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The Political and Economic Roles of King Jaja of Opobo to the Development of the Nigeria's Niger Delta Region, 1821-1891

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Abstract:

This paper hinges on King Jaja of Opobo and the Nigerian Niger Delta Region. Jaja is a well-known figure in the Nigerian and African history. Numerous research on him have previously been conducted by academics from various professional areas. However, such research did not shed light directly on his responsibilities in the region's growth. This study steps in to close the knowledge gap on the subject. To accomplish this, the investigation investigates Jaja's pedigree. It then delves into his views, as well as his political and anti-colonial agitations. The study goes on to describe Jaja as a mega-entrepreneur and Niger Delta liberator. It specifically examines his agitations and contributions during the colonial era. The conclusion of the article calls for inclusive political leadership in post-colonial Nigeria and exhorts the current generation to draw lessons from both Jaja's successes and failures.

Keywords: Jaja, mega-entrepreneur, liberator, political, colonial.

Introduction

Paul Valery wrote in *Analects* that "for a certain class of litterateur, reading poetry is never anything other than an exercise in detecting defects", in response to the state of the criticism of the French National Poetry at the time.[1] Akporobaro also pointed out on January 4, 1992, in *The Guardian* the importance of the study of biography, as man naturally has both evil and good repute regardless of the elite group he belongs to in the society. In response, this study will provide a critical evaluation of King Jaja of Opobo's valiant efforts

[1]*Analects,* accessed February 22, 2022. en.m. wikipedia.org/wiki/An. The *Analects* discussed the attributes of the sayings and philosophies of the Chinese that usually motivated their life and time, thoughout and values. In like manner, King Jaja also demonstrated sense of virtue as the main prerequisite for leadership in his society.

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in trade and politics during the British imperialism in the Niger Delta.[2]As John Tosh noted in his book, evaluating King Jaja of Opobo's brave acts from a historical perspective is consistent with the function of history. The book made the case that historical knowledge of the past is necessary for shaping every society's future because it will show the pragmatism of King Jaja of Opobo and its practical worth in reconstructing people's past. Thus, this paper investigates the socio-economic and political interests and quality of King Jaja of Opobo's life. In the areas of business, entrepreneurship, and politics, King Jaja was a model trailblazer, pacesetter, and an inspirational genius. Throughout the colonial era, he distinguished himself as a top businessperson.

European explorers arrived on the West African coast in the 1470s, and trade between Europeans and Africans flourished along the shores.[3]The Niger Delta's tributaries' waters took on commercial significance to promote sociopolitical ties with the Europeans. King Jaja of Opobo competed with colonial traders and merchants along the coasts of Opobo in the Niger Delta, which over time developed into a strategically significant hub of trade with Europeans, for a piece of the palm oil exploited by the British traders. The Niger Delta was wealthy and strong in the 1800s, and as such, the European traders and explorers frequently flooded there.[4]

Competition from the colonial traders occurred throughout the colonial era. This resulted in King Jaja's political acumen becoming a potent weapon for political mobilization for the expansion of the commercial system in Bonny and in the Opobo city-states. King Jaja of Opobo and the Europeans engaged in disputes over political and economic power dynamics in the Niger Delta during this time. Consequently, Jaja's appearance and challenge to the British monopoly ushered in a gradual wave of reformation with newly found business acumen, panache, and deftness which made him famous and historically renowned in the Niger Delta over the colonialists, who were the major principals, and principalities to the liberation of his people[5].

