

**THE SOCIO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORON PEOPLE IN  
AKWA IBOM STATE (1920-1980)**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
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## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **MARVELOUS ADATANG** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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**PROF. EDDY ERHAGBE**  
**(Project supervisor)**

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**DATE**

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**PROF. JACINTA NWAKA**  
**(Head of department)**

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**DATE**

## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to my late father Mr Sunday Okon Adatang, your impact while you were alive, played a crucial role in shaping and moulding me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere gratitude to God, for his mercies, kindness and guidance, throughout my academic journey.

To my dearest Mother, Mrs Sarah Nkoyo Adatang, you have been my backbone and a support system to me Thank you so much for all you do. To my wonderful sisters; Becky, Victoria, Israel, blessing, Daniel. I'm grateful to God for making you all my siblings Thank you so much for all you do.

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Marvelous Adatang

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the socioeconomic development of the Oron people in Akwa Ibom State between 1920 and 1980. It explores the historical background of the Oron, including their origins, migration narratives, and settlement patterns, with particular attention to oral traditions and indigenous perspectives. The research analyzes the impact of colonial rule, missionary activities, and emerging economic structures on the transformation of Oron society during the period under review.

The study further investigates key aspects of socioeconomic change, such as trade, agriculture, education, and political organization, highlighting how internal dynamics and external influences shaped development outcomes. Using a combination of historical methodology, oral interviews, and secondary sources, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of continuity and change within Oron society.

Findings reveal that while colonial intervention introduced new economic opportunities and administrative systems, it also disrupted traditional institutions and patterns of production. Nevertheless, the Oron people demonstrated resilience by adapting to these changes and integrating new systems into their existing cultural framework.

The study contributes to the broader discourse on African socioeconomic history by emphasizing the importance of local agency, oral tradition, and indigenous knowledge in understanding community development. It concludes that the period from 1920 to 1980 was pivotal in shaping the modern socioeconomic structure of the Oron people.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

The Oron people, an ethnic group located in the southeastern coastal area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, have a long and rich history of socio-economic development. Traditionally known for their fishing, trading, and farming activities, the Oron people developed complex systems of local governance, economy, and social organization before colonial contact.<sup>1</sup> The period between 1920 and 1980 marked significant transformations for the Oron communities, influenced by colonial administration, missionary activities, and post-independence developments.

Colonial policies introduced new economic structures such as taxation, cash cropping, and formal education, which altered traditional patterns of production and trade.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of administrative centers and infrastructure like roads and ports under British rule opened up the Oron region to external markets but also subjected it to exploitative colonial economic policies.<sup>3</sup> However, the Oron people displayed remarkable resilience and adaptability, engaging with new opportunities

while preserving key aspects of their cultural identity.

Post-independence Nigeria brought about further shifts. The oil boom of the 1970s and the creation of states like Akwa Ibom led to greater integration of the Oron region into the national economy, although inequalities in development persisted.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of these changes, the Oron people continued to rely heavily on fishing, farming, petty trade, and education as primary means of socio-economic advancement.<sup>5</sup>

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The main aim of this study is to examine the socio-economic development of the Oron people in Akwa Ibom State between 1920 and 1980.

The specific objectives are:

1. To trace the historical background of the Oron people's economic activities before and during colonial rule.<sup>7</sup>
2. To examine the impact of colonial policies on the Oron economy and society.<sup>8</sup>
3. To analyze the major socio-economic changes that occurred in Oron land between 1920 and 1980.<sup>9</sup>

4. To assess the challenges faced by the Oron people in adapting to new economic realities.<sup>10</sup>
5. To evaluate the contributions of the Oron people to regional and national development during the period under study.<sup>11</sup>

### **Scope of the Study**

The study covers the period between 1920 and 1980, a time of critical socio-economic transformations due to colonial, missionary, and post-independence influences. Geographically, the study is limited to the Oron communities within the present-day Akwa Ibom State. It focuses on key aspects such as fishing, agriculture, trade, education, and political participation. Limitations of the study include possible gaps in oral histories and the scarcity of written records specifically focused on the Oron people.<sup>19</sup>

### **Methodology**

The study adopts a historical research method using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include oral interviews with elders, retired teachers, fishermen, traders, and local leaders in Oron communities.<sup>20</sup> Archival materials such as colonial records, missionary reports, and government documents

will also be consulted. Secondary sources include published books, journal articles, dissertations, and historical texts related to Akwa Ibom and the Niger Delta region.<sup>21</sup>

## **Literature Review**

The socio-economic development of indigenous communities in Nigeria has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to how colonial and post-colonial policies influenced local economies and cultural practices. The Oron people of Akwa Ibom State, located in the southeastern coastal region of Nigeria, represent one of such ethnic groups whose socio-economic evolution reflects a complex interplay of traditional livelihoods, colonial interference, and national integration efforts.<sup>23</sup>

According to D.A Offiong in his book titled *Social Relation and Economic Development in Nigeria* he stated that the traditional economy of the Oron people was primarily based on fishing, farming, and canoe carving occupations which was shaped by their coastal geography and access to rivers and creeks. This subsistence economy supported a communal way of life that was largely self-sufficient before colonial incursion. In line with this, R.k Udo in his work *Geographical Region of*

*Nigeria* emphasizes that the pre-colonial Oron society maintained intricate trade relations with neighboring ethnic groups, exchanging fish, salt, palm produce, and local crafts.<sup>24</sup>

The colonial period, starting in the early 20th century, brought significant changes to the socio-economic structure of the Oron people. A.E Afigbo in his work *The Warrant Chiefs Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigerian* argues that British colonial policies reoriented local economies to serve the colonial economy, introducing cash crops and formal taxation that disrupted indigenous systems. For the Oron, this period marked the beginning of migration to urban centers in search of employment, as well as the integration into a monetized economy. Also

U.Nkereuwem<sup>25</sup> in his work *The Impact of Christain Mission in Akwa Ibom State* notes that missionary activities also played a role in transforming the Oron society through the establishment of schools and churches, which introduced Western education and Christianity, further influencing social and economic behavior. Post-independence Nigeria (1960–1980) saw the continuation of these socio-economic shifts, with increased emphasis on national development and state formation. The creation of Cross River State in 1967, and later Akwa Ibom in 1987,

brought both administrative recognition and developmental challenges to the Oron region<sup>26</sup>

Further E.E Ekong in his book *An Introduction to Rural Sociology* highlights that while government development policies aimed to improve infrastructure and education, the Oron people often felt marginalized in resource allocation and political representation. This concern is echoed in the works of O.E Uya in his work titled *Colonial Administration in Southeast Nigeria*, He documents the growing political awareness and activism among the Oron elites during this period, as they advocated for greater inclusion in regional and national politics.

