



Agbekoya protest: It's implication on cocoa production in western Nigeria, 1960-1968

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Abstract

Agbekoya was a peasant revolt in Western regional part of Nigeria. It is the most popular peasant driven political uprising in Western Nigeria history. It continued to be referred to as a successful example of collective action against unpopular government policies. This paper is therefore set to examine Agbekoya crisis and its implication on cocoa production in Western Nigeria, 1960-1968. The purpose of the paper is to examine the extent to which the crisis did impacted on the production of cocoa in the region. The paper examines the origin of the introduction of cocoa to Western Nigeria. It went further to look at the causes, the course and the consequences of the the crisis, most especially as it impacted on cocoa production in Western Nigeria in the early years of independence. The research methodology employed in the analysis of data obtained is historical and descriptive. The paper obtained its data mostly from secondary sources which is made up of books, journal articles, newspaper reports and government publications relevant to the topic. The notes that the farmers protest was occasioned by the repressive attitude of the government which took the form of over taxation, extortion by marketing officials and other exploitative tendencies of the personalities representing the government. The study concludes that cocoa production experienced a downward trend during the latter part of the 1960s due to lack of encouragement on the part of the government to the peasant farmers.

Keywords: Agbekoya; Cocoa Production; Revolt; Economy; Western Nigeria

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1. Introduction

Cocoa was the most important export crop in West Africa throughout the colonial period which became prominent mostly in Ghana, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire and to some extent in the Cameroons (Faluyi, 1996). Cocoa is one of the major cash crops which had made significant contributions to the economic advancement of South-western Nigeria from the colonial period through the early post-independence period in Nigeria. The vast contributions of cocoa to the nation's economic development have been reported by many authors (Abang, 2004). Cocoa has made significant contributions in terms of the volume of production, foreign exchange earning capacity, and income generation to Nigerian economy. In terms of foreign exchange earnings, no single agricultural export commodity has earned more than cocoa for South-Western Nigeria (Alamu, 2013). In the area of employment generation, the cocoa sub-sector provides both direct and indirect employment generation.

Cocoa, as a major export crop was introduced to Western Nigeria from Europe in the late 19th century. Sara Berry noted that the earliest cocoa farms in the Region were established by Lagos merchants and traders who took up farming when their trading and commercial activities were no more yielding the desired dividends. Most of these cocoa farms were established near Agege and Otta in the present Lagos State and Ogun State respectively. However, a few Ijeshas and Ondos planted farms near their trading communities in Southern Ondo. They combined farming with their trading activities and some of these farms were established at various points along the routes from Lagos to the interior, such as Aiyesan, Atijere, Ajebandele (Folayan et al., 2006).

Available sources such as J.B Webster corroborated by Sara, S. Berry suggested that it was from these early farms established at Agege and Southern Egba land that the knowledge and required information about cocoa farming were disseminated to other parts of Western Nigeria. The agencies involved in the dissemination of the information about the knowledge of the new crop among others include the Merchants and the missionaries. As they travelled inwards carrying out their commercial and missionary activities, the traders and the clergy men equally disseminated information about the opportunities that abound in the cultivation of the newly introduced cocoa seed.

The missionaries were, however, highly instrumental to the introduction and promotion of cash crop production in Nigeria, and most especially in the defunct Western Region. One of the most enthusiastic advocates of this vision was Rev. Charles Philips. Perhaps, the major source that wielded the greatest influence on the missionaries in their encouragement of agriculture was the Buxton Policy of "The Bible and the Plough". Buxton stated that:

*let missionaries and school masters, the plough and the spade
go together, and agriculture will flourish: the avenue to legitimate
commerce will be opened, confidence between man and man will
advance as natural effect and Christianity operate as the proximate
cause of that happy change. (Buxton, 1967),*

At the point when Henry Venn took on the situation of the General Secretary of the Christian Missionary Society, he held the view that the reception of this teaching by the Anglican Mission would introduce another social and economic request which would create instructed elites that would render enormous advantages to Africa in Church, business and legislative issues. The Missionary undertaking under the authority of Bishop Charles Philips acquainted cocoa seedlings with the general population of the region. Bishop Philips enthusiastically sought after Henry Venn's strategy of economic independence (Adesina, 2004). He realized that if the teacher undertaking was to succeed, he should advance the change of the material well - being of the assembly. No big surprise, in Jan. 1895, the Bishop reproved changes over in Ondo and its environs to take up cocoa generation (Adesina, 2004). In 1896, the Bishop himself, trying to demonstrate authority by illustration planted coffee on his own ranch. This was taken after two years by an activity by the authority of the congregation who voted to secure espresso and cocoa manor for the congregation future help (Adesina, 2004). Towards the finish of the 1890s, the Bishop assumed a significant part in the foundation of Ajebandele, a homestead settlement found South of Ondo town. The settlement was a showing ranch intended to explore different avenues regarding money products, for example, coffee, cocoa, kolanut and to likewise fill in as focal point of trade (Adesina, 2004).

