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0521025575 - Palm Oil and Protest: An Economic History of the Ngwa Region,
South-Eastern Nigeria, 1800-1980

Susan M. Martin

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Introduction

The dominant themes in rural West African economic history during the past two hundred years are usually held to be the impact of capitalism and colonialism.¹ This study began as an attempt to follow convention, in exploring the colonial-period history of a region which was heavily involved in cash cropping. But during the research and writing, the region itself, and the Ngwa people, took hold of the author's loyalties and imagination. The result is a history of the Ngwa people which shows how the economic opportunities open to them were influenced by the local environment and by the social structures which they created, as well as by the economic and political changes wrought by outsiders. The interaction between local and external causes of change is explored in detail for the period between the First and Second World Wars, and shown to have continued up to the present day.

Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly turned to history for help in understanding recent African economic difficulties. They seek to uncover the roots of 'underdevelopment' and of the current 'food crisis'.² In eastern Nigeria, problems of 'underdevelopment' and of 'food crisis' have been relatively muted. In the 1970s the collapse of the oil palm export industry, which during the colonial period provided most of the region's import-purchasing power, caused no drop of incomes overall because it occurred simultaneously with the rise of profitable urban industries and of state employment, fuelled by the mineral oil boom. Meanwhile the region's farmers developed a profitable industry supplying *gari* (cassava meal) to the local towns. The signs of strain lay below the surface of the regional economy: in the disparity between urban men and rural women, especially in the generation which had reached adulthood during the 1960s; and in the growing pressure of population on the land. Eastern Nigeria had survived the Atlantic slave trade with one of the highest population densities in sub-Saharan Africa, but by 1980 this advantage had become a liability.

How could one begin charting the history of this regional economy, and how could one explain its special problems in the 1970s and 1980s? I began with the assumption that the expansion of the oil palm industry from 1800,

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and the imposition of colonial rule from 1891, must have had a strong impact upon the domestic economy. This assumption was rooted in the very different approaches of vent-for-surplus and dependency theorists.³ Yet I was also interested in the work of the geographers and anthropologists who tried to describe the domestic economy itself in village studies made during the colonial period.⁴ Finally, I wanted to develop the theoretical insights of contemporary anthropologists, who may differ from their predecessors in philosophy but who usually share their desire to understand the internal structures of village societies, as well as their interaction with the outside world.⁵

On arrival in Nigeria I rapidly discovered that none of these approaches, taken alone, could reflect the views of the farmers I lived with or of the local authors whose studies were kindly lent to me and drawn to my attention. I had chosen to study the Ngwa region because it was heavily involved in the oil palm export industry and yet little studied by economic historians, most of whom had focused on the Delta region and the Ibibio area near Calabar (see Map 1).⁶ Source material had been a secondary consideration; yet it turned out that the Ngwa region was surprisingly rich in local sources, at least for twentieth-century history.⁷ The Ngwa are a relatively large and coherent Southern Igbo ethnic group: in 1931, when they were first recognised as such and surveyed by colonial officials, they inhabited an area of 474 square miles and numbered at least 123,000 people. By 1953, their population had grown to nearly 200,000.⁸ In recent years, they have produced many scholars and there have been several important local contributions to their history and geography.⁹ During my stay in the village of Ahiaba-Okpuala, in 1980–1, many people were eager to help with this fresh study (see Map 2).¹⁰ Finally, the Ngwa had been heavily involved in the Igbo Women's War of 1929, after which many local women had spoken before the Aba Commission of Enquiry. The 'Notes of Evidence' printed by the Commission provide a rare insight into contemporary village-level views of colonial history.¹¹

The view which emerged from these local sources often stood at variance with that recorded in the archives. In the memories of the old people who spoke to me, local imperatives of food production, local traders and African missionaries stole the limelight from the transport innovations, currency changes, administrative structures and export sector fluctuations which filled the official mind. While officials debated whether to allow European firms to take land for plantations, eventually deciding to leave the local economy in the hands of African smallholders, the smallholders themselves were transforming their economy and society in unexpected and often unseen ways.¹²

