

The Economic Foundation of Nupe Kingdom to 1800 A.D: A Survey of the Facilitating Factors.

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Abstract

The importance of a virile and viable economic system in the evolution and sustenance of states, whether modern or ancient, cannot be overemphasized. It can be argued that the political ideological superstructure of a society has its origin in the character and development of that society's economic base. The economic processes in conjunction with environmental, political and cultural processes work together to make 'society and history'. The economic system and activities of the Nupe of old and the emergence of a formidable Nupe Kingdom in the past, can be said to have hinged on a number of facilitating factors. This paper attempts to examine such factors, which include, geographical location, natural endowments favourable for agriculture, industrial trade and commercial activities and practices as basic for the transformation of the hitherto independent polities, into a united centralized polity called Nupe Kingdom.

Introduction

Nupe Kingdom came into existence as a centralized authority after the emergence of an important personality popularly called Tsoede or Edegi or Amadi. For the purpose of this paper, the former name is adopted. The birth, growth and life of Tsoede is shrouded in myth and controversies.¹ The important thing to note, however, is the fact that Tsoede was born of Nupe woman in Nupeland, partially grew up in the court of Attah of Igalaland at Idah and came back to Nupeland, his birth place, to establish a centralized authority over the entire Nupeland in place of the existing independent chiefdoms or city-states.

The Kingdom established by Tsoede became one of the most important centralized polities, known, not only in the North – Central area, but the entire Nigerian area and beyond, comparable with Borno, Oyo empires, Binin, Igala and Jukun Kingdoms, as well as, ancient empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, outside Nigeria's borders. A pertinent question that may agitate our minds at this juncture is, what were the facilitating factors that made it possible for Tsoede to achieve that feat? The importance of economy to the formation of states and the sustenance of same, cannot be underrated.

The geographical and strategic location of Nupeland, presence of rivers, fertility of land, topography of the land, which encouraged movement into and outside, transitional climatic conditions, which favoured growth of crops of the savannah and forest types, among others, provided potential and thriving economic activities favourable for human habitation and livelihood. Agreeing with this, Idrees and Sule observe that the nature of the land area inhabited by the Nupe, more than any other factor, influenced their economic pursuits, which provided diverse economic opportunities for the inhabitants.²

Hence, the economic potentials with which Nupeland was endowed with, attracted trade and commercial activities from diverse communities, both within and outside the Nigerian area. They also favoured migration – both internal and external, which, in turn, facilitated large population settlements, economic, as well as socio – economic organizations.³ Through a long history of migrations, settlements, hunting, fishing and farming, man is said to have taken advantage of the possibilities and has taken strides to avoid, reduce or remove the limitations to enable him impact positively on his environment.⁴

Among the economic activities discussed in this paper, are agriculture, trade and commerce, industrial economy, works of arts, transportation and communication on water and land.

Agriculture to 1800 A.D.

Agriculture, from time immemorial formed the most dominant economic activity widely practiced in Nupeland, as it is in most parts of Nigeria. It, to a very large extent, used to be critical in the determination of settlement pattern of the Nupe in the past. According to Thurstan Shaw,⁵ well-established agricultural production in the process of state formation cannot be over-emphasized. This was facilitated, particularly

by the presence of important rivers – Niger and Kaduna across Nupeland. Evidence of the precise period and details of the agricultural practice and tools in the remote past in our area of study may be difficult to ascertain. However, it may not have substantially gone beyond subsistence level. Ajayi and Alagoa argue that domestication of food crops and animals was the basic activity for control of settled communities.⁶ We may generally consider the transition from total dependence on hunting and food gathering to stock raising and agriculture

A number of modern scholars and writers on Nupe in particular and other places in general, have emphasized the importance of rivers and other environmental factors in relation to agricultural production. Nadel and others, rightly observe that the largest population of the Nupe were farmers.⁷ River valleys providing better fertility than the upland areas attracted the earliest farming communities.⁸ Consequently as pressure continued building up on the river valleys, other farming settlements began to spread in the upland and flood plain areas. This was made possible due to the availability of plentiful land for farming and other aspects of agriculture.

The existence of Rivers Niger and Kaduna are said to have predated the later Stone Age, as the evidence from archaeological studies in the Middle Niger area shows – dating as far back as 10,000 years ago,⁹ or prior to 3000BC.¹⁰ Such evidence shows that the earliest human settlements were located within the vicinity of the rivers which cut across the length and breadth of Nupeland. The flood plains which hardly suffered droughts, favoured the growth of most tropical food crops, such as maize, rice, groundnuts, cotton, sugar cane, sorghum, yam, among others. The early settlers in Nupeland may have produced variety of crops which may have laid the foundations for the change from the gathering and hunting economy to that based on agriculture and animal husbandry. With this, permanent settlement, rather than wandering about, could be ensured. This, in turn, provided catalyst for state formation with attendant advantages. Thurstan believes that “the change from dependence on hunting, fishing and gathering the fruits of wild trees, to crop-raising and stock – keeping, is the most important step which man has taken in the last ten thousand years:¹¹ This change increased man’s capacity to control his environment and emergence of civilization in terms of food storage, accumulation of wealth and an increase in population.

The establishment of a famous centralized polity – the Nupe Kingdom, which lasted from 16th to 19th centuries may have been facilitated among other factors, by favourable agricultural and environmental conditions conducive for state formation. This then suggests a high correlation between a well – organized agricultural system and state formation process.

