

FROM SLAVES TO PALM OIL

Slave trade and palm oil trade
in the Bight of Biafra

G.I. Jones



CAMBRIDGE AFRICAN MONOGRAPHS 13

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CHAPTER 1

The traditional economy

I. Subsistence agriculture and local trade

In studying the economy of south-eastern Nigeria it is necessary to be on one's guard against the published opinions both of social anthropologists and of colonial historians. The former (e.g. Dalton and Bohannon) have sought to make their African material fit the economic models derived from the study of other more primitive or prehistoric societies and have defined West African societies as subsistence economies in which markets were peripheral. The latter have assumed that the overseas trade of Nigeria in the precolonial period was a system of barter, because that was what their sources called it.

In Nigeria, as in other parts of Africa south of the Sahara, the bulk of the population would seem always to have been rural rather than urban and distributed in local communities which produced the bulk of their food. This kind of agriculture can be called subsistence inasmuch as its goal was self-sufficiency in its food supply. It does not however mean that Nigerian village agriculture is a form of primitive shifting cultivation. Wherever they have been studied in detail, Nigerian systems of agriculture have been shown to be very sophisticated, the result of centuries of experience which have produced rotational systems, which make the most economic use of the land, labour and materials that are available to the cultivator. These systems vary according to the locality, being affected by differences in soil, rainfall and other ecological conditions as well as by demographic and social factors.

Agronomists have also tended to accuse the African farmer of resistance to change. This is certainly not the case in eastern Nigeria. The factor for which these experts make no allowance is that the Nigerian farmer and his family have to produce enough food to support a large group of people and cannot therefore afford to take risks. My work in eastern Nigeria has consistently proved that where the demand justified it people were prepared to change, but that the change was initiated by those who could afford to do so. These were not the farmers initially, but the government agricultural research departments and following them the business men with capital to risk.¹ Indeed the past history of the region shows that people living in places which favoured the production of a considerable surplus of a particular commodity changed or modified their agricultural system in order to produce it if the demand was strong enough, and in the case of really scarce items like salt and fish protein

¹ A recent classical example of its kind was the introduction and development of rice growing in Abakaliki. An earlier example was the development by Ibibio and southern Ibo villages of the systematic production of palm oil and kernels.

were prepared to abandon agriculture and move into areas where they could concentrate their labour on the exclusive production of such items and buy the vegetable food they needed.

It was certainly not an economy in which exchange was based on barter or one in which (as suggested by Bohannon) the role of money was not properly understood. Money played a significant part not only in the market but in other fields as well; for example marriage depended on the payment of bride wealth, which was assessed and largely paid in money as were fines in criminal cases and damages in civil ones. As in medieval Europe, there were different currencies and accounting devices in different areas and for different purposes but traders had no difficulty in using or exchanging all of them and in deriving a profit from so doing. I have distinguished elsewhere² between native and trade currencies; the former being the cowrie currency of the Central Sudan and the Lower Niger and the iron currencies further east and south, and the latter the various standardised imports used in the overseas trade of the Gulf of Guinea. But again as in medieval Europe there was a chronic shortage of ready cash and therefore a great reliance on credit, though the attendant risks were reflected in the accepted rates of interest, which were normally 100% per annum. The only security most borrowers could offer were their rights over land or over the members of their households and these were regularly transferred, the transactions being known locally as 'pledging' in the case of land, and 'pawning' in the case of people. In both cases the transfer was in lieu of interest on the loan. The creditor had the use of the land or the pawn became a member of his household until the debt was repaid. Pawning was prohibited by the colonial government who considered it a form of slavery, which it was not. Land and people could also be sold to meet a family's or lineage's debts. This however was exceptional in the case of land. In underpopulated areas there were cheaper ways of acquiring it; in the heavily populated ones it was considered a sacrilege to alienate family land and most communities in these areas forbade it. The sale of people was said to be common 'in the old days', particularly in the case of criminals and troublemakers, but also by poorer families who could not meet their debts.

Again it seems odd to suggest that markets or the 'market principle' were only of peripheral importance in this part of Africa, which has for several centuries been dependent upon a very substantial export trade, first in slaves and then in palm oil and where almost every able-bodied adult woman was and is dependent for her cash income upon market trading. Nor was this system of trading introduced by Europeans. Portuguese accounts show that it was already in operation in the Rio Real area when they first visited it.

² Jones, 'Native and trade currencies'.

In its simplest form the economy of a community in eastern Nigeria was based on the subsistence agriculture of its men and women to produce the bulk of the food for their households. With this went some measure of individual specialisation to produce additional commodities which he or she could sell in the local markets for cash or credit with which to buy the things they needed. Some of these things could be supplied by other people in the community, most were produced within the neighbourhood or not too far from it, for example pottery, woven mats or superior types of baskets, but some things were only to be found in particular places, for example minerals like salt or ironstone, special supernatural powers believed to be innate in some local native spirits or in ritual offices, special crafts like blacksmithing, doctoring or divining. Once an adequate system of communication had been built up and particularly in the case of the ritual beliefs and practices, once a demand for them had been created, people from the communities which were so favoured specialised in exploiting these resources and either produced them for local sale to visiting traders, who retailed them in areas where there was a demand for them, or in the case of craftsmen, themselves travelled to operate in these areas.

This movement of goods and services produced in turn additional specialisations like those of the host, the guide and the trade caller. Travel in a region devoid of any strong central authorities, where every town or village was virtually independent and likely to be in a state of quiescent if not of active hostility with its neighbours, could only be managed by those who had collectively built up a system which secured them a safe passage along the routes they would be travelling. After leaving the neighbourhood of his home town, the traveller spent each night of his journey in the home of a 'host' who provided him with food and accommodation and on the following day with a 'guide' who was related to the communities along the route and who could safely lead him on the next stage of his journey and deliver him to another host. This process was repeated until the traveller reached his destination, when he lodged in the home of his final host until he had completed his business and was ready to retrace his steps to his home town. If his business was trading, he visited each day one of the markets in the neighbourhood. If he was practising a craft, he depended on a 'trade caller', a man who acted as his local agent and put him in touch with those who required his services. All these people were regarded as his 'friends' and their services were rewarded by gifts in cash or the equivalent in kind. These gifts had a standardised value and provided the members of towns and villages lying along the principal trade routes with a modest but by no means negligible income.

The system that developed in the southern and populous areas of eastern Nigeria, which for convenience can be referred to as the Niger-Cross River hinterland, was one in which there was almost universal part-time

specialisation on the small-scale production and local marketing of commodities that were easy and cheap to make or obtain from hunting, collecting, gardening and animal husbandry. A considerable part of the production and most of the marketing of them was in the hands of the women. There were also people who had moved into some areas so that they could be fully employed in the exploitation and export of their special resources; for example the waterfolk of the coastal estuaries and the Niger, who were engaged in fishing and smoke-drying their catch, or in the coastal estuaries in fishing and in making salt from boiling sea water. Scattered throughout the area were deposits of superior clays and small communities of potters (women) to take advantage of them. There were outcrops of lateritic iron and communities of iron smelters working them along the Eastern Highlands and the Ohaffia ridge as well as in the Egede hills and other parts of the eastern plain. Underlying this plain were saline deposits and wherever these came to the surface there were salt boilers (women) to make use of them. For example at Uburu (north-eastern Ibo) and Opoma (Iyala); on the Cross River at Nkum and Mamfe and north of the Benue at Keana.

Some communities, again lacking any natural resources of this sort specialised in crafts both secular, like working in wood and metals, e.g. carvers, canoe makers, blacksmiths, brass smiths; and magico-religious, e.g. doctors, who were also diviners, and 'priests'. Both were believed to have special knowledge and techniques for manipulating supernatural power for the benefit of their clients, the doctors through processes which were mainly magical and medicinal, the 'priests' by enlisting the power of the spiritual being to whom they ministered. Most towns and tribes had such tutelary deities, 'jujus',³ who watched over the well-being of their local community. Many of these 'jujus' had powers which could also be invoked by people outside the community and the most valued of these was the bestowal of fertility upon women (and upon animals and crops) and the determination of the truth in socially disruptive litigation. One or other of the parties could be challenged to invoke the deity to prove the truth of his claim. These were the so-called 'oracles'. Most were believed to cause a perjurer or one of his close relatives to die within a specified period; some, and these were the ones later suppressed by the colonial government, were said to kill him immediately and he was never seen alive again by his people. The best known of these in the nineteenth century were the Agbala 'juju' of Awka (Nri Awka Ibo), the Amadioha 'juju' of Ozuzu (Etche Ibo) and the notorious Chuku Ibinokpabi, the 'Long Juju' of Arochuku whose 'power' was extended by its priests throughout the region from the Niger to the Cameroons. The 'Long Juju' and

³ From the French 'joujou' toy. Now the accepted Nigerian English term for any magico-religious cult or object.

most of these judicial oracles were also invoked for fertility purposes. A 'juju' that was widely famed for fertility but not in recent times for judicial powers was Igwe Kala of Umunoha (Isu Ibo) and in the same Isu tribe was the oracle Ntubu of Ubomini, which kept within the colonial law since its decision was indicated through the administration of a poison to a chicken which was substituted for the person who invoked it. The Awka 'juju', which was probably developed as an imitation of the 'Long Juju', was overshadowed in importance by the cult of the Eze Nri. The powers associated with this cult were derived from Nri, the ancestor of the Umunri clan, and were believed to be immanent in his reincarnation the Eze Nri, the ritual head of the clan. His 'servants' were able to make use of them to nullify the effects of a breach of a tabu or to destroy cults or medicines which had become dangerous to their owners.⁴

This commercialisation of the powers of local divinities and the retention of magical and religious practices through travelling priests and doctors was a characteristic mainly of the Ibo and of Ibo drawn especially from two special areas and from particular communities in these areas. One was in the west and included the towns of Aguku Nri, Awka and Nkwerri, the other in the east and particularly the Arochuku and Abiriba tribes. These were also the areas in which secular crafts were concentrated. The Ibibio did not travel any distance, except in the case of the riverain group and then only by water. They made use of the 'Long Juju' of Arochuku but also had their own oracle, a fetish or medicine called Mbiam, which was not commercialised but distributed throughout the area and was from all accounts very efficacious; there were very few Ibibio who were prepared to perjure themselves on it. Ibibio doctors were organised into two categories, Idiong and Ibok, each with its own divining techniques, and were grouped into associations or secret societies on a neighbourhood basis which cut across tribal and village affiliations. Idiong ranked as the most prestigious of Ibibio societies as it admitted to its membership wealthy men who though not practising as doctors and diviners were initiated into its mysteries on payment of high entrance fees.⁵

Ibo ritual and secular crafts and professions were not mutually exclusive or restricted to particular descent groups, guilds or other associations. Recruitment was mainly by apprenticeship and the apprentice was rarely the craftsman's

⁴ During most of the colonial period the office of Eze Nri in both Aguku and Owerri towns was in dispute and therefore vacant, but this did not affect the work of his 'servants'.

⁵ Because of their power, i.e. influence, Idiong societies during the colonial period found themselves frequently accused by non-members of occult and criminal practices, e.g. the 'leopard murders' in Abak in 1944-45, but these accusations were never substantiated.

own son but usually the son of a cognatic relative or friend. There was nothing to prevent a successful craftsman or trader who could accumulate sufficient capital or credit diversifying into trading in scarcer and more valuable commodities, or into other entrepreneurial activities. Thus we find communities famed for particular skills engaged in other crafts as well, with these skills or ancillary specialisations extending to other towns in the immediate neighbourhood. At the same time it was very difficult for people of other neighbourhoods, particularly those in the areas in which these crafts were operating, to break into these professions or trades; they lacked the connections and the know-how, and visiting craftsmen and traders were determined to maintain as far as they could their monopoly of these professions. To the layman this professional expertise was a form of magic only available to those to whom its mysteries had been vouchsafed. In the Kalabari myth relating to the dispersal from their family home of the deities of various Rio Real communities, the magic for trading with Europeans was embodied in a charm represented as a piece of paper (a 'book') which was given to the Kalabari goddess. The deity of Bonny tried to take it from her and the paper was torn in the struggle, leaving the larger portion with him. As a result the Bonny people were able to obtain the greater share of the trade.

Whatever the reason, we find communities of professional traders and other craft and ritual specialists confined almost entirely to these two areas, Nri-Akwa-Nkwerri and Arochuku-Airiba. These were not centres of trade or local industry; their craftsmen had their homes there but spent most of their working life elsewhere. In this as in many other critical features the trading and commercial organisation of south-eastern Nigeria differed markedly from that of the Hausa north or Yoruba west and of Benin City. There the pattern, the organisational principle, was one of centralisation and the maintenance of a separation between town and country. Power and wealth were concentrated in the city, the centre of government, of trade, of industry and of religion. People of the same trade or craft were grouped together in guilds or quasi descent groups (Ogbe in Benin City) which occupied their own wards of the town. In the case of Hausa cities, foreign traders were segregated in their own separate quarter. Trade and local industries were to a considerable extent under the control of the state. Markets were of two kinds, urban and rural. The former were held daily; they were concerned with wholesale as well as retail business, and they supplied the urban population with part of its food. Rural markets were scattered at some distance from each other and from the city and were held periodically; their main function was to provide a forum for local petty trade, for the distribution of cheaper goods brought by traders from the urban market and for the sale to these urban traders of foodstuffs for this market and of anything of value that might be available locally.

In the Niger-Cross River hinterland conditions were different. There were no states powerful enough to exercise control over commerce or industry. Trade was free and there were no market taxes or other controls. There were no urban centres until these were created by colonial rule, and there were therefore no urban markets. On the other hand there were, particularly in the populous areas, a vast number of rural markets, almost every town or sizeable village having one. These markets were hardly 'fairs'; they were held too often and are better distinguished as weekly markets since they were held on a particular day in a week of eight days. As neighbouring markets took care to have a different day from that of their neighbours this meant that most Ibo or Ibibio women could expect to have a market in their own village every eighth day and another market within easy walking distance every other day of the week.

With this proliferation of markets went a much greater dispersion of trade and the progressive breaking down of imports into quantities that were small enough to be handled in the petty trading sector of these markets, and a similar bulking up of export produce obtained initially from the producers in equally small amounts. The principal agents in the chain between the producer and the consumer were the petty trader, the itinerant trader and the wholesaler.⁶ There were no concentrations of commerce and industry in the big centres of population in the Niger-Cross River hinterland as there were in Benin, Oyo, Kano or, until the Fulani destroyed them, in the Igbira towns. Markets, particularly in the populous areas, were very large if measured by the number of people attending them, but though the turnover might be considerable, the volume of goods exchanged and their value was relatively small. The important wholesale markets where goods changed hands in larger consignments were on the borders and where systems of transport dependent on water changed over to those which went overland or where the main trade routes running north and south intersected with those going east and west. In some of these entrepôts most exchanges took place in the market but in many,

⁶ For example, in the case of the trade in dried prawns in the Cross River estuary, the itinerant trader, a man, bought and bagged in a fishing market from a number of petty traders enough dried prawns to make a head-load if he was walking, a small canoe-load if travelling by water. The petty traders were women selling prawns which they had bought from a fisherman's wife or were fishermen's wives selling on commission for their husbands. The itinerant trader sold his load to an Efik wholesaler (usually termed a 'middleman' who, when he had enough to fill a larger canoe, had it paddled to an upriver market where he sold either the whole load to a single middleman or in smaller quantities to several middlemen who were known as his 'customers'. These men sold in head-loads to itinerant traders who travelled back to an inland market where they either sold the whole load to another itinerant trader, or distributed it in smaller amounts to women trading in that and in other markets in the neighbourhood.

particularly when valuable or scarce commodities were involved, they took place outside it in the neighbouring compounds or 'beaches'. There was no animal transport in this part of Nigeria. Goods could only travel over water in canoes, or be head-loaded by porters overland, and the communities engaged in trading operated in one or other of these elements, but never in both.

Water transport was the only economic means of transporting commodities in bulk over long distances unless they were so valuable that the owners could break them down into head-loads. Porterage overland had the advantage that it was more direct and therefore speedier. Long-distance trade in the early days was predominantly concerned with such valuable or lightweight goods. A slave was a valuable commodity and one particularly well suited to the overland trade. He could walk and he could also carry not only his food but the goods of the slave trader. The Portuguese for example were buying slaves from Benin to sell on the Gold Coast to the Ashanti traders who needed porters to carry back the bulkier European goods they had bought with their gold. On the other hand the trade in palm oil and other cheap agricultural exports which replaced the overseas slave trade had to be virtually confined to markets served by navigable waterways until the advent of the railway and supporting motor roads.

II. Slavery and the slave trade

Slavery was a traditional Nigerian institution and the trade in slaves a very ancient one, since it was the unvarying convention that an enslaved person must be removed out of his own area and disposed of in a place so remote that he could never find his way home. The demand for slaves came from two sources, domestic – it was the speediest way of enlarging one's household – and ritual, as sacrifices to local deities or in mortuary rituals. A domestic slave was a member of his master's household and lineage, a slave used for sacrificial purposes was not but was, at least amongst the Ibo and Ibibio, bought specially for this purpose. Victims for mortuary rituals on the other hand frequently came from the deceased's household.

The status of slaves and social attitudes towards them varied in different areas. The northern Isuama and Oratta Ibo had a unique category of slave, amounting to a caste. These were the Osu, slaves bought for the town's deity, and forming a kind of living sacrifice to it. As the property of the deity they were ritually dangerous. Anyone who married an Osu became one him or herself and this tabu on intermarriage was extended in some localities, notably Onitsha (Mili) and neighbouring towns, to domestic slaves, Ohu. But this was exceptional. Universally slaves, whether Osu or Ohu, were expected to support themselves by farming and to receive land for this purpose. Osu when sufficiently numerous were grouped together into a unit which functioned as a

separate segment of the village. Otherwise they were attached to the lineage of the priest of their deity. Ordinary slaves formed part of their master's lineage and were in much the same position as the poorer freeborn members of it. Slaves, including Osu, could trade and in communities which specialised in trade they were able to become very wealthy, own slaves of their own, and found their own lineages or in exceptional cases their own communities (e.g. Aro-Ndizorgu and Opobo). Ritually and politically they were initially at a disadvantage as they had no kinfolk to support them and were barred from most ritual or political offices since these were normally hereditary and therefore open only to descendants of the first office holder. A distinction which was almost universal was between a bought slave who was a newcomer to the community and one who had been born into the community, and therefore belonged to it, and ought not to be sold away from it.⁷

Some communities made a social distinction between freeborn, true descendants (called Amadi in Arochuku and Afikpo) and non-Amadi, usually distinguished as Ohu (slave) or Obia (stranger) and including people of both categories. Most did not and in the great majority of Ibo and Ibibio and Cross River villages (I have no information for other areas) the distinction between slave and freeborn rapidly became blurred; the descendants of the slave (or stranger) becoming one of the many minor lineages within the larger descent group whose genealogical connections with the founder were obscure.

The proportion of slaves to freeborn varied very greatly; areas devoted mainly to agriculture, whether subsistence or for export (e.g. north-eastern Ibo) had few slaves and poorer communities were mainly slave exporting. In some Isuama Ibo towns almost the only slaves were the Osu 'juju' slaves (who had been bought by public subscription). Areas involved in trading or in which there was considerable differentiation in wealth contained a large proportion of slaves but this did not result in the kind of class differentiation that is found in the Hausa states. The kinship structure ensured that the membership of descent groups included rich and poor, slaves and freemen. Misunderstanding of this and of misleading and emotive words like 'plantations' have led some historians into Marxist type explanations of some of the nineteenth-century episodes of Eastern Delta and Old Calabar history.

Normally slaves and their descendants lived with other members of their master's household and lineage. In Benin City and in some of the trading states of the delta where residence in the capital became congested and costly, the personnel of the household or lineage (house) was distributed between its city residences and its country estates, which were referred to in local English as plantations. The important members resided for the most part in the capital

⁷ Necessity might compel a breach of this prohibition both in the case of freeborn or slave.

and engaged in politics and trade and other business; the majority of the labour force and poorer members lived on the country estates, growing food for themselves and for their superior members in the city. In Benin as in Bonny a plantation was a comparatively small settlement belonging to a single chief, or in the case of Bonny a single 'house'. In Old Calabar it was a sizeable village containing a large part of a major Efik 'house'. The petty kingdom of Osomari on the Niger and Nike and neighbouring towns in the Nkanu area of the eastern plain were exceptional in making a residential distinction between slaves and freeborn and settling the latter in their own separate villages. But these were not referred to as plantations. In the early colonial period some of the villages broke away from their master's community and asserted their independence. These were the only instances in eastern Nigeria to which the term 'slave revolt' could be applied. The so-called slave revolts of Old Calabar or Bonny were not revolts on the part of slaves against their masters. In the Efik state of Old Calabar they were the assertion of the collective power of the poorer, rural and predominantly slave members of a ruling house in support of the head of the house and were directed against those members who, they felt, were encompassing his death by witchcraft, or if he were already dead, to see that his 'murderers' were brought to justice. In the case of Bonny it was a case of civil war in which the protagonists on both sides were slaves who had risen to the chieftancy of its most powerful houses. In the Eastern Delta social mobility was so rapid that an able bought slave could found his own (canoe) house, and end by becoming the head of a group of such houses. Among the Efik the position was more anomalous, many able slaves became the wealthiest men in the state (e.g. Yellow Duke, Iron Bar Duke) but because they were not of Efik descent they were unable to become heads of houses and were thus debarred from overt political activity.

The main demand for slaves originally came from the wealthier and politically more centralised Hausa and Yoruba areas, amongst which can be included Benin. The peoples of the Niger-Cross River hinterland were relatively poorer and more self-sufficient in their economies and their wealth was more evenly distributed. This is reflected in the price which the Portuguese had to pay when they came into these markets – at Geebu (Ijebuode) and at Gwatto (Benin) they had to pay from 12 to 15 copper or brass bracelets (manillas), at the Rio Real market 8 to 10. We can therefore assume that the traffic in slaves was directed mainly towards the Lower Niger and the north and west.

Once the overseas trade developed the situation changed; not only were the bulk of the slaves brought to the Biafran ports but as the general wealth of the region increased there was also an increased local demand for them.

III. Trade routes and trading systems

The Niger-Cross River hinterland and its extension northward to the Benue is completely surrounded by waterways except for the mountain barrier on the Cameroons border in the east. The Niger and the Benue are formidable rivers, particularly in the rainy season, while the Niger Delta and its lateral extensions behind the Nigerian coastline is the most extensive in the African continent and prevents any direct access by land to the coast.

Trade in this delta area until the development of the overseas trade with Western Europe was limited to small widely dispersed and highly mobile communities of fisherfolk and salt-water boilers who exchanged their smoke-dried fish and salt for vegetable foods and other products of the hinterland. They sold either to people on the delta margin or to other waterfolk who travelled between the upriver markets and those on the coastal estuaries. For their more valuable commerce delta and hinterland alike looked northward to the Hausa and other cities of the Central Sudan and through them across the desert to the Mediterranean. Trade between southern Nigeria and the Sudan was no recent phenomenon, as shown by the early use of bronze in considerable quantity for the making of ritual and sumptuary articles. Their size was as remarkable as their artistic quality and technical excellence and the metals required for their manufacture must have been imported from other parts of Africa, since there were no local sources. The evidence of the Igbo Uku bronzes which archaeologists have dated to the eighth century A.D. is an indication that the Nri-Awka Ibo area must have been in trading contact with other parts of West Africa for many centuries before the establishment of the overseas trade. They also suggest that the volume of this trade must have been considerable to be able to generate the wealth needed to accumulate such a rich treasure.

Trade routes leading to the north from the Niger-Cross River hinterland went overland by the most direct route, crossing the Benue just above its confluence and continuing on to Zaria and Kano. But the Lower Niger and Benue also carried a riverain trade, the former leading north-westward and then through its tributary the Kaduna northward; that of the Lower Benue leading eastward and then northward along the Gongola river. There were separate communities of waterfolk operating the trade of these rivers, each in their own particular sector of it.

We have no details of the early trade on the Lower Benue, but we know that the Lower Niger trade was of considerable antiquity and importance. It was the south-eastern extension of an ancient trading system covering the Western and Central Sudan, whose currency was the cowrie shell, and whose main artery linking the different subsystems together was the river Niger. The Yoruba markets extended this system to Benin and this city to the western

delta through its port of Gwatto on the Rio Ferosa (or Benin river). The Middle Niger and its riverain tribes diffused it to the Igbirra at its confluence with the Benue and southward to the northern and Ishan Edo and to the northern, western and Isuama Ibo.

But this cowrie-based system ended here; beyond was another system of which little is as yet known and whose medium of exchange was iron in various forms. This we can assume was diffused down the Benue from further east. In the Idoma area the currency resembled a tongued hoe blade, higher up the river in the Wukari (Jukun) area it took a different form. This subsystem based on the conventionalised 'hoe' blade would seem to have extended to the Eastern Delta well before the seventeenth century; for European traders visiting the Rio Real, where the currency had already changed to imported manillas, described that of the inland people of Moko as taking this triangular form, which they likened to that of a sting ray.

Initially the trade of this subsystem, which linked the Lower Benue to the Middle Cross River and the latter to the coastal estuary of the Rio Real, was insignificant. In many respects it was peripheral to that of the Lower Niger, to which it was connected by lateral routes down the Lower Benue or overland through Igala or northern Ibo territory, supplying it with camwood, ebony and other Cross River forest products or with savannah valuables like ivory.

By the time European navigators had made contact with the coast there were two overland trade routes and systems of trade associated with them which linked the populous areas of western and eastern Nigeria with the Hausa concentration of the Central Sudan and which were connected respectively with the Bights of Benin and Biafra. The western system terminated at the Benin port of Gwatto on the Benin river, the eastern at the estuary which the Portuguese called the Rio Real.

Between these two overland routes was the waterway of the Niger, which with its tributary the Benue drained the Nigerian middle belt and which from the confluence of these rivers southward formed a separate trading area in which people from each side of the river exchanged their products and where goods changed hands. The waterways of the delta connected this trading area with the Benin river and with the Rio Real, but they were little used until the advent of the palm oil trade of the nineteenth century. It remained a subdivision of the cowrie-based trading system, looking to the Yoruba (and Benin) west and the Hausa north for the bulk of its more lucrative trade.

With the development of the overseas slave trade the Yoruba cities operating the western route developed another outlet to the sea further west, which avoided Benin territory. This, which became known as the Slave Coast (and later formed part of the French colony of Dahomey) thereafter exported most of the slaves carried by the western system. Benin, as its power and military activities declined, became increasingly a slave importing centre and

concerned with the export of other commodities, including the mysterious valuable known to the trade as blue coral.

The eastern system divided at the same time into a northern and a southern sector. The former retained the hoe blade currency and its northern and Lower Niger connections and its principal traders remained Hausa. The southern looked southward and overseas. Its currency became the trading currency of the Bight of Biafra, namely the brass or copper rod, and it was operated mainly by Cross River Ibo traders and craftsmen. It became virtually a separate trading system which we have called Cross River.

The Lower Niger system in both its northern or Igbira-Igala and its southern or Ibo sectors continued its northern and western orientation and, like the western system, retained its cowrie currency.

The Niger-Cross River hinterland was thus divided between two trading systems, the one centred on the Lower Niger and looking north and west, the other directed southward to the trading states of the Bight of Biafra and controlling the hinterland trade with Western Europe and the New World.

A. The Lower Niger system

After passing through the Bussa rapids on the Nigerian western border, the Niger passes through the territory of tribes speaking Nupe and related languages as far as its confluence with the Benue. Below this point it divides the Edo on the western side from the Igala on the eastern as far as the town of Illah and thereafter separates the western from the central Ibo. But all these people are predominantly landfolk. The control of the river and of its traffic was in the hands of specialist communities speaking Igbira at the confluence and Igala and Ibo below it. It is this part of the river from the confluence south which we have called the Lower Niger which concerns us here.

Its early history and prehistory still awaits detailed study. Historical descriptions only begin in the nineteenth century with the journals of the Landers and culminate in Baikie's very accurate and detailed travels. But these accounts only refer to the trade that went up and down the Niger and Benue; they tell us very little of the commerce and of the overland routes that crossed them, and apart from Baikie not very much more about the people involved in this trade.

