the people into 'black Englishmen.'" Complimenting the state on effecting this change, he argued, included the "spread of Missionaries and Education."⁵⁹

There were those who disagreed with Palmer's assessment. The commissioner of Calabar Province did not see any wisdom in challenging a policy formulated by officials highly regarded within colonial circles:

It will be interesting to ascertain if when making such a sweeping condemnation of the Government's Policy, the writer considered who were responsible for the building up of the existing system of administration. The names of Sir Claude MacDonald, Sir Ralph Moor, and Sir Walter Egerton might have occurred to his mind. All these were men of mark and each one continued the policy on the lines of his predecessor.⁶⁰

Reiterating the so-called backwardness of the Igbo, the commissioner remarked:

It is obvious that the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces are of a much inferior mental caliber than those in the West of the Niger... This fact was very quickly ascertained by former Administrators of the protectorate (old Southern Nigeria) and the system of native courts instituted for the simple reason that the object aimed at was to try and educate the native and to bring him on a higher scale also by the said system of Native Courts to make the Chiefs (so called) feel that they were Chiefs not only in name but as such were responsible for the welfare of their country. To this end not only successive Governors but all Political Officers have striven and striven hard. Mr. Palmer beyond his tour through the Provinces has I believe no experience of the type of native his report deals with.⁶¹

This reaction to Palmer's observations points to the extent to which policy was driven by ideology and why it witnessed little in the way of a shift until the 1929 Women's Revolt.

The new structures and institutions, nevertheless, became important instruments for the expansion of an economy based not only on the production and marketing of palm produce but also on the greater opportunity offered for marketing an extensive array of foreign commodities.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The potential wealth from the trade in palm produce was not lost on British imperial and trading interests. Imperial policies and the rhetoric of the era bears this out. The opening of the Igbo country or what Governor Sir Walter Egerton described as the "richest part of the country"⁶² led High Commissioner Sir Ralph Moore to predict that effective occupation of the interior produce market would "result in largely increased prosperity both to the Administration, the commercial community, and to the natives themselves."⁶³ The

quotations above reflect the attitude of European officials as they embarked on the mission to civilize and develop the region in the early part of the twentieth century.

Indeed, advocates of the abolition agenda of the mid-nineteenth century outlined the revolutionary potential of so-called legitimate commerce. To them, the trade in agricultural and other commodities had the potential to liberate African slaves, provide opportunities to all and sundry to participate in commerce, increase accumulation, and modernize African economies. While a few economic and political leaders dominated the slave trade, the trade in oil was not capital intensive. Wealth, therefore, could be gained from individual enterprise.⁶⁴ Although the new trade was influenced by the existing social, political, and economic structures, access to oil palms and labour remained the most critical factors in the new trade for many communities in the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland, where the transition to the palm oil economy necessitated structural changes to meet the labour required for oil production. New economic relations developed upon the ashes of the old trade in slaves, but palm produce was a driving force for the economic and political developments in this region from the mid-nineteenth century. The quantity of palm produce exports after the abolition and the expansion from the period of colonialism reveals major changes in the rural economy in response to new demands. But this does not in itself tell us much about how this expansion was achieved. The development of trade and commerce in the post-abolition era did not depend upon local initiative alone. It was achieved through the double imperial ethos of “civilization” and “commerce.” This imperial ethos had fundamental implications for both the socio-economic and the political structures of the Igbo and other African communities.⁶⁵

Colonial officials were obsessed with the agrarian question. To many officials, this was the main purpose of imperial acquisitions in Africa. Therefore, until the later development of minerals as an important part of the colonial economy, the African population, the European administrators, and the European traders were linked in the desire to expand African production of cash crops. Although the Igbo and other peoples of the Bight of Biafra hinterland were already exporting palm oil and kernels from the time of the abolition of the external slave trade, the incorporation of the region as a British colonial possession created a new market for palm produce and increased access to

the world market for many small-scale producers.⁶⁶ As in many other societies in western Africa, relations between Europeans and Africans during the colonial period were rooted in the attempt to transform agriculture. From the beginning of the twentieth century through the end of colonial rule, officials and local farmers alike redirected local labour and resources to meet the demands of European markets for palm oil and kernels.⁶⁷

