

## BRITISH COLONIAL POLICIES AND THE OIL PALM INDUSTRY IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA, 1900-1960

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**ABSTRACT** This paper is on British policies and the oil palm industry in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Until 1900, the region was in the forefront in the production of palm oil and palm kernel for export. The export of palm produce from this region was threatened by the emergence in the world market of produce from Malaya, Sumatra and the Belgian Congo. The British colonial administration introduced the plantation scheme and pioneer oil mills to improve the quality of oil in order to remain relevant in the world market. These policies and their impacts are discussed focusing on the Niger Delta, peopled predominantly by the Isoko and Urhobo. The conclusion drawn is that the various British policies toward the oil palm industry had no revolutionary impact on the people.

**Key Words:** British colonial policies; Pioneer oil mills; Demonstration plantations; Niger Delta.

### INTRODUCTION

The oil palm is an indigenous plant not only to the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, but also to all the people of tropical Africa. Before the establishment of British rule in the region, the people within the Niger Delta region had established an economic system which revolved, to a large extent, around the oil palm. The people had an economic system which made adequate provisions for their needs and their immediate neighbours.

When the British finally penetrated the hinterland of the Niger Delta, the exploitation of oil palms was paramount in her imperial motives. Of all the principal export commodities during the colonial period, palm oil and palm-kernel have the longest histories being some of the earliest commodities exported from the present day Nigeria. Palm produce became important in the second half of the 19th century with the abolition of slave trade, the inauguration of the industrial revolution, and the development of the railway which required palm oil as a lubricant. Moreover so, palm oil was used for “the manufacturing of soap, candles, margarine, and as cooking fat” (Dike, 1956). The use for palm oil in Europe increased with time. The residue of palm-kernel was fed to livestock, while palm oil itself was used for the manufacturing of pharmaceutical products (Helleiner, 1966).

Between 1865 and 1910, the export of palm produce doubled from West Africa as Nigeria took the lead (Stillard, 1938). By 1900, palm produce constituted 89% of Nigeria’s total export (Helleiner, 1966; 97). But this trend began to decline with the emergence and export of other products including rubber and cocoa. Nigeria’s lead

in the palm produce export trade was further threatened with the growth of plantations in Sumatra, Malaya, and Belgian Congo. By the 1920's, these countries have begun to export high quality palm oil (Stillard, 1938).

Understandably, this threat to British economic interest in the world market for palm produce was readily checked through a number of colonial policies. Central to these policies was the aim of maximally exploiting the natural and human resources of Nigeria for the purpose of securing profitable trade for Britain (Hopkins, 1973). This, the colonial administration hoped to achieve not by radically destroying the existing indigenous production methods, but, through the modification of such (Usoro, 1974). Furthermore, there was the need for government to encourage the introduction of demonstration plantations, and the use of hand presses and crushing mills for boosting the quality of extracted oil.

This study will focus on the palm oil industry in the Western Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This area, comprised mainly of Isoko-Urhobo people, was highly involved in the palm produce trade. In the Niger Delta, experimental plantations began as early as 1932 while the first oil mill was established in 1949. As should be expected, the mills and the plantation schemes had both positive and negative impacts on the people. It is hoped that this study would more than complement earlier studies on British colonial policies and African responses.

## THE OIL PALM INDUSTRY IN THE WESTERN DELTA TO 1900

Before the establishment of British colonial administration among the Isoko-Urhobo people of the Western Delta region of Nigeria (Fig. 1), the people had established an economic system which not only made fairly adequate provisions for their needs, but also for those of their immediate neighbours such as the Itsekiri, Ijo and Kwale (Ikime, 1972; Aghalino, 1993). The principal economic activity of the people was collecting palm nut from which oil and kernel were extracted.

Palm-nut collection was a seasonal activity. The periods of collecting extend from January to June and it was controlled by a council of elders in each village community, whose duty was to officially declare the palm bush open or closed for collection. Oil extraction from the palm-nut was a process that lasts for approximately 21 days, and it involves the cooperation of the man, his wife and children, and in some cases, members of the extended family. The first stage in palm collection was the climbing of the palm trees using ropes woven from raffia palms. The man uses a cutlass to cut down the nuts, usually bunched together in a big cob of about eighteen inches long. The wife's role was to haul to the trough the nuts collected in a single day, which amount to "a little over one puncheon (13 cwt) or 180 gallons of oil and fifty-six bushels of palm kernel" (Bradbury, 1957). In certain circumstances, such as when the tapper is a bachelor, the husband is very sympathetic, or the wife is very sick, the man could assist the woman in gathering the scattered nuts to his own trough.

