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THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN TRADE ON SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND POWER DYNAMICS IN OLD CALABAR, NIGERIA, 1847–1877

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the transformative impact of European trade on the social structures and power dynamics of Old Calabar between 1847 and 1877. Following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, European trading firms redirected their commercial interests toward palm oil, reshaping the economic foundations of the region. The transition from slave exports to commodity trade not only altered patterns of wealth accumulation but also redefined political authority among the Efik and Ibibio communities. Traditional institutions such as the Ekpe society and the Obong monarchy adapted to new realities, negotiating with European merchants while consolidating internal control. European firms introduced new hierarchies of influence, and empowered certain elites, and marginalised others; this gradually eroded indigenous autonomy. This period also marked the intensification of European intervention in local governance, and laid the groundwork for colonial subjugation. By situating Old Calabar within broader Atlantic trade networks, the research highlighted how commerce became a vehicle for cultural exchange, social reorganisation, and political realignment. Drawing on archival records, oral traditions, and secondary literature, the study underscores the dual legacy of European trade: economic integration into global markets and the destabilisation of indigenous institutions, ultimately paving the way for colonial rule in southeastern Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: European trading firms, Palm oil trade, Efik and Ibibio societies, Ekpe society, colonial subjugation, Power dynamics.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Old Calabar in the nineteenth century represents one of the most dynamic intersections of indigenous African institutions and European commercial expansion. Situated along the Atlantic coast and the Cross River estuary, Old Calabar was not merely a geographical entity but a vibrant socio-political and economic hub that connected hinterland communities with global trade networks. By the mid-nineteenth century, the region had already undergone centuries of transformation through its participation in the transatlantic slave trade. However, the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the subsequent British naval blockade in 1839 forced a dramatic reconfiguration of its economic foundations. The period between 1847 and 1877, therefore, stands as a crucial epoch in which European trading firms consolidated their presence, palm oil became the dominant export commodity, and indigenous institutions were compelled to adapt to new realities.

The choice of 1847 as the starting point of this study is deliberate. It marks the effective end of slave trading activities in Old Calabar and the beginning of sustained commodity trade, particularly palm oil. By this time, European firms, especially those based in Liverpool, had begun to establish permanent trading posts and networks in the region. The termination point of 1877 is equally significant, as it coincides with a period of economic recession and decline in palm oil prices, which weakened the indigenous economy and exposed Old Calabar to deeper European political intervention. Thus, the thirty-year span under review encapsulated both the zenith and the decline of Old Calabar's palm oil economy, while it highlighted the socio-political transformations that accompanied this transition.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the wealth of literature on Old Calabar, much of the scholarship has focused narrowly on either the slave trade era or the broader Nigerian context, leaving gaps in understanding the specific impact of European trading firms during the palm oil boom. Works such as G. I. Jones' *From Slaves to Palm Oil* and Monday E. Noah's *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans* provide valuable insights into economic and political developments, but often neglect the nuanced interplay between commerce and social structures. Moreover, fragmented histories of individual communities have made it difficult to reconstruct a comprehensive narrative of the region as a whole. This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining how European trade reshaped indigenous institutions, altered power dynamics, and laid the groundwork for colonial subjugation.

Objectives of the study

The research is guided by four key objectives:

a) To examine the socio-cultural institutions that characterised Old Calabar during the period under review.

b) To assess the impact of European trading firms on the political and economic structures of the region.

c) To evaluate the contributions of European firms, to the development and transformation of Old Calabar.

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d) To determine the extent to which European commercial activities facilitated the subjugation of the region.

The research is guided by the following questions:

a) What were the socio-cultural institutions in Old Calabar during the period under study?

b) What was the impact of European of European firms on the political and economic structures?

c) What were the contributions of European companies to the development and transformation of Old Calabar?

d) How did European firms facilitate the subjugation of the region?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to African historiography by situating Old Calabar within the broader context of Atlantic trade networks while it emphasised local agency and adaptation. It highlights the dual legacy of European trade: on one hand, economic integration into global markets; on the other, the destabilisation of indigenous institutions and the erosion of autonomy. By focusing on the period 1847–1877, the research underscored how commerce became a vehicle for cultural exchange, social reorganisation, and political realignment. Furthermore, it provides a framework for understanding the complex relationship between trade and colonialism, offering insights that remain relevant to contemporary debates on globalisation and dependency.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from sociology, anthropology, and economic history. Primary sources include archival documents, missionary records, and oral traditions, while secondary sources encompass scholarly monographs, journal articles, and regional histories. Comparative analysis is employed to situate Old Calabar within wider West African and Atlantic contexts. This methodological blend ensures a holistic understanding of the subject matter, balancing quantitative data on trade volumes with qualitative insights into social and cultural transformations.

Structure of the Paper

The paper is organised into eight sections. Following this introduction, the literature review critically engages with existing scholarship and identifies gaps. The third section provides a historical background on the land and people of Old Calabar, emphasised geography, origins, and socio-political institutions. The fourth section examines the transition from slave trade to palm oil economy, while the fifth analyses the role of European trading firms and their interaction with indigenous power structures. The sixth section explores socio-cultural

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consequences, including missionary influence and cultural exchange. The seventh section discusses how trade paved the way for colonial rule, and the final section concludes with a synthesis of findings and suggestions for future research.

