



## THE DECLINED CONSUMPTION OF COCOYAM (XANTHOSOMA SAGITTIFOLIUM) (L.) AMONG THE OWO PEOPLE OF ONDO PROVINCE OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA, 1850-1960.

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### Abstracts

*Cocoyam was one of the indigenous tuberous crops that sustained the population of Owo in pre-colonial times. The crop was produced as a complement of yam, it was consumed in large quantity especially during the annual planting period. Red cocoyam was stronger than the white species (colosasia esculenta). In recent times, red cocoyam species was hardly accessed by the consumers and the basis for its disappearance has greatly been marred with series of assumptions. The research methodology primarily made use of oral interview, conducted on one hundred (100) people in the study area. Data were analysed from historical perspective. It was established that red cocoyam suffered a great set back in the 1850s, consequent upon the destructive effect of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's Yoruba wars that ravaged the indigenous crops of the North-eastern Yoruba communities including Owo. The economic base of Owo was targeted and plundered with impunity by the belligerents. A stronger force was the wave of colonial threat of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which plunged the indigenous agricultural base into unending superfluous colonial methodical structure. The study gained insights into the significance of the crop to the people of Owo of Ondo Province of Southwestern Nigeria. Such among other findings was that the food crop was a veritable source of nutritional and economic values, it also established that the crop had the potentials of reducing food scarcity and alleviating poverty among the post colonial people of Owo for sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** *Declined, Consumption, Indigenous Cocoyam, Nutritional, Economic values.*

## Introduction

Cocoyam was one of the principal staple food crops on which the pre-colonial population of Southwestern Nigeria subsisted. Doku sheds light on the history of cocoyam domestication which was as old as period before 5000 B.C among the South-east Asian farmers where it formed part of their oldest staple crops.<sup>1</sup> Its exact period of domestication among the Owo people of Ondo Province was uncertain. The tuberous crop known as *ilegbe* in the local dialect was as old as the existence of the ancient Owo town. Thus, apart from being a principal staple food crop that sustained the population in pre-colonial times, it also formed one of the articles of trade peddled across intra and inter-regional markets, as far as the northern areas of Ilorin to Kano in the heydays of West African trade across the Saharan Desert.<sup>2</sup> This study was inevitable against the backdrop of misconceptions about those items that constituted the food baskets of Owo people of Southwestern Nigeria prior to colonial era. Findings showed that cocoyam produced various related food items such as *iyan-ilegbe* known in general term as *iyan-koko* (pounded cocoyam), *iresi-ilegbe* or *eepo-koko* (cocoyam rice), *koko-sisun* (roasted cocoyam), *koko-sise* (boiled cocoyam), *asasu-koko* (cocoyam porridge), *ipekere-koko* (cocoyam snack) and *obe-koko* (cocoyam soup). These delicacies contributed greatly to food sustainability forces of the people in the past. This Study revealed that the Owo people cultivated cocoyam more than any other tuberous crops including yam.

Hence, a reconstruction of the history of ancient Owo town was incomplete without a survey of its economic history, with special focus on the relevance of its pre-colonial agriculture and food crop production and consumption. Cocoyam was a well-known food plant which had a long history of cultivation as indigenous food crop of the people of Owo and it belonged to the family of *Araceae*.<sup>3</sup> Two major species were cultivated, the *colosasia esculenta* (white cocoyam) known as *koko funfun* and *Xanthosoma sagitifolium* was the red

<sup>1</sup> E. V. Doku, "Root-crops in West Africa" in *Journal of Soil Sciences* vo.6 (Trinidad 1967), pp. 36-60

<sup>2</sup> Nzietchueng, S. "A State of the Art of Cocoyam (*Xanthosoma* sp.) in Pathological Research in Cameroon" Being a paper presented at the Mid-term Evaluation of National Root-crop Improvement Programme (NCRIPC), Ekona, Cameroon, 1978-1979.

