

Historiographical Understanding of Group Perceptions: The Ijaw and their Neighbours in the Niger Delta

Ezuwobomude Emmanuel Eweke

History and International Studies, Faculty of Humanities
Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria
Email: ewekeemmanuel2017@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper provides insights on the perception of the Ijaw (Izon) people of their neighbours in the body of knowledge. This is germane as it would provide a rich, non-discriminatory view of managing inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations. Studies on culture and civilization have been mostly dominated by social science scholars. Thus, mainstream social scientists have created a rigid framework where the mathematical concept of 'greater than and lesser than' are applied to the study of peoples and cultures. A fundamental problem observed is seen in the discouragement of dialectical thinking ultimately reflected in the canonization of African history without the input of those being studied. Ake (1981) has averred that this is akin and connected to the institution of slavery and slave trade, racism, colonialism and its concomitant effects on relations among the various world peoples. This has been the hallmark of historical scholarship in Africa until K.O. Dike leading the Afrocentric charge, established the need for a balance through micro-study of peoples. Taking the Ijaw (Izon) society as case study, it is observed that, they have been understudied and mostly seen only in their late nineteenth and twentieth century's agitations for self-determination against British imperialism firstly and oppression, domination and victimization in the Nigerian state. The Ijaws had sound knowledge of their neighbours in pre-colonial times. This is descriptive according to the occupation, dietary patterns and location of the neighbours which is the opposite of what Eurocentric concept of civilization that profiles Africans as backward and Europeans as the only hope of the 'dark continent.' The article re-echoes a humanistic approach of collaboration of disciplines as well as democratization of research

processes to accommodate the perspectives of people being researched on. This is a fundamental pillar of historical engagements reflected as historical objectivity. It further advocates the *Izonic* model which is an all embracing view of humans as part of humanity and the need for unity of purpose in tackling challenges. The study adopted the historical method (ethnographic observations and oral interviews) in the collation of data while the descriptive analysis was used for data processing and presentation.

Keywords: Historiographical, Group perceptions, Ijaw, Niger Delta, African history.

Introduction

The study of the origin, development and relational dynamics of various societies has been the preoccupation of humanities and social science scholars although with different interests and foci. While scholars in the humanities have attempted to inquire into the peculiarities in the origin and function of different societies, social sciences researchers have been more preoccupied with how sophisticated a particular society is in relation to another. In other words, it is essentially about function for those in the humanities, and basically about structure for the social sciences. The foregoing does not totally mean that humanities scholars are not interested in the structural studies of various societies as do social scientists in their functionality. While these kinds of divides are encouraged in the pursuit of knowledge especially in today's academic scholarship, Kasulis (2002) advocates that one should focus on what each society tends to consider as relevant, authoritative or mainstream to it than attempting to use the yardstick from another environment to measure the way of life of people in a particular study area.

It is on the above premise that this article sets out to look at Western African civilizations from the perspective of the non-centralized societies that have not been adequately studied in the context of civilization studies. It would evaluate what is obtainable in the European or Western parameter for classifying societies which constitute the canon of academic engagements and attempt to posit that, such studies should complement knowledge and deepen our understanding of others especially those in Africa than compete with them in the bid to impose what could be seen as ideal on others. To Ikime (1979), this is the ultimate goal of the historian in

sub-Saharan Africa which houses the Ijaw civilization, the centre of our discourse. Thus, to promote scholarly understanding of various peoples by engaging in micro-studies of particular environment would no doubt, enrich both our perception of other peoples as we as the universal body of knowledge which academic scholarship strives to build, sustain and expand.

Conceptual Clarification

Etymologically, civilization is derived from the Latin word, *civilis* meaning “of the citizens”. It was coined by the Romans to distinguish themselves as citizens of a cosmopolitan, urban focused civilization from the “inferior” peoples who lived in forests and deserts on the fringes of their Mediterranean empire. In other words, it is about the attitude of the Colonial Roman authorities over the various people they had forcefully conquered especially their African provinces of Mauritania *Caeseronic* and Mauritania *Tingitana*, which served as the food basket of the Roman empire (Schraeder, 2004, p. 50). The Greeks earlier drew the line between themselves and other non-Greek language speakers. Considering them blabbers, the Greeks lumped outsiders together as ‘barbarians’, which meant, ‘those who cannot speak Greek.’ Thus, we have two critical concepts used in civilization studies which are, ‘citizens’ and ‘barbarians’ that were purely socio-cultural parameters for distinguishing one group from another and not biological as later pseudo-scientists of the 18th and 19th centuries took it to be. Europeans later added the term, ‘savages’ to refer to African peoples as lacking no form of creativity and ingenuity. There are several scholarly views on what the concept of civilization means.

From the initial usage to date, its meaning has continually evolved basically to suit the situation or perception of those involved. Stearns et al (2001) states that civilizations are societies that; generate surpluses beyond survival needs which in turn, promotes a variety of specialized occupation and heightened social differentiation as well as regional and long distance trading networks. This also spurs the growth of cities and development of formal states... From the foregoing, it is clear that the author’s perception of civilization is basically economic in orientation as it begins with attaining a certain level of production of surpluses, attaining specialization in various professions as well as having markets to sell what has been produced. Civilization studies according to Miller (2005), is synonymous to

cultural comparison. In other words, it is about the comparative analysis of culture based on sophistication and complexity. Attempts at defining what civilization means over the years, has been more about how a particular people or society is more advanced than others in all areas of their various endeavours.

