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# Igbo Women in The Cashew Industry in Obollo-Afor, South Eastern Nigeria Since 1978

**Odoh, Samuel Onyenaezichi**

*Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka*

**Corresponding Author:** Odoh, Samuel Onyenaezichi, **Email:** samuel.odoh@unn.edu.ng

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the years historical discourse and historical studies in Africa and elsewhere have dwelt largely on the exploits done by men. Historical writings have been gendered insensitive with regards to the women's roles in economic development, especially in rural communities. This paper sets out to analyze the roles of women in the economic growth of Obollo-Afor especially in the cashew industry since 1978. The paper adopts a qualitative research methodology and made use of both primary and secondary sources such as relevant books, institutional publications, oral interviews among others. It was discovered in the course of the research that the roles of the women in cashew industry have contributed significantly to the economic development of the area.

## **Keywords**

Igbo, Women, Cashew, Processing, Marketing

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of African women in history started receiving historical interest since 1970s. This has been fostered by the international women movements and the general developments in African history after the Second World War (WWII). It is important to state that the problem of African development led to the studies of women in the society, economy and politics to achieve equitable and sustainable development and change (Eno, 2009). The aim was to show that African women including the Igbo women of Southeastern Nigeria contributed significantly to the economic development of society in order to counter earlier assumptions of African women as being passive, docile and dependent (Eno, 2009). The contributions of women to cashew industry and how they strived to sustain the economy through their petty trading in cashew related businesses are yet to receive any scholarly attention in the area of study. The Igbo women of Obollo-Afor extraction engaged in this industry in different capacities ranging from planting, harvesting, marketing of raw cashew nuts and cashew fruit, processing to marketing of processed cashew nuts. However, this study shall concentrate on processing and marketing of processed cashew nuts in Obollo-Afor.

Be that as it may, it would be germane to briefly look at cashew nuts in Nigeria, Cashew is a small to medium sized shrub believed to have originated from a short-growing ecotype *Anacardium occidentale* that occurs among the low vegetation of the *restinga* in coastal northeastern Brazil (Hammed et al., 2008). It was introduced into Nigeria between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Portuguese traders and first planted in Agege, Lagos state, Nigeria and from there it spread to a few other parts of the country through the activities of man (Hammed et al., 2008)

The introduction of cashew tree in Nsukka areas was during the colonial period by the Europeans who came to settle in the area. These cashew trees were massively planted in their areas of settlements like the famous magistrate quarters (*Magi Quarters*), Leprosy Reserved Area (*Ulo-Ogwu*) in *Ibada*, all in Obollo-Afor. The aim of its plantation in these areas was mainly for provision of shade and also as wind breakers. The people only consumed the apples (*Mmiricashuu*) and the nuts (*mkpuru-cashuu*) were thrown away as a result of their acidic nature which made parents admonished their children to avoid it (Abah, 2017). It is also important to state that at this point the people were ignorant of the economic importance and mineral contents of the tree but accepted its plantation as a means of checking wind (wind breakers) and provision of shade [*canopies over areas they grow*]. The plantations of cashew in the western and Eastern

regions of Nigeria by their respective regional development corporations never ushered the crop fully into the commercial crop category until 1970s when the commercial strength of cashew was realized with the invasion of local markets by Indian merchants seeking for raw cashew nuts to meet the Indian local processing capacity (Olawale et al., 2010; Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020; Suleman & Rahman, 2020). This massive need/demand for the products in the continent of Asia aroused the awareness of both the people and the government which led to the planting of more cashew trees by the people and enactment of law for the systematic research on cashew production in 1971 by the Federal government of Nigeria (Olawale et al., 2010). In view of the above development, cashew related businesses became main employer of women labor in most parts of Nigeria especially Obollo-Afor. These cashew nuts produced by the plant are very important fruit crop. They are found on grocery and health food stores shelves across the world. Locally, they are eaten as food after processing/frying and usually seen in pale, ivory colored/coated white nuts. The nuts are packed with energy containing about 1 per ounce of energy while the fleshly succulent parts attached to the nuts are eaten raw or processed into wine/juice and other beverages for human consumption (Enwelu et al.,2014). Cashew nuts are very rich source of minerals. Minerals such as potassium, copper, iron, magnesium, zinc and selenium are concentrated in the nuts. A handful of cashew nuts a day in the diet would provide enough of these minerals and prevent diseases caused by their deficiency. Selenium found in cashew nut is an important micronutrient which functions as co-factor for antioxidant enzymes such as Glutathione peroxidase, one of the most powerful antioxidants in the body (Enwelu et al.,2014)

Be that as it may, with the construction of the Enugu-Makurdi highway which eventually came to successful end in 1978 when the highway was opened to traffic, led to the demand for goods and services by both the driver and travelers on transit on approaching Obollo-Afor. This demand for goods and services led to new economic activities in the area. In view of this trend, the demands for goods and services by passengers and drivers led to the provision of needed goods and services by the Obollo-Afor women and other women in neighboring towns. Shops were constructed along the highway to provide these goods and services (Odoh,2015). Among these goods and services are cashew fruit (*MmiriCashuu*) and cashew nut baked (*mkpurucashuu*).The women's roles in this cashew industry have become so obvious that the name of the town has become synonymous with cashewnuts.

