

# **PRE-COLONIAL TRANSPORT SYSTEMS: A VERITABLE INSTRUMENT FOR INTER-GROUP RELATIONS AMONGST OWERRI IGBO COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that bush paths and navigable rivers, streams as well as creeks served as transport routes that linked the forest region of Owerri Igbo with their neighbouring communities. It thinks that pre-colonial transport systems, due to its commercial and strategic importance, were extensively used by farmers and traders, who participated actively in both internal and long distance commerce. This paper submits that, pre-colonial transport systems such as human portorage on land and dug-out canoe on water promoted intra and inter group relations amongst Owerri-Igbo communities and their neighbours, by enhancing regional specialization across spectra of occupational pursuits as farmers, traders, blacksmiths, diviners and traditional healers.

**Keywords:** Pre-colonial, Transport systems, Inter-group relations

## **Introduction**

Transport and communication channel the flow of persons, commodities and ideas between places and over-time and mediate relationship and interactions between individuals and communities (Ukwu, 1980) Right from the ages, man has remained a locomotive animal moving from place to place for exchange of goods and services. The constant phenomenon of scarce human and material resources as well as the indispensable need for the exchange of goods and services has always justified the importance of transportation in human history.

The meanings and functions of transportation are many and varied. Transportation according to Wayne (1983:1, is, "an activity that provides for the movement of goods or individuals from one place to another". Ogunremi (1982:3), summarized the functions of transport in the following terms;

*Transportation enables society to enjoy advantages of specialization of resources, and the benefits of domain of labour by making it possible for products to be brought from distances, thus avoiding the necessity for local production*

Transportation laid the foundation for the discovery of agriculture and the sophisticated tradition of iron metallurgy. For instance, early agricultural activities started when the early man through his gyratory activities observed the germination of already discarded seeds in his overgrown environment. With the use of iron implements of the Neolithic era, the adventurous ancestors of modern man were able to clear forest regions into farmlands while farm routes later grew into enlarged bush paths which were used by primitive communities.

Although, protagonists of the 'Hamitic myth' argue albeit erroneously that knowledge of iron metallurgy penetrated into the Nigerian NOK region, through Egypt and Cushitic Meroe. Isichei (1976:9), thinks that the date of Nigerian iron working at NOK is now known to be earlier than Meroe-500 B.C. and this may well indicate an independent invention. It doubtlessly reached Igboland by diffusion from NOK. It is worthy to stress here that the diffusion of highly skilled and sophisticated tradition of metallurgy into different parts of Igboland like Nri-Igbo-Ukwu, Awka, Nkwerre etc was made possible through such interactive forces like trade contacts, cultural borrowings and gyration of tribes.

The origin of many Nigerian roads has remained very controversial. However, Falola and Ogunremi (1986:17) explain that primitive roads in the forest region were constructed by hunters, who had to create tracks while searching for game and by farmers, who were connecting one farm with another. As society stabilized, primitive communities used farmlands and farm trees to situate their boundaries. Pre-literate communities in the Owerri Igbo region constructed bush paths through communal efforts to boundary farmland spots. These bush paths served as transport routes that linked one neighbouring community to another. With the passage of time, these local paths gained both commercial and strategic importance since they were exploited by traders and head porters who participated actively in both internal and external commerce (Nwawuba, 1998).

### **A Geographical Delineation of Owerri Igbo Communities**

Owerri Igbo communities belong to the Igbo ethnic stock: Historians and cultural anthropologists speculate that the Igbo settled in a wide area or complex called core centers, namely, Nri-Awka and Isuama (Orlu) complex. Secondary waves of migration and dispersal took off from the core-centers of Igbo settlements to form the Nsukka-Udi highland communities, Uratta, Ikwere-Ekwe, Asa and Ndoki clans, Ngwa group of clans, Ohafia-Arochikwu clans as well as Eda, Item and Abiriba clans (Afigbo, 1984). Buttressing these claims further, Talbot (1962:4) stated thus;

*...The Ibo.... have no tradition of migration from elsewhere and appear to have settled in the thickly populated parks of Nri-Awka and Isu-Ama area for a very long period and have spread from there....*

Owerri Igbo communities comprise villages currently found in Owerri-North L. G. A., Owerri-West L. G. A and Owerri-Municipal where the Owerri-Nshi-Ise group of clans is situated. Historically, Owerri-Igbo communities occupied their present home lands through waves of migration from the Igbo core centers of Nri-Awka and Isuama (Orlu) areas. This group of clans or communities includes, Owerri-Nshi-Ise group of clans, Nekede, Ihiagwa, Egbu, Naze, Umuguma, Okolochi and Uratta group of clans who later became victims of colonial conquest following the birth of modern Nigeria in January, 1, 1914.

