INDIGENOUS GIN PRODUCTION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY ECONOMY OF UGHIEVWN CLAN OF WESTERN DELTA, NIGERIA.

By

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Abstract

As with other parts of Africa, British colonial administration stifled the indigenous technological instincts of Nigerian peoples. Before the introduction of colonization to Africa, the people had their own ways of providing for their needs. The advent of colonialism disrupted this ingenuity. The colonial economy of most African states was structured to improve the economies of the colonizers. It is against this background that this paper seeks to show how the introduction of foreign drinks (spirits) dampened the indigenous technological instincts of the Ughievwn people and consequently led to the decline of indigenous gin production which came to be regarded as “illicit”. The paper concludes that because of the influence and exploitative interests of colonial administrative officers who were out to advance the development of their employer’s economy, indigenous technological instincts of the Ughievwen people nose-dived. Colonialism thus impacted in major ways on the lives of those whose lands were colonized. This may affect people’s lives, even in the near future.
Introduction

The foundations of pre-colonial states and societies and their civilizations have been linked to the colonial and post-colonial process of modern nation building (Osadolor and Otoide, 2005:159). While the debate continues, it is important to note that historical conditions and culture of socio-political organization seem to have influenced to a great extent, the pre-colonial states in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, examines the precolonial gin production in Ughievwen clan with a view to ascertain the appropriateness of the strand of the debate that contends that “the emergence of states in West Africa was the consequence of external influences” (Garvin, 1979:15-38, Connah, 1987).

Ughievwen land in present day Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State evolved its indigenous method of gin production long before European brand of “Spirits” was introduced with the advent of colonialism. Ughievwen clan was sufficiently blessed by geography, even though the soil was not too favourable for agricultural practice as was the case in neighbouring Edo land. Situated in the tropical forest zone, though with interconnecting rivulets, it had the advantage of adequate rainfall, abundant sunshine and soil that favoured raffia palm growth. As will be seen in this study, the people were able to adapt to this tropical rainforest environment and were able to exploit the resources to good advantage. Indigenous gin production in precolonial Ughievwen clan thus voids the view that the emergence of states in West Africa and by, extension, development was necessary products of external influence.

Methodology

This study is essentially based on information from archival sources and handing over notes by colonial administrative officers. However, where these sources not forthcoming with
needed information, resort was to secondary sources, books. The study therefore, is an analysis of these sources. From these sources, it was discovered that the main interest of the administrative officer was basically exploitation and the desire to improve the industrial growth of Britain. The result is that indigenous industries like gin production was stifled. In the conclusion, attention is drawn to the fact that continuous reliance on foreign goods without adequate effort at developing indigenous technological instinct of Nigerians may further deepen the morass of underdevelopment if urgent steps are not taken.

**Geographical setting of Ughievwen Clan**

Ughievwen people occupy part of Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State. The sub-culture area has its administrative headquarters at Otu-jeremi. Its territory is bounded on the South and South-East by the Okpare or Ekiagbodo creek, on the west by Gbekebo Greek, on the North and North west by Esaba creek in Udu Local Government Area of Delta State, on the North East by Agbarho clan and on the East by Ughelli clan (Johnson, 1932:3-5). It is a contiguous landmass generally plain and low-lying of about 6 metres above sea level with an intricate water network of meandering Creeks, interconnected rivulets and tidal river with the River Forcados as the major body of water (Pippah, 1999).

The clan is made up of thirty two villages and situated in the rainforest region of Nigeria. The area, as with the rest of the Niger Delta has humid climate that is subequatorial with a long wet season lasting from March to October. (Aweto, 2005:684-685). This alternates with a shorter dry season that lasts from November to February. The climate is influenced by two prevailing air masses – the South West Monsoon wind and the North-East trade wind. While the former prevail during the wet season, the latter prevail during the dry season. The South-West’ Monsoon winds originates from the Atlantic ocean and are associated with the wet season, that is warm and moisture-laden. The North-East trade. Wind
on the otherhand, originates from the Sahara desert. Its effects are most noticeable in Ughievwen land from December to February during which it ushers dry and dusty harmattan.

Annual rainfall in Ughievwen area, like other parts of Urhoboland is high being usually up to 2500m (Aweto, 2005:685), while average sunshine hours are 1800. The implication of this is that on the average, there is active sunshine for forty-two percent of each day (Oyaide, 1991:1).

