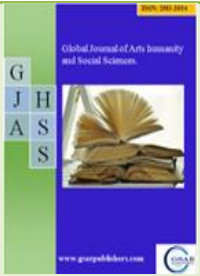
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TRADING AT THE FRONTIER: BENIN'S IMPRINT ON AKOKO-EDO MARKETS AND TRADE NETWORKS

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical and cultural relations between the Benin Kingdom and her Akoko-Edo neighbours, with a unique perspective on how the market exchanges were building long-lasting socio-cultural relationships. The main focus is to examine how trade acted as a medium of political, economic, and cultural unity between Benin Kingdom and Akoko-Edo region, thus, the paper will demonstrate how these exchanges led to interdependence and the development of identities. The article also seeks to point out the importance of the frontier markets like *Ibillo*, *Ososo* and *Lampese* in not only moving the movement of goods but also in altering the movement of customs, beliefs and language across the Benin-Akoko border. The study is done through the use of a qualitative historical approach and is based on the use of oral traditions, and established secondary literature. Using interview data collected by means of the oral exposition with local elders, those being the keeping of the tradition within the communities of Akoko-Edo, we present the knowledge and understanding of one of the past actors of trade and its lived experiences, whereas secondary sources represent the academic interpretation of what occurred in the region.

According to the findings, trade between Benin Kingdom and the Akoko people was much beyond an economic venture, as it turned out to be a form of cultural diplomacy and social cohesion. Communities had been exchanging not only goods like coral beads, palm oil and salt through markets and trade fairs but also rituals, dressing code, language trends as well as marital practices. This historical relationship has been instrumental in establishing a shared regional identity that reflects both the Benin imperial culture and the local Akoko-Edo traditions, which is still evident today in societal way of doing things and culture manifestations

Introduction

The historical developments of the contacts between the Benin Kingdom and the Akoko-Edo region represents a relatively understudied example in the research of the precolonial West African frontiers communities. The Benin Empire which existed between the 12 th and the 19 th centuries and stood out as one of the most politically advanced as well as artistically accomplished kingdoms in Africa. Located within the rich rainforest belt of modern-day southern Nigeria. It thrived during its peak periods especially in the 15th and 17th centuries when the Benin polity expanded, politically and commercially, towards the north and along the west boundaries, absorbing scores of peripheral

communities, including those within Akoko-Edo axis. Akoko-Edo, located on the northern fringe of contemporary Edo State, comprises a variety of settlements such as *Ibillo*, *Ososo*, *Somorika*, *Lampese*, *Makeke* and *Enwan*. These societies occupies a topographically hilly rugged terrain and historically functioned as buffer-zones, as well as important corridor between the Benin metropolitan area, the Yoruba speaking communities Akoko to the west and the Nupe regions further north.¹

¹E. Aisien, *Origin of the Edo People*. Benin City: Aisien Publishers, 1995, p. 21



Although Considerable scholarship has examined the internal political administrative system, dynastic heritage and artistic achievements popularly of Benin, its renowned bronzes and ivory sculptures, comparatively little attention has been paid to interactions with non-peripheral peoples.² Previous research has often acknowledges Benin's military campaigns and the tributary system imposed on neighbouring communities by the *Oba*, but has generally failed to explore in detail the subtle, long-range connections maintained through trade, intermarriage and ritual exchange.³ This paper contends that these connections were enforced by military or political dominance, but rather sustained and mutually beneficial interactions, particularly through long-distance trade. The regularity of its patterns and interactions created by such trade, served as the most consistent point of contact between Benin and its neighbours, particularly the Akoko. The trade established formal arrangements that promoted daily interactions including, goods, people and cultural practices. Through this sustained engagement, a hybridised frontier identity emerged, neither wholly Benin nor entirely Akoko in character.

Historical Context of Benin–Akoko Relations

Benin Kingdom's Expansion into Edo North

The historical expansion of Benin into the Edo North and especially the Akoko-Edo area, formed part of internal consolidation and imperial outreach during the late precolonial era. Despite scholarly debates regarding the precise chronology of these developments, the Benin Kingdom remains a focal subject of research. Generally, scholars agree that the polity evolved out of earlier proto-Edo settlements in the *Igodomigodo* governed by *Ogiso* dynasty which then evolved under the *Oranmiyan* dynasty during the 12th and 13th century.⁴

Egharevba, Benin historian and chronicler of the royal establishment, believes that the centralisation process started with the accession of the prince of Ile-Ife origin who came to rule the people, called *Oranmiyan of ile ife origin*, and established Benin territorial ambitions, he became the first ruler of the *Oba* dynastic kingship that replaced the *Ogiso* rule when it failed.⁵ The rule of *Oba Ewuare* the Great (c. 1440-1473) traditionally credited with the creation of Benin City as a walled and cosmopolitan city turned point of Benin territorial ambitions.⁶ *Ewuare* had conquered two regions that had gone well beyond the core Edo-speaking regions into the northern and western extreme of modern Edo State.

