

Economic Potentials of the Lower Niger to Riverside Dwellers in Nigeria upto 1997

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the economic potentials of riverside dwellers on the Lower Niger River up to 1997. Trade is one of the most important subjects to study in the lives of the peoples of the Lower Niger. This study is significant because the interchange of goods whether as raw materials or manufactured items brought into contact different communities to exchange material, mental and spiritual aspects of life. The basic argument in this paper is that in the pre-colonial and colonial period in Nigeria, trade in the Lower Niger region was a major source of income for the sale of agricultural produce in the domestic market and for export of staple commodity crops. In the pre-colonial period the Nupe, Kupa, Kakanda, Kede, Igbira Koto, Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw people who were principally professional canoe men became pilots and captains of ships during the colonial period because of their mastery of the Lower Niger. They piloted ships conveying goods and passengers downstream to and from the south from Lokoja on the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue, through Agenebode, Idah, Onitsha, Asaba, Warri, Sapele and Burutu on the open sea to earn a living. The study adopts historical methodology using primary and secondary sources.

***Keywords:** Lower Niger, economic potentials, riverside dwellers, transportation services*

1.Introduction

The economic potentials of riverside dwellers of the Lower Niger in the pre-colonial and colonial periods were essentially trade in agricultural commodities and the piloting of boats. The Lower Niger River served a useful purpose in the interchange of goods and services for the peoples of the former Warri, Onitsha and Kabba provinces. In the pre-colonial period, the Nupe, Kupa, Kakanda, Kede, Igbira Koto, Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw people who were principally canoe men became pilots and captains of ships during the colonial period because of their mastery of the Lower Niger River. They piloted ships conveying goods and passengers downstream to and from the south from, Lokoja on the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue, through Agenebode, Idah, Onitsha, Asaba, Warri, Sapele and Burutu on the open sea.

Trade was an important aspect in the life of the peoples of the Lower Niger. Goods such as: salt, sugar, kerosene, clothes, shoes, cooking utensils, building materials, iron beds, headpans, shovels, bicycles, drugs, gun powder, head pans, etc were imported from overseas to the provinces in the Lower Niger via Burutu and Warri ports. Trade in agricultural commodities was one of the most important sources of economic well-being of the peoples of the Lower Niger in the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

The principal exports from Warri were palm oil and palm kernel. Consumption of imported provisions like rice, tinned fish, sugar, tea and coffee was considerable among the Itsekiri and Ijaw. From the hinterlands of Nigeria and Northern Nigeria came principal exports such as, cotton, groundnut, shea butter nuts, benniseed, and soya bean. River ports on the Lower Niger River were linked to Burutu.

The Lower Niger River passes through some major towns in Nigeria. These major towns were Lokoja, Agenebode, Idah, Onitsha, Asaba, Warri, Sapele, and Burutu. Most of these towns are located in the forest belt of Nigeria, a belt which is rich in valuable forms of sylvan produce, such as palm oil and palm kernel (one of the most important staples of West African trade) from which the southern territory derived its name "Oil Rivers" protectorate. Trade was the chief means of transmitting culture, tradition and civilization from one community to the other. The actual interchange of goods whether as raw materials or manufactured items brought into contact different communities to exchange material, mental and spiritual aspects of life.

2. The Lower Niger River

A.D. Ali in his Ph. D Thesis at the University of Lagos¹ described the Lower Niger as the portion of the River Niger which stretches from Lokoja, where the River Benue joins the Niger to form a confluence and flows southward to the Atlantic Ocean via a many-mouth delta. The study focused on the major channel of the Lower Niger which passes through Warri, Sapele, and Burutu where it empties itself into the open sea. This waterway used to be the best means by which man transported himself in the ancient periods in Nigeria. The Lower Niger had very considerable influence on many phases of human activities. Ogunremi² noted that in pre-colonial Nigeria there were professional transporters that used canoes before the construction of roads and the building of railways the Lower Niger was the main transport route for the riverside dwellers. Some of the most important cities, towns and villages in the Nigeria are situated along the Lower Niger.

The Lower Niger River was a very important highway which was found useful for British exploration in the early years of the nineteenth century as point of penetration for official military expeditions, for expeditions of trade and exploration. Clapperton's servants, John and Richard Lander (two brothers) finally completed the exploration of the Niger in 1832 and were able to establish (for the Europeans) that the River Niger flowed southward and emptied itself into the Atlantic Ocean. From that year onward, trade has existed on the river. The British maintained the first trading station at Lokoja at the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue.

