

“Ise K’ogun Ise” (Hard Work as an Antidote to Poverty): A Study of Colonial Oweland, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study elucidates how proverbs when appropriately used within their social perspective continue to provide information and a rich knowledge of the people’s past. Just like the Owe proverb “ise k’ogun ise” meaning hard work is the antidote for poverty, the people of Oweland have always placed emphasis on work as the only means for survival. To an average Owe man or woman, industry represents a virtue. This examination of the adage provides us with valuable insight into the economic history of the people during the colonial era. The study emphasizes the economic independence of the people of Oweland using the proverb “ise k’ogun ise” as a motivating factor. It contends that in spite of the limitations and constraints of the activities of the British Colonial Government in Oweland, the people demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness and ingenuity to rise above socio-economic barriers imposed by the colonial policies, and accrue for themselves the required finances needed to migrate to the new line of business introduced by the colonial government.

KEY WORDS: *Oweland, Proverbs, Colonial rule, Economy, Oral tradition*

INTRODUCTION

According to Alagoa (1979), the past may be dead but we cannot bury it. It is against this background that this study explains how proverbs, when appropriately cited within their traditional background continue to provide the requisite information needed for the understanding of the past of a group of people or community. The proverb “ise k’ogun ise”, an Owe popular adage for hard work, is examined in this work. For the purpose of this work, the word “ise” will be serving dual purposes. Although they have the same spelling, but different connotations. The first “ise” means hard work while the second “ise” means poverty. To the people of Oweland, hard work remains the surest path to wealth. This Owe proverb provides significant understanding, not only into the oral history of the people, but also on the assertive nature of the people during the colonial era.

However, laying emphasis on the assertive nature of the people of Oweland during the colonial era will provide us with the necessary information on the economic ingenuity of the people of Oweland as they had to adapt to the new phase of life introduced by the colonial government. Although, contrary to Eurocentric worldview that the people of the African continent had no history of their own and could not achieve any meaningful thing before the coming of the whites; this study calls attention to the economic ingenuity of the African race that Oweland represents, using the Owe adage “ise k’ogun ise” as a case study. It argues that despite the restrictions posed by the colonial government, the people of Oweland demonstrated incredible wits to rise above all

limitations posed by this foreign government on the people and accrue for themselves unimaginable affluence during the period of colonial rule.

Proverbs and the Reconstruction of the People's Past

Proverbs continue to play a major role in the reconstruction of the past of the people of Oweland. Oweland got its name from Oba Akaiyeja of Atiba quarters in Ile Ife, the father of the three hunter brothers who migrated from Ile-Ife and latter founded Oweland. Owe was the nickname given to Oba Akaiyeja, the father of the founding brothers. He earned the nickname due to his dexterous nature of employing proverbs in deciphering difficult circumstances. The three hunter brothers were however, latter referred to as Owe. (Olubiyo, 2009). Thus, the origin of the people of Oweland. Proverbs have continued to be used by the people of Oweland to reconstruct their past. Proverbs have been observed to reveal various parts of people's culture (Fasiku, 2006:25). The past is consequently the father of the present; and the past and present together provide the only foundation for a prediction of the future, thus a clear understanding of the past allows a person to function efficiently in the present (Alagoa, 1979).

The literal meaning of Oweland is *land of proverb*. Through the constant reiteration of proverbs, the people of Oweland have been able to preserve their history and pass it from one generation to another. The Owe proverb "Ise k'ogun ise" has always encouraged the people to work hard to earn a living. This was the case during the colonial period where they had to adapt to the change in lifestyle introduced by the colonial government. As Taylor (2003:13) succinctly asserted, proverbs are the lucid facts of life that subsume the good conduct of a society. Culture as well as proverbs facilitate development and enhance the attainment of societal integration (Ademowo and Balogun, 2014). The role of proverbs in Oweland cannot be over emphasized, as the use of proverbs has always propelled economic growth and development. Through the constant use of the proverb "ise k'ogun ise", the people were able to regain their balance during the colonial era. This was because the colonial period brought about new trends in the economic relationship and organization of the people.

