

## THE LAND HAS CHANGED

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

Chima J. Koriech

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## CHAPTER THREE

# GENDER AND COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL POLICY

Colonial records provide an index from which the official view of the role of men and women in agriculture in the colonial period can be derived. From the beginning of the colonial agricultural experiment, officials had a fixed mindset about what to produce and who should produce it. Whether they emphasized cash crop production, soil conservation, or improved production methods, colonial officials had one thing in common: they believed improved agricultural production was important for the state and the local people. But colonial officials constantly imposed European gender ideas on Igbo society. As it did in the political arena, British rule transformed the context of traditional society by creating institutions and class differences based on European notions of gender roles.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on men as cash crop farmers, bureaucratic efforts to improve agriculture encouraged the men even in areas that men and women had previously complemented each other. While official policy did not reflect a blatant discrimination against women, colonial educational and extension schemes aimed at improving agricultural production excluded women. Yet up to the end of colonial rule, the expansion in production in both the palm oil economy and food production was as much the making of rural women as it was the product of men's expanding interest in the production and marketing of agricultural goods.

Igbo societies had a well-developed sense of gender distinction, but the idea of a very strict division of labour along gender lines did not exist. Gender roles were marked by a high level of fluidity in the roles women and

men performed.<sup>2</sup> Indeed gender structures and ideology, as social categories, and their relationship with identities, as Igor Kopytoff observed, were based on what people do (roles) rather than any existential category.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a separate sexual world for men and women was not the norm. But the fluidity and complementarity that defined Igbo gender relations of production were at odds with the rigid colonial ideology regarding the role of men and women. Although women brought their own experiences and labour into most areas of production, colonial policies fostered the notion of “male farmers” and farmers’ wives, who were not seen as independent contributors engaged in farming.<sup>4</sup> The most important area of bias centred on the exclusion of women from all agricultural extension and support services offered to local farmers.

## WOMEN, AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND EXTENSION SERVICES

As early as 1888 the *Kew Bulletin* suggested that the superintendent of agriculture consider the apprenticeship of refugee (ex-slave) boys and the industrial education of sons of chiefs as part of the early colonial agricultural policy.<sup>5</sup> By 1913, the colonial department of agriculture in eastern Nigeria was offering agricultural instruction and practical demonstrations to school teachers and their senior pupils.<sup>6</sup> By 1918, seven male pupils were offered theoretical instruction in farming by the Department of Agriculture.<sup>7</sup> With the merger of the agriculture departments of the Northern and Southern Provinces in 1921, the parent department widened its horizon and intensified its activities in the dissemination of agricultural techniques, research results, training, and extension services. Even these early experiments focused on boys.

In 1922, the Department of Agriculture explained the direction of subsequent educational services and extension programs to assist the native farmer. The Director of Agriculture, O. T. Faulkner, proposed two courses (a lower and a higher) of agricultural education at Ibadan in Western Nigeria to cater to the interest of Nigerian farmers. The lower course was for boys with only primary school education and the upper course for boys with the Cambridge Junior Examination.<sup>8</sup> The aim of the course was to introduce new

modes of production, limited mechanization, soil management techniques, and general agricultural processing improvements to these boys. No such course or program was devoted to women.

By the end of the 1920s, innovations were introduced in the palm oil industry. In the Awka and Nsukka divisions in 1929, the Department of Agriculture was selecting boys for training in palm oil extraction and nut-cracking machines operation.<sup>9</sup> In 1934, the Department of Agriculture began offering instruction to those who wished to derive a living from farming by targeting “farmers’ sons.” In a memorandum to superintendents of agriculture throughout the southern Provinces, H. G. Poynter, assistant director of agriculture, instructed that the government’s agricultural education should consist of a course of three months’ duration in practical work and demonstration supplemented by lectures “for boys who wish to farm” rather than train them as assistants in the department.<sup>10</sup> According to O. T. Faulkner, Director of Agriculture, thirteen boys attended the first course when the program took off in March 1934 at the Moor Plantation in Ibadan. The course consisted of practical and demonstration work on the field as well as instruction in crop science, elementary mathematics, and bookkeeping. Faulkner triumphantly noted that “those who attended the course returned to their father’s farms, except one who is acting as secretary of a cooperative cocoa marketing society.”<sup>11</sup> Limiting such programs to farmers’ sons had unintended consequences and remains an excellent example of colonial perception about women’s role in agriculture.

These measures did not have the desired effect because they failed to attract the boys as intended. A district officer remarked:

I find that boys whose educational attainment would qualify them for this course are not at all anxious to take advantage of the offer. It seems that any who has acquired a slight knowledge of reading and writing consider farming, or for that matter any manual labor, beneath his dignity.<sup>12</sup>

The acting district officer for Onitsha Division confirmed the unwillingness of boys to take advantage of the program. When B. C. Stone wrote to his superior in 1934, he was frustrated by the lack of interest in farming for young boys: “I have not so far found any candidate for the instruction course for farmers’

sons. The only boys who have presented themselves were unwilling to proceed with the idea when they found that there was no likelihood of the course leading to a subsequent Government appointment.”<sup>13</sup> District Officer B. W. Walter of Udi wrote that there were no candidates from his division.<sup>14</sup>

