



## **Prohibition Of “Illicit” Alcohol In Colonial Nigeria: A Study In The Tenacity Of Oogoro (Local Gin) In Urhoboland, Southern Nigeria, 1910 – 1950**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examined the tenacity of Oogoro (local gin) in Urhoboland, Southern Nigeria following British prohibition of its production and distribution in colonial Nigeria. This paper argued that the emergence of local or home-made gin as a competitor to imported alcohol generally referred to as “trade spirits” primarily informed attempts to outlaw its production and distribution through series of liquor laws. This paper also argued that efforts by the colonial authorities to discourage local consumption of imported alcohol by persistently imposing ever-increasing custom duties and taxes on it amounted to playing to the gallery by attempting to satisfy the international anti-liquor lobby represented by temperance societies, humanitarian evangelicals and other economic interests that had persistently opposed alcohol consumption by the native population on health and moral grounds. Confronted with the absence of viable alternative sources of colonial financing, it is not difficult to locate where imperial interest lay: imposing ever increasing duties and taxes on alcohol generated huge revenue receipt. Ironically, rather than eliminate the market for imported alcohol in line with temperance protestations and in tune with international agreements, higher duties on spirits helped stimulate increase in production and consumption of local gin in Urhoboland following higher retail prices and scarcity of imported alcohol during the First World War. Obviously, legislation was necessary to deal with the unanticipated fiscal threat posed by local gin to colonial finance. However, the liquor statutes, law enforcement personnel and the law courts deployed to check alcohol production and distribution seemed to be effective in curtailing its production only to a limited extent in the mainland or “semi-urban” areas of Urhoboland, but were ineffectual in dealing with the production and distribution of alcohol in the rural areas due to such factors as local sabotage, ingenuity and expertise displayed by brewers and marketers of gin, difficulty in accessing areas of alcohol production, inadequate law enforcement personnel and equipment and above all to an undercurrent of local cultural and economic nationalism which had been built around the home-made gin on account of age-long religious, and socio-cultural usages and attachment to it by Urhobo people.*

**1.Introduction**

The penetration of Urhoboland by British merchants in the closing decades of the 19th century derived from the necessity to consolidate old Euro-Africa economic relations dating back to the Atlantic World: the trade in palm oil and kernels. Valued more for its oleaginous qualities than for its wine, the common African oil palm, *Elais guineensis* and its close relative, the wine-bearing raffia palm have stood the test of time due to their manifold utility to the Urhobo. Palm oil and kernels were bartered for a variety of European manufactures – rum, brandy, gin, whisky, mirrors, clothes, brass basins, beads and other products until the late 19th century, following the monetization of Urhobo economy. However, it seemed European alcohol at that time was not accessible to large sectors of the population. Its apparent restriction to a select commercial and political elites such as rulers, merchants and the well to do in the society probably assisted to stimulate the necessity to produce a local substitute.

One consequence of that indigenous effort was that the local gin from earliest times (probably dating to the Atlantic period) not only acquired its cultural origins among the Urhobo, but also its original name – amvwevwe-arka (america) or udi-america (white man's drink) because of its striking semblance to the imported alcohol that was believed came from America. Due to the popularity of the home-made gin at that time among the Urhobo and other consumers in Nigeria, the gin was locally referred to as ogogoro, agbakara, kai-kai, push-me-I-push-you, Sapele water, Udi-Urhobo and “morning pepper soup”. These epithets and appellations seems to underline its alcohol strength as well as its environmental origins.

Although Urhobo people brewed fermented palm wine, the gin as well as palm wine served more as social than as commercial products due to the late development of a money economy in Urhoboland (Ekeh 2004). The introduction of a variety of British coins in the area, beginning from the late 19th century partly facilitated the rise of palm wine and local gin to prominence. Unlike palm oil, the factors which underpinned the production, uses and consumption of the home-made gin seemed natural to the Urhobo. Such environmental and cultural factors as will be examined were fundamental in accounting for its earliest stirring and subsequent tenacity in Urhoboland following colonial prohibitions and onslaught on it. Patronage of the home-made gin by a broad segment of the Urhobo for secular and ritual uses in socio-cultural and religious worship and observances coincided both with the arrival of the British colonialists as well as with the burgeoning world trade in alcoholic spirits from which the colonial government in

Nigeria derived substantial revenue following the imposition of custom duties and taxes. Unsurprisingly then, the resultant clash of two sources of alcohol in Urhoboland – local and imported liquor was inevitable following the imposition of formal colonial rule and the increasing fiscal benefit of the spirits trade.

