



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 fallacy of this notion. It avers that in spite of the use of all instruments of coercion, and importation of salt from Europe to stifle the local salt industry, the latter not only was able to absorb the strain but also survived the challenges and thrived within the period of this study. The paper also highlights the degree of specialization among the various players in the industry.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the European opinion of pre-colonial African economic system as basically subsistence, unspecialised and static, it has been increasingly shown by scholars that African economies were sufficiently diversified, professionalized and dynamic. 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, Nigeria, was salt industry. A biological essential for human 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, salt is said to exchange for gold at par, that is, weight for weight. Hopkins [47]. 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

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prominent role in the economic life of the people of Ogoja, as in deed the other peoples of West Africa.

The homeland of the Ogoja people is 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 Abakiliki 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 helped to sustain the economy. Variations in natural resource endowment enabled groups to specialise in the production of those items which they were advantaged.

Thus, 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 was one of them. Indeed, long before the advent of colonialism, the technique and technology of salt making in use by the people had been highly developed by the people. The origin of the technology in Ogoja, indeed is as old as the people. The earlier popular notion that African society had 'No ingenious manufacture among them, no art, no science' [Erim and Uya,1986 : 1] is a historical fallacy. Scholars generally now recognise that change and development are universal phenomena, because in every age and time, human beings have demonstrated the ability to exploit the resources of their environment independently. 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. Among the people of Ogoja, the salt industry was a prominent feature of their economic life.

Salt-making, both in the pre-colonial and colonial times, was a thriving industry in Ogoja Province. J. W Wallace observed that this industry was prominent 'in three areas of Ogoja Province, namely 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 are the focus of this study.

THE COLONIAL CHALLENGES

As was 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 increased importation of salt from the metropolis. British officials applied direct and indirect, subtle and intimidatory tactics or means to stifle local salt production and thereby encourage importation from the metropolis. One of the methods employed by Colonial administrators in the area to achieve this was to portray the local produce as inferior. For instance, under the pretext of ascertaining the quality of the salt produced in Yala clan, Dr C.M.Tattam, a colonial official, forcefully invaded a salt lake 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 this 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.

A major threat to the Ogoja salt industry was the importation of salt from Europe. Increased importation of salt from Europe posed a great challenge to the local salt industry. Cheap and some times poor quality salt was imported from Europe and distributed in Ogoja. This was done even after the survey team’s investigation of the quality of the local salt. It seems likely that Dr. Tattam would have recommended a total ban on the local production of salt if he had found the product to be of poor quality. The colonial government however, allowed unrestricted importation of salt into Ogoja, probably to snuff out the local salt industry. The colonial administration seemed to have expected the collapse of the salt industry in Ogoja. Decohorst, a British official in Ikom (one of the Divisions in Ogoja Province) in 1941 asserted that “at the present when English salt can be obtained cheaply, the industry of salt making is not so lucrative, though,” according to him, “it is still carried on ...” (1941:48).

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Importation of salt from Europe had a disruptive and destabilising effect on the local industry. This was especially noticeable during the Second World War. This was a period when there were instances of economic depression in Europe occasioned by the war effect. In respect of Ikom District within that period, Decohorst reported that “the salt situation... was having a more noticeable depressing effect” (1941:5). He was quick to add also that it had “eased considerably.” Although Decohorst gave no reason why the depression eased off, it is most probable that salt from other parts of Ogoja was distributed in Ikom where the depression was harder. Further to the above, poor quality imported salt was reported in Ikom area where the local salt industry did not seem to be very strong. According to Decohorst, “there are complaints that the present Suez salt is inferior” (1941:5). Thus, the area became a dumping ground for the cheap and inferior salt from Europe.

During the Second World War, there was instability in the supply of salt from Europe. This in effect created its dynamics in the salt circulation in Ogoja. This resulted in irregular supply of salt to Ogoja Province generally, and especially to areas where the local industry was weak, and created a situation of “scarcity” of the commodity in such areas. This situation led to the emergence of profiteering cartels who were ready to make profit through exploitation. This group usually studied the market situation, bought the quantity in the market and hoarded them. Such action aggravated the scarcity and added to the strain on the industry. Shute reported in 1941 that: A scarcity of salt was disclosed in September, and immediately followed by an attempt by middlemen to buy up what stocks remained. This was a second attempt on the part of middlemen to use their business acumen selfishly to their own profit by exploiting the public ... (5). All these circumstances, increased the strain on the local salt industry in Ogoja Province. Nevertheless, the industry not only survived the inclement colonial weather but also thrived during the period,

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

Several factors were responsible for the survival of the salt industry in Ogoja Province during the period of our study. First, the society considered the salt industry as part and parcel of their culture which came from their past and therefore could not be separated from them. That was one of the reasons why certain scarifies and rituals were performed by priests in the process of salt-making. These scarifies were symbolic of their affection and attachment to their past. It was considered part of their history and the people attributed to it values which imported salt lacked.

