

Historicising Local Gin (*Ogogoro*) And the Culture of Drinking Among the Arogbo-Ijaw of Ondo State Up To 1970

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Abstract

Local gin is variously referred to as *Kái-kái*, *Bàbàèrìn*, *Etonto*, Ijaw Tuwo *Wuru*, *KuroWuruPush-me-I-push-you*, *Sapele-water*, *Ekpetesi*, *Ogogoro*, and *Pàràgàin* in many places including the coastal and riverine areas of Ondo state. The places where it is produced within the area of study include all the communities in Arogbo kingdom. The inhabitants of Arogbo kingdom are known to be predominantly fishermen by virtue of the territory which is primarily riverine and coastal. *Ogogoro* production is also central in the socio-economic life of the people. Despite its negative effects on the consumers and several efforts in discouraging the consumption of this *Ogogoro*, it is still very much popular among the Arogbo-Ijaw as it serves several socio-cultural purposes such as marriage rite, burial rites, festivals, appeasing the ancestors and social gathering. This paper x-rays the production, historical ascendancy, socio-cultural and economic significance of *Ogogoro* among the Arogbo-Ijaw. Historical methods such as oral interviews and secondary sources were used in the collection, collation and interpretation of data. The findings reveal that, the consumptions of *Ogogoro* which was a taboo before this period is now part of youth's way of life and that no marriage is consummated without *Ogogoro*.

Keywords: *Ogogoro*, Palm Wine, Libation, Arogbo-Ijaw, Riverine, Pre-colonial.

Introduction

In any human community, the geographical terrain has a way of fashioning the socio-economic life of the dwellers. The Arogbo-Ijaw of Ondo state is not an exception. The nature, type and pattern of a people's food consumption and drinking habits are direct reflection of their overall culture and behavioural ethics. Available evidences show that the people of coastal and riverine Nigeria like any other cultural group in different climes of the world, relished in alcohol usage, which in the area of study composed of palm wine from the raffia palm, known respectively among the Arogbo-Ijaw as *Ijaw Tuwo Wuru* which is generally referred to as *Ogogoro* by many ethnic groups. The drink serves its peculiar social and economic functions and it proved to be a lucrative business, which provides employment to a large segment of the populace who found their livelihood in it either as palm wine tapers or distillers of gin or even marketers of the products or in translation of it into other industrial usage (Obot, 2012). *Ogogoro* has various socio-economic and cultural functions among the people of Nigeria especially the Arogbo-Ijaw of Ondo state. It is used in rituals, marriages, oath taking, festivals and entertainment. It is presented as a mark of respect and dignity. Though the coastal and riverine regions of Ondo state are often primarily associated with the international trade linked to European contact, economic activities relating to food have been very important from time immemorial (Korieh, 2003).

The basic alcoholic beverage produced and consumed in the area was palm-wine tapped from the raffia-palm. From the fifteenth century contacts between the Europeans and peoples of coastal Nigerian empires and kingdoms especially during the trans-Atlantic slave trade era, brought new varieties of alcoholic beverages primarily, gin and whisky. Thus, beginning from this period, gins especially schnapps from Holland became integrated in local culture of the peoples of coastal and riverine areas and even assumed ritual position. This situation was also peculiar to the Ijaw of Ondo state, especially the Arogbo-Ibe extraction. It must be noted that, prior to the contact of the people of coastal and riverine Nigeria with the Europeans, alcohol was derived mainly from the raffia palm trees which were numerous in the region. These palms were tapped and the palm wine collected and drunk at various occasions.

From the era of the trans- Atlantic slave trade, the import of gin, rum and whisky became prevalent among the Ijaw of Ondo state. These were used in exchange for slaves and to pay homage to the traditional rulers. Even in the nineteenth century when legitimate trade supplanted the obnoxious slave trade, alcoholic beverages of various sorts continued to play important roles in communities (Odejide, 2006). Centuries of importation of gin into the area led to the entrenchment of imported gin in the culture of the people. No cultural events such

as marriage, naming, burial, meeting of elders, peacemaking, incantation, libation, offering to the ancestors, and gifts to important personalities took place without the use of *Ogogoro*. *Ogogoro* was soon integrated into traditional medicine and was used for mixing various herbs and roots as remedies to various health conditions. Furthermore, *Ogogoro* was used as collateral in business negotiations, for payment of fines in local traditional courts and councils especially council of elders, as store of wealth, as measurements of wealth and as an alternative to currency. This practice is still common among the people till date (Dumbili, 2013).

