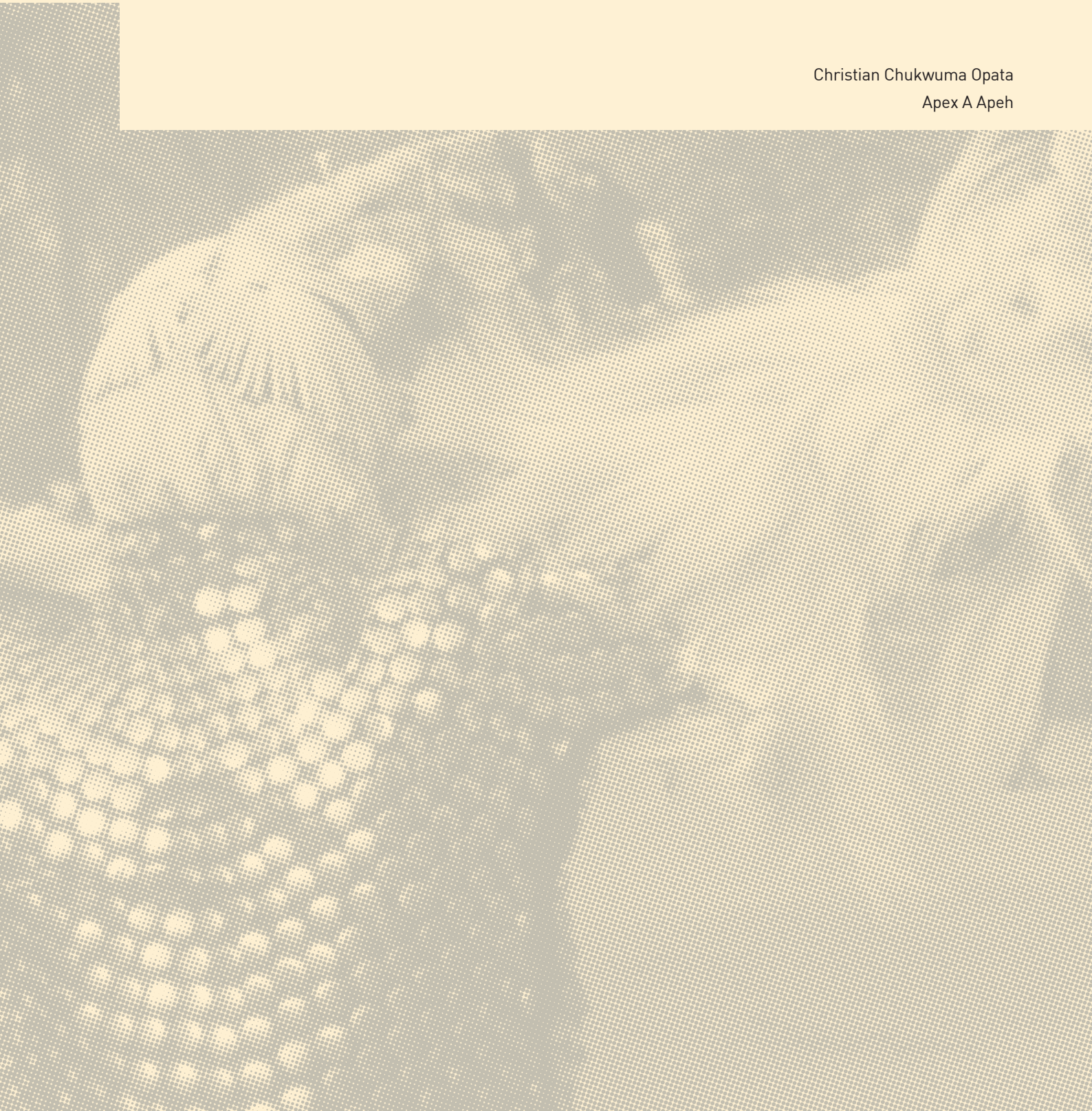
In Search of Honour: *Eya Ebule* as a Legacy of Igbo resistance and food security from World War II

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the various legislations enacted by Britain in Nigeria during World War II that were not farmer-friendly, some Igbo peasant farmers devised strategies to evade them by resorting to the time-honoured means of labour conscription. Their strategy provoked competition amongst the peasant farmers and labourers who cultivated the crops. The competition gave rise to two distinct classes among Igbo peasant farmers. To date, these classes continue to exist amid notable changes; financial rewards have overtaken material and intangible rewards in encouraging productivity. This research aims to show the dynamics of the rural farmers' resistance to colonial legislation using traditional knowledge in Igboland, and the legacy of their resistance based mainly on ethnographic surveys, focus group discussions, archival records and interviews with the sons of prominent farmers of that era who were involved in the practice.

Keywords

garri traders, World War II, Igbo, yam farms, *Eya Ebule*, women farmers, cassava production, politics of labour recruitment, colonial resistance, Lejja, Nigeria.

