THE PALM TREE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF UBULU-OKITI OF UBULU-OKITI, DELTA STATE IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **HAPPINESS CHIMAROBIM** with matriculation number **ART2008847** in the Department of International Studies and Diplomacy, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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(Project Supervisor)	**(Head of Department)**
Date	**Date**

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to GOD ALMIGHTY for His infinite mercies and grace that saw me throughout my course of study.

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CHAPTER ONE
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The palm tree, *Elaeis Guineensis* is one of the most economically significant plant in tropical Africa, renowned for its versatile use in food, trade and craftsmanship. In the pre-colonial West Africa, the palm tree was the backbone of many rural communities.

Providing not only a steady source of food, but also contributing to local and regional trade systems. It various products including palm oil, palm wine and palm kernel makes it invaluable to many communities. The community of Ubulu-Okiti situated in the Aniocha South region of Delta state, Nigeria, is an example of a region where the palm tree played a critical role in its economic development. Northward it shares a common boundary with Issele-nkptime, southwards with Ani-agbala, eastwards with Otulu and westwards with Issele-uku [1]. Historically Ubulu-Okiti was part of Ubulu-Uku which was founded by Ezemu before it broke away to become, an autonomous community in the 19th century. It is the third group of the Ubulu-clan, which comprises of Ubulu-unor, Ubulu-uku and Ubulu-Okiti. It brokeaway to become an independent community due to internal rivalry, before then it has been under Ubulu-Uku which has been in existence since the 16th century [2]. This separation marked a period of social and economic transformation for the people, as the community established itself, the palm tree became one of the central pillars of its economic structure. From the time that it became autonomous, the palm tree has been a major part of its economic life. The palm tree was to Ubulu-Okiti what the Nile was to Egypt, the same way it is attributed that “no Nile, no Egypt” same can be said that “no palm tree, no

Ubulu-Okiti” as it was central to its economy, structure and survival. Just as the Nile River, provided a means of transportation, and boosted the agricultural system of Egypt, which became vital for ancient Egyptian development, the palm tree provided Ubulu-okiti with a wealth of resources essential for its sustenance and prosperity. The

palm tree in Ubulu-Okiti was not only a symbol of life but also a key driver of economic activity, sustaining the community through its various by-products which includes, the palm wine, palm oil, palm fronds and kernel seeds. There were also other by -products of the palm tree which was incorporated into daily life for soap making, for medicinal purpose e.t.c. It was an indispensable tree providing the foundation upon which the community's social, economic and cultural structures were built. This study explores the multi-faceted economic contributions of the palm tree to Ubulu-Okiti in the pre-colonial era, focusing on its impacts on local production, trade, and the socio-economic wellbeing of the community. By examining these elements, this research aims to highlight the centrality of the palm tree in shaping the community's economic landscape during this period.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the economic benefits of the palm tree to Ubulu-Okiti during the precolonial era, highlighting its role in trade, self-sufficiency, and overall socio-economic using the following objectives;

1. To examine the various economic products derived from the palm tree, including palm wine, palm oil, palm fronds, and palm kernels.
2. To analyze the role of the palm tree in local trade and its integration into broader regional trade networks.
3. To investigate how the palm tree supported the socio-cultural practices of the community.

4. To explore the broader economic impacts of palm tree cultivation on the development and sustenance of Ubulu-Okiti's economy during the precolonial era, including trade limitations due to preservation challenges.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the economic benefits of the palm tree to the community of Ubulu-Okiti in the pre-colonial era. It will explore the role of the palm tree in local economic activities, trade and socio-cultural practices, providing insights into how this resource was central to the economic life of Ubulu-Okiti.

To provide a comprehensive narrative, the research will begin by exploring the origin and history of Ubulu-Uku, the parent kingdom from which Ubulu-Okiti seceded. This study will also talk about the origins, culture, traditions and way of life of Ubulu-Okiti people. These aspects will provide a broader understanding of the context in which the palm tree played a central role in the community's economy. Additionally, the research will provide methods of producing palm oil and palm wine, highlighting the labour intensive processes involved and the importance of these products in the local economy. The study will also delve into the uses of the various by-products of the palm tree, and how it enhanced the domestic life of the community within the period of study.

Methodology

This study employs a narrative approach to explore the economic significance of the palm tree to the community of Ubulu-Okiti in the pre-colonial era. The research is grounded in both primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive

understanding. The primary sources include oral histories, interviews with elders, which offer direct insights into the community's practices, trade systems, and economic reliance on palm products. These are complemented by secondary sources, such as scholarly articles and books which contextualize the findings within the broader scope of West African trade and agricultural economies. The combination of these sources allows for a rich, multidimensional exploration of Ubulu-Okiti's historical economy, providing both firsthand accounts and scholarly analysis to reconstruct the community's engagement with the palm tree.

Literature Review

The palm tree has long been a crucial economic and cultural resource across communities both in the Niger Delta region, across Nigeria, Africa and the world at large, thereby shaping trade, sustenance and social interactions. It provides palm oil, palm wine and palm kernels. These by-products of the palm tree played central roles in local economies and served as key trade commodities. The palm trees, multifaceted contributions to the pre-colonial era have been documented by various academic scholars both within Nigeria and across the continents. The literature review for this study provide contexts on the economic significance of the palm trees from different regions and examine how these insights can inform an understanding of Ubulu-Okiti's palm tree economy during the pre-colonial period.

A. A. Apeh and C.C. Opata in an article titled "*The oil palm economy among rural farmer in Nigeria*", provides and highlights the importance of the oil palm (*Elaeis*

Guineensis) to rural farmers in a rural community in Enugu south eastern Nigeria [3]. It compares the economic benefits of various products derived from the palm tree including palm oil, palm kernel, timber, palm wine, brooms among others. Contrary to the common belief that palm wine and palm oil are the chief products, the study found that palm wine generates the highest annual revenue for farmers in Enugu Ezike. The income from palm wine surpasses the yearly income from palm oil, palm kernel and broom and the proceeds from the revenue have contributed significantly to the socio-economic life of rural communities, improving their living conditions and contributing to their overall development. Similar to Enugu Ezike, the palm tree played a crucial role in the economy of Ubulu-Okiti. The various product derived from the palm tree such as palm wine, palm oil, palm kernel seeds and oil, brooms e.t.c, were essential sources of income and trade for the community. The overall impact of the palm tree in rural areas as seen in Enugu Ezike, shows that palm trees were crucial for socio-economic development.

O. A. Akeem et.al in an article "A *History of Oil Palm Production in Nigeria*" provides a comprehensive analysis of the oil palm's industry development in Nigeria during the mid-20th century [4]. The book highlights how oil palm production significantly boosted the Nigerian economy in the 1950s, more than any other resources at that time. It discusses the role of oil palm in local trade and its contribution to the economy before the discovery of crude oil. It also discusses the agricultural processes involved in oil palm production and the various uses of the oil palm products. The author also examines challenges in the oil palm industry such as the impact of World War II and the Nigerian

civil war. The book also highlights the socio-economic contributions of the oil palm production to rural communities such as job creations and income generation.

B.N Ukaegbu in an article "*Production in the Nigerian Oil Palm Industry 1900-1954*" provides a comprehensive study that examines the developments and dynamics of the oil palm industry in Nigeria, during the first half of the 20th century. The book provides a detailed historical account of the oil palm industry in Nigeria, covering the period from 1900-1954. It also explores the economic conditions that influenced the production and trade of palm oil and palm kernels. Ukaegbu also discusses the significant contributions of the oil palm industry to Nigerian economy. The book additionally delves into the traditional and modern methods of oil palm cultivation and processing. It highlights the transition from manual to mechanized production techniques and the impacts of these changes on productivity and efficiency. It also addresses the various challenges faced by the oil palm industry and efforts made by colonial government to improve production and export quality.

The historical context provided in the book can help draw parallels between the broader developments in the Nigerian Oil Palm Industry and the specific case of Ubulu-Okiti. Understanding the traditional and modern methods of oil palm production discussed in the book can help explore how these techniques were applied in Ubulu-Okiti and their impact on the community's development[5].

F. Morah in an article "*The Nigerian Palm-Wine Science and Socioeconomic Importance*" explores the science behind palm wine production, including fermentation

and different types like "up-wine" (from the male inflorescence) and "down-wine" (from felled oil palm trees). It also covers palm wine from Raphia palms, known as ogoro, ngwo, and ukot among various ethnic groups [6].The lecture highlights palm wine's socioeconomic role in Nigeria, emphasizing its significance in social and cultural practices. Similarly, in Ubulu-Okiti, palm wine production has been a major economic activity since the pre-colonial era. The town, known as the "home of natural palm wine," specializes in tapping "up-wine," thanks to a unique oil palm species that makes its palm wine highly sought after.

E.W. Nwogwonuwe's book "*The Story of Ubulu Kingdom: A Historical Documentary of the Ubulu People"* explores the history of the Ubulu people, including Ubulu-Okiti, detailing their migration, settlement, and the conflict that led to Ubulu-Okiti's secession from Ubulu-Uku [7]. It also highlights their cultural heritage, documenting traditional practices, festivals, and the socio-political structure of the Ubulu communities. This historical background provides context for Ubulu-Okiti's economic reliance on the palm tree, showing how palm products, particularly palm wine, were integrated into cultural traditions. The book's emphasis on the socio-political and economic systems helps explore the palm tree's role in economic stability and development within the community.

Research Project in an article "*Ubulu-Uku and her neighbors 1900-1950*" explores the historical relationships between Ubulu-Uku and its neighboring communities,

including Ubulu-okiti. It provides insights into the origins and interactions of these communities during the early 20th century [8].

S.G Watt provides an in-depth exploration of the palm tree's versatility in his book "*A Dictionary of the Economic Products of India*" [9]. His work discusses the extraction of sap for traditional beverages like "*toddy*" which served both social and economic functions in Indian rural communities. He also emphasised on the significance of the palm leaves and fibers, which were used for thatching, weaving baskets and crafting mats, while fibers were employed in making ropes. The economic importance of the palm tree was also highlighted as used in construction, tool making and crafts. Watt highlights the sustainable utilization of the palm tree, ensuring its regenerative capacity. These findings underscore the palm tree's pivotal role in rural economies and it's adaptability as a resource. For Ubulu-Okiti, this literature provides a framework to analyze the community's reliance on the palm tree in the pre-colonial era. Watts findings on and sustainable multipurpose use of the palm tree align closely with practices employed in Ubulu-okiti, emphasising its central role in rural communities.

K.O. Dike's article "*Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885*" analyzes the economic and political shift from the slave trade to the palm oil trade in the Niger Delta [10]. He highlights how palm oil replaced the declining slave trade, driven by European industrial demand, leading to increased production and regional trade. Applying Dike's insights, Ubulu-Okiti's economic development can be examined through palm oil trade growth and expanding trade networks. These networks facilitated

wealth accumulation and economic diversification. Beyond economics, the oil palm held cultural and social significance, reinforcing the need to consider these dimensions when assessing its impact on Ubulu-Okiti's economic history.

