



THE LAND HAS CHANGED

History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

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CONCLUSION

The focus of this book has been to analyze the complexities surrounding the changing world of rural farmers in the context of various historical epochs, highlighting the structural changes that occurred as a result of these changes, and stressing the importance of restoring the voices of rural people in the history of the changes. Drawing on rural farmers' responses to official policies, their memories of events, and the impact of the ecological, environmental, and demographic factors that are endemic to Igbo society, this book has demonstrated the need for a more inclusive framework for explaining the dynamics of agricultural change in an African society. As this case study shows, the trajectory of agricultural change in Igboland has been the result of a complex array of factors – some external in origin, and others the result of factors that derive from internal social, political, demographic, environmental, and economic conditions. The study emphasizes the importance of government policies, resource endowment, demographic factors, changes in national and regional economies, and, not least, the role of social values in the processes of agricultural development and change. It is not enough to show that African societies have experienced significant transformations; it is perhaps more important to explain how different groups, regions, and genders in rural Africa have been affected by state intervention and the other structural changes that have occurred and how they have responded to these challenges. Such an analysis challenges previously held assumptions about African farming systems, in regard to the capacity of peasants to increase productivity, that were based only on the broader picture. The book highlights the need to complement any

general theory about African agricultural change with detailed case studies to produce a coherent outline that incorporates local specificities. To fully understand the history of rural Africa in the colonial and post-colonial periods, we must also explore the roles, actions, and responses of the rural population in the context of the changes that occurred. This is what this book has done.

The debate that emerged in the 1980s on the nature and explanations of African agricultural decline exposed complex conceptual and theoretical dilemmas. Clearly, the analysis of agricultural change masks important regional and historical issues about the nature of change in particular settings. The externalist paradigm explains only one aspect of many contributory factors, while the internalist perspective ignores important historical antecedents. Both explanatory models were found wanting due to their overwhelming emphasis on macroeconomic indicators while they ignored peasants as historical actors and the centrality of gender to any meaningful analysis of agricultural change. The role of external and internal factors remains crucial to any meaningful analysis, but only if they are considered together with myriad other variables, including the actions of the rural population. Obviously, empirical evidence challenges general explanatory models, which do not provide important details about the forms and nature of the change, or details of how local variables and social dynamics, including gender, have influenced the nature of change and local responses.

Another conceptual concern in this study centres on the gender question, as it constituted a serious omission in previous analysis. The most obvious limitation of general explanatory models is that they tend to ignore the way that the dynamics of agricultural change were mediated by gender ideology in African farming systems. Assumptions about the sexual division of labour as a given operate at various levels of the discourse on women in agricultural production. For policy-makers, these assumptions, especially the idea that men are the genuine farmers, have informed perceptions and ideas about male and female agricultural roles. Gender as a category of analysis has been taken as self-evident in the study of African agricultural decline. However, this neglect became a significant discursive context for feminists with regard to the roles of women and men in general, and in the debates about the gendered nature of official agricultural and development policies. I have explained how this relates to Igbo agriculture, and the limitations imposed

by the neglect of gender analysis. In terms of a feminist-informed political economy, the most obvious limitation of the mainstream analysis of agricultural change was the exclusion of gender as a social category and as an essential framework for the analysis of agricultural change, particularly in Africa. However, this study has shown that ideas about gender as a category of analysis or about the impact of gender ideology in the economy are diverse and vary from one society to another. This book has outlined the source of tension in feminist debates over the notion of gender and the impasse of universalizing gender experiences. Although useful in explaining the realities of colonial and post-colonial African economies, the political economy model, on which the Western conception of gender is based, has marginalized local gender relations and treated male experiences only peripherally. Although conclusions from a particular region and historical context should not be extrapolated to all of Africa, the agricultural and societal transformations in central Igboland have been examined in these broad contexts.

Agriculture and agriculture-related commerce were the central elements of pre-colonial Igbo society and economy, and they defined livelihood and identity. Before the beginning of colonial rule in 1900, the domestic economy was heavily dependent on yam production. Other economic activities and social practices were directly or indirectly linked to this agricultural system. The importance of the yam, the food security it provided, and the social status it conferred on big yam farmers shaped the production pattern of central Igboland in many significant ways. The production of yams was also directly linked to Igbo masculinity and social stratification, gender ideology, and labour practices. Successful production of yams required a large labour force, a considerable amount of time, and significant investment in agricultural inputs. The significance of yams in the life of the Igbo man suggests that there was already an increase in agricultural intensification and ecological change in the nineteenth century. The production of yams for subsistence and prestige purposes encouraged farmers to produce above subsistence levels. This book suggests that intensive yam production explains the high population density of central Igboland and the depleted soil in many parts of the region. Unfortunately, the available data do not permit a refined analysis of rural life for this period. The paucity of demographic and environmental data on Igboland has prevented a detailed examination of the influence of popula-

tion growth on the rate of environmental transformation and change prior to 1900. However, one can speculate that ecological and demographic factors had already imposed constraints on the ability of farmers to increase agricultural productivity on the eve of colonial rule.

