**Water Bodies and the Development of Societies and Trade Network in the Lower Niger Region: History and Lessons for Economic Development.**

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**Abstract**

Extant research have shown that the emergence of societies/settlements and sustainable trade network around the lower Niger region can be linked with the availability of water bodies, which provided the necessary ingredients for social and economic development. This is true of societies around the riverain Esan southeast area, their Etsako neighbour as well as those around Aboh (Agbor), the Onitsha (Anambra). Both oral traditions as well as historical evidences have shown that the water bodies and water transport system as provided by the River Niger ( also known as Oshimili or Ohimili) as well as other tributaries like Alika, Anam river among others aided human and economic development. This paper is therefore an attempt at historicizing the how this took place and possible lessons for modern day economy and economic development of Nigeria. Data obtained from primary and secondary sources were deployed to carry out the study with an analytical and narrative historical approach. This includes historical, descriptive and analytical approaches based on gathered evidence. The primary source for this research is based on field investigations conducted in the area and surrounding territories. Among other things, the data collection process includes semi-structured interviews with individuals. The research also uses historical documents from the national archives, relying on previous research conducted on issues of trade and economic development, in addition to documentary data taken from newspaper accounts, diaries, letters and verbal reports. The paper is divided into five : Introduction, Conceptual Clarification and historical background, Geography and development: The Waterways, Settlements and Trade Network.

**Keywords: Water Bodies, Trade, Economic Development, Lower Niger Region.**

**Introduction**

Scholars in the area of Economic and Environmental history have argued that, historically, in every human society, the environment plays very crucial role in both human development and survival. This can only be achieved once there is meaningful interaction between man and man on the one hand and man and his environment on the other. This interaction in the field of history is referred to as Historical Process (Carr, 1973:9; Gardiner, 1959:126, Marx and Engel 1976:31, Godelier, 1977:215). The argument is hinged on the premises that the relationship between man and his environment in an area is a dynamic one, involving a two way flow of influence in which the environment affects man and in which his activities in turn leaves their imprint in form of distinctive cultural and socio-economic landscape. In this way, an understanding of the nature of this physical/natural environment, man’s interaction with it and changes over time will give clear picture of how society has advances overtime to its present level of development, develop inter/intra group relations. It is in this light that the paper seeks to establish the relationship between Water Bodies and the Development of Societies and Trade Network in the Lower Niger Region.

The importance of Water bodies in the history of settlements and development of sustainable trade networks in societies of Lower Niger region cannot be overemphasized. This is because through the water bodies, trade and commerce became an integral part of the peoples an important aspect of the peoples civilization. Thus, over centuries, this led to the free flow and exchange of goods, technology, cultural exchange and idea. In some other cases, the emergence of human society has been associated with activities associated with waterways, trade and Commerce. This is because in the cause and course of exchange, people associate free with one another, during which ideas and values are transferred and absorbed. This is the role the water bodies in and around the societies occuppy the riverine ports of Esan, Etsako, Aboh and their Igbo neigbhours play in the socio-economic life of the people. This is seen in the historical role played by the commercial and other social related at the bank of the river Niger ( which remained the most important excahnge point among the people). The most significant been the history of the mingling of people to form an indivisible entity as represented in the history of the societies/settlements which presently occupy and traded along the along bank (specially among Esan area, their Etsako neighbour as well as those around the Aboh (Agbor ), the Ose Market and Ifeku Island/people and their neigbhours) from time immemorial in the Nigerian territory (Ogedengbe, 1971:1; Okwoli, 1973:1; Akubor, 2005, 2010, 2014).

The above views have also been shared by earlier scholars, who identified two factors that have over the years made inter/intra group relations in the Nigerian area meaningful. The first as far as these scholars are concerned has to do with the complementarity of the Sudan belt and the forest zone with the intervening transitional Middle Belt dominated by the Jos Plateau. Ajayi and Alagoa (1980) argued that this complementarity has encouraged the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas north and south across the zones. On the second factor which in the view of the scholars, engenders compactness, has been the essential unity of the river systems. Ajayi and Alagoa (1980:224), summarized it thus:

Nigeria is really the basin of the lower Niger south of the Bussa rapids with the Benue, their tributaries, and the enormous delta spreading out into several creeks and lagoons. The unity of these waterways encouraged a network of relationships within the basin. These river networks provided routes of contact between peoples cutting across.the north and south axis and supplementing it. Accordingly, one must recognise east and west movements of peoples and ideas as well as the north and south movements already suggested by the vegetation zones. It is because of this compactness that despite the fortuitous manner in which the political unity of Nigeria came to be achieved, culturally and economically, Nigeria was not really an arbitrary creation.

