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Export of Oil Palm Produce from Esan in the Colonial Period

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Abstract

The paper examined the export of oil palm produce from Esan in the colonial period and its impact on the domestic economy. Prior to the formal imposition of colonialism in Esanland in 1900, communally owned oil palm trees grew wild and were found everywhere in Esan land. Palm oil and palm kernel were used to meet the basic socio-economic needs of the people. In addition, they served as means of exchange and measures of value. The imposition of colonialism in Esan, like in other parts of the country, expanded export of palm oil and palm kernel. They were needed for the industries in Europe for the manufacturing of soap, candles, margarine, cooking fat, pharmaceutical products, livestock feeds and as lubricants for industrial machines. The need for cash in the newly introduced “monied” economy made women to abandon the growing of needed food crops. Instead, they concentrated on the processing and trading in oil palm produce. This development had implications for the domestic economy. It was argued that although many women benefited and were empowered from the processing and the trading in oil palm produce for export, the domestic or traditional economy suffered.

Key Words: Oil palm produce, export, industries, domestic economy. Cash economy. Colonial period

Introduction

One of the immediate effects of the imposition of colonialism and the subsequent introduction of foreign or export trade in Nigeria was the emergence of dualism in the economy of the country. In addition to the traditional sector, which was predominantly subsistence, was the modern sector, which was oriented towards foreign or export trade (Ekuerhare, 1971: 21). The colonial government promoted the production of those cash crops that were needed in the metropolitan market such as cocoa, rubber, coffee, cotton

and palm produce. This development was in line with the primary objective of the British colonial rule in the country, which was to use the country as an agricultural colony to produce raw materials for the British industries as well as to provide market for the products of the industries (Watts, 1983, p. 22).

In Esan, as in most other parts of southern Nigeria, it was the men who were encouraged to cultivate the new cash crops. Women were left in the traditional sector to produce much of the foodstuffs for the survival of the family and by extension, the society at large (Unumen, 1988: 252). However, the need for cash in the newly introduced “monied” economy made many women to also abandon the growing of food crops for the more modern occupations, such as processing and marketing of oil palm produce for export that yielded the needed cash. This situation had negative implications on the traditional or domestic sector of the economy. The main focus of this paper is the implications of the export of oil palm produce from Esan on the domestic economy in the colonial period.

Esan is an Edo sub-group, which is located to the north-east of Benin City, the capital of Edo State. The area is coterminous with the present day Central Senatorial District of Edo State (Unumen, 2012, p. 413). With a landmass of about 1,859.2 square analysed 5353, the area is currently made up of five local government areas, namely: Esan-West, Esan-Central, Esan-North-East, Esan-North-West and Igueben in Edo State (Ukhun and Inegbedion, 2005, p.129). The area is bounded on the north by Etsako-West and Akoko-Edo local government areas of Edo State, on the east by Ika and Oshimili local government areas of Delta State and on the south by Uhumwode and Orhionwon local government areas of Edo State (Okoduwa, 1997, p. 1).

Esan people speak a language, which is also known as Esan. Esan language is a Kwa sub-division of the Niger-Congo language family (Ojugo, 2004: 2). Esan people are generally believed to manifest the closest cultural and linguistic similarities to the Bini people. Although Ishan was used in the colonial period for the people, this was due mainly to the inability of colonial officials to pronounce the original name correctly. The fact remains that the name of the land and people remain Esan (Okoduwa, 1997, p. 22).

The Pre-colonial Economy of Esanland

Although the pre-colonial economy was basically subsistence to meet the basic human needs of the people, they produced as well for export to neighbouring settlements. Agriculture was the mainstay of the pre-colonial economy of the area. The society was strictly divided along sex lines, which were the bases of role allocation. With regard to the economy, some economic activities such as the processing of palm oil were internally divided. Others were sex-specific. Women grew maize, melon, cocoyam, groundnut, pepper, beans of various types and vegetables, which were considered as “women’s crops” and the men would have nothing to do with them because they were considered to be beneath their social standing. On the other hand, the men specialised in cultivating yam, which was the major staple crop. Similarly, the major traditional cash crops, such as kola-nut were also exclusively reserved for men (Unumen, 1988, pp. 30-31).

