

# The Role of Small-Scale Palm Oil Processing in Rural Development: A Case Study of Nsit Ubium, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 1960-2020

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Article History	Abstract
<p><b>Original Research Article</b></p> <p><b>Received: 01-03-2026</b></p> <p><b>Accepted: 15-03-2026</b></p> <p><b>Published: 20-03-2026</b></p> <p><b>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s):</b> This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p> <p><b>Citation:</b> Ekaette Umanah Ekong. (2026). The role of small-scale palm oil processing in rural development: A case study of Nsit Ubium, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 1960-2020. UKR Journal of Economics, Business and Management (UKRJEBM), Volume 2(3), 95-100.</p>	<p><i>Small-scale palm oil processing remains a critical yet underappreciated driver of rural development in Nigeria. This study examines the role of palm oil production in Nsit Ubium Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, with particular focus on Ikot Ubo community. Employing descriptive and analytical historical methods, data was collected from oral interviews, archival records, and secondary sources to reconstruct the socio-economic significance of palm oil processing. Findings revealed that palm oil production in Nsit Ubium was largely a communal enterprise, with men responsible for harvesting and women dominating processing activities. Beyond its economic value, palm oil shaped local trade networks, reinforced cultural traditions, and sustained household livelihoods. However, challenges such as land scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, and marginalisation in development planning have constrained the industry's growth. Despite these limitations, small-scale palm oil processing continues to contribute to income generation, food security, and cultural continuity in rural communities. By situating Nsit Ubium within the broader discourse on rural development, this study underscores the need for policy interventions that recognise and support small-scale producers. The research not only fills a historiographical gap but also provides insights for development planners seeking to harness indigenous industries for sustainable rural transformation.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Small-scale palm oil processing, Rural development, Gender roles in agriculture, Traditional industries, Nigerian economic history.</p>

## 1. Introduction

Palm oil has long been recognised as one of the most important and versatile agricultural commodities in Nigeria and across West Africa. Derived from the fruit of the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), it has historically served multiple purposes: as a staple in indigenous diets, a raw material for industrial products, and a major export commodity during the colonial era. By the mid-nineteenth century, palm oil had become central to European industrialisation; it fed the demand for soap, lubricants, and margarine. Nigeria, endowed with vast oil palm belts in the South-South, South-East, and parts of the Middle Belt, emerged as one of the world's leading producers.

Despite this prominence, the contributions of small-scale producers in rural communities have often been overlooked in both economic history and development

planning. Much of the scholarship on palm oil focused on macroeconomic trends, colonial trade policies, or the activities of large-scale enterprises. Yet, rural communities such as Ikot Ubo in Nsit Ubium Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, have sustained palm oil production through traditional methods that continue to shape livelihoods, cultural practices, and local economies.

This paper investigates the role of small-scale palm oil processing in rural development, using Nsit Ubium as a case study. It seeks to highlight how palm oil production has contributed to income generation, food security, and cultural continuity, while also identifying the challenges faced by rural producers. The study argues that small-scale palm oil processing is not merely an economic activity but a socio-cultural institution that underpins rural resilience.

By situating Ikot Ubo within the broader discourse on rural development, the paper aims to fill a historiographical gap and provide insights for policymakers seeking to harness indigenous industries for sustainable transformation.

The central research questions guiding this study are:

- a) What role has small-scale palm oil processing played in the economic and social development of Nsit Ubium?
- b) How have gender roles, communal labour, and cultural traditions shaped palm oil production in Ikot Ubo?
- c) What challenges constrain the growth of small-scale palm oil processing, and how can policy interventions address them?

In answering this question, the paper contributes to the growing body of literature on rural development in Nigeria, emphasised the need to recognise and support small-scale producers as agents of economic change.

## 2. Literature Review

Palm oil has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its central role in West African economies and its importance in global trade during the colonial period. Early works such as Kenneth Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* and *100 Years of British Rule in Nigeria* emphasised the significance of palm oil as a commodity that shaped colonial economic policies and European-African relations. Dike argued that palm oil was not only an export product but also a political instrument through which colonial authorities consolidated control over indigenous economies. Similarly, Edet Udo's *Who Are the Ibibio?* highlighted the transformation of the Ibibio economy under colonial rule, noting that palm oil became a crucial agricultural product demanded by European industries in the nineteenth century.

