



Women's Role in Palm Oil Production in the Pre – colonial Niger Delta, Ikwerre – Etche Example

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Abstract: *The role of women in palm oil production in Ikwerre and Etche in the Pre – colonial period was unavoidable. Such significant roles were demonstrated in all stages involved in the production process thereby exposing their proficiency in the occupation. The two ethnic groups described as close neighbors share common features responsible for the rich endowment of their environment with oil palm tree which produced raw materials for palm oil. Furthermore, other highlight of the study explains the uses and marketing of the product among the people and their neighbors. However, the effectiveness of women in production of palm oil during the colonial period were influenced by the socio – cultural systems of the people. Historical methods adopted in the study include the use of published and unpublished materials, and oral sources derived through field work.*

Key words: *Palm oil production, Niger Delta, women's role*

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Introduction

In the pre – colonial era, the people of Ikwerre and Etche were dominantly engaged in farming as their traditional economic life. During the period, as there was no Western influence, agriculture played significant role in the sustenance of livelihood. Palm oil productions being an indigenous aspect of agriculture were engaged in by both genders in the production process. But as most writers attributed the occupation of palm oil production to men, our argument remains that women contributed enormously in the production process hence their activities were evident in all stages of production.

Description of the Area, Ikwerre – Etche:

They are distinct group of people and neighbours who share common features in Rivers State. Precisely, the Ikwerre are group of people and an ethnic group that inhabit a substantial part of the northern half of Rivers State. Their spoken dialect is Ikwerre classified under the Igbo group of language. At present, the Ikwerre consist of four local government areas in Rivers State namely: Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor, Emohua and part of Port Harcourt City (Ndimele and Williamson 2002: 152). The territory of Ikwerre is bounded by those of other ethnic groups. To the northern and western part, the Ikwerre are bounded by Ogba – Egbema, Ekpeye and Abua, and to the south by the Ijaw. In the South – west and East their neighbours are the Etche, Tai and Eleme, while in the North – East they are bounded by the Igbo in Imo State.

The physical feature of the area includes an undulating plain watered by the new Calabar River. Ikwerre Land is situated within the tropical rain forest of the coast of Guinea having the south – west monsoon in the wet season (May – October), and the north – West trade wind (November – April) in the dry season. Their vegetation consists of a dense rain forest that promotes the growing of high trees, oil palms, raffia palms and plantain. With this, agriculture in Ikwerre reflects the ecological setting of the people.

Also, the Rivers which flow longitudinally throughout the entire length of Ikwerre bisect the area into two; eastern and western sectors. The eastern sector is bisected by the Port Harcourt Omerelu – Owerri road. While the western sector is bisected by the East – West road linking Rivers State with Akwalbom, Delta and Edo State.

Similarly, Etche is also an ethnic group in Rivers State that consist of present two local government areas, namely; Etche and Omuma local government areas. Their spoken language is Etche, also classified under Igbo group of language (Ndimele and Williamson 2002:153). Etche is located in the northern part of Rivers State and share boundaries with Ikwuruta, Ipo, Omademe, Ubima and Apani in Ikwerre local government area. They also share boundary with Eneka and Rumukwursi in Obio/Akpor local government area. On the northern part, Etche share boundaries with Umuezum, Alulu and Amala in Ngo – Okpala local government area in the present Imo State. Also bounded by are Owuaza and Ngwa in Abia State (Offor 2001:11).

There are vast expanse of land in Etche that promotes agricultural practice. The land is also very fertile and grows forest products like oil palm (*elaeisguineensis*) and other high trees. As a result of this Etche is recognized for her palm produce. Similarly, the area is well watered by *Ogochie*, *Otamiri* and Imo River. The *Otamiri* and its tributary the *Ogochie* are remarkable for the cleanness of the water. However, it is pertinent to mention that in course of research both people (Ikwerre and Etche) agreed on the Igbo and Benin stories of Origin and Migration. But details of such account could not be explained in this piece.

