

Water Bodies and the Development of Societies and Trade Networks in the Lower Niger Region since Prehistoric Time: History and Lessons for Economic Development

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Abstract

Extant research has shown that the emergence of societies/settlements and sustainable trade networks around the lower Niger region can be linked with the availability of water bodies, which provided the necessary ingredients for social and economic development. This is true of societies around the riverain Esan southeast area, their Etsako neighbor, as well as those around Aboh (Agbor), the Onitsha (Anambra). Both oral traditions as well as historical evidence have shown that the water bodies and water transport system provided by the River Niger (also known as Oshimili or Ohimili), as well as other tributaries like Alikpa, Anam River, among others, aided human and economic development. This paper is therefore an attempt at historicizing how this took place and possible lessons for the modern-day economy and economic development of Nigeria. Data obtained from primary and secondary sources were deployed to carry out the study with an analytical and narrative historical approach. This includes historical, descriptive and analytical approaches based on gathered evidence. The primary source for this research is based on field investigations conducted in the area and surrounding territories. Among other things, the data collection process includes semi-structured interviews with individuals. The research also uses historical documents from the national archives, relying on previous research conducted on issues of trade and economic development, in addition to documentary data taken from newspaper accounts, diaries, letters and verbal reports. The paper is divided into five sections: Introduction, Conceptual Clarification and

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Introduction

Scholars in the area of Economic and Environmental history have argued that, historically, in every human society, the environment plays a crucial role in both human development and survival. This can only be achieved once there is meaningful interaction between man and his environment. This interaction in the field of history is referred to as Historical Process⁴⁰. The argument is hinged on the premises that the relationship between man and his environment in an area is a dynamic one, involving a two-way flow of influence in which the environment affects man and in which his activities in turn leave their imprint in the form of a distinctive cultural and socio-economic landscape. In this way, an understanding of the nature of this physical/natural environment, man's interaction with it and changes over time will give a clear picture of how society has advanced over time to its present level of development, while promoting inter/intra group relations. It is in this light that the paper seeks to establish the relationship between water bodies and the development of societies and trade networks in the Lower Niger Region.

The importance of Water bodies in the history of settlements and the development of sustainable trade networks in societies of the Lower Niger region cannot be overemphasised. This is because through the water bodies, trade and commerce became an integral part of the people and an important aspect of the people's civilisation. Thus, over centuries, this led to the free flow and exchange of goods, technology, cultural exchange and ideas. In some other cases, the emergence of human society has been associated with activities associated with waterways, trade and Commerce. This is because in the cause and course of exchange, people associate freely with one another, during which ideas and values are transferred and absorbed. This is the role the water bodies in and around the societies occupy, the

⁴⁰ Carr, Edward Hallett, *What is History?* (London: Penguin 1973), 9; Gardiner, P (ed), *Theories of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 6.; Godelier, Maurice, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 31; Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, *Collected Works*, 5. (Berlin: Dietz, 1976), 215.

riverine ports of Esan, Etsako, Aboh and their Igbo neighbours play in the socio-economic life of the people. This is seen in the historical role played by the commercial and other social relations at the bank of the river Niger (which remained the most important exchange point among the people). The most significant been the history of the mingling of people to form an indivisible entity, as represented in the history of the societies/settlements which presently occupy and trade along the bank (especially among the Esan area, their Etsako neighbours, as well as those around the Aboh (Agbor), the Ose Market and Ifeku Island/people and their neighbours) from time immemorial in the Nigerian territory⁴¹.

The above views have also been shared by earlier scholars, who identified two factors that have, over the years, made inter/intra-group relations in the Nigerian area meaningful ⁴². The first, as far as these scholars are concerned, has to do with the complementarity of the Sudan belt and the forest zone with the intervening transitional Middle Belt dominated by the Jos Plateau. Available sources argued that this complementarity has encouraged the movement of people, goods, and ideas north and south across the zones⁴³. On the second factor, which, in the view of the scholars, engenders compactness, has been the essential unity of the river systems. The source summarised it thus:

Nigeria is really the basin of the lower Niger south of the Bussa rapids with the Benue, their tributaries, and the enormous delta spreading out into several creeks and lagoons. The unity of these waterways encouraged a network of relationships within the basin. These river networks provided

⁴¹ Ogedengbe, Kingsley Oladipo, 'The Aboh Kingdom of the Lower Niger', C. 1650-1900 (PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1971), 1-5; Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Impact of Colonialism in Nigeria: A Case Study of Esanland 1897-1960' (M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2005), 1-50; Akubor Emmanuel Osewe, 'Colonial Domination and Cash Crop Production in Esan Division of Benin Province of Colonial Nigeria 1906 – 1960: A History of Agricultural Stagnation and Decline' (PhD Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2010), 1-30.

