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Dynamics of Trade and Market Management in Pre-Colonial West Africa: A Survey Research in Indigenous Economy

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the nature, form and methods of trade organization and market management in West Africa in the pre-colonial era. It submits that though West African economies in the pre-colonial period were largely driven by agricultural-related enterprises, their economic production, nonetheless, grew beyond mere subsistence level. This necessitated an exchange of commodities with neighbouring and some distant communities. This study identifies the different forms of markets among the peoples: local, regional and external. It further examines the modes of exchange and currency management technique before the coming of Europeans. The paper also highlights the role of the state in marketing and trade. It concludes that trade was well organised among indigenous West Africans while markets were well structured for socio-economic advancement of the people.

I. INTRODUCTION

One remarkable feature of the West African agricultural and industrial systems was that they operated above the subsistence level. All the sections of the economy were capable of generating surpluses, which were disposed through trade. This partly explains why trading and markets formed integral parts of the West African indigenous economy. There were others reasons for the existence of markets. No West African community was self-sufficient in its economy. The people in the savannah region needed coastal products such as salt and fish; and those in the coast also needed goods such as Shea butter, hides and skin produced in the savannah region. Even within the same region, location and geographical differences led to market variations on the goods produced (Falola, 1995). This alsopropelledand promoted trade. Within the same society, be it a town, village or a clan, division of labour and specialisation in economic functions encouraged the emergence and growth ofmarketing activities. The farmer needed tools and toolmakers needed food. The indispensability of trading and markets encouraged the need to develop the institutions which could facilitate commerce, namely transportation, trade routes and currency (Hodder and Ukwu, 1969).

Trade Routes

West Africa had many trade routes which fell into three categories. First, there were local routes linking the villages and towns in the same area together. Second, there were regional or inter-states trade routes. Third, there were international highways which linked many states and different regions together. Thus, West Africa was linked together by a complex network of routes. Many highways took off in the coastal region, passed through the vast hinterland and went northwards (Skinner, 1964). For example one highway started in Lagos, passed through Abeokuta, Ilorin, Bida, Zaria and Kano all in Nigeria. Another began in Accra, Kumasi, Salaga, and Mango up to Say on the Niger bend. Yet another began in Monrovia and passed through Mussardu, Keruan, Kanka, Bamako, Djenne to Timbuktu (Skinner, 1964).

The trade routes presented some distinguishing characteristics. First the trade routes connected the whole of West Africa together. Those places which were not located on the major highways were linked by extensive feeder roads.

Second, the routes were wide enough for people who travelled on foot or on animal. Most of the European travelers who made use of these routes especially in the 19th century remarked that they were “good”, “fine” and “adequate”. Finally, the routes were safe and secure except in period of wars. It was the primary responsibility of the rulers through which the routes passed to make them safe. Hence,it was common among affected states to patrol the routes and to appoint soldiers or hunters to accompany the traders. Meanwhile, thetrade routes were a means to an end, the end being to get to the marketcentres, which were a major aspect of the West Africa economy (Falola, 1995).

Markets

A market in the West African sense is a demarcated site where traders and consumers met to exchange products. Transactions could however be made in places which were not strictly markets. For instance, there were "road side markets" where goods were spread on the ground. Food sellers also had their different stalls located in different places while hawking was done by children and women who carried and advertised the goods about (Hodder, 1969; Skinner, 1964).

The market place was, however, the most developed. It had a number of features. First the market was multifunctional; it performed socio-political functions besides the commercial. The market was a place of entertainment as well as an amusement which enabled drummers, singers and poets to practice their arts. Moreover, it was a place to disseminate information and spread news and rumours. Nevertheless, the commercial function of the market remained the most significant.

