



EBIRA MIGRANTS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN EKITI, NIGERIA IN THE COLONIAL ERA

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Abstract:

This paper explores the migration and spread of the Ebira migrants into Ekiti of southwest Nigeria in the colonial era. The impact of colonial rule on Nigeria is still a subject of debate. This paper indicates that Ebira migrants are a major factor in the effectiveness of the colonial economy in Ekiti land. In other words, Ebira migrants are a factor in the integration of Ekiti society into the international capitalist system through “cheap workers” in the Ekiti. This article uses a methodology that uses oral sources as well as historical materials in this paper. This paper demonstrates that migration is crucial for the survival of economic development in all societies by solving important problems. This paper follows the same approach, considering the situation in Ekiti land in the colonial period in Nigeria.

Keywords: colonial, economic development, migrants, intergroup relations

1. Background to the Study

Migration is a global phenomenon and has been an integral part of human existence. From time immemorial, men and women have moved from one place to another in order to satisfy social, political, economic, and environmental needs. Before British colonialism, Nigeria experienced mass movements of peoples, which influenced the present distribution of population and ethnic groups.

This paper explores the historical process that led to the migration and settlement of Ebira migrants in Ekiti, southwest Nigeria during the colonial era. It is important to note that before the colonial era, these migrants were never an integral part of Ekiti. Their contributions to economic change and transformation are the focus of this paper.

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2. Conceptual Clarification

Historically, people are migrants, and all people are species that depend on time and space. All human societies are included in the prototype of the necessary social relations due to their different geographical features. Some of them are endowed with natural resources, while others are not. Various migration problems in Nigeria indicate that the decision to migrate from one place to another depends on economic factors. The theory of migration has many economic and non-economic determinants of migration. As Afolayan pointed out, the behavioural theories underlying migration decisions are based on an assessment of external factors. This approach takes into account various social and psychological factors, such as the perception and evaluation in the decision-making process of participants. Using the decision function as a variable allows people to decide whether to move or not. The solution is always the best because evaluation is often based on imperfect information and other human qualities.

During the colonial era, there were significant alterations in the pattern of migration. The introduction of salaried/wage employment and the concentration of facilities was accompanied by movements from the rural areas into cities and towns.

Udo (1975) noted that migration is accompanied by constant and semi-permanent changes and is defined as the reaction of man to economic inequality or the movement of people, into wider space, whether national or international

Development economists mainly applied neo-classical theory, which emphasised the individual decision to migrate, based on a rational comparison of the relative costs and benefits of remaining at home or moving. The neo-classical theory assumed that potential migrants had excellent knowledge of wage levels and employment opportunities in destination regions and that their migration decisions were overwhelmingly based on these economic factors. Most theories derived from that of Ernest Ravenstein, who was believed to be among the earliest migration theorists used census data from England and Wales to develop his laws of migration. Guided by a push-pull factor, his theory postulates that unfavourable conditions in one place such as oppressive laws and heavy taxation “push” people out and favourable conditions in an external location “pull” them in. The pull forces are those factors that attract a population to a particular location. These include the availability of fertile land, adequate market facilities, efficient transport, communication network and the prospect of job opportunities. According to the neo-classical model, the mere existence of economic disparities between various areas should be sufficient to generate migrant flows. In the long run, such flows should help to equalize wages and conditions in underdeveloped and developed regions, leading toward economic equilibrium.

According to Ravenstein (1885), the primary cause of migration was the desire for better economic opportunities. The volume of migration decreases as distance increases, migration occurs in stages instead of in one long move, population movements are bilateral and migration differentials which may include gender, social class and age, influence a person’s mobility. His theory of migration seems to be applicable to all forms of migration and thus provides a framework from which other theories have been

developed. While it remains the focus of this study because of its universal appeal, it is equally important to touch on a few other theories to assess their relevance. This push-pull theory can be used to decipher the migratory trend of the Ebira to Ekiti.