<sup>3</sup> W. Oyemakinde, "The Structure of the West African Economy" in G.O Ogunreim and E. K. Faluyi *Economic History of West Africa* (Ibadan Rex Charles Publications 1996) p.1-5. See W.S. M. De Boef, "Agro Biodiversity Livelihood and Markets" in S. De Boef, W.S and E.O Keefe (eds.) *Community Bio Diversity Management: Promotion Resilience and Conservation of Plant Genetic Resources*. (Zaire African Pacific 1999) 177-193.

species,<sup>4</sup> generally called *koko pupa* in Yoruba language. Cocoyam was commonly planted in the past, it was generally regarded as a patient crop, which gave its best even with very minimal attention. Pre-colonial Owo farmers engaged in subsistence production of cocoyam with labour force mainly sourced from among the family members. The immediate, extended, slaves, pawns, peons and co-operative forces supplied needed labour with which the farmers cultivated their farmland. Cocoyam corms were often grown in the rainy period and harvested around August to December, when farmland were prepared for new planting season. The leaves of cocoyam were shaped like a shield and as high as a meter in length. Cocoyam was harvested at the annual planting period, when the indigenous farmers started experiencing annual scarcity of food. In recent times, production and consumption of cocoyam has significantly declined. The work of Ndiritu and Wambuguh was aptly referring to the above when they write that the trend of production and consumption of indigenous crops in Nigeria has drastically dropped, they buttressed that small scale holding farmers were no longer interested in food crop cultivation due to modernity and labour shift from rural to the urban centers.<sup>5</sup> Oyewole also identifies that application of land use rules further exacerbated low food crop production in Nigeria, except in the north, where modern farm techniques were adopted for large production of food crops.<sup>6</sup> However, cocoyam production was not a peculiar crop of the northern farmers. Fasoyiro, Ajibade, Omole, Adeniyani and Farinde, discuss that securing maximum food for the fast growing Nigerian population has engendered serious relentless researches targeted at the study of under-consumed food crops that were adaptable to environmental conditions similar to the Ondo Province and were found resistible to pests and insects. It was postulated that the disappearing seeds of many food crops meant that new varieties should be imported into the mainstream of production.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> C. Ndiritu, and L. Wambuguh, "The Role of New Technologies in Enhancing Food Security in Africa" in A. Ogunrinade, R. Oniang'o, and J. May (eds.), *Not by Bread Alone: Food Security and Governance in Africa*, Today Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Oyewole O. B. "Accessibility of Land for Empowerment" in *Journal of Sciences* (Ibadan, Longman Publishers 2010)

<sup>7</sup> S. Fasoyiro S. Ajibade A. Omole, O. Adeniyani, E. Farinde Proximate, minerals and Anti Nutritional Factors of Some Underutilized Grain legumes in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nutrition & Food Science*. ;36(1): (2006)18-23. Grant G, More L. J., McKenzie NH, Stewart J. C., and A. A. Pusztai, Survey of

## **Research Problem**

Cocoyam was one of the principal food crops that engaged the agrarian population of Owo as it was traced to the ancient farms of Ago-Paanu and Maleghe. In recent times, the staple food crop, which among other food items, typified the traditional pride of the Owo people of old Ondo Province was facing a serious threat to disappearance. 1850 significantly introduced distraction into the traditional economy of Ondo Province and Owo was directly involved in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century sanguinary backlash that challenged the functional structure of the people's indigenous methods of food production and consumption. Towards the end of the Century, the productive indigenous economy had given way to foreign ideas that eclipsed the people's pattern of feeding. The trend of production and consumption of cocoyam among the ancient people of Owo had dangerously declined. It was observed that the traditional drive for the production of indigenous food crops has waned, thereby, paved way to infiltration of exotic food items and pattern of consumption. Thus, the indigenous farmers of Owo in recent times cultivated cocoyam for basic consumption rather than maintaining the pre-colonial economic and socio-cultural balance of surplus production for immediate and extended needs. Nonetheless, the law of demand justifies the law of supply by establishing that there was low demand for the consumption of cocoyam mainly due to pronounced shift from the old pattern of food consumption to modern innovations and tradition, which affected the structure, nature and functions of the traditional society of Owo in Ondo Province as the study area. Hence, attention had been shifted to the consumption of potato of different varieties, yam from among the Ebira who settled in the major farming communities of Owo, up to the middle-belt area of modern day Benue State. Food stuff sellers revealed that those who bought cocoyam were the older people who either retained the taste of the food crop or were placed on special diets.<sup>8</sup> Solidifying the above position were responses from middle aged people located to the local markets of Owo, they reiterated that they preferred to spend money and time on food items which were consumed in modern times, such as sweet potatoes,