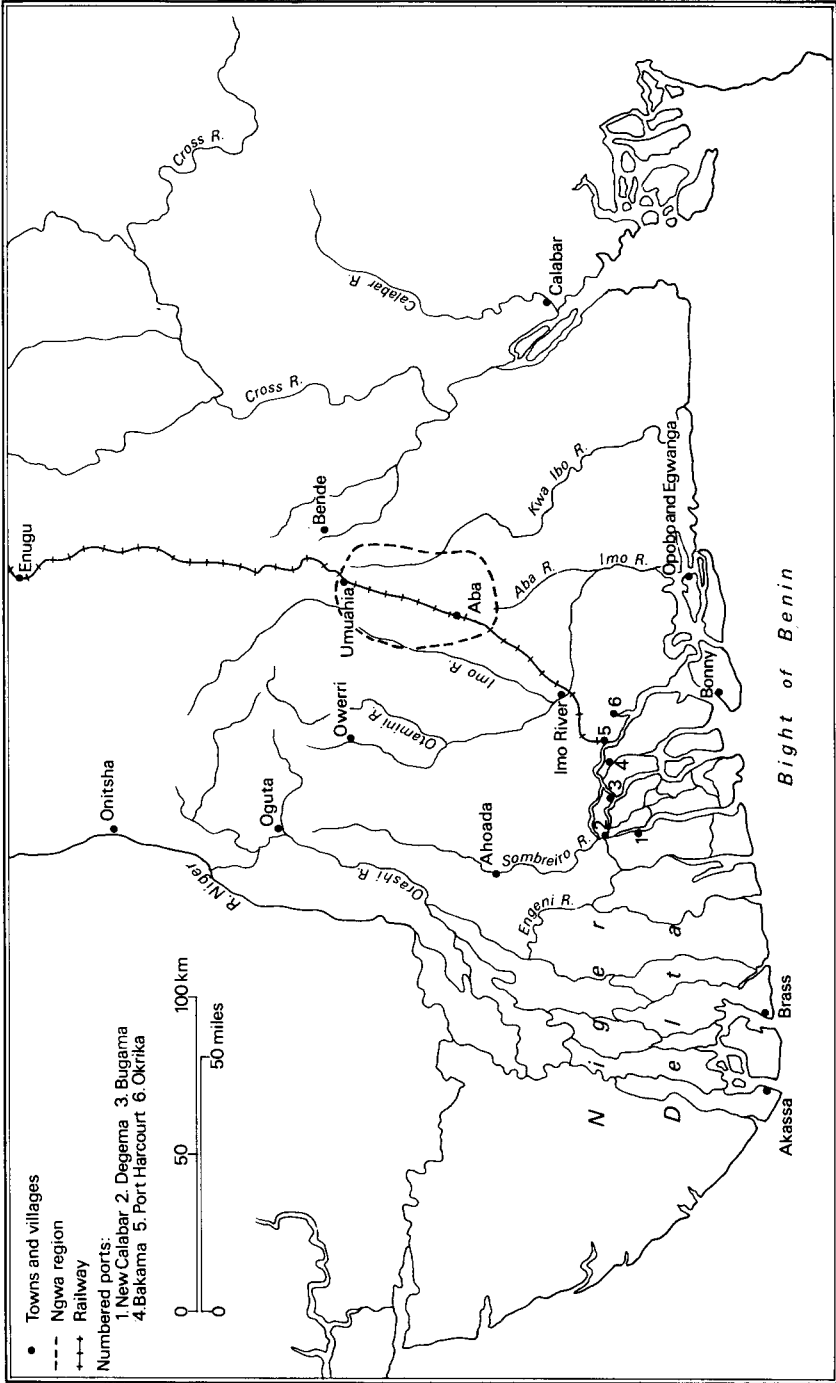
Both the official and the local perspective clearly encompassed vital aspects of the region's history. It was necessary to make a synthesis of the two, just as it was necessary to balance the theoretical approaches of the economists and the anthropologists. The two tasks of synthesis overlapped,