Women also dominated the local industries. With the exception of iron smiting, women exclusively controlled other industries such pottery, mat weaving, weaving of the popular Esan cloth and processing of agricultural produce, including palm produce. In addition, the marketing of surplus produce in the local markets was an exclusive economic activity of women (Unumen 1988, pp. 30-37). The most popular, widespread, and, perhaps, most important female industry in pre-colonial Esan was cloth weaving. Apart from its utilitarian value of providing cloth for both men and women for various purposes, Esan cloth served as a means of exchange, a measure of value and means of storing wealth at various times (Unumen, 2013, pp. 82-83).

Processing of palm oil was a major economic activity in the area. Palm trees grew wild and were communally owned. They were found all over the ethnic landscape (Unumen, 1988, p. 31). The area, which forms the northern part of the Nigerian rain forest region (Okoduwa, 1997, p.1) was very conducive for the flourishing of the oil palm, which is known to be found in humid tropics and the coastal belt of West Africa (Berger and Martin, 2013, p.1). According to Okoduwa (2007:32), the general spread of palm trees all over the ethnic landscape was due to human activity, which dispersed the seed after eating the fruits, and birds and rodents that carried the nuts from their primary areas to other places.

Since palm trees grew wild and did not require any tending, they were regarded as common property and belonging to everybody in the community. As a consequence, any male could harvest any ripe palm-nuts in any part of the community. The only exception was that farmers had temporary rights over the oil palm trees that were in their yam farms as long as the yam crop remained to be harvested from the land (Okoduwa, 2007, pp. 33).

Materials and Method of Palm Oil Processing in Esan

The processing of palm oil was essentially a family affair in Esan in the pre-colonial period. However, and, as Usoro (1974, p. 91) has stated, in the five major stages involved in the preparation of palm oil, namely, harvesting, preparing the fruits for boiling, de-pulping, extraction and the supply of wood and water for boiling, all but harvesting were women activities. Nevertheless, children of both sexes assisted the women in the different stages involved in palm oil processing.

The knowledge of processing palm oil in Esan is of great antiquity and no one knows exactly how or when it came about (Unumen 1988: 31). The men cut the ripe and fresh bunches of palm fruits from the palm trees by climbing the tree with a loop of rope known as *efe*, made from palm fronds and cutting off the palm bunches with a cutlass. According to Berger and Martin (2013, p.1), each bunch of palm fruits weigh 10 kilograms (kg) or more and contain more than a thousand individual fruits similar in size to a small plum. Palm oil is obtained from the flesh of the fruit covering the kernel. After harvesting, bunches were collected in one spot. To allow for natural fermentation so that the fruits could be easily picked off the bunch, the bunch was divided into a few sections, the sections were then heaped together, analysed and covered with leaves for three days or more. The women thereafter picked the fruits from the thorny bunch section and transported the fruits home for the actual processing (Unumen, 1988, p 32).

To extract oil, the fruits were boiled and then put in a large wooden trough (*oko*) for trampling or mashing. The women mashed the soft fruits with their feet. It was not uncommon for children of both sexes to also help at this stage of the manufacturing process (Unumen, 1988). Next, water was poured in the trough, mixed thoroughly so that while the nuts and fibres sank, the scum would settle on top and would later be ladled into a pot. This was repeated until the scum had been thoroughly extracted. The nuts were spread in an open space to dry; the fiber too was dried and used as fuel for fires. Then the scum was boiled over a fire in a large pot until all the water had evaporated. The pure oil would then come to the top of the pot while the impurities settled at the bottom of the pot. (Edeko, 88).

After processing, the man would give a proportion of the oil and kernels to the wife or wives who processed the oil as compensation for their labour (Unumen, 1988: 32). The pure oil belonged to the husband while the oil residue, the kernel and its by-products, belonged to the woman as payment for her labour. The residue or impurities was also very important. When the pure oil was removed, the residue at the bottom of the pot was dried and when dried was highly inflammable. This was known as *okherekpe* or *okherele* or *anele*. It was used by the women for making local candles known as *ukpobor* for use at night. As will be seen in the fifth section of this paper, colonial intrusion altered this pre-colonial arrangement. Women started to buy palm bunches from men who were not their husbands for commercial processing. In that case, the oil and kernels belonged to the women. Although this new arrangement did not result in a re-distribution of processing activities between the sexes, it favoured the women who prospered greatly from it (Unumen, 1988, p.172).