Thus, from the above it is clear that as far as Nigerian history is concerned, water bodies and maritime domains - including rivers, lakes, coastlines and coastal areas, creeks and tributaries, have from prehistoric times, played significant roles in shaping human activities and history, culture, civilization and socioeconomic developments. In the case of the selected riverine societies of Southeast Esan and their neighbours, the rich maritime domains have not only served as outlets for transportation, trade and inter/intra group relation and exploitation, but also as vital lifelines which have influenced the multifaceted development of societies, economies and polities from time immemorial. It therefore safe to argue here that, the direct relevance of these water bodies to the history of the people/area can be seen in the way they affect settlement pattern, agriculture, communication and trade, as well as the people’s outlook, concept of the world among other things.

**Conceptual Clarification:The People, Space and Time.**

It is important to make it clear from the onset that although, the paper focuses on societies of the Lower Niger region, however, the scope will be limited to societies around the riverine area of present day Esan southeast and their neighbours.it must be made clear that since the focus will be on the precolonial and colonial period, the societies in question, should not be seen in the light of the present day set up. This is because these societies were often fluid and overlapping due to conquest, expansion and incorporation. In this way and over time, the communities have become an admixture of dialect, sharing the same culture, but in most cases retaining their original language. In fact, Bradbury (1957:1-22) in a more graphic way, described the societies thus:

The society is an indivisible one, with admixture of languages;…the southeast Ebu, lnyelen and the settlements of Ibaji have sometimes reported as Ishan communities. They claim for the most part edo and Isham Origin but speak a dialect of Igala with and admixture of Edo vocabulary. The social organization exhibits Ibo characteristics but most of their cults are clearly of Edo origin. In urho chiefdom Ishan and Igala communities live side by side, each retaining its own culture and social organization; most of the people speak both Ishan and Igala. Igala is spoken as a second language in Urowa and Ugboha chiefdoms.

 According to Linguistic studies, the languages of the people belongs to the Kwa speaking sub-family of the Niger Congo language family within the cluster of the kwa languages group and centering roughly in the area of the Niger - Benue confluence are Yoruba Edo, lgbo, Idoma Nupe, lgbirra, Gbagi and Igala, and their separation have been pinned between 2000 and 6000 years ago (Vansina, J et al, 1969:132).

In line with the above, emphasis will be on these societies which occupied and traded along the along bank of the river Niger specifically among the riverain societies of Esan, their Etsako neighbour as well as those around the Aboh (Agbor ), the Igbo, part of Igalaland/people and their neighbours from time immemorial in the Nigerian territory. The settlement patterns, demography and occupation of the people are largely structured to meet the demands of the riverine environment. The unique feature of this area is that the river Niger itself remains a vital commercial link as it has done from the earliest time between the people.

Scholars have repeatedly analyzed the network of interlocking markets on the river, a structure that is clearly mirrored in the description of early European observers. Traders from Brass and other coastal states brought European goods to Esan at the trading station on the Niger (Illushi), where they were exchanged originally for slaves and later for palm oil. Also Igala traders in far ranging canoes, carried goods up the Niger to Esan where they met traders from Benin, Nupe, Sapele and Itsekiri land, the Esan traders cross over to Amalu, up to the Onitsha area with their farm produce. In general, all the traders met at a market called Ega-Oria (later called Illushi), which till date act as a converging pot /port for economic activities. Esan and Ifeku people generally controlled the operations of the market and it was their source of slaves and market for their saleable goods. Baikie and Hutchinson observed in 1854 that, the people were primarily agriculturalist, who fully exploited the resources of the land and water bodies, which they channeled into trade. Through this, they lived comfortably from the ample produce of their extensive farms/water resources and sold surplus, supplying Onitsha and Aboh with yam and cotton.