The Benin push into Akoko-Edo area was motivated by a number of strategic and economic considerations. The top of the hills occupied by settlements in this zone provided natural fortifications whilst also acting as a bridge to the interior trade networks between Benin and *Nupe*, *Igala* and north Yoruba markets.⁷ The region was thus vital towards ensuring the long distance trade in salt, elephant ivory, kola nuts and slaves- products which formed the economic lifeline of the Benin court. According to Alagoa, the northern expansionism of Benin was not only intended to enhance political dominance, but also to establish all the economic blood vessels through which the forest and the savannah were linked.⁸ Therefore, the Benin conquest of the Edo North cannot be entirely viewed on the scale of territorial conquest alone, but also; it was, at the same time, a well-informed understanding of economic geography.

According to court records and oral traditions, the tactics of Benin to assert its presence in the northern Edo hinterland included the direct conquest and political subordination, the cultural absorption and the symbolic conviction. In certain cases, the king sent military units to strengthen their positions and in others they relied on diplomatic relations, taxation regimes, or political marriages to assimilate the communities living on the fringe. *Ososo*, *Ibillo*, and *Enwan* traditions tell of migrations out of Benin, to accommodate a sometimes explicitly sent out garrison of settlement or accommodation by refugees because of an internal dynastic crisis, or inter-polity war.⁹ Such movements were not an isolated affair; instead, they came in successive waves with two of the most well-known being under *Oba Ozolua* (c. 1483-1504) and *Oba Esigie* (c. 1504-1550), both of whom embraced expansionist policies which went northwards.¹⁰

In terms of occupation, the Edo-speaking migrants who settled in the northern part of the Edo Province and became accustomed to agricultural life as well as to the mountainous terrain. They engaged in farming, blacksmithing, weaving and local businesses. The economically diverse Akoko-Edo landscape which includes the tropical forest, rocky outcrops, and savannah patches, supported a diverse economic approach comprising of root crop farming, animal keeping, and long-distance trade. Oral tradition attributes the introduction of yam preservation techniques, bronze casting, wood carving techniques and the symbolic use of coral beads in rituals and festivals to migrants who originated in Benin.¹¹

²P. G. Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin*. London: British Museum Publications, 1980, p. 47.

³J. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968, p. 55

⁴E. O Alagoa, *The Practice of History in Africa*, Ibadan: University Press, 2000, pp 161–164.

⁵J. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 4th ed. Ibadan: University Press, 1968, pp. 2–4.

⁶P. Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin*, London: British Museum Publications, 1980, pp. 12–15.

⁷P. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration, 1897–1938: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom* London: Longman, 1979, p 14

⁸E. O Alagoa, *The Practice of History in Africa*, Ibadan: University Press, 2000, p. 164.

⁹Oral interview with Chief Agbonifo of Ososo, April 15, 2025.

¹⁰O. Omoregie, *Benin and Her Neighbours: Cultural and Political Relations from the 15th to the 19th Century*, Benin City: Ethiopia Publishing Corporation, 2005, pp. 26–29.

¹¹Kwekudee, "Edo People: Africa's Most Popular and Advanced Ancient People," *Trip Down Memory Lane Blog*, <https://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/06/edo-people-african-most-popular-and.html> (accessed July 17, 2025)

In turn, the rituals specialists among these migrants such as, the priests, diviners, and emissaries of the *Oba* in whom ceremonial roles were carried out during installations of chieftains and in market festivals, enhanced the presence of Benin cultures in the region.¹²

Migration of Akoko-Edo Communities with Benin Roots

The Migration histories of the Akoko-Edo communities are situated within a complex network of oral traditions, symbolic genealogies, and cultural affiliations that periodically highlight their historical tie with the Benin Kingdom. All these polities have their own history, but throughout most of the tales common theme is a fifteenth- to seventeenth-century expulsion of the Benin metropolis, induced by war-raiding, missionary proselytising, inter-dynastic instability, and the intentional colonisation of garrison settlements to stabilise the kingdom against the northwest attack threat.¹³

