

**Economic development in Esanland up to 1906:  
Entrepreneurship and responsiveness to change and  
continuity**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the economic activities of Esan people from earliest times to 1906. It problematises entrepreneurship as an elastic factor of production and development in Esanland. Its elasticity made the pre-colonial economy of Esan responsive to the economic forces of change and continuity. And it contextualised the Esan people as the means and beneficiaries of development in Esanland within the period. The paper finds that economic survivalism in Esan did not take place in vacuum. It was triggered by the adaptation of Esan people to their environmental milieu and responsiveness to the forces of economic change. Hence, using historical research methodology, the paper employs primary and secondary materials to demonstrate this historical fact. From the patterns of economic development in Esan during the period, the paper finds that its economy was neither subsistent nor static. It was dynamic and viable because of the dynamism of Esan people as entrepreneurs. Consequently, the pre-colonial Esan economy was able to satisfy economic needs in Benin Kingdom and beyond through Benin agents. Therefore, after the conquest of Benin in 1897, the British were attracted to Esanland, prompting a shift in economic emphasis to Esan in 1906. This paper concludes that the continued responsiveness and adaptation of Esan people to their environmental milieu and emergent forces of demand and supply made Esan economy relevant to the British.*



**Keywords:** Esanland, People, Responsiveness, Adaptation, Development

## Introduction

Man is an economic creature and from early times, he has been actively engaged in the business of making a living from his environment. Over the years, mankind in Esan and everywhere has built a symbiotic relationship with his earthly home. And this has resulted for him undertaking a diversity of economic activities in his quest for survival; which cumulatively constitute the economy of his nation. Man's survival in pre-colonial Esan was largely dependent on the extent to which he successfully mastered and engaged in these activities, that is, the level of his adept management and exploitation of his environment and its inherent resources. Fittingly, G.A. Petch observes that the word economics is derived from two Greek words: *oikos* (meaning 'house') and *nemo* (meaning 'to manage'), which collectively means to manage a house.<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this understanding is the fact that, in all societies, the cardinal responsibility of man, as an economic creature, is to effectively manage and harness all the resources found in his environment in order to fully maximize the total utility derivable from them.

Propelled by his inherent economic wiring, man in the ordinary business of life had engaged diverse in economic activities. And mankind has continued to expand the base of these economic activities in order to satisfy human wants.<sup>2</sup> These economic activities, particularly the effort to understand them, is what Alfred Marshal (1842-1926) conceived as the main purpose of economics. Thus, as an economic creature, man is perceived as a business person (entrepreneur), who is, in constant search of opportunities to minimise cost.<sup>3</sup> This, according to Chester G.

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<sup>1</sup>G.A. Petch, *Economic Development and Modern West Africa*, (London: University of London Press Ltd., 1961), 9.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> A. Marshal quoted in J.U. Anyaele, *Comprehensive Economics*, Lagos: A. Johnson Publishers Ltd., 1990, p.1.; and A. Marshal, "Principle of Economics: An Introduction" cited in A. Ezeoha and A. Ituma, "An Institutional Analysis of Entrepreneurship Development in Nigeria" in

Starr, is rationale behind the domestication of plants and animals right from the Neolithic Age, when man gained mastery over his environment and stopped submitting blindly to the pressures of nature. Man's economics of survival, Anthony Okoduwa maintained is geared towards feeding his stomach. And this in his view made the study of man's economic history past or present, the history of the stomach.<sup>4</sup>

It is against this backdrop that this paper will examine the Esan people and their economic development (survival) up to 1906. The termination of the scope of this study in 1906 was informed by the fact, 1906 marked the start of British colonialism as a force for economic change in Esanland. The study area is located in the Northeast of Benin City the capital of Edo state. It is a forest region with a tropical climate. The fertility of the land and the seasonal rainfall Esanland enjoys tilted economic survivalism in the region towards farming than all else. The people of the thirty-five communities that make up Esanland exploited their environment and responded well to the forces of change to build a viable and dynamic economy during the period of study. But according to the observation of Onwuka Njoku the economic activities of pre-colonial Nigerian societies are largely terra incognita in economic historiography.<sup>5</sup> He observed that the crux of economic history is to demonstrate how men and women, free people or slaves, elites or commoners engaged in the business of making a living by organising and exploiting the resources available to them.<sup>6</sup> This paper is informed by the need to demonstrate Esanland as one of the economic theatres of life where mankind interacted with his environment to satisfy the need of the stomach.

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AkinyinkaAkinyoade, et al (eds.), *Entrepreneurship in Africa*, (Boston: Brill, 2017), 150.

<sup>4</sup> C.G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 17; and A.I. Okoduwa, *Harnessing the Origin and Economic History of Esanland: A Dialysis for Autarky in Nigeria*, (Benin City: Independent Concept, 2018), ix.

