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Rural-Urban Migration, Labour Mobility And Agricultural Development In Yorubaland, 1960-1985

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Abstract
In the two and a half decades that preceded Nigeria's independence, Yorubaland recorded some socio-economic transformation that changed its rural and urban landscapes. Banking on the promise of self-rule and its attendant benefits, which included modernity, thousands of young men and women from cocoa-growing villages, yam fields, and palm oil groves migrated into the bustling streets of Ibadan, Lagos, Abeokuta, and other emerging urban centres. While the migration reflected aspirations for education, wage employment, and urban living, it quietly drained the countryside of its most energetic labour force. This work seeks to investigate how rural–urban migration reshaped agricultural labour in post-colonial Yorubaland between 1960 and 1985. It will explore demographic changes in farming communities, the economic and cultural push-and-pull factors behind migration, and the subsequent feminisation and ageing of the agricultural workforce. Attention will also be given to the way state policies, such as Operation Feed the Nation and the Green Revolution, attempted to address food shortages without adequately reversing rural labour depletion. The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, with reliance on census data, colonial and post-colonial government records, agricultural reports, and contemporary newspaper accounts. Oral histories from farmers, migrants, and community leaders will offer invaluable insight into lived experiences, bridging the gap between statistics and human stories. The work situates rural-urban migration within the broader economic development of post-colonial Nigeria. Accordingly, it is expected to contribute to our understanding of how development trajectories can both empower and undermine agrarian societies. In doing so, it will shed light on the long-term implications for food security, rural sustainability, and socio-cultural continuity in Yorubaland.

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I. Rural-Urban Migration

On the eve of Nigeria's independence in 1960, agriculture was the mainstay of the economy, as farming not only provided the largest occupation but also generated state revenues across all regions. In the Western Region, vast cocoa plantations stretched across the Yoruba countryside, their exports funding schools, roads, and regional development dreams. In the North, groundnut pyramids were key to agricultural wealth, while cotton, sorghum, and millet sustained both commerce and subsistence. The East survived on palm produce, oil, and kernels, feeding local industries and an export trade that linked villages to global markets.

Following independence in October 1960, the Western Region, the home of the Yoruba, embarked on an ambitious development agenda rooted in regional planning and educational reforms. The 1962-68 Western Nigeria Development Plan, issued by the Ministry of Economic Planning and Community Development in Ibadan, prioritised free universal primary education alongside extension of rural infrastructure, viewing education as essential to social transformation throughout the region.[1] Cocoa-derived revenues funded roads, schools, and rural social services, effectively enabling rural youth to aspire beyond subsistence agriculture and migrate toward emerging towns and urban centres.[2] Newspapers of the period carried optimistic accounts of progress: free schools, educational scholarships abroad, and burgeoning civil service opportunities in Ibadan and Lagos.[3] At the same time, regional authorities' development strategies reshaped the rural–urban balance of labour and settlement. State investments in roads and lorry networks extended into farming villages, linking remote cocoa and yam-producing zones to urban markets.[4] This infrastructure expansion, announced in official development bulletins and covered by regional press, facilitated not only crop trade but also physical rural–urban mobility.[5] As labour-intensive export agriculture declined in relative profitability, rural youth saw greater economic promise in urban wage labour, teaching, clerical jobs, transport services, than in traditional farming.[6] Migration from rural to urban centres has been a major feature of social development in Nigeria since the establishment of colonial rule in the late 19th century. This expanded with the introduction of different programmes by the government after independence.

The impact of Western education on the migratory tendency of the people, especially the youth, cannot be overemphasised. The Ashby Commission's 1960 recommendations led to federal and regional legislation mandating free primary education in the Western Region from 1962 onward.[7] Enrolment surged through the

1960s, producing literate cohorts eager for salaried posts in administration, education, and commerce.[8] Regional newspapers reported on elevated school leavers refusing farm apprenticeships, instead migrating to Ibadan and Lagos for secondary and tertiary schooling, even where local job markets were saturated.[9]

Consequently, by the late 1960s, rural communities in Yorubaland began experiencing labour depletion amid demographic transitions. Official census data and agricultural reports, circulated through the government Gazette and rural extension services, recorded a declining ratio of working-age males in villages as compared to older women and children.[10] Rural leaders interviewed in newspaper features lamented the "draining" of young men to urban centres, a phenomenon reported as both voluntary and state-enabled.[11] Combined, these structural policy shifts, development planning centred on education and infrastructure, regional resource control through cocoa revenues, and urban job creation, constituted the foundational context for escalating rural–urban migration in Yorubaland after 1960.

