

THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE OHU MALIKI IN OKENE TOWN, KOGI STATE, 1917-2020

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Abstract

This study examines the emergence and development of Ohu Maliki from 1917 to 2020, tracing its historical evolution within the socio-economic and cultural landscape of Okene Town. The research investigates the factors that led to the establishment of the market, its growth over time, and its role in shaping commercial activities and social relations in the area. Using historical research methods, data were collected from both primary and secondary sources, including oral interviews, archival materials, books, journals, and relevant documents. The study reveals that Ohu Maliki emerged as a response to the growing commercial needs of the local population and gradually developed into one of the most important market centres in the region. It further demonstrates how colonial policies, population growth, transportation networks, and indigenous entrepreneurial activities contributed to the market's expansion. The research also highlights the challenges faced by the market, including infrastructural deficiencies, economic fluctuations, and changing patterns of trade. Despite these challenges, Ohu Maliki has remained a vital institution that promotes economic exchange, social interaction, and community development. The study concludes that the history of Ohu Maliki reflects broader processes of economic transformation and urban growth in Okene Town. It therefore contributes to the understanding of local market institutions and their significance in the historical development of communities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ohu Maliki, Okene Town, Market History, Economic Development, Trade, Community Development.

Introduction

Market activities have long been central to the socio-economic life of the peoples who now constitute Nigeria, from the Pre-colonial era through the period of colonial rule and into the post-colonial period. It has served as one of the most important aspects of social relation among people

of various communities that made up the country.¹ *Ohu* in this study refers to market which connotes an authorised public place of buyers and sellers of commodities meeting at a place more or less strictly limited or defined at an appointed time. The contribution of market to any given society cannot be ignored or understated. It is a man-made feature in any environment one finds themselves and the size of the market depends on the status of that place.

Okene town which is located in Kogi Central and is one of the most populous and economically vibrant towns in Kogi State. It is predominantly inhabited by the Ebira ethnic group known for their industriousness, rich cultural heritage and strong community networks.² Within this socio-economic setting, *Ohu Maliki* serves as a major hub for commercial activity. It is one of the oldest and most active markets in the town attracting traders and buyers from nearby villages and towns across.

This research examines the *Ohu Maliki's* Emergence, Organisation, Evolution and Economic Significance. Beginning as a modest barter-driven gathering, it evolved into a central trading hub shaped by Ebira social systems and external forces such as colonial policies. The following sections explore its origin story, including various names and founding figures the traditional leadership model, structural changes over time, colonial interference and modes of commerce. Through a focused lens on trade articles and market mechanics, this research demonstrates the market's transformation from a grassroots institution to a pivotal socio-economic and cultural centre.

Conceptual Clarifications

The need for conceptual clarification at the outset of any study needs not be over-looked. In historical enquiry, it is fundamental to provide clarifications for the basic concepts that form the framework of the study. For a better understanding of the subject matter, it is of great importance to clarify the most relevant concepts of this study. The concepts that need clarification under this section are: Market, Trade and Exchange.

Market

In economics, a market is any arrangement that allows buyers and sellers to come together to trade goods and services, guided by the forces of supply and demand.³ As a concept, market is a gathering of people for the purchase and sale of merchandise at a set time, often periodic.⁴ A market is likewise referred to as a city square or other fairly spacious site where traders set up stalls and buyers browse the merchandise.⁵

¹ Udama Joseph Vincent, "Markets and market system in Ankpa Local Government Area of Kogi State: A Historical Evaluation" *Dutsin-ma Historical Review*, 2, no.1, (2010):207.

² Interview with Onyi Inda, 43 years, trader, interviewed in Okene on 12th December, 2024.

³ Mankiw, N. G. *Principles of Economics* (Ohio: Cengage Learning, 2014)

⁴ Stigler, G. J. "The Economics of Information", *The Journal of Political Economy*, 1961, 69(3): 213–225

⁵ Marshall, A *Principles of Economics* (London: Macmillan, 1890)

To Hopkins market is a network of producers, distributors, and consumers whose interactions are linked through systems of exchange, transportation, negotiation, and credit. He notes that African markets developed long-distance networks, complex currencies such as cowries and metal rods, and sophisticated bargaining traditions long before colonialism.⁶

Polanyi conceptualises market as an embedded economic institution whose operations are governed not only by price but also by kinship, social obligations, religion, and political structures. He argues that in pre-industrial societies, markets are not autonomous forces. They are integrated into the social fabric, shaped by customs and communal values rather than abstract price competition.⁷

Samuelson and Nordhaus conceptualise market as the institutional arrangement that allows buyers and sellers to interact, negotiate prices, and exchange goods and services. According to them, markets operate through price mechanisms, enabling resources to be allocated efficiently while reflecting the forces of supply and demand.⁸

Bohannon and Dalton describe a market as a culturally defined social institution where periodic or continuous exchanges occur according to recognised norms, values, and social obligations. In African societies, they argue, markets function not merely as economic venues but as social spaces that reinforce communal identity and moral expectations.⁹ Ibrahim Usman views market as an essential part for the development of any town as they enable cities to realise their industrial and agricultural potentialities.¹⁰ Markets are very important in the economic life of communities; they enable people to obtain their daily needs without having to travel to long distances.

