

THE IBIBIO-OGONI DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN THE NIGER DELTA: THE PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines the diplomatic relations between the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State and the Ogoni people of Rivers State, who both live in the Niger Delta region. It discovers that diplomatic intercourse existed between these two groups during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, engendered by diverse factors such as common origin, geography, shared cultural values, economic and political needs, colonization and the missionary enterprise. Even though at present the Ibibio and Ogoni live in areas separated by the Imo River and in distinct states of the federation, this study has shown that the separation is a recent experience triggered by forces of history. Based on the available evidence, in the remotest past, these two groups belonged to a common ancestry. The findings creates the possibility that most groups in Nigeria, particularly those situated on the either side of frontiers of ethnic nationalities that engage in acrimonious relations that generate conflict, might possibly be of a common ancestry. It suggests that lessons from such mutually beneficial relations should be adapted in nation building efforts. The paper adopts a historical narrative methodology.

Introduction

In recent times, relations between nationalities in Nigeria have been characterized by conflict and suspicion. This unhealthy development is mostly prevalent in communities situated on either side of the frontiers ethnic nationalities. Usually, factors like the hunger for more land because of population explosions and the quest to dominate the neighbours account for the conflict. The recurring border conflicts do not only result in wanton destruction of lives and property but also diversion of government attention from pursuit of developmental programmes to that of conflict resolution in the troubled zones. Ironically, reasonable weight of historical evidence points to the fact that these ethnic nationalities used to live more in peace than in war especially during the pre-colonial period. In other words, there existed healthy diplomatic relations among the people (Basse, 1999). For the purpose of this paper, the term "Ibibio" refers to all the groups that make up the present day Akwa Ibom State, namely: the central Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Eket, Ibuno and Andoni.

In the case of the Ibibio and Ogoni people, factors such as: traditions of origin, geographical proximity, economic and socio-cultural forces engendered contact and inter-dependence between them in the pre-colonial period. It is believed that the languages of the Ibibio and Ogoni originated from a common parentage i.e. *proto* language because of the inexhaustible similarities between the languages spoken by the two groups. During the colonial period the Ibibio and Ogoni were part of the Calabar Province and the Divisional headquarters of

Ogoni District was in Ikot Abasi (formerly Opobo), a coastal town in Akwa Ibom State. By virtue of the colonial administrative structure the people shared the same colonial experience. In addition, the missionary enterprise provided the spiritual and institutional cords that further integrated them.

Diplomacy

The term diplomacy has been variously defined by scholars in accordance with their perspectives. Many of the scholars interchanged diplomacy for foreign policy, some with intergroup relations while others regard it as international relations. No matter what, it simply means the relationship or interaction or contact that exists between one distinct group and another. It is undisputable fact that no nation in the world can exist on its own without interacting with one another in terms of politics, economy and socio-cultural needs. These needs therefore justified the healthy co-existence of different groups in the world (Ojo, 2012).

Diplomacy is the fundamental means by which foreign relations are conducted and foreign policies of states are adjusted. It is a credible part of international relations which technically means relations among actors – state and non-state – in the international system. To a very large extent therefore, diplomacy can be seen as the management of international relations by negotiation. Negotiation is an art that calls for the use of tact and intelligence or persuasion and reason. Diplomacy, in a restrictive sense, concerns the attempt by various state and non-state actors in the international system to maintain relations by non-violent means. But in reality, diplomacy does more than morally negotiating to reconcile rival national interest. It is more than the art of making compromise in international politics; it involves the whole business of communicating between actors and the employment of all tangible and intangible resources of power to achieve the ends of foreign policy. At the level of sovereign states, it involves the questions of peace and war, the conclusion and observance of treaties, the making, maintenance and breaking of alliances, the establishment of boundaries and or indemnities (Smith, 1977).

