



## THE LAND HAS CHANGED

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

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## CHAPTER ONE

# **“WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FARMERS”: SOCIETY AND ECONOMY AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

This chapter examines the socio-economic constitution of Igbo society, especially the ways in which the intersection of agriculture with individual and group identity illuminates historical patterns and processes of change. It outlines the key elements of the economy in relation to agriculture and trade before the twentieth century. In so doing, it links the political and social landscape of the Igbo to its political economy and sources of identity and provides the background needed to assess the developments in all these areas from the beginning of the twentieth century onward.

The Igbo-speaking people are one of the largest single ethnicities in Nigeria. The Igbo have been characterized in the extant literature as decentralized or as forming what anthropologists termed “stateless societies.” These early classifications, as advanced by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, were based on the relevance and centrality of the lineage system of social organization in the regulation of political relations within and outside particular groups.<sup>1</sup> Under this system, the responsibility for leadership is said to rest on village councils. Yet scholars who have identified a much more complex political organization in both the centralized societies and those founded on the segmentary-lineage principle have challenged such a broad dichotomy as applied to pre-colonial African political systems. As M. G. Smith noted, all

political systems have a shared characteristic of competition at various levels – a competitive dimension that cuts across lineage groups for control of decision-making, creating the opportunity for the development of a hierarchical structure even among elementary societies.<sup>2</sup>

Although most parts of Igboland exhibit a decentralized political structure, they embody a much more complex political system. Indeed, scholars have identified models that range from kinship and lineage networks to societies where titled persons and age-sets have controlled the instruments of power and authority.<sup>3</sup> Other parts of Igboland, such as Oguta, Onitsha, and Umueri, have monarchical political systems. At all levels of government, however, the Igbo have practised a form of direct participatory and representative democracy.<sup>4</sup> As Raphael Njoku argues, “the distribution of power, authority, and the processes of local administration are the same” in both the monarchies and the village republics. He notes further that the “elders ruled [*sic*] by representation, participation and negotiation,” and the notion of difference is found primarily in “the king’s ceremonial objects and titles.”<sup>5</sup>

Most important to note at this juncture, however, is the interconnectedness between the political structures of the Igbo and sociocultural and economic life and how this interplay relates to agriculture. The role of indigenous political actors and their influence on matters of production, reproduction, access to productive resources, and control of labour for production provide the contexts within which the Igbo economy can be understood. This role relates to their control of the distribution of resources and the impact on gender relations of production. This relational approach is important in understanding the forms of economic change that have occurred and the ways in which they reveal the trends in the historical patterns of production as outlined in subsequent chapters.

The reconstruction of the origin and antiquity of plant domestication and agriculture among the Igbo, as among their counterparts in many parts of western Africa, is largely based on conjecture.<sup>6</sup> Like most forest dwellers, the Igbo shifting cultivators produced such staple root crops as yams (*ji*; *Discorea spp.*), cocoyam (*ede*), and various kinds of cultivated bananas (*unere*). In addition, trees such as the kola tree (*oji*), the oil palm (*nkwu*), and the raffia palm (*ngwo*) provided additional sources of food, beverage, and income.<sup>7</sup> The long history of plant domestication is evident in the large variety of food crops and

edible plants in the Igbo subregion of West Africa.<sup>8</sup> The variety of crops and plants that attest to the antiquity of agriculture in the Igbo region include African rice (*oriza glaberrina*; *osikapa obara obara*), Guinea corn (*sorghum vulgare*; *oka okiri*), bulrush millet (*oka mileti*), hungry rice (*osikapa ocha*), Bambara groundnuts (*voandzela subterranea* or *ahueekere otu anya*), cowpea (*vigna unguiculata*, *akidi*), benniseed (*sesamum indicum*), okra (*hibiscus esculenta*), kaffir or Hausa potato (*pectchranthus esculentus*), fluted pumpkin (*tel-faria occidentalis*, *ugu*), gourd (*legenaria isiceraria*, *agbo nwanru*), and several other plant species. However, root crops provided the largest percentage of calories in the Igbo diet, followed by oils and fats from oil palm and cereals.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible to paint a clearer picture of agriculture in modern times. As elsewhere on the West African coast, contact with the Europeans from the fifteenth century was a major transformative factor for indigenous agriculture. The arrival of the Portuguese in Benin and later on the southwestern lagoon coast and in the creeks of the Niger and Cross river basins resulted in the introduction of important food plants of central and South American origin. The arrival of maize (*oka*), cassava (*akpu*), groundnuts (*ahu ekere*), sweet potatoes (*ji nwa nnu*), tomatoes, tobacco (*utagba*), and several varieties of citrus fruits helped to diversify the region's food plants. By the seventeenth century, maize in particular had become an important secondary crop in the forest region.<sup>10</sup> The new food crops and fruits led to the clearing of forests and changes in production relations.

The introduction of Southeast Asian crops, including certain species of yam, cocoyam, rice, and banana, provided new varieties of food of high nutritive value that made it possible to support large populations.<sup>11</sup> Several species of fruits, including oranges (*oroma*), lime (*oroma nkirisi*), tangerine, grapefruit, and mangoes, and also sugar cane were part of this exchange. It is difficult to date precisely when these crops were introduced, but it is speculated that they came into the Igbo region either by northern routes via Egypt and the Sudan, or across equatorial Africa, or by the sea route round the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>12</sup> The new patterns of agriculture that emerged with the introduction of these crops entailed a more efficient use of human and material resources in Igboland in ways that J. E. Flint characterized as "perhaps the most efficient in Africa."<sup>13</sup>

Asian and American crops, especially cocoyams (*ede*), had a long-term impact on Igbo society, especially on gender ideology. Cocoyams came to be known as a woman's crop and women performed the routine work of planting, weeding, and harvesting the crop. Control of cocoyam production gave women a distinct identity as they took related titles such as *eze-edede* (cocoyam king) as a mark of success in farming, just as men took the yam-related title of *eze ji* (yam king).<sup>14</sup> Yams and cocoyams are the only crops that attained this status in Igbo cosmology, although they are never regarded as equals. The significance of both crops as expressions of male and female identity was confirmed by Nwanyiafo Obasi when she asked, "What is man without yams and what is woman without cocoyams?"<sup>15</sup> In all, considerable dietary adjustments occurred among the Igbo with the adaptation of the so-called women's crops.

Indigenous protein-rich foods were in short supply even in normal times. The few sheep, goats, and chicken that were kept and wild game provided an irregular, but quite significant, source of protein. Cattle, which were of the dwarf tsetse-fly resistant variety (*ehi*) and poor in meat yields, were kept mainly for prestige and ritual purposes.<sup>16</sup> Thus the Igbo could not by all accounts be regarded as animal husbandpersons for most of their subsistence, aside from occasional income, did not come from keeping animals. Dried fish were generally bought from coastal areas until the colonial period when the Igbo people became the main consumers of the tons of Norwegian stockfish, locally known as *okporoko*, that were imported into Nigeria.