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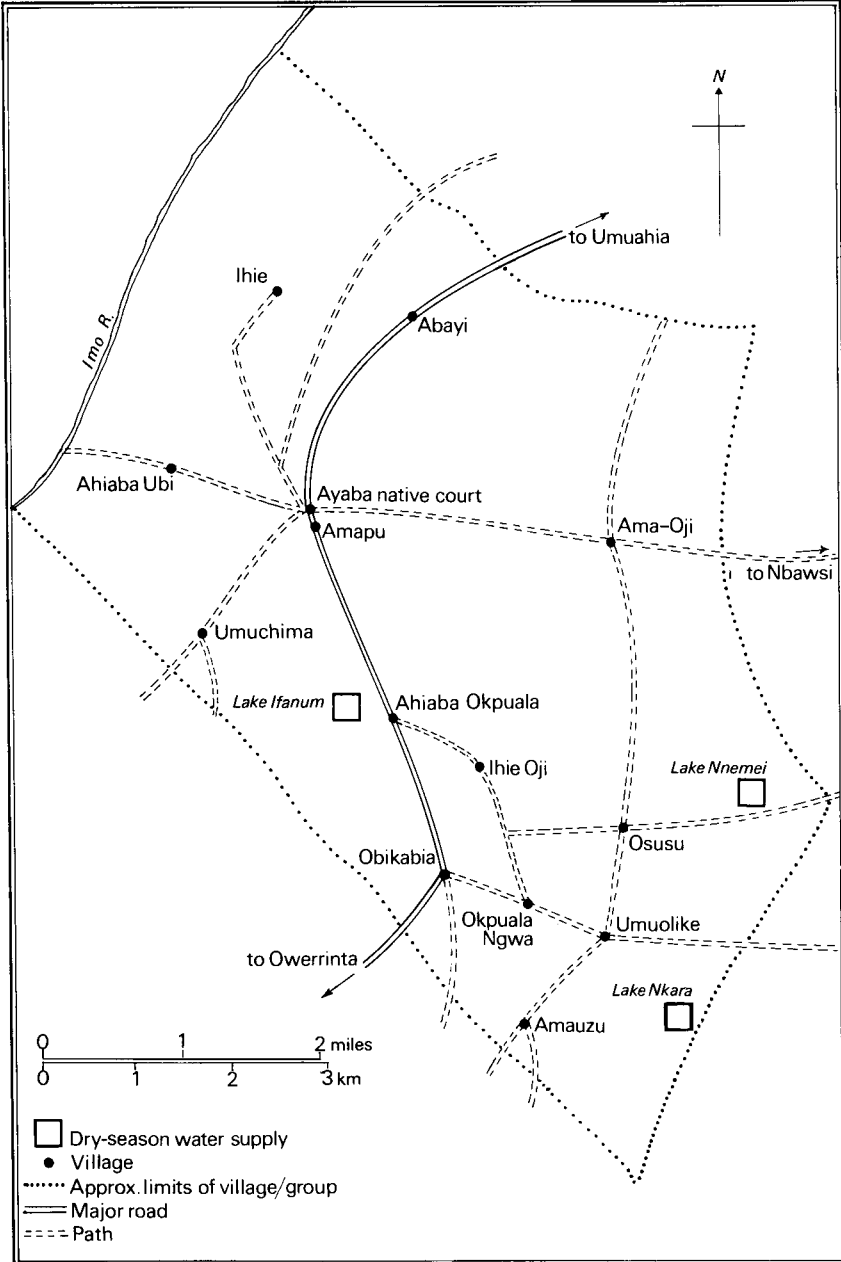
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Map 1. Ports, river and rail trade routes, south-eastern Nigeria

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Map 2. Ngwa-Ukwu (Ofo-Asato) village group

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in that the official view had much in common with the dependency and vent-for-surplus theories, and even with some of the work of neo-Marxist economic anthropologists, while the local view was reflected and supported by the work of other anthropologists and geographers. This Introduction will provide a survey of these two broad types of theoretical approach, which will be set in the context of classical economic theory and of the more recent 'farming systems' approach to agricultural economics. In comparing these approaches, we will focus on two main points: firstly, on the theorists' 'ideal-types' of economic progress and secondly, on their view of the main causes of economic change within rural African societies. Theorists adhering to the classical 'ideal-type', as outlined below, usually emphasise external causes of change; those who are moving towards the definition of alternative forms of agrarian change more often emphasise local or internal causes of change.

