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The Travails of African Women in a Globalized Economic System: Glimpse from Pottery Industry of Oto-Edo and Ughevbughe, Western Delta, Nigeria

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I. INTRODUCTION

Change, as the only constant thing in life holds true in the evolution of societies all over the world. It is the constant variable in the process of social evolution.¹ Human Societies have had to contend with how to adapt It to Their needs and has therefore posed a big challenge in man’s effort at engendering stability. This inimitable truism has Spanned time and space. African states have and will continue to fashion out ways of evolving solutions to the myriad of challenges. Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women of Ughiewwen clan, Western Delta of Nigeria, typifies this due largely to their deplorable conditions exacerbated by changes in the economic system in their communities.

In the twenty-first century world where different cultures and economic systems are becoming connected and similar because of the influence of large multinational companies and improved communication, the need to restructure past economic

engagements of African women to meet current realities cannot be glossed over². In the light of this, the paper examines the condition of women in Africa and shows, with illustrations from the Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women of Ughiewwen clan, Western Delta of Nigeria, how they came to be subsumed in the development crisis that came to define the process of social change in the African continent. The reason why the process is crisis laden is examined and suggestions are made on how African women could be made more relevant like their counterparts in other parts of the world.

The study is divided into six parts. Following the introduction is the methodology employed in gathering the data upon which analysis was made. This is followed by an examination of the land and peoples of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe, Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women in the indigenous economic system, the pottery industry and women of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe in Ughiewwen clan and the impact that the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century had on this economic engagement. Ways of repositioning and improving the productive capacities of African women in a globalised world in the twenty-first century takes the final segment that concludes the work.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the historical method that involves collection and analysis of data. The study depended largely on oral interviews which Vansina, recently said provided they are well interpreted, represent “history in their own right”³. It also utilized information derived from the Intelligence Report compiled on the Ughiewwen people by S.E. Johnson in 1932. Where these sources could not provide answers to the issues examined, resort was made to secondary sources such as books. From the analysis of these sources, it was found that the industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century affected social activities of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women in terms of economic engagements. In the conclusion therefore, attention is drawn to the need to fashion out ways of sustaining

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the productive capacities of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women of Ughievwen clan, Western Delta, Nigeria so that they could contribute positively to economic development of the Nigeria state, the changes occasioned by industrial revolution notwithstanding.

a) Oto-edo and Ughevbughe: The Land and People

The territory of Ughievwen to which Oto-edo and Ughevbughe belong is made up of about thirty-two villages before and even after the British came to the area⁴. Within the first three decades of the twentieth century, these areas were under Warri Province until four years later, when they became part of Ughelli Division⁵. In modern Nigeria, Oto-edo and Ughevbughe are located in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State. The immediate neighbours of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe include: Ekrejegba and Ekakpamre to the North, Ighwrekan, Edjophe, Otujeremi and Agbowhiame to the South, Ighwrekeka and Usiephron to the West, while to the east, they share border with Effurun-Otor and Olomu clan. The people speak Ughievwen (sometimes called Ujemen by non indigenes) dialects of the Urhobo language.

Traditions of origin of the Ughievwen people to which these areas belong, point to Benin, Middle East and Ijo land (Bayelsa State) as possible areas from where the people migrated. However, a recent study dismissing the possibility of mass wave of migration from one area, but rather, in a “stop and move” fashion has suggested an arrival period for the Ughievwen in the area to the beginning of the eighteenth century⁶. While the traditions of origin of the Ughevbughe are in agreement with other Ughievwen people, that of Oto-edo point to the ancient Benin Kingdom.

The tradition that links Oto-edo to Benin claims that the community was founded by a Bini prince called Edo⁷. The tradition claims that long ago, one Eruowho left Benin with his brother called Edo. What led to the departure is not explained by the tradition, but that in the course of their sojourn, Edo founded the present village of Oto-edo, while his brother founded Effurun-Otor. Both communities can be reached through a tributary of the River Niger in Western Delta. The tradition claims that not long thereafter, Edo migrated to Ijawland where he married again and even founded a village called Edowhare near Sagbama in present day Bayelsa State of Nigeria. However, what happened there before migration out of the place for the present abode of the Ughievwen people is not explained by the tradition.