At the end of the collecting period, the palm nut collector (*Oberokpa* in Isoko-Urhobo) then slices the bunches into four or more smaller pieces each, covers them with palm branches and they are left for a period of two to three days to ferment a

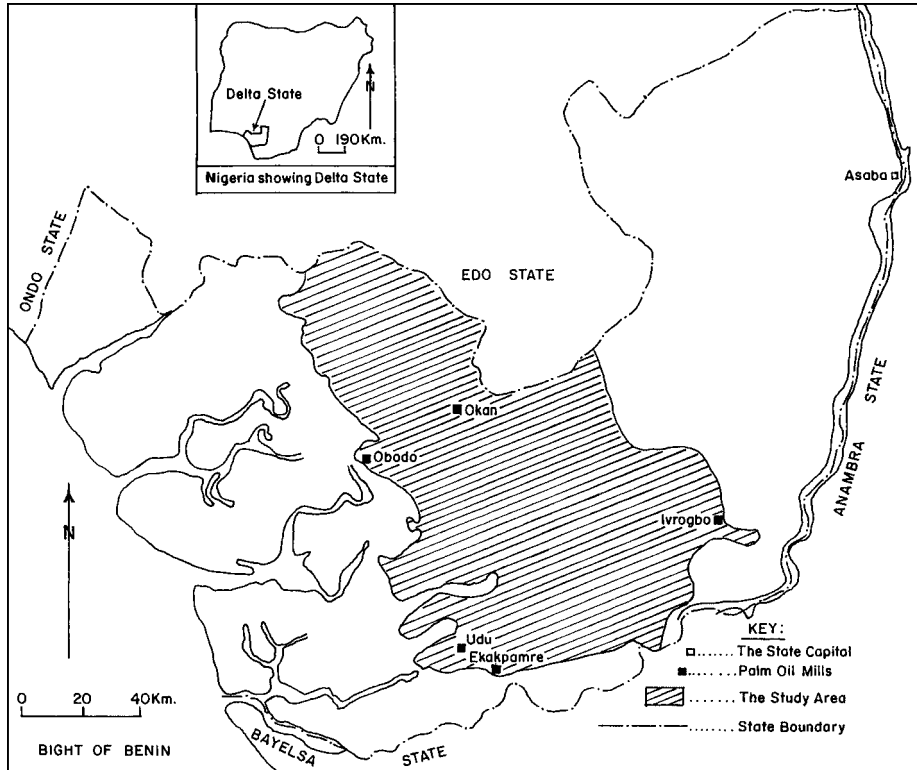


Fig. 1: A map of Western Delta showing location of some Palm Oil Mills.

little. This fermentation softens the nuts and facilitates further processing. That done, the palm nut collector, shake the nuts loose from the sliced cobs into a bamboo rack, designed to remove husk or dirt from them. The clean nuts are then transferred into the oil canoe or trough of about 12 to 15ft long, 3 to 4ft wide and 4ft in depth, with a sloping bottom and a plugged hole at the end (Otite, 1973: 28; Bradbury, 1957: 135).

When the trough is half full with palm nuts, the nuts are trodden with bare feet for about two days until they are reduced to pulp consisting of nuts, having integument and oil. Since this part of the job is laborious, the man is often assisted by friends and members of the extended family. The pulp that emerges as a result of the treading is piled on the higher end of the trough so that the oil will flow to the lower end. The trough is then covered with plantain leaves as well as palm fronds for a couple of days. Two to three days later, the man and his family complete the process of oil extraction, which may take approximately two full days more.

The oil is usually of poor quality, and poured into tins for further boiling to remove impurities. Water is then added to the pulp and shaken vigorously to float the oil that is left in the nuts and hairy integument. The oil is syphoned off from the top of the water into drums and boiled for about one hour, after which it is poured into kerosene tins ready for consumption and sale. Meanwhile, the clean nuts and

fibrous residues are thrown out of the trough to dry for about nine to ten days. These are shared by the women who participated in the palm oil processing. The women crack the nuts for domestic use and for sale (Mba, 1982).