<sup>5</sup> O. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, (Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2001), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Therefore, this paper will interrogate Esan's economic tripod of agriculture, industrialisation and trade as the critical economic activities that helped make ends to meet. More so, the paper will deepen historical appreciation of how Esan people as a factor of production served as the means and ends of development. Hence, it will highlight the people's management and utilisation of their land to build a viable economy that was globally attractive. It will demonstrate that the British conquest and colonization of Esanland in 1906 was economically determined. In 1906, British interest in the agricultural and industrialisation products produced in Esan for the benefit of its metropolis became the new force of change and continuity Esan people had to respond to. This made the people the means of development, but not the ends of development during the period. Therefore, the paper maintains that in the economic business of life development is beneficial and sustainable when the people are its means and end.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper is theoretically underpinned on the Rostow structuralist model of economic development. This theory is otherwise known as the Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth. Walt W. Rostow<sup>7</sup> is an American economic historian who propounded and popularised the idea that economic development in societies of the world follows a structured process as it progressed towards modernity. This implies that the economic development of nations do not take place in vacuum and is not riotous. Rostow's theorisation of economic development offers a general sweep of the path of nations must take to attain economic growth. And on this note, the theory had come under much criticism. Theoretically, Rostow compartmentalized the process of economic development into five (5) sequential stages which nations must generally pass through at one time or the other in their drive to economic development. These stages of economic growth<sup>8</sup> are:

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<sup>7</sup>Michael P. Todaro and Stephen C. Smith, *Economic Development* (12<sup>th</sup> ed.), (Harlow: Pearson Educational Limited, 2015), 120.

<sup>8</sup>W.W. Rostow, The Stages of Economic Growth, *The Economic History Review*, Second Series, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1959, 1.

1. The traditional society.
2. The preconditions for take-off.
3. The take-off.
4. The drive to maturity.
5. The age of high mass consumption.

The contextualisation of this paper within the Rostow's stages of economic growth is not because of its perfection. Because it is a given that all economic theories and laws such as the laws of demand and supply that state that: "*The lower the price the more the quantity would be demanded; and the higher the price the more quantity would be supplied,*" are not watertight and cast in iron. This is because of the unpredictability of man. It is a given that buyers demand ostentatious commodities and *giffen* goods more when their prices are high; and that sellers tend to supply lesser quantity of goods to the market when their prices are high to prevent price from crashing. That said it is instructive to note that this study is anchored on Rostow theory of economic development because of its analytical applicability and aptness in the explanation of the changes and continuities in the economy of Esanland. Furthermore, it captures perfectly the main thrust of this paper that the pre-colonial Esan economy was neither subsistent nor static. In the period of study, the Esan economy was largely a traditional economy. And Rostow explained that economic development begins from this stage. At this stage, He wrote that traditional societies (or economies) develop within limited production functions.<sup>9</sup>

However, M.L. Jhingan explained that the fact that economic development takes place in traditional societies within a limited production function does not mean that they experience little or no economic change.<sup>10</sup> Rostow made this point crystal clear by asserting that traditional societies have the economic capacities to respond and adapt to the forces of economic change. He captured the point this way,

*Both in more distant past and in recent  
times the story of traditional societies is a*

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup>M.L. Jhingan, *The Economics of Development and Planning* (39<sup>th</sup> ed.), (Delhi: Vrinda Publications Ltd., 2007), 124-125.

*story of endless change reflected in the scale and patterns of trade, level of agricultural output and productivity, the scale of manufactures, fluctuation in population and rural real income... They did not lack inventiveness and innovations...*<sup>11</sup>

It follows logically from this contention that the pre-colonial economy of Esanland was not stagnant. During the period, entrepreneurship (inventiveness and innovation) in the region was the bastion of economic development. It enhanced the effective mobilisation of land, labour and capital for development and caused the Esan economy to be responsive to change and continuity. Therefore, agriculture, indigenous industrialisation and trade developed as the main economic activities entrepreneurship engendered in Esan traditional economy. In Europe, just as the discovery of the new world and advancement in science and technology created the preconditions for take-off<sup>12</sup>, so also the resourcefulness of Esan traditional economy attracted Britain to Esanland and it facilitated colonial relations that launched Esanland into its precondition for take-off stage. Jhingan explains this stage as a transitional phase where the preconditions for sustainable economic growth are created.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, in 1906, the incorporation of Esanland into the British Nigerian colonial enterprise, introduction of indirect rule, and British colonial economic policies paved the way for the Esan economy to enter its take-off stage of economic growth.