In the light of this, his development into a famous kingship status as a slave boy had garnered praise, but it had also come perilously close to failing to garner the expected historical and reflective attention on his value and his significance who was a slave boy who possessed quality manpower for high performance in resolving his local issue with aspirations to be a model for excellence. The purpose of this study is to close the historical gap between the heroic exploits of King Jaja and higher education in the modern day, and to do so with measured impartiality and insight for future discussion. Therefore, this study is divided into eight parts: an introduction, a conceptual discourse and explanation of the

[2]Webster, J.B and Boahen, A.A. *The Growth of African Civilization: The Revolutionary Years West Africa: Since*
*1800 (*London: Longman Green & co. Ltd, 1967), 199-201.
[3]Webster, J.B and Boahen, A.A. *The Growth of African Civilization: . . .,* 193
[4]Webster and Boahen, *Growth*, 193
[5]Webster and Boahen, *Growth,* 193

study, Jaja of Opobo's early history, his vision and ideologies, politics and agitation against colonialism, his role as a mega-entrepreneur and liberator, his battles and legacies under colonial rule, and a concluding section which accounts for the discussed ethical values of King Jaja of Opobo for future generations.

Methodological Orientation of the Study

This study is an exploratory discourse which aims to discuss the socio-political impact and business savvy of king Jaja of Opobo in his region by conducting a critical analysis of pertinent secondary data which were extracted and carefully examined from a wide array of secondary sources, including textbooks, journal articles, and newspapers. The study also entailed a historical-sociological inquiry[6] of political tenacity of Jubo Jubofem (also known as Jubo Jubogha), as he was known by his first slave master, Chief Alali, against the British authority in Bonny as a slave kid. Further, the study examined his political acumen, the socio-cultural impact this had on his community in Opobo's Riversides, and his adamant opposition to colonial imperialism.

The decision to employ contextual analysis highlighted the psychological costs that he incurred in opposing colonial institutions to the civility and cultural decorum that had been changed by European colonial officials and their accomplices in the eighteenth century. The approach offers the historical support needed to make an empirical case for King Jaja of Opobo's contributions to communal development. The empirical justification is to comprehend the patterns and generalisations of his ideas, moral convictions, and contributions to the oil palm trade, which the European traders were engaged in. King Jaja formed trade guilds to dominate the exportation of oil to Liverpool Company as a smart businessman and wealth creator. He and the British agents along the Niger Delta coast established a variety of forces as a result of his non-alignment with the policy of the British consuls on the distribution of oil palms, which generated considerable conflict.[7]The phenomenal of his politicking at that moment explained the contents of this study.

Without a reconstruction of the role played by king Jaja of Opobo in the liberation of his people from the persecution of the British colonial agents, the focus of this study which is the historical knowledge of the growth of nationalism in the coastal region of the Niger Delta will remain a vacuum. The fact that he survived before being born without a silver spoon also demanded

[6]*Disarmament,* "Workshop on the Role of Border Problems in African Peace and Security, A Research Project of
United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa, Lome, Togo (United Nations: New York,
1993), 10.

[7]https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.582. published online 25 February, 2019.

academic attention. Furthermore, his unwavering perseverance and political stance, which brought him fame among his people deserve to be recorded in the annals of history.

The Early Humble Beginning of Jubo Jubogha

Jubo Jubofem later assumed the title of monarch of the Opobo city-states under the new name Jubo Jubogha[8]. He was an Igbo merchant prince who was born in 1821 at Umuduruoha Amaigbo in what is currently the State of Imo, according to historical records. The early history of King Jaja of Opobo is described in a variety of recorded sources. One of the accounts claimed that before being moved to Chief Alali, the head of the Dappa Pepple ruling house, he served as a servant boy on apprenticeship to an oil palm mogul in Bonny, whose name was not specifically given[9]. Before he became famous and established the Opobo Empire, the second account also claimed that he was a slave kid taken to Bonny and educated by the William Dappa Pepple royal family[10].

His humble upbringing contributed to his success in his chosen careers as a politician and businessman. It was proof that he was an underprivileged child[11]. He made his way up the long, winding, and difficult routes to fame and survived by making money. His refusal to support the British government's decision to allow some chiefs in Bonny to harbour Spanish slave traders led to their removal and the establishment of Dappa in Bonny[12], in front of the opposing senior chiefs. He made the commerce in palm oil appealing. His inspirational leadership style sparked the emergence of a brand-new group of business elites. Alagoa said in his paper that Jaja did not initiate a right of free passage against the British enterprises notwithstanding their disagreements and competitiveness[13]. He built more commercial routes or outlets to Bonny regions, his competitor kingdom, and tried to expand Opobo's market there[14]. Before Jaja discovered Opobo town in 1870, the Eastern Niger Delta's palm oil trade was conveyed along the main thoroughfare or base of Bonny, in addition to delivering goods from Elem Kalabari and the port of Twon on the River Brass[15].

