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Abstract

Inter-group relations in pre-colonial Igbo societies have been severely undermined by the various erroneous reports from Eurocentric scholars who held the view that Africans lived in solitude prior to European intrusion into the African continent. This erroneous view was given impetus to by the postulation of Europeans who dismissed the African continent as having no historical importance to the world at large. Hence, an attempt to reconstruction a historical sketch of Ikwuano-Bende Relations in pre-colonial times becomes pertinent to further illustrate pre-colonial societies interacted with one another as this will further debunk the views held by Hegel, Trevor Roper, among others. Findings based upon this research showed that their relationship took numerous dimensions which included but not limited to commerce and trade; cultural exchanges; migration patterns; conflict and diplomacy, trado-religious activities, among others. It also showed how intertwined both groups have been long before the coming of the Europeans. The study concluded that there existed an inter-group relations between the two communities before and after the slave trade. Historical analysis was employed as the method for this research.

Keywords: Ikwuano, Bende, Pre-colonial, Relationship, Neighbours, Inter-Group.

Introduction

Inter-group relations is a very common trend across the country as there exist evidences pointing to the fact that various ethnic groups have interacted with one another in diverse ways even before the coming of the British. There exist a plethora of literatures depicting the robust relationship that had transpired among these various ethnic groups. These inter-group relationships took diverse forms such as war and diplomatic intercourse, marriages, migration patterns, trade and commerce, traditional and religious settings, among others. Whatever dimensions inter-group relations may have taken, it is important to uphold the truism that inter-group relations existed and is still in existence even in contemporary times as it cuts across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras.

While intergroup relations may be described as intercourse that transpired between two immediate neighbours, it is intrusive to note that it is not limited to only neighbours of immediate boundaries, as studies have shown that across the length and breadth of Nigeria, various ethnic groups have



interacted even when they do not share immediate boundaries.¹ Against these erroneous claims by Euro-centric scholars that portrays African societies as non-interactive or in absolute isolation, studies such as those conducted by Ratele, *Inter-group Relations: South African Perspective* ; Okpevra, *Dynamics of Inter-Group Relations in Pre-colonial Nigeria up to 1800: A Reappraisal of Lopsided Historiography and Attah, Nigerian Inter-Group Relations: Emerging Trends and Challenges* among others have all helped in debunking the views that Africa and African societies lived in abject isolation.

Given the foregone background, the task of this study is to carry out a holistic assessment of intergroup relations concerning two neighboring communities in south-eastern Nigeria. Specifically the groups to be examined are the Ikwuano people and their Bende neighbor in Abia State. Ikwuano has an area of 281 km² and a population of 137,993 at the 2006 census.² It is made up of about 59 villages and communities and is bounded by Ini Local Government Area Council of Akwa Ibom State by the West and Umuahia North by the North. They are also bordered by Bende in the east and Ngwa in the South. Ikwuano Local Government Area can be referred to as the food basket of Abia State basically because of her rich agricultural produce. The land is endowed and is nourished by the fertility of the Inyang River. Ikwuano as the name implies is derived from the coming together of four (4) related brothers namely Oboro, Ihere, Ariam-Usaka and Oloko. Ikwu, means four relations.³

Bende refers to Bende Autonomous Community in the present Bende LGA of Abia State. Bende is also the headquarters of Bende LGA. It is made up of the following villages; Amaogwu, Etiti Ulo, Isiegbu, Agbamuzu, Ndi Ekugo, Ndi Mgbotogwu, Agbimiri, Okputong, Amaoba, Umuokoro, Ndiokorieukwu, Ukpom and Obuohia. Bende is also a socio-cultural group made up of four major villages namely; Bende Ovu(Agbomiri, Amaigwu Isiegbu), Ummisiobu (Okputong, Ndiekugo, Ndiokorieukwu and Ukpom), Umuoche-Amaoba, Agbamuzu, Umuorei, Umuokoro.⁴ Bende is situated on one of the highest elevations in South Eastern part of Nigeria. In the 19th century the commercial highway from Bende to Arochukwu in the south passed through Itumbauzo, Okoroma and across Mako in the Cross-River area.⁵

