

INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA: THE ARO-IGBO AND THEIR CROSS- RIVER BASIN NEIGHBOURS, 1700-1902

By

Chukwuemeka Nwosu, Ph.D

Senior Lecturer

Department Of History and International Studies

Faculty of Humanities

Imo State University,

Owerri

+2348037112023

barrchukwuemekanwosu@yahoo.com

&

Donatus Nath Uzoma Okwara

Federal University of Technology,

Owerri

+2349060132276

uzomaomoore67@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine the intergroup interactions between the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours, with particular reference to geography, migrations, trade links, conflicts and cultural borrowings spanning through decades and centuries. Aro-Igbo is located in the Cross River plains, in the buffer zone between three major ethnic groups; Igbo,

Ibibio/Efik, and Ekoi. Her Cross River basin neighbours of Southeastern Nigeria was the highway by which light and civilization would penetrate the remotest recesses of the terra incognita inhabited by the Efik, the Ibibio, the Oron, the Ejagham, and the Agwagwune peoples of the upper Cross River basin. Presently, there is a dearth of detailed studies of the interrelationships between the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours. What we do have are mainly documented tidbits of aspects of Aro-Igbo interactions with their Cross River Basin neighbours and such accounts tend to cover a relatively short period in the history of their relations. In this regards, the colonial dispatches, collections of private papers, missionary correspondence and oral tradition, however, indispensable to our area of study were be used, though with caution to investigated this seemingly neglected aspect of intergroup relations. It is our argument that the communities that inhabited our area of study were not strangers to each other; however, there had been diverse levels of intergroup contacts and historical forces of geography, propinquity, migration routes, mingling of people, migration routes, trade, conflict, politics and marriages, ultimately hoisted bonds of affinity and consanguinity.

Keywords: Intergroup, relations, Aro-Igbo, neighbours, Cross-River Basin.

Introduction

Arochukwu, the home of the modern Aro-Igbo, is situated on the far eastern edge of Igbo land; a few kilometres inland from the west bank of Cross River

near Itu. The Aro-Igbo live both in their historical centre at Arochukwu and in over one hundred and fifty Aro colonies which they founded between 1700 and 1900 in various parts of the over 80,000 square miles of Southeastern Nigeria between the Niger and Cross Rivers and between the Benue River, and the coast of the Bight of Biafra.¹ The Aro-Igbo is located in the Cross River plains, in the buffer zone between three major ethnic groups; the Igbo, Ibibio/Efik and the Ekoi while the colonies are located among these ethnic groups.² The Cross River Basin neighbours of the Aro-Igbo inhabit the lower and upper basins of the Cross River State. The Efik occupy the lower basins of the Eniong Creek, Cross and Calabar Rivers, extending the Great Kwa River to Akpayafe on the Cameroon border. To the immediate west and North West of this contagious riverine landscape lie the Ibibio and Igbo countries respectively. The city of Calabar is a tripartite capital for the Efik, Qua and the Efut, the three ethnic groups whose history has since been drawn into the same municipal area.

The researches of H.F. Mathews, P.A. Talbot, Simon Ottenberg, U.I. Ukwu, and David Northrup have clearly shown that the people of Southeastern Nigeria were intimately linked by a network of trade routes largely controlled by the Aro-Igbo, Efik, Ijo, Awka, Nkwerre, Abiriba, and Akunakuna and along which flowed not only trade goods but also other items of culture.³ Thus, here we are concerned to show that Southeastern Nigeria was not an economic and cultural Island “entire of itself,” but on the contrary was linked vitally by trade with the peoples of the Benue Valley. In this context we define intergroup relations as the interactions between

two or more distinct cultural or linguistic groups. Such interactions could be peaceful through trade, migrations or marriages. Infact, they could also be violent, through wars and conquests. Furthermore, either by peace or war, an important result of inter-group relations has been the spread of some common traits such as religious ceremonies, names, dresses, royal emblems, titles, currencies and some other forms socio-political and socio-economic institutions among the interacting communities. Falola and others discussed the factors that promoted intergroup relations among various Nigerian groups. They classified these factors are trade, trade routes and markets, religions, Diplomacy and war. While these factors indeed facilitate inter-group relations, they did not show how these happened among the various Nigerian communities.⁴ To this end, conquest and war, the slave trade and slave-raiding, migration and settlement were treated as factors of inter-group contact and on other occasions as factors or even evidence of discontinuity in relations between groups.

