

AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN EASTERN NIGERIA BEFORE 1976: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines agricultural activities in Eastern Nigeria before 1976, a period marked by significant economic, social and political changes. Agriculture was the backbone of the regional economy, with crops such as palm produce, cocoa and root crops serving as major sources of income. The region's agricultural sector was characterised by small-scale farming, with farmers relying on traditional farming methods and tools. The introduction of cash crops by colonial authorities led to a shift from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, with many farmers producing crops for export. However, this shift also brought challenges such as land degradation, labour exploitation and fluctuating market prices. Despite these challenges, agriculture remained a vital sector of the regional economy, providing employment and income for millions of people. This study draws on historical records and empirical evidence to provide insights into the dynamics of agricultural activities in Eastern Nigeria before 1976. It covers the defunct Eastern Region of Nigeria, which comprised the present-day states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Bayelsa, Cross River (then part of the South-Eastern State), Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers. The methodology adopted is historical analysis and an extensive review of data collected from primary and secondary sources. The findings of this study have implications for contemporary agricultural policies and practices in the region.

Keywords: Agricultural Activities, Eastern Nigeria, Pre-1976, Cash Crops, Small-Scale Farming

Introduction

Agricultural activities have been the backbone of the economy in Eastern Nigeria for centuries, providing employment, income, and food for millions of people. Before 1976, the region's agricultural sectors characterised by small-scale farming with farmers relying on traditional farming methods and tools to cultivate crops such as palm produce, cocoa, yam and cassava¹. The region's fertile soil, favourable climate and abundant rainfall made it an ideal place for farming and agriculture played a crucial role in the regional economy².

The introduction of cash crops by colonial powers in the late 19th century marked a significant turning point in the region's agricultural history. Crops such as palm produce and cocoa became major sources of income for farmers, and region's economy became increasingly integrated to global economy³. However, this shift also led to challenges such as land degradation, labour exploitation and fluctuating market prices, which had significant impacts on farmers' livelihoods⁴.

Despite these challenges, agriculture remained a vital sector of the regional economy, providing employment and income for millions of people. The region's agricultural sector was also characterized by a complex system of land tenure with communal, individual and pledge systems coexisting in different part of the region⁵. Understanding the dynamics of agricultural activities in Eastern Region of Nigeria before 1976, is essentially for appreciating the region's economic and social history for informing contemporary agricultural policies and practices.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of agricultural activities in Eastern Nigeria before 1976, drawing on historical records and empirical evidence to provide insight into the region's agricultural history. By examining the region's agricultural sector during this period, this study seeks to contribute to deeper understanding of the complex relationships between agriculture, economy as society in Eastern Nigeria.

Land Tenure System Before 1976

The predominant land system in Nigeria during the pre-colonial period was the customary land tenancy where landholding was owned by villages, towns, communities and families. Land was not owned by individuals, but by communities and families in trust for all the family members.⁶ The legal estate under customary land tenancy was vested in the family or community as a unit. During this period, land belonged to the community or a vast family of which many were dead, few were living and countless members yet unborn. The customary land tenure in the area now comprising Southern states of Nigeria before colonial rule was held in the following ways:⁷ (i) communal lands (ii) stool or chieftaincy lands (iii) family lands and (iv) individual lands.

The community lands comprised land which the entire community had an individual or proprietary interest. Such community lands were supervised and administered by the chiefs and traditional ruler. The stool or chieftaincy lands were found mostly among the Yoruba and comprised the Oba's palace and surrounding lands.

The family lands were lands that were vested in the members of the family as a corporate group. The individual property comprised lands whose title was vested in individuals and was obtained by partitioning of the family land to individual members of the family. However, during the pre-colonial period, land held under customary tenure could not be sold or alienated. Such act was generally regarded as capable of depriving the future generations of the opportunity to acquire land.⁸

Land Ownership During Colonial Rule

The land ownership structure in Nigeria during colonial rule was designed to suit the motives of the British imperialist. As a major factor of production, land was inevitably required by the colonial authorities to achieve their economic, social and political objectives. The British merchants, who came to the country purely on economic motive, required land to establish their merchandise. The National African Company and its successor, the Royal Niger Company, required land to expand its business in Nigeria. The colonial governors also required land for public purposes. Because land ownership in pre-colonial Nigeria was communal, the colonial authorities initiated law and regulation governing land ownership, land use and development, among others, to enable them acquire and convey titles to land for the purpose of commerce and governance.⁹