Among the Yala people, for instance, there was wide spread belief that one must eat Okpoma salt (one of the salt producing communities) in order to speak Yala language correctly. This explains the people’s aphorism, “rooma na piyala,” which means “eat Okpoma salt in order to understand Yala,”

(Buikman 1970: 1). We all know the importance of language to any people and culture. So from the people's perspective, the salt industry must survive if their culture and history must survive. It is little wonder therefore that the industry had to be preserved at all cost. Demise of the industry would have been seen as tantamount to demise of the people's language, the vehicle of their cultural expression.

One of the attributes of local salt is that it could be used for the cure of certain ailments. Many people patronised it because of the belief in its medicinal efficacy. It was diligently used by traditional health practitioners because, they believed that their medical practice was a gift from their ancestors who also provided the salt brines. For instance, traditional doctors combined herbs with local salt for the treatment of certain ailments like malaria and yellow fever, among others. Sometimes these combinations were said to be recommended by the spirits during consultations by the doctors. According to local sources, they proved effective. In the eyes of the people, salt was not just a mere additive to food, it had curative powers. Its survival was therefore paramount to the people since imported salt lacked such efficacy.

The second reason for its survival derived from market forces of demand and supply. It is common economic truism that the twin forces of demand and supply determine both what is produced and prices (Anderson 1980: 109). Commodities are purchased mostly because of the satisfaction that consumers derived from their consumption. The demand pattern for local salt showed that consumers derived more satisfaction from it than salt imported from Europe. Indeed, local salt was considered by the local consumers in Ogoja Province to be superior to imported one. Shute acknowledged this fact in his annual report, stating that the people of Ogoja "complained that Suez salt is inferior to English salt ..." (5). By inferior they meant not having all the essential qualities of local salt. There is no doubt that both the Suez and English salt was inferior to the one produced locally because consumers' choice pattern showed a preference for local salt. In Abakiliki Division, for instance, it was reported that the "local product is preferred by large sections of the community to imported salt" (Shute 1941: 5). In a different report also on Ogoja Division, Wallace noted that "Yala salt is used to the exclusion of imported salt in the clan Districts" (1910: 92). Although there are no statistics showing some consumer index, there is no doubt that local salt was preferred by the consumers to imported salt. Indeed, there were instances during periods of scarcity when the price of local salt increased by 300% (Shute 1941: 5), while that of imported salt stagnated. Thus, the superior quality of the local salt spoke for itself in the face of competition, and this helped to sustain the industry during the colonial period.

The survival of local salt industry was also helped by the abundance of salt wells at several places in Ogoja Province. Though no precise data exist on the matter, however, there were several reports on the preponderance of salt wells in many communities of Ogoja. A survey carried out by Buckman reported that "the people of Ogoja Province had numerous salt wells ..."

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(1941:3). The survey revealed that one community alone of Yala clan had sixteen wells existing there. It is interesting to note that whenever there was salt scarcity in the market, more discoveries of salt wells were made. This is suggestive of the smartness of the salt producers who responded quickly to market situations in order to make profit and in the process cushion the effect of such shortages. "At the height of the shortage", reported Shute, "a brine spring was discovered close to Abakiliki station which was known to the natives (sic) but was not in production which suggests that the shortage was not very acute" (1941:5). Shute uses the word discovery, but to the local people it was not regarded as a discovery. They were merely making use of what they knew was available when it became necessary. More and more wells were brought into production in order to sustain the steady supply of the product. This helped the local industry in its struggle to survive.

Equally important in meeting the colonial challenge to the local salt industry was the vastness of the market and the patronage, as indicated earlier, which the local producers received. Imported salt on the other hand did not enjoy the same patronage. While the latter was distributed in rations to divisions, especially in times of shortages, the local salt was readily available. Thus, the local produce provided the guarantee costumers needed and this ensured continued patronage. Indeed, the pressure for survival was sometimes more on imported salt than the local type, especially during the Second World War. During that war when imported salt was rationed in many parts of Nigeria, imported salt distributors in parts of Ogoja Province had difficulty marketing theirs in the face of competition with the local produce. Shute reported an instructive instance of how a "seller [of imported] salt in the Ezza tribe (sic) area of Abakiliki Division, where the local produce was preferred, returned three of the four bags, saying that there was no demand for trade salt" there (1941: 6).