Since the concept is a European originated one, it has been shaped mainly, over the years, by scholars of western orientation. Put differently, there has been a one-way traffic on what this 'over-used' concept should entail. However, it is important to note that, while earlier scholars had used it to mean European dominance and conquest; others have, in years after African independence, advocated cultural cooperation and harmony. This is, however, after the end of various phases of their discriminatory and exploitative activities have metamorphosed to neo-colonialism from the 1960s. To a mind yearning for uniformity of thought, these contradictory positions of scholars from the West would seem confusing. However, there is no need for confusion. The idea has only evolved to accommodate a subtle approach of 'mental' dominance and imperialism. This is reflected even in the academia where International standards are set without recourse to the peculiarities and challenges of Western education in the African continent and of course, the significant input by African scholars in crafting and evaluating such benchmarks.

Historians in Europe and the United States of America have pointed to the rise of civilizations as marking the origins of the modern world (Duiker & Spielvogel, 2004). This interpretation has been used to imply that the course of settled urban life and technological advancement of the human race has been linear in nature, leading directly from the emergence of agricultural societies in ancient Mesopotamia to the rise of advanced industrial societies in Europe and North America (Coffin & Robert, 2005). This, no doubt, represents a clear state of ignorance about the activities in West Africa and other areas. Thus, when there is no viable contribution from peoples of a particular area on their way of life, there is the reality of using the perception of those in Europe and America to represent others. This of course, would be seen as an attempt to impose Eurocentric development process as a model to measure societal advancement.

Also, Stearns *et al* (1993) emphasized that, civilizations are

societies that generate and use an economic surplus beyond basic survival needs. This position seems to promote capital accumulation and exploitation of surplus as the basis of being advanced than others. Their position below asserts the above: it has given human groups the capacity to reshape their environments in fundamental ways and to dominate other living creatures. The history of civilizations embraces most of the people who have ever lived; their literature, formal scientific discoveries, art, music, architecture and inventions, their most sophisticated social, political and economic systems; their brutality and destruction caused by conflicts' their exploitation of other species; and their degradation of the environment – a result of advances in technology and economic organization (Stearns *et al*, 1993, p. xxviii). The foregoing exposition is symptomatic of the kleptomaniac and hypocritical position of the capitalist West that always 'change the rules of the game during play.' For example, environmental pollution, production and sales of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear and biochemical equipment of warfare, deforestation, climate change and many other issues affecting mankind have been ignited by those in Europe due to their quest to exploit the human resources in particular and natural resources in general of other regions and peoples respectively. In the course of doing these, the value system of such peoples as regards their relations with nature is jettisoned.

As regards wildlife, Africans have managed to give animals and plant life their space and evolved rules that prohibit killing and poaching of them especially for business use. Should we not see these as environmental protection and conservation measures, then nothing can be described as such. Rather, social scientists term such rules 'taboos and pollution' which seems to suggest that such rules and regulations are of a 'lesser' standard to theirs (Hendry, 1999, pp. 34-46). With demand for elephant tusks, lions, chimpanzees and gorillas as well as snakes of different varieties for commercial purposes, the rules of various African peoples were breached and nature violated. With advent of colonialism, the parameter of the lives of Ijaw in particular and Africans peoples in general, was regulated by the rules conceived and designed by the British. The Ijaw people were thought to be the same with their neighbours especially the Igbo, Urhobo, Itsekiri and Yoruba. British anthropologists and sociologists looked for evidences through the various

intelligence reports carried out through the late 1920s and early 1930s to subjugate the Ijaws under other peoples.

Historians are aware of how such positions implicated the use of force and fraud in European imperialism. These Eurocentric positions ignore the sophistication, dynamism and humanity of many cultures it deliberately side-lined (Coffin & Robert, 2005). All these are done to ensure that, other parts of the world do not use the methods they had used in advancing their courses to also do same thereby, maintaining the status-quo of the now global, international system. Civilization can be seen from the writings of European scholars, as an attempt to 'hierarchify' human existence with Africans at the lowest ebb of the ladder. First, it was based on language, dress manner and later moved to colour (Hendry, 1999, pp. 23-25). It became the cover to institute colonialism as 'civilizing mission.' This presupposes that, Africans had no culture, no past and, therefore, no history. This can be seen from views expressed by Eurocentric scholars such as Trevor-Roper, David Hume, A.P. Newton, Frederick Lugard, Frederick Hegel and many others whose pseudo-scientific views of European and white superiority were used as justification for European exploitative adventures (Uya, 1984, pp. 1-2; Ayandele, 1979, p. 77; Omoera, 2019, pp. 237-238). Those who are termed civilized possess the following societal characteristics:

1. written records that must include origin, development and conquest of others;
2. centralized government (especially a monarchy or theocratic leadership personifying state authority in an individual); and
3. architectural innovations ranked arbitrarily as the '7 wonders of the world.'