Authorities on diplomacy such as Nicholson (1969) and Smith (1976) claim that in the pre-history, two groups of savages, fighting over hunting boundaries, stolen cattle or abducted womenfolk were simply tired of slaughtering one another and appalled at the prospect of mutual extermination wished to reach out to each other for negotiations and cessation of hostilities. Their difficulty was how to get their peace proposal to the other side. At this time, it became apparent that such negotiations would be severely hampered if the emissary from one side is killed in the course of trying to deliver his message across. So, those charged with what can be described as the earliest examples of diplomatic activities surrounded themselves with an awe-inspiring air of superiority; they donned distinctive clothes, adorned their bodies with religious emblems to show that they were sacrosanct, and assumed an immensely dignified demeanour to impress their fellows that they were different from other men (Nicholson, 1969 and The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1999).

Based on the above it is obvious that African diplomacy emerged long before the European intrusion into the continent and since the Ibibio and Ogoni relations pre-dates the contemporary period in other words, they practiced pre-colonial African diplomacy. The colonial interlude and the missionary enterprise in the Niger Delta region only helped in strengthening the existing institutions or in modifying them to engender the continuous interactions and linkage between groups.

The Ibibio People

It is important to note that the present territory of Akwa Ibom State where the Ibibio people live, had not always been home of Akwa Ibom people – as the people are known today – and their very distant ancestors. Rather, the present territory was occupied through the process of migrations of people into it. Through linguistic and archaeological research, scholars have shown that the people known as Ibibio, Annang or Oron in Akwa Ibom State, Efik, Agwagune (Akunakuna), Kiong (Okoyong), Legbo and Yakurr in Cross River State and Ogoni in Rivers State, to name but a few of the speakers of the languages of the South-South of Nigeria classified by linguists as Delta-Cross emerged as distinct ethnic groups some centuries ago. Before that period, one could not distinguish the Ibibio or the Kiong or the Ogoni. This is because beyond those years, the Ibibio, for example – or more correctly, their very distant ancestors, together with the very distant ancestors of the speakers of Delta-Cross formed a single group that lived or were associated together, probably in the middle regions of the Benue Basin (Abasiattai, 2010).

The Ibibio migrated from the Central Benue region, the Cradle land of Bantu expansion through the forest to the Cameroon and settled in Usak Edet on the side of the Nigeria–Cameroon border before migrating into Nigeria (Ukpong, 1999). It is believed that population explosion following agriculture and more settled life accounted for the perennial southward movement of the Ibibio. During this movement, besides smaller Ibibio communities, several large centres of concentrated Ibibio population emerged known as Ibom where the various Ibibio groups lived. One of such Ibom was reported in the Oban forest that is, in the Ibibio eastern migration route. Another was located in the present Arochukwu district (Abasiattai, 1991). After settling in Arochukwu, the Ibibio established the famous shrine known then as the *Long Juju of Arochukwu*...from Ibom some of the Ibibio people spread to other places in the mainland (present Akwa Ibom territory) while others remained. The last Ibibio people in Ibom were expelled by the Aro who, not being a military race themselves, hired Akunakuna and Ekoi warriors to fight the Ibibio (Noah, 1980).

The Ogoni People

The Ogoni called Nkwo by the Ibibio (Abasiattai, 1991) occupy the stretch of land east and west of the Imo River at the point between Opobo and Rumukrushe, about eleven miles north of Port Harcourt. With an area of approximately 5000 square miles, the Ogoni area of abode is located in the north Eastern part of the Niger Delta. The area is bounded to the South by the Andoni River from where it is separated by a strip of land occupied by the Ndoki of Igbo race. Other neighbours are the Opobo/Nkoro and Andoni to the South, the Ibibio to the East, the Ikwerre to the North and the Ijaw of Okrika and Bonny to the West. Ogoni consists of six kingdoms, namely: Babbe, Nyokana, Ben-Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme (Igbara and Keenam, 2009).

The popular theory of origin and settlement of the Ogoni states that the Ogoni originated from the East (around the Nigerian-Cameroon Mountain) (Alagoa 1988 and Igbara, 2013). According to this tradition, the Ogoni people in the process of their migration to Nigeria lived for some time in Oban because of the abundance of food crops, fruits and other necessities of life and later moved into the Cross River Basin. As a support to this Nigeria/Cameroon region theory of migration, Naanen cites Ododop, Yakurr, and Bahumo

and some other inhabitants within Ogoja region of Cross River State as having ancestral affinity with the Ogoni people. These groups like the Ogoni, claim the Oban forest near the Cameroon highlands as their Cradle land. Some of the special characteristics of the Ogoni, which make them, differ culturally from their Igbo and Ijaw neighbours include the use of five day week, the digging of deep defence trenches round villages for security purposes and their language (Naanen, 1981).

