

The Dynamics of Reed Economy in the Western Coast of the Niger Delta in the 20th Century: A Historical Survey

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Abstract

Despite the enormous economic and technological importance of reed production in the western Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the 20th century, economic historians and anthropologists have not given it scholarly attention. This survey therefore, examined the dynamics of the indigenous techniques of reed production as well as its socio-economic inter-play with other sectors of the region's economy. The study aims at unraveled and brought to the fore the extent of the contributions of this indigenous mode of production to the socio-economic development of the region during this period. Traditional methods of reed production and craft development in the region were found very progressive, receptive and economically viable in the region, most especially between 1964 and 1980. It was also observed that this was primarily as a result of higher demand for reed mats by crop farmers from far and near within Nigeria. Data collection technique was largely based on oral interview. About 23 informants of deep indigenous knowledge of reed production and the history of craftsmanship in the region were purposively selected and interviewed. Studies show that, of the three human groups that constitute the region, the Ilaje and Itsekiri were those professionally engaged in reed farming and mat weaving activities. It has been observed that, of all the categories of reed, the Ogo-Ore (tall reed) was the best and of highest economic value. Survey equally indicated that the traditional production techniques among the people did not radically improve over the years. It was noted that reed production economically empowered a large number of the rural population by providing employment and fostering artisan skills among the people during the period of study.

Keywords: Reed Production, Mat-Weaving, Socio-economic, Dynamics, Niger Delta, 20th Century.

Introduction

The western coast of the Niger Delta of Nigeria is peopled by the *Ilaje*, *Itsekiri* and *Arogbo-Ijo*. The Niger delta region is one of the largest wetlands in the world. (Eyoand Oladipo, 2003:ix). It covers an area of 70,000 kilometers and it is noted for its sandy coastal ridge barriers, saline mangroves, fresh water mangrove swamps and seasonal swamp forest as well as lowland rainforest, (Eyo, and Oladipo 2003:36). The region is traversed and crisis crossed by a large number of rivers, rivulets, streams, canals and creeks. The coastal line is buffeted throughout the year by the tides of the Atlantic Ocean while the mainland is subjected to regimes of flood by the various rivers. The vegetation is tropical rainforest with high trees, oil and raffia palms.

The region is geographically divided into two broad belts which are; the freshwater swamp and the salt water swamp zone. The western coastal fringe of the Niger Delta region, (between the estuary of Benin river and *Araromi* in *Ilaje* West along the coast) which forms the study area is a belt between 6 and 5 kilometers wide, and about 100 kilometers long, lying behind the coastline (Ebiseni: 2013). It has a thin muddy beach consisting of a number of Small Islands running along the coast. The soil here is black silt and a large part of this belt to the coast is low-lying, being flooded daily up to about 1.5 to 1.8 meters of water level at high tide (Mejebi: 2013). The prominent vegetation in this belt is mangrove. The red and white mangrove trees, especially to the eastern fringe are so impressive and over-grown that it is rightly referred to as the mangrove forest belt, giving visitors the major physical characteristic image of the region (Alagoa 1972:13). Given this geographical location, reed becomes a natural vegetation with its production as an environmentally determined occupation in the region.

The Niger Delta economy has been replete with fishing and oil exploitation. With this development and despite the immense contributions of reed production to economic development, all attention was still given these sectors (fishing and oil production) at the expense of other sectors in the region by governments and economic historians.

This study therefore has unraveled the history of the peasant reed economy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as well as its inter-play with other aspects of the region's sub-economic sectors, such as transportation and mat-weaving industry. The study also examined the role of reed production in the backward and forward linkages in the economic development of the region between 1900 and 2000. This is against the over generalized view that the region could only be viable for fishing and oil production alone and could not be engaged in productive farming as a result of the littoral characteristics and relatively poor soil. Though the 20th century Nigeria partly fell within the period of British colonial rule, nothing was done by the colonial masters to encourage the growth of reed economy during colonial era. This was for the fact that reed production was of no meaningful economic value to the economic ambition of the British officials (Mafimisebi, 2013).

