

The Oil-Palm Economy and Economic Changes in Uruan L.G.A. of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (1900-1960)

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ABSTRACT

The world economy from 1900 to 1960 was based on several cash crops (cotton, cocoa, coffee, and palm oil), but majorly the oil palm economy, which was termed the 'legitimate trade'. The colonial economy flourished from proceeds from the trade in palm oil and other oil palm produce. Oil palm production had long been a traditional practice in the Uruan area. However, the early 20th century saw a surge in oil palm production in response to increasing demand for palm oil and palm kernels in both domestic and international markets. The oil palm economy in Uruan during this period was shaped by various factors, including colonial influences, technological advancements, and global market trends which have not been captured by literature. Based on the aforementioned, this paper employs the historical methodology of narration and analysis and gleans information from oral and written sources for its presentation, showing that in spite of noted challenges such as indigenous land tenure practices, manual labour, stiff competition from rival communities and fluctuating global prices, oil palm production created manifold employment opportunities for local farmers and labourers and also contributed to rural development. The export of palm oil and palm kernels also improved the living standard of local communities and generated considerable revenue, which

enhanced the overall economic development of Uruan within the period under review.

Keywords: Oil Palm Tree, Oil Palm Economy, Economic Changes, Uruan

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the oil palm industry in the 19th and 20th centuries marked a critical economic change in many parts of Africa, including the Uruan clan of the lower Cross River region. From 1900 to 1960, the oil palm economy in Uruan underwent significant transformations that impacted the economic landscape of the region. Oil palm cultivation and palm oil production have long been a traditional practice in Uruan; however, the 20th century saw a surge in oil palm production in response to increasing demand for palm oil in both domestic and international markets. Villages such as Idu, Ifiayong Usuk, Adadia, Ibiaku Uruan, Mbiaya, Ituk Mbang, and Ekpene Ukim, amongst others, were notable for their intense involvement in the production and subsequent sales of palm oil and palm kernels in the area, mostly through the Nwaniba port to commercial firms such as the United Africa Company (UAC), John Holt Company, Mandillas and Kalabaris (M. & K.), Griffigths, and Frazier and Shepherd, which operated in colonial Nigeria in the area.¹

Furthermore, the oil palm tree played an important role in the economic life of the people. For instance, its frond was often used for building fences and racks for storing farm crops; its trunk was utilised for building houses; brooms were obtained from its ribs; its oil was used as food and for lighting houses; and oil extracted from its kernel, called *mma-yanga*, was used in most cases as medicine.² After extracting the oil from the palm fruits, the fibre left was used as firewood.³ Most of the palm oil plots in Uruan were communally owned since the palm trees grew wild, though some were cultivated. Palm trees that grew in some residential areas were harvested by the residents.⁴ When palm oil and kernel began to attract the attention of the European traders, Uruan people sold the palm products to European trading agents who visited their coastal areas at Ikpa, Nwaniba, Esuk Ikot Etuong, Issiet Inua-Akpa, Issiet Ekim,

¹ Dominus Essien, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*. (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 1993), p. 7

² *ibid.*, 38

³ Okon J. Etim, "Economy and Social Change in Colonial Uruan", (B. A. (Hons) Long Essay, University of Cross River State, Uyo, 1988), p. 6

⁴ Dominus Essien, "The Traditional Economy of Uruan", An Unpublished Private Manuscript as Cited in Dominus Essien's *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, p. 38

Anakpa, Eman Ukpa and others, where the products were taken to Calabar for sale or exchange for European goods.⁵

Despite being a significant economic sector during this period, there is a lack of comprehensive research and analysis on the development, growth, and impact of the palm oil industry in Uruan during the specified time frame. The absence of a thorough examination of this crucial industry hampers an understanding of the economic dynamics, social implications, and historical context of Uruan's economic development during the first six decades of the 20th century. To understand the economic history of the palm oil industry in Uruan and the factors that contributed to its successes and failures, there is a need for a comprehensive study that would provide insights into the challenges which faced the industry in terms of the industry's sustainability and competitiveness.