The first of such legislation was the Public Ordinance of 1876 later re-enacted as Public Lands Acquisition of 1917. The Act had empowered the government to acquire land compulsorily for public purpose subject to the payment of compensation to the land owners. The land acquired thus becomes state (formerly Crown) land, and therefore, become the property of the state. This strategy by extension helped the government to free land from the customary land tenure, which had restricted the land ownership and holding strictly to the family and communal and hardly individual. In effect land needed for development purposes must be compulsorily acquired by government for this purpose. The state land laws by implication empowered the government to grant leases of state land to private individuals. This title of such grants was therefore, free from any communal claims.¹⁰

Following from the foregoing, number of ordinances were passed with the aim of acquiring land for use of government and private developments. These include native lands; acquisition proclamation of 1900; the native land acquisition proclamation 1903; the Crown Lands Management Proclamation of 1906, (as amended); the Native Acquisition Ordinance 1917; the Niger Lands Transfer Ordinance of 1916 and the Crown Ordinance 1918. In 1935, the Registration of title Act was enacted. This act recognised under the Act, land Registration Act Cap 99 and the registered land Act of 1965 was also enacted for the purpose of registration of titles to land.¹¹

In the Eastern Region, the Land Tenancy law 1935 was enacted. Others include, the acquisition of land by aliens law 1957, In 1958 the state land Act Cap 48 was enacted which vested the ownership of all public lands in the state. Land Instrument Registration law of 1963, Land Instrument Preparation Law, 1963 and Recovery of Premises law, 1963.¹²

Colonial Efforts at Agricultural Activities

During the colonial times, agriculture was the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. It was the chief employer of labour for the majority of the Nigerian people were farmers.¹³ The advent of colonial rule introduced a money economy among the peasant communities. This in turn provided an incentive for the peasant farmers to produce more cash crops for sale and eventual export to Western Europe.¹⁴

The potential of agriculture for propelling Nigeria's economic development was recognised by the colonial government when policies were put in place to encourage output growth and extract the surpluses there from.¹⁵ The predominant these of development during the period was the surplus extraction (philosophy or policy) whereby immense products were generated from the rural area as to satisfy the demand for raw materials in metropolitan Britain. This early interest of extraction policy was on forest resources and agricultural exports like cocoa, coffee, rubber, groundnut, oil palm, among many others etc.¹⁶

Until outbreak of the World War II in 1939, the colonial department of agriculture had focused on the expansion of palm oil production, improvement in the quality of produce and efficient marketing of agricultural produce.¹⁷ Progress was made in the export and commercial sectors of agriculture, but the government faltered on the development of the subsistence sector. In his book *The Land Has changed, History, society and Gender in colonial Eastern Nigeria*, C.J Korieh, observes that:¹⁸

Nigeria, like other colonial territories experienced rising food prices and increased importation of food items during this time. The impact of part policies became evident towards the end of 1930s and government became increasingly aware of the need to encourage the production of food. The government remarked in 1938 report of the department of agriculture "the production of export crops, important as this is to the must not be subordinated to the production of food stuff for local consumption, for those who are under fed cannot do the maximum amount of work"

While the government recognised the need to improve local food production, it did not provide any direct incentive to farmers until the outbreak of the war. On the outbreak of the war, colonial officials were asked by the imperial government in London to carry out the task necessary to secure the local resources need from Nigeria to support the effort. Thus, officials embarked on a double strategy of encouraging more export production and a more aggressive drive to increase local food production. The establishment of the Eastern Regional Development Board (ERDB) by colonial government in 1949 would as a result have marked a turning point in agricultural development of the region. The Eastern Regional Development (Loan) Board, succeeded the Nigeria Local Development Board in April 1949. It (ERDB) had funds totaling over £355,000 at its disposal at the time.¹⁹ The Nigeria Local Development Board had financed the development of commerce and industries programme of Pioneer Oil Mill development, (POM), but when the Eastern Regional Development (Loan) Board was formed it sold these assets to the newly formed ERDB which, with far greater fund at its disposal financed a total programme of sixty-seven mills for the region. The Eastern Regional Production Development Board also encouraged peasant participation by paying a subsidy of five pounds to individuals or communities for the rehabilitation of palm grooves.²⁰

