

**Food Crop Production, Hunger,  
and Rural Poverty in Nigeria's  
Benue Area, 1920–1995**

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and Rural Poverty in Nigeria's  
Benue Area, 1920–1995**

**Mike Odugbo Odey**

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*To my wife, Grace Ochuole Mike Odey for  
her boldness to step into Dorcas' shoes; for helping me  
put the broken pieces together and for giving me a  
new name and a new dream.*



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# Series Editor's Foreword

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola  
University of Texas at Austin



# Preface

The history of *Food Crop Production, Hunger, and Rural Poverty in Nigeria's Benue Area, 1920–1995* is essentially an introduction to economic history of Central Nigeria.

This book is an expanded argument originating from the first one I ever articulated. The two are essentially set against the same historical circumstances and geographical context, using agricultural resources of the Benue region as the subject of analysis. As much as possible, the two lines of argument were kept parallel despite some overlap in the years covered. The first volume was concerned with the development of cash crop economy and its consequences on the economic history of Benue Province up to 1960, stretching as far as the immediate post-independence period up to the civil war. This second book concentrates on the economics of food crop production activities and how hunger and poverty came about with other diverse unintended consequences for a period of about seventy-five years, up to 1995. To some of my critics, the difference between food and cash crop in the Benue area would appear to be an unnecessary taxonomy because both of them have a fluid division, like that of the egg and the chicken chasing each other. However, available evidence has shown that it is quite plausible to maintain two separate volumes on the Benue agricultural history (one of cash and the other of food) without giving in to easy stereotypical conceptualization as demonstrated here and there.

Because of the long incubation period of this particular book, several things have gone into the crucible and almost prevented its emergence, so I am glad that it has come out at last to prove that no challenge lasts forever, no matter how overwhelming. Benue state in central Nigeria lies east of the Niger-Benue confluence and has one of the most remarkable agricultural potentials for the production of root and grain crops simultaneously. In fact, it is the only state in Nigeria that is eulogized as the food basket of the Nation. The central argument articulated in this book is derived and extensively refined from my PhD Thesis which was awarded in 2002 by the University of Jos, Nigeria, first under the supervision of late Professor Charles C. Jacobs and later Professor Monday Mangywat. After considering several options for the title of the book,

*Food Crop Production, Hunger, and Rural Poverty in Nigeria's Benue Area; 1920–1995* is considered to be most appropriate because it captures a multiplicity of intellectual and general interests. Indeed, I have used the drafts of the chapters for lecturing undergraduate courses in Benue economic history, especially in Trade and Politics in Benue Region and as an adjunct in the People and culture of the Benue Valley as well as Comparative Economic Growth & Development. More often the data has also been reshaped for analyzing issues in rural and economic development and poverty alleviation of the people of central Nigeria, which by comparative analysis can also be extrapolated for analyzing other rural areas in the country. For several years now, I have depended on the primary sources used in articulating this book to lecture my undergraduate and postgraduate students economic history and I believe they will find the book useful. I hope the book will also be of interest to Benue policy-makers who are concerned with the future directions of the Benue political economy, especially the economic basis of Benue history as it has to do with food production systems and its diverse implications and complexity in the way that no one else had attempted to do. For the whole of Central Nigeria, this is the first attempt to trace systematically the historical development of food crop production and related “food questions” of strategies of production, output levels, distribution network and factors leading to hunger and rural deprivation of the vast majority of Benue people within the stipulated time frame. The book maintains a generic link between pre-colonial through the colonial past, up to the post-colonial era of the Benue agricultural systems. Although doing so in such a long perspective was a Herculean task, that is the best way to underscore the significance of the history of food security in the area that is generally regarded as “the food basket of the nation.” Here, it was clearly demonstrated how natural factors and socio-economic relations of production acted and reacted upon each other overtime to mastermind the changing character of the Benue food question with far-reaching implications.

