



## History of Trading Currencies in the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria Before the Nineteenth Century

Chinyere S. Ecoma<sup>[a],\*</sup>; Lequome E. Ecoma<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D. Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

<sup>[b]</sup>Post Graduate Student, Department of Public Administration, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.

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\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

The history of the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria has suffered neglect in the area of scholarly interest for a very long time. Until recently, the area was one of the least known in Nigeria. Early European mariners to the region cast aspersions on the culture history of the people and labelled them indiscriminately as “fragments of earlier world”, “human clusters”, and “splinter zone”. Given this lacuna in the culture history of the Upper Cross River Region, this paper is a bold attempt at documenting and articulating some coherent perspectives of the culture history of the people. Using sources in its methodology, the paper highlights the level of sophistication of the economy which existed in the area prior to the nineteenth century. It also serves to situate the history of the region in its proper context, showing that far from being a mere subsistence economy which was dormant, rigid and unprogressive, it was flexible and basically dynamic. The research concludes that contrary to the misconception of visitors to the region, the people had developed a viable and vibrant economic system which utilised a variety of currencies in exchange transactions. This also depicts the contributions made by ancestors of the people towards development in the region long before the coming of Europeans.

**Key words:** Culture history; Economic system; Currencies; Development.

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### INTRODUCTION

In assessing the level of sophistication of an economy such as existed in the Upper Cross River Region, the following factors become very crucial—markets, routes and then of course, the medium or media of exchange. From the system of distribution and exchange of products already highlighted (Ecoma, 1998) it becomes apparent that the pre-colonial economy of the region was far from being a mere subsistence economy, certainly a market economy (Esse, 1993; Ndoma-Egba, 1972, p.64; Northrup, 1978, p.157), which for many centuries involved the use of a currency of one type or another. Therefore, the use of a currency to facilitate exchange is but an indication of a more developed economy.

Our area of concern—the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria is within the Cross River Basin and situates between latitudes 5° 30' and longitudes 8° 40' east. It is indeed a broad geographical area bounded on the east by the Republic of Cameroon; west by Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi States; north by Benue State, and south by Odukpani and Calabar in Cross River State (Petters, 1990, p.1). This area had suffered neglect in scholarly interest until recently due to the dearth of historical sources. This presentation is a bold attempt to articulate developments among the people of this area from early times to the nineteenth century. For clarity of purpose, in this paper, the Upper Cross River Region shall cover the entire northern half of present-day Cross River State (Appendix), comprising these ethnolinguistic groupings: Obudu, Obanliku, Ogoja, Yala, Bekwarra, Ikom, Boki, Etung, Obubra, Agbo, Bahumono, Yakurr and Biase.

On this premise, we attempt a discussion on the trading currencies in the Upper Cross River Region. Particular reference on this subject will be given to currencies in Ogoja area and such will be used as generalisations of currency types in the region. This consideration is purely based on the historical relevance of Ogoja as the Old Provincial Headquarters vis-à-vis the weight of evidence provided by sources in the area. Though other units in the region made use of currencies, on the whole, experiences were similar to that of Ogoja area.

## 1. THE INITIAL FORM OF EXCHANGE TRANSACTION/OTHER VARIETIES

Prior to 1890, the initial form of exchange in the region was barter (Anene, 1966). This kind of exchange (where the price system was totally absent) arose generally following the transition from a purely hunting and gathering economy to crop cultivation and animal rearing. Consequently, it led to increased food production beyond the subsistence level (Majuk, 1995, p.134). Material goods reflected their values in terms of individual demands of the parties contracting. All transactions in this exchange system needed a double coincidence of want (Latham, 1971, p.519). To lessen the degree of friction, the society imposed some generally acceptable values where all kinds of commodities, small domesticated animals and even tools were exchanged and certain normative ranges and values for standard goods served as points of reference in assessment. A standard calabash of groundnuts, millet, etc. represented one standard of value. Economic equivalents here were not fixed, haggling and bargaining were also indulged in since values were unstable and varied not only with demand and supply, but with the trading acumen of the traders (Ekejiuba, 1972). This rather intriguing system often left the erroneous impression that they were the primary forms of non-monetised exchange, (Ndoma-Egba, 1972, pp.70-71) that it indicated a relatively primitive level of development with goods being exchanged on an irregular or ad hoc basis. The Mbube-speaking unit of Ogoja, the Agwagwune of Biase as well as other units in the Upper Cross River Region, did exchange one commodity for another (Ayambi, 1981, p.85; Ubi, 1985, pp.10-11; Sunstom, 1970, p.66). For example, foodstuffs like yams for slaves, or even palm produce for yams or salt. These, have always accounted for the fixed social and economic ties among units even before the coming of Europeans into the region.

