

1-1-2006

Voices from Within and Without: Sources, Methods, and Problematics in the Recovery of the Agrarian History of the Igbo (Southeastern Nigeria)

Chima J. Korieh

Marquette University, chima.korieh@marquette.edu

VOICES FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT:
SOURCES, METHODS, AND PROBLEMATICS IN
THE RECOVERY OF THE AGRARIAN HISTORY OF
THE IGBO (SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA)

CHIMA J. KORIEH
ROWAN UNIVERSITY

I

Over the past few decades, social history has variously and successfully explored the lives of neglected groups in society. Nevertheless, the question of capturing these “silent voices” in history, including those of women, remains at the heart of social history. Although few sources are available that allow historians to hear these voices, new methodological insights offer opportunities. A multidisciplinary framework and a broad range of methodologies can shed new light on the lives of peasants, who have been often neglected in history and provide opportunities to “hear” their voices and concerns as historical subjects. The object of this paper is to present some critical perspective on the use of oral and archival sources for the study of the agricultural history of rural Africa. What I present here is my approach to the collection and use of various sources for the study of Igbo agricultural history in the twentieth century. It suggests that oral sources, in particular, offer an important opportunity in the writing of an inclusive history of agricultural change—a history that for the most part has been created by rural peasants. Another objective is to outline my personal experiences in the field and to suggest important ways of situating the researcher not only in the analysis of the evidence, but most importantly, in the context or the fieldwork environment. Both, as has been clearly shown, can affect the historian’s analysis and perspective and the resulting history.

Igboland is situated in Southeastern Nigeria and lies between longitude 7°E and latitude 6°10’ N. The region borders the middle belt region of

Nigeria to the north, the river Niger to the west, the Ibibio people to the east, and the Gulf of Guinea and Bight of Biafra to the south. Most of the region lies on a plain less than 600 feet (about 183 meters) above sea level. Most of Igboland lies within the Guinean and Sub-Guinean physical environment and is characterized by an annual rainfall of between forty and sixty inches per annum, with a dry season lasting between three and four months in northern Igboland and a mean monthly humidity of about 90% throughout the year.¹ The pattern of rainfall produces two distinct patterns of vegetation. The southern part of the region is characterized by heavy rainfall that produces a dense rainforest that thinned out northwards into a savanna. However, many centuries of human habitation and activities have turned the whole region into secondary forest, with only pockets of forest oasis remaining.²

Under the present state structure in Nigeria, the Igbo, with an estimated population of 30 million, inhabit the entire Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, and Ebonyi states, while a significant number live in Delta and Rivers states. The Igbo comprise over 60% of the total population of eastern Nigeria, but occupy a little over half of the land area of southeastern Nigeria. Thus Igboland is characterized by high population density compared to most parts of Africa. With an estimated population density of 236 persons or higher per square mile, the Colonial Resident for Onitsha observed in 1929 that land was quite limited in proportion to the population in many parts of the region.³ By the 1940s a population density 800 to 1,000 persons per square kilometer was recorded in most parts of Igboland.⁴ The population density in the Igbo areas was about four times the Nigerian average according to the 1963 census.⁵ This high population density continued to be reflected in the 1991 population census.⁶ An

¹W. B. Morgan, "The Influence of European Contacts on the Landscape of Southern Nigeria," *Geographical Journal* 125(1959), 49.

²Most of the original forests in Igboland have been cleared following a long period of agricultural activity and human habitation.

³See National Archive of Nigeria (hereafter NAE) ONPROF 7/15/135, "World Agricultural Census," Resident, Onitsha to District Officer Awgu, 16 January 1929.

⁴See Margaret M. Green, *Land Tenure in an Ibo Village in South-Eastern Nigeria* (London, 1941); and J. Harris, "Human Relationships to the Land in Southern Nigeria," *Rural Sociology* 7(1942), 89-92. For a more recent study see Abe Goldman, "Population Growth and Agricultural Change in Imo State, South-eastern Nigeria" in *Population Growth and Agricultural Change in Africa*, ed. B. L. Turner II, R. Kates, and G. Hyden (Gainesville, 1993), 250-301. For current population estimates see Nigeria, National Population Commission. *1991 Population Census of Nigeria* (Lagos, 1991).

⁵David R. Smock and Audrey C. Smock, *Cultural and Political Aspects of Rural Transformation: a Case Study of Eastern Nigeria* (New York, 1972), 21.

⁶See Federal Office of Statistics "1991 Population of States by Local Government Areas," *Digest of Statistics* (December 1994).

important demographic characteristic is the high female population ration in the region. In all the local areas in which I conducted fieldwork, the female population was on the average 10,000 more than the male population.⁷ The demographic composition has gender and development implications including access to resources and contribution to agricultural production.

Today the vegetation in many parts of Igboland is composed of palm groves ranging from 100 to 200 trees per acre in some areas. The palm groves have largely survived human activities because of the importance of the edible oil derived from the oil palm and its increased importance as a source of cash after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ During this period, palm oil became a major source of economic transformation and exchange between the Igbo producers and European traders.⁹ The expansion of palm oil and kernels production during the colonial period led to a major source of the transformation of Igbo agriculture and society.