Introduction

Most academic debate that accounts for poverty in Africa tends to accept one explanation; colonialism.[1]

> *The economic history of Nigeria is a narration of shame and exploitation. It is the story of a handful of fortune seekers, with the blessing of England, coming to Africa under the guise of trusteeship only to strangle the goose that lays the golden egg. Instead of educating the people to stand on their own feet, the foreigners aim at economic deformity of the people.*[2]

The above quotation reflects the frame of mind of some Igbo people in respect of their colonial experience. The truth, however, is that in all human societies, economic considerations take centre stage and economies are organised around relationships between masters and

subjects, the poor and the rich, the profit makers and losers, producers and consumers. This must have informed Toyo[3] to posit that societies thrive on extremes. Writing in relation to Africa's colonial experience, Fredrick Cooper remarked that *in parts of Africa, colonisation drove rural dwellers into deepening poverty.*[4] Logically, when people feel cheated, especially by a superior, there is a high likelihood that they will become lawless. To avoid squabbles arising from such lawlessness among players on both sides of the economy, men established rules that would regulate their conduct and this gave rise to the process of legislation and the attendant laws in most (if not all) polities. However, even in the face of legislation, exploitation and domination occur, giving rise to wars and conflicts. Underlying most conflicts are economic factors. Manning Nash posits that the relationship between economic and social systems is that the economic system is only a part of the system of social action and the economic system is tied to the social system in three ways: first by normative integration, second by functional interdependence, and third by causal interaction.[5] In what appears to be a better depiction of the relationship between the economy and social and political institutions, Bayard Rustin, as cited in Henderson and Ledebur, insists that *the economy is the bone, the social institutions are the flesh, and the political institutions are the skin, which grows on the flesh and bone,*[6] thus indicating the centrality of the economy in all communities.

Writing on World War II, David Goldfield et al observed that the countdown to the Second World War started in 1931 when Japan invaded and took over the Chinese province of Manchuria and followed this up with a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. They maintain that what spurred Japanese nationals to take that line of action was the view, prevalent among them in the early 1930s, that Britain, France and the United States had treated them unjustly after World War I, despite Japan's participation in the war against Germany. Japan reasoned that the most important thing to do was to expel the British, the Americans, the French and the Dutch from Asia and reorganise its economy into a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.[7] This meant that those powerful nations would lose their economic footholds in Asia if the Japanese plan was put into effect.

Therefore, to understand why Britain enacted some laws that were not farmer-friendly in Nigeria during World War II, (especially after the closure of the Mediterranean sea-route to Britain, and the 1942 seizure of the island colonies in the Far East), one has to understand their economic standing in Nigeria before then, and why Britain had to fall back on Nigeria to the extent of ignoring the interests of the peasant farmers who had been producing some of the resources used in their industries. A.J.P. Taylor states that Great Britain was a weakling in comparison with other European industrial nations ten years before 1939. Taylor maintains that while the manufacturing production of Germany increased by 27% between 1929 and 1939, that of Great Britain increased by just 17%, whereas that of Soviet Russia increased by 400%.[8] As Britain was the nation that set the world on the course of the modern industrial revolution, this was a bad omen for her and dictated that Britain should hold on tenaciously to any area in which she had a strong economic advantage. This must have informed her reliance on Nigeria. Moreover, Brian Gardiner posits that trade had always been a major reason for Britain 'opening up' Nigeria. Britain, Gardiner observed, had a serious economic interest in Nigeria to the extent that in 1927, Britain supplied 62% of the imports and took 45.6% of the exports.[9] Given that Britain had a major stake in the Nigerian business environment prior to World War II, Britain relied heavily on Nigeria during the war, especially after 1942. Britain also had to fall back on Nigeria since the hoped-for help from the United States of America was not forthcoming. This was because public opinion among the citizens of the United States did not support America helping France and Britain; only 37% of the populace were in support.[10] Because of the situation Britain found herself in, she adopted both administrative and coercive measures to compel Nigerian farmers to produce export crops, even at the expense of local food production.[11] Granted that agriculture was seen as the 'Igbo staff of life',[12] production was based on the determination of the farmers and the demands of their local environment. Farmers were left with the choice of what to plant; there was no legislation or undue influence from outside Igboland prior to this period that dictated what farmers should plant. During the war, Britain pressurised Nigerians into assisting them, and such assistance had negative consequences on the farmers.

