

AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE ITSEKIRI PEOPLE; 1850-1900.

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the economic history of the Itsekiri people from 1850 to 1900. The economy has been very vital in the history of the Itsekiri people. The objective of the study is to discuss the dynamics of the Itsekiri Economy during the period of study of the people. It also focused on trade relations between the Itsekiris and the Europeans as well as their neighbors from 1850 to 1900. The local industries in Itsekiri land also contributed immensely to the growth of their economy. The study adopts the historical approach and interpretive design using primary and secondary sources. The work concludes that the Itsekiri's were greatly involved in trade and other economic activities and this has rapidly improved the growth of their economy.

Keywords: Economy, Trade, Fishing, Itsekiri.

INTRODUCTION

Economy is an integral aspect of society that cannot be overruled. It is the backbone of every society and there is no country without an economy. Various activities have been implemented in economic affairs to aid satisfaction as well as to create wealth. Activities ranging from production to buying and selling of goods have been practiced to ensure satisfaction.¹ Benedict Afful notes that an economy consists of the economic system in a certain region, comprising the production, distribution or trade and consumption of limited goods and services in that region or country.² In sum, an economy is the sum total of produce and service transaction of value between two economic agents in a region, be it individuals, organizations or states.

The economic activities of the Itsekiri People have been determined by their environment. The Itsekiris, just like their Ijo neighbors are primarily fishermen who supply fish and crayfish to the people of the hinterland.³ Their economy, is highly organized around fishing and trading. This is largely due to their relations with the Europeans during the period of the slave trade and the legitimate trade. They also engaged themselves in trade relations with their neighbors in the hinterland. Apart from trade, various industries in Itsekiri land have helped to develop their economy.⁴

FISHING AND WATER TRANSPORTATION

In the area of economic activities, indigenous technology has been developed to cater to fishing. Similarly, technology has been developed for other aspects of food production. The oldest types of fishing in Itsekiri land included subsistence and commercial fishing. Industrial fishing is relatively recent in Itsekiri land. Both marine and inland fishing have been exploited in Itsekiri land for a long time (the former in the saltwater mangrove and deep-sea environment and the latter in the freshwater zone in rivers and lakes), It is important to note that fishing played a much more important role in Itsekiri land because the area was characterized by water and as such this was the dominant economic activity in place. Both men and women were into fishing.⁵

In Itsekiri Land, the fishermen used various methods of fishing. Seine nets (Eriri), dragnets (Ugbugba), circular throwing (Obiriki), hook and lines of various types such as Eggho, Isotsi, Ale-Eggho, Ikodo, fish fence (Ede) made near the riverbank. Spears such as ugangan, akasi, etc. throwing poison (Esoko-Odia), floats (Efo and Eriko) made of a piece of bamboo gourds, and cork from the umbrella tree, baskets of various kinds such as Akereghe-Ikide, Ogudu-Ighere, Uruba, Ita, Ekobi were the fishing gears used. Ekobi is conically shaped and attached to a stick and used in catching crayfish.⁶ Ita is also similar to ekobi, but it is very big and heavy, conically shaped and made of cane, with a door at the entrance. There is also the

canal and it is used for storing fish. It is square -shaped and big. Heavy woods are pinned at its end to prevent it from being carried away by the tide. Worthy of note is the fact that these fishing instruments provided additional economic activities for the Itsekiri People.