(i) The Igala sector

A feature of all these communities was their heterogeneous composition. The Igbira, whose two petty kingdoms of Igu and Panda controlled the trade of the river at the confluence, though they spoke a Nupe type of language claimed to have come from the Jukun kingdom of the Middle Benue. Their rulers were derived from the Royal clan of the Igala kingdom and their two

walled cities, which contained the terminal markets of the overland routes from the north, were filled with Hausa and other traders as well as with weavers, dyers, iron workers and other craftsmen both local and drawn from other commercial centres.

Similarly the Igala kingdom, whose capital city of Idah bordered the Niger, was equally mixed in its population, which was distributed between the autochthonous Igalamela clans, the immigrant Royal and Ashadu clans and their component subclans, and the metropolitan and other clans, almost all of whom derived from elsewhere. Amongst these were the riverain group of clans who alone operated on the river and were all of Igbira origin.

Below Idah and possibly antedating it, but now remembered only in the origin myths of some of the neighbouring communities, was a small concentration of people on and around Ifeku island made up of Yoruba together with some Edo, Igbira and other riverain folk. Some of this Yoruba element migrated from it to found the Ishan Edo chiefdoms of Irrua and Ekpoma and probably the Yoruba-speaking tribe of Odiani of the Asaba division. Those who remained or who moved from there later survived as part of the equally mixed 'tribe' of Illushi and the small Ineme tribe of blacksmiths which claimed to have come there from Obadan in the Benin kingdom.

The presence of a Yoruba base on the Lower Niger is interesting and suggests an early movement on the part of the Owo Yoruba to establish contact with this trading area, with the subsequent foundation of the towns of Irrua and Ekpoma along the route leading from Owo through Ifon to the Ifeku area. The traditions of the northern and Ishan Edo suggest a similar expansion from Benin city to the Lower Niger and the regrouping of the earlier autochthonous Edo and other elements already established there with Edo migrants from the Benin kingdom. Those which became the Etsakon and Ivbiosakon groups were ranged along the route leading to Idah, those that became the Ishan were aligned in the direction of Ifeku and Illushi.

The conflicting myths about the origin of the Igala kingship may refer to two different periods, namely to a very early one when this part of the Lower Niger and Benue was included in the eastern trading system and looked towards the Middle Benue for its trading contacts and to the Jukun kingdom for its political contacts; or to a subsequent one when the Lower Niger became part of the western system and the Yoruba form of sacred kingship. This was diffused from Ife to Benin and from Benin to Idah, whence it was extended up the Niger to the Nupe kingdom and up the Lower Benue to the Idoma kingdoms of Doma and Keana.

Baikie and other nineteenth-century travellers considered that the state of Idah, which they found in decline, had once been the dominant power on the Lower Niger. Local traditions appeared to confirm this inasmuch as the Nupe, Igbirra and Idoma kingdoms were established by rulers derived from the Idah

royal clan. Contemporary informants and following them ethnologists have assumed that this dominance was political and the result of conquest but oral tradition does not support this, and it is more probable that the power of the Idah state and of its ruler was similar to that of the Benin. Here the ritual authority of the Oba remained unchallenged but his actual power depended on the administrative capacity of individual Obas and their principal chiefs. We have no means of knowing the original system of government in Idah. The system which operated in the nineteenth century and which is claimed to have been the traditional and original one involved a complete change of all government officials at each succession to the kingship. This made it very difficult for an Atta or for the chiefs who came to office with him to consolidate their power. The nineteenth-century records show that during this period the Atta had no power over the chiefs of the rival riverain clans, who claimed control of the river in his name. Whatever may have been the position in earlier centuries, the kingdom of Idah was not a trading state like those further north or south, nor was its capital a commercial centre. The growth of the overseas slave trade in the preceding century had shifted the centre of gravity of the Lower Niger trading system further south to the Asaba-Onitsha area of the Ibo sector while the political and mercantile activities of the rival riverain clans of the Igala sector had polarised its trade between the markets of Irri on the Igbira and Adamugo on the Ibo border.

(ii) The Ibo sector

The Lower Niger at its junction with the Anambara river was the domain of the Umueri tribe and its derivatives, the riverain towns of Illah and Asaba on the western side of the river. Facing Asaba on the other side of the river was the town and petty kingdom of Onitsha. Below Onitsha were the riverain states of Osomari, Aboh and Oguta. Osomari was on the channel connecting the Niger with the Orashi river, which led to the Rio Real area; Oguta was further down the Orashi on the northern shore of the lake of the same name; while the southern part of the river above the point where it ramified into the Niger delta was controlled by Aboh. Osomari and Oguta were derived from the Igala area; the traditions of the former brought its founders directly from Igala to their present territory, where they joined with an Ibo group already there; the Oguta claimed to have migrated from Benin to the Idah area and thence to the Oguta lake, where again they absorbed an Ibo group already there. The Umueri tribe was of far more ancient origin and of mixed Igala and Ibo descent. It had expanded southward from Agoleri on the Anambara river. One sector had moved to the Nri-Awka centre, there to become the Umunri tribe whose head was the Eze Nri, a sacred king whose ritual power was on a par with that of the Atta of Idah. The other had extended down the Anambara to its junction with the Niger and across it to establish the towns of Illah and

Asaba.

The Asaba-Onitsha crossing was the most important one on the river, for it carried the route from the Middle Cross River to the west and linked the populous central Ibo area with Benin kingdom. The route passed through Ibo territory on both sides of the river till it reached the Benin kingdom, the towns on the western side being clustered along it, and their traditions indicating a restructuring similar to that of the Ishan and northern Edo but in an even greater concentration. Like them there seems to have been a regrouping of an aboriginal Ibo population with others coming from the Benin kingdom, but in this case the migration was associated with a single leader, Eze-chima, who established the chiefdom of Agbor on the Benin boundary and the Umuezechima tribe further west and whose son founded Onitsha on the eastern side of the Niger. Besides the Ezechima movement there was also a movement on the part of the Umunri tribe which established the town of Ibusa in the Asaba hinterland and beyond it the chiefdom of Ogwashiuku immediately south of the Umuezechima towns.

Agbor, midway between Benin City and the Niger, was an important centre of communications. From it routes led north-eastward through the southern Ishan towns to Illushi, or through the northern Umuezechima towns to Illah and thence to Adamugo market. They also led south-eastward to the Ase river and across it to Aboh, but the most important route led due east through the senior Umuezechima towns, or through Ogwashiuku to the Asaba-Onitsha crossing and to the Nri-Awka concentration beyond. Not only did it carry the long-distance trade between the Middle Cross River and Benin and the Yoruba country, there were also the more local exchanges between the two most heavily populated areas adjacent to the Lower Niger, and it was the route taken by the Nri-Awka traders and craftsmen to their employment on the western side of the river. The river crossing was controlled by the large town of Asaba. Onitsha, like other Umuezechima and Umunri foundations, remained land based. All routes from the Nri-Awka territory converged on Onitsha, for the country north of the Anambara and between it and the Niger was a swampy alluvial plain almost uninhabited except by elephant hunters, and that below Onitsha was a similar broad alluvial area framed by the Ase and Orashi rivers with the Niger flowing between them. Onitsha lay on the high ground between, which led eastward to the Nri-Awka Ibo concentration and its market from the nineteenth century onwards became of ever increasing size.

Below Onitsha, trade was mainly riverain again. The southern end, where the delta waterways converged, contained a large number of small independent communities of southern Edo, Ibo and Ijo extraction in contact with similar small Ijo communities in the lower and coastal areas of the delta. The area was of sufficient importance to attract a substantial migration from Benin, associated traditionally with the Chima movement. This established a route

from Agbor to the Ase river and the foundation of a line of towns down it as far as Ashaka and then across it to the Niger to become the petty kingdom of Aboh.

When Europeans appeared on the scene, Aboh had become the dominant community in that part of the Niger and they were told that the Obi of Aboh was the king of Ibo and that he controlled the Ibo section of the river and the king of Idah the rest. But it is clear from their accounts that the other riverain states of Osomari, Oguta and Asaba were not in any way subject to Aboh nor is there any indication in their traditions that their movements on the river were restricted by either Aboh or Idah. It is clear that Idah like Benin was a land-based state. The control of the river and its trade lay, in the Ibo sector, with these Ibo states or petty kingdoms, and in the Igala sector with the three major Igala riverain clans. In size and power these clans were equivalent to the Ibo states, but because they were also involved in the politics of the Idah state they were never able to consolidate their hold over more than a small portion of the river.

(iii) Patterns of trade

In considering the Lower Niger trading area we need to distinguish firstly a riverain trade moving from south to north and being fed by the land-based communities on each side of the river, a trade in which all the riverain communities were involved to a greater or lesser degree; secondly an overland trade running east and west; both long-distance between the Middle Cross River and the Benin, and more local between the populous areas on each side of the river. Asaba and Onitsha were primarily concerned with the east-west trade, Aboh and the riverain Igala clans with the north-south trade. Aboh, for example, is described as trading (exchanging goods) with the Abokko clan at its market of Adamugo and when this was abandoned at its new settlement of Okokenyi above Idah. These Igala clans who, as we have seen, were all of Igbira origin traded in the Igbira markets and in others further up the Niger and Lower Benue.

We have very little information about the range of commodities and of the volume of trade coming into and passing through this Lower Niger trading area. The more valuable were mainly part of the long-distance trade between north and south, east and west. Going out of the area were slaves and going through it was ivory from the Cross River forests, the eastern plain and the area beyond. This was in addition to the ivory obtained in the region itself, e.g. from the alluvial savannah and forest between the Anambara and the Niger. Coming into the area was jewellery in the form of brass, copper and, more rarely, silver ornaments, and of beads made from glass or from agate or similar semi-precious stones. The brass and copper work was made by local smiths but the metal had to be imported. The glass beads were made in the

Mediterranean area, some say in Venice or other Italian cities. The agate ones like the cowrie currency originated in India and the Maldiv Islands. Both were part of the Sudan trade.

There was a substantial trade in cotton cloths, some dyed in indigo, some undyed. They were worn as loincloths, skirts and cloaks. They came from the Yoruba country and from other places that wove them in smaller quantities e.g. Nupe, Igbira and some Edo communities. The superior types were bought throughout the area, the rest went mainly to the central and northern Ibo who, like the Ibibio and other people to the south and west, had no cotton and knew only how to weave raffia cloth.

Another import that went very largely to the central Ibo, who rubbed it as a red powder on their bodies and into their cloths, was camwood from the Cross River forests.

The nearest supplies of salt were in the Brass Ijo area and at Keana in the Lower Benue valley, and we can assume that the lower sector of this trading area obtained its supplies from the former, and the upper from the Lower Benue.

Some of the smoke-dried fish from the coastal delta may have reached the Lower Niger, but the bulk of its fish came from the river itself and from its tributaries. All the riverain communities caught fish and there were also specialist tribes of fisherfolk living in canoes on the river or on its sandbanks in the dry season. These retailed their catches, either fresh or smoke-dried, in the adjacent markets or sold them wholesale to traders who carried them to the more distant places where they traded.

Most of the towns and villages in this Lower Niger area grew sufficient food for their own requirements, selling any surplus in the neighbouring markets. Wealthier towns whose menfolk were traders and craftsmen and thus were abroad for most of the year arranged for their families to buy the food they were unable to grow for themselves or to hire the male labour they needed to produce it. Thus there was a movement both of food and of labourers from the surrounding towns into the Nri-Awka and Isu concentrations from where most of these migrant traders and craftsmen were derived. The movement was initially very small, but it continued to increase steadily as the population and its commerce increased. There was also, in the areas bordering the Niger-Cross River hinterland which lay outside the zone in which oil palms flourished or where yams and other food crops could be cultivated, some demand for these foodstuffs.

Thus edible palm oil was traded up the Niger from the Onitsha area and yams downriver by communities whose land was suitable for the cultivation and transport of yams, for example in the Anambara and the Lower Niger

alluvial plain.⁸ These yams were loaded into canoes and taken down the delta waterways by the farmers themselves or by traders who had bought them, and were sold in the Brass and Rio Real markets.

Far more important than the traffic in foodstuffs was the movement of specialists providing essential services. A village might have little or nothing with which it could trade, but it still required the services of doctors, diviners and other ritual specialists, and of blacksmiths and other craftsmen. In the Hausa north and in the Benin and Yoruba kingdoms such professionals tended, like the traders, to live and work in the main commercial centres and to travel between them. We have no information on Edo involvement in trade on the western side of the Niger or of the extent to which traders or other professionals from Benin travelled there and to the riverain markets. Oral tradition refers to their visiting them and to particular villages in the Ishan area, namely Ekekhelem and Igueben, which developed out of staging posts for travellers en route from Benin to Illushi on the Niger. The most active traders and travelling craftsmen seem to have been Ibo belonging to particular towns in the central Ibo concentration. They travelled on both sides of the Niger not only in the Ibo-speaking area but also in Ishan and as far south as the southern Edo and they ranged eastward as far as the Eastern Highlands. They came from specialist communities of doctors, diviners, of smiths working both in iron and brass, of tree fellers, canoe makers, carvers in wood and ivory, as well as of traders in most commodities. They travelled overland, only using water transport when there was no other means of getting to their destination. The traders who operated up and down the Niger and other waterways were drawn exclusively from riverain tribes, Ibo-speaking below Illah, Igbara, Igala and Nupe-speaking above.

Though every central Ibo town had its market, and some of these were very large, their traders and other professionals preferred to operate away from their home town in areas where they had established business connections and to travel between these places of employment and their homes. The Nri-Awka towns in the northern part of this central concentration were the wealthiest, as their people were closer to the more lucrative trade routes and to the Onitsha-Asaba crossing. They were collectively known by the people amongst whom they travelled as Umunri and Umudiawka after their most famous towns, Nri (or Aguku Nri) and Awka, though a number of other towns were included under these terms. The Eze Nri was a sacred king whose ritual powers were held to be equal to those of the Ata of Idah or the Oba of Benin, but whereas the power of these two rulers was exercised locally in validating the right to

⁸ Where two crops of yams could be grown in a year, the second on land which had been under water during the main farming season when the river was in flood.

rule of their subordinate chiefs and of neighbouring petty potentates, the people of Nri had commercialised the supernatural gifts of their king. They travelled throughout the western, northern and Isuama Ibo and the Ishan Edo areas and used his supernatural power to nullify the effects of the breach of a tabu or to remove cults of deities, fetishes and magical objects of all sorts which had become dangerous and which their owners wished to be rid of. While the Umunri were renowned in local mythology for these ritual services, the Awka were equally famed as blacksmiths, though like the Umunri they were also doctors and traders and in the case of the Awka people carvers in wood and ivory.

The central Isu towns, collectively known as Isuama, derived from the southern part of this concentration and were equally famed in the areas in which they traded as doctors, blacksmiths and priests of 'oracles' as well as being engaged in other less prestigious trades. They travelled westward to and across the Niger using, according to Baikie, Osomari and Oguta as their points of access to it, eastward as far as the Umuahia area and southward into the Oratta country. Some travelled to the Niger Delta as canoe makers, others to less remunerative work, hunting small game which they smoke-dried and sold in the Lower Niger markets. Others went southward to the southern Ibo markets as sellers of dogs and other small livestock. Nkwerri (Isu) blacksmiths were said to have extended their trade as far as the Ogoni country on the Rio Real margin. But it is not clear whether they had reached there before the development of the overseas slave trade. We know that Cross River Ibo blacksmiths were working in the Andoni area and that Cross River doctors and other specialists were travelling there well before this time. What is definite is that although the southern Isuama towns traded in the Oratta area and possibly beyond, they do not seem to have had trading contacts with the Rio Real. Like the Nri-Awka, their trade was oriented towards the Niger and to the north and west, and they remained part of the Lower Niger system with its cowrie currency.

This was equally true for the Aboh part of the Lower Niger. This was a riverain area connected by water with the trading state of Warri, with the Ijo of the Brass coast via the Nun channel, and through the Ndoni Creek into the Engenni river and thence into the Rio Real. There was apparently no trade with Warri. There was a demand for salt in the Lower Niger area and we have assumed that some of this was met from the Brass area, either directly by the producers or through traders from the state of Nembe. We know that Oguta and other riverain communities as far north as the Lower Anambara river took their surplus yams for sale in the Rio Real and we can assume that some of its

salt found its way back there.⁹

But the valuable trade, for example slaves and ivory, went north through the Igbara or Nupe markets to the Hausa country or westward to Benin City.

B. The Cross River system

This system began as the southern part of an ancient system that linked the Lower Benue with the Middle Cross River and the Cross River Ibo section of this river with the Rio Real estuary. It only developed in response to the expansion of the overseas slave trade, but by the end of the eighteenth century it controlled the whole of the trade between the hinterland and the trading states of the Bight of Biafra. Until this overseas demand for slaves appeared, its trading activities had been small and directed mainly towards the Lower Niger area and the north and the main business of the professionals who operated the system was in the provision of ritual and secular services.

Ethnography and oral traditions show that the communities who possessed these trading and other special skills were located on the high ground on the western side of the Middle Cross River, and in the riverain area below. This was an area which had attracted settlement from three different sources, Ibo from the Umuahia area further west, Ekuri-speaking people from the eastern and north-eastern side of the Cross River, and Ibibio from the south. Those groups which occupied the high ground eventually became the Ibo-speaking tribes now distinguished as Cross River Ibo, those in the riverain area remained Ekuri-speaking and are now known as Biase. Apart from the Ohaffia (Ibo) and Agwagune (Ekuri) tribes who were established in the northern part, most of the early settlement seems to have been in the south in what is now the Arochuku district. This was followed by a general movement north to settle beyond Ohaffia in the case of the Item, Abiriba, Ada and Afikpo Ibo, and to occupy the Cross River valley below on the part of the Abayong, Enna and other Biase tribes. The Arochuku tribe which later came to dominate the Cross River trading area originated from a combination of the Ibo elements that had remained behind, from other Ibo of more recent settlement and from Cross River elements (Akpa) that had moved there from the other side of the river.

It was these Ibo and Biase tribes who were involved in the Cross River trading system, the Ibo tribes providing the craft specialists and operating the overland trade, the Biase controlling the commerce of the Upper and Middle Cross River. The most famous of these tribes were the Abiriba, Item and Arochuku and on the Cross River the Agwagune. The Abiriba and Item

⁹ By the nineteenth century the Brass Ijo and the Rio Real had ceased to make salt and Baikie referred to a shortage of this commodity in the Lower Niger area.

travelled mainly as doctors, diviners, blacksmiths and carvers, the Arochuku as exploiters of the fertility and judicial powers of their tribal deity, Chuku Ibinokpabi, the 'Long Juju' from whom the tribe took its distinguishing name.

Initially as with the Nri-Awka and Isuama Ibo it was the ritual specialists and blacksmiths who pioneered the more distant travelling circuits and as soon as other forms of trade developed, diversified into the more lucrative ones. These circuits led northward through the Ohozara country to the southern Idoma and Tiv markets, eastward on the other side of the Cross River through the Yako and Mbembe tribes to Okuni and the Ekoi country, westward to the Okigwi sector of the Eastern Highlands and southward through the Ohuhu-Ngwa country.

The trading boundary with the Nri-Awka of the Lower Niger system was in the Okigwi area, and with the Isuama traders in the Umuahia. We do not know when their southern routes were extended to the Rio Real area but it must have been very early for, as I have shown elsewhere¹⁰ there are Cross River Ibo names in the genealogies of the Kalabari and Bonny trading states. The Kamalu dynasty of the former was derived from an Ibo doctor, while the small village of Bakana claimed to have a founder who came 'from Arochuku' and to have been established on the New Calabar river before the arrival of Owame the group that became the Kalabari. Oral traditions make it clear that the specialists attracted to the Rio Real were craftsmen who made their tools and weapons, and doctors and diviners who introduced them to their 'oracles' and other cults. The Cross River Ibo had no need for the local products of the Rio Real. The Middle Cross River was not a densely populated area like the central Ibo concentration, there were ample supplies of fish in the Cross River and its tributaries, of game in the Ohozara and in the Cross River forests, and of salt at Mamfe and Okpoma in the eastern plain. The salt and dried fish of the Rio Real went to the southern Ibo and to the Anang Ibibio (later known to the trade as the Kwa Ibo) and we can assume that the rest of the Ibibio concentration obtained theirs from the salt-boiling Effiatt communities at the mouth of the Cross River.

We can only guess at the reason why the Cross River Ibo did not extend their travels to the Cross River estuary. The most likely reason is that they were Ibo-speaking, derived from the Umuahia area and in contact with it and that this area, besides expanding eastward, was also expanding southward along the line of the Imo river which led towards it through the Ngwa and Etche territory.

The Cross River trading system only developed fully during the period of the overseas slave trade and this is discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁰ Jones, *The trading states of the Oil Rivers*.

CHAPTER 2

The period of the overseas slave trade

I. The overseas trade and the development of the coastal ports

A. *Under the Portuguese*

The Portuguese, when they established their trading empire in West Africa, developed a uniform system of trade for the Gulf of Guinea in which the trade currency or medium of exchange was brass or copper in the form of bracelets (manillas). This extended from the Rio de Lago to Fernando Po and the adjacent mainland. They traded in any valuable commodities that could be produced in their maritime empire, buying in the areas where they were available and selling wherever there was a demand for them, or where they could create one. The only exception was the supreme valuable, gold, which was monopolised by the Portuguese government. Apart from the Cross River and its delta, which was avoided for reasons which may have been navigational, they traded at any estuary (river) where there were people who were prepared to trade with them.

Pereira's account of the trade, written at the beginning of the sixteenth century,¹¹ shows that there was then no trade on the Slave Coast. The Rio de Lago (Lagos), which provided an outlet for the Ijebu Yoruba, afforded some slaves, ivory and black pepper. 'Five leagues up the left branch' of the Forcados estuary was 'a place of barter' where they sold slaves, cotton cloths, panther skins, palm oil and some blue shells with red stripes which they called 'coris'. These were 'all valuable' at the company's headquarters the castle of St. George del Mina on the Gold Coast 'where the king's factor sells them to the negro merchants for gold'. We can probably associate this market with the trading state of Warri. Reference is also made to the Sobo (Subou) people 'further in the interior' and beyond them other negroes 'called Jos, who own a large country and whose principal trade is in slaves and some ivory'. We have no means of knowing what were the conditions of trade amongst these small isolated and independent Ijo communities which inhabited the delta area between the Forcados and the Santa Barbara river whose descendants are now divided between the western Ijo and the Brass administrative divisions. The petty kingdom of Warri controlled the Forcados estuary, but the rest of the river remained the domain of the Mein, Trakiri and other piratical tribes whose only means of acquiring slaves was by force of arms from their neighbours. We can assume that these tribes along or near the coast and which were

¹¹ Pereira, pp. 123-134.

traditionally reputed to have been the earliest settlements were engaged in salt boiling and fishing, but we have no means of knowing where they sold their products. We can only note that in later times, that is in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Forcados estuary and the rivers and creeks to the south of it traded in the Warri area, while the trading state of Nembe, which came to control the creeks connected with the Nun river and further east, became part of the Rio Real trading area. It was this part of the coast and by extension the state of Nembe itself which acquired the distinguishing name of Brass, a name which later European tradition derived from the Brass 'Neptunes' that were sold there for salt boiling.

The most important places where they traded were however the Benin port of Gwatto and the Rio Real. The former was on a small river, the Gwatto Creek, a tributary of the Benin river. Here, the Portuguese government had a factory. The kingdom of Benin was in an expansive stage; it was 'usually at war with its neighbours and takes many captives which we buy at 12 or 15 brass bracelets. From there the slaves are brought to the castle of St. George del Mina, where they are sold for gold'. The trade with the Benin kingdom was a government monopoly, that on the Rio Real was not, it being one of the 'rivers of the island' (of São Tomé), that is, it was one of the rivers on the Biafran coast on which its Portuguese settlers had been given a licence to trade. Pereira's informants were impressed by the size of the village and of its salt industry, but failed to name it. It could have been Finnema or Abalama, or possibly the later arrival, Bonny. They traded there for slaves and livestock. There is no mention of ivory or black pepper and compared to Gwatto, slaves were cheap, costing only 8 to 10 bracelets. East of the Rio Real were the Kwa Ibo and the Cross River. The former, though it led into the heart of the Ibibio country, attracted no trade, either local or overseas, until the end of the nineteenth century. The Cross River, though it led directly to the Arochuku area and the Middle Cross River and had a substantial salt-boiling industry in the Effiatt area on the western side of the estuary, was, as we have mentioned, avoided by the Portuguese, nor does it seem to have attracted traders from the Middle Cross River system, either Ibo or Biase. We can assume that the salt was traded by the Effiatt upriver to the Uruan markets of the eastern Ibibio. There were also Effiatt settlements on the eastern side of the Cross River delta in the Rio del Rey area, where they were in contact with the Bantu-speaking Balundu and the Ekuri-speaking Ododop tribes. There were trails leading northward from here through the Ekoi territory to the Middle and Upper Cross River and beyond. The delta division of Ibibio (to which the Effiatt belong) regarded this Rio del Rey area as their aboriginal home. From here they expanded to the western side of the Cross River estuary and thence along the coastal delta as far as the Andoni area of the Rio Real and up the Lower Cross River to the Uruan area of the eastern Ibibio. But they left unoccupied

the centre of the Cross River delta where it is joined by the Old Calabar river. This part was later settled by Efut from the Rio del Rey, Kwa from the Ejagham Ekoi and Efik from the Uruan tribe.

It is not possible to attribute any dates to these movements. They probably precede the introduction of the overseas trade to these parts. The demand for salt and for dried fish in the populous hinterland is likely to have been much greater than the uncertain and infrequent demands made by visiting overseas traders. The important prawn fisheries at the mouth of the Cross River would have provided a far more cogent reason for the Efik movement into the delta, while on the Oron side of the estuary was the large Effiatt village which Europeans, when they came to visit the river, called Salt Town.¹² The Efik were able to catch and dry these prawns in considerable quantity and to carry them and the Oron salt upriver to sell through their Mbiabo kinsmen of Ikot Offiong and Edere villages in the adjacent Uruan markets. Efik traditions make no reference either to trade or to fisheries. They explain their movement to disputes leading to warfare in the Uruan tribe which brought them to the Lower Cross River and to civil war, which dispersed them upriver to the Arochuku area as the Enyong tribe, on the Cross River from Ika Offiong to Ikonetu as the Mbiabo Efik, and on the Old Calabar river as the Efik of Old Calabar. There were now three separate coastal communities exploiting the marine resources of the Cross River estuary and delta, namely the Effiatt fishermen and salt boilers of the Tom Shot and Jamestown area, on the western side, the Efik of Old Calabar exploiting the prawn fisheries on the eastern side of the estuary, and the Effiatt of the Rio del Rey delta area on the Cameroons border, engaged mainly in the exchange of dried fish for vegetable food with the Efut landsmen on the delta margin.

B. After the Portuguese

As the overseas trade developed in the seventeenth century and other European nationals became involved in it, the uniform system of trade operated by the Portuguese disappeared. The Slave Coast ports were established and on the Cameroons side traders shifted from their original trading location (on the coast adjacent to the island of Fernando Po) eastward to the Duala area and westward to the Rio del Rey, while further west the Efik state of Old Calabar with its anchorage on the Old Calabar river below Duketown eventually became, after the Rio Real, the most important port in the Bight of Biafra.

There was a major difference between the trade on the western and on the eastern side of the Niger Delta. On the former, which included the Bight of

¹² Its head carried the title Captain Thomas and the name survives in the Efik transliteration Tom Shot. There is no C in the Efik language.

