

## MODE AND MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE IN PRE-COLONIAL ESANLAND, EDO STATE, NIGERIA UP TO 1900: EVIDENCE OF A DEVELOPED MARKET ECONOMY

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to examine the mode and medium of exchange that developed among Esan people of the present Edo state which attracted people from other countries and near to its borders. Without doubt trade during this period was the result of surplus production of which various media of exchange were adopted and developed. This debunks and discredits the myth of a purely “subsistence economy” that was for some time used to characterize the economy of Esan people. The paper also focuses on the various economic production activities as a background against which these modes and media of exchange were necessitated prior to 1900.*

### **Introduction**

The myth of a subsistence economy was for some time used to describe the economy of Esan people of Edo state.<sup>1</sup> That no African community was all that self-sufficient in the production of agricultural goods. The physical environment, geographical factors and the degree of specialization and skill acquisition, all of which varied from one region to another were responsible for this imbalance.<sup>2</sup>

However, this myth has now been sufficiently discredited and largely abandoned. According to Osadolor:

The development of the mode and medium of exchange was a dynamic phenomenon which integrated the Esan economy into a network of relations with other peoples. And so long as the market economy became manifest from the early times and increased in size towards the end of the nineteenth century, various mode and mediums of exchange were continuously refined to meet the needs of the people.<sup>3</sup>

In line with the above quotation formed on the firm premise that the Esan economy for a relatively long period before colonial domination had developed to a stage where certain commercial sectors in the economy had become independent in the national, regional and wider contexts. This is to suggest that the various modes and mediums of exchange encouraged the further productive activities and effective distribution of the produced goods and services.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of evidences from primary and secondary sources, an examination of the mode and medium of exchange in the pre-colonial economy of Esan land up to 1900 was carried out. The period 1900 was chosen in order to accommodate three specificities. One was the time when the medium of exchange was based on household decision. The second was when market expanded incorporating all the

different households in the village markets and the internationalization of markets in Esanland. Finally, when the village markets could no longer be sustained due to/when forces of change eventually emerged by the middle and to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, part one pays attention to the various economic productive activities in Esan which for a long period remained dynamic.<sup>6</sup> This is followed by the examination of the mode and medium of exchange at different periods. Thereafter, discussion focuses on the market economy especially the periods when the country started having contact with Europeans. The paper then concludes with the major point that in spite of the peoples efforts to maintain the *status quo*, the forces of change that emerged in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century no longer permit the use of the generally accepted mode and medium of exchange in Esan-land.<sup>7</sup> Before these various parts receive attention, there is need for us to know who are the Esan and their different economic activities before 1900.

**Esan:** Esanland is located in the tropical zone of the northern part of Nigeria's forest region. Esan as an Edo word refers to the people, their land and culture.<sup>8</sup> The land is situated on a plateau north East of Benin City of the powerful Benin kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Esan has boundaries on the North west with Owan and Etsako on the North east; on the south West with Orhionwon and Ika, while on the East with Aniocha and

Oshimili areas.<sup>10</sup>

The Esan have different conflicting accounts of their origin and settlement pattern which should not bore us here. However, most if not all Esan is said to have come directly and indirectly from Benin as could be seen from the uniformity of socio-cultural and political organization.<sup>11</sup>

According to Samuel Irabor, Esan since time immemorial is sparsely populated with less than 520-609 people per sq kms. The thick contradiction of its people is still evident around Uromi, Ekpoma, Irrua, Ewohimi, Ubiaja, Igueben and Ewu especially.<sup>12</sup> The principal incentives for the density according to oral evidence were probably for defense against external forces and for its soil fertility which boosted several economic productive activities which necessitated exchange for continuity and sustainability.<sup>13</sup> The population of the area had always fluctuated since 1931 which before had always been contested and not acceptable to majority of the people due to open controversies and manipulations by the population commission and probably the state government. Meanwhile, the 2006 population census figure not yet contested stood at 587,859 people in the present five local government areas.<sup>14</sup>

Before the advent of the Europeans, Esan territory consisted of loosely connected kingdoms each group built round an *Onijie*, King.<sup>15</sup> Among them is Irrua, Uromi, Ekpoma, Ubiaja, Ugboha, Ewohimi, Ewu, Uzea, Emu,

Ohorduna, Ebelle, Amohor, Okalo, Ezen, Udo Ugbegun and Igueben.<sup>16</sup> Esan are among the component entity of the Edo speaking peoples of South-west Nigeria.