Afigbo (1987:18) in his study of Igbo and their neighbours advances another theoretical framework which broadens our horizon on inter-group relations. Afigbo argues that inter-group relation presupposes contact and interaction between groups each of which has an identity to make some inputs into the relationship. What this implies is that there must be contacted first. It is this contact that necessitates interactions between the groups. Also, Afigbo stresses the need for interacting groups to have unique identities in form of different languages, cultures, natural-endowments, religions and geographical origins. Thus, this theory can adequately be used to explain the level of cooperation and interaction between the Ebira and Ekiti people.

Economic development is the product of human interaction with the environment, which reproduces material life in order to improve the quality of material life. To reproduce this material as a means of livelihood, someone interacts in various areas of the company, industry, trade and farming. Economic development in terms of the adoption of this paper indicates that Ebira contributed to the economic transformation of the economy in agriculture, population growth, expansion of trade and the development of new rural areas.

This article recognizes the conceptual basis according to which human migration is a product of the interaction of the environment and humans in the economic, social and psychological areas in which material life can be reproduced

3. History of Ebira Migrations into Ekiti: Colonial Period

Although the relationship between the Ebira and Ekiti could be traced to the pre-colonial period, the imposition of colonial rule and the establishment of a capitalist economy in Nigeria led to the mass exodus of the Ebira into Ekitiland. The Ebira, like other people, were required to contribute their labour resources to colonial pursuits. The primary aim of the British Colonial administration in Nigeria was to use the country as an agricultural base to produce raw materials for their industries and to serve as markets for finished products. In order words, the main reason for British colonial rule in Nigeria was economic exploitation. The target was to promote trade to the advantage of Britain. And in order to achieve this, it was believed that *“without cash crop, there could be no revenues in peasant economy, except in the embarrassing form of labour produce”*. This is brought about by the policy of the colonial administration of financial self-sufficiency, thus, the introduction of a peasant export-commodity production which was the bedrock of the colonial administration in Nigeria.

The colonial administration also initiated the provision of infrastructural amenities like the construction of roads, railways etc. in order to facilitate the haulage of resources from the interior of the land to the coastal areas for upward passage to the outside world. Thus, the hinterland was opened up for the commercial transaction. At a point, various economic policies were imposed on the citizens. Adegbola highlighted

three steps undertaken by Britain and this modified the pattern of migration within the country. The first was to lay the foundation of a modern transportation system over which the articles of trade could move. Secondly, the monetization of the economy and the introduction of tax (Ibrahim, 1985:223). These measures brought about fundamental changes in Nigeria's economy.

The colonization of Nigeria brought about drastic changes in the social, economic and political life of the populace. It changed the motivations and directions of migration patterns. With the effective occupation of Ebiraland by the British government, there was the aggressive promotion of the colonial economy. There was the need to expand the market economy through increased productivity on the part of the indigenes to provide revenue either through export or import dues or through the ability of the producers to support direct taxation. Lugard believed in the virtue of work. He stated in 1906 that *"direct taxation is a moral benefit to the people by stimulating industry and production, and that there is no civilized state in the world where direct taxation has not been found to be a necessity, and African communities which aspire to be regarded as civilized must share the common burden of the civilization"* (Crowder, 1962:206).

4. Socio-Economic Impacts of Ebira Migrants in Ekiti State

Discussions on the consequences of migration always tended to focus on the negative impacts on the sending (source) areas alone. It is important to note that, migration created both opportunities and risks for the sending and receiving areas, thus, it is imperative that a holistic approach be given to discussions on the socio-economic impacts of migration. The movement of people, particularly labour from one area to another creates for the two areas both negative and positive socio-economic effects.

The impacts of migration have been felt in areas ranging from social, economic, and political to cultural. The impacts of migration are complex, bringing both benefits and disadvantages. Migration has an impact on the place that has been left behind as well as on the place that is being migrated to. These impacts can be both positive and negative. It is common knowledge that migration has a positive economic, social and cultural impact on Ekiti. As the contributions of migrants are great for their sending area, they are also significant for the host community.