The imposition of British rule in Nigeria was followed by the acquisition of land by the Forest Department, the precursor to the Department of Agriculture.⁶⁸ But the development of colonial agriculture can be traced to the work of Sir Alfred Maloney and the establishment of a botanical station at Lagos in 1887. The station started with a modest expenditure of £300 a year, and its superintendent was expected to grow different kinds of useful trees, plants, and herbs as well as a model kitchen garden.⁶⁹ In 1888, the Royal Niger Company began a plantation at Asaba, which was transferred to the government in 1901, in addition to a station at Nkissi. A garden was started in 1903 at Calabar under the administration of Sir Claude MacDonald. Advances made between 1903 and 1905 led to the formation of the Botanical, Agricultural, and Forestry Departments in the colonies of Lagos and Southern Nigeria under the headship of Mr. H. N. Thompson. By 1910, the departments were separated and the Agricultural Department became autonomous. The new department focusing on agriculture was firmly established from this time onward under the directorship of Mr. W. H. Johnson, who rapidly developed it into one of the most important departments in the colonial bureaucracy. After the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Nigeria, Mr. Johnson remained the director of agriculture in the Southern Provinces.⁷⁰ The agricultural structure began to assume new forms in a European colonial society obsessed with rural transformation and an African society forced to adapt “modernity” and a new consumer culture.

The advance into Igboland was prompted specifically by the desire to remove barriers to the palm oil trade. The colonial government took steps to encourage the production of palm oil and kernels among the Igbo and other communities lying within the palm oil belt of what became Nigeria. Most of southeastern Nigeria was particularly suited to the expansion of the palm industry. Wild groves dotted the landscape and little capital was required to produce palm products in minimum commercial quantities. But the

transformation of the local agrarian society was the result of both local initiatives and the aggressive attempt by colonial officials to create a peasant society dependent on the production of agricultural produce. Fredrick Lugard, the first colonial governor of Nigeria, summed up British economic interests: "It is in order to foster the growth of the trade of this country [Britain], that our far-seeing statesmen and our commercial men advocate colonial expansion."⁷¹ This expansion was essential because revenue from peasant production would support the local administration and provide the essential raw materials for British industries.

The expansion of colonial control and the development of roads and transport stimulated peasant production of palm oil and kernels. As early as 1902, colonial district officers were employing forced labour to construct roads, courthouses, and government rest houses. H. M. Douglas, for example, who joined the colonial service in 1894 and served in various capacities until 1920, personified what Felix Ekechi called the "uncrowned monarchs" and imperial autocrats. Douglas's role in planting British rule in Eastern Nigeria, including the use of forced labour to construct roads, is legendary. His philosophy of opening up the country through the construction of roads yielded significant results. By 1906, when he was transferred to Onitsha as district officer, Douglas had constructed over two hundred miles of motorable roads linking different parts of the Owerri district, earning him the nickname of *Beke ogbu ama*, the road-building Whiteman.⁷²

The *Pax Britannica*, bringing new incentives and opportunities to expand domestic production for the market, was accompanied by increased production of palm oil from the Igbo region. In 1905, for example, Governor Walter Egerton, visiting Oguta, reported that there was an "Enormous quantity of oil in the store, ready for export on the rise of the river."⁷³ By 1914, exports from Owerri Province were valued at over one million pounds.⁷⁴ Opening up Igboland attracted European trading firms to Oguta, Owerri, Owerinta, Ife, and other places. Coastal traders from Okrika, Bonny, and other areas also followed as the region opened up with the spread of roads.

Control over local production was achieved through political and administrative measures. Governor Hugh Clifford was clear about this when he wrote in 1920: "The administration was not to engage in commercial enterprises of any kind but would prepare and maintain the conditions – political,

moral, and material – upon which the success or failure of such enterprises depended.”⁷⁵ This policy was in response to the attempts of a Liverpool industrialist, William Lever, to develop oil palm plantations in Sierra Leone and Nigeria.⁷⁶ In a speech delivered at a dinner in honour of Sir Hugh Clifford, governor of Nigeria, at Liverpool on 9 July 1924, Lord Leverhulme, used the occasion to attempt to persuade the colonial authorities to give freehold rights to Europeans for the development of palm oil plantations in West Africa. The Leverhulme experiment in Sierra Leone had shown that plantations could not be successful without a carefully controlled labour force and secure land tenure. Leverhulme argued: “You cannot have prosperous business without some security of the capital invested in it.” He charged: “We had not [*sic*] right for the palm-trees in Sierra Leone. We had no rights to collect the fruit ourselves or to force the Natives to collect it, with the result that there was such an irregular supply of fruit that when our 20,000 [pounds] capital was exhausted we packed up and went away.” He reminded his audience of the difficulty facing European investors and of a widely held assumption about the African producers: “I don’t know of better material anywhere for labour in the tropics than the Natives of West Africa, but they are not organizers.”⁷⁷ In Leverhulme’s view,

Whatever merit the African native has, it has been proved by the opportunities he has had in the United States that he has not got organizing abilities. Now the organizing ability is the particular trait and character of the white man.... Do you think we shall be allowed to keep our present position of responsibility to the countries within the Empire if we do not make some organized effort to develop them on sound lines? That can only be done with capital, but capital will not flow without security. There is no rabbit so timid as your capitalist. The remedy for trade stagnation is to restore confidence. Leave our business men alone, but give them security in all that is reasonable and right. Our immense Empire will only be held if we administer it for the best interest of the people, on a wide, broad policy, without maudlin sentimentality or brutality.⁷⁸

