

A History of Otuokpoti Community from 1940 to 2018

By

Akikpo, Honour Brahms
Department of History and Diplomacy
Faculty of Arts, Niger Delta University
Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State

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Binabinador Odogu
Department of History and Diplomacy
Faculty of Arts, Niger Delta University
Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State

Abstract

This is a documentary research on the "History of Otuokpoti community from 1940 to 2018." Relying on the multi-disciplinary approach with data drawn mainly from primary sources such as oral interviews and supplemented with secondary sources. This research attempts to document the pre-colonial history of Otuokpoti community located in the Niger Delta region in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The study has revealed that the people of Otuokpoti are heterogeneous in nature and that, in the past, the community was a melting pot of different clans who must have shared similar customs with the Otuokpoti people. The study is very significant for its contribution to expanding the knowledge of the reader on the history of Otuokpoti people whose history has largely remained hidden in the oral tradition and oral history of the people. Clearly, it will help society to see more reasons why they should take interest in documenting their history for posterity sake. The study adopts the modernization theory as its theoretical framework which holds that, nations or communities grew and moved from a simple stage to a complex stage or from a primitive to a modern stage. The study covers the period when the third Obenema Obosain Aguda in 1940 (Uniting the three political realms of Otuokpoti Community: Agosuani, Igura and Agotoma) consolidated Otuokpoti Community for flexible administration, to 2018 when the waters of the Ekole River began for the second time to destroy Agotoma due to human participation (the indigenes of Otuokpoti Community harvested the industrial mat for personal use) in destroying

the industrial water pad from the Holland company which late Melford Okilo brought to salvage the situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Keywords: History, Otuokpoti community, Modernization theory, Salvage, Society

Introduction

Otuokpoti is a community in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State and is in the Central Niger Delta. This research work dealt with the issues relating to the conflicting origin of Otuokpoti people. The tradition of the origin of Otuokpoti people is highlighted in three school of thought and they are, the *Okoro* branch of origin, the *Tungbo* branch of origin and the Benin branch of origin. This research on Otuokpoti community however, has not been given wide attention by scholars and there are little extant materials on the topic in question. The history of Otuokpoti Community has largely remained hidden in the oral tradition of the people. About 60% of the data collected for this study was drawn from oral tradition and oral history(oral interviews in general). The study equally covered the origin of the people of Otuokpoti, the natural surrounding and geographical setting of the people, their historical background from two different oral sources and their language. This research paper examined the pre-colonial economy of Otuokpoti in relation to the *Obenema* [king] and the different compound chiefs of *Agosuani*, *Igura* and *Agotoma* respectively and each family head within these compounds mentioned above. One important discovery that is revealed in the study was the influence of the traditional religion of Otuokpoti on the participation of her citizens in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. An exploration was carried in this research on the distributive systems of trade that was evoked in the years before the colonial administrators conquered Southern Nigeria.

A History of Otuokpoti Community from 1940 to 2018

The location and physical environment of a nation or a community goes a very long way to determine the rise and fall, natural resources, market and economic opportunities, and government intervention programs that comes to such a nation or community. The environment is the surrounding of man, and the surrounding is the environment of man. The location and environment of Otuokpoti community has so much power and strength to influence the entirety of the people

living there including mentality, the way they speak and communicate, the way they react to circumstance, the way they socialize, their physical appearance and even their temperament. Before looking into the study deeply, it is important to carry out a survey on the location and natural environment of Otuokpoti Community. The natural environment is defined in the light of corporate and social responsibility as the natural physical surroundings in which life takes place. Some would call it nature, our living planet, life on earth or the geographical world,¹ from an scholarly point of view, location is quite different from environment. In the five themes of geography, location comes first and it is as follows: Location, place, human-environment interaction, movement and region. Every point on planet Earth has a location and, location can be viewed in two different forms. There is what is called absolute location and relative location. A location as described by its latitude and longitude on the Earth is called absolute location. While on the other hand, a location is described by where it is compared to something else is called relative location.² Environment describes the ecology of a particular location how organisms or people interact with their surrounding and how the environment responds too. When it comes to the environment, there are three important factors that play out and they are: dependency, adaptation and modification. Humans and organisms depend on their environment for survival; and with time, people slowly or quickly adapt to their environment as the case may be. And lastly, human beings modify their environment. Sometimes in modifying the environment, the environment in turn modifies or alters its inhabitants.³