The classical 'ideal-type' model of economic development has clearly been modified and refined by economic theorists over the two hundred years since it was first set out in the work of Adam Smith. However, its basic assumptions about the nature and root causes of economic progress still provide the framework for most contemporary debates over African economic policy, and also provide the setting for the debate between dependency and vent-for-surplus theorists. Thus the starting-point for our discussion will be the vision of Smith himself, as set out in the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. The essence of this vision was innovation through the use of capital and the division of labour, stimulated by market demand through international and town-country trade, and protected by the state through the maintenance of law and order.¹³ In the agricultural sector, Smith held that there was relatively little scope for increasing the productivity of labour through refinements of the division of tasks. However, he held that capital could usefully be employed in extending and improving the cultivated land. 'Stock' was needed to purchase seed, tools, cattle and labour; and further capital could be used to finance improvements like 'buildings, drains, enclosures and other ameliorations'. Such improvement held forth the prospect of solid prosperity and full employment for the nation, while more rapid growth of labour productivity could be achieved by the development of complementary urban industries.¹⁴

In Smith's view, the development of complementary relations of trade and investment between town and countryside was essential to a nation's prosperity, but economic growth could also be furthered by the extension of such complementary relations to other nations. Both farmers and manufacturers benefited from international trade by exchanging the range of goods which their natural resource base tied them to producing, for others which were not locally available. Trade made it worthwhile for them to produce a surplus above national needs, and so achieve full employment and go beyond it, investing capital and energy in the 'improvement' of their 'productive powers'.¹⁵

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Smith's theory has stimulated and provoked economists for the past two centuries. The vent-for-surplus theory of international trade has caused especially heated debate, both in the nineteenth century when John Stuart Mill gave it this label, and since the 1950s when elements of it were rediscovered and developed by Hla Myint.¹⁶ Less attention has been paid to Smith's view of agriculture's role in economic development, yet it will be argued below that this view has profoundly influenced both neo-classical and Marxian writers: it has become an unexamined bedrock of Western thought on Third World problems.

Unfortunately, Smith himself did not elaborate his view that progress in agriculture was to be achieved by investing capital in the improvement of land. He appeared to take British agricultural technology and land/labour combinations for granted; his main chapter on agricultural economics was significantly entitled 'Of the Rent of Land'.¹⁷ This in itself should warn us against applying his assumptions without examination in an African context. As a number of recent studies have emphasised, sub-Saharan African farmers dispensed for centuries with such hallmarks of Eurasian technology as the plough and the wheel. Goody's stimulating works explore the consequences of this regional divergence; while Boserup has searched for explanations, emphasising that the Eurasian concern with improving the land need not be shared in the many African regions with sparse population.¹⁸ These studies cannot provide complete answers to the questions of whether and why African farmers innovated or improved their productivity in ways which do not fit Smith's European model; but they indicate that the questions need to be asked.¹⁹

There is a great divide between those who think that the Smithian model provides the basic blueprint for progressive innovation, and those who ask whether there are alternatives. The nature of the division is complex; for example, current forms of political radicalism may conflict with the search for alternative definitions of economic and technological progress. To explore the divergence between African and Western views of innovation can be seen as a distraction from the study of the political oppression and social divisions which have often handicapped all potential innovators, whatever their aims.²⁰ Implicitly the new radical standpoint may well be grounded not only in Smith's faith in the virtues of capital and the improvement of land, but also in Marx's belief that capitalism and the Industrial Revolution had brought unparalleled advances in technology, which ought to be applicable to nations other than those which had invented them.²¹ In this view, the plough might be useless in regions without oxen, but the tractor is truly international. Yet both inventions form part of a continuum in Western development by which capital is used to clear and improve land, in the tradition praised by Smith.

The congruence between radical and neoclassical views of technical progress may be seen in the long-running debate between dependency and vent-for-surplus theorists. Hla Myint began the debate with an exposition of

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Smith's ideas in 1958. He argued that agriculture in the Third World had failed to develop before the rise of trade with Europe, largely because of poor communications and a lack of town-country symbiosis. The imposition of colonial rule was followed by a rush towards development through transport innovations, foreign investment in mills and plantations, and a vent-for-surplus export boom in peasant farming communities. However, the innovations in agriculture which Smith had expected to result from trade did not follow in the peasant communities, because land remained in abundant supply and few communities even reached the stage of diverting labour from other uses to export production. In recent years, heavy taxes have given farmers fewer opportunities to accumulate capital, and even fewer incentives to invest it in the improvement of land.²²

