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URHOBO TRADITIONAL ECONOMIC STRUCTURE BEFORE THE ADVENT OF COLONIALISM, 1800-1900

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Abstract

The paper examines the structural outlines of the traditional economy of the Urhobo in the nineteenth century prior to the advent of British colonial rule at about 1900. The study highlights elements of the geographic environment like climate, vegetation and soil in stimulating a meta-economy that promoted various economic activities like agriculture, industrial and handicraft manufacture, fishing, alcohol production, weaving, trade and related activities in which many segments of the population were engaged. Apart from the influence of the physical environment on the pre-colonial economy, the essay also examines cultural and historical experiences of the Urhobo as factors which helped shape their proclivity towards the "independence" or self-reliance associated with the traditional occupational pursuits. Specialisation and environmental conditions further facilitated the growth of the cash or market economy in which various products of agriculture and wares of industry were exchanged. The paper submits that the structural interdependence among the various economic units, and between the economy and society's social and cultural institutions were salient factors which promoted sustenance, tenacity and resilience of the traditional economy of the Urhobo.

Keywords: environmental influence, traditional economy, existential challenges, occupational activities, market economy.

Introduction

The environment impacts every human society as it provides the resources for the survival of humans and it also influences, to varying degrees, the growth and development of society's political, religious, social and cultural institutions. The traditional pre-colonial economy of the Urhobo was intertwined not only with the environment from which it derived its motivation but also there was interdependence among economic units; hence knowledge of the environment provides an essential background to the study of their economy.

Although Ekeh (2005:1-5) has adequately discussed the environmental context of Urhobo culture, it remains to emphasise its economic context and, perhaps, some peculiar features of the traditional economy. First, beyond the nexus between the economy and society's institutions, linkages and interdependence among economic units were the norm rather than the exception. Second, the economy was self-sustaining, tenacious and resilient. Its sustainability derived from being a meta-economy, while its tenacity and resilience derived from its cultural under-pinning. Thus, many age-long economic activities still persist - although to varying degrees with some modifications as heirlooms, for example, traditional kernels oil (*ori-ibi*), production, distillation of palm wine into a potent alcohol (*agbakara*), and weaving of palm and straw mats.These activities are still relevant to the cultural practice of clitoridectomy *(opha*) ritual and ceremony of young maidens among the Ughievwen and the Udu as they were of old.

The environment with its biodiversity was not only the provenance of pharmacognosy, it also mediated the economy by imposing limitations and setting the basic parameters for growth, specialization and even innovation. There were innovations,although not profound, as the society was not entirely unchanging. But the traditional African economy portrayed in Western literature as static, unchanging and unresponsive to market principles is epochal rather than enduring.As the evidences suggest,this *Eurocentric* construct seemed to correspond to the period when production and goods primarily existed in their original 'socialized' form, that is, as items of social gift exchange used to mark social and ceremonial occasions rather than one of market exchange. Production and the economy gradually moved from one of subsistence or socialized form to profit seeking or market economy. This transition occurred much earlier probably dating from the Atlantic trade period in the late 15th century with the use of 'trade' or 'commodity' currencies- the so-called transitional currencies which included cowries, salt, copper wires, gin, "manilla" and to its modern form-paper and minted currencies.

The sustenance economy of traditional Africa espoused in Western historiography is devoid of exchange and specialization-two concepts that underline a market economy. Market places not only existed in the traditional Urhobo economy, they, in fact, facilitated a process where exchange of goods and services responded to the imperatives of supply and demand. The village market which predated the arrival of the Europeans would seem to indicate a fluid and thriving economy in which various wares of industry and agricultural products were exchanged domestically and between the Urhobo and some proximate groups to the south, east and west.

The traditional economy of the Urhobo was not an elitist one as it permitted mass participation.However,cultural and gender stereotypes have subsisted over time with regard to the inebriated and lazy male whereby the women dominate the agricultural labour force. But,as this essay will reveal, contrary to popular misconception, female dominance of the rural labour force is explained by cultural reasons and the physical demands of certain economic activity requiring gender specialty. Thus, a "division of labour" dating to antiquity in economic activity evolved over time. In addition to this gender-biased role in the traditional economy, one important economic enterprise – the distillation of gin which guaranteed independent action in its production and marketing – also seemed to satisfy in part the inclination of the Urhobo toward independence in entrepreneurial pursuit.