Indeed, Leverhulme stated with much confidence that “the African Native will be happier, produce the best, and live under the larger conditions of prosperity

when his labour is directed and organized by his white brother who has all these million years' start of him."⁷⁹

Critics like Governor Hugh Clifford were opposed to the creation of European owned and managed plantations for both political and economic reasons. They believed that local agricultural production had a "firmer root" in the hands of the local farmers since they would be self-supporting in terms of labour. Moreover, the prevailing land tenure system and the population density of the Igbo region, which was as high as 1,000 per square mile in some parts, would impede the plantation system. Lugard also recognized the peculiar population problem in Eastern Nigeria. Unlike Northern Nigeria, where the Native Ordinance of 1910 vested the freehold of the land in the governor, in the east the colonial government adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude to the land question. The Land and Native Rights Ordinances of 1910 and 1917 ensured that land for agricultural production remained in the hands of the local farmers.⁸⁰ The implications of the plantation model for the eastern part of Nigeria were clear in 1932 when the director of agriculture stated:

Speaking generally and broadly, the people of the "palm belt" have already not enough land for food crops. If they start generally to plant palms on their farmlands, they will have to cut down the groves and use that land for farming. Such a change-over might not compare quite so badly with grove replacement as might be thought: for ordinary farm crops can be and are grown between the young palms on a "straight plantation" for two or three years, whereas the shade from the old palms in groves under direct replacement ... is too heavy.⁸¹

In addition, conditions in West Africa were different from those in the Belgian Congo and East Indies where successful experiments had paid dividends. Oil palm plantations dominated by European firms would have created a class of landless labourers and social problems for the colonial authority in West Africa.⁸² The government was also wary of providing compulsory labour for private profit or protecting monopoly rights, as was done in the Congo. Plantation experiments in the former Gold Coast and in Sierra Leone had shown that European-owned oil palm plantations could be profitable without government assistance and subsidies.⁸³ Peasant production seemed the cheapest method

for officials and gave local people the ability to pay their taxes in order to assist in maintaining self-sustaining colonies. Colonial officials were convinced of the built-in efficiency of peasant production, for local producers were meeting the needs of European industries.⁸⁴

For most of the colonial era, local farmers undertook production and trade in palm products with simple techniques often described as primitive and crude.⁸⁵ Yet great strides were achieved in palm oil production, which remained the single most important export product for the Igbo and the country as a whole. Indeed palm oil production and export had shown a steady increase in Nigeria from 1901 to 1943. The production of kernels also doubled from the 1911 levels and in 1942, “exports were three times those of 1901–1905 period.”⁸⁶ A delegation of the Empire Parliamentary Association, which visited Nigeria in 1927/28, described the oil palm as “the axis of the prosperity of the West Coast rainbelt.”⁸⁷ In their view, there will be an obvious link between the “prosperity of the whole palm belt ... and the power of absorption of British goods.”⁸⁸ In 1920, Nigeria produced about 52,771 tons of oil, valued at £1,655,914. About 153,354 tons of palm kernels, valued at £2,831,688 were produced in the same year.⁸⁹ Exports of palm oil and palm kernels increased to 246,638 tons and 127,111 tons respectively in 1928,⁹⁰ contributing 62 per cent of Nigeria’s export earnings.⁹¹ The value of exports had increased more than sevenfold and export volume multiplied fivefold by 1929.⁹² Revenue from palm kernels increased from £3,189,000 in 1921 to £4,429,000 in 1930. Government revenue from palm oil also increased significantly, from £2,520,000 in 1921 to £3,375,000 in 1930.⁹³

Amid these broad economic shifts, daily life in the countryside remained much the same. Considerable human energy was expended in extracting the thousands of tons exported annually until the development of mechanical crackers. The increase in export quantities during this time was the result of large-scale exploitation of wild palm groves that drew on the labour of men, women, and children.

Oil extraction was a labour-intensive, laborious exercise. The children removed the nuts from the husk, and the women directed the extraction of the oil. In the soft oil process, the nuts were boiled in water until they became tender. They then were pounded in a big mortar (*ikwe nkwu*), and the nuts were separated from the fibre. The resultant fibre was pressed by hand to

Table 2.1. Exports of palm oil and kernels; five-yearly averages.