The missionaries were by all account not the only wellspring of data about the new products acquainted with ranchers in the interior. Merchants and traders were similarly extremely instrumental in edifying the provincial people in the inside about the open doors that possess large amounts of the development of fare yields, for example, cocoa, coffee, and cotton (Folayan et al., 2006).

For example, a few Merchants and traders who dwelled in Lagos, and who were keen on the advancement of their home groups in the inside made constructive strides at urging their kin to take up the creation of cocoa, and other cash crops. Numerous traders and vagrant workers from the inside likewise interacted with cocoa, coffee, and cotton around Lagos (Folayan et al., 2006).

Some of these men ran home with the information and planted the new products for themselves as a method for boosting their pay. The exercises of the vagrant workers who were occupied with cocoa cultivating filled in as a driving force to alternate ranchers than the guidance prior given by some priests who simply urged them to plant cocoa but never took part in the development of cocoa cultivation and widespread.

Be that as it may, few groups started to take part in the development of cocoa the moment they had the opportunity. Cocoa was known in most piece of the Western Region before 1900, however the level of worthiness of the new harvest contrasts from one group to the next. Farmers in a few groups received it substantially sooner than in others. Sara Berry called attention to that "Farmers started to explore different avenues regarding cocoa in Ibadan and Egba around 1890; in Ilesha by 1896. In Ibadan, numerous new cultivating villas were built up in uncultivated woods territories appropriate to cocoa before 1900. Similarly, a visitor to Egband in 1901 found various cocoa cultivates amongst Asha and Ilogbo (close Otta) and furthermore around Okenla on the railroad. Ilesha built up somewhat later, however by the mid 1920s, she was viewed as one of the primary cocoa delivering territories in Western Nigeria" (Folayan et al., 2006).

It took a genuinely prolonged stretch of time before farmers in Ondo, Ife, and Ekiti started to explore different avenues regarding cocoa development. In 1917, in one of the correspondence drafted by the District

Officer, it was recognized that "The Ife individuals are altogether a horticultural people and have an extremely rich nation. Everything has been done to empower their excitement for cocoa developing which is quick turning into their most imperative industry" (NAI 1917).

However, cocoa production suffered a setback in the latter part of the post-independence period due to what was regarded as harsh economic policies introduced by the government of western region which eventually led to wide protest among the peasant farmers in the region. Hence, this section examines the causes, the course and the consequences of Agbekoya protest as it affects the economy of western region in the earlier part of the post- independence period.

2. Agbekoya protest

Agbekoya's rebellion was a peasant revolt in Nigeria's former western region. The Association was an heir to an indigenous system of work cooperative akin to trade unionism and drew on a tradition of occupational guilds that had regulated working standard and policies for centuries in the region. Yoruba workers in various professions do organize themselves in to 'egbes' ie, peer groups or guilds that do protect the interest of their members in situations that requires collective actions (Beer and Williams, 2011). It is the most popular peasant driven political uprising in Western Nigerian history and continued to be referred to as a successful example of collective action against unpopular government policies (Adeniran, 1974). The revolt was predominantly aimed at agitating for a reduction in taxes, though some believed it has a political dimension.

During the 1950s, the colonial government of Nigeria established local commodity depots in many parts of the country (Adeniran, 1974). The Depots served as stores of exchange of goods the government was interested in buying from the peasants. The western regional government intended to increase the tax revenue from farmers by regulating the sale of cocoa through the agency of the marketing boards. Most of the products to be sold were made to undergo a process of grading examination. Against this backdrop, there was the formation of a farmer's organisation (Daily Sketch, 1969) to represent the interest of the farmers within the new marketing system.

The Western State Farmer's Union was officially inaugurated on May 29, 1968. (Daily Sketch, 1969) Its first annual general conference came up at the Parliament Building, Agodi, Ibadan May, 27, 1969 with over 500 delegates in attendance. Addressing the Conference, the then Western State Military Governor- Brigadier Adeyinka Adebayo- said his government was committed to encourage farmers in the state to form cooperative groups for the marketing of their produce at the local level. He further re iterated his government determination to improve the lot of the farming population in assisting them to deriving maximum benefit from their labour.