It becomes very important to consider their relation along the borderline since both are large groups with many dialects and a variety of cultures. Moreover, the ingenuity and uniqueness of their interactions over time could be seen clearly within both communities than with other communities in Abia State. Bende influence on the culture of Ikwuano people is an established historical fact. It is against this background that the study will

¹ Uya, E. O. (1992). "Nigeria: The Land and the People", In Uya E.O (ed.), *Contemporary Nigeria, Essays in Society, Politics and Economy*, (Buenos Aires: EDIPUBLI S.A), 16.

² Onyirimba. S (2001); *Ikwuano book of records; Volume 1 9Eds* Kings publishers, Lagos

³ Ibid

⁴ Osuagwu, C.E, *Bende-Aro Relationship: Beyond the Slave Trade*, *Journal of History and International Relationship*, Abia State University, Uturu, Vol.1 No1, Enugu, *Chimbest Global*, July, 2013, p.165-173.

⁵ Ejiofor, L.U, *Dynamics of Igbo Democracy: A Behavioural Analysis of Igbo Politics in Aguiyi Clan*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1981)

attempt to elucidate on the various aspects that enabled both Ikwuano and their Bende neighbour to co-exist side-by-side till date.

Origin, Migration and Settlement Patterns of Ikwuano

Ikwuano is made up of four kindred Clans of Oboro, Ibere, Oloko and Ariam. The earliest Immigrants into Oboro and Ibere areas came from Ukwa in the old Aba province. The settlers in Oboro defeated the Ibibio aborigines at Mbiopong, settled first at Ahiafor and later moved down to Ahuwa where they are living till this day. Some of the Ibibios of Mbiopong retreated to their kins at Nkalu. Some retired to a little outpost about a mile south-west of Mbiopong and that settlement is known today as Obunta.⁶

Ahuwa people, the immigrants from Ukwa, came with two deities: Ikenga Oboro, a male god and Ala Oboro the wife.⁷ When the priest of Ala Oboro died, his wife whom the priest had married from the defeated people of Mbiopong ran back to her village with the deity. Before now, Ikenga Oboro had become a terror to the people of Ahuwa who now would gladly be rid of it. Thus when Ala Oboro was taken to Mbiopong, Ahuwa village readily acquiesced, and seeking to transfer Ikenga's 'Ira' to Mbiopong, directed all people who went to offer sacrifices to Ikenga to send them to Ala Oboro where Ikenga might as well enjoy the sacrifice with his wife. In this way, Mbiopong now Isiala, the home of the aborigines of Oboro, became the capital of Oboro. The immigrants into Ibere lived away from Ahiafor and also settled at the village of Mbi-nyang after overpowering the Ibibio settlers. A dominant element of the population settled down at this Mbinyang which today is still the seat of the ancestral shrine of Ibere.⁸

Later on in history, a preponderant population immigrated from Bende and Abam villages and settled in Ibere and Oboro villages of Amaoba, Ngoro, Iberenta mid Ngwugwo among others. They soon became the dominant elements of the population in Oboro and Ibere and so assimilated the old inhabitants.⁹ But the assimilation of the original inhabitants did not altogether erase their heritage of kinship with the Annangs. For example, there is still the Uoro festival at Nkalu in Uyo province to which people from the villages of Mbiopong and Mbinyang, pay their traditional homage.¹⁰

The remaining two Clans of Oloko and Ariam-Usaka came into their present homeland in precisely the same way. Ariam and Oloko belong to the same family of Isuogu. Ariam itself is made up of two sub-families, Ariam and Usaka. Ariam had come from Ugwuala in Abam and Usaka had come from Oraobara also in Abam. Ariam is made up of seven villages of Ariam Ala Ala, Ariam Elu Elu, Obeama Ndiorie, Ekpiri elu Elu, Azunchai and Ekpiri Ala Ala. The earliest

⁶ Umuzuruike Orji, interviewed.