Urhoboland is located in the rainforest belt of Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria within latitude  $6^{\circ} 51'$  north of the equator and longitudes  $5^{\circ} 40'$  and  $6^{\circ} 25'$  east of the Greenwich meridian. As with other Niger Delta people, the Urhobo are influenced by and strongly attached to the environment. Urhoboland is a contiguous territory of about 5,000 sq. km and was part of Colonial Warri Province of southern Nigeria up to the 1950s. The perimeters of its land are defined by major rivers such as the Ethiope, Forcados, Warri and Kiagbodo; with numerous tributaries and distributaries which link these rivers and they served as the major means of transportation in the area during the colonial period. Annual rainfall – varying between 2,500mm in the mainland (upland) to 3,500mm in the wetter southerly areas of Urhoboland account for the overflow of major rivers. The resultant floods gives rise to both seasonal and permanent fresh water swamps, the natural habitat of two native species of wine bearing raffia palms (*Raphia hookeri* and *Raphia vinifera*) whose exploitation constitutes a principal activity among the Urhobo. One implication of the encasement of the Urhobo in the hinterlands of the rainforest was the late penetration of its pestiferous territory by western influences hence a strong attachment to its culture.

This study is justified by the apparent gaps in the literature on indigenous alcohol in Urhoboland. The literatures on the colonial history of Southern Nigeria treated alcohol in part and they tilt in favour of European alcohol (Wyndham 1930; Ofonagoro 1975; Olorunfemi 1984). The literature on local gin among the Urhobo seems to gloss over some fundamental aspects: its spiritual significance, cultural underpinnings and attachment of the people to the home-made gin, the ingenuity and creativity of the Urhobo to sustain an indigenous effort in the face of colonial onslaught of attack on local gin and other latent factors which accounted for the persistence of alcohol in colonial Urhoboland. This study attempts to fill the gaps.

## **2.The International Liquor Trade And Its Impact In Influencing The Prohibition Of Alcohol In Colonial Nigeria: An Overview**

According to Ayandele (1966), the world trade in alcoholic spirits was the major social and moral problem that attracted the attention of European powers in the closing and

opening decades of the 19th and 20th centuries. As the scramble for territories by the colonial powers in Africa intensified with increasing fiscal importance of the liquor trade, concerns about the potential abuse of spirituous liquor by the 'native' population were expressed by a variety of interests. Two diametrically opposed bodies whose debates and petitions helped shape the direction of international and colonial response to the liquor conundrum in Southern Nigeria were involved in the liquor debates that followed. The first was the anti-liquor group ably represented by London-based humanitarian and temperance societies and the cotton textile merchants. The second was the Liverpool-based pro-liquor interests represented by British and European merchants of which F and A Swanzy, the Miller Brothers and John Holt and Company stood out.

Temperance societies such as the Native Races Liquor Traffic United Committee, the Aborigines Protection Society and their humanitarian counterpart, the Church Missionary Society had argued before the Brussels Convention, the first ever convention summoned to discuss the liquor traffic – that the spirits imported into West Africa contained poisonous and injurious substances that badly affected the health of the native population. In support were the cotton textile merchants who argued through the Manchester Chamber of Commerce that spirits import led to excess drinking which demoralised the natives and gave rise to wasteful expenditure of incomes thus eliminating the market for European manufactures. They argued that the natives who could not control their drinking urge would rather expend their incomes on drinking than patronizing imported manufactured products. However, apprehensions about the disappearance of trade were assuaged by the pro-liquor groups who argued that the spirits trade helped to expand the market for imported merchandize which had displaced the obnoxious slave trade. To them, the liquor trade was an incentive to stimulate the production of cash crops and the trade in spirits had always been the lifeblood of West African commerce. This latter view was shared by many officials in the colonial office and it seems to represent the official mind of imperialism (Olorunfemi 1984).

As the liquor issue became intractable with the failure evidently of appeals by humanitarian evangelicals to halt the trade, numerous international conferences were called between 1890 and 1919 to discuss it. The General Act of Brussels (1890) arising from the convention of Brussels not only "recognised the moral and material consequences which the abuse of spirituous liquors entails on the native population", article xci of the Act prohibited the importation and distillation of spirituous liquors in places it designated as alcohol prohibition zones primarily on religious or cultural

grounds such as the muslim-dominated north of Nigeria, while imposing a duty of 6½d per imperial gallon up to fifty degrees strength on imported alcohol in non-prohibition zones such as the christian-dominated south in the hope that higher alcohol retail prices would discourage drinking. However, article xcii of the Act left the right to delineate boundaries of alcohol prohibition and to impose tariffs independently after an agreed period of three years, to the discretion of each signatory power (Wyndham 1930). Obviously cooperation was necessary on matters of delimitation of frontiers as failure to delineate frontiers by one country could render the provisions of the Act ineffectual in another country that proclaimed prohibition zones by promoting smuggling. Before long, it was apparent that the higher duty prescribed in the Act and the ones imposed independently on alcohol did not help to reduce spirits import as the French and Portuguese did not proclaim prohibition zones. Consequently, a higher and comprehensive duty involving all the signatory powers was necessary if smuggling was to be checked.

