

TRADE IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBO LAND: A CASE STUDY OF NNEWI

Daniel Chukwuma Nzereogu, PhD

Department of History and International Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

dc.nzereogu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of trade in pre-colonial Igboland, with a focused case study on Nnewi, a prominent commercial hub in southeastern Nigeria. By analyzing historical records alongside oral traditions, the paper explores the economic structures, trade networks, and market systems that underpinned Nnewi's role in regional and trans-regional commerce prior to colonial intervention. The research highlights the interplay between indigenous trade practices, social organization, and resource distribution, illustrating how Nnewi's strategic location and entrepreneurial spirit facilitated the exchange of goods such as palm oil, textiles, and metal works. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the socio-political implications of trade, including the formation of market alliances and the integration of Nnewi within broader Igbo economic landscapes. Despite its historical significance, Nnewi remains under-researched in terms of its pre-colonial commercial history. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing an empirical, place-specific analysis of trade and commerce in Nnewi within the pre-colonial Igbo world. Ultimately, this investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of indigenous economic systems in pre-colonial Africa, challenging colonial narratives that often marginalized African agency in trade history.

Key words: Trade, Commerce, Igbo, Nnewi, Market, Pre-colonial

Introduction

Trade and commerce have historically served as fundamental components of social, economic, and political life across Africa. Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, pre-colonial trade networks were robust, intricately structured, and integral to regional development. One notable center of commercial vitality was Nnewi, a town that emerged as a significant hub for intra- and inter-regional trade long before the advent of colonial rule. This article investigates the nature, organization, and dynamics of trade and commerce in pre-colonial Nnewi, situating the town within the broader economic landscape of pre-colonial Igbo land.

The Igbo economy, in general, was characterized by a decentralized, market-oriented system, often anchored by periodic markets and supported by extensive kinship networks and trading guilds (Afigbo, 1981). In this structure, trade was not only a means of subsistence but also a vehicle for social mobility, cultural exchange, and political influence. Nnewi, distinguished by its strategic location and entrepreneurial populace, developed a complex market system that linked it with neighboring Igbo communities and distant trade partners in the Niger Delta and beyond (Isichei, 1976).

As a case study, Nnewi provides a unique window into the broader patterns of Igbo commercial activity, particularly the ways in which indigenous systems of production, distribution, and trade adapted to ecological, political, and social contexts. By examining oral traditions, historical records, this article reconstructs the economic landscape of pre-colonial Nnewi and evaluates its role within the regional trade networks of the time. It also explores the implications of these commercial activities for understanding pre-colonial African economic agency, challenging earlier Eurocentric narratives that minimized indigenous economic sophistication (Hopkins, 1973; Ekechi, 1989).

Literature Review

The study of pre-colonial trade in Igbo land has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly in efforts to challenge earlier Eurocentric assumptions about African economies. Afigbo (1981) argues that the Igbo economic system was marked by decentralized, yet highly functional trade networks, which operated through rotational markets, long-distance exchange, and family-based commercial organizations. He highlights the intricate social institutions that regulated trade, including title systems such as the Ozo and Nze, and gendered market hierarchies.

Isichei (1976) emphasizes the importance of markets as cultural and economic institutions in Igbo society. She identifies the roles of women in controlling market activity and facilitating regional trade, particularly through the Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo market calendar. Her work is instrumental in showing how trade in towns like Nnewi was deeply embedded in social organization.

Nzimiro (1972) provides further insight into the entrepreneurial tradition of Igbo society, particularly among lineages and extended families. His analysis of social class formation through wealth acquired from trade is particularly applicable to towns such as Nnewi, where commercial prestige often translated into social mobility and title-taking. Similarly, Uchendu (1965) underscores the communal values that governed pre-colonial Igbo economic behavior, showing how trade was both a collective and individual endeavor.

