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A Reconsideration of the Environment, Migration, Settlement and Economic Activities among Nupe Fishing Group of Central Nigeria

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Abstract: Environment plays a significant role in the history of human settlement and economic activities. Since when man took to sedentary life the choice of area of habitation has become a major challenge for survival. This accounted for constant population movement from one place to another in an effort to earn a relatively fair livelihood. Central Nigeria area with its friendly ecology has attracted a number of people overtime making it a corridor of human interaction and melting pot of culture and economic activities. It is on this premise that we attempt to examine the migratory trend and settlement pattern of fishing group among the Nupe (and its sub-dialect) in Central Nigeria area. The study made use of primary and secondary sources in obtaining information. Reconnaissance survey was also undertaken. The data collected were analysed using content and descriptive methods.

Keywords: Environment, Migration, Nupe Fishing Group, Settlement and Economic Activities.

INTRODUCTION

Man became sentimentally attached to an environment when he took to sedentary life. The attachment and claim to such environment was due to push and pull factors prevalent at any giving time and point he found himself. The push factors are usually unfavourable situation such as drought and famine, war, political turmoil, breakout of deadly diseases among others that made individual or group to abandon an hitherto settlement in search of or to a place that offers better condition of living. The pull factors on the other hands connote favourable conditions that encourage human habitation in a giving place. These conditions may include fertile land, favourable climate, access to water, political stability, security and other elements that promote socio-economic development and wellbeing of the people.

The above factors made man to continuously search for a better place that will guaranty not only peaceful but socio-economic and political development. It was on this premise that in sub-Saharan Africa, population movement and human settlement and resettlement continued up to the end of 19th century. One of such area that witnessed constant population movement of both outflow and influx of people is the Central Nigeria area. Being environmentally friendly and strategically located on a vegetal transition zone between forestry south and savannah north made it a centripetal point of human attraction for habitation from within and outside the area. The resourcefulness of the environment further influences choice of economic activities depending on the local ecology of the area of settlement. This made the region to be for long “a focal area of migration, commerce and

conquest, which have set up cultural cross currents of many kinds".

It was on these conditions that Nupe people and indeed the fishing group made riverine area of Central Nigeria their place of habitation and economic activities. The high level of interaction between them and the environment made them master of their trade leading to specialisation and monopoly of both their trade of fishing and canoeing overtime.

The Environment

Central Nigeria or Middle Belt as it is also known described the land area that runs from the border of Benin Republic in the west to the Cameroonian border in the east. It encompasses the states of Niger, Kwara, Kogi, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba and Abuja, FCT. The area lies between the forestry south and the savannah vegetation belt, a transition zone where '' both root crops of the southern economy and grain crops of the northern dry savannah can be grown.'' The area is criss-cross by a number of rivers of which Rivers Niger and Benue anchored the drainage pattern. Most of the rivers empty into one another or empty either Niger as with Kaduna, Gbako and Gurara or Benue before Benue formed a tributary of Niger at a confluence town of Lokoja. These rivers are free of rocks and dangerous rapids that made navigation possible. The area is generally of low relief and undulating land of not more than 200ft above sea level and presence of sporadic valleys and isolated hills and inselbergs of not more than 800ft sea level.

Rainfall is fairly distributed across six to eight months but decreases both in duration and amount from the south to the north following the migratory pattern of Inter Tropical Convergence. The amount of rainfall received, the low relief and valley nature of the land made it to be prone to flood during rains in which extensive rich flood plains are left behind on both sides of the river banks and the ponds got filled up. This encourages both aquatic farming and cultivation of crops. The sun is generally overhead making the temperature to be high with an average of 270c. The vegetation being a transition one came to be known as Guinea Savannah due to climatic factors of rain and sunshine on one hand and soil nature and ground water on the other. The friendly and resourcefulness of the area made Bingel to note that:

> The nature of the relief, climate and vegetation of Niger Province area and indeed of a larger portion of the Middle Belt is indicative of an area that provided wide opportunities for human habitation and the pursuit of man's economic needs.

