Agricultural Practices and Settlement Patterns of the Tiv of Central Nigeria, 1900-1975

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Abstract
The paper examines the socio-economic problems encountered by the Tiv through their adoption of the shifting cultivation system of farming. The Tiv people of central Nigeria are known to be predominantly farmers. The adoption of shifting cultivation system by the Tiv people made them to move their compounds with their farms. Consequently, the Tiv resorted to the scattered settlement pattern which invariably requires a lot of land space. Therefore, in the course of their search for fertile lands for farming, they clashed with groups they came into contact with. It also led them into collision with other groups especially when they migrated into the middle Benue valley. With the advent of colonial rule, the people’s system of shifting cultivation was always at variance with the policies put in place by the colonial administration and laid the foundation for future conflicts in Tivland. In the post colonial period, concomitant with the incorporation of the Tiv economy to the capitalist economy, certain socio-economic variables in the emerging post colonial Tiv economy were clearly at variance with the continued usage of the shifting cultivation system. The objective of the paper therefore is to show that the adoption of the shifting cultivation system of farming has been responsible for the high mobility rate among the Tiv that has resulted in incessant land conflicts among them and their neighbours at all frontiers. It recommends the adoption of modern technology in farming to increase farm yields and the training of farmers in modern farm methods.

Introduction
The Tiv are known to be an agrarian people who take farming as a way of life. The people adopted the system of shifting cultivation system of farming. This
involved using a field for two or three farming seasons and then moving on to another place of land. This movement involved moving compounds along with their farms. The system of shifting cultivation therefore made the people to be highly mobile in search of fertile farmlands. In the pre-colonial period the people lived in nucleated settlements and these were located on mountain tops, a typical example is Swem the original homeland of the Tiv which was said to be a mountainous settlement.

However the people's settlement pattern changed from the nucleated to the scattered nature of settlements when they dispersed into the middle Benue valley sometime in the 16th or 17th century. The Tiv initially lived in fenced settlements called Agar. This was necessitated by the availability of vast unoccupied land which abounded in the Benue valley. In their practice of the shifting cultivation system of farming in the Benue valley, the Tiv fought bitter wars with groups such as the Chamba, the Jukun, Idoma, Etulo etc over land.

With the advent of colonial rule in the early years of the 20th Century, the British administration instituted economic policies which directly impacted upon the people's practice of shifting cultivation. The proclamation of the land and native rights act placed land under the jurisdiction of the colonial authorities. Consequently, all lands are declared by ordinance to be under the control and subject to the disposition of the Governor. No title to the occupation and use of all lands is valid without the Governor's consent. The people could no longer move unfettered on to lands as they previously did. The demarcation of territorial boundaries meant that land henceforth had distinct identities indicating where a group's land started and ended. Consequently the people could not move without trespassing into other people's lands. The creation of ethnic homelands led the Tiv on a collision course with groups such as the Jukun on the east, the Obudu and Ogoja peoples in the south. The overall effect of the colonial policies on the practice of shifting cultivation system of farming was that it was no longer practicable to continue with its practice. This was because land at the disposal of the people became limited and further movement to acquire fresh lands led to violent land conflicts with neighbouring groups.

In the post colonial period, certain social and economic phenomenon such as population increases compounded the practice of the shifting cultivation system. The population density of most of the areas increased leading to land scarcity and landlessness in southern Tivland. Southern Tivland has a population that rises in some areas to a density of over five hundred and fifty
persons per square mile.\textsuperscript{3} Other issues such as the commercialisation of food crops by the people and land speculation and the introduction of plantation or tree crop agriculture led to increased demand for land by the people leading to the fragmentation of land into smaller pieces. The practice of the system of shifting cultivation therefore became impracticable and insistence upon it led to incessant and protracted land conflicts in Tivland.

**Agricultural Practices and Settlement Patterns of the Tiv in the Pre-Colonial Period**

The Tiv people from the period of their remembered history have been farmers. This was practiced alongside other traditional industries. This consisted mostly of farming root and grain crops, hunting, livestock rearing and domestic industries such as weaving, smithing and carving.\textsuperscript{4} The Tiv regarded farming as a special role assigned to them by their legendary progenitor, Takuruku Anyamazanga.\textsuperscript{5}

