



An Analysis of the Importance of Oil Palm Tree in Central and Southern Nigeria

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1 Introduction

The oil palm tree is one of the major crops that significantly contributed to Nigeria's economy before the country's civil war of 1967 to 1970 (NIFOR 2003). Between 1948 and 1964, Nigeria was a leading producer of palm oil in the world (NIFOR 2003). As a result, Malaysia and Indonesia came to Nigeria to acquire oil palm seedlings, and this has helped to boost their economies. However, the Nigerian civil war, and more significantly, the discovery of crude oil, which diverted the country's economic attention, adversely affected the oil palm industry. While oil palm production was relegated to the background in Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Columbia took the lead (NIFOR & FDA 2005). Even with the tireless effort of the Nigeria Institute for Oil Palm Research (NIFOR), Nigeria is only now the fourth-largest producer of palm oil and palm kernel after the aforementioned three countries. It is against this backdrop that the chapter seeks to identify ways by which the oil palm tree and the by-products can be revitalized for sustainable economic growth in Nigeria.

The oil palm tree is commonly found in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the southern and the middle belt of Nigeria which has a temperate climate

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and good soil condition, for its production. It grows tall, erect, sturdy, beautiful, and majestic. Its leaves, also called fronds are spread at its head, beneath which it produces the palm fruits on bunches all year round. Its stem is hard and sometimes rough from fallen fronds. Although the oil palm tree has fibrous roots, and no deep taproots, it stands immovably strong in the ground. In modern days, farming of oil palm has been modernized; planters space the trees to avoid or limit soil acidity, and by so doing, intercropping becomes very important as the well-spaced plantation pattern lets the plants in between to naturally treat the soil. A space of 8–9 meters between the palm trees could be used for planting lower crops such as melon, cassava, cowpea, and groundnut within the first five years of the oil palm tree. Intercropping also helps to prevent soil erosion as well as to curb weeds. However, intercropping should be done without stretching the limited soil resources (NIFOR & FDA 2005: 25). After five years, the palm fronds spread like cover crops, hence there would be no need for further intercropping at this stage.

It is noteworthy that in 2014, as seen in the Tribune Newspaper, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, who was Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development at that time, has indicated that it is not relenting its efforts in boosting the palm tree sector sustenance. Thus, he further asserted as follows:

So far we have distributed to all the States in the South-West of the country, a total of 2.6 million of sprouted nuts of palm oil seedlings, which represent 28% of all the sprouted nuts administered across the country. Oyo State has received 351,000 sprouted nuts of palm oil seedlings; Ogun State has received 600,000; Ondo 574,000; Ekiti 219,000; and Osun 312,000. (*The Nigerian Tribune* Newspaper, Tuesday, 18 November 2014)

Nonetheless, this proposition is not enough for the South West part of Nigeria whose soil is very rich for oil palm production, just like South East, South–South, and Central Nigeria compared to the rival countries mentioned above. So the government at all levels in Nigeria should intensify effort at boosting the economy of the country through oil palm production as an alternative source to the petroleum economy.

2 Importance of Oil Palm Trees

The oil palm tree is a multipurpose plant. Some native adages in Nigeria use it as a metaphor to refer to a self-sufficient and independent person. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2020) rates the African palm the most important in

the world, as a prime source for vegetable oil, fat, coir for mats and ropes, and the endocarp as fuel and to make charcoal, cups, bottles, trinkets, a beverage from the liquid endosperm, cattle feed, coconut milk, sugar, alcohol vinegar, and furniture making. In pre- and post-colonial Nigeria, the oil palm tree was a major cash crop, which served the European industries as raw materials for industrial and domestic use such as the production of soap and detergent, and lubricant. Other export crops that developed in that era were cotton, groundnut, rubber, cocoa, among others (Alison 1946: 12). As a result of its demand, which was necessitated by its value in the European industrial revolution, the oil palm tree was cultivated in large quantities. It is, therefore, reasonable to argue that the cultivation of oil palm tree, which grows both in the wild and domesticated in Southern and Central Nigeria, is indigenous to the people.

3 Mulch and Subsidiary Crops

Palm fronds are used as mulch for grain seedlings planted on ridges. This protects crops from the direct excessive heat of the sun. Mulching of pre-nursery and main nursery seedlings with suitable materials is very important for the conservation of soil moisture. In other words, they are important for soil protection. Partially shredded decomposed oil palm bunch refuse serves as the best mulching material (Alison 1946: 12).

