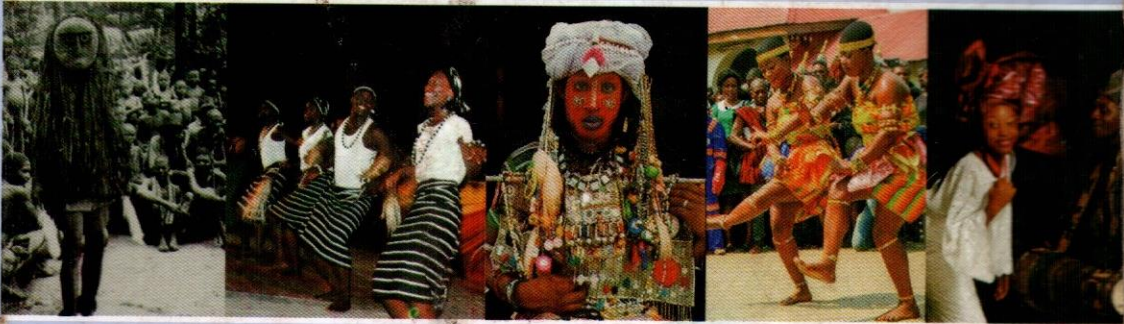




Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo



WEST AFRICAN PEOPLE, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE



Ucha I. Mbofung
General Editor

W. O. Arinde
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With the assistance of I. Adeakin

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FOREWORD

General Studies (GES) provides ample opportunities to undergraduates of various disciplines to broaden their knowledge in order to qualify to be described as being truly educated. In other words, the maxim stands true that to be educated is not just because of one's acquisition of educational knowledge and certificate in a particular discipline but knowing at least a little bit about everything in one's world and environment.

This philosophy informed the policy which makes it compulsory for all students in all Nigerian universities to take courses in General Studies, which cover every major discipline across faculties. In Ajayi Crowther University, the courses chosen are in the Humanities, Social, Management, and Natural Sciences, in addition to Entrepreneurial Education through which each student graduates with additional certificate in one or more skills. A new addition to the GES compliment of courses is the Character Assessment course which records the behaviour of each student. The rating is computed as part of the final year overall results. The popular saying stands true that education without character amounts to breeding 'clever devils'. In a Christian University like ours that strives to raise godly intellectuals, this innovation is helpful to achieving our overall objectives.

I commend the efforts of the Director of the Centre for General Studies, Dr. Ucha I. Mbofung, an erudite scholar in the field of Library and Information Science, and a very disciplined administrator, for the efforts made to organize and edit these series of General Studies Books of Reading.

We give our blessings upon all staff and students who will use these resources, that so doing, they may acquire requisite knowledge that will aid them in maximizing their potentials to positively impact society.

Thank you.

Rt. Rev. Prof. Dapo F. Asaju

Vice-Chancellor

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MODULE FOUR

PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN WEST AFRICAN STATES

Ukamaka Iwuamadi

Introduction

It is important to note that prior to the advent of the Europeans to West Africa, this region had engaged in numerous trans-Saharan trades particularly with the Arabs from North Africa. Items such as leather, fabrics, gold and slaves were traded with the Arabs for horses and firearms. The Arabs also introduced writing, Islam and influenced some of the architectural buildings of some of these pre-colonial West African societies.

The evolution of economic activities in the sub-region initially started as a kind of subsistent economy where food was produced for local consumption, to the epoch of commercial trade where production was surplus for sales. However, the earliest economic activities of West Africa which was agrarian in nature varied depending upon geographical location. In some sub-regions, populations moved with their livestock continually in search of food as the seasons changed. This can be seen in pastoral societies such as the Fulani ethnic group of West and Central Africa, and the Fulbe in Mali. Although in some African sub-regions where conditions were favourable year-round, populations were relatively sedentary (settled) (Grazel, 1990). Also, the domestication of livestock and crops especially cereals such as millet and sorghum made populations to permanently occupy lands that previously could support only temporary settlements. Furthermore, the advent of craft works such as iron work, pottery, weaving *etc.* created an avenue for the production of surplus food and the productivity to specialize in a particular product as well as other commodities for exchange in the market which brought about the expansion of commercial trade among neighbouring communities before her contact with the European world.

Unit 1: Objectives of the module

At the end of this module, students should be able to:

- Understand the various economic activities in the pre-colonial West African States.
- Fully comprehend the geographical role in the economies of West Africa states.
- Explain the subsistent nature of the early West African economy
- Analyze the evolution of craft-work as it affects inter-regional trade in ancient West Africa.
- Understand trade pattern in West Africa before her colonization

Unit 2: Geography and Specialized Agrarian Activities

It is imperative to note that geography to a great extent determined the economic activities of pre-colonial West African States and also influenced the trade pattern during that period. In the north, West Africa begins in the sands of the Sahara Desert. To the west and south, it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and to the east by the mountains of present-day Cameroon. This Region Includes: the vegetation zones of desert, semi desert, savannah and forest. The Sahara Desert spreads across approximately 3,500,000 square miles in North Africa and the northern part of West Africa. Sand dunes cover one quarter of the Sahara, but this desert also has bare, rocky plains and even mountains. The Sahara is very dry except for some scattered oasis and this has made it not suitable for large settlements. South of the Sahara is a zone of semi desert called the Sahel. The Sahel is not as dry as the Sahara. It has enough water for short grasses and some small bushes and trees to survive.

