

OIL MILL RIOTS IN EASTERN NIGERIA 1948/51:
A STUDY IN INDIGENOUS REACTION TO
TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION*

By

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How do peasants respond to technological innovation which threatens to undermine their economic autonomy? Why do they react the way they do? What effect do such responses have on the success or failure of development programmes in Africa; and what are the implications of these for future policy?

These questions are relevant in today's Africa where national governments, aid donor countries and development agencies are increasingly advocating the application of modern technology to agricultural and industrial production. In a recent article, Jonathan BARKER sums up this orientation among «donor and development agencies» in this way:

«Briefly, the idea is that if technology, credit, and markets can be channeled to small-scale agriculture and manufacturing units, these units can respond by making efficient use of capital, creating new jobs, and supplying basic consumption needs of the masses. On this analysis, growth can continue while its benefits are redistributed to lessen the incidence of poverty» (1).

Nigerian government's thinking along these lines is reflected in the emphasis it has placed on the mechanization of agricultural production in the Third and Fourth National Development Plans. In the Third Plan, a National Centre for Agricultural Mechanization was founded with an estimated capital expenditure of 4,000,000 naira (2). The Centre was to:

- i. undertake adaptive research studies into the mechanization problems of Nigerian Agriculture.
- ii. undertake the evaluation of various forms of mechanization for wider adoption in different farming systems in Nigeria.
- iii. make systematic improvement in hand tools and equipment, co-ordinate mechanization trials and facilitate the mass production of tested farm implements that are consistent with the country's factor endowments (3).

In the Fourth Plan, the Centre is to be strengthened because «a considerable amount of mechanization is now obviously required in order to reduce the tedium of farm operations and the unattractiveness of farming as an occupation» (4). A corollary of the intensification of mechanization is that the Land Use Decree will be reviewed with a view to making

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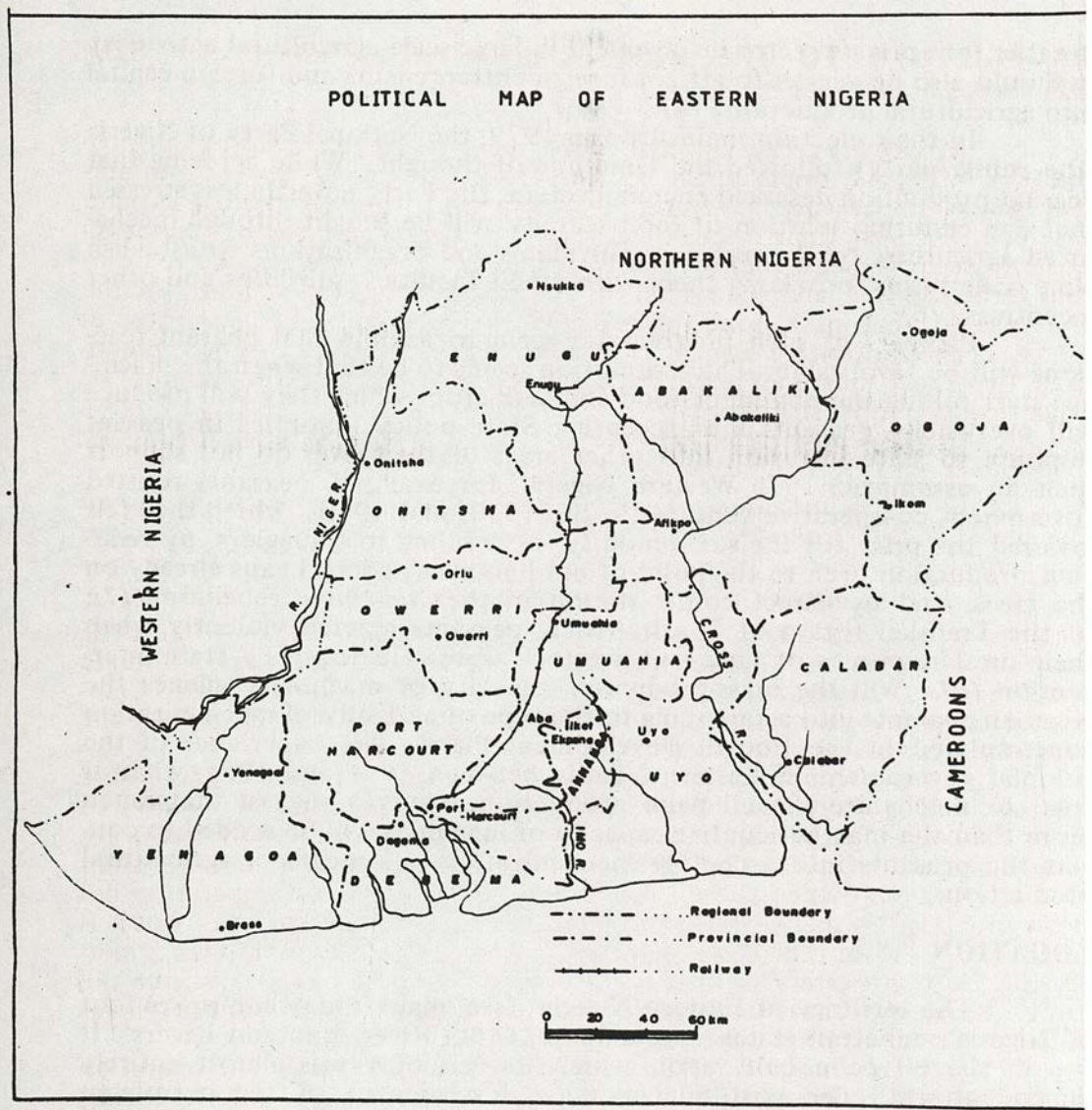
it easier for «private sector involvement in large scale agricultural activities». It should also be «easier to attract foreign entrepreneurs and foreign capital into agricultural production» (5).