Also, in a well-spaced oil palm plantation, subsidiary crops different from cover crops can be planted in between the palm trees in the initial stages of the plant. These crops include coco-yam, tobacco, pumpkins, pepper, and so on. The required labor in this subsidiary farming is light. Thus, it provides women the opportunity to do subsidiary farming, and in turn, raising their income and boosting the markets where the proceeds are sold. Thus, income is derived from both the oil palm tree and the subsidiary crops.

4 Social-Cultural Lifestyle and Empowerment

The oil palm tree contributes greatly to the social life of the Nigerian people. The sap tapped from the tree is called palm wine, and it is served on several social and cultural occasions. For example, it is served in a marriage engagement ceremony, burial ceremony, and other festivals and cultural occasions. The influence of palm wine consumption also extended to colleges and universities. For instance, the Palm Wine Club is also known as *Kegites Club*

was formed by a limited number of undergraduates in some Nigerian tertiary institutions to promote and celebrate African culture and enjoy some camaraderie. The *Kegites Club* is believed to have been founded in 1963 at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) (Kola Adeniyi 2018). Through its network of contacts, its members who have attained prominence have been able to empower one another economically. In the same vein, its network also enhances intermarriages among various ethnic groups. This also facilitates intergroup economic relations which is a key instrument of peaceful interdependent coexistence (Kola Adeniyi 2018).

5 Effect on Climate and Socio-economic Well-Being

The oil palm tree, which forms the major component of forests in Southern Nigeria, mitigates climate change for healthy living and sustainable economic growth. For instance, when people interfere with the forest, such interference hardly interrupts the oil palm trees because of the importance attached to the trees. The interference is observed only in palm wine and felling the fronds for brooms. The main tree remains untouched as part of the forest which mitigates climate change, because deforestation can lead to environmental degradation, destroying flora and fauna and endangering the life of mankind.

The place of oil palm in Nigeria's economy and socio-economic life is also significant. The oil palm tree as an indigenous crop that grows virtually everywhere in central and southern Nigeria is both individually and collectively owned by the community, and nobody is prohibited from assessing them at any point in time. In Igboland and Igalaland, for instance, to cut down a palm tree without any genuine reason constitutes a serious offense that would incur the wrath of the community. Besides, the oil palm is widely regarded as a major economic tree because of its products, ranging from brooms, palm oil, pomade, healing balm, soap, cooking fuel, building and roofing materials. As a result of this deep-rooted attachment of the people to the tree and its products, the people of southern Nigeria have great value for it. They devote their time and energy to its cultivation because of its numerous prospects, especially the products gotten from it.

The production of palm oil in precolonial Nigeria was in the hands of the native farmers who gathered the fruits from the wild palms and extracted the oil from the fresh pericarp through manual processes. There were two forms of manual extraction of palm oil. The first form was much less laborious and produced hard oil (International Institute of Agriculture, Rome 1939: 329),

while the second was much more strenuous, producing semi-soft or soft oil. In the production of hard oil, the fruit was first heaped and later allowed to soften by fermentation. It was then pounded, and very hot water was added to the fruit, enhancing the extraction of oil. The liquid was again heated to separate the oil from the pulp. For the process involved in the extraction of the soft oil, the fresh fruits were boiled in water and the resulting mash was then pounded and the nuts separated. The liquid was then heated to separate the oil from the pulp and oil on the surface was skimmed (Tobback 1944: 3). The oil obtained was heated further to remove the moisture and thus purify it for consumption. Another way of extracting oil was by boiling the palm fruits until the pericarp softened. They were then turned into a mortar and trodden vigorously using one's foot until the flesh begins to separate from the nuts. Today, however, a pestle is used to pound the fruits in a wooden mortar to separate the flesh from the nuts. This is removed and strained to produce an emulsion, which together with the liquid in the mortar is then boiled and allowed to settle before the oil rises to the surface and is skimmed off. Then the remaining fiber is boiled again for further purification.