## Women in Cashew Nut Processing in Obollo-Afor

The income of cashew nuts is enhanced through proper and efficient processing. The main objective of processing of cashew nuts is to remove the valuable cashew Kernels from the shells without damage to the kernels. This is because whole nuts removed safely without damage to the kernels attracts higher price than the broken ones. The broken cashew nuts are usually not attractive to customers at the point of marketing (Enwelu et al.,2014). In spite of this well-known fact in the industry, cashew nuts are processed locally by women using manual techniques like frying ovens constructed with metal such as open pans and open drum. These local cashew nuts processors usually the women and their children are engaged in this enterprise as a means of livelihood. Through this manual processing method cashew nuts are consumed locally in rural, semi and urban areas like Enugu town, Onitsha, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Benue and beyond (Enwelu et al.,2014).

The local processing of cashew in Obollo-Afor has spread so wide that most of the women are found in this industry. The women usually converge at the Obollo-Afor market on Afor market day to purchase raw cashew nuts from the farmers who usually come to the market to sell the raw cashew nut (*mkpuru-cashuu*) which they have been able to gather within the four days. These raw cashew nuts from the farmers are usually measured using a basket meant for the measurement. The basket of raw cashew nut is usually sold at the rate of ₦11,000-₦12,500 depending on the availability of the raw cashew nuts within the period(Asogwa,2017). Some women purchase from raw cashew nuts dealers who sell the product in bags to the local processors. The constructions of open pan, open drum, oven are carried out by tinsmiths or tinkers who specialized in the construction of household utensil. These open pans and open drums are placed on the tripod or fire place and some quantities of raw cashew nuts are poured on the open pan on tripod and allowed to start emitting oil or cashew nut shell liquid (*Manucashuu*). The emission of liquid from the cashew nuts while on fire triggers or ignite flames on the raw cashew nuts on open pan or open drum as the case may be(Mbah,2018). The flames on cashew nuts on pan are allowed to last for four-eight minutes depending on the quantity of raw cashew nut on the pan. The flames usually reduced due to exhaustion of oil in cashew nut. The local processors at this point will lower the pan out of the fire place in order to extinguish the flames on the roasted cashew nuts. The women who specialized in the industry usually use ashes to mix with the already roasted cashew nuts. According to Mrs. Josephine Agbo (2019), the reason for the application of ashes on the roasted cashew nuts is to prevent the

cashew nuts from cooling down and breaking into pieces during cracking. With the application of ashes, the broken ones are minimized or completely avoided to produce a whole nut unbroken which attracts higher prices in the market. The separation of the kernel from the shells is usually tedious task among the women as the acidic content of the shells cause burns on the women fingers. These cashew burns change the palms and fingers of the women beyond recognition. The cashew burns last on the affected area for more than a month. This has created phobia among the younger women and children in the industry who believe in the proper maintenance of their skin(Agbo,2019). In view of these burns sustained during cracking of the cashew nuts led to the use of leather (waterproof) to cover the hands before the commencement of the exercise. However, the system has improved to an extent that the women especially the younger ones decided to wear glove during the exercise which has proved effective in the prevention of the cashew burns(Ojobor,2019). The cracking of cashew nuts locally usually follows a sequential order. A cashew nut is picked with the left hand and the right hand used to hold firmly a small stone which the local processor hits on the roasted cashew nut softly to give way for the separation of the kernel from the cashew shell. The reason for the soft application of the small stone on the roasted cashew nuts is to avoid causing damage to the kernel. This unbroken kernel would be placed in a contain one after the other until the quantity required for the market is processed. In view of the intricacies involved in the processing of the cashew nuts which requires patience, perseverance and being meticulous in the art of processing of the nuts, Mr. Makata John (2020) believes that some occupations have been preserved for a particular gender depending on the nature and the skills required for the job. With this assertion , women's roles in the industry and their subsequent domination gives more justification to this study

Be that as it may, the women who specialized in this stage of processing have a particular time and day when these cashew kernels are taken to *Afor* market as early as possible for marketing. On the day of marketing these cashew nuts, people from different parts of Nigeria like Enugu town, Onitsha, Port-Harcourt, Lagos and neighboring towns usually converge at the place designated for the selling of this product. The arrival of these people from other parts of Nigeria leads to the hike in price (Onwe, 2019).