Drawing the attention of scholars to the area of focus and the importance of the water bodies to the economy of the area, Osiruemu E (2005:412) wrote:

The myriad of waterways in the Lower Niger constituted important commercial highways. Among the various river ports in the area, Aboh occupied a central position, as it was visited by Edo, Igala, Ijo and Northern Igbo traders, and from Aboh, land and river routes radiates into the hinterland on both banks of the Niger. Such trade routes, on the west bank bank of the river, led from the important Niger markets of Allabeta and Autshi to Agbede in the Kukuruku country. Although the beginning of transportation facilitates in the Niger Delta cannot be determined with utmost accuracy, the early settlement of the region and organisation of polities in the region could only have been possible with the use of water transportation. The main tool for these business transactions was canoe, for it was canoe that made movement in the Delta possible and efficient.

In line with the above, Boston (1965), opined that the strategic geographical position of most of these societies around rivers helped in establishing strong relations, that have stood the test of time. The source specifically pointed at the strategic position of the people of western part of Igala on the Niger, who brought her into contact with a wide range of peoples and a great variety of cultures such as the Igbo, the Yoruba, some Edo-speaking groups, the Igbirra, Agatu, Idoma and Jukun (Byng Hall, 1918:166, Byng Hall, 1922:7 )

**Water Bodies and Emergence of Human Settlements/Societies: Evidence from Oral History and Traditions**

Historically, oral tradition of a people tells the story of the hectic and tedious task of state formation.In the case of the societies around the Lower Niger region, the story revolves around how the people over time have been able to interact meaningfully with their natural environment, to produce sustainable economically developed state.

Among the various traditions of the people inhabiting the area, most seems to agree with the view that the existence of water bodies around the area, provided the necessary impetus for the emergence of human societies. As far as the traditions are concerned, the navigable waterways along side it providence, encouraged movement into the area, while at the same time strengthening inter/intra group relations.

For instance, Asenime (1998) argued that the emergence of the Ebu settlement in the area was influence by the numerous waterways. Citing the oral tradition of the people, he argued that the tradition of the people holds that they migrated from Igalaland to their present site during the period of political crisis within Igalaland. During this period, there was no central authority, under any particular individual and the people lived in separate settlements. According to the source, the crisis which erupted during this period that led to migration of some people, was centred on the struggle of the various settlements within Igalaland to control the major trade routes and centers within Igalaland. As a result of this, there was great loss of lives and properties, and so some settlements, especially, the one considered weaker migrated to more peaceful areas along the River Niger banks and one of these migrating groups was led by a man known as Kiri. It further argued that, Kiri and his followers fled through the Niger to a place called Ode, where they also met some group of people also fleeing from one great king in Bini, whom they tried to oust out of office, but could not succeed.Emphasizing the role of water resources, Asenime 2005 continued:

…Kiri became so popular as a veritable priest of mammon and was fond of building huts along the river Niger bank for the worship pf his Ebo (gods/deities). Theough his activities, and vast knowledge of the gods, he gained for himself the title of the Chief Priest of the settlement, and people came from far and near to worship in his shrines.

On the establishment of other settlements around the area, Asenime argued that as a result of the fertile area as well as suitability for human activities, the population continued to grow, so much so that it became clear that there was the need to move further into the interior. On the movement into the interior and how the new settlements were also influenced by waterways, Asenime (2000), wrote:

As a way of resolving this both Kiri, Ebu and Ginuwa decided that it was necessary that some settlements would move further to the interior, thus Kiri and Ginuwa moved their people towards the Niger Delta area in search of new land, while Ebu remained on the original land for sometime, but later moved with some of his followers for reasons not quite certain (to other more favourabe land/settlemnt). Among his followers wre basically the Igala, Bini and some Ode people. They ourneyed along the Niger up to Illushi and here some of Ebu followers got weary and decided to settle here, i.e, Illushi, Ugboha and other neigbhouring areas, while others moved on with him to the present day Ebu land. At their present site, they met the Okpanam (an Igbo speaking group), whom they expelled from the land and settled, while they intermarried with others. This is said to be responsible for the mixed language presently spoken among the Ebu and Inyelen people

Another tradition among the Ifeku people also recognise the role of waterways in the selection of area of settlement by the people. In his analysis, Akuba, P.A. (2003), argued that the river bank bordering Esan southeastern area in southern Nigeria attracted a large chunk of the migrants especially Igala people from Central Nigeria as a result of the resources it was able to provide for the people who were escaping from the oppression of Attah in Idah. Quoting the traditions of the people, Akuba argued that this tradition as it concerns migration to the bank of the river, dates for back into the pre-colonial period, during the reign of a great king in Ane-Igala, who sent some people out in search of building materials to build a befitting palace for the king. This group specifically went searching for a specific type of building rope (iku) for roofing. During the search, some people moved towards the rich and well watered area of Illushi/Ozigono (which later became a trading centre in Oto-Esan, serving as a melting pot for the Esan, Igala, Igbo, Bini, Usobo and Ijekiri). At Illushi, the search team was able to acquire the needed Iku (rope), which they took back to Idah (the seat of the Attah), after which they returned to the “new found land” with their kith and kin, and so this span of land was renamed Efa eku (Efa-Pull, Eku (Iku) – rope) meaning land of those who came in search of rope. This has been corrupted to Ifeku. Since that period till date, the area has continually attract people due to its richness in acquatic resources.

