



THE LAND HAS CHANGED

History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

Chima J. Koriech

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FOREWORD

I consider it a distinct honour and privilege to have been invited to write a foreword for this book, *The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria*, which is a major and significant contribution to Igbo studies. In this volume, the author provides a vivid account of the patterns of socioeconomic change in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, but focusing primary attention on present Imo and Abia states. The book deals with the transformations of agriculture during the colonial and postcolonial eras. It is certainly a study whose time has come, insofar as this genre, relating specifically to the Igbo, has been in the doldrums for too long. In other words, studies dealing with colonial agrarian policies and their impact on the indigenous peoples seem thus far to have been neglected by both indigenous and foreign scholars. Korieh's book, therefore, fills an important gap in the existing studies dealing with British colonial innovations or changes relating to agriculture in Nigeria. As a remedy, Korieh examines and analyzes the transformations in agriculture in southeastern Nigeria with a special focus on the colonial and postcolonial periods.

In *The Land Has Changed*, a title borrowed from an agonized interviewee, the author confronts the problems of modernization as perceived by the British and challenges the notion that British colonial agricultural policies redounded to the benefit of the colonized. Rather, the transformations laid the foundation for decades of resistance, the decline of agriculture, and the onset of perennial hunger and poverty. In the author's words, "The book

centres on the British attempt to transform a colonial society (continued in the early postcolonial period) through the modernization of agriculture and the experiences, actions, and perceptions of the local population whom colonial officials often characterized as backward and unchanging.” In the final analysis, we are concerned here with, first, the dynamic processes of colonial and postcolonial socioeconomic engineering with their insidious consequences. Secondly, we witness the patterns of local/Igbo reactions towards the radical changes in the political economy.

Because of the accident of history, Nigeria (including Igboland) came under British direct rule from about 1900 to 1960. With the advent of the British, therefore, things literally fell apart with special reference to the political economy (agriculture). For example, Nigeria was brought inexorably under the vortex of the Western capitalist system, and ipso facto was engulfed in the capitalist economy. This meant that agricultural production *for export* became the foundation of the new economy. In a sense, agricultural products for the British industries became a British colonial economic preoccupation, and agricultural products now became the chief contributors to Nigeria’s gross domestic product. Put differently, Nigeria, as well as most parts of West Africa, entered into what A. G. Hopkins described as the “open” phase of colonial economic development, meaning the entry of the economy into the phase of the Western capitalist economic model of colonialism – exploitation. Of course, this implied changes in the patterns of production and commodity exchange (trade). The characteristics include the export of a range of agricultural and mineral products in exchange for a variety of British manufactures, chiefly consumer goods, the domination of some sectors of the economy by expatriates, and perhaps most importantly, the assertion of considerable influence and control over Nigerian economic policy by the British.¹ These changes invariably heralded the age of British imperial control, or unequal relationship, and thus the basis of colonial exploitation and other forms of oppression.

It might be pertinent at this juncture to examine the impact of the transformations in agriculture in the context of culture and life. We should emphasize the fact that agriculture (farming) was essentially the principal occupation of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria from time immemorial. In particular, agriculture was the core of the people’s source of livelihood, and

agriculture dominated the Igbo/Nigerian economy up to the 1960s. Virtually every adult household (family) was engaged in farming and, accordingly, food production (particularly yams, the king of foodstuffs) and other crops like cassava, corn/maize, and a variety of vegetables formed the basic staples of food. Not surprisingly, most people had enough food to eat, and quite correspondingly populations grew. Historically, therefore, Igboland was the land of plenty, where food production was ample and abundant, and people thus prided themselves as being blessed with surplus food and wealth. Is it any wonder that the elders still speak nostalgically of the “good old days,” in reference to when food was plentiful and poverty and starvation had no place in the land? In fact, studies show that agriculture was central to the evolution of the highly advanced Igbo civilization.²

Admittedly, there were times of food scarcity/shortages and hence temporary periods of hunger, known popularly as the period of *Onwo*. As Victor Uchendu explains: “By June, all the yams have been planted. A period of food shortage called *onwo* sets in.... *Onwo* is caused by lack of a well-developed system of storing surplus yams until the new crop is harvested. The chief staples then become cassava, cocoyams, and, in some parts of southern Igbo, the three-leaved yam locally known as eno.”³ These food crops are popularly referred to as “women’s” crops, while yam, the king crop, is known as “men’s” crop.

