

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture has been an old job since time immemorial. Many nations in the world are proud of their booming economy which is consolidated by agriculture. Agriculture is the backbone of any nation's economy. Agricultural production was the backbone of the economy of the societies of Nigeria for many decades. Agriculture developed in the region, as in the whole of the central savanna, through practical knowledge and experience accumulated over the millennia. It's against this background that this paper gives a brief history of agriculture from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period's societies in Northern Nigeria respectively. It examines the challenges of agriculture after the discovery of oil and the need for government to take drastic measures by improving the agricultural sector in order to rescue it from total collapse.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, agriculture provides more assured supplies of food. It provides a stimulated degree of urbanization and specialization and supports the ever increasing population. According to Evans-Pritchard, "the first revolution that transformed human economy gave man control over his own food supply. Man began to plant, cultivate, and improve by selection of edible grasses, roots, and trees". This transformation has been aptly described as "Neolithic revolution" (O.G., 1996).

No doubt it's quite obvious that most Nigerians and northern people in particular earn their living from land. Agriculture is the main stay economic activity in the larger part of the northern region, as it was in other pre-industrial societies. Moreover, agriculture remains, as in the past, the 'matrix in which all other indigenous economic activities are set. For the past five centuries the staple foodstuffs have been grains, such as millet, maize, rice, roots, yams, cocoyam, cassava and plantain. These crops are grown in association with a variety of legumes, bulbs and fruits. (Evans-pitched, 1990).

This paper examines agricultural practices before the coming of the colonialist, during colonial period and post colonial period in Northern Nigeria.

2. PRE-COLONIAL AGRICULTURE IN NORTHERN

The Sokoto Caliphate is then what is now known as Northern Nigeria. The Sokoto caliphate was established in 1804 following various wars in Hausa land to reform Islam, take political and economic control in the territory, during the second half of the 18th century (Mahdi, .A., 2001).

Agricultural production was the backbone of the economy of the societies of the region. Agriculture developed in the region, as in the whole of the central savanna, through practical knowledge and experience accumulated over the millennium. For instance, the peasants recognized grass as indication of fertile soil and knew the relationship between soil types and fertility. They also knew that regular weeding increases crop yields, mixed cropping makes better use of the soil, crop rotation bring the soil back to life, use of wood ash improves soil after it was made deficient overtime. They also knew that use of animal manures regenerates the fertility of the soil, as well as careful selection of appropriate tools and numerous other techniques and methods which were the result of prolonged trial and error in agricultural practices. In addition, successful agricultural production involves the knowledge of the seasons, something which the farmers in the region also knew only too well (Chafe, 1996).

The whole region is suitable for the cultivation of various crops. The main food crops are guinea corn, millets, rice, wheat and onions. All of them, except rice and wheat were grown for export as well. The leading cash crop were cotton, groundnuts, locust beans, shea butter, dyeing plants and terminal" The last listed was cultivated for food and for the growing of silkworms whose" threads were used for embroidery on clothes. In the rural areas men and women participated in all stages of agriculture, but in the urban areas, where the Islamic culture was stronger, it was the men mainly who tended the farms. However, slave labour was used widely as a complement (Mahdi, .A., 2001).

The onset of agricultural activities occurred during the dry season by clearing of farmlands. During this time before the first rainfall, clearing of farmland and manuring were undertaken but major activities were, however, reserved for 'Damina' (rainy season). The beginning of the farming activities

and the harvest periods were accompanied by certain festivities mostly performed in the 'Gandayen Sarakuna' (Chafe, 1996). During the wet season, various agricultural activities beginning with planting and ending with harvesting of crops were organized accordingly. During the peak for the rainy season, root crops were harvested. Such crops were used to make up for the shortages from the previous season. In years of drought and famine, more often in the northern parts of the region, some of the legumes and tubers planted, especially beans, cassava and sweet potatoes, made up for a poor harvest of cereals. More so, legumes and tubers played an important role in the ecological cycles with their nitrogen - conserving properties help in preserving the fertility of the land. In addition to this, the leaves, pods and stack produced 'Harawa' (grass) for the large herds of livestock of the region (Chafe, 1996).

