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DR. MRS. T. N. ODEGAH

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### EDITORIAL NOTE

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## PRE-COLONIAL TRANSPORT SYSTEM IN THE EASTERN NIGER DELTA AREA OF NIGERIA

*Odeigah, Theresa Nfam, PhD*

### Abstract

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century that we are currently in, with technological growth and development moving at a very fast pace, it will be difficult for this generation to appreciate or even imagine that for quite a long time, non-mechanical means of transportation existed in the Eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria. These forms of transportation were through human portage, canoes and pack animals that came through the Hausa traders that were trading with the people of Ogoja. Transportation could be traced back to the hunters in their search for food, animals and other goods. In their connecting the forests and settlements and linking other parts of their environment, those foot paths became roads for the farmers and traders. This study will therefore examine the state of development of the different means of transportation during the pre-colonial period in the Eastern Niger Delta area. It will adopt a historic-structural and multi-disciplinary approaches in addressing the issue. The study concludes that even though the various forms of pre-colonial transportation were vestigial and also had their challenges, they were able to help in the growth and development of the economy of the area.

**Keywords:** Pre-colonial, Transport, Economic,

### Introduction

Transportation is the key factor in the movement of people and good to different destinations. The pre-colonial forms of transport which happened to be the only means of transportation in the

pre-colonial period were human portage and canoe transport in areas which served by navigable rivers and this water ways linked the coastal people with the hinterland people<sup>2</sup>. Animal transport in the forest areas was very useful in the Eastern Niger Delta area, because of the northern traders who traded with the people of Ogoja. Animals like the donkey, camel and horse were used as means of transportation in the Northern part of Nigeria to the Eastern Niger Delta area. It is pertinent to note that in the Eastern Niger Delta area, all these forms of transportation contributed to the growth and development of the area economically, politically and socially. This paper will therefore highlight the three forms of transport system in the Eastern Niger Delta area and their economic important <sup>3</sup>.

### In The Pre-Colonial Eastern Niger Delta

#### Human-Porterage

This was the oldest and the most widespread form of transportation in many parts of the Eastern Niger Delta in the pre-colonial period. Human portage is the carrying of goods by man at the same time as he transports himself by walking. In most parts of the Easter Niger Delta, like Boki, Obudu , A etc. human portage was the only means of transporting goods in the pre-colonial era. Therefore human portage has attracted more observation and comments than the other forms of pre-colonial transport. Human portage was also adequate at that time for the carriage of goods to different destinations <sup>4</sup>. Apart from being described as wasteful, it has been seen as a sustainer of slave trade, because slaves were employed to carry goods to short and long distant areas. There were short and long distant journeys undertaken for various reasons. The short journeys were made to farm lands, markets, villages and nearby towns. But long distance journeys could take one to four weeks for the travellers to get to their destinations. Slaves or paid porters were largely engaged for long distance journeys <sup>5</sup>. Most people used their leather bags, pots, basket and calabashes on their heads or hands for the carrying of goods to their homes or farms. The

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network of roads linked one community or the other and therefore enabled the slaves or porters to move from one village to another. There were intra and inter trade activities among the Ifiks, the Ibibios and Bonny, Kalabari and even the Ijaws among other neighboring communities in the Niger Delta region <sup>6</sup>.

Labour for portage was recruited largely from the families and slaves. The family members were usually children and women. Long distance movement was done mainly by slaves and recruited casual workers. The porters also had ready devices by which they minimised delays and increased their speed. In their journeys instead of them requiring assistance of other porters in bringing down their load, they will use forked sticks to bring them down from their heads <sup>7</sup>. In order to avoid frequent pains in the head, the porters protected their heads by placing specially made pads on their heads before setting the load on it. The pads were made of folded cottons or leaves and designed to give some comfort to the head.

Transport also served in the distribution of goods like, farm produce and other goods which were generally produced for immediate consumption and for the various markets. Some of these produce were conveyed to the various markets through the various means of transport. Human portage was the only means of transport in some other places like Obudu, Ikom, Boki, Ugep, and while in Calabar, and Oron among other riverine areas human portage was supplemented by some other forms of transport like canoe transport <sup>8</sup>.

As useful as human portage was in the pre-colonial period, it had its own problems too. As well as it being described as wasteful, it has been seen as a sustainer of slave trade. This form of transport has been seen also as a social evil, which encouraged child labour, because children were involved to a large extent in carrying very heavy loads over short distances. Human portage was also wasting of time, mainly because of the porters' slow speed. The speed of the porter could be affected by the weight of the load they are carrying. Some of the slaves were made to carry very heavy load that caused them not to move very fast <sup>9</sup>.

Another problem with human-portage is the seasonal variation of physical conditions of the routes. Most times rain could impose a problem to the porters, when going to long distance routes, like moving from Ogoja to Ikom or Ugep. Other problems like insecurity during slave raids, and activities of kidnappers or robbers etc also affected this form of transportation system by creating a sense of insecurity and fear. The cost of human portage was also very high, because in this form of transport system not all people could go for long distance journeys <sup>10</sup>.

### Water Transport

Water transport system just like every other form of transportation served as links between internal and external business transactions or between communities. Coastal produce like fish, crayfish, catfish etc. were carried by canoe into the interior of the Eastern Niger Delta region in exchange for farm produce. Water transport, entailed the use of rivers, creeks, and lakes. This system was very important to the pre-colonial Eastern Niger Delta. The biggest trees in the area were used for the construction of canoes, and the canoes were used to convey goods or products from the riverian areas to the other communities <sup>11</sup>.

