International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies
Website: https://www.ijahss.in/
ISSN(*Online*): 2582-3647
Volume 3; Issue 4; Jul-Aug 2021; Page No. 22-30

Open Access | Original Paper

The Ijo and The Economics of The Niger Delta, Nigeria, In Pre-Colonial Times

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ABSTRACT
Despite the long time of separation, dating about six thousand years ago, the Ijo (central, western and eastern) maintained a common language and culture. They are linguistically related to their neighbours, such as the Edo, Igbo and Yoruba, all grouped under the Niger-Kordofanian proto-phylum of languages. As a result of the referrals to these people by eminent historians as 'city-states' and 'trading states' made it imperative for this study to painstakingly review the traditional economic system of the Ijo, especially of the Eastern Niger Delta states. This entailed a survey of their land and tenure system; agricultural products and practices; crafts and manufacturing; and trade and marketing in the pre-Atlantic trade period. Having considered the primordial socio-political and economic institutions in Ijoland, the impact of the trans-Atlantic trade nexus the transformations it wrought on the Ijo society; the economic impact of the Atlantic trade: its attendant accumulation of wealth, therefore power; the specifications and specializations in the political apparatuses; and the eventual move away from the village assemblies of the various Ijo states to the centrality of the political institutions as evidenced in the case of the Elem Kalabari, and of course in the other city-states were equally surveyed in detail. The paper in which the analytical method was extensively used concluded that the socio-political institutions of the Ijo (Izon) which attained higher degrees of centrality were already in existence before the Atlantic slave trade (although it aided the development of the War Canoes and City-States) and colonial times.

Keywords: *Ijo (Ijaw), Trans-Atlantic, primordial*, City-States, Trading States, War-Canoes, mangrove
Citation: Charles Okeke Okoko & Augustine Okechukwu Nwalu (2021). The Ijo and The Economics of The Niger Delta, Nigeria, In Pre-Colonial Times. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(4), 22-30.

INTRODUCTION

According to Lindsay Barrett:

> The Niger Delta is a vast system of wetlands and forests, and low lying alluvial islands and barrier reefs that sprawl across Nigeria's southernmost reaches. It serves as the discharge basin for the mighty River Niger into the Atlantic Ocean [1].

The Ijo (Izon) comprises the Central, Western and Eastern Delta States of the Niger Delta region. They are among the earliest ethnic groups that occupied the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. All the Eastern Delta states of Nembe (Brass), Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), Bonny (Ibani), and Okrika; and part of the Western Delta States, are known to have migrated from the Central Ijo Delta region. The basic ethnic unit of the Ijo is the Clan (Ibe). Their neighbours refer to them as 'Ibe' (Izon Ibe) because of the denominator of the cultural seal of a common language. E. J. Alagoa states that "It is important to note that, in the Western Delta states are the Urhobo and the Itsekiri kingdoms of Warri, who are not ethnically related to the Ijo. The Central Delta states are in the freshwater mangrove swamp, while the Eastern Delta and parts of the Western Delta States are in the saltwater mangrove swamp. [2].

Location and Physical Features

The term Niger Delta refers to the Eastern Delta kingdoms of Nembe (Brass), Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), Bonny (Ibani), and Okrika. These people, other than sharing a common language, have similar political, economic and social institutions.

The Ijo are bordered on the east and north by the equally related peoples, on the delta periphery, such as the Andoni (Obolo), Ogoni (Khana), Ndoki, Abua, Odual, Ogbia, Engenni (Egene), and the Igbo. To the farther east are the Ibibio and Efik state of Calabar (Old Calabar) on the Cross River estuary [3].

The Niger Delta is a panorama of mangrove swamps. Several rivers run in this region, all draining into the Atlantic Ocean. Yet, they do not all form the Niger Delta. Collectively, these rivers are called the oil rivers. From the west to east are the Benin River, the Forcados, Pennington, Middleton, Sengana, Nun, Brass, Santa Barbara, Som-breiro and Bonny

(Rio Real) rivers. Interestingly, only the eastern delta kingdoms form the Niger Delta: that is within the network of the tributaries and distributaries of the River Niger [4].