Special courses were also offered for school teachers under a school farm program. The first agricultural course for teachers under the rural education scheme began at Ibadan in 1937. Although some theoretical courses in agriculture had been offered to teachers at the Moor Plantation earlier, the rural education course aimed to provide instruction in practical agriculture and in methods of managing school farms and the teaching of elementary science. Norman Herington, agricultural education officer “insisted that the new courses must cover at least a complete growing season, starting with the planting of crops in March and finishing with the harvest in October or November.”<sup>15</sup> Since most of the teachers came from mission schools, Herington also suggested that the Missions or Voluntary Agencies should send “only trained teachers with some seniority” and that married teachers “should be allowed to bring their wives.” He hoped that such a group would give the work some status in the schools.<sup>16</sup>

Herington had laid a solid foundation for a similar agricultural course for teachers in eastern Nigeria. A large area of land near the Agricultural Experimental Station at Umudike belonging to the Government College, Umuahia, had been chosen when he arrived at Umuahia on 23 December 1938. Thirty teachers, mostly drawn from mission schools, arrived for the course in March 1939. The group included the headmaster of a Roman Catholic school at Egbu near Owerri and a member of staff of St. Charles’ Teacher Training College at Onitsha.<sup>17</sup> The syllabus for the course was flexible and largely based on “the seasonal work of the farm” and included instructions on planting and cultivation of crops soil science, seed germination, the science of air and water and plant growth. Herington wrote: “I was anxious that the educational value of the school farms should be recognized and appreciated and that this work should be linked with the school curriculum as whole and give a practical introduction to suitable elementary science.”<sup>18</sup> The teachers were awarded Grade I Teachers Certificate on successful completion of the course.

At Achi in Onitsha Province, the agricultural department acquired ninety acres of land for a practical school farm that officials argued would

train the “sons of genuine farmers in improved agricultural practice.”<sup>19</sup> The trainees, who were supposed to be “sons of bona-fide farmers,” were expected to “return to the family land and practice what has been taught.”<sup>20</sup> Again, officials were too optimistic that these young men would return to farming rather than white-collar employment. Officials failed to consider the attitude of young men toward farming and the influence wage labour had on rural life.<sup>21</sup> For many young men, farming was becoming increasingly unattractive while migration and non-farm income offered opportunity for independence from elders who controlled rural labour and land.

In 1940, the registrar of cooperative societies, E.F.G. Haig, recommended that the Southern Nigerian government should give serious consideration to the establishment of cooperative farm settlements for boys. He wrote that “The plight of thousands of Nigerian lads who leave school at the end of the elementary stage is a miserable one.” Haig emphasized: “In view of their partial education they believe, wrongly, no doubt, but with a deplorable strength of conviction that they are fit for clerical posts and unfit for manual labor. Whenever a clerical vacancy is advertised they send in their applications by the hundreds.”<sup>22</sup> It was his view that some form of legislation was necessary in order to compel or force these boys to take “their traditional occupation.”<sup>23</sup> To ensure that the target group would be effectively redirected to farming, Haig advised that the number of boys admitted into schools be limited through stiffened selection examinations. This would limit the number of candidates in schools and, conversely, increase the number of rural labourers for agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

By 1946, several schools had been established in which the teachers were expected to be instruments of rural transformation through school farms. By this time, The Niger Diocese at Onitsha had come to play a significant role in school farm inspections under Reverend Kenneth Prior of the United Church of Canada. Reverend Prior, who had been appointed as an Agricultural Missionary by the Church Missionary Society, played a valuable role in inspecting school farms belonging to the diocese. The school farms were not very successful in stemming rural drift especially for young boys. The persistent attitude was that “the schools were being used to get the boys back to farm work rather than give them the education needed for better paid work that most parents wanted.” The curriculum of the rural school was criticized

*Rural Education Course, Umuahia, 1946*

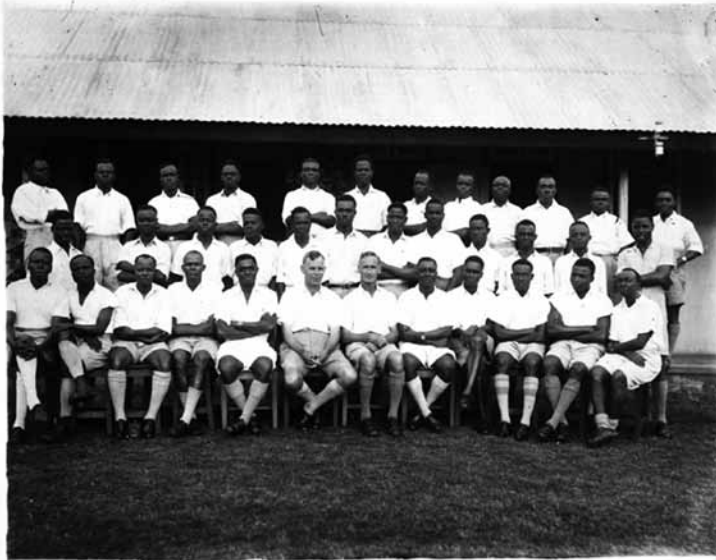
*Staff & etc.*

*A.W.Nwankwo*

*A. Mackenzie*

*G.N.Herington*

*W.E.Nwankolo*



Rural Education Course for Teacher's School Farm Program, Umuahia, 1946. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.)

for “being out of touch with the educational needs of village people” and was blamed for “the drift of school leavers into the towns in search of work” because the curriculum lacked an “agricultural bias.”<sup>25</sup>