In view of the introductory analysis, it is significant to note that the Central Benue valley was a major population conglomeration for the early Ibibio and Ogoni people. It was the woodland regions of the Central Benue valley that these groups eventually migrated southwards to their present locale in the forest regions, developing distinct ethnic and linguistic identities and cultures, during the process of their southward movements and settlement (Alagoa, 1988 and Abasiattai, 2010) have also noted that the Cross River Basin up to the Middle Benue valley formed a cultural watershed in African antiquity.

Economic Relations

Trade is an important factor and indeed the life-blood of inter-ethnic relations. Scholars have classified pre-colonial trade patterns into numerous categories. The two types of trade given by Afigbo (1987) are most relevant to this study. The first of these was that in which goods simply moved from one village market to another in all directions of need. In this type of trade, cultural and ethnic frontiers were crossed during the trading process. Described as “relay trade”, every village in southeastern Nigeria served at various times as forwarding agency in this mode of relation between groups and cultural areas. The second type was the long-distance trade in which professional traders crossed clan and ethnic frontiers of zones of cultural transition marketing their wares from one major market centre to another. Unlike the relay trade whose routes were virtually unplottable the long distance trade had easily identifiable routes, major market centres and major traders (Bassey, 1999).

The Ogoni most probably had relations with the Ibibio in their present territories for a long time (quite apart from their origins in antiquity). The Ibibio-Ogoni relations in the pre-colonial times were mostly commercial since Ogoni territory lay on the main trade route between Bonny port and the Upper Imo River. Ibibio attended Ogoni markets at Bodo, Kono Boue, Kaa, Duyaakara (Kpea), Gio and Ko (Opuoko), while Ogoni attended Ibibio markets in Essene, Ette, Opobo and so on (Kpone-Tonwe, and Gbeneye, 2013). The Ogoni sold salt which they manufactured from sea-water and fish to the in-land Ibibio and Igbo communities. As elsewhere, trade aided social intercourse and the Ogoni established several settlements like Warife in Ibibioland. Many Ogoni fishermen lived for a part of the year in fishing settlements in the Ibibio Islands (Abasiattai, 1991).

Inter-Marriages

Inter-ethnic marriages constituted important instruments of relations between different ethnic nationalities. Inter-ethnic marriages between the Ibibio and Ogoni pre-date their settlement in their present locale. It should be noted that convention existed among the ancestors of the Ogoni forbidding inter-marriage with non-farming neighbours, with the exception of the Ibibio women whose women Ogoni men were free to marry. It was not based on any enmity between the Ogoni and their neighbours, but it served to preserve the purity and creativity of the Ogoni (Kpone-Tonwe and Gbeneye, 2009).

There were two kinds of inter-ethnic marriage. The first was the one which the wife was made to live among the husband's people. The purpose was to encourage cultural diffusion. The wife was expected to bring along with her some elements of her people's language, their dances, folklores, world view, dishes and so on. As Afigbo (1987) has rightly pointed out "...over the generations and centuries this kind of link between cultures promoted cultural transfer and borrowings.

The second type of marriage was that in which traders and other categories of Ibibio and Ogoni people who rendered services on either of the frontiers took wives there. Rather than going back with their wives they instead allowed the women to stay among their own people to provide, not only conjugal benefits but also other form of benefits which aided their business professions.

According to Bassey:

Besides, inter-ethnic marriages promoted inter-group contact and integration. The Ibibio, for instance, gave and are still giving a very high regard to in-laws (ukod) and grandchildren (eyeyen) from their married daughters. In-laws and grandchildren are sacred to Ibibio people; they could not be punished or killed for any reason including crimes such as adultery, stealing or offence against secret society. The personal safety of in-laws and grandchildren was, and is always guaranteed and they fear neither being charmed, poisoned nor being violently attacked by their in-laws or mother's village. With this kind of condition the in-laws and grandchildren were safe in their wife's or mother's village in times of trouble or war (Bassey, 1999: 20-21).

