

THE PLACE OF NDI-IGBO IN COCOA PRODUCTION: The Cross River State Example, 1970-2015

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Abstract

Cocoa is one of the main cash crops in Nigeria. Its large scale production transcended the colonial times in the country. In Cross River State for example, Ikom with some other towns and villages are known for cocoa production. The crop emerged as the mainstay of the local economy of Ikom with those places recognized for production of cocoa up to 2015. It is equally unearthed that numerous people, especially those whose origin is traced to the towns drew supports from the proceeds of cocoa farms to dignify themselves in their various fields. Yet, cocoa farming was not fully mechanized up to the terminal of the study. It is however, verifiable that Ndi-Igbo mainly provided labour for cocoa production in the area since 1970. The indigenous people of the areas and the government of Cross River State have the land and sometimes, raised the farms, but Ndi-Igbo performed the tasks of maintaining the farms, and producing the crop. Hired labour and sharecropping were the bases for Igbo provision of Labour in the areas. Before the end of 1980s, some Igbo farmers in the towns had started re-investing their savings to acquire lands by either rent or outright purchase to raise their own cocoa plantations. It is further discovered that the civil war and its attendant effects were responsible for influx of the Igbo into the cocoa farms in Cross River and other states in Nigeria. Ndi-Igbo believed that it was one of the enterprises to venture into with little or no capital. Primary and secondary sources were relied on while its data were analyzed qualitatively, using content analysis and thematic approaches.

Keywords: Place, Ndi-Igbo, Cocoa, Production, and Cross River State

Introduction

Cultivation of cocoa dates back to the colonial times in Nigeria. It was one of the crops which were highly needed in European industries. So, the European traders and the colonial government in Nigeria encouraged increasing production of the exports to the detriment of the internal staples in the country. This laid the foundation for regular and excessive demand for the exports, especially cocoa in the 1950s. The degree of patronage given to the crop attracted more entrepreneurs into the enterprise. It is howbeit, important to note that other crops, such as plantain, banana, oil palm, and other staples were grown simultaneously in the field. Still, the fact that it is cocoa that mainly attracted farmers to the field depicted the nomenclature 'cocoa farm'.

Ndi-Igbo could have enthusiastically made exploit in the enterprise between 1950 and 1967, but their geographical, climatic, and soil features were not conducive for effective growing of cocoa in their lands. Ideal features and regions, such as tropical rainforests, and rich coastal

plains are suitable for growing of the crop. ¹ So, Ondo and Cross River States met those qualities more than other parts of the country. Their environments are characterized by mild climate, abundant water supply, and are shielded from harsh winds and extreme weather condition. To that effect, Ndi-Igbo had imperceptibly migrated to those areas for the enterprise in 1950s. Many among their farmers engaged more in provision of migrant labour than venturing into cocoa production enterprise as sharecroppers and cocoa farmers until the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967.

Other places that are not limited to Delta, Ogun, Oyo, and Akwa Ibom States equally, had records of cocoa production. Yet, it is verifiable that Cross River was the largest cocoa producing state, except Ondo State up to 2015. In 1970 for example, out of the total of 400,000 metric tons of cocoa produced in Nigeria, Ondo and Cross River States produced 160, 000 and 105,000 metric tons, respectively. ² Other cocoa producing states shared the rest of the metric tons.

Ndi-Igbo-Cross River Migration

Ndi-Igbo had commenced movement to different parts of the country in multitude, searching for greener pasture before the outbreak of the civil war in 1967. Those that migrated for cocoa farming in different parts of the country, such as Cross River State returned to their respective homes with their proceeds annually. The evidences of rich annual proceeds that were brought home turned and captivated numerous others to the enterprise before the outbreak of the war. The war defiantly re-integrated Ndi-Igbo in Igboland as they suffered severe violations in all parts of Nigeria. By the end of the war in 1970, Ndi-Igbo were left with little or nothing by both the disasters of the war and the post civil war government policies in Nigeria. ³