Extant evidences such as linguistic, ethnographic, oral and archaeological on the origin and migration of the Urhobo people point to three directions of dispersal from outside of their present territory in the western part of the Niger Delta. As Erivwo (1974:43) and Ekeh (2005:28) note, while some sub-groups like Avwraka (Abraka), Okpe, Olomu, Agbon and others point to Edo (Benin) territory as their original point of dispersal, others like Eghwu, Uwherun, Ughievwen, and the Owhowha group of clans – Agbarha, Ughelli, Ogor, Orogun which traditions claim to have arrived from Ogoibiri (Ijo) area seemed, like other Urhobo groups, to have settled into a physically challenging environment. Attempts by individuals and groups to assert themselves and impose their will over others and the imperative to survive apparently led to existential problems as the historiography of migration and settlement indicates. Thus, the most common theme in the narratives is one of struggle to gain and hold land, disagreements, disputes and inter-group conflicts which frequently led to a group provoking its own expulsion to found a new settlement in search of peace and greater farming and entrepreneurial opportunities (Bradbury, 1957:130-131; Ikime, 1965:17;1969:15).

Hard but apparently useful lessons learned from such conflicts and implosions might well have been an abhorrence of tyranny and dictatorship, love for freedom and independence

and a proclivity towards individualism. Thus, the trajectories of conflicted social relations overtime drove home one important cultural marker of the Urhobo: their independent disposition in character and thought from earliest times. Ultimately, as in other aspects of cultural life, their historical experiences which markedly underlined their "clannishness" helped shape the republican and diffused character of their social and political institutions with marked implications for kingship institution in contemporary Urhoboland (Forae, 2018: 592-605).

The paper sets out to examine the structural outlines of the traditional economy of the Urhobo with a view to highlighting salient factors which underpinned it. These factors include interdependence among the various economic units and their nexus with socio-cultural practices, hence its resilience, tenacity and sustainability prior to the advent of colonialism.

The paper is organised into five parts. The first examines the geographic environment. Agriculture and related activities are the focus of the second part. The third looks at traditional industries and handicrafts manufacture while trade is the focus of the fourth part.Some special traits of the Urhobo in economic life are outlined in the fifth and concluding part.

The Geographic Environment of Urhoboland

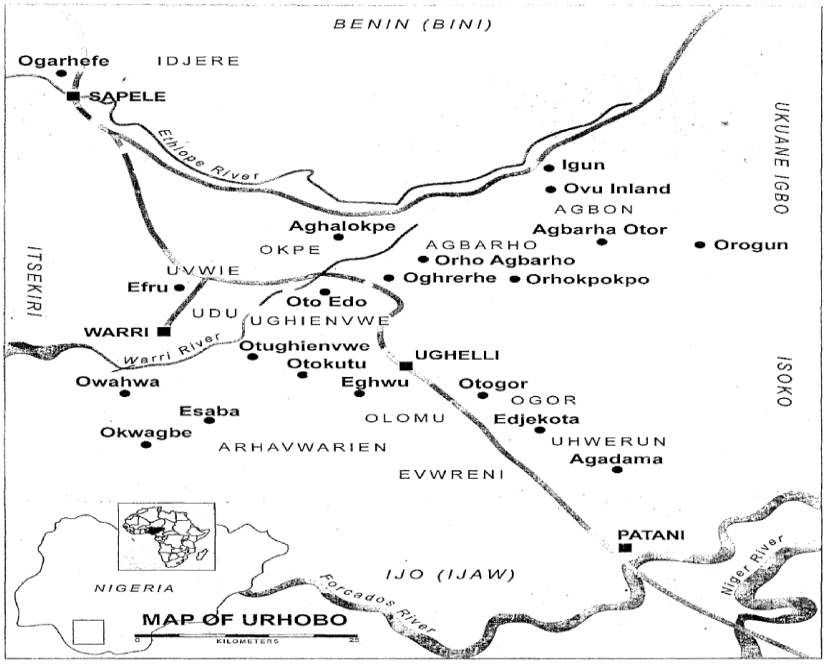
The Niger Delta environment has been described as difficult and akin to a refuge for the ancestors of the Urhobo. Environmental conditions derived from the pestiferous nature of the surroundings and a capricious climate, where survival occupied the thoughts and deeds of the progenitors of the Urhobo who, apparently were consoled by the refuge the area offered following threats to lives and property in their original abode (Cornevin, 1956). Environmental factors including the physical barriers encountered and the gutsy attempt to domesticate the environment brought about existential challenges which were key factors in shaping their economy and, more importantly, their independent orientation.

