

## BEYOND THE BIG HOES AND YAM MOUNDS: A RE-APPRAISAL OF EZZA TRADITIONAL ECONOMY

### INTRODUCTION

Apart from the Izzi and the Ikwo, the Ezza constitute one of the major Igbo groups in northeastern Igboland. The area is a micro-ecological niche within which demographers have delineated the Cross River Valley sub-zone. The Ezza territory can be located between 7°54' and 8°7' east of Greenwich Meridian and 6°20' North of the equator. With an estimated population of over 300,000, the area is bounded on the north and north east by Izzi local Government Area, on the northwest by Ishielu Local Government Area, on the south and southwest by Ohaozara Local Government Area and on the west, by the Isu and Oshiri.

The Ezza are made up of twenty one village groups which include; Amana, Ezzama, Inyere, Amaezekwe, Amagu, Nsoarra, Umuogharu, Idembia, Amuda, Okoffia, Echara, Ekka, Oriuzor, Ogboji, Amudu, Amawule, Amuzu, Umuezeoka, Umuezeokaoha, Nkomoro and Amekka. Ezza colonies can be found all over north-eastern Igboland and even beyond. The Ezza whether at home or in diaspora have a common eponymous ancestor called Ezeakuna.

Ezza soils fall under the hydromorphic category. The soil is reddish brown, clayey and gravelly (Ofomata 1975) and is prone to water logging. The vegetation is largely grassland with patches of forest which make it reasonable to suggest that area was formerly densely forested. Presumably, continued occupation and cultivation gave rise to the derived savannah. The Ezza area is drained by the Ebonyi River which rises from Nsukka and Udi Hills and, flowing in a southerly direction, empties itself into the Cross River.

The people are predominantly skilful farmers. In fact, in the sphere of farming, the Ezza need no introduction to the average Igbo man. Ezza farming skills have become proverbial and legendary. Their ingenuity and dexterity in farming feature in historical and anthropological literatures. The British were impressed by the Ezza farming skills when they came on the scene. For instance, G.G. Shute (1919) was obviously impressed by the Ezza farming ability when he observed, "The Abakaliki tribes are all good farmers especially the Ezza". Wallace (1941:98) a colonial agricultural



officer described the Ezza as "the best farmers in Abakaliki". Chapman (1932:8) in his own account described the typical Ezza as;

*"a renowned farmer of great merit,(who)... produces the largest yams and yam heaps on record"*

Chubb shared the same view, stating that:

*"The Ezza of Abakaliki Division..... are renowned as the best yam farmers in the eastern (Nigerian) Province". (1961:43)*

Njoku (2001:9) aptly observed that:

*Among the Igbo, farming was a passion and a universal pursuit. But it was the Ezza who had the upper hand in this pursuit being the greatest yam farmers*

The above observations are no exaggerations. The type of farming practised was largely shifting cultivation. Farmers left used lands for 3 to 5 years under fallow and move to farm new areas. The Ezza farming year was divided into two main parts. There was the dry season which lasted from late November to the end of March and a wet season which lasted from April to October. The farming activities could be grouped under six headings: clearing, hoeing, planting, tending, harvesting and storing. Crops grown included; yam, cocoyam, maize, pepper, okro and groundnuts. Yam of course, was the king of all crops, (Denton, 1935) . Its cultivation was done in large quantities by wealthier members of the community. Ottenberg (2005) admitted that the Ezza grew the largest yam ever seen with the men doing much of the yam farming and the women growing other crops.

As complements to crop production, the Ezza engaged in animal rearing, hunting and fishing. According to Allen (1931:4), "almost every Ezza man possesses at least one sheep and goat and very many cows". Ottenberg (2005) noted the rearing of large numbers of humpless dwarf Nigerian cattle (muturu) in Ezza. Fishing and hunting were never full time pursuits. Although carried out through out the year, they were pursued more intensively during the dry season when the bushes became dry and easier to explore and hunters could locate game more easily.

As indicated earlier, the hydromorphic nature of Ezzaland made it prone to water logging. In response, the people made large yam mounds. These mounds usually measured about 1.2 meters to 3.5 metres and



contained a cubic or more of top soil. These large mounds had two main advantages. First, they kept the yam vines out of the water. Secondly, they solved the problem of unavailability of sticks to stake the yam tendrils. Their innovation in the sphere of manure application was quite remarkable. Early British officials were impressed by their efficient application of manure made from leaves, crop remains, animal dung and night soil (Anyanwu, 1997, Njoku 2001). Wallace (1940:91) described the Ezza system of conservation as "interesting and unusual in this country". According to him,