It is important to note however, that cultivation of crops in Nupeland depended more essentially on the nature of the soil and the environmental features of Nupe. These include marsh land, flood plains – *fadama* and upper plains – *Kinti*. Sule¹² observes that rice, garden eggs, vegetables, among others were cultivated on marshy land along river valleys and other low lands. Kolanuts, banana, oil palms and others were produced on the forestland along the waterways. Labozhi, Yeti, among other areas of *Kusopa* – forest areas, in Nupeland were particularly noted for the production of Kolanuts and oil palms. The former in particular, in time past, became a major export crop in Nupeland. Labozhi town – the headquarters of *Kusopa* became a great centre for both domestic and international commerce – being the greatest centre of Kolanut production in the past. This situation seems to have been maintained up to date. The commodity is said to have been highly priced and valued because of its taste and flavour¹³ and exchanged for goods such as leather works, sheep, goats, horses, camels from Hausaland and Borno in the north and north-east respectively. In addition, Mason reports a tradition suggesting payment of tribute in Kolanut and eunuchs to the legendary Queen Amina of Zaria by the Nupe.¹⁴

Other crops grown in Nupeland included Sorghum (two varieties – brownish and whitish) – *Mayi* and *Kpayi* respectively, cotton and groundnuts, all typical of the agriculture of the savannah. Yam, cassava, oil palms, plantains, among others – which were typical of “neither the open savannah nor the rain forest”¹⁵ were also cultivated in Nupe. As stated earlier, the geographical position of Nupe, which can be regarded as economically strategic, permitted the growth of a greater range of crops, than can be grown either in the drier north or the wetter south.¹⁶ This was a rare natural advantage for Nupeland.

Apart from domesticated food or cash crops there were other wild grown plants and trees in Nupeland which had added value to the economic development of the area – hence providing catalyst for human

settlements and survival. They also served other purposes including provision of industrial materials, household furniture, medicine, food and its ingredients, energy, objects of worship, among others. Such plants include *Kuka* (baobab tree – *Adansonia digitata*); *Kochi* (shea butter tree – *vitellaria paradox*); *Lonchi* – locust bean tree – *Parkia biglobosa*, *Yukunnu* (palm tree – *Elaeis guineensis*); *Wuchi* (mahogany/iroko tree – *Khaya Senegalensis*),¹⁷ among others. Due to the importance of these and other wild plants and trees to human survival, whenever such plants were – whether in the plains or in the forests, they were treasured and protected for their economic, socio-cultural and religious values.

Apart from being a major determinant for survival and permanent settlement in early Nupe, agriculture also promoted works of arts and crafts. Production of farm implements such as small hoe-*dugba*; big hoe-*dzukun*; machet – *gada*; sickle – *lenzhe*; knife – *ebi*; axe – *egba*; among others, must have boosted other economic activities in terms of blacksmithing, brass and glass works. In this regard, agriculture on one hand and black and brass smithing on the other, can be said to be complimentary to each other. Sule,¹⁸ asserts that most of the agricultural implements produced by blacksmiths in Nupeland were initially exchanged for agricultural products. As the blacksmiths devoted much time to their craft, they had little or no time for farming. Therefore, they needed food crops from farmers, who, in turn, needed agricultural implements from the blacksmiths to sustain their farming activities.¹⁹

Other aspects of agriculture practiced in Nupe included animal husbandry, local poultry keeping and fishing activity. These activities are almost interrelated with agricultural production. Lovejoy,²⁰ for instance, believes that the growth of the livestock industry was closely related to agricultural expansion. This, to a large extent, was also determined by environmental factors. The riverain people particularly, and those on the flood plains depended more on fishing and canoe ferrying as a means of livelihood. While local poultry farming could take place in almost all parts of Nupeland, animal husbandry took place more in the open grassland. Among animals reared were and are still goats, sheep, horses, cattle, donkeys and dogs, most of which were imported either by way of direct purchase, or through exchange with available goods produced in Nupeland.

As to the source or origin of the crops cultivated in Nupeland in the early period, we may lack detailed knowledge of this. There are, however suggestions that, while some of the crops were indigenous, some others had their sources from outside Nupeland. Among the indigeneous ones were the variety of rice (paddy) (*Jankafa*) or (*Shankafa*) red in colour, botanically called *oryza Glaberrima*.²¹ It was grown, or is still being cultivated in other parts of West Africa including Mali, Senegal and Cote D'ivoire.²² Unlike now, rice food in the past used to be an elitist food for well-to-do individuals and families in Nupeland. For the less privileged, it used to be consumed under normal circumstances once in a while, except on special occasions – such as wedding and naming ceremonies and religious festivals. However, this situation, to a very large extent, seems to have changed, probably due to the increase in production and the purchasing power of the consumers.

The Nupe people are said to have exported their rice to other parts of Nigeria. These included Onitsha, Benin, Yagba and Ebiraland. The cultivation of this commodity would seem to have dated back to the earliest ages of man, long before the era of which we have historical evidence on the margins of the Neolithic Sahara.²³ Other varieties of rice produced in Nupeland called *Oryza Fatua* and *Oryza Sativa*, are said to have originated from Asia,²⁴ the growth of which was adapted to the naturally flooded or marshy places, such as river banks, valleys and fresh water mangrove swamps. Apart from swamp rice (*shankafa bata*), there is another variety recently introduced called upland rice (*Shankafa Kinti*). While cultivation of the former requires both shallow and deep flooding areas, the latter is grown without irrigation or flooding. In the past, it would seem that the number of local rice variety in Nupeland were minimum contrary to what we have presently. Nupe rice growers in both Niger and Kwara States now have local names for various varieties. They include, *majelisa*, *Gya'ana*, *Mambechi*, *Washagi*, *Zhikogi*,²⁵ among others. Some of the names of the varieties may have derived from the nature, colour, texture, size and predominant area of growth. The Portuguese are said to have introduced their own variety of rice in the 17th century.