Lady Lugard,³ wrote in *A Tropical Dependence*, that the Lower Niger River passes through some major towns in Nigeria starting from the confluence town of Lokoja to the open sea which include Lokoja, Agenebode, Idah, Onitsha, Asaba, Warri, Sapele, and Burutu. Most of these towns are located in the forest belt of Nigeria, a belt which is rich in valuable forms of sylvan produce, such as palm oil and palm kernel (one of the most important staples of West African trade) from which the southern territory derived its name "Oil Rivers" protectorate. Of the total length of 2,550 miles of the River Niger, about seventy five per cent or 1,980 miles are useful for commercial shipping. The entire Niger Basin is subjected to the influence of climatic variables characterized by a rainy and dry season from north to south.⁴

2.1. Peoples of the Lower Niger up to 1997

A.D. Ali,⁵ in his *Trade and Transport in the Lower Niger*, refers to the peoples of the Lower Niger as the inhabitants of former Kabba province with headquarters in Lokoja, Warri province with headquarters in Warri, and Onitsha province with Headquarters in Onitsha. The provinces were divided into divisions for administrative convenience. Each of the three provinces had five divisions. Warri, the headquarters of the then Warri Province sprang up as a town constituted along ethnic lines.⁶ Warri was originally inhabited by the Itsekiri, Urhobo, and Ijaw (the original name is Izon). British commercial enterprise attracted people to the site of present Warri.⁷ Lokoja is a nodal town. It was the biggest town and commercial nerve centre of Kabba province. The early inhabitants of Lokoja were traders and farmers. Lokoja was a commercial rendezvous for traders from all parts of Nigeria before the arrival of the European.⁸ Onitsha is situated on a terrace of the River Niger. Onitsha gained more importance as a nodal town with the completion of the Niger Bridge in 1966. Onitsha is one of the most important commercial centres in Nigeria.

In the colonial period, the three provincial headquarters in the Lower Niger served as the major urban centres and as a model for disseminating western civilization. From the outset, these provincial headquarters functioned as inland river ports. In the early days of colonial rule, most office jobs were performed by Creoles, Gold Coasters, Ibo and Yoruba. Other ethnic groups did not possess the qualification required to do the white collar jobs until the 1930s.⁹

A.D. Ali,¹⁰ in his M.A. Thesis at the University of Jos, identified the major ethnic groups in Lokoja on the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers as the Oworo, Bassa Nge, Nupe, Kakanda, Hausa, and Igbira Koto. The Oworo and Bassa Nge were farmers; the Nupe were fishermen, canoe men and farmers; the Kakanda were canoe paddlers and farmers; the Hausa were traders and farmers; the Igbira Koto were fishermen, canoe men and farmers while the Ebira, Okene and Okun were farmers and hunters.

Idah on the Lower Niger south of Lokoja is inhabited by the Igala speaking people. The Igala are dominantly farmers. They cultivate the palm tree and produce palm oil which they supplied to Lokoja and other towns on the Lower Niger. According to history, the Igala people migrated to their present location at Idah after the collapse of the Kwararafa Kingdom in the fourteenth century under the leadership of one Abutu Eje. The title of the traditional ruler of the Igala people is *Attah*. The first Attah was one Ayegbe Omo Idoko.¹¹

A second version of the origin of the Igala holds that the Igala people migrated from somewhere in Edo (most likely, Benin). The present ruling family of the Attah is a union of a band of Jukun immigrants with that of an older ruling race at Idah speaking a tongue resembling Yoruba. The Jukun people on ascending the throne adopted the title of Attah but introduced their own system of government.¹²

The Igalamela or nine clans were the first group of Igala to settle at Idah. It was these people that the Jukun met on arrival. These nine clans are still found at Idah today spread throughout Oji-Okoko or the

present Igalamela district. The Attah is a semi-sacred head, the father of the people. Inheritance in Igalala was patrilineal. If an Attah dies, his wives are inherited by the next Attah.¹³

