CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF THE YORÙBÁ



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Tóyìn Fálọlá

and

Akíntúndé Akínyẹmí

PAN-AFRICAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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ISBN: 978-1-943533-18-3
LCCN: 2017941788

PAN-AFRICAN UNIVERSITY PRESS
Box 618
8650 Spicewood Springs # 145
Austin, TX 78759
Telephone (512) 689 6067

Africa
P. O. Box 14458
University of Ìbàdàn
Ìbàdàn, Nigeria
234 (0808) 6392371
www.panafricanuniversitypress.com

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

To four outstanding scholars who have contributed to
the understanding of Yoruba culture:
Wande Abimbola
Adeagbo Akinjogbin
Makanjuola Ilesanmi
Oludare Olajubu



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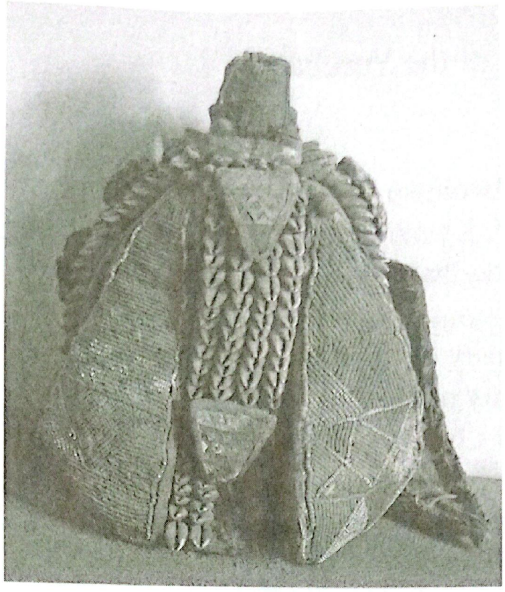
A work of this magnitude could not have been successfully completed without the assistance of many other people. We would like to thank those colleagues who aided us and those friends who guided us while the project lasted. We are grateful to Dr. Adéshínà Afọ́láyan who served as the link between us, the editors, and many of the contributors based in Nigeria; Professor Ọláwọ́lé Fámúlẹ̀ and Dr. Stephen Fọ́láràmí who supplied many of the images in the book; Dr. Kazeem Oyetunde Ẹ̀kẹ́olú who provided illustrations in some of the chapters; and Dr. Stephen Fọ́láràmí and Emmanuel Oyèwọ́lé Oyèníyì who designed the book cover.

We would also like to thank our contributors for their patience in the course of editing the volume, and for putting up with our numerous requests regarding editorial matters. It has been two years since the first request for contributions was sent out. Between then and now the contributors have done so much difficult and taxing work, often at inconvenient times in their own schedules. The contributors, drawn from three continents – Africa, Europe, and North America – have all made this project a huge success.

The book publisher, Pan-African University Press, deserves our gratitude for the interest in the project. Specifically, we would like to thank production staff and others at the publisher's headquaters, especially Dawid Kahts our typesetter and indexer, Tim Colton, the production manager, and others who worked behind the scenes and invisible to us as editors. We are also grateful to Bryan Cooper Owens and Jessica Shenette for copy-editing the original manuscript submitted by contributors.

Last but not the least, we would like to thank our employers, the University of Texas at Austin and University of Florida in Gainesville for approving this book project as part of our research assignment.

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Chapter 37

Economy, Commerce, and Wealth

Saudat Adébísí Ọláyídé Hamzat

Introduction

When we study society, we are studying human interrelationship; the successes and challenges. Economists measure the living standard and growth development rate over time in material terms. Culturists analyze the charter of life, i.e., the socio-cultural institutions that are used to guide people's emotion into socially sanctioned forms (be it in the social private life or in the public political domains). They argue that the use we put this non-material culture into dictates what we get in material terms. Yet, the material gain is put over and above the non-material culture. This chapter discusses economy, commerce and wealth generation in traditional and contemporary Yorùbá society using data and information from historical sources, oral traditions, interviews, observations and library research. The objectives of the chapter are to: (i) define and identify the interconnectedness of economy, wealth and commerce within the context of Yorùbá culture; ii) highlight the different forms of economic systems in Yorùbá land during the pre and post-colonial period; iii) evaluate their economic growth; and iv) identify potential for future development.