Shedding more light on this, Ford and Scott observed that,

The wild palm faces ready for harvesting were frequently scattered in the forest, at some distance from the places of abode. Its gathering involves much waste of time. It was transferred manually to the village for extracting the oil. The inner nuts of the palm fruits are crushed between stones by women and children to extract the kernel; the incomes from the sale of the palm-kernels were only recognized as the women's prerequisites. (Ford and Scott 1946)

Contributing to this, Allison asserted that:

The whole household shared the palm oil collection and preparation. The young men climb the palms using a sting supporting them from their back. The men of the compound then cut up the palm bunch so that the fruits fall out. The women boil the fruit and pound it in a long mortar to separate oil and kernels and waste fiber. The kernels were then dried in the can. (Allison 1946: 38)

It is worthy of note that women played a significant role in the palm oil processing industry. It was the exclusive preserve of the women to boil, refine, process, package, and sell off the finished product. While major agents from the cities competed with them in town markets, palm oil trading was in the hands of women at the village market level. The reason for women's domination of the industry is not farfetched. First, women occupy about 70% of the

processing activities in the agricultural value chain. Second, palm oil formed an indispensable commodity and ingredient in the daily meal of every household, and since women preoccupied with the preparation of household meals, ensuring an adequate supply of palm oil for the household also became their prerogative.

6 Source of Food and Fuel

As an indispensable household item, palm oil was put into different uses. As a result of its rich and nutritional contents and value, it was and is still used as a sauce for eating yams, potatoes, cocoyams, and other edible tubers. It is also used in the preparation of different local soups and dishes such as *banga*, *egusi*, *ewedu*, and *okra*. It is also used for frying and preservation of other food items like fish, meat, yam, and sweet potato. The use of palm trees extends even to its trunk. Palm trees that are neither used for furniture nor firewood are allowed to decay. The decayed trunk produces very nutritious edible maggots that serve as alternatives to fish or meat protein. Maggot farming is another lucrative industry that yields good income and provides economic sustenance for its farmers. Another important aspect of the decayed oil palm tree trunk is that it attracts the growth of mushroom vegetable which is rich in proteins. It is used for cooking soup and also cooked with other grains like corn, beans, cowpea, among others. It is sold in various markets in Central and Southern Nigeria (Unanimous Oral data collected in Igala land, October 9, 2018). The kernel nut can either be eaten alone as snacks or used to garnish cassava flakes popularly called “garri” in place of groundnuts or coconuts. Before the discovery of petroleum, palm oil served as fuel for local lamps to give light at night.

The oil was poured into an earthen pot with a wick made of cotton wool fixed into it. The wick is lit through fire flame and this provided light for domestic use. This made the people also to engage in cotton farming as a subsidiary industry for wick making (Abah 2019). The trunk of the palm tree itself can also be split and used as firewood. Before the advent of the stoves, gas cookers, and electric cookers as we have today, people relied heavily on firewood. Even with the coming of these cooking tools, the place of firewood cannot be removed as people still rely on it when cooking for large events like weddings, burials, and village meetings. The wood fire is also preferred when using the oven for frying garri. The chaffs that are gotten during the production of palm oil are kept under the sun and allowed to dry up properly

and the dried chaff is thereafter used for cooking as an alternative to firewood. In addition to this, the shells of the palm kernel can also be used in place of firewood.

7 Soap and Cream Production

Palm oil has been a major ingredient used in the soap making industry. The process of native soap making is simple. First, the palm fruits are extracted from the bunch, and the empty bunch is dried and burnt. The ash is then properly mixed with the palm kernel oil and water. This mixture is boiled until it is solidified. The end product is a soap for domestic use. It is rich in alkaline and naturally so good that it is preferred by the natives to contemporary products (Ocheja 2019). Apart from bathing, it is also used for washing clothes, plates, and furniture. Soap making is an industry that native women engage in which augments the local economy. Thus, in the value chain, the chaff from the oil palm bunch becomes useful. Also, the native oil palm soap is medicinal in another way as it removes skin infections like eczema and different kinds of rashes.

Another domestic product from the palm tree is pomade. To make pomade from palm produce, the fruit shells are broken to get the kernels. The palm kernels are put in a wide pan or special clay pot and set on fire for some time. The kernels produce a black liquid which is allowed to cool and is then poured into bottles. Oil palm pomade smells good and it is soothing on the skin. This local pomade, made from oil palm, like the oil palm soap, is also very medicinal and comes in handy in many ways for the cure of different ailments. One of such ailments is convulsion (Ocheja 2019).

