



TRADITIONAL ECONOMY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: PRE-1968 ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE GUNGAWA OF YAURI AND BORGU EMIRATES

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines what some scholars of Economic History such as A.G. Hopkins described as 'Domestic Economy' or what others like T.B. Ingawa and G.O. Ogunremi referred to as 'Pre-Colonial Economy' of African people. The Economic History of a people is an account of how the people in a particular place or a community earned their living in the past. The primary focus of this paper is an examination of economic activities of the Gungawa before their forceful resettlement from their traditional homeland on the numerous islands and banks of River Niger in Yauri and Borgu Emirates to the eastern and western banks of the river as a result of the construction of Kainji Dam. Although discussions in the paper centre on the pre-colonial period, the scope of the paper is extended to almost two decades after colonial period because the resettlement in 1968 produced everlasting consequences on the pre-1968 economic activities of the Gungawa.*

KEYWORDS: Traditional Economy, Northern Nigeria, Yauri, Gungawa.



INTRODUCTION

The word Gungawa was originally used by the Hausa people in Yauri to designate all those people who have made the islands on the River Niger their homes. It originated from a Songhai word *gungu*, meaning an island.¹ The Gungawa called themselves *Baresha* and called their language *Tsuresha*. The Hausa people in Yauri were the first to call them *Gungawa*, meaning dwellers of islands, and called their language *Gunganci*.² According to Mahdi Adamu,³ the Gungawa were among the four ethnic groups who inhabited Yauri area long before the establishment of dominance of the Hausa people from Katsina, over the indigenous people, during the first half of the 15th century. The other three were: Kambari, Dukkawa and Shangawa. However, as at present, the Gungawa are found in Yauri, Ngaski and Shanga Local Government Areas (Yauri Emirate) of Kebbi State and in Agwara and Borgu Local Government Areas (Borgu Emirate) in Niger State.

This paper attempts to discuss the traditional economic activities of the Gungawa till the year 1968, when they were resettled from their numerous islands and banks of River Niger in Yauri and Borgu Emirates as a result of the construction of Kanji Dam.

The Pre-1968 Economic Activities of the Gungawa

Before the resettlement in 1968, the Gungawa were engaged in quite a number of economic activities that include: Agriculture, Fishing, River Transport, Trading and Crafts Industry. This is in line with the argument put forward by Ogunremi,⁴ that “The structure of West African economy in the pre-colonial period comprised the main agricultural and non-agricultural productions and distributions of various commodities. It also consisted of services.” Describing the pre-colonial economy of Zaria, Mahdi Adamu⁵ also noted that “the major economic activities through which the Hausa people satisfied their economic requirements before the 20th century were agriculture, crafts, commerce and the service industry.” In his article on the pre-colonial economy of Hausaland, Ingawa⁶ explained that “trade and agriculture have for time immemorial been the most important aspects of the economic life of the Hausawa, among whom agriculture has been an aged old activity.” Let us now discuss the sectors of the pre-1968 economy of the Gungawa, one after the other.

Agriculture

In its simplest form, the term agriculture has been defined as the cultivation or production of crops and the rearing of livestock for human use.⁷ Like many African communities, crop cultivation has been a major occupation amongst the Gungawa due to suitable condition along the banks and islands of the River Niger that favoured the production of both rainy and dry seasons crops. The rainy season farming began as soon as the rainfall started around April or May, until around October or November. The dry season farming on the other hand started in November and continued until around March. The principal crops produced included guinea corn, beans, millet, cassava and sweet potatoes which were produced as food crops.⁸ Whatever surplus is produced was exchanged at either the local or regional market. Rice and onions were the major cash crops and they were marketed in boats by the Gungawa to as far places as Jebba, Lokoja or Onistsha in eastern Nigeria for sale.⁹ The cultivation of onion usually commenced around September or October before the end of the rainy season and it was harvested in February and March.¹⁰ All farming activities were done manually with locally produced implements that include *rikoma* (called *hawuya* in Hausa or hoe in English), *ridonokoma*



(*galma* in Hausa or large hoe in English), *ruma* (*gatari* in Hausa or axe in English), *hishebo* (*gizago* in Hausa or small axe in English), and *rela* (*lauje* in Hausa or sickle in English).¹¹

Animal rearing, especially the rearing of cattle amongst the Gungawa, was for saving and getting additional income for various purposes. It was also a sign of wealth and prestige among the Gungawa for an individual to rear cattle. Whatever animals they reared, the Gungawa used to transport them on foot to *Kurmi*,¹² for commercial purposes.¹³

