

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXISTENCE OF MARKETS IN ONITSHA

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Abstract

Markets in Onitsha, like other parts of Igboland, in pre-colonial times, served both economic and social purposes. This is to say that market centres were used for both the exchange of goods and services and also for social gatherings, which included town meetings, local feast celebrations, dance group presentations, oath taking, to mention but a few. This paper examined the social implications of the existence of markets in Onitsha, and brings to limelight the extent the existence of markets have fostered social growth and development in Onitsha and its environs. The methodology of this paper is based on qualitative, descriptive analysis of available data, using primary and secondary sources. The findings of the paper indicate that the existence of markets in Onitsha have both positive and negative implications. The positive implications include urbanisation, growth of town unions, development of basic infrastructures, and emergence of elite groups, to mention but a few. The negative implications on the other hand include: congestion of the city, high rate of social vices, and heavy presence of touts in the city. Based on the findings, the paper concludes that despite the negative implications, the existence of markets in Onitsha is still a force to reckon with in the growth and development of social integration in the city. On that note, the paper recommends proper regulations by the government to reduce the negative effect mentioned to the barest minimum.

Keywords: Markets, Social, Onitsha, Existence, Development

Introduction

In an attempt to place the origin of markets in Igboland, Adiele E. Afigbo, notes that “just as *Chukwu* is believed to have instituted agriculture, so he is believed to have institutionalised trade and markets, by creating the Igbo market days, naming them after four heavenly fishmongers each of whom went round Igboland establishing markets bearing his name”². From Afigbo’s narrative, it is clear that the Igbo regard the origin of the market and trading in their society as ancient, going way back to those far-off days when the day was young, and when men held discussion directly with God.

In the traditional Igbo society, agriculture, trade and local manufacture were the economic mainstay. Trade ranked next to agriculture in Igbo traditional economy³. Although subsidiary to agriculture, trade nonetheless, formed an integral and important aspect of the pre-colonial economy. Because agriculture and local manufacture went beyond the subsistence level, trade became *ipso facto* pretty imperative⁴. The agricultural sector and the local manufacture generated surpluses that needed to be disposed, and the need to find a suitable avenue for the disposal of these surpluses gave rise to the establishment of markets in Onitsha and other parts of Igboland. Although the existence of markets in pre-colonial Onitsha and other parts of Igboland, was supposed to be economically driven, social factors seemed to have also been an important consideration in establishing them⁵. They not only fulfil its economic role as a place of buying and selling but also serve as an important social, political and religious meeting place⁶. Hence, the market places were used for town meetings, dance group presentations, local feast celebrations, oat-taking, wrestling activities, and so on. This may have been

expected, since all that was required to establish a market, at the time, was an open ground or communal space, which village square adequately provided. There was practically no village or community in Igboland that did not have a village square⁷.

With the passage of time, markets in Onitsha have grown beyond the local level as markets are no longer held in village squares but are held in designated areas with well-constructed lock-up shop allocations for the traders. That notwithstanding, markets in Onitsha, just like in time past, have continued to play both economic and social functions in the society. This paper will therefore, discuss the social implications of the existence of markets in Onitsha.

Social Implications of the Existence of Markets in Onitsha

The social implications of the presence of markets in Onitsha will be discussed under the following:

Urbanisation

Urbanisation is the increase in the proportion of people living in towns and cities. It occurs because people move from the rural areas to the urban. Urbanisation is also defined as a process of population concentration that proceeds in two ways: the multiplication of the points of concentration and the increase in the size of individual concentrations. The point of concentration is no doubt, the city⁸. The essentially demographic characterisation of urbanisation is comprised of economic and behavioural aspects. It involves structural changes in the economy that foster population concentration and changes in the behavioural pattern of the population following from such concentration.

The existence of markets in Onitsha metropolis has given rise to an increase in the proportion of people living in Onitsha. The vast population of people living in Onitsha stems from people from different parts of the country and beyond. People are known to have left their villages for Onitsha in search of greener pastures as a result of the presence of markets in Onitsha. Some of these settlers were brought to Onitsha at very tender ages as apprentices to wealthy traders who after being served for a period of time (depending on the agreement reached with the apprentice family and the trader), were settled, and therefore, remained in Onitsha to grow their business and raise a family. The population growth of Onitsha over the period of six years (1990-1995) is shown in the table below⁹:

Year	Population
1990	337,000
1991	346,000
1992	361,000
1993	379,000
1994	398,000
1995	418,000

