

BETWEEN EXPLOITATION AND PROFIT MAKING: TRAVAILS OF WOMEN IN OIL PALM PRODUCTS' EXPANSION IN BENIN PROVINCE DURING WW II

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Abstract

Benin history, like most Nigerian history, is either largely patriarchal or gender neutral. Though Britain mobilized men, women, and materials in her West African colonies to actively and effectively prosecute World War II (WW II), the contribution of women and mobilization of their labor and resources have not been given attention in the historiography of the war. This is true for women in Nigeria's Benin Province. This study, using the content analysis method, examines the travails of women in the economy of World War II with specific reference to the export oil palm industry in Benin Province. It argues that women in Benin Province were dominant historically in the production and trade of palm oil and kernels. During colonial rule, they continued to produce as an ancillary industry to supplement their incomes. However, during WWII the British administration employed coercion via emergency laws and relative price hikes to compel women to increase export production. Though there was increased production, the drudgery and exploitive pricing by middlemen drove the women into other more profitable ventures such as foodstuff and local trade in palm oil, rendering the export trade targets for palm oil unachievable. The study concludes that women in Benin Province were fully mobilized during the war on the side of Britain and her allies, while war-time colonial policies in the industry entrenched a structure of underdevelopment that endured into the post-colonial economy. It continues to undermine women's development in the erstwhile Benin Province of Nigeria. The study, therefore, recommends a restructuring of the post-independence oil palm economy to eliminate its structure of exploitation, dependence and underdevelopment to make it globally competitive. In this way, the industry could contribute to resolving the economic crisis currently faced by women in the defunct Benin Province, Nigeria and, by extension, West Africa.

Keywords: Benin Province; Britain; Nigeria; Oil Palm War; War Economy; West African Women; World War II

Introduction

The relationship between West Africa and Europe dates back to the fifteenth century. The highly fluid relationships have been sometimes equal, sometimes unequal. One variable that has remained constant in these relations is the economy. In all instances, however, European capitalist accumulation in all its phases has gained tremendously from the human and resource

exploitation of West Africa.¹ This situation continued until the late nineteenth century when relations took colonial forms. The British West African colonies that emerged, particularly Nigeria- with her abundant human and natural resources, became a major center of mobilization of human and material resources for British industrial capitalist accumulation. Britain was interested in monopolizing the cheap agricultural commodities and large markets for the sustenance and expansion of British industrial capital.² The ensuing competition for exclusive spheres of trade culminated in the scramble for and partition of West African territories among European powers towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Berlin West African Conference of 1884/1885 convened by Otto von Bismarck peacefully resolved European rivalry over the resource rich territories that were partitioned among the European powers. Colonization turned West African territories into appendages of European powers, and deployed the people and resources of the territories to the service of European powers, including fighting their wars. When in 1939, the Second World War broke out between the European powers, citizens of the British West African colonies were drafted into it.

World War II (1939 – 1945) was essentially a European affair with grievous implications for the rest of the world. Not only Europe which was one theatre of the war, but also European colonies bore the cost and felt the impact of the war. Nigeria was one of the colonial possessions that felt the weight of the war because of Britain's desperation for human and material resources to successfully prosecute the war against the Axis forces led by Germany. In the process of Britain's desperation to stave off defeat and rescue her crumbling allies, nothing was too sacrosanct to draft into the war effort. Benin Province was a part of the Colony and Protectorates of Nigeria. Located in the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria, Benin Province was a rich source of cheap rubber, oil palm products, cocoa and timber. Most of these resources had become important in the economic calculations of Europe since the Industrial Revolution but they assumed new and critical importance during the Second World War with Britain's loss of her Far East territories.

¹ I.G. Shivji, "The Struggle to Convert Nationalism to Pan-Africanism: Taking Stock of Fifty Years of Africa's Independence", *Pambazuka* 1, (2011): 544, accessed 20/3/2015, <http://Pambazuka.org/en/category/features/75620>.

² Scholars such as K.O. Dike (1956), J.F.A Ajayi and Michael Crowder (1971), and T. Falola and M.M. Heaton (2008), among others, have argued in their studies that the major reasons for European colonization of Africa was to gain unfettered access to her cheap primary produce which served as industrial raw materials and the markets for their finished goods which were being mass produced.

Women in Benin Province were, more than ever, mobilized for the optimal export production of palm oil and palm kernels by the British colonial administration in Nigeria for the sustenance of Britain, her industries and European allies during World War II. The consequent intensification of the exploitation of the oil palm products, it is argued in this study, amounts to a declaration of a kind of war on the oil palm resources and the peasant women who were the dominant productive agents in Nigeria's Benin Province. This is considered a kind of war not only because of the massive expansion of the production of oil palm products and the formal declaration of the area a "production zone" but also because the production process was brought under and subjected to the "emergency regulations" of the war.

The way and manner the women and the oil palm resources of their land were mobilized conform to the nature of mobilization of men and materials characteristic of World War II under the "emergency regulations" imposed by the British colonial administration in Nigeria. Yet, the women of Benin Province have not been given any attention in the history of the export oil palm industry at that time. This study historicizes their contributions to the war effort. It is anchored in a qualitative analysis of archival source materials and supplemented by oral interviews, and secondary and tertiary source materials. It also discusses the impact of the war economy on the peasant women in Nigeria's Benin Province.

The following sections of the study are structured to provide a historical, prismatic view of women in the literature on Nigeria's Benin Province, describe women in the structure of the oil palm export industry under the colonial economy, and discuss women in the production system in Benin Province during World War II. The oil palm war in Benin Province is also interrogated to provide a case study of women at war, highlighting its impact on women in Benin Province specifically. Finally, the sections allow the drawing of a conclusion.

A Prismatic View of Women in the Historiography of Nigeria's Oil Palm Industry

A review of the literature on oil palm production in Nigeria shows significant neglect of the contribution of West African women to economic development and the impact of economic change on them in general. The coverage of the export oil palm industry conforms to this existing historiographical pattern. This neglect of the active agency of women in the historical process continued in the literature on the oil palm industry in colonial Nigeria during World War

II. An attempt is therefore made here to review some studies on the history of agriculture, cash crop economy, and oil palm production in Nigeria to help us understand this neglect and to provide justification for this study.

The emphasis of most studies³ is on cash crop development under colonial rule. For instance O.E. Tangban shows how trade in cash crops promoted inter-group relations,⁴ while M.O. Odey focuses on intersecting forces of production and social formation. He asserts that “it is by looking at the interaction between the available forces of production and the social formation that one can determine whether or not the so-called development of export commodities was responsible for other aspects of development in the Benue area over time.”⁵ S.A. Shokpeka and O.A. Nwokocha’s essay argues that the colonial economy was structured in such a way as to improve the economies of the colonizing powers while very little, if any, regard was paid to the colonized indigenous population.⁶ None of them discussed the contribution of Nigerian women to World War II, or the colonial export trade, including export production of oil palm products.

