

ASPECTS OF PRE-COLONIAL ISOKO ECONOMY UP TO 1900

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DECEMBER, 2019

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FACULTY OF ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ART (B.A)
HONOURS DEGREE, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY.**

DECEMBER, 2019

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this study was carried out by **Miss Faith Efeoghene OKARIE** in the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City.

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to Almighty God for giving me the grace and wisdom to complete my academic programme.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude goes to Almighty God for His sufficient grace in my life and especially throughout the period of my academic pursuit.

I will not fail to acknowledge and appreciate Dr. Frank Ikponmwosa, my project supervisor, whose guidance, assistance, words of encouragement and profitable suggestion has led to the completion of this research work. God bless you Sir.

My profound appreciation goes to my HOD, Prof. Benson Osadolor and all the lecturers and staff of the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, for their words of encouragement, constructive criticism, guidance and inspiration during the course of my academic pursuit.

I am also very grateful to my parents Mr. and Mrs. Okarie for providing me with the financial, spiritual and emotional support I needed during the course of my study. May you live long to enjoy the fruits of your labour in my life. Also, my gratitude goes to my siblings Mr. Favour Okarie, Mr. Prosper Okarie and Miss Victory Okarie, for their love, prayers and care throughout the period of my study.

Furthermore, I will not fail to acknowledge my wonderful friends who have made a lot of positive impact in my life throughout my undergraduate period: the HOD of Philosophy in person of Dr. S.I. Odia, Miss Mmesoma Princess Obi, Miss

Taiye Josephine Momoh, Miss Aminat and Mr. Richard Okoro, and all my course mates in the Department of History and International Studies.

Finally, I wish to appreciate Engr. Ilesanmi Oladiran for his support throughout my academic pursuit and the Late Ogbuefi Steve Uyaebo. May his gentle soul rest in perfect peace.

God bless you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

This work is a concise effort to critically analyze and explore the aspects of Isoko economy, as it pertains to agriculture; fishing and hunting inclusive, industry and trade. The method of acquiring land for the purpose of farming or for carrying out the economic activities is also given equal attention up to 1900.

Geographically, the general topography of Isokoland is flat, and much of it is subject to annual flooding. Two distinct floods are distinguished by their causes, as well as period of occurrences, which include the heavy local rainfall, while the other is caused by flood water coming from the river Niger. The influence of the flood pattern on economic activities is substantial, as shall be exposed in this work. However, the most outstanding physical features of the area are the two great swamps running Northeast and Southwest with a relative highland between them. Located in present day Delta State of Southern Nigeria, Isokoland is divided into two local government areas; Isoko North with Ozoro as its head quarter and Isoko South which has Oleh as its headquarter. The climate is equatorial and is marked by two distinct seasons, the dry and the rainy seasons; the dry season lasts from about November to April, and is significantly marked by the cool harmattan dust haze

from May to October and is usually characterized by flooding, with a brief dry spell in August¹.

Records state that the first group of Isoko ancestors migrated to the region from Benin, alongside the Urhobos, in about 1600 AD². The ancestors in the first group were Erowa the senior, Uzere, and Okpe. Isoko oral history told that the second group led by ancestors of Iyede left Benin at about 1650 – 1700 AD during the reign of Oba Ozolua, the Oba of Benin, whose reign was considered chaotic by the Isoko ancestors. After a short while, the ancestors of Ughelli, Ogor and Agbarha-Otor 3 brothers in Ughelli North Local Government Area also followed the trail of Iyede ancestors and settled in their present sites³

It must be noted, however, that there have been disagreements in the origin of the Isoko people, most especially from historians like Professor Obaro Ikime, who believe this to be untrue. Ikime states that:

If there is any aspect of the history of the various peoples of Nigeria about which no one can speak with any exactitude, it is that which deals with the origins of our peoples⁴.

Notwithstanding, this disbelief on the origin of the people from Benin were based on British intelligence reports of the 1930s and Ikime's field work of 1961 – 1963⁵. However, the Isoko people are unique and their district ethnic group is made up of

Nineteen clans with a total of about 2.1 million people. They are peaceful people and this can be reflected in the fact that there are no records of history of major conflicts or wars between them and their neighbours in the past before colonial conquest⁶. However, their geography greatly influenced their economic pursuits, which was based in farming, fishing, hunting, industry and trade. The most dominant occupation in their industrial sector, as will be discussed consequently in this work, is the palm oil production, extraction, refinery and utilization⁷.

This work further examines the methods geared towards the acquisition of lands, which include; individual acquisition, acquisition through the family and acquisition from the community.

Another topic that will be critically analyzed is the local industry, majorly the oil palm industry, which yielded the people so much revenue that it formed the foundation of the wealth and trade relations of the Isoko people with other communities. This shall be followed by other industrial production like blacksmithing, woodcarving, masquerades, pottery, boats, drums, etc, which will be equally discussed. Soap making and traps weaving shall not be left out.

Finally, their trading systems both domestically and internationally will be discussed, as well as the currencies they traded with, aside from the trade by barter system, which included currencies like salt, elephant tusks, beads, cowries, etc. The articles of trade and the market days will also be highlighted in this chapter.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically examine and expose the aspects of Isoko economy up to 1900, while the objectives include:

- To highlight and examine the nature of their geography, climate and origin, and how these affected their economic life.
- To pinpoint their methods of acquiring lands in order to carry out their economic activities in agriculture, trade and industry.
- A review of how they organized and utilized their economic activities in order to make the society thrive and prosper.
- To reveal the dynamic economic approach of the people and how this contributed to both local and international economic growth in Africa.
- To contribute to the works written about the Isoko history, especially their economic history,'
- To draw the attention of others to the proper understanding of the Isoko economic structure.

Scope of Study

This research work focuses mainly on the aspects of the Isoko economy from the period of their existence in their present region, up to the year 1900. In order to achieve this, critical investigation have been conducted into the agricultural,

industrial and trading patterns of the people, while examining the means by which the people procured lands for these activities. Furthermore, this work will intensively recount how they practiced these activities in such a sophisticated manner, as to ensure that their economy thrives and prospers.

Literature Review

This research work, as have been earlier stated, examines the aspects of Isoko economy. A few renowned scholars as well as economists have shown interest in evaluating and bringing into limelight, the methods and manners that the Isoko people carried out economic activities in Trade, Agriculture and Industry.

S.O. Aghalino, who is the major authority on historical works and research conducted on the Isoko Economy and society wrote a few books and publications on this topic. These covered aspects in the Agriculture, industry as well as and trade currencies.

Okpevra in his article titled "Hunting in Isoko" gave detailed analysis on how the hunting occupation was carried out not only for economic reasons, but for leisure. It nonetheless formed a part of the economic mainstay of the people, as the animals caught in the forests fetched some income for the hunter. The skins of these animals were equally important and highly sought after⁸. Hunting also brought in financial gains for the blacksmiths who manufactured the weapons that

were used for hunting, as the hunters, in time, formed the commanders-in-chief of the militia. They were highly respected and seen as powerful men, thereby also gaining chieftaincy titles in the process, as well as other advantageous statuses⁹. Obaro Ikime, in his book titled "*The Isoko people, an Historical Survey*" gives an explanation on the land tenure system of the people. It was his contribution to the study of the Isoko history that gave the understanding on how the people acquired land individually, through their family connections or through the community¹⁰.

S.O. Aghalino in his article published in African study monographs titled, "*British colonial policies and the Oil Palm Industry in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria*" deals with the importance of the oil palm industry to the Isoko people, both before and during colonial rule in Nigeria. He explained the processes on how the oil palm was planted, cultivated and harvested, and how the produce was utilized into numerous finished products like palm oil, soaps, pomade, etc; while the palm fronds were fed as fodder to goats, or used in creating brooms or as fodder for fire. In fact, Aghalino's work on the oil palm industry has been thoroughly educative, and has greatly helped in this research work¹¹.

Jessa O. Morrison, in his article, "*The Origin of Isoko people*" gives a historical background into the origins and migrations of the Isoko people from Benin kingdom. He provides a detailed analysis on the various traditions of origins of the people; that is, the theory that they migrated from Benin during the reign of

princes like Oba Ozolua, and the theory from Obaro Ikime that they did not originate from Benin. Jessa, nonetheless, did not give details as to why Obaro Ikime reached this conclusion¹².

Evelyn Onwaniban, in her work titled "*The Economy of the Niger Delta Before 1956*" provides a sketch on the geography of the Isoko people and how it affected trade in the region, especially trade with the Europeans. This work, however, is not a detailed attempt to expose the economy of the people, as it only scratches the surface¹³.

E.J. Alagoa in his book "*A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of Ijo oral Tradition*" gives a brief analysis on the roles played by the Isoko businessmen in the trans-Atlantic slave trade; in which some western Igbo slaves passed through the Itsekiri middlemen, as well as the Urhobo and Isoko. He, nonetheless, stressed that their role in the slave-trade was highly limited due to their geographical location, which actually prevented them from participating in the trade in slaves during the periods it flourished in Nigeria. The Isoko were also noted to have suffered pillage and attacks by Ijo slave raiders and pirates, though this rarely occurred¹⁴.

The oral interviews conducted during this research made on this topic also gave brilliant exposures on various aspects of the people's culture and economy. Pa Okpidi Charles gave delightful insights on the major agricultural products that were

produced, e.g. palm produce, cassava, yam tubers, etc. He also talked about the fish industry, and due to his previous occupation as a fisherman during the periods 1965-1970 his contribution on this topic proved valuable. Furthermore, talked about the palm fruit industry, and how it was used in making soaps. According to him, the process involved the cooperation of the man, his wife or wives and their children, as it was a tedious work. Pa Okpidi furthermore gave useful information into the manufacture of Ogogoro; the local gin similar to the European whiskey, which was used both for entertainment, relaxation and for medical purposes, as well as its various religious and ceremonial used¹⁵.

By interviewing Chief Joseph Obadiemu, I was brought into the realization that the Isoko society engaged in vast industrial activities, such a woodcarving, hero masquerade, cloths manufacture, building erection, manufacture of farming and warfare tools, etc¹⁶.

Chief James Okporaro's contribution to this work is chiefly based in hunting, as he made me understand the importance of hunting, which he said involved skill and precision, and as a specialized economic activity in West Africa, reached its seasonal peak during the dry season, as it led to the entrapment of wild games with ease¹⁷.

Finally, this work involved the collection of tidbits from various online sources and internet materials, and these were subjected to cross-examination and

validation from various textbooks in order to verify the claim of the authors on these subjects.

Methodology

The major challenge encountered while compiling this work, was obtaining information on the various market days and trade currencies of the people. In regard to this, the minute information I was able to gather on these aspects have been injected into the concluding part of chapter 4, as the information gathered was not sufficient enough to give it a more exhaustive analysis. Also, in the course of this research, I encountered numerous setbacks in obtaining valid, unadulterated information on the Isoko economy, as only a few writers, notably Obaro Ikime and Aghalino have written on the society. Various sources online and in some materials have also erroneously mistaken the Urhobo tribes and culture for that of the Isoko people, and a critical analysis on all information gathered led to the realization that while most authors shy away from writing on Isoko history, some of the few who did consciously or unconsciously applied falsehood to their works, especially in the cases where the Urhobos were mistaken as the Isoko people and vice versa. This is a clarion call to sons and daughters of the soil to make more efforts into the study and documentation of their history. I hope that with time, more valid information will be available to the public on those very aspects of Isoko economy and history. In order to achieve a comprehensive study, historical methodology is used. Both

primary and secondary sources are carefully analyzed to bring about a detailed analysis.