⁷ Ndukwu Onwugbufor, interviewed.

⁸ Onwualimba, interviewed.

⁹ Mazi Emulo Uka, interviewed.

¹⁰ Simeon Mazi, interviewed

immigrants to Ekpiri came from Ukwa in the old Aba province. They drove away the Ibibio inhabitants and settled where they are today.¹¹

When the two brothers Ariam and Usaka came in, they drove away the Ibibio inhabitants and founded their first settlement at Ariam Ala Ala. Later when they needed more land they sent warriors who drove the Ibibios farther southwest to Nto Ndang, and Ita Ikpo. All the newly occupied areas were given the name Ariam Elu Elu.¹²

The fourth kindred clan is Oloko. It was originally known as Afa. Afa, Usaka and Ariam came from the same father Isuogu. Thus the later settlers at Oloko came from Abam in Bende. They settled at Ihu-Uro, a site which is between Oloko Village and Amizi. Ihu-Uro is still the site of their ancestral shrine. From here they moved north-westwards and south-westwards, driving away the Annangs of Otoro and Nkanu. Consequently, they established the ten villages of Ahaba, Oloko, Umugo, Azuiyi, Amiri, Awomukwu, Nchara Otoro, Nchara Nkanu, Obuohia Okike and Usaka Eleogu.¹³

All the new immigrants defeated the Annang aborigines. They drove some and settled down and intermarried with the rest as a result of inevitable symbolic relationships. But since the latest and largest waves of migration had come from the Bende area, these latest immigrants assimilated the earlier settlers into their language and custom. The conqueror's retained the names of the villages they conquered. This is why names of villages in Ikwuano sound Ibibio.¹⁴

Oboro-Ika Version

This tradition of origin has it that a man known as Mazi Ika of Nkalu Ifufa, for fear of war attacks, also in hunt of animals, deserted his hometown and settled at the place presently known as Oboro land. There his first son was born and named him Uburu. Uburu is a certain flexible tree (Isikara) which is uneasy to be broken. Secondly, he had another son and named him Bende which is the present day Bende.¹⁵ The actual name of Mazi Ika is Oka-Ome from which he was nicknamed Ika. It was after the death of Mazi Ika, when Mazi Bende failed to find favour with his elder brother Uburu (now Oboro) that he migrated to the present place known as Bende. As luck and nature could have it, Mazi Uburu had a son whom he named Obu Opong which means Opong residence because he was lonely there with the exemption of a certain honey bees named Opong. Mazi Opong married early and had more children than his forefathers.¹⁶ Isi-Ala (as it is now known) being first village to settle in the barren land named it after

¹¹ Ebo Nwogbo, interviewed.

¹² Ogbonna Chibuzor (1998) Brief History of Ikwuano; An Unpublished journal for Coronation of Eze Egesie.

¹³ A Memorandum to the Military Governor of Imo State of Nigeria for the Creation of a New Local Government Area Out of the Present Ikwuano-Umuahia Local Government Area of Imo State Nigeria.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ History of Oboro

¹⁶ Ibid

his father's name 'Ala-Oboro' and they thus became the headquarters of Ikwuano till date.¹⁷

It is important to note that there had and always been mutually beneficial relationships and even borrowings between the Bende and Ikwuano peoples before now. There are to be found many examples of this. The former headquarters of Ikwuano was called Nbiobong. Its neighbouring communities include Ekebedi, Umuagriga and Ntalakwu. The replication of these names in Bende and Ikwuano is clear evidence of history.¹⁸ Some people equally migrated from Bende to settle in Ikwuano and such an example is the Ubibia people of Oronta-Nnono, Oboro who migrated from Ubibia in Itumbuzo to where they live presently in Ikwuano.¹⁹

