

## **Archaeological Evidence for Intergroup Relations in Okunland, 16th Century AD**

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### **Abstract**

*The Okun cultural landscape as used in this paper depicts the landmass occupied by people ascribing to the Okun identity. Not much is known about the historical events taking place within the Okun cultural landscape as at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD because of the scanty materials available. Some of the researches so far conducted in the area has not been harmonised so as to give the reader a comprehensive overview of events that took place within the area. The present paper is aimed at shedding light on the types of socio – cultural interactions of the people of the study area from earliest period about the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD.*

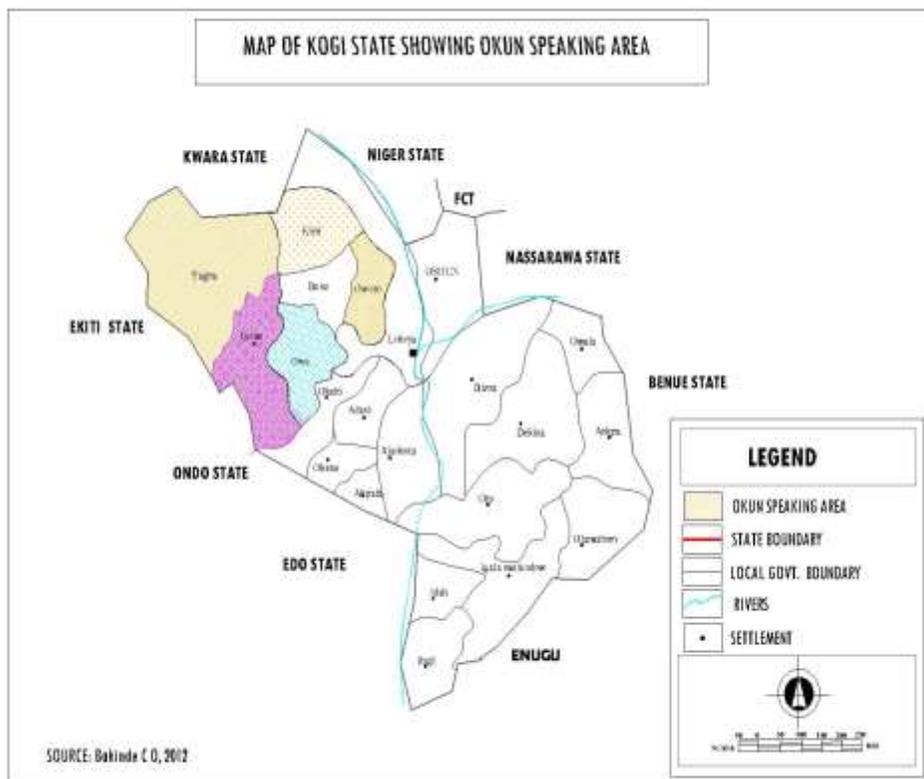
### **Introduction**

The Okun people are the north-eastern most Yoruba subgroup with six distinct but mutually intelligible languages. They ascribed to the Okun appellation because it is a common mode of greeting among them, even though it is not exclusive to them as other sub nationalities such as Ekiti and Ijesha of the Yoruba stock also use the same means of greeting. The Okun people are mainly located in Six local government areas of Kogi state, even though there are also pockets of Okun people in Ekiti, Kwara and Ondo States, (see Fig. 1).

### **The State of Okunland in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century AD**

Okun people entered the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a frontier group because at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century they were confronted with three empires or kingdoms which were all trying to use them as source for raw materials and labour. According to Kopytoff (1987) a frontier state is one that is far from the metropolis but serves as a source of supply of materials needed to maintain the metropole among other things. A frontier is also a geographical region which consists of politically open areas nestling between organised societies. Because they are located in empty or sparsely populated areas, frontiers are areas that can offer little political resistance to intrusion. Again, one of the characteristics of frontier zones in Africa is the possession of dual traditions of origin. According to Kopytoff (1987), “The

collective ‘official’ history that such society tells about itself may be unitary and straight forward. But it is belied by the individual histories of its separate kin groups that show their ancestors coming from different areas and at different periods”.