The above parameters failed to see the ingenuity and dexterity of other peoples especially those in Africa except it is in consonance with what had been stated. Before their contact with Europe via the Atlantic ocean, the Ijaw society and other civilizations had their ways of lives. Should civilization studies be about how 'advanced' a society is to another. The proposition of scholars that Africans have no civilization has been debunked by Afrocentric historians as very faulty and intellectually not rigorous. Also, it has been established

that, written records do not constitute the 'only' watertight genuine source of history. In fact, written sources are grounded in oral sources except when it is fictitious and does not originate from reality. Thus, without oral source, there is not written one. To sum the analysis on civilization, it is observed that, settled European 'urban' life called 'civilizations' is not necessarily better than other societies. Nomadic groups have often demonstrated great creativity in technology and social relationships as well as promoting global contacts more intensely than settled ones. The case of the Incas where there was no writing before contact with Europe is a clear example (Stearns *et al*, 2001).

Another perspective to looking at civilization studies from a conservative view is the concept of nativism. Although it was originally a concept that treated the opinion that the American way of life needs to be protected, the interactions between various peoples of the world via trade and migration have implications for its study (Knoll, 2010, p. 21). The first problem a nativist approach would trigger is that of equating it with xenophobia and racism (Guia, 2016). In other words, it would portend a situation where there is total exclusion and isolation of peoples. It is a fact that, the Ijaws were not in isolation in their 'traditional' abode. They had interactions with their neighbours and forged cultural links. The concern of historical discourse is centred on 'what man has and had done'. If Euro-African relations are studied on the basis of what transpired in such group actions, historians would not have had any qualms. However, when chronicles are deliberately made by one group not only to document their relationship with others but to rationalize the actions of other peoples (without those being spoken for aware of such and being able to contribute to the discourse) during their interactions, with the intention of profiling people as 'smart', 'clever', 'dull', 'beautiful', 'intelligent', 'wise' or 'more sophisticated', 'more complex', among other qualitative attributes, is discriminatory and against the promotion of 'goodwill' in research pursuits.

This is the perception created in documentaries (written and oral) by non-Ijaw scholars of the people. In fact, they are rarely mentioned when a 'lump' study of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general is embarked on. Nativism, secondly, does not function as a nation-building idea. Guia (2016) asserts that 'it emerged rather as a mechanism to modify already existing construction of nationhood

along 'native' and 'non-native' lines. To apply such to a historiographic study would mean firstly that, the Ijaws saw and profiled their neighbours as 'outsiders' and there had been attempts to exclude others from benefitting certain privileges in Ijawland which was not essentially the case. Studies have it that, there was the accommodation of people through acculturation in pre-colonial Ijaw societies. The widely celebrated Jaja of Opobo became an *Izon* and enjoyed all rights due a 'native' despite his Igbo ancestry (Dike, 1956; Jones, 1963). This is also reflected in the Ijaw agitation for resource control and self-determination in the Nigerian state since 1966. The Ijaw people had rarely asked their neighbours to leave Ijawland but advocated the implementation of local content policies in the economic activities of multi-national oil companies, mitigation of environmental pollution from oil exploration and exploitation as well as ownership of natural resources within the area. Also it would be tantamount to creating the Ijaw people as a product of British imperial enterprise which is not the case. This is due to the reality that, the issues of 'native' and 'non-native' as well as 'indigene' and 'settler' as seen in the twentieth century and beyond, are created and amplified by colonialism.

West African Civilization: A Historiographic Interrogation

West Africa or Western part of Africa is also known as 'sub-Saharan Africa.' The term Sahara is used to describe the barrier between North Africa, extending to the Red Sea and from the Mediterranean to Central Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan. It is the world's largest desert occupying over a quarter of Africa covering about 3,500,000 sq. miles (9,065,000 sq. km). This area is very significant and strategic in the interrogation of North-South relationship in African history. It is important to note that, this barrier did not prevent interactions between the various peoples on each side of the divide. Rather, the trans-Saharan trade which was carried out in the area, ensured the cross-fertilization of cultures that has endured in the history of the various peoples. The southern part of the Sahara desert is home to over a thousand ethnic groups with most having unique cultures, the ethno-linguistic configuration includes the Afro-Asiatic, Indo-European, Khoisan, Niger-Congo and Nico-Saharan language families. Some of the ethnic nationalities in the area are, namely, Efik, Idoma, Ashante, Wolof, Ijaw, Urhobo, Kri, Mandingo, Yoruba,

Akan, Aku, Itsekiri, Bifada, Dendi, Dagbani, Ewe, Fon, Ga, Jola, Mende, Ibibio, Chamba, Birom, Papel, Hausa, Serer, Kanuri, Yarma, Jukun, Tiv, Igala, Benin (Edo), among others. Before contact with the other parts of the world, the various peoples of West Africa were organized on the basis of their kindred and kingdoms. While the Ijaws, Igbo, Urhobos, and Kru societies were said to be organized on what was termed a non-centralized system, the Yoruba, Mandingo, Kanuri and Benin were coordinated on a centralized system basis.

Different scholarly views on West African civilization studies exist. There are two categories of such works done on the West African sub region and the peoples. The first is by Arabic and European as well as Afro American scholars while the second is by West African scholars of African origin. Before the twentieth century, the history of Africa in general and West Africa in particular was basically the history of the Arabians and Europeans in Africa. In other words, the civilization of West Africa was determined by what they had written or said to be civilization. West African views were not considered in the crafting of such works and it painted the various peoples in the most despicable manner. This was because the various peoples of West Africa had no written form of documenting their activities and this was taken to mean they had no history. Thus, Arabians and Europeans rejected the basic and most fundamental source of history which is the oral source used by West Africans to preserve their history. This has raised philosophical issues about writing as history. Scholars such E.H. Carr, Collingwood and others have tackled the question: is there history without the historian?. Put differently, is there history without the art of writing? This debate has been adequately handled in the compartment of history known as historiography.

