

## The Sorko Expansion in the Waters of the Niger to the End of the 20th Century

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is exclusively on a series of Sorko (also called Sarkawa) migrant communities, their settlements<sup>1</sup> and foremost their major contributions in private sector to the general development of the riverine communities<sup>2</sup> in Yauri and Borgu Emirates of Kebbi and Niger States of Nigeria, up to the end of 20th century. Through their migratory expeditions long before the 20th century, the Sorko who are primarily known as Kabawa fishermen from Kabi (now Kebbi) region have established permanent stronghold in the east and west banks of River Niger within the geographical area of the 2 emirates. They provided a lot of socio-political and foremost, economic development in the area. This research has emphasis on the riverine communities of Ngaski and Borgu Districts. Notwithstanding the acute shortage of documented sources the paper has been able through the use of oral data to bring into light the major characteristic features of the Sorko activities.*

**Keywords:** *The Sorko people, Niger River, Migrations, Intergroup Relations, Social Integration*

### INTRODUCTION

The name Sorko might have been the origin of the Hausa word Sarkawa; Sorkawa which can be regarded to mean the Sorko people. Sarkawa is the name given to all fishermen who came from the upper reaches of the River Niger. Some of them were Hausa, such as those who are now settled between Bakunji and Gebbe, in the present Shanga Local Government Area of Yauri Emirate while others are Zabarmawa ‘Songhai’; Sorko etc. Since the creation of Kainji lake, Borgu and Yauri Emirates, particularly in Borgu and Ngaski Districts, had received thousands of Sarkawa immigrants from Argungu Emirate who now reside there as permanent citizens.<sup>3</sup> The Sorko society is believed to be one of the branches of the Nilo-Saharan language family of the Songhay extraction, mostly from the larger part of western Niger and adjacent areas of Burkina Faso, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria. The Sorko majority have since 18<sup>th</sup> century assimilated into the Hausa dialect, including their political structure and religion (Islam). Many had mastery of the course of River Niger and made their livelihoods from the river and its bordering islands. As of recent, they live in the Niger

River valley and exploit the river for fishing jaunt and irrigation. They grow millet, maize, sorghum and rice.<sup>4</sup>

In Songhay dialect, the word Sorko means “Masters of the River”. They were warrior fishermen who specialized in building and operating boats and canoes. The Songhay chronicle shows that after a long history of conflict, the Sorko fishermen are said to have once defeated the Gabibi community and established their Kingdom of Al-Kawkaw with capital at Dendi, located along the Niger River about halfway between the river great bend and its confluence with the Benue River. The foundation of Songhay Empire in 1464 itself under King Sunni Ali (1464-1492) was greatly achieved with the Sorko military might. The Sorko boatmen were said to have helped Ali during his wars of territorial expansion and were also instrumental in the Ali’s great military victory against Djenne in 1475, which led to the consolidation of his empire.<sup>5</sup>

During the leadership of Askia Muhammad Toure (1443-1538) Songhay launched a series of attacks against Kebbi but was never successful. Instead, peace reigned between the 2 powerful kingdoms. Consequently, there was

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expansion of the Sorko in Kebbi valley during this period, which perhaps led to the Sorko assimilation into Kabawa.<sup>6</sup>

### EARLY SORKO MIGRATIONS AND THEIR SUBSEQUENT SETTLEMENTS ON THE NIGER RIVER

Even though the exact period of the influx of other Nigerian tribes into the Niger areas of Yauri and Borgu could not be dated accurately, some studies have clearly showed that the Sorko were not the first fishing community to have stepped in their foot into these areas. The Gungawa (Reshe) island dwellers were believed to be among the autochthons of Yauri region who established their settlements on some islands on the River Niger in the Yauri and Borgu areas. By the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Hausa migrant traders penetrated the area, they found the Gungawa living there. Those Hausa migrants were believed to have established their hegemony by peaceful means over the Gungawa and later used force and brought the remaining communities on the mainland under their control, establishing their political rule on the people, to date.<sup>7</sup>

The period from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had witnessed widespread migrations and settlements of various communities into other Nigerian communities which had produced a diverse effect on both the migrant groups as well as the host communities. Renowned scholars on migrations like Samir and Prothero have conducted researches and provided several explanations as to why such migrations occurred. As such, the scholars have characterized migration into two (2) types, namely the seasonal and permanent.<sup>8</sup> As far as seasonal migrants were concerned, Prothero estimated 259,000 of them as going south from Sokoto Province alone, and Samir Amin estimated the flow of the Nigerians at one million persons annually, who mostly settled in different communities along the Niger banks. Many of those migrant settlers were highly impressed by the favourable climate of the area.<sup>9</sup>