Very few authors have worked on our area of study; still there has been no comprehensive study on the intergroup relations of the Aro-Igbo and their neighbour. Onwuka Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba, Adiele Afigbo, S.O Onwuekwe has written on the area. There interests have been on aspects of the relations between the Aro-Igbo and their neighbours and not on the entirety of the relations. Afigbo, for instance has focused on trade. Onwuekwe looks at culture and inter-cultural borrowings and argues that “the Aros certainly inter-married and borrowed from their neighbours the Ibibios, the Igbo, the Efiks, the Ekois, and others”.⁵ Apart from these

works, there are others which consist of brief references to the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin Neighbours. These include the works of OkonUya, Effiong U. Aye, Emmanuel N. Nsan and Ekpenyong Ndiyo⁶ C.B.N. Ogbogbo, R.O. Olaniyi and O.G. Muojama⁷ published in 2012; Edet A Udo,⁸ published in 1983. Also there are some book and journal contributions in our area of study that equally made brief references as well. With regards to the former we have the work of L.C. Dioka,⁹ P.I. Oguagha¹⁰, A.E. Afigbo¹¹, Asuquo O. Anwana¹², and the later include among others Linus M. Okafor¹³, O.A. Ubi¹⁴, and the last but not the least is Monday E. Noah.¹⁵ There is therefore, the urgent need for separate holistic studies of Aro-Igbo relationships with their Cross River Basin neighbours. Infact, such studies will contribute immensely to a deeper understanding of Aro-Igbo cultural history, and those of its neighbours. Moreso, they will aid in erasing the notion that Nigeria is a recent colonial fabrication of groups of peoples that had little or nothing in the past. This study thus attempts to fill the gap by focusing on a broad range of factors- reference to geography, migration, trade links, conflicts and cultural borrowings between one group and another spanning through decades and centuries. We turn to an overview of the Aro-Igbo and Her Cross River Basin neighbours; and the Aro-Igbo and their Neighbours: some patterns of intergroup relations in our subsequent cursory survey.

Overview of the Igbo and Her Cross-River Basin Neighbours

Igbo land has been divided into five main groups by modern ethnographers. Thus, the categorization was hinged on territorial location as well as general cultural

similarities of the group. These are Northern or Onitsha Igbo, Northeastern Igbo; the Southern or Owerri Igbo; the Western Igbo and the Eastern or Aro-Igbo [sic]¹⁶ The component units of Aro-Igbo include Abriba, Abam, Afikpo and Edda. Others are Arochukwu, Ohafia, Ututu and Ihechiowa¹⁷. The Aro-Igbo people have been distinguished from other Igbo groups on the following features: unlike the general Igbo area, the Aro-Igbo kingship and rule of inheritance is matrilineal.¹⁸ Even in Arochukwu where it has been suggested to be patrilocal marriages were encouraged with ikwu-maternal relationship-and marriages outside ikwu were believed to head toward failure as childlessness, premature death and other misfortunes would occur.¹⁹ Although, there is a dual descent, which is not found elsewhere in Igboland except among Aro-Igbo sub-group. Ottenberg suggested that this much have been as a result of their contact with matrilineal groups in Cross River Basin.²⁰ Besides, there are linguistic similarities among them and their Ibibio and Efik neighbours unlike other Igbo groups. Aro-Igbo have dialects which contain many words or phrases borrowed from either their Efik or Ibibio neighbours.²¹ There exist among them common traditional societies, Ekpe was the most pervasive and plays prominent role in political and social matters unlike other Igbo areas. At Arochukwu, for example, the MgbalaEkpe, where important issues are discussed and decisions taken for the administration of these areas.²² Aro-Igbo maintained that these institutions were borrowed from the Cross River Zone.²³

The origin of Aro-Igbo people would perhaps be more meaningful within the context of the general Igbo history.

Also the migration of the people to the area now called Aro-Igbo land is inextricably associated with the general migration of other Igbo people in the time past. The nature and extent of Aro-Igbo influence in pre-colonial times have been analyzed by various scholars, and there is no need to repeat it here.²⁴ At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Aro-Igbo slaving oligarchy backed up, as it was, by the prestige of the widely famed clans of Abam, Ohafia, and Edda was without question the dominant commercial interest in the hinterland of what was the Bight of Biafra. By 1927, it was in utter disarray and its ascendancy a thing of the past. The process by which this disaster overtook the Aro-Igbo has never been fully analyzed, nor has the changing response of the Aro to their deepening predicament. To this end, it is argued here that contrary to popular belief, the decline of the Aro began before and continued after the much famed expedition of 1901-1902.²⁵ No doubt, that expedition was the severest single blow that expanded British interest that dealt with Aro hegemony, but it cannot alone explain the decline and fall of that interest-group. Furthermore, it is also argued that the Aro fought hard to retain their long standing dominance in the economic life of the Igbo, the Ibibio and their neighbours, but were unable to refashion the basis of their ascendancy to suit the new situations which arose with imposition imperial interest and rule.²⁶