Otuokpoti Community is located on a very fertile ground in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Otuokpoti is one of the renowned communities in the Ogbia environs. To the North, Otuokpoti Community shares boundary with Agbura community, and at the extreme North, Azikoro Community. From the South, Otuokpoti Community is bordered with Onuebum and Ewoi Communities. At the North-East Elebele is located. Otuoke and Otuabagi Communities are located South East of Otuokpoti Community –and the Niger River flows through the Otuokpoti Community. Ikibiri and Ayama communities are situated at the North-West. Otuokpoti has a direct contact with Niger River just as Ayama Community has direct contacts with the Nun River. To a considerable extent, Agbura community at the North and Onuebum Community at the South has direct contacts with the Niger River, whereas Ikibiri

and Ayama at the far West are located in the environs of the Nun River. From the Southern environs of Otuokpoti community, one can rightly see that, the River Nun and Niger are far apart, and each further divides itself into smaller tributaries. In the 20th Century and the latter part of it, the people of Otuokpoti community could only access Yenagoa through the Niger River. Otuokpoti and Agbura Communities were and are close to each other. There were some narrow foot paths that linked these two communities. This geographical advantage led to inter-marriages between the two communities. But by the early 21st Century, the Government of Bayelsa State constructed modern roads to link up Yenagoa Local Government, Azikoro community and by extension, linking up to Agbura and Otuokpoti communities and further down to Otuoke. At the extreme West beyond the Niger River, are large expanses of land belonging to Otuokpoti Community that was mostly used for farming. The river served as the instrument through which the European missionaries came to Otuokpoti community to spread Christianity. It aided the birth of alien religion and European cultural consolidation. And furthermore, the early ancestors settled at the river bank. This allowed the people to have surplus fish and sea food which aided trade by barter and eventually the establishment of the Otuokpoti market which was located very close to the river up till date. To a large extent, as it is known in most parts of Africa, water bodies were of great importance to the rise of great civilizations in Africa, and many of the initial ancestral settlements took place around river banks. The very first settlers in the Otuokpoti environs pitched their tents at the banks of the Niger River for several reasons: Firstly, it was a suitable spot for fishing and farming. From earliest times, humans were in constant need of water supply for survival. Secondly, the river served the people well in active transport and communication as it connects Otuokpoti Community to Onuebum and other communities down the South. It was an efficient means for transporting articles of trade across long distant area. In modern times, in some part of Africa, agriculture for instance is still resting on the shoulders of natural rivers, streams and lakes as the case may be. Being a riverine community, the shrine of " *Agirani*" and the Otuokpoti general cemetery are located close to the Niger River, especially the cemetery. In recent years, it was reported that about 20% of the cemetery has gradually been eaten up by the river. A number of times residents in Otuokpoti had reported of seeing corpses floating towards the community from the cemetery. Linguistically speaking, there are several communities whose

languages are quite similar to that of Otuokpoti community. The people of Otuokpoti speak the “*AgBeya*” or “*Abaya*” languages of Nigeria, with over a quarter million speakers.⁴ Oral traditions on the other hand has revealed that, these communities are about forty in number and they are within the environs of the Ogbia Local Government Area. The communities are: Anyama, Egeleama, Elebele, Emadike, Emagu, Emakala kala, Emeyal, Epebu, Ewania, Ewoi, Ibo, Imiringi, Iyakiri, Kolo, Obakilolo, Obelebiir, Obuaba, Ogbia Town, Ogboama, Ogireyankiri, Okiki, Okodi, Oloibiri, Ologi, Ologoghe, Oluaganagu, Onuebum, Opume, Oruma, Otegila, Otuabagi, Otuabula I, Otuabula II, Otuakeme, Otuedu, Otuegwé, Otuogidi and Otuogori.⁵

The location and natural environment of Otuokpoti community however, is embedded with many economic resources and potentials. From earliest times, the economic resources that had sustained the lives of the people of Otuokpoti could be grouped under forest resources, land resources and water resources. Naturally, your location determines your allocation. That is to say, your location whether as humans or a community, goes a long way to determine what comes to you and the kind of people that comes in contact with you. Otuokpoti Community is naturally blessed and located at the banks of the Niger River. Let's take a look at some of the economic potentials and resources that Otuokpoti Community is blessed with are:

Land Resources: The Land resources that are found in this area are myriad and complex in nature. In economics, land resources comprise all naturally occurring resources as well as geographic land. Examples include particular geographical locations, mineral deposits, forest, fish stocks, atmospheric quality, geostationary orbits and portions of the electromagnetic spectrum.⁶ For the sake of insufficient scientific data and information on the place of study at the moment, the researcher was unable to lay hands on any geostationary orbits and electromagnetic spectrum as part of the landed resources and economic potentials of Otuokpoti Community. Such data could possibly exist, but no written work has been carried out on it. The location of Otuokpoti Community is ecologically-friendly. And as such, the people experience bountiful harvest yearly after the farming season. However, some sections of the community have red and gray soil in abundance used for the construction of mud houses and locally made altars for fish and meat

smoking and preservation. In recent years, there was little evidence of crude oil deposit in between Agbura and Otuokpoti Communities at the “*Ekole*” Creek.⁷