Prothero has shown that economic motives were of outstanding importance to migrants, as many were said to have left home seeking to supplement their income in various ways. Beside the general desire for economic betterment there was another push factor that forced people to migrate. Most of the 1,300 migrants interviewed along the River Niger

between July and September 1966 indicated that they left home because of poor crop yields, lack of farm land or because they wanted to earn money for bride price or for setting up petty trading activities. About 5% of them argued that they left home in order to avoid enemies, while several others simply attributed their departure from home to fate.<sup>10</sup>

The early Sorko influence in the waters of Yauri and Borgu Kingdoms could be dated back to mid-16<sup>th</sup> century when Muhammad Kanta (1516-1561), founder of the Kebbi Kingdom is said to have reached agreements of free and peaceful passage with Yauri aimed at securing trade routes through Yauri to Nupeland. However, there was no reported case of battles between the two States even during Kanta's time but in return, Kanta agreed not to attack Yauri. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, Yauri fearlessly gave asylum to a deposed king of Kebbi, Muhammadu Dan Giwa (1700-1717) who was believed to have come along with his Kabawa loyalists who were mostly fishermen. They freely engaged in their fishing outing in the waters of Yauri and in the neighbouring islands.<sup>11</sup>

The year 1810 was another turning point in the history of cordial relations between Kebbi and Yauri following the agreement of peace and neutrality between Gwandu and Yauri during the reign of King Albishir Dan A'i of Yauri. This agreement ensured free passage of different communities, including the Sorko fishermen into Yauri area. They further moved into Borgu Kingdom and began to establish relations with the Borguans.<sup>12</sup>

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the indigenous communities of Yauri and Borgu Emirates had witnessed the arrival and settlements of some more Nigerian communities especially the Hausa, Sarkawa (Sorko), Zabarma, Nupe, Yoruba and Igbo among others. The most leading migrant groups were the Hausa who have earlier settled in the area as itinerant traders, farmers and craftsmen, then followed by the Sorko. They both settled along the eastern and western banks of the River Niger.<sup>13</sup> The towns of Wara, Kakwaran, Gungun Hoge, Gungun Bussa, Malale, Shagunu and Yumu were known to have earlier received a considerable number of the Hausa and Sorko migrants because of their geographical and economic importance, with abundance of water resources. This no doubt had played a significant role in attracting the nearby and far

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away traders, especially the Nupe, Igbo and Yoruba who transformed modern fishing-tools business in the area. The fishing occupation received much impetus. Consequently, those coastal towns and villages, especially in Ngaski and Borgu Districts were highly favoured by the immigrants. No wonder such settlements are now developed into large towns with people of diverse ethnic origins.<sup>14</sup>

### THE CLIMAX OF THE SORKO EXPANSION AND THEIR ACTIVITIES IN THE NIGER BANKS

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were continuous migrations of the Sorko fishermen who slowly occupied the whole length of the Middle Niger purposely to carry out their fishing occupation. As professional fishermen, they concentrated on the banks of the River Niger and its tributaries in the Yauri and Borgu Emirates in the territories of the Akimba, Gungawa, Lopawa and Laru ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> Though many of them came into the area before the Niger Dam Resettlement Project, the vast majority came in the late 1960s after the dam was commissioned. By then most of the indigenous island dwellers like the Gungawa (Reshe), Kambari (especially the Akimba of Libata, Wara, Kakwaran, etc), Lopawa and Laru were resettled on the mainland.<sup>16</sup> According to the indigenous informants, the clear identity of the earliest Sorko immigrants was thin facial marks on cheeks of their men and women, similar to that of the Kambari. However, they were fluent Hausa speakers.<sup>17</sup>

The Sarkawa immigrants were believed to have come in large numbers, migrating along with their wives, children and properties and occupied the eastern banks of the dam and what remained of the Hoge Island. They considered their new settlements as their new homes. Enquiries have shown that most of them came from Argungu, Maiyama and Mungadi in Argungu Emirate as a result of pressure of fishing grounds. Other Sorko groups from Niger and Mali later followed the Niger tributaries and finally met their kinsmen. They harmonized their relationships through intermarriages. The completion of Kainji Dam in 1968 was indeed of great economic significance to the Sorko people because it opened up more fishing grounds and opportunities to them. So their influx in the area became noticeable.<sup>18</sup>

Among the first set of the Sorko people who settled within the Ngaski District long before the

Kainji Dam resettlement (between 1920s and 1930s) were the late Nasanyi, Alhaji Dan Kwaifa, Alhaji Manu na Wara, Alhaji Dan Sango Bakari, Alhaji Manu Tungan Mai Ruwa, Alhaji Garba Mai Jirgi, and many others.<sup>19</sup>