Source: <https://populationstatistics.com/nigeria/onitsha>

A close look at the population growth indicates a steady and progressive growth in the population of Onitsha, which has continued with the passage of time. The gradual migration of people to Onitsha has over the years advanced Onitsha into a city. In the words of K. B. Dickson, the city is a compact settlement engaged primarily in non-agricultural occupations, specialisation of economic activities, division of labour, and factory centred production¹⁰. With the presence of markets, Onitsha has over the years metamorphosed into a city. Agricultural activities have died a natural death in Onitsha, and

trade specialisation and other forms of economic sustenance seemed to be the order of the day. Traders are often known with a particular specialisation of trade within the markets. Some are known to trade in kitchen wares, others are known to trade in lace materials and yet others are known to trade in casual wears, to mention but a few. Technically put, there seemed to be division of labour amongst these traders, too, for just as the person who sales curtain materials/fabrics is different from the person who sells the curtain lining and other curtain accessories, are also different from the person who sews the curtain to its final piece¹¹.

The presence of markets in Onitsha has also contributed in the transformation of the neighbouring communities of Onitsha into semi-urban centres. Semi-urban centres are places where large numbers of people come together, whether forcibly or voluntarily, in special-purpose settlements that lack many of the feature characteristics of cities¹². These neighbouring communities include Obosi, Nkpor, Odekpe, Nkwelle Ezunaka, and so on. These communities have been transformed to semi-urban centres for the following reasons—Onitsha has over the years become congested due to the teeming population who reside in it for purposes of trade and sourcing for other means of livelihood.

Also, the dense population concentration of Onitsha both as a business and residential area, has led to the relocation of some markets out of Onitsha to the neighbouring communities. Some of the markets relocated include Electrical Market now in Obosi, Old Motor Parts Market, also in Obosi, New Motor Spare Parts Market now in Nkpor, Building Material Market now in Ogidi, and so on. As a result of these relocations, the population of these communities around the new markets areas has relatively increased because some traders would prefer to reside in locations with close proximity to their business areas, for easier access, and reduction in cost of transportation, both for him and his apprentice (s) as the case may be. Besides, the shift of markets to these communities seemed to have attracted new migrants who are seeking for greener pastures to settle in the said communities. It is a known fact that people who trade in Onitsha markets may reside in places as far as Umunya community, Nteje, Abba and even Abagana community¹³.

The dense concentration of Onitsha town has also given opportunities for the neighbouring communities to develop. Wealthy traders, for want of space, could hardly obtain a virgin land in Onitsha in the recent past because most lands in Onitsha are already sold out. What this means is that the traders and other business owners, who want to develop property are left with no choice but to purchase this property from the neighbouring communities, thereby shifting development to these areas. A case in point is the Nkwelle-Ezunaka community which is currently seen as an extension of Onitsha Government Reserved Area (G.R.A). Real estate business owners have since cashed in on the availability of land in the area and have developed a lot of estates in the area, which has in turn attracted a lot of landlords and tenants alike¹⁴.

In assuming the status of an urban centre, Onitsha has since affected the higher institutions of learning in Anambra State. Due to the higher concentration of people in Onitsha arising from the availability of certain social amenities, some staff of the higher institutions find it convenient to shuttle to and from Onitsha to the centres where they work. For instance, some staff members of Nnamdi Azikiwe University at Awka, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University at Igbariam and Uli Campuses; Nwafor Orizu College of Education at Nsugbe; Federal Polytechnic, Oko; Paul University, Awka and; Federal College of Education (Technical), Umunze, are all known to reside in Onitsha, from where they shuttle to work. On an enquiry as to why they chose to live far away from their places of work,

the researcher was made to understand that these preferences had to do with the presence of the markets in Onitsha. A staff of Federal Polytechnic, Oko, informed the researcher that her husband is a business man at the Ochanja Central Market, and the children all attend schools in Onitsha, and as a result, it was more convenient for her to go to work from Onitsha and return instead of disrupting the lives of the entire family by making them relocate to Oko where it will probably take them more time to settle in¹⁵.

Another staff of Nnamdi Azikiwe University mentioned that aside the fact that her husband is a business man at the Onitsha Main Market, the cost of living is lower in Onitsha than Awka, hence, there is no need to move her entire family to Awka where they will spend more money on the children's tuition fees, house rent and other living expenses¹⁶. It is important to note here that traders' in Awka, and other locations in Anambra state where these higher institutions are located all travel to Onitsha to purchase the goods they sold at their respective markets. In other words, to determine the cost of each commodity, the transportation and other running cost would be added, thereby making the goods more expensive from what could be obtained in Onitsha.