Primary Sources

Primary sources consulted in order to achieve a comprehensive study are oral interviews, which is conducted by thoroughly quizzing Isoko Indigene leaders, elders and knowledgeable scholars, who have vast understanding on this topic; and who have the interest of exposing their unique socio-economic patterns in the era.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources include textbooks and journals which are obtained from university and public library and materials across the country which are used to develop this work. Further cross-examination of online works will also be conducted in order to provide exhaustive data or a historical analysis on the aspects of Isoko economy.

Organization of Chapters

To situate the research work in proper historical perspective, the chapters are outlined and summarized as follows;

Chapter One: Introduction: This chapter places emphasis on the systematic approach adopted in undertaking the study. It deals with the introduction into the

work, its aim and objectives, literature review, chapterization, and the challenges faced in the compilation of this work. These are basically the introduction of the research work, which is to excessively introduce and analyze the aspects of Isoko economy and its socio-political as well as financial or economic impact to the people.

Chapter Two: The Geography and Traditional Settings of The Isoko People: This chapter examines the origin of the Isoko people, their general socio-political institutions before the colonization off the British and how these affected their economic activities. The chapter also highlights and explains the community and clan system, as well as their religion, cultures, festivals and rituals, etc.

Chapter Three: Agriculture as an Aspect of the Isoko Economy: This chapter thoroughly focuses on the aspects of Isoko economy up to 1900, especially on their land tenure system and agriculture, in which farming, fishing and hunting were excessively discussed. The contribution of hunting to their Agricultural production was also given equal recognition.

Chapter Four: Local Industries and Trade in Isoko: This chapter evaluates the trade and industry of the people, especially the oil palm industry, the fishing industry, and the manufacture and craft industries. It also contains the trade and trade currencies used by the people before the year 1900, all of which reflects the

importance and contributions of the economic activities of the people of Isoko on their societies and that of their neighbours.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: This is eventually the summary and conclusion of this work, i.e. the overall analysis on the various aspects of the Isoko economy, and it's impact or influence on the people.

ENDNOTES

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15. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi, 84 years, Orié Irri on 20/12/2019.
16. Oral Interview with Joseph Obadiemu, 71 years, Orié Irri on 22/12/2019.
17. Oral Interview with James Okporaro, 70 years, Ozoro on 22/12/2019.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGIN AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE ISOKO PEOPLE

Introduction

This chapter is an evaluation into the various traditions of origin of the *Isoko* people as told by both the indigenous people and scholars alike. The socio-political aspects of the people in areas like their monarchical system, their age-grade systems of leadership and the responsibilities of each group on the society shall also be discussed, as well as their religious beliefs, festivals, cultural traditions like female circumcision and its relevance to marriage, etc shall also be discussed here. Furthermore, an analysis on the general traditional justice in *Isokoland*; i.e. a list of some offences and their punishments shall also be highlighted and discussed in order to shed more light on the unique cultural heritage of the *Isoko* people.

The Geography of Isokoland

The *Isoko* people are found mostly in the area now known as the Isoko Local Government Areas of Delta State formerly Bendel State Nigeria. They inhabit the area enclosed by longitudes $5^{\circ} 5^1$ and $6^{\circ} 25^1$ East and latitudes $5^{\circ} 5^1$ and $5^{\circ} 40^1$ North of the Equator¹. The area occupied by the *Isoko* is about 470 miles square with a population of about 750,000². The Isoko Local Government Area is

bounded on the north by the Ndokwa Local Government, on the east by the Ase Creek and on the West by the Ughelli Local Government Area. The neighbours of the *Isoko* are, therefore the Aboh, the Ukwani, the Urhobo and the Ijo people(s).

The Isoko Local Government Area falls within the evergreen forest belt of southern Nigeria. The oil palm is found in great quantity in this area and this accounts for the *Isoko* being great producers of palm oil and palm kernels. The *Isoko* land is flat and low lying, intersected by numerous creeks, water courses and swamps, with relatively higher and drier ground rising towards the north-east³. According to J.W Hubbard, the outstanding physical features of the area are the two great swamp systems the Betel and Owhe swamp systems running roughly N.N.E and S.S.W which in the wet season become waterways⁴. The areas between these two swamp systems are usually flooded during the rainy season when the floods of the Niger which flow into the swamps, through the Ase creek cause the swamps to overflow. The towns and villages are on the highest ground possible which are generally flood-free.

There is no doubt that the geographical situation of the *Isoko* country colours the lives, culture and occupations of the *Isoko* people. Thus, while those who live in the riverine and coastal areas engage mainly in fishing, those in the highest grounds practice farming and harvest two-crop of yams in the year. But for the greater part of *Isoko*, farming has to be carried on during the dry season only;

and a very wet season may spell famine for the people⁵. Yams and cassava are the chief agricultural products. While the men are responsible for the work of preparing the bush for the yam farm, planting and harvesting, the women take care of the growing yams by weeding and are solely responsible for the growing of cassava.

The Traditions of Origin of the Isoko People

The *Isoko* people like their Urhobo neighbours had semi – autonomous political units of diverse origins⁶ who have been brought together by the passage of time by cultural, economic and linguistic connections. Before 1930, the *Isoko* occupied eleven clans⁷. These were the *Aviara*, *Emevor*, *Enhwe*, *Erohwa*, *Igbide*, *Iyede*, *Okpe*, *Ozoro*, *Olomoro*, *Owhe*, *Ume* and *Uzere*. According to *Isoko* traditions of origin, the *Isoko* clans fall into three migratory groups. The first group is made up of those clans, six in number which trace their origin to Benin. These are *Avaira*, *Emevor*, *Iyede*, *Okpe*, *Ozoro*, *Ouhe* and *Uzere*. The second group made up of *Enhwe*, *Ume* and *Igbide* claim to have come from Igboland.

The remaining two clans have different claims. *Erohwa* tradition, for instance claims that the people have always been where they are and so migrated from no where. *Olomoro*, on the other hand, is believed to have been founded by the children of the founder of the Urhobo clan of *Olomu*⁸. It is thus an amalgam of people from different places that have come to form what have become known as the *Isoko* people. No one knows precisely when the term *Isoko* began to be applied

to the collectivity of this people as they were called the “Igabo” by their Aboh and Ukwani neighbours and together with the Urhobo were called the “Sobo” after the re-organization of the 1930s by the British. According to Ugboma, the word, “*Isoko*” originated from Benin where it means “people who live in the outskirts”⁹. The clans of Benin origin are therefore believed to have applied the word to themselves and later it was applied to all the people in the area.

It is very likely that the social, cultural and political organizations of the *Isoko* people might have been greatly influenced by the traditions, norms and cultural characteristics of their original homes.

The Political Organization of the Isoko People

Like most Edo – speaking peoples, age grade organisation was typical of the social organisation of the *Isoko* people. The male in *Isoko* were graded into age grades called *Itu*, according to age. That is, all those born within a specified period of time belonged to the same age-grade or *Otu*, singular of *Itu*. All the children born in that period consort together for life and move up together to the highest office, each group being taught citizenship by the process of suggestion and imitation¹⁰. As a matter of fact, the *Isoko* males passed through the various age-grades, *Itu* and it was in these *Itu* that they were trained for their various roles in the society for each *Itu* had its services to perform for the society. Every *Isoko* male, was, therefore, expected to grow up capable of performing these duties; and failure

to perform them efficiently was viewed with great concern by the society. Generally speaking, the age grade in *Isoko* can be conveniently grouped into three main age-grade organisations as in the old Benin Kingdom.

At the very top of the *Itu* was the *Otu Okpako* which was the age grade of the elders. These were men who had attained the age of 45 or 50 years and above, and because of their age most of them were exempted from community work and war. Most of the *Ekpako* were members of the *Odio* society¹¹, by virtue of which they were members of the village council or clan council. In this capacity, they became responsible for the government of the village or clan. Thus, the *Isoko Ekpako* became legislators, judges, councilors and the repository of customary laws and customs¹². The next *Otu* to the *Otu Ekpako* was the *Otu Evrawa*. This *Otu* had a wide-range of years, from 16 to 45 years and can be divided into the senior and junior groups, because of the nature of responsibilities assigned to each group. The senior group of the *Otu Evrawa* was called the *Ekpako Evrawa*¹³. These were middle-aged men between the ages of 35 and 45 years. They were the main warrior grades of the clan, and also supervised the lower grades. They also served as the vigilante society of the societies and helped in catching thieves, and also in punishing erring or deserving individual who had flouted the rules of the villages. Their activities in expelling people from the clan was in most cases confined to those persons suspected of practicing witchcraft.

The junior grade of the *Otu Evrawa* was merely called the *Evrawa*. Those who constituted this *Otu* were young men between the ages of 16 and 35 years. They assisted the senior grade but were mainly charged with the functions or duty of communal work for the good of the clan in general, and formed the labour corps of the community. They were also responsible for road making, cleaning, building of markets and public meeting places; communal pond fishing and any other duties assigned from time to time by the senior *Itu*¹⁵.

Unlike the menfolk, the women were not neatly organized into *Itu* or age-grades. This might have been due to the fact that they performed quite different duties from the men. The women-folk were, however, organized into two main *Itu*, namely the *Eweyae* and the *Emete*. Those who were in the *Otu Eweyae* were those women who had been circumcised and were married. They had their leaders called *Ekpako – Eweyae* and regular *Otota* who could bring their grievances to the village communities¹⁶. They were the guardians of all rituals surrounding childbirth, and were also responsible for the organization of the village, town or clan market, and for the care of fertility shrines, as well as enforcing taboos affecting women. They also saw to it that market rules were obeyed¹⁷. The other female *Otu*, known as *Otu-Emete* comprised all uncircumcised and unmarried girls. The *Emete* adolescent girls helped the young adolescent boys to keep the village clean. They were generally responsible for sweeping the main streets and market places.

The Ovie i.e. King

There are some clans in *Isoko* like *Aviara*, *Enwe*, *Erhwa*, *Igbide*, *Iyede*, *Okpe*, *Ozoro* and *Uzere*, where an *Ovie* king title crept in at a later stage of their development. The *Ovie* title is probably derived from the Benin title of *Onogie*, the title given to the hereditary head of Benin villages or village groups. Nearly all the *Isoko* clans that assume the *Ovie* title admit that they had to send their candidates to the Oba of Benin to be properly crowned as *Ovie*. It is claimed that *Iyede* was the first clan in *Isoko* to obtain the title of *Ovie* by the Oba of Benin. The first nine *Ivie*, plural of *Ovie* went in succession to Benin and their titles were ratified by the Oba¹⁹. The post of *Ovie* is hereditary in some clans. Most of the *Ovie* were merely priests of the clan divinities until the British administration raised some of them to the status of clan heads or Native authorities in the colonial era.

The Clan Council and the Village Council

There was no centralized administration in the *Isoko* communities. Thus, unlike the Old Benin Kingdom where the socio-political organization was dominated by the Oba, who was the pivot around which everything revolved,²⁰ there was no central figure in *Isoko* that assumed the position or posture of the Benin Oba. This must have resulted from the differences in the origin of the people who have become known as the *Isoko* and the rather autonomous nature of the settlements. In *Isoko* therefore, the village constituted the most effective political

unit. This resembles the political structure of Benin village, for the Benin village was the basic unit of the Benin kingdom. Another authority which in many respects possessed a greater power than the village government was the clan. This level of government was never quite formalized or uniformly well-defined in the various clans. It was, nevertheless, the final authority within the area of the clan, with the village institutions constituting extremely virale local government units.