The Niger Delta is made up of islands with sandy beach ridges bordering the Atlantic, immediately after which is the salt water swamp "covering a vaster area from twenty to twenty-five miles from the sandy ridge, and two feet below normal high-water level and is flooded daily at high tide"; and the freshwater swamp at the northern extremity of the delta which is flooded seasonally. Bonny is situated on the inner edge of one of the sandy ridges [2]. Here also are some of the very ancient towns of Kalabari region such as the Ke; and in Nembe, such as Okpoma, Odioma, and Twon. All of Okrika and parts of Nembe and Kalabari territories lie in the tidal saltwater mangrove swamp. However, the greater portion of the delta referred to as 'central' Ijo live in the freshwater swamp [5].

Traditions of Origin, Migration and Settlement

Several accounts of the traditions of origin of the Ijo (Izon) are replete with the mention of the Bini as their probable relatives. The study of bronze artifacts in the lower delta indicates that there were interrelations between the Ijo and the Bini, and not necessarily as kinsmen.

Historians, when faced with this dilemma of possible places of origin recourse to the interdisciplinary approach, otherwise called historiography. In this study, linguistic and archaeological data have proved very useful. Concerning bronze relics in the Niger Delta, E. J. Alagoa narrated that:

> The Mein traditions…indicate the nature of Benin relationship with the Delta. There had developed among the leaders of three Mein groups (Akugbene, Ngbelebiri, and Ogbolubiri) a dispute over who was to be chosen Mein Okosowei, that is paramount elder of all Mein. Kalanama, head of Akugbene, decided to make a trip to Benin. He obtained various objects as emblems of office, and took the title of 'Pere'. The leaders of the other groups similarly obtained Benin bronzes and took the title of Pere [6].

In the traditions of the Urhobo, Isoko and Ughele, are evidences of such trips to Benin and the acquisition of emblems of bronze and brass from the Oba of Benin as symbols of authority. The inference that could be drawn here is that the Oba of Benin was such a powerful monarch that alliances with him were sought. He, thus, assumed the principal arbiter in times of disputes between lesser states. The distances covered by these disputants to the Benin Kingdom was so astounding that Alagoa commented that probably:

> The Oba was a distant, impartial potentate able to settle disputes. [But] He had to be paid a number of slaves as a fee for his services and the bronze insignia of office [5].

Continuing, Alagoa stated that there are no evidences to suggest that the Ijo, east of the Forcados River "ever came under the direct sway of the Oba of Benin"[2].

In an attempt to unravel the probable place the Ijo migrated from, we adopted the comparative method used by linguists to discern areas where older versions of languages were spoken. This is premised on the fact that the dispersal of human populations affects the languages spoken by them. According to Robin Horton:

> When a population speaking a given language splits into two societies, which become geographically separated from one another, some characteristic changes take place in the language. In each section, there are changes of vocabulary, changes of pronunciation and changes of grammar. These changes, however, tend to be different as between the two sections. After a century or two of such non-identical changes, people of one section still understand those of the other, but with difficulty. We say that there are now two dialects of the original language. After ten or more centuries of such changes, people of the two sections [will] no longer understand each other [7].

Therefore, the continuous splitting and dispersal of populations will continue to affect their languages; form new dialects; and subsequently, new languages. When the comparative method is used, if there is a high degree of similarity in the basic vocabulary of these languages, we infer a recent separation. But if the similarities are low, we infer a remote relationship. We can then say that many years, if not centuries, have elapsed since these peoples separated from each other. The original language before splitting and dispersal is called the proto-language, while subsequent ones fall into sub-families, branches, groups, languages and dialects.

Numerous traditions and writings in the 1920s and 1960s suggested Edo, more specifically Bini, origins for the Ijo. A comparison of the Ijo and Edo languages showed that while there are similarities in basic vocabulary, it is very low. Moreso, paralleled comparisons of Ijo-Yoruba and Ijo-Igbo languages also showed low levels of similarities in basic vocabulary. Horton continued that:

> There is no indication… of a special historical relationship between Ijo speakers and either Edo speakers in general or Bini speakers in particular. Indeed, given the fact that Edo, Yoruba and Igbo are far closer to one another than they are to Ijo, it would seem likely that the ancestors of the Ijo separated from the ancestors of the Edo, Yoruba and Igbo long before the latter had differentiated into distinct groups [8].