The article argued that European trade between 1847 and 1877 fundamentally reshaped the social structures and power dynamics of Old Calabar. While indigenous institutions such as the Ekpe society and the Obong monarchy adapted to new economic realities, their authority was increasingly undermined by European firms. European goods and capital created new hierarchies of wealth and influence, empowered certain elites and marginalised others. Moreover, the reliance on European trade fostered economic dependency, which in turn facilitated political intervention and eventual colonial subjugation. Thus, the period under review represents not merely an economic transition but a profound social and political transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historiography of Old Calabar and its trading activities has attracted considerable scholarly attention, yet much of the existing literature remains fragmented, either focused narrowly on the slave trade era or offering broad generalisations about Nigeria's nineteenth-century economy. To situate this study within the wider body of scholarship, it is necessary to examine the contributions of key authors, identify their limitations, and highlight the gaps that this research intends to fill.

Early Economic Histories in Old Calabar

One of the most influential works on the transition from slavery to palm oil is G I. Jones' book, *From Slaves to Palm Oil: Slave Trade and Palm Oil Trade in the Bight of Biafra* (1989). Jones provides a detailed account of how the abolition of the slave trade created the conditions for palm oil to emerge as the dominant export commodity. He emphasises the economic significance of palm oil, noting its role in European industrialisation, particularly in soap and candle manufacturing. Jones also highlights the persistence of market principles in African societies, where money was used not only in trade but also in social transactions such as marriage and fines. However, while Jones offers valuable insights into the economic dimension, his analysis is limited in scope. He paid little attention to the social and political consequences of the transition; particularly how European trading firms reshaped indigenous institutions.

Jacob M. Price, in his essay "*Credit in the Slave Trade and Plantation Economies*" (1991), explored the financial mechanisms that underpinned slave trade. He argued that the use of credit and cash substitutes expanded the scale of the trade, and enabled merchants to operate across vast distances. Price's work is significant for understanding the economic logic of the slave trade, but it does not address the subsequent shift to commodity trade in Old Calabar. His focus remained on the Atlantic system as a whole, and left regional dynamics underexplored.

David Richardson's *Slave Exports from West and West Central Africa, 1700–1810,* (1989) provided quantitative estimates of slave exports, and demonstrated the scale of Africa's contribution to the transatlantic economy. Richardson's statistical approach is invaluable for

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contextualising the decline of the slave trade, but like Price, his work does not extend into the palm oil era.

Political Histories and European Intervention

Monday E. Noah's *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans, 1800–1885,* (1980) offered a political history of Old Calabar, focused on the role of European agents such as John Beecroft. Noah described Beecroft's interventions in local politics, including his role in the succession of King Archibong in 1852. He portrayed Beecroft as a kingmaker who wielded considerable influence through treaties and gunboat diplomacy. Noah's work is crucial for understanding the political dimension of European presence, yet it does not provide a systematic analysis of trading firms as economic actors. His emphasis on individuals and political events leaves the broader structural impact of commerce underexplored.

Latham's *Old Calabar, 1600–1891,* (1973) examines the long-term evolution of Calabar's economy and politics. Latham highlights the role of Duke Ephraim (Effiom Edem), who consolidated power through his leadership of the Ekpe society and the Obong monarchy. Latham shows how Duke Ephraim monopolised customs duties and undermined the local salt industry, thereby reinforcing his dominance in both slave and palm oil trade. This analysis is valuable for understanding indigenous agency, yet Latham's focus on individual leadership does not fully capture the systemic influence of European firms.

Tekena Tamuno, A. Mahadi, and U. Anyanwu's book, *History of Nigeria: Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century* (1991), situates the transition from slave to commodity trade within the broader Nigerian context. They argued that the abolition of the slave trade created the need for alternative products, leading to the rise of palm oil and other raw materials. Their work emphasised the social and political consequences of this transition, including increased European intervention. However, their analysis is general and does not provide a detailed case study of Old Calabar.

Missionary Accounts and Cultural Perspectives

Missionary writings also contribute to the historiography of Old Calabar. William Robert's, book, *12 Great Christian Missionaries* (2007), discussed Mary Slessor's work in Calabar, highlighting, her efforts to combat slavery and promote education. While missionary accounts provided valuable insights into cultural encounters, they often reflected Eurocentric biases and failed to capture the complexities of indigenous institutions.

Eyo O. Mensah and David L. Imbua's article *Street Names in Calabar Metropolis, (2015),* offered, a socio-historical perspective, and showed how colonial and missionary legacies are inscribed in urban spaces. Their work underscores the lasting impact of European presence, but it, focuses, on the twentieth century rather than the mid-nineteenth.

Ikenna U. Unya's *Themes in Nigerian History and Governance* (2019), emphasised the gradual decline of slave dealers' wealth and the adaptation to commodity trade. Unya highlighted the varied responses of Nigerian states; some cooperated with, Europeans and others intensified trade with neighbours. His analysis is useful for understanding regional diversity, but it does not provide a detailed examination of Old Calabar's unique institutions.