The source of sorghum would seem to be indigeneous, at least to the Nigerian area. It is reported to have been domesticated by the middle of the second millennium in the Sahara and savannah.²⁶ Yam grown in the moist zones of West Africa, probably as far back as five

thousand years ago²⁷ may have been introduced to Nupe from south eastern Nigeria and from Nupe's immediate neighbors the Gbagyi. The local names of certain varieties of yam suggest that. For instance, we have *echi-egbogi* translated as 'Igbo Yam' and *achibiri Gbari* translated as 'eat small Gwari yam'. The geographical location of Nupeland makes it favourable for the cultivation of yam and oil palms. The habitat of yams and oil palms is neither the open savanna nor the rain forest.²⁸ As was the case with other West African areas, Nupeland witnessed introduction of new crops from the 'New World'. These included cotton, cassava, citrus fruits, maize, sugar-cane, groundnuts, sheanuts, among others. While some of these crops are said to have been introduced as a by-product of the slave trade, others came through foreign growing associations and trading companies. For instance, cotton and sheanuts were introduced to Nigeria by the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) and the Royal Niger Trading Company (RNC), respectively.²⁹

As for the source of Kolanut production in Nupeland, there are varying claims. Most of the *Kusopa* people- (forest dwellers) would claim the indigenality of the crops from their land. However, there are suggestions that the crop may have been introduced to the *Kusopa* with headquarters at Labozhi town since the early 19th century by the *Wangara* traders coming from Gwamja in the former Ghana empire. Mason, for instance, reports oral tradition suggesting that the first trees in Labozhi were grown from seeds and seedlings imported from Gonja.³⁰ This tradition, if actually reported well, appears misleading. The cultivation and marketing of Kolanuts in the area far predated the 19th century. Kano Chronicle, for instance, reports exchange of trade goods, including Kolanuts between Nupeland and Hausaland – Kano, Zazzau and Katsina as far back as 15th century,³¹ or probably earlier. The source under reference reports Nupe, at one time in the past paying forty eunuchs and ten thousand kolas as tribute to the legendary Queen Amina of Zaria who ruled in the first half of the 15th century.³² If we accept this to be a historical fact, then, the issue of the beginning of Kolanut production in Nupe in the 19th century remains logically and chronologically countered. While we cannot dismiss the inter-group relations between the centre of Kolanut production in Nupe and that of Gonja, marketed by the *Wangara* traders in the early period, it still

remains to be well established which of the two areas was the origin of Kolanut cultivation.

Industrial Economy to 1800 A.D

Another aspect of the economy of Nupeland in its early history, which made it famous was the industrial economy which existed in various forms and in various localities. The industrial base of the Nupe can be said to have been broad and diversified, reflected in the abundance of local industries across Nupeland. Mason³³ asserts that the village artisans evoked much more interest than did the fruits of the peasant labourers. According to him, the skill and diversity of the extensive trade in manufactured goods in Nupeland gave the early European visitors to the area pleasant surprises. It was this which nourished and sustained markets and merchants over many centuries.

Initially, production of manufactured goods would seem to satisfy the domestic needs of the people. But with the increase in skill, quality and quantity of production, the need for outside patronage and export arose. Nupe for instance was noted for the production of iron which had a multiplying effect on the output of other areas. According to E. Pritchards, quoted in, Ogunremi and Faluyi,³⁴ iron metallurgy did not only “bring economic revolution, it also put political power into the hands of those who knew and used it over those who did not”. Iron war weapons, such as poisonous pointed spears, local guns, arrows, among others, helped existing or emergent ancient Kingdoms, Empires and Chiefdoms to subjugate their peoples and even their neighbours. As warfare could, in those days, direct or even destroy economic activities, it could also help create trade and other economic pursuits as a result of creating a larger political unit under strong military (leadership) protection.³⁵ Nupeland in the pre- and post Tsoade periods fitted in this scenario. The production of iron was enhanced by the availability of raw materials for which Nupeland of old was noted.

Thus, Schon and Crowther describe Nupe “as a country of iron”³⁶ while Clapperton identifies the source of it to be the hills, with steep slopes and flat tops punctuating the country side, associated with several of the capitals of Nupe – Gbara, Jima and Bida³⁷ and other areas such as Rogun and Kpada at the southern bank of River Niger. Supporting the procurement of raw materials locally, Jimada and Sule aver that all the raw materials used in the production of glass and beads at *Masaga*

in Bida were derived from the hills in the area.³⁸ This debunks the hermitic hypothesis of the origin of the glass workers in Bida which points to Egypt. In contrast to this traditional claim, the availability of the raw materials locally suggests glass working in Nupeland from early time. The precise period for this may be unknown to us. However, it must have been several centuries before the 19th century, taking into account the glass workers' tradition of migration from Egypt in the remote past.

The quality of iron works in Nupe of old, attracted patronage from far and rear. A number of sources³⁹ report people flocking Nupeland in search of cherished iron works produced by artisans. For instance, trade in such works existed between Nupe and Yawuri,⁴⁰ as well as, Kano, Katsina, Zaria and Yorubaland.⁴¹