Reed production and Economic Boost in the 20th Century

It has been noted that reed production formed a means of livelihood of many people of this region for centuries before British colonization (Curwen, 1937:35-36). However, the 20th century was a landmark in the production of reed and reed mats as mat-weaving industry received a tremendous boost in the region. Some factors were accountable for high production in reed farming during the 20th century Niger Delta region. Between 1964 and 1977, reed mats were in high demand mostly by the cocoa farmers in the northwest and the groundnut and kolanut farmers in the north of the region as a result of high exportation rate of these products (Ogungbure: 2013). Also, unlike the previous centuries, the 20th century was characterized as a result of higher exportation rate by the use of powered boats for transportation which resulted in easy mobility and increased productivity in the region (Ehinmore, 2007: 245-46). In addition, access to capital became easier owing to formation of larger guilds and granting of bank loans to rural farmers by the governments from the 1970s (Lebile: 2013). The opening up of some water ways as a result of the dredging of a canal along the Ilaje water route which started in 1976 was instrumental to easy transportation which in turn facilitated production of reed as well as mobility of labour in the region.

Though the pre-colonial Niger Delta region and the 20th century adopted similar traditional production techniques, the 20th century was a tremendous improvement in the area of capital formation, labour recruitment and market organization.

In this region, cultivation of reed was highly favoured due to the swampy and deltaic terrain of the area. Like other Nigerian societies, shifting cultivation and crop rotation characterized farming activities owing primarily to land tenure system and the relatively low level of technological advancement during this period. The two main geographical zones which are, the seaside and the inland area induced different production of crops, resulting in territorial specialization in farming. The seaside (*Igbekun*), is characterized by black and muddy soil (*erogho*) which favours the cultivation of reed than the inland part (*ebaha*) which is characterized by loamy soil and favoured the planting of crops, such as cassava, plantain, okra, yams, fruits and vegetables (Akintokun:2013).

Studies have shown that between 1964 and 1980, blacksmithing industry received higher productivity as a result of higher demand for farming tools, such as spades, cutlass, knives and axes in the regions (Ehuwa:2013). This fact notwithstanding, production still remained characterized by relatively low technological level and small-scale holdings. This seems to suggest that, in the 20th century, reed farming in the region still retained its tradition of non-mechanization, but was a mixture of subsistence and export production. A cursory view of the general and common characteristic features of these farmers and artisans in terms of factor endowments, production techniques, response to economic incentives and innovations, shows that, they were industrious, receptive with well organized market orientation (Elebiju: 2013).

Though the origin of reed farming in the region is specifically unknown, the start of its cultivation has often been dated to about 1100 A.D when people had already settled in the area (Agbudeloye: 2013) Among the *Ilaje* and *Isekiri* people in particular, it is said to have become a fulltime occupation, especially among the women as from the 16th century (Tomamowo: 2013).

Reed Planting Harvesting Techniques,

Reed (*ifere*) is a natural grass that grows in a swamp (near water) and whose long thin hollow stem is dried and made into floor coverings or mats. In this area, reed farms (*oko-ifere* or *oko-ere*) are located in the open swamps in the black mud (*erogho*). Reed is said to be planted at the beginning of the rainy season (around March) and harvested during the following dry season, from January (Dorsu: 2013). The planting involves bush (grass) burning and it is planted in suckers. Harvesting is by cutting from the root, drying in the sun, spreading and later picking and separating into sizes and grades (Edema: 2013). Grading is said to have included; *ogo-ifere* (tall category), *oma-ifere* (short category), and *kunoko* or *kuroko* (dead category that are already brown before harvesting). After harvesting and separating, reed is then tied in bundles; parts of it could be sold to retailers while the rest could be used for mat-weaving if the same farmers are industrial mat-weavers. Before weaving commences, there would be the pulling off of the brownish base (*yiyo-idi ifere*) to allow neatness and convenience during weaving (Mafimisebi:2013).



Fig1. A reed farm in oke nla, Ondo state

During sales and weaving, these graded sets are said to have different prices and value. The *ogo-ifere* (tall category) is the best in rating and most expensive in price. Mats are said to be tied in bundles of twelve pieces each (1 dozen) for accurate pricing. One common practice in reed farming is leasing. Farmers who could not harvest all their reeds in a particular season could resort to leasing out the farms. In most cases, reed farms are said to be owned by individual household who would raise labour through children or relatives for cultivation. Where such labour is inadequate, farmers could hire more from outside their family domain (Atibere: 2013). The system of shifting cultivation is said to have later compounded the problem of scarcity of land which has already been caused by land tenure system. However, this practice enabled the farmers meet their domestic demands as well as produce surplus for exchange, while the fertility of the soil was maintained.

