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Yoruba Traders in Cote D'Ivoire: A Study of the Role Migrant Settlers in the Process of Economic Relations in West Africa (*Pp. 134-147*)

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Abstract

The bid to relocate into an alien territory is usually anchored on the migrant's hope for better fortunes or prospects. The independence government in several West African countries could not meet the high expectations of their citizens. There were also political and economic problems which made members of the commercial class to feel not secured in their own states. The tales of better economic fortunes in neighbouring countries provided attraction to those in this category, including Yoruba traders, who were naturally desirous of migration. The Yoruba traders of Southwestern Nigeria present an important alien commercial class in Cote d'Ivoire, and some other west African states. This study evaluates some of the major economic activities such as agriculture, trade, commerce and industrial activities that have for some decades engaged the services of Yoruba traders in Ivory Coast. It assesses the various pull and push factors in the migration, the social and political situation in both countries, government economic policies at specific periods, and the aspirations of

Yoruba migrants' settlers. It also reflects on how the current political crisis in Ivory Coast has affected Yoruba traders especially as the conflict has forced many of them back to Nigeria. The study concludes that the enterprising nature of Yoruba migrant traders had made them influence positively the Ivorian economy.

Introduction

Migration and the establishment of alien commercial settlements of groups appear to be part of the demographic features of West Africa (Mabogunje, 1968). The trend of migration has been informed by economic anticipation for profitability, social constraints, political instability, security situation and other related factors as applicable to specific countries in the sub regions. Indeed, for most of the traders, their ability to adapt to prevailing situation determined the possibility of their stay or settlement in any West African society .At independence and afterwards, these factors coupled with other domestic and external pressures, further increased the rate of migration from one country to another.(Mabogunje,1968).The much acclaimed fortunes in other places outside Nigeria provided attraction to those groups, including the Yoruba traders, who were naturally desirous for migration. The Yoruba migrant's settlers or traders from Nigeria represent an important alien commercial class in Cote d'Ivoire and some other West Africa Countries. (Bauer, 1954)

It is evident that both Nigeria and Ivory Coast gained political independence in 1960(Uweche, 1978) and it was that period that many Yoruba migrants actually began to settle permanently in Abidjan and in other important towns in Ivory Coast (Ellis, 1951). The various economic and social policies adopted by the independent government towns in Ivory Coast. The various economic and social policies adopted by the independent government in each of these states only intensified the rate of migration by labourers and others, mostly youths or middle aged groups in the society.

The 1970s and 1980s represent the era of rapid economic growth in Cote d'Ivoire for which the Yoruba traders had played an important role in terms of services they provided within the distributive sector of the economy. They also provided the required labour in plantations, and acted as produce agents for many of the multinationals in Cote d'Ivoire (Toye, 2001)

The Yoruba traders are also noted for the meaningful contributions that they made to the private sector in terms of trading activities, the transport industry especially road transport and their role in mechanizing and other commercial activities within the Ivorian economy since the 1960s. As a result of the recent political crisis in Cote-D'Ivoire which degenerated into rebel uprising, and the reprisal attacks on Nigerians and other alien groups, many Yoruba migrants had made a forceful return to their home country. As they had lost their fortunes to the Ivorian crisis, many of the returnee Yoruba traders now start afresh in Nigeria (and some others still in Ivory Coast) their commercial and related activities.

The Pull and Push Factors in Migration

The practice of migration is not restricted to Africa. It has the global trend, and applies to people in both the developed and the less developed countries.⁹ Since no country has everything unto itself or can fully satisfy the interest, needs and requirements of all its citizens, it is only natural that there would always exist waves of immigrants seeking better opportunities beyond the borders of their own nation. It is possibly in this light that Yoruba traders who migrated to Cote d'Ivoire for economic activities could be viewed as part of the normal process of human pursuit in order to fulfill individual or group aspirations most especially when there are widely accepted tales of better prospects in such places. (Rhoder, 1991. Adelodun et al, 2002)

The existence of pull and push factors often give legitimacy to all forms of migration.(Aristide in William et al,1978). The desire to move to distant regions might be borne out of domestic pressures or other forms of constraints and challenges to which an individual or a group could not provide an immediate solution.(Sklar,1983).Such pressures were manifested in the case of many Yoruba traders who migrated to Cote d'Ivoire as from the 1960s. It could also be the desire of the migrants to seize the opportunities provided by their host states or governments to their own advantage. This has also been relevant to many of the Yoruba traders in Cote d'Ivoire.