The Nupe who live in Lokoja came to settle there to trade in about the seventeenth century as a result of its location on the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue. The Nupe language is spoken by several ethnic groups in the middle belt of Nigeria particularly around the Niger Benue confluence. The Nupe ethnic groups comprise Kakanda, Kupa, Gana-gana, Benu-Nupe, Kyada, and some Dibos.¹⁴ Some of the principal towns of the Nupe are situated on the Lower Niger such as Baro, Lapai, Bida, Pategi, Lafiagi, and Agaie.¹⁵

Ogunremi,¹⁶ wrote that the Nupe people used Lokoja on the Lower Niger River as an intermediate trading station on their way from the north or south of the Niger River in the pre-colonial period. Some of the Nupe people came to reside permanently at Lokoja. Before the British military intervention in 1897, some Nupe men were slave dealers. These slaves were captured from all over the middle belt of Nigeria especially around the Niger Benue Confluence and brought to Lokoja or taken to other parts of Northern Nigeria for sale. Nupe traders also brought goods such as knives, bridles, strips, ornaments, brass, Nupe cloths, leather and other items to Lokoja for sale.

The BassaNge have their home across the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue. Their largest settlement is Gboloko. They are dominantly fishermen and farmers. They cultivate okro, vegetables, tomatoes, pepper, garden egg, and cassava. They formerly co-habited Mount Patti (patti is a Nupe word for hill) with the Oworo at Lokoja but fled across the confluence to the eastern bank due to the incessant raid by Nupe slave raiders and frequent invasion by King Massaba's (of Nupe) forces.¹⁷ The BassaNge ethnic group was formerly under the Oworo chief but fled across the River Niger from Lokoja during the Fulani raids and settled at Kpata, the river bank south of Lokoja. Their traditional ruler was Maiyaki. The position of the traditional ruler was hereditary. The BassaNge were variously placed under the Olu of Oworo, Igbira district, Idah division, and later under the Attah of Igbirra in accordance with their expressed wish.¹⁸

The Kupa people in Lokoja are canoe pullers. They are found in Kupa district in Lokoja Local Government Area. Their principal town is Abugi. The district occupies an area of 276 square miles with a population of 3979 in 1923. The title of the traditional ruler is Etsu Kupa.¹⁹ The Kupa state that they are not Nupe in origin and that they originally inhabited Ebo on the River Oku in Kotangora province many hundreds of years ago. They migrated to their present home in Niger State due to inter-ethnic wars using canoes down the Lower Niger hence they were nicknamed Okupachi by the Nupe. Okupachi means 'a canoe puller' while Oku is the name of the river they came from. Although they have retained their dialect, they tend to adopt the Nupe language but speak it with a peculiar accent entirely their own. Another section of the Nupe are the Kakanda. According to archival sources,²⁰ they migrated from Idah with the Nupe. They are divided into two groups; the bush or farmer Kakanda and the river Kakanda. The Kakanda originally spoke the Igalala language but later merged it with Igbira thus producing a different language. According to Bajimi Mohammed:

The Kakanda migrated from the Jukun kingdom and settled in their present home, Budon (Abidon which means refuse dump) at

about the 1650. Many of them later settled in Lokoja as canoe pullers and traders.²¹

Archival sources however state that:

The Kakanda are found in Budon District. They occupied an area of 176 square miles with a population of 2209 in 1920 The Kakanda claimed descent from the Jukun. They claim they were the first followers of the Attah of Igala when he migrated from Jukun. It was he who appointed the first chief of the Kakanda when they resided at the western bank of the River Niger north of Lokoja. The position of the prime chief can be given to the descendants of any of the Jukun families.²²

Some Hausa people live in Lokoja. They are a heterogeneous group but speak a common language belonging to the Afro-Asiatic group.²³ The Hausa people came to Lokoja long before the arrival of the European. They came to trade in kola which they purchased from Ashante in Ghana and Yoruba land. They exported the kola to the northern part of Nigeria and other parts of Africa. With time, however, they came to settle at Lokoja which they found favourable for their commerce.²⁴

The Igbira Koto ethnic group in Lokoja came from Kotonkarfi, north east of Lokoja. They speak the Igbira language. In 1923, the Igbira Koto district occupied an area of 556 square miles with a population of 26,466. The Igbira are mostly canoe men and fisher men. Also found in the Kotonkarfi district are the Gwarri (Gbagi) who were mostly farmers. A.D. Ali,²⁵ in his M.A. Thesis noted that the Oworo ethnic group migrated from Lokoja at about 1800 during the Nupe raid to settle on the Agbaja plateau about twenty eight miles from Lokoja. In 1923, they occupied a district covering an area of 330 square miles with a population of 4,411. The title of the traditional ruler of the Oworo is Olu of Agbaja. The position of Olu is hereditary.