II. Demographic Shifts And Migration Patterns In Post-Colonial Yorubaland

Yorubaland stood out as a land of optimism and mobility within the first years of independence. The 1963 Population Census, the first after independence, recorded Nigeria's urban population at 15.4 per cent**,** with the Western Region, including Yorubaland, showing the highest proportion of town dwellers in the country.[12] Ibadan, the regional capital, had swelled to over 627,000 residents by 1963, making it West Africa's largest indigenous city after Lagos.[13] Cocoa-belt villages like Ilesa, Ondo, and Owo were losing young men to these urban hubs, a phenomenon that newspapers such as the Nigerian Tribune described as "the pull of the bright lights," linking the rural exodus to expanding administrative and commercial opportunities.[14]

According to Adeyemi Adebayo, a cocoa farmer based in Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State, this alarming pattern of migration intensified through the 1970s, exacerbated by Nigeria's oil-boom, urban growth, and state reorganisation in 1967**.**[16] There was a surge in Lagos's population from 1.4 million in 1970 to an estimated 3.5 million by 1985**,** while Ibadan's population topped 1 million by the early 1980s.15 The 1973 population estimates placed the urban share in Western Nigeria at roughly 21 per cent, up from 15 per cent a decade earlier.[17]

As time went on, new state capitals such as Akure (Ondo State) and Abeokuta (Ogun State) became secondary magnets, drawing civil servants, teachers, and traders from rural districts. Government bulletins from the period hailed the growth of these capitals as evidence of "balanced development," even as rural councils complained of labour shortages in planting seasons.[17]

One particular feature of the flows was the preponderance of male youth. Migration-survey data from the Federal Office of Statistics in 1974 indicated that nearly 60 per cent of rural–urban migrants in the Western Region were aged 15–34.[18] Census sex-ratio figures reveal a persistent male dominance in urban centres during the 1960s and 1970s. Ibadan's 1963 male-to-female ratio stood at 1,115:1,000, compared to the national rural ratio of roughly 980:1,000**.**[19] This imbalance reflected the prevailing norm: able-bodied young men moved first to secure jobs or apprenticeships, with women following later, if at all.

Reports showed that, later, especially by the late 1970s, female migration began to rise, especially among unmarried women. Reports in the *Daily Sketch* in 1978 noted the increasing visibility of young women in Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta markets as traders, seamstresses, and domestic workers.[20] Government labour reports confirmed that female participation in urban informal sectors had grown by over 40 per cent between 1970 and 1980.[21] Nonetheless, in cocoa villages, extension agents still recorded a shortage of young male hands for seasonal farm work, with some districts reporting a 25–30 per cent drop in available male labour during peak harvest months.[22]

As it is, the migration routes reflected Yorubaland's economic geography. From the cocoa belts of Ondo and Osun, migrants streamed toward Ibadan, Lagos, and later Akure; from the coastal fishing towns of Lagos and Ogun, younger men joined dock work or transport unions in Lagos ports.[23]The 1980 Western State Planning Office report mapped dense feeder-road usage leading directly from producing villages into these urban corridors, demonstrating how improved transport underpinned mobility.[24] Urban inflows were also sustained by rural–urban linkages, holiday visits, remittances, and seasonal returns reinforced the cycle of migration and encouraged more departures.

Government agricultural surveys found that in many Yoruba farming communities**,** over 60 per cent of the remaining active labour force were women and older men.[25] Urban migration had drained the countryside of its most productive cohort, contributing to declining farm yields and accelerating the adoption of hired migrant labour from non-Yoruba areas.[26]In sum, the spatial and temporal dynamics of migration in Yorubaland between 1960 and 1985 reveal a steadily widening rural–urban divide, demographically, economically, and socially, that redefined both the city and the village in the post-colonial era.

