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British Colonial rule and cash crop production in Igalaland, 1900-1960

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Abstract

This study analyses cash crop production, marketing and distribution in an agrarian society, the colonial economy of Igalaland (Central Nigeria). The work covers the period between 1900 and 1960, during which Igalaland became an epicentre of the transformations that attended a process that became symbolic of colonial economic changes. The effort to critique the history of the food economy in Igalaland under colonial rule enriches the analysis of the lasting footprints of colonial exactions and economic structures, and their role in shaping the trajectory of exploitation and resilience within the food sector. This aspect of the Igala economic history is yet to receive the critical attention it deserved. This constitutes a major gap in the history of the region. The research principally relied on primary sources from the Kaduna and Ibadan branches of the National Archives of Nigeria, secondary sources, and semistructured interviews. The paper argued that, despite the overall negative implications of colonial policies on Igalaland, the fortunes of the colonial administration, middlemen, and farmers were bettered from 1945 as a result of the colonial emphasis on the production and marketing of food and export crops.

Keywords: Colonial rule, Cash crops, Agriculture, Igalaland

Introduction

The British colonial regime transformed the scope of cash crop farming in Nigeria and Igalaland in particular, replacing indigenous subsistence farming

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with commercialized cash crop farming.[1] Before colonization, the Igala people practiced small-scale farming, growing crops like yams, millet, and sorghum for local consumption and trade.[2] This system was ecologically and economically self-sustaining. The onset of colonial rule brought a domineering economic system that focused on cash crop exploitation to satisfy palm oil and cotton production for European industries.[3] Colonial policies brought about radical changes in land ownership patterns. Myriads of farmland became the property of British administrators and trading companies. The introduction of taxation such as the hut and poll tax forced some Igala farmers to turn to cash cropping to sustain their livelihood.[4] Most subsistence farming households however, became economically overburdened as they tried to meet the dual subsistence and market expectations of colonial economies.[5]

Moreover, the creation of price control, enabled colonial administration to manage the pricing and marketing of cash crops, thus, restricting the profit margins of local farmers[6]. These policies further deepened economic inequalities by restricting the mobility of Igala farmers's sophisticated investments in farming techniques, advanced farming infrastructure. Farmers started to actively seek ways to bypass colonial restrictions resulting in tax evasion, land grabbing, and some forming informal networks for trade.[7]

Colonial rule inflicted great hardships, which the trend continued to post-colonial agriculture did not counter the embedded fundamental inequalities wrought during the colonial period.[8]Government attempts at agricultural policies like Operation Feed the Nation and Green Revolution intended to modernize farming, but were mostly countered by lack of policy coherence and inadequacy of physical structures.[9] Because of this, many of the issues facing Igala farmers during the colonial period still exist today, and comprehensive reforms in agriculture are needed to achieve sustainable economic growth and food self-reliance in the region.

This paper explores the historical evolution of cash crop production in Igalaland under British rule, examining its economic, social, and political consequences.

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[1]Mohammed, Sanni Abdulkadir. An Economic History of IGALALAND Central Nigeria: 1896-1939. (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 2014) 85-89.
[2]O. N. Njokwu, Economic History of Nigeria 19th and 20th Century. (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 2001) 134.
[3]Danladi, Abah, and ChijiokeNwosumba Victor. "The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, Nigeria 1920-1956." *International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2015)
[4]Abah, Danladi, and Tanko A. Adihikon. "Avoidance, Evasion and Refusal: Women Tax Resistance Movement in Colonial Igalaland of Northern Nigeria, 1900-1960." *Lapai Journal of Humanities* 11, no. 5 (2020): 54-80
[5]O.N, Njokwu. Economic History of Nigeria, 134
[6]U. J., Ineke. 2025. "The Food Economy of Colonial Igalaland, 1900-1960." *Economic History in Developing Regions,* Vol. 40, 2 (2025) doi.org/10.1080/20780389.2025.2504681
[7]Abah, Danladi and Adihikon, Tanko A.*Igalaland of Northern Nigeria*, 54-80
[8]Omorogiuwa, Omorogbe, Jelena Zivkovic, and Fatima Ademoh. "The Role of Agriculture in the Economic Development of Nigeria." *European Scientific Journal* 10, no. 4 (2014)
[9] Boafo, James, and Kristen Lyons. "The Rhetoric and Farmers' Lived Realities of the Green Revolution in Africa: Case Study of the Brong Ahafo Region in Ghana." Journal of Asian and African Studies 57, no. 3 (2022): 406-423

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By analysing colonial policies and their long-term effects, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on post-colonial agricultural development in Nigeria.

