

# Traditional Igbo Economy: Challenges to Growth and Development

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## Abstract

The Igbo had at various times demonstrated the strong will to develop their society and economy. Her economy was practically anchored on the three main pivotal sectors namely, agriculture, non-agricultural production and trade. These sectors had over the years faced some challenges from within and outside the society. Since the pre-colonial period, the challenges, to a large extent, had threatened and rocked the very basic foundation of the traditional Igbo economy. Each of the sectors of the economy was indeed a victim of this circumstance at one time or the other from the pre-colonial up to the post-colonial eras.

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional Igbo economy rested on three major sectors namely agriculture, non-agricultural production and trade. The manner the Igbo worked and controlled her economy over the centuries attracted comments about the character of the Igbo as a people. This was aptly captured in Hugh Crow's comment.

The Eboes (Igbo)... are a well formed people of the middle stature: many of their women are of remarkably symmetrical shape and if white would in Europe be deemed beautiful. This race is... of a more mild and engaging disposition than the other tribes particularly the Quaws... they are preferred in the West India colonies for their fidelity and utility as domestic servants, particularly if taken there when young as they then become the most industrious of any of the tribes in the colonies.<sup>1</sup>

This was an observation by a slave dealer about the Igbo. It should be adjudged objective for one or two reasons. He was not speaking to impress any Igbo leader or group whom he of course owed no compliment. Rather, one would perceive from this observation an advertorial on the character of slaves that should be exported to West Indian colonies for better service delivery.

There was also an account of the famous ex-Igbo slave, Olaudah Equiano who wrote about his people as contained in his popular *Interesting Narratives*. He talked about the economic activities engaged by his people. According to him,

Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women are engaged in it... our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance.<sup>2</sup>

The above observations about the Igbo were quite appropriate. The diligent and hand-working characters of the Igbo were encouraged and complemented by the benefits of their fruitful and conducive environment richly endowed with fertile soil for agriculture, as well as various solid mineral resources such as iron ore, salt-lakes, palm tress, cotton, clay soil and screw pine (padamus), that encouraged the development of local crafts and industries in the area. Besides, Igbo land with about the highest population density per square mile in Africa, only comparable to that of the Nile valley area<sup>3</sup>, had an environment free from any natural barrier. Thus free movement of people within and outside the area for the purposes of trade and other economic activities was guaranteed.

These flourishing economic and environmental outfits in Igbo land must have provided the enabling conditions for the reign of the Igbo culture between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, A. D. C. Ifemesie's account of the Igbo culture would create a good impression of the level of socio-economic development attained by at least a part of Igbo land. In creating this picture of Igbo culture Ifemesie said,

...the whole collection of Igbo Ivory, beads, manilas etc, suggests the possession of considerable wealth, at least by a sizeable section of the Igbo people in the distant past. Such wealth apparently enabled them to import among other things copper for casting and beads for ornament. And they must have had the political and economic organization which made the requisite trade possible... since the goods had to be carried over long distance. Moreover, the people undoubtedly had iron tools and weapons with which they exploited their productive environment...<sup>4</sup>

A civilization of this nature compared favourably with that of the Italian city states in the renaissance era of the European modern period. If the tempo of this civilization of Igbo continued, perhaps, the much talked about underdevelopment among the Igbo would have been unreal. Igbo land would have forged ahead

other African countries and perhaps maintained a vanguard position among developed countries of the world. This essay is devoted to the investigation of the cause or causes of the Igbo backsliding and almost total relegation in her economic growth and development. Efforts are made here to highlight the nature of the challenges facing the Igbo economy over the centuries as well as the extent of their damages to the Igbo economy from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. In doing this, attention is paid to aspects of the key sectors of the economy namely, agriculture, local industries and crafts, and trade in the *bid* to diagnose the main features of the economy that constituted victims of the challenges.

## AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is said to be the mainstay of the Igbo economy, involving men, women and children<sup>5</sup>. Igbo land was located at the tropical rainforest zone. The soil was fertile, rich in soil nutrients, and thus very conducive for farming<sup>6</sup>. The Igbo operated an ideal land tenure system that provided for the land needs of the members of the community<sup>7</sup>.

