

**TRADE AS A DIPLOMATIC CHANNEL IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBO DIPLOMACY-  
THE NNEWI EXAMPLE**

**NZEREUGU, DANIEL CHUKWUMA.**

Department of History/Diplomatic Studies

University of Port Harcourt

[danielnzereogu@gmail.com](mailto:danielnzereogu@gmail.com)

07066823400

**Abstract**

*Some scholars had argued that most pre-colonial African societies such as Igbo land never practiced diplomacy before the coming of the Europeans into the area. But such assertion does not hold water in the light of pre-colonial Igbo societies. Diplomacy is an essential ingredient of human existence. Right from the pre-historic age when people began to come together in societies it became necessary for them to co-exist and co-operate in the titanic struggle against nature and in the efforts to subdue and muster the environment to man's advantage. Thus, pre-colonial Igbo land was not alien to diplomatic practices. They practiced diplomacy at various levels through different channels. The aim of this work is to highlight trade as one of the important channel through which diplomacy was practiced during the pre-colonial times in Igbo land generally and particularly in Nnewi, thereby buttressing the fact that economic activities did fostered diplomatic activities in pre-colonial Igbo land. Trade in pre-colonial times provided the platform for economic co-operation, alliances and intergroup relations between Nnewi and her neighboring communities as well as among other Igbo communities, thereby fostering diplomatic intercourse among them.*

## **Introduction**

Berridge (2005) highlighted that channels of diplomacy implies the modes or the pathways through which all the functions of diplomacy are pursued. In modern diplomacy, these modes include direct telecommunications, bilateral diplomacy (conventional and unconventional), multilateral diplomacy, summitry and mediation. In as much as this is true it is important to note that pre-colonial diplomacy in Igbo land was not as advanced as that of modern diplomacy, even though there could be slight similarities in some aspects. Hence, pre-colonial diplomacy in Nnewi was conducted along the lines of inter-group relations. Thus, the channels of diplomacy in pre-colonial Nnewi could be traced to the various means of inter-group relations between Nnewi and her immediate as well as distant neighbours, which included trade. Hence, trade as an economic activity to a great extent boosted diplomatic activities in pre-colonial Nnewi and Igbo land at large.

Nnewi is one of the Igbo urban towns east of the Niger in Anambra State of Nigeria. It is the present headquarter of Nnewi North Local

Government Area and it has been classified by Uchendu (1965) and NjaKa (1974) as belonging to the central Igbo Area.

### **TRADE DIPLOMACY IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBO LAND**

Trade was a key instrument for diplomatic intercourse within the Igbo society as well as between the Igbo society and her neighbouring non-Igbo societies. According to Falola, et al, (2006, p. 60) among the prominent Igbo communities that communicated economically with their immediate environment were the Nri and the Arochukwu and it was as a result of improved trade. Along this line, Onwuzirike (2005, p. 77) highlighted that market trading contributed a lot in establishing diplomatic ties and fostering relations among the Igbo society. He pointed out that market days were carefully allocated to the villages that made up a town or to each of the towns that formed a clan. So once a week, traders from the other towns and clans would converge in a village to buy and sell. The next day they would go to another village and this process is continued throughout the week. Through this process diplomatic ties were initiated and solidified between and among the various

communities. This is why in the event of any negotiation or dialogue between the village heads of various communities or clans, it was normally held at the market square, signifying the importance of trade and the market place in the diplomatic relations between villages, towns and clans.

It is important to note that trade became a diplomatic channel as a result of the development of long-range trade in pre-colonial Igboland. There are two aspects to this matter and they are- the development of regional trade within Igboland and the development of long range trade linking the Igbo people with their neighbours. But it is reasonable to suggest that the two kinds of long-range trade developed 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. It is as well important to note that the Northern Igbo, in response to their worsening environmental conditions, turned

increasingly to other professions, especially to trading. Though they did not entirely abandon agriculture, they became increasingly dependent on their neighbours for the extra with which to supplement the meagre produce of their exhausted soil. This to a great extent encouraged trade and by extension fostered diplomatic relations between them and their neighbours.

Furthermore, there was long-range exchange of 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 smith 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 (Uburu), lead (at Abakaliki) and fish (from the Cross River). With regard to the development of long-range trade linking Igbo land 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. The trade between the

Igbo and the Ijaw and the Igala probably constituted the most important external links of the Igbo. Thus, all these trading links both within Igboland and outside Igboland created the avenue for fostering diplomatic links too.

