

## Indigenous Gin Production and Colonial Onslaught: A Study in Coping Strategies in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria



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### Abstract

*This paper examined the tenacity of local gin (ogogoro) production in the Niger Delta region following the British prohibition of its production and distribution in colonial Nigeria. The emergence of the home-made gin as a competitor to imported alcohol generally referred to as "trade spirits" primarily informed colonial attempts to outlaw its production and distribution through a series of liquor laws. The paper employed the historical research method by using primary and secondary sources. Oral interviews were conducted with some local gin producers and inhabitants of the area. Extant archival materials were obtained at the National Archives, Ibadan. The secondary sources consisted of relevant literature on colonialism and local gin production in the Niger Delta, government publications, and reports of independent bodies, newspapers and internet materials. All the sources were critically examined and interpreted. This paper argued that the opposition of colonial authorities against the production, sales, and consumption of native gin in the Niger Delta was primarily informed by colonial concern about the threat posed by the indigenous gin to colonial revenue. It further examined various strategies employed by the local distillers that rendered efforts ineffectual in dealing with the production and distribution of local alcohol especially in the rural areas of the region. The paper concluded that local cultural and economic nationalism, which had been built around the home-made gin on account of its age-long religious and socio-cultural uses and attachment to it by the people, made its production and consumption thrive unabated despite colonial onslaught against it.*

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Indigenous, Alcohol, Niger Delta, Coping strategies

## Introduction

Before the advent of British colonial rule in Nigeria, the Indigenous people of the Niger Delta region had taken their environmental resources as an intrinsic part of their existence woven around well-established economic and social systems that placed value on the environment. Land and water bodies, for instance, are not to be abused or desecrated, but are seen as critical natural elements to be cherished, and preserved by present and future generations.<sup>1</sup>Hence, destruction or denial of access or use of environmental resources is considered a threat to life, which is usually fiercely contested. Notably, under British colonial rule over the Nigerian peoples, the production and distribution of an age-long indigenous gin generally referred to as *ogogoro*, was prohibited and banned by the colonial authority from being produced and sold across the colonial society.<sup>2</sup>The colonial government saw the homemade gin by the Niger Delta people as a competitor to imported alcohol generally referred to as "trade spirits". These primarily informed attempts towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to outlaw local gin production and its distribution through a series of liquor laws such as the 1910 and 1912, Distilleries Ordinance No. 13 of 2 August, and the Distillation of Spirits Prohibition Ordinance No. 2 of 27 September respectively against local gin describing the home-made alcohol as 'illicit gin'. Notwithstanding, the Niger Delta people did not dampen their agitation and determination for continual production of the local gin. In response to the quest for protection of their right over their resources and homemade article, the locals resorted to various forms of strategic response behaviours demonstrated toward acquiring resource or property rights for internal economic autonomy and participatory self-determination in resource exploitation in the region. This paper, therefore, is focused on the creativity and ingenuity of the Niger Delta people and the various coping strategies they adopted to sustain an indigenous effort in the face of colonial onslaught against local gin production in the region.

## Geography and the People of the Niger Delta Region

Over the years, the determination and definition of the Niger Delta region has taken different dimensions. The region which is located in the central part of Southern Nigeria has been a victim of definitional pluralism and conceptualization. Ogbogbo<sup>3</sup>observed that the definition of what constitutes the Niger Delta has been very dynamic reflecting the interests involved at different times and circumstances. Hence, there is an understanding among scholars of the geographical or core definition of the Niger Delta as well as the political interpretation of the region.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Aghalino, "Oil Exploration and its Impacts on the Niger Delta", *Kiabara: Journal of Humanity*, Volume 7(1), (October 2001): 100-111.

<sup>2</sup>Adeniran Olorunfemi, "The Liquor Traffic Dilemma in British West Africa: The Southern Nigerian Example, 1895-1918", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 17(2) (March 1984): 232-236.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Ogbogbo, "Identity Politics and Resource Control Conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta", *Journal of the Humanities*, 14(1) (November 2007): 31-54.

<sup>4</sup> Caution Preboye, "The Core Delta: Iduwini Clan" (Ibadan: Rural Development Nigeria Ltd, 2005), 32-51.