Second, the markets were properly organized. The form of market organization differed from place to place though they shared many things in common, namely, one, they were well laid out, some had trees to provide shade while some had tents or stalls built of thatched roofs. Two, there were trade guilds (associations) organized along commodities of trade. For example, there could be guilds of livestock dealers, foodstuff sellers and fish sellers, in a market. Members of the same trade guild sat close to one another. This arrangement had at least three merits. It made it convenient for buyers to locate the section of every item in the market; it reduced the possibility of making excessive profit because consumers could easily compare prices of many traders; and it enabled consumers to choose the best from a large number of the same good. But the system was not without its demerits; it made it easier for traders to fix and control prices, and as long as they sat close to one another, no trader could sell below the agreed price. Finally, trading went on in a peaceful atmosphere. Most importantly, the political authorities in a West African States took interest in the orderliness of the market, partly because the dues and tolls paid by traders went a long way in financing their bureaucracies (Falola, 1995; Hodder, 1969).

Officials with wide powers were usually placed in the markets to monitor the activities of both traders and consumers. On the whole, all West African markets were orderly. Buying and selling in the market-place were well organized. Clapperton, a nineteenth century traveler, who saw a market in Kano was so much impressed and commented that "there is no market in Africa that is not so well regulated" (Skinner, 1964).

The third and most important feature was that the markets were held either daily or periodically. Daily markets were held in virtually all the urban centres where they served the immediate needs of the people living in the towns and their environs.

Periodic markets on the other hand were held at intervals of two or more days. The periodic days for holding markets varied from one locality to another and from state to state. For example, among the Bete of Southern Cote d'Ivoire and the Kukuruku of Nigeria, market periodicity was at the interval of ninth day. Among the Yoruba, Ibo and Ibibio, all in Nigeria, market periodicity was on every fifty or eight day. Seven-day markets were more widespread in Southern Ghana, Northern Nigeria, among the Wolof of Senegal and the Minianka of Cote d' Ivoire. Six day markets were the practice among the Dyula of Senegal, and the Dagomba of Konkonba of Ghana (Falola, 1995). While the periodic markets did perform the functions of the daily markets, their most dominant economic function was the collection, bulking and distribution of local food products, and local craft industrial product (Falola, 1995).

Most of the periodic markets in every region were linked together in sequence of operation, or most markets belonged to the same ring. People living in contiguous parts of a region might have their periodic market on different days of the week to avoid clashes and give room for maximum participation.

Where market days overlapped, traders and consumers had the choice of attending those that were spatially close, those that had the commodities in which they were interested or those where they had trusted friends and customers. By giving allowance for the operation of periodic markets in different places, a repetitive market cycle came into existence whereby traders could trade in most days of the week in different markets (Hodder, 1969).

The organization of the market and the periodicity of the market in parts of West Africa during the colonial period attested to a well organized trading system. This trading system was carried out at three basic levels; local internal, regional and long distance trade.

Local or internal trade involved the exchange of goods between the people of a town on one hand and the people of another town and its immediate environs on the other. The daily markets earlier discussed catered basically for local trade. In many communities, trading was restricted to the mornings, from dawn till around noon. In many others, it was in the evenings between 6:00pm and 10:30pm, yet in others, trade went on throughout the day in the market.

Goods were brought into markets in many ways. First, traders went into the farm to buy goods directly from producers. These good were later taken to the markets. Second middlemen intercepted producers going to the markets which they in turn sell to traders or directly to consumers. Third, the producers could take their goods to the markets to sell directly to consumers.

Regional or External Trade

All West African States participated in external trade, both regional and international. Geographical differences had far-reaching impact on what could be manufactured or grown in every State. For instance, the Savannah region was good for rearing cattle, but bad for cultivating kolanuts or palm trees. Similarly, the forest region was suitable for the cultivation of kolanuts but could not support livestock rearing because of the menace of tsetse flies. Consequently, a community had to establish trade relations with others in order to obtain all the goods that it could not produce. There were two broad categories of regional trading. The first was provincial, with trading activities being concentrated in the provincial periodic markets. The trade involved people who belonged to the same state or kingdom. They normally met in the capitals or in the major markets of the kingdoms.