Other conferences convened between 1899 and 1912 imposed higher tariffs on spirits, - 5s 6d a gallon by 1912 with a burgeoning of colonial revenue receipts. However, disagreement among some of the signatory powers and liquor exporters such as Holland, USA and Britain over tariff regime, smuggling – following non-delimitation of frontiers and the unanticipated increase in local distillation of alcohol prompted the 1919 convention of St. Germain-en-Laye. This convention went beyond earlier ones by stating in Article 2 that “it was necessary to prohibit the importation of distilled beverages rendered more especially dangerous to the native population in the non-prohibition zones by the nature of the products entering into their composition”. Article 5 forbade the manufacture of distilled alcohol in the prohibition and non-prohibition zones (Wyndham 807 – 808). The failure of this convention to impose uniform tariff on imported spirits led to conflicting interpretation of its provisions among the colonial powers as each sought to act independently by imposing differing and often higher tariff on imported alcohol thus ensuring a continuation of the international liquor trade.

Apparently acting in tune with the Brussels Act which sanctioned unilateral actions in matters of tariff and, taking into account the prevailing local and international situation particularly temperance protestations of liquor import and colonial apprehensions about possible escalation of local distillation of alcohol, the colonial authorities in Nigeria instituted a Royal Commission of Inquiry in 1909 to examine the liquor issue in southern Nigeria. With prohibition of imported alcohol outside of its mandate, the inquiry came to

the conclusion that there was “absolutely no evidence of race deterioration due to drinking, no connection between drink and crime and nothing to complain of as regards the quality of spirits imported into southern Nigeria” (Ayandele 323). Thus, the inquiry upheld the continued importation of spirits into southern Nigeria in line with the Brussels Act, while it prohibited the local distillation of alcohol contrary to the provision of the same Act.

The report of the inquiry did not however dampen the determination of the anti-liquor bodies in their bid to make the native a teetotal. Their pressure resulted in the introduction of a series of liquor licenses in southern Nigeria by the colonial government aimed at regulating the sale of imported alcohol. However, it seems fiscal measures aimed at regulating spirits import and consumption were cynically undertaken to douse temperance protestations while guaranteeing increased revenue receipts. Thus, one conclusion which the inquiry reached and, on which the government acted was that the production of local gin affected government’s revenue as it undercut the taking out of licences by sellers of imported alcohol thus indirectly defrauding the state of much needed revenue. In 1910, local gin was labelled “illicit gin” and was outlawed (Olorunfemi 241). Colonial interest became directed towards the producers and distributors of the home-made gin. Aside from the impact of international agreements arising from the liquor trade in influencing external and internal policies towards imported and local alcohol as we have seen, concerns in colonial circles about the supposed health hazards of excess drinking and the fiscal exigencies of the colonial state as will be revealed shortly further helped shape official response to local gin and to justify onslaught on it by promulgating stricter liquor laws.

### **3.Colonial Concerns About Local Alcohol Production, Revenue And The Liquor Statutes**

Local gin production activities are principally carried out in the swamps in close proximity to the raffia palms. Proximity to the swamps and forest are important spatial and economic considerations among distillers in order to facilitate production by reducing cost of production. As a bulk-reducing activity in that the weight of raw material (palm wine) used for producing gin is heavier than the final product – the gin, producers tend to benefit from cost economies by setting up their distilleries close to sources of raw materials and inputs. Escravos (2008) pointed out that on average, about 250 litres of palm wine was required to produce about 20 litres of raw alcohol, while

about 300 – 400 kilogrammes of wood was necessary for the continual distilling operation as well as large volume of water which assists to condense the vapour (alcohol) produced by boiling palm wine. The dearth of raffia palm trees in the mainland apparently necessitated the use of sugar and yeast as alternative to palm wine by alcohol distillers in the towns; although some distillers added sugar to palm wine to assist fermentation and for a stronger brew.

Distillation of gin commenced by boiling either fermented palm wine or a solution of yeast and sugar in a metal drum which has been laid on its side or left standing. At the top of the drum which served as the distilling oven, one or two long copper pipes are permanently attached to capture the alcohol steam and conduct it through hollowed out wooden trough locally called okpoko. The trough was usually filled with cool water at regular intervals and the water acted as a condenser to the gin. As figure 1 shows, the distillate – the gin drips out gradually at the other end of the pipe. The primary distillate known in the local parlance as ‘tamukara’ or ‘simple’ in English must be distilled twice to obtain an alcohol volume of about 50 per cent.