Similarly, most studies on oil palm⁷ focused on the changes that occurred in the industry within the context of export production and colonial policy, but neglected the gender theme in World War II and are silent on the oil palm industry in Benin Province. For instance, E.J. Usoro looked at oil palm production and trade within the context of what he described as British policies and internal policies,⁸ while S.O. Aghalino elaborated on the fact that the oil palm

³ O.E. Tangban, “Colonial Trade, Cash Crop Production and Inter-Group Relations in the Cross River Area of Nigeria: 1891 – 1960,” in *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds. O. Akinwumi, O.O. Okpeh, Jr., and J.D. Gwamna (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2006): 454-470; M.O. Odey, *The Development of Cash Crop Economy in Nigeria’s Lower Benue Province* (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2009): passim; S. A. Shokpeka and O.A. Nwokocha, “British Colonial Economic Policy in Nigeria, the Example of Benin Province 1914-1954,” *Journal of Human Ecology* 28, 1 (2009): 57 - 66.

⁴ Tangban, “Colonial Trade,” 454 - 470.

⁵ Odey, *The Development of Cash Crop Economy in Nigeria’s Lower Benue Province*.

⁶ Shokpeka and Nwokocha, “British Colonial Economic Policy,” 57 - 66.

⁷ See E.J. Usoro, *The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry, 1906 – 1965 (Government Policy and Export Production, 1906 – 1965)* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1974); S. Martins, *Palm Oil and Protest: An Economic History of the Ngwa Region in South Eastern Nigeria, 1800-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); S. O. Aghalino, “British Colonial Policies and the Oil Palm Industry in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, 1900 – 1960”, in *African Study Monographs* 21, 1(2000): 19 – 33; A. Pim, *Colonial Agricultural Production* (London: University Press, 1946): 1 - 12; P. T. Bauer, *Economic Analysis and Policy in Underdeveloped Countries* (London: University Press, 1957): 183; O. Ogen, “Urhobo Migrants and the Ikale Palm Oil Industry, 1850-1968”, *The Nigerian Journal of Economic History* 5 - 6 (2003): 1.

⁸ See Usoro, *Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*.

industry became important in the second half of the nineteenth century with the abolition of the slave trade, the inauguration of the industrial revolution and the development of the railway which required palm oil as lubricant.⁹ O. Ogen focused on the interface between migration and development in agricultural production with specific reference to the palm oil industry.¹⁰ A. Pim noted that despite the fact that efforts were concentrated on improving small native-owned plantations, the total area cultivated was still much less than the area of wild palm groves that produced the bulk of the oil palm products but which received little or no attention.¹¹ P.T. Bauer's interest lay in demonstrating that the Nigerian palm oil industry was primarily a peasant industry and that most of the oil palm groves regenerated themselves by natural means. The fruit was reaped by peasants according to communal land tenure systems.¹² N.E. Attah's doctoral thesis unveiled the nature of the oil palm industry and the major factors that determined its historical trajectories in Igalaland.¹³ S. Martins' work on palm oil provided a perspective on resistance to exploitation of Nigerians by the colonizers. Though it includes women in this process, it does not target them as the central dramatis personae.¹⁴ As noted earlier, they also neglected the gender theme in World War II and are silent on the oil palm industry in Benin Province. In general, the literature gives the impression that women were either completely absent or were docile in the historical process. In contrast, this study on Benin Province, Nigeria argues that women in Benin Province were major, even the dominant, players in the production of oil palm products under the World War II economy. They performed an important war function, and were exploited in the process by the British.

Women in the Structure of Oil Palm Export under the Colonial Economy

Agriculture was the mainstay of the colonial economy of Benin Province up to World War II. The importance of agriculture is underscored by the fact that the colonial economy was founded on the tripartite need to meet the demand of British industries for cheap primary commodities required as industrial inputs, to provide large markets for British finished goods and to generate governmental revenue for the colonial administration. These three key needs of the

⁹ K. O. Dike quoted in Aghalino, "British Colonial Policies", 19 - 33.

¹⁰ Ogen, "Urhobo Migrants," 1.

¹¹ Pim, *Colonial Agricultural Production*, 1 - 12.

¹² Bauer, *Economic Analysis and Policy*, 183.

¹³ N.E. Attah, "The Dynamics of Oil Palm Production in Igalaland, 1900 - 1960" (Ph D Diss., University of Ibadan, 2010).

¹⁴ Martins, *Palm Oil and Protest*, passim.

colonial economy determined the nature and structure of the export oil palm economy under colonial rule. However, the structure of the oil palm economy became complicated by the exigencies of the Second World War. The colonial administration's official policies and practices in the oil palm sector of the economy were the critical driving forces of export production of palm oil and palm kernels in Benin Province. However, these were mediated and tempered by established cultural practices and existing occupational traditions of the people. This intersection of culture and traditions resulted in the dynamic and unique structure of the export oil palm production system that developed in Benin Province during the colonial interlude. This was characterized by a rigid division of labor and specialization along gender lines associated with the production unit in Benin Province.¹⁵ This characteristic structure was captured by the Acting Resident of Benin Province in a memorandum which stated that:

Among the natives of the province the men collect the palm fruit and bring it to their houses. In the Agbor District they sell the fruits to their women for 2d a bunch. The women then prepare the oil and kernels and market them and the proceeds are theirs. In the remainder of the province they do not buy the fruit but they return to their husbands the money they received for the oil retaining that received for the kernels.¹⁶

In all cases in the province, it was observed that men were responsible for the harvesting of the oil palm fruit because it was considered unfeminine, too dangerous, and too physically exerting for women. However, women undertook the tasks of extracting the oil and kernels from the bunches, with men and boys providing additional voluntary support at the de-pulping stage by helping out with the pounding or mashing activities. Despite the assertion that men were responsible for transporting the fruits from the locations of harvest indicated in the memo quoted above, elders interviewed on the practices of the time stated that women and adolescent children were also responsible for the physical conveyance of the harvested fruits to the houses where they were processed.¹⁷ Equally significant here is the fact that the earnings from trade were shared between men and women in accordance with laid down customary principles, thus

¹⁵ F.E.F. Ayokhai, "A History of the Oil Palm Industry: A Study of Benin Province, 1914 – 1965" (Ph D Diss., Nasarawa State University, Keffi, 2015).

¹⁶ National Archive Ibadan (N.A.I), B.P. 681/5 "Export of Palm Kernels."