Explanation of Concepts: Women and Palm Oil

In the explanation of Women, Faseke (2001:1) defined Women as adult female persons. This idea explains that the female group possesses some characteristics which make her different. It is on this premise that most enlightened men and women are of the view that there are differences in their natural endowments and each sex has an appropriate field of development and action.

Women are also perceived to be inferior intellectually, emotionally unstable, feeble minded and inherently less assertive. Against this, Makinde, Agara and Ajayi (1992) argued that women possess the traits and features that make them more effective managers in contemporary society. But this idea is a deviation on the ground that, as woman was created from the ribs of a man, it means she was considered as a weaker sex who should be respected and honored.

Scholars like Idyorough (2005:16) also view women as a group of people who suffers from deprivation, exploitation, oppression, domination and subjugation in various areas of endeavor incomparable to men. The consequence of this was the demand by women to secure and depend equal rights and opportunities with men which in other word is called feminism. However, women's agitation for equality and empowerment framework identifies participation, which means having a share or a say as to how things should be done or how the resources available in the society should be allocated. Through participation women from Ikwerre and Etche were actively involved in palm oil processing in the pre – colonial era and equally identified their problems and needs. Even though some women from the area have strived to compete favorably with their male counterparts in all spheres of lives and achieved success in different professions, they are still very few.

Similarly, in African Tradition Religion, Faseke (2001:5) explained that women are regarded to be fragile and weak sex who should be tolerated and directed or manipulated to play whatever role assigned to her. With this a woman appears not to achieve any greatness as a man could achieve. But with proper assessment on the role of women in palm oil production in the study area beginning from the reception of palm fruits from the grove to its clarification the above idea is not in conformity to the reality.

Palm Oil:

Palm oil is one of the products of the oil palm tree. It has a long and important place in the history of Nigeria and the Niger Delta. Despite the overbearing influence of the petroleum oil in the national economy, palm oil is still a major agricultural resources produced in the Niger Delta. (Fwatshak 2012:170). Palm oil (also known as dende oil) from Portuguese is an edible vegetable oil derived or gotten from the Mesocarp (Vedellishpulp) of the fruit of the oil palm (*elaeisguineensis*) (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/palm-oil). It is also described as oil that is obtained from the fruit of some palm trees used in cooking and making soap and candle ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/.....](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/)).

Furthermore, historians described palm oil as the most important product that featured in the legitimate trade after the abolition of trade on human beings. Early in the 19th century, the oil trade had developed and in 1830 became more vital in the Niger Delta as they exported more oil than other West African countries. It is also important to state that during the period; most of the palm oil from Ikwerre and Etche were sold to Bonny (Dike 1965:41-43, Anene 1981:2767).

Also, Orugbani (2005:43) in describing palm oil on its industrial uses explains that it is used in lubricating machines. The product was also useful in the preparation of tin plates especially in South Wales and United States as he expressed that when white hot were dipped in palm oil, it enhanced smoothness and glassy surface of plates. However, it was the high export of palm oil from the Niger Delta that made the region to be known as the “Oil Rivers”

Women’s Role in the Traditional Palm Oil Processing in Ikwerre and Etche Nationality.

There are different stages involved in the processing of palm fruits into palm oil. Among the stages where vital role played by women from the study area include:

- i. **Harvesting of the Palm Fruits:** This is the first step that remains significant in the production of palm oil in any African community. Although, harvesting of palm fruits from the grove or plantation is exclusively done by men.

Picture of a Grove



Source: Field work of Odufor Etche, Date: 6-8-2017

This is because the culture of the people considers it as a taboo when a female sex climbs on a palm tree. (Offor 2014:357). At this stage the duty of women commence when the palm fruit (bunches) are being cut, and with its force of gravity to the ground, there are splashes of fruits from the bunches. As the women carry out the bunches from the grove with their basket or basin, they also picked the splashed fruits. Thereafter, the bunches and picked fruits are arranged separately at home where the actual processing takes place.