4.1 Economic Implications in the Destination Area

For the receiving area in Ekiti, the positive benefits from migration are the infusion of 'cheap labour' into their economies. As early as the 1940s-1950s, the attraction to work in Ekiti was strong. The economy of Ekiti was predominantly agricultural and the performance in this sector is crucial to the development of the area. The Ebira migrants came into Ekiti at a time when there was an expansion in the cocoa production in the area and this encouraged an influx of Ebira migrants. The non-availability of fertile land in their own village and the introduction of taxation were a condition which prompted migration. There was an emphasis by the Ekiti farmers on cocoa production to the neglect of food production. Cocoa cultivation in Ekiti appears to have started about 1895,

introduced by returning Ekiti freed slaves from Ilesa, Ondo, Ibadan, and Lagos (Berry, 1975). Until the 1920s, Ekiti remained primarily a food-producing district with special emphasis on yam, maize, guinea corn and vegetables but it also produced some cotton and tobacco. The introduction of colonialism made the cultivation of cash crops more attractive but because of the transition that was expected Ekiti farmers continued to concentrate on food crop production until they had garnered enough experience in the techniques of cocoa to grow successfully these new crops (Olatunji, 2001). The high demand for cocoa in the world market made most Ekiti farmers divert their attention to the production of the export crop. Profit from cocoa and the status it conferred on the cultivators encouraged more people to take to it even in areas where the land could support cocoa cultivation, even though not as successfully as in Ondo or Ibadan, when market prices were high, it paid off. Little wonder that cocoa is described locally as *“the most chiefly of all trees”* or, more precisely, the most economically valuable tree crop as yet⁴. Cocoa-farming falls squarely within the civilizing mission of 1841, which intended to make Nigerians abandon ‘heathenism’ and material poverty by growing crops needed in British factories while adopting the Christian way of life (Webster, 1863:418) The Church Missionary Society, and later the African Church, became part of this design by training itinerant preachers to spread the gospel of coffee, cocoa, cotton and work as well as the scriptures (Chief Ojo, Irona quarters, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria on 4th August 2014).

It is argued that *“the growing demand for money and the belief that no food grower can make as much as the cocoa farmer”* (Mojola, 1980:135) have since the 1930s turned Ondo State (present Ondo and Ekiti states) into one of Nigeria’s *“rural districts that depended on other rural districts for a considerable part of their basic food requirements”* (Udo, 1971:415). Until the 1920s, Ekiti remained primarily a food-producing district with special emphasis on yam, maize, guinea corn and vegetables but it also produced some cotton and tobacco⁵. Cocoa cultivation undermined food production in at least two ways. First, farmers tended to put the most fertile land under cocoa, thereby precipitating a shortage of equally suitable land for food cropping. Secondly, given limited labour supplies, cocoa-growing encouraged a near-total abandonment of food cropping in some areas (Olufemi, 1996:35)

This diversion led to a food deficit in the area. By the 1920s, colonial officials were expressing misgivings at the rate of cocoa expansion and its possible backwash effect on food production. Rowling reported this trend with regard to Ondo and Ekiti Divisions, citing an Assessment Officer’s remark that *“owing to the high price of cocoa a great many farmers are beginning to concentrate almost entirely on this crop to the detriment of their staple food crops”* (Rowling, Land Tenure, p. 72; Annual Report, 1927, p. 52.). The area began to feel the effects of the change by way of food shortage, scarcity and high cost of foodstuff. *“But cocoa-growing also created conditions that have turned the present-day Ondo State (Ondo and Ekiti States) into a food-deficit area since the 1930s to this day”*. As observed, on the one hand, policy responses to the food-cocoa imbalance in the 1930s and 1940s were scuttled by infighting and inertia in the colonial agricultural bureaucracy; and on the other, how official support for cocoa-growing between the 1950s and the 1970s virtually precluded concern for food crops, setting the stage for Nigeria’s food crisis of the 1980s. One of the

far-reaching effects of that inclination has been the lack of official interest in the food sub-sector. Sara Berry has also linked the quest for formal education or training outside agriculture by cocoa farmers' offspring with the generalised desire for social mobility and with diversified accumulation strategies among the Yoruba peasantry (Berry, 1984:50).

