

## **Water bodies and the Economic Developments of Eastern Niger Delta in the Pre-colonial and Colonial Eras: The Ibani Experience**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the profound impact of water bodies on the economic development of the Ibani Kingdom in Nigeria's Eastern Niger Delta from the pre-colonial to colonial era. Through a meticulous exploration of texts, the research chronicles the central role that these water bodies played in the founding of the Bonny and later Opobo Kingdoms. It highlights how these natural resources not only bolstered but also sustained the economic prosperity of these kingdoms until the colonial period. The geographical landscape of the Eastern Niger Delta, dominated by water bodies, significantly shaped the region's economic trajectory during the period under review. The arrival of Europeans in the 15th century via the Atlantic Ocean marked a pivotal moment for Bonny, transforming its economic fortunes and reshaping its trade relations with inland communities. This shift catalyzed the evolution of the Duowari house system into the more militarized War Canoe house system, a change that enhanced the region's economic structure and contributed to Bonny's emergence as a city-state. The internal strife that ensued eventually led to the disintegration of Bonny and the establishment of the Opobo Kingdom in 1870. The transition from the slave trade to legitimate trade in the 19th century sparked an unprecedented increase in canoe fleets navigating the creeks and rivers of Bonny and Opobo. These waterways became vital arteries for trade, linking the kingdoms with various inland communities and satisfying the demands of European trading partners. The resulting influx of European traders, particularly into Opobo, solidified its dominance in the region's trade, culminating in the establishment of the Egwanga Opobo seaport and the ensuing economic boom. This study not only sheds light on the instrumental role of water bodies in the economic development of the Ibani people but also connects this economic growth to the broader socio-political developments of the time. It serves as a crucial resource for preserving the historical heritage of the Ibani Kingdoms of the Eastern Niger Delta, offering insights that are valuable for both present and future generations.*

**Keywords:** *Water bodies, Eastern Niger Delta, Pre-colonial, Colonial, Ibani*

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## Introduction

The Ibani Kingdoms of Bonny and Opobo lie in the heart of the Eastern Niger Delta in Rivers State, Nigeria. These ancient lands were first settled by the Proto-Ijo aborigines, the original inhabitants of the Eastern Niger Delta, who made their way from the Central Niger Delta long before the arrival of the Andoni. Their migration, which dates back to around AD 1000, marked the beginning of the rich history and culture that still thrives in the region today (Alagoa and Fombo, 1972:5 and Oko-Jaja, Obuah and Jaja, 2022). It was suggested that they left their Kith and Kin in the Central Niger Delta and sojourned through Saka (Oduval) Soku and locations in present-day Andoni Creeks to the east (Horton, 1997), where they settled at the east of the Eastern Niger Delta following the discovery of the Imo River, through which they established economic contacts with other communities and thus began their inter-group relations with communities linked to the river. The incursion of Andoni groups into the Eastern Niger Delta from the mouth of the Cross River led to the dispersion and migration of the Proto-Ijo inhabitants farther inland and the consequent establishment of the different Ijo communities of the area, such as Ibani, Kalabari, Okrika, and Nkoro (Horton, 1997; Oko-Jaja, 2020). The Eastern Niger Delta is predominately a saltwater swamp environment with a myriad of criss-crossing rivers and creeks that empty into the Atlantic Ocean. These water bodies that defined the geographical environment of the area underscore the successful migration of the Proto-Ijo group into the area from the Central Niger Delta and consequently the establishment of the Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms in the area. However, the water bodies indeed moulded the local economic activities of the Ibani people, encouraged their robust economic relationships with the hinterland communities, vis-à-vis intergroup relations, and equally paved the way for their earlier contact with the Europeans.

The arrival of the Europeans into the Eastern Niger Delta in about the 15<sup>th</sup> century marked a significant turning point in the economic activities of the Bonny people, their relationship with the hinterland communities, and their developments, as her numerable meandering tidal creeks, which interlace small rivers linking the hinterlands, such as Orashi, Imo, Aba, and Kwaibo, became very busy highways for commercial activities (Jones, 1963:15; Coockey, 1974:11; Oko-Jaja; Obua & Jaja, 2022). However, it is unknown when Ibani people established contact and commercial activities with the Europeans, but according to Dike, a second wave of migration into the Delta regions occurred between 1450 and 1800 following the development of the Atlantic slave trade, and that this migration impacted the Ibani people with the arrival of the Ndoki Ijo group into Ibani land through the Imo River, headed by Alagbariye (Dike, 1956:24).