According to Afigbo (1981), at 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 were already long established. Afigbo (1981), further stated that the Igboukwu finds (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. 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. Also according to Shaw (1970), 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 as well would suggest highly developed

long distance trade. Again, Alagoa (1970), there evidence which suggests that the trade between the ijaw and their hinterland neighbours was already firmly established before the dawn of European contact. Furthermore, Northrup (1966), has argued that long before the Europeans showed up on the Nigerian coast in the fifteenth century, the lower Niger had become an important commercial highway in which Agbo occupied the important position of an emporium visited by Edo, Igala, Ijaw and Northern Igbo traders. This Niger waterway was the main axis of the trade of Igboland west of the Northern Igbo plateau, its use and level of development as a trade route in those far off days suggests the existence of 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. All these instances above strongly portrays the fact that trade played an important role in fostering inter-group/diplomatic relations among Igbo communities as well as between the Igbos and other neighboring ethnic nationalities.

Also, in the bid to ensure the free passage and safety of traders from one community to another as they embark on their various trading activities, Afigbo (1981), highlighted on what could be referred to in the modern day diplomatic practice as a trade pact, agreement or alliance which existed in precolonial Igboland. He stated that between one clan and another, a ritual brotherhood could be established by means of the Igbandu (covenant) blood pact. Under this agreement the leading representatives of the clans or village-groups concerned met at their common boundary and after performing the prescribed ritual, drew blood from their veins and mixed it in a container. Then they would dip pieces of kola nut in the blood and eat. This ceremony was believed to constitute the groups concerned into a blood union whose members were bound to treat each other as clansmen. Thus by this means an outward-looking community could extend the area within which its citizens could travel in safety for their trading activities. This, obviously is purely a diplomatic practices necessitated by trade.

It is quite important to note that trade and marriage worked hand in hand to foster diplomatic relations among the Igbos in pre-



colonial times. According to Afigbo (1981), most long distance traders and travellers were polygamists, and usually took care to choose their wives from important and strategically placed towns along their normal route of business. By marriage such a travelling trader became an accepted member of his father-in-law's clan, especially where the father-in-law came from an influential family. The mere mention of the father-in-law's family could constitute a safe-conduct pass. Furthermore the father-in-law's house provided hostel and warehouse facilities which were otherwise lacking in pre- colonial Igboland. Thus the traders went so far as to leave some wives in their natal homes where they built them houses into which they themselves could turn in as the occasion demanded without unduly bothering their parents-in-law. This in modern diplomacy could be referred to as a consulate or even an embassy.

So through these ways trade fostered diplomatic relations among various Igbo communities as well as between the Igbo and other neighbouring ethnic nationalities.

### **THE NNEWI EXAMPLE**

According to Afigbo (1981), trade as a factor of contact arose from the fact that different communities within the Igbo area were differently endowed with resources. Communities were thus compelled to engage in local and long range exchange by the need to transcend their limitations and maximize their advantages.

According to Okafor (2015; Personal Communication), since the pre-colonial times the major market in Nnewi was the Nkwo-Nnewi which took place every eight days. In addition, there were other smaller markets such as Eke Ama-Obi, Eke-Ogwugwu, Nwa-Afor Uruagu etc which took place every four days. Likewise all the other surrounding communities had their various market days, for instance neighbouring Nnobi had a popular market known as Afor- Nnobi. Nnewi people travelled with their wares to other communities on their markets days to trade with them and vice versa.

It is important to note here, that it was by means of specialization that diplomacy was fostered through trade in pre-colonial times. Each town had a particular commodity that it is well

specialized in producing. According to Ifeakandu (2015; Personal Communication), Nnewi was known for her prowess and ingenuity in processing palm fruits into palm oil as well as the production of bitter kola fruit (Ugolo), while Nnobi was well known of being blessed with a land that produced high grade palm fruits. Also Okafor (2015; Personal Communication), noted that Oba produced the best of palm wine, while the best of meats such as oxen and various kinds of bush meats were gotten from Awka-etiti, as Awka-etiti was well known for having good hunters who caught various kinds animals for meat such as antelope, grasscutter, squirrel etc. The mode of exchange was mainly trade by barter or the use of cowries. Thus, trade based on these areas of specialization boosted diplomatic intercourse as well as inter group relations both between Nnewi and her neighbours and among the various Igbo communities in the pre-colonial era.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion it is quite obvious that trade in pre-colonial Igboland played a key role in establishing diplomatic contacts and fostering diplomatic relations among Igbo communities and between Igbo communities and non-Igbo communities. Thus trade as a means of economic survival has proved to also be an a valuable instument in facilitating diplomatic relations. Hence, even in modern day diplomacy, trade has also provided avenues for countries to establish and foster diplomatic relations in the form of economic treaties and alliances.

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## PRIMARY SOURCES

### LIST OF SELECTED INTERVIEWEES

<b>Name of Person Interviewed</b>	<b>Status/ Occupation</b>	<b>Place of Interview</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Mode of Interview</b>	<b>Interview date</b>
Mr. Ifeakandu Onubuogu Emmanuel	Trader	Nnobi	60years	Direct	7/8/15
Mr. Euka Okafor (Nnanyelugo)	Village Elder	Uruagu Nnewi	100years	Direct	5/8/15