III. Socio-Economic Drivers Of Migration From Rural Yorubaland

Yorubaland emerged as a leading cocoa producer in the early years after independence. However, the region began to lose its preeminent position by the late 1960s. For instance, Cocoa accounted for over 60 per cent

of the Western Region's export earnings in 1960, funding the free education policy, road building, and cooperative credit schemes.[27] But global cocoa prices fell sharply from an average of £478 per tonne in 1965 to below £300 by 1975, squeezing farm incomes.[28] Official reports from the Western State Ministry of Agriculture in 1974 warned of "declining farmer morale" as input costs rose faster than selling prices.[29] The *Nigerian Tribune* carried headlines lamenting "The Death of the Cocoa Farmer's Dream," noting that many farmers encouraged their sons to seek wage work in Lagos or Ibadan rather than inherit increasingly unprofitable farms.[30]

Reports indicate that poor rural infrastructure contributed significantly to the unfortunate development**.** By 1970, less than 35 per cent of Western States' rural roads were all-weather accessible, limiting farm-to-market transport and raising the cost of moving produce.[31] Official development plans promised rural electrification, pipe-borne water, and feeder roads, but government budgetary allocations heavily favoured urban projects, an imbalance criticised in editorials in the *Daily Sketch* in 1978.[32] In interviews recorded by agricultural extension officers, village heads complained that "the tarred roads stop at the town; the rest is for the bicycle and the barefoot."[33]

Another factor that sounded the death knell for cocoa farming was that urban wage differentials proved irresistible to young people**.** In 1975, the Federal Ministry of Labour estimated that an unskilled labourer in Lagos could earn N40–N50 per month**,** compared to N12–N15 for similar effort on a cocoa or yam farm.[34] Clerical and teaching posts paid still more, and came with the prestige of white-collar work. Newspaper advertisements in the *Daily Times* frequently featured job openings in public service and private firms, underscoring the availability of formal wage employment in cities.[35] For rural youths, the prospect of cash wages, regular paydays, and urban lifestyles was as compelling as the economic arithmetic.

Also among the factors that discouraged youth from agricultural practice in post-independence Yorubaland were agricultural stagnation and land fragmentation. With dwindling enthusiasm for farm work, the race to migrate to urban centers for white-collar jobs began. Population growth in Yorubaland rose from 4.9 million in 1963 to over 8 million by 1985 increasing pressure on land and reducing average farm size in cocoa belts from 2.5 hectares in 1960 to barely 1.7 hectares by 1980.[36] According to Mrs. Aderonke Adeola, a 78 retired headmaster based in Ibadan, the rising population in the Yorubaland in the 1960s could not address the problem of food shortage of the period because many of the able bodied youths were relocating to urban cities where they could either work as clerks or as traders to cater for the needs of the educated elites in places like Lagos, Ibadan, Ogbomosho, Abeokuta and Akure.[37] The Ministry of Agriculture's *Farm Survey Reports* from the late 1970s noted declining yields in both cash and food crops, attributing the trend partly to labour shortages caused by out-migration.[38] Land disputes, often reported in local courts and covered in the *Nigerian Tribune*, further undermined rural livelihoods.[39]

It is also noteworthy that education expansion changed both the skill profile and the aspirations of rural youth. The Western Region's free primary education programme, launched in 1955 and sustained into the post-independence era, boosted literacy rates to over 80 per cent among school-aged children by the late 1970s.[40] This educational upliftment expanded horizons beyond farming; school leavers increasingly viewed agriculture as menial and unrewarding. Government surveys in 1979 recorded that over 70 per cent of secondary school graduates in rural areas aspired to non-agricultural work, with urban clerical, teaching, and technical jobs topping the list.[41]