### **Pictures showing women marketing cracked cashew nuts**

This stage of processing also ends some women involvement in the processing while others who specialized in packaging and marketing take over the next stage usually the final stage in the

cashew industry. The packaging and marketing take place after the cracked or shelled cashew nuts pass through baking process.



**Figure 1:** Pictures showing women marketing cracked cashew nuts

### **Cashew Bakery in Obollo-Afor**

The baking of cashew nuts in Obollo-Afor has taken a new dimension as a result of the number of women involved in the cashew industry. According to Grace Attama, a baker who specialized in baking of cashew nuts for people, bakeries in Obollo-Afor are more than (10) ten in number situated at different locations . The objective of baking a cashew nut is to ensure that the cashew nut is properly dried for easy packaging and the avoidance of wastage(Attama,2018). The bakery is constructed in a way that it contains different layers (coaches)depending on what level of dryness customer wants the cashew nuts to be baked.

#### **Picture showing cashew nut baker attending to cashew nuts in the bakery**

With the introduction of cashew bakery in early 1990s in Obollo-Afor, the cashew processing has proved beyond the initial method of allowing the roasted cashew nuts to last on fire until the roasted cashew nuts are properly dried for easyremoval of the tiny scales without much harm to the cashew kernel by the women(Odika,2019). Mrs. Ugwuagbo (2018), a cashew nut supplier to Port Harcourt, said that the introduction of the cashew bakery in Obollo-Afor has greatly reduced the wastage encountered during the processing. According to her, the broken ones are avoided and quality of cashew packaged since the introduction has been attractive to customers in different states of the Federation. The baking oven or furnace gives the cashew nuts an attractive colour (Ivory colour) which commands higher price in the market. It is important to note that the bakers employ some persons who are engaged in different stages of

baking(Ugwuagbo,2018).Some of the workers are to ensure that enough logs of wood are available for use, some ensure the quantity of cashew nuts to be baked and the price tags for each quantity are intact. Some persons are incharge of furnace and the number of minutes the cashew nuts in the furnace stay or last to avoid burns.



**Figure 2:** Picture showing cashew nut baker attending to cashew nuts in the bakery

According to Igwebuike Onah (2018), a worker with Emmy cashew bakery, Obollo-Afor, the price collected for the bakery is ascertained using a plastic basket which is also used in measuring raw cashew nuts. A plastic basket of cracked cashew nuts to be baked attracts the sum of ₦300. Each cashew nuts dealer (*Onye-ashuacashuu*) comes with at least ten of these baskets for baking which does not take time before it would be ready. Most of often, the baked cashew nuts are combined with another customer's own with marks to avoid wastage of resources and also maximize profit by the bakers(Onah,2018).

However, after the baking of the cashew nuts, the women who are scattered all over Obollo-Afor and neighbouring towns move or retire to their various shops or personal houses to continue with the removal of tiny scales on the baked cashew nuts. At this point, the removal is carried out using a small knife to ensure that the hard ones are removed.



**Figure 3:** Pictures showing women in peeling and packaging of cashew nuts



The baked cashew nuts scales can easily be removed or detached as a result of the intensity of fire during baking. The women are mostly seen around “NewPark” Obollo-Afor where most of them rented or owned shops for this industry. In these shops, three things are usually carried out: One is the removal of tiny scales on the baked cashew nuts for packaging. Two is the packaging of cashew nuts into different sizes for onward marketing and the last is the marketing of cashew nuts to some customers who would want to come in person to verify the products before payment (Odika,2019).

According to Mrs. Ugwuagbo (2018), the customers who insisted on coming to Obollo-Afor in person instead of paying to the dealer’s account and the cashew nuts delivered to them through way bill or by bus drivers who ply their routes have their reasons:

*“Some of our co-dealers play or carry out sharp practices on their customers during packaging of the products. Some dealers during packaging into different sizes deliberately scoop a handful of broken cashew nuts (Eyogiyo) into the packaged ones and used the unbroken ones or whole nuts to cover it all round to avoid notification or detecting the broken cashew nuts inside the package. These people sell these ones for the same price to unsuspecting customers in the name of well-packaged ones”*(sic)

### **Marketing of the Processed Cashew Nuts in Obollo-Afor**

The marketing of these processed cashew nuts in Obollo-Afor takes two different methods. These methods identified are: Hawking of processed cashew nuts by women and the supplying of packaged cashew nuts (*using bottles and other containers*) to different parts of Nigeria and beyond.