The government also introduced some innovations. One of them was the installation of palm oil mills following the establishment of the Pioneer Oil Mills (POM) projects. The mills involved a simple factory process designed to process about three-quarters of tons of palm fruit per hour, between 1949 and 1954. As a result, the Board of Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation spent about 64 per cent of its income, on the erection of oil mills.²¹ About this period, oil mills operating in the region employed a labour force of about 1368 people.²²

In the 1950s, an important step in the government's attempt to accelerate the pace of agricultural development, especially the palm oil industry. This pilot scheme, which began in the Abak and Uyo Provinces, was extended to the Owerri Province in 1954. It also marked the beginning of the indigenisation of agricultural policy in Eastern Nigeria and the transformation of the nature and scope of government support for agriculture.²³ The mid-1950s, particularly, witnessed further development of earlier programmes. Extension services and demonstrations to improve the skills of local farmers were introduced.²⁴ Practical school farms, field days and agricultural shows were instituted to stimulate farmers' interest in the new farming techniques. Extension work became available to all divisions of the region with the opening of the new school of agricultural at Umudike in October 1955.²⁵

The new farming techniques, like everything new, did not come without any resistance from the local population. In fact, there was resistance to the introduction of oil mills in some parts of Igboland. Women resisted the introduction of oil mills in Ngwa and the neighbouring areas because the innovations threatened their control over palm kernel.²⁶ They particularly resisted the attempts by European firms to buy the uncracked nuts.²⁷ There was widespread mistrust of government's real intention and fear that the introduction of these mills would result in loss of land and oil palms to the government.²⁸

Post-Independence Efforts

The new Dr Micheal Okpara's agrarian policy' (as the scheme was popularly known) was aimed at two main things, namely: to deal with the assault on the increasing trend of unemployment, especially among school leavers and to improve productivity through modern science and technology and increased wealth and living condition of everybody.²⁹ Thus, during the 1962-1968 Development Plan period, government adopted three methods of intensifying the production of tree crops; encouragement of peasant farmers by assisted planting schemes; establishment of farm settlements and plantation projects.³⁰

The farm-settlement scheme was aimed at the development of settlement villages for well-trained agricultural settlers on the land acquired by Government in selected areas throughout the region.³¹ In the 1962-1968 development plan period, it was intended to establish seven settlements-each accommodating 720 farmers on about 12 acres of land per farmer (Altogether, the scheme settled a total of 1,525 farmers in the Eastern Region. The settlements were at Igbariam, Boki, Ohaji, Ulonna North and South, Erei and Uzo-Uwani).³²

The Eastern Region's government also gave considerable opportunities for plantation agriculture. The climate of the region was well suited to tree crops; there was abundant supply of labour and ample land. The scheme had between 1964 and 1965; and about 160 square miles leased for plantation purposes. The economic advantage of the programme to the region was that it contributed substantially, to the export earnings and government revenue, and provided the much needed employment and increased the purchasing power of the region. The plantations were run respectively by the Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation and PAMOL a subsidiary of Unilever.³³ (PAMOL plantation is sited in the outskirts of Calabar the capital of Cross River State).

The encouragement of peasant farmers holdings by assisted planting schemes is known to have worked out satisfactorily. There was an upsurge of enthusiasm for oil palm rehabilitation and the rubber planting scheme. Oil palm products formed the basis of the money economy of the region, providing about 80 per cent of the region's export revenue. Rubber was comparatively a newcomer to the economy the region, but extensive plantations were established in the Ogoja and Calabar areas.³⁴

The oil palm rehabilitation scheme began in 1962 as part of the first six-year development plan and was arguably the most important project under the tree crop programme in terms of its scope. The government aimed to tie its agricultural programmes to peasant producers through intensified oil palm rehabilitation. The major objective was the improvement and replacement of old oil palms with seeds capable of improved yields per acre, producing fruits with increased oil content.³⁵ The department of agriculture supplied free seedlings and fertilizer and offered extension services for the first five years to participating farmers. Participating farmers were also paid up to 28 dollars per acre over the five-year period in which crops were expected to mature.³⁶ The incentives offered by the government generated enthusiasm on the part of rural farmers.

The Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC) plantations represented the most ambitious of the agrarian development programmes.³⁷ In principle, the Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation plantation project represented a major step towards the achievement of a comprehensive agriculture development policy. A total of 148, 930 acres was acquired for plantation development in twenty-two locations in the first five years after independence³⁸. By the end of 1965, 67,000 acres had been planted with cash crops, with 85 per cent coverage projected by the end of 1968.³⁹

Post-Civil War Efforts

The agriculture sector was among those sectors of the economy that suffered severe set-backs as a result of the civil war. Agricultural infrastructure was destroyed and programme initiated during the 1962-1968 plan period, which aimed at modernisation and improvement of agriculture, and increase in productivity of peasant farmers, were disrupted.⁴⁰

In 1970 following the end of the civil hostilities in the country, the East-Central State government took possession of the School of Agriculture at Umudike that was established in 1955, to serve the needs of the eastern Nigeria for trained agricultural technicians at the junior and intermediate levels.⁴¹ The East Central State government put in considerable effort to reconstruct it from the ruins of the war. On April 1, 1972, it was taken over by the Federal Government as the Federal Agricultural Research and Training Station, Umudike and later in April 1976, became the National Root-crops Research Institute. As a federal institution, its students were drawn from all the federal and state ministries of agriculture, the research institutes and other agencies engaged in agricultural development schemes throughout the federation.⁴² As a result of the school's new status, the below were its objectives:

1. to produce sub-professional agricultural technicians at the certificate and diploma levels as required by research, extension and agricultural development schemes of various government and agricultural institutions in Nigeria;
2. to upgrade by further training, serving agricultural staff so that they become equipped for higher responsibilities; and
3. to organise practical courses for farmers to enable them benefit from modern farm technologies.

The school also became a centre for seminars, conferences and workshops on various problems of agricultural development in the country.⁴³

The East Central State Development Plan for 1970-1974 was also, aimed at the reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure, revival of the modernisation and improvement programme initiated in 1962-1968 plan period and modest expansion of the activities in the agriculture sector.⁴⁴ In an address delivered by the Hon. Commissioner for Agriculture and Natural Resources at the 1972-73 annual programme planning conference to the agricultural decision, held between 3rd and 6th January 1972 at Enugu, he stated among other things that: ⁴⁵

the major problem now confronting the East central state in particular, and the country in general, is very obvious to everybody. It is none than the problem of acute shortage of food supply. Food, shelter and clothing are basic human needs, but food is the most fundamental of them all. The East central state has been hit economically because it was the main theatre of the civil war. Farmers lost most of their tools, planting materials and illustrates. In many areas they also lost their houses and other personal properties. The government is anxious to alleviate their suffering and help them stand on their feet again...

continuing, the Hon. Commissioner maintained that:⁴⁶

it was the intention of government to provide farmers with those facilities and services which they cannot afford by themselves. These include agricultural credit, fertilizers, pest control, chemical, high-yielding seeds, livestock of high quality, tractor service, storage and processing facilities as well as technical guidance. Transportation and marketing of farm produce were also organized in order to create effective links between farmers and consumers. Government hoped that farmers on their part will provide the land manual

labour for non-mechanized operations. That also, both individual, farmers, cooperative societies and communities would be encouraged and assisted to produce more food on their land. Farmers cannot show enthusiasm unless they are assured that their efforts will be rewarded.

It was to meet these challenges that the East Central State Government formulated a new strategy for agricultural development. The new strategy consisted of measures aimed at generating an appreciable increase in the income of farmers even at their level of productivity and laid proper emphasis on all aspects of the agricultural development process, especially hitherto neglected secondary process of storage, transportation and marketing.⁴⁷

The agencies for implementing the new policy were the Agricultural Development Authority, the Department of Agricultural Extension, the Department of Agricultural Production and Animal Husbandry and the Forestry Commission. Established by Edict No. 13 of 1973, the Agricultural Development Authority (ADA) was to engage in the production, processing, storage, packaging, marketing, development and manufacture of agricultural products. It was also authorized to promote the activities of agencies genuinely interested in agricultural development, to enter into partnership with such bodies, if desirable and to give them credit facilities to enable them execute their programmes.⁴⁸ The Agricultural Development Authority (ADA) popularised agriculture in the state as it engaged in direct production, provided inputs and other facilities for farmers which they hitherto lacked and demonstrated that agriculture could be a profitable enterprise.⁴⁹