The *Isoko* had the *Odio* society, which together with the *Ekpako*, elders formed a clan council known as *Egwae Edo*, that is, the supreme body that governed the clan. Thus, like many Nigerian groups that had no centralized government, the government of the *Isoko* people has been described as genocratic, government by the elders. Among the *Isoko* people, therefore, the government, whether at the clan or village level was essentially councilor²¹. While the genocratic system is true to some extent, it is an over-simplification of a complex situation. Admittedly, there were elders in the ruling council of each village and clan. The complexity arose from the fact that the elders were members of the *Edhe*, *Odio* society, which formed the ruling council, and seniority in the societies was not based on natural age but on length of membership. As a result, an *Odio* might be younger than some people in the community because the ability to pay for the prescribed ceremonies also counted.

There were also certain *Ekpako*, Elders who were not Edio because they could not meet the cost of membership of the society. According to Professor Obaro Ikime, while such *Ekpako*, Elders were allowed to sit in the village council, they were derisively referred to as *Ekpako Igheghe*, which means foolish elders who couldn't command the respect and influence of the Edio, who invariably took precedence over them in council²². There were other members who were not necessarily elders. These include the Oletu-Ologbo whose appointment was not based on age. Another was the Osewo, father of the town, whose candidature was not based on age in some clans like Owhe and Ofagbe. It is also pertinent to note that at the village level, the criterion for becoming an Odio was not Edhe, Odio society but age, Owhe clan clearly illustrates the difference. While the head of Owhe clan is designated "Odio – Edhe" and the other eight Edio in his council are also called Edio-Edhe, at the village level the Edio were called Edio Okauru²³.

There were two levels of government in *Isoko* during the period. These were the village government and clan government. The clan government was the largest political unit experienced by the *Isoko* before the imposition of British rule. The Egwae Edio, clan council cut across village and town interests. The concept of the clan, as made up of persons, all of whom traced their ancestry to a common figure, made this possible. The clan council, where it existed, as a higher authority, had the powers to legislate for the whole clan. The council concerned itself with more important matters like "external war and defence", annual festivals and

sacrifices, inter-clan negotiations and more serious breaches of clan laws and customs. The clan council, thus having taking care of the more important aspects of government, left other matters of less importance to the village councils which were much more active than the central body, clan council. The composition of the council, whether at the clan or village level, was essentially the same but while conforming to a certain general pattern, it varied from clan to clan.

Generally, the bulk of the council was made up of Edio Edhe. It is not known how the Edhe society came to be the basis for political recruitment in *Isoko*, but it is, however, known that a vast majority of the male population in *Isoko* belonged to this society and that it required some measure of wealth to gain membership. Also, it is known that the rules governing members insisted on high moral conduct. Most of these rules derived from clan law and customs and the society tended to be regarded as the custodian of clan laws and customs. This might explain how the society acquired its political role. Long membership was seen as conferring added wisdom²⁵. Each council, whether village or clan, had a head who could -in modern parlance- be called 'president'. There was no uniformity in the various clans as to who should fill this position. There were, however, three persons who qualified for the post. There were the Ovie, in those clans where the office existed, the Odio-Ologbo, and the Osewo, father of the town, where the holder of the office was different from the Odio-Ologbo. The post was easily filled in those clans which possessed an Ovie who was regarded as the executive, judicial

and spiritual head of his clan. In such clans like *Emede*, *Igbide* and *Iyede*, the Ovie was: president” of his clan council and the symbol of clan unity. As the Ovie had to come from a particular family, age was not a criterion for the office, but the man must be, in most cases, the oldest surviving son of the late Ovie. In clans where the Ovie was essentially a clan priest like *Aviara* or where the office of Ovie did not exist, the *Odio-Ologbo* presided at clan council meetings. As the whole life of the community was so closely linked with the spiritual world of the gods and ancestors, the Ovie had to be a member of the council to be ready for consultation as the need arose²⁶.

The Otota

In addition to these men, *Edio* who formed the bulk of the village and clan councils, there were other men who sat in the council by virtue of the offices they held within the village or clan. The most important of these was the *Otota* who was the spokesman of the council. He was appointed by the village or clan head after due consultation with the council. While in most clans, the *Otota* was appointed on his personal merits or qualities; in *Owhe* and *Uzere* clans he was the *Odio* next in seniority to the *Odio-Ologbo*. His office was delegated to a younger man who possessed a commanding personality, a good voice, a clear knowledge of the clan laws and customs and respect for those in authority. In terms of functions, the *Otota* was one of the most important personalities in the village and at the higher level in

the clan. He summoned the meeting of the council on the instructions of the clan head. He was the mouth piece of the 'president' at such meetings and at trials, he voiced the verdict of the clan, or village council. He directed the work of the Iko who were the messengers of the council. Anyone desirous of seeing the village or clan head had to go through the Otota. He represented or was at the head of representatives of his village or clan in inter-village or inter-clan negotiations, whether these involved matters of peace or war, acting on the instructions from the council, which he had to adhere to strictly. It was vitally important, therefore, to appoint the best man who could be found for the Otota's duties²⁷.

The Oletu-Ologbo

Another important member of the council who may not be an Odio was the Oletu-Ologbo. He was the head of the Iletu and commander-in-chief of the clan army and he sat in the council by virtue of this fact. The Iletu were middle aged men who were still agile and energetic. This agility combined with their special qualities of strength, courage and endurance made them effective executive officers of the council. The Oletu-Ologbo was expected to be loyal to the council in all respects. He had his own court where he tried offences mostly connected with law, order and stealing. In most clans, the Oletu-Ologbo was chosen for stature and proven valour in war and similar trials but in Owhe clan, although these qualities were also necessary, the Oletu-Ologbo of Uruovo village is usually the Oletu-

Ologbo of Owhe clan. This concession was granted to Uruovo because Iluelogbo always appointed the Osewo, priest of Otor and Akiewe always appointed the priest of Oriseowe²⁸.

Quarter Council

Apart from the clan and village councils, there also existed quarter councils. These were a gathering of the heads of families which made up the quarter. The quarter council was the lowest court for trying cases which arose between members of the quarter. At this level, the oldest Okpako in the quarter was always the head and presided over quarter meetings²⁹.

Functions of the Council

These councils were both political and judicial bodies. The laws of the land was regarded as having been declared once and for all by the ancestors, but new laws could be made from time to time as the need arose. These councils acting as courts tried all cases. Offences over which the Edio council had jurisdiction were infringement of religious laws, witchcraft, murder, adultery, manslaughter, etc. the punishment for these offences varied with different Edios or village councils. But generally, infringement of religious laws was visited by such severe penalties as death; stealing was sometimes punished by death or by blinding. Adultery was a very serious offence and heavy compensations were awarded to the aggrieved husband. Witches were buried alive or left to the mercy of the *Eni* of Uzere. Other

severe punishment for serious crimes included such taboos as ostracism, banishment or sale into slavery³⁰.

The administrative system in *Isoko* pre-supposed that clan laws were to be well known to all clan members as it was handed down from father to son. The family constituted the smallest unit. The head of the family arbitrated over all domestic disputes. Only serious matters which the family head could not settle were sent up to the village or quarter council. The village councils, were the most decisive judicial bodies. The councils, in addition to possessing all powers of jurisdiction over certain types of offences, also operated as preliminary investigation centres for the clan council. In all cases, appeals from quarter and village councils went to the clan council. Here, the *Otota* of the quarter or village would lay before the clan council, all available evidence of investigation already made. Thus, in the judicial sphere, the clan council was the highest court of appeal and its decision or verdict on any matter, whether sitting as a court of first instance or as a court of appeal, was considered final. But if it was unable to satisfy the appellant, trial by ordeal or swearing was resorted to. Thus the *Isoko people* believed in super-natural forces in the solution of problems³¹.

To talk about the womenfolk, the female population was not represented in the *Edio* council, the sole legislative body for the village or clan. But they attended the village assembly and their leader, the *Oletu-Eweyae* was allowed to speak.

Apart from their attendance of the village assembly, the women had no political functions to perform. However, the Eweyae were very active and could put the women's views across to the Edio council through the Otota their views were always treated with respect as the women had potential weapons of revenge should their opinions be treated with contempt. The method varied from clan to clan, but essentially it involved sanctions. That is, the women in a town or village, whenever their views on issues of vital importance to them had been neglected, organized the domestic and commercial activities of the village concerned, which was a very drastic and expensive business. The men greatly, avoided this mass movement of women, as it involved them destroying the property in their village of refuge and also cost the men of the village much in repairs and accommodation. In order to avoid these, the men in the village or clan councils greatly honoured or respected the views of the womenfolk in judicial matters³².

Punishable Offences in Isokoland

A list of some offences and their punishments include:

Murder

Death by hanging was a general rule. There was usually a special tree in the village outskirts, forbidden bush from which the hanging was done. Hanging took place after formal trial and was carried out by the *Otota* or *Oletu*. In some places, the family of the murdered man did the hanging. This satisfied the debtor-creditor

relationship. If the murderer was caught in the act he could be dispatched by the relatives. For the fact of a murder having been committed in the certain clans there were special executioners known as *Ikorikpokpo* who came from the more elderly ones among the Evrawa. Their method was to beat the murderer to death with sticks³³.

Manslaughter

To the *Isoko people*, this meant murder by accident and the penalty was hanging or compensation. If the family of the murderer were quick enough to send emissaries to the victim's family to plead for the life of their relation, they might get away with paying compensation in the form of giving a daughter of their family to the victim's family the idea being that this daughter would replenish her new family through her issue. In addition, the family of the offender had to meet part of the burial expenses. If the family of the victim insisted on hanging, the council would give in if they were satisfied that there was evident carelessness leading to the accident.

Theft

Stealing, burglary and robbing were all classified together as one offence and the usual penalty was a fine which varied in amount according to the gravity of the offence. In some clans e.g. stealing farm produce was regarded as particularly odious and such a thief might be sold into slavery. In Owhe, thieves were often

blinded by having boiling oil poured into their eyes. In Aviara clan, habitual rogues were killed and were even considered lucky if sold into slavery. Of the fine imposed, some parts went to the injured party as compensation, and some parts were retained by the council. Where a robber injured the man whose property he robbed, he had to pay the doctor's fee as well as pay a fine for assault in addition to whatever fine was imposed for the theft. On the whole, theft was regarded as a particularly heinous offence and many families preferred that any thief in their midst should be sold into slavery rather than that he should forever soil the name of the family.

Arson

Arson was regarded as a very serious offence, as it could easily lead to death. It was a rare crime for which the penalty was for the offender to pay the cost of rebuilding the house and value of all property destroyed. In addition, he was liable to a fine as this, like theft, was an offence against the community as a whole. Where it could be proved that the burning of the house was accidental, there was no fine. All that was needed was for the offender to assist the owner of the house in rebuilding it³⁴.

Adultery

Adultery was only committed when a man had sexual relations with a married woman. If a married man had sexual connections with an unmarried woman, this was no offence, unless the female concerned was under the age of puberty, in which event the man was charged with rape, punishable by a fine and compensation to the girl's father. The penalty for adultery was a fine, compensation to the husband and propitiation of the ancestors of the clan against whom the offence was regarded as having been committed. It was not always that cases of adultery were reported to the elders. The husband of the woman involved or any of his relations could, soon after the offence, take vengeance by committing adultery with a wife of the family from which the original offender came, provided he could find such a wife!

In such a situation, it would appear that the elders were prepared to ignore the facts even if these came to their notice. Such a situation did not, however, arise frequently, as it was difficult to find a woman who could allow herself to be the tool of vengeance against the family into which she was married. The compensation paid was heavier if the woman was pregnant at the time of the offence, as a result of it. Any child born as a result of a man committing adultery with a married woman belonged to the man. The husband could, of course, get rid of the woman and claim all his expenses on her marriage from the adulterer³⁴.

