

OCCUPATIONS AND INDUSTRY IN THE NIGER DELTA: A STUDY OF KUGBO KINGDOM FROM PRE-COLONIAL TIMES TO 1940

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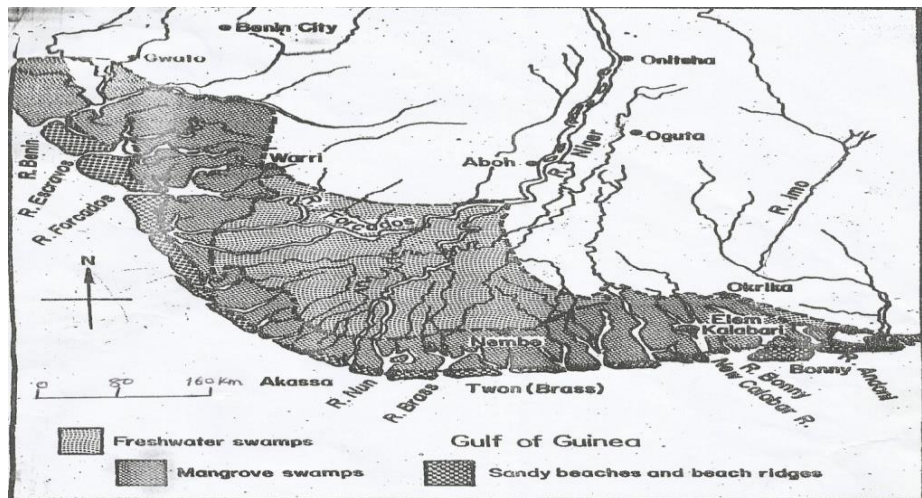
Abstract

The Assistant District Officers, Sir S.P.L. Beaumont on his Intelligence Report, he presented in 1940 about the Odual (Isaka) Clan in Degema Division in Owerri Province had asserted that people of Kugbo were lazy and care free. This paper re-evaluates this assertion with redressing the erroneous claims by investigating into the occupations and industry of the Kugbo people from Pre-colonial Periods and 1940 and secondary sources. This study reveals that contrary to the Eurocentric assertion, the people of Kugbo were quite industrious as they engaged in numerous subsistence economic activities from the Pre-colonial times before the advent of European 'intruders', These economic and agricultural activities include farming, fishing, trading, craftsmanship, palm-oil production, and blacksmithing, among others. The significance of this research lies in the vivid exposition of the agricultural and economic enterprises of the Niger Delta peoples as a rebuttal to erroneous Eurocentric documentation.

Keywords: Eurocentric assertions, occupation, industry, economic activities, Kugbo people

1. Introduction

A 1940 Intelligence Report on the Odual (Isaka) Clan in Degema Division in Owerri Province by Sir S.P.L. Beaumont described the Kugbo people of Rivers State in the Niger Delta as being lazy. . He said that the people were care free, passing most of their leisure (and they have much) in dancing and wrestling”¹.



Map of the Niger Delta ²

The Niger Delta is like a tree with its branches turned upside down from the Forcados River to the west, to the Imo River in the east with the Atlantic Ocean in the South.³ It also covers the “three former divisions of Ogoni, Degema and Brass together. Today these divisions are to be found in the three natural Niger Delta States of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers. As a result of domination and dishonest act by the former Eastern Region against them, they moved for their own states but could not succeed. From the British-inspired, Niger Delta Basin and Development Board (NDBDB) was later established in 1961.⁴

Recently, the Niger Delta is described as a triangle with its apex between Ndoni and Aboh, descending eastwards to the Qua Iboe at Eket and Benue Rivers in the East and West respectively along the Atlantic coast.⁵ Again some people define the Niger Delta as “Core” and “Periphery” areas of the Niger Delta. While Delta State, Rivers State, Bayelsa State and to some extent, Akwa Ibom State are regarded as the core Niger Delta States, the Periphery States comprise; Ondo, Edo, Abia, Imo and Cross Rivers states. However, they are jointly called the Nine Niger Delta States.⁶ The peoples of the Niger Delta are mostly believed to have migrated to the East and West from the Central Niger Delta. They are fishermen with little farming due to the enormous rivers which include from Western Fringes of the Benue River, Escravos and Forcados. The Central Niger Delta is from the Pennington River to Nun River. Brass, Kalabari and Bonny are in the Eastern Niger Delta. Then from Andoni River to Imo River forms the Eastern Niger Delta fringes.⁷

The vegetation of the Niger Delta is fresh water swamp in the Central, then Mangrove swamps in the West and East. The rivers mentioned above run to the Atlantic Ocean. The peoples of the Niger Delta beginning from the West, we have the Itsekiri, Edo, Urhobo and part of Ijaw. In the East we have the Nembe, Kalabari, Ibani, Opobo and Wakirike. On the Eastern fringes, we have the Obolo, Ibibio, Efik, Ogoni and some Ndi- Igbo. In the Central Niger Delta, we have the Ijaw Yenagoa, Epie-Atisa, Ogbia, Engeni, Abua, Odual and the Kugbo.