Despite all these, the traditional Igbo agriculture faced a number of challenges which had adversely affected her in terms of growth and expansion. One of the challenges facing this sector was land issue. Igbo land is so thickly populated that the population density per kilometer was put at 1000-1,500 persons per kilometer<sup>8</sup>. This population density per kilometer ration would not augur well for large scale farming. No doubt, the land tenure system in Igbo land provided a tradition which ensured that every member of the community secured a piece of land to farm on. But one should bear in mind that while the sizes of cultivable lands were constant, the population size continued, unabated, to grow and multiply. Population of an area naturally could only reduce or dwindle in the face of epidemics or wanton loss of lives through wars, raids and other forms of hostilities.

Certainly, Igbo land witnessed instances of disaster in one form or the other and at one time or the other. For instance, Igbo land was a raiding arena for slaves during the Inhuman Atlantic slave trade era from 1600 – 1830s and even beyond. Similarly there were inter and intra-communal crisis that lasted from the pre-colonial period up to the recent times. Igbo land was also war theatre during the World War II and the Nigerian civil war. All these events impacted negatively on the population size of the Igbo people.

Despite these deluge and calamities, the Igbo had the natural capacity to correct and stem the trends of population decrease. Igbo men and women had all the natural endowments and gift of fecundity necessary for unrelenting procreation drive in the *bid* to boost and increase the population. The Igbo traditionally cherished boost in population size of families and communities. This was why they engaged in various methods of population increase devices such as polygamy<sup>9</sup> and early marriage practices by both sexes. So, while wars and other possible forms of disasters were on the one hand ravaging the population density of the people, the Igbo men and women on the other hand took natural measures to correct the anomaly and ensured not only population increase but indeed population explosion.

But the other variable factor for agriculture which was land, remained static or even decreasing. The area called Igbo land never decreased because no part of it had been ceded to any of her neighbours as a result of wars of conquest or diplomatic reasons. But when we talk about arable or cultivable land, it is certain that it had to decrease steadily because of constant pressure and demand for space for residential, industrial and commercial purposes. Most of the time owners of lands due to fast revenue they earned from their land bidders, quickly sold their lands for purposes other than agricultural uses.

But the problem of agriculture arising from shortage of land could have been solved if the people had practised mechanized modern scientific methods of agriculture. Use of fertilizers and high yielding varieties of crops were hardly adopted and applied by Igbo farmer<sup>10</sup>. The same too, was true about the application of herbicides and pesticides to improve their agricultural yields<sup>11</sup>. Thus, alternative ways and means of improving the quality of land for increased production were unadopted, unapproved and unapplied. And so, the issue of land as an obstacle to improved farming in Igbo land continued to linger with its attendant handicaps and ugly consequences.

## CLIMATIC CONDITION

We have already noted above that Igbo land is in the tropical rain forest zone. There were two main seasons in the area namely the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season lasted for a period of six months between the months of May and October, while the dry season lasted from November to April the following year.

Under this condition, effective agriculture or cultivation took place only during the rainy season. During the dry season, no meaningful crop planting took place especially in the upland areas of Igbo communities. This was as a result of the scorching heat of the sun as well as the dehydrating and abrasive hamattan winds which were detrimental and harmful to crop cultivation at the season. Besides, the people lacked the facilities to undertake such responsibilities. In developed and developing countries, efforts were made to apply scientific irrigation methods to ensure continuous cropping the whole year round. In the absence of the said irrigation method, other scientific or mechanized methods were adopted by such countries to provide moisture in the farms

to achieve the same goal. But in Igbo land these measures were lacking.

In the pre-colonial period, dry season was completely designated a period of harvest and rest; no planting of any sort took place<sup>12</sup>. In the colonial and post-colonial eras, there were efforts to plant palm trees and cassava though in small scale. But they were neither watered or fertilized. The result was a low yield harvest. So the climatic condition of the Igbo land was a serious barrier against efforts to meet the agricultural needs of the Igbo over the centuries. Thus, Igbo land relied heavily on other parts of Nigeria for her agricultural needs.

