



## THE LAND HAS CHANGED

### History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

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ISBN 978-1-55238-545-6

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# INTRODUCTION: PERSPECTIVES, SETTING, SOURCES

Few attempts have been made to teach the native more modern methods of farming, but in this direction the native has so far shown himself to be quite unteachable in this part of Nigeria. – *Edward Morris Falk, British District Officer, Aba, 1920*

Our grievances are that the land has changed and we are all dying. It is a long time since the chiefs and the people who know book [Western-educated people] have been oppressing us. We are telling you that we have been oppressed. – *Female Witness, Aba Commission of Inquiry, 1930*

“The land has changed!” This is how my father began when I asked him in the year 2000 to relate his experiences of the nature of change since the colonial period in my village, a small rural community in central Igboland. Many rural dwellers shared similar sentiments. However, when African people tell stories about the colonial period, some talk about a period of plenty while others talk about a period of deprivation. Grace Chidomere, a rural farmer and small-scale trader, looked back on the colonial era with nostalgia, describing it as the “good old days.”<sup>1</sup> Eighty-year-old Francis Eneremadu, who served as a tax assessment officer in the colonial period, remembers, with a degree of sadness, a period when “things were very good.”<sup>2</sup> “People lived off what they earned

from produce sales, trading, and farming,” said Comfort Anabalam, a rural farmer in Mbaise.<sup>3</sup>

Not all, however, hold the view that the colonial period was a time of plenty. Some associated the colonial period with mere “survival” because it included several periods of crisis for the rural population. The depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s and the economic difficulties it engendered in low export prices for palm oil and kernels and high costs of imported goods generated a crisis in the local economy for which the rural and urban populations paid the price. Reacting to the colonial restrictions imposed on African traders during the Second World War, for example, A. Jamola, a trader in Aba, who had been refused a permit to trade in gari (a local staple produced from cassava), expressed the following sentiments in his petition to the district officer on 21 July 1943.

Imagine our suffering, Sir, during this period for which I am restricted from exporting garri to the north especially when the small profit accruing from the trade is being exhausted. I can assure you, Sir, that I do appreciate your point of view in this rather difficult question, but at the same time I would very respectfully and humbly ask that in addition to your viewing the matter from the official stand-point, you may consider the lives of a family which may perish as a result of the measures which have been taken to restrict the garri trade.<sup>4</sup>

Jamola’s request was an act of desperation, but such sentiments were widespread and reflected the diverse outcomes of colonial encounters from the native viewpoint. One woman’s view of the society and economy during this period supports this perspective: “since the white men came, our oil does not fetch money. Our kernels do not fetch money. If we take goats or yams to market to sell, court messengers who wear a uniform take all these things from us.”<sup>5</sup>

From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries onward, African societies underwent significant transformations. This is evident both in the regions where the attempt to transform rural agriculture was enforced through rural peasants and in colonies where commercial production by a

white settler community left indelible inequality between the settlers and the African population. In both cases, production for export worked to link African societies to the industrialized societies of Europe and provided opportunities for some and a struggle for others. Yet the history of agriculture in the twentieth century was one of growth and prosperity that was followed by progressive decline from the 1970s in many areas. In many parts of Africa at the beginning of the century, the agricultural sector was demographically larger, wealthier, and more productive than most other sectors of the economy. The agricultural sector had become demographically smaller, poorer, and less productive than ever before by the end the century. Farmers at the end of the century had declining incomes and were worse off, on average, than those who did not farm. There is considerable agreement among scholars and other commentators that the rapid decline and disintegration of the rural economy accelerated under the pressure of state policies and modernization.

In Igboland, as in most of colonial Africa, agricultural production was an instrument and focus of colonial governance, and high productivity was the ambition of officials, since government revenue depended largely upon peasant taxes, export duties, and import duties. From its establishment in 1910, the Nigerian Department of Agriculture pursued a policy of encouraging indigenous development of the palm oil industry as a means of achieving economic development and drawing rural folk into the cash economy. Colonial policies and European demand for palm oil and kernels led to an expansion in the productive capacity of Igbo households and drew them closer to the capitalist market. Until recent times, the Igbo region was largely dependent on rural agriculture, and palm oil was the most important agricultural produce and an important source of accumulation.<sup>6</sup> Household members participated in the formal economy as producers and marketers of palm produce, and, for most of the colonial and early post-colonial period, they built substantial wealth until the agricultural decline that set in from the late 1960s. How is this change reflected in the history of the region and the memories of those who witnessed these changes?

This book addresses this historical problem. The context for rural change varied across much of Africa and the decline and crisis that have occurred were not generally related to state policies alone. Structural changes, over which the rural population as much as the state had little control, the people

themselves, and their activism, were also powerful forces of change, as this book suggests for the Igbo society. Rather than concentrating on state policies alone, the book will instead focus on the complex processes through which an African society responded to state intervention during the colonial and early post-colonial period. While I do not attempt to describe local life in its entirety, I use agricultural change as a lens through which to view socio-economic change, political struggle, cultural change, and colonial hegemony. The book centres on the British attempt to transform a colonial society (continued in the early post-colonial 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. Such perceptions of African societies' attitudes toward official ideas and about development and change would come to reflect the top-down approach in the attempt to modernize agriculture.

