



THE LAND HAS CHANGED

History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

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CHAPTER SEVEN

ON THE BRINK: AGRICULTURAL CRISIS AND RURAL SURVIVAL

When both the identity of self and of community becomes indistinguishable from that of the land and its fabric of life, adaptation follows almost instinctively, like a pronghorn moving through sagebrush. – *Donald Worster, Dust Bowl, 164*

By the end of the 1980s, low agricultural productivity, food insecurity, and environmental degradation became apparent in many parts of Igboland. Indeed, most of central Igboland struggled to feed a growing population on a diminishing area of farmland under the impact of years of neglect of agriculture in favour of a national economy dependent on the petroleum industry. These trends threatened the ability of farmers to increase productivity and to practice sustainable agriculture.¹ The crisis in the rural areas forced many rural dwellers to rethink the approach to their livelihood and survival strategies.² This chapter goes beyond the focus in the colonial and early post-colonial periods to outline the condition of agriculture since the 1980s and to examine the way in which the Igbo, especially in central Igboland, have sought to deal with issues of livelihood historically.

Although Nigeria experienced a degree of prosperity from oil revenue before the mid-1980s, this prosperity was short-lived. The dramatic fall in oil prices from more than \$35 a barrel in 1980 to as low as \$10 per barrel in 1986 affected the economy at all levels.³ The changing fortunes of the state affected the rural economies as the country faced a recession and increased

debt burden. The introduction of painful austerity measures culminated in the implementation of World Bank and International Monetary Fund macroeconomic policies in the form of a structural adjustment program (SAP) by the Ibrahim Babangida administration in 1986. The aim of the SAP was debt recovery in the short term and poverty reduction through economic growth in the long term. The liberalization of the economy involved the elimination of stimulus programs, abolition of subsidies, reduction in price control, export promotion, devaluation of the currency, privatization of state owned industries, and reduction in public spending.

The structural adjustment program affected rural life. It led to an increase in rural poverty and in the prices of all necessities of life. Although the cost of living increased enormously, real wages actually fell under the SAP and massive lay-offs of workers and overall economic problems followed. Household consumption data collected between 1980 and 1996 and agricultural census information collected in 1993 and 1994 show an increasing level of poverty in the agricultural sector.⁴ In the mid-1990s, about 67 million people, or about 65 per cent of the population, were identified as poor. A poverty assessment (PA) study carried out in parts of Nigeria revealed that 87 per cent of the core poor in 1985 were members of rural agricultural households.⁵

Raluca and John Polimeni's study of the impact of the globalizing trends of the 1980s on Igbo society show that the restructuring of the public sector diminished the capacity of rural people to cope, even through traditional institutions, including the extended family, attempted to help communities to "maintain cultural traditions."⁶ Eugenia Otuonye, a rural dweller and mother of five children, reflected on the impact of the SAP era: "We have not had a good life since the government brought *ota na isi* [knock on the head]; life is much harder than words can describe."⁷ A school teacher recalled how she embarked on backyard farming to help sustain her family. The case of Isidore, who lost his job as a construction worker in a Port Harcourt shipyard, was not an isolated case. "I have never held another paid job since I left Port Harcourt in 1989, and it has been a struggle to support my family."⁸ Many young people faced similar uncertainties and experiences. *Ota na isi* as a metaphor for hardship became part of the political and economic discourse for many rural dwellers. Songs reflected the hardship of the era.

At the state levels, government agencies encouraged farmers to diversify, with emphasis on food production. The federal and state governments throughout Nigeria, with the support of the World Bank, set up the Accelerated Development Agricultural Programs (ADAPs). This was the outcome of the Nigeria Food Strategies Mission, which had been concerned with the deterioration of the food situation in the country.⁹ The Imo State Accelerated Development Agricultural Program (ISADAP), which covered most of central Igboland, was established in September 1982 to capitalize on the food production functions of the Ministry of Agriculture and, at the same time, minimize the protracted problem of red tape in public sector activities. The reduction of government's hold on the operational mechanism of ISADAP was a tacit acceptance of the constraints that state interventions had imposed on agricultural development in the past.

The first three years of ISADAP witnessed improvements in extension and agronomy services. These involved about 707,983 farming families in Imo State, from whom 28,077 contact farmers were selected.¹⁰ The program also embarked on the provision of high-yield cassava cuttings and seed yams to farmers. While this represented an improvement on past years, only 380 extension agents were provided, a very small number in relation to the number of farmers in the region. However, the production data from ISADAP in 1983 showed an improvement in food production. The total area under cultivation went up from 52,000 hectares in 1981 to 88,000 hectares in 1983. With an estimated increase of 16 per cent in cultivated area for 1984, ISADAP appeared to be the only state-owned agricultural project that made some gains. Cassava output in 1983 was 293,000 metric tons. This represented a 24 per cent increase over the 1977 figures. Rice production increased from 5,000 metric tons between 1980 and 1983 to 55,000 metric tons in 1985. The prices of major food items, including yams and gari, fell by between 29 and 52 per cent in different towns in the state.¹¹

ISADAP made some gains, but the fall in staple food prices may not have been directly related to its activities. The crisis of the 1980s brought both the rural and urban population face to face with a major rise in the cost of living. Both rural and urban dwellers adopted a self-help strategy of producing more of their own food. In many Igbo households, the proverb, *aka aja aja wetara onu nmanu nmanu* (it is the soiling of the hands that brings about

the oiling of the mouth), came to be strictly applied in daily living. Open spaces in towns and backyards were suddenly converted to farms. The general economic decline in the country compelled many rural and urban dwellers to engage in some production.

Yet these gains did not translate into an overall improvement in agriculture. Government programs remained largely inefficient while rural farmers did not always respond favourably or put government advice into effect. In fact, the total area under cultivation had fallen over the longer term, from 203,000 hectares in 1976 to 52,000 in 1981 in Imo State, representing an annual decline of 32 per cent.¹² The output of yams in 1981 was 22,000 tons, representing a 39 per cent decrease from the 1976 output. Likewise, the output of cassava had also fallen by 78 per cent between 1976 and 1981. While these data may not be very reliable, they indicate an increasing crisis in the rural sector.