The conglomeration of the Sarkawa immigrants formed their new areas of settlement like Tungan Mai Ruwa, Wawu, Bakari, Tungan Halidu in Ngaski District in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was the product of those Sorko migratory expeditions in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that also established parts of the Borgu riverine communities of Malale, Shagunu, Tungan Garba, Islands of Banya, Karula, Shinga and Hoge Island (Gungun Hoge), Tungan Gyama, Yumu, Talke, Bunzawa and Bussa Island (Gungun Bussa) and had some influence at Dossawa village, whose settlers majority were believed to have migrated from Dosso town in Niger Republic. Initially, their major profession was fishing but later some of them engaged in other professions of high values like water transportation (Hausa, fito) where they possessed large canoes operating within their vicinity and beyond. They sailed as far as Onitsha in the eastern part of Nigeria. Some of them became rich and had even inter-married with the local communities among whom were the royal classes, a reason why they entered party politics.<sup>20</sup>

It is indeed, not an exaggeration for one to say that there was no single riverine town or village without resident Sorko people living on permanent basis.

### EFFECTS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SORKO MIGRANT COMMUNITY ON THE PEOPLE OF YAURI AND BORGU EMIRATES

The social and economic impact of the activities of the Sorko immigrants towards the development of the territory and its society can be dated back to the end of the 19th century when population expansion seems to have stimulated economic activities especially in trade and commerce in the area of the river Niger. As already seen, fishing had received great impetus through the preservation of the fishing culture by the Sorko. Some of the Sorko immigrants had engaged themselves in farming when they arrived. It needs to be mentioned that the area had gained prominence in farming profession by producing large quantity of grains which made the area well known in Nigeria.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, there was flow of a variety of goods from outside the territory which no doubt

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had confirmed expansion of markets not only within the boundary of the riverine communities but went far beyond into the nearby hinterland settlements like Ngaski, Makawa, Kwanga, Gungun Tagwaye, Cupamini, Dilli, Auna, Kabirba, Dalau and others.<sup>22</sup>

The contacts between the riverine communities and the Sorko immigrants had also contributed to the establishment of commercial network of Hausa, Zabarma, Yoruba and the Igbo Diasporas through the exchange of goods which later made the area and its environs prominent and successful in both long and short distance trades. Those commercial relations no doubt developed and expanded their trade in commodities like fish and groundnut as well as other commodities like Kolanuts and salt. There was encouragement in the development of occupational groups and specialization in modern artisans by the indigenous youths some of whom became mechanics, masons, carpenters, food sellers, drivers and many others.<sup>23</sup>

Foremost, the Sorko communities living in the areas of Borgu and Yauri have no doubt contributed to the growth of revenue generation through their payment of annual taxes as well as expansion of markets, since most of them did not confine themselves to fishing and agriculture. They engaged in other professions of high value and many other skillful jobs that made them acceptable among the people they lived.

Cultural assimilation was another effect of the riverinners' interactions with the Sorko immigrants. Several cultural changes occurred, whereby the host tribes adopted new modes of dressing, religion and the language of the leading migrant tribe -the Hausa. For instance, nearly all the Akimba, Gungawa, Laru and Lopawa today are fluent Hausa speakers, a development which facilitated the oral interviews for this study.

The Sorko who were Hausa as well were no doubt part of this major development as they proved to be a distinct specialised Hausa cultural group. Almost in all the riverine towns and villages there was hardly an indigenous man or woman bearing their local or traditional names. Most bore Hausa names like Manu, Audu, Shehu, Mamman, Amadu, Shagari, Garba, Mammadu, Mashayabo, Halima, Abu, A'i, etc, all of which were derived from either Islam or the Hausa. This was simply because all the Sorko were practicing Muslims. Many

riverinners had adopted the religion of their guests, Islam. Indeed, it should be recalled from the earlier discussions that all the pioneer Sorko immigrants were Muslims who become assimilated into Hausa-Muslim culture since the 18th century. Social integration had reached its peak when the majority of the immigrants, especially among the Hausa, Zabarma and Sarkawa who have been intermarrying from the indigenous tribes and among themselves, a development which automatically made them to become close relatives irrespective of differences of language, ethnicity or religion. To-date, intermarriages across ethnicities has become the leading social factor in the area.

The religion of Islam and the Hausa culture are the main beneficiaries of the new sociological development.<sup>24</sup>

Emergence of new towns and villages was another direct effect as already seen with the case of the Sarkawa immigrants who established their new settlements which today remained part of the Ngaski and Borgu Districts. The leading Sorko established settlements were Tungan Mai Ruwa, Wawu, Bakari, Tungan Halidu and many others.