### **Economic Production in Pre-colonial Esanland: Land Ownership, Utilization and Appropriation**

It was generally agreed that land in pre-colonial period was not (private) property and to sell it, even if one contemplated it would amount to selling a genealogical position. "Land then was regarded as a natural property of a family group but not that of a single individual and that one was always ready to lay one's life on the line should an individual genealogical portion of land was threatened.<sup>17</sup> Each family group considers its ancestors land as a natural endowment where except when loaned through the *Edion*, elders to person outside that family group can claim a share in that land. Nor could the group disposes of land which is regarded as a natural legacy of the ancestors.<sup>18</sup> Apart from the communal land, individuals could lay claim to land which depended on the ability to clear a part of the virgin forest for farming or building. However, the concept of ownership of land implied that an individual could use the land as he thought fit. Such use of land was restricted by the will of the gods or the all pervading spirit of the ancestors whose wishes were interpreted through the priest of the earth goddess.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, actual occupation of land by - an individual,

once permitted was usually regarded as conferring rights of continue use. Therefore, anyone who first deforested a parcel of land had a right to that land. This was expressed locally as *Ono gbe egbo vanlen egbo*. The piece of land thus acquired became a family property and could not be sold but passed from father to the first son through the generations. However, the Onojie of the kingdoms enjoy a limited exception. He could claim any particular land as a right especially when such an area was to be used for the benefits of every member in the community. For example, the original settlers of the present Uromi kingdom market site were asked by the Onojic Okolo of Uromi to evacuate the area for the propose of siting a central market there.<sup>20</sup> The Onojie's exclusive right over land redistribution was not exercised in isolation by him. He had to confer with his chief priest of the earth shrine and titled Chiefs, *Ekhaemon* and the *Edion* in council whose approval was necessary before the execution of any land policy. Thus the Onojie as the supreme ruler only held the land in trust for his subjects.<sup>21</sup> The system of land tenure in pre-colonial Esan also granted strangers the right to possess land either for farming or residential use, provided permission is obtained from the elders and their behaviour confirmed with the established norms and values within the society.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the communal farm land and that of the individual land, there were also lands owned collectively. These included burial ground, land for markets, play grounds,

shrines, planting of economic trees and border land. With an acceptable land policy sanctioned by tradition, there was hardly any dispute over land in pre-colonial Esan. According to Okojie, “No one knowing something about inter-village boundaries in Esan would fail to be impressed with the rarity of land disputes. It was either due to the cool headedness of Esan as a people or due to the abundance of land available for full exploitation. While some agreed that this was due to the use of *okoven*, common oath applied in the demarcation of land between adjacent villages and sometime individuals.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Agricultural Production**

Agriculture brought about fundamental developments which changed the essence of human existence for good. It enhanced technological development and led to the emergence of permanent settlements resulted in increase population as well as the evolution and sustenance of complex medium of exchange etc.<sup>24</sup>

Esan before 1800 and up to the present period is mostly an agricultural county, everybody, man or woman being simple farmers whose main food crops are yams, corn, coco-yams, cassava, melons, banana with plantains as subsidiary crops usually planted by the women in the men farm.<sup>25</sup> Farming was the most important productive activity in Esan land because it was so ordered that it defined all the various stages of the year into farming phases. It was either

bush burning time, bush clearing, planting weeding, tilling, harvesting, threshing or storing time. Farm year ends about the second week of December and any time after the new year begins with the clearing of bush for the main farms and by March/April, yams and corns are planted.<sup>26</sup> After the first or second heavy rain, *amenukpe* usually the third week of which by May fresh corn is available and new yam in July or early August.

