

## The Role of the Environment in Migrations and Settlements of Jukun Awanu People Along the Benue Valley

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### Abstract

From the perspective of Economic History, the environment is one of the major determinants of man's adaptability and sustainability. It determines the economic activities of man. It also compels man to either live in a particular place or force him to migrate out of that place to another favourable and peaceful place where he can continue his daily economic activities. In the case of Jukun as an ethnic group in the Benue Valley, we recorded in their chronicle the history of their migration from Gongola Hawal and parts of the Upper Benue basin and Lake Chad to their present habitat in the Middle Benue Region and built their first capital in Kwararafa near Wuryo in Gassol Local Government Area of Taraba State and later in Uka or Wukari in Southern Taraba State. Even Greenberg's language classification states that the Jukun belongs to the Jukunoid Groups of the Benne-Congo sub-family. In writing the economic history of Jukun, they are categorized into two, namely, riverine and non-riverine Jukun. In this paper, our main concern is to examine the economic activities of riverine Jukun, that is, Jukun Awannu and Wurbo. This category of Jukun is mainly found in the riverine environment due to their fishing, farming, and canoe construction activities along river Benue, Chad basins, and tributaries. We also intend to look at the challenges of such activities in their environment and suggest ways to address them.

**Keywords:** *Economic History, Migrations, Environment, Jukun Awannu, Riverine*

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## **Background to the Study**

Environment refers to our immediate surroundings where all living and non-living components co-exist. It can be used to refer to the natural, social, and built or artificial environment. It can be classified into three or four categories, namely, aquatic or hydrosphere environment (i.e., marine such as oceans, seas, and freshwaters, which includes lakes and rivers). It includes terrestrial or lithosphere environment that is land, soil, and or rocky outer layer of the earth. The atmospheric or air environment. The fourth one is the biosphere or biological component of the environment, that is, that part of the earth where living things thrive and live. It is the portion of the planet that can sustain life. The earth has three other spheres: the atmosphere, the lithosphere, and the hydrosphere. All four types or categories are indispensable for human and animal survival. Above all, the environment determines human activities like fishing, farming, and other occupations, as seen in this paper.

It should be borne in mind that the environment can be favorable and or unfavorable. Moreover, it is also important to note that the environment is dynamic and changing due to some natural or human factors. Thus, the alternative is between good and bad. If it is good, people and animals settle there permanently, and if otherwise, people are compelled to migrate or emigrate from that environment to a favorable condition. Therefore, it is on the basis of this, that the paper is crafted or coined as *Environment, Migration and Settlement of Jukun Awunnu People along the Benue valley*.<sup>1</sup> Let me reiterate that the environment is fundamental and one of the major determinants of people's economic activities. From the perspective of Economic History, Jukun Awunnu, and Wurbo are under the category of riverine Jukun, whose occupations or economic activities are fishing and canoe construction. They share similar economic activities with the Ijo of the Niger Delta. On the basis of this, Ruben K. Udo says:

*It is hardly necessary to say that the economy of groups such as the Ijo of the Niger Delta has been closely related to and very much limited in some aspects by the conditions of their physical environment. In this vast, low-lying region of swamps and innumerable waterways and creeks, the traditional economy has mainly been limited to fishing and salt-making. transportations have been restricted to canoes and, lately, powered riverine boats.*<sup>2</sup>

This quotation equally represents the generally acceptable picture of the economic activities of Jukun Awannu and Wurbo people around river Benue and its tributaries.

Having said that, this paper shall answer the following fundamental questions:

- i. Who is the Jukun Awannu and Wurbo people?
- ii. What type of environment are they mainly found in or located in?
- iii. What are their traditional economic activities?
- iv. What are some of the challenges associated with their occupational activities?