The three major ethnic groups in Warri province, as earlier stated, were the Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw. The Urhobo stretched from the Forcados River across the forest plains to the Warri division.³¹ The Urhobo ethnic groups were dominantly palm workers.²⁶ The Ijaw ethnic groups were predominantly fisher communities.³³ There are five outstanding Ijaw clans all of which have striking similarities. They live in the Forcados district and were reconstituted into ethnic divisions. The Ijaw have no tradition of migration outside the delta and may be presumed autonomous. According to the Iduwini legend (Ijaw on the east coast between the Ramos and Pennington creek) the Ijaw were often in conflict with the Itsekiri ending in Itsekiri predominance.²⁷

Ijaw custom distinguishes between community and family creeks. There is also distinction in the payment of dues by strangers. The Ijaw engaged on varied occupations but incomes are derived from joint family effort in produce cultivation, farming, trading, and fishing enterprises.²⁸ The Itsekiri and the western Ijaw clans inhabit the swamps of Forcados, Warri and Sapele.²⁹ The Itsekiri call themselves Iwere which was Anglicized to Warri by the British in the late nineteenth century. With the introduction of cash crop trade the Itsekiri became middle men. They guarded this position jealously for a long time.³⁰ The Itsekiri were good traders. The Itsekiri were politically the most important group in Warri province but are

numerically inferior to the Urhobo.³¹ Table 1 below shows population of the sub-ethnic groups, Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw in 1929.

Table 1: Population Statistics of the Sub-Ethnic Groups in Warri Province in 1929.

Sub-Ethnic Group	Clan	District or Division	Men	Women	Children	Total
Itsekiri	Itsekiri	Warri	2863	Not	Counted	*****
Urhobo	Ukpe	Sapele	7464	8255	8667	24386
	Ughara	Ughara	2386	2288	3693	8367
	Isoko	Ase	12826	13540	7840	34206
Ijaw	Kabowe	Ase	1674	2110	2383	6167
	Iduwini	Forcados	1407	2199	3607	7113

Source: NAI CSO 26/2 11857 Vol. 7. 1929 Warri Province Annual Report 20

According to a legend, the Itsekiri migrated from Benin towards the end of the sixteenth century and settled in their present location after a period of conflict with the Ijaw of Iduwini and Gulani (Ogulgaha) clans in Forcados district. The first Olu of Itsekiri lived at Ode Itsekiri about three miles from Warri. The biggest town of the Itsekiri is Big Warri originally called Ode Itsekiri. It is the ambition of every male of the clan to be buried there. The Olu's title carries with it both a religious and secular significance which gave him double power such that he could either side with the oracle priest or with the council.³²

Due to trade rivalry, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Itsekiri kingdom had been split into three main groups namely: the royal family in Ode Itsekiri led by Oritsemone, Yonwaren and later Ogbe; the Emaye group based in Jakpa and led by Tsanomi Numa and Dogbo, and the Ologbosere group led by Idibofun, Idiare, Awala, and Nana with Batere as base. The commercial and political rivalry among these groups constituted a major feature of Itsekiri history in the second half of the nineteenth century.³³

Mcphee,³⁴ in his *The Economic Revolution in British West Africa* opined that the colonial authorities rightly recognized that the development of waterways and railways is the surest way to rapid the economic development of Africa. Mcphee corroborated Lugard's view about transport in Africa. Mcphee believes that no meaningful development can be achieved in colonial export trade in Nigeria without the development of the railways and waterways. He noted that the two major problems faced by European capitalist investors in Nigeria was that of transportation and labour. The transportation of shea butter nuts from Northern Nigeria to the sea coast was particularly problematic. The difficulties encountered in transporting export produce to the seaports made it appear as if Northern region was cut off from the coast. Mcphee concluded that:

The importance of the transport factor in West Africa cannot be over rated. Half the tragedy of Africa lies in the word "transportation". Means of transport are essential to trade, but that is not all. The development in West Africa of modern means of communication will bring not only wealth, but new and desirable goods and ideas.³⁵