Responding to colonialism as a force for economic change, the Esan economy shredded part of its traditionalism to become a pseudo modern economy from 1906. Seamlessly, the Esan economy experienced structural changes that marked the start of its drive towards maturity and the age of high mass consumption. And this change can best be put into proper historical perspective through theorisation. Murray Hunter observed that all economies evolved and developed over time and that theories are the veritable frameworks developed in their wake or

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<sup>11</sup>W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 4.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>13</sup>M.L. Jhingan, *The Economics of Development and Planning*, 124-125.

aftermath to give them both descriptive and predictive explanations.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Rostow's theory of economic development lends itself well to this study as a veritable instrument for understanding economic growth and development in Esanland. It has both descriptive and predictive analytical implications for Esan economy that transcends 1906. Stretching the narrative of Rostow's theory further, Hunter argued that economies yet to complete their transition through the five stages of economic growth would remain an underdeveloped economy. He explained it this way,

*An underdeveloped economy is one that has broken out of the traditional mode and is beginning to experience some development spurred by government investment in transport, social capital and other infrastructures. Government supported roads, railways, airports, communication services and schools enhance the ability of society to develop and transform itself from a rural based society.*<sup>15</sup>

This implies that an economy still in transition is a pseudo modern economy. Although it had left the traditional stage, it still remained an underdeveloped economy until it reached the stage where local production can conveniently satisfy mass consumption needs. The utility of this argument here rests on the predictive or long-range economic development inferences Rostow's theorisation enable us deduce about Esanland. To this end, Mario Coccia definition of economic development as a *process* that generates economic, social and technical *progress* in nations<sup>16</sup> justifies this panoramic assessment of economic development. It coheres with Rostow theory in presenting economic development as a timeless continuum. Implicit in this

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<sup>14</sup>Murray Hunter, "The Stages of Economic Development from an Opportunity Perspective: Rostow Extended", *Geopolitics, History and International Relations*, Vol. 4(2), 2012, 25.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>16</sup>Mario Coccia, "Theories of Development" in Ali Farazmand (ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy and Governance*, (New York: Springer Cham, 2017), 1.

understanding is the fact that economic development in Esanland is a continuum best appreciated through the long lens of history. Economic development in Esan cannot be confined and restricted to a specific time and space in its history. Thus, the Rostow theory demonstrates that there was economic change, continuity and development in Esanland that cut across time. And that the burden of human economic activities in Esan was how to satisfy wants and consumption<sup>17</sup> which society was expected to meet on or before the age of high mass consumption.

### **Factors of Production in Esan: Land**

Land is the part of the earth not covered by water.<sup>18</sup> It constitutes the earth's lithosphere and a free gift of nature abundantly available in Africa, the second largest continent in the world with a total landmass of 30.37 million km<sup>2</sup>. The demand for land as a factor of production in pre-colonial Esanland was a derived demand. Land was demanded not for itself; but for what it could be used for (farming) to ensure the survival, sustenance and welfare of the people. Hence, Fred Burke and Michael Kublin observed about pre-colonial African societies that, while cattle herders see cattle as life; in agrarian societies like Esan, the people viewed land as the source of life itself. It was seen as the air the people breathe and necessary for life; thus land was hardly sold from one person to another.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, as a factor of production in pre-colonial Esan land was held in high esteem. This explains why land was communally owned in Esan during the period and held in trust for the people by their village head, '*Odionwele*'; and at the community level by their political head, the *Onojie*. Due to the centrality of land to the economy of Esan, it was shared according to individual family need for it. Joseph Osagie puts it this way: *every man had unfettered access to land for cultivation and building purposes. Such a right could however not be sold or ceded as land was*

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<sup>17</sup>M.L. Jhingan, M. Girija and L. Sasikala, *History of Economic Thought (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*, (Delhi: Vrinda Publications Ltd., 2011), 20-21.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>F. Burke and M. Kublin, *World Regional Studies: Africa*, (Boston: Houghton Miffling Company, 1991), 31.



*regarded as sacred as well as a gift from nature.*<sup>20</sup> Further, Dawood Egbefo and Michael Ibiezugbe assert that land was the mainstay of the Esan people's existence and their basic means of production. And that all primary and tertiary economic activities such as agriculture, manufacturing and trade depended on land in Esan. No wonder, no one family in pre-colonial Esan was allowed to own land permanently. Hence, although it could be transferred from father to son, it cannot be sold to others or strangers; because land was a vital economic property communally owned and held in behalf of the community by the *Onojie* (King) or the *Odionwele* (Village head).<sup>21</sup>

In pre-colonial Esan, acquisition of land was consistent with the modern international law principle of land acquisition and ownership, that is, the principle underscoring the effective occupation of terra nullius.<sup>22</sup> To this end, Osagie observes that, the acquisition of land in Esan was based on the principle of "*Ono kagbeegboyalenegbo*" meaning that, the first person to deforest and occupy a parcel of land owns the land.<sup>23</sup> Based on this principle, in Esanland, farmers could acquire as many plots of land as possible in different areas; as long as they do not encroach on the land of others.<sup>24</sup>

In Esan, the traditional land use system encouraged the use of land in such a way that after use, the land was allowed to remain fallow for a period of time in order to help it recuperate and regain its nutrient, so that it will be relevant in another farming season. And this informed the adoption of the shifting cultivation farming technique in Esanland. More so, the native land use

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<sup>20</sup> J.I. Osagie, *Economic Development in Esan in the Colonial Period*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Benin, December 2004, 23.

