

Coastal Trade in Awa, Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria 1900–1970

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Abstract

This paper examines the contributions of communities in Awa clan to the success of the international trade in commodities from the 1900s to the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970. It analyses how these hinterland dwellers were railroaded into trade relations with European merchant ships and the impact of such trade on the development of settlement patterns, skills acquisition. It also critically assesses the Awa communities more than 100 years after.

Keywords: creeks, waterways, trading vessels, palm oil, kernel, rubber

1. Introduction

This seminar paper examines aspects of Awa history, both the previously published, previously unpublished and unexplored aspects of her economic history that have remained buried until now in the more widely known history of the defunct Eket Division. The paper seeks to analyse the early trade contact of the people of Awa with European merchant companies and their African agents, the neighbouring communities and the involvement of Awa inland Ibibio people in international trade during the period under review. The papers will also cursorily look at the impact, if any of these trade contacts on the lives of the people.

2. Scope

Onna Local Government Area was until 1989, an integral part of the former Eket Division, one of the oldest districts in the Eastern Region of Nigeria. It has its administrative headquarters at Abat. There are three clans in Onna local government area namely; Oniong, Nnung Ndem and Awa, which together form the acronym Onna. The area has a total of forty-one villages with Awa accounting for twenty and the 2006 census figures put its current population at 123,000.¹

Verifiable information on Onna is not only sketchy but also scanty. Information gathered on the former Cross River State, focused on Eket Division, very little mention is made of Onna and its clan of Oniong, Nnung Ndem and Awa. The Onna local government council has apparently not cared to accumulate information about itself. Besides, early history on the Ibibio concentrated more on already known sub-ethnic groups such as the peoples in Eket, Opobo, Ikot Ekpene, etc. As a matter of fact, the demographic pattern of Eket and Onna was only until recently unverified. Census figures for Onna like what obtains at the national level are unreliable and have been subjected to all sorts of intrigues since it is one of the major determinants of government largesse. Awa area is the focus of this seminar paper. Occasional mention would however be made of Eket, Etinan, and the neighbouring clans of Nnung Ndem and Oniong only to the extent on which they throw more light on the subject under review. Awa consists of the following villages - Afaha Attai, Afaha Ishiet, Afaha Ubium, Awa, Awa Iman, Awa Nkop, Awa-Ndon, Atiamkpat, Ikot Akpan Ishiet, Ikot Nkang, Ikot Akpan Nkor, Ikot Ese Ishiet, Ikot Mbong, Ikot Edem Udo, Ikot Udo Essang, Ikot Akpan Mkpe, Ikot Obio Ekit, Edem Idim Ishiet, Nnung Oku Ekanem, and Ntan Ide Ekpe.

3. Definition of the Concept of International Trade

The concept of international theories of trade is a collection of economic thoughts that enveloped Europe from the 1500s to the 1750s. It is a collection of similar attitudes towards economic thinking and international trade. According to Scot Ranzan,² one of the most prominent economic theories of that period was mercantilism. Mercantilists regarded economic activity as a zero sum game in which one country's economic gain was at the expense of another.

Mercantilism² also states that nations should accommodate financial wealth through exports and discouraging imports. It was the view of several economic theorists at the time, that this wealth could easily be acquired through trade surpluses, government intervention and colonization. Trade surpluses could be maintained through the colonization of underdeveloped territories for their raw materials.

Britain would colonize the underdeveloped countries, ship
the raw materials needed back to the home country and
export the finished product around the world.³

Government intervention occurred when certain imports are banned or when tariffs are imposed on imports. At the same time, government would subsidize the local industries to expand exports. Governments also gave exclusive rights for certain routes or area to specific companies. Under this type of arrangement, trade

monopolies fostered the generation of higher profits through monopoly over power. Profits⁴ would contribute to a positive trade balance and the wealth of rulers.

