

The dynamics of indigenous farming in western Nigeria from the 1850s to the 1920s*

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Abstract

This paper highlights changes in the agricultural economy of western Nigeria between the 1850s and the 1920s, a period that witnessed the transition from indigenous rule to British colonial rule. It focuses on differential access to land, types of agricultural labour, the size of individual farm plots, and the type and destination of farm produce. Examining farm sizes in the indigenous agricultural system of western Nigeria, the paper demonstrates that continuity and contrasts in agricultural practice in the era of indigenous rule and under colonial domination may be explained by changes in the political economy, and the cost of, and access to, land and labour. These changes also accounted for the steady reduction in the average farm size since the pre-colonial period.

During the opening decade of the twentieth century, a major debate took place in official and business circles in British West Africa about the desirability of establishing European-style and expatriate-owned plantations in the region. One prominent advocate of the idea was William Hesketh Lever, founder of Lever Brothers, a major player in the palm produce export business between West Africa and the United Kingdom.¹ The debate was finally decided against Lever and his supporters by Nigeria's colonial governor, Hugh Clifford, who declared his preference for peasant, smallholder agricultural practice. Clifford stated *inter alia* that

though many of [the plantations] ... have proved enormously successful under European management, they always remain and must continue to be *exotic and artificial creations*, with which the indigenous population has little connection.²

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¹ K. Dike Nworah, 'The Politics of Lever's West African Concessions, 1907–1913', *International J. African Historical Studies* 5 (1972), pp. 248–64.

² National Archives of Nigeria, Ibadan (NAI), CSO 1/32/53, Hugh Clifford to Lord Milner, dispatch 408, 29 May 1920. Italics added for emphasis. A study of

However, one of Clifford's successors contended that his argument in favour of the 'efficiency in production' of peasant production as against the plantation system had been 'exaggerated'.³ That said, Clifford's decision was a milestone in official policy and in the agricultural history of colonial Nigeria.⁴

The literature on the agricultural history of Nigeria and, specifically, western Nigeria, the homeland of the Yoruba (see Map 1), has dwelt largely on agricultural policies, the introduction of new crops, labour and entrepreneurship in the sector.⁵ While some studies have focused on particular communities Ibadan and Ijaye in particular,⁶ Hopkins and Agboola examined agricultural changes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but with respective emphases on innovations in the colonial context and the introduction of exotic crops during the transition from indigenous to British colonial rule. This essay takes an alternative approach. It situates the subject in the twin contexts of the political economy and ecology of western Nigeria between the 1850s and the 1920s.⁷ It calls attention to the overarching political economy of slaveholding, subsistence farming and empire-building during the pre-colonial period, and modernization and export crop production during the colonial period. In the latter context, the discussion engages the diversity of the ecology, ranging from forest and swamp to the savanna. It thus differs from existing studies by covering the two epochs, instead of treating them separately, highlighting both changes and continuity in farm sizes, labour and agricultural practices across time and space.⁸

Note 2 continued

plantation agriculture in Nigeria is R. K. Udo, 'Sixty years of plantation agriculture in southern Nigeria, 1902–62', *Economic Geog.* 41 (1965), pp. 356–68.

³ NAI, CSO 1/34/44, Confidential 'B', Bernard Bourdillon to MacDonald, 5 Apr. 1939.

⁴ Udo, 'Sixty years of plantation agriculture'; Tom Forrest, 'Agricultural policies in Nigeria, 1900–78', in J. Heyer, P. Roberts and G. Williams (eds), *Rural development in tropical Africa* (1981), pp. 222–58; Ayodeji Olukoj, 'The Faulkner "Blueprint" and the evolution of agricultural policy in inter-war colonial Nigeria', in Adebayo Oyeade (ed.), *The foundations of Nigeria: Essays in honor of Toyin Falola* (2003), pp. 403–22.

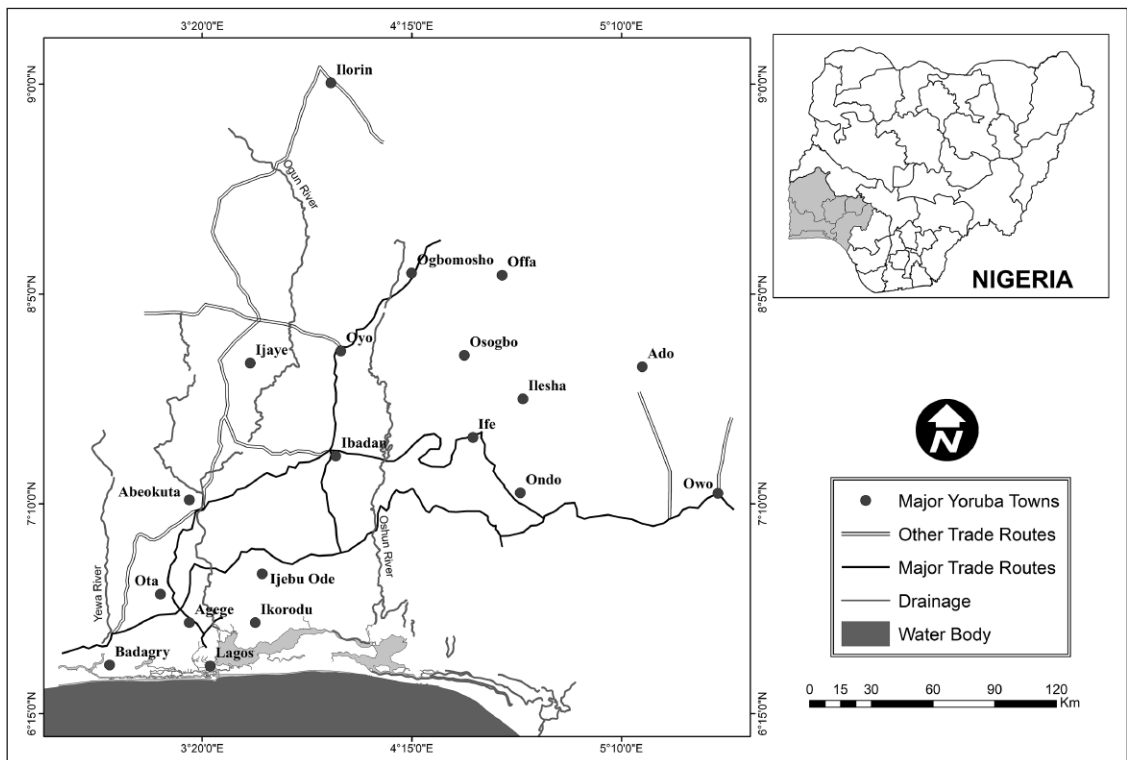
⁵ S. A. Agboola, 'Agricultural changes in western Nigeria, 1850–1910', in I. A. Akinjogbin and S. O. Osoba (eds), *Topics on Nigerian economic and social history* (1980), pp. 128–45; A. G. Hopkins, 'Innovation in a colonial context: African origins of the Nigerian Cocoa-farming industry, 1880–1920', in Clive Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (eds), *The imperial impact: Studies in the economic history of Africa and India* (1978), pp. 83–96; and B. A. Agiri, 'The development of wage labour in agriculture in southern Yorubaland, 1900–1940', *J. Historical Soc. Nigeria* 12 (1983–84), pp. 95–107.