YEARS	PALM OIL (TONS)	PALM KERNELS (TONS)
1901–05	56,740	125,432
1906–10	70,435	143,072
1911–15	76,099	170,301
1916–20	82,868	195,305
1921–25	99,003	216,204
1926–30	124,233	252,839
1931–35	123,667	285,131
1936–40	135,501	314,286
1941	127,777	378,120
1942	151,287	356,588
1943	135,268	331,292

Source: RH, *Mss Afr. s. 823(4)*, R. J. Mackie Papers.

extract the oil.⁹⁴ In the hard oil process, the fresh nuts were pounded, and water was then poured over the pulp. The resulting surface oil was skimmed and boiled, and the oil was extracted.⁹⁵

Producing kernels was even more tedious as each nut was cracked between two stones to extract the nut inside the hard outer layer. Women and children obtained kernels by cracking the nuts between stones.⁹⁶ I can relate this to my own personal experience. The drudgery of cracking palm kernels between two stones was one of the tasks I most hated as a child.

The division of labour involved the allocation of routine and light work to women and children and the assignment of more arduous, “dangerous,” and heavy duties to men.⁹⁷ However, women’s work was much more varied than men’s work. Christiana Marizu remarked that “It required a lot of work and effort to produce even the smallest quantity of oil... You start by fetching the wood and water even before production can begin.”⁹⁸

Some early European administrators remarked on the changing landscape as the Igbo encountered European rule and embraced the new consumer culture that came in its wake. A major stimulus for African production was the desire for European goods. Raymond Gore Clough, a European trader, had suggested that Africans should be induced to bring their oil to the traders by stimulating their interest in “imported goods and creating a desire ... for all the attractive articles displayed in the factory store.”⁹⁹ By the 1920s, the African population was demanding a greater variety of goods, beyond salt, gin, tobacco, stockfish, and cloth, which had been the predominant articles of trade in the past.

Edward Morris Falk, who became the district officer for Aba Division in December 1920, noted the changing structure of the Igbo economy:

The native produces food stuffs, palm oil and kernels. He is a consumer of a long list of European commodities such as clothing and textiles, liquor, imported food stuffs, ironmongery, crockery, kerosene oil, gunpowder, soap, matches, tobacco, camp equipment, cheap imitation jewelry, cycles, in fact anything which the natives sees the white man use from gramophones and sewing machines to tinned salmon or boot laces.¹⁰⁰

The buoyancy of the palm produce trade in the post-First World War era created a demand for tools and equipment that aided practical skills and enhanced leisure. Raymond Gore Clough, trading on the Oil River, recalled in his memoir that African traders and produce agents were demanding sewing machines, phonographs, and bicycles for resale to an increasingly prosperous African community.¹⁰¹ But to many Igbo people, these items were not regarded as luxury goods. Michael Echeruo has argued that “Typically, the Igbo did not expend their meager resources on these essentially luxury goods. However, their availability meant that some members of the community that could afford them became visible and triumphant successes. What was otherwise considered as wasteful frills became marks of real success to be emulated.”¹⁰² Yet only a very few people invested their money in such luxury goods as radio and phonographs. On the other hand, bicycles, the most common means of transport, were used for haulage and trade. A. E. Cooks, district officer for

Owerri, noted that the bicycle was an important factor in the economic life of the Igbo in the 1920s:

Not only is it used to transport palm oil in four gallon petrol or kerosene tins and palm kernels in sacks from the bush markets to collecting centres on the main roads where the produce is transferred to lorries for export, but it is also used extensively in internal trade.¹⁰³

An important trade developed out of the introduction of bicycles. Cooks observed that bicycle repairing “developed into a major industry and repair shacks are to be found dotted all over the division, especially at cross-roads, large markets, etc. The Owerri Ibo is a genius at improvisation and it is astonishing how long he manages to keep a bicycle on the road considering how grossly he overloads it.”¹⁰⁴ The bicycle was increasingly also used for passenger traffic, including in the urban towns.

By the 1920s, most of southeastern Nigeria had been drawn into the expanding market for oil. The palm produce trade was the means through which many households met their basic need for food and other expenditures. Eugenia Otuonye recalled that she relied on income from palm oil and kernels to clothe and feed her children and pay their school fees. “Many people had no other means,” she said.¹⁰⁵ Cooks confirmed this:

In the eastern area of the division generally known as Nguru area, the people are too thick on the ground to live off it and are obliged to buy large quantities of foodstuffs, mainly cassava, from other areas. Fortunately, this area is rich in oil-palm and it is mainly from the sale of oil and kernels that the people obtain the cash to buy the food they cannot grow.¹⁰⁶

Agricultural development stimulated changes in production relations and internal trade. The large increase in male participation in the produce trade led to the creation of new economic opportunities. The development of the commodity trade led to the rise of produce agents, mostly men, who also controlled the supply of European goods.¹⁰⁷ Women engaged in the new trade as producers and distributors and supplied the increasing urban population

with foodstuffs. These changes associated with the production of palm oil and kernels were unquestionably the most dynamic features of rural economic life and accounted for the growth in per capita income throughout the colonial era.