2. A Brief Survey of Kugbo Kingdom

Kugbo is located in the fresh water swamp portion in the Central Niger Delta. In the north, it is bounded by Odual, in the South West, Oloibiri then East by Orusangama and North East by Degema. It is a kingdom that is composed of four communities such as Akani, Amurukeni, Amuruto and Emago in Abua/Odual Local Government Area in Rivers State. In all official documents, they are known as Akani-Kugbo, Amuruto- Kugbo, Amurukeni –Kugbo and Emago-Kugbo. Amurukeni became part of Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa State (BALGA) since 1958.⁸ Till the time of this research, it is in Ogbia Local Government, with the new creation of Local Governments during Babangida's regime.⁹ According to Esadi as far as linguistically, Amurukeni belongs to the Abua, Odual, Ogbia and Idema group of languages in the Kwa sub-group of the Benue Congo languages of the Niger Congo group of languages in Africa.¹⁰

The forest of the Kugbo Kingdom created a good environment for agriculture, hunting, weaving, carving, palm oil production, lumbering, among other enterprises. These economic activities met and satisfied the immediate needs of the people. In the sections that follow, we discuss the various agricultural and economy activities of the people thefrom pre-colonial times to 1940 prior to the advent of the British and the establishment of colonial rule and the subsequent intelligence report on the Odual (Isaka) Clan.

3. Occupations of the People of Kugbo in Pre-Colonial Period

3.1. Farming

The people practiced subsistence farming on the land within the fresh water swamp forest and produced food crops such as plantain *okai* cocoyam *okolo*,

banana *ule*, and so forth. These food crops were supplied to the people of Nembe, Abornema and others who in-turn brought *garriefenia*, and crayfish *isorlto* to sell including clothes. Another crop produced by the Kugbo people was *cocoyamelel*. Vegetables like pepper *udu* and so forth were among those produced for subsistence living. In the farm, the women clear the grasses, weed the growing grasses against the crops. Meanwhile the men fell the trees. The harvest of the crops was done by the women while the men provide fishes or animals for the home.¹¹

3.2. Hunting

The fresh water swamp of Kugbo was very rich in wild animals. Hunting was consequently one of the earliest economic activities of the people of Kugbo. They used implements such as guns (*Ava*), machets (*ogidi*) and spear. These implements were obtained from upland markets of Nkwerre. Hunting was basically a masculine occupation. A form of hunting was the singular *otabha* or *orabh-ma-mata*. The hunter entered the forest alone in search of games however, sometimes, two or more hunters combined and entered the forest. This can be group hunting. Any animal killed was shared among the hunters of the group for local consumption. The surpluses were sent to Nembe and Kalabari people in exchange for sea foods. The animals normally killed were mainly monkeys, bushbigs, antelopes and iguanas, among others. From some of the games caught hides and skin got for local use as drums (*Okuma*). Another type was trapping or trap setting. This was usually done by men just like the fence trapping or main trapping itself.¹²

3.3. Fishing

One of the major economic activities in the Kugbo kingdom during the pre-colonial period was fishing done by both women and men or boys and girls. This was due to the presence of the Kugbo Greeks, rivers, lakes, ponds, and swamps that provided natural habitat for fishes to exist naturally. There were so many techniques used by the people of Kugbo to catch fishes. Majority of the methods were made possible with the availability of canoe technology which Kugbo people carved for themselves and those they sold to outsiders. According to Mr. Inatimi Akari, the people engaged in fishing activities in lakes and ponds (*omobh-aghini*), with different types fishing gears such as harpoons, spear (*osobh*), fish hooks (*amkpabh*), nets (*ogbo*), weaved fish traps called *egheleghel-*

osobo. Other fishing gears were screens *oghe* for lobster. It was fixed with smaller valve called *egheleghel* were hung on it especially during the floods. Other fishing gears used by the Kugbo people included weaved nets made stronger with cane-sticks *odidigh*. This system was called *oza*. Women in the night during the rains went to the river and caught lobster as the water flowed. Still, another gear was the net used by men.¹³ They went to the river and caught the shrimps especially during the ebbtide with two or three person. The fishermen used canoes in the river for the occupation.

3.4. Local Industry and Craft

A major economic activity in Kugbo in the pre-colonial period was local industries and craft. Carving was one of the main occupations of the people of Kugbo. Carving was a lucrative occupation in the pre-colonial Kugbo people. It met the needs of both religious worship, economic activities and entertainment life of the people as some of the deities were represented in wood. These dieties like *okpeti-tipotone* kept in the shrines required regular replacement owing to the ravage of white ants especially the masquerades like *agiri*, *ebede*, *ipiribani*, *okuku* and *kala-seguwere* carved from wood. The pieces of the various masquerades which performed traditional dance were supplied by Kugbo carvers. Other instruments carved and used worthy of mention were local spoons, canoes and paddles, mortars, plates, brooms, etc.