Cultural Similarities

The people of Ikwuano belong to the same dialectical group with Bende. We speak the same dialect and the forms of our greeting, Owara, Ndewo and Ka are also the same with Bende.²⁰ Some of the prominent cultures include the following;

New Yam Festival

The new yam festival marks the period of harvesting new yams, usually between August and September. It is a festival dedicated to the Earth-Deity [*Ala*]. Its significance cannot be over-emphasized.²¹ When there was a bumper harvest the people attribute it to the fact that they acted in harmony with the laws of the earth goddess. But when the people experience poor harvest, it is interpreted as retribution from the gods for failure to appease them. Each village in Ikwuano and Bende celebrates the new yam festival during their own market day in either August or September of every year.²²

The new yam festival is marked by local wrestling which is participated by young adults of both sexes in a public square. Males wrestle with their fellow males and females with females. This wrestling event climaxes the new yam celebration and add pump and pageantry to the occasion. It is an occasion when the youths measure their strength and exhibit their prowess.

Ekpe Cultural Festival

Ekpe festival is an event celebrated annually by the people and centered on some characteristic aspect of that community and its culture.²³ It is often

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ C.I.Atuonwu, "A Study of Migration, Settlement and Inter-Group Relations of the Ubibia People of Oronta" (BA Thesis., Abia State University,Uturu,2001),15.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Onyirimba, S (2001); Ikwuano book of records; Volume 1 9Eds) Kings publishers, Lagos

²³ Onukogu, E.T, "Osuama in Ikwuano LGA, During the Pre-Colonial Era: A Socio Economic Survey" Unpublished B.A Project, Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1985.

marked as a local holiday. Festivals often serve to fulfill specific communal purposes for the season of musical or other performance which involves joyfulness and merry making, especially in regard to commemoration or thanks to the gods and goddesses. Celebrations offer a sense of belonging for social, culture, and kindred spirits.²⁴

Igbu-Ehi Cultural Festival

Igbu-Ehi cultural festival is not a yearly event but a generational or coeval event. It is celebrated mostly by the people of Inyila, Obuohia, Iberenta, Iyaku, Ngwugwo etc. The festival takes place every 10, 20, or 30 years, and serves as a social indicator which separates the seniors from the juniors. It is through *Igbuehi* that people are ranked, graduated and grouped into age grades.²⁵

Sunday Market Day

The Sunday Market Day (festival) is an event usually observed every two months. Until 1960s parents buy new clothes for their children. In every individual family, rice is cooked, goat and fowl killed, private and public compounds are usually swept and kept in good sanitary condition by individual families and a designated age-grade association. Hunters [those who use gun and those who use dogs] hunt for animals to be used for cooking for family consumption and entertainment of visitors.²⁶

Itu-Ogwu (Iwa-Anya)

Itu-Ogwu or Iwa-Anya is a secret society. It is practiced by almost all the villages in Ibero. Itu-ogwu is a secret society in the sense that only those who undergo or went through the rituals are inducted as members of the society. Women are not accepted or admitted as members. Itu-ogwu is associated with the daemons [spirits].²⁷

Ibu Ngwo

Ibu-ngwo is another feature of itu-ogwu. During the day designated for ibu-ngo, a root or branch of a tree called Ngwo is cut to size. The [Dibia] will tie a cock on it and use fresh egg laid by an Igbo hen as well as hot drink to invoke it into action. It is surprising how a root or branch of a tree called Ngwo will cause someone to stagger or reel immediately it touches the head or neck. Any of the initiates who doubts the strength of the Ngwo or boasts that it will not do anything will suffer most as the Ngwo will torture him, carrying him round and round the public square [Ama], throwing him down several times. The

²⁴ Ikwuano Development Union (2012), Documentation of Ikwuano History and Institutions; in commemoration of 21 years anniversary of Ikwuano Local Government Area of Abia State. Published by IDU federated