Prelude to the Proverb "Ise K'ogun Ise" in Colonial Oweland

The changes introduced by the colonial government affected virtually every aspect of societal life, namely, the social, spiritual, political and economic spheres. The most affected area was the economic aspect. The impact of these changes on the people of Oweland can be analyzed positively and negatively. In essence, notable social changes brought about by colonial imperialism produced both positive and negative impact which shall be analyzed. Although the people socially benefitted, the coming of the United Africa Company (UAC) (Amihere, 2011:175) and John Holt trading firms (Panaki, 2011:315) into Oweland brought Oweland into another phase of economic activities. The activities of the trading firms no doubt changed distribution and patterns in the economy. For instance, there was drastic decline in the demand for locally made goods, while the imported goods were highly demanded by the people.

To this end, the locally made goods like woven cloths, and local liquor lost market and could not compete with the imported Manchester cloth, gin and beverages. Thus the economy began to be dominated by European made goods. This began the gradual elimination of locally made goods from the economy. Hence, trading and agriculture which were the major sources of livelihood for

the people began to dwindle as the people boycotted locally made items for imported goods. The people due to their resourcefulness had to switch over in line with the new trend.

The New Phase of Commerce

In the economic realm, trade and commerce dominated the daily life and has formed part of the people's economic activities right from the pre-colonial period. This continued on a large scale during the period of colonial rule. This was made possible because of the European merchants in many towns in Oweland and general improvement in roads. Indeed there was massive improvement in the transportation system. Roads constructed did not only help in linking Oweland with other towns and villages, but also facilitated easy movement of goods and services from one place to another. As Hellenier (1966:12) rightly observed, improved transport facilities made it easier to find market for surplus production.

Indeed, British colonial rule in Oweland brought about new trends in the economic relationship and organization of the people. The expansion and innovations in the sector obviously transformed production beyond subsistence level. The expansion which led to enormous surplus of production in palm produce, cotton, coffee and cocoa provided additional money for the people, as sales from cash crop production improved the well-being of the people.

Aside from trade in agricultural produce, the indigenous traders extended trade relations to both the Southern and Northern parts of the country with Hausa and Nupe traders bringing into Oweland leather works, Onion, Natron, Beads, Mats and Pepper (Audu and Oshewolo, 2014). They returned home with Palm oil, Woven materials and pots produced in Oweland. From the south, the traders entered Oweland with European cloths, Lamps, Guns, Mirror, salt and some other European manufactured goods. The men and the elderly women were the ones that dominated this type of trade; the younger women stayed back at home and took care of the children (Oniemola, 2011).

In 1929, the world economy began to experience a depression. Consequently, prices of all commodities either export or import dropped to an unprecedented level. This continued to have direct bearing on the economy, most especially the farmers and the traders. In order to combat this, some conscious farmers and indigenous traders in Oweland decided to form a Co-operative movement in the late 1930s. The factor behind the formation of co-operative associations was ostensibly the desire to raise money either for farming or trading purposes. The women folk largely took advantage of this opportunity to enhance their participation in economic activities particularly trading and commerce.

By the time the depression was over in 1939, the wind of trade changed. Two European trading companies entered Oweland and established themselves firmly in the economy. These were, the United Africa Company (UAC) and John Holt (Budgen, 1923). They performed two major functions in the economy. Firstly, they traded in a number of European-made goods like soap, candle, cloths, beverages and hard wares. Secondly, they acted as the collection and marketing agents at the trade centres (Budgen, 1923). The activities of expatriate trading firms located in Oweland had negative impact on the economy. Since it was these trading companies that controlled the export as well as the import trade and fixed the prices not only of imported goods, but also of the exports produced by the people, prices and values were changed arbitrarily. The

further introduction of trust system (granting of credit to the producer) led to the subjection of peasants to the exploitation of merchant capital and its agents.

