

International Journal of Arts and Humanities
(IJAHA)

Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(1), S/No 16, January, 2016:100-107

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i1.8>

Ijo-Itsekiri Relations before the Colonial Period in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Ijo and Itsekiri are two of the closest neighbours in the Warri area of the Western Niger Delta region of Nigeria. They have intermarried and had lived together for centuries. But towards the close of the last century, the two groups clashed, ostensibly over the relocation of the headquarters of the then newly created Warri South (later Warri South-West) Local Government Area in the present Delta State from Ogbe-Ijoh (an Ijo town) to Ogidigben (an Itsekiri town) by the late General Sani Abacha – led Federal Military Government of the time. During the crisis which claimed many lives and property, and destroyed many private and public businesses, the two groups fought each other with all kinds of dangerous and sophisticated weapons. This situation had made many well-meaning people to ask whether there were longstanding grievances between the two groups. The available records reveal that there were, indeed, deep-rooted grievances between the two groups. These problems however started from the colonial period in Nigeria. Before then, the two groups had lived peacefully together. This is the picture this article attempts to document.

Introduction

Before the European colonisation of the area that became Nigeria in 1914 the various peoples of Nigeria had been in existence. Many of these peoples had, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, lived in their present locations for centuries, and had had their own ways of life (Orugbani, 2005). They had, for example, practised their own traditional religions and had operated their own social and political systems based mainly on the principles of gerontocracy and primogeniture. Blood and family ties determined, to a large extent, the nature of relationships. Life in general was essentially communal; everybody was his brother's keeper (Orugbani, 2005).

In some places where conditions were favourable, well-organised states, kingdoms and empires sprang up and flourished. In the north for example, were the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Hausa States of Kano, Katsina, Zaria, Nupe, Kebbi, and Kwara. In the forest region were the powerful kingdoms of Benin and Oyo, while in the extreme south, in the area popularly referred to as the Niger Delta, were the city-states of Nembe, Elem Kalabari, Okrika, Andoni, Bonny, Opobo, Ode-Itsekiri etc. (Alagoa, 1970; Stride and Ifeka, 1971, Crowther, 1978).

With regard to inter-group relations, the various peoples of Nigeria had freely met and traded together. The coastal peoples such as the Ijo, Andoni, and Itsekiri produced fish, crayfish and salt, which they exchanged for the agricultural products of their hinterland neighbours such as the Isoko, Urhobo, Ukwuani and so on. The major rivers such as the Niger, Benue, Forcados, Benue, Bonny, Escravos etc, for a long time served as trade routes and means of contact between the various peoples of Nigeria, especially in the south and the middle belt. In the north, pack animals such as camels, mules and donkeys were effectively used in the movement of goods and people from one place to another. These economic contacts, no doubt, led to social, political, and even religious relations amongst the peoples of the different geographical zones.

In the Ijo-Itsekiri area, the focus of this article, there is the general consensus that the people had "lived together for several decades" (Ayomike, 1990a: 17; Clark, 2003). The common impression is that it was the advent of the Europeans with their alien systems of trade, education, religion, and government that strained the hitherto cordial relations between the two groups. This article is an attempt to properly document the relations between the Ijo and Itsekiri in precolonial times. The aim is not to divide the people, but to enable Nigerians and the international community to put in proper perspective the recently hostile relations between the two groups.

Economic Relations

The most important economic activities of the Ijo and Itsekiri in precolonial times were fishing, salt making, weaving, and canoe carving. As riverine peoples, both groups were engaged in fishing. But the fishing activities of the Itsekiri were largely

restricted to the creeks and shallow waters (Udo, 1981). They were, therefore, producers of mainly crayfish. It was the Ijo who went into the high seas for big time fishing business. They therefore did not only supply the Urhobo, Ukwuani and other upland Nigerian peoples but also the Itsekiri with fish.

In addition to fishing, Ijo women produced salt from the sea water and the roots of the mangrove trees which the Itsekiri bought. Although Obaro Ikime (1977) has stated that the Itsekiri also produced salt, the Ijo were no doubt, more prominent in this occupation. The Ijo in turn, bought the clay pots which their women used in grinding tobacco, cooking and producing salt from the Itsekiri (Alagoa, 2005).

The Egbema (Ijo) of Opuama and Polobubo who were experts in carving canoes, paddles, and the weaving of baskets also sold these items to the Itsekiri. The canoes produced by these people were equally patronised by other Ijo groups in the Niger Delta, the Isoko and Urhobo in the hinterland, as well as the riverine Yoruba of the present Ondo area of Western Nigeria. They served as means of communication and transportation.

On their way to the Isoko, Urhobo and Ukwuani markets in the hinterland, the Ijo and Itsekiri passed through each other's territory. Passage was easy and peaceful – no group molested the other (Erezene, 2008).