Although, the river Niger is the major river around the area, however, further research have shown that within the Ifeku area (longitude 6° 36' 1" E, and Latitude 6° 43' 30" N), there are variuos water bodies, which coincides with the names of the villages. These water bodies over the years have sustains the socioeconomic life of the people. Some of this incluedes; Ukpo-ukpodo, aji-akpa, Ajiidagozi-piye,idagozi-lile, Ajikpata,. Ukpogudu, ukpoegbolo, ukpo orpa, Ajiabutu, Ajiorbe, Ajigbegbe, Ajigagu , Ajikpopo, Ajiane, ajioguga, Ajiallah, Ajinwuchola, Ajiokoway, Ajielanyi, Ajiefoko,Ajipala,Ukpo-ibogujo,Aji owoli, Ajiofolo, Aji-agwowo, Ajikekele, Ajianekwe. Others are Iyegbi: Afah and Apulu, Adagwu lake; Okwoshimili:Charlachi, okwoshimili, Oyimah, Jaciaya and ukpobogujo; Ajobe: Awoko lake. All these are considered instrumental in the economic life of the people so much so that extant literature on economic development in the area made specific reference to some of them (Daniel Oiko, 2024).

Establishing the role of the water bodies in the attraction of people as well as the evolution of settlements/societies, especially from Ifeku Island, Okoduwa (2013), citing the traditions of some Edo people which emphasized the role of water bodies opined thus:

What is obvious in this tradition is that like all those who migrated into Irrua from **Ifeku Island,** Amilele was a Kyede man who belonged to the predynastic peopling of Esanland. That traditions believe that he returned from Benin to Irrua with a wife shows that he was earlier recognized as the leader of Irrua including Akho village inhabited by the **worshipers of the earth**. Migration traditions in the village of Eidenu also in Irrua show that both the founder and many of the settlers were Nupe in origin. It is more accurate to refer to the Nupe of Ifeku Island in the Niger as Kyede. **Since these so called Nupe were riverine people they were the river transport people of Kyede. Their influence was very strong in the development of the village of Eidenu where the people worship Amese, the god of stormy weather to this day**. It would seem that Kyede element persisted for a long time in Irrua and was responsible for a number of unique Irrua customs. Three great Kyede warriors were instrumental to the founding of the village of Eidenu. All three were deified and “are worshiped during the yearly festival of Eidenu” Even more obvious is the Kyede influence in Amese, the god of stormy weather and his priestly line whose title is Ohen Amese, an institution that is unique to Irrua. **Gods of stormy weather are far more important to canoe people than they are to agriculturists. The canoe culture was adapted and perpetuated among the land cultivators or agriculturists of Irrua (**emphasis are mine)**.**

 **Water Bodies, their Tributaries, and the Trade links and Commerce (Economy) of the People.**

Environmental historians have argued that the earliest economy of the area, revolved around the water resources especially as it was able to create the necessary atmosphere for trade. For instance, scholars agreed that along the Niger River above the Delta was another area of Interaction and the Ijo, Edo, Igala, and Igbo people. It have been specifically noted that the roots of the contact must go back for a considerable time before 1500 since among the Igbo west of the river those elements of Edo culture which antedate the rise of the Benin Empire (c.1300) are more wide spread than those that can be detected from Benin. From the testimonies of these scholars, it has been established that due to the water banks, commercial activities particularly trade from the Igala area to the Niger bank market was always at the peak during flood season, and was conducted in canoes manned by the Igala canoe men. As early as the 19th century, the market pulled a large population, as observed in the 1830’s, when some 300 canoes were seen going up to the market, while in 1841, 60 canoes holding from 2 to 70 men were observed returning from it (Brooke 1920, Baikie, 1966, Bradbury 1957). This made the area a bee hive of economic activities and integration. It is important to note that it was as a result of these trade activities that the Igala culture and language spread beyond the original frontal of Igala land into some other areas especially among the Igbo people and the Edo people. In the case of the Edo area, it has been discovered that Igala settlements dots various villages of the Esan (Edo) people. This can be found in villages like Emaudo (Ekpoma), Ahia and Udakpa (Present Day Esan Southwest Local Govt Area), some parts of Ugboha and Irrua. In fact oral tradition of the Edo people holds that Irrua (an Edo community) was established by an Igala man, while Emaudo in Ekpoma was established by warriors from Igala. With this, the people have one claim or the other to have migrated from earlier settlements around the well water area. Analyzing the end result of the above, Brooks, N.J, argued that the result of this trade relationship is the formation of an indivisible community of Ishan, Ibo, Kukuruku (Afenmai) and Igala, who formed most of the early settlements of the area (Akubor, 2014).

