

28 WOMEN AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF AKWA IBOM STATE

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INTRODUCTION

For decades now, there have been some contention about the nature of women labour. Social theorists like Murdock (1949), Fox (1972), Parsons (1959) argue that biological differences determine women's role in the society. Others like Oakley (1974), Bettelheim (1969) disagree and argue that norms, values, and roles are culturally determined and socially transmitted. They therefore believe that culture is the sole determinant of gender roles. While we recognise the biological functions of the woman regarding child-bearing and the socialization of the young as well as the long period the mother spends in caring for the young, we do not lose sight of the fact that every society determines what roles its men and women should play in the development of the society.

In Akwa Ibom State, for example, women do most of the farm work. Similarly, in Delta State, women have 'female crops' like cassava, okro, pepper that they go to take in the men's farms. Among the Mutilpygmies of the Zairean forest men and women hunt together and also share responsibility for carrying the young ones.

This chapter however looks beyond the gender controversy and examines how women labour to improve their lot and that of the society in Akwa Ibom State. Women here are not held back by their 'weak' biological nature, rather they are fired by what we call here, for lack of appropriate words, "improvement syndrome." In the words of Kapur (1982) the women of Akwa Ibom State use what they have to develop what they do not have. They are innovative, resourceful and forward-looking. They meet their basic needs continually through improving their cultural items; and exchanging them for resources of other people.

In this chapter, our objectives are:

to observe and discuss how women of Akwa Ibom State have to a large extent demonstrated their ability to meet the food needs of the State through modernising their food processing techniques and actually producing food;

to show how the women through their artistic ingenuity have created and satisfied the thirst for adornments. Local raw materials have been used to produce beads, earrings, care products and ceramics, with high aesthetic value.

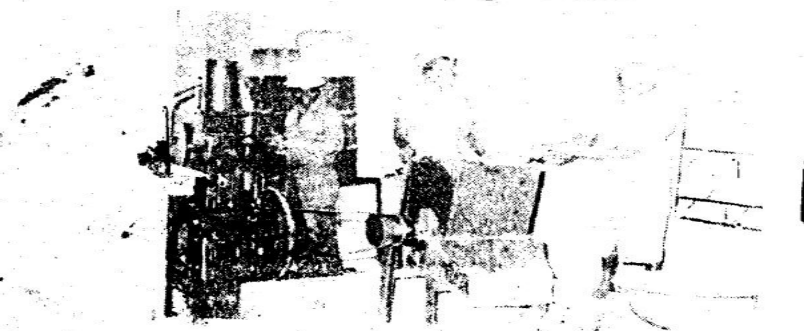
We also show how the women have penetrated the other Nigerian and international markets through their fashion designs and their production of delicacies. This chapter is a result of elaborate and continuing interviews being carried out by the writers with women in craft centres, fish smoking ponds, informal businesses et cetera in Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, and Oron.

We have elsewhere (Modo and Umoh 1994) demonstrated that the women of Akwa Ibom could put the State on the industrial map of the world through their responsible use of available indigenous raw materials if given the support by their State government. We shall now discuss our observed development in food processing, crafts, food and delicacies.

GARRI PROCESSING

Garri is the staple food in Akwa Ibom State. Previously, for the production of garri, cassava was normally grated by hand, no matter what quantity of cassava. This was not an easy process as the work was done almost throughout the whole day. After grating, the cassava was bagged and a big stone placed on top of the bag to drain the water out of the cassava. The drying process almost took about three days, then the cassava was seived to get the texture and it was ready for frying. The need to improve production to cater for the increasing population in the State has forced the indigenous technicians to invent garri processing machines. The presence of the machine encouraged the women who now produce about thrice their previous level. With the machine, the entire process of grating, drying, seiving and frying takes just a day.

Table 1: Garri Processing Machine



Cassava Processing Factory - Edemaya,
 Ikot Abasi Local Government Area

With the improved method of cassava processing, it is now possible to produce garri in large quantities both for home consumption and for export to neighbouring countries like Cameroun.

PALM OIL PROCESSING

Palm oil has been the main source of income to this South East Region even since the colonial era. Women in Akwa Ibom and the River States are engaged in the production of palm oil, both for home consumption and for export. Palm oil was normally processed manually by removing the fruits from the bunches, a process which took a whole day. After the fruits had been removed, they were cooked in big drums and then pounded in large mortars. The fruits were sometimes pounded by men who were paid to do the work, but in most cases, the job was performed by the women themselves. The fruits were then separated from the nuts and squeezed by hand to extract the oil.