The production of a variety of farm and war implements, no doubt would have supported and sustained agricultural production as well as expansionist policies characteristic of the early period of Nupe history and probably, of other neighbouring communities. State formation came to strengthen the craft and artisan guilds as they played more prominent roles in the state, which became the major patron of the products of some guilds.⁴² This phenomenon may have survived up to the Tsoede period between the 15th and 16th centuries and the Jihadist periods in the early part of 19th century in Nupeland. Of particular importance were the blacksmiths to the Jihad movement under Malam Dendo or Manko (as he was also called) at Raba town that when the Jihadists were leaving the town for Bida, the new Emirate capital,⁴³ various artisans were moved along and settled at various quarters in Bida. The blacksmiths, *tswachizhi* for instance, were settled at *Dokotza* quarters, while the glass, brass and bead workers were settled at *Tswatamukun*, *Masaga* and *Tswatako* areas of Bida respectively. The rulers depended so much on the continuous production of bows and arrows, swords, local guns, ammunitions, among others, to enable them carryout raids, wars and expeditions. So also were the farmers depending on the continuous production of farm implements for their continuous production of agricultural products for both domestic consumption and for exports. This interdependent dialectical process would seem to have been the practice in Nupeland from the early time. Hence, for reasons stated, above, by the beginning of the 19th century, the indigenous industries, in Nupe are said to have expanded owing to the increased demands for

the products internally and externally.⁴⁴ However, by the later part of the 19th century, Nupe cultural arts had begun to witness rapid decline in patronage and production. This followed the introduction of foreign (European culture) including influx of foreign industrial and manufactured products, among which were textiles, consumer goods, modern war and farm implements, among others. Despite this however, it cannot be said that the importation of such goods to the Nigerian area at the period under review, had totally supplemented the local production of works of arts, but only tremendously reduced dependence on them.

Weaving to 1800 A.D

Another important economic activity for which Nupe was noted in the early times was weaving. Clapperton and Denham report that most of the textile industrial activities in Nupeland were carried out by males and females.⁴⁵ While spinning was exclusively reserved for women, men essentially did the weaving. The Nupe are reported to have excelled in weaving from very remote times and rivaled the inhabitants of Kano in the arts of weaving and dyeing.⁴⁶ Clapperton notes that the Nupe men-slaves were renowned throughout the Sudan “as being the best weavers and Nupe women the best dyers”⁴⁷ No wonder, the high quality and value of Nupe cloth, *ede* attracted merchants from almost every part of the Nigerian area. These included Hausa, Yoruba, Yawuri, Koton-Karfi, among others, who came to purchase the cloth from the famous Nupe market at Kulfo.⁴⁸

In the same vein, Leo Frobenius’ collection of traditions and ones collected by this researcher in Nupeland suggest exportation of Nupe woven cloth to other parts of the world. According to the former, Nupe textile products were sold in places as far as Ougadougou (in present-day Burkina Faso), as they were also traded across the Atlantic to the Americas.⁴⁹

As was the case with the smiths, the weavers would seem to congregate into towns/centres where there was thriving market for their products. Consequently, designated textile industrial centres emerged in Nupe, among which were Kulfo, Gudu or Ogudu, Eggan and Bida.⁵⁰ Such centres that had existed from the early period in Nupeland attracting high demand, are reported to have survived up to the 19th century. Crowther, for instance, is reported to have seen at Eggan (which had been the dominant port and effective head of

commercial navigation in the Middle Belt) in 1841 as many as 200 looms,⁵¹ weaving different types and sizes of cloth. These ranged from white cloth – *edekun* and or *edekoshi*, to strip white, blue and red cloth – *edetakpola*. At Kulfo town, Clapperton saw Yoruba artisans producing various wares as well as Yoruba women cotton spinners.⁵² It is suggested that the Yoruba must have learnt the skill of silk and cloth weaving from Nupe, especially from the immediate neighbours. Jimada reports the Landers to have specifically noted that the Nupe town of Zagohi produced high quality textile imitated by its Yoruba neighbours.⁵³

No wonder, Clapperton, Mahdi Adamu, Mahadi Abdullahi, Jimada, among other sources, observe the widespread of Nupe skilled weavers and blacksmiths together with their products in Yoruba, Yawuri and Hausalands⁵⁴ and most probably other parts of Nigeria and beyond. Jimada, for instance, notes that several towns in Kano area, such as Kura, Rano, Bebeji, Gumel, among others, are identified with Nupe merchant and immigrants cloth weavers, dyers, spinners, tailoring, as well as involvement in wholesaling and retailing of textile products.⁵⁵ The Yoruba chiefs at Oyo-Ile are said to have been very fond of wearing Nupe quality cloth,⁵⁶ as was the case with the Kano nobility class⁵⁷ of old. The Landers who passed through Nupe in 1830 noted “the cloth which they (Nupe) of Zagozhi manufactured in common with their countrymen and the robes and trousers which they work are most excellent and would not disgrace an European manufacturer. They are worn and valued by kings, chiefs and great men and are the admiration of the neighbouring nation”.⁵⁸

Of all the centres, Kulfo, as noted earlier, was one of the most important. It served as a market between the south Atlantic and the Mediterranean to the north. This strategic position attracted different kinds of merchants and European goods from the savannah and the sea coast through Yorubaland. According to Clapperton, Kulfo all the times was a central point for this part of the interior which saw the importation and re-export of foods from the north...⁵⁹ This analysis is an indication of the position of Nupe in terms of trade with the neighbouring communities.

Being a purely commercial centre, the citizens of Kulfo must have been well connected in one form or another with attendant financial benefits. For instance, hostel accommodation of various categories are

said to have been provided both within and outside the town, for merchants and travelers.⁶⁰ While merchants with lifeless goods, such as salt, potash, cloth, beads, kolanuts, could easily have been accommodated within the four walls of the town, those who had animals to tend remained outside the walls of the town for spacing, grazing and proper tending.⁶¹ Apart from being a commercial entrepot, Kulfo and indeed, other trade centres in Nupeland, must have possessed effective administrative mechanisms and security outfits, such that would ensure protection of traders and their goods. The expected levy on imports and exports, would seem to have strengthened the position of the political elite and the financial position of the respective communities. This, among other factors, may have provided a strong base for the foundation of and consolidation of Nupe Kingdom, which lasted for several centuries.