The motivation for individual participation in the processing of palm oil in the pre-colonial period stemmed from the individual, whether man or woman, who stood to gain from the exercise. Because of its economic value, the oil palm is a traditional source of revenue for the people. For most men, palm oil was processed partly to meet domestic consumption needs and partly for satisfying social obligations such as payment of dowries, purchasing essential articles item such as salt or luxury items like gin and gun powder. It is important to add that the entire processing of palm oil and kernel was carried out using locally manufactured goods. In addition to the climbing ropes, locally made cutlasses bought from itinerant Awka smiths were used in the harvesting of fruits. The earthen pot was used for boiling palm fruits especially during the production of soft oil (Benjo, 1983). Other items used were the calabash spoon locally called *Unuo*. The mortar was used for pounding boiled fruits, while a wooden spade was used to scoop pounded pulp into the trough.

I stress that the oil palm made immense contribution towards meeting the socio-economic needs of pre-colonial Isoko-Urhobo people of the Western Delta. The palm frond was used in burial ceremonies and in the propitiation of the gods. At the domestic level, the oil palm had other functions. The trunk of the palm was used in building houses; its fibre was woven into fish traps, while the fronds were used for construction of thatched fences around the compounds. Palm frond was also fed as fodder to goats, while the veins were used in making brooms. The palm kernel was chewed with maize, as snacks. Kernel was also fed to goats and chickens. The palm nut, after the kernel had been removed was used to cement marshy areas in compounds and foot paths (Usoro, 1974). The palm oil is ultimately used for cooking. The “banga” and “owo” soups, special delicacies are made from the oil. Besides this, the oil palm was tapped to yield palm wine. The pomade is a therapeutic all-purpose oil which readily served as Sloan liniment to the people (Okumagba, 1980; Otite, 1973; Bradbury, 1957).

Since the oil palm industry was a principal source of revenue for the people, it had its pantheon deity called *Edjokpa*. This goddess protected the people as they executed their duties relating to oil extraction. In return, the deity was venerated before the palm bush could be declared officially open for tapping. In some parts of Urhobo land, animals such as the dog was used as sacrifice to the deity. As the strategic importance of oil palm industry was self-evident, any foreign innovation which tended to distort and/or modify the established system of prospecting oil palm without the approval of the people would have naturally displeased many people.

#### BRITISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE OIL PALM INDUSTRY: 1900-1923

The opening decade of this century marked a turning point in the determination of Britain, along with other imperial European nations, to effectively occupy the

African continent. For Britain it meant a redefinition, and consolidation of her imperial strategies (Ikime, 1972; Aghalino, 1993). The Isoko-Urhobo people of the Western Delta had been in contact with the Europeans for a number of centuries, but it was not until 1900 that Britain decided to penetrate into the hinterland of the Western Delta. The intention of Britain was to establish Pax Britannica, in order for trade and commerce to thrive to her glory. Thus, between 1905-1911, the whole of the Western Delta was brought under British sovereignty after a spirited resistance by the people. Having subdued the region, it was indeed necessary to exploit the local resources, particularly the oil palm. The growth of the oil palm industry in Nigeria during the colonial period must be grasped within the framework of the primacy of the economic motivation of imperialism. At the initial years of British colonial administration in the region, the European impact on the oil palm industry was the juxtaposition of the use of European products such as cutlasses and basins, with products of indigenous technology in the traditional processing of palm oil. However, the introduction of these tools in the processing of oil had no revolutionary effect on palm oil production.

From 1910, the colonial administration began direct involvement in the oil palm industry in the region as government policy started to unfold. British economic policy towards the oil palm industry in the Western Niger Delta was influenced not only by the general agricultural policy of Britain in Nigeria, but its overall goals and motivations for occupying Nigeria in general. British colonial economic policy up to 1945 was characterised by a number of agenda. Central to these was maximally exploiting the natural and human resources of Nigeria for the express purpose of securing profitable trade in the world market (Hopkins, 1973). It was perhaps this motive that influenced the British colonial administration to place the exploitation of cash crops such as oil palm, cocoa, cotton, groundnut and rubber, topmost priority in her economic development programme in Nigeria (Crowder, 1968).

The colonial government believed in achieving the development of cash crops not by radically destroying and/or altering the people's existing indigenous production techniques, but "through the gradual modification of such" (Usoro, 1974: 35). The modifications were to be effected through various ways. First, the colonial government tried to make available to the local farmers the kinds of seedlings known to increase the yield. Secondly, the colonial government sought to also improve the quality of the cash crops produced by the people.