The Efik

The Efik occupy the lower basins of the Eniong Creek, Cross River as well as Calabar rivers, stretching beyond the Great Kwa River to Akpayafe on the Cameroon border. They share boundaries to the north with the Igbo,

to the West with the Ibibio as well as to the South with Oron. Presently, they are located within Calabar South, Calabar Municipality, Odukpani, Akpabuyo as well as the Bakassi local Government Area of Cross River State. The city of Calabar consists of the Efut, Qua as well as the Efut. Efik origin, more than any other aspect of their early history, has become a subject of heated debate among scholars of different persuasion.²⁷ The conundrum associated with this subject has been exacerbated by the Efik themselves who lack unanimity about their origin.²⁸ “Efik traditions about themselves,” Andah, an author of Efik extraction wrote, “seem, for their part to be divided on the question of ethnic origin. While some claim Ibibio affiliation, some others claim Igbo, especially Aro point of dispersion, while yet others, claim non-Igbo”.²⁹

The Ibibio

The Ibibio are located at the Southeastern corner of Nigeria. They share common boundaries with the Arochukwu and Bende to the Northeast, Ijaw of Rivers to the West and Southeast; Bight of Bonny, and to the northeast is Oron. There are three competing traditions of origin among the Ibibio. One tradition insists on autochthonous origin, while the other points to the “east”, and another tradition points to Cameroon as their original homeland. The first tradition, which emphasized autochthonous origin, maintains that the Ibibio may have been the earliest inhabitants of Southeastern Nigeria.³⁰ However, it has been said that the absence of archaeological information in the area occupied by the Ibibio has made it difficult to ascertain the veracity of this theory. Furthermore, the second tradition of Ibibio

origin clings to the “East”. The tradition of eastern origin describes the Ibibio as descendants of a traveler and hunter from the “east”³¹ The most popular tradition of origin is that which links the Ibibio with Cameroon³². K.O. Dike, for example, described the Cameroon highlands as the area of Ibibio evolution.³³ A historian of Ibibio extraction, M.E. Noah, in apparent corroboration, did not only argue that the Ibibio came from Cameroon, but went further to trace their migratory.

The Oron

Oron is bounded in the north by Uruan of Ibibioland; in the South by the Atlantic Ocean and Akpabuyo of present Cross River State; in the West by Ibeno, EsitEket as well as NsitIbom Local government areas of present Akwalbom state. The region provides the ocean entranceway for Nigeria to Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. The people of Oron dwell on the West bank of the estuary of Cross River basin. Oron lies between latitude 0430⁰N and 5⁰N and along longitude 0830⁰E and stretches over an area of 219.60 square kilometers.³⁴ Except for those areas which have been deforested for settlements as well as cultivation, Oron lies within the equatorial region with the feature of heavy rainfall throughout the year and as such constitute a natural forest vegetation. Although a sizeable proportion of the Oron people in the riverine areas has been subsumed or joined with Cross River state in the newly created Bakassi Local government Area. Currently, and for effective development, Oron is bifurcated into five local government areas namely Oron, Udung Uko, Mbo,

Urueoffong/Oruko as well as Okobo, all in the present Akwa-Ibom State.

The Ejagham

The most populous group in Cross River State is probably the Ejagham. Their enormous land mass cover and extended from Ogoja local Government Area in North to Calabar Municipality in the South. Ejagham is bounded to the North by Obudu and Obalinku; to the South by Efik; Yakurr and Biase on the Western Fringes; to the east by the South-Western province of Cameroon. Ejagham is situated on longitude 8⁰00 E and between latitude 5⁰00N and 6⁰30W of the Equator.³⁵ The issue of Ejagham origin is still enmeshed in controversy among scholars. Infact, the origin of the name “Ejagham” is continuous perplexity that has generated some argument. One account is of the view that the name was derived from the word Njagham, meaning “I have showered”, perhaps at a lake in Mfum contiguous to Ikom. This has been given as one of the reasons why Ikom remains predominantly an Ejagham speaking area.³⁶

The name Ejagham, according to a source was derived from Lake *Ijagham* and it must have been derived from *Ejakmening* “Lets clap”. This, it has been suggested was said by the first ancestors of Ejagham land at sighting this extraordinary piece of water.³⁷ No matter the argument, what is indubitable is that the name by which the people are known is in memorialization of a milestone - a lake—which the people met in the course of their migration to their first settlements in South-Eastern Nigeria. Some of the historians claimed that it is also

likely that in a bid to sustain a connection with their Kith and Kin in Cameroon the name Ejagham by which some groups in Cameroon are also identified with were hanged on to or grasped.