The focus is the central Igbo region in southeastern Nigeria, defined as the areas included in Owerri Province in the colonial period or contemporary Imo State and parts of Abia State. The area lies within the oil palm belt, which includes, roughly, the area west of the Cross River and south of the region between Onitsha and Afikpo. This was one of the most important centres of palm oil production in the colonial and early post-colonial periods, and it is, therefore, an important case study in the impact of agricultural change and local responses. The region is also characterized by high population density, significant out-migration, and relatively poor soil.<sup>7</sup> This was also an area that witnessed major political agitations during the colonial period, including the tax revolts of 1929, that were deeply rooted in the agrarian economy as described in chapter 4. In chapter 5, I also examine the link between the rural economy and the forms of political consciousness that emerged as this economy was threatened by the depression caused by the Second World War. These unique characteristics presented peculiar challenges to the population in this part of Igboland, but they also provide an opportunity to assess how local historical contexts mediate major societal transformations. The advantages of this regional approach include the opportunity to collect data in depth, to provide comparative perspectives on how different parts of Igboland responded to varying ecological niches, and to explain the varying responses to the transformation that came with colonialism.

The forms and patterns of change addressed in this book have occurred throughout Igboland, but it would be a mistake to assume that these transformations occurred uniformly and that there were no variations. Although different parts of Igboland experienced unique circumstances due to diversity in population, ecology, and socio-economic structures, this book stresses that there is some level of homogeneity and continuously draws upon the collective experiences of the territory historically known as southeastern Nigeria, where the Igbo remain the dominant population. Therefore, I have not confined myself to the central region alone.

While the book covers the period from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, its central concerns revolve around the periods of substantial growth in agriculture – the beginning of European colonization and the subsequent colonial period (1880s–1960), and the (1960s–1970s), which witnessed a gradual but significant decline in agricultural output. These were periods when the majority of the population made their living from agriculture and the trade in agricultural produce. My study illuminates the changing nature of agricultural production and the rural economy over different historical periods and shows how the rural population responded to these changes.

In most of colonial Africa, agricultural commodity production was seen as an essential engine of growth upon which the development of African farmers and societies depended.<sup>8</sup> Colonial intervention increased the pace and scope of agricultural change in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa, leading some commentators to characterize this period as an era of agricultural revolution.<sup>9</sup> The degree of social and economic changes had fundamental implications for agricultural sustainability and rural subsistence.<sup>10</sup> Development and economics-oriented studies have concluded that economic reforms driven by cash crop production in both the colonial and the post-colonial period led to agricultural decline and threatened rural survival.<sup>11</sup> They have blamed contemporary agricultural decline on colonialism, government mismanagement of resources, and the effects of a global economy.<sup>12</sup> These factors constitute the general explanations for the forms of agricultural change that have taken place in most parts of Africa, but they do not provide explanations for regional experiences.<sup>13</sup> The responses and actions of the local population, the social context in which they produced crops, demographic factors, environmental factors, and political changes undoubtedly contributed to the pace

and forms of changes that occurred – for government policies did not function in a vacuum. The policies pursued by colonial officials, at times through coercion, on the one hand, and the response of local farmers to the opportunities created by the new economy, on the other, account for the pace, scope, and nature of the transformations that occurred in the twentieth century.

Scholars are still struggling with how to explain these changes throughout Africa and how to characterize African producers like the ones described in this study. Two major perspectives have been used to explain Africa's disappearing farming population.<sup>14</sup> At one end of the spectrum, scholars posit that Africa's agricultural decline was the result of the incorporation of African economies into the world capitalist system. At the other end of the spectrum are scholars and international agencies such as the World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the International Monetary Fund who argue that the causes of agrarian breakdown are rooted in the internal economic policies of African governments since independence.<sup>15</sup>

The externalist argument has focused on the adverse effects of colonialism and an international economic environment that created poor terms of trade for Africa's primary agricultural exports and dependency on developed economies. This line of thought suggests that the dependency of African countries on the export of primary products has proven risky for both state and peasant revenue as the high cost of imports and very low prices for export produce lead to economic stagnation and poverty. Agricultural decline, therefore, is seen as a legacy of colonialism, which continues to support the economies of the developed countries to the detriment of primary producers in Africa.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Marxist-informed analyses blame the plight of African societies on colonialism and neocolonialism. The plethora of work in this area is grounded on dependency theory. There is widespread agreement within the dependency school that the infrastructure in colonial Africa was built to facilitate the exploitation of local resources, particularly agricultural raw materials that were essential to the industries of Europe.<sup>17</sup> This development pattern disrupted indigenous economies and political structures and rendered them dependent on Europe and the developed world.<sup>18</sup>

The British, like other colonial powers, did not have a well-articulated plan for agricultural development. The inability to work out a coherent and

long-term strategy for agricultural development, John Levi and Michael Hainden have argued, was chiefly due to the fact that “policy was unduly subject to passing fashions ... or to pressure from powerful individuals who pursued particular enthusiasms.”<sup>19</sup> According to Michael Watts, “While the success of metropolitan capital depended upon expanded commodity production by households which subsidized the reproduction of their own labor power, the demands of capital and the effects of commodity production simultaneously undermined (and occasionally threatened) the survival of those upon whom it ultimately depended.”<sup>20</sup> The export market spawned new and often “contradictory” forms of production in rural societies, while the form of capital accumulation that emerged stifled the survival of a viable local peasantry. The emphasis on export production turned rural peasants into producers of raw materials largely for the benefit of European traders and industries. In good years, farmers could earn a modest profit, but the structure of the colonial economy did not develop an independent and self-sustaining peasantry. Overall, the externalist argument remains as valid today as it was two decades ago. However, the dependency theory paradigm and its basic concepts of “incorporation” and “centre-periphery” relations ignore internal dynamics of change.