Adultery was regarded as a grave personal insult to the husband of the woman. Indeed, before the trial, the husband's family could destroy with impunity property belonging to the offender. Should they destroy property other than that belonging to the offender, the latter was bound to pay the value of all property so destroyed. In some cases, the Ehovwonren would plant their staffs of office outside the door of the offender. This was the signal for destruction of property as described above and a warning to the adulterer to send emissaries to the offended party to plead for an early settlement. Where the adulterer came from an entirely different clan, inter-clan wars could very easily result³⁶.

Incest

This was a most uncommon offence and the punishment was fine on the male and propitiation of the ancestors by both parties³⁷.

Assault

This was punished by a fine and compensation or occasionally by allowing the offended party to damage the offender's property. If during the fray the offender had bitten the other man, additional compensation was levied. Cases of assault were not frequent as the assaulted party usually fought back at once and the matter ended there. But where the village issued a proclamation against fighting, cases of assault came up more frequently³⁸.

Defamation

The most serious manifestation of the offence was for one free man to call another a slave. This was a very grave offence for which the offender paid an extremely heavy fine and compensation. Where other forms of defamation occurred, the victim was expected to indulge in cross abuse³⁹.

One should note that habitual offenders, whatever their offences, were usually sold into slavery, as they were regarded as bringing disgrace on their family, and ultimately on the community as a whole. It will be clear from the above that deprivation of liberty in the form of imprisonment was unknown. That punishment was the consequence of the introduction of British rule⁴⁰.

The Social Organisation of the People

The family consisted of a man, his wife or wives and their children, and they lived together in a compound; one or more groups of families related through patrilineal descent occupy a ward of the village. The village itself was a compact settlement, usually containing fewer than 500 persons. Both men and women were grouped into the aforementioned age-grades, each with particular responsibilities. Traditional religion included the belief in a creator god and his messengers, in spirits and in ancestral spirits. Diviners were consulted to explain failures in any activity, on occasions of illness or death, and before economic activity. Witches

were believed to be organized into groups that met regularly in large trees. This activity was prevalent in *Isokoland* until the introduction of Christianity in the area, in the 19th century⁴¹. The geographical situation of the *Isoko* country coloured the lives, culture and occupations of the people.

Religious Beliefs and Practices

Isoko religion begins with Oghene, the Supreme Being, who is believed to have created the whole world and all peoples, including the *Isoko people*. Oghene always punishes evil and rewards good, a belief that leads the *Isoko people* to blame witchcraft for any evil which may happen to a good man. To bridge the gulf between the *Isoko people* and Oghene, an intermediary is appointed called ‘Oyise’, also regarded as the ‘messenger of Oghene. Through Oyise, Oghene can be involved in case of calamity or need. The greatest moral force in *Isoko* life is the worship of the ancestors ‘Esemo’ in addition to the worship of Esemo, most clans worship the clan founder, who, unlike other men who are reincarnated again and again, remains forever in Eriwi, the spirit world watching over the clan he created. The clan founder is usually represented by a clay image in a sacred grove, served by a priest, and worshipped by the whole clan at the beginning of the dry season and by women who want children⁴².

Female Circumcision

Female circumcision in *Isokoland* was not uncommon, and was carried out with much pomp and display, as it means that a girl has attained the status and priviledges of womanhood, and is considered the most important female puberty rite, for without the central operation was circumcision, when the labia minora are removed or a girl remains a girl all her life, and cannot bear a child save by incurring hatred and severe censure. The operation is a rite of passage, during which a girl moves from irresponsible girlhood into the state of womanhood when she is priviledged to bear a child and be the means of an ancestor finding reincarnation; it is also the mark of ownership which her future husband puts upon her, for he bears the most of the heavy cost of the rites.

The rites, too, form an occasion for the display of wealth, the girl's parents and her betrothed striving to spend as much as possible and thereby to gain social prestige. In another sense, it is a part of marriage, for the man sleeps with his future wife during the rites, and when they are completed she goes to his house as his wife without further ceremony. A girl's first menstrual period is the sign that she is ready for circumcision, the parents and future husband are told, and they come together and agree upon a date for the rites to begin; if the girl is well developed and capable, she may be circumcised so soon as sufficient money has been collected, but normally, at least a year elapses and often longer⁴³.

ENDNOTES

1. Online source, wikipedia.org/Isokogeographyandclimate.
2. 2001 Census figures in “Mid-West Statistical Note Book” *Ministry of Local Government (Statistics Division)*, vol. *VIX*, Benin City, p. 134.
3. Government of Mid-western Nigeria: “Master Plan for Urban and Rural Water Supply” Benin City, pp. 6-17.
4. J.W. Hubbard, *The Sobo of Niger Delta*: (Gaskiya Corporation: Zaria, 1948) p. 161.
5. J.W. Welch, *The Isoko Tribe in Africa* vol. 7 No. 1 1934 p. 161.
6. R.E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, (London: 1957) p. 127.
7. The Isoko people are organized into clans. A clan is a term used to refer to a group of people or collectivity of villages that claim descent through the male lineage and a common ancestor who founded the clan. Today, there are seventeen clans in Isokoland.
8. See the Intelligence Reports of the various Isoko clans mentioned. For details on the origin of the Isoko People, refer to Ikime, O., *The Isoko People* Pp. 8-10; Hubbard, J.W., *The Sobo of the Niger Delta Delta and Ugboma*: E.S., *The Traditions of Origin of the Isoko People of Nigeria*. A thesis submitted to the University of Benin for PhD., History, Nov. 1984 chapters 3-5.
9. E.S. Ugboma, *The Traditions of Origin of the Isoko People*, (Online Publication in academia.edu), pp. 36-42.
10. J.W. Welch, *The Isoko Tribes in Africa* p. 167.
11. Odio society was a society of Ekpako or elders whose members formed the ruling class in the village or clan.
12. R.E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom* p. 127.
13. Oral Interview with Isaiah Oghenemairo, 68 years, Lagos on 15/07/2019.

14. Oral Interview with Ambrose Egbidi, 81 years, Oleh on 25/06/2019.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Oral Interview with Patience Ekemena, 72 years, *Okpe* on 27/06/2019.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Oral Interview with Comfort Oghenemairo, 60 years, Lagos on 15/07/2019.
19. NAI CS026, file 27994: *Intelligence Report on Iyede clan* p. 16. (see also the *Intelligence Reports* of the other clans also mentioned). (source: researchgate.com; Intelligence Reports on Isokoland).
20. P.A Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom 1897-1938* (London: Longman, 1979) p. 13.
21. NAI. CS026 File 27989: *Intelligence Report on Owhe clan* p. 22 (source: Researchgate.com, Intelligence Reports on Isokoland).
22. O. Ikime, *The Isoko People* p. 32.
23. Oral Interview with Isaiah Oghenemairo, 68 years, Lagos on 15/07/2019.
24. Oral Interview with Ambrose Egbidi, 81 years, Oleh on 25/06/2019.
25. Oral Interview with Isaiah Oghenemairo
26. Oral Interview with Comfort Oghenemairo
27. O. Ikime, *The Isoko People* p. 35.
28. *Ibid*, p. 37.
29. Oral Interview with Patience Ekemena
30. Oral Interview with Ambrose Egbidi.
31. Oral Interview with Comfort Oghenemairo.
32. Oral Interview with Isaiah Oghenemairo

33. *Ibid.*
34. Oral Interview with Ambrose Egbidi.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Oral Interview with Comfort Oghenemairo.
37. Oral Interview with Ambrose Egbidi.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. J.W. Welch, *The Isoko tribe*, pp. 163-164.
41. *Ibid*, pp. 166-167.

CHAPTER THREE

AGRICULTURE AS AN ASPECT OF THE ISOKO ECONOMY

Introduction

This chapter examines the place of agriculture in the traditional economy of the Isoko people. It discusses the nature of agricultural practices and the importance of the respective sub-sectors of agriculture in Isokoland up to 1900. However, before discussing agriculture, the chapter will outline and analyze the various modes of acquiring land for agricultural use in Isokoland.

Land Tenure System

This aspect is mainly focused on the administration of land in Isoko societies, and an examination of the control, use and ownership of land. Land administration in the society was based on the regulation of land, and conversion of land ownership without significant fines and duties of taxation, unlike the present day acquisition of land in the Isoko society. It should be stressed that the economies of the Isoko people, like those of other Nigerian Communities depended on the land. It would also appear that as a result of the close kinship and communal ties which bound the founding fathers of Isoko together, and the collective effort which was required to tame vegetation, land was regarded as a communal property. Until

recently, the sale of land was forbidden, although it could be mortgaged provided it would be returned as soon as possible.

Among the Isoko people, land was a commodity, which over the years have appreciated in value and this has made the commodity scarce and open to many issues, which was a direct result of the colonial rule in the society. Land in Isoko had deep socio-political and cultural values. It was the home of the ancestors who played active and important roles in the clans, family and villages. So land could not be sold, as selling it would mean short-changing the ancestors and vexing the spirits of those unborn. Those who attempted to sell lands belonging to the community were believed to suffer the consequences of death or disfiguration in parts of their bodies¹. In the era, there were three types of lands which are;

- Family owned lands
- Individually owned lands
- Community owned lands.

Family lands were the lands held in common by members of the family and their heirs through inheritance. By virtue of being a male member of these family, one was entitled to the use of the family – owned lands. Women could not acquire lands even when they were part of a family because if they did, the family would lose this land to another family when she marries. Women’s rights to land was derived through their membership in the compound and the land was attained

through marriage. For many women, these rights have become increasingly vulnerable to forfeiture. The role women played in agricultural production, however had been severely constrained by their meager share of land. Land could not be given out except with the consent of the family².

One way in which family – owned land, was acquired was through exchange for credit. Land acquired by this method was temporarily held and used for the family by the creditor until the family that owes the debt has finished paying. This system was also found among the Igbos. Family land was subject to overuse which led to infertility. The need to produce enough for the consumption of the members of the family resulted in the men having many wives and children who contributed to the labour force, thus leading to an increase in population amidst a small number of farming land. These factors and problems of family land consequently led to the development of *individual land acquisition*. Individuals who were capable could enter into the forest to clear for themselves a portion of land. These lands were usually far away from home, and the farmer could decide to get more land from the Ovie, ruler. The Ovie had no power to allot community land to anybody, but could give out “open” land belonging to the community to any person who needed land for farming or building houses. Thus, when the land given out has been built upon, it becomes the property of the individual and could be inherited by his heir. This was also observed in some parts of Akwa-Ibom and Abia communities³.

Community or clan lands were owned by all living and unborn members of the clans. As have been noted, every clan is made up of different families and it was members of these families that owned the land. Examples of clan lands were bushes not owned specifically by anybody, swamp land and lakes. Clan lands were held in trust by the Ovie for all the villages that made up the clan. During the period, land was used by the members of the community, as farming was the major occupation. Since farmers enjoyed unrestricted rights over land, they could only plant annual crops which took only a year to mature. They engaged family members, the age grade, etc. in farm labour. The equipment used were simple farm tools, such as cutlasses, hoes and so on. Production was mainly for consumption, but all these changed when the colonialists came into the picture. They had planted yam, on these farm lands, as it was the major subsistence crop, along-side cassava, cocoyam and maize.

Agriculture in Pre-colonial Isoko Society

Agriculture was a major aspect in the Isoko society, without which it would have been an unrecognized society in Nigeria as it was the source of most of the people's livelihood, as well as the basis of their economy. Almost every family was involved in one way or the other in agricultural activities, which was firstly and majorly for individual consumption. Due to the nature of the land occupied by the Isoko people, agriculture was intensive in certain areas than the others. In the

riverine communities, like *Uzere* and *Araya*, farming was not as intensive as in other towns like *Iluelogbo* and *Uzere*. In the case, whether the average Isoko farmer lived in *Ozoro* or *Uzere* he was always confronted with the problem of how to overcome natural problems occasioned by the fluctuation of the climate⁶. It should be stated from the onset that the economies of the *Isoko* people depended on the lands.