The Historical Ascendancy and Production of Local Gin

The proliferation of local gin production popularly called *Ogogoro* appears to be a development of the early colonial period. A brief examination of the possible origin of *Ogogoro* production in Nigeria and consequently in the coastal and riverine regions of Nigeria suffices to point out how it may be linked to the colonial political economy. The prohibition of gin imports in the early period of colonial rule, and the collapse of cash-crop economy in Nigeria during the period of international economic recession of 1929-33 made it difficult for indigenes to be able to patronize imported trade spirit. According to some traditions, a man known as Stocky James Iso, a native of Calabar, was said to have been the first man to distill *Ogogoro* in Nigeria. He worked with Paterson Zochonis (PZ) and later with G.W Griffiths, another British firm. While he was working with these European firms, he had the opportunity to travel to New York for a period of one year within which he was able to work for three families as household servant. Thereafter, Iso learnt the art of distilling *Moonshine* before his return. Iso was imprisoned for three years between 1929 and 1931 for stealing the sum of £95 from Paterson Zochonis. By the time he completed his jail term, he began to sell his skills in distillation for £25 per lesson to interested individuals. Other evidence suggests alternative beginnings of *Ogogoro* distillation in Nigeria. For instance, it is also possible that it was acquired from hospitals and laboratories where spirits were distilled for medical and scientific purposes (Ovie, 2013).

However, it is apparent that most of the people arrested and tried by the colonial court in the 1930s could be linked back to either Mr. Iso or a person he trained. Following Mr Iso's experience, the production of *Ogogoro* was done through the boiling of fermented palm wine popularly called *Pami*. In addition to palm wine, the equipment used by the local distillers consisted of simple equipment that could be easily located. These included a dugout canoe, or a carefully designed wooden rectangular structure similar to a box, a big drum, three or four pieces of connecting copper pipe, water, local black soap or palm oil, tapping knife, firewood, and receiving containers, these were assembled to boil and extract the alcoholic

content of the palm wine, and to filter the distillate into the receiving water. (Interview with Weinoh, 2021). In the process of boiling the palm wine, the alcohol-containing vapour is controlled and condensed back to a potent liquid form. The final product can be distilled many times to increase potency. A minimum of three hundred litres kegs of palm wine is exposed to between three to four hours of vigorous boiling and the vapour is passed through a wooden pipe into another fifty litres kegs of semi-*Ogogoro* called *Seimo*. (Interview with Serun, 2022). These fifty litres of *Seimo* will also be distilled to produce twenty-five litres keg of *Ogogoro*.

Finally, the distilling of fifty litres of *Ogogoro* will produce the strong alcoholic drink called “Turn” which is collected into a small litre bottle. This first extract is called “Turn”, and it is so strong that it can be diluted with twenty litres of water and will still produce intoxicating *Ogogoro*. The Arogbo-Ibe, with its many coastal and riverine waterways offered an ideal place for the production of *Ogogoro* in large quantities because of the availability of raffia palm which was the main raw material for the production of plan wine. Initially, in the entire pre-colonial Niger Delta region, trade in spirit was only accessible to some people who could afford it. As trade regulations and later the global depression limited its accessibility to very rich people, the distillation of *Ogogoro* began in earnest. It did not take long and production was made less expensive through the additional use of sugar during fermentation (Interview with Moro, 2021).

