



THE IMPACT OF THE TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE ON THE IRON WORKING INDUSTRY IN THE ABUJA AREA OF NIGERIA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The trans-Saharan trade was a trade across the Sahara desert which linked North Africa and the Mediterranean with West Africa. It was a very significant trade that involved the use of camels as a beast of burden across the Sahara. Though the impact of this trade on the economic, political and cultural contexts on the West African communities are often discussed, not much is known about its impact on the iron working industry in the Abuja area of central Nigeria. This paper therefore examines the impact of this trade on the iron working industry in Abuja area. It posits with the view that this trade had a tremendous impact on the industry in terms of tools manufactured, boosting of trade in iron products, dissemination of new ideas in the techniques of iron production and other socio-cultural impact.

Keywords: Abuja area, Peopling, Early Stone Age, Blacksmithing, Kwararafa.

INTRODUCTION

The trans-Saharan trade was a caravan trade which served as a strong chain binding the Maghreb, the Sahara and the territories of West Africa together. The existence of this trade has been traced to a very remote antiquity. Rock arts especially rock paintings and engravings in the Sahara have depicted scenes of early contacts between the Western Sudan and the Maghreb as early as 1000 BC.¹ This trade although it continued up to the 19th century A.D, was already in decline mainly due to the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The 19th century Jihads in West Africa affected the trans-Saharan trade, but did not lead to its decline rather commerce boomed as a result of the peace and establishment of emirates after the jihads.

Mainly as a result of the use of the camel as a beast of burden across the Sahara, several networks of caravan routes were established linking the Mediterranean world and the Sudan. By 1490 - 1590 when the Songhai Empire flourished, and also during the reign of the Sifuwa dynasty in Bornu, the trade was one of the major stimuli of growth in the Sudan. Kano, in the present day northern Nigeria, was one of the major commercial, industrial and cultural centres that participated in this trade.² By the beginning of the 19th

century when the trade began to witness its major decline, Kano in particular, and other settlements in Hausaland had developed intricate trading networks which cut-across distant areas such as the Savanna forest regions of southern Nigeria (especially areas occupied by the Oyo Empire), the Niger/Benue Basin (where the area of study falls), other parts of Hausaland, and Bornu.

One of the four major routes of this trade ran through Air to Agades in the Hoggar region. From there, it moved further through Ghat and Ghadames, and it ended in Tunis.³ This route is popularly called the Kano -Agadez - Ghat - Ghadames - Tunis route. This route was famous for products and produce like kolanuts, pepper, slaves, beewax, iron bloom, and sea salt from the Yoruba, Benin, Igbo and the Niger Delta coastal areas of the present day Nigeria. Items like horses, cowries, firearms, textiles, and glass beads, were imported through this route.⁴ Apart from the four major trade routes, there were minor routes that linked the major ones from local production centres in Nigeria.

In the area that is now referred to as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, by the 19th century the people were not isolated from this trans-regional trade road networks which were used for this trade cross-crossed parts of the territory. For example, the Keffi, Karu, Garki, Abuja (now Suleja) road passed through the heart of the territory. This road was used for human portorage and commercial activities in the area. Also, another road network stretched from the Niger/Benue confluence area passing through Koton karfi, Abaji (joining the Toto, Nassarawa, Umaisha and Lokoja networks), Kwali, Gwagwalada, Zuba and Abuja(Suleja). This road network further linked the Zaria - Kano trans-saharan network through Diko. Another one stretched from Abuja (Suleja) through Minna to Nupeland.⁵

Through these road networks, trading activities were enhanced and exchange of ideas on production techniques, were facilitated. The trans-Saharan trade therefore was not restricted to Hausaland, Bornu, and the Magreb alone. The areas in the Federal Capital territory, Abuja were linked to this super highway. The participation of the area in the trans-Saharan trade led to many economic, social, cultural and technological changes. These changes began to significantly affect the iron working industry in the territory, particularly by the 19th century.