The Agwagune

About one hundred and twenty kilometres northwest of Calabar and about twenty kilometres southwest of Ugep are several Agwagwune³⁸ settlements. On the eastern bank of the Cross River are where these settlements are located. Thus, the people live in seven neighbouring villages which among others are: Ibenabang, Egbizum, Emomoro, Okurike, Itu-Agwagwune, Ibarakpo as well as Ugbem. As at present time, they are bounded on the west by Biakpan and Erie, to the east by Akpet and Abini, to the north by Ijom and Adim and to the south by Ikotana. Indeed, all these neighbouring communities are located within the upper Cross River Basin. Infact, the historical significance of Agwagwune derives from a combination of factors. The Aro-Igbo commercial hegemony in the upper Cross River basin throughout the eighteenth as well as the nineteenth centuries, the Agwagwune were one of those who successfully withstood them. Undoubtedly, the exercised a major economic control in many settlements within the middle and upper Cross River basin starting from Umon in the South to Ogoja in the North. The word Agwagune is an anglicized form of the expression Agune-egune which literally means: people who ferry others across the river (ferryman).³⁹ Thus, the literary meaning of Aguneegune (ferryman) suggest that the word is loaned from other people who in all probability were their (Agwagune)

neighbours. The word agune-egune probably refers to a ferryman or family who performed that function. Although, the river in all probability, also may be the Cross River, since the Agwagune live by its bank. Oral tradition is silent on who nicknamed them thus, but Erei tradition claims that it was the Erei (Etono group) who invented that name⁴⁰, and Erei is one of the five clans in Biase.

The Igbo and Their Neighbours: Some Patterns of Intergroup Relations

One interesting feature of the history of many parts of Southeastern Nigeria is the ease with which neighbouring peoples which built up meaningful and mutually beneficial contacts with each other and also evolved accounts of origin and migrations which tended to make them one people⁴¹ A.E. Afigbo⁴², O.E. Uya⁴³, and E.O. Erim⁴⁴ in their separate studies on the people of South-Eastern Nigeria showed that these people were indeed more historically as well as culturally related. A.E. Afigbo, in his work, "External Contacts and Relations: An Overview," contended inter-alia It is important to bear in mind that the ultimate foundation of external relations is the fact that no sovereign community, no matter how rich and however favoured by nature, can produce all its needs to that what its people consider the good life and self-fulfillment whether at the individual or group level. To attain these goals, geographical, economic and other advantages provided by nature and history are utilized and maximized, while advantages in the same areas are

transcended, through relations with neighbouring people and regions.⁴⁵

Aside from the foregoing, we shall examine the natural as well as historical forces which facilitated and enhanced intergroup relations between the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours. By this essay, four factors that boosted intergroup relations were highlighted namely: geographical factors, population movement and migrations, trade and commerce; and intergroup martial ties among the people.

Geographical Factors

One of the key factors which promoted intergroup relations between the people in our area of study was the geographical factor. Cross River and its tributaries provided intrinsic network and served as the bedrock for the establishment of historical contact and intergroup relations. It is important to state that Cross River rises from the Cameroon Mountains, meanders through the frontiers of a number of these groups and thereafter, it empties into the Atlantic Ocean. It passes through the gentle undulating savannah plain to its confluence with Eniong Creek, and continues through forested coastal plain which extends west to the Niger Delta.⁴⁶ Cross River and its tributaries-Calabar, Akpayefe, Great Kwa, Ndian, Mbo and Uya-Oron Rivers among others; were seen as formidable obstacles, which hindered inter-group relations within much of this area.⁴⁷ The upper reaches of the tributaries on the right bank of Cross River are formidable obstacles during the rainy season owing to

their swift currents and boulder-strewn channels too wide and violent to be bridged by native methods.⁴⁸

For them, these obstacles were largely responsible for the ethnic, social and political fragmentation which characterized the peoples of the region.⁴⁹ Although, it was rather a misconception as well as a misrepresentation of the actual value of the Cross River Basin mostly as it concerns the people of this region. Much as it could be conceded that during the rainy season some of the tributaries are virtually unusable, it has been pointed out that the rainy season was a period when the indigenous people did very little travelling.⁵⁰ Travelling as well as trading were prevalent during the dry season when many of the sections of the tributaries were easily navigable by means of native canoes or in any case could be forded at different points in pre-colonial era. However, all the year round the main river was navigable by these crafts.

Evidence abound that before the arrival of the Europeans, the Efik, Ibibio, as well as Oron fishermen met at various fishing settlements along the river banks, its tributaries and the numerous creeks to earn a living. Against this background, Effiat, Inua, Abasi, Ute Bramah, ObioIyata, Mbendoro, InneOkang as well as many of such villages, which currently make up the Bakassi Local Government Area, were abinitio fishing settlements. Accentuating on the significance of Cross River to the Efik and Akunakuna people, J.C. Anene contended:

The Efik of the estuary and the Akunakuna group on the upper reaches of the (Cross) River exploited the opportunities afforded by their location to achieve extensive economic power. Economic power carried considerable political and cultural significance.⁵¹