The ADAP programs did not produce any significant change in the gendered pattern of previous policies. Women were ignored as independent farmers. The perception of women as “homemakers” excluded them from agricultural credits and other forms of support for farmers. The home economics centres proposed by the federal government under the ADAP scheme focused on nutritional education for rural women.¹³ Moreover, women’s inability to provide collateral such as land worked against them in obtaining credits and loans under the program.¹⁴

Rural life continued to go through a severe crisis, despite attempts to revitalize agriculture. In most of Igboland, where the average holding had declined considerably, the economic opportunities provided by agricultural pursuits offered rural dwellers little relief. The average farm size in most of Igboland in 1974 was under 0.10 hectare per household. Only 5 per cent had between 2 and 3.99 hectares, which represented the largest holdings.¹⁵ It was the emphasis on the non-agricultural sector that often ameliorated the effect of agricultural decline on rural dwellers.

While these problems persisted, the expanding urban sector demanded semi-skilled labour for the construction industry and other service sector jobs. This development was important in two ways for the Igbo countryside, which experienced a population growth rate of over 3.0 per cent but produced few jobs. First, the Igbo responded to the urban economic growth and the

Table 7.1. Average size of farm and holding, 1984–85.

STATE	NO. OF FARMING HOUSE-HOLDS (IN THOUSANDS)	TOTAL NO. OF FARMS (000)	TOTAL AREA OF FARMS (PER THOUSAND HA)	NO. OF FARMS PER HOUSE-HOLD	AVERAGE SIZE OF HOLDING (HA)	AVERAGE SIZE OF FARMS (HA)
Anambra	565	1,363	137	2.41	0.25	0.10
Imo	634	1,529	109	2.41	0.18	0.07
National Average	6,066	12,141	6,608	2.00	1.14	0.57

Source: *Rural Agricultural Sample Survey, 1984/85, 1985/86* (Lagos: Federal Office of Statistics, 1990), 16.

opportunities it afforded them. It was by diversifying household incomes that the Igbo were able to deal with decreasing land and low productivity in rural agriculture. Second, the expansion that occurred in the petroleum sector stimulated new forms of economic activities outside agriculture, especially an expansion in the service sector and a booming supply business.¹⁶ Others leased land as absentee farmers in areas such as Ohaji and Egbema and hired labour to produce cassava. But this was not the story of the majority of the population, who continued to struggle and to adapt to the changing landscape of rural Igboland.

Given the role that migration and the adoption of crops such as cassava have played in recent years, the rest of this chapter will examine the resiliency of the rural population, the changing cropping patterns, and how many have coped with the changing rural landscape through migration. How these changing livelihood strategies have affected rural identity and rural gender roles will be examined.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN RURAL LIFE

The ability of rural Igbo, like many Africans, to eke out a living in the face of economic adversities beyond their control is remarkable. Even after all the structural changes that have occurred, a large portion of the Igbo population has remained in the rural areas. Igbo tenacity can be linked to a sense of place that comes from having a link with the land – *ala* – even as survival strategies have shifted enormously from dependency on farming to dependency on a variety of non-farm income-generating activities, including wage labour and migration. This sense of place defines rural adaptation in ways that reflect the important link between the land, farming, individuals, and group identity.

Two conditions have influenced the way in which people have responded to the conditions in the rural economy: The first is the tendency for some rural dwellers to reinvest excess income in other income-generating activities. The second is what Bongo Adi identifies as the push factor. Here, some rural dwellers have no option but to diversify in response to declining agricultural productivity, land scarcity, and population pressure.¹⁷ Bryceson has argued that the attempt to eke out a living in some rural economies has led to de-agrarianization, in which most rural farmers shift away from agriculture to non-agricultural income-generating activities.

Most of central Igboland have exhibited such tendencies since the 1970s. The scarcity of land, poor soil, and population pressure has made diversification inevitable for communities such as Mbaise, Mbano, Etit, and others in central Igboland. Nwanyafo Obasis, a rural farmer in Mbaise, explains: “We combine farming and trading in order to survive. If one is a trader without a farm, one is taking a risk because the market could fail.”¹⁸ In Nguru, Mbaise, since the 1970s, Adi found that poor soil, scarcity of farmland and a very high population density has left the people “little option but to move away from agriculture as a significant source of income.”¹⁹ Here, as in other parts of Mbaise, the number of landless people has increased significantly while fallow periods have been eliminated altogether. The significant shift to non-agricultural activities came in response to the crisis in agriculture, and people responded to both the internal and external structural changes through their social institutions. According to Eugenia Otuonye, “We are left

with no option but to do other things in order to survive. I sell *akara* [bean cake] and do other odd jobs to provide food for my children.”²⁰

Yet we cannot generalize about the nature of the agricultural crisis because conditions differ markedly even within one region. While most of central Igboland faced a severe agricultural crisis, agriculture remained an important source of income for some parts of the region. Umuagwo, Ohaji, and Oguta have continued to engage in significant commercial and subsistence food production that supports the local population as well as the urban population of Owerri. Here, relatively smaller population and the rich soil support both commercial and subsistence agriculture. Farmers’ incomes have remained relatively competitive because farm products have continued to attract high prices due to the demand from other parts of the region and the urban areas. As Adi noted in a study of livelihood in Umuagwo, the average fallow period is between five and ten years because it is relatively abundant in comparison to the rest of the region, where the average land holding is about 1.2 hectares per household. Umuagwo remains a significant source of cassava and gari for parts of central Igboland, an important food item among the Igbo today. The adoption of cassava has radically transformed the agrarian culture of the Igbo, their dietary habit, and rural identity, as they eat more cassava than the traditional favourite – yam.

CASSAVA PEOPLE AT HEART?