Furthermore, the southern part of the Sahel emerges into the Savannah, an area of tall grasses and scattered trees. The savannah has a long rainy season. Because of rain, grains such as millet, sorghum and rice can be grown there. Grasses provided food for cattle. Rivers like the long Niger Rivers help make nearby land fertile and also provide fish for consumption and trade. Some important pre-Colonial societies/empires in this region include: the Hausa-

Fulani state, Timbuktu, Kanem-Borno, and Songhai. The River Niger on the other hand extends into the forest zone in the southern part of West Africa. This zone is wetter than the Savannah. Its Northern part is a woodland forest of trees and shrubs. Oil palms, yams and kola trees are mostly cultivated in this zone. The southern part of the zone is lush rainforest where rain falls all year round. In the rain forest, tall trees such as mahogany and teak grow above swamps and lagoons and important empires such as the Ashanti in modern-day Ghana, Dahomey of present day Benin Republic and Benin in modern day Nigeria developed from this zone.

However, these geographical regions offered their own specific climatic conditions for production which were not favourable to all food produce due to salient issues impeding them from growing in a particular region. For instance agriculture and mining were the two most important productive activities in the tropical forest zones. Forest land, cleared with iron axes and digging sticks, was very fertile. Here people grew oil-palms, yams, plantains *etc.* But the forest limited people's access to grazing land. A significant problem was diseases. The forest harboured mosquitoes and tsetse flies, especially along the rivers and streams. Tsetse flies carry the trypanosomiasis parasite that is fatal to cattle, so it was too risky to breed any cattle there. And the presence of tsetse flies of course meant that people were infected with sleeping sickness, thus aggravating the scarcity of labour. Malaria fever was probably significant, but sleeping sickness was more prevalent. The combined problems of disease and scarcity of grazing land prevented the development of pastoral or agro-pastoral systems in the forest zones. The land in the savannah region on the other hand was generally less fertile than land in the forest zones. But the environment was less hostile, so there was a better chance for agricultural, agro-pastoral and pastoral economies to develop. Farmers in the savannah mainly grew grain such as millet and sorghum. Like the people in the forest zones, the savannah people were constantly threatened by endemic diseases such as malaria.

Unit 3: The subsistence economy

The term "Subsistence Economy" is an economy which is not based on money, in which buying and selling are absent or rudimentary, (though barter may occur), and which commonly provides a minimal standard of living. All pre-colonial West African economies at the earlier stage were subsistence in nature. However, it all depended on the degree of production because some societies were producing more than the others. "All power lies in the land" goes a Ghanaian proverb. As in most agrarian economies, the system of land ownership was the dominant element in determining the structure of the economy. In the pre-colonial West African economy, land was distributed equally and most families had full rights to the land they used, paying little or nothing in the way of rent or taxes. A fair share of available land was the right of every member of the community. The product of the land thus belonged to the family that cultivated it. All land had owners and land rights were jealously guarded. According to Jones (1936), the land tenure system of West African societies were designed to protect against artificial scarcity, by ensuring that land did not accumulate in the hands of the few, and that every member of the society had an unquestionable right to participate in its use. The ownership of land, gave rise to agricultural systems in West Africa communities. As Fage (1955) noted agriculture holds the central importance in West African history, just as food production has radically transformed man's life style. Livestock keeping, hunting and gathering appear to have a secondary or sub-ordinate position to crop production.

Extant literature has it that during the precolonial period, each community produced most of the things it needed. Family members worked together to clear the fields, plant seeds and harvest crops. These small communities traded with one another for additional goods. Over time, the process of migration, provoked by a long-run demographic/population change gave rise to regions with differing resource endowment particularly in terms of land-labour and other gifts of nature. These differing resource endowments stimulated the growth of inter-regional trade and the long-run process of specialization which propelled commercial trade through the advent of craftwork which will be discussed in the following units.

Unit 4: Craft-work

In a general context, craft-work is also a determinant factor to measure the level of societal advancement. Childe (1936) identified some of the elements which he believed were essential for a civilization to exist. These include: the plough, wheeled cart, smelting of copper and bronze, specialized craftsmen etc. Such can be attributed to the pre-colonial West African communities in the epoch known as the Iron Age. This era gave rise to the existence of traditional crafts such as: iron working, pottery, woodwork, basketry and weaving which played an important role in the pre-colonial economic structure of the West African societies. From an economic point of view, iron working was perhaps the most economically important industry in the pre-colonial West African societies. This led to the forging of hoes, axes, machetes and other valuable agricultural implements which created an avenue for surplus production and advancement of commercial trade. For instance, the Nok people living in the present central Nigeria are well-known for their Iron work. Nok blacksmiths made axes, hoes and weapons such as spears which were used for farming and hunting. The ancient city of Jenne-jeno in the Morden day Niger was also noted for farming and fishing because the kingdom is situated in a riverine area. Besides, farming and fishing, the people were potters, metal smiths, weavers, leather workers, bead makers and ivory carvers. The same goes for the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria who were also noted for fishing and salt making.