⁴² Ajayi, Ade & Alagoa, Ebiegber Joe, 'Nigeria Before 1800: Aspects of Economic Developments and Inter-Group Relations' in *Ground Work of Nigerian History*, Ikime, Obaro (ed.) (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigerian Ltd, 1980), 224.

⁴³ Ajayi, Ade & Alagoa, Ebiegber Joe, 'Nigeria Before 1800: Aspects of Economic Developments and Inter-Group Relations', 224.

routes of contact between peoples, cutting across the north and south axis, and supplementing it. Accordingly, one must recognise east and west movements of peoples and ideas as well as the north and south movements already suggested by the vegetation zones. It is because of this compactness that, despite the fortuitous manner in which the political unity of Nigeria came to be achieved, culturally and economically, Nigeria was not really an arbitrary creation⁴⁴.

Thus, from the above, it is clear that as far as Nigerian history is concerned, water bodies and maritime domains - including rivers, lakes, coastlines and coastal areas, creeks and tributaries, have, from prehistoric times, played significant roles in shaping human activities and history, culture, civilisation and socioeconomic developments. In the case of the selected riverine societies of Southeast Esan and their neighbours, the rich maritime domains have not only served as outlets for transportation, trade, and inter/intra-group relations and exploitation, but also as vital lifelines that have influenced the multifaceted development of societies, economies, and politics from time immemorial. It is therefore safe to argue here that the direct relevance of these water bodies to the history of the people/area can be seen in the way they affect settlement patterns, agriculture, communication and trade, as well as the people's outlook, concept of the world, among other things.

The People, Space and Time

It is essential to clarify from the outset that, although the paper focuses on societies in the Lower Niger region, the scope will be limited to societies around the riverine area of present-day Esan Southeast and their neighbours. It must be made clear that since the focus will be on the precolonial and colonial period, the societies in question should not be seen in the light of the present-day set-up. This is because these societies were often fluid and overlapping due to conquest, expansion and incorporation. In this way and over time, the communities have become an admixture of dialects, sharing the same culture, but in most cases retaining their original language. In fact, R.E. Bradbury, in a more graphic way, described the societies thus:

⁴⁴ Ajayi, Ade & Alagoa, Ebiegberi Joe, 'Nigeria Before 1800: Aspects of Economic Developments and Inter-Group Relations', 224.

The society is an indivisible one, with admixture of languages...the southeast Ebu, Inyelen and the settlements of Ibaji have sometimes been reported as Ishan communities. They claim, for the most part, Edo and Ishan Origin but speak a dialect of Igala with an admixture of Edo vocabulary. The social organisation exhibits Ibo characteristics, but most of their cults are clearly of Edo origin. In urho chiefdom, Ishan and Igala communities' live side by side, each retaining its own culture and social organisation; most of the people speak both Ishan and Igala. Igala is spoken as a second language in the Urowa and Ugboha chiefdoms⁴⁵.

According to Linguistic studies, the languages of the people belong to the Kwa-speaking sub-family of the Nige- Congo language family within the cluster of the kwa languages group and centring roughly in the area of the Niger - Benue confluence are Yoruba, Edo, Igbo, Idoma, Nupe, Igbirra, Gbagi and Igala, and their separation has been pinned between 2000 and 6000 years ago⁴⁶.

In line with the above, emphasis will be on these societies which occupied and traded along the bank of the river Niger. Some of these riverine societies include the riverine societies of Esan, their Etsako neighbours, as well as those around the Aboh (Agbor), the Igbo, part of Igalaland/people and their neighbours. These have occupied the area from time immemorial in the Nigerian territory⁴⁷. The settlement patterns, demography and occupation of the people are largely structured to meet the demands of the riverine environment. The unique feature of this area is that the

⁴⁵ Bradbury, Robert Elwyn, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-speaking people of Southwestern Nigeria* (London: Longman, 1957), 5, 22-25.

⁴⁶ Apeh, Apex A., and Chidi M. Amaechi, 'Agaba Idu: Historicizing Culture-Contact and Royalty among some Nigerian Peoples,' *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* 27, no. 1 (2019): 37-53.