A variant of the same tradition even claimed that the said Edo was a relation to Ewuare the Great of ancient Benin Kingdom⁸. A close examination of this tradition throws up salient questions such as: could the said Edo be one of those Binis that left the

kingdom in the heat of the situation in Benin Kingdom at that time?, if it is true that he founded Oto-edo and named it after himself, what about the name of his brother, Eruowho, which has more semblance to Urhobo than Bini?. Yet, the tradition is vehement in the claim that Edo had children in Oto-edo named after him such as Ehoru (whose ancestral shrine still exist near the Town Hall), Esusuoefe, Gogodi up to Djevbudu (the father of one of the interviewees) who died on September 7, 1944⁹.

Whatever doubts that may exist concerning the above Claims, an important point to note is that it confirms that the area was inhabited by people long ago. The similarity in name with the Binis of ancient Benin Kingdom could not have been accidental. Perhaps, until excavation is done on this area, any definitive comment will be difficult to be made. However, almost all Ughievwen Villages visited in the course of this research, the people attested to the special skills of the women of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe in pottery work from early times.

b) Oto-edo and Ughevbughe Women in the Indigenous Economic System

Nineteenth century Ughievwen society was organised in a monarchical structure in which villages and communities were under the control of the Ovie with the headquarters at Otujeremi. The means of livelihood and survival of these villages depended on fishing, trade and ancillary industries. The pottery industry among Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women represented one of the indigenous Economic System. The need to appreciate the historical reality of the indigenous economic system underscores an examination of the role and place of women.

In Oto-edo and Ughevbughe, like most indigenous Nigerian societies, the culture of shared social responsibilities along gender lines had evolved and was clearly defined¹⁰. The family institution exhibited this trait. Husbands and wives had the obligation of attending to needs of their families. Whereas husbands fulfilled this social responsibility if enough food was available for consumption, wives were expected to assist in whatever meagre means they could. Failure to meet up with this expectation could elicit quarrels between husbands and wives¹¹. As a result of this, women that deserved respect from their husbands devised means of assisting in the family upkeep.

Again, in Ughievwen land, certain ceremonies required women to feast their fellow women. One of such was *epha eyamwon*. It was an important cultural practice of the Ughievwen people. It was a sacred initiation of matured females into adulthood. Every woman initiated acquired a traditional social status that placed her above those who have not undergone the initiation. It is important to state that not all matured

women were so initiated but rather those who could afford the means. This celebration took place in the months of June and July annually, simultaneously, in all the different communities in Ughievwen land¹². This period preceded the celebration of Ogba-Urhie festival at Otughievwen (the headquarters of the clan)¹³. All the *epha* made traditional public outing at Otughievwen on a market day especially during the celebration of the Ogba-Urhie festival¹⁴. The avenue for realizing this social fulfillment was thus provided in the pottery industry, among others, under the indigenous economic system.

The above depicted instances of shared social responsibility in which Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women were socially mobilized to play important roles in the overall development of their society under the indigenous economic system.

c) The Pottery Industry Among Oto-edo and Ughevbughe Women

Pottery industry constituted one of the main occupations of women in pre-colonial Oto-edo and Ughevbughe communities. The geography of the villages of Ughevbughe and Oto-edo, with soils that are essentially clayey was special factors that facilitated this industry, unlike other parts of Ughievwen clan. The main raw material was clay (a whitish sticky type of soil). Other items used up to the final stage of production included: a powdery substance prepared from grinded broken pots mixed with clay to make it hard, some quantity of water used to make the clay less sticky during pounding, smoothed sharp hard stick for decoration, firewood, dried green leaves and dye¹⁵. The clay was dug from the soil and carried to the place where production was done (usually by the side of their houses or at the back of the houses). The clay was soaked, pounded and kneaded. It was then sharpened and later decorated. The next stage was drying during which the kneaded clay was kept under the sun and fired with dried green leaves and dyed. The pots were then sharpened into required pattern by moulding and cooling¹⁶.

Different types of clay products were derived from the above process. This included: utensils, articles for decoration, earthenwares (traditionally called *ewwere*) used for storing food, water and palm wine, and plates for serving food. Some were even used as water coolers (a local form of refrigeration). Terracotta designs of Both Human beings, animals, statues for worshipping gods and goddesses were also made. This was used by Igbe worshippers common among the people¹⁷. Other use to which pottery products were made included: pipes for smoking tobacco and clay dolls with which children enjoyed their leisure.