The Ijaws in the Niger-Delta were the great canoe builders. They built most of the canoes that were used for transporting passengers from the coastal areas to their various destinations and the canoes were sold to the people of Oron and Calabar. Canoe building was an industry in its own right. There were specialists in canoe building who were moving from one place to the other, where trees or grasses were available to build canoes. They used the canoes to operate not only in their own environment, but also in other neighboring towns that were navigable <sup>12</sup>. It also served as a link between internal and external trade. Canoes were also used for the conveying of goods such as salt, palm produce etc. Several tons of palm oil produced in the hinterland was carried to river areas. Canoes were also employed in carrying goods such as bananas, plantains yams etc. Local traders in most riverine areas in the Eastern Niger-Delta region

depended on canoes for their day to day trading activities<sup>13</sup>. Even in economic, social and political activities in their various communities, canoes were used for transportation from one town to the other<sup>14</sup>.

In the pre-colonial Eastern Niger Delta area the Oron and Calabar rivers were actively employed for navigation activities and business activities thrived especially among fishermen. Some of the fisherman lived along water courses or lakes, using their nets or placing their wires of basket garths wherever they were likely to have a good catch of fish.

When you compare canoe transport with other forms of transportation in the pre-colonial transport system in the Eastern Niger Delta area, one of the major advantages of the water transport system was that the canoe travels faster than the porters and it is comfortable when seating in it<sup>15</sup>. In the head-porterage system, the porter could easily become sick or tired etc. A canoe could be used every day of the week by anyone who has expertise in its operation. It cannot rebel against the passengers nor become neither troublesome nor tricky like porters. Such factors like feeding or resting those often delayed porters need not delay a canoe. Its services were undisturbed as long as it remained unbroken and as long as there were paddlers to manipulate it. Canoes were suitable for long and short distance journeys and its carrying capacity was high<sup>16</sup>.

The canoes were also used for other purposes like fishing as we have earlier on mentioned. The Efiks and Ibibios used canoes mostly in doing business and trade. They were used for wars and politics as well as carrying individuals from one place to the other for meetings and rallies. The operational cost makes it by far the cheapest mode of transportation.

Water transport system like any form of transportation had its own problems. One of the major problems of water transport had to do with the season. The season can affect water transport adversely, especially the dry season during which the water level is low for canoes to sail. Another limitation of water transport was the canoe capsizing and all the people and goods inside the

canoe perishing inside the water. During economic and political dissension within a community or between one political unit and another, during wars and conflicts some water routes become inaccessible.<sup>11</sup>

### **Pack Animals Transport System in Niger -Delta**

Pack animals transport system was also used in the Eastern Niger-Delta in the pre-colonial days by the Hausas that traded with the Ogoja people. The Hausas had their settlement in Apakpa Ogoja, this place was their trading centre, where colanuts and cows were sold. However, because of the difficult terrain in the area in the coastal area, this form of transport system was not very wide spread, but was limited mainly to inland areas. Pack animals like donkeys, horses and camels were used for transporting goods from places like Kano to places like Ogoja and Ikom<sup>12</sup>. These animals were mostly brought from the northern part of the country like Kano etc. This form of transport, significantly promoted the trade between the northern part of Nigeria and the Eastern Niger -Delta area<sup>13</sup>. It is also pertinent to note that all these animals had their own advantages. Camels especially could spend days before taking water and they could travel long distances. It has the capacity to carry some considerable amount of load over long distances<sup>14</sup>. The uniqueness of this form of transportation system did not originate from the Eastern Niger Delta people, but it facilitated trade between the Hausas and the Ogoja people.

### **The Economic Functions of Pre-Colonial Transport System**

As far as transportation is concerned, it has a lot to do with the economy of any given society, for any economy to grow it requires the movement of goods and services from one place to another. Transportation involves the moving of raw materials to areas of production and for moving of finished goods to consumers<sup>15</sup>. Transportation determines the extent of market prices; because where transportation is not costly, goods tend to be cheap and affordable. A transport economist, Bonavia for



example stresses that the function of transport which is to carry commodities from points where their marginal utility or significance is relatively low to where it is relatively high<sup>16</sup>.

It is important to note that these different forms of transportation promoted trade and improved the economy of the Eastern Niger Delta area. The surpluses generated in the economy had to be disposed of and the transport system therefore played an important role<sup>17</sup>. No community was self-sufficient in its economy, the people in the hinterland needed coastal products such as salt, fish crayfish etc. and the riverian area inhabitants also needed produce like yams, cocoyam, water yam, plantain, bananas palm oil and other agricultural produce and all these items needed transportation to convey them from one destination to the other<sup>18</sup>.

The political and social activities were also facilitated by transportation, because some of the political and social activities involved moving people from one place to another<sup>19</sup>. The Efiks like their counterparts in other parts of the area were an active group which interacted in several ways with their neighbors either by trade or political activities and transportation played a major role<sup>20</sup>. Transportation was also useful during the market days. Market places played a very important role in the lives of various towns and villages. There were periodic and daily markets that needed movement from one market to the other<sup>21</sup>. Market days provided suitable occasions to observe the continuing dominance of non-motorised forms of transport in the grassland areas. Women are to be found walking in groups and carrying food items on their heads<sup>22</sup>. Individuals needed transportation to carry whatever items for sale either by road, water or animals. The Eastern Niger Delta traded with the Northern part of Nigerian was through the transportation of pack animals. These animals carry large quantity of goods like cola nut to Ogoja for sale<sup>23</sup>.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the various forms of pre-colonial transport system namely, the human portorage, canoe and pack animals

contributed to the growth and development of the Eastern Niger Delta economy. It also helped in the linking up of various communities in the area and outside the area, especially in the movement of people to perform economic, social and political obligations like visitation, going to farmers, markets marriage ceremonies, funerals and religious functions. Transportation as an economic function also contributed to internal and external trade in the area. Despite its numerous problems and limitations, pre-colonial transport in the Eastern Niger Delta helped in the economic development of area.

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