Another characteristic of a frontier zone or region in Africa is that such zones or regions lie at the fringes of the established African societies. The model proposed by Kopytoff is fraught with some shortcomings as has been pointed out by Ogundiran (2009) and Usman (2009) when applied to the Yoruba speaking people. That notwithstanding, the Okun people satisfy most of the criteria for being a frontier region. For instance, they were surrounded by the Igala kingdom

to their east, Nupe kingdom to their North and the Old Oyo Empire to their Northwest at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Activities taking place in these three kingdoms shaped events that took place within Okunland.

Apart from the above, the various traditions of origin in Okun societies are always presented in two layers. The first layer of the traditions of origin is the migratory history. This could be regarded as the official history of the people which tries to trace the origin of the people to either from Ile – Ife or Oyo – Ile. The second layer traces their origin to autochthonous development in which the various clans in each settlement came to their present location on an individual basis. Based on the above therefore, the Okun speaking area satisfies the criteria set for an area to be called a frontier zone. Thus, the Okun landscape was a frontier zone at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The migrants from the metropole to Okunland at this period wanted to construct a desirable social order akin to what was obtainable at the metropole. It was therefore these migrants that probably introduced the state system to the Okun people (Bakinde, 2011). However, the migrants were not powerful enough to bring about a complete transformation of the political system to align with the operational mode at the metropole, hence the adoption of the principle of ‘no ruling houses’ among the Okun people. The rotational kingship system, an innovative political system which incorporates the indigenous practices of the people with the new political order introduced by the migrants became the adopted political institution of the Okun people. The crystallization of the political model adopted by the Okun people would have started by the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, if not earlier.

### **Archaeological Evidence for the Peopling of Okunland**

There are archaeological evidences suggesting that these migrant groups were already in Okunland at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological evidence from Okun sites has produced data in support of the habitation of Okun landscape at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by groups with evidence of pottery and iron working techniques and an organized political system. Dates clustering around the 16<sup>th</sup> century have been obtained by Obayemi (Obayemi 1985) for Akpa and Ikaro. At Ebere, a habitation site on top of the Ebere hill in Ogidi, Bakinde (2013) obtained a date of 290±40 BP (Cal. 1500 – 1660 AD. Beta – 309322). At this site, there is an element of political centralisation represented by the availability of remnants of numerous house foundations in form of rectangular granitic stone arrangements. On the site which was quite extensive covering about 350m by

450m, are cultural materials such as iron slag, pottery, cowrie shells and polished stone axe. The availability of these cultural materials suggests that the site was an activity area when it was in commission.

Oral tradition collected from Ogidi, the extant community of the prehistoric inhabitants of Ebere, infers that Ebere was inhabited by migrants from Ile – Ife. According to tradition the people settled first on this particular site before migrating to other places within Okun landscape. Based on this oral tradition, the hill was excavated to obtain datable cultural materials for the establishment of the date of arrival of the migrants from Ile – Ife.

The structure chosen for the excavation was a complete house foundation represented by granitic stones arranged in an L – Shape (Bakinde 2013). It was the most complete of all the house foundation structures on ground at the site. Being a site on a hilltop location, the depth of the excavation was just about 46cm before we got to the basement rock. The 4m by 6m pit was set in such a way as to encompass the whole house foundation structure. Cultural materials recovered from the excavation include pottery, iron slag, polished stone axe, upper grinding stone, tuyere and palm kernel. An in-depth analysis of these cultural materials had been done and its implication for the history of the Okun highlighted elsewhere (Bakinde 2013). However, for our purpose here we shall be dealing with an aspect of the analysis on pottery from Okunland. In doing this, we shall highlight the general and chemical analysis of the pottery as we deem this sufficient to throw considerable light on the history of the Okun people from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