In a speech to the Conference of Christian Rural Workers held at Ibadan in 1955, Herington remarked: “The schools cannot be blamed for the drift of population brought about by changing social and economic conditions. In the badly over-populated rural areas of the Eastern Region many people are obliged to go elsewhere to find work and the village schools should assist in this development rather than try to discourage it.” The attitudes toward farming had worsened by the 1950s. Herington accepted: “Boys cannot be forced to become farmers against their will and attempts to impose an agricultural bias would probably be resented by parents and teachers alike.”<sup>26</sup> He suggested the course for school teachers should be called Rural Science rather than Agricultural Education and the centres at Ibadan and Umuahia became Rural Education Centres.<sup>27</sup>

Well into the 1950s, colonial officials were still very frustrated with what they termed the conservatism of Igbo farmers and the lack of interest towards farming by young boys. Michael Mann, community development officer for Okigwe Division, wrote:

The conservatism of the Ibo farmer is well known, and indeed he does not differ from farmers all over the world. Many Ibo [*sic*] farming practices are not only inefficient, but are actually harmful and destructive to the soil. 'Ala' – the Okigwi Ibo word for land, is also used for 'our soil', 'our country' and it is their most precious possession, which is most jealously guarded, and over which suspicions and ill feelings are most readily aroused.

Mann was particularly frustrated with the number of Igbo young people migrating to the towns for non-existent jobs instead of settling to life as modern farmers in the rural areas. This was particularly so for people in Owerri Province, where education was seen as the route to a better life for the boys as well as their families.

One of the major problems confronting us in the Eastern Provinces, and especially in Owerri Province, is that of the Standard VI schoolboy on leaving school. The family contributes in order to send the young boy to school, and often at great sacrifice, maintain him until he reaches Standard VI. Then the young boy, for a multitude of reasons – lack of funds, shortage of secondary education, competition in examinations – is thrown on to the labor market and his own resources. He as a result of his education, considers himself a cut above his uneducated brethren, and looks for employment for which his education has been training him.<sup>28</sup>

However, very few could find suitable employment based on their level of education, leading to high levels of what Mann described as “acute disappointments and disillusionment.”<sup>29</sup>

Given their investment in their children's education, families expected some return for the “money expended, and are angry and disappointed the young boy is unable to secure employment.” Despite the low prospect of jobs



in the urban areas, officials described as alarming the drift of the youth towards the towns, where, away from the discipline of their village and advice of their elders, they became easy prey for the disgruntled politicians. These youths became a class of “unemployable and irresponsible fortune seekers.”<sup>30</sup>

How to resolve this concern was a recurring problem for many officials. The obvious answer according Mann “is that the boy on leaving school should be absorbed into his village.” To solve this problem, he proposed that: i) The village must be made more attractive by means of increased social services and social improvements; ii) the prestige of farming must be raised and methods brought up to date; iii) local industries be set up to employ the young girls and boys in their own villages.<sup>31</sup>

Mann set up an agricultural team, consisting of a member of the agricultural department and some labourers who would offer demonstrations, advice, and encouragement to “those farmers who will listen.... Time is not wasted in talking to those who are opposed to change, but a great effort is made to convert the young men and the more progressive farmers to such simple improvements as composting and feeding of livestock.”<sup>32</sup> The team would select the most intelligent of willing farmers for a course at the Uturu Trade Centre. There they would farm under instruction on poor land with improved methods in order to show them that “improved methods will bring them more money as well as improving their land.”<sup>33</sup> The trainees were expected to return to their farms in the villages and continue to have advice and regular visit from officials of the agricultural department. It was hoped that, by adopting improved farming methods, the progressive farmer would see the benefits and advantages of improved methods more easily than “his neighbor who carries on as usual.”<sup>34</sup>

When the government of the Eastern Region introduced an agricultural extension services known as the “On-the-Job” training program, the scheme was initiated by the department of agriculture to enable the “men to improve their farming.”<sup>35</sup> The evidence we have for the Onitsha Province shows that men came in groups for a month at a time to receive practical training in soil conservation, compost making, and the care of seedlings and of such permanent crops as citrus and oil palms.

There were a few farmers who attempted to modernize their production methods. One such person was seventeen-year-old Mark Nwadike of Ubahu

Okigwe whose father died when he was young and left him a lot of land, but little money. When Mark finished schooling at the Methodist School Ihube, reading up to standard VI, he returned to his village and tried to put into practice some of the things he had learnt on the school farm. Colonial Administration recorded that Mark travelled to Okigwe to look at the Government Agricultural plot and to consult the Agricultural Assistant. He started to put compost around some of his yams, and dug a compost pit near his house, into which the compound sweeping are placed each day.<sup>36</sup> Mark witnessed improvement in his farming as well as in his living condition. Such success stories were part of the campaign to encourage young men to go back to the land instead of “wandering off to the towns.” Felix Dibia of Umuariam Obowo in Okigwe Division was another of the few who went back to agriculture in the village. Felix had been trained at the Government Agricultural Farm at Umudike. Despite “skeptical remarks and jeers of his neighbors,” he was determined to put what he had learned into practice in his own farm. He had set up a small poultry with a Rhode Island Red cockerel and five pullets he had obtained from the Government and planned to expand into piggery. His feeding of the chicken, according to Michael Mann, “caused conversation amongst his neighbors who asked, ‘Why feed a chicken, it is meant to feed us?’”<sup>37</sup> Such was the prevailing view of many people and their attitude to innovation.

Overall, the attempt to modernize agriculture focused attention on the men and the boys. The colonial government did not really draw the female folk into its modernizing program, despite the central role they played in agriculture. For women, the concept of the “private sphere” informed the colonial development program that targeted women specifically. Although British officials were operating in a different and changing historical context, women’s work was seen as belonging largely to the domestic sphere.