⁶ Bolanle Awe, 'Militarism and economic development in nineteenth-century Yoruba country: The

Ibadan example', *J. African Hist.* 14 (1973), pp. 65–77; Toyin Falola, *The political economy of a pre-colonial African state: Ibadan, 1830–1900* (1984) and id., 'The construction and destruction of the economy of Ijaye, c.1832–1862', *Afrika und Uebersee* 74 (1991), pp. 21–37.

⁷ Julian Clarke, 'Households and the political economy of small-scale cash crop production in south-western Nigeria', *Africa* 51 (1981), pp. 807–23, is a study of the political economy of small-scale farming in a south-central Yoruba community in the 1970s.

⁸ A recent study of African agriculture over the long durée is Vibeke Bjornlund, Henning Bjornlund and Andre F. Van Rooyen, 'Why agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa remains low compared to the rest of the world – a historical perspective', *International J. Water Resources Development* 36 (2020), pp. S20–S53. An illuminating study of indigenous farming practices in Nigeria is N. O. Adedipe, P. A. Okuneye and I. A. Ayinde, 'The relevance of local and indigenous knowledge for Nigerian agriculture', paper presented at the International conference on bridging scales and epistemologies: Linking local knowledge with global science in multi-scale assessments, Alexandria, Egypt, 16–19 Mar. 2004, www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/bridging/papers/adedipe.nimbe.pdf, accessed on 26 Feb. 2021.



MAP 1. Olukoju Map of Yorubaland, 1850s–1950s

It contests the underlying assumption in Clifford's assertion that plantation-style, extensive farming was 'exotic' or 'artificial' in the Nigerian context. This erroneous view has been echoed by Agboola, who claimed that 'the plantation idea was alien to Yoruba agriculture'.⁹ This is debunked in this paper by copious references to contemporary evidence for the existence of extensive servile and free labour-run nineteenth-century farm settlements belonging to Yoruba warlords in Ibadan and Ijaye. To be sure, the family farm or smallholder farm has been the dominant feature of west African agriculture. Toulmin and Guèye have stated that 'farming in West Africa remains overwhelmingly in the hands of smallholders'.¹⁰ 'West Africa,' they noted, 'exhibits a diverse array of family farms, in terms of size, assets, market orientation, income, diversification of activities, reliance on migrants' earnings and vulnerability to risk'.¹¹ This is exemplified by agricultural practice in colonial Gambia (contemporaneous with our case study), where, in most places, 'farmers cultivated peanuts on small-scale farms ... by hand (konko) ... with remarkable success'. Yet, a British official noted in the 1890s that, at Kombo on the Gambian South Bank, 'the farms were especially large and they were in good condition'.¹² However, Thapa

⁹ Agboola, 'Agricultural changes', p. 136.

¹⁰ Camilla Toulmin and Bara Guèye, 'Is there a future for family farming in west Africa?', *IDS Bulletin* 36 (2005), p. 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² Assan Sarr, 'Gender, spirituality, and economic change in rural Gambia: agricultural production in the lower Gambia region, c.1830s–1940s', *African Economic Hist.* 45 (2017), pp. 7–8.

has pointed out that though 'small farms' or 'family farms' were defined in various ways, 'many sources define small farms as those with less than 2 hectares of cropland'.¹³ That said, this paper argues with examples from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century western Nigeria that indigenous extensive farming (plot sizes of ten or more hectares, though not necessarily patterned after European-style plantation agriculture) was practised by the military aristocracy of the nineteenth century and some of the Western-educated African elite of colonial Lagos in different politico-economic settings. It highlights changes – and their implications – in access to land, labour mobilization and exploitation, and the linkage of agriculture with warfare and the political economy in one context and social mobility in the other.

Preferring 'extensive' agriculture to the somewhat problematic concept of 'plantation agriculture', this article analyses indigenous extensive farming (involving single farms of several acres of cultivated land as contrasted with the household smallholder, multiple subsistence plots) by the indigenous Yoruba elite in Ibadan and Ijaye¹⁴ and compares their agricultural practice with a successor generation of the Anglo-African, Christian mission-influenced elite of Lagos¹⁵ in two defining epochs, the 1850s to 1893 and the late 1890s to the 1920s, respectively. This longitudinal comparative analysis of agricultural practice, land use, capital and labour mobilization in western Nigeria in two distinct sociopolitical and economic settings across a century is a major departure from the dominant preoccupation in the literature with microstudies of export crop production and marketing, labour, agricultural policy and entrepreneurship.¹⁶ It also explains the apparent lack of continuity of indigenous extensive agriculture in the region.