S/N	Item	Level 1	%	Level 2	%	Total	%
1	Pottery	3,666	97.06	1,878	100.00	5, 544	98.04
2	Palm Kernel	10	0.26	0		10	0.18
3	Polished Stone Axe	1	0.03	0		1	0.02
4	Iron Slag	94	2.49	0		94	1.66
5	Tuyere	5	0.13	0		5	0.08
6	Upper Grinding Stone	1	0.03	0		1	0.02
	Total	3, 777	100.00	1, 878		5, 655	100.00

**Table 1:** Table showing materials collection from Ebere Pit 1.

The cultural materials most especially pottery from Ebere show close affinity with materials from Ufe area; an area represented by the following archaeological sites, Itaakpa, Okeeghon, Oluwaju, Aseye, Ogidi hill and Okekafe. All the diagnostic groups identified for Ufe area are also represented in Ebere materials. Again,

Ebere and Ufe area pottery have the same morphological attributes which they share with materials from Ogboh – another archaeological site excavated by Bakinde (2013). Ogboh excavation materials have been properly documented. However, the site has not been chronometrically dated. In general, therefore, pottery analysis of the following Okun sites Itaakpa, Aseye, Okeeghon, Ogidi, Okekafe, Ebere, Oluwaju, and Ogboh give ample evidence that the pottery traditions of the people that lived in all these sites are the same (Bakinde 2010). Most of the decorations from all the sites are identical and seem to be made by the same set of potters. Also, the raw materials used in the manufacture of the vessels seem to come from the same matrix.

Chronologically, there are observable elements of cultural continuity in Okun pottery tradition from all the sites and from the earliest traditions as documented by Oyelaran (1998) from Oluwaju and Itaakpa and Bakinde (2014) from Ebere to the present. Therefore, the pottery traditions from Ufe area, Ogboh and Ebere represent a cultural continuum from the Oluwaju date (1840 ± 125 BP) to the present in terms of vessel forms and decorations. The most prominent decorations on Okun pottery are grooves, roulette as well as multiple decorations. Apart from the above, other decorations adopted by the people include stamping, pinching, perforation, and striation. All the archaeological sites in Okunland have the various decorations cited above; however, the degree of their conformity with Ebere pattern in terms of percentages varies from one site to another. Since there is a high rate of uniformity in the pottery traditions of all the Okun pottery assemblages, the Ebere finds are used for the discussion that follows as representing the general Okunland pattern. This is because the Ebere site is centrally located when compared to other sites and the dates obtained for Ebere is apt for the period we are considering in this paper (see plates I to IV).



PLATE I

*Grooves including channelling, Ebere excavation*



PLATE III

PLATE II

*Grooves with roulette, Ebere excavation*



PLATE IV

*Different types of grooves from Ebere excavation Pinching from Ebere excavation*

The vessel form of Okun pottery follows ten morphological categories (Bakinde 2014). In some of the sites however there may be situations whereby some categories might be absent. The ten categories have been divided into two important groups: the jars or pots and the bowls (Bakinde 2014). The first group has seven types while the second group has three. These analyses were based on the functional attributes of the ware as obtained through ethnographic surveys as well as on modern archaeological model. The various jars available in Okunland therefore are *Amu*, *Oponbo*, *Uke*, *Agba*, *usa*, *Odu*, and *Ogaa*. The names of these pots are determined by the function they were manufactured to perform. While *Amu* was meant for water storage *Odu* is used for the storage of farm produce most especially grains. *Agba* and *Ogaa* are used for storing liquor but the volume each could contain varies. While *Ogaa* can contain only about 8 litres of liquor, *Odu* will comfortably hold 200 litres of palm wine. The second group are the bowls which are in three categories of *Agbagba*, *iderikoko* and *awodin*, the first is used for commercial purpose when Garri is being fried while the second is used

for medicinal preparation for infants or for ritual purposes and the last category is that used for covering the various pots.