The natural vegetation of the Ughievwen sub-group is rainforest with swamp forest occurring in flat-flooded valley and adjoining low lying area that are seasonally or permanently water-logged. The forest vegetation is wet low land forest (Olorode, 2002:66-67) that is floristically different from the rainforest of the drier northern margin of the rainforest zone of Nigeria (Hopkins, 1974). The area has some timber. The notable timber-producing species include: Antiaristoxicaria excalsaciba, pentandra and piptaderiastrum africanum (Aweto, 2005:687). Other trees that feature in the rain forest include: pentaclethra macrophylla, chrysophyllum albidum and irvingia gabonesis. The last two species are fruit trees which were important sources of income and dietary supplement for the people.

Raffia Palm especially Raphia hookeri and Raphia Vinifera are the dominant elements of the flora of the swamp forest. Savanna vegetation also occur in the area usually in discontinuous patches on the creek flood plains. This vegetation lack the typical fire-resistant trees that characterize the drier savanna of Northern Nigeria. Only few trees such as the oil Palm and Bridelia Micromtha are present in the Savanna patches, although most of them are basically without trees. The main grasses include: spear grass (Imperata cylindrical), panicum maximu and Hyperrhenia sp (Aweto, 1987:177-178).
The soil within Ughievwen area is deeply weathered and nutrient deficient especially within the Ukpedi part of the area. In well-drained areas, the soil is mostly Oxisols according to United State’s soil taxonomy (Aweto, 2005) and they are called ferralithic soils. They are predominantly sandy, the proportion of sand in the top 10cm of the soil may be up to 90% (Aweto, 2005). As a result of this, the soil is loose and poorly aggregated as they contain very low level of clay and organic matter. Hence following the heavy rainfall that occurs in Ughievwen area, it is not a surprise that the soils are intensely leached, base deficient and acidic in reaction. There are however, few patches of clayey soil derived from shale. Such soils are also water-logged due largely to impaired drainage.

Map of Ughievwen clan showing the thirty two villages of the clan

Early settlement in Ughievwen clan

Unlike the Northern Edo Communities, most of which narrate variants of a family common story of emigration from Benin, but more like the migration traditions of the Cross River people (Amadi, 1988:1), the traditions of origin and settlement of Ughievwen people are complicated because of the intertwined nature of the stories of waves of migrations from various directions in the course of their search for homes. While some claimed to have migrated long distance, others moved only within a geographical region as evidenced in the movement of Owahwa from Otughievwen to found Owahwa (Nukueye, 2003:13). Some were people fleeing from events in larger societies such as Benin, while others came for reasons of the quest for safety and security (Usore, 2008). As a result of the complex nature of the stories, five traditions of state formation, namely the Hamitic hypothesis, Exodus from Benin, Ijo origins, Niger/Congo confluence hypothesis and totemic tradition are emphasized (Erhagbe and Oghi, 2011). However, while the Hamitic hypothesis is dismissed as lacking historical validity, just as the Niger/Congo version and totemic tradition, the exodus from Benin though has some historical validity but not in the form related by the tradition. Movement from Benin was essentially in a “stop” and “move” fashion (Erhagbe and Oghi, 2011). Even though the Ijo version finds historical basis in the long social ties between the Ughievwen people and the Ijos, the suggestion by E.J. Alagoa that such movement was likely to have happened in the Seventeenth century (Alagoa, 2005:193) is also rejected. Rather, using the King-list and mean of reign approach as has been done elsewhere (Emordi, 2000 and Ubi, 1983:121-126), it has been suggested that settlement on the area by the Ughievwen people could have been at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Erhagbe and Oghi, 2011).
However, Ughievwen clan was said to have been occupied by four main families that sprang from the four children of Ughievwen, the eponymous founder of the clan. These children were: Orhowe, Owahwa, Ukpedi and Uvburie (Johnson, 1932:2-9). The Ukpedi group consist of Otughievwen (Otu-Jeremi), Imode, Eyara, Erhuwaren, Agbaghare, Ayagha, Oginibo, Okwagbe-Otor, Okwagbe waterside, Iwhreoku and Agbowhiame. The Uvburie group is made up of Ekrokpe, Otokutu, Egbo, Urhiephon (Usiefron), Ekakpamre, Ughevbughe, Ekrejeba and Iwhrekeka. The Owahwa group on the other hand, is made up of Owahwa, Otutuama, Otegbo, Iwhruogun, Ophorigbala, Saba, Okwenor, Egborode and Otitiri, while the Orhowe group comprise Iwhrekan, Ejorofe and Otor-Edo.

**The basis of Ughievwen Economy**

The economy of the Ughievwen clan by the nineteenth century was not totally subsistence-oriented. Agriculture played an important part in the economy. This included: fishing, crop production, industries like pottery, mat making and gin (Ogogoro) production. The economy also comprised simple industry and distribution of various products through exchange system. The implication of these was that the economy became market oriented as there existed an organized surpluses, which involved the use of the barter system. In this regard, it also implied that like most precolonial economies of West Africa, was not entirely subsistence (Flint, 1976:381).