Another important point to note is the fact that the Itsekiris offered sacrifices to the gods of the sea 'Umalokun' before they commence fishing so that they will have a good catch.⁷ Also, when the stream and rivers are not producing enough fish, sacrifices are made to the god of the sea, Umalokun.⁸

Fish preservation, selling and distribution were yet other economic activities connected with fishing. For fish preservation, both smoke-drying and wet smoking are used for preserving and processing fish in Itsekiri land. Smoke-drying is more effective for fish preservation and involves the use of heat and smoke to cook and give the fish a special appearance and flavor. The drying of the fish results from allowing fairly uniform heat to get to the fish for a day or more. In subsistent and commercial fishing, this kind of smoking is sometimes done over the fire used for cooking food with the fish placed on the specially constructed platform of mangrove wood built over the fire for the purpose. Wet smoking involves allowing the smoke to get into the fish for between four to six hours to give the fish a characteristic flavor. Such fish is for immediate or almost immediate use as the fish cannot last for long. Fish racket and a column or pair of columns of woods are used

for packaging fish for drying. This has been the major indigenous means of preserving fish both for storage and distribution in Itsekiri land.⁹

Apart from fishing, the Itsekiris were also involved in salt making. It is important to note that salt could be obtained from three sources. These are mangrove trees (Ibojo), salt trees (Igbo-Okun), and seawater (Ikpe).¹⁰ The method of preparing salt from the mangrove tree is to cut off the shoots or tendrils, which are piled up until a sufficient amount for salt making is collected. These shoots are then burnt until they are reduced to ashes, which are packed in baskets and stored. The length of time for which the ashes are stored depends on the financial need of the manufacturer. Some are stored for three months, others six months, and for some, even up to a year.¹¹

The next process of salt making is to drag a canoe ashore and gather together some big pots. The baskets of ashes are hung over the canoe and water is poured through them. When sufficient water has drained through the ashes into the canoe, the large pots are filled with this liquid. These pots are placed on a fire and boiled till the liquid evaporates. More water is drained through the ashes, added to the pots and again boiled up until they are filled with salt deposit, which is then left to harden. This method was known as the evaporation of seawater (Ikpe).¹²

The last method is the extraction of salt from the salt tree (Igbo-Okun). For this method, the whole tree is used, chopped up into small pieces and burnt to ashes. The ashes were then collected into bags made of screw-pine or raffia and water is poured into it. The solution formed was then evaporated, leaving the solid salt at the bottom. This salt, however, is of lesser quality than that from the mangrove tree but the Itsekiri find it more lucrative because they can produce it in large quantities. Salt was an extremely valuable article of trade during this period and even today, local salt is preferred to imported salt for the preparation of certain dishes.¹³

Transportation on the other hand is the movement of man and materials from one place to another.¹⁴ Bell posits that transportation is important because it enables man to reach somewhere and carry out further activities.¹⁵ To Olujoku, transport is having an enabling factor in the development of an economy.¹⁶ To further corroborate this, Milne enumerated the importance of transportation as the most vibrant lubricant to trade.¹⁷ North as quoted by Ogunremi further notes that transportation enables society to enjoy advantages, specialization of resources and the benefit of division of labor by making it possible, for products to be brought from distances thus avoiding the necessity for local production of needs.¹⁸

In Itsekiri land, the mode of transportation in use was water. This resulted from the fact that the area was characterized by water. The canoe was the vehicle of the

waterways in Itsekiri land.¹⁹The Itsekiris purchased canoes from the Ijos and alter and enlarge them to suit their requirements.²⁰This mode of transportation used in Itsekiri land, however, had its advantages. Firstly, it resulted in interactions between her and her neighbors. This is because it linked the Itsekiri with her Ijo, Ilaje and Urhobo neighbors in the hinterland. The water transport also aided economic, political and social activities in that, it made it possible for the Itsekiris to adopt some cultural traits of their neighbors. It also contributed to the development of the Itsekiris because of its impact on social, economic and political activities. Itsekiri land became a centre for lucrative trade. It must be noted that the Europeans presence in Itsekiri land was made possible through this mode of transportation (water).²¹Overall the greatest advantage of canoe transport in Itsekiri land was its low cost, and this was due to its high carrying capacity. Large goods were conveyed in canoes to the hinterland as well as other coastal areas.²²

