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**AGRICULTURE AND LAND TENURE SYSTEM IN
IGBOLAND: THE UMUAHIA EXAMPLE UP TO 1896**

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ABSTRACT

This article studied agriculture and the land tenure system in Igboland: the Umuahia example up to 1896. This study observed that Umuahia practiced a self-sufficient economy with the production of agricultural products such as: cash crops and its subsidiaries. Such crops include: palm farming, cocoa, yam, kola nuts, banana, cocoyam, raffia palm, vegetables and livestock. This study is of the view that land tenure systems were mainly patrilineal in Umuahia pre-colonial economic institutions. This study adopted a 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 Primary, secondary and tertiary sources like oral interviews, archival materials, journals, published and unpublished texts, were employed as means of data collection for the historical reconstruction of the study. This study concluded that Umuahia's pre-colonial economy should be transformed and modernized. It should as a matter of fact employ mechanized farming so as to compete favorably with other communities in West Africa.

Keywords: Economic, Agriculture, Land, Yam, Cocoyam, Palm and Livestock.

INTRODUCTION

Land was a key factor of production in Igbo pre-colonial economic institutions. Land tenure system could be structured into three: communal, lineal and individual land tenure system. Land tenure system differed in Igboland. Land was always available to the individual owner for agricultural proposes, but may be given out to others on leases basis, specifically for cultivation. This article explores some salient issues in Umuahia pre-colonial economic institutions bordering on agriculture and land tenure system. Umuahia pre-colonial economy was a cash crop economy which specialized in the production of such commodities like cocoa and palm oil. Umuahia farmers also cultivated other subsidiary crops like: yam, banana, kola nuts, cocoyam and vegetables. Umuahia pre-colonial economic institutions practiced livestock farming. Land tenure was usually subsumed under the communal, lineal and private/individual. Land tenure system in Umuahia pre-colonial economic institutions was strictly patrilineal. This

study is divided into six sub-headings, namely: yam cultivation, cocoyam cultivation, palm farming, livestock farming, planting of vegetables and mode of sharing lands in Umuahia.

Agriculture

Agriculture was the mainstay of Umuahia economy in pre-colonial times. The soil was fertile; and, thus very conducive for farming. The fertility of the soil led to the production of enough staples that accounted for the high population density in Umuahia. Every able-bodied individual, man or woman was actively involved in agriculture. Moreover, every family had to work and produce most of what it needed.

Thus, for increased yields and harvest, it was expedient to marry many wives, have more children, therefore, more hands or labour for farming in Umuahia. The Umuahia man strengthened his labour supply through a retinue, of indentured servants or individuals who took loans of food items (especially yams) and seedlings and were

required to work in his farms for a period as a means of repayment. The dominant system of farming was shifting cultivation because land was plentiful so also was farm labor. Hired laborers came from Obowo and the labourers were deployed at minimum costs.

They were usually paid in kind in return for their labour. Thus, the farms were well taken care of and they supplied the much-needed foods to all parts of Umuahia. The fallow period ranged from five to seven years. Each farmland had a name; for example, the land occupied by umuahia-Ibeku Township was Umuahia farmland known as Alaocha-Ibeku. It was farmed by the people of Ndume, Afara, Ugba-na-Nkata, Ossah, Emede and Amuzukwu Ibeku. Furthermore, farming was mainly subsistence; both the men and women played gender specific roles in the farming process, and infact, in the crops planted. The men prepared the farms for planting, by themselves or by the use of hired labour. The Umuahia in the pre-colonial times practiced shifting cultivation, whereby every year each lineage, village

and kindred decided which of lands would be cultivated. Around mid-January, the farming season commenced with bush-clearing.¹

Each farmer or kindred started clearing its own portion of farmland allocated them. Bush-clearing was followed; a few weeks afterwards by bush burning, which was succeeded by the planting of crops, lasted till end of April. Land ownership in pre-colonial Umuahia was basically of different kinds: communal, lineal and individual. Communal land ownership, originated in a situation where a group migrated to an entirely new site and occupied a reasonable tract of land which subsequently became communally-owned. Communal land ownership was based on the inalienable and equal rights of joint ownership of land by every member of the community, with some appointed members, usually elders and titled men, given the responsibility to act on behalf of others as custodians of the land.²

When it came to individual ownership, land was

always available to the individual owner for agricultural proposes, but may be given out to others on leases basis, specifically for cultivation. Land may be pledgeable but is inalienable. Land could be lost if it was sold or pledged to somebody outside the village or family. But if transferred by pledge or sold to a brother it could not be considered to have been lost. It is worth of note, that title could be acquired and land transferred. Another mode of acquiring land was by seasonal transfer which limited the tenant to one farming season. An important requirement for this type of temporary transfer was that no perenial crops should be planted on the land, and that cash crops such as oil palm fruits should not be harvested by the tenant. In addition, the "landlord received a nominal sum as rent and this arrangement did not involve other members of the leasee's family. Land could also be pledged for an unlimited period. Though it was recoverable by the leaser and his successor within three generations. As stated earlier, the system of cultivation practiced then was shifting cultivation.