## LABOUR

Labour is an indispensable factor in the development of any economy. It is evident that all the sectors of the traditional Igbo economy had remained static, undeveloped, and operating merely on subsistence level over the centuries. We have discussed above some of the factors militating against the progress of the economy. Here, the issue of labour is discussed. The quality of labour in any society was paramount to the reformation of not only the economy but also the society at large. Unfortunately in Igbo land the labour force had remained unskilled or semi-skilled in nature. It had stucked to conservative ideas and opposed to virtually all forms of innovations. Thus agriculture remained unmachanized and unscientific because the farmers were predominantly illiterates unexposed to modern ideas and skills of farming. Types of tools used by the traditional Igbo farmers were the usual cutlasses, hoes and diggers they needed for bush-clearing, mound making and yam harvests respectively since the pre-colonial times. Use of modern agricultural tools was yet to be accepted. Thus the ambition to embark on large scale agriculture in Igbo land had remained farcical and a mirage. Crafts and local industries had remained at a low scale production level, just because the labour force was so unskilled that it lacked the capacity to generate innovative ideas to boost and expand production and maximize profit. Even the trade and commercial sector had continued to operate at local and long distance trading levels. Commodities sold still remained food items, products of smiths, sculptors, potters, cloth-weavers, mat-makers and salt-makers among others. Centers for national and international commercial transactions were virtually lacking due to the absence of such traders with the needed acumen and initiatives to generate progressive ideas.

There was also an issue of rural-urban migration among the youth in search of white collar jobs, better living environment and modern school environments that were lacking in rural areas. This exodus reduced the population of rural dwellers who constituted agricultural labour force in the villages and negatively affected the output in the agricultural sector.

## GOVERNMENT PATRONAGE

In the pre-colonial period the various community governments, strived to guarantee the reign of peace and security in their domains. These were necessary conditions for the growth of their respective community economies. During the Colonial period the scope of agricultural demands expanded from mere subsistence needs to demands for cash crops such as palm produce, rubber and cocoa among others. But the Colonial Government failed to provide enough financial assistance to the farmers, by way of loans or grants. The resultant effect of this was that the farmers continued to depend on their meager resources to farm, leading to low scale farming and low output of both food items and cash crops. The Colonial Government, too, did not take steps to establish model or demonstration farms to educate rural farmers on the modern farming skills<sup>13</sup>. Thus agriculture continued to be a business of old men and those who lacked initiatives and where-with-al to embark on any other lucrative ventures.

## TYPES OF CROPS CULTIVATED

Growth and development in the agricultural sector of the traditional Igbo economy were bound to reflect on the entire structure of the system, particularly the types of crops cultivated. For the fact that there were glaring deficiencies in the quality, variety and species of crops cultivated by Igbo farmer, there was indeed a serious doubt cast on the growth and progress of Igbo traditional agriculture.

Two major problems had been identified with agricultural crops of Igbo land. One was the limited number of the crops cultivated in the area. Apart from yam, cassava and maize that had few varieties and species of varieties, other crops lacked such outfits. The result of this short-coming was the failure of Igbo traditional agriculture to adequately meet the economic demands of the people. Take for instance yam crop which was celebrated in Igbo land as king crop had only two species cultivated in Igbo land out of the existing 600 dioscorea species<sup>14</sup>. Unfortunately, the species cultivated by Igbo farmers lacked the potentials and efficiency for high yielding capacity. Thus they never met the food demands of the people since the pre-colonial era. Despite the fact that this was the target crop for any Igbo farmer, male or female, there had never been a time the demand for the crop was met. Igbo farmers were in the miserly habit of regulating the quantity of the yams consumed by their household or friends. It is a common Igbo saying that "*Mbe nwa Okochieoha si na aka otutu di mma n' oruru ma o dighi mma n' oriri*" (Tortoise, the son of Okochieoha, said that many hands are good for doing work, but are not good for taking food)<sup>15</sup>. This saying clearly illustrates, the dilemma of the Igbo *di ji* (a successful

farmer) who would want to have many hands to do his work but would, if he could help it, prefer to feed few mouths if he must accumulate enough yams to take the yam title<sup>16</sup>. Some farmers were derisively referred to as “Okoji na ata mkpume”<sup>17</sup> (wealthy farmer that fed on stones). These practices were targeted at avoiding excess consumption of yam crop by the family members.

It was apparently in the *bid* to remedy this situation that women embarked on the cultivation of other crops to serve as substitutes and reduce over dependence on yam for family food sources and supply. Thus other tuber crops such as trifoliate yam, aerial yam (*discorea bulbifera*), cocoyam and cassava, were cultivated by women to meet the food needs of the families.