¹⁷ Interviews with J. Afakhai, 83-year-old retired Produce Inspector at Benin City on 18 November 2013; A.O. Akhanemhe, 72-year-old farmer at Uzairhue on 26 November 2013; B. Otoghile, 78-year-old former oil palm plantation owner at Benin City on 25 November 2013; A. Ekhiator, 74-year-old oil palm plantation owner at Evbotubu on 26 November 2013; and O. Osamudiamen, 97-year-old oil palm plot owner at Ekiadolor on 27 November 2013.

minimizing the incidence of gender exploitation. This collaborative and complementary structure of relations clearly testifies to the cooperative nature of the traditional productive unit and to the role of women as the major and dominant actors in this production and trade.¹⁸ The roles of men and adolescent children were ancillary to the production, but complementary and collaborative to those of the women. It is on this premise that it has been concluded that women undertook and led most of the activities that constituted the productive process of the oil palm industry in Benin Province up to 1960 and later, under conditions that did not facilitate change in the technology of extraction.¹⁹ This also reflects the fact that household decision-making processes around crop production were based on division of labor and reward along gender lines that did not undermine the authority of men over the household production unit. This shared role and responsibility in household decision-making was reflected in the reward system in which the women kept proceeds from palm kernel trade, while returning to their men only proceeds from palm oil trade.

Export oil palm production was characterized by manual methods of production carried over from the pre-colonial era. Consequently, production was defined by the massive exploitation of women's labor to achieve maximum export production output. Women in the oil palm industry in Benin Province under colonial rule up to World War II did not benefit much from such technological advancements as hand-presses, nut-cracking machines, bicycle transportation, or oil mills used by their counterparts in East Africa where the plantation system of production was well established.²⁰ Even though a loan scheme financed by the local government for the purchase of hand-presses had been introduced by the Agricultural Department in 1931,²¹ a communication between the Superintendent of Agriculture in Benin City and an Assistant Director of Agriculture in Ibadan in March 1935 revealed that only three

¹⁸ This view has been reinforced for Ishan Division of Benin Province by women interviewees cited in J.I. Osagie, "Colonial Rule and Oil Palm Production in Esan, Benin Province, Nigeria," *Ilorin Journal of History and International Studies* 5, 1 (2015): 42 - 57.

¹⁹ Interview with Adaeze Chukwu, 71-year-old palm oil trader at Asaba on the 7 November 2015. See also Osagie's interviews with some Esan women farmers and traders in his study, "Colonial Rule and Oil Palm Production in Esan."

²⁰ David Anderson and David Throup, "Africans and Agricultural Production in Colonial Kenya: The Myth of the War as a Watershed," *The Journal of African History* 26, 4, (1985): 327 - 345. See also Osagie, "Colonial Rule and Oil Palm Production in Esan," 45.

²¹ E.F.G. Haig, "Cooperative Development in Nigeria," (Paper presented at the Third West African Agricultural Conference, Lagos, Nigeria, June 1938): 351.

Benin City farmers (namely Chief Ogwa, S.O. Bazuaye and N.O. Dosomah) owned oil palm presses, while Chief Legemah bought one presser and a nut cracker in July of the same year. It was also stated in the communication that there were many more presses in Benin Division as a whole. At the same time, the Agricultural Department was also moving around with demonstration presses, loaning them to cooperative societies.²² In 1936, farmer societies in Ehor, Ehana Camp, Okuo and Igbekhue in Benin Division built meeting-houses and bought palm presses.²³ Although, it is difficult to ascertain the quantity of presses meant by “many” in the communication, we get a sense of a shortfall in the desirable quantity as the movement of presses for demonstration purposes and their being loaned suggests that farmers were not only being trained in their handling but also were encouraged to embrace their use for production.

It does not seem that there was widespread ownership and use of presses and nut-crackers in Benin Province despite the fact that the number of hand-presses in use in Nigeria rose from 58 in 1932 to 834 in 1938. How many of these were available in Benin Province is another question. That the contribution of hand-press extraction to palm oil output between 1932 and 1936 was less than one percent and only reached a meagre two percent by 1938²⁴ suggests that women in Benin Province did not benefit very much from technological advancements in the industry to increase their production or to mitigate any suffering caused by the drudgery of their labor. Extrapolating from the percentage of the contributions of presses and crackers to oil extraction outputs indicates that their impact was negligible.

Usoro points out that only a few people could afford hand-presses because of their cost. He further asserts that most owners of the hand-presses in Eastern Nigeria used them to process fruits for other producers for a few pence. This was probably also the case in Benin Province where oil palm production and processing was not of great significance to the local economy and wellbeing of the people because of alternative sources of income. The availability of hand-presses was, therefore, of minor importance to export production output since up to 98 percent of the producers of oil palm products in Nigeria depended largely on traditional methods of processing. Osagie, in his study of colonial rule and oil palm production in Esan, Benin

²² BP 175 Oil Palm Plantations: Superintendent of Agric, Benin City to Asst Director of Agric, Ibadan, (30 March, 1935): 215.

²³ Haig, “Cooperative Development in Nigeria,” 357.

²⁴ Agricultural Department, *Annual Report on the Agricultural Department for the Year 1938* (Lagos: 1940): 27.

Province, reinforced this point, stating that “Even when the machines were introduced, the people still continued with their traditional method of processing without much alteration,”²⁵ most likely because of the high cost of the machines.

The introduction of hand-presses also influenced the pattern of labor allocation. Usoro argues that since the presses were operated by men in Eastern Nigeria, it resulted in a major redistribution of processing activities between the sexes. Where hand-presses were used, men became more involved in production processes (other than harvesting) than before.²⁶ Since this gender reallocation of labor roles did not occur much in Benin Province in the absence of many machines, it could be inferred that oil palm processing remained a supplementary task for the women who engaged in such other activities as farming for food production, food processing, and weaving. Nor are there any accounts of women transporting oil palm fruit and products on bicycles in extant studies on Nigeria during World War II. In fact, Gloria Chuku’s study of Eastern Nigeria makes a clear case against women’s use of bicycle transportation up to the 1930s. She argues that “women’s failure to acquire bicycles deprived them of an opportunity to participate in the small-scale capital accumulation through trade.”²⁷ There is no evidence yet to prove that the situation was any different for women in Benin Province during the same period.

The low input of technology in oil palm production was linked to British colonial policy’s insistence on limiting foreign participation in the ownership and management of the industry. Apart from denying the industry the expertise of such participation, it also limited the input of technology that would have resulted from capital inflow accompanying that involvement. This constraint thus limited the technological input to what capital the peasant farmers could muster, and resulted in the retention of pre-colonial traditional modes of production in Nigeria. Sir Hugh Clifford, a colonial governor of Nigeria, rationalized this policy of excluding foreign involvement, saying:

...agricultural industries in tropical countries which are mainly, or exclusively in the hands of native peasantry (a) Have a firmer root than similar enterprises when owned and maintained by Europeans, because they are natural growths, not artificial creation, and are self supporting, as regards labour, while European

²⁵ Osagie, “Colonial Rule and Oil Palm Production in Esan,” 45.

²⁶ Usoro, *Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*, 93 - 94.

