

## The Impact of Western Culture on Sustainable Development: a Case Study of Ewekwu Community

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### ABSTRACT

Ewekwu people practice distinct and unique economic systems prior to European conquest. This is so when viewed from the fact that most of those economic activities were not found in any other communities in Rivers State. Even though European conquest destroyed several of them, there still remains other aspects that have continued to co-exist with modernity. These economic activities can be harnessed to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the people that can contribute to nation building. Ewekwu people have been victims of colonial oppression, first in the hands of Europeans colonizers and then later by the Nigerian state through the process of internal colonialism made possible by the inability of the Nigerian operators of government to integrate the people in any development plans. During the time, Ewekwu people suffered all forms of discrimination and loss of human dignity in the hands of their oppressors which were responsible for their late pursuit of education and educational attainments rather than by their ardent belief in tradition which local historians believe were the barrier. Today, however there has been an urgent need to break from the past in order to establish the future so that they could catch up with the present ideals. The economic activities were unique and distinct which set them apart as a people with special cultural heritage that ushered in significant ancient civilization.

**Keywords:** *Colonialism, development, exploitation, culture, dominant*

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### **Background to the Study**

Evekwu people were colonized by the British like any other ethnic group in Nigeria between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries period. According to Obaro Ikume (1977) The Various regions of Nigeria were systematically conquered by London between 1885 and 1914 and then colonized up till 1960. It was during this period that Evekwu too was conquered and made subservient to the whims and caprices of the British administration.

Before the British colonialism, the Portuguese were the first to arrive the waters of Niger Delta about the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They remained dominant in the region till the end 16<sup>th</sup> century. From Bonny to Port Harcourt, the Portuguese came to the waters of Evekwu-odegu via Choba enroute to Isiokpo in a bid to familiarize themselves with the terrain and the environment.

They came to the waters of Evekwu in small gun boats. And since the villagers could not pronounce Portuguese, they simply referred to them in adulterated English as Portorkiri. Once on sighting Portuguese gun boats, the people immediately would begin to look for local instruments to attack them thinking that they were mermaid spirits that had come to desecrate the water and their land. At a point, the Portuguese began to use their superior weapons to shoot at the local people in order to make them surrender and yield to their colonial demands.

### **Location of Evekwu**

Evekwu is a small community within the Ikwerre nation and its people inhabit the central part of Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. During formative years of its early history, it was made up of about six extended compounds out of which two were subsumed into other larger compounds. For instance, Rumuesi was subsumed into Rumuihuordu whereas Rumuodokirika came under Rumuwordu. But today, Rumuodokirika has asserted its independence while Rumuesi is partially trying to come out of Rumuihuordu hegemony.

According to Ikunga, (2006:80) Evekwu is a community in Odegu which lies between longitudes 6°: 40 and 7°:15 east, latitudes 4°:45 and 5°:15 North. Its boundaries consist of Rumuji in the North, West by Rumuodogo, Ibaa in the east across Ikwerre channel and Emohua in the South. Indeed, the entire area is within the equatorial rain forest zone of the Guinea coast. The dialect of Evekwu is a branch of Odegu language group classified as related to the lower Niger group with that of other Ikwerre but distinct from all other Ikwerre dialectal variations and without any foreign influences of any sort. Evekwu is accessible in and out, from Ahoada through the East-West Road, there is easy communication to all parts of Rivers State. And from Odegu itself it is easy to travel to Ibaa through the village of Rumuji or across the Ikwerre channel by canoe. Even during the months of rain the area could still remain accessible to the various Odegu villages and other neighbouring communities.

The origin of Evekwu is buried within the various hypotheses on the origin of Odegu clan which has to do with the Benin theory. Oral tradition is the most veritable source for the reconstruction of Evekwu history. According to it, the people of Evekwu are the children of Odegu who was said to have migrated from the Old Benin empire during the reign of Oba Ewuare of Benin probably between 1140 – 1473. Again, Ikunga (2006:87) goes on to assert that there were disturbances in the old Benin empire as a result of the autocratic and rule of the Oba. Those who could not withstand him at the time had to a more peaceful areas of habitation. Odegu was one of the escapees who moved South wards to Aboh and then to the