The economy of the people also rested majorly on agricultural sectors like farming, fishing and hunting, and they also had local industries and traded with other societies and communities. The *Isoko* people in times cultivated various varieties of yams such as *Okpe* or yellow yam; and *Okeya* or water yam. Other plants cultivated included *Iziwo* or pepper and *Eza* or beans⁷, palm collecting was a major economic activity of the people as the oil palm trees were planted in *Isokoland* in wild groves. The oil palm was a source of revenue for the people, as it had manufacturing functions, like its use in soap making and for pomade. Raffia palms were another important economic tree, as the raffia palm was tapped to obtain palm wine for entertainment and for brewing their native alcoholic distilled drink call *Ogogoro*, a hot drink similar to the European whisky⁸. It is not known when fractional distillation of potent alcohol began, but what is important is that the people seemed to have had some latent technology in this regard. Cassava was another major crop that was cultivated alongside yam in this period. But it is important to state here that although the people sold some of their food crops and

manufactured products, their main occupation was farming and fishing, which was majorly for individual consumption and not for outright sale. Thus, they produced food crops in a large scale and were able to feed the population conveniently. Cassava, which was the source of most of the food consumed by the *Isoko* people were processed to make *garri*, starch, meal, *oziegu*, fufu, etc.

Fishing in Pre-colonial Isoko Society

Aside food crop farming, they also engaged in fishing, and till date are known as one of the major fish producing societies in Nigeria, and this was evident in their precolonial fishing activities. This was carried out in canoes – and locally made boats. Their economy was also based on fishing because of the geographical location of some communities in such villages like *Uzere*, *Aviara*, *Igbide*, *Erhowa* and *Ikpide*. Here, the people engaged in fresh water and open sea fishing. Fishing tools include locally made hooks or *Oghole* and the weaker fish traps made from the *Rafia* palm. The Bonga dominated the group of surface swimming fishes¹⁰.

Hunting in Pre-colonial Isokoland

Like farming, hunting was widely practiced in *Isokoland*. Traps were set or erected for animals and birds. Hatches, spears and later, dane guns were used. Hunting dogs were said to have been drugged to enhance their perception, and rattlers were hung on the dogs' collars for them to lead the way. However, hunting was not done as much for economic wealth but for the prestige attached to it.

Hunters were highly celebrated because of their bravery and they formed the bulk of the community informal defence squad¹¹. Hunting, though limited in scope during the period of our study, nonetheless met the immediate needs of individuals and the community at large. The hunting and trapping of wild game was a male task and the hunters were extremely skilled in identifying tracks and anticipating the movements of games. Their intimate knowledge of the forest life and their ability in deducing extremely precise information from faint tracks promoted their hunting successes.

Hunting in *Isoko* was a specialized economic activity which as in most parts of West Africa, reached its seasonal peak during the dry season. At this time, the demand for farm labour was low, bush burning was rampant, and organized bush fires drove out game from their hiding places enabling the hunters catch these games with ease¹². A chief method of hunting was stalking, in which the hunter through stealth and taking advantage of variations in terrain, wind, and cover, attempted to get close enough to an animal to make his weapons more effective. While stalking the animal, the hunter calmed the animal's fears by simulating its natural voice. Its gregarious instinct would make the animal move closer to the hunter, thus improving the chances of its being killed. The mimicking device was used in another way. This time the hunter mimicked the distress signals of an animal in pains. This attracted its natural Predator to the hunter. The first technique

was most effective during the mating season. The second took advantage of the kill instinct of predators¹³.

Hound hunting was used in *Isoko*. In hunting big game, for example, hounds were used to track the game while the hunter followed on foot. For example, an area of forest land known to be the habitat of some game was besieged and dogs on whose necks were tied small bells - *Egogo* or *Okan* – and whose eyes had been smeared with locally made energizer to make them very ferocious, were released to chase and kill the game. The jingling of the bells directed the hunters to wherever the dogs went, and so facilitated the recovery of the killed animals¹⁴.

Tracking was another important hunting device. This involved trailing of the spoor of animals which consisted of foot prints of crushed bush, or dung. This method was often used in hunting the large beasts that herded together, such as buffalos, deers, and wild hogs or bush pigs and elephants. A recent rain or heavy dew greatly aided tracking they facilitated the hunter's evaluation of the regency of the spoor. Hunters used contrivances as snare, pitfalls and baits to capture or kill animals. A snare entangled the quarry noose. It was set over a trail so that an incoming animal put its head or leg through noose and tripped the trigger which then tightened the noose over its neck or leg. Thus, the animal was held captive until the hunter got to it, it until it was strangled. Pitfall accomplished a similar objective. The animal stepped on a deceptive thin grass earth covering a deep pit,

and fell into it. There it remained until the hunter came to kill it. Baits were used to attract animals to the pitfalls¹⁵.

Earliest hunting weapons were bows, arrows and spears. Bows made of strong, wood like *urhihi* or water cane or *Etofe* and bamboo, drove arrows tipped with stones or flint to impale animals within their range; Spears were long shafts of wood with razor-sharp heads of flint, metals or stones. These were thrown at the game by hunters to impale it¹⁶.

Hunting Weapons

The commonest hunting weapon in most of West Africa was the bow and arrow. These however were not widely patronized by the *Isoko*. But they were very common among riverine dwellers where it was used for fishing and hunting small game and birds. The bow was made up of a pliable wooden shaft or a length of willow cane – *urhihi*. It tapered at each end and was stringed with piassava produced from the hard mid-rib of raffia palm frond. The arrows, about a meter in length, were made from *Etofe* and from dried branch of a raffia palm. They were carved into sharp pointed tips, which were poisoned with juice obtained from the barks of certain trees or snake teeth. One or two feathers were usually affixed to the base to give them stability in flight. The bow and arrow, though not popular tools in *Isoko* land were used for impaling fishes and hunting big birds and small quarryies like squirrels. An arrow with fresh poison was almost instantaneously fatal to birds

and small quarries, but had no known harmful side effect on people who ate animals killed by it.

Another hunting weapon was the spear, *Okrase*, which had a long wooden handle or shaft and a hollow metal head manufactured by local blacksmith, known as Odhogu. Spear heads were about four inches long and were of various types. One had a single 'smooth and sharp tip with two downwards pointing metal off shoot from the sides. This was called *Okrase*. Some of the products gotten from these wild games served as trade currencies for the people. In places where elephants were hunted their tusks were used as both currencies and commodities of long distant traders. Hides and skins got from animals such as antelopes and tigers, or leopards also served as important articles of trade which used for making talking drums, local leather clothes, leather bags and shoes. Also proceeds from hunting were used as items in the barter trade for complementary needs.

Hunting aided the development of some local industries such as blacksmithing. The blacksmith industries flourished mainly from the constant patronage of hunters for whom they made hunting weapons. Blacksmiths with remarkable ingenuity made local guns – *Uresa-Utheva* and gun, *Oworu*: spring traps of various sizes *agbefe*; spear metal head – *Okrase*, and the trident Spear head; By contrast with blacksmithing, hunting did not have much impact on wood carving. However, the industry was encouraged by the fact that it supplied the

handle, or shaft of the spear and Ojo the trident head, and other farming implements¹⁷.

Hunting and the Promotion of Agricultural Production

Hunting promoted agricultural production in various indirect ways. For example, we saw above that the fenced bush trap was a well knitted barricade round the farm land or along the bush path, and that traps were set in the openings provided in it. Intruding rodents were often caught by these traps and were thus prevented from invading farms and destroying crops. Also gun shots released at periodic intervals during the day, in the farm scared away bird, pests and rodents. In the event, many farms were often free from the scourge of rodents. This increased yields and invariably promoted agricultural production. Hunting also provided alternative employment for farmers at off season times. Thus, when the demand for farm labour became less, rather than remain idle, most farmers resorted to hunting to keep themselves busy and bring meat for home consumption, or sale¹⁸.

Hunting and the Socio-Cultural System

Hunting was also an important economic activity that affected the cultural milieu of the *Isoko* people in times in a variety of ways.

Firstly, the organisation and mobilization of all village adult males in a communal hunting expedition trained the communities in the art of communities, for the achievement of a given goal, such as defending the village against invasion

or making war on others. Thus a group of adult males organized for hunting could easily be turned into a militia for military purposes. The leaders of the hunting expeditions could easily be turned into military officers. For example, the Oletu-Igue could pass for the commander-in-chief, and the rank and file of the village hunters association could be easily transformed into the trained hard core of village armies especially as hunters were the elite military officers of *Isoko* villages or communities¹⁹. Hunting demanded bravery. The large carnivores – tiger, panther and leopard, and herbivores buffalo and even elephants – were dreaded and avoided. Only brave courageous and fearless men dared to hunt them. Thus, village communal hunting helped to develop the qualities of courage and fearlessness in the citizens of the village community. And these qualities were highly required in times of village wars. Furthermore, as already noted, hunting expeditions were an intrinsic part of village festivals in *Isoko*. Hunters' displays therefore featured prominently in festival such as *Ogene*, *Egba* and *Ukwame* in *Ozoro* Kingdom. Hunting was thus one of the means of exhibiting the rich variety of *Isoko* cultural endowments.

That aside, hunting served as an avenue for transforming a man's status into the upper sphere of village society comprising of elders, village heads, chiefs and title holders. For proficiency in hunting did in time lead to the achievement of the distinctive tile of *Osuee-ruku* an equivalent of the *Etsako*, *Ogbalege* and *Ogbuefi*. Thereafter, he was looked upon with awe in the village society²¹. What is more,

hunters created hunters' lanes by which they repeatedly went on their hunting expeditions. These lanes were usually the starting points of new footpaths which then became permanent through the constant trend of pedestrians and traders.

Traditionally, it was obligatory to give certain parts of animals killed at hunting expeditions to elders. These parts included the head, chest, lungs and the legs. For instance, when a hunter killed a buffalo, he called together his extended family and presented the elders with the head, the hand and the chest. Thereafter, the head was cooked and eaten in a communal feasting at which the elders blessed the hunter and prayed for more successes for him. In this way elderly people who could not hunt any longer were cared for. In addition, the heads of most scared animals were taken to the *Okparan-Olua*, who after the cooking and eating of the meat, lodged the skulls of the animals at the family ancestral shrine which bound all the family members together. All the deposits of skulls and other constituents formed the altar at which the *Okparan-Olua* poured libation in thankful propitiation and supplication of the ancestors for past kills, for the future kills and for protecting of hunters from danger²³.

Moreover, as noted above, animals were killed mainly for private consumption. Hunting therefore provided animal protein, a desirable food constituent for good health. Other sources of protein available to the people, such

as beans, nuts and fruits of various kinds did not contain all the essential amino acids needed by man.

Finally, hunting also introduced the *Isoko* into their cosmic science. Among the *Isoko*, three great realms were seen as governing the spheres of hunting – those of man, the animals and the spirits. The hunter moved from one realm to the other to execute a successful hunt. Thus, when he left the human world, the village he entered the forest or the animal world. With skills given to him by the spirit through such intermediaries as native doctors, he hunted animals which themselves were often believed to have incarnated in elementals of low spirit power. The spirit world therefore gave them as gifts to man to be killed and used as food. But man had to be guided by certain rituals to avoid the wrath of the spirit world.