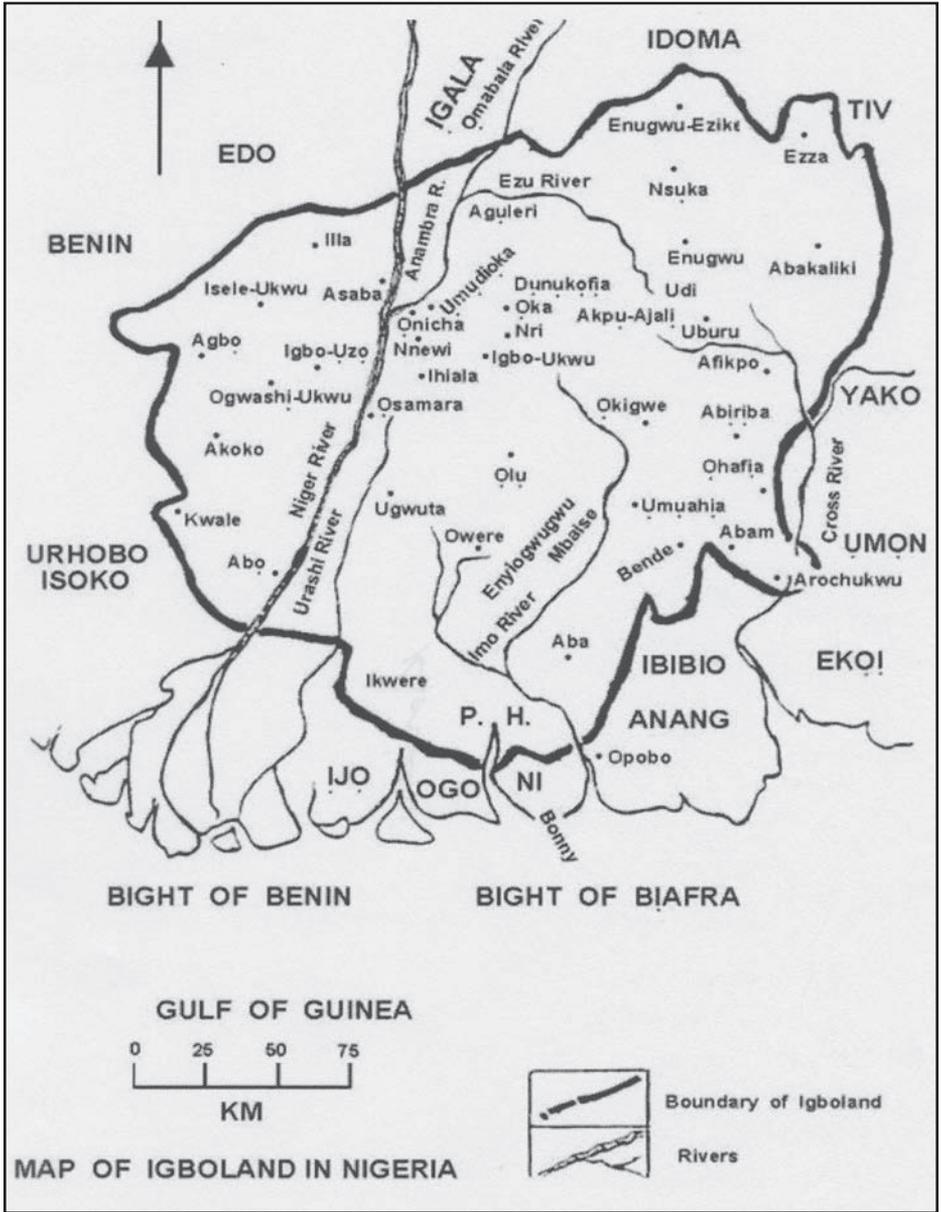
Agricultural transformation among the Igbo was influenced by the physical geography of the region. Environmental conditions—including the climate, rainfall patterns, soil formations, and the abundance of the oil palm in the region—were broad factors that influenced the nature of agricultural development. The agricultural system used was rotational bush fallow. Land was cleared and cultivated until its fertility decreased, and then the plot was left fallow to regenerate its fertility. W. B. Morgan explains that “the need for crop land in a rapidly expanding population environment led to the clearing of the original vegetation and the emergence of grassland dotted with useful economic trees including the oil palm, coconuts and various fruit trees.”¹⁰ According to Morgan, “the

⁷For the gender distribution of the population see *1991 Population Census*.

⁸The Biafra hinterland was a major source of slave during the Atlantic trade. For an analysis of Igbo participation in the slave trade see, for example, Ugo Nwokeji, “The Biafran Frontier: Trade, Slaves and Aro Society, c. 1750-1905” (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1998). On the transition from slave trade to commodity trade see Robin Law, *From Slavery to ‘Legitimate’ Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth Century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995); Martin Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁹I have examined the pre-colonial expansion of the palm oil trade for the Igbo elsewhere. See Chima J. Korih, “The Nineteenth Century Commercial Transition in West Africa: the Case of the Biafran Hinterland,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34(2000), 588-615.

¹⁰Morgan, “Influence,” 52. Population pressure and land scarcity have fundamentally influenced Igbo agriculture, where the characteristically poor soil continued to deteriorate rapidly with frequent cultivation. For the impact of soil type on agricultural productivity in Eastern Nigeria see, for example, G. Lekwa, “The Characteristics and Classification of Genetic Sequences of Soil in the Coastal Plain Sands of Eastern Nigeria” (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 1979), as well as R. K. Udo, “Pattern of Population Distribution and Settlement in Eastern Nigeria,” *Nigerian Geographical Journal* 6(1963), 75.



MAP OF IGBOLAND IN NIGERIA

Guinean environment of the I[gb]bo and Ibibio-land my have been comparatively easy to clear since the soil consisted mainly of deep, well-drained sands."¹¹ This may account for the dense settlement in the Orlu and Owerri axis at a much earlier period. Population pressure has, however, imposed a check on this practice, and farmers had been forced to put the land under continuous cultivation by the 1950s, except in a few parts of the region such as Abakiliki, Ehamufu, Ngor Okpala, and Ohaji, where ample farmland exists. Even in these areas farmers have shortened fallow periods. What I embarked on was to reconstruct the history of agricultural change among the Igbo, using oral and documentary sources.

II

Conscious of my interest in the lives of peasants, I have largely emphasized the qualitative method in both research and the analysis of textual sources.¹² Oral sources and life story narratives provided one of the few opportunities to achieve this goal. Oral sources are not substitutes to written accounts that emanate from "on-the-spot eyewitness documentation," as John Thornton argues.¹³ Still, oral narrative allows the researcher to learn first-hand about the social context within which peasants operated and to clarify peasant agency in societies.¹⁴ Oral history narratives challenge what Nakanyike Musisi calls "universalist and essentialist categories," and rather emphasis individual lives.¹⁵ Oral narratives help situ-

¹¹Morgan, "Influence," 53.

¹²Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein have identified four major idioms of qualitative inquiry: naturalism, ethnomethodology, emotionalism, and postmodernism. On how each applies to the researcher and the subject see Gubrium/Holstein, *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (New York, 1997). See also John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, 1998). For an introduction to the theoretical and empirical issues involved in quantitative history see Miles Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies and Methods* (New York, 1999); and Larry J. Griffin and Marcel van der Linden, eds., "New Methods for Social History" *International Review of Social History* 43(1998), 3-8.

¹³John Thornton, "European Documents and African History" in John Edward Philips, ed., *Writing African History* (Rochester, 2005), 254.

¹⁴Pamela Riney-Kehrberg adopted this methodology in *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence, 1994), 187. This study combined oral interview with statistical information from Kansas State Agricultural census. This method enabled the author to analyze persistence and include personal details such as "age of farm operator, land descriptions, ownership status, etc.," the sort of information that may not be easily derived from census data. My methodological perspective benefits from this approach, but expanded to include life history narratives and oral accounts.

¹⁵See Nakanyike B. Musisi, "A Personal Journey into Custom, Identity, Power, and Politics: Researching and Writing the Life and Times of Buganda's Queen Mother Irene Drusilla Namaganda, 1896-1957," *HA* 23(1996), 369.

ate the context and circumstances under which peasants produced goods and responded to state intervention.