Hopkins (1973), in his foundational work *An Economic History of West Africa*, critiques colonial portrayals of African trade as primitive, arguing instead that African trading systems were profit-driven, competitive, and integrated into wider trans-Saharan and Atlantic exchange networks. His thesis on indigenous African capitalism provides a useful framework for understanding Nnewi's dynamic commercial system prior to colonial rule. Despite this growing corpus of literature, few studies offer a localized, micro-historical perspective on individual Igbo towns. Nnewi—despite its later prominence in Nigeria's industrial economy—remains under-researched in terms of its pre-colonial commercial history. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing an empirical, place-specific analysis of trade and commerce in Nnewi within the pre-colonial Igbo world.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology, synthesizing oral traditions, archival data, and secondary scholarship to reconstruct the commercial system of pre-colonial Nnewi.

Oral Sources: Oral data were obtained through interviews with traditional title holders, market leaders, and elder custodians of local history. This approach draws on Vansina's (1985) methodological framework for using oral traditions as valid historical sources, particularly in societies with limited written records.

Secondary Literature: The study engaged with a wide range of academic literature to frame the analysis, including key works by Afigbo (1981), Hopkins (1973), and Isichei (1976). These sources provide theoretical and comparative contexts for interpreting the Nnewi case within broader Igbo and West African economic history.

Analytical Approach: This study employs a historical materialist lens, interpreting commerce as a product of material conditions, political organization, and social institutions. The study also draws from economic anthropology to understand how kinship, gender, and ritual systems influenced patterns of trade (Meillassoux, 1971).

Trade in Pre-Colonial Igbo Land

A key sector of the pre-colonial Igbo economy is trade. Although subsidiary to agriculture, trade was nonetheless an important aspect of Igbo economic activity. Austin (2004), corroborating Meillassoux (1971), pointed out that in stateless societies like in Igboland some non-state institutions provide a framework for market exchange which included such institutions like the ethnic-religious diaspora. This ethnic as well as religious diaspora was a prominent and essential part of commercial life in mostly as regards long-distance trade during the pre-colonial era. He noted that people of a given diaspora most times monopolized trade on a particular route. These trading diasporas plied their trade within and across areas through their networks of control. He also highlighted that the ethnic diaspora was cemented by intermarriage and the development of a distinct identity, thus providing what he referred to as a "moral community" within which issues of agency were resolved.

Austin (2004) also stated that these itinerant traders would mostly stay with landlords with whom they are related probably by marriage, who would then introduce them to local trading partners and generally assist them to make contracts. He noted that credit was also guaranteed among members of the same diaspora and that moral hazard is reduced by this common membership. He also noted that there were other belief systems that work too in reducing hazards. Austin (2004), pointed out that in Igboland the itinerant traders and residents from Aro community formed the predominant commercial diaspora. He noted that they followed their own gods as did their fellow Igbo-speaking customer and partners.

Again, long-range trade developed in Igboland in consequence of differences, or growing differentiation in ecological conditions, leading to a situation in which one part produced more of one kind of goods that it could consume, and had to exchange the excess for those goods which it needed and could only get from its neighbours who either produced them or were in a position to procure them from their other neighbours. In Igboland the key to the situation would appear to be the increasing ecological differentiation between Northern Igboland and the other areas surrounding it. From all currently available indications, Northern Igboland was the first part of Igboland to be effectively settled by the Igbo. It was from there that they subsequently spread to the neighbouring low lands to the west, south and east. The result was that its vegetation was soon eaten down and the soil overworked, while the neighbouring areas of relatively late Igbo settlement remained fertile and comparatively under-exploited. The Northern Igbo, in response to their worsening environmental conditions, turned increasingly to other professions, especially to trading, manufacturing, medicine and the exploitation of occult forces as ritualist

and diviner. The justly famed Aro, Awka, Nri and Nkwerre specialist are on this Northern Igbo ridge. Though they did not entirely abandon agriculture, they become increasingly dependent on their neighbour for the extra with which to supplement the meager produce of their exhausted soil, (Afigbo, 1973).