<sup>21</sup> D.O. Egbefo and M.I. Ibiezugbe, p. 76. and see I.S. Ehimogie, "Land Ownership and Utilization in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Esan Kingdom" cited in D.O. Egbefo and M.I. Ibiezugbe, "Contributions of Women to Sustainable Economic Development and Consolidation of Intra and Inter-Group Relations, 1850-1960," *The Nigerian Journal of Economic History*, November 15, 2016, 76.

<sup>22</sup> B. Bazuaye and O. Enabulele, *International Law*, (Benin City: Ambik Press, 2006), 205.

<sup>23</sup> J.I. Osagie, 23-24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 24-25.

decree allowed foreigners in Esan to own land only on a temporary basis; and such a foreigner can only possess land on a permanent basis after performing the traditional rituals naturalizing him as a native of Esan.<sup>25</sup>

## Labour

Labour is the human resources and efforts used in cultivating land and harnessing other factors of production to satisfy human want.<sup>26</sup> In the period under review, Esanland was blessed with abundant able-bodied and productive young men and women, who constituted the working population or labour force of the society. During this period, large proportion of Esan's labour force was gainfully employed in the farming sector. In the words of Joseph Osagie: "The labour needs for agriculture were provided by all and sundry with the exception of the old and invalid."<sup>27</sup>

In Esanland, the population was divided into three (3) main age grades that constitute its labour force. They were: the *Edion* (elders from 45 years and above), the *Ighene* or *Igbama* (youths from 26 years to 44 years), and the *Egbonughele* (all males from 12 years to 25 years).<sup>28</sup> However, in pre-colonial Esan, the family size was usually large, by design, in order to provide the manpower needed for farm work. In addition to this, manpower in pre-colonial Esan was also drawn from friends, relatives, in-laws, kinsmen, slaves; and from reciprocal labour known as '*irogan*': a farming co-operative society, where farmer belonging to the same age grade agree to help each in turns to do farm work such as clearing, planting and weeding.<sup>29</sup>

In another dimension, the rich labour resources of Esanland attracted the attention of European slave merchants to the region via their Benin agents; who during the trans-Atlantic slave trade era acquired able-bodied manpower from Esan and sold them to

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 23-25.

<sup>26</sup> M.A. Iyoha et al. *An Introduction to Modern Macro-Economics*, (Rev. ed.), (Benin City: Mindex Publishing, 2003), 4.

<sup>27</sup> J.I. Osagie, 28.

<sup>28</sup> C. Okojie, 47-48.

<sup>29</sup> J.I. Osagie, 28-29.

European slave merchants for onward transportation to Europe and America where they worked in European plantations. According to Anthony Okoduwa, *from the beginning (of Benin-European trade relations), European traders in Benin indicated their interest to trade in gold, slaves, cloth, ivory and pepper from the native believing that gold and slaves were to be found in Benin.*<sup>30</sup> The attendant consequences of the European demand for slaves, was the exploitation of the labour resources of Esanland. And this, according to Walter Rodney, led to the depletion of Africa's labour resources; and the underdevelopment of its economy. Further, he writes that aside from the millions that were exported to Europe and America alive; most of the labour force were killed in the various wars that were fought to capture slaves.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, this huge economic loss to pre-colonial Esan economy, on the other hand profited the Benin, Benin imperial economic agents (the *Ekhen*: long distance traders sent by the Oba of Benin to Esanland to procure slaves and other trade goods from the region), and to a large extent Europe.<sup>32</sup> Despite the avowed embargo on sale of male slaves in Benin, Frank Ikponmwosa observes that, Benin still benefitted from the slave trade era by selling female slaves and other war captives to the Europeans through the port of Ughoton.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, these slaves acquired from Esanland and elsewhere satisfied the ever increasing demand for slave labour for agriculture within and outside Benin; but especially in European plantations in America where slave labour from Esan and elsewhere augmented their labour shortfall before the rise of the industrial revolution in Britain that paved the way for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

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<sup>30</sup>A.I. Okoduwa, "Gold and Cloth in Esan-Benin Economic Relations during the Pre-Colonial Times" in Alexandra Esinaje et al. (eds.), *Perspectives on the Humanities*, (Benson Idahosa University, 2017), 25.

<sup>31</sup> W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972), 103-105.

<sup>32</sup> F. Ikponmwosa, *Colonial Rule and Economic Development in Benin*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, 2014, 75-79.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 80-81.