Ososo: Migration of Warrior-Clans and Cultural Continuity

The upland town of *Ososo* serves as notable example, which is regarded by many to have been occupied by emissaries sent northwards under the reign of *Oba Ozolua* (c. 1483/1504). According to oral tradition, these warrior-migrants performed two functions; to protect the territory and taking control of local economic networks.¹⁴ The location (raising rocky outcrop) that they would have chosen provided not only a situation where defense could be easily held but also the possibility of monitoring the trade taking place across the hills connecting Nupe axis with the Yoruba hinterland.

This historical trajectory was closely accompanied by cultural exchanges. *Ososo* remain clear instances of a still-discernible Benin influence, evident in the wearing of coral beads in attire at ceremonies, in the titles of local chiefs, such as, the *Oghie*, *Ekhaemoya*, and regalia that resembles those of the palace elite of Benin, festivals that resemble the *Igue* of Benin itself.¹⁵ In addition, invocations there conducted in *Ososo* shrines include Edoid lexical forms as noted by both local informants and anthropological observers.¹⁶

Ibillo: Settlement of Traders and Ritual Functionaries

Another major settlement in Akoko-Edo is *Ibillo* which also traces its lineage to Benin Migrants. Oral tradition recounts that, migrations to *Ibillo* occurred in waves, with the earliest phase taking the form of refugee movement triggered by dynastic succession crises after *Oba Esigie* in the early sixteenth century.¹⁷ This initial group comprised not only militants but also traders, bronze casters and ritual practitioners who sort security and independence in the north hills. The establishment of organised market days, ritualised oath-taking to ensure trade honesty and shrine-based conflict resolution mechanisms, all of which are evidences of precedents set in Benin, are hallmarks of the fact that the development of *Ibillo* as a commercial centre in Akoko-Edo was largely shaped by this migrant community.¹⁸

The *Ibillo* people became well known occupationally as imbibolites due to making implements of iron, hunting, and transporting goods long distances like pepper, shea butter, and cloth to markets in southern Edo and in exchange for goods like coral, cowries and salt which were brought by Benin traders. This historical positioning is verified by the continuity of the *Ibillo* Market which is one of the northern entrances into the Benin's trading zone and which still operates to this day.¹⁹

Akuku and Enwan: Ritual Kinship and Economic Integration

It should be mentioned that communities like *Akuku* and *Enwan* in the present-day district of Akoko-Edo of Nigeria traces back their origin to Benin polity. Their constitutive discourse, though, has a focus not only on military conquests but also on ritual migration and development of spiritual kinship. As folklore of the region has it that, the founders of *Akuku* came to southern Nigeria and found ritual outposts in the north, having been diviners and priests of palace cults, in Benin, and focused on maintaining ritual control over sacred groves and managing local deities believed to straddle both Benin and Akoko regions.²⁰ This course is in line with the approach of the kingdom to connect political power with spiritual rule.

The settlers were settled in quarters with compounds that included shrines, and common agricultural fields, and central markets-buildings that reminded us of the southern Edo socio-economic patterns. The *Akuku* people were known for Yam cultivation, Trade

¹²O. J. Isaac, *Cultural Geography of Northern Edo*, Auchi: Inland Press, 2001, p. 44.

¹³E. J. Alagoa, *The Practice of History in Africa*, Ibadan: University Press, 2000, pp. 169–172.

¹⁴O. Omoregie, *Benin and Her Neighbours: Cultural and Political Relations from the 15th to the 19th Century*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2005, pp. 23–26.

¹⁵Oral interview with Chief Ighodalo Aigbe, Ososo Cultural Council, April 15, 2025

¹⁶I. O. Ojo, *Cultural Geography of Northern Edo*, Auchi: Inland Press, 2001, pp. 38–39.

¹⁷J. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 4th ed. Ibadan: University Press, 1968, p. 56.

¹⁸P. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration, 1897–1938*, London: Longman, 1979, p. 12.

¹⁹D. A. Aremu and M. M. Afolabi, "Akoko Resistance to External Invasion and Domination in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Vol. 6, No. 7, 2022, pp. 60–61.