The second was inter-regional, involving people from more than two states. Inter-regional markets were unique because of the larger number of people and the wide varieties of goods that were involved. A number of inter-regional markets were held on neutral grounds or in frontier towns and they were jointly administered by two or more states. Many of these inter-regional markets existed in West Africa in the pre-colonial period. Among those that were attended up to the 19th century were Goa in the country of the Songhai, Kaya among the Mossi, Salaga in Ghana, Dendi in Northern Dahomey and Kano in Nigeria.

The organization of the external trade was more complex than the internal trade. Trade was exclusively in the hands of long-distance traders. These were highly specialized trader with considerable trading skills and capital. These traders usually organized themselves into caravans. The caravans were usually big, ranging from about twenty to more than one thousand traders. The time to take off was based on a calculation of the distance to be covered to reach the markets of their choice. The caravans moved slowly, resting and sleeping at intervals. They also stopped at the toll gates along the routes to pay the compulsory tolls on their goods. The caravan dissolved when it reached its destination, with every trader displaying his merchandise in different sections of the market.

Currency

It is impossible to have a distributive system, the type discussed above without efficient currency, which was well developed in the pre-colonial period.

Although, it is true that goods were exchanged by barter in many societies, the use of money for transaction was the most common. Barter as a system of exchange, was not as dominant as many anthropologists would want us to believe, and the so-called dumb trade whereby traders exchanged goods without any verbal consultation was strange in many parts of West Africa (Johnson, 1970). West Africa commercial transactions were multilateral and widespread for barters to cope with, the only solution being the use of currencies. There were all kinds of currencies in West Africa, within a region there could be as many as four. In Nigeria for instance, cowries, brass, iron and copper objects were commonly used. Three varieties of currencies were, however, widespread in West Africa (Johnson, 1970; Kirk-Green, 1960). The first was cloth money. The use of cotton strips was reported among the Borno in Nigeria and the Wolof in the Senegambia. The second was metal currency. Gold, copper and iron rods were used in different parts of West Africa. Manmillas, currencies made of brass and copper, were widely used in the Niger Delta and a variety of iron wires was in circulation in upper Guinea Coast. Gold was the common currencies in Ashante and many parts of the central forest region and also in the Western Sudan. The Arab scholars who visited West Africa reported the use of gold as far back as the eleventh century A.D. There were two forms of gold currencies. The first was gold dust normally kept in bags. The second was dinnars which were minted in large quantities at Nikki in Northern Dahomey. These two forms of gold currencies circulated widely in West and North Africa.

The third variety of currency was cowry shells. They were used in virtually the whole of West Africa. The use of cowry had a long antecedent and it probably spread at different times, from one area to another until it became popular throughout West Africa. It had a number of advantages. It made exchange possible over a wide territory since it was used in many places. Its small size made it easy to carry, though it was bulky for large transactions. The cowry served as an effective measure of value and a unit of account which made it convenient to know the value of each good in relation to another and to fix prices to all kinds of products. Finally, the cowry could not be forged.

All the above currencies facilitated exchange of goods and services. Transactions could be made by making use of the currencies in places where they were legal tenders. The currencies also made it possible to establish a capital market where people could borrow money. There were small-scale credit institutions like the esusu among the Yorubas. None of these services would have been possible without currencies (Falola, 1995).

II. EXTERNAL TRADE DURING THE PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMY

There is no doubt the fact that external trade was the out-growth of internal exchange in West African societies.Prior to external contact, considerable internal exchange took place with such items as foodstuffs, raw materials,and livestock and manufactured goods.It is however expedient to mention that the trans-Saharan trade and the Atlantic commerce were the two major external trades that West Africans engaged in during the pre-colonial period. They affected the West African sub-region in positive and negative ways.

The Trans-Saharan Trade

The first contact between West Africa and the outside world was through North Africa. This was made possible by the use of donkeys and camels and the development of caravan routes across the Sahara. The beginning of the trans-Saharan trade dates back to antiquity. It was in existence for at least a thousand years before the Arab conquest which began in the seventh century A.D. It has been suggested that the Carthaginians crossed the desert and discovered West Africa centuries before Christ and that they established commercial contacts with West African coasts (Stride and Ifeka, 1973). The rise of Arab power contributed to the growth of the trans-Saharan commerce, which reached its peak in the 16th century. Though the development of sea-borne trade did provide a rival, it did not supplant it entirely. However, the trans-Saharan trade entered an era of relative decline in the last quarter of the 16th century (Fage, 1977).