Furthermore, according to Afigbo (1981), there was long-range exchange of the natural resources with which the different parts of Igboland were differently endowed. The Northern Igbo plateau was and is rich in iron Ore deposits and in smelters and smiths who transformed the Ore into iron, tools and ritual objects. The Niger-Anambra Valley produced fish, while the North-Eastern and Cross River Igbo areas were endowed with salt lakes at Uburu, lead at Abakaliki and fish from the Cross River. With regard to the development of long-range trade linking Igboland with its neighbours, similar factors were important. The Ijaw to the South produced salt and fish which they exchanged for agricultural produce from Igboland, while the Igala to the North were in a position to bring into Igboland horses, glass beads and bronzes in exchange for Ivory and slaves. Afigbo (1981) also noted that the trade between the Igbo, Ijaw and the Igala probably constituted the most important significant East-West trade, except probably the one in beads and cloth which went from Agboh through Benin and Yorubaland to Akan land. It is as yet impossible to be precise as to when the kind of long range trade discussed above developed both within Igboland and between the Igbo and their neighbours to the North and South. But according to Afigbo (1981), what information we have tends to show that by about the ninth century, the trading system of Igboland was such that one can firmly assume that both regional trade linking different parts of Igboland and long-range trade linking Igboland and the region further North (the Sudan and beyond) were already long established. He noted that the Igboukwu find (dated back to the ninth century) suggest that by that date Igboland was already engaged in the exchange of slaves and Ivory for horses, beads and bronze coming from the north.

According to Shaw (1970), the assembling of slaves and ivory in quantities large enough to cover the cost of the luxury, and no doubt expensive items from the north would also suggest regional trade within Igboland. It is also likely that the rich regalia and artifacts discovered at Igboukwu were not all made in or immediately around Igboukwu, though certainly many of them were made in the area east of the Niger and South of the Benue, this again would suggest highly developed long distance trade, (Shaw, 1970). Also, according to Alagoa (1970), there are evidence which suggests that the trade between the Ijaw and their hinterland neighbours was already firmly established before the dawn of the era of European contact. Reinterpreting the bits of evidence on the state of trade in the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra, Northrup (1966) has convincingly argued that long before the Europeans showed upon the Nigerian coast in the fifteenth century, the lower Niger had become an important commercial highway in which Agboh occupied the important position of an emporium visited by Edo, Igala, Ijaw and Northern Igbo traders. It is observed that this Niger waterway was the main axis of the trade of Igboland west of the Northern Igbo plateau, that its use and level of development as a trade network east of the Northern Igbo plateau, at about the same level of development and serving to link the Northern Igbo area with the plains to the east of it. The items of this trade most likely were salt and lead from the North-Eastern and Eastern Igbo, and beads, Iron wares and horses from the Northern Igbo plateau. The traditions of the Northern, Eastern and North-Eastern Igbo never mention obtaining salt from the south before the introduction of European salt. The fact is that from the Igbo town of Uburu northwards into Ogoja there are brine lakes from which salt was made by evaporation. This salt trade was ancient indeed, at least predating the fifteenth century, (Afigbo, 1973).

According to Ofonagoro (1971), there was also probably another trading system linking the Northern Igbo area with the salt and lead producing regions of the North-Eastern and Eastern Igbo and through them with the Cross River Waterway. Of the Southern Igbo area we have little information. But it might not be wide off the mark to assume that they traded agricultural produce for salt and fish with the Ijaw as it is unlikely that the latter would have got all the carbohydrate and vegetable foods they needed from Agboh. Ofonagoro (1971), also noted that it can also be assumed that the Southern Igbo got their iron tools, weaponry and some ritual objects from the Northern Igbo, the only part of Igboland which was endowed with iron Ore. Basically this pattern of exchange economy persisted in Igboland until the imposition of colonial rule in the first decade of the 20th century. The organizational structure for carrying on this long distance trade according to Ofonagoro (1971), certainly improved with time. At first the most likely method is that items moved in a relay fashion from one village to the next in the direction of greatest demand. This means of distributing trade items moved remained very much in vogue in Igboland into the 20th century, most people never travelled outside their village. And even at the time when the trading system in Igboland was most developed, it was only a small fraction of people who travelled from one region of Igboland to the other for business, (Ofonagoro, 1971).

