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# The Socio-Political and Economic Impact of Yam Production and Marketing on Urbanization in Sankera Area of Tiv Land, Central Nigeria: A Historical Materialistic Discourse

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**Abstract:** The socio-political and economic impact of Yam Production and Marketing on urbanization in Sankera area of Tiv land in Central Nigeria is a historical materialistic analysis of the growing activities of yam production and marketing on urban ad Semi-urban formations in Sankera area of the Tiv people. The study examines how the continued galloping process of yam production and trade emanated from its core production area of Tiv land referred to as the Sankera geo-political zone and eventually led to the sporadic rise of semi and urban centres using the internal process of migration in the Tiv territory. The study further examines how yam production and marketing developed into both the central fugal and central petal forces of driving out yam farmers and traders from the southern parts of Tiv area where there was early land shortage and exhaustion to the fertile land of the sparsely inhabited portion of the Sankera people in the Tiv territory. These population movements led to the emergence of small and large settlements or communities of the Southern Tiv people in Sankera territory. This historical reconstruct uses historical methodology of the narrative analysis to obtain information from oral, archival, written as well as internet materials. The study finally speculates that the formation of semi and urban centres which eventually developed into socio-political and economic nexus in sankera area of Tiv land brought about socio economic transformations specially in Sankera territory and indeed in Tiv land and Nigeria at large. This historical assertion, therefore justifies the concept of historical materialism which upholds that the manner in which human beings produce the necessities of life determines the forms or types of societies in which they live as well as historicism which also conceptualizes that the history of anything sufficiently accounts for its nature or value.

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## INTRODUCTION

W.L Lawal, once argued that in Africa, Nigeria is the leading producer of yams with about 31136,000 tones production in 2007. Yam is a food crop which exists in two common species, botanically known as DISCOREA ROTUNDATA AND DISCOREA CAYENESIS. At present, yam crop is rated as the most important staple food crop in Nigeria. It is pounded or eaten when fried, roasted and even boiled. Yam tubers are also processed into flour for food consumption. Its tubers contain water, starch, protein, fibre, minerals, vitamins, and others. These contents are used in industrial and pharmaceutical laboratories for different purposes. Coincidentally, the two common species of yam crop are very much indigenous to the West African Region and Nigeria in particular.

Nigeria as a country is divided into 774 Local Government area councils, out of the 36 states including the Federal Capital territory, Abuja. These area councils are inhabited by about 170 million Nigerians from about 250 diverse ethnic peoples including Tiv, Covering a stretch of

land measured at about 910, 770sq, km, known as the Nigerian Nation.

Within the Nigerian State, the major yam producing states, include, Benue, Kwara, Niger, Ondo, Ogun, Ebonyi, Delta, Plateau, Taraba, Abuja and Nassarawa. As a matter of facts, Nassarawa state, leads at present in the exportation of “Pepa” yam to Europe for trade. Out of all these states, Benue State is the highest producer of yam crop in Nigeria and indeed the whole of west Africa (Umar et al 2006) with average annual production of 2.37 million tons from about 226,000 hectares of land. Geographically, Benue State is one of the 36 states in Nigeria and is divided into 23 Local Government Area councils. Tiv ethnic people are very dominant in 14 out of the 23 Local Government Areas, covering the largest land mass in the State popularly referred to as the Tiv land in this study.

Among the 14 Local Government Areas dominated by the Tiv people, Ukum Local with an estimated population count of about 216,930 and is the highest yam producing area in Benue State. Ukum Local Council is made up of two districts, Afia and Ngyenev out of the four distinct clans namely, Ucha, Torov, Mbaterem, and Ngyenev. There are also 13 Council wards in Ukum LGA on the whole. The major occupation of the people is farming with utmost preference to yam production.

As a leading producer of yam in Benue State and indeed in Nigeria, Ukum LGA is followed by Katsina-Ala, and Logo LGA coming second and third respectively in that order. The conglomeration of the three most important producing local councils in Benue State, makes up the present geo-political area referred to in this study as the Sankera (core) yam producing area in Tiv Land and indeed in Benue State. This zone is traditionally inhabited by five sub-ethnic groups of Ukum, ShitileUgondo, Tongov, and Ikyurav (USUTI). These sub-ethnic groups are well known for yam production and are nicknamed by other Tiv sub group as “Undyor” implying people who foolishly produce and live on yams without giving any consideration to other issues of life.

Sankera zone is completely located in the guinea Savannah area, naturally endowed with the most fertile land for yam production than rest of the four similar land divides in Tiv territory namely Kwande, Jemgbagh, Jechira and Minda.