This picture of agricultural production is incomplete without outlining the basic unit of social production as an entity. The system was very unique, comprehensive and cohesive. Among Hausa farmers, the fundamental productive unit in the nineteenth century was the 'Gida' (Household). This consisted at least of a nuclear family with unmarried sons but could be much wider; married sons tended to stay on, and there could be 'Bayindiga' or 'Barorin- Gida ' (Domestic slaves). The numerical strength of 'Gida' (household) differed from one another out the occupation and status of the 'Maigida' (house leader) was the prime determinant of the actual composition of the 'Gida' (house). Thus, agricultural activities were mainly undertaken in the 'Gandun Gida' (family farm).

All able bodied members of the 'Gida' (house) were expected to partake in one activity or another. These activities ranged from clearing the land to planting, weeding and harvesting. The 'Gandu' (large farm) system formed the social basis of the economic main stay of the societies of the north (Chafe, 1996).

However, around the settlements there was an inner ring of permanently cultivated field (Karkara and an outer area of the fields that were not fertilized but fallowed to let them regain their fertility. This outer area and non-cultivated bush constituted at the same time the primary grazing areas for the pastoralists, who were predominantly Fulani. Again toward the end of the dry season, family heads would meet to iron out issues related to summer itineraries, grazing opportunities dates for marriages. During the wet season each nuclear family might follow its own itinerary. In any case, groups would break up rapidly into individual families in case, of disease or drought, trying to avoid mass infection or looking for pasture for their animals. There was cordial and mutual understanding that existed long between Hausa and Fulani during the dry season, when crop production activity was limited to some of the low-lying Fadama. At that time of the year it was mutually advantageous that" the herds had access to the fallow lands and the stubble of the cultivated fields; the animals got access to fodder, and their droppings add manure to the soil. In addition, farmers and herders exchanged grain and dairy products. There were no frequent clashes or dispute among them. There were some peculiar features of social production (Wale, O., 1996).

Farming was carried out based on the old methods of production, which is very low in productivity. The agricultural production unit was still largely the family farm which was usually small and scattered. Agricultural techniques have remained very much the same as had been handed down by the forefathers. But with no doubt, farmers were able to produce sufficient foodstuff that could be reserved for next year to come. Foodstuff were very cheap, affordable and available in the markets, and people from neighbouring communities attended Northern markets because no community was self-sufficient in the production of agricultural and manufactured goods, which were required either as necessities or luxuries. Prior to this, farmers were among the richest people in the society because their position earned them title-ships as 'Sarkin- Noma' (chief farmer) and so on (Akinjobi, 1980).

It is through the benefit that accrued from farming that some were able to purchase other luxurious things like donkeys, horses, camels, and ostrich or build houses, get married and go for pilgrimage. All these took new shape or dimension during European colonial period.

3. COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL POLICIES IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The period of the colonial administration in Nigeria, 1861-1960 agriculture was given a big boost to develop the colonial economy. In the first place, the colonial authorities' approach to the 'management' of the Nigerian economy was characterized 'by two main orientations. The first was informed by the major factor which initially informed British presence in the territory that eventually became Nigeria, that is, the search for cheap supply of raw materials, to contribute to the sustenance of the British Empire (Ndoh, 2000).

The second is what is described as "colonialist nature capitalism with a welfare tendency". This is an approach by which the government sought to directly and totally influence, in some ways the course of events in the country with their desire for cheap raw materials and expansion of colonies' markets for the products of the colonialists. The authorities therefore through a combination of devices,

stimulated the production of such industrial raw materials as palm oil and kernels, cocoa, cotton, groundnut and rubber. (Ndoh, 2000).