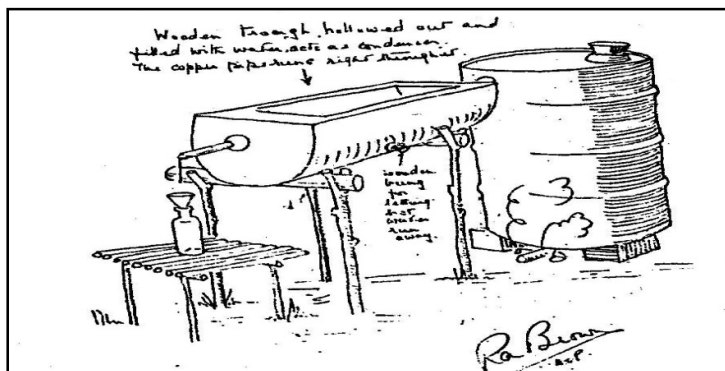


Figure 1: Local Gin Distillation Apparatus

Source: Korieh CJ 2003. *Alcohol and Empire: "Illicit" Gin Prohibition and Control in Colonial Eastern Nigeria*. *African Economic History* 31: 119.

Colonial concerns about local gin primarily stemmed from the unscientific and unrefined methods of its distillation. The supposedly harmful materials used in its production, possible metal contamination due to the copper distilling pipes, the production environment and the differing alcohol volume of local gin were in the view of colonial authorities enough evidence to stir worries in official circle. For instance, the authorities claimed through laboratory tests by its Analyst (later, Chemistry) Department that highly



volatile acids and esters were found in local gin; the majority of which contained 40 – 50 per cent of alcohol by volume, while one sample recorded an alcohol volume of 66 per cent (NAI 1931). Numerous colonial reports about the effects of alcohol intake on the health of the natives were blunt and painted in lurid hues. Such reports alluded to alcohol's many negative effects to include insanity or even death. For example, one of such reports claimed that small quantity of the home-made gin taken over a length of time could lead to such negative health conditions as peripheral neuritis, gastro-enteritis, optic-neuritis, urethritis and prostatitis; cirrhosis of the liver, tuberculosis and many other ailments (NAI IBMINHOME 1931a). Such reports about the health hazard of local gin appear regularly in discourse and correspondences between colonial officials.

Although the colonial authorities expressed deep worries about the possible harmful effects of local gin, the spirituous liquors imported into southern Nigeria were not healthier or safer either which resulted in their outright prohibition in the first instance by international law and, which were subject also of humanitarian and temperance protestations. Such chemical materials that go into the composition of trade spirits which were viewed as poisonous and injurious to health include benzoic aldehyde, absinthe, salicyclic esters, thujona, star anise, hyssop and similar substance containing essential oils for chemical products which are recognised as being hazardous to health (Korieh 2003).

Alcohol producers in Urhoboland used natural materials in gin production. For instance ugun, the bark of the tree, *Saccoglottis gabonensis* urban is believed to induce a quicker fermentation of palm wine. The bark was also used to flavour and colour the gin – light pink. Although Urhobo gin distillers believed that the ugun added pungency to the gin and improved its quality, Dalziel (1937) suggested, however, that the addition of the bark often had harmful effects not attributable to the alcohol content of the gin. Native soap was added to the brew in order to prevent the potentially fizzy wine from rising to the level of the pipes thereby mixing with alcohol. The soap was produced from a concoction of ash (obtained from the burnt oil palm-nut bunch) and palm oil; while the copper pipes gave the gin a distinct aroma. Marketers of gin often diluted alcohol with water to reduce its intoxicating effect – although to varying degree – before sale partly to mitigate its effects on consumers and to reap higher profit from sales. Although not peculiar to local gin, imported alcohol was often adulterated by diluting with water. This practice dates to the 18th century and was widespread in Euro-African trade making



adulteration of produce subject of numerous colonial statutes and a criminal offence (July 1975; Ofonagoro 1975, 115; Olukoju 2002).

Beyond colonial theorising however, colonial concerns about local gin were unjustified as there was no empirical evidence or study undertaken by the authorities in Urhoboland or in Southern Nigeria implicating the home-made gin as the cause of ill-health or fatalities in colonial Urhoboland. Nevertheless, the constellation of views and issues on the alcohol question created a dilemma for the colonialists particularly when viewed against the background of colonial finance. Although colonial authorities were apprehensive about local gin while down playing the potential health hazard of its counterpart – imported alcohol, they were undoubtedly more concerned with the threat posed by local gin to its finances, especially since custom duties on spirits provided the bulk of government's revenue as Table 1 reveals.

