

American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)

e-ISSN :2378-703X

Volume-5, Issue-4, pp-408-416

www.ajhssr.com

Research Paper

Open Access

The Rise and fall of the South Coastal Economy of Tai Local Government Area: A Political Economy Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The majority of the Nigerian population either live in or depend substantially on the economies of rural communities for their livelihood. Yet, these communities are often neglected. This neglect has led to poverty and underdevelopment, which combined with other factors to ignite various dimensions of social conflict, including intra-community and communal wars, insurgency and terrorism. This paper launches an excursion into the history of a cluster of local communities in the southern part of Tai Local Government Area (LGA) in Rivers State, Nigeria and their neighbours in other LGAs with the aim of explaining their rise, prosperity and eventual fall. Our study utilizes the political economy approach to investigate the interconnectedness of social psychology, politics, and economics in the analysis of the metaphysics of historical causation. It reveals that in the past, traditional authorities and institutions in the communities were strong, the core values and norms of society were humanistic and promoted the idea of society as a social contract. The faltering of those institutions, a twisted ethical framework and the erosion of humanistic values, coupled with poor State intervention measures altered the hitherto communitarian relations that existed within and among communities and led to conflicts and underdevelopment.

Keywords: Local Economy, Political Economy, Social Conflict, Economic Growth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tai is a Local Government Area in Rivers State, lying between latitudes 4.17° and 4.19° north and longitudes 7.13° and 7.15° east. Rivers State '... is situated in the coastal plain of the eastern Niger Delta. Its topography is mainly characterised by rivers, lakes, creeks, lagoons and swamps of various dimensions. The land surface can be grouped into three main divisions from north to south: freshwater zone, mangrove swamps and the coastal sand ridge zone' (UNEP, *Environmental Assessment* 22). It also has three corresponding coastal vegetation zones, namely: (i) the freshwater zone; (ii) the beach ridge zone; and (iii) the saltwater zone. According to the UNEP Report, 'The beach ridge zone is vegetated by mangroves on the tidal flats and by swamp trees, palms and shrubs on the sandy ridges. The saltwater zone is mainly vegetated by red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*). The coastal plain and freshwater zone is vegetated by forest tree species and oil palm' (UNEP, *Environmental Assessment* 32).

The communities in the southern part of Tai, namely Gio and Kporghor, are strategically located coastal communities having borders with some communities in Gokana, Ogu-Bolo and Eleme LGAs with similar occupations, except those of Ogu-Bolo that are mainly fishers. Much of Gio and Kporghor communities lie within the coastal ridge zone, but their southern fringes fall within the mangrove swamps with a patch of freshwater zone in the north-east. Their soil was, prior to the devastating effects of oil exploration that commenced in the mid-1950s, very rich in coastal alluvium and covered with luxuriant mangrove and evergreen rainforest vegetation. From the late 1970s through to the early 1990s, these communities had a relatively supportive local economy. Their land was rich in coastal alluvium and their physical environment was not as heavily polluted as it has become. The economy was agrarian and farming was lucrative. The creeks and land were viable and offered enormous resources like fishes and crops. The inhabitants of the area were predominantly peasants, whose families lived on their own means and, compared to most other rural communities in Ogoni, they could rightly be said to have had a robust local economy. The people were generally very hard-working so much so that abject poverty was regarded as self-inflicted as they did not see any reason why anybody who is physically fit should be poor. There was a high level of social order and the

community was cohesive. The relationship among the neighbouring communities of was very cordial, with a very high level of interdependence among them.

In the mid-1990s, intercommunity relations among the communities in the area took an ugly turn, which culminated in violent communal conflicts and internecine wars. Some of the instances are the wars between Kporghor and Gio both in Tai LGA, and between the former and Wakama Ama in Ogu-Bolo LGA. One recurrent factor responsible for the incessant conflicts in the area is dispute over territorial boundaries. Interestingly, a good much of the contestations stem from ignorance occasioned by bankruptcy of accessible and reliable history. The non-availability of an accurate narrative has at least two notorious consequences. The first is mutual hostility arising from false assumptions of territorial rights based on ignorance of the truth. Secondly, ignorance of the core values and cultural dispositions that served as instruments of social cohesion and control in the past has led to cultural dislocation and internal tensions that portend imminent anarchy if urgent steps are not taken to nip it in the bud.