Transportation and Communication to 1800 A.D

The importance of transportation and communication systems in the survival and sustenance of trade and commerce – be it internal or external, agriculture, slavery and any other forms of economic activity, cannot be overemphasized. Transportation accounted for the movements of goods and services from one place to another. Means of transportation in the olden days can be categorized into land and water. There was the use of animals of burden, such as donkeys, horses, camels, cattle and human portage. Most of these animals were imported into Nupeland from the savanna through Borno and Hausalands. They were exchanged for available needed goods in Nupeland, such as slaves, kolanut, fish,⁶² clothes, products of arts and crafts. Besides exchange of goods, trade facilitated by transportation system promoted inter-group relations both within and outside Nigerian area.

Water transport used to and to some extent, has continued to play significant role in the economic activity in Nupeland. As noted previously, Nupeland has been naturally endowed with the presence of Rivers Niger and Kaduna and their tributaries, which are said to have played a much larger part as means of communication and carriers of trade and ideas in the past than they do in modern times.⁶³

The two rivers in general and River Niger in particular, had been a major determinant in the economy of a larger population of the Nupe. In addition to agricultural activities, the river served as the main conveyer

of commerce and traffic,⁶⁴ as well as being the source of providing protein in the harvest of fish⁶⁵ and other water animals both for local consumption and for export. The Kyadya group, as well as the Kakanda canoe men effectively monopolized and controlled trade and commerce up and down the Rivers Niger and Kaduna since ancient time. Each of these groups had the portion of the River Niger under their 'jurisdiction' and control in terms of canoe transportation. Each of them also had water and territorial boundaries beyond which they would hardly allow fishing and transportation activities from members outside their group. Eggan and Lokoja towns would appear to have provided such boundaries between the upper and down streams of the Niger River.

Thus, in compliance with the above, Sule reports that the Kyadya from upstream had to transfer goods into Kakanda canoes⁶⁶ for downstream movement. The same process concerning up-stream movement of goods from the Kakanda to the Kyadya. However, this situation may not have been a hard and fast rule. Traditions collected recently by the researcher from Jebba, Gbara and Nupeko riverain areas affirm trading and canoe – ferrying from Nupeland downstream to the Niger Delta and Onitsha areas and upstream to the neighbouring French territories. Crowther and Taylor⁶⁷ estimate a journey on big canoe lasting for at least ten days between Nupe and the Delta.

Internally, several river ports or markets emerged to which bulky goods and services were moved due to effective and less economical river transportation network then. Such river ports in Nupeland in the early times included Raba, Eggan, Katcha, Jebba, Gudu, Gbaradogi, Kpatagban, Elah,⁶⁸ Baro (Gidi) and Nupeko. These and other market centres were not only for domestic transactions, they are also said to have been essentially "international" in the sense that non-Nupes converged there to buy and sell goods too.⁶⁹ Lander brothers on one hand and Schon and Crowther on the other, are reported⁷⁰ to have observed at the town of Eggan, variety of goods from Nupe hinterland being sold there. They also noted that apart from Nupe and Kakanda, other numerous languages, such as Yoruba, Hausa, Kanuri, Fulfude, Igbo, among others were spoken there.⁷¹ This is an indication of the position of Eggan being a melting port for various merchandise and nationalities. Apart from slaves, other exportable goods at the market were rice, textiles, locally manufactured iron goods and pottery, in exchange for imports, such as salt and potash from Doma and Keana

(in what used to be part of Kororofa/Jukun Kingdom, but which now form part of the present-day Nasarawa state) and probably horses from Borno and Hausaland.

The importance of the Niger and Benue Rivers in the early history of the Nupe and other communities “was reinforced by the emergence of major kingdoms”, (Jukun, Nupe and Igala) which, according to Obayemi, “flourished on the banks of the rivers”.⁷² As for the Nupe kingdom located above the confluence of the Niger-Benue, it has been said:

The big rivers of Niger and Kaduna form the two axis of the country and efficient natural system of communication. It is no accident that the early Nupe Kingdom grew in the area near the confluence of the two rivers which were its first high roads.⁷³

This most probably may have informed Frobenius and some Arab scholars and historians, such as Al-Bakri and Ibn Batutta,⁷⁴ to have claimed existence of magnificent Nupe Kingdom(s) as early as 1068 A.D or even much earlier. No wonder, this may have been a major base for Ndagi’s repeated postulations on the existence of very early empires which flourished along the banks of River Niger many centuries before the emergence of Tsoede in Nupe.

Apart from the major rivers under discussion, there were other smaller, tributaries and creeks which provided sources of livelihood and to some extent, transportation facility for the people. Idrees mentions such rivers as Gbako, Kampe, Dukku, Eche, Gazun and Egwa.⁷⁵ They are said to have been rich in fish and alluvium, as well as providing an efficient system of natural irrigation.⁷⁶

Trade and Commerce 1800 A.D.

Apart from agriculture and other economic activities discussed above, the Nupe from ancient time had been involved in one form of trade and commerce and another. Like we have observed earlier, Nupeland was strategically and favourably located which permitted not only the growth of a variety of crops, but also free movement both within and outside its territories. This made possible internal and external trade and commercial activities to thrive. Due to the texture of soil, varieties of crops were produced in excess of the locality’s consumption

which other communities might be in need of, hence exchange of products between, or among other communities.