The discussion is organized around the interlocking issues of context (pre-colonial warfare and early British colonial rule), access to land (by military conquest and inheritance, and colonial-era alienation), labour (servile/unfree, wage, household), output (foodstuff versus cash crop), marketing outlets (local and indigenous versus imperial/global), household subsistence versus market consumption of produce, and diverse farming practices.

The analysis is based on archival material and contemporary eye-witness accounts and secondary source material. Fragmentary data on population, labour, land values and agricultural output, which indicate changes in the agricultural economy, have been collected from the accounts of missionaries and colonial officials between the 1850s and 1920s. The paper is spiced with life histories and case studies of prominent entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector of western Nigeria, ranging from the Ibadan and Ijaye-based Yoruba warlords of the early and mid-nineteenth century, to the likes of J. P. L. Davies and J. K. Coker of Victorian Lagos.

¹³ G. Thapa, *Smallholder farming in transforming economies of Asia and the Pacific: challenges and opportunities* (2009), p. 6. Garner and Compos however note that 'references to size often mean either the size of landholdings or its market position with respect to larger commercial farms'. See Elizabeth Garner and Ana Paula de la O Campos, *Identifying the 'farm': An informal discussion of the concepts and definitions*, ESA Working Paper 14-10 (2014), p. 7.

¹⁴ Awe, 'Militarism'; Falola, *Political economy*; and Falola, 'Construction and destruction'.

¹⁵ Hopkins, 'Innovation in a colonial context'; and

Ade Adefuye, 'John, Gershion and Joshua Ricketts: Jamaican contribution to the socio-economic development of the Colony province', in G. O. Olusanya (ed.), *Studies in Yoruba history and culture: Essays in honour of Professor S. O. Biobaku* (1983), pp. 135–52.

¹⁶ Sara Berry, 'The concept of innovation and the history of cocoa farming in western Nigeria', *J. African Hist.* 15 (1974), pp. 83–95; Sara Berry, *Cocoa, custom and socio-economic change in rural western Nigeria* (1975); Forrest, 'Agricultural policies' and Olukoju, "'Faulkner Blueprint'".

In effect, the article demonstrates that there was more to indigenous agriculture than the idealized, small plot, subsistence farmer. It derives valuable insights from the internal dynamics – factor allocations of land, labour and income, food processing and value addition – and impact of indigenous extensive farming in two successive temporal and politico-economic contexts. Critical to this is indigenous initiative or agency in changing the sociopolitical and economic milieu of the 1850s to the 1920s.¹⁷

I

The nineteenth century was possibly the most active period of indigenous warfare and state-building in western Nigeria, homeland of the Yoruba. The century began with the collapse of the Old Oyo Empire, a pre-modern state that straddled the modern states of Nigeria and Benin at its height in the early eighteenth century. However, internal crises and pressure from the emergent Sokoto Caliphate led to its dissolution by 1817.¹⁸ Three interwoven processes – warfare, population displacements and state-building – followed, leading to the rise of the successor states of Ibadan and Ijaye (from Old Oyo), on the one hand, and the rump of Old Oyo centred just north of Ibadan and the non-Oyo Yoruba States of Abeokuta, Ijebu and the Ekiti Parapo Confederacy. These processes had serious implications for economic activities, especially crafts, agriculture and commerce, which required varying degrees of settled life and sedentarization. More importantly, these activities, including stable human settlement, peace and security, underpinned the political economy of the Yoruba States. Given the pre-industrial or agrarian setting in which these developments took place, agriculture was key to military and political power. As we shall see, it demanded the control of land, labour mobilization and policing. Case studies of Ibadan and Ijaye, where warlords built their power on an increasing number of military retainers, who needed to be provisioned, illustrate the necessity for and practice of extensive agriculture between the 1850s and the 1890s.

In the meantime, it is important to historicize and contextualize agricultural practice in western Nigeria as it had developed by the 1850s. The following general features can be highlighted. There was an ecological divide between the forest and savanna belts of Yorubaland, each with its peculiar features. It has been asserted, for example, that ‘large farms were usual in the savannah’.¹⁹ This contrasted with the smaller average sizes of farms in the forest zone, where the rudimentary farming implements apparently limited the extent of bush clearing for extensive cultivation. Agboola remarked, with reference to Ilesa, Idanre and Ondo in eastern Yorubaland, that ‘despite the use of slave labour, farms were generally and understandably of smaller sizes than in the savannah zone’.²⁰

Yam was the dominant crop in both ecological zones of western Nigeria well before the 1850s.²¹ Ibadan ‘chiefs and head-warriors’ reportedly had ‘large farms for yams in the 1850s’.²²

¹⁷ An illuminating analysis of African agency as a historical concept is provided in Lynn Thomas, ‘Historicizing Agency’, *Gender and Hist.* 28 (2016), pp. 324–39.

¹⁸ See I. A. Akinjogbin (ed.), *War and peace in Yorubaland, 1796–1886* (1998).