Cultivation was usually carried out using simple implements. The middle 15<sup>th</sup> century migration from Benin into the Esan region led to the widespread and effective use of iron implements for farming in Esan land.<sup>27</sup> Such tools included hoes, *argwae*, knives, *orha*, axes, *uze*, cutlasses, *opia*, sickle, *utatan*, hand spade etc. These tools which were first introduced by migrants from Benin and some from Aboh, were later to be manufactured by the blacksmiths in various Esan kingdoms. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, blacksmithing and other iron works had developed in many parts of Esan.<sup>28</sup> Among them were centres in Ewoyin of Uromi, Idumigun in Ekpoma and Idumun Bekhae in Ugboha. Farming was quite intensive and optimal because of the availability of skilled, unskilled labour and surplus land. According to oral traditions, “it was difficult to quantify the production level of agriculture generally, but it was obvious that production far outweighed domestic consumption because the key crops and animal products were exchanged for other goods and services and as source of raw



materials for some industries”.<sup>29</sup>

Other farm produce included products from some economic trees such as kola-nut trees, coconut trees, oil palm, rubber and cotton which according to many Esan made a name from the natural khaki, “Esan cotton”.<sup>30</sup> This aspect of Esan agricultural produce was abandoned during the colonial imposition. Only the oil palm and rubber survived the colonial period.<sup>31</sup> From the palm trees, palm oil, kernels were produced by the women who bought the ripe nuts from the men for local use and export. All over Esan land, the oil palm, *Udin* were planted in wild grooves and it was also tapped to obtain palm wine used for entertainment, herbal medicine and libation or prayers to the ancestors and the dead but living spirits.<sup>32</sup> There was also the tanning of the palm kernel into black oil, *Uden* for body cream, hair creams, lubricants and for preventive and curative lotion mixed with other herbs. The raffia also were knitted for roofs top brooms and costume for masquerades.

### **Hunting and Animal Husbandry among others**

Another ancient activity of Esanland was hunting. Hunters, *Orhe* were specialists and the occupation was restricted to men who had the charms to overcome the physical and metaphysical danger in the evil-infested forest.<sup>33</sup> They were highly regarded because of their diabolical powers. They hunted for lions, leopards, rain deer, grass cutters, antelopes, rabbits, monkeys, eagles and many others. Hunting

involved a lot of risks. It was not an all comers profession as hunters went in search of wild animals in remote and dangerous forest for days. Besides the use of dane-guns, *osisi*, charms, magic, traps and knives, dogs were also used as weapons.<sup>34</sup> In Uromi, Ubiaja, Ekpoma and Ewu, hunters were highly celebrated because of their bravery and as captains of the state informal defence and offensive squads. The stocks killed were taken to the market for exchange after a portion was sent to the king and the village head.

There were also some evidence of animal husbandry of livestock such as fowls, *okho*, pigs, *une*, humples, cow, *emina*, sheeps, goats, ducks. In addition, fruits, snails, gathering of rare eggs of birds and reptiles were also engaged in by women and children, who most of the times went far into the forest with the hunters in search of these items for home and market consumption in the weekly markets.<sup>35</sup>

Other prominent economic activities in Esanland included fishing activities by those living on banks of rivers in places like Ozigono, Idoa, Oralo, Ebelle and Ekpoma. Here, men engaged in fresh water and open river fishing. The fishes caught added to the peoples' protein and others not immediately consumed were preserved by either smoking, drying or salting and sold to traders from Iboland, Benin, Igala, Nupe, Yoruba among others.<sup>36</sup> There were also evidence of manufacturing, blacksmithing, textile and cloth production, soap making, pot making, leather works, wood

carving, mats and basket weaving.

### **Mode of Exchange**

The consolidation of the various productive activities in Esan by periods no doubt led to the development of an organized and sustained mode and medium of exchange and a distributive system through the established markets, *eki*.<sup>37</sup> Various exchange methods were developed in pre-colonial Esanland. The people based their mode of exchange on three principles: acceptability, portability and easy recognition. These were reciprocal by giving gifts and later through market exchanges.

