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Colonialism and Economic Transformation in Isanlu, 1946–1960

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Abstract

This paper examines the economic transformation of Isanlu from 1946 to 1960 under British colonial rule. It argues that post-Second World War colonial policies significantly restructured the community's indigenous economy through the commercialization of agriculture, direct taxation, market expansion, and the monetization of labour. Using the historical method, the study draws on archival records, oral interviews, and relevant secondary sources to analyze the nature and impact of these policies. The findings reveal that colonial economic reforms integrated Isanlu into the wider colonial economy, altered traditional patterns of production and exchange, and contributed to the decline of some indigenous industries. At the same time, the people of Isanlu responded by adapting existing economic practices to meet the demands of the colonial cash economy. The article concludes that the economic transformation of Isanlu was shaped by the interaction between colonial policies and local agency rather than by colonial intervention alone. By focusing on a rural Okun-Yoruba community, the study contributes to the historiography of colonial Nigeria and demonstrates the importance of local histories in understanding the wider impact of British colonial economic policies

Keywords: Colonialism, Economics, Isanlu, Nigeria

Introduction

The history of colonialism in Nigeria has generated extensive scholarly interest, particularly regarding its impact on indigenous political institutions, social organization, and economic development.[2] While considerable attention has been devoted to major urban centers and economically strategic regions, relatively little scholarly work has examined the localized experiences of rural communities such as Isanlu in present-day Yagba East Local Government Area of Kogi State. Yet, it was within such communities that colonial economic policies were implemented and experienced most directly. An examination of

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2 T.N.Tamuno, "British Colonial Administration in Nigeria in the Twentieth Century," in O. Ikime (ed.) Groundwork of Nigerian History, Ibadan: Heinemann Books (Nig). Plc,1980, p.393

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Isanlu therefore provides an important opportunity to understand how British colonial rule transformed indigenous economies at the local level and how local communities responded to those transformations.

Between 1946 and 1960, British colonial economic policy in Nigeria entered a decisive phase. Following the end of the Second World War, the colonial administration introduced a series of development programs designed to increase agricultural productivity, expand commercial activities, improve transport infrastructure, and strengthen administrative efficiency. Although these initiatives were presented as measures for economic development and modernization, they were primarily intended to consolidate colonial authority and increase the production of raw materials required by British industries.[3] consequently, rural communities such as Isanlu became increasingly integrated into the colonial economy through the expansion of cash-crop production, direct taxation, commercial exchange, and labour mobilization.[4]

Prior to colonial rule, the economy of Isanlu was largely organized around subsistence agriculture, local trade, hunting, craft production, and a system of reciprocal exchange regulated by indigenous political and social institutions. Agricultural production focused principally on food crops cultivated to meet household needs, while periodic markets facilitated the exchange of agricultural produce, livestock, and locally manufactured goods with neighboring communities.[5] Economic activities were therefore structured primarily to sustain local livelihoods rather than to satisfy external commercial demands. British colonial rule gradually altered this indigenous economic system by introducing policies that reoriented production towards the wider colonial market and strengthened the monetization of the local economy.

The period between 1946 and 1960 was particularly significant because it witnessed the implementation of the Colonial Development and Welfare programs, increased investment in transport and communications, the expansion of produce marketing systems, and greater administrative penetration into rural communities. These developments transformed patterns of agricultural production, labour organization, taxation, and commercial exchange in Isanlu.[56]Farmers increasingly participated in commodity markets, indigenous industries encountered new forms of competition, and economic decisions became progressively influenced by colonial administrative priorities. While these changes created new commercial opportunities for some inhabitants, they also generated structural inequalities and altered long-established economic relationships within the community.[7]