These rituals often varied widely from one community to another, but among the *Isoko* people, the characteristic pattern had four elements. The first was the preparations for the hunt. This was in three parts. The first was divination, to determine the success of the hunt. Then came the sanctification of the hunting charm – the *egwere*- which protected the hunter against all contrary spirits during the hunting expedition. ‘This was an important element in the preparation activities for the *egwere* hunting charm had to be reconsecrated to renew and amplify its powers. This was done with either a cock or dig. If this was neglected, the *egwere* could appear to the hunter in dream and demand its due. Further neglect after this

usually resulted in failure for the hunter, leading to his eventual death. His neglect of his hunting charm exposed him to a range of forest dangers. The third aspect of the preparation rituals was the strengthening of the courage of the hunter and the efficacy of his weapons.

The second elements in the rituals to avoid the wrath of the spirit world was done to help the hunter leave, without incident, his village, the abode of man and enter the forest, the abode of animals. To do this, the hunter had to perform some rituals which conferred on him an awareness crossing boundaries from the human world to that of animals. For example, the hunter had to ask permission from the animal and spirit worlds to enter the bush or forest without any misfortunes, such as deadly confrontation with evil spirits and gods which could kill him. He also had to seek the advice and blessing of the animal and spirit worlds to make his hunt rewarding. The third element involved his return to the human world. To achieve this, they had to perform ritual once again to desacralize him and make him fit to re-enter the human world. Then he had to perform rituals to atone for all offences against the animals, especially those that were slain in mating, labour or pregnancy, and neutralize all animal curses against him²⁵. The final element was reintegration of himself once again into human society. This took the form of sharing his kill with the elders according to established norms. Certain parts of the kill, such as the skull or bones were set aside and not consumed because, they were believed to contain the seat of the animal's spiritual power. Thus, on no account was a hunter

permitted to eat the head of sacred animals, since that would be direct affront to the animal world which could result in the death of the hunter. Through hunting, therefore, people acquired a great deal of *Isoko* cosmic science²⁶. According to Pa. Charles Okpidi, the hunting system also helped the farmer as excess game canvasses were thrown on the farmlands, and this made the lands more fertile.

ENDNOTES

1. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi, 84 years, Orire, Irri on 24/07/2018.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Oral Interview with James Okporaro, 70 years, Ozoro on 24/07/2018.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. O. Ikime, *The Isoko People an Historical Survey*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972) p. 35.
7. S.O. Aghalino, "Economic Foundation of Isokoland", *Ilorin Journal of History* vol 1, 2006, p. 4.
8. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi
9. S.O. Aghalino, "Economic foundations of Isokoland", p. 5.
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11. Oral Interview with James Okporaro.
12. *Ibid.*
13. O.N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*, (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corp, 2002), p. 74.
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17. *Ibid*, pp. 75-79.

18. B.J.E Itsueli, "Hunting and Fishing in the 19th Century Etsako", *The Herodotian: Journal of the Department of History*; College of Education, Abraka. Vol. IV, June, 1981.
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20. *Ibid*, p. 80.
21. B.J.E. Itsueli, "Hunting and fishing in the 19th century Etsako", pp. 68-69.
22. O.N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*, p. 81.
23. R.A. Lawrie, *Meat Science* (Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1979), pp.367-373
24. O.N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*, p. 85.
25. *Ibid*, pp. 80-81
26. B.J.E. Itsueli, "Hunting and Fishing in the 19th Century Etsako", p. 69.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOCAL INDUSTRIES AND TRADE IN ISOKO

Introduction

The *Isoko* economy rested mainly on land produce, rather than aquatic produce i.e. fishes. Plantain, yam, cassava and maize and formed the bulk of the main food crops, while palm oil and the oil palm products helped to sustain and even develop their economies.

Consequently, an important aspect of the *Isoko* people's life was in the area of manufacture and industry. This can be further classified into the arts and crafts industry, blacksmithing, furniture making, utensils, earthen ware and pottery making, masquerade and decorative instruments creation, soap making, medicine production and woodcarving. But the most important aspects of the *Isoko* industries were the oil palm and the fish industries, which accounted for the bulk of their export trade products locally and internationally, alongside food crops. To supplement their essentially agricultural economy, the *Isoko* tribes engaged in some highly localized trade concentrating first on barter among neighbouring family groups and later with nearby clans and finally, non-indigenes. This chapter is an analysis of the various local industries of the *Isoko* people, as well as their trade relationships both locally and internationally, which transited from mainly food crop trades to slave trade. Detailed analysis on the various trade currencies and

industries shall also be discussed, and their impacts on the economies of the people, especially through the trade of these products.

The Manufacture and Craft Industries

Another aspect of the *Isoko* society economic life was in the area of manufacture/industry. Woodcarving was practiced in several villages in *Isoko*. These included *Olomore*, *Iluelogbo* and *Uzere*. Hero masquerade or *Emetho* of various designs were produced, apart from beautifully decorated dolls for play and for special occasions. Human figures were also carved¹. The people also manufactured tools for farming and warfare, like cutlass, which they were never afraid of and which gave them the title, “*Isoko Otolopia*”². They also produced hoes for farming and the construction of houses. But their major industry was the oil palm industry³. The processing of oil palm fruits into palm oil was prominent amongst craftsmen and women of this period in *Isoko* land, and this was used in making palm oil which the people used in so many ways, majorly in cooking. The most common use they employed in the consumption of palm oil was serving it as a sauce with boiled or roasted yam. The palm fruit, when juiced, was also used in making soaps. The men also produced dry gin, popularly called *ogogoro* or in some parts of Delta, Sapele water. The techniques and effort used in the production of this dry gin was so sophisticated, it was easily compared to the European whiskey. This gin also served as a medicinal drink, and when mixed with various natural

herbs and plant, was used in the treatment of various ailments such as fever, rheumatism, malaria, cough etc. The people also manufactured other types of native medicine with the local herbs and plants around them⁴.

Within the *Isoko* industrial economy, the women had separate economic opportunities for artistic expressions. Most of them engaged in pottery making which was essentially a female affair. Clay utensils like pots, bowls and earthenware were manufactured for domestic usage. The women also engaged in making a wide variety of raffia mats that ranged from plain patterns to more elaborate multi-coloured creation. Soap making was also a major activity of the women folk. The black soap was obtained from the remnants of the burnt shafts of the palm fruits. The need for soap making was informed by the necessity to bathe and wash properly. The black soap itself was also medicinal as it was used for curing and treating Acne⁵.

The Oil Palm Industry in Isoko

Palm nut collection was a seasonal activity. The periods of collecting extended from January to June and it was controlled by a council of elders in each village community, whose duty was to officially declare the palm bush open or closed for collection. Oil extraction from the palm nut was a process that lasted for approximately 21 days, and it involved the co-operation of the man, his wives and children, and in some cases members of the extended family⁶.

The first stage in palm collection was the climbing of the palm trees using ropes and woven raffia palms. The man uses a cutlasses to cut down the nuts, usually bunched together in a big cob of about eighteen inches long. His wife's role was to haul the trough that was collected in the trough in a single day, which amounts to "a little over one puncheon i.e. 13 cwt or palm kernel". In certain circumstances, such as when the tapper is a bachelor, the husband is very sympathetic, or the wife is very sick, the man could assist the woman gathering the scattered nuts to his own trough. At the end of the collecting period, the palm nut collector i.e. Oberokpa in Isoko then slices the bunches into four or more smaller pieces each, covers them with palm branches and they are left for a period of two to three days to ferment a little. This fermentation softens the nuts and facilitates further processing. That done the palm nut collector, shakes the nuts loose from the sliced cobs into a bamboo. The clean nuts are then transferred into the oil canoes or trough of about 12 to 15ft long, 3 to 4 ft wide and 4ft in depth, with a sloping bottom and a plugged hole at the end⁷.

When the trough is half full with palm nuts, the nuts are trodden with bare feet for about two days until they are reduced to a pulp consisting of nuts, having integument and oil. Since this part of the job is laborious, the man is often assisted by friends and members of the extended family. The pulp that emerges as a result of the treading is piled on the higher end of the trough so that the oil will flow to the lower end. The trough is then covered with plantain leaves as well as palm

fronds for a couple of days. Two or three days later, the man and his family complete the process of oil extraction, which may take approximately two full days more. At this stage, the oil is usually of poor quality and poured into tines for further boiling to remove impurities. Water is then added to the pulp and shaken vigorously to float the oil that is left in the nuts and hairy integument. The oil is siphoned off from the top of the water into drums and boiled for about one hour, after which it is poured into kerosene tins ready for consumption and sale.

Meanwhile, the clean nuts and fibrous residues are thrown out of the trough to dry for about nine to ten days. These are shared by the women who participated in the palm oil processing. The women crack the nuts for domestic use and for sale. The motivation for individual participation in the processing of palm oil in the period stemmed from the individual, whether man or woman, who stood to gain from the exercise. Because of its economic value, the oil palm is a traditional source of revenue for the people. For most men, palm oil was processed partly to meet domestic consumption needs and partly for satisfying social obligations such as payment of dowries, purchasing essential articles, items such as salt or luxury items like gin and gun powder. It is important to add that the entire processing of palm oil and kernel was carried out using locally manufactured goods. In addition to the climbing trees, locally made cutlasses bought from harvesting of fruits. The earthen pot was used for boiling palm fruits especially during the production of soft oil and other items used were the calabash spoons locally called *Unuo*. The mortar

was used for pounding boiled fruits, while a wooden spade was used to scoop pounded pulp into the trough⁸.

Cogent to note is that the oil palm made immense contribution towards meeting the socio-economic needs of *Isoko* people of the western Delta. The palm frond was used in burial ceremonies and in the propitiation of the gods. On the domestic level, the oil palm had other functions. The trunk of the palm was used in the building of houses, its fiber was woven into fish traps, while the frond were used for the construction of thatched fences around the compounds. Palm frond was also fed as fodder to goats, while the veins were used in making brooms and setting a fire to cook with. The palm kernel was chewed with maize as snacks. Kernel was also fed to goats and chickens. The palm nut, after the kernel had been removed was used to cement marshy areas in the compounds and for foot paths. The palm oil is ultimately used for cooking the “banga” and “owo” soups, special delicacies in *Isoko* which are made from the oil. Besides this, the oil palm was tapped to yield palm wine. The pomade, and soap, as have been mentioned earlier in this chapter, served as a therapeutic all-purpose oil which readily served also as Sloan liniment to the people. Since the oil palm industry in *Isoko* was principal source of revenue for the people, it had its pantheon deity called *Edjokpa*. This goddess protected the people as they executed their duties relating to oil extraction, in return, the deity was venerated before the palm bush could be declared officially open for trapping. In some parts of *Isoko*, animals such as dogs were used as sacrifice to the deity. As

the strategic importance of oil palm industry was self-evident, any foreign innovation which tended to distort and/or modify the established system of prospecting oil palm without the approval of the people would naturally displease many people⁹.

The Fish Industry in Isoko

Nigeria have always been a fishing country, and Nigerians are fish-eating people. On a national scale, the approximate average share of seafood in the total protein consumption is about 33%, most of which are generated by the southern territories in the country. This share is probably much less in the northern part of the country, where the share of meat is much larger. Thus, fishes caught both in inland waters and in the ocean provide the bulk of the animal protein in the southern regions, where the network of rivers and canals enables massive transportation of marine fish inland. In Pre-colonial *Isokoland*, seafood became the major source of animal protein on the one hand, and of income on the other. This led to the paramount importance to them of ready access to equipment, fuels or firewood and credit, to ensure their food and economic security¹⁰.