Even though the water was the Itsekiri's trade route, it is important to stress that it was the hinterland that supplied almost all the goods that the Itsekiri people exported and goods passed through the major villages, towns and markets to the coastal areas. Most parts of the Itsekiri areas were not suitable for the cultivation of crops so they relied on the interior people from the earliest times on long-distance trade for their food. In return, they exchanged their products with the products of the hinterland. From early times, yams and slaves were among the prominent

articles of trade carried by water from the hinterland. As Ryder has reported, "this was noted by Pacheco on the Rio Real where the canoes brought yams in large quantities ... many slaves, cows, goats, and sheep which they exchange for salt with the coastal inhabitants". This was indeed the case as the hinterland exchanged various products with the Itsekiri people.²³

ARTS AND CRAFTS

It is certainly difficult if not impossible to discuss fully the multifarious works of art and crafts which the Itsekiri people engaged in during the period under study. Among the immense contributions of the Itsekiri economic prowess are pottery, mat making and bead making. In this section, much cognizance will be given to the crafts listed above and others such as silver works, canoe making, carpentry and bead making.²⁴

Pottery was an imperative industry of the Itsekiri people. It was the specialty of the Itsekiris who supplied the rest of the Delta. The capital of the Itsekiri kingdom had tenacious red clay which was very good for making pots for holding water and other utensils for domestic purposes. This task, however, is relegated entirely to the womenfolk and comprises of three sections: water pots, salt pots, and cooking pots. The water pots are round in shape and have small mouths. These are never used when freshly made. After they have been shaped and baked, they are filled with water and placed on a fire. When the water boils, this is smeared over the outside,

and the pot is smoked until it becomes dark brown or black, then it is ready for use.²⁵

Salt pots are made flat with very wide mouths. As soon as they are baked, they are ready for use. Each salt pot can only be used once as the content becomes so hard that the pot has to be broken. Cooking pots are of much the same shape as salt pots but they are not so flat. As all Itsekiri eat directly from the cooking pots, the mouth of the pot must be sufficiently wide to allow for easy ingress. The size varies widely according to individual requirements. Some are only capable of cooking enough food for one, while others may hold enough for twenty or thirty persons. These pots are baked very hard, then rubbed all over the inside with a mixture of cassava starch and water.²⁶ When this is hard, dried bamboo leaves are packed inside and burnt. The pots are then washed, after which they are ready for use.²⁷

Carpentry and wood-carving (Agbede-Ogbiegin), was another craft that was carried out by the Itsekiri People. However, this was not on a large scale. They made only doors and windows, tables and boxes. The matchet is the principal tool employed. It is used to cut the timber and a broken matchet serves as a plane. The Itsekiri do not make canoes directly but buy from the Ijos. They do, however, alter and enlarge these canoes to suit their requirements.²⁸

Basket making (Oghon-Akpere) was also done by the Itsekiri People. The only baskets made are those used in fishing. They are made of cane and comprised of

three different shapes for the actual catching of fish and a large flat covered shape in which dried fish is kept. Baskets of various kinds such as Akereghe Ikide, Ogudu, Ighere, Uruba. Ekobi were made. Ekobi is conically shaped and attached to a stick, and used in catching crayfish. These baskets are all of the plainest order, no attempt is made to ornament them with colored insertions or patterns.²⁹

Mat making was also an important craft in Itsekiri land. Cognizance must be taken of the fact that the women make all the mats used for domestic purposes, sleeping mats, ceiling mats, "chop mats" window, door and veranda screens. The sleeping and ceiling mats (for which they used the inside of the bamboo) are made of strips about one eighth of an inch broad, laid side by side and bound together with thin strips. Dyed string in different colors is sometimes used to bind the strips. The screens are made in the same way and hung in position. The "chop" mats, which are used to sit on while eating, are quite small, about two feet by one and are usually extremely artistic. They are made entirely of dyed ti-ti and woven in intricate patterns. Both native and European dyes are used, but they are said to prefer the European variety, to the locally made ones.³⁰ The mat-making industry is almost entirely in the hands of the Benin River women. However, this activity saw the light of the day due to the availability of reeds that grew in Itsekiri land and also, the Itsekiri women were known specialists in the production of mats.³¹ Also,

what made the products of these mat industries very unique and acceptable were their attractive geometric designs and colors.³²

