

## **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE, 1900 – 2019: THE STORY OF COCOA FARMING IN ISE-EKITI, EKITI STATE, NIGERIA**

**BY**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of the paper is to show that cocoa farming in Ise-Ekiti is one of the effects of British colonial enterprise in Nigeria and that it did impact on the town and her people. It is noteworthy that Ise-Ekiti is the leading community in cocoa production in Ekiti State and that prior to the introduction of cocoa, agriculture was the main stay of her economy. Findings show that introduction of cocoa did bring about some changes in the agricultural life of the people. The positions taken in the paper were generated from both the primary and secondary sources the paper used. The paper urges government to give agriculture the required attention so as checkmate unemployment.*

*Key words: Cocoa, Ise-Ekiti, continuity, change*

## **Introduction**

Ise-Ekiti, one of the numerous communities in Ekiti State, is the headquarters of Ise/Orun Local Government Area (LGA)<sup>1</sup>. It is located on a land area of roughly 432 square kilometers. According to the 2006 census, it has a population of 113,951<sup>2</sup>. Like other Yoruba towns in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the economy of Ise-Ekiti revolved around agriculture. As a matter of fact, it is the oldest production activity in the area. So involved were the people in agriculture that it was common to see people from the area move to other towns in Yorubaland in search of fertile land to practice the trade. Among the places, they moved to were Akure, Idanre and Ondo. Though food production was the focus of their agriculture, they also cultivated tree crops. Some of the tree crops they cultivated are cotton, oil palm tree and cocoa<sup>3</sup>. While oil palm tree and cotton are indigenous to Nigeria, cocoa came from outside Nigeria. It came with British colonial enterprise<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that cocoa and other trees crops like oil palm tree, and cotton which the British found very relevant to their economic well being were also called cash crops<sup>5</sup>. These crops, it is worthy to note, brought some changes to the agricultural life of the different Nigerian communities. More shall be said on this in respect of Ise-Ekiti later. But suffice it to say that it was so because the British favoured cash crops and gave the cultivation every encouragement.

The point being made is that the coming of the British to the area that later became Nigeria was for their own good. In the course of working for their (i.e. the British) own good, the scheme of things in Nigerian communities got affected. It could not have been to the contrary because the afore-mentioned encouragement that was given the cultivation of cash

crops made them priority crops. One of the manifestations was the adverse effect it had on food production. This was so because the British colonisers cared little, if at all they did, how the colonised fared as far as feeding was concerned. As a matter of fact, the British had as its primary agricultural objective the optimum production of cash crops<sup>6</sup>. This should not surprise anyone because, colonial rule, by its nature, is not meant to benefit the colonised<sup>7</sup>. Fredrick Lugard, a key player in the colonial enterprise in Nigeria confirmed this in his comments thus: “European brains, capital and energy, have not been and never will be expended in developing the resources of Africa: that Europe is in Africa is for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes”<sup>8</sup>.

It may be necessary to point out that the British encouraged the cultivation of each of the cash crops in areas where they would produce optimally. For instance, though ground nut could grow in the southeastern part of the country, the British overlooked them and encouraged it in the defunct Northern Nigeria because the yield from the southeast was nothing compared to what was got from the North. In the same vein, while it is not in doubt that cocoa can grow in both the defunct Eastern and Western Regions, it is a fact that it does better in the latter. As a matter of fact, the East was the first place cocoa was tried out in Nigeria. The region, however, lost to the defunct Western Region because the ecological conditions of the West were more favourable to the crop<sup>9</sup>. Thus, cocoa became the major cash crop for the defunct Western Region. From Lagos, where it did thrive after it failed in Calabar and Bonny, the knowledge of cocoa cultivation spread to other parts of Yorubaland. One of the areas it spread to was Ise-Ekiti, the highest cocoa producing area in Ekiti State. The paper is divided

into five sections viz: introduction, cocoa in Ise-Ekiti, challenges facing cocoa production in Ise-Ekiti, impact of cocoa on Ise-Ekiti and conclusion.