To address the issue of women in the developmental process, women’s training centres were opened to create opportunity and provide training for women. The Women’s Training Centre, opened at Obowo in June 1950, provided a daily class where women were taught the making of fairly simple embroidered mats, tray cloths and other linen work. They paid a monthly subscription, which covered the cost of materials, and they sold their work for “their own profit.” Man commented that this system has made these centres



Felix Dibia feeding corn to his chickens. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.)



Mr. Mark Nwadike with his yams grown with composting. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.)

extremely popular, as the “women are not considered by their husbands to be ‘Wasting Time.’”<sup>38</sup>

Christian missions were also involved in the broader rural development agenda, but they had a clear notion of the role of women in a Christian home. Mission schools played a significant role in actualizing this ideology through the establishment of a rural development centre and by actively collaborating with the Government under the school farm program. The Anglican Diocese of the Niger, the Methodist Church in Eastern Nigeria, and the Church of Biafra (Presbyterian), for example, were aided with a grant from the Government and worked closely with agricultural and educational agencies to offer training to young men and women in the rural areas. The information and visitors’ guide of the Rural Training Center at Asaba declared: “The aim of the center is to help young people become better farmers and home makers, that they may lead the way towards an improved and enriched Christian rural life.”<sup>39</sup> Fourteen ex-Standard VI boys began a two-year course in farming in November 1951, followed by twenty other boys. On their part, each boy was allocated a half-acre to farm: 3/10 acre of yams in the flood area, and 2/10 acre rotation plot in the upland. After deducting cost of seed, labour, and ploughing by tractor, etc, all profits went to the student.

Colonial programs were male driven, regardless of obvious female participation in agriculture and the difference women farmers could have made to agricultural productivity. The first class of girls at the Rural Training Center at Asaba began with seven girls for a two-year course in domestic science and homemaking. The Girls’ Cottages offered the practical training useful for homemaking:

The girls learn how to be good homemakers by doing just that in their own cottages. They do their own marketing and food preparation, cooking on a smokeless Indian stove, built chiefly of mud. They eat together in family style, and have their own living room. They learn to sew, not only by hand, but on the Centre’s sewing machines.... The girls operate their own kitchen near their cottages. They also have some work with poultry, and will later have their own flock of chickens.... Improved diets, a more hygienic mode of living and wiser motherhood are emphasized in the course.<sup>40</sup>

Yet in the rural context of the colonial society, officials clearly ignored women and concentrated efforts on men, who were more likely to leave the rural areas. This ideology was more often the result of ignorance or ideological bias than an objective assessment and a clear perspective of the local agricultural system. The improvement schemes targeted a group that was becoming increasingly interested in earning cash income outside agriculture and neglected the women, the major agricultural labour force.<sup>41</sup>

Behind the thinking of colonial officials was a model in which agriculture would continue to be central to the income of the overwhelming majority of the rural population and one in which it would be modernized to attract young men to continue to take farming as a profession. They, however, failed to recognize several factors that worked against such thinking and the potential of rural agriculture. A report by the secretary for community development to the Eastern Nigerian government noted the improbable conditions that worked against government policy in Igboland:

The flight of the Standard VI boy from the land is the theme of especial lament by both educated Africans and Europeans, but it is difficult to see what there is to keep him. The social organization of the village does not encourage individual enterprise; many of the amenities, the existence of which his schooling has acquainted him with just do not extend to his village; and the main form of employment – agriculture – has such a low status and gives such a low return that the greater variety of employment offered in the towns and the social status of the white collar jobs are bound to exert a strong attraction.... Should the Standard VI boy stay in the village there is little enough to maintain his educational attainment, let alone stimulate him to improve it. The intellectual isolation of the educated man is enough to dissuade all but the really dedicated and the mediocre from taking up rural teaching.<sup>42</sup>

There were other reasons alluded to by a colonial official. Prospects for a better life and opportunities remained a major motivation behind the “drift from the land,” he noted. “To the individual this might mean regular income, better health and educational provision, and the stimulus of the urban environment with its variety of cultural outlets. But deep down beneath this reasoning lies



Girls making pottery products at a Catholic Community Development Center. *Source:* PRO INF 10/241.

the knowledge that there is no future on the land for the majority. The third or fourth son knows that his chances of inheriting the father's farm are slight." He also alluded to the population density in parts of Igboland and the difficulties of surviving on farming in such areas where land hunger remained the greatest source of litigation in the Native Authority courts. In parts of Owerri Division, with an estimated population as high as 1,000 per square mile, the drift from the land "is sheer necessity," this official argued. In his view, "The productivity of the land cannot be significantly increased without capital, and this will not be available in sufficient amounts until a smaller farming population is able to win a reasonable surplus from its land and efforts."<sup>43</sup>

British policy was similar in other colonial possessions but some colonial officials recognized that this policy was wrong. J. B. Brown, an agricultural officer in Bamenda, Cameroon, tacitly acknowledged this when he wrote:

“Programs for future agricultural development ... ought to be aimed at women and at making the younger generation of males favourably disposed towards agriculture.”<sup>44</sup> Despite women’s indispensable role in the agricultural economy, colonial authorities continued with a policy that often misdirected services to improve agriculture throughout the country.