The work also underscores the timeless significance of food as an indomitable source of power far above military, scientific, and technological know-how or oil-wealth. It challenges the general attitude of taking the food question for granted. The history of food production activities here is linked to hunger and poverty in the Benue rural sector where food producers remain as poor as ever and hardly fed well all year round. These themes naturally moved together in locked steps and are central in the economic history of the Benue people like the rest of the so-called Less Developed Economies in the Global South. Like E. H. Carr's predictions of world catastrophes, hunger and poverty are always with us, weighing heavily on everyone. Although hunger and poverty do not need any scientific proof for anyone to know that they are world catastrophes,

they are as certain as the notion that everyone shall die sooner or later. But despite all odds from the two maladies, most people find themselves alive until the next day, and history continues as such in the Benue Region. And when we are ready to learn, then we must have to turn to the history of food production and hunger in the Benue area of Central Nigeria.

Furthermore, the book attempts to explain and resolve the contradictions why those who are endowed with huge agricultural and other natural resources continue to remain poor and hungry despite extensive food crop production. Furthermore, the book is set against the background of the cycle of global/national food insecurities and re-echoes the necessity for fresh critical and theoretical thinking about how to deal with the debacle. Additionally, it offers important suggestions for the improvement of the living standards of the Benue rural farmers who constitute over 95% of the Benue citizenry. Finally, the work provides a critique of the political economy of hunger and rural poverty of Benue State and re-echoes the strategic importance of food power in the development process of the Benue area, though still in the hands of rural small scale farmers.

The strength of this book lies mainly in the originality of primary sources on which it is based and the diversity of secondary materials used. The plethora of resources used for the analysis includes oral data, archival sources, statistical data, government publications and NGO reports—which were long-buried away from the reach of scholars. All of these were supplemented with secondary sources as reflected in the select Bibliography of the book. Beside these, the significance of my personal observations, interactions and reflections on the political economy of the Benue region, which have shaped my thinking over time as shown in the final outcome of the book, cannot be undermined. My rural background in Ohirigwe Igede, one of the most backward villages in Benue State of Nigeria has largely moderated my life as a university don since 1988, and has greatly influenced my perception as an economic historian to write a book of this nature. I am aware that the book is imperfect and far from what I wished it to be; certainly not because of narrow-mindedness, or oversimplification of the complexity of the Benue political economy, or my negation of the claim that “Benue is the food basket of the nation,” which has not yet been scientifically proved, but because of my human limitations and the burning desire that everything I do must be perfect.

What has finally emerged from my research is the significant fact that local food insecurity remains a stark reality in the Benue region because the amount of food that is produced cannot meet demands and which puts the nation at more risk for depending on the Benue food supply. Every serious thinker knows that that is an illusion from which we must have to free ourselves. This is why

it was necessary to maintain as the central argument that the dialectical relationship between food crop production, hunger and rural poverty are inseparable nexus. By implication, this underpins three important issues. First, Benue State is not “the nation’s food basket,” even though it is contributing remarkably to the nation’s economic growth through the food sector. Second, failure of institutional structures to cope with food insecurity and the “significant” negative changes that have taken place in the food distribution network over the years are constantly exhibited and this is a reflection of the nagging question of the development of the area. Third, the rich agricultural potentials of Benue State are yet to be fully exploited due to lack of transformation of the factors of production system. This book demonstrates that an interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of the Benue food systems seems to be the most appropriate research methodology in the economic history of the region by bringing together diverse interests with broad implications for the Benue development process.