### **Cocoa in Ise-Ekiti**

*Theobroma cocoa* is the botanical name of the plant popularly called cocoa. The plant, it is necessary to note, is known as ‘cacao’ while the fruit is called cocoa. The tree is usually between six (6) and ten (10) metres tall. The word, ‘theobroma’ is derived from Greek and it means “food of the gods”<sup>10</sup>. The exact date of introduction of cocoa into Ise-Ekiti is not known. What is clear to the people is that it came in the early years of the twentieth century. How it came into the town is also not known. This explains why Idowu posited that it must have been through one of the three sources suggested by her study. One of the three possible sources is linked to Ise-Ekiti indigenes who migrated to Akure, Idanre and Ondo for farming and the tapping of palm wine. These were said to have come in contact with cocoa while there and decided to bring it home. Another possible source, according to the account, has to do with the indigenes of Ise-Ekiti who were trading in places like Ilesha, Ibadan and Abeokuta. Like the first group, they equally came in contact with the crop while there and decided to introduce it to their people in Ise-Ekiti. Finally, is the possibility that Ise-Ekiti indigenes who got converted to Christianity introduced the crop to the town<sup>11</sup>.

However, the paper holds the view that while it may not be possible to know which of the three afore-mentioned possible sources introduced cocoa into Ise-Ekiti, it is not impossible that each of those three sources had a hand in popularizing the crop among the people. The reason for this position is given below and it revolves around the spirit prevalent in Ise-

Ekiti at that time. According to Idowu, the indigenes of Ise-Ekiti who moved to other Yoruba towns did not do that because they had issues with the town. Rather, it was in search of greener pastures and they did visit home from time to time<sup>12</sup>. Put in another way, the love of the town was there. If the love of the town was there, it means they would not hesitate to do what would benefit the town. The research of Oyewale shows that Christian missionaries and converts, and Yoruba people living outside their hometowns helped a lot in spreading the knowledge of cocoa into the hinterland of Yorubaland. According to this study, while preaching the Bible, the missionaries also encouraged the converts to take to cocoa farming. In respect of the traders, he said their desire to develop their home communities made them to encourage their people to take to cocoa farming<sup>13</sup>.

The reason for the encouragement given cocoa cultivation as seen above derives from the fact that from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth century, cocoa was a tool of economic upliftment for Nigerians. According to Agboola, the benefits accruable to those who took to cocoa farming greatly aided the spread of the knowledge of cocoa farming further into the hinterland. It was also because of the benefits in cocoa farming that Christian missionaries encouraged their converts to take to it<sup>14</sup>. If from the last years of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth century cocoa had become of high economic value as seen above, it is very probable that Ise-Ekiti indigenes living in other towns in Yorubaland and the ones who had converted to Christianity would not lag behind in propagating the crop in their town. One cannot but see it that way when it is realised that some of

the towns they lived in – Ilesha, Ibadan, Abeokuta and Ondo- were among the places from where the knowledge of cocoa spread further inland<sup>15</sup>.

There is no doubt that the efforts of the three groups really bore fruit because the people of Ise-Ekiti embraced their message. Starting from the existing farms at the initial stage, they moved to forests hitherto unused which were cleared for the crop. It is noteworthy that they made use of their traditional implements. These are cutlasses for clearing the bush, weeding and trimming the cocoa tree, axe for felling trees and hoes for making heaps and weeding<sup>16</sup>. What aided the enthusiasm of the people was the ecological condition of the area. Ise-Ekiti is said to be blessed with “deep, fertile and well-aerated loamy soil, which is able to retain moisture during the dry season”<sup>17</sup>. This soil type is said to be very conducive to cocoa farming. As a matter of fact, the efforts of the people were successful. So successful were they that in the 1940s, some of their indigenes who had travelled out in search of greener pastures came back home to take up cocoa farming. Some of them were late Pa Joseph Idowu, Baba Otun, Baba Fagba and Late Pa Coker<sup>18</sup>.