Trade and Commerce in Pre-Colonial Nnewi

Indeed, production in pre-colonial Nnewi and most part of Igboland was based on agriculture and was mainly at the subsistence level but still it must be taken into account that exchange was common. In line with this Hopkins (1973), states that the majority of household during this period in West Africa undoubtedly produced the greater part of the goods they required as consumers, but the pure, subsistence economy was an exception rather than the rule. He further notes that most households regarded trade as a normal and an integral part of their activities, and planned their production strategy accordingly.

In pre-colonial Igboland two types of trade existed. They include long distance trading and local trading. According to Hopkins, (1973), Local trade refers to transactions which took place within a radius of up to about ten miles of the area of population. This was the range which could be covered in one day by foot or by donkey (in areas where the use of donkey was prevalent), while still allowing time to exchange products and return home. Beyond this radius it was necessary to make arrangements for overnight stops, to reallocate work in the household and sometimes to make use of professional carriers and commercial intermediaries. Hence, local trade occurred between Nnewi and her immediate neighbours which included Nnobi, Ichi, Ozubulu, Awka-etiti, Oraefite, Igboukwu, Amichi, Awka as well as others. The trade items for the local trading were mostly food items and products of smiths, sculptors, potters and cloth weavers among others. Products of smiths and sculptors were brought into Nnewi mainly from Awka while products of potters and cloth weavers came from Igboukwu. The main products sourced from Nnewi were mostly agricultural products as agriculture was the mainstay of pre-colonial economy. Palm nuts and palm oil were the main agricultural products Nnewi supplied to her neighbours. Another product Nnewi supplied to her neighbours was Ogiri (fermented oil seeds such as castor, sesame and egusi) used in preparing local delicacies, as Nnewi women were very popular at that period producing this particular food stuff.

Hopkins (1973), further highlights that local trade came about from the way production is carried out by households and as a result of changes in the natural as well as human resources endowment of the micro-environment. The main target of households was to ensure that necessary products that were essential for their survival are secured. In order to reach this target each household tried to plant the amount of crops needed for survival in what, from experience was known to be a poor year. In planning for disaster, there would be more crops available in an average year than the household could consume. Sometimes these crops were stored for future use, but this was not always possible with perishable varieties. Sometimes, if neighbouring villages lack foodstuffs, local produce was traded. This type of trade can be thought of as a system of compensation, equalizing losses experienced elsewhere. A surplus was planned, but trade was unpremeditated. This illustration is pertinent to showcase that exchange potential was present even where production levels were governed by the siege mentality associated with pure, subsistence economies. This, to an appreciable extent, was the situation in Nnewi. In pre-colonial Nnewi, most of the food requirements were met by household production, while trade served as an alternative, often used only in emergency situations. A more typical case was that of households which regularly planned their production of foodstuff and crafts with a certain amount of exchange in mind. Trade of this kind was made possible by the presence of complementary needs within regions which are sometimes regarded as being uniform. Variations in natural resources did not have to be profound for local trade to develop, though marketing activity was especially intense on the borders of ecological zones. Usually, it was not a question of sharply contrasting specialism, but of a subtle shift of emphasis between adjacent areas with very similar economies. For instance, on village might grow foodstuffs of a different variety or better quality than the next, or produce a particular colour or design of cloth, this thus would lead to trading so to acquire what is lacking or needed in a particular village.