Proponents of the internalist argument agree that the policies pursued by African leaders since independence have contributed significantly to the decline in agriculture. International economic and financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank mainly base their argument on the role of the state in directing the pace and structure of agricultural change in many African countries. As Sara Berry notes, these institutions have interpreted Africa’s agrarian stagnation as “a crisis of production, arising in part from historical factors, but also exacerbated by African governments’ penchant for excessive and ill-advised regulation of economic activities.”<sup>21</sup> Their contention that African states have generally ignored agriculture informed the imposition of structural adjustment programs in Africa. However, the biases and prescriptions of these institutions have been deplored. Their development models often are based on Western experience and a development ideology that is largely prejudiced against African economic and social systems.

The internalist perspective also focuses on factors confronting many African societies, including high rates of population growth, the lack of adequate infrastructure and industrialization, political instability, the neglect of agricultural investment, and environmental forces such as drought. Yet, the argument that the post-colonial state in Africa has produced little positive result in agriculture remains the dominant one. Robert Clute notes in his overview of the role of agriculture in African development that the continent remains the only part of the world to experience a decline in both agricultural and food indices in recent years.<sup>22</sup> The greatest problem in African agricultural development, he argues, is “the pervasiveness of political elites with an urban bias.”<sup>23</sup> The marked contrasts between the ideology professed by the African elite and the reality of their practical actions have led to “a growing gap between the urban elite and the rural masses.”<sup>24</sup> The broader issues facing African agriculture go beyond the development ideology pursued by the African elite. Moreover, the focus on state intervention in the post-colonial period ignores the historical origins of state intervention in peasant agriculture dating back to the colonial period and the long-term impact of incorporating local economies into the capitalist market.

The dichotomy that emerged in the debate has left unanswered questions about the dynamics and the effects of change on studied societies as well as about how African societies have responded to the crisis in agriculture. Indeed, the gendered impact of social and economic change is crucial and understudied even though Ester Boserup’s groundbreaking work, *Women’s Role in Economic Development*, drew attention to the centrality of female labour in African farming systems.<sup>25</sup> Boserup addressed the most important concern of feminist scholars – the role of women in agricultural production – while glossing over gender analysis,<sup>26</sup> and important relational changes taking place as a result of state intervention in rural economies. Much of the scholarly literature about gender and socio-economic transformation in Africa has a long and problematic history in which gender or economic transformation is not analyzed in the context of studied societies. Furthermore, the fact that gender relations are automatically equated with women’s subordination has meant that important issues concerning women and men and the ways in which government policies impinged on the lives of rural people have not been well analyzed. The result is that we still lack an understanding of

agricultural change as one among a number of mutually constitutive factors such as state policy, demography, ecology, gender, the household, and other social and economic imperatives that order people's lives in their locale but are also influenced by people's relationships with the world beyond their own immediate societies.

The key to understanding these changes has varied widely across Africa. Researchers in western Africa, in particular, have articulated the process through which rural farmers were integrated into the complex economic structures that developed in colonial Africa as well as the complex structures that influenced this process and informed its outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Sara Berry's study of how cocoa production stimulated the development of capitalist social structures in rural Yorubaland, including the evolution of private property rights in land and a land market, is a good example of the market-driven transformation of pre-colonial social structures. Still, the absence of a distinct class or category of labour and the availability of land in Yorubaland gave the development of peasant agriculture its character.<sup>28</sup> Polly Hill's study of the development of rural capitalism in Ghana may also be noted.<sup>29</sup>

The Igbo context was different from the above examples in the process of incorporating the region into the colonial economy. For Igboland, J. Lagemann points to a "more equal distribution of agricultural resources and farm income as population pressure increases, and greater inequalities in the distribution of total income as non-farm employment becomes more important."<sup>30</sup> Unlike the situation in western Nigeria and Ghana, where cocoa was a new crop, the oil palm was indigenous to Igboland and had been developed as an export product before the advent of colonialism. Access to the oil palm would, generally speaking, be open to most households, based on existing primogeniture with regard to land. Large-scale capitalization and new labour and land arrangements were not features of peasant farming in the oil palm production zones of Igboland. Susan Martin's study of the Ngwa Igbo may be noted in this regard.<sup>31</sup>

While the cocoa-producing areas in Western Nigeria and Ghana, about which Berry and Hill have written, attracted migrants, the Igbo area continued to be a net exporter of labour. Lineage and other forms of labour and land use persisted into the late colonial and post-independence periods. The extensive quantity of oil and kernels produced in the region was, therefore,

achieved by the mobilization of household labour and continued reliance on a land-tenure pattern based on lineage and relationships controlled by elders. Despite large-scale production, what emerged among the Igbo was a class of farmers and traders that was largely undifferentiated.

The trajectories of change were also shaped by developments that emerged from the period of British disengagement from Nigeria. The mid-1950s were particularly significant in this regard as Nigeria entered the era of internal self-rule in 1954. The Lyttelton Constitution of 1954 provided for regional governments (Eastern, Western, and Northern) with wide powers in political and economic affairs at the regional level. When independence was obtained from Britain on October 1, 1960, the government of the Eastern Region had the opportunity to fully implement its economic policy and ideology. The new elite, under the leadership of the pragmatic premier of the Eastern Region, Dr. M. I. Okpara, rejected the colonial political order, but they inevitably accepted the economic one bequeathed by the British. Agriculture was perceived as the source of economic development. The regional government focused on the establishment of community plantations and farm settlements for export production, although innovations were introduced to encourage food production and to draw farmers further into official agricultural programs.<sup>32</sup> However, the attempt to modernize indigenous agriculture revealed the paradox of an elitist state that aspired to “modernize” a population that viewed state intervention with skepticism.