Water Resources: The economic potentials in this region are so numerous and complex that, they are inexhaustible. Geographically, there is a small running stream located South-East of Otuokpoti that connects it with Agbura Community. This stream and other water bodies are all fresh water. As a result, the mangrove plant is not part of the natural resort of Otuokpoti community. There are two geographical belts found in this region. The fresh water belt which has been mentioned earlier and the sandy beach belt. Towards the South-East of Otuokpoti Community, are found many waterways (creeks, and even creeklets). And the palm oil tree is commonly found there. In the fresh water belt, according to Ama-Ogbari, the fresh water belt is very arable. Apart from water resources, forest resources included various economic trees like “*Abura*” and “*Mahogany*” that had sustained the lives of the people from the distant past to the present⁸ It was used for canoe carving, making of chairs and tables.

Forest Resources: These resources include different species of animals including birds of different colours and sizes, “*Iroko*” trees, Mahogany, Giant Sequoia, Ponderosa pine, Coast redwood, lodge pole pine, the rubber plant and different species of palm tree. The raffia palm and the oil palm are the most common in Otuokpoti Community. Some of these palm trees for the production of locally made gin, palm wine and red oil. The leaves of the raffia palm are used for the manufacturing of thatches used for thatched houses in Otuokpoti community. The location and environment of Otuokpoti Community equally encouraged certain economic activities. Some of these economic activities include fishing, canoe carving, basket weaving, making of thatches for thatched houses and so on. Fishing as an economic activity has been a long aged activity among the coastal towns in the Niger Delta environment. This is one of the major occupations among men and women and the youths. Fishing activities took the form of establishing family and compound pond which sometimes takes five to six years before the fishes are harvested. And at other times, it took the form of daily fishing activity in the rivers and creeks. All were carried out mainly for subsistence purposes and not for surplus gain initially. But as time went on, surplus were exchanged through the barter system. The people bartered their excess fish and farm products

with their neighbor in exchange for some other goods or commodity which they lacked. Canoe carving on the other hand, was of different sizes and suited different purposes – sometimes depending on the waterways they are to be used. Some families in Otuokpoti community were naturally endowed in canoe making and the construction of war boats, fishing boats, and the ones used in long distance trade before and during the era of colonial rule in Nigeria. This however, can be used as a prove to ascertain the fact that, the people of Otuokpoti community in particular and other parts of the Niger Delta and Africa in general had a well-established and organized economic system, crafts and methods of carrying out economic activities long before they had external contacts with the Europeans. Otuokpoti Community is geographically divided into three distinctive parts with their specific names. Agosuani means the Northern end of Otuokpoti, Oguta is central Otuokpoti. Agotoma is the name of the Southern strip of the community.

Historical Background of Otuokpoti Community

From an honest point of view, the historical background of most communities in the Niger Delta region and Nigeria at large has conflicting origins. Otuokpoti community is one of such communities. There are three schools of thought concerning the origin of Otuokpoti Community. In an interview with Mr. Asemia, he gave the following data to explain the origin of Otuokpoti Community. Okpoti one of the sons of Okoro who is a son of Ogbia was the founder of the community called Otuokpoti. The name Otuokpoti means Okpoti family. Okpoti one of the sons of Okoro moved from the present site of Otuokoroma (now called Ologama) with his brother Otuogori. Okpoti had a disagreement with his elder brother Ogori because of their family members. Okpoti had to leave Ogori to the present site of Otuokpoti community with his children: Aguda, Ayi, Ododo, Ayammane, Eketi, Izua, Okolotiti, Ekpese, Osula, Egbigbighe which are the founders of the original ten families of Otuokpoti community respectively. Ogodinei is the covenant name between the members or citizens of Otuokpoti and crocodiles. It became so severe that the people looked for solution and found a medicine woman who came to the community to solve the problem. On an agreed date, the woman and representatives of the community led by a man from Ogula family (Otu-Ogula) went in a canoe with dancing and singing to a point north of the Ikole River. The woman made some incantations which brought a very large crocodile afloat close to the canoe. The man from Ogula family represents Otuokpoti's left

central finger was incised, and that of the crocodile was also incised and the blood from the animal and that of the man were mixed and was licked by both the crocodile and the man. To know if the covenant was successful, a stone and a length of bamboo were dropped into the river. If the stone floats and the piece of bamboo sank it meant the exercise was successful. The stone floated and the bamboo sank. From that day onto present day, crocodiles do not kill or attack Otuokpoti citizens: in turn, the people of Otuokpoti too, no longer eat crocodile. Annually, the people used that spot on the Ikole River to commemorate that event.

