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The Socioeconomic Relationship between Nupe and its Neighbours: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted socio-economic relationship between the Nupe people and their neighbors including the Hausa, Yoruba, Igala, and Gbagyi, from the pre-colonial era through the early 20th century. Utilizing a historical-analytical framework, the research investigates how the Nupe Kingdom (KinNupe) leveraged its strategic location at the confluence of the Niger and Kaduna Rivers to become a pivotal hub for regional trade, cultural exchange, and political diplomacy. The analysis reveals that the relationship was defined by a complex blend of symbiotic trade (notably in textiles, glasswork, and horses), inter-ethnic marriages, and shared religious developments, alongside periods of tension driven by territorial expansion and the 19th-century Jihad. The study argues that these interactions were not merely transactional but served as the primary engine for regional integration and technological diffusion in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Ultimately, the research highlights how these historical ties laid the foundation for the contemporary socio-economic landscape of the region, offering insights into the enduring nature of inter-group relations in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Nupe, intergroup relation, socio economic, neighbours, historical analysis.

Introduction

The people who call themselves Nupe live in the heart of Nigeria, in the low basin that is formed by the valleys of the two rivers Niger and Kaduna, between 90 30' and 8° 30' N.L. A line drawn from Leaba, on the Niger, eastward to Kataeregi marks the northern

boundary of Nupe land, another line drawn eastward from Shari (or Tsaragi) to Abugi and on to the Niger south of Baro the southern boundary.[1] The Niger, flowing almost straight north-south between Leaba and Jebba, divides Nupe country from Yoruba in the west; the slowly rising country, east of Lapai and Gidi, sloping upward towards the hills of Gbari country, forms the eastern boundary of Nupe. It is a low-lying, softly undulating country, not more than 200 feet above sea-level in most parts. A few low ridges of broken, rocky hills stretch out, rib-like, from the river valleys, and curiously symmetrical flat-topped hillocks rise abruptly here and there from the plain.[2]

The highest points are no more than 800 feet above sea-level. At Jebba the Niger forces its way through a narrow passage formed by rocks, the ragged end of a short, broken chain of hills. Farther south, at Kpatagba and Baro, and above Yankyedya in the north, hills and rocks close in upon the river. Raba, the ancient river capital of Nupe kingdom, stands on high cliffs of red sandstone. Between cliffs and rocks the river bed is bordered by low banks on which stretches of thick rain-forest alternate with shrub and low bush. During the rains both forest-covered banks and open bush are flooded far inland and turned into vast swamps; the level of the Kaduna at Wuya rises by 30 feet; and in the Niger valley villages which lie on high ground in the dry season have the water of the river washing the threshold of their houses. Part of Jebba Island is flooded every year; and Nupeko, near the confluence of Niger and Kaduna, about two miles from the river in the dry season, can be reached only by canoe in the rains. The big rivers Niger and Kaduna form the two axes of the country, an 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 as well as its natural boundaries.[3] A net of smaller rivers and creeks, rich in fish, covers the country, pro viding an efficient system of natural irrigation. In most parts of Nupe land the soil is rich and fertile, especially in the thinly inhabited districts west of the Kaduna, the only part of Nupe which still possesses large areas of virgin forest. East of the Kaduna, especially round Bida, a dense population and intensive cultivation have reduced the fertility of the land. It is the typical soil of Northern Nigeria, red earth mixed with laterite and rich in silicates, a fact which becomes important for the native glass industry in Bida. Lemu, pure white sand is found, a much more fertile soil as far as I can judge, which makes the country in the eyes of the native 'more beautiful' by which he really means 'more useful'.. Lastly, the low broken hills of Nupe are ferruginous, and on their slopes iron ore is mined by the natives.[4]

Vegetation and Natural Resources

The geographical position of Nupe country makes it a typical area of transition from the southern forest belt to the arid savannahs of the north. Narrow strips or patches of thick rain-forest-like vegetation accompany river valleys and watercourses; but then, inland, we find a country of thin forest, shrub, and 'orchard-bush', alternating with beautiful open park-land, such as round Bida and Agaie, where intensive cultivation has cleared bush and shrub. The plant-life, again, reflects the geographical position of Nupe midway between north and south.[5]