The Arabians were the first to have contact with West Africa and as such, to write about the various peoples and their societies. However, their writings were religiously based in favour of Islam and God (Allah) as the source of every given action. Societies that had Islam were promoted while others were ignored (S.A. Ajayi, focused group discussion, 15/4/2010). Human agency was not recognized as it was only 'God' that had made the various Islamic practicing states prosperous and invincible in battles. Although these writings were properly arranged (chronological and utilized primary

sources, they still discriminated against areas such as the Ijaw society that had not embraced Islam describing such peoples as 'nfidels' just as in the case of European concept of 'barbarians' and 'savages.' Europeans came in contact with the West African area in the 13th century. Their coming to this area was purely to bypass the Arabians who controlled the trade routes on the Mediterranean as well as across the Sahara (Dike, 1956, p. 1).

The fundamental position of Eurocentric historiography on West African peoples can be adequately comprehended from the concept of 'Hamitic Hypothesis.' Africans were categorized as Negroes and descendants of Ham. Europeans, therefore, claimed descent from the other children of Abraham through the Hebrew mythology. They claimed Africans are meant to 'serve' other peoples and African destiny must be decided by others (Eliasu, 2017, p. 20). This view aided the exploitative trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as European colonial adventures in Africa. A taxonomy of the human family was created and Africans were excluded from the family of humans, denying that 'blacks' were of common ancestry as Europeans (Seligman, 1930). Scholars such as Norton Cook, Alan Burns, Margery Perham and others wrote about Africa as a dark continent. Africans had no consciousness of their environment and self. Therefore, Europeans had to discover it for them. For example, assertion such as "Mungo Park discovered the Niger", "Mary Slessor stopped the killing of twins", etc., are cases in point (Imbua, 2013; Banigo, 2009).

From works done on West African civilizations, one would notice the focus on centralized systems more than the non-centralized in various historical works. From Ade Ajayi J.F. and Crowder, M. (1971; 1974), *History of West Africa*; Vansina, J. (1966), *Kingdoms of the Savanna*; Smith, A. (1971), *The Early States of the Central Sudan*; C.R. Niven, (1937), *A Short History of Nigeria*; Nachtigal, G. (1977), *Sahara and Sudan*, looked at empires such as the ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, Hausa States, with some focus on the Sokoto Caliphate and Yoruba States. The earlier mentioned states are referred to as 'Sudanese States' and are projected in these writings as 'civilizations' from West Africa. The material implication of the above is that, other areas especially the Ijaws were left out, ultimately labelling those excluded as the 'barbaric' and 'backward' areas. The energies of West Africa historians in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were dedicated to re-asserting the African personality and culture

which had been battered by the colonial assault through their intellectual interrogations. One might pardon West African scholars for that oversight because the history of the various peoples in West Africa cannot be studied in one fell swoop. However, the erroneous and discriminatory Hamitic hypothesis moved to areas that were termed non-centralized as the attention given to the empires and kingdoms created the impression that they were better than others with democratic and non-centralized systems. This is what is referred to as 'divide and rule'. However, later studies have continued with this bias against other areas not included in European civilization metrics. Thus, humanities and social science scholars, further this divide even in their intellectual engagements. When civilizations are referred in institutions of learning especially in Nigeria, students are first introduced to Greek, Chinese, Roman, Inca and other civilizations to the detriment of those in Africa.

Duiker and Spielvogel (2004, pp. 222-224) dedicated chapter 8 of their work to early civilizations in Africa but no substantial discussion was done on West Africa save for the expansion of Islam to the area as well as a brief outline of ancient Ghana and Mali empires respectively. This no doubt is a carryover of the Arabic and Eurocentric views of the area. They did not bother to engage the study area to see whether there is anything different that could be seen other than what had been said. The implication of this is that religion must be that from outside African origin before it could be considered fit for recording and documentation, hence, worthy of human study and inquiry. In the same vein, Iftikhar (2001, p. 82) in chapter 4 of the work analysed Trading states and Kingdoms in Africa. However, it was the empires of ancient Ghana, Mali and Songhai that deserved attention due to the influence of Arabic historiography that promoted Islam in these states. The only state mentioned in present day Nigeria was the Benin Kingdom because of its bronze works of arts and how it was able to capture 201 towns and villages in *Ekiti, Ikara, Kukuruku, Eka* and *Ibo* country. It is important to emphasize that the European-looted Queen *Idia* bronze head and other valuable works of art from Benin Kingdom ensured that discussions on the ingenuity of the people was sustained. No doubt, this is essentially due to the satisfaction the finances raised from tourism have availed the colonial enterprise. To agree that Benin was a civilized state was the least Eurocentric scholars could do.