Although agriculture dominated both the subsistence and exchange economies, the Igbo pursued other productive activities and moved between occupations as the demands for special goods or skills warranted. Such movement of goods and skills produced additional specializations like salt production and fishing, and also led to the formation of guilds and the rise of ritual specialists. Other people facilitated trade as hosts and guides.<sup>17</sup> The role of the last mentioned was particularly important in a region that lacked a strong centralized authority to guarantee safe passage from one village to the other.<sup>18</sup>

The Igbo economy had become part of a larger regional economy, that of the Bight of Biafra, by the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> Although Europeans did not visit Igboland until the late nineteenth century, early European travellers to the coast of West Africa and the Bight of Biafra recorded life and livelihood

among the Igbo in connection with the regional economy of the lower Nigeria basin. Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a Portuguese geographer visiting in the sixteenth century, observed a vigorous trade in salt between the hinterland and coastal societies of southeastern Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> The Igbo brought forest and agricultural products to the coast in exchange for salt and dried fish.<sup>21</sup> Writing in 1699 on Kalabari/Igbo relations, John Graziilnier notes: “The land about the town [Kalabari] being very barren, the inhabitants fetch all their subsistence from the country lying to the northward of them, called the Hackbous [Igbo] Blacks.” Graziilnier reported further: “In their territories there are two market-days every week, for slaves and provisions, which Calabar Blacks keep very regularly, to supply themselves both with provisions and slaves, palm-oil, palm-wine, etc. there being great plenty of the last.”<sup>22</sup>

The commercial relations that had developed prior to European contact expanded with the development of the slave trade in the eighteenth century. The accounts of captives of Igbo origin in the New World provide a rare and unusual glimpse of the agricultural and exchange economy of the Igbo in the two centuries before European colonization. An important source is the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, who was born in an Igbo village in ca. 1745 and sold into slavery at the age of eleven.<sup>23</sup> Equiano recorded the social and economic life of eighteenth-century Igbo society in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African*, published in 1788. Agriculture, he wrote, “is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women, are engaged in it. Thus we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years.”<sup>24</sup> Equiano’s description of Igbo society and economy in the eighteenth century is supported by the accounts given by other enslaved Africans of Igbo origin. Archibald Monteith, born about 1799 in Igboland and taken to Jamaica as a slave during the Atlantic slave trade, affirmed in his memoir that yams, potatoes, and Indian corn were an integral part of Igbo agriculture in the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

Nineteenth-century European accounts offer more perspectives on the Igbo agricultural past. In his journey to Bonny in 1840, Hermann Koler, a German doctor, took notice that the Igbo exported agricultural produce and metal goods to Bonny. He described Igboland as rich in natural products – maize, rice, yams, oil palms, dyewoods, cotton, and so forth, and as “quite indispensable” in the provision of staple foodstuffs for Bonny.<sup>26</sup> W. E.

Carew, who visited Ndoki in 1866, was impressed by the abundance of agricultural produce among other provisions in the market: "It abounds in corn, palm wine, rum, fish, deer's flesh, dogs' flesh, cat, fowls, tobacco, yam, eggs, spices, pineapple, palm oil, bananas, cassava, cloths, gun powder, pipes, and things which I could not number."<sup>27</sup> During an expedition to Akwete in 1897, A. B. Harcourt described seemingly extreme fertile land and "yam plantations extending for miles in all directions."<sup>28</sup> In a journey to Nsugbe and Nteje in 1897, S. R. Smith observed what would obviously be classified as women's crops: "I noticed, growing in the Ntegi farms, pepper, cotton, black rice, cassava (*Manihot esculenta Crantz*), and several other edible useful plants."<sup>29</sup>

The prodigy and efficiency of the Ezza farmers of northern Igboland, especially "their efficient application of manure made from leaves, crop remains, animal dung and night soil," impressed European visitors in the early twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> Sir W. Egerton described the Ezza as "thrifty and excellent farmers."<sup>31</sup> Miss Holbrook, who visited Umudioka near Ogidi in 1904, recognized the complementary role played by both sexes in agriculture: "The people on the whole are very industrious, the women especially, one seldom finds them at leisure, very often they are out helping the men plant or tend the yams, or planting cassava on their own account."<sup>32</sup>

Much of this suggests an economy that had developed far beyond subsistence levels and that met the food and exchange needs of the population before the colonial encounter. By the sixteenth century, settlement on the fringes of the Guinean rainforest and on the Sub-Guinean environment had produced communities of town dwellers increasingly shifting to rotational bush fallow cultivation instead of earlier forms of shifting cultivation.<sup>33</sup> This led to a consistent use of already cleared forest rather than virgin land and accounts for the high population concentration in the Igbo region.

Gender ideology played important social and economic functions in regulating production relations, the land tenure system, and the labour process. Traditional Igbo farming was based on the complementary participation of men, women, and children. In this circumstance, farming defined both male and female identity and instilled the value of hard work in both adult and young Igbo persons. Equiano recalled, "Everyone contributes something to the common stock; and, as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars."<sup>34</sup> It was the height of social snobbery for an Igbo person, as Victor

Uchendu concluded, to be referred to as *ori mgbe ahia loro*, – that is, one who depended on the market for subsistence.<sup>35</sup> This cultural ethos defined Igbo identity and attitudes to farming until recent times.

## ENVIRONMENT, DEMOGRAPHY, AND ECONOMY

In the past our soil was fertile because people were fewer and there was less cultivation. In fact, land was cultivated every four years. Now land is scarce because of too many people – *Luke Osunwoke, Interview, 5 January 2000.*

The physical and environmental conditions, including climate, rainfall patterns, and soil formations influenced agricultural practices among the Igbo. Most of Igboland falls within the Guinean and Sub-Guinean environment. The Guinea region is characterized by an annual rainfall in excess of fifty inches, less than three months of dry season, and a mean monthly humidity of 90 per cent or more throughout the year. For the regions in the Sub-Guinean vegetation zone (northern Igboland), the rainfall ranges between forty and sixty inches in the year with a dry season lasting between three and four months.<sup>36</sup> The pattern of rainfall produced two distinct patterns of vegetation. The southern part of the region was characterized by heavy rainfall, producing a dense rainforest, which thinned out northwards into a savannah. However, many centuries of human habitation and activities have turned the whole region into a secondary forest, with only pockets of forest remaining. Although the region is fortunate to receive a well-distributed annual rainfall that can support a variety of crops, the soil has never been very fertile.<sup>37</sup> Little variations in the timing and quantity of rain in a growing season can upset the agricultural cycle, food production, and food security. Stories of *unwu* (famine) abound in local folklore.

The demographic characteristic of southeastern Nigeria, particularly in the areas inhabited by the Igbo, was a major determinant of the economic life of the people and the social structures that emerged from it. The Igbo occupy

a little over half of the land area of southeastern Nigeria but comprise over 60 per cent of the total population. The need for crop land in a rapidly expanding population environment led to the clearing of the original vegetation and the emergence of grassland dotted with oil palms and other useful trees.<sup>38</sup> Morgan observes that “the Guinean environment of the I[g]bo and Ibibio-land may have been comparatively easy to clear since the soil consisted mainly of deep, well-drained sands.”<sup>39</sup> By the middle of the twentieth century, the vegetation in many parts of Igboland was already composed of palm groves ranging from 100 to 200 trees per acre in some areas. The palm groves have largely survived human activities because of the importance of the edible oil derived from the oil palm and its increased importance as a source of cash after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

Colonial estimates and ecological characteristics are proof of both high population and extensive use of the land. When the population density was about 236 persons per square mile, the colonial Resident for Onitsha observed in 1929 that land was quite limited in proportion to the population.<sup>41</sup> By the 1940s, a population density of 1,000 persons per square kilometre was recorded in parts of Igboland<sup>42</sup> and by the 1960s the density in the Igbo areas was about four times the Nigerian average.<sup>43</sup> The high population density in many parts of Igboland often resulted in the over-exploitation of the soil and consequent erosion and destruction of the top soil. According to J. R. Mackie, the director of the agricultural department from the 1930s:

The Agricultural problems are extremely difficult. Much of the soil is a very acid sand [*sic*] the Onitsha and Owerri Provinces carry a very dense population which is far greater than the soil can support.... Once they have become exhausted beyond a certain point recovery under fallow takes a very long time.<sup>44</sup>

As people were boxed into a diminishing land space, their survival became dependent on their ability to remaster an already exhausted environment.