Year	Spirits	Other Goods	Spirits as Percent of Total Customs Revenue
1904	480	286	62.66
1905	509	284	64.18
1906	600	285	67.79
1907	807	376	62.89
1908	691	325	68.01
1909	639	352	64.48
1910	1,000	441	69.39
1911	876	465	67.73
1912	1,015	568	64.11
1913	1,140	585	66.08

*Table 1: Comparative Customs Revenue Collected on Spirits and other Imports Southern Nigeria: 1904 – 1913 (Value in Thousands of £)*

*Source: Olorunfemi A 1984. The Liquor Traffic Dilemma in British West Africa: The Southern Nigerian Example, 1895-1918. International Journal of African Historical Studies, 17, 2: 238.*

As local opposition to direct form of taxation gathered momentum with its failure evidently to generate the needed funds, an indirect form of taxation seemed to appeal to

both Nigerians and the colonialists (Ayandele 324-325). The seemingly harsh legislation against the home-made gin as will be shown would suggest that colonial finance was an issue that weighed heavily on colonial mind especially when viewed against imperial policy of economic self-sufficiency and the imperative to meet the huge administrative and infrastructural requirements of the country. One colonial administrator justified the revenue derived from duties on spirits thus:

The spirit trade is the main financial support of the imperial structures in West Africa... I shall be sorry to see the spirit traffic abolished in West Africa, because I happen to be charged with the duty of finding necessary funds to carry on the machinery of government in one of the West African colonies, and I know of no satisfactory means of obtaining money than by a duty on spirits (Lagos Standard 1895).

As Table 2 shows, liquor licenses imposed on sellers of imported alcohol also yielded additional revenue. In southern Nigeria, wholesale and retail licences were issued for 15 pounds annually, while 25 pounds was charged for General Licence. As Geary (1927) pointed out, the revenue generated from licence fees proved more than just a nominal amount as it helped to finance local government administration from 1909. Obviously, the true colonial agenda regarding the prohibition of local gin was primarily driven by economic interest by saving imported liquor from local competition. To that end, the state was not obligated to reconcile its conscience with its treasury receipts. Official protection for imported alcohol was facilitated through a series of laws that prohibited local gin until the 1950s when stricter regulations for distillation of alcohol were promulgated and licences similar to those for imported alcohol were introduced in a bid to control the production and consumption of local gin following apparent failure to stamp it out. Although the government had to grapple with the moral question of legalizing the home-made gin and unilateral revision of international agreements, it also recognised the telling fact that the production of alcohol was widespread and its consumption considerable. The imperial government eventually approved the private distillation of alcohol in 1943 and the colonial government was advised to proceed with the necessary legislation (Akyeampong 1996). However, after some ambivalence, the colonial authorities chose not to legalize but rather regulate the production, sale and consumption of local gin through legislation

Year	Total	
1928	28	321
1929	27	057
1930	29	022
1931	30	521
1932	30	835
1933	31	231
1934	31	899
1935	28	236
1936	27	929
1937	32	862
1938	31	620
1939	n/a	
1940	25	231

*Table 2: Liquor License Revenue, Nigeria, 1928 – 40 (in pounds £)*

*Source: Nigeria Blue Books of Statistical Data (1928-1940) (Extracted and compiled for the period 1928 – 1940)*

The Distilleries Ordinance No. 13 of 2 August 1910 and the Distillation of Spirits Prohibition Ordinance No. 2 of 27 September 1912 were the earliest liquor laws against local gin. Sections 8 and 9 of both ordinances prohibited the production, distribution and possession of local gin and stipulated a fine of £100 or 6 months imprisonment. The maximum penalty for a first offence was £100, and £500 for a subsequent offence. The 1919 Liquor Ordinance and Prohibition of Gin Distillation in Nigeria reaffirmed earlier Ordinances while imposing heavier penalties. Section 8 stipulates that: “No person shall distil, dispose of any spirits distilled in Nigeria” (Korieh 123-124). As local gin distilleries proliferated as testified to by various colonial reports, colonial lawyers had to draft more drastic laws to deal with its spread. The government also adopted import restriction of distillation equipment like copper pipes through its Order-in-Council No. 11 of 1931. This order laid strict controls on the import of metal pipes especially copper tubes. Possession of such pipes without good reason became culpable (NAI IBMINHOME 1932). A sugar control bill was also enacted to check local gin production (NAI IBMINHOME 1934).