3.5. Musical Instrument

Wooden musical instruments were among the craft of the people. The drum was prepared by using hides and skin of wild animals such as bush pigs. The wooden instrument was carved from big trees. These were used for entertainment in festivals and rituals. *Drums* were also used as a means of communication. The above industry was very lucrative to the carvers for they practiced the art as an occupation.¹⁴

3.6. Healthcare: Bone Setting

In terms of healthcare, there were both native doctors and masseurs who attended to the health challenges of the people of Kugbo. Some masseurs specialized in bone-setting. They applied local oil and a leaf called *Akaleghelegheto* was used to treat broken or dislocated bone. A notable man, according to Alfred John (20-

1-2024) was late Chief Law Moses lived up to 1999. On his death, his son, Mr. Chukwuemeka took over the technology.¹⁵

3.7. Weaving

Another important craft that deserve mention was weaving. The weaving materials were locally gotten from the mangrove swamp forest, which included rattans and bamboos. What they weaved among others included fishing gears, baskets, and mats.¹⁶The fishing gear was skillfully made to catch lobsters. The weaving of fishing gears was done by both men and the women depending on the instrument or type of the fishing gear. Other instruments such as mats were done by the women who went into specialization as they were less strenuous.

3.8. Production of Iron Implements

Iron implements were also manufactured by the people of Kugbo, although this was done in small scale by few blacksmiths. The raw material was normally the iron-ore. From the iron-ore, implements like machetes, knives, hoes and other tools were manufactured. We must mention, however, that iron-ore was never mined in Kugbo but imported from the Ikwerre who might have gotten from the eastern hinterland of Nigeria.¹⁷

3.9. Local Spirit (Gin) distillation

This was another important economic activity. This was done by the Efik, Ogoni and Ibibio people who migrated to settle in Kugbo. The raw material for gin distillation was and is still the raffia-palm tree.¹⁸

3.10. Palm Oil Production

Palm oil production had been a major occupation of the people of Kugbo and the Urhobo tenants from time immemorial. Palm oil was a useful ingredient for cooking food and its production provided employment and income for Kugbo men. The palm oil was also exported to other distant kingdoms and it brought wealth to the natives.

4. The Colonial Period (1914-1940)

The advent of colonialism to the Niger Delta brought along with it changes in all aspects of human endeavours. Kugbo, like other parts of the Niger Delta was

not left out. some sectors experienced increased productivity while production declined in other occupations. Few individuals in Kugbo clan took part in the market-oriented agriculture during this period. Farmers began to grow coconut and palm trees for commercial purpose. One famous farmer was M.K Esadi popularly called M K. The produce of these farmers included palm oil and palm-kernel. These products were sold to the colonial masters through their agents. Production of those cash crops incorporated Kugbo into world economy.

Hunting occupation in Kugbo clan decreased during the colonial era. This was as a result of some factors. Firstly, it became unlawful to hunt without obtaining a license for the gun. The license was to be obtained for a fee and the people did not understand why they should pay for license to own guns. Secondly some animals were declared endangered species which could not be killed. The result was a massive decrease in hunting. The advent of colonial rule adversely affected the local industries and craft in the kingdom of Kugbo as their product could not favourably compete with the European goods. Some of the locally made goods, especially gin, were declared illegal and illicit, while importation and consumption of the dry gin of the whites (European) was encouraged.¹⁹

In fishing, the use of important fishing gears adversely affected the local weavers as the locally produced fishing implements were replaced with foreign ones. These included the use of cotton nets and well -designed four, three, two and half fingers net for the exercise. The imported fishing nets proved more effective in the fishing enterprise. A big challenge to the Kugbo natives was the illicit gin problem that adversely affected the production of the product.

5. Conclusion

With the application of historical research methods, this study has revealed that the declaration made by the Beaumont Report of 1940 that painted the Kugbo people as lazy and not industrious was not true. The work revealed that the people of the Niger Delta with experience from Kugbo Kingdom, were not lazy. This is based on the numerous agricultural and economic activities that the people were engaged in from the Pre-colonial to 1940 when the report was made. The location of Kugbo in the Central Niger Delta in the midst of rivers and creeks, coupled with the fertile soil supported productive activities. The forest provided a good environment for the people to be engaged in subsistence farming, fishing, animal trapping, hunting, weaving, carving, trading, and

gathering of palm-nuts and palm oil processing. Many natives also got involved in lumbering activities especially during the colonial and post-colonial periods. These economic activities met and satisfied the immediate needs of the people. An important aspect of this work is that it projected the natives of Kugbo people as industrial and productive and has, in its little way corrected the erroneous reports of the Eurocentric documentation on Africans.

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