In the first place, the only firms were the United African Company and John Holt (Sciortino, 1927). The two parties preferred the system because of the greater opportunities for profit it afforded the merchants. A major result of the exploitative exchange practice and other trade arrangements such as those involving the people of Oweland was that peasant incomes were next to nothing. Against the background of overvalued prices of imported goods, low peasant incomes meant that the cost of production through the purchase of imported inputs such as hoes and cutlasses and later bicycles and consequently that of reproducing the petty commodity producer was high. The granting of credit to the producers enabled them exercise unencumbered control over the peasant and his produce. The farmers could not sell their goods to the highest bidder; the system often placed the receiver of credit at great disadvantage in the market and made it particularly difficult for him to compete with the man who owes no debt for what he offers. The system led to trade monopoly. The firms traded and forced the farmers to sell their goods to them at horrible prices. However the trust system was characterized by “unequal exchange” between local produce and imported goods (Onyekpe, 2008).

The huge profits that accrued from these activities went to the companies and not to the colonized. The other consequence of this development was of course the elimination of indigenous traders from the profitable and important sector of the economy altogether. The activities of the trading firms no doubt changed distributions patterns in the economy. For instance, there was drastic decline in the demand for locally made goods, while the imported goods were highly demanded by the people. This began the gradual elimination of locally made goods from the economy.

European Merchants were supported and assisted with money from the expatriate banks. This money was used to expand their trade in Oweland and other societies in the country. Towards the end of 1940s, indigenous traders could not compete with the European merchants in trading activities. Therefore, they began to assume the position of agents and middlemen between the alien firms and the people (Oyehunwa, 2017).

The lack of access to capital meant that women were denied access to medium and large scale loans which were vital in operating the bulk purchase level of the colonial trading and commercial activities. However, the women were still able to devise means of bridging this huge gap in trade financing. This effort was largely commendable and further demonstrated the economic ingenuity of Owe women. The proverb “ise k’ogun ise” also contributed to the effort exerted as the proverb continued to spur them to action and thus their contribution in the economic growth of the land. The colonial economic policies ruthlessly exploited the people no doubt but the people also benefited somehow as the constant reiteration of the Owe proverb “Ise k’ogun ise” continuously spurred them to work harder as success comes through hard work. This made them to intensify more effort to meet up with the requirements of the trading firms. As a result several means of accruing capital such as “Esusu” (Rotational credit Association), “Alafowosowopo” (Cooperative Union), were introduced by the people (Oniemola, 2011).

CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

Esusu (Rotational Savings and Credit Association)

The *esusu* type of capital accumulation was dominated by the women folk. For women the raising of capital on a comparatively large scale was done in several ways. To finance an *ad hoc* trading venture, the necessary money was raised as a loan from a friend or relative or, if both failed, the loan could come from someone else with money to lend. Interest on the money was usually made on repayment. Alternatively, to increase their capital and facilitate their trade, members of each trade guild organized *Esusu*. This was a system whereby each member contributed a fixed amount periodically as jointly agreed members (Bascom, 1952). The total amount realized at each contribution was then given to a member and the process was repeated until each contributing member had had her own turn (Akinjogbin and Osoba, 1980:50). Although, the *esusu* was usually organized within each association, it was not compulsory that every member should participate. A member could also undertake to pay twice the agreed amount, in which case she took two turns (Akinjogbin and Osoba, 1980:50). Thus the *esusu* form of accruing capital contributed immensely to the development of Oweland as the people through this means were able to meet up with the market demands as well as the demands of the trading firms

Alafowosowopo (Cooperative Union)

Cooperative union was all about a group of people pulling their resources together in order to achieve certain goals. The goals included enhancement of socio-economic condition of the members. The history of this economic institution in Nigeria dated back to the colonial period. It was said to have developed around 1930s as a result of the economic depression due to the prices of exported crops which dropped to an unprecedented level. This brought about untold hardship for the people. In order to combat this, some conscious farmers as well as indigenous merchants in the society decided to come together to form a cooperative movement.

In Oweland, Cooperative and Produce Marketing Union (CPMU) were formed so as to enable them stand their own against the exporting aliens. The Union members were produce buyers who bought produce directly from the farmers. They therefore acted as intermediaries between the people and exporting aliens. The Union members possessed wealth and had influence between the Europeans and the indigenes. The union members developed the movement by encouraging farmers to join the Union, as a result the union advanced credits to their members and customers far ahead of harvesting as a guarantee for regular supply of produce during harvest. Through the activities of the union and her members, there were increased production in farm produce and the low price which the produce were bought soon appreciated. This was because major aim of the movement was to change the economic fortune of the people by securing a reasonable producer price for the export crops. In order to achieve this aim, the movement assumed the status of a licensed buying agent when it got registered in 1953.