African historians faced many difficulties when they began to explore the possibilities that oral sources offered for the reconstruction of precolonial African history. According to David Henige, historians have realized that “respectable history could actually be gleaned from mouth rather than pages, and that those who did it were respectable historians.”¹⁶ Historians’ emphasis on oral tradition and sources as a critical choice for African historians compensated for earlier construal, which cast their use as “inferior” superstitious or looked only at their use as “supplements” to written sources. Oral sources have particularly enabled Africans and Africanists in general to adapt African stories to meet what Joseph Miller noted as “the high standards of the historical discipline’s exclusionary ethos.”¹⁷ A key figure in this new methodological quest was Jan Vansina, whose groundbreaking work, *Oral Tradition*, and his earlier article “Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba,” epitomized the quest to accept oral testimonies as reliable as documentary evidence.¹⁸ Early pioneers like Vansina saw oral tradition as “one of many possible paths to the past.”¹⁹ For the methodological rigor he brought to bear on the new method and his argument for “text-like properties of testimonies,” many Africanists have acknowledged their indebtedness to Vansina.

Since the publication of Vansina’s *Oral Tradition as History* Africanists of different disciplinary persuasions, but most importantly historians, have essentially reshaped African historical methodology.²⁰ For the first time, historian became the siblings of anthropologists and shifted attention from archives and libraries to human beings. I found the book a valuable companion to anyone embarking on the challenging pursuit of oral historical fieldwork in Africa. Like many others who have embarked on the historical quest in Africa, I have benefited from Vansina’s methodological insights and functional analysis.

In the Nigerian historical scene, a new historical current known as the Ibadan School of History emerged in the 1950s. Early pioneers like Kenneth O. Dike, F. Ade Ajayi, J. C Anene, and others, provided the outlines of a viable African history that predated European encounters with Africa. However, it took the decolonization and liberation of Africa for historians

¹⁶David Henige, “Oral Tradition as a Means of Reconstructing the Past” in Philips, *Writing African History*, 171.

¹⁷Joseph C. Miller, “History and Africa/Africa and History,” Presidential Address, American Historical Association, Washington, DC, 8 January 1999.

¹⁸Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: a Study in Historical Methodology* (London, 1965). For his work on the Bakuba see “Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba I,” *JAH* 1(1960), 45-53, 257-70.

¹⁹David Henige, “Oral Tradition,” 171.

²⁰Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: a Study in Historical Methodology* (Madison, 1985).

to start filling in the outlines. This school, which among other things emphasized the use of oral sources, was given a boost with the publication of Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* in 1956.²¹ Dike's book broke new methodological ground by using oral sources to reconstruct the political and economic history of the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century. His work began the process of bringing back Africa into history as well as a serious study of economic and political processes in Africa by African historians.

As a pioneer in the field of African history, the Ibadan school was consistently bold in challenging ideological and epistemological hegemonies that shaped the writing and interpretation of African history after it emerged as a respected field of inquiry.²² Following Dike's work, the Ibadan School influenced African historical literature and the use of oral tradition as a source for African history. For African historians, the use of oral history became a form of identification that attempted to rectify the omission of African voices in history—a major achievement associated with the rise of African historiography.

The methodological and conceptual problems associated with oral accounts and the ways historians have addressed them have varied over time. For one, the validity of oral sources for historical reconstruction has been contested on different grounds, as historians strive to differentiate their craft from memory. The most vocal criticism of oral methodology came from Eurocentric historical tradition and the privileged position given to written sources. This of course relates to the early concerns within the discipline of history, when African historians were required to address the viability of their enterprise. Concerns bordered on both content and method. Was there a history to tell? Was it possible to construct a credible history out of the oral tradition? These questions have been addressed through the work of Vansina et al., and in the Nigerian historical scene by A.E. Afigbo, among others.²³

Today, there is widespread acceptance that oral tradition is a viable source and a history in its own right, and historians accept custodians of oral traditions as both informants and historians. Here I am concerned

²¹African historians in particular owe an immense debt to Kenneth O. Dike, whose book not only presented the value of oral sources in the study of African history, but also presented a new internalist framework—that of the study of African societies by Africans and the emergence of the modern academic history of Africa.

²²The University of Ibadan was Nigeria's premier institution of higher learning. The Ibadan School also advocated a nationalist history that demonstrated that African has a history before the contact with Europeans. On Ibadan School of History see Toyin Falola, ed., *Tradition and Change in Africa: the Essays of J. F. Ade Ajayi* (Trenton, 2000), 377-88.

²³A.E. Afigbo has addressed some of these issues in several historiographical papers. I have written a commentary "Historians, Historiography and Historical Interpretations-Commentary," which will appear in selected works of Adiele Afigbo currently being edited by Toyin Falola.

with the record of people with specific and distinct historical experiences, so my use of oral data in this study is consistent with Susan Geiger's explanation of their use in life history and narratives to represent the life experiences of the informant.²⁴ Oral history challenges megahistories and has been particularly useful in the feminist approach to history. Oral sources have particularly been useful in centralizing women and gender or the writing of an inclusive history of Africa. Kathleen Sheldon has shown the centrality of oral information in finding information about women that were absent in archival and other written sources, thus "bringing women's perspectives to the study of social change."²⁵ My experience in researching widowhood among the Igbo in 1996 confirmed the dynamic and critical role oral history plays for African-centered research. That experience confirmed my respect for the practice of oral history, but also raised important concerns about the conceptual questions and contexts in which it is applied. My treatment of these issues in my earlier research was mostly straightforward, but people and data from oral traditions do not readily fall into homogenous categories.

Personal narratives enabled me to write a different kind of history: the history of the lower classes, the history of women, and the history of peasants whose experiences have often been ignored in official historical documents. Oral sources extended the methodological and conceptual boundaries of my historical analysis by examining how individuals and groups related to the broader transformations in society. Oral sources tap deeply into the social memory of a society and reveals how a society individually and collectively remembers its past through life histories. Tapping on the interface between the two can bridge the gap between history, anthropology, and other disciplines, and broaden the ability of historians to capture an essential aspect of history, the social implications of economic transformations and change—to write history "from below."²⁶ As Paul Thompson explains, oral history can transform the content of history:

By shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored. It can also transform the processes of writing history, by breaking through the barriers between the chroniclers and the audience; between the educational institution and the outside world.²⁷

²⁴See Susan Geiger, *Tanu Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyika Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth NH, 1997), 15-17.

²⁵Kathleen Sheldon, "Writing About Women: Approaches to a Gendered Perspective in African History" in Philips, *Writing African History*, 474.

²⁶For the use of life history and oral narrative see Geiger, *Tanu Women*, 15-19.