It is important to point out at this point that cocoa farming brought some changes to the agricultural life of Ise-Ekiti people. One of the changes is that the focus of agriculture in the area which was formerly on food production changed to that of cocoa, one of the cash crops in Nigeria<sup>19</sup>. This was so because of the encouragement the British colonialists gave the production of cocoa and other cash crops. Given the importance of these cash crops to the economic well-being of Britain (this has been discussed in an earlier section of this paper), the colonialists went a step further to establish experimental and research institutes for them. The essence of the

institutes was for them to come up with ideas that would make the crops more productive. It is worthy to note that the institutes helped the British to bring up new varieties of the crops<sup>20</sup>. For cocoa, there was a Botanical Station in Ebute-Metta, Lagos, and it “facilitated the distribution of cocoa seeds to adjacent districts as from 1893”<sup>21</sup>.

People of Ise-Ekiti got drawn to cocoa farming because they saw cocoa farmers as being more prosperous than those who remained in the cultivation of food crops. The prosperity stemmed from the fact that there was an ever increasing demand for cocoa in the international market. Such was this demand that cocoa became probably the most profitable cash crop in colonial Nigeria. As a matter of fact, earnings from cocoa constituted a substantial percentage of the colonial government’s development expenditure<sup>22</sup>. The success that attended the efforts of the cocoa farmers brought about another change in the agricultural life of the people. This has to do with the fact that success of those cocoa farmers made them to devote more of their farmland to cocoa farming. As a result of their preference for cocoa farming, the farmers devoted more of their farmlands to cocoa cultivation. Such was the interest in cocoa that they went as far as clearing forests that had hitherto remained untouched<sup>23</sup>.

### **Challenges Facing Cocoa Production in Ise-Ekiti**

So far, we have seen that cocoa farming flourished in Ise-Ekiti especially in the pre-colonial period and early years of independence. Such was the flourishing that the area came to be leading in cocoa production in Ekiti State. Nevertheless, this should not be construed to mean that

everything has been well with cocoa farming ever since. As time went on, some issues that did impair cocoa farming crept in. One of them has to do with the discouraging attitude of government towards agriculture. It may be necessary to state here that this is a post civil war malaise. Before the afore-mentioned time, the country was highly dependent on earnings from agricultural exports. As a matter of fact, Nigeria was the second largest exporter of cocoa in the world<sup>24</sup>. But from the early 1970s when petroleum took over from agriculture as the country's main revenue earner, agriculture was relegated to the background. This ugly situation discouraged people from taking to agriculture. In Ise-Ekiti, the situation was not different in respect of cocoa farming as the study done by Idowu has shown<sup>25</sup>. It will be recalled that the people embraced cocoa farming because of the immense economic benefits they derived from it.

Another issue relates to the rural – urban migration. This is caused by the absence of basic amenities like pipe borne water, regular electricity, good healthcare facility, all season road etc. The absence of these facilities made people, especially youths, to prefer residing in the urban centres, and coming home once in a while. Added to it is the penchant for white collar job by the youths. In some cases, they want to leave the shores of Nigeria for countries of Europe, America and Asia. According to Idowu, virtually all her interviewees are exasperated about the situation. This has made cocoa farming to be an affair of the retirees and other elderly groups in the society. The result has been reduced production of cocoa<sup>26</sup>.

Mention must also be made of the low level of education of cocoa farmers. When cocoa was introduced into Ise-Ekiti western education was alien to the people. However, when the community embraced western

education, it did not benefit cocoa farming much because those who benefitted from western education looked in directions other than cocoa farming. This means that cocoa farming continued to be largely in the hands of the illiterates and not too educated. The implication of this is that some simple techniques needed in cocoa farming, application instructions in respect of chemicals, processes of producing quality cocoa among others which are taught the farmers are most of the time not assimilated because of their low level of education<sup>27</sup>.