The twentieth century witnessed the frenzy of democracy crusade championed by the United States of America (USA) as the best way of life recommended to the world. The irony is that even when it is seen that West African societies had democratic systems which are being practiced today, African scholars failed to critically look inward for answers to the teething problems of the European created nation-state system to enable it conform to their cultural space. This is would have ensured that Africans shake themselves off the psychological and mental tag of being backward. Franz Boas (1896) claims that all cultures are equal but different and as such they can only be properly understood in terms of their own standards and values. Evans-Pritchard (1965) stresses that societies are systems only because humans need to order the world rationally and scholars should study the structural order and seek meaning in the context of that particular society. More directly addressing the issue of discrimination, Hendry's (1999) analysis points to the reality that it is rather provocative to refer to someone as backward or uncivilized because it is derogatory. Hendry (1999, p. 1) further asserts that: it is now quite unacceptable to talk of 'savages' or 'primitive people', because all people, whatever their stage of technological achievement, have been shown to have complex, rational systems of thought and valuable contributions to make to the knowledge and wisdom of the world.

This article on Ijaw civilization would, therefore, take a different dimension from the seeming popular focus on the non-centralized system with special attention on the Ijaw civilization. Two reasons could be advanced for this. The first is that despite being the pioneer area of study in Nigerian historiography with K.O. Dike's (1956), *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, it has received less attention in terms of structural analysis. Although several researches have been carried out in the area, namely, Alagoa, E.J. (1972/2005), *A History of the Niger Delta*, Alagoa, et al (2009), *The Izon of the Niger Delta*, as well as Alagoa (1999) ed., *Lands and People of Bayelsa* treated the origin, migration, settlement patterns as well as the culture of the Ijaw people but not their concept or profiling of the neighbours as well as other peoples in the manner European profiling was done.

Second, the Ijaw society is a true reflection of a society built on equity, fair-play and justice as against prejudiced assertions by Eurocentric scholars as a people that have nothing worthy of study.

Thus, this paper is not a 'challenge' on the formed canon about the Ijaws in particular and non-centralized states in general. This is consequent on the reality that such views without the participation of the people are anti-democratic, anti-historical and anti-academic. It is rather a step in the direction of promoting understanding about the people. This is a *sine qua non* for building better knowledge and eradicates negative stereotypes which might be harmful to national integration especially in Nigeria.

An Izonic Study of the Ijaw Civilization

The fundamental ground to clear is the concept of *Izonic*. This is derived from the Ijaw conception and interpretation of the group self. To dissect this, the departure point is the meaning of the term in the people's worldview. From ethnographic investigations, the concept, *Izonic* is derived from the word *Izon*. There are two dimensions to the *Izon* idea. The first refers to the people. In other words, they see and call themselves *Izon* people. Also the language spoken by them is called *Izon*. So, the *Izon* speak *Izon* language. However, the term Ijaw is commonly used to refer to the *Izon* people. The Ijaw concept was said to be an anglicized term of *Izon* by European writers. Thus, Ijaw in various records, mean the *Izon* people (Alagoa, nd). On the other hand, the concept is translated as 'truth'. For example, an *Izon* person who wants to be reassured that the data being presented for scrutiny is reliable and would enquire: *ene gba mene eyi Izon egberi?* (Is the presented information the truth?)

The implication is that the *Izon* (either as a collectivity or individual) bond to always be truthful in deeds. This is a sacred creed which the globalized ideals of individualism through imperialist capitalism have pushed towards obscurity. However, the more the people are aware of the imposed economic and material as well as social inequality by the capitalist structured nation-state, the more the drive towards its shell to seek for inspiration to tackle such challenges. What is found is the solace that 'fighting and dying for the truth is better than being oppressed alive. This has defined their attitudes and actions towards the struggle for self-determination in the last two centuries. The relationship between the people under study and scholars especially in the humanities and social sciences is the search for the truth. Thus, the *Izonic* model is being projected as it encourages objectivity, empathy and fairness to the subject or

people being studied. Thus, it can be inferred that any scholar or individual that has imbibed the *Izon* attribute, is an *Izon* citizen. In other words, *Izon* citizenship is a global one despite its seeming 'small' numerical size in reference to the world's population.

It is a reality that every society has a culture. In this light, every society has a civilization worthy of studies since the discourse is more about a comparative analysis of cultures. The Ijaw or Ijo ethnic nationality is considered the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. They occupy the riverine area of the African coastline. They are found in states such as Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers States with very significant settlements in Gabon and Sierra-Leone. The Ijaw civilization can thus be tagged, "a civilization of the waters" since the life of the people had been largely influenced by the riverine nature of their environment (Alagoa et al, 2009). In fact, how they have engaged their challenging environment and managed to live at peace with it is begging for serious scholarship attention in all areas. This paper cannot tackle all areas sufficiently to the satisfaction of the varied nature of scholarship. However, it can at best, raise issues and further the discourse on the *Izon* people, with firm attention on seeking understanding as well as a look out for ideas from this people that can inspire solutions to global challenges.

From the above description of the Ijaw environment, we can, therefore, infer that their political, social, economic and even religious studies were constructed to suit the terrain they find themselves. Although they are now widely dispersed throughout Nigeria, the West and Central African Coastland and in the African Diaspora of Europe, America and the Caribbean, our focus would be on their traditional home in the Niger Delta. The Ijaw civilization is the oldest in the Southern part of Nigeria. According to linguistic evidence, the Ijaw language is 5000 years older than that of Yoruba, Igbo and Benin (Edo) (Williamson, 1969).