This paper seeks to articulate a historical narrative as well as meaningful interpretations of certain significant events in order to fill the existing lacuna in terms of a coherent account of the prosperity and eventual decline of the local economy of the cluster of communities in the southern part of Tai LGA. It is also intended to reconstruct the moral fabric of the local communities and societies by highlighting the missing link between the glorious past and our new distorted culture. Furthermore, it seeks to investigate the interconnectedness of social psychology, politics, and economics in the analysis of the metaphysics of historical causation.

II. THE EMERGENCE AND STRUCTURE OF THE ECONOMY

The early natives of Kporghor and its adjoining upland communities were predominantly peasant farmers, but they also engaged in woodcarving, animal hunting and fishing as subsidiary occupations. Their soil favoured cultivation of various agricultural products—cassava, yams, banana, pumpkin, melon, palm oil, pepper, egg plants, cowpea, etc. They operated a closed and relatively self-dependent economy in which exchange was based on the barter system. However, the level of diversification and functional differentiation within the society was very low, thus narrowing the scope of economic activities. Even the existence of Kebara Kira, Deeyor Kira, Borobara, and the founding of Gio community a few years later did not change the situation immediately. The reason is because, with the exception of the people of Gio and Kporghor who also engaged in fishing in addition to their main occupation of farming, all the communities produced and consumed basically the same products and each largely depended on her own produce.

At the community level, there exist *local* or *informal economies* whose activities are affected by, and in turn affect, the national and *underground* economies. Two isolated developments that led to a radical expansion of the commercial frontiers of the local economy of the southern coast of Tai were the founding of Wakama-Ama community sometime about the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the arrival of European and Bonny missionaries and traders at the coast of Gio some years after 1914 when the Europeans finally succeeded in breaking Ogoni resistance to colonial rule. Prior to that period, their main commercial intercourse was with the Bolo (originally Gbolo) traders who were the main suppliers of salt; hence, the name Gbolo (from which was derived Bolo) an Ogoni expression for “salt people” (“gbo” means people or group, while “lo” means salt). These traders used to supply salt and fish at a market in Kporghor that was called *Du Tsaah* and in turn buy farm produce from the people of Kporghor and other nearby communities in Tai. When the European missionaries saw the Okrika people coming from the island where they had settled, they inquired who the people were, and in response the Ogoni personal aides and translators referred to them as “gBo lo.” The Europeans, unable to pronounce the consonant cluster “gb” as a bonded consonant simply pronounced it as “b” and wrote the name as they pronounced it.

The market was called *Du Tsaah* because of its location. It was located along the coast of a stretch of land near the area now occupied by Wakama-Ama that was owned by Tsaah. Later on, the market was relocated from Kporghor to Gio and renamed as *Du Beemaa*, which means “coastal market” in Tai dialect. As at the time *Du beemaa* was established, it was neither named after Gio nor Kporghor because it was jointly owned by the two communities. Within a short period of time the market became a bubbling commercial hub, attracting traders from all over Tai and most parts of Ogoni as well as Wakama-Ama, Bolo, Bonny, Andoni, Opobo, Ekporo, Ogu, Okrika, Ndoki and even beyond. It soon became widely known as *Gio Market* and was so named because of its location, but that did not elicit any agitation or concern. The settling of the European and Bonny missionaries and merchants at Gio, somehow, influenced the decision of Kporghor people to relocate *Du Tsaah* to Gio. But there were also other factors that prompted the decision, one of which was that they decided to site it further away from Wakama-Ama whose indigenes allegedly used to take advantage of their proximity to the

market whenever a fracas broke out between them and people from other communities at the market. The second, and perhaps more compelling factor, was that a large branch from a very big live tree at the market fell off on its own without any fierce wind, which was an ominous sign in ancient Ogoni myths.