Fishing

The natural environment where Gungawa lived enabled them to make fishing as the second most important economic activity after agriculture. According to Bahago,¹⁴ the Gungawa carried out fishing both for domestic consumption and for commercial purposes especially during the dry season when there was little or no farm work. In the opinion of Mahdi Adamu,¹⁵ the dry season was the fishing season as it was the time when most Gungawa villages became communities of fishermen who constantly undertake fishing expeditions that would last for two or three days in nearby river channels. Fishing among the Gungawa was therefore what hunting was to the Kambari.¹⁶

According to Alhaji Adamu,¹⁷ fish was more available among the Gungawa before the resettlement of 1968. During that time, as he further emphasised, whosoever paid a visit to a Gungawa man on an island would be fed abundantly on fish. Alhaji Adamu attributed the post-1968 low catch to the flood caused by the construction of the Kainji Dam because the water level in the upstream of the dam has now been increased, thereby making fishing a difficult activity in the area. He added that the fishes caught in those days were much bigger than those of the post-1968 period. According to Muhammadu Farin Gida, he stopped eating fish shortly after the resettlement in 1968 because the fish being caught from that time are mostly very small and that he could not afford buying the little bigger ones these days.¹⁸

River Transport

This is an act of conveying goods and services from one place to another on a river by using canoes or boats. Operating this form of economic activity was an important economic activity among the Gungawa before the 1968 resettlement. The Gungawa boat drivers were, during the pre-1968 period, transporting people and their goods from the Yauri area in the River Niger, to such places as Lolo, Dole Kaina, Suru, Yuna, Jebba, Lokoja, and Onitsha.¹⁹ The Gungawa have been engaged in this form of economic activity long before the introduction of engine to drive the boats. They were then using long poles (called *hikolwa* in their language and *kala* in Hausa language) and paddle (which they called *hyatamwa* in their language or *filafili* in the Hausa language).

They used the long poles when going upstream, and used the paddles when moving downstream. The first type of engine they used was the one with exhaust pipe or tail pipe on top. The Gungawa River transporters used two types of boats: the medium sized which they called *abarabi* or *abara*²¹ in the Hausa, and the canoe which they called *bunguli*, *kwale-kwale*²² in Hausa. The *abarabi*, which they obtained from Onitsha, was used for long distance journeys and for carrying goods. The *bunguli*, on the other hand, was locally constructed and it was used mainly for ferry services.²³ But it needs to be noted that an informant²⁴ has argued that the use *abarabi* and *bunguli* have in recent years been replaced by the modern forms of boats they called *utsumu* and *utabo* or *kanke* and *tabo* respectively, in Hausa.



Trading

Exchange of goods and services was another important economic activity among the Gungawa before their resettlement in 1968. The Gungawa were engaged in both internal and external trading activities with their neighbours such as the Hausa, Shangawa, Bussawa and Kambari, and with peoples far away from them like the Nupe, Yoruba, Ebira and the Igbo. Most of the goods sold by the Gungawa during the pre-1968 period were agricultural goods such as onions, beans, rice and Shea nuts as well as few non-agricultural products like mats, baskets and farm implements. In return, products such as salt, palm oil, metal pieces and medium sized boats (*abarabi*) were brought by the Gungawa to their different islands.²⁵ The development of these trading networks between the Gungawa and their neighbours facilitated the development of the market system and market relations amongst the Gungawa and between the Gungawa and their neighbours. For example, in the northern Gungawa territory, market days were held at Tillo, Zamare, Koma, and Rofiya Islands after every four days while in the southern Gungawa territory the market day was held every four days at Hoge and Utono Islands as well as at old Wara, and then, on Fridays at Ngaski.²⁶

What is clear from the foregoing is that although the economy of the Gungawa before 1968 was at subsistence level, the Gungawa had been able to consistently produce some surplus for commercial purposes.

One of the major commodities for long distance trade among the Gungawa was onion, which they exported to very far places such as Baro in Nupeland, Jebba, Lokoja and Onitsha.²⁷ The Gungawa traders who sold their commodities in Onitsha travelled twice a year. An informant,²⁸ who had been to Onitsha 13 times in his life, emphasized that whenever he sold onions in Onitsha, he came back with bags of salt that were much cheaper in Onitsha.²⁹ He explained that some Gungawa purchased up to one hundred bags of salt each on their way back home after they had sold their onions.