Markets played an essential role in the commercial lives of pre-colonial Nnewi people, as the local trade goods were sold and bought in the various markets in Nnewi on the four market days. Hill (1966), highlights that in some areas in West Africa (including Nnewi), markets were held at intervals of between two and eight days, and occasionally longer. He further notes that periodic markets were usually formed into rings cycles, though the arrangement was by no means rigid and it also changed in the course of time, as some markets fell into disuse and others were founded. The frequency with which any one market was held depended on the number of markets in a particular ring. For example, Fagerlund and Smith (1970), note that in a ring containing just two markets each met on alternate days, and a two-day market week operated. The sequence of meetings was decided by the principle that proximity in space implies separation in time. That is to say, two markets which were part of a larger ring were unlikely to meet on consecutive days if they were only a short distance apart, because to do so might lead to needless duplication. Periodic markets were often held at places which were convenient to several settlements, but which did not coincide with any one of them. It was possible for a local market to attract many people on the day it met, yet to be almost completely deserted during the rest of the week. Rotating markets, like

systems of shifting and rotational cultivation, were an expression of the principle that the costs of permanence were not justified by the returns. Thus in Nnewi, apart from the major market- nkwo Nnewi which was the central market located at the centre of the Nnewi town which operates every eight days, there are other smaller ring of markets located in the four villages that make up the town. These smaller markets operate every four days according to the four markets days in Igbo land. These markets include- Eke amaobi in Otolu Nnewi, Orie agbo in Nnewichi Nnewi, nwa-Afor in Uruagu Nnewi and Nkwo amangwu in Umudim Nnewi. Hence on every market day there must be a market that is meeting in one of the Nnewi villages of which everyone in Nnewi and its surrounding neighbours that intend either buy or sell would attend.

In pre-colonial Nnewi, the traders who partook local trade were mainly female, part-time, small scale, mobile, and numerous. The reason it was mostly female was due to the fact that the trade an easier addition to farming activities, they were part-time because trade was seen as an appendage, though often an important one, to primary, domestic occupations, they were small scale because they lacked the capital to be anything else, they were mobile because the most efficient way of connecting buyers and sellers was by bringing them together in periodic, rotating markets, and they were numerous because local trade was a generally accessible way of adding to farm incomes, since it required few managerial or technical skills and little capital.

Also competition in local trade was fierce because there were hardly any barriers to entry and few alternative employment opportunities. Consequently, profit margins were slender. Of course, there were some imperfections in the market, but these should be seen not as evidence of the primitive nature of pre-colonial exchange but as a reminder that perfect competition is an ideal which is rarely found in the real world, even in industrial societies. A variety of traders organizations existed in West Africa, and these tried to exert a measure of control over prices and competition, though not much of it existed in pre-colonial Nnewi except for an association of hunters whose influence was not strong enough to control the prices of bush meat. However, according to Hopkins (1973), the indications are that the prices of most goods in local markets were determined mainly by supply and demand, and that the haggling skills of the parties concerned played an important part in deciding the exact price agreed in any single transaction.

On the other hand, long distance trade can be regarded as an attempt by African entrepreneurs to overcome the limitations of local commerce. Constraint still existed on the supply side, because it was just as expensive to produce goods for long distance trade as for sale locally. On the demand side, however, long distance trade presented an opportunity of connecting social islands of purchasing power, that is, consumer who, though only a small proportion of the total population, had sufficient wealth between them to support a market which was greater than that available to local traders in any one area. The less affluent majority participated in this commerce to a certain extent by using profits accumulated from local trading activities to purchase cheaper types of cloth and small quantities of essential items, such as salts. In general, however, long range commerce did meet the needs of affluent in the community since they had the wherewithal to acquire commodities that were not locally manufactured. The high cost of this kind of goods most times is because of the greater handling costs and risks of carrying goods beyond the area of production. These principles help to explain the composition and organization of long distance trade not only in Africa, but also in other parts of the world as the examples of the fur trade of pre-industrial Europe and the silk trade of the Far East clearly demonstrate. Thus long distance trading as well played its own part in Nnewi's pre-colonial trade and commerce even though it was not as robust as the local trade. It was by long distance trading that items that are not locally made or sourced came into Nnewi, these items include salt, dried fish, potash, textiles, leather goods, ostrich feathers, metal works such as swords of famous make, hides and skins as well as slaves. It has to be stated here that long distance trade in Nnewi was facilitated and dominated by the Aros, who brought into Nnewi goods from distant lands. A few of the long distance trade goods were also sold in the various markets in Nnewi, but most times these kind of goods are not always sold in the markets, the transactions are mainly done on agreements between the seller and buyer, especially when it comes to slaves.