One of the occupations to which the people of Ughievwen clan were engaged in the nineteenth century and even up to present times, was gin production which in local parlance is called Ogogoro. The origin of this term that has acquired popularity in the peoples’ usage is strange because no explanation has been given for the name. (Okonkwo, 2009:220). The term seem to have evolved from usages at drinking spots and leisure places overtime, otherwise the indigenous name common among Ughievwen people is Agbakara (distilled
spirit from raffia palm. Over time, the term “Ogogoro” assumed popularity among the people of the coastal area of Southern Nigeria. Whereas in the Niger Delta, its production was from the raffia palm, in the eastern part of the country (Igboland), it was derived from palm trees. (Okonkwo, 2009:224-227). Later, with the introduction of colonial administration, innovations such as the use of sugar and water was adopted. (Ubeku, 2011).

In the Niger Delta area, the Ijos were famed for gin production. From the early history of the Ughievwen people, it is not unlikely that they could have learnt this trade from the Ijos. Two villages famed for local gin production in Ughievwen clan from early times were Okwagbe and Owahwa. (Ubeku, 2011). This may not be surprising because of their closeness to the river. Though other Ughievwen people were and still involved, Okwagbe and Owahwa people had dominance. To a large extent gin production in Ughievwen clan could be likened to what obtained among the Ibibio, Efik and Igbos of eastern Nigeria, in which middlemen (diplomats) exchanged alcohol for slaves and other European goods (Okonkwo, 2009:227).

**The Colonial Economic System**

It must be quickly stated that the colonial economy of Nigeria rested on export crops which accounted for about seventy percent of export in colonial times (Ahazuem and Falola, 1987). In this regard, it was not strange that the colonial policies of Britain were aimed at exploiting the material resources in Nigeria needed to facilitate the growth of British industries to the neglect of indigenous industries. This had grave implications for the economy of Nigeria as the peasants were forced by the imposed circumstance to concentrate on the production of cash crops. It is instructive to note that within the period British companies like the United African Company, John Holt and Paterson and Zochonis (PZ) and
Lever Brothers came to dominate produce buying and export business. All these was to the neglect of indigenous industries.

Fundamentally, during the colonial period, Britain not only had firm control over the Nigerian economy, she also dominated the Nigerian market essentially as a result of the effect of the favourable policies of the colonial government in Nigeria. It has been shown that the policy of Britain and the colonial government in Nigeria crystallized in favour of protectionism. This started before World War I and reached its apex during the Second World War (1939 – 1945). For example, the colonial government imposed ban on the export of palm oil from Nigeria, save for the United Kingdom and later declared liquor produced in Nigeria as “illicit”. This was aimed at diverting the export of products to other places (Shokpeka and Nwaokocha, 2009). Thus, considering the fact that the Second World War (1939 – 1945) brought about severe shortages of raw materials to British industries, especially after Japan’s seizure of the Far East in 1939, the British Ministry of Food appropriated to itself the right of the sole purchase of primary products from West Africa, including Nigeria (Njoku, 1987).

The points raised above largely dictated colonial policies in Nigeria. An examination of the effect of these policies can be gauged from the discussion of gin production in Ughievwen clan in colonial Warri Province.

**Method of Gin production**

From the stories of the traditions of Ughievwen people, gin was derived from palm wine obtained from raffia palm trees which abound and is still present mostly in the riverine area of the clan. The palm wine got from it was a milky white liquid that has its characteristic aroma and contains plenty of sugar when it is fresh. It also contain yeast and as it got older,
there is accumulation of acetic acid. The presence of acid could be detected by throwing in a pinch of sodium bicarbonate powder into the wine and the effervescence is observed (Ubeku, 2011).

For the manufacture of the local gin, the palm wine got from the raffia palm was allowed to stay for about four days, during which the yeast fermented the sugar to produce alcohol. To increase the yield of alcohol, the scrapings of barks of a tree called Ogu was added. Otorogu which presently house one of the largest gas plant in West Africa was said to have had a lot of such tree in Ughievwen land, hence the name “Otor-Ogu” (the land of Ogu tree). After fermentation, the liquor is distilled. The distillery was usually a wooden or kerosene tin improvised rectangular plank, carved and nailed in the form of a basin, with a horizontal copper or wooden tube as condenser. The condenser passed through the wooden trough filled with cold water. The first distillate was turbid and therefore distilled to obtain the alcohol in a clear form. Re-distillation could be carried out a number of times until a product of desired quality was obtained. A first-grade product was one which when poured on the floor and lit with fire, burnt with a beautiful blue flame, smokeless, non-humionous flame which is quite different from the flame associated with burning kerosene or petrol.