Infact, it should be stated, that the importance of this River system to the Efik and Akunakuna, so it was to the Aro-Igbo, Ibibio, Ejagham as well as Oron. O.E. Uya, argued, “historically then, Cross River has remained a major highway for the intermingling of the people of the region, with consequent reciprocal influences on their respective cultures.”⁵²

Population Movements and Migration Routes

Furthermore, another salient factor which influenced and facilitated intergroup relations among these communities were population movements as well as migrations. It is indeed incontrovertible that these groups came in contact with one another in the course of their histories, although, there are considerable difference on the direction through which each of the group arrived at their present settlement. Evidence abound that during the course of these migrations, communities crisscrossed common routes as well as accounts for the mingling between these groups. According to the Efik early accounts and migration into their present abode in South-Eastern Nigeria, they passed through Aro-Igbo axis and Ibibio and according to accounts of Efik early migration into their present abode in South-Eastern Nigeria they passed through Aro-Igbo and are said to have settled in various places like Ututu, Umuahia, ItuMbonuzo and

Ibom in Arochukwu.⁵³ Infact, at this point the Efik interacted with the Aro-Igbo at different stages. It has been said that their nicknames Eburutu and Iboku are a function of that contact. A.K Hart, in line with this, contended:

When the Efiks (sic) reached Eastern Nigeria, they first settled at Ututu in Ibo country. The people of Ututu called the Efik immigrants Eburutu, a corruption of the words “Hebrew and Ututu”, the former word being a reference toEfik oriental origin. Eburutu is the name by which the Efiks (sic) are still known till this day.⁵⁴

Also, the Iboku which is still in usuage by the Efik was a function of their historical contact with the Aro-Igbo. It has been reported that the appellation Iboku is a corruption of an Igbo word, Ibo-Okwu meaning (troublesome or talkative Igbo)⁵⁵ by the Ibibio. According to E.U. Aye, “it was during their (Efik) stay among the Igbo that they called their hosts unege, a corruption of the Igbo word nnegi (your mother), often used by their hosts children to abuse their Efik playmates when they quarreled.⁵⁶ On the contrary, the Igbo called the Efik people ndenmong (from Efik word nmong meaning water people) or mbammiri (islanders). Indeed, it is most probable that these nicknames, scornful in nature or character, are reference to Efik contacts with the Aro-Igbo. Although, this does not suggest common antecedents however, a function of migratory routes contacts, experiences as well as interactions.

In yet another genre, Efik as well as Ibibio traditions reveal that the Efik pedigrees migrated through Uruan in

Ibibio land. It has been said it was at this phase of their history that the people were called “Efik” by the Ibibio meaning “oppressors” and those who cheat others”.⁵⁷ In this respect, Udo argued that the name came into use during the period of the slave trade and introduction of western education to Efik land, 1846-1900. Furthermore, he said, at these periods, the Efik because of their geographical position had contacts with the Europeans although they barred the Ibibio with such contacts. Therefore, the Ibibio who felt oppressed gave them the name Efik from the Ibibio verb, fik (to oppress).⁵⁸ The people were not abinitio known as Efik among the Ibibio whom they had interacted with by and large, experiences acquired in the course of their contacts, this suggests, gave birth to the name, Efik. In this regards, Monday E Noah said:

One important clue to an understanding of Efik origin and migrations is to bear in mind that the name Efik by which the present people are known, is fairly recent compared to the peopling of the estuary of the Cross River. It was the circumstances of the migration of the present inhabitants that actually gave rise to the name.⁵⁹

Also, the Efik gave the name Abakpa to the Qua while the latter referred to them as Anyong, a corruption of the Efik world Omonyong meaning “salutation”.

Accounts of Aro-Igbo migrations in a like manner suggest they had contacts with the Ibibio as well as Ejagham. For instance, in Aro-Igbo, as many scholars have reported, prior to Aro migration into their present

homeland, the Ibibio in the course of their Northern expansion had occupied that area. Conflict arose between the Arochukwu and their Ibibio neighbours, which accounted for the oft-quoted Ibibio war. With additional military strenght from the Akpa, the Arochukwu succeeded in pushing the Ibibio to their present locale.⁶⁰ H.F. Mathews said that the name Akpa referred to the Ekoi (Ejagham).⁶¹ Invariably, this suggests that in the course of this migration the Arochukwu mingled together with Ibibio as well as the Ejagham people. Afigbo admitted this position when he stated that “the Aro are the final results of generations of blending together of three ethnological entities-Igbo, Ibibio and the so called Akpa.”⁶² H.F. Mathews in 1927 reported that “The traditions of all the various ingredients of this composite community (Arochukwu) from the time of their settlement here agreed so well among themselves that they are worthy of much credence.”⁶³