The Importance of Oil Palm Produce in Pre-colonial Esan Society

In the pre-colonial era, oil palm produce was used to meet the basic socio-economic needs of the people. The oil palm was an all-purpose crop in pre-colonial Esanland, as in some other parts of southern Nigeria. The trunk of the tree was used in building houses, the vines were used for making brooms and the palm frond was used for making baskets and ropes. The fibre extracted from palm oil processing was used as fuel by the women. The palm tree was tapped for palm wine, which was a traditional drink required in traditional ceremonies, including, marriage, burial and age grade ceremonies. Palm oil had a wide range of uses. It was used in making delicacies and as ingredient in some of the various customary starch foods such as *awuoka*, *osisinapo*, *okwuoka* and *ekaaka* (Otaigbe, 2013).

Palm oil was also a basic ingredient in the preparation of the popular black soup. The whole ripe fruits were employed. First, the ripe fruits were washed and boiled. Next, the fruits were pounded and mixed with water to form a paste. The water was sieved out while the kernel and the fibre (*imo*) were thrown away. The grinded bitter leave, *usiria* leave or *uromihen* leave were added. All other soup ingredients such as fish, meat, onions, spices, salt, and seasoning were then added. The soup was boiled for 25 minutes and allowed to simmer for a further 15 minutes. The soup was served with pounded yam or *eba* (Otaigbe, 2013).

Palm kernel was used for the processing of the popular Esan pomade known as *uden*. After cracking, the seeds were put in a pan and gently heated until the dark coloured palm kernel oil was fully extracted. When it was cool, the oil was transferred into small

containers for use as both body and hair creams. According to Okoduwa (2007, p.33) the local cream served as an adequate protection for the skin during the extreme weather months of the hamattan. The oil was medicinal, too, for it was used for various ailments. Mothers used *uden* to reduce body temperature of children in feverish conditions.

Palm oil was also used in the manufacturing of local soap. Local soap manufacturing was also an exclusive preserve of women. The soap was manufactured by elderly women. The manufacturing of soap was decentralised throughout all the villages in Esan. In the manufacturing of soap, palm oil was mixed with other ingredients such as the ashes from some special plants such as *oran olu-oboh*, *okha*, *uwenkhuen* and the *jetrapha* plant, de-fruited oil palm bunches (*isusumedin*), incrustation of coconut, *oswoswo* plant and *amenmen* tree and the liquid tapped from *uniabhi* tree. Local soap had many values. Apart from its domestic use for bathing and washing of dishes and clothes, it was used for bathing new-born babies. It was also believed that it had some medicinal qualities. When injected into the anus, it was effective against dysentery (Edekor, 1988).

In the 19th century, when Igbo traders came to Esan for the purpose of buying palm oil for export for the first time, palm oil served as a measure of value. The coming of Igbo traders to the area led to the expansion of trading activities as oil palm produce were exchanged for articles brought by the Igbo traders such as *ozigono* fish and farm implements. By tradition, palm oil was among the items demanded from a prospective husband as dowry for his bride. It also formed part of the items demanded in burial ceremonies, which were popular in the area in the pre-colonial period (Aigbogun, 2013). It was also a means of storing wealth as it could be exchanged for other goods and services. Thus, there is no doubt whatsoever that oil palm produce played important roles in pre-colonial Esan society.

Export of Oil Palm Produce from Esan in the Colonial Period

The industrial revolution in Europe in general and Britain in particular, created a demand for oil palm produce from Nigeria and other parts of Africa for various purposes. Palm oil was used as lubricants for trains and other machines, for the manufacturing of soaps, candles, margarine and as cooking fat. Palm oil was also used for the manufacturing of pharmaceutical products. The residue of palm-kernel was used as livestock feeds (Aghalino, 2000, p.19). It was against this background that palm oil and palm-kernel were some of the earliest commodities exported from Nigeria by the British even before the formal imposition of colonialism in the country (Helleiner, 1966, p. 97).