Kotler defines a market as all the actual and potential buyers of a product or service, whose desires and purchasing power collectively shape the exchange process. He emphasises that a market is not merely a physical location but a conceptual space where demand is formed, expressed, and satisfied. Markets therefore exist wherever buyers and sellers are connected by the desire to exchange value, whether face-to-face or across distance.¹¹

Trade

Trade is another concept that needs clarification. Trade refers to the exchange of goods and services between buyers and sellers. It is one of the fundamental components of economic activity which revolves around the evolution of markets, both formal and informal. Within the market,

⁶ A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*. (London: Longman, 1973)

⁷ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944.)

⁸ Bohannon Paul and George Dalton, eds. *Markets in Africa*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962)

⁹ Toyin Falola, "Trade and Markets in Pre-Colonial Economy" in G.O Ogunremi and E.K Faluyi (eds.), *Economic History of West Africa*, (Ibadan: Rex Charles Publication in Association with Connel Publication, 1996)

¹⁰ Paul Kigbu "Changing Pattern of Trade and Market Centres in Eggon Area 1900-2015" (A PhD Thesis Submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, Federal University of Lafia, 2025), 12

¹¹ Kotler, Philip. *Marketing Management*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

trade serves as the operational factor through which economic values are transferred and needs are likewise met while markets serve as the physical environment where trade takes place.

According to Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, the propensity to trade, barter and exchange is intrinsic to human behavior¹² and markets are the arenas that facilitate such exchanges. To him, trade is not only about buying and selling, it is about mutual benefit. When people trade, both parties expect to gain something of value, which leads to cooperation and economic growth. In pre-colonial African societies, trade was central to development of complex economies and social structures. Markets provided spaces for inter-ethnic exchange, redistribution of surplus and the establishment of trade routes.¹³ Trade in the context of a market such as Ohu Maliki is not merely an economic function but a multi-dimensional activity that reflects the intersection of economy, society and culture. It plays a central role in sustaining livelihoods and facilitating intergroup relations.

According to Baumol and Blinder,¹⁴ trade is a win-win situation for both the seller and buyer. They both gain something during the trade. Dike sees trade as an act of buying and selling of commodities which is usually accompanied by the contact of cultures, the exchange of ideas, the mingling of people and capable of minimising political instability and wars.¹⁵ He further argued that trade with the Arabs through the Saharan desert, brought medieval West Africa in touch with Islamic world and Islam brought Arab culture and civilisation into Africa. From this view of trade, it is important to state that products from Ohu Maliki area such as agricultural products, blacksmithing were exchanged with their neighbors on one hand and traders on the other hand through the use of trade. The study therefore sees trade as not only the buying and selling of goods and services but also involves intra and inter cultural exchanges that goes on to foster peaceful relations among various groups. The researcher adopts Dike's concept on trade as working definition for this study.

According to Paul Samuelson and William Nordhaus, trade is "the organised activity through which goods and services move from producers to consumers, whether domestically or across borders." This emphasises organisation, institutions, and movement, making it relevant for analysing structured pre-colonial trading systems, weekly markets, guilds, and long-distance caravans,¹⁶

¹² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and causes of the wealth of Nations* (London: Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776)

¹³ Toyin Falola, "African Pre-colonial domestic economy" in J.D Atanda and B.A Agiri (eds.), *Tarikh: An introduction to the economic history of pre-colonial Africa* (Nigeria: Longman Nigeria plc, 18).

¹⁴ William. Baumol and Alan.S. Blinder, *Economic Principles and policy* (USA: Thomson Higher Education, 2006), 5

¹⁵ K.O Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger-Delta 1830-1855: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 1954), 5.

¹⁶ Samuelson Paul and William. Nordhaus. *Economics*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

Exchange

Exchange can be defined as the process in which goods and services are transferred from one party to another, which is usually based on agreement. In respect to market, exchange is not only a transactional act but also a reflection of broader social, cultural and economic relationship. In classical economic theory, Adam Smith spoke on the human tendency to engage in exchange is from self-interest and specialisation.¹⁷ As individuals on different aspect of economy like fishing, farming etc., they likewise depend on exchange of other goods which they do not produce themselves. This type of specialisation gives rise to market structure, which brings about exchange between buyers and sellers.

Exchange in markets like Ohu Maliki sustains not only individuals but foster community cohesion. Goods are exchanged not only food and clothing's but also culturally significant items like Kolanut, Beneseeds, Traditional beads, locally crafted wears all of which form traditional identity.