Culture is described as a manner of thought and ways of doing things. Culture influences the actions and reactions of people. According to Ilésanmí's (2004, p.33) theory of culture, the Yorùbá ideological thought or outlook about life, kinship or

family ties determines their wisdom about economic activities, it determines their manner of generating wealth. Their wisdom about money and power affect their trade (Ilésanmí 2004, pp. 55–56). Thus, this chapter analyzes economy and growth with the sociocultural and economic milieu of the Yorùba.

Definition of Terms: Economy, Commerce and Wealth

Economy is the art and science of wealth creation, the act of job creation, and the act of rendering services, for the welfare of all members of the society. An economy is a system for the organization and coordination of economics. Commerce is an essential part of the economy and it is concerned with trade and aids to trade. By trade, we mean the act of buying and selling goods and services. At varying degrees, the agents of every economy engage in commerce with a view to generating wealth. The central theme that links economy and wealth is commerce. Economists often classify economic systems into traditional, command, free-market and mixed economic systems. A traditional economy is tradition-driven, as customs, culture and tradition determine the system of production. In a command or planned economy, the means of production are owned and controlled by a central authority which is often the federal government. A free market or capitalist economy allows individuals to own and use productive resources to maximize their welfare while barring undue government interference in the workings of the market. A mixed economy is a combination of all three.

Economic growth is the concern of any society, and this is mostly expressed in terms of increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP); a measure of the economy's total output of goods and services. The process of economic growth is determined by two types of factors, economic and non-economic. Economic factors include natural resources such as land, human resources, capital, enterprise, technology etc. The non-economic factors include social institutions, political conditions, and moral values.

The Economic Factors

Land and all resources in and on it are the physical natural economic resources. Land as used in economics includes natural resources such as the fertility of land, its situation and composition, forest wealth and farm products. Climate, water resources, sea resources, solid minerals (like metals and gold), crude oil, and gas are all gifts of nature that grow the economy of a nation. The principal factor affecting the development of a country is the natural resources or land. Yorùbá land is not deficient in natural resources. The factor that has contributed to give the economic organization of the Yorùbá in its present form is that land was freely available to all in the pre-colonial days. The community as a whole exercised complete control over the land in its territory and allocated the land specifically to members of the community. The community also allocated land to others who settle in it once they accept the jurisdiction of the recognized authority. The land within the geographical boundary of any ethnic group was usually divided into distinct categories, namely: unused land,

market places, and sacred groves. Unused land belonging to extended families was shared among members of paternal homes, and where land was not enough or not available, people hired land on land-tenure-system. Tributes (*iṣákọ́lẹ̀/ owó-onílẹ̀*) were paid annually to land-owners, either for land renewal or for extended use. The market places were collective property of individual local groups.

The unused land was regarded as the collective property of the group as a whole. Every adult member of the community had access to land. On marriage, a young man has a portion of land allocated to him by his father. The land thus becomes his asset in perpetuity as long as it is put into beneficial occupation as defined by the community. Most land is held corporately by descent groups and allocated to members according to need, either as farmland or for housing.

Production is an economic activity. The Yorùbá engaged in different productive activities from where they generated money for their sustenance. Farming was the common occupation to every household. Subsistence farming was practiced by everyone in the community. Each head of the family had the assistance of his dependent relatives in tilling the field, planting crops and reaping. Vegetable farms and household food crops may be situated close to the house (*oko etílé*), cash crop farms are located at greater distance (*oko ẹgàn*), usually in the village where the farmer spends most of his time. The Yorùbá farmer normally resided in the village home, and only came to the town occasionally during ceremonies and festivals.

Farm crops were many, varied, and localized. For instance, yam and coco-yam were common in Ìjèṣà, Èkìtì, Ìgbómìnà, Ìlọrin, and Àkókó; rice and cassava were prominent among Ẹ̀gbá and Ọ̀yọ́ farmers. Cassava planting was popular in Ìbàdàn, Ifẹ̀, and Ijẹbu. Vegetables of different types (*ẹ̀fọ́ tètè, gbúre, ìsápá, ebòlò, ilá* (okra) and *ewédú*) were grown on farms with other crops. The Yorùbá in the rain-forest region of Ìjèṣà, Ifẹ̀, Èkìtì, Ìjẹ̀bú, and Ìbàdàn grow kola-nut (*obi*-àbàtà) while those in the savannah geographical belt grow tobacco (*tábà*).