The key to Igbo population densities and to the distinctive crowded landscape of compounds and oil palms lies in the social organization and the character of the environment and the agricultural economy. Food production, especially the production of yams, may account for the unusually high concentration of population in central Igboland despite the large-scale enslavement

of people from this region during the Atlantic slave trade. Although such an increase in population often leads to the emergence of complex societies, this did not occur here in terms of the formation of large centralized organizations. A simplistic explanation will include the absence of endemic warfare and conflict that would have resulted in the conquest and incorporation of other groups to reach the size of chiefdoms, states, or empires. Even the Aro and the Nri did not have the capacity to embark on such wars of conquest, so their influence over the rest of Igboland was more ritualistic than political. So, most of the Igbo remained organized in small groups and lineage organizations. The desire to live near one's own cropland, away from the authority of others, appears to have overridden all other considerations. This was a dominant factor in the evolution of the Igbo landscape.<sup>45</sup> Morgan and Pugh have argued that the "attractive environment of the homeland, and the lack of any but local contacts, produced an immense crowding of people."<sup>46</sup> The unique residential pattern of the Igbo has been explained by the perception that the Igbo think in human, not in geographical, terms.<sup>47</sup> Voluntary shifting cultivation would have been impossible to practice under conditions of high population density.<sup>48</sup> Local overcrowding increased the rate of agricultural intensification such that "probably nowhere else in West Africa is there so low a proportion of waste [land] and so high a proportion of cropland."<sup>49</sup>

Igbo farmers had a deep understanding of their environment, the way to manipulate it to suit their needs, and the consequences of human actions on productivity.<sup>50</sup> The Igbo, for example, rated the fertility of the soil by its colour and its distance from the homestead.<sup>51</sup> So, the difference in colour between *ala nkwurū* (compound land) and *ala mbara* (distant land) was an indicator of fertility and determined what crops or species of crop could be planted on the land. By the end of the nineteenth century, ecological and demographic challenges had forced farmers to devise new strategies to manage their environment. They adopted crop rotation and shortened their fallow periods.

The agricultural system used was rotational bush fallow (popularly known as swidden or shifting cultivation). Land was cleared and cultivated until its fertility decreased, and then the plot was left fallow to regenerate its fertility. During the fallow period, plant cover and litter protects the soil from the impact of high intensity rain, and the roots help bind the soil, increase water filtration, and reduce run off and soil erosion.<sup>52</sup> In addition to providing the

soil with nutrients, the fallow system provides supplementary food, animal feed, staking materials for yam vines, firewood, and herbal medicine.<sup>53</sup>

While the historical origins of these practices are difficult to establish, they probably arose in response to the limitations imposed by an increasingly less mobile population dating back more than two centuries.<sup>54</sup> To sustain their agricultural economy, the Igbo applied a set of conscious, interrelated practices aimed at making food production possible on their land through and beyond the foreseeable future. Igbo farmers made use of organic fertilizer, cover crops, and mulching to increase the fertility of the soil and to protect crops. The Ezza Igbo, for example, who were the greatest yam farmers, made compost in open circular pits, even using human excrement.<sup>55</sup> Their experience in farming and their efficient application of compost from leaves, crop remains, animal dung, and night soil surprised but impressed early colonial officials, who in general formed an unfavourable impression of the capabilities of African farmers. They interpreted unoccupied lands as unused or spare territory, which Africans were incapable of developing due to lack of skill or initiative.<sup>56</sup> Hence, techniques such as shifting cultivation were seen as wasteful. But they failed to grasp the principles underlying shifting cultivation.<sup>57</sup>

## INDIGENOUS MODE OF PRODUCTION

The work of Claude Meillassoux and other French Marxist anthropologists has been very instrumental in explaining the mode of production in traditional Africa.<sup>58</sup> Yet, as an example of the economy of the so-called stateless society, pre-colonial Igboland did not have an egalitarian mode of production, where all classes and groups had equal access to the means of production. The patriarchal and gerontologically based mode of production under the control of male elders precluded class and gender equity.<sup>59</sup> The specific method adopted in subsistence production, the control of the productive forces, and the relations of production gave elders control over communal land, the labour of younger members of the lineage, and the labour of wives and children.<sup>60</sup>

Access to land was linked to the membership of a kin-group. Until recent times, land ownership was predominantly communal and held in common

by an entire village, kindred group, or extended family.<sup>61</sup> Such lands were apportioned out to members during each agricultural season.<sup>62</sup> As land held in reserve for the benefit of the whole group, communal land could not be alienated without the consent of the group as a whole. This tenure system survived into the twentieth century in some parts of Igboland. A district officer wrote in 1929 that land in Owerri was “under communal control and ownership.”<sup>63</sup> European officials observed that land was controlled by the lineage heads who allocated it to relatives based on their need in Aba and Orlu areas at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> W. B. Morgan observed among the Ngwa in the 1950s that “community land is still divided by the decision of the elders.”<sup>65</sup> Individual land tenure developed rapidly in the twentieth century as a result of population pressure and intense commoditization of land during the colonial period.

Age, gender, and marital status were important elements that structured access to resources and assigned roles in production. The principle of seniority guided relations between males and females within the lineage group, between co-wives, and among male and female children.<sup>66</sup> The right to hold land was governed by inheritance rules and formed part of an elaborate kinship structure based on patriarchy in which only men could inherit land.<sup>67</sup>

The social organization of production and familial relationships, especially the institution of marriage, were linked. The marriage system, as a well-defined exogamous residential system, deprived women of the right to inherit land, based on the idea that they would marry and leave the group. So a woman’s usufruct right to land was relationally derived either through a husband or through children.<sup>68</sup> This customary land practice gave women room to manoeuvre within a very strong patriarchal inheritance system.

Labour was organized at the level of the nuclear family (*umunne*) and the extended family (*umunna*). An extended family, consisting of a group of close patrilineal relatives of about three or four generations, was the most important socio-economic unit. The household constituted the first resort for labour recruitment. In such a household, a man and his wife constituted the major organizers of farm labour, including the labour of their children. Through their labour contribution, dependents gained access to land, the most important means of production.<sup>69</sup> The importance of the family as a production unit perhaps explains why the Igbo valued large families. Mbagwu Korieh,

who until the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War in 1970 was a very successful yam farmer, stressed the importance of human labour in Igbo agriculture: “The size of a man’s household, the labour he could demand from relatives and clients, determined his success as a farmer.”<sup>70</sup> The more wives and children a man had, the greater his ability to increase production and his prestige.

Often members of an extended family helped each other by providing labour. Lineage heads had access to additional labour through the *oru orie* system. In this arrangement, the entire membership of the kindred provided labour to the head of the lineage (usually the oldest male in the lineage or *ofo* holder). This was usually on the *orie* day in some parts of Igboland.<sup>71</sup> It was an important traditional practice, legitimized by a gerontologically based ideology in which the kindred head symbolized the ancestors. As the head of the kindred and custodian of their *ofo* (symbol of authority and justice), he was compensated for these services.<sup>72</sup> The system gave an advantage to the kindred head since he could draw on a large pool of labour.<sup>73</sup> The formulation of *oru orie* labour arrangements in Igbo society had its root in a strong, traditional kinship structure where the provision of labour guaranteed the younger members sustenance, shelter, and other social needs in exchange for labour.