Geographically, the Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger River. A delta is essentially a natural creation. It comprises an area that is formed where a river divides before flowing into a body of water. Examples of prominent deltas around the world include; the Ganges Delta in India, the Nile Delta in Egypt, the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, and the Mississippi Delta in the United States of America. In the case of the Niger Delta under consideration, the area was captured by Sir Willink's Commission.<sup>5</sup>of the British colonial Government in 1958 as being composed of three divisions; Ogoni Division of Port-Harcourt Province, Degema Province, and Brass together with the Western Ijaw Division of Delta Province. Essentially, these provinces constitute present-day Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers states, which Niger Delta Environmental Survey<sup>6</sup>refer to as 'the core Niger Delta' covering nearly 26,000 kilometers square. Be that as it may, with the history of state creation in Nigeria, some Niger Delta communities have now been placed in states other than the core Niger Delta area while some areas that are contiguous to the Niger Delta such as Abia and Ondo states among others have shared similar historical experience with the peoples of the Niger Delta area since the period of active oil exploration and exploitation began in the region.

It is therefore understandable that because most of these communities harbor crude oil, and as oil-producing communities, their grouping into states became largely necessary and politically motivated for the purpose perhaps, of administrative convenience, development objectives, political expediency, and other considerations. In 1999/2000 for instance, the Obasanjo's led administration officially included other states to the Niger Delta. In part 1, subsection 2 of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) Act of 1999,<sup>7</sup>the Niger Delta is politically defined as being synonymous with all the Oil Producing States, thereby expanding the scope and classification of the region into nine states with the oil-producing communities cutting across these states. It is on this development that it becomes more generally acceptable that the Niger Delta consists of nine states which accommodate all oil-producing states in Nigeria, as well as others, considered relevant for political cum developmental objectives. On this broader outlook, the region in its complexity consists of Abia, Akwalbom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers states.

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Willink's Commission, "Report on Enquiry into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them" (London, 1958), 101-177

<sup>6</sup>Niger Delta Environmental Survey, "Abridged Version of Phase 1 Report" (PortHarcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 1997), 211-314

<sup>7</sup>Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), *The Regional Development Master Plan* (2021): 106-292, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.nddc.gov.ng/masterplan.aspx> Accessed 12/1/2023

**Table 1: The Nine States of the Niger Delta Region**

States	Land Area(square ki	Capital
Abia	4,877	Umuahia
Akwalbom	6,806	Uyo
Bayelsa	11,007	Yenagoa
Cross River	21,930	Calabar
Delta	17,163	Asaba
Edo	19,698	Benin
Imo	5,165	Owerri
Ondo	15,086	Akure
Rivers	10,378	Port-Harcourt
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>112, 110</b>	

**Source:** NDDC, Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan (NDRDMP).<sup>8</sup>

The above table shows that the Niger Delta in this broader perspective covers 112,110 square kilometers. The region has a shoreline of about 200 miles of its fourteen main tributaries.<sup>9</sup>It lies between latitude 414 and 533 degrees North and longitude 548 and 74 degrees East and is bordered to the South by the Atlantic Ocean and to the East by Cameroon.<sup>10</sup>Again, the Niger Delta is dominated by numerous rivers and creeks which formed an almost continuous network to the hinterland and flow into the Atlantic Ocean, and the area indicates a low topography; a few feet above sea level.<sup>11</sup> Due to this factor, only a fraction of the land is arable and as a result of its proximity to the sea, the waters are saline with the salinity dropping mainly in the wet season. Aghalino<sup>12</sup> revealed that the Niger Delta has over 40 different ethnic groups speaking about 250 dialects and spread across 5,000 communities. The region is therefore characterized by ethnic pluralism and noted to have the highest population diversity in the world.<sup>13</sup>

The numerous ethnic groups that make up the region are divided into; Western, Central and Eastern Niger Delta. The Western consists of Delta and southernmost parts of Edo state, harbouring the Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ijaw(or Ezon), and Ukwani ethnic groups while the Central consists of Bayelsa and Rivers states, which are made up of the Ijaw (including the Nembe-Brass, Ogbia, Kalabari, Ibanis, Opobo, Bonny,etc), the Okrika and Anddoni clans, Ogoni, Ekpeye, Ikwerre, Ndoni among others. The Eastern Niger Delta on the other hand includes Akwalbom and Cross River States consisting of Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Ogoja, Ekoi,

<sup>8</sup> Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), "The Regional Development Master Plan", 142.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Anene, "The People of the Niger Delta Country in the Nineteenth Century", in *Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, ed, Joseph Anene and George Brown (Ibadan: University Press, 1966), 98-121.

<sup>10</sup>Jephta Enaike, "Niger Delta crises: Challenges of Corporate Responsibility and Good Governance", (Lagos: Ar-Raham Production, 2008), 26.