The cocoa business became a part of the Yorùbá economy by the 1850s, and dictated the pace of the Yorùbá economy for several decades to come. Cocoa was brought by Europeans from Brazil to West Africa. However, cocoa farming and trade received a boost when Yorùbá-Saro from Freetown, Sierra-Leone participated actively in the business. Cocoa planting began in Agége, later in Ìjèṣà and Èkìtì. The planting and business spread to other parts of Yorùbáland before the end of the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century cocoa had become a major source of revenue to both the regional and federal governments.

Agriculture continues to occupy center stage in the affairs of the people, it produced the cotton seed, they harvest and yarned the cotton into thread (the basic textile material) that cloth weavers used to produce variants of (*aṣọ òkè*). Traditional weaving still abounds all over Yorùbá land, especially in Ìsẹ́yìn, Ọ̀yọ́, Ìbàdàn and Ìlọrin. Weaving is done with different types of looms (*apásá*); women weave on vertical mat loom producing about 3 meters and 9 meters; while some men weave on horizontal narrow band-treble loom. Another group of women weave on two up-right poles connected by different rods. Weavers display dexterity in moving yarn between looms by creating different patterns through interlace. In the modern period tenant farming,

sharecropping, and leasing were introduced by the British. The land-tenure system was changed in 1978 when the Nigerian Government took control of all unoccupied or unused land and rights to allocate it.

Archeological evidence indicates that the Yorùbá are economically, technologically and artistically advanced. Evidence of iron deposits were found in Uffe Ijumu in North East Yorùbáland, Central Nigeria, and also at historical sites of old Ijàyè town near Mọ́níyà (Ìbàdàn) in South Western Nigeria. Òbó Ayégúnlẹ̀, North East Yorùbáland (Àrẹ̀mú 2005: 134). Although gold and bronze deposits were found in Ile-Ifẹ̀, there was no direct evidence of local exploitation of these metals for ornament or for other uses before the colonial period. The findings of archeological research revealed a transition from a stone using technology to iron smelting and iron smiting in some locations at Uffe Ijumu in North East Yorùbá land, Central Nigeria, and also at historical sites of old Ijàyè town near Mọ́níyà (Ìbàdàn) in South Western Nigeria. Òbó Ayégúnlẹ̀, North East Yorùbáland (Àrẹ̀mú 2005: 134).

The Yorùbá invented metal tools at an early stage. They produced implements such as hoes and cutlasses which helped in the planting and harvesting of farm produce, and guns for local hunters. The blacksmith also engage in the production of the weapons of war in pre-colonial times. This bestowed a high social status on them. The blacksmiths were in many cases political aides and war leaders possessing divine power as the profession is linked with Ògún (the god of iron). The Yorùbá attached economic importance to the profession as they were seen as the nerve center of economic activities because they produced or manufactured some of the tools that other professions like farming, hunting, wood carving, fishing and cloth weaving needed. The profession is common to ancestral lineage, the ancestral home of such families are still identified as 'blacksmith compound' (*ilé alágbèdẹ*) in all towns and villages. Some areas are named *Àgbèdẹ adodo*. The praise-poetry of the guild of blacksmith shows the profession was an envy of others '*Ǹ bá tètè wáyé alágbèdẹ ni ǹ bá jẹ́*' (had I come to the world/been born earlier, I would have chosen the blacksmith profession). Skilled copper, brass and bronze workers are often associated with the monarchs and the elites that patronized their products. The pre- colonial metal work were usually called 'court art' because they produce royal objects for the king on the assumption of office in Ile-Ifẹ̀. According to Fádípẹ̀ (1970, p. 154) cheap imported metal made its continuance a needless waste of energy at the onset of colonialism. Closely related to the blacksmiths are the bead makers, who string beads of different sizes and colors together by thread, separate them into five or ten by bigger beads. Beads are made with pearls, (*iyùn/baba ìlẹ̀kẹ̀, ṣẹ̀gi/ìyá ìlẹ̀kẹ̀*, and *ọ̀pọ̀kún/ìyálóde*) are worn by royalty (kings and their household members, title holders, Ifa priests) and women during festivals and ceremonies.