The colour of Okun wares is mostly reddish brown, brown or black which is not too popular or widespread (Bakinde 2014). The colour of the vessel is important as it might indicate the constituent materials from which the vessel was made. Secondly, it could show the firing condition of the vessel and finally it might show the type of use the material was subjected to while it was in commission. Thus, on the basis of colour of wares, Okun pots were made from clay of the same geological formation. The technology employed in manufacturing these vessels looks identical as well as their firing conditions.

### **Trades and Trading Activities in Okunland, C. 16<sup>th</sup> Century AD**

In order to establish the provenance of the cultural materials from Okunland, chemical analysis of pottery from selected sites within and without Okunland was conducted. This became imperative as some Okun communities such as Okoro – Gbedde and Ogidi claimed not to have potters among them in the olden days. It was also claimed in these communities that they always obtained their vessels through trading activities from some other communities such as Erusu in present day Ondo State. Despite the claims that the people of Ogidi and Okoro – Gbedde do not manufacture pots, excavations carried out in Eberé, a site once inhabited by the Ogidi people, and Ogboh, a site once inhabited by the Okoro – Gbedde people produced lots of potsherds.

In order to verify the origin of the potsherds collected from Ogboh and Eberé excavations, representative samples were collected from these excavated sites as well as contemporary pots purchased from Erusu where oral tradition claims the pots in Eberé were procured. Another extant potting centre in Okunland, Ogga was visited and pots were bought there. Pottery from the excavations at Eberé and Ogboh was taken from the topsoil as well from the deepest level where there are potsherds. The result of the chemical analysis which was conducted through XRF (X – Ray Fluorescence) is that all the cultural materials came from the same rock formation. Thus, all the cultural materials from the excavated pits and those procured from extant societies came from the same parent material (Bakinde 2010).

Before this conclusion was reached, the XRF result was subjected to Bivarite and cluster analysis after which the constituent elements of the materials were adjudged to be mostly Basalt and Basaltic andesite. Thus, the parent material of

all the materials analysed is the same. This is in spite of the fact that some of the vessels were purchased from places that are more than 40 km apart from one another. This suggests that the people have been engaged in trading activities since a long time ago, most especially in pottery related items. The inference from the above therefore is that the Okun people have been engaged in trading activities from at least 1500 AD (the date established for Ebere site).

Objects of trade at this early date based on archaeological evidence undoubtedly include iron implements and pottery. Some of the trading communities in these commodities within Okun landscape include Ufe, Ebere, and Ogga. Trading activities also embrace other communities outside Okunland such as Erusu in Ondo State and Nupeland in present day Niger and Kwara states. It has been documented for instance that pottery from Ogga because of their high quality and their elaborate decorations found ready markets all over Yorubaland and also in Nupeland, (Samanu 1976) an assertion that has been corroborated by the result of the chemical analysis of potsherds from Ebere, Ogga, Erusu and Ogboh discussed above. Figure 3 is a reconstruction of the probable trade routes in 16<sup>th</sup> century Okunland based on the XRF result of pottery from Ebere, Ogga, Erusu and Ogboh. The XRF result shows that the materials used for the manufacture of pottery from these locations were derived from the same source. From this we infer that the economic base of the Okun people has been well founded long before this period. Apart from Ogga, other important pottery centres in Okunland at this period were Iffe, Egga and Odogi. Because of the high quality of their pots and others products, these various localities served as veritable market centres.

