

THE ETHNIC SETTING IN NIGERIA BEFORE 1800; A CASE STUDY OF TRADE AND WAR AS A MEANS OF INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN PRECOLONIAL NIGERIA.

The Nigerian area before 1800 contained great **empires, kingdoms, and states** which early African historians have been able to classify into two broad groups; **centralized and decentralized states**. All the tribes were so diverse but yet had so much in common, both great and small contributed to the progress of each other.¹ The peoples of the Nigerian area go way back historically and with recent scholarly findings, they have been proven to have been close to one another in the past more than ever believed. This brings an idea to mind; for if the people of the Nigerian area related so closely before the **amalgamation of 1914**, then the country Nigeria might have existed even before then, just not as a single political entity. There are many ways which the various groups of the Nigerian area related before 1800 but this study will be focused on two major means of relations among the ethnic groups of the Nigerian area; **Trade and War**. These two activities are chosen based on the fact that through them, cultural barriers among the ethnic groups in the Nigerian area before 1800 remained porous and they both give a clear picture of the ethnic setting among the tribes of the Nigerian area before colonialism.

RELATIONS AMONG THE TRIBES OF THE NIGERIAN AREA THROUGH TRADE

From the geographical and climatic features of the Nigerian area it is obvious that not every area can cultivate the same crops nor can the people of all areas practice the same skills, based on this it would be a misnomer to say that all the tribes before colonialism lived independently of each other. One of the major reasons the tribes of the Nigerian area could not do without depending on each other was the fact that they complemented each other perfectly. Their complementarities to a

large extent encouraged the transfer of goods and ideas to all parts of the area. The discoveries of stone tools in all the zones and even in parts that lack Stones reveal the early economic relations among the people of the Nigerian area. In some areas a specialty spread from a particular community to others; in Igboland it is believed that the skill of blacksmithing spread from **Awka** to several other Igbo villages. The geographical divergence of the people made trade unavoidable and the different regions had access to trade with outsiders differently. For states of the Western Sudan (present day Northern Nigeria), they practiced the **Tran-Saharan trade** which enabled them to have access to pack animals and many other items and skills. The trans-Saharan trade was a trade between the peoples of Northern Nigeria and the people of North Africa. It is noteworthy, that it was through this means that Islam came to Northern Nigeria. For areas of the Forest belt, they practiced the **Trans-Atlantic trade** which was a trade between the people of western Nigeria and Europeans via the Atlantic Ocean. Trans-Atlantic trade had been practiced in Western Nigeria since the 15th Century. Historical findings have it that the Portuguese were the first to engage the peoples of western Nigeria in this trade.

Within the Nigerian area, there were several routes that connected various periodical markets but chief among them was the **Niger- Benue waterway**. The people enjoyed trading through this water way because not everyone had access to pack animals. The river banks of the Niger-Benue confluence was a very busy point in the pre-colonial times as three great kingdoms surrounded it; the Igala, Jukun and Nupe kingdoms and due to the position of these kingdoms there was usually traffic at the confluence.⁴ The idea of trade among the tribes of the Nigerian area before 1800 was not that they would have starved or gone into extinction without trade but with trade they were able to prosper more than they would have on their own resources and know-how.⁵ Besides trading in goods, slaves were also exchanged or sold amongst the various

tribes and through slave trade, skills were circulated among various communities as some of the slaves sold were skilled labourers or were very familiar with the specialty of their own people. By the late 18th century, non-indigenes existed in diverse parts of the Nigerian area such as Hausa horsemen in different parts of Yorubaland, Awka blacksmiths in Benin kingdom and Igbo farmers in Calabar. Thus, slave trade promoted inter-group relations and made tribal peculiarities porous in the Nigerian area before 1800.