Crafts Industry

As far as crafts are concerned, the Gungawa in the pre-1968 period were more interested in blacksmithing, basket making, mat making, fish trap making and Shea butter making. They did not engage on weaving, dyeing or pot making. This was due to the fact that they obtained their cloth and dye from the Hausa and Shangawa people and the pots from their Kambari neighbours.³⁰ The blacksmithing industry mostly located in Zamare and Baha Islands produced farm implements that were sold in such markets attended by the Gungawa as Yelwa, Wara, Ngaski, Utono, Zamare and Rofiya.³¹

The Gungawa were also professional mat makers who specialised in producing the type of mat they called *wapa* or *wundi* in Hausa. This type of mat was circular at either end and was made from the fronds of *goriba* palm. It is important to note that most of the weaving of the mats was done during the leisure time, especially during the night time, and both men and women participated in the craft. Shea butter making was, however, entirely an economic activity monopolised by women.³²

Impact of Colonial Administration and Kainji Dam Resettlement Project on the Pre-1968 Economic Activities of the Gungawa



Like the economy of most African societies, colonialism disarticulated the economic life of the Gungawa. Colonial economic policies forced the Gungawa to abandon onion and rice production in favour of groundnuts, cotton and the collection of Shea nuts to satisfy British industries.³³ The economy of the Gungawa also became monetized and payment of taxes through the new currencies were made mandatory.³⁴ The implication of this to the Gungawa was that they were forced to sell their produce to the agents of the British traders in order to obtain the British currencies for the payment of taxes. The Gungawa farmers were therefore compelled to produce the cash crops needed by the British at the expense of local export crops (onions and rice) and staple food crops.

But it needs to be noted that hand-in-hand with colonialism, the Kainji Dam resettlement scheme in 1968 equally affected and disrupted the economic life of the Gungawa. With the resettlement in 1968, the Gungawa lost forever the opportunity of participating in fishing and river transportation businesses. These two economic activities have now been dominated by the *Sarkawa*.³⁵ Thus, the Gungawa had to change the pattern of their economic life. They could neither cultivate onions in large quantities nor could they quite easily fish to supplement their diet and income. The Gungawa could also no longer cultivate some of their major crops such as cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, millet and rice. Consequently, they are now left with the cultivation of only guinea corn as their staple crop while the onion which they cultivate through irrigation technique remained the major cash crop.³⁶

Inadequate space for farmland that became a feature after the resettlement pushed quite a number of Gungawa inland in search of more farmland. Following the Kainji Dam resettlement, for example, some of the Gungawa of Baha left their resettled site on the eastern bank of the River Niger along Yelwa-Zamare road to other places few kilometres east of Yelwa town such as Rafin Kuka, Tungan Gazau and Bakin Turu.³⁷ Quite a number of Gungawa of Zamare Island also moved further inland to a place east of Golongo and settled. They called the new settlement *Whalo* in their language or *Wadata* in Hausa, which means abundance or prosperity in English.³⁸ There were even some Gungawa who after the resettlement left their resettled sites for other places such as Malale, Kanya, Garafini, Soshi, Gungawa (near Babban Rami), etc. in the present Niger State.³⁹ The reason given by most of the Gungawa, who left their resettled sites for other places after their resettlement in 1968, was search for more farmland, arguing that the sites given to them during the resettlement exercise were not only inadequate, but were not fertile, hence the need for them to look for additional and more fertile lands elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

The structure of major traditional economic activities of the Gungawa has been outlined and disused in some details in the paper. It has been shown that the Kainji Dam resettlement of the Gungawa in 1968 from their traditional homeland located on the numerous islands and banks of River Niger in Yauri and Borgu Emirates affected the social and economic life of the Gungawa in various ways. The Gungawa from the period of resettlement could no longer depend on fishing and river transport as a means of survival. The only crop produced by the Gungawa after the resettlement was guinea corn as the staple food crop and onions, which is mostly produced by means of irrigation, as a cash crop.