²⁷ Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation of Southeastern Nigeria* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 155.

plantations can only be maintained by some system of organised immigration or by some form of compulsory labour, (b) Are incomparably the cheapest instrument for the production of agricultural produce on a large scale that have yet been devised; and (c) Are capable of a rapidity of expansion and progressive increase of output that beggar every record of the past.²⁸

He therefore argued against changes altering the traditional system of ownership and production practices, stating his opposition as follows:

...for these reasons, I am very strongly opposed to any encouragement being given to projects that have for their object the creation of European owned and managed plantation to replace, or even supplement, agricultural industries which are already in existence, or which are capable of being developed by the peasantry of Nigeria.²⁹

This remained the operative policy directive of the oil palm industry throughout the period of colonial rule in Nigeria, keeping women's production of oil palm products unnecessarily labor intensive. Even though Benin Province was a part of the global trade in palm oil and palm kernels, production was still predominantly dependent on the harvest, processing and marketing of the wild oil palm fruits by the peasantry, mostly women.

Most of the oil palm groves regenerated themselves by natural means and the fruits were reaped by peasant men according to communal land tenure systems. Generally, the oil palm seeds were sown through the agency of animals and birds that conveyed the fruits and scattered them while feeding on them. The seeds dropped were left to germinate and grow. Through this process, oil palm grew wild and groves developed over time. Since there were sufficient stands of uncultivated palm trees to meet the needs of the people, the idea of cultivating them, introduced in 1928 to increase production output and fulfil the increasing export demand, did not appeal to most peasant farmers.³⁰ However, the propagation and establishment of small privately owned oil palm plots was more successful in Benin Province since the province accounted for sixty-one percent of total acreage cultivated in Nigeria up to 1938.

The program of cultivating the trees met with varying degrees of success in the oil palm belt with Benin Province being one of the more successful locations. This fact was

²⁸ Sir Hugh Clifford, "National Council, Address by the Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford" (20 December, 1920): 186 - 187.

²⁹ Clifford, "National Council," 57.

³⁰ Bauer, *Economic Analysis and Policy*, 183.

acknowledged when it was noted that “the areas under consideration fall into two categories. The first comprises those in which the making of plantations is well established, and every man can see a plantation made by some farmer within a few miles...” and the Director of Agriculture considered that “Benin and Ishan Divisions and parts of Asaba Division...” (all parts of Benin Province) were classed in this category.³¹ The handful of oil palm plantations located at Ehor, Okwuo, Ogba, and Ibekwe (Igbekhue) in Benin Division in 1932 expanded into other parts of Benin Province to include areas in Ishan Division and Asaba Division by 1938.³²

A closer look at the figures, however, does not support the thesis of the success of colonial policy on the acceptance of the practice of small privately owned plantation schemes in Benin Province. The total area of southern Nigeria under oil palm cultivation was less than 10,551 acres in 1939 and it was owned by some 5,602 peasant farmers³³ and managed by household production units. A comparison of the number of plots cultivated by farmers who reacted positively with the total population of peasant farmers indicates that the majority of farmers responded negatively to the idea of cultivation of oil palm. The farmers engaged in oil palm cultivation did not amount to a significant proportion of the farming population of Benin Province. The figures from the 1936 census for Benin Division support this. The population of adult males was given at 39,450, adult female at 34,573 and children at 36,557. The 1936 figures from the annual report of Benin Province put the figures at 32,004 adult males, 47,883 adult females and 47,821 children for Ishan Division.³⁴ 716 plantation owners (out of 39,450 adult males) using 1,752 acres of land in Benin Division at the beginning of 1937³⁵ does not indicate widespread acceptance of the colonial policy. Rather, it suggests that there was very little enthusiasm by farmers in the province towards the cultivation of the oil palm.

The colonial administration also directed efforts towards the expansion of the production of export palm oil and palm kernels to increase government revenue. They planned to achieve this by a combination of calculated measures that included the regeneration of oil palm groves, the encouragement of the establishment of small privately owned oil palm plots, the introduction of improved seed varieties to the peasant male farmers and persuading them to adopt better

³¹ N.A.I., IB Min. of Agric 1/442, “Oil Palm Industry.”

³² N.A.I., IB Min of Agric 1/455, “Oil Palm Plots Benin.”

³³ N.A.I., IB Min. of Agric 1/442, “Oil Palm Industry.”

³⁴ N.A.I., CSO 26/2 File 14617 Vol.XII, “Annual Report for Benin Province 1938.”

³⁵ BP 175 Vol.III, “Oil Palm Plantations.”

cultivation practices.³⁶ These measures were implemented in such a way to ensure that the traditional system of ownership of oil palms did not change fundamentally. This is reinforced by Odey's research on the development of a cash crop economy in Nigeria's Lower Benue Province between 1910 and 1960 where the traditional mode of production also survived.³⁷

Though these studies fail to recognize women's efforts in the cultivation, production, and the trading of palm oil and kernels in Benin Province, the overall implication of colonial policy is that women's labor, more than anything else, was mobilized. They did the planting and weeding of oil palm plots, the physical conveyance of produce, and the processing and trade that constituted the major export production activities of oil palm products. It is important to stress that the trading of palm oil and kernels was actually undertaken by women. Generally speaking, men and children were not involved in the trading of palm kernel and palm oil in Benin Province. This reality is attested to by the 1924 Annual Report of Benin Province which states that:

Practically all the marketing is done by women who walk miles in order to attend the various market centres, such articles as palm oil and kernels only being snapped up by the native middlemen, generally a Hausa or Yoruba trader. The Binis take little pride in the markets and the Ibos (sic) are so saturated with fetish that their OMIS, (sic) or Queens of the Markets, are a menace instead of being a help to trade.³⁸

In the case of palm oil, it seems that women embarked on trade on behalf of their men, except in Agbor Division where the men sold out-right the oil palm fruits to the women. There also appears to have been a corresponding system of reward supporting this division of labor and making sure that women were not subject to undue exploitation by men. For example, while the women returned to their men the proceeds from the sale of palm oil, they retained for themselves the proceeds from the sale of palm kernel.³⁹ This was considered fair since men undertook the harvesting of palm fruits, a tedious and hazardous aspect of the production process. That men and male children often supplemented the women's labor in some of the tasks further helps the case for a fair distribution of rewards along gender lines. The fact that Benin Province was more

³⁶ N.A.I., IB Min. of Agric 1/442, "Oil Palm Industry."

³⁷ Odey, *The Development of Cash Crop Economy in Nigeria's Benue Province*.

³⁸ N.A.I. 14617/1, "Benin Province – Annual Report 1924."

³⁹ B.P. 681/5 "Export of Palm".

kernel-oriented than oil-oriented⁴⁰ suggests that the scale of rewards tilted more in favor of the women than the men. It was not unusual for women and children to gather wild and rotted palm fruits in the forest and crack them for the kernels which they could sell without relying on the men's harvested palm fruits. In this way, a lot more kernels were produced for the export market.

