

British Attempt at Developing Cotton as an Export Crop from Esan, Edo State, Nigeria, 1902-1925

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ABSTRACT Cotton (*G. vitifolium*) was indigenous in Esan cultivated and utilized for weaving of cloth and consumption of seeds as food. It met the needs of the people throughout the pre-colonial period and by the inception of colonial rule in the first decade of the 20th century the demand for cotton assumed a new dimension. Foreign varieties of cotton seeds were introduced by British agents while Esan farmers were encouraged to cultivate it as an export crop. As long as the new type of cotton fetched a good price in the market, Esan farmers cultivated it side by side with the local type which they used in weaving the indigenous cloth. But during World War I, when prices of produce including cotton fell Esan farmers lost will to cultivate cotton generally as more foreign fabrics came into the markets. This position remained until the end of the colonial period despite the fertile nature of Esan land for cotton growing and British attempt at developing cotton as an export crop from the area.

INTRODUCTION

By language and culture Esan people are Edo, a group located North East of Benin City. Esan generally with their family of chiefdoms speak a variant of the Edo language, which language experts believe began to separate into various strands about 4,500 years ago (Flight, 1981, p. 52). The people refer to themselves as Esan. The words Isa, Esa and Ishan that were interchangeably used by European writers and colonial administrators were the corruption of the same word Esan. Esanland lies between the fringes of the Savannah to the north and the forest (marginal forest) to the south. The plateau on the northern fringes had the forest vegetation, which thinned into the northward Savannah. It is made up of sandy topsoil that could be easily cleared and cultivated, relatively weed-free. The reason for the sandy nature of the topsoil has been partly due to "the widespread occurrence of sedimentary, granite and gneissic materials the downward elevation of clay; differential soil erosion due to the high kinetic energy of rainstorms tending to remove fine particles in run-off water; and the possible chemical destruction of kaolin in the topsoil" (Kowal and Kassami, 1978, p. 116). The topsoil is also mixed with laterite, various clays and free metal oxides often coat the quartz and clay particles, immobilized phosphate, and help to cement or compact the soil not only at the surface but also

in the lower layers where clay accumulates to form a pan-like horizon (Kowal and Kassami, 1978, p. 26). This area according to Darling have been very fertile for agriculture (1984, p. 26).

The position of Esan land in a favourable climatic zone enhanced the initial agricultural development and the entire economic structure of the area. Climatic position determines the natural environment, within which an ecosystem affects agricultural and economic activities. The skill in which climatic elements were manipulated for production purposes enhanced the development of Esan agriculture.

Esanland is influenced by seasonal winds. These are the Southwest and North-East winds. The former blows from the Atlantic Ocean. It is warm and humid. The wind prevails over the land and brings in its wake heavy rains that caused the wet seasons. Wet seasons were periods of much human activity when the planting of various crops by farmers was done. When rainfall stops by mid – October a period of dry season sets in following the Northeast winds. This usually lasted from November to March when there was virtually no rain in Esanland. The climate at this time is hot with a temperature of about 23^o – 25^o centigrade at mid-day. From around mid – December to January the weather became harsh and it was referred to as the harmattan or *okhuakhua*. These seasonal variations according to Akinbode could have been from the "latitudinal migration of the tropical convergence zone

(ITCZ)” (Akinbode, 1983, p. 3). Sometimes light rainfalls were recorded in the months of December and January. Also, strong winds and high air temperatures could be recorded between the months of January and March while the lowest are usually recorded during the months of June and July. In general, the altitude of the Esan plateau modified the temperature to such a level of eliminating extreme weather conditions. It was therefore not surprising that the relatively flat tops of the plateau remained much cooler than other parts of the land throughout the year. This perhaps explains partly why the plateau land was the first to be settled in Esan.