Armed with specific trade policies, governments controlled international trade activities to maximize trade surplus and by also keeping wages very low. In this atmosphere of monopoly, occasioned by Britain's strong appetite for the resources of 'less developed' territories, African countries were the preying ground. Pax Britannica was already extending her tentacles to the African interior

In 1885, the local agents of 'these' firms entered into an agreement, commonly called the 'pool', with the objective of reducing the price paid to the seller by the European purchaser of African produce. Such an agreement was obviously to the detriment of the African vendor.⁵

There were two policies being considered in the Foreign Office at that time about the situation on ground. The choice had to be made between the two policies: the native rulers could either be used or be crushed. The second option appealed more to Vice-Consul Harry Johnston when he arrived late in 1885. . King Jaja of Opobo, the merchant of the Niger Delta was one of the major casualties. The travails of Jaja of Opobo, are outside our area of interest, but suffice it to say that from the late 1890s after Jaja's deportation and consequent death, the Calabar interior areas were forcefully opened up for by British economic interests by Consuls, E.H Hewett and H.H Johnston.

4. Background

Until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, European political economic and missionary activities had only marginal significance to the peoples beyond the coastal fringes of the Calabar area. Several attempts by the European traders and their companies to trade directly with the rich palm oil producing belt beyond Calabar had been effectively blocked by the Efik middlemen kings. The wealth of the Efik Etubom and the King were derived almost exclusively from their activities as middlemen and traders, rather than as land owners or producers. A determined attempt was made to keep the Europeans out of the inland Ibibio communities for if the European traders were allowed to penetrate into the country and gain direct access to the interior markets, it was feared they would completely undermine the position of the Efik. Thus the Ibibio area which lay beyond the fringes of the Calabar area was the hidden treasure land of the Efik Kings.⁶

At the turn of the nineteenth century (1890s) following the abolition of slave trade, earlier in the century, the main concern of the British government was to introduce and replace the trade in slaves with the trade in commodities. The British strove to increase the volume and value of trade by extending its commerce hitherto transacted at the Calabar ports to the rich palm oil belt in the hinterlands. The process of extension was initially left in the hands of individual British traders and trading companies. But due to the intensity of the opposition unleashed by the Efik middlemen against their replacement by British merchants and trading stations, it became clear to John Beecroft and other British government officials who were based at the Calabar ports at the time, that they would have to ensure the protection of their traders. From 1890 to 1910 therefore, series of punitive expeditions were undertaken by the British forces on the areas which are today known as Ibibio land.⁷

The Ibibio country was known for its superior soft palm oil and other commodities which had originally been exported through Calabar ports. According to Kanaan K.Nair⁸, the Ibibio country lay in the belt of the richest palm producing part of the Calabar hinterlands. Palm oil and kernels were the main basis of the economy; on the banks of nearly every stream, deep enough for a canoe, could be seen puncheons both empty and full, large palm boiling pots and metal canoes. The Qua Iboe River flowing from its sources in the Atlantic Ocean flows through Eket and Awa area through its numerous creeks and inland waterways and these provided important trade routes for the European and African merchants.

Although the Qua Iboe River was the major entry for the overseas trade of the region, this trade would not have been profitable without the inland ports. Other than palm oil, Ibibio land abounded in palm kernels, yams, assorted types of fruits, medicinal plants etc. The overseas trade with Europeans would not have been possible without inland ports. There were eleven inland ports in Awa about which very little is known, but which nevertheless played a central role in the overseas trade with Europeans. This seminar paper would concentrate on the role played by the inland ports and waterways of Awa in the trade with the Europeans during the period under review.

During the era of the trade in slaves, slave ships berthed at a safe distance off the coast. According to Noah⁹ there were no great problems of cargo handling as the cargo in question were human beings. The role played by these inland ports were therefore ignored or by-passed. But with the abolition of slave trade, slaves many African traders and their communities were compelled to seek alternative export products. Dike and Ekejuiba,¹⁰ are of the view that palm oil was the main stay of Ibibio hinterland economy, there were also extensive trading activities in piassava fiber, cocoa, palm kernels, ivory, yams, rubber pulp, slaves, goats, sheep, cocoa-yams, maize, carved wooden items and chickens. The introduction of commodity trading meant many African

communities hitherto unknown in the hinterlands could participate actively in the trade with Europeans.