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Uwem Akpan's, *Akwa Ibom and Her Neighbours,* (2018) explores regional diplomacy, shedding light on the interconnectedness of Ibibio communities with neighbouring groups. His work is relevant for situating Old Calabar within a wider regional context, though it does not focus specifically on European firms.

Identified Gaps

From this review, several gaps emerged:

Limited focus on European trading firms: While scholars have examined economic transitions and political interventions, few have analysed the specific role of European firms in reshaping indigenous institutions.

Fragmented community histories: Existing works often focused on individual towns or leaders, leaving the broader regional dynamics underexplored.

Neglect of social restructuring: Economic analyses dominated the literature, while the social consequences of trade; such as changes in hierarchy, gender roles, and cultural practices—remained under examined.

Insufficient integration of multidisciplinary perspectives: Most studies adopted either economic or political lenses, without combining sociology, anthropology, and history to provide a holistic view.

Contributions of this Study

This research addressed these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of European trading firms in Old Calabar between 1847 and 1877. It integrated economic, political, and cultural perspectives to show how trade reshaped social structures and power dynamics. By focusing on the interplay between European firms and indigenous institutions, the study highlights the dual legacy of commerce: economic integration into global markets and the erosion of local autonomy.

Historical Background: Land and People of Old Calabar

Understanding the impact of European trade on Old Calabar required a careful reconstruction of the region's geography, origins, and socio-political institutions. The land and people of Old Calabar were not isolated entities but part of a dynamic cultural and economic system that stretched across southeastern Nigeria, southern Cameroon, and even Fernando Po (modern-day Bioko, Equatorial Guinea, also popularly known locally as '*panya'*). This background illuminated why Old Calabar became a focal point of European commercial interest and how indigenous institutions shaped, and were reshaped by, external trade.

Geography and Environment

Old Calabar occupied a strategic position along the Atlantic coast on the Cross River estuary. Geographically, it laid between latitude 4°57′ and 5°15′ North and longitude 7°15′ and 8°20′ East. To the north, it was bounded by the Benue region; to the west by Igbo communities; to the east by Cameroon; and to the south by the Atlantic Ocean. This location placed Old Calabar at the crossroads of inland and maritime trade routes.

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The region was characterised by dense rainforest vegetation, abundant rainfall, and a network of rivers and creeks. The Cross River, navigable for nearly 480 kilometers, served as the main artery of commerce, linking inland communities to the coast. Tributaries such as the Qua Iboe River, Calabar River, and Akpayafe created a complex drainage system that facilitated transportation and trade. Mangrove swamps lined the riverbanks, and provided natural harbours for European ships. This geography made Old Calabar one of the "Oil Rivers," a term used by Europeans to describe the palm oil-rich estuaries of the Niger Delta.

Climate also played a crucial role. With annual rainfall averaging 140 inches, the region was ideal for palm oil production. The rainy season, between May and July, and the dry season, from November to April, structured agricultural cycles and trade rhythms. The abundance of palm trees, coupled with navigable waterways, made Old Calabar a natural hub for the palm oil economy that replaced the slave trade.

Origins of the Efik People

The Efik, the dominant ethnic group in Old Calabar, traced their origins to the Ibibio people. Oral traditions suggest that the Efik migrated from the Ibibio hinterland due to ethnic wars and religious disputes. One account placed their early settlement in Arochukwu, where conflict with the Aro people over religious practices forced them to migrate further south. They refused to worship the Aro deity, *Ibritamchuku*, the Efik maintained their devotion to Abasi Ibom, the Ibibio god, and eventually relocated to the Cross River estuary. (Duopeba, 2014)

By the seventeenth century, the Efik had established settlements in Creek Town, Duke Town, and Henshaw Town. These communities became the nucleus of Old Calabar's political and economic life. The Efik name itself, meaning "oppressors," reflected their reputation as dominant traders and intermediaries between inland producers and European merchants. Their coastal location and entrepreneurial spirit positioned them as key players in both the slave trade and the subsequent palm oil economy.

Origins of the Ibibio People

The Ibibio, closely related to the Efik, are believed to have migrated from the Central Benue valley, the cradle of Bantu expansion. Their migration southward was driven by population pressures, conflicts, and the search for fertile land. Some groups settled in Usak Edet on the Nigeria-Cameroon border before moving into present-day Akwa Ibom. Oral traditions recount multiple migration routes: some Ibibio arrived by sea through Eket, Oron, and Ibeno; others traveled overland through Uruan and Arochukwu. (Edet, 1983)

The Ibibio established communities across southeastern Nigeria, including Eket, Oron, and Annang. Their settlement patterns reflected both agricultural needs and political rivalries. For instance, disputes over leadership symbols such as the elephant horn led to wars that dispersed groups along the Atlantic coastline. The Ibibio's widespread presence and cultural influence shaped the broader socio-political landscape of Old Calabar.

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Socio-Political Institutions of the Efik

The Efik developed a sophisticated socio-political system centered on the **Ekpe society** and the **Obong monarchy**. The Ekpe (also known as *Ekpo*) was a graded secret male society that functioned as both a judicial and executive authority. It enforced laws, judged cases, maintained peace, and regulated trade. The Ekpe's use of *Nsibidi*, a system of ideographic writing, and Ukara textiles symbolised its cultural authority.