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the Nutritional and Haem agglutination Properties of Legume Seeds Generally Available in the UK. *British Journal of Nutrition*. 1983; 50(02):207-1

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Bosede Ojikutu, Madam, 62 years, Oba Market, Owo 22/04/15, Agnes Ijawoye, Mrs, 67years, Yam seller, Oba market, Owo, 22/04/15

pastries and fries.<sup>9</sup> This was in consonance with the position of Ndiritu and Wambuguh when they logically exposed the unpleasant effects of modernity on pattern of food consumption.<sup>10</sup> This study elicited that the younger population lacked the knowledge of the existence and significance of indigenous food items, and this has seriously exacerbated the trend of forcing the staple food crop into early oblivion. Majority of the younger population were ignorant of cocoyam as one of the staple food items on which the older generation subsisted. They grew up with the western food items which cultural values were propagated and as well domesticated against the indigenous pattern of food consumption among the Owo people. Also, it was established in this study that growing level of poverty was shown in the people's lack of resources for procuring sufficient food items for sustaining the ever-increasing population.

### **Significance of Cocoyam to the Owo People**

#### **Economic Values of Cocoyam**

Fasoyiro, Ajibade, Omole, Adeniyani and Farinde posit that the relevance of indigenous food to sustaining the local population cannot be overemphasized. This was mainly because they were more accessible and they provided a significant percentage of the population with cheap source of income and nutrients. On this premise, the position of Walker and Kocher on production and consumption of indigenous food items, as a veritable source of food security against dearth of food, than full reliance on consumption of imported food items was explored in the analysis of the nutritional and economic values of cocoyam to the ancient Owo cocoyam production.<sup>11</sup> Cocoyam was significant to the economy of Owo people in the past, it served as complement of other tuberous crops, especially yam, plantain and potatoes (kukunduku). The preferred cocoyam was the red species because it was sturdier and had better taste than

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Oladunni Abejaye, Madam 72 yrs, Yam seller, Oba market, Owo 22/04/15 This shows the age line of departure from the consumption of indigenous food items, majority of people below age 50 complied with the modern trends of food consumption, having interpreted their responses. Some even rhetorically said; *se awon ounje wonyen maa n dun ni?* Meaning; "are those food items tasty?" De Langhe, E. *The Origin in variation of Plantain and Banana*, (Asia, IBPGR, 1964), pp 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ndiritu, C. and Wambuguh, L. "The Role of New Technologies in Enhancing Food Security in Africa" in Ogunrinade, A., Oniang'o, R. and May J. (eds.), *Not by Bread Alone: Food Security and Governance in Africa*, Today Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> A. F. Walker and N. Kocher, *Effects of Processing including domestic cooking on Nutritional Legumes*, (Nigeria Alfa and Cole 2002) p.41-46.



the white type. Cocoyam generally was herbaceous in nature and capable of growing to a height of 2 meters. Virtually all its parts were indispensable to the consumption pattern of North-eastern Yoruba people in the past.<sup>12</sup> They produced delicacies of different kinds through different methods of preparation.<sup>13</sup> The leaves were seldom cooked and eaten like spinach, the stalks were grinded or shredded to prepare soup delicacies for the consumption of any kind of food, especially *iyan-ilegbe* (pounded cocoyam), *iyan-isu* (pounded yam), *iyan-agidi*(pounded maize) and *eko-agidi* (hard pap).