A complex web of structural and political developments eroded the agricultural base before these policies could be fully tested. By 1966, the Nigerian federation was in a political crisis that led to a civil war between the predominantly Igbo-speaking people of Eastern Nigeria and the rest of the federation in 1967. Igbo society faced several challenges because of the civil war, which lasted until 1970.<sup>33</sup> Unprecedented famine followed, and agricultural crisis became a permanent feature of an area that was already a “food-reserve-deficit” area before the war.<sup>34</sup> The 1970s also witnessed major changes in the economic base of the Nigerian economy. The discovery of crude oil at Oloibiri in 1956 and the production that began in 1958 made Nigeria the largest oil producer in Africa and the eleventh in the world. The 1970s coincided with a rise in the world oil price, and Nigeria reaped instant riches from petroleum.<sup>35</sup> The emergence of the petroleum economy ushered in an important new phase

in Nigeria's economy. Agriculture, which earned significant revenue for the 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.

The book pays attention to circumstances that are uniquely Igbo. An important one is the cultural ethos associated with farming in Igbo society, especially the cultural impacts of yam production – the dominant male crop – thereby revealing the gender and power relation that exists and the poorly understood connection between farming, culture, and Igbo identity. This book thus illuminates the shifting nature of rural identity in parts of Igboland, such as central Igboland, where the agricultural crisis has been more severe and where non-agricultural sources of income have become more important from the 1970s onward. It reveals that the foundations upon which Igbo masculinities were built have shifted, gradually after the crisis of the Nigerian civil war (1967–70), and more dramatically in the petroleum boom era of the late 1970s. What has followed has been a progressive reordering of social relations and reinterpretations of “traditional” gender ideology despite the persistence of a dominating idea of male power.

The overall pattern of change that emerged in the colonial and post-colonial period was inseparably linked to perceived gender roles, which lay at the heart of the political and economic discourse of both the colonial and post-colonial states.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the discourse on the colonial impact on agriculture and gender has produced two important but related lines of critique. First, a substantive critique has focused on the adverse impact of the neglect of the role of women in agriculture stemming from the patriarchal ideology of officials. Second, feminist economists have drawn attention to the adverse consequences of hidden bias in the economic theories underpinning agricultural development.<sup>37</sup> Oyeronke Oyewumi rightly claims that “theories of colonialism relate a dialectical world of the colonizer and the colonized that are often presumed as male ... while it is not difficult to sustain the idea that the colonizer was predominantly male ... the idea that the colonized was uniformly male is less so.”<sup>38</sup> While represented as gender-neutral, official policies, which disregarded women's work, were in fact not gender-blind. The character of agricultural change was therefore distinguished by the unanticipated impact of male-centred improvement schemes and the role that

gender ideology played in shaping the processes of change. During the colonial period, officials excluded women from extension services, agricultural education, technological innovations, and agricultural loans. Thus, this study is also the story of the gendered nature of this encounter, particularly the colonial notion of the “male farmers” and its outcomes. The institutions created by colonialism contrasted with pre-colonial systems, transforming the roles men and women had previously played in their societies while creating new gender and class relations.<sup>39</sup> As systematic exploitation of colonized peoples, colonialism affected both men and women, but as a gendered process, it affected men and women in both similar and dissimilar ways. These trends continued in the post-colonial era, but the patterns and assumptions about the role and responsibilities of the genders within rural households have been challenged by economic and social changes.

The book emphasizes that economic and social changes were not the result of official policies and actions alone, even though the choices made by local farmers and traders and the rewards they received were determined by conditions created by the state. Therefore, this book attempts to present, through a particularly local dimension, the responses of rural households to official attempts to transform agriculture and other mechanism of state control. Since rural people were important agents of change and the instruments through which the state often implemented its agenda, they are the medium through which official policies and its outcome can be assessed.

Economic and political forces beyond their control often influenced the rural populations. But these populations also exerted an influence upon the state by employing various strategies, including rebellions or petitioning authorities to seek redress for grievances. These means, by which the local population influenced state behaviours, were employed in greater frequency during the Great Depression and during the Second World War in response to new market forces and state control that often imposed limits on rural people’s ability to control their own lives. Rebellions place the colonized population at the centre, show them as historical actors with pliable cultures and communities, and provide a more accurate understanding of the processes of colonization, its impacts on particular groups and communities, and its role in social and economic change. Through their engagement in the expanding economy as producers and traders and the use of revolts and petitions, ordi-

nary people accumulated political and economic capital that helped to shape societal transformations in the colonial period.

Petitions to colonial officials were used extensively from the 1930s as a means to seek remedy for grievances over a number of actions including taxation, court decisions, and policies that directly affected the rural economy (production and marketing of agricultural goods). The petitions sent to colonial officials are unparalleled as intimate and immediate records of life in colonial Nigeria, and as means for understanding African expression and the process of negotiating with a hegemonic colonial state. Furthermore, petitions highlight the important political effects of subtle forms of resistance and negotiation by rural men and women in the colonial context. Overall, they represent local perceptions and characterizations of societal transformations and show why ordinary men and women took matters into their own hands and in some cases influenced the outcomes of official policies.

Igbo farmers and traders adopted other strategies to win concessions when their resilience failed. They revolted and resisted when official policies and market forces beyond their control put their survival at risk or when colonial initiatives threatened them. These struggles, which took place in the rural areas, markets, urban areas, and colonial courts in southeastern Nigeria, helped shape the political and economic landscape of the colonial state, formulated in imperial offices in London and colonial offices in Nigeria. As instruments of social and political change, rural revolts particularly helped create political and economic space for ordinary people. The actions of rural people in Igboland had parallels elsewhere. However, the Igbos' actions took place in a particular cultural, historical, and economic context – within an economic setting that struggled with a mono-economy (dominated by palm produce), high population density, and severe land scarcity. It is, therefore, a history of an African society's experiences, contributions, collaborations, and resistance to colonialism and its consequences.