The Obong, or paramount ruler, was elected from among the heads of major houses and served as the political leader of the Efik. His authority was reinforced by his position within the Ekpe society. Together, the Obong and Ekpe created a dual system of governance that balanced ritual authority with practical administration. This system allowed the Efik to regulate commerce, including deals with European traders, and to maintain internal cohesion.

Cultural practices such as the ***Nkuho*** (fattening room for women) and ***Ekombi*** (dance) reinforced social identity and hierarchy. These institutions provided continuity and stability, even as external trade introduced new challenges. (Anwana, 2009: Ekarika, 2014)

Socio-Political Institutions of the Ibibio

The Ibibio political structure was organised into five divisions: ***idip*** (family), ***ufok*** (compound), ***ekpuk*** (lineage), ***idung*** (village), and ***ikpaisong*** (clan). At the family level, authority rested with the husband, assisted by his senior wife and eldest son. Lineages and villages were governed by councils of elders, while clans were overseen by the ***ikpaisong***, which functioned as a supreme council. (Ekong, 1983), (Edet, 1983)

This decentralised system emphasised collective decision-making and accountability. Laws were made and enforced by elders; sanctions ranged from fines to ostracism. The Ibibio also maintained age-grade institutions that organised labour, defense, and social activities. Like the Efik, they integrated political, social, and economic functions; it reflected the holistic nature of pre-colonial African governance.

Economic Activities in Old Calabar

Before European trade, the people of Old Calabar were primarily fishermen and farmers. The rivers provided abundant fish, while the rainforest supported agriculture. The introduction of the slave trade shifted economic focus toward human exports; the Efik acted as middlemen between inland suppliers and European buyers. The abolition of the slave trade forced a return to agricultural commodities, particularly palm oil.

Palm oil production became the backbone of the economy; women played a central role in processing and marketing. Market trading was a vital source of income, and almost every able-bodied woman participated in commerce. This gendered division of labour highlighted the social impact of trade, as women gained economic influence through market activities.

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Significance of Geography and Institutions

The geography of Old Calabar made it a natural hub for trade, while its institutions provided the framework for the regulation of commerce and maintenance of order. The Efik and Ibibio systems of governance were resilient but not immune to external pressures. European trading firms exploited these structures, negotiated with the Obong and Ekpe society and gradually undermined their authority. The combination of strategic location, rich resources, and complex institutions explained why Old Calabar became a focal point of European interest and why its social structures were so profoundly affected by trade.

Transition from Slave Economy to Palm Oil Economy

The mid-nineteenth century marked a watershed in the economic history of Old Calabar. For centuries, the region had thrived as a major hub in the transatlantic slave trade; the Efik and Ibibio acted as intermediaries between inland suppliers and European merchants. However, the abolition of the slave trade by Britain in 1807, followed by the naval blockade of the Bight of Biafra in 1839, forced a dramatic reorientation of commerce. The period between 1847 and 1877 witnessed the decline of slave exports and the rise of palm oil as the principal commodity; this reshaped the economic foundations of Old Calabar and altered its social and political structures.

Decline of Slave Trade

The slave trade in Old Calabar had reached its peak in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thousands of enslaved Africans were exported annually to the Americas; this generated immense wealth for local elites and European merchants. Yet by the early nineteenth century, abolitionist movements in Europe and America had gained momentum. Britain, the leading naval power, took decisive steps to suppress the trade and deployed warships to intercept slave vessels along the West African coast.

The blockade of 1839 effectively curtailed slave exports from Old Calabar. Local elites, who had depended on the trade for wealth and political power, faced economic decline. The disruption of the slave economy created a vacuum that demanded alternative sources of income. This transition was not immediate; clandestine slave trading continued in some areas, but the risks and costs increasingly outweighed the benefits. By the 1840s, palm oil had emerged as the most viable substitute.

Rise of Palm Oil Trade

Palm oil, derived from the fruit of the oil palm tree, had long been used locally for cooking, lighting, and ritual purposes. Its commercial potential, however, was realised only in the nineteenth century, when industrialisation in Europe created demand for raw materials. Palm oil became essential for soap, candles, lubricants, and later, margarine.

European trading firms, particularly those based in Liverpool, quickly seized the opportunity. Having lost their slave-trading profits, they redirected capital and networks toward palm oil. By 1857, exports from Old Calabar reached 26,050 tons; this reflected the rapid expansion of the trade. Prices initially soared, as palm oil sold for as much as £50 per ton in Britain. This boom enriched both European merchants and local elites, who adapted their production systems to meet demand. (Dike, 1966), (Latham, 1973)

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Economic Consequences

The transition from slave trade to palm oil economy had profound economic consequences**:**

Shift in Wealth Distribution: Whereas the slave trade concentrated wealth in the hands of a few powerful elites, palm oil production involved broader participation. Women played a central role in processing and marketing palm oil, thereby gained economic influence.

Integration into Global Markets: Old Calabar became part of a global commodity chain, as it linked African producers to European industries. This integration created new dependencies, as local economies became tied to fluctuations in international prices.

Price Volatility: The initial boom was followed by decline. By the 1860s, prices fell to £40 per ton, and by 1875 to £36. This volatility destabilised the local economy, made it vulnerable to global recessions.

