

OVERCOMING THE PROBLEMS OF SHORTFALL IN SUPPLY AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE PRODUCE IN THE 19TH CENTURY COMMERCE IN THE BIGHT OF BIAFRA HINTER LAND

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Abstract

The abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent introduction of commerce on produce had profound impact on the economic structure of the communities in the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra. The need to invent and adopt new economic structures and patterns to suit the nascent commerce was imperative. First, there was not just the need to switch over to production-based economy, but also to ensure regular and abundant supply of the products. Again, there was the need to convey the products to the 'beaches' for an onward bulk evacuation to the major river banks from whence they were ferried to the coastal ports. Certainly, these activities required large labour. And in a society where wage labour was yet non-existent, these posed a lot of challenges. This paper explores how marriages and marriage ties and alliances were employed to overcome the problems and challenges of the produce economy.

Introduction

The study of the transition from slave trade to produce commerce by the communities in the Bight of Biafra hinterland has largely remained an un-trodden path. The few existing work on this subject appear sparse, scanty and scrappy. This paper attempts to fill this yawning gap. It employs a holistic approach to examine the adaptability of indigenous entrepreneurship to the new commerce whose "structure," AG. Hopkins rightly observes "marked an important break with the past" as...salves and palm oil are commodities with obvious physical difference."¹ The new commerce, when compared with the slave trade, appears to have profound wholesome impact on the economies of the Biafra hinterland. As C.C Ifemesia argues;

If the substitution of the palm oil trade for the slave trade caused any economic revolution, it was in the wider distribution of labour and wealth to places and peoples that previously had scarcely any share in the conduct and proceeds of the overseas slave trade. Palm oil - and later palm kernels - could be procured by anyone who had access to the trees and could process their fruits... If whole communities could produce and sell palm produce, whole communities could also share in varying degrees, in the takings of the trade.²

The change from slave trade to produce economy was necessitated by the need of the industrializing nations of Europe, especially Britain, to obtain raw materials for her fledgling industries. Thus, demand for palm oil became imperative and the Biafra hinterland proved to be most importance produce market. As E.J. Usoro notes;

The early export trade in Nigerian palm products originated as a result of demand in Britain for vegetable oil seeds needed for industrial raw materials during the industrial revolution. Palm products were increasingly used as input in the manufacture of such products as soap, margarine, cooking fats, candles and lubricating greases.³

This paper examines how the problems associated with the production and transportation of produce were overcome through marriage and marriage ties. In order to address this task, the paper first analysis the political structure and the economic bases of the Bight of Biafra hinterland. Second, it describes the processes involved in palm oil production, and produce distribution with a view to establishing the drudgery therein, that necessitated intensive labour. It cites concrete examples of some successful entrepreneurs who exploited marriage and marriage ties to excel in the produce business.

As has already been indicated, the produce trade marked an important break with the past because of its obvious physical difference with the slave trade which lacked factor integration in the economies of the Bight of Biafra hinterland. In the produce trade, on the other hand, land, labour and entrepreneurial skills were for the first time integrated in the economy of the area. Labour, most especially became very essential, for it was needed to meet

the increasing pressure on supply and transporting produce, in an age where portage was the order and which entailed traversing long distances in hazardous and circuitous paths/routes.

B. The Political Structure and Economic Bases of the Biafra Hinterland

A good knowledge of the political structure and economic bases of the Biafra hinterland is very essential in understanding the development, growth and the adjustability of the entrepreneurs to the demands of the new commerce. The main political feature of the area was the absence of a centralized political authority. The highest level of political integration was the village-group. It fits well into Robin Horton's definition of "stateless societies."⁴ It was an egalitarian society characterized by the dispersal of authority among elders and heads of families of a mosaic of autonomous and sovereign village groups... (with) no central machinery for the maintenance of law and order within the village itself. Effective sanction existed for suppression of anti-social behaviours or the punishment of serious breaches of the law. The power of the village-group was not based on the possession of any standing or *ad hoc* military machine, or even any rights to the means of coercion, but rather on the consensus of the village composing the village-group.⁵

However, beyond and above the village-group, there existed a motley of oracles which commanded widespread respect and allegiances and from which aggrieved person(s) and group(s) could seek justice. These include the Ibini-Ukpabi of Arochuku. The Agbala of Awka, the Igwekala of Umunneoha, Kamalu of Ozuzu, Haba of Agulu, among others. Because of the awe which the supernatural powers associated with these oracles inspired and their perceived infallibility, disputants were wont to abide by their judgments and pronouncements. Those communities that operated these oracles used them to bolster trade through the immunity from molestation which these oracles conferred on them throughout the Biafra hinterland.⁶ In relation to the Ibini Ukpabi of Arochuku, Walter Ofonagoro states,

As children of God.... they could travel extensively with immunity from local molestation, in a land where long-distance journeys were fraught with danger...⁷

The Aro, especially, attracted votaries for the oracles and established trade networks through its numerous colonies and settlements in the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra. They played a leading role in the distribution of palm produce in Aguata area by buying the produce from the local producers in the community and transported these through portage to Uzoakoli market from whence they were conveyed to Obegu and Ohambele river mouth en route Opobo and Igwenga.⁸ However, the import of the political structure of the Biafra hinterland could best be appreciated when viewed against the background that the egalitarian nature of the society removed encumbrances of entry and participation in the produce trade.