Aside from mat making, the Itsekiris also like bead weaving. According to Adrain, Ling Roth points out that “such corals as the Binis had was obtained through Jekri (Itsekiri) traders, either from the Benin River or Lagos” Roth says further at Warri, “the actual crown of the king is a sort of a large cap in the shape of a cone, three feet high, covered with coral beads and with a couple of birds heads on top”. Eve De Negri said further on coral beads, “this coral was first discovered during the 15th century in the reign of Oba Ewuare. This type of coral was derived from a tree, growing on the sandy bank of the Benin River”. It is evident, therefore, that bead making started with the Itsekiri and spread to the other people of the Niger Delta.³³ The method of boring the bead requires a special skill. It involves a grinding stone. Thus, the hard stone is bored into holes necessary for stringing up the beads. Once the beads are bored, they are polished. Polishing the bead demands some skill and patience.³⁴

Silverwork was also done by the Itsekiris. Cognizance must be taken of the fact that the silversmiths obtained their silver from Europeans, and from it, they make chains, bracelets, rings and earrings. The silver is put into a clay pot over a fire of charcoal, and a local type of blow-pipe is used, to engender sufficient heat. This consisted of an old gun barrel joined to two pieces of wood (rather the shape of

scissors, with the gun barrel as the blade). These pieces of wood are covered with leather and a forced drougt secured, by working the blow-pipe with two sticks. When the silver melts, it is then beaten and shaped.³⁵

Canoe building was a major industry in Itsekiri land. However, this resulted from the fact that Itsekiri land was endowed with dense mangrove vegetation through which meanders a network of creeks. Huge trunks of wood were felled, hollowed out and parts were burnt to make the canoe and the beautifully decorated paddle. There were three types of canoes; the small one which conveyed people for short distances, the large commercial canoes for long-distance trade, and the war canoes used by the Itsekiri navy.³⁶It is against this backdrop that P.C. Lloyd observed that:

*There are wide variety of Canoes apart from the ones made by the Ijos, which the Itsekiri themselves make. This range from shallow ones used near the sea to the deeper Canoes used in the places interior creeks.*³⁷

TRADE AND LONG DISTANCE TRADE

Trade is one of the most important activities among the Itsekiri people, during this period. Just like other societies in the world, trade and commerce in Itsekiri land were of remote antiquity. Its development was because of the necessity to distribute the excess riverine produce and manufactured items to the public. Trade was the chief means of transmitting culture, tradition and civilization from one community to another. The Itsekiri People, like other nations, have been engaged

in trade with their neighbors because they cannot produce all that is needed in isolation. This resulted from the fact that Itsekiri is located in the Delta swamps which did not allow for agricultural production. Trade was in two categories, local or internal trade and long-distance trade. The local or internal trade involved the exchange of goods between the people of a town on the one hand and the people of a town and its immediate environs. Long-distance trade involved the exchange between a region or nation and another.³⁸

The Itsekiris had trade contact between and among themselves. Villages such as Bobi, Ogheye, Jakpa, Orere, Delekata, Tebu, Ugbuwangwe, Kolo-kolo, Dele, Bateren³⁹ were engaged in trade with one another. They also traded with other nations such as Ijohs, Urhobo, Isoko, Ukuwani, Nupe, Igarra, Esan, Benin, Bonny, Calabar, Ilaje. Trade between the Itsekiri took place on a daily basis. The trade relations between the Itsekiri and her neighbors during this period were very cordial.⁴⁰