The use of modern equipment as shown below has enabled palm processing to be done faster. There is now a machine designed to squeeze oil out of it. (See picture below).



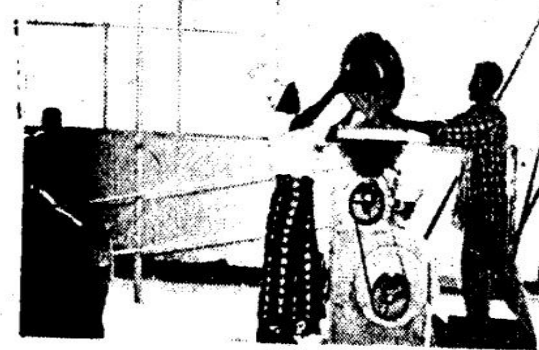
Palm Oil Processing Factory at
Abak Local Government Area

Pictures from Better Life Programme

The pounded rice has to be sieved through the process of 'upward throw.' By this process, the air blows off the chaff while the rice settles on the plate. Now with the aid of locally produced machine shown below, rice cultivation and processing by women has been made simple.

Women now use their abundant labour (through co-operative work group) to pluck the rice from the fields. They then spend a few hours to pass the grains through the machines. There are already prepared bags in different measures into which the grains are bagged in and taken to the market.

Centre has been established in the State capital to provide a market for products from rural areas.



Rice Milling at Ikpe Ikot Nkon,
Ikono Local Government Area

PALM KERNEL PROCESSING

This is another task the society attributes to women. Many years ago, women who processed palm kernel (i.e. removing the seed from the nut) were normally regarded as very poor women. In actual fact, this was because it required extra patience to crack the nut one by one in order to remove the seeds which are used for palm kernel oil. Very poor families had the patience to sit and crack the nuts and it took some days to have a reasonable quantity for sale.

With palm kernel now in great demand for modern industries, local machines have been designed to process this kernel. The government's palm produce board has machines for this purpose.

the desired quality. The state is now proud to have locally produced good quality bar soap or perfumed soap for toilet use. The machine shown below is locally constructed for soap production.



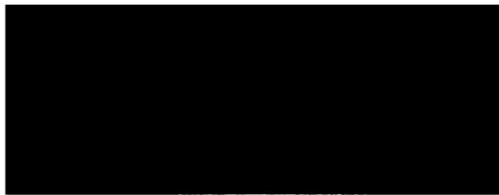
Soap Making Factory, Etinan Urban,
Etinan Local Government Area

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Women in Akwa Ibom are not known in the area of food processing alone. They are also known for using natural resources in the state for the production of goods for adornment like earrings, perfumes, functional raffia bags, indigenous cane chairs, etc. both for their internal use and for export.

Bead Work: For some years now, beads are extracted from certain seeds by women for the preparation of certain costumes usually worn by dancers and other women. Beads have been used for centuries as bodily ornaments in Akwa Ibom State area. There are also certain types of beads that are worn by royalty and nobility for specific occasions.* It is now a cultural break-through to see the Akwa Ibom State women use their improved skill and knowledge in the preparation of certain beaded products such as caps, hand-bags, mats, shoes and others. Other products include beaded mats with beautiful colour combinations which are made by women from Ikot Obong/Ikot Inyang Craft Centre in Akwa Ibom State.

The beaded products are so prepared to give them the desired elegance. Such beaded products are as shown below: The beads have been found to be very durable and admirable to Nigerians and foreigners.



A Beaded Handbag

Picture from Better Life Programme

Raffia Products: It is a mark of cultural ingenuity for a people to discover a natural product like raffia could be put to for their general development.

There is no gainsay that raffia tree has produced a number of consumable and non-consumable items. These are: palm wine, raffia and paper etc. Palm wine, is tapped from the abundant raffia tree and this is sometimes used in the preparation of gin which the colonialists erroneously called 'illicit' gin. The qualifier 'illicit' was used because the wine was not approved by the colonial government since it could compete with their whiskey if officially recognised. It was therefore made sometimes in hidden places to avoid government intervention. There are also certain insects, like Coleoptera that are extracted from a decayed raffia palm or tree and to some people is a very delicious meal.