Local Gin and the Socio-Cultural and Economic Life of the Arogbo-Ijaw

Like palm-wine, the alcoholic content of the *raffia* palm variety is much less but in addition more sugary. It is at its best when consumed fresh. This milky substance is obtained from the *raffia* palm in similar production process with wine from oil-palm tree. *Raffia* palms are concentrated in marshy areas near streams and rivers, and though occasionally, they grow in upland environment even in residential areas where grooves and marshes thrive. In some communities it is planted consciously in residential and non-residential areas. The *raffia* palm is indigenous to Ijaw land and other ethnic groups sharing parts of the Niger Delta. The tree was plentiful in the area and even today, in spite of the influence of urbanization and the clearing of hitherto bushes and farmlands for human settlement and for industry. Until the plantation economy of the 1950s and 1960s, the trees were not necessarily planted by man but sprouted by themselves by the process of seed dispersion whose agent could be man, animals or naturally by the dropping of over-ripe seeds from its bunch.

In the pre-colonial traditional economy, palm- wine tapping and *Ogogoro* production were lucrative businesses that offered employment to a wide range of the population even as a good percentage of others were afforded gainful employment through their trading and distribution of the products. At this point in time, the present derogatory or low social status

symbol, which the palm-wine tapper seems to assume today was unknown. At that time, he was a respected professional in the same way farmers, iron-smiths or craft designers were regarded. The Arogbo-Ijaw believed that the production and sale of *Ogogoro* had always been one of the principal occupations for all able-bodied men in their community. Marketing and distribution of *Ogogoro* provided employment opportunities to the women-folk. However, in recent times, men are also actively involved in the marketing and distribution of local gin. While the men did the palm wine-tapping and *Ogogoro* distillation, it was left for the women to market it, making it reach the target audience. Elders of the villages cannot recall a time when this was not the case, but they suppose that hunting and fishing must have been more important in pre-colonial days than at present. Prior to the advent of Western imperialism and the peripheral incorporation of Nigerian economy into the global capitalist system, alcohol was already familiar to generations of the peoples, who made use of their indigenous palm wine.

With the introduction of the foreign and imported spirits, the indigenous drinks did not dissipate but came to be consumed side by side with imported spirituous liquor—a major item of European merchandise both during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and legitimate trade eras. With the foisting of colonial rule on the peoples of the regions, the trend came to be that both the indigenous drinks and the foreign liquor came to complement and to compete with each other. It must be noted that, the invention of *Ogogoro*, and the adaptation of the distillation process to local tastes and practices, led to a reduction in the price of spirits. This made concentrated *Ogogoro*, accessible to both the rich and the poor, and consequently distribution and consumption increased because more people could afford to buy it. The oil boom of the 1970s was associated with an increase in consumption across Nigeria, and *Ogogoro* consumption went up further along with all other types of consumption. The expanded demand could be met by setting up production in the creeks of the Niger delta, and other coastal and riverine areas that were not easy to access by road. Similarly, most trade took place by water. In the early period of independence, *Ogogoro* was often traded from the Niger delta and the eastern Lagos lagoon towards Lagos and Ikorodu along with palm oil. As the trade in palm produce and other legal commodities moved increasingly towards the roads, the trade in *Ogogoro* expanded. Alcohol consumption among the people like any other part of the globe was a multifaceted communal and ritual affair.

Alcohol was therefore, part and parcel of life of the people ranging from naming ceremonies, entertaining guests at weddings, boat regatta, chieftaincy installments and funeral obsequies to pouring of libations to the ancestors. Consumption of *Ogogoro* among the Ijaw of Ondo State in the pre-colonial era was the exclusive preserve of men and it played a crucial role in political, religious and socio-cultural relationships. However, in recent times, women and young ones now drink *Ogogoro* (Interview with Serun, 2022). The drinking of

Ogogoro was culturally tolerated as part of ceremonial practices. Children and underage youths were not allowed to take *Ogogoro* drinks and in cases where they were permitted to do so, it was under the control of an adult. This assertion was corroborated by Mumboh Daniel when he stated:

Younger ones were barred from drinking *Ogogoro* in the 1960s, infact it was a serious offence which attracted sever purnishment, They were even afraid to inhale it while elderly men were drinking *Ogogoro* in the house. Any young one caught drinking *Ogogoro* was either made to uproot a big tree or publicly flogged. This was the situation before now (Interview with Mumboh 2022)

Serun D, summed it up when he added:

Ogogoro was guided like gold in our community community in the early 1960s compared to now that, young boys drink it like water. Drinking *Ogogoro* was an exclusive preserve of elderly men in our societies. It was an offence for youths to drink *Ogogoro*. Defaulters were summarily dealt with. (Interview with Serun, 2022)

The foregoing suggested the sacred nature of *Ogogoro* in most communities among the Ijaw of Ondo State. It is important to note that, there is a sharp difference in the way and manner *Ogogoro* is being consumed among the youths between the first quarter of the 1960s and what is obtainable in our societies now. The role played by *Ogogoro* among the Arogbo-Ijaw occupied areas included fostering communal unity and friendship. It was also a key requirement for the consummation of marriages. It was consumed at almost all ceremonies including cultural festivals, chieftaincy enthronements, child dedications and even funerals. Subsequently, even adult males who were expected to drink were required to drink responsibly. The people also used *Ogogoro* as a base for the preparation of certain charms or medicinal components. In this regard it served as conduit for the quick conveyance of the medicinal plant or its component to the blood for enhanced medicinal performance (Heap, 2008).

Today, *Ogogoro* is sold almost everywhere in Nigeria, but it is a commodity that can always be found in motor parks where public cabs and commuter vehicles are loaded for local and long distance journeys. Whereas in the past, adults from any community controlled the consumption of alcohol and applied punitive measures to those involved in criminal activity; but sadly, this is no longer the case. Female drinking, which has increased to often

problematic levels, is usually associated with prostitution and by extension to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The drinking of *Ogogoro* among young men including undergraduates is often associated with rebellion, protest, and social deviancy. The increased consumption of *Ogogoro* was associated with a decline in social control. Whereas in the past, adults from any community controlled the consumption of alcohol and applied punitive measures to those involved in criminal activities. Generally, the most frequent pattern of alcohol consumption in Nigeria is heavy episodic drinking (rather than moderate drinking). Among the Nigerian security agencies for instance, the consumption of alcohol had often helped its personnel to cope with the violence of conflict. There was a similar combination of alcohol and violence among the smugglers and consumers of *Ogogoro*, as many of the people were involved in the unregulated trade in *Ogogoro* used the drink to fortify themselves during their clandestine trading operations. Others consumed *Ogogoro* to prepare for criminal activities such as robberies and burglaries, which began to increase in many parts of Nigeria in the mid-1980s and 1990s. In response, many people who were at threat of such crimes, including lorry and bus drivers and conductors, but also the local vigilantes that sometimes organised to fight against such criminals, increasingly relied on alcohol as part of the social and spiritual preparation for their tasks. *Ogogoro* is also an important drug for most of the rebel groups operating in the Niger Delta. Like security agencies in the 1960s, the members of such groups often drink individually to deal with the stress of battle and evasion. In some groups, they must also drink *Ogogoro* in order to fit in and prove themselves as real men. In this way, *Ogogoro* has played its own role in fueling violence linked to insurgency (Ligunaah, & Dakubo, 2003).

In the socio-cultural milieu, like other pre-colonial African ethnic groups and cultural system, the Ijaw are deeply religious and believe in the existence of the spirit world. To an average Ijaw man, the spirits of the departed ancestors still have direct link with the living. It is the ancestors that protect the living from evil malevolence of other spirits and from curses inflicted by evil spirits who masquerade as humans or as agents of such dangerous groups. There are yet other spirits, which have their peculiarities such as water spirits, forests spirits, spiritual husband and so on. Spiritual husbands for example are known to afflict people and cause them to have spirit spouses, for which reason they are unable to live normal marital and sexual lives. Such people in most cases as in the case of women are unable to get pregnant or have miscarriage if they got married if the spiritual husband is not completely deactivated in the life of such woman. To deactivate the spirit husband, making libation of *Ogogoro* and food concoctions is necessary. (Ikùèjubè, 2005) The *Ogogoro* is poured on the floor in a secluded area and the spirits husband is invoked and elaborate offerings are made to get them freed. Women, who committed adultery and were involved in one form of abomination or the other, were likewise subjected to absolution.