<sup>11</sup>Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, "Investment Guide in the Niger Delta Region", (2005): 210-224, accessed January 25, 2025 [www.mnda.gov.ng](http://www.mnda.gov.ng)

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Aghalino, "Combating the Niger Delta Crisis: An Appraisal of Federal Government Response to Anti-oil Protest in the Niger Delta, 158-2002" *Maiduguri Journal of Historical Studies*, 2(1) ( July 2004): 111-136.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Sokolowski, "Modeling the Niger Delta Insurgency", *The Social Science Journal*, 27(2) (December, 2010): 38-51.

and Bekwara.<sup>14</sup> Generally, the socio-cultural heritage of Niger Delta people is reflected in their modes of dressing, marriages, traditional cultures and festivals. These indigenous people from early times relied heavily on the natural resources of their environment for survival. Through their ingenuity and creativity, they had well-established social and economic systems that placed value on the environment before the arrival of British colonial rule in the area.

### **Coping Strategies Conceptualised**

Etymologically, the word "cope" is derived from the Latin word "colpus" meaning "to alter". In its psychological paradigm usage, to cope denotes dealing with and attempting to overcome problems and difficulties.<sup>15</sup> Coping strategies therefore refer to specific efforts of behavioural responses adopted by an individual or group of people to cope with and manage difficult, threatening, or opposing conditions. It is a reactive and spontaneous response (usually a combination of adaptive styles and skills) that people employ as immediate measures toward adapting to unwholesome events or situations. Ahmed, Nosiru, and Tokede (2020),<sup>16</sup> note that coping strategies are methods by which individuals or groups formulate or practice to survive in a disarticulated economy and alienated environment. It is important to add that these techniques, designs, or measures are not formal, but rather escapist in outlook. In other words, coping strategies in the context of this paper are not planned strategies that usually involve government intervention and public policy, such as investment in infrastructure. Rather, coping strategies here are autonomous actions, adaptations, or escapist mechanisms by farmers and local manufacturers affected in rural settings.

Historically, coping strategies have been measured and categorised in a multitude of ways, however, most coping theories such as the transactional model, broadly classify coping attempts as either emotion-focused or problem-focused strategies.<sup>17</sup> While emotion-focused strategies try to alter the way one thinks or feels about a situation or an event, freely expressing emotions or avoiding the situation, Problem-focused coping strategy is based more on one's or group's capability to think and alter the environmental event or situation through the utilisation of problem-solving skills, creativity, interpersonal conflict resolution, and time management among other skills and competencies.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Niger Delta during the period under review, problem-solving strategies were largely adopted by the ingenious people. To escape colonial opposition against local gin production and sales, they put their creativities and

<sup>14</sup> Anene, "The People of the Niger Delta Country in the Nineteenth Century", 101

<sup>15</sup> Philip Dewe, "Determinants of coping: Some Alternative Explanations and Measurement Issues", *Psychological Reports*, 88(3) (May 2001): 832-834.

<sup>16</sup> Ameen Ahmed, et al, "Dynamics to the Study of Coping Strategies of Rural Farm Communities in the Context of Climate Change and Socioeconomic Challenges: the Nigerian Example", *Journal of Environmental Studies*, 23(1) (November 2020): 13-19.

<sup>17</sup> Generoso Mazo, "Stress: Its Causes, Effects and the Coping Mechanisms Among Bachelor of Science in Social Work Students in a Philippine University" *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research*, 3(8) (August 2015): 175-184.

<sup>18</sup> John Bloona, "Coping with Stress in a Changing World". (New York: McGraw Hill College Division, 1999), 35.

competencies into use by devising various means through which they continued the production of the alcoholic beverage despite colonial aggressions against it. However, it is important to state that coping strategies in the Niger Delta were largely influenced by the quantity and quality of available resources to the people. These include; knowledge and skills, social acceptance, and environmental natural resources, which enabled them to achieve diversification, relocation of local distilleries, and change in production time among others.

### **Development and Production of Indigenous Gin in the Niger Delta**

In the world of traditional liquors, it is not uncommon to encounter an array of unique spirits native to different cultures and regions around the globe. Before the advent of Europeans at the coast and contact with the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, palm wine, which was derived mainly from the raffia palm trees of the region, was a basic prominent brand of alcoholic beverage essentially important in the socio-economic development of the people. However, the Fifteenth Century contacts of Europeans and peoples of coastal Nigerian empires and kingdoms especially during the trans-Atlantic slave trade era, brought new varieties of alcoholic beverages and spirituous liquors primarily, gin and whisky, which were exported by the British into the colony of Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> Thus, beginning from this period, gins especially European schnapps became integrated into the local culture of the people and even served ceremonial and ritual purposes. This situation was also essentially predominant among the people of the Niger Delta region especially so by being coastal and riverine communities.