Failure of the Igbo farmers to meet the demands for yam in the post-colonial era resulted to the emergence of yam dealers who imported yams from parts of the northern Nigeria to Igbo land to augment local supplies. This was a lucrative trade for many Igbo and non – Igbo traders who engaged in this inter-regional trade carrying lorry loads of yams from northern towns of Katsina-Ala, Makurdi, Gboko, Jalingo, Zakibiam and Oturkpo among others, to major cities of Igbo land such as Aba, Onitsha, Awka, Enugu, Okigwe, Afikpo, Umuahia, Owerri and Orlu among others. The volume of yam tubers transported from parts of the north to Igbo land on daily or weekly basis far outweighed the volume produced locally.

The reason for the poor yield of local varieties was mainly due to their inferior quality and low-yielding capacity. Low yielding species would produce just one or two tubers per stand. Sometimes the yields were of small sizes. But high yielding species would produce multiple number of tubers per stand. These tubers were usually of big and medium sizes. So, no matter the size of the farm, the total output would take care of cost and expected profits. In Igbo land the reverse was the case. This resulted to many able bodied men and women who ought to be assets in the profession quitting it in search of greener pastures, most often in towns.

#### NON-AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION SECTOR

This sector involved a number of local industries and crafts which included pottery, salt-making, smothery, sleeping mat-making, sculpture, wine-tapping, cloth weaving, cloth and fish smoking, among others. These industries flourished in Igbo land in the pre-colonial era and even part of the colonial period before it began to face some teething challenges. The assertion of a high level of Igbo culture development in the past can be justified based on the following observations and remarks of C. Ifemesia on Igboukwu artifacts.

...the Igboukwu objects have portrayed the Igbo as a people with a rich and dynamic culture from times of fairly high antiquity. Internal evidence, especially in the context of the known West African metal-casting tradition, has placed the provenance of these works of art beyond reasonable doubts. The male and female human figures with African features exhibited on the pot-stand suggest that the artifacts were works of African craftsmanship... And the whole collection of Igboukwu Ivory, beads, bronzes, manilas, etc, suggests the possession of considerable wealth at least by sizable section of the Igbo people in the distant past<sup>18</sup>.

The above observation presents a picture of the level of socio-economic sophistication in Igbo land some centuries ago before it faced a number of challenges that militated against her progress.

The first major challenge the local industries in Igbo land faced was the slave trade. For over a century, some able bodied men, women, youths and even the aged were kidnapped and sold to European slave dealers at the coast for shipment overseas. The entire Igbo land was involved in this heinous exercise. Not only that the cream of the society, (the boys and girls), were the victims of the inhuman trading, the peace and tranquility mostly needed to carryout the traditional skills and crafts were adversely affected. Slave dealers carried out raids at the market squares, villages and farmsteads in order to capture slaves which were sold to the European slave dealers at the coast<sup>19</sup>. This negatively impacted on all the major sectors of the Igbo economy. The depopulation effect of the slave trade on the entire Igbo nation was equally atrocious. John Adams’ records of this inhuman transactions provides an insight on the extent of the toll of this trade on Igbo population. Thus he said;

This place (Bonny) is the wholesale market for slaves, as not fewer than 20,000 are annually sold here; 16,000 of whom are natives of one nation called Heebo, (Igbo), so that this single nation has not exported a less number of its people, during the last twenty years, than 320,000; and those of the same nation sold at New and Old Calabar, probably amounted in the same period of time to 50,000 more, making an aggregate amount of 370,000 Heebos (Igbo)<sup>20</sup>.

These figures represented the able bodied men and women of the Igbo extraction that would have been very useful in harnessing the various sectors of the Igbo economy to an enviable height. No doubts, if this sized of population had not been carted away from the Igbo society, and allowed to help in harnessing the traditional Igbo economy for nearly three centuries the slave trade lasted, the Igbo economy would not have faced the shock

and trauma it was subjected to, and perhaps it would have made a giant stride in the direction of industrial growth making the Igbo economy one of the leading economies in the world.