There is no doubt that a complex interaction of internal and external forces shaped the economy of many African societies from the late nineteenth century onward. Africa's encounter with colonialism is particularly significant in this regard. The agrarian system built before European contact had prepared the Igbo to play a central role from the era of the slave trade and throughout the colonial period. The Igbos' agricultural potential, especially in the production of yams and later palm oil, and their population, fed the Atlantic trade. As chapter 1 demonstrates, a high degree of commercialization and commercial relations had developed between the Igbo and other parts of the Atlantic World before the colonial encounter. Both the Igbo and the British built upon this existing network to inaugurate the significant transformation of economic and social life at the beginning of the twentieth century.

When the British first imposed colonial rule in the region in 1900, they were essentially interested in extracting the agricultural products needed to support the colonial economy without changing the fundamental structure of the local production system. The political change that followed in the form of indirect rule was instituted to create an infrastructure that would enable the achievement of these economic objectives. The emphasis on export production, the new regulations encouraging local production, and the ever-increasing requirement for cash pushed the Igbo to expand the production of palm oil and kernels. However, the top-down approach of colonial officials often neglected local production systems while the patriarchal assumption governing African farming systems neglected female farmers. The inability of the colonial state to work within the pre-colonial production system, the channeling of agricultural development programs mostly to male farmers to the exclusion of women, and the neglect of the subsistence sector significantly transformed the agricultural economy of the Igbo. The analysis of gender in this book reveals that the roles of women and men in agriculture became differentiated because of the British notion of the "male farmer." This new gender ideology imposed on the Igbo ran contrary to the complementary nature of men's and women's roles in the production system. Amid the inconsistent

agricultural policies of the colonial era, Igbo producers were integrated into the world economy, which fundamentally changed the rural economy and the people.

The impact of agricultural development and the exploitation of the agricultural resource base stimulated increased production and revolutionized production methods in some areas. This led to further agricultural intensification. The colonial economy also created specialist traders and oil palm harvesters, who significantly transformed rural life and employment. Unlike previous works, this study has explored the long-term implications of increased agricultural commercialization and agricultural intensification in a densely populated region of Nigeria. I have argued that the colonial government's development ideology and the transformation of other sectors of the economy encouraged agricultural involution and contributed to the declining importance of agriculture in the region. Like other African societies in the colonial period, the Igbo were part of the making of their own history, but not "necessarily under conditions of their own choosing."¹

The half-century following colonial rule was marked by significant events, which had a direct impact on Africa and Africans, even though they occurred in faraway Europe. The discussion of global crises such as the Great Depression and the two World Wars suggests that these events had a direct impact on the lives of rural Africans. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that the colonial economy created a local dependency on income from the sale of cash crops and increased the vulnerability of peasants to the slumps that often occurred in the local and international markets. I have shown that the local population was visibly distressed by the declining income from palm oil, the high prices for food, and the insecurity engendered by the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The discussion of the 1929 Women's Revolt in 1929 (in chapter 4) suggests that the revolt was deeply rooted in the agrarian economy of the region. Previous studies have emphasized the feminist origin of the revolt and the introduction of income tax by the British in Eastern Nigeria in 1928. However, the report of the Aba Commission of Inquiry, which examined the immediate and remote causes of the revolt in 1930, and the "Notes of Evidence" recorded during the inquiry demonstrate that the depression, which was rooted in the agricultural economy, was paramount in the minds of the local people. Frequent references were made to the low

price of palm produce and the significant rise in the price of foodstuffs. Overall, the tax problems provided an opportunity for the people to demonstrate their anger regarding the state of the economy and the political policies of the British. The 1929 revolt would become one of several popular protests and locally initiated agitations that would characterize African-British relations in colonial eastern Nigeria into the early 1950s.

The analysis provided of the World War II period in chapter 5 is significant in regard to both the contribution of rural African societies and the impact of the war on their lives. In Nigeria, Britain sought and received the commitment of Nigerians to support the war effort. Across the country, communities mobilized in various ways to support the war effort. This book demonstrates that the local population contributed financial support both directly and indirectly. Igbos supplied soldiers in a variety of capacities and provided resources, including food items for the troops. Igbo farmers were forced to increase the production of palm oil even though prices remained lower than before the war. However, the biggest problem faced by the colonial administration was how to curb the rising cost of living that became prominent due to labour shortages created by the war, low levels of import and export, and shortages of locally produced food items, such as rice, yams, cassava, and salt, and imported products such as sugar.