3 Apata, Z.O. British Administrative Changes and Reorganisations in Northern Nigeria, 1897-1839: With Specific Reference to Northeast Yorubaland, Ibadan: Cresthill Publishers Ltd., 2011, Pp. 119-200.
4 M.D.A. Olorunmonu Isanlu Kingdom 1894-2010, Lokoja: Medupin Success Publisher, 2010, p.26.
5 E.A. Moses. Cultural History of Isanlu Kingdom. Abuja: Mat-sunshine Printers, 2020, p.31.
6 Oral interview with Iye Gbeke, 80+, Ifa Priest in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.
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This paper argues that British colonial rule fundamentally transformed the economy of Isanlu between 1946 and 1960 by restructuring indigenous systems of production, exchange, and labour to serve the broader objectives of the colonial state. Although colonial policies stimulated commercial agriculture, expanded market networks, and introduced limited infrastructural improvements, these developments were largely designed to facilitate imperial economic interests rather than autonomous local development. The resulting transformation reshaped indigenous economic institutions, modified patterns of social interaction, and produced economic changes whose effects extended beyond Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960.[8]

To achieve this objective, this paper adopts the historical method, drawing upon archival records, oral interviews, and relevant secondary sources. By integrating these diverse forms of evidence, the study reconstructs the economic transformation of Isanlu during the late colonial period while situating the community within the broader context of British colonial economic policy in Nigeria. In doing so, the article contributes to the growing body of scholarship on local histories by demonstrating how national colonial policies were interpreted, implemented, and experienced within a specific rural community.

Pre-colonial Economy of Isanlu

A proper understanding of the economic transformation that occurred in Isanlu between 1946 and 1960 requires an examination of the indigenous economic system that existed before the consolidation of British colonial rule. Colonial policies did not emerge in an economic vacuum; rather, they encountered an already organized and functional economy that had evolved over generations in response to the environmental conditions, social organization, and political institutions of the community. The transformation that followed therefore represented not the creation of an entirely new economy, but the gradual restructuring of an existing indigenous system to accommodate the objectives of the colonial state.[9]

Before the twentieth century, the economy of Isanlu was predominantly agrarian and centered on subsistence production. Agriculture constituted the principal occupation of the population and formed the foundation of household livelihood, social stability, and communal survival. Families cultivated food crops such as yam, cassava, maize, guinea corn, millet, cocoyam, vegetables, and beans primarily for domestic consumption, while any surplus was exchanged through local markets or bartered with neighboring communities.[10] Farming was organized on a household basis, although communal labour arrangements enabled families to undertake labour-intensive agricultural activities such as land clearing, planting, and harvesting. These cooperative labour systems not only increased agricultural productivity but also reinforced kinship ties and social solidarity within the community.

8 M.D.A. Olorunmonu Isanlu Kingdom 1894-2010…p.79.
9 Oral interview with Abosede Adekunle, 70, in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.
10 Oral interview with Sunday Job, 70, in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.

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Land constituted the most valuable productive resource in Isanlu and was held under customary tenure regulated by indigenous authority. Ownership was generally vested in families and lineages under the supervision of traditional rulers and family heads, who exercised custodial responsibilities over communal land. Individuals enjoyed secure rights of cultivation through membership of a lineage or family rather than through individual ownership in the modern legal sense. The customary land tenure system ensured broad access to agricultural land, while minimizing social conflict and preventing excessive concentration of land in the hands of a few individuals. Consequently, agricultural production remained closely integrated with indigenous political institutions and communal values.

Agriculture was complemented by a vibrant network of local trade and exchange. Periodic markets provided opportunities for farmers, hunters, artisans, and traders to exchange agricultural produce, livestock, craft products, and other household necessities. These markets also served as centers of social interaction where information was exchanged, disputes were settled, and relationships between neighboring communities were strengthened.[11] Isanlu maintained commercial contacts with other Okun-Yoruba communities as well as neighboring Nupe, Okolomo, Ejuku traders, thereby facilitating the circulation of goods beyond the immediate locality. Long before colonial intervention, therefore, Isanlu had already developed commercial networks that linked it to wider regional economies.[12]

Craft production constituted another important component of the indigenous economy. Skilled artisans specialized in blacksmithing, weaving, pottery, wood carving, leatherwork, basket weaving, and other household industries that supplied essential tools and domestic items required for agricultural and social life. Blacksmiths manufactured farm implements, knives, hunting weapons, and other agricultural equipment indispensable to farming activities, while potters and weavers produced household utensils and clothing for local consumption. These indigenous industries demonstrated the technical knowledge and economic self-sufficiency that characterized the pre-colonial economy of Isanlu before the introduction of imported manufactured goods under colonial rule.[13]

