

OGWUMABIRI MARKET AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF UMUAHIA, 1900-1975

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Abstract

This study examined the contributions of Ogwumabiri Markets to the development of Umuahia, the capital city of Abia state in South-eastern Nigeria. It explores the multifaceted impact of these markets on the city's socio-economic growth, Urbanisation, and cultural evolution. The purpose of this study, therefore is to historicize Umuahia's strategic location as a railway hub, spurred real estate development and contributed to its Urban sprawl. The study also attempted to demonstrate that culturally, markets have become melting pots where different ethnicities and cultures interact, promoting social cohesion and cultural exchange. The study utilised thematic analysis and secondary sources, including books, journals and newspapers by various scholars. The findings indicate that marketing activities and market institutions are integral to urban development. Markets also present challenges such as congestion, environmental population and strain on urban infrastructure. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive urban planning and sustainable development strategies to ensure that the benefits of markets are maximized while mitigating their adverse effects.

Key word: Markets, Development, Umuahia, Culture, Urbanisation, infrastructure.

Introduction

Umuahia is the capital of Abia State in Nigeria. It is a town located within Ibeku. It is made up of Ibeku villages called Amuzukwu to the north, Afara ukwu to the South, Nkata to the North east, Ohokobe Ndume to the South east, Ossa Ugwunchara and Emede



villages to the West¹ The name *Umuahia* started off as a central market post called *Ama-Ahia* meaning market place, but with evolution; bad pronunciations and rewritings, *Ama-Ahia* became *Umuahia*. It is known by various names *Ugwuocha*, *Ugwunchara*, *Ogwumabiri*- all referring to the central trading post in the city. This post serves the surrounding villages whose market days are either up-coming or have passed, continuing the tradition of buying and selling.

There are four market days that trades only once a week. *Afo nta* and *Afo-ukwu*, *Eken-ukwu* and *Eke-nta*, *Nkwo nta* and *Nkwo-ukwu*, *Orie nta* and *Orie-ukwu*. There is always one big market day in a week hence *Ogwumabiri* market serves as a central point for all others for cheaper goods. Given its serenity and proximity to other towns such as *Ohafia*, *Abiriba*, *Arochukwu*, *Obowo*, *Ngwa*, *Okigwe*, *Uzuakoli*, *Bende* to mention but a few. Merchants of produce, pottery, crafts, textile, traditional medicine, cattle, palm wine and tools travelled from afar to trade at the busy market centre. With many roads leading to it. ² As a popular market, it created the picture of a giant business centre and commercial tree towering above others within the locality and attracting numerous 'business birds of the air' which came regularly in their hundreds to perch or settle on the 'business tree'.

The establishment of administrative centres and the revolution in transport was a significant development for trade and marketing. The railway, constructed between 1913 and 1915 cut through the heart of Igbo land to the coal mines at Enugu and gave this area for the first time direct access to the coast at the Port Harcourt real head.³ There are three railway stations in *Umuahia*; *Amaeke* station, *Umuahia- Ibeku* station, and Old *Umuahia* station. Eventually it linked northwards with the grain and meat producing savannah country of Northern Nigeria. From the point of view of the external trade, the most important result of railway



construction was the establishment along the route of European firms after the manner of the riverine and coastal stations. Indeed so close was the similarity that the stations were known locally as beaches.⁴ These dums rapidly attracted markets and trading communities around them and formed the nucleus of new commercial towns.

The question then is, is development critically important? What is development? The term, development remained a phenomenon that has been a subject of series of debates by experts due to its economic, sociological, and political dimensions.⁵ Although, there is an emerging consensus that development is critically important to all nations of the world. However, there emerged a considerable confusion over what development actually is; in general terms, development is likened to an event constituting a new stage in a changing situation or the process of change perse.⁶

Development as an evolutionary process, has positive connotation and of course development is always of something particular- human being, a society, a nation, an economy, a skill it is often associated with words such as under, over, or balanced, too little, too much, or just right.....⁷

Development can also be defined as an act of improvising by expanding or enlarging.⁸ This research will historicize the development of *Umuahia* and provide a comprehensive understanding of the role played by the *Ogwumabiri* market in the development of *Umuahia* from 1900 to 1975. The work is organized in four themes. The first examines the establishment of *Ogwumabiri* market. Secondly, the ways in which the market fostered economic growth and contributed to the overall development of the town. The Third theme recounts the obstacles or challenges faced by the market and the strategies employed to overcome them. The fourth theme is conclusion. The terminal year



of the study (1975), marked the post Nigerian Civil War administrative years under General Yakubu Gowon. It witnessed the massive migration of the Igbo, from the remote communities to *Umuahia* and who mostly came as destitutes. These people came and established business activities and with the enormous success they gained from it attracted other people to also settle in *Umuahia*.

