



Colonial Challenge to the Ogoja Salt Industry, Eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Some scholars have often assigned a super-imposing, all demolishing power to colonialism especially when it came into contact with African traditions, institutions and industries. This was done to justify Western preconceived notion of economic and technological superiority. This paper uses the local salt industry of Ogoja Province in the colonial period to show the falsehood of such a notion. It avers that in spite of the use of all instrument of coercion, and importation of salt from Europe to stifle the local salt industry, the later not only was able to absorb the strain but also survived the challenges and thrived within the period of this study.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to European opinion of pre-colonial African economic system as basically subsistence, unspecialized and unviable, it has been increasingly shown by scholars that African economies were sufficiently diversified, professionalized and viable. There were several industries which exploited the natural resources of their areas for the benefit of the people. One of such pre-colonial industries in Ogoja Province was salt industry.

A biological essential for home survival, salt was one of the widely traded commodities in pre-colonial West Africa. The demand for this all-essential mineral was not only ubiquitous throughout West Africa; the supply was all but insatiable. 'Salt famine' was a major nightmare in some parts and children are said to be bartered for this commodity in some places. In the ancient kingdom of Ghana, according to Hopkins [47], salt exchanged for gold at par, that is, weight for weight. Part of the problem was that though the demand for salt was universal, the areas/centres of production were relatively few and restricted. Salt producers therefore controlled a strategic resource. Against this background, it should occasion no surprise that salt played a prominent role in the economic life of the people of Ogoja, as in deed the other people of West Africa.

The Colonial Challenge To The Ogoja Salt Industry

Ogoja people are found in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. In the colonial period, which is the scope of this paper, Ogoja Province was a major administrative unit consisting of six Divisions. The divisions were; Ogoja, Obudu, Ikom, Obubra, in present Cross-River, and Abakaliki and Afikpo in Ebonyi States of Nigeria, Farming was the major occupation of the people. However, there were several other occupations like fishing, hunting cloth-making, pottery, etc, which sustained the economy, There was specialization among the various peoples in the area; each group specialising in the production of those items needed by society, by exploiting the resources available in their peculiar localities.

The people of Ogoja Province, like most societies of Africa, were able to exploit their various natural resources to meet the needs of their people. The traditional salt industry is one of them. Indeed, long before the advent of colonialism, the technique and technology of salt making had been known to and used by the people. The origin of the technology in Ogoja, although not the focus of this paper, is as old as the people. It would amount to what Uya referred to as 'programmed ignorance' for any one to think now, as David Hume thought in 1786, that African society had 'No ingenious manufacture among them, no art, no science'[Erim and Uya,1986 ; 1]. Scholars generally now recognise that change and development are universal phenomena, because man, wherever he finds himself, has the ability to exploit the resources of his environment independently. This is true even of early stone-age of man. This is why scholars have stressed the fact of independent inventions [Majuk,2003-5] among the various societies of the world according to their needs.

Salt-making, both in the pre-colonial and colonial times, was a thriving industry in Ogoja Province. J. W Wallace observed that the salt industry was prominent 'in three areas of Ogoja Province, Uburu area of Afikpo Division, Yala Clan area of Ogoja Division, and Ikom.'[1910;92]. Corroborating this observation, D. A.F. Schute, in his survey of Ogoja Province in 1941 identified brine lakes and springs in Uburu and Okposi in Afikpo District, in Yala area in Ogoja District and at various places in Ikom [1941 ;5].Among other uses, salt performed three main functions among the people- as commodity, as medium of exchange and for medical purposes.

This all-important industry in Ogoja Province, like other traditional industries or institutions, met with several challenges when it came into contact with colonialism. The nature of the challenges, their impact on the industry and the industry's resistance against colonial odds is the focus of this study.

THE CHALLENGES TO THE SALT INDUSTRY

As is the case in several places, British officials used intimidation and harassment on some of the local salt producing communities as one of the means of paving way for importation of salt from the metropolis. British

officials applied direct or indirect, subtle and intimidatory tactics or means to stifle local salt production and thereby encourage importation from the metropolis. For instance, under the pretext of ascertaining the quality of the salt produced in Yala clan of Ogoja District, Dr C.M.Tattam, a colonial official, forcefully invaded a brine pond exploited by local salt producers. J. V. Decohorst reported that;

The refusal by the Yala people to disclose the whereabouts of brine springs which Dr C. M.Tattam, Acting Director of Geology survey, wish to investigate their degree of salinity, necessitated the approval of a police escort to accompany him. This spring was discovered and the information required obtained...[1941-5].

The move to investigate the quality of the local salt was in actual fact a pretext which hid the real motive –to frustrate the local industry. Colonial antics such as these one above is a common phenomenon and all too often recurrent, and therefore not strange to any student of the history of colonialism. The aim in cases of this nature was to destabilise the industry, create scarcity and want among the people and thus pave the way for the distribution of salt from Europe which was already in the Nigerian market. Allan Mcphee, an apologist of British colonialism in Africa, revealed that the thrust of British economic policy in all her colonies in West Africa was to create ‘wants among her natives[sic] which will stir them to increased activity to produce increasing quantity for European markets’[1985;9]. There is sufficient evidence from literature to show that such economic policy was to stimulate the production of raw materials such as minerals and agricultural produce for European industries and not for finished produce like salt. British interest was to induce the production of raw materials among her colonies for her industries on the one hand, as well as create markets for finished produce, on the other.