Expansion of Inland Trade: To meet demand, traders extended their networks deeper into the hinterland, created new catchment areas for palm oil. This expansion intensified competition and sometimes led to conflicts over resources.

Social Consequences

The economic transition also reshaped social structures**:**

Empowerment of Women: Women's role in palm oil processing and marketing gave them greater economic agency. Market trading became a vital source of income; it altered gender dynamics within households and communities.

Transformation of Elites: Traditional elites, such as the Obong and Ekpe society, adapted to the new economy and regulated palm oil trade and negotiated with European firms. Their authority, however, was increasingly challenged by the wealth and influence of European merchants.

Decline of Slave Dealers: Those who had depended on slave trade saw their wealth diminish. Some attempted to resist the transition, but most eventually cooperated with European firms to sustain their status.

Political Consequences

The rise of palm oil trade had political implications:

Negotiations with Europeans: Local rulers entered into treaties with European firms, granted trade rights and sometimes political influence. These agreements eroded indigenous autonomy.

Gunboat Diplomacy: European merchants, backed by Britain's naval power, enforced compliance. Resistance was met with threats or actual bombardments, as seen in Beecroft's interventions.

Centralisation of Authority: The need to regulate palm oil trade strengthened institutions like the Ekpe society, which acted as a judicial and executive authority. Yet this centralisation also made indigenous systems more vulnerable to European manipulation.

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Prelude to Palm Oil Decline

By the 1870s, the palm oil economy faced challenges. Global recessions reduced demand, while overproduction kept prices low. The economic downturn of 1877 marked a turning point, weakened local elites, and exposed Old Calabar to deeper European intervention. The decline of palm oil trade set the stage for colonial subjugation, as economic dependency translated into political vulnerability.

European Trading Firms and Indigenous Power Structures

The period between 1847 and 1877 witnessed the consolidation of European trading firms in Old Calabar, a development that profoundly altered the region's socio-political landscape. These firms, primarily British and especially Liverpool-based, were not merely economic actors but agents of structural transformation. Their presence reshaped indigenous institutions, empowered certain elites, marginalised others, and gradually eroded local autonomy. To understand this process, it is necessary to examine the strategies of European firms, the responses of indigenous elites, and the broader consequences for social and political organisation.

Emergence of European Trading Firms

Following the abolition of the slave trade, former slave-trading companies quickly redirected their capital and networks toward palm oil. Liverpool merchants, who had dominated the slave trade in Old Calabar, established permanent trading posts along the Cross River estuary. These firms operated warehouses, employed agents, and maintained fleets of ships to transport palm oil to Europe.

The firms were highly competitive and often undercut one another to secure favourable terms with local suppliers. Yet they also cooperated, when necessary, formed cartels to stabilise prices or lobbied the British government for naval protection. Their dual strategy of competition and cooperation allowed them to dominate the palm oil trade by the mid-nineteenth century.

Strategies of European Firms

European trading firms employed several strategies to secure control over commerce in Old Calabar:

Monopolisation of Trade: Firms sought exclusive contracts with local chiefs, offered them credit, firearms, and luxury goods in exchange for palm oil. This created dependency and limited indigenous bargaining power.

Treaties and Agreements: Merchants negotiated treaties that granted those trading rights and sometimes political privileges. These agreements often undermined traditional authority, as chiefs ceded control over trade routes and markets.

Gunboat Diplomacy: Backed by British naval power, firms enforced compliance through threats or bombardments. Resistance was met with military intervention, as seen in John Beecroft's use of gunboats to intimidate recalcitrant chiefs.

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Introduction of European Goods: Firms imported salt, textiles, alcohol, and firearms, which became integral to local economies. These goods altered consumption patterns and created new forms of wealth and status.

Indigenous Elites and Adaptation

Indigenous elites, particularly the Efik, responded to European firms with a mixture of cooperation and resistance. The Obong monarchy and the Ekpe society played central roles in the mediation of trade, regulated commerce, and maintained order.

Duke Ephraim (Effiom Edem): As Obong and head of the Ekpe society, Duke Ephraim exemplified indigenous adaptation. He monopolised customs duties and forced European merchants to pay levies directly to him. He also undermined the local salt industry, facilitated European imports, and consolidated his economic and political power.

Ekpe Society: The Ekpe functioned as a judicial and executive authority, enforced contracts, and punished defaulters. Its ability to regulate trade made it indispensable to European firms, which relied on its enforcement mechanisms. Yet the society's authority was gradually eroded as firms gained direct access to chiefs and bypassed traditional structures.

Obong Monarchy: The Obong negotiated treaties and maintained relations with European merchants. While this enhanced his prestige, it also made him dependent on external support, and weakened his autonomy. (Anwana, 2009)

Social Restructuring

The interaction between European firms and indigenous elites led to significant social restructuring:

Empowerment of Aligned Elites: Chiefs and merchants who cooperated with European firms gained wealth and influence. They used their resources to consolidate power within their communities, often at the expense of rivals.

Marginalisation of Traditional Industries: The importation of European salt undermined local salt producers deprived them of income and status. Similarly, the decline of slave trade marginalised former dealers.