N. Arhin et al.'s book "*Palm Leaves: An Anthology of Ghanaian Poets*" explores the cultural and economic significance of the palm tree, using it as a symbol of unity, creativity[11], and resilience. The anthology reflects its role in providing sustenance, shelter, and cultural identity, mirroring its importance in Ubulu-Okiti, where it also fostered cultural cohesion. The palm tree's symbolism in Ghanaian society aligns with its broader cultural role in Ubulu-Okiti, shaped by social structures and community bonds. Both regions relied on the palm tree for economic activities, including palm oil production and construction. The anthology's depiction of the palm tree as a unifying force reinforces its shared cultural and economic value across these communities.

The palm tree, often called "the tree of life," is remarkably versatile, with every part serving a purpose—even after being felled. The reviewed literatures underscore its economic and cultural significance across various regions. However, despite extensive scholarly work on the palm tree's economic impact, none specifically examine Ubulu-Okiti's role in the pre-colonial era. Additionally, there is little documentation on Ubulu-Okiti's history and existence. This gap necessitates focused research to uncover how the palm tree shaped Ubulu-Okiti's economic development, which is the core objective of this study.

Chapter Outline

This work is divided into five chapters which are as follows:

Chapter One: Background to the Study

This chapter outlines the study's framework, covering the introduction, aims, objectives, and scope. The research adopts a narrative approach, combining oral interviews with secondary sources to construct a coherent account of the palm tree's role. Interviews with elders and traditional custodians in Ubulu-Okiti capture indigenous perspectives, while textbooks and academic journals validate and contextualize these accounts.

Chapter Two: Historical and Socio-political Background of Ubulu-Okiti

This chapter explores the origin and history of Ubulu-Okiti, including its separation from Ubulu-Uku in the 19th century. It examines the community's socio-economic and intergroup relations, highlighting the palm tree economy's role in trade networks and political structure. The social life, customs, traditions, festivals, and religious practices of Ubulu-Okiti are also discussed, with a focus on palm products like palm wine in ceremonies. Additionally, the migration story of Ezemu and the historical connection between Ubulu-Okiti and Ubulu-Uku are analyzed to provide necessary context.

Chapter Three: Cultivation of Palm Trees in Ubulu-Okiti in the Pre-colonial Era

This section explores the cultivation of palm trees in pre-colonial Ubulu-Okiti, highlighting traditional farming methods.

Chapter Four: The Economic Contribution of the Palm Tree to the Development of Ubulu-Okiti in the Pre-colonial Era

This chapter explores the palm tree's economic role in pre-colonial Ubulu-Okiti, highlighting its impact on livelihoods, trade, and development. It examines traditional processing methods for palm products and their various uses in medicine, crafts, and agriculture. The discussion also covers the labor-intensive nature of production and the challenges of preservation and storage.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter presents a comprehensive summary of the research work.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF UBULU-OKITI

Ubulu- Okiti is a town situated in Aniocha South Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria. Northwards, it shares a common boundary with Issele- Mkpitime,

Southwards with Ani- Agbala[1], and Eastwards with Otulu and Westward with Issele-Uku. Its population is estimated between five to six thousand with six quarters namely: Ogbe-Iyase, Ugba, Ogbe- Ani, Ashaba Okiti, Ogbe oji/ Ogbe Aku and Ogbe Obi. It broke away from Ubulu-Uku- around the 19th century.

Ubulu-Uku is situated approximately thirty kilometers west of the River Niger in Aniocha South Local Government Area of Delta State. It shares boundaries with Ogwashi-Uku to the east, Obior to the west, Issele-Uku to the north, and Ubulu-Unor to the south [2]. Ubulu-Uku is one of the three Ubulu towns in Aniocha South, alongside Ubulu--Okiti and Ubulu-Unor. These towns are regarded as "brother towns" due to their common ancestry, tracing back to Ezemu and his siblings. While Ubulu-Okiti is a secession from Ubulu-Uku, Ubulu-Unor was the initial settlement of Ezemu and his family. Ubulu-Uku is characterized by a hilly landscape, with the Enugu-Iyi and Abuedo areas perched atop an extended range of hills. The central parts of the town, including the Ubulu tree, Isho, Akwu, Ogbeofu, and Idumu-Osume, lie within a valley. Several rivers originate from these hills, flowing through the clan and extending toward the sea via neighboring communities. Among these rivers, Iyi Agor (River Agor) is particularly notable.

Ubulu-Uku is the largest and most populated town in Aniocha Local Government Area. The Anioma region, where Ubulu-Uku is located, lies south of the Edo Central Plains, encompassing parts of Delta and Edo States. The Anioma homeland spans

approximately 6,300 km², bordering Anambra to the east, Imo and Rivers to the southeast, Bayelsa to the south, Isoko to the southwest, Urhobo to the west, and southern Edo and Kogi to the northwest and north, respectively. The Anioma people, known for their peaceful coexistence with neighboring ethnicities, are politically referred to as "Delta North." The term "Anioma," meaning "Good Land," was coined by Chief Dennis Osadebay [4], integrating the first letters of Aniocha (A), Ndokwa (N), Oshimili (O), and Ika (I), with "MA" added to form the acronym.

Among the 25 local government areas in Delta State, Aniocha South is one of the nine northeastern regions that make up the Anioma people[5]. Ubulu-Uku, the largest and most populated town in the Aniocha region (comprising Aniocha South and North), is predominantly inhabited by Igbo-speaking people with various dialects. The migration that led to the foundation of the Ubulu clan in Anioma dates back to the 16th century, with Ubulu-Unor, Ubulu-Uku, and Ubulu -Okiti forming the three primary settlements, the latter being the youngest. Ubulu settlements extend beyond Anioma, reaching the southeastern region across the Niger, where related Ubulu clans include Ozubulu, Ubulu-Isiuzor, and Ubulu-Ntu. Oral tradition traces all Ubulu clans, both in Anioma and the diaspora, to a common ancestor, Ezemu, the younger brother of Obodo[6].

Topographically, Ubulu-Uku's hilly terrain is comparable to Agbor in Delta State, Auchi in Edo State, and Ibadan in Oyo State, however the town's elevation offers scenic views, especially at night, creating breathtaking landscapes.[7]. The origin of Ubulu-Okiti is intricately linked with that of Ubulu-Uku. Occupationally, Ubulu men are primarily

farmers, weavers, hunters, and palm wine tappers, while the women are traders, farmers and skilled weavers. Using hand looms, they produce highly valued materials sought after by both local and foreign visitors.

The Migration Story of the Ubulu People

Ezemu, who is regarded as the founder of the Ubulu kingdom, is remembered as a renowned medicine man and skilled hunter of exceptional marksmanship. His fame extended beyond Ubulu-Uku to neighboring kingdoms and communities. One of the Obas of Benin invited Ezemu to prepare a special herbal remedy, "*Izo-Idayi* [8]*,"* which reportedly prolonged the Oba's life. It was said that this tradition continued as successive Obas requested the same treatment from Ezemu's descendants.

There are multiple accounts of the migration story, each with slight variations:

According to oral tradition, Ezemu's grandparents migrated from a far region and settled first in Ife, from Ife, they moved to Afor, a village in present-day Ndokwa Local Government Area of Delta State. After a long stay in Afor, Ezemu's parents gave him and his siblings a pot *(Ududu)* containing herbal mixtures and instructed them to settle wherever the pot fell. Ezemu embarked on the journey with two of his siblings Obodo and Aniga

The pot fell at Ubulu-Unor, marking their settlement there. As a hunter and herbalist, Ezemu frequently traveled from Ubulu-Unor in search of games and herbs, he often rested under a large tree known as the "Ubulu" tree, located in what later became as Ubulu-Uku. One day, while resting, he noticed smoke rising in the distance, he went

towards the direction where the smoke was coming from and there he met a man called Ekei, a blacksmith and leader of a small group. Ekei and his people were already settlers there, the place was called Ani-Ekei. Later, he encountered another settlement led by Anugwe, the descendants of Anugwe were called Umu-Anugwe. He formed a cordial relationship with these two men, and visited them often. Before Ezemu came, these two men and their clans lived seperately but Ezemu brought them together.

Being ambitious, wise, and strategic, after sometime, he raised the question of leadership, asking whether they felt the need for a King. Ekei declined due to his age, while Anugwe refused, citing his focus on farming, in oral accounts, Umu-Anugwe are often referred to as"ndi ju Eze shali ji(meaning those that rejected the crown for farming)[9]. Ezemu then asked whether he could take up the kingship, and the two men agreed. Following this, Ezemu traveled to the ancient Benin Empire. At that time, the influence of the Oba of Benin extended beyond the ancient Benin empire. He sought the Oba's approval to become king. The Oba granted his blessing and presented him with a staff of office.

Upon returning to Ubulu Unor to announce his new status as king, his sister, Obodo, sat him down and shaved his hair, as he had become quite unkempt. Prior to this, Ezemu had long hair. He was known as "Eze isi iyomiyo" (King with long hair). Obodo's act of shaving and tidying him up demonstrated a motherly role, further reinforcing oral traditions that suggest she was a woman. As it is uncommon for men to perform such a task. The town's name, Ubulu-Uku, derives from the "Ubulu" tree, under which Ezemu

often rested, and "Uku," meaning "big," signifying the tree's grandeur. Though the tree still exists, it has suffered severe burns over time.

The origin of the Ubulu people has been attributed to various sources. In an interview, Obi Anene claimed that the Ubulu-Uku people migrated from Ife. He argued that their connection to the Yoruba is evident in certain cultural traits. For instance, Ezemu's staff remains a significant relic in the palace. Additionally, linguistic similarities exist between Ubulu-Uku and Yoruba. For example, the Yoruba word for "cat" is "ologbo," while in Ubulu-Uku, it is "onogbo" in other Igbo dialects, it is "pussu." Similarly, the Yoruba word for "beans," "ewa," is "iwa" in Ubulu-Uku[10]. Due to gender norms, Obodo, despite her seniority, was never recognized as a ruler. Instead, her descendants became the Okpalas of Umuata, the lineage of Obodo.

Another account has it that, Ezemu and his siblings were persuaded by their weary and aged parents to leave their village, Afor, located in Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State. This decision was made to avoid imminent extinction from a warring army led by the reigning monarch of Idu land and to preserve the sacred guardian pot of power, "*Ududu*." The people who departed Afor included Obodo, Ezemu, Aniga, Ekehe, and other families who sought to survive the siege. Accompanied by their wives and relations, Ezemu and his siblings journeyed eastward. Upon reaching a location where the "Ududu" fell and broke, Ezemu, Obodo, Ekehe, and Aniga decided to settle there [11]. They established their first home approximately 120 kilometers from their

original village, Afor. This new settlement became known as Ani-Obodo, now Ubulu-Unor, and is regarded by all Ubulus as the ancestral home of the first settlers, Ezemu and Obodo.