Agirani: "*Agirani*" is a war and fertility oracle brought by some sons for the community. People go to worship it especially, to make vows in expectation if request is fulfilled. It also protects the people from charms from evil people.⁹ Furthermore, on the historical background of Otuokpoti community Mr. Asemia in addition, informed the researcher that, *Agosuani* is the name of the Northern end of Otuokpoti community. *Oguta* pronounced *Igura* is an adulterated pronounciation, and it is the name for central Otuokpoti community. And lastly, *Agotoma* means the Southern end of Otuokpoti community. Some of the kings that ruled Otuokpoti community include Okpoti Okoro, Aguda Okpoti, Obosain Aguda, Agulagula Obasain, Aguda Obusain, Tebeda Amusuo, Kengi Wongo Ikadi, Dogood Atoni, Theophilus Wongo, Basker Congo Inegite, Cousin Wongo XIV.¹⁰ From the above oral interview with Mr. Asemia, out of the fourteen kings or *Obenema* that have ruled Otuokpoti Community, eleven were mentioned. In respect of the *Izogua* festival and the appointment of kings, Mr. Asemia informed that, *Izogua* festival is a celebration of freedom of the Otuokpoti people from annual flooding and marine erosion. Before 1982/83, the community used to suffer from the menace of flooding and serious marine erosion. In 1982 November, the Government of late Chief Senator Melford Okilo Obiene contracted a company from Holland which started work of flood and erosion control in the community. The work was completed in 1983. As for the appointment of kings: In the past, kings were appointed using an oracle and divination by soothsayers. In contemporary times however, it is done by the nomination of three people, and followed by election. The winner is installed traditionally as the king.¹¹ From a scale of one to ten, four part of the citizens of Otuokpoti community concur with this first tradition of origin. They considered themselves to the descendants of Okoro.

Yet another source, Mrs. Regina Azini on the origin of Otuokpoti community, informed that, the founder of Otuokpoti (*Okpoti*) came from Tungbo community which is a coastal town in the Niger Delta environment. According to this tradition, *Okpoti* migrated from *Tungbo* with some of his loyalists (being one of the Chief men) in search for a new place for better settlement due to scarce resources and possibly over population. This migration took almost a month before *Okpoti* and his followers eventually settled down in the current location of Otuokpoti community. It was that, their initial stopover was the environment of Agbura community. He later moved southward and settled permanently at the Northern strip of Otuokpoti community – *Agosuani*. However, *Okpoti* had three sons at the time of his migration and settlement and the sons are *Agosuani*, *Igura* and *Agotoma* who were in turn given inheritance before the death of their father. According to this resource, the land of Otuokpoti was shared into three for each of the sons and this still stands till date. This landed inheritance became known in Otuokpoti as the *Agosuani* compound, *Igura* compound and *Agotoma* compound respectively. At the time when the inheritance was given, *Agosuani* had the largest. For some reasons he was said to be the first born of *Okpoti*. Later on, *Agosuani* lost some portions of land to Agbura people due to their uneven encroachment into Otuokpoti community. This encroachment however, led to the very first communal crisis between Agbura and Otuokpoti people in the ancient past. The second communal clash took place about the late 20th century. The first crisis according to Mrs. Regina Azini, must have possibly lasted for more than a decade or two. The other two brothers (*Igura* and *Agotoma*) came to the aid of their brother and some lands were recovered. At the time of carrying out this research, with all evidence and physical observation the *Agotoma* compound of today has more land mass than the other two compounds, but it was not so at the beginning. Among them all, *Ogura* (*Igura*) took a more central position and has the smallest landmass. More so, due to its central position and for reasons best known to the god of war and fertility (*Agirani*), the traditional stool of leadership and the king's exotic palace was located in *Igura* compound. And the "Agirani" shrine by extension is situated at the boundary between *Igura* and *Agotoma* when moving towards the South.

Presently, the “*Agirani*” shrine has disappeared from its original site and location. The removal of the shrine was due to a Christian revival programs that took place in the community some years back. And that the missionaries preached against it and ordered for the shrine and its artefacts to be disposed into the river – while some were burnt with fire. Some participants were reported to have lost their lives after they engaged in the events leading to the destruction of the shrine and its relics.¹² An oral interview on the third school of thought was given by Joseph Egba. According to him, Ogbia kingdom was founded by *Ogbeyan* who migrated from Benin Kingdom. His two sons *Okoroma* and *Oloi* ventured into present site of Ogbia kingdom after the demise of their father.¹³ These two sons of *Ogbeyan* hosted other immigrants namely *Obutoni*, *Tarabiri*, *Oboloma* and their miscellaneous groups that constitute the six major sub-clans in Ogbia kingdom. They are *Olio* group, *Okoroma*, *Tarakiri*, *Oboloma*, *Obutoru* and *Odinade*... On the other hand, the *Okoroma* group later migrated away from the other groups that founded the following *Okoroma* villages; *Otuabagi*, *Kolo I*, *Kolo II*, *Imiringi*, *Otuogire II*, *Emadike*, *Owoma*, *Otuakpein*, *Otuaganagu*, *Okiri*, *Ologoghe*, *Onuebum*, *Otuogori*, *Otagire* and *Otuokpoti* Community.¹⁴