By British colonial design, European alcohols brought into the colony of Nigeria were used in exchange for slaves and to pay homage to traditional rulers in addition to being sold. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the obnoxious slave trade was supplanted by the legitimate trade, imported alcoholic beverages of various sorts continued to play important roles in coastal communities of the Niger Delta and other parts of the Nigerian colony. This resulted in the heavy importation of liquor into the colonial state, which consequently altered the role of palm wine in various rituals and socio-cultural activities that existed in the pre-colonial era; a colonial development that marked a watershed in the uses of alcoholic liquors in the colony. Sources indicate that by the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the local people of the Niger Delta have developed a habit of drinking imported potent distilled liquors as well as its uses in marriage ceremonies, naming, burial, meeting of elders, peace-making, incantation, libation, offering to the ancestors, and gifts to important personalities.<sup>20</sup>

However, the effects of the collapse of the cash-crop economy in Nigeria during the period of the International Economic Recession of 1929-33 in addition to the wartime activities, disrupted

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Akyeampong, "What is in a Drink? Class Struggle, Popular Culture and the Politics of Akpeteshie (Local Gin) in Ghana, 1930 – 67", *The Journal of African History*, 37(2) (1996): 229 – 230.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Ofonagoro, "Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria 1881-1929", (New York: NOK Publishers Ltd, 1975), 12.

the importation of alcohol into Nigerian colonies. Instead of reducing the consumption and use of alcohol due to the wartime effects (as argued by the anti-liquor lobbyists represented by temperance societies, humanitarian evangelicals, and other interest groups in Great Britain and the United States of America), the colonial British administration prohibited gin and attempted to discourage its importation through the imposition of heavy taxes and customs duties.<sup>21</sup> The aftermath of this development was the scarcity of imported gin and higher retail price of European alcohol; making it difficult for indigenes to patronize and to have access to imported trade spirit.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, this led to the search for alternatives; the result of which was the distillation of the Nigerian gin, known as *ogogoro*, an alcoholic drink predominantly popular and originally produced within the mangroves of the Niger Delta region. *Ogogoro* is produced from the sap of various species of palm trees such as the raffia palm found in the environment of the region.

According to traditions on the origin of *ogogoro* production in Nigeria, James Iso, a native of Calabar in the Niger Delta, was said to have been the first man to distill *Ogogoro* in Nigeria. Iso learnt the art of distilling *Moonshine* in New York, where he served three families as a household servant before his return to Nigeria in 1931. At his return, Iso was said to have begun the transfer of his foreign-acquired skills in distillation for £25 per lesson to interested individuals across the Niger Delta communities.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore not out of place that the local Ijaw, Efik, Urhobo, and Ibibio communities of the region are usually credited with the initial production of *ogogoro*. In any case, by the 1930s, the indigenous people of the Niger Delta have begun to master the technology of alcohol distillation, which swept through the colony.

### **Method of Local Gin Production**

It is important to note that the Niger Delta environment played an essential role in the overall development of local gin in the region. The local distillers perfected the art of distilling alcoholic drinks from materials that were readily found in the environment. As it were, the production process of *Ogogoro* is relatively straightforward but it requires certain professional skills to ensure quality and safety. The traditional processes include the following:

### **Harvesting Palm Sap**

The indigenous gin is often made from the sap of raffia palm trees or, less commonly, from other types of palm, like the oil palm found in the environment. Hence, the gin production activities were principally carried out in the swamps and forests close to the raffia palms to

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<sup>21</sup> Ovie Forae, "Prohibition of "Illicit" Alcohol in Colonial Nigeria: A Study in the Tenacity of *Ogogoro* (Local gin) in Urhoboland, Southern Nigeria, 1910 – 1950". *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 2(3) (March 2013): 13-33.

<sup>22</sup> Oladipo Awofisayo and Baitei Fukpene, "Historicising Local Gin (*Ogogoro*) and the Culture of Drinking among the Arogboljaw of Ondo State up to 1970", *Uniujo Journal of Humaitis(UUJH)*, 27(1) (May 2023): 169-179.

