

Indigenous Economic Agency and the Commercial Development of Aba in Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria

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Abstract

Aba, popularly called Enyimba City, rose to greatness even before the advent of colonialism in eastern Nigeria. As a commercial hub in the region, it owes its evolution to two principal factors often neglected by previous authors, namely (1) the serene natural features and (2) the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) with stranger elements. Unfortunately, most authors have attributed its rise to colonialism which in our view was a clog in the wheel of the development of the city. This Study, which adopts qualitative research methodology by using the historical descriptive approach, argues that the coming of the colonialists did not significantly lead to the evolution of Aba as a commercial town. Rather, the ingenuity of the Ngwa people in trade, education and industry led to the rise of Aba Ngwa commercial town. Aba plays host to three major markets: (1) Eke Oha, (2) Cemetery, and (3) Ariaria international markets. All of these markets predated colonialism. Not boasting of any unique natural feature, save the Aza River, the table land, which encourages farming, existence of some valuable minerals, and openness to visitors, accounts for the sustenance of the town after the devastating civil war. Other factors which followed the war had no less effect in the rise and growth of Aba. This study reveals that with the sustenance of ingenuity of pre-colonial Ngwa people, the city of Aba would rise to an unprecedented height in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Colonialism, Development, Evolution, Industry, Market

Introduction

Aba is one of eastern Nigeria's most important commercial centers. The city, which is also known as the "Enyimba City," has its economic importance that predates colonial administration, and historical evidence indicates that the indigenous Ngwa people's inventiveness played a major role in Aba's commercial endeavours. Located in what is now Abia State, Aba's development as a commercial hub can be ascribed to a number of elements, such as its advantageous geographic position, its thriving entrepreneurial and cultural legacy, and the ability of its citizens to adjust to both historical and economic shifts.

Aba is situated within Abia State in the southeast region of Nigeria between latitudes 5°07'N and longitudes 7°22'E. Due to its relatively flat terrain, heavy yearly rainfall, and humid temperature, the city is located in a tropical rainforest zone. Umuahia borders Aba to the north, Mbaise borders it to the west, Ikot Ekpene and Abak in Akwa Ibom State borders it to the east, and Asa, Ndoki, and the Imo River borders it to the south. Its development as a commercial hub has been greatly aided by its advantageous location at the meeting point of important road networks that link Port Harcourt, Owerri, Umuahia, and Ikot Ekpene (Nwaguru 1973)—see Figure 1.

By highlighting the significance of pre-colonial trade networks, indigenous industries, and the impact of significant historical events like the Nigerian Civil War, this study challenges the widely held belief that colonial influences were the primary cause of Aba's economic success. Despite its devastation, the war brought about a new wave of industrialization, especially in the manufacturing and unofficial trade sectors, including the now-booming clothing and shoe businesses.

Background of the Study

A good take-off point in discussing the evolution of Aba as a commercial center should consider briefly, the primordial origin of Aba and its environs. The aborigines of Aba belong to the sub ethnic group of the Igbo called the Ngwa. Situated in the tropical rain forest of the southern Igbo plain now in the southeastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria, it is surrounded in the north by Olokoro Clan of Umuahia, Mbaise on the west, Ikot Ekpene and Abak on the east. Asa, Ndoki and the Imo River constitute the southern neighbors of the clan. It is bounded to the north by latitude 5° and 6° to the north and longitudes 7° to 8° east and covers an area of about 520 square miles, inhabited by half a million people as at the 1963 census. It lies in a flat plain with the highest elevation of 100 feet in the basin of the Aza River in the southeast. The average rain fall is between 80 to 100 inches with an average annual temperature of 80°F. (Nwaguru, 2012).

The land is fertile for food production and, until recently, almost everyone engaged in farming. This was combined with petty trading in which everyone had one good or another, mainly excess farm products, to exchange whether at home or in the village markets. The Aba people had a tradition of pooling labor to break farm bottlenecks. This confirms the reason pooling resources for commercial purposes was not strange to them and assisted greatly in revolutionizing the town into a commercial center. So, it would not be an overstatement to attribute the evolution of Aba as a commercial centre with the introduction of a credit institution, the *Isusu* (relational loan schemes), which was a means of capital formation during pre-colonial and post-colonial Igbo land.

Aba did not possess any remarkable natural feature that could be an attraction, but the people were largely farmers producing yams, cocoyam, cassava, maize and assorted vegetables, particularly pumpkin. There was an iron industry at Abaala which smelted and smithed various iron implements. Akwette became part of Aba Division during the colonial period. The products of this industry were also exchanged in the various markets in Aba. The clan also possessed the famous Ekeoha market where all the neighboring clans exchanged their excess agricultural and manufactured goods. Myriads of other markets existed in every Aba village but the Ekeoha was the biggest and a collection center and it took place every eight days. This market and products exchanged in it made Aba the rallying point of all her neighbors. Other features that contributed to the evolution of Aba as an important commercial center include the following: strategic location, existence of individuals with entrepreneurial spirit, physical features, migrants, introduction of bicycle, railway, the Nigerian Civil War, shoe and garment industries, and the iron workers. These aspects are further discussed in the

appropriate sections.