The demands of the war forced the British to restructure the local economy to ensure that Africans produced the commodities needed to support the British war effort, including food and export products such as palm oil. The government introduced new regulations and laws to effectively control peasant production and the distribution of essential food items through the Nigeria General Defense Regulations (Law No. 75 of 1941). Those directly affected by the new regulations and controls were farmers and traders engaged in the sale of produce including yam and gari. Both local and urban populations were visibly distressed due to the food crisis, especially because of the British management of the local production system and the insecurity that this engendered, as reflected in the petition of a local trader in Aba who petitioned a British district officer to consider “the lives of a family which may perish as a result of the measures ... taken to restrict the garri trade.”² And Mr. Muoma, who had been prevented from carrying on his normal trade in gari, deemed it “abnormal” and an “injustice,” since cutting him out of the

gari trade “deprived him of his livelihood.”³ The Aba Community League, an organization representing various community associations and unions, wrote to the local district officer on 12 August 1942 about the negative effects of food restrictions on the residents of the town.⁴

The agrarian roots of the various petitions written by the local population remain evidence of their struggles to survive the depressed economy of the war and their strategies for coping with the crisis engendered by the war. This fills an important gap in the history of World War II in relation to rural African colonial history and challenges the dominant Western-centred narrative of the war that lays less emphasis on the contributions of the African population and the impact of the war on their society as described in chapter 5. Since most of those who petitioned officials during the war were small traders and rural farmers, the exploration of their petitions and the economic, cultural, and social conditions that gave rise to them is a major contribution to the historical analysis of the conditions faced by African societies, especially the lower classes, during the war. It provides scholars with new and groundbreaking materials about World War II and corrects the impression that the effects of the war on the “home front” applied to European societies alone. Yet, the war also created opportunities for Igbo farmers and traders who took advantage of the high prices for *gari* to increase production and sale of the product in Northern Nigerian cities.

It is facile, however, to speak of government policies and external influences as if they represent the overwhelming determinant of agricultural change among the Igbo. Obviously, all these factors must be considered in tandem with the impact of the palm produce trade since the nineteenth-century commercial transition in Igboland. Government policies cannot be isolated from pre-existing ecological and demographic factors that increased the rate of agricultural involution. These factors exacerbated the situation caused by government intervention in the rural economy and were coupled with the problem of the expanding urban sector, which attracted a large portion of the rural population.

The early post-colonial period was revolutionary in many ways. Although the regional government in Eastern Nigeria continued the agricultural programs of the colonial regime, which emphasized production for export, the government also broke away from the earlier rejection of plantation agricul-

ture. The indigenous political elite intervened even more directly in peasant agriculture than the colonial government had done.

From 1962 onward, the regional government tightened its grip on the agricultural economy through the establishment of produce marketing boards, community plantation projects, and new farm settlements. From the government's point of view, agricultural expansion, the participation of the state in agricultural projects, and the integration of rural peasants into these projects were essential to the rapid development of the region. Yet, the condition of peasants deteriorated while the state and marketing boards profited from the control of the peasant surplus. The continued neglect of the perspectives of rural farmers and the gendered ideology of the "male farmer" did not change in the post-colonial period.

By focusing on the Nigerian Civil War and the development of the petroleum industry, the study highlights the impact of these factors on rural agrarian life. The agricultural economy of the Igbo went into a deep crisis because of the civil war. The local food production capacity of Igboland could not meet the needs of the army and the rest of the population, despite the efforts of peasants and the Biafran regime to sustain production during the war. The severe food crisis that emerged after the outbreak of the war in 1967 revealed the inability of the region to feed itself on locally produced food. This had already created a high level of Igbo dependency on other regions before the war broke out. The war, overall, produced a high rate of agricultural involution in terms of a movement toward non-agricultural activity, due in part to people's frustration with rural poverty, especially among the younger members of the population.

The development of the petroleum industry worsened the crisis in the food sector. As oil exports and revenues increased, the overall importance of agriculture declined, while expenditure on food importation increased. The dependency on petroleum revenue had serious negative effects on the rural areas, as it induced a high level of out-migration to the urban areas. The high rate of urban infrastructural development and industrialization in the petroleum era made agriculture unattractive and drained rural labour. The "boom and bust" cycles that followed the development of the petroleum industry affected rural peasants, as the high inflation rate that followed the development of this industry made it more difficult for the rural population

to cope. The situation continued into the 1980s and led to a decline in the quality of urban life as well.