Further, the exact period when these Ndoki Ijo groups arrived and settled in the Eastern Niger Delta is still unknown, but according to Jones, the site in which the Ndoki Ijo migrants settled in the Eastern Niger Delta was already occupied by the Ijo communities of Abalama and Iyankpo, and that the Abalama people were later driven out and resettled in the Kalabari area, while the Iyankpo people split into two groups, Tombia and Finnema, and that the former left the area and settled in the Kalabari area (Jones, 1963:105). These earliest Ijo settlers were at the site that Jones identified before the arrival of the Ndoki Ijo groups, where the Ibani aborigines of the Eastern Niger Delta were established by a group of the Proto-Ijo aborigines of the Eastern Niger Delta (Oko-Jaja, Obua, and Jaja, 2022).

However, the warm reception which the Ibani aborigines accorded the Ndoki Ijo groups in their territory underscores a long existing bond between them (Oko-Jaja, Obuah, and Jaja, 2022),

and their harmonious existence in the area projected the enabling environment for the enhancement of the Europeans activities in their coast and subsequent trading relationship during the reign of Asimini as the Amanyanabo of the area (Alagoa and Fombo, 1972:7). It is claimed that King Asimini reigned in Bonny between 1430 and 1450 (Ogolo, 2020:1), and within this period, no significant trading activities were recorded between Bonny and the Europeans, but Alagoa and Fombo claimed that Asimini was the first Bonny King to receive comey (customs duties or protection money) from the Portuguese in Obo Manillas (Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:8). But Nwokeji in his work suggested that the European trading activities in the Eastern Niger Delta became prominent in the Kalabari before other areas (Nwokeji, 2010:15), and possibly this explains the reasons for the relationship between King Asimini and King Owereya Dappa (Owerri Daba) of Elem Kalabari (Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:8).

Nevertheless, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bonny became prominent in the Atlantic slave trade owing to her strategic location, relationship with the Aro, as well as its safe and extensive anchorage (Dike, 1956:24), and this development was sustained and enhanced, leading to her city state status, thus, multiplied her economic development, and which impacted on its socio-political structures, hence, the evolution of the Douwari house system into the War Canoe house system during the palm produce trade and the consequent political cum economic crisis that led to the Opubo sections under the leadership of Chief Jaja eluding Bonny and establishing Opobo Kingdom at the mouth of Imo River, east fringe of Eastern Niger Delta (Oko-Jaja, 2020).

The Imo River highway and its link with many trading communities in the hinterland played a role in the founding of Opobo at its present location in 1870. With the founding of the Opobo Kingdom, the Ibani Kingdom in the Eastern Niger Delta became two, and the water bodies continued to impact their economic development throughout the remaining period of the pre-colonial era and the colonial period, with Opobo overtaking Bonny in the dominant position of the palm produce trade in the Eastern Niger Delta through the visionary leadership of King Jaja and their dominance of the Imo River (Oko-Jaja, 2020).

Further, the study will examine, among others, the influence of the water bodies on the economic development of Bonny before contact with the Europeans, during the period of the slave trade, as well as their impact on the economic development of Bonny and Opobo in the period of pre-colonial legitimate trade and the colonial era. The essence of this study is to focus the lens on the water bodies of the Eastern Niger Delta, particularly the Ibani Kingdoms, and critically reflect on their influences on the economic developments of the people in the pre-colonial and colonial epochs, with the view to ascertaining the degree of other factors involved vis-à-vis the economic development of the other communities in the Eastern Niger Delta within the period.

### **Water bodies and the economic development of Bonny Kingdom before her contact with the Europeans**

Indeed, Bonny Kingdom's economic past is the record of a continuous dialogue between water bodies and history, from the very beginnings of fishing agriculture and salt making to the arrival of European traders and consequent slave trade and later legitimate trade.

Water bodies played a big part in the development trajectory of the Eastern Niger Delta communities. The physical environment of the area is predominantly a saltwater swamp environment, largely under water, with little settlement land and even less for farming; thus, the inhabitants had to depend on fishing and salt manufacturing for their economic survival. The water bodies in the area, such as creeks, rivers, and seas, indeed contributed to the enhancement of their fishing economy, and the salty nature of their water bodies equally contributed to the enhancement of salt manufacturing.

Bonny people, like other Eastern Niger Delta communities, depended mostly on the fishing and salt manufacturing economies before their contact with European traders. However, as Hopkins (1973:44) noted, the knowledge of iron was visible in West Africa, particularly at Nok, in what is now part of Northern Nigeria, in about 500 BC, and iron-producing techniques had spread throughout the region by about the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, which is an indication that the proto-Ijo aborigines of the Eastern Niger Delta that founded Bonny and other Eastern Niger Delta Ijo communities had the knowledge of iron and some of the basic tools produced from it before their migration from the Central Niger Delta to the Eastern Niger Delta. And this is obvious because the canoes and paddles that they used to transport themselves through the different creeks and rivers into the Eastern Niger Delta could not have been manufactured without the presence of cutlass and axes.