The introduction of free education by the Action Group led government led to a desire for formal education in the area. Thus, the generalised desire for formal education by the youth and cocoa production by the indigenous farmers led to recurrent food shortages. According to an official report, *"The lack of locally-grown foodstuff is apparent and no one could be found to undertake to supply rations to the Ado prison next year at 6d. per diem. 8d. per diem is the lowest price tendered. In 1944, the prison contractor accepted 4d. per diem"* (Annual Report, Ekiti Division, 1945, p. 8. Ondo Prof. 1/1/120A, NAT.). As stated by Agboola, between 50% and 75% of agricultural land was devoted to cocoa in parts of southern Ekiti, Owo, and Ondo in the 1960s (Adegbola, 1980:131-132). In the 1970s, according to Sara Berry, *"most cocoa farmers [were growing] some food crops, but most of my informants said they did not normally produce enough foodstuffs to meet their families' needs, but purchased at least part of the food they consumed"* (Berry, 1984:50). At various times in its growth cycle, the new crop demanded intensive attention that exceeded the nurturing required by root crops. At various times in its growth cycle, the new crop demanded intensive attention that exceeded the nurturing required by root crops. Moreover, as male farmers expanded the amount of land devoted to cocoa, they began making demands for labour and transport that far exceeded those associated with traditional agriculture (Olatunji, 2001:101).

Following the introduction of the colonial economy, wage labour gradually replaced domestic slavery. It was noted that Ebira people who had good reputations for producing food and would not dare to demand land tenure, had been welcomed to the cocoa belt (Adegboye, 1966:88). Available records indicated a relatively high concentration of Ebira migrants as wage labourers in Ekiti, and this could partly be understood with reference to the attitude that Ekiti people adopted towards certain types of jobs that were available at the time. The need for labour in the expansion of cocoa plantations was met through the migrations of the Ebira farmers who were in need of cash (Information obtained from Prof. G. I. Olomaola, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti in April 2012).

Migration was a survival strategy in Ebiraland. For the landless farmers who were in need to meet some obligations, migration was the only choice for livelihood. The first generation of Ebira migrants started as wage earners on cocoa farms or food farms, and switched to self-employed food farmers as a result of neglect by the indigenous farmers. Ebira migrants provided labour (often cheap labour) to a wide variety of economic activities in their destination. The Ebira migrants, who were used to food production, took over food crop production. They grew yams, beans, cassava, maize, guinea corn and vegetable crops like okro, garden eggs, pepper, and assorted efo (vegetables) (Okene, 2005:64). Yam was and still is, the most important food crop in Ekiti. The main ingredient for making *lyân* (pounded yam). Yam was the main food crop by the Ebira.

The timely change of the Ebira migrants from wage labourers to food crop producers helped to alleviate the problem of food shortage in the area. As observed by Udo, Ebira migrants turned certain parts of the cocoa belt from a food deficit to food surplus areas. The native cocoa farmers bought foodstuffs from the Ebira as a result of their occupational specialization (Afolayan, 1985).

Ebira migrants have also been found to increase the productivity of Ekiti economies through the contribution of migrants to food production. Influxes of migrants into Ebira land can be looked at as an important and vital factor in the future of the Ekiti labour market and the sustainment of the food production system. Ebira migrants do not take jobs from the native population, as widely believed. On the contrary, they filled positions in those sectors that are unable to recruit indigenous workers. During this period, however, Ekiti was undoubtedly known as being at the forefront of education not only in Western Region, but also in Nigeria, which was why, before independence, it was known as "*fountain of knowledge*" (Oyebode, 2001).

Western education was then a novelty which opened the doors to the white man's world and salaried employment. As such, parents were committed to its proper acquisition by their children, while the children were in turn eager to acquire it thoroughly. Thus, Ebira migrants responded to the need for "secondary" work that the Ekiti native population refused to perform because these jobs were often tedious, poorly compensated and at times, dangerous and also because Ekiti craved for Western education. The virtual disappearance of the traditional labour exchange accelerated the labour shortage on the farms. We can see that although physical labour is a big part of migrant work profiles in chapter four, low-skilled work did dominate and migrants were making their presence known in other areas of the labour market. The Ebira migrants were the major source of labour in Ekitiland- surplus but labour- short area (Interview with Chief Ojo, Irona quarters, Oye-Ekiti). Thus, expanded significantly the supply of labour in Ekiti. Also, Ebira migrant workers have contributed greatly to the economic development of Ekiti. As labour migrants were generally young and well-motivated to work, their performance in host communities' labour market was good.