Benin and the Slave Coast, the African and internal trading system sought to impose its own cowrie currency; but the European traders were flooding the market with cowries brought out in bulk from the Maldiv Islands to Western Europe and thence to the Gulf of Guinea. They sought unsuccessfully to impose various trading currencies of their own (e.g. the iron bar) and by the end of the eighteenth century these had become accounting devices for the conversion of trade goods into slaves. This was in terms of the Gold Coast currency of ounces and ackies of gold on the Slave Coast. On the Benin river, which included the Warri trade, it was a fictional unit, the pawn, valued at 2s 6d in English money. On the eastern side the position was reversed. The local trading systems took over the brass and copper trading currency in place of its own. By the seventeenth century the Dutch had become the principal traders on the Rio Real and the Kalabari their principal suppliers. The whole area had been given the name Calbaria and the name had been extended to the Efik, who were now known to the trade as Old Calabar; the Kalabari being distinguished as New Calabar, or in the local trade English as Young Calabar. In Barbot's map of 1699 the estuary was called Calabar ('vulgarly called Calabar and by the Portuguese Rio Real'), its two rivers the New and the Old Calabar rivers and the town of Ubani (Bonny) was shown as Bandy. During the eighteenth century, when the English had replaced the Dutch, Bonny, now known as Grand or Great Bonny, had displaced Kalabari as the principal trading state and the estuary had become the Bonny river. The Kalabari and the Efik continued to be distinguished as New and Old Calabar and their respective rivers were still called by these names.

During the seventeenth century the overseas traders sought to replace manillas (bracelets) with copper bars as a trading currency, both at the Rio Real and at Old Calabar, and Cross River Ibo smiths at both places had forged copper wires from them which were twisted together into strands. The copper rod, which was changed to brass in the nineteenth century, became the currency of the Cross River trading system and of Old Calabar, which also retained the copper wire as a smaller currency unit. The Rio Real however reverted to the original manilla currency, which remained that of its local trading area, which included the Brass Ijo and most of the southern Ibo and Ibibio. By the nineteenth century it had become a bronze miniature torque made in Birmingham and so debased in quality that it could only be used as currency. The copper and brass rods however retained their purity and, apart from being used as money, were traded to the central Ibo and to the Lower Niger trading area generally for use as metal by the local brass and copper smiths.

II. The expansion of the overseas trade and its results

The overseas demand for slaves in the Bight of Biafra can be correlated with the cultivation of sugar in plantation conditions, at first on islands off the equatorial African coast and later in the West Indies. During the Portuguese period those sold on the Rio Real were bought by planters from the island of São Tomé, while slaves bought in the Bight of Benin went to the Gold Coast. With the development of the sugar industry in the Caribbean the demand for slaves increased and went on increasing until it was finally ended by the British naval blockade in the nineteenth century. By this time an estimated 35,000 slaves a year were being shipped from the Bight of Biafra and probably as many if not more from the Slave Coast.¹³

The effects of this trade upon the organisation and the living conditions of most eastern Nigerian communities from whom these slaves were derived was very different from its results in other parts of Nigeria. Apart from its early stage in the Niger and Eastern Delta it did not produce an increase in warfare, nor did it lead to the build-up of military states with powerful armies dependent for their maintenance on the booty from successful warfare and slave raiding.

The types of warfare and the conventions and rituals governing them were not productive of many captives. In most cases fighting was in defence or for acquisition of land or to avenge a murder or other wrong. In the first case fighting was at a distance, the combatants withdrawing or dispersing into the forest cover if outnumbered. The Tiv and the north-eastern Ibo of the eastern plain who were the most successful at it, had few slaves and had few for sale to others. Most of their opponents preferred to withdraw and those who remained made their peace and were incorporated into the tribal structure of their conquerors. Wrongs were avenged by raiding and ambushes and in the Middle Cross River area by attacks on compounds and villages. In this Cross River form of warfare the warriors, after discharging their spears (and in later times their muskets), sought to close with their opponents and destroy them with their short two-edged cutlasses. But this form of attack, though it spread terror throughout the rest of the Ibo and Ibibio country when carried there by Cross River Ibo raiders, was not concerned with the acquisition of captives; the warriors' objectives were their enemies' heads for use as war dance trophies. Eastern Delta marine warfare was equally unproductive; any prisoners that might be captured being ceremonially eaten and their skulls and long

¹³ Few figures are available, those that exist and which are given respectively by Captain Adams, Dr Jackson and Antera Duke agree in giving an annual average export of 20,000 slaves from the Rio Real (excluding Brass) and 14-15,000 from Old Calabar.

bones used to adorn the victors' *Ebeka* (war trophy).

Had raiding for slaves developed in the Niger-Cross River hinterland the Arochuku tribe, when they achieved their monopoly of the hinterland slave trade, could have been expected to take advantage of it. But the use they made of the fighting qualities of their Cross River Ibo neighbours was totally different and provided yet another example of their inspired commercial exploitation of a local resource, in this case the Cross River type of warfare. A wealthy individual or more usually a village seeking revenge could hire an Arochuku agent to arrange a raid on the offending community. These raiders were known in the northern Ibo area as Ada and in the southern Ibo and Ibibio country as Abam, and they were principally recruited from the Ada, Ohaffia and Abam tribes. Locally the fighting qualities of these tribes were rated no higher than those of their neighbours.

The Niger-Cross River hinterland was by Negro African standards heavily populated and the bulk of the slaves exported from the Biafran ports came from the areas of greatest concentration, namely the Ibo and Ibibio territories. The ever increasing demand for slaves was met in ways far less socially destructive than in other parts of the country. Some of these were sanctioned by law, for instance the sale of a person to meet his family's debts; some were in breach of the law, for example child-stealing or kidnapping of people. Some were outside the law, for example piracy on waterways, ambushes on land. These categories might be clear-cut or they might blend into each other. For instance, the selling of a relative into slavery unless there was no other way of preventing the disintegration of the family was a sin, an abomination, and forbidden by the ancestors. But selling a relative into slavery was a sanction regularly employed against those who were confirmed criminals or troublemakers. Ancestral vengeance might however be avoided if the victim was betrayed into an ambush, with his kidnappers subsequently paying to his relatives a pre-arranged sum. This would be treated not as a sale but as compensation paid to the man's family for a wrong that had been committed against it (i.e. for seizing and making away with one of its members).

A. The coastal states

The most noticeable feature of the overseas slave trade was the amount of wealth which it brought into the country, particularly to the communities who were able to engage in the trade and more especially to those who were eventually able to achieve a local monopoly of it. Here again there was a critical difference between the Cross River-Biafran trade and that elsewhere in Nigeria. In the north and the west such monopolies were acquired and maintained by political means. In eastern Nigeria they were the result of the exploitation of economic advantages which had been established before the

advent of this trade.

Oral traditions, both in the Forcados and Rio Real, indicate that the increased demand for slaves resulted in warfare and slave raiding between the various Ijo tribes, the most successful of which were the Mein and Trakiri on the Forcados river and the town of Bile on the Rio Real. This however was speedily followed on the latter estuary by an organised trade in slaves brought from the hinterland, in which first the Kalabari and then the Bonny were the most successful.

European sources confirm the primacy of the Kalabari in this trade and the much later appearance of the Efik and with them of the Cross River. During the seventeenth century the Kalabari, Bonny and Efik supplied the bulk of the slaves exported from these rivers, but other local communities also traded directly with the European shipping. During the eighteenth century these three states established a monopoly of the trade on their respective rivers, the Rio del Rey was abandoned as a trading river and the Brass or Bento river, the port of the Nembe state, became an additional trading river in the Rio Real area.

The reason for the trading supremacy of all these states was probably their close association with the trading systems of the interior. Kalabari was a community of mixed origin originally settled on the New Calabar river opposite markets which were the termini of routes leading inland through the Etche country to Umuahia and the Cross River Ibo area. They were connected with the Cross River Ibo and one of their principal descent groups derived from a founder with a Cross River Ibo name. When the Europeans arrived in the Rio Real they were in occupation of the western side of the Rio Real estuary. The Ubani (Bonny) were a similar Ijo community of mixed origin with similar Cross River Ibo names in their royal genealogies. They were originally settled in the Ndokki area of the Lower Imo, whose markets were the termini of routes leading north through the Ngwa country to Umuahia. Later they moved down the Imo to settle on the eastern side of the Rio Real on the island which contained the large village referred to by Pereira.

Similarly the Efik were derived from the hinterland Ibibio tribe of Uruan and were distributed down the Cross River from Enyong in the Arochuku area to the Duketown anchorage, while the Nembe state was in contact with the Lower Niger trading area through the Nun river and other waterways.

The routes leading from the upriver markets of the Kalabari and Bonny went overland and were the most direct between them and the populous Ibo and Ibibio areas. Hence it is not surprising that the Rio Real exported the greatest number of slaves. The Efik were in contact by water with the Uruan markets of the densely populated eastern Ibibio concentration. They were also in contact with the Arochuku tribe on the Enyong river and to shorten the time taken to transport slaves down the Cross River, the Aro walked most of their

slaves, which were destined for Old Calabar, to Uwet at the navigable limits of the Old Calabar river. From here they could be carried more directly down this river to Duketown, or could continue on foot along the trail that ran from Uwet to Creek town. Nembe was never able to export slaves in the same quantity as these other trading states. It was too far distant by water from the Lower Niger markets and could not therefore compete there against traders who were selling to the Aro at Oguta or Ndizorgu on the overland routes.

The advantages of their delta environment, which prevented European traders from having direct access to the hinterland markets, meant that these trading states were able to act as intermediaries between them and the inland traders and thus obtain a major share of the profits from this trade. The greatest profits no doubt accrued to the European traders, but they had also to bear the greatest losses; dysentery and other epidemics could and did kill off entire cargoes of slaves and many of the crew before they could reach the New World markets. The African traders of the Rio Real and Old Calabar had no comparable risks. They obtained trade goods on credit from the supercargoes, who then had to wait until they returned from the 'upriver markets' with slaves, who went straight on board the European vessels. Barracoons, where slaves were kept on shore to await the arrival of a slave ship, only appeared at the very end of the slave trade with the establishment of the British naval blockade of the coast. The journey to the upriver markets was relatively short, the Kalabari could reach theirs on a single tide. Slaves were landmen and most could not swim; there was little danger of them escaping. The European trading vessels were competing against one another and were never able to combine together, whereas the 'king' and leading men of each trading state, who were also its principal traders, combined together as a council which met and negotiated the 'terms of trading' with each vessel before it was permitted to trade.¹⁴ These trading states thus became very wealthy and their wealth enabled them to make up for their lack of numbers. They could arm themselves with muskets and cannon and prevent their numerically more powerful neighbours from trading directly with the Europeans. These were the Okrikans in the case of the Kalabari, the Andoni in the case of Bonny and the Effiati and other adjacent Ibibio villages, including some of Efik origin in the case of the Efik of Old Calabar. They could also, should the need arise, increase their numbers or replace their losses through warfare or disease by the incorporation of slaves into their various lineages (houses). By the mid-eighteenth century they had established a complete monopoly of the trade at their respective ports, namely Ifoko for the Kalabari, the Bonny river for Bonny, Brass for the Nembe state and Duketown for the

¹⁴ For a full description see J. Barbot, p. 459.

Efik. In the case of the Rio Real area, each state had also established the exclusive right, which never seems to have been challenged, to buy slaves in the 'upriver markets' on the delta margin in which they had traditionally traded. These were not the only markets in the area. There were others described in the nineteenth century as food markets, to which traders repaired to buy food, and others again in the Niger Delta to which they went to buy canoes. These were open markets in which anyone was free to trade. Bonny traders could replace their canoes in such markets in the Nembe area, passing through Kalabari territory to get there, while Okrikans, Andoni and other lesser delta communities could sell their dried fish in these food markets and buy plantains, palm oil and other vegetables for their own consumption or for sale in the markets of these trading states.

B. The hinterland

While the Kalabari, Bonny and Efik were establishing a monopoly of the overseas trade in their respective ports, traders from the Arochuku tribe were acquiring a similar control in the hinterland of the overland trade in slaves and in overseas imports. Nothing is now remembered in local traditions of the conditions that prevailed before they achieved this dominant position. We know however that the trade routes which served this hinterland trade and which fed the Biafran ports when the demand arose there were those of the Cross River trading system. The country through which they ran was flat open savannah in the northern part, and rainforest or forest scrub in the south. There were no obstacles to movement and a minimum of rivers to cross, and the principal trade routes took the most direct lines across it. Important markets developed where the major routes intersected; the most important both in traditions and in recent memory being Uburu and Bende. In the nineteenth century and probably in earlier times they were held for four days running every lunar month at each place, giving traders plenty of time to move between the two (a distance of approximately 30 miles) and to sell their wares when they arrived.

From these two, market routes radiated in all directions. Thus in addition to the direct route running north from Uburu through Isu, Mtezi, Ngbo to Agala and Igumale in southern Idoma others ran on each side of it, on the west through Lengwe and Nike to Eha Amufu and thence to Igumale, on the east through Ekemoha (Ezza) Odumoke, Ezza Effium to Igumale. From Igumale the northern route continued through the Idoma country to Utonkon and thence to the Abakpa market of Yangedde. According to Armstrong¹⁵ these three markets were the largest in the Idoma land and were visited by both Ibo and

¹⁵ Armstrong, p. 108, 122.

Hausa traders. From Abakpa the route led northward to the Lower Benue, crossing it in the vicinity of Loko, and continuing to Keffi, thence to Zaria and finally to Kano.

Most of the markets named in the two lateral routes were junction points for routes leading for example north-westward from Nike to the Nsukka concentration and thence to the Igala country and Idah on the Niger, or westward from Lengwe through the Awgu highlands to the Nri-Awka concentration. Similarly a route led north-eastward from Ekemoha across the Okporku river to Ejekwe and Ogoja and thence north to the Tiv market at Katsina Ala, where again Ibo and Hausa traders were in contact.

Both Bende and Uburu had routes which connected them with the important riverain crossroad at the Afikpo bend of the Cross River at its junction with the Okpoha. Here land routes leading from north to south and from east to west had to cross one or other of these rivers. The northern led on from Afikpo to Ekemoha, the southern continued along the Ohaffia ridge to Arochuku itself. The east-west route led eastward through the Bahumunu and Yako to the Ekoi area and Mamfe, westward through Akeze (the halfway stage on the route between Uburu and Bende) to the Okigwi area and the Nri-Awka and Isuama concentrations beyond.

Bende was primarily the distributing centre for slaves, who reached it from further north and particularly from the Nri-Awka and Nsukka concentrations. From Bende they were routed to the Kalabari, the Bonny or the Efik markets. In the case of the first named, their road led through Umuahia (Olokoru) to Udo 'beach', where they crossed the Imo and then led southward through the Ezenihite and Etche country to Chokocho, where they crossed the Otamini river just above its junction with the Lower Imo, and proceeded to one or other of the Isiokpo or Okpumbutolu markets on the eastern side of the New Calabar river. The Bonny trail led through Oloko and the Ngwa country to the Aba river and then southward to Akwete, Ohambele, Obohia, Azumini and other Ndokki markets on the north side of the Lower Imo. The way to Old Calabar was south-eastward across the Enyong valley to Arochuku, thence to Atan 'beach', where they were taken over the Cross River, and then overland to Uwet market on the Old Calabar river. They could also be sold when they reached the Arochuku area to the Efik at one of the neighbouring markets.

Bende however was only one of the centres through which slaves were collected and distributed to the coastal markets. Those from the Isuama and from the southern part of the Lower Niger trading area were brought along a route that led from Oguta diagonally to Owerri and thence to Okpala on the Imo. This route collected slaves from the Isuama and Oratta country on each side of it. Okpala was also a stage on the route leading from Bende to the Kalabari markets and slaves on the Oguta-Okpala route could be sent either southward through the Etche country to these markets, or be taken across the

Imo to join the Ngwa route leading to the Ndokki markets. Or again, slaves collected from north of Owerri could be routed southward at Owerri through Nekede to Ihiagwa, where they crossed the Otamini and thence travelled to the Isiokpo markets via Omanelu and Elele.

While slaves from the Isuama and southern Ibo country could be distributed between the Kalabari and Bonny markets, the Ibibio from the Anang and eastern Ibibio concentration could be routed either to Azumini and the Bonny markets or to Okopedi Itu or Nwaniba on the Cross River for sale to the Efik. Those on the Ndokki side normally went to the Bonny traders and were known to the trade as Kwa Ibo, those near the Cross River to Old Calabar, where they were called Egboshari; those in the centre were traded to whichever port was offering the highest price. On the eastern side of the Cross River, slaves went exclusively to Old Calabar, along trails which went from the Middle Cross River through Ekuri-speaking tribes to Uwet, or further east from Mamfe or Ikom through the Ejagham Ekoi country to Obutong on the Great Kwa river and thence either to Duketown or, while this was still a place of trade, to Iking in the Rio del Rey area. Mamfe was a salt-producing centre and a route led from it to the grassland area of the Cameroons, which was used by slavers and other traders coming to Old Calabar from what is now the Bamenda area of the Western Cameroon. Slaves and other merchandise also reached it by canoe from the coastal area. The Ikom and Mamfe area and the country beyond were known to the trade as Mbarakom, the coastal as Ambo or Amboses. The Efik 'house' of Oku Atai was also known by these names, possibly because it originally handled the trade from these directions.

In the sparsely populated hinterland of Old Calabar and the Cameroons trade routes were few and far between; further west where every community of any size had one or more markets, the routes connecting them formed an intricate network extending from the Cross River and the Lower Niger northward to the Igala and Idoma country. They might appear clear and obvious when plotted on a map, but on the ground they tended to be confused with the even more numerous and more constantly used paths which linked together the compounds of dispersed villages or led away from them to their surrounding farmlands. Hence one of the needs for 'guides' for those travelling outside their own area. The routes we have briefly outlined were the ones normally used by traders passing from one important market centre to another, because they were the most direct. Should part of the route become unsafe however, usually because of an outbreak of war between two communities along the route, the traveller and his guide had no difficulty in finding alternative ways through neighbouring towns which bypassed the obstacle.

The nexus of interconnected markets was created primarily by local and petty trade. There was little natural wealth in the region and not much scope therefore for long-distance trade until it was able to exploit its only resource,

its manpower. Once communities had begun to do this, professionally as itinerant craftsmen and traders or as merchandise in the form of slaves, long-distance trade routes became increasingly important and the dearth of wealthy clients or customers encouraged itinerant craftsmen to extend their range and to diversify into trading whenever the opportunity arose.

Neither European nor local sources support the idea that this market network developed in response to the overseas trade. Oral tradition likes to think that it was always there. In combination with other evidence, it shows that these markets were divided between the two different trading systems which we have called the Lower Niger and the Cross River. The Umunri and Umudiawka traders of the former operated as far east as the Nsukka and Abaja concentrations of the eastern highlands, the Isuama met with Cross River traders in the Okigwi and Umuahia areas. The overseas trade however completely altered the balance between the two systems and reversed the direction of their principal export once the demand for it had reached the hinterland. Previously the Cross River system had been the poor relation of the Lower Niger and largely dependent on it for its long-distance trade, while the commerce of its coastal trading centres was confined mainly to the exchange of produce between the delta fisherfolk and the farmers of the neighbouring mainland. Thereafter these coastal communities became the centres through which the principal exports and imports of the Niger-Cross River hinterland were channelled, while the Ibo traders of the Cross River system organised their collection or distribution and the trade in transit to and from the Lower Niger area.

We can assume that, as in the coastal centres, a number of tribes were engaged in this trade before one of them became dominant, but we have no data relating to the early days of this hinterland trade. All we know is that by the end of the eighteenth century the Arochuku tribe had a virtual monopoly of the overland trade in slaves supplied to the Biafran ports and in the valuable commodities like guns and gunpowder imported by them.

C. The Arochuku trading organisation

The reasons for the success of this particular Cross River tribe were probably the same as in the case of the Biafran trading states, it had the right trading connections.

Ibo communities whose members travelled to trade or to work abroad were normally only able to organise their travel in a particular direction from their home town. Some managed to operate in more than one direction, but only exceptionally were they able to extend their organisation to cover all directions, for example in the case of the Umunri and the Umudiawka. In the Cross River system the Arochuku tribe was the only tribe that had been able

to do this. The Abiriba originally travelled eastward in the Middle Cross River area and only recently (early twentieth century) to Okopedi market in the Itu (Enyong) area of the Cross River, and to Umuahia (Ibeku). The Item travelled originally up the Cross River and to the north-eastern Ibo country, and only in the early twentieth century did they establish a trading base in Aba (Ngwa) township. The Ohaffia travelled southward to the Lower Imo and the Andoni country in the Rio Real area. But the Arochuku, who specialised as travelling priests 'selling' the supernatural powers of their local deity, had been able to build up an organisation which enabled them to travel in all directions from Arochuku. Their deity was famed throughout the Niger-Cross River hinterland, both as a fertility 'juju' and as a judicial 'oracle' from the Lower Niger to the Rio Real and to the Okobo and Oron tribes on the Cross River estuary. We do not know when these limits were reached, for this ritual 'trade' continued throughout the period we are studying. But contact with the Rio Real area would seem to have been established well before the days of the overseas trade, since the Kalabari tradition attributes the introduction of the cult of the 'Long Juju' (Suka Obioma) of Arochuku to Opukoroye, the founder of the Korome ward; while his descendant, King Owerri Daba, was said to have brought the overseas traders to Elem Kalabari.

Their mixed origin was an advantage here. The Aro began as we have seen as a federation of Ibo Middle Cross River (Akpa) and Ibibio migrants, and this would have enabled their travelling members to move in the various directions from which their forebears had come. They would be familiar with and probably able to speak their language, and possibly even to claim relationship with some of the people amongst whom they would be travelling.

The early travelling alignments are still preserved in the directions in which the nineteenth century Arochuku villages were trading. Thus the Oror and Utughugwu villages of the Okenachi clan operated in the Biase area and beyond, which was the area in which their ancestor of the same name was said to have travelled as a doctor. Villages from the Akpa clans (of the Ibom Isi division) travelled on the eastern side of the river, the side from which the Akpa were derived, Ibom in the Obubra area, Ugwuakoma in the Ekoi country and Amasu in the Uwet area. Obinkita, the Ezeagu village in which most of the Ibibio elements were concentrated, travelled to Itu and to the Ibibio country beyond. The villages of the Okwara Azu clan, whose founders were said to have come from Amaseri in the Afikpo area, traded through this area to Uburu market and to the north-eastern Ibo country.

In addition to these traditional directions, villages from all three Arochuku divisions traded, either initially or later, with other Ibo to the north, the west and the south. Thus Isinkpu (Okenachi division) and Atani (Ibom Isi) traditionally travelled south through the Ngwa country to the Bonny markets in the Ndokki country and to the Kalabari ones on the New Calabar river:

Amankwu (Okenachi division) traded with the Nri-Awka and Isuama Ibo and founded Aro Ndzorgu. Ibom, Atani and Ujalli (of the Ibom Isi) did the same and together with Obinkita (Ezeagu) founded the Ndi-Enyi villages in the Aghamili valley: while Amuvi and Amangwu (Okenachi division) and Abagru (Ibom Isi) as well as the Okwarazu villages (Ezeagu) operated northward in the Ohozara and the Eastern Plain.

Once a steady demand for slaves had developed in the Rio Real markets, the Aro had contacts with markets in the Ibo and Ibibio country from which to meet it and as the trade expanded they were able to extend further and further north, tapping the resources of the Lower Niger trading system and of the Lower Benue and competing in the Idoma and Tiv markets against dealers from the trading system centred on Kano and the Hausa north.

They traded in the Ibo sector of the Lower Niger area as far as the Niger and the Anambara river, but not for slaves. On this, the eastern side of these rivers the trade was in the hands of Nri-Awka and Isuama traders, who sold to the Aros in the settlements they had established at Ndi-Enyi and Ndzorgu, and in the neighbourhood of Oguta. On the Lower Niger itself the riverain communities competed against each other for the slaves that came into their markets, which they sold to traders who had come by water from Brass or the Rio Real, to the Aro at Oguta or to traders from Benin or carried them upriver for sale in the Igbira markets or beyond. The prices offered by European slavers in the Biafran ports were normally sufficiently high to enable the Aro to offer a better price than any of the other buyers. They were also operating a shorter and more efficient system for transporting slaves to the coast.

We do not know how or when the Arochuku traders achieved their dominant position in the Cross River trading system and in the hinterland slave trade which fed the Bight of Biafra's ports. By the end of the eighteenth century their trading organisation was probably at its zenith and so was the Biafran overseas slave trade. The Aro seem to have handled the entire overland trade that went to the Rio Real and almost all that went to Old Calabar. No details are available on the operation of the Oban trail. The Aro also handled the trade in guns and gunpowder and other valuable imports.

The tribal structure was altered so that they could handle it and any other entrepreneurial activities that offered. They still travelled between their home villages and the places where they traded, but an increasing number settled in suitable places along the various trade routes, where they acted as agents and 'trade callers' for their travelling countrymen and as local money lenders. We have already referred to their major settlements of Ndi-Enyi and Aro Ndzorgu, apart from these their more important villages were around Bende, on the routes leading south from it through Oloko and the Ngwa country, and in Ibibio land, for example in the Itak tribe, and at terminal markets like those on the New Calabar river or near Oguta.

III. Other exports

A. Valuables

Apart from slaves, the only other valuable export from the Bight of Biafra was ivory. This was a commodity obtainable at most of the other West African ports, but there is not enough material available to determine in respect of any of these exporting areas either the amount that was exported or its value.

John Barbot tells us that at the beginning of the eighteenth century a Mr Grazilhier estimated that there was a yearly export of from 30 to 40 tuns of elephants' teeth from the Rio Real. A tun was presumably a barrel, but we do not know its size. James Barbot, who sailed there in 1699 and tried to buy some, found that the price was 'so very dear they would have turned to no account in Europe'. His brother John gave an estimate of 10 to 12 tuns annually of 'good tusks' from the Rio del Rey and he also mentions Old Calabar as a place where ivory could be obtained. Captain Adams, whose information related to the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, wrote that the principal rivers exporting ivory in the Gulf of Guinea were the Benin and the Cameroons. We can assume that by comparison with its export of slaves the export of ivory from the Rio Real was negligible.

Valuable woods, such as camwood and ebony, do not seem to have been exported from the Bight of Biafra ports. Both were available in the Cross River forests and a certain but unknown amount of it was being traded, as we have seen, to the Ibo area of the Lower Niger. But it was not until the colonial period that an export trade in valuable timber was developed and then mainly in the Sapele area of the Benin river.

B. Foodstuffs

A far more important export was food. Slaves had to be fed from the time they were taken on board until they were sold in the markets of the New World. It was soon appreciated that they survived better if they were fed as far as possible on their customary diet, which in the case of those shipped from the Bight of Biafra ports was said to be yams and plantains.

The difficulty with the indigenous food plants of West Africa, whether the grains of the savannah or the root crops of the forested regions, was that almost all of them were seasonal and that the humid climate made their storage impractical except for a very short period. There was thus in most areas a few months in the dry season after the harvest when there was a temporary glut which was followed by a time when the staple foods became increasingly scarce. This ended in a few months of semi-starvation at the beginning of the new farming season when everything was growing and before

the earlier ripening supplementary crops were fit to eat. This may well have been one of the more obvious reasons for the early acceptance and diffusion of New World crops and in particular maize and groundnuts. Introduced originally as supplementary crops they speedily developed into staple foods in the areas best suited to them and, when there was sufficient demand, into export crops. Little is known about their introduction but by the seventeenth century maize was grown both for local consumption and export on the Gold Coast and was one of the principal foods of the southern Yoruba, who were able to grow two crops in a single farming season. Manioc was an excellent root crop in the forest regions, for it could remain in the ground until required for use for a period of up to 1 or 2 years. But it also contained a poison (prussic acid) and its distribution in the Bights of Benin and Biafra was confined to Warri, where it had become the staple food¹⁶ and to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, where it was grown for export (as farinha). The principal food of the Ibo, Ibibio and other slaves exported from the Rio Real was said to be yams, supplemented by plantains, while further east and south-east, in the sparsely populated, heavily forested hinterland of Old Calabar, in Rio del Rey and the Cameroons river, the staple food was plantains. This plant, like many other bananas, is a shade-loving species which grows and reproduces itself all the year round, where the soil is rich enough, as for instance in the humus on land cleared under high forest trees or on the volcanic deposits around the Cameroon mountain. Elsewhere it can only flourish on compost heaps and on land enriched with compound rubbish.