During this period, farmers usually organized two major types of farms. These included the neighbourhood farms (*oko-ifere-etile*), which could be sited on the outskirts of the town. In this case, farmers went to farm and returned home daily. There were the farmsteads (*uba*), located in distant places in which farmers would spend weeks and months. Studies have shown that most of the large reed farms were located in the eastern part of the region. These are the *Itsekiri* villages, such as *Itebu*, *Ijakpa*, *Etisun*, *Ugbege*, *Gbokoda*, *Aja-amita* etc (Omomowo: 2013). It is said that during scarcity of reed, the Ilaje reed farmers, traders and mat-weavers would travel on water along the creeks to the eastern part of the region where they would have farms for leasing from the *Itsekiri* farmers who were not as enthusiastic as their Ilaje neighbour in the business of mat-weaving. Harvesting of reed could be for about 1-2 months depending on the size of the farm and quantity and quality of labour employed (Ayepgha: 2013). Harvesting is said to be labour-intensive. During harvesting, farmers usually built small huts (*ule-awure*) in the farm where they rested and prepared food for feeding after the morning labour. Traditionally, during mat-weaving activities, mat weavers, usually females, would collectively engage in singing, chatting and storytelling during this herculean but exciting exercise. This was to reduce boredom and stress in the weaving industry (Luro: 2013).



Fig2. Bundles of harvested reed (*udi ifere*)



Fig3. Bundles of mats

Some reed farmers owned farms for leasing, while some planted reed to provide raw materials for their mat-weaving industries. There were still some who engaged in farming just for production of reed for sale. Up to the 1980s, farming and mat-weaving were still viable economic activities in the region. Today, the cultivation of reed and organization of mat-weaving industry appear to have declined drastically in the area. This is as a result of the presence of economic alternatives, such as trading in petrol, clothes, interest in white collar employment and participation in partisan politics.

Obstacles to Reed Production in the Region

Generally, farming in Nigeria faced similar problems irrespective of the system, period and area of practice. In the Niger Delta region, the practice of land tenure system was so entrenched in the administrative structure that any person who trespassed on other person's *omi* or *ufo* (an area of fishing water) could be violently attacked or reported to the community leaders for civil offence. Therefore, fertile land could not be easily converted into farmland. Also scarcity of land could occur as large part of the region is covered by water.

Another obstacle was flooding. Most parts of the coastal area are usually water logged during the rainy season and much water brings about stunted growth in reed especially when the farm is sub-merged by water (Fregene: 2013). Moreover, a large part of the shore is low-lying and covered with black mud, which is subjected to the erosive and depositional action of the sea. The farmers therefore, found it difficult to site their farms close to the shoreline.

Fishing was a serious threat to reed farming in the area during the 20th century. It was seen as more lucrative and more convenient as it was practiced on daily basis with immediate income compared to reed farming that is based on annual harvest. The result was that, many reed farmers are said to have taken to fishing from the 1980s when fishing became much more enterprising (Erejuwa: 2013). The situation was such that, while women engaged in fish smoking and trading, men engaged in catching of fish, which resulted in gradual neglect of reed farming.

Transportation problem also hindered smooth operation of the farmers. While shallowness of water created mobility difficulty in the western fringe of the region during dry season, swift water current also constituted mobility problem in the eastern part, especially near the estuary of Benin river. In this situation, boat pullers would have to be knowledgeable in the tidal movement as mobility is usually hinged on low and high tide calculation (Ojulari: 2013).

Application of simple implements, low nature of technological advancement and non-application of fertilizers were also obstacles to effective cultivation of reed in the region. There were also the problems of road users, hunters and fishermen who are said to be constructing water ways and foot paths in the farms in the rainy and dry seasons. These usually created farm destruction and wastage to the farmers (Ayadi: 2012). The problem of weeds is very pervasive as the stubborn mud-grass (*eeran*) is a weed that usually causes stunted growth to reed in the area. Curbing of this menace involves a lot of labour, money and time.

The result was that, reed farmers, given these myriad problems had to always be on the watch-out in the farms in order to chase off intruders. Hanging of *juju* (*umale* or *kukubaku*) in the farms to scare trespassers is said to have been adopted by farmers in the area. This was an effective means of security in the farms as the people believe in the spiritual efficacy of *kukubaku* power than any other means of checking criminality and civil offences.