Also, the presence of markets in Onitsha has helped in producing the group of literate traders by reason of the higher institutions of learning located in Anambra State. It is true that there is no presence of Universities, Colleges of Education or Polytechnics in Onitsha, however; these institutions in Anambra state have been greatly influenced by the markets in Onitsha. For one, most students of these higher institutions of learning visit Onitsha for business transactions. As a result, they get acquainted with the market environment. Some of these students after they have left school with no white-collar job in view resort to starting up their own business with the capital raised by their family members. Some of these young graduates were people whose fathers or close relative already had shops at the markets. In view of this, the markets in Onitsha have been saturated with many graduates, who have in turn brought in positive innovations in the running of businesses at the markets¹⁷. Mr. Obinna Izuako, in the course of the field work, confirmed to the researcher that he took over his father's business when he graduated from the university and could not find any white-collar job. Ever since, he has managed and nurtured the business to the point that he now orders goods from China and also makes supplies to other parts of the country¹⁸.

Growth of Town Unions

Town Union represent an association formed by the people of the same town, local government or even district as the case may be. Town Union can also be seen as an agency of the community through which innovations and development purposes are achieved for the community¹⁹. As has already been mentioned, the presence of markets in Onitsha has brought about the cluster of settlers in the town for trade and other forms of livelihood. These people have left their families and friends in their respective towns and villages for Onitsha in search of greener pastures. Faced with the challenges of settling down in an entirely new environment, the settlers have resorted to forming associations of their town's people in the diaspora. Through these associations, the people have been able to bridge the gap between the people who reside at their home towns and the people who reside in Onitsha. Virtually every town is known to have a scheduled meeting day for its town's people who reside in Onitsha. By so doing, social interactions and bonding take place. People from the same town have been able to meet and know themselves, thereby, reducing the hollowness and emptiness that come with living in a foreign land. These associations are also known to support their members who are in need of help. For example, contributions could be made for a member or members whose shops were

guttled by fire disaster or met with other forms of misfortunes their business, to be able to start life afresh. They have also been known to play vital role in fostering development to their hometowns through various support systems²⁰.

Emergence of Elite Groups

The presence of markets in Onitsha has also given rise to the society's categorisation of its people into rankings based on factors like wealth, income, education, family background and power²¹. The families, who reside in Onitsha, have long been classified into different social classes like the upper or wealthy class, the average or middle class and the lower class or the poor within the society. This social classification is determined by how well-off a family is financially able to take care of their financial and material needs, including the number of property and assets they own, the location and type of houses they live in, the number of and type of cars they own, the schools their children or wards are enrolled in, and so on²². It is this social classification that determines one's success in life within the society.

The presence of markets in Onitsha has also given rise to the establishment of social clubs where people of like minds and like social status convene to relax and share ideas. Some of these clubs include the elite club, the peoples club, the Onitsha sports club and others²³. These clubs have over the years being viewed with high importance, and members of the clubs are accorded high regard in the society. Individual who indicates interest in becoming a member of these clubs must meet the social and financial status required by the constitution of the club before his or her admittance. The clubs are also known to attend social events organised by their members. This has over the year promoted social integration amongst people of diverse culture.

Development of Basic Infrastructures

Infrastructure is the collection of systems and facilities that serve as the basis for the economic growth of a country. It includes the services and facilities required for economic development, industrialisation, improved lifestyles and flourishing businesses²⁴. Infrastructures facilitate and accelerate economic development, such that where there are no infrastructures, economic development and growth would be difficult to achieve²⁵. In other words, infrastructure refers to services and facilities that help to uplift economic activities and growth of a country or region by facilitating better productivity. Therefore, physical infrastructure is crucial for a country's economic and social development as it helps to improve the people's quality of life. These include construction of good road network, railways, bridges, tunnels, water supply, sewage, electricity and telecommunications. Such facilities comprise interconnected systems that enable, sustain, or improve society and the environment²⁶.

The Anambra State government, through the presence of markets in Onitsha, has continually ensured the provision of basic infrastructures like roads, electricity, bridges and flyovers, healthcare facilities, school systems, to mention but a few. The presence of these basic infrastructures has gone a long way in improving the living standards of the people who reside in Onitsha and its environs. The major providers of these infrastructures have their offices in Onitsha because of the importance of Onitsha to the economy as made possible by the presence of markets.