5. The Presence of European Trading Firms in Awa Creeks

Noah in his article 'Inland Ports of Ibibio land' is of the opinion that the Ibibio hinterlands became a hub of commercial activities due to the presence of the hinterland ports. In his view, a hinterland is a place of contact between land and maritime space which provides services to both the maritime and the hinterland. The primary function of the hinterland, is to transfer goods from ship to inland carriers and in this regard it serves as a meeting point where water and inland transport meet and intertwine.¹¹

Awa ports which featured actively in the early inland trade were *Eka Esuk* in *Ikot Akpan Ishiet*, *Esuk Ibekwe* in *Ikot Udo Essang*, the Awa creek between *Ikot Akpan Eshiet* and *Mkpok*, the ports at *Ikot Akpan Nkor*, *Ikot Obio Eket*, *Esuk Esa* in *Okat*, *Esuk Edem Idim*, *Esuk Ikot Obong Ishiet*, *Esuk Atiampkat*, *Esuk Akpaube*. Three of these inland ports *Eka Esuk*, *Esuk Akpaube* and *Esuk Ibekwe* in *Ikot Akpan Ishiet*, *Ikot Udo Essang* and Awa villages respectively hosted large ocean faring vessels of 500 - 1500 tones. Disused jetties projecting into the river which used to serve as anchors could still be seen till present day.

It must be noted however, that these coastal trade routes were the same routes used by African slave dealers and European slave merchants to evacuate slaves from the hinterlands. According to Chief Sunday Robert Umoette of Okat,¹² slaves were the main export commodities before the introduction of the trade in palm oil and kernel. These inland waterways and ports according to Noah, ports were functional because they did not require elaborate port facilities for loading and off-loading imports and exports and were previously used in evacuating human cargoes.

Umoette said there was a warehouse in Okat divided into two sections. One section contained European import products brought in by the European trading firms of United African Company, John Holt, Peterson Zochonis, and the Miller Brothers. These trading firms filled the warehouses with such goods like gin, tobacco, beads, guns and gun powder, mirror, European clothes, hat, shoes. The other section of the warehouse were filed with palm oil, palm kernel, piassava and other assorted types of local commodities waiting to be transported to the mother ships in Calabar ports. Markets, in the words of Umoette, were always established at every water front. These markets, he said, were avenues for the sale of local commodities like yams, coco yams, chicken, cocoa, rubber pulp, palm oil products, ogogoro (locally brewed gin), and piassava, slaves, carved items. In the view of Noah, these inland trading ports could also rightly be referred to as inland trading zones because of the extensive trading activities going on by the riverside by reason of the trading ports.

The village head of Okat, Etteidung Monday Bedford Akpan¹³ said that life at the trading stations was tough for the Europeans. The surrounding villages which had fought back European intrusion into their society were not friendly. According to him, some Europeans lived in the trading stations for months and years and most times died there.

The work of the African agents, (who were mainly indigenes of the villages mentioned earlier and their environs) involved the assembly of casks and the detailed recording of the daily business transactions in a book known as the Beach Report Book. Details recorded in the Beach Report Book included, quality and quantity of palm oil and kernel, date of delivery and delivering agent etc. Since the oil palm is a seasonal plant, many of the European traders spent between 15–40 years of their working life on trading ships, hulks, huts and warehouses along the Onna and Eket end of the Qua Iboe River. The African representatives were the earliest Ibibio entrepreneurs and their wealth is replete in the storey buildings built according to Umoette in Awa, Oniong and Nnung Ndem communities. Prominent locals' in the piassava, rubber, palm oil and palm kernel business were Moses Udo Nta, Robert Moses Umoette, Richard Umoette, Henry Usoro, John King, Eno Akpan Henry, and Henry Effanga.

In Basse Umoette's¹⁵ view, after harvesting the oil palm fruit, we select the very good ones and put them in a big iron pot called (*eka abang adan*) big oil pot. The pots were so big that it conveniently contain a full grown adult. After cooking, about six adults come together to pound the palm fruits and after pounding, the workers begin to squeeze out the oil by hand. In his words 'it used to be very painful and energy sapping, as it takes several hours of continuous squeezing to extract enough oil from the palm to fill a kerosene tin, which by today's measurement would be about 4 gallons'.

The African representatives of John Holt, the Royal Niger Company, Peterson Zochonis, Shepherd and Fletcher were African sales agents who were mainly indigenes of the locality- *Ikot Akpan Ishiet*, *Awa*, *Ikot Udo Essang*, *Afaha Attai*, *Okat* and *Mkpok*.¹⁶ These local people encouraged their brethren to produce palm oil and kernel, piassava, cam wood, ivory, that would be sold to European trading companies, stationed at the watersides. Every week these representatives would go into the villages and buy up palm oil and kernel that was produced and stored in kerosene tins. A particular household produced up to six kerosene tins or more of palm oil and 3 bags of kernel, another household produced only two or less.¹⁷ This method of trade allowed the indigenous population unlike the time of the trade in slaves, to be directly involved in the overseas trade with the Europeans and served as school for the development of entrepreneurial skills.