Fortunately, cocoa production enterprise is one of the businesses of the time which the people could have ventured into with little or no capital. It required mainly manual labour and locally-made tools, such as machete, go-to-hell with long wooden handle, among others. As others took a long distance of returning to cocoa farms in Ondo State, many among them chose to go to Cross River State for the same enterprise. Proximity was one of the factors that were put into consideration by the Igbo farmers for their choice of state to migrate to. In this regard, those who could not raise any form of transport fare, trekked and managed to have their ways to different cocoa farms in Cross River State. ⁴

The truth is that those that had earlier knowledge of cocoa production (sharecroppers) engaged subordinates (the new comers) in form of apprentices and labourers. The terms of annual service of the said-apprentices were usually discussed with the consents of both parties' family members. Remarkably, the apprentices' family members were equally brought into the picture during payment for the services rendered or work done by the apprentices. Additionally, at the period of two or three years of service by the apprentice, he was usually granted sense of responsibility and autonomy by his master-sharecropper. Through his master or as the case could be, the apprentice obtained a farm to work as a sharecropper.

At first, small size of farm was entrusted to him to maintain and produce cocoa seeds for the year. The size was important because it was used to test the capacity of the sharecropper in cocoa farming and management. It was through this means that numerous people of Igbo origin migrated in drove to cocoa farms in the state. Although the area of interest is the Old East-Central State that consists of the present day Ebonyi, Enugu, Abia, Anambra and Imo States. Before 1980s, numerous Igbo sharecroppers in the area had started re-investing their savings in the enterprise,

renting cocoa farms, buying land to grow theirs, and purchasing some cocoa farms completely.⁵ This development in the business attracted more Ndi-Igbo to Cross River State.

Honestly, the tasks of maintaining and managing cocoa farms under the bases of sharecropping and provision of labour were mainly performed by Ndi-Igbo. Therefore, the Igbo were impactful in all the four factors of production of cocoa in state. They re-invested their proceeds as capital, bought lands, provided labour and management to the farms. So, Ndi-Igbo filled gaps in production of cocoa in Cross River State.

Cocoa Cultivation in Cross River State

Growing of cocoa was operative in notable cocoa-producing towns and villages of Ikom, Ogoja, Etung, Obubra, Akamkpa, Uyanga, Ikot Offiong and Calabar in present day Cross River State. Among the local government of the state, Ikom was identified as the largest cocoa-producing local government in the state. It as well, hosted the largest Ndi-Igbo cocoa-farmers and labourers in the area. Ikom as one of the cocoa-growing towns possesses various factors that enable cocoa production in the area. Some of those attributes include well-drained and aerated sandy-loamy soil with moderate depth of between 100 and 150cm, acidic P^H of 5.5-6.5, high organic matter content of 2-5% providing nutrients and water-holding capacity, and temperature of about 22-28°C (72-82°F). Its soil is further characterized by plains and gentle slopes with tropical rainforest of about 1500-2000mm amount of annual rainfall.⁶ These features are within the range suitable for effective cocoa production.

Viable seeds of cocoa could either be planted directly in the field (farm) or raised in nursery. If raised in nursery, the seedlings were further transplanted to a prepared field at a spacing of 3m*3m. The same spacing range is maintained where the viable seeds were planted directly in a prepared farm. So, an estimated plant density of 1,111 plants per hectare could be realizable with the range of spacing.⁷ It worthwhile to reiterate that manual labour was fully involved in cocoa production in the area within the time under study. To promote germination, growth, productivity, and ensure effective sustenance of the already existing plantations, bush burning was discouraged in those cocoa-producing towns and villages.

Other routine maintenances of cocoa farms include weeding or clearing, mulching, pruning, supplying, and regeneration of aged cocoa plants in a plantation. Efforts to control diseases and pests of cocoa, such as black pod, cherelle wilt, charcoal rot and cocoa mirids, mealy bug, cocoa pod borer, respectively remain fundamental in growing and management of cocoa. Some varieties of cocoa begin to bear fruits between 3 and 5 years of planting and maintenance. Fully developed and ripe pods are usually harvested using go-to-hell with long wooden handle for plucking, and baskets or head-pans for picking and packing them. The pods are usually heaped at a place to ferment for a period of 4-8 days before breaking of the pods and sorting of the seeds for sun-drying, bagging and distribution.⁸