The commodities of the trade were constrained by two major considerations. First, the journey across the desert took approximately three months, thus highly perishable commodities were not ideal or suitable for such a trade. Second, value in relation to weight was of considerable importance, commodities with high value in relation to weight were preferred (Blake, 1937).

The exports of West Africa to North Africa and Europe were gold, slaves, dyed cloths, irony, pepper, ostrich feathers, hides, kolanut and gum. These were exchanged for salt, horses, metal goods including swords, gun and gun powder, cowries, Arab dresses and a number of European goods such as Manchester cotton, French silks, glass beads, mirror and other fancy goods (Boahen, 1964).

Gold and slaves were the most important commodities of the trans-saharan commerce. Their importance derived from the fact that they were state necessities. The precise period or date when the gold trade began in West Africa is unknown; it probably dates back to the Carthaginian times. The adoption of gold coinage in the Muslim world and the replacement of silver with gold as Europe's main currency contributed to the growth of West African gold export between 11th and 17th centuries. In this period, West Africa was the leading supplier of gold to the international economy, accounting to about 66 percent of the world production. African gold not only contributed to the smooth and efficient functioning of the domestic economy in Europe, but it is also speeded up the settlement of international indebtedness. Within Africa itself, the importance of the gold trade was evident. It contributed to the wealth and the political power of the great states of the Western Sudan and the rise of some North African ports. For instance, the strategic position of Morocco on the Northern terminus of the Western Caravan route enabled it to get ample supplies of gold from West Africa (Boahen, 1964; Blake, 1937).

It is believed that a trans-Saharan trade in slaves must have existed as early as about the second century A. D. , though perhaps in little volume, However, the expansion of Arab power in the 7th century led to vast increase in demand for slaves to serve as soldiers, labourers and servants (Fage,1977). To meet this demand, West Africa had to increase its exports of slaves to North Africa and the Middle East. It has been estimated that about two million slaves were involved in the trade in each century during the late Middle Ages. According to Lewicki, between twelve and fifteen million slaves passed through Cairo in the 16th century. This estimate is considered to be high for the early 19th century;Boahen suggests that about 10,000 slaves per annum were exported across the Sahara desert. Figures or estimates may vary but the number of slaves carried across the desert was not by the stretch of imagination inconsiderable. Whether the number of slaves involved in the trans-Saharan trade was as great as the number involved in the trade across the Atlantic is a different question.(Falola, 1995).

Another commodity which requires some comment is salt. Salt was one of the unavoidable dietary necessities in most areas of West Africa. It was in desperate need by West African merchantsin exchange for an equal weight of gold. The salt was not brought from North Africa but was rather purchased from the salt mines in the desert especially at Taghaza (Blake, 1937).

The trans-Saharan trade was conducted by Arab and European merchants, Berbers, Jews and Negroes. The trade called for considerable organisational arrangements to reduce the dangers and difficulties inevitable in such long distance commerce. It became imperative in the interest of safety to develop a network of routes across the desert. On each route, there were stopping places, usually; oases, where camels, foods, water and other requirements could be obtained. The most important of these included Agades, Ghat in Salah, Taghaza, Ghadames and Sijilmasa (Boahen, 1964).

Entreports were developed at both the northern and southern termini of the Saharan routes. The important northern termini were Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers and Fex. For these centres goods for West African were dispatched, while those for Europe and Middle East were stored pending sales and shipments. Important southern termini were Kano, Kukawa and Timbuktu. At these centres, goods for North Africa and European markets were packed and loaded, while the goods for consumption within West Africa were distributed (Falola, 1995). Since the trans-Saharan trade was fraught with dangers and risks, it was necessary for the traders to travel together in caravans including guards, porters, drivers and guides. Undoubtedly, considerable organization must have been necessary to ensure that merchants met at the departure points at the right time. Departure dates were usually at the end of the rainy season when the danger of sandstorms was minimal.