### Structure of the Pre-Colonial Esan Economy: Agriculture

The pre-colonial economy of Esan comprises the various economic activities the people of Esan engaged in, in order to make a living. And these were largely environmentally determined. Given the tropical climatic conditions and regular rainfall of the tropical region, farming emerged as the predominant economic activity in pre-colonial Esan. Providing insight into the development of agriculture in Africa, Kevin Shillington writes that the movement towards crop cultivation began with the gathering of wild grain; then farming gradually developed with the deliberate protection, weeding, saving of seeds, and re-sowing of the gathered wild grains and roots crops. Consequently, domestication of plants became a full scale economic activity, when wild grain's survival became increasingly dependent on man's intervention.<sup>34</sup>

In pre-colonial Esanland, the availability and accessibility of land gave a fillip to the development of its agrarian economy. More so, the easy access to labour resources within and outside the extended family gave further boost to the consolidation of farming as the pivot of the pre-colonial Esan economy. Hence, Wale Oyemakinde observes that: "farm land was plentiful enough not to create a constraint on development in pre-colonial West Africa... Family labour was convenient, not only because it was readily available, but also because it was easily disciplined."<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, demonstrating the centrality of farming in West Africa, G.O. Ogunremi writes that the pre-colonial economy was structured along the line of agriculture, gathering, hunting, fishing, pastoralism, mineral working, and craftsmanship.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, the pre-colonial economy of Esan like that of other neighbouring economies during the period rested heavily on

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<sup>34</sup> K. Shillington, *History of Africa* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 22.

<sup>35</sup> W. Oyemakinde, "The Structure of the West African Economy" in G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi (eds.), *Economic History of West Africa*, (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 1996), 1-2.

<sup>36</sup> G.O. Ogunremi, "The Structure of Pre-Colonial Economy" in G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi (eds.), *Economic History of West Africa*, (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 1996), 15-28.

agriculture as the main strand of its economic tripod. Thus, with regards to the Isoko economy, Samuel Aghalino points out that the pre-colonial economy rested squarely on farming.<sup>37</sup> Implicit in this view is the fact that, farming was the pivot on which every other economic activities revolve in Isokoland. Similarly, Joseph Osagie observed about the Esan economy that, *in spite of the existence of other economic activities such as cloth weaving, basket weaving, blacksmithing, and hunting; Esan was basically an agricultural society. Other professions and trade were regarded as secondary.*<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Okojie noted that everybody in Esanland, man or woman, were simple farmers, who produced food crops such as Yam, Maize, Cocoyam, Beans, Pepper, Melon, Banana, Plantain, and Groundnut. They also cultivated economic crops such as cotton and palm produce on the same farm land through the mixed cropping farming technique.<sup>39</sup> Farming in pre-colonial Esan was basically a family business. Resultantly, Aghalino argues that: "The household was a very important unit of labour for agriculture because it cost less... it involves no formal payment of wages and because it could be used to a point, where its marginal productivity is zero."<sup>40</sup>

Although yam was majorly cultivated in pre-colonial Esan, because as Okoduwa explains, yam was considered the King of crops<sup>41</sup> however; Bradbury reveals that, yam farming was complemented with hunting, and fishing: especially in Amaru, a fishing and trading village on Alagbetta creek, founded from Ugboha; and also with the rearing of animals such as: fowls, goats, sheep and dwarf cattle.<sup>42</sup> Further, Okoduwa adds that, *outside farming, Esan people continued to hunt for ...snail (ure). They engaged in gathering or collecting of vegetable, edible fungi (utun) and various types of fruits... to complement their food*

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<sup>37</sup>S.O. Aghalino, "Economic Foundations of Pre-Colonial Isoko Land," *Ilorin Journal of History*, Vol. 1, No, 2006, 27.

<sup>38</sup>J.I. Osagie, "Agriculture in Esan in the Pre-Colonial Period," *Benin Journal of Historical Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1997, 74-75.

<sup>39</sup>C.G. Okojie, 15-16; and J.I. Osagie, 79.

<sup>40</sup>S.O. Aghalino, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup>A.I. Okoduwa, *Harnessing the Origin and Economic History of Esanland*, 17.

<sup>42</sup>R.E. Bradbury, 63.

needs.<sup>43</sup> However, farming remained important to the Esan people and central to their economy to the extent that Elizabeth Obasuyi reports that the people of Esan had to give up cattle rearing later, during the colonial period, when they became a potent threat to their farm.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, A.G. Hopkins<sup>45</sup> and J.I. Osagie<sup>46</sup> conclude that the Esan people of Africa, like other Africans during the pre-colonial period, were expert farm managers; who despite their heavy reliance on simple farm tools such as: digging stick, hoe, machete and hand plough; were still able to achieve food sufficiency and they exchanged their surplus with their neighbours for other needed items they do not produce.