<sup>23</sup> National Archives, "Memo by W.E. Hunt, Secretary Southern Provinces to Residents, All Provinces, Nigeria", (Ibadan, 1931), File 1/21.

facilitate production and the economic consideration of minimizing cost. The first step involves tapping the sap from palm trees, a process usually done early in the morning. Tappers climb the palm trees and carefully cut into the flower stalk to allow the sap to flow into containers. This sap, which is "palm wine," is usually sweet and non-alcoholic but begins to ferment naturally due to wild yeasts in the air as soon as it is collected, turning into alcohol within hours.<sup>24</sup>

### **Fermentation**

After the collection of the raffia palm tree's sap into containers, the palm wine is left to ferment naturally under the scorching African sun. The natural fermentation process can last from one day to about a week, depending on ambient temperatures and the desired strength of the fermentation. At this stage, no external yeasts are added, as the wild yeasts present on the palm and in the environment are sufficient to ferment the sap into palm wine with a low alcohol content of about 4% to 6%. In some cases, the dearth of raffia palm trees in the mainland necessitated the use of sugar and yeast as alternatives 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.<sup>25</sup>

### **Distillation**

The fermented palm wine then undergoes distillation to increase the alcohol content, resulting in *ogogoro*, a traditional liquor akin to gin or rum. The distillation process traditionally involves a simple pot still, which consists of a large pot for the wine, a heat source to boil the liquid, and a condenser to cool and condense the vapor back into liquid form. The setup might vary, but it essentially allows the alcohol vapors to be collected as they evaporate from the boiling fermented palm wine, condense in a cooling system, and then drip out as a distilled spirit. This distilled liquid is *Ogogoro*, which has a much higher alcohol content than the original palm wine, usually around 30% to 60% alcohol by volume, making it a potent hot drink.

### **Collection and Storage**

The distilled *Ogogoro* is collected into containers. The first part of the distillate, known as the "head," is often discarded because it contains methanol and other undesirable compounds. The main portion, or the "heart," is kept, while the "tail," which comes out towards the end of the distillation process, might be redistilled with the next batch or also kept, depending on the producer's preference. Distillers succeeded in supplying the local market with strong, potent, cheaply flavoured, and pleasant local alcohol to sustain the drinking culture and other uses of gin already created by the European contact with them. Hence, the local gin made

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<sup>24</sup> John Jackson and Samuel Adebayo, "Traditional and Modern Palm Wine Production in Nigeria. *Biotechnology and Molecular Biology Reviews*, 4(6) (May 2009): 140-148.

<sup>25</sup> Forae, "Prohibition of "Illicit" Alcohol in Colonial Nigeria..."23-30.

serious headway against the long-standing imported liquor trade. For the colonialists, such import substitution was not a welcomed development, and hence, attracted colonial opposition.

### **Colonial Onslaught Against Indigenous Gin and Coping Strategies of Local Distillers**

As mentioned above, the invention of indigenous liquor manufacturing from local resources by the Niger Delta people was opposed by the colonial authorities. Colonial concerns about local gin claimed that the process of its distillation involved unscientific and unrefined methods as well as the uses of supposedly harmful materials such as possible metal contamination due to the copper distilling pipes. The production environment of native gin and its differing alcohol volume was also in the view of colonial authorities enough evidence to stir worries in the official circle about the continued production of local gin.<sup>26</sup> The British colonialist onslaught against indigenous gin was also occasioned by the fact that most of the locals took to drunkenness and this affected their productivity and by extension, it impacted negatively on colonial tax. Also, most of the locals who were into the production of Oogoro became very powerfully rich and a big threat to British colonial interest. Consequently, through the instrument of prohibition, the colonialists described the local gin of the Niger Delta as 'unhealthy, unlicensed' and ultimately as 'illicit gin' and alluded in numerous colonial reports, to many negative effects of alcohol, which include insanity and death.<sup>27</sup>

Colonial authorities became particularly apprehensive about native gin and imposed harsh legislation to suppress its production and distribution. Various liquor laws and ordinances that prohibited the distillation of local alcohol were promulgated and licenses similar to those for imported alcohol were introduced in a bid to control indigenous gin production, sales, and consumption throughout the Niger Delta region and other parts of the Nigerian colony such as in coastal Yorubaland where the spread of oogoro production has reached.<sup>28</sup> Notably, in 1910 and 1912, the Distilleries Ordinance No. 13 of 2 August, and the Distillation of Spirits Prohibition Ordinance No. 2 of 27 September respectively 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 1919 Liquor Ordinance and Prohibition of Gin Distillation in Nigeria that followed reaffirmed earlier Ordinances while imposing heavier penalties. Section 8 stipulates that: "No person shall distill, dispose of any spirits distilled in Nigeria."<sup>29</sup> Since sugar and metal pipes were useful in local alcohol production process, British colonial lords enacted a sugar control bill to limit the supply of sugar and import restriction of distillation equipment like copper pipes through its Order-in-

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<sup>26</sup>National Archives, "Nigeria Police Annual Report", (Ibadan, 1934), File 1/21.