Hunting, palm produce collection, and the gathering of forest resources further diversified household incomes and supplemented agricultural production. The surrounding forests provided timber, medicinal plants, fruits, fuel, and other natural resources that contributed significantly to rural livelihoods. Livestock rearing, particularly goats, sheep, poultry, also complemented crop cultivation and enhanced household economic security. This diversified economic structure reduced vulnerability to crop failure and enabled families to satisfy most of their material needs through locally available resources.[14]

11 Oral interview Mrs. Segun Olawumi. 50+. Trader, in Isanlu on 14/12/2024.
12 M.D.A. Olorunmonu Isanlu Kingdom 1894-2010…p.79.
13 Oral interview with Abosede Adekunle, 70, in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.
14 ibid

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The organization of the indigenous economy reflected the broader social and political institutions of Isanlu. Production, exchange, and resource allocation were regulated by customs, age-grade associations, kinship obligations, and the authority of traditional institutions. Economic activities were therefore embedded within social relationships rather than driven exclusively by market forces. Wealth was measured not only by material accumulation but also by the capacity of individuals and families to fulfill communal obligations, support relatives, participate in festivals, and contribute to collective welfare. This integration of economic activity with social institutions fostered cohesion and ensured that production served both individual households and the wider community.[15]

Nevertheless, the indigenous economy was not static or isolated from external influences. Through regional trade and interaction with neighboring societies, Isanlu participated in broader commercial networks long before the arrival of British colonial administrators. The community demonstrated considerable adaptability by incorporating new products and trading opportunities while preserving its indigenous economic institutions. It was this relatively stable and self-regulating economic system that British colonial policies encountered and gradually transformed after the establishment of effective colonial administration. The transition from this indigenous economic structure to a colonial economy accelerated after the Second World War. Between 1946 and 1960, British colonial policies increasingly redirected agricultural production towards commercial objectives, expanded taxation, encouraged participation in colonial markets, and strengthened administrative control over rural economic activities.[16] Consequently, the traditional economic organization of Isanlu underwent profound changes that altered patterns of production, labour, trade, and resource allocation. Understanding the character of the pre-colonial economy therefore provides the essential foundation for analyzing the nature and extent of colonial economic transformation in Isanlu during the late colonial period.

Agricultural Production and Commercialization

Agriculture remained the foundation of Isanlu's economy throughout the colonial period, but between 1945 and 1960 its character changed significantly. Rather than merely increasing agricultural output, British colonial policy redefined the purpose of production by redirecting rural agriculture towards the demands of the imperial economy. The post-war colonial administration regarded agriculture as the principal means through which Nigeria could supply raw materials for British industries while simultaneously generating revenue for the colonial government.[17] Consequently, agricultural development in Isanlu was designed less to improve the welfare of local farmers than to strengthen Britain's economic recovery after the Second World War.

15 NAK KABBAPROF, 2954/1954. Proposal for the Removal of Isanlu Market.
16 NAK.Kab. Dist.2/1.vol.3. Yagba district, 1945.
17 Apata, Z.O. and Akinwumi, Y. (eds.), The Groundwork of Niger-Benue Confluence History, Ibadan: Cresthill Publishers Ltd. 2011, p.132

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Prior to this period, farming in Isanlu was primarily subsistence-oriented. Households cultivated a variety of food crops to satisfy domestic needs, and agricultural surpluses were exchanged within local markets. Production decisions were largely determined by household consumption requirements, environmental conditions, and indigenous farming practices.[18] Following the implementation of post-war colonial development policies, however, agriculture increasingly assumed a commercial character. Farmers were encouraged to produce larger marketable surpluses, and cultivation became progressively influenced by opportunities for monetary income. This transformation marked an important departure from the traditional objective of agricultural self-sufficiency.[19]

The commercialization of agriculture was facilitated through the activities of colonial agricultural officers and Native Authority officials, who encouraged improved farming methods and greater participation in commercial production. Demonstration farms, extension services, and agricultural campaigns sought to persuade farmers to increase productivity and adopt practices considered more efficient by colonial administrators. While these programs introduced certain innovations into local farming, they were primarily intended to expand agricultural output rather than fundamentally improve rural livelihoods. Agricultural modernization therefore functioned largely as an instrument for increasing the availability of exportable produce within the colonial economy.[20]