Though it may be difficult for us to know details of marketing activities in early times due to dearth of documented records, markets for specific items in one form or another then may have existed at various strategic and accessible locations. Such would have facilitated marketability and movements of goods and services, which in turn, required network of trade and commercial routes for both imports and exports.⁷⁷ Nupe enjoyed a wide scope of trade routes which were branches of the general trans-Saharan trade routes across West Africa.⁷⁸

Consequently, there emerged in Nupeland ancient commercial and trade centres which may be regarded as entreports. Among such centres were Gbara, Eggan, Raba, Mokwa, Labozhi, Jima, Katcha, Nupeko and Kulfo.⁷⁹ Long before the establishment of emirate system in Nupeland in the 19th century, some of such centres served as transit camps for immigrants, clerics and traders coming from Hausaland and Borno to Yorubaland and Gonja⁸⁰ and those going to the former from the latter. As a result, these initial transit camps became commercial, political, as well as socio – cultural melting pots or centres.

Frobenius for instance, cited in Sidi, describes Raba and Gbara as having rapidly grown to be flourishing towns in Nupeland, renowned for industrial art such as cloth weaving, glass and brass smiting, blacksmithing, sculpturing, soap making, mat and hat weaving, among others.⁸¹ These formed part of the articles of trade produced in Nupeland. In his assessment, Nupe produced more clothing than the Hausa countries. But Raba took the lead among all the Nupe cities in this regard. It was very ancient and had been founded before the Edegi (Tsoede) epoch... It was surrounded with a wall (*ebang*) (*eban*) by *Etsu* Madjia (or Magia) at the beginning of the (19th century) before the Fulbe had been banished to Ilorin... In those days, Rabba (Raba) was already so large and its population so wealthy that it had as many as 1,400 horses⁸²

Levtzion, believes that trade stimulated a higher level of political organization, while the emergence of extensive states accorded more security to trade routes.⁸³ Hence, Nupe in the early period must have witnessed a complex network of intense economic activities, rapid growth of population and emergence of state organizations. It can,

therefore, be suggested that the history and success of state formation in early Nupe, like that of other areas in the Central Sudan revolved on three themes – trade, state and religion. Hardly could any meaningful political organization have thrived without strong economic backing which trade, commerce, agriculture, among others, provided.

Paul Lovejoy stresses the relationship of commerce and clericalism⁸⁴ in the Central Sudan in the early times. It was observed that little or no marked distinction existed between traders and Islamic clerics in the early introduction of Islam in the region – including Nupeland. Merchants, Islamic clerics, scholars and travelers all played significant role in this regard, at least initially. As regards the formation of states, all in general and, the clerics in particular, were instrumental. The latter did not only take part in the teaching and propagation of Islam in Nupeland, they also served as advisers to and officials in the administration of host governments. In the same vein, Sule asserts that trading activities by traders from Borno and Hausaland as well as Gonja and Yorubaland in towns in Nupeland left a lot of wealth in the hands of members of the ruling class and economic elite.⁸⁵ This, together with other economic potentials may have facilitated political organizations in Nupeland.

Both Abdullahi Smith and Mahadi Abdullahi, emphasize not only the importance of environment and agricultural activities, but also that of trade and commerce as major factors for state formation and evolution.⁸⁶ Like these sources separately argue, establishment of centralized states in Hausaland was made possible by a combination of factors under reference. Obayemi on one hand and Ajayi and Alagoa on the other, consider the same factors – being responsible for “the emergence of mega state formation”⁸⁷ and establishment of “three major kingdoms, Jukun, Nupe and Igala”, respectively along the banks of Rivers Niger and Benue. Opening up of major trade routes between Nupeland and Hausaland, Borno, Gonja, among others and possible immigrations, may have boosted the economic, as well as socio-political potentialities of Nupe in antiquity.

Like Mahadi reports Kano being a “melting pot” of the Western Sudan,⁸⁸ in the early times, same can be said to have been the situation in Nupeland in the Middle Niger area. One important feature of the domestic economies that formed a common feature in both Nupe and Kano was the strategic locations of the areas in the early times⁸⁹. They

served as major routes and gateways for commerce and trade between the Sahara and the coast. Among the important routes was the one from Zinder through Kano to Zaria, through Kontagora to Raba and Mokwa in Nupe, from where it crossed to Oyo – Ile and from there to Bussa and Gwanja.⁹⁰ Through this and other routes, movement of *Nufawa* to Kano and *Kanawa* to Nupe was made possible long before the 19th century, which made migrations one of the most dynamic themes in pre-colonial Nigerian history.⁹¹ As stated earlier, the early trade between Wangarawa and Hausaland and Borno passed through Nupe and Bussa. For instance, before or during the reign of Aliyu Yaji as *Sarkin* Kano (1349-1385),⁹² trade in Kolanut became an important economic activity between Nupe and Wangarawa⁹³ on one hand and Kano and Borno on the other. These inter-group relations facilitated by this long – distance trade and commercial activities were established many centuries before the 19th century.

Goody and Mustapha are reported to have said that trade in Kolanut and manufactured goods between the savannah country and the forest belt of West Africa was already important in the time of Leo Africanus⁹⁴ earlier than the 15th century. The Kano Chronicle claims that “merchants from Gonja began coming to Katsina”, presumably with Kolanuts, which the Gonja and Nupe produced and marketed. Indeed, this commodity was believed to have been known to the doctors of North Africa as early as 12th century.⁹⁵

Against the backdrop of such relations, we began to have immigrations and settlements of Nupe traders and skilled workers in other parts of the Nigerian area. Even though details and precise periods in the remote past may not be available to us, such settlements may have been earlier than the 14th and 15th centuries, when we began to have records of intergroup relations between Nupe and Hausa, Borno and Yorubalands. Lander reports that by the 15th century, Nupe was exporting a variety of manufactured goods such as saddles, stirrups, cloth, hides, glassware beads, horses and slaves to Yorubaland.⁹⁶ Other goods exported to Yorubaland by Nupe included swords, religious books and caps from Hausa, Borno, Maghreb and Middle East.⁹⁷ In return, goods of European manufacture such as guns, shields, muskets, salt and iron bars were exported to Hausaland through Nupe,⁹⁸ from the coastal areas of Porto – Novo, Badagary and Lagos.

