

Slaves in Agricultural Development of Ibadan, 1835-1893

SALAMI, B. Olawale (Ph.D),

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria,

Email: olawalesalami2000@yahoo.com

Abstract

Nations are generally endowed with the natural resources which are exploited for the physical and human development of such a geographical entity. Such natural resources may include fertile land and deposits of all kinds of liquid and solid natural resources. The Ibadan of our period may not have paraded the latter, but the former was available and very fertile. In other words, the pre-colonial Ibadan advertised fertile land that was suitable for the production of both cash and subsistence crops to feed the town. Ibadan also has advantage of abundant human resources that could be mobilised at the shortest notice. These were mainly the producer slaves and they produced more than seventy percent of labour that was required on the farms. Agriculture thus became one of the mainstays of the economy of Ibadan.

The focus of this article therefore, is to underscore the indispensable role the producer slaves played in tilling the land to produce food in large quantities both from the small and large farms, which were in most cases owned by the civil and military chiefs.

Introduction

Ibadan is a traditional Yoruba speaking town located in the hinterland of Yorubaland in the present day Federal republic of Nigeria. Its history was an interesting aspect of the nineteenth century history of the Yorubas. The nineteenth century Ibadan developed a definite military propensity which by all standards sustained the institution of slavery unprecedented in *Yorubaland*. With the availability of these 'living tools' in large proportions, defeat was unthinkable for Ibadan in all wars. But these creatures along with the ever increasing population of Ibadan had to be fed, provided with weapons of war and there was also the need to pay for the services of those who would supply other necessities of life. Obviously, to meet these demands of the state, other sectors of the economy like agriculture had to be developed. But this was certainly not to the detriment of militarism. Both had to be accorded due attention if the state was to prosper. In this regard, militarism was intensified to, among other things; get more hands that would support agriculture.

Geography, Types of farms and the crops

One of the most important sectors of the economy of Ibadan in which slavery featured as an engine of growth was agriculture.⁸ The geographical location of Ibadan was suitable for various crops. The city was centrally located in the western half of western Nigeria. The soils were fertile with heavy texture close to the surface.⁹ Throughout the year, the temperature was always normal and the heavy rainfall was distributed with two fairly distinct maxima around June and October, constantly, heralding high relative humidity.¹⁰

Another factor which aided agriculture was the land tenure system. The traditional idea that the land belonged to the King had no place in Ibadan. Ownership and control of land were instead exercised by the few military and civil chiefs as well as some compound heads. Therefore, land was there virtually for the asking by any new immigrants, so long as he was sponsored either by a well established settler, an *Ologun* or a civil chief. This made it easy for each immigrant to settle down in Ibadan for the utilization of the fertile land for large scale agricultural production. The traditional household labour comprising of the members of a family was only good enough for subsistence production, the *aaro*¹¹ and *owe*¹² which were other methods in which the Yoruba mustered

⁸. NAI, Lagos Annual Reports, 1899, pp. 15 – 16. Also see B. A. Awe, 'Militarism and Economic Development in nineteenth century Yorubaland: The Ibadan Example', *Journal of African History*, 14, 1973, 65-77, and Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country*, London, 1893, 60

⁹ J. O. Adejuwon, 'Farming and Farmlands in Ibadan Division of Western Nigeria', M.Sc. Thesis, (London, 1962), 37

¹⁰ G. J. A. Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, (London, 1966), 53

¹¹ *Aaro* was a system whereby farmers bound themselves together in a mutual aid association (Egbe Aaro) to provide collective aid for its members in doing heavy work on rotational basis. Such works included clearing virgin land, weeding and harvesting, a member of Egbe

addition labour force, could only be used to produce a little above subsistence level since they were not always available throughout the year. To ease this labour problem, therefore, some Ibadan farmers who could afford to buy slaves colonized their various farms with the human machines. These creatures that became the pivot of the economy could be described as the producer-slaves and were needed for various reasons. Among other reasons, was the availability of fertile land in abundance and the need to feed the increasing population. In addition, the primeval forest was in every way over-powering, so that a group approach became acceptable, as the most convenient method of clearing the land for cultivation. Moreover, the constant warfare, kidnapping and general insecurities necessitated defence which could only be provided by a large number of people working together.¹³