Marcel Mauss defines exchange as “the system of giving, receiving, and reciprocating goods or obligations that binds individuals and groups together. Mauss emphasises that exchange is not only economic but also social, making this definition especially useful for pre-colonial African markets where trade was embedded in kinship, religion, reciprocity, and social obligations.”¹⁸

Samuelson and Nordhaus describe exchange as “the act of trading goods and services between individuals or organisations, typically facilitated by price signals in a market system.” This definition captures economic exchange, price determination, and market behavior, useful for explaining how value was assigned in traditional markets.¹⁹

Origin of the Ohu Maliki

Prior to the institutionalisation of the Ohu Maliki, economic life in Ebira land was organised around subsistence farming and barter exchange. Ebira communities were scattered, and the low population density limited the emergence of a central trading venue. Exchanges of agricultural produce, poultry and local crafts occurred sporadically and informally. Goods were traded directly from farmsteads or along narrow bush paths that connected neighbouring compounds. Without a coordinated commercial space, market transactions were limited in both volume and social interaction. The practice reflected the agrarian nature of the society and the limited infrastructure for mass trade. Anthropologists such as Paul Bohannan argue that in such settings, markets are not only venues of trade but of cultural transmission.²⁰ Hence, the lack of a market did not imply

¹⁷ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

¹⁸ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by Ian Cunnison. (London: Cohen and West, 1966)

¹⁹ Samuelson Paul and William D. Nordhaus. *Economics*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

²⁰ Paul Bohannan and George Dalton, *Markets in Africa* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1962), 9–11.

economic isolation, but rather a different structure of communal exchange that predated centralised markets.

According to Oral tradition and local informants, the actual establishment of Ohu Maliki can be credited to Inya Akinori, a woman from the well-known Ogu Clan in Okene. Oral interview with Mr. S.I. Bello confirms that Akinori's vision was to bring scattered farmers together to sell their produce in a single, accessible location.²¹ The market began modestly near the present-day poultry section, where villagers gathered to trade Yams, Maize, Vegetables and Livestock in the early mornings and late evenings. This schedule was adjusted to suit the routine of farmers, who worked their fields during the day. It is informative note here that, Akinori's pioneering role challenges male-centric historical narratives and affirms the central place of Women in African trade history. Scholars like Gracia Clark document similar patterns across West Africa, where market women wield economic and political influence.²² Thus, Ohu Maliki's origin is both a socio-economic and gendered milestone in Ebira history.

The naming of the market reveals an intersection of linguistic evolution and cultural memory. While it is commonly called Ohu Maliki, some locals pronounce it "*Ohu Variki*," a variation attributed to tongue-twisting tendencies in Ebira speech.²³ This shift illustrates the flexibility and fluidity of oral language traditions in Africa, where sound changes often alter the historical phonetics of place names. The name "Maliki" also bear Islamic undertones. Thus, the market's dual nomenclature mirrors the broader Ebira ability to blend tradition with innovation. It also preserves cultural memory across generations, with older speakers preferring "Maliki" and younger ones opting for "Variki."

The formalisation of the market into a permanent institution occurred under Attah Ibrahim Onoruoiza in the early 20th century. The Attah designated a virgin tract of land directly behind his palace for market use. Oral sources state that a footpath was created linking the palace gate directly to the market entrance, reinforcing the cultural connection between traditional authority and commerce. He then decided to name the Market after his first son, Abdulmalik. Who unfortunately died when the Attah was still in throne. This follows a broader historical trend seen in West African polities, where central markets were often positioned close to royal compounds. The proximity allowed for regulatory oversight, ensured order during transactions, and solidified the ruler's role as the guarantor of economic stability. Over time, the small trading site expanded due to increased participation and population growth. As the need for space grew, the market extended to the road, forming the nucleus of Okene's commercial life.

Spiritual beliefs and ritual cleansing were also integral to the foundation and continuity of Ohu Maliki. Oral accounts from Onyi Adeiza, indicate that ritual purification was performed

²¹ Interview with S.I. Bello, 47 years, Chairman of Ebira Trader Union, Interviewed in Okene on 3rd July, 2025.

²² Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 52–54.

²³ Interview with Alhaji Musa Abere, 49 years, Community Elder, Interviewed in Okene on 5th July, 2025.

periodically, especially after incidents considered spiritually defiling.²⁴ For instance, when a corpse was found at Ohu Manaka (a sister market), market activity was suspended until cleansing rites were completed. The chief priest, known as *Ohireba*, supervised these rituals by consulting with deities and performing sacrifices at designated points within the market.²⁵ These rites were believed to purify the environment and ensure prosperity, safety and communal harmony. Although the rise of Islam and Christianity has reduced the prominence of these practices, they remain symbolically significant, especially during major cultural festivals. The *Ohireba* still appears at traditional events, maintaining continuity with Ebira spiritual heritage.

Organisational Structure of the Ohu Maliki

The Organisational structure of Ohu Maliki evolved significantly between the Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial periods, reflecting the broader transformations that Ebira society underwent during these three eras.

Pre-Colonial Period

In pre-colonial days, the market was focused primarily along indigenous social and political organisations firmly rooted in communal traditions, kinship, and the authority of the local ruler. The Attah, as the supreme traditional ruler of the Ebira people, had absolute control over the market, although actual management of trading activities was entrusted to officials appointed under his command. These market officials, often painted in local descriptions as guardians of the market, were responsible for making sure trading activities went on uninterrupted, conflicts were settled fairly, and the market environment was kept in an organised state.²⁶

In the pre-colonial setting, the market plan in Ohu Maliki was not in conformity with modern planning activities in relation to the creation of market spaces but was informed by local forms of knowledge. This reflected the activities of merchants and consumers in the market as well as the community of Ebira. In Ohu Maliki, despite the lack of written and planned market layouts or market boundaries, there was market zoning that defined efficiency and harmony in the market.²⁷ The layout of the market was mainly centered on the nature of the products that were being sold. Vendors handling similar products were grouped alongside designated market sections.²⁸ Agricultural products like yam, cassava, maize, millet, and vegetables were located in the market areas that were easily accessible since these products attracted more buyers and were the backbone of the economy of the area. Animals were sold at the external periphery of the market layout for

²⁴ Interview with Onyi Adeiza, b.1978, Trader, Interviewed in Okene on 6th July, 2025.