The market expanded rapidly in terms of scope of commercial activities and reached the peak of its boom in 1993, after which it declined sharply and finally ground to a halt in 2000 as a result of the war between Kporghor and Wakama-Ama in which Gio became an ally to the latter. During the period of its boom Gio market was of great service to communities around the area. Kporghor benefitted superlatively from the market because of its proximity to the market and the comparative advantage offered by large areas of fertile lands at their disposal. Both Gio and Kporghor enjoyed equal measure of economic advantage in terms of proximity to the market; that is because since they both did not incur transportation costs on the commodities they supplied at the market, they could afford to sell their goods at slightly lower prices than those supplied by traders from distant communities. This means a lot in economic terms, given the high price elasticity of most of the commodities. Secondly, even when the commodities were sold at the same prices with those of other suppliers from more distant locations who had to incur transportation costs the suppliers from Gio and Kporghor still stood a better chance to make more profit, *ceteris paribus*, because their total and average costs would be comparatively lower than those of their competitors from far communities. But Kporghor was more favoured than Gio in terms of both the size of land available to them and the suitability of their soil for agriculture.

The market thus stimulated economic activities in the area, and the communities emerged as a strategic economic nerve centre within Ogoni. With their rising economic fortunes, they cultivated even more virgin lands on the island known as *Ma-ue* from which they produced and supplied huge tons of various agricultural products. The land was still naturally rich in coastal alluvium and the level of environmental degradation was still very inconsequential at that time. Hence, crop yield was amazing. The rivers were still teeming with fish, making fishing also a lucrative occupation. Although there is no accurate statistical documentation of the rate and size of growth in terms of per capita income and contribution to GDP, one can assert matter-of-factly that the economy grew steadily from the post-civil war period until the early nineties. Many of the inhabitants became relatively self-sufficient farmers, albeit at a subsistence level. Many of them were also able to gather the means to build houses and sponsor their children and wards through school. Many of their children and wards weathered the challenge of having to attend Secondary and Teachers' Training colleges in distant communities and it paid off handsomely.

The economic fortunes of Kporghor and her neighbours rose steadily up until the early nineties and, then, eventually began to dwindle. The following section attempts to explain the present state of underdevelopment and crisis within this cluster of communities.

III. EXPLAINING THE DOWNTURN

Etymologically, the term phenomenon derives from the Greek word *phainomai* ("to appear"); so in the broadest sense of it the term means an appearance of sorts. There is a long philosophical tradition according to which phenomenon is used to refer to something that is perceived by the senses, experienced by an individual. Phenomena in this sense are contrasted with the *reality* behind the appearances, which Kant calls *noumena* (Kant 250). This sense of the concept of phenomenon which emphasizes the immediacy of experience has been lost in contemporary philosophy of science literature.

To the contrary, in contemporary usage a phenomenon is usually unobservable: 'Phenomena are detected through the use of [observable] data, but in most cases are not observable in any interesting sense of the term' (Bogen and Woodward 1988:306). A phenomenon is something that is inferred on the basis of observable data (Reiss 17)

Reiss further notes that:

... not everything that transcends the immediacy of sense experience would be called a phenomenon. Rather, a phenomenon is something that is significant, something of scientific interest: 'A phenomenon is noteworthy. A phenomenon is discernible. A phenomenon is commonly an event or process of certain type that occurs regularly under definite circumstances.' A phenomenon is therefore something that calls for theoretical explanation. It is an event or process whose existence we have ascertained so that we can use it as a starting point for our scientific investigation (18).

It is in its contemporary usage that we may refer to the increasing rate of voter apathy in southern Nigeria in the period after the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election up until the tenure of President Olusegun

Obasanjo in 1999 as a phenomenon. In this example, voter apathy is (strictly speaking) an unobservable phenomenon: low turnout of eligible voters at elections can be observed but the apathy itself is inferred on the basis of an intricate analysis of the relevant variables. Both senses of the term, as an observable fact and as something inferred on the basis of inferred data, will be deployed in our explanation of the phenomenon of economic downturn in the communities in the southern part of Tai, among which Kporghor is prominent.