A kerosene tin of palm oil was then sold for 10 shillings. Some of these agents sometimes lend out wooden drums which had originally been given to them by the European trading companies at Eket, Okat and Awa ports. The agents in turn loaned out the drums to the small village producers. When it was collection time, the local trading agents went round the villages and bought up small holdings of palm oil, and poured them into large 1,000 litre metal drums waiting at the ports.¹⁸ When all the drums had been filled up, they were then rolled into the river and then into metal canoes waiting at the creeks from where they were transported to the ships anchored at Eket and from Eket to the mother ships at Calabar. Some of these products also find their way to Bonny, Aba and Uwani markets in Rivers State.

It was the practice on entering a village; the agents immediately went to the house of the village Head and presented him with imported European gin, European style clothes, beads, bowler hats, cigars, mirrors and other gift items. After obtaining his approval, they went from house to house and convinced the locals to produce more palm oil, kernel and piassava. These agents brought with them articles of trade like pomade, soaps, george-wrapper, tobacco, snuff, candle, kerosene tins, hats, beads mirror, European clothes, and imported gin in exchange for local commodities. Ekwere¹⁹ noted that after these containers of oil were filled up and hundreds of bags of palm kernel were bought and transported to the warehouses situated at the numerous coasts in Awa, the agents then contacted their parent companies in Eket. The companies would then send out what used to be known as (*eka ubom abang adan*) big canoe of palm oil. The containers were loaded at Eka Esuk in Ikot Akpan Ishiet, Esuk Ibekwe at Ikot Udo Essang and Esuk Akpaube in Awa area.

It was also the practice then for the European and their local African representatives to bring big canoes to buy oil palm, kernel and rubber at Akpaube port from where it is taken to Eket in *ubom abang adan*. Apart from palm oil, kernel and piassava, some traders brought dried stockfish for sale at Esuk Ikot Edem Udo and Akpaube ports. Indeed several people in Afaha Attai also worked as drivers in the big boats. The trade in palm oil, kernel, piassava and camwood involved virtually all the people in Awa since it was impossible to see a homestead without two to ten palm trees standing on it.

Besides palm oil, he noted that the prevailing trade in rubber also took place in Awa. Udoh is of the opinion that some specific families were outstanding in the cultivation and processing of the rubber tree. Since the crop was only recently introduced by the European traders, few families were buoyant enough to even purchase few stands. Some of the individuals deeply involved in the rubber trade were Nathan Etinge, Richard Basse Tom Udoh and John King.

The people of Afaha Attai usually took their wares to the port at Apaube to sell to the European and African middlemen traders. Several people in the village benefited from the inland trade at Awa during this period. Indeed, there was a rubber plantation in the village which was owned by the UAC, the lease period for the plantation was 99 years and since the expiration of the lease, the land had to be re-possessed by the village. Owing to the absence of local capital and entrepreneurs rich enough to buy these vast plots of land from the occupying company UAC, the plantations were destroyed and subsequently used for planting local food crops.

Sunday Umoette²⁰ said the main stay of the maritime industry in Okat was rubber and palm oil, the African Chiefs and traders' accumulated wealth in form of large stores of non-perishable goods; gin, metal bars (manila), guns, gun powder, imported at exorbitant prices, wooden houses, full of furniture and household items which were widely used by them and their families. These goods were received in exchange for hundreds of kerosene tins of palm oil, bags of palm kernel and large quantities of semi processed rubber strips.

The oil palm was stored in bottles, calabashes, clay pots, some for domestic use and also for sale. Kerosene tins were introduced by the UAC from the 1930s. Forty-two kerosene tins of oil filled one puncheon of oil, 10 small tubs or 5 large wooden barrels will take a labourer a season (six months) to fill. It took a labourer two weeks to fill a small barrel of oil. A kerosene tin of oil palm cost 10 British shillings and a puncheon could attract as much as five British pounds. These puncheons were more durable types of wooden casks because the inner parts were lined with aluminum sheets.²¹ These containers were stored in the compounds of the trading stations along the creeks of Awa, Okat, Ikot Udo Essang, Ibekwe, Ikot Akpan Ishiet villages and when filled with palm oil were transported through head portage to warehouses built along the river banks. When necessary, the oil palm was re-boiled at the trading stations to further improve its quality. These small trading stations along the numerous creeks and rivers in Awa and other ports of the Ibibio hinterland accommodated the European trade agents, their offices and the export goods stored in the same building. At larger oil markets in Ibibio hinterland, many firms like the UAC. John Holt, G. B Ollivant, and non-British firms competed amongst themselves for the produce from the hinterland and their trading stations later became the centre of activity and later developed into settlements.