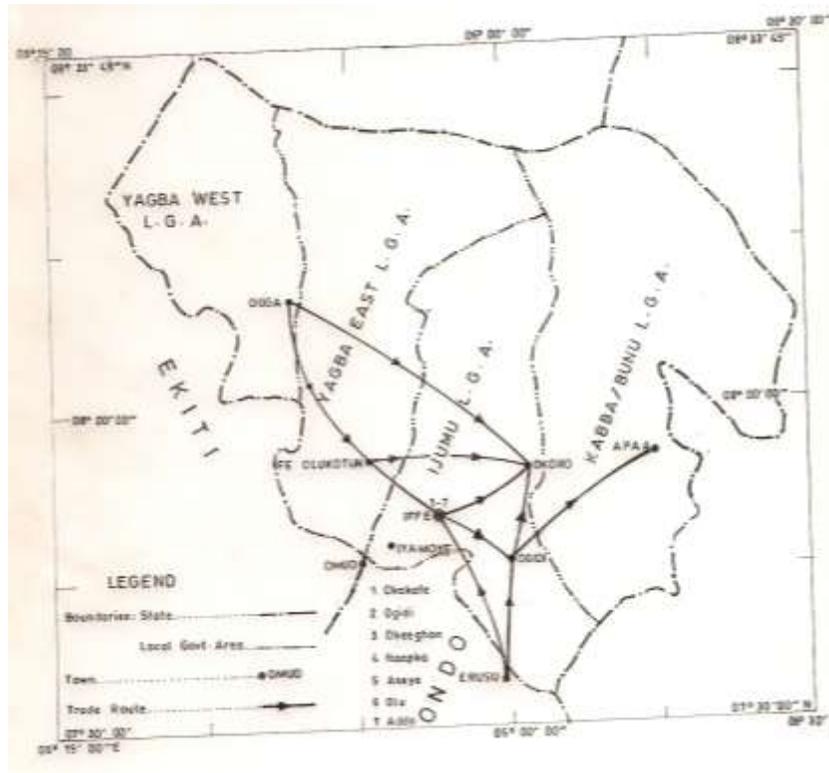


Fig. 3: Okunland trade route in the 16<sup>th</sup> century based on XRF analysis

Apart from pottery, The Okun people were also engaged in iron smelting and smithing at this period or earlier. The principal towns engaged in iron smithing include the Gbedde sub group of the Ijumu and the Amuro subgroup of the Yagba. Bronze casting or smithing was carried out in Okedagba in Ekin – Adde, Aloo, Ibiti in Gbedde as well as Amuro subgroup of Yagba (Samanu 1976). Brass working was also a major preoccupation of the Olle – Bunu section of Okunland. It has been claimed that the practice dates back to 1500 AD (Ibisagba et al 1994). The brass workers of Olle are held in high esteem as they are referred to as Omo onile (the owners of the land). They are also regarded as superior to blacksmiths who in most cases are regarded as foreigners (Ibisagba et al 1994). As a confirmation of the practice of iron working among the people since a long time ago, almost all the sites excavated in Okunland have a record of iron slag and tuyere. This is a confirmation that the people listed above and probably their progenitors were engaged in this trade as attested to by oral tradition. The practice

of iron smelting among the people has a long pedigree which according to Oyelaran (1998) dates to 1840 + 125BP.

Apart from brass and iron objects, oral traditional account from Olle also alludes to the fact that the Okun people were engaged in trading activities with the Nupe who are the immediate neighbours to the north. Objects of trade in this direction apart from pots, Bronze objects and iron implements was the cloth locally referred to as Aso Opo (Ibisagba et al 1994) and other types of clothes. The Olle people are reputed as the best in manufacturing clothes that could withstand the test of time in terms of durability and aesthetic value. These clothes were traded to the Nupes who in turn traded them to their Hausa neighbours to the North. From here the clothes which traditional accounts say are better than some clothes manufacture in Europe at that period of time.