There are different ways of *explaining* a phenomenon. We can broadly classify the different ways under scientific and non-scientific approaches. This classification is, however, somewhat loose and not immune to the controversy regarding the criteria for demarcating the domain of science from pseudoscience (Aigbodioh 56-75). In our present context, we use scientific explanations to refer to the kind whose claims are based on some verifiable natural law or principle, supported by evidence and established on the basis of a rigorous analysis of causal linkage between the explained phenomenon (*explanandum*) and the claim(s) that is (are) made about it (*explanans*). According to the “deductive-nomological model” (“D-N model”) of scientific explanation which, notwithstanding its drawbacks 'has come to be accepted as the “received view” of scientific explanation since the 1960s' (Reiss 20), a scientific explanation falls into two parts: an *explanandum* (from Latin “the thing to be explained”), which is a description of the phenomenon in question, and an *explanans* (from Latin: “the explaining thing”), which is/are the statement(s) considered to give an account of the phenomenon (Hempel and Oppenheim, in Reiss 20). The history of the philosophy of science reveals a huge gamut of divergent opinions on what is considered to be the right kind of connection between the *explanandum* and the *explanans* of a scientific explanation. But that is not within the purview of our present concern; nor do we need to delve into a discussion of the discontents of the D-N model.

The scientific method is not necessarily anti-metaphysics. In fact, the latter provides, or rather seeks to provide, a comprehensive and unifying account of the empirically perceptible world and so-called “extra-scientific” or transcendental realities. Perhaps, there is need to draw a quick distinction between metaphysics and some other attempts to provide a comprehensive account of reality which are commonly mistaken for metaphysics, for example theology. One striking difference is that unlike theology, philosophy is intolerant to dogmatism and all forms of canonical fallacies.

Our analysis of the collapse of the local economy will thus not admit of theological presuppositions, not because these presuppositions are entirely bereft of epistemological relevance, but because our chief goal is simply to offer an explanation that is more or less scientific and holistic.

Several factors account for the underdevelopment of Kporghor community and her contiguous neighbours. These include socio-cultural, psychological, environmental, economic and political factors. Before discussing these factors, it may be necessary to substantiate the argument that the area is underdeveloped. I argue that the area is *underdeveloped*, not unaware of the fact that the label "underdevelopment" is gradually losing currency in contemporary discussions in development studies and "developing" has become a preferred term. A key premise for the reclassification is the argument that there is no economy anywhere in the world, as it were, that does not record some growth in at least a sector of her economy within any given time period, however insignificant the rate may be. Hence, the argument continues, such an economy, if it has not developed substantially enough to be regarded as developed, is *developing*. Secondly, those who are opposed to the labelling of some societies as underdeveloped may wish to argue that describing an economy or society as such portrays underdevelopment as an absolute condition, whereas every economy, if not developing is either 'underdeveloping' or stagnant. Thirdly, the label conveys the idea that the condition of underdevelopment is deliberately contrived by some agency. In other words, it suggests that the development of the society in question has been wilfully *suppressed* by some agent or actors (which could be a dominant class, an imperial state or an inexorable divine will) that hinder development. Obviously, it was such pejorative and value-laden political imports of the term that made leaders of the so-called 'underdeveloped' countries to reject the label as 'offensive' and as an indictment.

In spite of the psychological appeal of the preceding arguments, I still consider the term '*underdeveloped*' appropriate in our present context, but I must add that it is a relative term. A country or society may justifiably be regarded as underdeveloped in *relation* not only to its rate and quantum of economic growth but also to the degree of qualitative transformation, in the sense that the country or society *has failed* to optimally harness and utilize available human and material resources. In other words, the rate and level of growth in all its ramifications and the pattern of distribution of wealth fall short of what it could offer if her potentials were fully harnessed. Furthermore, a very substantial and continuous growth in one or some sectors of an economy will not automatically translate to development unless all the other sectors are also growing or, at

least, no sector is declining at a rate that is high enough to have a countervailing force on the booming sectors. Paradoxically, therefore, an economy might be *developing* in a linear direction, in one or few sectors, and yet it is *underdeveloped* relative to its potentials. This explains why economists emphasize the importance of substantial and continuous growth in the real sector as a key index of sustainable development. Growth and decline in the real sector tend to affect all other sectors more than proportionately.