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[8]J.S. Cookey, *King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times, 1821-1891*,S-0-9549138-0-9. Retrieved 2020 02-
16 & "Jaja of Opobo", *Encyclopedia of World Biography, vol. 8, 2nd edition. Detroit MI: Gale Research,*
1998, 201-204.
[9]Webster and Boahen, *The Growth of African Civilization. . . ,* 200
[10]Ibid., 201.
[11] Fajana, A. & Biggs, B.J. *Nigeria in History* (Ibadan:Longman, 1976), 17
[12] E.J. Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the 19th Century", in *Nigerian History*, ed. Ikime O.
(Ibadan: Heinemann Books, 1982), 251
[13]Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta", 251
[14] Webster and Boahen, 204
[15] K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885*, London,: 1956, 102 & 252

His Vision and Ideologies

In the nineteenth century, geography had a distinctive role in how the Niger Delta's inhabitants interacted with one another in terms of trade and political organisation, influencing both change and continuity. During the pre-colonial period, geography influenced and encouraged the presence of British authorities, traders, and merchants.[16] Thus, the British spies planned to seize power over the Niger Delta people's economically, politically, and spiritually by sowing discord among followers of traditional religions. Jaja used his traditional belief system background in conjunction with Ijaw traditions and culture to spread his business talents to address the economic issues facing his society at the time. He carved out a niche for himself in the functional or rational trading approach. His historical materialism and economic determinism, however, had less to do with capitalist ideology and more to do with his humble upbringing as a slave boy.

His distinctive vision of a glaring damaging culture from external forces inspired the nature of his democratic socialism and egalitarian principles, which attracted commercial and industrial creativity in oil palm production that was appropriated and exported to Europe in the nineteenth century. His peculiarity as a slave boy formed the basis for his eloquent and consummate political operation and the radicalism with which he competed with colonial powers over their involvement in the acquisition and exportation of indigenous economies. He was astute in business and vibrant in politics.

During the repressive era of British colonialists, Jaja was a cultural ambassador who campaigned for the preservation of the identity and dignity of the African race in order to inspire respect for his people. Jaja immediately became aware of the sinister aim behind the introduction and imposition of a foreign religion on the communal traditional culture of his people because of the development of the Western-style religious organisations and ideals in the Niger Delta region. He never stopped fighting to protect indigenous institutions and faith, which incensed colonial imperialists. His organisations split apart because of his resistance to European tyranny. The way in which external force was restrained by force was impacted by the cultural interdependence in the eastern delta states.[17] Jaja exploited his nationalism and commonwealth ideas for the purpose of shielding his people from colonial imperialism and economic diversions. In the light of this, stopping the international slave trade as a historical reason to end slavery elsewhere was therefore inappropriate. Because of the development of industrial equipment to support manufacturing economies, slavery was mostly abolished because it did not benefit the British economy.[18] Jaja's growing strength and confidence provoked the British government and John Holt of Liverpool, along with members of the Liverpool of the African Association who pressed for strong actions against him over what he described

[16]*Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 203
[17]Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta", 249
[18]Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery,*Chapell Hills, 1944.

as falling rates of profit, which the colonial government used to destabilise his influence.[19]