I have not attempted to discuss rural life in all its ramifications as it relates to colonial and post-colonial policies. The two general themes that stand out in this book – themes that highlight the role of the state in a colonial context as well as the rural population as agents of historical change – suggest that, despite the actions and top-down approach of official policies, the voices and actions of ordinary people proved critical in determining the forms of social

and economic changes that followed state intervention in Igbo society. These particular themes (state policies and peasants responses) have been chosen both because they are timely topics of debate among scholars of colonialism and African development and because they allow for a historical narrative that fully explores the processes of economic and social transformation among the Igbo. A critical assessment of these themes also suggests that, although the forces of intervention were mostly beyond the control of rural people, these people often negotiated as individuals and as a group, offering competing claims for political and economic rights throughout the colonial period.

The salient features of the Igbo region in general and central Igboland in particular have been underscored in the literature. I will comment on them in order to outline the distinguishing features of this book. Some of the earlier commentaries included the work of Northcote W. Thomas. Thomas commented on the links among poor soil quality, the shortage of land, and subsistence insecurity in the densely populated parts of Eastern Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, labour migration from barren lands within the Onitsha-Awka axis to more favoured regions by the late nineteenth century provides valuable information for periodizing land scarcity and the emergence of an agricultural crisis in parts of Igboland before the imposition of colonialism. Barry Floyd made similar observations and suggested that the soil in the region, which was never of high fertility even under the original high forest cover, was further impoverished by continued use under traditional farming methods.<sup>41</sup> Central Igboland shared in these constraints.

References to the population pressure found in missionary letters and travellers' journals suggest that high population numbers were already an economic problem by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The "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," reported a missionary in the Owerri region in 1866.<sup>43</sup> Land became so crowded in most of the region that fallow periods had already been shortened by the 1940s.<sup>44</sup> G.E.K. Ofo-mata's recent edited collection, *A Survey of the Igbo Nation*, devoted considerable space to the ecological character of Igboland and its impact on agriculture and livelihood.<sup>45</sup> These studies provide a useful framework for the study of rural subsistence and survival strategies in a changing agrarian landscape.

Perhaps the most important aspect of these works is their usefulness in locating the origins of agricultural crisis in several parts of Igboland in the late nineteenth century and its increasing spread in the early twentieth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of the Igbo were still engaged in agriculture. Many combined subsistence production with the production and marketing of palm produce. Scholars and commentators have examined the changing nature of Igbo agriculture since the extensive commercialization of the economy began in the beginning of the twentieth century. *Trade and Imperialism* by Walter Ofonagoro, published in 1979, is an important historical work on British commerce and the establishment of colonial rule in Southern Nigeria. This volume is an introduction to the uneven and sometimes antagonistic process through which British colonial authority and commerce were extended to the southeastern Nigerian hinterland. With specific regard to agriculture, Eno J. Usoro's work on the palm oil industry remains an important study.<sup>46</sup> Although largely a quantitative analysis of the export sector, it provides a useful source for the study of the palm produce trade during the colonial and early post-colonial periods.

A recent work by Simon Ottenberg, *Farmers and Townspeople in a Changing Nigeria: Abakaliki during Colonial Times (1905–1960)*, is the story of successful rural farmers in the midst of an emerging town and the ethnic interrelationships, integration, and conflict between the town and the rural areas that occurred. The broad framework of this study supports my argument that the history of Africa's encounter with colonialism is also a story of African responses, resistance, accommodation, and innovation. The anthropological and historical approaches are welcome. The current work places local responses and innovation in a broader historical context and framework.

The gender dimension of agricultural and economic transformation among the Igbo has received significant attention from scholars. One of the most significant works relating to Igbo agrarian change is Susan Martin's monograph, *Palm Oil and Protest*. Her detailed analysis of the changing nature of the household economy among the Ngwa Igbo enables a broader understanding of how the commercialization of palm oil trade spurred the transformation of the rural agrarian economy and changes in gender relations of production. Martin's work on the Ngwa region shows that local initiatives

played a significant role in the patterns of export growth, capital investment, and the food production sector, a major deviation from both the dependency and the vent-for-surplus theories, which had dominated the discourse on the development of the export sector. Yet, Martin's conclusions, particularly in regards to gender transformation and women's ability to participate in the new economy, are problematic since access to land and other production resources was not often under the control of lineage and household heads. Individual land tenure, which had become widespread in most parts of Igboland by the beginning of the nineteenth century, had more significant implications for gender and the household economy than Martin acknowledged. Men and women shared a common basic outlook toward the colonial economy, and the production patterns that emerged occasionally empowered women to claim more economic rights and engage in the formal economy. Indeed, Martin's earlier article, "Gender and Innovation: Farming, Cooking, and Palm Processing in the Ngwa Region of Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1930,"<sup>47</sup> which analyzed the role of women in the agrarian change in this region, argues that women responded to the expanding oil palm economy by introducing innovations, developing efficient time management strategies, and adopting new crops such as cassava.