The trans-Saharan trade involved movement of people and trade goods. By implication, therefore, human contacts and sharing of ideas were involved. By the 19th century, the main imports from North Africa through Kano to the Niger/Benue basin included exotic or luxury goods which were often indicators of wealth or social status. Principal amongst these goods were glass and coral beads, metal objects like iron sandals, lanterns, royal or ceremonial staff. It should be noted that steel swords or blades from Germany and England were part of the imports from Europe through North Africa to West Africa.⁶ Some of these iron blades were traded as far as to the Abuja area as ascertained by the discovery of such iron blades or shields in Kwali.⁷

With the Jihad, men of wealth and political authority emerged. These men needed metal objects such as tools for defensive purposes, royal regalia and as part of exotic goods. It should also be noted that the significant transformations in the iron working industry became more noticeable from the Jihad years mainly due to the fact that other non iron metal objects like copper and bronzes were now being brought in larger quantities from North Africa. The dominant use of iron as tools, weapons, and ornaments, was significantly challenged by the use of the imported non iron metal products.

Impact on Trade

The impact of the trade in the changes in the iron working industry in the area of study especially by the beginning of the 19th century was not as significant as expected because most of the indigenous iron

products were still being patronized by the commoners, while the imported items were for the ruling or wealthy classes who were a tiny minority. The trans-Saharan trade provided some of the early sources of iron materials like weapons, tools, currencies as well as domestic and agricultural utensils in the territory. Trade in iron products became an essential component of the domestic economy of the territory by the 19th century.

With the trans-Saharan trade, taxes were imposed on the traders there by providing the much needed wealth for the rulers who controlled the trade routes. Also, providers of auxiliary services like guides, porters, cooks and servants were able to benefit economically from the trade. The trade, therefore, provided the opportunity for economic growth. The iron workers benefited from the sale of their products. The boost in iron production to meet the general increase in demand for both exotic and essential iron products was revolutionary.

Impact On Iron Working Technology

Iron working technology was not the exclusive reserve of the inhabitants of the territory in the 19th century. Many other Nigerian communities were involved in the trade in iron products to the Abuja area especially Hausa migrants from the northern part of Nigeria. Kano, which served as one of the main centres for the trans-Sahara trade in Northern Nigeria had iron workers ranging from prospectors of iron ore, smelters, blacksmiths and a host of others. Apart from iron, other metals like copper, bronze, gold, and brass, were produced. The involvement of the territory in the trans-Saharan trade, therefore, created the avenues for sharing of new ideas on techniques of iron working in the territory. The new ideas acquired from migrant iron workers led to the production of different varieties of tools, weapons, and utensils. New techniques of production were introduced while new products were traded to the area.

The pre-colonial economy of the territory which involved farming of food crops, hunting, pottery making, weaving, and animal husbandry was stimulated to grow beyond subsistence level as a result of her involvement in the trans-Saharan trade. The demand for imported goods from other parts of the country and even beyond necessitated the need for diversification and specialization so as to cope with both the internal and external demands. Iron production, therefore, became one of the central occupational activities that sustained the economy. Blacksmiths had to produce more items to supplement the imported items from North Africa. Iron blooms formed a major item of trade. There were bought by blacksmiths who in most cases were non smelters.

Impact on Urbanization

In terms of the settlement patterns and urbanization in the territory, the trans-Saharan trade led to the development of large settlements in the territory. Such settlements include Kuje, Gwagwalada, Zuba, Karu, Abaji, and Geriki. These settlements were involved in trading activities and specialized commercial productions like iron working, textile production, weaving, dyeing, and pottery making. While some of these settlements were walled to ensure adequate security, others were guided by able bodied guides or security operatives. The special distribution of these settlements indicate that by the beginning of the 19th century, there were separate settlements for people involved in specialized crafts as mentioned earlier.⁸ Also, the markets in these settlements held every four days to enable traders, craftsmen, farmers, and providers of other services to prepare properly for the domestic market. These markets attracted traders not only from the immediate environment but from far areas like Hausaland, Igboland and Yorubaland (old Oyo Empire). Due to local variations in the environment and production skills, different varieties of products and produce were brought to the markets. Daffa, Kwali, Dangara, Bwari and Rubochi markets in the Abuja area were famous

in the marketing of iron tools and implements. These markets were located within farming communities and as such enjoyed high sale of iron products. The significance of the iron tools and implements in the political economy of the area in the 19th century could only be appreciated if one considers the significance of iron tools in agricultural food production, security and socio-cultural uses. Iron staffs formed an aspect of the political authority of some of the traditional ruler while some of the iron objects like the anvil became objects for oath taking.