Another method of raising labour among the Igbo was an appeal to friends (*irio oru*). Under this system, the farmer appealed to friends or kin for help during the farming season. Men often made appeals during yam planting and harvesting. Women often made use of this labour system during the planting and harvesting of their crops. Through this work arrangement, women as well as men relied on social networks to execute farm work. For women in particular, the work arrangement gave them substantial access to labour. The system benefited both the host farmer and the labourer because the host always provided lavish entertainment on the farm and in the house at the end of the day’s work. An Igbo adage puts it rightly: *akpuzie onye oru, ya abia ozo* (If a labourer/worker is well fed, he/she comes again). Workers in this arrangement were often given parting gifts of yams and other food items.

Mutual exchange of labour (*owe oru*) was an equally important method of labour recruitment. A work group was the basic system adopted in an increasingly labour-intensive agrarian system to meet its labour needs. This sys-

tem of labour organization and management was organized along the lines of age grades, friendship circles, or social or finance clubs (*isusu*). These groups worked in turn for their members. For women in particular, this was a very popular method of providing labour for cocoyam and cassava cultivation.<sup>74</sup> Women married into the same kindred group (*ndom alu alu*) often took turns helping each other with farm work. Cash payments were not usually made, but the host provided food and drinks.<sup>75</sup> Work groups may have concentrated on clearing the forest (young men's groups in particular); others may have concentrated on tilling the soil or other phases in the farming cycle up to the harvest. But the most serious groups participated in the three most important phases in the farming cycle: clearing the forest, planting the crop, and weeding. The system was beneficial to all concerned because it solved fundamental labour shortage problems, especially for widows and others who did not have a large, family-based labour force.

There was evidence of the wide use of unfree labor in the form of both slaves and pawns (*ohu*).<sup>76</sup> Pawns were usually debtors who provided labour or other services to a creditor for a specified period or until the loan was repaid.<sup>77</sup> In some instances, debtors who pawned themselves lived with the creditor until they worked off the debt. The debtor was not usually paid for his/her labour throughout the period and still had to pay the loan in full.<sup>78</sup> This system was important because it guaranteed constant labour throughout the year. The existence of the *ohu* system, in an otherwise egalitarian society, indicates the existence of poverty and social and economic differentiation.

Labour was often organized along gender lines and many African societies distinguished between the labour of men and women. Yet, early European perceptions of Africa gave the impression that women did most of the farm work while men enjoyed much leisure time. A German trader, David van Nyendaël, described women in late-seventeenth-century Benin as having so much employment that they "ought not to sit still."<sup>79</sup> The women of Whydah, Dahomey, in the same period, "Till[ed] the ground, for their husbands,"<sup>80</sup> and the Capuchin priest, Denis de Carli, reported that women in west-central Africa worked the fields while men made little or no contribution to agriculture.<sup>81</sup> Walter Rodney identified the same trends in the societies of the Upper Guinea Coast.<sup>82</sup> Though not an expert on the Igbo, French historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch has noted that "it was women who worked in

the fields” among the Igbo.<sup>83</sup> Anthony Hopkins cites Bamenda (Cameroon) as an example of a pre-colonial society in which women were very important in farming, while among the Yoruba they were much more prominent in trade.<sup>84</sup>

A gendered division of labour was the underlying principle that structured production relations among the Igbo, but there was ample flexibility in the tasks performed by men and women.<sup>85</sup> From Equiano’s description, the most important source of energy (human labour) among the Igbo remained relatively unchanged into the contemporary era. Equiano wrote in his autobiography: “Our tillage is exercised in a large plain or common, some hours walk from our dwellings, and all the neighbours resort thither in a body. They use no beasts or husbandry, and their only instruments are hoes, axes, shovels, and beaks, or pointed iron, to dig with.”<sup>86</sup>

Tilling the ground for yams, planting them, and staking them were predominantly male tasks. Women and children carried out important farm operations such as clearing the land at the beginning of the farming season, weeding, planting, and tending certain crops such as melon (*egusi*), maize, cocoyams, and cassava. Men were involved in clearing virgin forests. Yet the division of labour was fashioned to suit the economic and demographic realities. Convenience was important in dictating how the family did its work. Basden notes that women took their full share of tasks that were regarded as men’s work, especially turning the soil and mounding up the yam beds.<sup>87</sup> Chief Onyema states, “No taboo barred women from participating in all agricultural practices or activities.”<sup>88</sup> Even though the cultivation of yams is regarded as a man’s affair, a division of labour still existed. Luke Osunwoke of Umuorlu, explains: “In the production of yam there was a division of labour. Men prepared the mounds and also measured the soil for the yam stands. Women weeded the land after the crop had been planted.”<sup>89</sup> J. Harris concluded that the division of labour in farm work was anything but rigid and few strict rules were enforced.<sup>90</sup> Yet, women have been known to play less significant roles in agriculture, concentrating on trade and craft manufacture in some Igbo groups. Women in the Nsukka area played a less crucial role in agriculture, concentrating rather on cloth weaving, pottery production, and petty trading, while men generally dominated farming.<sup>91</sup>

# ETHOS OF THE IGBO AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

There can be little doubt that a crop as precious and as demanding as the yam would in time acquire this “status of a god of life.”  
– *M.J.C. Echeruo, Ahiajoku Lecture, 1979*

At the core of Igbo farming was the cultivation of yams. It was the most important symbol of prestige and other forms of identity were directly or indirectly tied to its production and consumption. Until recent times, yams also shaped important elements of Igbo cosmology and food and dietary habits. Alexander Falconbridge, a British slave ship surgeon, who visited the Bight of Biafra during the second half of the eighteenth century, described yams as “the favourite food of the Eboe [Igbo].”<sup>92</sup> D. G. Coursey referred to the Igbo as “the most enthusiastic yam cultivators in the world.”<sup>93</sup> According to Reverend G. T. Basden, yam “stands for [the Igbo] as the potato does for the typical Irishman.... A shortage of yam supply is a cause of genuine distress, for no substitute gives the same sense of satisfaction.”<sup>94</sup> H. H. Dobinson described yams as the chief product of Asaba in 1891.<sup>95</sup> Linus Anabalam, a rural farmer in Mbaise, said, “A man who bought yams from the market in the olden days was ridiculed and regarded as lazy.”<sup>96</sup>

Yam, a highly ritualized crop, was synonymous with the agricultural ethos of the Igbo people. Emmanuel Nlenanya Onwu notes: “The discovery of yam cultivation formed not only the economic base of Igbo civilization but it also carried tremendous religious import. It was of such great importance that it was given ritual and symbolic expressions in many areas of Igbo life.”<sup>97</sup> The most significant expression of the rituals was the celebration of Ahiajoku (the yam spirit) – a thanksgiving dedicated to the earth goddess (Ala) before the harvesting of new yams. The new yam festival was not just an offering of thanksgiving to the gods; it signified community life and social cohesion. Although celebrated in recent times largely as a symbolic activity and devoid of its ritual components, the new yam festival remains a memorial to the most important crop in Igbo life.