The book is arranged into seven chapters: Chapter One deals with perspectives, sources and the nature of the argument, and Chapter Two examines the nature and structure of the agricultural economy in the Benue region during the pre-colonial period. Chapter Three is concerned with the establishment of colonial rule and its economic structure in Benue Province from 1920 to 1960. Chapter Four brings in the history of the nature and roots of food security problems in the Benue Area from 1960 to 1975. Chapter Five is an analysis of the relationship between food crop production, hunger, rural-poverty and responses to the rural phenomenon in Benue State; 1976–1985. Chapter Six is a history of the post-colonial food and rural development policies of Benue State Government between 1986 and 1995. Finally, Chapter Seven is a conclusion on the issues raised in the book. The focus is on the major contributions of the book and the prospect of future research on the Benue Studies in Central Nigeria as well as the necessity for a re-thinking on the reduction of hunger and poverty which I have reiterated is the most plausible means by which national development can be achieved.

In the final analysis, if all my arguments in this book are not plausible and therefore not persuasive enough and discarded for any reason, I will still feel fulfilled granted that what has been issued here will stimulate further debate on the phenomenon of food, hunger and poverty in a world that is so blessed by God of all sufficiency for all humans to enjoy. I will also be gratified if the audience will be provoked by my line of argument on the complex issues presented here to take me on for the purpose of advancing research on the Benue food systems and the development of central Nigeria which I consider to be strategic to the development of economic history in Nigeria.

# Acknowledgments

The basic inspiration for this book is mine but the whole idea would have been an unlikely odyssey without the development of the idea, help and encouragement from friends, several individuals and organizations that were on hand to lend me support, and from whom I have learnt so much in the process. It is delightful, though inadequate; to use these few pages to express debts of gratitude I owe such individuals and groups from the gestation period to the time when the ideas in the volume were fully matured. I must frankly confess that the work was carried out under uncommon mental agony for the most part arising from the incidence of my burnt house and even worse, the traumatic experience of the sudden departure of Dorcas, my late wife, to be with the Lord. I must thank her here (posthumously) for thrusting me into the chilly winds of life with her final challenging words that I should “try and live again, and afterwards make it home to join me in glory.” Most important of all, I must return all thanks to God who gave me the inspiration for the work in the midst of the aforementioned circumstances, and the incredible grace to finish it at last.

The present book has profited greatly from Professor Monday Y. Mangywat and the late Professor Charles C. Jacobs, who have distinguished themselves as my long-time lecturers, research supervisors and academic mentors. Despite his busy schedule as a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jos, Professor Mangywat’s tireless devotion to reading and correcting the manuscript and his additions and crucial suggestions on the PhD Thesis which has formed the basis of the book should therefore be specially acknowledged in lieu of conventional thanks.

I should also like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of my several UAM research assistants (listed in the bibliographic section) who spent much time collecting oral data from different parts of Benue State on which the analysis is also based. Others who deserve special thanks here include the staff of the National Archives, Kaduna, Mrs. Maria Ajimah and all the staff of BERWASSA under her, and those of BERDA and BNARDA agencies in Makurdi, the Benue State capital.

Apart from the close affinity I developed with people I came in contact with over the years in the process of gathering data for the book, I have also bene-

fited from being a lecturer at one time in the University of Agriculture, Makurdi, and later Benue State University, Makurdi, by freely using the libraries of the two universities: I therefore extend my gratitude to all those who facilitated my research work, including the then Head of Department and colleagues in the Department of Remedial and General Studies, the Dean, College of Science, the Vice-Chancellor, and indeed Professor Ikenna Onyido of the University of Agriculture, Makurdi then and now the Vice-Chancellor of Michael Okpara university Umudike, whose firm interest and belief in my “proverbial recovery from shock” helped me so much then and during my PhD research efforts which constituted the origins of this particular volume. Others include: the pleasant staff of the Post-Graduate School and the library Staff of the University of Jos, others of BSU Makurdi, and Benue State Library and Arewa House, Kaduna.