Changes to the dominant notion of the male farmer remained in place until the beginning of 1950. The increasing role that the African elite began to play in domestic politics from the early 1950s and the regional autonomy achieved in 1954 would eventually lead to some cosmetic changes in the gendered nature of state policy in agriculture. This period was a turning point in economic policy because the government of the Eastern Region introduced some changes to existing policy, particularly in the agricultural sector. The main emphasis beginning in 1952 was on extension work and agricultural shows to stimulate the farmers’ interest in new farming techniques and “proper” land utilization.<sup>45</sup> This scheme continued to be offered to male farmers until 1956, when the Agricultural Department started a scheme of “non-residential” practical farm schools in two villages. The farmers, who included women, received training in the use of fertilizers and techniques for citrus farming and soil conservation. The new scheme, according to the government, was to require minimum intellectual effort and disruption of rural life, and “fitted into the normal social and economic life of the village.”<sup>46</sup> This change in policy is a tacit acknowledgment that past policies had been misdirected and ignored local realities, but it also showed that officials still believed that local farmers were ignorant and incapable of adopting sophisticated innovation independently.

There was still no consistent effort or commitment to see women as important actors in agricultural development thought. For example, by 1960, the School of Agriculture at Umudike, Umuahia, which revolutionized agricultural training and extension work in the region, had a class of forty-one agricultural assistants and seven field overseers, which included only one female student, the first to be recruited since the school’s inception in 1955.<sup>47</sup>

The gender bias in colonial support for local farmers was not limited to the extension services and improvement schemes. Colonial financial support schemes discriminated against women farmers. The co-operative section of the department of agriculture introduced a loan scheme in 1931 to improve



family production and assist farmers in buying palm oil processing presses. By the 1940s, farmers were applying for loans as individuals or collectives from the Nigerian Local Development Board to develop palm oil and cocoa plantations. This pattern continued for most of the remaining part of the colonial period. In 1952, for example, the agricultural department in the Aro District supplied 1,250 palm seedlings to local farmers for the extension and establishment of plots.<sup>48</sup> All the private individuals supported in the scheme were males, a pattern seemingly replicated in other parts of the region. The available data on distribution of loans on 31 March 1958 indicates that 165 were given for general agriculture in the amount of £157,369. The share for agricultural industries, including palm oil mills, rice mills, corn mills, cassava graters, and copra plantation and factory, was 46 in the amount of £91,301.<sup>49</sup> What is remarkable about this is that all the borrowers listed from various divisions in Eastern Nigeria were men. Further, except for a few cases where farmers were given loans for mixed farming, all individual loans, which ranged from £250 to over £4,000, were given for the sole purpose of developing cash crops, mainly palm oil plantations.<sup>50</sup> These policies prevented innovations trickling down to women who carried out the bulk of farm work, and thus did not have the desired effect of transforming African agriculture.

## GENDER AND INNOVATION

The first three decades of the colonial era were marked by continuity in agricultural processing technology in the palm oil industry. In this era, 90 per cent of palm oil and palm kernels were obtained from natural groves with minimal capital investment.<sup>51</sup> The production, marketing, and transport systems were described as still most “primitive” and wasteful, compared to the alternative method of mechanical extraction.<sup>52</sup> Emphasis, therefore, was placed on improved quality through produce inspection and the adoption of new processing methods and improvement schemes.<sup>53</sup> In 1915, the Colonial Secretary, Bonar Law, appointed a committee to study the trade in palm products and make a recommendation for “the promotion in the United Kingdom of the industries dependent thereon.”<sup>54</sup> The committee reported in May 1916



and recommended improvement strategies that were eventually adopted.<sup>55</sup> By 1920, the government was ready to adopt measures to improve the quality of palm oil and reduce what was described as the wastage associated with the traditional hand extraction method. Toward the end of the 1930s, the demand for more efficient production methods, in general, and improved quality of oil, in particular, resulted in the adoption of new processing technology: palm oil presses and palm oil mills.

The colonial officials, as earlier indicated, began increasingly to advocate for the cultivation of oil palms on plantation lines.<sup>56</sup> So strong was the pressure on farmers to convert their farms to oil palm plantations that colonial officials relaxed an earlier policy that strongly resisted any attempts to influence indigenous production. By 1932, there were about 119 native-owned palm plots in Owerri region and about 36 in the Onitsha area.<sup>57</sup> In economic terms, the expansion of the palm oil industry, in particular, meant that Igboland was saddled with the burden of producing export goods to meet European demand, and this threatened the local agricultural economy. For most people in the region, the changing social and economic systems were affecting agricultural sustainability. As Dei argued, one can trace the harm to effective sustainable development in Africa to intensified appropriation of wealth from the rural peasants by the state.<sup>58</sup> The conditions fostered by commercialization eroded the agricultural base of Igbo societies.

The government's effort to encourage palm oil production received a boost with the introduction of palm oil presses. By February 1933, twenty-one Duchscher presses were in operation in Eastern Nigeria. The 1938 Annual Report of the Agricultural Department indicates that the number of hand presses increased from 58 in 1932 to 834 in 1938.<sup>59</sup> However, statistics are part of the story. Despite the high rate of increase in the installation of these presses between 1933 and 1938, hundreds of thousands of producers engaged in the oil industry still relied on traditional production methods. By 1938, Nigeria's position as the world's largest supplier of palm products had been surpassed by Indonesia and Malaysia, but some fundamental changes occurred in the way peasants produced oil and kernels.