The way iron implements contributed to the successful migration of some Ijo groups from the Central Niger Delta to the Eastern Niger Delta area and their subsequent founding of Bonny, so did iron tools contribute to the economic development of the area before their contact with the Europeans. The Bonny economy of fishing and salt manufacturing was sustained and enhanced through the use of iron tools, their knowledge about their environment, and their contact with their neighbours and hinterland communities. The knowledge of iron helped in the production of fishing tools such as harpoons, which were major tools in the catching of big fish. Harpoon is a barbed missile resembling a spear that is thrown by hand to catch big sea creatures. This tool helped the Bonny fishermen catch big fish in their rivers. Also, with the help of iron tools such as cutlass, they construct bamboo fishing traps, baskets, and bamboo stick fishing fences. These fishing gears helped them catch a variety of fish (Abasiattai, Ekpo, & Ezebube, 1997:85).

Further, their knowledge of the tidal movements of the sea and the different flood periods of the rivers equally enhances the degree of their fish harvest. With this knowledge, the Bonny fishermen knew what kind of fish to target, where, when, and what kind of fishing gear to use. In the same vein, their contact with their neighbours and the interior hinterland communities helped them in the sharing of ideas on the enhancement of the fishing and salt manufacturing economies; as well, the selling of their fish and salt to the hinterland communities in exchange for their produce, such as vegetables, palm oil, yam, and bush meats, among others, helped them in the balance of their diet, thus having enough energy to enhance their economic development in fishing and salt making. Also, their contact with the hinterland communities was made possible through the network of their rivers that linked to other rivers that connected different hinterland communities.

The salt manufacturing economy, as noted, was made possible by the nature of their water bodies. The water in the creeks and rivers of the Eastern Niger Delta is salty, which explains the essence of salt manufacturing in the area before their contact with the Europeans. Salt

manufacturing was through salt water boiling (Alagoa, 2005:191), and the availability of clay pots and iron pots gotten from their contact with the hinterland people and the plenty of mangrove woods used as fire wood for the boiling of the water, made this exercise possible in Bonny in the pre-colonial era. The mangrove woods were also used for the drying of fish and crustaceans. Women were also involved in the harvest of fish, but they confined themselves to the small creeks and mangrove swamps, catching crayfish, lobsters, and other crustaceans using baskets, but were prominent in the salt manufacturing exercise.

Indeed, the economic activities of the Bonny people were developed, sustained, and enhanced as a result of their water bodies, which equally necessitated their contacts with their neighbouring and hinterland communities. The intergroup relations established with the hinterland communities helped in the development of the fishing and salt-making economy until their contact with the European trades, and the article of trade demanded changed the economic trajectory of Ibani (Bonny) and the concomitant migration of some of their hinterland trading partners into their area through the Imo River.

### **Water bodies, slave trade and the economic development of Bonny**

It is unknown the exact date the Portuguese traders established contact with the Eastern Niger Delta area and the community they first established trade transactions with, but available sources (Jones, 1963; Nwokeji, 2010; and Wariboko, 2007) suggested that the Portuguese traders established a strong trading contact first with the Kalabari people, as noted in Jones (1963:35), where he asserted thus:

*They also indicated a time sequence in which primacy in the slave trade belonged to Kalabari with Bonny coming on the scene later and learning the trade from them while depriving Andoni of their share in it.*

Also, according to Jones (1963:33), this period was between 1450 and 1550. Dike (1956:24) equally observed that:

*The most important movement of populations occurred between 1450 and 1800, and gradually converted the little Ijaw fishing villages into the city – states. This second wave of migration followed the development of the slave trade and involved all the tribes to the Delta hinterland; it was a movement in which the Igbos, being numerically superior, were predominant. Points on the Delta Coast, suitable as harbours for the European sailing ships, were quickly occupied. Such was the case with Bonny.*

As noted, it is unknown the date when Ndoki Ijo groups with some of their Igbo friends (Alagoa and Fombo, 1972:4) immigrated into Ibani land in the Eastern Niger Delta, but their migration could not have been accidental, as suggested by Alagoa and Fombo (1972), following Dike's assertion that the knowledge of European slave trading activities in the Delta necessitated the movement. As equally noted, the Ibani aborigines of Finima, whose primary economic preoccupation was fishing and salt manufacturing, could not have survived without establishing a commercial relationship with the interior hinterland people as well as their neighbours. Jones (1963:35) corroborated this assertion when he noted that:

*Pereira's description shows us that at this period Bonny, or the village that preceded it, was already a local trading centre of some importance, having not only a developed trade in salt and provisions with the interior but an external trade with Europeans as well.*

However, he further noted that “Andoni and Bonny legends suggest a salt-boiling industry in the Bonny area before the arrival of the European traders, and they imply an early pattern of slave-raiding and slave-stealing followed by the extension of the slave trade to the inland markets.”