In the earliest period of their history, the Tiv migrated from one area to another particularly when their population increased and the land could not contain their farming practice. This means that the people were highly mobile. And that accounts for the series of migrations associated with the people. And since the people moved their farms with them, they could be said to have started the shifting cultivation system of farming at this time. From recorded accounts of Tiv history, Swem is generally accepted as the earliest place of settlement of the people.\textsuperscript{6} Swem is a mountain located close to the Nigeria/Cameroun border.\textsuperscript{7} The Mountains surrounding swem in Cameroun extend into Ikyurav-ya in Nigeria. And from all the places that the Tiv settled in their migratory waves, Swem is the most remembered. When the Tiv left Swem they moved and settled on a mountain called Binda.\textsuperscript{8} The last group of hills on which the Tiv remember settling on is Mwange, running east to west about ten miles south of Ikuarav-ya frontier.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, one fact which is clear about the character of early Tiv settlements is that hill tops and ring dykes were preferred, probably on the basis of safety and security considerations.\textsuperscript{10} It can therefore be argued that security considerations accounted for the choice of nucleated settlements adopted by the people because of the uncertainties of the times when marauding groups of slave gatherers and other war-like parties menaced.\textsuperscript{11} Another probable reason could have been the fact that the population of the people then had not grown in large numbers as when they dispersed into the middle Benue valley. What this implies is that the Tiv were not restricted by any
territorial boundaries, and due to their love for farming, when they ran short of fertile land, they moved in search of land which could accommodate them. The people at this time lived in nucleated settlements hence the choice of mountain tops or other enclosures that could give them protection from potential enemy groups. Thus, the movement and subsequent settlements of the Tiv people were dictated by their farming practices, especially when they ran short of land for farming or it was no longer fertile for farming, they migrated to other areas. The attachment to their farmlands was inherited from their ancestors. And each household therefore preferred to live on their farmland and subsequently establish their de facto claim to the land and also establish some measure of independence.  

The Tiv people left the Binda hills when their population had increased and the land could no longer sustain them. This progressive spread of the Tiv over the Benue valley eventually resulted in the abandonment of the hill tops and the establishment of settlements on the plains. The break-up of these settlements must have occurred between 1565 and 1595. The people therefore abandoned the nucleated settlement pattern and adopted the scattered pattern when they dispersed in the middle Benue valley. Paul and Laura Bohannan described the scattered settlement pattern as “a series of small blocks of agnatic kin held together and separated by the lineage system. Each Tar is combined with another next to it, to form a larger more inclusive Tar.” Generally, therefore Tivland is characterised by scattered homesteads arranged in terms of lineage settled in group of compounds according to lineages. Therefore brothers who were related in the next extended lineage settled next to the first and so on.

The scattered settlement pattern of the Tiv could have largely been influenced by the farming practices adopted by the people, especially the shifting cultivation system. According to Hembe, “because the people were shifting cultivators they preferred to move their compounds around their farms. Consequently, after a three year rotational cycle, the tendency had always been to move to new farm areas and this in some cases involved the movement to a new settlement.” The movement to a new settlement by a farmer always had serious social implications. This is because he was going to trespass on the land of his neighbour which often led to violent land conflicts.

The Tiv people had grown in population at this material time and also found themselves in the Benue valley plains which were quite expansive and inviting to an agrarian group. This is because in 1933, Downes estimated the
population of the people at 600,000. The 1951 tax assessment of Tiv Division alone totalled 625,113. 
In their movement the people were never oblivious of territorial boundaries. Indeed all Tiv particularly southerners disliked boundaries. 
Thus the vast fertile lands found in the middle Benue valley coupled with the fact that the people did not recognise territorial boundaries aided the constant movement of the people in search of fertile lands for farming. The high mobility of the Tiv in search of fertile farmlands accounted for the constant clashes between them and other groups like the chamba, Jukun and the Idoma in the pre-colonial period. This constant search for land was necessitated by the farming practice of shifting cultivation. 
The desire for more land necessitated by the practice of shifting cultivation led the Tiv into bitter wars with the Chamba in the pre-colonial period. And in many of these wars, the Chamba meant to check Tiv incursion into their territory. According to Makar, “The most decisive of these wars was fought at Ushongo hills where the Chamba launched very deadly attacks on the Tiv. However, the Tiv developed an effective resistance to the Chamba raids.” A probable date of this war could have been in the early decades of the 19th century.

Some of the Tiv Clans such as the Iharev, Masev and nongov moved north toward the river Benue. Here too the desire for land influenced by the people's practice of shifting cultivation pitched the Tiv against the Idoma. The people’s need for more land caused the Idoma who settled between the Mu and the Ikwe hills to move further towards the Ibo. Others like the Nongov even crossed the river and headed towards the Alago peoples of Keana and Awe. According to Sargent,

The roots of the Tiv migration into the north lay in the turmoil south of the River Benue. Between 1715 and 1745, the Tiv homeland became severely overcrowded, and consequently there was acute shortage of land. The population continued to grow rapidly, but the available land resource remained virtually static.