Central Nigeria area most especially the Niger-Benue confluence area thus became home to quite a number of people that included Igala, Bassa, Idoma, Alago, Tvi, Afo, Koro, Gade, Igbira, Gbari, North eastern Yoruba and the Nupe that make the place a melting pot of culture. The study is concerned with Nupe people.

People, Migration and Settlement Pattern

The Nupe refers to a people, language and to some extent the land they occupied and lived on. The origin of Nupe people and their name is uncertain and still a subject of debate and speculation giving rise to different explanation by different sources. Some sources in an attempt to identify whom Nupe people are, tried to explain their origin while others give explanation of the name. Yet, some approach it from dialect point or their settlement pattern with others concentrating on the nature of occupation or economic activities they engaged in. As our focus is not Nupe generally but the fishing group, we don't need to go into that argument. However, we shall identify their area of settlement.

The Nupe being one of the major ethnic groups in the area could be found from the confluence town of Lokoja living on both sides of the Niger River extending to the southern parts of Borgu and the lower basins of Kaduna River. They occupied the entire land on the eastern side of the Niger River to as far as Kataeregi and the western side reaching Share. The area they occupied covered the territorial space that came to be refers to as the Middle Niger. Ezeokeke thus described the area of habitation of Nupe as:

> The geographical position of Nupe land makes it a typical area of transition from the southern forest belt to the arid savannah of the north. Most of the area iscovered savannah of various types ranging from Guinea savannah in the southern part of the Kingdom. The meeting point

> of the dominant vegetation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in Nupe land, the coexistence of marshland and savannahcountry and the existence of river network which served as an efficient naturalsystem of communication encouraged the development of a viable centre ofcivilisation founded by the Nupe people.

The time of their settlement in the area could not be said with certainty but Sule believed that they make reference to when they became conscious of themselves and the land they occupied from fifteenth century AD. He also noted that such territorial area they inhabit had not been static due to expansion emanating from conquest and assimilation. It was therefore opined that:

> There seems little doubt from the evidence in Sokoto Province that the land of Nupe was formally either of much greater extent than is now the case, or was situated much further north. The people gradually moving southwards totheir present habitat at the confluence of Niger and Kaduna Rivers.

The Nupe fishing group came to be identified as the Kyadya and Kakanda. Their identity is rooted on their history, place of habitation and occupation or economic activities. This made Ade Obayemi to opine that:

> The question of identity or definition of a people is rooted in History….It is however always important to note that the definition of a people or the assertion of a cultural identity is primarily based on speech-the name of the language or dialect usually being the name for the cultural group.

The Kyadya

The Kyadya who are wrongly seen as a subgroup or sub-tribe among the Nupe claimed not only being Nupe but indigenous to their area of habitation. They claimed not to have migrated from a distant outside Nupe land and speak Nupe proper. They refer to Muregi as their ancestral home. Muregi, a settlement at the confluence of Rivers Niger and Kaduna became the dispersal centre from where they expands, conquered and colonised establishing settlements along the banks on the land of the aborigine Bataci. Despite being settlers and minority among the Bataci they lord themselves as local rulers exercising authority over them. However, among the Kyadya, a few claimed that their forbearers migrated from Idah to Nupe land long before the coming of cultural hero- Tsoede settling along the banks and remained a fishing community have been acculturated into either Kyadya or Bataci whom they lived with.

The nature of environment and the resources therein play significant role in human habitation. The Middle Niger with its artery of river channels anchored on Niger influenced population settlement and distribution. Abubakar observed that “the availability of and access to water has been a factor in human settlement and accounted for population concentration in or near the river valleys where water can be access for human and animal use.” This made Kyadya to have their settlements on a narrow strip of land or to some extend not more than three hundred feet along the river banks of Niger, Kaduna and Gbako. They also settled in the existing Bataci settlements as was the case with Edozhigi, Mambe, Zhima and Danchitagi.