From the above traditions, none was expedient enough to explain the exact origin of the Otuokpoti people. But from a scale of one to ten, about 4% of the people of Otuokpoti claimed to have been the descendants of *Okoro*. 5% of the people claimed that their origin from *Tungbo* – and the scantily few (1%) claimed their ancestral line from Benin Kingdom. From the oral source the research gathered, it is imperative to conclude that the natural environment of Otuokpoti community must have been a melting pot in the distant past where different clans and immigrants of similar languages met. Going by the narratives of the first two traditions, similarities are bound to occur. Although, it is clear that from pre-historic time, there has been an ancestral linkage between the people of *Tungbo* and Otuokpoti. Somehow this could be observed during the annual *Izogua* festival (every November) in Otuokpoti community as the people of *Tungbo* are fully represented. When the latter is celebrating their festivals too, the people of Otuokpoti are represented in their number. Linguistically speaking the people of Otuokpoti and the *Tungbo* has similarities in their languages. But on the other hand, the very first tradition origin explained by Mr. Asemia seems to be more authentic and more detailed than the others. In a way of concluding this session,

the research admits that, it must have been possible that *Okpoti* the founder of Otuokpoti Community must have indeed been one of the biological sons of *Okoro* who migrated to the present location of Otuokpoti; but the argument is that, he must have met some early immigrants of similar language and ideology with his. And being a powerful leader, he must have one way or the other incorporated the other groups or immigrants to his people. Therefore, the research submits that Otuokpoti community was a melting pot of traditional and foreign settlers. And the location of Otuokpoti must have been the main contributory factor.

Migration and Settlement Pattern

Looking at it from a larger perspective, it will be safe to admit that, the original ancestors of Otuokpoti community formerly organized themselves into various clusters of families which united to defend themselves against foreign invaders. The people of Otuokpoti see themselves as belonging to different coherent ancestors, but bound in unity by ties of common language, tradition and culture. The inhabitants are proud and flexible (resilient) in nature. Long before and after the era of colonialism in Nigeria, the people of Otuokpoti travelled by locally made wooden boats and canoes to Nembe and Brass. Since their settlement was around the banks of the River Niger, they travelled north the River Niger to River Nun to carry out trade with the people of Ayama community. And in most cases, these journeys lasted up to two months. The history of migration of the Otuokpoti people could be traced to Tungbo Community. Although in the first tradition of origin of the people, their migration was not revealed but only their ancestral home was traced. Okoro the father of Okpoti was not mentioned in the second traditional account of the people. The second account viewed their migration as taking roots from Tungbo community in the past – and going by that account, they eventually settled at the Northern strip of the present day Otuokpoti community which is at the banks of the River Niger. Many of them are found as migrant fishermen, farmers and hunters in camps as far as Onuebum, the far south of the River Niger, and the *Ekoli* River linking them up with the people of Otuoke, Otuabagi and Elebele on the South-East. Otuokpoti people had long lived in location and environment in proximity with many river trading routes and streams, and the people were fully connected to other villages by trade as far back as the fourteenth century.¹⁵ Being a maritime people, the people of Otuokpoti among other coastal communities in the Niger Delta were the first to have contact

with the Europeans and were active during the palm oil trade between the Westerners and the inhabitants in the interior. The other main traditional occupation common to the people is canoe carving of different sizes and fitting different purposes.

Pre-Colonial Socio-Political Institutions

Pre-colonial era or history in connection with Otuokpoti community is the era of the history of Otuokpoti before the arrival of colonialism. It is the period in history when the people of Otuokpoti had no single external contact with the outside world of Nigeria and Africa, but they must have possibly had trade connections with other neighbouring coastal towns and community within the Niger Delta region. As one of the “giants” in Ogbia kingdom, Otuokpoti community lies between Agbura community to the North, and Onuebum community to the South. The River Niger separated Otuokpoti community with its fertile farmlands at the West. The pre-colonial era of Otuokpoti community witnessed the flourishing of indigenous crafts and industry. The era also witnessed elaborate systems of government in both Otuokpoti and neighboring communities and there was great fragmentation of the political system because the people hated autocratic leadership that could hold the people together by force.¹⁶ The Otuokpoti people were among the earliest clan groups that occupied the Ogbia environs in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria far before colonialism found its expression in Nigeria and the African continent. Therefore, this section would be dedicated to examine the early economic institutions of Otuokpoti people, their socio-political institutions, indigenous industries and crafts and early religious institutions.