- ii. **Threshing:** After the bunches had been conveyed to the milling site (home), the next step where women demonstrate proficiency is the removal of palm fruits from the bunches. At this stage, manual threshing is achieved by cutting the fruit – laden spikelet from the bunch stem with cutlass or machete, thereby separating the fruits from the spikelet’s by hand

(<http://www.fao.org/Docrfp/005/ya3355e04.....>). On this, children from both Sex could offer a paid labour.

Threshing stage



Source: Wenenda Amadi, A native of Rumuekini.

Date: 08-08-2017

Alternatively, the bunches may be allowed for weeks, so that the fruits could be easier to lose when beaten or shaken by women. Through this method, the palm fruits could also be separated from the bunches.

- iii. **Washing of Palm Fruits:** To ensure proper hygiene in the processing of palm oil, after threshing, the loose fruits are carefully washed by women with clean water to remove all kinds of dirtiness or any unassociated particle in the production process.
- iv. **Cooking of Fruits:** This is one of the tedious stages in the processing of the palm oil. The stored fruits are carried by women from the shed to a cooking place. Women took the responsibility of cooking the fruits by boiling them in a big pot called *ite* for a period of one to four hours depending on the quantity of fruits. Cooking could be done in the day or overnight with the help of men (husband or male children) using firewood and empty fruit bunches as sources of fuel to keep burning until when the fruit is considered done. (<http://martinlibrary.blogspot.com.org/2014/07/processingsteps>). Fruit cooking weakens the pulp structure, soften it and make it easier to detach the fibrous material and contents during the production process. Thereafter, the cooked fruits are collected by women and poured into a big wooden mortar *ekhwrenkhwo* for pounding with wooden pestle. During pounding, if the mortar is a bigger sized type, two or three women could pound at the same time.

However, through field work it was agreed that sometimes men also assisted in pounding the fruits. Pounding is assumed to be complete when the mixture of nuts and crushed pulp are obtained (Judith 2017). After pounding, the mixture of nuts and crushed pulp are poured inside a bigger basin. At this stage, there were two methods women adapted to extracting palm oil. Firstly, warm water was mixed with the pounded fruits. Thereafter, the fibers and kernel were extracted. After extraction, the oil is then filtered and cooked before it becomes good palm oil.

(1) Cooking stage



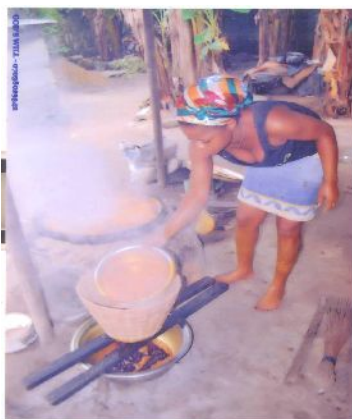
Source Amadi Faith. A native of Rumuekini
Date: 09-08-2017

(2) Cooking stage



Source Amadi Rose. A native of Rumuekini
08-08-2017

(3) Filtering stage



Source: Field work at Egwi Etche
Date: 11-08-2017

(4) Real Palm oil



Source: Field work at Egwi Etche
Date: 11-08-2017

While in the second method, the pounded fruits were poured into a big basin where the nuts and fiber are being separated. At this point warm water was poured into the basin containing the nuts to extract oil that is to be mixed with the fiber. The fiber at this stage is cooked and poured into a bag for pressing to extract the oil. It is after this, stage that clear oil is obtained.

Distribution of Palm Oil

“Production, the economists remind us that, it is not yet complete until the goods get to the consumers (Falola, 1984: 103-104). At Ikwerre and Etche, the distribution or marketing of palm oil took place in the market and also at home.

The wholesale traders bought directly in tins (20liters) from the producers at home, and then sell to the retailers who sold in bottles to household users either at market or at home. On the other hand, the producers also sold to the retailers and household users.

