

INTERROGATING THE 1968/69 CLASS CONFLICT IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Although some literature on post-colonial conflict in Africa have demonstrated that the crises in Western Nigeria were caused by taxation and tax-related considerations, scholarship on inter-class relations and class formation in Africa is far from being complete. The 1968/69 resource poor peasant struggles was not only between unfledged classes with very little political self awareness, this study is also an example of class conflict or more appropriately, class clashes between representatives of an urban-oriented policy of development and what a scholar refers to as 'agrarian population'. Using primary and secondary sources, the study explores the various ways through which the bureaucrats, politicians and the military rulers shortchanged the peasants who were derogatorily designated as 'static', 'timeless', 'changeless' individuals and groups inhabiting a backward society and deploying anachronistic agricultural techniques in a rapidly changing modern world. This research exposes the weaknesses of early post-independent rulers' tax policies by looking at how the peasant farmers in Western Nigeria contested the imposition of high taxes on their personal incomes and vigorously asserted themselves. The uniqueness of this study resides not only in its adding to recent scholarship that is trying to bring the historiography of peasants of South-western Nigeria to the standard that obtains in other places around the world, it also recognises the need for further research to preserve the social memory of the 1968/69 Agbekoya Riots through the collection, preservation and dissemination of literature on the major stakeholders in the tax riots.

Key Words: Class, Conflict, Equity, Nigeria, Peasant, Society

Introduction

Class theory recognizes the existence of social class in every society. The significance of the position of the individuals or groups in the immediate post-colonial South-western Nigeria society also counted as the contest between the rich and the poor, like all economic contests, played a great part in the politics of the Nigeria people. The

historical importance of differences in rank and caste, equality before the law and other contrasts within the society once again took the centre stage in the immediate post-colonial Western Nigeria as the interests of the individuals and groups became incompatibles again. The success story of the Marxian theory of class and class conflict was again demonstrated among the Yoruba speaking people of Western Nigeria as the various classes and groups within the

Yoruba society, which included the poor resource peasant farmers, bureaucrats and politicians irreconcilably contested for, among other things, positions, advantages etc to the extent that those members of the society like chief Obafemi Awolowo and other prominent Nigerians, who desired and worked for peace, had difficulties containing the class struggle.

Background to the Agbekoya Movement: Causes of the 'War'

The history of British presence in Nigeria dates back to 1861 when Lagos was brought under colonial rule. However, the largest chunk of Yoruba land came under colonial rule in 1893. Since the territory that later became Nigeria came under colonial rule in a gradual piece-meal fashion, one could say that the effective colonial occupation of the largest chunk of modern Nigeria took place after 1900. The administration of the Lagos protectorate was officially transferred from the foreign office to the colonial office on the 1st of April 1899, and Sir Ralph Moor was appointed the High Commissioner (Geary, 1927: 122.).

During the period of British rule, the 'cocoa economy' grew among the Yoruba. This crop, which was produced exclusively for the world market, accentuated and fostered latent class divisions. This cash crop, for decades, brought affluence and prosperity to some, but the same crop, (as a monoculture) unfortunately, turned out to be a

fluctuating and unstable base for the economy of Yoruba land. The British colonial government tried to facilitate the growth of cocoa production by indirectly tinkering with the rural economy and ensuring the extraction of small surplus through export duties for administrative finance. The colonial taxation was a major aspect of administrative changes of the early years of colonial rule that engendered a number of crises in South-western Nigeria. (Falola, 2009).

For instance, through its taxation policy, peasant production was spurred, but the government's attempt to impose heavy taxation in a period of falling producer prices led to a violent reaction in Yoruba land in 1918. (Atanda, 1969: 120-138). From then onward, British colonial officials began to give less attention to farmers' production and benevolently observed the cocoa trade while indirectly taxing the producers in order to cover the cost of administration. The major beneficiaries of the cocoa trade were the colonial trading companies, who soon reconciled themselves to peasant production since it ultimately turned out to be cheaper and more efficient than they had envisaged in the Western Region.

The Nigeria Cocoa Marketing Board was established in 1947 to 'assist in the development of the cocoa industry for the benefit and prosperity of the producers' (Galleti et al. 1956: x-xvi). The difference between world prices (less government export/produce duties, freight etc) and prices guaranteed by the Board constituted

its 'surplus', which, according to the terms of its establishment, was to be kept in trust for the producers. (Galleti et al. 1956: xii.). Although the peasant farmers profited from the post war prices of the colonial state through the Marketing Board, the latter was extracting a significant fraction of the actual world marketing prices, thereby shortchanging the local farmers effectively. The degree of exploitation was intense and the Board had subtly assumed the role of a tax collector (Olatunbosun, 1975: 53-75.). By 1956, the income of the farmers had become massively destabilized as private savings and investment by producers were almost impossible (Bauer, P. 1956). The Western Nigeria cocoa farmers began to live on the 'brink' from season to season, high or low prices translating to brief prosperity, and in some cases, foreclosure and ruin.