In line with the above, Ukwedeh (1976), was able to identify two phases in the history of the people as influence by waterways. The first is from what is considered the earliest times - C. 1700 A.D, while the second phase was between C 1750 — C. 1900 AD.

According to sources, by the of the first phase, the earliest settlers had become established though in small groups around the ancient centers with relatively little inter group contacts but subsisting from the resources of their environment (particularly the waterways and resources). In his Analysis, Ukwedeh (1976) wrote:

As we move into the second phase we find some new developments creeping up. By the 1530s the ldah-Benin war of 1516/17 had gone but the trails of its social impacts behind. In the 1530s the few dispersed settlements on the left bank of the river began to show some degree of heterogeneity owning to sporadic infiltrations into the society of the remnants of the defeated Igala army that have been taking refuge among the Ishan of the right bank. At the right bank the Igala refugees were staying among the Ishan people of Ahia, Ugboha, Anegbete, where some elements of lgala speech still survive. Though few stayed behind, the majority of them eventually found their way into the left bank villages in southwestern Ibaji district. The descendants of those who did not cross to the left bank form the bulk of the population of those right villages that claim Igala origin in Bendel state today.

On the reason for such migration, the author continued:

The main reason that made flee the right bank of the river was hostility from the people among whom they settled. Though the wars had ended and were far from the former war theatre, the fact that these defected Igala soldiers were in the enemy camp was enough for them to ensure the antagonism of the dreadful lshah and Inele people. There was trouble over right to property, ownership of land and heavy tributes were imposed on the defeated soldiers for the amount of land cultivated and hunting rights.

The arrival of these new elements from the right bank led to changes in the apparently conservatives society of the left bank. Those who got married to either Ishan or Inele women crossed with them. The ldah soldiers themselves were not made up purely of Igala people but mixed with Idoma, and perhaps lgbirra and Nupe. The descendants of these immigrants from the right bank in southwestern Ibaji district today include Ufoko, Ohiogu and Oyokwa clans of lgbirra origin, Echule clan with Idoma origin, Agwalo, Ochata of ldah origin, and lmanyumi, Amoma’duja and Okpatawo clan of Igala origin. Other groups not identified here also found their way into the left bank society.

Other sources, also argued that apart from the diversification of ethnic groups, other change and cultural items found their way into enrich the traditional system especially through the waterways economic activities. For instance, it has been established that coconut tree was introduced into southwestern Ibaji district by the immigrants from the right bank of the river, who were of the Edo origin. It is therefore not surprising that till date, coconut is called uno’ba (oba’s Nut or kernel) in lgala language.

The water bodies and resources as well as the need to harvest them, also encouraged the development of technology, with which the people were able to control the new environment. For instance, although most of the settlements were around the river bank, others who were farther in the interior thought of the idea of storing water for domestic use. Recognising this as a problem as well as the ways in which the people went about sorting themselves out, Ukwedeh (1976) wrote

Another natural result of the coming of new immigrants was the congestion of the ancient centers outlined in phase one. The congestion led to conflicts among the old and new corners. As this situation occurred a sort of ‘hiving off’ of some people to colonize other streams in the neighbourhood began to take place. Apart from the fish got from the streams there was a great risk for women to travel a long distance alone in search of water for drinking and other household needs. As the population continued to expand the available natural streams which could easily be colonized got exhausted. Thus dawned the era of diggings (Uko) in virgin valleys which after the rains and the Niger floods became filled with water, trapping a great amount of fish. The improvised stream (Uko) was repaired yearly by the owner until it became deep enough to trap big fish and some sea animals. Such centers which came to control considerable population developed around Ochua-chua, Ogohoma, Ojoba, lyore, Echeba and Ogene-ebe.