Anne Martin's *The Oil Palm Economy of the Ibibio Farmer* provided one of the earliest systematic studies of palm oil production among Ibibio communities. Her work underscored the economic behavior of peasant farmers, the methods of harvesting and processing, and the role of women as primary producers. J.E. Gray's 1922 bulletin on "*Native Methods of Preparing Palm Oil in Nigeria*" similarly documented traditional techniques, emphasised the communal and gendered nature of production. These studies collectively demonstrated that palm oil was deeply embedded in the socio-economic life of southern Nigerian communities.

More recent scholarship has examined the dynamics of change in palm oil production. Anthony Nwabughogu's

*The Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria, 1900–1960* explored how colonial development policies affected indigenous industries, including palm oil. Apeh A. Apex's thesis on the oil palm industry in Enugu further highlighted the gendered shift in production; it noted that while women initially dominated processing, men became more involved as palm oil gained commercial value. L.S. Suggate's *Africa* (1974) pointed to the persistence of traditional methods despite the introduction of oil mills, stressed the need for improved varieties and technology.

Beyond economic studies, works on Ibibio history and culture provided important context. E.U. Okoko's *Ubium: History, Custom and Culture* and Ekong Ekong's *An Introduction to Rural Sociology* examined kinship, migration, and social organisation, it situated palm oil within broader socio-cultural frameworks. Koko Ette Ina's *The Changing Faces of Ibibio History* reinforced the antiquity and significance of the Ibibio as one of Nigeria's oldest ethnic groups, while Hopkins' *Economic History of West Africa* framed African economies as subsistence-based but adaptable to external demands.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, a notable gap remains. Most studies focused on the larger Ibibio society or on macroeconomic trends, left specific communities such as Ikot Ubo underrepresented. The literature rarely addresses how small-scale palm oil processing contributes to rural development at the micro level, nor does it systematically examine the intersection of gender, culture, and politics in shaping local economies. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on Ikot Ubo in Nsit Ubium, and thereby contribute to both Nigerian economic history and rural development discourse.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical historical approach to investigate the role of small-scale palm oil processing in rural development in Nsit Ubium, with particular emphasis on Ikot Ubo community. The methodology is designed to reconstruct past and present practices, situate them within broader socio-economic contexts, and highlight their implications for rural development.

### 3.1 Research Design

The descriptive method was employed to provide a detailed account of palm oil processing techniques, gender roles, and socio-cultural practices in Ikot Ubo. The analytical method was used to interpret these findings within the framework of rural development, drawing connections between local experiences and wider economic and political structures. This dual approach ensures that the study not only documents historical

realities but also critically examines their significance.

### 3.2 Sources of Data

The research relied on a combination of **oral, archival, and secondary sources**:

**3.2.1. Oral Interviews:** Community elders, women processors, and local traders were interviewed to capture indigenous knowledge, lived experiences, and cultural traditions surrounding palm oil production. Oral testimonies provided insights into gendered labour divisions, communal work practices, and perceptions of economic marginalisation.

**3.2.2. Archival Materials:** Documents from local government offices, church records, and colonial-era reports were consulted to trace historical patterns of palm oil production and trade. These sources offered evidence of the economic importance of palm oil and its role in shaping colonial policies.

**3.2.3. Secondary Sources:** Published works, including books, journal articles, and thesis were reviewed to situate Ikot Ubo's experiences within the broader historiography of palm oil in Nigeria. Key texts included studies by Kenneth Dike, Edet Udo, Anne Martin, M.B. Abasiatai, M.E. Noah, E.E Ekong and E.U. Okoko, among others.

### 3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Oral interviews were conducted using semi-structured questionnaires; it allowed flexibility to probe deeper into specific issues. Interviews were held in both English and Ibibio to ensure clarity and authenticity. Archival research involved systematic examination of available records, while secondary sources were critically analysed to identify gaps and corroborate oral accounts.

