Academic Journal of Current Research
Vol.7, No.2; February-2020;
ISSN (2343 – 403X);
p –ISSN 3244 - 5621
Impact factor: 6.37

THE DIFFUSIONIST THEORY AND FOOD-PRODUCTION IN PRE-COLONIAL WEST AFRICA

[1]Daniel Chukwuma Nzereogu [2]Dr. Charles O. Asuk
[1]Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
danielnzereogu@gmail.com07066823400
[2]Department of History & Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract: *Some scholars have propagated the diffusionist theory which opines that development in agriculture and the origin of food production in West Africa is linked to the entry of ideas and crops from other parts of the world into the region. This both indicts the economy of pre-colonial West Africa and as well supports the Eurocentric perspective which views pre-colonial West African economy as undeveloped and not being dynamic. But this view when subjected to critical interrogation lacks much merit. This is much because even though pre-colonial West African agricultural economy was not as developed as that of Europe, it still possessed some basic elements that enabled it to maintain food production through which the indigenous population was sustained from one season to another. Hence this work aims at highlighting the fact that food production originated in pre-colonial West Africa independent of external influence and ideas. It would thus conclude on the premise that although food production was of an independent origin in pre-colonial west Africa, ideas and crops from other regions of the world did boost food production and agricultural development in pre-colonial West Africa.*

Keywords: *Agriculture, Food, Production, West Africa, Pre-colonial, Influx*

Introduction

The Diffusionist theory is a theory that postulates that the origin of food production in West Africa is traceable to the influx of ideas and crops from other parts of the world such as North Africa, Asia and South America into West Africa.

Indeed the coming of the Europeans in the late fifteenth century led to the introduction of a number of crops which are now regarded as typical of West African agriculture. The most important of these were maize, cassava, groundnuts, tobacco and later on cocoa as well as a variety of fruits. According to Hopkins (1973), the principal source of supply of these crops was South America, and the two main channels of diffusion were a direct route from Brazil, and an indirect route through Iberia, both of which were established by the Portuguese.

Aim and Objectives

This work aims at highlighting the fact that food production originated in pre-colonial West Africa independent of external ideas and influences.It is an anti-thesis to the diffusionist theory of food production in West Africa. Bringing forward the debate on the origin of food production in West Africa, it would draw attention to what food production was like pre-colonial West

Academic Journal of Current Research
Vol.7, No.2; February-2020;
ISSN (2343 – 403X);
p –ISSN 3244 - 5621
Impact factor: 6.37

Africa, the process of the diffusion, the reason for the diffusion as well as the changes caused by the diffusion.

The Debate

As a result of the influx of crops into the West African agricultural space, the origins of the food-production in West Africa have become the subject of considerable controversy and debate among scholars. According to Clarke (1962), agriculture began in the savanna around 2000 B.C., following the diffusion of ideas and plants from Egypt. However, Murdock (1959), has argued that agriculture began independently in West Africa about 5000 B.C. Likewise, Porteres (1950), has also suggested that West African agriculture was an independent development but considers that it originated between 2800 and 1500 B.C. Wrigley (1960), as well has advanced a case to show that certain kinds of agricultural practices originated in West Africa and that the region may have been an independent centre of origin. These arguments though often speculative with regard to dates and evidence have brought to the fore hypotheses which are beginning to receive serious attention making the diffusionist theory which was once unquestioned to become subject to interrogation. Consequently, Hopkins (1973), has therefore noted that the latest archaeological research has tended to stress both the antiquity and the variety of pre-historic agriculture and by extension food production in West Africa.

Food Production in Pre-colonial West Africa before the influx

Again, it can be said that West African agriculture as well as food production, besides being of pre-historic origin, did not lag far behind primary centres of origin such as the Middle East. According to Hill (1962) at early date in West Africa before the influx began, the main staples were millet, rice and fonio in the savanna zones, and yams and the oil palm in the forest zones where Igbo land is located. In Igbo-land for instance food production has been an age long process that has been on, long before foreign crops penetrated the area. Okeke (2019), highlights that prior to influx of food crops from other parts of the world the Igbo people were not lacking in food nutrients as their food production was efficient enough to cater for the six classes of food necessary for quality nutrition. He further states that the source of protein in pre-colonial Igbo society included crops like Okwe and Akidi (both in the beans family) while goat and chicken served as the for animal protein, yam and coco-yam covered for carbohydrate, palm-oil and salt which was used in preparing most of the meals provided for their fats and oil as well as the mineral needs. Local apples and cherries were good sources of vitamins for them while drinking water was sourced from various springs and streams scattered in various parts of Igbo-land.

In other words the people of West Africa by means of agricultural activities had been producing their food and were feeding well before the introduction of crops from other parts of the world. So, while external contacts were of great importance, it could be suggested that there was an indigenous West African Neolithic agriculture, pointing to the fact that West Africa was not left out during the Neolithic revolution, which marked the beginning of the domestication of plants and animals as well as food production.