²⁵ interview with Onyi Adeiza, Trader.

²⁶ Interview with Adayi Onotu, 63 years, Retired Civil Servant, Interviewed in Okene on 20th July, 2025

²⁷ Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and former member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July,2025

²⁸ Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and former member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July,2025

hygiene reasons, while artisans, blacksmiths, potters, and cloth vendors were located in market sections that gave them room for effective display of their products.²⁹

This type of functional zoning had various functions. Firstly, it optimized transaction processing by ensuring that consumers quickly found what they wanted without roaming the market unnecessarily. This led to decreased conflict because there was no competitive use of market space by different merchants selling different commodities.³⁰ This type of zoning promoted cultural identities because different families/lineages were identified with different occupations at the market.

Customary levies were occasionally collected on behalf of the Attah, but these were symbolic rather than standardised, representing loyalty and the communal nature of the market rather than functioning as strict taxes. The pre-colonial organisational structure of Ohu Maliki was therefore communal, kinship-based, and anchored in traditional authority, with age-grade institutions and women's networks forming essential pillars of its operation.³¹ The creation of the age-grade associations, known locally as *Ozoku*³², which acted as regulators and disciplinarians of community discipline. These bands of young men contributed physically to the upkeep of the market and ensured security while also enforcing codes of conduct among consumers and vendors. Besides, the distribution of huts and trading space aligned with kinship and lineage connections, so that families-maintained continuity and access to specific trading areas over generations. Gender was also significant in structuring this organisation, as women dominated selling foodstuffs and local household items, with men tending to handle larger transactions in Livestock, Tools, or Cloth. Women's informal networks were vessels of collaboration and control, supporting fairness in exchange and offering support to other members of their group.³³

The Ohu Maliki usually took place on market days, which were usually organized in line with a cyclical pattern rather than on a daily basis. The market days were standardized and known to all in the Okene area and other neighboring settlements. The market days were also organized on a timeline that gave farmers and artisans an opportunity to produce the goods, travel from the rural villages, and attend to the agricultural duties. The selection of market days had a direct connection with agricultural cycles.³⁴ Peak market days happened to be during harvest periods when surplus agricultural produce was ready to be traded. Whenever planting times arrived, fewer market days occurred due to the high priority given to agricultural work. This ensured that the market did not

²⁹ Interview with Mrs. Raliat Salami, 43 years, Textile Vendor, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 8th July, 2025.

³⁰ Interview with Mrs. Raliat Salami, 43 years, Textile Vendor

³¹ Interview with Adayi Onotu

³² Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and former member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July, 2025

³³ Interview with Mrs. Raliat Salami, 43 years, Textile Vendor, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 8th July, 2025

³⁴ Interview with Adayi Onotu, 63 years, Retired Civil Servant, Interviewed in Okene on 20th July, 2025

interfere with subsistence agriculture but rather supplemented it. Subsistence agriculture was the backbone of the Ebira economy.

Each day in the market had its activities organized in an arranged daily program. There was trading early in the day when the produce was fresh, coupled with heavy traffic from the buyers. There was the peak time during the noon hours, which was the time for heavy business, characterized by heavy bargaining, interactions, and mobility from one business center to another.³⁵ Late in the day, businesses gradually reduced as the sellers prepared to go back to their places before the night sets in. The daily activities in the market were organized in a planned daily program. There was trading in the early morning hours while the produce was still fresh, accompanied by high traffic generated by the presence of the buyers. There was the peak time in the middle of the day, which was the time for conducting business, accompanied by high levels of bargaining, social interaction, as well as high mobility from one business center to another.³⁶ Later in the day, the business activities were slowing down as the sellers were preparing to return to their stations before the night fell.

Colonial Period

The Colonial Period introduced significant changes to this indigenous structure. With the establishment of British authority in the early 20th century, the market was drawn into the orbit of colonial economic and administrative systems. Under indirect rule, the Attah and his council were retained as nominal custodians of the market, but their authority was now subordinated to colonial officials.³⁷ Market organisation increasingly revolved around revenue collection, as Ohu Maliki was transformed into a strategic site for the imposition of stall fees, daily levies, and other taxes. The revenues collected were channeled through the native authority into the colonial treasury, making the market an important fiscal tool for the British administration.

To implement this system, there were new administrative offices created. The daily running of the market was left to market masters, who were generally loyal to the local authority but were tolerated by colonial officers. They were supported by clerks, and these introduced a bureaucratic element into market life through the written recording of dues, stalls, and transactions. This was a major departure from the earlier oral and communal system. The colonial state also introduced security arrangements in the form of native authority police, whose presence came to dominate more disciplinary functions of the age-grade associations. Ohu Maliki became more deeply linked to external trade networks. The expansion of road infrastructure and the colonial export economy meant that traders from other ethnic groups like Edo, Hausa, Nupe, and Igala became more prominent in the market. This increased diversity added layers of complexity to the organisational

³⁵Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and former member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July, 2025

³⁶Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and former member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July, 2025

³⁷ Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years....

structure, as the Native Authority had to balance indigenous priorities with the demands of migrant traders and colonial economic policy.

