

Study Session 11:

Labour and Culture in The Pre-Colonial Period



11.1 Introduction

In this interesting session, you will learn about the traditional culture of labour. Labour constitutes prominent aspects of a people's culture in any human society, just like land and capital are essential aspects of the means of production. Material production is the basis of human existence. Thus, production basically distinguishes man from the lower animals. Labour, which is man's activity towards the creation of utilities and values, requires that man applies his physical and mental efforts to objects or things found in the natural environment. To be able to work on land, societies devise means and instruments of labour. It is the objects and means of labour that constitute the means of production. The combination of the means of production and labour input constitutes the forces of production. Culture has been defined as the totality of human expressions, activities and existence. In this session, we shall discuss the nature of the pre-colonial labour culture and the means through which workers acquired training for productivity and efficiency among the different peoples of the several kingdoms, chiefdoms and empires.



Learning Outcome for Study Session 11

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- ✓ Discuss the nature of pre-colonial labour culture in Nigeria.
- ✓ Highlight how the pre-colonial workforce acquired training for productivity at work.

11.2 Labour and Culture in The Pre-colonial Period

As noted in the introduction, in this session you will appraise the traditional culture of labour and operations in the pre-colonial Nigerian societies. This will help to understand and appreciate the changes and continuity in social and economic

transformation that have occurred in our social and economic spaces. You must bear in mind, that pre-colonial Nigerian society was based on a communal economic system. Economic activities were carried out with the intention of widening social relationships, rather than making money. The pre-colonial labour system in many communities in Nigeria did not attract wages or remuneration. The family unit was a major source of manpower in virtually every facet of productive exercise. Labour was mostly supplied by women, especially those who had been privileged to have many children. They competed for their husband's attention by ensuring that they delivered their respective children for the public work.

Moreover, the mutual reciprocal culture also served as a source of labour supply. There were established principles of collective contribution to community development. For instance, when the whole community required man power to work on a common project, such as building a house, renovating the shrine, constructing a road leading to the river, market or town hall, the matured young men collectively offered their labour for no fee. There were traditional means of punishing those who refused to participate in one way or the other.

While this was done without any expectation of wages or pecuniary reward whatsoever, the head chief of such locality or the head of the supposed age grade was obligated to feed the entire workforce throughout the period of their activities. In this case, the women and the young children in the local community were jointly assembled to provide food and drinks for the workers. Among other factors of production, labour posed a great challenge for the pre-colonial period. It was difficult getting required workforce for the production of goods and services. The reason for the relative scarcity of labour was the huge availability of land and demographic problems. The pre-colonial people had wide expanse of cultivatable land beyond what the human population could exhaust, coupled with the rapid population decline. In fact, labour shortage was a result of the rampant low life expectancy and infant mortality rate which generally shortened life span. There was also the several incidences of epidemics and diseases which claimed lives of children in addition to incessant raiding and kidnapping.

Consequently, it became fashionable for people to keep families and maintain a polygamous family in order to ensure adequate labour supply. In this case, it was expedient for wives to mobilize their respective children to the farm to ascertain that they worked passionately for their father and earned his love and respect. In other words, family labour was coordinated mostly by the women in a way that maintained harmony and peace within the family. The nuclear family and the extended family therefore, constituted a significant source of manpower needed for agriculture-related activities in many pre-colonial Nigerian societies. People scheduled their time to stay at home or in the farm at given periods. Some spent their days, weeks or months

between staying in the farm or at home, usually located many kilometers outside the community. Most farmers arranged to spend a number of days, weeks, or month on their farms with their families. Others vary their habit slightly, depending on the season of the years. During harvesting or planting season, more time is spent on the farm. The farmers involved members of their families in their endeavors. They probably could not do otherwise, because of the time consuming and energy-sapping nature of their system of farming.

In most areas, especially among the Yorubas and the Igbos, farmers devised a system of collective workforce based on rotation of family members to work on one another's farm. This was to ease stress and achieve efficiency and productivity in farming. Three classes of such group farming are identified among the Yoruba, Edo, Igbo and the Hausa people. The first emanates from the willingness of male members of the same family to work together. They worked on a family land under the supervision of the eldest man. The proceeds of such labor belong to all members of the family. This was either shared out or used, wholly or partly, to discharge obligation incurred by the family or a member, for example acquiring wives for eligible bachelor within the family.