¹⁹ Agboola, ‘Agricultural changes’, p. 130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

However, there were co-staples in the respective zones – guinea corn, maize, beans, cotton, tobacco and vegetables – in addition to tree crops – kolanuts, locust bean, coconuts, plantains, bananas and the oil palm – which yielded edible oil, kernels, palm wine and emollients. The combination of the co-staples varied with the ecological divide of the region. According to contemporary observers during the 1850s, while guinea corn was the co-staple of yam in the savanna, its place was taken by maize in the forest zone.²³

The agricultural economy of western Nigeria was complex and diverse. This, coupled with the antiquity and vibrancy of the arts and craft industry, local markets and long distance trade, meant that by the mid-nineteenth century, it was ‘a peasant agricultural economy rather than a purely subsistence one’.²⁴

Previous biographical and state-centred studies of Ibadan and Ijaye, and eye-witness accounts by European missionaries provide the data for analyzing agricultural practice in the context of warfare and state-building during this period.²⁵ The Ijaye and Ibadan warlords, and the notable woman entrepreneur, Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, established large farms which fed their extensive households and military retainers. At Efunsetan’s death in 1874, she had three large farms, each of which contained a hundred slaves, who planted yams, corn and vegetables.²⁶ A striking praise name (*oriki*) of Ibikunle, the Ibadan supreme ruler in the 1850s, was ‘owner of farm land at Ogbera ... [and another] at Odo-Ona, A wide expanse of farm land, extensive as far as the city wall at Adesegun’.²⁷ Henry Townsend, a visiting British missionary, asserted that *Aare* Kurunmi, supreme ruler of Ijaye, alone had large farms of some 100 acres in size.²⁸ A report by S. H. Clarke, another contemporary missionary, stated that Ijaye farms covered ten to twelve miles beyond the city walls. It took Clarke an hour-long horse ride to traverse the farmlands which stretched towards the Upper Ogun River.²⁹ Long after he left the locality, he referred wistfully to ‘the rich and luxuriant farms of Ijaye’.³⁰ The farms produced yam, corn, palm oil, vegetables and fruits for domestic consumption, and export to Ibadan and Abeokuta.

Making allowance for slight differences, we can identify the following features of the extensive farming of this era. The farms were larger than the usual household plot. A European missionary observed in 1851 the presence of kolanut groves occupying several hectares fortified with mud walls and owned by Ibadan military chiefs.³¹ The missionary Townsend reported that Ibadan’s supreme chief in 1850 – either Oderinlo (1847–50) or Ope Agbe (1850–51) – had a farm ‘as large as 100 acres’ near the city in which maize, guinea corn and yams were planted.³² Another missionary, David Hinderer, observed that Ibadan chiefs and top military leaders owned extensive yam farms during the 1850s.³³ Farms located outside the city walls, known as *oko egan*, were generally extensive. Awe stated that some *oko egan* had 600 (or even more) slaves working on them, a clear indication of their large size.³⁴ Clarke noted this trend at Ilorin

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁵ Awe, ‘Militarism’; Falola, ‘Construction and destruction’.

²⁶ Details in Bolanle Awe, ‘Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold)’, in Bolanle Awe (ed.), *Nigerian women: A historical perspective* (2001), pp. 63–82.

²⁷ Awe, ‘Militarism’, p. 67, n. 4.

²⁸ Falola, ‘Construction and destruction’, p. 24.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ William H. Clarke, *Travels and explorations in Yorubaland, 1854–1858*, ed. J. A. Atanda (1972), p. 111.

³¹ Falola, *Political economy*, p. 91.

³² Ibid.

³³ Agboola, ‘Agricultural changes’, p. 130.

³⁴ Awe, ‘Militarism’, p. 69.

(a northern Yoruba metropolis that fell under Fulani rule), where he observed that seven or eight villages engaged in agriculture 'the property, no doubt, of wealthy men residing in the cities'.³⁵ He also spotted 'another farm village of considerable size situated in a fresh country still in a good state of cultivation, being the farms and plantations of Ilorin planters'.³⁶ A European eyewitness account of the vast holdings of one Braima near Ilorin in 1889 stated as follows:

For some miles ... our route lay through Braima's plantations. ... The farm covers a large tract of country, spreading far and wide over hill and dale. Now we pass through vast fields of lofty millet, and now through acres of yams. We ... descend into a deep valley, where we find ... a regular forest of bananas. ... Plantations of pepper and various spices are next passed through, and by the time we reach the limits of our host's domains, we have seen what can be done with land, in this part of Africa, by a man of enterprise.³⁷

The large size of the farms was attributed to the ease of clearance of farmlands in the savanna and the extensive exploitation of slave and captive labour.³⁸ In all, extensive farming – rather than intensive agriculture – was practised: 'farmlands were (simply) expanded to cope with increasing demands for food'.³⁹

From the 1850s, the farm settlements emerged as a pillar of agricultural production in Yorubaland. Mega city-states, such as Ibadan, Ijaye and Abeokuta, were encircled by rings of farm settlements (*abuleko* or *oko aba*), which were an average of fifteen to forty kilometers removed from the centre of the cities and towns, and inhabited by people from the main towns. Such farmsteads were noted by European visitors to the Yoruba heartland as early as the 1850s.⁴⁰ In 1891, Alvan Millson, an Assistant Colonial Secretary, informed a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society that Ibadan, which he described as 'The London of Negroland', with a population of some 200,000 persons, was '[s]urrounded by its farming villages, 163 in number'.⁴¹ Agiri noted that after 1878, Egba farm settlements had extended to Ota, 40 miles south of Abeokuta, and south-eastwards between Owode and Mokoloki, 25 and 40 miles, respectively, from Abeokuta. Similar forays were made westwards toward Ilaro.⁴² 'The establishment of the numerous farmsteads', Falola noted, 'was one of the most significant developments in the agricultural history of the post-1850 era' in Yorubaland.⁴³

These large farms employed slave labour in the main, as confirmed *inter alia* by our earlier reference to a single farm in Ibadan worked by 600 or more slaves. J. P. L. Davies, J. A. O. Payne, and Chief Abasi, notable Yoruba entrepreneurs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, testified before a colonial Commission on Trade in Lagos in 1898 that there were 'large plantations' or extensive farms which employed between 80 and 500 slaves in the vicinity of

³⁵ Clarke, *Travels and Explorations*, p. 86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³⁷ Captain A. F. Mockler-Ferryman, *Up the Niger* (1892), pp. 211–14, cited in Ann O'Hear, *Power relations in Nigeria: Ilorin slaves and their successors* (1997), p. 31.