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- [2]. For more on this and origin of the Gungawa, See Y. Abubakar, "History of the Baresha (Gungawa) People to 1968", *M.A. (History) Dissertation*, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 2011, p. 1 and pp. 35-41 respectively.
- [3]. M. Adamu, "A Hausa Government in Decline...", pp. 29-30 and p.46. See also M. Adamu, *The Hausa Factor in West African History*, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1978, p. 33.
- [4]. G.O. Ogunremi, "The Structure of Pre-Colonial Economy ", in G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi, *An Economic History of West Africa Since 1750*, Ibadan, Rex Charles Publication, 1996, p. 14.
- [5]. M. Adamu, "The Economy of A Hausa Capital: Zaria in the 18th and 19th Centuries", a Paper Presented at Departmental Seminar, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 13th February, 1982, p. 1.
- [6]. T.B. Ingawa, "Some Aspects of the Pre-Colonial Economy of Hausaland", in *Kano Studies: New Series*, Vol.2 No. 4, 1986, p.61.
- [7]. See K.P. Srivastava, *Academics Dictionary of Agriculture*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 9.
- [8]. Most of the informants interviewed have given these as principal crops produced by the Gungawa as it was very difficult to point at any Gungawa settlement where these crops were not produced on a large scale.
- [9]. Oral interview with Malam Muhammadu Abdullahi Baha, aged 85 years, interviewed in front of his residence in Baha on Friday 4th March, 2011 and Malam Muhammadu Sani Maiunguwa Uneku, aged over 90 years, interviewed in front of his residence in Uneku on Monday 13th June, 2011. See also, Y. Abubakar, "History of the Baresha...", p. 49.
- [10]. In a group discussion with Malam Jatau Waziri, aged 90 years, Malam Mamman Waziri, aged 85 years, Malam Zayyanu Waziri, aged 67 years and Malam Musa Hwali, aged 65 years. My discussions with them took place in front of the residence of Village Head of Koma in Gumbi, on Saturday 10th July, 2010. See also M. Adamu, "A Hausa Government in Decline..." *op.cit*, p. 26 on the domination of rice production among the Gungawa.
- [11]. Y. Abubakar, "History of the Baresha...", p. 50.
- [12]. *Kurmi* is a Hausa term which literally means a thick forest. It is also used in northern Nigeria to refer to southern part of Nigeria, particularly south-west, which was thickly forested and was dominated by the Yoruba speaking people. Different informants have identified many places in Yorubaland where they used to go to sell their cattle. According to some of them they used to go to Jebba, Ilorin, Oyo, Ibadan, Shaki, Ife, Abekuta, Ogbomoso and Eko (Lagos) on their feet to transport both themselves and the cattles. For more on Hausa meaning of the word *Kurmi* see G.P. Bergery, *A Hausa-English Dictionary and English-Hausa Vocabulary*, London, Oxford University Press, 1934, p. 653.
- [13]. Oral interview with Malam Yusuf Ubandawaki, aged over 90 years, interviewed in his residence in Hilala, on Wednesday 7th July, 2010. The italicized words in the brackets are in the Hausa language.
- [14]. Malam Muhammadu Bahago, aged 85 years, interviewed in front of the residence of Noman Dakin Gari, on Friday 26th November, 2010.



- [15]. See M. Adamu, "A Hausa Government...", pp. 28-29. Mahdi Adamu has further explained that the dry season was also a time when groups of fishermen used to come to Yauri from the upper reaches of the river Niger and spent about three or four months catching fish with the Gungawa. Such fishermen, according to him, were called *Sarkawa*, no matter where their homes were.
- [16]. *Ibid*, p. 27.
- [17]. Alhaji Adamu Tillo (Chairman PDP Tillo Ward), aged 60 years, interviewed in front of the residence of his father in Tillo, on Tuesday 18th November, 2010.
- [18]. Malam Muhammadu Farin Gida, aged 100 years, interviewed in front of his residence, in Gungun Sarki on Sunday 21st November 2010.
- [19]. Malam Isan Ali Nagari (Noman Hilala), aged over 80 years, interviewed in front of the residence of Village Head of Toro, on Saturday 20th November and Thursday 25th November, 2010.
- [20]. *Ibid*.
- [21]. According to G.P. Bergery, A Hausa-English Dictionary and English-Hausa Vocabulary....*op.cit*, *Abara* was a large round-bottomed dugout boat.
- [22]. According to H.D Gunn and F.P. Conant, *People of the Middle Niger Region Northern Nigeria*, London, International African Institute, 1960, p. 14 *kwale-kwale* was a type of canoe hollowed-out trunks joined together at a central seam.
- [23]. Oral interview with Malam Abubakar Saddiku Gungun Hoge, aged 75 years, in front of the residence of Village Head of Hoge, on Monday 2nd August, 2010 and Maiunguwa Uneku... This has also been confirmed by many Gungawa informants in Yauri Emirate.
- [24]. Malam Garba Abarshi, aged 85 years, interviewed in front of the residence of Wakilin Hakim in Ula'ira, on Sunday 12th June, 2011. Most of the Gungawa informants have also confirmed this information.
- [25]. In a group discussion with Malam Muhammadu Fain Gida..., and Malam Ibrahim Maginga, aged 80 years. This discussion took place in front of the residence of the former in Gungun Sarki, on Friday 9th July, 2010.
- [26]. Gungawa District Notebook, File No. DNB/27/93/10, obtained from Waziri Junaidu History and Culture Bureau, Sokoto, p. 30. This has also been confirmed by Malam Adamu Zakari (Turakin Maginga), aged over 90 years, interviewed in front of the residence of Village Head of Kakwaran in Wara, on Saturday 11th June, 2011, Malam Garba Abarshi and Malam Muhammadu Sani Mai Unguwan Uneku, *op.cit*. By northern Gungawa I am referring to the Gungawa living in the present Yauri and Shanga Local Government Areas, and by southern Gungawa I mean the Gungawa in the present Ngaski Local Government Area, all in Kebbi State.
- [27]. Malam Bisallah Sarkin Jirgi, aged over 100 years, interviewed in front of his residence, on Thursday 18th November, 2010. A minimum of thirty (30) days are given by most of my informants as number of days used for a return journey from the Gungawa villages to the markets due south. The journey back home always took longer because the boats would be travelling upstream.
- [28]. Malam Ibrahim Maginga...,
- [29]. According to him he used to buy a bag of salt at Onitsha at the rate of three and half shillings (Hausa, *sule ukku da sisi*) or four shillings (Hausa, *sule hudu*) and then sold it at home at the rate of five shillings (Hausa, *sule biyar*).
- [30]. Malam Yusuf Ubandawaki...,
- [31]. Oral interview with Malam Usman Alhassan Tateku, aged 74 years, in front of the residence of Wakilin Tateku, on Sunday 1st August, 2010.