In this system, a whole village would move to a particular farmland for one year, after which they would move to another one for the next year leaving the previous land to lie fallow in order to regain its fertility. The Umuahia, being predominantly farmers, combined the production of cash crops like cocoa, kola nuts, banana, oil palm, with food crops like yams, cocoyam and vegetables, they produced enough foods for consumption and sold the surplus to buyers from Obowo, Uzuakoli, Bende, and among others. They also lived in an area that had and still have good and steady sources of water supply. Food crops like cocoyams, fruits vegetables and maize were mainly cultivated by women while men concentrated on the cultivation of yams, kola nuts, cocoa, palm oil and banana to mention but a few.

Yam Cultivation

Of all agricultural crops, yam remained the most important farm crop throughout Igboland. Yam was the king of crops and the more yams a man had in his barn, the higher his status in the society. Yam titles such as Ezeji and Okogbuo

(rich yam farmer) were created to promote the production of yams. The title given to a particular farmer depended on how many yams he had in his barn. Yam farming had a lot of beliefs and rituals attached to it. While the men planted yams, the women tended the farm by weeding it and ensuring a healthy environment for the crop to grow. In the words of Obidiegwu:

Yam ownership and cultivation conveys numerous social meanings with a role in defining social status and enhancing the attainment of traditional title ship in southeastern Nigeria: you know how important a person is by the number of his yam barns...these days if you go to a big man's house in the village, you would likely eat pounded yam. Yam cultivation is an important element of the traditional and social aspects of economic activities dominated by males. An adult male without a good quantity of yam reserved in his barn is derogatorily regarded as worthless.³

This goes to show that yam was the king of all crops in Umuahia in particular and Igboland in general. Yam cultivation had a direct link to marriage alliances and polygamy because family ties were sustained on yam production, owing to its high demand of human labour and

care. It implied the existence of an intrinsic relationship between yam production capacities and enlarged family sizes. The cultivation and ownership of yams are largely associated with social status, wealth, privilege, and capability. The association was mostly related to some beliefs surrounding the origin of yam, the processes involved in its cultivation, and the multiple social and cultural values credited to it.

However, a common narrative links the origin of the yam crop with the Supreme Being and the earth's goddess. It took an average of seven months of activity, which included bush clearing, village preparing yam sets and tubers, staking and trading the yam, vine weeding, harvesting, certain yam tubers home, preparing yam barns, tying the tubes on the barn racks and other rituals. These procedures involved a tremendous amount of physical energy and material resources which could only be borne by the strong, the wealthy, and the members of the community who were capable of keeping to tradition. During farming period yam

was a revered crop to be cultivated by the Umuahia. Theft of yam was regarded as a more abominable crime than the theft of other goods.

Severe ritual procedures were applied to restore the productivity and sanctity of yams desecrated by the thieves. When a new yam tuber was sighted as a result of having been washed away, people quickly react by covering the tubers with soil to avoid another eye seeing the near-abominable act. Understandably, the Annual yam festivals were indicative of the importance attached to yams and its cultivation. The new yam festival involve some religious activities, such as the yam related sacrifices at shrines and the pouring of libations and cultural activities, such as songs and dances to express happiness and appreciation to the ancestors and the gods for bountiful harvest.⁴

Cocoyam Cultivations

Another crop cultivated by the Umuahia people in pre-colonial period was cocoyam. Cocoyam was a common name for more than one tropical root which is divided into

two, namely: taro and malanga. Cocoyams were herbaceous perennial plants that belonged to the family of Araceae and are grown primarily to their edible roots tubers. The petioles of the leaf stems grew erect and reached lengths in excess of one meter (3.3.ft). The leaf blades were large and heart-shaped and can reach 50 cm (15.8m) in length. The corm produces lateral buds that give rise to side-corms depending on the species and variety.⁵