In the 2016 HDI Report, the average annual HDI growth in Nigeria from 2010-2015 is 1.08, falling under the group of Low Human Development countries. The HDI is 'a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development — a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living' (UNDP 2015). The situation in the south coastal communities of Tai is even worse than the national average of 1.08. It is usually difficult to precisely measure the human development index (HDI) in the informal local economies. The difficulty in measuring HDI in local, mostly rural economies in Nigeria stems from the fact that a great deal of the productive and subsidiary activities at that level go unrewarded and is usually neglected in national income accounting.

It is, however, quite easy to pass an acceptable judgment on rate of economic development and social progress at the local level using some adapted components of the HDI. This approach involves analysis of both qualitative and statistically measurable variables such as life expectancy; prevalence of treatable diseases and general health condition of the people; level of literacy and skills; unemployment rate (or, its reverse, employment level); level of availability and quality of social infrastructure (such as schools, roads, healthcare facilities, potable water, electricity, etc.); literacy level; level of eradication of preventable diseases; level of availability and quality of food for individuals and households; state of the physical environment.

There has, no doubt, been marginal and unsteady growth in some of the indices of development within the coastal economies for the past fifty decades. Still, that fact does not negate the claim that the area is underdeveloped, and it is so in four fundamental senses. One, the level of structural differentiation is still very low and growth has been confined to a few sectors to the exclusion of the real sector, especially since after the early nineties. Secondly, even in the few isolated areas where growth has occurred, it has been both slow and irregular. For example, although there are a few natives of these communities who have become very highly educated, there is simultaneously a huge drop in the marginal number of educated people. The population of semi- and highly skilled persons in the area is also very negligible. Thirdly, both in the areas that have witnessed visible growth and those that have not, available resources have not been optimally harnessed. Finally, some exogenous social and political forces or agents have been responsible for the backwardness of the community in some ways, so much so that the communities can rightly be said to have been *underdeveloped* in a similar sense in which Walter Rodney in his famous work, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (1972), holds Europe culpable for Africa's backwardness. Having made the above point, I shall proceed to discuss some of the major factors that have accounted for the downturn.

Socio-Cultural Factors

A major socio-cultural factor that has imperilled the economy of the south coastal communities is the erosion of pristine cultural norms and values among indigenes and inhabitants of these communities and their neighbours. One such value is the communalistic spirit, which is one of the defining elements of African socialism. The early settlers of these communities saw themselves as a common stock. Their concept of a neighbour meant not just members of one's own village or town, but also those of neighbouring communities, irrespective of ethnic identities. In fact, a morally upright and friendly indigene of another village was regarded as a better neighbour than even a member of one's kinsfolk who does not exhibit such brotherly affections.

Much as the cluster of communities within the different culture groups of Wakirike (Okirika) and Ogoni maintained a high level of intra-ethnic cohesion based on their internal affinities and psycho-social attachment, they also cherished certain aspects of each other's culture, which reinforced a sense of social complementation among them. As a result, the people made friends across community and ethnic divides both as communities and individually. Thus it was the case that the Ogoni communities of Gio and Kporghor used to invite their friends from Wakama-Ama as guests during some of their cultural feasts and festivals in the same way as the Wakama-Ama used to invite the others during theirs, e.g. during *Oki Masquerade Display* and boat regatta.

Interpersonal and inter-community relations were based on the mutual trust that existed among the inhabitants of the various communities. Agreements and contracts, although usually unwritten, were held sacrosanct, whether or not they were contracted on oath. Such were the kinds of values and mindset that

promoted mutual co-existence among the ancestors of these neighbouring communities. It may be may not be inappropriate to regard those values and consciousness as part of the wisdom of the old generations and to see their abandonment as the folly of the present generation. Regrettably, as those values ebbed, the bond of friendship and good neighbourliness among members of the various communities began to weaken and the relationship between one community and the other gradually became frosty, paving the way for hostilities and other forms of aggression.