During their stay in the country, labour migrants spent a part of the money they earned on goods such as textiles, building materials, bicycles, hoes and cutlasses and other farming tools. As stated by Chief Ojo, Ebira migrants have contributed to the development and expansion of small businesses, which are the cornerstone of the Ekiti economy. They have contributed to the development of agriculture and Ekiti economic growth is significantly enhanced as Ebira migrants directly impact the economy through their contribution to supplying the manpower needed on the farm. As observed by Afolayan, Ebira farmers were reported to be very hardworking in providing cheap labour on the farms. As a result, the Ebira tenant farmers helped in providing the needed food crops as early as possible in the year in contrast to the situation before their arrival in the area. Moreover, there was an increase in the diversity of crops grown and a lowering in the prices of some foodstuffs (Afolayan, 1985). The food production in Ekiti improved considerably to the efforts of Ebira self-employed migrants.

Other aspects of their impact on the destination economy include; the rents they paid for utilizing land, the house rents, purchases made locally, the tax they paid and the labour supply, especially of the first generation of migrants who served as hired labour and later as labourers during the off-season period on cocoa farms and in the collection of the palm fruits. The rent payable by migrants for houses and land is used as an additional income to the Ekiti landlords.

5. Population Growth

One of the lasting impacts that Ebira migrants had created in Ekiti is the establishment of settlements known as "Ago Ebira", such settlements are scattered all over the state. Three of such villages are Erifun, Ajebende, Aba Ebira in Ilokun, which were formally entirely of Ebira formation and domination. The exact years in which these villages were founded are not yet established, but they are believed to have come into existence from the migration of the Ebira to the areas. The founders of these villages first settled at Erifun in Ado-Ekiti, a predominantly farming community, which is much larger in terms of population in the same district. This has contributed to the population growth of Ekiti over the years. The population of Ekiti was 327,396 in 1952 rose to 1, 418,114 in 1963 and by 2005, the population rose to 2,737,186. Green gave an estimate of about 30,000 Ebira farmers in the Bende (Edo and Delta states) and Ondo States (now Ondo and Ekiti states) between 1935 and 1963. (Udo, 1975:20; Berry, 1975:123) While Ohiare gave an estimate of between 50,000 and 60,000 Ebira migrants in the Southwest in 1960 and 1970 respectively. However, the trend had not stopped but continued.

Migration to urban centers added growth in the developing countries as follows: *"The major sources of the growth of urban population in developing countries will not be natural population increase but rather the continuing in-migration of rural people; over 50 percent of the urban growths in many developing countries are due to the accelerated pace of rural-urban migration"*¹. Thus, through Ebira migration, Ekiti local population was significantly improved through the several farm settlements, some of whose population ran into hundreds. Migration is an important means to sustain population growth. Thus, Ebira migrants contributed to the rapid growth of Ekiti over the years.

Also, Ebira migrants contributed to the economic development of Ekiti. A major reason that triggered the mass exodus of the first generation of migrants to Southwest and Ekiti, in particular, was as a result of the introduction of taxation. So, migration started in order to avoid paying taxes or to work as hired labourers in the cocoa areas to enable them to get enough money to pay their taxes. However, the revenue derived from the economic activities and taxes collected by the migrants assisted the Ekiti provincial administration to initiate infrastructural developments. The Ebira migrants also spent part of their income on articles, such as textiles, building materials, bicycles, hoes and cutlasses and other farming tools from the Ekiti traders.

Although it is not within this study to measure in quantitative terms the contributions of Ebira migrants in Ekiti, the facts available clearly showed that the contributions to the economy are enormous. Migration and, more general, population

redistribution is linked to economic growth and development. The early colonial period witnessed the presence of Ebira migrants who made important contributions to the economic development of Ekitiland. As discussed above, the major contributions of Ebira migrants to development were in the growth of towns and villages, and population growth. Other contributions included the expansion of trade in food and cash crops and the gradual growth of markets.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, it has been established that Ebira mass migration into Ekiti land had its roots in the colonial period as a result of the imposition of colonial rule and the establishment of a capitalist economy in Nigeria.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

About the Author

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