



AN OVERVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST AND SECOND WORLD WARS ON THE PALM OIL INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA: IGALA LAND AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Oil Palm Industry in Igala land just like other economic activities was affected by the outbreak of the two World Wars (First and the Second World Wars). The effects were both negative and positive. The War periods were characterized by chaos, anarchy and restiveness. This affected the production, distribution and sale of the oil palm produce, both locally and in the international market. With the World Wars, emphasis was placed on the production of food crops such as cassava as against the oil palm produce. This paper which is based on a historical research carried out in the area, interrogates the impact of these great Wars on the production, distribution and marketing of the oil palm produce in the Igala land of central Nigeria. It posits that while the oil palm industry faced decline as a result of the wars, there was increase in agricultural food production particularly the production of cassava, which provided the much needed starch for some industries.

Introduction

The First and Second World Wars took place from 1914 to 1919 and 1939 to 1945 respectively. The wars were characterized by general insecurity, pandemonium and instability in most parts of the world, Nigeria inclusive. Igala land which is located in the central part of Nigeria was famous in oil palm production. This industry not only employed a substantial number of the people, but was a major foreign exchange earner for Nigeria, especially during the colonial period. In fact, the end of the First World War (WWI) was followed by years of economic depression which led to an era of unrest. Thereafter, the Second World War (WWII) followed suit, not leaving out the fact that colonial economy in Africa and Nigeria specifically had created heated argument. During this period, the colonial economy was affected by the worldwide economic crisis which in turn affected the demand for Nigeria export crops and weakened the purchasing power of territories under colonial domination and control. The two world wars had adverse effects on the oil palm industry as it did on the economy of the world generally. The economy of the world witnessed a great set back which also affected Nigerian export trade including trade in palm produce.¹

The two World Wars had lasting effects on Nigeria's economic development as it affected some of the economic activities such as the oil palm industry. The oil palm industry in Igala land suffered several setbacks during these periods of crises. First, the colonial government laid more emphasis on the cultivation of cassava for starch production needed during the war. Secondly, the diversion of labour to this end affected the demand and production of oil palm produce. This paper examines the impact of the two World Wars on the oil palm industry in Igala land .

The World War 1

The world's first global conflict also known as the "Great War" was fought from 28 July, 1914 to 11th November, 1918. It pitted the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire against the Allied Forces of Great Britain. The term World War I did not spread much until a second worldwide conflict broke out in 1939. Before that year the war was known as the Great War or the World War. It was one of the most violent and destructive wars in European history. Out of 65 million men who were mobilized more than 10 million were killed and more than 20 million wounded.² The whole of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, was under European rule. Great Britain and France controlled the largest colonial empires. Thus, they depended on them extensively for both human and material resources. Going by conservative estimates, well over 4 million non-white men were mobilized into the European and American armies during the war, in both combat and non-combat roles. European combatants used their colonial resources both materials and men to wage the war.³

Nigeria which partook in the war on the side of Britain experienced some setbacks in her economy. During the war, economic peace enjoyed before its outbreak was interrupted. Firstly, the closure of some European markets, lack of shipping

space, decline in the barter terms of trade in African primary exports which stood at 3.7% between 1883-1913 dropped to 3.2% in 1914-1929.⁴ Though the major fighting in the First World War was confined to a relatively limited area, for instance, northeastern France, Western Russia, the Balkan Peninsula, the Alpine frontier between Austria-Hungary and Italy and the deserts of what would later be called the Middle East. But millions of people far from the battle fields felt the effects of the war, people who lived not only at the home front in Europe but also in towns and villages throughout the world

The War brought with it severe fall in the terms of trade between Britain and Nigeria. The loss of demand in agricultural exports particularly in the oil palm trade caused the country severe economic problem in general and Igala land in particular, where the oil palm industry was an important economic asset .the pre war boom evaporated and the people suffered serious income decline. To worsen the situation all able bodied men were mobilized to fight the war on the side of the colonial government and this affected commercial activity negatively.⁵

The war had serious effects on the position of the European firms and those doing business with them. The German trading companies that had been generous in their credit policies were closed down, and the closure ended competition as the remaining European firms capitalized on this to monopolize the market.⁶ All these affected the market prices of Nigerian exports which continued to go downward and did not recover until 1917. The intensity of it was that the European firms slashed down the producer's prices of export crops far below the world market price, while farmers were producing more to secure a greatly reduced amount of imported goods. The European firms were making profits for example the Niger Company made 5-6 times what they were making before the war.⁷

It is important to stress that, Nigeria had become the largest exporter of palm oil and palm kernels in the world prior to the outbreak of the war; both had been very important commodities in international trade.⁸ There was decline in the export of palm oil and palm kernel as attention shifted to cassava production to meet the war time needs. Generally, the First World War period brought untold drastic fall in the prices of palm oil and palm kernels in Igala land. The fall in export commodity prices, led to the elimination or consolidation of several smaller import and export European firms and African alike into larger ones. Only large firms survived and this affected the prices of palm produce as the large firms gained monopoly of the market. This led to protest on the part of Africans against colonial administration.⁹ According to Agih, the production of palm oil was on during the war period, the only problem encountered during this period was that of marketing of the product as the Igbo people who usually came to buy the oil stopped coming during the war period. He further stressed that for the fear of being captured while travelling during the war, the Igala traders could not embarked on long distance trade. Therefore, the price of oil fell drastically and the producers were not encouraged to produce.¹⁰

The World War II

Britain and France declared war on Germany on the 3rd of September 1939 and this second European war was known as the Second World War of 1939-1945. ¹¹In terms of lives lost and material destruction, the Second World War was the most devastating war in human history. It began in 1939 as a European conflict between Germany and an Anglo-French coalition but eventually widened to include most of the nations of the world. It ended in 1945, leaving a new world order dominated by the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

More than any previous war, World War II involved the commitment of nations' entire human and economic resources, the blurring of the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, and the expansion of the battlefield to include all of the enemy's territory. The most important determinants of its outcome were industrial capacity and personnel. ¹²Colonies were dragged into the war to support their colonial masters in fighting as well as providing materials to support the war. ¹³ during the war, the colonial government earmarked a large portion of the Nigerian budget as a contribution to imperial defense.