The traditional Ibo and Ibibio agriculture was based on the cultivation of yams (the men's crop) and cocoyams (taro), the women's crop; this was supplemented by various squashes and beans and later by maize. Cassava (manioc), which during the twentieth century became a staple and in the Ngwa and eastern Ibibio areas an export crop (as farinha) was a late introduction, not reaching parts of the hinterland (e.g. Ohaffia Cross River Ibo) until the end of the nineteenth century. There were two main varieties of yams cultivated, an inferior earlier-maturing type confined to the forest zone, and a superior later-maturing type grown in both but reaching a larger size and superior quality in the savannah immediately north of the forest zone, particularly in the southern part of the eastern plain now occupied by the north-eastern Ibo and in the southern part of the Anambara valley and its savannah extension into the Niger riverain plain. These yams matured by November and December and could be lifted throughout the dry season. The better yams of the forest zone were fit to eat from the end of June onward, depending on the advent of the rainy season, which begins at the coast and is progressively later as one moves inland. The

¹⁶ Barbot, p. 377.

inferior types of yams matured even earlier.

(i) *The Rio Real yam trade*

The best farmers in the vicinity of the Rio Real are reputed to be the Ogoni and after them the Ngwa Ibo and Anang Ibibio, all on the Imo side of the Rio Real hinterland. The farmers on the New Calabar side, namely the Ekpeya and southern Ikwerri, are not noted for their yam farming, probably on account of the low-lying swampy condition of much of their land.

We can deduce from the accounts of John and James Barbot that there was a considerable trade in yams from the Rio Real in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, but that it was also a very seasonal one. It was recommended that a ship carrying 500 slaves should take with them no less than 100,000 yams. James Barbot took only 50,000 and suffered because of it.¹⁷ But yams were bulky and tended to become mouldy and rotten after a time and ships therefore brought out from Europe horse and similar beans and also supplemented the yams with maize and farinha (cassava meal) bought from São Tomé and Príncipe. It was at first assumed that the best time to visit the Rio Real was in the months of July, August and September.

Yams are not fit to be taken out of the ground before July and August. Europeans account these two months the best season of the year, because of the continual rains which refresh the air and give the natives an opportunity to apply themselves wholly to commerce up the land for getting of slaves and elephants' teeth and are consequently the fittest time to purchase slaves with expedition but more especially in August and September. But in August and September and so on to March these eatables grow very dear among them insomuch that some ships have been forced to fall down to Amboses and Cameroons river in May and June to buy plantains. To avoid this long delay it is much better for a ship bound to this place from Europe to stop at Cape Tres Pontas or at Anamabon on the Gold Coast to buy Indian wheat or corn there.¹⁸

John Barbot is wrong about the period when yams were scarce. In most of the forest hinterland as in the savannah country further north, yams can be lifted as soon as they are mature enough to be eaten, but it is customary to leave them in the ground until the onset of the dry season, that is from November-December. In the savannah-forest margin and further north yams are not fully grown until then. With the advent of the new farming season, that is from March onward, yams become increasingly scarce and by June are virtually unobtainable. There would thus be a sound reason for the Ngwa and Ogoni farmers to market their yams as soon as they could be lifted, that is in July,

¹⁷ Barbot, p. 465.

¹⁸ Barbot, pp. 379-80.

and this would result in a dearth of yams until the northern yams came on the market at the end of December.

By the end of the seventeenth century Europeans had learnt that the best time to trade was in the dry season. Mr Grazilhier, who traded in 1700, told James Barbot:

In the months of August and September a man may get in his complement of slaves much sooner than he can have the necessary quantity of yams to subsist them, but a ship loading slaves in January, February etc., when yams are very plentiful, the first thing to do is to take them in and then the slaves.¹⁹

But too many captains and supercargoes had become aware of this and had thus forced up the price of slaves. In October 1700 Grazilhier had to pay 24-26 iron bars for a male slave and proportionately less for a female. In 1703 and 1704 the price had dropped to 12 bars for a male and 9 for a female.²⁰

James Barbot, who was there in July 1699, paid 14 bars and 9 bars respectively. He seems to have had no difficulty in getting yams and we can assume they were forest yams from the Imo area, as he was in the Bonny anchorage and trading with that state. The yams, which were plentiful in the New Year, would have come from the riverain area of the Lower Niger to the Kalabari state. John Barbot distinguished between them, saying that

The yams at Bandy point (Bonny) are nothing near so good nor so lasting as those we have from Foko (the Kalabari anchorage) or New Calabar town, where the soil is more proper for their production.²¹

He was wrong in assuming that yams were grown in any of these places.

We are left with the conclusion that ships trading at the Rio Real in the eighteenth century expected to take away from there enough yams for their middle passage except at certain seasons when they were not available. Inferior yams grown in the forest country bordering the Imo were available in July and early August. Superior yams from the marginal savannah of the Niger riverain area were not obtainable until late December to February, when they were abundant. There were no yams to be bought between April and June and supercargoes had to buy plantains from Old Calabar, Amboses and other places further down the coast.

John and James Barbot's accounts show that slavers visiting the Rio Real in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries expected to take away from there enough yams for the requirements of their slaves. When there were not enough yams available, they added coarse beans (horse beans) brought out from

¹⁹ Barbot, p. 465.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 464.

²¹ Ibid., p. 380.

Europe, maize bought on the Gold Coast (at Cape Tres Pontas or Anamabon), or farinha (cassava flour) obtained from some of the islands in the Gulf of Guinea. Considering the number of slaves shipped from this port this implies the export of a large tonnage of yams and we have suggested that they were obtained from two sources, namely the country bordering the Lower Imo (southern Ngwa, Anang, and Ogoni) and the Anambara and Lower Niger riverain area. It is impossible to obtain a definite estimate of the size of this export trade in yams. If we take Captain Adams's estimate of an annual export of 20,000 slaves from the Rio Real and half the recommended figure of 100,000 yams for a cargo of 500 slaves to allow for shipments in the off-seasons when yams were not obtainable, we arrive at an approximation of an annual export of upward of a million yams.

The export of yams from the Lower Imo area probably arose in response to the demands of the overseas slave trade and could have been one of the factors stimulating the expansion southward of the southern Ngwa and Anang tribes. With the cessation of the slave trade the demand for their yams disappeared and they were able to turn with greater profit to the production of palm oil until in the twentieth century they were able to expand their cultivation of manioc (cassava) and with it an export trade in 'garri' (farinha) by rail from Aba to Jos and other commercial centres in the northern provinces of Nigeria.

The trade in yams from the Lower Niger was, if we accept Pereira's account, a more ancient trade that preceded the overseas trade, which expanded with the increased overseas demand. When this ended it continued, but on a very reduced scale, and confined to the not very numerous riverain Ibo communities of the Lower Niger, who were farmers as well as watermen or who bought the yams in which they wished to trade from the Anambara and other riverain markets. Landowners in the marginal savannah on the southside of the Anambara river found it more profitable to rent their surplus land to families from the overpopulated western uplands and Eastern Highlands. These families then moved into the area in the planting season to cultivate the yams and other food crops they needed for their subsistence, returning to their upland homes after harvesting them.

(ii) The Cross River yam trade

The trade in foodstuffs on the Cross River developed in a very different way. There was no export of yams until very much later. In the seventeenth century Old Calabar was still a trading centre that supplied, like the Cameroons ports, only forest produce, namely plantains and game.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, there was a considerable trade from the Middle Cross River bringing savannah yams to Old Calabar and the Cross River estuary, and this trade continued to grow during the

succeeding centuries. For the advent of the palm oil trade, besides leading to the increase of the population of the Old Calabar area, had also enriched the populous Ibibio oil producing areas sufficiently for them to be able to afford this luxury.

I have no details of the quantities of yams shipped from Old Calabar. The best yams were grown in the savannah areas north of the Cross River and drained by its tributaries the Okpoha, Aboyne and the Ewayong. This was the country of the north-eastern Ibo, who had so modified their methods of cultivation and of acquiring the additional land they needed for it that they were able to expand over the whole of the present Abakaliki division. Superior yams were also grown by other tribes of the Middle Cross River and the development of the trade had equally important effects upon their tribal distribution.

The yams were sold to the Agwagune and other Biase river folk, who loaded them into large canoes and carried them with speed to Old Calabar and later to other Lower Cross River markets. European accounts of the trade are lacking, but it can be assumed that during the period of the slave trade and the Efik monopoly of the overseas trade, the yams were sold to the Efik traders, who then resold them to the European supercargoes.

By comparison with the Niger or the Benue, the Cross River has a strong current carrying canoes down it in midstream at speed and with a minimum crew. The return journey was more leisurely, with the canoe more than half empty, carrying lighter imported trade goods in smaller quantities and being poled along the shallower sides of the river. During the nineteenth century the canoes carried palm oil as well as yams and the river traders became very wealthy, particularly the Agwagune tribe, whose men achieved a preponderant share of the river trade and whose women, unlike those of other south-eastern Nigerian tribes, also travelled to temporary trading and other employment abroad.

The growth of this riverain trade had a considerable effect upon the settlement pattern of the Middle Cross River people who bordered it, particularly the Mbembe tribes. These, after originally expanding northward into the eastern plain and southward into the forest, became regrouped as a number of large villages bordering the river. The recoil on the northern side was in face of pressure from the Ikwo tribe of north-eastern Ibo which was itself expanding rapidly towards the river. This obliged the Osopong Mbembe to withdraw to the forested margin bordering the Ewayong river. On the southern side there was no such pressure; the movement was a voluntary one and led to the establishment by the Okum tribe of the large village of Apiapum as a port on the river for its hinterland settlements. Similarly part of the Osopong tribe moved across from the northern side to establish the large villages of Ogada and Obubra immediately above it. All these villages were

established at the expense of the Mbembe settlements already there.

IV. The abolition of the overseas slave trade and the aftermath

The British naval blockade of the Gulf of Guinea brought the overseas shipment of slaves from the Biafran ports virtually to an end by the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Its disappearance affected the coastal states and the hinterland very differently. The former were able to find in the export of palm oil a very convenient replacement and to establish this new trade before the slave trade came to an end. The oil palm grows in wild or semi-wild conditions in the rainforest belt in areas where the high forest has been reduced and particularly in the more heavily populated Ibo and Ibibio country. Difficulties of overland transport however prevented those communities at any distance from navigable waterways from participating in the export of palm oil and the boom which had accompanied the expansion of the slave trade must have been followed by a severe and prolonged depression in those areas and in those outside the oil palm belt.

In the northern sector of the Lower Niger trading area, the abolition of the overseas slave trade coincided with the extension of the Fulani Jihad to the Niger and Lower Benue. This destroyed the commercial centres of the Igbira and overran the northern Edo area and made it tributary to the newly created Nupe Emirate of Bida. It also disrupted the Hausa trade in slaves from this area. Slaves still continued to go north probably in greater numbers but not by way of trade. They went as the spoils of Fulani warfare or as tribute to the Emirates of Zaria, Bauchi and Gombe from the people their military commanders had subjugated.

In the Cross River trading area the most notable long-term result was the loss by the Aro of the principal commodity in which they traded and their inability to find a replacement for it. Unlike the trading states of the delta, the Aro were unable to change over to trading in palm oil. The oil had to be handled in bulk before trading in it became profitable. The only means of transporting it in such quantity was by water and the Aro trading organisation was a land-based one. Aro fortunes continued to decline until, with the advent of British colonial rule, they were displaced from their dominant position by Isuama and other traders, the wealthiest of whom were women.

Throughout the nineteenth century however the Aro retained their hold on the Cross River trading system. They alone had an organisation that covered the whole area, they remained its principal moneylenders, they retained a virtual monopoly of the trade in guns and gunpowder and other valuable imports and they still controlled what remained of the trade in slaves.

The British government had little difficulty in bringing the overseas slave trade to an end, first by preventing their own nationals, till then the biggest slave traders, from engaging in it, then after other European nations had been persuaded to follow suit, by establishing a blockade of the slave exporting ports. The internal slave trade was not so easily suppressed and trading in slaves continued in the Lower Niger and Cross River trading areas, for there were local people wanting to sell slaves and others wanting to buy them. But there were not nearly enough of the latter. The demand compared to that of the overseas trade was negligible and there were no more fortunes to be made out of it. The trade continued and was not brought to an end until after the Second World War. The colonial government made slave dealing a criminal offence, but this merely drove it underground.

The demand for slaves came from two sources, from communities in underpopulated areas, for example in the Cross River hinterland, who were colonising new territory and were short of manpower, and from the Ijo delta. Here the accepted form of marriage prevented a husband from founding a family, as his wife's children belonged to her parents' group. The acquisition of a slave wife solved this problem.²²

The principal purchasers of slaves for colonising purposes during the nineteenth century were the Efik of Old Calabar, who settled them with the poorer members of their houses (lineages) in the Duketown and Creek town hinterland. Others were bought by Yako and other Middle Cross River tribes and by the Aro themselves, who established similar 'plantations' on vacant land on the eastern side of the Cross River later known as the Ugwuakoma clan area. In this they were following the lead of the Aro settlement of Ndizorgu, which at an earlier date had begun to grow food crops on land in the Imo valley for sale to the families of Ndizorgu men trading abroad and to the overpopulated communities on the surrounding high land.

²² There was a second form of Ijo marriage in which the payment of a high bride price entitled the husband and his group to his children by the wife, but most Ijo women would not agree to be married under this form, as they considered it defined them as slaves.

CHAPTER 3

Trade in the nineteenth century

Until 1807 the pattern of the export trade from the Bight of Biafra had been a gradual expansion of the export of slaves which, beginning in a small way in the sixteenth century, expanded steadily during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reaching its peak at the beginning of the nineteenth century when it was first reduced and then brought to an abrupt end by the British naval blockade by about 1839. With the nineteenth century there developed a trade in palm oil which, however, followed a different pattern. It reached its peak in the Oil Rivers both in price and in quantity about 1855-57. Thereafter the price declined, while the quantity exported remained almost stationary up to 1884. The loss from the fall in oil prices was made good by the development of a new export, palm kernels, which began in the 1870s and increased rapidly in volume, the tonnage exported after 1900 becoming twice that of palm oil and the value of these two exports forming more than three-quarters of the total export trade of Southern Nigeria.

The ending of the overseas slave trade marked the end of an epoch in the economic history of Nigeria and the introduction of the trade in palm oil the beginning of another, in which it constituted the predominant export. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, it encompassed the greater part of the colonial era, only declining after the Second World War when the colonial government was itself being phased out and the country attained its independence.

In following these developments we can for convenience distinguish three periods: precolonial, early colonial and middle colonial. This takes us to 1945, the end of the Second World War, and also to the end of this study. The succeeding period, which was transitional between colonial rule and independence, belongs to the post-Keynesian era and requires more specialised treatment.

It is the first of these periods that is examined in this chapter.

I. The oil palm and its oil

There are two types of palm trees to confuse the historian of eastern Nigeria, the raffia palm (*raphia vinifera*) and the oil palm (*elaeis Guineensis*).

The raffia palm is a domesticated species which requires a great deal of moisture and is mainly planted in swamps (though the Ibibio have a few dryland varieties). It flowers only once after about 7-10 years growth, then dies and it supplies the farmer with piassava fibre and with raffia from its stem. Its leaves and branches provide him with poles and roofing mats and palm wine is

obtained from its sap.

The oil palm is a semi-wild species with a wider range than the raffia palm though it grows best in areas of heavy rainfall. It cannot survive in high forest as it is unable to compete in height with the taller trees and it cannot be cultivated in plantation conditions in eastern Nigeria unless the fertility of the soil is maintained, for it tends to deplete it of certain minerals (e.g. manganese). It grows best around residential areas where the soil has become enriched by household rubbish and compost. It lives to a considerable age and is valued by the farmer for its oil and kernels, which are derived from its fruit, and for its sap, which is the principal source of palm wine in areas which are too dry for raffia palms, that is in a large portion of the northern Ibo country and in the Ibo part of the eastern plain, where it has been introduced for this purpose. Further north amongst the Idoma and the Tiv, guinea corn beer replaces palm wine as the principal drink.

An oil palm produces either palm wine or palm oil, since the wine is produced by cutting off the inflorescence, which grows two to three times in a year, and inserting a draining tube with a gourd collecting bottle attached to it. In areas where oil palms are plentiful most able-bodied males can climb oil palm trees. Raffia trees are short enough to be reached with a ladder. The production and sale of palm wine from both types of palms tends to be a specialisation and in some areas younger men may organise themselves into full-time palm wine tappers, travelling to areas where they can rent the palm trees they need from the people who own them. Thus for example most of the north-eastern Ibo communities have lost the art of climbing their oil palm trees which in 1930 were being tapped by immigrant wine sellers from the Awgu tribe of Mbowo.

Oil palms grow best in a belt which is correlated with rainforest and heavy rainfall. This extends from Warri and the southern Edo across to the southern Ibo and Ibibio. In this belt they are found in greatest profusion in areas of high population density. Here they grow around residential sites or in areas of rotational cultivation. Oil palms are almost as numerous in the densely populated Isuama and Nri-Awka areas, but here their yield is said to be less and a considerable number of trees are used for palm wine. Oil palms also extend up the Niger at favourable sites in the Igala and Igbira country where they are valued for their oil and, as we have seen, in the Ibo part of the eastern plain, where they are used for palm wine. There was also an abundance of oil palms in the Obubra, Bansara and Ikom riverain area of the Middle Cross River. South of this riverain area as far south as the delta margin there were few palm trees as the country was mainly high forest. This originally included the Old Calabar area. It is as well to bear this in mind, for during and after the colonial period this became an oil producing area and the one part of eastern Nigeria where expatriate and government oil palm

plantations were established.

In the early part of the nineteenth century the only oil palms would have been around the Efik, Kwa and Efut settlements. It was not until the poorer section of the Creek town and Duketown population had been settled in the hinterland that palm trees would have been able to grow there and a generation or more later they would have matured and multiplied sufficiently for commercial exploitation.

Amongst the Isuama and northern Ibo and in northern areas where they had been introduced or were in limited numbers, oil palms were individually owned, particularly those used for palm wine. Amongst the Ibibio and southern Ibo they were the common property of villages or of their subdivisions and the cutting and collecting of the fruit, which appeared throughout the year though in less quantity during the dry season, was regulated by the village elders.

Palm oil is made from the fibrous pericarp of the fruit, which grows in a compact cluster weighing on average about 3.75 pounds. The pericarp encloses a nut from the kernel of which another oil, palm kernel oil, is expressed. Palm oil is produced locally by a combination of male and female labour, the man's work being primarily to climb the tree and cut the fruit, the woman's to process the oil from it. Palm kernels were exported whole to European mills that expressed the oil and turned the residue into cattle cake.

By the end of the nineteenth century the trade recognised four grades of palm oil, namely edible, soft, semi and hard. They were determined by the amount of F.F.A., free fatty acid, present in the oil. If the percentage was below 9% the oil remained liquid (soft), if much above this it became increasingly solid (hard) and could only become liquid when heated. The amount of F.F.A. depended on the method of production. To make the superior liquid oil the fruit had to be sterilised very soon after it was cut. If left to soften so that the fruit was easily detachable from the central stem, F.F.A. developed and continued to increase the longer it was left. Oil produced for local consumption and usually referred to as edible oil had a percentage of 5% or less F.F.A. The fruit had to be carried home as it was cut, hacked off the stem and put into a pot and boiled; the boiling had to continue until the pericarp had softened sufficiently for it to be separated from the nut by being pounded in a mortar. Once the nuts had been removed the fibre was reboiled, the oil which rose to the surface was skimmed off and the fibre was further squeezed by hand under water to extract the residue.

If however the fruit was left in piles after it had been cut down, fermentation would set in rapidly, softening the pericarp and the attachment of the fruit to the stem, so that the fruit could be pulped and the nuts and oil extracted with a minimum of heating and, in some methods, by using only unheated water. It thus needed much less labour, particularly female labour, to produce and was therefore favoured in underpopulated areas like the freshwater

swamp areas of settlement in the Niger Delta. These were visited by companies of Isoko (southern Edo) and Ibo men who rented the right to collect fruit from the local owners and processed the fruit themselves using their canoes as mortars and water containers. The oil made in this way was taken and sold to the agents of factories established on the principal waterways. Such oil would have become hard before it reached the factory. But the agent could offer them a very competitive price, since the cost of conveying it to the coastal port was very much less than if it had been soft oil. A puncheon of soft oil sank and therefore had to be carried in a canoe, and very few canoes were large enough to hold more than three puncheons. Hard oil floated and two men were all that was needed to steer a raft of 20 to 30 puncheons to its coastal destination.

The production of semi oil was better suited to many southern Ibo areas where palm trees were more widely dispersed and where the population to collect and process the fruit was less numerous; many such areas also lacked a convenient supply of water.

These three systems are all claimed today to have been the traditional methods, but it is probable that those for producing inferior oil were evolved during the nineteenth century in response to the demand of the export trade. Climbing oil palms is an arduous and dangerous activity, whether the climber uses the widespread single rope method or the double ropes of the Ngwa Ibo and of the Ibibio.²³ Men only climbed to cut fruit when their people needed oil or when the economic inducement was great enough. During the days of the slave trade, small quantities of palm oil were bought as part of the food for the slaves, and there was also some demand for palm oil from further up the Niger, which was met from Niger riverain sources, but there was no major demand for it, either from the coastal or the middle-belt markets. Some fruit was cut to meet local requirements, the rest was left unharvested. Palm kernels, if they were needed, could be got from the nuts of overripened fruit that had fallen and rotted on the ground.

The abolition of the English slave trade, coming as it did in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, completely changed the position. The new machinery needed lubrication and palm oil constituted a suitable and reasonably cheap lubricant and it was available in what was believed to be inexhaustible quantities in the Biafran hinterland. The Oil Rivers traders were right in this assumption, but the full potential of the eastern Nigerian oil palm belt was never realised, the limiting factors being transport in the nineteenth century and price in the twentieth. We can only guess at the quality of the oil exported

²³ The danger is not so great for palm wine tappers, who have to climb the trees they are tapping at least twice a day, and who therefore reduce the danger of slipping by clearing away lichen and cutting footholds when needed.

during the nineteenth century. We know from the memoirs of the slaver Captain Crow that the oil bought in his day, that is at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, was edible or soft oil but we can assume that its quality soon degenerated, since it was required mainly for lubrication and soap making. Consular and other documents refer to one quality only, namely 'saleable oil' and this was oil that had not been adulterated with water, mud, banana stems and other foreign matter. The merchants, if the treaties of commerce are any guide, were concerned with quantity, not quality.

In the twentieth century until the 1940s oil was marketed under the four grades of edible (not more than 9% F.F.A.), soft (not more than 18%), semi (not more than 27%) and hard (not more than 36%). As the market price in West Africa for edible oil was never high enough in relation to the other grades, little or no edible oil was sold for export. A considerable quantity of oil below 5% was produced for sale locally, particularly in the Ibibio area. This was used partly for local consumption, but mainly for blending with semi to produce soft oil. The addition of 16 gallons of edible oil to 30 gallons of semi oil would produce a drum of soft oil.²⁴

By this time, that is by the first half of the twentieth century, the bulk of the hard oil exported from eastern Nigeria came from the Niger Delta and its northern extension in the Aboh area of the Lower Niger. Semi oil came mainly from the area supplying the Rio Real (Port Harcourt) and soft from the Ibibio area supplying the port of Old Calabar. We have suggested that this was partly due to the amount and type of labour, to the distribution of the palm trees and of water supplies. In the freshwater area of the Niger Delta the population was sparse with alternative specialisations available. The Ibibio country had the greatest concentration of trees and people. In the southern Ibo area where the trees were less concentrated and the population less, the shortage of male labour was met by young men who migrated seasonally from the eastern Isuama towns further north, and when the export of palm kernels developed towards the end of the nineteenth century, these men brought their child relatives along with them. They were given their keep and a daily wage, the men for cutting palm fruit, the children for cracking palm nuts.

The overriding factor affecting the quality of oil produced in these regions however, was the prices paid on the local factory 'beaches' (buying centres). For example those at Oguta found it more convenient to raft their oil to the Rio Real port of Abonnema; and thus offered a proportionately high price for hard oil. As a result they received oil not only from the Niger Delta, but also from the heavily populated western Isuama region. Those western Isuama

²⁴ It would also accelerate the increase of F.F.A. Such a drum of blended soft oil bought at 16-17% F.F.A. would have become semi at 20% F.F.A. within a week.

towns nearer Osomari and Onitsha however produced soft and semi oil for sale to factories on the Niger, where the prices for these grades were higher, or made edible oil for sale in Onitsha food market or to riverain traders taking it for sale in the northern provinces.

The prices for Nigerian oil until the outbreak of the Second World War were ultimately controlled by companies operating in the world oil market. Before the war they preferred to buy their edible oil from plantation companies in Sumatra and other parts of Indonesia and their palm kernels and inferior palm oil from Nigeria. Prices were fixed accordingly and supported by the assertion that the West African farmer was unable or unwilling to produce oil of superior quality. This myth was disproved during and after the war as soon as the price offered for edible oil made its production profitable.

A. The palm oil trade

Liverpool interests, which till 1807 had been concerned with the Bight of Biafra slave trade, did not take long to turn to 'legitimate trade' in the form of palm oil. Thomas Tobin, the former slave trader, claimed²⁵ to have been the founder of the Bonny palm oil trade with Charles Horsefall. In Old Calabar there were 'two houses, Mr. Bold's and Mr. Penny's already established in a small way'. Jamieson gives the figures for the early years of the trade. In 1806, imports of palm oil into Liverpool from the Bight of Biafra were 150 tons, by 1809 they were over 600 tons, by 1819 over 3000 tons and by 1829 over 8000 tons, and by 1857 26,050 tons, by which time exports of oil from the Bight of Biafra made up two-thirds of the total imported into Great Britain.²⁶

The pattern followed by the oil trade was the opposite to that of the slave trade. It started with a strong demand, worked up to a boom when prices on the home market went as high as £50 a ton, then declined gradually, from £40 in the 1860s to £36 in 1875, £30 in 1879, £20 in 1886, £19 in 1896, after which it rose slightly to £23 in 1900.²⁷ Records of the prices paid in the Oil River ports are deficient. Adams gives £12 to £15 a ton for oil in Bonny when the trade was just beginning there and £14 for Old Calabar in the same period. Burton has a valuable passage in his letter of 1864.

The action of petroleum combined with stagnation of American trade began to be felt in 1862. The great fall of prices was in 1863. During the Russian war oil equalled £50 a ton, at one time £53 10s; it has now declined to £32 and will fall lower. A total of £16 must be laid up before the ton can be purchased

²⁵ P.P. 1847-8, 3rd P. Vol. XII, 3rd Report, p. 4.

²⁶ Jamieson, 1859.

²⁷ The prices are the average United Kingdom prices for the year.

and agents cannot reduce the local price below £19.²⁸

Consul Livingstone in his trade report for 1873 has an interesting passage.

The price received for oil in England has fallen of late while the price paid on the rivers has risen to twice or even thrice its former figure, one firm reports a loss of £20,000 from last year's trade.²⁹

This was when a change in the system of overseas transport from sail to steam had brought a reduction in freight rates while an influx of new firms had increased the competition between the oil exporters. We can assume therefore that the new traders were more able to pass on this reduction in transport differentials to the local African traders in slightly higher local prices for oil, but we can only guess what these prices were. We can also assume that this picture applied mainly to the Old Calabar river. There is no evidence of intensified competition on the Rio Real.

When we examine the quantity of oil exported we are again compelled to use British import rather than local export figures and until after 1880 they refer to the whole of West Africa less the British West African colonies. The amounts of oil imported are given in the following tables:

**Table I: Imports from the western coast of Africa
(Excluding British colonies)**

1835	12,800 tons	1865	31,000 tons
1845	25,000 tons	1875	36,800 tons
1855	32,000 tons	1880	36,100 tons

²⁸ Burton, P.P. Vol. LVI, 1865.

²⁹ Livingstone, P.P. Vol. LXV 1873.