Palm kernel oil popularly called black kernel oil which is useful in local African societies is another product made from palm trees. The palm kernel oil is derived from palm kernel, which is a by-product gotten during the production of palm oil, after breaking the shell. It is the heating of it in a clay pot with moderate fire that brings out the oil from the kernel. In the production of the palm kernel oil, the palm kernels are smashed to separate the nuts from the shell. The nuts are poured into a clean dry pot without water and then put on fire to extract palm kernel oil. The process of heating and extracting the palm kernel oil could last for about an hour or more depending on the intensity of the heat beneath the pot. Palm kernel oil is also one of the ingredients used in the manufacturing of the local black soap. The production of this black soap involves heating the kernel oil in a clean dry pot on the fire; thereafter, burnt palm fronds ashes are poured on the hot oil and

properly mixed with some potash powder by stirring it until it gets cold. The result of this process produces black soap. The black soap is very useful in the home. Before the coming of modern soaps, newborn babies and even adults had their baths with this local soap. The black soap is arguably better on the skin of newborn babies than modern soaps. The production of this soap is a form of occupation and source of income as the producers sell them in large and small quantities to buyers. Apart from the production of black soap, the palm kernel oil itself was used as a body and hair cream for both adults and babies before the coming of the modern creams.

8 Palm Tree Wine

Although much has been said about the value of the palm tree in this chapter, another value of the tree is contained in the palm wine tapped from the tree, which is both socio-economic and medicinal. Palm wine, which is whitish in color and has a sweet taste, is a special type of traditional and local drink gotten from the trunk of the palm tree, used in entertaining guests. It needs no special process of preparation as it is ready for consumption as soon as it is tapped from the palm tree. It is worthy of mention that once the wine is tapped from the oil palm tree, that tree would cease to bear fruits. For this reason, the natives are careful to harvest the palm fruits long enough before converting the tree into wine tapping. The wine could be tapped by using a climbing rope or by felling the tree.

Freshly tapped palm wine is less in alcohol content but fermentation increases its alcoholic content. Before the use of modern bottles, palm wine was presented in kegs made from gourds. To this day, kegs of palm wine are presented by a groom during traditional marriages in central and southern Nigeria. It is medicinal as the yeast content in it can aid clear vision (Pharm. Ada Ugonma, February 6, 2019).

Palm wine and sugar form the basic ingredients for the distillation of gin. The internal fermentation of palm wine produces about 5.2% alcohol by volume. When the distiller boils off 50% of the mash each time and then redistills the distillate, the alcohol strength increases. By the end of the third distillation, there will be half a pint of spirit comparable in strength to the imported brands (Olofun Abu, March 8, 2019). Treating the distilled alcohol with burnt sugar produces a spirit similar in bouquet and appearance to whisky while adding tobacco juice makes it brandy colored. The bark of a cinnamon tree, nutmeg, and cloves adds their distinct flavor (Olofu Abu, March 8, 2019). The use of palm wine initially restricted the distilling area

to the southern raffia palm and oil palm belts. However, within a few years, there were new alternative ingredients like banana, cashew, bitter and sweet cassava, coconut, guinea corn, maize, pineapple, potatoes, and yam. With some of these available in the north, the distilling business has spread to that region (Olofun Abu, March 8, 2019).

There has been a recent development in palm wine production. The production of plastic bottles has contributed to the growth of the palm tree industry. Investing in palm wine is cheap and very easy. The production process begins by getting the needed amount of palm wine from palm wine tappers. After getting the wine, the sugar level of the wine must be properly checked. The palm sap is filtered and brought to the production room. The palm sap is further filtered in the production room to further remove dirt. The sap is then poured into a clean pasteurizer and then the pasteurizer is switched on to check the temperature until it reaches 90 °C (Olofun Abu, March 8, 2019). The hot sap is poured into properly washed plastic bottles and cocked immediately. Thereafter, it is put in cold water to cool after which it is removed from the water, labeled, and packaged for sale. This has become a very lucrative business in most parts of Nigeria.