In Esanland, oil palm production expanded from the late 19th century into the colonial period. Initially, Igbo traders came from Agbor and Asaba to exchange produce from the east for palm oil. Women in Uromi took advantage of the demand for oil palm produce and formed a palm oil guild in the 19th century (Okodua, 1988). They would purchase palm oil from the other markets in Esan and sell to the Igbo traders at Uromi market. In Irukepken market, Benin traders bought oil palm produce, for onward transmission to Benin City. After the opening up of Esan in the first decade of the twentieth century, Igbo traders penetrated the interior and started visiting major

markets to buy oil palm produce. This might have influenced the large preponderance of Igbo settlers in Esan in the colonial period.

In the colonial period, women took the palm oil and kernels to the nearest village market, where they sold them by measure to one of the many of Igbo buyers. The Igbo small-scale traders sold to the bigger middlemen, the majority of who were also Igbo, who then sold to the British trading firms at Ilushi, the Esan river port, by weight. It is pertinent to state that by 1913, three British trading firms, namely: the Niger Company, John Holts and Co., British Cotton Growing Association (BCCGA) had opened offices at Ilushi (NAI, 1914).

The British trading firms initially bought palm oil by the tin but found that so much time and money was wasted in bringing it up to “Produce Export Regulations Standards” (PERS). As a consequence, the trading firms started to buy only by the drum. The drums were on the firms’ premises at Ilushi and were allocated to the bigger middlemen who filled them from tins collected from the markets. The firms did not buy until the drum was full and passed by the examiner for export. On the other hand, kernels were sold by weights and the firms bought parcels of any size (NAI, 1941).

The figures concerning the volume of trade in oil palm produce in the early colonial period are not available. However, available evidence suggests that by 1912 there was increasing trade in palm oil and palm kernel in Esan. The 1912 Nigerian Handbook revealed that there was “an increasing trade in palm oil and kernels with the Jekins on the river Osio and in palm kernels...” (NAI, 1912). Benin Provincial Annual Report of 1914 stated that Esan palm oil was of excellent quality but not produced in sufficient quantities for export (NAI, 1914).

Increased demand coupled with increase in the price of palm produce motivated the men to harvest more palm bunches and the women to process more palm oil and palm kernels. For example, in the period 1911-1913 and 1924-1920, the price of palm oil rose by 17.3% relative to that of crops such as copra and groundnuts. From 1929 to 1936 the price of palm oil relative to that of the copra and groundnuts rose by an average of 16.5% (Usoro, 1974).

In Esan, from the figures of British trading firms, an export of 1,082 tons of palm oil and 4,579 tons of palm kernels was recorded in 1932. Production decreased to 302 tons of palm oil and 2,000 tons of palm kernel in 1936 (NAI, 1938). It must be remarked, however, that the export figures of the British trading firms are inadequate for examining production in the area. To buttress this point, in 1937, the District Officer, Mr. A. P. Pullen, explained that the decrease was due to the fact that:

A large quantity of purchase in April, 1937 still remains unsold as the purchases are awaiting a rise in prices which is not likely to materialize... An outlet for sale of oil has been found by some traders in Oshogbo who find a market in Nigeria, people purchasing for local consumption (NAI, 1938).

Palm produce export from Esan was 49 tons of palm oil and 2,683 tons of palm kernels in 1938. This increased to 499 tons of palm oil and 3,202 tons of palm kernels in 1939. Explaining this increase in palm produce trade, the District Officer reported that trade actually went up by 8.5 per cent in palm kernels purchases and 97% in palm oil, despite the fact that the 1939 prices were lower than those of 1938. He,

therefore, explained that “the increase in purchases was due to relaxation of 1938 hold up” (NAI, 1939). Thus, one would agree with Usoro (1974, p.72) that, to a very large extent purchases depended on the controlling powers of the middlemen over producers, their control over the marketing of product and over producers, the producers’ ignorance of produce price and their allegiance to their middlemen. Usoro (1974, p.72) also argued further that “the export supply curve with a kink mainly reflects the direct effect of middlemen’s expected profit level and F.O.B. price fluctuation on his supply decision, rather than the direct effect F.O.B. price fluctuations of producers’ output” (Usoro, 1974, p.72).