From the foregoing, one can infer that the Ibani aborigines had established a strong commercial relationship with their Ndoki Ijo brothers through the Imo River before the Europeans established contact with the Eastern Niger Delta, and probably, when the Europeans visited the Eastern Niger Delta for trading activities with them, these Iban aborigines disclosed their European trading contact with the Ndoki Ijo groups in the course of their trading relationship, leading to their subsequent immigration into the Eastern Niger Delta. Indeed, if these claims are to be believed, they suggest that the possible date of their immigration to Ibani land in the Eastern Niger Delta could be between 1450 and 1550, as Dike suggested. Be it as it may, an important issue about their migration was that the Ndoki Ijo group migrated with some Igbo tribe men, and they might have advanced in commercial activities following the trade developments surrounding the Nri civilisation and the Awka blacksmiths within and outside Igbo land before the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Afigbo, 1980).

In fact, the cordiality of the integration of the Ndoki migrants with their Ibani host communities contributed in no small measure to the rejig of the economic activities of the area between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Jones (1963), Ryder (1980), and Nwokeji (2010) suggested in their works, Kalabari communities first dominated the European trading activities in the Eastern Niger Delta, and King Owerri Daba was associated with having developed the Kalabari slave trading activities with the European traders. Indeed, this development underscores the motive for the hobnob of Asimini (one of the Ndoki immigrants) with King Owereya Dappa (Owerri Daba) [Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:8]. Nevertheless, an important issue to note here is that Asimini's relationship with King Owereya Dappa was before his enthronement as King of Bonny or after. However, Alagoa & Fombo (1972:7) had observed that the Portuguese visited Bonny during the leadership of Alagbariye, also one of the Ndoki immigrants but Asimini's predecessor. In essence, Asimini's boldness to accept to sacrifice his daughter Ogbolo to the sea gods as to widen and deepen the Bonny river for European ships to come into Bonny (Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:7) suggests that Asimini had established a relationship with King Owereya Dappa before his enthronement as the King of Bonny. There, he understood the importance of the European trading activities in Kalabari and how they revolved around the King and was convinced of the need to bring the European trade equally to Bonny, and that prompted him to do the sacrifice, thus beginning European active trading activities to Bonny, and that prompted him to do the sacrifice, thus beginning European active trading activities in Bonny.

The fact that European trading activities in Bonny began actively during the reign of King Asimini, it did not surpass that of Kalabari until the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when they emerged from eclipse and challenged Kalabari domination of the slave trade in Eastern Niger Delta (Ryder, 1980), and part of the reasons responsible for the unprecedented rise of Bonny

slave trade was their relatively more convenient anchorage, and which contributed as part of the reasons why some ships' captains became reluctant to spend the usual five or six weeks anchoring off Kalabari before receiving cargo, rather preferred to anchor near the river mouth where they are less exposed to mosquitoes (Ryder, 1980 & Nwokeji, 2010:46).

The network of Bonny rivers and creeks that linked Imo River in the south through the Andoni River and presently Opobo River, hitherto referred to by Burton as Kom Toro (Jones, 1963:34), as well as Sombriri River in the north linked through the Kalabari River, helped the Bonny traders scour the interior communities for slaves and other items. Indeed, the demand for slaves and other hinterland produce helped the Iban people increase their productivity on the harvest of fish as well as other sea foods and salt manufacturing, which they exchanged for slaves and other items from the interior hinterland people, a fact that began the hunt for manpower in Bonny and consequent domestication of slaves in the area.

The domestication of some of their slaves from the hinterland energised the economic productivity of Bonny vis-à-vis their trading relations with the hinterland communities and their European traders on their coast. However, the rapid expansion of the slave trade and the consequent domestic slavery concomitantly snowballed the demographic and territorial expansion of Bonny. Dike (1956:25) agreed to this claim when he observed that "it was during the era of traffic in human beings that the Delta gained the bulk of her population, particularly was this the case with Bonny." Bonny expansion and her consolidation of the trade witnessed the European introduction of a "trust" system in the kingdom, which equally gave a boost to the trade. According to Cooley (1974:21),