Umoette²² pointed out that UAC planted rubber along Awa river banks and in the villages during the 1930s and the company operating in Okat was then known as Pamol, an arm of UAC. Rubber plantations were also established in Mkpok, Ikot Akpan Ishiet, Ikot Udo Essang, Awa Ndon, Afaha Atai, Ikot Nkan, Eket, Ikot Atia Ntit, Ikot Obia Ata and Okon. When the rubber trees were ripe for harvesting, all the natives of these villages worked as labourers for the company, they extracted the rubber pulp; put it in large containers, then into large

metal drums donated for that purpose by the UAC. The rubber pulp was transported from all the villages mentioned above to Okat which had a factory and a processing plant along its river bank, and was a sort of headquarters and central processing area. The pulp would then be emptied into large metal drums after which the officials of Pamol would pour chemical into the metal drums. These caused the pulp to harden, and after hardening, the pulp was pressed to extract its water content, and then cut into thin long strips and put out to dry. After it had thoroughly dried, it was packed into canoes and transported to Eket, from Eket it was again loaded on to small ships enroute to Calabar ports and from there to Britain, France Germany and Portugal. The natives from these villages were involved in the overseas trade in rubber only as workers and labourers. At the end of these exercise employees were paid about 10 British shillings which was the usual wage at that time.

The rubber trade did not involve the entire Awa community unlike oil palm and kernel trade. This was because rubber was a foreign commodity introduced into Awa by the European trading firms. Besides, local capital was not developed to the point of buying rubber seedlings from the European merchants. Apart from this, operating a meaningful rubber processing business at that time would require the ownership of large plantations, before the plant could be economically cultivated.

Ubokmfonabasi Ekwere of Ikot Udo Essang said the local business people were unable to buy rubber plantations due to the huge capital outlay involved in rubber seedlings, acquiring and clearing land for planting etc. In his opinion, the trades in oil palm, kernel, piassava, cocoa, yams were more beneficial to the local communities, since it involved virtually all the villagers. There were literally no homesteads without three or more stands of the oil palm tree, so everyone took part in the commerce. Women particularly benefited from the trade, with most of them taking their wares to any African middleman of their choice. Big time entrepreneurs were mainly men and they evacuated their product to Eket in their own canoes, to be sold to the European trading company of their choice.

Kanaan K. Nair,²³ said the demand for rubber at the international market dropped and the European trading companies operating in Awa and other ports of Ibibio land stopped buying and selling the commodity. When the UAC which was a major buyer of the commodity relocated from the area in the 1950s the land was repossessed by the community. Records of the volume of early trade in rubber are not only scanty, but the available ones could not be verified. When the European merchants stopped buying rubber, the local plantations where this commodity was planted, were burned down and the land put to other use. Ekerette Thompson, the Etteidung of Mkpok pointed out that when UAC withdraw from the trade in rubber, it sold its trading stations, boats, warehouses and other assets to the Bata Shoe Company located at Aba now Abia State. Local entrepreneurs who benefited from the rubber trade while it lasted were J. C Umofia. I.T. Ekanem, Richard Bassey, John King and Henry Usoro.

Ubokmfonabasi, pointed out that some of the Awa ports were noted for specific products.

Some of these ports were noted for particular commodities.