A peculiar characteristic of a settler community in any country is that of embarking on short term economic venture that will bring immediate benefit. This is always the situation for settlers who do not have proper or adequate immigration papers and other conditionalities or permits for residence. Many

Yoruba traders in Cote d'Ivoire are noted for this, much in the same ways as many other illegal aliens are found in different parts of the West African sub region.

The economic interest of migrant settlers is anchored on profit maximization without necessarily having the aim of contributing to the development of their host countries. It is realized that most aliens always wish to evade tax payments, gave false record of the profit made through their economic practice and also engage in other forms of activities that are detrimental to the economy of their host states(s). (Uweche, 1983) Although, Yoruba traders have made positive impact on the Ivorian economy, many of these traders mainly focused on profit rather than the promotion of economic developments of Ivory Coast. The prospects of tax evasion and unrestricted profit making were probably sources of attraction of Yoruba traders to Cote d'Ivoire.

Apart from government policy and other forms of incentives made available, there is also the important factor of attitude of the Ivorian people in terms of their hospitality and preparedness to accommodate aliens in their midst. This fact had indeed influenced the rate of migration of Yoruba traders to Abidjan. (Adetoro, 2002) In fact, according to many of the respondents, there is considerable amount of hospitality displayed by the indigenous people of Ivory Coast to aliens much more than what is obtainable in many other countries in West Africa. This not only enhanced the integration of Yoruba settlers into Ivory Coast, but also made many Yoruba immigrants to remain in that country until the crisis took a dangerous dimension and they became victims of the rebels' insurgence. (Dapo, et al, 2001)

Yoruba and Ivorien Traditions, Demography and Economy

The Yoruba people inhabit the Southwestern part of Nigeria as an important ethnic group spreading across the Oyo, Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo, Lagos, Osun, Kwara and parts of Edo States. They occupy the forest belt and parts of Guinea Savannah, Johnson (1956), which enable them to practice agriculture as they grow both food and cash crops. Since the era of Yoruba warfare in the 19th century, Ajayi (1965) the forceful emigration to which the Yoruba population were subjected and taken them to distant polices where they eventually resettled and participated in the task of social and economic developments especially during the after colonial rule.

Cote d'Ivoire is a country in the West African sub-region which is bordered on the West by Liberia and Guinea, on the North by Mali and Burkina Faso, on the East by Ghana, and on the South by the Atlantic Ocean (Uweche, 1983). It became independent on August 7, 1960 and has approximately 15 Million population.(Uweche,1983). The major settlements include Bouake, Mau, Grand-Bassam and others. Its major exports include Coca, Coffee, Timber, Petroleum products and fruits while the sub-equatorial climate in the south of Cote d'Ivoire has given rise to the production of large quantities of Oil Palm for local consumption and export to other countries. According to recent population estimates, 5 million out of the country's inhabitants are non-Ivoirians.(Uweche,1983).Most of these immigrants are from Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Ghana and Nigeria especially the Yoruba and also the Lebanese community that engage in various forms of commercial activities in the country.

Majority of the Ivorian population are descendants of the Baoule and Agui groups which are closely related to the Ashanti of Ancient Ghana. The main commercial centres are Comoe, Boudoukou, Birginville, and the beach settlements of Vridi, Agboville, Koshogo and Jacquerville located at the North of Bouake, with various economic practices conducted on daily basis(Profiles,1998) Except in artisan shops and other outlets such as Supermarkets where prices of items are fixed, most of the Ivorian commercial centers are placed where people constantly negotiate through signs and strike genuine bargain, usually to the satisfaction and appreciation of their customers.