The Diffusion Process

It has to be noted that the spread of Asian and American crops was undoubtedly a lengthy process and is still going on today, nevertheless the slow pace of change should not be taken as evidence that indigenous farmers were unreceptive to new opportunities. First it took time for knowledge of foreign seeds and plants to spread throughout the region as a whole. Second, new crops were tried out cautiously because no community was going to place its established food supplies at risk through the hasty adoption of untested novelties. Third, the rate of diffusion was sometimes inhibited by technical problems.

Academic Journal of Current Research
Vol.7, No.2; February-2020;
ISSN (2343 – 403X);
p –ISSN 3244 - 5621
Impact factor: 6.37

Crowder (1973), posited that cassava, for example though introduced in the sixteenth century, did not begin to spread rapidly until the close of the eighteenth century, when it became known how to process the crop in such a way as to remove the prussic acid which some varieties contained. Fourth, the speed of adoption was related to the growth of demand for foodstuffs. For instance McLoughlin (1970) highlights that in the twentieth century, the rise of wage labour force and the development of specialized export producers encouraged farmers in certain areas to concentrate on producing food for the internal market.

The Reason for the Diffusion

Again it is worthy of note that where new plants and seeds were adopted, it was not because they caught the fancy of a primitive people, but because they were seen as useful additions to the existing range of foods, and being worth more than the extra cost of producing them or alternatively because they were regarded as good substitutes, yielding a higher return for the same input than the crops they displaced. Thus Chukwu (2015), notes that maize has spread in areas formerly dominated by yams and sorghum because it gives two crops a year, both of which have fairly good yields, while cassava has become common in yam producing regions because it is easy to grow and produces food throughout the year. Yams are still the preferred food and they have greater nutritional value, but they make heavy demands on the soil and they need a great deal more labour.

Changes caused by the Diffusion

It suffices to note here that with influx of these new crops into their agricultural space, pre-colonial West African societies did show themselves willing and able to adapt existing forms of agricultural organization where necessary. According to Hopkins (1973), in this regard, three types of alteration were called for. First the length of time particular plots were farmed often had to be increase in order to accommodate a greater number of new crops. Second, new techniques of cultivation had to be adopted on occasion, for instance the spread of swamp rice in Sierra Lone during the nineteenth century was associated with a new method of transplanting the seedlings from nursery beds to under-water fields. Third, a certain number of occupational change was required. The spread of cassava among the Yoruba for example meant that women became more involved in agricultural production, for they were allocated the task of processing the crop.

Furthermore, according to Ekechi (1981), it has to be stated that although contact with other continents led to the introduction of some troublesome weeds such as the spear grass, there is no doubt that on the balance, the introduction of seeds and plants was of great benefit to West Africa. The new crops offered the means of improving nutrition and as well boosted the variety of food available in the region. It reduced the risk of famine and made it possible for a larger population to be supported. On the other hand also, the export-crop production growth in West Africa during the twentieth century should not be seen as a miraculous reaction of a backward people to wholly novel external demands, but should be regarded as one further development in a long history of agricultural experiment and adaptation

Conclusion

Hence, from the foregoing analysis it is quite clear that despite the fact that some of the crops that has become an integral part of West African staple were brought in from other parts of the world, agricultural history in the pre-colonial period of West Africa is a story of innovation rather than dependency or stagnation. Therefore, any assumption that the pre-colonial agricultural economy in West Africa was static, having been frozen at the very dawn of African history is untenable.

Nevertheless, the new crops offered the means of improving nutrition and as well boosted the variety of food available in the region. It reduced the risk of famine

and made it possible for a larger population to be supported.

References

Chukwu, J. C. (2015). Traditional Igbo Economy: challenges to growth and development. Journal of cultural, society and development, Vol.10, pp. 35-42

Clarke, J. D. (1962). The Spread of Food Production in Sub-Saharan Africa. Journal of African History, Vol.3, pp.211-228

Crowder, M. (1973). West Africa under Colonial Rule. London: Hutchinson.

Ekechi, F. K. (1981). Aspects of Palm Oil Trade at Oguta (Eastern Nigeria), 1900-1950. African Economic History: Vol 10, pp.201-220

Hill, P. (1962). Some Characteristics of Indigenous West Africa Economic Enterprise. Economic Bulletin of Ghana, Vol.6, pp. 3-14.

Hopkins, A. G. (1973). An Economic History of West Africa. New York: Longman Group.

McLoughlin, P. F. (Ed). (1970). Africa Food Production Systems. Baltimore

Murdock, G. P. (1959). Africa: Its Peoples and their Culture History. New York

Okeke, C. (2019). Oral Interview

Porteres, R. (1950). Vieilles Agricultures de l' Afrique Intertropicale. Agronomie Tropicale, no.5, pp.489-507

Wrigley, C. (1960). Speculations on the Economic Pre-history of Africa. Journal of African History, no.1, pp. 189-203