The impact of World War II was felt not only in Britain, but throughout her colonies. It is on record that gifts from Nigeria to aid the British government during the war were *generous and extensive*. The Emir of Katsina personally gave 5,000GBP for a tank, which was named after him. The government of Nigeria sent 100,000GBP to the United Kingdom for the prosecution of the war while the 'Win the war' fund sent 15,000GBP to buy aircraft. As of the

end of September 1942, the total amount in monetary terms subscribed by Nigeria for aircraft was 124,331GBP. This excludes a mobile canteen, which saw duty during the bombing of London, and a Flying Food Squad.[13] The importance of Nigeria's war support efforts could be understood in the context of the global economic gloom that most European nations which got involved in World War II had experienced after the First World War; they were yet to recover from the economic disruption of World War I when they got entangled in the Second World War. For the Igbo, when World War II began, their leader and the most prominent nationalist in Nigeria, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, used his *West African Pilot* to influence Igbo support for, and in favour of Britain during the war. Azikwe attacked the Germans and their attitude to black Africa. The Germans, through the views expressed by Karlowa and Wilhelm von Alwurden (both German writers), professed that any African who believed in British or French democracy was a Bolshevik and had to be annihilated. This meant that the Germans marked down all Africans under the colonial auspices of Britain and France for destruction. Incidentally, these two European nations had the largest number of colonies in Africa. Writing on January 20, 1939, in relation to the Germans and their notions of Africa, Azikiwe surmised as follows: *read them and weep my fellow Africans, but don't keep weeping because we must resist this challenge by concerted action in partnership with the Mother Country.*[14] That the Igbo and Nigeria heeded the call of Azikiwe and his like was shown by the fact that they met all the targets set for them in the production of primary products like palm oil and kernel used in the effective prosecution of the war, especially when the Allies lost their Far Eastern colonies. The target set for palm oil was 370,000 tonnes while that of palm kernel stood at 170,000[15] and these targets were met. To ensure Nigerians reached these targets, the British had, as a matter of exigency, to enact legislation, which was to help in piloting the war-time economy to their advantage, even when the Igbo and other Nigerians were not comfortable with such laws and their provisos.

Before delving into the legislation proper, it would be apposite to state that there are contradicting debates on British agricultural policies in Nigeria during the colonial days. Scholars such as M.O. Ijere would argue that the British, through their agricultural policies, educated Nigerians in new scientific and economic methods of agriculture and also imported and distributed agricultural implements of a superior type to those made locally.[16] At the other extreme are scholars like S.A. Shokpeka and O.A. Nwaokocha who posit that the policies of Britain in the field of agriculture were geared towards the production of export cash crops to feed her industries—an exercise which, they contend, forced local farmers to ditch the production of food crops to focus on cash crops.[17] Of equal importance to this study is the debate on the nature of Igbo resistance to colonial rule.[18] To truly appreciate the fact that Igbo colonial experience in the agricultural sector was not always a tale of woe (even if the advantages were incidental), one must take note of the caution by Luise White that in writing about the colonial world, it is best to do so with the images and idioms produced by the subjects themselves.[19] British economic policy in Nigeria, especially during World War II, emphasised the production of export crops at the expense of food crops for local consumption. This shift in emphasis introduced not only food scarcity in the rural communities but also in the emerging urban centres. Many Igbo traders and entrepreneurs saw this development as an occasion for them to test their entrepreneurial skills. Most of them took to setting up trading bases in areas where the prices of food crops were high, while buying the same at lower prices from areas where prices were lower. They allied with transporters of Igbo extraction to attain their objectives and transported their wares mostly at night.[20]

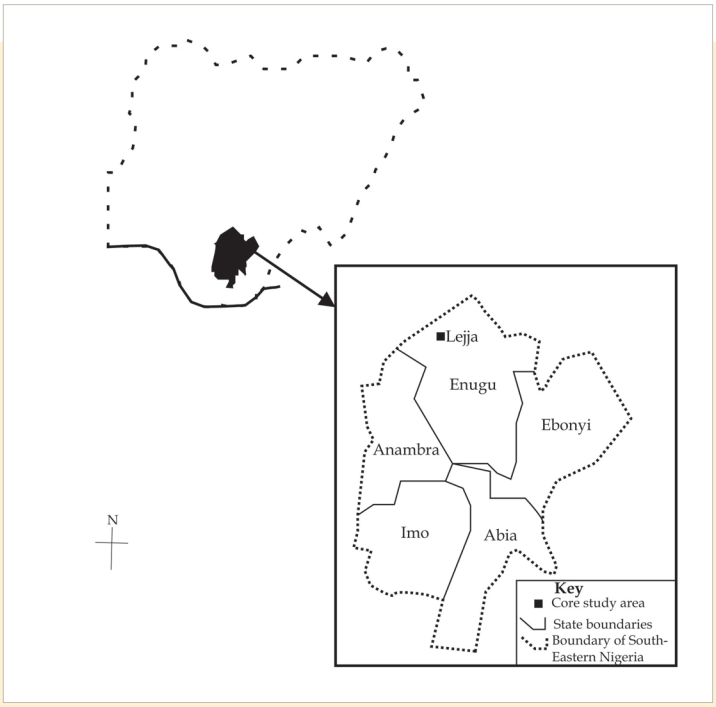
To restrict these trading exploits, the British struck at the very 'artery' that supplied blood to the business by enacting the 1939 Nigerian Defence Motor Transport Regulation. This particular regulation not only imposed limitations on the use of commercial vehicles for passenger services during the war, it also empowered the colonial government to intervene directly in the sale of new vehicles, tyres, tubes, spare parts and petrol. By the same token, it provided for petrol rationing among vehicle users, though it discriminated against vehicles used for passenger purposes and private cars but favoured those engaged in exporting produce.[21] 'Produce evacuation' was here interpreted to mean only those goods bound for the seaports for onward shipment to Europe. Palm produce and cassava, the two main Igbo agricultural products that were so vital to their economic life, were seriously affected by the war-time legislation and control. Palm produce was needed in Europe for soap manufacture and also for the production of margarine. Cassava, on the other hand, was in high demand, especially during the war, because cassava starch was used in maintaining military uniforms.