Despite the pressures of modernization and marginalization, the Oron people retained key aspects of their cultural identity.<sup>27</sup> Studies by I.O Essien<sup>28</sup> in his work *The Socioeconomic History of Akwa Ibom* and M.B Abasiattai<sup>29</sup> in his book *A History of the Cross river Region of Nigeria* underline the resilience of Oron traditions, such as their cultural festivals, communal land ownership practices, and matrilineal inheritance systems, which have continued to influence their socio-economic decisions and organization.

In conclusion, the literature reveals a dynamic narrative of the Oron people's socio-economic development from 1920 to 1980, shaped by internal cultural continuity and external political and economic forces. However, there remains a gap in localized, community-based studies that document the Oron people's agency in navigating these transitions a gap this study seeks to fill.

## **CHAPTER OUTLINE**

The research is organized into five chapters:

### **Chapter One: Background to the study:**

This chapter provides the introduction, aims, scope of the Study, methodology, and Literature Review on this topic.

### **Chapter Two: Historical Background of the Oron People:**

This section explores the history of Oron people in Akwa Ibom which explains the following; the historical Origin both mythical and migration, settlement pattern and geographical location, political administration from the pre-colonial to post-colonial, economic activities, social structure and the conclusion.

### **Chapter Three: Socio Economic Development of the Oron People**

This chapter focuses on what actually happened in the Oron society which explains the historical origin, political administration, socio activities of the people and the conclusion.

### **Chapter Four: Political Development and Governance of The Oron People**

This chapter focuses on the evolution of the political structure, leadership and governance system among the Oron people.

### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ORON PEOPLE**

#### **Introduction**

The Oron people collectively referred to as the Oron Nation constitute one of the major ethnic nationalities in present-day Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> They are predominantly located in the southeastern part of the state, along the Atlantic coastline and within the riverine zones of the Cross River basin.<sup>2</sup> The Oron ethnic group is made up of several closely-knit clans, including Afaha Okpo, Ebughu, Enwang, Okobo, Udung Uko, Idua, and Urue-Offong/Oruko.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the Oron people have maintained a strong sense of unity, identity, and independence. Their culture is shaped by their environment which is largely riverine, coastal, and swampy terrain and has influenced their social structure, economy, and belief systems.<sup>4</sup> They are known for their expertise in fishing, canoe building, and navigation, traits that have been passed down for generations.<sup>5</sup>

The Oron people speak the Oron language, a Lower Cross River language within the Niger-Congo linguistic family.<sup>6</sup> Although the language shares some

similarities with Efik and Ibibio, it remains distinct in tone, lexicon, and structure. Language, oral tradition, and festivals remain vital elements in preserving the Oron identity as a people whose contact with Western civilization began early due to their coastal location, the Oron were among the first in Nigeria to experience European trade, Christianity, and missionary education.<sup>7</sup> Despite this exposure, the Oron people have retained a significant degree of cultural autonomy, evident in their traditional institutions, customs, and communal way of life.<sup>8</sup>

## **Historical Origin: Mythical and Migratory Background**

### **Mythical Origin**

The mythical origin of the Oron people is deeply rooted in oral history and spiritual narratives. According to popular belief, the Oron trace their ancestry to a place called Usakedet, believed to be in present-day Cameroon.<sup>9</sup> This myth describes a journey guided by ancestral spirits across water bodies and forests, culminating in their settlement near the Cross River estuary in this myth, the Oron ancestors were divinely instructed to follow the course of the river until they reached a land blessed with both water and forest resources. There, they would find peace, prosperity, and spiritual connection.<sup>10</sup> The myth emphasizes the Oron

people's deep connection to water, which features prominently in their religious practices and festivals.<sup>11</sup>

The mystical narrative of the Oron people's migration highlights their deeply spiritual worldview, one in which divine forces, ancestral spirits, and sacred geography guided their movements.<sup>12</sup> This account explains not only where the Oron came from but also why they left their original homeland and how they came to settle along the southeastern coastline of Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

According to elders and custodians of Oron tradition, the people's earliest known settlement was located in a region referred to as Ubuit Ikot or Ubuit Uruan.<sup>14</sup> While modern ethnographers associate this area with the Cross River basin or the Rio del Rey region of present-day Cameroon, its exact location is less important in oral history than its spiritual symbolism it was a place where the ancestors first established communion with the gods and where the foundations of the Oron identity were laid , this settlement was governed by strict spiritual laws and customs religious rite were performed to honor the Ekung Ekodun (ancestral spirit) and the community was guided by diviners , and custodian of sacred knowledge at some point it was believed that the land became spiritually closed .<sup>15</sup>

Several reasons are given for the Oron people's departure from their original homeland:

**A. Prophecy and Divine Instruction:**

Diviners, using sacred instruments such as the Okpon (divination board), reportedly received visions and signs indicating that the people were to leave their homeland. These prophecies were interpreted as commands from the ancestors, signaling a divine call to migrate in search of a new spiritual and territorial destiny.<sup>16</sup>

**B. Desecration and Spiritual Pollution**

Oral traditions speak of a sacred taboo that was broken possibly involving the killing of a totemic animal, the desecration of a shrine, or internal betrayal. The consequence was a spiritual curse on the land, which manifested in failing crops, diseases, strange weather, and infertility. The custodians of ritual knowledge concluded that the only path to redemption was to seek out a new land purified of this spiritual stain.<sup>17</sup>

### **C. Ancestral Withdrawal and Loss of Favor**

Some accounts emphasize that the Ekung Ekpu ceased to appear in visions and refused offerings. This was interpreted as the ancestors withdrawing their favor, a clear sign that the current settlement was no longer the spiritual homeland. This silence from the ancestors created a sense of urgency and anxiety within the community, prompting the decision to migrate.<sup>18</sup>

### **D. Signs from Nature and Water Spirits**

Oron mythology often portrays rivers, creeks, and coastal waters as inhabited by divine beings. In some accounts, the people were led by the spirit of the waters, possibly a goddess or river deity, who appeared in dreams and directed them through the riverine routes to the coastal lands where they now reside. The final destination was confirmed through positive omens: calm waters, the appearance of sacred animals (e.g., the crocodile or python), and favorable dreams received by the elders..<sup>19</sup>

The migration was ritualized. Sacred objects including Ekpu figurines, relics, and heirlooms were carried along. At each resting point, divination determined if the land was acceptable. This process continued until they reached

present-day Oron, confirmed as the chosen land through dreams and ritual signs upon settlement alter were erected , shrines were constructed and a new convent was established with the ancestral spirit marking the spiritual rebirth of the Oron. People in their home land .<sup>20</sup>

However there are comparative traditional Analysis between the Oron and Neighboring mystical tradition, Efik(Calabar region): The Efik also trace their origins to the east and recount being guided by dreams and spirits to the banks of the Cross River. Like the Oron, they revere water deities and ancestral spirits, especially through the Ekpe society and the Nsibidi symbolic tradition.