The population growth of Tiv whose statistical data is hard to come by during this period, could have increased by a few hundreds was a crucial factor that necessitated migration to other areas and was compounded by the shifting cultivation system that further exacerbated the problem of land scarcity. Similarly, southern clans especially the Kunav and the Gaav moved toward the upper Cross River groups especially towards the Obudu and Ogoja areas. This southward movement pushed the Tiv into direct collision with these groups whom the Tiv refer to as the Udam. The Tiv gradually pushed them back and
with each push, occupied their territory. These are some of the many conflicts that the Tiv had with the aforementioned groups in the pre-colonial period. These conflicts were inevitable considering the agricultural practice of shifting cultivation adopted by the Tiv that required they move on to new lands after intermittent periods of farming.

**Colonial Policies and their Effects on Agricultural Practices and Settlement Patterns**

The agricultural practices and settlement patterns of the Tiv remained unchanged even after their colonization by the British in the early decades of the 20th century. As a result, the introduction of certain colonial policies had adverse implications on the economy of the people. The enactment of the land proclamation acts in the first decade of the 20th century which brought all lands in northern Nigeria under the jurisdiction of the colonial authorities came into collision with the practice of shifting cultivation by the Tiv people. Land then was alienated and brought under the jurisdiction of the colonial administration. Consequently, people could no longer move to occupy land under the practice of shifting cultivation without encountering problems.

According to Obenson, with the enactment of the land and native Rights Proclamation of 1910,

i. All land from then on was to be controlled and administered by the governor in the interest of the indigenous population, and

ii. Title to land should be based on effective occupation. Individuals could hold customary title to land in effect, the usufructuary rights of customary land and nothing more.

The enactment of the land and native rights proclamation Act brought land under the jurisdiction of the colonial administration. Officially therefore, the people could no longer move unencumbered to occupy land indiscriminately as before. Some areas became designated as forest reserves while others were used as farm demonstration centres such as at Ihugh and Adeiyongo in southern Tivland. With the coming into effect of this policy, land became clearly defined and all land henceforth came under the jurisdiction of the colonial government. The implication the policy had on the people was that it led to the end of the communal ownership of lands in Tiv society. People in need of land for farming or settlement were allocated parcels of land for specified periods of years. This situation meant that land could henceforth be alienated. People were henceforth restricted to territories they occupied.
Further movement to other lands meant trespass. The situation escalated land skirmishes between the Tiv and their neighbours especially in the southern part of Tivland.

The demarcation of territorial boundaries by the colonial administration was meant to give the various groups distinct identities. The boundary lines were drawn to indicate divisional, provincial and protectorate jurisdictions. As a result therefore, each group was expected to restrict their activities especially as they relate to land within the confines of the boundaries drawn. With this development, a sense of separate or isolated existence was instilled in the various groups and any violation of the border resulted into friction. The demarcation of territorial boundaries was therefore a direct affront to the Tiv people whose farming practices did not recognize territorial boundaries. The policy however did not stop the people from the practice of shifting cultivation. Consequently, the Tiv people were embroiled in constant conflagrations over land from all frontiers with their neighbours. In the south, the Tiv clashed constantly with the Obudu and Ogoja peoples. To their east, the Chamba and the Jukun always engaged the Tiv in very fierce battles concerning land issues. To the north, occasional skirmishes occurred with the Idoma and across the river Benue they engaged the Alago and others.

The colonial administration also embarked on the policy of creating ethnic frontiers. This meant restricting various groups to confined territories. Thus in the southern part of Tivland, in order to checkmate Tiv incursion southwards the people were compelled to construct the Munshi wall. The munshi wall therefore left the upper Cross River groups with vast quantities of unoccupied land which the Tiv needed. However, due to the farming practice of shifting cultivation which encouraged the scattered settlement patterns, and coupled with an acute land shortage in southern Tivland, the people were always in need of land for farming. These lands could be secured from their upper Cross River neighbours. However, with the construction of the Munshi wall, a clear line of demarcation had been put in place between the Tiv and their Upper Cross River neighbours. The wall clearly indicated that the Tiv could not exceed it. It was meant to curtail the movement of the Tiv within their territorial limits. Therefore on several occasions when the Tiv sought for the vast unoccupied lands from their southern neighbours, such requests were turned down. The creation of ethnic frontiers severed hitherto good symbiotic relationships that existed between the Tiv and these groups. Subsequently any slight violation of the temporary border lines created by the British resulted to violent conflicts.
One such incident took place in 1950 between the Tiv of Mbaduku district and their Obudu neighbours over the ownership of a piece of land. The incident was sparked off by the killing of a Tiv woman in the farm.  

