

Labour and Labour Utilisation in Pre-Colonial Kin-Nupe Economy

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Abstract

Nupe land is endowed with enormous resources utilized for production and distribution of goods and services. However for the production and distribution of goods and services to be efficiently done human resources most especially labour force became a critical factor. Overtime, this was not lacking in Nupe land which contributed to their specialization and production level beyond subsistence and well distributed. It is against this background, this study adopted historical method and content analysis to examine the nature of labour, its utilisation and contribution to economic and social activities in Nupe land before colonial conquest. The study reveals that Nupe land was endowed with human resources from where they established efficient sources of labour force and utilization overtime.

Introduction

Development of any human society depends much on utilization of its human and natural resources. Natural resources that included capital form the passive factor of production that depends much on human resources for exploitation and usage. Human resources on the other hand constitute the most critical and active factor in capital formation, exploitation and usage of natural resources in production and distribution process towards national development.¹ The friendly nature of the ecology and endowed natural resources in Nupe land attracted human settlements from the earliest time.² The natural resources provided the people with diverse economic opportunities. The opportunities which were based on the dictate of the environment influenced human settlements and economic activities that brought about mastery, specialization and division of labour in occupation and productions.³ The mastery and specialization of labour in Nupe socio-economic set up was based on area of settlements and utilization of the resources. For instance, those in the riverine area monopolized fishing, transportation and marshy land cultivation known in Nupe land as *Kyadya* and *Bataci*.⁴ Another specialized occupation are the iron workers who specialised in mining of iron and blacksmithing referred to as *tsuacizi*. Along with occupational specialization was the division of labour among workers. Certain work were reserved for women such as sheabutter making⁵ while men only were engaged in iron mining and blacksmithing because of energy

requires to work the iron. Trade and commerce was open to both men and women.

The mastery, specialization and division of labour were aimed at efficient production of goods and services to meet the basic needs of the community, keep part for the future use and even for exchange. Thus, whatever the level of production and economic development of any giving society including Nupe land labour forms a critical factor. This informed the examination of labour and labour utilization in Nupe land before colonial administration. The study became more apt considering the fact that effort has not been made in this direction.

Conceptual Clarification

Labour as an economic institution is central to the growth and development of human society. It is the most active agent in the production and distribution of goods and services. It is the most valuable asset of the population that needs and could be mobilized for growth and development of a country's economy⁶. However, in pre-colonial Nupe land, no section of the population entirely depended on the sale of their labour for sustenance. People earned their living on the products of their labour as no persons were employed as working class and paid wages.⁷ The use of labour is a function of level of economic and political development of any giving society which manifest in the production of goods and services to meet the demand of not only immediate consumption but that of trade. The mobilization and use of labour came to be influenced by the individuals economic and political status in the society hence different

forms of labour were in operation in pre-colonial Nupe social-economic system.

Basically, labour system in Nupe land of our period centered around four major sources or components. These were;

- i. Household *efako*: This refers to the recruitment and mobilization of labour for socio-economic activities from within the family. The size of labour here depends on the population and characterization of the household.
- ii. Cooperative labour *dzoro*, *egbe*: As the name implies, it involves people coming together to work for a benefactor without paying for their work.
- iii. Servile labour *wuzhi*, *tsofa*: This is a social and economic institution where an individual acquire another person either by force, purchase or by any other arrangement to work for him/her without being paid.
- iv. Cultural (labour) practices *gwatan*, *egbe yawo*: This was a cultural practice that have been integrated into economic activities for mobilization of labour to assist an incapacitated person or for the benefit of would be in-laws⁸.

Pre-Colonial Nupe Economy

For us to appreciate the centrality of labour in Nupe economy, it is imperative to briefly discuss the economic structure in order to understand our line of argument. Nupe economic structure was determined by its strategic location and natural resources therein. Thus, the economic was anchored around four key activities of agriculture, manufacturing, commerce and transportation.

Agriculture *enu*

Agriculture that dated back to antiquity in Nupe land was the chief economic activities that employed majority of the people. Based on the area settlement and resources there in, agriculture came to be divided in to three segments of farming, fishing and livestock keeping.

Farming that involved production of crops was the most widely practice agricultural activities due to fertility of the land of nupe land. Nupe land for the purpose of economic production was divided into three sections of river valley and low lands, the upland and the forestry area⁹. The river valleys and low land areas due to fertility of the existing marshy land varieties of rice were produced. Other crops produced in the

area include vegetable, garden eggs, sweet potato, cocoyam among others¹⁰. The upland *kinti* or hinterland area that inhabited majority of the population stable crops such as millet, maize, guinea corn, beans, yam, paper and other crops were produced. The efficiency in the production of rice and corn in these areas made Baikie to described Nupe land as the great corn and rice yielding country¹¹. The third section of production area the forestry area was located along the river valleys or water courses allowed for the cultivation and harvest of tree crops such as kolanuts, oil palm, banana, plantain and grains.

The cultivation of crops in Nupe land went beyond subsistence level as they also produced for exchange. Some of these crops were also produced twice in a year.