Apart from Olle, there is ample evidence that trade certainly existed between Isanlu – Yagba, Bunu and Kirri groups with the Nupe at this stage (Samanu 1976). These groups of traders travelled to Abugi, Eggan, Pategi in Nupeland to sell and to buy. Nupe traders travelled to Akutupa, Iluke in Kirri territory to purchase their high-quality cloths. At this point also, Yagba, Bunu and Ikirri high quality cloths were said to be on sale at Eggan and Katcha from where they got back red fez cap – which was a highly priced material throughout Okunland as well as beads, black cloths and potash (Samanu 1976). People from other parts of the country apart from the Nupe also patronise these groups. For instance, people from parts of Akoko, Ijumu, Kabba, and Yagba are said to travel to these Bunu country to buy special high quality clothe for funeral ceremonies called aso ipo and special cloths for egungun masquerades (Samanu 1976). It was claimed that Nupe itinerant medicine men and fortune tellers have also been roaming about in Ijumu and Owe areas of Okunland charging fees for their services from their customers. In Gbeddeland, there has been report of trading network between them and the Nupe and Akoko people from a very early period. Objects of trade include indigo, kolanuts and cotton thread which the Nupes came to buy. In exchange, they usually bring with them their own wares such as potash, Agbeji (straw hats), local shoes, mats, red caps, black gowns and beads (Samanu 1976).

A number of routes have been identified for these trading activities (Samanu 1976) (see Fig. 4). One of such routes was through Iluke to Otun – Gbedde to Adde through Omuo to Akoko area. Another route is through Irunda, Isanlu, Mopa across Gbeddeland to Akoko. Yet, another route went through Egbe, Ogga,

Ejuku, Ife – Yagba, Adde and into Akoko country. The last route was through Ikirri, Bunu, Kabba to Akoko country. The people were also engaged in long distance trade. According to Samanu (1976), men traders:

travelled as far as the coast to Ejinrin to trade in cloths, salt and to purchase cowries. The route taken was through Omuo, Ikole Ekiti, Ilesa, Idiagunre near Ibadan, Gbongan, Ikire to Ijebuland and finally to Ejinrin. Other routes through Ondo was also used.

It has also been documented that during this period the Okun people were involved in both the trans –Saharan trade as well as the trans-Atlantic trade. According to Jimada (2005):

There was the old trans Saharan trade route traversing the Nigerian area from Hausaland, through Nupeland, to Yorubaland right down to the coast. One route which starts from Timbuktu goes through Sokoto, Birnin Kebbi and Kontagora to Mokwa, from where it crosses the Niger at Jebba and goes through Oyo – Ile to Egbado. The same route probably branched off at Mokwa going east through Gbara and Muregi and crosses the Niger to Kabba, Ikare Akoko and ends in Benin. Another route crosses the Niger at the Nupe town of Kpatagbon to Yagba and Ekiti. Another goes down through the Niger to Lokoja, Idah and ultimately to Onitsha and beyond.

Thus, within this period the Okun people became involved in trading activities first in raw materials and finished products. Throughout this period there was no record to the best of the knowledge of the researcher of animosity between the Nupes and their Okun counterpart. Rather they were trading at this period in time as equal partners.