### Nutritional Value of cocoyam

The study was able to fill the vacuum between indigenous food items and malnourishment by exploring and discussing the inherent nutritional values of the indigenous cocoyam amidst other edible crops of the Owo people of North-eastern Yoruba. Apart from the fact that production of indigenous crops largely played vital roles in boosting food baskets of any nation, it was a cheaper source of natural nutrients which were not derivable from other available staple food stuffs imported from the external markets.<sup>14</sup>

### Nutritional Contents of Cocoyam

Nutrients	Percentage (%)
Carbohydrate	83.46
Ash	5.2
Protein	9.4
Crude fibre	0.73
Crude Fat	0.37

Source: Passam 1982

The above table showed the nutritional value of cocoyam, although the carbohydrate level was higher than the other nutritional contents as represented in this table, yet its consumers subsisted on it much more than any other food

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the chefs

<sup>13</sup> T. Falola, "African Pre-colonial Domestic Economy..."<sup>11</sup>, origin of cocoyam was traced to Africa from where it became domesticated through interaction with the Bantu groups.

<sup>14</sup> T. Walker, T. L.Kelly, R., Rovere, D., Templeton, G., Thiele and B. Douthwaite, *Strategic Guidance for Ex-Post Impact Assessment of Agricultural Research*, Report prepared for SPIA, CGIAR (Rome Science Council, 2008).

crops. For instance, the cooked tender leaves and shoots, eaten as spinach were rich in minerals and vitamins. Cocoyam and all its edible parts were very rich in Thiamine, Riboflavin and niacin. The above findings about the nutritional contents of cocoyam was in tandem with the positions of Oyenuga and Coursey that cocoyam corms contain significant percentage of nutrients of about 7.57 % of Crude Protein, appreciable quantities of Vitamins B and C as well as Fat and Carbohydrate.<sup>15</sup> It was also reliably gathered that the crude fibre in cocoyam was higher than the percentage in *Discorea* spp. species (yam), this has placed cocoyam at a better valued position than yam which was the most consumed tuberous crop among the people of Owo in recent times. Adu-Peters established that modernity and changed pattern of food consumption was basically responsible for the dwindled consumption of cocoyam amongst the Owo people.

### **Cocoyam and Hunger/Poverty Reduction**

Colonial influence and its lopsided capitalistic tendencies ushered commodity economy into North-eastern Yoruba communities, the indigenous farmers hurriedly side-tracked the production of tuberous crops for optimal production and exportation of exotic grain crops. Subsequently, the surplus food baskets were depleted and the area became a net importer of grain commodities with high number of under-nourished people since independence. North-eastern communities which were abundantly endowed with agricultural friendly environment in diversity has become one of the poorest food importing entities in Southwestern Nigeria. Clover avers that “no human right has been so frequently and spectacularly violated in recent times as the right to food.”<sup>16</sup> Idachaba, centrally argues that a society with insufficient food supply for its citizenry is no doubt, one with submerged socio-economic security well-conceived in endangered future.<sup>17</sup> Despite all forms of propaganda of successive governments, Owo was far from being food secured. The United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Kimoon attests that a child dies of hunger at every five

<sup>15</sup> V.A. Oyenuga, *Nigeria's Food and Feeding Stuffs*, (Ibadan, university Press,) pp 98. Also, D. G. Coursey, *The Edible Aroids World Crops*, 20 (4): 23-30.