²⁵ Onyirimba

²⁶ Ikwuano Development Union

²⁷ Ibid

staggering and torturing may, sometimes, last for several minutes or even one hour. The Ngwo will not stop torturing the esoteric until he falls down.²⁸

During the last day of the event, the esoteric, now being fully initiated, become [the] new members of the itu-ogwu society. The new members take their bath thoroughly. Each is given njuju-ogwu, that is, a short broom containing medicine, okika and other concoctions they will wear and dance in the public arena [Ama]. This day is called 'Izu-eke' – a day all the new members will dance to satisfaction and to the admiration of the spectators. During this occasion, both the new and old members will be aiming to shoot each other with what is called [Aba] – poison. If you are shot with *aba* and it fails to harm you, it means that you have been well baked and nurtured during the one week of stay with the [Dibia] and demons.²⁹

Okonko Society

Okonko as a secret society, is restricted only to men who fully met the financial and material obligations prescribed by it. Men who did not meet the society's prescribed financial and material obligations are not accepted or initiated into the *Okonko* society. Children and teenagers can be members of the society but cannot be fully initiated until they have reached adulthood, to avoid divulging or revealing the secrets pertaining to the society. Women are not accepted or initiated into the *Okonko* society – it is truly the preserve of men-folk.³⁰

The *Okonko* society has rules and regulations guiding the conduct and behavior of its members. They are not allowed to leak or divulge the secrets of the society neither should they, in any way, or at any given time, reveal to non-members, including women, how the *Okonko* Oracle or shrine looks like, or functions. The Oracle is preserved in a sanctuary attached to the *Agbala* [big hall] built in the public square [Ama]. Women are barred from entering the *Agbala*.³¹

Oba Society

This is an indigenous association of Ikwuano people. Membership of this society is drawn from renowned and successful farmers with enormous Yam to show off in the society. Their title is the highest cultural and traditional title which only the successful in the society can hold. Often, they are addressed as "Omendi" or "Ezeji." These titles explain in simple terms that a person is initiated into the Oba society and has become a fulfilled member and respected farmer. The women's counterpart of Oba is 'Uju Ede'.³²

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Agbakwu Onyeharaonye, interviewed.

³⁰ Eтуру Onyeani, interviewed.

³¹ Osuagwu, C.E, Bende-Aro Relationship: Beyond the Slave Trade, Journal of the Academic World, Vol.1 No1, Owerri, Uzometro, November, 2013, p.177-185.

³² Osuagwu, C.E (2010). Bende and Her Neighbours in Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Periods. Phd Thesis, Department of History and International studies, University of Uyo.

Uju Ede

Uju Ede which was the main women's organization in pre-colonial Ikwano community, was a highly respected social institution among the women for upholding moral uprightness and industry. It provided moral leadership and a forum for social interactions. It was celebrated once in a year, specifically, before the harvest of cocoa yam (Ede), which was traditionally, regarded as women's crop. No woman who had ever been accused of stealing or any other social vices was allowed membership. Known thieves and their husbands were exposed and ridiculed through songs. For this celebration, the women put on their best costumes and ornaments and made public display of their wealth, prowess and unity.³³

For a woman to be qualified to become a member of the Uju Ede Society, she must have performed the Egwu Nwa ceremony (that is the celebration of the birth of a child) or after having two or three children. With the celebration of the Egwu Nwa, a woman was adjudged to have become a full-fledged woman and was now qualified to join the apex women organization (Uju Ede Society).³⁴ Also, the intending member of the society had to prepare assorted types of food and palm wine and this was usually done under the supervision of elder members to ensure that it was of the best quality.³⁵