Impact on Social Stratification

Another significant impact of the trans-Saharan trade on the iron working industry in the area in the 19th century was in the area of social stratification. With trade in iron products and other auxiliary services provided by the industry, men of wealth and political influence emerged in the society. Some of these men constituted the traditional rulers (*Etsu*) and other title holders. Some of them used iron staff as symbols of their political authority.⁹ Good examples of this are the chiefs of Yaba, Gwagwa and Wako who use ceremonial iron staff as their symbols of political authority. This royal staffs are only used on ceremonial occasions like the installation of a new chief. Also, the trans-Saharan trade provided the royalties imports indicative of royal status symbols like horses, decorative iron knives, iron racks (for the horses), iron pendants, etc. The evolution of these royalties could also be due to the fact that royalties or taxes were imposed on the traders that transacted businesses in their domains. They also levied some of the artisans that worked in their domains, the iron workers inclusive.

The trade also exposed the various natural and human resources available in the territory. Well endowed areas like Kawu, Shere, Dangara, and Daffa which had good quality iron ores attracted miners from neighbouring areas like Gulu and Bida in the present Niger State.¹⁰ Also, Koro miners from Jere and other neighbouring areas moved into the area primarily for smelting purposes. The attention giving to the area in terms of iron production and trade brought economic growth as wealth was derived from the iron working industry and other related activities. Those with wealth became powerful individuals who controlled their communities. Some of the iron objects were also used as currencies or as a means of exchange. The trade further enhanced social stratification, and specialization in productive activities. Iron, unlike other metals like gold and silver provided tools or implements that affected the lives of the entire citizenry. In the 19th century history of iron working in the territory, the trans-Saharan trade provided the impetus for the changes witnessed in the industry going by the discussions so far.

Conclusion

The discussions so far reveal that the trans-Saharan trade was one of the vital tools for the transformation of the iron working industry in the Abuja area of Nigeria. It provided the much needed market for the iron tools and implements thereby leading to the boost in the production of iron products. Also, imported iron objects from North Africa were also used in the territory to supplement the locally produced ones. The development of local and regional markets in the area was also traced to the trans-Saharan trade. Through the trade, iron objects were not only used for agricultural food production and warfare, they also became status symbols and luxury items for the wealthy and politically influential ruling elites.

ENDNOTES

1. A. Adu Boahen, "The Caravan Trade in the Nineteenth Century", **Journal of African History**, 111(2) 1962, pp.349 – 356.
2. For details on the early states of the central Sudan, see B. Barkindo, "Early States of the central Sudan: Kanem, Borno and some of their neighbours to c.1500 AD", in J.F. Ade Ajayi and M. Crowther (eds.) **History of West Africa**, New York: Longman, 1985, pp. 225 – 254 3.
3. For details see R. Olaniyi, "Kano: The Development of a Trading City in Central Sudan", in A. Ogunniran (ed.), **Pre-colonial Nigeria...**, pp.301 – 318.
4. See A.G. Hopkins, **An Economic History of West Africa**, New York: Longman Group, 1973, pp. 79 – 87.
5. For details, see J.A. Ohiare, "The Kingdoms of Igu and Opanda, c.1700 – 1939: A Study in Intergroup Relations", Ph.D Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1988, pp. 244 – 250. Also, see M.A. Filaba, "A History of Karu...", M.A. Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; 1994, pp. 296 – 302.6.
6. A. Adu Boahen, "The Caravan Trade...", p.357.
7. The iron shield or blades discovered in Kwali (buried by the river bank) is typical of the European blades both in size and description. Oral data collected in the area reveal that the iron blades or shields were imported through North Africa. They served as a form of currency or store of value. The blacksmiths use them for smiting activities.8.
8. Fieldwork: Oral information from Mallam Buhari Ijakoro, c.60 years, retired trader, Bwari, 24/4/2012.9.
9. For more details, see M.A. Filaba, "A History of Karu...", M.A. Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; 1994, p.110. Also, see **Gazetteers of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria**, vol. iv, London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1972 p. 308.
10. Fieldwork: Oral information from Mallam Ismaila Buikpe, c.55 years, retired civil servant and community leader, Buikpe, 1/4/2012.