

African Research Review

An International *Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

Vol. 7 (4), Serial No. 31, September, 2013:120-137

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.7i4.8>

Staple Food and Livestock Production among the Yoruba of the Colonial Nigeria: The Ekiti Experience

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Abstract

Traditionally, the Ekiti were known for the production of yam, cocoyam, plantain, cassava and other root crops which people were forced to produce, particularly as a result of the draught of the 1920s. With migrants workers from the East and Middle Belt particularly, Ekiti people were able to produce more than enough food that made them self-reliant. They were also good in livestock production with purely traditional methods. Such livestock included goats, sheep, dogs, fowls, among others. In fact, livestock production was the preoccupation of both men and women and it solely depended on traditional methods because people were not receptive to some innovations brought by modernity. Staple food and livestock production were the economic backbone of the people before the era of cocoa boom.

Introduction

In the colonial period, before the early 1950s, Ekiti was not known for any notable industry but seen as people whose devotion to, and proficiency in, farming was nationally acknowledgement through some agricultural shows in the old Western Region (Sportlighting Town 2, 1990). In fact, the dexterous farming capability of the Ekiti people earned them in Lagos, the enviable nickname, *ara oke*, meaning people very distant from a city but hardworking and productive in farming (Onofowokan, 1969). During this period, however, Ekiti was undoubtedly known as being in 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, et. al, eds., 2001).

It was not until the 1940s that the farming impact of Ekiti was felt in the major cities of Western Region, particularly Lagos, Ibadan and Osogbo; when Ekiti became the major supplier of staple food to these and other towns. This was the period the Ekiti people were also recognized as very hefty, strong and physically stable because of their much loved, most notable and popular food called *iyam* (pounded yam). According to A. Oguntuyi (Oguntuyi, 1973:13):

The staple food in Ekiti for years was pounded Yam (*Iyan*). A wealthy man ate it three times a day, the poor once a day... When yams were not available (that is not brought from the farm), any other article of food could be used as a substitute, but it must be pounded (i.e. boiled corn, plantain, cassava).

During the early colonial period, before cocoa became a very lucrative farming, the Ekiti had an aggressive approach to farming. This was very evident in the production of a variety of staple crops through which, by the 1940s and 1950s, many Ekiti men and women had had a high level of economic security.

To the Ekiti farmers of the colonial period, there was no difference between staple food and livestock production. This was because it was natural for a staple food farmer to also, essentially, own and raise livestock. No doubt, the colonial Ekiti experienced high socio-economic and educational development through staple food and livestock production.

Staple food production

The production of staple food in Ekiti in the colonial period was not all that different from the situation in the pre-colonial period, in spite of certain colonial influences. However, apart from yam, cocoyam and rice, the Ekiti were also very rich in the production of grain crops which were cultivated before colonization. Notable grain crops were *kokondo* and *otili*. Some factors were however responsible for this in the colonial period. These were the 1919 epidemic or influenza and the First World War which caused the death of many farmers or brought sickness, thereby creating food shortage and making people turn to grain crops which well compensated for root crops. Mr. P. Donald, the Acting District Officer for Ekiti, commented on this in his Annual Report on Agriculture (Donald, 1932):

The Honourable Divisional Officer may like to know that the Ekiti people who though were self-sufficient in root crop production, among others, before the majesty rule, have diversified their food crops. They have now shown increased interest in planting those crops which they had for years neglected because of the supremacy of yams which earned the people the nickname “pounded-yam-eaters”. Perhaps what created this situation was the unfortunate epidemic and the 1st World War, all of which brought famine over a decade ago. Of course though to a little extent some farming innovations or propaganda by the government were also part of what now make Ekiti a good territory for root and grain crops”.

The above reaction clearly shows that Ekiti was able to fight food shortage with the cultivation of grains. This seems to contradict the belief that in the colonial period, Ekiti and other Yoruba groups in the west, lacked adequate food supply and therefore depended on “foreign sources’ to survive as echoed in Oladele Omishore (1991, 8):

In the 1980s, Nigeria discovered that there were severe structural defects in the economy because of its dependence on foreign sources for food to nourish its rapidly growing population. It would seem that the beginning of this problem can be traced to the colonial experience with agriculture.