Creation of New Hierarchies: Wealth from palm oil trade created new social hierarchies based on economic power rather than lineage or ritual authority. This shift destabilised traditional structures and introduced new forms of inequality.

Political Realignment

European firms did not merely reshape economic relations; they also altered political dynamics:

Erosion of Autonomy: Treaties and agreements gradually eroded indigenous sovereignty. Chiefs who signed contracts with European firms ceded control over trade routes and markets, and this reduced their independence.

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Centralisation of Authority: The need to regulate palm oil trade strengthened institutions like the Ekpe society, but this centralisation also made them more vulnerable to European manipulation.

Proto-Colonial Control: Through intervention in succession disputes and enforced compliance through gunboats, European firms acted as proto-colonial agents. Their economic dominance translated into political influence, paved the way for formal colonial rule.

Case Studies in Old Calabar

Several case studies illustrate the impact of European firms on indigenous power structures:

Beecroft's Intervention (1852): John Beecroft presided over the succession of King Archibong, and effectively acted as a kingmaker. His authority was backed by naval power; this demonstrated how European firms and agents could override indigenous processes.

Salt Trade Suppression: Duke Ephraim's facilitation of European salt imports undermined local producers, consolidated his power while it weakened communal industries. This case highlighted how European goods reshaped local economies and hierarchies.

Customs Duties Monopolisation: European merchants were forced to pay levies directly to him. This way Duke Ephraim reinforced his dominance. Yet this also made him dependent on external trade, exposed his authority to global market fluctuations.

Broader Consequences

The consolidation of European trading firms in Old Calabar had several broader consequences:

Economic Dependency: The region became dependent on European markets and goods, and made it vulnerable to global recessions.

Cultural Transformation: European goods and practices altered consumption patterns, social status, and cultural norms.

Political Vulnerability: Economic dependency translated into political vulnerability, as European firms used their influence to intervene in local governance.

Colonial Prelude: The erosion of autonomy and the empowerment of European firms laid the groundwork for colonial subjugation in the late nineteenth century.

European trading firms were not passive economic actors but active agents of transformation in Old Calabar. Their strategies of monopolisation, treaties, gunboat diplomacy, and introduction of European goods reshaped indigenous institutions, empowered certain elites, and marginalised others. The interaction between firms and local structures created new hierarchies, eroded autonomy, and paved the way for colonial rule. By examining this process, it becomes clear that commerce was not merely an economic activity but a vehicle for social and political reorganisation.

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Socio-Cultural Consequences

The economic transition from slave exports to palm oil trade in Old Calabar between 1847 and 1877 was not merely a shift in commodities; it was a profound transformation of social and cultural life. European trading firms, missionaries, and imported goods altered indigenous practices, reshaped gender roles, and introduced new forms of hierarchy. These changes were complex and involved both adaptation and resistance, and they revealed the deep entanglement of commerce with culture.

Cultural Exchange and Material Transformation

European firms introduced a wide array of goods into Old Calabar, including salt, textiles, firearms, alcohol, and luxury items. These imports quickly became symbols of wealth and status. Chiefs and merchants who cooperated with European firms displayed their prosperity through European clothing, household items, and weaponry. Such material culture reshaped local notions of prestige and created new hierarchies based on access to imported goods.

The introduction of salt is particularly significant. Traditionally, coastal communities produced salt through evaporation, and salt workers held considerable economic and social status. However, European imports undermined this industry and deprived local producers of income and prestige. This shift illustrated how trade could destabilise traditional livelihoods while it empowered elites aligned with European firms.

Textiles also transformed cultural practices. European cloth competed with indigenous fabrics, altered dress codes, and ceremonial attire. While *Nsibidi* writing and *Ukara* textiles remained important symbols of identity, European fabrics introduced new aesthetics and consumption patterns.

Gender Roles and Women's Economic Agency

One of the most notable socio-cultural consequences of the palm oil economy was the empowerment of women. Women played a central role in processing palm oil, from harvesting fruit to boiling and refining the oil. They also dominated market, trading, and sold palm oil and other goods in local and regional markets.

This economic agency translated into social influence. Women gained greater autonomy within households, as their income contributed to family wealth. Market queens and female traders became respected figures, and challenged, patriarchal norms. The prominence of women in commerce also reshaped marriage practices, as bride wealth increasingly involved monetary payments derived from trade.

Yet this empowerment was not without tension. Male elites often sought to control women's economic activities, and used institutions like the Ekpe society to regulate markets. Nevertheless, women's participation in palm oil trade marked a significant shift in gender dynamics, highlighting the intersection of commerce and social change.

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Missionary Influence and Cultural Transformation

Missionaries, particularly those from the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, arrived in Old Calabar during this period, sought to convert the population to Christianity, and abolished traditional practices. Mary Slessor, who arrived in 1876, became one of the most prominent figures, advocating against twin infanticide and promoting education.

Missionaries established schools, hospitals, orphanages, and chapels and introduced new forms of social organisation. Literacy and Western education created opportunities for upward mobility, particularly among young men who served as clerks or interpreters for European firms. Christianity also challenged traditional religious practices and undermined the authority of priests and ritual leaders.