The Sorko large settlement in Gungun Hoge is quite admirable. As at present in new Wara town, there is a large Sorko dominant ward called unguwar Sarkawa, which came into existence since 1968 after the dam resettlement. These settlements were run by the Sorko Village Heads who were answerable to the Emirs of Borgu and Yauri.<sup>25</sup>

More interestingly, the Sorko and other non-indigenous communities were allowed to participate fully in the political activities of the host community. Available evidence showed that some of them were even absorbed into the services of the ruling class,<sup>32</sup> and were involved in decision making.

For instance, some of those who were absorbed into ruling class were Alhaji Dan Gongola (sometimes called Dan "gondola"- a small long, narrow boat with a high prow and stem, propelled with a single oar.) of the Sorko origin. He was conferred with the royal title of War Chief (Sarkin Yakin Maginga) in Ngaski District during the reign of late Sarkin Maginga Hussaini (1976-2001).

A renowned Sorko businessman Alhaji Umbaru Batte was the current Chairman of the Nigeria's ruling political party, All Progressives Congress (APC) of Ngaski Local Government Area.<sup>26</sup>

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The Sorko migrations and settlements also contributed to the demographical expansion of the occupied towns, though at the initial stage there were no intermarriages between the new settlers and inhabitants of the towns. But as interactions continued they were later allowed to do so. As a result of this, the population increased and the Sorko status changed from strangers to townsmen. It was the polygamous nature of the Sorko that boosted the population expansion. By the end of the 20th century, there were approximately more than two million Sorko settler communities in Borgu and Ngaski Districts. Their presence is no doubt a boost to the preservation of fishing culture in the area, which expanded up to the areas of Lake Chad.<sup>27</sup>

It needs to be noted at this point that Western education has been playing influential role in the Sorko settlements as hundreds of their children were enrolled into such schools, from Primary up to University level. As a result of the influence of Western education, several Sorko are now occupying prominent positions not only in Kebbi and Niger States but also at national level. One Malam Umar Mohammed Wara (popularly known as Dantallo) was among the prominent Sorko personalities who attained high level education. He is the son of a prominent Sorko wealthy business woman called Hajiya Abu 'Yarbankwai from Mungadi. She is among the first set of the Sorko immigrants that came to Wara between the 1930s and the 1940s. Umar was born in August, 1970 at new Wara where he attended Primary School from 1976 to 1981. He later obtained NCE in 1993 and Bachelor degree certificate in 2004 at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where he was still running his Master degree. He is presently lecturing at Federal College of Education, Kontagora in Niger State.<sup>28</sup>

An interesting part of the Sorko history is that, despite the extent of their permanent settlements in the area of the River Niger, they still maintained cordial relations and close contacts with their original homeland -Argungu Emirate. They have been paying occasional visits to each other and also maintained intra-relative marriages.<sup>29</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from the available information at our disposal, migrations were an old feature in the social and economic life of the Sorko people. The territories of the Yauri and Borgu Emirates in the waters of the Rive Niger have also been one of the areas attracting migrant

groups since the pre-colonial era to date. As a matter of fact, today there was hardly a major town or village in the areas, especially those on the coast of the River Niger where the Sorko have no political and economic influence. Their activities in the area of Yauri and Borgu Emirates have become a great source of inspiration to the socio-economic and political development of the inhabitants.

The Hoge Island is the greatest beneficiary of such inter-communal relationship. The Sorko (Sarkawa) settlements can be found in other coastal towns such as in Yauri, Rofia, Zamare, Kisabu, Pisabu, Utono, Gidan Kwano, Gungun Tagwaye, Dilli, Cupamini, Kuka-Ukku, Malale and many others. They live there as a highly practising fishermen accompanied with farming and trade culture.