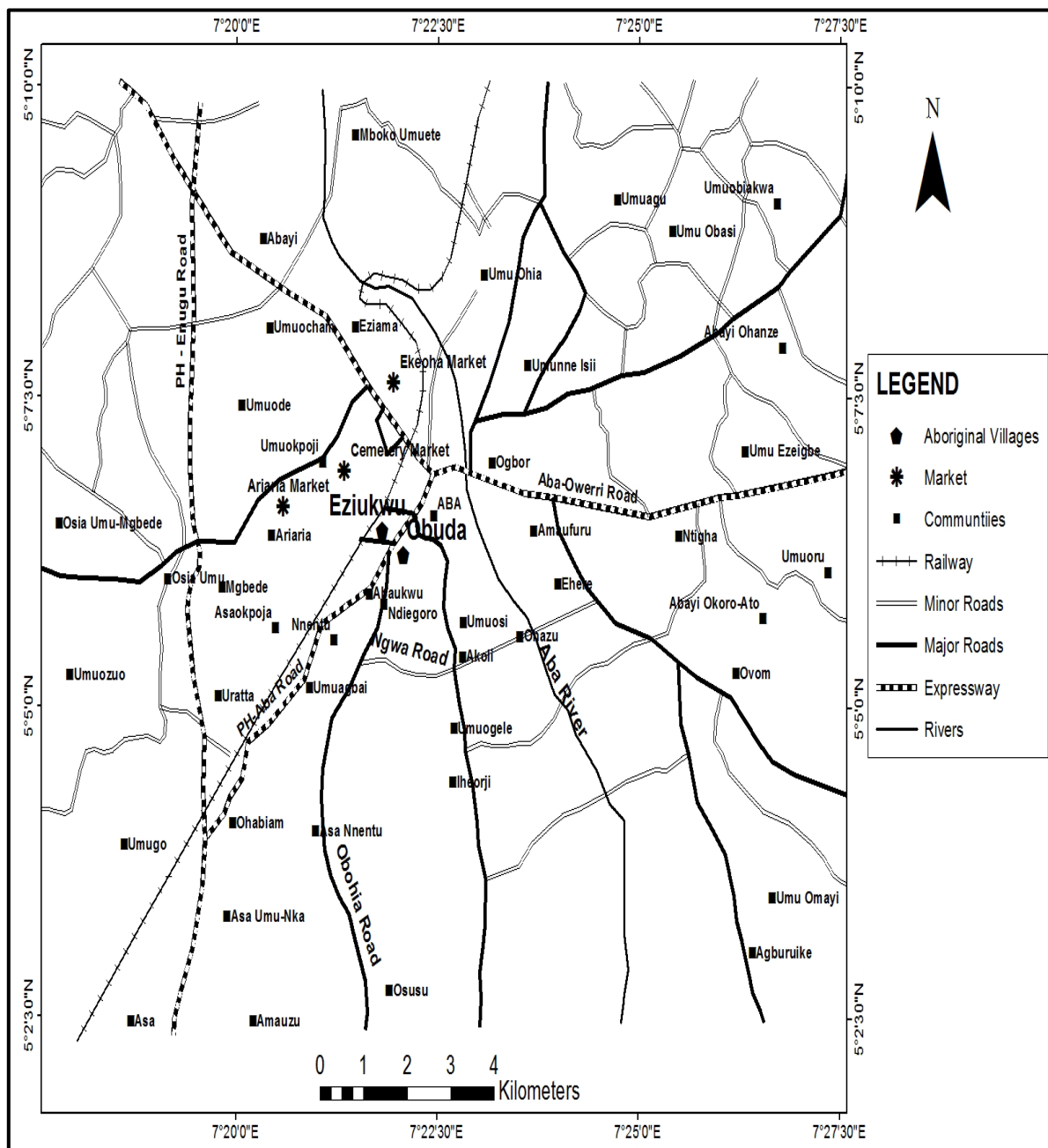


Figure 1: Map of Aba and Its Metropolis

Source: Olatunde Olatoye, Cartographer, Department of Geography, University of Port Harcourt

The study is a scholarly attempt to decolonize the history of Aba and debunk statements like that of Trevor Roper who believed that every development in Africa came as a result of its colonial experience, and reorient the historical narrative of Aba's commercial evolution. This perspective returns agency to the indigenous Ngwa people and acknowledges their industrial, cooperative, and entrepreneurial brilliance as the cornerstone of Aba's economic identity, in contrast to many previous studies that attribute colonialism as the main driver of urban and economic development.

Also, the choice of Aba in this research is because Aba represents a grassroots indigenous commercial model unlike Lagos which developed as a colonial administrative and port city. Invariably Aba presents a non-colonial model of urban and commercial development. Lagos and Kano have gotten a lot of scholarly attention, but Aba has not gotten as much; therefore, its contributions to Nigeria's commercial development are frequently disregarded or misinterpreted. By assuring more equitable regional and ethnic representation, research on Aba fills a gap in Nigerian economic historiography. It is on this backdrop that the study examines the evolution of Aba as a commercial center in eastern Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research methodology and used the descriptive research approach. This means that words and the “What is?” question are emphasized.