The expansion of commercial agriculture also altered patterns of labour organization within Isanlu. As market production increased, households required additional labour to cultivate larger farms and harvest greater quantities of produce. Although communal labour arrangements remained important, the growing demand for agricultural labour encouraged increased reliance on hired workers, reciprocal labour groups, and family labour. Young men and women assumed greater responsibilities within agricultural production, while seasonal labour movements became more common during periods of intensive cultivation and harvesting. These changes reflected the increasing integration of labour into a monetized rural economy.[21]

Commercial agriculture further strengthened the relationship between rural producers and colonial marketing institutions. Produce buyers operating under government supervision purchased agricultural commodities for distribution through regional commercial networks that ultimately supplied export markets. Farmers therefore became increasingly dependent upon external buyers whose purchasing practices, grading systems, and pricing policies were determined largely outside the community. This reduced the autonomy previously enjoyed by local producers and exposed rural households to fluctuations in commodity prices beyond their control. As agricultural production became increasingly

18 E.A. Moses. Cultural History of Isanlu Kingdom. Abuja: Mat-sunshine Printers, 2020, p.31.
19 M.D.A. Olorunmonu Isanlu Kingdom 1894-2010…p.78.
20 W. Oyemakinde, "The Development of Cash Crop Economy in Nigeria," in Akinjobin, I.A. and Osoba, S.O. Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History, Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1980, p.500.
21 W. Oyemakinde, "The Development of Cash Crop Economy in Nigeria…p.507.

commercialized, farmers were compelled to adapt to economic conditions determined by the wider colonial market.

Transportation improvements introduced during the late colonial period further accelerated agricultural commercialization. The construction and maintenance of feeder roads improved communication between Isanlu and neighboring commercial centers, thereby facilitating the movement of agricultural produce to larger markets. Easier transportation reduced the time required to move goods, expanded trading opportunities, and encouraged greater participation in regional commerce. However, these infrastructural developments should not be interpreted solely as evidence of colonial benevolence. Roads were strategically constructed to facilitate administrative control and ensure the efficient evacuation of agricultural commodities from producing areas to export channels.[22] Thus, improvements in transportation simultaneously served local commercial needs and imperial economic objectives.

The increasing emphasis on commercial agriculture produced both opportunities and challenges for the people of Isanlu. On the one hand, greater market participation enabled some farmers to generate cash income, improve household purchasing power, and finance social obligations such as education, taxation, and housing. The circulation of money within the local economy stimulated commercial activities and encouraged the growth of petty trading and products marketing. On the other hand, increasing dependence on agricultural markets exposed rural households to unstable commodity prices and periodic fluctuations in demand.[23] During years of poor harvests or declining prices, many farming families experienced financial hardship despite producing larger quantities of agricultural commodities.

The commercialization of agriculture also affected food production. As farmers devoted increasing attention to market-oriented cultivation, concerns occasionally emerged regarding the balance between food crops and commercially valuable produce. Although subsistence farming remained central to household survival, the growing importance of monetary income sometimes encouraged the reallocation of labour and land towards crops with greater commercial value. Consequently, colonial agricultural policy gradually reshaped local priorities by linking economic success more closely to market participation than to traditional measures of agricultural sufficiency. Nevertheless, the response of Isanlu farmers to colonial agricultural policies was neither uniform nor passive. Rural producers exercised considerable agency by selectively adopting innovations that enhanced productivity while preserving indigenous farming knowledge and customary land tenure practices.[24] Rather than abandoning traditional agriculture entirely, many households combined established cultivation techniques with emerging commercial opportunities. This selective adaptation demonstrates that

22 NAK ILORIN. PROF. 900/912
. M.D.A. Olorunmonu, Isanlu Kingdom, Ibadan: Medupin Success Publishers, 2010, p.77.
23 Oral interview with Baba Emmanuel Ogundele, 70, hunter in Isanlu on 14/12/2024.
24 ibid

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economic transformation in Isanlu resulted from a continuous interaction between colonial intervention and indigenous decision-making rather than from unilateral colonial imposition.