The Marketing Board was also engaged in the quality control of cocoa products through a policy of close produce inspection. Attempts were made to control the spread of cocoa diseases, particularly swollen shoot, but the Ibadan peasantry vigorously resisted the activities of the cutting gangs. 'Two hundred and forty five square miles were found to be infected with swollen shoot, ... an estimated acreage of cocoa in areas of mass infection' showed 'a total of 50,000... of 1,548,236 cocoa trees were cut down up to April, 1952 and the sum of £197,370 went to farmers as

compensation. (*Southern Nigeria Defender*. 1952). There was initially insufficient evidence to show whether the sealing policy was completely effective or not. But it soon became apparent that sealing and cutting were just a politically expedient approach to the problem. The details of the activities of the Ibadan 'Maiyegun society' (set the world right) have been well documented in another work. (Beer, 1976: 54-57). The *Maiyegun* movement essentially epitomized protests by small peasant producers in the Ibadan area against government policies, (and her agents) which threatened to push them down from a precariously balanced precipice.

The Action Group (AG) was elected to power in the Western Region in 1953 and one of its principal objectives was to use the huge 'surpluses' of the Commodity Board locked up in London Banks to secure 'Life more Abundant' for the teeming population of Western Nigeria. (Awonor-Gordon, 1982) During this period also, cocoa was the largest earner of foreign exchange for Nigeria and incidentally, Western Region had relative autonomy in the marketing of the crop. The region had, over many years, built up a substantial financial reserve through the activities of Cocoa Marketing Board, which became handy to the federal government of Nigeria during the civil war years as most of the weapons of war were imported and paid for in hard currency from the reserve (Afowowe, 1998:83).

The Colonial Cocoa Marketing

Board, which was regionalized by Western Region Law No 10 of 1954, became the Western Region Marketing Board. Originally, the main role of the Marketing Board was to help to "promote the development of producing areas...enhance the prosperity of the producers and...people of the region as a whole", (Ajayi, & Ojeyide, 1974) but like its predecessor, it failed to achieve these goals because the Board was soon drawn by the state government into its structure through amendments made to the original law in order to boost the degree of political control over its activities. The region's ambitious First Development Plan was launched in 1955 and by 1959, had spent over £102 million on education, roads, economic development and social services (Ajayi, & Ojeyide, 1974). However, it soon became apparent that it was the Region's urban areas that were really benefiting from the 'life more abundant' drive of the Western Region government's socio-economic policies. The rural dwellers were largely ignored.

Although one could say that the Western Region enjoyed a period of peasant-financed development from 1954 to 1961, it could also be said that some of the flaws of the Action Group (AG) development strategy were results of self-serving policies that were deliberately geared towards satisfying the interests of the dominant classes in the society. It was, indeed, a policy which ensured that the highest possible financial benefits returned to its controllers, which included bureaucrats and politicians. The class

issue was succinctly noted by a news media when it asserted that there were two groups of people in the Western Region: "those who live at the public expense and those who provide the money" (*West Africa*, June 6th, 1959).

The Western State's economy remained based on cocoa monoculture despite attempts at diversification. In fact, the attempt to base economic growth on cocoa 'surplus' experienced its first setback in the 1961/62 season; this period marked the beginning of the end of the 'prosperity era' as the optimism and complacency of the ruling classes got its first jolt during this period. The 1961/62 season epitomized the birth of a slump in the rural areas, which persisted until the late 1960s. In 1963, a scholar noted that the senior ranks of the service formed an 'elite' group. With a minimum starting salary of £720 per annum, which represented twenty times the yearly income of a relatively prosperous cocoa farmer, the young graduate easily entered a closed shop through the 'magic key' of his education. (Lloyd, 1967: 129-153) Through the 1960s, the major source of revenue for the Western Region government continued to be taxes collected from the low income group who were the majority both in the rural and urban areas.

