

IBEKU ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS UP TO 1896

By

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Abstract

This article studied Ibeku economic institutions up to 1896 with special interest on manufacturing, trade and marketing, transport and communication and institutions for capital formation. The article observed that Ibeku practiced self-sufficient economy with the production of craft products such as: blacksmith and pottery products. The article is of the view that short and long distance trade provided a platform where Ibeku traders, artisans and farmers marketed their agricultural and craft products. They also saved their earnings through institutions for capital formations. The article adopted historical method. Primary, secondary and tertiary sources like oral interviews, archival materials, journals, published and unpublished texts, were employed as means of data collection for the historical reconstruction of the article. The article concluded that Ibeku pre-colonial economy should be transformed and modernized to compete favorably with other communities in West Africa.

Keywords: Economic, Institutions, Transportation and Communication.

Introduction

Ibeku in the Igbo language simply means to call out for help. This meaning may have been derived from the responses of a hero to the calls of those who needed his help, while some people believed that the word 'Ibeku' is the name of their ancestor who lived at Isieke Ibeku. His full name is 'Ibeku Ukwu' and his accolade is 'Ogurube'. The word 'Ogurube' simply means that Ibeku was great and his children are a great multitude. Ibeku clan is located to the West of Bende town. Around the border, are Ohuhu, Uzuakoli and Ozuitem clans; to the East, are the clans of Ibere and parts of Bende; and to the South, are Olokoro and Ubakala clans. Ibeku pre-colonial economy rested on three major sectors like: agriculture, crafts and trade. This article explores some salient issues on Ibeku pre-colonial economic institutions bordering on manufacturing, trade and marketing transport and communication and institution for capital formation. During pre-colonial periods Ibeku had self-sufficient economy such as craft products. Ibeku also practiced short and long distance trade. Craft and agricultural products were essential commodities traded in this kind of trade. Ibeku traders, artisans and farmers trekked from different farm locations and craft industries to such markets like: *Ahiaorieugba, ugbo* Bende, *Ariam, Ndoro, Agbagwu*, among others. Transportation in pre-colonial Ibeku was by head portage through crossing foot-path. They also established institutions for capital formation to save their earnings. This article is divided into twelve sub-headings, namely: internal trade, long distance trade, blacksmithing, carving, weaving, pottery, age grade association, family, association of married women, village assembly, *Isusu, Umuada* and *Utuomaechi*.

Trade and Marketing

Trade and marketing involved the transfer of economic goods from one person to another. These were basic concepts that underpinned the buying and selling of goods and services. Compensations were paid by a buyer to a seller. Trade and marketing were subsidiary to agriculture and manufacturing. An important aspect of Ibeku pre-colonial economy, is that the Ibeku firmly believed that trade and marketing were instituted by the Supreme Being *Chileke*, who created the Ibeku market days, and gave them various names. Therefore based on this backdrop, Ibeku people regarded the origin of trade and marketing as ancient occupations.¹ Ota observes that:

There is a link between agriculture, manufacturing and trade. Without trade, there would be a tendency to self-sufficiency and with trade, goods and services are transported or moved from areas of abundance to those of scarcity. This was the case of the Igbo communities that were contiguous and those that were far apart.²

This assertion proves that trade and marketing played a pivotal role in economic activities of pre-colonial Igboland. Similarly, trade and marketing were very remarkable aspect of the economic activities of pre-colonial Ibeku land. The medium of exchange was barter system. Trade and marketing could be divided into two namely: the short-distance or internal trade and long-distance trade.

Internal Trade

This type of trade was conducted in Ibeku local markets, and the goods exchanged were specialized products from local industries. Exchanges came about because some villages possessed goods which were not available in others. The markets existed at the clan and village levels. Some of the prominent markets included: *Ahia Oriougba*, *Ahiaeke*, *Ahia-Orie-Ogwu* and *Ahiankune*. *Ahia-Oriougba* was located at Ugba Afarata Ibeku, which was conducted on *Orie* market days. *Ahiaeke* was a central market because it was situated at the boundary between Isieke and Ndume community. It was conducted on *Eke-Ukwu* market days, while *Ahia Oriougwu* was located at Afaraukwu Ibeku. It was also conducted on *Orieogwu* market days. It is interesting to note that Ibeku traditional calendar was, and still is, made up of eight days. They included: *Ekeukwu* and *Eketete*, *Afoukwu* and *Afonta*, *Orieukwu* and *Oriete* and *Nkwo-Ukwu* and *Nkwo Nta*. The commodities of trade include agricultural and craft products.³