In the absence of special grants and scholarship, the work would have been impossible without the financial and material support from my parents and friends like Dr. Dan Adikpe in the UK, R. I. Hart and Emma Ofor, as well as Barrister Eje Ogo and Sam Aba for their financial support at the initial—and sometimes at very critical stages of my research efforts on the book. Of no less importance were the families of Godwin & Happiness Ogbonna, David & Lillian Odey as well as David & Joy Nagha for hosting and giving me free accommodation to continue this book work under unusual circumstances I cannot forget. My special thanks also go to Joel Odey and Emenyi E. Emenyi, as well as Ann Akpegi and Mathew Ogoji for their customary typesetting skills and patience for my never-ending corrections. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Emmanuel Chiahemba Ayangaor for his good spirits and assistance on several aspects of my editorial works from time to time despite his own busy schedule. Still others Maria and Sunday Adimah, Oga and Esther Ero as well as Ochi Ikape who were always close by to give a helping hand when I needed a word of encouragement or someone to talk to regarding the book project. I must not forget to extend my thanks to Oga and Lucinda Otumala in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, to Coby Van Rossoum and Ruth Abu in the Netherlands and posthumously, to Godwin Ogo Abu for being such a dear friend until his sudden death in 2007.

My unreserved special gratitude also goes to Ona Ode and Patience Onekutu for their moral support and for allowing me to encroach into their ever always busy schedules to read and to edit the huge volume tirelessly, and for reshaping my thinking by so doing. I am indeed grateful to David Edugbeke Ode for his countless useful suggestions, moral support and statistical data analysis, originally put together by Federal Office of Statistics and the Benue Ministry of Finance under Dan Ejale. I heartily salute though unconventionally, my very

senior Reverend-minister friend like Rev. M. Ogbaji, and so many people of similar disposition whose encouragement expedited my recovery process after the trauma of a burnt house and all the tragedy that followed in 1995.

I must confess that I am most fortunate to have friends like Professor Toyin Falola at the University of Texas in Austin, USA, who I consider to be more than a phenomenon particularly for facilitating my link with the publishers of this book in North Carolina, USA, and who, together with Professor Okpeh O. Okpeh of the Benue State University, Makurdi, has read the chapter drafts and written a report to the publishers on the book and has reminded me to prioritize my busy schedules to enable me finish the long-awaited book. Furthermore, I must thank other colleagues, including Professor Sati U. Fwatsak who took time to read and write a special report on the book to the publishers, and Professors Z. D. Goshit and Cyril Imo, at the University of Jos, who stimulated me to think globally and to act locally in my writing, and who allowed me to use their offices at the preliminary stages of researching for this book.

Nonetheless there are still several final notes of thanks for other debts of gratitude too numerous to mention here such as to my junior sister, Regina Ode, now Mrs. Ogoji, who will continue to remain an important chapter anywhere my story is told, especially for playing the role of a surrogate mother for years since Dorcas had gone and during my research trips. To my children and my aged parents I am equally grateful for their long forbearance towards my inability to care for them as I should. Indeed, all the errors and weaknesses that may be found in the book are solely mine and not of the individuals mentioned here. It is my hope that whatever criticisms may arise in this book will stimulate further research on the Benue area of central Nigeria. And all that will be an added value to the book.



# Acronyms

ABU	Ahmadu Bello University
ADC	Agricultural Development Corporation
ADP	Agricultural Development Program (Project)
BERDA	Benue Rural Development Agency
BERWASSA	Benue Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Agency
BNARDA	Benue Agricultural and Rural Development Authority
CDC	Colonial Development Corporation
DFERRI	Directorate of food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FOS	Federal Office of Statistics
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
JAST	Journal of Agricultural Science and Technology
LBRBDA	Lower Benue River Basin Development Authority
LGA	Local Government Area
NA	Native Authority
NAFCON	National Fertilizer Company of Nigeria
NAFPP	National Accelerated Food Production Program
NAK/MAKPROF	National Archives Kaduna/Makurdi Provincial Office
NIPSS	National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies
OFN	Operation Feed the Nation
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
UAC	United African Company
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WATSAN	Water and Sanitation Agency