The economic bases of the Biafra hinterland was also closely tied and influenced by its political organization. The egalitarian nature of the society provided even opportunity and level playing ground for participation in economic activities by all and sundry. The level of success of the individual or group, therefore, rested on entrepreneurial skills. This is typified in the rise of *Ogaranya*, individuals who distinguished themselves through their success in produce trade and who also attempted to use their wealth to wield power and influence in the society.⁹

The chief economic activity with regard both to the number of people engaged in it both on full or part time basis, and to the prestige it carried, in most communities in the Biafra hinterland, was agriculture. It was so important that Prof. V.C Uchendu describes it as "the Igbo staff of life"¹⁰ He states:

To remind an Igbo that he is ori mgbe ahia loro "one who eats only what the market holds" is to humiliate him. This does not imply that traders are not respected. All it means is that the Igbo see farming as their chief occupation and trading as subsidiary not a substitute for it.¹¹

Until the introduction of the produce trade, farming centred chiefly on the cultivation of staple food crops such as yam, cocoyam, cassava and vegetable, which most families produced enough to last all the year. But there were some communities whose soils were so fertile and who gave so much time to farming that they produced for outside markets. These exported some of their surplus agricultural products to areas outside Igboland and helped "to supply the needs of certain Igbo groups whose soil had deteriorated so badly that they had increasingly come to pay less and less attention to farming."¹² The latter consists of the Isuama-Awka-Orlu uplands. They are the core settlement from where the Igbo dispersed. Their soils had as result of over-working been exhausted, and therefore farming was no longer a lucrative venture. The people who live in this area had turned increasingly to other profession, especially to trading, manufacturing, medicine men, and the exploitation of occult forces as ritual experts and diviners.¹³

The introduction of produce commerce appeared to have stimulated the cultivation of cash crop (palm oil) at the expense of the staple food crops. This state of affairs made farmers galvanize their efforts towards the production of palm oil. Again, it created vistas for new economic opportunities, as more and more people got involved in the whole process of palm oil production and distribution. The extent to which this affected the supply of staple is an aspect of the commerce that requires further investigation.

One thing is obvious from the foregoing analysis: the produce commerce led to faster integration and created "wider distribution of labour and wealth to places and person that previously had scarcely any share in the conduct and proceeds of overseas slave trade."¹⁴ The manner of raising labour to process palm oil and its distribution became a knotty problem. This was further compounded by the absence of wage system that would have been the avenue for the compensation and reward for labour. Again, new entrants to business were confronted with novel problems. Whereas some former slave dealers and wealthy individuals could retain the services of pawns and slaves and easily adjust to the new trade, others deficient in this regard could not readily raise the required labour and therefore resorted to marrying several wives to raise children to provide labour for palm oil processing.¹⁵

C. The Processing of Palm Oil

It is believed that palm trees grew wild in the forests of the Biafra hinterland and the palm oil had been processed for consumption and the excess sold to communities in the riverine Igbo communities (*Oru*) and the Niger Delta where the ecological features did not warrant the growth of palm trees. The supply of palm oil to the riverine Igbo (*Oru*), from the upland (Igbo) could be attested to by the former in their dialect in which the palm oil, 'ofe Igbo,' which literally means 'Igbo soup.'¹⁶ Processing the palm oil entails the whole process of 'production,' which economists define as the type of activity, which changes the form of the materials with which it works into goods and services capable of satisfying human needs directly or indirectly. Production process is not yet completed until the finished product gets to the end users. As regards palm oil, production procedure would include cultivation, nurturing, harvesting, processing the palm fruits into palm oil, and finally delivery to the coastal middlemen who dealt directly with the Europeans. But the absence of cultivation and nurturing reduced the activity of processing to gathering the palm products in natural wild groves, extracting its oil, packaging and distributing to the coastal middlemen.

With regard to processing the palm oil, E.J. Usoro's picturesque description needs to be quoted *in extenso*. According to him;

Extraction of the oil and kernels involves crude processing which in the case of oil extraction implies boiling or fermenting the fruit, pulping by pounding or mashing with the feet in a container, and squeezing the de-pulped fiber by hand to obtain the oil.¹⁷

Thus, palm oil production was indeed a tedious and laborious exercise that also consumed a lot of time. According to N.L. Njoku the major task of processing rested chiefly on women and children. He states that; ...the harvested fruit branches were usually taken home by women and children, Fruit preparation, de-pulping, extracting oil from the fibres including firewood and water supply, are other tasks requiring mainly the labour of women and children each performing a separate task.¹⁸

In effect, there was the logistic problem of maintaining a regular supply line. The point to note here is that the labour demand for processing palm oil, especially those of women and children necessitated raising labour and most producers adjusted through polygamous marriages and raising several children to serve as hands in the production process.