Onitsha is the largest town along the Lower Niger with a very important and large market. After passing the last rocky obstruction and heading due south, the river flows in its own alluvial deposits, and finally bifurcates into many branches and reaches the ocean, into which it has built out a vast delta. The drainage area of the River Niger amounts to 430,000 sq. miles. It is drained by many affluent tributaries. The Forcados River alone had a good waterway to the River Niger, and owing to the difficulties of negotiating the Bars at the Benin and Escravos rivers, it forms the port of entrance to Warri and Sapele. The rest of the tributary from Ramos to Opobo has no good approach to the Niger.³⁶

Forcados River is the most accessible estuary of all the rivers immediately inside the bar. From Forcados, large-ocean going vessels can navigate along inland waters to Sapele 138 kilometers, and Warri 65 kilometers. The Forcados form the main navigable outlet of the Niger River which it joins at Samabri, 175 kilometers to Forcados. For some 24 kilometers of this distance, namely, from Bar to Gashawk there is 30 feet of water and thence for 48 kilometers to Ganagana the least water is 9 feet according to season. Forcados is the trans-shipment port in so far as its use for Niger River is concerned.³⁷

The ports of Burutu, Sapele and Warri form the link with inland navigation on the River Niger. Burutu port was established on an island in the Western Niger Delta in the opening years of the twentieth century. Earlier, the Forcados estuary was the best entrance to the Benin port as ships measuring twenty feet could cross the bar. Later the Escravos estuary was opened for sea-going ships in 1938 when the situation of the Forcados estuary gradually deteriorated to as low as twelve feet. The Lower Niger River is navigable by ocean-going vessels from the conference at Lokoja to the open sea at Burutu during the rainy months of May to October when there is high water. This is because there are usually no constraints on the movement of ships during this season.

2.2. Economic Potentials of the Lower Niger upto 1997

The Lower Niger River served a useful purpose in the interchange of goods and services for the peoples of the former Warri, Onitsha and Kabba provinces. Trade in the three provinces had certain common features. These features include fluctuation in prices of agricultural produce, export of staple crops as a major source of income to farmers, and farmers spending a larger part of their income to purchase imported manufactured goods.

In the Lower Niger, the palm tree which is semi cultivated by natural regeneration, was the most valuable economic tree and is generally distributed in groves of land formerly under cultivation. The Urhobo are the largest tenders of the palm trees. They established semi-permanent palm working settlements not only in their own lands but on both Itsekiri and Ijaw lands and paid dues for such use. Efforts to popularize the cultivation of the culley palm oil trees in the districts of Ashaka, Kwale, Sapele and Warri in 1928, was only popularly embraced by the Urhobo. Kernel cracking machines were

introduced in June 1929. In the same year, a palm tree forest reserve was started at Okpe territory. Kernel cracking machine gained popularity among the Ijaw. It was sold for five pounds.³⁸

Archival sources,³⁹ reveal that kernel formed the bulk of staple export. The Urhobo produced the greater quantity of the palm kernel exported but it is difficult to estimate the amount or quantity of Urhobo production alone in any particular year. Among the people of the Lower Niger (aside from the Itsekiri and Ijaw), yam and cassava served as staple food. They were widely grown in all the provinces. Because of their marine environment the Itsekiri and Ijaw were chiefly producers of sea foods such as periwinkle and salt (from the mangrove plants and from the sea water). They also produced clay pots and straw mats from local reeds. The Urhobo produced food crops such as plantain, starch, garri, cocoyam and palm oil. The staple food crops of the Warri province during the period of this study were cassava, yam, plantains, cocoyams. The luxury foods were maize, groundnuts, and sugarcane.⁴⁰

An informant, Mrs. Nkiru Okeke observed that⁴¹ commodities like yam, cassava flour, onion, pepper, beads and beans were brought downstream mostly by the Hausa and Nupe from Lokoja and other parts of the north for sale. The supply of foodstuffs such as cassava, yam, potatoes, okro, tomatoes, garden egg, corn and pepper was seasonal. For instance, in the months of May, June and July, potatoes, garden egg, cassava and other products were supplied. In the months of July, August, September and October, corn and yam, were the main supplies. Tomatoes and other vegetable crops came mostly in the dry season. Yams, potatoes, beans, corn, tomatoes and pepper were mostly taken downstream from Kabba and Onitsha province to Warri province. Majority of the Igbo traders on the Lower Niger were Anam. There are seven main Anam villages, namely, Umudorra, Umuikwu, Umueze, Mmiata, Umuoba, Oromaeti and Umuemem.