Upon their arrival at the new settlement. During the process of "Ima-Ani"(a practice where a tree is planted to signify the first settler of a place), Obodo, as the eldest, insisted on holding the bottom of the stick while Ezemu held the top. When the time came to pour libation to the gods under the tree, Ezemu attempted to do so, but Obodo objected. As the senior, Obodo claimed the exclusive right to pour libation and further insisted that since she had held the planted tree at the bottom, the land belonged to her. Consequently, Obodo named the place Ani-Obodo, much to Ezemu's dismay. It was later changed to Ubulu-Unor. Determined to establish his own settlement, Ezemu took his family and moved inward toward a large tree where he frequently hunted, carrying with him a portion of the broken calabash and an *egbo* tree. While resting under the "Ubulu" tree, he noticed smoke rising in the distance. Curious, he followed the smoke and arrived at the edge of what is now the Isho quarters of Ubulu-Uku. There, Ezemu encountered Ekei and his clan, he befriended them. Venturing eastward, he discovered a group of farm settlers who identified themselves as Umu Anugwe. These two clans, Ani-Ekei and Ani-Anugwe, were likely unaware of each other until Ezemu facilitated their introduction. Their interaction soon led to a strong friendship. Ezemu gained their trust over time and proposed an alliance to establish a ruling authority. However, both Ekei and Anugwe

declined, citing their old age or preoccupations. Consequently, Ezemu became the first king of Ubulu-Uku.

Despite this, Ani-Obodo, the initial settlement of Ezemu and his brothers (Obodo, Aniga, and Ekehe), remained significant. After Ezemu was chosen as the king of Ubulu-Uku, he traveled to Ani-Obodo to inform his siblings of the news. In a symbolic gesture, his sister Obodo shaved his hair to prepare him for his coronation.

Ubulu-Uku is seen as the headquarters of all Ubulu clans. Some of the customs and traditions instituted by Ezemu are still practiced by the Ubulu clans today. While the Ubulu clans in Aniocha South operate independently with their own rulers, they maintain common ties. For instance, some quarters found in Ubulu-Okiti are also present in Ubulu-Uku, and their greetings are similar. If the oldest man in a clan is from Ubulu-Uku, he is seen as the overall head of the family, and other members including those from Ubulu-Okiti must come to Ubulu-Uku for family meetings. This tradition also works vice versa. The Ubulu clans are deeply interconnected, like three fingers of the same hand, bound by shared customs, values, and traditions. Their lineage traces back to a common ancestral root, reinforcing their unity and cultural identity.

Ezemu is known as one of the three greatest occultic grandmasters in history and was said to possess mystical powers that made him famous within both the Igbo communities and in Benin (Idu). His mystical abilities strengthened diplomatic ties between Ubulu-Uku and Benin, which the Oba of Benin relied on and maintained. Ubulu-Uku existed as an independent and autonomous kingdom. One story recounts that

Ezemu, while on his way to Benin to visit the Oba, he encountered a palm wine tapper on a tree and requested some palm wine. The tapper refused, prompting Ezemu to tell him, "Wait on the tree until I return." Ezemu then continued his journey and was away for weeks. Upon his return, he said to the tapper, "Let us go home." By then, the tapper had died on the tree, and only his skeleton remained. As his remains fell to the ground, the medicine man gathered the pieces. Ezemu was greatly feared, as no one wanted to challenge him.

In another of his exploits, he visited a neighboring town to confront them for an offense they had committed. Seeking refuge, he gathered the children in the community on a particular day, entered a basket, and instructed them to drag him along the road. As they did, each child mysteriously turned into an anthill, and it is said that the community has remained so ever since. Oral accounts has it that he did not die a natural death, his sudden disappearance from his throne remains mysterious [12].

As Ezemu settled in Ubulu Uku and began ruling as king, he had two children: a son, Ijedinkajezie, and a daughter, Oziemife, commonly called "Ozim." Ijedinka, being the only son, was later killed in a neighboring village, which meant Ezemu had no male successor. To prevent the loss of his lineage, he performed certain rites on his daughter that bound her to her father's house. While she was permitted to have children, she could not live with her husband, outside her father's house, and her children could not bear their father's name. Instead, they took the name of their maternal grandfather, Ezemu. This tradition, known as "i do me madu nu uno," was instituted in the Ubulu clans. It was

typically performed to keep a woman at home. The descendants of Ezemu's only child (female) were later referred to as "Umu-Ozim." Some of them, feeling resentment and oppression, later left to form Ubulu Okiti. Although Ezemu was not the first settler in Ubulu-Uku, the establishment of the kingdom is attributed to him, as he was its first ruler. Thus, he is revered as the founding father of the Ubulu Kingdom.

The Separation of Ubulu Okiti from Ubulu Uku

Until the 19th century, Ubulu Okiti existed as a quarter in Ubulu Uku. Due to leadership struggles, resentment, and marginalization, internal conflicts and rivalries arose among the Ubulu brothers, leading to a faction breaking away to establish Ubulu-Okiti.

Although they broke away, they didn't immediately have their own King. Instead they were ruled by Onichies, who reported to the palace in Ubulu Uku.The separation was not without conflict. As more people migrated from Ubulu Uku, disputes and demands for autonomy intensified, leading to further divisions. The first settlers in Ubulu Okiti are said to be the "Umu-Ozims," who, after a series of leadership disputes in Ubulu-Uku, left to form their own kingdom. Though the conflict was eventually resolved, they never returned to Ubulu-Uku.

Why It Is Called "Okiti"

There are different accounts of how Ubulu Okiti got its name. One version suggests that when the new settlers in Ubulu-Okiti visited their brothers in Ubulu-Uku, their

relatives observed that they looked well-fed and nourished, referring to them as "kitim kitim," which eventually evolved into "Okiti."

A slightly different version states that during their conflict with Ubulu-Uku, the settlers took away a sacred medicine pot called "Okite," and their method of dispersal led to them being referred to as "Okiti.pu" "Ubulu" was later added to maintain ties among the Ubulu clans. The third account is that seperation happened during the reign of Obi Okitikpa of Ubulu-Uku, hence the name Ubulu-Okiti.

Expansion of Ubulu Okiti

Over time, other settlers migrated into the region. Utoli, the father of the Ashama people, befriended one of the earliest settlers in Okiti, named Aloh. The Umu-Idu people in Ubulu-Okiti migrated from Idu (Benin), while others from neighboring kingdoms also settled there. Gradually, the region expanded into what is now known as Ubulu-Okiti. From its earliest days, Ubulu-Okiti's economy was rooted in agriculture. The first settlers enjoyed bountiful harvests, which sustained them after each farming season. As the community expanded with more settlers, the abundance of palm trees led to a heavy reliance on palm wine tapping.

Men primarily engaged in palm wine tapping and yam cultivation, while women were responsible for palm oil production, household duties, market activities, and vegetable farming. It was considered an abomination for a man to cultivate cocoyam, as it was not regarded as a major crop. While husbands could assist their wives with cocoyam farming, a man who fully engaged in it was perceived as effeminate. A man's strength

and maturity were measured by his ability to tap palm wine. If he was not involved in palm wine tapping, he was considered lazy and unserious. Given the abundance of palm trees, palm wine became a significant source of income for the community from its inception.

Political Structure

Like many pre-colonial societies, Ubulu-Okiti had an age-based political system that respected elder leadership. Initially, it was not fully autonomous but was governed by regents known as Onichies, who were appointed by the Obi of Ubulu-Uku. The Onichie was not chosen from the royal family, this was done in order to to maintain a balance of power. His role was to serve as an intermediary between the people of Ubulu-Okiti and the Obi of Ubulu-Uku, relaying messages and ensuring the king remained informed about the affairs of the community. The "*Onichie"* reported to the Obi everything he needed to know about Ubulu- Okiti. If there was a message from the king to the people, it was passed through the *"Onichie*." He served as the intermediary between the people of Ubulu Okiti and the Obi of Ubulu-Uku.

The people traveled from Ubulu-Okiti to Ubulu- Uku for meetings. If there was communal work required at the palace, the people of Okiti would travel to Ubulu- Uku to participate. Hunters who caught large games were expected to present it to the Obi of Ubulu- Uku, this was seen as a sign of honor to the King. While the settlers were allowed to form their own community, their activities remained largely regulated by the ruling family in Ubulu-Uku. This arrangement persisted for a time, but eventually, the people of

Ubulu-Okiti began agitating for their own king and full independence. The kingmakers in both Ubulu-Uku and Ubulu-Okiti remain descendants of "Ozim" (Umu-Ozim) and are responsible for selecting kings and deciding matters concerning the throne. Before Ubulu-Okiti had its own King, the Onichie was the highest-ranking authority. After the community established its first king, the Onichie became second in command and acted in the king's capacity when necessary.

Ubulu Okiti is divided into six quarters: Ugba, Ashaba Okiti, Ogbe-Aku, Ogbe-Iyase, Ogbe-Ani, and Ogbe-Obi. Each quarter comprises multiple kindred. An administrative chief represents each quarter, serving as its head and acting as a delegate for palace meetings. These chiefs are the "ndi isi ogbe." The third in command after the Onichie is the Odafe-ede. Then there are other administrative chiefs such as the "Isibe", "the Ozoma", "the Ojubi", "the Oduah", and "the Owele".Each of these administrative chiefs is greeted based on their title: the Ozoma is greeted with "Onya," the Oduah is greeted with "Nwadei," and the Owele is greeted with "Ojeani." Just as the greetings vary, the responses also differ according to the titleholders. After the administrative chiefs, next come the palace chiefs. The "Ojiba" is the head of all palace chiefs, followed by the "Ozoma-Imuno" and others.

Following the palace chiefs are the war chiefs. The Iyase-Onowu is the head of the war chiefs, and like other chiefs, the Iyase and his children are greeted with "Onowu." Next in command after the Iyase is the Odogwu, who is greeted as "Odogwu-abii," followed by the Okita-oza, greeted as "Okita." "Oguluzeme" is another title held by a war

chief, among others. Each of these chiefs plays a distinct role in the political structure of the kingdom. The Onichie deputizes on behalf of the king in his absence, calls, and presides over meetings at his discretion. The chiefs have a general day of meeting called "Izu-ani," but the Onichie can schedule additional meetings as needed. He also enforces rules. In the absence of the Onichie, the Ojubi is next in command. The "Ndi isi ogbe" (head of quarters) represent their quarters and kindred.

At the lower level, a quarter comprises many kindred. The oldest man in each kindred is regarded as the "Diokpa," who serves as the representative of his kindred. Family disputes and other minor conflicts are brought before the Diokpa, who acts as a father figure, offering counsel. As a mark of respect, he is entitled to certain farm produce harvested by farmers in his kindred, along with other privileges[13].The Diokpa also represents his kindred in meetings ("Izu") when all kindred in the same quarter convene. While the Diokpa is accorded respect as the head of his kindred, each family within a kindred has its own representative—the oldest man in the family. However, the head of the quarter holds a higher rank as he represents not just his own kindred but all kindred under his jurisdiction.