Another threat to the growth of traditional local industry was the influx of foreign made products in Igbo land and Nigeria at large. From the seventeenth century onwards, the European slave dealers and merchants started importing European made goods into Igbo land. These were in form of trust goods which they left in the hands of their agents. These included tobacco, hats, salt, cloths, jewelries and plates among others. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European made goods had flooded Igbo markets, providing close or even better substitutes to the locally made ones. Under colonial rule, the Europeans even introduced measures that made it mandatory for the people to buy their products. One of these was the colonial employment conditions. Employees in the colonial service by their orientation and taste were inclined to European life style and products as mark of distinction and modernity. Besides, European goods as products of mechanized industries appeared standardized and apparently more attractive than the locally produced equivalents. The prices of the European made goods were relatively cheaper than the locally produced ones. This was as a result of the advantage of large scale production enjoyed by producers of mechanized goods.

These European factors went a long way in frustrating the growth and development of the local crafts and industries. Igbo pottery said to be the oldest industry in Igbo land<sup>21</sup>, dated to the Late Stone Age was almost choked to death by the influx of European substitutes such as aluminum pots of various sizes, enamel plates and vessels of various sizes, enamel and plastic cups and containers of various sizes, flasks, kettles and plates of ceramic products. By the twentieth century European wares, were already set to take control of virtually every need and interest of the Igbo, thus laying dangerous foundation for the eclipse of the Igbo local pottery industry.

Another local manufactures badly affected by the influx of the European goods in Igbo land were products of the smiths such as cutlasses, hoes, diggers, guns and bullets among others. Popular smiths in Igbo land were the Awka, Nkwere and Abiriba people<sup>22</sup>. They transversed the entire Igbo land in the pre-colonial era, producing farming implements for farmers. They also produced spears, guns and gun powder for warfare and security purposes. A missionary account gave an insight on the advanced nature of the Igbo smithing profession.

I paid a visit to a black smith's shop. It was most interesting. With exceedingly primitive tools and very meager materials, these native smiths turn out some very neat work. While I was waiting, he made a needle out of a piece of old knife. The age and point all complete without being filed or ground. He was wearing a pair of armlets made from old knives. They were chased and polished<sup>23</sup>.

This account represented the early 20<sup>th</sup> century objective picture of what smothery in Igbo land was. But behold, no sooner than later, the continued influx of European substitutes to products of smiths in Igbo land started to negatively affect the growth of the industry.

The same applied to salt-making industry locally undertaken by women from Uburu, Okposi and Enyigba communities in the present Ebonyi state of Nigeria. Salt from these communities were demanded and used by people from parts of Igbo land and beyond<sup>24</sup>. But with the influx of the European made salt in the area, demand for the locally manufactured ones, almost seized for the obvious advantages mechanized metropolitan industries had over manually produced items of the local industries.

The Europeans as already noted above made no effort to develop or mechanize the existing local industries, nor did they establish new centers for salt production in Igbo land<sup>25</sup>. Rather their policy was purely to flood the markets with foreign manufactures of salt. Industrial revolution in Britain placed the metropolitan industries at vantage position over local ones. Prices of their goods were relatively cheaper than that of local industries due to the advantage of large scale production; the standardized nature of the mechanized products made them more attractive to the buyers than locally produced ones. Ultimately there was a drastic shift in the demand for local salt in favour of the foreign ones, leading to the near collapse of the local industries. During the Nigerian civil war 1967 – 1970, demand for locally produced salt appreciated due to the fact that Biafra suffered blockade, preventing free importation of foreign goods into Biafra. But soon after the war in 1970, the ban on importation of foreign salt and other European made products was lifted, leading again to a decline in the demand for locally produced salt and near collapse of these local industries.

Cloth weaving was another local industry that suffered from the importation of foreign made substitutes. By the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, cloth weaving in Igbo land had attained a high level of proficiency. There were very popular cloth weavers in Igbo land, including Nsukka, Abakaliki, Asa and Ndoki (Akwete), as well as Anioma<sup>25</sup>. The products of these weavers were popular and attracted demands from various parts of Igbo land. Akwete was probably the most famous among places that made use of the women's vertical loom in Nigeria<sup>27</sup>. It was in Akwete the *Popo* cloth was designed. This cloth was highly esteemed and used by women of the Old town of Bonny. *Popo* cloth was named after the coastal town of Opobo where such cloths were sold originally<sup>28</sup>. All the royal cloths in Bonny were said to be woven in Akwete including *Ikaki* (tortoise)<sup>29</sup>.