Politics and Agitation against Colonialism

He opposed colonial adventurism in his day and stood up for it as a man of high moral character. He was described as "a man of outstanding ability paired with a ruthlessness that alone could secure survival in the cut-throat struggle of oil palm trade" by Michael Crowder, who also noted Jaja's heroic actions in Niger Delta politics"[20]. When Jubo Jubogha assumed control of the Anna Pepple House when Chief Alali, the regent, passed away, as described by Ade Odusanya in the *Headlines* piece from June 1991, leadership among the Niger Delta people became not only dependent on royal descent. The power struggle was between the former slave Oko-Jumbo and the king Jaja. Between 1869 and 1870, Jubo Jubogha, who had outsmarted Oko-Jumbo, established the Opobo kingdom with the help of free slaves from the Opubo Anna Pepple dynasty of Bonny.[21]The oil palm that was supplied was removed from Bonny, his master's realm, and planted on the Imo River Estuary. As a liberated slave, Jubo Jubogha competed with his owner, Dappa Pepple, and opposed his schemes as one of his fiercest foes. King Jaja had significant influence over the Niger Delta city-states as well as Opobo, a new settlement that served as the primary strategic location for oil exports to European nations, because of the transition in power. Due to the revival of Jubo Jubogha's maneuvering, this led to new, fierce conflicts for market locations.

Strong Jubo Jubogha became king Jaja of the Opobo kingdom on January 15, 1870, after ascending to the throne of Bonny[22]. There was political unrest between him and another House unit in Bonny as a result of his accession to the throne. In 1886, he seized both political and economic dominance from the House unit of the Anna Pepple group.[23]Chief Oko Jumbo, the leader of the Fubare Manilla Pepple group then started a power struggle. The agitation put the Manilla family under pressure to take the reins of leadership since they were unable to compete with King Jaja and his group in their monopolistic way of controlling the oil palm trade and their failure to pay equity taxes to the family of Dappa Pepple. As a result of King Jaja of Opobo's stance, relations with the Manilla family were strained, which further complicated their peaceful co-

[19] Webster and Boahen, 201
[20] Ibid., 200-201
[21]Walter I. Ofonagoro, "Jaja of Opobo", Notes on the Ancestry of Mbanaso Okwaraozurumba otherwise known as
King Jaja of Opobo, 1821-1891", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 9 (1978): 145-156.
[22]Jens O. Zinn, *Introduction to Biographical Research*, Kent; Kent University Press & Fischer-Rosenthal Wolfram,
"Biographical Structure in Present-day Societies" in *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Societies,* Chamber-
League, et. al. (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).
[23]Webster and Boahen, 204-205

existence[24]. The outcome exacerbated class divides between the two illustrious families. However, in his capacity as a diplomat, he made certain accommodations for Bonny, and the tactic allowed him to win the backing of several commercial elite organisations. Jaja's timely response to the shift in the economic system and distributions reveals his deftness in trade operations. It also presents him as a valiant soldier and commander.[25]

Mega-Entrepreneurial and Liberator

The king of Opobo, Jaja, was a powerful businessman who resisted forming an alliance with British allies. His refusal to support the British consuls further heightened their animosity, while his political tenacity propelled him into a greater leadership position. He was well-liked and well-known by his people. The Niger route discovery in 1830 was penetrated by explorers, steamship companies, and Macgregor Laird companies for the purpose of oil palm exploitation. In 1864, the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) at Bonny, led by Bishop Ajayi Crowther increased tension by subtly attacking local institutions. This led to a confrontation with King Jaja in 1887. His career was greatly influenced by his intelligence and business acumen. Due to his labour-intensive character, he was determined to use the internal crisis to his advantage to monopolise the palm oil trade. Rivalries developed because of the sporadic emergence of new lineages and House units in the city-states of Bonny and Opobo.

Jaja was not the first early businessperson, but he was the first slave kid to pioneer a sophisticated type of trade free from clinches and passionate nationalism. Before Olomu, the father of Nana Olomu of Itsekiri, began trading in palm oil, Jaja used his outstanding talent and the resources at his disposal to regulate palm oil exports between 1830 and the 1880s.[26]He was a tenacious fighter and a leading nationalist political personality of his era who provided pragmatic political agitation expression and consciousness. Despite his political knowledge and trade habits, his response to the polemical nationalism fervour was a demand for arms in a political war to free the country from colonial domination. He had innate and natural entrepreneurial abilities and a sensibility towards the development of his people, which was contrary to the political class of today. Additionally, it was fortunate for him that he incorporated a plan to grow and maintain his interest in commercial inventiveness, which may have been extinguished by the presence of British traders and the inherent faults of colonialism.