In northern Nigeria, emphasis was on the production of groundnut and cotton with rapt than any other crop. This is because cotton production will supply the looms of Britain's largest manufacturing enterprise and textile industries. In order to find lasting solution for Britain main sources of supply, apart from the one in the U.S.A. cotton belt, the British Cotton Growing Association (B.C.G.A), decided to focus on cotton and groundnut production in the north. One of the central arguments was that cotton had been grown and even exported from Southern Nigeria as early as the 1860's but the B.C.G.A.'s hopes were focused on the North where its agent reported that "there are unlimited lands, suitable for cotton growing, and that labour is available. The soil in some districts was reported to be "the finest cotton soil in the world". Reports received in London estimated that in Northern Nigeria "almost sufficient cotton can be grown to supply the wants of cotton industries in London" (Anjorin, 1980)

Kano and Zaria were supposed to be the dual centers' of this immense development. Particular attention was paid to the Kano area, with its relatively high degree of indigenous agricultural sophistication and large farming population. Kano also had the advantages of a large local handloom weaving industry already attracting supplies of home grown cotton (Apeldoorn, 1981: 92). By 1910-1911, Governor H. Hesketh Bell of Northern Nigeria was enthusiastically using administrative staff as propagandists for cotton. "Strenuous efforts are being made to encourage the natives to grow cotton on a large scale" he wrote in the annual colonial report to the colonial office.

"My officers will do all they can to open the eyes of the chief and people as to the advantages and probably profits of growing cotton and I believe attention will be paid to their advices." (Anjorin, 1980)"

It was not surprising when Hesketh reported this because there is no doubt about the fact that for many centuries cotton culture had been a popular indigenous industry in Northern Nigeria. Indeed, as far back as the time of Leo Africana, constant references had been made by visitors to the country about its flourishing cotton industry. During the Sixteenth Century, for instance, Kano cloths were sold in the important market centers of the Western Sudan and even in North America, and during the Nineteenth century, sources indicated that two-thirds of the people in Sudan zone wore Kano cloths even the Tuareg veil was made from Kano cotton. As was reported the productive capacity of Kano, Zaria, Katsina and Hadejia-Katagun cotton districts amounted to 3500, 1000 and 700 tons per annum respectively (Anjorin, 1980).

Groundnut is the other cash- crop that played vital role in the northern Nigerian agricultural activities. Groundnuts were introduced to West Africa during the slave trade. It is said that their purpose was to supplement the meager diet of slaves being shipped to the Americas. The plant spread rapidly, and by the 1850's Governor Birth found it widely used for food and oil. There was serious demand for groundnuts between 1906 and 1914 with profound effect on Northern Nigeria which came as the result of the manufacture of an entirely novel product margins. The Europeans saw Kano land as very suitable to grow groundnut on a huge scale. This is because light sandy soils are a great advantage since harvesting involves lifting the entire plant out of the earth by hand. Such soils are present in much of Kano province. Another reason was that groundnut also needs at least 22 to 24 inches of rain during the growing season, and this too is almost always achieved in the region of Kano (Anjorin, 1980).

Soon after the harvest, Kano price for nuts was up to £60.0 and in that case appears to have made it profitable for farmers to sell for export within a radius of about 90 or 100 miles from the rail head at Kano. In the last two months of 1912, the enthusiasm felt by farmers, middlemen, and trading firms alike due to the huge profit made them to add more extra time to increase production. There was great competition around the product among farmers, buyers and various stakeholders. The profit generation capacity of the product created massive competition and increased crop production in 1912. Extra incentives were provided by the agents in great force before planting and during the subsequent rains. The way the locals embraced the farming was very strong. This was indicated in March 1913. However, focus on this product greatly reduced the cultivation of other crops especially sheet nuts, onions and grains of various types which were grown extensively in Sokoto, Katsina and Borno emirate (Ayodele, 2003).