⁴⁷ Akubor Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Role of Geography in fostering intergroup relations in Nigeria: A case study of Igala of Central Nigeria and Esan People of Southern Nigeria, circa 1500 – 1850 AD', *Lapai Journal of Central Nigeria History* 1, no.1 (2007): 15-21.

river Niger itself remains a vital commercial link, as it has been from the earliest time between the people⁴⁸.

Scholars⁴⁹ have repeatedly analysed the network of interlocking markets on the river, a structure that is clearly mirrored in the description of early European observers. Traders from Brass and other coastal states brought European goods to Esan at the trading station on the Niger (Illushi), where they were exchanged originally for slaves and later for palm oil. Also, Igala traders in far-ranging canoes carried goods up the Niger to Esan, where they met traders from Benin, Nupe, Sapele and Itsekiri land. The Esan traders cross over to Amalu, up to the Onitsha area, with their farm produce. In general, all the traders met at a market called Ega-Oria (later called Illushi), which to date acts as a converging point/port for economic activities. The Esan and Ifeku people generally controlled the operations of the market, and it was their source of slaves and market for their saleable goods. Baikie and Hutchinson observed in 1854 that the people were primarily agriculturalists, who fully exploited the resources of the land and water bodies, which they channelled into trade. Through this, they lived comfortably from the ample produce of their extensive farms/water resources and sold surplus, supplying Onitsha and Aboh with yams and cotton⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ Akubor Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Role of Geography in fostering intergroup relations in Nigeria: A case study of Igala of Central Nigeria and Esan People of Southern Nigeria, circa 1500 – 1850 AD'...

⁴⁹ Akubor Emmanuel Osewe, 'Edo Diaspora in Ane Igala: A Case study of the Agbacha Iwogun in Ibaji Land' in *A Diminishing Past-A Rescued Future: Essays on the Peoples, Traditions and Culture of the Esan of Southern Nigeria*, (eds.), Ukaugo V. and Akubor, E.O. (New Jersey: Goldline and Jacobs, 2013) Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Role Of Archaeological Evidence In Establishing The Relationship Between Man and His Environment in Oto – Esan, South-Western Nigeria', *The Journal of Zaria Historical Research*, III, no. 2 (2013); Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'Benin's Contributions to Trading Networks of the Lower Niger Region', in *Benin Studies Under The Scalpel: Essays in Honour of Ekhaguosa Aisien* (ed.) Uyilawa, U. (Benin: Institute for Benin Studies, Nigeria, 2020): 22.

⁵⁰ Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'Benin's Contributions to Trading Networks of the Lower Niger Region'...

Drawing the attention of scholars to the area of focus and the importance of the water bodies to the economy of the area, Osiruemu E⁵¹ wrote:

The myriad of waterways in the Lower Niger constituted important commercial highways. Among the various river ports in the area, Aboh occupied a central position, as it was visited by Edo, Igala, Ijo and Northern Igbo traders, and from Aboh, land and river routes radiate into the hinterland on both banks of the Niger. Such trade routes, on the west bank of the river, led from the important Niger markets of Allabeta and Autshi to Agbede in the Kukuruku country. Although the beginning of transportation facilitates in the Niger Delta cannot be determined with utmost accuracy, the early settlement of the region and organisation of polities in the region could only have been possible with the use of water transportation. The main tool for these business transactions was a canoe, for it was the canoe that made travel to the Delta possible and efficient⁵².

In line with the above, J.S., Boston⁵³, opined that the strategic geographical position of most of these societies around rivers helped in establishing strong relations that have stood the test of time. The source specifically pointed at the strategic position of the people of the western part of Igala on the Niger, who brought her into contact with a wide range of peoples and a great variety of cultures, such as the Igbo, the Yoruba, some Edo-speaking groups, the Igbirra, Agatu, Idoma and Jukun.

Water Bodies and Emergence of Human Settlements/Societies: Evidence from Oral History and Traditions

Historically, the oral tradition of a people tells the story of the hectic and tedious task of state formation. In the case of the societies around the Lower Niger region, the story revolves around how the people, over time, have been able to interact

⁵¹ Osiruemu Edith, 'Water Transportation in the Niger Delta 1500-1900', in *Precolonial Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Toyin Falola* (ed.), Ogundiran A. (Ertrea: Africa World Press Inc., 2005), 12

⁵² Osiruemu Edith, 'Water Transportation in the Niger Delta 1500-1900'...

⁵³ Mason, Michael, 'The Igala Kingdom-The Igala Kingdom', By JS Boston. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968. Pp. xiv+ 310; illus. and maps. 100s, 'The Journal of African History' 10, no. 4 (1969): 681-682.

meaningfully with their natural environment, to produce a sustainable, economically developed state.