In Eno J. Usoro's *The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry: Government Policy and Export Production 1906-1965*. The author discusses the derivatives and the importance of the oil palm tree and the policies and practices that shaped the development of the industry.⁶ The book also explores the social and economic impact of the industry on Nigerian society, particularly in the areas where oil palm production was concentrated. Usoro analyses the various challenges that the industry faced over time, including competition from other producers, changing market demands, political instability and the responses of industry leaders and policymakers to these challenges and how they adapted to changing circumstances.

Samuel O. Aghalino's monograph titled *British Colonial Policies and the Oil Palm Industry in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, 1900-1960*, provides a historical analysis of British colonial policies and their impact on the development of the oil palm industry in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The author argues that British colonial policies played a critical role in the growth of the oil palm industry, with the government providing support through measures such as land acquisition, tax incentives, and infrastructure development.⁷

Kenneth Onwuka Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* is widely recognised as

⁵ Dominus Essien, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, p. 38.

⁶ Eno J. Usoro, *The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry: Government Policy and Export Production, 1906-1965*, p. 97.

⁷ Samuel Ovuete Aghalino, "British Colonial Policies and the Oil Palm Industry in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, 1900-1960", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (2000), p. 19.

a seminal work in African historiography. As one of the first major African-authored scholarly texts on African history, it marked a significant intellectual turning point in the writing of African history by challenging Eurocentric narratives and foregrounding African agency. Dike's work focuses on the intricate interplay between commerce and political power in the Niger Delta during the transitional period from the Atlantic slave trade to the era of "legitimate" commerce, culminating in the imposition of British colonial control.

At the heart of Dike's thesis is the assertion that African societies (specifically the trading states of the Niger Delta) were not passive recipients of European economic and political influence. Instead, they actively negotiated and adapted to, and sometimes resisted, external pressures, particularly those stemming from shifting trade dynamics and growing British imperial interests.⁸

"Production for Trade", a chapter written by Richenda Scott in the book *Native Economies of Nigeria*, edited by Margaret Perham, focuses on the pre-colonial economic system of Nigeria and the role of production for trade.⁹ Scott argues that production for trade was an essential component of the pre-colonial economy of Nigeria, as it facilitated the exchange of goods and services both within and outside the region. The chapter provides a detailed account of the various goods produced for trade, including goods such as palm oil, kola nuts, and cotton, and how they were exchanged through market systems.

Joseph P. Ekarika's *Uruan-Efik Essien Duopeba: Akwa Ibom Evolution and Origins/pre-History and Heritage of the Other Ethnic Nationalities* offers a comprehensive exploration of the historical and cultural evolution of the Uruan and Efik peoples of Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State, Nigeria. Drawing from extensive archival research, oral traditions, and anthropological studies, Ekarika provides a nuanced narrative that situates these communities within the broader context of southeastern Nigeria's ethnic and cultural landscape.

Ekarika's work is grounded in a meticulous examination of the migration patterns, settlement histories, and socio-political structures of the Uruan and Efik peoples. He traces the origin of the Uruan people to the Rio del Rey region near the Cameroon-Nigeria border, highlighting the waves of migration that led to their settlement in the Cross River Basin and eventual establishment in present-day Akwa

⁸ Kenneth Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (London: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 3

⁹ Richenda Scott, 'Production for Trade' in Margaret Perham (ed.), *Native Economies of Nigeria* (London: University Press, 1946), p. 240.

Ibom State.¹⁰ The author employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating linguistic analysis, archaeological findings, and oral histories to reconstruct the trajectories of these communities.

A significant portion of Ekarika's analysis focuses on the cultural institutions that have shaped Uruan and Efik societies. He delves into the roles of traditional societies such as Ekpe, Ekong, and Nka, examining their functions in governance, socialisation, and conflict resolution. The study of Ekpe, in particular, is noteworthy. The author explores its evolution from a local institution to a pan-ethnic symbol of authority and cultural identity. He also addresses the complex interplay between indigenous belief systems and the introduction of Christianity, detailing the syncretic practices that emerged during the colonial period. Ekarika also engages critically with ongoing debates regarding the ethnic identity and historical narratives of the Uruan and Efik peoples. He examines competing origin stories, including those that position the Uruan as a distinct ethnic group separate from the Ibibio and those that assert their integration into the broader Ibibio cultural milieu. By presenting these perspectives, Ekarika provides a balanced view that acknowledges the complexities of ethnic identity formation in the region.