The state government introduced a series of taxes and one of them was the State Development Levy. Although there was nothing necessarily evil in the introduction of this new levy as it was intended to cover up the shortfall in government revenue, its institution sparked off discontent among the low-income groups who were mostly petty traders/market women as they were

taxed on the same basis as their male counterparts. On the other hand, the affluent in the society deliberately avoided their fair share of taxes. Thus, "farmers were being fleeced to pay for titled dignitaries and pen pushers." (Beer, 1976: 162) Unfortunately too, the rate of infrastructural development was not commensurate with the enormous taxes, levies and rates that were demanded by the Western State, and this was another source of discontent, particularly for the rural dwellers.

The Western State's financial reserve, which was generated through the efforts of the peasant farmers, turned out to be what the Federal Military Government depended on to purchase most of the instruments of war like guns, tanks, war-planes etc, which were imported and paid for in hard currency during the Nigerian Civil War. It was during this period that Governor Adebayo, the then Military Governor of Western State, launched his new tax initiative that turned out to be politically volatile. Apart from increasing taxes and rates that were formerly payable within the region, compulsory Federal Savings Scheme and Regional Savings Schemes were also instituted in order to assist the Federal Military Government in her war efforts against 'Biafra'.

The general disapproval that arose from the government's involvement in the Marketing Board's affairs and the saving schemes were tremendous and through it all sympathy was generally with the low income earners. Was it, therefore, surprising that those socio-political observers, who heard all the hushed

discussions about the economic policy of the military authorities, should have thought wistfully that there was no serious philosophy behind the activities of the Western Region administration, except that of meeting the demands of the headquarters in Lagos. Money was required to prosecute the Nigerian Civil War and the burden of providing the needed funds fell directly on the resource poor Yoruba peasants. These excessive tax demands ultimately culminated in the Agbekoya Riots of 1968/69.

A synopsis of the Agbekoya Riots

Indeed, the view that 'wars' are always fought for economic interests really found supports in the origin of the Agbekoya Riots. Personal interests, fear and rivalry were not the motives which prompted the peasants to what proved a severe struggle. One cannot concentrate solely on their ostensible cause: "Whatever the apparent cause of any riot, the real one is always want of happiness. (Paine, 1937: 137) The causes of the peasant's unhappiness on the eve of the disturbances were multifarious. Therefore, generalizations regarding the causes of these riots would be misleading.

The Agbekoya Riots can only be properly understood and appreciated if it is viewed as a class struggle. It epitomized the reactions of the peasants groups against the exactions by the State, which was controlled by the bureaucratic/local bourgeoisie classes. Scholars have even attested to the existence of classes among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria.

(Garvin, 1980) The rebellion was ignited by the very high rate of personal taxation of (£3/5 plus water rate, local rates for those with an assessed income of under £50 per year) and the low cocoa price. Farmers knew that the Marketing Board was short-changing them by paying only a fraction of the world price, but the uprising occurred only after peasants' efforts to use peaceful channels to secure redress proved abortive. The Agbekoya riots were a populist movement whose leaders and members were mainly illiterate Muslims, small-scale farmers and hunters who had not previously been noted for political activities (Peil, 1976: 171).

The introduction of the Marketing Board system was a salient cause of the disturbance. The stabilization policy of the Board only led to the destabilization of the income of the cocoa farmers since the prices of the imported consumer goods were rising while cocoa price was not. The government and the urban beneficiaries of its policies were exploiting the farmers effectively. (Garvin, 1980: 124) The point is that the Western Nigerian government's attempts to exploit the cocoa marketing surpluses for developmental purposes led to a massive and disproportionate fiscal contribution by the farmers. As if this was not enough, the government sought additional revenue by increasing direct taxation and various levies, promising the farmers various social benefits like roads and electricity, which were never delivered.

Tax was a central issue because the collection process provided the farmers with the necessary reasons to sanction the authorities. (Garvin, 1980: 125) The farmers saw themselves as exploited and oppressed by the military ruling class that refused to accept fair prices for their cocoa, sent fraudulent officials to harass them and denied them of the amenities that had been promised. They perceived themselves as victims of a government that kept demanding series of higher taxes at a time peasant groups did not earn enough to meet their existing obligations. (Garvin, 1980: 125) The atrocities committed by the tax collectors were many and the aggressive ways they went about their duties also left much to be desired. (Alhaji Akadiri Olaniyi). The peasants actually had deep-seated distaste for some new fiscal policies of the government, and these included the federal government's compulsory saving scheme, the water rate that was introduced on all taxpayers, the development rate and the newly introduced taxation of women earning above 100 pounds per annum. (*Daily Times*, 22nd February, 1969).