Glottochronological analysis of the Ijo and Igbo, Yoruba and Edo languages point to the fact that the first settlement of the Ijo in the central delta areas was about five thousand years ago. Therefore, the Ijo would have settled in parts of Central Delta five thousand years or more ago [9].

The founding fathers of the Ijo states of Bonny, Elem Kalabari, Nembe and Okrika migrated from the freshwater swamp of the central delta to the saltwater swamp of the eastern Niger delta. According to Alagoa and Fombo:

> Traditions clearly indicate a place in the Central Delta, but do not identify an exact location. Fombo names two places: "their homeland Okoloba (Ijaw)" and "their homeland Tubaratoro in Ekaw (Ijaw)". The second name seems to have derived from Webber (1931) who recorded that the immigrants started from "the Ijaw country, from a town by name Tubaratoro (or Tuburubi or Obiatoro) [10].

While it is accepted that these migrating ancestors took different routes to the eastern Niger delta, they all emanated from the freshwater swamp of the Central Niger Delta.

Using the genealogies and kinglists of the Eastern Niger Delta states, we infer that the migration of the various states of the Niger Delta from the central freshwater area of the delta took place about a thousand years ago. This is corroborated by radiocarbon dating of the 'Houses'; and the oral traditions of the Niger Delta, which put it between 1600 to 1800 A.D. Concluding from documentary evidence, Alagoa said that:

> The Portuguese Captain, Pereira, summarizing his country-men's knowledge of the West African coast at the beginning of the sixteenth century said all the coast fro m the Forcados River to Bonny River (Rio Real) was occupied by the Ijo [11].

The Traditional Political Organization of the Pre-Atlantic Slave Trade Ijo

Speculations were rife regarding the origin and development of the political structures of the delta states. Kenneth Dike in his "Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta" referred to the Niger Delta states as city-states. He was impressed by the "territorial organization" of a central authority, which controlled trading stations to the hinterland, thereby underestimating the effect of acculturating slaves from the Igbo hinterland into Ijo society; and that although the socio-political structure was based on kinship and descent, the admission of slaves as citizens turned the Eastern Niger Delta states to more open societies. The status of an individual became dependent on residence and as well as on descent. A slave could become a chief, as was the case of King Jaja of Opobo.

G. I. Jones in his "Trading States of the Oil Rivers" referred to the Eastern Delta states as "trading states", attributing the peculiar features of state as responses to the Atlantic trade. He neglected the enduring responses to internal and long-distance trade; and such local factor as environmental change, for instance, the migration of the founding fathers of the Eastern Delta Ijo from the freshwater mangrove swamp of the Central Delta to the saltwater mangrove swamp of the River Niger Delta. This obviously caused changes in the economic, socio-cultural and political life of the people. The descent-based culture of the farming-fishing economy of the central delta gave way to the fishing-salt boiling economy of the eastern delta communities. Moreso, the admission of non-indigenes and slaves as full citizens resulted to a society based not only on descent but also on acculturation and open criteria of identification. [12]

General Ijo Political Structure

The highest ethnic unit of the Ijo was the 'ibe' (clan). The Ijo (Central, Western and Eastern Delta) general pattern was the non-recognition of central political institutions over them. Rather the 'ibe' were held together by the recognition of a presumed blood relationship, religious and cultural affiliations [2]. Individual Ijo villages had complete political autonomy. The denominator and cultural seal of a common language further underpinned the sense of kinship. In furtherance, Alagoa said that:

> The common founding ancestor is usually presumed to have borne the name by which the group is known, and to have founded one town from which his sons spread out to found each of the member towns and villages [2].

The non-centrality of the political structure was more pronounced in the central and western delta 'Ibe', where only the cult of the 'Pere', and its high priest, held authority. The religious office of the high priest, 'Pere', in later years changed to the political leadership of the 'Ibe' in Ijo communities.