In their election manifesto in 1979, the National Party of Nigeria (the ruling party) followed the same line of thought. While agreeing that peasant production deserved encouragement, the Party nevertheless stressed that «an enduring solution to food scarcity will be sought through mechanized agriculture by encouraging individuals and organizations to establish large scale farms, providing them with credit facilities, subsidies and other incentives» (6).

Planners of such programmes seem to assume that peasant reactions will be favourable. The assumption seems to be that when the machines start rolling the abundant food and cash crops which they will produce will overwhelm peasants into accepting State policy. Studies in peasant response to state intrusion into other areas of their lives do not support such an assumption. In Western Nigeria, for example, peasants resisted government co-operative ventures in the 1930s and 1940s, which they felt lowered the price for their commodity, by «selling to smugglers, by reducing production even to the point of not harvesting cocoa beans already on the trees, and by direct confrontation in the *Agbekoya* rebellion» (7). In the Transkei region of South Africa, peasants reacted violently when their rural resources of land and livestock were threatened by state intervention (8). Will the mass-productive capacity of machinery silence the Nigerian peasants into acquiescing to the type of agricultural mechanization contemplated in the Fourth Development Plan? The experience of the colonial government in Eastern Nigeria between 1948 and 1951, when it tried to mechanize the oil palm production, seems to suggest that much more than the mass-productive capacity of machines will be needed to convert the peasants into accepting mechanization as a means of agricultural production.

LOCATION

The territory of Eastern Nigeria (see map) today comprises four of Nigeria's nineteen states – Anambara, Cross River, Imo and Rivers. It lies in the oil palm belt, upon which its economy was almost entirely dependent until the post-independence development of the petroleum industry. Its colonial history was characterized by persistent resistance to the colonial state, sometimes leading to violent riots. Two of these – the Aba Women's Riots of 1929 and the Enugu Colliery Riots of 1949, well documented in literature – led to the setting up of Commissions of Inquiry by the colonial government (9). Whereas these two riots arose essentially from the frustrations of unfulfilled expectations from the colonial government (10), the riots described here are peculiar in the sense that they arose mainly from an attempt by the colonial state to initiate some form of rudimentary industrialization.



BACKGROUND TO THE RIOTS: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE OIL MILLS

Attempt by the colonial government to mechanize oil palm production in Nigeria began in the 1920s. During that time, British commercial interests operating in Nigeria, who controlled the export trade in palm produce, felt that their interest was threatened by the output of plantation economies in the East Indies. The British merchants then pressed the Colonial Office to act, and succeeded in getting the Secretary of State for the Colonies to appoint a joint Colonial Office and Merchants Committee in 1923. The Committee was charged with the responsibility of recommending the «best means of securing improved and increased production» of palm produce in West Africa.

In its report submitted to the Secretary of State in 1924, the Committee came to the conclusion that:

«Without the introduction of modern machinery for removing the oil and kernels from the fruit, it will not be possible for the oil palm industry in British West Africa to increase to any extent or in the near future to compare with plantation products from the East» (11).

This report marked a turning point in British colonial attitudes towards the oil palm industry in West Africa, and in Nigeria in particular. Although the Nigerian Government refused to accept openly the verdict of the Committee for a few years after the publication of the Report in 1925 (12), the verdict nevertheless influenced official policy from then on.

The preoccupation of the Nigerian Government after 1926 became one of finding ways and means of improving the quantity and quality of palm produce. Hitherto, the Government had been content to encourage native method of extraction. This method was essentially women's affair though the men owned the oil produced. The method of preparation has been discussed in many works (13) and need not detain us here. But it is important to state that it was generally believed that this method was inefficient. It was wasteful in that it extracted only «55%» of the oil from the fruit. Besides, because of the delay inherent in the preparation, the oil was usually of poor quality, containing high free fatty acid (14).

But this method fulfilled an important function in the operation of the peasant economy of Eastern Nigeria. Among the Ibo and the Ibibio, women had property rights (15) and the preparation of palm oil was one sure way of getting money to provide their needs. There were various ways through which the women made money through the preparation of palm oil. First, all kernels belonged to them. When dried, these were cracked in small quantities and sold to the produce traders. Second, the women owned the unrefined part of the oil (16). This was usually refined later and the oil sold by the women. Third, a woman whose husband was generous could expect to receive some cash gifts from him after the oil has been sold. But this was not always guaranteed and so, some women who knew that they would get nothing from their husbands, took some quantity of oil before handing over to their husbands the oil produced. Such women later sold the oil taken in this way and converted the money realized to their

own use (17). Preparation of palm oil was therefore, a major source by which the women found money to buy their kitchen needs, and provide themselves with clothing and ornaments. There were other non-monetary benefits that the women enjoyed. They took enough quantity of oil for domestic consumption. They also accumulated fuel from the fibre and kernel shells (18).

By 1928 however, the Nigerian Government, preoccupied with finding a method of increasing and improving production, came to the conclusion that the use of modern machinery was the best means of attaining this goal. The arguments in favour of the modern machinery was that:

- (a) «much larger proportion of oil in the fruit can be recovered by this than by any other means;
- (b) «the mill can produce oil of the highest quality... and
- (c) «that oil of superior quality offered in a large bulk of uniform and guaranteed quality is now, or will in the near future be much more valuable commercially than oil produced at present... (and) that the time will come when such oil as is exported now will be practically unsaleable» (19).

Thus, in that year, the Government began to induce European firms to establish oil mills promising subsidies for such projects (20).

No firm took advantage of this offer throughout 1928 and 1929. The United Africa Company (U.A.C.), the only company which gave a reply, did not commit itself to establishing a mill. It asked instead, that Government subsidize it for the existing oil mill at Ibeagwa, which it had taken over from the Nigerian Products Company, an offshoot of the Niger Company; that the Government should erect two mills, one to be equipped with «centrifugal machinery» and the other by «hydraulic pressure» at a cost of £ 50,000 to be run on behalf of the Government by the company, with a proviso that the company might buy them from the Government after five years operation» (21). The Government took this as a vote of no confidence by the firms on the viability of oil mills in Nigeria, and decided therefore, that it should withdraw the subsidy offer (22). This was however, turned down by the Colonial Office (23), and so the offer was allowed to remain open for some years.