²⁷See Paul Thompson, "Historians and Oral History" in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1988), 22-71.

Most importantly, it gave peasants an opportunity to participate in the production of knowledge about themselves and their communities, and provided a view into their lived experience and survival strategies. Although conceptualizing the past this way may be influenced by present reality, this methodological framework enable me to write a “new” social history—one based on new use of sources, new framing of historical questions, and greater flexibility in theory and practice of history.

In view of the centrality of oral data in this argument, it is important to clarify other related theoretical and methodological issues. It was particularly important to situate myself both in relation to the methodological questions regarding oral sources and to my fieldwork experiences, as well as the representation and interpretation of the experiences of the informants, the social context, and the discourse around them.²⁸ The fieldwork experience is a very personal one, and the encounters in the field are not governed by general rules. However, such personal experiences and encounters are essential to the research process.²⁹ Not least, they can open up new theoretical insights, methodologies, and interpretations of data.³⁰

Historical interpretation is influenced by context as well as content. The “insider/outsider” discourse has been associated more with the anthropological tradition, although every social research should address the issue.³¹ Donald Messerschmidt examined the contending views about studying one’s own society in *Anthropologists at Home in North America*.³² It was considered part of the professional ritual for young anthropologists, or “baby anthropologists” as Margaret Mead put it, “to leave the comfortable nest of his or her social upbringing and brave the trials and tribulations of study in other lands, or at least among a people

²⁸For the use of life histories in historical reconstruction and the problems of interpretation and representation see Geiger, *Tanu Women*, 16. See also Kathleen Barry, “Biography and the Search for Women’s Subjectivity,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 12(1989), 561-77.

²⁹For further discussion, see, George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology and Cultural Critique: an Experiment in the Human Science* (Chicago, 1986).

³⁰G. N. Uzoigwe, “Recording the Oral History of Africa: Reflections from Field Experiences in Bunyoro,” *African Studies Review* 16(1973), 183-201; Judith Okeley, “Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge” in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. Judith Okeley and Helen Callaway (London, 1992), 1-28; Juliana Flinn, “Introduction” in *Fieldwork and Families: Constructing New Models for Ethnographic Research*, ed. Juliana Flinn et al (Honolulu, 1998), 5-6.

³¹Enya P. Flores-Meiser, “Field Experience in Three Societies” in *Fieldwork: the Human Experience*, ed., Robert Lawless et al (New York, 1983), 49-61.

³²Donald Messerschmidt, ed., *Anthropologist at Home in North America: Methods and Issues in the Study of One’s Own Society* (Cambridge, 1981). For the advantages and disadvantages of insider research see Akemi Kikumura, “Family Life Histories: a Collaborative Venture” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Perks and Thomson (London, 1998), 140-44; R. Merton, “Insiders and Outsiders: a Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78(1972), 9-47.

other than theirs.”³³ This long tradition within anthropology was an important consideration for the anthropological “space” and cultural relativism. Elizabeth Enslin has shown that the boundaries between “us” and “them” have been broken, even within anthropology, as anthropologists increasingly study their own societies.³⁴

Victor Uchendu, an Igbo anthropologist whose work has been very influential in understanding Igbo society, argues that “the ‘native’ point of view presented by a sympathetic foreign ethnologist who “knows” his natives is not the same view presented by a native.”³⁵ While both views are legitimate, Uchendu advocates that living a culture demands more than knowledge of its events, system, and institutions; it requires a connection with these events and with an emotional attachment to cultural values and norms only an insider can possess.³⁶ Kim Choong Soon explained that fieldwork in one’s own culture allows the researcher “to develop more insight into the culture because of familiarity with it and to arrive at abstractions from the native’s point of view.” Soon explains that “[o]ne does not have to learn another language or understand a different way of life, and one may have little difficulty in developing rapport . . .”³⁷ In his study of the Ewe of modern Ghana, Godwin Nukunya posits that his connection with the Ewe opened doors which might be closed to ‘outsiders.’ He explained: “[b]ecause I was one of them and not a ‘foreign intruder,’ the fear and suspicion, which always lurk in the minds of subjects and informants during social research in general, were almost absent.”³⁸

Can there be “insider” informed ethnography? I have grappled with this question since 1996, when I studied widowhood in Igbo villages in Imo state. I carried out my work among a people with whom I share a common ethnicity, language, and culture. I also interviewed members of my father, mother, and uncle. My relationship with the region and my family became important in conceptualizing the role of the fieldworker, even in a community where the researcher is perceived as an “insider.” My own family history can be used to illustrate this point. Both my father and my uncle perceived their interviews with me as part of their duty to teach me about my past. From when I was a young boy, my father, whom

³³Messerschmidt, *Anthropologist*; Bela Maday, ed. *Anthropology and Society* (Washington, 1975), 41.

³⁴Enslin, “Beyond Writing,” 548.

³⁵Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria* (New York, 1965), 9.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Kim Choong Soon, “The Role of the Non-Western Anthropologist Reconsidered: Illusion versus Reality,” *Current Anthropology* 31(1990), 196-201.

³⁸Godwin K. Nukunya, *Kinship and Marriage among the Anlo Ewe* (New York, 1969), 19.

many people referred to as an “encyclopedia of local history, culture, and tradition,” impressed on me the need to understand my family history and that of the community at large. For him such knowledge fulfilled social needs and was crucial for one to be a well-educated and functional member of society. This situation confronts the researcher with a different set of problems than the usual. Based partly on my own family history, I have examined how men and women from different classes experienced the rapidly-changing economic and social condition of Igboland. My father’s own experience as a produce buyer in the 1950s informed part of my analysis.

Through the involvement of members of my family in my current research, I attempted to integrate my role as researcher, historian, family, and clan member. My relationship with the region and my family is mediated by my role as a historian and more by my social location as an insider, *nwa afo*, or “a son of the soil,” to use the Igbo parlance. While these claims contradict those made by critics of insider research, they do not diminish the advantage the insider has in understanding the complexity and nature of his/her own society. Does it mean less inclination on the part of “insider” to construct opaque stereotypes of a society? Probably not in all aspects, but in my case it gave me a greater connection with the people among whom I did research. Again using my family to illustrate this issue, the access to historical information was seen as part of the process of my acculturation and education about the past. My strong family tradition and past experiences of village life provided special insights into matters that would otherwise have been denied to a researcher. As Nukunya notes in his Ewe study, informants “had confidence in me because they knew I could not “sell them.”³⁹

While connection and identification with a society can provide common grounds for conversation and cultural sensitivity, it should not gloss over crucial differences between the researcher and subject, especially differences of identity and power. The fact that the observer and the observed may have distinctly different frames of reference opens up problems of interpretation.⁴⁰ Ndaywei Nziem has written of the African researcher as one who has a double role as observer and actor. As Nziem rightly observes, “natives [African] too often find themselves ‘outsiders’ when approaching an African society,” arguing that the Africanist “assumes uniquely an observer’s position.”⁴¹ “Separated from their men-

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Kirsten A. Kjerland, “Cattle Breeds; Shillings Don’t: The Belated Incorporation of the abaKuria into Modern Kenya,” (Ph.D., University of Bergen, 1995), 9.