Ekpe Society

Ekpe society is a cultural group which was borrowed or inherited from the Annang. The institution has a deeper meaning than can be simply explained. It refers to a certain kind of institution which might be termed a "secret society" or "closed association" although those words may not be very apt to describe it. However, its membership comprises a formally constituted group of persons who have agreed to abide under a common rule and who participate under series of rules defining status and the interrelation of its members. In the actual fact, Ekpe is an instrument of authority which guarantees protection. The essential ingredient of Ekpe is that it institutionalized internal government whereby it prevails on an offender. It is a very powerful society and highly respected, and even super-imposes its authority on the people especially when it has to do with good governance and culture. Ekpe society is quite different from Ekpe cultural festival as the latter refers to a carnival. Even the pronunciation of the words as used above is quite different.³⁶

There are different associations in every village and some represent different sectional interests, organizing particular activities. Some of these associations have already gone moribund while others are still active in organizing village affairs. Some of them have government support and some have given way to the new ³⁷orders, following the evolution of Christianity. Nevertheless, the

³³ C.I. Atuonwu, "A Study of Migration, Settlement and Inter-Group Relations of the Ubia People of Oronta" (BA Thesis., Abia State University, Uturu, 2001), 15

³⁴ Nwogu Sunday, interviewed.

³⁵ Elder Chief M. A. Atuonwu, 75 years, Ubia, Retired School Principal, Interviewed Dec. 24th 2000.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

importance of these institutions and associations is vested in their activities; recreational, political, spiritual or economic.

Bende-Ikwuano Relations in Pre-Colonial Times: A view through the Prism.

There has always been mutually beneficial relationships and even borrowing between the people of both communities before the 19th century. There are to be found many examples of this. The former headquarters of Ikwuano was called Nbiobom. Its neighbouring communities include Ekebedi, Amoba and Ntalakwu. The replication of these names in Bende is clear evidence that there existed a deep relationship between these two groups.³⁸

An examination of the culture of most communities in Ikwuano vis-a-vis that of Bende shows a marked compatibility. The Oba and Ekpe societies, the Bende counterpart of Ozo title of Onitsha, are found from Ikwuano to Bende. Going to bed with a woman by day and committing adultery with the wife of a younger relative are taboos in the two communities. The marriage customs of Bende and Ikwuano also show a great similarity. The Bride goes to her husband when she returns the empty wine pot to her groom's house. Finally, the war Dance is a heritage of both communities. This dance has been one of the greatest culture and tradition of Ikwuano.³⁹

Ikwuano and Bende people are powerful and rich in cultural heritage despite the advent of Christianity and western civilization which abolished certain aspects of their tradition. For instance, when a woman gives birth to a child, she goes to the market after eight market days as a special outing. Today that is replaced with a church child dedication and naming ceremony. The coming of Christianity in these communities in the early 20th century was a strange development and the genesis of civilization to the people in a dark age but damaging to their belief.⁴⁰ A historical appraisal of the two communities shows a mark of compatibility. Cultural identity in the form of associations, cults, dance, festivals and carnivals that existed between these two with the same rules, methods and recognition prior before the advent of European presence in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study is an academic contribution towards inter-group relations which existed among the Ikwuano and Bende people of present Abia State before the coming of the British colonial rule. This became necessary owing to the fact that attention have not been given to how these groups interacted in pre-colonial times, as well as to help further debunk the erroneous views given by Euro-centric scholars that African existed in isolation.

³⁸ Uka Emolu, interviewed.

³⁹ F.O.Oguegbu, *Oboro History*, Enugu, 1953.

⁴⁰ Oliver.I.Ebubeogu, *History of Ibero*, Ebutrade International, Abuja, 2006.

Through secondary and primary sources, the paper has given a historical illustration on how both groups interacted. Some of the major factors of contact for them were culture, migration, marriage, reports of skirmishes among them. However, they were never endemic but another means for their continuous relationship.

In sum, the Ikwuano-Bende inter-group relations in pre-colonial times, is one example of the numerous relationships that existed among the various people that make up what is today Nigeria. Trade and commerce, warfare and diplomacy, language, migration, as well as trado-religious institutions.