Long-Distance Trade

Long-distance trade linked the people of Ibeku with their neighbors namely: Uzuakoli, Ndoro, Oboro, Bende, Old Umuahia, and Ubakala. The main items of trade were pottery products which were largely worked in Akpoko Okwuta and Emezi Ukome Isieke Ibeku; and Nchara also produced excellent pottery products. The Ibeku people exchanged those commodities with smithery products from Olokoro, timber from Uzuakoli, and food stuffs from Ndoro and Oboro. Long-distance trade although an adjunct to domestic trading and marketing was dominated by the male folks. The major markets that were connected to long-distance became the hubs of smaller markets that were dispersed all over Ibekuland. These major markets included the Ariam market which was located in Ikwuano. The Ndoro market that was located at Ndoro Ikwuano, while *Ndi Mgborogwu* market was located at Bende; *Ahiaukwu* was located at Olokoro and *Agbagwu* market was located at *Eke* Uzuakoli. The *Agbagwu* market at Uzuakoli was an important one that connected the people of Cross River Igbo and the Ibeku in pre-colonial times. Like *Ndi Mgborogwu* in Bende, *Agbagwu* Uzuakoli, was a notorious relaxing outlet. There were other locally crafted and European products such as gun-power and mats. Long-Distance trade was controlled by the *Arochukwu* which were controlled *bylbeniukpabi* and by their warlike neighbor, such as the Abam Ohafia.⁴

Those traded to Uzuakoli usually started off many days before Agbagwu was due. They travelled in large groups, carrying their goods on their heads, and the men were usually armed to defend themselves. Fox asserts that:

Agbagwu market was famous over a very large area; its popularity and great trade attracted people from far and near. Aro traders were always paramount, but traders from Akaka Ehigwu, Ehigwu Ngwo, Agbaja Ngbogho, Nnewi, Okaiuga, Obowo, Ibeku, Ukwa, Ndi Okpara, Bende, Ohafia, Ozuitem and even as far as Ibibio and Onitsha also came to it.⁵

This assertion proved that Agbagwu market was popular in pre-colonial times and Ibeku people as great merchants were attracted by the popularity of the Agbagwu market. Ibeku was also attracted by the popularity of *Ugbo* market in Bende. They transacted their major businesses in the market.

Transport and Communication in Pre-colonial Ibeku land

Transportation laid the foundation for the discovery of agriculture and sophisticated tradition of metallurgy.⁶ Transportation took agriculture beyond subsistence farming. Transportation in pre-colonial Ibeku was by head portage through crossing foot-path. Ibeku people used human portage as a major means of transport. The porters were recruited from nuclear and extended family settings. They were hired to evacuate farm produce from the farm. The medium of exchange was barter system. Moreover, Communication in pre-colonial Ibeku was done through the use town crier '*Oku- ekwe*'.⁷ His message was disseminated when moved to strategic positions.

Manufacturing and Crafts in Pre-colonial Ibekuland

Manufacturing

The Ibeku manufactured a wide range of items, such as agricultural tools, household furniture, weaving, and pottery, among others. Afigbo opines that: Pottery for instance, was carried on wherever the necessary clay could be found in Igboland. Such were Inyi, Ishiagu and Ibeku. But apart from these, there were innumerable other little communities which met local needs in pottery in areas far away from the famous centres.⁸ It is worthy of note that among these crafts that pottery was the leading craft.

Blacksmithery

Smithing was very important to the economic, political and social lives of the Ibeku. Politically, the village heads accorded respect and relevance to the smiths because they made their weapons of war, such as arrows, their bars and staff of office. The Ibeku took to craft because it serviced other sectors of the economy such as farming, carving and hunting. The Ibeku people used machetes, and Dane guns before some of their neighbors, which gave them an edge over their neighbors in wars and other pursuits. The Amuzu were advent at smithing thus the connotation of their name- *Ama Uzu*; and played important role in the military history of the Ibeku.

Carving

Carving was highly developed and derived its beginning from utilitarian, religious, cultural and social needs. Even the *Ala* deity was represented in wooden form instead of being molded. Wattle houses with strong wooden doors were in popular demand. It should be noted that carved wooden doors had been preceded by doors made of bamboo poles (*Ogugu*), held together by wooden rods or heavy twine (*Udo*).