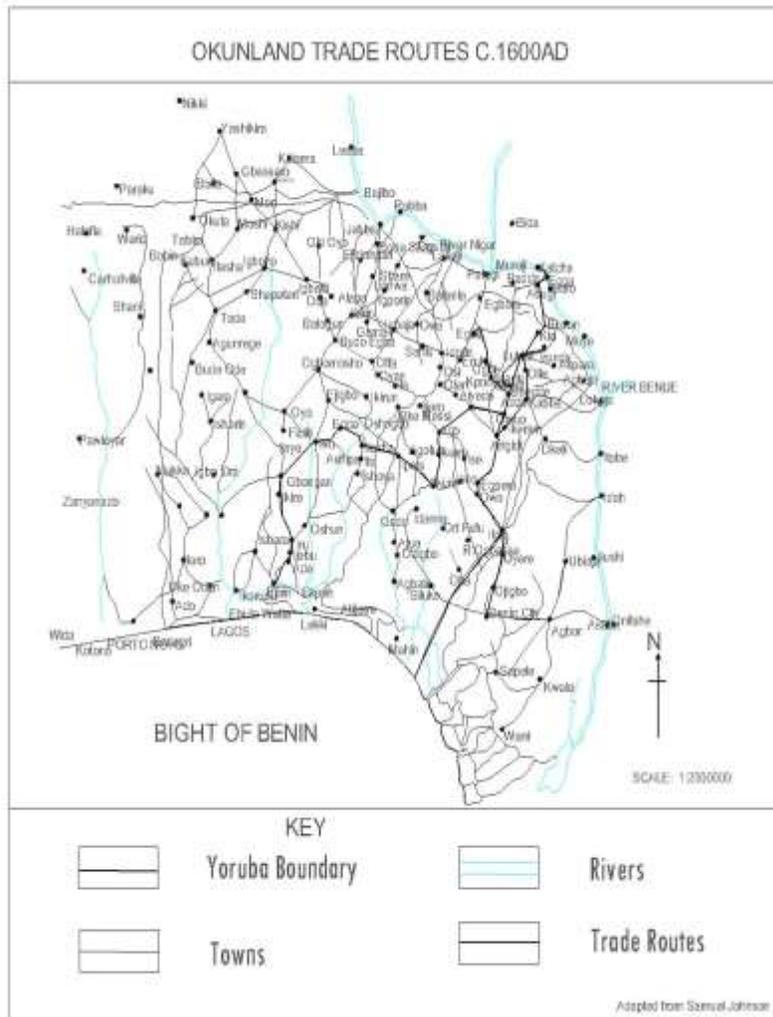


Fig. 4: Okunland Trade routes in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

To the east of the Niger at about the same time, there was political fermentation taking place among the Igala People. The formation of the Igala kingdom has traditionally been traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD (Ukwedeh, 2003, Obayemi 2011). There is a conflict however in this date if Tsoede, the figure head of the formation of the Nupe kingdom to the North of Okunland is to be considered sacrosanct. This is because the foundation of the Nupe kingdom has traditionally been traced to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. If the founder of the Nupe kingdom came from the

Igala kingdom then the Igala kingdom would have been in existence before the 17<sup>th</sup> century normally claimed. The chronology of the foundation of these kingdoms being not the focus of the current research effort, we concentrate on the relationship between the Igala people and their Okun neighbours as at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There has been a close cultural affinity between the Igala and Okun people (Obayemi 2011) from the pre 16<sup>th</sup> century period.

At that point in time, the Igala people were living as segmentary societies with each village having their own heads usually the eldest in each of the federating units. However, in about the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the process of the evolution of dynastic rule which of course started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or earlier became consolidated under Ayegba Om'Idoko (Ukwedeh 2003). With this consolidation all the various Igala groups came under the political control of Ayegba Om'Idoko with his headquarters in Idah having the title of Attah of Igala.

As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century even before the full consolidation of the Igala kingdom the Attah of Igala had extended his sphere of influence to the Niger – Benue confluence area including parts of the Okun speaking area most especially the Oworo group (Ukwedeh 2003). This was achieved under Ayegba Om'Idoko through the appointment of Ohiomi as the representative of the Attah of Igala in the Niger – Benue area. Upon his appointment, Ohiomi and his supporters founded a new settlement called Umaisha near Oh'elehu, a settlement not far from modern day Koton Karfe. From this new settlement he was able to perform his task of collecting annual tributes on behalf of the Attah of Igala from the Kakanda, Igbirra, Oworo as well as some Nupe elements up to Raba (Ukwedeh 2003).

The principal controller of trade and commercial activities within the Niger – Benue area at this period was the Igala kingdom. They were not only controlling the trade but has brought the Kakanda and all the Ebirra groups as well as the Oworo under tribute paying relationship. As at this point the Nupe kingdom was still in their segmentary state and far from being consolidated. With the establishment of Umaisha as an outpost of the Igala kingdom, the Niger – Benue confluence area became centre of convergence for traders from different places for trade. The Ebirra settlements of Igu and Opanda (later called Koton Karifi) were the main trading centres. Jukun traders, for instance came along River Benue to the confluence area. Similarly, Igala traders came to the area from the Lower Niger. At about the same time also, Nupe traders sold goods like cloth, rice,

pottery and beads; and bought commodities like guns, salt and antimony in the trade of the confluence area most especially at Umuaisa and the various Oworo communities (Mohammed 2011).