The Iyase (head of war chiefs) is responsible for gathering and mobilizing warriors at the king's command. He oversees their training and ensures the security of the community. His duties include remaining vigilant for potential conflicts with neighboring kingdoms, preparing defenses, and organizing attacks when necessary. When required, the Iyase also led military conquests against weaker and less populated neighboring

villages. Additionally, he plays a crucial role in forming military alliances with nearby kingdoms when the need arose. The warriors of Ubulu-Okiti and Ubulu-Uku united with other forces from neighboring kingdoms across the Delta region and the Southeast during the "Ekumeku War," which lasted for many years in the late 19th century. This war was a resistance movement against the imposition of colonial rule and the disruption of indigenous cultures and traditions.

Umunna, a group of men from the same kindred with shared patrilineal and matrilineal descent. They are sons of a particular kindred, and their input is crucial in matters related to marriage, family dispute resolution, burial ceremonies, and other communal decisions. Fines and levies are imposed on any member of a kindred who defies the orders or instructions of the Umunna. The Umuada represents the female category of daughters from the same patrilineal and matrilineal descent. They ensure that necessary requirements are met during burials and marriage ceremonies within their kindred. The Umuada also provides wedding gifts to a young bride after her bride price has been successfully paid. Similar to the Umunna, they impose levies and fines on erring members who deviate from established rules and traditions. The Umunna and Umuada play essential roles in every kindred. During occasions, they oversee certain responsibilities in line with the custom of the land. When a person dies within a kindred, only the Umunna is permitted to dig the grave. Specific responsibilities are designated exclusively for the Umunna and Umuada within each kindred. A person may face sanctions or suspension from the Umunna or Umuada council if they exhibit behavior

that contradicts their code of conduct or repeatedly violate established norms. These rules are grounded in the values, beliefs, and traditions of the community.

Ubulu-Okiti functioned as a hierarchical monarchy, with a central king overseeing the kingdom while subordinate leaders managed the various clans and quarters. Each quarter has a leader, and a quarter consists of multiple kindred. Each kindred is governed by its oldest man. Matters that cannot be resolved by family heads are first taken to the kindred, where the oldest man presides and delivers judgment. If unresolved, the issue is taken to the head of the quarter before being presented to the Onichie or the king. However, certain communal matters may require higher authority intervention beyond the lower-level leadership. These chiefs and elders serve as arbiters at their various levels [14,] and matters beyond their control are taken to the full assembly.

Each age set had designated rights, duties, and obligations. The youth groups, which comprised able-bodied men and young boys of age, were referred to as "Ikolo." Duties were assigned on different days for matters affecting the community, such as communal clearing and other responsibilities. Respect was accorded to the elders and chiefs as they formed the core of the community's administrative system. Hard work was also encouraged, as some individuals could earn titles based on their dedication to their group. The general village assembly meetings were usually held in the designated "Illoh" or village square.

Method of Dispute Settlement

The hierarchical monarchy allowed every adult male in the village to participate in its political processes. Disputes such as land conflicts, marital issues, and theft were first tabled before the "ogbe," where "Ndi-eboh" were present, and the case was presided over by the oldest man in the clan, the "Diokpa." The complainant would first present their case before the elders, followed by a question-and-answer session. Cross-examinations were conducted to verify the claims [15]of both the complainant and the accused. Decisions were made by the elders after carefully hearing both sides. The system ensured that each quarter, clan, and kindred could preside over their affairs without interference from higher authorities. Only matters beyond their control were brought before the palace. An elder who was not from a particular kindred was not allowed to participate in the meetings or gatherings of that specific kindred within their quarter.

Outside the palace authority, the hierarchy was structured as follows: the Ogbe was the highest, followed by Ebo, then Idumu. The Obodo comprised the entire village, including the palace[16], Ogbe, Idumu, and Uno. Each of these groups was governed by respective Diokpas and elders. The respect culture accorded the Diokpa certain rights and privileges based on his age and the position he occupied.

When the palace called for meetings, all elders and chiefs representing each clan, kindred, and quarter were required to be present. During palace meetings, the war chiefs were seated on the left-hand side of the king, while the palace chiefs sat on the right-hand side.

The smallest unit in the political and social structure was the Uno (house) [17]which comprised the father, mother/wives, and children. In some families, it also included grandparents, parents, children, and other relatives living in the same household.

Intergroup Relations and Economic Life

Intergroup relations may be described as intercourse that transpired between two immediate neighbors, it is important to note that it is not limited to only neighbors of immediate boundaries. Studies have shown that across the length and breadth of Nigeria,[18]various ethnic groups have interacted even when they do not share immediate boundaries. Like every pre-colonial African society, the trade-by-barter system [19]was the major means of commerce. It facilitated trade and exchange of goods and services, and Ubulu-Okiti was no exception to this system.

The people of Ubulu-Okiti actively engaged in trade, fostering economic and social interactions with various neighboring and distant communities. Their commercial activities extended beyond their immediate environment, establishing trade links with traders from Asaba and across the Niger. Additionally, they maintained economic relations with nearby kingdoms such as Ubulu-Uku, Issele-Uku, and others, further strengthening their regional trade network.

Beyond these local interactions, Ubulu-Okiti traders also engaged in commerce with merchants from Benin and Lagos. This extensive trade network enabled the people of Ubulu- Okiti to access goods that were not readily available in their community.

They primarily sold palm wine, palm oil, other palm and agricultural produce, which were highly valued commodities. In exchange, they obtained essential goods such as fish, salt, and various other items necessary for their sustenance and economic well-being.

Trade in Ubulu-Okiti was structured around a four-day market cycle. Originally, the designated market day was *Nkwor,* but it was later changed to *Orie.* On this day, traders from different regions gathered at the Ubulu-Okiti market to exchange goods. Likewise, on the market days of other neighboring communities, Ubulu-Okiti traders traveled to their markets to conduct business. This system of reciprocal trade reinforced economic ties and facilitated intergroup relations, ensuring a steady flow of goods and cultural interactions between Ubulu-Okiti and its trading partners. Through these trade activities, the people of Ubulu-Okiti not only sustained their economy but also contributed to regional commerce, fostering mutual dependence and strengthening relationships with other communities. Rainfall was a major source of water supply for the people. As they had only one river, which in later times became restricted from communal use and it was elevated to the position of a sacred river.

Customs and Traditions (Omena-Ani)

The customs and traditions of Ubulu-Okiti closely resemble those of other Ubulu clans and share similarities with many traditions of the South East region. One of the core values of Ubulu-Okiti is deep respect for elders, alongside a strong commitment to moral integrity and peaceful coexistence. Hard work and diligence are also highly esteemed virtues. Renowned as one of the most tranquil communities in Aniocha South and Delta

State, Ubulu-Okiti thrives as an agrarian society with a deep spirit of hospitality. This warm and welcoming nature has long made the community a favored stop for travelers, particularly long-distance travellers seeking rest and respite on their journeys.

The name "Aniocha" means "Land of purity and cleanliness," with "Ocha" literally translating to "white," symbolizing purity. This is why the Aniocha region, which includes Ubulu-Okiti, is known for its distinctive "*Akwa-ocha*" fabric. Traditionally, this handwoven white cloth was unique to Ubulu-Okiti and Ubulu-Uku. In the pre-colonial era, outside of agriculture, weaving *akwa-ocha* was a primary occupation for the women of these communities. In pre-colonial Ubulu-Okiti, akwa-Ocha was deeply embedded in traditional dress. Every region in pre-colonial Nigeria had its own distinctive clothing, and for Ubulu-Okiti, *akwa-ocha* was the standard. It was used for burial ceremonies, marriage rites, and was worn by chiefs and warriors alike. Every indigene utilized *akwa-ocha* in the pre-colonial era, not only for clothing but also in purification rituals and traditional meetings of chiefs.

Akwa-ocha came in different styles and categories. The attire varied in form:

1. Chiefs wore two pieces sewn together as a skirt, known as "*Ibe-na-bi*," while three pieces were stitched together as tops.
2. Elderly women draped three pieces as wrappers, called "*Ibe-atoh*," complemented by two pieces as tops.
3. Warriors sported red *akwa-ocha*, a striking emblem of courage and readiness for war.

4. Ritualists and traditionalists used *akwa-ocha* in sacred ceremonies, signifying purity and ancestral connection.

One of the most striking customs surrounding *akwa-ocha* was its role in validating a bride's chastity. On the wedding night, a special *akwa-ocha* (of lesser quality) was presented to the bride by her mother. The following morning, the groom was expected to return the cloth, bearing bloodstains as evidence of the bride's virginity. If the proof was affirmed, jubilations erupted. The mother paraded the stained fabric, proudly showcasing it to family and well-wishers, who in turn showered her with praises for raising a virtuous daughter. This moment elevated the status of the bride, her husband, and her family, reinforcing the communal values tied to chastity and discipline.

Ubulu-Okiti's customs and traditions are not mere relics of the past but enduring elements that continue to shape the identity and cultural pride of the people.

Young unmarried girls traditionally wore "*akwa-ocha*," a handwoven fabric deeply rooted in Ubulu-Okiti's heritage. For them, it was known as "mpe," a modest covering for their genitals and sensitive areas. Over time, a less intricate fabric, the "China poplin," was introduced for young girls, offering ease of washing while maintaining cultural significance. For young men and village youth, a variation called "mpe-orlu" was commonly worn. This version of "*akwa-ocha"* was of slightly lesser quality, yet it remained an essential part of their attire, particularly for labor-intensive activities. These young men would wrap it around their loins, signifying their readiness

for work while adhering to cultural expectations. Married women also had specific customs tied to "*akwa-ocha*." When preparing meals for their husbands and children, a wife would dress in this fabric to perform *"nni-ugodi*" (the act of cooking). It symbolized duty, respect, and the nurturing role of a woman in her home. Burial ceremonies held a deep connection to "*akwa-ocha."* The deceased's family, particularly their children, would emerge dressed in the fabric, signifying purity, continuity, and respect for their lineage. Similarly, a bride preparing for marriage adorned herself in "*akwa-ocha,"* as it was the only acceptable material for her wedding attire, reinforcing its status as an emblem of honor and tradition.

Across pre-colonial Nigerian societies, clothing held profound cultural significance. The Yoruba had "*Adire,"* a dyed fabric that reflected their artistic identity, while in Northern Nigeria, intricately embroidered robes symbolized status and nobility. Among the Deltans, particularly in Ubulu-Okiti, "*Akwa-ocha*" was more than just clothing—it was a marker of identity, woven exclusively by the women of Ubulu-Okiti and Ubulu-Uku. It came in different categories, each tailored for a specific occasion, making it an indispensable aspect of daily and ceremonial life. Today, "*akwa-ocha*" retains its place in Ubulu-Okiti's cultural fabric, though Westernization has influenced its use. Modern fashion and convenience have introduced new dressing styles that many now favor. However, its relevance endures, especially in burial rites, where it remains a poignant symbol of heritage and respect for the departed. While no longer the dominant

everyday attire, "*akwa-ocha*" continues to weave its legacy through the traditions and ceremonies of Ubulu-Okiti.