The Agbekoya riots threw the heartland of the old Western Nigeria into chaos, pandemonium and disorderliness between October 1968 and November 1969. This period was characterized by anarchy arising from the conflict between the state and a broad section of the peasantry who violently resisted the imposition of some economic measures put in place by both the state and the Federal Military governments. These measures were intended to assist the federal

government in the prosecution of the Nigerian Civil War and cover up a severe financial deficit in the Western State. Naturally, increase in taxation, occasioned by the civil war affected the peasantry most severely. Consequently, the scattered riots that broke out in some parts of Western State (Ijebu Remo, Ibarapa, Egba and Ibadan) from the late 1968 were mainly against increased taxation, rates, levies, the arbitrary nature of tax assessment and the often brutal manner of its collection by tax officials. (Beer, 1976: 162) These riots were massively supported by the peasantry and were certainly not exclusively farmer's problem; it spread through the down-trodden civilian population. (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968: 42).

The farmers' protest graduated from a mere spontaneous rejection of increased taxes and corrupt local government officials into organized peasant movements, which demanded important social reforms in the state. The riots were well coordinated and before long, the farmers in Ibadan villages began to see themselves as peasants opposed to an alien and oppressive system. (Beer, C. 1976: 162) Hence, there were sporadic guerilla actions and foray into the urban areas by the peasants. The *Agodi* Prison in Ibadan was stormed and over four hundred prisoners were set free on the 16th of September, 1968. The event in the West was, indeed, "a 'war within a war'" (*Nigerian Tribune*, 18th September, 1969) because the Nigerian Civil War was being prosecuted by the Federal Government at the same time. It was negotiation rather

than force and suppression which led to the restoration of peace. The intervention of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the Federal Commissioner for Finance, paved the way for the much desired peace on the capitulation of the state executive council. Thus, the axiom that only the peasants are 'revolutionary' (Fanon, 1963:30) in a colonial country was once again demonstrated.

The Resource Poor Peasant farmers and the Abracadabra of African 'Juju'

The reactions of the peasant groups against perceived injustices by the Western State military government was almost spontaneous; the decision of the farmers to fight back resulted in disturbances that rocked 'West' for several months, a situation that left some impact in its wake. The farmers' 'war' against the government forces that raged in Akufo was 'unprecedented' (Ma Morianmo Adekanmbi Ajayi) as houses were razed, children hidden in baskets in the "bush" for safety, and husbands, such as the then *Baale* of Akufo, Ajayi, survived by escaping to Ibadan and remained in exile for several months. Many fathers abandoned their social responsibilities as heads of the homes to their wives. Paradoxically, some people believed that it was the Western State Police Force that saved them from the situation of that time, which goes to show that the state, among many techniques, applied the 'divide and rule' system in her dealings with the peasant farmers.

The peasants' groups generally exhibited chaotic and unruly conducts during the riots. At Idi-Ayunre, the

Commissioner and Mr. Borisade were met on the way by a crowd of 2000 people carrying charms and other dangerous weapons. However, the timely intervention of Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo of the Nigerian Army prevented the situation from degenerating into a full-blown crisis as the crowd was dispersed. (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968: 18). Policemen as well as soldiers were ambushed and killed by rioters at Akanran in early August, 1969. A leading hunter at Akanran actually led an invasion of Agodi Prison on the 16th September, 1969. (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968: 22). There, eleven prisoners, including one Adeleke Ademiluyi, who was serving a seven years sentence refused to leave their cells (*Headlines*, 10th January, 1974: 8) because their terms of sentences was about to be completed.

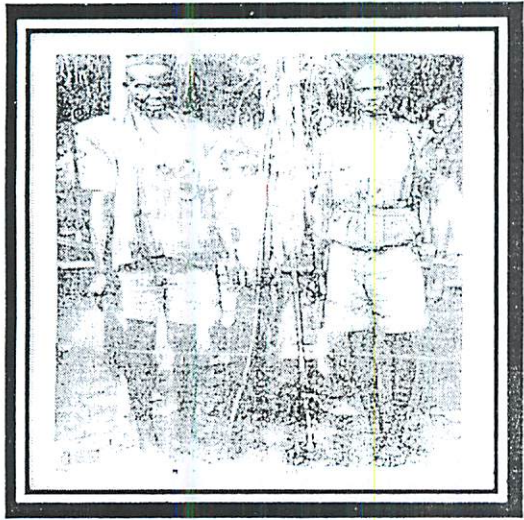
The battle between the rioters and the law enforcement agents was so fierce that it was being compared to the Ore encounter between the Federal and the Biafra troops. "*Oleku, Ija Akanran!*" was a common slogan among eye witnesses, and it was meant to show that the clash between the peasants and the law enforcement agents at Akanran was a terrible one! Even before the invasion of Agodi, Akanran had become a high risk terrain for anti-riot policemen. People like Sokoro, Raaji Kolobo and Supo, among others, ensured that this was so. (Pa Lasisi Obisesan). Corpses of policemen were, at various times, deposited at the public mortuary of the Western State hospital, Adeoyo, Ibadan.