Village Political Structure

In the analysis of village political structures, Alagoa stated that Semblances of central political structures were found in the autonomous villages where authority resided in the village assembly, 'Amagula'. The 'Ama-okosowei' (town elder) was the President of the village assembly while the executive leadership of the 'Amagula' was the privilege of a younger man, 'Ogulasowei' (spokesman). There were other officers like the messenger, town crier, deputy president and village hangman. The 'Orukarowei' of each village was the equivalent of the general Ijo 'Pere' who carried out community religious duties at the shrine of the 'Ama-oni' (town deity) [2].

The biggest social and political unit, in the pre-migration and pre-Atlantic periods, was the ward (Polo). The ward was subdivided into the 'Wari' (sub-ward, house-hold or family); and further divisions into age sets, which cut across kinship lines [13].

The Political Structure of the Eastern Delta States

The Ijo, this paper is concerned with, are those that inhabit the saltwater swamp of the Niger Delta. That is the environment that is watered by the tributaries and distributaries of the River Niger, excluding the other rivers that make up the Niger Delta and discharge into the Atlantic Ocean.

The socio-political institutions in the Eastern Delta states of Nembe (Brass), Bonny (Ibani), Okrika and Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), were similar to those of the central and western delta Ijo. Here, the descent groups still made up the 'Wari', and the 'polo'; and the 'Amagula' (village assembly) still ran the affairs of the villages. It must be pointed out that the migration into the saltwater swamp affected the social, cultural and economic base of the Eastern Niger Delta. The change from a farming-fishing to fishing-salt boiling economy affected the basic village system of government. Age, as the qualification for the presidency of the village was relegated in preference to appointment based on descent from a 'Wari' or 'polo'. Consequently, the title of the president of the village assembly (Amagula) was no longer the 'Amakasowei' but now the 'amanyanabo'. Only the sitting arrangement in the 'Amagula' conceded some respects for the aged. The long-distance and Atlantic trades affected the political structure of the Ijo. The 'amanyanabo' acquired so much wealth, that he became a major decision-maker among his people. The emphasis changed from descent to wealth. Even slaves of great wealth and acculturation could become amanyanabo. The 'Wari' as lineage complex evolved into the open institution of the Canoe House.

Having given an overview of the socio-political structure of the Ijo clans (Izon Ibe) and the Eastern Niger Delta states, it becomes important to isolate one of the Eastern Delta states and do a comparative analysis of its socio-political institutions and economy before and during Atlantic trade times. This will be under the section titled "The Ijo and the Trans-Atlantic Trade".

Ijo Traditional Economic System

The Central and some parts of the Western Delta Ijo lived, and still live, in the freshwater swamp of the delta region. Sharing similar soil with the Igbo and some other communities in the hinterland, and the fact that this area which was flooded annually, always left rich deposits of silt on the farms, year after year, made the inhabitants of the freshwater delta to practice small-scale agriculture and fishing. In fact, the people of the freshwater delta are known to have supplied the whole mangrove swamp and coastal ridges with food; and not the large farming communities of the hinterland [2].

Another major commodity in the Niger Delta was salt. The migration of the four Eastern Delta city-states to saltwater mangrove swamp of the Niger Delta caused a change from farming-fishing to fishing-salt boiling. Salt became sold across the length and breath of the Niger delta, and with their neighbours.

The peoples of the Delta States were subsistent fishing, hunting, gathering and small-scale agriculturists. There were exchanges of products from the various parts of the delta. This was augmented by the long-distance trades with peoples from the delta hinterland and western delta; and the trade with the Europeans which turned the delta states 'into centers of redistribution" [14]. The Ijo of the Niger Delta became middlemen, collecting merchandize from the Europeans for sale in the hinterland and receiving hinterland products for sale to Europeans for export.

Land Ownership and Tenure

Until the evolution of the Canoe Houses, the fishermen enjoyed unrestricted rights for choice of fishing grounds. Their right to land was determined by belonging to a descent group, wari, which was organized on the trace of descent from a common ancestor. The ward was responsible for the allocation of land and of inheritable wealth [15].