The oral history of Owerri suggests that a legendary figure called Arugo was the ancestral founding father of Owerri, who lived in Umuorii-Uratta, east of Owerri. Arugo had two sons namely Ekwema and Ndumoha. The sons of Arugo became ancestors of the five towns of Alaenyi, namely Owerri, Awaka, Ihitta, Egbu and Naze

Similarly, Ekwema who finally settled at Ugwu Ekwema as a result of his flight from Umuorii-Uratta had three direct sons called, Amatu, Abaole and Odu. These sons of Ekwema became the founding fathers of Owerri Nshi-Ise clans which include, Umuororonjo, Amawom, Umuonyeche, Umuoyima and Umuodu (Unegbu, 1986).

## **Location**

The most strategic of all the Owerri Igbo Communities are Owerri Nshi Ise group of clans. The Owerri Nshi Ise group of clans due to its strategic location became an 'entrepot' such that passengers going to the Western Nigerian cities from much of South-East Nigeria must pass through. It is bounded in the North-East by Okigwe, in the North-West by Orlu, in the South-West by Ahoada in River State, in the South-East by Aba and in the East proper by Umuahia - the present capital of Abia State.

## **Towns**

Some important towns found in the Owerri Igbo area include, 'Owerri-Nshi-Ise' clans, Uratta Group of Clans, Agbala, Irette, Obinze, Umuguma, Avu, Oforola, Okuku, Nekede, Ihiagwa, Okolochi, Emekuku, Emii, Egbu, Orji, Awaka among others.

## **Traditional Mode of Transportation in Owerri Igbo Communities**

The Owerri Igbo like other forest peoples of West Africa used human portorage and water as major means of transport. Pack animals like horses and donkeys were not used due to the menacing threat of tse-tse fly.

### **(i) Human Porterage**

Human porterage simply means "the carriage of goods by man at the same time as he transports himself by walking" (Ogunremi 1975:37). Most of the head porters were recruited from nuclear and extended family settings. Majority of heads of families in Igbo land were subsistent farmers who depended greatly on their wives and children for the movement of agricultural products to and from the farm. Again, a man's production had to be carried to the consumers, and at the peak of harvesting, when immediate removal of crops from the farm to the villages or market places was a

matter of urgency in order to avoid waste, the producer relied on his family and slaves (Ogunremi, 1982).

Human porters throughout pre-colonial Nigeria made use of local roads or bush-paths that linked neighbouring villages, city states and even kingdoms and empires. In the Owerri Igbo area, various clans and village groups were linked by bush-paths. For instance, an age-long bush-path that linked Okolochi village with Ihiagwa is called Uzo-Ukwu (lengthy bush-path). Perhaps the name Uzo-ukwu was adopted because of the trekkable distance involved in any movement from Okolochi to Ihiagwa or vice-versa.

Long distance traders from Arochuku, Awka, Nkwerre recruited the services of slave porters who carried their goods to distant markets. Apart from slave porters, carriers also transported goods through land routes. Professional carriers were free people (mainly strongmen) who sustained their livelihood through carrying goods from one place to the other (Ogunremi, 1982).

Although, a doyen of Igbo history, Afigbo (1981) has flamboyantly emphasized high level of development, long distance trade recorded in terms of organizational efficiency of market centers and safety of travellers and head porters, a critical analysis of the long distance commerce and the head portage system of transport suggests that the human portage was a time-wasting transport system since its cost - effectiveness depended on seasonal changes as well as the security along the trade routes. Afigbo's uncritical views are quoted below;

*The Igbo evolved an intricate system for ensuring the safety of well-meaning travelers. Igbo law, custom and morality forbade the molestation, let alone the wounding, killing, kidnapping and enslavement of a fellow clansman. Between one clan and another, a ritual brotherhood could be established by means of Igbandu blood pact (Afigbo, 1981: 135-137).*

Many transport experts like Ogunremi and Falola (1986), postulate that Afigbo's viewpoints appear too romantic to command belief. They strongly maintain that head portage mode of pre-colonial transportation was characterized by inefficiency which strongly impeded the commercial pursuits of the Igbo people. Ogunremi (1982:82) outlines some of the adverse effects of human portage in the following ways:

*Scarcity of porters often limited production of fragile products such as pots, because it was easy for porters to slip when the ground was soft and pots to be broken in the wet season; snakes, scorpions, and ants were common on the route; streams had to be forded, flood sections of the route had to be waded through; and bridges or ferries had to be used to cross swift and deep rivers. All these could lead to scarcity of porters.*

One major problem that characterized the human portage system of transport was the insecure nature of the bush-paths. Bush paths used as trade routes and ordinary routes were not safe. Inter-tribal wars hampered trade on goods and merchandise. Travelers and traders around Obowu, Ezinihitte and Enyigwugwu areas constantly needed the assistance of road guides who were mainly warriors (Ogoke, 1981).

Insecurity of routes owing to infestation by slave raiders, kidnappers or robbers and to civil wars, might also scare off porters and raise cost of portage (Ogunremi 1982:). High cost of professional carriers lured many long distance traders to encourage internal slavery. This explains the tendency of professional traders to (buy and) own slaves who served as carriers and as trade commodity (Afigbo, 1981).

## **(ii) Water Transportation**

During the pre-colonial period, Nigerian rivers served as carriers of trade. Ajayi and Alagoa (1980) highlight that river systems probably played much large part as means of communication and carriers of trade and ideas in the past than they do in the present time. Before the coming of highways, railways and airways, rivers provided the only thorough fares for the cheap transportation of large, quantities of commodities over long distances in many parts of Africa.

The presence of major rivers like the Niger and Benue as well as other inland water ways, such as streams, rivulets and creeks paved the way for marine transportation. Pre-colonial Nigerian people promoted the efficacy of marine transportation through the dredging of rivers, streams and creeks to make them navigable by canoeists. Olarenwaju opines that European explorers, traders, missionaries and soldiers were attracted to the Nigerian coastal waters because riverine communities engaged themselves seriously in the material development of marine transport. Olarenwaju (1986:1) buttressed his points in the following manner;

*In the absence of roads and railways, the initial efforts at transport development centred around dredging southern Nigeria's internal water ways to render them navigable year round by river crafts drawing at least five feet of water. This opened the river basins for direct exploitation by British traders.*

Although riverine communities like Egbema and Oguta had access to the Atlantic coast, the hazards of canoe transportation affected both trade and population movements. For instance, canoe transportation remained insecure due to the presence of river animals like crocodile (*Aguiyi*). The canoeists can be ambushed by local creek pirates who intercepted river boats for the purpose of robbing market men and women. The creek pirates were shaved with local knives (Onyenze, 1998).

Most communities in the Owerri Igbo area are situated in upland areas which made contact with coastal middle-men trader very difficult. A traditional historian - Prince Nkwocha (1998) - affirms that the absence of extensive river networks like the Niger and Benue in and around Owerri never posed serious barriers to trade and inter-group relations. He asserts that "many traders from Owerri Igbo enclave especially the Oratta communities of Agbala, Obibi-Ezena, Emeabiam, Eziobodo, Ihiagwa and Okolochi forded across the Otamiri river into towns like Mgbirichi, Umuagwo from where they entered into Ikwerre-etche, Ijo and Efik areas for the purpose of buying riverine commodities such as salt, fresh fish, periwinkles and European manufactured goods.

## **Economic and Social Impacts of Pre-colonial Transport Systems in Owerri Igbo Communities**

Pre-colonial transport systems such as human portage on land and dug-out canoe on water stimulated the growth and expansion of market centres in Igboland. The presence of bush-paths paved the way for the exchange of goods and services. It also encouraged cultural borrowings, intra and inter-group relations. Many Owerri Igbo Communities like Nekede, Ihiagwa, Okolochi and Obibi-Ezena produced agricultural commodities like dried cassava, yam, palm oil and palm kernel which were carried by means of human portage to neighbouring markets like Orie-Obibi (situated in Obibi-Ezena), Nkwo-Okolochi, Orie-Amaraku, Eke-Atta and Nkwo-Ukwu Ihiagwa where they were exchanged for commodities like oil-bean seed (*Ugba*) and *Utara Ukwa* (a proteinous food substance extracted from the fruit of an *Ukwa* tree). The oil-bean seed and the *utara ukwa* were the chief products brought by Atta and Mbieri communities (Nkwocha, 1998).