There were about four types of farms where the producer-slaves worked and each of these fields represented stages of development in the agricultural history of Ibadan. Before the 1840s, the people including slaves worked on the farms which were located close to the compounds and fenced round to prevent animals from destroying the crops planted in them. These were called *Ogba* (garden)¹⁴ and their closeness to the compounds were to beat the insecurity that permeated the newly established city, in the 1820s, and 1830s. From the 1840s, when the frontiers of security had been expanded gradually, the population of the city increased and the *Ogba* could no longer be relied upon in the production of food to feed the teeming population. Therefore, like the free burghers in South Africa, the Ibadan people had to explore virgin lands in the forest to secure enough space for economically viable agriculture. People started to cultivate the land in their neighbourhood. This neighbourhood farms were called *oko-etile*.¹⁵ In the 1830s, these farms were less than ten kilometres from *Oke-mapo*, the heart of the city. But by 1840s, they had almost become part of the town¹⁶ as a result of the rapid growth of the city.

The large farms were the largest employer of slaves and by 1850s, they were virtually worked by slaves. In fact, the owners of the farms had to settle their slaves on the farms to constantly look after the crops, more so, when it became difficult for them to trek the long distance involved daily. The settlement of the slaves on the farms was the foundation of the third type of farm, *oko-aba* or *oko-abule* (farmsteads).¹⁷ The farmers penetrated further into the virgin forest, established new and large farms as well as built farmsteads where they could stay for some time for farm work. They only returned home when there were social and religious activities or when there was not much to be done on the farm. The slaves that worked on such farms, on their own, seldom went to the city of Ibadan because they always had work to do on the farms. The fourth type of farms were those located at the banks of streams or swamps to exploit the potentials of these areas. Therefore, at the banks of *Kudeti*, *Alafara* and *Lege* streams, assorted vegetables, yams, beans and maize were grown throughout the year.

The farmsteads on which the slaves were engaged had by 1858, spread as far as *Lalupon* and beyond in the north-east, and as far as the town of *Apomu* in the south east. It also embraced deserted old *Egba* towns of *Ojo*, *Ika*, *Iroko*, *Ikeye* and the remains of *Owu* and *Erunmu*.¹⁸ By 1891, farmsteads established around Ibadan numbered as many as a hundred and ninety three.¹⁹ Some chiefs had up to 5-6 neighbourhood farms as well as the same number of farmsteads, all of which were occupied by slaves. On a farm, there were often as many as one hundred slaves, depending on the wealth of the founder of such a farm. The slaves undertook such operations as bush clearing, heap-making and planting. A plot could have about two hundred heaps, arranged in ten ridges, each containing twenty heaps. This was followed by planting which was supervised by their masters or the head-slaves (*Olori-oko*). Weeding was constantly done by the slaves and during harvesting periods, they were fully stretched. Both men and

aaro was bound, when called upon, to return the services of other members; one by one. The member who was engaging his colleagues would entertain them after the day's work with food, palm-wine and kolanuts. Readers who wish to explore the subject further should see N. A. Fadipe *The sociology of...*, 150-151, and G. J. A. Ojo *Yoruba Culture*, 59 – 61.

¹² Owe (working bee) was also a system of cooperative labour on an *ad hoc* basis. The pattern of its frequency and intensity was much the same as that of aaro. A large number of people were usually involved. It was a way in which labour was pooled not strictly on rotational basis like in aaro, but one which enabled a man to summon help from relatives, friends and associates at peak periods of cultivation for a day or two. Also for further details, See N. A. Fadipe, *Ibid*, pp. 150-151 and G. J. A. Ojo, *Ibid*, 59 – 61

¹³ G. J. A. Ojo, *Yoruba Culture...*, 58

¹⁴ T. Falola, *Political Economy of an African State: Ibadan, 1830-1900*, (Ife, 1984), 88

¹⁵ T. Falola, *Political Economy...*, 88

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88

¹⁷ B. A. Awe, 'Militarism and Economic Development...', 69-70. Also see Chisholm, M. *Settlement and Land Use*, (London, 1962), 47

¹⁸ B. A. Awe, 'The Rise of Ibadan as a military Power in the nineteenth century' D. Phil, Oxford, 1964, 87, see also Daniel May, *Journeys in Nupe and Yoruba countries in 1858*, J. R. G. S., 30, 1860, 213-233.

¹⁹ B. A. Awe, *Ibid.*, 87

women slaves were engaged particularly in harvesting while they along with the freeborn women engaged in processing of agricultural produce.