## **Jukun/Jukun Awannu: Origin and Migration**

There are two oral traditions about the word Jukun as an ethnic group. According to one of the traditions, the word Jukun is derived from the word *Pajukun*, which has been shortened by Hausa to be called Jukun due to difficulty pronouncing the word Pajukun. In the other

tradition, the word Jukun came into being as a result of a response to a white man when he was strangely looking at a giant typical Jukun man. Then, the Jukun man responded and said, *Mclim Pajukun Ba?* which literally means, "Am I not a human being? From this response, we understood that the word Jukun means human being. These two traditions supported what Mahdi Adumu said: Jukun is the name the Jukun ethnic group calls themselves and is understood as such by many other people. Then, where was their original habitat? Although, some of the Jukun believed that their original base was *Yemen*. This *Hamitic Hypothesis* was debunked by many professional historians like Abdullahi Smith, *Sa'ad* Abubakar, et cetera. There must be substantive proof or evidence for their claim of Eastern origin. The only undisputed fact is that Smith, *Sa'ad* Abubakar says:

*There are reasons to believe that before the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Jukun's most important habitant was Gongola Hawal, part of the upper Benue Basin and Lake Chad. For in the days when Bepi Flourished, its rule extended through the upper Benue as far as Rai Buba.... Thus, on these bases alone, it can fairly be said that the Gongola Basin appears to have been the main Jukun habitant. Moreover, it still contains several Jukun communities, such as Kirfi, Pindiga, and Julingo Shani.<sup>3</sup>*

Based on the above submission, the Jukun's original inhabitants were Gongola Hawal, Upper Benue Basin, and part of Lake Chad, not Yemen. Even Greenbera's language classification states that the Jukun belongs to the Jukun-oid Groups of the Benue-Cango sub-family. Subsequently, the Jukun migrated from the upper Benue region to their present habitat in the Middle Benue region and built their first capital in Kwararafa near Wuryo in Cassol Local Government Area of Taraba State and later in Uka or Wukari in Southern Taraba State. Thus, the study area is the Benue Valley, which is arbitrarily divided into lower, middle, and upper regions. Furthermore, the upper region is further subdivided into the Gongola and Yola arms.

From the economic perspective, in the analysis of the Jukun community in Benue Valley, they are categorized into riverine and non-riverine Jukun. The riverine Jukun are Awannu and Wurbo, just like Ijo, Urhobo, and Itsekiri mentioned above. In this category of Jukun, their main traditional occupations are fishing and canoe construction.

### **Jukun Awannu and Hydrosphere Environment**

The Jukun Awannu people are naturally found in the riverine environment, which is why Dogaru Douglas asserts that:

*The phrase Awannu means the riverine, and the word Jukun, derived from Pajukun, means people. If the two words Jukun and Awannu) joined together, it will, therefore, mean riverine people. The name Jukun Awannu, as they are called by their Jukun brothers and others as well, is a nickname that they are easily identified with as a result of their close romance with riverine activities such as fishing, canoe construction, and farming, as well as water transportation. They are found primarily close to the rivers where they carry out their businesses of fishing and other fishing-oriented activities, which is their main source of livelihood. This explains why, during the colonial era,*

*they were mostly referred to as riverine Jukun by even the colonial administration and historians as well as anthropologists.*<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, non-riverine Jukun are *Banani* or *Baada* and their related groups. This category of Jukun is naturally found in a non-riverine environment. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on riverine Jukun people, that is, Awannu and Wurbo. Etymologically, Awannu means those that survive on water or river. In contrast, Banani or Baada means people of the farm or farmers. Jukun Awannu and Wurbo mainly engaged in fishing with some farming and canoe constructions or making. The Banani or Baada (non-riverine Jukun) and Abakwariga engage in farming, weaving, dyeing, and blacksmithing. Therefore, based on the above analysis, their locations or environment determine their economic occupation or activities.<sup>6</sup>