The initiative for the modernisation of the oil palm industry came from Sir William Lever, of Lever Brothers Ltd., who suggested the grants or concession of land to commercial firms for the establishment of palm plantations. But this proposal was rejected by the colonial government as well as the home government and the commercial firms of the United Africa Company (UAC), and in particular, John Holt. Similarly, British public opinion led by E.D. Morel was vociferously opposed to the scheme (Buell, 1928). It was argued that the plantation system would disrupt the traditional land tenure system, which could lead to violent outbursts and protests by Nigerians who would be deprived of their land (Hancock, 1942).

For the colonial government, such a prospect was anathema to efficient administration. Besides, it was contended that a successful oil palm plantation would inevitably create a class of landless labourers who would be left unemployed if the

plantation failed. In addition, the granting of freehold land to European firms would cause “endless legal and political problems for the colonial authorities” (Meredith, 1984: 311). Moreover, in the larger West Africa where Nigeria belonged, it was not certain that European-owned oil palm plantations could be profitable without permanent government protection, assistance and subsidy—a prospect which the colonial administration did not find appealing (Hopkins, 1973; Usoro, 1974; Fieldhouse, 1978).

Opposition to the plantation initiative was also expressed by a number of Nigerian nationalists. For example, Dr. C.C. Adeniyi Jones, member of the Nigeria legislative council, referred to the nucleus plantations proposal as the “thin end of a wedge”, and asked, “where, if these plantations were to be in sparsely populated areas, their labour force would come from?” (Adeniyi, 1928). It seemed to him that involuntary labour would likely be resorted to. Similar reservation was expressed by Julius Ojo-Cole, and he urged the Nigerian government to turn to the Nigerian farmers rather than the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce to develop the oil palm industry (Julius, 1928). If this suggestion was acceded to by the colonial government, it would have greatly redressed some of the problems that emerged when pioneer oil mills were finally established in the region.

Aside from the opposition of Nigerian nationalists, and the local farmers as will be demonstrated below, the failure of the plantation schemes elsewhere influenced the decision of the colonial Government not to endorse the plan. In fact, the failure of plantation schemes in Sierra-Leone and the Goldcoast (Ghana) where government opposition was not as pronounced as in Nigeria, must be regarded as a plausible explanation for the lukewarm attitude of government to the scheme. These plantations failed because “there were difficulties with regards to labour recruitment, and to diseases from neighbouring native trees” (Perham, 1937: 309). Thus, it first seemed that the administration was guided by antecedence.

But in the face of mounting competition and pressure from the joint West Africa Committees of the Liverpool, London and Manchester Chamber of Commerce, the Secretary of State for the colonies organized a committee in 1923 to study the Nigerian palm sector, and make recommendations for its improvement (Forde, 1941). After an intensive survey of the industry, the Committee supported the introduction of the plantation scheme and improvement of the palm groves. It also recommended the introduction of produce inspection to help regulate the quality of palm produce exported from Nigeria.

#### THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ASPECTS OF THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE OIL PALM COMMITTEE: PLANTAIN SCHEME AND HAND PRESSES

The colonial government had earlier decided to embark upon a programme of assisting the local farmers to cultivate improved seedlings. The response to this initiative to improve palm groves took place at two levels in the Western Delta. These were the participation of UAC and the individual farmers. The UAC systematically undertook experiments aimed at improving the methods of planting oil palm for increased yield, and also the method of palm oil extraction. Although the colonial

**Table 1.** Progress of Planting of Oil Palm Trees Urhobo/Isoko; 1932-1937.

Year	No. of planters	No. of extension of groves	Average% Increase in Acres
1932	4	*	19.2
1933	3	3	16.4
1934	*	1	0.2
1935	6	2	21.0
1936	2	4	9.0
1937	8	1	12.7
Total	28	11	78.5

\*Not available

Source: Ughelli District, 1 File No. 391, NAI, 1937.

government refused to grant concession to firms, the only exception was that made to UAC for its plantation at Ajagbodudu (Cowan Estate) in the Western Delta; Ikotombo in Calabar area of Southern Nigeria, and Ndiain in Cameroon (UAC, 1952). These concessions were conceived by the colonial government as model estates for the cultivation of selected and improved seedlings, to encourage African palm plots. In 1930, UAC alone owned 6,900 total acreage of palm plantation (Udo, 1967).

For the individuals, the first attempt to cultivate a variety of palm fruits did not start until 1932, four years after it was officially introduced by the Department of Agriculture. In the Western Delta, the ratio of wild plots to selected seedlings was 1:3, in contrast to Aboh Division, also in the Delta Province, which was 1:2 (National Archives Ibadan, henceforth NAI, Ughelli District 1 File 391). Table 1 shows the relative response of the people of the region to the plantation scheme.