Theoretical Framework

The Push and Pull Theory is applied to the contribution of *Ogwumabiri* market to the development of *Umuahia*. Push –pull factors in migration according to Everett S. Lee are categories that demographers use to analyse human migration from former areas to new factors causing migrations into group of factors.⁹

Push factors are things that are unfavourable about the area that one lives in and pull factors are things that attract one to another area. It is a popular theory to explain the reason why the tourists decide to visit the destination rather than other place, the kind of experience they want to get and the type of activity they want to do. Examples of pull factors include political instability, lots of jobs, natural resources, better learning institutions, and better climate. Ultimately, migration happens because of the combination of push and pull factor.

Rush factors encourage people to leave their points of origin and settle elsewhere, while pull factors attract migrants to new areas for example, high unemployment is a common push factor, while an abundance of jobs is an effective pull factor.

Also, Duncan in his book, *The Theory and Consequences of Mobility of Farm Population*, has presented a theory regarding the mobility of population engaged in agriculture. His theory is the combination of microscopic and macroscopic active forces in the process of migration.¹⁰

According to Duncan, whatever effects are created by changes in structural factors of the country, the same effects are caused by migration. Thus, for achieving many structural aims, migration is the functional alternative to social change.¹¹

There are some miscellaneous causes which affect migration. They are labour problems, strikes, riots, increase in real wealth, search of new means or ending up of the supply of old resources.¹² Rural people desire city goods, and as they yearn for them, they also strive to earn money to purchase them. Migration favourably alters the value system of the rural communities and the augmented contacts may introduce in the rural societies better awareness towards such things as hygiene, immunization, importance of education of girls, healthy and balanced diet.¹³

Migrants from the rural areas are usually unskilled for jobs in the “Urban Formal”. Sector and hence may pick up sundry jobs in the “Urban Formal Sector” .¹⁴ Such jobs are low paying but also help in warding off hunger, which the migrant would have faced in their original setup. Initially, many unskilled migrants take up jobs of mental and manual workers or as petty helpers, assistant or as peddlers of goods. Some migrants may earn good amounts even by such jobs thus the productivity of per capital income and employment increases as mainly migrants move from “Zero sum” or even “negative sum” to “positive sum” activities. Thus socio-economic productivity goes up. The great advantage lies in the migrants giving better education and training to their second generation.¹⁵

Origin and Establishment of Ogwumabiri Market

It is already well known that in Igboland, names are generally meant to convey some kind of ideas or message, or to carry a meaning. Place – names as well as names given to individuals always carry a message or a meaning. Viewed in this way, it is quite conceivable that the name *Umuahia* might have originated as a



nickname given by the *Olokor* village to the only village in the clan who's comparatively much larger population easily conjured up the picture or image of large numbers or multitudes of insects or animals or birds, such as weaver birds.

The word '*Umuahia*' referred to the *Aro* trader – settlers in that village and meant something like *Ndi* – '*Ozuahia*'; Trader's addicts, or professional traders. This, in the Igbo language, would translate into something like, *Umu-ozu-ahia*- a trade people.¹⁶ Indeed old *Umuahia* village (*ndi nwe ahia Afor Ibeji*) was clearly one of the communities in the old *Bende* Division that attracted a sizable population of *Aro* settlers and traders in pre-colonial times, the *Afor Ibeji* market was as popular as those at *Uzuakoli*, *Uturu-Okigwe*, *Ife* (in *Mbaise*), *Bende* and *Uburu*. It serves as a key markets for the *Aro* dealers and their local agents, including a significant number in the old *Umuahia* village, dealing in slaves and other commodities. It is therefore quite possible that such a name '*Umu-Ozu-ahaia*' or '*Umuahia*', was applied in deference for those trader-settler elements and peoples at *Afor Ibeji* and the surrounding areas. The undoubted social and political power influence enjoyed by these traders and their local agents are derived mainly from their commercial enterprises or acumen, which was felt by the entire community.¹⁷

After the pacification of the surrounding neighbours, the abolition of slave trade and the *Afor-Ibeji* peace Agreement with Europeans, followed by the full introduction of the colonial Administration, this place started witnessing a steady influx of merchants and European goods from the coastal town. The following major trading companies established their posts in this town between 1910 to 1930, John Holt, Managed by one Coker a Creole who later resigned to become an Anglican Priest, GB Olivants managed by Spiff and CFAO under the management of one Macpherson another Creole.¹⁸