The study also made use of primary and secondary data sources. For primary data, oral information was retrieved from entrepreneurs in Aba; these entrepreneurs were actively engaged in shoe making and other commercial businesses in Aba. Traditional rulers were also contacted. The secondary data were retrieved from books, journals, and Internet sources.

Theoretical Framework

The study employed three theories to help provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that led to the rise of Aba as a commercial hub. These theories are (1) Modernization Theory, (2) Dependency Theory, and (3) Indigenous Entrepreneurial Theory.

According to Modernization Theory, social and economic advancement proceeds in a straight line from conventional to contemporary economic systems. The theory, which was put forth by Walt Rostow in 1960, describes the stages of economic growth, which include mass consumption, take-off, drive to maturity, traditional society, and preconditions for take-off.

The evolution of Aba from an agrarian community to a commercial hub in the city corresponds with the phases of modernity. The transition from a traditional economy to an industrialized one is symbolized by the establishment of the railway system, the growth of industries like the shoe and clothing sectors, and the development of infrastructure (Nwaguru, 1973). Although Modernization Theory sheds light on Aba's economic transformations, it falls short in explaining the contribution of both external economic factors and indigenous entrepreneurship.

Dependency Theory, which was established by academics like Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) and Andre Gunder Frank (1967), contends that underdevelopment of peripheral economies is caused by external capitalist forces taking advantage of them. Since the colonial economic system incorporated Aba into international trade networks in ways that gave priority to the interests of European powers, this viewpoint is pertinent to Aba's commercial development.

Aba's economy was set up by the colonial government to act as a hub for the collecting of raw materials, especially palm oil, shipped to Europe. Economic dependency lasted into the post-colonial era as a result of the development of British commercial companies and laws that limited local economic sovereignty (Meagher, 2010).

Indigenous Entrepreneurial Theory emphasizes how traditional business methods, cultural values, and regional economic players propel economic growth. This idea highlights the inventiveness and resiliency of indigenous cultures in contrast to modernization and dependency theories which concentrate on outside influences.

The Ngwa people's entrepreneurial inventiveness played a major role in Aba's

development as a commercial center. While talented craftspeople in metalworking, textile manufacture and shoemaking helped diversify the city's economy, the utilization of traditional banking systems like *Isusu* promoted business expansion (Hagen, 1965). In addition, the commercial ecology was enhanced by migration patterns and the arrival of traders from Mbaise, Bende, and other settlements, which enabled Aba to sustain its economic importance in spite of its limited infrastructure.

Existence of Personalities with Entrepreneurial Spirit

The liberal scholars have averred that the underlying cause of underdevelopment in the Third World is lack of habit of savings and investment. Indeed Hagen (1963) has declared that the culture and traditions of Third World countries do not encourage savings due to bottlenecks in production and, hence, there is the fear of investment. But the existence of groups and individual entrepreneurs such as the Nkwerre and the Aro merchants who were making finances available for traders at an interest seems to puncture this theory and therefore seeks to blame the retardation of development in this region not on any internal factors but the manner in which the region was integrated into the world capitalist unequal exchange system, which subtly overtook the inhabitants of this region. Chief Ogbuji Ukaegbu of Aba was revered to have been a headman in one of Jaja's canoe fleet. In an oral interview with Chief Egbulefu, this Ogbuji led the first British to his compound in Aba where they mounted their sleeping bags and tents in his compound which turned out to be the site of the present Museum of Colonial History in Aba. And having settled them, he returned to his duty post at Opobo and was given gifts by the British officials and the personnel of the Royal Niger Company for a successful execution of his assignment. He also had employees in the new legitimate trade who assisted him in the buying of palm oil and palm kernel. In fact, he was one of Jaja's agents from the hinterland (Egbulefu, 2016). Engineer Emmanuel Adaelu recounted how he felt dissatisfied being a teacher and had an inner longing to start entrepreneurial activity in manufacturing. It was his drive, although with limited education, that led him to establish one of the flourishing production enterprises in Aba that has survived the 20th Century and is waxing stronger in the 21st Century as the Home Charm Paints. According to Adaelu, "This industry became the first indigenous paint manufacturing company in eastern Nigeria" (2018, 61).

The paint industry drew further developments to Aba and its environs when he established a twin company named Chemlap whose main business was to produce locally the major raw material for paint production in Nigeria. Such entrepreneurs like Adaelu were so foresighted that they had the interest of his country at heart when they refused to leave the control of the new companies. In fact, Adaelu partnered with Tai Cheng of China in the hands of expatriates but resolved that employment would be accessible when the control of that company remained in the hands of indigenes. The products of Chemlap later became the source of raw materials for plastics, synthetic glasses and leather works. The company also produces various forms of synthetic products that can be used for paints, textile, paper, adhesives, and woodworks, including cotton fibers and all forms of synthetic threads for woven and nonwoven products. Chief Ananaba of Obegu and Nwanunu of Umuacha, to mention these two stalwarts, stood out as people who possessed the aggressive spirit of entrepreneurship that raised capital against all odds and engaged in trade in palm oil with the coastal middlemen. Nwanunu was a merchant financier that raised capital for small and big time entrepreneurs through his *Isusu* or *Ogbo* business (Nwabughuogu, 1984).