However, Martin's conclusion that men took the lion's share of the proceeds and amassed capital from palm oil production because they maintained political and economic control of the Ngwa lineage system of production ignores women's ability to work around these social institutions for their own benefit. My own study shows that the transformations that occurred empowered women to claim economic rights and engage in the formal economy. Indeed, Gloria Chuku's *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1960* has outlined women's contributions to agriculture, commerce, and craft manufacture.<sup>48</sup> Chuku demonstrates that some women were able to seize the new opportunities offered by the colonial economy in the areas of export crops such as palm oil, trade, and commerce, despite the gendered ideology that tended to favour men. Nwando Achebe's *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960*, challenges the notion of women's invisibility in African societies.<sup>49</sup> As farmers, traders, potters, and weavers, some successful

females translated their economic successes into political and social power and authority.

While these studies provide a useful framework to assess the implications of expanded commodity production for rural farmers and the way in which rural producers carried the burden of economic transformation, the present study of central Igboland underscores the centrality of rural men and women in the transformation of rural societies and extends the analysis by emphasizing how rural farmers adapted to state-induced transformations and market forces. By highlighting the role of rural people, this work underscores a fundamental fact, which is that one cannot truly understand the dynamics of change in an agrarian society without a detailed understanding of the history of its major actors – rural farmers and traders.

The book is important for several reasons. The book is, in many ways, a history of policies pursued by colonial (and, to some extent, post-colonial) governments in Nigeria, supplemented by voices “from below” and some degree of re-interpretation of sources, in order to bring in the perspective of local people. Most rural farmers did not leave individual sources such as diaries and memoirs, but they left their imprints in other places. They left records in the forms of petitions, letters, and memories. Drawing on an extensive array of previously unread colonial archival sources and oral accounts, this book reveals the “silent voices” in history, their resilience, adjustments, and adaptations in a changing society. Their voices and concerns, as reflected in petitions and supplications, challenge universalistic and essentialist categories in history. Capturing the “silent voices” in history, including those of women, local agency, and contestations of the dominant modernization ideology of the post-colonial elite, is at the core of this book. It puts the reader in direct contact with ordinary victims of colonial control, evoking a feeling of what it was like to live through the era. As such, it is also a social and cultural history of economic change and the rural farmers and traders who were important agents of change.

Second to the Atlantic slave trade, no story is more important in shaping the history of the region than the British attempt to transform agriculture. Yet official policies and perceptions about the local agricultural environment, the mode of production, and the role of colonial subjects – male and female – reflected a narrow understanding of African production systems.

Local production patterns were more complex than officials realized. Household production patterns and strategies were influenced by several factors, including market forces, kinship structures, and modes of resource allocation. The contradictions that emerged from the official construction of new economic and social formations and the responses of rural farmers have not piqued the interest of historians of colonial Eastern Nigeria – a region that was heavily dependent on local production in the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods. The significant role of local actors and local responses to the changes engendered by the expansion of commodity production and colonial intervention, and the forms of transformations that emerged, shaped the outcome of the colonial encounter and local economies.

This book challenges the largely deterministic notion that the social and economic transformation of colonized societies was the making of the state alone. It shows that rural people acted as important agents of change for themselves and their communities. Significant internal forces also often forced officials to interrogate European discourses and strategies. The ways in which the British exercised power over the rural population and their response also reveal these interactions as negotiated encounters between colonial officials and natives and challenge the simplistic notions of a hegemonic colonial state and a compromising native population.

The book explains the salience of agricultural change in central Igboland in terms of the interaction of state agency, structural, historical, and social factors, all induced by the opportunities to generate income from cash crops. The economic structures that emerged drew from the social and cultural backgrounds of both imperial Europe and African societies. Amid several forces, including imperial Britain, European traders, physical and environmental conditions, high population density, land tenure systems, war, famine, a rebellious peasant population, and a gender ideology largely indifferent to the local context, the transformation of the rural economy presented a daunting task for officials and local farmers alike. The members of the African population were impressive in their capacity to balance state demands with their own cultural ethos as farmers in a landscape that was changing rapidly.

The history of socio-economic change, as depicted in the case of the Igbo-speaking people of southeastern Nigeria, raises far more complex – if less easily defined – questions than the classic debates about the long-term

effects of imperialism on colonized societies.<sup>50</sup> What was the response of local people in southeastern Nigeria? In reconstructing a narrative of the changes that occurred, I have paid attention to how state policies, market forces, and significant events in the twentieth century, including colonialism, the Great Depression, and the Second World War, combined with the actions and responses of the African population to shape the character and nature of change in this region.

## A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

Throughout this work, I use various terms, including *farmers*, *traders*, and *peasants*, to refer to the groups of people whose lives, economic activities, and social activities are reflected here. Despite the difficulty of finding an acceptable definition for African peasants, the term peasant remains useful in examining the lives of people who refer to themselves as farmers or traders or both. Although the classification of Africa's agrarian social structures, especially the application of the term *peasantry* as a social category, remains problematic, Igbo producers of the colonial and early post-colonial periods embody the basic characteristics of peasants outlined by T. Shanin, namely the pursuit of an agricultural livelihood for subsistence and commercial purposes; reliance on family labour as a unit of production; subordination to state authority and market forces through which peasants' surpluses are extracted, and membership of a community that defines peasants' outlook, attitude, and worldview.<sup>51</sup>

While one can debate endlessly whether the Igbo and other groups in southeastern Nigeria fit this categorization, the majority of Igbo farmers were involved in an agricultural export economy, using household labour, to meet their survival needs and the demands (taxes, rents, and other fees) that arose from their incorporation into state institutions. In the colonial and early post-colonial periods, there were certainly those who moved from farming to non-farming occupations and vice versa. Whether as traders, farmers, or both, all were affected by the social and economic processes of these periods. In employing the term *peasants*, this book considers the term as a fluid and

unstable one and uses it mainly for descriptive purposes. Although the term peasant is employed here mainly descriptively, it should be said that the actions of the state and the forms of hegemony it exercised over the rural population highlight the extractive power of the state over the rural population – a basic characteristic of a peasant-state relationship.