The Ivorian economy had, since the pre-colonial period, been based largely on agriculture which engaged the services of a arge proportion of the population(Profiles,1998) The product of cash crops such as coffee, cocoa and palm product for exports to Europe was encouraged by the French colonial administration(Profiles,1998). With Government incentives, the country almost doubled its agricultural production capacity during the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1970s, the Ivorian economy was in fact considered to be a model economy for other African states.(Uweche,1983).But with progressive collapse of World Market prices as from the 1980s for Cocoa and Coffee- the country's two main exports, the Ivorian economy had slumped deeply into recession as agriculture could only provide a quarter (1/4) of the country's GDP.

The considerable performance of Agriculture in Cote d'Ivoire was due to some factors: (a) Favorable climate, (b) Abundance of fertile land, (c) Government's provision of minimum guaranteed prices for crops to encourage mass production. The country also produced high quality rubber which, during the 1990s, made her to be Africa's largest producer, as posited by Uweche (1978), ahead of Nigeria and Liberia. It plans that by 2015, annual rubber output should reach 150,000 tonnes (Profile, 1998). Apart from rubber, the production of cotton, timber and livestock was encouraged by the government of Ivory Coast.

The manufacturing industry was also an important sector in the Ivorian economy. The process of industrial growth was achieved in the early years of independence through generous investments and also by fiscal concessions. The idea of customs protection also encouraged many foreign firms to establish imports substitution industries especially the agricultural processing industries, and also the reorientation of local industrial units towards the export market. The government had also used its privatization policy, which was officially launched in 1980 to encourage the country. This policy perhaps clearly reflects government's preference for "the assumption of the means of production by local operators".

Early Adventures of Yoruba Traders to Cote D'ivoire

There are indications that Yoruba migrant traders reached Ivory Coast before the outbreak of the Second World War. By the 1930s, it is reported that some traders from Ijebu and Oyo provinces were already resident in Cote d'Ivoire. (Awoyale, 2002). In fact, messages were sent by people in Ejigbo in 1942 to their kith and kin in Cote d'Ivoire advising them to stay in that country until after the war. (Oyedeji, 2002). The motives for the migration of the Yoruba at this period include, among others:

- The anticipated surplus gain that they could derive from various forms of economic activities in Cote d'Ivoire.
- The non-readiness of the immigrants to take interest in the wide range of job opportunities available in Nigeria at that period.
- Many saw immigration as a good channel through which they could secure better economic fortunes in distant places which they considered to be a secured environment.

- The Yoruba migrants also saw the adventure as a way to depart from or avoid family problems at home, including those that relate to marital contracts, domestic responsibilities and local burdens within the compound or settlement.
- Some Yoruba people believed that such migrant would enable them gain access to the rich mineral deposits of Cote d'Ivoire unlike their counterparts who became local farmers in Ondo and Oyo provisions. (Awoyale, 2002)

Thus, at independence, the search for better fortunes in foreign lands was no longer a strange endeavour to the Iwo and Ejigbo traders, and those of the Oke-Ogun districts. Such adventures indicated or depicted the industrious nature of the Yoruba traders and other groups who sought better opportunities in regions where they would be free from all forms of domestic or family constraints.

As from the early 1940s, the adventures began as migrants often gathered under trees, and trek en-mass to neighboring towns where there was always a waiting Bedford lorry (Jagi) that traveled for about 10 days to Cote d'Ivoire. (Oyedeki, 2002). The transport fare at that period was put at £2.10 for each of its 32 passengers. (Oyedeki, 2004). This amount was maintained by the transporters up to the 1960s when alternative routes were sought through the Atlantic at Lagos Sea port. (Oyideji, 2006). The route was considered shorter and cheaper by the migrants. There were also cases of passengers who could not afford the fare, and so often disembarked at Lome from where they would trek to Abidjan (Oyedeki, 2006).