The above assertion will definitely exclude Ekiti that produced more than enough staple food for its growing population. For example, the Ekiti people, who never depended on external sources for food, even saw Western education as secondary to agriculture or farming, or as disturbing to farming (Olofin, 2006).

This was why government and the missionaries found it difficult to make many pupils attend school in Ekiti until the early 1920s. This period, Mr. Eagleton of the Education Department, Lagos, during his visit to Ado-Ekiti, advised the Provincial Officer to “make all the schools in the interior start their lessons at noon, particularly in the farming seasons” (Eagleton, 1925). This reaction was a follow-up to a letter from the Resident District Officer, R. Jacobson, who was “seriously disturbed” about ‘the sparse population of pupils who preferred to follow their parents to farm very early in the morning...’ (Jacobson, 1924). By 1928, particularly in the area now known as Irepodun/Ifelodun Local Government Area of Ekiti State, education for over-aged boys and girls was introduced to supplement the existing one. The adult, evening, lessons began at around 2 p.m., after many people must have returned from their farms, some kilometres away (Dare Agbedana, 1970).

With this system, farming did not suffer as initially expected by parents. In fact, farming became the pragmatic philosophy of the Ekiti

people, believing that Western Education without farming was completely useless; as fanatically expressed in a very popular song which became an “anthem” to be sung, very mandatorily every morning in schools before lessons began:

Iwe kiko
Lai si oko, ati ada
Koi pe o
Koi pe o
Ise agbe
Ise ile wa
Enikosise
Yio ma jale
Iwe kiko, etc.

English Translation

Western Education
Without hoes, and cutlasses (farming)
Is incomplete (insufficient for livelihood)
Is incomplete (insufficient for livelihood)
Farming (agriculture)
Is our traditional/natural occupation
He who does not farm
Will eventually be a thief
Western Education, etc. (Agbedana, 1970).

This was how the Ekiti people retained their farming tradition without jeopardizing their chances for the new, Western educational system which they also embraced fanatically, particularly with the introduction of free education in the early 1950s by Obafemi Awolowo, the premier of Western Region.

By the 1920s, because of the serious draught that affected the whole of Yorubaland, and which brought famine, Ekiti farmers began to plant more cassava, which had not been a popular food among the people. This was unlike the situation with the Ondos and the Ijebus

who made cassava one of their main staple food. The Ekiti also during and after World War II began to cultivate water yam, *esuru* and other root crops along with the popular yam which also had varieties like white yam (*isu funfun* or *usu fifun*), *olo* or *adan*, *iyán* and *isu afo*. This was a way of fighting famine. According to a Departmental and Miscellaneous Report on Agriculture (N.A.I., Ondo Prof. E. 28, 1925):

In the middle of the year, there was food shortage in the Province owing the draught. The Ekiti yam crop in particular was severely affected and repercussions of this were felt in the Ondo Division... a “grow more food” campaign was carried out by the Agricultural staff, and the farmers responded....

However, to survive the famine, the Ekiti people had to grudgingly patronize those food crops which had not been traditionally favoured by the people. These crops, as unpopular as they were, eventually became part of Ekiti root crop cultivation throughout the colonial period (see Table 1). The opening of the school of Agriculture in Ibadan in 1927 and in Akure in 1942 as well as the influence of the Moor Plantation in Ibadan, to some extent, helped many Ekiti farmers, especially in Ado, Ifaki, Ikere, Ijero, Ikole and Igbara-Odo, among others, to develop interest in acquiring or giving more land areas for large scale root crop production (Oyenuga, 1967). No wonder, Ekiti people were able to produce staple food so abundantly that they were able to sell the surplus in the major cities of Western Region in the 1940s.

While many Ekiti farmers were already being influenced by the new methods of crop production, taught by the trained agriculture students sent to many parts of Western Region, including Ekiti, some farmers rigidly held on to their age-old methods of farming. However, on the whole, by 1945, agriculture in Ekiti had generally experienced developmental changes brought about by improved farming methods, road and trade systems (Oloidi, 2011).