The next style was known among the Yorubas, known as *Aro*. It was a form of labour exchange among age-mates. These youngsters tacitly vow to help one another on individual's farm in rotation. The host at any occasion however, was obligated to feed his colleagues after the day's work. *Owe* (working bee) is the last of the group farming methods. This is practiced among relatives and in-laws. The object is to come together to help a needy member. There was no rotational labour exchange. It was simply giving a helping hand. The beneficiary is not bound to reciprocate. He demonstrates his appreciation by feeding his benefactors after the day's work.

Nonetheless, there is also a lesser known method referred to as *Nabo*. On this occasion, the youths help one another to work in rotation on their father's farms. This practice was seasonal; even in some circles; it was referred to as festival because of the feasting which usually rounded off the day's work. This system was similar to the *Aro*. The difference is that youths worked on their father's farm in *Nabo*, rather than on their personal farms in *Aro*. Participants in *Nabo* are younger than those in *Aro*. The youths are still dependent on their parents or guardian in *Nabo*, but independent in *Aro*. The wealthy farmers on the other hand, employed labourers to man their farms on continuous basis. They only visit the farms once in a while, or through representation, to keep the workers alert to their responsibilities. As stated above, subsistence farming was the basis of the economy before the advent of the white men. The people only bothered with food crops for consumption and in case of surplus, to be disposed of either in the local or inter-town market or exchanged through trade by barter.

There were diverse insurance institutions in pre-colonial Nigerian communities which emphasized mutual responsibilities and obligations while expressing a desire to alleviate poverty rather than indemnify. Prior to the introduction of the modern insurance system in the colonial period, *there had been diverse kinship ties and communal institutions that catered for unprecedented needs* of individuals and society. Major problems that emanated from funerals, marriage ceremonies, sickness or occurrence of any loss were met through existing communal or kinship insurance organisations. Most of these insurance institutions, functioned as credit and social security organisations. One of these is the 'Apo Ijo' insurance system known as 'Otu' – an important economic organization constituted by mutual consent of young people, age grades and extended family to attend to unforeseen crises. There is also the *Esusu* and *Aro* methods which were prevalent among groups of Yoruba farmers and hunters, vis-a-vis the *Ogbo*, *Isusu* and *mitiri* contribution clubs among the Igbo.

Apart from this arrangement, the other means of labour recruitment was slavery, and the slave trade. In fact, slavery was an important means of labour recruitment both for domestic and agricultural activities. Slavery was a system based on forcing people to work for another person without any remuneration, with the working person lacking control over his or her person. This means that it was a condition of being held in servitude as a property of someone else.

A critical investigation of the pre-colonial labour system would show that slavery was practiced everywhere in African societies, a social institution basic to economic life from prehistoric times to the modern era. The trans-Saharan slave trade, which was one of the major channels of African slavery before the fifteenth century, grew significantly from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, as vast African empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu developed south of the Sahara and marshaled the trade in slaves. Borgu, like several African states, was a viable source of slaves for internal West African in the trans-Saharan markets. Therefore, people were captured from far communities to be made into slaves in other towns. In most cases, in the pre-colonial era, slaves were bought from specialized vendors by the rich people who subjected them to all forms of work without reward. Slaves were used by influential people to convey goods or produce from the farm to the markets as well as for other commercial activities.

Agriculture was an important economic activity in the pre-colonial kingdom and empires. Although, there a number of other productive sectors, agriculture employed a large number of people. The non-agricultural occupation consisted of clearing of lands, mat making, mounds making, sowing, weeding and craft workmanship. But the pre-colonial agricultural system determined the pattern of labour employment. Farming activities was based on traditional homemade implements, namely: hoes, cutlasses and axes. The principal articles of food grown were yams, palm oil, maize, pepper, calabash, cocoyam, fruit and cotton. Since primitive implements were used,

productivity was quite low and relatively substandard, but the farmers were not aware of it because all they needed was production, essentially required for household consumption and communal supply.