Until the mid-nineteenth century, cassava was confined to the root crop belt of West Africa, primarily in the lowland tropical forests.²¹ As noted in chapter 1, the Igbo were a “yam people at heart,” but this icon of Igbo agriculture, masculinity, culture, and identity has been put on a back burner in Igbo agriculture. Indeed, since the 1970s, the Igbo can be aptly described as a “cassava people at heart.” The adoption of cassava, as Simon Ottenberg argues, is an important measure of the “index of the level of change,” among the Igbo.²² Susan Martin has stressed the major transformations that followed the introduction of capitalist agriculture (palm oil exportation) and how male control of the product and low-priced palm oil products sometimes forced women to divert

their labour to cassava production. The cultivation of cassava led to changes in food production methods, gender, and intergenerational relationships as rural families confronted the agricultural crisis of later years.²³

Nevertheless, the changes began much earlier. European accounts show that cassava reached Onitsha about 1857.²⁴ Recollections of rural people confirm that the Igbo initially looked down upon cassava. An evangelist in Onitsha in 1863 noted that those who grew cassava were the poor who could not “afford to plant yams.”²⁵ The early rejection and skepticism were partly associated with the poisonous characteristics of poorly processed cassava.²⁶ However, it began to “defuse less tardily” during the influenza pandemic of 1918–19.²⁷ The First World War and the famine that followed the pandemic, Don Ohadike had noted, increased the importance of cassava in parts of Igboland. By the 1920s, Ormsby-Gore observed that cassava had become a major supplement to the native food crops.²⁸ In addition, a district officer in Owerri described cassava as the main supplementary foodstuff. He noted that the average amount of cassava planted was about the same as that of yam in 1929.²⁹ Its importance would increase in later years.

Cassava gained prominence in Igboland for a number of reasons. Clearly, it provided a suitable alternative source of cheap carbohydrate and soon became a famine-relief crop that alleviated the traditional hungry period (*unwu*) preceding the yam harvest. Luke Osunwole remembers: “In those days there was famine, usually after yams had been planted. June and July were the worse months. Our people would do their best to survive on cassava, cocoyams, and yams set aside for eating (*ji njakiri*) that had been stored in the storage house (*mkpuke*).”³⁰

Advances in the production and utilization of the cassava tuber made it a popular food item in the urban areas. Processed cassava in the form of gari became very popular among the expanding urban and working class population, which was dependent on a cheap source of food. Morgan observed that cassava was a cheap, easily transported food of increasing popularity among the majority of the employed population and had the “advantage of harvest in May and June when no other fresh food is available.”³¹ Often referred to as *nri okopkoro* (food for spinsters/bachelors), gari was a very convenient food because it was very easy to prepare – by simply pouring boiled water over the flour to make a dough eaten with soup.



Women preparing gari at a Government Agricultural Development Center, c. 1960s. (Reproduced from the library of the National Archives, Enugu.)

Soon, gari became an important item of trade. By 1938, Igbo traders were sending about 4,000 tons of cassava flour to the north, and by 1942, this had increased to over 6,000 tons of gari per annum. The trade created an opportunity for peasant farmers to increase their income.³² The Second World War and the high cost of imported food increased the importance of cassava as food for a wider population and the army. By the 1940s, it was spreading in areas such as Abakiliki that had relied heavily on yam production.³³

Although cassava was seen as less prestigious than yams, and therefore as a woman's crop, its overall importance as a source of income for women increased dramatically over time. Morgan observed that cassava profoundly altered the economic and social relations between husbands and wives and fostered economic opportunities for women as it became an important source of cash income for them.³⁴ Phoebe Ottenberg, who studied the Afikpo Igbo in the early 1950s, confirms that the introduction of cassava, considered "beneath the dignity of men," was a major source of change in women's economic

fortunes.³⁵ Ottenberg states, “If a woman’s husband did not give her food, she was in a sorry plight; [with cassava] now it is possible for her to subsist without the aid of her husband.”³⁶ Though Ottenberg’s comments were an uncritical characterization of women’s economic position, the crop afforded them opportunities for capital accumulation, self-esteem, and a higher degree of economic independence. “Nowadays women do not care if the husband doesn’t give them any food, for they can go to the farm and get cassava,” an elderly Afikpo woman confirms. “If a woman has any money she buys [rents] land and plants cassava. The year after she does this she can have a crop for cassava meal, which she can sell and have her own money. Then she can say, ‘What is man? I have my own money!’”³⁷ Hence, women strongly resented any attempt to challenge their dominance in cassava production and trade. As early as 1925, for example, they complained about unfair male competition in what was regarded as women’s trade.³⁸

The high rate of agricultural involution from the end of the Second World War contributed to the apparent decline in yam cultivation and the ascendancy of cassava. By the 1950s, yam was “a rich man’s food” and one that required substantial investment in labour and money to produce. “Cassava helps us to feed the family more than any other crop,” Robert Ibe said.³⁹ Linus Anabalam recalls: “Unlike the past when yams and cocoyam were the main crops, it is not unusual to find a farmer with four or five plots under cassava crops alone.”⁴⁰ Related to the labour question is an aging rural agricultural population. “What can an old man and his wife do as farmers?” Linus Anabalam asked, as he reflected on the labour problem.

Cassava has no specific harvesting age and is, therefore, a convenient crop when alternative income-producing activities “compete for the farmer’s time.”⁴¹ Given the greater labour involved in yam cultivation, Morgan observed, “more money may be obtained from the growth of cheaper cassava sold in Aba Township or sent in the form of gari to Port Harcourt and Calabar Province.”⁴² Significant focus shifted to cassava production because it required less labour. The ease of transporting food of increasing popularity among the majority of the employed population, the advantage of a harvest in May and June when no other fresh food is available, and the ability to produce cassava on land with short fallows resulted in the expansion of cassava growing at the expense of yams.⁴³ While many in the rural areas adapted to

the changing agrarian landscape, others, especially the younger population, migrated in search of better opportunities.

MIGRATION AND RURAL LIVELIHOOD

Migration from the Igbo region typically occurred because of demographic and geographical conditions and the pressure on available agricultural land.⁴⁴ A disproportionately higher percentage of Igbo migrants came from the densely populated central region than from elsewhere.⁴⁵ References to population pressure found in missionary letters and travellers' journals suggest that the size of the population was already an economic problem by the end of the nineteenth century. A missionary from the Owerri region reported in 1866 that "population is so great that if they hear we shall want carriers, they come in great numbers begging to be used, even during the farming season."⁴⁶ Thomas Northcote linked the poor quality of the soil, the shortage of land, poverty, and subsistence insecurity in the region in the early twentieth century. Significant labour migration from the barren lands of the Onitsha-Awka axis to more favoured regions already existed by this time.⁴⁷ As Kenneth Dike confirms, "The density of population which was and still is a main feature of the I[g]bo country.... Hence the I[g]bos pressing against limited land resources had, of necessity to seek other avenues of livelihood outside."⁴⁸

Like Dike, Simon Ottenberg observed that poor soil incapable of supporting more than subsistence agriculture was a major factor that forced the Igbo to seek sources of livelihood elsewhere.⁴⁹ R. K. Udo, writing about Eastern Nigeria, paints a picture of densely populated areas like Mbaise and Awka from which people were forced to migrate as tenant farmers even before the colonial era.⁵⁰ British anthropologist Sylvia Leith-Ross described Nguru Mbaise, in central Igboland in 1935, in these words:

The over-population of this area is well known, with its consequent land and, possibly, food shortages. I saw it at its poorest time, when last season's yams were finished, and only a few of the new season's (women's) yams were ready to be dug.