Overall, the realities of agricultural decline and food insecurity were influenced by government policies and the general attitude toward agriculture. The agricultural policies of the government often reflected the “boom and bust” cycles of the petroleum economy. The worsening economic situation of the 1980s forced the government to introduce new agricultural programs aimed at increasing the levels of food production. However, government interventions did not result in significant increases in levels of production, due to mismanagement, corruption, and nepotism.

Paralleling the changing nature of rural agriculture there were also significant shifts in the rural economy, in farming practices, and in employment opportunities. Overall, the Igbo have adapted remarkably well. The agricultural crisis in the region compelled the Igbo to increase their non-agricultural forms of employment. These changes, while contributing to income diversification outside agriculture, did not totally disrupt the agricultural base of the rural economy. Some members of the rural population have continued to farm, but under difficult circumstances, including less fertile soil, decreased availability of labour, and scarcity of land. Given the increasingly tight straits in which the Igbo found themselves, it is not surprising that income diversification has become the norm. Younger persons, in particular, have favoured migration, and remittances remain an important source of household sustenance and economic development.

However, the combined effects of a declining agricultural economy and opportunities outside agriculture have undermined aspects of traditional Igbo agricultural ideology. The importance of the yam as the icon of Igbo agriculture and masculinity and its social and ritual importance have declined because of the decreasing importance of agriculture. The increased importance of cassava in Igbo agriculture and food security has increased the role of women in household food security and income. The changes in the local economy and the transformations in the region have worked to empower women in significant ways. Women have assumed greater control over household resources and have ventured into areas traditionally regarded as male spheres of influence. The changing nature of the roles that women and men have played in the economy demonstrates the contested nature of gender

ideology and challenges mainstream ideas about gender division of labour and resource control.

The picture of socio-economic change that emerges from this study is a complex one. The combination of state policies, peasant actions, and environmental and demographic factors accounts for the trajectory and pace of change and the rural strategies for survival. For the Igbo, like many other societies in Africa, the internal dynamics of change have been influenced by external factors created by a capitalist world economic system that has depended on developing economies for cheap raw materials. However, the Igbo case points to some of the complexities associated with agricultural transformation and the problems that emerge from a simplistic analysis.

In historical perspective, the tragedy of the Igbo agrarian experience owes much to the policies implemented by the colonial and post-independence authorities. The most common threads in the post-independence era have been the role of the state in the expansion of cash-crop production, the state's direct intervention in the peasant economy, and the lack of any radical change in colonial ideology and attitudes toward the rural farmer. Another common thread has been the neglect of the sociocultural and economic background of local societies by both the colonial and the post-independence states. The neglect of peasant perspectives in the design of government agricultural programs has limited whatever progress the programs might have made in agricultural transformation. To argue that local perspectives matter and that they have much to offer to improve agricultural production is not to suggest that peasants have a monopoly of all of the necessary agricultural knowledge. Rather, agricultural improvement programs would have gained much from incorporating the perspectives of peasants to ensure lasting sustainability. Throughout this study, an attempt has been made to highlight the importance of demography and of the ecology of the Igbo territory in explaining the nature of agricultural change. This book has demonstrated that only through an examination of how both internal and external factors interacted with each other vis-à-vis the local environment, and the inclusion of the actions and voices of rural people as agents of history and change, can the agrarian history and current crisis of the Igbo be understood in its entirety.

In spite of the fact that the state provided the institutional and structural framework within which local farmers operated, the goal of transforming

and modernizing agriculture has not always been reached. Rural response to modernization has not always been in congruence with official expectations. The transformations that took place occurred not just as a result of state policies, they happened because African institutions, structures, and initiatives played significant roles. In the political sphere, greater success was achieved despite the constant resistance of the Igbo population to British rule.

In the final analysis, the twentieth century remains a period in which the agricultural past was represented by significant growth as much as by weaknesses and decline. By the end of the twentieth century, the lives of rural dwellers in rural Igboland had been transformed by the effects of public policies and the actions of rural dwellers themselves. The attempt to modernize agriculture and the encouragement given by the colonial state to rural farmers to produce palm oil and kernels transformed people's lives and increased their dependency on the market for survival. In addition, the dual impact of the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s and the world wars as historical by-products of a globalizing world, coupled with increased structural changes that strengthened in the wake of European contact, facilitated the rapid transformation of rural lives. The result was a profound change in livelihood strategies. The level of non-agricultural income-generating activities in the rural areas increased in the post-independence period, especially from the end of the civil war in 1970, when agriculture ceased to provide a decent standard of living for the rural population.

The high rate of agricultural involution that began at end of the war was accelerated in the late 1970s by the dependency of the state on income from the sale of petroleum. This period has been described as a period of agricultural crisis for many African societies, and this was certainly so for the Igbo. In this economic environment, the importance of agriculture in rural life and livelihood changed significantly with the increased dependency on non-agricultural sources of income for rural dwellers.