In addition to the above settlements, population increment and occupational calling may lead to founding of a new settlement either temporally or permanently. On population increment as with Nupe tradition, a family or group of people could live to found new settlement with the permission of elders or approval of state officials. Such settlements are also established along the river banks and may be on permanent bases. On the occupational calling, this may be for fishing expedition and seasonal without intent of permanent settlement. The migrants are expected back to mother settlement at the end of the fishing expedition and harvest of ponds and pools within the area. The major settlements of Kyadya includes Muregi, Cegu, Leaba, Sabo,Shankyede, Yankyede, Sonka, Egan, Bazumagi, Buka, Bela, Kpakefu, Ogudu, Ketsogi, Lekpata, Edozhigi, Ela, Difu, Gbaradogi, Dokomba, Kpatagbe,Katcha, Wunagi,Gidi,Wuya etc. These settlements were spread along the banks of River Niger from Leaba to Baro;from Muregi to Wuya on River Kaduna and settlements around Katchaon Gbako River.

The Kakanda

Theidentity of Kakanda just like the Nupe has for quite sometimes be a subject of argument and speculation with some scholars giving it a distinct identity while others opined that it formed prt of larger Nupe group. For instance, Nadel argued that:

> On the river, in the south, we have another group which has for sometimes been under Nupe political influence and has partly adopted Nupe language and culture. The Kakanda they are not, however regarded as part of the Nupe tribe or not yet.

Idrees toying the line of Nadel wrote that "the Kakanda are essentially a distinct group in the confluence region contrary to the erroneous belief that they are a part of large Nupe group." However, these arguments seems not to add up as Sule noted that Kakada have no tradition of migration beyond their area of habitation apart from those of the ruling class or dynastic origin, and linguistic studies done identify them to belong to Nupe language cluster. This made Obayemi to conclude that "Kakanda… the language belong to the Nupe group although by no means directly intelligible to speakers of Nupe." One can conclude therefore that the Kakanda despite dialectic variation forms part of Nupe conforming to its socio- political structure and culture.

The Kakanda could be found within the Middle Niger around the banks of Niger from the confluence town of Lokoja extending to areas around Egan as the upper limit and on the confluence of Gurara river. They also settled in the hinterland. The Kakanda thus come to occupy the forestry zone of the Savannah. Their major settlements include Muye, Budan,Giriyan, Gori, Ara, Sokun etc. Today, they could be found in states of Niger and Kogi.

Economic Activities of Kyadya and Kakanda

Fishing

The choice and practice of an economic activity or occupation depends on the availability and access to resources that support such a venture. The critical natural resource in fishing is water which comes in forms of rivers, streams, pools, ponds and creaks. This was quite in abundance in the area of habitation of both Kyadya and Kakanda. Their land which is a contiguous one is traverse by Rivers Niger, Kaduna, and Gbako along with other streams, pools and ponds in the upper Middle Niger of Kyadya while Niger, Gurara and streams in the lower Middle Niger to confluence town of Lokoja that housed the Kakanda. The entire fishing process is controlled by the two groups which made them not only monopolised but master of the occupation because "they alone were devoted only to river activities." For ease of fishing and regulation of common resources among the two, the Kyadya controlled the larger portion of the water course monopolising fishing from Leaba to Baro on the Niger and from Muregi to Wuya on Kaduna river and Katcha area on the Gbako from its confluence with Niger. Kakanda on the other hand controlled the downstream from Baro through Muye to the immediate south of the Niger- Benue confluence.

Fishing could be done in several ways using different but available facilities. Firstly, it could be done individually which Nupe refers to as buca that involved the use of funa throwing net. It may be embarked upon anytime of the day or night and the proceeds owned and appropriated by the individual. Secondly, fishing could be done collectively with number of persons involved depending on the size and capacity of the net. For instance where small nets such as padi a smaller dragnet of 10 by 4 yards is in use the number of persons involved is three while Lulugi measuring 20 by 7 yards is worked by six people. These nets are not used daily as it requires drying for at least two days whenever used as part of maintenance. The work team are usually from the same home or family and the proceeds appropriated accordingly among them. The bigger dragnet called Wasako requires at least eight workmen before being put to use. Its useage is not within the vicinity of their settlement but far away from home where water is deep. This fishing expedition is embarked upon after due planning as it takes days or weeks and mostly done in the night before returning home. Team members are family members and proceeds appropriated among members with the head dictating. This fishing type is known as efako family fishing. From the proceeds of the fishing expedition family needs such as renovation and building of new houses, payment

dowry and marriage ceremonies, maintenance and purchase of fishing tools and so on are undertaken.