The Seme border was the main customs check point until the 1970s when Ayinminikore and Gbouyankoro borders along the Lome-Ghana route were opened, following the establishment of ECOWAS. (Bulletin, 1978) With better road network, traveling to Cote d'Ivoire now takes a day or two while some who could afford it patronize the air route alternative although the motor transport is still preferred by some Yoruba traders.

Ivorian Government Policy and its Implication on Yoruba Traders

The active participation of many Yoruba traders in the Ivorian economy has been as a result of government policy in Ivory Coast that favoured it. For instance, successive administration in Cote d'Ivoire had operated an open

economy which gave almost equal opportunity to both citizens and aliens to undertake series of economic activities.

The Ivorian government provided necessary infrastructures to promote investments in the country. Through the provision of infrastructures of facilities, especially the San Pedro Port completed in 1960, the improvement of rail and road transport facilities, the upgrading of airport and seaport facilities, the Abidjan town with its Port has become the most engaged in Francophone Africa, handling the cargo trade for the whole country as well as for the neighbouring states of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Republic. It should also be stressed that the government of Cote d'Ivoire openly enough prominence of foreigners in the country's international airport of Abidjan, Yamoussoukro and Bouake, as well as a number of regional airports (Uweche, 1985).

Another important form of incentive for Yoruba settlers in Cote d'Ivoire was that the country's long serving President Houphouet-Boigny genuinely encouraged the active participation of foreigners in the economy. There were occasions when he granted greater protection to alien than the country's citizens. He strongly believed that influx of people and the exchange of ideas among different culture groups would accelerate the process of nation-building especially in Cote d'Ivoire. (The trade liberalization policy of government which allows importation of European manufactured goods freely into Cote d'Ivoire had attracted many Yoruba traders to that country. This process has continued up to the present, as French goods are found in every part of Cote d'Ivoire. It is indeed remarkable that the Ivorian CFA is still tied to the French currency, which by implication allows goods from France to be readily found in Ivorian market centres. (Uweche, 1985).

Apart from government policy which favoured strangers resettlement in Cote d'Ivoire indigenous Ivorians are also always prepared to accommodate aliens in their midst. Before the 1960s, it is reported that local Ivorians even encouraged the immigrant trades to learn and understand their indigenous language(s) through the residual sign language (Opeyemi, 2002, Toye, 2003). They so much openly accepted them that they allowed these alien traders to determine the quality of CFA notes that worth the amount of goods they brought to Abidjan market and other commercial centres in the country (Orodapo, 2003).

Economic Activities of Yoruba Settlers in Cote D'ivoire

As several Yoruba merchants were attracted to Cote d'Ivoire in the period after independence, their mobility was guaranteed by the existence of an efficient transport business organized by some Yoruba entrepreneurs (Toye, 2003). With Attadiku as the pioneer transport especially before the 1960s, many other transporters emerged in the post-independence era as more Yoruba people became increasingly interested in taking up business career in Cote d'Ivoire. For instance, the growing number of transporters to meet the commercial needs of Yoruba immigrants resulted in the formation in 1980 of the Yoruba- Abidjan International Transport Union. (Labo et al, 2002). It consisted of several transport owners. As from the mid- 1970s, the Union had mainly the Toyota 20- passenger lorries on its fleet, while at present 18-seater buses and Peugeot wagons are used by the transporters. In most cases, **ce Jour** pay 25,000 CFA (=N=4,150) while those without permit pay passengers with International Passport or Residual Permit (i.e. **Carte de** 30,000 CFA (=N=5,700) as transport fare to Abidjan (Oyedeji, 2002). There are about nine (9) immigration checkpoints for Narcotics and other outlawed substances.