### **Industrialisation in Pre-Colonial Esan**

The buoyant agricultural sector and the forest resources of pre-colonial Esan provided the needed raw materials for its indigenous industries. More so, industrial activities thrived because of the high availability of labour and capital (crude implements), which sped up indigenous industrialisation in pre-colonial Esan as the second strand of its economic tripod. Capital equipment in this regard, refers to all physical objects that helped the Esan people in their industrial activities. It includes buildings that give shelter from the weather, roads, wells, reservoirs, stone tools and iron tools; which serve as machinery to help improve raw material in every stage of production.<sup>47</sup>

Indigenous industrial production in pre-colonial Nigeria, Aghalino observes was utilitarian and appropriate to meet the needs of the people.<sup>48</sup> Thus, in Esanland, the locally produced and available raw materials determined the type of industrial activities the people engaged in, in order to convert these raw materials into consumable and usable forms. Therefore, the

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<sup>43</sup> A.I. Okoduwa, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Personal Interview with Elizabeth Obasuyi, 66 Years Old, Ex-Farmer, Edokpolor Quarters, 20/07/2018.

<sup>45</sup> A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*, (New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1973), 36.

<sup>46</sup> J.I. Osagie, 81.

<sup>47</sup> G.A. Petch, *Economic Development and Modern West Africa*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> S.O. Aghalino, 31.

cultivation of cotton: a white seed fiber used to make fabric,<sup>49</sup> as one of the major crops of Esan; palm produce, and the heavily forested nature of Esan topography account for the emergence of indigenous textile industry, palm oil industry, sawmill and woodcraft industry, and the iron industry, among other industries in pre-colonial Esan.

### The Textile Industry

The textile industry of pre-colonial Esan was the industry that brought the most fame to the Esan people and elevated their civilization to the international limelight. The cotton and cloth industry as Okoduwa describes it satisfied the need for clothing in Esan, promoted trade and exchange, and brought Esan women to the socio-economic front burners in pre-colonial Nigeria. Esan cotton (*G. Vitifolium*) called *Olulu* in Esan language was an indigenous species of cotton cultivated by Esan women in the farm lands of their husbands, usually in the month of May during the period. At the end of the planting season dried cotton wool were usually harvested for production purposes in December and January.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, the Esan textile industry in pre-colonial period was dominated by women. From the planting of cotton to its harvesting, down to its conversion into cloths; and the subsequent marketing and sales of the cloths were all handled by women. Thus, Okoduwa described the Esan textile industry as a Female (Feminine) Enterprise. The industry empowered Esan women and positioned them to contribute to the socio-economic development of Esanland. The women produced a variety of Esan cloths such as: the thick multi-coloured cloth called *Ukponododo*; the *Ukponasiso*: woven as work cloth or sewn as farmer's bag; *Ukponagbo*: woven as ordinary wrapper; and the *Ukponnogian*: a scarlet cloth woven for ceremonies.<sup>51</sup>

Aside from clothing Esan people, the cotton and cloth industry gave impetus to trade and exchange. Indeed, Esan cloth was used

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<sup>49</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses, *Insight on the Scriptures (Vol. 1)*, (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1988), 515.

<sup>50</sup> A.I. Okoduwa, 41; and C.G. Okojie, 10.

<sup>51</sup> A.I. Okoduwa, 41.

in barter trade with the immediate Esanneighbours and beyond; where it satisfied the demand for Esan cloths in foreign markets, and was exchanged for other needed goods produced outside Esanland. Furthermore, the industry produced cotton seeds; which were used locally for cooking soup and for manufacturing herbal medicines.<sup>52</sup> Beyond Esan, the cloth industry partly supported and sustained the pre-colonial economy of Benin economy.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, to effectively satisfy the ever increasing European demand for cloth, Philip Aigbona Igbafe in his article *"The Pre-Colonial Economic Foundation of the Benin Kingdom"* writes that Benin traders ventured into the hinterlands in search of cloths; which gave the Benin-European economic relations a great boost; and fostered consistency in trade which led to the emergence of the "credit and trust system" between Benin and European traders.<sup>54</sup> During this period, Okoduwa further asserts that Esanland was one of the hinterlands, where Benin obtained cloths.<sup>55</sup>

### **Palm Oil and Brewing Industry**

In pre-colonial Esanland, cooking, eating and drinking were important activities that contributed to the happiness and social well-being of the people. Occasions and events such as marriage ceremonies, burial ceremonies, ritual and religious ceremonies, and festivals were usually incomplete without them. Hence, the palm oil and brewing industry occupied a special socio-economic place in the life of Esan people. They put food on the table and arguably sustain the entertainment and hospitality culture in pre-colonial Esan. It is relevant to add that in preparing the favourite staple food of Esan, pounded yam and ogbono soup,

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<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> S.E. Orobator, "Trade of Imperial Benin with the Portuguese and the Dutch" in O.N. Njoku (ed.), *Pre-Colonial Economic History of Nigeria*, (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2002), 113-117.