### **Reciprocal Exchange Method**

According to tradition, it was customary that people served their parents, families, friends, village heads and the community. Farming as mentioned before now, the main occupation of the people was sometimes carried out on a cooperative basis in which people went to work for an individual on a given day. The man they worked for would be responsible for their food, drinks and entertainment that day. This was what the people referred to as *Urgan*. This did not apply to farming alone. A man building a house could also need the help of his people especially those of his peer group which he paid for by feeding them.<sup>38</sup>

Another form of reciprocal exchange was that enjoyed

by those who could not own farms independently for one reason or another, they could seek economic security from the wealthy class. They worked in the rice plantain, oil palm plantation or yam farms for the wealthy farmers and were mostly paid with some produce from the farm as dictated by the owner of the farm.<sup>39</sup>

Another significant method of reciprocal exchange was that between the Benin and Esan. Esan were specialists, in multi-coloured cloth weaving known as *Ukpododo* worn by the Oba's wives and some prominent Chiefs. Esan cloth was exchanged by the wealthy for beads from Benin which were in high demand in Esan and beyond.<sup>40</sup> These beads were worn on occasion such as *Ilodion*, the ceremony for moving from one age grade to another.

Reciprocity could also be noticed when an elder, *Odion* could give a share of his land on rent for a fee from the harvest. This form of exchange became prominent when the market exchange became the new trend in Esan land.<sup>41</sup>

### **Gift Exchange Method**

In pre-colonial Esan, most herbal and spiritual, *Okoh* medicine men and women were known not to charge their client for service rendered, but receives gifts in return. They received gifts ranging from firewood, fowls and goats, food stuff. It was a common sight in the herbal and spiritual medicine practitioners' compound with several livestock and

some other items from their clients. It was also common too for respected farmers to get a wife as gift from among his people so long as they know that he will comfortably take care of the said wife. It was customary that on festive occasions the in-law brings yams, palm wine, fowls and kolanut as gifts for the father-in-law. The wife's father would also command respect because his child was married into a well known, respected and rich family or household.<sup>42</sup>

In another development, a hunter who sends the hind leg of an animal to an *Omijogbe*, eldest son does so as a gift exchange. He knows that the *Omijogbe* is the custodian of the ancestral shrine. Thus with the gift, the *Omijogbe* will always remember him when worshipping the ancestors and other divinities in the family.<sup>43</sup> An *Odionwele*, village head of the council of Elders received various gift from people after settling disputes. This was not fixed or compulsory but as a mark of appreciation. Many people whose favour the dispute ended usually sent gifts like palm oil, palm wine, yams, fowls, goats and some other items.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, there were also people nominated in the community to assist the *Odionwele* in his farm by helping to clear the farm, plant the crop and do some other requested jobs. This was not restricted to any village. The *Odionwele* of Ebele by constitutional right could decide to send his subjects or *Ekhaemon*, chiefs to present yams or drinks to the *Odionwele* of Ugbegun during festivals to show his

friendship. In appreciation for such gifts, the receiver could give his daughter to the son of the Odionwele in marriage.<sup>45</sup>

### **Early Market Medium of Exchange in Pre-colonial Esan**

The market exchange was very significant in pre-colonial Esan economy. Its early development encouraged mass production of goods and the socio-political structures became orientated towards its organizations.<sup>46</sup> Against the assertion that the value of items were not known, fruits could be felt and weighed with the hand, coconut could be shaken to know if there was enough water. Yam could be examined and weighed and rice could be bitten with the teeth to test of its goodness.<sup>47</sup>

Money is anything that is generally acceptable as a medium of exchange for making payment and settlement of debts. As a medium of exchange it has functions and characteristics.<sup>48</sup>

From the above definition, various mediums of exchange were adopted in Esan-land during this period under review. These included tobacco, salt, iron, copper, gold, beads, cowries and later metal coins. According to oral tradition, right from the onset, Esan economy was ubiquitous as each kingdom possessed items that were needed by people from other regions and the outside countries. To this end, the development of a medium of exchange was an inevitable

process of goods and services exchanged.