Ibibio: The Ibibio recount spiritual migrations involving forest spirits and ancestral guidance. Similar to the Oron, they view land as sacred and only habitable if sanctioned by the ancestors.

Ijaw (Delta region): The Ijaw speak of being led by sea spirits and moving across rivers and creeks until they reached the islands and mangroves of the Niger Delta. <sup>21</sup> The worship of water spirits such as Beni-Owei or Pere closely parallels the Oron reverence for aquatic deities..<sup>22</sup>

## **Migration and Historical Origin**

In contrast to the mythical account, ethnographers and historians suggest that the Oron people migrated from the Cross River basin, part of a larger Ibibio-Efik movement that occurred over several centuries.<sup>23</sup> Linguistic and cultural similarities among the Oron, Ibibio, and Efik support this claim, although Oron people have maintained distinct customs and language.<sup>24</sup>

It is believed that the Oron migrated in waves between the 13th and 16th centuries, possibly due to wars, population expansion, and the search for fertile land.<sup>25</sup> Their settlements were typically near rivers, mangroves, and estuaries, where they developed a water-based economy.<sup>26</sup>

## **Settlement Patterns and Geographical Location**

Upon arrival in coastal Akwa Ibom, the Oron clans established independent but culturally related communities. Oron Town (Idua) served as the traditional capital, Ebughu specialized in canoe building, and Enwang thrived in palm-produce trade.<sup>27</sup> Okobo, Udung Uko, and Urue-Offong/Oruko became agricultural and commercial hubs.<sup>28</sup>

Geographically, the Oron area is characterized by coastal plains, swamps, mangroves, rivers, and rainforests.<sup>29</sup> These features fostered a water-based economy, with clustered settlements near rivers and wooden walkways, houseboats, and fishing platforms still common today.<sup>30</sup>

## **POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION**

### **Precolonial Political System**

The Oron people traditionally practiced a decentralized political system, with authority vested in family heads, elders, and age-grade associations.<sup>31</sup> At the clan level, a Council of Elders coordinated disputes, festivals, and inter-village relations.<sup>32</sup>

The Ahta Oro, regarded as the supreme traditional ruler, held primarily spiritual and ceremonial authority.<sup>33</sup> The Ekpe society functioned as a judicial, security, and cultural institution, enforcing laws and order, Ekpan enforced laws through masquerade and ritual, ensuring peace and harmony also membership was earned through merit, age and wealth which influenced one's political standing<sup>34</sup>

## **Colonial Interference and Warrant Chiefs**

The arrival of British colonialists in the early 20th century disrupted the Oron political structure<sup>35</sup>. The British introduced the Warrant Chief system, appointing individuals (often without community approval) to represent colonial interests. This undermined traditional authority and caused friction within communities.<sup>36</sup> The Native Authority system, established by the British, further imposed external administrative boundaries and tax obligations. Oron leaders resisted some of these changes, and by the 1930s, petitions and local unrest reflected dissatisfaction with colonial interference.<sup>37</sup>

## **Post-Independence Administrative Evolution**

After independence in 1960, Oron became part of Eastern Nigeria, later South-Eastern State, and finally Akwa Ibom State in 1987.<sup>38</sup> Despite continued political marginalization, the Oron Union and the Ahta Oro remained key unifying institutions.<sup>39</sup>

## **ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE ORON PEOPLE**

### **Fishing (The Backbone of Oron Economy)**

Fishing has historically been the primary economic activity of the Oron people. Their mastery of the river and sea gave them an advantage over neighboring ethnic groups, and their fishing techniques became more specialized over time.<sup>40</sup>

Canoe construction was a vital skill, with large dugout canoes used for deep-sea fishing and inter-community transport. Fish smoking and preservation were essential techniques, enabling fish to be transported inland or traded in distant markets like Calabar and Uyo. Men typically handled the fishing itself, while women processed and marketed the catch in surrounding towns and villages. By the 1940s, Oron fishing networks extended into the Cameroon border regions and even up to Gabonese waters.<sup>41</sup>

### **Agriculture and Subsistence Farming**

Although constrained by swampy terrain, Oron people also engaged in farming, particularly on the drier inland areas and upland ridges. Crops included cassava, yam, maize, cocoyam, plantain, and vegetables. Palm oil and palm kernel production became especially important during the colonial period. The British

exploited palm produce for export, which led to the expansion of palm plantations and the introduction of new tools like metal tapping knives and hand presses. Slash-and-burn methods and communal farmland systems were common .<sup>43</sup>

### **Trade and Commerce**

Trade was another major pillar of the Oron economy. Market days were observed in many villages, especially in Urue-Offong, Enwang, and Okobo. Women were dominant in trade, often serving as the middle agents in fish, produce, and textile exchange.<sup>44</sup> Barter was common in earlier years, but colonial rule encouraged the use of currency and formalized market systems. Canoe trade routes connected Oron markets to Calabar, Opobo, Bonny, and even remote inland towns.

The colonial introduction of roads and lighters (flat-bottomed cargo boats) in the 1930s–1950s opened up trade access, especially for palm produce..<sup>45</sup>

### **Labor and Colonial Impact**

From the 1930s, many young men migrated to Calabar and Port Harcourt as dockworkers and clerks, remitting income home.<sup>46</sup> By the 1960s–70s, Oron diversified into boat building, sawmills, and palm oil mills, integrating more fully into Nigeria's economy.<sup>47</sup>

## **Social Structure of the Oron People**

The social organization of the Oron people was both hierarchical and functional. Family ties, age grades, secret societies, and gender roles structured daily life. These elements evolved over time, particularly under colonial and post-colonial influences.<sup>48</sup>

### **Kinship and Lineage**

The extended family system was central to Oron society. A typical compound housed multiple generations, and the Etubom (family head) acted as leader and spiritual intermediary.<sup>49</sup> Lineages were patrilineal, though matrilineal ties also mattered in inheritance. Elders wielded significant authority.<sup>50</sup>

### **Age Grades and Societal Duties**

The age-grade system organized individuals by peer groups who shared responsibilities. Young men formed civic groups for clearing roads, building houses, and organizing festivals, while female age grades managed communal cooking and sanitation.<sup>51</sup> These groups also served as informal policing units.<sup>52</sup>