Location and neighbours

Urhoboland falls within north of the equatorial latitudes at $6^{0}5^{1}$ and longitude $5^{0}40^{1}$ and $6^{0}25^{1}$east of the Greenwich Meridian. Its spatial territory constitutes a part of the landward extension of the Niger Delta plain and it is encased in the hinterlands of the rainforest of the western part of the Delta. Some fundamental environmental, economic and cultural implications of their location are worth mentioning here. The first is heavy precipitation with strong influence on biodiversity and a meta economy. Secondis the

tenacious attachment to its culture due to the relatively late arrival of Western European influences which only began to make incursion into Urhobo land in the late nineteenth century. The Urhobo people are located next to the Itsekiri who occupy the area lying northwest to the Atlantic Ocean. Urhobo territory is crisscrossed by several rivers, including the Okpare Creek, Warri River, Ethiope River, and Jamieson River .The Forcados River delineates the Urhobo from their southern neighbours – the coastal Ijo. East of the Urhobo live their most closely related neighbours, the Isoko, and farther to the east are the Ukwani. The Benin and Esan people occupy the area lying north of Urhobo land (see map).

Map of Urhoboland and neighbouring people



Source: Foss, P. P. (Ed.) 2004. *Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art.* Ghent: SNOECK Publishers, p. 20.

Climate and vegetation

Urhoboland is characterised by heavy rainfall as should be expected in equatorial conditions.Rainfall varying annually from 2500mm in areas of higher elevations (mainland) to 3500mm in the low-lying (southerly) areas in the months of June to

October when life-giving rains with violent storms turn destructive in their flood waters. Temperature also varies between 28^0C in the low-land to 35^0C in the mainland respectively in the months of November to May. However, a brief intervening period in the month of August characterised by a cessation of rainfall is experienced. These climatic features have assisted the development of large rivers. Such rivers include Ethiope, Warri and Forcados with numerous creeks which transverse Urhoboland.

Three types of natural vegetation which are not mutually exclusive can be identified: equatorial rainforest, fresh water swamp forest and patches of savanna grassland. According to Aweto and Igben (2003:13-14), low-land rain forests exist in areas of relatively higher elevations such as Ethiope (east and west), Okpe, Sapele, Uwherun, Evwreni as well as some other low-lying areas like Udu, Ughievwen and Ughelli. The forests yield both hard and softwood in addition to fruit trees. Hardwood species include the oil bean tree, *Pentaclethramacrophylla* locally called (*okpagha*), the silk cotton tree, *Ceibapentandra* locally referred to as (*ohahe*), Iroko tree, *Milicia* (*chlorophora*) *exelsa* (*unoho*), and camwood *Pterecarpussoyaxisp* locally called *Isele* among other trees. The last mentioned tree is useful for producing a red dye that is mixed with kernel oil to produce a glossy paste. The paste is daubed on the skin of a circumcised maiden during the traditional circumcision ceremony to symbolize the radiance of the water goddess. Fruit trees include *Irvingiagabonensis* (*ogbono*) native to the environment, while the oil palm tree, *Elaisguineensis* and the local bamboo, *Oxytenanthera Abyssinia Munro* referred to as *akpa* grow abundantly in the environment. The fresh water forests are quite extensive and situated farther inland from ocean water. Extensive areas of the swamps occur in the low-lands and to a limited extent in parts of Mosogar, Sapele and the lower sections of the Jamieson River. However, two dominant elements of the flora of the swamp beltare the ubiquitous raffia palms and a semi-aquatic plant, *Cyperusarticulatus* locally referred to as *imirhe-ere.* Two native species of raffia-*Raphia hookeri* (*ogoro*) and *Raphia vinifera* (*ekian* or *ibodje*) are recognised and widely utilised by the natives (Otedoh 1978:2-9). Grassland vegetation referred to as *ato* occurs as discontinuous patches in areas like Aghalokpe, Okpara, Idjerhe, Igun, Urhodo and other areas.

Soil and relief

The soils of Urhoboland are generally classified by geographers into two: hydromorphic and alluvial. While the hydromorphic soils of the swamp belt are generally clayey, acidic and rich in phosphorus (which support growth of the palms), those outside the swamp belt consist of well drained sandy loam over coarse sandy sub-soil which support root and tree crops.Urhoboland is drained by a network of streams and the earlier mentioned

rivers. The large rivers are flat-floored, flooding adjoining areas during the wet season, thereby giving rise to both seasonal and perennial swamps.

From the foregoing narrative, the environment viewed from physical and cultural perspectives, had implications for the economic pursuit of the Urhobo as will be discussed next. For instance, while palm wine tapping, gin distillation, weaving, pottery and fishing were the principal activities of the swamp dwellers; farming, wood carving, palm oil and kernels production; kernel oil and local soap manufacture; hunting and others occupied the attention of the inhabitants of the mainland.