Customs and traditions in Ubulu-Okiti are deeply rooted in ancestral heritage, shaping the moral fabric of the community. Incest is considered an abomination, a belief not unique to Ubulu-Okiti but widely upheld across traditional Nigerian societies. Even the Bible condemns incest, reinforcing its moral and spiritual prohibition. The community places a high value on integrity and strongly condemns acts such as theft, murder, and adultery and other crimes [20]. While some offenses may carry lighter penalties, crimes like theft, murder and adultery have severe consequences. A thief caught in the village is publicly shamed—forced to carry the stolen item on their head while being paraded through the community. Children and other villagers follow, singing mocking songs as they escort the culprit to the Diokpa or Ndi-Ichie, where judgment is rendered.

Adultery, especially when committed by a married woman, is regarded as a serious offense with dire repercussions. It is believed to invite misfortune, not just upon the woman but upon her entire household. If a woman is unfaithful, her children may inexplicably fall sick and die unless she confesses. If the husband is aware but conceals it—perhaps because his wife is the family's breadwinner—he, too, may suffer grave misfortune, including illness and death. A woman guilty of adultery is considered unclean and unfit to prepare food for her family, as doing so could bring harm, especially to her husband and children. If she is caught or confesses, the Umu-Ada (daughters of her husband's kindred) conduct a purification ritual known as "*Isia-Ify*." This lengthy process

involves multiple cleansing rites to purify the woman, her husband, children, and household, dispelling any spiritual harm caused by her actions. Only after completing these rites is she deemed cleansed and restored. Refusal to undergo the purification process carries heavy consequences. She may be ostracized, denied access to her husband's home, or even cast out of the marriage entirely. In Ubulu-Okiti, tradition demands accountability, ensuring that moral transgressions are addressed to maintain harmony within the community.

Festival and Celebration

The Ine Festival (*Iwa-ji*), is the most revered cultural celebration in Okiti. More than just a feast, it is a sacred tradition marking the end of one agricultural year and the dawn of another. A time of thanksgiving, unity, and renewal, the festival symbolizes the community's deep connection to the land and its ancestors. Every September, the air in Okiti becomes electric with anticipation as preparations begin for this grand event, which lasts for eight days.

The festival opens with *ika-Ine*—a moment of ritual significance. In a carefully choreographed tradition, the palace chiefs and warlords approach the king, declaring, "We want to eat yam." Their request is not a mere statement of hunger—it is a formal sign that the harvest is ripe, awaiting the King's blessing. However, no one is permitted to taste the new yam without the King's approval. Instead of granting immediate permission, the King sends them away with an order: "they must return with what they will use to eat the yam". This command sets off an ancient ritual. The warlords,

formidable figures of the land, venture into the forest to cut sacred leaves, which they bring back to the palace. Four times they repeat this journey, each time dropping the leaves at the King's feet. These leaves are not ordinary—they symbolize human heads, a throwback to the warrior culture of old. When the final bundle is laid, the King places his feet upon them, uttering prayers and invoking the spirits of the land to ensure a bountiful harvest and a year free of misfortune. Four days before the festival begins, a moment of great significance unfolds. The Ikenga—the revered god of war—is brought down by all the warlords. This act signals an important decree: from this moment onward, no one may engage in battle or violence. Any violation of this sacred peace will be met with severe sanctions. The final proclamation of the festival date is not spoken but thundered. Those who have consulted the village deity emerge to announce the chosen day, and with it, gunshots pierce the sky—a deafening declaration that the *Ine* Festival is set to begin. With the stage set and the gods appeased, Okiti stands on the brink of celebration, ready to embrace the new year with feasting, joy, and reverence.

Participation and Rituals of the Ine Festival

The Ine festival is not just a communal celebration—it is a sacred tradition that upholds the values of hard work and self-sufficiency. Participation is strictly reserved for those who own a yam farm. A man who does not cultivate his own yams is forbidden from taking part; it is considered a taboo for anyone to purchase yams from the market for the festival. To do so would be an insult to the gods of the land, a violation of the very essence of the festival's purpose—honoring the fruits of one's labor. On the day marking

the commencement of the festival, the community gathers in reverence. Libations are poured, sacrifices are offered, and prayers of gratitude fill the air, directed toward their Chi—the personal and communal spiritual forces that have guided them through another farming season. The people give thanks that the year's labor was fruitful, that no tragedies befell the farmers[21], and that they were kept safe from accidents or untimely deaths in the fields.

The main ritual begins with the *Ilo-fe-ji-oku*, a deeply symbolic ceremony honoring the farm god/goddess—the deity believed to oversee productivity and protect farmers in their toil. With this act, the people seek continued blessings for prosperity and abundance in the coming season. As the sun begins to set, a tradition both bold and unyielding unfolds.

Young girls take to the village square, dancing and singing, but theirs is no ordinary performance—it is one laced with sharp satire, a fearless exposé of the village's moral failings. For the next seven days, this festival becomes a week of reckoning. Those who have stolen, committed adultery, or even murder find their deeds boldly called out in song. No wrongdoer, no matter their status, is spared from this public satire. It is a time of truth and cleansing, where justice is served not through punishment, but through the unflinching voices of the community. During this sacred week, those whose misdeeds are exposed must remain silent. They have no right to retaliate or protest, for the festival serves as a time of purification, ensuring that the land is not tainted by hidden sins. Once the festival ends, however, the grace period expires. Should anyone mock or ridicule a

wrongdoer outside this seven-day window, the accused regains the right to defend themselves.

The eve of the eighth day is one of profound respect and homage. Men, women, and youth visit the homes of chiefs, elders, and revered ancestors—those whose contributions have shaped the community. They pay their respects, acknowledging their wisdom and sacrifices. On the final day, the entire village unites in a grand procession. They first gather at the homes of village heads, then move in unison to the village square, and from there, they proceed to the palace in an atmosphere of jubilant dancing and merriment. At the palace, the *Ina-aka* ritual takes place—a solemn display of allegiance and respect to the King. The administrative chiefs, palace chiefs, and warlords lead this sacred act, reaffirming their loyalty. Once completed, the King is led back to the village square in a majestic procession, where the festival reaches its climax.

The square erupts with performances, acrobatic displays, drumming, and unrestrained celebration. The King himself, adorned in full royal regalia, performs before the crowd, embodying the spirit of the festival as he entertains the people. As the festivities wind down, the King is escorted back to his palace, and in turn, each village quarter leads its respective chief home. Later in the evening, the people gather once again at the village square for "*Igu-ji*," the grand finale of the festival. This marks the climax of the celebrations, filled with singing, dancing, and prayers for a prosperous farming season ahead.

On the eight-day Ine festival concludes, the following day is observed as "*Ine-akwa ocha*," a ceremony led by the women. The highlight of this event is the elegant "*akwa-ocha*" attire they adorn, symbolizing purity and renewal. Young mothers and women of the village move through the community, chanting *"iyi-ai-kpo, iyi na nu nua ooo*." This ritual serves to nullify any curses or negative pronouncements made by the children or indigenes, ensuring that no ill words take root in anyone's life.

The Ine festival itself is traditionally held on *Nkwor* day, honoring the heroic legacies of ancestors. During this period, kings and chiefs are prohibited from partaking in the eating of the new yam—only the general community enjoys this privilege. However, a special day, *Orie,* is set aside eight days after the festival for the royalty to partake in the harvest. Beyond being a market day, Orie holds deep spiritual significance for Ubulu-Okiti. It is a day of governance and decision-making, where crucial matters concerning the throne and the community's welfare are deliberated. The day is particularly tied to the Ozim lineage, as their meetings are traditionally held on Orie. Furthermore, any descendant of Ozim who passes away is customarily laid to rest on this day, reinforcing its role as a time of solemn transitions and weighty decisions.

Other celebrations, such as marriage ceremonies, remain private affairs—but the true heartbeat of any festivity is the palm wine. After all, what is a festival without palm wine? It flows as freely as the laughter and stories exchanged, binding the people in a shared spirit of joy and tradition.

The Social Life of Ubulu-Okiti

Ubulu-Okiti is a community deeply rooted in peace, unity, and strong social ties. Their way of life is centered on communal living, where harmony and togetherness are valued above all else. One of the key elements that bound the people together is palm wine, considered the king of ceremonies. This cherished drink played a vital role in every major social event. At traditional marriages, it symbolized acceptance and unity between families. At burials, it was shared in remembrance of the departed. Village meetings were never complete without it, as it encouraged dialogue and camaraderie. Even in everyday life, palm wine was a staple at casual gatherings, reinforcing friendships and fostering a deep sense of belonging.

The nights in Ubulu-Okiti held their own magic. Under the full moon, families would gather in their courtyards, sharing stories that carried wisdom and humor. Elders passed down folklore, history, and lessons to the younger generation, ensuring the continuity of their traditions. Younger children and teenagers reveled in "*egwu onwa"*, immersed in the euphoria of the full moon." These moments were also a time to relax, reflect, and connect, strengthening the bonds within the community. In Ubulu-Okiti, social life was more than just interactions—it was a way of life, carefully nurtured through shared experiences, customs, and a deep appreciation for togetherness. Even when men gathered in farm huts "*Unubi"* to relax and unwind from the day's stress, the palm wine strengthened their merriment.

Age Grades and Social Organization in Ubulu-Okiti

In Ubulu-Okiti, age grades played a crucial role in organizing community life and strengthening social ties. These groups, formed based on age brackets, were more than just social units; they were structured institutions that fostered discipline, unity, and cooperation. The young boys/men were referred to as "*ndi-ikolo"* while the young girls were called *"umu- agboo"*. Each age grade had specific responsibilities that contributed to the well-being of the community. The youngest age grades assisted with communal tasks such as clearing pathways, and running errands for elders. The middle-aged groups took on heavier responsibilities, such as organizing village meetings, maintaining security. The elders, who had passed through all the ranks, acted as custodians of wisdom, acted as arbiters in disputes resolution, overseeing important decisions and ensuring that traditions were upheld.

One of the most unifying aspects of the age-grade system was the organization of festivals, ceremonies, and communal projects. During traditional marriages, burials, and initiation rites, age grades played key roles in planning, execution, and entertainment. They also collaborated in building infrastructure, such as repairing roads, clearing major roads and pathways, and assisting in large-scale farming activities. These collective efforts reinforced cooperation and ensured that no individual or family felt isolated. Beyond their formal duties, age grades provided a strong support system. In times of celebration, they rejoiced together; in moments of grief, they stood as one. This deep-rooted system of brotherhood and sisterhood ensured that the social fabric of Ubulu-Okiti remained intact, fostering a community where every individual had a place and a purpose.