The relevance of trade among the tribes of the Nigerian area before 1800 cannot be over-emphasized as some kingdoms were established based on trade considerations. Just as oral traditions have it that **Oranmiyan**, the founder of the **ancient Oyo Empire** had chosen the location of Old Oyo at the edge of the savannah where he would have easy access to cavalry from Hausaland. By this time pack animals had been popular and used for many purposes in Northern Nigeria. It was very important for Oyo to have easy access to horses because it was surrounded by powerful neighbors such as the Nupe and Borgu tribes. Indeed cavalry later became a major source of its victory in conquests and if Oyo was not able to acquire horses for a war it was a great limitation as it gave them an edge over their rivals.⁶ This reveals the fact that the peoples of the Nigerian Area were well aware of the fact that on their own they could not be all powerful and therefore, made trade one of the major considerations for settling in an area when migrating.

Furthermore, a point that buttresses the importance of trade in pre-colonial Nigeria was the ability of the different tribes to know the possessions of one another and also the unique occupations of each other, take for instance, Oyo's desire to settle close to the Niger-Benue confluence was with the knowledge that the Hausa's possessed pack animals which they used for long journeys and also war, in fact this was a major reason why slaves were bought from diverse areas so as to buy them along with their skills. It was through trade that the tribes got to discover

their strengths and the advantages each had against another. To a large extent the ability of a state or Kingdom to trade with the outside world boosted its wealth and recognition among others.

The subject of trade among tribes in pre-colonial Nigeria emphasizes greatly the relevance of the Niger-Benue confluence before colonialism and debunks the Eurocentric idea that before colonialism the people of the Nigerian area did not utilize properly their God-given geographical attributes. The Niger-Benue confluence as a major trade route reveals the true worth of trade as a means of inter-group relations and a small recap of the geographical setting of the Nigerian area is highly necessary to buttress this point. The present map of Nigeria shows the country divided into two parts by the Niger-Benue confluence. When one journeys from the south to the North or North the south and arrives at the point of the confluence, he/she is said to have exhausted the journey half way. In the same vein, the confluence was the major link of southern and Northern Nigeria in pre-colonial times. The most popular city near to the confluence was **Lokoja**. Lokoja was a Centre of trade before colonialism; majorly because it is home to different ethnic groups due to its position near the major waterways of the Nigerian area, the indigenes of the area include the **Nupe, Hausa, Yoruba, Igala and Igbira** who all claim to have named the city, and among the settlers are the Igbo's, Bini and Tiv.

Lokoja is located on **Mount Patti**, thus the reason why the Yorubas claim to have named it *Ilu Oke Oja* which means “the city on the hill that did not fall” Traders from different parts of the Nigerian area met at Lokoja to exchange their commodities such as Grains, Animal skins and husks, hand crafted shoes and wears. Due to this trade in Lokoja specific tribes were known for specific crafts, occupations and crops of different kinds and species. Besides the role of Lokoja as a trade centre, it was a place of rest for travelers going from the north to south or south to the North, mostly caravan traders within the country. Surprisingly, till date Lokoja remains a place of

rest and refreshment for travelers. The strategic position of Lokoja attracted the many tribes who later came to be settlers and despite the tussles that transpired among the powerful kingdoms at the confluence, Lokoja still maintained its position as a meeting place for many groups to exchange trading items amongst each other.

Noteworthy is the fact that trade was not always rosy as inter-ethnic wars sometimes interrupted trading activities and the supply of commodities but even so, through inter-group trade variety and dependency amongst the tribes of the Nigerian area was promoted. Little wonder the spread of iron technology, bronzes and crop cultivation patterns before the advent of colonialism. The Niger-Benue routes were not the only routes leading to trade markets but were discussed extensively due to its great importance. There were many other trading routes that linked to periodic markets. Before the coming of the colonialists and the transport revolution, pack animals, canoes, human portorage and bush paths were the major means of transportation.

In a nut shell, inter-group relations through trade between the tribes in the Nigerian area cannot be overemphasized, one wonders often why today there are popular words for some items among tribes and in some cases words that seem to be in their corrupted form, a good example of this is the word for onions in Hausa and Yoruba which is very analogous. The Hausas call it “al-basa” and the Yoruba’s “alubosa”, this suggests that the word is a borrowed word lent in the process of trade since time memorial.⁹ Considering this cultural exchanges, it would be erroneous to claim that the each tribe of the Nigerian area lived independently or in economic isolation before 1800.