Apart from the infrastructures provided by the government in Onitsha, the missions and private individuals have also undertaken the task of providing some of these basic infrastructures themselves.

The Christian missions in Onitsha have since taken upon themselves, the role of establishing all kinds of schools – primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Onitsha and its environs. Some tertiary institutions located in the Onitsha metropolis include: St Charles Borromeo College of Nursing; University on the Niger; Shannahan University; Pope Johnpaul II Major Seminary; National Metallurgical Training Institute; Holy Rosary School of Midwifery; Grace of God Theological College; to mention but a few. These schools have contributed in the advancement of knowledge to the youth within and outside of Onitsha. These institutions have not only become a source of employment to many, but also a source of internally generated revenue for the state.

Hospitals have also been founded by the Christian missions and private individuals in Onitsha. Some of the hospitals include St. Charles Borromeo Specialist Hospital, Holy Rosary Specialist Hospital and Maternity, both owned by the Roman Catholic Mission; New Hope Hospital and Diagnostic Centre; Nigerian Health Specialist Hospital; Leeds Hospital; Toronto Hospital; All Hallows Hospital and Maternity; Arinzechukwu Hospital and Children's Hospital; Bex Memorial Hospital; Gozie Specialist Hospital; Kanayo Specialist Hospital and Maternity; Niger Optical Hospital; Rush Green Hospital; Venik Hospital and so on. These hospitals are all employers of labour and people meet and interact in them²⁷.

Hospital business is also a lucrative one in Onitsha because of the teeming population in Onitsha. They have also been able to glean from the numerous human, financial and material resources in Onitsha, made available by the presence of many markets. With this development, there has been a multiplier effect of these infrastructures on the economy of Anambra State in particular, and Nigeria in general.

Similar to the establishment of hospitals by the Christian missions and private individuals in Onitsha is the establishment of primary and secondary schools in Onitsha. Virtually all the churches in Onitsha own their schools within the church premises; some nursery and primary schools, while others own as much as secondary schools. The number of the private schools owned by private individuals and churches in Onitsha is double the number owned by the government. The churches have been able to found their schools relatively because the presence of markets in Onitsha has resulted in the gathering of more people, whose children would need to be enrolled in schools. As mentioned earlier, the establishments of schools have created employment opportunities for the unemployed youth in the town, while the school owners, on their part make ends meet from the resources generated from the running of the schools. The schools have also benefited from the markets as school uniforms, consumables and other materials are procured from the markets in Onitsha, while the traders in turn patronise the schools by sending their children and wards to acquire the basic knowledge.

Establishment of Religious Institutions

Religion refers to a search for a sacred being within a traditional context such as a formal religious institution²⁸. Religious institutions on the other hand, are institutions that exist to support and manage the practice of a specific set of religious beliefs²⁹. Religious institutions include churches, mosques, temples and other places of worship and institutions that exist to support and manage the practice of a specific set of religious beliefs³⁰. The presence of markets in Onitsha has over the years enhanced the establishment and growth of religious worship centres in Onitsha metropolis. The influx of men and resources into Onitsha as a result of the presence of markets has advanced the establishment of churches and other worship centres as a result of the teeming population who reside in Onitsha. Most

church groups or denominations have either their regional, district, or even national headquarters in Onitsha. The establishment of the regional or district headquarters is informed by the prospect of church growth supported by the presence of men of timber and calibre who reside in Onitsha.

Negative Implications of the existence of Onitsha Markets

Increased Rate of Social Vices

Social vices are caused by complex interactions of psychological, sociological, economic and biological forces that encourage individuals to rebel against societal norms³¹. Social vices include rape, cultism, pilfering, murder, prostitution, indecent dressing, youth restiveness, bribery, kidnapping, child abuse, robbery, occultism, corruption, gambling³², to mention but a few. The presence of markets in Onitsha has attracted the good, the bad and the ugly, to live and do business in the city. A lot of traders, who are under pressure to succeed in business, go as far as entering into occultism, and most times, are required to sacrifice human blood, leading to wanton killing of innocent citizens for money rituals. Some wicked traders, who envy the foot traffic in his or her neighbour's shop, could use diabolic means to detract customers from entering his neighbour's shop. Some go as far as killing the neighbour through diabolic means out of envy³³.