By 1460, a viable agricultural economy was in existence in Esan with the development of indigenous crops native to the savannah – forest belt. The cultivation of the indigenous yam and the utilization of the oil palm trees were complemented by the production of other crops including cotton, beans, pepper, melons and fluted pumpkin. The rearing of domestic animals was also practiced. These activities led to the expansion of communities in the area. An early agricultural development was crucial for the Esan people especially as it formed the basis for the future introduction of some American and Asian crops that diversified the agriculture of the people. Apart from providing food for the people, agriculture was an economic sector, which created gainful employment for all members of the society. Although in its foundation, agriculture was inward looking pre-occupied with the need to provide food for the people, for a long time families or individuals were able to produce more than was needed for home consumption and for manufacturing items of immediate utility. Being an agricultural area men, women, and children all members of the society were engaged in agricultural production. Enough food was produced to feed the population. Surplus production was traded away. Population grew. Turnover grew. Potentials increased. It was in this setting that cotton assumed the status of a significant crop in pre-colonial Esan.

COTTON

For many centuries before 1900 when British agents colonized Esan, “Ishan cotton” an indigenous crop was used to manufacture *Ukpon-Ododo* the thick multi-coloured cloth. “Ishan cotton” (*G. vitifolium*) locally called *olulu* was

of long, strong and coarse lint. Pursglove, identified the indigenous cotton as having been in use in the area long before the 15th century (1991, p. 344). He suggests that the perennial forms of *Gossypium barbadense* spread in post-Columbian times from Eastern South America and the Caribbean to West Africa giving rise to the Esan cotton of Nigeria. By the 19th century it was obvious that Esan had a long history of cultivation and use of cotton. However, Esan people did not export cotton to other areas, but instead exported large quantities of native cloths manufactured from indigenous cotton to many places including Benin and Agbor. Cloth weaving in Esan was an important pre-occupation by women in pre-colonial times. Esan cloth was an important commodity in the trade with neighbours. Cotton products were exchanged for salt, iron tools, and beads. Apart from the lint, cottonseeds were edible. Women planted cotton in their husbands’ farm during the months of April and May. The dried wool was picked from the plants by January (Okojie, 1960, pp. 26-27).

Women did the transformation of the wool into cloth. The varieties included *ukpon-asiso* specially woven as work cloth or sewn as the farmer’s bag, *ukpon-agbo* or the ordinary wrapper, *ukpon-ododo* or the multi-coloured cloth and *ukpon-nogian* – the scarlet cloth. While it is possible that the craft was independently developed in view of the available raw materials in the forests, it is also possible that the knowledge came from people who migrated into the area long before the 15th century.

In the process of weaving the native cloth, dried wool was picked from the plant and separated from the seeds with wooden tools known as *Osomuro* and *ukpelomon*. The wool was spun into threads after beating into some softness. The wool was thereafter drawn out and spun into threads that were later dyed with various colours of black, red and yellow. The vertical and horizontal handlooms locally called *erindo* were used to weave the threads into cloth. Both the ordinary (undyed) thread and the dyed ones were alternatively used to achieve specific artistry (Talbot, 1926, p. 94). Other sticks used as tools to process cotton included *eben*, *aha*, *okidore* and *ikpifeme*.

The most valued cloth for farm work was *ukpon-asiso*, thickly woven and coarse in texture. The *ukpon-agbo* was woven with un-dyed threads. They were usually woven for women

who tied them as wrappers before the advent of European textiles. The *ukpon ododo* or multi-coloured cloth was the popular Esan cloth, which attracted commercial status from European traders beginning with the Portuguese in Benin during the 15th century.

The importance of cotton and the size of production were significant in pre-colonial Esan hence it was regarded as the largest industry in the area (Aveling et al., 1926, p.140). As was mentioned earlier, women planted cotton in their husbands' farm. They harvested the wool during the dry months of the year. Although it is not certain how much cotton was produced annually in pre-colonial Esan, the quantity like in other cotton producing and cloth manufacturing centers in Zaria, Biu and Yoruba land throws light on the fact that it was significant to have sustained the Esan weaving industry (Ogunremi, 1982, p. 21). Cotton is a textile plant, which was grown mainly for weaving cloth. Cotton cultivation, yarn making, dyeing and weaving were parts of a process in which women of differing experiences and ages participated. Hence, cloth manufacturing was on a considerable scale and was market oriented. Women spent more time weaving than farming. Thus the knowledge of cloth production was transferred along the family line from mother to daughter.