Weaving

Weaving was very prominent in Ibeku but cloth weaving was the most prevalent and boasted their economy. The yarn was made of tough but very coarse cotton called *Mgbasa* made from African cotton tree. It was woven by the Emede Mkpuru who was noted for their beautiful tough *mgbasa* cloth. Nkata was another community noted for cotton cloth weaving. The art

shared an antiquity. Their products were widely known and admired, and until recently, were very highly priced. Weaving was almost exclusively an art for the women. In both Emede Mkpuru and Nkata, women wove cloths and marketed them. The products were always in great demand and the industry consequently enhanced the economy of the people. The major markets for the cloths included the famous *Ahia-Eke* Ndume and the *Orie Ugba* which still exist.

These were great economic centres where the *Mgbasa* and *Emede Mkpuru* cloths were sold. They attracted traders from distant places, such as Ikot Ekpene and Ngwaland.

Pottery Making

Pottery-making was widely practiced among the Ibeku. They had and still have the right-type of clay. *Akpoko* Okwuta and *Emezie* Ukomme Ibeku were noted for their pottery. They produced a variety of pots for cooking water storage; and had an attendance of the yellowish-buff type clay. Although the Afarata and Isieke had an abundant supply of clay, they were not adept in pottery. Afaraukwu women were noted for their beautiful pots and leadership in the pottery industry in Ibeku. In pot making, there was a sequence that was followed. According to Ikechukwu, the clay was mixed with some sand and water and worked on a solid patch of ground. During the working process, unnecessary materials, such as small sticks, stone particles and other odd bits were removed. These could present blending and cause cracks, if not showed, in the eventual product. The clay mixture was worked on until a certain consistency was attained and the material became very pliable. It was then taken in small amounts and formed into a number of long and almost cylindrical pieces. On an open left palm, pieces of the cylindrical clay materials were placed with the right hand and, in a dexterous manner, the right thumb and the index finger were used in initiating the molding of a pot. The open left palm provided a preliminary base. Note that when the pot being molded got to a certain size, it was transferred to the top part and the molding processes continue. The next line of action was to use *Mgbugba* an object akin to a mason's trowel in smoothing the sides of the pot being molded. It is worthy of note that water was always available for a smooth finish.

After processing, the molded pots were left for about a week to dry in a covered place. Designs could be introduced at the molding stage according to the intended usage. The next stage was conducted in an open space. The ground was prepared and shreds of earthen pots and known as *Agwukwa* (pot) on which the pots were placed upside down, were put in place. Ikechukwu, further states that the drip palm fronds (*Oporo*) were abundantly placed in between the pots, above, below and around them.

The dry fronds were then set on fire after the potter ensured that a proper set up had been achieved. Midway through the firing, huge flames lept into the air and were reminiscent of giant bonfires. The heat generated was so intense that people were forced to keep at a safe distance. Where a portion had burnt off too quickly, dry palm fronds were held in front by the women in charge of the firm to act as heat shield and some were then placed in the section requiring more dried fronds. The whole process was over in about forty-five minutes when all the fronds would have been reduced to ash, revealing attractive reddish brown pots. The pots were carefully removed with a long piece of heat resistant sticks '*Icheku*'.

There were various types of pots for different purposes, such as *Udu*, *Agwu*, *Oku* and *Udu Mgburu* (pots wares). *Udu* is useful for fetching water from the stream. While the *Agwu* was used for storing drinking water. *Agwu* produced a cooling effect of high temperature as a result of the microspores and the evaporation which usually took place on the outside of the pot. The *Oku* served as traditional dishes especially vegetable soups such as *ugu* and *Ugbogboro*. The last one was *Udu Mgburu* which men used for

storing palm wine. It usually contained some medicinal herbs that together with the wine could be warmed for drinking during the cold or rainy season.

