
PRE-COLONIAL MARKET CENTERS IN CENTRAL NIGERIA AREA: A CASE STUDY OF KARU

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Abstract

Exchange of goods and services between Nigerian peoples in Pre-colonial times remains a grossly neglected area of research. Yet, evidence abounds to show that there was a lot of coming and going between different Nigerian communities long before colonial advent. Domestic exchange during this period was far more important economically than foreign trade. In Karu majority of the households undoubtedly produced the greater part of the goods they required as consumers. Most households regarded trade as a normal and an integral part of their activities, and planned their production strategy accordingly. Although most households produced most of their basic needs in the pre-colonial era, the economy was nevertheless very much market – oriented. The existence of specialist producers of certain items, arising from variations in natural and human resources bases, dictated economic inter-dependence. Trade was in consequence, a crucial component of the economy for it is through trade that disparities in productive capacity between communities are bridged. This paper contends that trade in pre-colonial Karu as elsewhere, is as old as man himself, and the concept of the market is appropriate to early as well as to more recent times.

In this article, the term Middle Niger is used as a geographical rather than a political term to refer to the territory of the Gbagyi (Karu) settlement which derived its name from a hero called Karu. This article which focuses on pre-colonial market and market organization is offered as a contribution towards the improvement of our knowledge of the history of this very important region of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Trade in pre-colonial Karu just as in other places emerged as a result of the complementary needs of communities which were in close proximity to each other: Indeed, trading was done mostly, but not entirely in the market place. It was very rare to find a community without a market. The distributive system can be categorized broadly

Academic Excellence

into two i.e. domestic and external trade. By domestic trade we refer to exchange of goods and services within the territory that later became Nigeria and between the peoples who lived within it. By external trade we mean trade between Nigeria on the one hand and the outside world on the other. Trade across the Sahara desert and the Atlantic Ocean typifies this.

Short distance trade resulted from the production strategy of local households and from variations in the natural and human resource endowment of the micro environment. The basic aim of most households was to secure the products needed to maintain their customary standards of living. The traders involved in local exchange tended to be predominantly female. They were mainly female because local trade was a convenient adjunct to household and, in some farming societies, they were part time because trade was regarded as a supplement. Markets in pre-colonial Karu were predominantly periodic, not daily. Periodicity varied according to culture areas, but four day, five day and seven day periodicities were wide spread. Periodicity was a function of a combination of factors, low purchasing power of consumers, sparse population and an insufficiently diversified economy.

One common feature of local trade is that, it posed few transportation, logistical and security problems as participants in it came, as it were, from walking distance. Secondly, agricultural and easily perishable goods dominated local exchange. This was so because the system catered mostly for the subsistence needs of households. Of course, apart from its commercial import, the market place was a venue for social interaction: gossips were bandied about, lovers met and dated and some people went there to enjoy the thrill of mass gathering.

Origins and Early History of Karu

As earlier mentioned, Karu settlement derived its name from a hero called Karu. (Mailafiya, 1994) Bitrus Narai collected some traditions which claim that Karu was a brother to one Queen Amina of Zaza (Zazzau/Zaria) who migrated south wards. He left Zaria in C. 1400 AD to Dotoo (angwan Korofi) of present day Keffi. (Mailafiya, 1994) Karu and his people later left Dotoo in C1500 to Maraba hill (about 15km east of Kurape). Karu died at Maraba at the age of 150. His descendants migrated further westwards to found old Karu in the forest in C 1600. This settlement is claimed to have grown in size and had a population of about 5,000 by the beginning of the 19th century. He did not say how he came about the exact dates in the traditions. The tradition further stated that not all the people left Dotoo to Maraba and Karu, some of them stayed back and are still there. Other migrants from all directions joined Dotoo and founded new wards like Pe-biyi (meaning small settlement) Reno near river Antau/Anyinutom and Kupan Gwari south of Dotoo. These settlements are claimed to have been exclusively Gbagyi. They grew in size and merged as one settlement which was later named

Pre-Colonial Market Centers in Central...