### 3.4 Analytical Framework

The study employed a historical-sociological framework, integrated economic history with rural development theory. This framework allowed for analysis of palm oil processing not only as an economic activity but also as a cultural and political institution. Gender analysis was applied to highlight the central role of women in production, while rural development theory was used to assess the contributions of small-scale industries to livelihoods and community resilience.

## 4. Limitations of the study

Several challenges were encountered during data collection. Some informants were reluctant to share information, fearing that it might be used for taxation purposes. Others demanded compensation in the form of money or local gin before granting interviews. Additionally, archival materials were limited, with many

records either incomplete or inaccessible. Despite these constraints, triangulation of oral, archival, and secondary sources ensured the reliability and validity of findings.

### Findings

The findings of this study revealed the multifaceted role of small-scale palm oil processing in Ikot Ubo, Nsit Ubium. They highlighted traditional methods of production, gendered divisions of labour, economic contributions to rural livelihoods, and how challenges constrained growth.

#### 4.1 Traditional Processing Methods

Palm oil production in Ikot Ubo was carried out using traditional techniques that had been passed down through generations. The process began with the harvesting of ripe fruit bunches, typically undertaken by men. These bunches were then transported to communal processing sites where women took charge of the labour-intensive tasks.

The fruits were boiled in large drums or clay pots to soften the mesocarp. After boiling, women pounded the fruits in mortars to release the oil, which was then skimmed off the surface of the boiling water. The oil was collected, filtered, and stored in clay pots, gourds or wooden barrels known as during the colonial era as puncheons. Although simple, this method was physically demanding and time-consuming. Oral testimonies emphasised that processing was often carried out communally, with groups of three or more women working together to ease the burden.

Despite its limitations, traditional processing ensured that households had access to palm oil for consumption and trade. By-products such as palm kernel, fiber, and raffia were also utilised, this demonstrated the resourcefulness of the community.

#### 4.2 Gender Roles in Production

Gender played a central role in shaping palm oil production. Men were primarily responsible for harvesting, climbing tall palm trees, and cutting down fruit bunches. Women, however, dominated the processing stage, transforming raw fruits into oil. Oral interviews revealed that women viewed palm oil processing not only as an economic activity but also as a social institution that reinforced communal bonds.

Women's involvement extended to marketing palm oil in local markets such as *Urua Ntakrok*, *Urua Ederebo*, *Urua Itam*, *Urua Fionaran*, *Urua Fionetok*, *Urua Ete* and several others. They traded palm oil alongside other products like *garri*, *fufu*, and raffia mats. This economic agency positioned women as key contributors to household income and community sustenance. Over time, as palm oil gained commercial value, men began to participate more actively in processing and trade; this

reflected the shift in gender dynamics.

### 4.3 Economic contributions of palm oil processing to Ikot Ubo

Palm oil production was the cornerstone of Ikot Ubo's rural economy. It provided:

**4.3.1. Income Generation:** Families relied on palm oil sales to meet daily needs, pay school fees, and participate in communal obligations.

**4.3.2. Food Security:** Palm oil was a staple in local diets, rich in vitamins and essential for cooking.

**4.3.3. Trade Networks:** Local markets facilitated exchange with neighbouring communities, this integrated Ikot Ubo into wider economic systems.

**4.3.4. By-Product Utilisation:** Palm kernel oil (PKO) was used for soap-making, raffia for roofing, local mattresses and mats, roasted kernel oil (*mmayak*) is used for body and hair nourishment, palm kernel cake, used in animal feed production and also palm wine for social ceremonies; like marriages, chieftaincy installations, festivals and funerals.

Archival records and oral accounts confirmed that palm oil was not only an economic commodity but also a cultural resource; it shaped festivals, rituals, and social institutions.

### 4.4 Challenges faced by local palm oil producers

Despite its importance, small-scale palm oil processing in Ikot Ubo faced significant challenges:

**Land Scarcity:** Limited farmland restricted expansion of palm plantations, this forced reliance on subsistence farming.