Among the various traditions of the people inhabiting the area, most seem to agree with the view that the existence of water bodies around the area provided the necessary impetus for the emergence of human societies. As far as the traditions are concerned, the navigable waterways alongside it, encouraged movement into the area, while at the same time strengthening inter/intra-group relations.

For instance, it is believed that the emergence of the Ebu settlement in the area was influenced by the numerous waterways. Citing the oral tradition of the people, he argued that the tradition of the people holds that they migrated from Igalaland to their present site during the period of political crisis within Igalaland. During this period, there was no central authority under any particular individual and the people lived in separate settlements. According to the source, the crisis which erupted during this period, which led to the migration of some people, was centred on the struggle of the various settlements within Igalaland to control the major trade routes and centres within Igalaland. As a result of this, there was great loss of lives and properties, and so some settlements, especially, the one considered weaker, migrated to more peaceful areas along the River Niger banks, and one of these migrating groups was led by a man known as Kiri. It further argued that Kiri and his followers fled through the Niger to a place called Ode, where they also met a group of people also fleeing from one great king in Bini, whom they tried to oust from office, but could not succeed.

Another tradition among the Ifeku people also recognise the role of waterways in the selection of the area of settlement by the people. In his analysis, Akuba argued that the river bank bordering Esan's southeastern area in southern Nigeria attracted a large chunk of the migrants, especially Igala people from Central Nigeria, as a result of the resources it was able to provide for the people who were escaping from the oppression of Attah in Idah⁵⁴. Quoting the traditions of the people, Akuba argued that this tradition, as it concerns migration to the bank of the river, dates back to the pre-colonial period, during the reign of a great king in Ane-Igala, who sent some people out in search of building materials to build a befitting palace for the king. This group specifically went searching for a specific type of building rope (iku) for roofing. During the search, some people moved towards the rich and well-

⁵⁴ Interview with Peter Akuba, aged 80+, Okpatawo, Edo, 12 November, 2010.

watered area of Illushi/Ozigono (which later became a trading centre in Oto-Esan, serving as a melting pot for the Esan, Igala, Igbo, Bini, Usobo and Ijekiri)⁵⁵. At Illushi, the search team was able to acquire the needed Iku (rope), which they took back to Idah (the seat of the Attah), after which they returned to the “newfound land” with their kith and kin, and so this span of land was renamed Efa eku (Efa-Pull, Eku (Iku) – rope), meaning land of those who came in search of rope. This has been corrupted to Ifeku. Since that period to the present day, the area has continually attracted people due to its richness in aquatic resources⁵⁶.

Although the river Niger is the major river around the area, however, further research has shown that within the Ifeku area (longitude 6° 36' 1" E and Latitude 6° 43' 30" N), there are various water bodies, which coincide with the names of the villages. These water bodies over the years have sustains the socioeconomic life of the people. Some of this includes: Ukpo-ukpodo, aji-akpa, Ajiidagozi-piye, idagozi-lile, Ajikpata, Ukpogudu, ukpoegbolo, ukpo orpa, Ajiabutu, Ajiorbe, Ajigbegbe, Ajigagu, Ajikpopo, Ajiane, ajioguga, Ajiallah, Ajinwuchola, Ajiokoway, Ajielanyi, Ajiefoko, Ajipala, Ukpo-ibogujo, Aji owoli, Ajiofolo, Aji-agwowo, Ajikekele, Ajianekwe. Others are Iyegbi: Afah and Apulu, Adagwu lake; Okwoshimili: Charlachi, okwoshimili, Oyimah, Jaciaya and Ukpobogujo; Ajobe: Awoko lake⁵⁷. All these are considered instrumental in the economic life of the people, so much so that extant literature on economic development in the area made specific reference to some of them⁵⁸.

Establishing the role of the water bodies in the attraction of people as well as the evolution of settlements/societies, especially from Ifeku Island, water bodies, tributaries, trade links and commerce (economy) of the people environmental historians have argued that the earliest economy of the area revolved around the water resources, especially as it was able to create the necessary atmosphere for

⁵⁵ Interview with Peter Akuba...

⁵⁶ Interview with Peter Akuba...

⁵⁷ Interview with Oiko Daniel, aged 50+, Lagos, 15 July, 2024.