A Lodge, an American clergyman who visited this town within this period made the following remarks:

“(Old) Umuahia is a fast growing town in population. Government is planning it as a provincial headquarters will mean great influx of many people; servants, government clerks, with their families and a host of others, trading ventures are planning to build extensions to their already existing stores and this will draw more and more of the people from the surrounding country to trade their produce”.¹⁹

Besides, as the administration was being expanded and streamlined in order to cope with fledging commercial activities, it became necessary to shift the administrative post to a more spacious site about four kilometres away in a place called *Alaocha, Okata* or *Mkpa*, an evil forest used in common by the people of *Ibeku, Ubakala, Ohuhu* and old *Umuahia*. According to the Royal Book of Record, Worgu kamanu “performed the traditional rituals to cleans the ancient forest land within the *Ibeku* clan Of evil spirit. After deforesting the area, he handed the land over to the government. This land was then made a crown land and developed as a township” (intelligent Report 1932). *Umuahia* is well known as being an agricultural market centre since 1916. It is also a railway collect-point for crops such as yams, cassava, corn (maize), rice, taro, citrus fruits, palm oil, cocoa and palm kernels.

The *Afor Ibeku* market was one of the many attractions to immigrant *Aro, Abiriba* and *Ubani* (Bonny and Opobo) traders, and others settlers from different directions. As a very popular market, it created the picture of a giant business centre and commercial tree towering above others within the locality and attracting numerous business birds of the air which came regularly in their hundreds to perch or settle on the business tree. The (old) *Umuahia* village or *Ndi New Afor Ibeji* market community, was



remarked for the numerical superiority of its commercially active population. This population appeared to be ever on the increase at that time, as fresh settlers from various areas constantly came in to settle.²⁰

With its comparatively larger population of 504 adult males in 1935, the old umuahia trading community would indeed have looked (especially to the smaller Olokoro village whose populations then had numbered a mere 88, for Umudere; 73 for Ama Ngwa, 74, for Umuobia and Ajonkwu, 52), like a sea of humanity, a beehive of people, a swarm of bees or locusts or a chorus of weaver birds (Ottenberg, 1958) Ogwumabiri Umuahia main market was built in 1935 at the city centre during the colonial era.²¹

Ogwumabiri Market Development And Its Contributions To The Growth Of Umuahia

The establishment of administrative centres was a significant development for trade and marketing. It did not greatly affect the external trade nor the old markets and routes associated with the coastal trade. But it increased the scope for trade in local produce in the interior, particularly food crops. The garrisons and the administrative personnel constituted a nucleus of a non-rural based population dependent on the country-side for food.²¹ Traders and persons engaged in other service occupations as well as men who came in originally as conscripted labour, all settled near the government station.

Be that as it may, the most significant development was the revolution in transportation. The railway constructed between 1913 and 1915, cut through the heart of Igbo country to the new found coal mines at Enugu (later to become the capital of Eastern Nigeria) and gave this area for the first time direct access to the coast at the port Harcourt railhead.²²



These dums rapidly attracted markets and trading communities around them thus formed the nucleus of new commercial towns. whereas at Aba, both administrative and commercial centres coincided, the two functions helped each other out and the urban community flourished where there was competition between a commercial and an administrative centre, as between Enugu and Udi or between Umuahia and Bende, the commercial centre prevailed, eventually taking over the political functions of the vanquished town.²³

Up to the end of the 1920s, the waterways and the railway line bore the bulk of the long distance traffic. In 1926, the government was still considering the practicability of building feeder railway lines from *Oguta* to Aba or Port Harcourt.²⁴ By the beginning of the 1930s, however, it had become evident that improvement in road transport was necessary to increase production and trade, the bulk of the population being concentrated away from the waterways and railways. Plans for road development were prepared but had to be shelved during the war. Between 1937 and 1960, there was a substantial road building program that more than doubled the road millage. At the same time, the number of motor vehicles registered annually increased more than eleven times. Road development led not only to a greater integration of the region but also to a change in orientation of the interior areas from the waterways and railway to the road system. It must be mentioned here that there are three railway stations in *Umuahia Ibeku*. First was *Amaeke* station, then *Umuahia-Ibeku* station and old *Umuahia* station, all constructed during the 1920s.²⁵ The motor road network today reflects the weakness of centralizing links in Igboland. The principal nodes are at the chief urban administrative centre, the nuclei of the system. In addition to these, a number of rural cross roads have also become important.