Thus, from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Okun people were engaged in trading relations with the Nupe people to the North and the Igala people to the east. Trading with these people afforded them the opportunity of mingling with various types of traditions and customs. Some of these traditions and customs are incorporated into the cultural practices of the Okun people. For instance, part of the result of these intergroup relations could be felt in the traditions of the Oworo people which inferred that the institution of kingship system among them has its origin in Idah. This is contrary to the tradition among other Okun groups.

From as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century or earlier, trading activities of the Okun people with the Nupe and the Igala was conducted on the basis of equality. However, this does not imply there were no conflicts here and there within this period between the Okun and her neighbours, it does mean such conflicts are not to a scale that could cause a breakdown of rule of law and disrupt trading activities. In the case of the Igala kingdom, as soon as there was consolidation of the dynastic rule, the trading relations took a drastic turn. Instead of trading as equal partner, tributary system was introduced in which the Oworo people and their neighbours started to pay tribute to Idah.

### **Discussion**

Population movements have been a recurring decimal on the geographical area occupied by Okun people from the prehistoric era till now. Despite being relegated to the backwaters by researchers when compared with researches conducted in central Yorubaland, the little research so far conducted in Okunland has shown that the area holds the master key to unravelling some salient problematic associated with early Nigerian history. This is because population movements at the confluence region have been attested to in oral tradition, archaeological reports and from linguistic source from the prehistoric period until the present. Thus, the assertion by linguists that the area occupied by the Okun people and the Niger – Benue confluence area in general was the dispersal ground for the Niger – Congo family holds a very important place in the early history of the Nigerian area. This is because the differentiation of the various linguistic clusters in the Niger – Congo family started about 7000 years ago within the confluence region. Secondly, and in tune with the above is the excavation at

Itaakpa which has shown that Okun area had human occupation from the Stone Age period to the present. As a corollary to the above is the fact that Itaakpa is the only site in Nigeria with a clear demonstration of the transition from a stone using society to Neolithic and the modern era (Opadeji 2012).

From the archaeological and linguistic evidence, one could conclude that the confluence area was the ancestral home of most of the linguistic groups in southern and central Nigeria. As such, it was probably from this area that these various groups developed to their modern forms. Therefore, the confluence area has been an area of cross fertilization of ideas as well as group differentiation and cultural fermentation over time. From the Stone Age period the Okun speaking area had witnessed high level of intergroup relations which cut across social, cultural, trade and economic spheres. The trading network cuts across groups to the north of the confluence, for instance the Nupe and to the east of the confluence among the Igala and other groups within the confluence region such as the Kakanda and Epira. These trading relations started from the prehistoric era and have been sustained up till the present. Items of trade vary depending on the trading partners and the period of trade. At its earliest form, trading activities were conducted on the basis of equal partners with the Igala and the Nupe. However, with the establishment of dynastic rule in the Igala kingdom part of the Okun people were incorporated into the new kingdom as vassals.

### **Conclusion**

The history of the Okun area needs to be adequately studied in order to be able to understand the process of state formation in the derived savanna zone. A detailed study of the Okun speaking area would throw considerable light on the history and evolution of such societies as Igala and Nupe; two of her neighbours with direct historical relationships right from the precolonial era till now. In order to be able to do this the archaeology of the Okun speaking area needs urgent attention. Rock shelters which abound in the area should be the object of such inquiry because they tend to produce dates that are quite early when compared with open air habitation sites. There is also a need to synthesize the research findings of the archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnographers that had worked on various parts of Okunland. This perhaps will be a good starting point towards writing a holistic history of the Okun people.

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