Thus, to achieve its goal of popularising agriculture and increased food production, the Agricultural Development Authority encouraged the active participation of private business organization and private farmers in joint venture with it. The Authority's strategy for agricultural development was based on the conviction that any meaningful agricultural development policy in a developing economy should bring in the rural communities into the mainstream of the economic development process.⁵⁰

In order to secure active participation and co-operation of farmers in the new strategy the government encouraged the farmers to form progressive association instead of struggling individually against heavy odds. Such association, apart from wielding great bargaining power could raise capital for their operations more easily than individual farmers. Efforts to organise farmers into associations culminated in the lunching of State Farmers' Council by the then State administrator, Mr. Ukpabi Asika in June, 1973 after similar association had been lunched at divisional and community Council levels.⁵¹

These associations served as channels of communication between the government and the farmers. They helped to publicise agricultural extension programmes, initiated and promoted group activities and provided feedbacks on government's extension activities to enable the government assess the success and failure of acts extension services.⁵²

Young farmers' Clubs were also organised to inculcate the techniques of agriculture in the youths of the State by the end of 1973, there were 222 clubs in the state with a membership of 5,400 young boys and girls. There were 663 groups projects and 8,061 individuals' projects. The projects included vegetable gardening, livestock rearing and planting of food crops.⁵³

The young Farmers' Club extension programmes provided a practical and informal out-of-school education in agriculture and allied subjects to youths. It was based on the concept that the youths of today will be the farmer of tomorrow and if the desired improvement in the state agricultural output was to be achieved, the youths must be involved in agriculture while they are young instead of flocking into the urban towns in search of white-collar jobs on leaving school. It must be admitted that in spite of this programme, most able-bodied young men comprising school leavers and even, illiterates drifted into the towns in search of jobs that were often not there, leaving aged men and women with very low productivity potential on the farmers. The result of course was low productivity of the agricultural sector.⁵⁴

By engaging in direct production, ADA did not compete with farmers but complemented their efforts by providing them with such services and technical expertise which they on their own could not provide. Agricultural Development Authority during its era established and developed a number of agricultural projects and allied industries strategically located in different parts of the old East Central State. The Authority also converted the pre-war farm settlements into state farms. The Authority was also known to have created ten state plantations/farms located at Uzo-Uwani, Ulonna North, Ulonna South, Erei, Abakaliki, Nekede, Nkwere, Ezunaka, Ezillo /Nkalagu, Ohaji and Igbariam.⁵⁵

The Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) were first lunched as viable projects in 1972, only two years after the end of the civil war, when Nigeria was facing first food and fibre shock.⁵⁶ The project, was launched against the background of the dwindling Nigerian agriculture, which in the 1950s and 1960s, had attained prominent expertise through complete reliance on small scale-farmers.⁵⁷ The main and first feature of the ADPs was its reliance on the small-scale farmers as central focus for increased food production. The projects were funded under a tripartite agreement involving the World Bank 66 per cent, Federal Government 20 per cent, and state government 14 per cent. The two main objectives of the ADPs were to increase food production, and to raise the income of small-scale farmers.⁵⁸

Summary

Agricultural activities in Eastern Nigeria before 1976 were characterised by small-scale farming, traditional farming methods and a focus on cash crops such as palm produce cocoa etc. The region's fertile soil, favourable climate and abundant rainfall made it an ideal place for farming and agriculture played a crucial role in the regional economy. The introduction of cash crops by colonial powers led to a shift from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, this shift also led to challenges such as land degradation, labour exploitation and fluctuating market prices. Despite these challenges agriculture remained a vital sector of the regional economy, providing employment and income for millions of people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, agricultural activities in Eastern Nigeria before 1976 were shaped by a complex interplay of historical, economic and social factors. The region's agricultural sector was characterised by small-scale farming, traditional farming methods and a focus on cash crops. While the introduction of cash crops brought new economic opportunities, it also led to significant challenges for farmers.

Understanding the dynamics of agricultural activities in Eastern Nigeria before 1976 provides valuable insights into the region's economic and social history and highlights the need for sustainable agricultural practices and policies that support small-scale farmers. By learning from the past, policymakers and farmers can work together to build a more resilient and productive agricultural sector in Nigeria.

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