#### **Cashew Hawking**

In Obollo-Afor, cashew hawkers are seen carrying wares on their heads and some on wheelbarrows scrambling for prospective buyers in vehicles on transit. This trend appears to be common in Obollo-Afor in view of the heavy road vehicular traffic witnessed both at night and during the daytime. In the event of a vehicle pulling to a stop, the cashew hawkers usually women are seen in numbers jostling to sell their wares to the passengers (Odoh, 2015).

#### **Pictures showing women marketing cashew nuts through hawking**

The service provided by these hawkers is to satisfy the immediate wants of the passengers and drivers on board. These hawkers are seen displaying their wares such as cashew nuts and fruits especially during the season. The services of these hawkers to the passengers in transit are quick and brisk as passengers have but limited time to spend at the station (Odoh, 2015). The



passengers have testified to the roles of the hawkers where goods are brought to them at the comfort of their seats in the vehicles. They said this has helped in checkmating time wasted at the designated bus stop. Abah Festus is a businessman based in Gboko but travels to Onitsha once every week to buy goods. He said he has been seeing some passengers who complained of being left behind by their drivers because they wasted too much time eating. He went further to say that since he had been travelling that he liked patronizing the hawkers including the cashew hawkers instead of taking the risk of being abandoned by his vehicle. To him the hawkers including cashew hawkers provide all the services that would have warranted his coming out from the vehicle(Odoh,2015). In view of the importance attached to the roles of the hawkers like cashew hawkers by the travelers, a hawker named Ifeoma Onah who hawks cashew nuts along the highway was interviewed and she had this to say about the business she engages in:

*“Hawking is a business many parents would not allow their sons and daughters to carry out due to the risk involved as well as the stigma attached to hawking. But economic realities force one to be a hawker. The hawking business of any kind is for brave women who could take the risk inherent in the business” (sic)*

The business of hawking of cashew nuts and other wares is dominated by the women folk of Obollo-Afor and their neighbours from the surrounding towns which gives credence to the discourse on women’s contributions to the economic development in the town.



**Figure 4:** Pictures showing women marketing cashew nuts through hawking

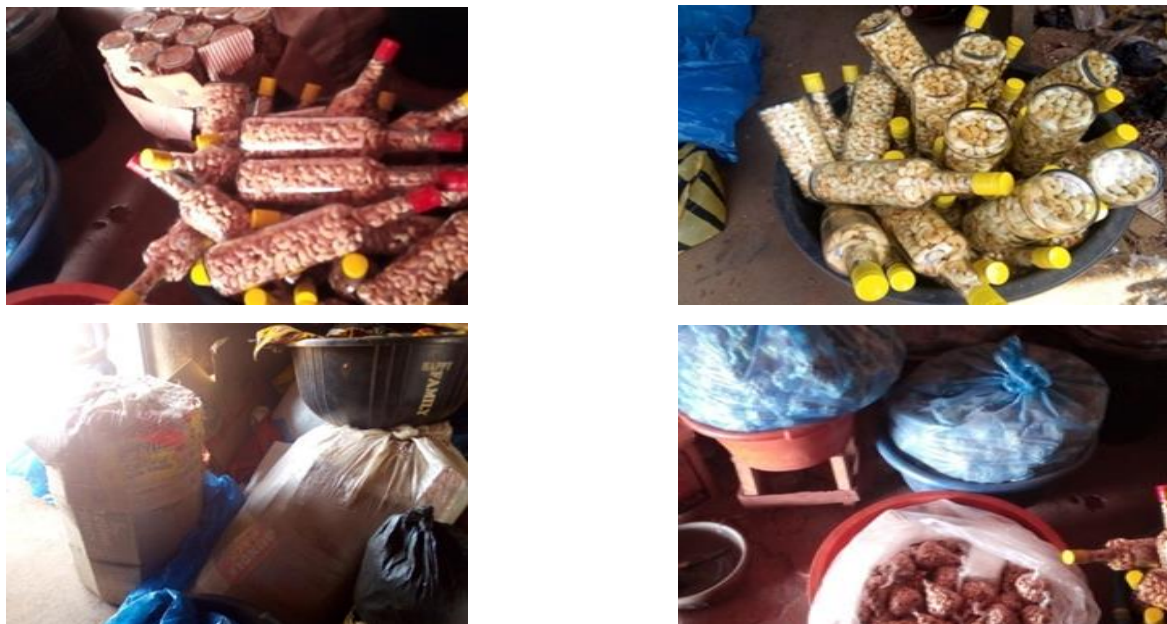
### **Supplying of Packaged Cashew Nuts**