Agricultural Practices and Products

Seemingly, agricultural practices would have been the preserve of the freshwater swamp parts of the delta where bananas and plantains, cocoyam (taro) and the water yam were cultivated. Some livestock were kept, and vegetables grown. These would have been domesticated from the wild because traditions indicate that these plants grew wild in the saltwater swamp of the delta, where the soil did not support agricultural endeavours. The Portuguese introduced maize and cassava into the delta from Brazil and South America, essentially, to assist in feeding slaves from West Africa. The manioc was to become a major delicacy in the delta. Rehearsing Alagoa, Barbot reported lots of cassava farms and bushes in Warri [16].

Trade and Marketing

That there were freshwater and saltwater zones warranted that what was not obtainable in one zone were needed in the other. While the origin of this activity has defied certainty, trading and marketing in the Niger Delta is of remarkable antiquity.

Rehearsing Robin Horton, the Ijo (central, western and eastern) were essentially farming-fishing and later salt-boiling communities. Yet, the earliest exchange relations would have been between the freshwater farming-fishing swamp and saltwater fishing-salt boiling communities of the Niger Delta. Farm products of the freshwater swamp like bananas and plantain, cocoyam and water yam were traded for the salt from the saltwater swamp. The array of products increased with the long-distance trade, which brought the Ijo into closer contacts with the peoples of the coastal hinterland and neighbours in the western areas of the delta. Salt, fish, snail, and other riverine products were exchanged for vegetables, palm oil, iron implements and raft materials from the Igbo and Ibibio hinterland. Likewise, bronze and agricultural products of the western delta and Yoruba areas were exchanged with Ijo vegetables, salt and fish. This trading relation was long established before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Niger Delta in the 16th century (c. 1508) [17]. Kimble Pereira, a Portuguese merchant, reported the presence of large trading canoes made from single tree trunks, which brought yams, slaves, cows, goats and sheep from the hinterland. Some of the products like cows and poultry were indicative of the long-distance trade that already existed between the Niger Delta, the hinterland and the savanna regions through the Middle Belt. The long-distance trade in the delta was fairly well organized. Re-echoing Pereira and Barbot, Alagoa has recorded that, "They carried javelins and shields for defense, with twenty paddlers and were capable of carrying seventy to eighty warriors" [17].

Crafts and Manufacturing

The earliest forms of crafts' production were facilitated by the environment's fishing activity. Thus, were produced such implements as harpoons, initially made of wood; basket traps, made from raphia palm; and poisons, which when robbed at the tips of the harpoons induced instant death or paralysis. Other implements like spears, machetes and nails were imported from the hinterland, via the savannah and North Africa through the Trans-Saharan trade. As the volume of trade increased, although rafts and other contraptions would have been used to transport goods within and beyond the creeks, canoe-making became a big industry. The Arogbo, whose name is derived from "Aru ogbo" (canoe forest), are famed in the traditions of the western delta as foremost producers of canoes. Elem Kalabari was another centre for canoe making in the delta [17].

Salt boiling was another industry that throve in the Niger Delta. Salt was in such great demand in West Africa, that according to Barbot "a slave, and sometimes two, are given for a handful of salt" [18]. The Eastern Niger Delta, of all the other centres of salt production in West Africa where seawater was boiled in pots and evaporated in pits, was unique in its method. Oweh, recorded that rather than boil seawater in large brass pans, the Ijo, especially the Bassan and Itsekiri, their western delta neighbour, manufactured salt from concentrations/deposits on the aerial roots of mangrove trees, especially of the Rhizophora racemosa [19]. The roots were cut and burnt to ashes. The concentrated solution filtered from the ashes of the burnt roots was boiled in pots, which determined the shape and size of the salt cakes. These shapes and sizes formed various units for exchange in trade. However, other centers of salt production existed. The Itsekiri were also famed as salt and pot producers. The Bassan salt manufacturers and traders are said to have procured their salt making pots from the Itsekiri in exchange, probably, with slaves [20].

The Atlantic Trade

Recorded by Jan Vansina, the first European nation to set foot in the Niger Delta and the West African coast was Portugal. The Portuguese appropriated the already existing long-distance trade to their advantage by establishing contacts and outposts, which enabled them to take "over the movement of goods from one point to the other along the coast" [21].