*Open circular pits about 8 to 10 feet and 2 to 3 feet deep are gradually filled with a mixture of grass, leaves, crop residues, household refuse and animal dung. Great care is taken not to waste any dung and it is carefully collected daily. The compost is made mainly in the wet season, when rain keeps it sufficiently moist and leaves are even turned two or three times in the course of making. The finished compost appears to be of excellent quality.*

Averse to western education, in part, because they regarded farming as a better school for the young (Afigbo, 1981, Anyanwu, 2005), the Ezza did not keep their farming skills to themselves. As farming experts, they were known to have exported their expertise to different areas of Eastern Nigeria and even beyond (Anyanwu 1996) Ezza migrant farm labourers were ubiquitous in Ogoja, Obubra, Calabar, Ondo, Ibadan, Owerri Onitsha, Awka etc, especially during the dry season. Denton (1935) remarked that the bulk of agricultural labour in Eastern Nigeria was supplied by the Ezza. Writing about Umor in the 1930's, in the then Ogoja Province, Forde (1964:22) observed:

*The hoeing of yam hills is traditionally women's work and in ordinary circumstances no Yako men undertake it. But for nearly a generation now parties of 'stranger's' visit Umor.... And share in this work as paid labourers. The foreign labourers are Ezza Ibo living west of Cross River, among whom a considerably greater share of farm labour is done by men*

Chubb (1961) also observed that the Ezza hired themselves out as farm labourers at great distances from their homes. Harris (1956) acknowledged the presence of Ezza migrant farmers in Mbembe. The Ezza were invited by Effuim elders partly to help them exploit their economic potentials, especially farming. The Effuim and Okpoto were initially hunters and, until the Ezza settled there, were hardly good farmers. Ezza settlement meant for them the acquisition of new farming skills such as the making



of large yam heaps (Anyanwu, 1993). It was Ezza settlers that introduced the growing of red pepper in Effuim from where the knowledge spread throughout Ikwo.

Between 1951 and 1953, Ezza migrant farm labourers were attracted by the growing need for wage labour in cocoa plantations in Ondo and Ibadan (Nwafor 1992, Anyanwu, 1993). Not all these labourers were all Ezza. As a matter of fact, the labourers included in their ranks the Izzi, the Ikwo and other northeastern Igbo elements but the generic name Ezza was usually applied to all of them. Some of the Ezza labourers in the course of time rented land to settle and farm on their own account. Pockets of such settlers are to be found scattered among the Ezza neighbours of Ezillo, Afikpo and Amagunze.

Because the Ezza society was largely agrarian, land was the most valuable asset, the most important property inherited from the ancestors. Land was thus communally owned and the elders held it in trust and allocated it.

### **Beyond the Big Hoes and Yam Mounds**

As a result of Ezza's rare dexterity in farming, scholars have tended to write about them as a people who knew no other occupation or who did not engage in any other economic activities in the pre-colonial era than farming. Thus Udoh (1964:331) opines that:

*Unlike farmers from other Ibo sub-tribal groups who normally have an additional occupation such as petty trading or carpentry, the Ezza depends solely on the produce of his farm*

Wallace (1940:15) was of the opinion that "the Ezza pin all their faith in farming" Chapman (1932:10), shares the above opinion when he regarded the Ezza man as;

*a most perfect example by sheer instinct of a land grabber simply because he is lazy to think as others have done of cultivating the same ground at regular intervals. The result is that the Ezza spreads out all over the country side as a farm labourer the easiest and most natural work to him.*

Isichei (1977) noted that despite the assault of Western education and Christianity, the Ezza had to stick to farming, one sphere in which they had always excelled. The temptation to rhyme a popular hymn is usually strong. Knowledge is hardly advanced by bandwagon posturing and as Njoku (2001) rightly observes, myths entrenched by age and uncontested



repetition tend to assume the garb of an authentic fact. The discussion that follows challenges the stereotype about the Ezza. It essays to demonstrate that, contrary to the pretensions of popular literature, the Ezza apart from farming, engaged and in fact excelled in some other economic activities. As a matter of fact, the Ezza engaged in trade, tried their hands in certain crafts and floated industries both on part time and full time basis.

### Blacksmithing

Blacksmithing was one important industry among the Ezza and in which they were quite innovative. Being an agrarian as well as a war like society (Anyanwu, 2000), this was not surprising. The industry provided the weapons of war which the Ezza so badly needed. These weapons of war were important because of the bellicosity of the northeastern Igboland environment in particular, in which the Ezza settled and the Cross River area in general (Afigbo, 1987, Anyanwu, 1993, 1998, 2000). Some of the weapons included *Mbuko* (iron thorns) usually laid on the path of the enemies to immobilise them. There was also the *Awalawa* - a long machete with a pointed end which was used both as a spear and machete. Another weapon was the *Opia*, a peculiar type of spear. All these were peculiar Ezza weapons of war which were innovations of their blacksmithing industry, (Anyanwu 1993, Afoke 1974).