According to Chukwu (2015), Igbo societies were communal in socio-political and economic lives. This meant that the societal values and norms that typify the Igbo were revealed in every facet of their lives including trade and commerce. Both at the local and long distance trading levels, these values and norms thrived. He notes that stealing and cheating of any kind were despised as obnoxious and detestable while the inviolability of the market place was maintained as revered.

Medium of Exchange in Igbo land during the Pre-Colonial Era

Another aspect of pre-colonial trade in Igboland which requires mention is the question of currency. It is as yet impossible to be precise as to when money transaction was introduced into Igboland. But one thing which is quite

clear is that this development preceded the dawn of the European era in West African trade. It would appear that by the 18th century much of the commercial transactions in Igboland were done in money. Using information gathered in the 19th century and early, 20th century, one would discover that many currencies were in use in pre-colonial Igboland. These included salt, Umumu (iron money), cowries, manilas, brass rods, and copper wires, (Afigbo, 1981).

The use of salt as currency is a phenomenon found in many communities the world over. And, it is quite possible that salt was the oldest currency in use in Igboland. The salt which came in earthen jars from Uburu was ground into fine powder and moulded into cones of different sizes and used in exchange transactions. Probably coming next to salt in time was the iron money, known as Umumu which was perhaps minted on the Northern Igbo plateau. According to Basden (1921), the Umumu consisted of tiny pieces of iron resembling small squashed tin-tacks, half an inch in length, with arrow shaped heads and stem about the thickness of a large pin. It would appear to have been most in use throughout the Northern Igbo and to have spread into Idoma and Tiv. It may well have been in use in other parts of Igboland, especially in southern and Cross river Igbo area, before it was squeezed out by brass rods, manila etc. (Nwabara, 1965).

There is evidence, according to Jones, (1958), to suggest that cowries were in use in Igboland before the advent of the Europeans. Salt, iron money and cowries were available in small units and were extremely useful for small purchases. The brass rod, manila and copper wire came with the Europeans and were useful for large purchases, as their exchange rates were much higher than those of the pre-European currencies, (Jones, 1958). Afigbo (1981), further stated that as much as one or two currencies might be dominant in one part, there was no area of Igboland where any of them would not have been recognized and used as money.

One of these ancient currencies that were used in pre-colonial Igboland was the manila. The manila was an ancient currency in pre-colonial Igboland but its use as a legal tender continued for centuries even up to colonial era. Naanen (1993) noted that during the colonial era when the British currency was introduced in Igboland, it coexisted with the manila as the traditional currency in Igboland. Naanen (1993) further stated that the coexistence of the two currencies was a result of the British authorities not being able to ensure that the British coin was properly circulated as well as the historically entrenched use of traditional currencies. This situation thus made the colonial authorities to accept the manila as a legal tender. Naanen (1993) in effect stated that the coexistence of the two currencies created a sub-system within the economic system of colonial Nigeria.