To limit the trade in cassava and palm produce and stifle local consumption, the colonial authority introduced the Food Control Order of 1943. This Order placed restrictions on the trade in domestic products, especially agricultural produce, between districts, provinces and even regions.[22] As traders were not allowed to move freely with their goods, they complained to the government hoping that changes that would be favourable to their trade would be made. The greatest percentage of the complaints came from *garri* traders (*garri* is derived from cassava). In a petition to the Resident of Owerri Province, the Garri Traders Association of Aba registered their disappointment over the quota system implemented by the District Officer of Aba with respect to the volume of *garri* that was allowed to exit the District. They argued that this system would slacken the *garri* trade, negatively affecting, if not bankrupting, the average *garri* trader, and make life 'not worth living'.[23] The control of the trade in *garri*, and by extension cassava production, during this period was to draw labour away from cassava production to support the production of exportable oils.[24] These restrictions not only limited the income of traders but also caused serious hunger, especially in the urban centres where they originally sold these products. Scarcity led to competition for available commodities and this was to trigger changes in the prices of these products. For instance, as at June 1943, 2 cups of *garri* sold for 1d in the Northern region of the country as against 10 to 15 cups prior to the regulations.[25] The dearth of *garri* in the Eastern Province to which the Igbo belong was such that between the months of November and December 1944, over 5,000 people (both men and women) in Ikot Ekpene District of Eastern Nigeria took to the streets to protest the scarcity of the commodity.[26]

Lejja peasant farmers were also affected by this restriction, as Edem women, who before the restrictions bought cassava tubers from them with the intention of processing them into *garri*, stopped patronising them as a result of the restriction.[27] However, in the Lejja community, farmers went into competition with a view to producing more staple foods like yam, black beans and maize. The most enduring legacy of their very important protest is observed among yam farmers in the form of competitions. That yam was given greater attention during this period should occasion no surprise, as among the Igbo, yam was, and still is, regarded and respected as the chief crop.[28]

Igbo peasant farmers and the politics of food production during World War II

To the local peasantry of Eastern Nigeria, the definition of food security as the availability and access to adequate nutritional food for healthy living,[29] was not a concern at this period (Figure 1). This was because hunger was so



Figures 1 and 2
Showing the position of Igboland in Nigeria and its component states.
Source: Apex A Apeh, 2012.

pronounced throughout the period. The extent of hunger was such that its impact still survives in the collective memory of the people, especially in proverbs that emanated from peoples' responses to the food situation in their area at the time. Such proverbs as *agha Oyibo vuteru urioto*, (the Whiteman's war brought malnutrition), *adighi ajuafo ihe orii, maka ihere ji eme onu* (the stomach is not asked what it ate because the mouth will feel ashamed) suggest that what was eaten was substandard, and *eho ju n'uwo'la* (when the stomach is filled, intrigues would go), are examples that suggest that the people were concerned with food availability and accessibility, not quality, even in the face of variety.

Though farmers resorted to planting major staples, the rural peasant farmers also introduced a variety of strategies to boost production even as they played down cassava production. The ability or otherwise of a farmer to navigate his way through these strategies would indicate his class. Even as resort was made to planting crops that were the major staple food of the rural peasantry, the farmers introduced many strategies to boost production, and the ability or otherwise of a farmer to negotiate these strategies successfully dictated the class to which he and his wife/wives belonged. In communities around Nsukka area such as Lejja, Ede Oballa, Ozalla and Ekwegbe, the first strategy was to negotiate with important local farmers who, before the introduction of the regulations that emphasised export crop production, were notable yam farmers. Enthusiastic and energetic farmers who did not have seed yams negotiated with those who had enough, either to buy or to plant for them as sharecroppers. In the case of the latter, for ten lines of yam stacked in the barn handed over to the sharecropper, he returned to the owner twelve lines of the same length after harvest, the remainder he kept as his share. Through this means, farmers like Chukwuma Nwozor of Umuakpo Uwelu village Lejja took the title of *Omeruegu* (renowned yam farmer).[31] To ensure that they met their targets, sharecroppers formed cooperatives within which they exchanged labour services on a rotational basis. This was called *Igba Ohwu*.