Also, from the Ezza blacksmithing forges, items of social significance and status symbols were produced. These included ritual and ceremonial bells, anklets, title staff, pendants, and so on. Hunters depended on blacksmiths for hunting bells, iron arrow tips, and traps. On their part, wood workers needed axe, carving knives, and domestic utensils such as door hinges and staples, nails, kitchen knives and tripod stands which were also produced by the blacksmiths (Njoku 2001).

The industry also provided the agrarian technological base by producing hoes, knives, machets and diggers. Again their farming implements especially the hoes and matchets, were produced in response to the peculiarity of the Ezza soil and vegetation, respectively. The Ezza soil, as stated earlier is prone to water logging and, according to Isichei (1977) is of the consistency of concrete in the dry season. In response therefore, the Ezza blacksmiths developed a giant heavy circular iron bladed hoe, which, though short handled, is wielded more like a pick axe than a hoe. And the Ezza developed a special skill of wielding these giant hoes with seeming ease, which no other Igbo group can imitate effectively



(Isichei 1977). It is as a result of this that among the Igbo, another name for the Ezza is *Ndi Ogu Ukwu* (the people that wield the big hoe).

Ezza blacksmiths again in response to Ezza vegetation which is partly open grassland and partly orchard bush savannah with patches of forest, developed the long and large bladed machete. Iron for smelting was imported from Uburu, although most of the iron for smelting were sourced from within (Anyanwu, 1993, Allen, 1930). Some of these iron were exported to Igbo Ukwu and Ottenberg (2005) estimates that about 90% of the bronzes found in the ancient Igbo-Ukwu site came from Abakaliki area. Njoku gives an interesting account of the work of a blacksmith:

*To forge an item, a piece of iron was buried in a charcoal hearth at the centre of the forge. This hearth was kept aglow by an apprentice who pumped a pair of bellows whose muzzle was inserted into the hearth. When the piece of iron turned ember red and thus became malleable, the smith removed it from the hearth and placed it on the anvil, using a pair of pincers. He then hammered the iron to produce the desired item. The iron was returned to the hearth to be reheated when it began to cool. The process was repeated several times until the required item had been obtained (2001:46).*

Given the peculiar nature of the products of Ezza smithing industry, Chima (1974) and Ottenberg (2005) are inclined to suggest, that the Ezza did not learn blacksmithing from any group. Oral evidence collected by the present writer supports this view, although Ezza elders acknowledged the presence of Awka and Udi blacksmiths in Ezza land in 19<sup>th</sup> Century. On their part, Ezza blacksmiths travelled widely practising their craft. Up to 1960, prior to the planting season, Ezza blacksmiths travelled widely throughout the Abakaliki area and south to Afikpo and beyond making and repairing iron farm tools and other equipment (Ottenberg 2005). The Ezza village group of Amuzu was particularly famed for blacksmithing.

### **Wood Carving**

Wood carving was an important Ezza craft. Though hardly full time, it was nevertheless lucrative for the practitioners. The wood carvers met the needs of religion, of entertainment and day to day domestic obligations. The practitioners made hoe and machete handles, doors, stools, canoes, wooden utensils and other domestic gadgets. In most cases, the blacksmith could not do without the wood carver and vice versa. In fact, some kind of a symbiotic relationship existed between the farmers, the blacksmiths,



and the wood carvers. The wood carvers supplied the blacksmiths with hoe and knife handles; the blacksmiths, supplied the farmers with finished hoes and knives, while the wood carvers and the blacksmiths depended on the farmers for food. It must be stressed that in some cases a man could engage in more than one economic activity as a full time farmer and a part time wood carver, and vice-versa.

Other industries practiced were the pottery, weaving and salt production. The salt industry was the exclusive preserve of the women and the industry was associated with spirit forces. The brine was believed to belong to a goddess who gave rules guiding its exploitation. For instance, only the women could fetch and evaporate the brine. Another was that such women must not be in their menstrual period (Nweke 1974). The women of Amekka village of Ezza were noted for salt mining. They stored the brine in pots and evaporated it over fire in earthen wares specially made for the purpose.