With the railway; there was another economic landmark which became immediately obvious once the line transverse Igbo land. This was the fact that the European commercial companies which hitherto hugged the coast and the river banks, because they wanted cheap transportation, now penetrated the Igbo interior establishing posts and depots at vital points on the railway line. As a result the railway stations and halts became produce buying points of varying degrees of importance. Among such points were points of evacuation, Aba, *Umuoba*, *Umuahia*, *Uzuakoli*, *Ovim*, *Afikpo*, *Agbani* and *Eha Amufu*. Each of these became, as it were, a port with the surrounding towns and villages as its hinter land.²⁶ They served as centres for collecting local produce mainly palm oil and palm kernel. They also served as venue for distributing the new cash currency, stock fish, tobacco, kerosene, cloth, enamel wares, metal gadgets, gun powder, spirituous drinks and so on.

Also prior to Nigeria's independence, the business climate was almost totally dominated by the colonial and other European multinational companies like the United African Company (UAC), GB Olivant, Unilever Plc. Petterson Zechonics, Leventis, etc; to mention but a few. These companies primarily engaged in bringing into *Umuahia* finished goods from their parent companies overseas. While the raw materials like palm oil, palm kernel, cocoa, rubber were being transported via the coast through the Atlantic Ocean to overseas.²⁷ The raw materials were being sourced from *Umuahia* and the environs. These companies have vast business experience and strong capital base, as such, dominated the economy. The government of those days encouraged them to become stronger by giving incentives as favourable tariffs and tax concession.

It is worthy of note that all these multinational companies situate around *Ogwumabiri* main market *Umuahia*. Hence *Umuahia* main market attracted international status with people coming



from far and near to patronize the market. The discovery of the commercial viability of this area was to be the main attraction of the people and the subsequent establishment of the cattle trading community i.e cattle market. The cattle trade or industry had since the establishment served as one of the most significant economic activities in *Umuahia*. The cattle market served the entire southern provinces, Chad, Niger and Cameroon.²⁸

Furthermore, 1940 – 60s witnessed the establishment of many institutions and colleges of educations- Trinity College in *Afara Ibeku*, Assemblies of God Mission Seminary at Old *Umuahia* in *Amakama Olokoru*. The Federal Girls Secondary School in Old *Umuahia*. The Federal School of Agriculture at *Umudike*, Government College, *Umudike, Umuahia*. The Michael *Okpara* University of Agriculture in *Umudike*. The modern Ceramic Industry at *Afara-ukwu* came on stream producing primary sanitary wares, bath tubes as well as tiles while the metallic industry was also in the offing for the production of small machine tools.²⁹

Golden Guinea Breweries was established in 1960 and it became an economic epi-centre and financial life wire for not only the people of the then Eastern Region but also indigenes of *Umuahia* who enjoyed the social and economic benevolence it offered through the social responsibility programme, as the slogan goes “Golden Guinea, the Choice of Many”³⁰.

Undeniably, the Golden Guinea Breweries *Umuahia* served as a tourist haven for the city as people came from far and wide to taste the bubbling liquor that tinkled out from the golden bottle. It encouraged inter and intra ethnic marriages and promoted acculturation. The ancient city of *Umuahia* played host to people of diverse culture, language and background who were marketers, business men and women, and who were working in the firm since 1960. The Golden Guinea Brewery was situated at *Afara Ukwu*.³¹

Obstacles and Challenges Faced By the Market and Strategies Employed To Overcome Them

The opening up of *Umuahia* by the European commercial companies brought tremendous increase in population. Thus, different people came into *Umuahia* with various trade and skills, creating more goods and services for the community. For the greater quantity of goods and services were based on greater skills and human inventiveness. Hence Walter Rodney asserted that man was liberated in order to have opportunities in displaying and developing his talents.³² The resultant effect of this was the growth of schools, road constructions, health facilities, banking industry, pipe borne water, Electricity, post office, to mention but a few.³³ On the other hand, there were lots of challenges faced by *Ogwumabiri* market. One of such challenges was the limited market size. *Ogwumabiri Umuahia* main market is situated at the heart of the town. It is a bustling hub where you can find everything from handcrafted goods to fresh produce. As a result of lack of space, the market caused obstruction for railway lines and devastating environmental degradation. The marketers were selling on the rail lines for lack of space, thus, turning the pedestrian bridge into a dumpsite. There were chains of business in every street in *Umuahia*, be it low scale and or full-scale business. There is availability of mechanical items to be sold in the town, both motorbike and fairly used cars.³⁴ Hence market fragmentation, *Ogwumabiri Umuahia* was faced with numerous small businesses competing for customers and market share. Consequently, the Timber and Allied market was relocated from *Umuahia* urban centre to Ajata.³⁵

