

A Historical Re-Assessment of Yoruba Women in Cocoa Production in Nigeria: A Case of Tonkere Farm Settlement in Osun State

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changing role of women in cocoa production in Tonkere farm settlement in Osun State, Nigeria. Cocoa was and still a valuable and important cash crop among the people of Tonkere and Southwest Nigeria at large. Prior to Nigerian independence, cocoa industry was dominated by men while women only assisted their husbands during planting and harvesting periods. The post-independence and new land tenure system that gave equal right to both men and women to own landed properties brought a new development in the agricultural sector. This development led to the emergence of women cocoa farmers in Tonkere and other Yoruba communities in southwest Nigeria. The participation and contribution of Yoruba women in cocoa production are hardly documented and acknowledged. This paper therefore examines the changing role of Yoruba women in cocoa production in Tonkere, explaining the factors inhabiting their performance in cocoa production. This paper will benefit extensively on the oral interview with the major participant in cocoa production in Tonkere most extensively women cocoa farmers.

Keywords: Women, Cocoa, Production, Tonkere, Performance, Harvesting

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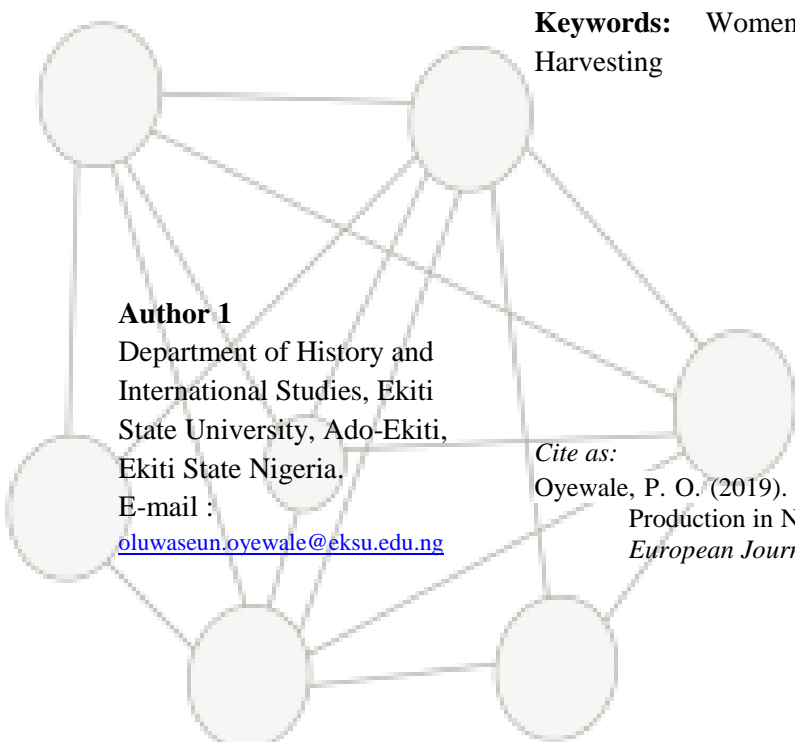
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INTRODUCTION

Cocoa remains the main and major cash crop of the people of Tonkere. Tonkere, just like any other Yoruba farm settlements, is the conglomeration of different Yoruba groups coming together and settled for the purpose of economic survival. Tonkere being a farm settlement became popular in Osun State as a result of civil unrest of 19th and 20th centuries in Yorubaland which led to the dispersal of people to different Yoruba communities, Tonkere inclusive. Basically the Oyo-Yoruba refugees who were dislodged by the Fulani wars of 19th century could be regarded as co-founder of the settlement. The settlement also became populated by the outcome of the disentanglement between Ife and Modakeke from 1835 to 1910, due largely to the problem of resource control. This made the settlement to become permanent home of individuals who ran away from political and economic problems that confronted them in their original home countries¹.

It is interesting to note that different Yoruba migrants migrated to Tonkere and settled in different locations under the different names but Tonkere Oluwatedo as the central. There exists sub farm settlement groups occupied by different Yoruba groups but still under Tonkere Oluwatedo. For instance, Tonkere Orile is occupied by Edunabon, Ayetoro is occupied by Ede and Sekona people, Tonkere Eleso is occupied by the first set of refugees from Modakeke during the first Ife-Modakeke crisis while Tonkere Oluwatedo could be regarded as the hearth of Tonkere as the place has eventually moved from the status of farm settlement to town².