Labour and Management of Cocoa Farms in Cross River State

Local technology and manual labour were pre-dominant in the sector of agriculture in virtually all parts of Nigeria. Cocoa production in Cross River State was no exception. No doubt, cocoa was not the only crop grown in the fields in the towns and areas for cocoa plantations. Other crops, such as oil palm, cassava, maize, yam, cocoa yam, pepper, melon, pumpkin, tomato, potato, bitter yam, plantain, banana, among others, were grown by the farmers for provision of food. Some

crops that were not limited to cola-nut, bitter cola, bush mango, and walnut supported to boost the farm proceeds. All these were not without timber and pulpwood trees of African Mahogany, teak, iroko, African oak, ebony, rosewood, afara, gmelina, eucalyptus, among others, in the plantations.

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To provide routine maintenance and management to the plantations; labourers and sharecroppers that were mainly drawn from Igboland took steps forward. The sharecroppers were engaged by the farm owners to maintain and manage their farms. The said-sharecroppers had a right of certain percent of the total annual outputs. In some cases, a plantation owner provided pesticides to take a share of 70% of the total outputs, while the sharecropper took 30%. Where the sharecropper provided the pesticides, he stood to secure 50% of the total outputs as the plantation owner took the other 50%.¹⁰

In this arrangement, a sharecropper took care of the farm. He engaged labourers where necessary to ensure effective management of the farm for increasing yield and productivity. He paid wages to the labourers on a daily basis, and to the apprentices annually. The payments made to the apprentices (labourers engaged with the consent of their family members) were done annually, and in conformity with the terms of their contract (agreement). Inasmuch as male labour was mainly required in the plantations for clearing the farms, pruning cocoa trees, application of pesticides, and plucking the developed and ripe pods; both male and female labour were however, required for picking, and gathering the plucked pods, breaking the fermented pods, sorting of, and sun-drying the seeds.¹¹

Investigation revealed that the available labour force whose origin was traced to Cross River State mainly constituted old people and those from poor families. Young men and women within the active work age developed apathy to cocoa farming and agriculture, generally. Yet, the role of youths in agricultural development cannot be jettisoned. It is true that most young people of Cross River State origin hardly, engaged in cocoa farming. Undeniably, their parents that stood as the plantation owners were always concerned in all activities in the farms. However, some of the young people whose parents were the farm owners monitored the farms from cities that were not limited to Ikom and Calabar. The increasing absence of people within the active age in the farms could further be attributed to farm drudgery, absence of social infrastructure, and low life expectancy in the rural areas and plantations. Before 1980s, some sharecroppers as Paul Mgbada, Matthew Okereke, Obasi Okorie, and Monday Chukwuma had started re-investing their savings, acquiring plantations by either rent, lease, complete purchase of land to grow cocoa or full purchase of already existing cocoa plantation.¹²

Prior to the 21st century, a number of Ndi-Igbo cocoa farmers started developing apathy to the enterprise. Many among them turned down joining their friends or relatives in the plantations. Certain factors were responsible for the sudden development, first, the enterprise seemed strenuous and laborious, second, it was forthwith, considered as one of the vocations of the uneducated and unexposed people in the society. It is evident that some of the sharecroppers in cocoa farms in Cross River State declined and withdrew from the enterprise between 1990 and the first decade of the 21st century. For some, the enterprise was too burdensome. Many among them that progressed in the business continued in it to enable them ensure progressive supports to their family members who were either in school or in other businesses.¹³ To that effect, most of the sharecroppers did not introduce their children to the profession. This therefore, resulted in the decline of the pace in which Ndi-Igbo migrated to cocoa farms in Cross River State in drove.

Engagement of Ndi-Igbo in Cocoa Production and its Impact on Ndi-Igbo and Cross River State

The presence of Ndi-Igbo in agriculture and cocoa production in Cross River State was effectual in the socio-economic activities of both the Igbo and the people of Cross River State. For Ndi-Igbo, the enterprise was a source of income, food and employment. Rather than remaining inactive and torpid, the war violated Ndi-Igbo had the option of engaging in any menial job, such as cocoa farming to earn a living. With the enterprise, Ndi-Igbo were at least, able to cater for themselves and their families as at the 1970s.