Pilfering is another popular social vice in Onitsha markets. People, who come to the markets to trade, tend to lose their money to these pilferers who often cut open the bags of unsuspecting customer, taking their money and telephones. These customers may not know that they have lost their money and other valuables until they get to the point of payments for their purchased goods. Some pilferers are even in the habit of stealing people's goods. Some of the pilferers stay around the motor parks or bus stops with some bags containing trash, while they target goods of unsuspecting traders worth hundreds of thousands. The unsuspecting customers often lose their goods to this group of pilferers, too. The researcher witnessed, in the course of this study, a scenario where a woman's telephone was taken from her purse without her knowledge and the pilferer would have made away with the telephone if a good Samaritan had not called the attention of the woman. Unfortunately, the traders in the markets know who these thieves are but are reluctant to report them to the appropriate bodies³⁴.

High rate of touting

A tout is any person who solicits business or employment in a persistent and annoying manner³⁵. Touts are popularly known as "*Agberos*" in our setting. A shop tout is someone who is engaged by a shop to loiter outside their office, sometimes outside the building, or outside their competitors' shop. The tout then promotes the services to a passer-by and then escorts the person back to the shop, where they are paid a commission for each person that is brought back³⁶. The use of touts by traders and transport companies are not new in Onitsha. However, the practice has degenerated over the years, to the point that touts go as far as molesting innocent citizens who would rather not patronise them. A case in point are the motor parks in Onitsha; travellers' baggage has been torn and looted by these acclaimed touts, and in severe cases, the travellers clothes have been torn³⁷. These touts have become a menace to the society and they are difficult to curb. The governor of Anambra state Prof Charles Soludo, on his assumption to office as the executive governor of the state, announced the total emancipation of *agberos* from Onitsha and every other part of the state³⁸. This was met with a loud applause from residents of Onitsha, who have suffered unduly from these *agberos*. Sadly, their joy was short-lived as *agberos* disappeared on the roads only for a short while. Presently, the presence of

touts on the streets of Onitsha is overwhelming; and residents live in constant fear of encounter with them.

Congestion of the City

Although, the government of Anambra state and the Onitsha markets union leaders have made some efforts at decongesting the city by relocating some markets out of Onitsha to neighbouring towns, Onitsha has remained congested. Illegal structures have been indiscriminately built in parts of the city without proper approval from the town planning authorities³⁹. Some of these structures are said to have been built on drainage ways, thereby causing blockades of the water channels. This has over the years given rise to erosion in some areas in Onitsha. A typical example of the erosion prone areas is the Nkisi-Aroli area. Erosion has eaten deep into this area to the point that four storey building in the area was swallowed up sometime ago⁴⁰.

The roads leading up to the market areas are also congested by traffic every morning and in the evening during peak hours. On some occasions, all the major roads leading to the markets in Onitsha encounter traffic jams for a whole day. This is due to the fact that the roads leading to the markets are not wide enough. Some of the roads were built as street roads, and therefore, could not cushion the numerous numbers of both commercial and private vehicles plying the road on a daily basis. The heavy traffic often makes some traders lose their customers to other traders probably because the customers got tired of waiting and decided to buy the goods from another trader. Some traders in the bid not to lose their customer have been involved in road accidents that cost them their lives. A typical example is a young boy who was said to be the only son of his parents; he was in a road traffic accident while headed for the Onitsha Main Market where he had a shop on a fateful Monday morning. At the time of the accident, an eyewitness stated, there was a traffic gridlock on the day and his customer kept calling him on the phone. In a bid to get to the market, at all cost to satisfy his customer, he got down from the commercial bus and entered a bike to get to the market faster. Shortly after, the bike rider was involved in an accident, killing the young man on the spot⁴¹. As a result of constant road traffic, some traders have long resorted to taking commercial transport to the markets so that when the traffic becomes unbearable, they could easily alight from the vehicle and walk to their destinations. Hoodlums and miscreants are said to have capitalized on the chaotic traffic situation in Onitsha to unleash mayhem on innocent traders who may have been stocked in traffic. Many traders and passersby have been robbed by miscreants at the points of traffic gridlock.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that the existence of markets in Onitsha have brought about an upward directional movement of the society from lesser to greater levels of efficiency, quality, productivity, choice, mastery, and accomplishment. Through the existence of markets in Onitsha, Onitsha has gradually transcended from a rural to an urban centre. The existence of markets in Onitsha has also brought about development of basic infrastructures; growth of town unions and; emergence of elite groups. Although, there may appear to have some negative effect of the presence of markets in Onitsha, there is no gainsaying the fact that positives outweighs the negatives. On that note, the paper recommend that the government and policy makers should devise a way of totally eradicating the menace of social vices and the presence of touts, or at least reduce to the barest minimum.

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