Cultural Borrowings between the Ibibio and Ogoni

The striking cultural similarities between the Ibibio and Ogoni could be attributed to their common origin. Indeed as noted by Edwards cited in Abasiattai:

The very name "Ogoni" is of Ibibio origin, there are links between the Ogoni language and Ibibio, and this "feel" of Ogoni culture as a whole seems not too dissimilar to the "feel" of Ibibio culture (Abasiattai, 1991: 445).

The similarities manifests in the following areas of human endeavours such as:

Religion: Before the advent of Christianity both cultures regarded twin babies as evil. In the event of multiple births, both mother and children were usually ostracized, an action the early missionaries successfully eradicated by their activities within the Cross River Basin. This was, however, not peculiar to these societies since other cultures had one reservation or the other about twin babies and their mothers. Ritual brotherhoods existed between them and strengthened their relationship. The Ibibio attended the Ogoni *Yaa* and *Bogokoo* festivals, while the Ogoni people visited Ibibioland during *Ekpo Nyoho* festival. The two nationalities also believed in the consultation of oracles, a practice. For instance, the *Gbenebeka* of Gwara, whose influence stretched to Ibibio communities, was widely consulted.

Music and Masquerade: The singing rhymes and patterns in Ogoni indigenous music find great semblance with that of the Ibibio. The *Amanikpo* puppet theatre cult is common to the two cultures. According to Abasiattai, mutual acculturation was similarly evident in Ogoni

Amarikpo society, for example. The society, which enforced village laws and orders and collected debts, was said to be:

...distinguished by masked dances in imitation of the *Ibibio Ekpo* society, and its name is believed...to be of *anam Ekpo* – to dance *Ekpo* (Abasiattai, 1991: 446-447)

Another aspect of similarity is the seductive dancing style by women and aggressive back trilling display by the men of these cultures.

Carvings: The craft works of the *Ibibio* and *Ogoni* are similar in shapes and patterns in the production of stools, mortars, pestles, canoes, drums sizes, knife handles, wooden beds and chairs. The techniques for framing them and the implements used are not different from the other (Igbara and Keenam 2013).

Building Patterns: Thatch making, roofing styles of mud houses show no significant difference. The rectangular shaped housing pattern reveals common cultural affinity and there are similarities in both furnishing and finishing.

Dressing: There exist close relationship between the dressing pattern of the *Ibibio* and *Ogoni*.

Pottery: This has been an old occupation in the region. Pots were used not only for cooking and palm wine tapping but also as instruments for making music for dancing by both cultures. Pottery decorations, uses and paintings convey similar pictures and meanings on interpretation. Fortunately, the raw material had been abundantly available in the region.

Method of Transportation: The method of transportation is by head. Pottage and canoes are of similar shapes between these groups, both groups have fishing and farming as their main means of sustenance and they all make use of iron implement.

Other Aspects of Shared Culture: The materials used in the making of basket, bow and arrow, mat making, fine raffia palm leaves and dyeing make it difficult to distinguish between these groups. These cannot be mere coincidence. It is much more real than commercial and point to a common ancestry (Igbara and Keenam, 2013).

Language Factor

Language was a veritable cultural instrument of diplomacy which helped to foster inter-group relations. The spread of various Nigerian languages across frontiers was not necessarily through formal education; rather it was through inter-group relations and settlement. Sharing common borders helped in spreading and understanding of one another's language (Basse, 1999). The *Ibibio* and *Ogoni* languages both exercised such an "absorptive power" that these frontiers communities became bilingual (Gbeneye, 2016).

Basic Core Vocabularies Explanations: One buttressing factor of the East-West migration theory for the *Ibibio* and *Ogoni* is the use of basic core vocabularies between the occupants of the Cross River Basin. In the case of the *Ogoni*, the degree of cognition, in both sounds and meanings of certain words, differs considerably from those of their current neighbours within the Niger Delta (Igbara and Keenam, 2013).

Sample of some basic core vocabularies and the degree of cognition between Ogoni, the Ibibio of the Cross River Basin on one hand and the current neighbours of the Ogoni within the Niger Delta on the other hand.