In our classification of environment, the most suitable and accommodative environment for them is a hydrosphere or aquatic environment for their traditional or ancestral economic activities, fishing, and canoe construction. This sub-group of Jukun is always found in riverine areas like oceans, seas, lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams. It has been established that the hydrosphere is very large, and it contains about 71% of the surface area of the earth; it covers all water present on the surface of the earth. It involves salt, water, freshwater, frozen water, and groundwater. Its significant impact has been that it sustains various life forms and plays an essential role in the ecosystems and regulating the atmosphere. It benefits not only the Jukun Awannu and Wurbo but also human beings generally. Besides, drinking water is used for domestic purposes like cooking, cleaning, and industrial purposes. As we shall see, it can also be used for fishing, transportation (with canoes), agriculture (farming), and generating electricity through hydropower.<sup>7</sup>

### **Jukun Awannu Fishing Activities**

Fishing and canoe constructions along the Benue Valley and its tributaries constitute one of the major segments of the economic activities of the Jukun Awannu and Wurbo people. Another important activity is farming. Historically, the Jukun-Awannu and Wurbo are one of the sub-divisions of Jukun and descendants of the defunct kwararafa confederate state. This category of riverine Jukun is mainly found in Lokoja, Makurdi, Ibi, Numa, Jimetu, Mayo, Narewa, Tella, and Sheka, to mention only a few.<sup>8</sup>

Fishing in Jukun-Awannu means (*Pazhe or Aje wa pan*), is the activity of trying to catch fish. Fish are usually caught in the wild or bush in rivers, ponds, lakes, seas, and even oceans, a hydrosphere environment. The techniques for catching fish include hand gathering, spearing, netting, angling, and trapping. Generally, fishing may include catching aquatic animals other than fish, such as mollusks, cephalopods, crustaceans, echinoderm, crocodiles, hippopotami, et cetera. The term is not generally applied to aquatic animals such as whales, where the term whaling is more appropriate. Fishing tournaments or festivals are held in places like Ibi (Nwonyo) in Taraba State and Argungu in Kebbi State. It is imperative to note that the central focus of this study is Jukun-Awannu and Wurbo. However, they are not the only fishermen in the Benue basins.<sup>9</sup>

From a global perspective, according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (F.A.O.) statistics, the total number of commercial fishermen and fish farmers is estimated to be 38 million. Fisheries and aquaculture provide direct and indirect employment to over 500 million people in developing countries.<sup>10</sup> In 2005, the worldwide per capita consumption of fish captured from wild or bash fisheries was 14.4 kilograms, with an additional 9.4 kilograms harvested from fish farms. In his analysis of fish and other agricultural products, B.Z. Abubakar says;

*Historically, since Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, God provided them with food and other fruits. Man cannot survive spiritually and physically in his or her environment without food. Food can only be acquired with tools or implements for fishing, hunting, and farming. In general terms, fishing and farming are inseparable, and they are part and parcel of agriculture throughout the stages of history, that is, from the early Stone Age, Acheullian, Sangeon, and Iron Age to the present age of globalization, with emphasis on the tools and implements used by man in order to adapt and survive in the environment he/she finds himself/herself.<sup>11</sup>*

Fish (Azhe in Jukun) is an essential dietary element and one of the significant sources of animal protein available to man. Thus, as mentioned above, fish can only be acquired or caught with tools or implements. Fishing occurs not only in Benue and Chad Basins but in all of Nigeria's rivers, creeks, lagoons, lakes, and oceans. The most active fishing period occurs during the dry season (December to April), whereas during the wet season (May to October). The fishermen also engage in farming activities. Federal and state governments are encouraging the development of local fisheries inland and at sea by sponsoring researchers to stock reservoirs and offering training to improve fish culture.