The small scale artisanal fishery is the main economic sector in the coastal areas of Pre-colonial *Isokoland* like *Umeh*, *Uzere*, *Ibedeni*, *Egbema*, *Asafo*, *Owodokpokpo*, *Ekregbesi*, etc. and this became the main source of income for the inhabitants. The participants are mainly fishermen who catch the fish, and the

fisher-women or fish mummies who smoke and market them, as well as river boatmen who transport them, and finally secondary and tertiary fish dealers, a variety of supplies, servicemen and money lenders, whose businesses were associated with or totally dependent on the fishery. This meant that over 300,000 inhabitants annually derived their livelihoods in various ways from the fishery¹¹.

Artisanal marine fishermen of Pre-colonial *Isoko* Nigeria were among the bravest, most skillful and professional small-scale fishermen in the world. They operated mostly from open, surf beaten beaches. Their canoes sometimes capsized in the surf, which they must cross on the way to and from their fishing grounds. Loss of catches, equipment and even human life was a frequent occurrence¹². The hard and dangerous environment of marine artisanal fishing requires a continuous application of wits and skills, numerous decisions made daily and hourly, competitiveness, a need for a strong commercial sense on the one hand, and team work brought to perfection on the other, and finally, a strong will and physical fitness. Most artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen manifested fiercely independent attitudes with respect outside ideas, and as a rule were communicative, surprisingly well informed and, overall, a people who knew their business¹³.

The Fisher-women/Fish Mummies

The womenfolk of the Pre-colonial *Isoko* fishing communities deserve the utmost respect. As with other West African “Fish-Mummies”, they were

industrious, skilled in their trade, business minded and very articulate about their needs and problems, as well as those of their families. They did not accept technical solutions that were incompatible with their own criteria. And generally, these criteria were the right ones. For example, they rejected the idea of common, efficient smoke houses which seemed healthier and much more feasible to the western technicians. “We must smoke our fish at our houses, for we must at the same time, look after our children”¹⁴, they often said. Now dilapidated and often abandoned smoke houses can be found all over *Isokolands*, products of “top-to-bottom” programs run by ignorant technocrats who were oblivious to the fish – mummies wisdom. In addition to their usual roles as wives, mothers and housewives, women played a major economic role in the fishing communities in the territories and for that matter, in most artisanal fishing communities in *Isoko*. They were busy handling, processing and selling fish and were less well known or often ignored. They were also often involved in fishing, especially when most of the fishing was done in rivers, estuaries, lagoons or creeks, and where the catches were not massive, some women could be found fishing. Their fishing operations, however, were separate from those of the men, by specializing mostly in handling pots, baskets, small trap fishing, and small-scale drag netting¹⁵.

Their catches of small crustaceans were substantial and they probably produced the bulk of the mollusks of most fish either from small paddled canoes or by wading and diving. A significant share of their catches were for self-

consumption. In marine communities, where large amounts of small pelagics such as bonga, sardinella and shad were plentiful and seasonal-glut catches occurred, women were less apt to go fishing, spending most of their time instead in handling, processing and selling fish¹⁶.

The women's functions however did not necessarily end with fishing, fish smoking and trading. Women also made various fishing equipment: for example, fish traps and fish baskets. They also acted as a shore gang at fish beaches and wharfs, removing fish from fishing nets, cleaning and re-stacking them. As a rule, the fisherwomen of Pre-colonial *Isoko* land were financially independent. The fishes that they smoked were bought from fishermen, who included their own husbands or other relatives. Some owned canoes which they used for collecting and transporting wood, or fish, as well as for fishing in the creeks or chartering to fishermen. Apart from commercial relations between wives and husbands, women also traded with relatives and other fishermen¹⁷. Depending on the circumstances, they also became creditors or debtors to fishermen, especially when they lacked cash to pay for the fish before selling them. But more often, they lent fishermen sums for working capital or even for investments in equipment, exacting in returning the fishermen obligations to deliver them their catches. This system led to prolonged and increasing indebtedness of men to their wives, as well as other women, that sometimes ended with the fishermen taking their canoes and crews

and migrating to other communities, distant fishing camps or provisional settlements, sometimes for good, in order to avoid their commitments¹⁸.

Fish Smoking and Firewood

In view of local and national consumers' preferences, and also the prohibitive costs of creating and maintaining sophisticated refrigeration vessels, smoking was the only feasible way to keep fish edible for more than a few hours throughout the area's artisanal fishing communities. Fishes were hot-smoked in one layer and grilled over an open fire, usually inside houses full of smoke¹⁹. The product, which was desirable in local markets, was quite acceptable even to distant communities and regions. But unfortunately, one layer smoking required a lot of firewood per kilogram of smoked fish and working in an environment of smoke often caused eye diseases, and for some, blindness. Frequent conflagrations also consumed not only the houses where the fire broke out, but at times, whole neighborhoods, another risk of this method of fish smoking. Attempts had been made in the late 1800s to introduce the much more efficient and less dangerous Ghana-type "chorkor – smoker"²⁰.

In communities specializing in bonga fishing, fish smoking during the main season assumed the character of a cottage industry. A single fish smoking worker-trader, usually a woman, usually processed lots of 1.25 – 2 mt of bonga. In large smoke houses located in fishing communities heavily involved in the bonga fish

industry, teams of up to 10 women may smoke that amount in a day's work. With the open-fire technology, large amounts of firewood were therefore consumed²¹.

In villages situated among the mangrove woods, the women usually provided for their own firewood needs. But in the villages situated far from the mangrove woods or where the woods in the vicinity were depleted, wood collecting gangs carried firewood on canoes for sale by canoe loads. The firewood represented a significant component of overall production costs, which was an attractive feature and similarity of the Ghanaian "chorkor" kilns, which used half the wood fuel per unit of smoked fish than the open-fire methods²².

Trade in Pre-colonial Isoko

To supplement their essentially agricultural economy, the Pre-colonial *Isoko* people engaged in some highly localized and long-distance trade, concentrating first on barter among neighbouring family groups and later with nearby clans and farther villages. Trade in agricultural produce dominated transactions with other regions before the prevalence of slave trade²³.

Market Days in Pre-colonial Isoko

Before the coming of the Europeans, the people of *Isoko* like most of their neighbours operated a lunar calendar and the day a new moon appeared was generally regarded as the first day of the month. From one planting season to the

other was a year, and a week consisted of four days and not seven days. The four days of the week in a traditional *Isoko* calendar are *Euor*, *Athuewrno*, *Uje* and *Athujeno*.

Ewor i.e. *Ewhor* also called *Edewor* was regarded as a sacred day by the adherents of many of the traditional religions in *Isoko* – the way Sunday is to Christians. *Ewor* was therefore regarded as the first day of the week in the *Isoko* traditional calendar. Furthermore, in each *Isoko* community, one of the days of the week was set aside as a market day. Therefore that day also became known as *Edeki* in the community. For instance, *Ewor* was the market day in *Emede*, *Oyede*, *Umeh*, etc. To the people of these communities, *Ewor* was also *Edeki*. But the people from the communities of *Ozoro*, *Olomoro*, *Igbide*, *Eniwe*, etc chose *Uje* as their market day. Again, *Uje* in those communities was also *Edeki*. It should be added that in the *Isoko* societies, almost every village or clan had a market. These markets however varied in sizes as there were small markets called *Eki – Oto* and large markets – *Eki. Ologbo*. The market days, *edeki*, were so chosen that no clashes occurred with the market days of neighbouring villages. Market intervals also, in some cases, varied from four to eight days²⁴.

Nature and Articles of Trade

Domestic and external trades were the main types of trading activities in *Isoko* in the Pre-colonial period. Farmers, traders, carvers, fishermen, food gatherers, hunters and other producers exchanged their commodities for other goods they lacked. In domestic or local trade, articles exchanged in the markets include palm produce like palm oil and kernel; starch, yam, plantain, garri and meat. Other articles of trade include fish, woven bags, arts and craft works, and smelted products like cutlass, hoes, etc²⁵. Towards the 18th and 19th centuries, the people began to engage in the lucrative slave trade, though in a limited fashion, due to the territorial hindrances they faced, and stiff competition with their Urhobo and Ijaw neighbours, who were better slave traders than the *Isoko people*.

Fish Marketing in Pre-colonial Isoko

Fish have always been one of the most important protein sources to the *Isoko* societies, and hundreds of thousands of fish were annually exported locally and externally through the trans-saharan long distance trade, thereby generating huge revenue for the people. The fishes caught in the riverine *Isoko* communities were sold by fishermen to fish traders. The latter were women and few men who cleaned, smoked and sold about 5% of the fish in local markets and the remaining 95% to outside traders, mainly from neighbouring villages or regions, who created a distribution network in other parts of the countries. In some cases, the fishes may

change hands several times before eventually reaching the consumer. Major fish traders, whether from outside the *Isoko* riverine communities or from within the area also supplied fishermen, often on credit, with netting, fuel and sometimes even outboard motors. This had engendered permanent or semi-permanent relationships between fishermen and traders – with all the associated advantages and disadvantages²⁶.

One problem that plagued the local marketing system was a lack of working capital. Although fish mammies supported the traditional credit system, fishermen complained that often they had to let the women-traders have the fish and then wait to be paid until the women processed and sold them, during which time they needed new capital tools for their next fishing trips. Thus, they had to wait until the fishes were sold, and in the process, lost potentially productive fishing time, or chose to obtain capital tools on credit at a traditional credit cost²⁷. Visibly within this traditional market-cum – credit framework, there was an important difference between the local village fish mammies and the outside traders. While the former were usually poor hardworking women, who were being “smoked alive” while trying to make a living for their families and themselves, the latter were full-scale merchants and money – lenders to both genders, who usually had plenty of cash at their disposal²⁸.

Slave Trade

The Pre-colonial *Isoko* people were not avid slave traders, unlike their *Ijo* and *Urhobo* neighbours and neither were they slave raiders, who attacked unsuspecting villages and communities for potential slaves²⁹. Since most of the slaves sold at the ports of the eastern Niger Delta came predominantly from the Igbo country, some Western Igbo passed through *Itsekiri* middlemen, as well as *Urhobo*, *Isoko* and other groups from the regions under Benin influence³⁰. This meant that the traders of the Delta, then, did not themselves raid for the slaves they sold to the European ships but procured them from communities adjoining the Delta or through the *Aro* and other trading communities of the hinterland. Some of the slaves came from a long way inland, usually passing through many intermediaries³¹.

In the Western Delta, the *Ijo* Communities were placed in a peripheral position in relation to Itsekiri and Benin, and in response, they preyed in the trade of these two kingdoms, sometimes, supplying slaves to Itsekiri. *Ijo* piracy is reported in most of the accounts of European visitors to the western Delta, and *Ijo* traditions confirmed these piratical activities as well as the supremacy of the Itsekiri in the overseas trade. The *Kabo*, for example, were notorious for their piracy on the forcados river. The *Erohwa*, a prominent *Isoko* group, were driven

further inland from their old site on the Forcados close to the site of Patoni, one of the best known raiding communities³².

But, while the people of *Uzere*, the descendants of *Uzee* and servers of *Eni*, were in effect forging tools for the integration of their homeland, larger developments were occurring on their territorial periphery. They had heard of *Oyibo*, the white man, and his power. *Oyibo* could be found in many different parts of the Delta but he had never been to *Isoko*. The *Isoko people* who had been taken as slaves by the *Ijaw* raiders knew the white men well but were never able to tell their people about him. But a few *Isoko* had probably seen him in Warri or Akassa or Gana-Gana or one of the other centers of exchange the Europeans had manned over the past 400 years. So strongly had the fact of great strength been impressed upon the *Isoko* that one of the most powerful gods of the area had been named after *Oyibo*³³. What this means is that, although the *Isoko* Pre-colonial people were linked to slave trade and had experienced some modicum of slave raids themselves, they did not participate fully in the trade. Their activities in the trans-Atlantic slave trade was more as a need to defend their territories from slave raids coming from their *Ijaw* and *Urhobo* neighbours, rather than as a means to make lucrative profits. This was also because they depended heavily on the palm-oil or oil-palm trade, which began to increase in intensity during the 1700s alongside slave trade and the 1800s with the global transition from slave trade to legitimate trade, which saw

palm oil as one of the major crops to be exported to Europe for their fast developing industries.