Attempts at innovations in production methods were made from the late 1920s to encourage production and improve the quality of oil. Experimental farms were opened at Umudike in 1926 and Nkwere in 1930.¹⁰⁸ From 1927, the department of agriculture introduced a policy of encouraging the development of locally owned palm oil plantations. Twenty-seven acres of experimental palm plots were established in the Aba Division in 1927. There was a substantial rise in the number of locally owned plantations from 9 in 1928, covering 70 acres, to 88 in 1931, covering 377 acres.¹⁰⁹ The number of plantations rose to about 200 by 1932 in the Southern Provinces.¹¹⁰ However, progress was slow as rural farmers viewed government-backed programs with suspicion. F. D. Carr, the colonial Resident for Owerri Province remarked that while “agricultural officers strove valiantly and set up model and experimental farms and though interest in them was considerable they were, generally, written off by the Ibo farmer as being excellent for the European but of little practical use for him.”¹¹¹ The lack of enthusiasm for oil palm plantation was strongest in Owerri Province, a region with a very high population and very little land. Chief Enweremadu, a local administrative officer during the 1930s, remembers that there was fear among rural farmers that they could lose their land and oil palms to the government.¹¹² The director of the agricultural department confirmed the high level of apprehension among rural farmers when he wrote: “So strong has this sentiment proved that repeatedly individuals or families have decided to try planting palms, but have later given in to the strong adverse public opinion of their neighbors.”¹¹³

There were, of course, other factors that explain the lack of enthusiasm for innovation among Igbo farmers in Owerri Province besides the fact that Carr describes the Igbo as “intensely jealous of his land and strongly and violently resented any form whatsoever of Government intervention.”¹¹⁴ The environmental and demographic factors in the province also explain this lack of enthusiasm among farmers. In fact, Carr acknowledged that progress in improved methods of agriculture was slow due mainly to the system of land tenure and consequent fragmentation. In the region, the need for improved

methods of farming was obvious, for the rapid increase in population necessitated more intense cultivation, which had seriously depleted the fertility of the soil. Carr recalled that by the 1920s the average size of yams, the staple diet, “had decreased by almost half and the less demanding coco-yam and cassava [*sic*] were rapidly becoming more and more in evidence.”¹¹⁵

Local producers were also encouraged to purchase hand presses for the extraction of the oil.¹¹⁶ The Duchacher press, manufactured by a Luxembourg firm, proved to be most satisfactory in terms of cost, quality, and quantity of oil extracted. About 80 of these presses, capable of extracting oil with a 5 per cent lower free fatty acid (FFA) content were in use by the early 1930s.¹¹⁷ However, there was no large-scale adoption of these presses by local producers, despite the improvement in quality and quantity of oil produced with these presses, because the oil producer did not make sufficient extra profit to warrant such an investment.

Attempts were also made to increase the quality of produce meant for the European market. In 1928, the government introduced produce inspection – enforced grading and inspection of palm oil and kernels by government agents to ensure quality. The government considered exempting plantation quality oil from export duties following the demands of the United Africa Company, which had argued that it could not compete with cheaper products from Malaya and Sumatra. The issue of export duty was problematic for the government in Nigeria. Downing Street was of the view that such an exemption should extend to Africans who produced products of similar quality.¹¹⁸

Colonial efforts to restructure the local economy achieved success due to the collaboration of local people. Most Igbo peasants embraced the opportunities provided by the colonial economy because they were drawn inexorably into it. As many commentators have noted, colonial demands of taxes and labour imposed added burdens upon peasant households, although crop sales and wages also provided them with cash.¹¹⁹ Still, the change in the character of the economy was not achieved by any large-scale transition from subsistence economy to large-scale appropriation of land devoted to palm oil production, for two main reasons. First, the palm oil economy was already well developed following the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the transition to commodity trade based on palm oil. Second, the history of combining subsistence agriculture with market production within a physical environment littered

with palm groves had proved effective in meeting European demands. Only in a very few cases were significant amounts of land devoted to planting new oil palms.

Although many farmers did not devote whole plots of land to oil palms, they took risks when the prospects for gain justified this. A small number of businessmen who were in a position to acquire land and risk capital answered the call of the agricultural research departments to invest in commercial oil palm production. The introduction of motor transport contributed significantly to this expansion as African businessmen invested in the transport sector. By the 1920s, trucks were moving people and goods and bringing the whole region into the vortex of the world market. Rural farmers understood the importance of the palm oil industry and cash crops to their economy. They devoted more time to the care and protection of wild oil palms on their plots and often planted new ones on the boundaries (*oke*) that demarcated individually owned plots of land. However, struggles over ownership of palm trees and land, Onyegbule Korieh noted, “became more frequent.”¹²⁰ Some rural farmers also often planted a few cocoa or coffee plants on compound plots as the demand for these products increased.