Trade itself was structured to meet colonial needs, particularly the transportation of Cash crops like cotton and groundnuts, which were directed to designated depots linked with regional and export markets. These measures restricted the scope of action of local business people in some sectors but left foodstuff trade, which was women-dominated, relatively unaffected.³⁸

Post Colonial Period

The administrative structure of the Ohu Maliki became hierarchical and rooted in customary practice, led by the *Oga Ohu* (Market Leader), who serves as the chief executive officer. He is appointed by the traders' union, not through electoral processes but via consensus built on loyalty, long-term contribution and demonstrated leadership within the market community. This process, as explained by Mallam Audu Otaru during an interview, often considers one's active participation in market affairs, including conflict resolution and sanitation drives.³⁹ The tenure of the *Oga Ohu* is undefined, varying between four and eight years depending on traders' satisfaction and union agreements. His role includes convening market meetings, liaising with local authorities, approving infrastructural changes and overseeing internal disciplinary measures. Discussions and major decisions are deliberated in a committee before implementation, reinforcing collective ownership of the market. The *Oga Ohu* also holds symbolic value, functioning as a cultural custodian, especially during communal events.

The *Onyi Ohu* (Women Leader) occupies a pivotal position as both a deputy and representative of female traders, especially in decisions that concern their welfare, hygiene or stall allocations. She steps into leadership in the absence of the *Oga Ohu*, but all significant actions must still receive his consent.⁴⁰ She works to resolve disputes among women, often involving market sanitation or price control, before escalating them to the central leadership. This role reflects the high presence and economic relevance of women in the market and mirrors similar gender-specific leadership structures found in other Nigerian traditional markets, as examined by Gracia Clark in her work on West African market systems.⁴¹ The position is often filled through communal trust and not imposed, allowing continuity of gendered representation in leadership.

Administrative duties are coordinated by the *Ocherisa Ohu* (Secretary), who may be either male or female. The secretary ensures proper documentation of market affairs, including minutes from meetings, stall allocations and trader registry. This role requires competence in basic literacy and recordkeeping, which is often developed through community apprenticeship or formal education.

³⁸ Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and former member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July, 2025

³⁹ Interview with Mallam Audu Otaru, 60 years, Retired Trader and Former Member of the Ebira Traders' Union, Interviewed in Okene on 7th July, 2025.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mrs. Raliat Salami, 43 years, Textile Vendor, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 8th July, 2025.

⁴¹ Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 102–107.

The secretary's work provides institutional memory, ensuring continuity even when leadership changes. In parallel, the *Odoreika* (Public Relations Officer) manages both internal messaging and external communication with stakeholders, including the local government and traditional rulers. He or she sends meeting notices, disseminates information about market schedules, and relays updates on health or safety issues. Oral interviews with Mr. John Ehizojie revealed that modern tools such as loudspeakers and WhatsApp groups are now employed alongside traditional town criers.⁴² These roles sustain operational clarity and ensure that no trader is left uninformed.

Revenue generation is the responsibility of designated revenue agents, who are tasked with collecting monthly dues from all traders: ₦500 for security and ₦200 for welfare. These fees support market sanitation, security guards and minor infrastructural repairs.⁴³ In addition, the Peace and Reconciliation Committee, which mediates trader disputes, imposes fines that further contribute to market revenue. These agents operate under the supervision of the traders' union and are required to issue receipts, promoting transparency. This financial structure fosters autonomy and reduces dependence on external funding.

The final element of the market's organisational structure is its spiritual dimension, symbolized by the *Ohireba* who is the chief priest responsible for ritual cleansing. While his role has declined due to the influence of Islam and Christianity, he still performs symbolic rituals during major festivals or after unusual events such as a death in the market. Sacrifices and spiritual consultations are sometimes required to cleanse or bless the market, especially before the Ekuechi festival. These rituals are believed to ward off misfortune and ensure prosperity. Though controversial among younger, more religiously conservative traders, the spiritual presence of the *Ohireba* remains respected by many elders. This aspect of market administration underscores the Ebiraland worldview, in which commerce, community, and spirituality are inextricably linked. Thus, the market is not merely an economic space but a socio-cultural arena where material and spiritual order must be maintained in harmony

Development of the Ohu Maliki

The development of Ohu Maliki reflects the broader socio-economic evolution of Okene society. Initially operating as an informal gathering of farmers exchanging goods on open land, the market's earliest phase mirrored the subsistence economy of the Ebiraland people. With population growth and increasing trade, rudimentary huts made from local materials were introduced to shelter goods and traders. As trade intensified, zinc-roofed stalls replaced these temporary shelters, creating a semi-permanent architecture that encouraged continuous commercial activity. According to market elder Mallam Yusuf Adeiza, "We once used thatched covers and mats to shield our goods from sun and rain but what you see today grew from our needs."⁴⁴ This transition marked the beginning of Ohu Maliki's transformation from a subsistence market to a semi-urban

⁴² Interview with Mr. John Ehizojie, 48 years, Current *Odoreika*, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 8th July, 2025.