Religious Life in Pre-Colonial Ubulu-Okiti

Before the arrival of Christianity, the people of Ubulu-Okiti had their traditional forms of worship, referring to the supreme God as Chi. While some believed in a personal Chi—a guiding force that shaped one's destiny—others engaged in more structured religious practices, including libation offerings, shrine visits (iyi), and sacrifices. Each quarter and family had distinct ways of connecting with their creator. Traditional worshippers revered various deities, among them Okiti Mmiri/Iyi Okiti, the village's sacred river. Unlike ordinary rivers, this body of water was considered sacred, and the people of Ubulu-Okiti neither swam, washed, nor fetched water from it. Other significant deities included Ikenga, Ogugu, and Ezemu, the latter of whom was later venerated among the Ubulu clans, particularly in Ubulu-Okiti and Ubulu-Uku.

Despite the prevalence of traditional worship, there were still those who believed in Chi as the supreme creator. They addressed Him with names such as Chukwu, Chineke, or Obinigwe, and when offering prayers or libations, they directed them toward the heavens, signifying their belief that God resided there. A well-known proverb in Ubulu-Okiti captures this concept: "Onye kwèli Chi e kwèli," loosely translating to "What you believe is what your Chi believes." This reflected the understanding that a person's spirituality was shaped by their perception of God. With the advent of Christianity, many of these traditional practices faded as people embraced the worship of the one true and Living God. Today, only a few individuals continue to engage in idol worship, while the majority have abandoned those rituals in favor of Christian faith. Ultimately, whether

through direct prayers to Chi or traditional rites offered to alusi (deities), each person's spirituality was shaped by their understanding of the divine.

In conclusion the economic, social, and religious life of Ubulu-Okiti in the pre-colonial era was deeply rooted in tradition, trade, and spiritual beliefs. The people maintained strong economic ties with neighboring communities, particularly Ubulu-Uku, from where Okiti originally migrated. The Onichies, as political figures, played a crucial role in governance and decision-making. Festivals such as Ine not only celebrated agricultural cycles but also reinforced communal bonds, while religious practices varied between those who worshipped deities and those who believed in Chi as the supreme creator. Through it all, the palm tree stood as a pillar of economic life, providing food, oil, and the ever-present palm wine—an essential element in both commerce and celebration. These aspects collectively shaped the identity and resilience of the Ubulu-Okiti people.

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CHAPTER THREE

CULTIVATION OF THE PALM TREE IN PRE-COLONIAL UBULU-OKITI

In pre-colonial Ubulu-Okiti, the cultivation of the oil palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis)* was a structured process, deeply embedded in the community's agricultural system. The palm tree was a major economic resource, providing palm oil, palm kernels, and palm wine, all of which played vital roles in trade, sustenance, and cultural practices.

Propagation and Planting

Oil palm trees thrived in the warm, humid climate of Ubulu-Okiti, where temperatures averaged around 30-32°C, with well-distributed annual rainfall of at least 200 cm. While the tree could tolerate dry spells of two to four months, it flourished best in fertile, well-drained soils. Farmers selected high-quality seeds from mature fruit

bunches. These seeds were extracted by scraping off the exocarp and mesocarp using knives or by retting in water [1]. To preserve viability, they were dried under shade for two days before storage.

Germination was a careful process. The seeds were soaked in water for five days, changing the water daily, then dried briefly before being placed in a warm, moist environment for about 80 days. Once germination commenced (typically within 10-12 days), the sprouted seeds were transferred to prepared nursery beds or placed in soil-filled containers, often using local methods equivalent to modern polybags. These nurseries were maintained with regular watering, especially in the dry season. When the young palms reached an appropriate size, they were transplanted into the main field using a triangular spacing system, ensuring sufficient room for root expansion and fruit production. This was ideally done at the onset of the rainy season (May-June) to take advantage of natural soil moisture.

Growth and Maintenance

A distinctive feature of the oil palm's development in Ubulu-Okiti was its slow initial growth phase. The tree took about three years before forming a visible trunk, as its apex expanded into an inverted cone. After this stage, its vertical growth accelerated, increasing by 25-50 cm per year, depending on environmental and hereditary factors. Oil palms were monoecious, producing both male and female inflorescences alternately in cycles. This natural reproductive pattern ensured consistent fruiting over time. The

process from flower formation to mature fruit took about 42 months[2], requiring patience and careful observation from farmers.

Weeding was a regular task in the early years of growth. Farmers manually cleared surrounding vegetation with cutlasses and hoes to prevent competition for nutrients and water. As the palm trees matured, their expanding canopy provided natural shade, suppressing weed growth. Palm groves were often maintained in communal or family-owned farmland, with younger generations learning the skills of palm cultivation through apprenticeship.

Harvesting and Utilization

Oil palm trees became productive between 7 and 10 years after planting. At this stage,

different parts of the tree were harvested for various uses:

Palm Wine: In Ubulu-Okiti, palm wine tapping was done by climbing the tree and making controlled incisions near the crown. A gourd or calabash was placed to collect the sap, which flowed steadily, particularly in the mornings and evenings. This method allowed the tree to continue producing wine for an extended period.

Palm Oil and Kernels: The fruit bunches ripened approximately 5-6 months after pollination. Harvesters used long knives or climbed the trees to cut the ripe bunches. The fruits were processed traditionally—boiled, pounded, and pressed to extract the rich red palm oil. The kernels were further processed for palm kernel oil or stored for trade. A

single oil palm tree remained productive for up to 30 years, ensuring a continuous supply of palm products. When older trees became less fruitful, new palms were cultivated to maintain a steady cycle of production.

The people of pre-colonial Ubulu-Okiti had a deep understanding of the oil palm's lifecycle, ensuring sustainable cultivation through traditional knowledge. Their methods of propagation, growth management, and harvesting allowed them to maximize the economic and cultural benefits of *Elaeis guineensis,* securing its role as a cornerstone of their livelihood.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PALM TREE TO UBULU-OKITI IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Ubulu- Okiti is a town situated in Aniocha South Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria. Northwards, it shares a common boundary with Issele- Mkpitime, Southwards with Ani- Agbala, and Eastwards with Otulu and Westward with Issele-Uku. Its population is estimated between five to six thousand with six quarters namely [1]: Ogbe-Iyase, Ugba, Ogbe- ani, Ashagba okiti, Ogbe oji/ Ogbe aku and Ogbe obi. It is a peaceful agrarian community. In this present day, they are mostly farmers, while some of the men

also engage in hunting and the women are traders and also farmers. In the pre-colonial era when palm wine tapping was a major source of livelihood for the men, while palm oil production and trade in other palm produce were mostly for the women, in recent times there has been decline this is due to civilization with younger generations, embracing other forms of livelihoods.

The Palm Tree and Ubulu-okiti in Pre-colonial Era

Elaeis guineensis, commonly known as the oil palm or African oil palm, is the most widespread and versatile species among the many varieties of palm trees. While other palms, such as the coconut palm, also exist, the oil palm was the most valuable to the people of Ubulu-Okiti because every part of it served a purpose. The oil palm was central to trade and commerce, primarily for its production of palm oil and palm wine, from the early years of Ubulu-Okiti, the community became renowned for its palm wine and palm oil production. The specific variety of palm trees found in the region produced a uniquely flavored wine, distinct from that of other areas. This exceptional quality made Ubulu-Okiti a sought-after destination for traders and buyers from distant regions, a legacy that continues to this day. Palm wine production and trade have remained a defining aspect of Ubulu-Okiti's economic and cultural identity.

When discussing the economic significance of the palm tree, it extends beyond just trade and commerce. While the palm tree played a crucial role in boosting trade by providing valuable products like palm oil, palm kernel oil (udeaku), and palm wine, its impact on economic life was much broader.

The palm tree contributed to livelihoods in multiple ways. Many people were engaged in tapping palm wine, processing palm oil, and extracting udeaku, which was widely used for both cosmetic and medicinal purposes. Additionally, the various parts of the palm tree—roots, fronds, bark, and fibrous chaff—were essential in daily life. They were used for construction, as a source of fuel, in traditional medicine [2], and in soap making, all of which supported local industries and provided economic sustenance.

Thus, the economic significance of the palm tree is not just about trade but also about its overall contribution to the community's survival, self-sufficiency, and development.

In Pre-colonial Ubuluokiti, the palm tree's importance can be categorized into three broad areas:

1. **Trade and Commerce** – Palm wine, referred to as "nkwu-enu"(up wine), palm oil (manu-nni), and palm kernel oil (udeaku) were highly valued trade commodities. The oil can be extracted from both the fruit and the seed. Palm fruit oil is derived from the outer mesocarp, while palm kernel oil is obtained from the endosperm. Most palm fruit oil is used in food products, whereas palm kernel oil is primarily utilized in non-edible products such as native black soap , detergents, and cosmetics. In recent times, it has also

been incorporated into the production of plastics, surfactants[3], herbicides, as well as various industrial and agricultural chemicals.

The palm oil trade flourished in the pre-colonial era, but by the 19th century, European demand surged due to its essential role as a lubricant for machinery and an ingredient in food production. Local communities in the Niger Delta, including Ubulu-Okiti, became heavily involved in palm oil production, making it a key economic activity that significantly influenced social structures and relationships. The trade led to increased interactions between European traders and African producers, reshaping local power dynamics and, at times, resulting in conflicts over resource control [4]. Palm oil was not only a crucial cash crop but was also deeply integrated into local diets and customs, solidifying its role as an economic and cultural staple in Ubulu-Okiti. The process of producing palm oil is rigorous and labor-intensive, requiring significant manpower. The extraction of red oil involves boiling the nuts for an entire day or alternatively treading them down in pits, kneading them,[5] and then drawing off the oil through a sieve.

2. **Livelihoods and Employment –** Many people engaged in tapping, processing, and selling palm products, providing economic sustenance. Larger production especially in the areas of palm oil production required more hands. The multifaceted nature of the palm tree made it possible that one cannot be idle during that period, a person who was not into tapping of palm wine or cutting of palm trees, can be involved in the production

and processing stage, a person who doesn't engage in processing stage can move to the selling stage i.e helping to market the commodity.

3. **Local Industries and Utility** – The tree's various parts were used for construction, fuel, traditional medicine, and other household need. This broad economic significance made the palm tree indispensable to Ubulu-Okiti's economy. It was not just a resource but a vital economic pillar that shaped the community's prosperity and self-sufficiency.

Traditional Palm Oil Processing in Ubulu-Okiti

Palm oil processing in the pre-colonial era was a meticulous five-stage practice, each step requiring skill, patience, and strength. While men handled the first stage—harvesting—the remaining four stages fell mostly to women and children. This division of labor ensured efficiency and granted women control over the palm kernel seeds, which they could process into palm kernel oil (udeaku) or dry and deshell for trade.

In Ubulu-Okiti, market operated on a four-day cycle (Eke, Orie, Afor,Nkwọ).Initially, Ubulu-Okiti's market day was known as Nkwọ, but over time, it was changed to Orie, marking a shift in the community's trading customs. Processed palm oil was taken to these markets, where it was either sold or exchanged for essential goods.