In cleansing of abominations and purifications in most communities, materials or *Ogogoro* also played significant role during libation. This could be presided over by elders or those commissioned by tradition to do so in the community. Oath and ordeal rituals also involved the use of *Ogogoro*. There are different dimensions of this: claim of innocence in grievous accusation such as murder, theft, or adultery. Others include war-oath, medicine-oath or agreement or business oath in which case, one offers not to break his own side of the bargain or offers to die if he does otherwise. In other words, if the perjurers fail to live up to the oath obligation, he is to lose his own life or very serious things may happen to him at a given sign. It is, perhaps, in traditional marriage ceremonies that the importance of *Ogogoro* appears to demonstrate itself the most. In marriage ceremonies *Ogogoro* is a *sine qua non*. From its beginning to the end, almost every step in the discussion of traditional marriage and its consummation is done with *Ogogoro*, and the absence of it is an indication of disrespect and as such, the marriage ceremony may be punctuated by series of payment of penalties (Interview with Serun, 2022). Beginning from the first visit after eloping has occurred, the representatives of the prospective suitor present bottles of *Ogogoro*, telling the father of the maiden and his relatives who are sent for, that they are with their daughter (indicating that she is not missing). From this moment, if the drinks are accepted, the marriage proposal has commenced. It is important to note, however, that in marriage ceremonies like other serious traditional engagement and festivals, *Ogogoro* takes centre stage which is used in officiating marriage ceremony. Marriage is a sacred institution ordained by God. It is not something brief or ephemeral.

When prayers are offered during the marriage, *Ogogoro* is used for libation, and the husband and wife are expected to drink out of it. This is done when the father of the bride or the eldest man in the extended family as the case may be, poured out *Ogogoro* into a cup and after prayers, offered it to the groom, and when the groom drinks, he also gives it to the bride to drink (Ikùèjubè, 2005). Considering the fact that palm-wine was highly desired or demanded in all occasions, be it the numerous festivals, rituals, marriages or even in personal need such as entertainment of friends and visitors, palm wine tapping was respected as a lucrative business that kept the tapper busy all year round. However, *Ogogoro* later became widely used in medicinal preparation. Medicine men or herbalists generally demanded it from their clients for the mixing of concoctions, which included roots, shrubs and leaves or other medicinal properties. It is believed that alcohol acted as catalyst in extraction of pharmacological properties for which reason, they were preferred to water.

In the social sphere, the offering of *Ogogoro* to a visitor was an expression of love and hospitality. The next crucial item to offer a friend or visitor after *Ogogoro* was food and drink especially in the pre-colonial era. It was not important how often the friend visited, in so far there is *Ogogoro* left in the cellar or family bar, it was customary to offer it as an

expression of love and appreciation. In funeral ceremonies, such as wake-keep *Ogogoro* was used by young men to keep them awake all through the night. From 1960s, like any other social gatherings, individual and group consumption of alcohol provided a kind of liberating power that enabled the individual to overcome sleep or fear and to overcome obstacles to social discourse. This paved the way for the promotion of social commitment, cohesion and shared identity (Interview with Serun, 2022).

Conclusion

Ogogoro is well entrenched in the culture of the peoples of Niger Delta especially the Arogo- Ijaw playing different roles at different historical times and acquiring various meanings. Given centuries of large scale production, importation and consumption of *Ogogoro* the role it plays in the economy, socio-cultural usage, entertainment, social cohesion, diplomacy, conflict, gender and class relations as well as cultural creations in the history of coastal and riverine Nigerian communities cannot be over-emphasized. Although the consumption of alcohol clashes morally with the civilizing mission of the missionaries, the financial exigencies of the colonial government led to the intensification of the importation of alcoholic drinks on which high import duties were placed. Efforts of the colonial government to control the type of alcohol that was consumed produced new forms of entrepreneurship among the people of Nigeria. The impact of colonial alcohol policies on indigenous socio-economic lives, endeavours, actions and reactions of indigenous people to these policies are very significant. Since it is not as injurious as the colonial master made us to believe in order to sell their own products during the period.

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