²⁰Oral interview with Priestess Aisosa Ehigie, Akuku, March 23, 2025.

in medicinal herbs and conducted rituals and thus these people often ventured to the surrounding towns in order to perform spiritual rituals. In *Akuku*, the *Oghodua* and *Ebokhin* shrines, has ritual codes and symbols similar to Benin City such as the sitting of ancestral stools and marker use of Benin iron staff forms.²¹

Somorika and Makeke: Cultural Adaptation and Defensive Settlement

Somorika is a peculiar instance in Benin migration story. Oral tradition associate the settlement with a mixture of migrants of Benin, *Nupe* escapees and *Yoruba* traders hence creating a cultural context which can be termed as a cultural melting pot. Benin elements are still pronounced, amidst the mixed cultural population: the prominence of Benin can be witnessed in the practices of chieftaincy, burial rites as well as the practices of ancestor veneration. *Somorika*, the hilltop settlement, like its sister-settlement *Ososo*, was chosen, on the one hand, because of the defensive possibilities offered by the location, and on the other because of the seclusion necessary to the keeping up of a cave-dwelling religion in the midst of the flux of the frontier.²²

Findings of a fieldwork done in *Makeke*, which lies on the Northern front of Akoko-Edo, suggest that this was a major trade station as well as a tributary community to Benin. Oral narrative restates that the representatives of the oba had seasonal missions to pay their blessings, give gifts exchange visits and re-establish diplomatic ties not necessarily to collect taxes themselves.²³ Therefore, the inhabitants of *Makeke* did not define themselves as secondary subjects but as kinsmen of Benin, and they were subjects in performance of ritual and ceremonial life of the central kingdom via the organisation of gifts exchange and marriage alliances.

The Trade Networks: Routes, Markets, and Goods

The pre-colonial trade in Southern Nigeria has been geographically structured effectively by the physical landscape as also by political structure. The Benin to Ibillo to Akoko Corridor was one of the most important thoroughfares to integrate the Benin Kingdom into its northern and western neighbours. In this path, merchants traded commodities and at the same time moved peoples, ritual practices, forms of language and sociopolitical influences.²⁴ We find by this the route along which the towns of the frontier like *Ibillo*, *Ososo*,

Somorika and the polities of neighbouring Akoko were assimilated into the economic structure of the Benin Empire.

The corridor was a Benin's based trade based on the imperial city of Benin City in modern southern Edo State. Leaving that centre the traders and royal messengers would go north east through *Uselu*, *Ehor*, *Ekpoma*, and *Auchi* then on the North hills at *Agbede* and *Ibie*. Their pathway then moved towards the Akoko-Edo territories of *Ibillo*, *Ososo* as well as *Lampese*. In the end, the pathway linked up with Akoko polities in what is now Ondo State and reached north towards *Igala* and *Nupe* lands of the Middle Belt.²⁵ Placed on the very border of various ecological and ethnical regions, the crossroad of the forest/savannah ecological boundary and the intersection of Edo-speakers and *Yoruba*, *Igala* and *Nupe*, the Benin-Ibillo-Akoko Corridor became a crucial degree point in an egalitarian and stratified hierarchical exchange of the region.

Ibillo, which was situated on terrain that was relatively lower than towns of *Ososo* and *Somorika* served as a relay point in the central market in this trade corridor. Local oral histories point to the city as a meeting point of Benin merchants heading northwards and *Akoka* and *Nupe* merchants coming southwards. One of the most notable of the markets situated in the contemporary state of Akoko-Edo was the *Ibillo* Market which featured periodic market days where pepper, yam, goats, red dye (camwood) and carved tools would be traded against salt, coral beads, cowries, bronze ornaments and iron tools.²⁶ In addition to its market networks, the Benin had a ritual presence in the Akoko frontier as witnessed by the frequent coming of the *Oba*-sponsored emissaries who delivered offering and ritual items aimed to reinforcing the spiritual authority of Benin in the area.²⁷

Local communities kept the footpaths and caravan routes which formed this corridor and in many instances they did so in tandem with Benin military envoys as a defensive ones to cushion long distance traders.²⁸ *Ososo* and *Somorika* urban settlements that were near and high offered secure resting and housing points along major ridge systems. Even in the *Ososo* region traces of ancient market-sites, on the outskirts of shrine groups, and old stone terrace-traces, may occasionally mark the old caravan tracks.²⁹ Oral testimony in *Ososo* records that market carriers (*okha*) many of whom were women, used to go to Benin markets in organised

²¹Kwekudee, "Edo People: Africa's Most Popular and Advanced Ancient People," *Trip Down Memory Lane Blog*, Available online @ <https://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/06/edo-people-africas-most-popular-and.html>. (Accessed on July 15, 2025)

²² Oral testimony from Elder Akoh Ede of *Somorika*, April 2025.