## **Women in Oron Society**

Women played vital roles in trade and family management.<sup>53</sup> They dominated local markets and also held spiritual roles, such as Obongawan Ekpe. However, colonial influence increasingly marginalized women from leadership.<sup>54</sup>

## **Education and Social Mobility**

Christian missions introduced Western education in the early 20th century. Schools in Oron town, Ebughu, and Enwang provided opportunities for boys to become teachers, clerks, and pastors.<sup>55</sup> By the 1950s, several Oron elites had emerge contributing to regional development and politics including girls education which originally lagged behind but gradually improved in the 1960's and 1970's.<sup>56</sup>

## **Religion and Health**

Oron traditional religion revolved around ancestor worship and nature spirits, (Ekung ,Abasi) and oracles. Sacred forest and water bodies were common places of worship mediated by priests (Abia-Idiong). Healing combined spiritual and herbal practices.<sup>57</sup> Christianity later introduced hospitals, Literacy, and new moral codes, transforming spiritual life.<sup>58</sup>

## **Cultural Life of the Oron People**

The Oron cultural heritage is rich and expressive, tied to spiritual beliefs, environment, and social organization. Culture is not static but adaptive to modernity.<sup>59</sup>

### **Festivals and Ceremonies**

Major festivals include the Ekpe Festival, Ekong and Ekpo masquerades, and the New Yam Festival.<sup>60</sup> These events blend spiritual rites with social celebrations, attracting both locals and diaspora.<sup>61</sup>

### **Marriage and Family Life**

Marriage was communal, involving negotiations, rites (Uoro Ndo), and feasts. Polygamy was common in the precolonial era but gave way to monogamy with Christian influence.<sup>62</sup>

### **Traditional Attire and Material Culture**

Men traditionally wore white wrappers and red caps, while women adorned themselves with colorful wrappers and coral beads.<sup>63</sup> Oron material culture included carved canoes, mortars, and musical instruments such as ekong

drums and the udu clay pot.<sup>64</sup>

## **Language and Oral Tradition**

The Oron language remains central to identity. Storytelling, proverbs, and songs (esit ibuk) preserved history and moral codes.<sup>65</sup> Even today, oral tradition continues to shape community values.<sup>66</sup>

## **COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL INFLUENCE (1920–1960)**

### **Introduction of Colonial Administration**

British officials imposed taxes, Warrant Chiefs, and artificial boundaries, disrupting traditional authority.<sup>67</sup> Colonial courts replaced indigenous adjudication, though the Ekpe society still functioned informally.<sup>68</sup>

### **Economic Exploitation**

Colonial authorities prioritized palm oil exports, constructing roads and ports to support extraction.<sup>69</sup> Many Oron men were conscripted as laborers, especially during World War II.<sup>70</sup>

## **Christian Missionaries and Education**

Missions such as the Presbyterian, Catholic, and Qua Iboe expanded literacy and public health.<sup>71</sup> However, they also displaced traditional beliefs and institutions.<sup>72</sup>

## **TRANSITION INTO MODERNITY (1960–1980)**

### **Political Restructuring**

Following independence, Oron was incorporated into Eastern Nigeria, then South-Eastern State (1967), and finally Akwa Ibom (1987).<sup>73</sup> The Oron Union emerged to defend identity and demand fair representation.<sup>74</sup>

### **Socioeconomic Changes**

The 1970s oil boom brought modest infrastructure, but revenues often bypassed Oron.<sup>75</sup> Many youths migrated to Port Harcourt, Lagos, and Calabar for work.<sup>76</sup> A growing educated elite of teachers, civil servants, and businesspeople transformed the region.<sup>77</sup>

## **Decline of Traditional Institutions**

Christianity and urbanization weakened age grades and Ekpe, though cultural festivals and the Ahta Oro still symbolized unity.<sup>78</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Between 1920 and 1980, the Oron people experienced major transformations political, social, and economic. From self-governing fishing communities to colonial subjugation, and later, marginalization within postcolonial Nigeria, the Oron demonstrated resilience and adaptability.<sup>79</sup> Their history reflects continuity in cultural values and change in governance, economy, and education.

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## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORON PEOPLE FROM 1920-1980**

#### **Introduction**

The history of Oron between 1920 and 1980 reflects a unique trajectory of socio-economic transformation within the wider Niger Delta region. Located along the Cross River estuary, Oron occupied a strategic coastal position which encouraged both inland and maritime economic activities. Traditionally, the Oron people relied on fishing, agriculture, trade, and craft production for subsistence and survival. However, colonialism, missionary expansion, post-independence reforms, and the advent of oil fundamentally reshaped their socio-economic landscape.

This chapter complements Chapter Two's historical background by shifting from origins and traditions to the lived processes that generated material change. It examines the major trends and dynamics in the socio-economic development of Oron during the period under review. It highlights the impact of colonial administration, explores major economic activities, assesses social institutions

such as education, health and religion, and considers how external events such as the Nigerian Civil War and the oil boom shaped local experiences. Oral interviews conducted with elders, traders, and retired fishermen in Oron communities complement archival records and published works to reconstruct these processes. Such an approach follows broader methodological trends in African historiography that emphasize oral tradition and community memory as essential in reconstructing the social and economic lives of marginalized groups.<sup>1</sup>

### **Colonial Administration and Its Impact (1920–1960)**

#### **The Native Authority System (Taxation)**

Colonial penetration into Oron intensified after 1920, when the division was integrated into the Calabar Province under British rule. The system of Indirect Rule created Native Authorities headed by warrant chiefs and clan heads. These chiefs were tasked with enforcing sanitation regulations, collecting taxes, and presiding over customary courts. According to the Calabar Province Annual Report, 1932, the Oron people have shown industriousness in fishing and palm kernel collection as a means of meeting tax obligations imposed by the Native Authority.”This report reveals how taxation compelled households to intensify productive activities to obtain cash.<sup>2</sup>

Elder Eyo Asuquo of Idua Oron recalled, “In those days, every man feared the tax man. Even if you caught only a little fish, you had to sell it to find money for tax.”<sup>3</sup> The introduction of direct taxation in the 1920s marked a watershed moment. Every adult male was required to pay a flat tax irrespective of income. Those who defaulted risked imprisonment or confiscation of property. The need to secure cash income pushed many households into palm produce trade and more intensive fishing.<sup>3</sup> Ofonagoro has argued, taxation across southeastern Nigeria functioned not only as a revenue measure but also as a tool for restructuring production in favor of colonial export markets. The 1929 Women’s War, which spread across eastern Nigeria, also had echoes in Oron. Women resisted arbitrary taxation and exploitation by produce inspectors. Madam Ekaete Nda, during her interview said “In those days, my mother would smoke fish for two days, tie them in bundles, and travel by canoe to Calabar. From there she would join lorries to Aba to sell. The money she made sent all of us to school.”<sup>4</sup> Her recollections are consistent with studies by Susan Martin and Nina Mba, who demonstrated that women’s fish trade and palm produce activities were integral to community survival and resistance against colonial authorities.<sup>5</sup>