⁴¹Ndaywel E. Nziem, “African Historians and Africanist Historian” in *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury (Beverly Hills, 1986), 20-27.

tal universe of origin," natives, Nziem argues, "are no longer capable of grasping the elements of their own heritage by introspection alone."⁴² This assumption of a common African perspective is problematic. As Bogumil Jewsiewicki noted: "[t]he fundamental problem of academic literature on Africa lies in the question of where and by whom it is produced as well as where and by whom it is read."⁴³ These views are important, but more significant remains the consideration of the way ethnography is mediated by the insider/outsider influences as much as heeding what Elizabeth Enslin calls a "redrawing of self/other distinction" to widen "the ethnographic canon to include first-person accounts . . ."⁴⁴ For Robert Merton, "[w]e no longer ask whether it is the 'Insider' or the 'Outsider' who has monopolistic or privileged access to social truth; instead, we [ought] to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking."⁴⁵

I have also reflected on the critical term called "perspective" in order to understand the context in which I worked in an inclusive way and to present an objective analysis.⁴⁶ However, I did not wish to truncate and sacrifice the richness of personal experiences to fit with a theoretical framework. I was conscious of the fact that I too may be looked on as an "outsider," albeit in a very different context. However, I see myself as an "insider" writing the history of my own people, although I am writing for a predominantly Western academic audience. Thus, I was/am faced with the task of maintaining what Obioma Nnaemeka called "a balanced distance between alienation and over-identification."⁴⁷ As an insider, it was possible for me to translate some of the unspoken words and actions into the spoken, because a phrase sometimes represents a very long story or a deep sense of emotion. I have had to deal with the problem of interpretation and mediation within my own culture. Since both the "insider" and "outsider" perspectives have the possibility of distortions and preconceptions of social reality, my task has been to evaluate the distinctive advantages and limitations of each perspective in relationship to my own research. As Raphael Samuel rightly argues, "[t]he historian's own sense

⁴²Ibid, 21.

⁴³Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "African Historical Studies, Academic Knowledge as 'Usable Past' and Radical Scholarship," *African Studies Review* 32/1(1989), 9.

⁴⁴Elizabeth Enslin, "Beyond Writing: Feminist Practice and the Limitations of Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 9(1994), 537-38.

⁴⁵Merton, "Insiders and Outsiders," 9-47; Kikumura, "Family Life," 141.

⁴⁶For a cautionary note see Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in *The Black Aesthetics*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York, 1971), 315-26.

⁴⁷Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: from Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton, 1997), 2.

of personal identity may place limitations on his/her work,” but can also “it gives it thrust and direction.”⁴⁸

My interest in life history narratives and the kind of data I wanted to collect obviously influenced the outcome of my research. Participants talked freely about general trends and more reluctantly about some aspects of individual lives. In other situations, informants were glad to talk to me but reluctant to discuss certain aspects of their lives. The assumption was that such information might be shared with other people in their community. Informants often referred to themselves in the third person. In such cases, people generalized personal experiences when discussing traumatic events or poverty. I have tried to contextualize these issues by moving between different levels of analysis, from the social and cultural norms/values of the Igbo and my own understanding of participants’ personal emotions to the collective experience of the group. The tendency to generalize personal experiences I have also translated as representing collective identity and reality.⁴⁹

Oral historians must also deal with the problem of memory, which is human and fallible. But as Hoopes succinctly put it, “[a]ll historical documents, including both oral and written, reflect the particular subjective minds of their creators.”⁵⁰ Although written records appear less subjective and distorted by memory and, therefore, widely accepted by a better source of “facts” than oral documents, historians who do not regard written sources as suspect do so at their own peril.⁵¹ This is a valid argument for combining oral testimonies and other sources, but it must be emphasized again that all sources are the result of individual interpretations of events and subject to bias. What oral history does best, according to this line of thought, is to give a “feel” for the “facts” that can be provided only by one who experienced them. Conscious of the need for a historical perspective on the agricultural change in the region, I urged my participants to recount their own experiences and to remember specific events in their own lives and those of their parents/family. Many recounted the nature of agricultural change at different historical times. The perils inherent in this method are recognized and a balanced view achieved by combining oral sources with primary and secondary sources. To minimize the perils associated with oral information, I often cross-checked individual stories with others for accuracy concerning the same period and events.

⁴⁸Raphael Samuel, ed., *Village Life and Labor* (London, 1975), 1-26.

⁴⁹It was interesting how people often used the expression “we” when discussing their civil war experience.

⁵⁰Hoopes, *Oral History*, 15. For comments on the problematic of text and archived materials see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and The Verbal Arts: a Guide to Research Practice* (London, 1992), 82.

⁵¹Hoopes, *Oral History*, 15.

Despite the semblance of a homogenous society in central Igboland, the effects of agricultural change varied widely among individuals and gender. The variations are not limited to individual circumstances, but extend to ecological differences which affected particular processes and responses to the agricultural change. While the pace of transformation in the palm oil industry has a long history for some individuals or societies, the experiences of others could be traced to more recent times. The pace of change partly depended on the physical environment and historic links with the external market, which began long before the colonial era. Nevertheless, the broad views in addition to individual stories present a balanced picture of the complexities of agricultural change in Igboland and how farmers have adapted.

We are also dealing with memory, selective remembering, and how changing circumstances in the present affect how people understand and explain the past. For the colonial period in particular, one must bear in mind what Stoler and Strassler argued regarding the colonial encounter: “[w]e need to understand not only what is remembered and why, but also how the ‘colonial’ is situated in popular memory.”⁵² Although the historical evidence does not support any extended period of unbridled peasant prosperity, many of them think of the old times as better. For many peasants, however, there exist few reference points for comparing the “past” and the more recent history. This means that the effects of agricultural change lie in different time frames and memory; hence informants differ in the interpretation of the impacts of agricultural transformation.