Between 1930 and the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the Government concerned itself more with encouraging the use of hand presses (24) by the African producers than in subsidizing the firms for the establishment of the oil mills. And despite the low prices paid for palm oil in the 1930s (25), the number of hand presses in Eastern Nigeria jumped from 63 in 1933 (26) to 800 in 1938 (27). The outbreak of the war in 1939 once again reopened the issue of the oil mills. During the war, the Government discovered that many of the oil producers in Eastern Nigeria had turned to the production of gari for trade with the North because of the greater income which gari could earn the producer as compared with palm produce (28). As this trend continued throughout the war there was fear that it might continue after the war. This would have become a serious threat to the Government's source of revenue. Closely tied to this was the

problem of raising money for post-war development. Both the resident Minister in British West Africa, Lord SWINTON, and the British officials in Eastern Nigeria believed that the revenue must come from the oil palm industry (29). Finally, the old threat from the East Indies had not been forgotten. It was feared that at the end of the war, when conditions returned to normal, the Nigerian producer might find himself in greater competition with the output of the plantations using modern methods, and that he would be at «an impossible disadvantage unless improved methods of production could be introduced and the grade of oil available for export thereby improved» (30). In 1944, the U.A.C. lent its weight to this argument. In an article entitled «The future of the Nigerian oil industry», the Company stressed the need for mechanization of the oil industry if it was to survive the competition from the East Indies (31).

The end of the war in 1945, and the availability of funds through the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, created a favourable environment for active discussion of the oil mills. But no action was taken until 1946, when as a result of a tour of Eastern Nigeria by A.H. YOUNG, Deputy Director of Commerce and Industries, Lagos and J. W. WALLACE, Acting Assistant Director of Agriculture, Umuahia, sites were selected for the establishment of the oil mills (32). Construction work began that year and one, that at Amuro, was opened before the end of the year (33). By 1951, there were eleven oil mills operating in Eastern Nigeria (34).

THE RIOTS

Right from their inception the oil mills met with opposition from the women whose interests were threatened by the mills. In 1946, the women of Nnewi District in Onitsha Province demonstrated in «protest against the proposal to erect oil mills» in the area (35). In Owerri, Aba Division, Owerri Province, local opposition against the mill about being erected there, led to a halt in the work. The mill was then transferred to Nsulu (some 10 miles north of Owerri) (36). When, in 1948, construction was proceeding at the Nsulu site, a significant riot broke out against its establishment (37).

The Nsulu oil mill riots were the most serious of all anti-oil mill riots which took place in Eastern Nigeria. It broke out on the 5th of January, 1948 and has some parallels with the «Aba Women's Riots» of 1929 (38). The temporary stores at the mill site were burned down by «a mob of approximately 100 women», mainly from Ubaha village but assisted by women from the neighbouring villages of Mbubo, Umuosu and Oloko (Bende Division). Thirteen permanent labourers employed by the Department of Commerce and Industries were driven off the site. A number of pick axes, shovels and hand pans in the store, as well as a certain amount of personal property belonging to the labourers, were also damaged or destroyed in the fire. The women also made unsuccessful attempts to burn some of the sawn timber on the site. They then marched up to the Nsulu Native Court, about two miles away, «singing and dancing in an attempt to enlist the support from the women of other villages to whom they sent messages asking for assistance».

The report of the outbreak of the riots did not reach the District Officer, Aba, until 7.45 p.m. that day. So it was not until the 6th, that he acted. On that day he took his assistant, W. J. GRIFFITH with an «armed party of one Lance-Corporal and four constables» to the oil mill site but found no sign of trouble. Meanwhile, however, the women were busy driving away those whom they had thought had any connection with the oil mill from Ubaha village. Among these were one Okorie, their member in the group council at Nsulu. The other was the «Ubaha man who signed the temporary agreement» for the establishment of the pioneer oil mill. The District Officer then instructed the police Corporal to proceed with investigations, in conjunction with a representative of the group council «with the object of arresting the ringleaders» (39).

Police investigations proceeded on the 6th with assistance of the Clan Council Member, Josiah NWACHUKWU, described as «the most outstanding personality in the group». Other members who promised assistance were «too frightened to render active aid». Police and NWACHUKWU proceeded to Ubaha where they arrested elder NWAGBO and two women alleged to be ringleaders. They were unable to find elder AGOMUO said to be the «principal initiator of the trouble». They were brought to Nsulu Native Court and locked up.

- Late in the afternoon, a crowd of women numbering «400 from Ubaha, Umuode, Mbudo and Umuosu villages... demonstrated at the court premises demanding the release of the prisoners». The police refused, and so the women attempted to assault Josiah NWACHUKWU. He was escorted to safety. The women then turned on the police but were successfully driven off after a scuffle. Three of them were arrested.

By 9.30 p.m., the court premises in which the prisoners were kept was attacked, presumably by the women. The corporal and five constables on duty were overpowered in the dark; the prisoners were released and the roof of the main Native Court was set on fire. Then armed reinforcements of 29 policemen was sent to the scene followed by the District Officer. Meanwhile, the Ubaha women had called in assistance from «as far a place as Ikot Ekpene and Bende Divisions». Messengers sent out in plain clothes by the Government squad found that «the men and women of Ubaha, Umuode, Umuosu and Mbudo villages were waiting armed at the bridge near the oil mill site on the Umuahia road to offer resistance». The mob was estimated to number 500.

Fearing that he had no adequate force to meet the challenge, the District Officer decided to proceed to Ubaha without escort, but accompanied by the interpreter, AZUBIKE, Court member ABENGOWE, described as «an influential oil trader at Nbawsi», and an orderly.

They met the women who were singing and dancing with slogans such as «'we are as strong as iron' and 'we cannot be bent'». They dispersed after the District Officer had promised to discuss their grievances at a full meeting of the group council on the 12th at which the women would be represented (40). When the meeting did convene on the 12th, «almost the entire adult population turned out both men and women» numbering «approximately 4,000 people». And «90 % of those present were flatly opposed to the erection of the mill». The project was therefore abandoned at least for Nsulu (41).