Strategic Location

No one denies the importance of geographical location on the rise of states. Even the great western Sudanese states flourished at major trade junctions. Aba lies along the west bank of the Aza River and at the intersection of roads leading to Port Harcourt, Owerri, Umuahia, Ikot Ekpene and Ikot Ibasi. The strategic location made it a collection center for agricultural products en-route the coast following the establishment of railway by the British in 1913. It was peopled by the Ngwa clan of Igbo. Nonetheless, Aba assumed a larger territorial dimension with the advent of colonialism which, due to administrative convenience, came to stand for four main groups of people of the Old Aba division, namely the Ngwa, the Ndoki and Asa, Etche and part of Ika and Annang villages.

By 1953, an administrative action transferred Etche and Ika-na-Annang villages in Ndoki to Ahoada and Abak divisions, respectively (Nwaguru, 2012). From that period on, Aba became a reference point and an identifying mark for all the clans that made up the old Aba Division. Being the administrative and commercial headquarters of the division, it also hosted a station of the eastern railway that ran from Port Harcourt in the south to the north. Figure 1 shows the original Ngwa clan of Aba and its adjoining neighbors. It is made up of many villages, namely Eziukwu and Obuda, Abaukwu, Osusu, Eziam, Umuokpoji, Asaokpoja, Uratta, Ohazu, Nnentu, Umuagbai, Ndiegoro, Ohabiam, Amaufuru, Iheorji, Umuogele, Akoli, Umunneisii, and Umuosi.

Impact of Physical Features: Aza and the Imo River

Perhaps the major natural feature in the basin is the Imo River and its tributary, the Aza River. The significance of rivers as communication channels before the construction of modern roads remains inestimable in the economic life of any people that possesses it. In the case of Aba, the two rivers of Aza in the heart of the town and Imo River at its southern boundary provided a great commercial and cultural link between the people and their neighbors.

Through the Aza River, other Ngwa clans accessed Aba from Okponton to Azumini. It was the connecting link through which the Ekeoha market was accessed from its central axis. The Imo River connected it with the states of eastern Niger Delta, particularly Opobo. It was through the Imo River that the Omuma, Umagbai Opobo and other eastern Delta areas accessed Aba. The agricultural products of Aba and other Ngwa clans reached the Delta states through the Imo River. King Jaja's trade routes crisscrossed the Imo River through Owerri, Aba, Bende, and other trade centers of the hinterland.

Migrants and Their Impact in Aba: The Aro, Nkwere, and Opobo

Before the advent of colonialism in Igbo land, Aba hosted visitors from diverse areas, especially the Igbo from surrounding towns and the Delta region. Among the migrants within the Igbo areas that visited and sometimes settled among the Aba and made significant impact in its economic and social life were the Aro, the Nkwere, and the Opobo. From the 1800s, during the era of slave trade, the Aro made significant impact on the economic and social life of the Aba Ngwa in the organization of slaves for onward shipment for the European merchants at the coast. They also performed religio-judicial functions backed by the revered powers of the dreaded *IbinuUkpabi* of Arochuku. The Aro who were the agents of the dreaded oracle the *IbinuUkpabi* of Arochuku adjudicated on the moral and social lives of Aba and traversed the area as they covered Ibibio and Annang communities, Cross River and the Delta areas. With the onset of legitimate trade, the Aro organized an intricate trade

network that webbed the eastern region into a commercial nexus, linking the Ngwa, Ibibio land, Cross River, east and western Delta states.

In many Ngwa communities were various Aro settlements that bore appendage of Aro names. Such Aro settlements bear AroNgwa, AroUnuekwe, AroUmunka, and so on. The impact of these settlements cannot be overemphasized. This study had earlier pointed out that most entrepreneurs got their capitals from collective savings of a group of people and this savings scheme was called *Isusu*. The Ngwa also established their own indigenous *Isusu* clubs. The Aro and Nkwere were known to be industrious as well as exploitative. They were also shrewd in business and this impacted the communities in which they settled. Apart from helping their host, the Ngwa, in farm work, some of them occupied positions as village heads which, during their tenure, they engaged in tangible community development projects such as building of primary schools at various parts of Ngwa land. Pastor Daniel Michael testified that the prosperity of the Aro in Ngwa communities attracted the jealousy of Ngwa men who began to remind them that they were strangers. He recalls Aliche Sunday of Umuagbai, whom they prevented from building a brick building because he had an Aro ancestry. The Ngwa seemed to have learnt of Aro business acumen and developed defensive strategies after their business aggression.

The establishment of colonial rule generated opportunities and conditions conducive for migrants who found one activity or another among the Aba Ngwa people. Prominent among these groups, aside the Aro, was the Nkwere whose members migrated from their home in central Igboland, some five miles from Orlu, and settled in many villages in Ngwa land. They were prodigious in money lending activities. Once settled, the Nkwere money lenders seized opportunities such as the money lending business (*Isusu* or *Ogbo*) as a speedy means of making wealth. In the account of Nwabughuogu (1984), they allied with the Ngwa Warrant chiefs for political immunity and got new laws to govern the operation of the *Isusu* which enabled them to pervert the course of the traditional practice to their own advantage. Thus, the Nkwere club heads enriched themselves at the expense of the Ngwa contributors. Yet, despite this exploitation, the people patronized them as there was no other means of obtaining ready money to meet their major socioeconomic needs. Nevertheless, after the events that followed the Aba Women's War of 1929, when the Aba division witnessed serious reorganizations which swept away the Warrant chief system with their Nkwere cohorts, the Ngwa, learning from their tactics, formed their own *Isusu* clubs and began flourishing like their Nkwere credit masters (Nwabughuogu, 1984).