Amid the early piece of Nigeria's freedom, the Action Group which was the leading political group in the Western locale made a few strides towards taking care of the general issues of the Region. Numerous streets prompting towns were tarred, credit was stretched out to agreeable social orders and schools were produced for quality instruction. Notwithstanding, as the Nigerian political scene turned out to be more unpredictable with the detainment of the first political pioneer of the Western Region, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the 1966

overthrow, and the start of the civil war, lawmakers came to see the agriculturists as pawns to be utilized for appointive techniques.

3. Causes of the Agbekoya crisis

The crisis was engendered by some of these factors. Firstly, the local deport officials also began to present themselves as minor vassal lords demanding bribes and other concessions from farmers before accepting their agricultural products billed for sale (Daily Sketch, 1969). Mr. A.K. Degun attested to this fact. He said it was observed that more often than not, some members of the Union, especially the senior ones, had been accused of various offences ranging from bribery and corruption to nepotism and fraud in the conduct of their official duties. Secondly, the excessive levy of taxes (Daily Times, 1969) without commensurate provision of social amenities (Daily Times, 1969) and the lack of maintenance of existing infrastructural facilities. The amount of tax to be paid by an adult in Western region was 3 pounds, 5 shillings. This was to be collected by local authority for the provision of social amenities for their respective areas. Thirdly, the arbitrary standard used for examination of agricultural products meant for sale by the local deport officials was considered unfair, as it suggested that a very significant amount of harvested cocoa bean were discarded as unfit for the accepted produce that was allowed into the market (Daily Times, 1969). The farmers saw themselves exploited and oppressed by a government which refused to pay fair prices for their cocoa, and now asking them to pay higher taxes when the farmers simply considered themselves not able to afford the payment.

This, however, was not the first time there would be an organised resistance against harsh government policy in the Region. Members of the loose farming guilds that eventually coalesced into Agbekoya were called Mayegun League (Beer and Williams, 2011) (Life Abundant), then called Mayegun Society which was founded as an urban social club in 1938. Its prominent leaders were active in urban affairs. These were Latorera who was a popular socialite and Mustafa Ali. It was the Mayegun League that coalesced into the Egbe Agbekoya in the 1950s by a group of concerned farmers who were ready to ensure a better life for farmers in the Western Region (Adeniran, 1974). This group first developed more militant tactics during an epidemic of swollen shoot disease which was ravaging cocoa plantations during the 1950s (Beer and Williams, 2011). This development prompted the government to come out with the policy that affected cocoa trees should be cut down out rightly in order to prevent the spread of the disease to other cocoa trees. The government, therefore, deployed agents to move from one cocoa farm to the other and ensure the total eradication of the affected cocoa trees (Beer and Williams, 2011). In 1968-69, agitation was concentrated in those areas where cocoa production had long been in decline, because farmers had lacked the incentives and resources to cut out and replant old trees, which leached away the fertility of the soil.

In February, 1948, *Akanran* farmers resolved to resist the policy of cutting out by force. In March, the government team assigned to carry out the cutting of the affected cocoa trees were barred from *Fabeku*, while farmers in *Lagun* area attacked cutting gangs. The farmers, however, demanded for compensation for the loss of the cocoa trees which the government was not ready to pay. Several violent clashes occurred before the matter was settled in favour of the League.

As the local depots became institutions in the economic life of the average farmers, the *Agbekoya* group and many other peasant farmers continued to complain about several other issues they regarded as unjust.

Other factors which favoured the *Agbekoya* protest was the emergence of political elites on one hand who were not given the opportunity to partake in the government and the educated elites who were the products of the free education introduced by the regional government. The combination of these elites which coincided with a more dynamic leadership among the *Agbekoya Parapo* created a juxtaposition of sort and a stronger political movement was born. They decided to set an organisational target as follows: the removal of local government officials pillaging their villages, a reduction of the flat tax rate; an end to the use of force in collection of taxes; an increase in the price of cocoa, an improvement in construction and maintenance of the roads that leads to many villages.