The most valuable product from this tree is the raffia itself. Raffia is obtained from the palm frond by peeling the upper and lower layers of the frond. The raffia lies in the middle. The raffia is extracted by women in large quantities and dyed. They are then dried to enable the colour prevail. The raffia is used for a number of products such as table mats, hats, lawyers' wigs, shoes and others. The women have a few craft centres where they are taught to make these items. Readers are advised to take a tour of the State to see the ingenuity in display here. Today, these products have replaced imported shoes, wigs, and hats.

The general development currently being experienced in the State is the result of proper use being made of the gains from such cultural industries.



A Raffia Bag

Pictures from Better Life Programme

CONUT SHELL PRODUCTS

We argue here that it is a sign of cultural take-off into sustainable development (Rostow 1960) that the coconut which is found in abundance in Akwa Ibom State and which previously was for just consumption could now be used to produce other goods. As of now only the soft fruit inside the nut is eaten in raw and coconut sauce inside has medicinal value, as is popularly believed. Previously, coconut shells were thrown away as they were good for nothing. Now the Akwa Ibom State women have exploited the situation and

We are grateful to the Better Life Programme, Akwa Ibom State Branch for pictures displayed here.

are using the coconut shell and fibre in the preparation of carpets and necklaces. The fibre is used for preparation of carpets while the shell is used for the preparation of necklaces and earrings.

The Akwa Ibom State woman is able to use her increased knowledge and skill in designing the necklaces and the earrings such that they are admired by both indigenes and foreigners. The process of this development is very complex but the production of earrings involves the filing of the hard nut to shape, and using red hot iron rod to piece it and finally dyeing or colouring it to match the colour of one's clothes or complexion. The photograph below is an example of such products.

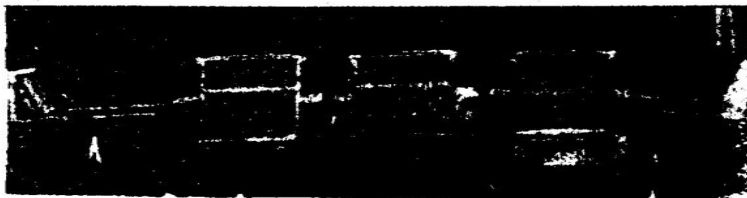


Various styles of coconut shell necklaces and earrings to match
Picture from Better Life Programme

CANE PRODUCTS

If development entails using what you have to make further wealth, then there is development in Akwa Ibom State especially as cane tree is found to be a worthy substitute of wood for the production of house-hold and office equipment. Cane trees are found in swampy areas here in the Southern part of Nigeria. In Akwa Ibom State, women are much involved in cane products making. The cane tree is processed by peeling off the greenish part of the tree and the clean stem is used in the preparation of cane products.

They have soft stem that could be bent to taste. A wide variety of cane products are produced by Akwa Ibom State women. These cane products are highly durable and serve a wide variety of utility and decorative purposes. Products made from cane include shopping baskets of various shapes and sizes, trays, chairs, room dividers, newspaper stands and others. The photograph below shows the beautifully designed products made by women from cane trees either in their various craft centres or as individuals.

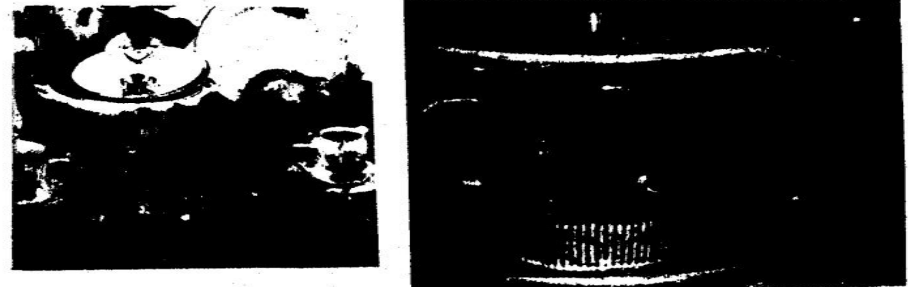


Picture from Better Life Programme

A very exciting picture of baby-pram is one of the products made by Akwa Ibom State women from cane products. These products are produced in large quantities for both export and home use. The improved knowledge and skill by women in the State have made it possible for different designs of cane products to be made.