By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Akwete weaving industry had attained a high level of sophistication,

making use of entirely imported cotton in place of locally grown ones<sup>30</sup>. Lamb and Holms commented on the quality of the tools used by the Akwete weavers as well as the size of their cloth, saying thus:

Akwete loom is the widest in Nigeria...Akwete cloths are usually intended to be used as single panel cloths-woven with a wider warp which can be over 4-feet. Single panel serve for Akwete cloth while in others, two panels must be employed.<sup>31</sup>

Asaba and ubulu-ukwu communities in Anioma produced cloths with predominantly white background, decorated with inlay and was thus popularly referred to as *akwa-ocha* (white cloth)<sup>32</sup>. Abakalik people on their own wove the *Ukara – Ekpe* cloth which was designed by Ohafia, Abiriba and Aro people<sup>33</sup>. Nsukka and Agbani people also wove cloths popularly demanded within and outside their communities.

Unfortunately, these weaving industries in Igbo land were adversely affected by the influx of European made substitutes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, leading to their near collapse. Apart from the above discussed industries, there were other local skills of popular standard in parts of Igbo land. They included sleeping mat-making, roofing mat-making, basket-making, calabash-making, cloth dyeing and fish smoting crafts, among others. These were all victims of the unpopular policy of flooding Igbo land with European foreign products. As a result of this, most of these local industries have gone into extinction while surviving ones operated in very low capacity.

People's preference for the foreign alternative was not necessarily based on their superiority over the locally made ones. Rather, the low price tag of the foreign products was among the main reasons behind people's choice of the products. In addition, the psyche among the youth and elites to click to "modernity" as erroneously represented by the European outfits generally, made the people adapt to European goods as a way of queuing into the band of the elites.

### **EFFECT OF CULTURE/TABOO**

An objective discussion on the challenges to the traditional Igbo economy would not ignore or overlook the ugly effects of some aspects of the people's culture on the growth of the economy. All sectors of the economy (without any exception) were affected by the menace. On the agricultural sector, there was the problem of male gender sensitivity. Major structures of this sector namely land, yam crop (king crop) farming calendar and even the labour force were under the control of the men folk. Afigbo had once observed that the Igbo society and agriculture were patrilineal<sup>34</sup>. The implication of this was that men and women were not exposed to equal opportunities. Yam crop which was referred to as king crop was indeed associated with the men while the women produced subsidiary crops such as coco-yam, maize, aerial-yam, trifoliate yam cassava and vegetable crops. Unequal opportunities among members of the two sexes limited their chances to contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of the agricultural sector.

The same applied to the traditional crafts and industries in the area. Unequal opportunities also abound in the non- agricultural sector. Take for instance the case of pottery industry which was said to be open only to the female folk. Men were not allowed to participate<sup>35</sup>. A reason given for this discrimination was that women entered the clay pit naked. So, to allow men take part in the business could lead to rape and other sexual abuses which were abominable conducts against the earth deity<sup>36</sup>. There was also a case of oracular injunction in Ishiagn community, Ebony state of Nigeria, banning men from taking part in the trade<sup>37</sup>. These taboos and superstitions to some extent hampered the operation of the *laissez-faire* system which could have thrown it open for men and women interested in the trade to participate. Measures could be devised to eliminate chances of sex abuses. Different clay pits for the men folk could serve this purpose. It is likely that pottery industry would enjoy optimal growth and development in Igbo land where a cross fertilization of ideas by both sexes took place. Participation of both sexes in the industry would also result in increased productivity, meeting the demands of people for pottery products.

Taboo also hindered technology transfer. Girls from pottery communities who learnt the skill were banned from practising the skill outside her natal community. In order to achieve this, the girl potter was not allowed to get married outside her village to avoid the risk of divulging the skill to non-potters<sup>38</sup>. But this culture was not in the best interest of the *laissez-faire* system which guaranteed free entries and exit of participants in the trade. Besides, transferring the skill elsewhere would help to boost the manufacture especially if the basic raw-materials and other necessary facilities for the trade to thrive were available in those areas.