The population depended on cassava and cocoyam and a small amount of very poor corn for its daily food. The over farmed land produced smaller and smaller crops.⁵¹

Emmanuel Ude recorded that land scarcity in Mgbowo forced the people to migrate to other parts of Igboland such as Ezioha, Inyi, and Ndeaboh by the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵² Similar observations were made by Ikenna Nzimoro about the Awka, who migrated as squatter farmers to other parts of Igboland because of poor soil. Poor soil in the Nnewi area, he noted, caused a switch from farming to trade.⁵³ This trend also explains the migration into Owerri (Oratta-Ikwere), and eventually across the Imo River into Aba (Ngwa) and from these across the Aba River to the Aza, where the movement was stopped by the British conquest.⁵⁴ The westward migrants settled on the borders of Benin (among the northern and southern Ika). To the northeast, they invaded the Cross River lowlands and established a frontier on the Okpauku River. There the Igbo reproduced the grassland pattern of fortified settlements in which compounds were loosely grouped together. To the south, they reproduced the forest pattern of dispersal.⁵⁵

Linked to the demographic pressure in the Igbo region is the environmental degradation that has become a part of the landscape in several parts of the Igbo country.⁵⁶ Continued use of the land and human activity has led to a breakdown in agricultural productivity. Floyd had predicted that this would happen under the traditional farming methods used in the region.⁵⁷ For the 1940s, Forde and Jones estimated a population of between 600 and 1,000 persons per square mile over much of Okigwe Division.⁵⁸ A population of more than 1,000 persons per square mile has been recorded in northern Ngwa, Owerri, and Orlu.⁵⁹ According to the 1963 census, the regional population density had reached more than four times the Nigerian average.⁶⁰ Land scarcity, land degradation, and a high level of non-farm activities have been noticeable in areas such as Isu and Mbaise, where population density was over 1,000/sq. km by the middle of the twentieth century.⁶¹ The very high concentration of population in the Igbo region gave rise to extensive modification of the natural environment and exposed the soil in many parts of the region to leaching and erosion.

The pressure on the land is reflected in internal migration rates as well as migration out of the region. Many men from the over-populated parts of Igboland were forced to work as migrant farmers on the lands of others. Accurate figures for these moves are not obtainable, but from oral sources, it can be seen that certain area such as Okigwe, Obigbo, and Etche attracted tenant farmers and labourers from the more crowded areas of Mbaise, Owerri, Mbano, and Etiti, among others. Charles Takes, who carried out rural sociological research in the Okigwe Division of Owerri Province in 1962, noted that there were considerable differences in density. The population in the area north of Okigwe Township still contained virgin land available for cultivation. In the southern part of the division, however, towns such as Mbano and Etiti faced extreme scarcity of land, such that many people no longer found a living in agriculture.⁶² Luke Osunwoke of Umuorlu recalls: "Our people went outside the community to look for food. They lacked sufficient land and there were no thick forests. So they often migrated to Elele, Ahaoda, and Ikwerre where they worked as agricultural laborers."⁶³ The members of the Nguru clan of Mbaise, struggling with the demands of an expanding population on leached, eroding land, supplemented their income by working as migrant labourers for the Etche clan.⁶⁴ Some parts of eastern and western Nigeria have served as recipients of Igbo migrants from the less agriculturally favourable areas such as Awka, Owerri, Mbaise, Isu, Mbano, and Obowo, who have relentlessly sought ways to improve their lives through migration. For the Mbaise Igbo in general, high population density and increased intensification became the only way out of their economic problems. Many migrated as tenant and seasonal farmers within and outside the region. According to Isichei, the Ezza, who had ample land, performed herculean feats of industry on their own yam farms and then travelled west to toil on the farms of others.⁶⁵

The land tenure system, which led to progressive fragmentation of farmland and to primogeniture, made life in rural areas difficult.⁶⁶ By the 1950s, fallow periods had been significantly reduced in many part of central Igboland such as Mbaise, Mbano, Obowo, and Etiti.⁶⁷ The fragmentation of land holdings resulting from the land tenure system made agriculture frustrating and inefficient and prompted many young men to migrate. Stanley Diamond explains the pull and push factors in Igbo migration:

Population pressure and land scarcity remained the most important determinants of migration. Population pressure on deteriorating forestlands (1,000 plus per square mile) in, for example, Owerri Province at the heart of the Eastern Region, had, in conjunction with the social character of the I[g]bo, led to a continuous migration of I[g]bo to all regions of Nigeria; the largest number of migrants, of course, found their way north since the Region so designated represents three-quarters of the country. Moreover, the educational level of I[g]bo was higher than that of the average Northerner, enabling them to get jobs in the civil service, trading, [and] utilities. Nigeria becomes, in effect, an I[g]bo Diaspora.⁶⁸

The population of Igboland has increased progressively. Part of what constituted Owerri Province (in Imo and Abia States) now has an estimated population of over 6.8 million according to the 2006 population census of Nigeria.⁶⁹ This population explosion has meant unprecedented pressure on available land, considerable deterioration of the environment, and high levels of poverty. I have seen in my own village that even firewood and water have become commodities that most rural households have to pay for. This was not the case two decades ago.