**Marginalisation:** Ikot Ubo's contributions were rarely acknowledged in development planning, this led to exclusion from infrastructure projects.

**Infrastructure Deficits:** Poor roads and inadequate storage facilities hindered access to markets and reduced profitability.

**Labour Intensity:** Traditional methods were physically demanding, limited productivity and discouraged the younger generations.

**Cultural Constraints:** Fear of taxation discouraged informants from sharing information; it reflected historical mistrust of government interventions.

These challenges underscored the vulnerability of small-scale producers and the need for targeted policy interventions to support rural industries.

### 4.5. Continuity and Change

While traditional methods remained prevalent, there have been gradual shifts. The introduction of mechanised oil mills in nearby towns has influenced production practices, though many households still rely on indigenous techniques due to cost and accessibility. Gender roles have also evolved; men increased their participation in processing and trade. Despite these changes, palm oil continues to serve as a cultural and economic anchor in Ikot Ubo.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from Ikot Ubo revealed that small-scale palm oil processing is not merely an economic activity but a complex institution that integrates livelihood strategies, gender relations, cultural traditions, and political realities. This section discusses these dimensions in the light of broader theoretical and historical frameworks.

### 5.1 Palm Oil and Rural Development

Palm oil production in Ikot Ubo demonstrates the centrality of indigenous industries to rural development. Rural development theory emphasises the importance of local resource mobilisation, community participation, and small-scale enterprises in sustaining livelihoods. In Ikot Ubo, palm oil provided income, food security, and trade opportunities; it reduced vulnerability and enhanced resilience. The communal nature of production reinforced social cohesion, while trade networks integrated the community into wider economic systems.

However, the marginalisation of Ikot Ubo in development planning reflects a broader pattern in Nigeria, where rural producers are often excluded from policy frameworks. This exclusion undermines the potential of small-scale industries to contribute to national development. The recognition and support of communities like Ikot Ubo is therefore essential for inclusive growth.

### 5.2. Gender and Economic Agency

The gendered division of labour in palm oil production highlights the critical role of women in rural economies. Women dominated processing and marketing, positioned themselves as economic agents within households and communities. This aligns with feminist economic perspectives that emphasises women's contributions to informal and subsistence economies.

The findings also revealed shifting gender dynamics. As palm oil gained commercial value, men became more involved in processing and trade, a reflection of the commodification of what was once a female-dominated industry. This shift underscores the need to analyse rural industries through a gender lens, recognise both the

empowerment and marginalisation that can result from economic change.

### 5.3. Cultural Continuity and Social Institutions

Palm oil production in Ikot Ubo was embedded in cultural traditions such as communal labour, masquerades, and women's institutions like *Iban Isong*, *Ebre*, and *Mbopo*. These institutions reinforced social norms, regulated behaviour, and sustained cultural identity. Oil palm by-products, such as raffia, palm kernel oil (pko), roasted kernel oil (*mmaiyak*) and palm wine, which was integral to festivals and rituals, and further linked economic activity to cultural continuity.

This integration of economy and culture challenges the notion of rural industries as purely subsistence-based. Instead, palm oil production in Ikot Ubo illustrates how indigenous industries serve as vehicles for cultural preservation and social order, even in the face of colonial and post-colonial transformations.

### 5.4. Political Marginalisation and Development Planning

The study highlights the political marginalisation of Ikot Ubo, despite its significant contributions to palm oil production. Development projects often bypassed the community; it reflected unequal distribution of resources and recognition. This marginalisation is consistent with colonial legacies that prioritised export-oriented production while it neglected local producers.

From a rural development perspective, this exclusion undermines equity and sustainability. Policies that fail to acknowledge small-scale producers risks perpetuation of poverty and underdevelopment. The case of Ikot Ubo underscores the need for participatory development planning that integrates local voices and recognised indigenous industries.