Igala Economy Before British Colonial Rule

Prior to the establishment of British colonial rule, the Igala economy relied mainly on farming with subsistence agriculture as its key component. Farmers in the Igala region grew and traded essential crops such as yam, millet, sorghum, and vegetables not only to sustain the population but also for trade within and outside the region.[10] Their farming methods were mostly traditional which involved shifting cultivation with simple implements like hoes and cutlasses. Supplementing the economy and food supply was fishing in the fertile floodplains of the River Niger and Benue, which was additionally supported by the fertile environment.

In the pre-colonial era, trade was an important aspect of the Igala economy. Economic activities with neighbouring groups like Nupe, Jukun, and even the Igbo were made possible due to the favourable positioning of Igalaland on the major trade routes in Nigeria and in a transition belt in Nigeria. As a result of this, Idah and other market centres became actively involved in the selling and buying of agricultural produce, crafts, livestock, and goods. Salt, kola nuts, and iron tools were also extremely valuable commodities traded regionally and beyond.[11] Trade which is a fundamental part of inter-group relation began to thrive as people from the neighborhood brought their produce to the market creating equitable distribution of goods to the people.

Beyond farming and commerce, craft production also contributed to the economy of the Igala region. Significant Industries, such as blacksmithing, pottery, and weaving supplied necessary tools, utensils, and clothing materials. For economic and security reasons, blacksmiths produced farming tools and weapons.The Igala women were not left out of the allied industry as they contributed the uniqueness of their craft to the economy. Among Igala women, pottery was a common pastime, and clay pots were used for cooking and storage. The weaving industry produced textiles for local consumption and for trade with other communities.[12]

The economy of the Igala before colonial rule was to land. Land was divided among villages and collectively owned, receiving the agricultural elders guarantee so that every villager was able access the land.[13] This system avoided land monopolies-control and facilitated coperate farming especially among age grades leading to a boost in enthusiasm and production. Family lineages were built around land birthright, enabling customary laws, which maintained the land-able control regardless of family ownership. These traditional laws were reinforced by the socio-political structure of Igalaland.

[10] U.J., Ineke. 2025. "The Food Economy of Colonial Igalaland, 1900-1960." ….2
[11] Okwoli, P. E. *A Short History of Igala*. Ilorin: Maltama, 1998
[12] Abah, Danladi and Adihikon, Tanko A. Igalaland of Northern Nigeria, 54-80
[13] Abdulkadir, An Economic History of Igalaland, 85-89

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As the supreme ruler, the Attah of Igala exercised control over the economy which allowed him to manage social conflicts and disputes among traders and farmers for stability.[14] The royal court facilitated trade agreements and alliances with neighbouring kingdoms, thereby enhancing economic prosperity.

British Colonial Agricultural Policies in Igalaland

The British control of Igalaland from 1900 to 1960 changed the traditional economy by integrating the indigenous economy into the global capitalist system. The colonial emphasis was focused on cash crop farming, taxation policies, the restructuring of land tenure, and infrastructural development that advanced the British interests at the Igala people's expense.[15]

One of the earliest and most impactful colonial policies was taxation. As a result of this, farmers were forced to grow cash crops like cotton, rubber, or palm oil in order to raise the money with which taxes were paid. This system however, became a burden for Igala Farmers as they were structurally pushed from subsistence farming to commercial farming. Farming practices became more difficult to sustain economically leading to increased food insecurity, particularly for a large section of small farmers.[16]

Furthermore, the British administration started export crop agriculture by setting up large-scale farms called plantations. These were held by European firms like the Royal Niger Company and United African Company who dominated and set prices which economically disadvantaged local farmers. Hence, the economic autonomy of Igala farmers was limited when colonial authorities forced the farmers to sell their produce using a pricing system set by the colonial authorities.[17]