**Table II: Exports from Lagos and Niger Coast Protectorate
(later known as Southern Nigeria, and after 1914 as Nigeria)**

1895	43,300	1935	143,000
1905	54,300	1945	114,000
1915	73,000	1951	150,000
1925	128,000		
1930	136,000		

**Table III: Palm oil imports 1855
Oil Rivers**

Bonny & Kalabari	16,000	(16,000-17,000)
Brass (Nembe)	3,000	(2,000-2,800)
Old Calabar	4,000	(4,000-5,000)
Cameroons	2,000	(1,800-2,000)
Other unspecified parts of West Africa, including Lagos and Bight of Benin	7,000	
Total of above	32,000	
British West African colonies	8,500	
Total imports	40,500	

The proportion exported from the different rivers is preserved in Consul Hutchinson's report for 1855 and Burton writing in 1864 gave the figures of the average tonnage exported from the Oil River ports. These two sets of figures when combined with the Board of Trade import figures give us the Table III, Burton's averages being given in brackets.

British import figures after 1880 are inadequate as oil was beginning to be exported to Europe, and after Burton we have no further figures of exports from individual Oil River ports, only a summary of total exports from the Bight of Biafra for the years 1866 to 1871, which were 22,300 tons in 1866, 28,500 in 1871 and averaged 25,800 over the whole period.

The pattern which emerges from these figures, however, is clear. During the nineteenth century the bulk of the world's supply of palm oil came from the Oil Rivers and over three-fifths of it came from the Bonny and New Calabar states. But unlike the slave trade the quantity of oil did not increase, it soon attained the figure of 16,000 for the Rio Real and 32,000 in the case of the

total West African trade, and there it remained. The fall in the price of oil neither led to a noticeable decrease nor an increase in production.

B. The palm kernel trade

What it did do was to develop another export, palm kernels, and this export increased rapidly. Kernels do not appear as a West African export until after 1860. In 1862, 272 tons were imported into Great Britain.

Livingstone describes the beginning of the kernel trade in the Oil Rivers; the nuts, he says, were originally thrown away. It was known to the European traders that the kernels of the nuts contained a valuable oil, but the cost of transporting nuts to Britain was too great, and the nut cracking machines they brought out were unsatisfactory. Eventually the women and children were persuaded to undertake the work by hand. The trade began in Old Calabar in 1869, and a little sooner in some of the other rivers. A thousand tons of kernels were bought in Old Calabar that year at two shillings per bushel, and in 1871 upward of 2,000 tons at eight shillings a bushel. This was followed by opposition on the part of African palm oil traders. The export, when Livingstone wrote his report, had temporarily declined and no subsequent consul refers to the trade. However by 1875 imports were 10,000 tons and in 1885 they were 22,031. The exports into Britain began to decline after this but exports from West Africa to other European countries, notably Germany, continued to increase. Unfortunately we have no further figures of kernel exports from the Oil Rivers until after 1900, but in 1903 Nigerian exports had reached the figure of 131,900 tons, of which Britain took 21,000 tons and Germany 109,000 tons. By 1928 the Nigerian export of kernels was 246,000 and 416,000 tons by 1951. Their value, however, like that of palm oil, declined from £13 7s a ton in 1875 to £11 6s in 1885 and £8 3s in 1903.

Palm kernels were produced by the poorer section of the community. The cracking of the nuts by hand was a slow process and became a spare-time occupation for women and children. The prices paid were low and the labour was not very rewarding, but the transport was not so difficult as the kernels could be carried in locally made bags and sacks and could come from much further afield.

C. Transportation

The problem of transport was the determining factor in the expansion of the palm oil trade. The oil was heavy and fluid or semi-solid. It was difficult to transport as the containers, whether they were local pots or European casks, were also heavy and suitable only for transport in bulk and this did not exist except by river. Elsewhere the only form of transport was portage on people's heads and neither the containers nor the price made this an economic

greater range of goods but costly goods and luxuries. Dapper remarked that one could unload on the Rio del Rey goods that could not be sold on the Gold Coast. Captain Adams's list of trade goods which related to the boom period at the beginning of the nineteenth century showed that the only Indian silks were handkerchiefs, pullicats and bandannoes in the case of Bonny, pullicats and lungees in the case of Old Calabar. Thomas Tobin, speaking when palm oil prices were still high, showed that even Indian cottons had been replaced by Lancashire imitations:

They mostly have British manufactured goods now because they are so very much cheaper. The Indian romals at that time (the time of the British slave trade) were about fifteen shillings. They get for about three shillings the imitation of them from Manchester.³¹

Consul Livingstone in 1871 when palm oil prices had fallen wrote

It is somewhat startling to find that the best kinds of Manchester goods, such as Madras, have been driven out of the oil markets by Swiss prints of the same class. Swiss Madras is cheaper and its colours much superior to Manchester. The cheapest Manchester prints such as guinea cloth, romals and baroes still retain their market and will probably continue to do so.³²

The general trend of the Biafran import trade during the nineteenth century was not to create more luxuries but to convert former luxuries into necessities, for instance, spirits, tobacco, clothing, firearms, and to make the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland dependent on a large range of these and other necessities which they had formerly either produced themselves or had gone without. For one of the more important results of the change in eastern Nigerian exports was that the wealth derived from the new export was distributed far more widely and more of it reached the actual producers.

The oil was produced and marketed in small quantities by a very large number of people, and many others were involved in its collection and resale in larger amounts. Competition between these transit traders, and between the middlemen (or women) to whom they sold it was keen, for the restrictions established by the slave trade did not apply. Anyone could engage in this new trade. The trading states of the coastal estuaries, now called the Oil Rivers, retained their monopoly of direct trade with the overseas merchants and merchant firms but in the Rio Real area they were in conflict with each other to secure their access to new oil markets, and on all of these rivers the component 'houses' of each state were competing against each other to secure

³¹ Ibid., p. 4.

³² P.P. 1873 Vol. LXV. Consul Livingstone's report for the year 1872.

a greater share of the trade. It was a situation in which more of the profit was passed down to the producers and these were almost all the women and most of the men in the oil producing areas. The palm trees grew wild around their compounds and on their farm lands, the only labour involved was the cutting and processing of the fruit and this did not interfere with their farming activities. The amount of oil which they produced and sold in the local markets was not large, but it provided them with a small but regular cash income which was not required for their subsistence but could be spent on goods and particularly on imported cottons which, thanks to the fall in world prices, were now within their means.

These changes can be seen if we examine some of these overseas imports in greater detail.

(i) Salt

The earliest accounts of the Rio Real refer to a substantial salt making industry. There was an equally large one at the mouth of the Cross River, and in the Brass Ijo area. During the succeeding centuries the clay pots used for salt boiling were replaced by European neptunes and Brass pans. In the early nineteenth century Adams writes:

Salt being very cheap in Liverpool and always in demand at Old Calabar, the vessels going there generally take of that article the amount of their registered tonnage'.....³³

as the trade in palm oil increases in Bonny, salt will become more in demand, vessels trading there take at present about fifty tons Brass pans, Neptunes and Kettles are in general demand but are considered losing articles of trade.³⁴

Delta-produced salt in fact could not compete with Cheshire salt, which could be brought out from Liverpool in ballast, and during the nineteenth century salt making virtually ceased in the delta. In Old Calabar, for example, the crew of salt became the principal import exchanged for oil according to Lieutenant Bold writing in 1841. The crew was a barrel which contained 9 gallons or 72 pounds of oil, or 56 pounds of salt. To buy ten crews of oil valued at a hundred copper rods the supercargo traded ten crews of salt, two kegs of gunpowder (a keg = half pint), four iron bars, one wedge of soap, one looking glass, one quart mug, one large striped cap or two red caps and eight yards of *romal* (cotton cloth).³⁵ On the Cameroons river salt was 'the most essential ingredient (of trade) in this river, it very much reduces the cost of the cargo:

³³ Adams, p. 247.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 263.

³⁵ Bold, pp. 80-81.

also being in great demand you will scarcely be able to trade without it'.³⁶

(ii) Tobacco

We do not know when this plant was introduced to West Africa. Captain Adams writing in 1823 said it was in strong demand as an import on the Slave Coast and in Benin, having been previously traded there from Bahia by the Portuguese in the final stage of the slave trade. On the other hand there was no demand for it at Bonny, Old Calabar and Angola, as tobacco was cultivated locally. But by 1873 tobacco (Virginian) heads Consul Livingstone's list of staple imports, and hogsheads of this type of tobacco continued to be a major import throughout the colonial period.

(iii) Spirits

Although the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland had their own traditional alcoholic drink, namely palm wine, European spirits soon became an important article of trade, at first brandy then with the development of the West Indies sugar-rum. By the end of the eighteenth century each trading post had their own preferences; according to Adams 'English brandy was (originally) preferred at Bonny and Old Calabar but the natives of those places now prefer French brandy or rum'. Rum was 'held in most estimation in the Gold Coast, especially that manufactured in America'. French brandy was 'esteemed on the Slave Coast, Lagos and Benin, also Hollands gin'.³⁷ By the end of the century gin (trade spirits) had displaced all the others and had become the accepted strong liquor of the Niger-Cross River hinterland and incorporated into their religious rituals to be used in feasts and in making superior libations to tutelary spirits and ancestors and in marriage transactions. In parts of the delta it became an alternative form of currency. The reason for its popularity was not only its price but its packaging. It was imported in cases of six and of twelve bottles. These could be broken down and the bottles sold separately. Brandy and rum on the other hand came in two gallon jars or in puncheons and there were no satisfactory or cheap small containers available locally into which they could be decanted for transport and sale in upcountry markets. They could also be more easily adulterated.³⁸ Cases of gin could not be

³⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁷ Adams, p. 260.

³⁸ 'Spirit used in trade (i.e. brandy and rum) is generally reduced to three-fourths of the proof strength. At Bonny to two-thirds, where pepper is made to supply the deficiency of strength. The captains, careful of the health of the natives, soak a quantity of dry bird-pepper in brandy, which is strained off and put into the brandy at the time it is mixed with water, this gives it pungency and prevents detection.' Adams, p. 260.

tampered with so easily.

(iv) Cloths and clothing

The Yoruba and the Hausa had their own distinctive dress, the Ijo, Ibo, Ibibio and other people of eastern Nigeria, like most of their northern and eastern neighbours, preferred to go naked or to wear a minimum of clothing in the form of a narrow skirt or loincloth, and in the case of wealthier men, a cloak. While in most cases this was primarily due to poverty and the absence of suitable materials, in some it was a matter of fashion. The north-eastern Ibo, for example, retained their traditional dress – a waist towel for the men, a pubic apron for their wives – until the end of the Second World War.³⁹

Pereira describes the Ijo of the coastal area and of the Rio Real as naked except for torques of copper round their necks. Ethnographers have shown that the Niger-Cross River area lacked cotton and cotton weaving except in the extreme north. Those in the forest region wove strips of raffia cloth which they made into bags and used as waist cloths. Those in the savannah and on the forest margin bought cotton strips from their northern neighbours or from further west. By the end of the nineteenth century cotton cloths had replaced raffia. There always seems to have been a preference for cotton over raffia and bark cloth, and both Nigerian and overseas traders sought to cater for this demand. Until the trade in Indian cottons had developed, the European traders could only supply West African cloths (Guinea stuffs) which, as vessels to the Bight of Biafra did not call at the Slave Coast or Lagos, came from other than Yoruba sources. Once the Indian trade expanded they were able to introduce a large variety of the cheaper Indian cottons and in considerable quantity. The trade in Indian cottons and silks still awaits research, all that can be said is that, despite the steady increase in the quantity of imported Indian cottons and of their nineteenth-century European substitutes, the import of the cheaper Yoruba and other Nigerian cottons, far from being displaced, continued to expand and to extend its range from the northern Ibo area as far as the Rio Real delta.⁴⁰ The imported cottons were fancied for the brightness and variety of their colours and designs; they were too light and delicate for hard wear. The Yoruba cloths were valued for their strength and durability. By the mid-colonial period native Nigerian cottons still predominated in the northern part of the Niger-Cross River hinterland and imported cottons in the southern oil exporting areas, though even there most women had as their general utility

³⁹ The women's dress was changed because young men returning from war service and other employment abroad decided it was indecent and derogatory.

⁴⁰ The traditional bride wealth in Okrika was a length of raffia and a length of Yoruba cloth. The former was obligatory, the latter was said to be an optional but normal extra.

garment a fathom of Yoruba blue and white cloth worn around the waist as a skirt and kept their fathom of imported cotton print 'for best'.

The problem of how these Yoruba cloths reached the southern Ibo and the Ibibio has yet to be solved. In colonial times there was a considerable trade in these Yoruba blue cloths, which had been traded to Onitsha market from the north and west and were bought by Isuama and Nri-Awka traders to retail in the southern Ibo and Ibibio markets. But no reference is made in local traditions to such a trade in earlier times. We also know that there was a considerable export of such cloths from the Benin river to European traders, though there is no reference in the few records of the Biafran trade that have survived to Yoruba cloths forming part of the trade goods they brought to the Rio Real or Old Calabar.

What these records and oral traditions agree upon is the import by all these trading states, including Warri, of luxury cloths and clothing, together with superior hats, helmets and other headgear. These were for the use of the wealthier members of these states and of their trading partners in the hinterland.

The early part of the nineteenth century had seen the invention, production and distribution of a mass of military and other uniforms and headgear in Britain and Western Europe. When these came into the second-hand clothing market a ready sale was found for them in the trading states and in due course in the Ibo sector of the Lower Niger. Wealthy men who had acquired titled offices and positions of authority in their communities wanted ceremonial dress to define their status and in default of local models looked overseas for their inspiration. The titled men of Asaba and the Obis and high officials of the petty kingdoms of the Lower Niger wore scarlet military or hunting coats and red felt fezzes. The King of Creek town (Old Calabar) was said to have worn a brass replica of the British Crown and copies of British Coronation robes when he assumed his office. The eventual result was a compromise, the European influence ending at the waist and the coat or jacket being worn over the traditional loincloth, which in its ceremonial form was a skirt which extended from the waist to the ground. These cloths (arse cloths in nineteenth century trade English) were mostly fathom lengths of superior imported cotton prints; but in the Ndokki area on the Lower Imo, a small weaving industry came into being specifically to supply the needs of the big men of the Rio Real. This made the colourful embroidered Akwete cloths which could be woven to suit the wishes of each individual client. They were woven from imported cotton yarns, and their designs and techniques (e.g. the false embroidery) were the same as those of the Ijebu Ode Yoruba on the delta margin in the Lagos area. Unfortunately the origin of this enterprise has now been completely forgotten and no myths have as yet arisen to account for it.

From about 1870 according to Consul Livingstone, discarded army uniforms went out of fashion. He did not say what replaced them, but by the end of the century the English top hat and the collarless dress shirt had become the approved wear for men of superior status. It was worn without a collar and over the skirt. In the trading states it was copied by local tailors and elaborated into the 'Opobo gown', a garment which was made out of lightweight gaberdine or worsted suiting material of a dark colour, or of brightly coloured and patterned flannel. It extended from the neck to below the knees but still betrayed its origin in the narrow band at the neck with holes for the attachment of a collar (which was now no longer worn), by the ruffles on the chest, by its shirt tails fore and aft, and by its elaboration of the flap which in the prototype had attached it to a top trouser button. This diffused rapidly throughout the delta, the southern and Isuama Ibo and to the Ibibio and Cross River areas and has become the traditional dress of the present-day people of the Imo, Rivers and Calabar states.

(v) Tools and weapons

The weapons and the cutting and digging tools of south-eastern Nigerians were made for them by the local smiths from iron smelted in the eastern highlands, the Okigwi Ohaffia ridge and in the eastern plain. Iron in the form of the iron bar soon became a standard import and at the end of the eighteenth century, European traders sought to make it the trading currency of the Rio Real. This failed, since in the following century improved techniques of smelting iron in Britain and Western Europe resulted in the production of iron in considerable quantity at greatly reduced prices. Its price continued to fall and the quantity imported to rise until the end of the century. At the same time cheap iron enabled European manufacturers to make cutlasses and knives at prices well below those of the locally made ones and by the colonial period these had virtually disappeared. From this time onward there were only two types of cutlass available, both imported. One, made of wrought iron and used for farming, was called a matchet. The other, used for fighting and made of coarse steel, had the trade name of hunting knife.

Hoes were more resistant to change. The great variety of their sizes and shapes in different areas defeated European attempts to mass-produce them and they continued to be made by local smiths out of imported iron bars.

(vi) Guns and gunpowder

The most striking change in weapons however was caused by the introduction of firearms. The traditional projectiles of the tribes in the Benue valley and eastern plain were arrows, which in the case of the Tiv were said to be poisoned. In the forest and delta areas they used throwing-spears (referred to by Dapper as assegai). Muskets, though introduced in the previous century

as presents to kings and other notables, did not become a standard article of trade until the middle of the eighteenth century in the case of the coastal states and probably a little later for the hinterland. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the demand for guns and gunpowder was considerable, the results of the Napoleonic wars had stimulated their production in Western Europe and after 1814 there were considerable quantities available for the West African trade and at very competitive prices. In 1823 they were shown (by Captain Adams) to be one of the major articles of trade at Bonny and Old Calabar.⁴¹ As with cotton imports, each trading post had its preferences.

The tower proof musket is adapted for the Gold Coast generally, also for Widah, Lagos and Benin. French muskets also English military ones are esteemed at Bonny. The greater proportion of the muskets taken to the place during the existence of the slave trade have been of bad quality. the natives (because of the humidity) invariably give a preference to those guns the furniture or mounting of which are of brass: those having pans of that composition are of great request at Calabar'.⁴²

Even at the reduced prices of this period a musket was a costly item. It was said to cost eleven to fifteen shillings in English money, depending on its quality, and was valued at four bars or forty coppers (copper rods) at the coastal ports and probably at considerably more in the hinterland markets. Gunpowder was equally costly and a recurrent expenditure for the gun owner. A keg was said to contain about half a pint of liquid and the equivalent in powder and was valued at four copper rods; there were about seventy kegs to a barrel, which cost three guineas in English money.

Yet by the end of the century throwing-spears had disappeared and almost every able-bodied male adult in the delta and its forest hinterland had a gun which he used for hunting and fighting. Elsewhere in Nigeria and particularly in the north, guns belonged only to the wealthy and to their retainers, but in the Niger-Cross River hinterland the wealth from the palm oil trade was more evenly distributed. Guns were durable articles which could be inherited, gunpowder however was a recurrent expenditure; it was difficult to store on account of the humidity. Most men kept a small amount in case of emergencies, but before a village could go to war it had to raise the money to buy the extra quantity needed for the campaign and this was obtained for them by the Arochuku traders.

⁴¹ His abstract of goods suitable for purchasing 100 tons of palm oil at Bonny listed: 150 barrels of gunpowder £450 or 15,750 bars 300 tower proof and French muskets £180 or 1,2000 iron bars 300 tape or Bonny blue romals (cottons) £180 or 900 iron bars Other items (beads, neptunes, manilloes, copper bars, oxhorns, etc.) £190 2,5000 iron bars (Adams, p. 252).

⁴² Adams, p. 261.

Some idea of the quantity of guns in circulation in the Biafran hinterland at the end of the century can be gained from the accounts of the numbers surrendered in the early colonial period as the country was brought under control.

B. The export trade

(i) In the hinterland

If we examine the distribution of firearms we can construct a 'gun frontier' which also affords a rough indication of the extent of the overseas trade and of the distribution of the wealth derived from it. This frontier on the eastern side of the Niger⁴³ corresponded approximately to the boundary between the northern and southern provinces. South of this frontier a gun was the normal fighting and hunting weapon. North of it guns were in short supply in the vicinity of Idah and on the Niger and absent elsewhere; people continued to rely on their traditional fighting weapons. This northern sector remained marginal between the trading systems of the north and those of the coast, its population apart from the southern Tiv was much lighter than further south and except on the Lower Niger and in the confluence area was less involved in trade. During the eighteenth century it had been able to trade in slaves and in ivory. During the nineteenth century the southern demand for slaves ceased, the Fulani warfare destroyed the Igbira states through which the northern trade had been channelled, and the Hausa elephant hunters finally exterminated the elephants which until then had roamed in the remoter parts of the Benue valley and of the eastern mountain barrier; and ivory had been their only other valuable export. While the north-eastern Ibo had expanded their cultivation of yams in their sector and built up an export trade with the Lower Cross River which brought them all the guns and trade gin they needed, the agricultural potential of the rest of the eastern plain and of the Benue valley remained undeveloped. It continued during the nineteenth century to reflect on a very reduced scale the pattern of the more populous Ibo and Ibibio south and during the colonial period its main export was its people, as migrant labourers.

On the southern side of this frontier there was a considerable extension of water transport. All the navigable or potentially navigable waterways were used to bring the oil of the hinterland to the nearest coastal ports. Most of these smaller rivers and their tributaries tended to become blocked in their higher reaches by trees that had fallen across them: but they were still navigable by light canoes which could be manhandled across such obstacles. The southern Edo oil was carried down the numerous rivers that drained that country to Warri and the Forcados estuary. Oil from the Aboh area of the

⁴³ I have no data for the western side.

Lower Niger and from the freshwater ports of the Niger Delta went either down the Nun and other waterways to Nembe and its anchorage at Twon (Brass), or through the Engenni channel to the Kalabari on the Rio Real. The Nri-Awka concentration and part of the Nsukka took their oil to the Anambara and to the Niger at Onitsha and Osomari for sale to the European factories as soon as they were established there. But the quantity of oil produced in the northern Ibo country was not great in comparison with areas further south. The produce of the western Isuama went to Oguta and the Orashi-Engenni waterway, that from the eastern Isuama and from the Ohuhu-Ngwa Ibo went to the Imo river from Udo 'beach' southward. The Sombreiro, the New Calabar and the western tributaries of the Imo river carried oil from the Southern Ibo, while the eastern tributaries of this river, namely the Aba and the Essene, carried that of Anang Ibibio. Oil from the eastern Ibibio and from the Middle Cross River went down the Lower Cross River to Old Calabar. The one river left out of this development was the Kwa Ibo, a river which runs through the heart of the Ibibio country and which is navigable for large canoes as far as Etinan and for smaller ones as far as Utu Etim Ekpo village. The explanation is probably that it lacked any overseas trading organisation at its mouth. Whatever the reason, it only became an 'Oil River' at the end of the century.

But although the main export of the country was now waterborne and the water transport system of the principal waterways had been extended further inland to meet this new requirement, the overland routes still remained in use for movements of other goods, both local and overseas. The principal overseas imports were still valuable, light in weight and suitable for being made up into head-loads for portage overland and such items as for example, salt, guns and powder, cloths, and trade gin continued to follow the more direct overland routes and in the case of the more valuable items to be handled mainly by Arochuku traders.

Possibly the most important economic change was in the sector of labour and employment. In the oil palm belt the trees were a natural resource growing wild in profusion. Here, particularly in the densely populated areas where labour was far in excess of the subsistence farming requirements, it could now be employed in the production of an export commodity which provided both men and women with a cash income. The area which benefited most from this change was probably the Ibibio country, where the population of both trees and people was highest and was also closer to the coast. Areas where the human population was short of trees could, as in the Isuama area, send out migrant labour to the areas where the trees were in excess of the local supply of labour. This migrant labour however was restricted to people living within the oil palm belt, for climbing palm trees and cutting the fruit was a skill which was lacking elsewhere. As we have seen, it became a southern Edo and western Isuama specialisation for the Niger Delta area, and an eastern Isuama

one for the southern Ibo area.

There was also a considerable increase in the division that already existed between those areas in which the population specialised in migrant occupations and the surrounding areas whose people remained sedentary agriculturists. In the former areas, particularly in the Nri-Awka and Isuama, more towns were able to engage in employment abroad, some as specialist craftsmen and traders, most as migrant labourers. For there was now in the surrounding oil producing areas an increased demand for both specialist crafts and agricultural (palm fruit collecting) labour. This occupation division became very apparent in the Ibibio country by the end of the century, when almost all the Ibibio population was employed in farming and oil production and all the local trade and craft specialisations were provided by Cross River Ibo migrants.

(ii) In the Oil Rivers states

The development of the export trade affected both the economic and the political organisation of these coastal states. Some like Warri and Nembe, which had played a relatively minor role in the overseas slave trade, were able to expand their trade and with it their power; others like Old Calabar suffered a diminution of their trade. Warri was able to control the trade of the Benin and Forcados rivers, which amounted to a sizeable portion of the 7,000 tons shown in Table III as exported from 'other parts of West Africa', but which were almost entirely from Lagos and the Bight of Benin (i.e. Warri). Unfortunately no distinction was made between the oil exported from these two areas. Nembe controlled the trade from the delta area further north. Old Calabar, which had been a major exporter of slaves, suffered a decline. The vast hinterland of Old Calabar was mainly high forest and during most of the nineteenth century its only large supplies of oil were in the Uruan markets which tapped the heavily populated eastern Ibibio country. These supplies were large enough to make it the second largest exporter of oil, but its share of the Bight of Biafra trade had dropped as against that of the Rio Real which had become the greatest Oil River in West Africa and its trade had risen to half of the total trade from the Nigerian and Cameroon ports.

Although—as we have suggested—part of the wealth from the new export trade had been passed to the producers, the major profits went to those who could handle the oil in bulk, and these were the traders of these coastal states and the European firms to whom they sold it. It was a simple matter for the Kalabari or Bonny or other trader (middleman), having loaded his canoes with empty puncheons supplied by the agent with whom he traded, to take them to an upriver market. Here he could buy oil in small quantities from the local producers who were petty traders in that market, or from young men who had bought some oil in a market further afield and carried it to the oil buying centre either on their heads or in canoes small enough to operate on the

streams that fed the Oil River.

Each of these middlemen had his own trading organisation consisting of members of his own family and his household slaves, and of his 'customers' (the people who sold oil and traded with him in these upriver markets). In Nembe, Kalabari and Bonny, the members of a 'house' (maximal lineage) formed a single trading corporation. Its head was elected from the middlemen who belonged to it, and a commission was paid to him by the agent of the company with which the house traded, on all oil sold by its middlemen to this agent. Elsewhere each big middleman traded on his own, though in political matters the members of a 'house' formed a single political unit.

The palm oil trade would seem to have made it easier for individual middlemen (and in the Rio Real area for those who had become heads of houses) to make their separate fortunes, whereas the slave trade as it developed during the eighteenth century favoured only the house that had made itself politically dominant and its head, who had become the king of the state. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth there were powerful kings in Kalabari, Bonny and Old Calabar and their houses had expanded and become unduly large at the expense of the others. During the nineteenth century wealth and political power passed from the king to the heads of these houses. On the Rio Real they became grouped behind rival leaders whose struggles for political dominance culminated in civil wars which split Bonny into the two states, Bonny and Opobo, and produced a tripartite division of Kalabari into the towns of Buguma, Abonnema and Bakana. In Old Calabar rival houses competed for the kingship and Creek town became powerful enough to have its head recognised as king, thus providing Old Calabar with a dual monarchy, a position achieved by Nembe at the end of the previous century. This proliferation into rival houses aligned behind powerful heads extended even to Warri, whose government till then had followed a Benin or Yoruba model. This disintegrated into an aggregation of competing houses whose heads had displaced the Olu (king) as the rulers of the state and had moved with their people to become established in fortified settlements, mainly in the Benin river area. There was no longer any king with whom the British traders and their consul could negotiate, all they could do was to recognise the most powerful of these rivals as governor of the river.

The change from slaves to palm oil also brought with it the need for each state to redefine the area over which it claimed a trading monopoly, its 'trading empire'. During the period of the slave trade a distinction had been observed between the trade in slaves and trade in foodstuffs and other commodities. The former belonged exclusively to the state in whose 'trading empire' the markets were situated, the latter was unrestricted; anyone was free to go to any 'food markets' to buy or sell, and palm oil was a food. The trading states had little difficulty in excluding other delta competitors, but they

had to fight to redefine the boundaries of their new 'trading empires' and to extend them still further into the hinterland to reach markets like Oguta, which had previously supplied them overland.