Trade Currencies

The predominant means of acquiring products in the Pre-colonial *Isoko* society was the trade-by-barter system, in which some quantities of goods or products were exchanged for other goods or products which were both perceived to have the same economic value(s). In riverine communities, especially, where booming markets sprang up on the banks of the rivers where various types of fish, dry and fresh were caught, farm produces like the staples – garri, starch and tapioca were either traded or simply bartered for fish³⁴. Salt was also a commodity in great demand for itself among the *Isoko* people, and so it came to be used in the Niger Delta societies for trade and also as an accounting unit or currency. This particular use was reported in the 19th century by European visitors Adams reported for the late 18th century in the region that;

“The medium of exchange is salt, and calculations are made in pawns, one of which is equal to a bar in Bonny or 2 silver or 6d sterling”.³⁵ Other trade currencies included the cowries manillas, copper ingots, dried fish, gold, elephant tusks, beads, etc. These were regarded as the local currencies by the *Isoko* people but in the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the Europeans sought to change the circulation of these currencies to one which would greatly benefit them and give them the upper hand

in their trade transactions with Africans. This was achieved with the introduction of paper and coin money as legal tender to all African states and kingdoms, including *Isoko*.

ENDNOTES

1. S.O. Aghalino, “Economic Foundations of Pre-colonial Isokoland”, *Ilorin Journal of History*, vol 1, 2006, p. 14.
2. Oral Interview with Joseph Obadiemu, 71 years, Orie, Irri on 20/07/2019.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Oral Interview with James Okporaro, 70 years, Ozoro on 20/07/2019.
5. S.O. Aghalino, “Economic Foundations of Pre-colonial Isokoland”, p. 19.
6. S.O. Aghalino, “British Colonial Policies and the Oil Palm Industry in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria 1900 – 1960”, *African Study Monographs*, 2000, p. 20.
7. *Ibid*, p. 21.
8. *Ibid*, p. 22.
9. *Ibid*, p. 22.
10. Personal observation, as a result of researching the people’s lifestyles and geographical makeup.
11. B.Y. Menakhem, *Integration of Traditional Institutions and People’s Participation in an Artisinal Fisheries Development Project in Southern Nigeria*, (Online Publication in jstor.org).
12. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi, 84 years, Orie, Irri on 20/12/2018.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Oral Interview with Efeyome Okpidi, 79 years, Orie, Irri on 20/12/2018.
15. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Oral Interview with Efeyome Okpidi.

18. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi.
19. B.Y. Menakhem, "Integration of Financial Institutions".
20. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Oral Interview with Efeyome Okpidi.
23. O. Ikime, *The Isoko People, an Historical Survey*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972) p. 39.
24. Online Article by *Isoko Wa Doh*, a facebook group on Isoko Culture and History institutions in www.facebook.com/isokowado.
25. S.O. Aghalino, "Economic Foundations of Pre-colonial Isokoland", p. 23.
26. B.Y. Menakhem, "Integration of Financial Institutions".
27. Oral Interview with Efeyome Okpidi.
28. Oral Interview with Charles Okpidi.
29. Oral Interview with James Okporaro.
30. E.J. Alagoa, "Long distance Trade and States in the Niger Delta": *The Journal of African History*, vol. 11 1970, p. 127.
31. *Ibid*, p. 131.
32. *Ibid.*
33. P.P. Ekeh, "History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta", (Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society, 2007), pp. 48-49.
34. Oral Interview with Efeyome Okpidi.
35. E.J. Alagoa, "Long Distance Trade", p. 326.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In summary, the economic activities of the Pre-colonial *Isoko* people were unique and dynamic and was greatly influenced by the geographical and climatic conditions of their territory. The people reside in much of the coastal regions of present day Nigeria and share boundaries or territories with the *Urhobos*, *Ukwanis* and *Ijaws*. There are various traditions of origin of the people, but the most recognized theories are those that claim that the people migrated from Benin, during the reign of Oba Ozolua between 1483 and 1514, while others maintain that the people migrated peacefully from Benin before Oba Ozolua reign. Other traditions of origin either claim that the *Isoko people* migrated as a sub-group from the *Urhobos*, or that they were an already established people who resided in their current abode, but were influenced greatly by their *Urhobo* and *Itsekiri* neighbours.

The *Isoko* people formed a single social or political unit, and local communities remained autonomous, although they were classified and constituted under the age grade systems, with the *Olotus* and *Ototas* at the helm of affairs due to their knowledge, wisdom and charismatic personalities. But in some parts, of *Isokoland*, the people were ruled by ‘*Ovies*’, i.e. kings who were constituted to serve as the monarchical rulers to the people, and fashioned in such a way as to emulate the monarchical system of the Benin Kingdom. The people were also

worshippers of African Traditional religion which includes belief in a creator god i.e. *Oghene* and his messengers in spirits, and in ancestral worship. Diviners were consulted to explain failures in any activity, on occasions of illness or death, and before economic activities were carried out. Belief in witchcraft was also rife during this period. Also, female circumcision was common, as it also connoted a wealthy status of the girl's family, due to the pomp and pageantry of the event.

The Economy of the people was greatly influenced by their geography, which was both riverine and agrarian in nature. Due to the nature of land occupied by the *Isoko* people, agriculture was intensive in certain areas than the others. In the riverine communities like *Uzere* and *Araya*, farming was not as intensive as in other towns like *Iluelogbo* and *Ozoro*. Thus, the economy of the people rested squarely on farming, hunting, fishing, local industries and trading. The women also participated in food gathering like collecting wild fruits and snails from bushes. Oil palm trees were planted in *Isokoland* in wild groves and the oil palm was a source of revenue for the people as it had multifaceted functions. It was used for making soaps and for pomade. Other trees that had both subsistence and industrial functions was the *Raffia* palm which was tapped to obtain palm wine for entertainment and for brewing native alcoholic drink called *Ogogoro*, a hot drink similar to the European whisky.

Like farming, hunting was widely practiced in Pre-colonial *Isoko*. Traps were set or erected for animals and birds. Hatches, spears and, later, dane guns were used. Hunting dogs were drugged to enhance their perception and rattlers were hung on the dogs' collars for them to lead the way. However, hunting was done not as much for economic wealth but for the prestige attached to it, and hunters were celebrated for their bravery. They also formed the bulk of the community informal defence squad.

Aside from agriculture and hunting, the Pre-colonial economy of the people was based on fishing because of the geographical location of such coastal or riverine villages like *Uzere, Aviara, Igbide, Erowha* and *Ikpide*. Here, the people engaged in freshwater and open sea fishing, and this helped in their quest for protein rich foods for consumption. Other aspects of the people's economic life were in the area of local industries and manufacture. Woodcarving was practiced in several villages in *Isoko*. Hero masquerade of various designs were produced, as well as beautifully decorated dolls for play and for special functions. They also engaged in the carving of Human figures. What is more, they engaged in blacksmithing activities like in the production of indigenous tools like the axe, cutlass and hoes. With tools like the chisel, the people were able to turn out impressive output in form of carved plates, mortars, paddles, boats, drums and religious objectives.

The women were not left out of economic activities that encouraged artistic expressions. Some parts of *Isoko* land were known for pottery making which was essentially a female affair. Clay utensils like pots, bowls and earthenware were manufactured for domestic usage. They also engaged in making a wide variety of raffia mats that ranged from plain examples to more elaborate multi-coloured creations, as well as soap-making and the weaving of fish traps.

The major local industries that helped boost the people's economy were the oil-palm industry and the fish industry. In the oil palm industry, the people established an economic system which not only made fairly adequate provisions for their needs, but also for those of their immediate neighbours such as the *Itsekiri*, *Ijo* and *Kwale*. Thus, their principal economic activity was collecting palm nut from which oil and kernel were extracted. The palm nut industry involved the cooperation of the man, his wife/wives and their children, and in some cases, members of the extended family. The intricate processes of collecting, extracting and processing palm – nut oil have been discussed in this work, as well as the immense contribution towards meeting the socio-economic needs of *Isoko* people it had. Besides generating the principal source of revenue for the people, the palm frond was used in burial ceremonies and in the propitiation of the gods. It was also used in the construction of houses, for fish traps, construction of thatched fences around compounds, etc. It was also fed as fodder to goats and its veins for making brooms. The palm kernel was chewed with maize, as snacks and also fed to goats

and chickens. The nuts were used to cement marshy areas in compounds and foot paths, while the oil was used for cooking special delicacies such as the “*Banga*” and “*Owo*” soups. In fact, the uses of the oil palm tree and its fruits were inexhaustive to the *Isoko* people, and this made it immensely valuable to them both in the Pre-colonial and in the colonial eras.

The fish industry was also a valuable industry of the *Isoko* people, before the colonial era. For the *Isoko* people who resided in mangrove areas, and who mostly lacked agricultural or pasture land, seafood was practically the main source of animal protein, on the one hand, and of income, on the other. The small-scale artisanal fishery was the main economic sector in the *Isoko* coastal lands, and the participants were fishermen who caught the fish, fisher-women or fisher mummies who sometimes caught fish too but mainly whose work was predominantly to smoke and market them; as well as river boatmen who transported them, tertiary and secondary fish dealer, a variety of suppliers, servicemen and money lenders, whose business was associated with or totally dependent on the fishery. Thus, the number of active fishermen in these areas were numerous, and the additional people who derived their livelihoods in various ways from the fishery were usually well over 300,000 annually. This makes the fish industry one which ensured the survival of much of the *Isoko* population.

Domestic and external trades were the main types of trading activities in *Isoko* in the Pre-colonial period. Farmers, traders, fishermen and other producers exchanged their commodities for other goods they lacked. Slave trade was not uncommon in the Pre-colonial *Isoko* society, especially towards the 18th century, when the slave trading in the Benin and Itsekiri kingdoms were rife. However, in domestic or local trade, articles exchanged in the market include palm produce like oil and kernel, starch, yam, plantain, garri and meat, as well as the goods from food gatherers like wild fruits and snails. Other articles of trade included slaves, fish, woven bags, pepper, etc. The trading systems included trade-by-barter, as well as the use of Pre-colonial currencies like cowrie shells, manila, copper ingots, gold, etc. Their market days were also uniquely scheduled and chosen that no clashes occurred with the market days of neighbouring villages. Since almost all the *Isoko* villages or clans had a market, the economies of the people also rested on their trading activities. These markets, however varied in sizes as there were small markets called *Eki-Oto* and large markets – *Eki-Ologbo*. The market days or *Edeki* were usually the busiest days of the week, and markets intervals varied from four to eight days. These unique socio-economic structures proves that the Pre-colonial *Isoko* societies had a unique history that is worth studying, both by the present and the future generations.

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Ekemena, Patience	72	Trader	Okpe	27/06/2019
Igbidi, Alex	83	Rtd. Teacher	Orie, Irri	16/07/2019
Obadiemu, Joseph	71	Farmer	Orie, Irri	2018/2019
Oghenemairo, Isaiah	68	Businessman	Lagos	15/07/2019
Oghenemairo, Comfort	60	Businesswoman	Lagos	15/07/2019
Okpidi, Efeyome	79	Rtd. Fisherwoman	Orie, Irri	2018/2019
Okpidi, Charles	84	Rtd. Teacher	Orie, Irri	2018/2019
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