The Itsekiris carried out their trading activities in the market. Toyin Falola notes that a market is a demarcated site where traders and customers meet to exchange products.⁴¹ In Itsekiri land, the market day is called 'Ojobon'. This was carried out every four days interval. The trade starts as early as 5:30am and ends by 5:00pm.⁴² According to Intelligence Reports, there were two purely Itsekiri markets: Jakpa Market and Madaja Market. These markets were held in a creek

and not on land. Canoes were tied up along the side of the river bank and display their wares while the purchaser visits the various canoes in his canoe. Apart from the above, there are mixed markets in the township of Koko, Sapele and Warri, but they cannot be considered as Itsekiri markets, although a large number of Itsekiri attend them.⁴³

Commodities like yam, cassava, garri, corn, sweet potatoes, Kpokpogarri, plantain and starch were brought from the hinterland mostly by the Urhobos.⁴⁴The Ijos brought dried fish into the Itsekiri markets but not in large quantities, Igarra and Nupe also visited the market, bringing in groundnuts. Bonny and Calabar also carried out extensive trade with the Itsekiri and one of the principal articles of trade was brass pans which the Itsekiri used in the manufacturing of salt.⁴⁵The Itsekiris brought in goods such as salt, pots, dried fish, crayfish, crab, periwinkles and mats such as Abiba, Ere, Ejiko etc. It should be stressed out here that the Itsekiris were more involved in trade with the Urhobos than any other nation.⁴⁶

To foster trade, various mediums of exchange were put in place. It should be noted that the currencies in Itsekiri land were dependent on the kind of activities that were carried out because there was no standardized system of exchange.⁴⁷ There was the system of trade by barter and haggling, Barter is a form of trading in which goods were exchanged directly for other goods without the use of money as a medium of exchange.⁴⁸ Haggling on the other hand is a type of negotiation in

which the buyer and seller of goods and services debate the price and exact nature. Cognizance must be taken of the fact that trade by barter was not very dominant, though it was still in use.⁴⁹

Other currencies that were used include Cowries, Anini, Ipinini and Ikibe⁵⁰. These currencies were used to purchase goods from the market. They were in use in virtually the whole of Itsekiri land. However, they had several advantages. They made exchange possible, not only in Itsekiri land but over a wide territory since it was used in many places. Their small sizes made it easy to carry, though they were bulky for large transactions⁵¹. For the cowry, it served as an effective measure of value and a unit of account which made it convenient to know the value of each goods in relation to another and to fix prices to all kinds of products. Also, the cowry could not be forged.⁵²

TRADE WITH THE EUROPEANS

The Itsekiris, during the period under study, were engaged in trade with the Europeans. However, this was in the form of commodity trade.⁵³ Prior to this period, they have been engaged in nefarious traffic in human beings, known as the slave trade.⁵⁴ Evidence shows that the Itsekiris were part of the traders in slaves. However this trade was abolished by the leading slave trading nation, Britain, in 1807, and other countries, notably Sweden, Spain, Portugal, France, the

Netherlands and the United States followed suit in the first half of the 19th Century.⁵⁵

The reasons for abolition are controversial, one view argues that the pressure from humanitarians who were appalled by the moral injustice of the trade and the sufferings of the slaves, forced the British Government and others to put an end to the trade. The second view emphasizes economic changes associated with the industrial revolution in Europe which made the use of slaves unnecessary. According to Eric Williams, a leading proponent of the economic factors, the contribution of the humanitarians to abolition have grossly been exaggerated by men who have sacrificed scholarship to sentimentality and, like the scholastics of old, placed faith before reason and evidence.⁵⁶ Although the change from slave trade to commodity trade in the Delta took place over several decades, until the mobilization of a full military apparatus in the second half of the 19th century, Europeans pressure could not affect major slave-trading states.