Also common at that time was wood/calabash carving (*agbẹ́gilére*). Artisans in this group change woods or calabash into artifacts (*iṣẹ́-ọnà*). Gourds are designed vertically or horizontally. A blade is used to make the design by cutting the cuticles. Designs come in pictures, drawings and even paintings. The size of the gourd will determine the design. Works under this trade include wooden trays, royal chairs footstools, tables, furniture, carved doors/windows in palaces, and shrines. Calabash carvers transform

gourds of various sizes into priceless/valuable items, such as drinking and eating plates for royalty, medicine case holders (*àdó*), and decorative items in palaces and temples.

Sculpture was also popular among the Yorùbá. It is a three dimensional work of art which includes carving, modelling and casting. Carving is to form image representation from solid material like wood to make something with precision. Modelling is to form an object after a specific pattern and shape. With computer, a sculptor can create an image, which can be made real. Casting, the third leg in sculpture, begins with making a mold after which a sculptor gives a shape or a form of artistic personality, to the sculpture by covering it with liquid, plastic, concrete, or any other hard substance. The cast is left for some time to dry, until more work will be done to finish the sculpture.

Women usually did pottery; the major raw material is clay soil (*amọ̀*). The soil is dug and mixed with water, then a potter begins to make a mold by increments, finally, a pot is made. Pots of different sizes are made from clay, they are dried in sun for days, then baked in a furnace to withstand future use. These production processes are time-consuming jobs, and they require patience.

Technological changes are regarded as the most important factor in the process of economic growth. They are related to changes in the method of production which are the result of some new technique of research or innovation. Changes in technology lead to increases in the productivity of labor, capital, and other factors of production. All the above crafts need professional and technological advancement.

Labor is man's effort and physical, and it is an essential factor of production. It is no doubt a major source of wealth creation. In the pre-colonial days, slaves and pawns represented the only regular source of commercial labor. The labor of free-born men was freely available when needed on the basis of reciprocity. A man in the pre-colonial days relied significantly on his own labor and the support from his wife or wives, unmarried sons and daughters and on the labor of slaves (*ẹrú*) and pawns (*ìwọ̀fà*). But occasionally, the man received collective help of productive nature from others in the form of *àáró* and *ọ̀wẹ̀*. *Àáró* is a form of standing association for mutual help. A member of this association is entitled to the assistance of other members of the association in clearing the land of weeds preparatory to planting, or planting seeds. In this case, the host feeds his associates and also reciprocates in kind. In the *ọ̀wẹ̀* system, the help is specially commissioned by the party desiring it. It is used for the building of a house or the rebuilding or re-roofing of one, and the clearing of land, bush, or forest growth.

Division of labor improves scale of production and economic growth. This has always been practiced in Yorùbáland. Women and age groups have their special area in the production of goods and services. This resulted in increase in productivity. They lead to economies of large-scale production which further help in industrial development.

Capital is a manmade aid to production and management. It means the stock of physically reproducible factors of production, and it may be money or physical, i.e. any equipment like machines and vehicles used in production. In the pre-colonial days, the Yorùbá traded-by-barter, then the cowry was used as money. Capital was easily available for the majority of the population. The farmer makes his son independent

upon marriage by providing him with necessary farm implements: a hoe, cutlass and basket. The husband also provides his wife with capital sometimes in the form of raw-products saleable for cash. The sentiments of kinship and social solidarity as well as other non-mercenary motives are operative in the supply of capital to one starting from scratch.

Raising capital on large scale involves loans from friends and moneylenders. Before the colonial rule, there were three notable means of capital investment. Capital could be invested in goats, sheep and poultry; or in slaves; or in *ìwọ̀fa*. *Ìwọ̀fà* is a labor based service provided by a debtor to offset, or to pay off interest on a loan. *Ìwọ̀fà* can be a man, a woman, a girl, and a boy. It is described as a system in which one that borrows money, serves the person periodically in lieu of interest on money or loan. They also come together in groups to contribute money which they lend each other. Such contributions may be in the form of *àjọ* or *èsúsú*.

The introduction of legal tender at the middle of 19th century changed the Yorùbá economy for good. Lagos (Èkó) became a crown colony in 1860. In 1884, the Royal Niger Company Charter became operational in Lagos Colony and the Southern Protectorate. In order to facilitate easy commercial transactions paper currency and coins were introduced to replace the cowries previously used in trade-by-barter by Yorùbá and others.