²³ O. Omoregie, *Benin and Her Neighbours: Cultural and Political Relations from the 15th to the 19th Century*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2005, p. 30.

²⁴E. Joe Alagoa, *The Practice of History in Africa*, Ibadan: University Press, 2000, p. 173.

²⁵ P. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration, 1897-1938*, p. 13. London: Longman, 1979, p. 13.

²⁶Oral interview with Elder Otaru Musa, Ibillo, April, 15, 2025

²⁷O. Omoregie, *Benin and Her Neighbours: Cultural and Political Relations from the 15th to the 19th Century*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2005, pp. 28-29.

²⁸D. A. Aremu and M. M. Afolabi, "Akoko Resistance to External Invasion and Domination in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Vol. 6, No. 7, 2022, p. 61.

²⁹I. O. Ojo, *Cultural Geography of Northern Edo*, Auchi: Inland Press, 2001, p. 40.

groups and carry the goods on their heads across ridges and valleys between Benin and Akoko markets.³⁰

The route which was Benin- Ibillo-Akoko trade corridor served not only as a route of the flow of commodities but also as a means of cultural exchange. The travellers, who trodded this path, did not only transport goods but also musical repertoires, folktales, titles, and sacred objects. Particularly, this route carried Benin ritual customs (including installation of chiefly rulers, with coral regalia, and annual ancestral celebrations) into Akoko-Edo towns and cities.³¹ The frequent contact along the corridor slowly eroded ethno-political boundaries forming a long-lasting cultural collage.

The corridor was the centre of militarisation and political realignment in the course of nineteenth century, triggered by Nupe raids and Ibadan military *marauds* in Akoko region. As a result, the dominance of Benin in the corridor became less and the Akoko societies formed local defence societies and diverted trade to new colonial and missionary hubs.³² But the heritage of the Benin-Ibillo-Akoko trade corridor lives on in material and oral culture as testimony to centuries of active interdependence and economic experience together.

Overview of Trade Goods

Goods from Benin: Prestige, Currency, and Ritual Symbolism

In the African trade arena, the goods being taken back into the hinterland of Benin by the Akoko traders were a top-grade commodity package which comprised coral beads, cowries, bronze and salt. The goods were used as an indication of political power, cultural status and continuity of ancestry.³³ Coral beads, called *ivie* in Edo, constituted visible signifiers of position, authority and inheritance, and chiefs in *Ibillo*, *Ososo* and seat of *Akuku* districts were often bejeweled during their installations, often taken as the results of trade deals or diplomatic offerings offered by Benin envoys.³⁴

Cowries, spread along the coastal routes and further along the Benin corridors, played the roles of currency as well as spiritual instrument. In Edo language they were called *owho*, and they served as the offering materials in shrines, objects of divination, and mediums of exchange on the market--as a kind of primitive,

proto-monetary system which anticipated colonial currency.³⁵ The commodities traded in bronze and brass on a very regular basis included ritual bells (*ekpen*), armlets and sculpture figures. Though having sophisticated metalworking skills, most communities living on the fringe did not have such technical skills and therefore depended on Benin merchants to supply them with practical tools and ceremonial accessories.³⁶

Salt, the invaluable seasoner and preserver, came by bundle-wrapped packages and changed hands in large quantities, so it was a chief article of over-land trade. It also had high market value in the hinterland markets like *Somorika* and *Enwan* enhancing its significant role in vast trading activities.³⁷

Goods from Akoko-Edo: Agricultural Produce and Local Craftsmanship

Akoko-Edo societies supplied everything including a broad variety of agricultural and craft-produced products. The most significant of them were palm oil, tubers of yam, beef, cloth, and traditional medicines. Palm oil, one of the most important ingredients for cooking, were traded inside pots and calabashes often consumed together with kernel and shea butter. The culturally important crop was yam, which held the major subsistence and ceremonial economies centre stage. Ibillo and Lampese were observed to produce more yams, surplus within the region and hence end up being suppliers in the southern market.³⁸