Fishing was another economic activities and second in line in agriculture activities. Fishing activities is limited to the riverine area and available pools and ponds of Nupe land. It became the major economic activities of the kyadya people that lived along the bank of River Niger-Kaduna and Gbako while the Kakanda group occupied the banks of Niger down to Lokoja from Baro. The harvest of fish from pools and ponds and smaller rivers were done by the batacizi, marshy land cultivators.

Livestock formed the third agricultural activities widely produced but of less significance. Both men and women were involved. Animals such as goat, sheep, hens, were reared. Horses and donkeys were also kept most especially by the ruling class and nobles. Hunting and gathering of forest forms the auxiliary aspect of agriculture economy of Nupe land. People involved in hunting were few. Gathering of fruits such as locust beans and shea nuts that grew widely were undertaken by women.

Manufacturing *eyantswa*

The nature of environment and resources available made it possible for some section of the population to engage in manufacturing. The availability of raw materials to different industrial activities made it possible for production of variety of goods for domestic and other uses. The earliest manufacture produce were to aid agriculture, hunting, domestic chore and even wars. The major industries in nupe land cantered on mining, blacksmiths, brassmiths, glasswork, pottery, weaving textiles

among others¹⁴. They produced for both domestic and external markets.

Commerce and trade *woce*

Production of goods is incomplete when the goods have not gotten to consumers or end users. Trade that began at individual level moving from one person or house to another looking for a potential exchanger to satisfy their needs led to the establishment of markets. Gradually this led to evolution of three patterns of trade namely local or domestic trade, regional and international trade. In the exchange of goods, both manufactured and agricultural produced formed articles of trade. The articles of trade could also be locally produced or imported from near and far including Arabian and European goods. To facilitate trading markets of different importance came into being. The most important of these markets were those of international repute like Eggan, Katcha, Rabba, Kulfo, and Ogodo¹⁵.

Transportation *yanzanda*

The fourth economic aspect centered on provision of services to aid movement of persons and goods. Considering the ecology of Nupe land, two types of transportation were evolved as early as man began to sedentary in the area, namely road and water transportations. The road or land transportation mostly began as footpath where person and goods were moved through the use of human porter age, donkeys or caravans. Water transportation centered on the Niger- Kacha and Gbakorivers linking different communities that lived along their banks. Being the cheapest means of transportation it handled bulky goods over long distance and across banks. Some of the settlements along banks became international market centres such as Eggan, Lokoja, Gbobe, and Rabba¹⁶. The water transportation was exclusively dominated by the Kyadya and Kakeada people of Nupe land.

Labour Utilisation in Pre-Colonial Nupe Land

The mobilization and use of labour is a function of the level of socio-economic and political development of the society. In other words labour useage is determined by the status of the individual or group in the society. This informed the sources and useage of labour in pre-colonial Nupe land. The following are the labour operational system.

Family Labour

The rudimentary sources and employment of labour was at the household level that formed the basic unit of production and consumption. At this level, labour was organized at household level called *efako* or at individual level called *buca*. *Efako* refers to a labour unit of production that consist of male members of the house usually of about 10-15 persons¹⁷. The head of the *efako* mobilized and assigned work to members in the production process. He also determined the appropriation of the produce and responsible for certain upkeep of members¹⁸. The beauty of this was that young ones are being trained and initiated in to the labour system¹⁹. More so, the *efako* when it becomes too large it break to form another *efako* under the leadership of another elder in the family. The second labour utilization within the family system is the individual work called *buca*. Despite collective family work, individuals are allowed time to attend to their personal production process. This is to reduce dependency most especially among the unmarried and the children in preparation for adulthood. Whatever he produced belongs to him. It is important to note that individual cannot attend to their personal work when *efako* is to operate. In most areas, *buca* work was done between 6:00 to 8:00am and 6:00 to 8:00pm. This labour system applied to all occupation as young ones inherit family occupation; farming, black smithing, fishing among others. However, the number of persons involved in *efako* differs from one economic activity to another. Farming has the largest number of members in its *efako* when compared to fishing and blacksmithing.

Cooperative Labour.

Cooperative labour mobilization came into being in response to socio-cultural and economic demand. It was meant to ease and fasten the work to be done. Cooperative labour mobilization was of two types. The first being *dzoro* where people of the same age and occupation work on rotation bases for each member of the group. The beneficiary doesn't pay on the work done but provide refreshment.²⁰ The second cooperative labour mobilization called *egbe* differs from *dzoro* in planning, scope and people involved. It began with invitation to members of the community cutting across age and occupation depending on work to be done. The date fix need not be immediate

to allow for adjustment in invitees scheduled. The labour system could be utilized in farm, industrial work, building of house among others. The work done was not paid for but food and drinks were provided. To energize workers drummers and singers were invited to provide music and support.