The political history of the creation of the three Local Government Councils of the Sankera zone, shows that Katsina-Ala LGA was first created along with Benue State in 1976. After an interval of about five years, Ukum LGA was carved out of Katsina-Ala in 1981 while Logo LGA came third in 1996 excised out of Katsina-Ala territory evidently. The history of the three Local Government Area Councils in Sankera goe-political region speculates that their establishment was galvanized by the gradual galloping nature of yam production and trade which eventually established as an economic main-stay for socio-political and economic development of Tiv land and indeed the whole of Benue State in Nigeria.

G.W.B Briggs, a colonial scholar writing in 1944 about the prominence of yam crop among the Tiv people argues that:

***Yam is a staple food crop and a family's well-being depends entirely on the success or otherwise of this crop. Grain is also used for food but as a pule only when yams are not available.***

Brigg’s argument in the above presents an idea of a preferential treatment given to yam food production over and above other food crops from the pre-colonial Tiv land till date. Another

colonial Anthropologist, Paul Bahannan while writing about Tiv farm and settlement toed a similar line with Briggs. He describes, Tiv as traditional yam farmers with a cultural belief which narrowed them down to short-sighted people, who could not see anything good beyond their yam farms in their pre-colonial times. They were fully contented with yam production as the only means of life sustenance on earth. Bohaman clearly states that:

***Tiv are virtually interested in their farms... I find that a dozen or so of the key words I heard most often were words which had to do with land in one way or the other.***

Bohannan's further description of the Tiv life during the pre-colonial era denotes that Tiv were virtually traditional farmers whose everything depended on their yam farms. Farming was a key, determinant of almost everything about their well-being here on earth. It was the availability of fertile land for farming that could determine where to settle, where to farm yams, their rights to ownership of land, their farm tools and others. Sharing the same view S.T. Yandev also postulates that yam production in Tiv land had influenced the colonial delineation of the most popular Tiv Native Authority (N.A) and further argues that:

***Yam production overtly or convertibly influenced the colonial delineation of the Tiv Native Authority which served as the food Basket of the Nation.***

Restating the growing significance of yam production in the Tiv Society from the initial stage as the main staple to its present position as the economic Main-Stay of the people denotes the increasing impact of this food crop on the socio-economic and political developments in Tiv land and beyond. Very significantly, the transformation of yam production from the subsistence stage to that of a commodity product was achieved by the colonial administration during the colonial era, (1915-1960). This monumental achievement was attained by the colonial administration in Tiv land with the use of colonial economic transformational policies. The likes of such policies include taxation, commoditization, infrastructural provision, preference to cash crop production and many others. By the end of colonial period in Tiv land, yam crops had become a commodity product, already frame-working functional developments of capitalism in Tiv territory and beyond.

Essentially a few of such functional developments of the capitalist entrenchment on Tiv land through the transformed mode of yam production and trade had become manifest as follows:

- Yam marketing began to overwhelm its consumption rate in Tiv territory and continued till date.
- The dual role of yam production as food and cash crop continues to intensify from the colonial to the post-colonial era in Tiv society.
- Increase in yam production became synonymous with increase in yam trade of the Tiv area.
- In the colonial time, yam trade of the Tiv people began to assert itself as a veritable source of wealth creation in the Tiv economy. This development led to a situation where by very few farmers/traders began to accumulate more wealth than others. With more

wealth, they started buying land and labour force of the less wealthy yam farmers for further augmentation of their capital formation.

- Yam trade at the exit of colonialism obviously replaced benniseed production and trades export, of the Tiv people as their main source of income earning.
- All these and many other indications of the capitalist penetration into the Tiv land in yam production and trade were fast-tracked and trajected to the post-colonial Tiv area for further expansion of the capitalist world.

The attempt so far, has identified and defined Sankera as the main study area. The development of yam crop from the stage of a staple crop to that of economic main-stay of the Tiv people has also been briefly touched. More efforts will be geared towards understanding the concept of urbanization in the study. Most importantly explaining how the galloping yam production and trade encourage the up-rise of urban formation in the colonial and post-colonial Tiv land specifically in the geo-political region of Sankera.

The concept of urbanization in this context is explained as a socio-cultural and economic process of the coming together of villages, compounds and hatchets to form semi and urban centres in a given region. According to Ortserga, the formation of urban centres which is urbanization in itself is key to the development of financial institutions in any given economy worldwide. Urbanization is therefore.