### 5.5. Continuity, Change, and Modernisation

While traditional methods remain prevalent, gradual changes are evident. Mechanised oil mills have been introduced in nearby towns, offering opportunities for increased productivity. However, cost and accessibility limit their adoption in Ikot Ubo. Gender roles have also evolved, with men increasingly participating in processing and trade.

These changes reflect broader trends in rural modernisation, where traditional practices coexist with modern technologies. The challenge lies in balancing continuity with innovation, to ensure that modernisation does not erode cultural traditions or marginalise vulnerable groups. Supporting small-scale producers with appropriate technology, training, and infrastructure can

enhance productivity while preserving cultural identity.

## 5.6. Implications for Policy and Scholarship

The case of Ikot Ubo has important implications for both policy and scholarship. For policymakers, it highlights the need to recognise small-scale palm oil processing as a driver of rural development. Interventions should focus on the improvement of infrastructure, provide access to credit, and support cooperative societies. For scholars, the study fills a historiographical gap by documenting the contributions of a specific community, thereby enriching the literature on Nigerian economic history and rural development.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusion

This study examined the role of small-scale palm oil processing in rural development, using Ikot Ubo in Nsit Ubium Local Government Area as a case study. The findings demonstrated that palm oil production is not merely an economic activity but a socio-cultural institution that sustains livelihoods, reinforces communal bonds, and preserves cultural traditions. Women emerged as the backbone of processing and trade, while men contributed primarily to harvesting and, increasingly, to marketing as palm oil gained commercial value.

Palm oil production provided income, food security, and integration into local trade networks, while by-products supported other industries such as soap-making, hair and body oil, mat weaving, and palm wine production. Yet, challenges such as land scarcity, infrastructural deficits, and political marginalisation constrained the growth of the industry. Despite these limitations, small-scale palm oil processing continues to play a vital role in rural resilience and economic survival.

By situating Ikot Ubo within the broader historiography of palm oil in Nigeria, this study fills a critical gap in scholarship. It underscores the importance of micro-level analysis in understanding rural development and highlights the need to recognise indigenous industries as drivers of sustainable transformation.

### 6.2 Recommendations

#### For Policy Makers

**6.2.1. Infrastructure Development:** Improve rural roads, storage facilities, and access to electricity to enhance productivity and market access. This is particularly important as most roads in rural areas are not tarred. Inaccessible roads and the absence of electricity are a major hindrance to small-scale businesses located in rural communities.

**6.2.2. Technology Support:** Provide affordable mechanised oil mills and training programs to modernise production while preserving traditional knowledge.

**6.2.3 Cooperative Societies:** Encourage the formation of cooperatives to strengthen bargaining power, facilitate access to credit, and promote collective marketing. Financial institutions need to locate their offices in local government headquarters to make them readily available to rural-based businesses.

**6.2.4. Inclusive Planning:** Recognise and integrate communities like Ikot Ubo into development frameworks to ensure equitable distribution of resources.

#### **For Scholars and Researchers:**

**6.2.5. Micro-Level Studies:** Conduct more community-based research to document the contributions of overlooked rural producers. Rural communities are the preferred location for small-scales which most times cannot afford the cost implication of an urban location. It is important to have a database of small businesses located in rural areas for development purposes.

**6.2.6. Gender Analysis:** Explore the evolving roles of women and men in palm oil production to understand the implications for empowerment and equity.

**6.2.7. Comparative Research** Compare palm oil production across different Ibibio and Nigerian communities to identify patterns of continuity and change.

#### **For Local Communities**

**6.2.8. Knowledge Preservation:** Document and transmit traditional processing methods to younger generations to safeguard cultural heritage.

**6.2.9. Community Mobilisation:** Strengthen communal labour practices and local institutions to sustain social cohesion and economic resilience.

### **6.3 Final Reflection**

Ikot Ubo demonstrates that small-scale palm oil processing is both an economic lifeline and a cultural anchor. Supporting such industries is not only a matter of economic policy but also of cultural preservation and social justice. For Nigeria to achieve sustainable rural development, it must embrace the contributions of small-scale producers, ensure that communities like Ikot Ubo are no longer marginalised but recognised as vital partners in national growth.

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