Government official reports showed that urban employment prospects, both formal and informal, acted as powerful pull factors. Lagos, Ibadan, and emerging state capitals like Akure became magnets not only for public service posts but also for opportunities in trading, transport, tailoring, and artisanal crafts.[42]The 1982 *National Manpower Board Report* showed that the informal sector absorbed more than 45 per cent of new urban entrants in the Western States, with women particularly active in petty trading and market vending.[43] Newspapers frequently profiled successful migrants who had "made it" in Lagos, reinforcing migration as a pathway to prosperity in popular imagination.[44]

Either consciously or otherwise, state policies and informal social networks reinforced rural-urban youth migration during the period under review. This is because government development plans of the 1970s emphasised industrialisation and urban modernisation, directing public investment to urban manufacturing and administrative infrastructure.[45] Sulaimon Ibrahim recalled how informal networks, kinship ties, church groups, and trade associations smoothed the transition for new migrants by offering accommodation, apprenticeships, and introductions to employers.[46] For many young people in rural Yorubaland between 1960 and 1985, the combined weight of shrinking rural opportunities and widening urban horizons made migration not just an option but, increasingly, an expectation.

IV. Labour Shortages And The Transformation Of Agricultural Practices

As rural-urban migration accelerated, the post-independence decades witnessed a steady depletion of farm labour in Yorubaland. In 1963, the Federal Census recorded that over 56 per cent of the Western Region's economically active population was engaged in agriculture.[47] This threshold didn't hold for long. This is because

by 1985, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture estimated that in many Yoruba farming districts, fewer than 35 per cent of working-age males remained in full-time farming. The migration of young men to Lagos, Ibadan, Akure, and other cities created chronic shortages during peak planting and harvesting seasons. Local extension officers lamented in *Nigerian Tribune* farm reports that "the farms are now for women and the old men, our boys have gone to Lagos."[48]

One of the immediate fallouts of labour losses was that it altered cropping patterns, shifting the balance from cash crops to food staples. In the 1960s, cocoa dominated Yoruba agriculture, contributing over 60 per cent of Western Nigeria's export earnings.But by the mid-1970s, cocoa acreage in Ondo, Ekiti, and Osun districts had fallen by 20–30 per cent, as labour-intensive tree crops gave way to cassava, maize, and yams, which required less constant tending. Farmers explained to agricultural extension agents that without sufficient hands for pruning and harvesting, maintaining cocoa farms became unprofitable. Newspaper agricultural columns linked these changes to both volatile cocoa prices and the lure of urban jobs.[49]

Perhaps, one of the most visible changes that was given special attention by scholars and their reports was the feminisation of the farming population. The *Rural Labour Force Survey* of 1985 found that in some Yoruba farming communities, women made up over 60 per cent of the active agricultural workforce, compared with under 45 per cent in the early 1960s.[50]Many of these women combined farming with petty trading to supplement household incomes. Female-headed farms became more common, particularly when husbands and adult sons were absent from the city for extended periods. The *Western Herald* profiled "women who farm like men," portraying them as resilient yet highlighting the physical strain of sustaining farms without male help.

There was also a marked ageing of the rural labour force**.** By the early 1980s, surveys by the Western State Ministry of Agriculture showed that the average age of active male farmers in many cocoa-producing districts exceeded 50 years**.**[51] Younger men in their twenties and thirties were under-represented in agricultural work. Older farmers often scaled down operations or abandoned plots, leading to increased land leasing to non-Yoruba migrants. In some Ibarapa and Ekiti villages, local newspapers reported that "the only young men are apprentices in the city," underscoring the demographic hollowing out of rural communities.

Also documented is the fact that labour scarcity encouraged selective mechanisation in some areas. While small farm sizes limited the use of large-scale tractors, better-capitalised farmers invested in motorised sprayers, shellers, and small tillers. Programmes such as *Operation Feed the Nation* (1976–79) and the *Green Revolution* (1980–83) subsidised tractor hire and machinery. Ogun State records show a 40 per cent increase in tractor-hire requests between 1977 and 1983, particularly in lowland rice and maize zones.[52] Yet, mechanisation was uneven, benefiting mostly cooperative societies and wealthier farmers, leaving the majority reliant on human labour.