Another substantial colonial intrusion was the reorganizing of land tenure systems. Under customary Igala practice, land was regarded as belonging to the community and was distributed for farming equitably. However, British Policies changed some portions of land into private lands thereby enabling European and colonial elite firms to buy massive chunks of agricultural land. This policy diminished the indigenous control of agricultural resources and increased the scarcity of farmlands for many local farmers.[18]

Also, the development of infrastructure was another distinctive feature of British colonial agricultural policies. Roads such as the Idah-Nsukka and Lokoja-Ankpa-Otukpa routes were constructed with the sole aim of improving the movement of cash crops to the export markets at the expense of local economic development. Although these infrastructure improvements enhanced transportation, they were not philanthropically motivated or to serve the locals

[14]Miachi, The Incarnate Being Phenomenon, 115
[15]Abah, Danladi and Adihikon, Tanko A. Igalaland of Northern Nigeria, 54-80
[16] Stephen, Ocheni and Basil C. Nwankwo. Analysis of Colonialism and Its Impact in Africa. *Cross-Cultural Communication* 8, no. 3 (2012): 46-54.
[17]Danladi, Abah, and ChijiokeNwosumba Victor. "The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, Nigeria 1920-1956." *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL* 2, no. 2 (2015)
[18]O.N, Njokwu. Economic History of Nigeria, 134

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they were undertaken within the context of forced labour policies which Igala farmers were subjected to, resulting in harsh treatment and abusive working conditions.[19]

The cumulative effect of these policies was the weakening of the Igala economy, increased rural poverty, and long-term dependence on cash crop production. The colonial economic structure undermined indigenous agricultural systems and created economic disparities that persist in Igalaland today.[20]

Impact of British Colonial Rule on Cash Crop Production in Igalaland 1900-1960

The evolution of Igalaland's agriculture, particularly with regards to their cash crop cultivation, suffered greatly as a result of the British colonial control between 1900 and 1960. The British sought to set up an economy within their colonies to service Britain, focusing on exports of palm oil, rubber, and cotton, completely neglecting the subsistence system of farming. This re-orientation also helped increases dependency on Igala market economy agriculture cultivate towards non-sustainable perennial crops.[21]

In order to encourage crop production, the British added on additional controls through a taxation regime which forced cash cropping into Igala farmers. In their zeal to integrate capitalism, taxes were set that made it impossible not to pay tax thereby systematically integrated local spending and earnings to a global capitalistic framework. These taxes dictated that all traditional food crops had to be replaced with cash crops.[22]Farmers were already facing severe poverty due to the economic control exercised over price and trade through their trading firms of the Royal Niger Company and United African Company.[23]

They also set up infrastructural facilities not intended to improve the economic conditions of the locals but aimed at facilitating cash crop exports. Roads like Idah-Nsukka and Lokoja-Ankpa-Otukpa were mainly used for ferrying agricultural products to be shipped at the export ports. These schemes were underpinned by forced labour, and thus exploited Igala farmers and increased poverty in the countryside.[24]

In addition, colonial policies interfered with the locally defined agricultural production and marketing systems. British introduced a hierarchy of markets that uncontrolled and dominated pricing through British firms, leaving local producers completely defenceless. Thus, the indigenous system has been uprooted without any limitations.[25]

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[19] Abdulkadir, An Economic History of Igalaland, 85-89
[20]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[21]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[22]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[23]Abah, Danladi and Adihikon, Tanko A.*Igalaland of Northern Nigeria*, 54-80
[24] Abdulkadir, An Economic History of Igalaland, 85-89
[25]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2

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The long-term effects of British colonial rule on cash crop production in Igalaland were profound. The emphasis on cash crops over subsistence farming created food insecurity, weakened traditional farming practices, and entrenched economic dependence on global markets. Many of these structural inequalities persist today, affecting agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods in Igalaland.[26]

Economic Consequences of British Colonial Rule in Igalaland

The British colonial rule from 1900 to 1960 in Igalaland had profound impact economically and socially. These impacts stemmed from policies aimed at reorganizing the local economy to align with British capitalist interests, whilst deliberately displacing indigenous social and economic systems.[27]

The integration of Igalaland into the global capitalist economy was one of the most fundamental actions taken during the colonial period. The British implemented a cash crop system, which required Igala farmers to shift their focus from subsistence farming to the cultivation of export crops such as palm oil, rubber, and cotton. During the colonial period, traditional farming to meet food and subsistence needs was already a norm, and this change further exacerbated the food insecurity problem.[28]