### Pottery

In respect of pottery, the leading village group in this sphere was Ogboji. Production was also the work of women. Those engaged in it produced vessels of different types, shapes and sizes used for varying purposes. Like salt production, the industry was hedged around with taboos and a lot of dexterity was used in its production and handling hence the saying in Igboland "Onye ite abughi onye ahia"

The weaving industry was also dominated by women and only a few men engaged in it. The products of this industry included baskets, mats and rope (udo). The production of these items was integrated into the domestic chores of women. Ropes (udo) were twined by the Ezza mainly from fibres made from the bark of a shrub.

### Trade

Trade was another prominent economic activity which the Ezza engaged in. Trade was one of the factors of internal and external relations in Ezza. Ottenberg (1958) saw markets as important centres not only for economic activities but also for communication and social intercourse. On his part, Meek (1958) regarded markets in Igboland as places for exchange of commodities, dissemination of news and relief from farm work. Talbot saw pre-colonial Igbo markets as meeting places which provided good opportunities for courtship introduction. The above observations were true of markets in Ezza.



The Ezza traders engaged in both short and long distant trade. Several local markets existed in and around Ezza. Almost every village in Ezza had its own market. The markets were periodic and based on the Igbo traditional four-day week, namely, Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwo. The markets were not of equal importance and size as some had wider catchments areas than others. For example, the Ezza Ekeimoha market was attended by people from within and outside north-eastern Igboland, including Umon and Akunakuna traders from Cross River; Uburu, Abiriba and Aro traders. Goods bought and sold in Ekeimoha market were mostly agricultural products such as yams, cocoyam, livestock and palm produce. Also sold, were products of wood carvers like kitchen utensils, and blacksmithing products such as hoes, machetes and diggers. Other products sold included dane guns, cloths, hats, iron pots and tobacco. Also sold were slaves, Akarama from Umon and Akunakuna traders, gun powder from Aro traders, iron rods from Abiriba and Uburu and horses from Igala and Uburu.

Hitchcock, an early missionary of the Church of Scotland Mission visited the Ekeimoha market and marvelled at the sea of heads in the market and the wide range of goods on display. He observed:

Ekeimohan (Ekeimoha) was in full swing and in the open plain as far as the eyes could see, long lines of men and women streamed in with their loads on their heads. Here the power of the Aro was evident (McFalarn, 1946:31)

Chima (1976) agrees with Hitchcock that Ekeimoha achieved fame with the coming of Aro traders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and their consequent settlement marked the genesis of a commercial revolution in Ezza (Anyanwu 1993, 1997) is of the opinion that the Aro in the 19<sup>th</sup> century exerted a lot of commercial and economic influence on the Ezza. With their coming, the Ezza traders were encouraged to adventure into Uburu, Umon and Akunakuna markets. Ezza traders were ubiquitous in many northeastern Igbo markets like Okwo Ngbo, Nkwo Nkalagu and Ori Ukawu bringing with them commodities like yams, slaves, pepper, okro, livestock and palm produce. Aro traders and settlers largely played the role of middlemen through which exotic goods such as akanwa (natron), Unuekpe (White salt), tobacco, elephant tusks and cloths reached Ezza. The advent of the Aro traders also led to the spread and cultivation of food crops which were named after them namely, *Unaeru* (three leaved Aro yam), *nkashieru* (Aro cocoyam) and *Okoroeru* (Aro okro). It is also



believed that it was the Aro that introduced the use of cosmetics like uli, ornaments like *ochi* and elephant tusks usually adorned by titled men.

The economic influence of the Aro on Ezza notwithstanding, it has been argued (Anyanwu 1993, 1997) that Ekeimoha market had already achieved fame before the advent of the Aro. The Aro traders, he argues had in fact been preceded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by traders from Umon, Abiriba, Uburu and Akunakuna and concluded that the process of economic revolution was already in place before the arrival of the Aro and that it was the fame of Ekeimoha market that attracted the Aro in the first place. But whether the Ezza achieved commercial or economic revolution with the coming of the Aro as Chima would want us to believe, or that the nucleus of the revolution predated the advent of the Aro as this writer suggests, what is certain is that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ezza were engaged in extensive trading activities with their immediate and distant neighbours.

### Conclusion

The Ezza of northeastern Igboland were predominantly farmers. In this sphere they were innovative and resourceful and produced the largest yams and yam heaps on record. This was made possible by the use of peculiar large bladed hoes and matchets produced by the Ezza smiths in response to their milieu. Their skill and innovation were widely acknowledged in colonial, anthropological and historical literatures. As a result, scholars have tended to write about them as a people who knew or engaged in no other economic activities than farming. But the view is not in accord with available evidence. True, the Ezza were excellent farmers and farming was the predominant economic activity; but it is also true that they engaged in other economic activities like trading, blacksmithing, weaving, pottery and floated several industries. As a matter of fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find any Igbo traditional society, which engaged in just one economic activity.



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