As officials promoted new production regimes for local farmers, hand presses caused the re-distribution of traditional labour among men, women, and children, increasing men's participation in palm oil and kernels process-

ing and marketing. Hand presses extracted about 65 per cent more oil than the traditional method, and they were reported to be in common use by the end of the Second World War.<sup>60</sup> A.F.B. Bridges compared the labour and quantity of oil extracted by the hand press and the traditional method in 1929. He recorded that it took 4 women about 9 hours to produce 331 lbs of oil, but 2 men and 2 boys about 2 hours to extract 491 lbs of oil from the same quantity of fruits.<sup>61</sup> Eno Usoro also compared the man-hours spent using the pre-war traditional method of preparing oil with the post-Second World War method using the hand press. Total production-hours spent by men increased from 600 to 1,050, while production-hours of women and children declined from 1,450 to 992 after the introduction of agricultural innovations.<sup>62</sup>

By the 1940s, the colonial government encouraged the new Nigeria Oil Produce Marketing Board and the Eastern Nigeria Regional Produce Development Board to supervise the installation of what became known as “pioneer oil mills.” In 1946, the installation of palm oil mills began in the Igbo communities of Owerinta and Azumini.<sup>63</sup> The pioneer oil mills were intended for large-scale production and processing of palm products. However, farmers continued to fear that “the building of mills meant that the Government was going to take over the palm trees.”<sup>64</sup> Morgan is right to argue that changing circumstances may demand changes in agricultural technique, but all suggestions for improvement “must face the fact that Ibo farming practice is careful and based on long experience and that the environmental conditions offer limitations unknown to Europeans.”<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the introduction of the pioneer oil palm scheme, marked by innovation in processing technology and methods, further affected the local agrarian economy in some parts of Igboland.

Morgan observed in the 1950s that despite the restrictions imposed by physical conditions and despite a conservative outlook, Igbo farmers were gradually changing their methods in response, “firstly to changing social and economic circumstances, and secondly to influence of Government Departments, particularly the Department of Agriculture.”<sup>66</sup> The expansion of trade offered improved markets for palm products. Still, innovations were gradually entering the Igbo region. Export from Aba Division increased with fluctuation to 39,427 tons of oil and 21,523 tons of kernels in 1952. And by 1960, there were 3,236 hand presses, 153 powered nut crackers, 172 rice mills,

and 30 cassava graters.<sup>67</sup> Obviously adequate attention was not given to the food sector.

The Agricultural Department could not persuade women to use hand presses even though they extracted about 20 per cent more oil than the manual method.<sup>68</sup> The installation of oil mills moved the production process out of the home and eliminated women's access to produce. The introduction of palm nut cracking machines also slowly challenged women and children's role in the production of kernels, a process that threatened women's income from the sales of kernels. The threat to women's participation in palm oil and kernel production was resisted in parts of Eastern Nigeria. Susan Martin documented how Ngwa women in central Igboland mounted spirited protests.<sup>69</sup> Women resisted the attempts by foreign men (European firms) to buy the uncracked nuts.<sup>70</sup> Women carried similar oil protests in other parts of the province. In 1951, for example, women attacked men as they returned from the market and seized the palm fruits they bought. Women's refusal to deal with the pioneer oil mills gave men an advantage that women protested. The District Officer for Opobo reported that the women refuse to deal with the Pioneer Oil Mills, as they were "unable to compete with the men." He added that women were losing their traditional means of income and their only prospect seems to be "ever-increasing dependence on their men-folk." This prospect, he argued was "not attractive to these vigorously independent women."<sup>71</sup> In Abak, Midim/Nung Okot in the Opobo Division, women protested the purchase of palm fruits by men from the local market.<sup>72</sup>

The protests against the installation of oil mills were an indication of the important role of palm kernels as a source of independent income for women. Moreover, the innovation in production methods was not uniform throughout Igboland. The oil mills and presses were concentrated in the Ngwa and Azumini areas. Yet the revolutionary impact of the new technology has been exaggerated. The new technology, it appears, was not the most significant element of change because mechanization did little to diminish women's control over production in many parts of Igboland, where they continued to use traditional methods of production. M. M. Green, a British anthropologist who studied the Agbaja people in the 1930s, recorded that there was only one hand press in the village in which she worked.<sup>73</sup> In Mbaise area, hand presses were not common until recent times according to several informants.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, colonial attempts to shape the direction of agriculture and the exclusion of women ignored the importance of female labour. Yet, previous studies of the dynamics of commercialization of agriculture and technological innovation have sometimes fostered confusion over how these influenced gender relations. Susan Martin has pointed to the profound changes in gender relations of production following the expansion of the palm oil industry among the Ngwa of Eastern Nigeria from the late nineteenth century. As the commercialization of agriculture became a critical source of income and new forms of identity, the pre-commercialization division of labour, Martin argues, “acquired ideological significance,” which strongly favoured men.<sup>75</sup> Margaret Stone has also drawn attention to what she refers to as the “ideological constructs of male and female status and power” and the transformation of sexual division of labour as rural societies were drawn into the capitalist world.<sup>76</sup> Basil Ukaegbu suggested that the production of palm oil was women’s prerogative and was essentially used for household consumption until the trade with Europe developed.<sup>77</sup> The export potential of palm oil made it an attractive economic opportunity for men who could acquire goods such as guns and spirits with income earned from the palm oil trade.<sup>78</sup>

These works have drawn attention to the use of gender as a framework for understanding social transformation, in particular why allocation of resources was transformed in ways that often favoured men. This is probably true for most parts of Africa, although the real impact at the household level may have been exaggerated. These models emphasize social structures (culture) as the engine of history, when in fact social structures were products of historical processes of social change. Sara Berry’s study of how cocoa production for export stimulated the development of capitalist social structures in rural Yorubaland, including the evolution of private property rights in land, is a good example of this market driven transformation of social structures.<sup>79</sup>