With the shortcomings of the barter system and the subsequent expansion of trade and market, a variety of currencies were introduced into the region and these went into circulation centuries before the colonial rule (Hopkins, 1973, p.61). These were cowrie shells, iron and copper bars, manila rods, beads, salt, cloth, slaves, and tobacco. The cowrie (*Cypraea moneta*) a fungible

and aliquot object, displaced the barter system (Hopkins, 1966, p.472; Ndoma-Egba, 1972, p.73; Ogunremi, 1980, p.102). It was first introduced via Egypt into the Western Sudan. From here, it gained entrance into South-eastern Nigeria where the Upper Cross River Region is situated (Ade-Ajayi & Alagoa, 1980, p.238) and by the time the Portuguese arrived, it was already well established. This induced them to import more cowries directly from the Indian Ocean. Cowries, originally, were shells found in the Maldives Island and with the development of trade between Europe and India, they were now shipped from India to Western European ports where they were brought by European traders to the slave coast in ever-increasing quantities during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Jones, 1977, p.278). Some Economic historians credit the use of this currency as having indicated an advancement in African Economy well before the coming of the Europeans. It allowed regional specialisation of production to develop well before European penetration in the second half of the nineteenth century (Hodder and Ukwu, 1969, p.46).

In other parts of Nigeria like Benin, this currency was in use as from about 1300 and in the eighteenth century, it gained acceptance in parts of the hinterland along the Niger, bordering on the Igala (Johnson, 1970, p.32). In all probability therefore, the use of this currency extended from there into adjoining Benue-Obudu-Ogoja zones in the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria as one of the earliest means of exchange. Essentially, the use of this currency here as decorations do affirm its widespread use as a notable currency in the region of our study in the era before colonial rule.

Trade in the Upper Cross River Region developed a general purpose currency in the iron money, which was the oldest form of currency in use in the South Eastern parts of Nigeria. This currency was already well established as could be gathered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century report below:

In the province of Moco a kind of iron money is made, each piece of which is as long as the palm of one's hand and has a tail or span in length...currency of this type was still used in remote parts of the Ogoja area until this century (Jones, 1977, p.279; Northrup, 1978, p.159).

The existence of this currency has been widely acknowledged by the people of Old Ogoja Province. Among the Nkum, Akajuk and Ukelle of Ogoja, this currency is reputed to have taken the form of a flattened strip of metal shaped like a Y with a long tail (Aggrey, 1980, p.33; Attoe, 1990; Jones, 1977, *ibid*; Meek, 1969; Northrup, 1978, *ibid*; Obokon, 1985). The Nkum referred to it as "Efify", the Akajuk as "Uyanyan" (Eyo, 1979, p.49; Obokon, 1985, p.75) or "Eyayo". This was valued much later in the nineteenth century at three British pennies approximately. Among the Biase, the widespread use of this currency for exchange transactions before the colonial era has equally been acknowledged (Attoe, 1990). They

referred to it as “Apa”. Among the Igbo-speaking people of Eastern Nigeria, its use has again been acknowledged where it took the form of a small conventionalised arrow head (Ekejiuba, 1972; Jones, 1977, p.279). Ikom in the Upper Cross River Region then under the Eastern Region also used this iron money in her traditional exchange system (Ejogha, 1984, p.35). It is generally believed that this same currency though different in general shape and size, was the one used by the Idoma and Tiv as recorded in Hutchinson’s impressions of Western Africa. The Idoma called it “Akika” and the Tiv “Ibia” respectively. During this period, local transactions were carried out in this currency side by side with the barter system. Such was the norm of exchange relations in Ogoja zone where the people made use of items like farm products, plants, seeds, salt, beads, and iron for money (Obokon, 1985, p.74) while other commercial transactions were still being done by barter simultaneously with the currencies.

Further expansion of trade with Europe led to the importation of iron bars which the Akajuk referred to as “Ekpeke”, as a trading currency. This iron bar was not a common currency but functioned as an acceptable standard of unit of value for products and manufactured goods. These bars were therefore, higher in value than a manila. This greatly diminished the value of the older iron currencies in the Upper Cross River Region. Though the earlier and older iron currencies served as general purpose money, they survived in later centuries, only for some special or perhaps largely ceremonial purposes in the region of our study. A typical example is found among the Ekoi-Ejagham where small iron tokens referred to as “Akpa” or “Apa” are still given as part of the Nuptial fees. In the event of the marriage failing, this could be returned to the groom to dissolve the bond (Northrup, 1978, p.160, p.162). In recent times, especially in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, this currency has been used for varied purposes ranging from its usage as a symbol of rightful claim to land, wife, slave, paying for sacrifices to purification. These additional functions serve as an indication to the antiquity of the money in the region.