Piyaako, meaning Urban center. This development happened when Karu had long left. It is also claimed that until Karu's death at Maraba near Kurape, he maintained his ties with Queen Amina by sending to her yearly gifts (gaisuwa) of 100 slaves.

Although traditions in Hausaland point to the fact that Zaria had connection with Gbagyi speaking people and that same Zaria people migrated to Gbagyiland, and some Gbagyi settlements paid taxes in form of slaves to Zaria since Queen Amina's days, but much more clearly as from the 18th century. Indeed, the urbanization of Zaria was characterized by stationing Gbagyi slaves in their farm estates (gandaye) and their children (chuchunawa) became Islamized (Mailafiya, 1994)

A different informant related that Karu was founded by a man named Iya Karu from Birnin Gwari, and that he was the younger brother of Mali/Yaali the founder of Waru. A similar tradition was presented by some title holders in Karu District which claimed that all Gbagyi people originated from around Kano and Katsina and later migrated to Zaria during the reign of Queen Amina in 1536. They again moved to Birnin Gwari where they were dispersed by Fulani raids. Then they went to Niger-Benue, confluence area. The migrants founded Karu in 1600 A.D. and were brought under the Suzerain of Queen Amina in 1689. (Mailafiya, 1994)

This tradition strikingly corroborates with another collected from Zaria which was reported by Arnet, claiming that Zaria town was founded by Bakwa Turunku, the 22nd ruler in 1536, c. in the chronicles of Zaria, when he moved away from Zaria, Turunku was named after his second daughter, whose elder sister by name Amina later ruled the settlement. Despite this corroboration, the date claimed by Karu people as the date of their arrival does not agree with the date Amina ruled as found in the traditions collected in Zaria. It might be very likely that some of the story tellers in Karu had learnt of this tradition in secondary works which they knitted to their tradition/origin. This could be so since no tradition of migration can specify 1536 as the date of Gbagyi arrival at Zaria. (Arnet, 1920)

Pre-colonial Society and Trade among the Gbagyi People of Karu

The characteristics of communal pre-dynastic and state societies in this area is similar to that in the Jos Plateau area and down to the Niger/Benue confluence area. A scientific theory of evolution of settlements in the Savannah was propounded by Abdulahi Smith. The area derived its livelihood in similar ways as the environment permitted (Smith, 1987). Their closeness encouraged common ties. The indigenous traditional polities or authority structures and cultural ties had similar features from one society to another and built on common economic activities.

The basic unit of production was the household (Piwa) comprised of families of the same forbear (azakoi) and extended relations (obeh) who lived in a common compound (Piwa). The household normally split into smaller units for effective control and administration (Byanyiko, 1971). The lineage-head or chief was normally the descendant and the founder of the settlement. Therefore he could allocate land for housing and farms to new comers. The portions allocated to immigrants such as the Gade, Afo, Bassa, Gwandara and Hausa were usually delineated (Byanyiko, 1971). Natural barriers like streams and hills were good land boundaries, where there were no such natural marks, baobab tree, cotton tree and any big tree were used to demarcate the boundaries. National Archives Kaduna (NAK K3148).

The dominant economic activity has remained farming since almost all the people take farming as their main occupation. The household has been noted to be the most economic unit in virtually all West African societies. Other economic activities that supplemented agriculture and which helped with the diversification of economy were pottery, metal smelting and smiting, crafts and sylvan production.

Pottery: Pottery was the most wide spread since the clay for potting is found in patches all over the region. Pottery in this region is of great antiquity and has been identified as part of the Nok culture. Archaeological dating of the potting there as iron work in Taruga revealed that the inhabitants and the crafts are direct continuation of the Nok Culture that flourished there between 6th century B.C to 1st century A.D (Mailafiya 1994). Thus Gbagyi pots were admired by outsiders and Europeans for being famous, Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA 1989). At the eve of Colonial conquest, British government assessed the Gbagyi pottery and observed that it was of “high quality and remarkable beauty”. The colonial government then wished that the pottery be supervised by the government and Abuja to become a “major national pottery center (Mailafiya, 1994). The potters were taxed in cowries and in kind.