RELATIONS AMONG THE TRIBES OF THE NIGERIAN AREA THROUGH WAR

One of the inevitabilities among groups is conflict and the tribes of the Nigerian area did not live

free from this inevitability. War was an unavoidable means of inter-group relations and before the advent of colonialism the different groups inhabiting the Nigerian area practiced sophisticated forms of government, meaning that each group had their values. There were about six r noticeable reasons why groups of the Nigerian area warred against themselves before 1800; **to replace a defunct prominent power among groups of a tribe, for territorial expansion, to gain satellite states to increase its economic status through preying on smaller states, competition, to check the growing power of smaller states, to acquire strategic lands or routes to trade with many and even Europeans.**

Firstly, the wars fought to replace a defunct prominent power among groups of the Nigerian area before 1800 was as a result of the fact that in every tribe there were stronger or more powerful states. The Yoruba's had Oyo and the Hausa's had Katsina, Kano and at one time Gobir. However, the Yoruba civil wars serve as the best case study for war based on the fact that the wars were still on till 1800 even though they had their roots in decades before. The Yoruba civil wars that lasted from 1793 - 1893 had its roots in the demise of the Old Oyo Empire. This war according to historical records was a struggle among states with one mythical origin to replace a defunct prominent power amongst them which was Oyo. The Old Oyo in its hey days was the most powerful empire of the forest belt but just as Ibn Khaldun's theory of the cyclic motion of every society, Oyo had its period of flowering and decay; the days of peace and prosperity went by.¹⁰ War alliances formed during wars were very vital forms of intergroup relations especially among the Yoruba's. Noteworthy is the fact that it was not until 1800 that the name Yoruba was used to refer to the whole stock, the Egba, Ijebu, Ijesha and many others, but prior to that period they did not regard themselves as Yoruba, the term Yoruba was used prior to that time when referring to the people of Oyo and Ife.¹¹

The main aim of war alliances during the Yoruba civil wars was to achieve common objectives of groups and these alliances were of two kinds; **defensive and offensive**. Defensive alliances were formed to protect each other against a group or groups, meanwhile offensive alliances could be formed to seek vengeance. The most knotty and sophisticated alliances were the Ife-Ijebu alliance against Owu in 1821, Ijaye -Egba alliance in 1860 and the Ekiti-parapo grand alliance against Ibadan in 1878. . For the Yoruba towns, wars were avenues for the formation of new backings and reconciliation of old ones, as long as they had common objectives. In some cases however, not all the objectives of the groups in an alliance were the same, this was the case in the Ife-Ijebu alliance of 1821.

The people of Owu were noted for their courage and skills in fighting with *agedemgbe* (long cutlasses), this specialty and character earned them recognition and respect from their neighbours. They had grown boastful due to this popularity and began terrorizing their neighbours but unknown to them; they showcased their strength at the wrong time. The height of the attacks of Owu against her neighbors was the taking over of the Apomu market which was a very important market town in Ife, where people from different Yoruba towns came to trade and the tolls received served as a major source of revenue for Ife, the Ife saw this as wickedness on the path of Owu and also an insult on the spiritual authority of the Ooni of Ife, they sought vengeance. The first attempt of Ife to retaliate failed and while Ife nursed her grievance against Owu, they discovered that Owu had similarly committed a sin against the Ijebu by humiliating and murdering some Ijebu traders over a market misunderstanding at the same Apomu market. Seeing this, the Ife indulged the Ijebu in forming an alliance in 1821 to get back at Owu and the result of this was the sad but total destruction of Owu.