The policies of the colonial administration in the oil palm industry of Benin Province derived from the need to satisfy the needs of Britain both for primary commodities and markets on favorable terms of trade. Thus, the colonial administration in Benin Province had to administer the province and supply primary commodities, including oil palm products, to Britain without infringing on the finances of Her Majesty's government. The colonies, including the provinces that constituted them, were expected to bear the cost of their own administration in spite of their being British satellites. The oil palm industry was one means of generating revenue for the upkeep of the province. Levies paid to the colonial administration by migrant groups such as the Urhobo for the exploitation of the oil palm resources in Benin Province became a major source of government revenue⁴¹ that complemented the revenue derived from female labor.

In sum, the role of women in the prevailing structure of export production of oil palm products was not only stimulated by colonial policies but also by the traditional division of labor and culture of occupational specialization which predated the colonial interlude. This was complicated by the exigencies of increased demand for export oil palm production during World War II. The productive processes remained in the hands of women of Benin Province during the Second World War even as the World War II period witnessed significant increases in the export production of palm oil and palm kernels. This occurred at a national average annual rate of 14,038 tons and 20,026 tons respectively, representing an annual average increase of 7.6 percent and 5.8 percent for palm oil and palm kernels respectively.⁴² These increases were delivered under the conditions of exploitation that characterized the prosecution of the war.

Women in the Palm Oil and Kernel Production System in Benin Province during World War II

⁴⁰ Ministry of Agriculture. Palm-Oil and Kernels – General. Ibadan: Ministry of Agriculture/1/433, n.d.

⁴¹ B.P.1655/1 1956 *Annual Report (Departmental) Benin Province*.

⁴² Usoro, *The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*, 74.

In Benin Province, the pre-colonial traditional manual method of extracting oil and kernels from the oil palm fruit continued during World War II and entailed several steps. First, the women and children physically plucked and conveyed the palm fruits harvested by the men. Then women boiled and manually de-pulped the fruit to separate it from the kernel. This was followed by the extraction of its oil and, finally, the “cooking.” Children, and sometimes men, assisted the women with de-pulping activities.

Plucking, done by women and adolescents, consisted of the removal of individual fruit seeds from the harvested bunches of palm fruits. This was often done seven days after harvesting. During this time, it was expected that the harvested bunches would wither, making for easy plucking. Striking a properly withered bunch against the ground or a lump of wood resulted in most of the fruits falling off, leaving those remaining to be hand-plucked.⁴³

Plucking was followed by the boiling of the palm fruit by the women. The main purpose of boiling was to soften the grip between the outer layer of the fruits and the hard kernel enclosed within. Boiling was, in turn, followed by de-pulping. This involved the separation of the soft outer layer and the kernel. This was usually done by packing the boiled palm fruit into a mortar or a special wooden device shaped like a canoe and used as a mill. A mortar was used for a small quantity of palm fruit, but the wooden mill, (called *oko* in Etsako) was used for a large quantity. If the mortar was used to isolate the kernel, the palm fruit was packed into it and a wooden pestle was softly applied to pound and turn the contents, while water was added at intervals to facilitate separation. If the *oko* was used instead, the de-pulping of the kernels was done by the crushing of the fruit with the feet. Young boys and girls who were either the offspring of the women or other members of the family were pressed into service, acquiring productive skills and a sense of social responsibility. As family members, they were expected to help out as laborers in this process without financial reward. The process was often completed with the removal of the kernel and the fruit’s chaff from the *oko* with the hands, leaving the water and oil content.⁴⁴ This concluded the maceration process which was presided over by the women.

⁴³F.E.F. Ayokhai, “Indigenous Science and Technology in Edo Society: Agricultural Produce Processing among Uzairhue, 1900 - 1960” (MA Diss., Nasarawa State University, Keffi, 2008): 75; See also Ayokhai, “A History of the Oil Palm Industry.”

⁴⁴ Ayokhai, “Indigenous Science and Technology”, 75 - 76.

The next stage of production was the extraction of oil. It involved the isolation of the oil content from the water in the *oko*. The oil was skimmed off the water in the *oko*, and the kernels and chaff isolated from the oil in a process involving the application of pressure on the contents of the *oko*. This could take two or more days depending on the volume. Thereafter, both the chaff and the kernels were packed into baskets.⁴⁵ This was done by the women, assisted by adolescent girls.

The heating of the extracted oil in a clay pot over a fire, with a few pepper berries added, marked the final stage of the extraction process.⁴⁶ It usually involved the women's heating (cooking) the clotted oil extract over the fire, melting, and dehydrating it until it produced the aroma indicating it was ready. Then, it was declared "done" and ready for consumption. It was gathered and stored in clay pots by the women.⁴⁷ A byproduct of oil extraction was the palm kernel. These were dried and cracked by women and children before being put to further uses.⁴⁸

Oil Palm 'War' in Benin Province: Mobilizing Women's Labor

At the beginning of the twentieth century, exports from the British West African countries accounted for about two-third of the world palm oil trade.⁴⁹ Americans had also realized that palm oil was suitable for soap-making and other industrial purposes. As a result, US imports of West African palm oil increased steadily, reaching a peak figure of 60,000 tons, four times the volume imported from Sumatra (the Dutch East Indies).⁵⁰ By the Second World War, the world trade in palm products was dominated not only by countries of British West Africa (mainly Nigeria), but also by the Belgian Congo (later Zaire and now the Democratic Republic of Congo), and the Netherlands' East Indies (Sumatra and Java), now Indonesia.

The war created its own exigencies, leading Britain to declare emergency measures in her West African colonies, one of which was establishing centralized purchasing of all primary export products. This brought palm products under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office (C.O.)

⁴⁵ Idem.

⁴⁶ Attah, "The Dynamics of Oil Palm Production in Igalaland," 68.

⁴⁷ Ayokhai, "Indigenous Science and Technology," 77.

⁴⁸ See Ayokhai, "Indigenous Science and Technology" for some of the uses the palm kernels were put to in pre-colonial societies.

⁴⁹ Nigerian Institute For Oil Palm Research, *Brief on the Institute and Highlights of Achievements* (Benin City: NIFOR, n.d): iv.