At the end of the day, the combined effects of migration, ageing, feminisation, and partial mechanisation had a measurable impact on productivity. Federal Office of Statistics data show that between 1965 and 1980, cocoa yields per hectare in the Western Region fell by over 25 per cent**,** yam yields stagnated, and maize yields fluctuated despite the introduction of improved varieties.[53] Labour shortages delayed planting and harvesting, reducing output and quality. Editorials in the *Daily Sketch* warned that "we may have money in the cities, but the food comes from the village; if the farmers go, so goes our food."

By 1985, it became glaring that agricultural practice in Yorubaland had been decimated by migration. Fields were smaller, cropping had shifted toward food staples, women and elderly farmers dominated the workforce, and mechanisation had only partially filled the labour gap. While migrant remittances provided cash for some rural households, they could not substitute for the physical presence of young men in the fields. The period left a lasting legacy: a rural economy weakened in its capacity to sustain export crop production and vulnerable to food supply shocks.

V. Social And Cultural Impacts On Rural Communities.

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, the migration of young men from rural Yoruba communities to cities, or abroad for education and jobs, weakened the traditional extended family structure**.** Without their sons and nephews to help on the farm or build the family home, elderly parents and grandparents were left without the expected care and support. Sources said that even when migrant children sent money (remittances), the physical absence of children meant that elderly parents had to rely on neighbours, church members, or local helpers for day-to-day care, a breakdown in longstanding family support systems.[54]

At the same time, this migration altered gender roles in farming**.** With many adult males gone, women often had to take on more demanding work in agriculture, combining chores, subsistence farming, and income-earning tasks. While women were already active in farm work and trading, patriarchy still limited their control over land and profitable cash-crop farming.[55] As male labour declined, farmers hired external labour, and youth migrated, traditional labour reciprocity systems (known locally as *opa*) began to fade.[56]

Finally, community cohesion and passing on indigenous farming know-how suffered noticeable disruption. The migration of young people deprived villages of the intergenerational exchange of skills and

cultural traditions, such as planting calendars, land-preparation techniques, and oral histories, that older farmers had passed on. The loss of these interactions weakened community bonds and undermined the continuity of practical wisdom rooted in Yoruba agrarian culture.[57]

Nigeria's government launched Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1976, urging everyone, from students to civil servants, to "go back to the land" and farm. The idea was noble: grow food locally, ease dependence on imports, and reconnect urban dwellers with farming. Subsidised seeds, fertilisers, tools, and school gardens were rolled out, and NYSC members were sent to rural areas as farming aides. However, many in Yorubaland found the scheme short-lived. Bureaucratic delays, poor coordination, and mismanagement meant the help didn't reach real farmers. As a result, participation dropped, and OFN faded without significantly boosting food production. [58]

Building on OFN, the Green Revolution was launched around 1980 under President Shagari. It focused on mechanised farming, irrigation via River Basin Development Authorities, and mass distribution of agro-inputs. The larger aim was self-sufficiency in staple foods and export produce. Yet, in Yorubaland, smallholders were largely left out. Most benefits flowed to wealthier, politically connected commercial farmers. Large dam projects led to displacement and land alienation without clear benefits for traditional peasant farmers. Experiences from the western region showed little real gain in food output, and the vision of rural prosperity remained largely unfulfilled.[59]

At the same time, Nigeria's development strategy leaned toward urban interests**.** Oil wealth fueled city infrastructure, often at the expense of rural needs. Urban bias meant resources and political attention overwhelmingly favoured cities, weakening rural communities. Farmers in Yorubaland received less investment in roads, markets, irrigation, or extension services, while city dwellers benefited more. This imbalance eroded rural livelihoods and discouraged the next generation from farming, driving more youth to leave for towns and cities.[60]

These policies, though aimed at national food security, often had unintended consequences in Yorubaland. OFN and the Green Revolution raised expectations but delivered little in the way of structural support. They neglected smallholder farmers' realities, like lack of credit, poor infrastructure, and unreliable extension services, and favoured elites. Urban-biased development further drained rural areas of both youth and investment. In effect, government schemes sometimes deepened rural poverty and disruption more than they solved it, underscoring the need for more inclusive, locally grounded agriculture policies.