The Atlantic trade started in earnest in the 16th century and this added a new dimension to the economy and on the socio-political systems of the Ijo. The first remarkable impact was in the increase in the volume of trade to the hinterlands, especially in slaves, which were in great demands in the West Indies. The trade in slaves was so profitable that the Portuguese did everything to make sure that the slaves survived the hazardous passage to the New World in great numbers. In the words of Alagoa:

> They [Portuguese] bought yams and other local food to feed the slaves on the passage across the Atlantic. But in time, they introduced food crops from Brazil and other parts of South America to be grown in West Africa for the same purpose. Such crops as maize and cassava are believed to have been introduced this way [22].

The Portuguese had trading posts along the coasts at Warri and Ughoton in the Western Delta. From here, according to Adams John, they controlled the trades from Benin and Gold Coast regions to as far as the Congo where they monopolized the trade in copper which was remoulded into manilas and brought to the Niger Delta as currency [23].

The peoples of the delta states, on their own, concentrated on developing markets in its direct hinterland. Thus, explained further by Alagoa:

> Elem Kalabari opened the Obia markets, while Bonny had to further east and north to trade at Ohombele [Ohambele] and other markets in Ndoki country, since the Okrika and andoni traders did business at Bonny. Nembe traders developed contacts up the Niger at markets in Aboh and Ossomari, meeting Kalabari expansion westwards in the nineteenth century in the Oguta Lake and in the Orashi River [24].

Long-distance trade routes in the hinterland were not abandoned, but continued to be used by the slave traders. Notable inland slave markets were at Ohambele, Azumiri, Uzuakoli, Bende, Ndoki, Aboh and Ikot-Ekpene. Slaves were moved through footpaths, from these markets, to the Niger Delta. There were also intermediate middlemen-communities, for instance, the Arochukwu who held monopoly of slave trading in the hinterland. They were as a matter of fact well positioned between the rest of the Igbo and the Ibibio and Niger Delta. Thus, the Aro have been referred to as 'okeigbo' meaning the boundary of Igboland to the south.

The slave trade had become so important that by the end of the 18th century, it was the sole merchandise of the trade routes. Local foodstuff was now diverted to feeding the slaves. There was a drop in the trade in other goods manufactured in West Africa and the Niger Delta. In fact, Europeans competed with local manufacturers to the extent that the English imported salt into the Niger Delta. It is recorded that English ships brought in as much as 50 tons of salt each into Bonny [25]. The peoples of the Niger Delta found the European salt cheaper and the slave trade more lucrative that they abandoned salt making.

The slave trade required more capital and organization that only the evolution of the 'War Canoe Houses' could cope with exigencies of the trade. It was necessary to provide requisite logistics for this trade. For instance, the canoes had to be large enough to carry sufficient merchandize to the hinterland for exchange for slaves. Because of the rivalry between the different canoe houses in the delta, enough paddlers and fighting men were needed. The shields and javelins of the 'wards' and pre-slave trade era, gave way to mounted canons. These military arrangements were only necessary in the Niger Delta, since the purchase of slaves in the hinterland was done through peaceful negotiations. It was only in the Niger Delta that there were ambushes and snatching of slaves from rival canoe houses [26].

Impact of the Slave Trade and Transformation of the Ijo: The Case of the Elem Kalabari (New Calabar)

That the Atlantic slave trade had immense impact on the socio-political organization and economic life of the Ijo, especially the Eastern Niger Delta states, will be stating the obvious. It generated fierce rivalry between the canoe houses on the one hand and city-states on the other. In the words of Eluwa *et al*:

> In almost all the Ijo city-states before 1900 AD, branches of the royal families who became rich…made serious claims to the throne. For example, at Bonny, Perekule (Pepple) seized power from Awusa; in Elem Kalabari, the first Amakiri replaced the existing king because he used his wealth and power to repair the damage caused by

fire; in Nembe, the Mingi dynasty came to power; while in Okrika, the Ado did the same [27].

The political institutions became transformed and sophisticated. The power of the kings and chiefs increased as a result the wealth acquired via the slave trade. Unlike in the 'Wari' times, where power was invested on the 'Amagula', 'House' members were strictly under the control of the chiefs, who were responsible for the money with which they engaged in some trades; take a new wives; and generally for the welfare and overall well being of the people [28].