³⁸ Agboola, 'Agricultural changes', p. 130.

³⁹ Falola, *Political Economy*, p. 88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴¹ Cited by Ruth Watson, 'Civil disorder is the disease of Ibadan': *Chieftaincy and civic culture in a Yoruba City* (2003), p. 5.

⁴² B. A. Agiri, 'Aspects of socio-economic changes among the Awori, Egba and Ijebu Remo communities during the nineteenth century', *J. Historical Soc. Nigeria* 7 (1974), p. 469.

⁴³ Falola, *Political economy*, p. 90.

Abeokuta, Badagry and Ijebu Ode.⁴⁴ Ownership of such farms was typical of the leading lights of nineteenth-century Ibadan military aristocracy – Ibikunle, Ogunmola, Latoosa and Akere.⁴⁵ Given the distance from the main towns of Ibadan and Ijaye, the farms also housed the slave labour employed on them. But household labour remained important, and not only for small peasant farmers. For, the civil and war chiefs (in Ibadan and elsewhere) deployed close kin and free-born supporters – in addition to slaves – in both fighting and farming during this period.⁴⁶ The chief or military leader was actually respected for the size of his household, comprising both the freeborn and servile members (slaves and pawns), that he could mobilize at will. According to Awe, slaves, mainly war captives, constituted ‘the bulk’ of a chief’s following. While ‘the best of them were recruited into his own private army ... [m]ost of the remaining slaves worked on his farms, and many Ibadan farms were indeed colonized entirely by these slaves’.⁴⁷ Near Ilorin, in the northern Yoruba savannah belt, agricultural slaves worked on the farms under the supervision of overseers (*alakoso*), selected for their loyalty to the owner.⁴⁸

The farms produced a variety of crops, mainly root crops (yam) and grains (corn and guinea corn). Varieties of yam and corn, the dominant foodcrops, were processed into various food items. Kolanut, which was consumed locally but was also in demand from northern Nigeria, was the dominant cash crop till the 1860s, when palm produce attained greater importance as a major item of international trade. In Ibadan, the supreme chief, Balogun Ogunmola, monopolized the production and sale of kolanuts up to his death in 1847. Subsequently, other leading chiefs in Ibadan took to kolanut production and trade in view of its high economic value.⁴⁹

The products of these farms exceeded domestic consumption.⁵⁰ They contributed to the local and distant market systems that served the fiscal and commercial aims of the State. Foodcrop production on these farms was accompanied by handicrafts such as cloth weaving (indigo planting), dyeing, basket and mat weaving. By implication, these farms were not simple or monocultural economic units. Men were dominant in number but women too were present in large numbers. Moreover, the production of commodities was also accompanied by human reproduction, which boosted the labour force.

Extensive farming in the pre-industrial and pre-colonial setting of nineteenth-century Yorubaland was founded on some common practices.⁵¹ It relied upon rudimentary farm implements – hoes and machetes. In addition, natural manure was hardly ever used as mixed

⁴⁴ TNA, CO 147/133, Denton to Chamberlain, 4 Jun. 1898, enc., ‘Evidence to the Commission on Trade’.

⁴⁵ Awe, ‘Militarism’, p. 70, n. 12.

⁴⁶ E. Adeniyi Oroge, ‘The institution of slavery in Yorubaland with particular reference to the nineteenth century’ (Unpubl. Ph.D Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1971), p. 158, asserted that a war chief’s reputation rested on his ability to ‘fight, farm and trade’. Cited in Awe, ‘Militarism’, p. 68.

⁴⁷ Awe, ‘Militarism’, p. 67.

⁴⁸ O’Hear, *Power relations*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Falola, *Political economy*, p. 91.

⁵⁰ J. E. Inikori, ‘The development of commercial agriculture in pre-colonial west Africa’, *African Economic History Working Paper Series* 9 (2013), p. 3, has explained that large-scale production of this type was ‘commercial agriculture’, as contrasted with large-scale farming undertaken with non-wage labour and designed to provision households and warriors, which was ‘subsistence’ agriculture, irrespective of the volume of production.

⁵¹ Discussed in Adedipe, Okuneye and Ayinde, ‘The relevance of local and indigenous knowledge’.

farming was barely practised. Cow dung could have served the purpose but cattle rearing was not sufficiently widespread. A notable exception was Efunsetan, who owned two cattle farms in the city of Ibadan managed by her Hausa slaves, though it is not clear whether she used the dung as manure on her extensive farms. In any event, the abundance of cultivable land and relative soil fertility in the region did not necessitate intensive farming, which would have required the use of fertilizers or manure.

Furthermore, rotational farming was the norm given the abundance of land. A corollary of extensive farming, it did not significantly improve agricultural practice. Moreover, there was no recourse to irrigation. However, farmers exploited swamp land (*akuro*) located along the banks of rivers and streams. Swamp farming sustained certain crops that could not be grown elsewhere, especially during the dry season.⁵² In addition, the range of crops was fairly wide, cutting across the seasons. But there is no record in the literature of experimentation with new or hybrid crops. However, some form of specialization was practised where the local ecology (such as swamps) permitted. For example, Alalubosa (place of onions) and Onireke (place of sugar cane) in Ibadan were named after crops which might have been predominant there.⁵³

Finally, insecurity – kidnapping and destruction of enemy farms, and population displacement in the wake of the fall of Ijaye – disrupted farming at different times. Ibadan farms were raided by its western adversaries (Ijebu and Egba) while the bulk of the army was busy on the eastern front. Between 1860 and 1865, Ibadan farmers abandoned their farms in the direction of Ijebuland and shifted their activities to more secure areas near Ijaye. Still, Ijebu and Egba kidnappers disrupted farming during the Kiriji War (1877–93) to such an extent that Ibadan experienced occasional outbreaks of famine.⁵⁴

In summary, the extensive agriculture of this period took place in the context of intermittent pre-colonial warfare; access to land by military conquest and inheritance; mobilization of household and slave labour; production of foodstuffs primarily for domestic consumption but also for local markets and even regional trade; reliance on indigenous credit facilities; and rudimentary farming practices. No major innovations were recorded in terms of land use, cropping or capital formation.