Salt-making industry in Igbo land was also affected by cultural taboos for instance in the salt – producing communities of Igbo land such as Uburu, Okposi and Enyigba communities only women were allowed to practice the trade. Men were completely banned from the exercise<sup>39</sup>. Even among women of a salt-producing community not all of them were allowed to take part. Only women and girls from within the lineage where the salt lakes and streams were located, were allowed to fetch the brine water for boiling. Even daughters of these villages married to other non-salt producing communities were not allowed to fetch the salt water for

salt preparation<sup>40</sup>.

As noted above in respect of other crafts, such discriminatory practices would not augur well for the growth and development of the industry. Potential contributors to the development of the skill were locked out, denying them opportunities to exhibit their wares of talents. Similarly potential apprentices and journey-men were denied opportunities to learn and practise the trade. The obvious consequence of the cultural taboo was lack of expansion in the trade. This was indeed the sorry situation the industries were, prior to the advent of the European traders who saw the economic loophole and exploited it through the importation of foreign salt at a comparatively cheaper cost, paving way for the sale of the product at various markets in Igbo land. Thus, by the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demand for European salt was already a steady trend. Its steady supply and availability at every part of Igbo land as well as its relatively cheaper cost made it a more preferred product compared to the locally made (Uburu) salt.

## TRADE AND COMMERCE

Two types of trading existed in Igbo land over the centuries. They were the local and long distance trading. Local trade dealt principally on food items as well as products of smiths, sculptors, potters and cloth weavers among others. This served the commercial interest of contiguous communities. On the other hand, long distance trading attracted people from far and near and the items sold in the market satisfied the needs of the people beyond mere subsistence level. The commodities sold here varied. They included food items, slaves, horses, cow, products of smiths, sculptors, cloth weavers and potters among others.

Igbo society was communal in socio-political as well as commercial lives. This implied that the societal values and norms that characterized the Igbo were reflected in every aspect of their lives including trade and commerce. Both at the local and long distance trading levels, these values and norms prevailed. Stealing and cheating of any sort were abhorred as evil and abominable while the sanctity of the market place was upheld as sacrosanct.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, negative developments started to creep into the market system, following the advent of the European traders and the subsequent introduction of capitalist system in Igbo land in particular and Nigeria at large. Capitalism is said to be an economic system based on private rather than state ownership of business and transport services, with free competition and profit – making<sup>41</sup>. Unbridled quest for profit infiltrated and indeed permeated the commercial as well as the socio-political lives of the Igbo. In commerce and trade all manner of tricks and corrupt practices were displayed and exhibited. Not only that prices of goods went high due to artificial scarcity deliberately created to serve the purpose, the particular commodity under artificial scarcity was most often adulterated to increase supply, in order to meet demand and maximize profit. Thus palm oil was adulterated using calm wood, palm kernel, too, was adulterated with some quantities of palm kernel coats and pebbles which ought to be disposed of. Buyers on the other hand, paid their customers with counterfeit coins and currency notes.

Virtually every buyer or seller was involved in the mess. Some farmers would carry some quantities of rotten or unwholesome tubers of yam to the markets for sale to make profits. Similarly, professionals such as smiths, potters, salt-makers, sculptors and cloth weavers manufactured low quality and fake products which were sold at the markets making fast money.

The inordinate ambition to exploit every opportunity for profit maximization virtually killed the zeal among people to produce original and high quality materials. All these had the impact of discouraging the growth of the local industries and crafts among the Igbo in particular and the entire Igbo economy at large.

## CONCLUSION

Igbo economy like most economies world over started as a local phenomenon. It was organized in three major sectors, namely, agriculture, non-agricultural production, and trade. All these sectors prospered in the pre-colonial period, taking care of the needs of the people at the local, village group and Igbo national levels.

The economy began to face threats and challenges since the inception of European influences in the area from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Local and external factors contributed immensely to the down trends of the economy. But the external factors played greater damage to the economy than the local factors. For instance, the crushing roles of slave trade, colonialism and the associated problem of importation of European made goods did not augur well with the economy. Most importantly, the inability of the successive post-colonial governments of Nigeria to place ban on European goods in the country even worsened the matter. Thus, the traditional Igbo economy even in the recent times remained undeveloped and unprogressive without serious attempts by individuals, groups and government to revamp it.

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