Social relations

Although there are a few accounts of conflicts and settlements in some of the traditions of both the Ijo and the Itsekiri, social relations between the two groups were quite cordial in precolonial times (Erezene, 2008). For one thing, most of the clashes were often between individuals and single communities mainly over fishing rights in the creeks, which cannot be treated as ethnic problems between the Ijo and Itsekiri.

The early European records available often described the Ijo in “derogatory terms without any attempt to identify particular sub-groups or towns” (Alagoa, 2005: 26). From these vague records, however, Professor E. J. Alagoa has been able to pick out some references that were made particularly to the “Ijo communities living around the Benin River”. These, no doubt, were Egbema communities. The Egbema were (and still are) the only Ijo sub-group that inhabited the Benin River area with the Itsekiri (Erezene, 2008). John Barbot (1932 cited in Alagoa 2005: 26) referred to these Ijo communities as a people “who lived altogether on plunder and piracy on the rivers”. This was definitely a reference to the period of the Atlantic trade, first in slaves and later in agricultural products.

It is interesting to observe that while the early European traders saw the Ijo as pirates and trouble-makers, their Itsekiri neighbours of that time somehow admired their adventurous spirit (Ayomike, 1990b). William Moore seems to have slightly

exaggerated the situation. According to him, “nobody dared carry war into Ijo country... and expect to return to his home victorious” (Moore, 1970: 94). Because of their apparent admiration of the bravery of the Ijo, Itsekiri noble men took delight in adopting Ijo nicknames and appellations (Ayomike, 1990b). Ayomike as reported in a pamphlet, *Nanna*, produced by the Nanna Living History Museum, Koko, Delta state, Nigeria (n.d.) that even the great Itsekiri Chief, Nana Olomu, had two Ijo appellations – *Opubeni* (mighty flood that floods everywhere), and *Dedeikumo* (All, shut up!). Ijo songs were also freely used during festive occasions by the Itsekiri.

In the course of their contacts, the Ijo and Itsekiri freely intermarried. Even the popularly acclaimed founder of the Itsekiri Kingdom, Ginuwa, was said to have married an Ijo woman, Adirimo; the grand-daughter of the first Iduwini (Ijo) monarch (*Pere*), Duwini. Prince Ijjen who took over from him (Ginuwa) as head of the Itsekiri people was the son of this Ijo woman. A later ruler of the Itsekiri, Erejuwa I, also married an Isaba (Ijo) woman called Ebinimiere (Emaye), who gave birth to Prince Uwala and Princess Idolu (alias Iye). When Erejuwa I died, she became the wife of his successor, Akengbuwa, and gave birth to two more sons (Omateye and Ejo) and another daughter. This second daughter was the mother of Olu Ginuwa II, the grandfather of the immediate past Olu of Warri, His Royal Majesty, Ogiame Atuwatse II. It is in fact believed in some quarters that there is practically no Itsekiri family in Warri without Ijo blood and vice versa (Tosanwumi, 1997).

As they interacted, the Ijo and Itsekiri also learned to speak each other’s language. Even today, many Ijo and Itsekiri of the Escravos and Benin River areas are bilingual.

Religious Relations

Before the introduction of Christianity, the Ijo and Itsekiri, like other Nigerians, had practised their own religions. Although their religious practices were significantly different from those of the Christian faith introduced by the Europeans, the idea of a Supreme Being (God) was not foreign to them. They had always believed that there was an invisible being who controlled the affairs of the universe (world) and everything in it. In their perception, this invisible being cannot be reached directly by ordinary human beings. They, therefore, worshipped him through their own smaller gods or intermediaries. In some Ijo areas, there was also the concept of a national god who was believed to play direct roles in the lives of the people (Alagoa, 2005). This god was usually associated with the founder of the group as it was often believed to have been brought by him.

Among the Itsekiri, the Supreme Being or God is known as *Oritse*. The symbol of his altar was a long plain bamboo staff painted white with chalk, and a yam (also plastered white) in a forked furrow at the top, with a string of cowries and a white piece

of cloth (baft) or a white chicken tied to it (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1981). On the yam was thrust the red tail feather of a parrot. Sacrifices before this altar were made with nothing other than “pure natural water or coconut juice” (Sagay, p. 64). The present-day symbol of *Oritse* is a wooden cross loosely covered with white cloth (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1981).

Below *Oritse* was *Umale Okun (Umaleokun)*, the god of the sea, which was believed to control the fate of all Itsekiri people, and was responsible for wealth and fertility. Ogheye, an Itsekiri settlement at the mouth of the Benin River, was the main centre of worship of this god. The *Olu* (paramount ruler of the Itsekiri) assisted by his Chief Adviser, *Ologbotsere*, presided over the ceremonies associated with the worship of *Umale Okun*.

While *Umale Okun* was the national god of the Itsekiri, every community had its own *Umale* (Sagay, p. 65). These *Umale* had shrines at which people made appeals to the spirit world. In addition, the Itsekiri had many other gods connected with war at Ode-Itsekiri (their ancestral headquarters) and in various other towns and villages. Chief among these war gods was *Ada*. It has been suggested in some quarters that this god was possibly the one to which human sacrifices were made in Itsekiriland. The sacrificial victim was, according to these sources, always an albino (Sagay, p. 66).