Gradually, what was initially regarded as a mere show of magical

prowess by a few disgruntled illiterate farmers degenerated into a national issue. (*Headlines*, 10th January, 1974: 8). Anti-tax demonstrators attacked the *Soun* of Ogbomoso, Oba Olajide Olayode, with broom stick (*gaga-owo*). What the eye witnesses (unseasoned eyes) actually saw were broom sticks, but in the metaphysical realm, these were machetes as his body was soon dismembered and carried round the streets. (*Daily Times*, 4th July, 1969: 1). It had been said in some quarters that the *Soun* put up some spirited efforts to save own life and survive the attack by transforming into a number of domestic animals such as chicken, ('Adie') cat, ('Olongbo') etc. But all these did not help much as he was soon assassinated and his body was dismembered with 'broom sticks', ('owo'), which goes to show that the Agbekoya peasant war was fought with the non-conventional weapon types.

Some *Oba*, *Baales* and chiefs as well as the council officials became victims of the farmers' hostility as the crisis developed. Caught in the classic predicament of the colonial African chiefs, they appealed for conciliation, but went further by urging the farmers to pay their taxes and eschew violence. Significantly, the disharmony between the state officials and the peasant movements provoked political hostility and convulsion, which dragged the entire polity into series of crises. It was these disruptions that consequently resulted in the assassination of the *Soun* of Ogbomoso, Olajide Olayode, (*Daily Times*, 4th July, 1969: 1) the razing down of the palace/clubbing to death of a traditional chief, Michael Bamidele Atoyebi, the Elemomo of Ila-Orogun, while the properties of the then Orimolusi of Ijebu-Igbo, Oba Adetayo Sami, were reduced to rubble.

TWO AGBEKOYA FARMERS



(Source: NAI, *Headlines*, No. 10, January 1974, p. 9).

The 1968/69 disturbances led to the growth of new tax movements in areas otherwise calm, and these movements appeared under various names such as, *Talaka-parapo*, *Mekunnu-taku*, *Agbekoya* and *Aiyekoya*, which variously interprets as 'the poor unite,' 'the poor adamantly refuse' and 'the 'World says no to suffering' or 'Farmers reject suffering'. (*Daily Times*, 23rd March, 1969. See also Ayoola Commission Report, 1968) The question may be asked; why would the peasant population of a State take up arms against the entire Western State security machinery? Apparently, the administration of Governor Adeyinka Adebayo had no welfare policy for the peasant farmers, and did not consult widely before taking vital decisions when the governor took over power in 1966. His economic policy had no respect for the resource poor farmers and saw nothing wrong if they were shortchanged for the benefit of the State.

Consequently, the threat of violence and unlimited anarchy, which is symptomatic of lack of an effective state, became the order of the day. The State, obviously, had no respect for human rights and the contending issues of the period were closely associated with poverty and inequality. The Western State peasant farmers' socio-economic development was sacrificed on the platform of national security as they were forced to pay taxes, rates and other charges which turned out to be too burdensome for them. It is, therefore, not to be wondered at, that peace and security became elusive in the Western State as a result of the disturbingly harsh economic policy that was pursued by the state government.

The peasant farmers saw 'fathers' (kings) betraying 'sons' (people). How could one remain a faithful subject to an *Oba* whose conduct proved it to be ready, ever and always, to betray the interests of the followership, particularly the peasant farmers? The peasant had come to feel in the very depth of his being that the historical mission of the *Oba* had to come to an end. Therefore, they encouraged every movement that might lead towards the final disruption of that impossible State and her agents that operated a harsh tax policy against the people. Since the peasant farmers wanted a farmers' kingdom, it became imperative that the Western State administration that operated an unfriendly tax policy had to be confronted for the people to be liberated. Only then, would it become possible for the farmers to be reunited in the farmer's kingdom which they craved for.