Between 1935-1937, there was increase in planting. This may be attributed to the partial recovery in prices of palm oil after the great depression. By 1946, there were over 101 acres of plot in the Urhobo Division. It would be unfair to the farmers to attribute the increase in the number of local plantations entirely to the increase in prices for palm produce. Further explanation could also be sought largely in the dynamism and enterprise of the people who required cash earned from the produce trade to meet their social and economic obligations. The point to add is that the changes in society which involved the payment of taxes, school fees, and purchasing kerosene must have influenced the people to increase their acreage of palm.

At the beginning, the Isoko-Urhobo people of the Western Delta reacted negatively to the plantation scheme. At Ughelli, when the District Council requested a piece of land for plantation and the clan trustee of the land, *Osuivie*, of the time, Omamohwo, and representatives of the ten villages signed an agreement with the District Officer at Ughelli. Upon the agreement, the senior District Officer, W.K.D. Macray ordered his deputy, to organize the clearing and pegging prior readiness for planting of palm trees, the people were alarmed at the extend of land acquired (NAI 1301/1, 1949). When the villagers saw how much land had been ceded to the British, they resorted to violence. They tried to mob the government workers to stop them from further work. In order to check the behaviour of the people, policemen were recruited both from Ughelli and Warri to safeguard the workers.

The question may be raised as to why the people were opposed to the plantation, when in reality, their leaders had signed agreement which gave the land to the

Department of Agriculture? The traditional modalities for measuring acreage of land was at variance with the European tapes and acres, and the elders may not have anticipated that the land they were parting with would be so large to incur the suspicion and antagonism of their people.

True to the apprehension raised earlier on by the colonial officials and Nigerian nationalists with regards to the volatility of African land tenure, the Isoko-Urhobo people saw that the adoption of the plantation scheme would interfere with their traditional economic and cultural systems. The new scheme also affected the land tenure system based on collective ownership held in trust by the elders who largely constituted the village council (Ogbobine, 1980). The introduction of individual plots was regarded as a radical departure from the existing system as it meant individualisation of land in place of communal ownership. Furthermore the elders came to fear that their authority would be eroded with regards to control of land. It must be noted that prior to the colonial period, scarcity of land had been partly responsible for interclan disputes. It was easily imagined that individualisation of land ownership could escalate land litigations (Ikime, 1972).

The difficulties of the potential plot-owner were not limited to the opposition of the elders and a large majority of the Isoko-Urhobo people. When the prospective plantation received approval from the elders, further approval the District Officer (D.O.) before the Department of Agriculture could provide selected improved seedlings and give required advice for laying out and maintaining young plants through the visiting agricultural assistants. Finally an approval must be gained from the Divisional Officer (Apena, 1985). Apart from these bureaucratic bottlenecks, planting of oil palms was also complicated and limited by shortage of improved seedlings in stock at the Department of Agriculture. Shortages caused delays, created distortions, and in the process some potential planters resorted to planting wild palm, as was the case in Ughelli in 1937 (NAI, Ughelli District File 391).

The plantation scheme in the Western Delta as was in other parts of Nigeria failed in spite of the enthusiasm of the Department of Agriculture. As a possible means of stimulating the local farmers to accept the plantation scheme the Department of Agriculture influenced and advised the government to pass the Cultivated Oil Palm Ordinance in 1935. This ordinance provided that if a farmer registered his cultivated palms with the government, and the oil produced by him from the said farm met the required standard quality, i.e. 5% free fatty acid, he would receive a "full rebate of duty which was in force" (Ekundare, 1973). In spite of this incentive, the plantation scheme failed as it was bedevilled by a number of factors mentioned above.

The colonial government was concerned for the improvement of oil quality in Nigeria and was willing to regulate and ensure quality oil to be exported from Nigeria in order to compete favourably with other major producers of palm oil (Usono, 1974). The oil palm committee recommended the mechanical extraction of oil palm when the government through Department of Agriculture experimented with hand presses. Thus, the Culley hand press was adopted in 1929, and the Dutchscher hand press in 1932 (UAC, 1951). The former had a capacity of five gallons and was sold to farmers for fifteen to thirty-five pounds, while the latter had a capacity of nine gallons and was sold between nine pounds and thirteen pounds. The latter was German-made, but preferred to the former which was English-made. It



had the extraction scale of 10% of the oil content of the fruits, which was higher than the traditional method. Besides, it could extract 65% of the oil in the fruits with a free fatty acid content of one and half percent.