As stated earlier, most of the Yoruba immigrant traders in Cote d'Ivoire during colonial rule settled in Abidjan and other important towns as migrant workers, coffee growers and produce merchants.(Ogunwale,2001) After independence, many of them became intercity traders in that country, as they specialized in the purchase of items such as *Kampala*, *Adire* and other cotton materials from Abeokuta, especially the *Aso Oke* textile which they sold to prospective customers in the interior of Cote d'Ivoire. More of these traders are currently engaged in the sale of headgears and lace materials as well as other forms of textiles and wears in various market centres. They are expected to have their traveling and trading permits, while those who had shops especially in Abidjan were made to obtain 'lampo patents'(Orodapo,2003).The Yoruba merchants sold goods both in their shops at Abidjan and also in rural villages in the interior such as Bouake, Tiebesson, Bhifo, Lackouta, Adjegeh, Aboisso, Anyama and others. The rural traders also often come to the commercial town of Abidjan to purchase articles of trade and for other social activities.

The Yoruba merchants and others in Cote d'Ivoire operated under the platform of Yoruba-Abidjan Traders Association which began in the early

1960s. It has several branches such as those for traders from Ogbomoso, Ejigbo, Igbomina, Ijesa, Egba, Iwo, Ijebu etc. For instance, the Ejigbo branch of the Association was established in April 1962 and registered under the authority of “*Center de Development Sociale et Culture (Adedoyin, 2003)*.”

Apart from the commercial activities of these Yoruba merchants, many of them have also become investors in manufacturing industry and also produce (cocoa and coffee) merchants. Many of those who currently trade in electronics and related items are products of apprenticeship under the Yoruba Traders Association and now operate electronics stores where they sell wire and electrical materials, industrial hare-wares, circuit and electric poles, photocopy machines and computers, with their accessories.

It should be stressed that the major interest of the Yoruba traders and merchants in Abidjan and other towns in Cote d’Ivoire had not centered on the establishment of industries in the country but rather than they have continued to be quite relevant in the distributive sector of the economy.(Elis,1951) Their main pre-occupation had always been the conduct of trade and commerce either within Cote d’Ivoire or between Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire. Those that were involved in the commercial network between Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire usually operate from Lagos where they purchase their trade items such as soaps and toilets, rubber band, their dressing materials, textiles, cream, torchlight, belt, towels, wears and cosmetics, jewelries, sewing thread and motor parts all of which are taken to Abijan where they are sold at various commercial centres. Thus, through their commercial activities at market centres, and the customer duties or tolls collected from them at every border point which form part of government revenue in different countries they reach before Abidjan, the Yoruba traders had contributed considerably to the process of economic growth o both Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire and indeed that of the entire sub-region.

The economic, socio-cultural and communal activities of the Yoruba traders had equally promoted inter-group relations in Cote d’Ivoire. As the Yoruba migrant settlers became integrated into the Ivorian society, they established themselves in communities referred to as “*Commune des Yoruba*”. They are well established in the Ivorian settlements of Attlecoube, Adjame, Temidire, Agboville, Bassam, Marcory, Port Bouet and Treichville.(Orodapo,2002)

Since the rights and freedom of religion and association are granted Yoruba residents in Cote d'Ivoire, they have exploited such rights not only to enhance their economic pursuits but also to promote religious and social development of Cote Cote d'Ivoire. Both Islam and Christianity had experienced rapid growth in the country due to the activities or efforts of Yoruba traders and other Yoruba groups. In fact there is a large proportion of Yoruba Muslims in Attiecouble where they have built a central mosque that enables them to observe their religious prayers and undertake the training of Muslim youths in Arabic education and Islamic worship. For the Christians, they are largely based in both Marcory and Treichville where several Christian denominations such as Marcory Baptist Church, CAC Church, Oke Ayo, CAC Port Bouet, and others exist. Such religious activities had improved the rate of social development in Cote d'Ivoire. (Adedapo, 2002)

The commercial activities of the Yoruba executives business class which since the 1980s have become involved in large scale international transactions, had promoted economic growth in both countries. Such Yoruba traders regularly visit commercial towns in the countries of Dubai, Thailand, France, United States and Britain from where they bring to Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire goods such as perfumes, jewelries, shoes and bags, wristwatches, wears, motor spare parts, lace and guinea materials, rice, grinding machines, computers and electronics, *petit pois*, etc. These items are often sold at competitive prices in both rural and urban settlements within Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire. This process had also resulted in the emergence of a set of indigenous traders in Cote d'Ivoire who operate in small cartels and kiosks most especially at ports and border towns. Within this category could also be found the local food sellers, the hawkers of raw and fried items such as *Ogi*, been cakes and others who are spread in cartier Adjame, Port Bouet, Adjoujou, and also the operators of stationary stores, supermarkets and others (Orodapo, 2003).