Esuk Ibekwe in Ikot Udo Essang and Esuk Okat evacuated more rubber than other inland ports in the Awa area.²⁴

Akpaube port at Awa was well noted for the evacuation of palm oil, while Esuk Ibekwe and Eka Esuk at Ikot Akpan Ishiet had palm oil and rubber as their major export products. In his view, the waterside was always a beehive of commercial activities with the presence of large European warehouses, factories and trading stations and make-shift residential huts at the creek. Most of these European firms imported from their countries, different range of merchandise to offer to the African middlemen. During the period under review 1900-1970, some of the articles of trade offered by European firms included, according to Dike and Ekejuiba²⁵ stockfish, salt, flour, sugar, tobacco, perfumes, beads, drinks and drugs. There were also assorted types of textile materials such as cotton, chiffon, khaki, wax prints and holandia. Hardware items consisted mainly of enamel ware, building materials, gun powder, sewing machines, cutlery, farming tools, later bicycles matches, paper, stationeries, lorries and cars were introduced.

These way European goods penetrated Awa, and other parts of Ibibio land and the increasing demand for palm oil, kernel and other local commodities increased the importance of the hinterland ports of Awa and other ports in Ibibio which lie in the palm oil belt of the Cross River Basin. From April 1930–April 1945, the average price of palm oil at the international market was twenty-two shillings (22) per pound weight. It dropped to six pounds between 1933 and 1937, and rose to nine to twelve pounds from 1942 to 1945.²⁶

6. Slave Trading

Our earlier analysis made it clear that although the British withdrew from the slave trade in 1807 and actively promoted legitimate trade in palm oil and kernel, slave trade lingered for over a century afterwards. Richard Bassey of Ikot Akpan Ishiet pointed out that slave trade never really stopped completely in the Ibibio hinterland; it just became 'refined'. As late as the 1940s and the 1950s, trading in human beings still continued until it dwindled to a mere trickle.²⁷

Richard Bassey and Sunday Umoette corroborated each other's account of the clandestine slave trading activities

that continued in Awa in spite of the ban placed on such heinous activity by the occupying colonial authorities. According to them one of the most powerful traditional chiefs of that time 1900-1930s was Ekpo Ofung Otu of Mkpok village. Otu had large slave holdings and defied the colonial warning to desist from the trade. An expedition was sent against Mkpok from the creeks of Ikot Akpan Ishiet and Okat by the use of gun boats. Mkpok was bombarded with rockets continuously for three days and the village was sacked. Ekpo Ofung Otu was taken prisoner and exiled to Sapele and after five years in exile he was set free, but died on his way back. Basseey and Richard²⁸ emphasized that the event put fear in other slave dealers. Mkpok became a sort of liberation centre as all the slaves of Ekpo Ofung Otu were set free and slaves captured from Awa and its environs were set free at Mkpok. Basseey pointed out that the name of the village from that time onwards became known as Mkpok meaning 'untie me'.

Due to an earlier legislation against the trade in slaves, slave trade was carried out in secret. A father could sell his troublesome child and other members of his family which he considered a major headache to the family and the community. The process involved taking the victim to the market with a particular product, under the pretext that the said 'product' was for sale. On arrival at the market, the person trafficking in persons would spread word around the market place, that he had a commodity for sale. This message was usually in coded language and only persons directly involved in the human trade would be able to decode his message. The unsuspecting victim would be told to sit and watch over the wares while his relative went to contact the buyer of the 'commodity'. He would wait in vain for his relative to return but the relative in question had collected payment and returned home. At the close of market in the evening, another person would come over to him, and on the pretext of returning him back to his people, take him through entirely different routes to hidden sections of the creek from where he is ferried by canoe to larger canoes waiting in Eket, Umani, Bonny and Aba and from there to French, Portuguese, German and Spanish slave ships.

7. Involvement of Awa People in International Trade

The trade in palm oil, kernel piassava, yams led to increased participation of Awa people in international trade. One of the reasons for the ease in the change from slave trade to palm oil trade was due to the fact that the Niger and Cross River areas where palm oil was drawn from, were the same hinterlands which supplied slaves and since the transportation system could cope with the bulky human commodity, transporting palm oil, kernel, piassava and yams was comparatively lighter.

Virtually every river inland waterway and creek had markets beside them. Amory Talbot²⁹ stressed that many of the European trading firms established their trading stations along the coasts. Manufactured goods from Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and Germany were stored in warehouses built with wood or galvanized roofing sheets. There were temporary residential huts for those European traders who were courageous enough to leave the hulk of their ships and spend time in the local community.