LAND, PEOPLE AND GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF TONKERE

The land of Tonkere, just like any other Yoruba farm settlement, is good for farming because farming is the primary occupation of people of the town. The weather and climatic condition of the town is good for agriculture and other business activities, such as trading, mat weaving and gold smithing. Basically, the people of Tonkere are Yoruba group who migrated to the town as a result of the fall and dispersal from old Oyo. Their arrival could be dated back to the second decade of the 19th century³. Although; there were the presence of other non-Yoruba groups in the town who came from place like middle belt, north and places like Togo and Cotonu. They came to the town, settled and worked as labourers in cocoa farms, these categories of people are known as *onise odun*. The progenitors of the town, as discussed, migrated from different parts of Yorubaland to farm in the forested belt and settled in their various farm steads⁴. They migrated from places like Ile-Ife, Modakeke, Ede, Ekiti, Ondo, Ijebu, Ibadan Ogbomoso, Osogbo, Ikire e.t.c to the area. The various farm settlements converged at Tonkere Oluwatedo for security and social life.⁵ The present location of Tonkere Oluwatedo was initially known as Tonkere *oja* which serves as the melting point for all sub farm settlements before mid 20th century. Oral interview reveals that each of the sub-settlements agreed to relocate in the 1936 to their present location, i.e. Tonkere Oluwatedo (meaning where God lives)⁶.

Geographically, Tonkere is located at the centre of major towns and cities in Osun state. It is about 25 kilometers to Osogbo and around 20 kilometers to Ile-Ife while it is less

than 6 kilometers Ede- Akoda junction. Tonkere is surrounded by a big river known as river Shasaha. The town is under the new demographic structure in Ayedaade Local Government Area of Osun state, Tonkere is bordered by Osogbo in the north, Ede in the west while Ile-ife in the east. Because of the fertility of the soil of the town, various agricultural products like Yam, Banana, Palm oil, cassava, maize kolanut, cocoa and other agricultural products prospered in the town.

It is worthy of note that, because of the geographical location of Tonkere, it makes the town very accessible to other neighbouring cities and communities in the state and its environs. Presently, there four major roads that lead to the town. (see Fig. 1 for details). The first is the road linking Tonkere with Ile-Ife on the western side, second to Edunabon in the eastern part, Adoda toward Ede and Osogbo and Osu to Ilesa.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF TONKERE

Agriculture remains the mainstay of the economic structure of the people of Tonkere. One cannot say exactly when people of Tonkere took to farming but it should be recalled that the history of agriculture is as old as man himself. Tonkere, just like any other Yoruba city-states in southwestern Nigeria, depends mainly on the produce from agriculture for their economic survival⁸. Agriculture and agro-allied production in Yoruba societies, Tonkere inclusive, depend largely on the quality of available land for cultivation⁹. Agriculture provides and assures steady supply of food, it also stimulates a high degree of urbanization and specialization and encourages an increase in production.

It is interesting to note that, the production of food crops was crucial among the people of Tonkere. In such case, farming was localized¹⁰. Agriculture which is the oldest occupation in Tonkere is practiced on the local experimentation and local tradition adapted to the soil¹¹. The production of both foods and cash crops are of great important in Tonkere. Both men and women play major roles in cocoa production in the area.



Fig 1. Family labour during cocoa season

It is equally interesting to note that the system of land tenure and land use in Tonkere generally ensured that a great majority of men had land to engage themselves as peasant farmers¹². Apart from food crops, farmers together with their wives engaged in palm oil production for local consumption and commercial purposes. The processing of palm oil is one

of the major gender industries in Tonkere. Palm oil is refined and processed into oil by women while males engage in the harvesting of palm fruits. The contributions of women to the economic development of Tonkere are numerous. They are important in the development of market for farm produce and other trading activities.