In the 1830s, trade in elephant tusk was a booming business in Asaba. They made bangles, ear rings, trinkets, and other ornaments from elephant tusk. Cotton was also cultivated in commercial quantity. Elephant tusk and cotton were the major items of trade which Asaba exchanged with her neighbours particularly the Nupe, Hausa, and Igala from Idah, Lokoja and Bida. Items that came downstream from Lokoja and other parts of the north included yam, slaves, caps and beads. There were two busy slave ports on either side of the River Niger at Asaba. Slave trade was abolished in Asaba in 1885. The anti-abolitionist movement in Asaba called Ekumeku carried out attacks against the abolitionists and the RNC at night.⁴²

There was also a very busy slave port in Lokoja in pre-colonial and colonial periods. The Nupe and Kakanda canoe men helped to transport the slaves in canoes through the Lower Niger downstream to the sea ports.⁴³ Ogunremi's⁴⁴ account of the antiquity of the river trade in Nigeria and the use of the dug-out canoe frequently referred to the Nupe, Kupa, Kakanda and Kede groups. These groups had used the canoe for centuries before Ibn Batuta saw it on the Niger in the mid fourteenth century.

Also, because of the location of Onitsha along the River Niger there was a lucrative slave market there. Europeans came to Onitsha to buy these slaves. Although, Onitsha people participated in the business of buying and selling of slaves, they did not sell their own people into slavery. The business life of Onitsha was provided by the non-Onitsha *Igbo*.⁴⁵ Specialization in profession in the Lower Niger took the form of household industry. The immediate environment dictated the type of profession that people

specialized in. The Kede, Ijaw, Nupe, and Igbira Koto specialized in fishing and transportation of goods in canoes and boats. According to A.K. Hwohwohu:

The Nupe, Kede, Kupa, Kakanda, Ijaw and Igbira Koto people were professional canoe men who provided the transportation services required on the Niger. They moved goods and persons from Bida and Lokoja downstream to Onitsha, Warri, Sapele, Asaba, Forcados, Burutu and other places on the Niger and delta.⁴⁶

R.K. Udo,⁴⁷ has noted that in the Warri province pottery and palm oil manufacture was the traditional activity of the Okere and Ugbori people. The Urhobo exchanged their palm oil, plantain, cocoyam, starch, and kpokpo-gari with other communities in the Lower Niger. The Urhobo villages which mostly produced these trade items include Ukpalla, Kiagbodo and Eruhu. Market day was fixed at nine days intervals where commodities were exchanged.

Aboh in the Lower Niger was a rich and powerful trading state beginning from the nineteenth century (precisely from the 1820s). It built up a virtual monopoly of the trade of the Niger Valley because of the strength of her war canoes with which she was not only able to hold Ijaw pirates in check but also protect her long distance trade. Aboh had trading relations with Asaba, Onitsha, the Igala Kingdom, Ukwani, Isoko and the neighbouring communities now in Delta state. The articles of trade included slaves and palm oil, arms and ammunition from Brass. Aboh sold food crops and exported commodities to all her neighbours including the Igala people.

In 1830, Aboh warlords on routine patrol with fifty canoes took John and Richard Lander captive at Asaba until some ransom was paid by King Boy of Brass.⁵⁴ Obi Ossai of Aboh who contested his position as an independent monarch with the leaders of the 1841 expedition later surrendered and was made to sign a treaty to promote peace and profitable trade in commodities. In 1851, Aboh went to war with Nupe in a struggle over trade. In 1870-80, Aboh fought against the Anam Igbo who tried to bar Aboh from reaching their Igala markets.⁴⁸

Laird and Oldfield's,⁴⁹ account in their Expedition in the early years of contact with the Europeans in the Lower Niger, articulated that the major articles of trade from Europe were gun powder, cloth, tobacco, smoking pipes, knives, mirror and carpets. On the domestic market, the following items were offered for sale: yams, palm oil, bullock, fowls, animal skin bags, ivory, pepper, cotton, Arabian mare, cloth and mat.