At the same time, rural farmers experienced major changes in kinship and community organization, especially in access to land. Under the traditional tenure system, pieces of communal land were divided among each family in the town, and heads of families would in turn allocate land to their own family members. British officials observed in the 1920s that considerable changes in the land tenure system had already taken place among communities in Owerri Province, resulting in frequent reports of land disputes in colonial reports. “Land cases and disputes are of annual occurrence, this year though numerous, no untoward event has occurred,” the Resident for Owerri Province wrote in 1920. Mr. Ingles, writing from Okigwe Division, noted: “The Division has been quiet with the exception of a few minor disturbances – chiefly over land claims.” Mr. Ferguson in Owerri Division, observed that the “usual land dispute, customary at this season caused a certain amount of excitement at the time, but died away when yams have [*sic*] been planted.” The communities in Aba Division had also seen transformations in access to land by this period.¹²¹

The ethos of village life and the values attached to farming were also changing rapidly. By the second decade of colonial rule, many young men were shunning farming for the prestigious and attractive opportunities in the expanding colonial towns and in the public service. New trade patterns, migration, and new consumer habits were disrupting the old kinship structures that redistributed wealth, as individuals chose to leave the village to seek their fortunes elsewhere. For younger people in particular, migration enabled them to escape the control of the elders in the villages, but many named rural poverty as their reason for migrating to urban as well as rural areas in other parts of the country. Over time, women effectively began to take up the opportunities offered by the emerging urban areas by establishing small retail shops or establishing themselves as prostitutes. “A purely consuming class of Government employees, mission school teachers, motor drivers and other callings is only now arising,” an official noted.¹²²

The greatest danger ahead is that the number of people who have taken to other means of making a living than farming is rapidly increasing. Experience teaches that the school boy who has learnt the rudiments of writing or those in the services of Europeans will not go back to the land to work on it though they may go back to their homes to trade or live on their wits as letter writers or money lenders. As a result, there is a rapid increase of consumers and of non producers. The people are flocking to the larger settlements where money is made easily by honest and dishonest means without physical effort. The Southeast is thus faced with a serious food problem, which may prove to be a difficult matter to solve in the future. Already the prices demanded for locally produced food stuffs are soaring upwards.¹²³

Trade and social relations increased in the aftermath of the establishment of British colonial control. Significant trading links developed between the Igbo interior and coastal middlemen who established trading posts along the water highways in the interior of the Bight of Biafra. The emergence of the so-called “water sides” connected hinterland producing areas to the coastal towns of Okrika, Bonny, Calabar, and other trading posts. The booming oil markets attracted coastal merchants, and thus established not only economic rela-

tions but also long-lasting cultural connections. Coastal merchants and the burgeoning numbers of local traders in the interior helped to create a fluid and multicultural town identity in trading posts such as Oguta and Ife, along the Imo River. The story of Joshua Adinembo, who established himself as a produce merchant after the First World War at Ife in Mbaise, is typical of the way the new trade created new forms of economic and social relations. An Izhon (Ijo) oil produce merchant and trader from Okrika, by the time of his death in the 1940s, Adinembo was married to several women, many of whom were from Ife and Ezinihitte along the Imo River in Igbo-speaking territory.¹²⁴

FOOD PRODUCTION

Colonial officials did not show much enthusiasm for the development of local food production. Reporting on the food situation in eastern Nigeria as early as 1912, the director of agriculture noted:

In some districts and even divisions, we have not yet been able to get even one tiny plot of palms planted by any farmer. And it is in these areas, with their heavy populations of trees and palms that the matter is of most urgency. This is not merely because this is the “palm belt” *par excellence*, nor even merely because neither the people nor ourselves know of any other export crop which will succeed on these poor acid soils. A more important reason for the urgency of this work in these areas lies in the poor food crops that the poor soil yields and their inadequacy to feed such a heavy population. If the yield of the areas that are occupied by palms could be doubled, as they easily could by the substitution of plantations for wild trees and groves, then more land would be available for food crops or much more money would be obtained wherewith the people could purchase food imported from other parts of Nigeria or from abroad.¹²⁵

In his memoir as a colonial administrator, which included service in Aba District, Edward M. Falk observed the decline in the production of food items and

the lack of interest in rural life and agriculture on the part of young people. “So low is the output of the individual that the question of feeding the non producers of food stuffs is already becoming a serious question,” Falk observed in the Aba District in 1920.¹²⁶ This grim assessment of the food crisis only worsened over time.