#### 4.Colonial Onslaught On Illicit Alcohol: The Tenacity Of Local Gin In Urhoboland

Two major factors that assisted to accelerate the production of local gin in Urhoboland from about 1905 were the relatively higher retail price of imported alcohol compared to local gin following higher custom duties imposed on the former and the Great Depression 1929 – 1931. War time activities also disrupted importation of alcohol into southern Nigeria which further reduced the share of the market for imported alcohol. The resultant scarcity was exacerbated by the global depression. One effect of the depression as Crowder (1976) pointed out was a catastrophic fall in commodity prices in the World market from between 60% and 70%. The resultant low income that accrued to Africans involved in the export sector obviously contracted local demand for imported merchandize in aggregate terms particularly for those goods whose prices were relatively high compared to local substitutes. The relatively low price of the local alcohol compared to the imported brands as Table 3 shows would obviously stimulate increased patronage of the former. A consequence was that the law courts and the police on whose shoulders the task of arrest, prosecution and conviction of violators of liquor laws rested in Urhoboland were kept busy particularly from about 1920 as the laws took hold. However, majority of those convicted for distillation related offences in Urhoboland (Warri Province) seems to pay court fines, as it was economically rational to pay such fines and keep out of jail with the prospect of continuing in the trade. As noted by one source concerning convictions for distillation related offences:

The culprits were fined five pounds, they had the money easily. Only when the government punishes any offender with imprisonment will illicit distillation cases drop (West African Star 1937).

Province	European Gin	Local Gin
Abeokuta	5s 6d	3s to 4s
Ijebu	5s 6d	n/a
Benin	5s 3d	n/a
Warri	5s 3d to 6s 3d	1s to 2s
Owerri	n/a	2s to 3s
Calabar	5s to 6s	n/a

*Table 3: Average Retail Price of Gin per Bottle in Southern Provinces, Nigeria 1933 (in Shillings and Pence)*

*Source: NAI: IBMINHOME 1/24, Residents' Telegrams to G. Hemmant, Chief Secretary to the Government Nigeria, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1933.*

Apparently, alarmed at the proliferation of local distilleries in spite of court fines, the authorities were at a cross-roads and some colonial officials recommended stricter legislation. For example, in one memo on the liquor issue despatched to the Chief Secretary, Government of Nigeria, the Secretary of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria was of the view that stern measures be taken to eradicate what he like many officials described as “a menace”. He recommended imprisonment of up to 10 years for offenders, in addition to higher fines for distillation related offences and to enlist the services of paid local informants as well as keeping a close watch on importation of distillation equipment and inputs particularly copper pipes, sugar and yeast (NAI IBMINHOME 1931b). Colonial records indicate that the authorities paid ten shillings for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of offenders (West African Review 1935). The system of paid informants was in operation in the Urhobo area for only a short period of time and it seemed it was subsequently subjected to abuses. For instance, some informants exploited the system for ulterior motives while others collected money from the police by giving out false information and disappeared. For those informants who were themselves engaged in the trade, such false information was intended to wipe out competition (Hitler; Kodeh 2009).

As gin distillers and marketers soon became aware of such infiltrators in their midst, they became more cautious and discreet in carrying out their trade, and the informants were increasingly viewed with scorn and hatred. However, the secrecy surrounding the gin trade following the introduction of the system of paid information meant that the informants themselves were often as much in the dark as the police. It was in the light of this situation that a colonial official lamented the problems inherent in the system of paid information:

- The practice of planting illicit liquor upon innocent persons is on the increase, and is assuming such proportions as to become a menace. It is often a matter of great difficulty to distinguish between genuine and fake information. (NAI IBMINHOME 1937)

Attempts by colonial officials to ensure tighter import controls on copper pipes and sugar were apparently ineffectual in checking the proliferation of the home-made gin due to the ingenuity of local distillers. Some distillers as Schnapps et al. (2009) pointed out improvised by using locally fabricated metal pipes which were used before the introduction of copper pipes, while others resorted to use Indian bamboo sticks, *Bambusa* spp used earlier as a distillation pipe during the pre-colonial period. Although

apparently unknown to their progenitors, the bamboo stick as a vegetal material reduced gin output by absorbing substantial quantity of gin and this accounted for its disuse by later gin distillers following the introduction of metal pipes. Distillers also improvised by using Ugun following difficulty in obtaining sugar or accumulated palm wine for a few days to allow for natural fermentation. The reintroduction of these materials and inputs was partly to circumvent the law prohibiting gin production and to ensure a continuation of the trade following increasing scarcity of imported inputs.