The second strategy was to increase the daily pay of labourers hired to do farm work, especially those who made the yam mounds. Prior to World War II, these labourers were paid six pence for one hundred moderate mounds, but this was increased to eight pence three years into the *Oyibo* (European) war with *Itila* (Hitler).[32] Consequent on this increase in wages, many able-bodied men took to wage labour. This resulted in an increase in the number of plots planted by the farmers and led to the availability of staple foodstuffs as the farmers adopted mixed cropping. Every yam farm had maize, cassava and even melon sowed by the side of the mounds at intervals, a practice unknown in most Igbo communities of Nsukka before the war, but which has survived to this day. The practice of mixed cropping, held sway in most Igbo communities, as observed by Achebe[33], but in Lejja, it was one of the legacies of resistance to World War II legislation. Prior to this period, the norm was to plant cassava separately as it was considered by the members of the community as a women's crop. As a way to compensate the women, all the other crops interplanted were theirs, given that they used the time they would have expended in planting their own crops in helping their yam-farmer husbands and relations. This meant that cassava production, even though it was a major staple food of the people, was played down during the war. This is a clear sign of resistance as cassava was in high demand by Britain during World War II where the starch derived from cassava was used in keeping the uniforms of the army in good shape. The people recount their experience of resisting cassava production to spite the British during this period using their proverb - *it was only when a hunter sighted the gazelle that he would shoot at it*, implying that if they stopped producing cassava in the quantity demanded by Britain, Britain would see none to control. The people's resistance could be understood in the context of C.J. Korieh's observation that;

> *...the changing nature of Igbo agriculture and the transformations that have occurred since the beginning of the 20th century has been most visible in the declining importance of yams - the symbol of Igbo masculinity, and the increasing importance of cassava as the most important subsistence crop among the Igbo* [34]

As the urge to make more money increased competition among the wage labourers, farmers observed that the majority of them, in a bid to create more mounds, paid less attention to the quality of work they did. Farmers then adopted a third tactic. This involved encouraging the wage labourers to plant by paying them with seed yams. However, this was on the condition that they did a high-quality job which was judged by the level and depth of tillage, the covering of grasses with soil, uprooting roots and stumps of small trees that would have acted as barriers to sowing the seed yams in the mound, etc..

For every one hundred moderate-sized yam mounds, the labourer was paid forty seed yams.[35] The size of the seed yams was such that they would be equivalent to those planted by the farmer on the very farm cultivated by the labourers. This had its own problems as some labourers refused to work for farmers whose seed yams they considered below average, or those who planted species of yam that were regarded as unbefitting to men of their class. A good example of such a specie is the water yam *(Dioscorea alata)*, locally known as Abala. This species of yam is derided by Lejja people as epitomised in their proverb, *Abala gba kogbale nólako n'ishi oba* (No matter how big the water yam is, it must be consigned to the edge of the yam barn).

Farmers who felt short-changed by the labourers' refusal to work on their farms had to devise another trick to force the workers to work for them. This tactic involved incorporating a very important cultural symbol - part of the costume of one of their traditional masquerades called *Ujam* - into the labourers' 'clothing'. This particular feature of the costume is called *Eya Ebule* and is derived from the very long hair (*eya*) which comes from the neck region of the local dwarf ram (*ebule*). It is obtained by skinning a slaughtered ram only at the neck region to get the hair attached to the skin for body adornment. Farmers would arrange a contest for labourers who were after honour and not money, and set the *Eya Ebule* as a trophy to be taken and worn by the most productive worker after he was handed the seed yams - 40 seed yams to 100 mounds multiplied by the number of mounds he cultivated. On the day set for the contest, the farmer would arrange for a very healthy dwarf local ram that had very long hair around its neck (in the local parlance *Nkpokoro ebule eya juru olu* - an old ram with long hair round its neck) and get it tied to the door of his yam barn. As the contestants arrived very early in the morning, they made their individual assessments of the ram. The approval or rejection of each assessor was recognised by his coming back to take a seat in the farmer's compound after assessing and evaluating the ram, or vacating the compound; taking a seat meant approval while leaving the compound was indicative of disapproval.