The fact that Ndi-Igbo in the enterprise mainly returned annually, and usually, by January favoured polygamy. So, some polygamous cocoa farmers left some of their wives and children at home and took others who were deemed to be helpful and supportive to the farm work to the plantations. Jocosely, before the end of 1980s, the farmers resorted to leaving their children in cities of Ikom, Calabar, their home cities, among others for their education and other businesses.¹⁴ This implies that they chose to be in the plantations with their labourers, apprentices and wives. Such children only visited their parents from time to time for supports.

Indeed, opinions abound that the vocation was a source of employment and income to cater for the family members of Ndi-Igbo. Yet, it is pitiable to state that numerous cocoa farmers of Igbo origin were uneducated and illiterates. This buttressed the view that most of them were introduced to the enterprise without education at any level. Others completed their primary school education only. The Ndi-Igbo cocoa farmers expeditiously, learnt from their counterparts from Cross River State who primarily used the proceeds from the plantation to give education and empower their children, rather than introducing their children to the vocation. Up to 2015, many cocoa farmers that are from Igboland were either labourers, apprentices, sharecroppers, farm owners or land-lords in the state. Some, such as Hyacenth Okoro and Chinedu Okoji that are farm owners and had gone out of the vocation visited and monitored the plantations for their rents and proceeds.¹⁵

The increasing population of Ndi-Igbo in different parts of the state led to the emergence of Igbo union in Ikom, for example. Igbo people from various cocoa-producing towns and villages attended their meetings. The union had Eze Ndi-Igbo in Ikom and Eze Ndi-Igbo in Cross River State. Indeed, Eze Oliver Ohanwe was Eze Ndi-Igbo in Ikom between 2005 and 2015. Those that served as Eze Ndi-Igbo in Cross River included Eze J. U. Onoh, Eze F. N. Ogbonnaya and P. N. Uche in 1985-1995, 1995-2005, and 2005-2015, respectively.¹⁶ The union helped Ndi-Igbo in addressing various issues that concerned them in their businesses in Ikom and other local governments in Cross River State.

On the other hand, the role of Ndi-Igbo in repositioning the economy of Cross River State and its citizens, especially the plantation owners and the entire cocoa farmers cannot be demeaned. Their presence in the plantations gave meaning and relevance to the cocoa farms in the state. No doubt, having a cocoa plantation was one thing, working on it for effective yield and productivity was another. It was the Ndi-Igbo that did the work of maintaining and managing the plantation. So, they were factors for economic growth and development in the cocoa-producing areas, and Cross River State, in general.

Conclusion

The present day, Cross River State attained recognition in cocoa production in the country before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967. Just as the war interrupted other aspects of life; in the economic area, cocoa production was not exempted. It resulted in the withdrawal of most farmers of Igbo origin from the plantations. In other words, cocoa production operations were abandoned due to, among other things, poor demand for the cocoa outputs, and fear of being attacked in the farms. The condition of Ndi-Igbo after the war was the propelling force that pushed Ndi-Igbo to return to cocoa plantations in multitude. They doubtlessly rose to becoming the providers of manual labour in the field of production. Investigation revealed that their return was facilitated by the fact that re-engaging in the enterprise required little or no capital.

Ndi-Igbo undertook the vocation as sharecroppers, apprentices and labourers. The apprentices were engaged by the sharecroppers with the consent of their family members. The two basic conditions for the contract include to be paid their agreed amount annually, and be supported to become self-reliant sharecropper after two or three years of apprenticeship. Ndi-Igbo and their host farmers (landlords) maintained their conditions for sharecropping until some of them (Ndi-Igbo) resorted to re-investing their savings in the profession. They re-invested through acquisition of farms by either rent, lease or outright purchase of plantations or open land to grow their crops. Once the lands or plantations were acquired, the Igbo farmer undertook full maintenance and control of the plantations and appropriation of the values of outputs within the defined period. It is through this means that some Ndi-Igbo rose from sharecroppers to co-farmers with the indigenous farmers of Cross River State since late 1970s. This became an indicator of more vigorous engagement, and commitment of Ndi-Igbo in Cocoa production between 1970 and 2015.

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