II

The military subjugation of the Ijebu Kingdom in 1892 and the conclusion of the peace treaties of 1893 formally ended the pre-colonial era of indigenous rule in Western Nigeria, and formalized British colonization. This introduced fundamental socio-economic changes which impacted on the political economy of the region.

First of all, colonial rule imposed a new regime of laws and political order, which substantially altered indigenous economic and sociopolitical systems. The impact of the relative

⁵² Falola, *Political economy*, p. 89. A similar trend has been observed in the Gambia: 'Prior to the expansion of cash crop farming, the most important rice farming communities were located close to the river and swamplands (locally known as faros). ... These

faros had fertile soils and a reliable source of good, fresh water'. See, Sarr, 'Gender, spirituality, and economic change in rural Gambia', p. 17.

⁵³ Awe, 'Militarism', p. 70.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6.

socio-political stability on agricultural activities occasioned by the imposition of British rule was attested the Governor of Lagos on a visit to the hinterland of Lagos in 1895:

I was much struck with the country I passed through ... to Ilaro; the land is undoubtedly very fertile and has on it quantities of the Oil Palm tree; in addition it is cultivated very extensively and produces large crops of maize, native beans, yams and other edibles ...⁵⁵

Second, labour relations were transformed by the abolition of the slave trade – though slavery persisted in some forms while debt peonage (*iwofa*) also allowed the continuation of non-waged labour. This had grave implications for erstwhile warlords and their slave-run farm settlements. In 1904, Aina, a leading farmer in Abeokuta, attributed the poor yield of cotton in the Egba Country to ‘three great disadvantages under which the cotton farmer laboured’. One of these was ‘a dearth of labour since the cessation of slavery, and paid labour was now both costly and difficult to obtain’.⁵⁶

Third, the introduction of modern currency, rail and road transport unleashed economic dynamics that expanded the scope of economic activities. Fourth, the introduction of cash cropping, and especially the cocoa export business, added a new dimension to farming in the hinterland of Lagos. Fifth, European missionaries and their African surrogates, and the returnees from the Atlantic Slave Diaspora added new human and material forces to the mix of economic and political dynamics. African missionaries, import and export traders, and professionals carved a niche for themselves in the emergent British colony. One of their initiatives was the establishment of extensive cocoa and citrus farms, especially in the immediate hinterland of Lagos. This was a new phase in extensive farming in western Nigeria.

Cocoa farming rapidly spread across south-central and eastern Yorubaland.⁵⁷ But, as Hopkins asserted, the ‘true pioneers’ of cocoa export industry ‘were Creole merchants from Lagos’.⁵⁸ Professor Ade Elebute, a notable surgeon and amateur historian, has commented on one of them, J. P. L. Davies, as follows: ‘He initiated a successful agricultural enterprise on the outskirts of Lagos, where he took the significantly innovative step of planting cocoa, a produce that bestowed a legacy of prosperity on many parts of south-west Nigeria’.⁵⁹ The pioneer cocoa planters differed in a number of respects from the nineteenth-century warlord-farmers discussed above. They did not wield military or political power and so were not focused on building or sustaining political entities. Indeed, their motive was primarily social and economic. Davies, the pioneer cocoa commercial farmer, was interested in making money from agriculture, after failing in commerce, in order to regain his social standing in Lagos.⁶⁰ In effect, their motives were not overtly political in the sense of state-building. Indeed, a later generation of cocoa growers outside Lagos who were drawn from the savanna fringes of the Yoruba country were also primarily interested in economic and social self-actualization in the face of the pressures and opportunities of the colonial political economy. They specialized in producing export

⁵⁵ NAI, CSO 1/1/15, George Denton to Joseph Chamberlain, 5 Oct. 1895.

⁵⁶ NAI, CSO 1/1/45, Report on Governor’s Visit to Cotton Districts, enclosed in Harley Mosely to Oliver Lyttelton, 30 Jan. 1904.

⁵⁷ Berry, *Cocoa, culture and socio-economic change*.

⁵⁸ Hopkins, ‘Innovation in a colonial context’, p. 88.

⁵⁹ Adeyemo Elebute, *The life of James Pinson Labulo Davies: A colossus of Victorian Lagos* (2013), p. 231.

⁶⁰ Hopkins, ‘Innovation in a colonial context’, p. 91.

crops – cocoa, in particular – rather than foodcrops for local consumption and to do so they depended on wage labour, which had cost implications for their operations. This supplemented household and cooperative labour (known as *owe* and *aaro*) in the Ibadan-Ife-Ondo ‘cocoa belt’ of the Yoruba hinterland. However, it appears that wage labour was not preponderant for as late as 1951–52, a survey revealed that members of cocoa farmers’ households supplied ‘over half the labour time expended on the farms’.⁶¹ But it is necessary to emphasize, as Berry noted, that ‘hired labour’ had been employed ‘from the earliest years of cocoa cultivation’.⁶² Moreover, as farmers, they took advantage of the modern transport and currency systems, and new crops. They also adopted modern farming and accounting methods. Finally, though their farm sizes varied and probably did not surpass those of the previous century, their relative economic net worth was more considerable.⁶³ This may be attributed to the fact that cocoa farmers did not consume what they produced; that they produced for the external, rather than the internal, market; and that the valuation of their crop (cocoa) was much higher than the food crops of the previous era.