Planting of Vegetables

Ugu (fluted pumpkin) was an important vegetable widely cultivated in Igboland during pre-colonial era. It is gotten from the planting of ugu seed. Ugu was mostly used in cooking soup and pottage foods. Fluted pumpkins were highly consumed especially in the preparation of the Efik Afang soup with water leaves. Ugu leaves are the highest consumed vegetable followed by water leaf among others. Ugu farming did well on sandy-loamy soil. To cultivate it, the first thing to do was to clear the land and remove every stump and debris. The soil was tilled if it was hard for easy

penetration of roots, good aeration and proper germination of the seed. Application of manure such as cow and goat dung among others was highly needed. After dressing the soil, the next thing to do was to plant. This was done very early in the morning or late evening. It could also be planted when the weather was cool. Early weeding was the best thing to do. Umuahia farmers started harvesting three weeks after planting or when the stems were long enough they use hand to cut the stem a little distance away from the bottom of the stem position.⁶

Palm Farming

The palm was one of the most important economic crops cultivated by the Igbo. From pre-colonial up to this day, the oil palm remained one of the most important economic plants of the Umuahia in particular and the Igbo in general. Palm trees were grown for a variety of purposes. They provided the nutritious palm oil used for everyday cooking. Palm oil was the red oil extract from oil palm fruits

'Elaeisguineensis' while palm kernel oil 'Eluaku' was also derived from the seed of the same oil palm fruit. The Umuahia did not have measures for palm tenderlings but uprooted them from around palm trees or processing area. Umuahia oral tradition recounts that Umuahia land was blessed with palm trees, making it a native crop that grew. When the farmers selected the better varieties from the places, the palm fruits were dispersed, they planted them in their farms known as Avonkwu or Ude Nkwu (palm plantation or forest). The palms were normally planted preferably during the rainy season when there was enough water in the soil to sustain the young palm tenderlings. This was done with proper spacing vis-à-vis the grown period when the palm fronds would be spread all over the place.

The importance of palm trees to the Umuahia could not be overemphasized. The harvesting of palm fruits provided employment to the climbers. The palm kernels while edible and eaten with tapioca. The climbing and cutting of palm nuts was technical; it was not for all comers.

The climber was always alone, thus his ropes must be as safe as possible while he climbed. Most men held their machetes between their shoulder and their head. When a climber reached the top of a palm tree, he cuts down the ripe palm heads with his machet.

He knew the ripe heads because the nuts were red. But he had to survey, before he allowed a palm head fall to the ground. This he did by dropping a small frond branch to fore warn whoever was beneath or frighten off chickens and goats. As soon as palm head landed on the ground, the climber's part of the job was finished. His wife or the employer carried it home for threshing and branches to ripen more for pulping or squeezing in wooden mortars and then subjected to hours of pounding.⁷

After the pounding, the nuts are picked, often times, alongside squeezing out the palm oil. Cracking of the nuts commenced after the extraction of the kernel. This was also a major economic activity for women and children. While the conveyance of the oil palm, most of the produce were

consumed or bartered in the local markets. Before the colonial period, oil palm was a major revenue earner for most Umuahia families. Meek notes that "The oil palms occur in house-lands."¹⁸ Members of the villages/communities owned the palms individually or collectively.

Livestock Farming-Animal Husbandry

Livestock farming was another lucrative occupation of the people. The major livestock farming was goats, pigs, sheep and fowls. It must be pointed out that cattle, was not really part of Umuahia livestock production culture. Livestock were kept for their meat and as revenue earners, protein supplements and for manure droppings. Livestock production continued to play a major role economically and culturally among the Umuahia. They were usually slaughtered during festivals and were a quick source of income. There were various types of livestock tenancy in Umuahia. Women gave out livestock like hens and she-goats to relatives to rear for them. Therefore, people gave goats, ducks and hens to their name sake, and friends 'Enyi', to rear.

This type of livestock farming did not involve permanent transfer of ownership of the livestock. Umuahia people acquired a sizeable livestock of their own through tenancy.

Land Tenure System

This was the relationship between people, groups and communities to land. Land tenure system prescribed and defined rules and rights pertaining to the ownership and allocation of lands. Land tenure was usually subsumed under the communal, lineal and private/individual. According to Umuahia belief and tradition, Ala (land) was a gift from God (Chineke), and from the ancestors. Ala (land) produced food and water which gave life to all living things. Ala (land) was and still is an important basic human need. Its source, generation and security always preoccupied all human communities. Whatever, threatened Umuahia people's sources of livelihood threatened spiritual existence. So, Ala (land) served also as a source of tools.