Production for exchange, of course, was an important component of the Igbo political economy. “Field studies in the eastern region [of Nigeria] have shown that the region possesses a highly developed system of distributive trade. This system is not recent in origin but appears to have been developed over centuries of slow and unimpeded growth.”⁴ Indeed, food production and trade significantly contributed to the dynamic process of population growth, therefore making Igboland one of the most densely populated regions of the African continent, if not in the world. Yes, Robert Stevenson affirms, “There can be little question that the I[g]bo region in south eastern Nigeria constitutes one of the greatest nodes of rural population density in all of sub-Saharan Africa.”⁵ Stevenson adds that, “the very nature of the density and the large area involved bespeak a rather respectable antiquity.”⁶

The point of emphasis here is that in Igboland food was plentiful, and poverty and starvation had no place in the land. But sadly, as Korieh’s study

illustrates, this supposedly pristine and prosperous country (land) was “spoiled by man” – arguably the British. The proverb/idiom, “A Country is spoiled by men,” or alternatively, “It is man who ‘spoils’ the country,” cryptically captures the Igbo ideological perception of change. Culturally and philosophically, the Igbo accept the principle/notion of change. In essence, they are fully aware that change is inevitable and can come from within or from without. But change, they also say, must be useful; otherwise, it must be rejected out of hand. Thus, in consonance with their cultural disposition that “life [hazards] must be faced and its problems overcome,” British colonial problems via agricultural changes had to be overcome. As illustrated in this book and in other studies, the British were the fundamental sources of trouble, with particular regard to the socioeconomic and political innovations that upset the apple cart. The female victims of agricultural change, for instance, resolutely challenged the oppressive regime, as evidenced in the Women’s War of 1929. In effect, British innovations triggered a variety of reactions, which were at times quite tragically violent in nature.

Also reacting specifically to the transformations in agriculture and the restrictions placed on trade, the aggrieved women expressed their discontent as follows:

Our grievances are that the land has changed and we are all dying. [Specifically,] since the white men came, our [palm] oil does not fetch money.

Imagine our suffering [as we are] restricted from exporting garri [cassava flour] to the north especially when the small profit accruing from the trade is being exhausted....

[And,] consider the lives of a family, which may perish as a result of the measures, which have been taken to restrict the garri trade.⁷

The introduction of the gender equation – voices of women – in this volume is critically important. It helps to call into question the assumption that African/Igbo women were simply the silent victims of colonial oppression. But this and other studies clearly show that, because women, after all, were (and still are) the

backbone of the extractive (farming) sector of the economy, they could hardly remain aloof over colonial intrusions into their sources of livelihood. Consequently, any study/studies of structural change(s) in colonial/postcolonial agriculture, which excludes women's voices, must certainly be declared as truncated. The author, therefore, makes a major contribution in Africanist scholarship and historiography by approaching his subject from a holistic perspective.

Using primarily archival and oral sources (interviews), Korieh navigates the complex and, at times, conflicting perceptions/notions of change, as they relate to agriculture. In particular, he critically examines the transition from an essentially subsistence agriculture-based economy to a capitalist export-oriented economy. And he further focuses attention on how colonialism and the international economic environment created "poor terms of trade" for Igbo/Nigeria's primary agricultural exports, and the onset and consequences of the dependency syndrome on developed economies.

Korieh notes, however, that from the 1970s Nigeria's socioeconomic woes began with the collapse or decline of agriculture, even though ambitious large-scale agricultural development projects had been attempted, e.g., Operation Feed the Nation, the importation of fertilizers, etc. But "Despite the heavy financial investments ... agricultural productivity remains abysmal." Several reasons are suggested for the colossal failures, including corruption and the crisis of governance, and the role of external factors – international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In the final analysis, Korieh attributes the ominous decline of agriculture to the shift from agriculture as the base of Nigeria's economy to reliance or dependence on petroleum as the principal source of revenue from the 1970s. His words:

The discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956 and the production [of oil] that began in 1958 made Nigeria the largest oil producer in Africa and the eleventh in the world. The 1970s coincided with the rise in the world oil price, and Nigeria reaped instant riches from petroleum. The emergence of petroleum economy [thus] ushered in an important new phase in Nigeria's economy. Agriculture, which earned significant revenue for the [Eastern] region and the country before the oil boom, suffered from low investment, leaving

the rural population vulnerable. Rural regions witnessed a major crisis, with social, infrastructural, and economic collapse in the 1980s.⁸

The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria, based on carefully researched archival and oral sources, provides us with a wealth of knowledge about changes in the Nigerian economy during the colonial and postcolonial eras. Although this volume presents a rather depressing picture of contemporary Nigeria faced with problems of dire hunger and poverty because it seems no longer self-sufficient in food production and now depends on the importation of food, it offers some ray of hope. Economic recovery under more patriotic and committed leaders might still bring Nigeria back to its lost reputation as the giant of Africa.

Felix K. Ekechi
Professor Emeritus
Kent State University