⁵⁰ N.A.I., CO 554/81/12, "Minute by J.E.W. Flood, 1 March 1929."

in 1942 via the West African Produce Control Board (WAPCB).⁵¹ This meant that oil palm produce joined cocoa in the league of commodities centrally procured by Britain, an indication that Britain had stepped up interest in oil palm products from her West African colonies. This reinvigorated interest was the fallout of Britain's loss of Far Eastern territories, a major supplier of oil seeds in the world market. The loss of these colonies during World War II forced Britain to shift her burden of primary commodities to her West African colonies. This aggravated the demand for oil palm products in the provinces of the British West African colonies, including Benin Province. Consequently, in 1942, Benin Province was declared an oil palm belt and a "production zone" by Public Notice 301 of 1943.⁵² This was part of an effort to mobilize human and material resources from all parts of the British Colony of Nigeria for the prosecution of the Second World War. The objectives of the emergency measures of the war period were, among others, to (1) control the direction of raw material export flow, (2) prevent the rise in British consumer prices of those items manufactured from raw materials imported from West Africa, (3) increase the degree of overall control over the West African economy which depended mostly on primary export products, and (4) ensure external markets for West African primary products under conditions of military hostility.⁵³

The objective was to realize maximum production figures, "that literarily so far as possible, the people are reaping all the palm fruits and marketing all the kernels". This led to the re-introduction of the "emergency measures" of forced labor into the production of oil palm products. In the note on the oil palm situation by the Acting Chief Commissioner, the Resident Officer of Benin Province was reminded that "when the need is so pressing we must obviously consider again making use of the powers conferred by Regulations No. 89 of 1943...."⁵⁴ The regulation under reference deals with the use of forced labor. The commitment to use compulsory labor in the export production of oil palm products is further reinforced by the Chief Commissioner's statement that:

I am not suggesting of course that compulsion as authorised by regulation 5 of Regulations 89/1943 should be employed wholesale but in areas where the Resident believes that the people could do more than they are doing, then I think

⁵¹ Usoro, *Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*, 75.

⁵² N.A.I., No. B.P. 2140/566.

⁵³ Usoro, *Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*, 74.

⁵⁴ Secretary, W.P. 21050 vol. 1, "Palm Production: Compulsory Measures."

that neither he nor the Native Authority concerned can hardly fail to make use of regulation 5.⁵⁵

In the case of Benin Province, compulsion was the result of general application. In order to make the application of compulsory labor effective, the entire Western Provinces of Nigeria was declared a production zone. According to the Acting Chief Commissioner, this was:

...in order that Residents may be able to employ these regulations, I am taking steps to have the whole of the Western Provinces declared a Production Zone under Regulation 3 (a) and to have Residents appointed Deputy Controllers under Regulation 3 (b). It will then be open to Residents to make use of regulation 5 (1) and (2) and by virtue of Regulation 10(b), read in conjunction with 1941 Legislation Page D.244 regulation 223 and with 1942 Legislation Page D.3 regulation 2 (b), to empower native courts to deal with offences against regulation 5.⁵⁶

The immediate consequence was that Benin Province was formally declared a “production zone” by Public Notice 301 of 1943.⁵⁷ This was followed by the full application of the regulation on compulsory labor. This is not to suggest that compulsory labor was being introduced for the first time; it had been used between the inception of colonial rule and the early 1930s. Rather, it is its re-instatement under the General Defense Regulations that is of interest here. The application of the compulsory reaping of palm fruits and the engagement of compulsory labor in the province can be substantiated by the fact that the Resident, Benin Province noted in a memo that:

I have also authorised the Oba of Benin to act for me under Regulation 5(1) for Benin Division and the District Officers for the other Divisions. Each will direct suitable persons to harvest and process the fruit where this is not being done.⁵⁸

The enforcement of this policy at the Divisional level can be gleaned from the directives issued to the Clan Councils on the subject. For instance, the District Officer of Kukuruku Division directed as follows:

I hereby direct you to arrange for the reaping of this palm fruit, and for cracking of the nuts and marketing of the kernels. You may order anybody to do the work. I suggest the occupants of farms (where the palms are in farmland) and the working companies where they are in unoccupied bush. You may prosecute in the

⁵⁵ Idem.

⁵⁶ Idem.

⁵⁷ N. A. I., No. B.P.2140/566.

⁵⁸ N.A.I., B.P. 2140/678. See also Secretary, W.P. 21050 vol. 1, “Palm Production: Compulsory Measures.”

native court anybody who does not obey your orders. If you do not work properly every member of the council will be prosecuted in my court.⁵⁹

The enforcement of the compulsory labor component of oil palm production was given the necessary impetus by the Native Courts which were particularly useful in the enforcement of colonial rule and policy. In this respect, the Resident of Benin Province, in a Public Notice issued in 1944 on oil palm production, ordered that “Subject to the jurisdiction and powers set out in the warrants establishing such courts there is hereby conferred upon the Native Courts... power to enforce those provisions of the Nigerian Defence (Oil Palm Production) Regulations, 1943....”⁶⁰

Another policy initiated to boost production of oil palm products during this period was the monitoring and inspection of production. As noted earlier, the District Officers were appointed Deputy Controllers to underscore the priority which the colonial government placed on the production of palm products during World War II. In addition to this, inspectors were appointed to “see that the orders are carried out and to report areas in which the fruit is not being reaped....”⁶¹ for the prosecution of the people. To ensure enforcement, the Resident of Benin Province had requested approval for the appointment of one inspector for Asaba Division, three for Ishan Division, and five for Kukuruku Division. With respect to Benin Division, it was noted that the situation was different since a scheme had been approved by the Oba in consultation with the District Officer and Provincial Forest Officer. Under this scheme, Forest Guards and Rangers informed the Oba of any area they found not “being worked properly” and the Oba under Regulation 89 sent a chief to ensure compliance, failing which he undertook the prosecution of the defaulters on whose farmlands the un-harvested fruits were found.⁶² The evidence of the overall efficacy of the combined measures adopted by the colonial administration in Benin Province was that palm kernel production received a boost as shown by the distribution of the total contributions of the division to the tonnage of palm kernel graded for export between 1939 and 1944 detailed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

⁵⁹ N.A.I., No K.D 546/B/43.

⁶⁰ Secretary, W.P. 21050 vol. 1, “Palm Production: Compulsory Measures.”

⁶¹ N.A.I., B.P. 2140/678.

⁶² Secretary, W.P. 21050 vol. 1, “Palm Production: Compulsory Measures.”

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF DIVISIONS TO THE TONNAGE OF PALM KERNELS GRADED FOR EXPORT IN BENIN PROVINCE BETWEEN MAY, 1939 AND DECEMBER, 1943

Divisions	1939(Tons)	1940(Tons)	1941(Tons)	1942(Tons)	1943(Tons)	1944(Tons)
Asaba	2466	3186	4262	2672	2989	3548
Benin	6461	3611	3863	3606	3719	3622
Ishan	2901	3064	3066	2969	3033	3366
Kukuruku	777	1057	1361	1321	1388	1748
TOTAL=	12,605	10,918	12,552	10,568	11,129	12,284

Source: Compiled by author from Ibadan, Ministry of Agriculture, File No. 19651/Vol. II and N.A.I., W.P. File No. 21050 Vol. I

The figure for 1944 is for January to September

Table 1 indicates that there was a decrease in export output production of palm kernels in 1942. That the province was formally declared a production zone in 1943 was certainly not unconnected with efforts to stem the decline and increase export production output. Also, the figures for 1943 and 1944 and the report on palm kernel production in areas where “inspectors received salaries or allowances” in the period January to September 1943 and 1944 show increases in the tonnage of palm kernel produced in the respective divisions of Benin Province. That export production decline was reversed and increased export output was sustained in subsequent years after the area was officially declared a production zone shows correlation between the colonial policies and production output. Table 2 below shows the percentage increase in palm kernel production in each division in 1943 and 1944:

TABLE 2: PALM KERNEL PRODUCTION IN BENIN PROVINCE DURING THE PERIOD JANUARY TO SEPTEMBER 1943 AND 1944 RESPECTIVELY

DIVISIONS	1943 (Tons)	1944 (Tons)	± TONS	± %
Benin	4122	3622	-500	-12.0
Asaba	2965	3548	+583	+19.6
Ishan	2965	3366	+40	+1.2
Kukuruku	1450	1748	+298	+20.0

SOURCE: N.A.I., W.P. File No. 21050 Vol. I

Though, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which the efforts of the chiefs and others receiving salaries or allowances were responsible for the increases represented by the above, it was the

opinion of the colonial authorities that the expenditure was justified by the results.⁶³ Another factor often linked to increased production was the payment offered for oil palm products. There was a general improvement in price and overall price stability in spite of some fluctuations during the war.

Despite increases in the other divisions of Benin Province (Ishan, Asaba, Kukuruku), there was a drop in export production outputs in Benin Division. Benin Division's low production output of export palm products seems to have been tied to the availability of several alternative sources of income. For men, the exploitation of rubber provided an alternative source and they opted to earn more of their income from this more lucrative cash crop. For women, it was the trade in foodstuffs in their flourishing local markets that brought them better returns. The Resident of Benin Province established this in his review of the situation in 1944 where he found that the women's failure to crack nuts at full capacity was due to the fact that "they did not consider that they get sufficient remuneration for the work involved when they have a much easier way to earn the required cash by selling food in very flourishing black markets."⁶⁴

Even in Ishan Division, the trade in export oil palm products had come to a standstill. The District Officer lamented that increased prices were not a direct incentive to the people of the area. He noted that the extra amount of money owed the producers was approximately £2,000 from palm kernels and £500 from palm oil. However, when this sum was divided among the adult population of over 60,000-- most of whom were engaged to some extent in palm oil or kernel production--it represented only 9d a head or 1½d a month during the first six months of 1944. Thus the incentive was negligible compared with such other spheres of business as rubber and rice production. He concluded that the figures showed that increased prices were not likely to have diverted labor or effort previously otherwise employed and did not affect food prices in the local markets, which were comparable to prices at the same time in the previous year. He argued that it was rice production that diverted labor and interest from kernels and noted that once the rice mill was moved from Ekpoma, kernel production increased by nearly 50 percent whereas at Illushi the contrast was even more marked.⁶⁵ Clearly, the women who were the predominant producers of oil palm products considered the prices they were paid exploitive or at least insufficient to compensate for their labor. To force the women to work under the exploitive

⁶³ Secretary, W.P. 21050 vol. 1, "Palm Production: Compulsory Measures."

⁶⁴ Ibadan, Ministry of Agriculture/1/433, "Palm-Oil and Kernels – General." See also B.P. 2134/409.

⁶⁵ N.A.I., B.P. 2134/409. See also Ibadan Ministry of Agriculture/433, "Palm-Oil and Kernels – General."

conditions of export oil palm production and boost that production, the colonial administration had to relocate the rice mills away from Ekpoma.

The situation in Kukuruku Division in Benin Province was a bit different. The District Officer noted that small and fairly frequent price increases did not have the expected outcome of increasing production. They actually had an adverse effect. He pointed out that there was always a lag between Gazette prices and those paid to the producer which in turn gave rise to uncertainty and loss of confidence between producer, middlemen and exporter. Confidence, he observed, was one of the essential factors for high production. Moreover, if the producer thought there soon would be a further increase, she sold no more than was necessary to get cash for immediate needs.⁶⁶ In the case of Kukuruku Division where the women did not have the luxury of alternative production as provided by the mechanized rice milling activities in Ishan Division, they were subject to price manipulations by the middlemen. They reacted by producing only enough to earn the money to meet their immediate needs and thus produced below capacity.

Though export production in Asaba Division was on the rise, the District Officer described the increased production during 1944 as compared to 1943 a result of “constant hammering, metaphorically speaking, to which he subjected the Native Authorities and the people.”⁶⁷ The weekly production returns from Native Authorities which he introduced from the 1st of February was also a factor in maintaining the level of production. This return encouraged Native Authorities to take an added interest because they felt that their individual efforts, clan by clan, were being disclosed month by month, and that he was therefore “keeping a close check on their efforts, and on their reactions to his demands for more kernels.”⁶⁸ The District Officer concluded that the increased price had no effect on local food prices and that no diversion of labor occurred as a result of the increased prices. Natives of the division who had not been actively employed in harvesting kernels before the price was increased did not start harvesting thereafter. Rather, it was his opinion that the Urhobo palm collectors started to work harder and the middlemen who were generally Hausa and Yoruba⁶⁹ became more active in seeking sources of kernel supplies.⁷⁰ Apparently, the increases in Asaba Division resulted from fear of

⁶⁶ Idem.

⁶⁷ N.A.I., B.P. 2134/409. See also Ibadan Ministry of Agriculture/433, “Palm-Oil and Kernels – General.”

⁶⁸ Idem.

⁶⁹ N.A.I. 14617/1, “Benin Province – Annual Report 1924.”

⁷⁰ N.A.I., B.P. 2134/409. See also Ibadan Ministry of Agriculture/433, “Palm-Oil and Kernels – General.”

prosecution more than anything else because of the District Officer's tactics of close monitoring of production figures and public show of same.

It is clear that a price rise did not induce increase in export production, probably because Britain held a monopoly on export products from Nigeria. This monopoly certainly constrained the competition that would have obtained in a free market situation where products sold at prices based on demand and supply in the world market. In the monopoly imposed by Britain's colonial government in Nigeria during World War II, the prices of export products were, as in the pre-war period, determined by the buyer (foreign merchants) who offered prices they deemed suitable for palm oil and palm kernel products. Because the emergency regulation compelled farmers to produce, it is impossible to measure how much production output was determined by market and price mechanisms. The administration felt that compulsion had a positive effect on production, and that the increases in prices smoothed the way.⁷¹

Under the circumstance, one can only submit that it was a combination of the variables examined above that induced increased production outputs in Benin Province during the war period. It is important to note that although the emergency regulations and their implications for export production policies of oil palm products during World War II did not directly target women, they nevertheless affected them the most. This is because the traditional division of labor and the culture of occupational specialization in the oil palm products production were skewed in such a way that the women who were the dominant producers were the direct victims of war time exploitation. The extraction of palm oil and kernels and the attendant trade in the commodities were squarely within the domain of women in Benin Province. It is therefore right to posit that the demands made by the British colonial administration on export oil palm production in Benin Province were essentially on the women who toiled under difficult labor conditions and price regimes to meet the production targets. They did so in order to avert the legal consequences of failing to meet those targets set by the colonial state acting on behalf of the metropolitan power, Britain.