*A cause, just as it is a consequence of socio-economic development in a region... Urbanization attracts finances to a region which in turn brings socio-economic developments to such an area*

After the attempt to understand the concept of urbanization, effort will further be directed at explaining the co-existing relationship between yam production and trade on one side and urbanization on the other side in the present study. Specifically, how did the expansion of yam production and trade of the Sankera people influence the sporadic rise of semi-urban and urban centres across the Tiv land and specifically in Sankera region? And to a large extent, what is consequential impact of urbanization on the socio-economic and political developments in Tiv land?

According to Nawani Aboki (2004) “Tiv ethnic group is one among groups with the fastest population expansion tendencies in Nigeria” He further attributed this assertion to the Tiv tradition of getting married to many wives to increase labour hands for more production of yams. In the same vein, eating quality yam food assists in improving potency and reproductive performance. Apart from Aboki’s prepossession, a one-time Minister of Defence, Rtd, General T.Y. Danjuma also argues that:

*The Tiv are at war with all their Neighbors. Why are they at war with all their neighbors from Benue to Nassarawa through to even Ebonyi State? In all these cases, it is over land, I think it is because of the expansionist tendencies of the Tiv people.*

These and many other assertions are suggestive of two contentious issues in this study. First of all, increase in yam production on Tiv Land brought about population over growth in the southern and parts of central Tiv area where increase in its production first started. Secondly,

population expansion as a result of increase in the production of yam eventually brought about land exhaustion which in turn degenerated into internal migration in search for fertile farm land. The long run effects of the internal migration led to the formation of Semi-urban centres specifically in Sankera Zone of the Tiv traditional territory and beyond, such as Dan-Anacha in Taraba State, Agyaragu in Nassarawa State and Dooshima in Plateau State respectively.

According to T.Y Danjuma, (Rtd. Gen) the formation of urban centres by the Tiv migrants on the lands of the non Tiv neighbours was another potential source of conflicts/crisis in central Nigeria.

Internal Migration began very early from the South Eastern part of Tiv land where yam production mainly for local consumption and other utility needs first started. This issue was long fore sighted based on the 1963 population census statistics by J.T. Tseyao:

***Going by the 1963 Nigerian population census, the whole of Tiv land has roughly 126 persons per square mile (PPSM). But southern and parts of central Tiv land have 200 PPSM while densities as low as 25 PPSM existed in the North and North Eastern Tiv land. Shortages of farm land in parts of central and southern Tiv land is unavoidable.***

T.A Varvar, in his contribution added another dimension to this phenomenon of increase yam production of the Tiv people. According to him, the gradual increase for yam production led to land shortages, degenerating into internal migration with the consequential effect of urban formation. That yam trade later became a central-fugal force pushing away, yam farmers and traders from the land exhausted and shortage areas to the centripetal areas of uninhabited fertile land of the Sankera people in Tiv area. He further argues that:

***Commoditization of yam had led to the large scale of Migration of the Tiv population from the southern and central parts of Tiv Land to the fertile areas of yam production, sustaining the immigrants communities where they existed before and creating next ones where they never existed.***

In summary, the analysis so far suggests a chain of related preposition in this study. That increase yam production which first started in the southern and parts of central Tiv land brought about population overgrowth. This was followed by land shortages and exhaustion that gradually engulfed the whole of Tiv land. Land shortages and exhaustion over time transformed into a sensitive centrifugal force pushing yam farmers and marketers out of these areas to the centripetal attraction area of the Sankera people which was then sparsely populated but very fertile for yam production. For over time, the process of migration away to settle in new areas for yam production and trade led to urban centres and semi-urban formation and expansion. In areas, where such centres never existed, new ones were established and expanding the ones which were in existence before. This chain of related preposition therefore speculates that internal Migration of the Tiv yam farmers for the purposes of increase yam production and trade in the post-colonial Tiv land, responsibly factored Urban and Semi-Urban Centres formation, specifically in Sankera core yam production Centre.

Based on this preposition, it also becomes suggestive that socio-political and economic reasons also aided the process of urban formation and expansion. But before we delve into the analysis of the socio-economic and political involvements into urban formation and expansion in

Sankera area of Tiv land, we shall first of all briefly touch on the Tiv traditional mode of internal migration which was positive to urban centre formation for socio-political and economic developments in the area.

Yogbo Gbajir, one of the oldest living Tiv elders of about 117 years old resides at Gbajir Town in Ukum Local Government Area. In the course of our oral interactions with him, he briefly explained to us that the traditional process of internal migration was different from the Fulani type of migration. According to him, Tiv people were never migrating in groups with their families, livestock and all their belongings to different locations reasons like the Fulani people. His vivid explanation on this issue reveals three ways of Tiv Migration namely:

- i. The individual and friendly visit to relations, friends, age-mates, kinsmen, in-laws and others living within the Tiv land.
- ii. People fleeing from family, clannish or kindred witchcrafts for safety to other areas within Tiv land.
- iii. Evacuation of the offspring of a daughter or sister from one clan of family married to other areas in Tiv Land back to her family people for the sake of incomplete or non-payment of the bride-price of their mother and threats of the witchcraft (Mnyam Chiegh).