In 1940, purchases in Esan jumped to an appreciable 1,082 tons of palm oil and 4,579 tons on palm kernel. The purchases of 1941 for both palm oil and palm kernel decreased to 725 tons and 4,260 tons respectively. As from 1942 the purchases of palm oil continued to rise. From 971 in 1942 it rose to 4, 287 tons in 1944. However, palm kernel purchases started to increase from 4,260 tons in 1941 to 4,699 tons in 1942. In 1943 it dropped drastically to 154, 796 lbs. The purchases decreased further to 80, 647 lbs in 1944 (NAI, 1942).

TABLE: PRODUCE INSPECTION – GRADING FIGURES, ISHAN DIVISION

YEAR	PALM OIL	PALM KERNEL
1932	1,082 tons	4,579 tons
1936	302 tons	2,000 tons
1937	481 tons	3,486 tons
1938	49 tons	2,683 tons
1939	499 tons	3,202 tons
1940	1,082 tons	4,579 tons
1941	725 tons	4,260 tons
1942	971 tons	4,699 tons
1943	4,181 tons	154,796 lbs
1944	4,287 tons	80,647 lbs
1947	N. A.*	4,017 tons
1948	N. A	4,646 tons
1949	N. A	5,627 tons
1950	N. A	5,185 tons
1951	N. A.	4,707 tons
1952	N. A.	5,222 tons
1953	N. A.	5,664 tons

1954	N. A.	5,274 tons
1955	N. A.	5,533 tons
1956	N. A.	5,939 tons

*N. A. means Not Available

Source: Computed from National Archive, Ibadan (N. A. I.), Annual Reports and File I D. 943 “Palm kernels Produce Grading Inspection Grading Figures”.

In a memorandum to the Resident, the District Officer, Mr. A. U. Scallon, advanced several factors for the shortfall in production of palm kernel. His report revealed that the output of the division could be increased by at least 60% if all the nuts available were cracked and sold. One of the major factors identified as operating against potential increase in purchases was “the absence of direct contact between producers and exporters” (NAI, 1942). The women believed that they were not getting a fair deal from the middlemen. As the District Officer put it: “rightly or wrongly the women are convinced that they are not getting a fair deal from the middlemen and this conviction operates against maximum production” (NAI, 1942).

Another factor, as identified in the memorandum, was the produce export regulation, which provided that produce be picked and dried properly. The women were reluctant either to pick and dry their kernels properly or to wait at the store while they are spread and inspected by produce examiners. Women also distrusted purchase by weight. Women wanted to return to the old system of buying by measure (the bushel and half bushel). According to the memorandum, “there is a general conviction that buying by weight was introduced solely in order to deprive the illiterate seller of the knowledge of whether she was getting the right price”

A third factor identified as operating against maximum production was the introduction of the “palm oil press”. While the palm produce trade had always been a woman’s business, the presses were owned by men who found the work of cracking kernels too un-remunerative. There were, in consequence, large accumulation of kernels at all presses in the Division (NAI, 1942).

Another factor, which could be advanced to explain the decrease in purchases of palm kernel in Esan at this period was the shift to other more lucrative businesses, such as the processing of rice and cassava. Prior to the 1940’s, the women collecting and cracking palm kernels were ready to continue to do this even at low prices since it was their only opportunity to obtain income. Once less arduous and more profitable opportunities appeared, women readily seized them. Thus, the shortfall was partly a result of the rational economic behaviour of Esan women, which in turn was a reflection of the rapidly expanding opportunities opened to them in the processing of garri and rice in the period of the 1940’s. One consideration in the production of palm kernels was “whether the hard work of cracking is commensurate with the price if there are easier ways of earning money” (NAI, 1942).