The Opobo traders also settled in the growing urban center of Aba and other strategic market centers such as Owerrinta along the Imo River and later in the railway stations of Omoba and Mbawsi. So, it is admissible that the Aro, Nkwere and Opobo traders left immense positive economic influence on the Aba people which saw the place on the plane of development that continued to expand into the 21st Century.

Introduction of the Bicycle and Its Impact on the The Economy of Aba and Its Environs

In Imo River Basin, wealth remained a status symbol, and this worldview led to a mad rush for acquisition of foreign goods. This worldview did not change in subsequent times—hence, the introduction of bicycles in Aba in the early 1930s was a source of social stratification which encouraged a class of wealth seekers who struggled to acquire them. In his article, “The Role of Bicycle Transport in the Economic Development of Eastern Nigeria, 1930-45,” Nwabughuogu (1984) signified the contribution of bicycles in the economic development of eastern Nigeria. He stated that bicycles were introduced in the region at about the early 1930s when they were used as means of transporting palm oil from the rural areas to the railway

stations and other collection centers. Two types of bicycles were in vogue in the region at this time: (1) the Black Raleigh and (2) the White Horse. While the Black Raleigh was basically used for commercial purposes, the White Horse was used for pleasure and a status symbol for its possessors.

The role of *Isusu* in the procurement of bicycles cannot be overemphasized. Due to its importance, the new petty traders who wanted bicycles utilized the credit provided by the *Isusu* to raise capital for their purchase. Not only for bicycles did people resort to *Isusu* for their procurement, the institution aided the procurement of virtually every other valuable property within the region. Contributors met once every Igbo week of eight days in the house of leaders of the institution and contributed a fixed sum of four or eight manilas to the common fund. Each member in his/her turn was entitled to the sum of these contributions which could be used to acquire properties of one's choice including bride price, school fees, bicycles, building houses, etc. The amount received by each member depended on the number of contributors; and as soon as all have drawn their share, the club was disbanded. Nwabughuogu (1984) testified that a bicycle became a major source of transportation which led to the decline in lorry transport that was developing at that time for obvious reasons: bicycles were exempted from taxation and could carry reasonable quantities of gallons of oil from the rural areas to the coast. Besides, due to the fall in palm oil prices in the years of depression, maintenance of the lorries was so expensive that bicycles became more attractive as alternative transport system.

Bicycles were also used as passenger carriers as well as means of transporting other goods such as cassava between Aba and Ibibio land and yam from Aba to Calabar. Mr. Sampson Nwasor narrated how he used his bicycle to transport people from Aba to Azumini, Ndoki and Asa areas. Most importantly, bicycle transport sustained the palm produce trade and contributed significantly to the increase in income earned from exports in the 1930s and early 1940s. The introduction of bicycles led to accumulation of income among the cyclists who operated them. It has been estimated that cyclists made an average of £22 pounds annually and since every young man owned one, it therefore meant that they were a source of wealth generation which helped to offset the impact of the depression and helped people of this region to pay taxes and other exigencies. They also contributed to the misfortune of middlemen as the cyclists helped the producers transport their goods to the factories and sold at the factory prices. They further encouraged cooperative self-help societies among the population of eastern Nigeria in the bid to purchase bicycles. These cooperative societies became the nucleus of cooperative societies which the colonial administration worked hard to establish throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Bicycles also led to the emergence of an artisan class: i.e. the bicycle repairers whose livelihood depended on bicycle repairing.

Beside the bicycle, other symbols of social class that led the people to engage in entrepreneurial activities included goods like hats, suits, mirrors, basins, staff, gins, etc. Those goods were imported by the European merchants. But acquisition of education was not pursued with the vigor with which they strove to acquire other appertains of the Whites. Schools were thought to be punishment grounds and so the wealthy refused to send their wards to school as they did not understand that education was the real social status symbol. This attitude has not changed much even in recent times as the region records very low literacy rates since residents still value wealth more than education.

The Introduction of the Railway and the Establishment of British Administrative Structures

The introduction of the railway by the British colonial administrators in the southeast was primarily motivated by the need to exploit the economic resources of the Igbo hinterland.

Following the Amalgamation of 1914, there was the need to harmonize the economic resources of the new nation and link the landlocked north to the coast. The means of constructing the railway was by unpaid labor. Generally, three types of labor were applied in the construction of Port Harcourt—Enugu rail line in 1913, which reached Enugu in 1916 and joined Kaduna in 1926. The types of labor were (1) political, (2) contractual, and (3) causal. Of the three, political labor stood for forced unpaid labor that the colonial government applied to the construction of the eastern rail line and the laborers were supervised by the chiefs. These forced unpaid laborers worked in gangs and each worked for two months before being replaced by another gang. Colonial records (NAE, OW 33618, Degdist 1/1/1) confirmed that a total of 11,200 forced laborers were recruited from Bende, Oloko, Umuahia, Abam, Okigwe, Udi, Owerri and Aba districts.