An apparatus showing indigenous liquor distillation
Source: Informant’s production unit, Okwagbe, Ughievwen clan.
The locally produced native gin was stored in cans for exchange on market days. The main market where exchanges took place were: Ekakpamre, Okwagbe waterside, Okpare and Warri. In these areas, tins of the local gin was bartered for products like plantain, fish, pepper, yam and tapioca locally called *Iphiniyan* and palm oil. Such local exchange was called *Emu-emi* (trade by barter). Local gin had quadruple effects on the people. Apart from its use as a means of trade by barter, it was used for the preservation of corpse (a traditional form of mortuary service) and as a means of demonstrating patriotism and nationalism among communities during marriages and festivals. It also served as spiritual food for the ancestors (Ubeku, 2011).

**Colonial attitude towards Gin production**

As pointed out earlier, one of the pillars on which nineteen century Ughievwen economy stood was indigenous gin (ogogoro) production. This aspect of the people’s economy began to suffer strains in the colonial era. As it were, the intake of alcohol caused drunkenness and posed health hazards such that House of Commons, England, took a debate in 1888 and by 1892 the Brussels Pact was signed to check excess alcohol consumption. However, the Brussels agreement was essentially aimed at reducing the importation of cheap spirits (Olukoju, 1997:68). The Pact stipulated that “prohibition: should be enforced except for non-natives from North latitudes 20 degrees or South latitude 22 degrees, in which distilled liquor did not exist or had not been developed, and that elsewhere a specified duty should be imposed as a minimum subject to revision after six years” (Olukoju, 1996:221). Unfortunately, while alcohol importation was prohibited in the Northern part of Nigeria, the Southern part of Nigeria had a different scenario. Imported gin continued to rise in patronage until the 1930s when colonial authorities enacted laws to stifle indigenous distillation industries.
It need to be stated that the subsequent declaration of native gin as “illicit” was nothing but a ploy on the part of the British to protect their economic interest. As Korieh put in: “the sentiments expressed by colonial officials and traders suggest that call for prohibition of local distillation was indeed an attempt to protect the fiscal interest of European liquor market” (Korieh, 2003:120). Religious bodies like Christian missionaries also called for the prohibition of native gin production. However, nationalist church in Urhobo area used native gin for Holy communion, just as the people used it for social activities and even as spiritual food. Colonial repression of this industry was understandable when it is recalled that the great depression in European at the time affected the colonial people in various ways especially as goods exported fetched paltry income.

In an attempt to curb native gin distillation, the colonial authorities introduced the liquor ordinance, cap. 131 of 1931. This was to discourage liquor production. By 1946, it was extended to sales of liquor. For a person to sell liquor, he/she was expected to obtain licence from from the licensing board set up for the purpose. Enforcement of this enactment was within the powers of local authorities. Persons involved in the liquor business were expected to have their names in government gazette (W.P. 156. Vol II, 1949). While Sapele was in charge of the area today known as Ethiope East and West Local Government Area of Delta State, the Jekri-sobo Division controlled the operations at Ughelli that had authority over Ughievwen area. To obtain licence, applications were made through the District officer to the Resident officer at Warri.

However, native gin production still continued to occupy a space in the social life of the Ughievwen people inspite of the colonial authority’s effort to suppress it. That restrictions were made on native gin production and sale, yet European “whisky” now had high patronage demonstrates that colonial government was out to suppress local industries in
Ughievwen land. The importation of European goods including “spirits” gradually put indigenous gin production out of business. The Europeans had argued that “manufactured goods have to be imported because the open economy had few modern industries of its own” (Hopkins, 1973:170). Thus, it could be said that the open economy situation occasioned by colonial rule was favourable to the colonial economy but to the detriment of the indigenous economic system.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined indigenous gin production (Ogogoro) in Ughievwen clan of Western Delta of Nigeria in the nineteenth century. The native gin has continued to play a major role in the social life of the Ughievwen people, inspite of colonial effort to suppress it. By the middle of the twentieth century, the colonial government realized that if stringent measures were not taken, their economic interest was likely to be dwarfed. However, the use of licensing boards to control production and sale of liquor appears not to have been able to wipe out completely, the production of the so-called “illicit” gin which was and is still regarded as the “commoners” drink. The neglect of indigenous industries may spell doom for the Nigerian state if attention continue to be concentrated on oil to the detriment of local industries. Should anything fatal happen to the crude oil industry on which Nigeria’s economy rest presently, the future of the Nigerian child will be in jeopardy. Finally, it has been shown in this paper that such exploitation and repressive measures were essentially done to kill the technological instincts of the Ughievwen people.
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