In the period 1949-54, there was a positive change in the export production trend for Nigerian palm produce. Export production of palm oil and palm kernels increased at an average yearly rate of 140,348 tons and 20,026 tons respectively. This represented an annual average increase of 7.6% and 5.8% for palm oil and palm kernels respectively

over the period 1949-54 (Usoro, 1974). In Esan, a noticeable increase was recorded in palm kernel purchases from 1949. From 4,646, tons in 1948, sales increased remarkably to 5,627 tons in 1949. Between the period 1949 and 1956, with the exception of the 1951 sales, which were low at 4,707 tons, palm kernel trade in Esan stood at 5,000 tons and above. A peak was reached in 1956 when the purchases were 5,939 (see table). Although figures for palm oil for the same period are not available, it is not totally out of place to estimate that since export of palm kernel increased, the production figures for palm oil equally increased since it is the same process that resulted in the two by product of oil palm processing.

The increase in total production was to some extent a reflection of the rise in price of produce. Between 1946 and 1947, there was a 50% increase in the price of palm kernel. Another increase took effect from 12th of March, 1948 when palm kernel price became twenty-one pounds, fifteen shillings per ton (Commerce and Industries Department, 1948).

Closely connected with the increase in producers' price was the re-organisation in marketing, which in turn resulted in stability of price of produce. Usoro (1974: 74) argued that improvement in processing methods and in marketing organization "revolutionized the pre-war pattern of palm products export production and laid the foundation for a second phase of export production consistent with the changes made".

The re-organization of the marketing system was instituted with the creation of the Nigerian Oil Palm Produce Marketing Board in 1949, which re-organised purchasing arrangements. Unlike the pre-war period when oil palm produce was purchased by middlemen and sold to foreign merchants, purchases were made by the marketing board through their licensed agents (Usoro, 1974). The Boards adopted a system of seasonal produce price announcements at village levels, the establishment of buying depots in or near villages and the competitive buying of products at the village level. As a result, the producers became familiar with prices of products, which no longer tied them to the controlling powers of middlemen (Usoro, 1974: 74). These were definite incentives, which motivated producers and induced increase in production.

Impact of Export of Oil Palm Produce on the Traditional Economy

It has been argued that colonialism represented liberation for women in Esan from the oppressive and dehumanising patriarchal system of the pre-colonial era (Unumen, 2012, p. 414-440). The period 1940s to 1960 was particularly a period of economic empowerment for Esan women, who, more than ever before, entered into the modern sectors of the colonial economy. The processing and marketing of oil palm produce was one of the major economic activities. This was due, in part, to the changes that took place in the pre-colonial arrangement, which enabled women to buy palm bunches from other men that were not their husbands, processed and made profits from the business. This was different from the traditional arrangement, which made processing of palm produce a family affair and the women got only little for their labour.

Many women who benefitted from the changes that occurred in the pre-colonial economic arrangement bought land, rubber and cocoa plantations from the men. For example, Apere Oboigba from Ekpoma bought a cocoa plantation in 1954. According to her, "I got the money from the profit I made from the processing of oil palm produce"

(Oboigba, 1988). Another woman, Anna Otaigbe, had also accumulated enough money that in 1959 she bought two parcels of land (Otaigbe, 1988). Others bought rubber plantations and/or built cement block houses, roofed with corrugated iron-sheet. This development represented social change because women were forbidden from owning houses and land in the pre-colonial patriarchal system in Esan (Unumen, 2012). Some women used the profits they made from processing and trading in oil palm produce for educating their female children who otherwise would not have gone to school because it was believed that educating a female child amounted to economic waste. This development resulted in positive changes in the status of women as educated women were well respected both in their husband's families and their families of origin (Unumen, 2012).

Notwithstanding that many women benefitted and were empowered from the processing and trading in oil palm produce for export, it had negative implications for the domestic or traditional sector of the economy. It has been pointed out that although agriculture was the mainstay of the colonial economy in Nigeria, the colonial government focused attention mainly on cash crops for export. Research and extension services were directly more "rigidly at the export commodities to meet the right quality of raw materials for the British industries" (Akande, 2003, p.14).

In Esanland, when the colonial government promoted the improved production of certain cash crops such as cocoa, cotton, palm oil and rubber, only men were encouraged, trained and provided those cash crops. Also, when the colonial government introduced improved palm seedlings in the area, in order to encourage high production, only men received seedlings. Palm seedlings were first introduced in 1928 and by 1939 about 685 farmers had planted 1,537.9 acres of oil palm in Esanland. In 1939 alone, thirty pounds was used to purchase new improved seeds of rice which was eventually distributed to male farmers. Through its agricultural department policy, the colonial government educated male farmers in new improved method of cultivation of those cash crops needed for export. These developments left only women in the traditional sector that produced food crops (Unumen, 1988).