In the modern period, capital formation or capital accumulation is the main key to economic growth. This is an increase in capital stock with the passage of time. On the one hand it reflects effective demand and, on the other hand, it creates productive efficiency for future production. It includes three interrelated stages: first is the existence of real savings and a rise in them, second is the existence of credit and financial institution to mobilize savings and to divert them to desired channels, and third is the use of these savings for investment in capital goods. Today, there exist credit facilities in all banking and financial sectors. Collaterals are used for loans in microfinance, commercial or banks of commerce and industry. There are also banks that partner with businessmen and corporate bodies today, in which case they share profit and loss together.

Tributes accrue to the traditional kings, chiefs, and war leaders from different sources like tolls collected from caravan traders, the markets and fines levied on culprits who are found guilty of various crimes. According to Fádípẹ̀ (1970: 14), as soon as the British indirect rule ensued in Yorùbáland, the tribute system changed to a taxation system. The salaries of the traditional rulers were paid from this source instead of according the traditional leaders the privilege of collecting tributes.

Distribution of goods produced or marketing occupies a central position in the traditional Yorùbá economy. Ògúndìran (2005), in his review of Fálọlá's (1995, 2004), reveals that the traditional economy in Yorùbáland was specialized and market-oriented. They developed sophisticated market and credit facilities with dynamic monetization and profit oriented production ventures. There are local and central markets. The local markets are for daily transactions between townspeople while the central markets are meeting grounds for people of different towns and villages. Many local markets are held during the hours of daylight while others have their peak period

after sunset. On the other hand, the central markets are held at intervals of four or eight days and last for the greater part of the day. An extensive system of marketing and long-distance trade is a hallmark of Yorùbá history. Both men and women conducted long-distance commerce. Women organized local trade networks and markets. As a consequence, women were given official roles in public affairs. Markets still meet daily, at night, and in periodic cycles of four, eighth or ninth days. Kings "*ọlọ́jà*" chiefs (*pàràkòyí,/ ìyálọ́jà,/ ìyálájé* oversee markets, guide sellers, and see to the smooth and peaceful coexistence of a diversity of people in the market. In modern terms, local, national and international markets are in operation. Government plays a regulatory role by influencing the operation of the market through its policies on stock market and currency exchange rate today.

Organization is an important factor of production in economic activities. It is a complement to capital and labor and helps in increasing productivity. In modern economic growth, the entrepreneur has been performing the task of an organizer and undertaking risks and uncertainties. He needs knowledge to function or produce, so theory is not enough, skills are important. An entrepreneur is indispensable in economic development because he is not a man of ordinary ability, he is an economic leader who possesses the ability to recognize opportunities for successful introduction of new commodities, new techniques and new sources of supply. He assembles the necessary materials and equipment, management and labor force and organize them into a running economy.

Non-Economic Factors

Apart from economic factors, non-economic factors also influence economic growth. All aspects of the social behavior of stakeholders involved in economic activities matter in the establishment of law and order. Scrupulousness in business dealings, including dealings with the revenue authorities, leaders, manufactures, and consumers is necessary. The Yorùbá philosophy about life and death is very apt to keep all stakeholders including political leaders, organizers/administrators, entrepreneurs, marketers, laborers, and consumers in check. To the Yorùbá, the world is a market place, we are sojourners in it, as everybody goes home after a day sale so shall all die / go home (eternal place of rest from the hustle and bustle of this world/market (*ayé lọ̀jà, ọ̀run nilé; àjò kò lè dùn kónílé má relé; ilé ayé ilé irọ̀*). Adopting these philosophies will improve our political and economic conditions. The Yorùbá moral values about truthfulness, equity, justice, and probity as expressed in their oral traditions may go a long way to move any nation forward. However, Western education/culture, literacy, and familiarity with technological and mechanical gadgets have led to reasoning and skepticism which brought about changes in social attitudes, expectations and values in Yorùbáland. This led to the death of cultural values in traditional Yorùbá society. Corruption, fraud, greed and many more that are alien to Yorùbá cultures thrive. Human factors or human beings make up the political life wire affecting directly or indirectly what should or should not be operative. The population growth of a society boosts their economy but economic growth does not depend on the mere size of human resources but on their efficiency. The increase in knowledge, skill and capacities of

all people of the country is referred to as human capital development. A proper use of human resources can be made for economic development in the following ways: first, they should have control over population, human resources can be best utilized if the size of population is controlled and reduced; second, there should be change in the outlook of the labor force.