S/N	English	Khana (Ogoni)	Ibibio	Ijaw	Igbo
1	God	Bari	Abasi	Tamuno	Chukwu
2	Water	Maa	Mmon	Mingi	Mmiri
3	Nose	Bion	Ibuo	Nini	Imi
4	Jaw	Bep	Ebek	Ibekeke	Agba
5	Ear	Ton	Uton	Beri	Nti
6	Mother	Ka	Eka	Yingibo	Nne
7	Father	Te	Ete	Dabo	Nna
8	Tongue	Edem	Edeme	Bele	Ire
9	Wife	Wa	Nwas	Tabo	Nwanyi
10	Two	Baa	Iba	Nmai	Abou
11	Three	Taa	Ita	Trei	Ato
12	Four	Nia	Inan	Ini	Ano
13	Seven	Ereba	Itiaba	Sonoma	Asaa
14	Eight	Ereta	Itiata	Ninei	Asato
15	Ten	Lop	Duop	Oyi	Iri
16	Yam	Zia	Udia	Burii	Ji
17	Forest	Kue	Ikot	Piri	Ohia
18	Stick	The	Eto	Siow	Osisi
19	Onions	Ayo	Ayim	Ayo-o	Ayo
20	Bird	Anue	Inuen	Feni	Nnono
21	Break	Bung	Bung	Ayi-ma	Gbajie
22	Shoe	Kpato	Ikpa-ukot	Okuro	-
23	Ant	Nyegene	Nuene	Mene	Ahuhu
24	Wine	Mii	Mmin	Iru	Mmanya
25	What?	E-doo	Nsido	Tiye	Gini
26	Grass	Abie	Mbiet	Osuka	Ahiha
27		100 per cent cognition	80 per cent cognition	10 per cent cognition	10 per cent cognition

Source: Igbara, Paul Igwe and Keenam, Chris. *Ogoni Perspective: An Aspect of Niger Delta History*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 2013, pp. 33-34

From the foregoing table, it is observed that there exists higher percentage of cognition between the Ogoni language and that of Ibibio within the Cross River valley. This also reveals the fact that Ogoni register greater historical affinity with the Ibibio than their current Ijaw and Igbo neighbours.

Diplomatic Relations in the Colonial Era

The first Europeans with whom the Ibibio and Ogoni established contacts with were the Portuguese. They were mostly traders and a few Christian missionaries. In their exploration of the West Coast of Africa in search of gold, Christian allies including the legendary Christian King, Prester John (Crowder, 1966), the Portuguese came in contact with the people of the Niger Delta probably in 1472 (Ejituwu, 1991) and by the sixteenth century they had also begun slave trading in the area. With the abolition of the slave trade, Britain turned her attention to the trade in palm produce and forest products which the Ibibio and Ogoni produced in large quantities. This development attracted British, French and German firms to establish their factories on the river estuary and the development of Ikot Abasi (formerly Opobo), a coastal settlement located in Ibibioland. The ensuing conflicts between the African and European traders influenced the decision of the British government to appoint John Beecroft as the Consul in the Bights of Biafra and Benin in 1849.

In 1885, the British established a protectorate over the area and named it the Oil Rivers Protectorate. The Oil Rivers Protectorate with headquarters in Calabar extended from the present Cross River State to Edo State, excluding the territories controlled by the Royal Niger Company. According to Udoma (1987) the area consisted of two provinces, which for the purpose of administration was divided into three Districts, each under the supervision of a divisional consular officer.

The Districts were:

The Eastern District – consisted of the area embracing the Cross River and Qua Iboe (Akwa Ibom River)

The Central District – comprised Ikot Abasi (formerly Opobo) and the Bonny River.

The Western District – was made up of Benin and Warri Rivers.

The Ibibio and Ogoni belonged to the Central District with headquarters in Ikot Abasi. In 1893 the area was renamed the Niger Coast Protectorate. In 1896, Claude Macdonald was succeeded by Ralph Moor and his policy of gradualism in the imposition of colonial rule was replaced by Moor's policy of aggressive imperialism. Moor's notion of effective administration was one in which military force would be the ultimate arbiter. In other words, during Moor's period as High Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Protectorate, military and punitive expeditions were the most popular instruments for subjugating the indigenous regimes to British rule (Uya, 1984).