CERAMIC PRODUCTS

The women have also excelled in the area of ceramics. They use clay to achieve this feat. Clay is found abundantly in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The extraction of clay was a very difficult process because it involved digging the ground to bring out the clay. The women are now able to extract clay with locally manufactured equipment which lightens and facilitates the process of clay. The clay which was normally ground to a very fine texture is now prepared by machines. The job of women is now lighter as only difficult ones are moulding and designing the products. The fine clay is mixed with water to taste and the different products are moulded then fired in a kiln. They are so designed to be admired by both Nigerians and foreigners. Such products are shown below:



Picture from Better Life Programme

FASHION DESIGNING

Akwa Ibom women excel also in the area of fashion design. They have locally designed cotton material, interact with women of other areas to prove their aesthetic and general outlook. As we are all aware, fashion has developed rapidly in Nigeria, over the years in terms of body adornment, styles and general dressing. The improved knowledge and skill of the Akwa Ibom State woman has made it possible for outdated costumes to be replaced by modern outfits. Fashion, it is often said, changes with time, so has Akwa Ibom State women been able to modernise their fashion to reflect the state of development in Nigeria.

Where pieces of cloth were used as costumes, now modern products have been substituted. The state of development in Nigeria is reflected through our fashion in both home and abroad. The women in Akwa Ibom State have now used their knowledge and skill to design materials to match the imported ones. They are able to use sophisticated machines

for embroidery of all kinds and have produced materials that are worn at home and abroad.

With the aid of raffia, elegant shoes are prepared which are sewn to match the bags. These products are admired and purchased by many as it is a deviance from the normal leather shoe and bag. Some foreigners buy them in large quantities to sell abroad.

FOOD AND DELICACIES

It is also important to observe that women have not only improve in the area of food processing and natural resources development, they have also made life more worth living through their discovery of more varieties of diets that are capable of making visitors to the State to decide or want to remain there. What we mean is that there is marked development in the area of food and delicacies among Akwa Ibom women.

Many years ago, the most popular food used in entertaining visitors were rice and yam. The women here have now improved the quality of their delicacies which can be served in both high and low quality hotel and restaurants.

Delicacies such as "Ekpang Nkukwo", plaintain pottage, foofoo (cassava), "Ekpang ebighe" and such soup as "afang", "efere nkong", "efere etike", "abak soup", "afia efere" and others abound in the State.

"Ekpang Nkukwo" is a traditionally tedious meal to prepare because of the processes of preparation and cooking. Previously cocoyam leaves were used in the preparation of the food but now with improved knowledge and skill, the Akwa Ibom State woman is able to prepare the food by substituting vegetables like 'nkong odusa', 'nkong ubong' (telferia) and others. The period for cooking 'ekpang nkukwo' is now shortened as the leaves now used for cooking do not itch as it was with the cocoyam leaves. 'Ekpang Nkukwo' is served nationally and internationally because they are now prepared with improved skill.

The preparation of plantain was limited to frying the ripe ones. Now our women are able to prepare plantain pottage such that it is enjoyed by both Nigerians and foreigners. The plantains are chopped to very small pieces and are cooked with ingredients such as dried fish and meat. Cassava foofoo is now served nationally and internationally because of its improved quality. Locally produced machines are able to grate and squeeze out the water in it that could have made the cassava to ferment and smell badly. When prepared in a decent way, the food is widely eaten in most high quality hotels.

CONSTRAINTS TO DEVELOPMENT

The Akwa Ibom State women are doing their best for the mean time. The women are aware of the need to break more grounds but the constraint is generally financial. There is not enough money to expand their businesses. Where loan is to be granted by finance houses, collaterals are normally demanded. Women do not have inherited land of their own to pledge and only a few could afford to own houses. Their businesses are therefore slow for they

most depend on informal credit funding arrangement (Orunukpo 1988:18). Then the estimated 10 percent who may go for bank loans could only go to Community Banks and Peoples Bank of Nigeria and not to more conventional banks. The constraint interference by husbands and relatives and especially in an area of financial demand makes such forward-looking women to be unable to plough-back gains to the business.

SUMMARY

It is obvious that Akwa Ibom women have made their marks. Through their ingenuity and the general awakening of women through the National Better Life Programme (1986-1992) they have used the available resources to produce more wealth. Today, many women in Akwa Ibom have small scale businesses such as cloth dyeing centre, cane chair shop, shopping centre for cultural items such as bags, earrings, or informal businesses such as eating houses where cultural soups are served, hair weaving centres where cultural hairstyles are woven at affordable prices, et cetera. There is however the need to allow women easy access to bank loans if this development achieved during the Better Life era is to be improved upon.

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