Impact of World War II on Women in Benin Province

⁷¹ The District Officer's observation makes this clear as he noted that whatever the effect, it had not been adverse and that there was no doubt that the increase in price smoothed the way for compulsion, which could not have been undertaken without it. The use of the compulsory powers conferred by Regulations No. 89 of 1943 has without doubt resulted in an increase in production. (Ibadan, Ministry of Agriculture/433, Palm-Oil and Kernels – General).

With the declaration of the emergency regulations in Benin Province, the British colonial administration in Nigeria drafted West African women into World War II. The gravity of the impact of the emergency regulations on women in Benin Province can be extrapolated from two major circumstances: the gendered structure of the export oil palm economy under colonial rule and the policies of the British colonial administration on export oil palm production during the war.

The traditional division of labor and the culture of occupational differentiation that continued under colonial rule, though rooted in an historical epoch predating the colonial interlude, ensured that women were the direct victims of the exploitation of the unequal relations that characterized the political economy of colonialism.⁷² For instance, all the increases witnessed in the export production of oil palm products were the direct outcomes of the toil of peasant women. They bore the brunt of processing and trading palm oil and kernels to ensure that their men fulfilled the production targets set by the colonial administration and therefore avoided the consequences of imprisonment and fines for which the colonial state apparatus was notorious. The structure of production in the oil palm sector guaranteed that women had no choice in their roles because they were simply fulfilling roles in the family production units that existed in the pre-colonial societies in the Benin area.⁷³ This provided the foundation for the colonial structure of exploitation to develop. Under colonial rule, the roles of women in the export production of palm oil and kernels were further entrenched to the maximum benefit of capitalist exploitation and accumulation.

Colonial exploitation built on the framework of traditional division of labor and the culture of occupational differentiation, giving the war policies on export production of oil palm products the platform on which to flourish. For instance, the war policy of the British to procure centrally all the oil palm products from Nigeria not only eliminated all forms of competition but also narrowed the options of prices available to the peasant women producers to those provided by the British middlemen and buying agents.⁷⁴ The women's loss was the British exporters' gain. The introduction of a product grading scheme and price differentials enabled the buyers to cheat the women by declaring their products substandard. Thus they could be purchased at ridiculously

⁷² Shivji, "The Struggle to Convert Nationalism to Pan-Africanism."

⁷³ Ayokhai, "A History of the Oil Palm Industry", 179 - 182.

⁷⁴ Idem.

low prices.⁷⁵ This discouraged women from producing palm oil for the export trade since they had other sources of income to supplement their personal and family needs, notably selling food items and cash crops such as palm kernels.⁷⁶ The net impact of these policies is that the women were exploited to benefit British capitalist accumulation.

Finally, the colonial policy's preference for the maintenance of the traditional pre-industrial ownership system and exclusion of foreign investors in the production process of oil palm products not only hampered the industrialization and mechanization of production processes and techniques but also resulted in the neglect of the development of the infrastructure necessary to modernize the oil palm industry. This was founded on the British colonial administration's logic that since the traditional system of ownership yielded enough to meet the need of Britain and their European allies, it was unnecessary to introduce changes in production processes and techniques. Increases in production were obtained through unnecessary physical labor and drudgery mostly experienced by the peasant women in Benin Province. The women's failure to respond positively to supposed price stimuli in palm oil⁷⁷ and the diversion of the palm oil to the alternative domestic markets that offered them better prices⁷⁸ showed, if not their resentment, then their rational economic behavior. The neglect of modernizing has led to the stifling and subsequently to the crisis of the oil palm industry in Nigeria, and contributed to the underdevelopment of opportunities for women.

Conclusion

West Africa and Europe have engaged in over five centuries of economic interaction. This interaction, though mostly unequal, assumed higher dimensions of inequality and exploitation during the colonial interval. During the World War II, women in Nigeria's Benin Province were subject to exploitation by their recruitment into the war economy. The export oil palm production provided the arena for their exploitation under the guise of emergency regulations that bestowed extra-ordinary powers on the agents of the colonial administration. The colonial administration took advantage of the traditional mode of production and the gender structure of the production unit in the oil palm industry in Benin Province, resulting in the

⁷⁵ N.A.I., B.P. 681/5 "Export of Palm."

⁷⁶ N.A.I., B.P. 2134/409. See also Ibadan Ministry of Agriculture/433, "Palm-Oil and Kernels – General."

⁷⁷ Ibadan, Ministry of Agriculture/433, "Palm-Oil and Kernels – General."

⁷⁸ N.A.I., B.P. 681/5 "Export of Palm Kernels."

exploitation of women in particular. This was overlaid by policies anchored on war-time emergency regulations that subjected women to compulsory labor (as were the men who undertook the compulsory harvest of the oil palm fruit), exploitive marketing and pricing regimes, and coercive state institutions. When these are added to the colonial administration's neglect to modernize the industrial infrastructures, the resultant effect was the underdevelopment of women's opportunities and the oil palm industry. Yet, this was justified by the British colonial administration as necessary initiatives to win a European war which they had dubbed a World War and in which they made their colonial subjects believe they had a stake. The conditions under which West African women in Benin Province were made to produce oil palm products in support of the British war efforts approximated a declaration of war on women. Moreover, the exploitation of women in Benin Province under the circumstances of World War II had more lasting consequences in relation to the oil palm industry, notably the cultivation of a negative perception of labor in this industry that has persisted into the post-independence era.

Post-independence West African women's war-time perception of labor in the industry has not significantly changed. Rather than perceiving their contribution to the industry in the interest of national growth and development, they have continued to see themselves as victims of government exploitation. Nor do they feel the dignity that they enjoyed under the pre-colonial labor and production system. Consequently, the production of oil palm products in the post-independence society is now considered unappealing by women in the erstwhile Benin Province. That the production processes and technology have remained largely as they were under colonial rule and the World War II era makes the oil palm industry even less attractive to, or rewarding for, the women. Rather than contributing to the amelioration of the crisis in the economy through pursuing oil palm production, women in the erstwhile Benin Province have abandoned the sector as one of the dividends of independence. They therefore have failed to tap into its great potential for accelerating economic growth and development. Lack of enthusiasm for this industry has been further exacerbated by the deceleration of the sector as a result of the revocation of Britain's contract to purchase all Nigeria's oil palm products in the immediate post-independence period. If women in the former Benin Province are to break away from the cycle of poverty and unemployment that currently circumscribes their lives, post-independence Nigerian government must take the necessary measures to reorient them. More importantly, it must provide the

necessary infrastructural and technological base for transforming the oil palm industry into a modern industrial sector within a culture of democracy and a competitive global economy.

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