The development of a peasant population, however, must be understood in the context of earlier commercial developments. The Igbo region of the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra was a major source of slaves for the Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The trade, mostly facilitated by the Aro and their trading outposts throughout Igboland, linked the region to the economy of the Atlantic world two centuries before colonialism. Commercial food production in yams and palm oil developed along with the slave trade to feed the market that the slave trade created. The abolition of the slave trade and the development of a trade in palm oil drew the region closer to the European market in the nineteenth century. The region represented Europe's most important centre of the production of palm oil – a product that shaped the Igbo economy from the end of the Atlantic slave trade onward. On their own initiative, the Igbo produced palm oil to feed the expanding demand for tropical raw materials that developed with the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The imperialism of the late nineteenth century made greater integration of the Igbo economy into the European economy inevitable.

Thus, the transformation of the rural Igbo producers can roughly be associated with two historical periods. The first stage represents the period when the Igbo were drawn into the international economy through the nineteenth-century commercial transition from the slave trade to the palm produce trade. The produce trade was an important factor in the transformation of Igbo agriculture. Yet in this period, many members of the Igbo population could not be regarded as peasants simply because they produced palm oil for export. This was particularly true of central Igboland before the colonial period. Igbo farmers enjoyed the freedom to produce on their own account using their labour without much external interference. The next stage coincided with the imposition of colonial rule, when Igbo farmers became increasingly commercially oriented due to the influence of the colonial state and foreign traders. Igbo farmers were drawn into more commercial agricultural pro-

duction from the beginning of colonialism – the coercive instrument for the extraction of peasant surpluses. The farmers in this period were different from earlier subsistence producers. They produced more for the market. Their increasing incorporation into the colonial and increasing European market that now included other traders made them more vulnerable to state control and to the dictates of the world economy beyond their control – at least in controlling the price of produce.

Regarding sources, I have relied on both oral sources and colonial documents to make sense of life in the colonial and early post-colonial state, the attempts by the state to transform the rural economy, and the ways the local population responded and shaped the outcomes. As Paul Thompson explains, “Oral history can transform the content of history by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored.”<sup>52</sup> In our context, oral sources stress African voices and explain agricultural change as rural people lived it; indeed, they provide, essentially, history “from below.”<sup>53</sup> The use of oral history rectifies the omission of rural voices, which are often ignored in official historical documents and have mostly been omitted in past studies of agricultural change.

This work is based on a people with whom I share a common language and culture. Situating myself in relation to the research context enabled me to deal with issues of representation and interpretation of the experiences of the informants and the social context.<sup>54</sup> I interviewed four members of my family: my father, mother, brother, and uncle. For my family, access to historical knowledge was seen as part of the process of acculturation and education about the past. This situation confronts the researcher with a different set of problems – the difference between individual and group history.<sup>55</sup> I was perceived as an “insider” and provided insights into matters that might be denied to an “outsider.” While these claims contradict those made by critics of insider research, it does not diminish the advantage the insider has in understanding the complexity and nature of his/her own society. There is less inclination by the insider to construct opaque stereotypes of a society. An insider perspective also has an impact on epistemology because the insider may have a better understanding of the social structures that generated a par-

ticular set of oral data.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Ndaywel Nziem has written of the African researcher as one who has a double role as “observer and actor.”<sup>57</sup>

However, I have been keenly aware of what Richard Wright called the “unscriptable factor” – “perspective.”<sup>58</sup> Faced with the task of maintaining what Obioma Nnaemeka called “a balanced distance between alienation and over-identification,” I was conscious of the problems of both interpretation and mediation,<sup>59</sup> since both the insider and the “outsider” perspectives present the possibility of distortion and preconception of social reality. I was conscious of the fact that I too may be looked upon as an outsider, albeit in a very different context. However, while the historian’s own sense of personal identity may place limitations on his/her work, as Raphael Samuel rightly argues, at the same time, that sense of personal identity gives it thrust and direction.<sup>60</sup>

Some informants talked freely about general trends and more reluctantly about some aspects of individual lives. Some of my informants were glad to talk to me but reluctant to discuss certain aspects of their lives for fear that what they said might be discussed with other people. Many informants made personal references in the third person. Some people generalized personal experiences while discussing traumatic events or poverty. I have tried to conceptualize these issues by moving between different levels of analysis: from the social and cultural norms of the Igbo, to consideration of the privacy of my informant, to the collective experience of the Igbo. As an insider, it was possible for me to transfer some of the unspoken words and actions to the spoken because a phrase sometimes represents a very long story or a deep sense of emotion. However, the generalization of personal experiences by informants shows how personal reality can translate into group identity and group reality. Interestingly, people often used the word “we” when relating emotional issues such as poverty and food insecurity, as a way of depersonalizing their suffering.

Oral historians must also deal with the problem of memory, on which oral history is heavily dependent but which is human and fallible.<sup>61</sup> The conditional acceptance of oral history is recognized. This study, however, seeks to present a balanced view by combining oral data with other primary sources and with secondary data. But as Hoopes succinctly put it, “all historical documents, including both oral and written, reflect the particular subjective minds of their creators.”<sup>62</sup> Yet the oral sources used here “give a “feel” for the

“facts” that “can be provided only by one who lived with them.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, I urged informants to recount their own experiences and to remember specific events in the lives of their parents and families.