<sup>27</sup>National Archives, "Nigeria Analyst Department Annual Reports", (Ibadan, 1931), File 12/31.

<sup>28</sup>Dolapo Adekola, "The Illicit Production of Oogoro in Coastal Yorubaland and the Niger Delta". *Portuguese Studies Review*. (2017), accessed (2017): 23-25, accessed September 10, 2024.  
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/>.

<sup>29</sup> National Archives, "Memo by Graham Shute, Secretary, Southern Province to J.A. Maybin, Chief Secretary to the Government of Nigeria, (Ibadan 1934), File 1/25.

Council No. 11 of 1931 laid stringent controls on the import of metal pipes, especially copper tubes. Possession of such pipes without good reason(s) became culpable.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the above prohibition and control measures, local gin distilleries proliferated in the Niger Delta, and alcohol production continued unabated.<sup>31</sup> Alarmed at the proliferation of local distilleries despite the measures of control, the authorities were at a crossroads and some colonial officials recommended stricter legislation such as higher court fines, keeping a close watch on importation of distillation equipment and inputs, particularly copper pipes, sugar and yeast, imprisonment of up to 10 years for offenders as well as enlistment of the services of paid local informants among others.<sup>32</sup> Be that as it may, these tighter efforts at dealing with the spread of local alcohol were ineffectual in checking the proliferation of the home-made gin due to the ingenuity of local distillers, who saw these colonial actions as infringement cum denial of their rights, manifested in the refusal of colonial authorities to accept and grant property rights of the native people over their home-made alcohol. Hence, colonial authorities' claims about the possible harmful effects of local gin for instance, and its subsequent prohibition were viewed with discontent and as unfounded. Forae (2003)<sup>33</sup> noted that; beyond colonial theorising, colonial concerns about local gin were unjustified as there was no empirical evidence or study undertaken by the authorities in Southern Nigeria implicating the homemade gin as the cause of illhealth or fatalities.

When interviewed, Akpesiri (2024)<sup>34</sup> argued that colonial authorities did not have the moral right to question the authenticity of locally made drinks, because their own imported alcohol was not free from harmful impacts on consumers. Notably, the health implications of imported spirituous liquors into Southern Nigeria during the period under investigation were subjects of humanitarian and temperance protestations due to their unsafe and unhealthy status, which resulted in their outright prohibition in the first instance by international law.<sup>35</sup> For instance, substances such as absinthe, and hyssop among others, containing essential chemical materials recognized as poisonous, hazardous, and injurious to health were compositions of trade spirits.<sup>36</sup> Alarmed by this fact about imported alcohol, local distillers adopted various strategies to ensure that their right to production of local gin is continued unhindered even in the face of draconian colonial oppositions.

The first coping strategy was the almost total reliance on locally sourced natural materials from their immediate environment. Essentially, natural materials were believed to have health

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<sup>30</sup> National Archives, "Memo by G. Hemmant, Officer Administering the Government of Nigeria, to Graham Shute, Secretary, Southern Provinces, (Ibadan 1932), File 1/22.

<sup>31</sup> Chima Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire: Illicit Gin Prohibition and Control in Colonial Eastern Nigeria", *African Economic History*, 31(1), (June 2003):7-11.

<sup>32</sup> West African Review (1935). *Informants and illicit distillation of spirits*, Volume 81(May 1935), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Forae, "Prohibition of "Illicit" Alcohol in Colonial Nigeria," 21-28.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Akpesiri Ogbudefe, a notable gin marketer, Okwagbe Waterside, Delta State, 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Hamiton Wyndham, "The Problem of the West African Liquor Traffic". *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 9(6), (1930): 801-805.

<sup>36</sup> Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire: Illicit Gin Prohibition and Control in Colonial Eastern Nigeria", 9-10.

benefits, and their availability in the Niger Delta region sufficiently aided the tenacity of local alcohol producers in the region. Local distillers in the Niger Delta used natural materials such as the bark of the tree known in the Urhobo native parlance as *ugun*. The bark served several productive purposes. It induces a quicker fermentation of the palm wine. It was also used to flavour and colour the gin as well as addition of pungency to the alcohol for improved quality. Native soap produced from a concoction of ash (obtained from the burnt oil palm-nut bunch) and palm oil, was added to the brew to prevent the potentially fizzy wine from rising to the level of the pipes thereby mixing with alcohol. After production, marketers of the gin often diluted alcohol with water to reduce its intoxicating effect-although to varying degrees.