Nupe is one of the northernmost countries in which the oil-palm is found, and yam and the southern variety of maize are cultivated; it is, at the same time, the southernmost habitat of the date-palm, the shea nut tree, and millet crops. The trees and plants which are important for Nupe production and diet are these, in the order of importance. In the drier inland areas we find the locust-bean tree (Parkia ftlikoidea), in Nupe lonci; the shea-nut tree (Bassia Parkii), koci; the indigo tree or vine (Lonchocarpus cyanescens), eci and indigo grass (Indigofera arrecta), tsentse; baobab (Andansonia digitata), huci or kuka; silk-cotton tree (Malvaceae), lembubu; date-palm, dobina; and finally the mango, man gorof a European importation. On irrigated land and in the thick groves near watercourses grow the oil-palm and other, less important, varieties of palm-trees, kola-nut tree (Sterculia acuminata), ebi, and banana, yaba. Only the kola-nut tree, the mango, and partly the banana are cultivated, all other trees growing wild. Nupe cultivation comprises the follow ing kinds of crops and edible plants and roots: three millet varieties, bulrush-millet (Pennisetum), mayi, 'late millet' (Spicatum), kpayi, and guinea-corn (Sorghum vulgare) eyi; yam, eci ; cassava, rogo; maize, kaba; ground-nuts, guzya; rice, jenkafa; sugar-cane, kpasanako; and onions, lubasai in the river marshes; further sweet potatoes, duku; beans and ground-beans, ezo and edzu ; red pepper, yaka, and various kinds of greens which are eaten as vegetable. Of plants utilized commercially and in native industry cotton, lulu; henna, lali; hemp, rama or egba, rope'; and gourds, evo, are the most important.[6]
In this enumeration of crops and plants of Nupe we have left the field of physical environment in the narrow sense. This rich and varied system of cultivation reflects already a standard of civilization, technical achievement, and inventiveness of a people which has learned to master its environment. Some of the plants and crops mentioned have been adopted comparatively recently and introduced into Nupe from the north and south. As the Nupe names for hemp, henna, or cassava are borrowed from Hausa the plants themselves represent 'borrowed' cultural goods. The cultivation of onions was introduced into Nupe from Hausa, and partly from Bornu, in historical times. Nor is the cultivation of yam an original cultural possession of the Nupe, which is proved by two facts: first, that the Nupe north and east of the Niger are un familiar with certain important ways of preparing yam common in all real yam countries, e.g. the drying of yam; and second, that yam, though to-day an important staple food, has still no place in their sacrifices, ritual meals, and first-crop ceremonies: only corn and millet may be used for these ritual offerings. Cassava, finally, has only been introduced in the last thirty years; thirty years ago, Nadel was told by a missionary, "it was almost unknown in Nupe.[7]Thus communication and culture contact have helped to mould the physical environment of today". This manifold agricultural system, however, could not have been evolved if the natural conditions of the country had not been favourable.
The meeting of south and north in the vegetation of Nupe, the coexistence of marsh-land and savannah country, the natural irrigation and the strips and patches of thick forest, all this was as essential to the development of the productive system of the country as was the inventiveness and stage of civilization of its people. We cannot attempt to decide which factor, environment or civilization, has had the larger share in this development. The rigid distinction

between environment and culture has long been abandoned as misleading and futile. For our investigation it is irrelevant. We can well regard the environment as it appears at present, the natural resources as they are utilized by the people to-day, as a unitary complex of factors the effect of which, upon the life and well-being of the people, we have to examine.

Nupe and Her Neighbours

The technology for the production of iron implements was introduced from Nupe to Yagba in north-east Yorubaland, from an early period. According to Captain Hugh Clapperton, the Nupe get their ore from the hills which they smelt where they dig it.[8]These hills are spread throughout the Nupe, and northern Yoruba areas around Oyo-ile and Share. Iron and silicates were derived and smelted locally, though it is possible that European iron bars were imported through Yoruba into Nupe and these were smelted down and used to produce necessary goods for household use. Mahdi Adamu refers to smelting work of Katsina migrants flourishing in the Kontagora area under Nupe supervision. Richard Lander implicitly acknowledged the advanced nature of the Nupe iron industry and saw merchants from Yoruba and Hausa buying iron bits and stir ups.[9]

It is possible that the Yoruba brought the technique of clay pot making and marking into Nupe, though specific evidence for this assumption is lacking. However, Oyo-ile was reputed to have been a major centre in the production of clay pots. It is possible that the Yoruba brought the technique of clay pot making and marking into Nupe, though specific evidence for this assumption is lacking. However, Oyo-ile was reputed to have been a major centre in the production of clay pots. It is possible that the technology of pottery production developed early in this area of cultural fusion.