The earliest recognized currency for exchange was tobacco which grew locally in areas that were however not easily accessible to every Esan individual Tobacco was used in rolls of three qualities. They were *Itaba Ugbo*, farm Tobacco, *Itaba Ewe*, Bush Tobacco and *Itaba Elimin*, the poisonous Tobacco. According to Ehizogie, tobacco was not universally accepted as a medium of exchange except in Ewu and Ubiaja. It also had a limited purchasing power in Irukepén. Tobacco came into Esanland from various places. Some came into Ewu from the northern part of the country as a result of the trans-Saharan trade, some from the Niger River through Ozigono and others from Ogbomosho through Ora to Irukepén. Treated tobacco could last for a long time and was easily carried about as a medium of exchange.<sup>49</sup> At first the control measure was regulated by a series of laws and recommendations to which Esan people paid little attention as can be seen by the frequency with which those regulations had to be renewed. With time the seeds of *Itabo ewe*, the Bush Tobacco found their way into Esan-land. The history of commercial cultivation of tobacco is not really known. All that could be said according to Dr. Osagie Osadolor is that “Initially the traders produced the required seedlings which were distributed free to the farmer cultivators Later the cultivators became accustomed to the culture of the crop”.<sup>50</sup> The efficiency of tobacco as a form of currency lies in the

ability to process it with molasses into long standing goods with high non perishable potency. Although various tobacco leaves existed in the region, the *Itaba Ewe*, Bush Tobacco became a specie that was adapted into a high grade quality. Its use discouraged the acquisition of tobacco from neighbouring people and as a currency. Consequently, the emergence of this phenomenon led to the obliteration of tobacco as a medium of exchange. Again, it was no co-incidence therefore that salt emerged to replace the product as the new medium of exchange.<sup>51</sup>

Salt, *Uwen* was another important commodity in pre-colonial Esan that was widely used as a medium of exchange, deposits from which cake salt of comparatively good quality were distributed. Although salty water was sometimes obtained by boiling certain river grasses or reeds, the method was not known to the Esan people. Moreso there was no major river or sea in Esan. Therefore most of the salt came from Benin and Eastern Igbo countries through Ozigono and Uromi.<sup>52</sup> The cake salt was produced by a process of boiling salt water through evaporation in containers of standardized sieves thereby providing a stable commodity for a long time. Such standardized units of exchange were bases for inter village trade. The salt was handled from village to village for exchange with other commodities. Later according to tradition the trade which was carried out in relay manner changed since many of the people from other villages now



traveled to Ozigono on their own to collect salt. This development again reduced the effectiveness of salt as a medium of exchange.<sup>53</sup> It was later discarded as an exchange medium when iron pellets, *Ikpameda*<sup>54</sup> was discovered and accepted as money.

Iron pellets, *Ikpameda* was one of commodity Esan people also used in settlement of their debt. According to oral sources, in all Esan markets, iron pellets served as a medium of exchange for goods and service rendered. The availability of iron was sufficient enough for the people to serve some special type or making splitting tools and ordinary tools like hoes. *Ikpameda* was used from earliest times to the era of Oba Ewuare 1440-1473AD. How long it was used as a medium of exchange is unknown since these pellets could also be transformed into other implements such as bells, gongs, chains, tripod for making fire etc. But as more and more iron was found and its use for other implements increased, its effectiveness as a medium of exchange also reduced.<sup>55</sup>

Copper was much of an ornamental necessity to man than iron. In its original form it was used as jewelry for adornment. According to informants in Uromi, Ewohimi and Ewu, copper was found in Ewohimi and this attracted other peoples to settle in the area. The ore was locally smelted and converted into bars which eventually served as money.<sup>56</sup> There were also ringlets made of coppers. The business of mining and refining was in the hands of a few families who camped on

the site of the outcrop in temporary shelters and guarded their secret profession.<sup>57</sup> But later, copper could not be used as a result of these reasons. Previously, the copper craftsmen worked primarily for their kings, Onojie but with time they started to work for themselves which made it surplus in circulation.<sup>58</sup> The copper mines were numerous in Ewohimi which made other Enijies to feel that with time, Ewohimi could dominate them and they individually sought for another medium of exchange. Beside there was the fact that the copper mines which had been worked since ancient times had been exhausted.<sup>59</sup>

At a particular point, in time gold was also used as a medium of exchange in Esanland. It was used in inter and intra village trade as trinkets but usually as gold dust for currency. Apart from its use as a medium of exchange, gold was also used as a security for a loan. Gold came from Uzea in Uromi and Ekpoma but the industry was later plagued with numerous problems. For example, gold was one of the reasons why Uzea was attacked in 1502-1503 by Benin under Oba Ozolua.<sup>60</sup> Again, there was the increasing use of large quantities of adulterated gold brought in by illegal miners. Also, the intensive exploitation of the gold mines during the Benin invasion led to a rapid exhaustion, disinterest among miners especially the kings of Esan-land.