⁴³ Interview with Hajjiya Zuwaira Yakubu, 40 years, Revenue Officer, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki on 9th July, 2025.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mallam Yusuf Adeiza, 73 years, Market Elder, Interviewed in Okene on 13th June, 2025.

commercial hub. The gradual building of infrastructure was driven by trader initiatives rather than government intervention, reflecting communal determination.

The market's sectionalisation emerged as goods diversified and the number of traders increased. Over time, stalls were allocated based on commodity types such as Grains, Vegetables, Livestock, Textiles and processed goods each gained dedicated spaces. This structure not only improved efficiency but also enhanced buyer experience, as customers could find goods quickly within specialised zones. The spread of economic specialisation in Okene, particularly in agriculture and crafts, made sectionalisation a necessity rather than an option. Nonetheless, this evolution allowed the market to maintain economic relevance while retaining traditional structures such as age-based trade groups and clan-based trader affiliations. During the pre-colonial days, the market space was small and there was no diversification of goods like in recent times. What was majorly obtainable during the pre-colonial days were agricultural products that was done through the barter system and later cowries helped in making an improving in the system.⁴⁵

A notable advancement in the Post Colonial Period is the introduction of infrastructural upgrades, especially in Road networks. Previously, poor drainage and dust from unpaved roads hindered both access and comfort. The rainy season rendered the market muddy and impassable, while harmattan covered stalls in thick layers of dust. Community associations, such as the Ebira Traders Union, partnered with local government officials to pave parts of the internal road network,⁴⁶ improving trade flows and sanitation.⁴⁷ These infrastructural efforts also included the installation of waste bins and clearing systems to maintain market hygiene, reflecting a shift toward public health awareness. Sanitation has since become a major priority, especially after concerns over foodborne illnesses prompted organised sanitation days. While gaps remain in funding and execution, the push for cleaner, accessible trading environments marks an important phase in Ohu Maliki's modernisation journey.

The inclusion of processed goods and imported items also marked a significant phase of economic diversification. With globalisation and increased consumer demands, Ohu Maliki expanded from trading only local agricultural products to hosting wholesalers and suppliers of factory-produced goods. These include beverages, toiletries, canned foods and clothing of which many are imported from Lagos, Onitsha and even abroad. Traders such as Madam Rukayat Owuda noted, "People now come here expecting to find the same brands they see on television, we must meet that demand or lose customers."⁴⁸ This shift reflects changing consumer behaviour influenced by media exposure and rural-urban linkages. Moreover, the sale of Ebira indigenous crafts such as *Itinochi* (hand-woven cloth) alongside imported textiles shows a dual economy in play.

⁴⁵ Interview with Mallam Yusuf Adeiza, 53 years, Market Elder

⁴⁶ Interview with Mrs. Maimuna Omeiza, b.1988, Secretary for Ohu Maliki, Interviewed in Okene on 13th June, 2025

⁴⁷ Interview with Mrs. Maimuna Omeiza, 37 years, Secretary for Ohu Maliki, Interviewed in Okene on 13th June, 2025.

⁴⁸ Interview with Madam Rukayat Owuda, 36 years, Textile Trader, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki on 14th June, 2025.

Colonialism and Its Impact on the Ohu Maliki

The arrival of British colonial rule in Ebiraland during the early 20th century fundamentally altered the socio-economic fabric of the Ohu Maliki, transforming it from a community-driven trading hub into an institution integrated into the colonial economic framework. This transformation began with the British conquest of Ebiraland in 1903, led by Major Marsh, whose punitive invasion employed superior firepower, including maxim-guns, to overpower the Ebira's traditional weapons like bows and arrows.⁴⁹ Consequently, the violent subjugation of key towns such as Okene, Ihima, and Obangade disrupted local autonomy, including the market's traditional governance, setting the stage for significant administrative and economic changes.

As a result of this conquest, the British introduced a system of indirect rule, which centralised authority and disrupted the Ebira's pre-colonial segmentary political structure, characterised by autonomous clan-group priest-chiefs (Ohinoyi-ete) who governed through consultation with clan elders.⁵⁰ In 1917, the appointment of Attah Ibrahim Onoruoiza as the District Head of Ebira Native Authority marked a pivotal shift, as he became a loyal intermediary enforcing colonial policies.⁵¹ This centralisation impacted the Ohu Maliki by subordinating the traditional market leader, the Oga Ohu, to colonial oversight, reducing their autonomy. Historian Toyin Falola argues that such colonial reconfiguration often eroded the indigenous logic of African institutions to prioritise British economic goals.⁵² Thus, the market's governance shifted from communal consensus to a hierarchical model aligned with colonial objectives.

Moreover, the introduction of formal taxation in 1909 further reshaped the market's economic landscape, requiring traders to pay levies in British sterling for stalls, security, and transported goods. This policy, perceived as exploitative, sparked significant resistance among traders unaccustomed to such fiscal demands. According to Aiyedogbon the people were forced to pay taxes on every item, even when they barely making profit.⁵³ These taxes, justified by the colonial government as funding for public goods like roads and sanitation, primarily served to extract resources for the colonial administration, shifting the market from a barter-based system to one driven by cash transactions. Consequently, this economic shift disrupted the communal exchange system, aligning Ohu Maliki with colonial priorities of capital accumulation.