Pottery industry played significant role in the pre-colonial economy of the people of Oto-edo and

Ughevbughe communities. Apart from the fact that it was cheap but dependable occupation for Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women, it afforded mothers the opportunity of looking after their children. It was also a means of employment, increased family income and encouraged both short and long-distance trade because its products were taken to other communities such as Warri, Ughelli and Okwagbe. This type of trade brought about increased interaction among the people and may have also encouraged cultural diffusion.

d) The Industrial Revolution and the Women of Oto-Edo and Ughevbughe in the Pottery Industry

The Industrial Revolution which had Britain at the forefront brought innovations in production processes that went beyond Europe. For Africa, it incorporated her into the capitalist economic system. The change elicited in Africa is demonstrated by the pottery industry among Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women of Warri Province in the early decades of the twentieth century. The area which later came under the control of Warri Province, had before its eventual subjugation by the British, had signed Protection treaties with the British officials. Salubi states that "by 1894, not less than fourteen of such treaties had been entered into"¹⁷. As argued by him, the signing of these treaties meant that the Protectorate Government did not wait for the enactment of Order-in-Council before penetrating into the hinterland of what was hitherto a virtual, sea-coast Protectorate¹⁸. Part of the reason for this development states Obaro Ikime, was the unanimous preference of all the Delta States for some kind of 'crown' administration as distinct from company rule..."¹⁹.

Before the coming of the British, the pottery industry as earlier stated, was not only a means of livelihood for Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women, it was also a means by which they complemented the income of the family. The pressure occasioned by technological advancement meant the women of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe had to make adjustments. For example, the use of wax was now introduced. By this, according to one of my interviewees, the essential material for the industry was molten (melted) metal and clay²⁰. By this new method, the wax was moulded into the required shape and pattern of the article to be produced. The model was then covered with a thick layer of clay and then heated till the wax melted. The vacuum left by the melted wax was filled with molten bronze or metal and left to cool. When it became hardened, the clay covering it was removed and the required shape is left²¹. With this method bronze statues and vessels were produced. The period when this method was introduced, perhaps, due to the non-literate nature of the practitioners is not easily remembered by the people, but it said to have gained

popularity when the Europeans Arrived Ughievwen area²².

By the description given above, in all probabilities, it could be suggested that it was the lost-wax method, which Art historical called *cire perdue*. Considering the fact that the people had contact with peoples outside their communities, through trade, it is also possible to suggest that Benin Kingdom that was mentioned in the early history of the people could possibly have had link with this. The crucial question however, is: how did revolution in technology occasioned by the Industrial Revolution affect the fortunes of the pottery industry in Oto-edo and Ughevbughe?

The introduction of colonial rule argues Ayokhai, came with "the establishment of the kind of law and order conducive for the exploitation of Africa's natural resources and transformation into one huge market for disposing surplus European goods²³, meant that Africans needed to adjust. The implications were grave. First, production in the industry, which hitherto, was propelled by the desire to fulfill basic needs, became driven by the desire for capital accumulation and neglect of the traditional mode of production. Second, labour was affected. For example, in pre-capitalist Oto-edo and Ughevbughe, women being part of the family's labour force organised themselves in work groups by which they worked for each other on rotational basis. This practice changed with the monetization of the economy under the capitalist system. Third, the monetization of the economy and the resultant export trade in palm oil which became the vogue shifted attention from the pottery industry and neglect of food production. Women played major roles in the palm oil production process. According to one of the interviewees, native technology of producing palm oil apportioned roles to women²⁴. While men harvested palm fruits by climbing the palm tree with the aid of *Efi*, a specially designed rope for the purpose, the harvested fruits were boiled and then laid out in a long hollowed-out tree trunk and worked on by women.