Trading stations in Okat, Ikot Udo Essang, Ikot Akpan Ishiet developed into some sort of settlement. Noah³⁰ noted that, the concentration of firms in a particular river port was a mark of substance and an indication of the port's growing importance. In the words of Ubokmfonabasi Ekwere weigh scales were used to weigh the kernels which were brought to the ports in huge cotton bags (made from the bark of trees) and virtually everyone interviewed in the course of this research mentioned the United African Company (UAC) as a major trading partner in the commercial activities in Awa and other commodities of Ibibio hinterland. There were other European firms such as Peterson Zochonis, John Holt, Miller Brothers, Fletcher and Shepherd at larger river trading stations like Eket, Bonny, Ikpa, Itu, Ibagwa and Eyieasana.

8. Development of Settlements and Craftmanship

These trading stations later grew into development centres where the local entrepreneurs had adequate capital continue to trade with the neighbouring communities. Where there was absence of local capital which was usually the case with most communities in Ibibio land, the European traders took their business somewhere else and these budding development centres or settlements experienced a sharp decline. This was the situation in Awa, Okat, Mkpok, Ndon Eyo, and other neighbouring communities. By the early twentieth century, the economic fortunes of UAC as it concerns the sale of rubber at the international market had declined.

Since river transportation was paramount for doing business in the creeks and inland trading stations, local boat builders had a thriving business building boats for the European and local traders at Awa. Some canoe boat-building ports like Eyieasana, Opobo, Ekpene Ukpa, Ndiya and several others supplied the Awa area with small river crafts. Since these river crafts were frequently used, these ensured that the creeks were cleared of snags, fallen trees and debris. This encouraged small European trading firms like Peterson Zochonis, the Miller Brothers, P.P. Nicolas, Fletcher and Shepherd, Griffith and company to set up inland trading stations along other creeks in Ibibio land. As the inland trade grew in importance from the 1930s and increased maritime activities in Awa and its environs, so did the need to further develop the rivers, creeks and waterways of Awa.

Colonial records from 1906-1945³¹ show a preoccupation of the colonial officials with the state of these inland

waterways and deliberate efforts were made to improve on existing ones and discover other inland ports. Several other ports were expanded between the colonial authorities in Calabar and their representatives in the inland trading ports in this regard. The Qua Iboe River came under colonial searchlight and in 1928 and 1929 clearing work commenced. During this period Awa creeks were inspected, along with the Eka Esuk, Esuk Ibekwe, Esuk Akpaube and Okat. With the opening up of more creeks in the Awa area, commercial activities blossomed.

Due to the superior quality of oil palm from the Ibibio area, the colonial authorities in 1903 promulgated the Roads and Creeks Ordinance which according to Noah empowered the warrant chiefs to call out their people between the ages of fifteen to fifty to work on any road or waterway for a period not exceeding six days in a quarter. Through this method of free labour, the colonial authorities ensured that the creeks and waterways were cleared of snags, fallen tree trunks and weeds which impeded free movement in and around these inland ports, and further opened up the Ibibio hinterland markets to overseas European commerce.

Most village heads could not immediately point out the benefits of this early inland trade in the lives of members of their communities. The early traders in the community used proceeds from the trade to initiate their children to the Ekpo and Ekpe secret cults, which was considered prestigious at that time. Wilson Udo said, these traders felt that their children's status would be better enhanced by being members of these secret cults than by going to school. The initiation requirements at that time were very expensive and these traders felt membership of secret cults was more important than western European education. A substantial part of the wealth from trade was also used to buy traditional initiation items into the '*ekpo apara*' cult (masquerade of prostitutes), ekpe, *nnabo* and other masquerades.

Ekwere and Richard however agreed that most of the proceeds of the early inland trade were used to 'marry our mothers, send children to school and start-up local cooperative society groups locally known as *efe etibe*'. Evidences of that early wealth could be seen in the number of stone houses built in Awa, Oniong, Nung Ndem and other communities in the area.

Conclusion

From the late 1930s, the fortunes of the oil palm trade in the international market experienced incessant fluctuations then decline, first due to the threat of the Second World War and later local agitations in Nigeria, arising from retrogressive British policies in her colonies. Besides, the local elites' desire for an end to colonialism had started gathering momentum and international attention. UAC's economic fortunes had also declined considerably during this period.