On the other hand, among the Oron groups like Idua, Okobo, Enwang, EfiatMbo and Ebughu, their various traditions of early migration indicate that they had contacts with the Efiks.⁶⁴ In Idua, for example, traditions of migration to their present settlement place them within the context of Efik migration from Arochukwu to Uruan.⁶⁵ Four groups of Eburutu namely Abayem, UsukAkpa, Enwang and Iboku, according to this tradition, reached Uruan from Ibom. Some insist that Idua was one of the groups identified as Usuk-Akpa who along with the Enwang and Abayem left Uruan before the Iboku.⁶⁶

Perhaps one could argue that this is what the Efik and the Ibibio sought to do in that part of their traditions of origin in which they claimed that the first place they inhabited on coming into Nigeria in the course of their migrations was the Ututu-Ibom axis, that this area served as their nursery bed and that it was from here that they spread to the areas they now occupy.⁶⁷ One could also suggest that this was the intent of the tradition which E.N. Amaku recorded in the 1920s or so, and which A.E. Afigbo claims that the Efik were the descendants of a marriage between an Igbo man, Okoroafor, and an Ibibio woman-an effort to forge relationships among the dominant peoples of the Lower Cross River Valley into an organic ethnic or kinship union....⁶⁸ Perhaps one could also suggest that these traditions and claims, for what they were worth, or other versions like them, were rife in Southeastern Nigeria in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and in stronger and more distinct forms than are found today.⁶⁹ William Balfour Baikie maintained that all the dialects spoken between Arochukwu and Old Calabar were directly or indirectly connected with Igbo, the missionaries held the view that the languages spoken by the Ibibio, Efik, Andoni and others have all been derived from Ibo at some ancient period.” Major A.G. Leonard on his part not only subscribed to this supposed analysis of the linguistic situation but recorded some other information which he had collected and which was to the effect that “the Efik of Old Calabar...claim descent from the Ibo”.⁷⁰

It must be pointed out that our concern here is not with whether these opinions and claims can stand the searchlight of historical inquiry. Our concern is with what

they tell us about the nature and character of inter-group relations in the zone, especially about relations with the various groups on our area of study. Only inter-group relations of a certain character and quality would create the kind of atmosphere in which traditions suggestive of harmonious and even kinship-derived relations would arise and flourish.⁷¹ It was conceded that it was in the course of repeated settlement in different parts of Igboland that the Efik came to be known as “Iboku” (quarrelsome Ibo) and “EfikEburutu” (the Efik from Ututu or Hebrew Efik and so on). By the first decade of the twentieth century, in fact, up to the 1950s when unwholesome Nigerian politics was born, only one theory of the relationship between the Igbo and the Efik had made it to the written records. In fact, only in 1964, with the publication by the Eastern Nigeria Government of Mr. A.K. Hart’s Report of Inquiry into the Dispute over the Obongship of Calabar did the second theory of that relationship make it to the written records. Thus, this theory gives it out that Igboland was at best a migratory corridor of the Efik, some kind of in- between time nursery bed of Efik culture.⁷² Of course the earlier theory stood side by side with it.

Before the Efik arrived at their present abode the Idua people asserted that “Idua were already established along the coast of the Cross River”. The early Idua settlers were among the followers of Ayo Iyo, OboyoNtekim, OsukpongNtekim as well as Atulyoka. OboyoNtekim was said to have established Akpa-Oboyo, corruptly spelt Akpabuyo.⁷³ This suggests that the original inhabitants of Akpabuyo came before the Efik established their plantations there in the eighteenth century were Idua.

Other villages established by Oboyo included EsighiIkotEtongo, and IduaInwang while Atulyoka founded EsukAtu on the bank of Calabar River.⁷⁴ Phillip Curtin avers that for some parts of the bight of Biafra, especially for the Cross River Valley, the Slave trade was conducted in a manner that made large scale warfare and devastation unnecessary, thanks to a measure of dependence on the long juju of the Aro as a slave recruiting institution. Monday Noah has contested this point vehemently, refusing to concede that any good came from the Aro and their oracle.

Although, the point is not that the Aro enterprise in our area of study, or anywhere else for that matter was not in varying degrees socially disruptive but that this would be only one side of the story. However, on the contrary there is enough evidence that suggests an ironic socially and politically integrative side which Noah tend to ignore in a bid (howbeit unconscious) to create the impression that what relations between the Igbo and the peoples of the region turned out to be after 1900 could be projected backwards without any modification to the pre-colonial period. Invariably, our position here, is that this is outright historical distortion for it is infact impossible to sweep under the carpet of ethnic prejudice, for example, Aro contributions to inter-group relations as well as travel, to the establishment and development of markets, to the relieving of families and villages of socially as well as morally deficient members, to the transforming of what would have been death sentences banishments to the New World, to the handling of complex religious as well as psychological problems through oracular pronouncements as well as counseling.