In this view, foreign investments in mills, plantations and infrastructure are added to Smith's criteria of commercialisation, specialisation and capital investment in land, to provide a theoretical model of economic growth applicable to Third World nations. But just as this view was being formulated, the idea that a creative role could be played by foreigners was beginning to draw keen opposition from radical writers of the dependency school. The Marxian economist Baran produced a theory that foreign investment and colonial economic policies had progressively impoverished the economies subjected to them. This theory became famous when it was applied to Latin America by André Gunder Frank.²³

For those economies whose colonial economic links had been forged more through trade than direct investment, the most relevant development of dependency theory was Emmanuel's controversial notion of 'unequal exchange'.²⁴ This concept was originally intended to describe a universal feature of colonial trading patterns, but it was weakened by disputes over its grounding in the labour theory of value.²⁵ Nevertheless, it continued to be cited in discussions of deteriorating terms of trade for Third World exports. Rodney argued that in the African case, impoverishment had occurred during the 1930s when the terms of trade facing African producers fell, but colonial pressure forced them to continue selling on the international market. The creation of monopolies among foreign trading firms also allowed them to reduce the real prices they paid to producers.²⁶

This discussion of why African farmers gained so little from trade led naturally to the question of why they entered it in the first place, and did not withdraw when prices fell. There is an interesting divergence between dependency theorists on this issue. Frank argues that Africans were initially commercially minded, and sacrificed other industries to specialise in the export trade before the terms of trade began to decline, thus becoming 'dependent' in the classic way. In this, he echoes Smith's thoughts on the dangers of international trade.²⁷ However, Amin argues that African communities were incapable of self-transformation into capitalist societies, and that force was needed to break down rural resistance to the spread of commodity exchange.²⁸

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Both Frank and Amin attempt to explain the failure of African economies to achieve capitalist development, including industrialisation; and in this they share an aim with Myint. However, in contrast to Myint's model of capitalist development thwarted by over-abundant natural resources and taxation, they produce the models of capitalist development thwarted by colonialism on the one hand, and local lack of interest on the other. Several conflicting and testable propositions about the history of village economies have been produced in the course of the debate. Did land and labour remain abundant as agricultural exports expanded, or did specialisation occur? Had African farmers developed a trade in food or raw materials with local craft producers before the colonial period? Did they have to be forced into the export economy, and forced to remain there from the 1930s, or did they enter voluntarily in search of profits? Did low incomes or limited ambitions hold them back from capital investment before the 1930s?

All these questions are stimulating and will be taken up in this study of Ngwa history, but it is notable that at the height of the dependency debate they were thrown out as conflicting statements, rather than questions. Dependency theorists devoted most energy to elaborating their views on the role of foreign firms and colonial officials; and so, as the debate developed, the nature of the stimulus which the theorists provided to historians changed. While some early studies of vent-for-surplus export expansion in West Africa emphasised African initiatives, the most detailed work inspired by the debate over dependency focused on world market forces, foreign firms and colonial policy decisions.²⁹ In this way, the debate encouraged researchers to reflect the view of documentary rather than oral sources. Ironically, the importance attached by both sides to their conflicting views of the role of foreigners reflects the views of the foreigners themselves, for whom their own actions were naturally of prime interest and who shared the theorists' belief in the universality of Western ideals of progress.

As the debate progressed, only one group of writers sympathetic to the dependency view turned their attention to the study of village economies. These were the neo-Marxist economic anthropologists, who shared Amin's view that African economies did not operate according to capitalist principles. Marx himself had hinted, in his *Grundrisse*, that there might be several different sets of principles on which pre-capitalist societies might operate. For example, in the Germanic mode of production, farming households lived independently, linked to one another by loose alliances and maintaining a complex relationship with their urban counterparts; whereas in the Ancient mode, the farmers themselves lived in towns and held property as individuals.³⁰ However, Marx had not developed this line of thought in any detail, and the French neo-Marxist economic anthropologists who sought to describe African village economies in the 1960s were forced to construct their own theoretical models.