Servile Labour Mobilisation

The institution of servility came into being as a result of expansion in the social, economic and political activities. The demand for servile labour was meant to expand production, create wealth or maintain and expand political influence. The servile institution or labour mobilization operates in two forms; pawn or slave. Pawn or what Nupe people refers to as *tsofa* according to Falola meant services rendered by a person as security for debt or to meet certain society demand while retaining his/her rights and privileges as free born member of the society.²¹ It operated based on mutual agreement between the owner of pawn person, the pawn him /herself and the master. The pawn does works for an agreed period of time to cover the agreed cost or money. The pawn can stay with the master, or commute on daily bases to work but return home after completing the day's assignment giving by the master.

Pawn labour came into being in an effort to raise money by individuals to pay debt, settle bridal price, payment of fine or pay taxes.²² This accounts for the treatment of pawn with dignity and even do the same work as other children in the family of the master. The pawn could be employed as source of labour in the family occupation, sales agents or could be assigned to any work by the master and could even work for themselves. The system grew to the extent that wealthy individuals apart from using it as source of labour, became a means of investment of capital.²³ The pawn unlike slave is not owned as property by master, but work to meet certain liabilities over a period of time.

Growth in economic activities and wealth creation occasioned by considerable increase in production and distribution of goods and services made house hold labour, cooperative labour and even pawn to be insufficient. Thus, to keep with the growing economic activities, people of wealth, larger producers and distributors of goods require a large number of labour force to maintain and improve on the system. This led to the obtaining and utilization

of slaves as labour force in different economic activities, military and politics.²⁴

Wuzhi or slave once acquired became the property of the master with no liberty, property including his children and have no claim to the fruit of his labour. He could also be sold but well treated in Nupe land to not only make them loyal but keeps them in good shape and productive. Slaves were acquired in Nupe land through three different means. Firstly

*through violent means of wars, raids or kidnapping induced by pretext to or ambition to establish, consolidate, exert or advance their political, religion and economic interest or combination of all by an individual or group of person.*²⁵

The second method was through socio-cultural sources of which an individual sacrifice his freedom in the service of another person for political protection and security. According to Ziri this could be liken to pawn but best described as clientage.²⁶ Sometimes a person could also be sent as tribute, gift or donation.

The third method of acquiring slave was judicial procedures. Individual or group who hitherto used to be killed or sent to exiles were now sent to slavery, or sold as slaves once convicted. For example, murderers or witches were sold into slavery while for a lesser offence such as theft they were made to work in emirs' farms called *ezozhi*.²⁷

Irrespective of the method of acquiring slaves, the most important thing was that they were exploited for production and services. Slaves were mostly used in the production of crops and other farm labour. For this purpose, the emirs and the nobles settled acquired slaves on farm settlement called *tungazhi*. On these settlements they worked to sustained themselves and their masters. They work under the supervision of their appointed leaders called Agaba, Santali, Sonmazhi among others.²⁸

Apart from crop production, slaves were involved in fishing and water transportation. Though their labour not used much in fishing they were much utilised in canoe transportation. These canoes were owned by royals and nobles in the society.²⁹ Slaves came also to be used as beast of burden on land for moving goods and services. They are mostly used by Nupe merchants.

In the manufacturing section, slave labour was used in mining field most especially in the

smelting of iron ore, pottery and bronze making. They also worked in the blacksmith workshop, gun making and processing of economic trees. In Bida, slaves entrusted with gun making lived in a compound or area that came to be known as *emi* or *efu gbalebozhi*. Slaves gotten from Yagba and Afenmai because of their mastery or skills in cotton industry were settled in *tungazhi* where they cohabit with Nupe weavers. The combined techniques and effort of the two made Nupe cloth to be famous in the course of 19th century.³⁰

Slaves came to be utilized also as government officials where they function as palace guards, messengers, tax collectors, official government delegates and liaison officers. These privileged slaves were even invested with state titles such as Sonmaji, Santali, Ndamaraki, Swajiya and Egbazhi.

Military service: Most of the able body men that were not sold were recruited into the state military service. Some of these men were military men or hunters before their capture as military prisoners and later slaves. Whatever be their status before then, they contributed to the defence and expansion of Nupe state that they served.

Socio-Cultural Labour

The integration of some cultural practices into the economic system of Nupe land led to the optimal use of labour force. The first was *egbeyawo*, labour mobilization for the benefit of a prospective in-law. A prospective son-in-law organized his friends whose number defers from one area to another to work on the in-law's farm for at least two or three years before or after marriage. The labour was not paid for but the father-in-law provides feeding. The process could be repeated for another person and the group when the need arises.³¹

An individual may also require labour assistance due to incapacitation or calamity that befell him. The community or group of individuals may request *gwatan* people to come to his aid by providing labour to get his work done. This may be on farm, industry, building or roofing of houses or workshop.³²

Conclusion

Labour is critical in the production and distribution of goods and services no matter the level of economic development of the society. In Nupe land, the growth in economic activities led to the institutionalisation of labour system

for effective exploitation and uses of resources. Thus, in this paper we examined the nature of Nupe economy, sources of labour and mobilization and how labour were used in the socio economic and political sphere of the society. We concluded by showing that the diversity and growth of the economy of Nupe land before colonialism could not be divorced from wide range of labour sources and its efficient employment.

Endnotes

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