Things quietened down during the remaining part of 1948 and the whole of 1949. With increased propaganda, particularly by the educated elite and the progressive unions, the popular attitude began to change. Demands were made on Government for the establishment of oil mills even from hitherto most hostile areas. A number of mills were established between 1949 and early part of 1950 (42).

But in the later part of 1950, anti-mill riots flared up again, this time in the Ibibio area of Calabar Province. At Ibiono in the Itu District, for example, women rioted in November against the establishment of the oil mills in their area. They beat up the President of their Native Council, the Revered Utit, and he had to be rushed to hospital for treatment (43). Reports of similar riots at Uyo, Ikop-Ekpene and Abak were also made (44). While in Owerri Province, where the mills appeared to have been accepted in 1949, protest letters from the Ngwa Women Organization were received by the District Officer for Aba (45). Protest against the establishment of the oil mills continued in scattered form in Eastern Nigeria throughout 1951. And by 1952, the District Officer for Aba confessed that:

«Mills have not yet fitted themselves into the social fabric and I imagine they will always be suspected until such a time as they are regarded as an institution (if ever). In the meantime, we can only keep up patient propaganda» (46).

CAUSES OF THE RIOTS

Various reasons were given for the outbreak of the riots. Official explanations were divergent. The District Officer for Aba blamed the outbreak of the Nsulu riots on «a few local agitators working on the women» and on «intrigue by interested oil middlemen» (47). But the Assistant Superintendent of Police, who investigated the riots, blamed them on the following factors:

(a) That the mill was sited on a land whose ownership was in dispute between two villages, Umnala and Ubaha. Consequently one group felt that the other had tried to deprive it of the land by leasing it out for the establishment of the oil mill;

(b) inadequate information had been given to the local women about the oil mill. «The Ubaha women said that they had not been told of the project and hearing a rumour that the Government was going to take their land, they thought that this was the thin edge of the wedge»;

(c) fallacious propaganda by some people that «the mill would be the ruination of the palm oil trade in the area»; and

(d) «that the site for the mill was brushed and the cassava uprooted without the question of compensation being fully discussed» (48).

The President of the Ibesikpo Convention, Uyo, E.O. EYO, took the line of the District Officer for Aba in explaining the outbreak of the riots in Ibibioland. In an article in the *Eastern States Express* in 1950 he claimed that:

«They (the women) were instigated by some produce buyers who have reasonable grounds to believe that they will lose their monopoly of the palm oil trade, if all palm fruits would go to feed the mills and then some favoured 'contractors' would be privileged to buy up all the products from the mills, and sell over to the European firms, thus making all the profit which the produce buyers should make» (49).

Isaac Uzoije NWORU, who took part in the erection of the oil mills from 1950 as a fitter/plumber and who witnessed some of the riots, confirmed that inadequate information was a major cause of the riots in Ibibioland.

«Two days of propaganda was mounted by the construction workers. Usually they were driven off on the first day. On the second day they would employ the services of the chief or any other respected individual from the locality to help in the propaganda. These men would help in explaining to the women the benefits of the mills. But construction workers made sure they did not enter any village on its market day».

He also gave other reasons, among which were the mode of recruitment of labour for an award of contracts by the mills. The villages in which the mills were located wanted to benefit from these as much as possible. They always reacted angrily if they felt they were cut off from labour contracts (50).

There can be no doubt that some of these factors contributed to the women's anger, but they do not satisfactorily explain the outbreak of the riots. Instigation by «produce middlemen» or any other local agitators may have played a part, it could not of itself have caused the women to riot if they did not feel their own interests affected by the establishment of the oil mills. For in the society of Eastern Nigeria, the women were not mere pawns in the hands of men or particular interest groups but were active participants in the day to day affairs of the communities in which they lived (51). Quarrel over ownership of land on which a mill was built did not occur in all the areas in which oil mills were built. Rumour about the disadvantages of the mills, like the theory of instigation by local agitators could only have stimulated women into action if their interests were involved. One factor which could have had a shocking effect on the women was lack of adequate information. The appearance of construction workers in a woman's farm with axes and shovels, uprooting cassava and cutting down economic trees, could cause the owner of the farm to revolt, but it could not cause a riot of over «100 women». This is not, however, to deny that inadequate information played a major part in the riots that took place, but as we shall see, its role was dependent on other variables to be discussed presently.

The real cause of the riots must be sought in two factors: either ignorance or neglect of the operation of the peasant economy by the planners of the mills, and the apparent inconsistency in government policy.

In planning the establishment of the oil mills, the Government's main concern was to increase the quantity and improve the quality of oil. Very little attempt was made to investigate the workings of the peasant economy in the area and consider how mechanization might dislocate it, or how it would affect the social structure. The only thing which the planners seem to have appreciated was that women controlled the palm kernel production. And right from the time when the idea of establishing oil mills was conceived, the belief had been that once the women were assured that they could buy back the palm kernel from the mills, all problems would be avoided. Thus the Secretary, Eastern Provinces, giving information to all residents on the procedure to be followed in establishing oil mills in Eastern Nigeria, categorically stated that the installation of nut crackers alongside the oil mills had been deliberately avoided «even though it was clear that the nut cracker makes the mill more profitable». The fear was that installation of the nut crackers would stir «local prejudice». Instead provision was «made for buying kernel shell for fuel and selling nuts to the women after extraction of the oil from the fruit». It was even decided to employ labour to pick the fibre from the nuts even though the nuts would be sold to the women (52).