In Warri the fighting was between rival houses, in the Rio Real area between rival states and here the fighting came to a head when the expansion of the oil trade had come to a standstill in the 1850s. The state of Nembe emerged as the loser in these struggles. Kalabari deprived it of access to the Engenni-Orashi channel and eventually established a settlement on the southern shore of Oguta lake. It was less successful against Bonny. The Sombreiro river, which lay between the Engenni and the New Calabar rivers, had never had any slave markets but it had valuable oil markets and Kalabari was unable to exclude Bonny traders from them. In the 'Perpetual Treaty of Peace between the Chiefs of Bonny and Calabar' dated October 1871 and negotiated by the British Consul, the Obiartubo markets (Okpombutolo on the eastern side of the New Calabari river) were specified as belonging exclusively to New Calabar (Kalabari), while Ndelli and Billituru (on the Sombreiro river) were to be traded in conjointly. In a subsequent 'perpetual Treaty' signed in 1879 Bonny was given the exclusive rights to trade in the Ndelli markets but no further west. New Calabar was given the right to trade 'at all the other Brass (Nembe) markets'. Bonny may well have needed this Ndelli oil for in 1871 Jaja, the head of the Anna Pepple (or Opobo) group of houses, had broken away from it to found the new state of Opobo. This was established on the delta margin where the Imo river joined the delta and it effectively denied the rival group of houses remaining in Bonny access to the far more important markets of the Lower Imo. We do not know whether Bonny was able to exercise its rights to trade in the Ndelli markets. The Kalabari by now had followed the example of King Jaja and had moved from their former position in the Rio Real estuary to the northern margin of the delta, accompanied by the hulks of the firms who were trading with them. Any Bonny traders wishing to visit Ndelli markets would have to pass through the Kalabari villages of Abonnema and Buguma on either side of the creek which gave access to this river.

Nembe was not a party to this treaty which gave the Kalabari the right to trade in its 'empire' and it was now being threatened on its western and northern flanks by new rivals, namely the merchants and philanthropists seeking to establish 'legitimate trade' with the hinterland. These, under the protection of the British navy, had passed through Nembe territory by way of Akassa and the Nun channel and had begun to trade directly in the Lower Niger area and had established trading stations (hulks) at Aboh, Onitsha and Lokoja.

The interstate and civil warfare that marked the third quarter of the nineteenth century on the Rio Real was not allowed however to interfere with

the quantity of palm oil exported from this area. The exports continued unabated but by the time the Oil Rivers Protectorate was established the oil was shipped no longer from the Rio Real but from the new ports of Abonnema and Opobo, with Brass a poor third and with a rapidly diminishing amount from Bonny itself.

On the Cross River, conditions were rather different. The Efik of Old Calabar had no trading rivals, their main problem lay in their more limited oil resources which they and the European merchants, particularly those coming new into the trade, always overestimated. They were able to prevent any other group trading direct with the European firms, but their efforts to extend their operations to the Middle Cross River markets were blocked by the Biase tribes, who controlled the trade of the river above Umon. They were already getting the oil from these markets, but they had to buy it from the Agwagune and other Middle Cross River traders. Their political system restricted political leadership to men of Efik descent thus preventing their most efficient traders, who like those in Bonny and Kalabari were mostly of slave origin, from becoming heads of houses. Thus we find the political elite too involved in local politics to be able to liquidate their debts by successful trading and those traders with the real wealth, like Iron Bar Duke and Yellow Duke, not obliged, as they would have been on the Rio Real, to use it for the advancement of their houses. The overlarge Duke House lacked any effective leaders after the death of the Great Duke Ephraim and competition for the kingship of Duketown was left to the offshoot houses of Archibong and Eyamba, while the head of the Eyo Nsa House of Creek town was able to crown himself King of Creek town. It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that the Efik sought to expand their trading empire westward along the coast. In 1879 the Henshaw House established a trading connection at Oron and persuaded the European trader George Watts to open a factory on the Kwa Ibo river in 1881. This brought them into conflict with King Jaja who considered that this river was now part of the Opobo trading area. King Jaja retaliated with a raid very similar to the more notorious Akassa raid of 1895. The Consul immediately intervened and this intervention was soon followed by the establishment of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1884.

CHAPTER 4

The early colonial period 1884-1914

The colonial era was essentially one of economic development. It was one of rapid change and of adjustment to change, particularly in the economy. The concept of development is usually associated with the later post-1939-45 war period when the word became a political slogan, but it was equally prominent earlier when it was known as progress. The critical difference was the lack of capital for investment in the earlier pre-Keynesian era, when the government was not allowed by treaty to intervene in trade and was also expected to balance its budget at all costs. Its revenue came mainly from export and import duties and its expenditure went mainly on the emoluments of its ever expanding staff.

There was little money left for other purposes and much of the development that took place during the period, for example in the field of education in southern Nigeria and in the internal trade between north and south, derived from local enterprise and was funded from local resources. The early colonial period was a transitional one during which the conditions which had operated during the mid-nineteenth century gradually changed as the European organisation of the overseas trade was extended inland. The system of communications remained the traditional one of transport by water of all bulky material and of head-loading the rest along overland footpaths, and it underlay the structure of administrative provinces and divisions into which the country became organised.

The second period, which extended from the amalgamation of the two protectorates in 1914 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, saw the commerce of Nigeria completely integrated into the world market and thus experience the full blast of the great depression of the 1930s. By this time the prices of food in Ibo and other southern Nigerian markets were geared to the world price of palm oil and tended to fluctuate according to its rise and fall. At the same time the communication system was revolutionised by the establishment of railways and motor roads. The western and eastern branches of the new railway system gave the two populous and commercial areas of the south direct and speedy access to northern Nigeria and evacuated northern produce through the new terminals of Apapa (Lagos) and Port Harcourt (Bonny river), cutting out the Niger and the middle belt from any participation in this trade. The waterway system of southern Nigeria was reduced to a similar condition of decline with much of the Ibo and Ibibio oil being taken by feeder roads to the railway and thence to Port Harcourt, while Forcados and other river ports only served for such trade as could still be carried more cheaply by water.

The later colonial period, which is outside our terms of reference, began during the Second World War and covered another transitional period, this time between colonial rule and independence. The national economy was completely changed through the introduction of Keynesian principles. It was now the function of government to manage the economy and of the colonial power and other external agencies to provide the funds to implement its plans. When the funds began to dry up after independence, the development of the mineral oil resources of the delta and the south-east which had been discovered during the war more than replaced them, making Nigeria the wealthiest West African territory and creating problems of communications and of uneven economic development which have yet to be mastered.

Europeans working in colonial West Africa saw themselves as three separate and distinct agencies, government, missions and traders, each with its own special sphere of interests and activities, and they tried very hard to define and keep their special fields of action apart and to avoid any interference in those of the other agencies.

I. The government

The government considered itself responsible for the establishment and maintenance of the conditions under which the other two could operate. Its first priority was the organisation of an administrative structure for the maintenance of law and order and with it an improvement of communications and the breaking down of any barriers to free trade and to the legitimate movement of those engaged in it within the protectorate. But it made no attempt to regulate prices or otherwise interfere with the import and export trade of the country. This was left to the commercial firms, which were in the process of combining into increasingly large corporations.

Up to 1900 there were two British colonial authorities with jurisdiction over south-eastern Nigeria, namely the Oil Rivers Protectorate with its headquarters at Old Calabar, and the Royal Niger Company, which was based on the Lower Niger and which monopolised the overseas trade of this river. Its headquarters were at Asaba in the southern sector, and its second base was in the northern sector at Lokoja, which had briefly been the station of a British Consul in 1866. The Oil Rivers Protectorate and the Royal Niger Company were in many respects rival establishments with conflicting interests which were bound to come into conflict sooner or later. The European merchants of the Oil Rivers and the African states with whom they traded had from the first been opposed to the opening up of the hinterland, but this common front had been breached earlier in the century by MacGregor Laird and the missionaries and traders who followed him to establish themselves on the Lower Niger. By 1879 the trading firms on that river had under the leadership of Mr. Taubman

Goldie, later Sir George Goldie, united to form the United Africa Company. By 1881 this company, now known as the National Africa Company, was virtually in control of the traffic of the Lower Niger and in 1886 this position was recognised by the granting of a Royal Charter. As the Royal Niger Company it now had political jurisdiction over this area and the monopoly of its trade with the outside world. Its charter also provided it with additional territory in the Niger Delta, which gave it a corridor along the Nun river to its port at Akassa a few miles west of the Oil Rivers port of Brass.

The government of the Oil Rivers Protectorate was entirely separate from the commercial establishments operating in its territory, but since most of these had been active there for the better part of the nineteenth century, it was in its initial stages dependent on them for its intelligence and to a diminishing extent for accommodation and transport. These firms, in association with the African trading states, controlled the commerce of its principal rivers. They fell into three trading areas. The western area handled the trade of the Bight of Benin (excluding that of Lagos Colony), and covered the network of waterways between the Benin and Forcados rivers which were monopolised by the various houses into which the State of Warri had disintegrated; the central area was based on the Rio Real area including the Brass (Nembe) territory; and the eastern area was centred on Old Calabar and the Cross River estuary. The central and eastern areas handled the very considerable oil trade of the Bight of Biafra except for that from the Cameroons river, which was now part of the German colony of the same name. This had its headquarters at Buea on the slopes of the Cameroon mountain and its port at Victoria in the territory of the people known to the eighteenth century slavers as Ambo or Amboses. The boundary between the German colony and the Oil Rivers Protectorate was defined by the Rio del Rey estuary.

These Oil Rivers trading states, as we have seen, were opposed to the opening up of the interior to free trade and so no doubt were the merchants with whom they traded. It was not surprising therefore that the extension of protectorate rule into the hinterland was slow in the Rio Real area even after the deportation in 1887 of King Jaja of Opobo, the most powerful of the Oil River states. A station was established at Akwete on the Lower Imo ('the Opobo river') in 1891 and another at Ngwa.⁴⁴ Progress into the interior was dependent on the existing system of waterways leading there, and the protectorate had neither the means nor the personnel to move away from them and into the heart of the Ibo and Ibibio country until after 1900.

The Royal Niger Company was more active. In the northern sector of the Lower Niger it was mainly engaged in extending the boundaries of its domain

⁴⁴ Probably the Ngwa subtribe of Ngwa Ugwunabo ten miles north of Akwete.

further up the Niger so as to bring Borgu and the Nupe area under its protection and forestall the efforts of the French empire builders coming down the Niger. In the southern sector the company concentrated on expanding its trade and on enforcing its monopoly over the purchase of oil within its territory. This immediately brought it into collision with the trading state of Nembe. Earlier in the nineteenth century this state had lost its markets on the Engenni-Orashi river to the Kalabari and it now found itself barred from its northern markets and from free access to the Lower Niger markets. Matters culminated in the Akassa raid of 1895 in which Nembe destroyed the Royal Niger Company's installations at Akassa and killed and consumed most of its African personnel.

In 1900 the Royal Niger Company's charter was withdrawn and it became once more the Niger Company until after absorption by the Lever group it became part of the United Africa Company. It abandoned its base at Akassa and transferring to the Forcados channel, established a new port at Burutu on the Forcados estuary. The northern sector of its former territory with headquarters at Lokoja became the base for the British colonial expansion northward which became the separate Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. The southern sector, which comprised the area from Idah southward, became part of the Niger Coast Protectorate which was renamed the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. In 1906, with the addition of the colony of Lagos, its title was enlarged to the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and it was administered as two separate units, Lagos Colony and the Protectorate.

This Southern Protectorate was divided into three provinces. The western comprised the Yoruba hinterland of the colony, the central the Warri and Benin area and the southern sector of the Royal Niger Company's territory, and the eastern the Rio Real and Old Calabar areas and their hinterland. Akassa and the Nun corridor was restored to the Brass division of the eastern province and the boundary of this division was extended westward as far as the Bomadi Creek.

By now the protectorate government was in a position to improve its communications. The Western Province was lacking in waterways leading into the populous and prosperous Yoruba interior and the first priority here was a railway. Begun in 1896 it reached Ibadan, the Yoruba commercial and political centre in 1900 and was then extended northward to reach the Niger at Jebba in 1909. The Northern Protectorate having brought the Hausa north under its control, found itself in a similar position. There were no suitable rivers leading into it from the Niger as the Kaduna river was only navigable as far as Barijuku. It began a railway in 1908 which extended northward from Baro on the Niger and reached Kano in 1911. The western line was extended across the Niger to join this northern line at Minna, and Kano, the economic centre of northern Nigeria, was now in railway communication with the coast along a

route which followed the general direction of the old trade route between it and the Yoruba south.

The central and eastern provinces were well served by a network of waterways and the government concentrated on improving and extending it while at the same time clearing the overland routes between them. The narrow lateral channels connecting the principal delta waterways were cleared of obstacles as were the smaller rivers leading into the interior. For example in 1909 the Imo river was made navigable as far north as Udo beach in the Umuahia area, and its tributary the Otamini as far as Owerri. Owerri was now a government station and an intersection centre of a system of roads and telegraph lines which was being extended over the interior as it was brought under control. These roads were only suitable for light traffic and in most cases were the old overland trade routes cleared to a width of 15 feet with temporary bridges made from local materials over the smaller streams and rivers and canoe ferries provided for the larger ones. They now led not only to the former markets but to the stations set up as the headquarters of the new divisions into which the country had been divided. Railway construction in south-eastern Nigeria was not undertaken until 1914 and was one of the critical developments of the second phase.

If we examine the administrative structure of provinces and divisions created by the two protectorates and compare them with the earlier pattern of markets and trading areas, their correspondence is striking. Ethnic and linguistic boundaries were disregarded, commercial ones reinforced.

Thus the Igala state of Idah was divided between the two protectorates. The area from the town of Idah southward and including the Etsako Edo territory on the western side of the Niger became the Idah division of the Southern Protectorate. The part north of the capital became the Igala division of the Northern Protectorate. This arrangement followed very closely the division of trade that had resulted from the warfare between the principal riverain Igala clans in the early nineteenth century which had left one clan controlling the trade of the river immediately north of Idah and the other the trade from below it as far as the Ibo border.

The Ibo people were divided between the central and the eastern provinces. Their two modern groupings of Onitsha and Owerri Ibo (which now form the Anambara and the Imo states) derived from the Onitsha division of the central province and from the Bonny, later the Owerri, division of the eastern province. Before becoming the Onitsha division the former was part of the Royal Niger Company's territory and of the Lower Niger trading area, while

the Owerri belonged to the Rio Real and Cross River trading area.⁴⁵

Adjoining the Onitsha division on the eastern side was the Okwoga division of the Central Province, which was centred on the important southern Idoma markets of Okwoga and Igumale whose trade went mainly southward to the Cross River. The Ibo area of Nsukka, which in the days of the slave trade looked to this Igumale-Cross River route for most of its trade, was also included in this division. North of the Okwoga division was the Idoma division of the northern protectorate whose trade went mainly northward to the Benue. East of the Okwoga division and extending to the Cameroons boundary were the Ogoja and Obudu divisions of the Eastern Province, whose boundaries extended northward to include the Egede and southern Tiv, whose trade went southward through Ogoja and Bansara to the Cross River. The area from Katsina Ala northward, which traded down the river of this name to the Benue became the Tiv division of the Northern Protectorate.

Similarly, if we turn to the coastal and delta area, there was the Warri division of the Central Province and the Brass, Degama, Bonny, Opobo and Calabar divisions of the Eastern Province whose boundaries corresponded with the trading area of each of these states.

This organisation was not the result of ethnographic ignorance on the part of the colonial officers nor based on administrative convenience. The latter consideration only affected the size of the unit and the location of the divisional headquarters. Instead it reflected the importance of commercial interests in Southern Nigeria, both to the people themselves whose leaders were certainly consulted on this matter, and to the colonial government. In the Northern Protectorate political and ethnographical considerations carried greater weight, at least with its senior administrative officers, and in response to their demands the northern and southern boundary in due course were adjusted so that all Edo-speaking people were included in the southern and all Igbira, Igala, Idoma and Tiv speakers in the northern provinces where they formed the Igbira and Igala divisions of the Kabba province and the Idoma and Tiv divisions of the Benue province.

⁴⁵ As the Onitsha division was extended inland it segmented into the additional divisions of Akwa, Udi and eventually Awgu, which together with the Onitsha division were grouped as the province of Onitsha. Similarly the expansion of the Bonny (Owerri) division produced the Bonny, Degama, Aba, Owerri, Bende and ultimately the Okigwi divisions of the Owerri province.

II. The missions

Christian missions were already well established before the arrival of the protectorate, with stations at Old Calabar (in 1846), Onitsha (1857), Bonny (1864) and Nembe (1864). To the uninitiated, Christianity was a European cult which it was well to possess, that is, to have established in the community, since its 'power' was associated with the political and commercial superiority of the 'white man'. The more sophisticated valued the missions for the literate education provided by their schools. After the establishment of the protectorate the Qua Ibo mission set up a headquarters at Ibeno on the Kwa Ibo river and the Primitive Methodist mission at Oron and Jamestown on the Cross River estuary. The five Protestant missions, the big five as they came to be called, reached an agreement under which each confined its expansion to a particular area: the C.M.S. to Onitsha and the northern Ibo country; its offshoot the Niger Delta Pastorate to the Rio Real area and Owerri; the Qua Ibo to the area served by the river of the same name; the Methodist Mission to the rest of the Ibibio area and, with the arrival of the eastern railway, to Uzuakoli and northward to Oturkpo (S. Idoma); and the Church of Scotland Mission to Old Calabar and the Cross River. The Roman Catholic Mission, which arrived slightly later in the field, was not bound by this convention. Its fathers settled at first in areas where the Protestants were already established, beginning at Onitsha in 1885.

To further their expansion each of these missions established training centres for catechists and school teachers; the C.M.S. at Onitsha and Awka, the Roman Catholics at Onitsha, the C.M.S. at Duke Town (Calabar), the Methodist Mission at Oron and later at Uzuakoli. These, particularly at Onitsha and Calabar, became centres of higher (secondary) education and their graduates, though they might have to spend their first few years after training in mission service, rapidly found their way to more lucrative posts in government or commercial employment, where the demand for literate Africans greatly exceeded the supply. Thus during the early colonial phase in south-eastern Nigeria the superior African posts in government service became the virtual monopoly of the Onitsha and Old Calabar schools and of the Onitsha and Efik communities that had sent their sons there. Other Ibo and Ibibio communities, particularly those made wealthy by the palm oil trade and in competition with these favoured areas were determined to bring this 'oppression' to an end by finding education for their own children. The few schools established by the government were quite unable to meet the demand and people turned increasingly to the missions, particularly to the big five and the Roman Catholics, as these alone could provide teachers. The full effects of this demand for education were only felt however after the 1914-18 war, when the missions were again able to expand their staff.

III. The trading system

In the nineteenth century the overseas trade of Nigeria was handled and controlled by the European merchant firms located at its ports and trading through the African merchants (middlemen) of the trading states in control of these ports. The trade of the Nigerian hinterland was in the hands of other middlemen who supplied both the local needs and the demands of the external systems in contact with them on their northern and southern boundaries. The business of the European firms was almost entirely wholesale, that of the indigenous systems was both retail and wholesale but lack of capital, difficulties of storage and transport and other organisational and social factors made it difficult to handle very large quantities of a product or to build up large businesses. The extension of colonial rule into the hinterland enabled the European overseas system to extend into the interior and take over the wholesale trade in imports and exports.

From now on any commodity that went out or that came into the country was controlled by these firms from their headquarters at the coastal ports through their outstations in the interior, while any development of the trans-Sahara trade was blocked by the boundaries established by a rival colonial power. The French *Colonie du Niger* claimed the poorer and ecologically more vulnerable northern part of Hausaland, the British protectorate the richer more populous southern part, and its trade was now diverted southward at first via the Lower Niger and the port of Burutu, later by rail to Lagos.

The extension of the European overseas trade into the hinterland deprived the coastal and south-western states of their monopoly of trading directly with European firms, it also displaced many of those traders who till then were engaged in the transport of goods in transit between the hinterland markets and these states. This function now devolved on the European firms and their local agents. An important effect of the change was to pass a higher price on to the producers, since one of the stages in the movement of oil or other produce from the farmer to the European exporter had been eliminated. The change was helped by the introduction of a uniform currency based on the British coinage, which became the only valid one for financial transactions with the government (e.g. in the payment of fines or taxes) or with European firms. This replaced the various trade and local currencies and was gradually accepted in the local markets. The speed with which this happened varied considerably. Most iron currencies disappeared rapidly as soon as sufficient coinage of lower denominations was in circulation (e.g. pennies, and in northern Nigeria one-tenths of pennies). Cowries, manillas and brass rods were more resistant; they were no longer being imported and market traders found it more profitable to retain them and to operate in both native and government currencies.

The extension of trade to the hinterland and the access of new middlemen seeking to buy from or to sell directly to the factories established in their neighbourhood enabled the European firms at long last to control the granting of credit, thereby removing a defect which according to the British Consuls had bedevilled the traditional system of trade of the Oil Rivers. It was known as the 'trust system' and was based on unsecured credit. Trade goods were given out on credit to the Kalabari or Bonny or Efik middleman for him to sell to other middlemen in an upriver market and the agent had to wait until the trader returned with slaves or later with palm oil to redeem his debt. Now the agent was able to buy direct from an oil middleman and to sell various categories of imports to other middlemen. The oil middleman, who was now more often than not a woman, traded on the firm's 'beach', buying oil brought to her by traders, usually men, who had bought it in small quantities from the various producers (women) in the neighbouring markets and had brought it on their heads or, if there were any local streams, in small canoes, or on bicycles after these were introduced. The oil as she bought it was bulked in casks (later in steel drums) supplied by the agent and when these were filled he inspected them and bought the contents, paying her in cash. Imported merchandise was sold in bulk to other middlemen, usually men, who specialised in handling particular lines, e.g. kerosene, cloth, 'articles' (i.e. hardware and haberdashery). They distributed it in smaller loads to their agents (men) who carried it for sale on commission in the markets of the areas in which their 'master' traded. Before such a middleman was accepted by a firm as its 'customer' he had to deposit with the firm as security a substantial amount of cash, after which goods were advanced to him on credit but never in excess of his deposit, which remained with the firm until he ceased to trade with it.

These changes came about gradually and unevenly, being far more rapid in the Niger Delta, the Lower Niger, Benue and the Middle Cross River and more slowly in the Rio Real trading area. King Jaja of Opobo may have been deported because he opposed the extension of European trade to the Ibo hinterland, but despite this and in marked contrast to the situation on the other waterways, no factories were established on the Imo and other waterways feeding Opobo. It was rather the Bonny and Opobo middlemen who themselves moved inland, settling in small hamlets along its main tributaries. Similarly enterprising Kalabari houses settled as far inland as Oguta lake.⁴⁶ The new system of trading did not become completely established in the southern Ibo and the Ibibio country until the second decade of the twentieth century with the clearance of roads and the diffusion of the pedal cycle and the four-

⁴⁶ Where in later years they were able to corner the contracts given by the Oguta factories with which they traded, for rafting their oil down the Orashi-Engenni river to the port of Abonnema.

gallon kerosene tin. The level terrain was ideally suited for dirt roads carrying lightweight traffic and the psychological effect of their clearing, which extended up to fifteen feet from the road centre, was quite as important as its practical value. Men felt they could travel in safety on these government highways and the possession of bicycles made it possible for them to cover greater distances and, unless very heavily laden, at an impressive speed. Local blacksmiths designed and made carriers for these cycles which could take up to three tins (twelve gallons) of oil, while raffia sacks of kernels of even greater weight could be lashed, one on the carrier and another to the bicycle frame.

IV. Principal exports and imports

The growth of the overseas trade of Nigeria during this early period is summarised in the tables at the end of this chapter, which also include the returns for the years 1925 and 1931 in the succeeding period. 1925 was the peak year in the boom that followed the 1914-18 war, 1931 was the lowest point in the subsequent depression. The war also affected the returns for 1914 through the loss of trade with Germany after August 1914. The figures are given to the nearest 1000 and derived from the Blue Book returns as quoted in the Nigeria Government Handbook. They are based on custom and excise records which did not distinguish between the various exporting regions.

A. Cash crops and other exports

Trade and commerce was considered to be a sector which was not the function of government. The declared objectives for the establishment of the Nigerian protectorates was the suppression of the slave trade and the opening up of the country to 'legitimate' trade and such trade was by definition free and by treaty open to all comers. The government however could hardly avoid being involved in it. Apart from the fact that its revenue was derived almost entirely from export and import duties,⁴⁷ it was its duty to develop 'legitimate' exports to replace the trade in slaves, and to protect 'the natives' from exploitation by outside interests. This was held to include the alienation of their land to 'non-natives' for Southern Nigeria was a protectorate in which the concept of Crown Land did not apply. Non-natives, which included expatriate firms, could only enter into leasehold tenancies. There was thus almost no development of expatriate plantations.

This was in marked contrast to the policy of the adjacent German colony of the Cameroons. Here expatriate firms were encouraged to develop the

⁴⁷ There was no direct taxation in eastern Nigeria until 1928.

agricultural potential of the country through the establishment of plantations of crops for which there was a demand in the home (German) market and which their experts considered were suitable for local cultivation. The role of the African population was limited to the provision of the manual labour on these plantations, while that of the government was to recruit the labour. In Southern Nigeria, where a considerable proportion of the population was already engaged in the production of a major export, the policy was rather to encourage the cultivation or collection by the local farmers of local products for which there was an outside demand and of any others which could be successfully introduced for this purpose. They were aided by the ever increasing world demand for cotton, leather, oils and fats, tropical hardwoods and other forest produce, and particularly for rubber.

(i) Rubber

In the case of the exploitation of the last named commodity, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria again afforded a marked contrast to some of the colonies of other European nations where the stimulus for the collection of forest rubber had to be provided by the colonial government. In Southern Nigeria its collection in the forests of Benin and Old Calabar had preceded the establishment of colonial rule and one of the first acts of the government after its conquest of Benin was to secure the passing of regulations to control its collection and to prevent the destruction of the forests. This was followed by encouraging the cultivation of *functumia elastica* (the most satisfactory of the rubber producing trees); but by the time these trees were ready for tapping the world's rubber needs were being met by pará rubber from trees grown in Malayan and Indonesian plantations.

The Nigerian export returns are misleading here as they make no distinction between forest rubber and pará rubber. Some pará rubber was introduced into the Sapele (Benin) and Old Calabar areas, but its cultivation was not encouraged after the 1914-18 war, since by this time the production of rubber in South-East Asia was already in excess of world demand. Nevertheless the export of pará rubber from the Sapele area and from an expatriate plantation in the Old Calabar hinterland came to equal that of forest rubber at the time of the forest rubber boom. During the Second World War the British need for rubber led to a temporary revival of the production of forest rubber which, together with pará rubber, reached a total of 23,600,000 lbs in 1945. This was followed after the war by the active extension of the cultivation of pará rubber in the Benin area so that by 1951 its export had increased to 46,700,000 lbs.

(ii) Timber

The end of the nineteenth century had also seen the establishment of a trade in mahogany logs which was centred on Sapele and the western delta forests.

This was an export that was incapable of much expansion, being restricted to those southern Nigerian forests accessible to navigable waterways and thus excluding most of the Cross River forests. There was a small export trade in some of their valuable woods, in ebony from Old Calabar, in camwood from Opobo, but most of the camwood from these forests was in greater demand in the internal trade for which we have no figures.

(iii) Botanical gardens

In support of its efforts to introduce new export crops, the protectorate governments established botanical gardens at the protectorate capitals of Old Calabar and Lokoja in which exotic trees and plants from other parts of the tropical colonial empire were planted and, if they proved successful, distributed to the 'station gardens' which had been created at each divisional headquarters, whence they could be disseminated to the local farmers. These crops included cocoa, coffee, pineapples, mangoes, avocado pears, improved varieties of bananas, guavas and citrus fruits. These became widely diffused in Southern Nigeria but almost all of them proved to be unsuitable for cultivation on a commercial scale. The exceptions were cocoa and citrus fruits. The latter never became an overseas export but by the 1930s had become an important item in the internal trade which was of sufficient value to encourage its cultivation in small plantations in Lagos Colony and on a lesser scale in the Umuahia area, the fruit in both cases being railed to markets in northern Nigeria.

(iv) Cocoa

The most successful introduction however was cocoa, but only on the special soils suitable for its cultivation under plantation conditions. Most of the entrepreneurs who planted it in the eastern region and who were mainly Arochuku and other Ibo traders, were unsuccessful for this reason. It was only in the central part of the Yoruba area that it flourished and by the end of the 1914-18 war it had become the principal Yoruba export.

(v) Kola

Developments in southern Nigerian agriculture however came quite as much from local initiative and in response to demands from other parts of Nigeria as from overseas.