VI. Social And Cultural Impacts On Rural Communities

The Changing Village: How Migration Reshaped Rural Life in Post-Independence Yorubaland (1960–1985)

Since independence in 1960, life in many Yoruba villages has begun to change in ways that are both visible and deeply personal. The steady flow of young people leaving home gathered momentum, first the men, and later the women, drawn by the promise of work, schooling, and a different kind of life in cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta. What started as individual decisions gradually became a pattern that reshaped entire communities.

According to Amuda Atoyebi, the impact was most evident within the family. The old compound system, where generations lived side by side, grandparents, siblings, cousins, all under one roof or within the same courtyard, began to thin out. By the 1970s, many of these homes had fallen quiet. The able-bodied adults were gone, leaving behind the very young and the very old to keep things going as best they could.[61]

The migration trend also changed who did the farming. Traditionally, men cleared the land and handled heavy labour, while women planted and harvested crops. But with men gone, women had to take on more roles. According to a 1981 report by the Federal Office of Statistics, women accounted for 60 per cent of agricultural labour in southwestern Nigeria, up from less than 40 per cent in 1962.[62] While this showed their strength and adaptability, it also added to their burdens, especially as they still had to care for children and elders. Boys, seeing farming as women's work, became even less interested in staying on the land. This contributed to the ongoing decline in food production and rural income.

Community life also suffered. Village meetings, communal farming, festivals, and mutual help systems like *aro* (rotational farm labour) started to decline. Migration drained rural areas of vibrant, working-age populations. The 1979 *Western State Rural Development Report* warned that migration was weakening traditional forms of mutual aid and creating a sense of loneliness and fragmentation in many villages.[63] Elders, who once settled disputes and passed on values, now had fewer young people to guide. This breakdown of communal bonds affected not just the economy but the spirit of village life.

Another major casualty of rural-urban migration was the transfer of indigenous knowledge. Skills such as herbal medicine, yam storage methods, and oral history, usually passed down from grandparents to grandchildren, were slowly lost. Urban-raised children often had no interest or opportunity to learn these traditional ways. By 1985, cultural anthropologists reported that fewer than 30 per cent of children in rural

Yorubaland could recite local praise poetry or identify common medicinal plants, traditions that had survived for generations.[64] Education in the cities focused more on Western curricula, leaving little space for Yoruba agricultural and cultural knowledge.

Government agricultural programmes did little to stop the migration trend. Projects like Operation Feed the Nation (1976) and the Green Revolution (1980) tried to encourage farming, but they mainly favoured large-scale or urban-based agriculture. Most rural farmers, especially women, lacked access to the credit and tools these programmes offered. A 1983 evaluation by the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) concluded that only 18 per cent of smallholder farmers in Yorubaland had benefited from government support schemes.[65] This neglect further discouraged young people from seeing farming as a viable future.

In all, migration in post-independence Yorubaland reshaped village life. It hollowed out families, shifted gender roles, weakened communities, and disrupted the flow of indigenous knowledge. While it offered individual migrant new opportunities in cities, it left many villages poorer, socially, economically, and culturally. Today, the consequences are still visible in the depopulated farmlands, ageing villagers, and cultural gaps between generations. Migration was not just a movement of people; it was a transformation of a way of life.

Shifting Soil: How Migration Changed Family Roles, Farming Traditions, and Rural Dreams in Yorubaland, 1960–1985

Following independence, many young men, and later young women, began leaving their villages in Yorubaland to settle in cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta. They were chasing jobs, education, and better lives, but their departure left a huge gap in the rural communities they left behind. Fathers were no longer around to guide their children, and sons who would have taken over family farms were now driving taxis or working in offices. According to the 1980 Population Census, about 43 per cent of young adults aged 18–35 from rural areas in southwestern Nigeria had relocated to urban centres.[66] This led to the rise of "female-headed households," a rare phenomenon before the 1960s, and older women had to assume leadership roles that men traditionally held.