Without a doubt therefore, local salt enjoyed wide range of patronage. Colonial records corroborate this position. Uburu salt in Afikpo Division, according to Wallace, was the main source of salt supply to much of Iboland, Afikpo area, Abakiliki, and some parts of Benue Province throughout the colonial period. "Yala salt," he explained further, "was used to the exclusion of imported salt in the clan area, and in many other parts of Ogoja and Obudu districts. It is exported to Benue Province..." (1910: 92). Indeed, the wide range of patronage which the local salt enjoyed was due to its quality, availability and cultural appeal.

The local salt industry during this period of study also enjoyed some economy of scale. Salt production involved various stages, each of which required specialization of some sort. Salt production in Ogoja Province was basically done by women. However, specialized functions went through the rubrics of the production processes to get the finished product to the market. In Yala clan for instance, when the brine lake or well was located, it was the men who organized labour for its exploitation by recruiting women within the salt producing community or from neighbouring communities. Wallace (93) identified two major constraints in the production of salt in Ogoja. First,

production required a large number of women, and second, much fuel in the form of wood was also required. Interestingly fuel was very scarce in the salt producing areas. As for the supply of fuel, production was done more in the dry season when it was easier to get firewood either within the salt producing communities or in the neighbouring communities. The elders were always available to settle cases related to salt production. The traditional priest gave the ritual security by offering sacrifices as required by tradition. The brine was stored in earthen pots. Interestingly also, the pots were produced by women from outside the salt producing areas. Shute's survey of salt production in Yala revealed that as many as 90 pots were required to store brine from only one well. The pots containing the brine were produced elsewhere and sold to women who processed the salt. In the case of Yala, the pots were manufactured by Nkim women, a neighbouring community. Woven mats needed for packaging the crystal salt for sale were also produced, mostly by different people both within and outside the salt producing areas.

The local salt industry during this period of study therefore, enjoyed some economies of scale. It created its dynamics both internally and externally, where all the players in the industry benefited from it according to specified functions. Internally, all the participants in the salt producing communities had a share of the profits which accrued from the production, according to their contributions. This was prescribed by tradition.

An insight into the dynamism of the industry can be illustrated. In 1960, the elders of Abacho, a salt producing community in Yala clan, hired out a brine well to a businesswoman at £20 (current exchange N400) for a ten day period. She employed 3 men who organized labour, storage pots and sale of the brine. Fifteen women were hired for ten days to draw the brine from the well. Ninety storage pots were also hired for ten days. The storage pots were filled five times since one day was used for harvesting or hauling the brine from the well, while it was sold out on the second day. At the end of the ten-day period her gross sales amounted to £44:4/-. Her expenses were as follows:

- (a) Cash to elders = £3
 - (b) Gifts to elders in kind; kola, palmwine, bikety (a local brew) clearing of site etc = £1.10.
 - (c) Initial payment for gathering rights = £20
 - (d) Overseer's, wage = £11
- Total expenditure = £35:10
Net profit = £8:14

In addition to the above, 15 pots were given to the women workers, and one pot of brine was given as payment for each of the storage pots for the ten-day period. The traditional priest had already been given his items for sacrifice. The entire brine was sold to women of the community who processed it into crystals. The crystals came in various sizes and the prices also ranged between 10/- to £1.10, depending on the size. This example illustrates how a large section of the society benefited from the industry. Externally, non-salt producing neighbours supplied pots, mats, firewood etc

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to the industry. Neighbouring communities which produced and supplied materials necessary for salt production also had their share of profit from the industry. The multiplier effect of the industry was shared by all strata of society, according to their varying degrees of participation.

From the above analysis, it is clear that the Ogoja salt industry was dynamic, and impacted the lives of the people both internally and externally. The salt industry in Ogoja in colonial times thus survived because it was dynamic. Because of the shared interests and benefits which it provided to all stakeholders, its survival was therefore paramount to all concerned.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude by pointing out that this study on Ogoja salt industry is an example of the dynamism and responsiveness of traditional African economy. This conclusion is reached against the backdrop of the stereotyped notion held by some scholars who have concluded with sweeping generalization that African economy was solely agrarian and subsistence and nothing more. It is true that the backbone of the people's economy was farming. It is however, incorrect to conclude that the economy was not diversified. This study has underscored the fact that during the period of our study, the economy of Ogoja Province was sufficiently diversified, specialized and professionalized.

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