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Secondly, amongst the wars fought to prey upon smaller groups for reasons of expansion and

wealth was the Nupe conquest that had its roots in periods before 1800 but lasted till the 1890's. Nupe kingdom was close to the Niger-Benue confluence and had risen to prominence in the 18th century to the extent Oyo Empire had seen its growth as a threat, Nupe itself had been a tribute paying state to Oyo but upon its freedom in the 1790's it began its journey of expansion and used its geographical advantage of being close to the confluence to spread its influence. The expansion of the Nupe to Northeast Yorubaland had resulted to a large alliance known as the Ogidi grand alliance which was an imitation of the Ekitiparapo grand alliance in Yorubaland in the 19th century. Following the demise of Mallam Dendo of Nupeland in 1833, Usman Zaki and Etsu Masaba fought against each other to win the throne. Each of the parties needed an edge over the other to win the war and in search for victory; they began a conquest of northeast Yorubaland which was blessed with human and material resources.

The Nupe conquered many areas in northeast Yorubaland and oppressed them by receiving tributes from them through the **Ogba system** which the Nupe used to control the conquered territories. The Ogba's represented the Etsu (King) in every conquered town, their main task was to ensure tributes are paid and no form of resistance is arranged against the Nupe government. Though there were many revolts such as the **Ogun Igberi in Kabba and Ejuku**, none surpassed the **Ogidi grand alliance of 1894**. The Nupe authorities had taken these revolts as a mere barking and did not realize something great was coming till one of the royal princesses was killed- **Audu Yamma** by furious Iffe farmers, what came after the murder of the princess was known as the **Yagba** revolt. At this time, the different areas were fed up of Nupe's oppression and realized that independent revolts and protests often had little or no successes; therefore they took the bold step of the Ogidi grand alliance. The groups involved in the alliance were the Ogidi, Aduge, Ogale, Ikaram, Isua, Afin, Ogbagi, Iffe (Ufe), Ayere, Ekinrin-Adde, Ogale, Igashi, Daga, Esuku and Oji.

They all in unity fought to end the oppressive Nupe rule.¹⁴ Just as Professor Z.O Apata explained this scenario to be like that of a chase to kill a snake and on getting to a wall, where the snake can no longer run, it turns its back and attacks the chaser. The plight of the Nupe and the groups in the Ogidi alliance can be likened to the illustration of the snake and the chaser, for they had been pushed to the wall under Nupe rule and could no longer take it.¹⁵ The importance of alliances in inter-group relations is that these different groups recognized they could not on their own conquer oppression against dominating hostile neighbours.

Another vital example of wars fought for territorial expansion and economic growth was the tussle between the groups in Hausaland before the Sokoto Jihad of 1804. For many years the tussle grew tougher for Hausa states that fought against each other to gain access to the strategic area of the Caravan route linking Hausaland to North Africa. The trade that transpired between the Hausa's and North Africans go way back to centuries before the 19th century and whichever state had direct access to the routes became the commercial leader and cultural centre of all the Hausa states. In 1700, all of a sudden Zamfara rose to power by conquering Kano which was a prominent trading centre, there by becoming e one of the prominent states of the western Sudan. Zamfara's rising constituted a threat to Katsina which occupied a similar position to Kano in Hausaland. Almost at the same time, another Hausa state known as Gobir began involving itself in the political affairs of Hausaland, to the extent it challenged the popular city of Kano in several battles form 1731-1743¹⁶ Gobir warred with Katsina and all her allies such as Zamfara and by the end of 18th century, Gobir had emerged as the most powerful state in Hausaland,¹⁷ though it waned internally due to the prolonged battles fought.

Furthermore, in many cases wars were fought among the groups in the Nigerian area to check the

growing power of smaller states and conquer them, thereafter the small states were often made tribute paying states. This a major trend among large and small communities in the Nigerian area. A good instance of a case that has its roots in pre-colonial times but still lives today is the issue between the Christians of southern Kaduna and the Hausa-Fulani settlers and the peoples of the Northern middle belt.