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## 2. END OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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By the end of the seventeenth century, the standard measure of value on the Cross River was the copper rod. Added to its function as a standard for measuring value at the coast, copper rods became a general purpose money in the Cross River area extending Northwards among the Tiv as well and remained the local currency in the adjoining Obudu-Ogoja zones until the establishment of the British Protectorate (Jones, 1977, p.277). Alagoa also maintains the fact that the currency and its subsidiary unit- copper wire- were used as currency in the entire Cross River Basin before the nineteenth century (Alagoa, 1980, p.255), thus incorporating the Upper Cross River Region. Further affirming this point, Northrup explains that though the

Portuguese never traded on the Cross River, it was implied that whatever transactions they did from the Guinea coast to Mount Cameroon, equally embraced parts of the Cross River Region. They paid for their transactions with copper and brass wristlets/manilas. A 17<sup>th</sup> century report on the Cross River trade credited to the Aragon- a European trading ship- had this to say:

The slaves there (Old Calabar) reckon by copper bars reducing all sorts of goods to such bars; for example, one bar of iron, four copper bars; a man slave, for thirty eight, and a woman slave for thirty seven or thirty-six copper bars... (Jones, 1977, p.275).

From old Calabar, this medium of exchange had extended up the Cross River such that at the beginning of the sixteenth century already, trade goods like yams, slaves, cows, goats, and sheep which came from up the Cross River, were paid for in copper bracelets. For example, in Aladim, Ezekwe and Bansara markets all in Ogoja, exchange transactions much later were still carried out in copper rods currency. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a tin of palm oil was sold for about twelve copper rods (Ayambi, 1981, p.86) or its equivalent in British Sterling. The use of this currency was equally widespread among the Biase (Attoe, 1990, p.111). Essentially, Latham’s comment on the usage of this currency as a general purpose money in the Cross River Region for controlling the distribution of status of goods within the social system (which implies the Upper Cross River Region) as early as 1698, serves as an indication of the widespread use of the currency in the region of our study. The value of this currency later declined in the nineteenth century for in Mbube as much as 100 copper rods could fetch only one slave from the Utugwang, Bekwarra and the Tiv areas.

Some of the copper rods were split into wires for smaller transactions. These were referred to notably as “Ukpugha” (Ejogha, 1984, p.35; Jones, 1977, p.275) by the Ejagham-speaking units in the Upper Cross River Region. Perhaps, the reference to money generally as “Okponan” by the Agbo units within the Upper Cross River Region may not be unconnected with this development in the seventeenth century. “Okponan” may well be regarded as an adulterated form of “Ukpugha” or “Okpoho” as popularly known by the Efiks of Old Calabar. These are all indications of the extensive trade contacts and relations between peoples of the Cross River Region in the era before colonial rule. These copper wires and rods were freely obtainable and acceptable in markets in the entire Upper Cross River Region in view of its characteristics. It acted as a store of capital and could be saved for future transactions by its users. Unlike the cowrie, its durability was guaranteed and these rods possessed the attributes of present-day money.

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## 3. EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

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From the early nineteenth century, rods changed from

copper to brass and remained so ever since. By the end of the century, it ceased to be used as currency in the region of our study. They were now replaced by lengths of copper or silver wire and by some British silver coins. The brass rod area according to Jones comprised people adjoining the Cross River- the Efik and some other Ibibio tribes, the Cross River Igbo, North Eastern Igbo, the Ekoi, Yako, Mbembe and other tribes of the present Obubra, Ogoja and Mamfe Divisions of the Eastern Region and the Cameroons. In fact, in the Biase area of the Upper Cross River Region, hired labourers were paid mainly in copper rods, brass rods and manila in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is confirmed that the brass rod currency was widespread among the Yala of Ogoja such that their marketing transactions were mainly done in brass rods (Jones, 1977, pp.278-279) during the period. As a matter of fact, brass rods were of a higher unit of money than the manila. They were also less cumbersome to carry about and less troublesome to deal in. Official payment of gifts, funeral rites, titles and other ceremonies were made in brass in the Upper Cross River Region. Yet, in this same area, articles of low value, particularly foodstuffs were exchanged one for another.