However, the adoption of the hand press was unpopular among the people of the Western Delta largely because most of the producers could not afford it. Not until it was introduced by the government that the people became aware of this “mechanised” system of oil extraction. The hand presses did not help matters as they failed to meet expectations. With the threat of oil export in Sumatra and Malaya, mechanical milling of oil palm was more than desirable. The oil palm committee stressed that the introduction of mills would help to improve the extraction and the quality of oil with free fatty acid content of less than 5%. The committee further suggested that the government should, in the first instance purchase twelve mills.

### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PIONEER OIL MILLS

The recommendations by the special oil palm policy committee was submitted to the government in 1945. In 1946, implementation began with slight modifications. This was influenced by a number of factors. The first was the need for government to study the recommendations thoroughly before accepting and implementing them. Secondly and importantly, 1946 created the best kind of economic atmosphere within which the government could implement a new scheme. It was in 1946 that the government’s new post-World War II policy of restructuring the colonial economy of Nigeria came into effect. This was set in motion through the adoption of the first ten-year plan of development and welfare for Nigeria.

The highlight of this development and welfare plan included the advocacy of the substitution of the British doctrine of colonial self-sufficiency with substantial infusion of British capital in Nigeria, and the need for government to expand substantially its economic roles in the colony, especially in the field of manufacturing and agro-allied industries (Hopkins, 1973). It may be added that the origins of these development in Nigeria post-World War II colonial economy must be sought within the context of the economic impact of the post-World War II radical nationalism which was essentially geared towards attainment of independence for the country (Coleman, 1965; Olusanya, 1964; Ezera, 1964).

In the Western Delta, the implementation of the pioneer oil mill scheme started in 1949, when one Imoniedafe was the clan head at Okan in the Agbarho area. He gave out a parcel of land for the establishment of the first mill at Okan. As usual, the government was formal in its approach. Hence Imoniedafe and the representatives from each of the ten villages that constituted the Agbarho clan signed an agreement to cede land on the bank of river Okan to the government for the establishment of the mill. The consultation with the village elders before land acquisition was in line with the government decision to avoid possible upheavals in the process of payment of compensations to land owners. The Okan mill came into operation in early 1950 with palm fruits from the palm plantation scheme. Several other mills were established between 1952 and 1960 (NAI, File 1308). In the Isoko area, the Ivrogbo mill was established in 1952, while in 1953, that of Ekakpamre was established. Mills

were established in other villages, including Omia in the Udu clan and Asagba in Urhobo land.

## REACTIONS TO THE PIONEER OIL MILLS SCHEME

At the initial stage, reaction to the mills was that of resentment, irregular patronage, and boycott. In most cases, the capacity of the mills could not cope with the volume of production. This problem was general but more prominent at the Asagba mill (NAI, File 1309). Consequently, palm fruits were not crushed on time thereby leading to wastage. To the palm oil producers, this was more than they could bear because of the economic loss. As a result, some producers resorted to the traditional method of palm oil extraction which the colonial administration had earlier discredited. Adding to the resentment of the people was that fruits could be rejected by the staff of the mills alleging that the fruits were damaged in the process of harvesting and portorage. Wild oil palm normally grew to 30-35ft, and were scattered in groves at long distance from the mill site. Hacking the fruits down to the ground in the harvest easily spoiled them. Besides, the spoilage from head portorage increased fermentation. The mode of transport was still "crude," and very few people could afford the bicycle back then. The fruits often did not arrive at the mills in the optimum condition of freshness.

Another area which incurred the wrath of the people was the loss of palm kernel to the mills. This loss undermined the socio-economic arrangement of the family, generally deprived the women of their income, as they 'owned' kernel after the oil extraction. The income the women realised from the sale of palm kernel was integral to the economic wherewithal of the family. Furthermore, soap and pomade manufactured from the palm kernel meant for domestic use was no longer available. Thus, the household economy was destabilized, upsetting the traditional family system. Indeed, the women's role in the economy was degraded when they lived at the mercy of their husbands. Even symbolically, the gift of palm kernel to women from their husbands used to be a manifestation of harmony in the convivial relationship between husband and wife.