Agriculture and Related Activities

Agriculture was the pivot around which the economy revolved and land was of vital importance culturally and economically. Land,whether family- or community-owned was not sold. However, land commanded price in colonial Urhoboland as it assumed more economic value due to the "export mentality" of the period. For those who could not access the family-owned land, including stranger elements, communal lands were accessible by fulfilling some requirements such as presenting kolanuts and some bottles of the local gin to elders of a community who would in turn grant land to whoever needed it.

Food and cash crops production

The availability and abundance of land in precolonial Urhobolandobviously indicated a thriving system of rotational fallow cultivation particularly when population pressure and the oversea trade of the colonial period had not taken hold. But this somewhat 'itinerant' system of farming compelled the males to do the tedious task of clearing and burning the vegetation. In addition, the extended family and other male adults provided labour when necessary for bush clearing. As prescribed by customary statutes, age grades like the *Otu-imitete* (children) also assisted the labour corps (*Otu-evwrawa*) in the tedious task of clearing and burning the bush. Land was cleared at the end of the dry season and the cut and slash of fallow vegetation was allowed to dry before being burnt to release ash to fertilize the soil prior to planting by the women and children at the beginning of the wet season. Annual crops like cassava, yams, cocoyam were inter-cropped alongside quick maturing crops like melon, okra, maize, peppers on predominantly small holdings – usually 0.1 – 0.2 hectare land and were harvested before the annual crops.

Agricultural output was generally in excess of demand of the household. In fact, as earlier mentioned,markets developed in response to surplus and a fairly diversified (specialised)

economy as goods and exchange gradually moved from their socialised form to 'business-for-profit'. While farming was popular and carried out full time, fishing, hunting and animal husbandry were undertaken as part-time activities, as they complemented crop farming and therefore were not large-scale activities.

Fishing

Fishing was carried out in the fresh and brackish waters and occasionally in large rivers. The catch by the fishermen included tilapia and a species of catfish, *Clariasspp* (*orhueren*)which is native to the brackish waters; electric fish, *Electrophorous electricus* (*orhirhi*), and two species of eels – *Ophichthidae* commonly called the snake eel (*ugberhen*) and the swamp eel, *Synbranchiformes* (*ophoro*). Traditional fish traps were made with piassava (*ibiahon*) and the bamboo (petiole) of the raffia palmand they included *akreghen, igen, otigen* and *oghore*. The mesocarp of the raffia nut locally called *ugbosun* was not only boiled and eaten by the natives butits raw form was made into a pulp and poured into the waterways. This stupefied the fishes making them swim aimlessly, thus making it easy for the fishermen to collect them. Fishing was not large-scale as demand was supplemented by exchange through trade with the more specialized Itsekiri and Ijo fish farmers who took to fishing on full-time basis.

Hunting

Hunting was a more specialized activity restricted to the males due to the hazards it posed. Game often consisted of small animals like the cane rat (grasscutter) *Thryonomysswinderianus*, antelopes, squirrels and bush pig. Hunting was seasonal and more popular in the mainland than in the lowlands as dictated by vegetation and relief. The wateriness of the low-lying areas did not promote hunting and availability of game. Children were expected to learn and master the art of setting traps and acquire some tutelage under their fathers. Hunting instruments included Dane gun, bow and arrow and traps of various types made with locally available materials.

Animal Husbandry

Domestic animals such as sheep, goats, pigs and poultry were also kept at individual and communal levels mainly to supplement the diet of the natives with protein and as sacrificial elements during rituals and social occasions. As earlier mentioned agriculture promoted linkages and inter-dependence among economic units. Apart from providing articles of exchangeable goods, agriculture also provided the raw materials as input required by traditional industries which were also fairly diversified prior to colonial rule.

It was fairly large as most people and even communities kept domestic animals in their compounds.

Traditional Industries and Handicraft

Numerous industries and handicraft manufactures existed in Urhoboland and were indicative of a fairly diversified economic structure. Such enterprises included palm oil processing and related activities like palm kernel cracking and kernel oil extraction, soap production, weaving, wood carving, pottery and distillation of fermented palm wine into alcohol.

Palm oil processing

The Urhobo were better known as producers of palm oil and kernels perhaps because these were major items of Euro-African trade. Evidence indicates that the oil which was exchanged for Portuguese merchandise such as brass "manilla" bracelets, tobacco, glass, beads and other meretricious products during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came from Urhoboland (Ryder, 1959:307-315). Ryder estimated oil palm export figures to be over 200 imperial gallons (approximately 1000 litres) and this would indicate a considerably large industries facilitated by the ubiquity of the palm tree. Evidence of the antiquity of palm oil among the Urhobo is also illustrated by folklore and nature spirits associated with the palm. Some of these as Bruce Onobrakpeya (2003:381) notes include the *edjokpa* deity of palm bush – a heirloom worshipped for bumper harvest. Another lyric in which palms are depicted is the *edido* as earlier mentioned.