Rosemary Harris, Latham and Nair, among other scholars draw attention to these other aspects as well as to the role played by the Igbo generally in the life of the peoples of the region.⁷⁵

Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce also encouraged interactions and inter-group relations between the communities in the Southeastern Nigeria, our area of study. Hopkins postulated that it was an attempt by the African entrepreneurs to overcome the limitations associated with local commerce which led to their participation in long distance trade.⁷⁶ Within our area of study, for the people, long distance trade, was an extension of their local trade networks with border communities acting in relay as centres of dispersal. The two major sources through which slaves were obtained for sale to the Europeans at the coast were warfare and local miscreants⁷⁷, but as the trade advanced, other abuses became manifest. Infact, people were kidnapped or sold on account of hatred and all kinds of trifles became an alibi for disposing unwanted members of the society. In reviewing the ways by which slaves were acquired with Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell, King Eyo II of Creek Town admitted that these people sold as slaves were obtained in various means:

They came from different countries and were sold for different reasons-some as prisoners of war, some for debt, some for breaking their country laws and some by great men who hated them. The king of a town sells

whom he dislikes or fears; his wives and children are sold by his successor in return.⁷⁸

Alluding to the jealousy with which each of the Cross River Basin peoples guarded their markets, E.A. Ayandele argued that:

Starting from Old Calabar, the ethnic groups of Efiks, Enyong, Umon and Akunakuna were monopolists in their commercial activities. One tribe along the river should not allow the other to pass through its territory for the purpose of trade. The tradition was that the Akunakuna must sell to the Umon, the Umon to the Enyong and the latter to the Efik.⁷⁹

On the upper reaches of the Cross River, Itu, was the main slave market for the Efik slave dealers.⁸⁰ It was through Itu that the bulk of Ibo slaves provided by the Aro reached the Efik middlemen. R.K. Floyer maintained that “the people there have a bad name.” and that “they used to exact tolls from canoes passing and on one occasion seized a Duke Town gentleman and held him to ransom. Calabar made war on them at that time and freed the river. Captain Beecroft being of the company.”⁸¹

Itu was particularly a fertile slave market on account of its proximity to Arochukwu where the famous Aro oracle was situated. In his study of Diglects of Africa, Rev. Clarke made reference to a place called “Aaru” which he said “is near to the EgboShary country and at Aaru, “the Ibos say their God, TshukuObyama resides.”⁸² Baikie noted that the Efik language was spoken at Aro

and that “to the northward and eastward of Ndoki is a large district named Abayim, where the Ibos and the people of Old Calabar meet for trade”⁸³

Infact, the Aro oracle was much more than a shrine because the Aro people were able to exploit the belief in the oracle for economic gain. Thus, human beings who were ostensibly meant to be sacrificed to the oracle found themselves in the slave markets of Itu and to a large extent, the Aromade themselves the “sole middlemen of the hinterland trade.”⁸⁴ Also, the Aro used the influence of the oracle to achieve free passage into areas that they should have been otherwise denied access or entry. By promoting the idea that they were special representatives of the oracle the Aro were able to build up vast networks of trading settlements throughout the Cross River Basin.⁸⁵ However, the oracle provided the Aro some immunity in a limited sense and even non-Aro traders often found it safer to join the Aro trading troupes upon payment of fees.⁸⁶ There Aro settlements even in Ubium, drained by the Qua Iboe River, where they were known as Inokon.⁸⁷ Obviously, evidence bearing directly on Aro influence and their activities regarding the slave trade also comes from the work of McFarlan when he wrote:

For over hundred miles on the right Bank of the Cross River their influence was supreme and they were known and feared as far as the Niger. They used the Akunakuna people as their agents. To the South, the Enyong River was an Aro waterway down which thousands passed in chains to the big slave market at Itu.⁸⁸

Against this background, with their extensive influence and trading connections through their agents, the Aro easily became the greatest suppliers of slaves that were sold at Old Calabar and they also enlisted some of the Efik slave dealers in the slaving troupes. Infact long distance trade was an extension of their local trade networks with the border communities, that is for the people of Southeastern Nigeria, acting as a source of control and supply centres. The numerous creeks that abound were among others the Eniong creek, Calabar, Qua, and Akpayefe, Uya Oron and Mbo Rivers. It has been reported that a route also ran from Arochukwu in Igbo territory to Itu on the Cross River where it joined the main river route to Calabar.⁸⁹ Afigbo contended that this was the major route that linked Old Calabar to the so called "Slave land", that is, the region between Ogoja and the Benue which fed Southeastern Nigeria with slaves up to about 1940s.⁹⁰