But as we have seen, women's share in palm produce in traditional society was not limited to the palm kernels. The preparation of palm oil offered most women a sure means of getting money and thereby maintaining their financial independence. It was a source of income which they were not prepared to lose. The main cause of the women's riots must therefore be seen against this background. The women saw the establishment of the oil mills as threatening their economic survival and financial independence as a group. A protest letter to the District Officer for Aba by the *Ogbako Umunwanyi Ngwa* (The Ngwa Women's Association) in 1950 attests to the fact that this fear was the fundamental reason for their protest. The women said they were protesting against the installation of the oil mills for two reasons:

1. The preparation of palm fruits and extraction of oil therefrom has by custom been the duty of the women and their means of gaining a living and any attempt to deprive them of this right will be visited with anger.
2. The deprivation of any woman of the right of preparing oil for a husband and taking her shares which consist of the palm kernels and the unrefined portion of the oil is a good ground for divorce.

They argued that if the men insisted on having the oil mills installed, it meant that they had «indirectly asked their wives to leave them, and if the wives remain at all with them there will be no peace» (53). In rioting against the establishment of the oil mills, therefore, the women were simply behaving like economic beings.

The fears of the women may well have been mitigated by a well-organized propaganda campaign before the installation of the oil mills. Perhaps, this is where the importance of inadequate information as a factor in the outbreak of the riots lies. But as we have seen adequate information

was not given to the women; in fact it was only after the women had rioted that the District Officer for Aba made efforts to explain to the women the benefits of the mills and Government's future intentions towards them (54). The acceptance of the mills after the intervention of the indigenous educated elite and the progressive unions, clearly illustrates the role which adequate propaganda could have played.

But if fear of group security was responsible for the outbreak of the riots in 1948, it cannot alone explain their continuation and spread from 1950 – a year and half after the first riots were brought under control. The first riots stirred up sustained activity by the colonial administrative and technical officers, educated elite and progressive unions, each group explaining the benefits of the oil mills. The result of this combined propaganda, as we have seen, was to increase the demand for an actual establishment of oil mills. Why then did anti-oil mill riots break out again in 1950?

The riots recommenced and spread from 1950 because of a sudden change in government policy which appeared to the people as pure deception. One of the promises made by the Government, when the erection of the oil mills was being considered, was that «as soon as the mill has been put into operation, it should be handed over to either the Native Administration or a suitable local organization in the form of a loan to be repaid over a period of ten to twelve years, while the Government retained the power to examine the accounts of the mill (55). The short campaign before the mills were constructed, was mounted on this promise. In 1949, the Department of Commerce and Industry took definite steps to fulfil this promise. Of the completed mills, it sold the one at Amuro, Okigwe to the Okigwe Industrial Company – an indigenous commercial organization. That at Amansi Awka was sold to the Ibey Trading Company Limited, another indigenous trading company. And of those under construction, that at Nbwasi in Aba Division was being erected with a view to handing it over to the Nigerian Eastern Wealth Company, while the one at Ndizuogu in Orlu Division was to be handed over to L.O. Okoro and Company Limited. Both were indigenous companies. There were also several other projected sites with prospective owners lining up to take them over (56).

But in 1950, the policy of selling completed oil mills either to private Nigerian enterprise or to the Native Administrations was revoked. On the 4th of May, 1949 as a sequel to the political developments which had seen to the growth in Nigeria of regional governments (57) Regional Development Boards were created in Eastern, Northern and Western Regions, under Ordinance No. 14 of 1949. These Regional Boards were to be joint successors to the Nigerian Local Development Board which was wound up on the 31st of March that year (58). Until that date, the Nigerian Local Development Board was directly responsible for financing the Pioneer Oil Mills while the administration was carried out by the Department of Commerce and Industry. Section 22 (1) of the 1949 Ordinance which established the Regional Boards gave them powers to take over control and supervision of development projects hitherto carried on in their respective areas by the now defunct Nigerian Local Development Board (59). Pioneer Oil Mill matters now came under the purview of the Regional Boards.

One of the early actions taken by the Eastern Regional Production Development Board (E.R.P.D.B.) was to review the policy of selling off the completed oil mills. The Board came to the conclusion in 1950 that although «some of the mills completed or begun when the scheme was financed by the Nigerian Local Development Board have been sold to private African enterprise», it was no longer feasible to continue the practice. The Board had instead «decided it is not justified in selling any more of the mills for sometime» but to guide them «towards more efficient production and also for the benefit of the entire society» (60).

But in doing this, it had alienated both the would-be buyers of the mills and the producers in general. This is where it appears the work of instigators could play a part. Those who lost the opportunity of buying the mills, it could be argued, instigated the women to riot. But this is an argument which ignores the role of women in traditional society, sketched above. Women could not have rioted if their interests were not directly threatened. The fact is that after two years of operation, the mills had begun to undermine the social fabrics which held society together. Martin ANENE observed with respect to the Ibibio, that by 1950, men were «entering the kernel trade for the first time, buying from the mills and reselling in the local market» (61). This was a view with which my informer, Isaac U. NWORU agreed (62). To the women these developments were nothing but deception. It did not require the work of «instigators» to make the women believe that they would one day lose all the benefits which the preparation of palm oil gave to them. The work of instigators could only have increased not caused the women's anger against the oil mills. For a people, the majority of whom depended on this crop for their cash income, the mills therefore represented a definite threat to their very existence. Hence the recommencement and spread of the riots.

THE EFFECTS OF THE RIOTS

One effect of the riots was to strengthen the influence of the women and their organizations – an influence which had been growing since the outbreak of the «Aba Women's Riots» in 1929 (63). Thus, while the riots were still raging, the Assistant District Officer for Aba, P. HOLLAND minuted «It is becoming increasingly obvious that with projects such as Pioneer Oil Mills etc..., the women must be consulted. They are the greatest potential source of trouble in the village and are well organized» (64).⁹ This concern was already affecting official policy since 1948. The Secretary, Eastern Provinces, in a memo to the Resident Owerri Province that year wrote:

«I am... to request you to direct your administrative officers that particular attention should be paid in future discussions regarding the establishment of oil mills to the possibility of unfavourable reactions on the part of the women and that women, in addition to the Native Administrations and the men, should be fully consulted» (65).