Dominus Essien's seminal work, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, offers a comprehensive examination of the Uruan people, an ethnic group situated in southeastern Nigeria. Essien delves into the origins, cultural heritage, and socio-political evolution of the Uruan people, providing valuable insights into their historical trajectory. Essien employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating oral traditions, archaeological findings, and linguistic analysis to reconstruct the history of the Uruan people. He challenges prevailing narratives by presenting alternative theories on the group's origins and migrations.

Essien posits that the Uruan people originated from East-Central and Southern Africa, migrating in successive waves to the Rio del Rey region near the Cameroon-Nigeria border.

He identifies Uruan Akpe (modern-day Idomi) as their initial settlement, where they established a robust socio-political structure. The first Batanga War in the 8th century AD prompted their relocation to Akani Obio Uruan, situated along the Cross River. Subsequent ecological challenges, including frequent flooding, led to further

¹⁰ Joseph P. Ekarika, *Uruan-Efik Essien Duopeba: Akwa Ibom Evolution and Origins/pre-History and Heritage of the other Ethnic Nationalities* (Lagos: Harmographic (Nig.) Company, 2020), p. 29.

migrations, culminating in their present-day settlement in the Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.¹¹

Anthony Hopkins, in his research *An Economic History of West Africa*, offers a comprehensive study of the economic development of West Africa from the pre-colonial era to the early 1970s. The book explores the major economic systems that emerged in the region, including the trade in gold, slaves, and other commodities, as well as the growth of colonialism and its impact on the region's economies. Hopkins highlights the impact of European powers on West Africa's economies, particularly the effects of colonialism on local industries and trade. He also examines the emergence of new economic systems and structures, including the development of cash crop agriculture, industrialisation, and the growth of international trade.¹²

An Economic History of Nigeria in the 19th and 20th Centuries by Onwuka N. Njoku is structured chronologically, starting from the pre-colonial era and progresses through the colonial period to post-independence Nigeria. The author emphasises the economic dynamics and transformations that occurred during each era, shedding light on the interplay between indigenous economic systems, colonial interventions, and post-independence economic policies.¹³

The pre-colonial section of the book explores Nigeria's diverse regional economies, trade networks, and agricultural practices. Njoku examines the impact of the slave trade on Nigeria's economic development, as well as the growth of trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic trade routes. The author also discusses the role of indigenous institutions, such as the Hausa-Fulani emirates and the Igbo market system, in shaping economic activities.

Moving into the colonial era, Njoku examines the economic consequences of British rule in Nigeria. The author explores the expansion of cash crop agriculture, the establishment of infrastructure, the growth of mining industries, and the exploitative nature of colonial economic policies, including the export-orientated nature of the Nigerian economy and the neglect of local industries.

The post-independence section of the book delves into the economic challenges faced by Nigeria after gaining independence in 1960. It examines the impact of oil

¹¹ Dominus Okon Essien. *Uruan People in Nigeria History* (Uyo: Modern Business Press Ltd. 1993), p. 3.

¹² Anthony Gerald Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Longman Printing Press, 1973), p. 11

¹³ Onwuka. N. Njoku, *An Economic History of Nigeria in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Printing Press, 1988), p. 13.

discovery and subsequent dependence on oil exports, which led to the neglect of other sectors and the emergence of economic imbalances. The author also discusses the role of government policies, corruption, and the impact of global economic forces on Nigeria's economic development.

Despite existing works on the oil palm industry in Uruan and the region's history, none have focused on 'the oil palm industry in Uruan' as their central theme. Furthermore, the varying periodisation of existing works has created a lacuna in Uruan's economic and general history, underscoring the need for this research.