This railway line and others constructed in Nigeria had similar effects on the lives of the indigenes. The lines magnetized the European firms from the coast to the hinterland and this resulted in the emergence of chains of trading depots on the lines. Such depots around the Port Harcourt axis appeared at Obegu, Ovorji, Umugo, etc. and they became the focal points of trade and new frontiers of economic opportunities attracting local traders from immediate and more distant communities. By the 1930s, Aba had risen to become the center of the motor transport business in the eastern provinces.

The railway lines stimulated export production, especially where they traversed areas far away from the waterways. In terms of revenue generation, the annual receipts of the railway showed a steady increase from £2,077,000 in 1924 to £2,178,000 in 1930 and £854,000 in 1938. In addition, commercial centers began to spring along the railway lines. The advent of railway led to a rapid development of the Aba division and increased facilities for trade and the sale of produce facilities of which the chiefs of Aba took full advantage. The spread effect of this development is well captured in the Colonial Annual Report of Owerri Province as follows: “This is very satisfactory and in marked contradistinction to the chiefs of Diobu who, in spite of even greater opportunities at Port Harcourt, have made no attempt to advance with the times or improve their positions in any way” (Annual Report of Owerri Province 1915. CSE. 1/85/988). According to Nwaguru (2012), the railway system led to the establishment of motor transport in Aba in 1919 to convey goods and produce to and from the rail stations through the feeder roads. Its spread effect in the economic and social life of the place is apparent in the introduction of West African currency notes in 1918; and although the indigenes did not appreciate this introduction, reason being their preference for manila, and suspicion of the white man’s gifts, yet, it is not possible to underestimate the significance of the railway, new trading shops, motor transport, and the impact of new currency notes to the standard of living of the people.

The Nigerian Civil War and Its Impact

Abundant literature has been published on the cause of the Nigerian Civil War which this present work does not hope to repeat. The aim of this section is to relay the effects of the war on the socioeconomic life of the Imo River Basin with a focus on Aba. One of the immediate effects of the war on Aba and its environs was the abolition of the provincial system of local administration. The Old Aba division was dissolved into three divisions of (1) Aba Urban (separating the neighboring clans), (2) Ngwa and (3) Ukwu. All were placed under the Divisional Headquarters at Enugu. Community councils in place of county councils were also established. Also, administrative divisions in accordance with the division of administration edict of 1971 were also established. In the place of the former Old Aba division, there were 49 community councils as well as divisional councils comprising representatives of all community councils in each of the divisions. Minor readjustments in the constituent units

within the Aba urban were established, but the Ukwa division remained intact. Law enforcement institutions, especially police and courts, were established in each of the new divisional headquarters. These were the political aftermath of the war. The social effects of the war, to say the least, were disruptive and the scars remained visible many years later. The destruction of lives and properties, social dislocations, diseases and hunger were visible signs of the war as Aba was one of the theatres of the war.

Economically, Eze I. A. Ikonne of Aba exhilarates on the economic outcome of the civil war on Aba. While admitting the destructive effects of the war, he relished how the war “opened their eyes on new opportunities.” Speaking in the same vein, Eze C. B. C. Ajuzieogu, the UleluOha of Aba, in an oral interview confirmed that progress and development occurred in Aba following the civil war. In his words, “the war opened our eyes to entrepreneurship. Before we welcomed strangers for nothing, but after the war, we became wiser.” A careful analysis of the opinions of the aforementioned Ezes revealed that after the war, many people seeking a new life moved to Aba in search of a means of livelihood and Aba was affected through the income it made on sale of lands and property to the migrants. Hitherto, they had dashed the visitor’s large expanse of lands for housing and cultivation. Most importantly, the new comers brought with them new skills in shoe and garment manufacturing.

The Evolution of the Shoe Industry

The economic devastation of the war exacerbated the problem of land hunger and extreme poverty in the eastern part of Nigeria. The rehabilitation, reconciliation and reconstruction efforts of General Yakubu Gowon after the civil war seemed to have been swallowed up with the ‘abandoned property’ saga in which the properties of the Igbo were deprived of them after the civil war. As a way of fashioning out a survival strategy, the survivors of the war started trying whatever occupations they could access.