Apart from *Ada*, there was *Ogun*, believed to have been brought to Itsekiriland by one Idibie from Benin. *Ogun* is also widely associated with the Yoruba. This could be an indication of some remote connection between the Itsekiri and the Yoruba, as is suggested in some quarters (Williamson, 1968; Sagay, n.d.; Ifediora, 1994).

Of less importance were *Ukpokwa* (a male god) and *Oweisiemo* (a goddess). The altars of these god and goddess of war were located near the royal harem. The Itsekiri also believed in, and practised ancestor worship, which is a clear indication that the people believed in life-after-death, or life beyond the grave.

On the whole, Itsekiri gods like those worshipped in many other parts of Nigeria, performed more than religious functions. Their priests were consulted on state matters, and their advice and decisions were taken very seriously.

Like the Itsekiri, the Ijo have always had the concept of a Supreme Being who ruled over the affairs of all peoples in the world. They, however, lacked a common name for this Supreme Being. This is because the Ijo comprise of very many sub-groups with different dialects.

In the Eastern Niger Delta, the Supreme Being (God) is known as *Ayiba* or *Tamuno*. In the Central and Western Niger Delta, God is called *Woyin*, *Ayibarau*, *Oginarau* or *Tamarau*. In these typically matrilineal Ijo communities before now, God was perceived as a female entity (Kiebel and Iyalla, 1989). In recent times, however,

with many of the Ijo now professing Christianity, the idea of the Supreme Being is gradually changing from that of female to male. And so, instead of *Woyin* (our mother) or *Tamarau* (creatress), the people now talk of *Nanaowei* (our owner or he that owns us) or *Temewei* (creator).

Below the Supreme Being, and of most direct relevance to each Ijo sub-group or *ibe*, was the national god. This god was usually associated, as stated earlier, with the founding ancestor, and in many of these Ijo sub-groups, the national god was an *Egbesu* or war god (Alagoa, 2005). Below this god, comes a number of divinities and primal forces such as *Beni-otu* (water people or deities), *Bou-otu* (forest people or deities), *Amatemesuo* and so on (Okaba and Appah, 1999; Alagoa, 2005).

As was the case in Itsekiriland, the priests of these gods in Ijoland were highly respected, and were often consulted on state matters. They, therefore, played important roles, especially in the Central and Western Niger Delta, where there were, in many cases, no elaborate state organisations in the past. It is now known that many of the earliest *Pere* (kings) mentioned in the traditions of some of these Ijo groups were, in fact, the high priests of their national gods.

With regard to inter-group relations, there is no strong evidence that either the Ijo or Itsekiri possessed any prominent god that was worshipped by both groups in precolonial times. Some traditional historians however remembered two prominent societies (or cults) which were said to have had both Ijo and Itsekiri members. These societies were said to have operated very actively in the 1940s and 1950s respectively. These periods are outside the timeframe of this article. It must however be mentioned that the gods of the Ijo and Itsekiri forbade the people from thinking ill of others. They, therefore, served as agents of unity rather than disunity.

Political Relations

From the economic, social and religious relations discussed above, it is obvious that the Ijo and Itsekiri lived peacefully together and had mutual trust and respect for each other in precolonial times. There is no evidence that one group exercised political control over the other. The people were clearly their brothers' keepers. Fishermen who fished in the creeks owned by others normally gave part of the catch to the owners in appreciation for allowing them to fish in such creeks.

There is also no reliable evidence that people paid rents for the use of land. From all indications, the payment of rents is a fairly recent development among the Ijo and Itsekiri. The payment of annual rents for land probably followed the *Public Lands Acquisition Proclamation* of 1903, as noted by Obaro Ikime (1977). This colonial legislation put a new value on land as European merchants and colonial officials started to acquire parcels of land under it to build factories and consulate offices. It was, indeed, from that time that the question of who owned the land and should, therefore,

be dealt with in that capacity started between the Ijo and Itsekiri of the Warri area. This was the problem that introduced the contentious issue of who arrived in the area first that has partly caused the hostilities between the two groups. The Itsekiri claim that they were the original settlers and that the Ijo were latecomers who they allowed to squat amongst them. The Ijo on their part vehemently oppose this claim by the Itsekiri. They assert that even the name, "Itsekiri", is a corruption of *seikiri*, an Ijo word for playground (Dime, 1997). In other words, the Ijo argue that they were in the Warri environment before the Itsekiri, and even had to give their name (Itsekiri) to them. This development marked the beginning of hostilities between the two groups.

Conclusion

It is clear from the expositions above that the Ijo and Itsekiri had lived peacefully together in precolonial times. It was the advent of the Europeans with their new forms of trade, religion, education, and government that caused hostilities between the two groups in the Warri area of the Western Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

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