In addition to fiscal changes, the British construction of road networks, such as the A123 highway connecting Lokoja and Auchi, enhanced the market's accessibility, fostering interethnic commerce with Yoruba, Nupe and Hausa traders. This infrastructure development aligned with the broader British strategy of opening the interior to secure a steady supply of raw materials, as

⁴⁹ A. A. Okene, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Ebiraland 1886-1917 A.D.," *Kano Studies New Series*, no. 1 (2000), 25.

⁵⁰ Okene, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Ebiraland 1886-1917 A.D.," 20.

⁵¹ Okene, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Ebiraland 1886-1917 A.D.," 33.

⁵² Toyin Falola, *Economic Reforms and Modernisation in Nigeria, 1945-1965* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2004), 88.

⁵³ Interview with Alhaji Sule, 63 years, Retired Trader and Market elder, Interviewed in Okene on 14th June, 2025.

evidenced by the establishment of a fort in Kabba to protect trade routes.⁵⁴ While these roads increased the volume and variety of goods such as palm oil, cotton and benniseed available at Ohu Maliki, they also enabled closer colonial monitoring, integrating the market into broader trade networks. However, this expansion introduced dependency on external supplies, challenging the market's reliance on indigenous produce like yams, maize and Itinochi cloth.

Furthermore, the colonial imposition of licensing systems formalised market participation, requiring traders to obtain permits often issued in English or Hausa, which marginalised Ebara traders lacking formal education or language proficiency. This policy created a stratified market, empowering literate or externally connected traders while disempowering grassroots participants. Such stratification was exacerbated by the collaboration of local figures like Atta Omadivi, who facilitated the 1903 invasion by providing geographical knowledge and trade connections with the Royal Niger Company.⁵⁵ Conversely, anti-British elements like Achegido Okino viewed such collaboration as betrayal, deepening social divisions within the market community. As a result, the Oga Ohu's role evolved into that of a bureaucratic intermediary, compromising the market's egalitarian foundation.

Despite these disruptions, Ebara resistance persisted, influencing the market's operations. For instance, the Okene riot of 1913, where locals attacked British escorts and police, and the 1914 tax protests during World War I, when traders believed the British would withdraw, reflect widespread opposition to colonial control.⁵⁶ These acts of defiance delayed the establishment of a fully centralised colonial economy until 1917. At Ohu Maliki, traders resisted taxes through non-compliance, maintaining traditional practices like ritual cleansings by the Ohireba to ensure spiritual harmony. Nevertheless, the permanent stationing of police in Okene from 1915 coerced submission, as the overwhelming presence of security personnel demonstrated British military strength.

Articles of Trade and the Operations of the Market

Ohu Maliki has evolved during the Post colonial days into a major trading hub in Okene, where diverse goods and services are exchanged. It began with local trade in essential commodities and has grown to accommodate a variety of produce, crafts, and industrial goods. Seasonal agricultural outputs like Millet, Guinea Corn, Rice, Groundnut, and Maize constitute the core of trade during harvest periods. At peak supply, prices stabilise; but in lean seasons, costs rise sharply. During festive periods such as Christmas and Sallah, prices also spike due to increased demand. Traders operate under basic economic principles of supply and demand.⁵⁷ According to Mrs. Fatima Musa, a grain seller, "sometimes, a single truck delay can shift prices across the whole market."⁵⁸ This reflects how delicate and responsive the market structure is. As such, fluctuation in supply

⁵⁴ Okene, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Ebiraland 1886-1917 A.D.,"23.

⁵⁵ Okene, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Ebiraland 1886-1917 A.D.,"25.

⁵⁶ Okene, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Ebiraland 1886-1917 A.D.," 28.

⁵⁷ Interview with Mrs. Fatima Musa, 39 years, Grain Trader, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 18th June, 2025.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mrs. Fatima Musa.

significantly shapes price mechanisms. Market participants adapt quickly, using experience and cooperation to stay afloat.

During the pre-colonial period, the objects of exchange were largely locally produced and agricultural products. Farmers in Ebira brought staple food items such as Yam, Guinea Corn, Millet, Maize, and Cassava to the market, along with Vegetables, Palm products, and Fruits while hunters brought Bush Meat, Animal hides, and other forest items. Iron smelting, which was a significant Ebira craft, produced tools such as hoes, cutlasses, knives, and arrowheads, which were exchanged for food and clothing.⁵⁹ Woven cloth, mats, pottery, and Ebira beads also formed an important part of the market economy during the pre-colonial days. The British restructured articles of trade found in the Ohu Maliki as there the colonial emphasis on Cash Crop production brought palm oil and palm kernels to the fore. These items were in high demand by colonial merchants, who exported them for industrial use in Europe. Cotton, introduced more systematically during this period, also gained importance as both a local and export commodity.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in the market's supply chain. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and inter-state bans created sharp declines in availability and significant price inflation. The cost of staple foods like rice and beans nearly doubled with a Mudu of rice went from ₦2,000 to ₦3,800, while beans climbed similarly. Local farmers were unable to move produce freely, and imported goods became scarce.⁶⁰ This disruption led some traders to stockpile ahead of announcements, while others formed small cooperatives to share transport costs. Though the market eventually recovered, the lessons from the pandemic still inform how traders operate today. Supply instability, once seasonal, is now approached as a recurring challenge. During the pre-colonial days, transactions in Ohu Maliki, like elsewhere, were dominated by barter exchange and sometimes by the use of cowries as mediums of exchange. Because of this, prices were not fixed in the way we understand them today, they were relative and often based on negotiation, supply, demand, and seasonality.⁶¹