Another conspicuous item was cloth made by nearby craftsmen especially colored *aso-oke* and raffia-based clothes which could be exchanged with metallic materials or salt. Some of the textile designs had Benin influenced patterns bearing witness of aesthetic transfer through the trade.³⁹ Periodic markets also featured livestock (including goats, chickens, and guinea fowl) that were regularly exchanged with beads or salt. The traditional medicine through roots, herbs and extracts of barks continued to be a useful service offered by the herbalists of Akoko-Edo majorly women and the character of the Akoko-Edo herbalists as businesswomen or healers was much respected.⁴⁰ In *Ososo* and *Akuku*, for instance, oaths were sworn before ancestors or deities to ensure fair

³⁵P. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration, 1897–1938* (London: Longman, 1979), 17.

³⁶ Kwekudee, "Edo People: Africa's Most Popular and Advanced Ancient People," *Trip Down Memory Lane Blog*, accessed July 21, 2025, <https://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/06/edo-people-africas-most-popular-and.html>

³⁷ Oral interview with Elder Igie Omozuwa, Ibillo, April 15, 2025.

³⁸ I. O. Ojo, *Cultural Geography of Northern Edo*, Auch: Inland Press, 2001, p. 43.

³⁹ Oral interview with Madam Adesuwa Edegbe, *Ososo Weaver's Guild*, March 2025.

⁴⁰D. A. Aremu and M. M. Afolabi, "Akoko Resistance to External Invasion and Domination in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Vol. 6, No. 7, 2022, p.61.

exchange.⁴¹ Other societies went further to formalise the management of trade by institutionalising trading clans (families specialised in long-distance transportation of goods) who memorised market routes, trade dialects and calendars of the year hence able to manage trading cycles. The cultural value of honor and reputation was a solution to survival in this system since there was no written contract in a society.⁴²

Trade as Cultural Transmission

The series of trade relations between the Benin Kingdom and the Akoko-Edo communities were veins of social combination, language overlapping, ritual sharing, and signs appropriation

Intermarriage and family relations

The intermarriage patterns in frontier towns also became an interim trade between Benin and Akoko since trade was becoming more and more intense between the two states. Oral traditions in the *Ibillo* and *Ososo* regions describe how high status.⁴³ Benin merchants intermarried into the local lineages, and others into the Benin kingdom, to establish trade partners as well as enhance a community status by way of legitimation. In some towns the official exchange of coral beads (*ivie*) at the time of betrothal began to symbolise official attachment to the Benin court.

These unions formed trans-cultural kinship systems that augmented *Oba* of Benin loyalty and allowed frontier societies the privilege to have high prestige. Descendants often had two titles (and/or were styled with ceremonial names pointing to behind the house of Benin) in legal and ritual situations, and the peoples they occurred among wore identities that crossed political boundaries.⁴⁴

Common festivals and masquerade arts

A lot of Akoko-Edo towns hold a festival that has a touch of Benin elements, especially masquerade displays, combining Edo and local iconography. Accordingly, in *Ososo* the annual harvest or ancestor celebration, the masquerade of Bini style mask and rhythms called *Bini-Ehen*, is held.⁴⁵ In Benin, the *Igue* festival, central to royal ideology, has inspired similar harvest and renewal ceremonies in *Ibillo* and *Makeke*, and is most frequently performed at market shrines at the end of the trade cycles.⁴⁶ These common rituals encouraged a dialogue of cultures, turning fairs into a zone of both exchange of commodities as well as performance of shared culture thus enhancing solidarity even across political hemisphere.

⁴¹Ibid

⁴²Oral testimony from Chief Ogundele Ajayi, Akuku, April 15, 2025

⁴³Oral interview with Elder Oludayo Ade, Ibillo, March 15, 2025

⁴⁴O. Omoregie, *Benin and Her Neighbours: Cultural and Political Relations from the 15th to the 19th Century*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2005, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁵I. O. Ojo, *Cultural Geography of Northern Edo*, Auch: Inland Press, 2001, p. 39.

⁴⁶J. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 4th ed. Ibadan: University Press, 1968, pp. 58–59.