However, missionary influence was uneven. While some communities embraced Christianity, others resisted and maintained practices such as slavery, polygamy, and ritual ceremonies. The coexistence of Christian and traditional institutions created a hybrid cultural landscape, reflecting both adaptation and continuity.

Social Tensions and Resistance

The socio-cultural consequences of European trade were not uniformly positive. The erosion of traditional industries, the empowerment of certain elites, and the introduction of foreign goods created tensions within communities.

Class Divisions

Wealth from palm oil trade created new social classes; elites displayed European goods while poorer households struggled to adapt. This inequality fostered resentment and conflict.

Cultural Resistance

Many communities resisted missionary efforts to abolish traditional practices and defended rituals such as Ekpe masquerades and *Nsibidi* writing. These practices became symbols of cultural identity in the face of European influence.

Generational Conflicts

Younger generations, exposed to Western education and Christianity, often clashed with elders who upheld traditional norms. This generational divide reflected broader tensions between continuity and change.

Hybridisation of Culture

Despite tensions, the interaction between European trade and indigenous institutions produced a hybrid culture. Traditional practices were not simply replaced but reconfigured. For example, the Ekpe society continued to regulate commerce, but its authority was increasingly intertwined with European firms. Nsibidi writing persisted, but literacy in English introduced new forms of communication.

This hybridisation reflected the resilience of indigenous culture. Rather than passive recipients of European influence, the people of Old Calabar actively negotiated, adapted, and

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redefined their practices. The result was a dynamic cultural landscape that combined elements of tradition and modernity.

The socio-cultural consequences of European trade in Old Calabar between 1847 and 1877 were multifaceted. Imported goods reshaped material culture, women gained economic advantage through palm oil trade, missionaries introduced new institutions, and communities navigated tensions between tradition and change. These transformations highlighted the deep entanglement of commerce with culture and showed that trade was not merely an economic activity but a catalyst for social reorganisation. The resilience and adaptability of indigenous institutions ensured continuity; even as European influence introduced profound changes.

Count Down to Colonial Rule

The period between 1847 and 1877 in Old Calabar was not only defined by economic transformation but also by the gradual erosion of indigenous autonomy. European trading firms, initially focused on palm oil commerce, increasingly extended their influence into political and social spheres. Their interventions, backed by naval power and diplomatic pressure, created conditions that foreshadowed the eventual imposition of colonial rule. This section examined how trade became a mechanism of control, how indigenous institutions were weakened, and how economic dependency translated into political vulnerability.

European Political Intervention

European merchants and agents did not confine themselves to economic activities. They frequently intervened in local governance, exploited succession disputes and conflicts to assert authority. John Beecroft, the British Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra, exemplified this trend. In 1852, Beecroft presided over the succession of King Archibong in Old Calabar, and effectively assumed the role of kingmaker. His authority was backed by gunboats, which threatened chiefs who resisted his decisions.

Such interventions undermined indigenous processes of leadership, selection and reduced the autonomy of institutions like the Obong monarchy and the Ekpe society. By positioning themselves as arbiters of legitimacy, European agents inserted themselves into the political fabric of Old Calabar and paved the way for deeper colonial involvement.

Gunboat Diplomacy and Enforcement

European firms relied heavily on naval power to enforce compliance. Gunboat diplomacy became a hallmark of the period, with British warships stationed along the coast to protect merchants and intimidate local rulers. Chiefs who resisted treaties or failed to deliver agreed quantities of palm oil faced bombardments or blockades.

This use of force eroded the authority of indigenous institutions. The Ekpe society, once the primary enforcer of contracts and laws, found its role diminished as European firms bypassed traditional mechanisms and relied on naval power. The reliance on external enforcement weakened local governance and created a precedent for colonial military intervention.

Economic Dependency and Vulnerability

The integration of Old Calabar into global markets created economic dependency. Palm oil exports tied the region's prosperity to fluctuations in international demand and prices. The

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initial boom of the 1850s gave way to a decline in the 1860s and 1870s, as prices fell from £50 per ton to £36. This volatility destabilised the local economy, reduced the wealth of elites and undermined their ability to maintain authority.

Dependency on European goods further compounded vulnerability. Imported salt, textiles, and firearms became essential to local economies and social status. Chiefs who relied on these goods to maintain prestige and power found themselves increasingly dependent on European firms. This dependency translated into political leverage, as merchants used access to goods as a bargaining tool.

Weakened Indigenous Institutions

The combined effects of political intervention, gunboat diplomacy, and economic dependency weakened indigenous institutions:

Obong Monarchy: Once the paramount authority, the Obong became increasingly reliant on European support, as it undermined his independence.

Ekpe Society: Although still influential, the Ekpe's role as enforcer of contracts was overshadowed by European naval power.

Traditional Industries: The decline of local salt production and other industries reduced the economic base of communities and weakened their autonomy.

These developments eroded the resilience of indigenous governance and made Old Calabar more susceptible to external domination.

The 1877 Recession and Its Impact

The economic downturn of 1877 marked a turning point. Global recession reduced demand for palm oil, leading to decline in exports and revenues. Local elites, already weakened by price volatility, struggled to maintain authority. The recession exposed the fragility of Old Calabar's economy and highlighted its dependence on European markets.