### REFERENCES

- [1] The influx of *Sorko* migrant communities in the area of Niger River was gradual. Some of them came as individuals and majority later came in groups. The majority settled there as fishermen.
- [2] The indigenous riverine communities of Yauri and Borgu Emirates in Kebbi and Niger States are the Gungawa, Kambari of few Awunci and Akimba majority, Laru and Lopawa. They originally lived along the eastern and western banks of the River Niger long before the construction of Kainji Dam, which made them to be resettled to new environment in 1968. Due to the nature of their environment, they appeared as fishing and farming communities.
- [3] See A. Mahdi, *Rise and Fall of Hausa Rule in Yawuri and Maginga Kingdoms from about 1425 to 1913*, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press Ltd, 2016, p. 14.
- [4] See "Zarma People" in [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djerma](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djerma), accessed on 3/11/2014.
- [5] See "The history of Ancient Songhay: People of Songhay", in [www.thesonghaycivilization.weekbly.com/people](http://www.thesonghaycivilization.weekbly.com/people), accessed 23/7/2017.
- [6] *Ibid.*
- [7] A. Mahdi, *The Hausa Factor in West African History*, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1978, p.51.
- [8] Seasonal immigrants were referred to as 'Yan Cin Rani in Hausa. They moved comparatively short distances (20 to 40 miles) during dry the season from their home towns or districts, probably with their families and with small personal belongings. Their motive for traveling may be partly social-desire to travel, visiting relatives and partly economic like practicing crafts such as weaving, pottery, mat making, to

- trade or to carryout dry season farming, while seasonal immigrants were referred to as ‘*yan tuma da gora*’ who mostly travel with only 3 essentials- a sword or bow and arrow, a bottle shaped gourd for drinking water. Many of them do not practice a specific trade in the areas to which they migrate but rely on their strength in the various labouring occupations which do not required any skill. See M. R. Prothero, *Migrant Labor from Sokoto Province Northern Nigeria*, Kaduna, Government Printers, 1958, p.17.
- [9] A. Samir, *Modern Migrations in Western Africa*, London, Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 80.
- [10] According to the 1913 Northern Nigerian Census Report on Traffic Migration on the River Niger, over 3,500 migrants passed through Yelwa and crossed the Niger monthly to Osogbo, Ilorin, Bida and other towns with available opportunities. These migrants were either from former French territories or the former Sokoto Province. Those coming from the French territories, especially Niger Republic, were mostly heading to Ghana and elsewhere in search of money to pay their taxes and support their families. The majority of them remained in the fertile areas around the River Niger to farm. Others settled down as hunters and blacksmiths. In Prothero, *Migrant Labor from Sokoto Province ...*, p. 73.
- [11] A. Mahdi., “The Hausa Government in Decline: Yauri in the Nineteenth century”, M.A. Dissertation, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University, 1968, Pp. 60-62.
- [12] *Ibid.*
- [13] A. Mansur, “Continuity and Change in the Religious History of the Kambari people, C. 1800-2015”, Sokoto, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, *PhD History Thesis*, 2016, p. 94.
- [14] In discussion with Alhaji Attahiru Giwa, the Village Head of Wara (over 70 years), at his residence Wara, 12/10/2016.
- [15] See A. M. Wara, “The Hausa Factor in Kambari History: Case study of the Akimba group of the Kambari people from the middle of the 18th century up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” in *International Journal of Arts and Combined Sciences*, Vol.3, Number 3, Abuja, August/September, 2013, p.72.
- [16] F. Salamone, “The Serkawa of Yauri: Class, Status or Party?”, *African Studies Review*, vol.18, issue 1, Cambridge University Press, 1975, Pp. 88.
- [17] Mamman Maidaji Yakumashe (over 90 years), at his residence in Bussa, Late Malam Na Utiya (110 years) at Wara and Late Malam Bawa Dan Gado Shagwa (over 100) at Shagwa in Niger State.
- [18] A.M. Wara, “The Contributions of *Zabarma-Sorko* to the Development of the Riverine Communities in Yauri and Borgu Emirates in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, *International Journal of Innovative Studies in Sociology and Humanities*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Andhrapradesh, India, September 2016, p. 38.
- [19] Alhaji Dan-kwaifa (over 70 years), interviewed at Wara, 22/02/2009.
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] In discussion with Late Na Utiya.
- [22] In discussions with Giwa and Late Dan Malam Bawa Shagwa.
- [23] *Ibid.*
- [24] In discussions with Late Dogo na Wara (over 80), at his residence in new Wara, 2/2/2010. According to Dogo, the Sorko had supported the water transportation network as far as Onitsha in southeastern Nigeria via Jebba until the outbreak of the Biafra War (1967-1970).
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Interview with the Village Head of Wara, Attahiru Giwa, 12/10/2016.
- [27] In interview with Alhaji Umar Muhammad (Kwakwaran, over 70 years) at his residence-Wara, 12/9/2017. Other elderly Sorko people have also confirmed the approximate existentiality of such number while others argued that their population was far beyond that.
- [28] In discussion with Mal. Umar Mohammed Wara (47 years), at new Wara, 13/8/2017.
- [29] *Ibid.*

**Citation:** Mansur Abubakar Wara, "The Sorko Expansion in the Waters of the Niger to the End of the 20th Century", *Annals of Global History*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-6, 2019.

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