Due to increasing difficulty in obtaining copper pipes, local distillers improvised by using locally fabricated metal pipes. Others resorted to the use of bamboo sticks, used earlier as a distillation pipe during the pre-colonial period before the introduction of copper pipes.<sup>37</sup> As stated above, *ugun* was also used following difficulty in obtaining sugar. In some cases, palm wine was accumulated and allowed to stay for a few days under the scorching African sun to achieve natural fermentation, resulting in a transformed, high-proof spirit. Essentially, these local efforts were to circumvent the law prohibiting illicit gin production and to ensure the maintenance of indigenous peoples' right to a continuation of the production and trade of local alcohol in the region.

Another point to note is the fact that colonial apprehensions about local gin were undoubtedly borne out of concern with the threat posed by the indigenous gin to colonial revenue. This explains why the authorities downplayed the potential health hazard of imported alcohol while magnifying the unfounded health implications of local liquor. Again, the variously imposed harsh legislations against home-made alcohol including police arrest and imprisonment of offenders would suggest that colonial finance was an issue that weighed heavily on the colonial mind especially when viewed against the imperial policy of economic self-sufficiency of the Nigerian colony. As it were, duties on spirits provided the bulk of the government's revenue as shown in the table below;

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<sup>37</sup> Forae, "Prohibition of "Illicit" Alcohol in Colonial Nigeria," 30-33.

**Table 2: Comparative Customs Revenue Collected on Spirits and Other Imports, Southern Nigeria:1904-1913 (Value in Thousands of £)**

Year	Spirit	Other goods	Spirits as % 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

**Source:** Extracted and compiled from Nigeria Blue Books of Statistical Data (1928-1940).

Notably, much of the bulk of the government's revenue from alcohol imported into Southern Nigeria as shown in Table 1 above, were from licenses imposed on importation and sellers of imported alcohol. For instance, wholesale and retail licenses were issued for 15 pounds annually, while 25 pounds was charged for general licenses.<sup>38</sup> According to the Lagos Standard Report (1895), a 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.<sup>39</sup>

The revenue generated from license fees proved more than just a nominal amount as it helped to finance local government administration from 1909. Therefore, the locals realized that colonial opposition against the local gin economy in the Niger Delta region in particular was primarily driven by economic interest supposedly achievable by saving imported liquor from local competition and creating a profitable market for imported alcohol at the expense of the rights of the natives to their indigenous liquor and its accrued socio-cultural and economic benefits. Local distillers resorted to various strategies to evade colonial wrath. Most distillers usually dismantle and take their production equipment into hiding in the forest to conceal them from the prying eyes of law enforcement personnel. Others used traditional oil lamps to discreetly produce at night with locals on the watchout for colonial police to alert

<sup>38</sup> William Geary, "Nigeria Under British Rule". (London: Methuen and Co, 1927), 152-159.

<sup>39</sup> Lagos Standard, "Governor Carter and Bishop Tugwell on the drink traffic (July 3, 1895), 2.

producers. These were complemented by smuggling by marketers who smuggled local gin by canoe through the swamps and creeks by travelling at night to evade detection and arrest by the colonial police. Dolapo<sup>40</sup> pointed out, that the numerous and intricate waterways in the Niger Delta were indispensable to the smuggling of gin.

It is important to recall that British trade in palm produce in the area had experienced a diversion, particularly from the 1920s from the waterways to the emerging railways, resulting in the neglect of the waterways, thereby making them safer transportation channels for local gin smugglers. In the bid to curtail and stamp out the smuggling of illicit gin on the waterways, the colonial government established the River Niger Protective Service (RNPS), an anti-smuggling outfit with its main station at Nkissi near Onitsha at the mouth of the Niger River. The RNPS was empowered to patrol the waterways to intercept canoes laden with illicit gin and to prosecute smugglers.<sup>41</sup> Notwithstanding, colonial efforts in this direction were fruitless as the outfit suffered from a shortage of adequate personnel and equipment necessary to carry out effective surveillance of the tributaries of the Lower Niger River. In addition, the deltaic nature of the Niger Delta environment was a major obstacle to policing efforts.