To obtain the oil,the boiled nuts are poured into the wooden trough (oko-edi) and mashed repeatedly with the feet. The pulp made from the mashed nuts is skimmed off and boiled repeatedly in a cauldron (clay pot) until impurities are removed. The oil is separated from impurities when it floats on the surface and it is skimmed off into jars. This industry expanded considerably under British colonial rule from the late 19th century.

Kernels and Kernel Oil Production

As an export commodity, kernel production was a fairly large-scale activity. Kernels are the by-product of palm oil processing. After extracting the oil, the kernels were left to dry in a raised wooden platform over fire (*ahanre*) in the kitchen before the hard outer shells are cracked open to obtain the nuts. Kernel oil (pomade) is a by-product made from the kernels. To manufacture the oil, the dried kernels were boiled repeatedly without water to produce a black oleaginous substance, (*ori-ibi*).This activity was restricted to the women folk as earlier mentioned and it satisfied local demand.

Local soap making

The native soap, *odja-urhobo* is made from a combination of palm oil and the filtrate of ash obtained from burnt fruitless palm bunch. The ash and palm oil were boiled repeatedly until a dark brown paste was obtained. The home-made soap was an indispensable input in alcohol distillation even up to the 1970s. It was added to the palm wine before distillation to prevent the heated palm wine from fuming excessively in the oven (Epinijigho, personal communication). Caustic soda gradually replaced the native soap. Pomade and soap production were small-scale activities which also satisfied local demand.

Weaving

Weaving was fairly large and a principal activity of the fresh water swamp dwellers where a specialised group of women and young girls evolved. The materials for weaving were obtained principally from the fibre of *Raphia vinifera*, and also from a semi-aquatic plant locally referred to as *imirhe-ere, (Cyperusarticulates)* which grow abundantly in swamps and sides of creeks. The bright green and unexpanded leaflets of the raffia referred to as *esara* and the pith of the petiole (bamboo) referred to as *ibodje* are particularly useful in mat weaving. To obtain the raffia, the epidermal strips of the leaflets are harvested and dried in the sun when they assume a pale straw colour, while the hard-outer fibre or splints of the bamboo (*edada*) is peeled to expose the pithy substance which is also dried in the sun. The *esara* are boiled with local dye *igaroro* of various colours and made into large bundles for sale in the market. They are used to weave a variety of products like jute bags *umi* for tying grated cassava and for palm nut collection. They are also used to fasten the pith and the *imirhe-ere* to produce beautiful, multi-coloured mats of various sizes and uses. The larger bridal mat referred to as *ewhere-opha* was a customary requirement in the clitoridectomy rituals of young maidens and as bedding for the newly betrothed woman. Apart from their customary uses, the large mats are also served as canopies for market stalls and bicycle repairer's shed. Owahwa, Esaba, Otutuama, Egbo-Ide, and Okwagbe in Ughievwen area have sustained the mat-weaving industry into contemporary times.

The bamboo is used with thatch to construct houses as it served as a frame to support the walls of buildings. The hard outer fibre of the bamboo is also used in weavinglocalsieves for removing impurities like fibre during the processing of palm oil and for weaving baskets and fish traps. An extensive market existed and still exists for raffia products in Udu and Ughievwen areas.

It is important to point out that the raffia palms are exploited only in the wild. It seemed Urhobo weavers do not know that raffia can be an important export commodity as it is in Madagascar and it is even more doubtful if they have knowledge of the economic potentials of the raffia palm.A variety of products can be made from the palms such as yeast from palm wine, ethanol by fermentation, brushes, raffia oil, pulp and paper, jute bags,handicraft products as well as bio-fuels. If reinvented, the gin industry can potentially stem unemployment and youth restiveness, thus reducing the incidence of poverty in the volatile Niger Delta region (Forae, 2009: 97-109).

Wood carving

Wood carving is a hereditary and specialised activity of adult males and male children who customarily undergo tutelage in the craft. The products were fairly diversified but the industry was also concentrated in areas where hard wood are plentiful. Notable areas of production were Oghior and other Udu communities as well as Agbon ccommunities. Carved images that included ancestors spirits *esemo* and nature spirits *edjo* as well as those that are of secular nature occupied important places in the spiritual and cultural spaces of the Urhobo as they are basically statuary for the spirits and less for mortals. While some like *obo* and *oneki* images are of spiritual-economic significance, others like *Iphri*, *urhievwen*, *oshare-erivwin* and *aye-erivwin* are personalized with social and spiritual significance. Objects of utilitarian and cultural significance include musical drums, ladle, seats, masks, trumpet and ceremonial rattle.