O. T. Faulkner, one-time director of the department, admitted in 1922 that the department was focusing most of its attention on export production without a corresponding interest in food production. Faulkner explained:

In reviewing the appearance of work, on which the department has embarked, it may appear that it deals too largely with products, which are, or might be exported ... but it must be remembered that it is much easier for us to help the farmer to take advantage of the changed conditions resulting from opening to him of the world’s market, than to teach him how to improve his method of growing his foods – methods which are the winnowing of centuries of experience, sifted to suit his ancestral conditions by generations of his forefathers.¹²⁷

In a report written after his visit to West Africa in 1926, Ormsby-Gore clearly argued for a balanced agricultural policy that would include food production:

The foundation of sound agricultural policy must necessarily begin with the production of food for the people. Food comes first, and economic crops for export should come second.... The development of economic crops at the expense of production of food for local consumption is most undesirable, and a plentiful supply of cheap food, both for the native and non-native inhabitants of the countries, is the first essential.¹²⁸

Officials did not often follow Ormsby-Gore’s advice.

Productivity in the area of local foodstuffs declined rapidly following colonial intervention. The Chief Secretary’s Office acknowledged that the decrease in the production of local foods resulted in higher prices for these food items.¹²⁹ In its determination to maintain the momentum and expand the production of other cash crops, the government ignored the threat that

the expansion of the oil palm export sector posed for rural farmers and food security.

The rising cost of food was also linked to climatic and structural conditions. Colonial reports from the first decade of the twentieth century show an erratic rainfall pattern that often affected the fortunes of local farmers. This was a recurring pattern in the years for which records are available. Diseases such as the influenza epidemic of 1918, officials reported, forced farmers to abandon their farms.¹³⁰ The First World War, the annual report of 1918 noted, combined with other factors to increase inflation and the cost of local foodstuffs in most alarming manners.¹³¹ The report for 1919 is worth quoting in some length:

The much reduced import of foodstuff, deficient rainfall and the inflation of the currency have been effective together in continuing the increase in the price of agricultural foodstuffs, and the heightened cost of these has been further operative in generally increasing the price of native foodstuffs not directly of agricultural origin, such as smoked fish and meat produced by the natives. The importance of the latter circumstance lies in the fact that the consequently reduced availability of such products for purchase by the poorer classes leads to a decrease in the important protein, rendered all the more difficult to make up owing to the fact that prices of the chief vegetable protein bearers, beanstuffs, have in turn been greatly enhanced.¹³²

In spite of the developments in the rural economy and the emergence of a relatively viable peasant economy, poverty and impoverishment were evident in the colonial period. By the 1930s, for example, reports of men pawning themselves, their spouses, or their children were rampant as peasants struggled to produce for the market and to meet colonial demands for taxes.¹³³ Although pawning was practised in pre-colonial Igbo society, Linus Anabalam confirmed that there was an increase in pawning due to colonial demands for taxes.¹³⁴ Some pawns lacked access to labour to exploit the land, as John Illife has noted. Others were young, able-bodied men, who lacked access to land (or other resources) and were unable to sell their labour power at a price “sufficient

to meet their minimum needs.”¹³⁵ J. S. Harris has shown that lack of access to land forced many to become casual labourers in the 1940s.¹³⁶

The demographic features of the region had economic implications. In 1921, barely two decades into the colonial period, there were nearly 4 million people living in Igboland.¹³⁷ C. K. Meek, who studied the Igbo in the 1930s, noted that the high population density found in some parts of the region was a major source of economic problems. Using the Nigerian census estimates of 1921, Meek noted that there was already a shortage of farmland among the Oratta (Uratta) and Isu groups in the Owerri area. He observed that the population might increase “beyond the limits of the productivity of the land, thereby giving rise to a non-agricultural floating population with nothing to give in exchange for the food it requires.”¹³⁸ Margaret M. Green, who studied the Agbaja Igbo in the 1930s, remarked: “The pressure of population on land is so great that every square yard of it belongs to definite small land-owning groups which may consist three or four males.”¹³⁹ In 1952, for example, Okigwe Division, with an area of 587 square miles and a total population of 422,706, had an average population of 720 persons per square mile. Orlu Division had an average of 873 persons per square mile. In the areas around Owerri, the density was no less than 500 to the square mile.¹⁴⁰ According to Udo, the most densely populated areas included Mbaise and Ikeduru in central Igboland, and northern Ngwaland where rural densities of over 1,000 persons per square mile were common. The Onitsha and Awka areas of Igboland were already facing food insecurity by this period. They depended on other regions to meet their subsistence needs.¹⁴¹ Although the crops and the farming system were similar to those of other parts of Igboland, Udo notes that palm oil was very important in ensuring the survival of the dense population in the uplands of Awka and other parts of Igboland.¹⁴²