Associated with the Igbo penchant for the yam are cultural habits, rituals, and taboos (Nso Ala) that structured yam cultivation, harvest, and consumption. Nso Ala forbade certain conduct and practices, such as stealing yams and cocoyams. Edward Morris Falk, remarking on the customs and practices of the Igbo in the Aba Division in 1920s, observed:

Stealing from a farm or farm produce, livestock etc. is considered to be a very serious crime indeed, even though only a trifle of small value be stolen. The Chiefs never fail to complain that the punishment which they are allowed to inflict is utterly inadequate to act as a deterrent.<sup>98</sup>

Breaking these taboos called for an elaborate cleaning ritual to appease Ala. The domination of this ritual knowledge by the Nri Igbo, which reached its peak of power between 1200 and 1640 but declined between 1650 and 1900, gave the Nri a level of imperial control over the rest of Igboland.<sup>99</sup> According to Dike and Ekejiuba, the Nri rose to prominence because “they set themselves up as the chief representatives of powerful spiritual forces, especially the key agricultural deities of the Igbo.”<sup>100</sup> In essence, Echeruo argues, “Nri was the immediate outgrowth of an agricultural revolution in the fertile valley of the Anambra River. That revolution, consecrated in the worship of the Earth (*Ala*) and of the Yam (*Ji; Fejioku*) was accelerated by the introduction of metal work, and the implements of agriculture which followed.”<sup>101</sup> The precious artifacts discovered at Igbo-Ukwu, while attesting to the wealth and influence of the Nri Empire, are also evidence of the wealth generated by its agriculture-funded, long distance trade and exchange.<sup>102</sup>

Yam signified life, masculinity, cohesion, and the value of hard work among the Igbo people. Since yam was closely linked to male identity, an Igbo man’s yam barn was his most important sacred space. Yam-based status was perhaps the most valued of commonly accepted male identity-linked pursuits, until the early twentieth century. Local political, social, and economic lives were woven around a man’s success as a yam farmer in many parts of Igboland. “What is a farm without yams; what is a man without a yam barn?” asked an Mbaise elder.<sup>103</sup> Nze James Eboh of Alike Obowo, noted: “A man would be proud of all his assets, but he was nothing if he had no yams. This is how a *dimkpa* [successful man] was measured in the past. Things are not the

same anymore.”<sup>104</sup> In Ohafia, like many other parts of the Igbo country, part of a man’s status or dignity derived from the performance of four yam-related rituals: (1) Ike Oba (Barn Raising), (2) Igwa Oba (Barn Sanctification) during which the Ifejuoku/Nfujuoku/Njuoku ji (Njoku Ji) shrine is constructed. Usually the chief celebrant places the biggest edible yam from his harvest on the Njoku Ji shrine; (3) Igwa Nnu (Consecration of the first 400 yams (*aka oba*)), and (4) Ime Okere Nkwa (a drumming celebration of achievement and the dignity of labour). To host the Ime Okere Nkwa festival, the farmer must have more than 2,800 yams (*aka oba ji asaa*). During the celebration, the chief celebrant places 2,800 yams at measured distances from his barn to his hamlet arena.<sup>105</sup> Such yam-based status conferred on men prestige at home and in the public arena, tied them together in associations of high achievers and differentiated them from less successful farmers.

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* captures the Igbo attitude toward yams and the link between the crop and male identity. Okonkwo’s work ethics and determination to build a barn through sharecropping exemplify this ethos.<sup>106</sup> The depiction of Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, as a lazy, unsuccessful farmer whose perennially poor yam harvest was a source of ridicule in his village is reflected in the different statuses of the two men in their community. The link between environment and agricultural production is also reflected in this dialogue between Unoka and the priestess of Ala (the earth goddess):

Every year before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of *Ifejioku*, the god of yams. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear. I weed.<sup>107</sup>

The priestess’s response reveals a deep connection between agriculture, Igbo cosmology, and agricultural practice and environment:

You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe. When neighbors go out with their axe to cut down virgin

forests you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labor to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man.<sup>108</sup>

Another fictional work, *The Seed Yams Have Been Eaten* by Phaniel Egejuru, further captures the importance of the yam among the Igbo and the transformations that have taken place since the Nigerian Civil War.<sup>109</sup> Egejuru wrote: “We young ones are happy now because we shall not go to the farm again as all seed yams have been eaten by the soldiers, both our soldiers and enemy soldiers. We now eat cassava and women go all the way to Umuagwo to collect cassava.”<sup>110</sup> The dilemma faced by the protagonist Jiwundu [yam is life] in the story and his resolve to perpetuate his name by striving to build his life around yam production show the complexity of Igbo economic rationality as well as the centrality of yam in Igbo cultural life. The disappearance of the yam and the concomitant decline of the Ahiajoku ritual threatened communal cohesion and collective identities.<sup>111</sup>

Although these are fictional works, they depict the values attached to yam production among the Igbo, but most importantly, they provide an insight into how the Igbo speak about yams and the link with male identity. Both works also depict a society where notions of acceptable gender role affected the agricultural pattern – labour, crop, and identity. Achebe wrote in relation to Okonkwo’s work ethic: “His mother and sisters worked hard enough . . . but they grew women’s crops like cocoyams [*ede*], beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops was a man’s crop.”<sup>112</sup> Achebe was also presenting the Igbo work ethic in general. As the “male” crop, the Igbo granted the yam privilege over other crops and its production was closely integrated to male identity. Early colonial observers noted a distinctly gendered pattern in crops cultivated in Igboland. The district officer for Owerri District noted in 1928 that yams were the principal crop and “the remaining crops are all women’s crops, grown, maintained and sold by them.”<sup>113</sup> The celebration of the yam as a symbol of masculinity and the cultural and spiritual essence of Igbo manhood is obvious in such male names as Ezeji (a title meaning yam king) and Jiwundi. As an example of Igbo philosophizing about the importance of the yam, Jibundu means that the yam is life, and it builds a home, a community, and a town.<sup>114</sup>

That, to be sure, suggests a long antiquity of the cultivation and use of yams and the existence of deeply rooted cultural and ritual practices associated with yams.

While it is difficult to trace the origin of the gender ideology associated with yam production, some of the patriarchal ideas related to yam production may have become more elaborate following the introduction of cocoyams and cassava. The myths and rituals associated with yam cultivation, it seems, were part of the power dynamics that evolved in a predominantly decentralized society in which sociopolitical and economic power was very amorphous. The high social status derived from successful yam cultivation became an important means of affirming male authority, identity, and status.

The intensive nature of yam production required large amounts of labour and a high rate of soil depletion. Basden concluded in his study of Igboland in the 1920s that “From an agricultural point of view, the yam is a very extravagant vegetable to grow. Each tuber requires a full square yard of land, which in itself, is a big demand. For seven or eight months, regular attention must be given to its care, absorbing much time and labor.” Basden noted that “If wages had to be paid, it is doubtful whether a yam farm would pay its way, let alone yield profit.”<sup>115</sup> The concern raised early in the twentieth century became more pronounced by the end of the century, as farmers faced the problems of degraded land and dwindling availability of labour and cost. These factors have challenged the traditional cropping and dietary patterns, changing them in favor of cassava – the so-called women’s crop.

However, when the Igbo talk about farming, they talk about yams, especially in defining male identity.<sup>116</sup> How did yams come to hold this prominent place in the agricultural and cultural life of the Igbo? The elevation of the yam to high status appears to have had its origin in the people’s agricultural past. The yam was certainly one of the earliest crops to be domesticated by the Igbo.<sup>117</sup> Legends about the origin of the yam enable us to speculate not only about the prevailing ideology but also about the gendered nature of yam production in the Igbo habitat. One version of such a legend recorded by Basden states:

In the olden times, there was nothing to eat, so Eze Nri considered what should be done to remedy the defect. He took the drastic

course of killing his eldest son, cutting the body in small pieces and burying them. His daughter shared a similar fate. Strange to say, five months later, yam tendrils were observed to be growing at the very places where the dismembered parts of the son's body had been planted. In similar fashion 'edde' [cocoyam] began to grow where the remains of the daughter had been buried. In the sixth month, the Eze Nri dug up fine large yams from his son's grave and 'edde' from the place where he had buried his daughter. He cooked both and found them sweet.<sup>118</sup>

While this legend may not explain the actual origin of yams, it reveals the prevailing ideology about yams and agriculture. In this legend, the yam represents masculinity, having grown out of the dismembered parts of the son, and the cocoyam represents femininity, for it grew out of the daughter's grave.