Generally, the economic history and structure of Otuokpoti community is quite similar in away when compared to other coastal cities, towns and communities within the Niger Delta environment in the past, and even in the present. The early economic institution of Otuokpoti Community is embedded in its economic history and as such, it is safe to define the economic history of Otuokpoti community as the segment that emphasizes the economic potentials and resources of the people, their economic activities (i.e. indigenous crafts and industries), economic growth and development, and the management of the economy. As it is seen and obtainable in other parts of the world, economy played a vital role in the

historical advancement, civilization, and development of communities and nations. A nation without a well structural economy is doomed to collapse. In American and European history, the economy had always been paramount in the process of their development. Such periods as the Stone Age, Age of Discovery, Feudalism, Industrial Revolution, Mercantilism, Slave Trade and so on were all predicated on the economic exigencies of the time which formed substantial part of their economic history.¹⁷ Karl Max who propounded the theories of socialism and communism stated that societies developed in line with these stages: communalism to slavery, to feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism and to communism. Therefore, communalism is the first and most productive stage of development of human society. The social relations of socialism are characterized by the proletariat effectively controlling the means of production, either through cooperative enterprises or by public ownership or private artisanal tools of self-management. Surplus value goes to the working class and hence society as a whole¹⁸. Although, according to Gasper Philip, The Marxist idea of socialism was also heavily opposed to Utopian socialism. Marx and Engels wrote very little on socialism and neglected to provide any details on how it might be organised.¹⁹ In spite of the above criticism, the central point which Marx wishes to make in his argument is that the general character of any society is determined by its economic structure, that is the manner in which goods are produced (mode of production); the economic structure constitutes the foundation or structure, while the political and legal institutions the dominant ideologies are the super structures.

The Family Mode of Production in Otuokpoti Community

The family mode of production or traditional mode of production is one of the types of economic systems that was practiced in most African societies in the past before the advent of European colonial interest in Africa. Economic system is the means by which societies or communities like Otuokpoti organize and distribute available resources, goods and services across a geographical region²⁰. In different parts of the world depending on the system that was in place, various forms of economic systems existed. These varieties are capitalism, communism, socialism and the mixed economic system. Accordingly, capitalism is an economic system in which private individuals own most of production and distribution. In this context, means of production refers to land, capital and means of transportation and industries.²¹ Socialism also known as the Command Economic System is the

economic system in which the government or a central authority controls, own and distributes the means of production. However, the mixed economic system is simply a mixture of both capitalism and socialism – in other words, it is a system in which the means of production and distribution are partly owned by individuals.²² Having established the background on what economic system is all about and its variables, the study will examine the type of economic institutions and systems that were in existence in Otuokpoti Community in the pre-colonial period. During the pre-colonial period, the people of Otuokpoti community had no knowledge of the aforementioned foreign economic systems. The people practiced a well-organized and systemized traditional economic system and in it exists the family mode of production and communism. Communism in the themes of Otuokpoti history implies that, Otuokpoti community as a whole had some control and ownership certain aspects of the means of production and distribution. And each of the ten families that made up the community too, had their own fairshare of the means of production and distribution of goods and services. What then is traditional economic system?

The traditional economic system of Otuokpoti community is the one which does not operate under a profit motive. Instead, it emphasizes the trading and battering of products (goods) and services that enable participants to subsist in a specific region; community or culture.²³ A traditional economy lies on customs, history and time-honoured beliefs, tradition guides economic decisions. Traditional economy depends on agriculture, fishing, hunting, gathering of fruits and nuts, or some combination of them. And they use barter instead of money.²⁴ From foregoing definitions and explanations, it is clear that, the people of Otuokpoti community in pre-colonial times, organized themselves in such a way that the means of trade, transportation, distribution and production were internally (indigenously) motivated and not externally influenced as some Euro- centric scholars in the past held on the opposing view. In the distant past, the means of production and distribution were mainly owned and controlled by the *Obenema* (i.e. the king of Otuokpoti Community), the respective Chiefs of *Agosuani*, *Ogura* (*Igura*), and *Agotoma* compounds, and each respective family head or chief of the ten families that made up Otuokpoti Community, and by extension the community as a whole had control over certain aspects of the economy. In other words, there existed some forms of communism in Otuokpoti community. Communism is a theory or system of a social organization in which all property

is owned by the community, and each person contributes and receives according to their ability. The king (*Obenema*) of the community by divine mandate had some large expanse of land for himself and family members, and the three chiefs of the three different compounds would normally go out of their way to make sure people are produced that would be in charge of the king's business of farming and harvest after every farming season. In the distant past, the *Obenema* of Otuokpoti Community had the privilege to own other farmland beyond the original reserved areas for the king and his family. At the end of every harvest season, all the farm produce are taken to the *Obenema's* supply store house where the *Obenema* would take portions for his family and distribute some to extended family members, the three compound chiefs and then, the workforce that was in charge of the *Obenema's* farming business. Below the *Obenema*, each compound had control over certain land, the production, and distribution of goods and service. At the level of the compounds, each compound chief (head) was the sole administrator of the means of production and means of distribution. By extension, certain businesses and business expeditions were mainly carried by those compound chiefs on behalf of their compounds. Certain farmlands and fish ponds were also collectively owned by each compound.