⁵⁸ Interview with Oiko Daniel...

trade⁵⁹. For instance, scholars agreed that along the Niger River above the Delta was another area of Interaction and the Ijo, Edo, Igala, and Igbo people. It has been specifically noted that the roots of the contact must go back for a considerable time before 1500, since among the Igbo west of the river, those elements of Edo culture which antedate the rise of the Benin Empire (c.1300) are more widespread than those that can be detected from Benin. From the testimonies of scholars⁶⁰, it has been established that due to the water banks, commercial activities, particularly trade from the Igala area to the Niger bank market, were always at the peak during flood season, and were conducted in canoes manned by the Igala canoe men. As early as the 19th century, the market pulled a large population, as observed in the 1830s, when some 300 canoes were seen going up to the market, while in 1841, 60 canoes holding from 2 to 70 men were observed returning from it⁶¹. This made the area a beehive of economic activities and integration.

It is important to note that it was as a result of these trade activities that the Igala culture and language spread beyond the original frontiers of Igala land into some other areas, especially among the Igbo people and the Edo people. In the case of the Edo area, it has been discovered that Igala settlement dots various villages of the Esan (Edo) people. This can be found in villages like Emaudo (Ekpoma), Ahia and Udakpa (Present Day Esan Southwest Local Govt Area), some parts of Ugboha and Irrua. In fact, the oral tradition of the Edo people holds that Irrua (an Edo community) was established by an Igala man, while Emaudo in Ekpoma was established by warriors from Igala. With this, the people have one claim or the other to have migrated from earlier settlements around the well water area⁶². Analysing the result of the above, Brooks, N.J, argued that the result of this trade relationship

⁵⁹ Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'Edo Diaspora in Ane Igala: A Case study of the Agbacha Iwogun in Ibaji Land'... 254-259.

⁶⁰ Baikie, B. Williams, 'Narratives of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwora and Benue in 1854', (London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1966).

⁶¹ Baikie, B. Williams, 'Narratives of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwora and Benue in 1854'...

⁶² Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Igala Factor in Esan History: Oral Traditions and Migration Revisited', *Journal of Benin and Edo Studies* 8 (2023): 18-33.

is the formation of an indivisible community of Ishan, Ibo, Kukuruku (Afenmai) and Igala, who formed most of the early settlements of the area⁶³.

According to the above source, by the first phase, the earliest settlers had become established, though in small groups, around the ancient centres with relatively little intergroup contact, but subsisting from the resources of their environment (particularly the waterways and resources). Analysing the issue, the source opined thus:

As we move into the second phase, we find some new developments creeping up. By the 1530s, the Idah-Benin war of 1516/17 had gone, but the trails of its social impacts remained behind. In the 1530s, the few dispersed settlements on the left bank of the river began to show some degree of heterogeneity owing to sporadic infiltrations into the society of the remnants of the defeated Igala army that had been taking refuge among the Ishan of the right bank. At the right bank, the Igala refugees were staying among the Ishan people of Ahia, Ugboha, and Anegbete, where some elements of Igala speech still survive. Though few stayed behind, the majority of them eventually found their way into the left bank villages in the southwestern Ibaji district. The descendants of those who did not cross to the left bank form the bulk of the population of those right villages that claim Igala origin in Bendel state today⁶⁴.

On the reason for such migration, the author continued:

The main reason that made them flee the right bank of the river was hostility from the people among whom they settled. Though the wars had ended and were far from the former war theatre, the fact that these defected Igala soldiers were in the enemy camp was enough for them to ensure the antagonism of the dreadful Ishaq and Inele people. There was trouble over the property right, ownership of land and heavy tributes were imposed on the defeated soldiers for the amount of land cultivated and hunting rights.

⁶³ Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Igala Factor in Esan History: Oral Traditions and Migration Revisited'...

⁶⁴ Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Igala Factor in Esan History: Oral Traditions and Migration Revisited'...

Other sources⁶⁵ also argued that apart from the diversification of ethnic groups, other changes and cultural items found their way into enriching the traditional system, especially through the waterways' economic activities. For instance, it has been established that the coconut tree was introduced into the southwestern Ibaji district by the immigrants from the right bank of the river, who were of the Edo origin. It is therefore not surprising that to date, coconut is called uno'ba (oba's Nut or kernel) in the Igala language.

The water bodies and resources, as well as the need to harvest them, also encouraged the development of technology, with which the people were able to control the new environment. For instance, although most of the settlements were around the riverbank, others who were farther in the interior thought of the idea of storing water for domestic use. Recognising this as a problem the people went about sorting themselves out.