This discussion of staple food will be incomplete without mentioning other staple foods like plantain and the grain crops which were an integral part of Ekiti agriculture in the colonial period. Ekiti had many types of grain crops, but the main ones were maize, rice and beans (with many varieties). The varieties of local beans produced very abundantly in the colonial period included *otili*, *kokondo* or *pakala* and feregede (fiofio). Melon and pepper were also commonly produced by all Ekiti farmers. They appeared to be more abundantly cultivated in Ekiti south, especially in Ikogosi, Igbara-Odo, Igbara-Oke, Ogotun and Ilawe. Part of the Ekiti staple food cultivated during the colonial period were okra, walnut, varieties of vegetables, amaritus garden eggs, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and groundnuts.

The colonial Ekiti considered grain crops generally as secondary staple food; which was why they were taken mainly as breakfast and, to some extent, as lunch. It was not in the culture of the Ekiti to use grains for dinner. Root crops like yam and cocoyam were traditional staples in this regard.

To an Ekiti man or woman, offering grains like beans, *ewa*, or even rice to somebody for dinner was not only strange but also seen as very unconventional and insulting. Beans, cooked or fried into *akara* (cake) balls, processed maize, in forms of *ogi* or *eko* (pap), roasted or fried plantain or processed dried powdered plantain, in form of *amala* with soup, were very popular food for breakfast.

For lunch, cooked or roasted yam or beans cooked with yam or pounded yam was also common food. To an average Ekiti, the most important meal was the dinner which, as already stated, must be pounded yam. Many families would even eat pounded yam two or three times a day.

Cassava product like *garri* or *eba* with soup was sparingly eaten and only for lunch. The production of staple food crops largely depended on the traditional agricultural methods, based on the use of hoes, cutlasses and knives, among other farming implements (Fig. 1).

Table 1: Root Crop Production and Locations, July 1950

| Yam | Cocoyam | Cassava | Varieties |
|---|--|---|---|
| All Ekiti towns. Cultivation-very vigorous | All Ekiti towns, but mainly in Ilawe, Igede, Iyin (Uyin), Ise, Emure, Ikere, Igbara-Odo, Igbara-Oke, Aramoko, Ado, Ogotun, Ikole, Ijero, Ikogosi Igbemo, Ushi Ido-Ajinanre Awo, Ugbole, Iworoko, Afao, Are, etc. Cultivation very vigorous | All Ekiti towns. Cultivation- not vigorous | All Ekiti towns. Cultivation-fairly vigorous |

Source: N.A.I., Ondo Prof. ¼ File No. C040, 1950, p. 4.

Shifting cultivation and burning continued to be the tradition, while the real traditional farmers feared or rejected modern innovations. Not even the compulsory school farms, usually located at schools' premises to educate pupils about new methods or techniques of farming, and could change some of the farmers' attitude. This was in spite of excellent yields, through application of manure or fertilizer, which was thought to be an indirect way to influence pupils' parents.

However, Ekiti farmers had no problem producing more than enough staple food for consumption and even for sale, as already understood, particularly when they had abundant labour force through fellow farmers, children and, later, migrant workers from the Middle Belt, Eastern Nigeria and the Mid-West. These migrant "laboures whose influx was very noticeable after the war (2nd World War) became a strong labour force in Ekiti agriculture, especially when more school children began to have less time to farm with their parents" (Akomolafe, 2008). An Administrative Report on Agriculture in Ekiti in 1952 makes this clearer (N.A.I., Ekiti Div. 1952):

... not even the trained Agricultural Assistants posted to various farm centres in Ado, Ijero, Ikole and many other towns to carry out extension work could change the people's traditional mode of farming. The

farmers were not in a hurry to adopt modern farming methods to produce staple food. This is understandable since their own methods have also proved to be a big success; more so when hundreds of migrant workers have also been absorbed for various agricultural activities on various terms of agreement....