Somebreiro axis after a brief sojourn with the Ihuaba of Ekpeye in Ahoada East Local Government Area of Rivers State. Having crossed the Sombreiro, Odegu as a hunter was more adventurous and in the process discovered a new haven across the Sombriero called Okporo or Eli-gbudugbudu within the forest zone close to modern day Rumuodogo. It was here at Eligbudu-gbudu that Odegu settled and had all his children including Ewekwu. Ewekwu initially inhabited the territory between Rumuodogo and Rumuji. But because of territorial contest with Rumuji formerly Rumuzi, war ensued between the two sons of Odegu. In a bid to end the war Ewekwu was asked to move away from their initial abode to a secluded virgin land close to Oduoha-Emohua. Today, at Rumuodogo junction there still stands an ancient shrine forest instituted as a bond between the two communities that represented peaceful disposition between them.

### **Traditional Structure**

The traditional Political system is based on gereontocracy. That is, rulership by Elders. On top of the political institution is the Ohna. The Ohna is the equivalent of the Oba in Benin. Once one is initiated into the Ohna, he carries a staff of office that is sacred and he becomes the intermediary between the living and the dead ancestors. He consults them and libates and makes sacrifices to them.

In Ewekwu, the oldest Ohna becomes the Nne Nwe Eli, that is the paramount ruler of the community which deviates from the Benin System. Rulership is rotational and not hereditary according to who now is the oldest Ohna. When he dies, the next oldest Ohna takes over as the Nne Nwe Eli. Below him, are Heads of families who trace their patrilineal descent to the family progenitor. Their position is also rotational according to the age of the person in the family. Below these people are titled chiefs.

The council of rulership or membership of the traditional rulership council constitutes the following:

1. The Ohna (could be more than one)
2. Heads of families
3. Titled chiefs
4. The Community Development Committee Chairman (CDC)
5. The Youth President.

The council meets weekly and any other time when there is emergency to take decisions affecting the community and or decide and settle disputes arising from quarrels or conflicts within the community. Once decisions are taken, they are final. When not satisfied, an individual can take his or her case to the Eli (land) deity or appeal to the Ele Ohna of another community. Today, individuals can resort to the law court.

### **British Colonialism**

According to oral tradition, British entered Ewekwu proper by 1900 through the New Calabars across the Sombriero River. Their rule was introduced as soon as they succeeded in destroying the traditional system and autonomy of the communities. According to Nwabara (1977:96), it was an unfortunate phenomenon which saw the imposition of an alien rule over the existing traditional system. Moreover, it witnessed the systematic destruction of the people's cultures through the employment of superior weapons of war.

The same assertions were applicable to the British attitude in colonizing Ewekwu. Ikunga (2006: 236) described the situation in which Odegu already possessed an existing cultural, political and economic systems richly organized according to the patterns of their own traditional values and needs before the arrival of either the Portuguese or the British colonizers which also affected Ewekwu.

Oral tradition still confirms that as soon as Britain effectively settled in Odegu communities they established the Native Court which made the people lose their sovereignty. The British colonial ideas overwhelmed the local systems. The system of taxation which was alien became a source of worry to Ewekwu people as tax collectors constantly harassed the local people and tax defaulters were put in jail. The emergence of Christianity and Christian norms conquered the existing local and traditional ideals that were unique among Ewekwu people. Indeed, Christianity was seen as being more oppressive against established local ideas and practices. However, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the British overtook the Portuguese and made their presence more dominant. They, indeed overwhelmed the entire Niger Delta including Ewekwu with their effective occupation policies through the introduction of their colonial administration. It has been a subject of debate and discussion the real motive behind European conquest of Ewekwu and the entire Niger Delta. Ake (1981:43 – 45) had stated that the motive of the British presence in the Niger Delta cannot be divorced from imperialism and economic exploitation as he went further again to demonstrate that it was the economic control and exploitation of foreign lands arising from the necessity to counter the impediments to the accumulation of capital engendered by the internal contradictions of the domestic capitalist economy that necessitated European conquest.

Okorobia (1999:99 – 102) agreed with Ake (1981) and further maintained that the very early contacts between the Niger Delta region and Europe was not when capitalist mode of production has become the dominant economic system but rather it was a time when feudalism was still dominant in Europe. According to him, that mode of production was mercantilist imperialism, bullionism that is, the belief that the quantity and quality of precious metals a nation possessed served as an index of its greatness. Indeed, the early period of European contact with Ewekwu people was marked by savage exploitation of slave trade especially after the Papal bull of demarcation in 1851 – 1856 which gave the Portuguese exclusive rights for the wealth of the West Coast of Africa including Ewekwu.