From 1870, export trade to Europe include groundnut, leather, beniseed, shea nut, tobacco, cotton, soya beans. and other commodities such as elephant tusk, snail shell and reed. These items were transported on the Niger to Burutu and Warri from where they were transshipped overseas. The crops were cultivated around the Niger-Benue conference by the Gwari, BassaKomo, GanaganaIgbira and the Hausa people in Kabba province.

Foodstuffs were purchased from different parts of Northern Nigeria especially, Makurdi, Gboko, Lokoja, Idah, Dekina, Umaisha, Koton-Karfi, Loko, Yola, Jimeta, Adamawa, Bauchi and Gombe. Items which were taken upstream from the Lower Niger River included palm oil, garri, fish,

fruits, vegetables and bamboo sticks. In the course of trade, some of the Kakanda were reported to have migrated and settled at Onitsha, south of the River Niger and Yola on the River Benue.⁵⁰

Pa Abraham Hwohwohu,⁵¹ observed that goods such as salt, sugar, kerosene, clothes, shoes, cooking utensils, building materials, iron beds, leadpan, bicycles, drugs, gun powder, head pans, etc were imported from overseas to the provinces in the Lower Niger via Burutu and Warri ports. The principal exports from Warri were palm oil and palm kernel. Consumption of imported provisions like rice, tinned fish, sugar, tea and coffee was considerable among the Itsekiri and Ijaw.

Prices of agricultural produce fluctuated according to the season. Commodity prices were lower in the harvest season months of June to October as most farmers offered their produce for sale. This is particularly true of perishable commodities such as vegetables and fruits. On the contrary, prices of farm produce were higher during the planting season months of February to May. During the harvest season, farmers had more income from the sale of their produce. Standard of living was higher in the provinces during this season when farmers exchanged their produce for cash with which they purchased provisions. Although prices of farm produce were higher in the planting season, farmers got lesser income because most farmers would have sold their produce soon after harvest. On the whole, produce prices are subject to fluctuation due to the uncertainties of global market prices.⁵²

As a result of the fluctuation in produce prices some traders of the Warri province conveyed their goods as far as Lagos for sale for higher profit and when returning, purchased trade goods far cheaper than at Warri or Sapele. For example, Chief Sam Itsekiri usually shipped large canoe loads of oil and kernels through the creeks to Lagos, returning with trade goods bought in Lagos far cheaper than they can be in Warri or Sapele. The trip took only twelve days wherefore he reaped much bigger profit than he would by dealing with local firms. By this transaction, large quantities of palm oil and palm kernels left Warri province direct for Lagos for export thereby depriving Warri of such shipment.⁵³ The transaction described above perhaps, justifies Frederick Lugard's main argument that transport enables trade to take place on a larger scale than was hitherto possible and that trade between groups of people increases the well-being of society.⁵⁴

Ikime,⁵⁵ in *Groundwork of Nigerian History* enumerated one of the economic importance of transportation as the most vibrant lubricant to trade. Before 1850, large ships could not really berth at Ode-Itsekiri and Ughoton on the Forcados River in the western Niger delta because it was shallow. The development of ports during the colonial period induced economic changes essentially in the area of cash crop production such as ownership of rubber and palm plantations.

The Itsekiri country is connected by a network of creeks to the Lagos Lagoon which made it possible for goods to be delivered from the Itsekiri kingdom to Lagos and Quidah. Firms in the province protested against this method of trading as it deprived them of some revenue and considering that they had to pay tax on rent. Nevertheless, the colonial authorities refused to intervene despite protests from foreign traders insisting that the firms brought down their prices close to what prevailed in Lagos.

According to HRM Ogunrimerime,⁵⁶ the Itsekiri dominated the colonial trade for many years. They were respected by the Urhobo for this reason. For this reason, many Urhobo women were attracted to Itsekiri men who married them. Similarly, many Urhobo men took pride in marrying Itsekiri women. But in later years, the Urhobo woke up to trade more on their own instead of using the Itsekiri as middle

men. They took the initiative of trading directly with the foreign firms or using their own Urhobo middle men when they discovered that they were being exploited by the Itsekiri. The Urhobo discovered that the Itsekiri middle men used to tamper with the cask measurement so as to reduce the quantity of palm oil and kernel it could hold.