The faltering of the hitherto existing inter-communal ties among the communities combined with the diminishing authority of traditional institutions to undermine the traditional conflict resolution mechanism by which leaders of the affected communities were able to pronounce and enforce appropriate sanctions on deviant characters. The aftermath of this has been frequent feuds and, in recent time, bloody wars among the communities, especially between Kporghor and Wakama-Ama. This frosty relationship has hampered social cooperation and economic activities within and across the communities in the area. As already mentioned, the recurrence of violent conflicts in the area has had a huge adverse effect on the social, political and economic stability of the area.

Another serious social factor that hindered economic development in the area is the absence of a post-secondary school in the area until towards the end of the 20th century. Until 1997 when Community Secondary School Kporghor was established, indigenes and residents of the community and the neighbouring communities had to travel to distant communities mostly outside Tai to acquire high school (O'Level) education. Another related factor that has hindered the development of the community is the growing tendency towards indolence and a declining interest in education and the acquisition of higher skills. Their forebears were very active and resourceful farmers and fishermen who, as I stated earlier in this chapter, were able to fend for themselves, provide for themselves some basic infrastructure, and afforded to send their children to school. Kporghor community recorded the highest percentage of the total enrolment in Primary School Gio/Kporghor during the period when the school was composed of enrolees from Wakama, Kporghor, Gio and few from Kira. It maintained that lead till the period when it was attended mainly by those from just Kporghor and Gio. The numerical dominance of enrolees from Kporghor community was, in fact, the deciding factor in the establishment of a primary school in Kporghor in the late 1980s.

Regrettably, this trend was reversed towards the late 1990s. There is a steady decline in the percentage of people in these communities that are interested in education, capacity building and legitimate occupations such as farming, fishing, and commercial services. Other factors responsible for this trend will be discussed under the environmental factors. Suffice it to say that a drop in the number of educated people in an area and their quality will invariably affect the general level of development which, unarguably, is a function of several factors, including literacy and educational skills.

Psychological Factors

The military occupation of Ogoniland in the 1990s led to de-recognition of many traditional stools and the superimposition of new community "leaders" on existing ones. Generally, the appointment of these leaders was not based on merit; neither educational qualifications nor ethical considerations were taken into account. That was a deviation from what obtained in the past in which the choice of community leaders used to be based on considerations such as moral conduct, contribution to community development, social status, level of knowledge, etc. In addition to the arbitrary appointment of community leaders by the military, appointments into other public offices and recommendations for important jobs were also done recklessly and on the basis of patronage. This led to the emergence of a new cabal of local moguls who also became 'king makers' in their various domains.

Not only did the new leaders become relatively rich and very powerful, they also perpetrated so much social injustice and encouraged what Chinua Achebe calls the 'cult of mediocrity' which brings '... the wheels of modernization grinding to a halt throughout the land' (20). Merit was sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity. One needed not to possess a suitable academic qualification or be of good character to be appointed into important positions but only needed to be 'connected' to the person in charge. The richest people in the society were thus neither the most educated nor the most entrepreneurial. This kind of skewed reward system is bound to dampen entrepreneurial spirit and discourage the drive to development of competence which, in turn, causes stunted economic growth and social progress. Analysing the effects of social injustice and 'tribalism' on the Nigerian society, Achebe states as following:

Let us take a hypothetical case where two candidates A and B apply to fill a very important and strategic position. A has the right qualification of competence and character but is of the "wrong" tribe,

while B, less qualified, belongs to the “right” tribe, and so gets the job. A goes away embittered. B throws a party and then messes up the job. The greatest sufferer is the nation itself which has to contain the legitimate grievance of a wronged citizen; accommodate the incompetence of a favoured citizen and, more important and of great scope, endure a general decline of morale and subversion of efficiency caused by an erratic system of performance and reward (19).