Another important medium of exchange was the bead, *ivie*. The success of the bead is readily explicable. Its size and

shape made it easy to handle, convenient to count and impossible to counterfeit until of recent when plastic beads come into existence. It was durable and could be stored for many years. Most of the beads were Indian red. *Ivia*, opaque dark blue *Ize noria* and some others. These varieties of beads made it divisible into smaller units as a medium of exchange. Beads were valued according to their quality. The most valuable, the Indian, red *Ivia* had more purchasing power. One of its limitations was limited supply.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, apart from the use of beads as a means of exchange, it was also used for the adornment of prominent individuals. With the scarcity of beads it was not easy for people to counterfeit them. Later on more manufacturing centres were discovered in Benin which were exported to Esan as currencies.<sup>62</sup> Although the use of beads as a medium of exchange is no longer practiced, beads are still very valuable, limited in circulation and its now used as symbol of traditional affluence and royalty. It is still common among the kings, chiefs, elders and some influential individuals. It is still highly valued for ceremonial dressing among Esan and Benin people as ornaments.

Cowries *Ikpiho* according to Okojie formed the currency all over the Esanland and only disappeared from the markets in the early nineteen-thirties.<sup>63</sup> The acceptability of cowries is readily explicable. Its size and shape made it easy to handle, convenient to count and impossible to counterfeit. With its durability, it could be stored safely for many years

among other qualities. The cowries' currency was said to have been the longest of used exchange currency and would have remained in use if not for the introduction of the European coins and later notes.<sup>64</sup> Again according to Okojie, even with the introduction of the coins, cowries continues to be a legal tender for quite a long time since they were still in demand for some of the important ceremonies such as funeral where Cowries were also sprayed out for the surging crowd to struggle for cowries were used in shrines and preparation of various medicine. The greatest drawback to the use of Cowries as money was their weight and bulkiness. Toward the end of the late 1890s, the emergence of metal coins did not lead to the immediate obliteration of cowry as a means of exchange, but its use was gradually phased out since they were used along with metal coins.<sup>65</sup> And with European interest, the purchasing power of the coins increased in the Esan economy. The final decline came when traders outside Esan began to reject the cowries as money and gave much respect to the British coins which began to gain a wider acceptance as a medium of exchange.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Market Economy: Sustaining Structures**

Market to many Nigerians has different meanings and application in pre-colonial period. Market, however to the Esan could be explained as any fixed area with an agreeable market days, spiritually sanctified, designed, reserve and

managed by the community where it is situated for the buying and selling of goods and services for the full exploitation of its economic resources and in the achievement of inter and intra group relations<sup>67</sup>

The development of these modes and means of exchange which had been highlighted in this discourse was a dynamic phenomenon which integrated the Esan economy into a network of market relations like other people. The market economy became manifest from the ancient, *agbon Oba* and increased in size towards the modern time, *agbon, eibo*.<sup>68</sup> So long as currency served as a medium of exchange and such currencies were consistently refined to meet the needs of the community, markets were established and transactions along these development of currencies.

Inter and intra kingdom market relations did not thrive in the period before 1463.<sup>69</sup> In Esanland, buying and selling was limited to the village wards and quarters. Compounds of village heads often served as market places and during this period structural and organizational changes which gave rise to kingdoms had not yet occurred. What actually existed were independent and highly security sensitive large village communities. It was not until the emergence of Esan kingdoms that Esan relations was transformed beyond the political to embrace economic development.<sup>70</sup>

In one of the works of Agbomen S.I. These changes of 1460s were quite fundamental to the expansion of economic

and social relations in Esan. By the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, the village communities were larger in terms of the geographical size, population and only needed the inflow of external ideas to assume the desired complexities which it finally attained in the 1460s following the massive exodus of people from Benin into Esan land and the introduction of a centralized administration. By the end of that century, the country had emerged concomitantly with the introduction of the cowry, crypteamonetic as a medium of exchange.