A significant dimension of the extensive farming of the early colonial period was the rapid increase in the number of cocoa planters – on the model of the Agege pioneers – in south central and eastern Yorubaland. This secondary wave of extensive farming (the stage of adoption), which had begun by 1920–21, was undertaken in a somewhat different economic and social ecology in eastern Yorubaland. The new crop of farmers rode on the wave of the philosophy of the ‘Bible and Plough’ which drove the expansion of Christianity into eastern Yorubaland.⁶⁴ The increasing popularity of cocoa farming and export trade drew on two main sources of new-generation farmers – demobilized Yoruba soldiers and migrants from the forest-savanna fringe of Yorubaland. The demobilization that colonial rule imposed on the warring Yoruba states unleashed a flood of former ‘war boys’, who found new opportunities in cocoa farming in the two decades after 1893. Berry noted that cocoa farming was embraced

most readily in Ibadan and Ilesha – the two principal belligerents in the Sixteen Years War. ... Just as the Agege planters turned to agriculture ... when their commercial ventures in Lagos suffered from depressed world market conditions, so many ex-soldiers in the interior fell back on farming to escape the economic consequences of the peace.⁶⁵

In addition, a large number of migrant farmers and labourers from the savanna fringes of northern Yorubaland surged into the Ife-Ondo cocoa belt from the 1920s but especially from

⁶¹ Sara S. Berry, ‘The concept of innovation and the history of cocoa farming in western Nigeria’, *J. African Hist.* 14 (1974), p. 90, citing R. Galletti, K. D. S. Baldwin and I. O. Dina, *Nigerian cocoa farmers* (1956), p. 668.

⁶² Berry, *Cocoa, culture and socio-economic change*, p. 130. See also Agiri, ‘The development of wage labour’.

⁶³ Hopkins, ‘Innovation in a colonial context’, p. 88, notes that Davies and Coker had 200 and 1,500 acres at Ijan and Agege, respectively. Jane Guyer, ‘Small change: Individual farm work and collective life in a western Nigerian savanna town, 1969–88’, *Africa* 62

(1992), p. 470 states that the ‘mid-size’ cocoa farm of the 1960s–80s was in the 40–80 acre range.

⁶⁴ J. B. Webster, ‘The bible and the plough’, *J. Historical Soc. Nigeria* 2 (1963), pp. 418–34; Hopkins, ‘Innovation in a colonial context’, p. 89; Charles Olutayo Adesina, ‘Modern agriculture in Nigeria: A historical exegesis’, *Benin J. Historical Stud.* 4 (2002–04), pp. 60–9.

⁶⁵ Berry, *Cocoa, custom and socio-economic change*, p. 53.

the 1940s.⁶⁶ It is worth noting that most of them began life as farm labourers but gradually raised capital to become farm owners themselves. Issues of tenancy were resolved within the context of indigenous Yoruba customs – such as by the payment of the *isakole*, a token form of land rent. Though initially nominal, *isakole* soon acquired greater significance in defining landlord-tenant relations in Ife and Ondo kingdoms in south central Yorubaland.⁶⁷ It is worth stressing, however, that the popularization of cocoa farming in the post-1920 phase was characterized by the fragmentation of farm plots, each farmer holding multiple but dispersed cocoa farms. By the 1950s, it has been noted, the average size of the cocoa farms in western Nigeria ranged between 1.4 and 2.5 hectares.⁶⁸

The challenges of access to land and labour mobilization were compounded by issues of access to capital and agricultural practice. Both are intertwined: cocoa farmers opted for extensive cultivation (rather than intensive exploitation of a limited area of land), which demanded labour and capital. As new areas were opened up to cocoa cultivation, new migrants gradually progressed, under the tutelage of more established ones, from migrant labour to farm owners.

In all, the indigenous large-scale farming of the first half of the twentieth century in the context of colonial rule was characterized by several significant developments. These included radical changes in access to land principally through colonial-era alienation and colonization of swathes of the forest belt of south central and eastern Yorubaland; deployment of household, cooperative and wage labour – ‘the use of market and non-market relationships’;⁶⁹ production of cash crops (cocoa and palm produce) for the overseas market and a variety of minor crops for the domestic market; utilization of indigenous (personal, family, networks) and modern credit institutions, and reliance on rudimentary farming practices. Mechanization and extension services were minimal, at best.⁷⁰ However, ploughs were employed in cotton cultivation in Abeokuta between the 1850s and 1870s, an innovation which ‘encouraged larger farms than was possible using traditional methods’.⁷¹ But this was not extended to cocoa farming. Indeed, Berry stated that, since all cocoa farmers, both large and small, employed the same tools and techniques, there were ‘no technical economics of scale in West African cocoa production’.⁷²

In the final analysis, a number of innovations characterized the agricultural practice of this period.⁷³ In terms of capital formation and land use, Berry has highlighted the economic value of ‘interplanting food crops with the young cocoa trees’.⁷⁴ She also noted that ‘the establishment of a new cocoa farm is an act of capital formation requiring the expenditure of productive resources over a period of several years before the farm begins to yield any output’.⁷⁵ The planting of cocoa in itself, the peculiarity of its planting, land and labour usage, and the

⁶⁶ Berry (ibid., p. 69) remarked that the ‘great majority’ of cocoa farmers in the Ife and Ondo villages in the 1960s had come from ‘the northern parts of Yorubaland’. They had been arriving since the early 1940s.

⁶⁷ Details in Berry, *Cocoa, custom and socio-economic change*, pp. 90–125.

⁶⁸ Adesina, ‘Modern agriculture’, p. 68.

⁶⁹ Berry, ‘The concept of innovation’, p. 90.

⁷⁰ The enterprise of two generations of the Ricketts

at Agbowo, on the eastern edge of the Lagos Colony provides an interesting exception. See Adefuye, ‘John, Gershion and Joshua Ricketts’.

⁷¹ Agboola, ‘Agricultural changes’, p. 143.

⁷² Berry, *Cocoa, culture and socio-economic change*, p. 181.

⁷³ See Agboola, ‘Agricultural changes’, for details.