From the 1730s onwards, manilas began to replace the copper rings in the Calabar hinterland (NAE, 1958) and found their way into inland markets in the Upper Cross River Region. Manila, copper and brass rods have a long history in West Africa (Ade-Ajayi & Alagoa, 1980, p.232). Manilas and rods were metal currency units originally made of copper and imported from Western Europe. Manila existed as conventionalised bracelets and by the eighteenth century, became relatively standardised in their modern reduced form. They were too small to encircle any human wrist and they were more accurately regarded as "rings" (Olof-Johnansson, 1967, p.11). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, 40 manilas were equivalent to 1 iron bar and by the end manilas were no longer made of copper but of a base alloy. Within Nigeria, which incorporates the Upper Cross River Region, manila and cowries were used side by side. In the Ekajuk-speaking area of Ogoja, this currency, Manila, was referred to locally as "Mogbim" (Jones, 1977, pp.278-279) and foodstuffs formed the bulk of commodities purchased with Manila.

By 1911, manila ceased to be legal tender. By the Manila Currency Ordinance of 1919, the use of manila by foreign traders in trade with the people was prohibited. Up till the end of the nineteenth century, manilas, brass and copper rods remained the purchasing media for the great bulk of trade and most imports had to be converted into manila or brass rods. The currency worth of the manila and the rods was too high for most petty market transactions particularly in the hinterland. Because of their high value, manilas and rods were exchanged for commodities of a very high value like animals including

sheep, goats and cows. They were also used to purchase commodities like cloths (Aggrey, 1980, p.33).

The value of these currencies in the region fluctuated yearly and from place to place often by as much as 50%. Africans and European merchants themselves manipulated this system of exchange to make a double profit. By 1902, brass rods fluctuated from 1<sup>s</sup> and 3<sup>d</sup> and in the Old Ogoja Province, it was worth three pennies.

Besides metal currencies, salt, cloth, gun and slaves were also used as media of exchange in the Upper Cross River Region before 1800. Towards the end of the century, a case of gin or rum became as much used currency of intermediate unit especially among the Cross River groups (Jones, 1958, p.40); since it was easier to transport. Patridge in Obubra, and Harris in Ikom equally acknowledged the use of this trade transactions with the Efiks at Calabar (Ekejiuba, 1972, p.15); before the nineteenth century. Cloth was also an established form of currency in our region of study and indeed in Nigeria long before the nineteenth century. Harris mentions the Florentine check (Patridge, 1905; Harris, 1972) used in commercial transactions at Ikom, that canoes there were seldom purchased with cash. Rather, they were directly purchased with equivalent values in goods, often cloth- a hundred pieces of Florentine check cloth reckoned at twenty pounds. A stable value for this cloth money existed in terms of rods and Nigerian currency in the Upper Cross River Region (where one ten-yard piece from 1911 onwards until the cloth ceased to be imported in about 1920), was worth five shillings or ten rods. Beyond Ikom, no such fixed ratios operated (Harris, 1972, p.130). In Ogoja for instance, the ratios fluctuated according to the season of the year. In the dry season, when river transport was difficult and few goods arrived from Calabar, one piece of Florentine check might fetch eight shillings. In the wet season, when the canoes could reach Ogoja more easily, a piece of cloth was worth only six shillings (Ibid). In the Mamfe area, the value also appeared to have altered according to what was being purchased and of course, difficulties of transport from Ikom to Mamfe (Ibid).

On the whole, it may be viewed that the number of different currencies used in the region of our study before 1800, never caused any particular confusion, neither did it impede trade in any way. Rather, what featured prominently in the area was the obvious overlapping and intermingling of currency zones which was of course, a normal occurrence in our economic system.

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## CONCLUSION

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This paper has demonstrated contrary to the gains of older historiography that trade and related activities in our region of study pre-dated the advent of European traders in the coastal areas of Nigeria. It is also clear that while indigenous trade evolved, it developed a variety of exchange systems which culminated in a variety of

currencies all of which were later replaced by other systems of exchange until the opening of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is quite apparent that the internal trade of the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria provided the local antecedents for the more embracing imperialism of the later centuries. The region was already involved in various levels of exchange relations between themselves and with neighbouring regions before the advent of Europeans. The commercial economy of the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria having been well developed, made use of both general and special-purpose currencies which were the indices of a viable economic system. It should therefore be clear that there was trade and economic development in the region before the nineteenth century and that the later trade with Europeans in the nineteenth century was built upon an earlier form of trade in the region.

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**APPENDIX**

**Map of Cross River State Showing the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria**