Environmental determinism posits that the physical environment plays a significant role in shaping human societies, cultures, and behaviours. This theory suggests that the natural environment, including factors such as climate, geography, and natural resources, determines the course of human development and the characteristics of societies. This concept has its roots in ancient Greece, where philosophers such as Aristotle and Hippocrates discussed the relationship between environment and human societies. Several other scholars have contributed to the development of environmental determinism. Some notable advocates include Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), a German geographer, who argued that the physical environment plays a crucial role in shaping human societies and cultures.¹⁴ Ellsworth Huntington, an American geographer, was another prominent advocate of environmental determinism. He argued that climate is a key factor in determining the characteristics of societies and cultures.¹⁵ Griffith Taylor (1880-1963), an Australian geographer, was also a strong proponent of environmental determinism. He argued that the physical environment determines the potential for human settlement and development.¹⁶

Though critics argue that environmental determinism overemphasises the role of the environment and neglects the impact of social, cultural, and economic factors on human societies, environmental determinism remains a relevant theoretical framework in understanding the relationship between environment and human societies. It is even more relevant in this study because it is the environment that determines and ensures the availability of resources in a given geopolitical entity. Without the oil palm tree in Uruan, the people would not have been involved in the production and eventual trade in oil palm produce.

¹⁴ Friedrich Ratzel, *The History of Mankind* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1896), p. 6

¹⁵ Ellsworth Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915), p. 3.

¹⁶ Griffith Taylor, *Geography in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Philosophical Library 1951), p. 11.

METHODOLOGY

This research was based on a multidisciplinary method of historical writing; hence, information was obtained from various disciplines, including history, economics, political science, geography, and anthropology. The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources were subdivided into two categories: oral traditions and archival documents relating to colonial activities in southern Nigeria. As oral information was found to be not completely dependable, materials from written sources were used to supplement the oral evidence collected. These written sources constituted the secondary sources of information for this research. They included published works, such as textbooks on various topics related to the research subject, and unpublished works, such as theses and other research projects carried out in related areas. The advantages of this integrated research methodology include the opportunity to collect data in depth, to provide comparative perspectives on how the Uruan people respond differently from other Ibibio areas in varying ecological niches, and to explain their varied responses to the transformation of the oil palm industry that came with colonialism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous Traditional Economy of Uruan

The primacy of economy is underscored in any human society.¹⁷ It provides the bedrock for both material and intellectual culture of humankind. Man is basically a *homo economicus* which, means that man is an economic being.¹⁸ Walter Rodney in his book *how Europe underdeveloped Africa*, states that the economy is an “index of other social features.”¹⁹ B. H. Hodder and Roger Lee also assert that a lot of social and political interactions are economically induced.²⁰ It is the economy that nourishes and sustains a people, lubricates their historical experiences, and informs the general prospects for their future.²¹

Farming, fishing, hunting, local industries, and trading were the mainstay of the Uruan economy in the pre-colonial and colonial eras. At first, the Uruan people planted crops like *enem*, *eka-udia*, *eko-akpana*, and *edomo*, which were types of yellow

¹⁷ Ini Etuk, “Ibibio Indigenous Economy” in Philip Afaha (ed) *Witness to History in Honour of Sir Sebastian J. Umoren* (Abuja: Command Publishers, 2015), p. 275

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bougle L’ouverture Publications, 1972), p. 10

²⁰ B. W. Hodder and Roger Lee, *Economic Geography* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 104

²¹ Ini Etuk, “Ibibio Indigenous Economy” in Philip Afaha (eds.) *Witness to History*, p. 275

yam obtained by the people through their local efforts.²² Other crops cultivated by the Uruan people included *okoti*, *nsama*, *ibaba* (local beans), and vegetables like *udot*, *ikong ubong*, *iko*, *ntokon*, and *akpana-mkpong*. It is important to note that the aforementioned crops were obtained by the Uruan people in pre-colonial Nigeria through their local initiatives²³ Palm trees were also cultivated, though in most cases, they grew wild and were used by the people for their economic advantage.

Certain species of yam, banana, plantain, cocoyam, beans, etc., were introduced to the Uruan people from Southeast Asia and from America via the Cape of Good Hope, Sudan, Egypt, or Equatorial Africa.²⁴ The introduction of Southeast Asian crops made it possible for the Uruan people to increase the variety of their cultivable food crops. This also resulted in increased food production in Uruan.

Following the contact of West African peoples with the American and Caribbean peoples, certain species of cassava, maize, breadfruit, coconut, mango, and other food crops were introduced to Uruan.²⁵ As was the case with Southeast Asian crops, the introduction of American and Caribbean food crops to the Uruan people significantly developed the traditional economy, apart from improving their eating habits and nutritional values.