9 Production of Pharmaceutical Drugs and Spiritual Potency

The significance of oil palm for the sustenance of the economic development of Africa cannot be overemphasized. Alcohol, a by-product of the oil palm tree, is used for medical purposes (NAE RIVPROF 20/15, 1931). Ethanol which is derived from oil palm is an important chemical in the manufacturing of some drugs: Cough Syrups like Bennylin—5%, Coltrex expectorant—4.7%, Norahistrine—3.5%; Vitamins: Geritonic—20%, Chemiron—20%, Orheptal—20%; Mouth Wash: Listerine—26%, Listermint—12%; Anesthetic/Pain Reliever: Tylenol Liquid and drops—7%; and Mentholated Spirit—over 50% (Adah Okorie and Ekundayo Moses 2019). Alcohol as its by-product is also used for the production of hand sanitizers against infectious diseases. Apart from its food value, the palm tree has proven to be useful in medicine for human health. For instance, it is a good source of Vitamin A, which is very good for the eyes. It is also taken for constipation to soften the belly and aid digestion. This raw material for pharmaceutical industries can also generate employment for the teeming youths in Nigeria raising the per-capita income, thereby enhancing the revenue base of the country.

In traditional African societies, palm kernel oil has proven its medicinal efficacy in many ways. For instance, it softens the stool for easy excretion. It serves as an antidote neutralizing different types of poison. It is believed to dispel evil forces when one rubs the kernel oil on one's body. This view about the potency of the kernel oil to dispel evil is a peculiar feature of the African, or specifically Nigerian, the worldview of palm kernel oil. For example, it is believed that convulsion in children is an attack of evil spirits. To cure convulsion, a mixture of palm oil, palm kernel pomade, special herbs, and other ingredients are pounded together and thoroughly mixed. This mixture is used to massage the convulsing child and it is also applied to the ears, eyes, nose, and anus for maximum effect (Abutu 2018). It also serves as a healing balm for other ailments such as swollen parts of the body and skin irritations.

Fronds from the palm are also important in the performance of certain rituals among the people of southern Nigeria. For example, when a dead person is being conveyed for burial, their spirit is believed to be hovering around which may prevent the corpse bearers from moving especially when the spirit is angry. Palm fronds together with other materials are used to appease the spirit of the dead. This is done by reciting incantations and then touching the corpse with the palm fronds or by tying the palm fronds in front of the vehicle or on whatever that is carrying the corpse. The Esan people of southern Nigeria as well as other ethnic groups in the middle belt also believe in the same mystical powers of the palm fronds. The Igala people believe that palm fronds can put the spirit of the dead in check. The tender frond that is usually in the middle of the palm tree regarded as the king of all fronds is also used for this purpose (Ose and Oboh 2016).

Furthermore, the newest palm fronds kept in particular places are believed to prevent evil spirits from operating. The palm frond can also be used to protect a person's valuable items especially when it is kept outside the house. For instance, farmers could keep their cultivated lands protected by fencing the farm perimeter with palm fronds. People also use these palm fronds to demarcate their newly purchased land from other nearby lands to avoid any form of encroachment leading to a dispute. From the foregoing, palm fronds can be seen to be morally, traditionally, socially, spiritually, domestically, and economically useful.

10 Automobile Industry

The palm tree is very useful in the automobile and transport industry. An interim report on the development of asbestos-free automotive brake pads using Palm Kernel Shell (PKS) as frictional filler material was presented (Olufemi Adebola Koya 2010: 5). This was with a view of exploiting the characteristics of the PKS, which is largely deposited as waste from palm oil production, in to replace asbestos which is seen to be carcinogenic (Olufemi Adebola Koya 2010: 5). Two sets of brake pads with identical ingredients using either PKS or asbestos as a base material were produced following standard procedures employed by commercial manufacturers. The physical thermal, mechanical, and tribological properties of the palm kernel shell-based brake pads were evaluated and compared with the values for the asbestos-based brake pads. The Standard Organization of Nigeria observed that the properties of palm kernel shell-based brake pads were better than those of asbestos-based brake pads in terms of lower specific gravity, lower percentage swelling when wet, higher heat resistance, heat dissipation, and co-efficient of friction. It also exhibited a lower wear rate (Olufemi Adebola Koya 2010: 5).

Aside from the enhancement of the road transportation system through the production of brake pads, palm kernels also contribute to the development of waterways. A lot of revenue is also generated in the course of transporting the bulky products via River Anambra and River Niger as well as other river tributaries in the Niger Delta to Burutu, Warri, Port Harcourt, and other port cites for onward transportation to Europe. This transport network encourages international trade, international relations, facilitates markets, and develops per-capita income, thereby boosting the economy of the country. Transportation of palm kernels through the waterways results in the development of a water transportation system through the dredging and clearing of hazardous plants on waterways. This indirectly creates labor and employment and also economic gain.