In our present analysis, Tai is akin to Nigeria and “loyalty” to political god-fathers is akin to tribal affiliation in Achebe’s analysis. The results are also similar. As Achebe rightly notes about Nigeria in the above excerpt, the erratic reward system associated with the cult of mediocrity is counter-developmental. The point of emphasis here is not that social injustice never existed in the area prior to that period, but that the wave of economic advantages accruable to the “beneficiaries” during this period undermined the moral fabric of society and fostered a new and unhealthy work psychology. It led to a massive unwillingness to work and a decline in the development of productive capacities. Many people abandoned economic activities and began to turn to politics, even when they are ill-fitted, for it, because it has come to be widely seen as a short route to wealth. Some of those who are driven by the prevailing get-rich-quick syndrome and cannot find a space in politics pursue their economic interests in other areas such as oil bunkering and armed robbery, all of which have adverse effects on the economy.

Environmental Factors

The emphasis here is on the effects of the physical environment, including both biotic and abiotic factors, on the level of development of the area. As pointed out earlier in this work, the area once had lands with lush green meadows, which is a manifestation of the richness of the underlying soil. That was the condition prior to, and up until shortly after, 1956 when crude oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in the area, after Oloibiri in present Bayelsa State. The commencement and intensification of oil exploitation activities in the area wreaked havoc with the ecosystem. Apart from the oil pipelines that crisscross the length and breadth of the community and the entire Ogoni region, which has greatly reduced the size of cultivable land, there have also been incessant spillages arising from negligence, sabotage and the activities of the operators of the underground economy, notably those involved in artisanal refineries. Vegetation has also been greatly impacted by gas flaring from flow stations in nearby communities. All of these have combined cause massive depletion of soil nutrients and aquatic resources. The cumulative effects of these fallouts of oil production on agriculture have also been grave. The human population has not been spared either. The presence of large amounts of lethal chemicals such as hydrocarbons and other toxic substances in the environment arising from poor environmental management associated with oil production, including both industrial production and artisanal refineries, has led to the prevalence of deadly diseases and high mortalities.

Economic Factors: Effect of the National Economy

Beyond what has previously been said of the economic implications of the other factors discussed above, it is noteworthy to mention the consequences of the production of mineral oil in Nigeria on both the national and local economies. One major effect is that oil (crude) soon became the hallmark and “commanding heights” of the Nigerian economy, leading to the neglect of the other sectors, including the agricultural sector. Following the huge depletion of soil nutrients arising from oil production activities and the failure of the government to provide adequate incentives to farmers, a large number of the active population from the communities began to migrate to the urban centres in search of greener pastures as was the general trend across the country. Regrettably, the oil industry is highly capital-intensive and so cannot absorb much of the teeming number of unemployed people seeking employment in the industry. It is particularly worse for those from underdeveloped minority communities who do not only lack the qualifying credentials and basic skills for the jobs but also face the challenge of securing employment in an industry that is almost a no-go-area, at least in practice, for the so-called minority groups in the Niger Delta.

Matters would probably have been pleasantly different had past policies of government aimed at reviving agriculture succeeded. On the contrary, agriculture has become very unattractive among the active workforce in the area leading to its abandonment. This factor, combined with the inability of many of them to secure an alternative occupation, has led to a severe contraction of the economy.

High unemployment has greatly imperilled economic activities in the area. It has led to the proliferation of artisanal refineries and engendered involvement in illegal oil bunkering, especially in the creeks and islands. Apart from the magnitude of wastage which these activities are causing on the national economy, they are also exacerbating the level of environmental degradation. Although these nefarious activities are substantially undertaken by members of the neighbouring communities and those drawn from other places, they do have a contagious effect on the area—their physical environment is depleted and the lure of “oil money” has drawn some of their natives into some illicit engagements. For example, some of them trade in the products and

some of the young girls have become commercial sex workers (CSWs) to the bunkers and workers in the artisanal refineries. This, in turn, has raised the prevalence rate of sexually transmitted diseases in the area and, in turn, decimated the active population. There is also a positive correlation between the resultant unemployment and armed robbery.