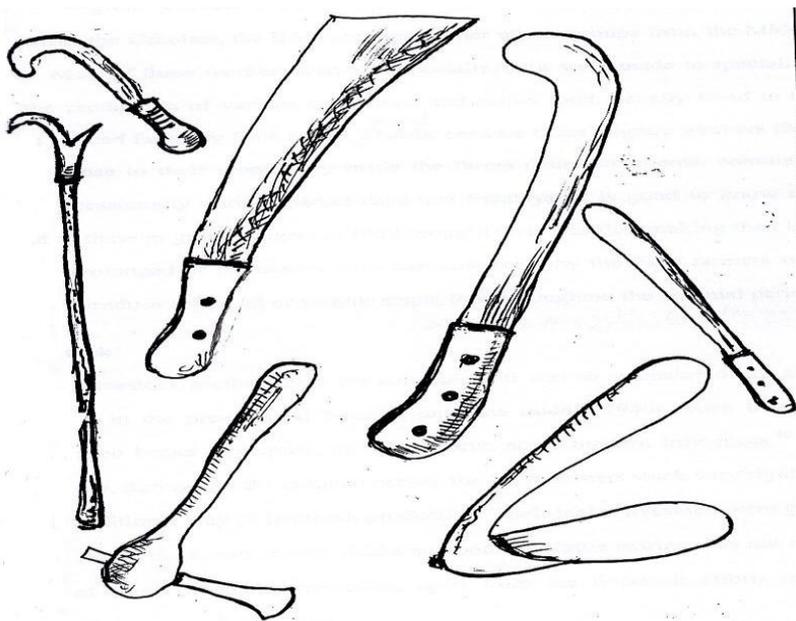


Fig. 1: Farming Implements in the Colonial Ekiti.

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These migrant workers were mainly the Igbos, the Igalas, the Ebiras, the Itsekiris, the Urhobos, the Edos and some other ethnic groups from the Middle Belt. Most of these workers who also specialized, or were made to specialize, in the production of various cash crops and staple

food, usually lived on the farm locations, far away from home. Because these migrant workers liked to be close to their crops, they made the farms their settlements, coming to town occasionally during market days and Sundays. Most of these migrant workers in Ekiti brought their families, making their stay either prolonged or eventually permanent.

Livestock

Livestock production method in colonial Ekiti was not all that different from that of the pre-colonial Nigeria, until the middle 1940s when livestock production was, to some extent, influenced by those trained in Agriculture schools (Oyenuga, 1967). But generally, throughout the colonial period, Ekiti farmers stuck very rigidly to their traditional way of livestock production. Their major livestock were goats, pigs, sheep, dogs, cats, fowls, and ducks, among others. Cattle rearing was not really part of Ekiti livestock production, apart from the livestock efforts of the Hausa/Fulani migrants in Ekiti.

The Ekiti women played major roles in livestock production. They were mainly responsible for the feeding, protection or care and sale of reared animals. Of course, the men also played supportive roles in this regard, particularly by providing, through farm products, feeding materials for the animals and birds. Women were very sensitive to the condition of these livestock in that they knew when animals were sick, lean or lacked appetite for eating. They were very good in providing for the animals or birds, like fowls and ducks, effective preventive medicinal substances or anti-flu concoctions. Women were also quick to know whether or not the number of particular livestock was complete, particularly when animals came home in the evenings. They were the ones who raised alarm when some of the livestock were missing, and the ones to find the reasons for this. Very rarely were animals stolen by neighbours.

In the colonial Ekiti, and even in other Yoruba groups, animals were not caged and restricted in their movements. They were allowed to roam freely beyond the owners' immediate environment. That is,

goats, sheep and fowls, among others, were reared “on free range system” (Olaitan & Idowu, 2002). These animals, particularly goats and more especially sheep, which were usually not molested “move in groups early in the morning to look for food (or additional food) and also return in groups... the fowls are allowed to be free in the house” (Olaitan & Idowu, 2002). Goats and fowls could occasionally intrude, in a homely manner, into their owners’ private rooms, but were also quickly driven out in a homely manner. However, dogs were an exemption, because of their special domestic and human relationship with people; they could enter any room without restriction.

Even without providing special locations for their abode, particularly at night, these animals, especially goats and fowls, used to naturally find their permanent sleeping places around their owners’ houses or yards. On rare occasions would they be forced into their sleeping places at night. Depending on the designs of houses, animals were allowed to sleep either in the backyard or side yard of a house. Goats preferred loose wood structures or rough mud enclosures, covered on top against rain. Some slept in the open premises that were protected from rain. Fowls preferred sleeping in high or elevated places, but where these were not available, they would cluster together in some loosely protected areas or open enclosures beside their owners’ houses. Occasionally, fowls would also occupy spaces near goats at night. These animals, particularly fowls, were always the first to wake up in the morning.