Although cowrie shells and coins had already found their way into local transactions, the age-old barter system was still practiced, allowing people to trade their produce for items they did not grow or manufacture. The stages involved in palm oil processing are:

1. **Harvesting (Iwu Aku**): The first stage of palm oil processing was the harvesting of palm fruit (*Elaeis guineensis*). Skilled tappers ascended the towering palm trees with the aid of an *agbuu*, a sturdy, rope-like belt woven from palm fronds. This was the method of old, long before the arrival of the wire-climbing belt known as *ukpai*. Harvesting required not just strength but precision, for the palm tree bears its fruit only at the crown, and a single misstep could mean a fatal fall. Thus, only seasoned tappers, whose feet had learned the language of the tree, were entrusted with cutting down the heavy bunches of palm fruit. Once harvested, the bunches were carried to the processing site. However, they were not always worked on immediately; the fruits were often left to rest for several hours or days. This waiting period allowed the fruits to ripen further, making the extraction process smoother and yielding more oil. Afterwards the fruits are stripped by the tappers, this involves separating the fruits from the main bunch with the aid of a cutlass.

2. **Threshing (Ita Nkpulu Aku):** At this stage, women and children undertook the laborious task of separating the palm fruits (nkpulu aku) from the bunches. This was done in two ways either by beating the bunch vigorously against the ground to loosen the fruits or picking out the fruits one by one by hand. The work was slow and painful, as the bunches bristled with sharp, spiky projections that pricked and scraped the hands of those who handled them. Yet, with calloused fingers and practiced endurance, the women and children persevered, for every fruit they freed was a step closer to the rich, red oil that sustained their households

3. **Boiling (Ikwu Aku):** After the palm fruits were separated, they were thoroughly rinsed and placed into a large pot for boiling. This process softened the mesocarp (the fleshy part of the fruit), making it easier to extract the oil. Boiling took several hours or could even last up to a full day, especially in large-scale production where a greater volume of fruit required prolonged heating to achieve the desired softness.

4. **Pounding and Extracting the Juice (Ipa Aku):** Once softened, the palm fruits were removed from the fire and transferred into a large odo (mortar), where they were pounded vigorously with aka odo (heavy pestles). In larger operations, the pounding was done in an ogbo, a much broader pounding hole, allowing for greater efficiency in extracting the rich pulp and juice. Palm oil is extracted from the fleshy mesocarp [6].After pounding, water is poured into the *odo* or *ogbo* to aid in the separation of the juice from the fibrous pulp. The palm kernel seeds (nkpulu aku) naturally detach during this process, while the remaining fiber gradually turned to chaff. The extracted juice is then carefully sieved and set aside for the final stage of processing.

5. **Cooking and Oil Separation (iyi mmanu aku):** The sieved juice is returned to the fire for another round of boiling, a crucial step in separating the oil from the water. As the mixture heats, the water gradually evaporates, leaving behind the rich, golden-red palm oil. This stage demands patience and experience, as careful monitoring is needed to prevent burning or spillage. Once the oil is fully separated, it is skillfully scooped into large clay pots and left to cool before being stored in jars for household use or taken to the market for trade.

Nothing is wasted in this process—every part of the palm fruit found a purpose. The residual palm kernel seeds remains in the hands of the women, who could either process them into udeaku (palm kernel oil) or dry and deshell them for sale. Freshly processed palm oil carries a distinct, rich aroma that sets it apart. This unique scent is a hallmark of its freshness and purity, often recognized by those familiar with traditional palm oil production. This traditional method of palm oil production is deeply woven into the economic fabric of the community, sustaining families and strengthening trade networks. Women played a crucial role in palm oil production during the pre-colonial era. While men handled the demanding tasks of climbing palm trees and harvesting the fruit, women were responsible for gathering and processing the palm fruit. They also played an active role in transporting the processed oil to the market [7], ensuring that no resource was wasted and that palm oil remained at the heart of Ubulu-Okiti's prosperity.

Traditional Palm Wine Tapping in Ubulu-Okiti (Iyi Mmaya Nkwu)

Palm wine (nkwu enu) is extracted from the inflorescences of the oil palm *(Elaeis guineensis*), locally known in Ubuluokiti as *ogbanku*. This tree produces multiple inflorescences each year, some of which are tapped for their rich, sweet sap. Palm wine serves various nutritional, medicinal, religious, and social purposes, contributing to its high demand [8]. It is a significant beverage and holds an essential place in local ceremonies.

Nkwu enu (up wine) derives its name from the tapping process, which requires the tapper to ascend to the crown of the palm tree. Tapping is a skill-intensive process that demands

precision and expertise. It begins with selecting the ogbanku—the immature inflorescence of the palm tree, which would later produce palm fruits. The tapper climbs the tree using an *agbuu* or *ukpai* and carefully makes an incision on the ogbanku with a cutlass. This incision allows the sap to start dripping. To collect the sap, the tapper employs a calabash (uke), a bamboo stick, and palm fronds. A bamboo stick is inserted into the opening to prevent it from sealing, and the calabash is strategically placed to collect the flowing sap. Once set up, the tapper leaves it overnight. The next morning, he returns to remove the uke, transfers the collected palm wine into a gourd, and repositions the uke for continuous collection.

Although the tapper may inspect the process in the evening, he cannot collect the sap at that time, as it has not yet accumulated sufficiently. This explains why, in rural areas, fresh palm wine is typically sold only in the morning. If left longer, the sap ferments, increasing its alcohol content. The best palm wine is experienced when freshly tapped. After collection, the tapper transfers the liquid into his palm wine gourd and cycles to the market, where eager customers await.

Since the earliest days of palm wine tapping, no permanent solution has been found to prevent fermentation after extraction. Refrigeration slows down the process but does not fully maintain its original taste over time. The inflorescence, once full of life, gradually withers after the tapping process, turning brown, brittle, and lifeless—signifying the transformation from a fresh source of sap to an expended one. Before tapping, the ogbanku is vibrant and firm, though its exact color varies from species to

species—often a mix of green and yellowish hues. However, once the tapping process is complete, the once lively inflorescence becomes exhausted, losing its freshness.

It turns brown, brittle, and lifeless, eventually drying out into a "ya ga ya ga" appearance—a fibrous, crumbling remnant. Beyond its role in palm wine production, this dried ogbanku holds cultural significance. It is a key ingredient in preparing the special ofe nsala traditionally served to a woman who has just given birth, as it is believed to aid recovery for a newly delivered mother.

Palm Wine Tapping and Masculinity in Pre-Colonial Ubulu-Okiti

In pre-colonial Ubulu-Okiti, palm wine tapping was a defining measure of manhood. A man who was not engaged in the palm wine business was often considered lazy, as tapping demonstrated both skill and strength. Masculine prowess was judged by one's ability to tap efficiently, making it a highly respected and lucrative trade that provided a means of livelihood for men in the community. Meanwhile, women played a vital role in the palm oil trade and the production of palm kernel oil (ude aku).

Traditional Processing of Ude Aku (Palm Kernel Oil) in Ubulu-Okiti

Palm kernel seeds were another essential resource, processed to produce ude aku, a valuable oil used in ancient times as a local pomade. When mixed with ncha ude, it served as a bathing soap. The production of ude aku began with drying the palm kernel seeds. Once dried, the arduous process of cracking the seeds commenced. The most

rewarding stage came when the oil was extracted and sold, providing a significant source of income that kept women highly engaged in the trade.

After cracking the kernels, the inner black seeds—palm kernel—are collected and transferred into a pot over a fire. The seeds are continuously stirred until they turned completely black and began releasing oil. Once fully burnt, the oil is allowed to cool before

being drained for sale or domestic use. While ude aku is primarily sold as a pomade, the by-products of the processing were also valuable. The shells from cracked palm kernel seeds were used to fill swampy or waterlogged areas, while the chaff from the extracted mesocarp was dried and repurposed as fuel. Palm kernel oil was widely utilized for skincare and hair care, serving as an effective natural moisturizer. Additionally, when mixed with ashes from burnt palm fruit bunches, it was transformed into ncha ude, a traditional soap. The palm tree, in its entirety, played a crucial role in the economic and social structure of Ubulu-Okiti, ensuring sustainable livelihood for its people while reinforcing cultural identity and traditions.

The Multifunctional Uses of the Palm Tree

The palm tree is a multi-reason tree [9] and every single part of the tree is useful to man's survival through:

1. **Food and Nutrition:** Palm oil is essential for cooking, ofe aku is a traditional delicacy prepared from fresh palm fruits, the palm oil is a key ingredient in preparing varieties of local cuisines and sauces. Palm kernel oil (ude aku**) is** used as a skin moisturizer and

mixed with ncha ude for bathing, and also for treating convulsions (egwu-ikei) in children.

Fresh palm wine is a good source of vitamin E and beneficial yeast for eye health.

Partially fermented palm wine improves lactation in nursing mothers.

Palm wine is also used in treating measles, malaria, and eye infections.

The inflorescence (ogbanku) is a key ingredient in preparing ofe nsala for newly delivered mothers.

Felled palm tree produces [10] edible worms when allowed to rot and they also produce the down wine known as "ozu".

2. **Fuel and Firewood:** The palm wood when felled is used as firewood. The chaff from the palm fruit, the cracked palm kernel shells, the remnant of the bunch from which the fruit was threshed are dried and used as fire.

3. **Cleaning and Household Use:** Palm fronds are **u**sed to weave brooms for sweeping.

It is also woven into baskets for storage and carrying goods.

Tablet soap is traditionally made from palm oil and used for washing clothes, especially akwa-ocha. The black soap (ncha-ude) is made by burning the palm fruit bunch, then mixed with ude aku to form a soap cream. Used for bathing, treating skin rashes, and easing constipation when applied to the anus.

4. **Construction and Infrastructure:** Palm wood is used as a bridge, it is also carved for ceilings, furniture, and chairs for relaxation. Palm fronds are used as roofing material for

houses, fencing for bathrooms, yam barns, and family compounds. It is also used in constructing farmhouses (unubi) and yam barns (oba). Palm kernel shells are mixed with other materials to form strong concrete, especially in waterlogged areas, they are also mixed with other ingredients for plastering of houses, construction of wells etc. The palm kernel shells are grinded to make gun powder.

5. **Traditional Medicine & Healing:** Palm roots are used as an analgesic [11] for headaches. **a**pplied to fractured bones to aid healing. Palm oil and kernel oil are used for stomach massages and treating children's illnesses. Palm kernel oil also served as a valuable cosmetic. Palm oil and palm kernel oil also serves as an antidote for ingested poison. It is used to massage newborns in order to cleanse the skin and prevent diseases, acts as a laxative for young children.