In terms of commercial activities, it is important to note that market centres existed in the various areas supported by the waterways. The markets of this phase should not be thought of in terms of the present organised markets but rather as random gatherings of buyers and sellers to meet the demand of the moment. One of the most important markets that developed during this period was on the west bank of the river, Egga Oria. E.O. Akubor⁶⁶, argued that the market of Oria became important as from the beginning of the 18th century, especially as it relates to the exchange in products that were extracted from the rivers and surrounding streams. It is argued that the riverine people of the southwestern Ibaji district brought to the market dried (smoked) fish, palm produce and yams, which they exchanged for bananas, livestock and Ishan cloth (Ukpon Ododo). Bradbury also argued that through this trade and exchange, some varieties of bananas and plantain were introduced by the Esan (Ishan) traders to Ibaji district from the west bank of the river. The source argued that the Esan traders could have got these new food items

⁶⁵ Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Igala Factor in Esan History: Oral Traditions and Migration Revisited'...

⁶⁶ Akubor Akubor, Emmanuel Osewe, 'The Igala Factor in Esan History: Oral Traditions and Migration Revisited'...

from Benin, due to the early contacts with the Europeans, especially the Portuguese⁶⁷.

Similarly, it has been argued that through this waterways trade contact, cowry's currency became a means of exchange in the area before the end of the first economic phase (1700AD). This was supplied as well as introduced to the market by the Edo traders, who had acquired this much earlier⁶⁸. According to sources, most of the cowrie shells in southern Nigeria came from the Indian Ocean, and as such, as early as 1515, imports began to come to Benin through the Indian Ocean. Also, in the same period, the king of Portugal gave a Portuguese merchant to have 500 quintals of Cowries brought from India each year for the São Tomé trade. This placed Benin in a very advantageous position to have early use of cowries. In this circumstance, the use of cowries could have become a common item in the Esan territory, at most a century after it had been introduced to Benin. The claim by some informants that cowries, currency used in Ibaji, were first introduced from the right bank of the river is therefore plausible.

Along the Niger, there were trade connections at Oria on the west bank, Adamugu and Igala bank market at the Niger-Anambra confluence opposite Asaba. Items of trade were slaves, dried fish, beads, foodstuffs and palm produce. Dried fish was sold by the people of the southwestern Ibaji district at Oria, Adamugu, and Ogurugu, from where they were taken to Onitsha. According to Colonial Assessment Report⁶⁹. Igala yam trade alone for 1920 amounted to about £66,666. out of an estimated total of £81,046. This testimony has been buttressed by the accounts of other scholars⁷⁰, who argue that a large chunk of both aquatic and other agricultural produce from these riverain communities went as far as Benin, Lagos and other surrounding countries.

⁶⁷ Daryll, Forde (ed.), 'People of the Niger-Benue Confluence Area' (London, Oxford University Press, 1955).

⁶⁸ Johnson, Marion, 'The cowrie currencies of West Africa part I,' *The Journal of African History* 11, no. 1 (1970): 17-49.

⁶⁹ Brooke, N.J., N.A.K. 67/1920 Assessment Report.

⁷⁰ Bradbury, Robert Elwyn, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria: Western Africa Part XIII...*

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The above economic success, especially in the area of commerce, was possible through the provision of the environment, especially the water bodies. It is therefore in line with this that it is argued that the economic development of the area cannot be explained outside the ecology. The source specifically noted thus:

...the local traditions among the ozigono people explain that the movement to the area was a result of the availability of games in the area, as well as the abundant water resources in the area. This is often explained in terms of the mixture of people inhabiting the area. For instance, the Esan, Usobo, Ighalan and Ibo inhabit the area, with each still maintaining a link with their traditional homeland. With this, the society became an area of plural cultural interaction leading to the formation of an indivisible community⁷¹.

It is thus clear that the economic prowess and prosperity of these communities as well as the atmosphere that encouraged such an environment, cannot be completely divorced from the ambience provided by water bodies and their rich resources.