11 Religio-economic Importance

Palm oil plays important role in religious and cultural rites among the native people of central and southern Nigerian peoples, making the palm also economically viable. Before the coming of Christianity and Islamic religions, the people of southern Nigeria were worshipping idols, gods carved out of

trees and stones. These trees and stones were used as symbols or representations of their gods. The carved wood sandstones were considered sacred and sacrifices were offered to these idols. One of the materials used as palm oil which was poured out on these woods and stones to appease the gods (Ichekwene 2019). Palm oil was also an important item for certain sacrifices at road junctions. In addition to other items such as pieces of white or red cloths, rice, beans, guinea corn, corn, and palm oil. The coming of Christianity and the Islamic religion has not eradicated the spiritual use of palm oil because the traditionalists who still believe in the gods of their ancestors still perform these rituals and sacrifices. Palm oil also formed part of the articles for major traditional ceremonies, festivals, initiation rites, and oath-taking. Its potency to deliver desired results was never in doubt and this has been sustained over time.

12 Temporary Shelter for Events

Palm fronds are used for making temporary shelters during important occasions, ceremonies, festivals, or any other event that requires people to be under a shade to be shielded from the tropical sun. From time past to date, the Igalas, Efiks, Ijaws, Igbos, and Yorubas use palm fronds to construct shades or huts within their compounds to serve as resting or relaxation points during the day. Shades are also constructed on their farmlands to provide them with a place to rest at intervals on the farm.

13 Craft

The peeling from the bark of palm frond stalk is used for making hats, bags, fish traps, toothpicks, and baskets. Basket making is an occupation practiced across southern and north-central Nigeria because of the enormous availability of palm trees. The baskets produced are of different shapes and sizes and they are used for various purposes. Market women rely heavily on baskets to carry their goods to the market. The big baskets are used by farmers during harvest to convey their produce home. There are also baskets for carrying poultry and rabbits. Baskets of medium and small sizes are used as decorations in residential houses, hotels, and other important commercial places. The bark of palm frond is also used for the production of a local tray for hawking and selling of goods in shops.

In the ancient Igala, Yoruba, Benin, Igbo, and Ibibio societies, the people extensively participated in these crafts. Ukpabi (1971) observed that many of the cottage industries in Nsukka division have a close affinity with the industries in the Igala division. The baskets made in Nsukka have the same shape as those made in Igala land. It would appear that while Igala historically influenced Nsukka in basket weaving, Awka, as the home of iron-working, introduced blacksmithing to the Igalas, aiding the mass production of cutlasses of varying shapes and sizes which in turn aided the production of more baskets. Riverine and swampy communities of Africa where oil palm trees naturally abound also engaged in the production of baskets used for transportation of agricultural produce from farm to home and thereafter to and fro market. The merit of the palm frond basket is that it is anti-rust and it is well ventilated for conveying perishable goods such as tomatoes, garden eggs, mangoes, cucumber, and other vegetables.

Hats of different sizes are also made from palm fronds. The hats are used either for fashion or by farmers, market women, and hawkers to protect themselves from the direct heat of the sun.

Palm fronds are also used to produce brooms which are very important for domestic use. Broom making is an economic activity engaged in by both men and women. Brooms are sometimes sold or given out as gifts alongside sponges, another economic activity of peoples of southern and central Nigeria. In a community such as Olowa-Elika, the clan or families known for broom-making also specialize in the crafting of baskets made out of palm fronds. These craftsmen also double as marketers of the product and usually occupy a particular area of the market square during market days as it is with every other product (Alhaji Okutepe 2019). This implies that the activity of the middlemen was limited except when products were needed in large quantities by those outside the community where transportation cost was involved. Brooms are of two types, one is made for sweeping and taking off cobwebs from the walls of houses, while the other type, usually in small sizes, is meant for stirring okra, beans, and *ewedu* soups. Okra is a delicious soup made from okra vegetable; beans soup is made from beans grains while *ewedu* is a Yoruba word for a special vegetable soup similar to okra. *Ewedu* is known as jute leaf in the English language. Therefore, brooms also serve as a ladle for cooking meals. It is important to say that brooms were exchanged for other goods and services during the period of a trade by barter. In the present day, brooms are now sold for money and still being exchanged for other goods in some local markets in various parts of Nigeria.