Unlike some areas of the mainland such as Sapele and Warri, which were relatively easy to access, the complex and non-navigable nature of the swamps, creeks, and rural areas by motor launches and steamers hindered police surveillance in some of the environment of gin production by land and in catching up with local smugglers who understood the water terrain so well. Thus, colonial law enforcement personnel and the law courts deployed to check the production and distribution of local gin seemed to be effective only in the hinterland or in semi-urban areas that were easy to access by colonial administrators or even by educated Africans. The relative safety offered by the rural areas therefore led to heavy town-rural migration of native gin manufacturers and the concentration of the gin industry in rural areas particularly from the 1920s. Anthony<sup>42</sup> noted when interviewed that gin brewers in major gin-producing places such as Okwagbe, Oginibo, Ujevwu, Otegbo, Ukpara, and other places in the Niger Delta, migrated from the towns to the villages following incessant colonial onslaught against distillers in the mainland areas. Although the migration of local gin brewers from the towns to rural areas also had economic consideration for gin manufacturers in terms of nearness to sources of raw materials in rural areas, the localisation strategy was a strong factor that helped to sustain the industry in the face of colonial oppositions as it largely kept them away from frequent police attack and easy capture.

Attempted police raids of distillation locations in some rural areas, expectedly encountered popular and fierce resistance as the full weight of local opinion was against them. For one, the Niger Delta people have come to accept, and perhaps rightly, that the local gin was

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<sup>40</sup>Adekola, "The Illicit Production of Ogogoro in Coastal Yorubaland and the Niger Delta", 25.

<sup>41</sup> National Archives, "Memo from C.N. Denton, Acting Resident, Benin Province to E.J. Kelly, District Officer, Aba (Ibaan, 1937), File 1/26.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Anthony Ihodije, a retired gin producer, Okpara Inland, Delta state, 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2024.

comparable to any imported alcohol, and could sufficiently serve as a replacement. In addition to getting affordable alcohol in the home-made gin, the impact of the age-long ritual and secular uses of local gin in the region played an essential role in the ingenuity and creativity of the Niger Delta people to sustain an indigenous right in the face of colonial objectives against local gin. Ogogorowas rich in socio-cultural and religious significance among the people. Its importance and impact were beyond being a mere local spirit but one that was deeply embedded in the history, traditional rites, and social practices of the people. During traditional religious rites, for instance, a variety of symbols including carved or molded objects regarded as 'statuary for the ancestors (the gods) and other land and forest spirits, which were usually concealed in shrines are poured on with local gin as libation. The homemade liquor equally serves as a primary adult drink in many social gatherings, including marriages, funerals, negotiations, and religious ceremonies. It is often drunk in gatherings and shared from a single bottle or cup(s), thereby fostering peace-making, a sense of unity, social cohesion, and community among the people. It is also used to seal agreements and covenants as a way of assuring honesty and commitment toward collective decisions.

In traditional medicine, many practitioners combine or soak ogogoro with medicinal leaves and herbs to create potent tinctures. The alcohol acts as a solvent, drawing out the useful compounds from the herbs for curative purposes of a variety of diseases and ailments such as rheumatism, spleen disorder, fever, yaws, flatulence, and pneumonia among others, while local diviners deploy the gin to appease spiritual forces to solicit their assistance in diagnosing the cause of ill-health and to effect a cure of same.<sup>43</sup> Economically, the production and sales of ogogoro were sources of income for many of the locals. The brewing is locally done, providing employment and encouraging local enterprise thereby contributing to the local economy. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Niger Delta especially the rural areas of the region became a hotbed of illicit gin distillation with the full weight of local opinion against colonial antagonism. Consequently, law enforcement personnel encountered popular resistance in their raids on illegal distilleries. 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 religious and socio-cultural life.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted from the foregoing to articulate the dynamics of behavioural responses as coping strategies adopted by local gin distillers in the Niger Delta region in the face of colonial opposition against the production and consumption of indigenous alcohol. Colonial efforts as revealed were directed to extinguish local gin production and its uses in the region through legislation, colonial police, and the law courts describing it as 'illicit gin' for overriding colonial economic interests. Despite the prohibition and control measures, local gin distilleries proliferated in the Niger Delta, and alcohol production continued unabated. Hence, it is important to conclude that the failure of

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Olorogun hubare Onorhie , traditional religion practitioner, Orogun Clan, 23th May, 2024.

colonial authorities to stamp out local gin in the region was due to the tenacity, creativity, and ingenuity displayed by local distillers gin in contesting their right to indigenous liquor production and its uses by the people.

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