The British economy needed to use the raw materials in Bonny for practical reasons, but King Jaja's adamant rejection made it difficult for the colonists to freely enter the Niger Delta's interior, which hurt their ability to build or promote British industries. Britain's inability to obtain the raw materials for her

[24]Ibid.
[25]Walter I. Ofonagoro, "Jaja of Opobo". ...
[26]Webster and Boahen, 197

industrial revolution was a blow to her economic interest and national progress, given that it had invested capital in the manufacture of palm oil and kernels.[27]A new chapter in the history of the people of Bonny and the position of King Jaja was opened with the appointment of John Beecroft as British Consul over Bonny in 1849, which continued British imperialism. Prior to his accession to the throne, treaties were formed to regulate "legal" trade, promote "amity" in the trade of palm oil, and enlist the support of local chiefs due to the abolition of forced labor abroad and its consequential detrimental effects on European businesses[28]. By virtue of the British traders' participation in their courts of equity, the chiefs were coerced with money prizes and occasionally used force that resulted in a gradual loss of sovereignty.

His Battles and Legacies during Colonial Rule

His brutality perfectly illustrated how he protected the interests of the country. His struggles against colonial pre-occupation to economic exploitation on the Niger Delta's creeks were traced as the origin of liberation warriors in Africa. He was the dominant figure in Niger Delta politics in 1800, fighting British colonialism. It is crucial to keep in mind that he served as the Black race's first nationalist, and that his influence continues to this day in interactions with the Western world and African traders.

King Jaja's politics with the colonial traders and officials in Opobo were influenced by his colonial responses and acts. With his cunning skill and trading knowledge, he employed strategies that caused export volumes to become static and export prices to fluctuate due to a drop in demand for produce abroad. As a result, he developed trading techniques as a master strategist that forced him to alter his conventional method of trading with foreign firms. By passing them, he directed the shipping of palm oil directly to Liverpool[29]. He also eliminated the profit margin of the European traders stationed in the Delta in that direction. Due to his rise to power and the traders' handling of him, competitive politics were started by the traders, which led to the destabilisation of his administration and kingdom. The Europeans were infuriated when attempts were made to take over the Jaja market at the Qua Ibo River and King Jaja fiercely resisted the European traders. This further aggravated and intensified the conflict.[30]

King Jaja supported the free flow of resources and production equipment. He divided authority among his subjects. His new political principle and notion was groundbreaking and unique, adding vitality to the dynamic political and economic systems, as Cowan correctly captured his influence thus: there is no room for doubt the Oil River had never produced a potentate with more power

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Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta", 249 &K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885*, London, 1956, 3
[28]Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta", .250
[29] Webster and Boahen, 197
[30]Ibid., 202-203

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than Jaja. He was just as cunning and foresighted as he was strong. Although he was rigorous and stern at times, he was always just, and the system of administration he established was as close to ideal as anything of the like could be. Although in practice, his own power was never questioned, each individual under his influence had the opportunity to appeal, and he followed his own norms and was in charge through his council of chiefs.[31].

The aforementioned brief focused on recognising his business acumen and entrepreneurial brilliance, which artistically depicted the idea of tolerance through an understanding of diplomacy and created a lasting contribution to customs, norms, and culture. This had a favourable and broad impact on world relations, ensuring an international system of government. Contrarily, reality deviates from the imaginary relationship. It is possible to characterise the historical injustice committed in Bonny by King Jaja as an unhealthy and undesirable overzealous attitude toward personal aggrandisement that was believed to be covered or carried out in accordance with good principles or with the intention of promoting better commercial relations. Without a doubt, King Jaja eventually achieved African sovereignty, primarily at the cost of dismantling the Bonny monarchy. He was looking for a less harsh reconstruction for the defeated Bonny.