Also, the standard rotation period for farming was about seven years in order to preserve the fertility of the soil. Between January and early March, many farmers usually grouped themselves into *ntem* groups or bush-clearing societies. On a specific day, *ntem* members grouped themselves and cleared bushes belonging to members. Raffia palm was an important economic tree in Uruan. It was used for the production of palm wine, both for drinking and for selling. Some quantity of palm wine was used for brewing indigenous drinks like *ufofop*.

The oil palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*), which also grew in Uruan, played an important role in the economic life of the people. For instance, its frond was often used for building fences and racks for storing farm crops; its trunk was utilised for building houses; brooms were obtained from its ribs; its oil was used as food and for lighting houses; and the oil extracted from its kernel, called *mma-yanga*, was used in some cases as medicine. After extracting the oil from palm fruits, the fibre left was used as firewood. Besides the oil palm tree, there were other economic plants such as coconut and cocoa, but they were of less significance in the economy of Uruan during the pre-

²²Okon J. Etim "Economy and Social Change in Colonial Uruan", p.6

²³Dominus Essien, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, p.3

²⁴*ibid*

²⁵*ibid.*, p. 34

colonial and colonial eras.²⁶ Soap making and bag production were also among the economic engagements in Uruan.²⁷

Oil Palm Economy in Uruan

Oil palm, scientifically known as *Elaeis guineensis*, is a monocotyledonous tree belonging to the family *Palmae* and the subfamily *Coccoideae*. It is native to West Africa, but is now cultivated extensively in tropical regions around the world, particularly in South-East Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The oil palm is a highly versatile plant, providing a wide range of products including edible oils, biodiesel, and industrial goods. The plant is monoecious, with separate male and female flowers (inflorescences) on the same plant. Cross-fertilisation is achieved through successive cycles of male and female flower production.

The oil palm produces bunches of fleshy fruits, which are reddish-orange in colour when ripe. The fruit is a drupe, consisting of a thin outer layer (exocarp), a fibrous mesocarp, and a hard-shelled endocarp that contains the seed or kernel. The pulp (mesocarp) of the fruit yields a solid, edible, orange-red oil called palm oil. The endosperm or kernel yields a clear, yellowish oil, which is also edible and solid, known as palm kernel oil.

Palm oil and palm kernel oil are important in world trade due to their versatility and wide range of applications. Palm oil is used primarily as a cooking oil, but also in various food products such as margarine, ice cream, and baked goods. It is also used in non-food products such as soaps, cosmetics, and candles. Palm kernel oil is used in a similar range of applications, but is particularly valued for its use in the manufacture of soaps, detergents, and cosmetics.

In addition to their use in food and non-food products, palm oil and palm kernel oil are also significant in the production of biofuels. The high yield of oil per unit area of land and the low cost of production make oil palm a promising source of biodiesel—a renewable fuel that can replace diesel fuel derived from fossil fuels. The cultivation of oil palm for biodiesel production has the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on fossil fuels.

The oil palm industry in Uruan is as old as the history of the Uruan area in present-day Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, dating back to the pre-British era. Few wild trees hold such economic and social value to Uruan farmers and the traditional economic system as the oil palm tree. The oil palm is believed to have originated in

²⁶Okon J. Etim “Economy and Social Change in Colonial Uruan”, p. 6

²⁷*ibid*

the tropical rain forest region of West Africa. Before the establishment of British rule, Uruan had developed an economic system which revolved, to a large extent, around the oil palm.

Nigeria was the largest producer of palm oil and kernel for the world market at the beginning of the 20th century, with all the produce coming from wild palms. In the Uruan area, oil palm flourished wildly, and many peasants were involved in the collection, processing, and marketing of its products for centuries. The bulk of the palm products were obtained from individual homesteads that were scattered throughout the producing areas of the region. Production was in the hands of small peasant farmers, who used traditional methods to extract oil from the palm fruit.