Conclusions and Suggestion

This chapter has analyzed the confluence between economy, commerce, and wealth within the context of Yorùbá culture. It discussed the various economic resources and activities as they affect growth in the traditional and modern period in Yorùbá society. It suggested the transition from a low productivity agrarian based economy to a more technologically intensive agricultural and manufacturing economy as possible solutions to the economic down-turn in the Nigeria society. It shows that the most important requirement of rapid industrial growth is people. Their social behavior is important in the process of economic development. Thus, this paper recommends the building of human character along the lines of Yorùbá philosophy. It also recommends that local governments must be seen as economic centers rather than political centers. In the face of the downturn in crude oil production, mechanized farming, modern fishing farming, iron smelting, and the ceramic industry should be promoted in the areas where natural resources for the production of these materials are available. Local government can fund the education of their youths to further improve the technological production of textiles, beauty and health products. Areas versed in textile manufacturing like Ọ̀yọ́, Ìsẹ́yìn, and Ìlọrin should be assisted with latest technology and loans. By so doing, they would be building a nation of job creators rather than job seekers.

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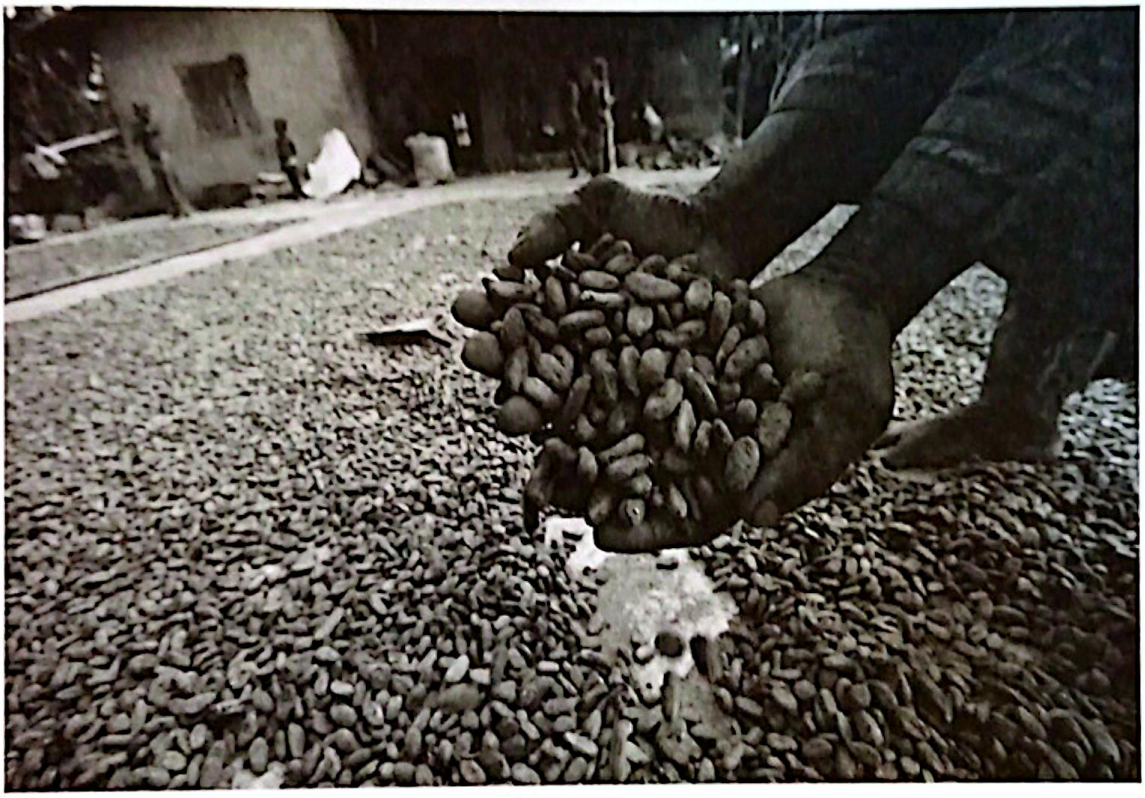
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