This vulnerability created opportunities for deeper European intervention. Merchants and consuls used the crisis to press for greater control, and arguing that indigenous institutions were incapable of effective trade management. The recession thus served as a catalyst for colonial expansion, as economic weakness translated into political subjugation.

Trade as a Mechanism of Control

European firms used trade not only to generate profit but also to exert control over local communities. They monopolised commerce, introduced treaties, and enforced compliance through naval power; they transformed economic relations into instruments of political domination. Chiefs who resisted were marginalised, while those who cooperated were rewarded with goods and prestige.

This dynamic created a system of indirect control, in which European firms exercised authority without formal colonial administration. Yet the logic of this system inevitably led to colonial rule, as economic dominance required political consolidation.

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Comparative Analysis

The trajectory of Old Calabar mirrors broader patterns in West Africa. In Lagos, European merchants and consuls used treaties and military intervention to secure control; this led to annexation in 1861. In Bonny, succession disputes provided opportunities for British intervention and weakened indigenous autonomy. The Gold Coast experienced similar dynamics; trade paved the way for colonial expansion.

Old Calabar's experience is distinctive in its resilience. Institutions like the Ekpe society maintained authority longer than in other regions, delaying formal colonial rule. Yet the underlying dynamics were the same: trade created dependency, dependency facilitated intervention, and intervention paved the way for colonisation.

CONCLUSION

The period 1847–1877 in Old Calabar illustrated how European trade served as a prelude to colonial rule. Economic dependency, political intervention, and gunboat diplomacy weakened indigenous institutions and eroded autonomy. The recession of 1877 exposed the fragility of the local economy and created opportunities for deeper European control. By the late nineteenth century, the groundwork for colonial subjugation had been laid; commerce functioned as both an economic activity and a mechanism of political domination.

The thirty-year period in Old Calabar represented a critical juncture in West African history, where commerce, politics, and culture intersected to produce profound transformations. The transition from slave exports to palm oil trade, the consolidation of European trading firms, and the adaptation of indigenous institutions collectively reshaped the region's socio-political landscape. This conclusion synthesised the key findings of the study, underscored its contributions to scholarship, and outlined avenues for future research.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The research has demonstrated that European trade was not merely an economic phenomenon but a catalyst for social and political reorganisation in Old Calabar. Several key findings emerged:

Economic Transformation: The abolition of the slave trade forced a reorientation toward palm oil, integrated Old Calabar into global commodity markets.

Price volatility and global recessions exposed the fragility of this new economy, created dependency on European markets.

Reshaped Social Structures: Women gained economic advantage through palm oil processing and market trading, and altered gender dynamics.

Wealth from palm oil created new hierarchies, empowered elites aligned with European firms while it marginalised traditional industries such as salt production.

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Political Realignment

Institutions like the Obong monarchy and the Ekpe society adapted to regulate palm oil trade but were increasingly undermined by European intervention.

Gunboat diplomacy and treaties eroded indigenous autonomy, positioned European firms as proto-colonial agents.

Cultural Consequences:

Imported goods reshaped material culture, while missionary influence introduced new institutions such as schools and hospitals.

Traditional practices persisted but were reconfigured; it produced a hybrid cultural landscape that combined elements of continuity and change.

Prelude to Colonial Rule: Economic dependency translated into political vulnerability.

The recession of 1877 weakened local elites and created opportunities for deeper European control.

By the late nineteenth century, the groundwork for colonial subjugation had been firmly laid.

Contributions to Scholarship: This study contributes to African historiography in several important ways:

Holistic Analysis: Unlike previous works that focused narrowly on economics or politics, this research integrated economic, social, and cultural perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of Old Calabar's transformation.

Focus on European Firms: By examining the specific role of European trading firms, the study highlighted how commerce functioned as a mechanism of control and bridged the gap between economic history and colonial studies.

Gendered Perspective: The emphasis on women's economic agency added a new dimension to the historiography and showed how gender roles were reshaped by trade.

Regional Contextualisation: Situating Old Calabar within broader Atlantic and West African networks underscores its significance as both a local and global actor.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The findings have broader implications for understanding the relationship between trade and colonialism. They demonstrated that commerce was not a neutral exchange but a vehicle for domination. Economic dependency created conditions for political subjugation, while cultural transformations facilitated the erosion of indigenous autonomy. Old Calabar's experience illustrated how colonial rule was not imposed suddenly but emerged gradually through the entanglement of trade, politics, and culture.

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Closing Reflection

The story of Old Calabar between 1847 and 1877 is one of resilience and vulnerability, adaptation and erosion. Indigenous institutions such as the Ekpe society and the Obong monarchy demonstrated remarkable capacity to regulate commerce and maintain order, yet they were ultimately undermined by the economic and political dominance of European firms. Women gained agency through market trading, yet traditional industries declined. Cultural practices persisted, yet they were reshaped by missionary influence and imported goods.

In the end, European trade left a dual legacy: integration into global markets and destabilisation of indigenous autonomy. This legacy underscored the complex role of commerce in colonial expansion; it reminded us that trade is never merely economic but always social, cultural, and political. By examining this period in detail, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of how colonialism emerged not as an abrupt imposition but as the culmination of decades of economic dependency and political intervention.

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