Also, infrastructure bottlenecks is another challenge. Bottlenecks such as inadequate transportation networks, unreliable power supply, utilities, banks, telecommunications and good roads. Hence the need to invest in alternative solutions or work with government authorities to address these bottlenecks. Accessing

financing for development projects in *Umuahia* may be challenging due to factors such as limited financial institutions, high interest rate, and stringent lending criteria. This is because, investors may not be willing to take on the perceived risks associated with investing in a smaller market.³⁶

Besides, regulatory environment in *Umuahia* is another challenge. Market players in *Umuahia* are faced with the complexity of navigating the regulatory environment due to the fact that it's subject to frequent changes. Compliance with regulations related to zoning, land use, permits, and taxes can add time and cost to development projects. Not only that, limited access to suppliers, contractors, and skilled labour in *Umuahia* may pose challenges for market players. Delays in obtaining materials or completing construction projects could impact projects timelines and profitability.³⁷

Conclusion and Recommendations

Markets have been instrumental in the development of *Umuahia*, contributing significantly to its economic growth, social integration and infrastructural improvements. By providing a platform for local businesses to flourish, markets have created employment opportunities and attracted investments in infrastructure, such as transportation and utilities. These developments have, in turn, supported the city's economic expansion.³⁸

Additionally, markets have acted as social hubs, facilitating cultural exchange and fostering community interactions. They have become central to communal activities, strengthening social bonds and enhancing the overall quality of life in *Umuahia*. This dynamic has not only improved living standards but also established *Umuahia* as an important commercial centre in the region.

In conclusion, the impact of market on *Umuahia's* development has been profound, driving economic growth and social cohesion while spurring infrastructural advancements. As these markets continue to evolve, they will remain crucial to the city's ongoing prosperity and development.

The development of *Umuahia*, the capital city of *Abia* state in Nigeria, can be significantly influenced by the impact of markets.³⁹ Markets are central to economic activities, and their proper management and expansion can stimulate the city's growth in various ways:

Infrastructure Improvement:

- Upgrade market infrastructure with better roads, electricity, water supply, and sanitation facilities to make them more accessible and attractive for traders and customers.
- Establish Modern Market Complexes with adequate space, storage facilities and security measures to enhance trade efficiency.

Promotion of Local Products:

- Encourage the production and sale of local goods, including agricultural products, handicrafts, and textiles to support local industries and create employment opportunities.
- Organize regular fairs and exhibitions to showcase and promote indigenous products to a broader audience.

Support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):

- Provide financial support such as low interest loans and grants to small and medium –sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in the markets.
- Offer training programs on business management, marketing, and technology use to help SMEs grow and complete effectively.



Digitalization of Market Transactions:

- Implement digital payment systems to streamline transactions and improve financial inclusion for traders and customers.
- Create an online marketplace platform to expand the reach of local traders beyond the physical market space, enabling them to tap into regional and international markets.

Market Regulation and Governance

- Establish clear and fair regulation governing market operations to prevent exploitation and ensure a level playing field for all traders.
- Form market associations or cooperatives to foster collective bargaining, resources sharing, and conflict resolution among traders.

Public – Private Partnerships:

- Encourage partnerships between the government and private sector to invest in market development projects, including infrastructure, training programs and technological innovations.
- Leverage corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives from private companies to support market improvement and community development.

Enhancement of Market Accessibility

- Improve public transportation systems to facilitate easy access to markets for traders and consumers.
- Develop logistical hubs and transport links to ensure efficient movement of goods to and from the markets.



Environmental Sustainability:

- Promote environmentally sustainable practices in markets, such as waste management, recycling programs, and the use of eco-friendly materials.
- Implement green market designs with proper drainage, tree planting, and open spaces to create a healthy market environment.

Health and Safety Measures:

- Ensure that markets have adequate health and safety measures, including first aid facilities, fire safety equipment, and regular health inspections.
- Provide education on hygiene and safety practices to both traders and customers to prevent health hazards.

Cultural and Recreational Facilities

- Integrate cultural and recreational spaces within market areas to attract visitors and promote social interaction.
- Organize cultural events and activities that highlight the local heritage and attract tourists, thereby boosting the local economy

Despite these challenges, market players can capitalize on opportunities for growth and innovation in *Umuahia* by leveraging on local resources, building strategic partnerships, and adapting to market dynamics. Overcoming these obstacles requires resilience, flexibility and a deep understanding of the local market context.⁴⁰

Implementing these recommendations could lead to a more vibrant, sustainable, and economically robust *Umuahia*, benefiting traders, residents and the broader community.



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