Title systems, Dress Cultures and Coral Regalia in Akoko-Edo Towns

Benin provided the model of institutional construction which the Akoko-Edo polities imitated and assumed the order of titles that mediated the allocation of prestige and indicated economic and political affiliations. Titles like *Oghie*, *Otaru* and *Odionwele* were in line with titles at Edo Court offices; officials with such titles wore coral apparel equivalent exclusively Benin dress styles.⁴⁷ Benin royalty controlled the production of coral beads and distributed them to friendly chiefs or merchants: coral bead quality types included *ivie* (the familiar pink/red type) and *ekan* (ruby-red aristocratic beads).⁴⁸

Wearing *ekan* was only permitted to those called as by the *Oba* and this was also reflected in the practices of local titles holders in *Ibillo* and *Ososo*.⁴⁹ *Ivie-uru* (neck beads), *ivie-obo* (wrist/ankle beads), *okuku* (coral headdresses worn by women), beaded *ada* (scepter-like icon) were derived as parts of ceremonial dresses of the Benin palaces and adapted in the local ceremonies.⁵⁰ Women traders usually gave these objects at trade fairs and formal gatherings, and as such, it enhanced their cosmological and symbolic significance in frontier people.⁵¹

Linguistic Cross-Pollination

It is through trade routes that Edoid lexicons were incorporated into the Akoko speech, specifically in the religious, political and trade related contexts. Such words as *Oba*, *Oghian* (chief), *Ivie* (bead), and *Egbe* (society or guild) got into local terminology.⁵² Farther into Shrine incantations as well as market proclamations retained some signs of the Edo grammar or phraseology especially that of *Ososo*, *Ibillo* and *Akuku*. Such borrowings represented more than linguistic fashion; they were a linguistic expression of symbolic power based upon Benin trade and ritual prestige.

Women held a crucial place in the frontier trade networks as traders, translators and cultural brokers. Established female traders in Akoko-Edo would visit Benin City to trade yams, herbs, and cloth in exchange of coral beads, titles, and oral histories. There were some of the Benin merchants who were married and joined them to be cultural liaisons in the country which ensured the culture of Benin passed into the communities they lived in.⁵³

⁴⁷ “Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries, and Cultural Translations in Yorubaland,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* Vol. 32, No. 2/3, 2002, p. 432.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ P. A. Iyi-Eweka, “Ivie and Ekan,” *Umewaen: Journal of Benin and Edo Studies*, Vol. 1, 2016, p.15.

⁵⁰ “The Cultural Significance of Coral Beads to the Benin People,” *Guardian Life (Nigeria)*, March 29, 2022.

⁵¹ “Edo Traditional Costumes: Coral Regalia,” *Edoaffairs*, accessed July 2025.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Oral testimony from Madam Adesuwa Edegbe, *Ososo Weaver’s Guild*, March 15, 2025.

Folkloric memory also honors a number of women as the matriarch of trading clans, credited with the introduction of *Ivie* and *Ekan* beads, creation of market oaths and leadership of ritual feasts that fused Akoko custom with Edo. Since they were cultural brokers, they did not just perform as economic actors but rather they played the role of ritual interlocutors who strengthened their trans-regional identities which are based on trade.

Spiritual Practices and Shrine Exchange

In Somorika societal domain, religious activities have the visible influence of the Benins. The *Ulokuaigbe* Shrine, vaguely set in the middle of the twentieth century and collectively imagined to have off-ancestral roots, highlights modalities of healing therapeutics, communion, and ancestral unity, which are also very relevant in Edo principles of philosophy.⁵⁴ It was through such interminglings that syncretism of Benin spiritual modes was gradually achieved with local Somorika worship.⁵⁵

Similar type of interplay is characterised in the town of Ibillo. Conventional reports refer that when preparing to take part in an annual market, traders would require to be subject to oaths to local shrines dedicated to *Eho*, before ancestral spirits common to Benin through migrant clergy.⁵⁶ The same is reflected in the town of *Ososo*, the New Yam festival of *Ososo* hands out coral beads (*ivie*) as signs of wealth and clan association similar to those at the Benin *Igue* festival. Local elders mention that market chiefs whose lineages are of Benin descent, are the only people who can officiate the ceremony.⁵⁷ The age-grade *Isi-si* (men initiated into adulthood) in *Somorika* at large has characterised its yearly road-clearing rituals and the *Ukpukpe* dance, forms of ritualism which have been influenced by the Benin war-dance tradition. The dances have been used in the past to instill societal vitality and security especially in the precolonial market dealings.⁵⁸