When the farmer was assured that the number of persons present was adequate for the contest (and they had to be many, for the people would always quote the tortoise who said that *Oru igwee di oyii* - work done in unison by many people is okay because of the company - which accords with Homer's [36] view that, 'light is the work where many share the toil'), he as a rule arranged for three levels of entertainment for the contestants. First, before they set off to the farm, they were served roasted yam with a sauce of fresh palm oil, pepper and salt. Very wealthy and generous farmers served the roasted yam and palm oil sauce along with a very big keg of palm wine locally called *Obele Agbada*. The wine was to have been tapped from a standing oil palm tree (*nkwu elu*) not from a felled oil palm tree (*expo*). Kegs of palm wine weighing between eight and ten litres [37] would be enough to share among the labourers without getting them intoxicated. Some farmers even went as far as engaging the services of professional flute players to inspire the contestants while they worked. (Plate 1)

On arriving at the farm, the 'Trophy-bearer' (the ram) was tethered at the opposite end of the farm so that the contestants could see it as they worked, as a subtle reminder that they were in a competition. The best labourer was determined by the number of mounds in the line he cultivated multiplied by the overall lines in a row, and how



Plate 1
Tethered ram to be won by the most resourceful labourer.
Photo: Apex A. Apeh, March 16, 2017

well the mounds were made. During their work on the farm, the labourers were served another round of food, preferably boiled yams and local sauce prepared with boiled and fermented *inene akpaka* (*Pentalethre Macropylla* seed). After eating, the contestants then went back for the final lap of the contest. It was at this stage that the competition became more intense as they were aware that the contest was about to come to an end. If at any stage of the competition, a contestant proved weak and an opponent standing next to him in the line of mounds garnered more speed in making the mounds than him, he was overtaken. The more powerful labourers would raise an alarm to force the lazy ones out of the way. (Plates 2 and 3)

As the slow contestant gave way, the owner of the farm or his assistants would draw close and insert marks which he/they had made to represent the individual contestants differentiating between the mound cultivated by the lazy one and that by the more energetic contestant. As the contestants exerted their energies, the flautist would sing their individual praises and at the same time cajole the weak among them. For instance, to taunt a slow contestant, the flautist would play a tune suggesting that 'men are making their fellow men pregnant', while for the more energetic contestant he would extol his virtues by playing tunes that depict him as *Oke n'enyi anu*, which literally means 'the male animal that has sex with other animals at will', a subtle way of eulogising his masculinity and at the same time referring to other contestants as women with hoes.[38] When it appeared to him that the tempo of the contest was slowing down, he would encourage all with the song *nsheshe munyi néyo mkpume* 'falling drops that eventually wear away the stone'.

At the end of the contest, usually, late in the day (around 4 pm), the contestants went back for another round of entertainment provided by the farmer. This time, it had to be pounded yam and very sizeable lumps of meat, preferably dried. The wife (or wives) of the farmers was (were) also in competition as the soup prepared for the contestants was used to persuade them to come for another contest if need be. The farmer's wife/wives prepared very thick okra (*Abelmoscus exulentus*) or egusi (melon – *Citrullus lanatus*) soup called *ohoyi* or *inene nwa'ku* respectively. The quality of the soup was first put to the test by placing a big ball of pounded yam on top of the soup. If the ball sank, it meant the soup had failed the test. Women, aware that their share of the crops on the farm would be reduced if the contestants were unhappy with their soup, resorted to using a lot of dried fish in preparing the soup. Contestants complimented women whose soup had many fish in it by asking them if they had gone to Odeke – a Nigerian community known for its large fish market. The nutritional value of the sauce, especially *egusi*, is confirmed by the fact that even though it is high



Plate 2
The flautist with his flute adorned with *eya ebule*.
Photo: Apex A Apeh, March 16, 2017.



Plate 3
Yam mounds made by the contestants.
Photo: Christian C Opata, April 13, 2018.



Plate 4
Tubers of yam and jars of palm wine to entertain the contestants.
Photo: Christian C Opata, February 12, 2016

in fat, it is good fat, which provides the essential fatty acids needed for healthy brain function, skin, nails and hair.[39] The farmer also served them palm wine till they had drunk as much as they wanted. (Plate 4)

As the entertainment went on, the farmer would instruct one of his people to slaughter the ram and skin it in the approved way. The slaughtered ram was cooked and then shared among the contestants. However, the climax of the event was when the *Eya Ebule* was tied to the left arm of the winner, about eight inches below the armpit. (Plates 5 and 6)

This was done after handing all the labourers their share of the meat of the slaughtered ram. When the trophy was tied to the winner's left arm, he would pick up his hoe with his right hand, dance around the compound and demonstrates how agile he was in the field of contest.