Fig 2. Road direction from Tonkere –Oluwatedo town centre

There are other important economic activities in the town apart from agriculture in which both men and women are actively involved. Other important economic activities closely related to farming in Tonkere are hunting, gathering and trade. Gathering and hunting were regarded as economic activities because at a stage of development some people substituted on them¹³. Men were known to be hunters while women engage in gathering of edible fruits for local consumption and commercial purposes. Various craft works are noticeable in Tonkere, ranging from indigenous black soap making, leather work, pottery, mat weaving, locust beans making and blacksmithing. These indigenous craft works are practiced mostly by both sexes in which many of them still engage in farming activities¹³. Because of the nature of occupation of people of Tonkere, blacksmithing work popularly known as *agbede* is very prominent in the town.



Fig. 3. A Blacksmith working at his workshop



Fig. 4. A workshop where cutlasses and hoes are made

Different types of cutlasses and hoes are made by blacksmithing for agricultural purposes, including local guns for hunters.

AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE IN TONKERE

Due to the nature and climatic condition of the town, agriculture remains the main and major occupation of the people of the town. Cassava, yam, vegetable, maize and cocoyam remain the major food crops produced in the town while cocoa production is prominent and prospered in the area. Tonkere is one of the major producers of cocoa in large quantity in the present Osun state¹⁴. The earlier settlers of the town lived in small huts popularly called *aba* which is naturally close to the farm. This may be true because of proper monitoring and supervision of the farm¹⁵. It is interesting to note that both men and women are actively involved in farming activities. Although, there other crops that are meant to be produced by men while their wives only assist during planting and harvesting seasons¹⁶. There are definite planting and harvesting periods for various agricultural crops dictated largely by rainfall pattern during which shifting cultivation, mixed farming, rotational farming e.t.c are practiced¹⁷. Apart from cocoa, palm oil and kolanut also flourish in the town. A large percentage of women involved in farming but never been regarded as farmers.

Traditionally, the role of women in cocoa production and other agricultural activities was predominantly a supporting role, although, while comparing the work women do in the farm, they are more active than men in some cases. Women make essential contribution in the development of agriculture in Tonkere. They were not only active in the production of food crops but also in the production of cocoa. They have contributed in the planting, weeding, harvesting and marketing of cocoa. In respect to development, they place significant roles, this is because development in Tonkere is related to increase in agricultural production which is the main occupation of the town¹⁸.



Fig. 5. A Cocoa woman working in her cocoa farm



Fig 6. A Cocoa woman farmer during the harvesting season

It has been explained earlier that agriculture was the and still the chief occupation and therefore the source of wealth of the people before and after colonial rule. It was the principal activity in Tonkere as it was in other pre-industrial societies¹⁹. Prior to the advent of colonialism, the farmers in Tonkere engaged in food crop production combine with palm oil processing²⁰. It is worthy of note that the indigenous method of cultivation was a widespread system common to all agricultural communities in Yorubaland in which Tonkere is not an exception. Their tools had always remained the traditional short handled hoes and cutlasses which farmers still use up till today²¹. Prior to the middle of 19th century, agricultural production in Tonkere was mainly for subsistence, but by 1900, the local economy was gradually being sucked into metropolitan and western economy through the exportation of cocoa and other agricultural products from Tonkere.

At the inception of cocoa into Tonkere's economy, most farmers, especially, those with smaller holding, still concentrate on the production of food crops because they were not fully aware of the economic importance of cocoa in the area being an alien crop²². Adoption and planting of cocoa was initially slow, but by the first decade of the 20th century, cocoa had become an important export crop in Tonkere. However, as people realized the economic importance of cocoa and heard about the prosperity it had brought to other Yoruba communities, it spread quickly in the region. Cocoa being an alien crop in Tonkere had gender specialization, but the involvement of women at the initial stage of its introduction was mere a supporting role. Men were known to be cocoa farmers while women are regarded as wives of cocoa farmers²³. But today, the position of women in cocoa production and cultivation as gone beyond being a farmers' wives, women are more active in cocoa business to the extent that many of them own cocoa farm of their own independently.