During the 19th century, Britain underwent a period of significant industrialisation, which necessitated a reliable supply of raw materials. The British government, in line with its policy of colonialism, had established colonies in Africa and other parts of the world to secure resources for its burgeoning industries. The transatlantic slave trade, which had previously been the mainstay of the British economy, was abolished in 1807, leading to a shift in focus towards the acquisition of raw materials from Africa. Consequently, trade in products such as palm oil, which Europeans valued highly as an industrial lubricant, replaced the trade in humans. Thus, palm produce became important in the second half of the 19th century. The development of the railway, which required palm oil as a lubricant, also increased the demand. Moreover, palm oil was used for the manufacturing of soap, candles, margarine, and as cooking fat. In addition, the residue of palm kernel was fed to livestock, while palm oil itself was used in the production of pharmaceutical products.²⁸

The oil palm industry had been a vital component of the economy long before British colonialism in Uruan. However, British intervention and their investment in the industry led to the expansion of the trade. Thus, when British agents eventually penetrated the hinterland, the exploitation of oil palm became their paramount motive. Uruan was brought inexorably under the vortex of the Western capitalist system and, *ipso facto*, was engulfed in the capitalist economy. This meant that agricultural production for export became the foundation of the new economy. In a sense, agricultural products for British industries became a British colonial economic preoccupation, and such products now became the chief contributors to Nigeria's gross

²⁸United Africa Company (UAC), 'The Future of the Nigerian Oil Industry'. African Affairs, 47, (1948)

domestic product. Put differently, Uruan, as well as most parts of West Africa, entered into what A. G. Hopkins described as the “open” phase of colonial economic development, meaning the entry of the economy into the phase of the Western capitalist economic model of colonialism—exploitation. Of course, this implied changes in the patterns of production and commodity exchange (trade).²⁹

British control of Nigeria's economy led to significant positive and negative changes in the agricultural sector. The British focused on cash crops, particularly oil palm, as a means of generating foreign exchange. On the positive side, the British introduced modern methods of cultivation, processing, and marketing. They built roads and railways, which facilitated the transport of oil palm from the hinterland to the coast. This led to increased production and export of oil palm, which contributed significantly to Nigeria's gross domestic product. On the negative side, the British prioritised the export of raw palm oil rather than the production of value-added products such as soap, candles, and margarine. This prevented Nigeria from developing its own palm oil industry and forced it to rely on imports of these products. According to Uwem Akpan, after the slave trade era came the so-called “legitimate trade.” The Ibibio were major players in the “legitimate trade,” supplying British firms with the bulk of the palm oil they needed to consolidate their industrial economy. It is worthy of note that Ibibioland, during this time, had the largest belt of oil palm trees in the world. For this reason, the area contributed significantly to making the region now known as the Niger Delta become known as the Oil Rivers Protectorate during the colonial period.³⁰ He further explained that the oil trade followed the route established in the lower Cross River region during slave trade era. Before the hinterland of Ibibioland was opened to European firms, products were sent to the port of Calabar through a relay process where they were then exchanged with the Europeans or their agents. But with the imposition of colonial rule and the subsequent opening of the interior by colonial agents, ports were opened.

Associated Changes

The oil palm economy brought significant economic changes in Uruan between the years 1900 and 1960. During this period, Uruan experienced a transformational shift in its economic structure due to the emergence of the oil palm industry. The oil palm

²⁹A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*. (London: Longman, 1973), p. 14

³⁰Uwem Akpan, “Economic Diplomacy in Ibibioland: The Pre-colonial Perspective”, *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 12, No. 1, January – March, 2018

tree proved to be well suited to the fertile soil and climatic conditions of Uruan.³¹ and the region's abundant rainforest provided the ideal environment for cultivating it. The oil palm plantations in Uruan became a source of significant wealth and created a vast network of economic activities and changes.

One of the economic changes that occurred as a result of the oil palm economy was the expansion of trade networks both within Nigeria and internationally.³² Uruan became a crucial node in the supply chain, where palm oil was processed and then exported to various markets around the world through different ports and beaches in Ikpa, Nwaniba, Esuk Ikot Etuong, Issiet Inua-Akpa, Issiet Ekim, Anakpa, Eman Ukpa, Adadia, Esuk Odu, and so on. Thus, Uruan metamorphosed from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture and export trade.