People generally feared that the mills encouraged the confiscation of farmland and valuable oil palm trees. This in turn, it was argued, disrupted the perpetuation of a smooth and cordial relationship among the society at large, the goddess of the oil palm trees, and ancestors who were believed to be custodians of oil palm and the land. The people felt they were to stop patronising the mills to keep the gods from visiting anger on the communities by way of pestilence and famine.

Produce buyers were in the forefront in the resistance against the oil mills. They were mostly indigenous business men and were equally affected by the oil mill scheme because they were middlemen of the region or for European firms such as UAC and John Holt, and felt feared losing their commission for oil purchase. In Olomu for example, Chief Utie of Okpare, a prominent oil merchant mobilised his people to boycott the oil mills (Ugbeyavwhren, 1982).

Compensation to land owners and crops destroyed in mill sites infuriated the people. The Okan mill construction was delayed causing delays in the signing of land

leases (NAI, File 1308). Delay in the payment was probably caused because identifying the land owners was difficult, as land was communally owned. Furthermore, the people reacted against the mills because it was feared that they could escalate intraclan land disputes. Compensation paid for land acquired for the mills was sufficient for villages and clans to vie for the the location of oil mills. This was evident during the dispute between Obodo and Omia of Udu clan over the siting of the oil mill (NAI, Kwale District File 1318). In some places, however, the communities did not ask for compensation. This was the case in Ekakpamre mill established in 1953.

However, from the mid-1950's, the response to the mills shifted from resentment to acceptance. They became so popular that some people applied to the Western Nigeria Development Board, for mills to be established in their communities, without compensations from the government (NAI, War Prof. File 1602). This sudden change of attitude could be explained by the growing awareness of the need to produce high quality grade of oil and kernel. Moreso, mills became associated with progress and modernity which helped to enhance the status of the communities they were located in. Furthermore, those who witnessed the British conquest of the region at the beginning of the 20th century feared that any further attempt to overtly frustrate the actualisation of the pioneer oil mills scheme may once again, attract the wrath of British fire power. As it were, as the economic and military consequences came into calculation in time, cooperation with the colonial state became the norm.

It would be ahistorical to ascribe the response of the people to the colonial economic initiatives entirely to missionary activities or improved transportation as Allan Mcphee (1926) and Helleiner (1966), have claimed. The area was generally untouched especially by the railways and major access roads. More significant, perhaps, were the feeder roads constructed by the communities, which provided transportation for the produce. This however does not imply that attempt was not made by the colonial administration to construct some roads in the Western Delta. For example, Agharho was linked to Ughelli in the 1930's (NAI, File 15, 1941/51).

## THE IMPACTS OF THE BRITISH COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL POLICIES ON THE PEOPLE

From the onset, British agricultural initiatives did not have much appreciable revolutionary impact on the economy of the region. With regard to the plantation scheme, its impact on the society was minimal. Nonetheless, its negative impact was that the acquisition of the few acres of land for the establishment of plantation reduced a portion of arable land for food crops in parts of Urhobo and Isokoland. The people claimed that the land leased out by the local people for the plantations were the most fertile areas.

Another area where these plantations had some positive impact on the society was the provision of employment opportunities for the people. Each plantation recruited a number of labourers for planting, weeding and harvesting of palm fruits. Apart from employing people from the villages where the plantations were, they also attracted migrant labourers from the Calabar area. The promotion of labour migration by the plantation scheme helped to promote all forms of social interaction

**Table 2.** Percentage Change in Oil Production by Each Grade/Quality; 1949-1954.

Year	Special Grade	Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Grade V
1949	–	66.4	14.5	12.7	6.0	0.4
1950	0.2	61.3	17.8	14.4	5.8	0.5
1951	6.3	70.8	11.4	7.5	4.0	–
1952	29.6	56.3	7.4	5.2	1.5	–
1953	50.4	38.0	7.2	4.4	–	–
1954	60.9	29.9	4.4	4.8	–	–

Source: Usoro (1974), *The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*. 85

between the various Isoko/Urhobo communities and migrants from other places of the Niger Delta (Aghalino, 1993).

The impact that the mills had over the people was largely limited, because the mills had to contend with operational and teething problems, such as the constant breakdown of machinery, caused essentially by dearth of qualified technical personnel and spare parts. It must be pointed out that the pioneer oil mill scheme brought about some relative changes in the oil palm industry. By advocating the sale of all palm fruits harvested by the local farmers to the mills, and by extension, fostering centralisation of palm oil processing, and by encouraging the sale of fruits largely at specified places i.e. mill sites and buying stations, the mill apparatus altered the marketing of palm oil product. A spin-off effect of the mill scheme, especially after 1949, was that it stimulated the government to establish more palm plantations in the region, although the scheme failed (Udo, 1965).