*The pivot of the Delta trade was the "trust" system. The European vessel handed over to the local trader various goods on which prices had been fixed, and in return the chiefs were expected to deliver as soon as possible the equivalent value of the goods in slaves....*

The trust system indeed enhanced the slave trade in Bonny, in the sense that, having contributed to the moribund situation of the Bonny local economy of fishing and the demise of salt manufacturing, it, however, began Bonny dependency on European goods and solely dependent on her economic development on the slave trade. These facts deepened Bonny's activities in the slave trade, and their contact with the Aro traders in the interior hinterland in the mid-eighteenth century contributed to the slave boom on the Bonny coast until the British abolition of the trade (Ryder, 1980). However, Bonny's dominance of the trade led to their massive acquisition of big trading canoes from Brass. According to Jones (1963), many of the trading canoes were fifty to seventy feet long, six feet wide in the centre, and could carry up to sixty to eighty people, with twenty paddlers on each side. These canoes traversed many Igbo, Ndoki, and Qua Ibo hinterland trading communities through the Imo River tributaries and its adjoining rivers, exchanging slaves with European-made goods, a situation that further enhanced Bonny, with an influx of visitors and equally exposed Bonny people to many hinterland communities, thus the establishment of Bonny trading posts, and all these underscore Bonny as a city state in the precolonial era. According to Dike (1956:30–31), "the term 'city state' as applied to the Delta communities embraces not only the settlements on the coast but also their extensions (by way of trading posts) in the interior".

In spite of making Bonny a cosmopolitan kingdom, the trade enriched the kingdom, thus creating a rich class of small oligarchy. The European traders in the Niger Delta, particularly Bonny, revolved the slave trade around the Amanyanabo (king) of Bonny and his cabinet members, comprising the head of the lineage houses, known as the "Duowari." They oversee and coordinate the trade in the Kingdom for the European traders; thus, in return, they received from the ship captains presents of various kinds (known as "Dashy"), customs dues (known as "Comey"), and credit (known as "trust"). In addition, they received a tax called "topping" or "work bar," which was used for the upkeep of the Duowari (Cookey, 1974:21). These were sources of income that contributed to making the Amanyanabo and the heads of the different Duowari affluent and influential in Bonny and beyond, till the palm produce trading era, after the abolition of the slave trade in about 1833 in British West Africa.

### **Water bodies, palm oil trade and the economic development of Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms in the pre-colonial era.**

The successful abolition of the slave trade in Bonny and the introduction of the legitimate trade in palm oil opened a new trajectory in the economic development of the area. Though it is unknown when the palm oil trade began in Bonny after slave trade official abolition in Britain in 1807, Dike (1956:99) gave us an insight when he observed that "a merchant who had been in the Bonny trade from 1825 to 1842 stated that within his experience the number of oil ships had risen from eight to fifty and where there had been three Liverpool Houses by 1840 there were twelve." The observation suggested that palm oil trade began gradually in Bonny River shortly after the abolition of slave trade in Britain, possibly as early as the 1920s, and as early as the 1930s, it had increased considerably and subsequently overtaken Calabar and became the leading palm oil trading port in the Niger Delta (Hopkins, 1973:141).

The palm oil trade in Bonny did not alter the trade structure established by the slave trade; thus, the Bonny water bodies equally became instrumental in the activities of this new trade, which also contributed to the enhancement of Bonny's economic development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The trade, as Alagoa noted, was capital-intensive (Alagoa, 1980), particularly among the coastal middlemen. On his part, Hopkins (1973:126) observes that legitimate commerce enabled small-scale farmers and traders to play an important part in the overseas exchange economy for the first time. Hopkins observations suggest that a good number of people in the interior hinterland communities of Igbo, Ndoki, Annang, and Ibibio were involved in the production of palm oil; thus, it equally required a good number of coastal middlemen, particularly from Bonny, to mop up the goods from all the hinterland trading communities, which implied that the palm oil trade in Bonny as well as other coastal communities was manpower intensive.

The capital- and manpower-intensive nature of the trade stimulated a new vista in Bonny that impacted its existence, especially its economic development, which culminated in its disintegration in 1869. Indeed, the capital-intensive nature of the trade enhanced the influential position of the small oligarchy class created by the slave trade in Bonny, as they equally dominated the trade, but this time, they needed enough manpower so as to completely and at a regular time comb the different production communities, mop up the goods, and move them to their coast. This fact encouraged the oligarchy class to acquire plenty of domestic slaves and request more trust from the supercargoes (Oko-Jaja, 2020). However, under this arrangement, the adopted slaves, after undergoing the ritual process of acculturation, were trained on the activities of the trade and thereafter were entrusted with some European goods by the master,



thus beginning to trade for their masters in the hinterland (Wariboko, 2007; Oko-Jaja, 2020). Further, after the exchanging of European goods with palm oil, the puncheons of oil were arranged and escorted with war canoes from the trading post to the Bonny Coast, where the European trading ships moored.