The significant changes wrought by the slave trade, and caused by the accumulation of wealth, therefore, power, were that:

I. The homogeneous 'House System' where leadership was selected through descent gave way to the heterogeneous 'War Canoe House System' where slaves and people of very low status could attain leadership if wealthy; and
II. The war "Canoe House system' increased rivalry and turned the Ijo states into trading and military corporations.

Elem Kalabari

The reason for picking Elem Kalabari for analysis is that there will be insufficient space to discuss the four Eastern Niger Delta states. Apart from terminologies and differences in names and places, what happened in one state took place in another. It will be recalled that the Ijo had semblances of socio-political structures, which were far from centrality in pre-Atlantic trade era.

To buttress these facts, this section seeks to consider the events in Elem Kalabari as fishing - salt boiling village and during the Atlantic trade.

Before the trans-Atlantic trade, the fisherman enjoyed unrestricted rights to choice of fishing grounds. His rights to land was determined by descent from a group designated a 'house' or 'Wari', organized on the basis of a dual marriage system - 'Iya' and 'Igwa', which incorporated offspring into the father's or mother's 'Wari' respectively [16]. Members of the 'Wari' also subsisted in larger settlements called the 'ward'. Members of a ward were not always genealogically related, but could trace descent from a common origin from an earlier settlement. The ward was concerned with the allocation of land and of inheritable wealth. Allegiance to the 'Wari' or ward was not strict as members could have kinship ties outside these pseudo-political institutions. Thus, there existed, and still exists, interpersonal ties binding the villagers to one another.

Another focus of loyalty outside the 'Wari' was the age set, which provided a source of aid to members on all occasions.

The most important village institution in pre-Atlantic trade era was the village assembly. Although the assembly was called by various names in Ijo society (fresh or saltwater zones), all the names have the linguistic root of 'Ama'. In some of the Delta villages, the assembly was the 'Amagula', but referred to as 'Amakobiri' in Elem Kala-bari. The linguistic root of 'Ama' is very significant as it further illustrates the common ancestry of all the 'Ibe'.

The assembly of all male adults, made policies and performed judicial roles. Leadership of the assembly was open to anyone of mature age with social and political clout. Most importantly, he must be good in rhetoric. The village was presided over by the 'amanyanabo' usually appointed from a descent group that claims discovery of the village site. The assembly ensured the performance of communal rituals and the execution of warfare and defense [29].

Other institutions, among which were the 'Ekine' and 'Periapu Ogbo', existed independently of the village assembly. The 'Ekine' was, and is still, an association devoted to the performance of masquerades: representatives of the water spirits. It was a necessity to be a member of the 'Ekine', which was an instrument for socialization and acculturation into the Ijo society. In fact, the mastery of the masquerade dances was a qualification for full citizenship.

The 'Periapu Ogbo', explained by Horton, was an association of headhunters: those who successfully caught and brought back men alive to the village to be slaughtered [29].

Starting from the 16th century, the institution of the canoe house replaced the traditional 'House' or 'Wari' system. The canoe house was a trading corporation where membership was by ability and wealth; and not by descent or kinship. Slaves were acculturated and incorporated into the canoe houses as full citizens. The canoe house advanced money to members to start businesses, and in turn reciprocated this gesture by paying taxes on trade goods. In this way, the minor traders now depended on the all-powerful 'Amanyanabo' – head of the canoe house, who acted as middleman between

the minor traders and the European merchants. Often, the Amanyanabo vouched for the honesty and as trustee for the minor traders.

Although in existence in pre-Atlantic period, the 'war canoe' institution which was for inter-village wars, became very essential as convoy for trading and provision of security for slave cargoes from the hinterland. As mentioned before, the Atlantic trade occasioned much rivalry that ambushes were laid by the other trading canoe houses of Okrika, Bonny, and Nembe [29].