Evidence shows that the Ejagham had trade contact with the Ibibios, like the Igbo, conducted mostly through middlemen at Itu and Umon Islands.⁹¹ Umon trade in pots referred to as abangUmon and esioUmon in local parlance, was indeed, famous in the Cross River Basin. Although, it was suggested that most of these pots were made by the neighbouring Afikpo people of Igbo,⁹² in the present Ebonyi state. It is significant to note, however, that another significant item of trade among the groups in the area of our study was salt. This was derived from Tom Shott Island situated at the mouth of the Mbo river,⁹³ and from here other groups in Southeastern Nigeria had access to it. Talbot reported that these salt springs were "possibly a determining factor in the final choice of

settlement among the tribes.⁹⁴ Apart from Tom Shott Island, salt springs were located among the sacred as well as in other places near Oban⁹⁵, in the Cross River basin and also salt springs were indeed in large deposits in Uburu, in the present Ebonyi State and served as an item of trade in their inter-group relations. In his assessment of salt as an item of trade, which linked the Igbo with other groups in Southeastern Nigeria, A.E. Afigbo argued “Salt was very important in trade and external relations of Cross River peoples. From her much of the Eastern, North Eastern and much of the Northern and Central Igbo obtained their salt.”⁹⁶

Intergroup Marriages

In our area of study, due to trade and commerce, the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours, came to realize the need to forge bonds of brotherhood to contain centrifugal forces that have been or may be generated by the circumstances of their intergroup relations that dates back to antiquity (sic)⁹⁷. Owing partly to the process of their intergroup relations, the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours have increasingly felt the need for mutual understanding and common identity. The realization has initiated the quest for meaningful relationships between the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours, in which mutual acceptance and understanding appear to be crucial factors. Since the early part of the nineteenth century, the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours had not only commenced such a question but had attempted to establish “meaningful relationships” with each other. It was expected that in the course of their intergroup relations

and process that the various groups in our area of study were also studying each other knowingly or unknowingly for some-time. Matrimonial affinity has always been an index of the measurement of the cohesiveness of a group and the Aro-Igbo and their neighbours in the Cross River Basin utilized this useful tool to maintain their identity. Yet as regards exchange networks, it is germane to point out that intra and inter-group exchanges among groups in our area of study led to marriages between one group and another. Propinquity was a key factor which promoted and sustained inter-group marriages, contacts as well as relations and linkages among the groups in our area of study. E.U. Aye asserted that the Igbo people have strong maternal ties with the Efik⁹⁸. It has been reported that Arochukwu traders and Afikpo blacksmiths of Igbo extraction, for example, took Efik and Ibibio wives in the course of their commercial sojourn in these neighbourhoods.⁹⁹ Evidence abound that trades as well as other peoples who rendered services over long distance took wives along their own people to provide not only the usually conjugal benefits however, other services which facilitated their travel as well as professions. Among such services were hostel and warehouse facilities etc.¹⁰⁰

Other Aspects in which Relations between the Aro-Igbo and their Neighbours Flourished

Among the Igbo, Ibibio and Efik peoples of Southeastern Nigeria, we know that an ancient pictographic script, the Nsibidi, reminiscent of ancient Egyptian inscriptions, was in use among secret societies and important political functionaries up to the end of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the Reverend J.K. MacGregor was lucky to

have met a woman in Abiriba in 1909 who had formerly run a school for the teaching of Nsibidi. However, it was used extensively by travelling smiths and secret societies, although was becoming sufficiently widely used by the end of the nineteenth century that even in one instance, proceedings of a court in the Enyong country were recorded in it. The Aro-Igbo interactions with its Cross River Basin neighbours, the Efik, and Ibibio peoples, account for the traditional secret societies found among these communities. In this regards, the Efik had Ekpe, Idiong, Ekong; and the Aro-Igbo had Ekpe, Akang, Okonko Obon. Furthermore, these societies performed similar socio-economic and political functions in the communities although, there were certain variations in practice.

Conclusion

From the proceeding analysis it has been shown that there were prolonged intergroup contacts between the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbours. Thus internal developments among the Aro-Igbo seem to have contributed to the evolution of neighbouring cultures and vice versa. In turn, the Aro-Igbo culture was influenced by developments from their Cross River Basin neighbours as a mutual and symbiotic relations in which both were beneficiaries in the exchange of ideas and culture. This process of mutual and beneficial intergroup relations have led to the realization for the need to forge bonds of brotherhood to contain centrifugal forces that have been or may be generated by the imposition of colonial rule. The realization has initiated the quest for meaningful intergroup relations between the Aro-Igbo

and their Cross River Basin neighbours, in which mutual acceptance and understanding appear to be crucial factors as earlier stated above. Furthermore, matrimonial affinity has always been an index of the measurement of the cohesiveness of a group and in intergroup relations in Southeastern Nigeria, the Aro-Igbo and their Cross River Basin neighbour utilized this useful tool to maintain their identity through enduring and resilient mutual and symbiotic exchange of culture that still withstands the test of time in modern Nigeria till date.

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