Indeed, this development increased the population of the area and exposed many adopted male adults of the kingdom to the palm oil trading exercise, thus equipping them with knowledge of the economic and political system of Bonny, as well as helping them have access to personal funds and emboldening them to accept responsibilities. The acquisition of more domestic slaves to effectively participate in the palm oil trade enhanced the Bonny population in the town, its satellite communities, and trading posts, thus equally enhancing its geographical expansion. Also, the trade, which required war canoe escorts of the goods from the hinterland trading posts to the coast, equally enhanced the number and size of the war canoe houses in the Kingdom, which significantly began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Perekule (Pepple) (Wariboko, 2017; Oko-Jaja & Jaja, 2023). The attachment of war canoes to the trade introduced a new trajectory in the establishment of war canoe houses in the Kingdom. Under this development, a successful member of a war canoe house who had worked very hard for the development of the house and had made the Chief of the house proud would be encouraged with the blessings of the Chief to establish his personal war canoe house, which would be made up of himself and immediate family, including his adopted children (domestic slaves), as to constitute a lineage-based trading corporation, and some of his domestic slaves formed the warriors that would man and maintain the war canoe, while the founder became the Chief, heading the administrative unit that he constituted.

The proliferation of the war canoe houses on the economic architecture of the palm oil trade encouraged unprecedented handwork, dedication, and the development of novel business acumen among the traders, as well as fierce competition among the war canoe houses, a fact that erupted among young energetic successful traders, particularly among the adopted children, and classes of successful and unsuccessful war canoe houses, leading to the moribund or merger of war canoe houses and envy, jealousy, and suspicion among the chiefs of the different leading war canoe houses. Indeed, the successful young traders began to be entrusted with leadership positions in their different war canoe houses, with the aim of boosting the fortune of the house in the committee of war canoe houses in the Kingdom. This was the development that engulfed the two royal war canoe houses of Fubara Manilla Pepple and Opubo Annie Pepple in the early period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after their founders in different times handed over their chieftaincy stool to their successful adopted sons and ascended the kingship throne of their father, King Pepple (Wariboko, 2007; Oko-Jaja, 2020). These chiefs, Tubongonegim (Maduka) and Ibaniburufia (Ibani), during their reign enhanced the fortune of their father's war canoe houses, thus making the two royal war canoe houses influential and powerful in the committee of war canoe houses in Bonny at that time. (Oko-Jaja, Jaja & Brown, 2022). These two war canoe houses dominated the palm oil economy of Bonny and evolved into a group of war canoe houses as the chiefs encouraged their successful members to establish their personal war canoe houses, subject to the main war canoe house.

The fact that the Monarch of Bonny was in a powerful position with an influential stake in the palm oil economy of Bonny at that period became a threatening position for these two royal groups of war canoe houses, thus the need for either side to scramble for the enthronement of

a favourable amenable candidate among the heirs to the throne when there was a vacuum, and the plot by any of the royal groups of houses to frustrate the enthronement of a perceived antagonist heir apparent [Wariboko, 2007; Oko-Jaja, Jaja & Brown, 2022]. These facts underscore the genesis of the schism within the Perekule (Pepple) dynasty in Bonny, leading to the division in the kingdom, subsequent fratricidal wars, and finally the exodus of one side, the Opubo Annie Pepple group of war canoe houses under the leadership of Chief Jack Jaja Annie Pepple, along with many of the independent war canoe houses in Bonny loyal to the Opubo group, to establish a new kingdom named Opubo Ama (Opobo) in memory of great King Opubo Annie Pepple of Bonny, founder of the Opubo war canoe house, in 1870 at the east fringe of the Eastern Niger Delta, estuary of the Imo River (Wariboko, 2007, Oko-Jaja, 2020; Oko-Jaja, Jaja & Brown, 2022).