Esan weavers used the horizontal looms that produced cloth of about 24 inches (0.61 metres) in width. Three pieces of the loincloth sewn together was known as *igbu* or the male coverlet, which the Portuguese referred to in Benin as *mukponoqua* or the Bini cloth. In Esan the use of cloth was a necessity like it was in other parts of West Africa. For example, Peter Darling suggests that the population for Uromi enclosed within the Iyala moat by the mid 15th century was in the neighborhood of 15,000 (1984: p. 200). Going by a regression on Uromi population in 1923 which stood at 13,653 with a distribution of 3,415 males, 4,411 females, 2,422 boys and 2,305 girls by 1400-1460 AD, Uromi had an estimate of 4,967 males, 4,854 females, 2,679 boys and 2,542 girls. The low population figure for Uromi and other Esan chiefdoms in 1923 can be explained from the fact that many people evaded the head count believing that it was for the purpose of taxation. Moreover, their Onojie Okojie I alias *Ogbidi* the Great of Uromi was being sent to prison in Ibadan because he refused that his subjects be taxed (1997, pp. 6-10).

The point that is being made is that thou-

sands of loin cloths were manufactured for internal use in Esan by the 15th century. All Esan men and women possessed the loin cloth. For example an average Esan man had a loin cloth for ordinary wear and three pieces sewn together known as *igbu* or male coverlet. This would give a total of four pieces on the minimum of loin cloth needed by every male. The woman also needed at least two wrappers of two loin cloths sewn together as one. A European visitor James Welsh who visited the area in 1588 observed that wrappers were tied by women above their breasts to cover them up to their knees (Hodgkin, 1960, p.144). Thus, the woman needed an average of four pieces of loin cloth at any given period. An approximate total number of loin cloth that was produced to meet domestic needs in Uromi with a population of about 4,967 males and 4,854 females by 1460AD, was 39,284 per annum.

With two months left out for planting and another two for the harvesting of crops and engaging in festivals, the Esan weaver worked only about eight months in the year and manufactured about 4 pieces of loin cloth per month, thus bringing to thirty-two the total number of loin cloth a weaver produced in a good year. Therefore, about 1,228 women out of an approximate population of 4,854 women in Uromi by 1460AD could have woven about 39,284 pieces of cloth. Like every other industry in pre-colonial Esan surpluses were usually sold in the market. Such surpluses could have arisen partly from the fact that not every male and female needed new cloth for cover every year. Moreover, external demands stimulated increased production and enabled the market to expand.

The significance of the cotton plant *olu* as an agricultural crop in Esan economy was demonstrated in its use to meet the demand for the native cloth industry that also accommodated the demand from Benin traders who sold them to the Portuguese in the 15th century. However, it must be said that since major spinning, weaving and cloth dying centres existed in Uromi (as in other parts of West Africa like Kano, Biu, Etsako, Nupe and Idah to mention but a few) what raw cotton found its way into the export market from the 15th century to the 19th century was the surplus production which could not be absorbed by West African industries (Nzemeke, 1985, p. 3)

By the beginning of the 16th century, Esan cloth fetched a good price, which ranged from three manillas for the *Igbu* or an iron bar for two

pieces locally called *Aruemudu* – the female wrapper. In Esan sales were in cowries. Prices of cloth varied over the years. Ryder says that Dutch and English alike bought them in thousands for resale in other parts of the African coast in return for slaves and gold. Although several goods served the purpose of money in a non-common currency economy, Esan cloth known by the Portuguese and the Dutch as the Benin cloth had the advantage of a currency being comparatively a non-perishable commodity that was easily stored (Ryder, 1969, p. 206). Many Esan Enijie or kings had store houses full of *Igbu-Ododo* cloth. This suggests that Esan cloth was a means of storing wealth and that the Onojie who presumably kept the finest *ododo* cloth in the chiefdom controlled its value. Esan rulers were probably the chief guarantors of the values of Esan cloth. The wide circulation of Esan cloth as money occurred throughout the pre-colonial period.