In term of commercial activities, it is important to note that market centres existed in the various areas supported by the waterways. The markets of this phase should not be thought of in term of the present organized markets but rather as random gatherings of buyers and sellers to meet the demand of the moment. One of the most important market that developed during this period was at the west bank of the river - Egga Oria. Akubor (2005, 2010, 2011), argued that the market of Oria became important as from the beginning of the 18th century, especially as it relates to the exchange in products that were extracted from the rivers and surrounding streams. Bradbury (1960) argued that the riverine people of southwestern Ibaji district brought to the market dried (smoked) fish, palm produce and yams, which they exchanged for bananas, livestock and Ishan cloth (Ukpon Ododo). Bradbury also argued that through this trade and exchange, some varieties of bananas and plantain were introduced by the Esan (Ishan) traders to Ibaji district from the west bank of the river. The source argued that the Esan traders could have got these new food items form Benin, due to the early contacts with the Europeans especially the Portuguese (Forde, 1955, Akubor, 2022).

Similarly, it has been argued that through this waterways trade contact, cowries currency became a means of exchange in the area before the end of the first economic phase (1700AD). This was supplied as well as introduced to the market by the Edo traders, who had acquired this much earlier (Johnson, 1970). According to sources, most of the cowries shells in southern Nigeria came from the Indian Ocean, and as such as early as 1515, imports began to come to Benin through the Indian Oceans. Also in the same period the king of Portugal gave to a Portuguese merchant to have 500 quintals of Cowries brought from India each year for the Sao Tome trade. This placed Benin in a very advantage position to have early use of cowries. In this circumstance the use of cowries could have become a common item in the lshan territory at most a century after it had been introduced to Benin. The claim by some informants that cowries currency used in Ibaji were first introduced from the right bank of the river is therefore plausible. On the effect of this on the economy of the area, Ukwedeh (1976)noted:

The effects of the introduction of cowrie currency were that it made the economic activities less cumbersome. Price became more standardized and prospective buyers could now buy whatever they liked whether they had any article to exchange or not. The arrival of cowries currency thus prepared the ground for the greater economic activity which was the main feature of the next phase of economic history of southwestern lbaji district.

On the impact on what may be best described as expansion of trade (especially between 1750 and 1900 D), the scholars wrote:

While farming, fishing and all the other economic pursuits mentioned in the phase one contained to be important the introduction of money economy into the area by the arrival of cowries currency extended the economy pursuits of the people beyond their immediate boundaries. The system of conservative exchange was broken in favour of more dynamic economic ventures. By early 18th century economic activities in the area had expanded inland to Ogurugu and Nsukka, Adani and Enugu-Ezike in the east, Anambra creek and Onitsha in the south.

Along the Niger, there were trade connections at Oria at the west bank, Adamugu and Igala bank market at the Niger-Anambra confluence opposite Asaba. Items of trade were slaves, dried fish, beads, food stuffs and palm produce. Dried fish was sold by the people of southwestern lbaji district at Oria, Adamugu, and Ogurugu from where they were taken to Onitsha. According to colonial assessment report by Brooke, N.J. (1920) Igala yam trade alone for 1920 amounted to about £66,666. out of an estimated total of £81,046. This testimony has been buttressed by the accounts of both Bradbury (1957), Okogie (1960) and Akubor (2007, 2022), who argued that a large chunk of both aquatic and other agricultural produce from these riverain communities went as far as Benin, Lagos and other surrounding countries.

 The above economic success especially in the area of commerce was possible through the provision of the environment especially the water bodies. It is therefore in line with this that Akubor (2012), argued that economic development of the area cannot be explained outside the ecology. The source specifically noted thus:

…the local traditions among the ozigono people explains that,the movement to the area,was as a result of the availability of games in the area,as well as the water resources abundant in the area. This is often explained in terms of the mixture of people inhabiting the area.For instance,the Esan,usobo,ighalan and ibo,inhabit the area,with each still maintaining link with their traditional homeland. With these the society became an area of plural cultural interaction leading to the formation of an indivisible community.

It is thus clear that the economic prowess and prosperity of these community as well as the atmosphere that encouraged such environment cannot be completely divorced from the ambiance provided by water bodies and her rich resources.