One of the models constructed by the French writers will be outlined in

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some detail here, because it clarifies the social divisions within agricultural communities in a way which is highly relevant to early colonial Ngwa history. The model itself has undergone several mutations: its outlines were established by Claude Meillassoux but it has been substantially modified by its creator, and by Terray and Rey. Rey's term, the 'lineage mode of production' will be used to refer to it, since its essence is the analysis of power structures within lineages. The model identifies a hierarchy of age and sex, which governs the distribution of tasks, power and income not only within households but also within descent groups and village communities.³¹

Meillassoux's initial model focused on the relationships between men of different generations within village communities which were assumed to be self-sufficient. He emphasised the reciprocal benefits of these relationships, while noting the authority held by older men and the importance of their control over access to women. In his later work, he developed his ideas on the importance of women to elder or senior men. He argued that senior men sought to ensure the community's biological reproduction, rather than to make material gains from production, and that women's value lay in their fertility rather than their productive powers.³²

Meillassoux's emphasis on biological reproduction was first challenged by Terray, who argued that within the overall hierarchy of age and sex, it was possible to identify various sets of social relations governing each of the many economic activities performed within a self-sustaining community. He drew attention to the extremely complex division of tasks and income relating to each activity, reworking Meillassoux's own field data on the Gouro.³³ This approach has been used in the present study to clarify the impact of palm produce export expansion upon different groups within Ngwa society. However, Terray himself did not take it this far, and indeed was criticised by Rey for side-stepping the issues of power and income distribution within the village economy as a whole. Rey emphasised the existence of slavery as a sign of the exploitation latent within senior-junior relations.³⁴

The neo-Marxist anthropologists as a group were also criticised by feminists for neglecting the role of women in agricultural production. Boserup had already shown how much work women did within many systems of hoe agriculture. This point, combined with the neo-Marxist emphasis on the strength of male control over women within lineage societies, raised possibilities of exploitation which had been overlooked by Terray and Meillassoux in their stress on harmonious elder-junior relations.³⁵

In developing these ideas Rey made a significant advance, which has been built upon in this study of Ngwa history. He began to explore the differences between senior men and the junior men, women and children whose labour they partly controlled, not only in terms of power and wealth, but also in terms of their attitudes towards new economic opportunities and innova-

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tions. He argued that new crops were most likely to be adopted by junior men and women, with the aim of establishing their right to farm them without the direct supervision and control of the elders.³⁶ This argument implies a distinction between areas of relative autonomy for women and junior men, and areas under the elders' control. Such a distinction provides an interesting new perspective on different economic sectors, which are more usually classified by terms like rural and urban, export and domestic, or cash and subsistence.

One major difficulty remains in applying neo-Marxist theory to the experience of a region heavily involved in cash crop production. Rey, like Meillassoux and Terray, held that lineage societies were essentially self-sufficient, being brought into 'articulation' with the capitalist mode of production by force, and in a position of subordination. In this respect, the neo-Marxist writers belong within the well-established tradition of 'peasant studies'.³⁷ Within this tradition, the state, the bourgeoisie or the landlords, rather than the peasants, are assumed to be the main initiators of economic change. Yet the Ngwa entered into the palm oil trade in the nineteenth century without European coercion; and they will be shown in this study to have played an active role in the many changes which occurred in the colonial period.

Within the peasant studies field, Chayanov and Kula have come closest to the analysis of peasant actions within a wider economy. They have demonstrated that the market decisions of non-capitalist producers can be heavily influenced by their consumption needs and by their systems of property rights. Kula also discussed the uses of wealth in pre-capitalist societies. He provided a detailed exposition of the view that in pre-capitalist societies, wealth acquired by trade could not be used to reproduce and extend itself (as in the capitalist model), because productive resources could not be bought. Nevertheless, wealth could be used for consumption and display.³⁸ His approach suggested that one could go beyond the simple assumption that pre-capitalist societies were not dominated by the profit motive, to ask whether wealth was desired, even if only for display; how wealth could be acquired, and how the rise of different occupations changed the possibilities for using it. Looking at the Ngwa evidence with these questions in mind, it became possible to come to terms with the high value which all sources hold that local people placed upon wealth; and to begin analysing the informal and fluid local hierarchy based on wealth. This ran alongside the lineage hierarchy of seniority, at times being closely identified with it, and at times taking on a life of its own.³⁹

All these theories helped to clarify the probable cleavages within village society, between senior and junior men, poor and wealthy, men and women, slave and free; they helped to identify the different social groups which may have initiated change for different reasons. However, they gave little insight into the kind of changes that Ngwa or neighbouring villagers might have wished to initiate or into the possible causes of change other