Several factors, however, prompted the need for trade in commodities or legitimate trade by the Europeans. There still arose the need for Europeans to come to Africa, again as a consequence of the industrial revolution. More than ever before, Europe needed raw materials to feed its growing industries. At the same time, she needed markets to distribute the products of the industries. It was strongly believed that Africans could fulfill these two needs if they could replace the trade inhuman

beings with trade in commodities. Additionally, the humanitarians believed that the vacuum created by abolition should be filled by trade in agricultural products to stamp out the slave trade completely. Sir, F. Buxton, a leading British anti-slavery crusader, was perhaps the most forceful in calling for "civilization, commerce and Christianity" in Africa.⁵⁷

With the decline of the slave trade, there was a new trade called the 'legitimate trade', i.e. trade in commodities. This trade called for greater organization and resource than the slave trade. The 'trust system' now became a much greater feature of trade than it had been earlier. Not only did the white traders have to entrust goods to their Itsekiri customers, but the latter also had to entrust goods in their turn to the producers of the palm oil, in this case, the Urhobo (and also some Kwale) to the hinterland. According to Ikime, this circumstance made it necessary for any Itsekiri who aspired to be a great trader to be seen as creditworthy. This in turn had various ramifications: first, it is meant for the successful trader an ostentatious display of wealth in the form of dress, house, furniture, the quality and quantity of food and drinks. Secondly, the trader had to possess a large fleet of trading canoes that would collect the product from the Urhobo settlements. These canoes were usually manned by slaves; the successful trader had to have a large number of slaves. Indeed the wealth of the trader was often measured in terms of canoes and slaves.⁵⁸ The internal slave trade had to continue and it continued till

the close of the century. These features of the trade led to great rivalry between the leading Itsekiri traders – rivalry in the display of opulence to justify continued 'trust being given and rivalry in securing greater quantities of oil from the Urhobo. This rivalry was sometimes serious enough to lead to wars and lasting family feuds. The possibility of war was only one of the reasons why the Itsekiri trading canoe was armed and why some canoes were designed primarily for war. There were two other reasons: the need for self-defense against Ijo attackers and the need to employ threats, when this became necessary, to get the Urhobos to maintain their obligations to the Itsekiris⁵⁹.

Among the commodities brought by European traders were cloth, guns, gun powder, glassware, mirrors, carpets, rugs, spirits, beads, plates, iron, tobacco, salt, some food items⁶⁰e.t.c on trust and distributed to credit-worthy persons in the Benin River settlements who would mobilize goods from the hinterland for the Europeans. Goods such as rubber, cassava, palm oil, palm kernel was mobilized from the interior by the Itsekiris in return for European goods. Apart from these, the European merchants also offered cowries for palm oil, palm kernel and other commodities⁶¹. But with the effectiveness of colonization in Nigeria, beginning from the last decades of the 19th century, the colonial powers began to introduce a unified currency system. This currency system was superimposed based on all

existing mediums of exchange. The new currencies, which were coins and later notes, were foreign to the people but were accepted as a medium of exchange.⁶²

Palm oil was the "pioneer staple" and the leading commodity for export during the period under study. Europe's industrial revolution created the need for oil and fat. Palm oil was used as a lubricant to oil the machinery, to manufacture candles needed for lighting and making soap. Europe turned to West Africa for oil. Worthy of note is the fact that the Itsekiri were among the leading suppliers of palm oil.⁶³

The palm trees had served domestic purposes before the trade in palm oil. The palm oil extracted served as edible oil for domestic uses. Brooms were made from the leaves, baskets were made from fronds. It also served as fuel for the local clay pot lamps. In essence, every palm tree was important in the domestic economy of southern Nigeria. But all produce served only the domestic economy, until the 19th century when development in Europe resulted in the demand for palm oil and kernel from West Africa.⁶⁴

Palm oil and palm kernel trade attracted European merchants, most of whom were agents of Europe and trading firms mostly from Liverpool, Glasgow, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Lisbon, Spain and Paris. Flint pointed out that the merchants of Liverpool had much capital invested in the trade with West Africa and were able to adjust and quickly took to the transition from slave trade economy to cash crop economy by the first half of the 19th century.⁶⁵