The above fact shows that colonial economic policies promoted major agricultural goods for cash and generated substantial foreign exchange for the government. But it created problems in some other aspects of the economy for instance Colonial administrations set quotas for agricultural production, prices for produce, and either directly controlled or indirectly oversaw companies engaged in the export and marketing of goods. This state of colonial economy left the production of food crops in the hands of peasant households who generally worked on small plots of land, with low in efficient

technologies. Thus given emphasis on cash- crops production no doubt created the conditions for the food insecurity which the country later experienced (Studies, 1998)

During the colonial period, administrators planned their colonies' economies not principally for the benefit of their African subjects, but to offset the cost of colonial administration and to provide some benefits to the metropolitan colonial power. During this time Marketing Board played very vital roles especially through the introduction of new currencies which destroyed not only agriculture but trade as a whole. The colonial monetary system with institutions like credit institution, money economy and vibrant capital markets destroyed the old agricultural system. Such credit institutions fostered closer relationship between debtors and creditors from various trading units. Also exchange brokers who speculate currency values especially during harvest seasons and booming trade seasons were completely sunk (Studies, 1998). The system introduced colonial taxation and compulsory payment of tax in the new currencies. It turned West African into a wage labour economy and embarked on the production of such crops as cocoa, groundnut, palm producer, rubber, coffee and cotton (Studies, 1998)

These goods were sold to European firms through their agents for cash out of which West African producers paid taxes. The payment of tax was consistently enforced and tax defaulters were heavily punished (Asiwaju, 1990). The impact of this system remained in West African economies till today. This situation remained during the independent struggle and beyond, no doubt our early elites inherited these economic policies without redressing them (Asiwaju, 1990).

4. AGRICULTURE IN POST-COLONIAL PERIOD AND THE OIL BOOM

Nigeria got her independence on 1st October, 1960. The past leaders inherited a lot of social economic and political problems from the colonizers and for that reason the country found her on the scene of military coup and civil war (1967-1970) which caused sound economic and social dislocations. In the 1970s oil was discovered and Nigeria experienced huge revenue from oil which led to what is popularly regarded as the oil boom. As a result Nigeria started to neglect its strong agricultural and high manufacturing bases in favour of unhealthy dependence on crude oil (Redding, 2008). The relationship between the oil boom of the 1970s and the aggregate decline of Nigerian agriculture is well known. Rural/urban migration increased as people attempted to reap the benefit from the windfall from oil production. Agricultural commodities for export therefore declined and food production became a problem. Starting from 1974, the economy became a net importer of basic food (Andrew, 1962), (Asiwaju, 1990).

Huge foreign exchange was utilized in importing food stuff, making their price go high. Subsequent government policies on food, like Nigerian Agricultural and Co-operative Bank (NACB) in 1973, the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1978, Green revolution in 1980, Back to land in 1984, Directorate For Food Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI) in 1989, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) programme could not reverse the deteriorating food situation because of inconsistency of Government policies on agriculture. Government was involved in direct food production, provided subsidies to peasant farmers and created more commodity boards for various agricultural and food products (Asiwaju, 1990).

Another aspect which contributed to the backwardness in northern agriculture was lack of concern from the politicians. Most of the past northern government and even some at present focused on construction of physical infrastructure, while paying less attention to agricultural activities. Today farmers are left with no sufficient fertilizers, no modern farming implements and techniques. Moreover, important point which contributed in the decline of agriculture was the policy of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The structural adjustment programme are a set of policies that have been imposed by external donors on indebted African states, as a condition for either rolling over existing debt or allowing debt to be undertaken. For many African states, some of the existing debt go back to the late sixties and early seventies, the first decade or so of independence, when newly independent states often took on a lot of debt in order to build up new infrastructure, and try to bring certain types of facilities up to "first world" levels and so on. Over the last 35 years, for a variety of reason independent African states have often been unable to settle that debt. Principally, structural adjustment policies have attempted to force independent states out of direct participation as owner-operators of economic enterprises.