The reward for hard work in this case might not appear to be commensurate with the effort put in by the contestants, but when judged from a cultural standpoint it really becomes significant. This is because the trophy is used for body adornment. In Africa, especially among the Igbo, it has been observed that arts generally help individuals to project a sense of self and this is especially true of personal adornment.[40] Among the Igbo, artistic concerns reverberate in ritual and social life so that they fuse the practical with the ideological, and if taken as a whole, are a commemoration of all human life, its splendour and spiritual essence. Thus, they are not so much an adornment to life, but more significantly, a way of maintaining life itself.[41] Moreover, among the communities of these contestants and farmers, this very trophy is worn by the traditional protocol officers of their premier masquerades. Thus the trophy signifies that its wearer is a lead manual worker in the field of agriculture, a major contributor to domestic food security. Equally important is the fact that wearing this symbol imposes a burden on its wearer (that of integrity and reliability) as he endeavours not to be outmatched by any other person. Winners would even intimidate upcoming contestants by wearing many such symbols to indicate the number



Plate 5
A masquerader adorned with the *eya ebule* trophy on both arms.
Photo: Christian C Opata, February 6, 2018.



Plate 6
A winner of the trophy on two occasions displays his *eya ebule* trophies on both arms.
Photo: Christian C Opata, February 6, 2018.

of contests they had won each time they were invited for a new round of the contest. This attitude is in line with the observation by Nnadi that integrity and reliability are the glue and fibre that bind successful personnel and business development.[42] All this is premised on the value system of the people, as value is an intrinsic force that activates, energises and propels an individual towards the attainment of a goal, which in effect has its roots in the psychology of motivation and emotion.[43] However, this system of mobilisation has changed with the increased monetisation of the economy, and urbanisation, as civil servants in urban areas have come home with money and given the farmers a good challenge in terms of physical infrastructure, like the building of modern houses.

Through this strategy, wealthy farmers who could afford to organise such contests were able to produce many yam barns, feed society and take titles. However, it is in the field of title-taking in the quest to meet the challenges of food deficit that farmers left enduring legacies that still thrive today, though with changes in strategy and details. It was in the context of taking titles befitting renowned farmers that the fifth major strategy adopted by farmers to boost production emerged, especially beginning in 1944.[44] Some farmers who did not have enough farmland to plant their crops resorted to establishing farms in very distant communities outside Lejja. This practice gave rise to the development of a farm in Adani, in Uzo Uwani local government area of Enugu state, which to this day is called Ugwu Lejja, even as some had their farms at Iyi Owerre, Iyoke N'igaa in the same Adani.[45] Farmers who had enough land mocked those that rented land outside their villages and outside the community by referring to them as *Okwomeru nri onyeozo enwghi akpakpa ohu* (those that depend on another person's food have no buttocks to sit with), a pointer to their being dependent on other people for their greatness and the survival of their farming business.

Even where the latter class of farmers made substantial contributions to agriculture and food security, they were never placed on the same level as those who planted on their village farm lands or their personal lands. This was probably based on the fact that they did not offer their security to their village all the year round as required of men in their community, since they had to be away occasionally to tend to their crops in distant places.[46] The level of respect accorded to these two classes of farmers gave rise to the institution of two separate classes of titled farmers: the *Obu n'ulo* (those farmers that farm and reside in their village) and *Obu n'ama* (those who farm and reside, even if temporarily, outside their village).

During title-taking to consummate their achievements as renowned farmers, the rites undergone by those whose farms were located within and those who farmed outside their village or personal lands differed. Those who planted within their village had, as a rule, to take a cock to the shrine of the progenitor of the village, and a hen to the shrine of the earth goddess of the village along with three kola nut seeds. The eldest man (village head) in that village or his deputy accompanied them to these shrines. The village head, who by right was the person authorised to offer sacrifices on behalf of the farmer (aspirant), broke open each kola nut, said prayers on behalf of the candidate and then slaughtered the fowls at different locations according to their sexes as determined by customary law. The remaining kola nut he took home as his personal share, while from those broken, he gave one lobe each to the aspirants. In the case of a farmer who farmed outside their village, the candidate would provide four kola nut seeds, a cock, some soil from the location of his farm and two hens. All the ceremonies were identical except when it got to the shrine of the earth goddess. In this situation, two kola nut seeds and two hens were sacrificed. The justification for this is that the officiating priest would, first of all, collect the soil mentioned above from the farmer, pour it on the floor of the shrine of the earth goddess in the farmer's native village and request permission from the ontological forces therein to allow the farmer to use products from elsewhere in the title-taking ceremony. Equally sought through this ritual was an alliance between the goddess of the farmer's village and that of his place of work. This was done to ensure that there was no contest between the two resulting from the neglect of either: neglect of the farmer's village for using what was planted outside its soil without permission to take titles from a village resident, or neglect of the village where the farmer rented land for not according it the recognition of being the soil that produced the riches that gave rise to the title.[47]