Overall, the colonial government’s agricultural development strategy was seen as the quickest way to introduce to Nigeria the benefits of “civilization” and modernization. This was the strategy of Hugh Clifford (governor-general of colonial Nigeria, 1919–25) for the economic development of the colony. Yet the Western ideologies of modernization were problematic for African agriculture because they neglected local production systems and often imposed a top-down approach to modern farming.¹⁴³ The perception that the local farmer was primitive and resistant to change stems from a narrow under-

standing of the socio-cultural context that influenced economic production. Rural farmers tried to balance their risks. But according to G. I. Jones, the “experts” made no allowance for the fact “that the Nigerian farmer and his family have to produce enough food to support a large group of people and cannot therefore afford to take risks.”¹⁴⁴

Yet the local agricultural economy was more sophisticated, developed, and adaptive to changing socio-economic conditions than colonial commentators thought. The growth in the palm produce trade was not just a reflection of the encouragement given by European traders and officials; African initiative was important in the expanding trade. Still, in this region, as in many parts of colonial Africa, the state acted, in the words of Bill Freund, as a “tribute-taker rather than an organizing agency for capital producers as in a developed capitalist society.”¹⁴⁵ The changes that occurred were also shaped by the colonial ideology of the “male farmer.” The colonial government created boundaries of economic and social difference based on gender. However, while colonial policies reinforced patriarchy, the new economy liberated women in some ways. Ironically, women subsidized the colonial state and the peasant household as agricultural labourers and peasant producers. Overall, women and men reaped a “mixed harvest” due to the ambivalent nature of colonial policy. Commercialization did not often translate into economic well-being. Prices and demands for palm produce fluctuated according to European economic and political conditions, creating dependence on the export trade and instability in the local agrarian economy. Colonial taxation and the high cost of living deprived peasants of any surplus.

The first two decades following the establishment of British colonialism witnessed irrevocable changes in the rural economic base. The response of the Igbo to the commercial incentives of the colonial period was influenced by the various contexts – local, external, and colonial – in which they found themselves. Primary production provided new means for achieving power and influence in the society. However, the concentration of resources in cash crop production increased the vulnerability of households to food insecurity. Farmers had neither control over the price of their produce nor the power to influence the price of imported foodstuffs.¹⁴⁶

Yet the period of conquest, ironically, was also a period of considerable growth in agriculture. But the level of growth in the first two decades of the

colonial period owed as much to the initiative of the local population as to the political and social restructuring that occurred in the first two colonial decades, including the demand for labour, the imposition of taxation, and the growth in Western education. The transformations that followed and the forms of the changes that occurred were, however, shaped by the capitalist interest of the colonial state as much as by the precapitalist structures of Igbo societies, including their kinship structures. But it was the Igbos' desire to acquire wealth, their desire for Western education, and their desire and appetite for Western culture that would have the most important impact on the economic and social structures of their society after a very short period of European contact.

Local farmers invested more labour and resources in cash cropping and trade, and palm oil and kernels became significant in reshaping the local economy as much as the relationship between colonial officials and their African subjects. Colonial policies contributed to further commercialization of agriculture and increased the number of small-scale traders in the produce and retail trades. But the emphasis on the production of cash crops disrupted the way the local population balanced production for exchange and production for subsistence as the palm oil trade dominated the economy in most parts of the Igbo country.

The process through which the goals of economic expansion and political transformation occurred was complex. Clearly, the hegemonic power of the colonial state helped create new modes of capital accumulation, but these could not have evolved without the participation, and sometimes the initiative, of the local people.¹⁴⁷ In southeastern Nigeria, where local people were already participating in the emerging capitalist economy of the late nineteenth century, by producing palm oil and later kernels for the European market, the colonial state became a powerful instrument for creating new opportunities for capital accumulation. Yet its unique features lay in the way local people were often able to manoeuvre to pursue other interests. The existing social, political, and economic structures that the Igbo population called upon influenced the changes that occurred in what was obviously a rapidly changing society.

Colonial agricultural policy was at best ambivalent, sometimes encouraging export crop production and at other times limiting it, as administrators

struggled to balance competing African and European interests.¹⁴⁸ The state influenced what was grown, how it was grown, and how it was priced and marketed. This intervention was partly effected by “policing the countryside,” in Walter Rodney’s phrase.¹⁴⁹ At the same time, foreign trade was increasingly controlled by European traders, mainly British. Over time, indigenous entrepreneurs were turned into agents of the foreign merchants. The monopolization of the most lucrative export and import trade in agricultural products and the repatriation of profits by foreign traders stunted the transformation of peasant agriculture and the flow of capital from trade into agriculture. For the Igbo, the changes that followed the colonial agricultural transformation were neither progressive nor regressive; rather, they represented what Hal Barron calls a “hybrid” of change and continuity.¹⁵⁰ Yet the classification of men and women as farmers and farmers’ wives, respectively, remained an important part of colonial agricultural policy, which I shall examine in the next chapter.