The other effect of the riots was that they shattered the hope placed on the oil mills as the best means of increasing production while maintaining high grade oil. It had been argued in 1946, when costing for the mills was being done, that the capacity of a mill would be «12 cwt. of fruit per hour», and that each mill would handle «2,000 tons per year which with an extraction of 20.7 % oil to fruit (mill efficiency assumed to be 85 %) should give an oil output somewhat in excess of 400 tons per year (66). But the table below shows that this dream was far from realized.

Table showing the Quantity of Fruit milled and oil produced by Oil Mills in Eastern Nigeria 1950/1951

Mill	Fruit milled in tons	Oil Produced in tons
Azumini	865.27	137.54
Umuchima	968.82	165.27
Umuduru	674.87	122.35
Ahoda	1,757.47	269.24
Akpabuyo	1,720.22	312.19
Usung Inyang	588.87	91.18
Ikot Akpabong	276.61	36.84
Oyubia	613.41	114.08
Ikot Ama	104.85	14.74
Oraifite	11.59	2.50

Source: Second Annual Report of the Eastern Region Production Development Board, 1950–1951. (Enugu: Government Printer, 1952), p. 7.

From this table, it is easy to see that none of the mills reached the target figure of 2,000 tons of fruit and 400 tons of oil per year. The decrease in the expected oil output had nothing to do with the riots directly. It can be explained by two factors: the inability of the mills to get the estimated quantity of fruit and the fact that instead of the estimated 20.7% extraction rate to fruit, the mills were producing at an extraction rate of 16.69 % (67). But the failure of the mills to get an adequate supply of fruit had some connection with the outbreak of riots. For instance, the mill at Azumini was said to have «shown very poor returns, largely owing to a certain amount of resentment from local farmers who had asked that the mill be handed over to them» (68). And of the Ikot Akpabong mill, the report was that:

This mill has not been successful since it was opened last September... owing to the opposition from the women who have boycotted the mill since inauguration and who have also prevented fruit supplies from being sold to those who support the mills (69).

The producers preferred to sell their fruit (when they chose to sell rather than preparing it themselves) to the oil presses. These were machines which did not threaten the economic security and financial independence

of the women. Hence, the «growing competition from the hand press owners» which the Chairman of the E.R.P.D.B. bitterly complained about in 1953 – a competition which he believed «the Pioneer Oil Mills cannot win... and never will» (70).

The non-cooperative attitude of the producers continued after the riots, preventing an adequate flow of fruit to the mills, thereby rendering them economically non-viable. For instance, in the year ending 31 March 1953, the forty-one mills in Eastern Nigeria, handled only 33,609 tons of fruit producing 5,716 tons of oil. This worked out «at an average of 819 tons of fruit or 2 tons per working day against the 4 considered necessary for economic operation» (71). In 1953, the Chairman of the E.R.P.D.B. proposed to sell the mills to the councils or co-operative societies on «deferred payment terms» (72).

The mills never won the confidence of the producers. In a short time many of them fell into disuse, leaving the traditional method of extraction and the hand presses dominant in the oil production in Eastern Nigeria.

In conclusion, the riots and their subsequent effect on the oil mills teach some lessons which are relevant in today's development planning in peasant societies. Firstly, they expose the weakness of inconsistency in the execution of government development programmes in peasant societies. Unfortunately, this seems to be the rule in many developing countries. It appears more reasonable to be as open and consistent as possible in dealing with peasants on such issues. Secondly and more importantly, they undermine the assumptions of many national governments, international development agencies, and even some governments of developed countries who advocate agricultural mechanization and rapid industrialization as the solution to the economic problems of the third world, without a corresponding advocacy of ways to mitigate the social dislocation such machinery might cause in these societies. It is contended here that for the mechanization of agricultural production in peasant societies to be successful, alternative domestic occupations must first be provided for those likely to be squeezed out of their occupation by the introduction of machinery. The non-adherence to this principle will, most probably, cause riots today as it did in Eastern Nigeria between 1948 and 1951. It might also make the role of such machinery in agricultural development counter-productive.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jonathan Barker, «Can the Poor in Africa Fight Poverty»? *Journal of African Studies*, 7,3 (Fall, 1980), p. 161.
2. Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Third National Development Plan, II: Project Summary*. (Lagos: Federal Ministry of National Planning, n.d.) p. 18.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Guidelines for the Fourth National Development Plan 1981/85*. (Lagos: Federal Ministry of National Planning, n.d.), p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Africa Currents*, No. 15/16 (Summer/Autum, 1979), pp. 42/43.

7. Gavin Williams, «Taking the Path of Peasants: Rural Development in Nigeria and Tanzania», in Peter Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein eds., *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa*. (Beverly Hills & London: Sage Publications, 1976), p. 133.
8. William Beinart and Colin Bundy, «State Intervention and Rural Resistance: The Transkei 1900–1965», in Martin Klein ed. *Peasants in Africa*. (Beverly Hills & London: Sage Publications, 1980), pp. 271–316.
9. See Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), Chap. xiv; A.E. Afiglo, *The Warrant Chiefs*. (London: Longmans, 1972), chap. 6; Agwu Akpata, «The Background of the Enugu Colliery Shooting Incident in 1949», *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, III, 2 (December 1965), pp. 335–363.
10. For the role of frustration in the Aba Women's Riots, See Anthony I. Nwabughogu, «Political Change, Social Response and Economic Development: The Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria 1930–1950». (Ph.D. Thesis., Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, 1981), chap. 3. Agwu Akpata's analysis in the article cited above shows that worker frustration was a significant cause of the colliery riots in Enugu in 1949.
11. Colonial No. 10, 1925, *Report of the Colonial and Merchants Joint Committee on Palm Oils and Kernels in West Africa* (London HMSO, 1929), par.8.
12. It was not the establishment of the mills that the Government opposed; it was its implications for the Government's land policy. The Committee had recommended that in order to make the mills viable, land had to be leased to a firm intending to establish a mill, to plant oil palm. This was against established policy. See W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs, II, Problems of Economic Policy 1918–1939*, (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp. 191 ff.
13. See Martin Anene, *The Oil Palm Economy of the Ibibio Farmer* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1956), pp. 11–12; Richenda Scott, «Palm Products and Groundnuts: Production for Trade» Margery Perham ed. *The Economics of a Tropical Dependency, Vol. I. The Native Economies of Nigeria* (London, Faber and Faber, MCMXLVI), pp. 217–242.
14. This was estimated to be in the range of from 6 % to over 25 % f.f.a. See United Africa Company, «The Future of the Nigeria Oil Industry» *African Affairs*, 47 (1948), pp. 42–43.
15. For Women's property rights in Eastern Nigeria, see C.K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (New York, Barnes and Noble, 1970), pp.202–203. See also Daryll Forde and G.I. Jones, *The Ibo and Ibibio – Speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria* (London: International African Institute, 1950) pp. 13 and 70.
16. This depends on the method of production adopted by a particular locality. The unrefined part called *Ogiri* in Igboland is a mixture of oil and water. This is obtained by putting oily fibre in water. Then the water is stirred with a fork-like stick which makes a foamy substance to rise to the top. This is skimmed off. Women later boil this so that real oil is separated from ordinary water. The oil so produced belongs to the women.
17. Society does not frown at this if it is known that the man does not contribute substantially in the maintenance of the household.
18. Interview with Isaac U. Nworu aged 52, dated 28/1/80. The District Officer for Nsukka found that the people of the area ignored the use of hand presses