Consequent on this divide, 'diaspora' farmers resorted to demanding land instead of labour as collateral from poor people who borrowed money from them, contrary to the practice prior to these contests. These farmers even imposed very difficult conditions and a short time-frame for the repayment of the loans. Failure to meet

these conditions would result in the loss of the collateral to the creditor farmer. This was the circumstance that ensured most of the land belonging to Ugwuanyi Agharu of Umuoda-Eze village Lejja remained in the hands of people outside his immediate lineage and in some cases, outside his village.[48] Diaspora farmers such as Ugwokeja Onyishi (even though not among the titled farmers) obtained land from Ugwuanyi Agharu by this means. The desire to acquire more land bordering on that of the farmer, preferably in his village, gave rise to a local saying among Lejja people. The adage states that *ekpere nwa nna n'ekperu nwa nna bu ya diri ndu, obughi ya karu nya* 'the prayer of a kinsman is for his fellow kinsman to be alive, not for him to be greater than him (the person saying the prayer)'.[49] These enduring legacies, which have helped in ensuring food security among Lejja citizens, vehemently contradict one of the entrenched views about colonialism in Nigeria, especially that canvassed by the likes of Captain Moloney. He claimed that after a century of depredation by the white traders, if the colonial masters *left altogether tomorrow, they would not leave behind, as far as I could observe, any memorials for the country's gratitude*.[50]

Conclusion

As a study of challenge and response, this study confirms the saying that the best soldiers are made out of the highlands of tribulation. This is made evident by the reactions of Lejja, Nsukka peasant farmers to colonial legislation in Nigeria during World War II. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, history is *a discourse best understood when the language in which a people think, talk and take a decision is used*.[52] Hobsbawm's axiom centres on textuality and contextuality which abhor blanket generalisations. Using Lejja, Nsukka rural peasant farmers and their response to colonial legislation in Nigeria during World War II as its text, and seeing how specific legislation impinged on the farmers' economic pursuit of their professional occupation as its context, this study reveals that their actions were in accord with the Igbo saying that *eji ngaga agbara oke efi oso* – 'pride is the best way of running away from the bull'. Confronted by the paucity of staple food for domestic consumption unleashed on them by a superior power (colonial authority - which in the local parlance is the bull), Lejja peasant farmers adopted viable strategies drawn from traditional wisdoms that helped them escape food insecurity during the study period, using civil disobedience and appeal to communal sentiment rather than open confrontation. Such strategies permeated their social and religious life, tested the ingenuity of the farmers in mobilising their labour force, introduced social stratification among yam farmers, engendered competition and also roused the ingenuity of the rural farmer in devising new ways of acquiring more land from debtors. The strategies also ensured that people took pride in farming. Hard work and excellence were honoured among those that laboured on the farms, especially those recruited to cultivate yam, as epitomised by the desire to wear the *Eya Ebule*. Incidentally, this novel strategy of promoting the spirit of competition and engendering food security has collapsed in the face of excessive monetisation and urbanisation as achievement is no longer measured in yam barns or the *eya ebule*.

In terms of innovation in farming practice, this era led to the empowerment of women. Prior to this period, they were saddled with the task of weeding their husbands' yam farms, yet they had no major stake in terms of ownership and right to use the yams when harvested. To compensate them for this apparent neglect, all the crops interplanted on the yam farms were theirs. Through the proceeds of their share, women devised their own title - *Omerubo* – professional (soup) cooks. As the quest for more titles triggered competition among men, so it did among women and the two titles have survived to this day in Lejja.

From a more scientific point of view, the idea of intercropping was a sure way of ensuring food security both in the short and the long run. Crops like black beans that were legumes had the advantage of adding atmospheric nitrogen to the soil and could equally provide a wide range of important benefits to the quality of the soil.[53] I.I. Ibeawuchi *et al* noted the importance of nitrogen by stating that:

> *In agricultural production systems, adequate levels of nitrogen (N) are essential for proper plant growth as it is useful for chlorophyll, enzymes as well as for the amino acids and protein used for building plant tissues and cell organelles. In many tropical agricultural systems, the importance of nitrogen is second only to water and the nitrogen content of most soil surface mineral soils is about 0.02 – 0.5%.*[53]

Hence, the farmers' resistance not only triggered competition and class distinction among farmers but also saw the emergence of an innovation in farming that improved soil fertility.

In Nigeria, about 95% of farmers are peasant farmers and they take care of the food needs of the greatest percentage of the population. On the other hand, 5% of Nigerian farmers are employed on corporate and government supported large-scale farms. Unfortunately, it is this 5% that has continued to receive priority in governmental efforts to promote agriculture in Nigeria. Incidentally, such programmes favour a capitalist system of production in the form of capital-intensive mechanised farming, cash crop production, large-scale farming at the expense of producing food crops.[54] This shows that Nigerians do not learn from history. Since there was very important opposition to the cutting back of food crop production in colonial days, it follows logically that the government should now pay greater attention to food crop production for domestic consumption to prevent its citizens going hungry. What Nigerians accused the British of is still being done by their post-colonial leaders, to an even greater extent. Unless all agricultural programmes are designed to favour the peasant farmers, Nigeria's dream of food security will remain an illusion.

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