Throughout most of the early parts of the twentieth century, there were relatively very few individuals with large-scale capital accumulation. In comparative terms, people met their subsistence needs with less difficulty in the colonial and early post-independence period than in the later periods, but this does not suggest the absence of problems in the agricultural economy. Indeed, incomes have increased more than what they were before the 1960s, but people spend more on education, healthcare, and on maintaining new life styles. As Linus Anabalam explains, “[r]ising income levels have not translated into greater material welfare. The rising expectations of modern living have made it much harder for us to cope.”⁵³

The ambivalence that emerged between peasant perceptions and subsequent analysis were resolved by looking at the issues in time perspective. It is significant to emphasize that rural farmers’ needs were limited, and they

⁵²On colonial memory see Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, “Casting for the Colonial: Memory in ‘New Order Java,’” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42(2000), 4-48; and Mitchell Richard Jr. and Charmaz Kathy, “Telling Tales, Writing Stories: Postmodernist Visions and Realists Images in Ethnographic Writing,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 25(1996), 144-66.

⁵³Interview with Linus Anabalam, Mbaise, 13 December 1998.

satisfied most basic needs without much difficulty before the post-independence period. Ironically, many peasants, most of the time, went about the business of subsistence and survival without much concern about the existence of the state or of state control mechanisms and how they impinged on their lives. The task of the historian therefore is to reconcile the individual and collective histories of peasants and their response to social and economic change.

The impacts of agricultural change and peasant survival strategies have never been homogenous; nevertheless, there are commonalities. Responses in the early colonial period centered on increasing production and strategies to counter falling producer prices, which intermittently reduced producer income. While some informants do not conceptualize their actions as responses to market forces created by a world market beyond their immediate society, I have interpreted them as indications of stress in the rural economy.

Oral narratives attempt to bring history closer to the central concerns of people's lives, both through the framework of inquiry (the questions asked and the way in which evidence is evaluated), and through the use of personal experiences and oral testimony to interpret the records of the past. As a valuable framework for social history research, it is necessary to know the inner life of the household—the competition for authority and lives, the allocation of domestic roles—to give a convincing account of the way external forces shape it. The importance of oral history in the study of agricultural change is that it includes the voice of peasants who are directly affected by the sector's prospects and problems.⁵⁴ As Raphael Samuel argues, “[m]uch history has been written from the point of view of those who have or have attempted to run other people's lives, and little from the real-life experience of people themselves.”⁵⁵ But overall, the examination of peasant life helps to highlight the intellectual and cultural depth of Igbo farming.

I had some practical advantages during my fieldwork. I worked in an area where I understood and spoke the local language. Thus I was able to observe social and economic conditions and participate in local/village

⁵⁴See for example, Iyegha, *Agricultural Crisis*, especially chapter 8. Though Iyegha's survey-type questionnaire limits the ability to record individual histories, his work buttresses the need for more people-oriented study of Africa's agrarian and economic problems.

⁵⁵Samuel, *Village Life*, xx. This and other volumes are based on history workshops held at Ruskin College, loosely organized around the theme of “Family, Work and Home. See especially the five volumes on *Work: Village Life and Labor*; *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers*; *The Workshop Traders*; *Women's Trades*; and *The Uniformed Working Class*. Among the Igbo the recent social history of the Biafra-Nigeria civil war represents such an endeavor. See Axel Harneit-Sievers, Jones O. Ahazuem, and Sydney Emezue, *A Social History of the Civil War: Perspectives from Below* (Enugu, 1997).

meetings, attend local markets, and be invited into private homes for closer interaction. I am well grounded in the knowledge of the society, and my familiarity with some of the participants was naturally an advantage. Many of them spoke to me freely because they perceived me as one of their own. I also had the advantage of following up three participants, with whom I had built good rapport while researching widowhood in parts of the area in 1996.

I conducted interviews between December 1998 and July 1999 and briefly in 2000 in rural Igbo farming households. My interviews and discussions with thirty men and ten women explored both the farming household and the farming environment. My interest extended to the farmer as a category and to his/her land-holding, labor, farming activities, problems encountered in farming, and survival strategies, as well as to the soil, population pressure, and other internal and external factors affecting the processes of agricultural transformation.

In selecting participants I considered the person's background and experience. I was interested in those with historical insight, that is, who knew the significance of what they have lived through. More than 80% of my informants were above the age of 60, and many possessed valuable knowledge of the issues involved in the study. While all participants self-identified as farmers, many had other, non-farming, occupations. Some male informants had migrated at one time or another, while some of my female informants were widows, although not often the head of the household.

I sought to identify general patterns throughout the region through individual histories and experiences. In this regard, I asked questions in the context of individual experience while also looking for typical patterns for comparative purposes. The guiding questions were framed to elicit a narrative answer/response and were based on the following themes: farming activities, gender and farming experiences, special incidents that may have affected agricultural production/activity in the area, implications/effects of agricultural crisis, and survival strategies. The format was an unstructured interview based on prior analysis of data drawn from secondary and archival sources and on the guiding questions. The form of each interview was non-directive and conversational, although always directed on my initiative. The non-directive structure facilitated flexibility and free response, and allowed for modification of questions or pursuit of new and relevant topics. I set out to conduct two-hour sessions with participants, but some ended up being longer, others shorter. In the course of an interview, other people might drop by and participate in the sessions. I found that I had to interview some participants more than once because I needed to probe certain issues further.

During the interview sessions, two possible obstacles were put into perspective to minimize bias. The first was the extent and the manner in which the response would be affected by the “male/female presence situation.” The second was interviewer influence, that is, my being a man of higher education and of apparent authority. In other words, would the results have been significantly different if a woman had interviewed the female respondents, if some respondents were interviewed in the absence of their male/female folks and by another person, probably of a different sex?⁵⁶

There is also the issue of power relations between researchers and subjects. In my case it may have played a part on two levels. There were those who perceived my status as higher and were willing to compromise with their time to suit me. There were others who dictated the time and place of the interview, and obviously saw themselves as higher status because they had information that I needed. I have not glossed over these differences or their effects on the responses and expectations of particular interviewees. In some cases age was an important factor and in others, status differentiated me from the participant. I have dealt with these issues not only as a historian through a critical interpretation of the data, but also by applying my own knowledge of the culture as an Igbo.

Some of the women who were interviewed in the presence of their spouses were occasionally reluctant to answer some questions. These women expected their spouses to provide information dealing directly with the household. The power relations between the man and his wife/ves and what information is for public knowledge dictated how these women responded to questions. Thus I recognize that I am dealing with not only individual histories, but also a collective history. A family’s honor and the need for each member to protect it often dictated how people presented themselves to an “outsider.”⁵⁷

Recording of the interviews made some of the participants very conscious of what they said. Sometimes informants gave very important information off the tape. Some participants would offer striking laughter, as if to say, “You are an Igbo, you should know [the answer].” This raised key cultural issues on two levels. On one level, there are certain things that are regarded as common knowledge. As an Igbo adage goes, *Atuora mmadu*

⁵⁶For a similar perspective see Nakanyike, B. Musisi, “Transformation of Baganda Women from the Earliest Times to the Demise of the Kingdom in 1966” (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1991); and Diane Bell, Pat Caplan, and Wazir Johan Karim, eds., (London, 1993).