The techniques of bead - making may also have developed in these areas from an early period, though, Akinjogbin notes that “a kind of coarse thick bead called lagidigba by the Yoruba, was probably imported from Nupe. The Nupe may also have produced some other beads such as the red beads, and the glazed crucible beads at Oyo-ile. One tradition of Oyo claims that the ancestors of their bead workers came from the Nupe area. There is also evidence of the patronage of Nupe markets by merchants from Yoruba for the glass industry.[10]

Textiles

At the great Nupe entreport of Kulfo, Captain Hugh Clapperton saw Yoruba artisans producing various wares, and saw Yoruba women cotton spinners.[11] The Landers specifically observed that the Nupe town of “Zagohi” produce high quality textiles imitated by its neighbours.[12] One writer has argued that the Lander’s observation suggests that the Yoruba acquired the knowledge and skill of weaving silk and cotton.[13]It is possible that the technology of pottery production developed early in this area of cultural fusion. The techniques of bead - making may also have developed in these areas from an early period, though, Akinjogbin notes that “a kind of coarse thick bead called lagidigba by the Yoruba, was probably imported from Nupe. The Nupe may also have produced some other beads such as the red beads, and the

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Trade and Commerce

The importance of trade to the development and promotion of inter group relations cannot be underrated. In his assessment, Ochefu stresses that trade and exchange is integral to the material development of any people.[17]Through these activities, various groups of people from different geographical regions, speaking different languages, practicing different religions and observing different cultural beliefs, are brought together to share or exchange ideas, goods and services, hence promoting unity and material well-being of those concerned.

Apart from agriculture, the Nupe from time immemorial had been involved in one form of trade and commerce and another. As 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 were in need of, hence exchange of products between communities.[18]

Though it may be difficult for us to know the details of marketing activities in early times due to dearth of documented records, markets for specific items in one form or another might 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. Nupe enjoyed a wide scope of trade routes which were branches of the general trans-Saharan trade routes across West Africa, Consequently, there emerged in Nupeland ancient commercial and trade centres which might be regarded as entreports. Among such centres were Gbara, Eggan, Raba, Mokwa, Labozhi, Jima, Katcha, Nupeko and Kulfo. 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 Gonja and those going to the former from the latter. As a result, these initial transit camps became commercial centres. Apart from being so, most of such places at one time or the other, in early times, became political, as well as socio-cultural melting pots, whose rulers endeavored to extend their authority in order to achieve an effective and perhaps, monopolistic control over trade. Frobenius for instance, describes Raba as having rapidly grown to be one of the flourishing towns in Nupeland, chief among which was Gbara, so renowned for industrial art. One of his

old female informants told him that around 1830 Nupe had "one hundred and twenty towns, each of them as large as Bida".[19]However, describing Bida among the large towns in Nupeland might have been a mistaken identity. By the 1930's Bida could best be described as one of the small settlements in Nupe kingdom. Moreover, it never was, at any time, before the emirate period, a capital of Nupe kingdom under Tsoede dynasty, as Nupeko, Gbara, Jima, Mokwa, Raba, among others, had been at one time or the other in the pre-emirate period. Bida assumed a place of political prominence after it became the emirate capital in 1857.