In the Hausa states, the peoples most often relegated to the tending and harvesting of agricultural crops were captives. Some other people like the Benin and Kanuri people, conducted raids on other states in order to capture people who could carry out the agricultural duties of their kingdoms. Elsewhere, agricultural duties were carried out by free people. Among these agricultural peoples, however, the workers often sought out other occupations during the months when the ground was too dry or in the periods between harvests. Among the more common secondary occupations were mining gold and engaging in trading activities. Many agricultural peoples produced one or more food crops, which were sold to their neighbors for other items such as cloth among other items. There were also those that sold goods or traded with other non-agrarian African groups for cattle, salt, or metals.

A large number of people were employed in animal husbandry. The animals for husbandry are domestic; such includes dogs, goat, chicken and pigs. These animals supplement the source of meat, or sacrificial offering, for their owners. Exclusive vocations for men include hunting, blacksmithing and carpentry. Hunting is the oldest male occupation in ancient Idanre. Only the males were allowed to embark on hunting into the forest to kill animals which served as meat for the family.

Hunting was practiced in virtually all parts of the pre-colonial society, it was usually carried out during the dry season when farm work was light. It was also easier to burn the bush and hunters could easily penetrate deeply into the bush. In most cases, Hunting were restricted to men who had requisite spiritual strength to overcome physical and metaphysical danger. The hunters used traps, clubs bows and arrows and later guns. The animals killed were either sold or consumed by the family. Hunting and gathering in the pre-colonial era, did not however, end with the development of farming. The people supplemented the products of their farms and gardens with wild fruit and assorted wild vegetables and mushrooms. In most farming season, the gathering of wild cereal grasses became crucial importance. In tradition, the hunter, with this courage and command of magic and herbal remedies was a paradigm very like the king, and the people accorded him prestige.

Also, calabashes and pots were also a viable economic item in pre-colonial societies. This items were used for storing and transporting foodstuffs and liquids, and as eating utensils, though only pots were used for cooking. Johnson described the art of the Yoruba Calabash, as it existed in the nineteenth century: "Calabash dressers are always found in a row in market places, plying their trade; all sorts of geometrical figures are traced or cut in calabashes; some designs are exquisitely beautiful."

More so, jewelry, beads and glass was of great significance to the Benin, Igbos and the Yoruba peoples. These items form a crucial socio-economic importance to the people, manufacturing was more diverse than mining. Several objects were made from plants, mineral and animal products. Among the leading articles were foodstuff, cloth and leather, wood and ceramic products. There were also people who specialized in tanning and dyeing animal skin which were in turn used to manufacture bags, cushions, apron, saddle cover and other. The people also exhibited great craftsmanship in the making of such objects as kitchen utensils, ritual and decorative works. The cloth industry according to record appeared to be the most widespread and the one which engaged a large number of people in the production of cotton, yarns, threads and dye.

The movement of people in order to trade in one commodity or another cut across zones, be these geographical or cultural. These trading activities led to the establishment of several large markets. The individual states had effective revenue collection systems. For instance, in his efforts to control commercial transactions south of the Sahara, the rulers of different kingdoms and empires pursued an intelligent policy: they levied a tax when goods were brought into or taken out of their territory. Traders had to pay twice on salt: one dinar on bringing it in and two dinars on taking it out. Commercial activities provided opportunities for individuals and the state to exploit and benefit from. While individuals produced for the market, sold to make profits, and offered their labour for different services; the state, through the political leaders, made use of commerce in varying ways to sustain itself: traders not only offered gifts to rulers but paid dues in the markets, different types of levies, and tolls when they engaged in trade that transcended boundaries. Such tolls were an integral part of the economic basis of power. They were a major source of revenue, together with taxation, levies, judicial fees and fines, and death duties.

Toll collection was done using minimal coercion and collectors had little need to use arms to force travelers to pay. The toll system was controlled by the chiefs who held power through the labour of men employed to handle such tasks. The primary aim of collecting tolls was to have revenues. Public treasuries merged with the private purses of the chiefs: revenues were collected and spent to satisfy both private desires and public needs (e.g. road maintenance, payment of tributes if a community was under a metropolitan power, prosecution of war, etc.).