Diakparomre and Ojo (2003:134-135) note that the spiritual and physical significance of imagery is underscored by the belief of the Urhobo on duality of planes of existence symbolized by *akpo* (physical) and *erivwin* (spiritual) worlds and the place of an individual in this duality. The Urhobo also believe that every human being has a spirit partner living in *erivwin* in which both worlds influence each other, but the spiritual wields greater influence. Thus, as Foss (2004:23) and Ojaide (2004:78) note, Urhobo art with its bold individualism and aggressive demeanour was not only influenced by its cosmology and environment but was also used as a metaphor for their historical experiences and existential struggles.

A collection of spiritualised imageries could be found in communal, family and individual shrines where the ancestors and deities are petitioned through the icons with a libation and food offering for peaceful co-existence, fertility of women and the soil and good health for success in agriculture and enterprise.

Unlike the coastal Ijo who are referred to as 'watermen' due to the extreme wateriness of their environment, the Urhobo had no large-scale need for canoes and therefore did not make canoe carving a specialty. Apparently, the complementary role canoes played in the economy of the Urhobo due to their location in the hinterlands hardly assisted to promote specialty in canoe building.However, canoe-carving on a small scale was undertaken in communities such asOkwagbe, Oginibo, Otutuama, Ophorigbala; Umolo, Eghwu, Arhavwarien, Gbarigolo, Ovwian, Aladja, Kokori, and Ofoni (Urhobo in Bayelsa).

Pottery

Although evidence indicates that a sizeable quantity of sub-stratum of clay existed in areas of fresh water swamps and the Urhobo also seemed to have produced some sizeable quantity of pots due to their manifold utility in the economy, they did not however acquire a specialty or tradition in pottery, perhaps because pottery was not the mainstay of their economy. In fact, domestic production was supplemented by importation from the more specialized Itsekiri coastal dwellers as pots constituted a significance article of trade in Urhobo-Itsekiri commercial relations dating from at least the sixteenth century (Llyod, 1963:213; Ikime, 1965: 42-43; Nana, 1994:58-69).

Oghior and Igbogidi in Udu; Oto-Edo and Ughevwughe in Ughievwen were particularly famous for pot making which is predominantly a woman's craft that is passed from mother to daughter. Oto-Edo in Ughievwen is renowned for its clay pots, bowls and plates which commanded premium prices in markets throughout Urhoboland (Foss 2004:26). Pots were of manifold utility and they served both secular and ritual purposes. They were indispensable in the distillation of alcohol from earliest times. For example, they served as ovens for the distillation of palm wine into alcohol before the introduction of the metal type oven and as receptacles for the distilled article. A pot was used by the palm wine tapper to fetch palm wine, collect the runoff from tapped palm treesas receptacle for accumulating wine that is undergoing fermentation and also for collecting rubber latex. Pots also served ritual purposes mostly at crossroads and at shrines. Onobrakpeya (2003:381) notes that offerings in clay pot were made to *edjokpa*, the palm tree deity as part of ritual of worship for bumper harvest. Clay pots also served other secular purposes, for instance, as musical drum, storage of water and as stand for oil lamps; cooking and serving of dishes. Pots for secular uses (with the exception of those for serving dishes and lamps) were usually larger than ritual pots.

The traditional method of pot production was as simple as the instruments of production. Raw clay was dug up from the sides of streams and rivers by the women and young girls and mashed in order to break it into smaller lumps, after which it was kneaded to achieve

the appropriate degree of elasticity desired. Moulding was done by building; the pots being built up from rough sausages of clay, to the shape and size required for use and fired. To avoid cracking during the process of firing, impurities like fibre and pebbles were removed. Instruments used include crude anvils – used to fix clay lumps into a convex mould and a small wooden paddle – used for patting and slapping the clay lump into a form. The women were responsible for the production and marketing of the finished product at the local market. It is important to point out that a girl was taught all the intricacies of the craft by the mother before she attained the age of puberty.

Palm wine and alcohol production

The distillation of palm wine into alcohol (*udi)*was a principal and long-standing industry in virtually all the villages ghievwen, and to a limited extent in some areas of Udu. The home-made gin occupies an important place in the spiritual and cultural spaces of the Urhobo. Major gin producing areas were Oginibo, Otegbo, Otughievwen (Otu-Jeremi), Ayagha, Okwagbe, Ughevwughe, Ujevwu and other areas. Young boys customarily undergo tutelage in the art of climbing the raffia palm and identifying species that were mature for tapping. A man and his wives were involved in the distillation process which was carried out in close proximity to the swamps. Spatial and agglomeration economies are reaped by the concentration of related activities like weaving, fishing, pottery and wood carving while the man who often marries two or more wives proceeds on his twice daily round of collecting palm wine from the trees he has tapped, his wives tend to boil the sap accumulated the previous day.