The market's internal structure is divided into commercial zones for Grains, Perishable goods, Textiles and Crafts. Grain merchants primarily sell Maize, Guinea corn, Rice, Millet and Beans, sourced from local and northern farms. Major suppliers come from Okene, Ajaokuta and other central towns, while external sources include Kano, Katsina, Sokoto and Nasarawa. Measurement units such as *mudu* or *tiya* remain standard, although actual weights vary by seller and commodity. Mrs. Hauwa Salihu notes, "one seller's mudu might give you more than another's, but you learn who to trust."⁶² Grains are highly patronised due to their role in daily meals and ceremonies. Pricing is determined not just by volume but by quality and scarcity. Therefore, even slight changes in rainfall or transport costs can cause significant fluctuations. Grain stalls are typically clustered for buyer convenience and supply management.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mr. Isa Okene, 46 years, Rice Trader, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 19th June, 2025

⁶⁰ Interview with Mr. Isa Okene, 46 years, Rice Trader, Interviewed in Ohu Maliki, Okene on 19th June, 2025.

⁶¹ Interview with Mr. Isa Okene, 46 years, Rice Trader

⁶² interview with Mrs. Hauwa Salihu, 57 years, Grains Buyer, Interviewed in Okene on 21st June, 2025.

Perishable goods form another essential trade segment in Ohu Maliki. Tomatoes, onions, okra, leafy vegetables and peppers are common during harvest months, mostly supplied by indigenous Ebira farmers. High-moisture produce is stored in open baskets to allow ventilation, while less perishable items like carrots and green beans are kept in sacks. Meat and fish are preserved using generators and deep freezers. Hausa traders introduce cabbage, peas, and non-native vegetables brought in from Jos, Bauchi, or Kaduna. “We bring what your land does not grow,” says Alhaji Yusuf Aliate, a Hausa produce merchant.⁶³ Perishable goods are not stored for long due to their fragility, and their prices are among the most volatile in the market. Environmental factors such as rainfall, transportation costs, and even fuel availability greatly affect supply chains and pricing stability.

Food items that were easily perishable during the pre-colonial days were preserved either by drying and smoking. Meat and Fish for example, were smoked and sun dried which retains the moisture of the items. Tubers like Yam were stored in barns which was often constructed with wood which helped the tubers to be tied with ropes and kept under shade and reducing it from getting spoilt and rotten. Vegetables, kola nuts, and fruits were often wrapped in banana or plantain leaves to retain freshness, especially when being transported to the market. Liquids like palm oil were stored in calabashes, which provided natural insulation against contamination and heat.⁶⁴

Textile and clothing merchants also thrive within Ohu Maliki, balancing imports with indigenous craftsmanship. Clothes sold in the market range from imported fabrics from Onitsha and Lagos to locally woven *Itinochi*, a traditional Ebira textile. *Itinochi*, produced mainly in Upogoro, carries symbolic colour patterns used in naming ceremonies, marriages and burials. Textile pricing is influenced by source, quantity, and occasion. Imported Ankara and lace vary based on design and scarcity, while *Itinochi* prices depend on the intricacy of weaving. The textile section of the market also includes tailors and cloth merchants who create custom outfits for ceremonies. As such, this part of the market supports both cultural identity and economic sustainability.

Apart from goods, Ohu Maliki hosts skilled artisans and service providers, enhancing its economic diversity. Carpenters, Welders, Tailors, Shoemakers, and Electricians operate from fixed and mobile workspaces scattered across strategic sections. These professionals not only serve customers on-site but also supply materials to local households and construction projects. This underscores the multifunctional role of the market in local livelihoods. Moreover, services like hairdressing, electronics repairs, and mobile phone sales have grown in recent years. The inclusion of these non-traditional trades has further broadened Ohu Maliki’s commercial relevance.

⁶³ Oral interview with Alhaji Yusuf Aliate, 43 years, Vegetable Seller, Interviewed in Okene on 21st June, 2025.

⁶⁴ Interview with Mrs. Hauwa Salihu, 57 years, Grains Buyer, Interviewed in Okene on 21st June, 2025

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the emergence of Ohu Maliki in Okene town, Kogi state and how the Ohu Maliki has undergone various stages that has shaped its growth till recent time. Since its establishment, Ohu Maliki has been a driving force in the social and economic development of Okene Town. It has facilitated the exchange of agricultural goods and become a center for economic activity, attracting traders and shoppers from various regions. The market's growth has created jobs, boosted local businesses, and spurred infrastructure development, transforming Okene Town into a vibrant economic hub.

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3	Hauwa Salihu	Grain Buyer	57 years	Okene	21 st June, 2025
4	Onyi Inda	Trader	49 years	Okene	12 th December, 2024
5	Rukayat Owuda	Textile Trader	36 years	Okene	14 th June, 2025
6	Yusuf Aliate	Vegetable Seller	53 years	Okene	21 st June, 2025

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