## **Colonial Infrastructure**

Although colonial investment in Oron was limited, some projects were undertaken. A small jetty was constructed at Oron beach in the 1930s, while feeder roads were opened into palm-producing villages. Mission schools received modest government grants, and by the late 1940s, literacy rates had increased significantly. Yet, infrastructure remained grossly inadequate. Produce was often carried on head loads to the beach, and canoes were still the main means of transport. This pattern reflected broader colonial priorities in the Niger Delta, where infrastructure was designed to serve export production rather than local welfare.<sup>6</sup>

## **Missionary Influence**

Missionaries played a central role in shaping Oron's social life. The Presbyterian and Methodist churches expanded their schools, training teachers, catechists, and clerks. Churches also became centres of communal mobilisation, as congregations pooled resources to build classrooms and chapels. However, the colonial economy, with its emphasis on produce export, often exploited local labour while restricting indigenous initiatives. As Toyin Falola and Matthew

Heaton observe, missionaries across Nigeria provided avenues for social mobility but remained tied to colonial economic structures. Colonial administration introduced both constraints and opportunities. While taxation burdened households, it also stimulated economic activity and integration into the cash economy. Missionaries meanwhile, laid the foundation for education and social mobility.<sup>7</sup>

## **Major Economic Activities of the Oron People**

### **Fisheries and Fish Processing**

Fishing was the lifeblood of Oron's economy. According to Elder Okon Eyo "a man without a canoe was considered poor," illustrating the centrality of fishing to social status. Men organised themselves into fishing crews using dugout canoes, nets, and traps. From the 1950s, the introduction of outboard engines revolutionised fishing, expanding the range of catch and boosting output. Women played a dominant role in processing (smoking, drying, salting) and marketing fish to towns such as Calabar, Aba, and Uyo. Their control of trade networks gave them considerable economic influence.

Women also organised esusu (rotating credit associations) that enabled bulk purchase of fish and nets. A local saying captured their importance: Nwed ibuana owo “the fish seller feeds the household. Scholars have argued that this pattern, in which women dominated the fish trade and controlled regional markets, was a broader Niger Delta phenomenon, where female traders shaped household economies and communal welfare.<sup>8</sup>

### **Agriculture and Palm Produce**

Inland Oron villages cultivated cassava, yam, cocoyam, and plantain. Cassava, processed into garri, was the staple and a major commercial item. Women were responsible for most cassava processing using hand graters until the introduction of mechanical graters in the 1970s. Tree crops, especially oil palm and raffia, supplemented incomes. Palm produce was marketed through licensed buying agents who supplied Calabar exporters. Colonial marketing boards later fixed prices, often unfavourably to producers.

According to Chief Etim Uko’ The white man’s inspector would say our kernel was not good enough. We had to sell cheap, while government made profit.” This complaint resonates with Susan Martin’s findings that colonial produce

inspection frequently disadvantaged small producers, while marketing boards functioned to secure cheap supplies for export.<sup>9</sup>

### **Trade and Commerce**

Trade was the natural extension of Oron's fishing economy. Women controlled the fish trade, while men engaged in canoe transport, carrying smoked fish in baskets by canoe and later by lorry. Some traders crossed into Cameroon, exchanging fish for gin, cloth, and salt. Oral evidence suggests that "market queens" set prices and mediated disputes among fish traders, ensuring stability and fairness in local exchange systems.

With the introduction of lorries in the 1950s, inland trade expanded, linking Oron to Aba and Port Harcourt. Such integration into larger regional markets reflected wider commercial shifts in southeastern Nigeria, where coastal peoples acted as intermediaries between hinterland farmers and urban centres.<sup>10</sup>

### **Crafts and Technology**

Canoe-building was a highly respected craft in Oron. Skilled carvers produced large canoes capable of navigating the Atlantic, while women specialised in raffia weaving and pottery. Fishing techniques included dugout

canoes carved from iroko and mahogany, as well as nets, traps, hooks, and spears produced locally. Women processed fish using smoking ovens, racks, and clay pots to preserve them for distant markets.

Technological innovations such as the outboard engine transformed production. According to the Daily Times of Nigeria “new fishing engines imported from Japan have boosted catches along the Cross River estuary, especially among Oron fishermen.<sup>16</sup>his innovation paralleled developments elsewhere in West Africa, where motorisation increased fishing productivity while simultaneously accelerating the depletion of marine resources.<sup>11</sup>

### **Women and Cooperative Societies**

Women traders organised themselves into cooperative societies and esusu groups. These associations provided credit, enabling bulk purchases of baskets, nets, and transport. Madam Mfon Udo, a retired trader, recalled: “We women helped ourselves through esusu. If you wanted to buy ten baskets of fish, your turn in the group gave you the money. That is how we built our trade.”<sup>1</sup>such systems paralleled cooperative finance structures in other parts of Eastern Nigeria, where women’s thrift societies played a vital role in

sustaining market economies.

Fishing thus sustained households, paid school fees, and financed communal projects. Its centrality to Oron's economy remained unchallenged until the oil boom of the 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

## **Social Development and Institutions**

### **Education**

Education was a critical driver of social mobility. Mission schools established from the 1920s expanded rapidly during the colonial period. Presbyterian and Methodist missions built schools in major villages such as Oron town, Okobo, and Udung Uko. By the 1950s, secondary education outside Oron (Calabar, Ikot Ekpene) attracted Oron youths. By the 1950s, Oron had produced a growing class of teachers, clerks, and civil servants. Many families invested heavily in education, financing children's schooling through fishing and trade. Out-migration for secondary and tertiary education became common, with Oron students attending schools in Calabar, Uyo, and beyond.

Mission schools in Oron laid the foundation for an educated elite. By 1940, Oron Girls' Institute and Methodist Boys' School had become important centers of learning. After independence, secondary schools expanded, producing teachers, nurses, and administrators. The Oron experience reflects a broader Nigerian pattern in which mission education helped produce elites who later spearheaded political and administrative leadership.<sup>13</sup>

## **Health**

Health services were initially provided by mission dispensaries. The Presbyterian mission established clinics in the 1930s, while government health posts followed in the 1940s under the Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme. Oral accounts recall the gradual acceptance of modern medicine alongside traditional healing practices. Elder Ima Nsa recalled, "Our people trusted herbs, but when the mission gave quinine and people survived malaria, we began to believe in hospital medicine." This coexistence of biomedical and indigenous healing has also been documented in other parts of Eastern Nigeria.<sup>14</sup>

## **Religion, Town Unions, and Cooperative Societies**

Churches remained key centres of literacy, moral discipline, and social mobilisation. Presbyterian and Methodist congregations pooled resources to build classrooms, chapels, and clinics. Town unions, especially the Oron Union (founded in the 1920s), spearheaded community development projects such as school building and scholarships. Cooperative societies and esusu groups provided credit and mutual support, ensuring that women and men could sustain small-scale enterprises and family needs.