Iron work which produced spears, bows, local and guns for hunting, made hunting and gathering of wild animals one of the most lucrative economic activities in pre-colonial West Africa. In the past, hunting provided the main source of animal protein and professional hunters occupied a highly respected position in the society (Ajayi, 1979). Hunting and exploitation of wild animals were regulated by traditional rules and every good hunter was expected to respect the traditional code of conduct that existed in whatever community he operated in. For example, in the southern forest areas of Ghana particularly in Ashanti, an unwritten traditional law involving closed seasons existed which was highly respected in the past and effectively regulated the exploitation of the giant African

snail 'Achatina'. The closed season for forest snails was strictly enforced in most Ashanti villages. At the beginning of the snail season when the snails were laying their eggs, the town crier would inform the community of the ban on snail collection. This was aimed at allowing hatching and growth of young snails (Afolayan, 1980). In sum, craft work was indeed an important socio-economic and political oriented activity among the West African societies during pre-colonial era.

Unit 5: Trade

The advent of craft work did not only bring about the expansion of agricultural products but also led to the building of empires or kingdoms which engendered population growth and inter-regional trade. These kingdoms played an important role in the development of trade and economic growth which made most of the region the centre of commerce and manufacturing. Empires such as Ghana, Ashanti, Timbuktu, Songhai, Sokoto Caliphate etc. engaged in one form of trade or the other which was basically in raw materials. One of the earliest kingdoms to emerge was the Ghana Empire which existed in West Africa between the Niger and the Gambia Rivers and presently located in what is now south-eastern Mauritania and western Mali. Its economy was based on iron, salt and gold mining along with agricultural produce such as kola nut (a stimulant as it contains caffeine). It was also a major market for cotton cloths (Benin cloth) from Benin, most of which were produced in Yoruba land and Nupe.

The Mali kingdom of the Mande people on its own part was also noted for its trade in gold, although kola nuts and slaves were also traded for goods such as salt, cloth, copper and metal goods. Gao the capital city of Songhai empire during that period became an increasingly important terminal for trade across the Sahara. Those trade goods included gold, salt, slaves, kola nut, leather, dates and ivory. Despite other agricultural products that were traded during that period, salt and gold mining maintained a significant position. Salt was used for seasoning and it was also an important source for preservation. Gold on the other hand was used for decorations, on articles for clothing more especially for the rich men, and for

currency. The slave trade was also important for the economic development of West African societies. Kingdoms had relied on slaves to carry out heavy work and were also used for the transportation of goods. In some societies, slaves served mainly as craftsmen, potters, wood workers etc. they also worked on farm lands so as to help produce enough food to supply the growing populations in towns as well as surplus for trade. The Asante kingdom of the Akan people in the present-day Ghana dominated trade during the 15th century as they traded their gold for slaves from the Portuguese who bought these slaves from the kingdom of Benin near Niger Delta in Nigeria. Slave labour made it easy for the Akan people to shift from small scale agriculture to large scale agriculture (Davidson, 1995). The shift transformed the Asante kingdom and it developed a wealthy agricultural and mining economy.

The trade routes also played an important role in the economy of ancient West Africa societies. The major trade routes moved goods across the Sahara Desert between Western/Central Africa and the port trade centres along the Mediterranean Sea. Traders moved their goods across the Sahara using Caravans. The camel was the most important element of the caravan because they can survive for long periods without water. They can also tolerate the desert's intense heat during the day and cold at night. It was used as the main mode of transportation during the ancient times. Kingdoms such as Gao, Mali, Timbuktu, and Jenne were the major cities which controlled a great of trade in the region. Some regions located in riverine areas controlled the trading activities across the river. For example, Ghana Empire located between the Niger and the Gambia Rivers also controlled trade across that river. It also contributed to the wealth of the region because taxes were collected from traders who passed through that kingdom. The expansion of trade across West African over time led to the evolution of local currencies such as cowries, manilas, copper rods, etc. which served as a means of exchange during that epoch. Taking together the aforementioned evidence, it is pertinent to say that West African societies engaged in lucrative economic activities which progressed steadily from early times to the mid-seventeenth century, propelled by population growth and

inter-regional trade. This work also shows that there were already well established prior to the colonization epoch.

Unit 6: Summary of the Module

This module has presented the economic activities in existence in pre-colonial West African societies used by various pre-colonial West African societies and how these activities contributed to the development of trade and empires in the region. The module has also discussed the subsistence economy of the early West African societies in relation to the evolution of craft works as it marked the genesis of inter-regional trade. Various inter-regional trade relations among West African societies prior to her colonization have been explained.

Unit 7: Assessment on the Module

1. In what way has geography affected the early West African economy?
2. Discuss the subsistence nature of early West African economy.
3. The advent of craft works led to the advancement of trade. Do you agree to this claim?
4. Discuss the various inter-regional trades among ancient West African societies.

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