They have attempted to abolish state controlled price levels on agricultural products and to abolish state controlled marketing boards of agricultural products (Ayodele, 2003) (Asiwaju, 1990).

Nigeria had a bad experience with structural adjustment policies particularly, in the rural areas. The policies had the effect of promoting large-scale agro business type farms, usually run by men, at the expense of small peasant-style farms that were often controlled by women. The policies

were not specifically aimed at putting the small-scale farmers out of business, or drive them off their land, but they were quite explicitly aimed at creating a rural type of capitalism as kinds of counter weight to the political elite (Ndoh, 2000), (Asiwaju, 1990). However, the fear of political instability in Nigeria that resulted from the implementation of these structural adjustment policies and from the relatively sharp increase in the prices of consumer goods, tended to undermine everyone in the country, including peasant and capitalist engaged in agriculture.

5. THE PROSPECTIVE CHALLENGES

The way agriculture is being undermined in Northern Nigeria is an ugly situation that is going to cause threat in the future. This is because farming activities are gradually going down every day due to the negligence by both the people and government. Hundreds of farmers keep on trooping into the city for means of livelihoods or survival. This is because funding of agriculture poses a great setback and challenges especially when government agencies like Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Nigerian Agriculture Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB), the Nigerian Agriculture Insurance Company (NAIC), Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme Fund (ACGSF) and Commercial Banks failed to address the matter effectively.

Funding is one of a fundamental problem that is facing the agricultural sector today. There is difficulty faced by poor farmers is securing short term loans to peak agricultural activities. Politics and lack of sufficient collateral security make commercial bank loans inaccessible to farmers. Although even if there is collateral security, the interest rate which is within the 19% to 20%, scares many small farmers away. The Nigeria Agriculture Co-operative and Rural Development Bank was established in 1973 to serve as a national credit institution charged with the responsibility of delivering credit to the nations agricultural sectors through the provision of loan to individual farmers, co-operative organizations etc. It introduced direct small holder loan scheme in 1981 in an attempt to reach out to the small scale farmers in Nigeria. What we should know is that Nigeria of yesterday is not Nigeria of today considering the size of land and huge population reaching up to 170,000 million people. Therefore statistically, when the population in the society increases surely every aspect of life must be changed. So it is beyond doubt that in the past decades consumption was low but productions in agricultural activities was high. The government of President Umar Musa Yar'adua introduced Fadama I, II, and III in conjunction with International Food and Agricultural Development (IFAD) where it also disbursed about 200 billion naira as agriculture loan in order to reposition the sector as part of its seven point agenda.

Therefore if this alarming condition is allowed continue, no doubt the country will experience extreme food shortage and high inflation that the common man cannot afford to buy food stuff and the rate of hunger, starvation and diseases will be on the increase .

1. CONCLUSION

Government and stakeholders must do something concerning agricultural development in the North. Our farmers need to have modern techniques of farming to catch up with the rest of the world. Today we are in a global village where science and technology are the order of the day. We should therefore take advantage of this and mechanize our agriculture. The farmer needs substantial support from especially, provision of reliable loan scheme and credit facilities for long term. Northern governors must join hands together to search for possible ways to rescue dwindling agriculture in the North. Two-thirds of farmers' today abandon farming and migrate to the urban centres in search of white collar jobs. Giving farmer's short time credit facility through bank cannot ease or contribute to rapid development; it will rather constitute obstacles to some extent.

Our farmers need to be fully equipped with new farm implements and insurance schemes. There is need to enlighten them on appropriate use of modern farming technology so as to meet up with global challenges. Government alone cannot make this sector viable. The private sector could invest by pumping in huge capital and sponsored research for modern techniques in agricultural production. If this is done, there will be available jobs for the youth and sufficient foodstuff that will make poverty history this is because hunger, starvation, poverty and criminal activities will be drastically addressed and controlled.

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