The manufacture of these pots were carried out mainly by women. The work was done mostly in the dry season. Pots were used as storage facilities which augmented calabash and wooden materials. Bassa pots were sold in Ebira markets in Igu and Opanda area. Gbagyi pots were sold at Ninkoro, Awe, Lafia, Nupeland and to the Ebira. (Mailafiya, 1994). The pot business was so brisk that some Gade and Gwandara people became pot traders. oral tradition indicates that Kurape and Karu pots were the best in the region. The ceramic art and portability of Gbagyi pots drew admiration that the Gbagyi were praised for being “famous for their pottery.” (Shekwo, 1986). It is however important to state here that pottery industry was one of the oldest industries that influenced the growth of local and regional trades in the pre-dynastic period (Shekwo, 1986). Change occurs, but not necessarily in the direction of industrialization. All societies have an economic system, in that they provide material

Pre-Colonial Market Centers in Central...

goods to satisfy biological and social wants, but the code devised for operating this system may not centre on economizing and maximizing principles of the kind which are thought to predominate in modern industrial societies.

In pre-industrial societies transactional rules other than price may be more important in determining the terms on which goods are exchanged. The principles governing market activity in these societies may be those of reciprocity, (obligatory, gift – giving among friends and kinsmen) and redistribution (the reallocation of customary receipts by a social determined authority. (Hopkins, 1973).

Another industry that had significant impact on the historical process of Karu was metal smelting and smiting. The metals mined in the region were Iron, copper and gold. Iron ore was found in patches all over the central Nigeria area. Hence smelting and smiting was an important industry in this region. The most important centers of smelting and smiting were Rubochi, Chikara, Taruga, Burari, Karu, Maitama, Kurape and Kurudu (Mailafiya, 1994). Only the Taruga site (a Gbagyi settlement in Niger state) has been dated by archaeologists and found to be one of the oldest iron working sites in the world belonging to the Nok culture which flourished between the 5th century B.C. The various economic pursuits of the people influence hunting etc needed heavy and strong iron implements. For instance, farming, crafts, hunting etc needed heavy and strong iron implements. Every male adult had at least two types of hoes in addition to a knife, a cutlass or axe and ten arrows. Hunters used spears, arrows, hooks and so on. Hence, iron was the bedrock of all Nigerian activities. These iron implements were for both local use and for regional trade. Ohiare has noted that the iron in this region was of high quality and was an item of export to Hausa land. (Ohiare, 1988)

The use of iron had significant impact on the historical development of the peoples of this region. Apart from its high commercial value, iron aided improved techniques on hunting, fishing and other forms of food processing. This meant better diet intake for the people which in turn led to population growth and socio-political changes.

The use of iron implements in this region also influenced demographic changes. Iron smelting and smithing attracted immigrant blacksmiths into the area from Hausa land who came to trade. Indeed, trading was done mostly but not entirely in the market places. It was very rare to find a community without a market. Some large and populous communities such as Bida, Kano and Ibadan had more than one market “Hidden trade” was engaged in by Muslim women whom the Koran forbids to trade in the open (Onwuka, 2001). Attendance at some markets ranged in several hundreds. Markets in pre-colonial Nigeria were predominantly periodic, not daily. They still are in the rural areas of the country. Periodicity varied according to culture areas’. Neighboring

villages and towns normally arranged their markets into a ring or cycle so as to avoid clashes between the markets. Market rotation ensured that each community in a ring had easy access to the goods and services it needed.