<sup>54</sup> P.A. Igbafe, "The Pre-Colonial Economic Foundations of the Benin Kingdom" in I.A. Akinjogbin and Segun Osoba (eds.), *Topic on Nigerian Economic and Social History*, (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., 1980), 32-33.

<sup>55</sup> A.I. Okoduwa, "Gold and Cloth in Esan-Benin Economic Relations during the Pre-Colonial Times", 27-34.



palm oil played an essential part in the process of cooking the soup; and palm wine was usually served as a complement to the meal, especially for the elders.

In most Esan homes, especially in the moon light hours, and during periods of ceremonies and festivities such as the New Yam Festival (*Ihuan*) and *Igbawasagbue*: a festival where married men carry gifts (mostly yams) to their in-laws and the Onojie; each family specially prepares and enjoys their favourite traditional meal with palm wine. For domestic cooking, the palm oil industry also provided the people with the needed raw material (palm oil) for making soaps, for bathing and washing clothes. And for the production of local cream for adorning the skin (the Kernel oil cream).

As an indigenous industrial activity, the process of producing palm oil in Esan begins with the planting and harvesting of palm fruits from the palm tree. To do this, adult males climb the palm tree with a rope (called *Ifi*), and with the aid of a cutlass fell the palm fruits. This is followed by the picking and separation of the palm fruits from its thorny bunch; which was normally done by women. When this is done, the women pour the palm fruits into a big native pot called '*Okadin*': an earthenware vessel built to the ground; subsequently, water is added into the pot, and fire made underneath it, and then the palm fruit is left to boil. When the palm fruits are fully cooked, the women extract the palm oil from it by marching it with their feet, when fully marched water is poured into the pot again to bring out the oil. The palm oil is then boiled again on fire until water completely evaporates from it leaving only the palm oil in the pot.<sup>56</sup>

The Kernel oil (*Uden*) cream was another essential finished product of the palm oil industry in pre-colonial Esan. It was particularly used as cream for new born babies. The production of this product begins with the collecting the waste kernels seeds generated during the palm oil production process, then it is dried and broken to remove the kernel or nuts inside. After this, the nuts are put into an empty pot and heated on fire for a long time,

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<sup>56</sup>Interview with Ezekiel Inojie; and J.I. Osagie, Economic Development in Esan in the Colonial Period, 34.

until the nut dissolves completely and its oil emerges.<sup>57</sup> The finished product (kernel oil cream), in pre-colonial Esan, is the cream generally used to oil the body during the dry season. And today, it is still in use as cream and as a therapeutic concoction to treat skin infection and disease.

The brewery industry in pre-colonial Esan was basically the palm wine production industry. This industrial activity in Esan was undertaken by few industrialists called 'palm wine tappers'. These palm wine tappers find gainful employment in the business of extracting white intoxicating liquid substance from palm trees. However, unlike palm oil production, palm wine making involves the tapper drilling a hole at the top of the tree, and inserting a thin extraction pipe into it, then he placed a suspended calabash at the base of the pipe to receive the wine, when it starts dripping from the tree. Hence, the palm tree itself was the raw material that the local brewing industry thrives on. Consequently, to get the best out of the palm trees, the palm wine tappers usually adopt the shifting tapping method in pre-colonial Esan. This means that, like the shifting cultivation method of farming, after tapping from a given tree, the tappers usually shift to another palm tree; thus they would leave the previous tree for a minimum of three to four years to regain its wine, before they return to tap from it again.<sup>58</sup>

### **Sawmill and Wood Craft Industry**

Esanland, being a tropical forest region, was blessed with abundant forest resources such as: Mahogany tree (*okha*), Iroko tree (*unoko*) and Obeche tree (*ubhebhe*) among others. They provided the raw materials that fed the Sawmill and Woodcraft industry. The industry produced finished products like Mortar (*okor*) and Pestle (*obhi-oko*): for pounding yams and other soup ingredients; wooden staff of office for the Onojie (King); Masquerade masks (*okpodu*): for traditional religious use, ceremonies and rituals; and other items like wooden doors, chairs, tables, wooden handle for farm tools and home equipment

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<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

(knives), and even wooden plates, cups, and calabash.<sup>59</sup> This industry contributed significantly to improving the standard of living and quality of life of the Esan people.

### Blacksmithing

The people of Esan being pre-dominant farmers needed iron tools such as cutlass (*opia*), hoe (*egue*), axe, watering can among others for their day-to-day farm work. More so, those who occasionally engaged in hunting needed weapons like arrow heads and spears, for their profession. And swords were also needed in pre-colonial Esan for warfare and self-defense; and for domestic use. The Esan people needed knives (*ukpoghae*), pots and pans for cooking; and plates and spoons for eating. Hence, the iron industry and blacksmiths (iron workers) of Esanland catered for all these needs.