Trade and commercial activities formed a strong basis for the early migrations and settlements in various parts of what came to be Nigeria. Mahadi for instance, mentions areas of large concentration of Nupe settlements in *Birni Kano* as *Jigau* ward which came to be identified as *Tudun Nufawa* (Nupe ward); *Bakin Ruwa* – (black water in Hausa); *Dalma*, *Madungurma* and *Marmaro* wards.⁹⁹ In these and other Nupe settlements within Kano city and its environs, the Nupe were noted for their skill and specialty in weaving, dyeing and production of royal gowns.¹⁰⁰ Being early great traders and skilled craftsmen, the Nupe are said to have linked Kano commercially with the markets of the Middle Niger area and the confluence regions. They may as well, have been the link between Hausa and southern part of the Nigerian area with possible assistance from and, collaboration with the Yoruba immigrants who are also believed to have settled in Kano in the early times.¹⁰¹

In the same vein, Jimada's¹⁰² extensive discourse on the early inter-group relations between Nupe and Yoruba seems to suggest that the latter originated from the former. According to him, by the first half of the 15th century, as we have noted earlier, Nupeland was exporting a variety of manufactured goods such as saddles, stirrups, cloth, hides, glassware, beads, horses and slaves to Yoruba land. In return, European manufactured goods to Yorubaland in return for European manufactured goods from Hausaland, Borno, Maghreb and Middle East, such as swords, religious books, caps, as well as slaves coming from Zinder for re-sale,¹⁰³ were exported to Yoruba. The volume of trading items and commercial centres between Nupe and Yoruba would seem to have increased over the years. M.D. May, for instance, reports that by the middle of the 19th century, Nupe traders had been well established in Yoruba towns of Ile-Ife, Ikare, Ifaki, Arigidi Ekiti, as well as Ikosi and Ikorodu.¹⁰⁴ In fact, Mason¹⁰⁵ cites sources suggesting that 'Ifa' the Yoruba divination system and 'Egungu' as a cult were introduced to the Yoruba by the Nupe. The sources also suggested Nupe being the first to introduce Islam by Ibolo, Offa and Igboho around the 16th century'. Similarly Mahmudu Modibbo's study, quoted in Y.B. Usman, reveals that "before colonial rule came, Zaria had communities of Nupe and Yoruba peoples in *Birnin Zaria* itself, people who had been there for several centuries and some of whom had become *Zazzagawa* of Nupe and of Yoruba origin..."¹⁰⁶

Nadel describes Nupe traders as well as skilled workers outside Nupeland as more “than merely birds of passage. They stayed at a place several months or even years at a time, and may possibly settle permanently. We find such settlements of Nupe traders in every larger town of Nigeria.”¹⁰⁷ Lovejoy refers to such community settlements as “Commercial Diasporas,”¹⁰⁸ who formed what Nadel labels as “Nupe colonies – small cultural enclaves in foreign lands”.¹⁰⁹ They shared cultural affinity and identity reflected in their common language and origin. We should note that while trade and commerce provided the major factors for emigrations out of Nupeland in the early period, another reason could have been attempt to escape from tyranny and persecution in the hands of the Fulani political and religious elites. Such movements, Abdullahi Smith posits, could not only result in the foundation of new settlements or the argumentation of old ones as potential nuclei of states, but could also have contributed to the growth and development of the states already founded.¹¹⁰ In any case, Nupe Diaspora communities in various parts of Nigeria, have, from the early periods, continued to promote economic and political development, socio-cultural bonds among the Nupe themselves, irrespective of state and religion and between them and the host communities on one hand and other ethnic Diaspora groups, on the other.

In the same vein, there are however, traditions of Diaspora non-Nupe communities or settlements at the village levels. Mason gives a few examples of these to include Abaji, Eggan, Bokani by the Hausa and Kutigi, Enagi, among others, by Borno.¹¹¹ Both Eggan and Abaji towns are said to have been founded by *Katsinawa* (men from Katsina), while Bokani was first settled by an eponymous man from Kano,¹¹² hence *Bokani*, a corruption of a Hausa word “Bakano”, translated literally to mean “man from Kano”. Jimada¹¹³ shows how a community called *Kusogi* (small forest), in Patigi was founded by immigrants from Gobir called *Gobirawa* between the 18th & 19th centuries. According to him, the Gobirawa’s flight from their zone southwards in the 18th century followed the wars and tribulations in their region. The immigrants came for hunting and divination in the ‘Small forest’¹¹⁴ *Kusogi* from which the name of the village was derived. Up till date, some inhabitants of *Kusogi* identify themselves with the founders by being great hunters and diviners. No wonder therefore, *Kusogi* used to be and is still being noted for the famous and fearful

cult- *Ndakogboya* throughout Nupeland. It also became an important and strategic market centre for the sale of meat and animal skins.