Indeed, the assertion of Jaja (2012:92–93) added credence to the economic motive of the Opubo section eluding Bonny in 1869 when he observed that:

*Having access and increasing participation in the trade became part of the reasons why King Jaja was emboldened to take steps to leave Bonny. It would seem that at least he saw the possibility of being a major player in the trade once he could secure strategic control over a trade route that would supply the European traders who were his friends.*

Having founded Opobo on the alter of economic interest, they doubled their efforts in achieving their aim of dominating the trade in the region; thus, they quickly monopolised the strategic points on the main creeks leading to the oil marketing of the Ndoki and the Igbo areas, thereby alienating Bonny from the major source of its supplies, as they quickly opened trade at the Opobo River with the supercargoes; hence, a few months later, they have firmly dominated the trade on the Imo River highway (Oko-Jaja & Orji, 2020). This development caused a great hiccup on the Bonny economy as they began the revival of their north-wing hinterland trade through the Kalabari-Sombriro Rivers and Okrika River, a fact that caused a serious conflict between them and Kalabari (Cookey, 1974: 75). In the same vein, the Bonny-Opobo arbitration peace treaty of January 3, 1873, which further shared the hinterland markets of the Ndoki and Igbo axes between Bonny and Opobo, failed to save Bonny's economic doom. Nevertheless, the Bonny-Opobo peace treaty, among other things, affirmed the independence of Opobo from Bonny, a fact that led to the January 4, 1873, commercial treaty between her British Majesty's government and Opobo's government (Oko-Jaja, 2020).

This treaty and the earlier one with Bonny solved the earlier trade impediments in the Opobo River, thus encouraging the economic expansion of Opobo (Oko-Jaja, 2020). With this development, the Opobo Chiefs began a massive expansion of their trading posts, this time into the oil-rich Qua Ibo communities. Indeed, Opobo's entry into the oil-rich Qua Ibo area and their hobnob with the Aro traders marked a major turning point in the climax of its economic expansion (Nwokeji, 2010:185; Oko-Jaja, 2020). This development contributed to Opobo demographic and geographic expansion, as well as being influential in the Niger Delta and beyond. The influential position that Opobo enjoyed over her dominant position in the trade in the Niger Delta contributed to her clash with European traders at the Opobo River, leading to some European traders penetration into the Opobo hinterland trading community of Ibuno, thus the Opobo-Ibuno war of 1881 (Cookey, 1974:107; Oko-Jaja, 2020). Opobo bombardment of Ibuno inflamed her soured relationship with some European traders as well as the British

government Consular authorities in the Gulf of Guinea; thus, Snow balled to the kidnapping and exile of King Jaja of Opobo and subsequent British colonisation of the Opobo Kingdom in 1887 and gradually other Niger Delta communities (Oko-Jaja, 2020).

### **Water bodies and the economic development of Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms in the Colonial era**

The colonial era ushered in a new chapter in the economic development of the Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms. The water bodies associated with the physical environment of these kingdoms were equally instrumental to this development. After the colonisation of the Opobo Kingdom in 1887, the British Consular Auto rites began to oversee the administration of the area, particularly the economic activities of the palm oil trade at the Opobo River. With this development, the European traders at the Opobo River were emboldened to penetrate into different hinterland trading communities through the creeks and rivers to establish trade with the locals (Oko-Jaja, 2020).

This same fate befell Bonny Kingdom when it was colonised in 1891; thus, the stationing of a British Consul at the George Shotton Hulk Bonny to supervise the political administration of the Kingdom as well as the economic activities at the Bonny River (Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:85). The direct establishment of trading contact by the European traders at Bonny and Opobo rivers with the hinterland people began the reverse gear that was later experienced on the trading activities on the rivers, as the Bonny and Opobo traders began competing with some supercargoes in the hinterland markets, hence the direct contact between the producers and the Europeans. With this development, some European firms proceeded to build factories in some hinterland market communities such as Ohambele (Oko-Jaja, 2020), and the colonial government cancelled the royalties paid by the supercargoes to the potentates and substituted in their place subsidy, an annual payment in relation to the volume of trade on the river. This situation officially terminated any dealings or overriding influence of the Kings of Bonny and Opobo over the supercargoes (Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:87).

At the Opobo River, Opobo traders relatively sustained their trade following the firm nature of the Egwanga-Opobo sea port in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sea port, which began relatively in about 1875, shortly after King Jaja's administration formalised their ownership of the area with the Ibekwe clan chiefs, took an unprecedented development twist when the area became the administrative headquarters of Opobo District in about 1903 (Abasiattai, Ekpo, & Ezebube, 1997; Oko-Jaja & Jaja, 2022). However, with the successful completion of the relocation of the headquarters in 1907, Egwanga Opobo sea port began riding on a trajectory of unmitigated development that saw the port rise to become the second largest port to Lagos sea port and the area to a cosmopolitan city, thus enhancing intergroup economic relations that contributed to Opobo Kingdom economic development (Oko-Jaja & Jaja, 2022).