Blacksmiths, known as *Ogiogun*, converts iron ore into domestic, farm, hunting and military tools or weaponry. Unlike other industries in pre-colonial Esanland that had the raw materials needed for their daily operations in abundant supply locally; the iron industry on the other hand does not enjoy a readily available supply of its needed raw material to feed the industry in Esan. Hence, to sustain the industry and preserve iron technology in Esanland, the *ogioguns* of Esan resorted to economic cooperation in the period of study. Joseph Osagie puts it this way, *as there were no iron deposits in Esan, the blacksmith obtained their raw materials through trade contact (cooperation) with their Igbo and Unemeneighbours*.<sup>60</sup> From this, it is safe to maintain that the core raw materials (iron ore) that fed and sustained the iron industry in pre-colonial Esanland were mainly sourced from the Uneme and Igbo people. During the period, several families in Esan

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<sup>59</sup> Pa the EhimenAmedu reports in an interview that the Abuya family in Ibore is the main Blacksmithing family in Esanland. Hence, farmers and hunters from Uromi and other parts of Esan usually travel to Irrua to contract the AbuyaOgiogun to make farm implements, hunting weapons, and domestic tools such as knives among others. More so, Mrs. Juliana Orukpe reports in interview that the Aigbadon family in Edenu was another dominant blacksmith family in Esan.

<sup>60</sup>Personal Interview with Mrs. Eserkhaigbe, 60 years, Trader, Ekpoma, 01/18/2020.

divested from farming into the blacksmithing business. Some of such families were the Abuya family in *Ibore*, the Inekponor family in *Irukep* and the Aigbadon family in *Edenu*.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, blacksmithing in Esan was run as a family enterprise. The crafts, technical know-how, and other operational skills of the iron industry were closely guarded family secret that only interested *Ogiogun* children inherit from their fathers.

Therefore, no child of a blacksmith was traditionally mandated or compelled to learn his father's profession. Thus, the decision to learn the blacksmithing craft from one's father was strictly a matter of volition across Esanland. More so, the knowledge and skill of blacksmithing in Esan was generally non-transferable to non-family relatives.<sup>62</sup> Hence, in pre-colonial Esan blacksmithing developed as a widespread family business among families deeply rooted in the craft. Providing insight into this economic reality in Esan, R.E. Bradbury<sup>63</sup> observes that most blacksmiths found in almost all of Esan communities traced their origin to the blacksmiths either in Benin or Uneme. Although they worked on part-time basis, like the Esanwood workers, the Esan blacksmiths still managed to master the profession to the extent that, some of the staff of office of the Benin monarchy, the ceremonial *ada* and *ebe* were said to have been made in, and supplied to Benin from Igueben.

And this demonstrates the centrality of Trade as the third strand of the pre-colonial Esan economic tripod. Both intragroup and intergroup and short and long distance trade flourished because of the buoyancy of agricultural and industrial productions and markets, as economic institutions in Esan, served as trading centres where buyers and sellers meet across territoriality. The economic buoyancy of Esanland after the fall of Benin in 1897 attracted the British to the region. From 1899-1906, Britain engaged the Esan people in a war of conquest that ended in British colonisation of the region. British colonial economic

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Inojie; and J.I. Osagie, "Agriculture in Esan in the Pre-Colonial Period," *Benin Journal of Historical Studies*, 31-32.

<sup>62</sup> J.I. Osagie, 32-33.

<sup>63</sup> R.E. Bradbury, 63.

policy in Esan resulted in the transformation of Esan traditional economy into a pseudo-modern economy. But the introduction of new cash crops, currency, taxation and economic infrastructures served British metropolitan interest than that of Esan people. Consequently, the British colonial economic policies undermined the position of Esan people as the means and ends of development. Colonialism turned the Esan people into the means of production and made the British metropolis the ends of production.

### **Conclusion**

Findings in this research suggest that the people of Esanland in the period of study were for most part the means of production and beneficiaries of development. They successfully manipulated their environment to make sustainable livelihood. And they responded and adapted well to the forces of economic change and continuity. Skillful management of land and exploitation of forest resources resulted in the domestication of crops as the economic life-wire of Esanland. Farming developed as the pivot around which industrial production and trade as economic activities Esan revolved. It satisfied household food needs and the raw material need of Esan indigenous industries such as the cottage and palm oil industries. And surplus Esan agricultural and industrial products such as Esan cloth satisfied economic needs within and outside through trade. Consequently, the pre-colonial economy of Esanland the paper argued was neither subsistent nor static. Furthermore, the paper maintained that after the conquest of Benin in 1897, the resourcefulness and viability of Esan economy was the pull factor that attracted the British to the region. This resulted in the Anglo-Esan war that lasted from 1899-1906. It ended with the defeat of Esan people and their incorporation into the British colonial enterprise. The Esan people responded and adapted well to colonialism as an economic force for change and their economy continued to be relevant. But this was largely to the benefit of the British metropolis not Esan people as economic development went forward.

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