<sup>16</sup> J. Clover, *Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa*, *African Security Review*, Vol.12, No.1 (2003)

<sup>17</sup> F. S. Idachaba, “The Looming Food Crisis”, *News watch*, Lagos, August 3, Special Colloquium Edition (2009).

second across the world.<sup>18</sup> He also relays the statistics of irreparable havoc wrecked by lack of access to necessary food items by the world population as he kicked off a food summit that lasted for three days in Rome where he claimed: “today, more than one billion people are hungry”, six million children die of hunger every year, 17,000 every day.”<sup>19</sup>

Considering the adaptable nature of indigenous crops and their ability to grow naturally under the ecological dictates of the area, the study therefore established that indigenous food crops have the potentials to reduce hunger among the populace. On this note have Breman and Reuler explored the diverse varieties of crops that were less consumed by the vast Nigerian population. They were classified as tropical food crops and many of these species were documented, out of which thousands were under-consumed. These Scholars were able to explore the nutritional values of these crops of being capable of allaying hunger and poverty from among the people.<sup>20</sup> They suggested that these under-consumed food crops would be able to keep the population healthy due to the fact that their production process was cheaper when compared with the imported food items most of which were referred to as fast food items.<sup>21</sup> In view of the above, the study evaluated the poverty alleviation profile of cocoyam as one of the under-consumed crops and established its potentials against the backdrop of food importation and diversification for the populace. Olorunda, Olowosile and Arowele report that cocoyam was milled into floury substance to produce food items such as tortillas, doughnuts, crispy chips (dundu) called snacks.<sup>22</sup> Other food items were *Ojojo* (fried puff), *ojojo* was prepared by grating peeled cocoyam, mixed with pepper, salt, onion and fried in hot edible oil. *Asaro* (porridge), was prepared by peeling cocoyam, well sliced into smaller pieces and cooked, ingredients such as pepper, salt, onion and palm oil were

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<sup>18</sup>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report, (New York: Oxford University Press 1994).

<sup>19</sup> ibid

<sup>20</sup> H. Breman and H. VanReuler, “Legumes: when and where an option? No panacea for poor tropical West African soils and expensive fertilizers”, in B. Vanlauwe, J. Diels, N. Sanginga and R. Merckx (eds) *Integrated Plant Nutrient Management in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Wallingford, UK: CABI 2002).

<sup>21</sup>Cf note 154

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Olorunda Abigail (Madam), (72yrs), Food-stuff seller, Oja-Oba Owo 16/5/17, Olowosile Mutiat (Mrs), (62 yrs), Oja Obá, Owo 16/5/17 and Arowele Dehinde (Mr) (52yrs), food-stuff farmer, Owo 16/5/2016



added and cooked into pastry form then served.<sup>23</sup> *Iyan-koko* known as *iyani-legbe* (pounded cocoyam) in Owo was prepared by peeling the back or cooked with the back, when it was done, the back was peeled with knife and pounded by strong members of the family. Red cocoyam was sturdy while the white species was soft, in other words, pounding the red species consumed more energy than the other type. The red species absorbed more water and swelled more after pounding. More interestingly was another delicacy known as *eepo* (epipa or eepa) among the other Yoruba-speaking groups in southwestern Nigeria. *Eepo* was the Christmas rice of the Owo in the past, it was prepared by boiling the peeled cocoyam, sliced and sun-dried.<sup>24</sup> The dried substance was beaten into smaller pieces in mortar and then cooked in similar process as rice. Ingredients such as dried fish, pepper, salt and oil were added and steamed till when ready for consumption. It was also usually eaten roasted or boiled with palm oil, garden-egg or *ikete* (black palm oil). However, Fasoyiro et al clarify that the level of production of indigenous food crops was not in tandem with the increased level of hunger and malnourishment in the North-eastern Yoruba area which housed Owo town. In other words, there was acute hunger due to shift from production of indigenous food crops such as cocoyam to the production of foreign food items such as cassava, exotic rice, sweet-potatoes and wheat due to contradictions such as the nature of soil of the new environment.<sup>25</sup> Plantain and other indigenous food crops also suffered similar low level of production from the agrarian economy due to labour migration to the urban areas.