The first and most sophisticated ingenuity of the Ijaw civilization can be seen in their architectural prowess in their settlement patterns and vessel or boat construction (Awotua-Efebo *et al*, 1999, p. 343). The Ijaw civilization might not have produced sky scrapping structures or fast engine boats. But their ability to utilize the "gifts" of nature to overcome everyday challenges shows the innovation and creativity of the people which is contrary to the Eurocentric Hamitic hypothesis that "Africans were not capable of any creativity".

In fact, the people had been skilled in areas such as oceanography and navigation, weather conditions and aquaculture due to their environment. The life of the traditional *Izon* people is mostly aquatic based. As such, their livelihood and occupations are centred around the riverine nature of their environment. Apart from being reputed boat builders, they are also skilled in fisheries and fishing as well as oceanography (Brisibe & Brown, 2017; Asuk, 2014, pp. 31-48). The *Izon* concept of water is *beni*. This is encompassing of the ideas of ocean (*abade* or *abadi*), river (*pou*), swampy area or stream (*lala*). The people had grounded knowledge of aqua-life as there were names for variety of fish (*indi*). Thus, most people were engaged not only if fishing, but hunting other aquatic creatures for food. The people in the salt-water area engaged in its production and traded this commodity in the internal trade with neighbouring peoples. For emphasis, the pre-colonial Ijaw society was guided by the *Izonic* model as commercial activities were doing with utmost sincerity and commitment to continuity in relationships.

The Ijaw civilization had a less stratified society where movement from one stratum to another is allowed. For example, a slave known as *Omoni* in her society, can regain freedom and rise to the highest level in the society. This is consequent upon that person haven satisfied the prerequisite to be granted citizenship of the community. Descendants of slaves such as *Alali*, Captain Hart (*Adango* alias *Akunnayi*), *Ibani-burufia*, Long John, Oko Jumbo all of Bonny, Jaja of Opobo some among numerous illustrations as they became respected personalities in the Ijaw society (Jones, 1963; Dike, 1956). Should the case of 'indigene' versus 'settler' arise, it is in independent Nigeria, such achievements would have been very difficult, if not impossible to attain. The political structure of the Ijaws is democratic in nature. There were no kings or centralized authority. The people arrive at occasions through deliberations on matters that concern them at their various constituent assemblies. For the village (*ama*), there is the *Amasebene* (Village assembly), and *Ibe* (collection of *ama*) related by kinship (Alagoa, 1972). There was more of consensus building at arriving at decisions than the imposition of ideas on others. In fact, anyone not seen to be contributing towards finding solutions to challenges of the society is seen as not fit to be part of it. Thus, everyone was expected to be involved in issues of societal importance.

On the religious plain, there is erroneous belief that the Ijaws did not have the idea of “God”. Their religious activities have been relegated to “deities” worship and so, are people without a religion. The Ijaw concept of “God” is *Tamarau, Ayiba* or *Oyin (Woyingi)*. For the Ijaws, “God” is omni-potent and omni-science. The beginning and end of anyone is determined by a mutual consent between God and that individual. (Okaba and Appah, 1999, pp. 150-7). An ethnographic examination of the world view of the people shows that, what is referred to a deities they worship are actually representatives of arch-divinities whom that particular image had adopted as their intermediary to “God” For Example, when the Ijaws pray for forgiveness for any wrong committed, it is normally with the saying, God please forgive (*TamarauSeseio*) and not to any of the identified divinities. In the plain of conflict and its resolution as well as management, the Ijaws had skilled conciliators, mediators and arbitrators. There were laid down rules in terms of dispensation of justice and professional solicitors across the communities (Eferebo, and Eweke, forth coming). The art of war known as *sor* was given great thought and attention before it is embarked upon. However, they believed that, there were always solution to problems without violence. Because there are no written records of such wars does not mean there had been no intra or inter-ethnic conflicts involving the Ijaws. What is more important is that, so long there were conflicts, where also various media of resolution and management.

In the health sector, Africans especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, had shown that they were able to manage the challenges of their time. For example, the *Akan* as well as Ijaw peoples had the concept of health, diseases and cure. In fact, through a diagnostic process known as *lor*, they were able to detect the sex of a child, illness and other maternal and child care issues (Appiah-Kubi, 1980; Eferebo and Eweke, 2017). The economy of Ijaw societies was properly structured and organized. It had the fundamental ideas of market (*Fou*), Credit (*Sa*), Payment (*Gbe*), Money (*Sele, egbegi, Idolor*), *Tukpo* (cheap), *Garen* (costly) etc. before contact with the West. Jones (1963:88-101) posits that, the Ijaws especially those considered as the Eastern Delta States, had a well-structured and organized economic system of trade that made them influential even beyond the Niger Delta. The Ijaw states of Kalabari, Bonny, Brass (*Nembe Se*), and Okrika built their political supremacy on their economic

and commercial advantages as middlemen in the trade within and outside their area. The Ijaws innovated media of payment, policies on importation and exportation, custom duties, trust system, fixed prices and bargaining among other issues relevant to trade. As regards currency, Jones noted that,

Portuguese trade in the Rio Real area consisted of exchange in the form of bracelets (Manillas) for slaves ... By the time of James Barbot there were two currencies, the trade currency and native currency used in market transactions between coastal traders and the people of the hinterland. The native currency consisted of cowries in the Western Delta (and) manillas in the Eastern Delta. (Jones, 1963, p. 92).