For example the colonial period saw a substantial development of the kola trade. This was an ancient export from the forest regions of West Africa to the Central and Western Sudan. South-eastern Nigeria produced enough kola for its own local requirements but had little to export elsewhere. Kano and the Hausa north obtained their kola from the Yoruba country by the overland route through the Nupe country. The construction of the railway between Kano and Lagos stimulated this trade to the extent that kola began to be cultivated under

plantation conditions in the area to the north of Lagos. There are no figures relating to this internal kola trade, it was certainly considerable but not enough to satisfy the increasing northern demand (presumably because the cultivation of cocoa was more profitable). However the contact now established by sea with the Gold Coast and other West African colonies enabled the African merchants engaged in the trade to import additional supplies from overseas, presumably from the Gold Coast Colony, and kola became one of the principal Nigerian imports, increasing in value from £27,000 in 1900 to £155,000 in 1914 and £606,000 in 1927. Details of the expansion of the internal kola trade are lacking, as are any figures of the export of kola to the territories beyond the northern boundary.

(vi) *Manioc*

The nineteenth century had also seen a minor revolution in subsistence agriculture in south-eastern Nigeria in the diffusion of cassava (manioc) in the forest regions and thereafter to the savannah further north. This was an Amazonian root crop introduced into West Africa, presumably by the Portuguese. By the seventeenth century it had become the staple food of Warri but, for reasons which remain unknown, it did not apparently penetrate further inland or to the Ibo or Ibibio country until the nineteenth century. My Isuama and Cross River Ibo informants in the 1930s maintained that their old men could remember when it was first introduced, which would appear to have been about 1870-1880. Its spread was not due to government action. There are no references to its diffusion in the government records and agricultural advisers of the 1920s were against its encouragement, since it was said to be devoid of any protein. By this time it had become a woman's subsidiary crop, planted like cocoyams (taro) on land not suitable for yam cultivation, and in the Nri-Awka and Isuama Ibo areas the cultivation of it resulted in conflict between cattle owners and cassava cultivators. By the 1930s the women had won and the result was a considerable reduction in the cattle populations in these areas. Further south, cassava was being grown in the southern Ibo and southern Ibibio areas as an export crop for sale to the overpopulated area which bordered them on the north and with the establishment of railway communication with northern Nigeria, cassava in the form of garri (farinha) became an important Ngwa and southern Anang export to northern Nigerian markets. By the 1950s cassava had been introduced into the farming cycle of southern Ibo and Ibibio, being planted on land from which yams had been lifted and replacing one of the years in which the land was rested before it could be used again for yams.

(vii) Shea-butter and benniseed

While new exports were being established in the Southern Protectorate the Northern Protectorate was doing the same in its territories. At first its efforts were limited to the Niger and Benue valleys, the Nigerian 'middle belt', and the most successful were shea-'butter' and benniseed. The first was a local product collected from the wild or semi-wild shea trees of the Guinea savannah and was already an important commodity in the trade between the middle belt and the commercial centres of the Hausa north. The second was an exotic product which was successfully introduced, mainly into the Tiv area.

But as it extended its rule further north, the protectorate government gradually moved away from the middle belt, transferring its headquarters from Lokoja to Jebba, then away from the Niger to Zunguru and eventually to Kaduna in the Zaria territory. Once rail communication with the coast was available, the Niger waterway and the middle belt generally were by-passed and government and overseas firms alike concentrated their attention on the development of the Muslim north. The two most successful exports that resulted were those of groundnuts and hides and skins.

(viii) Groundnuts

Groundnuts were another early introduction to West Africa from the New World and had long been a local crop cultivated both in the middle belt and northern savannah. There was and is a considerable local trade in groundnut oil which alas has never been studied. The policy of the Northern Protectorate government was to encourage the cultivation of groundnuts for export overseas in the relatively poorer, more populous and enterprising Hausa provinces where there was greater need for a cash crop and less choice available. It was assumed that the middle belt could be left to supply the local Nigerian market for groundnuts and their oil.

(ix) Hides and skins

The tanning of skins was an important and ancient Hausa industry and Hausa leather was traded not only to other parts of Nigeria and West Africa but also across the Sahara. A new outlet was now provided for it overseas. This undoubtedly stimulated an increased production of this leather, and there was also a growing demand for it in other parts of Nigeria as the wealth of southern Nigeria increased and communications with the north improved, but there are no figures either for the internal trade or for the exports that went overland. Untanned hides were a new product introduced by the trading firms who, when needed, provided facilities for drying skins on their 'beaches'. The bulk of these hides came from the Hausa north, the rest from the commercial centres in the south where cattle from the north were slaughtered. Very few

came from south-eastern Nigeria and the Niger-Cross River area.⁴⁸

(x) Summary

By 1914 each important area of Nigeria possessed its own principal export. Groundnuts and hides and skins from northern Nigeria; shea-butter and benniseed from the middle belt, the latter crop being almost entirely confined to the Tiv; cocoa from the Yoruba west; rubber and logs from the Benin and Warri area; palm oil and kernels from south-eastern Nigeria. None of these exports was confined exclusively to these areas, a considerable amount of palm oil was exported for example from Lagos and the Warri area, and of rubber and other forest produce from Old Calabar as well as some cocoa from the Middle Cross River.

There was also the export of cotton lint and cotton seed. This was at first obtained from areas accessible to water transport and, being light, could be carried there from considerable distances. That reaching Old Calabar was grown in the Idoma country and head-loaded to 'factories' at Ediba on the Middle Cross River. As the trade developed and the quality demanded improved, cotton exports became confined almost entirely to the Yoruba and Hausa areas.

Besides these major exports there were others of lesser importance which came from particular regions which could produce an exportable surplus. For example there was a sizeable export of maize from the southern Yoruba which later disappeared as the internal demand for it expanded. The Ibibio were also able to exploit their abundance of raffia palms by establishing a small trade in piassava fibre, which was centred on the Kwa Ibo river and its port of Eket.

B. Principal imports

The introduction of colonial rule brought little change in the import trade, apart from the single item of gunpowder. This, though still imported, disappeared from the returns of major imports. Cotton piece goods however continued to hold the dominant position, followed by spirits and tobacco. The most significant increase during the period was in iron manufactures and machinery. Most of these imports, particularly the more expensive and luxury items went to the oil producing areas and coastal ports. During the nineteenth century they had been confined mainly to the Oil Rivers trading states and their trading partners like the Aro. Protectorate rule brought with it the extension of free trade into the hinterland and this considerably increased the amount imported, particularly in the case of cottons and other textiles and

⁴⁸ Where it was customary to eat the hide as well as the flesh of slaughtered animals.

apparel.

The Yoruba and Hausa wore and tailored their own traditional clothing, as did the Nupe and other non-Ibo states on the Niger. Some of the cheaper imported cottons (e.g. white bafts) found their way into the southern Yoruba and Hausa trade (where they undercut the local cloths) and were used by the Egba Yoruba for adire dyeing and by the Hausa tailors for making into cheap gowns (*riga*); but most of the cottons and clothing went to south-eastern Nigeria. The former were produced by the Lancashire and other mills in the colours and designs favoured by specific regions. Similar variations occurred in hats and clothing. Red caps and English hunting coats were in demand in the Ibo sector of the Lower Niger, sailors' multi-striped woollen bonnets on the Middle Cross River. Tobacco was imported in hogsheads from Virginia, mainly to the Oil Rivers, and distributed from there throughout the Ibo and Ibibio country, where some of it was smoked in pipes but most was used for making snuff. Cigars were an item bought only by expatriates and the wealthy African elite; it was not until the 1920s that cigarettes were marketed in any quantity.

During the nineteenth century 'spirits' had changed from brandy and rum to the cheaper trade gin imported mainly from north-western Europe, and again found its way mainly to the Oil Rivers and their hinterland, becoming in some parts a unit of local currency. It was the one import that contracted. What is remarkable is that its decline was not more rapid, for the Southern Protectorate government, in response to pressure from humanitarian societies on the British Parliament, was imposing progressively heavier duties on 'trade spirits',⁴⁹ while the Northern Protectorate, in deference to Muslim susceptibilities, had prohibited the sale of alcohol in its territories (with certain exceptions for expatriates and southern Nigerians). The decline came after the 1914-18 war, when a flourishing distillation industry arose in the delta region which marketed a similar type of coarse spirits at the price of 6d per bottle. But being illicit, there are no figures available of the amount produced, the only indication of its size being the remarkable increase in the quantities of sugar sold by the local 'factories'.

The considerable expansion of imports under the heading 'Iron manufactures' reflects the increasing mechanisation of the country. The item 'Iron and steel' can be correlated with the needs of the railway, but it also includes corrugated iron sheets used for roofing public buildings and the houses of wealthier Southern Nigerians. Apart from a few in Lagos there were almost no motor vehicles in Nigeria until after the 1914-18 war. 'Carriages' in

⁴⁹ Rising from 3s 6d in 1906 to 6s 3d in 1913 and 8s 5d in 1916 on every gallon of trade spirits at a strength of 50%, with an additional 2s 6d for every degree in excess of this.

the same Item 6 refers to the few rickshaws in some of the coastal towns and the goods imported under this item were predominantly bicycles, which were bought initially by Europeans and Africans in professional and other superior employment, and then by itinerant market traders in the oil producing areas. Kerosene was an import destined mainly for the 'bush' (hurricane) oil lamps, a new and much valued article included under Item 5 'Cutlery and hardware'.

Amongst the food items, Item 12, 'Bread and biscuits', consisted principally of ship's biscuits ('hard tack'), a small but ancient import in demand in Oil Rivers communities. The 'Grain' in Item 11 was probably rice and 'Flour' was Canadian wheat flour used for making an English type of lightweight bread. Both were consumed in the ports and larger townships and this bread was in great demand as a food for those travelling by rail or who lacked the facilities for preparing and cooking African foods. 'Fish' was a new item destined mainly for the oil producing areas. Later government surveys showed that the delta and the coastal estuaries of Nigeria had long been overfished and the demand for dried fish from the delta hinterland remained unsatisfied, as the importing firms were unable to find an overseas supply that was cheap enough for the local markets. Eventually they were able to interest the Norwegian fisheries and thereafter the Nigerian markets formed one of the principal outlets for their stockfish (wind-dried cod), which after the 1914-18 war became a staple item of Ibo and Ibibio diet.

Table V: Principal Imports

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Year	TOTAL IMPORTS	COTTON PIECE GOODS	OTHER TEXTILES	APPAREL	IRON & STEEL	CUTLERY & HARDWARE	MOTORCARS CYCLES & OTHER CARRIAGES	MACHINERY	SPIRITS
	Value £	Value £	Value £	Value £	Value £	Value £	Value £	Value £	Gallons Value £
1900	1,735,000	605,000	82,000	36,000	-	82,000	1,500	-	- 179,000
1903	2,200,000	677,000	63,000	38,000	-	88,000	1,800	-	1,568,000 229,000
1910	4,964,000	1,323,000	182,000	66,500	393,000	158,000	25,000	50,000	1,974,000 463,000
1911	5,072,000	1,284,000	231,000	70,500	336,000	150,000	31,500	99,000	1,840,000 436,000
1913	6,779,000	1,676,000	159,000	88,200	358,000	155,000	42,000	157,000	1,808,000 456,000
1914	6,150,000	1,393,000	327,000	88,000	601,000	152,000	41,000	209,000	1,427,000 354,000
1925	16,906,000	4,494,000	264,000	206,000	994,000	204,000	433,000	440,000	211,000 217,000
1931	8,553,000	1,556,000	81,000	151,000	589,000	89,000	269,000	159,000	76,000 99,000

	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Year	TOBACCO	CIGARS AND CIGARETTES	GRAIN & FLOUR	BREAD AND BISCUITS	FISH	SOAP	
	Lbs. Value £	Value £	Cwts. Value £	Value £	Value £	Cwts. Value £	
1900	3,900,000 102,000	3,900	- 30,000	8,700	2,100	- 13,500	
1903	4,218,000 97,000	6,200	- 37,000	9,700	2,900	- 17,000	
1910	6,033,000 187,000	30,800	267,000 132,000	47,000	4,900	78,000 49,000	
1911	4,978,000 154,000	32,100	277,000 141,000	62,000	68,000	81,000 52,000	
1913	6,227,000 186,000	45,000	218,000 125,000	52,500	135,000	95,000 67,000	
1914	4,933,000 152,000	41,700	246,000 131,500	58,000	110,000	95,000 73,000	
1925	5,642,000 346,000	254,300	255,500 277,000	101,000	559,000	81,000 135,000	
1931	2,365,000 121,000	182,500	243,000 165,000	43,000	316,000	32,000 42,000	

15			16		17	
Year	KEROSENE		SALT		KOLA NUTS	
	Gallons	Value £	Cwts.	Value £	Cental	Value £
1900	535,000	19,000	466,000	40,000	13,900	26,600
1903	823,000	21,000	551,000	41,000	22,400	41,300
1910	2,792,000	86,000	704,000	49,000	62,600	91,600
1911	3,181,000	74,000	655,000	52,000	59,500	86,100
1913	3,955,000	93,000	731,000	63,000	80,700	117,300
1914	3,693,000	76,000	662,000	60,000	99,600	115,100
1925	3,991,000	187,000	1,005,000	309,000	157,700	615,600
1931	3,187,000	122,000	969,000	230,000	37,600	78,300

CHAPTER 5

The middle colonial period – 1914-1939

The period began in 1914 with the amalgamation of Lagos and the two protectorates into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, and with the construction of a new port, Port Harcourt, and a railway which connected it with the coal deposits discovered at Enugu Ngwo in the Eastern Highlands and ultimately with the tin mining centre of the Jos plateau and with the Hausa north.

The establishment of the new protectorate was to have been accompanied by the conversion of the local government systems of Southern Nigeria to the Native Administration model which Lord Lugard had developed in the Northern Protectorate, but shortage of staff due to the 1914-18 war deferred its introduction east of the Benin kingdom until 1927 by which time it was too late. In any case, the very different traditional systems of government in the various regions would have made this impossible. The administration of both protectorates had sought to build its local government upon the foundations of the indigenous political systems. In the Muslim north it found the Fulani-Hausa empire which had been extending its empire over the greater part of the Northern Protectorate. In the Yoruba west there were large kingdoms equal in size to the Fulani emirates, but in the south-east, apart from Idah, there were no political groupings large enough to form suitable local government units. The successive attempts to bring these south-eastern towns, villages and small tribes together into viable systems of local government were of a federal and conciliar type and all recognised and perpetuated their separate, independent and competitive nature. The northern administration on the other hand was based on the hierarchical structure of the Fulani empire which it sought to develop and extend to the 'pagan' (non-Muslim and tribal) areas whether these had been tributary or had remained independent. The larger kingdoms and chiefdoms of the Yoruba west were big enough to form local government units as was the Benin kingdom; the rest were not, and were eventually organised into federations similar to the south-east. Differences in the political development of west and east eventually resulted in the division of Southern Nigeria into Western and Eastern Provinces (later regions) but the primary division in Nigeria throughout this period was between north and south and, despite the efforts of the governor in Lagos, was intensified rather than diminished.

The establishment of a railway and of trunk-roads and water transport brought the formerly amorphous eastern provinces together into a coherent structure and at the same time provided them for the first time with relatively easy access to other parts of Nigeria. It also resulted in the rapid decline of the

systems of communication based on water transport and the final end of the dominance of the trading states which until then had monopolised them.

In the early colonial period imports and exports had to travel along waterways connected with five different ports – Forcados (or Burutu) for the Lower Niger trade, Brass for the central delta, Abonnema for the Kalabari trading area, Opobo for the Bonny, and Old Calabar for the Cross River trade. The government of the Oil Rivers Protectorate and of its successor had their headquarters at Old Calabar, the premier port and there was no commercial centre for the overseas trade.

The structure which gradually replaced it restored the former dominance of the Rio Real but gave it a new port and commercial centre and located this on the mainland at the head of the estuary with a railway leading to the north and trunk-roads linking it to the Lower Niger and to the Cross River. The new port was now part of the internal system of the hinterland instead of being separated from it by the New Calabar and Bonny waterways. The railway followed the general alignment of the old trade route from the Rio Real to the Benue with Aba station taking the place of the terminal Ndokki markets and Umuahia that of Bende. It reached the Enugu coalfields in 1916 and after the war was extended across the Benue at Makurdi to the tin fields of the Jos plateau and thence to join the western line at Kaduna, the new capital of the northern provinces. The railway gave the region a central spine running between its commercial centre of Port Harcourt and its coalfields at Enugu which also became its regional capital. Trunk-roads connected the Lower Niger with the Cross River and both with the railway and Port Harcourt. They converged on Onitsha which commanded the Niger crossing and access to the west, and they spread out from Aba to cover the Ibibio country as far as the Cross River. They were dirt roads and their bridges were limited to cars and 30 cwt lorries but people were now able to travel on them safely, cheaply and at speed. It was possible by the 1930s to travel from Onitsha to Lagos, the metropolis of the new protectorate, in a single day by a route that passed through Benin and most of the major Yoruba cities.

This structure was comprised almost entirely in Ibo and Ibibio territory. Old Calabar was now marginal to it as was the delta area, for both were devoid of roads and accessible only by water.

It is not clear from the material available whether Old Calabar and the Cross River trade actually declined or merely remained static and failed to keep pace with the expansion in the Ibo and Ibibio areas. Nothing was done to develop the area. No roads were made to link Old Calabar with the Middle Cross River; the terrain, like that of the adjacent Mamfe and Kumba divisions of the Cameroons, made their construction too costly. The drift of population from the central forests to the Middle Cross River in the north and the delta margin in the south which had halted slightly during the forest rubber boom

was resumed.

But Calabar retained its importance as a port for the Cross River trade and this, in addition to the Middle Cross River and eastern Ibibio oil and kernels, included benniseed from the southern Tiv and oil and forest produce from the Mamfe division. For this part of the Cameroons was now under British mandate and attached to the eastern provinces of Nigeria. Oil also reached it from the subsidiary port of Eket, and Old Calabar also served as a base for the shipment of Ibo and Ibibio migrants travelling to work in the plantations of the Spanish colony of Fernando Po.

I. The Ibo trading system

This restructuring enabled the Isuama and Nri-Awka Ibo finally to displace the trading states and Arochuku as the dominant traders of the region. The enterprising and educated sons of the wealthy members of the trading states forsook commerce and moved inland to professional and superior government employment, the poorer members reverted to fishing for their livelihood apart from those who had displaced the Kru labourers who during the nineteenth century had been employed by the trading firms. But these firms had now forsaken hulks for factories ashore and these were now distributed over the hinterland. Their labourers were recruited increasingly from landsmen and the only employment still reserved for delta folk was that involving water transport. They still continued to trade in oil on their particular rivers but an increasing quantity of oil was now brought to the 'beaches' of factories established in the hinterland and along the railway; and the 'middlemen' (or women) who traded with these factories were mainly Isuama, Nri-Awka and Cross River Ibo.

The import trade, which formerly had to pass through their hands, went directly to those Ibo traders who could now buy direct from the trading firms and who were establishing themselves in strength in the new ports and townships where these firms had their principal warehouses.

It was not that these coastal states and the Arochuku tribe had ceased to trade but that their former monopolistic position had disappeared. The advantage had shifted from the coastal estuaries to the hinterland and to communities whose traders greatly outnumbered them, were as enterprising and determined as they had been, and far more ready to take advantage of the new commercial opportunities which were there for the taking.⁵⁰ Some of these

⁵⁰ E.g. When the township of Port Harcourt was laid out, building plots were offered to the adjacent Kalabari village of Bakana, but none of these offers were taken up. By 1953 the population of this town was almost entirely Ibo and mainly Isuama and Nri Awka.

newcomers engaged in the oil trade as soon as motor and rail transport was established. Many specialised in retailing particular imports like cloth, kerosene, tobacco, hardware, 'articles' (i.e. stationery, haberdashery, English patent medicines, etc.), others handled by-products of these imports like bottles, tins, wooden cases, cardboard boxes and cartons. Others concentrated on the distribution of local products like smoke-dried fish, food crops, pottery and other handicrafts, finding new outlets for these and using new methods for transporting them. The poorer used bicycles (e.g. for carrying dried fish and raw cassava); the richer motor lorries (e.g. for north-eastern Ibo yams) or the railway (e.g. for carrying Ishiogo pots to Aba market).

With this went a corresponding expansion and diversification of traditional crafts and the mastery of new ones dependent on overseas imports like those of the carpenter, the pit-sawyer, the sewing-machinist (which like the others was a predominantly male specialisation) the repairer of bicycles and of other machines. Yet others turned to the provision of the new services now in demand in townships and commercial centres, e.g. 'bars' for the sale of palm wine (beer and soft drinks were introduced in the succeeding period), hotels (which were eating not sleeping places), garment menders (the lowest grade of sewing-machinists) and barbers.

The internal trade of the Niger-Cross River hinterland which had formerly been divided between the Lower Niger and the Rio Real-Cross River systems had now been brought together into a single system which we can call Ibo after its principal traders. It was based on the former Rio Real-Cross River system but was now controlled by the most active traders of the Lower Niger system. Its two great distributive markets of Onitsha and Aba were linked together and to the railway and Port Harcourt by trunk-roads and were connected to the rest of Nigeria by a railway which led to the Hausa north, and by a trunk-road from the Onitsha-Asaba crossing to Benin and the Yoruba cities.

The rest of the Lower Niger system declined and, except for the trade that still went up the Benue or across it to Benin, fell apart. Trade in the Ibo sector tended to follow its administrative division into Western (Warri and Benin) and Eastern (Onitsha and Owerri) Provinces. The northern or Igala sector, less the Edo-speaking part which was included in the Benin province, was left in a neglected and increasingly marginal position having lost to the eastern and western branches of the Nigerian railway the trade which formerly passed through it.

The protectorate now contained three principal centres of local commerce and industry which were also the three most populous areas, namely the Hausa north, the Yoruba west and the Ibo south-east. These areas had always been in trading contact with each other but the protectorate government had now joined them together by roads or railway and made them the three parts of a

single structure which was connected with the world markets through the ports of Lagos and Port Harcourt. At the same time it had effectively separated them from other areas with which they had formerly traded by political boundaries which in the case of the Yoruba and Hausa left a considerable portion of their areas on the wrong side of these boundaries.

The wholesale trade in exports and imports for the protectorate was handled by expatriate companies, their local collection and distribution by traders from these three areas who also handled the internal trade within and between these three regions. We can consider them as three systems each with its own traditional organisation and distinguishing products and skills. The Hausa and Yoruba systems as we have shown in a previous chapter differed considerably from the Ibo. In the Ibo system traders and craftsmen were essentially migrants accustomed to travel to trade or work in markets away from their home community, and they were organised on a basis of kinship and community. The other two systems also had their migrant traders but their strength lay in their resident traders and craftsmen organised into trade guilds and occupying their own special quarters in the urban centres in which they were concentrated.

The Hausa were valued for their leather and ivory work, for their silver jewellery and for their ceramic amulets and charms; the Yoruba for their cotton cloths and indigo dyeing, their kola, their maize flour, their 'chemists' retailing a vast assortment of animal, vegetable and mineral fragments required by native doctors for their medicines. The Ibo superiority lay in their expertise in retailing overseas imports and for the new skills and services associated with them.

The Hausa and Yoruba systems were of ancient standing and had long been in communication with each other. Ibo traders until the establishment of the protectorate had limited their travels to the eastern provinces and to the Edo and Igala country. Yoruba products, particularly their cheaper blue and white cloths, were traded into the eastern region in considerable quantity but few Yoruba traders found their way there. Hausa, however, had established some trading settlements there, presumably in connection with the internal trade in ivory, at least by the nineteenth century if not before, for example at Elele in the southern Ibo area, at Ogoja on the Aiya river, a tributary of the Cross River, and in the southern Tiv country at Katsina Ala. The establishment of British colonial rule led in its earlier period to a considerable extension of Hausa trade. They came initially as camp followers of the colonial troops (who were predominantly Hausa or Hausa-speaking) and they settled in the new stations where the troops were quartered not only in Nigeria but also in the Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate. In South-eastern Nigeria these military stations were in Calabar townships, Abakaliki and Ankpa. Thereafter there was little movement of Hausa traders into the Ibo area, except in connection with

the cattle trade which led to the establishment of a Hausa 'quarter' in Umuahia township and later of another in Enugu.

Movement from the Ibo system in the early period involved travel by water and affected the trading states and others further inland, for example the Biase tribes of the Middle Cross River like the Agwagune. Ibo who went abroad went mainly as labourers and servants. Most of the carriers recruited for the Nigeria regiment in the 1914-18 war were Ibo and served in the Cameroons and German East Africa. The commercial firms established on the Niger as they followed the northern protectorate extending its jurisdiction northward also continued to recruit their clerks and labourers from the Ibo south. These Ibo in their turn brought their relatives to work in the new factories and other commercial undertakings which were established there. Thus when tin was mined on the Jos plateau the labourers were Ibo.⁵¹

Ibo traders followed them and, once rail transport was available, developed an active trade with Jos and other northern commercial centres, not only in overseas imports but in foodstuffs and local materials. Thus products of the forest zone were railed north from Aba and Umuahia, for example raffia palm roofing mats, and poles, sawn timber, snails, oranges, manioc, together with some palm oil whenever the overseas price dropped below the northern market price. Northern products that were railed south were mainly onions and more surprisingly smoke-dried fish from Lake Chad.

But the most valuable northern export was the trade in cattle on the hoof which developed between the north and the south once the southern areas were wealthy enough to afford it. This beef cattle trade gradually developed into a very considerable one drawing its supplies from the cattle areas not only of northern Nigeria but of the surrounding territories as well. The cattle were bought by Hausa merchants and their agents from the cattle Fulani, they were led by Fulani drovers by various cross-country routes which converged on Ilorin (and later Ibadan) for the Yoruba area and on Umuahia for the Ibo. Here they were sold through resident Hausa agents to Yoruba or Ibo butchers who distributed them to their ultimate destinations.⁵² Other Hausa traders also developed a small localised trade in horses which were brought from the northern provinces for sale in the Nsukka, Nkanu-Ohazara and north-eastern

⁵¹ And are still (1971) derived predominantly from riverain Ibo of the Lower Niger.

⁵² This droving required considerable skill as the cattle, once they reached the tsetse areas of the middle belt, became infected with bovine trypanosomiasis and it became a race against time to get them to their final destination alive. Larger beasts from the plateau might finish their journey by rail. Veterinary estimates gave the loss in weight by the time the animals reached Umuahia at between 200-300 lbs. It was not till the late colonial period when an antidote to this disease had been discovered that this loss was prevented by inoculating cattle before they reached the fly belt.

Ibo areas. They were killed and eaten in mortuary rituals and title feasts.

II. The palm oil trade

The history of the trade in oil and kernels during this period is one of failure and decline. In 1906 these exports amounted to well over two-thirds of the total exports of southern Nigeria. By 1926, a peak year for quantity exported, it had sunk to under a half and it continued this decline thereafter. The construction of the railway and of trunk and feeder roads resulted in an increase in the tonnage exported (from 83,090 tons in 1913 to 135,801 in 1930 in the case of oil, and from 174,718 tons in 1913 to 272,925 tons in 1930 for kernels). Palm oil and kernels remained by far the most valuable of Nigerian exports during the whole period. But the full potential of the Nigerian oil palm belt was never realised during this period or thereafter. All attempts to increase the yield of the palm trees, or to reduce the labour of collecting the fruit, whether these were made by the agricultural department or by commercial firms, failed. All that this research established was that oil palms would not thrive if cultivated under plantation conditions, unless the fertility of the soil could be maintained by chemical fertilisers which the local farmer could not afford. Similarly all attempts to improve the extraction rate of oil by the introduction of hand and other oil presses failed. Presses were more suitable for the extraction of the higher grades of oil and as long as the prices of these grades were artificially depressed no one was prepared or could afford to buy them. Palm oil continued to be expressed by hand and the nuts to be cracked by hand, because in the latter case all attempts by the commercial firms to invent a satisfactory nut cracking machine had failed.