Finally, there is the issue of funds. The farmers are prevented from acquiring more farmlands, procuring the needed farm in-puts and hiring the required number of labour by paucity of funds. This is because they are usually not able to meet the collateral requirements of banks. The fate of the farmers is also what confronts those who procure the cocoa seeds from the farmers. These are the Pan-Buyers and the Licensed Buying Agents (LBAs). The corollary of the above is that the quantity these buyers would buy gets reduced. As it is reduced, so also the revenue that accrues to the farmers get reduced. There is also the case of complaint by some of the farmers that they are usually shortchanged by the weighing instrument used by the buyers<sup>28</sup>. The summary of what they are saying is that that is another avenue through which their revenue base gets reduced.

From the foregoing, it is clear that cocoa farming in Ise-Ekiti has not been without some hiccups. That notwithstanding, it has not made the area to stop cocoa farming but it has reduced the output from the area.

### **Impact of cocoa on Ise-Ekiti**

Notwithstanding the challenges that have confronted cocoa farming in the study area, it did make significant contributions to the town. One of

them is employment. We have shown that people in the study area were drawn to cocoa farming because those who were in it before them were doing well. Such was the prosperity of the indigenes who were into cocoa farming that those of them who had gone to other Yoruba towns in search of greener pastures came back home to take up cocoa farming. In essence, cocoa farming offered Ise-Ekiti indigenes a worthwhile employment. Apart from employment as farmers, cocoa equally offered the people employment as Store-keepers, Pan-Buyers, Licensed Buying Agents and transporters<sup>29</sup>.

Closely related to the above is that cocoa made people of Ise-Ekiti to be financially buoyant. This is because it increased the sources of revenue available to them. It is noteworthy that some teachers and other public servants who were resident in Ise-Ekiti went into cocoa farming on part-time basis. Some of them are non indigenes. A good example is a man from Osan-Ekiti, in Moba Local Government Area, Mr. Adeleke. He taught and level in the area and is now retired. Vulnerable members of the society – women, widows and retirees – also find in cocoa farming immense benefits. Among them are Mrs. Rachael Ayodele (widow) Mrs. Ajayi Folake (retiree) and Mrs. Grace Alayo (cocoa farmer). In their interviews with Yinka Idowu, they all attested to how cocoa has been of immense help to them<sup>30</sup>.

Mention must also be made of the what cocoa did in helping Ise-Ekiti produce people of substance in various professions – medicine, law, engineering and education. This is because it was with the proceeds from cocoa business that the education of those people was funded. Some of the prominent people in question are professors L.B. Kolawole (former Vice Chancellor, Federal University of Agriculture, Akure, Ondo State) and I.O. Agbede, Hon. Z.B. Olokesusi, a retired Principal and Barrister Owoseni

Ajayi, a former Attorney – General and Commissioner for Justice, Ekiti State<sup>31</sup>.

Another impact of cocoa on Ise-Ekiti is that it has made the town to be one of the areas the government of the defunct Western Region looked up to for internally generated revenue. This was when agriculture was the main stay of the economy of the country. Even now, the situation has not changed as per being a revenue earner, though the amount derived from them may be smaller than it was then.