Yams were much more than a food crop. The development of a yam culture and settled life supported the emergence of the complex social and ritual systems associated with yam cultivation and the development of settlements and communal property.<sup>119</sup> Yam cultivation was the major incentive for the development of technology suited to the extensive clearance of the original rainforest and the more effective mastery of the forest. The rituals associated with the yam cult themselves also express important aspects of power relations in traditional society: namely, the domination of ritual functions by men and the social prestige attached to the status of Ezeji, a title only men could take. Yam production, perhaps, also triggered the era of property ownership, in which land was controlled by wealthy yam farmers, the emergence of the early formation of agrarian communes, and the distinction between the poor farmer and the rich one. Yams brought tremendous changes in the life of the Igbo, including population growth, the elaboration of archetypical social institutions, and the evolution of a cosmological system in which the Earth (Ala) became deified and occupied the central place as the ordainer and guardian of morality, the source of law and customs.<sup>120</sup>

Production relations, land tenure systems, and land use are shaped by this culturally defined ethos centred on yam production. Social status, gender ideology and identity, taboos, and rituals associated with yams and cocoyams form an essential part of the cultural ethos. The extended family (*umunna*)

may have originally been organized to sustain yam production because yams required abundant labour and care from planting to harvest. This is probably true of most peasant agriculture. The labour required for yam cultivation led to the development of marriage alliances and the institution of polygamy. Marriage ensured the continued reproduction of the lineage and the availability of women's and children's labour. The consumption of yam followed the ties of kinship, comradeship, and friendship and its distribution generated new ties, trade, and social alliances.<sup>121</sup> By dominating yam production, men controlled the most important factors of production – land and the labour of wives, children, and younger lineage members.

Yet, women successfully exploited the flexibility inherent in the Igbo land use and tenure system to maximize their own production through intercropping a variety of other crops in the spaces provided by the yam mounds. This enabled women to perform important roles related to the overall diet and food security. They also performed important roles during the *unwu* period before the crops were harvested. Women dug up the first yams, known as *nwa agwagwa erie*, which helped people survive the lean periods, a task seen as demeaning for men.<sup>122</sup> These roles attest to the centrality of women in the food security arrangements.

## PRE-COLONIAL COMMERCE

Until the mid-seventeenth century, the economy of most of Igboland was still largely a subsistence economy, based on complementary ecological niches suited for particular types of crop production, fishing, and craft manufacture. However, although pre-colonial Igbo farmers produced primarily for their own subsistence, they also produced for exchange and extra income. The commercial system served as an efficient means of exchange and distribution of agro-based goods among other consumables. Agricultural produce dominated the local market as Elizabeth Isichei noted of the traditional Igbo market: “Merchandise was plentiful and varied, but common to all markets were yams, cocoyams, meat, fish, salt, maize cobs, beans, leaves, banana, paw paws, groundnuts, chickens, goats, sheep and dogs, palm oil, palm kernels,

pepper, kola nuts and so on.”<sup>123</sup> The predominance of agricultural produce in the Igbo markets was an indication of the link between agriculture and commerce. This, of course, was the case in most pre-industrial societies where the need for food was of primary concern.

A high level of intensive internal exchange had developed in the region before the overseas trade in slaves.<sup>124</sup> Long-distance trade depended on what Ukwu I. Ukwu described as “specialist groups and individuals,” and mostly relied on “covenants at the personal level, *Igbandu*, as the principal means of guaranteeing freedom of movement across the country and safety among strangers.”<sup>125</sup> Both the Aro and the Nri-Awka, who dominated early long-distance trade in Igboland and beyond, relied on the existence of a relay of hosts and trade pacts that developed into a great network of ritually based commercial relations.<sup>126</sup> As in most such societies, the demand for high value goods was not entirely absent prior to the contact with Europeans. The trade in such goods, which included salt, beads, ivory, dyes, cloth, carving, charms, and ironmongery, Ukwu argues, was for the most part “irregular and scarcely created new markets within an area.”<sup>127</sup> But the skills of the Awka people, whose prestige derived from the repute of their Agbala deity and their skills as diviners and doctors, were “useful in establishing markets for their wares,” including luxury goods such as “ivory and coral beads from the Anambra and Igala country.”<sup>128</sup> The Awka trading arrangement was integrated into agriculture as Awka people became Ahiakoku ritual specialists. The Awka trade diaspora did not establish permanent settlements, as the Aro did from the seventeenth century, yet the nature of their organization enhanced the exchange of goods and services throughout the Igbo country.

The Aro influence in the development of commercial relation in Igboland and beyond is legendary. The Aros’ success was contingent on the establishment of well-coordinated trading networks based on settlements by members of the Aro diaspora and trade fairs.<sup>129</sup> The Aros’ location in the escarpment between the central Igbo districts and the Cross River helped them to control several trade routes along the Awka-Orlu-Okigwi axis and as far away as Nike in northern Igboland. Their reach was felt throughout Afikpo, Uburu, Izza, and Izzi in the northeast. To the south, their commercial relations extended to Bende and Uzuakoli. Like the Nri-Awka before them, Aro traders distributed luxury item including horses and cattle “for ritual purposes.”<sup>130</sup>

The Aro called upon their network of trade routes and settlements in the era of the slave trade, which they dominated from the eighteenth century.

Two separate but related economic systems existed in Igboland in the pre-colonial period: a trade in slaves and a trade in palm oil, which developed after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. The Atlantic slave trade provided the initial link with the external market and the impetus for greater European economic contact in later years. Until the mid-nineteenth century, slaves were the most important export from Igboland. David Eltis and David Richardson estimate that about one in seven Africans shipped to the New World during the whole era of the transatlantic slave trade originated from the Bight of Biafra.<sup>131</sup> This corresponds to the estimated 11.9 per cent of the total number for which data are available via the Du Bois CD-ROM database.<sup>132</sup> Trade in the region grew steadily from the 1730s, reaching a peak of 22,500 captives annually in the 1780s and expanded further to about 40,800 in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>133</sup> Douglas Chambers suggests that, of the 11.6 million people estimated to have been shipped to the New World between 1470 and 1860, some 1.7 million were transported from the Bight of Biafra.<sup>134</sup> He estimates that 80 per cent of the people shipped from the Bight of Biafra were Igbo-speaking and reached the Americas in British ships.<sup>135</sup>

The Aro were the most important facilitators of the trade in the Bight of Biafra hinterland. The trade linked several parts of the Cross River trading system. Market routes branched in several directions within the Bight of Biafra hinterland from the major markets of Uburu and Bende. Nike or Aku in the north, Okigwi in the centre, and Awka in the centre-west were linked to these two major markets. Onitsha, Ossamari, and Aboh on the Niger, Akwete on the Imo River, and Itu on the Cross River were major routes linking the overland routes and waterways that moved goods.<sup>136</sup>

Important demographic and economic changes occurred as a result of the slave trade. The slave traffic resulted in concentrations of population in some coastal regions and clearance of the surrounding forest for agriculture.<sup>137</sup> Given the demand for local foodstuffs, local people understood the added importance of producing a greater surplus. Slaves were fed until they were sold in the Americas, in most cases on diets to which they were accustomed, on the odious journey known as the middle passage. The demand for provisions on slave ships increased the demand for local foodstuffs, includ-

ing cassava, yams, and palm oil.<sup>138</sup> The Bight of Biafra became an important source of commercial foodstuffs as the external slave trade developed.