In fact, several *Obas* and numerous

Baales as Ajayi, the *Baale* of *Akufò*, fled for their lives while several chiefs were murdered. The links between the peasantry and their rulers, which Moore and Wolf regarded as a crucial constraint on peasant rebellion had snapped, and like the industrial worker described by Adrian Peace in his *Choice, Class and Conflict: A Study of the Southern Nigeria Factory Worker*, the farmers organized themselves under their own leadership to enforce their interests collectively. They demonstrated that they had the consciousness and determination to resist oppressive and forcible exactions.

The *Olubadan* of that period, *Oba Aminu*, became an object of ridicule and derision among farmers who publicly pulled him by his gown (*agbada*) in front of Mapo Hall. (Garvin, W. 1980: 125) There was no longer a hiding place for the kings, chiefs, government officials and all those whose interests contrasted with those of the peasants. The peasants went about singing war songs and were determined to 'fill the very wide gully, which was adjacent to *Oba Aminu's* palace, with the chopped heads of the local policemen (*Akoda*)' (Safiu Amoo a.k.a. Omo Wanibori) These were people who saw themselves as being outside the law, and as the expression went, who had no civil status. These were people who had everything to gain and nothing to lose from an upheaval. These were resource poor peasant farmers who despite their low status in the society still inspired fear all around.

It was, indeed, the government's failure to listen to the demands of a relatively well organized group that led to the rise of this populist movement, which

applied non-constitutional method to secure redress, and in so doing, undermined the stability of the entire polity. They simply challenged the state government and its representatives in village affairs. (Beer, 1976: 381 & 394). More importantly, they used '*juju*' and momentarily came tops over the State's law enforcement agents. It was a war where the poor peasant class fought the State *elitist* class to a stand-still using every means within their disposal as objects of war. More importantly, they got the better of the State's law enforcement agents, and this explains why the state government capitulated and granted concessions to the peasant farmers!

Resource Poor Peasant Farmer versus the Western State Elitist Groups

Although the peasants generally relied heavily on cutlasses, clubs and charms to prosecute this 'war', the state law enforcement agents were initially incapable of handling the Agbekoya menace. Police guns were mostly ineffective against the farmers because bullets shot at the farmers were falling off like powder on glass. Apparently, the entire state law enforcement structure had no answer, at least initially, to the magical powers of the peasant farmers. (*Daily Times*, 23rd January, 1969, Front page)

Governor Adebayo had stated that he knew of no 'modern government, which can function without funds'. He claimed that 'a few disgruntled' elements were behind the agitation' and maintained that the riots were 'unprovoked.' (*West Africa*, 12th July, 1969. See also *Daily Sketch*, 7th July, 1969) This, unfortunately, is the

military mindset that has plagued Nigeria since independence. There is no place where a responsible government treats its citizens the way Nigerians are treated, as if the people have no right to complain. The fact is that the government of the time did not behave well. Nowhere in the western world would a government impose such increased taxes and rates without explaining to the people and seeking their co-operation. You cannot raise tax 50-100% at a time anywhere in the civilized world and expect things to remain the same. The question is: was it right to impose crushing taxes on the poor resource peasants to prosecute a war they were not interested in?

One cannot but agonize when the extent and consequences of the disturbances are considered. Perhaps, the same feeling was manifested when one newspaper described the "events" in the West as the 'war within a war'. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, 18th September, 1969) Over six thousand (6000) people died even at a conservative estimate in this uprising. (Beer C, 1976). However, this unfortunate episode in the history of the Western State was eventually brought to an end through the intervention of some prominent people in the country. The initiatives of Chief Obafemi Awolowo spurred the Governor and the *Olubadan* of Ibadan into lightning speed in order to get to the roots of the peasant grievances and steps were taken to redress them. Thus, Western State was saved from the destabilization which, unquestionably, had menaced her.

The Capitulation of the Western State government and the Concessions

The *Agbekoya* crises, which started in Ishara on the 25th of November, 1968 and ultimately spread to other parts of Western Nigeria, abated towards the close of 1968, but not before the peasants had demonstrated their absolute disrespect for the military government of the day. They, in fact, dealt devastating psychological blows on the psyche of the law enforcement agents through the use of charms and other traditional instruments of war. Cutlasses, clubs and charms were mostly relied upon by the peasants to prosecute this 'war'. The Western State law enforcement agencies were generally incapable of handling the *Agbekoya* menace as police guns were ineffective against the peasant farmers.

