

## Swiping Perennial Famine with Exotic Crops in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: The Case of Esan People in Edo State

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**ABSTRACT** Famine or food shortages are attributed to lack of adequate storage, man made and natural disasters. Famine could also be induced by alteration in environment and population growth. Perennial famine described locally in Esan as *ukhumun* was a circle of natural events in which surplus usually gave way to scarcity. Famine or *ukhumun*, lasted from April to September which surplus usually gave way to scarcity. *Ukhumun*, lasted from April to September when there was little to eat, the latter month marking the beginning of yam harvest. Scarcity during famine was sometimes aggravated when there was draught *okae* or locust *iriso* invasion before harvest. During *ukhumun* or famine, yam the staple crop lost its crumbly texture and became rubber-like, difficult to pound into *ema* or soft yam paste as food for the young and the old. Crop failure or poor harvest therefore merely aggravated the consequences of *ukhumun* because according to Esan traditions *Ukhumun fi bha gbon fibhelin min, aiye miebale* meaning “famine was in the land of the living and in that of the spirits and there was no more food to eat”. This statement usually prefixed all folk stories in Esan as it emphasized the need for wisdom and caution to sustain the growth of communities. To fill the period of scarcity before harvest, some exotic crops like plantain, maize, cocoyam and fruits were adopted into Esan agriculture especially from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There was an increase in the quantity and variety of available food as well as expansion of farm size to accommodate the new.