An attempt by the United Africa Company to operate an oil mill at Ibagwa on the Kwa Ibo river in the early 1920s was abandoned after it had provoked a 'women's riot' and a boycott of the mill.⁵³

The end of the 1914-18 war was followed by a brief boom which reached its peak in 1925-26 when a four-gallon tin of soft oil sold for 15s 6d in Aba market. This was soon overtaken by the world depression which brought the price down to 3s 4d by 1931. The fall in oil and kernel prices was greater

⁵³ Under the local system of oil production the women received the nuts as their reward for processing oil from palm fruit cut by the men. The men's income came from the sale of the oil, the women's from the sale of the kernels which came from the nuts. When the mill started to operate the men sold their fruit directly to the mill and the mill, having extracted the oil, used the nuts together with the fibre that surrounded them for firing its boilers, since it had no means of extracting their kernels. As a result of the 'riot' the men promised the women never to sell their fruit to the mill.

than in any other Nigerian product except tin.⁵⁴ The eastern region had become far more dependent on overseas imports than other parts of Nigeria and once the demand for forest rubber had ended it had no alternative export which it could develop to replace its losses in palm oil and kernels. Fortunately the world recession eventually led to a fall in the prices of most of the imports so that people could still afford to buy them. The region was self-supporting in its foodstuffs and in any case the price of local foodstuffs was geared to the world price of palm products and had therefore fallen proportionately. Thus despite the fall in the price of oil and kernels the amount of oil exported declined very little while the tonnage of kernels continued to increase. The dependence of the region on overseas imports and the production of oil and kernels to pay for them was not appreciated by the government or commercial firms at the time, but only became apparent later.⁵⁵

The world trade recession was accompanied by efforts on the part of the exporting firms to rationalise their procedure for purchasing oil in the Port Harcourt hinterland and for the evacuation of oil from that area. At the same time the protectorate government introduced a system of produce inspection to maintain the quality of the oil and kernels sold to these firms. It also chose this moment to introduce the Native Administration system of local government into the eastern provinces. The combination of all these changes resulted in the civil disturbances which erupted in the area most affected by these changes and which are examined in the succeeding section.

III. The women's riots

The fall in world prices for palm oil and kernels fell most heavily upon the women of the region. They expressed the oil and extracted the kernels and they also had to sell both in their local markets. At a higher level were other women, the 'middlemen', who bulked the oil and sold it to the factories. To add to their troubles this decline in oil prices was accompanied by other changes, some of them arising out of this depression, others fortuitous. These were:

⁵⁴ And the people mainly affected in this case were the mining companies and their labourers, almost all of whom were Ibo.

⁵⁵ In the first years of the 1939-45 war when a drastic cut in United Kingdom exports to Nigeria was followed by an equally impressive reduction in the production of oil and kernels despite a considerable increase in prices.

A. The new middlemen and motor transport

The development of motor transport, even though restricted to 30 cwt trucks, resulted in a change in the system of marketing oil developed in the previous colonial period which had reached its zenith during the 1914-18 war and the early 1920s. Thereafter it was gradually replaced in that part of the hinterland suitable for road and rail transport, by a new and more efficient one. It was a gradual process but was accelerated by the increased competition resulting from the trade recession.

The key operators in the earlier system were the 'middleman' and the carrier trader. The former, who was normally a woman, set up on the factory beach and bought oil in small quantities from carrier traders (male) who had bought it in smaller amounts in the surrounding markets from the producers. The oil was collected in casks and later steel drums supplied by the factory and as these were filled their contents were sold to the factory. This system, which had developed on the beaches of factories in the main waterways, was extended to the factories established at the principal railway stations. Here the middlemen were both men and women. The more enterprising of these men and other male entrepreneurs evolved a new system in which both the beach middleman and the carrier trader were eliminated. The new type of middleman obtained his drums on loan from the factory, carried them by lorry to his buying stations in the vicinity of large markets. Here his agents filled them with the oil which the producers brought directly to these stations without having to go to the local market. When filled the drums were transported back and their contents sold to the factory. By the 1940s some of these middlemen had installed hand operated oil presses at their buying stations which they rented to the producers for expressing their oil. This change, which was almost complete by the end of the period, had already begun by the middle of the 1920s and it was beginning to make itself felt on the new factory beaches along the railway.

B. Produce examination

The exporting firms had long been advocating the inspection of produce as a means of maintaining and improving its quality and by the late 1920s the government had the staff available to do so. The price paid for oil depended on its grade and this was determined by the amount of free fatty acid (F.F.A.) that was present in it. It now became the function of a government 'produce inspector' to test the oil and determine its grade before it was sold to the factory. The F.F.A. content was not stable but increased rapidly particularly in the case of blended oil. Delay in its examination therefore could result in a lowering of its price, as oil that had been bought by the middleman as 'edible' could degenerate to 'soft', or 'soft' oil could become 'semi' before it could be

inspected. In the case of kernels a change was made from buying by volume (by the bushel) to buying by weight and this again involved the produce examiner, this time to certify that the kernels had reached a specific degree of dryness. Both these innovations affected the middlemen and through them the producers. The poorer middlemen who formed the majority and were mainly women were the ones who were hit the most severely by these regulations. They were the ones who would have to wait the longest for the attentions of the inspector as they had smaller quantities of oil or kernels to sell. This resulted in a lower price being passed down to the producer for the middlemen could not risk buying oil at a price consonant with its grade at the time when it was sold by the producer, when this would have deteriorated to a lower grade before she could dispose of it to the factory. Similarly the price she offered for kernels would have to allow for the cost of the extra labour and time that might be involved in drying out the dampness that had accumulated while waiting for their inspection.

C. Abolition of the 'trade dash'

The 'dash' was a survival from the early days of the palm oil trade. It was a gift of trade goods made by the supercargo and later by the agent of the factory to the middleman for every consignment of oil which he sold to him. The merchandise was chosen by the middleman and its value was related to the quantity of oil in the consignment. Competition between firms had led to its retention and to its standardisation into a credit in trade goods which amounted to a fixed percentage of the money paid for the oil. The percentage might vary between competing firms but remained constant for all the oil bought by the firm. Thus it amounted to a slightly higher price for her oil which the middleman could allow for in her other calculations of the price she would offer to those who sold oil and kernels to her. But the trade recession caused the local firms in their efforts to reduce their costs to agree to simultaneously abolish this 'dash' with little or no warning being given to their middlemen. The abolition came into effect in 1927 in the Enyong Itu area and in 1928 in the Opobo area.

D. Changes in the systems for evacuating oil

Reference to the map produced by the commission of enquiry into these disturbances shows that only two areas were involved, the major one being the central area of the Niger-Cross River hinterland which was drained by the Imo river and its tributaries leading to the port of Opobo, the lesser one the area served by the Enyong Itu markets in the Arochuku part of the Cross River. The major or Imo area was now served by the railway from Uzuakoli and Umuahia southward to Port Harcourt. The lesser one was marginal to the main

eastern Ibibio oil belt and was linked to Umuahia through the Abiriba tribe whose traders were strongly established in Umuahia and in Okopedi (Itu). In the preceding century the river Imo had been the principal source of oil for the trading state of Bonny and in 1870 the civil war had resulted in the settlement of the Anna Pepple or Opobo faction at Opobo where the Imo joined the coastal delta the better to control the trade of this river. During the early colonial period, commercial firms and the colonial government were established on the western side of the river to form the port of Opobo which replaced Bonny as the principal Oil Rivers port, after Old Calabar. The government set about developing the waterways of the Opobo hinterland by clearing the Imo as far as Udo in the Umuahia area, and making its tributaries navigable for lighter canoes as far as Owerri and Aba, while Bonny and Opobo traders established trading settlements along these rivers, particularly the Aba river. At the same time it cleared the Kwa Ibo river as far as Utu Etim Ekpo which enabled the Anang Ibibio to market their oil either through traders operating on the Aba and Essene rivers or on the Kwa Ibo river through a factory at Utu Etim Ekpo.

The establishment of the railway and of feeder roads provided a new and more efficient system for evacuating the oil of this area. New factories were set up at the main railway stations, new middlemen took advantage of the change to break into the oil and kernel trade and the change from the old to the new system was accelerated by the depression and by the action of the trading firms which could no longer afford to operate two competing systems and weighted the price differentials of their various factories in favour of those feeding the railway and their bulk oil plant at Port Harcourt. The middlemen supplying these factories became predominantly the new type of motorised traders, those on the Imo waterways were mainly women, some of them, particularly those supplying the Opobo factories, of considerable wealth. But by 1939 the port of Opobo was dead and the trading system that supplied it moribund.

E. Direct taxation

It was intended when the two protectorates were amalgamated in 1914 that the system of local government which Lord Lugard had developed in the Northern Protectorate should be introduced into the Southern Protectorate. Under this system, known as indirect rule, the traditional systems of local government were recognised as Native Administrations and were made responsible to the Nigerian government for the local government of their respective areas. Shortage of staff led to the postponement of this project until after the war. But it was not until 1926-27 that the administration had been brought up to strength and the government was able to give effect to this change. It was a cardinal principle of indirect rule that the Native Administration should be responsible for the collection and allocation of its revenue which was to be obtained by direct taxation of the people in its area. In the Hausa north where indirect rule had originated, the Emirates had always taxed their subjects and all that was required of the protectorate government officers was to see that these taxes were fairly assessed and collected. In south-east Nigeria such taxation was unknown and none had previously been levied by the protectorate government. In 1927 the new system was introduced into the eastern provinces, having been established in the Edo and Ibo divisions west of the Niger in the previous year. Native treasuries were set up for each division, nominal rolls were taken and tax was collected for the first time in 1928. Though referred to as an income tax assessed on what was estimated to be the annual income of the average male householder it became in fact a poll tax levied on every able-bodied adult male recorded in the nominal rolls. The rate varied in different areas and averaged around 5s a head. This may not sound much but in 1928 it amounted to a sizeable proportion of most men's cash income and it had to be paid in Nigerian currency. There was certainly a considerable amount of this in circulation in the oil producing areas, but the economic dislocation resulting from a sudden demand for payment at one and the same time from all the men in the region must have been very great since, unlike the Hausa area, none of them had been conditioned to expect and to save for such an expenditure. Their only realisable source of income was from their palm oil and this had to be processed and sold for them by their womenfolk.

Tax, however, was collected without incident, possibly because of their knowledge of the unsuccessful demonstration against payment made by some of the Urhobo-Sobo communities the previous year. The total amount came to £352,267, a considerable sum of money when set against the total annual export of palm oil from the whole of Nigeria which only amounted to £ 3,751,000.

F. Indirect taxation

Throughout this period the protectorate government in Lagos seems to have remained unaware of the economic realities in South-eastern Nigeria, the region that was producing the major export of the country and the one most affected by the trade recession. No consideration seems to have been given to the fact that this oil producing area was already contributing a disproportionate amount of the revenue of the country in indirect taxation through export and import duties. The duty on kernels and on palm oil was based on their weight and not on their value. A ton of kernels paid a duty of 22s 6d. In 1923 when it had been raised to this amount it represented an ad valorem duty of 8%. With the fall in world prices this had increased to 14%. The duty on oil increased similarly from 6% to over 11%.⁵⁶

The price of most imports did not begin to fall significantly until after 1930. And as far as the oil producers were concerned their prices had actually been increased through the imposition of higher import duties.⁵⁷ The only concession made by the government was to abolish the 15% ad valorem duty on imported foodstuffs. While this may have benefited urban dwellers in Lagos and Port Harcourt and particular expatriates and middle-class Africans, it had little relevance to the eastern provinces which were self-sufficient in their food supply and did not buy any of these imports except stockfish, a semi-luxury.

G. The riots

Tax was collected in 1928 without incident but in the following year all these grievances came to a head in the area that was most affected by them and found expression in the disturbances which were later referred to as the *Aba Riots*, after the commission of enquiry into them which was held in this town. They began in Oloko in the Umuahia area on 23 November 1929 and were sparked off by the rumour that the government was intending to tax women. From Oloko they spread to northern Ngwa and to the Mbaise area of Owerri on the western side of the Imo. This was followed by demonstrations in Aba township and the looting of factories there. From Aba they spread to the adjacent Anang Ibibio divisions of Ikot Ekpene and Abak and thence to Opobo. The government had by now brought in units of the Nigeria Regiment and these confronted and dispersed the demonstrators, the disturbances coming to a tragic and bloody end at Utu Etim Ekpo and Abak on 14 and 15

⁵⁶ Aba report, page 103.

⁵⁷ 'For concurrently with the decrease in the price of palm products there has been an increase in the prices of imported goods. This is partly due to the several increases in customs import duties which have been imposed during the last few years.' *Ibid.*, para. 341.

December and at Opobo government station on 16 December 1928.⁵⁸

These riots have been represented by at least one colonial historian⁵⁹ as a rebellion against the government which affected the whole region. Actually, as the very comprehensive report of the commission of enquiry made clear, they were confined to the areas defined in subsection D. which in the case of the major area were affected by changes not experienced elsewhere.

The riots, which today would have been termed demonstrations, were made in response to specific grievances which were as much economic as political. They were made entirely by women⁶⁰ who massed in their thousands at pre-arranged market places and demonstrated against the government's taxation and the prices paid by the commercial firms.

The commission of enquiry was not aware that such female demonstrations were, as anthropologists later pointed out, a traditional method whereby the women of an Ibo or Ibibio community collectively asserted their rights or righted their wrongs as against the men of the community. Such demonstrations were never opposed but allowed to work themselves out naturally, which they normally did with little or no damage to persons or property. What was new here was the scale. The traditional demonstration involved only the women of a single town or village, more rarely of a single market. But these demonstrations brought together all the women in large and overpopulated neighbourhoods. There was no difficulty in bringing them together, they were women accustomed to meeting together in a number of contiguous markets. All that was needed was to send round to these markets to arrange the time and place for a mass meeting which worked itself up into a demonstration which ended by venting its anger in a conventionalised manner – by burning native courts in the case of the government and its taxation, by looting of factories in the case of the firms and their reduced oil prices. Looting of the property of an offending group was the customary way in which a local village avenged a wrong. The offenders, if they wished to settle the matter peacefully, withdrew before their arrival. If they were not prepared to do so they stood their ground and the result was a war between the two villages. In the Ibo divisions the administrative officers, since they lacked adequate police or other support, perforce conformed to the traditional male role, they acquiesced or withdrew, while the demonstration, having burnt the native court returned to their homes. The idea of burning the court was probably borrowed from colonial usage. In the early colonial period the

⁵⁸ Aba report, Appendix V.

⁵⁹ Gailey. *The road to Aba*.

⁶⁰ The male casualty at Opobo was accidental. The deceased was a Yoruba goldsmith unconnected with any of the rioters whose presence at the scene of the disturbance remained unaccounted for.

burning of houses was a 'collective punishment' employed against recalcitrant villages.

It was said at the time that the women believed that the government did not 'war' (i.e. fight against) women, and that the peaceful handling of the demonstrations in Oloko and Mbaïse had confirmed them in this belief. By the time the demonstrations had spread to the Anang divisions, however, the administration felt strong enough to confront them and a show-down was inevitable. Riot drill was a military and police exercise that was only invented after these disturbances and largely because of them. The sole method for dispersing a mob, laid down in military manuals and government standing orders, was to fire upon it if it failed to disperse after due warning.

These demonstrations, though they made a considerable impression on the government, had no effect on the oil market. Prices, which were still relatively high in 1929, continued to fall and thereafter to fluctuate between £6 and £ 13 for a ton of soft oil and between £4 10s and £ 9 for a ton of kernels.⁶¹

IV. Migrant labour and 'town' unions

The depression of the palm oil trade and the lack of any alternative exports stimulated the drive towards migrant labour. Though government and commercial agencies sought to improve palm oil cultivation and local systems of agriculture, the people themselves knew better. A few areas, notably the north-eastern Ibo country, were already producing a cash crop and these continued to do so; the rest remained subsistence agriculturalists and convinced that if they wished to improve their lot they – like the trading communities of the Nri-Awka, Isuama and Cross River Ibo – would have to find temporary employment away from home. This feeling was naturally strongest in the oil producing areas which had become accustomed to a cash income. They provided most of the unskilled labour employed by government and expatriate companies in the developing parts of Nigeria, being attracted by the very high wages paid by them. These areas were also in closer contact with Christian missions. This movement, as we have seen, began in the early colonial period but intensified during the depression when Ibo and Ibibo towns and villages combined with these missions to provide the education that became increasingly necessary to obtain such employment.

In considering this labour we need to distinguish two radically different wage structures: the 'local' which was that paid by farmers and other Nigerian

⁶¹ (1) e.g. average prices per ton of soft oil 1927-28 £22 6s 11d; 1932-33 £8 9s 6d; 1937-38 £10 17s 10d; 1928-29 £24 19s 11d; 1933-34 £6 11s 11d; 1938-39 £5 18s 9d; 1929-30 £22 2s 4d; 1934-35 £6 7s 10d; 1939-40 £5 19s 3d; 1930-31 £13 15s 1d; 1935-36 £10 13s; 1931-32 £9 12s 6d; 1936-37 £13 13s 10d;

employers, and the foreign, 'expatriate', which was that paid by the protectorate government and commercial firms. The former was governed by the natural economic forces regulating the local labour market, the latter was the system which was the concern of the government labour department when it was established, and of the government labour legislation. It was based on such concepts as a 'fair wage' and bore some relation to the salaries paid to government and commercial expatriate staff (which were correlated with those paid in other parts of British Colonial West Africa) but none to the local wage structure. These 'expatriate' wages were very high by local Nigerian standards and bore no relation to local wages or to the income which a man could earn by farming or from oil production. It cost a migrant labourer in the 'expatriate' structure very little to feed and maintain himself in his place of employment, most of his earnings were brought home by him and formed a considerable addition to the wealth of his family and of his home community. Those in clerical or other 'white collar' employment brought home proportionately less, having to maintain a standard of living commensurate with their superior social status.

The opening up of the hinterland brought with it a steady increase in this 'expatriate' employment while the amalgamation of the two protectorates opened up the whole of the northern territories to southern migrants in search of it. For in the competition for such employment the south was in a much stronger position and the south-east in the strongest position of all.

Indirect rule as developed in the northern provinces preserved and enhanced the division between the 'Muslim' north and the 'Christian' south. Those men who provided the leadership in the south, whether they had retained their traditional religions or had embraced Christianity, or, as in some Yoruba areas, Islam, were oriented toward change in a European direction ('progress') and toward education (literate English). The multiplicity of local languages and dialects made English the language of the administration while pidgin English had been the language of the overseas trade for centuries. In the northern provinces leading men and government officers were in agreement in seeking to preserve traditional Muslim values. Hausa was the language of the market place and it was made the language of the administration. With this went a feeling of political and military superiority, a legacy of the Fulani jihad of the nineteenth century which was accepted by the colonial military establishment which during this period made Hausa the language of the parade ground and recruited only northerners in the belief that southerners did not make good soldiers. But this was the only form of government employment restricted to northerners. Of far more serious consequences was the banning, in deference to Muslim sensibilities, of Christian missions from the Muslim north. This excluded them from the most active and populous areas. The pagan (non-Muslim) areas were too poor and too dispersed to take any advantage of the

few missions that were allowed to settle in their areas and the mission schools permitted in the northern township, which formed the only exceptions to this edict, were for the benefit of the southerners residing there. This ban on Christian missions had the long-term result of depriving most northerners of clerical and any other employment which required a knowledge of English and with it of reading and writing. Anyone who could speak pidgin or other forms of English could communicate with European administrators, traders and missionaries and with their African subordinates. Anyone who had the advantages of a mission education could expect to become one of these subordinates and find employment in that sector of the labour market in which throughout this period there were always vacancies. If the aspirant's literacy qualifications were insufficient for a southern appointment, he could always find one further north. The communities which had harboured missionaries in the precolonial period, namely Lagos and Abeokuta in the west and Onitsha and Old Calabar in the east, were able to secure most of the superior posts for their educated sons, but only in the initial stages for there was enough wealth in some of the Yoruba cities to finance the establishment of missions and their schools. Similarly in the south-east there was a phenomenal expansion of primary schools and of teacher-training colleges, each town or village pooling its resources and vying with its neighbours to persuade a mission to establish a church which was also a school in their village. The procedure became standardised during the 1920s, the mission agreeing to supply a catechist pupil teacher as soon as he had completed his training, and the village undertaking to provide the building and to guarantee the catechist's salary which, once the school was started, was met out of school fees. By the end of the 1930s there were very few Ibo towns and Ibibio villages which were without a mission church and school, and most of the other people in the south-east were following their lead. The exceptions were the Ijo delta and the high forest regions where the population was sparse and scattered and communications difficult, and the north-eastern Ibo who were too busy growing their yams to be interested in other forms of employment.

When it came to unskilled illiterate labour the south was again in a stronger position. Migrant labour could be fitted more easily into the agricultural and demographic patterns of most southern areas. North of the middle belt the rains came much later and ended sooner than further south. The result was a farming season of short duration during which enough food had to be produced to last through a long dry season. Farming was an exclusively male occupation and a village or farming hamlet could not afford to release many, or in some cases any, of its young men during the farming season as it needed their labour. They might well be unemployed during most of the dry season but 'expatriate' employment made no allowance for such seasonal needs, it required its labourers throughout the year. In the south the farming season was

much longer, enabling a much greater variety of crops to be grown while in the south-east both men and women farmed. All the food crops except yams belonged to the women and were cultivated by them. They now included cassava which could remain in the ground until it was required and could be lifted and processed for eating whenever it was convenient. Young unmarried men had little land to farm and were dispensable. Those who remained behind could be hired by the families of migrants to provide the labour of their absent males.

But the greatest advantages possessed by migrants from the Ibo area, whether these were traders, craftsmen, labourers or in superior employment, was their segmentary social structure and the attitudes derived from it, and also their traditional trading organisation. Both came into play as soon as Ibo moved outside their home neighbourhoods. On their home ground the Ibo were an aggregation of independent towns or villages each competing and on guard against its neighbours. In other parts of Nigeria the Ibo felt themselves to be a solid and united group. Anyone speaking the language was a fellow tribesman, a relative with whom one was in duty bound to combine for mutual aid. The same tribal or clan sentiment characterised other south-eastern peoples with a segmentary organisation, but when the 'tribe' was as numerous as the Ibo or Ibibio it meant that their migrants could be sure of support from fellow Ibo (or Ibibio) in almost every staging post or centre of employment in Nigeria.

The second advantage originally applied only to the limited number of Ibo communities that had specialised in travelling to trade or work away from their home town. But it was there for other Ibo and Ibibio communities to follow as soon as they were able to find migrant employment. Traditionally their traders or craftsmen from such communities, irrespective of their trade or craft, formed a single organisation whose members when abroad maintained contact with each other and with their home town. In precolonial times the structure of the Ibo trading system caused them to be dispersed between a number of markets and staging posts. In the colonial period the creation of townships and other centres of trade and employment tended to concentrate them in some of these centres in association with other Ibo migrants. In the precolonial period the difficulties of travelling any distance restricted their range and the direction in which they operated, only the most successful communities being able to build up an organisation which covered more than two or three directions. The establishment of colonial rule and of road and rail communications removed these obstacles while the expansion of trade and of the 'expatriate' employment that followed provided the incentive.

V. 'Tribal' and 'town' unions

The middle colonial period thus saw a considerable movement, mainly of Ibo but also of Ibibio and other south-easterners to employment in other parts of Nigeria and their concentration in Jos and other centres of labour and of trade. Here they became organised into that essentially Ibo institution usually referred to as a union which, as it developed during the third period and thereafter, became the most effective instrument for local development that has yet appeared in Africa.

It met the two primary needs of these now widely dispersed migrants: support in their new environments and the maintenance of their ties with their home community. Unions began, as far as we can now ascertain, during and after the First World War in places which contained a number of Ibo migrants. While their numbers remained small they formed themselves into a single association which they called a union and which we can distinguish as a 'tribal' union. As its numbers increased this union segmented into smaller unions according to their places of origin, which was sometimes extensive like a neighbourhood or division (e.g. the Awka divisional union) or, when enough people from a particular community were present, was restricted to members of this community (e.g. the Akwa town union). The 'town' unions became increasingly active and efficient, the divisional unions were replaced by the unions of its component towns while the 'tribal' union became otiose, only coming into action in cases where one of its members came into conflict with a man from another ethnic group.

There being no class or other social barriers in Ibo or Ibibio society, the leadership of these unions devolved upon their better educated and wealthier members and these took as their model the British club or friendly society. Each union had its code of rules, its officers (President, Secretary, Treasurer, Committee Members). It had its meetings which were usually opened with prayer and were recorded in minute books. But its objectives and the bonds which held it together were the traditional eastern Nigerian ones of blood and soil (i.e. kinship and local residence).

As the number of Ibo and other migrants increased and more of these associations were formed, their leaders combined them together so that they became branches of larger and wider groupings: the 'tribal' union on the one hand brought together all members of the tribe working abroad and eventually all members of the tribe in 'expatriate' or other employment; the 'town' unions on the other, whose membership was restricted to a single community, e.g. an Ibo town, an Ibibio 'clan'. Unions of intermediate size tended to break down as their members increased and to be replaced by the unions of their

component towns.⁶²

The success of the 'town' unions was phenomenal and they have now been copied by other south-eastern and by Yoruba and Edo communities. The 'tribal' unions in the case of the Ibo and Ibibio were less effective. They were formed by the literate and politically minded elite not very closely in touch with their illiterate members and their more parochial objectives. The Ibo union and the rival Onitsha and Owerri unions found considerable difficulty in remaining solvent, dissipated their energies in internal squabbles and intra-tribal politics and played no part in Ibo economic development. The Ibibio union was initially more successful. It founded a secondary school and provided a number of bursaries for the higher education of Ibibio boys. But it too failed to achieve its early promise and by the 1950s was split through intra-tribal rivalries.

The 'town' unions on the other hand went from strength to strength, particularly the Ibo ones. This was due partly to their size. The union needed to be small enough for its members to be known to each other and for its leading personalities to be used to working together, but not so small that it lacked enough members in remunerative employment. The Ibo town, a coherent community of a few thousand people fitted these requirements very well. The social organisation of the Ibibio and of those Ibo areas with a similar structure did not. Their 'clans' (tribes) were too large and disunited, their villages too small. There were also no Ibibio traders and their unions therefore lacked both the wealth and the financial expertise that characterised the more successful Ibo unions.

The critical reason for the success of these 'town' unions however was that their membership was restricted to the people of a single local community. The loyalty of the members to one another could be taken for granted and their aggressively competitive instincts so necessary for the survival of the community in its home surroundings could be translated to the wider fields now open to them. The unions' immediate objective was to secure employment or opportunities for trading, their long-term aim to secure the top jobs and to corner the particular service or trade in which the community was specialising.⁶³

A great deal of the money earned by the migrants was ploughed back through the union for the provision of educational and other amenities of the home town, and by the end of the middle colonial period the more active

⁶² The most important exception to this is the Mbaise Union, a federation of town unions which built up into five 'clans' and these into the Mbaise Union.

⁶³ E.g. long-distance motor transport in the case of Nnewi, garment making in Aba market in the case of Item and Igbere, the trade in empty bottles in the case of Enugu Agidi town.

unions had become organised for this purpose. Such a union had branches at all commercial employment centres where it had members and a home branch whose members had retired or had found employment locally. It had an annual conference to which all branches sent representatives and at which community developments were planned and were approved at an annual general meeting. The costs were met by the union and were divided between the various branches according to their size and the wealth of their members who vied with each other in the size of their contribution, because a man's standing in his home town was now equated with the size of his contribution to its welfare. In the lean decades of the 1930s and 1940s these 'town' unions were providing scholarships to secondary schools, medical dispensaries and maternity clinics. In the more opulent 1950s and 1960s they were building and maintaining secondary schools and pipe-borne water supplies and in the cases of the very wealthy (e.g. Ndizorgu or Abiriba) or the very large (Mbaïse), hospitals.

The phenomenal expansion of south-eastern Nigerians, but especially of Ibo in the market trading and employment sectors of the Nigerian economy after the 1939-45 war was in a large measure due to the activities of these 'town' unions which came into being in this middle colonial period. The repercussions of this very uneven development on the political history of Nigeria are well known, what has yet to be appreciated and provided for is the very uneven development it has produced within the former eastern region and within the various states into which it has now been divided.

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