In fact, as it was with the Portuguese, so with the British in that the main motive of early European conquest of the area was mainly to acquire wealth and raw materials from her colonies and indeed to get cheap labour from Ewekwu for her overseas plantations. Later, however, the Europeans were now to establish an unequal economic and political relationship with Ewekwu people. The relationship was based on and inequality of economic and political dependence of Ewekwu Odegu on Britain which claimed to possess superior civilization and higher economic potentials. This was the spirit behind British establishment of Pioneer Oil Mill at the nearby village of Rumuji at the time. So as to exploit palm produce very abundant in Ewekwu at the time.

The trade with the Europeans took two different dimensions. First, it took the form of commerce involving slaves and second the legitimate trade in agricultural resources especially palm produce which trade relationship transformed Ewekwu into an area for distributive trade. Ewekwu people played the role of middlemen in the collection of palm produce from producers in the community and transporting them to the collection centre at the village of Rumuji-

Odegu and preparing the processed for onward shipment to Europe through Abonnema Wharf to the Bonny water. It was for this reason and purposes that the Pioneer Oil Mill for Palm kernel processing was established by the British colonial officers in Rumuji-Odegu and all the palm produce resources in Ewekwu were harnessed by the foreign invaders and colonizers.

### **The Place of Ewekwu before European Conquest: its uniqueness**

It may be necessary here to understand the uniqueness of Ewekwu in relation in their culture in order to bring into fore the relevance of this work to scholarship. Ewekwu people practiced varying degrees of culture that set them apart from other communities before European conquest including the culture of development. According to Hanks (1971:402) culture is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings which is being transmitted from one generation to another. And when Iwe (1985:55) described culture as a descriptive and complex concept, he was stating the obvious. It is no wonder that Nwachukwu (2001:102) treats culture as an integral part of religion and religion involves everything about man's ways of life. This clearly means that culture has to do with man's attempt to understand himself relative to his environment including ways of economic development.

Therefore, one cannot but accept the explanations of Alagoa (1991:93) when he disclosed that only a proper appreciation of our past heritage can equip us to act effectively in the present to guarantee a future cultural identity of our creation. Nothing can be written about Ewekwu without writing about their cultural history for according to Afigbo (1984:27) a people with culture are a people with some form of history.

### **Uniqueness**

The town of Ewekwu is characterized by several annual cultural events. These include religious and cultural practices. The two are inseparable and interwoven. In Ewekwu, there is Eli deity which is regarded as the supreme being guiding the entire community. Before planting begins sacrifices were made to Eli since it was regarded as being responsible for crop fertility. In settlement of disputes, Eli can be invoked to ascertain those who are guilty. For instance, if some one has been accused of stealing in the farm or another items, the only way to plead his innocence is to accept to go to the Eli to swear or take an oath. In most cases, Eli has sent some people free. In others, they have been found guilty. These cultures, according to oral tradition, were established to enhance food production and other economic activities. It was also made to make the people civil. Sex in the bush or on bare floor was forbidden. Once the offence is committed, it takes a lot of sacrifices to appease the gods. One dies if he/she did not do so.

Prior to the conquest and colonization of Ewekwu, agriculture formed the most important economic activity of the people. It was by tilling the ground and planting crops that Ewekwu people survived and prospered. And by Ewekwu culture, planting cannot be done without slaughtering a ram or goat and sprinkling the blood on the farm land. Since the area possessed good vegetation, high soil fertility and so on the people became more agrarian engaging in subsistence farming. These accounted for the reason why agriculture was predominant at subsistence level. Food crops as yam, cocoyam, cassava, maize and vegetables were produced. The ever green forest region of Ewekwu had a collection of several animals while the Ikwerre channel and other streams and water ways made possible fishing activity. Hunting and fishing also were part of the economic activities of Ewekwu people. While some animals they caught

such as rabbits, grass-cutter, antelope were eaten, others like sheep, goats, dogs and fowls were domesticated. Fishes such as tilapia, electric fish, cart fish, etc were caught and eaten increasing the nutritive value of their food.