Indeed, this situation enhanced Opobo traders bountiful benefits from trading activities, in spite of the trade hiccups orchestrated by colonialism. The sustainable wealth from the trade enabled Opobo traders to enhance the western education of their children to higher schools after primary education. However, with the gradual introduction of the British economic system due to the effective British colonisation of Nigeria, values began to change from trade to certificates obtained from western educational institutions; thus, white collar jobs and employment were

opened for Nigerians with educational certificates in colonial institutions such as factories, churches, schools, and colonial administrative offices, among others (Oko-Jaja & Jaja, 2022).

This development diversified economic activities in the Opobo Kingdom, thus shifting the economic base of the area a little away from the palm oil-based economy in the Opobo River to Egwanga Opobo, Calabar, Port Harcourt, and other colonial-established urban areas. The British economic system at Egwanga Opobo provided employment and small-scale business opportunities to many Opobo people. The European companies employed most of the educated youths, and many climbed to management positions, such as trade callers, shop masters, and beach masters (Oko-Jaja & Jaja, 2022). These civil servants, public servants, and entrepreneurs became economic moguls when Opobo palm oil traders lost their firm control and dominance over the trade, thus becoming elites and role models in the Kingdom. Indeed, this era marked the end of measuring success through achievements in the palm oil trade in Opobo and began the period where success is measured by gainful employment in government and private establishments due to western education and achievements in other sectors of modern business activities.

However, the rise of Port Harcourt following the construction of a railway linking the port and hinterland community of Udi in Enugu between 1913 and 1916 sounded the knell of the coastal middlemen in many of the Niger Delta city states as European firms furthered their scramble for sites in the interior hinterland, this time along the rail line, thus enhancing their close contact with the old web of periodical markets and the women traders who bulked the produce from the villages (Gavin & Oyemakinde, 1980). This situation impacted badly on Bonny's economic development, as from 1913, there was an exodus of European firms from Bonny River to Port Harcourt (Alagoa & Fombo, 1972:86), a development that paralysed palm oil trading activities in the Bonny River. While at the Opobo River, the trade lingered in spite of the shock in the rise of Port Harcourt due to reasonable palm produce within the Ibibio and Anang communities. Unfortunately, the dark moment of trade at the Opobo River came during World War II when German submarines torpedoed allied trading ships near the Opobo Bar, a situation that caused many trading ships to shift their bases to Port Harcourt. Consequently, the less frequent movement of ships through the Opobo Bar led to its gradual silting, thus the closure of the port in January 1950 (Epelle, 1970:33; Oko-Jaja & Jaja, 2022), and the knell of trade on the Opobo River and consequent economic collapse and migration of many Opobo people to Port Harcourt, Calabar, and other urban centres for greener pasture.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis examined in detail the contributions of the water bodies prevalent in the physical environment of the Bonny and Opobo kingdoms to the economic development of the areas from the precolonial to the colonial eras. The locations of these kingdoms and the water bodies of their environment in no small measure contributed to the founding of these two Ibani kingdoms in the Easter Niger Delta, as well as their sustainability and economic development. Their strategic location close to the Gulf of Guinea put them in a vantage position to relate with the European traders that came through the Atlantic Ocean, thus coordinating the supercargoes trading activities with the interior hinterland people through their rivers and creeks that had links with other rivers and creeks that connected many hinterland communities, where the articles of trade were sourced for about four centuries.

The strategic location earned the Ibani traders the middleman position that they occupied over the trans-Atlantic trade, which enhanced their relationship with the interior hinterland people and also brought them into contact with European civilizations. Indeed, the middlemen position enhanced long-distance trade between the coastal people and their hinterland brothers as well as among the hinterland communities through the chains of middlemen positions established by the traders. The web of the chains of middlemen positions established by the Ibani traders in the hinterland markets enabled the free flow of trade into remote villages of the interior hinterland, thus the feeling of European presence in those areas through the exchange of European-made goods with the articles of trade. These developments contributed to Ibani traders' dominance of the trans-Atlantic trade at different times, hence their unprecedented economic development in the pre-colonial era.

Furthermore, the fact here is that African contact with the wider world was deeply rooted through trade, such as trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic, and these trading activities in Africa, with the Arabs and later the Europeans, contributed to the development of some important towns and cities in Sub-Saharan Africa such as Timbuctu, Kano, Gao, Lagos, Accra, Calabar, Benin, Opobo, and Bonny, among others, as well as the socio-economic and political enhancement of the people of those areas through their embracement of the visiting traders civilizations. For the economies of Bonny and Opobo, as noted, international trade developed them economically as they became entrepots. Consequently, these kingdoms became among the influential communities in the Niger Delta, following their economic achievements through this trade, a development they have sustained till the postcolonial era, following their achievements in western education, which became their core value as the palm produce economy collapsed and was replaced with the British economic system, leading to the crude oil exploration in the Niger Delta.

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