**Canoe Building Technology and the Development of Fishing (Aquatic) Industry**

It must be noted that the art and craft technology that developed in this area during this period revolved around the water bodies and her resources. For instance, the people were able to building canoe and boat with which the navigated the area. This is based on the fact that most of the settlements were located in island. Due to the nature of the terrain, during the dry season it is possible to crisscross the area of foot. However, this is almost nearly impossible during the rainy (flood) season when the Niger overflows its banks. This makes the canoes/ engine boat and other means of water transportation the most common means of movement around the area. This is not in any way suggesting that the people and area is completely cut off from the rest of the region as there existed a constant affair between peoples because one of the most important market (for the people of this area) was at Oria later moved to the right bank of the Niger (Egga Illushi). Since the market (and other surrounding major markets) held (and still hold) every four days the Ibaji people and those from the interior Igala area constantly use of the Niger by means of canoes. Today this market is referred to as Egga (River bank) market, while the canoe/boat terminus is referred to as Egga Ejini (Ejini is a corruption of the word Engine) (Akubor, 2005, 2010, 2014). Commenting on the importance of the canoe system among the people of the riverine societies, Isichei (1983:115), argued the canoes in coastal and riverine areas was the precise equivalent of the horse in the north. According to the sources, the canoe was a large-scale transport of bulky product over long distance, a function which no other form of transport could perform equally successfully including the railway in the first years of its introduction. On the capacity of the canoe, the scholar continued thus:

The bigger canoes here made from a single trunk are the largest in the Ethiopias of Guinea; some of them are large enough to hold eighty men, and they came from a hundred leagues or more up this river bringing yams in large quantities…they also bring many slave, cows, goat and sheep

The act of canoe building was a profession that was practiced by professionals who had vast knowledge of not just the carving, but also the best materials for the building. For instance, in area of the Igala, the Nupe engaged in canoe making in the Timber rich area along Okura river. In Itobe District along the Niger bank, the canoe industry is jointly carried out by experts of Igala, Nupe, Kakanda, Igbirrra, Yoruba and Bassa Nge extract. In the semi-riverain area of Ibaji and Abejukolo-Ife, the antiquity of canoe industry has gone beyond the limit that oral tradition can remember. So they simply argue, that the act/industry is as old as the establishment of their settlement. This situation is not peculiar to our area of study, as similar situation have been identitied in adjourning riverain territories (Byng Hall, 1918; Chapman, 1919: 12). For instance, it has been reported that the Arugbo people argued that they got the name of their initial settlement, a noted centre of canoe manufacturing. Thus Arugbo was derived from *aru* (canoe) and *Ogbo* (settlement), which is translates as “canoe making camp” (Osiruemu, E, 2005:416-7). Similarly, the art of making canoes is only famous among the states of Eastern Delta such as Apoi, Furupagha, Olodiama, Arugbo and Egbema, because of area possess that right type of timber for making canoe.This also (directly or indirectly) bestowed on them the knowledge (Alagoa, 1971-269-278, Ukwedeh 1984b: 16-17)

In case of fishing exercise and the harvesting of other aquatic animals, the professional fishermen were able to manufacture implements especially fishing hook(Uwo), either used for small scale fishing or the fishing net (Igan), depending on the depth of the river or stream where they fishing expedition is to be done. The materials needed for the production of either the hook or net were locally sources from among the riverine fishermen especially the Igala (Ighalan), who were mostly sheltered around the Niger bank referred to as Ottu-Egga. The Edo (Esan) alongside the Ighalan (Igala), Usobo (Urhobo) and Jekiri(Itsekiri) people were able tp provide the bulk of fish and other water resources that went into the profitable fish trade to Benin and Lagos area. This formed the basis of the wealth, which they used to satisfy other needs (Asenime, 2000, Akubor, 2005).