Having seen what fishing means, now let us turn to the fishery. Generally, the fishery is an entity that focuses on cultivating or harvesting fish. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (F.A.O.):

*A fishery is an activity leading to the harvesting of fish. It may involve the capture of wild fish or the rearing of fish through aquaculture.<sup>12</sup>*

It is typically defined in terms of the people involved, species or type of fish, area of water or seabed, method of fishing, class of boats, purpose of the activities, or a combination of the preceding features.<sup>13</sup> This definition often includes a combination of fish and fisheries in a region. Haven discussed fishing and fishery; now, let us examine its history globally. Fishing and fishery started in antiquity; it is an ancient practice that dates back to at least the beginning of the upper Paleolithic period, about 400,000 years ago.<sup>14</sup> Archeological investigations in Asia indicated that there were skeletal remains of a man who used to consume freshwater fish.<sup>15</sup> The finding has shown some discarded fish bones. Then, in Africa, fishing activity was evident since about 200,000 BC. According to this finding, people have developed basketry for fishing tools or traps and spinning as an early form of knitting to make fishing nets to catch more fish in large quantities.<sup>16</sup> During this period, most people in Africa lived a hunting-gathering lifestyle. They were mobile or nomadic, just like Awannu and Wurbo, who today are also mobile and scattered all over the Benue and Chad basins.



Based on the above analysis, one needs to find out when fishing started among the Jukun-Awunnu and Wurbo people. Naturally, this occupation is inherent in them. Biological and environmental factors played and are still significant in this profession, B.Z. Abubakar confirmed this postulation when he states that:

*Thus, environmental factor is one of the major criteria or determinants of the occupation of any group of people within a given period. In simple terms, environment, hereditary, and other natural factors played significant roles in determining the occupation of a particular group of people during a particular period. Therefore, based on these natural and environmental factors, some particular ethnic groups are identified with specific occupations. For example, in Nigeria, some particular ethnic groups are identified as fishermen; some are pastoralists, some are yam producers, some are cassava producers, and some are groundnut producers. In contrast, some are palm kernel producers, et cetera. It is important to note that even our contact with the Europeans still needs to completely change these natural economic activities.<sup>17</sup>*

### **Fishing Tools or Tackles**

Apart from environmental factors and other reasons mentioned above, fishing can only be possible with some tools or equipment necessary for fishing activities. Fishing tools or tackles are the equipment fishermen or anglers use when catching fishing. In fact, any equipment or gear used for fishing can be called fishing tackle or tool. These include hooks, baits, lines, spears, nets, gaffs, traps, wardens, tackle boxes, and cranes. Fishing tools or tackle can be contrasted with fishing techniques. Fishing tools refer to the physical equipment used when or during fishing, whereas fishing techniques refer to how implements or tools are used when or during fishing.<sup>18</sup>

### **Canoe Construction for Fishing and Water Transportation System**

A Canoe (Ako in Jukun) is a lightweight, narrow vessel typically pointed at both ends and open on top, propelled by one or more seated, standing, and kneeling paddlers facing the direction of traveling and using a single-bladed paddle.<sup>19</sup> In British English, the term canoe can also be referred to as *kayak*, while canoes are then called Canadian canoes or open Canoes to distinguish them from kayaks. Among the riverine Jukun and other riverine communities, canoes are widely used as one of the significant fishing tools as well as a means of water transportation, competitions such as racing, fishing festivals, touring and camping, freestyle, and general recreation.

Canoes or engine boats, as the case may be, are developed or carved based on the geographical location and economic motives of the riverine people all over the world, not just the Awannu and Wurbo people alone.<sup>20</sup> Some designs are used with sails or outriggers purposely meant for a vital means of transportation, exploration, and trade. Canoe-making remains an important theme or feature of the economic and cultural activities of riverine people. Adashu Gambo Zaku says:

*The intended use of the canoe dictates its hull shape, length, and construction. Historically, canoes and engine boats were dugouts made of the bark of a wood frame, but construction materials evolved to canvas a wood frame, then add some aluminum. Most modern canoes are made up of molded plastic or composites such as fiberglass.<sup>21</sup>*

From a general historical perspective, canoe construction for fishing and water Transportation systems is not peculiar to riverine Jukun alone but is a global phenomenon to all riverine communities worldwide. In broader etymological terms, the word canoe comes from *caribou* (dugout) via the Spanish canoe. It was constructed between 8200 and 7600 BC and found in the Netherlands. Thus, archaeological excavations in Denmark revealed the use of dugouts and paddles during the Ertebelle periods around C. 5300-79 50 BC.<sup>22</sup>