Different types of crops were cultivated. There were root crops, grains, legumes, tree crops, fruits and assorted vegetables. From the 1850s, cotton and rice were grown. With time, some farmsteads were named after their agricultural produce. A few of such place names were *Alalubosa* (place of onion) and *Onireke* (place of sugar cane).²⁰ These agricultural produce were taken from the farm-steads to the city for marketing activities. It was the absence of specialised crafts and markets in most of the farmsteads that forced the farmers to rely on the metropolis for manufactured and imported goods. The goods that were not immediately transported to the town were to be stored. Here the slaves were also engaged. They would construct rafters and vaults on which the farm products were kept for preservation. In some cases, they would need to dry some in the sun for days while some were fried or smoked. These goods, whenever they were ready to be taken to the metropolis, the slaves constituted the means by which they were transported.

The Chiefs, the farms and the producer slaves

Although there is not much record yet by which one can estimate the size of the land cultivated by an individual farmer or the yields from his farms, it can be suggested, that with the number of slaves working on the farms, the cultivated fields must have been extensive and the yields enormous. Therefore, apart from militarism, Ibadan chiefs, in particular, also got their wealth from agricultural production. The chiefs and a few individuals who had the wherewithal to engage large number of slaves got much more profit, than other farmers who could not afford to employ a lot of slaves on their farms. However, what is more important is that both the military and civil chiefs, including a few wealthy farmers derived a lot of profit from the use of slaves on their farms.

Oluoyole for example, was said to have had expensive plantations for each of the crops he planted. According to Johnson,

*...he had extensive plantations of okra (sic), beans, vegetables, corn and yams, a separate farm for each, and whenever he had to take any to the market, no farmer was allowed to sell that particular article that day as he had sufficient to supply all traders in the town, and could undersell any farmer.*²¹

In addition, *Oluoyole* owned nearly all the kolanut trees and kolanut grooves in and around the town all of which were worked by his slaves. He became so powerful as a result of his wealth, that, he was the only one that could use velvet robe while the other chiefs could only use velvet caps. With the wealth he acquired, he was able to feed his large harem, children and followers.²² His wealth was so enormous that European missionaries concluded, probably with a degree of exaggeration, that his house was covered with cowry shells.²³ The large number of slaves that worked for him reflected partly in his praise name as follows:

Nko tete mo b'ese nku bi ojo –

Odo kan gere ti won npe l'Ogunpa

Ogede eru Onyowon²⁴ l'of'ese mu

Odo na gbe

(I do not know that the feet can make a sound

Like the sound of an approaching storm.

There is a river flowing down the Ogunpa hill;

'Tis the myriads of Iba's (Ibasorun Oluoyole)

²⁰ B. A. Awe, 'Militarism and Economic Development....' 70

²¹ Johnson, S. *The History of the Yorubas: From the earliest Time to the Beginning of the British protectorate*, (Lagos: CSS Limited, 1960), 306

²² S. Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba...*, 304

²³ Stone, R. H. *In Africa's forest and Jungle or Six Years among the Yorubas*, (London: 1900), 55

²⁴ Onyowon is another name for Oluoyole. Oral evidence has confirmed this. For instance, Pa T. B. Bioku (80+) Mogaji Bioku, Pa. S. A. Lamidi, Pa. O. O. Kusimo, all confirmed this name.

*Slaves crossing it,
 That caused it to dry up once.*²⁵

Other military and civil chiefs who acquired large number of slaves to work on their farms included *Ope-agbe, Oyesile Olugbode, Ibikunle, Ogunmola, Akere, Orowusi, Latosa, Efunsetan Aniwura, Madam Omosa, Subuola, Iyalaje and Lanlatu*. Others were *Sunmola, Tubosun, Awanibaku* and a host of others.¹⁹²⁶ *Bale Oyesile* was said to be a wealthy man who owned a large barn for storing food and fine horses with decorated saddles. He wore the best clothes which only the rich and the noble could afford.²⁷ *Ibikunle* had extensive farm lands, at *Ogbere* and at *Odo-Ona*. He had the biggest compound in Ibadan. This covered *Ayeye* to a point near the neighbourhood called *Iyiosa*. The extent of his wealth also can be seen in his praise name:

*Ibikunle has a farm at Ogbere,
 Ibikunle has a farm at Odo-ona,
 Ibikunle's farm is extensive,
 It stretches down to the town wall of Adesegun
 Ibikunle's compound is bigger than some people's farmland
 For it is big enough for a wolve to run a race.*²⁸