The people were also good in local crafts such as baskets, fish traps, animal traps etc. Again, wood carving, traditional modeling and housing systems suited firmly to the traditional lifestyles that were found during the time. All these and others were in existence as part of the peoples heritage. Yet, they lived well enough to organize themselves orderly to the extent that peaceful co-existence was maintained. Ewekwu people went to school through informal traditional education system especially during the moonlight when parents brought their children outside to educate them on things that took place in the remote past. They learnt the system of counting and record keeping in the process. Adults thought younger ones house-keeping, trade, crafts, skills and some moral lessons. And with these, Ewekwu people were said to have had broad minds to accept western cultural orientation brought about by British conquest of the area.

### **The Impact of European Cultural Tradition on Ewekwu People**

Ewekwu people have had intimate contacts and relationship with Europeans between 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, before the emergence of the British on Ewekwu soil, they (British) back home had had an established cultural orientation higher than what already existed in Ewekwu. The higher levels of cultural orientation had long been embedded in their value systems or patterns of behaviour in which the British used as a weapon to subjugate Ewekwu traditional system. According to Ikunga (2006:236), because the British were the colonizers at the time, they succeeded in educating Ewekwu people on the doctrines of acquiring their own values or norms. In other words, the tendency was to make Ewekwu people forgo their cultural values in order to imbibe that of Western Europe. Again, the introduction of western civilization later was to transform Ewekwu economy from the barter system which characterized the rural economy to that of money economy that has long been developed in Europe.

Furthermore, through the systematic of cultural orientation, Europeans introduced the doctrine of egalitarianism in Ewekwu. It was a doctrine based on the equality of persons irrespective of the valued system that was in existence within the local community. Much as it was good to make all persons equal, things in Ewekwu later began to go in opposite direction. It is no wonder that Maker (1975:441) stated that individualism and egalitarianism are signs of a decaying society in which the younger generation are no longer willing to listen to the elders neither do they carry out their obligations in the society. To buttress this point, Ohiare (1988), declared that this group of individuals became overzealous in an attempt to impress their masters and colonial officials for possible recognition and for future appointments in the British administrative system. The same assertions took place in Ewekwu where because of western values the younger ones no longer expects the elders neither do they obey them. In fact, family structure was destroyed which had been there in the remote past including age long traditional institutions and moral values. For instance, traditional dancing festivals and wrestling have been discarded in place of European or American types. Their understanding and thought were that anything African that did not have European influence in it was uncivilized and unacceptable.

Agriculture was also affected. As people migrated to urban centres in search of white collar jobs, most people therefore abandoned their farms to seek for jobs in towns. Today, crops such as yam, cocoyam, pepper, three leave yam, etc can no longer be produced by Ewekwu people as farming has been completely neglected. In religious matters, the monotheistic system had displaced the polytheistic religious practices in which different gods were worshipped and for which the people believed ordered their society and made them uphold higher moral values. The system of administration of justice in which libation would be made to the gods to invite their presence in matters had been replaced with judicial court system in which those with sugar coated tongues and with enough money to bribe won the case irrespective of whether the person was guilty or not. However, there are good parts of colonialism such as in western education and in dressing. In fact, the type of food and mode of eating have all helped to change the world view of Ewekwu people. There is now a very dynamic system of economic development going on in the area. There are two primary schools built by the government operating in Ewekwu. Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) is also building a technical college there. Solid minerals are being exploited such as gravel, 3/8 and sharp sand etc as part of the economic activities which have helped to enhance sustainable development in the area.

### **Impact on Sustainable Development**

Most developing and developed economies have experienced factors of development in one way or another especially as it concerns sustainable development that has endured over time. The issue of developed is not an easy task to deal with. This issue of development is not an easy task to deal with, this is because many views about it abound. According to Simon (2003:8) development constitutes some diverse and multifaceted process of predominantly positive change in the quality of life for the individual and society in the aspect of material and non-material cases.

On the other hand, sustainable development as posited by Unumen (2013:41) is the development that improves and maintains the well being of people as well as improves and sustains the ecosystem rather than destroying it. He went on to say that it is relevant to the development of less developed countries. This ascertain rightly agrees with Lanew-Reid (1994:13-14) who explained that since the human system is an integral part of the ecosystem, a society can only be said to have sustainable development if both the human conditions and the conditions of the ecosystem are satisfactorily improving.