Canoe Building Technology and the Development of Fishing (Aquatic) Industry

It must be noted that the art and craft technology that developed in this area during this period revolved around the water bodies and their resources. For instance, the people were able to build canoes and boats with which they navigated the area. This is based on the fact that most of the settlements were located on an island. Due to the nature of the terrain, during the dry season, it is possible to crisscross the area on foot. However, this is almost impossible during the rainy (flood) season when the Niger overflows its banks. This makes the canoes/ engine boats and other means of water transportation the most common means of movement around the area. This is not in any way suggesting that the people and area are completely cut off from the rest of the region, as there existed a constant affair between peoples because one of the most important markets (for the people of this area) was at Oria, later moved to the right bank of the Niger (Egga Illushi). Since the market (and other surrounding major markets) held (and still hold) every four days, the Ibaji people and those from the interior Igala area constantly use the Niger by means of canoes. Today, this

⁷¹ Bradbury, Robert Elwyn, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria: Western Africa Part XIII...*

market is referred to as Egga (River bank) market, while the canoe/boat terminus is referred to as Egga Ejini (Ejini is a corruption of the word Engine)⁷². Commenting on the importance of the canoe system among the people of the riverine societies, E Isichei⁷³, argued that the canoes in coastal and riverine areas were the precise equivalent of the horse in the north. According to the sources, the canoe was a large-scale transport of bulky products over long distances, a function which no other form of transport could perform equally successfully, including the railway in the first years of its introduction. On the capacity of the canoe, the scholar continued thus:

The bigger canoes here made from a single trunk are the largest some of them are large enough to hold eighty men, and they came from a hundred leagues or more up this river bringing yams in large quantities...they also bring many slaves, cows, goats and sheep⁷⁴.

The act of canoe building was a profession that was practised by professionals who had vast knowledge of not just the carving, but also the best materials for the building. For instance, in the area of the Igala, the Nupe engaged in canoe making in the timber-rich area along the Okura River. In Itope District along the Niger bank, the canoe industry is jointly carried out by experts of Igala, Nupe, Kakanda, Igbirra, Yoruba and Bassa Nge extract. In the semi-rural area of Ibaji and Abejukolo-Ife, the antiquity of the canoe industry has gone beyond the limit that oral tradition can remember. So, they simply argue that the act/industry is as old as the establishment of their settlement. This situation is not peculiar to our area of study, as similar situations have been identified in adjoining riverine territories⁷⁵. For instance, it has been reported that the Arugbo people argued that they got the name of their initial settlement, a noted centre of canoe manufacturing. Thus, Arugbo was derived from

⁷² Bradbury, Robert Elwyn, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria: Western Africa Part XIII...*

⁷³ Isichei Elizabeth, *A History of Nigeria* (London: Longman, 1983),115.

⁷⁴ Isichei Elizabeth, *A History of Nigeria...*

⁷⁵ Byng Hall, 1918..., Chapman, R.S, 'Assessment Report on Ojoku District of Idah' (Kaduna: National Archives, 1919).

aru (canoe) and *Ogbo* (settlement), which translates as “canoe making camp”. Similarly, the art of making canoes is only famous among the states of the Eastern Delta, such as Apoi, Furupagha, Olodiana, Arugbo and Egbema, because of area possesses the right type of timber for making canoes. This also (directly or indirectly) bestowed on them the knowledge.

In case of fishing exercise and the harvesting of other aquatic animals, the professional fishermen were able to manufacture implements, especially fishing hooks (*Uwo*), either used for small-scale fishing or the fishing net (*Igan*), depending on the depth of the river or stream where the fishing expedition is to be done. The materials needed for the production of either the hook or net were locally sourced from among the riverine fishermen, especially the *Igala* (*Ighalan*), who were mostly sheltered around the Niger bank, referred to as *Ottu-Egga*. The *Edo* (*Esan*), alongside the *Ighalan* (*Igala*), *Usobo* (*Urhobo*) and *Jekiri* (*Itsekiri*) people, were able to provide the bulk of fish and other water resources that went into the profitable fish trade to Benin and the Lagos area. This formed the basis of the wealth, which they used to satisfy other needs⁷⁶.

The Water Bodies and Socio-Religious Existence of the People

The importance of these rivers in the natural environment of the riverain societies of Agbacha, their Esan, their Etsako and their Igbo neighbours, and their relevance to the history and culture of the area is in the way they have over the years affected the worldview of the people. In this way, the effects of ecology can also be seen in the traditional religion of the people, reflecting environmental features. Thus, for the Esan societies around water bodies, gods and goddesses became associated with natural features such as *Okun* (rivers), *Oto* (Earth/land), which were highly venerated and worshipped. Special occasions and feasts were held to commemorate their existence. During these festivals, various traditional dances like *Ilo*, *Agbega*, *Oleke*, *Abanyon*, *Aghemojie*, *Obodorhibhafa* and *Igbabonelimin* were displayed. The priests/priestesses of the various deities pour libations and make necessary sacrifices at the shrine of the deities. It is important to note that the calendars of these cultural and religious festivals were closely associated with the climate, seasons, as well as the first rain amukpe or harvesting of crops. The people of *Eidenu* (an Esan community) worship Amese, the god of stormy weather, to this