In the pre-colonial period, different people in Nigerian societies had many manufacturing industries where several products were produced for local use as well as export to Europe through North African traders. For example, leather works from Northern Nigeria and Mali were superior to any in the world by the fifteenth century. In the same way, Africa could boast of superb textile fabrics from the Congo, Buganda

and Asante and Yorubaland in present-day Nigeria. African copper in Katanga and Zambia was vastly developed and superior to European copper in the first century of the contact with the Europeans. Several African societies also formed the nucleus of the continent's own factory system and had crafts organised into guilds. As mentioned earlier, goods and services in Africa were exchanged through a network of well-organised trade routes and trading centres.



The introduction of remuneration for labour came with the coming of the British colonial policies in the twentieth century. This was because indigenous labour was very significant to the day-to-day functioning of colonial capitalism in Nigeria. The colonialist needed capable workforce in the construction of roads and railway system, ditto for other administrative activities. As colonial capitalism matured after the amalgamation of Nigeria, the government began to employ more Nigerians in the Public Works Department, agricultural plantations, mining among others. Consequently, the idea of salary was imported into the Nigerian economy. This was a precursor to the development of trade union activities which developed in the early 1930s. The colonial policy of segregation, discrimination and exploitation played a significant role in the formation of labour unions. Because colonial capitalism was founded on the motive of generating huge profit from Nigeria, the colonialists paid little attention to the welfare and earnings of the workers. The colonial authorities perceived every attempt by the Nigerian workers to run a union as a threat and they did everything to dismantle it. This fueled a lot of reaction from the workers. Be that as it may, wage labour introduced a new economic culture; of saving, budgeting for private spending and accumulation. This changed the preexisting communal system of production. Workers doing agricultural activities began to attach pecuniary conditions to any services performed at family and community level. The fact that the colonial government recruited many into the civil service made people to labour to be capitalized. The led to the rise of the *Nigerian new elite*.

In- text Questions

1. The pre-colonial labour system in many communities in Nigeria did not attract:
 - a. Penalties and charges.
 - b. Wages or remuneration.
 - c. Honorarium and gifts.
 - d. Training and professionalism.

2. In the pre-colonial period, people kept large families and maintained polygamous families in order to:

- a. Compete as the biggest family in their town.
- b. Prepare for war against their enemies.
- c. Promote brotherliness in kinship.
- d. Ensure adequate labour supply.

3. Slavery was also an importantboth for domestic and agricultural activities.

- a. means of labour recruitment.
- b.means of generating money.
- c.means of accumulating wealth.
- d.fighting wars and conquering neighbours.



4. In the Hausa states, the peoples most often relegated to the tending and harvesting of agricultural crops were:

- a. Women.
- b. Captives
- c. Boys.
- d. Men

In-text Answers

- 1. (a) wages or remuneration.
- 2. (d) to ensure adequate labour supply.
- 3. (a) means of labour recruitment.
- 4. (b) captives.

11.3 Pre-colonial Manpower Development and Productivity

From the above section, you have learned about the pattern of labour ethics and culture. The question that comes to mind is: how were people educated or trained for efficiency and productivity at work in the pre-colonial period?

In this part, you will learn about the pre-colonial pattern of preparing people for productive labour. As regards skill acquisition and educational system through which people became professionals in their respective fields, indigenous education was an important factor in the role people played in manpower development, in the agricultural, mining, poetry, hunting as well as other craft industries in the pre-colonial

period. Indigenous education systems in the various polities were efficient enough to prepare young men and women for their prospective roles and responsibilities at work and in the society. Vocational training was provided by the community members who possessed special skills or abilities in various fields.

In the pre-colonial period, skills for occupational development were acquired through professionals within the family and community. In most cases, boys were brought up to take to their father's occupation. In some other cases, they were sent to live with other men as apprentices to learn various vocations and life etiquette. For example, if one's father was a farmer, fisherman or blacksmith, there was every likelihood that the boy child in that family too would become a farmer, fisherman or blacksmith. Children learned the trade of their parents. Although occupations varied according to the geographical areas in West Africa, the major ones were farming, trading, craftwork, fishing, cattle rearing, wine tapping, traditional medicine and blacksmithing. Male children were trained in these occupations as they lived with their parents. The boys were also trained in other activities such as archery, tree climbing and wrestling.