From above discussion we have seen that fishing is done within family unit either individually or in group but labour force is often minimise within the immediate family. The tools for fishing remain nets of different sizes and hooks for children.

The presence of pools and ponds also allowed for the harvest ewan of fish from them. Though they are owned either by individuals, family, title holders or community, harvest of fish from them is usually fix on a specific day. Harvested fish are shared among participants with owners and community leaders receiving greater proceeds. Sometimes, individual or family ones could be lease out. Most of the ponds and pools are owned by Batacizi but fish harvest from it requires the expertise of Kyadya.

Women apart from fishing on small scale are involved in smoking, preservation and marketing of fish.

Transportation

The second most important economic activities of the Nupe fishing communities were river transportation or canoeing. This was based on the presence of rivers, streams and ponds that are free of rocks and cataracts that may obstruct movement with large canoes. This led to the emergence of many who dedicated themselves more to river transportation to ease movement of goods and persons across the rivers or from one settlement to another including markets. The settlements and markets may be near or not, on the same side of the bank or not. The size of canoes differs with some measuring up to fifty feet long and five feet wide. The canoes were paddled by slaves, hired person, or lease out with few owners paddling themselves. Fares collected by canoe men differ from one passenger to another, amount of goods involved and distance. For every trip canoe men made levies and duties were collected by the state agents. Also, Niger water way was divided into sphere of influence or control between Kyadya and Kakanda. The Kyadya group controls the larger portion of the River running from Leaba to Baro and on tributary rivers before that point. Thus Kakanda controls the waterway from Baro to the immediate southern fringes of the confluence town of Lokoja. River ports on Niger River were Leaba, Gbajibo, Poto, Eleh, Kpatagban, Rabba, Muregi, Dokomba, Baro, Eggan, Budan, Gboba and Lokoja. On Kaduna River was Wuya and on Gbako river was Katcha and Lokogoma.

Farming/Crop cultivation

Some fishermen among the Kyadya and Kakanda taking advantage of fertile marshy and plain lands and their cohabitation with Batacizi on a small scale took to crop production in and around there settlements. Attendance to crop production were done either early in the morning or in the evening which like other Nupe farmers refers to as lazhigi or lozungi. Labour was sourced from the family. Some of such lands cultivated were lease to them by the Bataci and pay royalties after harvest. Major crop cultivated were rice, sweet potato, cassava and vegetables. Whatever they produced they consume.

Commerce/Marketing

Man engages in production in order to satisfy his immediate or not too long physiological needs or to exchange to get what he could not produce. This necessitated the need for exchange which began through barter and later establishment of markets and introduction of currency. The founding of markets led to the evolution of occupational traders. Among the Nupe fishermen, as part of labour division and cultural ethos women were into preservation of fish and selling. Fish were sold either fresh or smoked. Fish are smoked using a specially constructed ekun. Fish to be smoked depending on the specie and size are either cut into wanted pieces, curved or not. Due to level of fishing, many have taking in to marketing of fish attending to nearby and long distance markets within and beyond Nupe land. Some fishermen due to lucrative nature of selling fish have made it a full time occupation.

CONCLUSION

From our discussion we have been able to establish that environment plays key role in movement, settlement and occupation of an individual or group of persons. This we have established that the settlement and economic activities of Kyadya and Kakanda around and along the confluence of Niger Benue, middle Niger and the basin therein influenced their economic activities of fishing, canoe transportation, crop production and trading which has become a trade mark to them.

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