The union brought members' produce and sold it to UAC. All these efforts were painstakingly carried out by the people with the constant notion that the antidote for poverty was hard work (ise k'ogun ise). So they worked assiduously to ensure that they achieve their aims. Lack of adequate fund, poor transport facilities, non-availability of banking facilities and poor response from the people, particularly farmers to join the movement were the teething problems that

confronted the union at her early stage. This development led to the birth of a new entrepreneurial class (Oyehunwa, 2017)

The Birth of Entrepreneurship in Colonial Oweland

A major attribute of trade and commerce was the growth of entrepreneurship. The emergence of an indigenous entrepreneurial class in Oweland was a product of the expansion in export trade during the colonial period. The merchant class acted in most cases in the beginning as middlemen between the alien firms (UAC and John Holt) and the local producers. This they did in their capacity as agents of foreign firms, contractors and transporters. Prominent among them were Chiefs S. Tolorunleke, S. A. Ajayi, Alhassan Dare, S. M. Fadile, and Madam Charity amongst others (Oniemola, 2017).

Given the unprecedented level of commitment to economic activities in Oweland, both genders owned and managed businesses. Unlike modern day businesses characterized by large networks and huge capital, colonial business ownership was relatively small. Just like their male counterpart whose entrepreneurial activities were enhanced by colonial economic policies, the women though relatively disadvantaged by these policies refused to be denied the opportunities to be active entrepreneur wise. However, the degree and expression of the status of Owe women in entrepreneurship varied from one economic activity to the other.

With the constant use of the proverb “ise k’ogun ise” the people of Oweland placed much emphases on work as the only means for survival, more so the proverb beckoned on all to utilize all available opportunities at accruing wealth. Even though the colonial policies introduced placed women at a disadvantaged corner, they were determined not to allow that weigh them down as they participated actively at realizing their dreams of being economically self sufficient (Akinwumi, 2000). More so, the proverb “ise k’ogun ise” tend to spur the women into action the more, not minding the colonial limitations they still displayed their resourceful nature and ingenuity by contantly being involved in economic activities which helped in supporting their husbands with the family finances and also to attain some measure of economic independence (Rene, 1995).

Both men and women were owners of local craft industries during the period under study. However, the cloth and dyeing industries were virtually owned by some highly influential people in the communities, and they seemed to have developed faster than any other indigenous industries such as the soap making and pomade industries and had consequently won more converts to itself mainly because of its expanding demands during the period under study (Ajayi, 2017)

Women in colonial Owe contributed immensely to the growth and development of entrepreneurship as well as the economic life of the people just like their male counterparts. They engaged in local as well as long distant trade within and outside the region. They were also actively involved in cottage industries producing items which were needed by their immediate families as well as those exchanged with their distant neighbors. They were also owners of cottage industries. The proceeds from these endeavors were controlled exclusively by them who used them to enhance their status, and contribute to the wellbeing of their families and the society in general (Rene, 1995).

Though, the indigenous entrepreneurial class may not have recorded the much expected success: that is building a self-sustained and self-reliant economy; but under the period of study, their activities at least made a difference in the economy of Oweland. Few employment opportunities were provided; goods and services were as well made available. Thus the proverb “ise k’ogun ise” continued to play a major role in the economic life and development of Oweland.

CONCLUSION

Although there were economic challenges, particularly during the colonial period, the people of Oweland were able to surmount these challenges. The people’s commitment to industry and hard work assisted them in overcoming the major problems induced by colonial policies. On the whole, the evidence so far suggests that trade was a major avenue for accumulation of wealth for the people of Oweland. Although the production and sales of cash crops was hijacked by the men but the women through their hard work still participated in the economic development of Oweland. The proverb “isek’ogun ise” has constantly spurred them to action as it is commonly believed by the people of Oweland that “atelewo oni e tani je” (a hard working person can never be disappointed). Thus hard work is perceived to be the antidote for poverty. It is therefore an area which could provide considerable insight into the intricate discoveries of ideas and the peoples past. The people of Oweland earned for themselves during the colonial period a pride of place in the society.

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