⁷⁴ Berry, ‘The concept of innovation’, p. 90.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

rapidity of its adoption and spread, were classic instances of innovation. Hopkins notes that the period between 1880 and 1920 was 'important not for the quantity of cocoa exported, but because it was a time of qualitative change and discontinuity, when the foundations of what was an entirely novel agricultural enterprise were laid down'.⁷⁶ The innovations introduced by the Lagos trader-turned-planters in and around Agege, some 15 miles north of Lagos, included a labour code, enforcement of quality controls, construction of roads, use of machinery and direct shipments of produce.⁷⁷ Capital was raised through personal savings, which for many served as start-up capital. Some farm owners accumulated capital during the slack season by working as farm labourers. Practically everyone tapped into the resources of social networks. Still, the expansion of cocoa farming was not accompanied by any radical changes to traditional farming practices, such as would have produced greater yields from existing cocoa farms. As experience had shown that older cocoa farms declined in productivity, the farmers 'devoted their entrepreneurial abilities and financial resources to the establishment of new farms and to the employment and supervision of labour on often widely scattered cocoa plots'.⁷⁸ Altogether, the innovating cocoa farmers took risks in trying out a new crop, bearing the cost of gestation of some five to ten years. That amounted to the 'postponement of present consumption for the sake of future returns'.⁷⁹

III

This discussion has highlighted aspects of large-scale farming in Western Nigeria by two distinct groups in two defining epochs. Some observations can be made about agricultural practice during the century covered in this study.

The first is the relative decrease in the size of the farms. The extensive slave-run subsistence farms of the pre-colonial warlords were often larger than the wage-labour based, export-crop plantations operated by Christian Saro Lagos trader-farmers. Easier access to (unfree) labour and land facilitated the ownership of larger farms in the precolonial period (up to the 1890s). The second is the differentially motivated population movements that accompanied these projects. During the nineteenth century, war chiefs relocated free and slave labour to farm settlements on the outskirts of the metropolis while cocoa farming induced the migration of the northern Yoruba from the savanna to the forest belt. The former was involuntary while the latter was voluntary, though induced by economic and social pressure. Third, in all cases, large-scale farming required colonization – clearing the forest and settling people in the respective ecological, political, economic and social settings. Fourth, innovation was undertaken by these groups of farmers, not only during the cocoa 'revolution', but in terms of a marked departure from earlier farming practices and, in most cases, labour mobilization. Fifth, the actors involved in these enterprises varied widely. The precolonial actors were rulers who had near-absolute control over land, labour and other material resources. The cocoa pioneers and their successors cut across social classes, ranging from the western-educated and sophisticated Lagos Saro urban elite to the provincial yokels of the Yoruba hinterland. The latter had to acquire land

⁷⁶ Hopkins, 'Innovation in a colonial context', p. 87.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

⁷⁸ Berry, 'The concept of innovation', p. 89.

⁷⁹ Hopkins, 'Innovation in a colonial context', p. 87.

by negotiation (rather than by force as in the previous era), leading to the acquisition of usufructuary rights. Sixth, these agricultural enterprises had a broader significance for their practitioners. The nineteenth-century warlords were driven by power consolidation and preservation, while the Lagos Saro pioneer cocoa planters sought social and political relevance in late Victorian Lagos. These efforts were manifestations of endogenous initiative and agency, which drove agricultural production beyond subsistence to profit-making.

This article has also highlighted significant changes in the wider agricultural economy of western Nigeria between the 1850s and 1920s. Major developments, if not turning points, took place in the two phases of agricultural enterprise considered in this essay.

First, the rise of farmsteads into important units of agricultural production from the 1860s, as Yoruba urban centres – epitomized by Ibadan and Abeokuta – conflated preparation for (offensive and defensive) war with state-building in the unstable political situation of the second half of the nineteenth century. Second, changes in labour relations – rise of wage labour and extirpation of servile labour – principally during the first two decades of the twentieth century, affected the profitability of agricultural enterprises and the size of farm holdings. Third, cash crop production, especially of cocoa after 1920, effectively laid the foundation for the modern agricultural economy of western Nigeria with significant implications for the region's economic, social and political development, and its self-assertion in the emergent Nigerian State. Fourth, land tenure changes, which had begun in colonial Lagos, gradually spread across the region. However, evolving indigene-settler relations became fraught and even took violent forms as late as the 1980s. Fifth, while extensive farming was limited to the savanna and the forest fringe of Yorubaland in the nineteenth century, cocoa planting brought cash crop-induced plantation-style farming into the forest zone during the twentieth. Yet, in the second wave of cocoa planting outside the Agege hub, 'it lost something of its plantation flavour as developed in the Agege area'.⁸⁰ This was because the indigenous Yoruba of the interior lacked the experience of American South and Caribbean plantation agriculture possessed by the Saro pioneers. Sixth, official policy towards agriculture varied throughout the period. In the nineteenth century, agricultural policy was an adjunct of the military and political agenda of warfare and state consolidation. In the early twentieth century, government policy shifted from the setting up of botanical gardens to non-intervention in production. The government was only involved in quality control through the institution of a produce inspection scheme.⁸¹

In the final analysis, the vast majority of western Nigerian farmers remain rooted in an agricultural tradition dominated by small-sized landholding. The reduction of farm holdings from the large enterprises of the nineteenth century to the medium-sized cocoa farms of the twentieth century may be attributed to the transition to a new political economy that ended servile labour, commercialized land and labour, and thus raised the cost of production.

⁸⁰ Agboola, 'Agricultural changes', p. 136.

⁸¹ O. N. Njoku, 'Evolution of produce inspection in Nigeria up to 1936', *ODU: A journal of west African studies* 19 (1979), pp. 43–57; and Ayodeji Olukoju,

'Government, the business community, and quality control schemes in the agricultural export trade of Nigeria, 1889–1929', *African Economic Hist.* 26 (1998), pp. 99–118.