As a result of the emphasis on commercial drive and ability, succession was open to all males in a canoe house. Free born or slave, ability to negotiate with European merchants on matters of trade was a necessary qualification for citizenship. The power of the canoe house head was derived from being the sole accounting officer of the institution. He maintained the canoe houses and favoured those who did well. The canoe houses were constantly enlarged through the purchase and recruitment of slaves. There were cases of rebellions, which resulted into the emergence of other canoe houses with or without the permission of former house heads. The canoe house system broke the age set system and extended inter-village kinship ties. Economic fortunes of individuals became tied to the canoe house. Each canoe house was autonomous under a distinctive body of laws. The community was an open one because slaves were incorporated and assimilated. The general assembly was no longer attended by all males but by the canoe house heads and amanyanabo. Representatives, who must be chiefs, attended the assembly from each canoe house. The amanyanabo had evolved from a mere ceremonial village head to a man of substance; of wealth; with a retinue of slaves; and elaborate paraphernalia of office in Atlantic trade era.

The 'Ekine' masquerade association shares a greater responsibility in socialization and acculturation of even slaves into the Ijo states; making the society an open one. This was a clear case of state formation vis-à-vis the accumulation of wealth and sustained participation in the long-distance trade. One important socio-political change was the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of people. A change from the mass assembly of pre-Atlantic trade times, to the chiefly assembly of Elem Kalabari state, with the amanyanabo presiding as a monarch. This was in fact, the highest level of centralization in Ijo history [29].

Currency of Trade

Jones stated that various types of money were used for trade in the Niger Delta states. Salt cakes, manufactured in Bassan were used in exchange for agricultural products and slaves. Slaves were also indirectly used for exchange. Slaves and salt were so highly valued that they became units against which goods were valued [30].

The Portuguese introduced brass and copper bracelets into the Niger Delta in the early 16th century. Iron bars were used in trading in Bonny and Elem Kalabari. Copper bars had lesser purchasing power than iron bars. Four copper bars were valued to one iron bar. By the middle of the 17th century, these metal currencies were reduced to less bulky forms of money in the hinterland; and the remnants used as raw materials for ornaments [31]. Manilas made from copper and brass, and cowry shells were widely used in the delta and the hinterland. These metal objects were reduced to such small sizes that the various denominations "penetrated the subsistence sphere of the economy and largely eliminated barter" [32]. The manillas, assorted beads, cowry shells, wire-coils, ring money and types of iron currency were so extensively used in the Niger Delta and environs that it originally defied the introduction and appreciation of foreign currencies. They were of such value that the British penny - '**Anini**' - was the equivalent to between nine and sixteen cowries. When the colonial government ordered for its withdrawal from circulation, about 1,722,870 manillas were recovered from the Ndoki district alone and more in Arochukwu to the hinterland [32].

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This survey has interestingly provided a continuum from the freshwater mangrove swamp of the central Ijo area to the saltwater mangrove swamp of the Niger Delta. Although the whole of this area is referred to as the Niger Delta, it is only the portion that is watered by the River Niger that should be rightly called the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta, therefore, comprised the Eastern Delta states of Bonny, Nembe, Okrika, and Elem Kalabari.

Despite the long time of separation, dating about six thousand years ago, the Ijo (central, western and eastern) have maintained a common language and culture. They are linguistically related to their neighbours such as the Edo, Igbo and Yoruba, all grouped under the proto-Niger-Kordofanian family of languages. As a result of the referrals to these people by eminent historians as 'city-states' and 'trading states' made it imperative for this study to painstakingly review the traditional economic system of the Ijo, especially of the Eastern Niger Delta states. Unlike in previous studies, we discussed their land and tenure system; agricultural products and practices; crafts and manu-facturing; and trade and marketing in the pre-Atlantic trade period.

Having considered the primordial socio-political and economic institutions in Ijoland, the impact of the trans-Atlantic trade nexus the transformations it wrought on Ijo society; the economic impact of the Atlantic trade: its attendant accumulation of wealth, therefore power; the specifications and specializations in the political apparatuses; and the eventual move away from the village assemblies of the various Ijo states to the centrality of the political institutions as evidenced in the case of the Elem Kalabari, and of course in the other city-states were discussed. Yet, these socio-political institutions, which attained higher degrees of centrality, were already in existence before the Atlantic trade era.

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