The expansion of export production led to fundamental changes in the local economy, most of which affected gender relations. The commercialization of agriculture in Igbo societies introduced new elements, particularly in the mode of production and gender relations, but like many other societies in colonial Africa, the Igbo were adjusting both their economic orientation and social relations, including gender, to commercialization and the demands of the colonial state. The changing economy was a “mobile” one and the opportunity

provided by the palm oil trade allowed both men and women to advance economic opportunities – for women through their participation in the production process and role in marketing. Fewer women become large-scale brokers, but they were central to small-scale marketing, which provided women significant economic opportunity and livelihood. Indeed, women continued to play important roles as producers and marketers of palm produce at the local level. Reporting on the Ekwerazu and Ahiara Clans in the Owerri Division in the 1930s, G. I. Stockley, Assistant District Officer for Owerri Division noted that: “The only traders from outside who visit the area in any number are the Isu middlemen who buy palm oil in the local markets principally from the women and carry it to the European firms.”<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, the control of palm oil was being renegotiated as the Igbo responded to new challenges from the mid-nineteenth century. The commercial importance of palm oil was very limited prior to this period. It largely fell under the purview of household subsistence need. In fact, its commercial importance did not increase in some parts of Igboland until the colonial period. An oral interview collected in Ogbe Mbaise in 1972 by A. M. Iheaturu is insightful. Eighty-year-old Andrew Anyanwu recalled, “People started off late to boil palm nuts and to sell oil and kernels. In the olden days, our people only made *eketeke* from fresh palm nuts, which they used for cooking. Palm kernel was thrown away, nobody bought them in the markets. Before we started selling oil and kernels, it was *ohu* [slaves], that people bought and sold to Nkwerre and Aro people.”<sup>81</sup> But the commercialization of the oil palm industry and the income it offered was attractive to both men and women. Both men and women, it appears, re-negotiated their production relationships in the face of new challenges and opportunities. Colonial demands in taxes and rates, often increased the burden of rural households, particularly those of the men, and they explain the interest men developed in the trade. Moreover, the incorporation of households into a capitalist market economy required fundamental adjustments in resource allocation. The nature of the transformation in the palm oil industry was also shaped by the fact that men controlled the most important factors of production: land and household labour. In spite of a gendered colonial policy, however, women continued to play important roles in both the formal and domestic economy.

## PERSISTENCE OF WOMEN IN PRODUCTION

Women participated in palm oil industry despite colonial neglect. Although men were increasingly drawn into the new economy, and disproportionately favoured by it, the trade in palm oil was not entirely dominated by men. Women played important roles as producers and marketers of oil. Early twentieth century European reports noted that women usually brought palm oil to the markets.<sup>82</sup> Some women, such as Omu Okwei of Ossomari and Ruth Onu-monu Uzoaru of Oguta, acted as produce agents, buying from local producers and re-selling to European factories from the late 1920s.<sup>83</sup> Besides acting as buying agents for produce in the palm oil industry, women performed the task of “bulking and of breaking bulk in produce-buying, both activities facilitating exchange at quantity and cost levels appropriate to the scale of production and buying habits of the customers.”<sup>84</sup> Women almost dominated cash crop trade at the local level, and they often combined their activities in the palm oil trade with the sale of cooked food, as the expanding commercial sector offered new opportunities for capital accumulation.<sup>85</sup>

Oral accounts from the Mbaïse region confirm the significant role of women in the local palm oil trade and their reduced reliance on farming in the colonial period. According to one informant, women frequented the buying stations at Umuahia, Ife, and Udo beaches in Mbaïse, from where palm produce was transported by river to the coast.<sup>86</sup> Linus Anabalam, who was a small produce buyer in Mbaïse in the 1940s, recalls buying mostly from women.<sup>87</sup> An informant stated that women were in control of production and marketing at the local level. She argued that the expansion of the palm oil market actually enabled women to obtain independent incomes.<sup>88</sup>

Given bicycles and motor lorries, however, men were able to cover longer distances to market produce that women had previously been able to sell. The ability to move oil and kernels in bulk and men’s domination of the system of haulage gave them a substantial advantage over women produce buyers.<sup>89</sup> Women only joined the long distance trade in later years, when motor lorry became the major means of transportation to distant markets.<sup>90</sup>

Yet, both men and women sought advancement in the new economy by dedicating more time to the production and marketing of palm products.<sup>91</sup>

Women particularly cashed in on the increased demands for palm kernels, despite the laborious nature of its production.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, primary production drew men and women away from subsistence production under which subsistence increasingly depended on the market. In historical perspective, changes in the colonial economy diminished women's levels of control of commercial production and significantly influenced the subsistence economy as well. Overall, commercialization in the Igbo region created an environment for men and women to diversify income generation strategies in the area of trade and production while significantly reducing farming activities over time. However, as the importance of cash crops for export grew, men and women became vulnerable because of their dependency on the export market and their reduced reliance on the traditional system of household subsistence. This not only diminished interest in other aspects of agriculture but also increased household food insecurity. The struggle over spheres of influence in the new economy increased tension between women and men, as women often threatened the men, and at times, called on the colonial authorities to protect their interest in the export or domestic economy.<sup>93</sup>

There was a dramatic response by both men and women to cash incentives offered by the produce sector. Apart from the cash incentives following the increased export of palm products in particular, the limited resources of the early colonial administration, as Martin Klein argued in another context, forced colonial officials to systematically extract wealth from colonized peoples.<sup>94</sup> The need to meet increased financial obligations (direct taxes and rates to the colonial administration) and the export potential of palm oil encouraged men to participate more in its production and marketing. Changes occurred in Igbo gender relations of production when the export of oil and kernels became the source of cash income and an important means to purchase the European goods that increasingly became part of the new consumer culture. The new cash nexus that emerged with the oil trade dissolved the old economic order based on subsistence agriculture, while rising consumption needs of the new society and colonial demands for taxes and rates forced upon the Igbo peasantry a burden their subsistence economy could not bear.