Medium of Exchange in Nnewi during the Pre-Colonial Era

Trade by barter has always been the system of exchange in pre-colonial African societies, but during the course of the various international trade involving Africa and other parts of the world some currencies were thus introduced into pre-colonial African societies. During the trans-saharan trade and the trans-atlantic slave trade eras imports into West Africa also included a number of currencies such as cowries, manilas, iron bars, and copper rods. These together with gold were used in part or full exchange for African products including slaves. Naanen (1993) highlighted that during the trans-atlantic slave trade as at 1505 a slave was valued at 12 to 15 copper manilas. Thus along the same line, Johnson (1966), posits that during that same period the difficulty of evaluating slaves in terms of assorted trade goods and commodity currencies led to the development of various units of account, such as the 'mythical bar', the 'sorting', and the 'ounce. Hence Hopkins (1973) notes that the bar became a unit of account in the seventeenth century, principally in Senegambia and Eastern Nigeria, at the same time sorting was being used mainly between the Gold Coast and the Cameroons, while the ounce was introduced into the Gold Coast early in the eighteenth century and was adopted at Whydah in the 1760s. These units were adapted from indigenous systems of exchange and accountancy and provide a further illustration of the way in which Europeans fitted in with African trading customs.

Hence, according to Basden (2006), before the introduction of the English coinage in Igboland, some currencies were in use. In the more southern and eastern parts of Igboland there was a strong demand for manilas and brass rods, while in the northern and western parts of Igboland Cowries were the most popular form of currency. In the south, trade gin was a recognized medium of exchange. He further stated that in the northern part of Igboland the manila was not current and the brass rods were wanted solely for the sake of being converted into "nza" (leg rings for girls). Also in corroboration Naanen (1993) highlighted that in pre-colonial times the cowrie areas included places such as west of the Niger and Northern Igboland, the brass rod was circulated in the Cross River region, while the manila areas included the eastern delta, southern Igboland and most of Ibibioland.

Basden also highlighted that at Onitsha and on the western side of the Niger River the large cowries shells were used whereas in the eastern hinterland the small type only were acceptable, the smaller being reckoned at double

the value of the larger. Nnewi is located between two regions where the use of cowries was prevalent, suggesting that cowries were also a dominant form of currency in Nnewi during the pre-colonial era.

According to Igbokwe (2018) the medium of exchange in Nnewi during the pre-colonial era was mainly trade by barter but as they began engaging in long distance trade they came in contact with cowries. So at some point cowries became the dominant medium of exchange in Nnewi. Later on as trading activities between Nnewi and other distant places increased they were introduced to metal bars like the brass rod which also served as a medium of exchange at that time. He further stated that at some point both the cowries and metal bars were used alongside each other as the medium of exchange and it continued like that till the colonial era when metal monies like the shillings were introduced.

But currencies like the manila which had long been in use in Igboland, had already formed the base of the pre-colonial Igbo economy and had developed a strong grip on it that even during the colonial era when the British currency was introduced it was hard for it to completely replace the manila. According to Naanen (1993), as a result of the historically entrenched use of the manila, the British colonial government had to recognize manila as a legal tender. He further noted that, the continuing circulation of the manila together with the British coins created financial and economic challenges, making the British colonial government to use some legislative measures to phase it off. Naanen still stated that as other local currencies capitulated as a result of these measures, the manilla remained popular due to objective economic factors, and was made strong by some of the very instruments designed to phase it off. The ultimate solution was to demonetize the manila which was accomplished in 1948 by withdrawing the manila from circulation.

Conclusion

The examination of trade in pre-colonial Igboland, with a focused case study on Nnewi, reveals a complex and dynamic economic system that was integral to the region's social and political organization. Nnewi's strategic position as a trade hub facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also the flow of cultural ideas and technological innovations across Igboland and beyond. The vibrant market networks, underpinned by indigenous institutions and traditional governance, demonstrate that pre-colonial Igbo trade was far from rudimentary; it was sophisticated, adaptive, and deeply embedded in the community's way of life. Understanding this historical trade landscape challenges simplistic narratives of African economic backwardness and highlights the agency of Igbo people in shaping their economic destiny before colonial disruption. Ultimately, the study of Nnewi's trade systems enriches our appreciation of pre-colonial African economic history and underscores the importance of local contexts in interpreting broader regional interactions.

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