Apart from being Africa's leading exporter of coffee, Ivorian government policy had, undoubtedly, helped the cocoa industry in that country to do well. This policy had also made Cote d'Ivoire to be a major exporter of palm oil in West Africa (Uweche, 1985). Thus, the lucrative nature of commerce in Cote d'Ivoire had made that country a source of attraction to millions of West

Africans, many of how work on plantations, in cosmetic and related occupations, and as merchants in the commercial capital and other major towns.

Ivorien Political Crises and Efforts on Yoruba Settlers

The economic fortunes of the Yoruba in Cote d'Ivoire soon came under severe threat when political tension raged in the country following the demise of former President Houphouet Boigny. It escalated into a chaotic situation when in 2001 the Ivorian Head of State, Gen. Robert Guei was assassinated as he wanted to impose himself on the people (The Punch, 2002) The main operation candidate from the North, Alhassan quattara, was also edged out of the presidential race, and the Electoral Commission eventually brought Laurent Gbagbo to powers as the Country's president (Nigerian Tribune, 2002)

With the Northern rebel's uprising since October 2002, Cote d'Ivoire had been made ungovernable for President Gbagbo. As the crises dragged on, and defying any sort of immediate solution, aliens including Yoruba traders and other groups became potential victims. The death toll in the ranks of Yoruba alien settlers rose almost on daily basis. They soon realized that returning to Nigeria was the only practical solution to the dilemma they faced in a war-torn country. Thus, as from November 2002, several Egba, Oyo, Ejigbo, Ogbomosho, Ijebu, Iwo, Igbomina and other Yoruba sub groups in Cote d'Ivoire in their hundred began to return to Nigeria in Lorries and trucks, to their utmost displeasure. Many of the survivors give tales of their experiences especially the cruel way in which their kit and kin were brutalized and property destroyed indiscriminately by the rampaging Ivorian soldiers, the rebels and other militia groups, including bandits etc (WestAfrica, 2002). Most of the returnees perceived the Ivorian crisis as one they had not prepared themselves for, but had brought almost complete destruction to what they had, for several decades, laboured for in Cote d'Ivoire.

As some of these Yoruba returnees currently plan on how to relocate themselves with their enterprise in Nigeria, many others still believe strongly that once a lasting peace is found to the Ivorien crisis, they would return to that country for their economic pursuits. They all share the view that in terms of economic fortunes, Cote d'Ivoire has a better prospect than Nigeria where uncertainty and disorders reign as the standard or norm for both public

and private organizations, including those in the informal economic sector of the country.

Conclusion

The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, like other groups, have always engaged in the process of migration and settlement to promote integration within the West Africa sub-region. Several Yoruba migrant settlers have employed their expertise in local and long distance commercial transactions to enhance the economic growth of their country and also that of Cote d'Ivoire.

Since the early years of independence, the presence of Yoruba traders in Cote d'Ivoire had become noticeable through their economic activities at market centres and along the trade routes in the region. The activities of these traders had resulted in the considerable growth of commercial transactions and the establishment of strong political and economic relations between Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire. The forms of prosperity by many Yoruba settlers in Cote d'Ivoire are expressed through the big edifices they their economic or financial base, and the high level of education some of them, with their children, had acquired in France.

The commercial activities of Yoruba traders in that country had equally led to the rapid growth of the Ivorian economy. Most especially during the 1960s and 1970s, the Ivorian economy witnessed a remarkable growth rate in the area of industry, trade and agricultural development. It is obvious that with government incentives and reforms, Abidjan and other Ivorian commercial towns had become centres of attractions to several Yoruba settlers and the nationals of other West African countries.

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