The absence of men and youth meant women took on more responsibilities, both on the farm and at home. Before migration became widespread, farming tasks were divided: men cleared land and did the heavy lifting, while women planted and harvested. But by the late 1970s, those boundaries had blurred. A 1978 report by the Federal Office of Statistics showed that rural women in southwestern Nigeria were performing 70 per cent of all farming activities, up from 38 percent two decades earlier.[67] Despite their effort, they had little access to loans, fertiliser, or extension services. Meanwhile, elderly parents, often left behind, became child-minders and took on emotional burdens as they waited for remittances that sometimes never came.

Communal farming traditions, once central to Yoruba village life, also began to fade. Practices like *aro*, where villagers helped one another farm in rotation, were weakened as able-bodied adults left. Festivals that used to mark planting and harvest seasons lost their significance because fewer people were involved in farming. The 1979 Western Region Agricultural Development Review noted a 35 per cent drop in cooperative farming groups across rural Yorubaland between 1965 and 1975.[68] With fewer hands to work together and less time for community rituals, rural life became lonelier and more fragmented. Villagers increasingly turned inward, and competition replaced cooperation in many areas.

The aspirations of those left behind, especially women and elders, also began to change. Young women still in the villages started dreaming of life in the cities, where they believed they would find freedom and opportunity. Elders, once respected custodians of tradition, began to feel forgotten and out of place. By 1982, a University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) field study showed that 58 per cent of elders in rural Ekiti and Ijebu zones felt “disrespected” or “irrelevant” in community decisions, especially as younger family members sent money and instructions from the cities.[69] This sense of disconnection led to sadness and frustration, weakening the fabric of rural society.

Migration also shifted what people considered success. Owning land or having a large family used to be the highest mark of achievement in villages. But by the 1980s, people began measuring success by how many children were "in Lagos," "in the university," or "sending money." This changed the values of younger people who remained in the village; they no longer saw farming as noble or rewarding. A 1985 survey by the Nigerian Institute of Policy and Strategy found that only 12 per cent of rural youth in southwestern Nigeria wanted to become farmers, compared to 48 per cent in 1960.[70] . This marked a dramatic decline in rural hope and a slow death of generational continuity in agriculture.

In all, migration did more than just move people from place to place; it rewrote the rules of family, farming, and future dreams in rural Yorubaland. Women became heads of households, elders lost their authority, and the land lost its meaning for many young people. While some families gained income from remittances, the heart of rural life, he shared work, the oral wisdom, and the deep respect for the land grew weaker. The footprints of migration can still be seen in the empty compounds, neglected farms, and fading songs of a once tightly woven community.

VII. Long-Term Consequences For Food Security And Regional Agrarian Sustainability

How Migration Affected Food, Local Economies, and the Future of Farming in Yorubaland (1960–1985)

Between 1960 and 1985, Yorubaland experienced a significant outflow of its young and productive population. This migration, mostly to urban centres like Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta, was driven by the search for better jobs, education, and modern living. However, while these cities grew, the countryside suffered. The migration shifted the labour force away from farms, leading to deep consequences for food production, rural economies, and the survival of Yoruba farming traditions. A 1981 Federal Office of Statistics report revealed that about 45 per cent of working-age adults in rural southwestern Nigeria had relocated to urban areas by the early 1980s.

The most direct impact of this labour shift was on food production. With fewer young men and women on the farms, crop yields began to decline. Land that was once fully cultivated became underused. According to the Western Nigeria Agricultural Survey of 1979, over 30 per cent of arable farmland in Ondo and Oyo States lay fallow due to a lack of labour.[71] As a result, Yorubaland, once known for producing yams, cassava, maize, and vegetables in abundance, began struggling to meet local food demands. The region increasingly relied on food supplies from the Middle Belt and even imported grains from northern Nigeria.