From the above, it was clear that the Ijaws and their neighbours, protected their economic interests and ensured that, there was mutual benefits for all. There were non-issues of change differentials to be reconciled as there were internal mechanisms to ensure uniformity. However, the Ijaws do not have the mercantilist urge to exploit others and accumulate excess capital which is one of the indices of being "civilized" in western terms. The contact between European and as well as other West African Coastal peoples created a challenge of having a consensus on the mode of exchange and other issues related to the commercial transactions between them. Instead of seeking a synthesis of ideas, Europeans decided to impose their view on the relationship and of course, things have been one-sided since then.

The Ijaw Perception of her Neighbours

The Ijaws had a sound knowledge of her immediate neighbours which are; the Igbo, Urhobo, Isoko and Itsekiri. It is important to point out that, from their worldview, the Ijaw people did not create a categorization or hierarchy of sophistication for her neighbours. The perception of her neighbours was formed around the geography, dietary behaviour and dominant occupations of the peoples by her boundaries. The closest neighbours to the *Izon* people are, the Igbo at the Eastern flank, Urhobo, Isoko and Itsekiri in the Western area. However, Benin and Yoruba sandwiched a small portion of her people within the present day Edo and Ondo States. The larger Ijaw people in the Eastern and Central Niger Delta seem to have limited

idea of the latter neighbours. As such, only the former would be considered. For the Ijaws, the Igbo are seen as *Otuo-femini-Otu* (people that usually eat vegetables). This is informed by the largely vegetative nature of the Igbos and the largely landlocked area they occupy. The Ijaws are used to diet that consists more of sea foods due to their environmental position and thus really distinguished their dishes from that of the Igbos (Chief Bodi Anthony, oral interview). The above description was not in any way to undermine or debase the Igbo culture just as Eurocentric views had done. The Ijaws detest pride (*ango serimo*) and did not treat their neighbours. To buttress this, the Igbo are well accommodated in the Ijaw territories of Bonny, Opobo, Okrika, Andoni, Kalabari and other Eastern Delta Ijaw territories.

The Urhobo and Isoko are seen as one and same people to the Ijaws, (Mrs. Queen-Mary, oral interview). They are referred to as *biu-otu* (*bie-otu*). This literally translates to 'those in the hinterland'. These ethnic groups which are on the Western flank of the Ijaws in the Niger Delta are very much connected with the Ijaws through marriages, trade and religious activities. They are seen as occupying the landed areas leading to the creeks where the Ijaw people occupy. This does not portray the Urhobos and Isokos as backward and unequal to the Ijaw people. The Itsekiri are seen as *Isele-San-Otu* which literally means 'people that grind *isele*. The Ijaws saw the former as producers of *isele* (a substance used during circumcision). This substance is said to be made from camwood. This occupation came with the Itsekiri people as they migrated from Benin to the Warri area (Chief Anthony Bodi, oral Interview, Mrs. Suopamo Itshekure, oral interview). For the Ijaw people, existence was not a matter of competition. It was rather, a reality of 'live and let live'.

The pseudo-scientific postulations of European philosophers whose thoughts encouraged 'might is right', 'survival of the fittest' and 'civilizing the uncivilized', triggered the mission to exploit Africa in general and the Ijaw people in particular. The end of this is to create a world where 'the haves' will continue to have while the 'have nots', are sentenced to an existence of perpetual slavery, domination and oppression. With the international political economy divided into North/South dichotomy with the former playing the master role and latter slave, the Ijaws as part of the African configuration, are faced with a double jeopardy situation. They

became oppressed minorities in the Nigerian state, down to the various provinces and regions. This is in addition to being part of the exploited south internationally. The perception of the Ijaw about her neighbours has not been dehumanizing and derogatory. It has been based on how they seem different based on food, location and occupation. Their non-aggressive nature has conjured them as being docile, laidback and backward people until the late 20th and early 21st centuries when they are now synonymous with resource control, and self-determination. They have been at loggerhead with the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta over issues related to environmental degradation.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to deepen our understanding of the concept of civilization by focusing on the peculiarities of non-centralized societies. Using the Ijaw society as a case study, we have demonstrated that the worldview of the Ijaws captures humans as equal. It only separated other peoples by using descriptive parameters of the basic features of the ethnic group especially in terms of dressing, food and location. It did not proceed to discriminate against others as being 'lesser beings' or 'inferior' to her. Thus, the Ijaw perception of others was not aimed at ordering her neighbours. As we have seen, the Ijaw descriptive view of the Igbo is based on the perception of the latter as vegetative but not because they were better. On the other hand, the Ijaws were seen as 'water people' or those even dwelling inside the water. It suffices that the Ijaws have shown that, the world can be a better place should the virtues of equity, fair play and tolerance be religiously adhered to.