Yam production, in particular, rose in importance as an important source of food for those shipped from the Bight of Biafra into the overseas slave trade. There was considerable trade in yams in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century in the Bight of Biafra according to the accounts of John and James Barbot. European slavers were advised to carry no less than 100,000 yams for every 500 slaves on ships. James Barbot took only 50,000 and suffered because of a shortage of yams.<sup>139</sup> Although the seasonal nature, bulk, and difficulty of storage of yams constituted problems for slavers, the demand was substantial along the Bight. It is impossible to estimate accurately the quantities of yams bought in the Bight of Biafra. Jones estimated an annual export of more than a million yams based on Captain Adam's estimates of 20,000 slaves from the Rio Real and half the recommended quantity of 100,000 yams for a cargo of 500 slaves.<sup>140</sup> Between 1801 and 1867 when the external trade was winding down, about 217,781 slaves were exported from the Bight of Biafra, suggesting that a substantial quantity of yams was still being purchased in the Bight.<sup>141</sup>

Thus, local production in the Bight and its hinterland was in part structured around providing food items for the slave market. Slavers, on their part, were interested in the dietary habits of their African victims. Alexander Falconbridge, a British slave ship surgeon, recorded: "The diet of the negroes, while on board, consists chiefly of horse-beans, boiled to the consistence of a pulp; of boiled yams and rice, and sometimes of a small quantity of beef or pork." Different African ethnic groups were identified with particular kinds of food. "Yams are the favorites food of the Eboe, or Bight Negroes, and rice or corn, of those from the Gold and Windward Coasts; each preferring the produce of their native soil," Falconbridge noted.<sup>142</sup>

The early commercialization of food production created a diverse economy in which the Ngwa Igbo and Anang Ibibio became well-known yam producers who fed the Atlantic market. Indeed, the production cycle in the region influenced slavers' traffic in the region. Barbot made a connection between the availability of yams, the famine (*unwu*) period, when yams had been planted, and the ability of European slavers to achieve a quick turn around in the Bight of Biafra. "Yams are not fit to be taken out of the ground before July and August. Europeans account these two months the best season of the

year, because of the continual rains which refresh the air and give natives an opportunity to apply themselves wholly to commerce up the land for getting slaves with expedition but more especially in August and September,” Barbot wrote. “But in August and September and so on to March these eatables grow very dear among them insomuch that some ships have been forced to fall down to Amboses and Cameroons river in May and June to buy plantains.... To avoid this long delay it is much better for a ship bound to this place from Europe to stop at Cape Tres Pontas or at Anamabon on the Gold Coast to buy Indian wheat or corn there,” he warned.<sup>143</sup>

Although Barbot was wrong about the time when yams were scarce (usually from March to June), the seasonal nature of yam production and African marketing strategies influenced the time Europeans felt it was best to trade – the dry season. Grazihier, who traded in the Bight at the beginning of the eighteenth century, understood this, according to the information he gave to British slaver James Barbot:

In the months of August and September a man may get in his complements of slaves much sooner than he can have the necessary quantity of yams to subsist them, but a ship leading slaves in January, February etc., when yams are very plentiful, the first thing to do is to take them in and then the slaves.<sup>144</sup>

These descriptions provide insights into the link between the developing Atlantic commerce and the rural agricultural economy of the regions on the West African coast. Slavers were forced to use local foodstuffs, thereby stimulating increased production of these food items in response to the new demands. We can assume that most of the yams bought at Bonny and New Calabar came from the forest region bordering the Imo River and from the marginal savannah of the Niger riverain area.<sup>145</sup>

The long-term impact of the abolition of the slave trade was also agrarian in nature. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the market facilitated effective exchange, which helped in the capitalization of aspects of the agricultural system.<sup>146</sup> Increased interest in tropical agricultural products followed the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>147</sup> The growing industrial development of Europe created a need for palm oil and palm kernels. The Igbo responded

to the transition from the slave trade to a commodity trade by introducing innovations that enabled them to increase export quantities. By the 1860s, the trade in palm oil, which began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had replaced the trade in slaves. The development of the trade in palm oil and later kernels helped in the further occupation of the rainforest and perhaps the further expansion of food crop production to support the demands created during the period of the slave trade. As early colonial reports suggest, the Igbo were expanding into the southeastern portions of the Guinean forest from the seventeenth century onward, a process that led to the cutting down of the forests and “replacing them by villages and hamlets surrounded by oil palm groves, farmlands and forest remnants.”<sup>148</sup> By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a considerable quantity of palm oil was being exported to Liverpool and other European destinations.<sup>149</sup> The original development of the palm oil trade was therefore associated with the slave traffic but increased in importance after the slave trade’s abolition.

By the mid-nineteenth century, some British officials and traders on the West African coasts strongly espoused the “liberating” tendency of so-called legitimate commerce within official colonial circles. When Captain Joseph Denman testified before the Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa in 1842, he assured its members: “When once the trade is interrupted at any place, people are not in the habit of sending traders up the country for slaves, and traders from the interior cease to bring slaves down to them there, and there is great difficulty felt in resuming ‘the trade.’” He argued that such disruption “in almost every instance” caused legitimate commerce to grow and helped to supply the “wants of the natives.”<sup>150</sup> Benjamin Campbell, British consul at Lagos from 1853 to 1859, and Richard Hutchinson, consul for the Bight of Biafra from 1855 to 1860, both declared the liberating potential of “legitimate” trade.<sup>151</sup>

The export of palm oil to Liverpool from the Bight of Biafra in 1806 was 150 tons, and by 1829 it had reached over 8,000 tons.<sup>152</sup> The trade from the Bight of Biafra increased from 4,700 tons of palm oil in 1827 to about 13,945 tons in 1834.<sup>153</sup> By the 1830s, Britain was importing about 10,000 tons of palm oil a year.<sup>154</sup> Between 1855 and 1856, the entire African production of palm oil was about 40,000–42,000 tons. Out of this figure, 26,000 tons exported through the Bight of Biafra, although the amount that came from



An early method of commercial palm oil production. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.)

the interior is not clear.<sup>155</sup> The output of palm oil from all the Niger markets between 1886 and 1888 was about 6,000 tons.<sup>156</sup> From the 1860s onward, when palm oil prices fell, and the 1880s, when the long process of establishing colonial hegemony began, the implication for the local agrarian economy of the dependence on palm produce became apparent, a legacy that was exacerbated with the imposition of colonial rule. Although the volume of the trade in palm oil was considerably low before 1900, Captain H. L. Gallwey, Her Majesty's vice-consul for the Oil Rivers Protectorate, had noted in the 1890s that trade on the Benin River was chiefly in palm oil with a substantial trade in kernels as well. This was the case for many other communities in the Niger Delta.<sup>157</sup> The limited quantity produced in the decades immediately before 1900 accounts for the reportedly high price demanded by native producers on the West African coast for palm oil.<sup>158</sup>

Palm kernels became an export item after 1860 as a result of the demand for soap making, margarine manufacture, and residue for cattle food.<sup>159</sup> Women and children performed the slow laborious process of cracking the nuts: "In 1862, 272 tons were imported into Great Britain."<sup>160</sup> Exports from

Old Calabar reached 1,000 tons at two shillings per bushel when the trade began at this port in 1869 and exports had doubled two years later at eight shillings per bushel. Exports had reached 10,000 tons by 1875 and 22,031 tons by 1885. Substantial quantities of kernels were being exported to other European countries, especially Germany, toward the end of the nineteenth century. By 1903, Nigerian kernel exports had reached 131,900 tons, mostly going to Germany.