**The** **Water Bodies and Socio-Religious Existence of the People**

The importance of these rivers in the natural environment of the riverain societies of Agbacha Esan, their Etsako and Igbo neighbours and their relevance to the history and culture of the area is in the way they have over the years affected the world view of the people. In this way, the effects of ecology can also be seen in the traditional religion of the people reflecting environment features. Thus for the Esan societies around water bodies, gods and goddess became associated with natural feature such as *Okun* (rivers), *Oto* (Earth/land) which were highly venerated worshiped. Special occasion and feasts were held to commemorate their existence. During these festival, various traditional dances like *Ilo, Agbega, Oleke, Abanyon, Aghemojie, Obodorhibhafe* and *Igbabonelimin* were displayed. The priests/priestesses of the various deities, pour libation and make necessary sacrifices at the shrine of the deities. It is important to note that the calendar of these cultural and religious festivals were closely associated with the climate, seasons, as well as the first rain amukpe or harvesting of crops. The people of *Eidenu* (an Esan community) worship Amese, the god of stormy weather to this day (Okoduwa 2013), while in *Oria* (which includes *Onogholo, Oria, Ukhuolo* and *Ogbokpa*) *Iyamolen* (a stream associated with wealth, fertility and agriculture), is deified and worshipped (Akubor 2024). Similarly, In the socio-poltical hierachy of their Igala neigbours/people, the role of the *Onu-Aji* (water king) *Ebo-Omi* (water spirit /god) stands out very conspiciously. This is well displayed in Egume District of Igala, where the *Onu-Aji* (water king) from the Adum clan is the chief priest of the god of Adale river, the main source of water supply for Egume town. It is worshipped to ward off war, small pox and death (Ukwedeh 1984).

Among the Agbacha people in the Esan area, the worship of *Ebo Omi* (water deities) is common. This system is synonymous with the practice among the people of Idah who worship the streams of *Odoma, Ihiake Atakpa, Okpe, Ikpako, Ebocho* and *Aduru.* In Igala area in the present Idoma -Igala boundary to the north eastern direction of Igala, the millet festival was centered on the worship of Okoto river, while in Imane north east of Ankpa, the first public performance of a new Onu Imane was some sacrifice to the god of river Omulewu in the Idoma-Igala boundary. Among the Calabari people, water deities are commonly refered to as Owu Amapo. Among the Igbirra, the concept of *Ori* (spirit) covers many areas of life such as peace, goodluck, fertility, bountiful harvest, among others. The Ori is believed to be resident and worshipped in a pool of water or part of a river (Ibrahim, Y.A, 1968). Among the Igbo neigbhours, the worship of sacred waters such as the *Otamini* or the water wife *Wainya Wala Dala* was common among the people(Talbot, P.A, 1967:32). In the case of the Anambra people, with specific reference to Idemili, Muoghalu C.O. (2022) wrote:

In Idemili…the major totem is the Eke Idemili(a specie of python with shimmering black and white spots). This python is highly revered and respected because to the people, it is sacred. This sacred python happens to be the representative of the river and because the sacred python represents the river goddess, the sacred python is also called Idemili. It is from this river that the area got its name. This could explain why the people from the area calls the sacred python our mother because of that recognition that it represent the goddess and that at the same time, it is a member of the community. As such, no one from Idemili eats python or kill it or do anything harsh to it. On unique characteristics of the sacred python is that in spite of the fact that it is a poisonous snake, it does not bite anybody from Idemili and this is why it lives freely among the people.

Evidence of the above (even till date) is witnessed among the people of this area (just like their counterparts in other riverain areas), pointing to particular rivers, lakes or creeks as their ancestral home, family shrine and the worship of water deities. In this way, water bodies constitute major aspect of their day to day life especially in sacrifices (as witnessed by the author in 1986 in Ukpo lake in Ukpodo), oath taking as practiced in the various shrines like Ushanene, Olokun and Alamoka (Okogie 1960, Akubor 2007), purification, sanctification and blessings as in Onene shrine Uhiele (Ibhawoh, 2023:37), welcoming of guest (as customary among the people of Ifeku Island and their Alebetta neigbhours) among others.

**Conclusion**

From the discourse, it can be argued that there is much to learn from the societies of Lower Niger area especially as it relates to man’s interaction with the environment to attain meaningful socio-economic development. In the case of the area under study, the people were able to make good use of the opportunities provided by the water bodies in and around their environment. It is important to note that the natural providence of river network in the area has been of tremendous importance in the establishment of links with adjourning communities. Through this they were able to established settlements/societies, which over time developed strong trade and commercial network, exchange of goods, technology, cultural values and ideas. With time, this became integral part of the people, as well as important aspect of their civilization. In this way, these societies continued to tame their environment, learn from others and by the eve of colonial rule, they had become economical independent and politically stabilised. This is a lesson, that the current Nigerian society must emulate as far as attaining self-sufficiency and economic stability is concerned.

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