⁷⁶ Akubor Emmanuel Osewe, ‘The Impact of Colonialism in Nigeria: A Case Study of Esanland 1897-1960’, (M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2005).

day, while in *Oria* (which includes *Onogholo*, *Oria*, *Ukhuolo* and *Ogbokpa*), *Iyamolen* (a stream associated with wealth, fertility and agriculture) is deified and worshipped. Similarly, in the socio-political hierarchy of their Igala neighbours/people, the role of the *Onu-Aji* (water king) *Ebo-Omi* (water spirit /god) stands out very conspicuously. This is well displayed in the Egume District of Igala, where the *Onu-Aji* (water king) from the Adum clan is the chief priest of the god of Adale River, the main source of water supply for Egume town. It is worshipped to ward off war, smallpox and death.

Among the Agbacha people in the Esan area, the worship of *Ebo Omi* (water deities) is common. This system is synonymous with the practice among the people of Idah who worship the streams of *Odoma*, *Ihiake Atakpa*, *Okpe*, *Ikpako*, *Ebocho* and *Aduru*. In the Igala area, in the present Idoma-Igala boundary to the north eastern direction of Igala, the millet festival was centred on the worship of the Okoto river, while in Imane, north east of Ankpa, the first public performance of a new Onu Imane was a sacrifice to the god of the river Omulewu in the Idoma-Igala boundary. Among the Calabari people, water deities are commonly referred to as Owu Amapo. Among the Igbirra, the concept of *Ori* (spirit) covers many areas of life, such as peace, good luck, fertility, and bountiful harvest, among others. The *Ori* is believed to be resident and worshipped in a pool of water or part of a river⁷⁷. Among the Igbo neighbours, the worship of sacred waters such as the *Otamini* or the water wife *Wainya Wala Dala* was common among the people⁷⁸. The python is highly revered and respected because of its sacred nature. As far as the people are concerned, this sacred python is the representative of the river, and because the sacred python represents the river goddess, the sacred python is also called Idemili. It is therefore not surprising that it is from this river that the area got its name. It is in recognition of this that the people from the area call the sacred python *our mother*, acknowledging it as a goddess and a member of the community. As such, no one from Idemili eats python or kills it or does anything harsh to it. One unique characteristic of the sacred python is that, in spite of the fact that it is a poisonous

⁷⁷ Ibrahim, Y.A., 'The Search for Leadership in a Nigerian Community: The Igbirra' Tao, C. 1865-1954 (M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1968).

⁷⁸ Talbot, P. Amaury, *The People of Southern Nigeria: History, Ethnology and Language*, (London: Frankcass, 1967), 32.

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snake, it does not bite anybody from Idemili and this is why it lives freely among the people.x

Evidence of the above (even till date) is witnessed among the people of this area (just like their counterparts in other riverain areas), pointing to particular rivers, lakes or creeks as their ancestral home, family shrine and the worship of water deities. In this way, water bodies constitute a major aspect of their day-to-day life, especially in sacrifices (as witnessed by the author in 1986 in Ukpo lake in Ukpodo), oath-taking as practised in the various shrines like Ushanene, Olokun and Alamoka, purification, sanctification and blessings as in Onene shrine Uhiele⁷⁹, welcoming of guests (as customary among the people of Ifeku Island and their Alebeta neighbours), among others.

Conclusion

From the discourse, it can be argued that there is much to learn from the societies of the Lower Niger area, especially as it relates to man's interaction with the environment to attain meaningful socio-economic development. In the case of the area under study, the people were able to make good use of the opportunities provided by the water bodies in and around their environment. It is important to note that the natural providence of the river network in the area has been of tremendous importance in the establishment of links with adjoining communities. Through this, they were able to establish settlements/societies, which over time developed a strong trade and commercial network, exchange of goods, technology, cultural values and ideas. With time, this became an integral part of the people, as well as an important aspect of their civilisation. In this way, these societies continued to tame their environment, learn from others and by the eve of colonial rule, they had become economically independent and politically stabilised. This is a lesson that the current Nigerian society must emulate as far as attaining self-sufficiency and economic stability is concerned.

⁷⁹ Ibhawoh Fidelia, *Faith and Favour: An Autobiography of Mrs Fidelia Ibhawo* (Benin City: TDC Aumon, 2023), 37.

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