This oral narration further reveals that individual/friendly visits to cement, ordinary relationships of personal problems like borrowing of domestic animals, cloths, foodstuff or even assistance to marry more wives could transform to relocation of Tiv people permanently settling with their relations in other parts of the Tiv land. These types of visits were very common in the 1930 across the Tiv territory, because of the drastic famine situation at that time on their land. The famine problem was caused by the severe destruction of yam tubers by beetles. Many people would visit their relations or friends in areas of less beetle-attack to solicit for yams and other foodstuff. After making several of such visits, they were offered settlement areas by their host to minimize their problems of famine. One such visitors were given parcels of land for settlement separate them from the original settlers, the family members and other relations used to join them up to build up new communities in such areas.

Secondly a family or two would escape unannounced away from their kinsmen to avoid being killed by the witchcrafts of their stronger kinsmen to other places to start their new communities. In some cases, people could escape to other parts of Tiv land for the fear of natural disasters such as measles meningitis, locusts destructions of crops and others leading to their migration to other locations on Tiv land.

Thirdly, all members of the offspring of a daughter or sister married to another family or kindred would be brought back to their mothers people for reasons of non-payment/incomplete payment of the bride-prices and witchcraft being practiced against such offspring. These offspring may permanently settle in the land of their mothers, building their own community among the people of their mothers (Angbaav).

In a similar way, we interacted with Yogbo Gbajir who also orally interfaced with Ugbem Duwer, a great grandson of Zaki-Biam of about 103 years old. He added another method by which the Tiv people were carrying out their internal migration in their traditional territory. He clearly pointed out to us that increase yam production in Tiv area became an

added source for internal migration of the Tiv people. This source of migration became more and more pronounced as from the 1960s, when yam product and marketing began to attain the position of an economic main-stay among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria.

According to his oral narration, all of sudden in the early 1960s, Tiv people from the South became overwhelmingly interested in marrying out their daughters to Sankera people to get access to farm land for yam farming and cheap food. At the same time, the Sankera people on the other hand developed much more interest in marrying the young ladies from the Southern Tiv land; Gaav and Kunav in particular. This was according to their traditional belief that ‘Kunav’ and ‘Gaav’ people are more endowed naturally with wisdom and smartness than other groups of the Tiv people. Therefore marrying their daughters would produce more smart children. This kind of mutual inter-marriage arrangement brought about a unity of purpose between the Sankera people and the southern Tiv people. This unity of purpose picked many Gaav and Kunav people who were already facing land scarcity in their area to migrate in numbers to settle in the fertile sparsely populated region of Sankera; to promote yam production and marketing.

This process of internal movement eventually led to the formation of Gaav and Kunav-communities in Sankera zone like Kasar, Agbaage etc and expanding the already existing ones like Zaki-Biam, Ayati, Idyom, Afia and many others.

Evidently, the migration of ‘Kunav and ‘Gaav’ specifically from the Southern party of Tiv land across River Katsina-Ala to Sankera region purposely for yam production and trade became more and more pronounced from 1960s upward as speculated orally by elder Ugbem Dugwer. Yam production and trade actually became a formidable factor for urbanization of small and large communities where they were not already in existence and rapid expansion of the ones already existing. It was as a result of this development that a sporadic rise of urban centres emerged in Sankera area in the Late 1970s. Such centres as Zaki-Biam, Ugbam, Anyiin, Tov-Donga, Chito, Agbaaye, Jootar, Ayati, Vaase, Gbeji and many others flashily up sprang and expanded.

Historically, the formation of certain Urban centres in this region started earlier than in the 1960s, for example Zaki-Biam, Ugbam, Anyiin, Tor-Donga, Agbaaye and others. History has it that, this category of urban settlements were the residences of influential people especially the traditional Chiefs ‘Ashagbajor’ and later ‘Utor-Agbande’ of the pre-colonial Tiv territory. Apart from being influential in one way or the other, this group of traditional people commanded material wealth with many wives, children, slaves and visitors, thereby attracting more and more people to settle with them for protection and many other pecuniary benefits. In this case yam production and marketing simply played a major role of expanding and developing them economically.