Continuity and Decline of Trade Ties

Colonial Disruption: Road to New Trade and Patterns

The physical realignment of Benin-Akoko trade routes was not the only effect of the introduction of British colonial rule on regional economies, but it shifted economic activity within the region. Since the beginning of the 1920s, the Public Works Department embarked on the construction of trunk roads between Benin City and *Esanland*, *Auchi*, and other northern areas, which did not cater

for the continuity of the traditional way of barter markets but acted more in the interests of the colonial governance and export of cash crops.⁵⁹

One such combustible situation is that of the Benin-Auchi-Ibillo line, which was integrated into the more general colonial road system, not as a major route to the hinterlands of southern Nigeria, but as a feeder to the hinterlands in northern Nigeria, thus creating a diversion of trade away from the hilltop markets to new centres of power in the form of urbanisation. Such roadworks weakened the local networks that were used by communities and shrines and which diminish the hilltop market economy. Towns like *Ososo* and *Somorika* which were originally part of frontier trade were later on marginalised as markets were moved along the colonial trunk lines.⁶⁰

Conclusion

This article has explored the Benin Akoko trade route not merely as an economic process but cultural infrastructure which has shaped identities, diffusion of customs and connected far-flung societies with the day-to-day process. Trade went far beyond the exchange of commodities like coral beads, palm oil and cloth because it was also used as a channel of intermarriage, language exchange, incorporation of rituals as well as adaptation of political alignments. The historical facts in hilltop towns like *Ibillo*, *Ososo* and *Somorika* attest to the idea that markets were platforms of trade, diplomacy and spiritual rejuvenation at the same time.

The legacy of Benin-Akoko interactions would still be felt despite the disturbances brought in the form of colonial demarcation of borders, the consequent orientation of the trade after the new road infrastructures were introduced, and the urbanisation of the post-independence markets. The legacy has been maintained in the language as loanwords, ceremonial titles, in dress largely through adoption of *ivie* and *ekan* coral regalia, in ritual as masquerading performances and commonality of festivals, and eventually in the social memory, through oral testimonies and an annual commemoration. This perseverance reflects upon the fact that West African social structures were characterised by the permeability of cultural borders and simultaneously by the integrating ability of the trading networks.

This issue, therefore, needs to be pursued further in future studies in terms of how women traders were cultural brokers, ritual technologies which regulated shrine-markets, in terms of precolonial mapping of trade roads and foot paths. These investigations enable scholars to recapture voices, directions and patterns that still influence the current regional identities and histories.

⁵⁴Wikipedia contributors, "Somorika," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, last modified July 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somorika>

⁵⁵Edo World, "Obah Festival (Somorika)," accessed July 2025, https://www.edoworld.net/Akoko_Edo_Obah_festival.html

⁵⁶Edo World, "The History of Ibillo, Akoko Edo, Edo State," accessed July 2025, https://edoworld.net/Akoko_Edo_The_History_of_Ibillo.html

⁵⁷I. O. Ojo, *Cultural Geography of Northern Edo, Auchi: Inland Press*, 2001, p. 39.

⁵⁸Edo State Digital Library, "Akoko-Edo Culture," accessed July 2025, <https://www.edostatearchives.org/article/akoko-edo-culture>

⁵⁹Public Works Department (Nigeria), *Annual Report of the Public Works Department*, 1926, 26; M. E. Taylor, *Public Works in Nigeria, Selected Engineering Papers*, 1930, pp. 45–46.

⁶⁰G. I. Oloidi, "Road Development and Market Displacement in Benin-Esan Region," *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, No. 4, 2024, pp. 15–16.



APPENDICES



Fig. 1: Map of Akoko-Edo, Northern Edo State

Showing key frontier towns that served as trade and cultural links between the Benin Kingdom and neighbouring regions



Fig. 2 & 3: Panoramic and Close-up view of *Ososo* hilltop settlement, showcasing its elevated rocky terrain and strategic location in Akoko-Edo, Edo State.



Fig. 4: *Somorika* Hilltop Settlement, Akoko-Edo: Renowned for its rugged terrain and natural fortifications



Fig. 5: A coral-adorned fly-whisk (ugbudien ugie), **Fig. 6:** A fine mesh coral crown (erhu ede)



Fig. 7: roadside scene from Akoko showing bundles of palm fruit and palm oil containers



Fig. 8: Cowrie shells the currency medium widely used in frontier trade between Benin and Akoko-Edo communities.



Fig. 9: Chiefs in Coral Regalia Performing the Ugie Dance



Fig. 10: Ivory coral beads, vibrant red/pink strands used by Benin chiefs and high-ranking titleholders.

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