Colonialism had its inevitable impact on the rate of migration as improved communications and structural changes increased mobility and opportunity. Clearly, the rate of migration was caused by structural changes as well as the motivation of individuals, mainly men, to acquire wealth and improve their lives. During the early parts of the colonial period, large numbers of Igbo people moved out of Igboland following the development of towns and the expansion of the railway and roads. Many also responded to the growth and expansion of the trade in European goods and the public service sector, and the increased opportunities for economic independence.⁷⁰

The discovery of bitumen coal in Udi near Enugu in 1903 was crucial in the shaping of colonial policy toward this section of southeastern Nigeria. After geological assessments in 1903 and further tests in 1908–1909, the government planned a railway to the seaport at Port Harcourt to facilitate the evacuation of coal and other resources from the region. This southern railway, which joined the northern one, reached Makurdi in 1910 and reached

its terminus at Oturkpo in the Benue area in the following year. Owerri Province supplied Port Harcourt, the colliery, and the brickfields with a large number of labourers. The railway, which linked up other eastern towns such as Umuahia, Omoba, and Aba, facilitated the evacuation of palm products to the coast. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the railway remained the most effective mode of transport, hauling almost all of Nigeria's foreign trade traffic. It was only after the extension of infrastructure by the colonial state (railways, creek clearing) that European firms seriously began building up hinterland stations.⁷¹

Railways and road construction accelerated the rate of agricultural output and stimulated market opportunities, and administrative reorganization and the introduction of rudimentary technology and research in agriculture motivated and sustained local interest in production. A unique "rail culture," marked by the growth of retail and service sectors dominated by women food vendors, developed along the railroads. Developments in transportation in turn led to the rise of cities and urban areas as trading centres where the raw materials produced by the local people were exchanged for European manufactured goods.⁷² These developments created an increasingly mobile Igbo population that swelled the emerging colonial cities and commercial centres. Gradually, inland transport and port facilities were developed, and banking and other financial institutions were organized to facilitate the ever-increasing use of a single modern currency as the means of exchange over all of Nigeria.⁷³

The Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s exacerbated the migration from the oil-palm-producing areas, which had been accustomed to cash incomes.⁷⁴ Local people were severely affected by the fall in the price of palm oil and kernels. Low returns from export crops and the general economic decline forced many rural dwellers to seek their fortune elsewhere. As Jones observed, "the depression of the palm oil trade and the lack of any alternative exports stimulated the drive towards migrant labour," despite the attempt by the government and commercial agencies to improve palm oil cultivation and local systems of agriculture.⁷⁵

The introduction of taxation in late 1927 created problems for young adult males who could not meet their tax and other needs from the resources available in the rural areas. Taxation forced many young men to respond to

opportunities in the expanding cocoa industry in the West and the rubber and timber industry in the mid-west. Migrants' income became the major source of cash for the payment of income tax, for marriage, education, the building of homes, and support for family members, especially the elderly. This trend was already visible by the late 1930s. Sylvia Leith-Ross was told during a visit to [E]Inyogugu village, Mbaise in 1935, that "about a hundred young men had migrated, during recent times, to Oluko in Umuneke Court area, 'where there is plenty of good land and the people do not mind,'" where they have "settled for good as farmers."⁷⁶ Harris's study of the economy of sixteen persons among the Ozuitem Igbo shows that off-farm sources of income including remittance contributed substantially to the total annual income of these individuals in 1939.⁷⁷ Although income from outside was changing rural lifestyles and occupations irrevocably, Linus Anabalam remarked:

The migration of men and young men and women also placed a heavy burden on women and the elderly as the expansion of Western education and opportunities for work in the public service led to a dramatic exodus of young educated people from the rural areas in search of white-collar jobs.⁷⁸

Urban towns drew a large Igbo population, including traders who became very active throughout the country. It is estimated that the Igbo population in Northern Nigeria increased from 3,000 in 1921 to about 12,000 in 1931. By 1953, the Igbo population in the North had reached an estimated 127,000. J. B. Davies, who worked with the United African Company (UAC) for many years in Northern Nigeria, remembers:

In the early years, they formed a nucleus of the commercial staff of all commercial companies. They filled the clerical jobs, acted as depot clerks and depot buyers. They were very efficient and particularly hard working. During this period, they were also the major transporters in the north and owned most of the commercial vehicles.⁷⁹

Lagos alone had 32,000 of the estimated 57,000 Igbo living in Western Nigerian towns and villages.⁸⁰ By the 1950s, the Igbo made up more than half of the non-indigenous population of Lagos, Benin, and the northern towns of Kano and Kaduna.⁸¹ A significant number of the nearly 10,000 easterners in the British mandate territory of Cameroon were Igbo.⁸²

Migration intensified after the Second World War. Linus Anabalam, who had migrated to Northern Nigeria in the 1940s with a group of other young men who worked as sawyers, recalled that many young men, some as young as twelve years, migrated to other regions in Nigeria. According to him, "We were all motivated to leave the village when we saw the returning soldiers, the kind of dresses they wore and their new lifestyle. You could not have a life like that from farming in the village."⁸³ Their high rate of migration meant that the Igbo came to dominate the civil service sector even in predominantly non-Igbo areas of the Eastern Region and Northern Nigeria. The domestic staff of the Calabar Catering Rest House in 1949, for example, was predominantly Igbo, most of them cooks, stewards, and houseboys.⁸⁴ Others, including a large number of Igbo ex-servicemen, worked in the rubber estates in the Calabar District. A petition by ex-servicemen to the district officer for Calabar seeking payment of bonuses was signed by a predominantly Igbo group. Over 80 per cent of the 59 petitioners were Igbo, an indication of their overwhelming numbers in other parts of the region.⁸⁵

The report of a commission of inquiry set up to look into the affairs of the former Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation Plantations found in 1968 that only 27 of the 300 senior staff came from Calabar Province where the plantations were located. The overwhelming majority were Igbo who were viewed as non-indigenes.⁸⁶ The report further noted:

In so far as the functional administration of the former ENDC was concerned, the supreme authority rested with a single executive who was stationed at Enugu with his senior staff, mostly Ibos, spread out to all the plantations. The result was that senior and junior posts including labour were filled by their kith and kin. It therefore became impossible to give effective participation to the indigenes of the areas where the plantations were situated.⁸⁷

The situation left the plantations with a labour crisis when the Igbos left during the civil war – a vacuum that the indigenes were unable to fill. The effects of large-scale migration of the Igbo have thus been a source of conflict with their neighbours as much as an avenue to survival in what has been a difficult economic environment.