More importantly, perhaps, the emphasis on cash crops production by the colonial agricultural policy meant that land that was hitherto used for food production was diverted to the cultivation of cash crops. This development weakened the solid foundation for the development and improvement of the food sector (Akande, 2003: 16). The situation was critical in Esanland. Esan people were yam producers. As such, yam was regarded as the "king of crops" or the staff of life because it was the staple food crop of the people. According to Okoduwa (2007, p. 133), a shortage of yam caused famine and distress among the people. In a society where women were precluded from cultivating yam, the abandonment of yam production for cash crops needed for export by men meant that food shortages could hardly be avoided. This was particularly so because in the traditional system the women's crops were usually interspersed in yam farms owned by the men. Thus, the neglect of yam production by the men invariably meant that the women had to clear their own farm land for planting women's crops.

The situation became worse when from the 1940s women also abandoned the growing of the needed food crop and moved in their large numbers into the "modern" sector,

which yielded the much-needed cash to survive in a highly monetised economy. Trading as well as processing and marketing of oil palm produce became more lucrative and attractive (Unumen, 2012:89).

This situation worsened the perennial famine described locally as *ukhumun*, which the area traditionally experienced (Okoduwa, 2007, p. 133). In the pre-colonial period, the effect of *ukhumun* was cushioned by the planting of “exotic crops”, such as plantain, maize, cocoyam, fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, and as alluded to, these were regarded as women’s crops, which Esan men considered beneath their status. The abandonment of these exotic crops made the perennial famine, which usually lasted between April to September, worse. The situation became critical in those years that there were draught, locust invasion that destroyed many plants, crop failure or poor harvest (Okoduwa, 2007, p. 137).

Apart from famine and general food shortages, concentration on export of cash crops in general and oil palm produce in particular contributed to the destruction of the local industries, which although dominated by women, met the basic human needs of the people (Okoduwa, 2007: 29-34). These include cloth weaving, making of mat, making of palm oil, soap manufacturing and making of body and hair creams. These indigenous industries suffered a setback with the attendant negative impact on the standard of living of the people. With particular regard to cloth weaving, the destruction of the industry has been traced to many interacting factors including the abandonment of the industry for the more “modern”, more lucrative and less laborious economic activities (Unumen, 2012). Thus, it is easy to agree with Akande (2003), that the destruction of the foundation of food crop production as well as indigenous industries in some parts of the country, including Esanland, is at the root of the food crisis currently being experienced in the country.

Conclusion

The imposition of colonialism in Esan, like other parts of the country, was accompanied by the introduction of export of palm oil and palm kernel. Palm oil and kernel were needed by the industries in Europe for the manufacturing of soap, candles, margarine, cooking fat, pharmaceutical products, livestock feeds and as lubricants for industrial machines. The men were the first to abandon food crop production for the cultivation of cash crops. The need for cash in the newly introduced “monied” economy made women to also abandon the growing of needed food crops. Instead, they concentrated on the processing and trading in oil palm produce. Export of oil palm produce from Esan had implications for the domestic economy. The abandonment of the growing of food crops partly account for the food shortages and famine that were experienced in the area in the colonial period. In addition, the local manufacturing industries that depended on these products including the making of native soap, cream, food seasoning and candles were neglected, and, ultimately, abandoned. More importantly, perhaps, is that the weaving of the popular Esan local cloth was ultimately destroyed.

A basic argument in this paper is that although many women benefitted and were empowered from the processing and trading in oil palm produce for export, the domestic or traditional economy suffered. There is no doubt that the current food crisis being experienced in Nigeria, which has resulted in massive food importation, can partly be explained and traced to the colonial policy of encouraging cash crop

production for export at the expense of food crop production. It is recommended that if Nigeria is to be self-sufficient in food production, a deliberate policy of encouraging food crop production must be mapped out and carried out by the nation's policy makers.

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