As mentioned earlier, land was, and still is, owned by individuals, families and communities. The five (5)

communities that make up Umuahia, namely, Ibeku, Ohuhu, Olokoru, Umuokpara and Ubakala have lands before their lineages and individual members. Ibeku was made up of: Isieke, Ossah, Ndume, Afaraukwu, Afarata, Emede and Amaoforo. It is interesting to note that Isieke owned landed property, in the other agglomerating communities of Ossah, Ndume, Afaraukwu, Afarata, Emede and Amaoforo; while represented as members of the other clans. Lineal relations among the Umuahia determined right and access to lands. Regarding communal lands, only adults who could pay their dues had rights to be allocated tracts of land for farming. At the family level, land was shared among brothers who were related by being descended from common ancestors, and this was strictly patrilineal among the Umuahia. Rightly to a piece of land was automatically revoked after harvests.⁹

There were cases where crops like palm trees and raffia palms were communally owned. Therefore every legitimate son of either the village or lineage group had the right to such economic trees. Consequently, the first

surviving son of a man while taking the lead in the inheritance of his father's property had the concomitant duty of being socially responsible for his brothers, sister, mother and father's wife or wives. The issue of who had a right to inheritance was well spelt out. Moreso, among all the inheritable properties, land was the most valuable. While lands could be communally owned, the crops are cultivated in them belong to the individual farmer.

The communal land was passed on from generation to generation to members of the clan who traced their origin to a common ancestor. Residential land except that bequeathed by the father to the rest now could be sold and bought. Regarding the sharing of land that belonged to the family, the first son took the western end, the second, the eastern part while the last son took the middle portion. This arrangement was applicable to the other four (4) communities in Umuahia in the pre-colonial times.

Mode of 'Iwa Ohia' (Sharing Lands)

In pre-colonial times, the mode of sharing lands lay with the first son. In the absence of their father the first son could summon his brothers for the commencement of the sharing of their lands but it was also based on mutual agreement.¹⁰ Assuming there was no mutual agreement, the Iwa Ohia society could be invited. If and when the Iwa Ohia society was invited by the first son, he presented to them the following items:

- a) A big chunk of meat
- b) Kolanuts (Oji Igbo)
- c) Garden eggs (Anara)
- d) Bitter kolas and
- e) A jar of palm wine

It must be noted that the number of male children in the family were required to be present in the gathering. The Chairman of the Iwa Ohia society usually asked the male children if they all agreed to share their ancestral land. If they affirmed, a time was fixed for the sharing. The Chairman of Iwa Ohia society then asked them to meet the

secretary of Iwa Ohia society for a list of items that they would offer at the date of sharing of land, usually on Eke day.

The first son was expected to present the following:

- a) Prepared five balls of fufu and five plates of soups.
- b) Five big chunks of meat and
- c) Two jars of palm wine.

The second son would present:

- a) Four balls of fufu with four plates of soup.
- b) Five big chunks of cooked meat; and
- c) One jar of palm wine.

The other sons no matter their number presented:

- a) Three balls fufu and with three plates of soup;
- b) Five big chunks of cooked meat;and
- c) Half jar of palm wine.

When the sons would have procured these items, the Iwa Ohia Society then assembled at the family's 'Obi' for the sharing. After eating and drinking the presented food drinks, they proceeded to the site of land earmarked for sharing. The Iwa Ohia society first mapped out a very big portion for the first son as Ipanye Okwa (privileges). They later shared the remaining land, giving the first son a land bigger than other male children, and the rest was shared according to their birth.¹¹ Assuming they did not finish that day, another Eke day was be fixed. Any time the shared lands came into

dispute, the Iwa Ohia Society was invited again to settle it. If not satisfied, the appellants referred their case to the Okonko Society that was then the highest judicial organ. The decisions of the

Okonko Society was respected and taken as general.

CONCLUSION:

Umuahia pre-colonial economy was self-sufficient economy which was agriculturally based. This was as result of the fertility of its soil which accounted for the production of enough staples that led to the high population density in Umuahia. The pre-colonial agriculture economy of Umuahia did not lack any dynamism. It was basically dependent upon the efforts of peasant farmers who were ready to embrace innovations. Moreso, when it comes to land tenure system in Umuahia, land was owned by individuals, families and communities. Therefore, only adults who could pay their dues had the right to be allocated parcels of land for farming. The communal land was passed on from generation to generation to members of the clan who traced their origin to

a common ancestor. Residential land except that bequeathed by the father to the rest now could be sold and bought. This study recommended that Umuahia pre-colonial economy should be revived and modernized through mechanized farming.

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