Therefore, through the instrumentality of indigenous institutions in Ewekwu, sustainable development could emerge. There has been a consistent human resource base in Ewekwu over the years, a peaceful disposition of the area, development of small scale businesses, local institutions such as craft centers, aggressive agriculture and with several natural resources within the community, Ewekwu could begin to transcend to some sustainable approaches that could place the community on the path of socio-economic development. There are several people oriented projects scattered around the serene environment of the community which have lifted the development level of the people. These includes, harnessing solid mineral exploitation, cassava processing, lumbering activities, weaving (Baskets and Mats) fabrication, boat building, poultry and food supplies.

These factors are relevant and most important in meeting the development needs of the area. The above development factors or activities aim at setting the people free from poverty,

deprivation and exploitation. Indeed, they aim also to correct the existing economic misunderstanding of the issues of modern day development processes. Western cultural tradition brings about relevant positive impacts that could relieve the people from the shackles of poverty, unemployment, oppression and economic exploitation. Western Europe has the modern economic systems that could assist the local Ewekwu economy to grow beyond what already is established in the community. They include modern educational systems, industrial development, modern infrastructures etc. Once these traditions are incorporated into Ewekwu economic plans, sustainable development could immediately emerge for the good of the people.

### **Conclusion**

Prior to the emergence of European colonialism, Ewekwu people had their own ethos and traditional values. Their way of life was so devised to suit the existing living conditions such that their values were conserved. However, the incursion of western values on the contrary altered all that previously existed which could be called Ewekwu. In fact, there can be seen still subsisting fair cultures of western civilization in spite of the degradations of European colonialism even through they form a small fraction of the whole lot of Ewekwu traditional values. The values degradation affected the traditional systems of wrestling said to have been originated from there. According to oral tradition very common among the people, wrestling bring with it all that makes an Ewekwu man brave. It is an event that exposes the strong in terms of the ability to withstand some unfortunate phenomena which might occur from time to time within the area.

Ewekwu traditional religious system has also been affected by European colonialism. The worship of Nda deity or other family deities in some families is being looked at as sin or evil according to the prescriptions of western religious ideals as Christianity has tended to overcome the religious life of the people. In other parts of the world such as in Asia and the middle east the people still practiced their religious and cultures to the administration of the entire world. The judicial and administrative system whose functions are performed by Oha have had several modifications to suit the dictates of European colonialism. The swearing of an oath or pouring libation to invoke the spirit of the gods or ancestors in serious cases or contests between parties was somewhat replaced by the western judicial court system made possible by the establishment of native courts where the smartest with sugar coated tongues won the cases. Unlike the traditional judicial system where no bribes were allowed, the court system was corruption ridden where whoever parts with sufficient amount of money won. Though, there are some elements of the traditional judicial system that are still existing where warring parties went to a shrine to swear an oath, however, only those that are willing went there.

Before entering into a new farm, sacrifices were made to the Eli goddess believed to be responsible for good harvest. Oral testimonies insist that because those who have embraced Christianity have abandoned this age long tradition, the gods no longer allow for good crop yield and bumper harvest. Before now, Ewekwu people were known for being good farmers producing plenty of food. Today the reverse is the case. There is a gradual disintegration of their values. The British have so revolutionized the traditional system to the extent that nothing really today exists of the actual cultures of the people. Going back to the basics will produce orderly conduct and evolve a better system.

Most of the economic activities such as hunting and fishing now found no place in Ewekwu traditional history. Those who ordinarily engage in them have emigrated to urban centers in search of greener pastures. They now look at those activities as demining. Crafts making followed the way of others and disappeared. A good number of the people prefer to go to school in order to gain paid employment while some others prefer to become pastors in various churches. Today, however, there is a shift from the much cherished traditions that kept the people at home to economic activities that would usher in sustainable development in the area. Those who emigrated to the urban centers are now returning to establish crafts, businesses and other institutions that are most rewarding to the sustainable development of the community.

Western cultural orientation has helped to sharpen the minds of the people to the need to be self sufficient and self sustaining within the context of in-ward looking to change community outlook for economic development since urban centers cannot accommodate all and sundry.

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