Significantly, on the 15th October, 1969, the state government stretched out a hand to the peasants, which the latter felt compelled to take. But the hand that the peasants took was an unholy hand of deceit and treachery. What was really taking place behind the scene was a change in strategy by the government. The new aim was not to resist the *Agbekoya* demands by force, but to compromise its leadership and neutralize the effectiveness of the movement. Apart from money, the state government used a woman police volunteer to compromise the peasant movements. (i.e Colonel Adeniyi Folorunso Adeyemi)

But for the intervention of Awo, the Western State government might have been compelled to submit absolutely to the dictates of the peasants, and indeed, the government came very close to relinquishing the running of the administration to the peasant farmers. It

was even feared that if the resource poor farmers were literate, they would have taken over the government of Western Nigeria, (Alhaji Aransi Oladoja) a structures that was controlled by the *elite*. The "untrammelled farmers' Kingdom," which Tafa Adeoye and the Agbekoya movement fought for, was almost achieved, and he made it very clear that they had never advocated for 'state creation', which was the idea of some greedy politicians. All they wanted was "farmers' control of farmer's life". (*The Nigerian Tribune*, 16th October, 1969)

The Western State government was propelled to grant some far reaching concessions to the farmers on 15th of October 1969. All those arrested and convicted of crimes (murder exclusive) committed during the rising were promised freedom. (*Sunday Times*, 28th September, 1969). Apparently, the peasant riot of 1968/1969 was not a total failure. It, indeed, succeeded in gaining some measure of success; the flat rate tax was reduced from £3:5 to £2, reforms were made in the local government structure and sanitary inspectors were withdrawn from all rural areas, the collection of Motor Park and market fees were suspended, and the official farmers union, Western State Farmer Union, (WSFU) in Ibadan was also reconstituted in order to give farmers adequate representation.

The Governor also 'invited about fifty of the Agbekoya movement leaders to the Government House' (*Daily Sketch*, 31st October, 1969. See front page of *Daily Times*, 23rd January, 1969) where they were treated to 'a lunch of pounded yam' and probably some kegs of palm

wine, which usually complemented such a meals. The governor believed that the whole episode of the Agbekoya Riots had gone into oblivion after the pounded yam romance of that day. Alas, that was not to be because the peasant's position was not materially improved by pounded yam and the seemingly benevolent utterances of the governor as the latter's concessions were not considered far reaching enough by the peasant groups.

The question may even be asked: why would the Western State military government be interested in lavishly entertaining some local peasant farmers if the former was not convinced that the farmers were VIP's? These were people perceived by the government as 'foolish Ibadan farmers' who were simply intolerant of the tax demands made upon their income by the government. These were people perceived by the governor as groups who allowed themselves to be used by some elements within the state (whose names he would not mention) against one another, and not against the State as a lot of people believed. It was generally believed by the bourgeoisie and other elitist classes that, considering the enormous power that the governor wielded, it was virtually impossible for these peasant groups to confront the military authority; that the governor could have ordered his 'soldiers to finish them off', but instead, 'exposed' himself to risks, traveled to Akanran and appealed to the leadership of the farmer groups to see reasons as to why they needed to pay the new taxes and rates. (General Adeyinka Adebayo)

The Collapse of the Agbekoya Movement

There is the cliché that says 'every State is founded on force'. (Gerth, & Mills, C. W, 1946: 78) Although all political structures use force, they differ in the manner in which they use or threaten to use it against oppositions. The Western State government applied both force and diplomacy in the struggle against the *Agbekoya* peasant warriors. Among the diplomatic strategies adopted was the 'divide and rule' system, which was targeted at throwing the seed of disharmony among the leadership of the movement. A woman police officer was even engaged to seduce Tafa Adeoye in order to divert the attention of the peasant farmers from the riots. There is no gainsaying in the fact that before the adoption of this *modus operandi*, it was virtually impossible to arrest Tafa, not to talk of keeping him in police custody.

The police woman, who volunteered herself, married Tafa Adeoye, and was, consequently, able to secure vital information about the movement, which she relayed to the State. It was at one of such periods when Tafa was not in his "regalia of power" that Abidogun, the police chief and a number of Tafa's 'friends' tricked him out of his home and had him arrested at Iyaganku Police Station. Before the intervention of this police woman and other state functionaries who collaborated, it was virtually impossible to arrest Tafa or penetrate the leadership of the *Agbekoya* movement. Tafa's decision to have a mole for a wife was seen by many peasants as a retrograde and thoughtless step. The Western State simply adopted a new

'modus operandi' in the war against the peasant farmers. It was this decision which saved the Western State government from the *Agbekoya* disruptions, which, unquestionably, had menaced her. At this stage too, unity in leadership and organization had been notably and fatally absent in the movements.