Like any other long distance trade, the trans-Saharan trade called for considerable capital requirements. The huge capital required was necessitated by the fact that in addition to the money for the purchase of commodities and payment of duties, the merchants had to hire guides and pay protection money to the desert peoples.

The impact of the Trans-Sahara Trade

The trans-Saharan trade had great negative and positive impacts on the economy of West Africa. Prior to the trade, West Africa was isolated from the rest of the world, so it goes without saying that the creation of the overland trade broke or partially removed the isolation. The growth of the desert ports such as Kano and Timbuktu was the result of the development of the trans-Saharan commerce. The importance of the centres derived from their being producers of clothing materials especially cotton goods which were in great demand in Europe and Arab world. The commercial prosperity of both Kano and Timbuktu in the 15th and 16th centuries could hardly be dissociated from their active and prominent involvement in the trans-Saharan trade. The development of the North African entreports: Morocco, Algeria, Tunis and Tripoli, was due largely to the trans-saharan commerce. As noted earlier, they became the gateways through which West African goods destined for European and Middle East markets had to pass. The trans-Saharan trade turned the Saharan into a bridge of communication and so linked West Africa with North Africa, thus leading to mutual enrichment of both sub-regions (Falola, 1995).

This trade brought with it the spread of Islamic religion and culture which profoundly influenced the political and social development of the Sudanese empires and states. Furthermore, trade provided a source of livelihood for the Tuaregs who depended on what they got from their business as guides and transports agents or as raiders of the caravans crossing the deserts. The trade offered limited encouragement for the production of the goods within West African sub region. The production of gold, leather goods and dyed clots increased in response to increased external demand.

The trans-Saharan trade involved a few people. In West Africa, the trade was in the hands of royalty, nobles and rich citizens. There could be no doubt that the participants realized large income since the trade involved relatively few people, it increased the problem of inequality of income distribution in the sub-region. The poorer sections of the population were barred from participating in the middle-man trade. This is because they could not afford the heavy capital outlay and perpetuated the vicious circle.

The most reprehensive aspect of the trans-Saharan trade was its involvement in Negro slaves. Trade in slaves defies the sacredness of the human race. It is obvious that the trans-Saharan slave trade depopulated West Africa. It also caused other social and economic dislocations in the region. As Ojo (2015) has pointed out, the slave trade "arrested and retarded Africa's demographical growth, evoked a perennial state of acrimony and warfare and created a tense and unprecedented atmosphere of insecurity which hindered economic activities and stifled local entrepreneurship and technological drive and dislocated Africa's socio-economic and political structures and institutions".

As from about 1875, the trans-saharan trade began to decline as a result of economic and political factors. In both the Western Sudan and North Africa there were political instability. The defeat of Songhai by Morocco in 1591 pushed Songhai into dynastic rivalries, independence movements and attacks from external aggressors. The Moroccan occupation of Timbuktu and Gao not only shattered the imperial unity of the Western Sudan but also diminished the economic importance of these cities. These unsettled conditions made the revival of large-scale trade along the Western route difficult if not impossible. The rivalry of the trans-Atlantic trade was the most significant factor that undermined the trans-Saharan trade. The Portuguese exploration of the Gulf of Guinea was followed by a growing trade with Europeans on the coast. It had grown to considerable proportion between the 17th and 18th centuries. As the trade across the Atlantic waxed stronger, the trans-Saharan commerce warned.

III. CONCLUSION

From the forgoing discussion, it may be affirmed that West Africa benefitted a lot from trade and the market economy even in the pre-colonial era. Most of the communities and some individuals, who were merchants, made a fortune through these activities. Incidentally, however, the introduction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought a devastating impact on West Africa as mentioned in the paper. This notwithstanding, the significant contributions of local and regional trades to the socio-economic growth and development of West Africa in the pre-colonial period cannot be over-emphasised.

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