The most glaring external factor that aided the growth of market in this region was trade. The Bassa, Ebira fishermen to the south of this region, dominated the trade along the Benue, Ebira and Igala known together as Akpoto and Kakanda penetrated the villages in northern Benue Basin to exchange their goods for local products. These were goods brought from the coast. Similarly, Hausa traders came from Zaria and Katsina area to trade with the Gbagyi. In addition, the Yeskwa, Jaba and Mada traders penetrated the area through Ninkoro and Kupan Gwari. Through these trading network, the Karu area was linked to the West African trading system. (Byanyiko, 1971)

Transport is a key factor in the movement of goods and services. In pre-colonial Nigeria three systems of transportation were in use, namely, water, animal and human beings. Water transport was dominant in riverine areas. It was the least expensive in the haulage of goods over long distances. Pack animals were the dominant means of transporting goods in the Savanna belt. The availability of dodder, the open terrain, light rainfall and reduced presence of tse-tse fly provided a good environment for pack animals. The camel, which revolutionized the crossing of the Sahara desert, was of little use in the northern Nigeria, the chief reason being in congenial terrain. The donkey, described by Polly Hill as the “the local camel of Hausaland” bore the brunt of transport in this region. (Onwuka, 2001)

The indispensability of the donkey in the transport landscape of Northern Nigeria arose from certain characteristics of the animal. First, it was easy to breed, and so was bred in most rural communities in the regions. Donkey tenancy was commonly practiced throughout most of Northern Nigeria, and through this practice both animals and owners multiplied easily. Second, the donkey was cheap to maintain. It could feed, while on the hools, off stalks of guinea corn and other grasses.

Third, the animal had a great reputation for patience and endurance. It could descend and ascend hills which a camel would avoid. An Hausa proverb says that “only a donkey shows patience under load”. It is instructive that in the early period of colonial rule, the Northern Nigeria administration relied mostly on the donkey for most of its transport needs. (Onwuka, 2001)

Human transport was the most pervasive of the modes of transport. In Northern Nigeria, where the pack animal complex prevailed and in the riverine areas where the canoe complex was dominant human portorage supplemented these modes. Human

Pre-Colonial Market Centers in Central...

portage was, and remains, the least efficient and most expensive mode of transporting goods.

Professional carriers were employed but the cost was often prohibitive. This explains the tendency of professional long distance traders to own slaves who served at once as carriers and as a trade commodity. It is important to note also that during the pre-colonial period, 'primitive' trade was conducted by barter. However, Hopkins notes that variety of currencies was in circulation centuries before colonial rule, the most important being gold, cowries, strips of cloth, and copper and iron rods (Hopkins, 1973). Cowries shells were first imported into West Africa via an overland route from North Africa and the middle East, and were in use in the Chiefs markets of the middle Niger from at least the eleventh century. Cowries were the most widespread currency in West Africa, and they continued to expand in area and in volume until the late nineteenth century.

Cloth, money and metal currencies other than gold were found in many parts of West Africa, but were dominant only in areas where cowries had failed to penetrate.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it is worth noting that the presence of extensive trade and general – purpose currencies provide grounds that pre-colonial Karu and other parts of Nigeria also had a market. In a market economy, the use of money is the key to all transactions. Unlike in modern Nigeria, there was not one universally accepted currency, but several. Each of these currencies had its area of dominance and acceptability. Of all the currencies in use in Nigeria especially in the late 18th century and early 19th century, the cowry was the most pervasive. It enjoyed dominance in all Yoruba land, most of Northern Nigeria and parts of Northern and Central Igbo land. The prevailing currencies were generally cumbersome unlike the cowry that was easy to handle because of its small size and shape, convenient to count and impossible to counterfeit. Furthermore, its durability meant that it could be stored for many years. The conclusion still holds that the principal currencies of pre-colonial Karu and by extension other parts of Nigeria served to extend trade and not to obstruct it. The indications are that these currencies were adequate for the needs of the time. It was only in the nineteenth century, when they became less efficient, that they were replaced by the currencies of the industrial world.

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