Specifically urban settlements in Sankera area as a result of yam production and trade in Sankera zone include: Chito, Vaase, Gbeji, Ayati, Agbaaye, Tine-nune, Gbor, Tyo-Gbenda Udende, Jootar, and others. The formation of this category of urban centres was attributed to their natural locations in the fertile, and sparsely populated areas within southern region. Suggestively, even the early Southern Immigrants who had settled in the already existing communities among the indigenes, for the sake of land inadequacy, had to migrate their siblings to these new settlements thereby expanding them the more, Empirically, Fave Uchichi, Vaachia Iorbo;, Abwa Asemaabo, Iorliam Bagu and Nongoatse Agbatse, who

earlier settled and established at Zaki-Biam town, had part of their siblings relocated to Chito, Afia Vaase and Dan-Anacha in the remote areas of Sankera Zone to increase their farming activities on the vast area of Sankera land.

For illustrative purposes, find below a ten-yearly interval of the migration trend of the Gaav, Kunav, and “Shangev” groups to the Sankera zone from 1960-2000 denoting the movement of yam farmers and traders from the Southern and Central parts of Tiv land to Sankera area, consequently leading to the development of urban centres.

A Table showing the migration of the Southern Tiv to the Sankera, North Eastern part of Tiv land for Yam Production and Trade, 1960-2000

S/N	Year	Origins of Migrants	No of Migrants in every ten-year	Host Committees
1.	1961-1976	Kunav, Gaav & Shangev-Tiev	2764 1821 2114 2514 3117	Zaki-Biam Ugba Anyiin Chito Gbor
2.	1971-1980	Kunav, Gaav & Shangev-Tiev	3593 2367 2748 3168 4052	Zaki-Biam Ugba Anyiin Chito Gboor
3.	1981-1996	Kunav, Gaav & Shangev-Tiev	4670 3077 3672 4248 5167	Zaki-Biam Ugba Anyiin Chito Gbor
4.	1991-2000	Kunav, Gaav & Shangev Tiev	1934 1274 1479	Zaki-Biam Ugba Anyiin

			1759	Chito
			2181	Gbor

**Source:** The Nigerian population Census of 1963.

The field survey of Tiv Land in 2013

The above table clearly shows the numbers of Southern Tiv people of Gaav, Kunav and Shangev-Tiev migrating to five selected communities of Sankera region in every ten years, from 1961-2000 purposely for yam production, trade and other activities.

The primary aim of this presentation will be defeated without any mention of the socio-political and economic turnaround brought to Sankera area as a result of urbanization through yam production and trade.

In this regard, Johnson's argument has to be recalled

*Development is a function of the agrarian commercialization and rationalization under a pecuniary stimulus call for a network of conveniently located central places where efficient exchange of goods and services could occur.*

Based on John's quotation in the above, it is no longer an understatement to argue that the formation of urban centres in a region is an invitation to the socio-economic and political development of such a region. Urban centres in any developing economy of the world are the platforms where all manner of commercial, socio-political and economic activities are freely and commonly transacted all over the world. Ideally, the coming together of people for one purpose normally evokes struggles and competition which are key to creativity, ingenuity, new discoveries and many others for achieving economic development.

In this particular case the coming together of the southern migrants converging in the new formed centres of the Sankera zone instigated a lot of socio-economic developments in the region. With the formation of urban centres across the same geo political region, arose the dire economic need to open up new roads to link up these urban centres which were quickly turning into commercial nerves of the area. This move also eased the hitherto communication gap among the Tiv communities, thereby promoting the exchange of socio-economic ideas and innovations for the overall development of the Sankera people. Lohoudedoo Burya while sharing this similar view states that;

*The receiving area of Sankera usually gets their work done by the migrants at relatively cheap cost, that the migrants population provides skills for successful execution of projects, that they usually provided for the running of government establishments like private school teachers that immigrants initiated the formation of associations for their benefits and sometimes participated in the communities formed special interest associations such as credit and saving societies like 'Bam' 'Adashi' for economic benefits.*

In addition, urban centre formation of immigrants in this part of the Tiv land, encouraged population growth; population growth in turn led to increased taxation and other related business activities. All these combined and further boosted the socio-economic activities in Sankera zone which later served as one of the vital factors for the creation of more local Government Council's in the area. It has been argued that the creation of additional Local Government Councils, socio-economic facilities, and other social amenities as well as political dividends driven to Sankera zone came about as a result of yam production and trade in the area.

In conclusion, therefore, the present write-up speculates historically that the tall standing position of the Sankera zone, in terms of socio-political and economic developments in Tiv land, is a derivation of the natural land and human labour force for yam production and trade of the area.

## **ENDNOTES**

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