The Atta and Mbieri traders lived along the banks of Otammiri river, in Olokwu, Umusu and Umuokpo, and consequently, became middle men in the fish, palm produce and periwinkle trade. Some of such families still live along the river banks till date.

Similarly, traders from Mbieri carried such commodities like *Uga* (a local device used for climbing oil-palm trees) by means of head portage to market centres like Orie-Amaraku in Isiala-Mbano, 'Nkwo-Ukwu' Ihiagwa, and Orie-Obibi. Also, Awara traders from Ohaji side brought 'Awara' yam (Ji-Awara) and plantain to 'Nkwo-Ukwu' Ihiagwa. In the same manner, Kalabari traders from Ijo land brought riverine products such as fish, crayfish and baked salt to 'Afor-Ara' market in 'Umunwuoha' (Ngoka, 1998).

Pre-colonial bush-paths that linked neighbouring communities throughout Igboland encouraged exchange of services and the recruitment of labour force for agricultural purposes. Through these bush-paths, most 'Isuama' or 'Isu' migrant farmers penetrated into Owerri Igbo communities like Umuodu, Nekede, Obinze, Ihiagwa, Emekuku, Okolochi etc where they were absorbed as migrant labourers. 'Isu', 'Isuama' or 'Isukanma' in Owerri dialect means a group of migrant labourers who as a result of land pressure due to overpopulation lacked enough farmlands for agricultural activities and who circumstantially migrate with their family members to Owerri Igbo Communities where they are given acres (or acreages) of land to cultivate. The proceeds of this co-operative venture which are mutually shared between the Owerri Igbo land owners and the landless and poverty-stricken 'Isuama' migrant labourers help the later to feed himself, his house hold and other members of his extended family (Nwawuba, 1998).

The Isu aka nma people who hail mainly from Mbaise, Mbaitoi, Ikeduru, Isu, Njaba, cultivated yams and other edible crops and also worked under the supervision of Owerri Igbo land lords who accommodated them in their respective compounds (*Ohe*) free of charge. Thus, the influx of Isuama-Igbo communities into Owerri Igbo areas triggered series of cultural borrowings and exchange of ideas which became manifest in the introduction of Isuama food crops into the Owerri area. Intra group relations

between Isuama migrant labourers and communities in the Owerri area were further cemented through inter-village marriage ceremonies.

Pre-colonial transport systems in Igboland aided internal slavery and the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade via bush-paths, inland water-ways and creeks. In Owerri Igbo area, slave dealers traveled through bush-paths from Owerri to Avu which was a popular slave market centre. From Avu, the slaves were marched through communities like Umuokanne, Obiti up to Kalabari area from where slaves were finally taken to Igwe Ocha (Port Harcourt) for shipment to Europe or the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean (Osuji, 1998).

When the Avu slave market was closed down, a prominent Chief of Akabo by name Njoku Nwanshi discovered another slave route through Nekede to Umuodu in Owerri Nshi Ise. From Umuodu the slaves were transported to Mgbirichi via the Nwaorie river for the middle passage across the Atlantic (Ngoka, 1998).

Trade contacts enhanced regional specialization across spectra of occupational pursuits as farmers, traders, blacksmiths, diviners and traditional healers in respective Owerri Igbo communities who hawked their wares and services to distant markets through out Igboland where they maximized profits. The presence of market centres made possible by transportation brought the people of Owerri Igbo region into closer contact with other communities in Igboland such as the enterprising Arochukwu long-distance traders, Awka and Nkwerre blacksmiths as well as professional diviners or oracle agents from Nri, Arochukwu, Awka and Umunoha.

## **Conclusion**

Pre-colonial transport systems in most parts of Igboland including Owerri Igbo communities like Umuodu, Nekede, Emekuku, Ihiagwa, Okolochi etc used local bush paths and as such mainly patronized the human portage system of transportation. These bush-paths culminated into a network of routes which promoted intra and inter-group relationships.

Pre-colonial transportation systems also encouraged internal and external commerce within and outside Igboland. Although, most Owerri-Igbo communities are not active participants in the long distance trade, trade contacts with the famed Arochukwu, Awka, Nri and Nkwerre peoples revolutionized the economic outlook of the indigenes of these communities whereby they learnt to combine their highly prized farming activities with other occupational/vocational pursuits such as long distance trade, cloth weaving, blacksmithery, traditional medicine after a period of apprenticeship training from their Aro, Awka, Nri and Nkwerre grand masters.

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