The imposition of taxation was another major economic consequence. Igala farmers were subjected to multiple forms of colonial taxes, including direct taxation and levies on agricultural produce. These taxes forced many farmers to abandon traditional self-sufficient farming in favour of cash crop cultivation to generate income for tax payments.[29] The taxation system also led to increased labour migration, as many Igala men left their villages in search of wage labour in colonial plantations and urban centres to meet tax obligations.[30]

Furthermore, the colonial restructuring of land tenure significantly altered the economic landscape. Traditionally, land in Igalaland was communally owned and managed, ensuring equitable access to agricultural resources. However, the British introduced individual land ownership, making it easier for colonial officials and European firms to acquire large tracts of land. This led to widespread land dispossession among indigenous farmers, increasing economic disparities within Igala society.[31]

The post-war years in Igalaland witnessed a phenomenal burst of development, largely a result of British policy measures for structural reform and development of natural resources within the region. The focus at the outset lay on structural reform, primary school development, and encouraging community-based road schemes; however, focus later shifted towards economic

[26]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[27]Ocheni and Nwankwo, "Analysis of Colonialism," 48
[28]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[29]Abah, Danladi and Adihikon, Tanko A.*Igalaland of Northern Nigeria*, 54-80
[30] O.N, Njokwu. Economic History of Nigeria, 134
[31]Abdulkadir, An Economic History of Igalaland, 85-89.

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ventures with a focus on exploiting the agrarian potential within the Division. The developmental burst, with increased financial investment, resulted in a sharp increase in living standards among members of the Igala community. Wealth distribution witnessed a great improvement within the Division, culminating into a near-complete elimination of poverty for the first time. However, there were indications, however faint, against this speedy progress that the time for consolidating these gains was rushing fast.[32]

There was a significant shift in the economy within the palm oil industry, which became a centre point for British economic control over Igala. Three palm oil processing mills were commissioned at strategic locations at Ayangba, Olla, and Alade during its second year of operations, leading to a great improvement in local production figures as well as financial returns. Despite transportation difficulties around Alade, total purchasing of palm fruit rose to 3,190 tons, compared with a figure of 2,240 tons for a year earlier. The increase earned local producers a return income of £25,300, aside from mill earnings worth £2,530. The trend continued with another 137 acres planted with quality palm seedlings, supplementing the 130 planted previously. Of great value, however, the Northern Regional Production Development Board allocated a total figure of £64,200 for constructing five additional mills and for improving plantationsa project subject to stabilization on global markets. The opening three new mills showcased the determination on the part of the colonial authorities to firmly place Igala on the palm oil industry's map.[33]

British colonialism aided other types of farming growing along with palm oil. Cotton farming, particularly in the Ife region, changed but stayed significant, with 45 tons of cotton seed distributed, earning approximately £20,000 that year. Despite a small drought lowering rains to 51 inches, food crop farming was good, and yam exports to the south regions sold at higher prices than normal. Plans to initiate deep-water rice farming in Mozum were unsuccessful, demonstrating the boundaries of colonial plans to farm that conflicted with the needs of local workers. Conversely, upland rice farming increased somewhat, assisted by new private rice mills in Ibaji and Odugbo. A demonstration farm was also established in Ibaji to instruct modern rice planting techniques. Meanwhile, three farms in Ankpa, Dekina, and Oguma improved due to improved supervision. Five new nurseries were initiated in Ayangba, Alade, and Ede (Idah), demonstrating the broader aim to transform Igalaland's farming for imperial economic purposes.[34]

The end of British colonial rule in Nigeria in 1960 marked a significant turning point for agriculture in Igalaland. After decades of colonial economic exploitation, land alienation, and forced cash crop production, the transition to an independent agricultural system came with both opportunities and challenges. While independence brought hopes of economic self-sufficiency, the

[32] Pedraza, H. J. Igala Division Annual Report. Part I – General. District Officer's Report, 1951, 1-2
[33] Pedraza, Igala Division Annual Report, 1-2
[34] Pedraza, Igala Division Annual Report, 1-2

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colonial legacy of cash crop dependency, taxation, and land tenure reforms continued to shape post-colonial agriculture in Igalaland.[35]

The Transition from Colonial to Post-Colonial Agriculture

Post British colonial rule, Nigeria sought to restore control over the agriculture industry and rural economies. In the early years of post-colonial Nigeria, there were attempts to boost the production of staple food crops that had been neglected during colonization, alongside the palm oil, rubber, and cotton industries.[36] The British also constructed various systems such as the market dependencies and land ownership frameworks which made it extremely challenging for many Igala farmers to shift from cash crop farming to diversified farming.