Some scholars have argued that the export-crop innovations took place and flourished without or perhaps in spite of the advice of European experts. Others stress the important contributions of research and innovations brought

by the colonial regime. The truth, Hart suggests, is “probably somewhere in between.”<sup>95</sup> The colonial administration included some basic training in its agricultural development program, but agricultural extension schemes represented the most ambitious effort by the government to enhance agricultural production. Although ignorant of the complementary nature of production and resource allocation at the household level, these improvements nevertheless offered a chance for higher productivity and improved quality.

In the end, the expansion of the agricultural sector, particularly the oil palm industry, was a result of colonial intervention as much as the outcome of the actions of African households. Although women constituted the main subsistence producers and an indispensable part of commercial production, they were generally denied extension services, agricultural loans, and agricultural training provided by the agricultural department. Women were an invisible factor in rural agriculture. However, women’s labour played an important part in sustaining peasant farming, despite the constraints imposed by colonial rule and the ideology of the “male farmer.” Women continued to participate in the production and marketing of cash crops and adopted new strategies to meet the demands of the changing agricultural economy. Contrary to the findings of some scholars, the commercialization of palm oil production did not radically alter the production process and women’s participation in the economy at the household level. While men increasingly dominated the “middleman” position in the trading system, women continued to control the marketing of palm oil and palm kernels at the household level. But production at the household level continued in the same manner except for the isolated installation of oil mills and other innovations in parts of Igboland.

But, the new economy also liberated women in some ways. Women engaged in the new trade as producers, while some became distributors. Many became suppliers of foodstuff to the increasing urban population and became involved in the wider colonial and international economies. However, the government’s agricultural and development policy, the changes in the gendered division of labour, and the control over and exploitation of the local agricultural resource base did not often stimulate peasant interest. Since the new economic structure was predicated on the patriarchal ideology of the “male farmer,” the neglect of women farmers that intensified with colonial



exploitation of peasant agriculture is important in explaining the political economy of colonialism, the impact on men and women's autonomy, and the responses of women in particular to their exclusion from official agricultural programs and the transformation of their society. Ironically, women, as agricultural labourers and peasant producers subsidized the colonial state and peasant household.

European commentators observed the persistence of women in food production. Writing in 1955 about the Ngwa and Ikwere Igbo, Morgan delineated a clearly gendered pattern of crop production and control:

Generally, amongst the Ngwa and Ikwerrri the men plant and tend those crops and trees needing most attention, leaving the remaining food production to women. Thus men's crops include yams, pineapples, oil and raffia palms, coconut palms, plantains and bananas, and oranges, African pear, kola, oil bean and 'vegetable leaf' trees. Women's crops are cassava, maize, cocoyams, beans, groundnuts, pumpkins, calabash, melons, okra, chillies and peppers.<sup>96</sup>

Women in some parts of Igboland devoted considerable time to cassava production, which became quite lucrative in the early 1940s. The demands for processed cassava flour [gari] in the urban areas increased women's interest in cassava production.<sup>97</sup> As elaborated in chapter five, the food crisis that occurred during the Second World War also increased the importance of gari as a substitute to imported food items such as rice. In 1949, for example, about 5,530 tons of gari was railed to the North, and by 1952, it had increased to 22,170 tons.<sup>98</sup> Farmers concentrated on food production in this period because of the lucrative market for food items. As the expansion of the economy, based on cash crops, forced peasants – male and female – into trading and other activities, they became increasingly less reliant on farming. In addition to the thousands of people whose livelihoods were directly affected by participating in the production of oil and kernels, many more became involved in small-scale trade. They would buy a bag of kernels or a few tins of oil at a time for resale to middlemen, for whom large-scale bulking of these goods became a full time occupation.

The expanding bureaucracy and the emergence of urban towns and cities inadvertently created the opportunities that arose from European intervention. As elsewhere in Africa, the urban population in Nigerian cities grew at an astronomical rate of more than 15 per cent annually in the first decades of the colonial period. By the 1920s, the population of cities such as Onitsha, Enugu, and Port Harcourt in eastern Nigeria had increased tremendously. Enugu and Onitsha grew from a combined population of a little over 1.1 million in 1931 to a population of about 1.77 million in 1952.<sup>99</sup> The urban population created a market for food produced in rural areas. Thus, the production of foodstuffs to feed the urban population increased despite the lack of colonial support for the sector. In this sector, women held advantage.

Overall, colonial officials navigated an uneven terrain in their attempt to balance competing gender interests, colonial policy, and the maintenance of a stable political economy. The development model pursued by the Department of Agriculture and other colonial officials aimed to transform the local economy and to meet European demands for palm produce. However, it also broke down “traditional” production relations, but balanced competing interests effectively enough to ensure continued production. At the same time, the development ideology of the colonial agricultural department, particularly the neglect of women farmers, combined with colonial extraction measures, limited the progress that could be made in local agriculture.