But unfortunately at the moment, such practices are no longer in place in Otuokpoti community and as such some compound farmlands and fish ponds had been bought over by some wealthy and prominent individuals for personal usage. Still in the pre-colonial era, some compound established inter-compound business and trade enterprises. Each compound had and maintained its own man of space located at the shores of the River Niger. But then, there was still the general market in Otuokpoti community where everyone converges to trade by barter. Below the compound mode of production and distribution of goods and services was the family mode of production. As earlier mentioned, Otuokpoti community is a conglomerate of the ten families (ten original families) that controlled the means of trade. The family mode of production implies that the means of production and the distribution of goods and services were owned, controlled administered and managed by the family or the ten families that made up the community. During the pre-colonial era as oral tradition has revealed, each family had some sphere of influence over certain aspects of the economy.

Each family is headed or represented by the oldest old man. Each family had fish ponds and farmlands and the items produced are shared and distributed to all family members. In fact, some families were so wealthy that they owned lakes and extremely larger farmlands and fish-ponds. One other important aspect of this tradition that existed among the people of Otuokpoti in pre-colonial times, were matters of membership to a particular compound and family. For one to be gifted with a land or by purchase, you must at least be able to trace your ancestral routes to the fourth generation on both father's and mother's sides. If that is done successfully in the presence of your compound or family elders, you will then be considered a true member of that family or compound. Where farmlands are harvested or sold (including fish ponds), distributions are made to family members only. This system adopted because among the indigenes and ten original families are found a mixed multitude of people who possibly must have migrated from other communities and clans who are not part of the original descendants of Okpoti and are claiming to be the children of Okpoti.

Pre-Colonial Economic Activities of Otuokpoti Community

For years, the people of Otuokpoti community had survived in their current environment as a result of the various endeavours and economic activities they engaged in. These economic activities are peculiar and similar when compared with other coastal towns and communities within the Niger Delta region. Some pre-colonial activities the people embarked on were;

Fishing: Fishing as an economic activity has been age long endeavour among the coastal communities in the Niger Delta. This is one of the major traditional occupations among men, women, and the youths. Fishing activity also took the form of establishing family and compound fish ponds and lakes which sometimes took five to six years before the fishes are harvested. And at other times, it took the form of daily fishing activities in the rivers, creeks with hook and line. All were done or carried out mainly for subsistent purposes and not geared towards sales and surplus gain. Except on instances when a family or an individual have surplus at one end and lacks other food items at the other end, they would barter their surplus food items with a neighbouring or for distant family in order to acquire the food items they needed or lacked at the moment. This however, was a normal pre-colonial economic endeavour among the people of Otuokpoti

community and the deltaic communities in Southern Nigeria and even in other communities in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. In some of the creeks and the Northern and Southern strip of the *Ekole* river, the people Otuokpoti would build and establish fishing camps and furnish it very well for convenience and comfort. And in most cases, they spend months and weeks in these fishing camps carrying out fishing, hunting and food gathering which invariably are used for barter between camps. In these camps, the fishes are preserved by sun drying or smoking and in some instances, these items are sold out to traders who are on their way to other long distant markets in the communities by boat paddling. The fishing methods and techniques are quite strange and sometimes simple.

One of the most common methods of fishing is the use of wide nets. It is thrown in the river and a few minutes, a drag is made. The line and hook is one other method used in fishing. Bait is attached to the mouth of the hook on the line, and there is a little indicator above the waters attached to the line to serve as a signal when a fish is dragging the bait attached to the hook. At other times, a pot of unfinished meal is dipped at the shallow edges of a river or stream for fishes to go in and eat. While the fishes are doing that, the owners of the pot quickly appears and removes the pot. Sometimes fishes are caught using this method and at other times, nothing is caught. Local poisons and dynamites are also used in some instances to kill fishes. But this method of using poison and explosives has been condemned and therefore, many indigenes no longer go by it. Sometimes too, the people would visit a stream or creek and construct small local dams at different parts of the stream or creek as the case maybe. After this is done, they would proceed to bail off the waters in between the dams for fishes to be caught. Other economic activities of Otuokpoti community before external contacts were made include hunting, palm oil and palm kernel production, weaving of local mats and different types of basket for different uses and purposes – some for fishing, fish storage and preservation, and others for trapping purposes.