Altogether, before the construction of roads and the building of railways the canoe was the universal vehicle of transportation particularly in the Warri province. In the Itsekiri and Urhobo controlled waterways, the canoe was popularly used for conveying passengers and goods. In the pre-colonial period, the canoes were propelled manually using wooden paddles. When the steam engine came to use from 1870, boats and ships became more popular as vehicles of water transportation.

Nadel,⁵⁷ in *A Black Byzantium* described the Nupe, Kupa, Kakanda, Kede, Ijaw and Igbira Koto as principally canoe men in the pre-colonial period who became pilots and captains of ships during the colonial period because of their mastery of the Lower Niger River. They piloted ships conveying goods and passengers downstream to and from the south – Bida, Lokoja, Idah, Onitsha, Warri, Burutu and to the sea. Because of their familiarity with the River Niger, they could predict or tell the safest direction for the vessel. The river ports in the Lower Niger were linked to Burutu. Thus, Burutu occupied a significant position in the network of communication in the Lower Niger.

The journey from Onitsha on the Niger to Lokoja at the confluence took two days by engine boat moving up river. It was easier for the canoe men to come downstream because it was a one-way movement so they spent one day. They spent more days while moving upstream because they had to move against the tide. After the construction of roads, traffic on the Lower Niger River declined. Passengers who traveled by these boats were mostly villagers and traders who were not linked by roads.⁵⁸

The location of Onitsha on the eastern bank of the Niger directly opposite Asaba and the road which crossed the Niger from the western part of Nigeria gave it an advantage of serving as the gateway to Eastern Nigeria and to Igbo land. Also, because of its location, Onitsha grew to become an important commercial nerve centre in Igbo land. Indeed, Onitsha market, up till now, is one of the biggest in Nigeria. Onitsha market has grown to accommodate both imported European merchandise and locally produced goods.⁵⁹

From Onitsha and Lokoja on the River Niger in the colonial period, ships conveyed produce to the seaports of Warri and Burutu. The ships could go upstream to Lokoja and Yola in the rainy season months of July to October during high tide. The goods which they brought to the sea ports were discharged and re-loaded for export overseas. The number of days the ships waited depended on the volume of load carried and the size of the ship. It was possible for ocean-going ships to come in to Burutu and Warri to discharge or load all the year round. Although, Warri was a centre for the distribution of European manufactured goods, its commercial life was sustained by the products of the agricultural sector in the hinterland.⁶⁰

The use of lorries as vehicles of transportation from the 1920s minimized the use of head portage. The lorry alleviated the trouble taken by farmers to convey their farm produce to the market. Compared with their neighbours in the Onitsha and Kabba province, the people of Warri province relied more on water transport than on land transport.⁶¹

3. Conclusion

The discussion in this paper focused on the economic potentials of riverside dwellers on the Lower Niger in the pre-colonial and colonial periods up to 1997. Trade was an important aspect in the life of the peoples of the Lower Niger. Goods such as salt, sugar, kerosene, clothes, shoes, cooking utensils, building materials, iron beds, leadpans, bicycles, drugs, gun powder, head pans, shovels, etc were imported from overseas to the provinces in the Lower Niger via Burutu and Warri ports. Consumption of imported provisions like rice, tinned fish, sugar, oven tea and coffee was considerable among the Itsekiri and Ijaw. From the hinterlands of Nigeria and Northern Nigeria came principal exports such as cotton, groundnuts, shea butter nuts, benniseed, and soya beans. The Lower Niger served a useful purpose in the interchange of goods and services for the peoples of the former Warri, Onitsha and Kabba provinces. In the pre-colonial period the Nupe, Kupa, Kakanda, Kede, Igbira Koto, Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw people who were principally professional canoe men became pilots and captains of ships during the colonial period because of their mastery of the Lower Niger. They piloted ships conveying goods and passengers down river to and from the south from Lokoja on the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue, through Agenebode, Idah, Onitsha, Asaba, Warri, Sapele and Burutu on the open sea to earn a living. The economic potentials of riverside dwellers of the Lower Niger in the pre-colonial and colonial periods were essentially trade in agricultural commodity crops and the piloting of boats. River ports on the Lower Niger River were linked to Burutu.

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