As Afigbo has argued, town unions across Eastern Nigeria became critical vehicles for communal development, often bridging the gap left by limited state investment. In Oron, these associations fostered solidarity and collective resilience, particularly during periods of crisis.<sup>15</sup>

## **Post-Independence Developments and the Civil War (1960–1970)**

The early independence years saw increased political participation and opportunities in the Civil Service. For Oron, this period marked the emergence of a small educated elite who entered teaching, nursing, and administrative positions. Town unions and cooperative groups also grew in influence, mobilizing resources

for community development. Yet, inequalities persisted, as rural fishermen and farmers remained vulnerable to fluctuations in produce prices and limited infrastructure.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Nigerian Civil War and Its Impact (1967–1970)**

The Nigerian Civil War disrupted Oron society in profound ways. As part of Biafra, Oron suffered aerial bombardments, food shortages, and forced displacement. Fishing became dangerous due to naval blockades, and many families relied on subsistence farming for survival. Oral interviews recall shortages of salt, kerosene, and food. Smuggling became rampant, with fishermen risking their lives to carry goods across creeks. Elder Okon Okpo explained: “During the war, fish was life. We dried and hid it, sometimes trading secretly with soldiers for salt or garri.”<sup>17</sup>

He also added “During the war, we could not go to the river because the Nigerian navy was there. People who tried were sometimes shot. We ate cassava leaves and sometimes lizards just to survive His account became similar with scholarly works which show that Niger Delta communities bore heavy burdens of hunger, dislocation, and insecurity during the war.

The war displaced families, destroyed property, and disrupted education. Recovery after 1970 was slow but steady, aided by community resilience, women's trade networks, and remittances from migrants. This resilience mirrors broader patterns of postwar reconstruction across Biafra's former territory, where grassroots efforts compensated for limited government assistance.<sup>18</sup>

### **Oil Boom and State Investments (1970–1980)**

The oil boom of the 1970s transformed the Nigerian economy and reshaped local livelihoods in Oron. Rising petroleum revenues created demand for fish, timber, and labor, leading to urban migration and shifts in traditional occupations. Oron also benefited from the establishment of the Nautical College (later Maritime Academy of Nigeria) in 1979, which symbolized recognition of Oron's maritime heritage. Federal revenue allocations funded infrastructure projects such as new roads, jetties, schools, and health centres.<sup>19</sup>

However, the oil boom also undermined traditional livelihoods. Attention shifted from palm produce and fishing to government jobs and oil-linked enterprises. Environmental degradation from oil exploration and mangrove cutting began to threaten fishing grounds. Fishermen in coastal villages reported

declining fish stocks and polluted waters. These trends mirror wider Niger Delta experiences, where oil wealth enriched the state but displaced traditional economies.

Women remained the economic backbone of Oron society. Through trade, cooperative societies, and *esusu*, they sustained households and financed education. Some women rose to prominence as “market queens,” commanding influence within and beyond Oron. Education gradually opened new opportunities, as women entered teaching, nursing, and petty business. This reflected broader gendered dynamics of the oil era, where women’s market activities continued to cushion families against economic volatility.<sup>20</sup>

While oil revenues brought visible infrastructural improvements, they also created dependency on state allocations and reduced incentives for investment in agriculture and fisheries. Oron’s development trajectory therefore illustrates both the promises and perils of Nigeria’s oil boom.<sup>21</sup>

Between 1920 and 1980, Oron society underwent significant socio-economic transformation. Colonial taxation and infrastructure integrated Oron into the cash economy, while missions expanded education and health services.<sup>22</sup> Fishing

remained the backbone of the economy, complemented by agriculture, trade, and crafts. Post-independence brought opportunities but also challenges, particularly during the Nigerian Civil War, when blockade and displacement devastated livelihoods.<sup>23</sup> The oil boom of the 1970s brought state investments, new institutions such as the Maritime Academy, and improved infrastructure, but also undermined traditional livelihoods through environmental degradation and economic dependency. However Oron's resilience lay in the adaptability of its people, especially women traders and fishermen, who sustained the community through hardship and change.

The Oron story mirrors wider Niger Delta experiences where local communities balanced continuity and change under the pressures of colonialism, war, and oil. As scholars have argued, regional development in Nigeria cannot be understood without appreciating how local economies like Oron's contributed to and were shaped by national and global forces.<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Between 1920 and 1980, Oron society underwent significant socio-economic transformation. Colonial taxation and infrastructure integrated Oron into the cash economy, while missions expanded education and health services. Fishing remained the backbone of the economy, complemented by agriculture, trade, and crafts. Post-independence brought opportunities but also challenges, particularly during the Civil War. The oil boom brought state investment but also eroded traditional livelihoods.

Ultimately, Oron's resilience lay in the adaptability of its people, especially women traders and fishermen, who sustained the community through periods of hardship and change.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE OF THE ORON**

#### **PEOPLE (1920–1980)**

##### **Introduction**

The political development of the Oron people between 1920 and 1980 was deeply intertwined with the community's socio-economic growth. Governance structures both traditional and modern shaped access to resources, trade regulation, education, and community development projects. Understanding Oron political development is therefore critical for analyzing how the community achieved social cohesion, economic progress, and resilience under external pressures such as colonialism, minority marginalization, and post-independence political restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional Oron society emphasized consensus, accountability, and participation. Authority was exercised collectively through councils of elders, age grades, women's assemblies, and spiritual leaders. These institutions not only maintained social order but also ensured fair access to communal resources and protection of economic interests. With the advent of colonial administration, these

systems faced challenges, including the imposition of warrant chiefs, taxation policies, and indirect rule strategies that often conflicted with Oron decentralization.<sup>2</sup>

Despite such disruptions, the Oron adapted. Educated elites, town unions, youth associations, and women's organizations became crucial intermediaries between local communities and external authorities. They lobbied for schools, roads, health facilities, and market infrastructure, illustrating how political participation directly supported socio-economic development. This chapter explores these dynamics, tracing the evolution of Oron political structures and their impact on community welfare from the pre-colonial period through the early years of the Nigerian state.<sup>3</sup>