Political Factors

The communities have had a long history of good governance. Key aspects of this governance include constitutionalism, accountability, broad-spectrum community participation in governance, protection of individuals' fundamental human rights as well as other political, economic and cultural rights, and preservation of community norms and values. All these worked together in various ways to promote social cohesion, internal peace and security, as well as the reinforcement of a value system that promoted the dignity of labour. Regrettably, the early 1990s began to witness a gradual weakening of some of the key institutions and agencies that had been responsible for good governance and preservation of values within the community, especially. Part of the reasons for the weakness of the local institutions is the demise of key traditional agencies such as the secret cults (Aminikpo, Nkoo, O-u-Olu, Zaghallowa, etc.) as a result of the proselytizing influence of modernization without an effective bridging of the gap by the emerging modern structures like state police and the law courts. In their heydays, those agencies played important judicial roles and thus strengthened the key institutions local governance. Not on has the weakening of the governance structure ushered in a state of moral tropy-turvydom within the communities as they lack the capacity to make and enforce laws. This has led to traces of banditry, hooliganism, vandalism, and insecurity of lives and property, all of which impede economic growth and development.

Beyond the internal political factors discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the most ruinous political factors are exogenous, that is to say that they are external. One such factor is political marginalization. This occurs at various levels and pervades the society. Ogoni is a minority nationality in Rivers State, which is in turn a minority State within the Nigerian State. Since the creation of Rivers State in 1967, till 1996 when Bayelsa was carved out of it and even up till date, Ogoni has not produced any key State or federal political position such as Governor or Deputy Governor of the State, let alone President or Vice President of the country, Senate President, or even Speaker of Federal House of Representative. The Local Government Areas of Ogoni are among the largest in the State in terms of actual population. Yet, they have the fewest number of electoral Wards and polling units, the creation of which was based on inaccurate census figures tinkered with by the politically and economically dominant ethnic groups. As is well known, political power almost always yield economic power and vice versa.

At the local government level, Ward 6 (Gio/Kporghor Gbam Ward) is about the largest in Rivers State. On the contrary, some communities in State which contribute much less to the state and national treasury than the communities in Tai and which are smaller in terms of both population and land mass are made Wards, for instance the neighbouring Wakama-Ama in present Ogu/Bolo LGA. Again, as at 2017, the area has not produced a Chairman or any key officer of the Local Government, and the highest State appointment it has produced is member of a state board. The communities have been marginalised by dominant communities in the LGA. Sadly, in a country where leaders are usually driven by the desire for self-aggrandizement and the pursuit of local interests, the unfortunate outcome is that communities and regions that are not able to produce the top political leaders are often end up being economically pauperized and neglected in terms of development. Twisted values and work ethics, political marginalisation, economic strangulation, environmental degradation, war and social unrest, and decline in economic activities took a heavy toll on the hitherto viable local economy and plunged it into serious economic recession. The resultant contraction of the local economy and the instability and structural dislocations within it have, in turn, occasioned a dire reversal of the people's economic fortunes. The glorious past has eventually yielded to a rather intolerable present that calls for urgent and concerted efforts by the local people and the state to reverse the current trend and transform the area again into a major modern industrial and commercial hub for which it holds great prospect.

IV. CONCLUSION

This work has provided a historical account of the rise and eventual decline of the local economy of the local communities of the southern coast of Tai and their neighbours. An abundance of natural resources, congenial climatic condition and the existence of peace were crucial factors that stimulated economic growth in the area. Peace among inhabitants of communities hinged on mutual interdependence and due recognition of the rights of others, especially territorial rights. We have also seen the negative consequences of the neglect of the local communities by government at the national levels. The gap created by this neglect combined with the cultivation of certain anti-social and counter-developmental survival instincts to pave the way for social conflicts, including violent communal wars that destroyed the moral, social and economic fabric of the communities.

Utilising the political economy approach, our study establishes the interconnectedness of social psychology, politics, and economics in the analysis of the metaphysics of historical causation. It also accentuates the relevance of humanistic core values and norms in promoting the idea of political community as product of a social contract. Amidst the crises besetting the area, there is still a huge prospect of economic recovery and the return of peace in the area. The government can facilitate this through well-coordinated state intervention mechanisms anchored on principles of social justice. The communities on their own part should have due regard for and reinforce the cultural basis for harmonious social and economic ties that had the hitherto thrived among them.

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