Canoe Carving: Canoe carving was of different sizes, purposes, and it suited different terrain and water ways. The carving of canoe was another important traditional craft in pre- colonial Otuokpoti Community. Some families were gifted with men who could carve and construct war canoes, fishing canoes, long distant trade canoes, and others used for short distant trade with communities in close geographical proximity. More so, the technologies and intellectual prowess

employed in making those things a reality were mainly indigenous based. This however, buttresses the fact that, before any external contacts were established between Southern Nigeria and the British, the people of Otuokpoti community had long ago been the force behind the making of their crafts – and by extension, their well-organized economic system. From the earliest times, the people of Otuokpoti were great canoe carvers and local boat builders, great hunters and fishermen and gatherers of the products of the riverine environment. They exchanged the fish and meat products for salt and other agricultural products with close and far distant communities. Apart from the internal barter trade involving each compound and families, the people established short and long distance trade with the people of Ayama at the River Nun, Onuebum and the southern strip of Otuokpoti and the people of Otuoke on the South-east. Short distance trade: As the phrase implies, the trade was carried out between the people of Otuokpoti and their immediate neighbours such as Otuogori, Agbura and Azikoro communities at the Northern extreme of *Agosuani* compound. The only means of exchange was the barter system – the people of Otuokpoti exchanged their surplus sea and farm products with their neighbours for the items or products they needed most. The internal short distance trade was one of the major ways in which the distributive system of trade survived in the pre-colonial era. Despite the challenges from their environment and some obstacles faced, by the people, the trade in many instances ended on a successful note. Long distance trade by extension was another form of distributive system of trade that existed between the people of Otuokpoti community with their neighbors. This type of trade cut across long distant boundaries and communities and a very wide range of geographical settings. This trade was established between the people of Otuokpoti and their neighbors such Kolo, Anyama, Tungbo in Sagbama Local government, Otuasega and other inhabitants of Ogbia town through the waterways. They would paddled for days and sometimes weeks in order to access their neighbours. These two forms of distributive trade continued successfully till the years when external contacts were established with the European traders.

Palm Oil Trade with the Europeans

Before 1880, there was the existence of palm oil trade between the people of Otuokpoti and their close neighbours and by extension, other far communities. By the late 16th Century (1500), the people of Otuokpoti had established trade contacts

with the people of Imiringi, Ogbia town and Opume in goods such as palm oil, and other agricultural products. But by the 18th and 19th centuries (1700s and all through 1800), complex organization of trade and business developed among most coastal communities. There was the emergence of middlemen, who bought slaves from the hinterlands and sold them to Europeans slave dealers who settled at the coast. But on the part of Otuokpoti community, there are no available records to show their involvement in any form of slave trade with the Europeans. But for other coastline communities like Nembe and Brass, reputable indigenous middlemen were given credits in the form of money and goods by the European traders. In return, the coastal middlemen bought slaves and other goods from the interior for the European merchants.²⁵ After the abolition of the slave trade by the British, the palm oil trade took over and it was called the legitimate trade. It was legitimate in the sense that; it was based on trust (trust system).

With the growing need of vegetable oil by the Industrial Revolution for the production of soap, cream and other lubricants, the palm oil trade between the British and the people of Otuokpoti soared very high. At the initial stage of the trade, the people of Opume served as middlemen between the British and Otuokpoti people because the British had their stations in Nembe and Brass – and Opume is closer to Nembe than Otuokpoti community. Opume middlemen and the palm oil traders of Otuokpoti had constant trade interactions at Otuoke. But with the passage of time, it was said that the palm oil merchants of Otuokpoti had serious misunderstandings with the middlemen from Opume and that trade relationship was broken. From then on, the palm oil merchants of Otuokpoti began to establish physical trade contacts with the European merchants of Nembe. They did this by travelling with local boats and huge maritime canoes through the River Niger down to Nembe. They spent weeks and months on water and sometimes, they occasionally made stopovers to other coastal villages during their journey. They usually exchange palm oil with European clothes, mirrors, guns, and other European article of trade. And most of the time, if there are no much merchandise for exchange on the part of the Otuokpoti traders, the European merchants would give out their goods on trust.

The palm oil economy as it is sometimes called, led to the rapid growth and emergence of wealthy men in Otuokpoti community, especially the family heads. This trade also led to the emergence of a class of Ordinary chiefs – these were

exclusively wealthy individuals who seized the opportunity of the trade to establish large palm oil farms. The palm oil trade or economy was part of the slave trade and had encouraged the rise of a relatively small group of large entrepreneurs in the region.²⁶ Other coastal towns must have participated in both trades but the people of Otuokpoti participated only in the palm oil trade (legitimate trade). The origin of post-independence economic system could be traced back to the colonial period when the European colonial administrators embarked on opening up the local markets and created high taste for European manufactured goods.²⁷

ENDNOTES

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