⁵⁷There are some issues that people believe should not be discussed in public, since it behooves on every member of the household or the lineage to present a good image of the unit. Anything that brings shame to the individual also brings shame to the collective unit. This is in line with the Igbo adage, *Otu mkpisi aka ruta mmanu ya ezuo ibe ya* (if one finger is dipped into [palm] oil it will smear the others).

ilu kowaa ya, ego e jiri luo nne ya furu obia (“If you tell someone a proverb and at the same time must explain its meaning to him/her, the bridewealth paid on the person’s mother is a waste”). They saw me as belonging to the society, an insider in a sense. Consequently, they expected me to understand certain nuances and unspoken words as well as any other fully-acculturated member of the group. As a result, I operated efficiently in the society with a secure identity. In contrast, the person without knowledge of community traditions is a stranger in town, without proper identity, and is open to being treated as ignorant. In other words, while certain questions were important to me as a researcher, the cultural context in which I was working and my understanding of the cultural expectations as an Igbo influenced how I asked questions. On the second level, the age difference between the participants and me was an important factor in how I probed personal lives. I tried to tread carefully to ensure that I respected the values of the society and the personal integrity of my informants. Overall, the participants had more information on contemporary periods than on the earlier parts of the century.

My interviews were conducted in the Igbo language. In some instances I translated word-for-word and in others meaning-to-meaning to capture best respondents’ ideas. I have translated the interview tapes to the best of my linguistic ability, but ensuring that my translations embody the account provided. In this process I acknowledge that there may be imperfections. I also studied oral data reported by other researchers, including Elizabeth Isichei’s *Igbo World* and various undergraduate and masters theses in Nigerian universities.⁵⁸ The use of these other accounts extended the scope of the present research and the coverage of Igboland.

III

Life histories are central in creating knowledge about rural life. This is particularly true of rural peasants and the lower class in society including women whose experiences have not usually made it into the written record. Texts, as James Hoopes argues, help establish the cultural and social context “without which oral evidence may lack historical significance.”⁵⁹ But I worked in a society where there were few personal diaries

⁵⁸Elizabeth Isichei compiled oral histories from different parts of Igboland dealing with extensively with economic change. This work helps push back the oral information to the early part of the colonial period: Elizabeth Isichei, *Igbo Word: An Anthology of Oral Histories and Historical Descriptions* (Philadelphia, 1976).

⁵⁹For an analysis of how each source of data can help balance the problems inherent in the other see, among others, Hoopes, *Oral*, 15; Charles C. Ragin, “The Logic of Qualitative Comparative Analysis,” *International Review of Social History* 43(1998), 165-84; Pattie Dillon, “Teaching the Past through Oral History,” *Journal of American History* 87(2000), 602-07.

or letters recounting personal experiences. In addition, the use of such sources is still unpopular in many African societies because the use of private letters for historical reconstruction could be seen as an intrusion. While some personal texts detailing everyday activities, as well as the formal records of government, businesses and other organizations existed in the archives, they did not often display the emotions of individuals and communities in the colonial context. At times, the available information was an important tool for propaganda.

For the colonial period, however, many petitions and supplications to colonial officials are located at the National Archives at Enugu. Most are related to the produce trade, particularly the introduction of produce inspection and a new system of buying produce, as well as the fall in the price of palm produce during the Depression. These petitions reflect the personal and group experiences of many due to the disruptions of the rural economy. The evidence might be fragmentary, but the overwhelming reliance on the written sources and the lack of marginalized voices in them call for more sophisticated analysis of existing evidence. These petitions and supplications reveal deep patterns of daily life, subsistence, and the underlying structure of state-peasant relationships.

I consulted agricultural department reports, intelligence reports, and other official publications from 1900 to 1960.⁶⁰ Colonial officials wrote about matters which they considered important or which they were bound to report upon the Colonial Office in London. This means that many aspects of social history were ignored. For the colonial era, periods of unrest prompted greater surveillance of indigenous populations, while food crises often prompted radical changes in local policy, as was the case during World War II. Before the mid-1950s the reports of the Agricultural Department were published to cover the entire country. I consulted the reports on Nigeria for general agricultural policy and information, but I sought specifically the reports on the Eastern Nigeria for information on the study area. The reports, which were written according to a relatively fixed format, provided information on agricultural policies, agricultural innovations, production levels, crops, diet, geography, ecology, soil conservation, land use, and subsistence production. They also revealed the responses by farmers to the cash incentives provided by export markets.

I consulted theme files and reports addressing specific issues such as the food situation and famine. These special reports provided valuable information concerning the condition of agriculture at different historical periods. In addition, specific theme files on women provided useful information on the gender implications of colonial agricultural enterprises. These

⁶⁰Some of these reports were consulted at the African Research Centre, LaTrobe University, Melbourne. Others were consulted at the National Archives of Nigeria, Enugu.

reports provide a wealth of information on social, economic, and administrative history. The reports include details of land values and ownership; business transactions; appointments to official positions; and notifications of government policy and regulations. They also give a sense of the rate at which technological change, such as agricultural tools and machines penetrated the colonies.

I gained a lot of insights from slave narratives in order to reconstruct some aspects of the history of Igboland prior to the colonial period.⁶¹ Several early European accounts made reference to agriculture among the Igbo.⁶²

For historians, it is obvious that documented sources do not raise the same level of suspicion as oral sources. Documentary sources, as Thomas Spear noted, remain the "*sine qua non* for historian," and are often accepted uncritically by historians.⁶³ The value of written records in the reconstruction of African history cannot be overstated. Documents of European origin have remained indispensable in the reconstruction of African history from the period of European contact. Travelers' accounts, missionary accounts, journals, and documents detailing European transactions from the late nineteenth century provide an important range of sources for historians. While these sources provide less evidence for social history, they do contain embedded accounts of life and livelihood from which we can reconstruct a social history of this period.

Yet, European accounts are problematic for a number of reasons. They were produced by outsiders with a high degree of ethnocentricity. According to Toyin Falola, these accounts were not written for Africans, "but largely for European audience."⁶⁴ Many of the Europeans who produced

⁶¹Robert J. Allison ed., *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano Written by Himself* (Boston, 1995). Archibald John Monteith's memoir was written by Reverend Joseph Horsfield Kummer in 1853. Kummer served the Moravian Mission in Jamaica and this account was edited by Vernon H. Nelson from the manuscript in the Archives of the Moravian Church, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: "Archibald John Monteith: Native Helper and Assistant in the Jamaica Mission at New Carmel," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 21(1966), 29-52.