By the eve of Nigerian independence in 1960, agriculture in Isanlu had undergone substantial transformation. Production had become increasingly commercialized, participation in regional markets had expanded, and farming had become more closely integrated into the wider colonial economy Yet these developments were characterized by an inherent contradiction. While colonial agricultural policies created new opportunities for commercial exchange and monetary income, they simultaneously deepened rural dependence on external markets and subordinated local production to the economic priorities of the British Empire. The transformation of agriculture therefore illustrates both the developmental possibilities and structural limitations of colonial economic policy in late colonial Isanlu.[25]

Taxation, Labour, and Colonial Revenue Policies

The introduction of colonial taxation constituted one of the most significant instruments through which the British administration transformed the economy of Isanlu during the late colonial period. Although taxation had existed in various forms within many pre-colonial African societies, British colonial taxation differed fundamentally in both purpose and administration. Rather than serving communal obligations or supporting indigenous political institutions, colonial taxation was designed primarily to generate revenue for the colonial state and to integrate rural communities into a monetized economy[26] between 1946 and 1960, taxation became an essential component of British economic policy in Isanlu, influencing agricultural production, labour organization, trade, and household economic strategies.

The expansion of taxation during this period coincided with Britain's post-war economic reconstruction. Following the Second World War, the colonial administration intensified revenue collection throughout Nigeria in order to finance administrative activities and implement development programs under the Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme. In Isanlu, tax collection was carried out through the Native Authority administration, which relied on traditional rulers, district officials, and tax collectors to assess and collect revenue. Although indigenous authorities participated in this process, the objectives and procedures of taxation were determined by the colonial government, thereby reducing the autonomy of traditional institutions in matters of local finance.[27]

Unlike the indigenous system of communal contributions, colonial taxes were assessed on individuals and were payable in cash. This seemingly simple administrative requirement had profound consequences for the economy of Isanlu. Since taxes could not ordinarily be paid with agricultural produce or through communal service, households were compelled to obtain money by

25 M.D.A. Olorunmonu Isanlu Kingdom 1894-2010… p.183
26 NAK.Kabba District.Acct.8.Isanlu Group. p.10
27 NAK LOKOPROF, 912/1940 Re-Assess Report

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selling farm produce, engaging in petty trading, or seeking other income-generating activities.[28] Taxation therefore accelerated the monetization of the local economy by making participation in commercial exchange a necessity rather than a matter of choice.

Oral evidence from Isanlu indicates that tax collection was enforced with considerable seriousness by the Native Authority. Individuals who failed to pay their taxes within the stipulated period were liable to arrest and detention in the Native Authority lock-up at Isanlu until payment was made either by the taxpayer or members of the extended family. The existence of this local detention facility demonstrates that taxation was not merely an economic policy but also an important mechanism through which colonial authority was enforced within the community. Fear of imprisonment encouraged prompt tax payment and reinforced compliance with colonial administrative regulations.[29]

The need to obtain cash for taxation significantly influenced agricultural production in Isanlu. Many farmers expanded the cultivation of cocoa and increased the processing of palm produce because these commodities could easily be sold for cash in local and regional markets. Although food crops such as yam, cassava, maize and guinea corn remained indispensable for household consumption, increasing attention was devoted to agricultural activities capable of generating monetary income. Consequently, taxation became one of the principal factors encouraging the commercialization of agriculture discussed in the preceding section.[30] Colonial fiscal policy therefore reshaped not only government revenue but also farmers' production decisions and household economic priorities.

Taxation also produced important changes in labour organization. Before colonial rule, the Oluse system of communal labour constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which agricultural work was organized in Isanlu. Under this arrangement, members of the community cooperated in clearing farmland, planting crops and harvesting agricultural produce without direct monetary payment. The expansion of the colonial cash economy, however, gradually weakened this institution. As cash became increasingly necessary for tax payment and other financial obligations, many young men preferred wage-earning activities or commercial trading to unpaid communal labour.[31] While Oluse did not disappear entirely, its economic importance declined as labour became progressively monetized.