Also, the development of cloth as a currency seems indicative of an economy of some sophistication. P. Bohannan suggests that money may be the most important single item in the changing of an economy (Bohannan, 1971, p. 218). General-purpose money such as the Esan cloth would do at least three things. It was a method of evaluating and comparing goods of different kinds such as knives, beads, guns, glasses to mention but a few. In support of this view Allan Ryder emphasized that by the 17th century, cloth was well established as the basis for trade reckoning and it continued to hold that position in Benin in the 17th and 18th centuries (Ryder, 1969, p. 208). Cloth was a means of payment; this factor being increasingly important in an economy where there was growing specialisation in occupations such as those of an elephant hunter or *ogbeni*, blacksmithers or *ojiogun*, leather workers *esohian* or *esaekpokin*, diviners or *eghuki* and many others.

COLONIAL PERIOD

It can be said with some degrees of certainty that it was the successful cultivation of cotton in Esan that encouraged the British to introduce other varieties of it into the Esan area during the early years of the 20th century. Cotton, though short-lived as cash crop in the colonial days was exported from Esan during the first decades of the colonial period.

The promotion of cotton growing in Esan

during the colonial period and in the Benin Province, was undertaken by the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA). It was founded in 1902 for the main purpose of ensuring the continued prosperity of British cotton industry by extending the sources of supply to overseas territories (Anjorin, 1988, p. 122). In collaboration with British colonial government, the BCGA sent out cotton experts to develop cultivation of the crop in Ishan Division. The first cotton experimental farm and ginnery in the area was established at Illushi the evacuation port for all produce from Esan (Osagie, 1988, p.76). From there colonial officials spread the new varieties of American and Egyptian long staples to all parts of Esan. For example, when Mr. W. Fosbery the then commissioner of the Central Division of British Southern Nigeria undertook a visit to Uromi in 1902, he emphasized the importance of cotton growing and distributed three bags of American cotton seeds to the people (Anene, 1966, p. 239).

To further stimulate cotton growing and encourage farmers to embark on large-scale cultivation of the crop in plantations the Deputy Conservator of forests in the southern provinces, Mr. Hitchens obtained half a ton of cottonseeds from the BCGA and distributed them to chiefs who were in turn mandated to distribute them to the farmers. In this respect, chief Iyamu of Ekpoma received 36 lbs of cottonseeds and distributed them to farmers. Similarly other chiefs in different parts of Esan were given the new varieties to grow as a form of experiment. The Onojie Iloghioba of Igueben had a load of 33 lbs which he distributed to farmers at Eguare, the Onojie's capital (Igbafe, 1979, p. 365).

An important factor in explaining the rapidity with which cotton was established as a cash crop in Esan was the motivation given by the chiefs. The colonial agents urged Esan chiefs to persuade the farmers to cultivate cotton for export. The chiefs acting on the instruction of the Resident Officer advised every farmer to plant the seeds that were distributed to them in return for cash at harvest. In this way, the chiefs can be said to have speeded the development of cotton growing in the area. The benefits were clear especially as the crop became a means of added revenue to the family income. Some chiefs wanted to profit from the distribution of cotton seeds by selling them to farmers hence the BCGA decided to distribute cotton seeds through African buyers that visited the towns and villages. In 1912, the