Intellectual training for them consisted of their sitting quietly beside their fathers at meetings and listening attentively to learn the intricacies of such tasks and skills as arbitration of cases, oratory (public speaking), wise sayings and use of proverbs. All of these activities stimulated their sense of rationality. Girls were often expected to stay at home to acquire the skills of cooking, sweeping, weeding the farms, hair weaving, body decoration and cloth dyeing from their mothers. As in the case of the boys, the girls did almost exactly what their mothers trained them to do.

In spite of regional differences, traditional or indigenous education among people especially the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo equipped individuals to fit usefully into their society. Youths learnt and professionalized different skills for self-sustenance while contributing to kinship and the development of their societies. The traditional education offered by the community was comprehensive, as it provided training in physical, intellectual, social, vocational and character development. However, it had its limitations. For example, in the absence of writing, people depended on the power of their memory to retain and transmit all learned ideas to future generations. However, memory could fail, and when a custodian of some useful information or skill died, all was lost. There were, however, no cases of unemployment.

The household played a significant role in the production of goods and services. In Yorubaland for instance, a household consisted of a man, his wife (or wives), children and relatives such as the immediate and extended members of his lineage. The word *family* was weightier in pre-European African societies than it is in the Western or even in contemporary Yorubaland. This was because people lived communally, with

no trace of individualism. Although social stratification and class differentiation could have logically occurred at some point, the gap between the rich and the poor was not very wide. The people focused more on collective development of the family than on personal individual accumulation of wealth. For example, among the Yorubas, Igbo, Benin and Hausa people, it was obligatory for the rich to help the poor.

There was a deep sense of communalism and mutual trust within a reciprocal socio-economic system. The property of the wealthy member of the family was regarded as the common property of all. This communal system inevitably fostered inclusive development because very rarely did people accumulate wealth inordinately or try to raise their own standard of living at the expense of the larger community. This was perhaps because the surplus income or estate of the rich was usually expended in benevolence to his immediate and extended family members. The ultimate aim of the communal and kinship system was to empower each member of the family and to ensure that the less privileged, such as the old, the sick and the unemployed were not left to suffer. This system impacted strongly on the work ethics of the people.

This "unwritten social theory" arguably enhanced inclusive development and social orderliness in the town, especially as the mode of production was based on the doctrine of equality, mutual cooperation and combined development. Because economic activities were conducted essentially with the aim of widening social relationship and cohesion rather than economic value, people were not motivated to work on the basis of their remuneration. Nevertheless, there were a good number of organised markets, institutionalized but "non capitalized" means of selling land, hiring labour and raising money.

In-text Questions

1. In the pre-colonial period, skills for occupational development were acquired through:
 - a. European universities and colleges.
 - b. The Universities of Lagos and Ibadan.
 - c. Professionals within the family and community.
 - d. Spirits and goddesses of knowledge.

2. In spite of regional differences, traditional education among people especially the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo equipped individuals to:
 - a. fit usefully into their society workspace.

- b. argue about their political leaders.
- c. compete among themselves.
- d. defeat the Europeans when they came to Nigeria.

In-text Answers

1. (c) professionals within the family and community.
2. (a) fit usefully into their society workspace.



11.4 Summary of Study Session 11

In this session you have learned that the pre-colonial Nigerian society was based on a communal economic system. Economic activities were carried out with the intention of widening social relationship, rather than making money. The pre-colonial labour system in many communities in Nigeria did not attract wages or remuneration. The communal and family units were a major means of labour supply in virtually every facet of productive exercise. The other means of labour recruitment was slavery, and the slave trade which also served as an important means of labour recruitment both for domestic and agricultural activities. The introduction of remuneration for labour came with the coming of the British colonial policies in the twentieth century. This was because indigenous labour was very significant to the day-to-day functioning of colonial capitalism in Nigeria. Skills for occupational development were acquired through professionals within the family and community. In most cases, boys were brought up to take to their fathers' occupation. In some other cases, they were sent to live with other men as apprentices to learn various vocations and life etiquette.



ACTIVITY

Now that you have completed this study session, you should assess how much you have learned by attempting the following questions. You can write your answers in a note book so as to be able to discuss extensively on it with your tutor at the next interactive session.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs)

1. How were people trained for productive labour in the pre-colonial period?
2. Explain the features of pre-colonial labour culture in Nigeria.
3. Highlight the development of wage labour in Nigeria.

11.10 References/ Suggestions for Further Reading

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