Urhobo distillers deployed the traditional pre-fabricated natural pot-still method to distil palm wine, as distinct from the colonial type method which comprised of a metal drum and copper pipes. The pot-still method is as simple as the equipment used. A large clay pot with an opening served as oven for boiling the fermented wine. Suitable hole was inserted at the top of the pot close to the opening. A dried bamboo stick with an opening each at both ends measuring about two metres in length was permanently attached to the hole at the top of the pot to capture and conduct the steam (alcohol) produced by boiling to a receptacle. Distillation commenced by filtering the fermented wine to remove impurities like dead bees and fibre before it was poured into the pot to a level just below the stick. The pot was placed on an earth mound over fire. Some quantity of native soap was added to the potentially fizzy brew to prevent it from excessive foaming. The steam percolated through the stick and continued to drip gradually into a receptacle. The pot was replenished with fermented wine at regular intervals in the course of distillation. The wine was discarded after a considerable period of distillation. But the distilling operation must be repeated by re-distilling the non-fizzy distillate of low strength (referred to in the

local parlance as *etamukara* or 'simple' in English) until a much stronger drink was obtained.

But this method of distillation yielded smaller quantity of alcohol due primarily to the natural equipment used. Apparently unknown to brewers, bamboo, a vegetal fibre absorbs liquid, while a clay pot took longer period of time to heat up, thereby significantly lengthening the distilling operation which lasted from sunrise to sunset. Brewers also determined the alcohol volume of their product by local method, like pouring some quantity of gin on red hot charcoal. The drink is regarded as strong when it becomes combustible (Forae, 2013: 1-2).

Although the potentially intoxicating effect of the home-made gin and possible health implications of its abuse were cynically offered as reasons for its eventual prohibition in 1912 by the colonial authorities in Urhoboland, the evidence indicates that prohibition was due to the fiscal threat which the home-made gin posed to imported alcohol (Forae, 2012: 111-139). It bears repeating here that colonial literature on alcohol was a significant factor that fuelled cultural stereotype by promoting racial prejudices in which Africans are believed to be unable to control their drinking habits and consequently becoming inebriated. Although colonial concerns about the possible abuse of the home-made gin were genuine, official apprehensions were unjustified as there was no empirical evidence or study undertaken by the colonial government in Urhoboland that indicated drinking was a significant factor that undercut the supply of male labour for agriculture. Contrarily, as Mcphee (1971:9) and Diduk (1993:1) note in their case studies, alcohol was a significant factor both in stimulating cash crop production and labour supply for agriculture in West Africa.

Trading Activities

The traditional economy was not an exception to the economic truism of the mutual in exclusivity of surplus, exchange and specialization. Butexchange was also propelled by the principle of the market place in response to the imperatives of supply and demand. Markets were periodic in economic sense and in line with the social and religio-cultural practices of the Urhobo. But in strict economic sense, periodicity of markets indicates a low population and low purchasing power in nominal terms – common features of precolonial African trade. During such market days which held at intervals of seven or eight days, agricultural and other products of industry from within and outside Urhoboland were traded.

Articles of trade and currency

Basic items needed by the family which were not produced by the household were purchased, and although articles of commerce were diverse, they were also of intrinsic value, for example, coral beads. One colonial intelligence report listed the goods sold in Ovwian market in Udu to include the following: palm oil, kernels, many types of pottery, native soap, local pomade, hoes, hooks, razors, beads, peppers, knives, palm mats, goats,varieties of fowl, salt, palm wine, crayfish and fish, to mention a few (NAI, 1934:74-76).This also holds true for the precolonial period as the goods were also sold in the market. Exchange was facilitated first by the barter system and later by transitional currencies. Unlike the coastal areas where European currencies circulated much earlier, the encasement of the Urhobo in hinterlands as earlier mentioned seemed to have delayed the arrival of imported currencies at least until the 1880s.

Organization of trade

Trade was also conducted outside the market place as sellers moved their wares for sale by hawking through the various footpaths that linked one village to the next by head porterage.Trading activities also took place along the small waterways to the big rivers by canoe. Although some of the human porters in pre-colonial Urhoboland could have been ambulated to the sea for export, sale by hawking was popular because a specialist group of merchants suited to the export economy had not evolved. It should be pointed out that the earth roads and intricate waterways were also indispensable to the trade in local alcohol during colonial rule as traders used them for smuggling to evade colonial law enforcement personnel as anti-liquor laws took hold as from the 1920s.