4. The course of Agbekoya crisis

Agitation first began in September 1968 in Oyo on the account that the education rate collected by the government was not judiciously used (Adeniran, 1974). Increases in tax assessments and water rates provoked wider opposition, which spread like wildfire to other places such as Ibadan, Egba, Remo, Ijebu and Oshun Divisions. The arrest of tax defaulters was the main spark for attacks on the authorities and institutions of government. Many Oba's Palaces were attacked while some others were set on fire. Obas and chiefs were considered accomplices of the government in what they considered as oppressive economic policies (Adeniran, 1974). They saw them as ready tools in the hand of the government as they were accused of calling for soldiers to assist in enforcing the collection of taxes which the farmers were not ready to pay. They were equally accused of misappropriation of public funds (Adeniran, 1974). District Council offices and officials were attacked. In several areas, these issues were seen as an opportunity for paying off political scores. In Ibadan, the state capital, farmers from Akanran met the Olubadan on 6 november, 1968 to protest against the payment of taxes. In an attempt to persuade the farmers to fulfil their tax obligation to the government, Governor Adebayo toured the Ibadan Districts. (Beer and Williams 2011) The farmers were, however, not ready to pay the tax which they considered to be oppressive. In fact at Akanran, farmers were said to have interpreted government insistence on the payment of tax as meaning that "they leave their dead unburied, their feet unshod, their children without schooling and their children unnamed if necessary to meet the taxes. His appeal, however, fell on deaf ears as the farmers insisted that 'they were not afraid to fight the government rather than pay taxes (Beer and Williams, 2011).

On the outbreak of the riot, the farmers were under the leadership of people like Adegoke Akekuejo, Tafa Adeoye, Folarin Idowu, Mudasiru Adeniran and Tafa Popoola (Beer and Williams, 2011). Within the *Agbekoya*, leadership tended initially to be dispersed among the different district council areas. Overall leadership lay originally with Adegoke Akekuejo (Ibadan West) and Folarin Idowu (Ibadan South-East), who were both young farmers, rather than Adeoye. He came from a humble tenant lineage, had neither formal nor Koranic education. He had a reasonable holding of cocoa, but could not be described as wealthy. He was a typical 'middle peasant' who articulated the farmers' determination to resist further exactions and displayed the courage necessary for such resistance. The compromise reached with the government on the issue of their agitation however

discredited most of the established leadership. At this point, leadership was conferred on those willing and determined to resist the government, rather than those who were concerned with negotiation and possible compromise. The Agbekoya mobilised and moved from one village to the other shouting the slogan, oke mefa lao san, oke mefa lao san, meaning that 'we are only going to pay 30 shillings' as they marched through the villages to persuade the local farmers not to pay any taxes to the military government of Western State. At a meeting with the District Officer on 6 December 1968, the representatives of the farmers insisted that they were not ready to pay more than 30 shillings per annum as tax. They also objected to the method of selection of tax collectors and assessment committees. (Beer and Williams 2011) Despite assurances on both sides, council officials who returned to the Districts on the 9th were driven back, and could not even be re-instated with police intervention. One official was killed at Idi Ayunre, (Ibadan South). Meanwhile, unrest had spread to all the adjacent Divisions. At Ede (Osun), Isara (Remo), Ijebu-Igbo (ijebu), crowds (apparently from the towns attacked the palaces of the Oba, who were accused, inter alia, of calling for soldiers to ensure tax collection. In Egba, Obafemi and the surrounding villages of rural Egba Division, agitation was initiated by the Parakoyi (market chiefs) against the payment of market fees to the local council. This led to the death of eleven people, and large number of arrests. The burning of council offices and the attempted murder of Alhaji Adegbenro, former Action Group leader and a state Commissioner.

On 25, November 1968, farmers attacked the staff and offices of the Council at Iyana Offa (Ibadan East) and attacked rate collectors in the city itself. The following day, armed columns converged on Ibadan and drove away council workers from their offices at Mapo Hall in Ibadan which was then the seat of the Regional government. There, they ransacked the offices of officials declaring that they were only going to pay \$1.10.

In an attempt to curtail the spread of the violence, the government employed the use of force and violence to quell the crisis and arrested some of the Agbekoya's leaders. However, farmers took to violent reprisal on government structures, and consequently, many government officials were killed. As a form of protest against the military government, the protesters attacked major symbols of state power like court houses and government buildings, setting free thousands of prisoners alongside some of their members that had earlier been imprisoned. It was the release of Chief Obafemi Awolowo that assuaged the violent rage of the protesters as earlier negotiated with the leaders of the group.

Consequently, some of the demands of the Agbekoya group were met. The local government officials who served as the administrators in the villages were removed, the flat rate system of taxation was removed, and the use of force in the collection of taxes was also abrogated. The price of cocoa was reviewed upwards and some of the rural roads leading to the farms were repaired to facilitate easy access by the farmers.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines Agbekoya crisis and its implication on cocoa production in South Western Nigeria. It traced the origin of cocoa production to Western Region. There was continual exploitation of the farmers by the government through the imposition of excessive taxation and the exploitative tendencies of the government officials in charge of the sales of agricultural produce. Just as it was during the colonial days, the peasant

farmers continued to be underpaid for their labour. This repressive attitude of the government, however, did not go unchallenged just as exemplified by the Agbekoya revolt of 1968 in Western Region.

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