6. **Social Life and Ceremonies:** The palm wine was deeply rooted in the social and cultural life of Ubulu-Okiti. No gathering—whether a traditional marriage, burial, or community meeting—was considered complete without palm wine. During marriage ceremonies (igba nkwu), in line with the traditions, a bride had to serve palm wine to her groom. The wine was poured into a special cup, often carved from a calabash or animal horn. The bride would walk around, pretending to search for her husband, even though she already knew him. Once she found him, she would kneel and serve him the drink. The groom, in turn, drank it and they both walked back with her to their parents for blessings.

In community gatherings and celebrations palm wine was a key element in burial ceremonies, youth meetings, and social events. It was the standard refreshment at such gatherings, symbolizing unity and merriment. A man's ability to host a successful celebration was often judged by the quantity and quality of the palm wine he provided. A host who served high-quality, well-fermented palm wine in generous amounts was regarded as hospitable, respected, and even influential within the community. Failing to provide enough wine could bring embarrassment and diminish a man's social standing. In Ubulu-Okiti, palm wine was more than just a drink—it was a cultural symbol of festivity, respect, and hospitality.

7. **Cultural and Spiritual Uses:** Palm fronds are use sed in traditional ceremonies and masquerade regalia, they are tied to the heads and mouths of coffin bearers. Placed on land or property as a warning sign, believed to ward off evil and deter trespassers from entering into a land.

8. **Source of Employment and Livelihood:** The palm tree was a major source of employment and income in Ubulu-Okiti. Palm wine tapping was a skilled profession, with tappers climbing trees daily to extract fresh wine for sale. Likewise, traders who specialized in selling palm products—such as palm oil, kernel oil, and wine—earned a living through local and regional trade. The demand for these products ensured steady economic opportunities for many families, making the palm tree not just a resource but a backbone of the community's economy.

Challenges of Palm Wine Preservation and Palm Oil Production

In the pre-colonial era, preserving palm wine was difficult due to its short shelf life, as natural yeasts caused rapid fermentation, altering its flavor and increasing alcohol content within hours. Microbial activity from exposure to air, tapping tools, and collection containers further accelerated fermentation, making long-term storage impractical. The absence of refrigeration made it nearly impossible to slow down this process, and traditional methods like boiling or adding local preservatives were only mildly effective. Additionally, transporting palm wine over long distances increased spoilage, limiting its trade beyond local communities. Despite these challenges, it remained culturally significant, with communities adapting by consuming it fresh. Meanwhile, palm oil production faced a different set of difficulties. It relied on labor-intensive manual extraction, which restricted large-scale production. The tedious nature of processing meant that output remained limited, affecting supply and trade in the pre-colonial period.

Despite the challenges of preserving palm wine and the labor-intensive nature of palm oil production, the palm tree remained central to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of Ubulu-Okiti. While modern advancements offer solutions, economic and infrastructural limitations continue to hinder their widespread application, allowing these challenges to persist from the pre-colonial era to the present. Yet, beyond its economic contributions, the palm tree shaped the very identity of Ubulu-Okiti, influencing trade, social interaction and daily life. Palm wine, in particular, fostered unity, hospitality, and tradition, serving as a medium for kinship, dispute resolution, and oral storytelling—

much like the Nile sustained Egypt. Furthermore, the palm tree's practical applications, from shelter to medicine, reinforced its indispensability. More than a mere resource, it was a cultural institution, deeply woven into the community's way of life. Recognizing and preserving this legacy is essential, as the story of Ubulu-Okiti cannot be told without acknowledging the enduring significance of the palm tree.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The economic significance of the palm tree to Ubulu-okiti in the precolonial era cannot be overstated. Ubulu-Okiti is a break-away faction from Ubulu-Uku, from the time it came into existence, it became an agrarian community that thrived on a palm-based economy and farming of other food crops, this provided livelihoods for its people. The men engaged in palm wine tapping and sales, while the women processed palm oil, sold palm kernels, and utilized by-products such as palm shafts for firewood and local soap production (ncha-ude). Even beyond economic uses, the palm tree served medicinal purposes—its roots aiding in bone reconstruction, its fronds used for construction, fencing, and broom-making, roofing of houses among other utilities.

The palm tree has remained a cornerstone of economic and cultural life in many African societies for centuries. Its importance extends far beyond Ubulu-Okiti, playing a crucial role in the livelihoods of people across West, Central, and even parts of East Africa. In Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast, the oil palm industry is a major contributor to the economy, providing employment for millions involved in cultivation, processing, and trade. Palm oil, a product of the tree, is a staple in African cuisine, a key ingredient in cosmetics, and a major export commodity.

Beyond traditional uses, the palm tree has held deep religious significance since ancient times, symbolizing prosperity, victory, and divine favor. From the earliest Biblical records, the palm tree was a central part of life and worship. In Leviticus 23:40 [1], God commanded the Israelites to use palm branches in their celebrations, signifying joy and reverence in His presence. Beyond its ceremonial use, the palm tree became a metaphor for righteousness and divine blessing. Psalm 92:12 [2]declares, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree,he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon," illustrating how those who trust in God will stand strong and thrive.

In the New Testament, the palm tree took on even greater significance during Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In John 12:13 [3], the people welcomed Jesus as King, waving palm tree branches and shouting "Hosanna; Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the LORD"—a symbol of honor and victory. Finally, in Revelation 7:9 [4], palm branches reappear in a vision of heaven, where a multitude from every nation stands before God, holding palm branches in worship, signifying ultimate victory and eternal peace. Thus, from the Old Testament to the New, the palm tree remains a powerful emblem of divine blessing, righteousness, and triumph, deeply rooted in biblical history and faith. Biblically the palm tree held very great significance, because of the versatile and usefulness of every part of the palm tree, GOD likens the growth of a believer to that of a palm tree, meaning that just as the palm tree flourishes, a true and obedient child of GOD will also flourish even till old age.

While the role of the palm tree was central in pre-colonial times, its significance extends beyond that period. Even today, the palm tree remains invaluable, not just to Ubulu-Okiti but to societies worldwide.

Palm tree holds cultural and traditional significance. Palm wine, tapped from the tree, is an integral part of social gatherings, traditional rites, and ceremonies across different ethnic groups. In Ubulu-Okiti, it is used for marriage rites (Igba nkwu), symbolizing hospitality and unity. The leaves of the palm tree are woven into mats, baskets, and roofing materials, the main body of the tree is processed for construction of chairs, beds stands, ceilings and many other items, while its fibers and shells are repurposed for fuel, soap making, and even animal feed, palm kernel meal is an important source of supplementary stock, feed to grass and hay for diary cattle especially in drought affected area [5]. Oil Palm fronds have also been found suitable as a maintenance feed and to produce quality meats from goats [6]. The shells of cracked palm kernel seeds are processed into locally made gunpowder. The medicinal value of various parts of the tree is also widely recognized, with its roots and extracts used in treating ailments such as malaria, digestive issues, and bone fractures and many others, the palm fronds was a major ingredient that Ezemu used to prepare “Izo Idayi” for one of the Oba of Benin. Palm oil is a global commodity, palm wine retains cultural and commercial relevance, and by-products of the tree continue to serve domestic, industrial, and medicinal purposes.

In contemporary times, the palm tree has become a cornerstone of the global beauty industry. Various parts of the palm tree, particularly palm oil and palm kernel oil, are widely used in the production of beauty products such as soaps, hair creams, and body creams. Palm oil is rich in vitamins A and E, making it a key ingredient in skincare products that promote hydration, skin elasticity, and anti-aging properties. Its natural moisturizing qualities make it a preferred base for lotions and creams. Similarly, palm kernel oil is valued for its deep-conditioning properties in hair products, helping to strengthen and nourish hair. Thus, the palm tree, revered for its religious and economic significance, continues to play a crucial role in modern industries, proving its enduring value in both tradition and commerce.

Despite its immense benefits, the full potential of the palm tree remains largely untapped in many African countries including Nigeria. The reliance on traditional processing methods, lack of modern agricultural techniques, and inadequate government support have hindered the growth of the industry. While countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have maximized palm oil production and industrial applications, African nations—despite being native to the oil palm—have lagged behind due to underinvestment in research, infrastructure, and value-added processing. It is crucial that the potential of the palm tree is fully harnessed. Governments should prioritize investment in palm-related industries, supporting research, mechanization, and sustainable practices to maximize productivity. By doing so, they can create jobs, boost local economies, and promote self-sufficiency in palm-derived products.

The palm tree has been a bedrock of economic and cultural development in many African societies, from Ubulu-Okiti to broader regions of West and Central Africa. Its contributions to livelihoods, industry, and traditional practices make it an invaluable natural resource. However, despite its vast potential, underinvestment and outdated practices have limited its full utilization. For Africa to harness the wealth of the palm tree effectively, governments must prioritize research, infrastructure, farmer support, industrialization, and sustainability. By taking proactive measures, the palm industry can become a key driver of economic growth, employment, and self-sufficiency. Investing in this sector will not only preserve an age-old economic tradition but also open new opportunities for innovation and development.

In conclusion, the palm tree has been and remains a fundamental economic resource. The versatility of the palm tree has earned it the title "King of all Trees," as it serves countless purposes across various industries. From its role in religious and cultural traditions to its widespread use in food, cosmetics, and medicine, the palm tree remains one of nature’s most valuable gifts to humanity.

However, despite its immense potential, the palm tree’s full benefits have yet to be fully harnessed. There are still untapped discoveries to be made regarding its economic, industrial, and medicinal applications. As research continues, new ways to utilize this invaluable resource will emerge, further proving its significance in wealth creation and sustainable development.

Given by God as a source of sustenance and prosperity, the palm tree holds the power to transform economies and improve livelihoods. The usefulness of the palm tree greatly contributed to the economic development of Ubulu-Okiti in the pre-colonial era. When fully explored and utilized, it has the capacity to drive innovation, create job opportunities, and enhance industries globally, recognizing its enduring value and expanding its utilization can drive economic growth and sustainable development, ensuring that its benefits continue for generations to come.

Endnotes

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S/N	NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	PLACE OF INTERVIEW	DATE
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2.	Ms. Blesssing Adigwe	50	Farmer	Ubulu-Okiti	29/10/24
3.	Mrs Charity Adigwe	51	Farmer	Ubulu-Okiti	29/10/31
4.	Mr. Peter Abujai	73	Farmer	Ubulu-Okiti	29/10/31
5.	Mr. Samson Mafiana	75	Mgt. consultant	Ubulu-Okiti	31/10/24
6.	Mr. Chika Augustine Okeleke	43	Farmer	Ubulu-Okiti	31/10/24
7.	Hon. Francis Anukposi	61	Musical Artist	Ubulu-Okiti	1/11/24
8.	Chief Aboki Agalim	80	Rtd. Teacher	Ubulu-Okiti	1/11/24
9.	Chief Linus Osemene	57	Civil Sevant	Ubulu-Okiti	2/11/24
10.	Mr. Wire	74	Farmer	Ubulu-Okiti	2/11/24
11.	Mr. Jonathan Amaka Egbuchie	34	Farmer	Ubulu-Okiti	5/2/25

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