D. Delivery of Produce

The delivery of palm oil to the coastal middlemen required a lot of time and effort. The distribution and delivery was done in a relay form. In the first place, palm oil was collected in gallons and calabashes from producers. The small middlemen and brokers collected the products mainly in casks and then transferred to bigger dealers. The bigger dealers then engaged the services of porters who in turn conveyed the products either to the river banks namely Imo and Orashi; or Uguwocha, (Port Harcourt) at which they were accumulated in large quantities in drums and ferried to the coastal ports. There were several of such inland routes through which produce were to the river banks. The researcher identified five of such inland routes. They are:

- i. The Mbaise – Ngwa axis which served the Mbaise and Ngwa areas with terminus at Imo River banks, Owerinta
- ii. The Orsu axis route which traversed Awo-Idemili –Mbosi – Isseke – Ihiala at the Ose-Akwa water front.

- iii. Owerri – Oguta axis which traversed Owerri – Irette – Orogwe – Ogbaku – Ejemekwuru – Nkwesi with terminus at Orashi river bank in Oguta.
- iv. Orlu axis which traversed – Orlu – Akokwa – Urualla – Ukpo – Okija at the Orashi water mouth at Okija.
- v. The Isu-Njaba axis; which begins at Amauzari – Ogwa, Orodo, Afara – Umuaka – Okwudo, at the Njaba river mouth at Awo Omama.

These are not, however, exhaustive of the routes used for the movement of palm oil in the Biafra hinterland, several routes existed that served the Northern and Cross-River Igbo groups.

The important question which arises is; How was safety of goods and personnel assured along these routes; going by the high level of insecurity prevalent at the time. Moreover, there was no central political authority to ensure and organize safety passages in routes. The acute fear of insecurity, which pervaded the Biafra hinterland, has been captured by Simon Otterberg. He declares;

For the average Ibo, distant travel of any kind was undertaken only under unusual circumstance.... while persons were fearful of being seized if they went far from their home areas, they were also fearful of being captured by oracle and this was an important factor in keeping communities and individual localized and isolated.¹⁹

Thus, there was insecurity for persons venturing beyond immediate area of their own villages without adequate safeguards. How-be-it, people still travelled over long distance and safety of passage was ensured through blood pact '*Igbandu*,' entered between the leaders of the caravan and those of the towns they traversed. Again dangers to security were mitigated by having friends in almost every town through which lay the merchant's route, to and from the distant markets. Of these Walter Ofonagoro identifies the institution of marriage "as the single most important safe conduct for long distance traders."²⁰ He persuasively states;

Polygamy played an important role in trade. Hinterland traders normally journeyed to and from distant Coastal markets on foot. Marriage connections were extremely important in ensuring their safety along the trade routes.²¹

Strategic dynastic marriages were contracted between the leaders of caravans and potentates in the towns that lay along the routes of trade. A few of such dynastic marriages deserve mention. Chief Onyekwere of Ekwereazu married a first cousin of Chief Edomobi of Achingali Obowo. One of Chiefs Edomobi's daughter was married to Ezikpi-Ebebudike of Itu. Because the people of Ekwereazu knew that Chief Onyekwere had as in-laws the Edomobi's of Achingali and Ebebudike of Itu, they were, thus, assured of safe conduct along Achingali to the river-mouth town of Itu.²² Similar dynastic marriages were contracted by Okorie Uzo-Oyibo of Ihiala. He established marriage ties in villages located along the trade routes he traversed. He became powerful and influential as a produce trader and leader of caravan that families such as Onyeausi of Egbema Ozubulu and Oguagba of Oraifite willingly gave their daughters to him in marriage in order to curry his favour and carry out their trade under his protection.²³

Walter Ofonagoro also records the case of Chief Nwuwa of Izombe. Chief Nwuwa was linked through marriage with Ogbaku, Umunneoha, and Awa. Because the people of Izombe and Umunneoha knew that Chief Nwuwa had as in-laws the Odus of Ogbaku and Egbuchulam of Umunneoha, Ogbaku and Umunneoha traders were assured safe-conduct through Izombe. Similarly, traders enjoyed the same privileges when they passed through Ogbaku, Awa Umunneoha and other villages on the trade routes where the marriage ties of their chiefs assured them of hospitality and protection.²⁴ So many of such marriage ties abound throughout the Biafra hinterland, as Ofonagoro affirms:

Similar arrangements, no doubt existed all over Igboland and elsewhere in south Eastern Nigeria hinterland. For the middlemen of the inland trade the acquisition of wives from villages strategically located along the trade routes he traversed most frequently on his expeditions to and from the waterside markets of the delta, may have been indispensable for a successful career in commerce.²⁵

Summary and Conclusion

This study has established the centrality of labour in the 19th century commerce in the Bight of Biafra hinterland. It also shows that many entrepreneurs engaged in polygamous marriages to raise children who would serve as family labour, crucial for maintaining a regular supply line of produce. Additionally, marriage ties were

established with prominent families along the trade routes to secure safe passage and also provide resting places during the long journeys on foot to the beaches and water front from where the goods were transported to coastal middlemen. These underscore the vital role of marriage alliances in the success of the produce trade in the Bight of Biafra hinterland during the height of palm produce commerce.

Endnotes

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