Among other leaders who acquired much wealth through the use of slave labour was *Are Latosa*. His private property included thousands of slaves, extensive estates and possessed the single ambition to amass wealth by all means. As a result of the work done for him by his slaves, he became so wealthy that his wealth came to be used as a Yoruba simile '*O lo rere bi ola Are*' (as extensive as *Are's* wealth).²⁹ Like the other war and civil chiefs *Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura*, an *Egba* born, who made Ibadan her home, also owned extensive farmlands, which provided her with agricultural produce she marketed or exchange for other goods. She was very rich, owning some 2,000 slaves in her farms alone excluding those at home for domestic work. Infact, everybody that was somebody in Ibadan of our period rose through the use of slaves in various ways. All the chiefs and highly placed people in Ibadan had large farms and farm-houses containing from a hundred to over a thousand souls.³⁰ A few examples of such farms and the names of their landlords are stated below:

<i>Name of founder</i>	<i>Date founded</i>	<i>Farmsteads</i>	<i>Location</i>
Chief <i>Elepo</i>	1840s	<i>Elepo</i>	North-East
Chief <i>Agbo</i>	1850s	<i>Agbo</i>	North-East
<i>Balogun Ibikunle</i>	1850s – 1860s	<i>Ogbere</i>	South-East
<i>Balogun Ibikunle</i>	1850s – 1860s	<i>Odo-Ona</i>	South-East
<i>Bale Olugbode</i>	1860s	<i>Olugbode</i>	South-West
<i>Balogun Akere</i>	1860s	<i>Olosan</i>	South-West
<i>Bashorun Ogunmola</i>	1860s	<i>Orita Bashorun</i>	North-East
<i>Are Latosa</i>	1870s	<i>Oke-Are</i>	North
<i>Seriki Lawoyin</i>	1870s	<i>Olodo</i>	South-West

Source: *Toyin Falola, Political Economy...*, p. 156

Conclusion

No doubt, agriculture like militarism was taken very seriously by the people of Ibadan. The town took advantage of good soil, conducive geographical environment, well organised land tenure system and availability of

²⁵ *Akinyele's Outline History of Ibadan*, Revised, translated and enlarged by Kemi Morgan, Ibadan, Caxton, n.d. Vol. I, 104
²⁶ NAI Ibaprof. 3/4 Intelligence Report on Ibadan Town, RWC Dickinson, 1938.
²⁷ *Akinyele's Outline History...* vol. II, 5
²⁸ *Akinyele's Outline History...* vol. II, 5
²⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol III, 8
³⁰ Johnson, S. *The History...*, p. 325

willing human resources. Such human resources were mainly the producer slaves. The labour of the producer slaves made nonsense of the traditional household labour comprising of the members of a family which was only good for subsistence farming. With the involvement of slaves in agricultural production, food was produced in large quantities and throughout our period, the city never experienced famine. There were small and large farms which signified stages of development in the agricultural history of Ibadan. As the population increased so also the size of the farms increased. The expansion of fields for cultivation necessitated the establishment of farmsteads, where the producer slaves were accommodated. This was done to reduce the stress the slaves would go through commuting between the farms and the city. It was also to bring them close to the farms so that they could gain more man-hours working on the farms. On each farm, there were as many as one hundred slaves depending on the wealth and power of the owner of such a farm. Such chief had up to six farms, each with a farmstead. In fact, by 1891, farmsteads in Ibadan numbered one hundred and ninety three, with a sizeable number of producer slaves managing them.

Such was the importance of slaves in the agricultural revolution in pre-colonial Ibadan. However, it would be wrong to conclude that slave labour featured prominently in tilling the land. The producer slaves were also involved in agriculture related ventures such as stock raising. This remained a supplement to crop cultivation. Among the animals people kept were horses, cows, sheep, goat, chicken and so on. Wealthy individuals and the chiefs acquired especially the Fulani and Hausa slaves, as tenderers of their livestock. Fulani and Hausa slaves were experts in animal tendering. According to Anna Hinderer, no Yoruba could milk the cattle except the Fulani slaves.³¹ She further noted that milk was always supplied to her house for food. This shows that milk was constantly produced both for personal and public consumption. Thus it is not unlikely that the chiefs and individual entrepreneurs must have derived part of their wealth from animal husbandry. Some of the animals like horses were used for transportation purpose, while some like cats were pets. Dogs among these creatures were sometimes used for sacrifice and hunting. What has today become the modern city of Ibadan was built on the sweat of human machines, otherwise known as slaves, through their involvement in all sectors of the society including the agricultural sector.

³¹ Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the*, 199

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request from readers and authors.

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