Lugard took steps to raise additional revenue by taking a uniform tax structure he had adopted in the North to help generate more fund to support the war. This brought with it more hardship compared to that of the First World War. Britain had to mobilize all the natural and human resources available at her disposal in order to prosecute the war. ¹⁴ O. N. Njoku observed that "the war was fought as much in the battle field by the combatant forces as by civilians on the home front, as much by the imperial powers in order to preserve their empires as by the colonized in support of their colonisers. ¹⁵ The colonist were burdened with issues on how to provide both material and moral support to their colonizers in order to attain victory.

In Nigeria, apart from conscripting men to fight the war, farmers were also forced to produce export crops which were most needed during the war to take care of the war needs which they were not party but compelled to be part of. ¹⁶ the traditional institutions in Nigeria were also in support as they compelled their subjects to fight in unity in support of the British cause. The economic hardship experienced during the Great Depression continued into the Second World War. In the words of A.G Hopkins,

The Second World War had a more serious effect on West Africa than the world Depression of the 1930s because of an acute shortage of consumer's imports and because of the abrupt closure of many export markets in Europe. ¹⁷

Nigeria played an invaluable role in the supply of agricultural exports to assist Britain as export good like palm oil, palm kernel and groundnuts were in acute demand in there. ¹⁸ The colonial economic policy during the war shifted according to

the war needs. Starch production became the focus in 1940. This had a serious effect on the production and sale of palm produce. The demand of the war was basically starch which was needed to starch the uniforms of the military service men, to meet this need, emphasis shifted from the production of palm oil and kernel to the production of cassava to meet the immediate need of the war. The people were forced to produce cassava as the demand for palm oil and palm kernel in the export trade declined. In his 1940 broadcast the Governor stated that,

Production of oil and kernels were in excess, one commodity which is not over produced and which in fact is badly needed by the imperial Government is cassava starch. Britain could take 10,000 tons of starch in a year and our duty is to make every effort to meet this need.¹⁹

The above statement by the Governor which directed that attention be shifted from production of palm produce to the production of starch in order to enable indigenous people make contribution to the war was to the detriment of palm produce as attention was shifted to the production of cassava which took more of women's time.

After the war, funds were provided to the Department of Commerce and Industries by the Nigeria Local Development Board to establish 12 Pioneer mills on an experimental basis. The first of the mills was opened in 1946. By 1949 when the Regional Development Boards were established five mills had been brought into operation. By 1960, 145 Pioneer mills had been erected involving public investment of over £2,340,000.²⁰

The Pioneer Oil Mill Scheme ranks as one of the largest developmental projects undertaken by the colonial government in the 1945-1960 era. This also led to the establishment of more oil mills in Igalaland. Including those at Alade, Acharu Egume, Olla and Anyigba.²¹ The presence of these mills affected the participation of Igala women in the oil palm industry in the sense that the mills usually denied women their usual reward of kernel. After processing the oil, the mill owners usually retained the kernels which hitherto rightly belonged to women. According to an oral source, most men preferred to sell off their palm bunches when harvested to the mill directly, instead of passing them through the women to be processed.²²

By this act, women lost their chances of getting palm oil for family consumption and also the palm kernel.²³ generally, the mills were unfriendly to women. As was stated in the previous chapters, women who championed the oil palm industry were not carried along. They were not given adequate attention. When the mills were introduced the men instead of the women were trained to operate the mills leaving the women with the tedious jobs of feeding the palm fruits into the press.

Judging from all these, it was not out of place when A.N. Echa postulated that the difficulties of the mills centered on the short and irregular supplies of fruits, which were sometimes held back and processed by the women using the traditional method which guaranteed them of having their portion than taking them to the mills which denied them their benefits. The women saw the unprofitability of the mills and tried all they could to avoid them.²⁴

Conclusion

The two world wars made Nigerians to suffer untold economic hardship as a result of the strictures placed on the people and the then colony by the colonial government. At the local level, the oil palm industry in Igalaland also witnessed a lot of setbacks during the period. The regime was characterized by hardship, famine and decline in produce prices, especially those of the oil palm produce. The palm produce dealers were left with no other option than to intensify their effort to produce more, despite the low price in order to have enough money to pay the mandatory tax and also to take care of their personal needs

Women whose major income came from the production of palm produce suffered a lot of setbacks as the decline in price left them with little profit from their products. The hardship during the period had never been witnessed before in the history of Igalaland. Though this period also experience the establishment of oil mills in Igalaland, these were not economically favorable to the women as such they were reluctant to accept them.

The introduction of oil mills into the Igala oil palm industry robbed the women who happened to be in charge of processing the oil palm their right to possess the palm kernels which was hitherto theirs prior to the coming of the oil mills. This, to some extent, affected the oil mills and hindered their success as most of them ran out of raw materials which the women withheld from them and preferred to process the palm oil using the traditional method. They did this in order to retain the palm kernel rather than lose it to the oil mills owners. Though the oil palm industry in Igalaland suffered during this period, it is important to note that, the palm industry continued to survive under peasant production as it has been before the onset of the crises.

Endnotes

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