Over the following years a pattern of specialization in the production of certain economic crops became manifest. Some Esan kingdoms were better in the production of cotton and palm oil and others in commerce and industry. Ekpoma for instance was well known for rice production and gold mining. It is on record that between 1600 -1705. Ekpoma flourished on the mining and export of gold. Uromi and Ewu excelled in the production of cotton and thus produced the best woven textile admired by her far and near neighbours. These successes by the various kingdoms came partly because there were internationally acceptable means of transactions.<sup>71</sup>

Another factor which sustained the growing market economy in Esan was the extinction of the slave trade particularly after the 1860s which brought about a shift in production. Consequently, economic status in the society was measured and equated in the amount of currency an individual possessed and not by the number of domestic slaves or house

helps one had. This tendency spurred up competition in cash crop production that was sold for the new currency. For example, large quantities of palm oil and kernels were produced by Esan men and women for both local consumption and exports. As the routes became safer, trade expanded and there was greater reliance on one another between Esan kingdoms for specific or diverse purposes. Consequent upon the growing economic inter-dependence among Esan people, several markets began to emerge and older ones expanded due to the amount of products sold and bought in these markets.<sup>72</sup>

The emergent economic picture gained further momentum with the monetization of the Esan economy. The economy of the area expanded more with the introduction of the coins as a medium of exchange. This was referred to as the “Currency system” by the Europeans. The desire to acquire European imported materials brought about the increased demand for coins and further growth in trade and commercial activities.<sup>73</sup> The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was especially important in the economic history of Esan land. The fundamental, intra and inter-group structure had been formed and the population was opened to a number of economic activities with basic organizational features that persisted up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Esanland was drawn closer to other parts of Nigeria through trade. The various economic activities expanded and became a major source of income. Esan, grew from a local economy to a regional one and then to an

international level.

Trade in luxury items was no longer the monopoly of kings or the highly placed people but for every individual with the necessary amount of money. The main consequence was the increasing growth in trade, the emergence of a working and middle class, the rise of new urban centres, establishment of a credit facilities, profit sharing and savings. In another development, the market economy provided for secondary employment for the people. Labour could now be exchanged for the coin money. And since agriculture provided employment for a lot of people, investors, therefore embarked more on commercial agriculture where by farm produce was sold for money and no longer exchanged for commodity currency. Through the growth in the market economy, various communities and villages were linked to the outside world. These contacts resulted in the modification of the peoples' standard of measurement like the introduction of *Adana* for the measurement of garri and rice instead of the *Ukpo Uvin*, coconut crust earlier in circulation.<sup>75</sup>

Socially, the markets apart from being places for exchange of goods and services were also avenues of social interaction among Esan traders and others from other market in other countries. This was enhanced by the various associations of traders in different commodities. A lot of conversation took place among the traders and during this process many new standards for prices were fixed. Thus



people were kept abreast of the current prices of goods and adjusted to any change.<sup>76</sup> This market phenomenon has remained till today. Moreover, new inventions, foreign news, recent dance steps, latest fashion and music were also diffused in these markets. It was this economic and social relevance of market and its structures in pre-colonial Esan that the colonial masters built upon by incorporating it into the capitalist mainstream of the global economy. Osadolor, B.T. in one of his studies of *Benin-Esan Relations before 1800* has it that: the volume of goods brought to Esan from the 1820s and the noted frequency of Nupe, Hausa , Yoruba, Igbo and European traders and sometime Arabs became so apparent both in the flow of finance and volume of exchanged goods and services. As a result of these expansions, many traders and providers of commercial activities became so wealthy that they began to attain the status quo like members of the Benin and Yoruba aristocracy.<sup>77</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It could therefore be said that on the economic side of pre 1900, Esan was an elaborate exchange economy due to early development of its modes and mediums of exchange. These means encouraged the complete market oriented economy. Although people pay tributes and give gifts, the gift exchange system in Esan receded into the background of the economy when the European coins became the acceptable means of exchange. Also as British agents began to penetrate

in the interior, it became safer and this enhanced the inter-kingdom market activities in Esanland. Moreover, the new currency was accepted by all people. This in essence meant that whatever one needed money was used in the settlement of debt. Thus it can be seen that from the pre-colonial period to 1900 Esan mode and medium of exchange was dynamic and receptive to change.

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