Igbo migration escalated beyond the confines of Nigeria in the 1940s. British-administered southern Cameroon attracted a significant Igbo population when Britain inherited the territory as a mandate colony after the First World War.⁸⁸ Cameroonian towns such as Kumba, Tiko, and Victoria had a large Igbo population, most of whom were engaged in small-scale distributive trade in foodstuffs and imported goods. The migration of the Igbo into the territory was encouraged by the British to relieve the Igbo region of its very high population.⁸⁹

A large number of Igbo people responded to the opportunities created by dwindling labour in Spanish plantations on the island of Fernando Po.⁹⁰ The decline in the indigenous Bubi population by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century forced plantation owners to look elsewhere for labour. The island's palm oil and cocoa plantations became a strong attraction for a large population of Igbo people. Thousands more migrated after the Spanish government of Fernando Po and Rio Muni concluded a labour agreement in 1942 with British Nigeria for the recruitment of Nigerian labourers. The agreement was also meant to check the illegal recruitment of labour from Nigeria as well as regulate the conditions of service for Nigerian migrants in a place that had a reputation for its harsh working conditions. According to the 1944 report of the Nigerian Labor Department, the labour agreement sought to regularize what had become “a large scale traffic in laborers and to endeavor to eliminate the unscrupulous native ‘black birder’ who earned a lucrative livelihood by kidnapping the ignorant peasants from the Ibo and Ibibio areas.”⁹¹

The propaganda encouraging people to migrate to Fernando Po for work came from the government, churches, friends, and relatives. Many men migrated to “improve their lives,” recalled Udochukwu, a former migrant.⁹² Although many had migrated to better their lives, the conditions in the Spanish plantations did not create an opportunity for accumulation. Wages were very low and many migrants were afflicted by disease and poverty. Yet, the number of migrants swelled. In 1961, there were around 4,000 Spaniards, 10,000

indigenous people – the Bubis – and over 50,000 Nigerians working on the cocoa plantations.⁹³ Their number had increased to about 85,000 by the mid-1960s, with Igbo, Ibibio, and Efik comprising two-thirds of the island's population.⁹⁴ This agreement remained in force after the independence of both countries in the 1960s.

While the Anglo-Spanish Employment Agency at Calabar recruited only men aged 18 to 45, some women migrated to the islands as wives, while a few more, mostly widows, went on their own. Life for many Igbo migrants to Fernando Po did not improve, as many returned more impoverished than before. The difficulties of plantation life and the very low wages forced some of the women into prostitution. Loise, a former migrant, notes that some men who could not deal with the hardship of plantation life “sent their wives to ‘New-Bill,’ a public square, for prostitution.” Prostitution enabled some families to survive, since the Spanish government “would stop providing food items as was stipulated in the labor agreement, if one left the plantation.”⁹⁵

The end of the Nigerian Civil War witnessed further large-scale migration from Igboland. Approximately 90 per cent of young people regularly moved out of the rural areas after the war. They found the challenges of rural areas too great. These movements are connected to the demise of a way of life and are embedded in the individual and collective biographies of many men and women. Alban Eluwa recalls:

You know in those days, if you did not have the money to attend a secondary school, your next options were to become an apprentice of some sort or move to the city sometimes with no specific aim. You had to leave when your mates had all left the village.⁹⁶

Onyegbule Korieh, a former migrant, recalls, “When I arrived at Obigbo in 1973, I found that there was money to be made from selling gari and part-time farming. I could make enough money out there to feed my family well and send my son to a secondary school in 1973.”⁹⁷ For many men like Alban and Onyegbule, survival in the rural areas had become a thing of the past due to the devastating impact of the civil war. Alban summed up the dilemma young people faced: “As a young man, if you stay in the village here, people

will always suspect you when a neighbor's chicken is missing. We had to seek opportunities to survive by leaving the village.”⁹⁸

Overall, the migratory pattern that emerged in Igboland was a response to the economic, ecological, and demographic factors in different parts of the region. Migration has given the Igbo an edge in small retail trade in the urban and rural areas throughout Nigeria and beyond, where they have operated retail shops or worked as artisans. While some elderly folks interpret the absence of young people from farm work as an “unwillingness of young people to cultivate the land,” the cash income generated outside Igboland has helped to transform many Igbo societies and provided an alternative income that supported a rapidly disappearing rural agrarian society. Remittance has also increased local purchasing power and the ability of elderly men and women to hire labour for farm work. Onyegbule Korieh explains: “Many of us depend on money remitted by our children to survive today. The rural area is very ‘dry.’”⁹⁹ Such remittances into Igboland have contributed to the economic advancement of individuals, households, and entire Igbo communities. Indeed the changing rural life, social expectation, support of the elderly, and demands of the extended family system force young men and women to find quicker and more “honourable” ways of earning cash than farming. This pattern has transformed the rural landscape and further reduced the values attached to agriculture.

MIGRATION, HOST COMMUNITIES, AND NEW IDENTITY

The migration trend has continued in recent times and most households have migrants living elsewhere. However, the host communities did not always welcome the Igbo. Indeed, their presence, even in other parts of southeastern Nigeria, often angered locals who resented what they perceived as Igbo aggressive tactics. J. B. Davies, an agent of the United African Company in Northern Nigeria, recalls:

There was always a certain amount of animosity. I think it went right back to the early years. When I first went to Nigeria in the 1930's practically every single commercial employer was other than Hausa, they were mainly I[g]bo's and Yoruba's. Practically every artisan was a westerner or easterner, and in the Public Works Dept of the native authorities, practically all the road labour were Ibo. This worked well for a time, but once the Hausa started to feel his feet and wanted to get on, wanted to start learning, wanted to earn money, wanted to get out of his farm and move into other fields, then he found he was blocked. He found that easterners and westerners were very happy and quite content to block him.... I think this was one of the things that tended to create a big rift between the northerner and the southerner.¹⁰⁰

In Southern Cameroons, the Igbo dominated public sector employment, trade, and education until the plebiscite of 1961, when the region voted to join Cameroon. There was the notion that the Igbo would unquestionably continue to dominate the local population if the region became part of Nigeria.¹⁰¹ The Igbo fear-factor was a political and economic reality in the Southern Cameroons from the early 1950s among the indigenous population. Sera Williams, daughter of Manga Williams, who was then king of the Victoria area, campaigned seriously from the early 1950s for "Southern Cameroons" to join the rest of Cameroon. She is reported to have once demanded from a crowd: "Any woman wey Igboman never slapa'am for this market place, make e-put ye hand for up!" No hand was raised in response to her question asking any woman in the crowd who had not been slapped by an Igbo man in the market to raise her hand.¹⁰² W. A. Robinson, British plebiscite administrator, remembers the "obvious distrust of Nigerians and in particular of the I[g]bos who were numerous in the frontier areas."¹⁰³ Similar hostility to the Igbo was found in Fernando Po, leading to the expulsion of 40,000 Nigerians, mostly Igbo, from the island in 1975 during Macias Nguema's rule.