Canoes or Akoh are constructed using various materials, including tree bark and hallowed-out tree trunks. Bark canoes required much skill and could only be made from the bark of certain trees at the right time of the year. As the case may be, trees scarred by the removal of bark to make canoes or engine boats became known as canoe trees. Most of the riverine people commonly use **Kurdi** trees (a typical tree of over 4 meters in length with a trunk growing in the forest) to construct canoes. Canoe making is a carpentry work. Thus, most of the tools required for carpentry work are also used by canoe carvers. As a result, canoe construction is a real carpentry work. There are no definite sizes (in length or width) of canoes. In other words, the sizes depend on the availability of raw material (trees), and the economy is usually smaller naively; canoes meant for fishing purposes are usually smaller than canoes meant for transportation.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the latter is more prominent in size. The size of canoe meant for fishing purposes has a length of 4.3m (14 ft.) and a weight of 23 kg. Generally, canoes are susceptible to damage due to wear and tear; for that reason, they are easily repaired or mended. They commented on the importance and roles of canoes and ships, B.Z. Abubakar opines that:

*From a global perspective, Canoes/ships were meant for fishing alone, and early explorers also used more giant canoes/ships to explore this part of the continent. The main purpose of canoe construction is for fishing and conveying people and goods across rivers and oceans. Early explorers like Mungo Park, Clapperton, Landers, and others explored the continent of Africa with bigger canoes.<sup>24</sup>*

Based on the above quotation, canoes are meant for fishing activities and for conveying goods, passengers, and explorers across oceans, rivers, ponds, and canals. Although, it has its challenges and disadvantages. However, there are tonnes of advantages when it comes to water transportation. These include the fact that this means of transportation can carry bulky and heavy goods and passengers. Economically, it has low running costs and low maintenance expenses, the cheapest means of transport over long distances. It also has a natural route network, allowing flexible services with little or no congestion. On the other hand, water transportation is slower than road transportation and aircraft, which means that it is unsuitable for transporting perishable goods. Overall, canoe construction for fishing and

water transportation among the riverine Jukun communities contributed significantly to the socio-economic development of the Benue and Chad Basins. It is important to note that a canoe is a tool of indispensable relevance to a riverine Jukun man just as the cuttle is to a Fulani herdsman. In fact, possession is used as one of the criteria to determine the richness or otherwise of an average riverine Jukun man.

However, some challenges are associated with fishing, farming, canoe construction, and other riverine activities.<sup>25</sup> Apart from the problems of processing, storage, and packaging of fish and other farm products, Dogara Douglas says that:

*The business of catching fish, like other professions or occupations, is not without hazards. These include attacks by dangerous animals or reptiles like hippopotami, crocodiles, snakes, et cetera, and unhealthy weather conditions during harmattan and rainy seasons.*<sup>26</sup>

Nothing at all is problem-free. Therefore, challenges are part and parcel of life. Despite all these challenges, the economic activities of riverine Jukun greatly contribute to the food security in the country and even beyond. It has also provided employment opportunities to people within and outside the riverine environment.

### **Conclusion**

The environment is one of the major determinants of human activities and is fundamental as a source of natural and human resources. Furthermore, it also serves as a powerhouse for livelihood. People generally depend solely on the environment for sustainability. Be it riverine or non-riverine. The environment is an indispensable factor in our daily activities. In the case of the Jukun Awannu and Wurbo riverine people of Benue Valley, their major traditional and hereditary occupations are fishing, farming, and Canoe construction, determined by their environment. These occupations serve as sources of food, revenue, and means of water transportation for everybody, not only riverine people alone. Canoes, or *Koh* as it is called in the Jukun language, are for conveying goods and passengers across river Benue and its tributaries.

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