Despite his intelligence and commercial prowess, King Jaja displayed flaws in his excessive pursuit of power at the expense of his history as a slave boy. His stubbornness and hubris caused both internal and external forces to mobilise a fierce defense against him. Alagoa hinted that King Jaja's failure to some extent was as a result of his refusal to accept the Christians Missionary Society's (CMS) hands of fellowship to promote Christianity in the Opobo kingdom. He claimed that this refusal was motivated by the Anglican Communion's establishment of its headquarters in his rival state of Bonny.[32]When Anna Dappa Pepple was exiled for refusing European colonialists' offer to voluntarily accept resources and distractions, circumstances granted him the privilege of holding the role of leadership of the royal family, but he ignored this.[33]However, the presence of British consuls, who were supposed to be adaptable to the local Deltan setting,

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[31] **F.** Pedler**,** *The Lion and the Unicorn in Africa: A History of the Origins of the United Company, 1787-1931*
(London: Heinemann, 1974), 74.

[32]E.J. Alagoa, "The Eastern Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the 19th Century", . . .250& E. A. Ayandele, The
Missionary impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914, London, 84-85

[33]O. Ikime, "the Peoples and Kingdom of the Delta Province", in O. Ikime (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*,
Ibadan: Heinemann Books, 1982, 98.

resulted in disproportionate manipulation of King Jaja's society to foster indirect authority on all socio-economic political structures in a stateless society without an established centralised government.

Things started to go wrong for king Jaja of Opobo in 1887 when the British Vice-Consul Johnston tricked him into attending a meeting in Gold Coast (currently Accra, Ghana), where he was tried and found guilty of obstructing the highway of trade and failing to uphold a provision of his treaty with the British. Direct shipments of palm oil were then made to Liverpool. The deportation scar was made more painful since the foreign traders who were jealous of his invincible status failed to consider the stress and strains that he endured as a struggler before his deportation to the West Indies from Saint Vincent Island. In June 1891, Jaja, a brave man, passed away while returning from exile to Bonny. When he passed away *en route*, his 1891 liberty and freedom only brought him defeat and crushing rejection. The Opobo state's influence quickly waned after his exile and untimely death. When his remains were unearthed and brought home from the Canary Islands for a customary, colorful funeral, he was honored like a deity. He was a great hero whose achievements in business and politics were very beneficial for long-term prosperity and economic stability. He sparked the recent uproar in Africa for restitution. King Jaja will be remembered as a steadfast freedom fighter and progressive arrowhead to uphold Black dignity. He never deserted the cause to uphold his beliefs and ideals in rapprochement with his dying or changing culture. It should be kept in mind that despite his limited capabilities, expertise, and originality, Jaja fought against all odds; evidently his anti-colonial crusade which paved the way for reparations movement in Nigeria and throughout the African continent, Bonny's history would not be what it is now if not for King Jaja's recalcitrance, perseverance, and willpower.

Conclusion

In this study, historical context and narrative studies were used to discuss King Jaja's life and reign. In post-colonial Nigeria, this study urged for inclusive political leadership. It is crucial to draw lessons from King Jaja's errors since colonial legacies are changing African beliefs and customs, including those in the Niger Delta. King Jaja was seduced into a colonial trick that ultimately led to his downfall. Every leader should seize control for themselves. Additionally, the work has helped to advance African historiography as well as biographical studies in Nigeria. African leaders should continue to be excellent in the post-Jaja era and be motivated by an unwavering commitment to the ideals of progressive welfare capitalism in a setting that is still battling to overcome colonial barriers to better nation-building.

He took in and provided financial aid to the liberated slaves; he was an accidental king who came to fame by skillfully using the occasion to his advantage. When considering his strengths and failures, there is no doubt that his political will, entrepreneurial abilities, strategic result-driven vision and resilience were beneficial to the welfare of his people. He also served as an

example of leadership that should be used to motivate the next generation toward sustainable development in the face of a high unemployment rate.

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