- in the 1930s because the women objected to their husbands. See National Archives, Enugu (hereafter cited as NAE) OP 1649; On prof 8/1/4779. Annual Report Onitsha Province 1937, p. 34.
19. Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office Papers (hereafter cited as C.O.) 583/168/682. See Governor Thomson to Alex Cowan (United Africa Company), dated 25/10/29. Enclosure No. 4 in Thomson to Colonial Office (hereafter cited as C.O.) conf. dated 25/10/29.
 20. *Ibid.*, Thomson to C.O. dated 25/10/29. Contains details of attempts made by Nigerian Government to improve the oil palm industry in general.
 21. *Ibid.*, Cowan to Governor of Nigeria dated 13/8/29. Encl. No. 3 in Thomson to C.O. dated 25/10/29.
 22. *Ibid.*, Thomson to Cowan dated 25/10/29. Encl. No. 4 in Thomson to C.O. dated 25/10/29.
 23. *Ibid.*, Passfield to Governor of Nigeria dated 13/2/30.
 24. The hand presses were intermediate technology. The distinction between them and the other means of extraction is seen by the fact that Ordinary native method extracted 55 % of the oil from the fruit, Hand press method 65 %, and Pioneer mill method 85 %, Factory mill method 93 %. See U.A.C., «The Future of Nigerian Oil Industry», p. 44. Although there were initial opposition to the hand presses, these did not last long. The women soon found that they could either sell their fruit to press owners or have the fruit extracted for themselves by paying a small sum of money to the press owner. In 1934, the price was as low as one penny a tin of fruit. See NAE, EP.10645 Vol. 1, CSE 1/85/5258 Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture, 1934, p. 122.
 25. Lagos prices for palm oil fluctuated from £ 13.15s.1d. per ton in 1930–31, to £ 6.7s.10d. in 1934–34 and to £ 5.18s.9d. in 1938–39. See *Report of the Mission Appointed to Enquire into the production and Transport of vegetable oil and oil seeds produced in West African Colonies* (London: HMSO, 1947), Appendix XI, p. 70.
 26. CO 583/220/30188 Annual Report, Agriculture Department 1935, p. 19.
 27. *Annual Report on the Southern Provinces of Nigeria 1938*. (Lagos: Government Printer, 1940), p. 10.
 28. NAE, 1642, Abadist 1/26/907. Palm Produce Production. See Agriculture Officer, Umahia to Resident Owerri dated 14/5/43.
 29. *Ibid.*, McCall to all D.Os. Owerri Province dated 3/2/44. «We are all thinking of post-war development... I can see no way in which this part of the country is economically to develop except through a more efficient oil palm industry». For Lord Swinton's view, see NAE, 1642/Vol. II, Abadist 1/26/908, Palm Produce Production, p. 217. Lord Swinton toured Eastern Nigeria during the war to whip up enthusiasm for oil and kernel production.
 30. *Second Annual Report of the Eastern Regional Production Development Board 1950/51* (Enugu: Government Printer, 1952), p. 7.
 31. United Africa Company, «The Future of the Nigerian Oil Industry» *African Affairs* 47 (1948) pp. 41–51.
 32. NAE, 1847, Abadist 1/26/1022. Pioneer Oil Mills General. See Secretary, Eastern Provinces to Residents Calabar, Onitsha and Owerri Provinces dated 13/3/46.
 33. *Ibid.*, Development Officer, Okigwe to Director, Department of Commerce and Industries Lagos dated 10/11/46.