Historically, women dominated in the sale of palm oil in most communities in the area. This was possible because women were better traders and skillful in the art and craft of trade (Olaoba and Ojo, 2014:113 – 114). On trading activities, the women from the Etche in the pre – colonial era transacted with the Igbo people; mainly Oratta, Okpala, Asa, Ngwa, Mbaise etc. to sale their palm oil. While the Ikwerre women sold theirs in markets at kalabari, Okrika, Eleme, Ahoada, Abua, Ohaji and Egbema. Most of those transactions lasted for more than one day depending on the distance whereby the traders slept overnight before returning home. It is pertinent to state that during the period, markets had a cyclic arrangement and organization on that revolved within eight days.

Furthermore, it is based on the conditions of the pre – colonial trade that Ayodele (2000:60 -61), identified two phases namely: the subsistence – oriented trade and the market oriented phase. In the subsistence oriented trade, the women from Ikwerre and Etche were closely associated with agricultural production chiefly dominated with palm oil. Exchange of goods in this phase did virtually no significant impact on the subsistence economy.

While in the market – oriented phase, it witnessed the introduction and increasing acceptance of both indigenous and imported currencies like salt, Brass, copper, Cowries, Manila, British silver and coins which enabled traders to bring in an increasing number of commodities. This phase witnessed a new form of capital accumulation and a new field of consumer demand was created.

Constraints of Women in Palm Oil Production

Women’s involvement in palm oil production as an economic activity of the indigenous people was commendable as it helped in the sustenance of families. But upon their effort, they were faced with some challenges. Among them were:

- I. The patriarchal nature of the traditional society. The norms among the people of Ikwerre and Etche are that men are undisputed rulers and leaders while the women depended on them as a provider. By this condition, the position of women according to Agbo(2009:106) depends on the supreme authority of man for her life. The consequence of this, weakens efforts of women in the promotion of the local industry.

- II. Cultural practice of the people over land ownership Palm tree from which the raw material for palm oil is derived grows in the forest which women from the areas were denied right of ownership. This aspect of the people's culture posed a serious threat to women's welfare in view of their economic empowerment. It therefore implies that palm oil production bywomen depend on the right and approval by men in the referenced nationalities.
- III. Poverty was another major challenge that affected palm oil production by the women. Hence the cultural practice in our society does not permit women to harvest palms based on ownership right, it therefore means that they could buy palm fruits or plantations in alternative. But the constraint remains as explained by Olua (2016:7) that women historically were exploited and formed the down – trodden class, and therefore could not afford enough income to shoulder any economic venture.
- IV. **Land Inheritance:** This is an aspect of violence against women in our society. Among the people (Ikwerre and Etche) inheritance of land is solely restricted to the man. The implication of this was that women were denied the opportunities of promoting palm oil production right from the immediate family.
- V. **The Influence of other Traditional Occupation:** This was a major constraint that affected women in the production of palm oil. As agrarian communities, Talbot (1969:904 – 945) explained that women were fully engaged in farming, salt and soap making, trading, Mat – making, weaving, dying, dress and hair making. In furtherance, the women were also much occupied in other domestic works; such as cooking of food, washing of cloths, cleaning of the houses and compound. The implication was that those occupations made women to give less attention to palm oil production.

Conclusion

Palm oil production in Ikwerre and Etche was a predominant economic activity practiced in the pre – colonial period. As agrarian communities, where oil palm trees are natural endowment, It stimulated the women in the production of palm oil for sustenance of livelihood. The study established that in all the stages examined in palm oil production, the role of women were crucial in achieving the product. This however, nullifies the patriarchal dominance of men in the traditional economic system of the people.

In the explanation of palm oil, inspite of its dominance during the legitimate trade, the domestic and industrial importance were also stated. It is also established that, the duties of women extended to distribution of the products to neighboring communities in Igbo land and the Niger Delta. However, the efforts of women in the promotion of the local industry were limited by socio – economic and cultural practices of the people. In an attempt to revive the local system of palm oil production in the areas, there is need to amend some cultural practices in both Ikwerre and Etche that could embrace the women.

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