On the eastern flank, the British introduced the policy of ethnic homelands through ethnic frontier lines in Wukari as a measure to check Tiv presence in the area. Tiv presence in Wukari too was facilitated by the people's system of shifting cultivation which involved the movement of the people's settlement along with their farms. The British colonial administration felt uncomfortable with Tiv presence in Wukari and in order to curtail it introduced the Gordon line. The Gordon line was drawn to serve as the limits of Tiv expansion to Wukari and hence to protect the Jukun from their neighbours. The factors which worked in favour of the Jukuns cannot be exhaustively analyzed here except to state that the British had the impression that the Jukuns were a people with a glorious imperial past which seemed to have created a sense of sympathy amongst some British colonial officers. It was in line with the impression created that the British came to ascribe to the Jukun a Hamitic ancestry. To further demonstrate the love they had for the Jukun, the British decided to expel the Tiv from Wukari which was considered as the cradle of Kwararafa. According to Jacobs, “

The British Resident J.M. Freemantle tried to resolve the issue of the massive Tiv presence in Wukari by ordering them to withdraw south and west of Akwana, Arufu and Wukari behind what was referred to as the Gordon line which was supposed to represent the limits of Tiv penetration of Wukari at the time of the British occupation.”

However no sooner were the Tiv expelled from Wukari using the Ring Fence Policy than they returned back to their former places of abode. Therefore the Ring fence policy was to be of short duration as the Tiv were soon filtering back into Wukari territory, and it would have been difficult to stop them. Thus a foundation had been laid by the colonial administration on the issue of conflict between the Tiv and Jukun. According to Jacobs, 'a major source of friction between the Tiv and Jukun has been the land question starting from the pre-colonial period and aggravated by the inconsistent policies of the colonial administration, sometimes opposing Tiv expansionism and at other times supporting it....The British bias in favour of the Jukun was evident in their determination that the Tiv in Wukari should be treated as 'settlers or as guests although some of those Tiv had probably lived in Wukari from the pre-colonial period.'
Thus on the eastern flank the colonial policy known as the Ring fence policy was used to checkmate Tiv presence in Wukari that had been facilitated by the Tiv farming system of shifting cultivation.

The Changing Economic and Social Variables and their effects on the agricultural Practices and Settlement Patterns of the Tiv

One positive factor which accompanied the incorporation of the Tiv economy to the capitalist economy has been the commercialization of the hitherto subsistence economy of the people. This manifested in the early post colonial period when the people began to produce on commercial scale many of the crops that they produced for subsistence. The awareness of producing crops and animals for sale started towards the second half of the 1960’s. When people began to produce crops for sale, that meant much greater quantities of the crops were to be cultivated. The implication here was that more land was needed for the production of the crops for sale. This good initiative had negative effects on the social milieu of the Tiv because the scattered settlement pattern led many individuals to alienate parcels of land to themselves at the detriment of others. And because the people still practiced the shifting cultivation system, it led to either fragmentation of their lands into smaller parcels of land or trespass unto the land of their neighbours, a situation that led to land conflicts.

Increases in the population of the people also affected the Tiv economy more so that they retained their farming practice of shifting cultivation. The practise among the Tiv is that once a male child marries a wife, the father divides part of the family land and allocates to the son. He in turn leaves the family compound and relocates with his family to the piece of land allotted him. The consequence of the above practice is aptly captured by Lyam thus:

With the increasing population amongst the Uya (compounds) and consequently an increase also in the number of married adults qualifying for their own farms, there is more and more fragmentation of farm plots amongst needy relatives. In some parts of Tivland particularly, an individual’s farmland now hardly serves even for his subsistence needs.

An increase in population correspondingly leads to a reduction of the amount of farmland owned by an individual Tiv. And because the people have maintained their practice of shifting cultivation, it translates to the fragmentation of land in order to accommodate the rising population figures.
The scenario has created a landless peasantry in Tivland with accompanying social consequences on the Tiv society.

The scattered nature of settlements influenced by the system of shifting cultivation has had dire consequences on the Tiv economy especially with the introduction of plantation agriculture. This system of agriculture has proved to be more profitable to the people than the cultivation of grain and root crops even though it requires more land than the latter. An informant agrees saying “we are gradually moving over to tree crop farming even though it requires more land but it is more lucrative than root crops like yams. I am able to make about one million naira from the sale of citrus fruits in one year.” However, this agricultural system involves the establishment of orchards and village forests. The establishment of orchards means that an individual requires more land for his plantation crops than the root and grain crops. Land scarcity and the accompanying social effects have become more noticeable in Tivland due to their scattered settlement patterns accentuated by the shifting cultivation system.