The processed and packaged cashew nuts are distributed to different parts of Nigeria and beyond from Obollo-Afor. The women involved in this industry have their customers in different cities like Abuja, Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Onitsha, Kaduna, Kano, Calabar, Enugu town. These processed cashew nuts dealers who are customers of the women in the industry in Obollo-Afor

place an order for the supply of the processed and packaged cashew nuts through phone conversation. The terms and conditions of the business are concluded on phone and the amount of money for the transaction would be paid to the suppliers' account number by the city cashew dealers(Ogbu,2019). The quantity of processed and packaged cashew nuts demanded and paid for by the city dealers would be supplied by the Obollo-Aforwomen through any of the available transport companies like Peace Mass Transit Ltd, EGMAT, Royal Mass Transit, Globis Mass Transit, SCOA, Entraco, Udenu Mass Transit, Ezike Oba Mass Transit and others that ply the state where the customer is located.

### **Pictures showing packaged cashew nuts by the women ready for supply**

The supplier provides the details of her customers to the driver for easy contact and delivery to the customer on the arrival of the products(Ohabuenyi,2019). Sometimes, the drivers whose duty is to convey these cashew nuts to different parts of Nigeria lament of the unserious or lackadaisical attitudes of the city dealers. Some of them believe that the drivers who have conveyed the product cannot go contrary to the terms and conditions of the contract and therefore most often refused to wait for the arrival of their goods in parks until contacted on phone for more than three to four times to come to take the delivery of the product (Ohabuenyi, 2019).



**Figure 5:** Pictures showing packaged cashew nuts by the women ready for supply

Be that as it may, as soon as the city dealer receives the products or take the delivery of the goods, the person informs the suppliers of the receipt after crossing checking the consignment on delivery.

However, with this method of marketing in place in Obollo-Afor, the industry is heavily populated and dominated by women who have changed the economic status of their families to the admiration of the people. It is worthy of note that both young and old women who engage in the industry can comfortably compare their financial statuses with any civil servant in Obollo-Afor, especially those in primary and secondary school levels(Odoh,2019). According to a banker, Mr. Ferdnard Ugwu (2019), of Ecobank, Obollo-Afor who was interviewed based on the lodgment of money and withdrawal capacity of these women in cashew industry had this to say:

*“I had the opportunity of intervening in a fracas or quarrel that broke out at the ATM gallery in our bank one fateful day. I tried to enquire what was actually the bone of contention and a man of 35-40 years old, narrated to me that he has stayed for more than 20 minutes waiting for the woman before him to conclude her transaction and she kept on withdrawing without taking cognizance of other customers on the queue. I also interrogated the woman and discovered she was a cashew nuts dealer who had come to make withdrawal for her business”(sic).*

With the above scenario, and the living standard of the women in the industry, many young ladies who should be in the higher institutions for their academic pursuit are found scrambling for space to engage in the industry. With their economic status, the women who are in cashew industry formed a league or association known as *Obollo-Afor Women Cashew Dealers Association* (OWCDA) to consolidate their hold on the industry. With the formation of OWCDA in 1992 to protect and consolidate that business in Obollo-Afor (Eze,2019). The members decided to embark on a kind of co-operative or thrift among themselves in order to raise a substantial amount of money for a member to acquire any needed property. The women started with a *Japan mate Yamaha* Motorcycle popularly called “*I love my wife*” by the Obollo-Afor people. It is important to note that this motorcycle was made popular by OWCDA. The display of economic achievements of the women in this industry lured some men into the engagements and marriage with the ladies in the industry (Ekene,2019).

## CONCLUSION

The involvement of Obollo-Afor women in the processing, packaging and marketing of cashew nuts have been judiciously examined and x-rayed to showcase their immense contributions to the economic growth of Obollo-Afor and its environs. The achievements of the women are clear testimonies of the eloquent economic opportunities inherent in the cashew industry. The state government of the RT. Hon. Dr. Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi on assumption of office in 2015 flagged off the construction of Dry Port for the easy evacuation of cashew nuts related businesses to other parts of Nigeria, but up till this moment, the construction has remained uncompleted to the detriment of the people in the industry. The unfinished Dry Port in Obollo-Afor has remained one of the abandoned projects in the local government. The idea for the construction was conceived out of the government desire to harness the economic endowments as well as opportunities in this cashew industry in Obollo-Afor.

The local processing and marketing of cashew nuts will stimulate further investment in product packaging for both local and foreign markets. These very areas require expertise and new investment to make Nigerian cashew product more competitive in the global market.

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