Neither the shoe nor the garment industry took after the traditional indigenous industries of the Ngwa; but, as stated by Meagher (2006), the industries evolved as a process of adaptation of indigenous institutions to new opportunities and activities. Silverstein (1983) expressed a similar view when he stated that contemporary Igbo manufacturing activities are not so much a product of traditional artisanal communities but have developed from the use of indigenous institutions as blueprints for the development of non-traditional activities by particular Igbo communities. The evolution of these industries was critically affected by the way the Igbo communities responded to the dynamics of Nigeria’s changing political and economic contexts. The evolution of Aba as a commercial center owed more to the exigencies of colonial interests of the early 1900s rather than traditional antecedents. With the establishment of colonial presence and its dynamics, Aba developed into a regional commercial center, attracting a wide variety of Igbo and non-Igbo migrants. Thus, after the civil war, diverse groups traced Aba for one business connection or another, especially shoe, garment and iron constructions. Evidence of this is the presence of *ama Awusa*, Yoruba and various town halls belonging to non-Ngwa groups. Forrest (1994) attributed this development to a serious land shortage, the collapse of palm oil exports, the defeat of the Igbo in the Nigerian Civil War, and the desire of commercial adventurers seeking a new beginning after the civil war. This in turn precipitated a rapid growth of small-scale enterprises in an environment of capital shortage and state neglect.

As mentioned earlier, among the small-scale industries that evolved in Aba were the shoe and garment industries. Nonetheless, Meagher’s interview with veteran shoe makers in Aba, and our interaction with people in the shoe cluster industry reveal that the shoe industry in Aba had started since the 1950s and expanded tremendously after the civil war. Also, the

progenitors of this business were the Mbaise people who, due to land hunger in their central Igbo area coupled with severe poverty and over population, sought alternative means of livelihood in Aba as early as the 1940s. Meagher (2010) gathered that even from pre-colonial time, land in Mbaise had been scarce and infertile which forced the indigenes to seek a living outside their land. They were forced to work as migrant laborers to their neighboring clans or struggled to eke out a living in crafts requiring little finance such as mat making, rope and petty trading. According to Adner (1953), many of them made a living as migrant laborers and domestic servants.

Raw material for the shoe making occupation started with scrap automobile tires for the production of crude rubber sandals. This was because the raw material was cheap, involving largely scrap, and production required only a few basic hand tools. Originally a household craft, it later expanded and became well established at the Eke-Oha market in the central commercial district of Aba. By 1961, specialization had entered into the business of shoe making, but the unskilled Mbaise producers continued to produce cheap rubber slippers while the skilled counterparts started experimenting with leather. The shoe industry in Aba had expanded to 92 shoe firms which were all destroyed by the civil war. Nevertheless, by 1970, after the war, the small-scale shoe producers reemerged to maintain the pre-war division. One group dominated by the Mbaise continued to produce the rubber sandals at the Eke-Oha market, and the other group with highly skilled and mechanized artisans from mixed ethnic groups dominated the leather shoe works.

The Mbaise inferior slippers and sandals may well account for the low-quality status usually ascribed to products of Aba as “Aba made.” After the fire incident that gulped the Ekeoha market in 1976, the shoemakers were resettled in a new market called Umuehilegbu Industrial Shoe Market near Ariaria International Market in Aba. The shoe industry in Aba operates as a cluster, producing shoe and allied products such as belts, bags, trunk boxes, bicycle seats, shoe soles, and shoes. According to Udo Nwachukwu, the Assistant Secretary of Shoe Producers Association, materials for the production of shoes come from Korea, China, Holland, Italy, etc. Some raw materials are also sourced locally. The classes of products depicted were according from their raw materials came. Indeed, the study discovered that Italian and Spanish shoes are produced in Aba and labelled as such, and there exists little or no significant difference between such shoes and those of foreign makers. Udo Nwachukwu testified that their major business partners spans Nigeria and beyond. Thus, from Cameroon, Ghana, Sokoto, Lagos, Onitsha, Maiduguri, etc. customers troop to Ariaria International Market to purchase assorted shoes. Aba shoe industries also exist in many parts of the world with the aid of the Internet.

The shoe industry in Aba has thrived well with the government which helped to equip the industry through seminars, soft loans, and provision of power supply. Members also engage in self-help activities in which they assist one another to raise start-up funds for new entrants into the business. The business is a lucrative one as interviewees testify of the benefit of the business. Nwanganga Emerole attributed the profit he gained from the business to the acquisition of many tricycles, cars, lands, training of his children, building of houses, etc. Udo Nwachukwu’s testimony was not different as he pointed to the myriads of entrants into the business and asked how these could have entered if it is not lucrative. Nonetheless, Mr. Nwachukwu relayed the problem of infrastructural decay as a major hindrance to the progress of the industry, especially roads. The few roads that are passable were being constructed by individuals and the Association of Shoe Manufacturing Producers.

The Garment Industry

The origin of the textile prowess in Aba is traceable to the economic restructurings that colonialism and the Nigerian Civil War engendered. Just as the Mbaise is revered to have pioneered the shoe industry, the garment industry owed its origin to the Bende sub-Igbo group. The Bende are found in the north-eastern part of Abia, and are neighbors to the Item, Abriba and Ohafia peoples. They worked closely with the Aro during the pre-colonial era and even after the colonial districts were restructured and the area came to be known as Old Bende. They were described by colonial records as successful traders, farmers and craftsmen. In the 1930s, migrants from Item were said to have pioneered tailoring in Aba where they were known as itinerant tailors specializing in alteration and repair of clothing. Over time, they were joined by other migrants from Bende district who settled in Aba, south of Aba main market. By the 1950s, the garment producers in this area began differentiating into two categories just like their shoe counterparts did. One group consisted of local tailors, who remained essentially artisanal in orientation and relied on apprenticeship as their source of labor. The other group comprised of garment firms and more mechanized, specializing in mass production of underpants and singlets.