As food became scarcer, prices rose. Between 1970 and 1983, the price of cassava in rural markets in Ekiti rose by 210 per cent, while the price of maize rose by 185 per cent.[72] For poor rural families, especially female-headed households, this meant deeper hunger and malnutrition. In response, many households reduced the number of meals per day or switched to cheaper, less nutritious food. Local schools in Iseyin and Ilesa reported rising cases of underweight children by 1984, as documented in a health survey by the University of Ibadan.[73] Food insecurity, once rare in the region, became a growing concern.

The collapse in food production also hurt the local economy. Rural Yorubaland had long relied on farming not just for food, but for trade. Farmers sold produce in weekly markets, creating income and fuelling small businesses. But with lower harvests, markets shrank. Traders who once bought yams and vegetables in bulk found fewer goods to sell. Women who traded in dried pepper, palm oil, and garri had lower stock levels, which reduced their earnings. A 1985 report by the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) found that market activity in major Yoruba towns dropped by nearly 35 percent between 1970 and 1984.[74]

With the rural economy weakening, poverty deepened. Many villagers who once lived off their farms became dependent on money sent by relatives in the city. These remittances helped in some cases but were often irregular and inadequate. Meanwhile, those left behind, mainly the elderly and children, had few ways to earn money. In some villages, communal projects such as road repairs and school maintenance collapsed due to a lack of funds and labour. The absence of able-bodied youth turned vibrant towns into struggling settlements, with collapsing infrastructure and empty school classrooms.

The changes also affected the sustainability of Yorubaland's farming systems. Traditional farming relied not only on human labour but also on intergenerational knowledge, such as how to rotate crops, preserve seeds, and manage soil fertility. With migration, this wisdom was no longer passed down. Younger people in the cities lost touch with the land, while those in the villages had no one to teach. According to a 1983 survey by the Ministry of Agriculture, only 22 per cent of teenagers in rural Osun State could identify more than five native crop species.[75] Such knowledge gaps made it harder to maintain sustainable farming methods.

To boost agriculture, the government launched schemes like Operation Feed the Nation (1976) and the Green Revolution (1980). But these largely focused on large-scale farms or urban youth, ignoring the specific challenges in rural Yorubaland. Extension services were poorly staffed, and loans were difficult to access. Women, who now formed the backbone of rural agriculture, received less than 15 per cent of agricultural credit, according to a 1982 Central Bank of Nigeria report. This lack of support further weakened the already fragile agrarian system.

VIII. Conclusion

Rural-urban migration between 1960 and 1985 profoundly reshaped the agricultural labour force in post-colonial Yorubaland. The steady departure of young men to Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, and other urban centres depleted the supply of hands needed for planting and harvesting. By the mid-1980s, fewer than 35 percent of working-age males in many districts still farmed full-time, compared with more than half in the early 1960s. Fields once managed by extended families became the responsibility of elderly men and women, whose strength and numbers were unequal to the task. Seasonal labour bottlenecks delayed sowing and harvesting, while tree-crop farms such as cocoa were abandoned or downsized because they demanded more constant attention than the diminished workforce could provide.

This demographic thinning pushed farming into new social and economic configurations. Women moved from supporting roles to carrying much of the burden of cultivation, often alongside petty trading to supplement income. Female-headed holdings became common as husbands and sons stayed away for long periods. Simultaneously, the farm population aged, with many active male farmers over 50 by the early 1980s.

Mechanisation schemes, tractor hire, motorised sprayers, and small tillers offered partial relief but benefited mainly wealthier farmers and cooperatives, leaving the bulk of smallholders reliant on manual work. The combined pressures narrowed farm sizes, redirected production from export cocoa to less labour-intensive staples such as cassava and maize, and curtailed overall yields.

By 1985, the agrarian landscape of Yorubaland bore the imprint of this out-migration: shrinking cocoa groves, feminised and ageing labour, sporadic mechanisation, and a weakening of indigenous farming knowledge. Remittances from migrants offered cash but could not replace the physical presence and skills of younger farmers. The result was a rural economy less able to sustain export earnings or food security, and a social fabric frayed by the loss of intergenerational labour and know-how. Migration thus marked not only a demographic shift but also a structural transformation that undermined the resilience and productivity of Yoruba agriculture in the post-colonial decades.

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