In his assessment, Nupe produced more clothing than the Hausa countries. But Raba took the lead among all the Nupe cities. It was very ancient and had been foundedbefore the Edegi (Tsoede) epoch.It was surrounded with a wall *(ebang) (eban)* by *Etsu*Madjia (or Magia) at the beginning of the century (19th century) before the Fulbe had been banished to llorin. In those days, Rabba (Raba) was already so large and its population so wealthy that it had as many as 1,400 horses.[20]

Levtzion, believes that trade stimulated a higher level of political organization, while the emergence of extensive states accorded more security to trade routes. Hence, Nupeland in the early period must have witnessed a complex network of intense economic activities, rapid growth of population and emergence of state organizations.[21]For instance, Jima, a onetime capital city of Nupe Kingdom during the reigns of Etsu Jibrilu and Mu'azu between 1749 and 1818, became one of the most famous commercial centres in Nupeland. It exchanged and traded in various commodities from various parts of the Nigerian area and beyond. The city was surrounded by strong wall which was both wide and several kilometers long.[22]It can, therefore, be suggested that the history and success of state formation in early Nupe, like that of other areas in the Western Sudan revolved on two themes -trade and religion. Hardly can any meaningful political organization thrive without strong economic backing of trade, commerce, agriculture, among others.

Paul Lovejoy stresses the relationship of commerce and clericalism 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 travellers 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.[23]As discussed elsewhere, 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. According to Lovejoy, Relations with the aristocracy were more intimate and in most Diaspora towns, marriage alliances were important.[24]Such arrangements solidified common interests between the government and commercial sector, strengthened Islamic influence, and led to the assimilation of immigrants as a privileged class. 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. This, together with other economic potentials might have facilitated political organizations and consolidation of.same in Nupeland.[25]

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.[26]Like the 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 states" 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 might have boosted the economic, as well as socio-political potentialities of Nupe in antiquity. Although time and manner of movements and inter-group relations between Nupe and those far places may be unknown to us, it is most probable that the stream of immigrants might have brought with them new skills, new crafts, capital, wealth, as well as socio-cultural influences.[27]

As Mahdi reports Kano, being a "melting pot” of the Western Sudan, in the early times, same can be said to have been the situation with Nupeland in the Middle Niger area. One important feature of the domestic economics of Kano and Nupeland is said to have existed in both areas.[28]This, according to Jimada was the strategic locations of Kano and Nupeland in the early times. 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 Mokwa anad Raba in Nupeland, through Bussa, from where it crossed to Oyo-Ile and then to Gwanja. Through this and other routes, movement of Nufawa to Kano and Kanawa to Nupeland was made possible long before the 19th century, which made migrations one of the most dynamic themes in pre-colonial Nigerian history. 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), trade in Kolanut became an important economic activity between Nupe and Wangarawa on the 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.[29]

Mahdi, reports Goody and Mustapha 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 Africanus earlier than the 15th century.[30]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 specialty in weaving, dyeing and production of royal gowns. Being early great traders and skilled craftsmen, the Nupe are said to have linked Kano commercially with the markets of the Middle Niger and the confluence regions. They, as well, had 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.[31]

The above situation in Kano arising from Nupe emigrations out of Nupeland might not have been significantly different from other places commercially connected with Nupe in the early times. Despite the ever-widening web of social and commercial relationships between Nupe and the north, as we have noted above in the case of Kano, we must however, not lose sight of the fact that Nupe culture in time past, was also firmly wedded to that of its neighbours in the Niger area. Both the western and southern banks of the river enjoyed such relationships. For instance, it was the conviction of Rev. Crowther, as reported in Mason, that the western Nupe (Gbede) had once been settled by Yoruba-speaking people, whom, either must have been assimilated or moved south of the river. In the southern bank however, the opposite is believed to have happened. Mason quotes part of Adeyemi's undated paper thus,[31]

> *It is believed... that the Nupes occupied part of the present Igbomina land before the arrival of the Igbomina. When they came, these Nupes... were presumably driven north eastwards to the Lafiagi- Patigi area or absorbed into the Igbomina community.*

In the same vein, Jimada's 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, Nupe 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 such as guns, shields, muskets, salt, iron bars, among others, were exported to Hausaland through Nupe from the coastal areas of Porto Novo, Badagry and Lagos. 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, were exported to Yoruba. The volume of trading items and commercial centres between Nupe and Yoruba would seem to have increased over the years.[32] 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.[33]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.[34]

Conclusion

From our discussion thus far, it can be claimed that the socio economic of ancient Nupeland hinged on intergroup relation with their neighbours. The aspect of the relationship includes 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 the major rivers-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 well as enhancing 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.

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