Traditional markets

Communities along the riversides that had markets were Oginibo, Otu-Jeremi, Okwagbe, Ekakpamre, Agbarho, Ovwian, Aladja, Okpare among others. These markets developed over time along the tributaries of the Warri and Forcados Rivers. Okpare, located at the confluence of the Kiagbodo River and Ekakpamre Creek, two tributaries of the River Niger, was an important outlet of the palm produce trade. Market places also developed in villages like Igun, Erho, Okpara water side, Eku, Amukpe, Mosogar and others which are located along the River Ethiope.

The market as a social and cultural nexus

One noticeable trend in these riverine towns was their cosmopolitan character due to the influx of traders who sought to benefit from the increasing trade between Urhobo and the British. For instance, the sale of the home-made gin, palm oil and palm products enabled traders to establish contacts and make friends with different categories of people, with such contacts resulting into marriages. The number of days required to distribute palm oil and alcohol made traders to be intimately close to buyers. This explains why the women were dissuaded from both trades. Some male gin distillers like the female traders recalled that the regular offer of gin as gift to the women by the men often developed into a husband and wife relationship and hence frequent female desertion of their matrimonial home. Many recalled that they married their spouses through trade. (Duophere; Obaghware, personal communications).

Special Traits of the Urhobo in Economic Life

Gender and cultural stereotypes in relation to the economic life of the Urhobo have subsisted over time. For instance, the males are alleged to be inebriated and lazy, thus undercutting the size of male labour available for agricultural production.This has accentuated the dominance of the agricultural labour force by the women. But the evidence indicates that while the women primarily cultivated food crops, the males were responsible for climbing the palm and other tall trees – an art from which females are customarily prohibited, as climbing tall trees requires courage, physical alertness and mental acuity – intrinsic attributes of the males. Mashing of palm nuts to extract its oleaginous contents is no less tedious, andrequires energetic males; hence male specialty in this and the closely related occupation of palm wine tapping. This "division of labour" (in crop farming and palm oil production) is age-long as the Urhobo acquired a specialty in palm oil production dating to the Atlantic trade period.

It is a historical fact that Urhobo males are hardworking and the idea that they are inebriated and lazy is now a moot point. For instance, work culture and work ethics in relation to agriculture and enterprise are captured in various folkloric renditions such as *edido* and *oberokpa*. The former is a folk lyric which depicts men in imageries singing while mashing boiled palm nuts with their feet in a wooden canoe-like trough, *oko* while the latter depicts a palm fruit farmer and his wife conveying bunches of harvested palms from the bush (Onobrakpeya, 2003:381). Another folklore that promotes hard work is captured in the Urhobo saying: "*ohwo ro she egbo oye rie erere egbo roye*" (the one that is able to clear and cultivate the virgin forest or bush should also be the one to enjoy its fruits). In other words, individual initiatives and determination were not only the key to successful enterprise but also reaping the fruits of one's labour.

Apparently, following from the trajectory of their historical experiences the inclination of the Urhobo to be independent falls in line with the 'independence' associated with the gin industry. As gin distilling seemed to offer the possibility of independent action both in production and marketing,a number of distillers recalled the independence gin production offered which later proved to be one fundamental factor for the tenacity of the industry in the face of colonial onslaught on it following series of harsh prohibition laws. More importantly, unlike palm oil which requires reciprocal obligations in mashing palm berries, gin distillers could work for themselves. Thus, the inherent difficulties in maintaining equal reciprocal relationship in palm oil processing proved to be a source of constant irritation and one of inter-personal conflicts. As the distillers reveal, the opportunity to work for oneself combined with the flexible market conditions for selling gin as buyers visited the distillation camps to buy their product, satisfied the inclination of the Urhobo toward 'independence' which gin distillation guaranteed relative to other economic pursuit (Duophere, Fieleghe, Ishele, Sawa, Keleji, Epinnijigho and Brorhien, personal communications).

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has revealed the linkages that existed among the various economic units on one hand and between the environment and society's institutions at sociocultural and economic levels. This inter-relatedness exposed some admirable features of the traditional precolonial economy which were fundamental to its resilience and tenacity.

Thus, environmental conditions dictated occupational pursuit just as specialization facilitated the cash or market economy. Production and consumption were also tailored to socio-economic and cultural realities and although the traditional economy-imposed limitations, production and consumption were above subsistence.

This essay also revealed the structural outlines of occupational activities such as production levels, labour requirements, consumption and distribution in the traditional Urhobo economy. In particular, gender roles and inclination toward certain economic activities were explained by customary law, the nature (physicality) of certain occupations and, more importantly, by traits acquired over time from the trajectories of human existence, for instance, the Urhobo inclination toward independence.

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