It was a major trend in the Nigerian area before colonialism that larger tribes at one point in time conquered small groups and made them tribute paying states or victims of slave raids. In the Northern Middle belt of Nigeria there are tribes such as the Bajju, Kataf and Kagoro who prior to colonialism had practiced their traditional religion and refused to imbibe Islam as a religion. They were often captured or subjected to annual raids based on the fact that it was a sin to enslave a fellow Muslim in Islam, so they served as the alternative. The various groups of the middle belt witnessed a population drain due to this slave raids by different Hausa states. There were usually many revolts but there were limits to what the smaller tribes could do to retaliate due to the fact that the Muslims had been more exposed to Islamic civilization even before colonialism. Till today the relations between the middle belt and the Hausa-Fulani's remain soured.¹⁸

From the various reasons for war discussed above there are many factors as to how they influenced relations among the ethnic groups before 1800. Through war alliances popular kings and warriors related with each other, tactics and weapons were shared among groups. Besides alliances, in many occasions when villages were destroyed totally, not all the indigenes were carried away in the destruction but rather, some were captured by the victors knowing they could use their skills by enslaving them in their own lands. Also, due to wars displaced persons joined

other groups or created new settlements in new areas, such was the root of the settler-indigene dispute that still exists today between Ife and Modakeke.

Additionally, a major facilitator of relations among Nigerian groups beside trade and war is inter-marriage. Inter-marriages brought together individuals from different groups to a new group and this often promoted cultural transfer such as dressing styles, cooking styles and borrowed words.¹⁹ In many oral traditions of the tribes in Nigeria, intermarriage is said to have been the origin of some tribes; the Efik from south eastern Nigeria claim to have their beginning in the wedlock of an Igbo man and an Ibibio woman. In other cases marriage was used to resolve strained relations, as a tool of diplomacy or to solidify tribal friendliness. In a quest for expansionism in 1700, the king of Gobir gave his sister to the King of Zamfara known as *Marroki* and this solidified the relations among both parties who had the common goal of rising above other Hausa states.²⁰

To draw the curtains finally, the ethnic setting in the Nigerian area before 1800 was not permanent, there were times of peace and times of instability but most importantly, the various groups though widely diverse lived together as siblings, they could be in bad terms at times but in real sense they could not do without each other. All the tribes in different ways and times contributed to the growth of one another and enjoyed the benefits of inter group relations which in the words of a great Nigerian historian is . . .the deepening of understanding, the promotion of a spirit of tolerance and the development of empathy”. This brings two questions to mind; if the tribes of the Nigerian area were so united before the 1914 amalgamation, then why are there so many tussles when they are to live as a single political entity? Or could the case of Nigeria be a reverse case of “divided we stand and united we fall? .However, one could submit that the ethnic setting in the Nigerian area before 1800, was a bitter-sweet affair of great dependency among

“united-diverse” tribes.

ENDNOTES

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² Akpofure, Rex and Crowder, Michael. *Nigeria: A modern History for Schools*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1966. p.17

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⁴ Ibid 229

⁵ Amihere, M.K, *Lokoja as an Important Precolonial and Colonial trade centre* in Apata, Z.O and Akinwunmi, Yemi, *The Groundwork of Niger-Benue Confluence History*, Ibadan: CrestHill Publishers Limited, 2011, p. 170

⁶ Akpofure, Rex and Crowder, Michael. *Nigeria: A modern History for Schools*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1966, p.40.

⁷ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/lokoja> accessed in April 2017.

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¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Apata, Z.O, *The Nupe Imperialism and the Ogidi Grand Alliance 1894-1897: Reflections on the Ekitiparapo War* in Akinjogbin, Adeagbo (ed), *War and Peace in Yorubaland 1793-1893*, Nigeria: Heinemann educational books PLC, 1998, pp 431-440

¹⁵ I am grateful to Professor Z.O. Apata for this vital information.

¹⁶ Crowder, Michael, *The Story of Nigeria*, London: Faber and Faber, 1978.p. 69

¹⁷ Ibid p.70-71

¹⁸ Ikime, Obaro. *History, the Historian and the Nation*. Ibadan: Heinemann Publishers Plc, 2006., p.93

¹⁹ I am very grateful to Mr B.O. Akanbi for this vital information.

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