Finally, there is also the issue of Ise-Ekiti attracting people from other parts of Ekitiland, other part of Yorubaland and people from other ethnic groups. Ordinarily, this is not a big deal. However, when one considers the fact that the area lacks basic amenities which is why cocoa farming is in the hands of retirees and other elderly groups, it becomes an issue. These people came there because of cocoa business. Some of them were born and bred in the town as Mr. Joseph Idowu, an indigene of Osi-Ekiti informed<sup>32</sup>. The same is true of Mr. Adeleke, from Osan-Ekiti mentioned earlier in his own case, he gave birth to all his children there and two of his daughters are married to Ise-Ekiti men. Some of them are from Oyo, Ondo and Osun States while those from other ethnic groups are of Igala, Idoma, Ebira etc ethnic groups. These groups have lived long in Ise-Ekiti that they now have sections in the town where they dominate. For instance, 'Aba Temidire' and 'AbaIdi-Osan' are mainly occupied by indigenes of Osan-Ekiti, 'Oko Oyo' is mainly occupied by people from Oyo and Osun States<sup>33</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

What we have done in this paper is to show that the introduction of cocoa brought about change as well as continuity in the agricultural life of

Ise-Ekiti people. The ‘change’ it brought about can be seen in the relegation of food crop production to the background by it, the clearing of hitherto untouched forests for it and the turn around it brought to the fortunes of the town and its people as seen under the impact it has on the town. However, the change was not wholesale because aspects of their agricultural life were continued. Finally, it will serve the community and Nigeria as a whole well if agriculture is given due attention. By so doing, unemployment will be reduced, and a number of negative things happening in the country will be checkmated.

### **Notes and References**

1. There are thirty-six (36) States in Nigeria and Ekiti State is one of them. The State (Ekiti), in turn, has sixteen (16) Local Government Areas.
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3. Ibid p. 1
4. S.A. Agboola, “Agricultural Changes in Western Nigeria, 1850 – 1910” In I.A. Akinjogbon and S.O. Osoba (eds); *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History*, Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1980, pp. 135 – 137.
5. This refers to a crop produced or formerly produced for export. They are not all tree crops as the case of groundnut, a legume, which was among the forest products the British looked for.
6. P.C. Njoku; “Changes in Food Items, Feeding Patterns and Food Crop Production in Mbaise Area of Igbo land from the Eve of Colonial Rule

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  9. S.A. Agboola, “Agricultural Changes in Western Nigeria, 1850 – 1910” in I.A. Akinjogbon and S.O. Osoba (eds.); *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History* ....p. 135.
  10. E.Y. Idowu; “Cocoa Production and Marketing in Ise-Ekiti, 1970 – 2010”...p. 2
  11. Ibid p. 34
  12. Ibid. p. 4
  13. P.O. Oyawale, “A History of Cocoa Production in South West Nigeria 1890 – 1980”, P.h.D Thesis, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, 2017 pp. 45 – 47
  14. S.A. Agboola, “Agricultural Changes in Western Nigeria, 1950 – 1910” in I.A. Akinjogbon and S.O. Osoba (eds.).....135 & 136

15. Ibid p. 135
16. E.Y. Idowu, “Cocoa Production and Marketing in Ise-Ekiti, 1970 – 2010”....p. 27
17. Ibid p. 27
18. Ibid p. 35
19. Ibid
20. P.C. Njoku; “Changes in Food Items, Feeding Patterns and Food Crop Production...” P. 36
21. S.A. Agboola, “Agricultural Changes in Western Nigeria, 1850 – 1910” pp. 135
22. Ibid
23. Ibid pp. 3-4
24. A Kirk-Greene and D. Rimmer; *Nigeria Since 1970: A Political and Economic Outline*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981 pp. 70 and 74.
25. E.Y. Idowu; “Cocoa Production and Marketing.....” p. 42
26. Ibid pp. 42 and 48
27. Ibid p. 48
28. Ibid 54 – 55
29. Ibid pp 63 – 64
30. Ibid pp 41 – 43
31. Ibid pp. 64 – 65
32. J.S. Idowu, 56 yrs, Staff of Health Department, Ikere Local Government Area 24/04/2020. His views were corroborated by Dr. C.A. Oluwasanmi, College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti and Mrs. C.

Oladepo, an indigene of Isan-Ekiti Staff of Ikere-Ekiti Local Government Area.

33. E.Y. Idowu; “Cocoa Production and Marketing.....” pp. 43 – 44