I have used a wide range of other sources, some of which have not been previously used. I consulted various documents left by imperial Britain in the National Archives of Nigeria, Enugu, the Public Record Office (National Archives), London, and Rhodes House Library at the University of Oxford. The archival materials contain concrete, dateable information and data, but limitations abound. Statistical data and information on agricultural production during the colonial period may not be the most reliable indicator of aggregate economic performance. Colonial data often did not provide an accurate level of agricultural production or indicate the level of peasant production. Often, colonial reports reflected the economic and political objectives of the colonial officials rather than the economic realities of the colonized societies. Colonial officials often relied upon data from experimental farms, which operated under optimum management conditions, to estimate food and export crop yields for the provinces and the country at large. In most cases, the optimum conditions differed immensely from the conditions that farmers faced in their natural environments. Such evidence of agricultural performance and conditions is problematic and unsatisfactory when used to reach general conclusions.

Many bits and pieces of useful information about rural life are missing from these reports. The effects of the shift to an export-oriented agriculture, the short- and long-term implications of colonial agricultural policies on farmers, the implications for subsistence production, and the general quality of life of rural producers are not easily discernible. As in many official colonial records, the voices of the local people are absent, although their actions speak for them. Official texts also obscure the life of the rural farmer, especially the contribution of women to agricultural production. The expression the “genuine farmer” was used in the colonial reports to refer to male farmers. Reading between the lines of the reports reveals the gendered nature of colonial policies. The colonial assumption that the farmer was male silenced the contributions of women and children. However, reading past the “colonial approach” reveals that this was an unrealistic assumption.

Colonial reports contain a mass of information on economic statistics and agricultural conditions in the colonies, but there is little information on the method of data collection. Generally, colonial reports tended to be too optimistic in their estimation and projection of production in the colonies. Failures were often ignored or left unexplained. This is understandable because the jobs of colonial officials depended upon positive justifications of their activities in the colonies. Positive and idealistic reports also guaranteed continued interest in the colonies by the British government. The reports are largely couched within an ideological framework informed by the economic motives of the colonial enterprise. For these reasons, I have considered the circumstances under which colonial reports were generated. Despite the problems with colonial sources, however, they document the evidence of agricultural crisis and the social conditions during the colonial period. They present a means of putting faces and voices behind official statistics.

I encountered a unique type of source – petitions – while researching this book. The hundreds of petitions written by ordinary people and local political activists provide a different perspective on the colonial encounter, agricultural change, and rural responses. The lives of ordinary people during the colonial period come alive through these letters, petitions, and supplications. The personal – and often intimate – letters of Africans create a unique portrait of the rough-and-tumble times of the colonial period. Most of the letters and petitions from ordinary people began to appear from the period of the Great Depression, but they became very common during the Second World War. The ability of Africans to write or to hire professional letter writers gave them the opportunity to respond to power and establish a dialogue with colonial powers – a dialogue that received some level of respect. Overall, these petitions reveal the impact of colonial policies on peasants and their attitude towards these policies.

Still, the use of colonial documents to examine changes in colonial societies and relationships between the colonizer and the colonized calls for some caution regarding their limitations. Indeed, questions abound. Were events and data recorded factually or were they reflections of the perspectives of officials in the colonies? Did colonial officers make history to portray themselves and government programs in a good light? What kinds of documents were preserved, and what types were destroyed, as frequently hap-

pened? The lack of local voices and their stories make it easy to promote an officially sanctioned point of view. As Thomas Spear has argued, every action, interaction, and dialogue within a colonial context ought to be assessed from the “perspective of the different actors to understand the particular meaning each gave to it.”<sup>64</sup> This caution over perspective informed my assessment of colonial sources and my attempt to provide some insight into the working of the minds of ordinary people in this period.

*The Land Has Changed* employs a diachronic and multidisciplinary approach and juxtaposes peasant production, peasant resistance, gender ideology, and the culture and identity of the African farmer with the broader scholarship on colonialism. The approach here has been one of blending between two fields of historical inquiry – social history and economic history – using oral, secondary, and archival sources. In following this approach, the book links the past and the present and integrates individual and personal experiences to the explanation of the agricultural crisis in Igboland. This has created the opportunity to put text and people in context and allowed a range of individuals and circumstances to be understood.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is arranged thematically, but each chapter addresses a specific historical issue from the beginning of colonial rule onward, thereby providing a level of chronological sequence. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the structure of Igbo society, politics, and economy on the eve of colonialism and the attempt by the British to restructure them in order to achieve the goals of imperialism. Chapter 3 examines how the mission to transform African agriculture and achieve uplift was implemented through the dominant Western gendered ideology of the male farmer – an ideology deeply embedded in colonial patriarchal thinking. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 take up the issues related to African responses to colonial policy and in relation to the major structural changes that defined the twentieth century, including the Great Depression and the Second World War. These events had a direct impact on the local society, often drawing rural peasants into the colonial economy, and at times generating considerable

hardship to which rural peasants responded by rebellions. Chapter 7 focuses on the agricultural policy of the Eastern Region after independence – its espousal of a development ideology that continued to espouse agriculture as the instrument for rural transformation. The chapter details how the agricultural programs of the early post-colonial period were stifled by political and structural factors including the Nigerian civil war and the emergence of petroleum exportation as the major source of income for Nigeria. Chapter 8 is a reflection on agricultural crisis, responses to it, rural coping strategies, the resilience of rural people, and the changing social relationships engendered by the crisis of the 1970s and 1980s.

The aim of the book is to write a history of Igbo agrarian change and societal transformation as ordinary people responded to colonial policies and the structural changes that came with colonialism. It was the actions, responses, and, at times, the resistance of these ordinary men and women that helped shape both the colonial society and the society the Igbo inherited at the end of colonialism.