The demand for cash also encouraged labour mobility beyond Isanlu. Oral traditions indicate that some inhabitants travelled to Lokoja, often on foot, carrying locally produced goods such as woven cloth, iron implements, beads, calabashes and other household articles for sale. The proceeds from these trading activities enabled them to pay taxes and meet other financial obligations imposed by the colonial administration. These journeys illustrate the adaptive

28 NAK LOKOPROF, 219/1948, Native Administration
29 Oral interview with Iye Gbeke, 80+, Ifa Priest in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.
30 Oral interview with Iye Gbeke, 80+, Ifa Priest in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.
31 Apata, Z.O. and Akinwumi, Y. (eds.), The Groundwork of Niger-Benue Confluence History, Ibadan: Cresthill Publishers Ltd. 2011, p.132

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strategies employed by the people of Isanlu in response to changing economic conditions. Rather than passively accepting colonial policies, local inhabitants developed new commercial networks that allowed them to satisfy colonial demands while sustaining their households.[32]

Women also played an increasingly important role in meeting household financial obligations during the late colonial period. Besides their traditional responsibilities in farming and food processing, many women participated more actively in local markets through the sale of agricultural produce, locally woven cloth, pottery and processed food items. Their commercial activities supplemented household income and enabled many families to cope with the increasing financial pressures created by taxation. Colonial economic transformation therefore altered gender roles within the household by expanding women's participation in commercial exchange, even though colonial policies rarely recognized or supported their contributions directly.[33]

Despite these adjustments, taxation imposed significant burdens upon many households in Isanlu. During years of poor harvest or declining produce prices, some families found it difficult to generate sufficient cash to meet tax obligations. The obligation to pay taxes irrespective of agricultural performance exposed peasant farmers to financial hardship and increased dependence on commercial agriculture.[34] In this respect, taxation functioned not merely as a source of colonial revenue but as a mechanism through which rural households became increasingly integrated into an economic system governed by external administrative and commercial interests.[35] Nevertheless, the people of Isanlu demonstrated considerable resilience in responding to these challenges. Families diversified their economic activities, strengthened participation in regional trade, relied on kinship support during periods of financial difficulty, and selectively adopted commercial opportunities created by colonial rule. Such responses reveal that the economic transformation of Isanlu resulted from continuous interaction between colonial policies and indigenous adaptation rather than from unilateral colonial imposition.

By the eve of Nigerian independence in 1960, taxation had fundamentally altered the economic landscape of Isanlu. It had accelerated the monetization of the local economy, encouraged commercial agriculture, weakened aspects of the traditional communal labour system, stimulated labour mobility, and expanded participation in regional markets. Yet these changes were primarily driven by the fiscal and commercial priorities of the colonial administration rather than by a deliberate programme of locally defined economic development. The history of taxation in Isanlu therefore illustrates how colonial revenue policies became a powerful instrument for restructuring indigenous economic institutions while simultaneously extending the reach of the colonial state into the everyday lives of rural communities.[36]

32 NAK Kab. District, Acc.9. 1922 Yagba District
33 Oral interview with Iye Gbeke, 80+, Ifa Priest in Isanlu on 12/12/2024.
34 NAK LOKOPROF, 218/1940, Native Administration
35 ibid
36 M.D.A. Olorunmonu, Isanlu Kingdom, Ibadan: Medupin Success Publishers, 2010, p.77.

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Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that British colonial rule fundamentally transformed the economy of Isanlu between 1946 and 1960 through policies that promoted commercial agriculture, direct taxation, market expansion, and labour monetization. Although these policies introduced new economic opportunities and improved access to regional markets, they were primarily designed to advance the economic interests of the colonial state rather than the development priorities of the local community. Consequently, traditional patterns of production, exchange, and labour organization were significantly restructured as Isanlu became increasingly integrated into the colonial economy.

Despite these changes, the people of Isanlu were not passive victims of colonial policies. Farmers, traders, artisans, and women responded by adapting indigenous economic practices to the changing colonial environment. While institutions such as the Oluse communal labour system declined in importance, they did not disappear completely, reflecting both continuity and change in the community's economic life. The experience of Isanlu therefore demonstrates that colonial economic transformation was shaped by the interaction between British policies and local responses rather than by colonial directives alone.

By examining the economic history of Isanlu through archival records, oral evidence, and secondary sources, this study contributes to the historiography of colonial Nigeria by highlighting how national colonial policies were experienced and negotiated at the local level. It argues that understanding communities such as Isanlu is essential to explaining the wider economic legacy of colonialism in Nigeria.

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