Most importantly throughout the period in focus, the plantation scheme hardly made any appreciable effect on the production of high quality oil in the region. The poor performance of the mills was caused essentially by the “lack of fruits, inadequate labourers to work on mills and also irregular supply of fruits to mills” (Usoro, 1974). This in turn was partly responsible for the inability of the mills to function at full capacity. This development, it must be stated, clearly faults the claims of the government during the period that the oil mill scheme was capable of making an appreciable impact on the production of high quality oil in Nigeria. It is more plausible to suggest that some innovations introduced by the Marketing Boards between 1949 and 1955 influenced the responses of the farmers to higher productivity. Central to this was the introduction of “price/grade differentials” (Usoro, 1974). This innovation among others helped to improve the quality of oil products in the region, as apparent in Table 2.

Whereas in 1949 there was no production of special grade oil, by 1954, special grade oil has risen to 60.9 percent of the total oil produced in the region. On the other hand, the amount of grade 1 oil produced declined from 66.4 percent of total production in 1949 to 29.9 percent in 1954. Other lower quality oil rapidly declined. The colonial government had introduced the price/grade promotion method earlier to promote the production and sale of cocoa in the then Western Nigeria. What is significant is that this promotion method which failed in Western Nigeria was successful in the Western Niger Delta and some parts of Eastern Nigeria (Yamey and Baner, 1954). The earlier promotion policies which preceded the innovation of price/grade differentials must have been learned from Sumatra and the Belgian Congo where there was a fledging oil palm industry.

I believe that what the colonial administrators could have done is to improve on the traditional method of oil extraction rather than claiming that the traditional method of oil extraction was inherently inferior. This contention must have emanated either from the arrogance of ignorance or the usual colonial prejudice of dismissing all indigenous technological advancements as inferior to Western models.

It is important at this juncture to examine the impact of oil mills on other aspects of the economy of the region. One contribution of the mill scheme to the economy of the people was that it provided employment opportunities to able-bodied young men as the plantation scheme. Each mill employed an average of about twenty-seven indigenous labour force. In some cases, some of these people were recruited from communities where the mills were sited. This was particularly true for the Ivrogbo mill. Given the apparently low employment opportunities from mills, there is no doubt that most of the labour force at this time was engaged in agriculture, trade and manufacturing of crafts while others left the region to other parts of the country in search of greener pastures (Otite, 1975; Essi, 1988). This is not to suggest that mill workers did not contribute to the growth and development of their communities as some of them built block houses, with corrugated iron sheets. In particular, mill workers at Ekakpamre helped their personal friends who were not "wage" workers to raise monetary loans in times of need. Such loans were used by the borrowers to pay taxes and school fees for their children.

Furthermore, as the plantation scheme, the established mills helped to boost the construction and development of feeder roads linking fruit processing areas with fruit-buying stations. A road was constructed link Agbarho with Ughelli (NAI, File 15, Vol. VII, 1941/51). In addition to the construction of roads, bridges were built across the Okan and Ekrethawe Rivers. Most of the roads and bridges are still functional in several parts of the Western Delta.

## CONCLUSION

This paper stressed the importance of the oil palm industry to the people of the Western Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria in general. Its importance is reflected in its multifaceted function in the domestic economy as a source of major revenue to the people. Even before the advent of the British, the oil palm was vital to the people (Buchanan and Pugh, 1955). Indigenous methods were employed to process palm kernel.

With British penetration of the Western Niger Delta in the closing years of the 19th century which culminated in the effective occupation of the region in early 20th century, the colonial administration was first content with the indigenous method of oil extraction. However, with the glut in the world market for palm oil and the stiff competition for high quality oil from Sumatra and Malaya, there arose a need to improve the quality of oil. Between 1920 and 1960, the colonial government introduced several initiatives to achieve the end.

Initially, the reaction of the Isoko-Urhobo people of the Western Delta was that of cold indifference, resentment, irregular patronage and outright boycott. Gradually,

the mechanized mills became accepted as they were seen as indices of modernisation.

I stress that whatever improvement that took place in the quality of oil and palm kernels resulted from the need felt by the people to meet emerging social and economic obligations as payment of taxes and school fees, rather than from the colonial government's initiatives.

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