There were, however, some dangers to livestock production in the colonial Ekiti. For example, the roaming culture of livestock exposed these animals to disease and theft. Occasionally, some of the animals would be killed accidentally by motor vehicles. Also occasionally, some embittered neighbours whose properties or food items had been destroyed or eaten up by these animals would, in annoyance, inflict physical injury on the animals. Very rarely, however, some animals could also be poisoned or killed for the above seasons.

The most devastating danger to livestock in colonial Ekiti, however, were the traditional mass killing of all the birds and animals seen on the streets during certain ceremonial or ritual occasions in many communities. The birds and animals included fowls, ducks, pigeons, goats, sheep, dogs and pigs. Some towns carried out certain traditional rites or activities when their kings died; some when particular powerful High Chiefs died or when strongly ritualistic festivals were being celebrated. On each occasion, using Igede-Ekiti as an example, whenever a king died, very early in the morning and for a number of days, all adults and grown up boys, armed with big knives, clubs, cutlasses and other hunting objects, would troop to the streets freely killing all sighted animals. These animals would be deposited at designated places where they would be roasted, cut into pieces and shared according to tradition. It is important, however, to know that before these killing activities took place, people would be warned or notified so that they could keep their livestock indoor or off the streets for the mandated number of days.

Fowls were reared at home and also in the farms by men. Those reared in the farms were by far greater in number than those reared at home. Though not all farmers practised this, those engaged in it used to build thatched huts for these fowls for their night rest. They were usually so trained that only a few would not enter the huts immediately it was nightfall. Where there were short trees near the huts, some fowls would prefer sleeping on them. The hens usually laid eggs in save areas of the bush, but would eventually relocate to the huts when their hatched chicks became strong. The fowls produced in the farm were preferred for food by many to those reared at home.

Dogs, to the Ekiti people, were very useful animals. They were easily reared without difficulty within people's yards. The opposite was the situation with pigs that were not allowed to come near entrances of houses not to talk of entering houses. They were usually accommodated in pigsties or pushed to the distant backyard of houses where watery or muddy grounds were created for them. They were

usually fed every morning. Pigs produced their piglets in make-shift enclosures or pigsties where they would not be disturbed.

Great effort was made by the government, however, through the schools of agriculture, to make the Ekiti farmers learn the modern methods of rearing pigs. But little interest was, however, shown by these farmers, except a few who had, by virtue of their financial security, accepted, to some extent, to try the newly introduced method. According to a government paper on Agriculture (N.A.I., Ondo Prof. 1952):

Pig pens have been erected at the Government expense at these farm centres with the idea of providing pigs for sale to farmers instead of the present system of ordering pigs from Moor Plantation each time a farmer applies for one. Three quarter bred English pigs (a boar and a gilt) have been distributed to three farmers... all these animals have done well and the owners now have some very fine looking young pigs from their English sows and also some good looking half breeds from their native sows.

The above account can be considered an isolated situation, because, as already noted above, only very few elite farmers or some retired educated Ekiti indigenes who had the land and the capital, were in a position to benefit from the above government agricultural policy (Fatunla, 2008). People had no alternative than to stick to their traditional way of rearing pigs, and this was the situation throughout the colonial period.

In the colonial period, livestock could be possessed by inheritance. They could be acquired directly as gifts from relations or friends. They could also be bought in the market. Animals or birds could be given out to an old man or woman within a particular age range for ablutionary reasons, as demanded or prescribed by an oracle. All these methods of livestock acquisition confirmed sole ownership of

animals on the owners. But there was also another method of acquisition of animals known as *agberansin* or *agba eransin* and in the case of fowls *agbadiyesin* or *agba adiyen sin*. In fact, this was livestock tenancy which made an owner give another person female animals like goat, sheep, dog, pig, hen or any other female domestic animal. The receiver, in this case, had no full ownership of the animal.

This type of ownership was conditional or contractual, in that it demanded some terms of agreement between the giver and the receiver. Such animals were also given to those who could not afford the money to buy their own livestock. The type of livestock tenancy also varied in terms or condition. For example, the owner could demand the first female of a particular animal while the second female delivered would be for the receiver. Some could demand at least two females and a male while the receiver would, after this, have the full ownership of the animal; though this particular condition was not common. In the case of dogs, puppies were shared with the owner having the greater number of the female ones in addition to at least one third of the male. Livestock tenancy could continue for several years without any side defaulting in agreement.