The immediate post-colonial period witnessed the growing value of land. The reasons for this situation cannot be farfetched especially when viewed against the backdrop of the incorporation of the pre-colonial Tiv economy to the capitalist economy. As a follow-up the means of production especially land became commoditized since it was the pivot on which the Tiv economy revolved. The cash crops that the people produced and sold to raise funds for their services came from the land. Consequently, the awareness about the importance of land to the monetized economic system raised the value of land to a much higher level. The Tiv began to produce benniseed as a cash crop at the rate of nine pounds from 1929. The crop, Soya beans was also introduced after World War II and its export commenced in 1947 with 10 tons at Twenty-four pounds seventeen shillings per Ton. The export of these crops is shown in the following Table:

**Table 1 Tiv Division: Export Surplus of Benniseed and Soya Beans (in Tons)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Benniseed</th>
<th>Soya Beans</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>8889</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>11102</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>10500</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954/55</td>
<td>15800</td>
<td>9100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Buying Price</td>
<td>Selling Price</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955/56</td>
<td>19000</td>
<td>19700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956/57</td>
<td>15800</td>
<td>15300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957/58</td>
<td>16200</td>
<td>13900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958/59</td>
<td>16200</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from J.I. Tseayo: Conflict and Incorporation in Nigeria: The Integration of the Tiv.38

As a result, traditional rulers, civil servants, traders, urban workers were all involved in the bid to privatize what was formerly communal lands. The issue of land speculation was compounded by the scattered nature of Tiv settlements and the system of shifting cultivation. This is because apart from the alienation of land by the speculators, the practice of shifting cultivation further reduced the amount of available land for farming. The consequence had been the emergence of a landless proletariat and the spate of violent land conflicts in Tiv society.

**Recommendations**

The resort to the use of the shifting cultivation system of farming has become impracticable in Tivland especially in the southern part due to the shortage of land available for both settlement and farming purposes. Therefore landowners can keep what they have and resort to the application of modern farming technology. They can apply modern farming inputs such as herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers on their farms. The application of these inputs increases farm yield and also maintains the soil fertility thereby preventing the resort to the use of shifting cultivation with its attendant consequences.

The government through the ministry of Agriculture can organize workshops for the target stakeholders such as farmers, traditional and community leaders, youth leaders, leaders of farmers' associations among others to sensitize them on the need to adopt modern farming methods. This would be with a view to abandon old methods of farming which have become impracticable as a result of changing circumstances, and have brought about social ills such as constant land conflicts on the Tiv society.

The government through the ministry of agriculture should reactivate its extension services and through it, organize and train individual farmers and farmer cooperative societies on modern farming services such as irrigation farming during the dry season. The government can in addition to the training, supply at subsidized rates irrigation machinery/equipment to the farmers who
wish to put into practise what they have learnt. The dry season irrigation farming could lead to cultivating the land twice a year thereby maximising the land, increased crop yield and profit margins when the crop has been taken to the market for sale. This system of farming has dual advantage for the farmer in that apart from maintaining the same land area and avoiding the inherent conflicts associated with shifting cultivation, he aggregates increased farm yields and makes more profit from the sale of the crops.

Conclusion

The Tiv people from the beginning have been predominantly farmers and had adopted the shifting cultivation system in their farming activities. In the initial stages of their history, land was plentiful thereby justifying their high rate of mobility. However, the shifting cultivation system of farming became an albatross to the social and economic interests of the people. This is because the system of shifting cultivation engendered a high mobility rate among the people in their drive to acquire fresh fertile lands after an existing field had been cultivated for two or three farming cycles. Consequently, the Tiv people were led into collision courses with other groups even before their dispersion to the middle Benue valley. With their dispersal in the middle Benue valley, from the 15th to the 16th centuries, the Tiv clashed with several groups such as the Chamba, the Jukun and the Idoma among others in their search for land, exacerbated by the system of shifting cultivation. With the colonization of Tivland in the early years of the 20th century, the policies put in place by the British colonial administration ran counter to the system of shifting cultivation and were meant to curtail its application. In the post colonial period, some social and economic variables led to increased demand for land and its attendant effects of fragmentation and landlessness thereby making the practice of shifting cultivation highly impracticable.

Endnotes


34. Deng, Benue State: A Land of Great Potentials, p.119.

35. Deng, Benue State; A Land of Great potentials, p.115.


38. Tseayo, J.I., Conflict and Incorporation of the Tiv, p.126.