However, Nigeria has failed to look at traditional democratic societies like those termed non-centralized systems which actually have the basic features of the style of governmental setup Nigeria has. Thus, Nigeria has to comprehend the complexities of the various civilizations and utilize the worthwhile knowledge therefrom. This has already been given as a clue to the country in the adage, '*wetin you de find for sokoto dey for your shokoto.*' The *Izonic* model is hereby recommended to the secular and academic worlds. It should be the basis for our everyday engagements, creating *Izon* citizens on a global scale. This would no doubt engender fairness, equity and justice in the dealings of all peoples of the world.

References

- Ajayi, S.A. (2010). Focus group discussion with postgraduate students, University of Ibadan.
- Ake, C. (1981). *A political economy of Africa*. London: Longman.
- Alagoa, E.J. (1972). *A history of the Niger Delta*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Alagoa, E.J. et al (2009). *The Izon of the Niger Delta*. Port-Harcourt: Onyoma.
- Alagoa, E.J. (nd), *Izon: The historical perspective*. Retrieved 3 Jan. 2019, from www.waado.org.
- Appiah-Kubi, K. (1980). The Akan concept of human personality. In Ade. Adegbola, E.A. (Ed.), *Traditional religion in West Africa*. Ibadan: Sefer Books.
- Asuk, O.C. (2014). In search of a window: An analysis of Ijaw migrations to Central Africa. *AFRREV*, 3 (1), pp. 31-48.
- Awotua-Efebo, E.B, et al. (1999). Transport and communication. In Alagoa, E. J (Ed.), *The land and peoples of Bayelsa, Central Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma.
- Ayandele, E. A. (1979). *The task before the historian*. *JHSN*, 9(4), pp. 1-12.
- Banjo, Y. (2009), Capital, religion and conflicts in 19th century Nembe-Ijo: Chief Christopher Iwowari, 1834-1897. *Journal of Intra-African Studies*.
- Bodi, A. (2018). Oral interview, 70+, Ogobiri.
- Brisibe, W. and I. Brown (2017). Understanding the planning and settlement patterns in selected Ijaw migrant fisher folks camps. Retrieved 3 Jan. 2019, from www.researchgate.net
- Coffin, G. J. & Robert, C.S. (2005), *Western Civilization*. New York: Norton and Company.
- Dike, K. O (1956). *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, London: Claredon.
- Duiker, W. J. and Spielvogel, J. J. (2004), *World History*. United States of America: Thomson Wadsworth. 4th ed.
- Eferebo, I. & Eweke, E.E. (2017). Scientific influences on hisotriography: An interrogation of interdisciplinary approach to historical scholarship. *Kaduna Journal of Humanities*, 1(3), pp. 1-17.
- Eferebo, I. & Eweke, E. E. (forthcoming). The idea and practice of dispute resolution in Africa; A case study of the Ijaw society. In B. Okaba et al. (Eds.), *General studies (GES): Book of readings*. Institute of Foundation Studies, Federal University, Otuoke.
- Eliasu, V. (2017), Evaluation of the Euro-centric views on African History. *Kaduna Journal of Humanities*, 1(3), pp. 18-32.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1965). *Theories of primitive religion*. Oxford: Claredon.
- Eweke, Q. (2018). Oral interview. 60+, Ogobiri.
- Guia, A. (2016). *The concept of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiments in*

- Europe. European University Institute Library. Retrieved 3 Nov 2019, from www.cadmus.eui.eu.
- Hendry, J. (1999). *An introduction to social anthropology: Other peoples' world*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- Huntington, S. P. (1997). *The clash of civilizations: Remarking of world order*. New York: Touchstone.
- Iftikhar, A. et al (2001). *World cultures: A global mosaic*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Ikime, O. (1979). *Through changing scenes; Nigerian history, yesterday, today and tomorrow*. Inaugural Lecture, University of Ibadan.
- Imbua, D.L. (2013). Robbing others to pay Mary Slessor: Unearthing the authentic Heroes and heroines of the abolition of twin-killing in Old Calabar. *Journal of African Economic History*, 41, pp. 139-158.
- Itshekure, S. (2018). Oral interview. 50+, Warri.
- Jones, G. I. (1963). *Trading states of the Oil Rivers*. London: Oxford Press.
- Knoll, B.R. (2010). Understanding the 'new nativism': Causes and consequences for immigration policy attitudes in the United States. Ph.D. thesis, University of Iowa.
- Mcintosh, P. (2007). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In Podolefsky, A. & P.J. Brown, *Applying cultural anthropology: An introductory guide*. 7th ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Miller, B.D. (2005). *Cultural anthropology*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Okaba, B. & Appah, S.T.K. (1999). Religious beliefs and practices. In Alagoa, E. J. (Ed.), *The land and people of Bayelsa: Central Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications.
- Omoera, O.S. (2019). Human rights issues in the Nigerian films October 1 and Black November. In Hjort, M. & Jørholt, E. (Eds.), *African cinema and human rights* (pp. 237-255). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. doi.org/10.2307/J.CTV9HVRJZ.17
- Schraeder, P.J. (2004). *African politics and society*, 2nd ed. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Seligman, C.G. (1930). *The races of Africa*. New York: Thornton Butterworth.
- Stearns, P.N., et al (1993), *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.
- Stearns, P. N. et al (2001). *World civilizations*. vol. 1. New York: Longman.
- Uya, E. O. (1984). *Perspectives and methods of studying African history*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing.
- Williamson, K. (1969). Language of the Niger Delta. *Nigeria Magazine*, 97, pp. 124-139.