⁶²"Mr. John Grazihier's Voyage from Bandy to New Calabar" in John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (volume 5 in *Churchill's Voyages and Travels* [London, 1746]), 380-81; C.M.S Archives, CA3/010, W. E. Carew, "Journal," January 1866; FO 403/233, Harcourt, Report on the Aquette Expedition, 29 February 1896—29 March 1896; S. R. Smith, "Journey to Nsugbe and Nteje, 1897," *Niger and Yoruba Notes*, 1898; CO 520/31, "Political Report on the Eza Patrol," enclosure in Egerton to Lyttelton, 16 July 1905 and *Western Equatorial Africa Diocesan Magazine* (1904), 29 ff., as cited in Isichei, *Igbo World*, 207-08.

⁶³Thomas Spear, "Section Introduction: New Approaches to Documentary Sources" in Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings eds., *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written and Unearthed* (Rochester, 2003), 169.

⁶⁴Toyin Falola, "Mission and Colonial Documents" in Philips, *Writing African History*, 267.

these documents did not speak the local languages, relied on second-hand accounts (oral information), and were more interested in commercial affairs than other aspects of life. As John Thornton has noted, the vastness of the region meant that European knowledge was limited to a few areas and “far large areas fell outside the European visitors’ observations and even outside their indirect knowledge from local informants.”⁶⁵ This would make some of the early European accounts mere guesswork and imprecise generalization. For example, European visitors to the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made numerous comments on the Igbo and other groups living in the interior from what they gleaned from the coast. While these generalizations provide some means to recover the past, the historian has to use them critically. That they were written does not make them more reliable *ipso facto* than any other source.

Using colonial documents as a prism to examine changes in colonial societies and relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, therefore, calls for a critical examination of colonial documentary sources. Colonial documentary sources may contain concrete datable information, but limitations abound. Statistical data and information on agricultural production during the colonial period may not be the most reliable indicator of aggregate economic performance. How do we make sure that events during the colonial period were recorded factually? How do we make sure that colonial officers did not make history to portray themselves and government programs in a good light? Are the reported data reflections of the perspectives of colonial officials rather than the economic reality?⁶⁶ What kinds of document were preserved or survived, and what types were destroyed, as was the common practice? What did the destroyed documents or expunged information contain?

Close reading of colonial documents show that many bits and pieces of useful information were often omitted in the reports. The content and context under which these documents were produced explain why women, for example, may be omitted from the records. Such blatant omissions in the documents tend to be repeated without a critical reading of what the documents say, but most importantly what they do not say. The effects of the shift to an export-oriented agriculture, the short- and long-term implications of colonial agricultural policies on farmers, the implication for

⁶⁵Thornton, “European Documents,” 255.

⁶⁶In large part colonial officials relied on data from experimental farms under optimum management conditions to estimate food and export crop yields for the provinces and the colony at large. In most cases these conditions differed immensely from the conditions which farmers faced in their natural environments. Such evidence of agricultural performance and conditions are problematic and unsatisfactory in making general conclusions.

subsistence production, and the general quality of life of rural producers are not easily discernible. As in many official records, the voices of the local people are often absent. The official texts also obscure the lives of rural farmers, especially the contributions of the women to agricultural production. The concept of the “genuine farmer,” an expression used in the colonial reports, was based the overwhelming assumption that men were the farmers, while a woman’s work was largely hidden behind her “husband’s products.” A critical reading of the documents, who produced them, and for what purpose reveals how much information can be gleaned from colonial accounts, information that complement oral sources on which many Africanists have come to rely.⁶⁷

Government reports contain a mass of information on economic statistics and agricultural conditions in the colonies, but there is very little information on how the data were collected. Generally, the colonial reports tend to be too optimistic in their estimation and projections of the level of production in the colonies. This is understandable, and even predictable, because the jobs of the colonial officials depended on positive justification of their activities in the colonies. These positive and idealistic reports helped to guarantee more investments in the colonies by the home government. The reports are largely couched within an ideological framework supported by the economic motives of the colonial enterprise. Therefore I have tried to put into perspective the circumstances under which the reports were produced.

To understand the implications of colonialism from the local perspective is not easy because of the contradictions inherent in colonialism. As Thomas Spear argues, “[e]very action, every interchange, within a colonial situation must therefore be looked at from the perspective of the different actors to understand the particular meaning each gave to it.”⁶⁸ This perspective informed my evaluation of colonial sources. Nevertheless, the reports have helped me to demonstrate the evidence of a gendered colonial policy, the emergence of the agricultural crisis during the colonial period, and the social conditions in Igboland in this period. The colonial reports have also been invaluable in putting voices behind official statistics. Archival records are indispensable in the historian’s attempt to understand continuity in human affairs and the search for historical “truth.”

⁶⁷For some new approaches to documentary sources, see Meredith McKittrick, “Capricious Tyrants and Persecuted Subjects: Reading between the Lines of Missionary Records in Pre-colonial Northern Namibia” in Falola/Jennings, *Sources and Methods*, 219-36; Christian Jennings, “They Called Themselves Iloikop: Rethinking Pastoralist History in Nineteenth-Century East Africa” in *ibid.*, 173-94.

⁶⁸Thomas Spear, *Mountain Farmers: Moral Economies of Land and Agricultural Development in Arusha and Meru* (Berkeley, 1997), 11.

As Barbara Cooper argues, “African history, perhaps more than other domains of history, has had to be inventive in its use of sources and eclectic in its approach to evidence . . . due in large part to the relative paucity of written documentary materials.”⁶⁹ The quality of historical documentation was not always consistent. The approach, therefore, has been an experiment in cooperation between oral, archival, and secondary, sources in the exploration of social and economic history. As Cooper remarks, “[o]ur confidence in our reconstruction of the past derives in part from the ways in which these various sources and methods, when used together, can refine, challenge, inspire, reinforce, or confirm one another.”⁷⁰ The quality of these sources lies in the combination of a large spectrum of official and secondary data with individual experiences in order to understand the pattern of agricultural change among the Igbo. And, despite their shortcomings as individual sources collectively, they link the past and the present and integrate individual and personal experiences to social explanations of agricultural change. This study helps to put texts and people together and to allow a range of individuals or circumstances to be understood in a responsive way. With this knowledge, one can understand how, over a relatively small region, subtle differences can exist in economic and social organization and also expose ideologies that are not primordial, but constantly shifting.

⁶⁹Barbara M. Cooper, “Oral Sources and the Challenge of African History,” in Philips, *Writing African History* (Rochester, 2005), 191.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*