Livestock production was an integral part of daily living in the colonial Ekiti. Many reasons have made this conclusion very valid. For example, it was one of the main sources of livelihood. According to J.H. Ellis, the District Officer, Ekiti, and the Secretary to the Provincial Advisory Committee on Development and Welfare (Ellis, 1952):

The place of women in the economy of this Division (Ekiti) cannot be undermeasured. They form a uniting force that makes commerce not only alive but also productive. The women are at their best when negotiating prices in the market while selling, particularly, their livestock which is one of the main economy generating activities in this Division today.

There is really no fixed price on any of the animals or birds sold. Price becomes fixed only after the buyers have paid. What is very interesting about the livestock sale is that on many occasions, these women bring home to their husbands or brothers more than one and a half times the amount expected from them...

Livestock, apart from being used for food, also played social functions. For example, goats and fowls were part of dowries during marriage ceremonies. Animals and fowls were also ritual items during many festive or ceremonial occasions. Various religious functions, traditional and Christian, also made use of livestock. Particularly during Christian Bazaars, animals were freely "auctioned" for sale. Devotees of traditional religion equally made use of animals for various rites; traditionally, animals were sacrificed for ritual purposes. Dogs were used for security or as guards, and were also used for hunting. Cats which, though, were not as popular as dogs, also played an important role of getting rid of all unwanted insects, rats, lizards and even snakes that usually entered some homes.

Cats were also loved, like dogs, for their association with people. Cattle rearing was not part of Ekiti livestock production, and in fact, it was not until the late 1940s that the government, through the employment of herdsmen and the activities of the agriculture schools, began to educate many Ekiti elite farmers about the importance of rearing cattles but with little success. Through the agriculture assistants, village herding schemes were initiated in 1944 to encourage cattle rearing and herding. Herds were opened in many areas of Ondo Province, but people generally showed little interest in this. The government bought eight bulls for Akoko District and seven for Ekiti Division in 1945. Many dwarf cattle were also bought for herding. According to a Miscellaneous Report on Agriculture (N.A.I., Ondo Prof. 1945), "many of the herds in the North of Ekiti Division were well tended but there have been failures in the south mainly due to non-payment of the herdsmen."

Cattle rearing in colonial Ekiti was not generally popular among the farmers, mainly because it was considered the occupation of the Fulanis or the Shuwa Arabs in Northern Nigeria who, during the colonial period, constantly brought to Ekiti Division lots of these cattles for people's consumption. Many, however, preferred to be butchers, and they were many in Ekiti, particularly from the 1940s. Without doubt, the popularity of cattle rearing or herding was restricted to the government circles, or to the Schools of Agriculture in Ekiti Division or Ondo Province.

Without doubt, livestock was the least affected by the modernization of agriculture. Unlike other areas like crop production, which, though to a very little extent, adopted the new agricultural innovations to improve their farming methods, livestock production in Ekiti was not seriously affected by modern methods throughout the colonial period. Towards the end of the 1950s, there was massive training of agricultural assistants by many agriculture schools in the Western Nigeria. Some of these schools were in Ilesha, Akure and Orin Ekiti. The training had little success, since many of those who graduated from the agriculture poultry schools had no capital to raise their own poultry farm infrastructure. Even those of them who had an all-round training in agriculture, particularly the mechanization of agriculture with the use of tractors, became redundant after more than two years of training. This, according to Oluwole Fatunla, one of those who went through the training successfully, was due to the "misapplication and wrong execution of the laudable agriculture policies of Chief Obafemi Awolowo" (Fatunla, 2008).

Conclusion

Ekiti agriculture during the colonial period was very promising, in spite of some unpredictable problems which temporarily challenged this situation. Farming largely depended on hoe and cutlass, though mechanized agriculture, to a limited extent, reasonably affected the production of cash crops. However, it must be understood that staple food in colonial Ekiti fully satisfied both local and national needs. The

methodology of raising livestock also acknowledged people's obedience to tradition. Thus, both staple food and livestock production, among colonial Ekiti, showed not only farming proficiency but also a triumph of tradition; which was why Ekiti farmers were commercially prosperous, while, at the same time, also helping to contribute to the economic advancement of the nation.

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INTERVIEW

Pius Olofin, 79 years, a former school Headmaster in Igede-Ekiti; Interview conducted on July 10, 2006 in Igede.