### Cocoyam and Cultural Values

Cocoyam was a supplement of yam and was more preferred to yam by the Owo people. It was consumed as regular staple food or prepared into *iyani* (pounded cocoyam) during *Igbade* or *Iwuye* (installation) ceremony, *Ero* or *odun-agba* (age-grade) ceremony, *Igbeyawo* (marriage) ceremony, *Oku-Agba* (burial ceremony) and *Gogo* (annual town festival).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Obayan Abigail (Madam), (72yrs), Food-stuff seller, Oja-Oba Owo 16/5/15, Olowosile Mutiat (Mrs), (62 yrs), Oja Oba, Owo 16/5/16 and Arowele Dehinde (Mr) (52yrs), food-stuff farmer, Owo 16/5/2016

<sup>24</sup> Bosede Ojikutu (Mrs), 62 yrs, Food-stuff seller, Oba Market, Owo, 22/04/2015

<sup>25</sup> ibid

<sup>26</sup> Olalekan Osasusi, (Chief), 53 years, Cultural Custodian, No, 15, Eyin-ogbe, Owo 22/04/2015

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has the potentials to bridge the gap between the threatened indigenous tuberous crops and the political economy of the Owo people of North-eastern Yorubaland. Food production and consumption depicted the physical and metaphysical strengths of groups of people in the past. It depicted the general well-being of the people and were not handled with contempt. Every individual has equal rights to food consumption as it was observed among the people in the developed world. In view of the above, Jenkins and Kendall affirm that access to sufficient food was the basic right of every man and the understanding of the right was central to any kind of human rights and social development.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, food security connotes a deeper understanding of equal access to it at all times. United Nations' Development Programme in Jenkins and Kendall asserts that this was measured using per capita daily supply of calories and protein and the child hunger rate was measured by the percentage of children who were undernourished.<sup>28</sup> Notably, on 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and called it a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.<sup>29</sup> The declaration entrenches that individuals have fundamental rights to sufficient food against hunger. As universal as these rights were, they remained untapped by every child across the globe.<sup>30</sup> These rights were implemented since 1948 and have not taken their course among the poor nations including Nigeria where Owo was located. Invariably, cocoyam producing area of Owo stands to benefit from the position maintained by Eide that a food secured society automatically established a great nexus with the rights of its people and the social environment for worthwhile development.

<sup>27</sup> J. C. Jenkins and S. J. Kendall, "Food Security in Less Developed Countries, 1970 to 1990", in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 66 Oct. 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Cf note 165

<sup>29</sup> A. Eide, "Globalization, Universalization and the Human Right to Adequate Food", in A. Ogunrinade R. Oniango and J. May, (eds), *Not by Bread Alone*", Food Security and Governance in Africa, (Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, South Africa, ABC Press 1999).

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

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### Oral Interview

Name	Title	Age	Occupation	Address	Date
<b>Tunde Salaja</b>	<b>Chief</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>Farmer</b>	<b>Maleghe farm</b>	<b>22/4/15</b>
<b>Ojikutu Bosede</b>	Mrs	62	Food seller	Oba market	22/4/15
<b>Abejeye Oladunni</b>	Mrs	72	Yam seller	Oba market	22/4/15
<b>Oguntoba O</b>	Mrs	66	Food seller	Oba market	22/4/15
<b>Ijawoye Agnes</b>	Mrs	67	Yam seller	Oba market	22/4/15
<b>Nureen Ibrahim</b>	Pa	93	Farmer	Ago Paanu farm	22/4/15
<b>Oguntoba J.</b>	Madam	70yrs	Healer	Oba market	22/4/15
<b>Obayan Abigail</b>	Madam	72yrs	Foodstuff seller	Oba market	16/05/16
<b>Mutiati Olowosile</b>	Mrs	62yrs	Cocoyam seller	Oba market	16/05/16
<b>Deinde Arowele</b>	Mr	52yrs	Food crop Farmer	Maleghe farm	16/05/16
<b>Olalekan Ojo</b>	Mr.	63yrs	Food crop farmer	Maleghe farm	16/05/16
<b>Osasusi Olalekan</b>	Chief	53yrs	Cultural Custodian	Eyin-Ogbe Owo	16/05/2016

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