Fig. 7. A Cocoa woman farmer harvesting cocoa

WOMEN AND COCOA PRODUCTION IN TONKERE

Cocoa cultivation in Tonkere appears to have started around early 20th century by some Christian Missionaries and refugees from Oyo who settled in places and like Modakeke, Ilesha, Ondo, Ibadan e.t.c. Many of them later moved to Tonkere for their farming activities, they moved because of the available fertile land for the production of cocoa and other related

cash crops. Some of the farmers had become Christians and belonged to CMS missions established by Saro (Sierra Leone) and Yoruba Christians who developed in their own way of concept “the Bible and the plough”. By 1930s, Tonkere farmers had been known as major producers of cocoa in the region in which women take active role in the production²⁴. The advent of colonialism with their massive demand for cocoa and other cash crops made cultivation more attractive in the region. Also, profit made from cocoa and the status it conferred on the cultivators encouraged more people to take to it. The change of attitude of farmers in Tonkere toward cocoa was partly a response to the introduction of British currency and profit it was expected to generate²⁵.

It should be noted that cocoa production in Tonkere was distinctly gendered. Men initiated cultivation and took responsibility for bush burning, tree felling, bush cleaning and heaping and because of their labour obligations to their fathers and husband, women participated in their usual role of weeding, harvesting, transporting, and processing from the very beginning²⁶. The planting of cocoa rested heavily on the labour of women and their children. Although, the entire family take part in planting of cocoa seedlings but in most cases men leave the actual planting to their wives and children. This may be true because oral interview with Pa J.A Oyewale reveals that cocoa seedlings planted by women germinated well compare with their male counterparts²⁷.



Fig. 8. A woman assisting her husband during harvesting season

The contribution of women during the planting season is more than helping or assisting their husbands, they take active role in the whole process. This assertion could be affirmed through the oral interview with Mr. Akintunde, a seasoned cocoa farmer in Tonkere who posited that his wife is more involved in the area of planting and harvesting of cocoa. He further stated that, through the influence of his wife, he is able to have large farm in Tonkere²⁸.

More importantly, the cocoa boom of 1950s and 1960s gave a new hope to cocoa farmers in Tonkere. This development led to an increase in farm land and full participation of women in the production. Husbands were compelled to ask their wives to increase the amount of time spent on cocoa-related duties²⁹. Apart from direct involvement of women on the farm, women also supplied labour through betrothal of daughters to prospective hardworking husbands. Since girls were often betrothed while they are still young, their fiancé were obliged to labour for many years. At times, to impress the parent-in-laws, prospective husband normally employed the service of his age grade to work on the cocoa farm of his prospective in-law. This is to increase the farmland of the in-law.

At this point, one needs to understand the fact that the expansion of cocoa farm in Tonkere coincided with the economic depression of the early 1930s. This made women to work longer in cocoa farms because their husbands could no longer afford the service of migrant labourers, and at that period, migrant labourers were relatively costly for those who could afford them³⁰. Therefore, it could be clearly understood that women in Tonkere took a leading role in the development of cocoa. The service they rendered has gone beyond mere farmer's wives but women cocoa farmers.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN COCOA PRODUCTION IN TONKERE

Cocoa has become a major cash crop in Tonkere that attracted many people into the town. At the early period of its introduction, women were passive. Men were made to be the owners of the farms while women only support their husbands when the need arises³¹. The active participation of women in cocoa cultivation in Tonkere in the post independence remains a subject of discourse among economic historians. Although, one can argue the involvement of women in cocoa cultivation as the aftermath of the economic depression cum scarcity of labour that changed the attitudes of women in Tonkere toward cultivation of cocoa and other cash crops. With this situation, some women rebelled against their husbands' assertion to the traditional prerogative of labour obligation³². Meanwhile, some women, especially elderly wives asserted their traditional authority over younger wives and left them with the responsibility in the farm. The transfer of duties by the elderly wives to the younger enables the elder wives to begin to export cocoa products to other neighbouring communities and villages³³.

Toward the end of colonial rule in Nigeria, the interest of women farmers in Tonkere began to increase on the production and cultivation of cocoa not because of its economic benefits but some women, especially the elder ones had the fear of their husbands marrying more wives which eventually could lead to their neglect. Meanwhile, some of them ended up having their own cocoa farms. On the other hand, the land tenure system that gave women equal right to own land also boosted the morale of women farmers in Tonkere. This development arose the interest of women to have full commitment on their agricultural pursuit unlike in the pre-colonial period when women were denied access to landed property. The production of cocoa and other cash crops set in motion the land reform which gave better opportunities for women to own land and cultivate on it³⁴.