Meagher (2006) recorded that by the 1960s, there existed about 733 small-scale tailoring firms in Aba. And Kilby (1963) attested that singlet production was well organized, and became profitable with considerable expansion potential while the tailors were numerous, disorganized, and heterogeneous, ranging from itinerant mending tailors to the London-trained suit makers. But by the 1970s Aba tailors had developed a range of distinct specializations and produced men's shirts and trousers, men's suits, women's skirts and blouses, men's and women's traditional wears and wedding dresses. This profession was however segregated along gender lines as women sewing for women and men for men. Bende people also dominated the supply and distribution chain of the garment industry, which included elastic and general tailoring materials.

It is important at this juncture to mention the role the shoe and garment industries have played in the evolution of Aba as a key economic center in Imo River Basin. Aba is revered as a major textile and garment center not only in eastern Nigeria but throughout the country and even beyond. From Lagos, Kano, and Kaduna, dealers in textiles flock to Aba to buy textiles and their accessories, and this is happening despite its messy environs, bad roads, and almost absence of virtually basic infrastructure that encourages external investment. A little peep into the revenue the Aba town generates to the state government is to say the least astonishing. The figure could definitely double when Aba roads are accessible and when infrastructural facilities are built.

The New Smiths Men

The Structural Adjustment Program of the 1980s which encouraged the use of local initiatives, also encouraged the rise and growth of iron workers who took the challenge of producing the machines that were once imported. Such machines include palm oil (mills) crushing and pressers, palm kernel crackers, kernel separators, block molding machines, hoes and machetes, candle and chalk machines, vibrating machines, layers, mixers, grinders, etc. In fact, Obinna Jude stated that there is no machine he could not fabricate given an appropriate environment and boasted of constructing any machine that Nigeria imports. Having spent 35 years in the profession, Jude stated that the country need not import most of the machines it is importing. He also admitted that the business is a lucrative one which has enabled him to acquire landed properties and places food daily on his table. His office also assists engineering students on practical aspects of their studies.

As it was the case with the shoe and garment industries, the iron works industry in Aba was inspired by the Ideato people of Imo state who, like their Mbaise and Item brothers in the shoe and garment industry, moved into Aba after the civil war in search of a means of livelihood. Unlike their counterparts in Abaala, who smelt and smith, the Aba fabricators only smith and get their raw materials from imported iron sheets. The greatest challenge of this industry is the gross neglect by the government. Jude points out the immense potential contribution of this profession to the national economy if financial relief could come from the government.

Conclusion

A number of interrelated causes such as Aba's advantageous geographic location, the local entrepreneurial spirit, colonial economic policies, the Nigerian Civil War, and the post-war industrial creativity of its residents have contributed to the city's development as a commercial hub in eastern Nigeria. This study has demonstrated that Aba's commercial vibrancy predates colonial authority, with the indigenous Ngwa people having a fundamental role in defining its economic environment. This contradicts the commonly accepted belief that colonization was the main factor driving Aba's economic progress.

Aba's commercial significance was greatly influenced by its location at a vital transportation hub that connected important trade routes in eastern Nigeria. Since they provided vital waterway linkages, rivers like the Imo and Aza further aided trade. A solid basis for the city's economic activity was also established by the Ngwa people's entrepreneurial spirit, which was seen in their early trade practices, regional industries, and cooperative financial institutions like the *Isusu* system. Despite its devastation, Aba was paradoxically affected by the Nigerian Civil War. Even though the war left enormous damage in its wake, it also produced an atmosphere that encouraged economic innovation. New industries emerged as a result of the flood of displaced people into Aba, especially the shoe and clothing sectors which came to define the city's post-war economy. Aba entered a new phase of industrialization and became a significant manufacturing hub in Nigeria, thanks to these industries which were started by enterprising groups like the Mbaise (who made shoes) and the Bende (who were tailors).

Notwithstanding its economic potential, Aba has encountered several obstacles, including deteriorating infrastructure, unfavorable governmental regulations, and disregard of its industrial sector. The city's commercial potential has not been fully realized due to inadequate roads, energy and financial support. Its people's tenacity, however, has kept the economy afloat, and local industries are thriving in spite of the tough business environment. Government support for small and medium-sized businesses, industrial policy reforms, and strategic infrastructure investment are all necessary to maintain Aba's economic growth and guarantee its position as a major commercial hub. Utilizing current industrial frameworks and technology advancements to harness the entrepreneurial spirit of the populace might establish Aba as a hub for international trade.

Historical and economic narratives are reshaped when it is realized that pre-colonial indigenous enterprise, not colonial architecture, was the primary force behind Aba's development as a trading hub. In addition to pushing historians, economists, and policymakers to prioritize indigenous agency in both historical interpretation and future planning, the study asserts that African growth was not a result of colonialism but frequently continued despite it. In the end, Aba's narrative serves as a tribute to the strength of native initiative, flexibility, and fortitude. Aba has the ability to reach new economic heights in Nigeria and beyond, as well as regain its previous commercial significance, with the right legislative changes and infrastructure improvements.

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