The foundation of Kutigi and Enagi towns, or at least the establishment of the present day ruling classes there appears to have had more political and socio-cultural impact on certain sections of Nupeland.¹¹⁵ The Borno emigrants into Nupeland in the 18th century is believed to have been led by Zanna Abubakar Maina from Borno due to dynastic disputes. On arrival at Kutigi area on animals – possibly horses and camels, the then *Etsu Nupe* – Muazu, welcomed and allowed them to settle in Kutigi area.¹¹⁶ They eventually established a Borno dynasty over the original inhabitants, the descendents of which are known as “*Benu*” a corruption of ‘Borno’, while their leader “*Zanna*” and *Bairma* corrupted as “*Ezonuwon*” and ‘*Bima*’¹¹⁷ title-Heads of Kutigi and Enagi which have since continued to hold sway in Kutigi and Enagi respectively. The titles are both political and socio-cultural.

Movements into and outside Nupeland in the early period were facilitated more by the nature of land and environment which permitted movement of goods and services both on land and water with little or no serious barriers. This, in turn, enhanced strong and viable economy, which, Smith considers as fundamental factor for state formation.¹¹⁸ According to him, viable economic potentials attract wealth and maintenance of a large and diverse population.¹¹⁹ Control of trade and trade routes attract tax levy; riches enhance strong and powerful military buildup, which, in turn, promotes and encourages territorial expansion. Migration, whether internal or external therefore, does not only lead to population increase, generation of revenue and exchange of trade goods, it also leads to intermingling or diffusion of cultures and technology, each of which are catalyst for economic development and evolution of states.

Conclusion

From our discussion thus far, it can be summarised that the economic foundation of ancient Nupe Kingdom hinging on a number of broad based sectors, had a high correlation with the evolution of state structure in the land. These included agriculture, industry, trade/commerce, art crafts and transportation. These were facilitated more by the strategic geographical location of Nupeland, being a commercial gateway between the savanna north and the forest south. It served as

an entreport for the two zones which could be said to have strengthened the economic, socio-cultural and political position of Nupeland. The natural presence of major rivers – the Niger and Kaduna, almost cutting across the entire land attracted a number of vocations such as virile agricultural production, fishing, canoe-ferrying-transportation and canoe-building craft as the rivers enhanced migrations and settlement patterns.

The emergence of important trade centres in the early period of Nupeland, linked by both internal and external long distance routes, did not only promote economic activities, but also inter-group relations, which to some extent, led to both emigrant and migrant settlements out of and into Nupeland respectively.

Our attempt at examining the economic foundation of Nupe Kingdom cannot be said to have been exhaustive or the limit of Nupe ingenuity¹²⁰ in the production process. There were others like bead making, shaping or drilling; bronze works, leather goods produced from imported animal skin, dyeing, brass and glass smith works; soap making from ashes and palm oil, located at different industrial centres, such as Bida, Kutigi, Sakpe, Gbara, Eggan, Mokwa, Kulfo, which, though contributed to the economy of the Kingdom, but could not be treated in detail in this paper due to lack of space. A modern source postulates that the ancient Nupe people were such masters of high arts and crafts, whose products, Ndagi claims, are “unparalleled in Africa”.¹²¹ He cites the “most naturalistic and the greatest works of art known as Tsoede Bronze at Tada” Giragi and Jebba and the magnificent glass and brass works at Bida as examples. In the same vein, Tony Cragg from the Royal Academy of Arts, United Kingdom, for instance, attempts to compare the Nupe Sculptural technology with that of European Renaissance. The Bronze found at Tada, he argues, “shows a sophistication equal to the European Renaissance sculpture of the same period, so much so that many refused to believe that it was the work of an African artist.”¹²²

The distinctive quality of the Nupe state in old times and the people’s ability to adapt or manipulate local conditions for a wide range of production, may have informed Clapperton and Denham to describe the word Nupe as “a label for a range of prestige goods found throughout the whole of Central Sudan...The people (Nupe) possess much knowledge in the fine and rare arts and from their country many elegant and marvelous things are still exported.”¹²³ The source further sees Nupeland as a place where several “materially advanced cultures met

and produced the technological synthesis which is evident, for instance, in Nupe metal working, weaving, glass-making and carving.”¹²⁴ In what appears supportive of the above claim, Mason avers that:

Nupe cultivator and artisan formed the amature which was central to the dynamic economy of Nupeland long before the 18th century in which the antiquity of the cultural and technical pattern appear clearly manifest.¹²⁵

From the foregoing views and analysis, it requires no laboratory test to deflect the arguments and hermitic hypothesis of the likes of David Hume, George Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper, who do not believe that “there was a civilized nation of any other complexion in Africa than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, and no science”...¹²⁶ and as such, do not regard Africa being a “historical part of the globe worthy of intellectual study.

Generally speaking, it can be safe for us to draw a conclusion that a combination of favourable factors for state formation existed in Nupeland, as they did in several other ancient communities, including Hausa, Yoruba and Igala lands, which became critical in the evolution of mini and mega state – like structures in the past. The formation of pre-Tsoede mini polities – *Bini Confederacy*, *Kyadya* and *Kusopa* polities and the foundation of larger and more central Kingdom in Nupeland, during and after Tsoede periods are cases in point.¹²⁷ Thus, by the end of the 16th century up to the 1800, Nupeland can be said to have undergone a fundamental transformation in terms of politics and economy. This feat was achieved essentially, due to the environmental, agricultural, industrial and commercial push-factors, as well as the artistical productive processes of the Nupe.

Footnotes

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- 16 Mason, *op.cit*, p.3.
- 17 For the Botanical names of the above plants, see A. Y. Solomon, *Nupe Heritage Dictionary*, Minna: Kochita Resources Ltd, 2013, pp. 396; 362; 435; 670 and 646 respectively. This is corroborated by Abubakar Moh'd Agric Extensions Ph.D student UDU Sokoto on 8/7/16 at Bida.
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- 127 Chapter 5, pp.152-160 discusses the foundation of Nupe Kingdom by Tsoede and its expansion and consolidation by his descendents.