This assertion was corroborated with the view of Madam Rachael, a prominent woman cocoa farmer in Tonkere. She claimed to have begun her farming activities in 1964 on a small portion of land she inherited from her late husband. She claimed to have started as a peasant farmer but when she realized the economic benefit of cocoa, she migrated to cocoa farming and became an astute cocoa farmer in the area. As a widow, she was able to train her children through the proceeds she realized from cocoa business³⁵. Her assertion was also supported by the view of Olatunji Ojo in his work, he asserted that most of the earlier Ekiti women who engaged in cash crop farming were widow who after the death of their husbands took over their cocoa farms and manage it with their children.

This development led to the gradual rejection of traditional idea concerning widow's right, particularly among those who converted to western religion (Christianity). Traditionally, wives of the deceased were expected to be inherited by his younger brother with the promise that he will take full responsibility of the deceased children and properties, including his cocoa farm³⁶. With the growth of western tradition, some of the widows in Tonkere who had children to cater for could no longer tolerate the unfair treatment meted out to them because some of their brothers-in-law who inherited them had failed to take the responsibility of their children. This led to total taken over of their late husbands' farms and cultivate on it with the assistance of migrant labourers, popularly known as *agatu* to work on their farm with a clear stipulated agreement of the sharing formular³⁷.

Mrs Idowu Olubunmi, one of the women cocoa farmers in Tonkere also shared her farming experience. Although, she claimed to be under the same roof with her husband but she said that she inherited her cocoa farm from her late father being the only surviving child of her parent and ever since, she has been working on the land through the assistance of migrant labourers³⁸. Nearly all the women interviewed had similar experience. Similarly, some of the male cocoa farmers interviewed in Tonkere did not claimed ignorance of this development. They complained about the negative impact of women having their own cocoa farm independently. For instance, Pa Oyewale explained that direct involvement of women in cocoa plantation in Tonkere could be said to have been responsible for scarcity of labour in Tonkere and other cocoa producing communities³⁹. This may be true because women who normally support and assist their husbands on the farms suddenly became planters of cocoa.



Fig. 9. A Cocoa woman farmer during the planting season

This made many of wives to be unwilling to work in their husband's farms since they both compete as farmers. This development led to separation and divorce of many couples⁴⁰. In a nutshell, this development has led to increase in the production of cocoa in Tonkere and its environs. This is simply because of the direct involvement of women in the production; both men and women now struggle to control the available land for cultivation in Tonkere. It could be rightly said that cocoa cultivation has become a legal occupation for both sexes in Tonkere and other cocoa producing areas in south west Nigeria.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN COCOA PRODUCTION

The role of women in Cocoa production is immensely noted not just only in the sphere of social development, but majorly in the economic growth and acclimatization of the product. These impacts ranges from growth, maintenance, and marketing phases; and it cut across domestic retribution and nation building.

It has been explained that most farming system display mixed pattern of women's agricultural responsibilities in the production cycle where one sex is primarily for livestock, vegetable and tree crops and care for their dwellings. Women are engaged in a wide variety of economic activities including construction of houses, land cultivation and harvesting and food storage and marketing.

The economic depression and the Land Tenure system gave both men and women equal right to own land and eventually paved ways for women to own cocoa farm. The involvement of women in cocoa farming had great impacts on their socio-economic life of not only the farming family, but the society at large. For instance;

- women were able to own properties and have control over it;
- women were able to attend to financial responsibility of their wards
- Women serve as the link between the cocoa seed and the geminating process, with reference to the visibilities and dynamism of the climatic stimulus
- Women participation in cocoa production gives a wider scope to the production paradigm as well as more marketing viability in the world market.
- Their participation also remodeled the cultural stagnation in the traditional economic system of cocoa production.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the production of cocoa in Tonkere has a well clear division of labour between men and women. Men were known to be planter while women were just to assist and support their husband in carrying the harvested cocoa seed to the place of drying. The economic depression of 1930s cum post-independence land reforms changed the status of women from mere farm assistant to cocoa planters. The land reform in post-colonial period

gave women equal right to own landed properties to the extent that some wealthy women bought land for the purpose of farming while some acquired it through inheritance.

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