Apparently, the resource poor peasant farmers succeeded in replacing the state with their own "home-made social order", (Beer, C. 1976) albeit, temporarily. The *Agbekoya* movement, indeed, demonstrated that the political power of the 'scum' was not the less real for its lack of permanent institutional expression. In spite of that, the farmers of Western Nigeria played a major role in shaping socio-economic and political conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is really unfortunate that the peasants who constituted the majority of the population and were the producers of Nigeria's real wealth and foodstuffs had no voice. The *elite* class in Western Nigeria instituted too many tax policies and multitudes of administrative controls to ensure the economic exploitation of the peasant majority. How were the *elite* different from the colonialists who also exploited the peasants through exorbitant taxes and levies in order to generate money for development? How were they different when it is considered that the post-colonial *elite* groups developed only the urban areas for themselves? Yet, they were often the ones who berated colonial authority for their economic exploitations. There are ample evidences to show that they too have not fared better than the colonialist since they assumed the positions of leadership.

Taxation was the weapon used by the leadership to further denigrate and dehumanize the peasants. No wonder then

why the peasants applied violence to threaten the administration of General Adeyinka Adebayo in order to make the latter change its taxation policy. They used the structures that were available to register their discontent and make their wants known. Indeed, when the *elite* class, as represented by the government and its functionaries, moved too far away from the poor peasants, the farmers resorted to force in order to make their point. They acted under local leaders with definite goals in mind. The violence that erupted from the peasants uprising was based on rational calculation that was largely successful until the Agbekoya leadership was compromised.

Conclusion

Class exploitation was not a new entrant into the Nigerian social milieu in 1960, when Nigeria had her independence. It had always been there even before the advent of colonialism. The class issue only became more pronounced with the coming of unregulated capitalism, which was a homicidal force. In the immediate post-colonial Western Nigeria, education and the control of political power became passports to the ranks of the prosperous, and the advantages of being a part of the '*elite*' included the opportunity to manipulate the system for partisan or personal benefits. The maneuvers of the Western State's *elite* were, unfortunately, at the expense of the peasants and working classes who were the real producers of the wealth.

The early post-colonial government economic policy did not

deviate from the colonial unfriendly taxation system. The policies of the military administration of Governor Adeyinka Adebayo was self-serving as they were intended to serve the interests of the dominant classes in the state, which included the bureaucrats, politicians and the commercial bourgeoisies. The need to meet the demands of the federal government in Lagos also led to disproportional tax demands on the income of the resource poor peasant farmers, who contributed a large share of the state revenue and benefited little because the surplus was appropriated, especially by the local bourgeoisies and the bureaucratic classes. Unfortunately, the new taxes, rates and levies did not lead to corresponding improvement in the provision of socio-economic facilities, and all these led to crises.

To this extent, the Agbekoya Riots were strident reactions of the peasants to the disconnection between the tax policies and their application in the immediate post-colonial Western State. The taxes and rates imposed by the councils, often for services which were, in most cases, never provided, inevitably led to strains in the entire system. The policy-makers during the period of study did not put the issues of taxation in proper perspectives and thus failed to resolve the traditional hostilities between the government and the governed, issues which became very critical for all stakeholders. The resultant revolts not only epitomized the poor peasants' response to the authoritarian nature of the ruling class, the resultant disruptions led to the assassination of chiefs/kings and the destruction of properties. These were clear testimonies to the fact that predatory leadership and insensitivity to peasant welfare undermined the relative peace in

South-western Nigerian of the early post-colonial era.

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Primary Sources

Oral Interview

Name of Informant	Age	Occupation	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Governor Adeyinka Adebayo	80+	Retired General Nigerian Army, Governor, Western State	Ikeja, Lagos	01.09.2008
Colonel Adeniyi Folorunso Adeyemi	60	Public Worker	Ibadan	19.08.2008
Chief Remi Obisesan	75		Akranjo	16.07.2008
Aransi Oladoja	100+	Cocoa Merchant	Akufo	04.07.2008
Alh. Olumuyi Akadiri	90+	Farmer	Akufo	04.07.2008
Moriamo Adekambi Ajayi	90+	Parp Seller	Akufo	04.07.2008
Pa Lasisi Obisesan	89	Council Official	Akranjo	16.07.2008
Alhaji Mobolaji Karamu Moboluwaduro	75	Produce buyer	Akufo	04.07.2008
Safiu Amoso (a.k.a. Ono Wamibori)	85	Contractor	Ali-Iwo Compound	16.07.2008