As investigations by the colonial police heightened the anxiety of distillers with ever increasing rates of punishment and stricter liquor law, coupled with the news of arrest of offenders in surrounding areas, producers and marketers resorted to various strategies to evade law enforcement personnel. Most distillers resorted to quick dismantling and concealment of their production equipment in the forest, while others produced discreetly at night. Traditional oil lamps lit up production areas with locals on the watch out for colonial police in order to alert producers. Marketers also smuggled the gin by canoe through the swamps and creeks by travelling at night in order to evade detection by the colonial police. As Empire and Agent (2009) pointed out, the numerous and intricate waterways were indispensable to the smuggling of gin. The indispensable nature of the smaller waterways to the gin trade particularly from the 1920s was as a result of the diversion of British trade in palm produce in the area from the waterways to the emerging railways (Ofonagoro 204 – 215). The diversion of trade apparently led to their neglect and abandonment by British trading concerns and local palm produce traders some of whom took to the local gin trade. The waterways offered relative safety due to their intricate nature which was understood only by the natives and made policing difficult. Although the colonial government was determined to prevent the smuggling of gin through the waterways by establishing the River Niger Protective Service, an anti-smuggling outfit empowered to intercept canoes laden with ‘illicit’ gin and to prosecute smugglers, its effort in that direction were apparently fruitless. With its main station at Nkissi near Onitsha at the mouth of the Niger River, the anti-smuggling outfit suffered from small numbers of personnel and equipment necessary to carry out surveillance of the tributaries of the Lower Niger River. For instance, the main station was manned by a custom officer, few policemen and a number of canoeists who patrolled up and down the River Niger (NAI 1913). However, the numerous markets which developed in the riverside areas of Urhoboland and in the creeks of the Lower Niger River primarily in response to the increasing trade in local gin seemed to indicate a thriving trade. Some of

those markets include Okwagbe, Okpare, Kakpamre in Urhhoboland; while others like Torugbene, Ojobo (Ozobo), Ayama, Toru-Ndoro, Tuomor, Bomadi, Patani and many others developed in the neighbouring coastal Ijo areas.

The non-navigable nature of the swamps and creeks by motor launches and steamers and the difficulty in accessing the environment of gin production by land were major obstacles in the efforts by the police to arrest and prosecute illegal gin distillers. Unlike some areas of the mainland such as Sapele and Warri which were relatively easy to access, the environment of gin production escaped much police surveillance. The relative safety offered by the rural areas partly contributed to the concentration of the gin industry particularly from the 1920s. Localisation of gin production activity was virtually completed by the 1930s and was characterised by the steady migration of local gin brewers away from the towns following colonial attack on gin producers. Hitler et al. (2009) recalled that some distillers in the major gin producing areas of Urhoboland such as Otegbo, Okwagbe, Oginibo and Ujevuwu migrated from the towns to the villages following incessant police harassment. Although, migration of distillers away from the mainland and the resultant concentration of production seemed to be a rational consideration by distillers in line with location economics and, in response to business-for-profit nature of local gin, localization however was a strong factor that helped to sustain the industry in the face of onslaught on it. Unsurprisingly, the rural areas of Urhoboland consequently became a hot-bed of illicit gin distillation and bootlegging.

Law enforcement personnel often encountered popular resistance in their raids on illegal distilleries. This is because the whole weight of local opinion was against them. Such raids were viewed with bias especially as the natives had come to view the home-made gin as a product woven into the fabric of their socio-cultural life and one which provided an answer to the problem of getting an affordable alcoholic drink. The Urhobo believe and perhaps rightly, that the local gin was as good as any imported drink and had realised that the colonial authorities suppressed the industry in order to create a profitable market for imported alcohol. Unsurprisingly therefore, the natives offered no help to the colonial police to whom they displayed open hostility and defiance and the police usually encountered frustration in their attempt to arrest illicit gin distillers. As one source reports:

- One can imagine the effect of such police actions was temporary at best. Stemming the distillation of Ogogoro in an area just gave neighbouring villages beyond the immediate vicinity chance to



supply the insatiable demand. As soon as the police squads withdrew, the illicit enterprise sprang up again (NAI 1934).

Although, as noted, the world depression acted as a catalyst to local gin production and consumption in Urhoboland, it also complicated matters for the police in their bid to stamp out local gin. The police authorities were hard-pressed to deploy officers in their numbers to cover the vast areas of Urhoboland and Southern Nigeria following retrenchment in the colonial police force. The special police squads as Tamuno (1970) pointed out were set up in the 1930s primarily to deal with illicit distillation following rationalisation in the force and were apparently ineffectual in dealing with the phenomenon. As noted by one source:

- If the Nigerian constabulary were reinforced by, say 200 percent of its present complement (3,726 men), I do not think the number would be adequate to control this area effectively.... A battalion of Cadets, regiments of Constables with scores of steamers and launches, also canoes and dug outs by the thousands before the police could make their presence felt (West African Review 1934)

Although the task of policing the rural areas was daunting in the face of limited personnel and equipment, we believe that the colonial objective of stamping out local gin would have been unattainable, even with a higher number of personnel and equipment on account of the factors already noted and, above all to age-long ritual and secular uses of local gin in the religious and socio-cultural setting and attachment to it by the Urhobo.