Socio-economic Role of Reed Farming in the Development of the Region

The available literature on colonial Nigerian economy and that of western Niger Delta in particular revealed that, deserved attention has not been given to the role and even the existence of reed farming in the socio-economic development of the region, even when the region has a lot of reed beds. However, studies have shown that, a productive and efficient craft and agricultural system lie at the root of the stupendous advancement of the 20th century Niger Delta economy and reed farming was a strategic player in this development (Ehinmore: 2007:243).

As it has been shown in this study, reed production had the potential of being an economic springboard from which other allied and cottage industries, such as transportation business sprang up. This development is said to have equally increased the demand for cutlasses, spades, axes, knives as farm implements from the blacksmiths in the distant upland area as well as the neighbouring communities. Importantly, the reed farmers have created some socio-economic development since they were usually located in the less developed rural areas where the need for economic transformation and employment was high during this period. In addition, local craftsmanship and technology were improved through the rise of cottage activities in the area of fashionable design of ornamental mats and other related materials giving rise to diversification of production. Also, there was a high level of socio-cultural interaction which fostered congenial intergroup relations in the region during the period (Dorsu: 2013). For instance, inter-group and inter-ethnic marriages, cultural diffusion, skill exchange, inter-regional mobility of labour as well as the general exchange of ideas which characterized this economy as in the typical African market organization could best be imagined than described.

The result was that, rural expansion and peasant empowerment increased rapidly among the rural dwellers in the region. In connection with the production of reed in the area there was the development of an inter connectivity between the rural and urban centers and the rise of a number of contractors who harvested and transported reed to many parts of the coastal and in-land areas. The establishment of reed farmers associations or guilds (*egbe-olifere*) developed to the level of lending of money not only to their members, but also to other interested traders and farmers (Omojuwa: 2013).

Reed farming had also impacted positively on the population and industrial culture of the people by not only fostering development of a large number of trades (at intra and inter regional levels), but also providing a sound basis for the establishment of a manufacturing sector in the region. The multiplier effect of reed farming economy was evident in the backward and forward linkages of the economic structure in the region. The setting up of a number of allied manufacturing enterprises in the rural settlements permitted a diversification of the rural economy and creation of employment opportunities. This, no doubt, had enhanced the expansion of market in the region during this period. For instance, market place such as Oghoye, Owoleba, Ijakpa, Atijere, Agerige, Igbokoda, Makon, and so on developed and enhanced interaction of polyglot trading Population. In a related study, J.A. Gana opined that, "the rural sector has made a substantial contribution to capital formation and growth of the Nigerian economy" (Gana, 1983: 187).

In addition, mat-weaving technology is said to have some cultural value during this period in that ornamented mats (*ore-olona*) were used as parts of pride wealth during marriage as well as valuable gifts to important personalities. It was equally used as bed-sheets by people as a sign of prestige (Ayadi: 2012). It is also said that during mat-weaving activities young females, through interaction with some female elders learnt about social orientation such as initiation into adulthood, sex education, spirit of communalism and enculturation (Omojuwa: 2013). This indicates that there is a high level of cultural component in the indigenous African industrial setting.

However, for the fact that mat-weaving is an exclusive female economic endeavour in the area, it prevented many them from having access to literacy education as they were fully engaged in mat-weaving activities. Furthermore, as time went on, there was much pressure on land which led to scarcity of land, hence, farmers started scrambling for the few available land in the area. This development later awakened the consciousness of most coastal rural dwellers on the economic value of land thereby leading to land commercialization, which was characterized by individual and communal disputes in the area.

Conclusion

A number of interesting issues in the production of reed in the 20th century western coast of the Niger Delta have been identified and discussed in this study. It has been proved that the reed farmers were astute socio-economists and technologist in their own class, giving the ways they effectively organized traditional factors of production to cope with the peculiar terrain and their efficient mode of capital formation as well as congenial organization of inter and intra regional relations and exchange. It could be deduced that the provision of employment, location of cottage industries and expansion of rural settlements have placed reed economy as a strategic player in the socio-economic development of the region during the period.

The study also shows that reed economy was one of the important factors responsible for the development of trading centers, founding of settlements along the coastal part of the region as well as being an industrial platform which fostered adequate preparation for the socio-economic challenges and uplift of the 21st century in the region. Therefore, it is not reasonable for governments and economic historians to undermine the existence and socio-economic value of reed economy in the area. The revival of and investment on such an economic venture by the governments and individuals could still assist in the economic diversification of the region in this 21st century.

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