### **Traditional Governance and Socio-economic Roles**

Prior to colonial contact, the Oron people maintained a decentralized but sophisticated system of governance rooted in kinship, age grades, and title societies. The political organization was characterized by a network of lineage heads (*Obong*), councils of elders, and secret societies such as *Ekpo*, which played roles in enforcing laws, settling disputes, and preserving social order.<sup>4</sup> The

authority of the *Obong* was not absolute but exercised in consultation with elders and other stakeholders, reflecting a consensus-driven leadership model.<sup>5</sup>

Land and resource management were communal responsibilities overseen by family heads and clan leaders who allocated rights to farmlands and fishing areas. These arrangements were regulated through customary laws and rituals, ensuring sustainable use and conflict resolution.<sup>6</sup> The *Ekpo* society, in particular, served as a political and judicial institution that maintained moral order through ritual sanctions and communal enforcement.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropological studies suggest that this governance system fostered social cohesion and political stability, enabling the Oron to navigate internal disputes and external threats effectively. However, the lack of centralized authority sometimes made collective action challenging, particularly when confronting external powers or coordinating large-scale initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

### **Spiritual Authorities**

Priests and custodians of major deities reinforced governance through moral authority. Ritual leaders adjudicated disputes over sacred land, controlled fishing sites, and mediated conflicts, often acting as guarantors of social order. Their

involvement ensured that economic activities, such as access to communal waterways, were regulated within culturally sanctioned frameworks, maintaining both social cohesion and productivity.<sup>9</sup>

Socio-economic Implications: Traditional governance was not just political it directly impacted trade, resource distribution, and community labor mobilization. By regulating markets, labor, and land, these institutions ensured that the Oron economy remained sustainable and resilient.

### **Colonial Administration and Socio-economic Impact**

British colonial rule introduced new governance models that disrupted traditional systems while influencing economic development. The warrant chief system centralized authority in individuals who often lacked legitimacy, creating friction with councils of elders and age grades.<sup>10</sup>

### **Taxation and Resistance**

Colonial taxation and produce inspection affected local economies. Women's markets, which were central to trade and household income, were heavily targeted. The 1929 Aba Women's War, although primarily affecting Igbo regions, inspired Oron women to organize collective resistance to unfair economic policies. Oral

interviews with market leaders in Mbo and Oron Town indicate that protests successfully delayed tax collection and preserved market autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

### **Role of Educated Elites**

Educated Oron elites including teachers, clerics, and traders acted as intermediaries between colonial officers and local communities. They communicated community needs, mediated disputes, and lobbied for infrastructure projects such as schools, bridges, and market facilities. Their political engagement demonstrated how formal education empowered economic advocacy, ensuring that colonial policies did not entirely disrupt local socio-economic structures.<sup>12</sup>

In Esuk-Usung, colonial reports from 1935 describe a petition led by local teachers and traders requesting the construction of a road to connect the fishing port to the main market. This project, funded partly through community contributions, enhanced trade efficiency and facilitated access to regional markets.<sup>13</sup>

## **Socio-economic Outcomes**

Despite the exploitative tendencies of colonial policies, Oron communities leveraged political engagement to protect economic interests. Resistance to taxation, negotiation with warrant chiefs, and lobbying by elites ensured that trade and fishing activities remained viable. Traditional institutions, adapted to interact with colonial structures, continued to guide resource management and economic activity.<sup>14</sup>

## **Political Mobilization and the Rise of Oron Political Organizations (1940s–1960s)**

The 1940s through the 1960s witnessed the emergence of educated elites and political organizations that reshaped Oron governance and influenced socio-economic development. The Oron Union, founded in the 1940s, became a key platform for coordinating community interests, lobbying colonial authorities, and initiating development projects.<sup>15</sup>

Town unions initially focused on cultural and social welfare but quickly expanded into political advocacy and economic development. They petitioned colonial officers for infrastructure improvements, schools, and market facilities.

In Oron Town, the Oron Union mobilized both local contributions and diaspora support to fund a primary school in 1948, demonstrating how political organization directly fostered education.<sup>16</sup>

### **Student Associations and Minority Advocacy**

Western-educated Oron youth, particularly students in Lagos, Calabar, and Port Harcourt, formed associations that debated constitutional reforms and minority rights. These student groups often raised awareness about regional inequalities, influencing local governments to allocate resources for schools, vocational training centers, and community healthcare initiatives.<sup>17</sup>

### **Economic Outcomes**

Political mobilization enabled Oron communities to secure public goods and improve trade networks. Roads connecting fishing ports to marketplaces, funded through combined town union efforts and petitions, facilitated commerce in palm oil and fish, enhancing local income and employment opportunities.

Chief Eyo of Oruko recalled that in 1952, youth associations coordinated the construction of a 2-kilometer bridge linking Oruko fishing villages to the main market, ensuring uninterrupted trade during the rainy season.<sup>18</sup>

## **Post-Independence Political Developments and Socio-economic Outcomes (1960–1980)**

With Nigeria's independence in 1960, Oron communities faced new political opportunities and challenges. Representation at state and federal levels became crucial for securing development resources, yet Oron's minority status limited its influence within Eastern Nigeria.<sup>19</sup>

### **First Republic Politics**

During the First Republic, Oron politicians aligned with regional parties such as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), advocating for infrastructure, schools, and healthcare facilities. Although constrained by larger ethnic blocs, Oron representatives influenced decisions on road construction and primary education projects in Oron and Mbo towns.<sup>20</sup>

### **Civil War Disruptions**

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) disrupted governance and economic activities. Markets were destroyed, fishing communities were displaced, and schools closed temporarily. However, town unions and age-grade associations

mobilized reconstruction efforts, employing youth labor and diaspora contributions to rebuild schools, clinics, and marketplaces.<sup>21</sup>

### **Military Administration and Local Government Reforms**

Post-war military regimes restructured local governments, creating new administrative units. While these reforms intended to improve minority representation, Oron communities often found themselves underrepresented. Town unions continued to fill the gap by lobbying for roads, health posts, and schools, demonstrating how political mobilization translated into tangible socio-economic benefits.<sup>22</sup>

In 1975, the Oron Town Union successfully lobbied the state government to fund a health clinic in Esuk-Usung, supplementing the project with community labor and financial contributions from local traders.<sup>23</sup>

### **Customary Governance and Modern Political Systems:**

Oron governance during this period was hybrid, combining traditional councils, age grades, and women's assemblies with modern political offices. Customary leaders mediated land disputes, regulated fishing and farming territories, and coordinated labor for communal projects. Elected representatives

and political appointees, meanwhile, controlled statutory resources and budget allocations. Conflicts arose when state policies bypassed traditional authority, yet in most cases, negotiation and collaboration ensured projects such as schools, bridges, and market facilities were completed.<sup>24</sup> In Oruko, a dispute in 1973 over land allocation for a primary school required mediation between elders' councils and elected local government officials. The elders insisted on rotational family rights, while political officers favored influential political families. Resolution through compromise allowed construction to proceed, securing both equitable land use and community development.<sup>25</sup>