The Urhobo like other Africans, do not view the physical world which they refer to as Akpo and the ethereal (spirit) world to be mutually exclusive. This perception derives from their conception of the cosmos, as essentially religious. They express their religious beliefs and worship through a variety of symbols that were either carved or moulded. Such statuary for the ancestors (usually dead relatives believed to be involved in the affairs of the living members of the family), and other land and forest-dwelling spirits believed to have both malevolent and benign disposition were the objects for individual and group worship from earliest times by pouring a libation of local gin on such statues which were usually concealed in shrines. Such shrines which were usually obscured by several layers of raffia were of various types and were common in colonial Urhoboland. The gin was an honorific item in the rituals of religious worship and one believed to stir the gods and ancestors to action. However, the more benign water goddess was propitiated with sweet wine or soft drink. Local gin was also significant due to its ritual

and secular uses in indigenous medicine and medical practices. The Urhobo make a concoction of herbs and gin which they ingested for the treatment of a variety of diseases and ailments such as rheumatism, spleen disorder, fever, yaws, flatulence, pneumonia among others, while the local diviner who often doubles as a traditional medical practitioner deploy the gin to appease the spiritual forces in order to solicit their assistance in diagnosing the cause of ill-health or ailments; to effect a cure of same, as well to make his herbal medicines efficacious (Samson 2009). The spiritual significance of a libation of gin in the age-long rituals of traditional female circumcision (clitoridectomy) of young maidens (epha) of the Urhobo, as Titi; Okaruadjeren (2009) point out is underscored by the belief that an appeasement is required to stay the hands of the malevolent spirits during recuperation of the young maiden following circumcision, otherwise it is believed recuperation might be difficult, complicated or prolonged.

Local gin is also consumed at social and ritual occasions. It is an essential requirement at the ceremony of dowry payment; the gin being used to propitiate an ancestor in order to attract his blessing and protection for the newly married.

Undoubtedly, the secular and spiritual significance of the home-made gin in traditional religious and socio-cultural observances was ultimately bound up with the necessity to keep the labour force healthy in agriculture and enterprise, and to attract the benevolence or to avert the wrath of an ancestor or deity following violation of taboos. Erivwo (1991) pointed out that common sins and taboos against the gods and mortals for which ritual of atonement was required included theft, incest, murder, adultery and dereliction of duty to an ancestor among others.

Apart from cultural factors which underpinned the use of the home-made gin, environmental stirring was not less significant. The great majority of the Urhobo were accustomed to drinking due to the foggy nature and wateriness of the environment particularly during the long period of rainy season and the cold harmattan spell in most parts of Urhoboland. Drinking was a part and parcel of the lives of riverine dwellers like fishermen who drank to counteract chills and pneumonia. It was also natural for traders to drink while conveying their merchandize to the various distant markets in the riverine areas as testified to by colonial reports.

Expectant mothers also indulged in drinking which they believed eased the pains of pregnancy (Okpurhe and Titi 2009). A broad segment of the population view the home-made gin as a stimulant, as it is believed the gin assisted to dilate the blood vessels and relax the body. The Urhobo also believed that local gin is of medicinal value for general

debility while it increased their appetite for food hence it is taken first before breakfast for those lacking appetite

### **5.Conclusion**

This paper has attempted from the foregoing to articulate the international dimension of the liquor trade. It also noted the impact of the liquor debates and petitions by the two sides in the liquor divide; and the agreements reached by the colonial powers and liquor exporters in shaping the direction of colonial policy and response to imported and local alcohol in southern Nigeria.

This study has also explained the fiscal benefits of the alcohol trade to government finances in the form of revenue receipts from custom duties and taxes on imported alcohol as well as licence fees and their impact in driving the onslaught of attacks on local gin despite deep concerns in official circle about its health implication on the natives and society.

More importantly, this study has revealed that the failure of colonial efforts to extinguish local gin in Urhoboland through legislation, colonial police and the law courts is explained by the creativity and ingenuity displayed by brewers and marketers of gin in concealing their product from the prying eyes of law enforcement personnel, as well as environmental, socio-cultural, religious and economic realities that underpinned the production, uses and consumption of local alcohol in Urhoboland. Above all, failure to stamp out local gin was due to an undercurrent of local nationalism woven around the home-made gin on account of age-long attachment to it by the Urhobo.

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