This trade was buttressed by new waterways that were developed to move oil and kernels to the coast. The development of agriculture, particularly the palm oil trade, led to the large-scale development of the internal slave trade and an extensive use of unfree labour in parts of Igboland. The trade in commodities also engendered significant speculation and investment in land, with significant sociological consequences. The demands of the oil palm trade, Michael Echeruo says,

... created the adventurer class in Igboland, the dare-devil entrepreneur who knew how to accumulate capital. Banking, for example, which under Nri, was a glorified loan-scheme, guaranteed by the higher fees to be paid by new initiates, became a truly capitalist enterprise. It is not an accident that the resulting accumulation of cash capital was more pronounced among the Aro than the Nri who continued to commit their reserves into mansions and objects of art/prestige, while the Aro provided the cash credit on which a mercantilist economy could thrive.<sup>161</sup>

We can trace the domination of aspects of Igbo life (ritual and commercial) before, during, and after the slave trade by the Nri and Aro and the linking of Igboland into a sort of economic and ritual commonwealth, and we can also see how the internal economic crisis the Nri and Aro faced toward the end of the nineteenth century reflected on other parts of Igboland. When one examines the case of Nri, as Michael Echeruo argues, prosperity in earlier periods “led to urban and later to imperial interests – which in turn nurtured a parasitic tradition of rituals that in time dominated Nri life, and made agriculture itself secondary to the system of sinecures on which Nri opulence came to depend.” In Echeruo’s view, the rural agricultural virtues and ethos of the fertile valley “gave way to the aristocratic feudal lifestyle of a metropolitan

capital and its satellite communities.” The Nri tradition of ritualized culture had so “debased the economic function of the yam that production took a secondary place to celebration,” while the very basis of the rise of the Nri – the internal sufficiency in food supply on which its dense population depended – was “seriously, even permanently, eroded, leaving the region “subject to the great hunger which would lead it to large-scale emigrations in the earlier part of the next century.”<sup>162</sup>

The period was one of crisis for the Aro and other African traders who had to give up their long domination and control of the market. The production and marketing systems the Igbo and other traders in the Delta had enjoyed until toward the end of the nineteenth century underwent fundamental changes. Kenneth O. Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba have documented the extensive involvement of the Aro in the lives and fortunes of the Igbo and their neighbours, including the Efik, Ekoi, Igala, Ijo, Jukun, Idoma, and Tiv, a process that combined to transform eastern Nigeria socio-economically in the three centuries during which the Aro “rose to prominence.”<sup>163</sup> Waibite Wariboko and Kenneth Dike, among others, have examined the attempt by African middlemen to hold their ground in the face of increased European encroachment.<sup>164</sup> African producers and traders frequently found themselves in unforeseen and unusual situations faced with the increasing interference in local trade by European traders, often encouraged by imperial officials. The volatility and unpredictability of the new trading and marketing relationships forced many Africans to respond in diverse ways. Two divergent socio-economic models competed for the upper hand in the African market: British ideas of free trade, which were attempting to break the old monopolies of African traders, and African trading systems that had largely relied on the structures of the Atlantic slave trade, which empowered some individuals and trading houses to act as major brokers of the palm oil trade.

Both the trade in slaves and the transition from the Atlantic slave trade to the palm oil trade had implications for gender. Anthony Hopkins called attention to changing gender relations that may have resulted from the high male slave export from West Africa.<sup>165</sup> How did traditional gender ideologies change in the wake of the transition to the palm oil trade? In a major contribution analyzing the gender dimensions of the commercial transition, Susan Martin argued that “the key to a man’s success in commercial palm

production lay in control of women's labor."<sup>166</sup> Martin maintained that despite women's contribution to the production of palm oil and yams, men claimed ownership of these products as heads of households. Martin suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century, the "division of labor acquired ideological significance, which strongly favoured men."<sup>167</sup> With specific reference to palm oil processing, Martin argued that "given the sexual division of labor and property rights, the opportunity clearly existed for Ngwa households and lineage heads to acquire wealth." This they did by "organizing yam and palm oil export production to serve the nineteenth century provisioning and palm oil export trade." On the other hand, "little pressure," she argues, was "put on their male labor resources by the palm oil industry in particular, since palms were harvested throughout the year and men's contribution to processing though vigorous, was brief, while women's work in palm oil extraction was both laborious and time consuming."<sup>168</sup>

Margaret Stone, like many other scholars, has shown that the imposition of capitalism on subsistence economies had fundamental implications for the sexual division of labour in farming and ideological construction of male and female status and power.<sup>169</sup> Most importantly, the European attitude towards African women helped magnify the differences between men's and women's access to resources and participation in commerce. Morgan notes that "European intervention brought economic changes which are reflected in new attitudes to land, cultivation and stock rearing, and these have produced further landscape modification."<sup>170</sup> But the reality of the palm oil trade's part in the transformation is more mundane than the picture painted by these scholars.

Admittedly, the impulse created by the new commerce tilted in favour of men, but there was also contestation for control between men and women. But scholars have often overestimated the ability of Igbo men to control the new trade in palm produce. Susan Martin, for example, ignores the fact that palm oil had little commercial value for either men or women prior to its commercialization at the end of the slave trade in the nineteenth century. And women remained important in both production and marketing from the late nineteenth century onward. They were not only entitled to some of the palm oil; they were entitled to the kernels, which became quite important in the export market. The evidence from the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries confirms the important role played by women in the commercial economy of the transition era. Adolphe Burdo, a member of the Belgian Geographical Society who visited Igboland in the late nineteenth century, for example, described Onitsha women who “traverse the country to collect palm oil and ivory.”<sup>171</sup> Basden reported that women traders dominated the trade in palm produce and imported goods into Onitsha from the turn of the twentieth century until the depression of 1929.<sup>172</sup>

Women traders were active in the distributive trade from the time of the opening up of the countryside to European goods. Raymond Gore Clough, who joined McNair, Henderson and Company as an assistant agent in 1919, described the tenacity of the African trading “mammies,” most of whom were certainly Igbo, including Madams Unuka, Osika, and Omvaro. “My customers were not only the canoemen who brought in palm oil; there were also the African trading mammies who took large quantities of a wide range of goods,” he wrote in his memoir.<sup>173</sup> The women in turn peddled these goods through their own shops or through subagents in the various markets. Clough describes these women as “ladies of standing among their own people and I could not help watching, with fascination, their dignified movements as they examined the brightly coloured earthenware bowls or basins, or cotton goods on display in the store.” It seemed that there was no anxiety about extending credit to these women traders. “There was a strict code of honour between the trading mammies and the traders, and it was extremely rare that credit granted was abused,” Clough recalled.<sup>174</sup>

Richard Henderson confirmed that women controlled the trade with European firms until the early twentieth century. Indeed, women resented male intrusion, when many men began to enter the trade.<sup>175</sup> Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, Nina Mba notes, women in the riverain Igbo areas who “controlled the markets, constituted the local and long-distance traders, were in a position to amass more wealth than the men.”<sup>176</sup> Although men were often taunted “for doing women’s work,” some men could not resist the opportunities offered by the retail trade and supply of European goods.<sup>177</sup> F. Hives, district officer for Okigwe, reported in 1917 that “trading in oil, or kernels in the market, in small quantities is done chiefly by women.”<sup>178</sup> Women’s roles as producers and marketers of palm oil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries challenge the perceived invisibility of women in this era. Like the

members of many other societies in Africa, the Igbo were not hidebound by custom.

Nonetheless, the changes that occurred with the emergence of colonialism at the beginning of the twentieth century, in addition to the patriarchal ideology of European officials, had a direct impact on the nature of agrarian change and gender relations of production. Evidently, Igboland faced significant transformations in the economy and social relations, as trade in palm produce expanded and as the Igbo adopted new sources of status and power at the beginning of the twentieth century. The transformative power of colonialism and market-driven changes fuelled by a cash economy challenged the old structures and institutions of Igbo society, including existing relations of production and means of acquiring income. Like other parts of Africa, Igboland was dragged further into the capitalist world following the establishment of colonial rule in 1900.