New forms of ethnic consciousness and identity often emerged among the Igbo in diaspora communities. But the development of ethnic consciousness or identity is not automatic. Such developments occur in a particular context and are influenced by the receiving community's view of the migrant

community. Once outside the homeland, a greater sense of cohesion, cooperation, and identification, at least based on a common language and experience, emerges in response to particular ecological and contextual factors. For the same reason, attitudes toward immigrant populations have often been informed by attempts to protect individual and group interests as host communities perceive their own survival as threatened. Both the perceived threat to the host community and the confrontational attitude toward the immigrant community gives rise to new senses of identity, often conflict-driven.

The Igbo responded to the contestation for resources with the host community by forging a new sense of community in the spirit of *igwe bu ike* (there is strength in numbers). This sense of community led to the formation of what have been described as “home associations” within the Igbo diaspora communities. G. I. Jones notes:

The greatest advantage possessed by migrants from the I[g]bo area, whether these were traders, craftsmen, labourers or in superior employment, was their segmentary social structure and the attitudes derived from it, and also their traditional trading organisation. Both came to play as soon as I[g]bo moved outside their home neighbourhoods. On their home ground the I[g]bo were an aggregation of independent towns or villages each competing and on guard against its neighbours. In other parts of Nigeria, the I[g]bo felt themselves to be a solid and united group. Anyone speaking the language was a fellow tribesman, a relative with whom one was in duty bound to combine for mutual aid.¹⁰⁴

Ideally, no Igbo person can have two homes, since “home” is not just a geographical expression but the place where one was born, where the ancestors are buried, or where one can connect with the past. The Igbo society remains one in which kinship plays a crucial and dominant role. The ethnic unions that emerged among Igbo migrants, therefore, acted as a bridge between their temporary location and their original homes. Town unions remained very active in this regard, while ethnic unions remained more effective in protecting Igbo interests in relation to other groups. In this context, *erinma* or solidarity,

... drew inspiration from the awareness that all members of each unit or segment of the Igbo socio-political structure [were] kinsmen or kins-women whose rights and privileges were the concern of all... Thus, for the Igbo, *erinma* (an abstraction contracted from *eriri omumu nwa* or the umbilical cord) implies familyhood and symbolizes the organic link between people of common ancestry.¹⁰⁵

As important as *erinma* has been in bridging the divide between individualism and cooperativism, *erinma* seem to have expressed itself among migrant groups in the form of a greater tendency toward cooperation despite a strong desire for individual achievement. This new conception of *erinma* emerges to serve the collective interest of the new community in the diaspora based on common experience and interests rather than on kinship. The expression of *erinma* among host communities becomes a form of collective action expressed by the group to protect its own political, social, and economic interests.

AGRICULTURAL DECLINE AND CHANGING IDENTITIES

We have always been farmers, but today, we depend on the market to survive. – *an Mbaise Elder*

This comment by an elder from Mbaise in 1999 captures the changing rural identity of the Igbo. The agrarian culture and structures of rural populations have been disappearing rapidly. An often-neglected aspect of understanding agricultural crises in rural societies is the impact of values and the constraints they may impose in dealing with contemporary social and economic issues. Values influence how people conceptualize problems and find solutions. While agricultural policies have been set by governments in an attempt to bring about desired ends within a society, they often do not take into account the values that local people attach to agriculture or its link to their identity as individuals or groups. Rural societies, farmers themselves, and the land upon

which they farm operate within a structural framework imbued with values and norms, which have consequences for the survival and continuity of rural life. Thus, some of the policies designed to solve the agricultural problem at one time or another have exacerbated the problems by neglecting to consider the way in which rural societies employ local value systems in making economic decisions and structuring people's lives. For instance, the economic crisis in the rural areas of Igboland has affected the quality of life and dietary habits. Much of the local diet is overwhelmingly composed of carbohydrates. Protein-rich food items like beans and meat are not frequently eaten by most families, as was the case in the past, because they cannot now afford them. Dwindling agricultural production and lack of agricultural labour have made rural areas more vulnerable to food shortages for the first time since the end of the civil war. But the attempt to negotiate the changing rural landscape has also entailed fundamental changes in other aspects of rural life including the roles that men and women have historically played.

Yet the most corrosive effects on rural identity have occurred in the context of a national economy that has continued to draw from the rural population. The Igbo have consistently combined farming with other economic activities. The economic returns from trading, for many households, are far greater than what they could ever earn from exhausted lands. Nwanyiako Obasi maintains, "It is best to combine farming and trade. If your trading capital falls, you can have something to fall back on."¹⁰⁶ Over 80 per cent of household income in central Igboland comes from non-agricultural activities. While most of Igboland remains agrarian in outlook, various forces have acted to modify and transform its agrarian characteristics.