free distribution of cotton seeds was officially stopped and a price of one penny per seed was imposed. For those who engaged in the long distance trade and took their cotton directly to the Illushi station for ginning, they were paid 2 pennies per Lb by the company. Such traders bought cotton wool in bits from various regional markets in Esan before embarking on the journey to Illushi. Esan response to the growing of cotton for export though slow initially probably because the new cotton seeds were not immediately available to every farmer and the indigenous cotton fetched unattractive prices since it was considered as low grade by the Europeans there is evidence that production increased over the years up to the 1920's. What stimulated the increased output by Esan farmers over the years was the ready market for cotton. Another important factor between 1902 and 1913 was that colonial administrators were increasingly demanding for tax payment in cash rather than in kind. To get the British coins locally called *ikpameda* a descriptive word for the silver looking coin, a farmer must have some produce even cotton for sale. Finally, British thought of increasing the production of cotton led to the distribution of cotton seeds directly to farmers through the various markets instead of the former method of distributing them through the chiefs. This method succeeded as women were the bulk cultivators of cotton in Esan (Okoduwa, 2006, p.185).

Besides the distribution of cotton seeds, Hitchens also went to various parts of Esan with the objective of propagating the adoption of the new cotton varieties. He reported that during his tour of 112 villages in the Southern Provinces, he used one of his lectures to discourage further production of the indigenous cotton and propagated the need to cultivate the American and Egyptian long staples (Uyilawa, 1988, p. 266). It is important to mention at this juncture that while farmers in Esan embraced and adopted the new varieties, they did not abandon the indigenous variety. Rather, the two were grown side by side as the indigenous specie continued to be used to weave the native cloth while the new cottonseeds were planted and harvested for sale to the European traders. In the same vein, since the traditional method of intercropping cotton with other food crops did not have any negative impact on the crop, most farmers refused to adopt the system advocated by the colonial officials to plant cotton separately from other crops.

Cotton unlike many other cash crops thrived well in Esan. Within two years of the initial distribution of the seeds a small quantity of cotton was exported from Esan. In 1912, the BCGA purchased 15,000Ibs of cotton at one penny per pound weight from Esan. By 1913, export of cotton from the area rose to 215,000 Ibs (Ben. Prov., 1914, p. 1).

Cotton production for export enjoyed a short boom in Esan from 1905 to 1914. Thereafter the farmers began to show lukewarm attitude to its cultivation. The reasons for this are not unconnected with the low price that was paid by the buyers, the importation of cheap textile materials from Europe and the destruction of the crop by the pink ball-worm. By the end of 1915, cotton production for export had stopped in Esan. However, as a result of the high cost of imported textiles from Europe during World War II and the period of the Great Depression, a few farmers continued to produce the crop just for local needs. By 1926 cotton was grown to a large extent for local purposes as it did not pay the farmer to carry it to the nearest firm at Illushi for sale where the price offered was too small to pay for the transport. In 1938 attempts were made by the BCGA and the colonial government to revive cotton cultivation in Benin province. But the Director of Agriculture advised the BCGA Manager Mr. Adams that it was not desirable to invest any more money on the cultivation of cotton in the province since it had already been tried and proved unsuccessful. Consequently, the BCGA decided not to reopen its office or promote cultivation of cotton in Kukuruku, Asaba and Ishan Divisions (Ben. Prov., 1938, p. 9). Thus, the production of cotton for export did not last long in the Esan area.

CONCLUSION

It has been observed in this paper that efforts by British agents to stimulate the growing of foreign cotton seeds in Esan were significant. Equally significant was the acceptance by Esan farmers to plant the new specie with the sole aim of selling for cash while they continued to plant the indigenous one for domestic needs. But the twist was that the price of cotton became unattractive to the farmer especially when colonial agents decided to stop the free distribution of cotton seeds but sold them at one penny per seed while at the same time the sale price of cotton

remained at two pennies per lb. Moreover, as colonial rule progressed more avenues to earn the British coins became opened following the increased demand for cash crops like rubber and cocoa. Finally, flooding of the colonies with flowery textile materials from Europe eventually undermined the cloth weaving industry and the use of local cotton as raw material for cloth weaving in Esan (Aveling et al., 1926, p. 371).

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