Women entered the tree trunk (*oko*) where they stamped their feet on the softened fruits to squeeze out the oil. The tree trunk (*oko*) was then filled with water and the soil skinned off the top. Thus, while men did the task of harvesting of palm fruit, the stage of processing was the duty of women²⁵. Migrations thus took place into areas where palm oil production was high and in the process, most Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women migrated to far-flung areas such as Ikaaland in Ondo State of Nigeria. This meant neglect of the pottery industry. This migration, states Olukoya Ogen, "... received boost through three major factors: the increased demand for palm produce by British traders, initial cultural constraints of

the Ikaale people and the experiences garnered by the Urhobo in the Niger Delta²⁶.

Apart from the aforementioned factors, it could also be argued that the type of education that came with colonial rule also affected the fortunes of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe women in the pottery industry. Western education seems to have guaranteed easier and quicker access to European currency and social mobilization. In a sense, this encouraged labour drain from the pottery industry to the palm oil industry and salaried employment in the civil service and professions in emerging cities and Urban centres across the country, Nigeria.

Above all, the pottery industry which until the coming of colonialism and was oriented towards the development of Oto-edo and Ughevbughe communities was abandoned in favour of the palm oil industry that became the vogue. Beside, the growing appetite for European manufactured goods among the Nigerian Public meant neglect of the indigenously produced goods. The resultant effect was that the pottery industry which hitherto, provided means of livelihood and employment for women gradually went into extinction. This is rather unfortunate because women in that region of the country have had to contend with this challenge even in the face of global economic 'meltdown'.

III. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to examine the link between the social crisis faced by modern African women and the change that occurred in the economic system in the first six decades of the twentieth century in Oto-edo and Ughevbughe communities of Western Delta, Nigeria. The consequent neglect of the pottery industry which was dominated as an occupational enterprise in Oto-edo and Ughevbughe communities by women seem to have worsened women's living conditions. To reverse this trend, it is suggested that:

- i. Efforts should be made by government to articulate policies that would improve the conditions of women in terms of employment and involvement in governance;
- ii. Resuscitation of local industries that in the past, provided means of livelihood to African women. Menial occupations such as hair plaiting, petty trading etc, should be financially empowered. Income realised from these occupation could help, provide basis of support from women for the upkeep of families;
- iii. The pottery industry which in the past turned out products like ear then wares, pipes, statues, etc, should be revived because they constitute part of African culture. Apart from the provision of employment, such industry also portray our rich cultural past, and

- iv. An overhaul of our education system to accommodate subjects that will Project our indigenous occupation and thereby ensure that women are effectively integrated into industrialization and developmental programmes necessary to face the challenges of the twenty-first century should be vigorously pursued.

Empowering the African woman is one sure way of solving family problems. As 'mothers' of the home, once family needs are taken care of, society by extension would be purged of the ubiquity of social vices and cohesion and peace will be easy to attain.

Endnotes

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7. Interview with Djevbudu John, 60years, Vice President, General Oto-Edo Community, 13/7/2011. This view was corroborated by Pa Urhierimu Edward Dick, 80years, fisherman, Ekrokpe Village, 13/7/2011.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. F.E. F. Ayokhai, "African Women in Changing Economic System: An Examination of the Oil Palm Industry among Uzairhue Women of Benin Province; 1900-1960" *Jalingo Journal of African Studies*... p. 42.
11. Interview with Mrs. Akpevwe Mesorho, 57years, pot maker, Ekrosen Quarters, Ughevbughe village, 13/7/2011. Her view was corroborated by Mrs. Okiemute Djevbudu, 56years, pot maker, Oto-edo village, 13/7/2011.
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13. Ibid.
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20. Interview with Mrs. Akpevwe Mesorho... 13/7/2011.
21. Ibid.
22. See F.E.F. Ayokhai, "African Women in Changing Economic System...", p. 50.
23. Ibid.
24. Interview with Michael Onobitai, 72years, farmer, Iwhreogun village, 14/11/2010. His account corresponds greatly with the works of J.W. Hubbard and J.A.P. Grant. See J.W. Hubbard, *The Sobo of the Niger Delta* (Zaria: Gaskya Corporation, 1952), pp. 29-30 and J.A.P. Grant, "Okitipupa: A Brief Survey" *Nigerian Geographical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 1957.
25. Ibid.
26. See Olukoya Ogen, "Urhobo Migrants and the Ikale Palm Oil Industry, 1850-1968", *The Nigerian Journal of Economic History*, Nos. 5 & 6, June 2003, p. 5.