The most regrettable gap in the most recent history of Nigeria is the period between 1870 and 1900 when commercial firms were opening the interior. By the second half of the nineteenth century, big corporations had emerged in the field of finance, railways and later industry and other sectors. They started as big corporations as a result of mergers prompted by competition in trade, business failures and emerging situations. The demands for West African goods were added advantages to the emergencies of large trading companies, particularly in the 1870s. West Africa became increasingly open to world markets from the early 1800s due to its huge exports of palm oil and kernels. Not surprisingly, the export of palm oil from West Africa rose from about 10,000 tons in 1810 to 40,000 tons in 1855. Export of palm oil from Nigeria started in the early 1800s from the Niger Delta and continued to increase in volume till the 1890s. For instance, exports of palm oil rose from 5,288 tons to 8,718 tons in 1889 while palm kernel rose from 11,871 tons in 1865 to 35,528 tons in 1889.⁶⁶

The trade prompted the European countries to extend their rule over West African territories in general and the Itsekiris in particular from 1885 with the agreement in Berlin conference in Germany. African territories were partitioned among European powers. For example, Britain seized Nigeria as its possession with effect from 1885. Britain took entire control over the foreign relations of their colonies in West Africa and banned their rulers from entering into treaties with any other

European nations. From the 1870s, European trading companies such as the National Africa Company (renamed Royal Niger Company and later United Africa Company) Messrs Miller and Co, the Central Africa Trading Company, James Pinnock & Co and others began to penetrate further into the hinterland of Nigeria. They established trading stations in places like Ughoton, Ode Itsekiri, Benin River, Escravos River, Aboh, Onitsha and Lokoja. This period was characterized by increased competition among European firms which operated in the lower Niger.⁶⁷ The Delta people who had objected to the European merchants trading to the interior were still more hostile when the different firms were amalgamated into one powerful company and they did not cease in their efforts to hamper its trade. On the whole, the company proved too strong for them but from time to time, stations were sacked by up-country people at their instigation and the company suffered. Especially before the grant of the charter, determined efforts were made to chase the company from the river. As a result, by 1894, the last Governor of the River, Chief Nana Olomu had fallen out of favour with the British and was dealt with. Caught by the circumstances of his office, Nana was accused of being a slave dealer, using his agents in Urhobo land to terrorize the people and obstruct free trade. To get at him, Ebrohimi (his headquarters) was bombarded. Nana escaped but later gave himself up and was deported first to Calabar and later to Accra.⁶⁸

The removal of Nana, which was expected to guarantee free trade and ensure peace in the hinterland markets, backfired. Trade suffered, as there was nobody to be held responsible for the misbehavior of the Itsekiris and other traders on the Benin River. Some European traders like John Holt started to call for his reinstatement. And so, something urgently needed to be done by the European traders and the imperial administration of the Niger Coast Protectorate to fill the vacuum created by Nana's removal and deportation.⁶⁹

In 1891, a native court was established to take care of the affairs of the Itsekiri but the power and influence of Nana had rendered it ineffective. This court was resuscitated as a kind of native authority along the Benin River and in 1896, minor courts were opened in which the local chiefs sat without direct interference from the European officers.⁷⁰ The clear implication of this development was that the British officers of the Niger court protectorate had started to see the relevance of using traditional institutions in running public affairs. As a result, a renowned Itsekiri chief, Dogho (Dore) Numa who had demonstrated loyalty to the British was employed in that position to control and represent the British in terms of trade.

CONCLUSION

From the above, it is irrefutable that the Itsekiris witnessed significant economic and industrial involvement which has aided their growth. They were also engaged

in intergroup relations with their neighbors. Apart from these, the Itsekiri's encounter with the Europeans had resulted in trade and the Itsekiri's were among the middlemen controlling the trade. Changes in the traditional trade system began gradually from the pre-colonial period when the Europeans became uncomfortable with their position at the coast and desired to explore the trade potentials of the interior people. The narrative changed with the Europeans direct involvement in the interior.

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