Again, the economic prosperity brought about by palm oil production led to the development of transportation infrastructure such as roads and ports, facilitating the movement of goods and linking Uruan with other regions.³³

The oil palm economy also led to the emergence of small towns and cities. Villages like Ikpa, Idu, Issiet, and Ifiayong became booming towns due to the volume of trading activities with neighbouring communities and the European companies through their ports.³⁴

The production and trade in palm oil created increased job opportunities for the people. The work of milling oil was tedious; thus, millers and even farmers employed youths as extra hands to assist in the cultivation and subsequent milling of the produce. Additionally, other derivatives of the oil palm tree provided various job opportunities. For example, the wine from the oil palm tree was tapped by a tapper and sold to palm wine sellers, who in turn sold it to final consumers. The palm fronds used for building (roofing) and construction also brought to the fore carpenters and builders, etc.

The oil palm economy also brought about technical and mechanical advancement, as the people sought skills and equipment that would reduce their labour while increasing their yield. In addition, the Europeans introduced machinery and

³¹ Dominus Essien, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, p. 34

³² An interview with Micheal Bush, 52years, Editor of the Bush House Publications, Akwa Ibom, at his residence in Ewet Housing, Uyo on 16th January, 2024

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ Dominus Essien, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, p. 35

equipment for milling into the area in the late 1940s.³⁵ One of such (the hand press) according to professor Ndon is still found in Mbiaya Uruan.³⁶

The rise of the oil palm industry also brought about changes in land use and agricultural practices. As palm oil became more profitable, farmers in Uruan shifted their focus from subsistence crop production to cultivating oil palm trees. This transition resulted in increased productivity and income for farmers, as the oil palm industry offered better financial prospects than the traditional subsistence agriculture hitherto practised.³⁷

Furthermore, the oil palm economy stimulated the growth of ancillary industries in Uruan. Palm oil processing mills, palm kernel crushing factories, and soap manufacturing units were established to support the production and market demand for palm oil-based products³⁸. Soap manufactured from the oil palm tree at this time was called *oton ekpe eyop*, obtained from the ashes of the empty fruit bunch. These industries provided jobs for both skilled and unskilled labourers, contributing to the local economy and improved livelihoods.

The growth of the oil palm economy in Uruan also had implications for the wider economy of the region. The production and export of palm oil generated revenue that contributed to the economic development of Uruan and improved living standards for local communities. Smallholder farmers benefited from the oil palm boom by selling their produce to processing companies or middlemen, further integrating them into the economic system.³⁹

Again, because of the wealth acquired by farmers, chiefs, and middlemen through the palm oil business, many of them were able to send their children to school, thereby entrenching and promoting education in the area.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The oil palm economy brought significant economic changes to Uruan between 1900 and 1960. It played a crucial role in transforming Uruan's agriculture, economy, and society. While the oil palm industry brought numerous advantages such as increased

³⁵An interview with Bassey Ndon, a Retired Lecturer of University of Uyo, Faculty of Agriculture @78years at His Residence On 6th February, 2024

³⁶*ibid*

³⁷Dominus Essien, *Uruan People in Nigerian History*, p. 39

³⁸*ibid*

³⁹An interview with Micheal Bush, 52years, Editor of the Bush House Publications, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, 16 January 2024

⁴⁰An input by Dr Ini Etuk on one of my visits to his office on 13th April, 2024

income, improved living standards, and employment opportunities, it also faced challenges and criticisms related to environmental sustainability, dependence on foreign markets, manual labour, and issues of land ownership.

Despite these challenges, the oil palm economy remained a driving force behind the economic changes in Uruan from 1900 to 1960. The industry's resilience and adaptability, along with the resourcefulness of local farmers and labourers, ensured its continued growth and importance in the region's economic landscape. The oil palm economy in Uruan not only provided livelihoods and sustenance for local communities but also played a crucial role in shaping the history and future trajectory of the region.

This study reinforces the relevance of environmental determinism as a guiding theoretical framework. The natural environment, particularly Uruan's fertile rainforest ecosystem and the native presence of the oil palm tree shaped the economic practices and historical evolution of the region. It was the environment that made the oil palm economy not only viable but central to the livelihoods and societal transformation of Uruan. In this way, the local geography and ecological resources directly influenced patterns of production, trade, and economic adaptation over time.

Understanding the historical developments of the oil palm economy of Uruan, through the lens of environmental determinism, provides valuable insights for present-day efforts in sustainable agricultural practices and economic development, especially in regions where natural resource endowments continue to shape economic opportunities and limitations.

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