With the revocation of the Charter of the Royal Niger Company at the end of 1899, the company ceased to possess administrative rights. Territories formerly belonging to the company, together with the territories of the Niger Coast Protectorate were by 1900 organised as the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria with headquarters at Calabar (Ikime, 1980). The Ibibio and Ogoni people still shared the same colonial District.

With the consolidation of colonial administration, a number of offices and departments were established in Ikot Abasi (formerly Opobo). By 1915, these included a Mess, District and Custom offices, Mortuary, Police, Prisons, Post and Telegraph, Judiciary, Transport, Education, Treasury, Medical and Forestry Department. Undoubtedly, these colonial institutions helped in galvanizing colonial rule in the Ibibio and Ogoni areas and strengthened their relations in a new dimension. Many Ogoni people lived and worked in Ikot Abasi (Opobo). Consequently, the oppressive colonial taxation policy attracted the collective displeasure of a cross section of Ibibio and Ogoni women and gave them the impetus to forge an alliance to confront the colonial establishment. This eventually resulted in the 1929 Women's War, which led to the death of many Ibibio and Ogoni women by the colonial officers (Akpan, 2016). In 1947 Ogoni Division was created and Ogoni was excised from Calabar Province and made to be part of Degema Province (Gbebebeh, 2010).

The Missionary Enterprise and the Consolidation of Ibibio-Ogoni Relations

The Niger Delta region came under missionary influence in 1846 following the establishment of the Church of Scotland Mission, now Presbyterian Church in Calabar, with Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell as the pioneer missionary. In 1864, the Church Missionary Society (Anglican Communion) was established in Bonny. The Qua Iboe established its presence in Ibeno in Akwa Ibom State in 1887 and Methodism came to the region in 1893 (Akpan, 2016). It was from Oron that Methodist faith spread to Ikot Abasi and from there it was planted in Kono (Ogoni) in 1910, Nwebiara and Bodo by 1916 (Gbebebeh, 2010).

According to Udoma (1992) The early Methodist Church in Ikot Abasi called "Ebenezer" was regarded as a holy refuge from the prosecution by the protagonists of traditionalism, and became a centre of enlightenment in the area and spread education and Christianity in the neighbouring villages including Ogoni. The Anglican Mission Primary School and three Methodist schools were well run and competed with each other for government grant-in-aid. They catered for the Ibibio, Obolo (Andoni) and Ogoni children in the area, outside the government school which was established in 1905. The Catholic Mission also established the Regina Coeli College at Esene, Ikot Abasi, which students of Ogoni extraction attended. As from the late 1930s, several Ogoni youths trained at the Teacher's Training College Uyo, and returned to teach in schools and also served as preachers in Ogoni this enabled them to contribute significantly to the development of the area (Abasiattai, 1997). It was not until 1954, that the first secondary school Birabi Memorial Grammar School was established in Ogoni (Igbira and Keenam, 2013).

Conclusion

The work has examined the diplomatic relations involving the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State with the Ogoni people of Rivers State in the pre-colonial to colonial Nigeria. The paper has shown that the relationship that existed among them was a mutual faceted affair, anchored on different aspects like shared origin, shared socio-cultural values. These factors generated cooperation and alliances and fostered peaceful co-habitation and economic prosperity among them

After settling down in the present locale, the Ogoni strengthened their relations by instituting a convention which forbade Ogoni women from marrying their neighbours in the Niger Delta region apart from the Ibibio. This process led to intricate web of personal relationship and bound the two groups together. The colonial experience created institutions that the people shared grouped them in the same administrative district. The Christian missionary enterprise which manifested in the establishment of churches also encouraged the relations between them. Some of the Ogoni people who were trained in the existing institutions in Ibibioland returned to served as interpreters, teachers, clerks and preachers in their domain.

These time-tested variables ought to be effectively and deliberately exploited in the post-colonial period to help reduce the current centrifugal forces particularly in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which is the “treasure base” of Nigeria and among other ethnic groups in the country for national integration and sustainable socio-economic development.

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