- [32]. Oral Interview with Alhaji Abubakar Laini, aged over 100 years, interviewed beside Juma'at Mosque 1 in Kan Gungun Zamare, on Wednesday 8th December, 2010, Malam Muhammadu Abdullahi Baha., Malam Abubakar Saddiku Gungun Hoge and Malam Garba Abarshi...
- [33]. Gungawa DNB, *op.cit.* Also in an oral interview with one Malam Garba Ma'aji, aged 80 years, he confirmed the introduction of what he called export crops such as groundnuts, cotton and collection of shea trees by the colonialists. He added that before the coming of Europeans taxes were not paid on individual basis in the Gungawa territory. The interview took place at his residence in Tsohon Garin Tondi on Wednesday 7th July, 2010.
- [34]. British Pound and Shilling were introduced as legal tender in all the British West African Countries. West African Currency Board was also established in 1912 so as to ensure adequate supply of the currencies. For details, See R. O. Ekundare, *An Economic History of Nigeria 1860-1960*, London, Longman, 1973, p. 314.
- [35]. According to Mahdi Adamu, *Sarkawa* is the name given to all fishermen who went to Yauri to spend some time, like three to four months, catching fish. Some of them, as he further explained, were Hausa people while others were Zabarmawa (Djerma) or Songhai. See M. Adamu, "A Hausa Government...", p. 27. Before the Kainji Dam Resettlement of the Gungawa the *Sarkawa* were catching the fish side by side with the Gungawa.
- [36]. Malam Muhammadu Farin Gida..., Most of the Gungawa whom I interviewed particularly the elderly ones hold this opinion regarding to the impact of the Kainji Dam Resettlement on them.
- [37]. Malam Muhammadu Abdullahi Baha..., During my field research I paid visits to Rafin Kuka and Tungan Gazau in order to confirm this version of the story. I actually met some Gungawa there and they confirmed to me that they were originally from Baha. They added that it was after they were resettled in 1968 they then realized that the resettled site was not only as fertile as their island settlement, but also was not enough for all of them to cultivate, as a result of which they moved further inland in search of more farmland.
- [38]. Alhaji Idi Mamman (Ubandawakin Sarkin Kudun Zamare), aged over 80 years, interviewed in Zamare at the palace of Sarkin Kudun Zamare, on Friday 9th July, 2010. An informant in Wadata, Buhari Muhammad Tanko (T.K.) by name, confirmed to me that his parents came to Wadata from Zamare following their resettlement in 1968. He however acknowledged the existence of some Gungawa from Hella in Wadata who later joined the founders of the village i.e. the Gungawa of Zamare.
- [39]. Malam Muhammadu Abdullahi Baha...