As the drums of independence began to beat louder in the 1950s, the colonial authorities gradually disengaged themselves from trading activities in the Nigerian hinterlands, preferring to maintain their business interests only in major towns and cities. Oil palm and kernel continued to be a major foreign exchange earner for the young Nigerian state after independence, accounting for about 65 percent of its foreign exchange earnings. Even with the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity in 1959, oil palm and kernel still maintained its importance in Nigeria's economic index, but its position was sliding. The commodities fortunes were further worsened with the political crises that rocked Nigeria from 1962-1970. The Nigeria Civil War finally put a halt to any meaningful trade in the commodities as the war was fought mainly in the oil palm producing belt of Nigeria and put tremendous strain on the existing infrastructure to make it accommodate the war.

END-NOTES

1. The Nigerian National Population Census, 2006.
2. Interview with Obong Patrick Ifon, a former chairman of Onna Local Government Area at Amity Hotel, Ewet Housing Estate, Uyo.
3. Julio J. Nogues, Unequal Exchange: Developing Countries in the International Trade Negotiations, The Political Economy of Policy Reform, 2004, www.ClassicInternationalTradeTheories.com, October 14, 2005
4. Ibid. p.
5. S. O. Jaja, *Opobo Since 1870: A Documentary Record with an Introduction*, (Ibadan: University Press 1991) p.
6. Kanaan K. Nair, *Politics and Society in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1841-1906: A Study in Diplomacy and Commerce in Old Calabar*, (London: Frank Cass and Company 1972) p.
7. P.A Talbot, *Life in Southern Nigeria*, (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1968), p.
8. Kanaan K. Nair, op.cit. p.
9. M.E. Noah, *Inland Ports and European Trading Firms in the Lower Cross River Basin*, unpublished research essay, 1986, p.
10. K.O. Dike and F. Ekejiuba, *The Aro of South-Eastern Nigeria, 1650-1980: A Study of Socio-Economic Formation and Transformation in Nigeria*, (Ibadan: University Press 1990), 1990. p. 236-260
11. M. E. Noah, op cit.
12. Interview with Chief Sunday Robert Umoette, the deputy Village Head of Okat, at the Village Head's

palace, Okat, in Onna.

13. Interview with Chief Monday Bedford Akpan, the Village Head of Okat, in his palace.
14. Interview with Chief Bassey Umoette, a family head at Ikot Akpan Ishiet village in Awa.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid
17. Interview with Mr. Johnny Ekwere, a deputy family head of Otung Ubium in Ikot Akpan Ishiet.
18. Ibid
19. Ibid
20. Interview with Chief Sunday Wilson Udoh, the Village Head of Afaha Attai in Awa area.
21. Interview with Mr. Johnny Ekwere op. cit.
22. Interview with Chief Sunday Umoette op. cit.
23. Interview with Chief Ubokmfonabasi Ekwere, the Village Head of Ikot Udo Essang in his palace.
24. Interview with Chief Ekerette Thompson Ufot, the Village Head of Mkpok in Nnung Ndem area of Onna.
25. K.O Dike and F. Ekejiuba. op. cit.
26. Memorandum of future policy of the marketing of oil palm in the Eastern Provinces CADIST 3/1/20 file C3376, 16 December, 1944. (National Archives, Calabar.)
27. Interview with Chief Richard Bassey and Chief Sunday Umoette.
28. Ibid.
29. Amoury Talbot, op. cit.
30. M. E. Noah op. cit.
31. Memorandum of future policy, op. cit.

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INTERVIEWS

- Mr. Patrick Ifon, former chairman ONNA Local Government Area.
- Chief U.P Umobang, former chairman ONNA Local Government Area.
- Etteidung - Chief Monday Bedford Akpan, of Okat
- Chief Sunday Robert Umoette, Head of Okat village Council
- Etteidung – Ekerete Thompson Ufot, Village Head of Mkpok
- Etteidung – Sunday Wilson Udoh, Village Head of Afaha Attai.
- Chief Richard Bassey, Family Head, Ikot Akpan Ishiet.
- Mr. Johnny Ekwere, Deputy Family Head, Ikot Akpan Ishiet.
- Etteidung – Akanubokmfonabasi Ekwere, Village Head, Ikot Udo Essang.
- Etteidunf - Chief Akpan Isaiah Adiakpa, Deputy Village Head, Afaha Ubium.
- Etteidung Samuel Umoren, Village Head of Ikot Ese Ishiet and Clan Head of Awa.
- Mr. Umanah Ubeng – Information Officer, Onna Local Government Area.
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