34. *Second Annual Report of the Eastern Regional Production Development Board 1950/51*, p. 7.
35. NAE, OP 1865 Vol. IX, Onprof 1/4904. Annual Report Onitsha Province 1946, p. 85.
36. NAE OW 6019/5, Abadist 1/7/1286 Oil Mills, p. 9.
37. NAE OW 6019/7, Abadist 1/7/1287 Nsulu Mill Disturbances.
38. The «Aba Women's Riots» of 1929 was also a revolt of the women against established authority in Eastern Nigeria. For details see Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs* Chap. 6 and Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria chap. XIV*.
39. NAE OW 6019/7, Abadist 1/7/1287 District Officer (D.O.) Aba to Resident Owerri Province dated 7/1/48.
40. *Ibid.*, D.O. Aba to Resident Owerri Province dated 8/1/48.
41. *Ibid.*, D.O. Aba to Resident Owerri Province dated 14/1/48.
42. NAE File 1847/Vol. II, Abadist 1/26/1023. Minute by D.O. Aba p. 356. Demands were received from all Divisions in Owerri Province except Bende.
43. *The Eastern States Express Aba*, 20/11/50.
44. *Ibid.*, 3/1/51.
45. See below.
46. NAE 1847/Vol. II, Abadist 1/26/1023. See minute by D.O. Aba pp. 356 in reply to Resident Owerri. to D.O. Aba dated 26/4/52.
47. NAE, OW 6019/7, Abadist 1/7/1287. D.O. Aba to Resident Owerri Province dated 8/1/48.
48. *Ibid.*, Assistant Superintendent of Police Aba Detachment, A. Cooper to Acting Deputy Commissioner, The Nigerian Police, Enugu dated 11/1/48.
49. E.O. Eyo, «Pioneer Oil Mill Bogey», *The Eastern States Express*, Aba 13/12/50.
50. Isaac Uzoije Nworu, interview dated 28/1/80. Isaac U. Nworu joined the construction firm of Costain which built some of the mills. He began to work on the oil mill construction sites from 1950; he later transferred to the Eastern Regional Production Development Board which ran the oil mills and remained attached to the oil mills until 1975, when he joined the Institute of Management and Technology Enugu where he works at present. He saw the rise and fall of the oil mills and witnessed some of the riots.
51. See S. Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939); M.M. Green, *Ibo Village Affairs* (New York: Praeger 1964); See also *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to inquire into the Disturbances in Calabar and Owerri Provinces, 1929*. Memo by C.T. Lawrence p. 13, par.73, «the Resident interviewed the Obon and chiefs together with the women whose leader, Mrs. Adam Archibong, stated in the course of a lengthy speech that the women shared equally with the men matters that concerned the welfare of the country».
52. NAE, File 1947, Abadist 1/26/1022. Secretary, Eastern Provinces to Residents dated 20/6/46.
53. NAE, File 1847/Vol. II, Abadist 1/26/1023. Petition by Oyidie Ohiaogu, Woto Eronwu, Hannah Uruakpa, Oyidie Ahuruonye and Mary Agbawo for *Ogbako Umanwanyi Ngwa* to D.O. Aba dated 3/10/50. See also their letter to D.O. dated 20/10/50 in *Ibid.*
54. This was done during the deliberations of the joint Native Administration and Women's meeting with the D.O. on 12/1/48. See NAE OW6019/7, p.18, Abadist 1/7/1287.

55. NAE, File 1847, Abadist 1/26/1022. Memo by S. Philipson for Chief Secretary to the Government, Lagos to the Oil Mills Finance Committee, June 1946, p. 43.
56. *Ibid.*, See minutes of the Residents Conference held at Enugu on 14 and 15 June 1949.
57. This was the introduction of Richards Construction in 1946. For details see Lord Hailey, *Native Administration in British African Territories, Part III*, (London: HMSO, 1951), pp. 3–6.
58. *Third Annual Report of the Eastern Regional Production Development Board, 1951–52*. (Enugu: Government Printer, 1953), pp. 1–2.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *First Annual Report of the Eastern Regional Production Development Board 1949–50*. (Enugu: Government Printer, 1951), par. 15.
61. Anene, *The Oil Palm Economy of the Ibibio Farmer*, p. 13.
62. Nworu, interview dated 28/1/80. Nworu also claimed that most fruit buyers cheated the producers by paying them less than the stipulated price.
63. Judith Van Allen, in two articles «Sitting on a man, Colonialism and the lost political institutions of the Igbo women» *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, VI, 2 (1972), and «'Aba Riots' or Igbo Women's War? Ideology, stratification, and the Invisibility of women» in N.J. Hafkin and E.J. Bay eds. *Women in Africa* (California, 1978), has argued that the political power which Igbo women exercised in traditional society through their associations was lost under colonial rule. I propose to take issues with these articles in future.
64. NAE File 1847/Vol.II, Abadist 1/26/1023, p. 279. See minute by P. Holland dated 6/11/50, commenting on riots then going on at Ikot-Ekpené.
65. NAE, File 1847, Abadist 1/26/1022, Secretary, Eastern Provinces to Resident Owerri Province, Jan. 1948.
66. *Ibid.*, Secretary, Eastern Provinces to Residents dated 20/6/46.
67. *Second Annual Report of the Eastern Regional Production Development Board 1950–1951*, p. 7.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
69. *Ibid.*
70. NAE File 1847/Vol.III, Abadist 1/26/1023, C.A.L. Guise to Resident Owerri Province dated 3/9/53.
71. Anene, *The Oil Palm Economy of the Ibibio Farmer*, p. 13.
72. NAE, File 1847/Vol.II, Abadist 1/26/1023. C.A.L. Guise to Resident Owerri Province dated 3/9/53.

RESUME

L'euphorie actuelle créée autour de la mécanisation de l'agriculture africaine semble ignorer une variable importante et nécessaire pour sa réussite : à savoir, la prise en compte des craintes qu'un tel processus peut créer chez les paysans. Si la mécanisation de la production agricole doit être une réussite dans les sociétés paysannes, d'autres formes d'occupation devront d'abord être trouvées au niveau du monde rural pour qu'il soit plus facile d'introduire la machine dans ce milieu. Les paysans réagiront probablement avec violence à toute innovation technologique qui met leur autonomie économique en danger. Cela a été le cas dans le Nigéria de l'Est avec les révoltes qui ont eu lieu entre 1948 et 1951 quand le gouvernement colonial, désireux d'augmenter la production et d'améliorer la qualité de l'huile de palme exportée du Nigéria, décida de mécaniser la production de l'huile de palme. Les paysannes s'opposèrent à l'installation des huileries qui, pensaient-elles, menaçaient leurs intérêts économiques. Elles arrêtèrent le travail à plusieurs endroits où on construisait ces huileries et refusèrent de les ravitailler en noix de palme. A la suite de l'insuffisance du ravitaillement de ces huileries en noix de palme, leur viabilité économique fut sérieusement affectée. Par la suite, la plupart de ces machines furent abandonnées et ainsi la méthode traditionnelle d'extraction de l'huile de palme continua à dominer.