Institutions for Capital Formation

Institutions for capital formation is a system by which individuals come together and set aside some of their earnings for savings and investment in a kind of contributive pool to enable them execute their major economic projects. Nwabughuogu, asserted that “institutions for capital formation promote economic growth significantly. He notes that Isusu is a credit institution in Ngwa Igbo, it includes: *Oha, Utu* and *Ogbo*. He further states that Isusu which is one of the dominant factors of institutions for capital formation, played a significant role in raising capital for the major economic undertakings of the people, such as marriage, acquisition of land, purchase of household goods, building, building of houses, payment of debts, education of children and supplying of trade capital.”¹⁰ However, Nwabughuogu’s assertion above suggests that institutions for capital formation instituted a large capitalist class in Ngwaland. This is also applicable with Ibeku. Therefore, institutions for capital formation occurs, when individuals in Ibeku through: Isusu, village assembly, age grade, family, among others, come together and set aside some of their earnings for savings and investments in a kind of contributive pool, to enable them have financial muscle to carry out major economic projects like: marriage, burial, acquisition of land, payment of debt, among others. There were seven to eight types of institution for capital formation. They included: age grade association, the association of *Umuada, Onukwuru Orié (Isusu), Utu-Onyemaechi* or traditional-life insurance, the association of married women, family and village administration.¹¹ *Age Grade Associations (Ogbo)*

The age grade associations were concerned with the development of the village. Those who belonged to an age grade were assigned projects either individually or collectively to be executed to the benefit of the community projects. The funds (through labour supply or barter system) mobilized were used for community projects. Age grade members were usually people born within the same age bracket of 1-4 years. The activities of age associations were as follows:

- a. Helped their mates who were in need.
- b. Helped each other during farm work
- c. Helped the wives and children of their late members
- d. Provided financial assistance to their members.
- e. Helped in the communal works.
- f. Embarked on the construction of roads and bridges for their communities.
- g. Formed cooperative societies whereby the money (through labour supply or barter system) contributed were channeled into farming and infrastructural development in the community.

Family

This included the immediate and extended families. The funds raised by the members were used to cater for members of the family. Under these arrangement members of the family who constituted the work force advanced money into the family mutual fund. The funds (*through labour supply or barter system*) mobilized were used for development purposes within the family circle. The funds were also used for the burial of family members Unlike the simple family arrangement where contributions made were not repaid, the extended family case was quite different. Under the extended family system, funds contributed or rendered to family member were usually repaid²

Association of Married Women (Umu-Ndim)

This includes married women in a given community. This group was specifically instituted to maintain peace and prosperity among the married women in the community. They made

contributions to revolve among them as a cushioning effect during dwindling income periods and of child birth.

Village Administration

This involved the contributions made by every adult (male and female) in the village for development purposes. The village members were taxed compulsorily to finance certain projects or services for the benefit of the community.

Umuada

The Umuada are the daughters of Ibeku. It usually intervened and settled disputes in their fathers land; and contributed towards its development by raising capital through labour supply or barter system.

Onukwuru-Orie (Isusu)

The Onukwuru Orie was, and still is the institutions concerned with loans, savings and mutual benefits. It played a pivotal role in raising capital (through labour supply or barter system) to execute major economic projects like: marriage, burial, payment of debts, marriage, and acquisition of land. It was made up of: *Oha and Utu*.

Utu-Onyemachi

These were contributions made individually which one did not live to benefit from. It was only the family of a member of this group that received the funds (through labour supply or barter system after the person must have died. The organizers paid interests on the money contributed to members who contributed fully before their death.¹³ The functions of the traditional micro-credit institutions could be summarized into saving, credit functions, discounting functions and developmental functions. The saving function involved the mobilization of funds from members while the credit function involved the channeling of the funds to investment purposes. The discounting function occurred when a member was urgently in need of funds and could buy the right of a member whose turn it was to receive the revolving fund.¹⁴

Conclusion

Trade and marketing were subsidiary to agriculture and manufacturing which were the chief occupations of the Ibeku people. Moreover, transport took agriculture beyond subsistence farming. Ibeku people instituted a capitalist class through the establishment of institutions for capital formation. Ibeku traders, artisans and farmers saved their earnings through institution for capital formations. This paper recommended that Ibeku pre-colonial economy should be transformed and reconstructed. *Ahia Oriugba, Ahiaeke, Ahia-Orie-Ogwu* and *Ahiankune* should be modernized. Ibeku transport system should be reformed. Ibeku craft industries should be equipped with machines to reduce the cost of labor and provide quick result. Legalized financial institutions should be established to transform Ibeku institution for capital formations.

ENDNOTES

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⁹ N. F. Okorie (43years), Transporter, Okwuta, Interviewed on 29/1/2018.

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¹³ N. Igbokwe (69years), Farmer (Retired), Okwuta Interviewed on 4/2/2018 ¹⁴R. Agbara (88years), Farmer (Retired), Okwuta, Interviewed on 8/2/2018.