The contested nature of gender ideology, especially contemporary patterns and changes in the self-image of rural men, reveals the most significant change in male and female identity. The challenges to male identity and masculinity have become even more insistent as structural changes connected with the destabilizing effects of agricultural decline transform gender roles and challenge male domination and economic power in rural settings. The change in gender roles and the challenge to the quintessential male authority, identity, and power have often led to conflicts between men and women. Phaniel Egejuru's *The Seed Yam Have Been Eaten* illustrates this change as reflected in the civil war agricultural economy of the Igbo. Jibundu, the

protagonist in the novel, expresses perhaps the prevailing view of many Igbo people. “Cassava has displaced yam in our occupation,” he laments:

We clear the bushes as usual and burn them. The women and the children plant cassava. It is less demanding. It leaves us men at home with little or nothing to do. We drink palm-wine from morning till evening when we eat our gari of fermented cassava *foo-foo*, and then resume our drinking till far into the night. Sometimes when we can coax our wives into giving us some extra change, we buy some home brew *akamere* to top off the palm-wine. Have you ever heard a man begging his wife for pocket money? Yes that’s what we do now. One must learn to be the vanquished in a war.¹⁰⁷

Linus Anabalam, like many other men, lamented that “things have changed because cassava is now king.”¹⁰⁸ This reflects a fractured identity among many Igbo men since the 1970s as the Nigerian Civil War and the structural changes that followed the development of the petroleum industry have eroded peasant identities, replacing them with multiple sources of livelihood that lay less emphasis on farming.

The changes that have occurred have had fundamental implications for gender relations and the roles men and women historically played in rural society. Women have increasingly dominated the non-agricultural sector through petty trading, food production, and food processing and they shoulder the household food burden. Households have become increasingly dependent on female income, not only in female-headed households but also in many marginal rural households, where female incomes are significant and sometimes constitute higher contributions to total income than those of males.¹⁰⁹ I spoke to men who saw themselves as “good for nothing.” They had lost their identity as men. For these men, the decline of a yam-based agrarian culture has engendered a crisis of masculinity and male identity in rural Igboland. “We are like castrated men today,” stated a rural dweller, who was ashamed of his dependency on his wife’s meagre trade for survival. Jonas Onwukwe, a retired worker at a government rubber estate at Emeabiam in Owerri Province, agreed: “We depend on our wives for subsistence because of their control over cassava production and marketing.”¹¹⁰ The historical

trajectory of changes in gender roles is not unique to Igboland, yet its effect on many Igbo men has been quite traumatic. Unlike the situation in many other societies, however, agricultural decline in Igboland, especially the decline in yam production and the palm oil trade, has made men hapless victims of the commercial drift of the 1970s and 1980s.

What has followed is a considerable transgression of gender norms, changes in the nature of family, kinship, human relations, and work, from the 1970s onward. Such transgressions have redefined issues of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, childhood, parenthood, the interaction between gender and sexuality, and household production strategies. All this has brought about a considerable crisis in many households that have to struggle to meet their daily needs. The dramatic changes in the rural economy, traditional norms, and household survival strategies are emblematic of the constantly shifting and renegotiated facets of African domestic and formal economy. These processes are especially complex for societies such as the Igbo because they are intertwined with the national and international economy. As men lose control of the social and economic structures of rural life, many have interpreted these changes as abnormal behaviour, particularly on the part of women.

The most visible change in rural areas has occurred in the control of income from the sale of palm produce, especially in parts of central Igboland, where it remains an important source of rural income. Many informants agree that women have largely taken over the control of income from palm oil – income previously seen as belonging to male household heads. Onyegbule Korieh provides some explanations: “Things have changed. When women process palm produce these days, they take both the oil and kernels. Women now own both the oil and kernels.”¹¹¹ Linus Anabalam agrees: “Very few men today have control over the palm oil produced in their house. Men do not care much any more.... It is a woman’s own today.”¹¹² Eugenia Otuonye’s view of the changing nature of resource control is expressed powerfully: “Any man who would demand the money from oil is crazy in the head.... Where should we [women] get the money to feed the family?”¹¹³ While palm oil continues to provide a substantial part of rural household income, households have altered the previous system of allocating oil to the man and kernels to the woman. “Ask my wife,” Onyegbule Korieh challenged. “I do not know what

happens to the oil sold in my house anymore.”²¹⁴ For many Igbo households the structural changes in the economy have eroded the long-standing system of provisioning for the household and the control of income from palm produce. The shift highlights the crisis of identity engendered by major structural changes among the Igbo and the ways in which both men and women have tried to negotiate it.

Although the priority given to agriculture has diminished, rural Igboland remains largely agrarian in outlook. Facing increasing difficulties in surviving as farmers because of population growth, poor soil, and the major changes that resulted from the war and the expansion of the oil industry, the Igbo began to adapt. But those who remained in the rural areas have refused to be entirely uprooted from their agrarian roots. The persistent agrarian outlook has influenced the value attached to farming in rural communities and the strong link between farming and rural identity. Rural dwellers still consider themselves primarily farmers, but like people in many other African societies, they have adopted a dual strategy that combines non-agricultural income earning with persistence in subsistence agriculture. Such a strategy has enabled rural African peasants to retain the security that subsistence agriculture offers during periods of economic crisis. The case of central Igboland suggests that agricultural and rural transformation and the ways in which people have responded has been shaped by this psychological dependence on agriculture, but all this has also been mediated by gender and the link with the capitalist world.

Most parts of Igboland have adopted a dual strategy of farming and trade in order to survive rural poverty. This is especially pronounced in central Igboland. While subsistence farming is a way of life that has virtually ceased for the majority of rural dwellers – since many purchase their food from markets – the idea of obtaining part of household subsistence from the farm continues to be highly prized among the elderly, who remain emotionally attached to agriculture. Rural farmers claim, and rightly so, that combining farming with other economic activities is an insurance against insecurity. This perception has remained strong in the psyches of rural Igbo people.

The persistence in agriculture is a rational economic behaviour and a practical expression of the belief among the Igbo that one ought not to depend on the market for basic subsistence. Igbo persistence in farming also has

much to do with Igbo identity. Victor Uchendu summarized this notion thus: “To remind an Igbo that he is *ori mgbe ahia loro* [one who eats only when the market holds] is to humiliate him.”¹¹⁵ This observation was quite true when Uchendu wrote it in 1965. However, persistence in farming has followed many trajectories since the end of the civil war. The Igbo have adopted several strategies, developed alternative income-generating activities, and adopted radical changes in their agricultural practices. While there remains a psychological dependence on agriculture, such dependency has mediated new forms of adaptation, especially the increased growth in cassava production.

Yet, the transition from a yam-based subsistence economy and a palm oil cash-based economy to a cassava-based agrarian system reflects the ability of peasants to adapt to a changing social and economic environment. Thus, from their early identification as a “yam people at heart,” the Igbo have become a “cassava people at heart.”