Besides, brooms used for cleaning are also used for winnowing during crop harvest. They are used to clear the chaff or dirt from the main grains such

as rice, millet, guinea corn, and beans. In most parts of southern Nigeria, brooms are not just meant for cleaning the environment; they are also used to sweep away bad luck (Ose and Oboh 2016). Also, when demonstrating the strength of unity, elders and parents use brooms to teach vital lessons. They simply ask the young ones with individualistic tendencies to bring a bunch of brooms and then ask them to break the bunch. Once unable to do so, they are asked to pick out a stick and attempt the same thing which easily breaks at once. The intended lesson is unity and strength in togetherness.

The broom has another great significance in African society. To the Esan people of southern Nigeria, it is associated with a lot of beliefs with spiritual implications. Like the Igala people, Esan people believe that the broom is beyond an instrument of hygiene but also of high spiritual significance. For instance, it is taboo to beat a child with a broom no matter the offense of the child, and the anger of the other person. If anyone beats a child with a broom, they have to perform some sacrifices to appease the gods of the land. Again, the Esan people believe that if a person flogs another with a broom, they imply that that person is either a witch or a slave. Superstitiously, the Esan people pray not to be like the broom that only serves utilitarian purposes, after which it is abandoned or kept in an unclean corner. In war times, a child is handed a bunch of brooms to be taking out the sticks as long as the war lingered. Each removal of a broomstick signals the death of the enemy (Ose and Oboh 2016).

14 Hunting Game

In hunting, strong palm fronds are used to fence an area in the wild believed to have animals. The fence is narrowly opened at a point where there is a trap set for the animals on their tracks. To make the fence firmly stuck in the ground, it is supported by a bamboo tree. Any animal passing through the narrow opening triggers off the trap and the animal is caught. The game caught is a source of protein and income for the family; sometimes they are sent to one's in-laws or a notable figure in the community as a gift. In riverine areas, palm fronds are also used for catching fish, prawns, and crayfish. A small canoe is properly lined with whole palm fronds and then capsized in the shallow part of the river where the trapper can firmly stand when he comes to inspect it. The capsized canoe with the fronds is left for about three or four days during which fishes swim in and make it their home where at night they come to sleep. The trapper comes early in the morning and carefully lifts the canoe, tilts it to empty some of the water before removing

the palm fronds, leaving the catch of fishes, prawns, and crayfish. Palm fronds are also used to construct mini dams and fences in rivers, lakes, and ponds for fishing. The palm frond, therefore, serves as an economic booster to the fishing industry.

15 Conclusion

A careful analysis of the usefulness of palm trees in southern and central Nigeria, in particular, and Africa in general reveals that the tree is very useful. The exposition in this chapter has laid bare the innumerable benefits of the palm tree in the economic, social, religious, and domestic lives of many Nigerians in the southern and central areas. Nigeria is the fourth-largest producer of palm oil and palm kernel in the world, after Indonesia, Malaysia, and Columbia. In fact, given the right framework of economic policy and political will, the potential of the oil palm tree would have been exponential. In Africa, Nigeria has contributed immensely to the oil palm subsector of the agricultural sector. The importance of palm trees cuts across so many other aspects of life. For instance, the oil palm tree is the most efficient and highest yielder per unit area of all plantation crops. It is the first choice crop for any country to meet shortfalls. Countries should endeavor to carry out researches that can lead to an improvement in the planting of this useful tree. Among the many other significant values of the tree, also provides environmental protection. Environmentalists have often stressed the importance of planting trees to save the environment from environmental hazards. The cultivation of oil palm trees taken seriously would be helpful in this regard. The Nigeria Institute for Oil Palm Research (NIFOR) should play a leading role in research and provision of improved seedlings to farmers across the nation for private cultivation of the oil palm trees since the sustainable economic future lies largely in improving the agricultural sector for enhanced food security which would in turn help to achieve the planned economic diversification drive of the Nigerian government.

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- An in-depth interview with Kola Adeniyi, a Lecturer at the University of Ife, Nigeria, November 7, 2018, aged 50 years.

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