The policies introduced by the post-colonial government focused on the advanced modernization of agriculture through mechanization and rural development programs. There were new government policies including the formation of farm settlements, cooperative societies, and subsidization of agricultural inputs to enhance productivity. However, these policies concentrated in other regions, and as a result, Igalaland was relatively neglected in national agricultural planning. [37]

Challenges in the Post-Colonial Agricultural System

A major problem encountered in the period of transition from colonial to post-colonial agriculture has been the persistence of cash crop agriculture. There was still a great demand for cash crops overseas and many Igala farmers found it hard to return to subsistence farming exclusively. A structural dependence on export agriculture and a lack of strong local industry meant that farmers had little choice but to depend on those British-established networks to get their crops to market. [38]

Problem of land tenure continued to exist as well. Although independence theoretically restored land to the people, the land reform process initiated by the colonial masters had changed traditional land tenure systems irrevocably. It was no longer possible for countless farmers to recuperate land occupied by plantations or given away via colonial re-distribution. This continued to create land disputes and economic inequalities in rural Igalaland.[39]

Another major challenge was rural infrastructure. Although some roads and transportation networks were built during colonial rule, they primarily served the interests of European traders rather than local farmers. After independence, many of these infrastructures deteriorated due to a lack of maintenance and

[35]Ocheni and Nwankwo, "Analysis of Colonialism," 48.
[36]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2.
[37] O.N, Njokwu. Economic History of Nigeria, 134
[38] Abdulkadir, An Economic History of Igalaland, 85-89
[39]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2

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government funding, making it difficult for Igala farmers to access markets and transport goods efficiently.[40]

Conclusion

British colonial rule had a profound and lasting impact on agriculture in Igalaland, restructuring traditional farming systems to serve colonial economic interests. The forced transition from subsistence farming to cash crop production led to food insecurity, economic hardship, and increased dependency on colonial trade networks.[41] The introduction of taxation further deepened economic challenges, compelling farmers to abandon traditional farming practices and shift towards cash crop cultivation to meet financial obligations.[42]

Resistance to these policies took many forms, including tax revolts, armed conflicts, and trade sabotage. Despite these efforts, the colonial government-maintained control through land tenure reforms and indirect rule, weakening indigenous governance structures. This resistance took place in many of the province from Ankpa to Dekina and Bassa Nge in Takete[43] Adaptation strategies, such as mixed farming and participation in colonial trade, allowed some Igala farmers to navigate the challenges of colonial rule, but these adjustments did not eliminate the systemic exploitation they faced.[44]

The transition to post-colonial agriculture did not immediately resolve the economic inequalities established during colonial rule. The persistence of cash crop dependency, land ownership disputes, and inadequate rural infrastructure limited agricultural progress.[45]Although post-independence governments introduced modernization initiatives, these efforts often failed to reach Igalaland effectively, leaving many farmers struggling with the same structural challenges imposed by British colonialism.[46]

For long-term agricultural growth in Igalaland, there is a need for comprehensive land reforms, improved rural infrastructure, and sustainable farming policies. Strengthening local markets, providing better access to agricultural resources, and investing in rural education can help reverse the negative effects of colonial rule. Understanding the historical impact of colonial policies on Igala agriculture is essential for shaping policies that support agricultural self-sufficiency, economic empowerment, and rural development in the region.

[40]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[41]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[42]Abah, Danladi and Adihikon, Tanko A.*Igalaland of Northern Nigeria*, 54-80
[43]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[44]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2
[45]Abah&Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2Abah &Nwosumba, The Dynamics of Palm Kernels Marketing in Igala Area, 2Abdulkadir, An Economic History of Igalaland, 85-89
[46]Ocheni and Nwankwo, "Analysis of Colonialism," 48

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