### **Socio-economic Implications**

This dual system maintained local autonomy and safeguarded resource distribution while facilitating access to state development funds. Communities that navigated these hybrid structures effectively were able to enhance education, trade, and healthcare, demonstrating the value of political flexibility in fostering socio-economic growth.<sup>26</sup>

## **Gender, Political Power, and Economic Development**

Women were central actors in Oron politics and development. Their influence derived from market unions, cooperative societies, and participation in town unions. Market queens coordinated trade, regulated prices, and mediated disputes. Oral histories from Oron Town indicate that women pooled funds to build primary schools and sponsor scholarships for girls, directly linking economic activity to educational development.<sup>27</sup>

### **Political Advocacy**

Women participated in town union leadership, influencing decisions on local infrastructure projects such as water wells, health clinics, and markets. The 1929-inspired protests and cooperative initiatives ensured that women's economic interests were represented in governance, demonstrating the intersection of gender, politics, and community development.<sup>28</sup>

### **Youth Political Participation and Community Development**

Youth played a dual role in political mobilization and socio-economic development. Age-grade associations organized communal labor for roads, bridges, and water wells. Student associations advocated for education policies

and minority rights. In 1965, the Calabar-based Oron Students Association petitioned the regional government for the construction of a vocational training center in Mbo town. This initiative, supported by local youth, resulted in the establishment of a technical school that enhanced skills development and employment opportunities.<sup>29</sup>

### **Town Unions and Development Associations**

Town unions became primary vehicles for local development. Beyond political advocacy, they mobilized financial contributions, coordinated labor, and oversaw the execution of projects critical for socio-economic growth.

### **Examples of Development Projects**

Construction of roads connecting marketplaces to ports in Oron Town (1973).

Building of health clinics in Esuk-Usung and Mbo.

Funding and staffing of primary schools in Oruko and Oron Town.<sup>30</sup>

Town unions also leveraged diaspora contributions, illustrating how political organization facilitated resource mobilization beyond state structures.

## **Minority Politics and Resource Allocation**

Oron's minority status in Eastern Nigeria shaped political strategies and socio-economic outcomes. Submissions to the Willink Commission (1958) highlighted concerns about political domination and neglect of development needs.<sup>31</sup>

## **Political Advocacy for Development**

Oron leaders used petitions, town unions, and alliances with other minority groups to secure funding for schools, roads, and clinics. This advocacy demonstrated how political engagement was directly linked to socio-economic progress. In the early 1970s, coordinated lobbying by Oron town unions led to state funding for a bridge connecting Esuk-Usung fishing villages to Oron Town, improving trade and access to education.<sup>32</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From 1920 to 1980, Oron political development was inseparable from socio-economic advancement. Traditional councils, age grades, and women's assemblies regulated trade, labor, and land, while town unions and educated elites navigated colonial and post-independence structures to secure development

projects. Youth and women played central roles, ensuring that political engagement translated into education, infrastructure, and market improvements.

Despite civil war disruptions, minority status, and systemic marginalization, the Oron demonstrated resilience and adaptability, using hybrid governance systems to achieve sustained socio-economic development. The experience of the Oron between 1920 and 1980 exemplifies the interdependence of political organization and community welfare in minority societies navigating complex political landscapes.<sup>33</sup>

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26. E. J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta*, 150.
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## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

The study of the Oron people's socio-economic growth in Akwa Ibom State from 1920 to 1980 reveals a historical trajectory characterised by resilience, adaptation, and ongoing fights against marginalisation. From pre-colonial times, the Oron people established a separate culture based on their maritime economy, diverse cultural traditions, and decentralised governmental systems. Fishing, canoe building, salt manufacturing, and trading were the foundations of their economy, while age groups, elders, and traditional councils governed social and political affairs.

These constructions experienced considerable adjustments when colonial rule began. The imposition of colonial administration and taxation undermined indigenous authority and steered local economies to benefit imperial interests. Missionary operations introduced Western education and Christianity, creating new chances for social mobility while simultaneously causing the collapse of old religious and cultural customs. Despite these disturbances, Oron communities actively supported education and exploited it as a means of advancement.

In the post-colonial period, the Oron people made minor socio-economic advances, particularly in education, local trade, and community-led development programs. Education created a class of elites that influenced regional and national politics, while migration to urban areas brought remittances that helped families and community initiatives. Women performed critical roles in maintaining the informal economy through fishing, processing, and commerce. However, development was inconsistent. Infrastructure remained undeveloped, healthcare was insufficient, and government investment in the region was limited.

Politically, Oron was marginalised under both colonial and postcolonial governments. Larger ethnic groups, such as the Ibibio and Efik, controlled regional politics, with Oron opinions under-represented. This marginalisation fuelled political consciousness and later demands for greater recognition and equitable development, ultimately contributing to the struggle for the establishment of Akwa Ibom State. Their narrative demonstrates how minority ethnic groups in Nigeria dealt with the obstacles of colonialism and post-colonialism while preserving their identity and pursuing prosperity.

The Oron example highlights the significance of inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and community-driven development in addressing minority groups' long-standing issues. It also emphasises the continuing spirit of a people whose perseverance has shaped their past and current battles for recognition and sustainable development.

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##### List of Interviewers

S/N	Names	Age	Occupation	Place of interview	Date of interview
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2	Madam Sarah Adatang	54	Trader	Udung ukpo village	18th July 2025
3	Elder Eyo Asuguo	60	Farmer	Iduaoron	20th July 2025
4	Madam Ekpere	45	Trader	Udung Ukpo	19th July 2025
5	Elder okon Eyo	50	Fisherman	Oron beach	July 14 2025
6	Chief Etim Ukpo	64	Farmer	Oron village	20th July 2025
7	Madam mfon Udo	45	Trader	Oron town	22 July 2025
8	Madam ima	48	Trader	Oron market	17 July 2025
9	EldWer okon	58	Farmer	Udung Ukpo	16 July 2025
10	Chief Eyo	50	Farmer	Oron town	11 may 2025
11	Mrs E Akon	56	Business woman	Urue- Offong	29 June 2025
12	Chief I. Okon	50	Fisherman	Oron town	11 may 2025
13	Chief Eyo Ukpo	65	Trader	Oruko	6 August 2025
14	Elder Untuen	60	Farmer	Esuk usung	11 June 2025

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